

## Lonely Austin Nights

The morning light grew brighter and more intense as Rikki slowly gained consciousness and became aware of the soft sounds of his wife, Danielle, making coffee, cleaning up after breakfast, and preparing herself for the day. He squinted his eyes open as much as he could bear, placed his feet on the floor, and sat on the edge of the couch with his head in his hands. It was another late night morning after for Rikki.

"Good morning Sunshine," Danielle quipped.

Rikki managed a hoarse grunt, his head still in his hands. His feet were solidly on the floor though his mind wasn't yet convinced.

"What time did you get in?"

"I don't know. Three o'clock, maybe four. I didn't want to wake you so I slept on the couch."

"You know I don't like you sleeping on the couch, Rikki."

"Sorry" was all Rikki could manage as he tentatively stood and walked over to Danielle, kissed her lightly on the cheek, and grabbed the cup of coffee she held out for him. "Thanks, Babe." The warm coffee felt good going down, though he wasn't certain his stomach would agree.

Rikki was not exactly Mr. Sunshine in the morning, and conversation was never easy, especially after a late night, but Danielle persisted. "Did you call that guy back yesterday?"

"What guy?"

"Your brother's friend. He wanted to talk to you about a job opening at his company."

"I guess I forgot."

"You forgot? We talked about this. You said you were going to call and set up an appointment to go see him."

"No, Babe. You said I was going to call him. Me and the boys were working up some new material all day for last night's show. I didn't have time." Rikki's head was pounding, now, as his blood rushed through him with increasing force, his hangover feeding off his frustration as he and Danielle covered the same old ground they'd been covering for months.

"You know I love you, honey, and I love your music," Danielle backed off a little, "but I think it's time that you consider settling down and getting a steady job. We can't have a family if you're out every night 'til four in the morning."

"I don't want to talk about this right now." Rikki began sucking in his cheeks.

"We need to talk about this, Rikki."

Rikki turned and walked into the bedroom, set his coffee down on the nightstand and fell on the bed, pulling the pillow over his eyes to shield them from the bright Texas sun. He heard Danielle noisily gather her things and stalk off to work.

Rikki loved Danielle more than he imagined he ever could love someone, but she occasionally showed flashes of her Italian fire, especially when her biological clock was involved. As Danielle drove off to work, Rikki rolled over, praying for just a few more hours of sleep.

As Rikki drifted off to sleep, he remembered when he first met Danielle one hot August night nearly six years ago at the Rusty Nail. His band was playing their regular happy hour show, and Danielle was speaking to her friend Meghan, the bartender. Meghan had told Rikki Danielle would be there, suggesting that he might want to get to know her.

After the band finished their set and packed up their gear, Rikki made his way over to Meghan's end of the bar, trying hard not to stare at Danielle. Her tanned legs were crossed demurely beneath a conservative black dress that completely failed to hide the swell of her breasts and the curve of her hips. He strode confidently to the bar.

"Hey Megs! How about a round of Guinness for the boys, and another pink girly thing for your beautiful friend here."

"Well thank you," Danielle blushed.

Turning to Danielle, he smiled broadly, almost comically, as he introduced himself. "I'm Rikki. I'm with the band."

"I'm Danielle. Thanks for the Cosmopolitan."

"Cosmopolitan," Rikki scratched his chin. "I wonder what came first, the relationship quizzes or the drink? I would say the drink, since you'd have to be drunk to come up with those insidious things."

Danielle chuckled. "Oh, so you're a comedian now too, huh?"

Rikki placed an elbow on the bar and leaned in to Danielle. "I've got many talents."

"So what's the name of your band?" Danielle asked.

"TBA."

"TBA? What's that mean?"

"To Be Announced," Rikki puffed out his chest proudly.

"To Be Announced is your band's name?"

"Yups." Rikki beamed.

"That's kind of dumb."

Rikki clasped his heart with his right hand and staggered away from the bar, steadying himself on her chair with his left. Danielle chuckled and sipped her drink.

"We couldn't really think of a name, so we just started using 'To Be Announced' until we could think of something better but it stuck. Besides, we get to play just about anywhere, any night of the week. Whenever the sign outside says 'band to be announced' we can walk right in and start playing."

Danielle rolled her eyes, but Rikki noticed the smile and the glance at Meghan that told him he was making progress. When the next band started playing, Rikki asked Danielle to dance. The band started with a couple of up-tempo two steppers then dialed it down. Danielle started to walk off the dance floor but Rikki grabbed her hand and pulled her close. He could feel her warmth of her back on his hand and the

rise and fall of her chest as her breath quickened. He looked down into her green eyes and smiled.

Danielle smiled back then laid her head on Rikki's chest, her arms wrapped around his neck.

Meghan finally kicked them out seven hours later when she had to close the bar at 3 am. Rikki walked Danielle to her car and they quietly held hands for a moment.

"I had a wonderful time tonight." She began.

"Me too. You're a wonderful dancer."

"Yeah, well you're pretty good yourself." She took a step closer and placed her hands on Rikki's chest, lightly massaging him as he stood there in silence. She finally lifted her head and met his gaze. "So are you going to ask me for my phone number?"

"I was getting to it. I didn't want you to stop. I love the way you touch me."

Danielle blushed and looked down at her feet. She stepped back and opened her purse, pulling out a business card. She wrote down her cell phone number and tucked it into Rikki's front pants pocket as she gave him a light kiss on the cheek and thanked him for a wonderful night. Rikki stood and watched as she drove off, a smile on his face.

Over the next weeks and months, Danielle made it to every gig, and they saw each other every night he wasn't playing. Rikki told her all about the plans he had to make it big in the music business as soon as he found the right group of guys to join him and Johnny, his drummer and boyhood friend. Rikki's world was finally falling together. That was nearly six years ago. Where had it all turned around? Why was it now so difficult?

