

>11:53<

The Beginning

I am depressed. Oh God I am so ssssoooooo depressed!

Yeah I know it's a pretty bad way to start, not exactly endearing and fluffy, not exactly making you want to spend your valuable time reading this...but I am. Miserable, grumpy, forlorn, urgh, I can't even be bothered to type all the words to describe how I'm feeling. I think the modern phrase is 'pants'...that's it, I am feeling pants!!! (And for the record, not frilly, pretty girly pink pants, great big grey-in-the-wash with holes in granny pants!

Ever since my dad left my mum, my life has been hell. My world has been turned inside out, flipped over and shoved into the dumpster. Well that how it feels. Before I start the story of how boring my life is and how it is eating me alive, I might as well introduce myself. My name is Akane Grey, I have spent 19 years on this dismal planet, I am the proud owner of a large student debt, and a university student who works night shifts in grotty dive of a local bar. (That wouldn't make much of a Tinder profile would it?!).

Yet that little ramble probably isn't even relevant to the tale I am going to share with you now, but that is me, Akane Grey, aged nineteen and nothing momentous has happened in my life so far. You are probably wondering what is this story is about, well it is simply a short record of a journey. A journey of love, fate, death and life.

It was a winter's night at the bar when I first saw him, the kind of night that even the chunkiest of scarfs can't fight off that icy bite. That boy who skulked in through the door with the cold air, the boy who orders the most random of drinks, the boy who smiles whenever he catches a glimpse of someone's eye, the boy who stole my heart. He was just over six foot tall, dark brown short hair which way waved over the crest of his head. His eyes were the colour of toasted hazelnuts, just like mine, but with a glint that made me feel like coming home. He wore a checked shirt with black skinny jeans, the standard uniform for that generation of 'cool kids', and even though everyone else was wearing it, you just knew HE was wearing it first. I couldn't see his shoes behind the bar, but I has a sense that they too would be awesome.

I was working late that night to cover for my friend Emily, AGAIN, so it wasn't even my shift, but hers I was working when he first walked into my life. At first he just sat at the bar looking pensive and insecure, I'd go so far to say even uncomfortable. You could really tell that he had never been to a bar before, it wasn't really his thing, if I had to guess I'd say he was more a bistro coffee shop and a tall skinny latte, probably even made with soya milk, a good barmaid just has a sense for these things. He raised his hand uncertainly, already feeling self-conscious about his chosen gesture, putting up his hand slowly like you would do if you were in a nursery school. It was cringingly embarrassing. He ordered a *gin* and sipped it slowly. (A gin?! Really what man does THAT?!)

I know it's a bartender's job, or so people think, to ask them what their worries are, I have seen all those film too, I am ashamed to say, cheesy as it is, I did that exact thing. I went up to him, after a shady re-arrangement and 'hoist-up' of my moderately ample bosom (never underestimate the tip increasing potential of a good bra!!) and quick ruffling and va-va-vooming up of my hair, and asked him what was on his mind.

He replied first by looking down at his drink and saying 'Errm, nothing really I'm just stressed out because of my exams, it's pretty full on right now,' and that what the exact moment he looked up at me, that's when his eyes lit up like a five year olds would if he saw a candy store with a ten foot sign in the window screaming FREE CANDY. Ow I am not for one second sating he thought I was giving anything away for free, drink or otherwise, I am just saying it was then, that the magic started, it was adorable, almost breath taking, the light that radiated from that grin that slowly spread across his face, and most wondrously of all into those nutty brown eyes. We started talking, and talking, everything, anything, just a torrent of words and thoughts, a huge mess of tangled stores and shared interest, like a giant knotted ball of string, and it just ran on all night, about school, friends, things that irritate us, you know, things all teenagers talk about. Then just before the end of my shift,

which if I am honest I really didn't work much of, and pretty much managed to upset most of the customers through my lack of interest in serving them, he made a move and said he really had to leave, he was already an hour late to something or another, I forget, I think I panicked because he was going, but hey of joy he asked for my number which I quickly scribbled onto a slightly gin soaked napkin and we parted ways. I guess sometimes I am glad Emily is so flaky that I have to pick her shifts after all.

There is a "rule" in the world of boys (no not THAT rule, another) where he has to text you three day after your first date. I know this shouldn't and probably didn't count as an 'official' date, but we did technically spend all of the night together so it could count, almost, well I am counting it! This rule, silly as it is however does help out us girls as well though, it can help define whether a guy actually likes you, separated out the boys from the men so to speak.

