

THE WHOLE STORY

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Hey man, don't bake out there ok? We're about to head back. The sun's killer. It's like the day Marko died, right? Wait, what do you mean? Come on. You know this. It was like a month ago. Seriously, where have been? I know you're at school now in Sacramento, but still. It's weird no one told you. Well, I mean what do you want to know? I can't really tell the story. I don't really know the story.

Basically, he suffocated. It was weird. He was on the beach, on a day like this with a lot of people, but it happened all of a sudden. It was that damn Chiclet the dentist had given him. Watch out for those things. He had been funny for a while before that, but the Chiclet took him out for good.

That's it. What? I don't know what more to tell you. I mean I can try, but I'd need a margarita to get the juices flowing. Yeah? Ramon's doesn't sound bad, if you're up for it. Well, thanks man. I'll get you next time.

So, I guess maybe it started when he had to find a way to pay for Claire's parking ticket. She'd taken his Civic and left it parked next to a hydrant while she went to get her hair highlighted. The thing was towed by the time she got back and of course he had to go get it.

He said he didn't feel like he should be responsible for that crap. So what he did was he went to the Sports Authority. He got the clerk to bring out on a nice pair of Adidas in his size. After trying them on, he asked for the clerk to bring out the next size higher. And while the guy was in back Marko just strolled right out of there wearing his new shoes. Which made him feel better about paying the ticket. But Claire was upset, and I don't know how I feel about the whole thing.

She was always making garlic chicken. He complained about the routine. Then they broke up so she could press patterns into clay somewhere up in Humboldt County. He went to Oregon on a vacation. Neither were really the same after that. They got back together eventually because he saw her one day right there on the sidewalk, wearing a sign around her neck advertising for Mrs. Lim's seafood buffet. It was her and the two Lim boys, she'd lost her tan and gained a few pounds but the sign she was wearing suited her or something.

Oh and then, like a week ago, he came to us with this idea for a road sign. He said he wanted to make signs for highways, small ones that would just say things like, “hang in there” or “someone needs you” Or like “this land is your land.” He was pretty psyched, I have to say, but Rich and me, we didn’t really see the point. It sounded like those Valentine’s day hearts you get that no one really likes. And besides, I think Marko realized that you could only read signs like this on a highway if you were going too slow. That didn’t stop him. He thought they could be made into some nice tee-shirts. Who knows? Maybe that would have worked. But it’s in the past because the next day was when he choked.

What? What do you want me to say? What else is there? The whole story? Man. How? How can I tell the whole story without starting at the very beginning? The very beginning of it all? How can I tell it without telling the story of the entire universe? It’s all there, it all fits somehow. I mean if that’s what you want, I can try. I hardly know anything. I can only imagine what happened to Marko.

Maybe it started on one of those seven thirty am mornings when you’re awake before your alarm and the birds are chirping like banshees. He had a toothache, actually—it had been keeping him up. And Claire’s snoring too, maybe, but mostly the tooth. Sucks, you know? He would have called in sick at In-N-Out but Sunil had already given him that week-long vacation that he’d spent in Oregon. So he called the dentist. I know, seems a bit drastic. He’d never been so decisive and serious before. But there was something off about him since they got back together.

Maybe it got really bad in Oregon. He told me he killed a chicken on his uncle’s farm. Yeah they were egging him on saying that he couldn’t do it, he didn’t know a hen from a handbrake and that he’d end up getting a beak-shaped scar on his forehead. He’s not the type to get proud, but Marko just wanted to prove to himself that he wasn’t sheltered. He was a survivor, too. It was just a chicken, something that had been on a plate in front of him his whole life. If he couldn’t kill it he didn’t deserve to eat it.

So he enters the coop. Or wait, it was probably a pen, because his uncle’s into free range kind of stuff. He’s ready, you know, rolling his sleeves up and bending at the knees, trying not to notice his Uncle’s chuckling from the porch. There are plenty of chickens. He’s surprised that they are brown, with soft-

looking feathers. They kind of reminded him of dogs in that way, he said. So he sets his sights on a shrimpy one without much gobbly stuff around the beak. It takes him about half a minute of chasing it around before he realizes it's not going to stop running and flapping and he's got to bend down and pick it up around the wings. Which he does, believe it or not, pretty easily. His uncle's not laughing now, he's telling Marko to bring the bird out of there and to this tree stump behind the house. Just as he picks up this mini hatchet, his uncle yells at him to put it down and to just wring the thing's neck. And it just comes to him, he said, like he'd been doing it all his life. He figures out how to hold the feet and wings down and he looks right down at that neck. It's scrawny and wriggling. And in the instant before he twists it in his hands he looks in its eyes. He watches closely and there's still life so he keeps twisting until, and here's the sick part, the head has completely twisted off. He feels the thing dying slowly in his hands. He knows he shouldn't let it go—or it would run around like a chicken with its head cut off, right?—but he wouldn't want to let go anyway because the way its panicked body deflates and twitches meaninglessly mesmerizes him. He watches and feels its lifeblood flow out.

When he came back from Oregon I was getting ready for a game of broomball. It was this sweet rivalry between our street and his and right as we're all running out of our houses in insanely bright clothes he drives up and puts on this goofy face like what are we doing? He parked the car in the street, parallel, instead of in his driveway. I thought that was messed up. So he didn't even want to play. He said he felt tired and that he would join us another day. He never did—but he was kind of busy with Claire after that, once he noticed her at the seafood buffet.

