

# Nigel's Epiphany

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Nigel's foot caught in the seatbelt and he tumbled onto the pavement. It hurt, but all he said was "oops." The driver's jaw dropped. One of the passengers in the backseat stuck his head out, eyes wide. "Are you okay?" Nigel picked himself up, tried his best to pretend he had not just fallen onto the sidewalk. He grabbed his backpack from the foot well and ran across the concourse, lost himself in the stream of mid-morning pedestrians heading south.

Here he found himself in unfamiliar territory, at the base of blue spires clustered along King Street. The sun glinted in grid-laid windows above the shadow line. Nigel scurried along, shaded by the glass and steel canopy, backpack over one shoulder.

In the car he had dozed uneasily for most of the six hour drive, hat pulled low to cover his open mouth. His head rolled forward and hung limp, so that now his spine felt like a rusted spring bent until the buildup cracked. The pain in his haunch from where he had fallen faded, replaced by thoughts of the previous night.

"We're going to the Skyline," his sister's message read. "Where are you?"

A streetcar snaked around a bend in the canyon between skyscrapers. Red and white trim gleamed as it slid along a silver rail. Nigel ignored the payment screen and took a seat next to the train's esophageal linkage. All the landmarks on this street that he might have once recognized had been razed and rebuilt anew. The storefronts across from the park had changed five times over. The city

was smooth, gave him nothing to grasp onto—except the folds of the terrain had not changed. He recognized this descent beneath the traintracks; and when they re-emerged again further west, the city's facepaint glared in grim absurdity against a deformed skeleton.

The Skyline broke through the simulation of '50s rock & roll filtered through '80s rockabilly pastiche, earned its own kind of authenticity. It was packed that early Saturday afternoon, dim enough that Nigel could remove his sunglasses without the light piercing his optic nerve.

Deirdre's bright red hair jumped out at him. She stood for a hug, but the excitement them both and they collapsed back into the booth. Nigel sat across from her and next to Kelly, who gave him a meek hello and a guilty side-eye before she continued to prod her untouched food.

"Kelly's turning 40," Deirdre said. "I thought she died last night. The taxi driver had to help me carry her up the stairs to my place." Kelly just sank deeper into her corner of the booth.

"I'm Emma." She was against the wall next to Deirdre. The three of them were pale and slumped, but Emma vibrated with energy. Nigel's gaze slid over her before something registered, and he returned to study her face more closely. Bleached eyebrows and dyed-blond hair smoothed the ridges of her face and gave her a vaguely extra-terrestrial look. "You're Deirdre's brother?"

"Nigel." They shook hands across the table.

"You look like that guy—in that movie; he plays the vampire—"

"It was a crazy night for me, too." Nigel put his elbows on the empty table in front of him. "I was drinking, but I just couldn't sit down. I was up walking around until four in the morning." He couldn't tell them the truth, so he left it at that.

"Well that's strange," Deirdre said.

Emma offered her glass. "Here, take a drink. Hair of the dog what bit you."

Deirdre lifted her own glass. "It's Perseco with an olive in it."

He took a sip. Coarse bubbles piqued his tongue.

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Long linen curtains struck the still air in Deirdre's living room. The coffee table was piled high with catalogues and fashion magazines. When Emma put her feet up, it swayed loose in its leg joints.

"Sorry about the mess. I'm not here very often. The cleaner comes every two weeks." Deirdre was standing by the corner lined with shelves. Records, books, plants; a tray of sunglasses and a mirror. "Should I put on a record?"

"Cleaner?" Nigel lagged behind. He sat on the couch next to Emma.

"Wow, she's got cleaner," Emma giggled. She held a catalogue open between her thighs. Breasts in mid-century hosiery pointed out at them. "Kelly let me stay in her spare room while her husband's gone, but I've basically been living out of my car for the past seven months."

"Should we do some acid?" Deirdre glanced around the room.

