

My Strychnine Valentine **by Andre Monserrat**

It wasn't my pod's choked whirring, the staticky sputter of last chance failsafes essentially telling me "You're fucked, it's over now. You can stop speculating about the time and place you breathe your last, 'cause it's caught up with you, pal." No, it didn't take the bleak finality of that white and cold square in my chest for me to know it was too late and the satellites were already vomiting death in a precise circumference around a busted up Winnebago in Tijeras, leaving torched cacti like cast iron silhouettes. When "My Strychnine Valentine" thrummed out of my collarbone amps, I knew you were dead, Julia, and, for a few more minutes at least, I was single again.

How did I get this far? Bleeding out my life, my clothes soaking in a supergrey cold December rain, watching my final second chance burn up into the night like a shuttle on some doomed trajectory. This kind of tragedy is something you gotta want. Want it bad.

And the kicker, what really puts salt in the wounds, is that Paul was right. He had told me, "Stupid Daniel, one day you gonna wake up and see she just a woman like all the rest, made of poison and ready to bite." His English was almost calculatedly ghetto. I had thought he was Korean. Paul, that fucking little fish, every night trying to mix it up with another podboy at NewRadio, a hangaround for old tech fetishists. Radio, that American cancer, silent killer of all I hold holy. The boys in NewRadio can hook you up old school, placebo walkman fixes for those without the balls to go all the way and get the pod graft. God save the scene from those that front! Paul knew shit, so I ignored his rhetoric.

Julia, why didn't you stay home in Alabama? In my head I see you in the sunshine, doin' time at the tail end of a full month of lazy, wasted days. Reading a book in the dusty light sifting through the window behind the rocking chair, then settling in for a soak in one of those antique bathtubs with feet on them.

Then it would be somebody else giving me the drugs. Somebody else, and not you, Julia, drawn by shattered city lights to find me, a shattered city boy born from 80's love and late blues. You taught me that all good intentions were really just paperweights on a love story desperately wanting to fold itself up into an origami crane and soar into the sun.

I will never forget the night of our first encounter, my sweet betrayer. Rewind. Play: It's the 5th of July. I'm hanging at the Dildozer, watching a gaggle of podboy wannabe's strap on goggles and dive into neurostim games with names like "Computer Science Department of Justice Alliance vs. Robots." I had already begun the massacre of an entire village of \$4 Pabst Iridescent Blue Ribbons. Piss beer always gets me limbered up for the ritual.

Through the front door I see Paul and Judi, my fellow Insomniacs, jump the ID turnstile. Paul's looking under the weather, eyes drifting left of center, maybe tripping on ring-a-ding. Of anyone in our lovely little troupe, I was certain that Paul would burn out first. Had that suicide bomber look about him, someone who would walk the line into the abyss, tracking the scent of real ultimate power, freedom and young pussy.

Judi floats in on dope wings, tells me Jen is bringing the drugs, maybe bringing a friend too. Country girl. Great, a new one. Had to be on the night it was my turn to run the show. Judi leans over the bar to get the barkeep's attention, ordering some Enniscorthy in a bottle, for fuck's sake.

"Put it on Danny's tab, too, hon," she says, flashing me a wink.

"No fucking way!" I protest.

"We had a deal! You're gonna earn your money tonight," she says, tapping my pod.

"Hey, alright," I say and let it go. No point in having this conversation again. And she was probably right. Jen was carrying some hard tunes, music so fucking good it could melt your synapses. The new controlled substance of the 21st century. Even the darknets wouldn't pipe this stuff, too afraid of the Man wasting their servers with military grade denial of service attacks. These tunes were coming through Croatia, hand delivered on sticks of flash.

I was the logical choice to do the 'cast, the sound scientist with the purest mix of pod gear and mental fortitude. I had secured this status after running a lethal tune known simply as "Em Eight." Did this on the heels of poor Jimmy trying to slap it in his playlist like it was "The Milkshake Song" or some shit. Now that fool's on life support.

After that, Danny was the go to guy.

Fast forward to that crucial turning point, later in the evening. Jen pulls up in her 60's Mantis, a great white shark of a car that still ran on gasoline. She's an hour late because she had to wait for you. And to think I was having doubts, like I might pull a disappearing act and bail on the deal, giving Paul his big chance to carry on in my place. But I don't get to make those kind of choices, now do I? I'm on board for the entire ride.

