

# Everything She Lost



## remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

In the twilight, I trip over the black backpack. "What the hell?" I ask aloud, scanning the empty street around me. I'm walking home from a friend's house, about to turn the corner into Ladd's Addition; a car drives by, spilling its light over the open bag.

Someone must have left this when they got on the bus, I think, noticing the Line 70 stop beside me. An envelope is sticking out of the top of the bag—I pick it up as another car goes by, read quickly by the passing headlight. "Dear Kelly," the card reads, "Happy birthday!" I pick up the bag, intrigued, and turn the corner toward my house.

I set each of the objects inside the backpack in the middle of my apartment floor: a birth certificate from the mid-'70s, a skirt with the price tag still attached, another collections notice from the county, nail polish and tampons and a book titled *Queen for a Day*. I look at the feminine artifacts, fit them together like puzzle pieces. Kelly is a woman in her mid-thirties, struggling to get her life back together after hard times. She probably never went to college, probably drinks too hard and laughs too loud and never got along with her mother. She lives with the sort of insecurity that the vain cultivate, looking at her reflection so long in the mirror that imperfections, the crooked nose and the crow's feet, overwhelm her. I shake my

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head sadly—I bet I'd like Kelly, I think of the woman I am making up. *She's probably heart-broken that she lost all this. She'd want me to get it back to her.*

I am not someone who sits easily with loss. I cannot for the life of me remember telephone numbers or appointments, or even where the hell my keys are. However, I can keenly remember the titles of books that I misplaced years ago, the sting of tennis games in which I was defeated, the faces of ex-boyfriends right before the door shut and they walked away from me into the vast darkness of the world. If I lost it, whether it's an object or a person or an opportunity, it's branded on my memory. I'm

certainly wired to never forget the things I desire—I can't think of a time I ever forgot that I was hungry or horny or greedy, even if I wanted to—and loss is almost the same thing, a painful hunger for things I once knew, a desire to have them with me always.

I pick up a flier—a man's name is written across the back, a local phone number beneath it. Through my phone, I hear two rings, three, four. "Leave a message," the nondescript voice-mail message commands.

"Hi, this is Nick Mattos," I say, pacing around the room. "I'm calling because I found a backpack that I believe belongs to a woman named Kelly, and your phone number is the only one in it. If you know Kelly, or how to get a hold of her, please give me a call." As I recite my telephone number for the message, I realize how silly it is for me to be contacting this man. What if this is someone she met in a bar and never called? I hang up the phone and see Kelly, sitting at the bar in her low-cut floral blouse, making flirtatious eyes over her drink. *Kelly, the woman who got away*, I imagine him thinking as he listens to my message, hearing her name. *The one I lost.*

One by one, I put the books and clothing and cosmetics back into the black backpack. *I don't want Kelly to be bereaved, any more than I am*, I think, the teeth of the zipper interlocking shut. Loss is the great unifier, a universal experience that gives all of us a matching brand upon our hearts. I imagine her, crying to a friend about her misplaced backpack, drawing close to someone else who understands her fear and longing. "I hope I get it back," I hear her say, and hope the same—for her missing items, and mine.

Perhaps somewhere in the world all the things that have absented themselves from my life—the ex-boyfriends and the missed opportunities and the misplaced t-shirts—are in the hands of curious people, endlessly asking themselves the question, "Whose was this?" I hope those people turn the lost things into a puzzle, make up their own stories about the man who misplaced everything—my absent-mindedness and vanity, my quickness to laugh. *Even if they don't find me, I hope the question sticks with them. I hope they keep looking. In any case, I think with a sad smile, I will.* ☐

NICK MATTOS has so far not found Kelly, and is fairly confused as to what should be done with her birth certificate, collections notice and other effects. Email suggestions to [nickmattos@justout.com](mailto:nickmattos@justout.com).

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