Kelly sat perched on a bench as though it grated slivers into her bottom. "I need to go home, I need to start getting ready. I can't believe we have a whole other night ahead of us."

"Oh my god," Deirdre laughed. "What are we going to do?"

Kelly prodded her face, moved the skin of her cheeks around. "I honestly don't know if I can."

Deirdre took her place in the rattan chair. "It's your birthday. Everyone's coming for you."

"I thought that was last night? When do we get to leave this life behind?"

"I don't think we can. There's no alternative. This is it. This is life." She was busy cutting the tiny square of paper into quarters.

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Deirdre wrapped a kilt over her jeans, hung an oversized bomber from her shoulders, tied on a pair of hiking shoes in a caramel–green colourway. Emma was wearing a plain white t-shirt, a denim jacket and straight-cut jeans over cowboy boots. Her freckled cheeks shone like a blown-out photograph.

Nigel had brought three books, a pair of extra underwear, and the same charcoal corduroy shirt he was wearing. “Try this on,” his sister said, and handed him some clothes from her dresser. The single cuff towered three ostentatious inches. The shirt was navy, with mother-of-pearl snaps and the distinctive Western points drooping down from the chest pocket.

Emma glanced up when he showed them his new outfit. Deirdre gave him a bemused look. “Lose the hat.”

“Why are you trying to dress me like a cowboy? I’ll just wear what I was wearing.”

Emma flipped her hair and returned to her phone. Deirdre slid her eyes from one to the other. Whatever she wanted to communicate, Nigel bristled at an overbearing hand. The floating sensation of the acid hit the weight that pulled him down, compressed him like a block of trash.

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Emma accelerated ahead of them. “Just give me a second.” She opened the back door of her Camry and pulled out a box, jammed it in the trunk. “Please don’t judge me. I’m homeless, basically.” Clothing piled high in tangled heaps covered the backseat; Nigel pushed them aside, ignored the bra that swam to the surface. He pulled a set of drop bars from beneath where he sat. “It’s alright, babe, don’t worry about it,” Deirdre said from the front seat. The surface of Nigel’s mind was completely smooth, devoid of any gravitational pull.

Emma backed out of her spot in the paid lot, nosed out over the sidewalk, then leapt into position next to the streetcar. Their drive was all fits and starts, rapid transitions from one point to another. “I

forgot that I'm on acid," she remarked, "but I think it's actually making me a better driver."

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In an obtuse angle formed by two condo towers, a group eleven strong convened for the first phase of Kelly's second birthday party. She was centred on the long side of the table, a dazed smile spread over her face. Nigel took the head, Deirdre to his left and Emma to his right. Their server approached, fearful of the boisterous group whose shouts and laughter ricocheted up the concrete crevasse.

The first four bottles of wine lasted no more than twenty minutes, and did not so much as dent the group's thirst. Emma took the closest bottle, index finger knuckled in the dimpled base, and poured an arc into Nigel's glass.

Deirdre was talking to Sam, Odie's new girlfriend, but she took the time to whip her head around and admonish him. "Take it easy." Maybe she had in mind one of those times when he had puked up his guts—fifteen years ago, when he was fourteen and she was eighteen: before they had both moved away. His blunted organs could no longer be affected by alcohol. It might dull his reflexes, elongate his speech, but the surface of his mind was too smooth for mere wine to catch hold.

"Look at this," Emma said. They stared down the length of the table. Her leg was warm where it pressed against his.

"Oh—" They watched it unfold with inexorable languor, heads drawn together. He was breathless as Odie grasped a bottle by the neck. The man didn't look, didn't care. Caught up in his conversation, he choked the bottle with a rough hand and splashed a crude stream into his glass.

"So rough," he said.

"Is that what you like?" she asked him.

"It's alright, but it depends on the situation. It's risky." There came none of the adrenaline that

typically accompanied moments of wager.

