

from Juked #5, Spring 2008

LIZ PRATO

HE NEVER GAVE IT TO YOU STRAIGHT

I'm asleep and hung-over when Lincoln calls me on Saturday morning and tells me he's in jail.

"Jail?" I'm suddenly more awake. "What for?"

Marc's still sleeping by my side. Somehow the phone didn't wake him.

"I got arrested," Lincoln says.

"Yeah, I figured," I say. "What for?"

He pauses. "It's kind of a long story. I didn't, like, kill anyone or anything like that. Could you just come bail me out? Please. I can't call Mom or Dad. They'll freak."

It means sunlight. It means making my body vertical. It means going to the ATM or the bank or the bail bondsman, depending on how high his bail is. All annoying things to do when there's a smack down going on inside my skull. When Marc and I still have six more hours until Suzanne gets back from her trip and he has to go home. "How much is the bail?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Jesus, Linc. What the fuck did you do?"

"Jake, please," he says. "I need you."

It's all Dad's fault. He's the one who wanted a boy so badly. That's what he had hoped I would be, a boy, and it's how I got my name. He wanted to name a child after his grandfather, and since my mother made it abundantly clear that she would endure one, and only one, pregnancy, Jake got pinned on whatever or whoever was coming out of her. So I became the girl named Jake.

Dad wanted someone to follow in his footsteps, and to make footsteps places he had never tread. He wanted his progeny to be an athlete, so he put a mobile over my crib made of four squishy baseballs floating through the air. Mom told me this, of course. It's not like I remember. When I was three he started tossing softballs to me in the backyard. I couldn't even use a knife and fork, so I'm not sure why he thought I could catch a softball three times bigger than my fist. By six he was throwing footballs at me. By eight it was basketballs.

Dad was never any athlete, except for a little boxing when he was in the Navy, so all this athlete-junk was just an unfettered dream. The arena where he truly wanted an heir was in business. He's that guy who looks at a piece of land with trees and groundhogs living on it and sees a strip mall. But I never wanted to build strip malls, and I was never all that good at catching baseballs and footballs and basketballs. After ten years of me failing to catch everything that Dad threw at me, he informed Mom that he wanted to try for a boy. Mom reminded him of her position on one, and only one, child. He said, But I really want a boy. And she said, I really don't. And he said, Fine, I'll go find a younger woman who wants to bear my heir. Okay, he never really said that, but it's what happened. He divorced Mom and met Kathy and got her pregnant and they had a boy, and it all happened so perfectly that you'd swear it was written in some business plan that Dad had bound between two shiny green covers. But his plan failed in one significant way. He never thought to ask Kathy, "Hey, mental illness doesn't happen to run in your family, does it?"

Before I can arrange for Lincoln's bail, I have to get Marc out of my bed and out of my apartment. It's not that I don't trust him alone in here. It's just my play for parity. After all, I can never be alone in his place, so he should never be alone in mine.

"You've gotta get up." I shake his shoulder. "Linc's been arrested, and I've got to go post bail."

"Linc?" Marc squeezes his eyes tight. "Jesus, what now?"

"It's apparently a long story," I say. "Now up and at 'em."

"Babe, no." Marc pulls me down next to him. "I'm not ready for this to end." His chest is hot against my back, radiating all the way through to my breasts.

"I've got to go." I kind of hide my voice. Maybe he won't hear it.

Marc sits up, and the sheets falls away from his chest. He's got a weird sunburn pattern, bright red around a white patch the shape of my head. We'd lain on the roof of my building yesterday afternoon. The sun was hot on my hair. I kept my ear to his heart, thinking if I listened closely enough, I could make it mine. I should mention it to him, that weird sunburn. That's the sort of thing that'll get a guy in trouble.

"Come on." I stand up. "Get dressed."

There's nothing Marc can do about that sunburn. Not now, anyway.

Misdemeanor assault, the clerk at the police station tells me. "He attacked a protester outside an abortion clinic." I like this. Linc's out there throwing punches for a woman's right to choose. He's always carrying signs and signing petitions to make the world a better place. Drink fair-trade, shade-grown coffee. Ride your bike, ride a bus, but don't drive a car. Keep Wal-Mart from building in your neighborhood. Dad wasn't real pleased about that one. But today even Dad might be proud. After all, there was boxing involved.