- If he texts you either the same night or the day after then he really liked you and thinks that the rule is a waste of time because if you like the girl then you can text her whenever he wants. (The ones you want – REAL men)
- If he texts you a day before he is meant to, then he likes you but tried to stick to the three day rule but couldn't last because he can't wait that long without talking/seeing you. (Also the ones you want - men)
- Or if he texts you on the third day or after then he is trying to play cool. This never works though because girls like to hear from there man and also likes them to call/text them when they says they will. (Cares what is friens think more than how he feels about you, waste of time these ones - Boy/mouse/player – do NOT want!)

Before I tell you when 'the boy at the bar' texted me, I ought to actually tell you his name. I think he said that he is called Barry Gustin. I know what you are thinking, what a weird name but he was actually really cute. Anyway, I was going to tell you when he text me. He actually text me as soon as I got in my car that very night and asked if I wanted to go round his place, I did of course because he was just mind blowing.

Don't think I don't know what you are thinking (you and that dirty mind of yours), Booty-call, but before you ask, we did not have any intercourse of any of that disgusting yucky, sticky, unhygienic stuff, we just carried right on from where we left off gossiping and watching a huge selection of gushy films starring the like of Sandra Bullock and Ryan Reynolds, you know the sort, well technically HE watched them, I fell asleep, and I strongly suspect I may even have snored, maybe even dribbled just a little, not my finest moment I grant you. Whoops.

In the morning, I found myself in a bed face down with the clothes I had on the night before. It was not my bed, or my room or in fact not even my house. I sat up and looked around the house to see if anyone was around. Following my nose, I first I checked in the kitchen, the place reeked of burnt toast. Stood by the cooker was Barry, making breakfast for two. I knocked on the side frame of the door to see if it was okay to come in, as he jumped around his face looked as if his heart had just dropped, he then said 'I woke up early so that I could make you breakfast in bed, but it's all a bit burnt and now you are awake anyway, I'm really not very good at thing am I?', which made us both laugh, especially as at that exact moment the smoke bellowing out of this toaster set the fire alarm off. I apologised several times for ruining the surprise, but he said the screaming of the alarm might just have given the game away anyway, it was then I also learnt it was better to juggle with burnt toast than to eat it! So that is how I met him. Barry Gustin, potential boyfriend, unskilled caterer and lover.

It had been a week since Barry and I had spent that first night together, we had been on several outings together since. Yesterday, he expressed his feelings for me and asked if I shared them, fast as it may seem it didn't seem wrong at all, just so natural, obviously I had because it was love at first sight for me. We both said this at exactly the same time then gazed into each other's eyes. I have no idea what he was feeling, but I knew that he was the one for me. We had so much in common, it was just like he was made for me. He had all the qualities I wanted, or had ever hoped to find in a person.

The Middle Bit - Months Later

Remember that depression? That unsightly 'pant' monologue at the very start? Gone! All gone, now I am blissfully happy, and woodland animals fly through mu open shutters every morning and make my bed...well not actually, but I can't imagine I could be any happier eve if they did (plus you KNOW those animals have to poop somewhere don't you?)

So now that we were officially dating, I could get to know him more. We texted every night about absolute nonsense until about two o'clock in the morning. But tonight was different, we spoke about the future and everyday things.

Akane: Hey, u ok. Xx

Barry: Yeah I'm good thanks. How r u? Xx

Akane: Yeah I am great now. What are you doing?

Barry: Just texting my girl ;-) xx

Akane: Aww babe you so cute. Xx

Barry: What campus are you again?? Xx

Akane: The one on North Street...why? Xx

Barry: Doesn't matter xx

Akane: Okay xx

Barry: I have got to go now, I love you xx

Akane: Okay, I love you too xxx

And that was it. I didn't hear from him for three days even though I messaged him loads. For those three days, I didn't really have anything to talk about so it was alright, and sometimes he did go off the grid for a few days, I assumed like me, he was just getting his head down on to one of the never ending assignments we were always bitching about. I was just as busy with my paper so I didn't have any time to text him anyway, that was just one of the things that made us so great, no pressure, no expectations, but a reassures 'knowing' that we were 'there'.

On the third day, I went to school like normal. I was sitting in maths doing Pythagoras' theorem when my phone started vibrating. At first I ignored it because it was going to be the phone company or something. Buzz buzz. It vibrates again.

Barry: Hey, I'm sorry I haven't spoken to you for the last 3 days. I was super busy. Xx

Barry: Please don't ignore me, I need to tell you something. Xx

Barry: Okay, just look to your right. Xx

I did as he asked expecting him to be pranking me but he wasn't. In the hallway was a figure, about six foot with a very familiar air about them. I got up and walked towards the faceless figure and he looked up and grinned. It was Barry, holding up enrolment papers for MY course, in my class. Even though my teacher had now repeatedly told me to sit down now, and was getting quite agitated with my disruption, I just stood there, mouth open and heart pounding out of my chest. I had never been so in love in my life. My boyfriend had moved to my school, just to be with me.