“It’s usually me who’s taking the risk,” she said. Odie sheathed the bottle inside its metal canister.

“I prefer if you tell me no than if you say yes. The ones who say otherwise don’t know the first thing about trust or communication. You need a safe word.”

“I’ll try to think of one.” She was looking at her phone again, but her leg did not leave his.

“What’s your deal, anyway?” he asked her.

“I’ve always had this dream of living in the desert. My ex grew up near the ocean. I think that’s why it didn’t work out. We were climatically incompatible.”

Evening was coming on. It was only May, early enough for a chill to set in. She drew her blue jacket close, crossed her legs and dangled a boot.

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They reconvened for phase two at the restaurant, and were able to reproduce the same arrangement around the table. Everyone wanted *steak frites*. Nigel and Emma split the tartar.

Deirdre drew Emma and her brother into a huddle. “How high are you?” she asked.

Nigel considered the question. “Not as much as before,” he confessed.

“I was going to take something to get back in the saddle,” Emma said, “if you’ll excuse me.”

When she returned, Nigel felt her small hand against his under the table. For a moment he grasped it as though she intended to hold it there, but she only wanted to press a plastic bag into his palm.

“Take it, finish it.” He excused himself. She was right that there was nothing there. He cut the seams of the tiny baggie lengthwise and rubbed the plastic against his gums. It tasted like chemical sweetener.

When he returned, Deirdre glared at him, face expressionless. Emma pressed her leg against his and ordered him a Manhattan.

She leaned over to whisper in his ear. "My safe word is salt."

A hunk of chopped beef trembled on the cracker in front of his mouth. Her blonde face caught the dim light. His perception shifted, the world swam, past folded back into present.

"Where did you get that word?"

"It just came to me. You don't like it?"

"It's not what I expected." A ghost only lives in the mind of the haunted, Nigel reminded himself.

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The group burst at the seams. A second wind buffeted Kelly and Deirdre, who led the charge into the anarchy of the night. They loitered in the lobby of a club and surreptitiously observed the door, tracking patterns in the guard's movements.

"It's so funny that we're here. People from the suburbs take the train into town to come here," Deirdre explained.

Nigel worried about how Emma might feel in her white t-shirt and pants. Wallflower might work for him, but he hated to see another brought down to his undignified level. The hostility of the lights, the close-packed strangers, the harsh techno was like a plunge into icewater. He struggled to keep his composure: the best he could manage was to cock his eyebrow. It didn't take long before Kelly called a retreat. Her place wasn't far. In the taxi, Odie sat up front while he sat in back next to two others. Emma laid across their legs and sipped a beer. He stroked her calf and felt it flex under his fingertips.

With no chase for the vodka and short on ice, they sipped it neat on single cubes. Deirdre had splintered off, vanished into the night. Odie sat close to Sam; Kelly, still in the middle, waved a tiny

crystal glass held between thumb and forefinger.

“Let my life begin!”

Now Emma had vanished. Well, she lived here. He knew the way to the bathroom. White tile and mirrors, every surface cluttered with cosmetics just as he remembered it. He gargled water, spat, washed the end of his penis, then poked his head into the spare room. It was still filled with Kenny’s bicycle parts. Emma had changed into white shorts and sat against the headboard. She didn’t want to face him, so he put a pillow under her hips and his fingers in her mouth. She tongued them energetically and spat up thick saliva. His sweat dripped onto the back of her shirt, but she didn’t want to remove it, even if she would allow him to momentarily pull it up. In sudden inspiration, he licked her from behind and caught a whiff of shit.

“Do you mind if I open the window?” The words tripped over his thickened tongue.

“Go ahead—you’re the one doing all the work,” she said, in the same pose as an odalisque. Green light glowed from the neon 7-II sign across the street.

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Nigel woke up de-hydrated three hours later. The sky was overcast, but light came insistent through the window.

“What have I done—I can’t believe it,” Emma said, hiding under the sheet. “What’s wrong with me?”

