Late Nights

 Driving with the windows down sun roof open trying to combat the humidity that the Charleston air brings. School brought me to South Carolina but this afternoon I’m headed to my girl’s house. A native of the city with an accent I can’t get enough of and a body I’ve watched progress over the last couple years. Her smile and eyes keep me engaged and when she walked away I’m always caught staring.

 Flicking the blinker up slowing down to make the right into her cul de sac blasting my favorite J. Cole song rapping every word off beat but spitting it like I wrote it. I come here every Sunday unless I’m away for a basketball game or she is out of town, it’s one of my only few emissions from the walls I called home. The most toxic thing is this relationship I’m in, and I know it but brush it off like everything else.

 I turn my wheel avoiding the rocks fearing one popping my tire, I hate driving on rock roads, I always wondered if there was a phobia name for that. I never cared enough to look it up, coming to a stop putting the car in park. I let the song play out watching my girl peak through the upstairs blinds and letting the neighbors know that I had arrived.

 She always made me knock; in the beginning I tried just calling her so she’ll meet me at the door. She nipped that in the bud early so I found myself knocking hearing shuffling of feet and a cry of the cat’s name imagining her ready to bolt out the door as soon as it opens. The cat loved the outdoors one time getting away and staying out overnight, she probably wasn’t ready to live the wild life yet.

Merging on to I-26 east bound, I stepped on the gas and mashed the cruise button at 67. The speed limit read 60 miles per hour but I had to get back to school before they locked the gates. Going to a military college wasn’t easy, but not impossible, there were some positives but it always interfered with my social life. Whatever social life I’m able to have due to basketball being a full time job on top of schoolwork. Of course, basketball is why I’m here in the first place, if not I would’ve never came to Charleston, South Carolina you would’ve found me at a HBCU falling into chocolate.

 My chocolate, my lady, is the reason for this late night adventure and the source of my anger. Riding in my Hyundai Sonata seat leaned unnaturally far back but still able to drive properly, my cracked iPod in hand trying to pick a J. Cole song to get me through this ride. However, every song I come across is our song but I was a fan before her so I push the thought from my mind. Somehow it creeps back reminding me of the pain we caused each other and how I’m about to go back to my barrack for another lonely night.

 I get off at my downtown exit and make sure to slow down because of a speed trap that police enjoy setting. Not there, so I push the limit only a couple more minutes before I make it to my parking spot. Dressed in our leave uniform of suit and tie, or blazer, which is ironically one of the more comfortable uniforms considering I despise anything other than sports attire. After parking and getting out I checked the side mirror to make sure my uniform was in order then set off to first battalion.

 Arriving a minute before being locked out bag in left hand saluting the Teach-Advise-Coach, TAC, Officer with my right as I strolled by with my head down trying to avoid any line of questioning. I hooked a left to head to the Alpha Company set of stairs dodging a knob, freshman, as he raced to get to the stairs first. Being a freshman here is the hardest thing because you’re subject to torment from anybody you see, and a way of banter is to force the knobs to pop off to upperclassmen before climbing the stairs to the fourth floor.

 Still reliving flashbacks from my first year I let him run up without having to speak a word to me. This year, my room is on the second floor right next to the Company Officers, and I room with my best friend and teammate. I pass a couple classmates on the galleys exchange pleasantries and catch up on company and corps wide gossip. I was told of another fallen cadet kicked out due to failure to abide by our core values. I’ve seen the system eradicate the weak and weave out the undisciplined, even after watching it closely the year before hearing it never gets any easier.

 Sunday nights are widely used for relaxing, if it isn’t study time you can find most of the upperclassmen on the galleys hanging on the rails or on the red and white checkered quadrant. Among the corps we have a saying of “live for the weekend” so our Sunday’s signify the end of freedom and the mark of another week. The computer lab was full of the cadets who liked to get ahead or couldn’t get ahead, and various genres of music could be heard blasting out of rooms on floors one through three. The chaos on the fourth floor bellowing throughout the battalion ensured the unexplainable feeling of being at home.

 I get to the room and go to open the door but it’s unlocked, telling me my teammate is already in the room because even though we were at a military school that frowned on theft, it wasn’t enough to leave the room unattended. Having a roommate that’s a teammate is a blessing because we both could be on the same page since we always had to get special orders for basketball. The rest of the corps didn’t see the work we had to put in outside of our everyday duties, this caused an unnecessary divide so having a roommate for you was ideal.

 I open the heavy door never forgetting being woken up to it slammed repeatedly on the fourth floor; you could hear the cadre start doors down as the noise escalated until it was your turn. I walk in to my teammate studying on his tablet books and papers on his desk with his phone in his hand on Twitter. We all need breaks, I dapped him up with a secret handshake if you will. Three taps with the back of the hand, a dap, and then connect our index fingers pointing them downwards and a snap to top it off.