For a few moments more you are still a shape on the other side of the passenger door. You open the door and a rapid countdown begins to that moment where I am undone and the Dulcinea duct tape of your broken love is the only thing strong enough to hold me together. You step out, rendering the whole street scene shadowesque, bringing the new light of day into my life. My pod sings something I haven't heard in a long time, maybe ever.

You say, "Hi, I'm Julia. I live in a trailer park." Your eyes bury me alive, suffocating words and thoughts.

I say, "I know you, marry me." Actually I say "Hey. I'm Danny," but that's what I meant.

We couldn't take the Mantis. Two seater, heavy on attention. We pile into Judi's Mitsubishi Evolver. Judi pushes the hot step through the floor and we rocket away. I play it smooth, my attention fixed on the street so your eyes couldn't take me away again. The whole way there you are quiet as a mouse, but at the same time I can hear the echo of my desires in you, clear as a 'cast. I queue up some music for shoplifting, a sweet bandito ballad called "Mola, Guay, OK." I press my fingers to the back of Judi's neck so she could ride the vibe, nano-assemblers enhancing the biochemical taproot to her nervous system, delivering a full-sense spectrum of music.

Judi howls, hammers it, running all the red lights.

And you just smile, silently, knowing you had your man.

Skip to the next track and we're huddled in Paul's apartment above the White Line, a federally sanctioned cocaine den. Strictly NuCoke, of course. Here we are again, the Insomniacs plus one, ready for another edition of "Tales from the White Line." Jen unwraps the flash, hands it to Paul who slots it in his belt hub. He's the buffer, in case things get shaky. And Judi's my good luck charm.

"We good?" I ask Paul, but looking at you. Glad you're not a mind reader or you'd see how tweaked out I am right now. I've already fallen for you, but new faces make me nervous and I'm about to 'cast some hard music and I'm not sure my pod is up for both in one night.

Paul nods, running a last diagnostic on our latest dose, fresh from Croatia, the debut of "Happy Song 2." The names never matter any more these days.

"Now or never," I say and Paul hits me with it, literally, a nanotransmitter-laden bitchslap across my jaw. I stagger back. My lip is bleeding, but I am ok. More than ok. The song turns my blood to mercury, tunes every synapse to a god frequency. I tear my shirt away so the speakers in my collarbones could shout. For a few seconds I fear the tune is beyond me and it'll take me down into a purple coma to sleep beside Jimmy. But I juke, I jive, I conjugate the reverb and flow out the other side. My fist plows into Paul's face, my right cross sending him to the floor where he lays there grooving to Happy Song 2. I grab Jen's head and press my lips to her forehead, 'casting the music. She closes her eyes, smiles, and gets on board. I am the Piper, follow me for I will light the path to all the joy your heart can take.

"Gimme some lip." Judi spins me around and sucks all the blood off my mouth, drinking up the song.

At last I come to you, Julia. Don't know if this is your first time, not sure if I care. I want to tell you, "Don't forget where you came from. You can get lost in all of this. Stay close. Don't you lose me. If you feel it all fraying away, meet me in the middle and I'll be your gravity." But before I can say any of that, you pull me into a candy cane kiss synchronized perfectly with the chorus and I know that I'd commit all manner of foolish, dangerous acts to keep you in my life.

I peel Paul up off the floor, check everyone's faces to make sure we are all riding the same happy wave, and then lead the charge down the stairs, bursting into the White Line. The patrons of the club raise their heads as one, wiping dust from their noses, half smiles on their played out faces as if they knew salvation had come at last. We fan out into the crowd, groping, slapping, kissing the faces of strangers, spreading the music on and on.

That's how our one summer together began, meeting about a crime, letting love change us into fools. Well, me at least. I wanted to bask every day in the sun of your simple devotion to me. All

those nights of shooting stars, lying on the roof of your Winnebago home out in the wild of Tijeras, my refuge from the city's oily concrete songs and big block fever. You were learning French and it amused me to hear your twang repeating after the recorded instructor. There were grafts for language, but you preferred the old-fashioned way. I encouraged you with my own contributions: "Je suis un podboy," "Je suis un baseballbat," "Je suis un steamroller."