Linc looks like he spent the whole night in jail, not just two hours. His dirty blonde hair is going as many different directions as a Chihuly sculpture, and his eyes are bloodshot red. He hugs me fast, and releases fast. "Thank you so much," he says. "I totally owe you. How much do I owe you? Five hundred, right? Well, I might have to owe you for a while. I've got my money tied up in some other

stuff right now.” This is the sort of thing our dad would say, and for him it’s probably true. He’s never liquid. All his money’s tied up in investments. But for a twenty-four year old record store clerk, this talk is a little grandiose. “Listen, we’ve got to bolt. We’ve got to go pick up Brittney. She’s probably waiting and is totally freaking out by now.”

Brittney’s his girlfriend. She’s nineteen and they’ve been together for two years. She makes conceptual art pieces out of retro toys. For Christmas she gave me a Lite-Brite that said “He Never Gave it to You Straight” in orange and pink plastic pegs. Marc asked, What’s that supposed to mean? and I said, You have to ask Brittney.

“Okay,” I say to Linc. “Where is she?”

“The abortion clinic,” Linc says. “And she was probably done over an hour ago. We’ve gotta go.”

A few years ago I went to visit Linc in Berkeley. He was living off campus in this big house with eight other students. His room was called The Cube. It had been awkwardly tacked onto the second story, over the driveway, and was a perfect square. There was just enough room for a futon to fold out with about one foot around each side. There are ugly appendages like this all around Berkeley, since space is so limited. People are always trying to figure out a way to charge more rent to more people. Fortunately, one of his roommates was out of town, so I didn’t have to sleep in The Cube with Linc. It’s not that I have any incestuous concerns, it’s just that he snores. If you wake him to get him to turn over, he jumps up with his eyes painted open wide and stands over you in fighting stance. It’s truly weird.

We took BART into San Francisco and drank cappuccinos in North Beach. Linc chatted up some prostitutes, tried to get them to unionize. Then we spent a couple of hours in City Lights Bookstore. Even though there are all these hard covers and best sellers, you’re not really thinking about John Irving or Alice Munro or Michael Chabon

when you're in there. The whole place is dusted with the ghosts of guys like Kerouac and Ginsberg. Well, maybe it's not their ghosts as much as their essence. You know.

Linc had this really pathetic fake I.D. that made him the same age I was, and the only way you'd believe Linc was thirty-two was if you were about a hundred, and everyone under a certain age looked the same to you. The I.D. never worked in Berkeley, but there were certain places in The City where they just didn't care. Vesuvio's was one of those places. We pushed to the back of the narrow bar and ordered whiskey sours. Linc drank a lot of them, and if I was a really good big sister, the kind you're supposed to be when you're so much older than your brother, when you're supposed to be more like a mom than a sister, I wouldn't have let him get so drunk. But I was getting drunk too, because of the guy I was trying to forget when I landed at my little brother's Cube in Berkeley.

Linc pulled *On the Road* out of his bag—it was an early edition, unsigned, but still cost considerably more than if he'd just bought the Penguin paperback for ten bucks—and he stood on top of his chair. He started reading out loud with the book in one hand. With his other, he gestured like he was conducting the philharmonic with his whiskey sour. Linc's long, blonde hair hung in his eyes, and his voice slid over John Coltrane air. The bartenders and waitresses ignored him. I guess this sort of thing happened often enough. But the tourists all watched and smiled and laughed. That's the thing about Linc. You can't help but want to watch him. He read the end, that part when Kerouac went on about the immensity of America and the children crying and the darkness over the rivers and God being Pooh Bear—before Pooh had been pimped by Disney—and I listened to his every word, every fucking word, and hugged my arms to my chest. My brother was such a beautiful exploding star.

Brittney's on enough painkillers and is generally stunned enough that she's not mad when we finally arrive. She's sitting in the wait-

ing room wearing sweatpants and Linc's black Coldplay T-shirt. I've never seen her without make-up before. Usually she has on a thick base of foundation and lots of black eyeliner that matches her dyed black hair. Today her skin looks gray.

"Baby, are you okay?" Linc asks. She wraps her arms around him, the sleeves of the Coldplay T-shirt bunching up around his neck. It exposes her tattoo of a heart with a flaming crucifix rising out of it.

"I just stepped out for a smoke," Linc said. "And those motherfuckers, those goddamn minions of the religious right who are pulling the damn puppet strings in this whole country, they were yelling at me and saying shit about you, and how we were going to hell, like yeah, they're never gonna see the inside of hell, and I fucking lost it. I just lost it, and hauled off on this guy, and can you believe it's okay for them to stand out there with those horrible pictures and to be screaming that shit at us, but it's not okay for me to do something about it? I got out of there as soon as I could. Jake saved my ass. I'm so sorry you had to be here by yourself."

