

Chapter 1 – She Left Me on Friday

Our first big fight felt different from all the rest. Of course, it contained the usual amounts of outrage and pettiness. But it also introduced something new: an acute impression of finality.

When Jordan slammed the car door, I knew she wouldn't return my calls for awhile. And I knew that I couldn't patch up our problems with a warm embrace or a fitful apology or an overpriced gift or a complete retraction of everything I had said or had meant to say. No, I would need something bigger than all that.

The conversation that evolved into our big blow-up started off innocently enough. Since popular music was my obsession and her profession, we often debated bands and artists. But it never ended acrimoniously. I liked Paul McCartney better than John Lennon. That was okay. I liked David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust while she liked Berlin Bowie. No problem. I preferred *OK Computer*; she preferred *Kid A*. I'd rather see Doves; she'd rather see Snow Patrol. I'd take Carl Barât over Pete Doherty, while she liked them the other way around. It was all good and without remorse. But that all changed when we discussed Michael Jackson.

We had been eating at N'awlins, our favorite eatery on Toronto's King Street restaurant row; the only dining establishment without a sidewalk tout begging pedestrians to sample their menu.

We had been sitting at the bar when we heard that Michael Jackson had died. Well, saw that he had died. The overhanging

TVs reported his death—but the sound was turned off. And the oblivious blues band played on.

Neither of us were Michael Jackson fans but we both fully understood his contribution to pop music. We may have questioned the slavish devotion by his teetering fans but we couldn't deny that he was one of the biggest pop stars in the world. He had been rehearsing for his upcoming residency in London's O2 Arena and he had sold out fifty shows. That's right. Fifty!

Of course, Jackson's death dominated the rest of our dinner. For once there was no lecture from Jordan about my choice of alligator skewers. And there was no obsession about what herbs were mixed into the tangy dipping sauce.

We devoted our entire evening to lip reading the TV talking heads and dissecting the incoming video shot outside Jackson's mansion.

Hours later, after midnight, Jordan and I were driving in my Toyota Corolla back to a bar in her neighborhood.

Jordan stared out of the window while I sleepily stared at her face whenever we stopped at the traffic lights.

"So he hired Eddie Van Halen and Slash to play on his songs, right? If he needed a big guitar lick now, who do you think he'd get?"

"If he was still alive?"

"Of course." Jordan checked herself in my rear-view mirror. There was no need. I think she just liked to look at herself every now and then.

"I don't know. Jack White?"

"Good one." She then softly sang to her reflection, "I'm black/he's White—"

"He's White/So am I/I'm straight/he gets high..."

Jordan sank back into her seat and rested her hand on my knee. I was instantly turned on. It was always a thrill to find her playful.

So while I got aroused by Jordan's touch, millions of Jackson fans around the world were grieving. Screaming. Completely despondent over a strange little man who danced across the stage and sang silly songs about love and sex.

Of course, at the age of fifty, Jackson died relatively young. That was sad, I guess. And it seemed preventable. He was a

severely medicated man who died from a drug overdose involving sleeping medication. It was Hollywood's latest cliché. Do all stars need to take drugs in order to fall asleep? Read a book. Drink a glass of milk. Or just stay up late and watch TV; you'll fall asleep eventually.

"You know, your nose is perfect."

Jordan smiled for a moment before hiding it behind some strands of her long brown hair. "Shut up."

"I bet you Michael saw your nose and then tried to copy it for his own face. And after eight surgeries, it finally fell off."

"You sure know how to charm a girl."

The classic rock station was playing "Man in the Mirror." We predicted that every radio station in the city would play Michael Jackson songs for the rest of the summer.

Michael Jackson instantly became big business (again). The movie about his rehearsals and its companion album alone would soon gross five hundred million dollars.

No, Jackson's pop popularity was never in dispute. But for me, his musical legacy would always be overshadowed by his bizarre lifestyle. The plastic surgeries, the bleaching of his skin, his long list of ailments (real or imagined), his paranoia, his penchant for wearing masks, his penchant for making *his kids* wear masks, his Neverland amusement park, his pet monkey, and his odd menagerie of famous friends from Macaulay Culkin to Corey Feldman to Elizabeth Taylor. He was eccentric at best...

When I mentioned all of this bizarre behavior to Jordan, her playful smile completely deserted her face.

"I know where you're going with this, but just stop it."

"What?"

Jordan turned off the radio. "He was never found guilty of anything if that's what you're getting at. It was just a stitch-up, you know?"

Stitch-up. She had mentioned a British word. That was never good. Despite growing up in a backwater town in the middle of the Canadian Prairies, Jordan liked to include British words and expressions here and there whenever she felt agitated.

“I didn’t suggest anything. But not everyone believes he was innocent.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jordan removed her hand from my leg.

