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# EMPTY ROOMS LONELY COUNTRIES

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This free sample of EMPTY ROOMS  
LONELY COUNTRIES contains the short  
story “Little Conundrums”.

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The Ghost Track on page 161 is “A Lot Like the Ones Back in High School”

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## LITTLE CONUNDRUMS

“You’re doing it again,” says Jules. She’s sitting on the bed watching me. A copy of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* is on her lap. I’m on the floor writing in my black book. There are empty bottles of beer on the floor and the table. The drapes behind the bed are closed, but sunlight’s still coming through. I can hear the sounds of London traffic outside. “This isn’t about regret.”

“What isn’t?” I ask.

“You know, *this*, all of this. It’s not like that.”

“I know it isn’t.”

“Then don’t write the story like it is,” she says.

“I’ll try to, I will. I just realized that I miss you, that’s all. And I know you’re not here right now. This part of the story isn’t real. It’s meant to be a dramatic hook to get the reader involved.”

“But it’s still part of the story.”

“It’s not real.”

“Just write the story, Christian.”

I look back down at the empty page in front of me. My pen connects. “I’ll try, Jules.”

My first night in London found me jetlagged and unable to sleep, which is how I ended up in the bar located in the basement at the hotel. I was twenty-three years old. I was sitting at the bar by myself listening to oldies on a skipping jukebox and watching the Japanese bartender read a book.

Five minutes later, I would meet Jules.

Five hours later, I would be wandering around the hotel hallways with a towel around my waist and holding an empty

bottle of tequila in my hand, shouting out her name until she had no choice but to open the door to her room.

Five days later, I would be sleeping in a small bed with another woman in Oxford, dreaming about Jules. She was sitting alone on a cloud in a canvas of blue. I was admiring her from below. We waved to one another as she passed. We laughed. She signaled for me to follow. I ran after her until I came to the ocean. She drifted over the water. She kept gesturing for me to follow, but I couldn't. And I stood there watching her get farther and farther away until I couldn't see her anymore.

Jules came into the bar like she owned the place. She was a little shorter than I was, wearing all black, her brown hair pulled back, and these wide, mischievous dark eyes. I could tell she was up to something from the get go. She sat down on the stool right next to me like she already knew me, took a sip of my beer, gave me a sly smile, and said, "Do you like little conundrums?" Outside of the invasion of personal space and the plundering of my beer, the first thing I noticed was her Australian accent.

"Would you like some of my beer?"

She frowned. "States?"

"States," I answered. "Australia?"

"Oz." She looked down at my beer. "You're not one of those Americans who thinks you're better than everyone, are you?"

"Better than everyone? With this face?" I took my beer back and held it up. "Would you like one?"

She nodded and smiled. When her beer came, she offered me a cigarette.

"No, thanks. It's Christian, by the way."

"Jules." We shook hands. "Why are you smiling?"

"I never heard an Australian accent in real life."

"Not in the movies?"

"That's not real life."

"Right."

"Are you a princess?"

"Only to my father."



“Do you even have princesses down there? When I was little, my friend John and I would wish for two Australian princesses to come visit –”

“One for each of you.”

“Yeah. We wanted them to visit our town during our summer break. They never showed.”

“Why princesses?”

“I don’t know. We thought they would be princesses. It’s stupid, I know. It really made more sense then.”

“I hope so. How long’ve you been here?”

“Just got here today...” And I told her my story. I told her about my novel and how I was there to finish it and how I was supposed to meet the woman who inspired it in five days and I was planning to drink continuously until then and how I was in love but not in love because the relationship I was in was so fucked up and how I was in college but I didn’t have a clue what I was doing and how this whole growing up thing while everything becomes more and more complicated is getting old fast and how it felt like my life was a senseless run on sentence and I’d just kill for a comma now and then to catch a god damned break...

“My turn,” she said. And she told me her story. She told me about how she graduated and wanted to change the world only to be immediately disillusioned, packed her bags and fled for Europe by way of Asia and Africa, and now it was two years later and she needed to figure out if she should keep riding this wave or jump off before it crashes. “So, do you like little conundrums or what? You know, little problems?”

“Like what?”

“Like what starts with *e* and ends with *e*, but only has one letter in it?”

“Oh, *those*.”

“Yup, *those*.” She crushed the butt of her cigarette into an ashtray. “How about this one? What is it that we often return but never borrow?”

“Do you talk to everyone like this?”

“Pretty much, yeah. Plus, conundrums are good about keeping you awake, especially when you don’t want to be.”

“We need some tequila.”

“I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“Okay.”

“I talk in my sleep.”

“So do I. Not that it matters, right?”

