

Lust for Life

By Mia Goulding

The cursor on my laptop is blinking, lonely on a white page with nothing but my name and a date to keep it company. I have to work at 6 am, I have a paper to write for college on Monday, and, wait a minute, I'm still in my mother's house in Valparaiso? I remember swearing that this scenario would never unfold. In fact, I was given a senior royalty when I graduated from Valparaiso High School in 2004: Most Likely Never to Return to Valpo. The other classmate to receive this royalty was an exchange student from Norway, so I imagine my classmates where almost as sure as I that my leaving this region would be permanent. I remember my Government teacher saying that he agreed that I was different from others in my class, that there must be someplace better for someone like me, whatever that means. Now that I think about it, if I had to pin the present situation on one pivotal moment, I'd blame it on my friend Jason and our all-out bum-excursion to California in January of 2005. Then, I'd thank him for being the first in an epic line of dominoes that fell against each other, leading ultimately to my present self: a strong-willed, motivated college student.

It was complicated, the whole thing. At the time I had been going through lots of pots of coffee per day and whole volumes of thoughts in paper journals. I aspired to be a poet, a lifelong vegetarian, and a world traveler with minimal (read: zero) funds. I was what you would call a radical thinker; I questioned everything that everyone else and I knew to be truth or fact. I also had no real direction, and nothing to lose, as far as I could tell. So, needless to say, it seemed like a dream come true when Jason asked me to accompany him on a tour of the west coast, for which he would supply my Greyhound ticket. This was fortunate for me, since all of my

graduation money had been spent at Bonnaroo that summer, and all of my Christmas funds had been exhausted except for around 45 dollars, which, at the time, seemed like an awful lot of money to a pseudo-anarchist-poet like me. I was especially good at “spanging” (panhandling strangers for their spare change) when money was a necessity, and I believed in the world and myself so much that I was not worried about what would become of me. Something about throwing all caution and familiarity to the wind seemed wonderfully irresistible to both of us; I found myself tingling with anticipation by the time we were ready to board the bus on that winter night of January third, in Gary. Little did I know that those three long days on the bus would not even compare to the wild ride that was to ensue over the next seven months.

The first three weeks that I spent in California were a blur of booze, concerts, and every flavor of strange personality I’d never known. One night, around Valentine’s Day, a girl named Danielle asked if I would want to work with her at a local Quizno’s, down the street from our flophouse, in which my bed was in the garage. I had just turned nineteen and had never had a job. It sounded new and fun for some reason, so I told her to set me up an interview, which she did. Thus, I was introduced into the working world, and surprisingly found great gratification in working for my money. Soon after, Jason grew bored and moved on, but I stayed and worked 40 or more hours a week for three months, sometimes under the table for sandwiches or cigarettes. A coworker who lived less than a block away offered me a spare room in her apartment for modest rent, and just like that I was supporting myself in ways I never thought I would. I learned to be responsible with my time, my money, and my living space through this first job, and soon enough I realized that minimum wage was not enough to get me out of the bottom of the barrel, so to speak. This was around the time that I met Steve, my boss from my second job in California. Steve ran petitions for the state, and he offered to pay me five to ten dollars a

signature, depending on the petition and who sent it out, plus five extra dollars for every person I registered to vote Republican. Now, at this point, the job was not about politics or values. The job was about money, lots of it, and with no taxes, it seemed flawless. I could run my petitions pretty much anywhere I wanted, whenever I wanted, and got a free ride to San Francisco anytime I had anything to turn in. I even acquired my own rental car to drive after awhile, paying for nothing but gas. At just over a thousand dollars a week, life seemed perfectly comfortable, until I decided that I was tired of hotel hopping from county-to-county. Furthermore, I was tired of Steve, the homosexual Roman Catholic/Republican, whose emotional tantrums and conflicting values were really getting on my last nerves. I decided it was time to get my own apartment. Not on my own, as in by myself, but with a new boyfriend, Billy, whom I worked with under Steve, and two of our other coworkers: John Wayne, who was from Alaska and had no teeth to speak of, and Josh, who was a permanently-visiting friend of mine from Chesterton, a neighboring city to Valparaiso. He had been sent out to stay with me by his mother, once he had completed rehab for his heroin addiction. And so it was, that all of us settled into our month-to-month rental apartment in Yuba City. We had no furniture, save for a few things from Rent-A-Center, but there was room on the couch for everyone to sit. It wasn't the prettiest apartment any of us had ever seen, and certainly not the one we were shown in the initial tour of the complex, but we were happy and independent and life seemed really good.