The other Insomniacs left us alone out there, where the closeness of the mountains was some kind of ancient threat to the rapid moving progress bar of their mortality. Sometimes your Alabama pals would drop in. I was always happy to loan you cash I'd never see again. Next day there'd be some new tunes to slot and I was too stocked up on stupid to make the connection. Fresh tracks from France, you'd tell me. Paul took an interest, though, his naked dislike for you galvanizing my ignorance, an excuse for me not to disturb the surface tension of your innocence. In the last days, his smug wolf smile should have been a warning that he had uncovered something about you, a dirty little secret that cries out of my pod even now, soon to cry no more.

Sometimes you'd stare out into that big night sea of silent satellites and ask me about dying. I'd say "Your love keeps me alive, babe," before my filters could process the cliché phrase into something poetic and sleek. You told me of your dark attraction to "My Strychnine Valentine" by the tragically late Vicious Visalia, its aggro cardio payload a favorite amongst suicidal lovers. You actually seemed disappointed that my hangman of choice would instead be "Sean's Song." What was it the oldsters said about burning out instead of fading away? That's what I wanted: to go out like "a fire arrow shot into forever." Later you'd want me to 'cast some new groove while we fucked in the crosshairs of Japanese orbital platforms and I'd forget about the desperate picture you were painting.

Skip ahead towards the end of my playlist, closer to now: Paul had run the 'cast like a pro. I'm trying not to notice the looks you two toss back and forth, like he knew something and you knew he knew. You're on a regular cycle of dropping some flash tunes, needing a bit of cash to fill in the gaps, 'casting with the Insomniacs. And I'm starting to notice how it keeps getting faster, this spiral you're riding. Moments with you blur and shudder, your attention drawn over your shoulder or mine, never quite hanging in the now.

The rest of the troupe had evaporated into the night, leaving us in the alley beside the White Line. You're not expecting this New Mexico night to be so cold, but you won't take my coat. You look desaturated, Julia, like all your Alabama sunshine's been tapped out, replaced with a coffee stained sheen. Lately I've watched you vanish into the 'casts with such complete commitment I worried you'd never return to me. But you were already running, weren't you? Running in place from a slow-motion explosion of your own design, with me at ground zero. You look at me with those gone grey eyes and push a last kiss on my mouth, saying you'll see me later in Tijeras.

I didn't know what that kiss had added to my playlist until now, the rain bringing clarity, soothing my wracked body. Skip back to fifteen minutes ago when the sudden pain kicked a hole in my chest, a surprise back alley mugging by invisible assailants. I fold to the pavement, doubling over, retching as though my whole skeleton has a plane to catch and couldn't wait for the rest of me.

I look up towards the footsteps, hoping for a compassionate stranger, someone who would do the right thing and get some paramedics on me right the fuck now.

Paul. It's Paul looking down at me, lighting a cigarette, doing nothing. And then I knew.

"I was not your enemy, stupid Daniel," he says. "I tried to warn you about your girlfriend, but you too stupid. She have sticky fingers. One day steal from the wrong men." He peels up the corner of his shirt to show me the tattoo. I don't need to know any Japanese to understand. And just for shits he starts 'casting some thrashy J-pop street song that all the hip Yakuza kids must be into. I think of all his visits to NewRadio, all his supposed tussles, and I realize that I never knew the score. I'd never set foot in that retro shit hole. Perfect place for a meeting. I had underestimated Paul. I had failed to take his measure and it burned me. And you too, Julia, perhaps worst of all. "Maybe you help her, maybe not. Means fuck all to me. I'm going up in the world. Now I'll rock the 'cast 24-7, yo." His cigarette arcs into the night, a flame arrow, dying quietly off camera. "Just business, Danny. See you never." From a long way away I feel my gut cave in around his boot. I cough some blood as it starts to rain.

What a lovely solution, babe. You had all the fixings for one of the greatest romances, but you had to throw it to the wind. Did you think you were sparing me something? Saving me from what

Paul's bosses might do to me? Or maybe this is how the perfect romance ends for you, with the lovers doomed and twitching. *Rise!* I scream to my crippled body. *Can you hear this? Rise!* But "My Strychnine Valentine" had done its job, a lullaby for a stormy night. And somewhere a Yakuza satellite cloaks itself and drifts, moving still through its precise orbit.

"Boom boom" goes the pod where my heart used to be, "chick a boom boom boom..." I think of the roasting husk of your Winnebago, out there in Tijeras where the mountains would hold back this rain.

"Our house would make a beautiful bonfire..." croons Vicious Visalia, her voice stroking my bones with the ecstasy of death.

Let it burn.