

The Underwear Thing

by Stephanie Austin

When I've finally had enough to drink to be able to talk to him, I find my ex-boyfriend on his back porch. He's finishing the last of his beer and talking to a guy named Daniel. The weather is on the cusp. Tree leaves are yellow. I haven't seen a bird in weeks. People on the patio hold themselves in. No one is dressed properly. Wasn't it just summertime? Wasn't it just completely warm?

As I sit down on the built-in bench that my ex-boyfriend and his roommates built when they moved in last year, his phone rings. That was part of the deal with the guy who owns the house. They're supposed to be working on it all the time. This way, their rent is lower. My ex reaches in his pocket, pulls his phone out, looks at the number, and then answers it. He sees me and nods. Daniel sees me. He also nods. I don't nod. I feel lame when I nod. Daniel wears glasses, not Buddy Holly glasses, but vaguely updated John Lennon glasses and his hair, which is brown and longish, is tucked behind his ears. I bet he has a good sense of humor.

"It's Daniel, right?"

More nodding. "And what's your name?" He reaches his hand out to shake mine.

"Kate," I say. I thumb in the direction of my ex. "We met a few months ago at his birthday party downtown."

"That's right. How old is he now?"

"25," I say.

"We're all getting very old," he says.

So then we don't say anything. We just kind of look around everywhere. There are random party-goers. Music is playing. The neighborhood around us is quiet. My ex-boyfriend hangs up his phone and puts it back in his pocket. His jeans are baggy and he's wearing his running shoes with the laces that always come undone. I point down and he follows my finger. He bends over and ties his shoe, double knots it.

"Hey," he says, "you came."

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"Here I am."

"What's up?"

I smile and say, "Nothing is up."

He looks past me. "Did you bring Jake?"

"It didn't work out with Jake," I say.

Daniel excuses himself. His body gets absorbed into the house that is getting fuller by the hour.

Jake was not his name; my cousin's dog's name is Jake. He's confused, but I don't correct him. My ex-boyfriend is relaxed, like I'm a comfortable piece of the background he's used to seeing. He's the host, and he's doing his hosting business, which is being friendly.

"That's too bad," he says. "Jake seemed like a nice guy."

He met him for a half second once when we all bumped into each other at a bar a few weeks ago. The guy was just a guy I'd met that evening who followed me around for awhile because I had cigarettes. We did not sleep together, but we could have. I could have. I wanted my ex-boyfriend to know I was wanted so when I saw him and his friends, I laced my fingers through the guy's and held on tight.

My cup is nearly empty. It's a screwdriver, heavy on the vodka because I made it myself. It's the only thing keeping my head up right now, and it's what speaks this next line: "You seemed like a nice guy too, and we didn't work out."

My ex-boyfriend is never outwardly fazed. He looks at me and smiles like it's no big deal I'm sitting in front of him.

"So, why not?" I ask.

"Why not what?" He asks, as though he's confused as to why we're still talking. "Why didn't we work out?"

My stomach swirls faster and faster and I want to put my arms out to brace myself.

"Your underwear," he finally says.

Someone nearby pulls out a pack of cigarettes and offers us one. No, thank you. I have to sit here and pretend I'm not dying.

Our knees are almost touching; they're like two magnets swirling in empty space waiting for a bump in the energy to cling together. It's just going to take one small push and they'll click together. Snap.

"What?" I ask, trying hard to use the moment to hate him.

The liquor starts to like the way his face looks. His jaw is straight and strong. The light from inside is dusting one side of his face while the other is dark, making his features, like his cheekbones, which are smooth and high, stand out even more than usual. He is still for a moment, and my heart pounds. Our banter has shifted, like wading from the shallow to the deep end. He taps his foot. "Your underwear reminded me of my grandma's underwear."

