

## Amends

By Zane Johnson

The blue smoke hung like a ghost over the shallow Platte River—the smoke of five or six tattered old men and two young guys, one a bit older and better conditioned to the nomadic life, all choking desperately on long butts forgotten on the bank. You could stare straight down the sandy linings and see the very end of it. It was finite; progression marked by short bridges patching the rift between the sides of the small valley. In the yellow streetlight glow of the city above it and faint caress of the moon and stars, the smoke seemed to collect and mold itself around a figure; everyone’s projection looked different. The oldest of the men saw their children, all grown up and distorted with daydream approximation. Others, their wives and friends and parents long gone, youthful reveries of comfort and jovial fraternal discourse. They sat and looked, mesmerized by their own smoke-wrought ghosts, silently recalling the sad stories of the lives they had left at the other end of the tracks. A Pacific Freight train thundered overhead. The ragged men had prepared two or three times for the jump, but couldn’t commit. It was never too close to the city, or a security guard would see. The anxiety of it all made action nearly impossible. Then, or never at all, they deposited themselves just before the small crater of the Platte— just one stop before the train depot that would have been their demise. They were lucky too: the worker bees were prowling the tracks tonight. From inside an apartment window overlooking the bounded cityscape, bisected by the Platte, a young woman saw the bees propelled on motorized carts. The beams of light from their flashlights looked an awful lot like stingers. And when that light fell on you, boy, you felt the sting.

The old men were escaping the finality of the lives they had already forged in other cities and states. “I bet there’s good work on those tracks” resounded against the enormous sound of the locomotive. Weak nods and hopeful chuckles followed. The young kid stole away to find more butts along the nearby trail, uneasy about being so close to the depot. The other kid joined him. He sensed that the older men needed their silence and revelry in the new life,

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and left as to not disturb their needed meditation. They introduced themselves briefly when the older kid hopped on the car. His name was Tyler; the other's, Max.

"Where are you headed?" Tyler asked, aware of the other's discomfort.

"I'm not going any further. I have an old friend here who I'm trying to find," Max said bashfully, careful to not let on too much to a stranger.

"Most folks seek out family first. Is he giving you work?"

"No. I plan on seeing them too, just not yet. I don't want to force my coming back on them so soon."

"Well, if I had family at all they'd be the first I'd call on." Tyler had to shout over the upset train, now clearing their bridge embankment. Empty-handed and weary of each other's sympathy, they turned around to return to the elders. The bearded sage-hermits, trudging endlessly along train tracks peppered, burdened discouraging with old candy wrappers, petroleum products, but penetrated brilliantly only ever so often with a fleeting ray of hope afforded by a long, barely smoked, cigarette butt.

Every time the contents of the freighter shifted, an apocalyptic roar followed that seemed enough to bring the whole train collapsing into the river, disrupting all of their efforts to escape. It was a terrible sound. One of the men got scared, sleep deprived and malnourished, hallucinating, and likened the fright to a poor start in this new life. Every time the old train thundered, he saw it crashing on him and his spectral retinue in the baptismal waters of the river.

It was time to part ways: the group had exhausted their supply of the half-cigarette-rich embankment and there was no longer any reason to entertain their ghosts. They decided it was time to put their plots to work. Uncomfortable goodbyes were said, not knowing if their travels had bore any real intimacy among them. Longing, longing, with such terrible longing the hermits looked back, once, twice, thrice at their ghosts, hungry only for their eyes to lock with those of the living, and tearfully departed from the nothing that they knew was never there.

The kids stuck together along the trail that led uptown. Max was determined; Tyler

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didn't know where else to go. It was an entirely new start for him: new city, new contacts, and new life.

They stopped at a payphone in a gas station on Park Avenue. There, Max called his friend, Keith, who was to meet him when he got to the city, hoping desperately that his new companion wouldn't put him out. In Nevada, he had called his friend and told him of his coming arrival in Denver. The conversation validated his struggles finding his way back and reminded him of his mission. The phone kept ringing. Before the final tone played back in his ear, Keith answered.

"Hello?"

"Keith—Keith its Max," tears were boiling at the corners of his eyes. He didn't know if he could do it anymore, the bittersweet sound of his old friend's voice almost made him collapse.