She laughed. “How long you staying at the hotel?”

“Until I leave for Oxford.”

“To see her?”

“Yeah, her.”

“Let’s buy the whole bottle.”

“Of tequila?”

She nodded. When she did this, I decided that I liked her smile very much. And her eyes. “You’re going to need it for your whole drinking thing.”

“As long as you help me get started,” I said.

“I can do that. Have you ever had a conversation wearing only a towel?”

In my room, I had a towel around my waist. Jules wore a towel across her chest. Our clothes were piled up on the bed. She took a swig of the tequila and said, “What is it that when you take away the whole, you still have some left over?”

“Wholesome. I knew that one.”

“How about –”

“You need to stop. You’re starting to hurt my head, Jules.”

“Imagine how I feel, I got all this nonsense in my head.”

She yawned. “God, I’m tired.”

“I thought conundrums were good for keeping you awake.”

“Not when I know all the answers, they aren’t!” She passed the bottle to me. “Why do you drink that stuff?”

“To forget.”

She yawned. “I need to go to bed.”

“Want to go out tomorrow night?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to find me first.”

“How? I don’t even know your last name?”

“It’ll be the first conundrum you solved all night.”

“Second.”

“Okay, second.” She picked up her clothes and moved for the door. “I hope I see you tomorrow then.”

“We’re seriously not sleeping together tonight?”

“Not tonight, no.”

"I was just making sure." I stood up. "I bet I can find your room in less than ten minutes."

"If you follow, it'll be cheating."

"I won't follow. I promise. At least tell me what floor you're on."

"This one." She stepped into the hallway with a grin. "Surprise me then."

"I'll try my best." I sat back down and decided to finish the bottle of tequila before I tried.

Jules and I went out the night after. We took the underground to some massive pub at what seemed like the edge of the city. I was still riding the wave of alcohol from the night before and had convinced Jules to fill up on liquor before we left the hotel to catch up. On the train, we sang songs loudly and horribly.

"That was cheating, what you did last night," she said.

"I was desperate," I said. "What if I never saw you again? What would I do then?"

"You'd manage."

"Maybe."

She put her head on my shoulder. "You'll have to really surprise me tonight."

"How?"

"That's for you to figure out."

Jules was a great storyteller; she could spin a yarn like nobody's business. She ended up telling me one story where her and her two friends spontaneously stole a taxi. By the time she was finished with the story, my whole body ached from laughter, and I was convinced that stealing a taxi was the coolest thing in the whole world.

"Let's steal one tonight," I declared while we stumbled home in the darkness.

"No, we can't. It's harder to do things in this country than it is back home. Repercussions, that sort of thing. By the way, you still haven't surprised me yet."

"I assumed you seeing how awesome I was would be the surprise."

"Keep assuming."

"The night's not over."

"I'm just saying."

"And I'm just saying the night's not over." As I said it, I didn't have a clue of what to do.

"I can't believe that I've been doing this for two years and I meet you now. I could've used a mate like you a long time ago."

"Better late than never."

"I guess." She kicked a bottle. "She's not right for you, you know that?"

"Probably," I said, "but she's in the direction my heart's pulling me."

"There're other directions. Just because gravity pulls us down doesn't mean we have to stay down."

"I know." I wanted to change the subject. "What's your favorite book?"

"My absolute favorite's *The Little Prince*. I love that book. It's like – why're you laughing?"

A copy of *The Little Prince* was already in my backpack at the hotel. It was the version translated by Katherine Woods with the classic cover illustrated by Saint-Exupéry that showed the little prince – bowtie and all, mouth open, eyes wide – standing alone on a small flower-speckled planet.

The book was wrapped in gift-wrap and everything. It was meant to be a gift for the girl in Oxford, the girl that Jules believed wasn't right for me.

I was secretly hoping that the magic the book provided for me when I read it before would work for her too; that she'd read the book, see the error of her ways, and eventually come running into the arms of the one person who'd been there for her all along. It was cliché and had all the logic of a John Hughes movie, but I was desperate and afraid of the future where I couldn't imagine living without her.

Despite all that, I liked the way Jules tugged at my heart enough to open a few doors I didn't know about, the way it felt like I was toying with enchantment in a place I didn't know any could be found.

It felt like *possibilities*.

“Well,” I said at Jules’ hotel room door, “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You guess?” said Jules.

“I’ve got a lot of writing to do tomorrow and...well, I’m sure you’re going to be busy.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she huffed. “You going to bed then?”

“I’m tired. I should, yeah.”

“You still didn’t – nevermind.”

“What?”

“Forget about it. It’s nothing. Tomorrow then, maybe.”

“I had a great time tonight.”

“Me too.”