"You spend a lot of time looking at your grandma in her underwear?" I ask. Self-defense, the aggressively playful kind, isn't something I do on a regular basis. Vodka helps. He laughs a little because he isn't sure if I'm joking, and he thinks if he laughs and takes it as a joke, then I will also have to take it as a joke. It's a trick. He is always tricking me.

He said to me after our first date, "I really like you." He said, "You're amazing." "I want you." He stayed all night. He kept a toothbrush in my bathroom. It was six months we were together. My personal record. He'd been with his last girlfriend for three years, since college. One of the things he'd said in his break-up speech was that he'd been talking to this girl again and while he was sure he didn't feel anything for her, he wasn't sure he felt anything for anyone. He was numb. My word was rebound. He said, no, time. He just needed time.

He peers into my cup. "If I know you—and I do—it's about time for you to have another drink."

"Wait. Are you telling me I wear granny panties?"

But he doesn't hear me because he's walking away. I give him the finger behind his back, but then I feel depressed and want to apologize even though he didn't see it. There is space under the bench. I could crawl in and stay there, shivering, shaking, until someone lures me out with the promise of something rich.

I'd planned on stopping after two drinks, but now I have the underwear comment looping in my mind. I have us, in his bedroom, getting me to my panties, me taking them off, him feeling repulsed. I have me getting dressed to go to work, taking off my towel in front of him, slipping on a pair of underwear and him averting his eyes. I have a drawer at home where I keep the underwear and I want to bring it over here, dump it in his living room, and set it on fire. I'm mortified. So, Plan B: keep drinking.

A guy sits next to me, like he'd been waiting for the spot all night, like we're playing musical chairs and jockeying for seats. I notice that he has a pack of cigarettes sticking out of his jacket pocket, so I ask him for one.

My ex-boyfriend is not a smoker, not even socially. He finds the habit weak and disgusting. I used to smoke. It was a long time ago when I was a whole other person with a whole other set of issues. Then, when he broke up with me, which was on a Monday night at the end of summer, I decided to smoke one cigarette. I got in my car and drove to the Circle K on the corner. The cigarette hurt. My lungs had forgotten the way the smoke felt, the choking, gasping feeling followed by a swoosh of euphoria. After that first, long drag I had to put my hand out against the wall of the Circle K. I almost passed out. I couldn't finish it.

The next morning the full pack was on the counter. It was so perfect and new and fresh and I had another one. After lunch, I had another one. By dinner I was halfway done with it. By the noon the next day, I had finished the whole thing.

He knew I was a smoker. He'd see me in pictures with my finger curled around a cigarette. He'd listen to my stories about cravings. He'd tell me he's glad I didn't smoke anymore. It would make him not want to kiss me.

I smoke tonight because I need to. My body hurts without it. I know he could see me. I know at any second he could poke his head out of the door and see the smoke rising from me so I do it fast, trying to get it in. I am immediately calm. I am immediately right. The guy sitting next to me talks about how he only knows one

person here, and he feels awkward. He asks me if I'm having a good time. He tells me his name is Alan.

I take long drags and blow the smoke up above me, sending it to God or Whoever, and looking into the house in case he comes back, then I hold it down, away from view. I nod when Alan says something, but keep my eyes on the door.

The nicotine rolls out from my lungs and enters into my bloodstream, heading straight into my head where the booze is hanging out. When they meet, they crash, and I feel dizzy. It's a good dizzy. It's a my-underwear-is-comfortable dizzy. Nothing is crawling up where it shouldn't. It's doing the job underwear was meant to do. I stand up, and Alan looks startled. I say, "You seem super awesome," and I go inside.

My ex sitting on the couch, talking to a girl who has dark skin and light eyes partially hidden under a cascade of silky brown-black hair. She looks Columbian. She's wearing a tank top and jeans, so I guess she forgot about the weather, too. Or maybe her skin is warm from living in Columbia.

He laughs at something she says, and she looks down at her lap, almost self-consciously, like she wasn't expecting herself to be funny. Their knees are touching. I hear him ask, "Are you here with anyone?"