"Max you're here! I can't fucking believe it—you came back! Where are you?"

"I'm at Park Ave, inside the Shell station. I have someone with me. Goddammit, Keith, I thought I'd never see you again. There's so much I have to tell you... so much you have to tell me!"

"Just give me twenty minutes and we'll have all the time in the world to catch up. But who are you with?"

Max struggled. Who was he? A comrade in travels that needed a little help? He was cleaner, younger than the others, but bore the same uncertainty in the furrow of his brow that carried with it distrust.

"He's a... he's someone I met on the rails. On the way here. I think he needs a ride."

"Oh. Where's he going?"

He muted the phone with his palm. "Where are you going?"

"I was hoping to go with you," he blushed at the misunderstanding. He was really counting on Max.

"What do you mean? I have people to see—so much to do. Don't you have anyone here?"

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“No, man, this is a fresh start for me.”

They meandered through the Platte River trail, awaiting the arrival of the long lost friend, consciously avoiding their jump off point for fear of police investigation. Visions of capture plagued Max; forced abandonment of his quest for absolution in the darkness of everything that led up to this point. To think that it would end by virtue of the nothingness of his existence, punctuated with lonely, lonely aftermath of the sentence started to make ugly his heart. An old uniformed officer would take them away from their very last chance. And, in the bitter actuality of the present, this very much was the last chance. Paranoid glances from Tyler heightened the sensitivity to the anxious reverie in the midnight moon. With nowhere to go until the arrival time, they exchanged stories to curb the anxiety: great stories of travels, loves lost and loves waiting to be rekindled in the forgiving embrace of the Queen City of the plains. Tyler was an indebted salesman from the West Coast. As to his debt, he allowed no further inquiry, and it was settled that the cosmos had barred his entry into a life of relative normality. Bad luck, bad luck, bad luck, and nowhere to turn to but a life of solitude next to the tracks. Max was skeptical—something was not being said that led him to indulge in his anxieties and dream up all kinds of possible truths in his conditional companion. Killer, thief, conman, but never a second thought to the possibility of a tender man, continuously mishandled by the no-fate that plotted him on rail station after rail station after under-bridge longing solitude.

But how could it possibly be? The modern world, whom comfort and gain are its noblest pursuits, breeds shortsighted men with a thirst for the inherent kindness of the human heart, but wade in lakes of freshwater avarice. Tell him to leave tell him to leave tell him leave tell him to leave... but where will he go, and who would I be to leave him alone? This is all a game of absolution after all, thought Max, and I must absolve myself of my terrible mistrust. Tell him to leave...

“Tyler, I think—” speeding headlights pulling to a stop on the bridge by the Shell. Rapture ensues, and a terrible weight of the game unraveling. Breathless running, like bugs to the zapping light of their great demise. Up to the bridge, hand to the car door handle, and all

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the weight of the sin of the world crashed, like the freighter into the shallow water. Keith was reaching across the center console to grasp his friend, slightly blinded by intensity of emotion. They embraced a long flustered embrace, forgetting quickly of the silent vagrant in the back seat. They unlocked their arms and looked at each other for just a few fleeting moments.

“How have you been?” Max asked his friend, stuttering, still flustered, embarrassed, and apprehensive as to what the future had to offer. Keith smiled his same whimsical smile, devoid of any semblance of judgment or spite.

“Good man—Ha!—I’ve been real good! I’m Keith,” to Tyler in the back seat, with hand raised up high to clap the other’s in a swooping shake. His head dropped while he sat digging enthusiastically in the center console, and pulled out a small flask. “Take a swig of that, and lay it all out.”

He told him of his loss in the Midwest, and of his greater loss on the West Coast that led him back home to avenge the first. He told him of the importance of seeing his parents and sisters as soon as humanly possible. All well and good, Keith said, but first to the bars. When Max left, Keith was in the middle of his substance turmoil. Since then, the nose and vein demons subsided, but alcohol and weed were the only redeeming seraphim to make them all go away. Nergal! Green and dusty, or gelatinous black melted tar; whatever rotted shape he takes he has not left you! Max took a meek sip of the strong brew (brandy?) and a long hit from the chillum, imagining Nergal’s spores inching upward and outward from his lungs to the shallowest layers of his thin skin. Maybe they would bear a brilliant oak tree from his skull, leaves growing like enlightened consciousness from the Bo, but probably it would feel more like a raving anxious mold seething destruction of the path to salvation.