Gloria Lim bought the buffet last year. That place has been in the dumps since I was in middle school, back when Corey—did you ever know him? yeah, he played center—when Corey was working there and told the health inspector that they re-used people's leftover tuna steaks to make the tuna salad. He knew it was going to get the place shut down, but that guy never figured out how to keep his mouth shut. Anyway, Gloria's built the buffet's reputation back up by adding dim sum and other cool Chinese stuff—and if they re-use their fish, they're not telling. So her family stands out there on DeWitt every Sunday

wearing these signs that have the prices and specials and they shout at strangers to come in. I feel so bad for her sons, it's nuts what she makes them do—and you can be damn sure she's not paying them! But that's where Marko saw Claire again after they broke up. She was standing on the street, wearing a sign that said something like, "Breakfast special, 3.95!" and looking like she'd gained fifteen pounds. Hair all in her face, he said, and totally out of place next to Gloria and her sons. He liked the look, actually. He told her that if she wanted, she could come to his place after she was done. That was probably a bad idea.

I wish that he had told us she was there when me and Diego came over to watch Bruce Lee. It would have made things so much easier if we'd known. We wouldn't have had to drive, but we assumed it would be a sleepover as usual so we brought the sleeping bags. As soon as we got near the door we smelled the garlic chicken. They were being all serious, sitting at the table and he was telling her something about how he just wanted more sunlight in his life, couldn't she give him that? That she always stayed up later than he did and that she didn't laugh as much as she used to. I was pretty embarrassed, but still we went in. He saw us and told us that the TV was all set to play in the living room. And when we asked him what was up he just sat there and pointed to it. Weird.

Diego and I fell asleep watching it because it was like the fiftieth time we'd seen it and we were too tired to copy the kung fu moves in real life. There was this dream I was having about all the children overthrowing the government and electing a dog to be president. Marko was there and he tried to assassinate the dog, I can't remember if this part is a dream or not but he and Claire were both crying in it and she was telling him that there was no other way. I woke up seriously hungry and left without even saying goodbye.

She always looked at him in both eyes one by one. First the left and then the right and back again like a clock or something was in her face, you know? She really couldn't just stare at one spot. And when she sneezed, she held it in.

I thought he had a right to know. I mean, why was she telling me if she didn't want him to know? Sure I thought maybe she just didn't have anybody else to tell, but that's way more depressing than if she was just afraid to tell him herself.

I called him, I'm pretty sure. I don't really remember when. Wait. We had just waxed our boards and he went home to feed Grrrzilla. There wasn't much going on, it was pretty hot and I wanted to get some lemonade. That why I called him. Yeah, I didn't really know how to make lemonade. I called to ask for the recipe, but I must have been pretty thirsty or messed up because I just ended up telling him straight out. I said, Marko, bro, I don't know if you know this, but in case you don't, Claire slept with Jeff. He didn't believe me, but then he got a little quieter and asked me why I was telling him that. Why else? I told him that he should know because I don't want to know something about his life that he doesn't know. He thanked me, which was cool, but he sort of squeaked and said bye. I didn't even end up asking him about the lemonade, and so I made this really foul glass that was so sour and tasted like Sweet n' Low. I wanted to retch.

He left for Oregon, then, which was too bad because that was right when Jeff put in his new ping-pong table. It would have been great if Marko was there because we got tired of playing two-on-one. But I guess he was out there thinking about things, and it changed him. Put some ideas in his head.

The day he told us about his idea for the road signs, we went to KFC. Marko took some really tiny bites out of his chicken leg. Like super small, microscopic. I thought at first his jaw hurt and he couldn't open any wider but then he was chewing fine, so I figured he must have been taking every bite really seriously. Enjoying every little bit of it.

Oh yeah, the toothache. I'd never heard him say the word "dentist" before, but he realized he could use his job benefits to go get his mouth looked at. There are other ways to get a nice smile, I remember telling him. You can just throw some whitening toothpaste in the mix. And you can just be happier. Maybe wake up with music instead of the alarm, that will bring out the smile. He told me to just shut up. A toothache doesn't go away with whitening, only the goddamn dentist can fix that, he said. I

know at that point he was hurting so I didn't push any further. There's always a limit to people, I guess. I'd never seen Marko at his limit before.

He came back from the dentist with the gum. Crazy-ass gum. They looked like Chiclets but were supposed to harden your animal—I mean “enamel.” We joked about that word. Like once I pulled up to the window when his staff was on break and instead of ordering a burger “animal style,” I ordered it “enamel style.” So he put a Chiclet in with the hamburger for me. It was funny, but I didn't eat it. They smelled like baby powder.

We'd finally convinced him to come to the beach with us. He'd been backing out again and again but that day the sun was really bright. He said that maybe it would do him good to get a little burnt, whatever that meant. There was this crazy low tide that day, and he was obsessed with sea glass and the sand dollars and crabs so we just figured we'd start out without him and see if he'd join us. I was riding serious A-frames out there, I didn't even really notice that he was laying still on the sand until there were people surrounding him and shouting for help.

The water wasn't warm when Marko died, and that maybe explains why the Chiclet was so hard in his mouth even though it was crazy sunny. The cold water that got in there made that piece of gum stiffen up. There's a few warm days but mostly cold days on the California coast, it's not like Florida. Sun or not, the water temperature depends more on the currents and where they're coming from. I saw on a map once that this current comes all the way from Japan. That's a seriously long ride, huh? I never get used to how big it is. The ocean.