When she shakes her head no, I walk into the kitchen and pour a bunch of liquor in a cup. I can't find a spoon or anything else to stir it with, so I just slosh it around.

A blonde girl follows me in looking for beer. There is a ton on the patio in the cooler. I know he doesn't want people in the fridge. I used to tell him not to stock the fridge if he didn't want people in it.

"There's some in the fridge," I say.

She opens the door and kneels down. "Ah, ha," she says.

With the door shut, she looks around again. I scoot past her and pluck the bottle opener-magnet off the fridge. It says *Beer Me* in big, exaggerated letters. I bought it for him last summer. I hand it to her, and it ends up in her pocket.

My roommate is here somewhere, and I meander around the party trying to find her. I need to talk to her and tell her about the underwear thing. I need to tell someone about the underwear thing.

Earlier that night while we were getting ready, I said to her that she should just up and go at some point, leaving me stranded so he would have no choice but to hang out with me. Then he'd realize his error. I am still amazing.

She isn't out back, she isn't inside, and she isn't in the garage. I walk out front and look for her boyfriend's car. Eventually, I stand in the space where it was parked and Daniel walks by smoking a cigarette. He gives me a little wave, and I give a little wave back.

"Hey," I yell out after him. "Can I bum a smoke?"

"Oh yeah," he says, reaching into his cargo shorts. He offers me a Camel, and lets me use his lighter. It's a Zippo.

"Nice," I say, after I light the cigarette. "Very fancy."

"I'm a fancy guy," he says, and continues walking. "Have a nice night."

"Thank you," I say after him.

I stand alone in the street and smoke, this time slower and with deliberation. I watch him walk, watch the way his legs go and the way his arms go. He walks like he's carrying something on his back that he doesn't want to let go.

I am on the couch for a long time before my ex-boyfriend comes around with the drink he promised me a long time ago.

"I've been looking for you," he says, handing me a drink. "Here."

What did I do with my other drink? So I drink his drink and he sits next to me on the couch for a long time telling me about this guy Alan he invited tonight. He's smart. He has a lot of interesting things to say about the world. He's a really great guy. Blah, blah, blah, Alan, blah, blah, blah, Alan. I break the news to him my roommate has taken off without me.

"I'd drive you home," he says, "but I've had too much to drink."

We're in close together, which feels strange and out of place. He puts his hand on my arm. My stomach drops. He acts like he's going to kiss me. He doesn't. I get up to go the bathroom.

The downstairs bathroom is occupied. The upstairs one is covered in boy. There is a dirty ring around the toilet bowl and grime in all the corners. The sink is coated in soap scum and beard clippings. The mirror is smeared with water marks. I pick up a bottle of mouth wash. It's old and the top is crusted over in green. Now I smell like Listerine cigarettes. His toothbrush is worn and in need of replacement, but I use it anyway.

The alcohol runs out a little after midnight and the people leave. I pour a glass of water from the sink and chug it, hoping that will ward off a hangover. Alan comes in the kitchen and sets his plastic cup in the sink as though it's a porcelain doll.

I grab his arm and say to hold on. I have to show him something. I don't have to unbutton my jeans because my underwear is poking out the top, but I unbutton them anyway.

He stares at me.

"What do you think?"

"What?"

"My underwear."

He takes a breath and then frowns. "It's nice." He rubs the back of his neck and takes another breath: a quivering, insane breath. "Is this an invitation?"

I let go of the elastic band and it snaps back against my skin. "Oh my God," I say.

Alan flushes. He puts his hands in his pockets and walks out of the kitchen, muttering something under his breath about the cold air. The house is cold. My ex says they are trying to wait another few weeks to turn the heat on, at least until after the first freeze. I find him in his room getting ready for bed.