I should have changed the subject right then and there. Tell her she’s pretty. Get back to her perfect nose. Distract her with a promise of Pimm’s and lemonade at the bar we still hadn’t decided on. But I didn’t.

“It’s just weird, you know? Convicted of molestation or not, it’s always going to be brought up.”

“It doesn’t have to be, Neil! People have to move on!”

Jordan had a refreshing point-of-view. She was a person who believed that until something awful is proven in a court of law; you had to give the plaintiff the benefit of the doubt.

That was admirable. And I agreed with her, although I had some doubts. I think many people do. I even made excuses for him. He was a talented kid who made millions for his family. He grew up virtually separated from society, surrounded by people who constantly insisted how special and how brilliant he was. His body grew but his mental development stopped. He was fifty years old yet he still behaved like a child. He bought childish things. He recreated a childlike amusement park. He related best to children; children who probably never questioned his odd habits. How was he supposed to mature into a rational adult?

His eccentric behavior was basically ignored from the beginning. Who was going to challenge him? Who was going to risk banishment from his wealth? Greed powerfully beats back all duty and propriety every day of the week. Greed allows troubled mental health. Greed abides with the flickering hope that maybe a feeble-minded man will miraculously snap out of it all by himself.

“So you got it all sorted then?” Jordan jabbed my shoulder.

“Sure.” I now fully concentrated on the road so I wouldn’t have to focus on her sour expression.

“He was a father to three kids, you know. You can’t do that without some sort of sense, can you?”

“He made them wear masks.”

“To protect their identity.”

“Maybe...”

Jordan strained against her seatbelt and stared out of the passenger window. Now trapped inside my Corolla, it was the furthest distance away from me that she could muster—apart from climbing into the back seat. I suddenly wondered if any pub in her neighborhood even carried Pimm’s.

“So what, Jordan? You’re offended now?”

“Yes, I’m offended, you twat. Who are you to judge his whole life?”

“So, I think he’s weird. Who cares?”

“Just because *you* think someone’s massively weird doesn’t necessarily make him massively weird.”

“Holy shit, Jordan! We’re talking about Michael Jackson here!”

“It’s just that...”

“What?”

We stopped at another traffic light on Queen Street. How does anyone get anywhere on Queen Street? And now a plodding streetcar was looming ahead. I should have turned off and taken a different route. But driving twenty miles an hour on a teeming street was all I could handle at that moment.

“It’s just that it says something massive about you, doesn’t it? Like you’re the clever-clogs now.”

“What’s *clever-clogs*?” I didn’t always understand her Queen’s English. Some words and phrases needed clarifying.

“You think you’re so fucking superior.”

Ah. Clever-clogs = feeling superior. Got it.

“So now you suddenly know the gold standard of what’s normal and what’s deviant. Like we all should be looking up to you for guidance on how to live.”

“I can’t believe you’re defending Michael Jackson.”

“I’m not defending *him*!”

“Then what?”

“I’m defending *myself*.”

“What? How did we get to *you* all of a sudden?”

“So what do you think about what I do for a living, daaaarling?”

Oh shit...*darling*. She was pissed. “Darling” was one of those safe words in our conversations. You know, like when sexual

deviants dress up in latex and smack each other around a bit to get off? They usually have a safe word they can say when the going gets too rough and they want to take a break. Something inconsequential that could never be construed as sexual. “Popcorn” maybe. “Richard Nixon” perhaps. “Darling” was Jordan’s word whenever we had a fight. The conversation was going to get very rough from now on unless I bailed immediately. And I didn’t bail.

My mind raced for a moment. She wasn’t Michael Jackson. She didn’t sing. She didn’t dance. She wasn’t famous. And she wasn’t an addled adult with a Peter Pan complex. It was a trick question, maybe.

“What do you mean?” It was the best response I could manage on such short notice.

“Well, since you seem to be the judge of everyone’s life, what do you think about my blog?”

Oh shit...*her blog*. Her rock show review website. You’ll find it at *JordanRocks.com*. There are no annoying pop-ups or interstitials but it is an ad-heavy site with plenty of tempting links. Apparently companies pay her money to list them on her website. I can’t imagine anyone actually linking to them but I know very little about the moneymaking intricacies of the internet. At any rate, she makes enough money to survive.

JordanRocks.com is essentially Jordan’s exhaustive journal about all the concerts she’s ever attended in her life, peppered with witty opinions and searing insights. But don’t expect a cohesive history on popular music or in-depth analysis. Bands she likes are gods. Bands she hates are ignored. It’s basically the confessional diary of a rock music lover, dressed up and glamorized as relevant just because it appears on your computer screen.