He was talking fast like this in the car, too, talking about the protesters outside the clinic, and that seemed reasonable, under the circumstances, to be ranting about them, but then he was talking about Donald Rumsfeld and the CIA and Iran and the death of some dictator in South America, and then he seemed to be saying that it was China's fault that he ended up in jail while his girlfriend was having an abortion. Or, at least, it was America's dependence on cheaply-made products. I used to think this sort of ranting was about being young and a Poli-Sci major at Berkeley. That's the problem with college. Everyone acts manic, so it's hard to pick out the ones who are truly messed up.

Linc asks me to drive them back to his place.

"What's wrong with your car?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," he says. "There're some issues with it. Some issues with Dad. The insurance and stuff, and I'm only supposed to

drive it to and from work, and the whole thing seemed unreliable, so we took a bus.”

“Wait,” I say. “You took a bus to bring your girlfriend *here*?” I can’t bring myself to say the word “abortion” in front of Brittney. Her eyes are wide and her mouth’s frozen in a little grin, like one of those kids who takes the short bus to school. Like she doesn’t know what’s just happened, and maybe I shouldn’t be the one to tell her.

“We couldn’t afford a cab,” Linc says. “We had all our money tied up in this. Jesus, Jake, can’t you just give us a ride home? It’s not like it’s out of your way, or something.”

It’s true. Linc’s apartment is on my way home, and it’s my day off, so I really don’t have anything better to do. Unless you count being with Marc. But if I brought this up, Linc might start talking fast and yelling about how Brittney’s been through something really traumatic and for godskae, Jake, I was just in jail and don’t you think all that’s a little more important than sneaking off with *Marc*? And the thing is, he’d be right. But he’d be wrong, too.

They sit in my back seat huddled in close together. She whispers to him, and he responds in a gentle tone. This is how they are all the time, not just after Brittney’s had an abortion. She’ll whisper, and he’ll say, “Yeah, fried chicken would be good.” Brittney whispers and Linc tells me, “Britt likes your sweater.” She whispers and Linc says, “Ahhh, Bunnycake. I wuv you, too.”

The first time Marc said he loved me I was on the verge on ending things. It all seemed so pointless, like a bad made-for-TV movie. We had met when he started coming to clinic where I give massages. He swears I’m the reason he finished the marathon in three hours.

We have to stop at the pharmacy. Linc and Brittney stay in the car while I get her prescription filled. While I’m waiting, I pick up a quart of cookie dough ice-cream for her. It’s what I bought after mine, when the cab driver was sitting outside waiting for me to fill my prescription. Shit, twelve years ago. How can I be old enough that anything in my life happened twelve years ago, much less some-

thing like that? I guess I didn't feel that much different than Brittney looks, all shell-shocked and meek. It's funny how little it makes you feel. Like you're not capable of taking care of yourself, and you just want your teddy bear and cold apple juice.

Linc and Brittney have turned my radio to a college station playing the Butthole Surfers, and have my air conditioner cranked on high and the windows down low. I hand them the plastic bag: Brittney's pain killers, a quart of ice-cream and the DVD of *Dirty Dancing*.

Brittney whispers into Linc's ear. He smiles. "She loves Patrick Swayze."

Linc had been out of college and back in town for only two months when I came home to the seven messages on my voice mail. "Yo, sis, whassup? You up? Let's go grab some breakfast. Dim sum, or pancakes, or some of that vile breakfast meat they eat in Pennsylvania. What's that shit called? I'll meet you at the Egg Cup in ten."

"Jake, whassup? You never showed for breakfast. Fuck, at least call me if you're not going to show. Man, we gotta talk about this job stuff. Dad's really on my ass. He thinks I should already be running GM or something. Those evils mothers, man, it's their fault all those people died. I mean, Bush planned the whole thing, everyone knows that, or not him so much because he's not that smart, but it was his idea and he had people plan it."

The first six messages were pretty much all like that, some of them longer, and some really short, and most of them louder, and all of them fast, until the seventh one, which was fucked-up slow. So slow that everything inside of me got speeded up fast. Some people who are no longer my friends called it "nothing more than a pathetic cry for help," like they would have had more respect for Linc if he'd taken more pills and drank more whiskey and had never left me that last message that sent me speeding to his place and calling 911.

He said he just didn't know what else to do. He couldn't figure out any other way to stop all the racing in his brain and his blood and his heart and his nerves and his skin and his teeth and his toes and his dick. That was the other thing. One of those messages, the longest one, was a confessional about all this weird sex stuff he'd been into lately, the kind of things you don't need to know about anyone on this planet, much less your younger brother. I try not to think about it too much, but let me tell you, even if that last drugged-out message had never crawled across my answering machine, the sexual confessional would have been enough. That was a real cry for help.

