

## Lullabies and Laments

*Luke Rolfes*

"That's what you do when you drink," said Justin. "You get drunk. That's the point."

Sitting on her bed, his girlfriend glared at him and continued to dress herself. She slid her jeans off her milky white legs and threw them on the floor.

"None of these look good on me anymore," she muttered. "And you never used to drink to get drunk."

Silence.

"Well, maybe I should," said Justin, taking a swig from his bottle of Bud Light. "Maybe I spent the first three years of college being a prude."

He watched her dig through her closet trying to find another pair of jeans. She grabbed a handful of empty hangers and looked at them, as if she were making an important decision. She must have felt his eyes in the silence.

"If you're gonna stare at me, then I'm gonna make you leave the room," she snapped.

Justin turned red, averting his eyes from her soft body, clad only in underwear.

"Why can't I look at you?" he asked quietly. "You are my girlfriend, and it's not like I haven't seen it before."

She turned to him, brown hair flowing past her bare shoulders. She strode over to him and draped her nearly naked body on him. In moments, her warm mouth was against his and they pressed themselves against each other, making a tangled mess on the bed. After several minutes, Justin pulled his lips away from hers.

"I love you," he breathed into her ear.

She squeezed his back with her fingers. "I love you, too."

"I would do anything for you, Molly," Justin whispered. "Anything." He could feel Molly's breath in his ear.

"I love you so much," she said.

"You would do anything for me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," she said. "Anything."

"Anything in the world?"

"Of course, almost anything."

Justin sat up. "What do you mean, almost anything?"

"Well," she said. "I wouldn't kill anybody for you."

Justin laughed. "It's not like I'd ask you to do that. Would

you do something for me you hate to do?"

"I don't know... maybe."

"Well, what's something that you hate?"

"Um... I wouldn't walk through campus in a bikini for you. I wouldn't sing for you. I wouldn't skip class for you."

"You'd skip class," Justin told her.

"Yeah, probably," she said, kissing his neck.

"You wouldn't sing to me?"

"No. No way."

"Why not?"

"I hate to sing."

"Whatever," he said. "I can't believe you wouldn't do a simple thing like sing for me."

"Come on," she laughed. "It's not like you want me to."

Justin didn't think it was funny. "Yeah, I would. I'd love it if you sang for me."

"Why?"

"Because you would hate it. It would mean a lot if you did something you hated."

"Well, you'll just have to get over it, then."

"Fine," said Justin. "I see how much you trust me."

Molly sat up and took his hand. "Okay, then, would you not get drunk tonight, because I don't want you to?"

"Hell no."

"What?" she asked. "So you're saying you lied to me?"

"No, I didn't lie to you!"

"You said you'd do anything for me."

"Well, it wasn't a lie at the time, but you made me change my mind."

She pulled away from him, getting off the bed and gathering up her clothes.

"Oh my god," laughed Justin. "Seriously. What am I supposed to say? You wouldn't even sing for me."

"Whatever," she said sliding into a pair of jeans.

"Don't be like that," said Justin. He made a space for her on the bed. "Come back."

"I gotta get ready."

Justin placed a five-dollar bill on the bar. "Give me a shot," he yelled over the music.

The bartender's spiked hair and white dress shirt turned and bent closer to him. "What do you want?"

"A shot. I want a shot."

"What kind?"

"Something that will knock me on my ass."

"You got it." The bartender snapped up the five with two fingers.

Justin felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Molly.

"Aren't you gonna dance with me?"

He thought she looked hurt, but he waved her away curtly, not wanting to deal with it. "Go dance," he said. "Dance with your friends."

She gripped his forearm and forced him to look in her eyes.

"Honey," she said. "You've had enough already. No more."

Justin laughed. "Hey," he said. "Just this last one. I already paid for it."

She started to pull him away from the bar.

"No, really," he said. "I'm fine. Just give me five minutes. I'm gonna have one drink and go to the bathroom. Then I'll come dance."

"Promise?"

"Yeah."

Molly did not look convinced; she squeezed his hand and walked away.

The shot burned all the way down.

"Je-SUS," Justin said, wiping his mouth. He reached into his pocket and placed a ten-dollar bill on the bar. "Give me two more."

Justin was gone. Finished. Hit by a liquid semi-truck drunk. He swung his head back and forth at the bar, trying to figure out what it was he was supposed to do. As he set his forehead down on the flat surface he became overwhelmingly inclined to just fall asleep.

"What in the hell," he whispered. "I know... something. Shit."

He motioned for the bartender to come over to him.

