

## **My Waterloo**

**By Lou**

I broke up with Alex outside a restaurant.

When the phone rang, I thought it was a casual check-in. She lived in Macau and we hadn't seen each other as often for the past month. I seized every opportunity to take her calls, even if I was at a friend's gathering. That time, Alex first asked me about what it was like dating Dawn.

"I like her a lot! She's so funny. Let me tell you a joke she said the other-"

"Do you still love me?" My smile quickly replaced with a frown and I hurried out of the dimly lit space to the streets.

"What do you mean? Of course I do."

"I don't think you do anymore, because if you do, why don't we talk as much as we used to?" She seemed threatened by Dawn. After all, Dawn was nothing like her. Alex was dusk.

"I'm dating Dawn too. I wouldn't have as much time to find you anymore."

I forgot what she said afterwards. I silenced myself and my mind went blank once I gave up reasoning with a person who already had their mind set, who insisted that my love dissipated.

"Say something! Why aren't you talking? Say something!" She repeated as if the desperate cries could make me speak up.

After a while, she let out a defeated sigh. "Just say it. Say what you've been wanting to say."

I didn't put up a fight. I loved her. But long ago, I already prepared myself for the day she decided to push me away. "I always do that to everyone who loved me." That was what she said before, almost with pride. Could she be testing my loyalty to her? If she jumped off a cliff, would I follow suit? Like in movies, those glorified self-sacrifices in the name of love.

I took a deep breath. This is it.



Alex always made me feel special. She had not come out to her parents about liking girls, until she met me, as if I was good enough to be shown to her parents. She brought me, as a girlfriend, to see her parents. “You will have to get with a guy one day anyway,” they told her. What they did not know was that she was with a guy, while being with me, but that would be too confusing for them. Between that French white middle-aged man and me, Alex chose to reveal her relationship with me. She chose us.

It seemed destined that she liked me enough to introduce me to her parents, because we liked each other from the very beginning. She was visiting Hong Kong for the weekend and Erin invited both of us to a party. That night after a little bit of alcohol and messy make-outs, Alex took me to her hotel room and we had sex. The sex was empty, just like our make-outs at the party. I determined we would have sex that night once I laid eyes on her. She had very short hair, as I was told she shaved her head bald only a few months ago, wore a short off-shoulder black dress, and she was very shy. And her dancing was reserved - just swinging from left to right with her head facing the ground, and her eyes closed. She was the kind of girl I wanted to experiment sex with, without any strings attached. That was why it took me off guard when I felt more than I expected. I did not admit it at first. I even tried to lie to myself and Erin that what I felt was mere physical attraction. Erin, a person I had dated for a few months, was insecure about herself, about her womanhood, her body and her voice. She was on the phone and asked, “Do you like her?” with such fragility. So I lied, to try to make her less insecure.

Yet, it could not possibly be. After hooking up, she decided to stay on the bed. Alex told me about her favourite toddler-sized carrot plushie, how she would cuddle with it every night. “I’ve never told anyone this,” she whispered, afraid that someone would be eavesdropping. She was being vulnerable, fighting her sleep to accompany my insomniac mind, revealing secrets no one else knew, to me, a person she just met that night. She made me feel special. I loved feeling special.

We talked about our past, with occasional flirtatious remarks in between. Then there was a moment of silence. “Can I kiss you?” she blurted out. It was already two o’clock in the morning and all the surrounding buildings had their lights off. We were lying on the bed face to face, with just the moon from the grand windows casting a light on us.

I leaned in for it, and it filled me with tingling sensations from the entire body, travelling in waves back to my very lips.



This is it. “Let’s break up then.” I was saying those words, but I wasn’t the one thinking of them.

“See? It’s not that hard.”

“Bye.”

I continued sitting outside after hanging up, scanning around the street to people-watch. The weight of my feet felt heavier than usual. I saw it coming, but this heaviness still came along. The familiar scent of musty Marlboro from the smoking pedestrians invaded the crisp cold January air.



“Want a cig?” Alex muffled with a lit one already between her lips.

“No, thank you.” I had always despised the smell of cigarettes, cursing under my breath every time I smelled someone smoking. I swore to never smoke myself. Despite all that, I kept on basking in the smoke she made for us. There is something about inhaling her fumes. What was once inside her is now drifting in the air free for me to consume. I was willing to destroy myself a little bit just to be in her presence.

“Why do you smoke this much?” I finally popped this question a couple of months into our relationship.

“I will find any possible way,” she said as she blew out a thin long trail of smoke, “to etch closer to death.” Her eyes squinted with absolute confidence and certainty. “I will die when I’m twenty-seven.” The twenty-seven club - a concept initiated with Alex’s favourite singer, Kurt Cobain’s death. Many rock and roll artists (at least 20 of them) died at this age. No one was sure if it was only a coincidence. I took that statement seriously. Sooner or later, I would have to prepare for our inevitable separation, no matter the reason.

I had never seen a person smoke with such intent. From the slow raise of her arm to connect the cigarette with her mouth, to the deep inhale making the cigarette butt light up, and finally her chin lifted up and smoke ran out from her small O-shaped lips, she was oblivious to how much of a trance I was in scrutinizing her every gesture. There was always substance in what she did as if she was trying to make meaning out of all the things she deemed meaningless. Thoroughly enjoying the quickened yet gradual decay of her body, her strong nihilistic nature was what attracted me in the first place. It was like the tiny voice in my head manifested into this person, agreeing to all my doubts about existence, about the absurdity I felt from everything. If death fell upon me, I would gladly embrace it. But Alex was a step ahead of me. She tortured herself, and always survived again and again, as if her body kept resisting from the verges of death. Perhaps it was calculated. It was enough to feel the life

in her holding on to its grasp when her vitality is slipping away. We saw in each other a part of ourselves. It made us less lonely.