Life *was* really good, that is, until I got sick. I have a serious allergy to mold. I cannot take antibiotics such as penicillin, and if I eat moldy food, well, bad things happen. Our humble home had no central air conditioning, but there was a wall unit in the living room, which was old but worked. The bathroom looked as though it had been prepped for tile, but somehow maintenance had never gotten around to it, leaving instead a layer of industrial cardboard around

the bathtub, which swelled and bowed out whenever someone took a shower. The whole of those two areas were especially moldy, but somehow I didn't notice until I began falling ill. The air conditioning unit proved to be especially toxic, since I could not clean it out and it had to be turned on during the hot spring days. I went to the hospital and got a surgical mask for free from a kind nurse, who said it might help to filter the spores from the mold itself and particles from a bird nest which had been built right over the air intake valve, spitting feathers and little pieces of stick whenever it was first turned on. So it was that I found myself, playing *Zombies Ate My Neighbors* on my rented 61 inch flat screen television, with a surgical mask on, so that I could keep my minimal A/C running and not overheat. I continued to get sicker, and eventually stopped working. It was hard to convince someone to stop and sign my petitions when I could barely breathe or speak, and it was hard to stand in the heat when I felt so horrible.

It was then that I resolved that I wanted to go to college. I realized I had never really viewed higher education as an option, more as a waste of time. This was probably because all I had wanted to do was write poetry, and I had decided that poetry classes would ruin, rather than nurture, my style as a writer. Sitting on my couch, with a swollen throat, by myself forced me to really ponder what it was that I was doing in California, and what it was that I wanted to do with my life. I knew a few things, like I wanted to feel good about whatever it was that I did. I wanted to be surrounded by nature, not to be locked in an office or, even worse, a cubicle. I desired something interesting, so that I would not look at myself in thirty or even ten years and regret the decisions I had made. After a few sleepless nights and half a notebook of ideas, I decided that the best thing that I could do was to head back to Indiana and move back in with my mother for a little while, just until I could get on my feet. I knew that she would welcome me home, and give me all the love and support that I needed. I would also have a quiet and clean place to study,

since my grade point average upon graduation from high school was decidedly low for one who was college-bound. I needed to start slow and learn good study habits for classes other than English. I knew could still keep my poetry as a hobby and pursue something more meaningful, such as environmental science, as a career.

Eventually, that's what I did, and I couldn't be happier with myself. Not even waking up on the doorsteps of new horizons could ever feel as good as building a strong foundation for the rest of my life. I've retained my open mind and curious nature, but gained a new sense of self-worth and direction that I never had before my adventure. Now that I'm going to an accredited college, I feel as though there is no obstacle that I cannot conquer. I also feel very intelligent, optimistic, proud, and mostly happy that I'm doing the right thing. That's all I ever wanted, anyway, now that I think about it. It's amazing how sometimes it takes being at the rock bottom of life to find a way to climb one's way out of the hole to the top. There is no limit to the possibilities and outcomes of my life now, and I sleep better than I ever have, knowing that. What I had hoped to find on the west coast, I still can't quite figure out. I have poured over old notebooks and memories to see if there was something better that I could have done for myself, and decidedly there was not. It's a good feeling to know I took a risk and survived, and made a right decision from which I'm still reaping benefits. Perhaps it was my self that I went out there to find. And maybe, someday, after I've finished my environmental science degree, I'll make my way back out to the Pacific Northwest to protect the beautiful scenery that I fell in love with two years ago. I'll just be sure to do it the right way this time: with a little more experience, knowledge, and determination, but certainly with no less lust for life in my heart.