"You need another shot?" asked the bartender.

"Nah," said Justin. "Um... I need to ask you... you seen my girlfriend? I can't remember where she went."

"Man, I don't know where your fucking girlfriend is," the

bartender said. "She's probably either in line to piss, or she's on the dance floor."

"Oh...shit!" Justin exclaimed. "I knew that. She told me."

The bartender laid his elbows on the counter and leaned forward, eyeing Justin suspiciously. Justin stared back at him with half-closed lids.

"You ain't drivin' tonight, are you, man?"

"Me?" Justin laughed. "Nah, I'd probably get an O.W.I. I think I'm drunk."

"No shit," said the bartender. "Why don't you go find your girl? I'm sure she wants to know where you're at."

Justin nodded fervently. Pushing himself up from his stool, he pointed two fingers at the bartender and smiled. "You, sir," he declared, "you are a good human being. Thank you."

The bartender shook his head. "Yeah," he said. "I'm a fucking saint."

A drunk girl staggered up to the counter, throwing herself on Justin's recently vacated stool.

"Give me..."she said. "One of those things, you know. With the coke. And that rum stuff in it. One of those things."

"That's a rum and coke, honey," said the bartender. "And that's four bucks."

Justin tried to walk toward the dance floor. He felt people pressing against him, waitresses running past him. They were moving at the speed of sound, he was sure. Techno music hit him from all directions. The bass thumped his sternum, repeatedly, tried to shake him to bits. Lights came at him from all angles. Attacked him. Flickering on and off. All around him was motion. Then darkness. Motion. Darkness. He rolled his head back and swore softly.

Gazing up at the lights, he momentarily felt himself flowing in the current of a quick river. His body staggered forward, and he almost lost his balance. Throwing his hands on his knees, he took a deep breath. Eyes closed, head back. Swallow. Breathe. Eyes open. He could not help but feel that he had wandered into a dream. Nothing was as it seemed. The world was trying to kill him. Music everywhere. Spinning and confusing him. He moved, needed to find something. Needed to get out. Needed to be somewhere other than here.

Molly was in front of him, on the edge of the dance floor. He saw her now. She had her back to a man. Justin could not see him, but he could see the man's hands placed firmly on his girlfriend's hips, his fingers fondling toward her belly button. They were swaying slowly. Justin could tell that the man's crotch was pressed firmly against her ass, pressing and pressing against her. Over and over again. She was smiling and pressing. Smiling. Pressing. Eating it up. She was smiling and pressing and eating it all up.

"Son of a bitch," Justin said slowly.

Covering the distance to the dancing pair in three giant steps, he grabbed Molly by the arm and yanked her away from her partner.

Molly seemed to take it all in stride. "Justin," she yelled calmly over the music. "I want you to meet Georgie. He works downtown in the hospital."

Georgie smiled and offered his hand. Justin stared at it, furious.

"Bullshit," said Justin. "You're too young to work in a hospital. Who do you think you are, Doogie Howser?"

Georgie laughed. "No, it's true. I swear I really do."

"Well, then. What do you do there, clean bathrooms?"

"I save lives," said Georgie. "You know, I stop people from dying."

As the words left Georgie's mouth, Justin's palms flew forward and hit him in the chest, knocking him back into another dancing couple. "Fuck you!"

Georgie, paying no attention to the people he had just bumped into, came storming forward with face flaming red. "What the fuck is your problem, man?" he yelled, shoving Justin back.

"Shut the fuck up!" Justin tried to push Georgie again. "You think I'm gonna let you dance-fuck my girl right in front of my face?"

They fought. Molly screamed for them to stop over and over again. Strong hands pulled them apart as they swung vainly and repeatedly at each other's heads.

"Let me go," yelled Georgie once they had been wrenched apart and restrained. "I'll kick this fuck head's skinny ass."

"Any time," Justin yelled back. "Any fucking time you want, you son of a bitch."

The bouncer got ahold of Justin and carried him bodily toward the door. Justin did not stop yelling insults until he was dropped hard on the sidewalk outside. When he hit the concrete, he attempted to spring back to his feet but felt incredibly weak. He just lay there. A large figure stood over him.

"Don't ever come back here," said a deep voice.

It was cold. Justin was alone. There was nobody around to see him lying on the sidewalk in a sad mess. Worthless. After what seemed several minutes, he dragged himself up to a sitting position against the brick wall of the bar. Shivering, he put his face in his hands and rocked back and forth, trying to slow the blood rushing through his head. He just wanted to die or pass out, whichever came first.

