

# A for Asshole

By Alexander Taylor

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We had a number of submissions (both fiction and nonfiction) for this issue about people breaking up and the fallout they experience when a relationship ends. This is the one we took and the reason is all about 'voice'. The story here is less important than the way it is told. The character of the speaker comes alive, not because we are reading his account, but because we are listening to it. By turns droll, sarcastic, self-pitying and insightful, the voice, with its recognizable millennial cynicism, engages us in real time. After reading 'A for Asshole' all six of us admitted that we've met or knew somebody that sounded exactly like Alexander Taylor. That's something of an achievement because in most Creative Nonfiction it's the subject that takes precedence, not the speaker.*

## A For Asshole

I don't want to die; I feel like dying, but I don't want to die.

A popcorn kernel from last night is lodged between my teeth, still salty and reminding me of what it tasted like to be engaged to my best friend. The cat's staring at me. It's her cat. We never liked each other, the cat and I. Now, she's all I've got left. I jab at the popcorn kernel with my tongue. All it does is flap, like an elephant's ear in the wind. I tickle the cat's forehead, not to stimulate her, but to simulate the feeling of touching Lindy's skin. A smooth wind blows outside the glass door.

She took the toothpaste with her.

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“You know there's no rules to breaking up,” she says. “We can act however we want to act.” We're sitting outside of work smoking together. Still working together.

“I don't want to be *just* friends.”

“Why does there always have to be titles?” She asks.

“If you're breaking up with me, I don't want to be anything.”

“Not even friends?”

“I don't want to be friends.”

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I fall asleep for 45 minutes on the couch. I wake up to seventeen text messages. I'd told my mom back in Michigan what had happened just before passing out. During my nap, she'd notified the entire bloodline.

“Are you okay?”

“You better just be sleeping!”

“Do you have anywhere to go so you're not alone?”

I have a voicemail. I don't think I could ever do it, jumping ten stories. It's not the wreckage I think about, but the fear of regretting the decision immediately after jumping. The regret would ruin those liberating seconds just before my blood painted the cement.

“Hi...um...I know you probably don't want to talk right now but I'm kind of calling to

check in...I'm really sorry that all of this is happening...I just really feel like this is probably the best thing to do right now...um...I think I need to get my priorities in order with myself before I include somebody else in my life and I think now is a good time to try to separate our lives a little bit...um...to hopefully set up a more successful life together in the future..."

I've been included in her life for three years.

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Our lease in downtown Tampa ends in eight days. We'd spent the last several weeks looking for apartments in Sarasota, eventually applying to one. We'd been accepted based on our accumulative incomes. She told me today she's moving into the place next week, alone. I have eight days to find an apartment on a part-time fry-cook, full-time student income. This lands me on Craigslist. The first ad I come across:

*"Can you keep daddy happy-----→ Sexy Sugar babe Gets her Bills Covered!"*

Our apartment is a studio, about 750 square feet. In one corner, I sit on the couch looking at *keeping daddy happy*. In the other, my ex-fiancé sleeps soundly. The only thing between us is a dinner table bought from IKEA. We never used it.

This was the space she wanted.

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We'd been working fifty-hour work weeks a piece to finance our new apartment, It was our only day off together. I suggested golfing or gambling or drinking. We were still lying in bed far into the afternoon when she received a text from a coworker.

“Mel needs her shift covered tonight.”

“And you're going to take it?”

“I think I have to.”

“But it's our only day off together.”

“I have to, babe.”

I began pouting. She got ready for work.

“You're really going to take that shift?”

“I already said I would.”

“You're being selfish.”

“We need money and Mel needs help. How is that selfish?”

Nostalgia for the day off we were supposed to have boiled over. I looked at her.

“I don't want to be with you anymore.” I made eye contact the entire sentence, a rarity she had to notice. My hand cut across my throat for dramatic effect. I stormed out of the apartment. I was single by the time the door slammed shut.

Several days later, a coworker asks me at the bar, “Did you hear Mel's sister is still in the hospital from that car accident?”

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“Can we fix this?” I try to sound masculine, but it's obvious I'm fighting tears.

“You've asked me this seven times already, Alex. I don't know.”

“Do you even want to?”

“I don't know.”

There's a silence over the phone for several seconds before the line goes dead.

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It's been a week and nothing's changed. Life inside me has withered away. Still, I truck on. “How are you feeling?” My mom texts me.

“Fine. Tired.”

“What are you going to do?”

I don't respond. Lindy was supposed to come back to the apartment tonight, but got drunk instead. The thought of chemically morphing my already unstable conscious makes me nauseous. This is the longest I've been sober in months.

*You loved her. She loved you. Maybe it's just over.* I write on a sticky note to remind myself during the next anxiety attack, when my breath continuously falls short and the room begins to spin.

I wad the paper up before the ink dries.

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“Friends?” She stretches her right hand out toward me. We're smoking on the bench at work again.

“You want a handshake?”

“This is what friends do.”

I shake her hand unenthusiastically.

“That's a limp grip.” Every time I see her now, instead of a kiss on the cheek, she sticks her hand out like a nervous intern at a business firm. I never thought I'd say it, but I'd prefer to just not touch her at all.

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I'm moving in with a friend from work while she takes the apartment. It was either that or *Sugar Daddy*. She's keeping the dinner table and the rest of the IKEA furniture I bought on a credit card that I still can't pay off.

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Sometimes, I text myself just to hear the phone vibrate. I'm paying \$120 a month for an alarm clock.

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“I'll take care of it,” she says, outside at work.

“How?”

“Don't worry, I'll take care of it.” She ashes her cigarette in the gravel. “I have to go back

inside.” She reaches her hand out for a handshake.

She thinks she missed her period.

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“Say anything if you still love me.” I text her after several weeks.

“Anything.”

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Back in February, for Valentine's Day, she surprised me with a gift. A tattoo. On herself.

“This way you can't get mad at me for forgetting to wear my ring,” She said, stretching her left hand out. On her ring finger was a capital A for Alex.

“What happens if we ever break up?” I asked her.

She told me the same thing she will tell her next boyfriend. “Easy. It's an A. A for Asshole.”

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *What inspired this note was obviously a painful experience, but the message is to keep moving forward. To keep on trucking. This piece was a therapeutic response to heartbreak and there were actually no intentions behind it. It was just me, my journal and the emotions that came along with it. Readers shouldn't be saddened by the essay; readers should feel inspired to learn from their mistakes; to allow certain things to alter their perspective of the world and to learn and grow as an individual when it feels like there's nothing left. Above all, 'A for Asshole' should be a message that mistakes are the greatest lessons and though it may not seem like it at the time, a mistake can be a pivotal point in the development of the person you decide you want to be moving forward.*

**BIO:** *Alex Taylor is a full-time news reporter for The Jamestown Sun, in Jamestown, North Dakota. He will graduate with his MFA in creative writing for nonfiction from the University of Tampa in January and has a Bachelor of Arts degree in creative writing and journalism. From Western Michigan University.*

*Alex is 23 years old and was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He spent four months studying abroad in Florence, Italy in 2016 as a recipient of a global engagement scholarship, where he studied Italian literature and took his favorite college course: the history of the Italian mafia. In his little free time, Alex often finds himself obsessively researching criminal cases in hopes of one day writing about them.*