And she’s somehow gained enough notoriety to occasionally appear on local radio stations. Whenever a show is short on big-name guests to talk about musical trends, they invite Jordan to call into the station and enlighten their listeners. And by now the minimal radio recognition had gone to her head.

“What do you mean? I like all your music stuff. Peter Gabriel’s Genesis rocks, Phil Collins’ Genesis blows. I get all that...”

“No, all the other stuff.”

Right. *The other stuff*. The traffic to her website instantly increased a few months ago once she veered away from the rock show script and started adding details from her regular life. Now she has witty opinions and searing insights about *everything*. *Lost* is the best show on TV because it makes you think. Dogs should be rescued from homeless people. Mayonnaise goes much better with fries than ketchup. Cures for diseases are suppressed so that the drug companies can keep us sick and make more money.

And don’t forget the inclusion of revelatory episodes from her love life. That’s where I make the occasional cameo. At least she spares me my name and calls me D. It might stand for “darling” but I doubt it. When I read about D’s adventures I think of “dickhead” or “douchebag.”

The whole website exercise was supposed to be about *the music*. She loved her favorite bands and she wanted to share her musical obsessions with the world.

Now she talks about buying red panties, wondering if D will like them.

I did.

Now she talks about how D talked her into seeing *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* over Matthew McConaughey’s *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*.

Was I wrong?

Now she talks about treating D to sushi dinner and getting annoyed when D got drunk on Sapporo beer instead—even though I specifically told her that I hated that gummy rice. However, my thorough objection didn’t make the website cut. And D got subsequently demolished in the comments section.

And yet—with all these mundane anecdotes about sexy underwear, weekend movie choices, and soggy food—she still calls herself a rock music journalist!

So what do I really think about what she does with her life? Quite frankly, I’m worried.

Previously, there was some level of purity in her rock ‘n’ roll passion. I didn’t always agree with her musical assessments but at least they were honest.

Where did that musical focus go? Now it's all about *her*. Or the glorified version of herself where she's society's hero and everyone else is either an enemy or a pawn.

But will dinners and drinks and adequate sex with D be enough for her? How long before she starts doing reckless stunts just to spike her website with more colorful anecdotes?

Look what happens to those *Survivor* contestants. They were all nice normal people with nice normal jobs and nice normal families. Then after being invited on TV and dangling the slim possibility of a million dollars in front of them, they're suddenly backstabbing their new friends, shitting in a hole, and eating animal testicles to win cash. Humiliation and derision don't matter. "It's all part of the game." Maybe.

However, when it's all over, many of them don't go away. They still try to ply their fleeting TV experiences into even more celebrity exposure. "I was on TV for a few weeks! I'm still here! Please talk to me! Please keep me relevant to your lives!" Suddenly, they're not so nice and normal anymore and they don't want to return to their nice and normal jobs. They want to be TV stars forever.

"You're not going to eat animal testicles, are you?"

"What?! No! Why?"

"I don't know, for your website?"

"Why would I ever do that, Neil?"

"I don't know. To impress your readers?"

I wondered what Jordan would be like if she was a celebrity. Would she ever pay for anything? Would she be one of those rich stars who never brings their wallets and expects everything for free? Like the movie star millionaires who shoot their movies in Toronto and then want free courtside seats to the Raptors games. "Look at me on the big screen, everybody. I'm just like you, I like basketball too! Except I sit down here beside the players. And I didn't pay a penny for my ticket."

Jordan would probably be one of those Hollywood starlets who wouldn't present an award at the Oscars unless she received a free gift bag. "I won't show up to your little movie party unless I get a

glimmering tote bag filled with jewelry, perfume, leather pumps, and a spa day at the Playboy mansion.”

“If you were presenting Best Animated Short Film at the Oscars, would you need to know what’s in the gift bag first or would you just be happy to be there?”

“Where the hell did that come from? What does that have to do with anything—?”

“Just answer the question.”

“Just answer *my* question, ‘What do you think about what I do for a living?’”

“Do you care about the gift bag or not?”

“What bleedin’ gift bag?”

“At the Oscars!”

“If there’s a bleedin’ gift bag, I’ll take it! Is that what you want to know?!”

“You’d take it?”

“Of course!”

What Jordan wants, what they all want—Michael Jackson, the *Survivor* contestants, the movie star millionaires—is to be loved. Just like the rest of us. It’s so basic, yet so maligned and distorted when you’re famous—or faux famous. The unconditional love from families and friends is always fine, but it’s never enough. The conditional love from strangers is much more demanding and attractive.

Jordan loved bands so she created a website. And she wants the bands to love her back. However, these bands can’t love her back because she’s lost in the expansive sea of fan anonymity.

