

Pretty Strung Out For a Girl

by Eric C. Wat

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I moved into my house three years ago. As I was unpacking, I found this T-shirt that K. gave me several months before. It was one of his favorite T-shirts, from the Vancouver Film Festival. There was a note attached to it where he wrote about me being his angel, a positive force in his life when he needed someone like me most. For the several months that we were seeing one another, there were many notes like this exchanged. Even in person, K. and I were very up front about how we felt about each other.

K. was unemployed when I met him. He had worked on a low-rated but critically acclaimed TV show as a contracted assistant director. When we started dating, the show was on hiatus and its fate was uncertain. K. was also a recovering crystal meth addict, a fact that strangely didn't scare me off. Without a job, his visa was expiring - he's Asian-Canadian. Both his grandmother and his best friend in Vancouver passed away within the first three weeks of our courtship, which plunged him further into his depression. He had to stop seeing his therapist because he was running out of money. None of this made for a great combination for the path to recovery.

We both thought I had come into his life in the most fortuitous way. When I stayed over, he would wake up early in the morning the next day, energized and ambitious. He cleaned up his desk, straightened out his wardrobe, worked on his resume, etc. while I was still sleeping. With me he felt positive about life and wanted to get back in touch with his friends.

And despite all his problems, I fell for K. because he got me in a way that nobody had in a long time. Early on, before we knew each other's last name, he read an article where I was interviewed. He called me after and said, "You're Eric Wat!" He thought the man in the article was funny and brilliant, just like I was with him. When he read the article, he could see me talking to the reporter in his mind. I wanted him to be the one.

Truth is, I wanted to believe that I had found a life partner as I was on my way to become a homeowner. I didn't know many who started this venture alone: people get married, have a couple of kids, and then they buy a house – the last piece of the stability puzzle. I was doing things in reverse, but K. made it feel like things might be falling into place.

So began our short-lived codependent relationship. He would disappear days at a time, incommunicado. I would despair. The emails about me my angelic presence came intermittently. When he surfaced, I told him I was not afraid of his dark. And I indulged his relapses. As time went on, he promised that we would try to have a drug-free relationship. I believed him, until he stopped returning my phone calls. When he was stressed out because the person who wanted to rent the

other room in his apartment and helped out with the rent didn't show up, I stayed with him the whole day. I wanted to spend the night, but he said he needed to be alone. I left, imagining the worst.

A few days later, he called and asked if I could come over and be with him as he opened his mail. He had been in debt and afraid to open his mail for the past two months. I refused. I was proud that I didn't submit to my own savior complex. Another week passed by, and we had the "talk." I told him I wasn't ready to give up (surprising even myself) and we could take it slow. But when it is the addict who tells you maybe he's not in a place to be in a relationship, you really need to get a sanity check.

Touching K.'s shirt in the middle of my new house made me realize how he was just the latest in my exploration of my own dark side. I didn't really experiment with anything until my mid-twenties. The threats of AIDS in the 80s had paralyzed my curiosities. Sometimes I think being a late-bloomer was a blessing because I've approached the taboos of sex and drugs with maturity and balance. But there are moments - and there's no better reflection of this than the seven days I used to wait between taking an HIV test and getting the result - I realize I still have the same obsessiveness of a typical teenager. Don't get me wrong, there are some great experiences that came out of these experimentations: As troubled as K. was, he was also a great guy and that's just not the savior speaking. But no question about it, the last few years I've hit some new lows and done some stupid things. And but for my friends (and my own addiction to be well liked by them), I could've easily slipped much deeper into the dark side and had a hellish time climbing back up.

You find some strange things when you unpack. When I found the shirt that K. gave me, I didn't resist the urge to put it on. It smelled like him. I wore it for the rest of the day. My own I-tried-to-save-a-crystal-meth-addict-from-himself-and-all-I-got-was-this-lousy-T-shirt T-shirt. We had not spoken for a few weeks since our "talk" and it made me want to call him - just to see if he's okay, I told myself. But I didn't. Sooner or later, we lost touch.

I've also kept all the love notes he sent me. I kept hoping there would be a day when I would delete them. I think people call that closure.

Couple months ago, I went to an all-day training at a hotel in Santa Monica, just blocks away from where K. lived. All morning I debated whether to go by. When lunch came, I decided no. Don't give in to your weak side. What would you say to him, anyway? It's over. If he wasn't there, you'd just obsess about where he could be. You can almost wear his shirt without thinking it had belonged to him. If you go over, three years of self-care would go down the drain.

But when lunch was over, I changed my mind. If I had believed in God, this would be His test and I had failed miserably.

I found K's building easily. His name was no longer on the listing. I checked twice. I didn't know why, but at that moment, I didn't have the reaction I thought I'd have. I realized that all these years I had blamed myself. K. had found hope in me, but I wasn't enough. But as I was walking away, I felt calm. I knew I had made the right decision – or rather, he had made the right decision for the both of us. It was as if him not being there had freed me. I didn't blame myself for abandoning him anymore. And Goddammit, I survived. I aced the frigging final exam.

Maybe closure is over-rated. I don't look for a day when I would delete his emails. Sometimes I'd open them because I want to remember that chapter in my life: sad, beautiful, a little brave, incomplete, frightening, and ultimately hopeful. Despite its brevity, it was all of that, all the things you would want life to have a little of.