“What’s wrong with you? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you, it’s just embarrassing. I love your sister. Please don’t tell her.”

“Maybe I can see you again before I leave,” he said.



“Yeah...maybe. Take my number.” She watched him pull his clothes back on. “I can’t believe it’s Mother’s Day.”

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Deirdre did not answer her phone. They were due for dinner. A few fitful hours as restless as those in the car. The battery in his phone clung to its last charge. Distances were long in this city, but after the twenty minute walk from Kelly’s place back up to Queen, Deirdre did not pick up her phone. Something hit his shoulder, ricocheted onto his lip. He tasted something salty. It was bird shit, an olive-brown mark left on his jacket. He had an extra napkin from the Manhattan that he used to scrape it off. The streets were full. Sons and fathers patronized wives and mothers. He stepped into a bookstore and bought a copy of *The Years*, then walked twenty minutes back to Deirdre’s block, there to pace in front of the locked brown door. She continued to not answer her phone. A homeless man held out a blackened hand, shirtless, distended belly covered in grime. Nigel could make out the golden halo that hovered over his head.

He entered a cafe, bought his coffee with a bill and received no change. He could not understand the book, but the swatches of whitespace that aerated the page soothed him. Deirdre finally called and let him in.

“I just woke up. Last night was it, that’s the end, I swear. I can’t keep doing this.” Her face was framed by a black hood. “What happened with you two last night?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t remember.”

Deirdre stared at him. “Of course you remember.”

“Well, you’ll have to ask Emma.” The *déjà vu* returned. His feet itched. Something followed him. He needed to move.

“Just tell me. She will.”

“It’s between us and God.”

“Okay, whatever.” She was looking at her phone again. “We have to go to mom’s.”

Nigel wrote: “My ex’s safeword was salt. She grew up next to the Pacific. We once stayed in the same room you’re in now. This city is unbearably stressful. I’m praying for both of us. Take care.”

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They found two seats facing leeward. A bouquet of tulips bristled in his lap.

“What happened last night?” Deirdre asked again.

Nigel and Deirdre had been children together. Dad was already dead. Someday mom would die too, and then the children would start dropping off. Could you really call this living? The train stopped at a junction, emptied out and filled back up. They stayed where they were. A boy stood by the doors, phone propped close to the wrap-around visor that protected his eyes. JNCOs swayed at his feet. It was an impossible coincidence that they both had the same safe word. Why salt? It must be in a book, or some film. He looked at his phone. No surprise that she hadn’t responded. Adventure like this made him feel alive, vital, young. To bury himself deep in someone new was a blessed gift—or so he had thought. That time had passed. He wasn’t a kid anymore. The weekend had started in stress and terror. He had fallen face-first out of the car. Deirdre snored gently on his shoulder, phone still illuminated in her lap. You can’t live so intensely as this without losing something on the other end. Kelly was forty now, but she was married. He, meanwhile, had reached his zenith and now just repeated himself to ever-diminishing returns. He could learn about others, he could immerse himself in technique, but he learned nothing new about himself: and at the same time, he could sense the formation of a keratinous resin. The wild of the night appeared endlessly dynamic, yielding end-

less variety: and he was not even truly committed to this life, just a humble dabbler. Greater souls than he had committed their entire life-force to the party. Immediate reward came at the expense of a greater fulfillment than could be realized in one night. How could he marry, now that he had felt the texture of Emma's saliva? A girl who bleached her eyebrows, lived out of her car, bubbled through life and dreamed of the desert. Certainly, her thighs, the attention she had lavished on him—but what good did it do him to confirm that yes, this beautiful, weird girl was a complex personality and that yes, he could fall in love with her, given half a chance? He clung to the edge of life by his fingernails. It couldn't keep going like this. The train emerged out of the tunnel into the flatlands of an eastern suburb. Here they were. It was Mother's Day.