 All the “dorm” rooms in each battalion looked the same except for ranked officials and corner rooms but there were a couple different arrangements. Walking in the sink was immediately on the right with a mirror big enough to brush your teeth and shave every morning. There was a medicine cabinet to store toiletries in height order and the over the counters to cure headaches the school can cause. Staying on the right following the sink was our rifle stand where we had to keep our harmless weapon cleaned and locked up. Only time we used them were for inspections and parades but our attendance was low for those due to sports so our rifles collected dust.

 The bunk beds were sat on the right wall and were sturdy enough, even though climbing was like clinging to the top of a tree in the wind. If someone has a fear of being crushed they would never sleep on the bottom bunk because you can hear every move they make. We never slept under the covers so that we could keep tight hospital corners for the MRI’s, Morning Room Inspection. As freshman we were told that our sheets need to be tight enough to bounce a coin off of it, sad to say I’ve seen turtles jump higher. We had to sleep opposite directions and at the head of each bed was a bag tied full of miscellaneous items that helped keep the room in order.

 My desk was on the same side as the beds and his was directly across, so our backs were facing each other. To his left was my full press, which was what we used for a closet hanging up uniforms, storing shined shoes, and a blanket that serves as a comforter. Next to it was my half press, which was a metal dresser holding folded uniforms and under garments. My teammates followed in reverse order and both our presses had to look identical, especially if we wanted to avoid gigs in inspection.

 I dropped my bag on the desk and plopped down on the bed chatting it up as I started to disrobe beginning with my not so shiny shoes. We joked and jabbed, as I got comfortable and sat at my desk lighting up my computer screen. Picked up my phone knowing my girl will be calling soon, even though I really don’t want to talk. But, just like most nights I suck it up, the unhappiness because this is who I said I wanted to be with, and surely she will change if she says she loves me the way she do. Right? It’s been a couple years now, maybe she is incapable, no, that can’t be. If you want it bad enough you can muster it up, that’s if you want it bad enough, right?

 I must be crazy staying when I’m not as happy as I should be but my heart wouldn’t debate, I really thought I could wait but in that time it seemed that we only grew apart. It’s worse because at one point in time she brought my escape from this citadel that keeps me locked up more ways than one, and there was nothing like laying on her exhausted from daily events. What happened to the good days as I mull over arguments shaking my head.

 Snapping out of my thoughts as my teammate yelled my name seemingly for the second or third time. Often, my thoughts are so encompassing that surroundings get tuned out my eyes maybe be open but I’m not looking. Seeing a different world traveling through pain trying to find solutions for what I called love. I gave him my divided attention still lost in my thoughts but trying to listen. After having to repeat his words the third time he gave up.

 Never the one to express emotions I didn’t know how to ask him for advice or what I should do next. I mean, I’ve told him my feelings but getting deeper into how I felt proved a struggle. So I sat in silence until the unpopular android ringer filled the room’s ambiance. I sighed and heard a chuckle behind me as I connect the headphones and pick up the phone.

 After exchanging greetings she did most of the talking, as she always does while I started doing a couple assignments on the computer. I prefer a lady that can talk a lot, with me always being captain or leader when it comes to sports and organizations I’m usually the one talking so it’s nice to be a listener sometimes. We also could sit on the phone for an hour and not say a word to each other, it’s like you’re in the same room. There are also times where she’ll go for an hour or two effortlessly only taking breaks to accommodate the people wanting to speak to us on our respective side of the phone.

 Finally finishing my assignments, which shouldn’t of took as long as it did but dividing my attention caused for half hearted work. I let my laptop play music lightly as I transferred to the bottom bunk now wearing nothing but underwear. Headphones still attached to the phone I get on social media laying on my back and my girl going off about some lady at work. Responding only when she takes a breath I scroll through pictures of couples wondering if they are struggling the same way I am. Honestly, my first time being faithful and I hated it, this cant be what this is all about.

 I couldn’t take it any longer so I close out and get back up to take my eyeballs out and use the bathroom leaving my phone in the room for lack of service. Getting back to my bed I take the headphones out and jump back under the covers. My roommate is in his bed by now the room dark and the phone lying on my face so that I could have my arms under my pillow. Talking in a more hushed tone knowing my boy is a light sleeper, he can hear a leaf fall from a tree by 5th battalion.

 Along with staying on the phone for hours we also fall asleep on the phone. When you really care for the person it’s a reassuring feeling hearing them breathe on the other line, besides them being next to you it also tells you they not talking to anybody else. Usually. Tonight she fell asleep first hearing inhales and exhales of what we established as love.

 Not feeling that emotion tonight I put the phone face down next to my pillow as I close my eyes to segue into a dream world where I have a girl that’s for me and I drive over the mental speed bump that effects the game that I love. Instead of sleep I start reminiscing on my schemes to get her to see that the way she treats me isn’t acts of someone who wants to be with me. Everybody is different and you have to tailor your efforts to satisfy your significant others needs. I guess that’s only if you want it bad enough, right?