When Rikki awoke, the glowing red lines on his bedside alarm clock read 3:07. "Crap!" He had a rehearsal at four o'clock at Johnny's. He jumped out of bed, grabbed his towel and took a quick shower, more to wake himself up than anything. He threw on some tattered old jeans, black shoes, and a faded blue t-shirt with its long-forgotten, worn out logo and headed out the door with his guitar, grabbing his black leather jacket on his way out as an afterthought.

As he made his way over to Johnny's, Rikki remembered the argument he had with Danielle that morning. It was nothing new; they had covered this ground often these past few months, but this time it seemed different, more real maybe, like Danielle was hinting at more than she was telling. He knew

Danielle wanted a family, and so did he, but he couldn't just quit his music and go sit in a cubical in some sterile office all day. "Fuck that," Rikki muttered as he pulled into Johnny's drive over a half hour late. He grabbed his guitar and walked around back to the broken down, detached garage that functioned as their rehearsal and recording studio and which they dubbed "Beantown South" in homage to his and Johnny's hometown of Boston.

"Hey Rikki, glad you could make it!" Johnny exclaimed as he threw his arms dramatically around his longtime friend, patting him on the back the way men do when they hug, lest someone get the wrong idea.

"Traffic."

"Yeah. Traffic. Or maybe the dozen Guinness you put away last night," Johnny chuckled.

Rikki had to laugh. As Johnny and the band sat around, idly chatting and drinking cold Shiners, Rikki unpacked his guitar, smiling for the first time that day. His hangover drifted away with the ringing notes of his guitar as he tuned up.

He and Johnny had met in ninth grade shop class back in Boston and were fast friends from the start. Rikki's father was a local jazz musician and used to sneak the boys into the clubs at night as he played the Boston circuit. By the time they put their own band together, Rikki and Johnny were already well known by the managers at all the clubs. These connections landed the boys some choice gigs later on. After high school, they discovered Stevie Ray Vaughn and Texas blues and decided to move to Austin and try their luck in that burgeoning music scene. They quickly landed part time jobs to pay their living expenses and started putting a band together. They played shows at any club at any time they could book them.

The band practiced for nearly four hours before quitting and was tighter musically than they'd been in a while. Rikki was glad for the mild throb the guitar strings left in his fingers. "Great rehearsal guys. That's it for today. Let's meet tomorrow around six. We've got the Continental Club coming up and we were a little off on the break in 'The Times You Lied.'"

Rikki was abuzz with excitement. They had played the Continental before, but never as the headliner. This show was a release party for their debut CD, a self-produced Beantown South production.

Thanks to some musician friends in town who were more established than they were, some local radio jocks agreed to stop by. If they liked what they heard and played the CD on the air, things might finally start to happen.

It was after nine o'clock as Rikki made his way to his car, the chill of the dark night air against his sweat soaked t-shirt and bare arms surprising Rikki. He was glad he brought his jacket with him even though it was fairly mild when he left. Rikki loaded his gear in the car and popped in a Miles Davis CD for the ride home, feeling both exhilarated and tired. Remembering how they left things that morning, he wondered what kind of mood Danielle would be in when he got home.

Rikki walked into the house and dropped his gear by the front door. He saw Danielle on the couch and walked over to her. She turned her face up to his as he bent down and kissed her.

"Hey Babe."

"Hey. How was rehearsal?"

"Great. The band is really catching a groove. I think that Continental show is going to kick ass."

"That's nice."

"Nice?" Rikki thought. My band is in a groove and ready to launch and that's "nice?"

"Rikki," Danielle started tentatively.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you can give that guy a call Monday? Just to see what he has to say?"

Rikki sighed, looking up at the ceiling and sucking in his cheeks. Then, taking a deep breath, "We've been over this, Babe. I don't want to work in an office. It's not my thing. You know how important the band is to me."

"Well this is important to me."

"I know it is. It's just that I don't want to be some freaking cubical jockey the rest of my life."

"Well what about me, Rikki? What about what I need? What I want? I'm almost thirty. I want to have children, a family."

"We can have all that, Babe. Why do I need to have some lame job to have a family?"

"Because if we have a baby and I stay home to raise him, we'll need more than what you get from the tip jar to survive. We'll need a steady income."

"Well if this thing takes off, our income will be more than steady."

"And what if it doesn't, Rikki? I don't want to bring a baby into our lives without knowing we'll be able to support it, or with a father who's out 'til four in the morning every night playing at bars."

Rikki knew she was right, but he also knew there was no way he could be happy with the life she wanted for him. "Well what do you want me to do?" Rikki's voice rising. "Stop doing what I've dreamed about my whole life?"

Rikki walked over to the sliding glass doors leading to the balcony of their one bedroom apartment. He placed one hand on the doorframe and looked out into the night, watching the cars and people go by. He wanted a family. He wanted even more for Danielle to have a family, but what good would he be to that family if he were miserable?

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On a lonely Austin night, the streets glistened with a freshly fallen mist. Rikki waited silently backstage, barely acknowledging the bustle around him. His usual enthusiastic greeting of fans and band members gave way to silent nods and wan smiles. He rubbed his finger nervously beneath the sleeves of his deep red, almost black, crushed velvet jacket, as if searching for the ring it once bore.

The house lights dimmed. A small spotlight shone on a black guitar. Rikki let out a faltering sigh, made the sign of the cross, and stepped nervously on to the stage as a hush fell over the crowd. He slung the guitar over his shoulder as he bowed his head low, his lips moving in silent prayer.

Beneath the shadow of his cap, Rikki's eyes glistened.