I had yearned to become close to Alex ever since we met. And I remembered the exact time I broke my oath and gave in to the temptation of smoking. I was in a hotel room with Erin and Alex. It was late morning. Erin and I just had a quickie with Alex watching and smoking. With blood flushed to my head, I noticed the way smoke floated around the room, becoming more vivid under the seeping sun rays. I asked Alex, "Can you let me have a puff?" She handed her cigarette to me, and I took in the smoke almost too eagerly. We were sharing this agent of destruction. It felt like she became a part of the smoke and was inside of me for a moment, touching my insides and entering my blood stream.



When she left her hometown and started studying in the city of casinos, Alex found herself through rock music. In that loud, expressive, and complex music defined by youth revolt, she sought solace that loosened up her chains of existential dread. I tried to listen to it too, in an attempt to do the same thing.

She particularly loved songs about parting ways and heartbreaks, almost to the point of obsession. It was like she got a kind of melancholic high from experiencing heartbreaks. The Libertines' *You're my Waterloo* was one of them. After visiting her parents, I left early on my own back to Hong Kong. When she stayed there, we continued texting each other. One day, she played and recorded the intro of *You're my Waterloo* to me. I saw that as a final sign, a farewell present.



The signs had long since appeared when I visited her parents in Northern China, in that little town only known for a historical beach. I took the ferry to Macau, met up with her and we took the plane together there, transferred to a train from a Northern city and arrived at her hometown. Her parents paid for the whole commute. It was around seven o'clock in the evening when we got there, and the northern atmosphere did not hesitate to engulf me in its freeze. My teeth chattered the most that they ever had. We got out of the gates, to the exit of the train station, and there were her parents and the giddy poodle that she always mentioned to me about.

She showed me around her hometown, but she wasn't her usual self. Her face looked so dimmed. Every time I tried to engage with her, there were only forced smiles and half-hearted replies. I was like a puppy waiting for the slightest sign of attention, constantly looking back at her to see if she noticed me. She seemed so far away to reach, like a star walking parallel besides me, always on its own course, and me on mine. "I'm just not in the mood," she said. But I felt something more than that.



The day after our first encounter, we decided to spend time together again before she left for Macau. Alex proposed, “How about we switch outfits? And I do makeup for you? Then we’ll go out.” We had very different fashion sense. Donning long damaged hair, I usually wore androgynous clothing. That day I wore a faded blue and red striped button-up with long black loose jeans. She wore a short black off-shoulder dress, something I would never wear if I could choose. Her extremely short hair made heads turn mainly out of shock. It was what she wanted to achieve. She shaved her head bald a couple of months before. “I wanted to challenge the traditional beauty standards,” she said. Her features were exaggerated even more with heavy makeup - full face foundation with strong blush along the cheekbones, nose and head shining from the highlighter, eyes accentuated with long cat eyeliner and dark eyeshadow.

The only reason I agreed to her suggestion was that it was not in broad daylight. No passerby could easily see me in this get-up that I feel so uncomfortable with. We first changed clothes and she did my makeup the way she usually did it for herself, even though the foundation was too light for my skin. I leaned in to let her apply makeup on my face, and it was the first time I looked at her this closely. Her cheekbones protruded similar to a model’s face, and her eyes were as round as a doll’s. Lips parted slightly, with her rabbit-like front teeth coming into view. She was very absorbed in her work, brushing my face so delicately as if she was afraid that a little more pressure could break it. I trusted her with it, because her gentleness made me feel safe.

She was done with makeup, and I let down my hair. A smile appeared on her face, while she stood there putting her hands around her waist, seeming proud of her work. I stood up and twirled, making my dress flow, to show off how much more feminine I looked. She giggled. We then made our way to the full-body mirror on the front door and processed how we both looked together. I was not able to recognize myself, trying to take in my face with makeup, the same kind of makeup Alex put on herself - full face foundation with strong blush along the cheekbones, nose and head shining from the highlighter, eyes accentuated with long cat eyeliner and dark eyeshadow. There was a new-found feeling of sexiness when I wore that black dress. My skin was so exposed, but also liberated. It was like I could take on the world in that dress. “I look like a little boy!” She complained beside me. What I was going through at that time, was a moment of embodiment of Alex, of taking on this person as my own.



After the breakup call, my friends found out what happened and tried to comfort me, but I did not feel comforted. They were rooting against our relationship, labelling me as a player, as if I did not take this relationship seriously at all. They got what they wanted, what they thought was best for me,

where I ended this polyamorous phase, so I could settle down with one person. I did not feel any tears in my eyes, just the weight on my feet still firmly planted on the ground, letting gravity pull me down. I told my friends I had to leave first, so I took the train to my studio apartment in the confined Kwun Tong industrial area. I turned on the lampstand exuding tangerine-tinted light and threw myself onto the sofa bed. Cracking open the side window where the chill trickled in, I lit up a cigarette with my hands outside the window. I did a few puffs.

I looked at the smoke dissipated into the air, felt my throat become warmer the more I inhaled. I failed myself. I tried so hard to find my bearings in this complex form of love, but I lost them. I wanted to shout at my friends, at my family that it was not just a phase, not an experiment. All the love I gave was real and whole. It was not broken apart like bread, shared among the lovers I had.

That night, Dawn came over to be there for me. She let me into her arms, and I fell into them. I did not realise how drained I was until I didn't need to hold on. I felt helpless, like the strength I mustered to withstand those outnumbered pulls in the tug of war became in vain. I had collapsed forward face-planting the ground on the playing field. But, I finally felt pain in my heart and lungs. Once I broke ties with Alex, it was like I could feel myself again. I wasn't in her shadows anymore.

“It's probably time to quit smoking,” I said.