By the time I get home from dropping off Linc and Brittney, Dad's number is on my caller I.D. three times, but he's only left me one message. "Jake, I'm trying to get in touch with your brother," he says. "He was supposed to meet me at the clubhouse for lunch to discuss his career options, but he never showed up and never called. If you see him, get him to call his old man."

Dad's got this idea that Linc would make a primo real estate developer. It's what he had hoped I would be. When I was six, he tried to teach me what a joint venture was. I malaproped it into a Johnny Bencher. Dad still hasn't given up on Linc. It's a cyclical business, he says. Sometimes there's no work and no money for months, and then you work eighty-hour weeks and make millions of dollars. It's like he was built for it, Dad said.

I call Mom. I tell her that Lincoln was arrested. I tell her about Brittney's abortion. I tell her about the five-hundred dollars bail.

"Where in the world did he get enough money for an abortion?" Mom asks. She's a clinical social worker. I never know if her concern for Linc is professional, or if she just feels sorry for him because his own mother isn't much of a mother.

"He probably got a cash advance on his credit cards."

"And where did you get five hundred dollars for bail?"

"I borrowed it from a friend," I say.

"What kind of friend?"

"The kind who can get five hundred dollars on a Saturday morning." I wish I was talking to Marc instead of Mom. I wanted to call him as soon as I walked in the door, but Suzanne is probably back by now. Her trip was only two nights. For me and Marc, her two nights were like a trip around the world. And the thing is, late last night I think he said he wanted out. He's not the kind of guy who goes around promising me that, either. It's complicated, he's always said. Money, obligations to his family, guilt. But late last night, something was different. Or maybe it was just the tequila talking.

"You know, Sweetie," Mom says. "You don't have to go running every time Lincoln has a crisis."

"I know, Mom."

"It's not like they're isolated events. This is just who he is. This is who he'll always be."

"I know."

I know, I know, I know. There was a time when I thought all the ecstatic dreams and paranoid conspiracy theories and fast talking and sudden despair was because Linc was so young. I had gone through some of that too, fueled by low self-esteem and drugs and sleeping with the wrong guys. I figured he'd grow out of it. But after the Cry For Help, when Linc was hospitalized and Kathy mentioned that her oldest brother was bipolar, I figured the meds would take care of it all. The valproate would smooth out the rough edges in Linc's psyche and he would be forever calm. That's what being stabilized meant, right? But Linc's meds have to constantly be adjusted. Add lithium. Add olanzapine. Increase Depakote. Oops, reduce olanzapine. Add Ativan.

His moods seem to stay steady for about nine months at a time. Summer's the worst. Then he ramps up, working overtime, planning some shady deal on the side that'll make him a load of dough, staying up until one in the morning, waking at five and riding his

bike for thirty miles then coming home and napping for twenty minutes, then placing or answering one of his personal ads, the ones you find under headings like “Casual Encounters” that say things like “Me: Controlling disciplinarian. You: Into humiliation and light pain. Let’s meet 2 nite and push the boundaries,” and then going to work, drinking a fifth of whiskey hoping to calm it all down before hooking up with someone from those ads.

He either ramps up toward all that, or so, so, slowly goes the other way. He stops returning calls. Stops eating. Stops showering. Stops working. Stops paying his bills. Stops getting out of bed. Stops seeing sun. He gets so damn thin that it’s like he’s trying to make himself just go away, away, away.

It’s not what was supposed to happen. He was supposed to fall in love with someone strong and mature. She’d see it all start before it gets bad. She’d tell him he needs to get his meds adjusted, and he wouldn’t argue with her, not like he argues with me. Not like he disputes all the reasons why I think he’s cycling on a point-by-point basis. See, that’s part of the problem. Lincoln’s smart, and it’s like his disease knows that. It’s like the disease figured out how to use Lincoln’s smarts to keep it alive.

I watch *Dirty Dancing* on DVD. A friend gave it to me a few years back for my birthday, and I think it was supposed to be a gag gift. “Oh my God, that’s hilarious,” I said when I unwrapped it. “Nobody puts Baby in a corner!” At the end where Johnny lifts Baby up in the air, I get a little teary-eyed. I’m not saying it’s a great movie. I’m just saying that it’s really something that Baby didn’t need to be saved by the hunky guy. I’m saying that it was nice that, in their own ways, they saved each other.

After the movie, I call Linc.

“Hey,” he whispers. “Hold on, okay?”