His face slackened. Keith was speeding, faster and faster down I-70, anxious himself to see what the end of the big ride would formally and finally bear. What fruit? How sweet and eternal would forgiveness taste? How such a state of bliss would be, emancipated from all of those to whom you’re indebted. You pay in grief and you pay in guilt, but the interest never goes away. Tyler’s still working on the interest, Max thought. He snapped back. The flash of

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hope vanished, if it ever was there, and he came around to the present that was devouring him second after fleshy second. In his self-pity he forgot about the weary man in the back seat, whom he had just met off the tracks. We're on new tracks together, he thought, loosened by drink, to heaven right here on our very own Earth.

His face slackened again, smoothed out by the cool midnight wind whipping it mercilessly through the cracked window. His fingers fumbled about the door, searching for the switch to bring it up. They searched the inside of the door, poking this and that, disoriented. It was like a vacuum had sucked up his immediate perception and replaced it with a small child who couldn't yet stand. Keith kept me standing for so long, he thought, and took another swig. He shook the flask and felt only a few charged drops pouncing from side to side. They wanted out, but to where did they wish to go? They're eternal trajectory was to bottle to flask to mouth. Birth to youth to death—finitely trudging through empty boxcars or highways or abandoned trails, sifting through old candy wrappers and porno mags on defiled city streets for absolution. But it was nowhere to be found. Nowhere, except for maybe in the spotlight there, yeah there! See it, man, illuminating rainless clouds and a dim moon that badly needed the pick-me-up. The car came screeching to a halt in a perfect empty spot outside the bar.

Max imagined what the next few hours had in store: sitting at the bar, fumbling over words to order a drink, and the same slew of thoughts plaguing him despite attempts for conversation from Tyler. And he would drink. If the world were flooded in brandy—if it washed over all of the skyscrapers and cleansed his reality, then what? Drunken bliss that looked like salvation.

And so he sat, and sat until he saw Keith, who had disappeared almost immediately after they arrived at the bar, fade out like the hungry ghosts at the river bank into the men's bathroom with a girl he had never seen before. He stood up and made to leave. Tyler noticed.

"Where are you going?"

"Uh... I... I gotta go."

"Well, where are you going?"

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“I don’t know man, but this is too familiar.” Familiar in the way he knew it would be, but convinced himself against the strong inclinations of reality that it would be wholly, for the better, different. He got up, shaky, knocking over the bar stool, and stood. Just stood, waiting for a deep breath to calm him, but it never came. Just shallow rhythms thumping enough not to flat line, his face regressing to its characteristic slack. Time passed. How much? Seconds minutes hours—eternity, scraping along like the old freighter that brought him to the promised land or demise, all mixed up together in the sacred dichotomy. Heaven and hell, Krishna and Duryodhan, Nergal and Shamash.

Max looked behind him to the bar counter after an indistinguishable amount of time sent countless breaths out of his body, countless blood cells in their fixed circulation. There was a shot glass filled with the nectar of his patron deity, and above on the bar-hand’s many shelves of alchemic concoctions, the host shrine offering pestilent bliss to make time impermanent once again. Shaky, he grabbed the small chalice and shaky, drank, sparing nothing but emptiness—Nergal! He exchanged a nervous glance with Tyler, the kind you exchange when you feel ashamed to recognize each other. All at once, uncompromising, the senselessness of why he was there and what he was doing there came crashing in on him like the freighter into the stream. This was all a grave distraction. Tyler, a distraction, Keith, a bigger distraction, Reverie, the ceaseless distraction. He had a purpose, and it was to move—move back to where he left from, he corrected himself in thought. He mouthed some broken vowels and left, ashamed that the words wouldn’t manifest, turned around and left. No ‘I’ll see you again at this time and place,’ just a swift turn and gone definitely. His eyes too started to look slack with the exhaustion of religious fervor.