So, what happens next, you ask. Well of course, we will spend all our time together forever and we will live happily ever after. We will make loads of memories together, I will hopefully meet his parents, and we'll get married and make a beautiful family together. Everything will be perfect...well that is what we hoped and thought would happen...sorry what I thought would happen.

A Bit Further Than The Middle Bit

Barry came to school after he had missed a day as if nothing had happened. This was happening more and more these days, but his grades weren't suffering and the teachers never seemed to question his absence, I guess because his papers were always in on time. This time he said that his Nan was ill so he had to go and visit her. Things between us were fine then. We walked to school with each other in the morning, he'd come and meet me on the corner of the road where I shared a flat with Emily, sat with each other at breakfast and went to class together. We never got bored of each other because we were just so in love, it never felt strained, in fact we always studied better just being around each other, even if we didn't talk.

After one of his longer visits back to visit his parents he looked tired, we took a night off and went out of town for a walk, we lay on the hill near his digs watching the stars. We talked about our future. When I went home and when I got into bed, my phone received a message.

Barry: Hey can I ask you a question?? Xx

Akane: Yeah sure babe, is everything alright?? Xx

Barry: How much do you love me? Xx

Akane: You know I love you more than anything in this whole world. Xx

Barry: Aww okay thanks. Xx

Akane: Is something wrong babe? Xx

Barry: No not at all, everything is fine... xx

Akane: Oh okay good, if there is something wrong, you can tell me

Barry: How much do you care about me? Xx

Akane: I would give you the world in a heartbeat if I could. Xx

Barry: Thank you. Xx

Akane: Where is this all coming from? Xx

Barry: ...Would you die for me? Xx

Akane: I would take a bullet for you any day babe. Xx

Barry: Really?? Xx

Akane: Any day, now seriously, is there something wrong?

Barry: No I am fine, you are fine, and we're both fine, Everyone's fine so don't worry xx

It was a week after these texts and six months into our relationship when he missed another day off of uni. This went on for three weeks, no replies to my texts, no calls, he didn't even answer his door when I went round. It was like he had disappeared. We've all been ghosted, but this didn't feel right, not us, we were stronger than that, I thought we were forever.

I didn't want to but I started getting scared. Had he died, did he move away or even worse had he just stopped loving me? Either way my heart was slowly breaking, it hurt, it physically hurt, I felt I would die without him, so I called him that night, just one last time before I prepared myself for the fact that maybe it was time to give up completely.

Ring.....Ring.....Ring.....

Barry: hello??

Me: (the relief flooded my chest) Hey, I haven't seen you in a while, is everything alright?

Barry: ...SILENCE...

Me: Barry, please answer me, please don't. I can't put into words how much I have missed you, don't cut me out, if it's over tell me, but this is just cruel.

Barry: Babe, I think we should break up. It's the best thing for us at the moment with exams and all.

Me: What? Wait, no! You can't leave me I love you so much, you love me, you said you loved me, you showed me you loved me. Please don't do this, they are just exams, they will come, they will go.

Barry: It's the best thing, for us both.

(HANGS UP)

It only took six words for him to rip my heart out of my chest, to kill me slowly, cruelly from the inside. 'I think we should break up'. That night and in fact several nights after that, I cried myself to sleep, I could barely breathe. I didn't know what to do with myself. My world just crumbled around me. He was the only thing that I wanted, the only thing that made sense, they key to everything else. Everything to make an effort for, the only one I woke up for and the only one I wanted to spend the rest of my life beside. Then he just ends it with no clear reason as to why. I was drowning in unanswered questions.

He didn't show up to school over the next three weeks so I started making friends, breaking outside my normal comfort zone. I hated it. At first I was hard, but it got easier as I found more confidence in myself. I spent more time with Emily, her

friendship meant a lot to me, she was loyal and kind, however I knew she was worried about me, she was always there, watching, caring. I had asked her several times over the past three weeks if she had seen or heard anything about Barry but she always said no.

It was a Friday when Emily was waiting outside my lecture hall. She looked washed out, like she had been crying, she couldn't look me in the eye. She looked up at me and her eyes welled up. She asked if I had heard.

About what?

She said she had news about Barry. She couldn't look at me, even though she was my best and only friend, said that she didn't want to be the one to break it to me. She gave me a phone number to call, hugged me a little too tight, a little too long, and then said good luck, 'I'll wait for you at home'. What had happened? What on earth was this all about, what was going on and why could no one give me a straight answer?