He tosses me a t-shirt, which I plan on keeping. He tells me he'll be back. His room is smaller than I remember, though it hasn't been that long since I've been in it. It's cleaner than the bathroom, which doesn't say much. I snatch a pair of boxers from his top drawer. When he returns, he has an extra blanket and a glass of water and Tylenol and I am under the covers. He puts the water and the Tylenol on the dresser.

"For you, later," he says.

He gets into bed. I'm on my back, adjusting to the dark. He's on his side, wearing a t-shirt, which is distracting because he always sleeps without a shirt. I have the distinct feeling I could lie awake like this all night, thinking about I don't know what, and going slightly mad from the quiet. I laugh a little about Alan. What a guy, that Alan. He asks me what's funny. I say nothing.

I turn on my side, so I'm looking at the back of his head and almost before I had settled he flips around so that he's facing me. He's been waiting for me to move.

"Are you sleeping?"

"No," I say. "I'm too drunk to sleep."

"Me too." He reaches out and touches my thigh, but pulls his hand back right away. "Are you wearing my underwear?"

"Yeah," I said.

I'm foolishly expecting, at any moment, for him to say he is sorry. He's sorry he is disparaging about my habits, he's sorry he isn't crazy-obsessively in love with me, he's sorry about what he said about my underwear, he's sorry all my dreams aren't coming true, he's sorry I'm at his party too old to be this drunk, too old to not understand my own limits, he's sorry he isn't solving my problems, he's sorry I can't seem to move past him, he's sorry I can't say what I really feel, which is that I just need him to be sorry. I need him to hold my hand, or put his foot on my foot, or take off his t-shirt.

It goes on a minute too long. It goes on two minutes, three minutes too long and I'm starting to figure out that he's waiting for me to take off my clothes or invite him over to this side of the bed. It's the opposite side of the bed I used to sleep on, and maybe I'm

the only one who realizes that. I just have to move my body. Just a little bit.

We face each other with our eyes closed. After a long time, he turns on his back and sighs. I know that means he's about to fall asleep. I get up to go to the bathroom, then take the extra blanket off the bed and go downstairs.

In the morning, he shakes me awake.

"Kate," he says, softly.

I'm confused for a minute, thinking we're somewhere else. And he's someone else. And I'm someone else. And what did I dream about last night? I think I was in my fourth grade classroom.

"What time is it?"

"Six."

"What the hell?" I sit up.

He goes into the kitchen and comes out with a mug of coffee.

"Want some?" He doesn't ask me why I'm on the couch. He doesn't ask me why I'm not with him, upstairs, where the heat has risen.

I stare at him. "I want to go to back to sleep. Let me just go sleep in your room. I'll call someone for a ride later."

"Come on," he says, turning away from me. "I'll take you home."

I pull myself together and then follow him out. He apologizes for his truck. It's full of junk. He opens the passenger side door for me and starts to move everything.

"It's really cold," I say, "I don't care. Just, let me in and turn on the heat."

He starts the truck—it's an old Nissan that is probably going to crap out soon—and we idle for a moment. It has to warm up. The heater is pumping cold air. I close my eyes and almost lean on him—*almost*—but I catch myself and open my eyes again. I look at

him from the side. His face is puffy, and he looks tired. He's wearing a baseball cap, the A's.

"You're kind of chipper," I say.

"I just have things to get done," he says.

We're driving down his street, and it's still dark. No one is out. No joggers. No dog walkers. It's dead out there.

"What things? What do you have to do at six on a Saturday?"

"We're moving into our new building," he says. When he turns, he doesn't use his signal, which always used to bother me. "They're disconnecting our servers on Monday, and I have some deadlines."

"I'm still drunk," I say.

I'm sitting in the middle of the truck, almost straddling the gear shift. I move around, trying to get comfortable.

"Sorry," he says.

"It's fine."

"You wanted to get in before I could move anything."

"Fine."

I turn the heat down, because now it's blasting in my face and making my eyes dry. I flip the vents up. He reaches between my legs to shift. I should have been ready for that, but I was watching the cold outside and didn't realize what had happened until it was over.