He leaned his head against the bricks and let his eyelids fall closed. Behind his eyes he saw colors. Lots and lots of reds. He wished it would rain, rain on him so hard. Thousands upon thousands of tiny wet droplets. They might take the red away. Bring him rest. Clean rest.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" demanded a voice.

He looked up. She was pissed.

"Talk to me," Molly said. "Talk to me right now or I'm leaving you here."

Justin's eyes felt so heavy that he let them ease shut. "Why did you let him?" he whispered.

"Let him what? Dance with me?" she asked. "We were just dancing!"

"He was going to try to take you home."

Molly coughed. "Do you think I would have gone with him? Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust him."

"Answer the question!"

"Fine," sighed Justin. "All I'm going to say is that you showed it off pretty good for him tonight."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What do you think it means? It means you were acting like a goddamn slut. How do you expect me to deal with that?"

Molly was crying. Justin could not tell if his words had made her start to cry or made her cry harder. He didn't want to open his eyes.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked. "Are you trying to hurt me? Or have you just become another stupid drunk?"

"Molly." Justin clenched his fists. "I do not want to get into this right now."

"You are really lucky that I'm in love with you," she snapped. "Otherwise I would have left you here to rot."

Justin leaned back against the bricks, feeling his brain swimming again.

"Are you even listening to me?"

He did not respond and in seconds felt her small hands grab him by the armpits and try to yank him to his feet. He attempted to resist her for a moment but resigned and pushed himself up off the sidewalk. He tried not to look at her, concentrated on standing upright. His head felt like a balanced boulder trying to topple him.

She pushed him toward the window near the entrance of the bar. He staggered forward and groaned.

"Molly, what the hell?"

"Look, Justin," she said. "What do you see?"

He peered through the window, feeling her fingers digging into his arm incessantly.

"Shit, I don't know. A bar."

"No!" she snapped.

"Well, what the hell do you want me to see?"

"Look at yourself."

"Jesus, Molly. Leave me alone. I'm really tired." He tried to walk away, but she jerked him back.

"Look," she ordered. "Tell me what you see."

He glanced at the outline of his reflection in the bar window, then looked down. His head still spun and he closed his eyes, trying to make it stop. "Nothing."

"You don't see anything?"

"No," he said. "Nothing."

She was silent. "You're scaring me," she said finally. "I have no idea who you are right now. The only thing I know is that I want to go home."

Justin waited for her to say something more.

"And you are not sleeping with me tonight," she whispered. "You're sleeping on the floor."

"Okay."

"I'm serious," she said. "The only reason I'm not dropping you off at your apartment is so I can watch you and make sure you don't drown in your own vomit."

"Okay."

"And do not try to talk to me," she said. "I don't want to hear your voice."

"I know," he said. "I'm pretty sure I'm sorry. I just want this night to be over."

"I don't want your lame apologies right now. I want to go home."

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

Molly closed the door to her apartment behind Justin. He had not spoken a word on the ride home. When she turned on the kitchen light, he squeezed his bloodshot eyes closed.

"Justin," she said. "Please just go upstairs and go to sleep on my floor."

Not looking at her, he obeyed silently and walked toward the stairwell.

"Hey," she said. "Take one of the blankets from my bed. And a pillow."

He did not answer.

Molly's eyes followed him up the stairs. Rubbing her temples, she wanted to cry again but felt too tired for tears. She got herself a glass of sink-warm water and sat down at the kitchen table. She placed her head on her hands, wanting to stay awake long enough so Justin would be passed out when she went to bed.

Next to her, the little red light on the answering machine flickered persistently. She caught it out of the corner of her eye.

The answering machine beeped and said, "Hi, this is Justin's mom... I got this number from his roommate. He said that he was going to be here tonight... umm, anyway. Could you please tell him, or Justin if you get this, that Dad and I want you to come stay at home tomorrow. We're not mad at you for leaving tonight. We just want to all go to Grandpa's wake together as a family. So, please, just call home when you get this. We'll still be up. Bye."

The answering machine beeped again and the little red light went solid.

Molly opened the door to her room, trying to make as little noise as possible. The floor was empty.

She opened the door wider, the light revealing Justin curled up under all her blankets on the bed. She shook her head.

"Figures."



She slid her shoes off and crawled into bed. Coiling her arms around him she pulled her face up until her nose brushed against his.

He stared at her with open eyes.

Her hand slid up the back of his neck and urged his head forward until her lips brushed against his cheek. As she ran her fingers through his hair she began to sing, ever so softly, her voice not even a whisper.