I walked out into the courtyard, for some reason my hands were trembling as I fumbled to enter the numbers into my phone, as I dialled the mysterious number that would answer all my questions.

Voice at other end of the connection: High Cross Hospital, Cancer Ward, this is Lesley speaking, how may I help you?

Me: Sorry, I think I got the wrong number. I am...

Lesley: What were you going to say dear?

Me: I am looking for my friend?

Lesley: What's their name?

Me: Barry, Barry Gustin.

Lesley: Yes, yes of course, room 143.

Me: What? What happened? Is Barry okay?

Nurse: Of course, he is resting, his family are here.

Me: What? The Cancer Ward?

Lesley: I am sorry dear I have to run, should I give him a message for you?

Lesley: Hello? Hello dear are you there?

I stood there, in a trance phone clutched to my chest, and all the pieces fell slowly into place, the extended visits home, the way he always looked just a little too tired when he came back to me, the way the lecturers always seemed pleased to see him back but never reprimanded him for not attending class, the gin he bought that first night but never drank just toyed with and spilt onto that napkin I wrote my number on. How could I have been so blind?

I left my back pack on that wall I had been sitting on, nothing else mattered, nothing else seemed real, there was somewhere I had to be, still clutching my phone in my hand I began to run towards the hospital, jogging at first as my head span with new realisation, the faster as my head started to clear and everything started to make sense. There was somewhere I needed to be.

Before it registered in my brain I was standing there, at the door to room 143. There he was, the love of my life, lying there on a hospital bed, his skin almost translucent. Tubes all attached to him, wires, and monitors beeping and bleating their mocking symphony. I lifted my hand to my mouth to muffle a sob, it was only then that I felt the tears soaking my cheeks. It was a horrible sight, and it was burning into my brain. He looked over at me and smiled a very weak smile.

Barry: You are dribbling

Me: Am I?

Barry: Yes, it reminds me of that first night we met and you fell asleep on my lap, I knew the moment you drewled on my favourite jeans you were the girl I would love forever

Me: Are you okay?

Barry: Yeah I'm all good, I'll be home tonight

Me: Sweetie!! Don't. Please talk to me.

Boy: I... I have cancer. It's my time. I didn't want you to remember me like this.

Me: You have what? Oh babe please say you are going to pull through, I don't want you to leave me ever again.

Barry: It's tonight Akane, that's why my parents are here, they are with my doctor now signing the papers. They are taking me off the ventilator tonight, there is nothing more we can do, believe me we have tried everything.

Me: Why? Why didn't you tell me?

Barry: I wanted to tell you so much but I just didn't want to hurt you. I wanted to keep us just us, something normal, I didn't want pity or borrowed time, or 'what ifs'. I wanted the plans we made and dreamt of to feel real, and I knew the only way we could have that was if you believed them, then I could to. I just wanted to see if you felt the same way about me as I do about you.... I love you more than anything, I would give you the world in a heartbeat, remember, I would die for you and you would take a bullet for me. We are forever.

Me: But I love you so much...

Barry: Don't be sad, I love you and I will always be here for you, no one has made me feel more alive than you have in the time we have been together.

Me: But why did you break up with me?

Nurse: Excuse me miss, visiting hours are over, it's time to make a move dear.

The End

That night, true to his word he was taken off of life support, the machines were turned off and the tubes were removed, the last words Barry ever said to me were "I will love you always and forever." I had promised him I would leave the hospital on our terms, not when fate dictated. I left his side and walked home. I'm not sure what time or even what route I took, I unlocked the door and slid without a sound, Emily was on the sofa sleeping clutching a half drunk bottle of cheap super market wine, she looked so peaceful as I walked past her and up the stairs. My heart was shattered now, not broken, shattered, if something is broken it implies there may be hope of it one day being mended, and I knew this was never going to be the case for me. What was the point of living if he wasn't in my life, what was the worth of all those broken dreams? All I knew was I couldn't go on.

I never met his parents, I never even knew if they knew I even existed in his life. The Doctor pronounced him dead at 11:53p.m.

Epilogue

The following was recorded in a report made to police investigators into the suicide of a 19 year old student discovered in a shared flat by her flatmate, near the North Street Campus:

Statement of Roommate – Emily Harris:

...I was asleep when the gunshot woke me. I hadn't even heard her come in, but I just knew what had happened, I flew up the stairs and threw her door open. There she was, my best friend motionless, her bedside table knocked over, all her things being swallowed in the expanding pool of her blood, her alarm clock just flashing where it has stopped, 11:53, that's when I was the note in her hand.

'I told him I would take a bullet for him... just like he said he would die for me...!!!'

By Illaria Knibb, March 2016