It had started to snow. Max stared at the ground, fascinated by the crunch elicited by his feet that he could no longer feel: the fact that these numb extensions of himself had an impact on his external environment, and the fact that he would not have recognized it had he not been staring at the instruments making the textured craters in the frost. Fascinating. He looked behind him at the trail of footprints he was leaving. Would Tyler follow? He was all left alone in

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there, and I was the one who left him alone. He can follow my footprints if he needs someone. And in fact, he did need someone, and he did follow. The unconscious impact had turned out to be a miracle; a layered realization to his place in the network of creation and time right here and right now, that was no longer right here and right now but, equally as miraculously, had naturally metamorphosed into then and there. And so on.

He walked and walked, mechanically, with his gnarled sense of purpose bestowed upon him at the bar. He was walking, to the familiar place that would be different, as he knew it would be. Dawn was breaking. Dawn broke. Max's head started spinning and divine retribution struck him like a fiery spear in his side. He wretched from all the liquor he had consumed in all too short a span of time. He was falling; he fell to his knees and saw the sky as it too changed into a sickly color: Fetid green and cobalt, and the colors began to separate like oil and water in the sky; like pestilence and prosperity. Beneath the breaking sun shone a tall apartment complex, haloed now by the expanding sky, tinged angelic gold and pink. It was like the Final Revelation bound with gold-leaf being delivered to he, to vanquish his heathen god, the cult of plague; to dilute the world, washed in liquor, with the Holiest Waters of fresh starts and forgiveness for wickedness, whether or not it pervaded in spite of the New Word.

Max was startled by a crunch behind him. It sounded like his purpose-driven footfalls descending earlier. It was Tyler, also staring at the ground, not yet noticing him. Max got up from his knees and rushed on to his deliverance, leaving behind his earlier woes. Never mind the actual man approaching him, just to speak to him, to hear why he had left so abruptly. He rounded the street corner and four blocks down Market Street stood the residential monolith. What followed was to be expected. Welcome by his sister, who resided in 212B, a tearful reunion in another network of unconditional love, phone calls to other relatives to announce his arrival. He several times had to explain the unexplainable: why he left and why the hard times befell him the way they did. They just did, and he just came back, motivated by a sixth sense for salvation that he knew was here all along. But he left, and why did he leave knowing that it was here all along? To prove the non-conditionality of love, and likewise, as a by-



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product, sorrow.

“Why did you come back? I’m so glad that you did, but why?” she asked.

“To make amends.”

“But you didn’t do anything! All you did was leave. But I think I know why you did it.”

“Why?”

“Because things weren’t going your way here. We called your work a week after you left to see if they knew where you were. We heard they fired you. We didn’t know how much you were drinking... that I don’t understand. I also don’t understand why you didn’t go for anybody for help. To me, or any of us. You just left.”

“I had to commit a sin to be absolved.”

Such conversations transpired throughout most of the day. All throughout, words fell short; too frail to condense into explanations. They are shaky, shaky hands pointing towards conclusions but shrivel into a wrinkled fist just before reaching any that are absolutely, 100% truthful; any that are shining, triumphant testaments to the glory and depth of the human heart.

That night, collecting himself, Max looked out the window. Across the street from the massive complex was a small, lonely bus station. After a few minutes, Max noticed someone emerging from the alley down the street. He crept along slowly, and when he reached the shelter of the covered bus stop, collapsed. It was Tyler, weeping on the ground. Max fell to his knees again like the morning before. Down there with Tyler, he saw the old men and their ghosts, weeping, and his family too, weeping. There were even obscure faces of the train bound bums he met in passing on his way. It looked like Hell. It was then that he reached a full awakening. Not the little glimpses of truth that he had witnessed along the way, but a wholehearted truth that was going to undo the whole operation: He was saved on the backs of all these gentle people, weeping.

The End

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**Zane Johnson bio:** I am currently studying literature at the community college of Denver. I am a poet, short fiction writer, and musician and perform regularly in the Denver area. I have previously contributed to the Rain, Party and Disaster Society, Ourglass, and the Animal Liberation Front's Activists+.