So now she wants the love from the stay-at-home mom who writes “LOL” to everything she finds slightly amusing. She wants the love from the nerd rock fan who still believes rock ‘n’ roll can save the world. She wants the love from the divorced pervert who scans the web for porn but still appreciates the figure of a fully-clothed internet hottie.

And she probably—hopefully—wants love from me. But we haven’t said it to each other yet. And I didn’t want to say it right then and there. Not in that moment. It should happen in a nice romantic setting with nice romantic thoughts swirling through our

minds. We were fighting and I didn't want to blurt it out in order to defuse a troubling situation. I needed more time.

"So answer me, Neil." Jordan was briefly calm again. "What do you think about what I do for a living?"

I needed more time.

"Well?"

"It's fine."

"Fine?"

"What's wrong with 'fine?' I think a lot of people would love to have a job that's 'fine.'"

"I don't."

"Well it's better than having a job that's lame."

"Why would you even say that? Are you now saying that my job is lame?"

"I didn't say that at all—"

"Then what are you saying, Neil?"

I needed more time.

"You just want people to love you like everybody else. I get that. It's okay."

"You don't think that...I make a contribution?"

"A contribution to what?"

Jordan snorted and unlinked her seat belt.

I repeated myself to be clear. "You want people to love you, Jordan. I get that. It's okay."

You can't get angry about admitting that you want love, can you? Can you?! Apparently you can.

Jordan suddenly opened the passenger door. If I was on a better street, I would have sped up so she couldn't escape, but I was on Queen Street. If it wasn't another traffic light, it was that cock-blocking street car. So I had to stop at Logan Avenue.

And unfortunately, it was close enough for her to walk home.

"You don't get it, Neil. And I guess you don't get *me*. You don't get me at all!"

"Wait!"

Jordan made a break for it. She left the door wide open and quickly retreated into the night. By the time I undid my seat belt and leaned over to close the passenger door—she had gone.

I slowly drove ahead on Queen Street—for once grateful for the traffic’s agonizing pace. Where did she go? East on Queen? South on Logan? Or south on Morse through the school yard? Maybe north on Logan to fool me? Where did she go?

Truthfully, I don’t think I looked that hard for Jordan. I honestly didn’t know what to say to her at that moment. Stopping her in mid-flight would only have been more destructive. I imagined a lot more yelling and increasingly challenging questions about why I didn’t know why *she* was doing all the yelling.

I guess I didn’t really respect what she was doing. Not anymore. And I definitely couldn’t tell her that. Even hesitating about it cost me a miserable midnight. Would lying to her help? Maybe for the moment. But I certainly wouldn’t like any new obligation of deceiving her for the rest of our relationship.

Damn. I just wanted things to go back to the way they were before Michael Jackson died. Hours ago, I was briefly horny. Now I was just as despondent as his teetering fans. Well played, MJ, well played.

I turned the car around. I couldn’t find her and even if I did, I would only make matters worse. I had to think of a new strategy.

“You don’t get it, Neil. And I guess you don’t get *me*. You don’t get me at all!” Those were her final words of the night. While they didn’t exactly flatter my comprehension of her grievances, they didn’t necessarily mean an end to our relationship. If Jordan was leaving me, I think I deserved a clear and concise break-up.

The truth was now I needed to look at her website. While her online accounts are somewhat unreliable, they do sometimes shine a dim light into her thought processes.

I threw out my flip-flops when I read her rant on the male foot. According to Jordan, men’s feet are disgusting and should be hidden. Plus men look ridiculous stomping around the big bad city with exposed garbage everywhere and lurking strands of hepatitis around every corner.

I even canceled our surprise trip to the Dominican Republic. Jordan wrote that the island nation had few points-of-interest and was buried under an avalanche of all-inclusive resorts, filled to the brim with pale North Americans who refused to explore the island

beyond the hotel buffet. So we slumped it around the Niagara-on-the-Lake wine country instead. It wasn't terrible. We got drunk.

But beyond Jordan's listings of her likes and dislikes, her reviews of life's events also tipped me off to her true feelings—often more thoroughly than any information gleaned from our face-to-face discussions.

When her beloved aunt died from pneumonia, Jordan informed cyberspace that she was feeling lost and angry. So I blithely accepted her surly mood and comforted her with some of her favorites. I drove out of my way to fetch the Irish Cream-flavored coffee she likes. I cuddled with her on *Grey's Anatomy* nights. And I sat through *He's Just Not That Into You* and made sure I smiled at all the whimsical predicaments.

She never did talk directly about her aunt to me, but my silent support was duly noted. D got good reviews for a while and a few of her fans even posted that I was a keeper (and maybe a closet homosexual).

I was pretty positive D would make an appearance in Jordan's next entry too—but now much less favorably. It was possibly the only way I could find out her true feelings so I could then scheme on how to fix the sticky situation.

And so began my agonizing wait.