 I know when I finally fall asleep that it will be good due to the southern dinner my girl’s mom cooks Sunday nights. Chicken, rice, beans, macaroni, greens that was the best meal I got all week and was always very thankful. Tossing and turning not trying to check the time on my phone knowing that 6:55 comes quick in the morning. I hear a noise on the phone I pick it up to see if she was speaking but it was just movement, I put the phone back face down.

 My other head was neglected tonight, just like most nights leaving his mind racing until I took it upon myself to put him to sleep. That wasn’t an option though unless I wanted to cause an earthquake on the unsteady beds, and I didn’t feel like getting up to get a sock. Riding this nightly wave started out as being unbearable even though I never expressed my deeper thoughts she wouldn’t listen just like with everything else.

 Everything I implore goes in one ear and right out the other, at least I assume because there still hasn’t been a change. Who am I to think I can change someone anyway? Slowly starting to realize people only change when they want to and apparently I’m not worth that. I’m the type to try to fit a circle into a square jamming it over and over until it fits, and get frustrated when things don’t go the way I think they should.

 Falling in love with the thought of or what we could be instead of what is blatantly in front of my face. Signs I ignored in the beginning and not thinking about the difference in upbringing maybe incapable *is* the correct word. There are certain characteristics a female can lack when the father isn’t around, and the consequences that follow can effect a lot of situations especially relationships. I was determined to show her what a real man was supposed to be like.

 That’s hard though, when I’m not happy. Seems like my desire to love became the fuel for the anger I felt coursing through because it just didn’t seem quite right. I’m not sure if I ever even had love before but the way people talk about it and how my parents act towards each other, this can’t be it. I’m not too sure what I would call what I felt, but it was strong, so hard to let go.

 I flipped to lay on my back eyes still closed but my mind was on a hamster wheel, seems like I think the most at night. Basketball dribbled through my mind as the breathing coming from the phone faded and J. Cole played softly on the laptop. Misses and makes, turnovers and losses reeled through my mind but it was worse looking in the stands and her not being there.

 Not paying too much mind while I’m on the court, in my zone trying to get every loose ball or rebound to edge my team to victory. Scared to… stage fright… fear of failure… I scratch my head still trying to determine what mental bound I couldn’t cross to make me shoot more, but I promised to do it next game. I promised last game too, starting to feel more like a wish, a plea. My next wish, as I subbed out of the game, was to sit down sip water and watch her sway in as I turn to tune back into the task at hand. A plea.

 Rolling back over I hang up the phone, I can’t take it, hop on Instagram and start looking for someone better. Anyone, I’m debating direct messaging a couple ladies filled with melanin. Surely they would love, support, and romance there man the way a women should. What if there was something wrong with me? What if I’m the reason? Just doesn’t make sense, everybody else is getting this treatment but not me. I can’t take it.

 I start a text, sliding away with the Android keyboard efficiently connecting letters to create the angry words spewing out of the tip of my thumb. Emotions flooded the screen as the clock ticked later into the night, words that I wouldn’t dare speak in front of my mother laced in every sentence. Unspoken innuendos that will remain mute until the day we die. Wouldn’t be my first time, not even close, but tonight wasn’t the night for it so I erase the message and put my phone face down once again.

 Lying on my left side and staring at the cement grey wall, thinking about digging my way out like Andy off of *The Shawshank Redemption*. Feeling innocent but proven guilty when I scroll through previous messages cringing at words I can’t take back. The wall stared back as a song played lightly above my head, not hearing the words only the metronome and other recurring beats. Letting each drum and clash stimulate the gyrus and sulcus of the brain smoothing out the peaks and troughs of life.

 The wall started to get darker as my eyelids grew heavier, anguish on my face and hate in my heart. I was always told to never go to sleep mad but it’s been awhile since I slept another way. Any other way would’ve felt foreign like the feeling I assume my pops experiences laying next to my mom, the way they take care of each other is unmatched and I tried to have that same relationship but I’m feeling like I’m the only one ready to relay that energy.

Too frustrating, a battle that seemingly can’t be won, and no matter how hard I try it’s like a dog chasing its tail endless hours pleading and fighting trying to change what’s been engrained. Never one to usually express emotion, but I speak up in my unhappiness looking in her unregistering eyes. The complacent eyes couldn’t hold gaze taking my words chewing them up and spitting it back to me leaving me appalled. Jaw slack wondering how she got her deduction but persistent on getting her to see things my way as well.

A plea.

Just like the sleep I begged to overtake my brain falling into a dreamless coma only to wake up fearing the night. Walking around campus with a mask on for those who walk past me never letting out my innermost. Depending on the camaraderie of my brothers on the court and the very few embraces with Mary to smoke screen the hole in my heart that expanded leaving nothing left. Anger transpired feeling it in the back of my throat ready to spit fire at a moments notice, a fault I promised to change but without any incentive.

Nor any to leave, apparently, I pull the blanket over my shoulders closing my eyes lying still in the darkness. My knees creep up to my chest as the warmth of complacency overwhelmed me carrying an inadequate feeling that has me yearning night in and night out. Learning how to deal daily because there’s a bigger picture, but sometimes that four-letter word can paint a canvas of a night like this.