My T.V. and the DVD player are still on. The screen is blue, and the word “DVD” is bouncing from side-to-side, like the ball in Pong.

It hits one side, bounces with seeming randomness to the other side, then back. It never lands right in the corner.

"Okay," Linc says, his voice normal volume. "Britt's asleep on the couch. I didn't want to wake her."

"How's she doing?"

"I don't know. Okay, I guess. I mean, what's okay, under the circumstances?"

I shrug, even though Linc can't see it. I guess the shrug is just for me. "I suppose okay means she doesn't regret it."

"She doesn't," Linc says, and I'm pretty sure he's shaking his head, even though I can't see it. I'm pretty sure he's shaking his head for him. "Thanks for everything today. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Linc thanks me a lot. For all the money, and the rides, and advice, and the calls to 911. He thanks me so fucking much that it's the same as not thanking me at all.

"I'm concerned about you." I use my calm and measured voice. "You're having money problems and getting in fights and talking fast. I think you're starting to cycle into a manic episode, and I want you to call your psychiatrist on Monday morning."

"No, Jake," he says. "I'm fine. Really."

"I realize you think you're fine," I say. "But you have to remember that's part of the disease. I'm on the outside, and I see things more clearly."

"Jake, listen . . ." he says.

Here we go. This is the part where he quickly and precisely destroys my reasoning. We'll go back and forth for several minutes until I have no choice but to give up, and in three weeks we'll be making some trip to see some doctor. It's about the hundredth time that I want to say Fuck it, you're on your own, and just hang up the phone.

He speaks slowly. "I can see why you think that. I really do. But, well, my girlfriend had an abortion this morning, and it kind of

upset me. I mean, I was in the waiting room while she was in there, and I couldn't sit still. I was so worried. I've never been through this before, but it seemed pretty normal to be anxious. Even to me."

"Well," I say. "Sure."

"And so I went outside to calm down and . . . man, Jake. I mean, you saw those pictures when we went back. All those bloody babies. And they called us sinners, and said Britt was going to hell, and it just made me mad. Wouldn't it make you mad?"

See, I was lucky. There weren't any protesters at the private clinic where I went.

"I've never been arrested before," Linc says. "And that was kind of scary, but it was hard to be too worried about being in jail when Britt was back there, by herself, 'cuz that had to be ten times worse than me being in jail. I mean, it was just a fucked-up day, Jake. But I really don't think the fucked-upness was about me."

It makes a lot of sense. His arguments always make sense, even when I still know I'm right. He's just a better debater than I am. He just knows how to neutralize me. But tonight I'm not so sure I'm right. There's a big difference between Linc neutralizing me, and gently inviting me to where he is.

"I'm going to keep an eye on you," I say.

"I know," he says. "That's the way it should be. Jake . . ." He shifts the phone to his other ear, and I know something, like I'm there with him. I know that he's sitting on the side of his bed, and his elbows are resting on his knees, and one hand holds the phone to his ear, and the other falls limp to his side, and his blonde hair all drops down, down down, toward his shag carpet. "I couldn't have done this without you today," he says. "Thank you. Really."

And for the first time in a long time, I say, "You're welcome."

My sheets are still tossed aside in a cold and disorganized heap. I pull them up, fold them over, smooth them out. I put on my pajamas, and I floss. My doorbell rings.

Marc is wearing sweatpants cut off into shorts, and a gray Notre Dame T-shirt. A black duffle bag hangs from his shoulder. His running shoes are untied.

"You getting ready for bed?" He points his chin to the cinnamon dental floss limp in my hand.

I nod.

"I suddenly don't have a place to sleep," he says.

I push my door the rest of the way open. "You do now."

Marc walks in and drops his duffle bag next to the couch. It's a pretty loud thump, at least two pairs of shoes and a shaving kit in there. "I'm tired." He walks toward my bedroom. "I'm going to bed."

I close the door behind me and secure all the locks, the little one on the doorknob that wouldn't keep out a basset hound, the deadbolt in the middle, and the latch at the top. I finish flossing my teeth over the kitchen sink then throw my dental floss out under the kitchen sink. I turn off my lights and go to bed. Marc's already lying down in the dark.

I get under the sheets next to him. He's so still that I can't even hear him breathing. I'd be the worst kind of mother, the kind who shakes her baby awake because she's afraid he's not breathing anymore.

"You know," Marc says, in this off-handed way, like it's something he just thought of mentioning. Like last night it wasn't just the tequila talking. "You could've told me about the sunburn."

"I know." I scrunch the pillow under my head. "I could have."