

**MY FIRST NIGHT OF
DRINKING ENDED
IN MURDER.**

Returning to Colorado after the breakup in New York, I had the opportunity to make a fresh start. I had little more than a computer and the clothes on my back, and nowhere to live.

I moved to Lower Downtown (LoDo) Denver where I found a pristine white-walled loft that would serve as my starter bachelor pad. I also went a little wild and bought a sports car — as young men with money trying to fill the hole left by a woman often do.

I parked the Italian machine under the building and moved in the few boxes I had to my name, along with a new bed and mattress.

The emptiness of the white box only drove home the point further — this was truly a fresh start.

I finished unpacking as the sun was setting behind the mountains, a sliver of which I could see from my tiny deck. I remember thinking it was up to me to change my outlook. If I wanted a new life, I'd need to try a new perspective.

I had spent the last eight years living to work — staring down and never looking up. It had made me a fair amount of money, but cost me my relationship, I believed. As the sun set, I told myself things needed to be different. I would try new things. Step outside of my comfort zone and see what life could be if I actually lived it.

At that exact moment, like it was scripted in the movie of my life, there was a knock at my door. I didn't know anyone in Denver.

Strange.

I opened the door and standing there was a police officer in full uniform. He introduced himself as my neighbor, Eric — he lived right across the hall. He saw that I had just moved in and he wanted to see if I needed anything. Officer Eric looked like a young Denzel Washington, a decade older than me, and you could smell his charisma. I did need a hammer to hang my one piece of art, so we walked across the hall to find one.

When he opened the door to his loft, I was taken aback. His place was two stories of brick walls and windows. One of the walls had a graffiti skyline painted on it while the windows were framed by twenty-feet of black velvet. The place was dense with lights, smells, and worldly possessions with mysterious backstories. I felt like I had just stepped onto the set of *Oceans 11* — I wouldn't have been surprised if George Clooney stepped out and offered me a drink.

We found the hammer and Eric asked if I had plans for my first night in town? He said there

were some great bars down the street and offered to show me around.

As I stood in the hall, able to see my empty white space on the left and his dense, rich world on the right, I didn't hesitate. I was going to start looking up. Tonight. He said he'd stop by at 10pm and we closed our doors.

Up until this point in my life, I had never had a single drink of alcohol. I never had any interest growing up, and I had been on-the-go building a business for the past eight years. I never saw the appeal. But now seemed as good a time as any to give it a whirl!

He showed up around my normal bedtime — 10:30 — and Officer Eric had transformed into Clubbing Eric. He was clearly not shy about his muscles, his tattoos or his scars. His gold chains and v-neck t-shirt made my 'going out' clothes seem underwhelming, but I thought, "What the hell, let's do this."

We walked less than a block to a bar that

was dark, loud and full of beautiful women. Eric walked in like he owned the place and said hello to half the people as we made our way to the back. The bartender knew Eric (of course) and started making his drink, asking over his shoulder what I'd have: "I'll have what he's having," quickly became my cover for not knowing how or what to order.

We made our way up some back stairs to a rooftop that overlooked the city. This was the shot in the movie that said: "Welcome to the big city, kid!"

I sipped my way through a few drinks as Eric chatted up women and was generous in his introductions: "Meet my new friend from Nebraska! Just moved here today." Around 11:30pm, we cashed out at the bar, and I had to give it to him — he had made my first night in Denver one to remember. As we walked out, it was clear I was a bit tipsy from whatever I was drinking, so I started to tell him I had had enough, but he cut me off: "We're just getting started."

Three minutes later, we're at the front of a three-story club with a line of beautiful people a block-long, lined-up behind the velvet ropes. But Eric knew the doorman (of course — an off-duty cop buddy) and we walked right in. Minutes later, he's holding court in a lounge somewhere tucked inside the club and I'm buying shots for a crowd of women unlike any I had ever seen in the cornhusker state.