“Sleep well,” I said, already walking away.

Jules was still standing at the doorway when I turned a corner.

Once I was out of sight, I ran to my room like the world was coming to an end.

I ripped open my bag, found the wrapped copy of *The Little Prince*, wrote a quick note on the hotel stationary, and left the room. When I returned to Jules’ room, I leaned the book on the door, knocked twice and ran back to my room.

By the time I was settled in my room, I was drunk and dizzy. I collapsed on my bed. I could feel sleep wanting to come on, and it probably would’ve if there hadn’t been a knock on my door.

Jules was at my doorway. She was holding the book. She was crying. “I don’t know how you did it and I don’t want to know. I don’t.” She put the book to her chest. “This is the best surprise I’ve ever gotten. This is...this –”

I started to speak.

She put her hand to my mouth. “Be quiet, you.” She moved her hand and kissed me hard on the lips while pushing me towards the bed. “Just be quiet.”

“It was a great surprise,” Jules says.

“You were a great surprise,” I say.

“Are we back to the part that’s not real again?”

“I’m afraid so.” I sit up. My back cracks.

“Why did you stop writing?”

“I don’t want to write about the part where you left for Ireland before heading home and you wanted me to come.”

“You said you couldn’t go with me.”

“And the part where I’d wake up with your head on my chest watching me, your fingers tracing my lips, and all I could think to do was fall back to sleep like we had all the time in the world.”

“You were tired.”

“And the part where we agreed to meet one another down the road, both knowing that it wasn’t going to happen.”

“It was better that way.”

“And the part when you read my book. I remember watching you read it from across the room. I remember what you said.”

“I said ‘If the book’s a love story, then why is it so angry?’”

“Right. And the part where I woke up to find you gone. You left me that note asking me not to go to Oxford, to meet you in Ireland instead. You wrote —”

“There’re happy stories inside of you wanting to be written, and I can bring those out of you.”

“Yeah, that.”

“It’s true, you know. There’re happy stories inside of you.”

“I know that. I just hope that you’re out there somewhere and you can read this. I appreciate the faith you had in me. I’ve fallen down a lot since we’ve met, but I’ve been good about getting back up. And I still don’t have a clue what I’m doing; only it’s not a bad thing anymore. I just wanted to say these things to you, to let you know that I’m fine.”

“It’s not about regret.”

“No, it never was. It was all about figuring out one little conundrum.”

“Which one was that?”

“What is it that we often return but never borrow?”

“Oh, that one.”

“Yeah, that one,” I say. “*Thanks.*”

## **REVIEWS OF SELECT STORIES:**

"[Counting Nuns] is quite engaging . . . you're bound to appreciate the humor and true-to-life inner dialogue Dumais presents."

**-THE FIX**

"Christian A. Dumais's "Counting Nuns" . . . contains a richness of language and imagery that many fictional stories lack. A perfect example of the editors taking a risk publishing an unusual piece that pays off."

**-THE FUTURE FIRE**

"“Mad Dogs” by Christian A. Dumais . . . chronicles his night out drinking with some visiting Secret Service and Air Force Two staff, a night which ends with him sitting in the apartment of two Polish lesbians. You’ll have to read the essay to find out how he gets there; but what’s great about this piece is that it makes real life seem just as strange as the fictional realities depicted in the rest of the magazine."

**- WHISPERS**

# EMPTY LONELY ROOMS COUNTRIES

collects 27 heartbreaking and funny short stories that span two continents, five countries and multiple universes to explore love, loss and redemption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## PAYING THE TAB

A prophet says be with the ones you love and the world will sort itself out. It's good advice, but all I'm seeing are a bunch of people too afraid to love. The clock pushes closer to midnight and they're afraid of rejection. Two pounds of anthrax with the potential of killing one-hundred thousand people, dirty bombs, mutant flues,

**2+2=5**

written on the walls, a collapsing economy ...and you're sitting there still afraid of a two-lettered word.

## MAD DOGS

Why did the Secret Service take the time out from protecting the second most powerful man in the world to completely screw up my life?

**Were they under  
orders to doom me?**

## THE ILLUSION OF SWING

I know at dawn I will hate myself because I will have to come to terms with the fact that we could have been starting a REVOLUTION or perhaps a new RELIGION, but instead we got DRUNK, SLOPPY and STUPID inside an era NOTHING like our own.

## OCULAR SINISTER

I thought about my past and how it felt like a succession of  
**UNIVERSES**  
**UNIVERSES**

created one on top of another, shaping and altering the architecture of my life, removing details—here, adding things here, until I couldn't quite place what was new, what was old, what was

**TRUTH** and what was **MYTH.**

