

Better Left Unsaid (excerpted)

By Joelg.

Matt resolved to take one more walk around the block. If Lina, his girlfriend, hadn't already made it to the other man's house, surely she'd come back to their apartment for the night. Things would sort themselves out in the morning. They always did. He just needed to know who this other person was, how long it had been going on, and why she hadn't thought enough of him to bring this up earlier.

He revolved around the block once more, determined to find some answers. The city was pulsing with an unusual number of people for a Thursday night, mostly jovial young people seeking out the next big thing. No faces familiar to him, though. He was about to give up for the night, assuming that she would most likely return in the morning anyway, and then things would be normal. He knew he was in the wrong, yet she had to share the blame too – but once they met up again, it would be settled for good. She would tell him about the other man, she would apologize, she would start crying and saying how it was all her fault. After, he would tell her about the probable promotion, and apologize for leaving her alone so often. Then he would find the other man and beat the shit out of him.

Dejected and sobering, Matt made his way back to his apartment building, flush with the thought that perhaps she had made her way back there without him noticing. No such luck. The apartment was as he had left it, with clusters of empty vodka bottles, the bathroom light still on, and the kitchen in disarray. He set himself back into his usual kitchen chair and realized his hunger. Save for a cup of coffee twelve hours ago, he hadn't eaten a thing all day. He stood up, nursed the last drop from the latest bottle, and had a revelation – the pizza place. It was open almost all night. He and Lina had gone there before, in better times, when she was waiting up for him after a late shift. That's where she had to be. That's where he went.

He hurried as fast as his liquored legs could take him to the dumpy pizza parlor two blocks away. The crowd of

assembled people still hadn't thinned; there must have been some sort of late meeting or over-long show or...

"The concert. The damn concert! How could I have forgotten?" He remembered now how excited Lina was at the prospect of seeing her new favourite band for the first time, and how much he had to pay scalpers to get decent seats. He swore that he thought it was next Thursday. He stopped dead in his tracks, looked up at the urban night sky, extended his hands as if feeling for rain, and unleashed a pronounced sigh. 'I did this to myself.' He balled his fists and sought something to lash. An aluminum garbage can found itself pretty bent out of shape when he was finished.

Surely she was there, waiting for him. She had to be. Her and her friends probably go there all the time to gossip and whatnot. And, well, even if she wasn't there, he could still get something to eat. When he got there, he was greeted by a swarming throng of college-aged kids, most of whom were either staggeringly drunk or swaggering to stay on their feet. And no sign of Lina. That was fine. He was less angry at her now, but felt considerably worse about himself. If he could just hide out in this crowd for awhile, get some grease into his system, and think things through, he'd be able to salvage something out of this situation.

He stumbled up to the counter and placed his order rather quickly, since most of the loiterers were in there for the atmosphere. It was then, when he had been at the head of the lackadaisical line, that he heard a familiar high-pitched giggle. Lina was there. She was in the crowd.

His eyes flared. "Lina? Lina!" he screamed in the general direction of her recognizable laughter. "Lina! It's me! Talk to me!" No response, except for laughs and pointing fingers from some of the more intoxicated loiterers.

"Outta my way, asswipes." He made his way to where she must have been. He couldn't bring himself to swear, except at work, since Lina didn't appreciate the humour in it.

She was there, clustered amongst

her friends, trying her best to hold back her scorn. Her friends – new friends, that he had not seen before – encircled her when they saw the shambling man emerge from the crowd screaming her name.

"It's OK, it's OK, she's with me."

He tried reasoning with the crowd, but no one moved. He tried to force his way closer to her, but a svelte brunette woman refused to budge.

"Listen, Lina, I just wanna talk."

That's it. You have every right to be angry with me, I know, really. Just... just listen to me, OK?" He tried to be as sincere as he could.

There was a sort of huddle where Lina and her four friends discussed strategy, which ended finally when a black woman with beaded hair stepped up to Matt's face.

"You ever touch her again and I'll feed you your own balls. You hear me?" She looked him up and down and shook her head. "Pathetic."

Lina stepped forward, still unsure of what might come next. She turned to her friend on her left and whispered something to her ear, presumably telling them to leave her alone with him for a moment.

"Talk."

"I'm sorry, I don't deserve someone like you, I messed up bad, I didn't mean to hurt you, or hit you, and it never happened before and it won't again, it's just been really busy at work lately, because Raymond, the Snitch, I mean, he has this promotion in line for me, and he wanted to make sure that I was really able to do the job, so that's why I always had to stay late all those days. Honestly. That's the truth. May God strike me down if I breathe a word a lie." He looked to the sky and smiled. "See? Still here." She looked back to her friends, then cocked her head to one side as she brushed her hair back behind her ears. Her friends, once a protective cocoon, left the couple, escaping around the perimeter of the restaurant. "Is that all you've got to say for yourself? You selfish fucking prick. You know I missed you. You know. You just didn't seem to get it. You should've known that I wasn't happy. Didn't you think it was

a little strange I wasn't around for a week? For two weeks? That we hadn't seen each other for more than ten minutes in almost a month? God, Matt. Were you even thinking?"

"No. I wasn't. I'm sorry. You don't deserve to be treated like that." She snarled, enforcing her near-frozen frown. "But you had no right to go off with some other guy just because I wasn't at your beck and call for a spell. You think I wanted to be stuck at work all that time? You think I liked hanging around fucking Snitch for weeks on end?" It was his turn to play prosecutor.

She had nothing else to say to him.

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