As the music got louder and the lights dimmed, my instincts kept telling me to call it a night. As a dyed-in-the-wool introvert, I had spent all my energy and was running on fumes (even if they were 20-proof). The only thing that kept me going was the hope that the movie I was living out was a romantic comedy, and I was about to experience the “meet cute”. I hoped I'd accidentally spill my drink on one of the women only to learn she has a cat named Enzo and we were starstruck.

It didn't happen.

We cashed out around 12:30am and started

to walk back to our building. When we got to the entrance, Eric stopped and I knew I wasn't going to like what he had to say.

"There's one more spot you gotta see," he said with a smirk.

I had secretly been excited to get home for fear I might have to throw up any minute. I didn't want to walk anywhere else and told him as much.

"It's further out, we'll have to drive. Let's take your ride."

This last line wasn't a question. He knew I wasn't in a state to drive, but somehow he was. Somewhere between better judgment and my commitment to do new things, I lost the battle in my head and handed him my keys.

Two-minutes later I'm sitting in the passenger seat of my own car, speeding away from downtown with the top down like a scene

from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Five Points.” came the answer, barely audible over the engine.

I didn't know Denver, but I had heard of Five Points. Not 15-hours earlier, when I was closing on my new loft, my realtor mentioned one place near downtown that I should avoid: Five Points.

“Is this a good idea?” I asked.

“Don't worry. I've got a gun in my boot,” Eric replied and downshifted into the darkness.

The breeze was helping a bit with the heavy feeling in my head, and I remember watching the streetlights go by in a blur. But without any warning, Eric hit the brakes and pulled over to the wrong side of the street. Out of the shadows, three men walked over to the car with their hands in their pockets. “*What*

good is a gun in your boot?" I thought. A minute before I was hoping not to throw up in my own car and now I was worried I wouldn't make it home alive. Why would we stop here of all places?

Then, one of the guys yelled out: "Nice ride, E!" and the three of them gave Eric a soul shake. And, that's when I saw it. The third guy slipped Eric a roll of cash smoother than any valet tip I could ever deliver. Bam! It hit me. The movie I was living was definitely not a romantic comedy — I had been in *Training Day* all night, and I never even knew it.

My heart was racing and all I wanted was to get out of there. But Eric had to show off and rev the engine (7,500 RPM redline). The sound acted as some sort of mating call because out of the shadows from the other side of the street came three women. Three prostitutes. And, they were not my type of prostitutes — they looked nothing like Julia Roberts. While the men talking with Eric paid me no attention, these women seemed quite interested.

They were leaning into my side of the car and all I could think was: “Please don’t let the studs on their boots scratch the paint!”

I may have been smiling and polite (midwestern upbringing), but inside I was yelling “Get the FUCK off my car!”

How did I end up here? I was trying not to throw up in my own car while drug dealers on my left were mugging with the crooked cop with a gun in his boot all while three “ladies” of the night were soliciting me on a street in the one part of town I wasn’t suppose to be. So much for trying new things!

I gave Eric a look that clearly made my point, and we took off. We were headed back downtown and I could see the end of the night approaching.

That’s when Eric made one more call. I couldn’t hear everything he said, but I caught the part where he asked whoever was on the other end if they would stop by “when they

got off work.” Who gets off work at two in the morning?

We made it back to our building and Eric explained that some girls he knew were going to come by soon. All I could focus on was making it to my own bathroom to throw up in my own toilet so I could salvage just a shred of my dignity. I gave him a non-answer just so I could slip into my place and put the ridiculous experience behind me.

When I finally did make it to my bathroom, I was able to get everything out of my system, and then some. My head was telling me I was in *Apocalypse Now* as I stumbled my way through changing out of my ‘going out’ clothes, getting ready for bed and turning out the lights...when there was a *knock knock knock* at my door.

I just wanted to be left alone. What could he possibly want now. I shuffled to the door, opened it a crack, and saw that it wasn’t Eric knocking. Instead, I saw two women who

clearly did just get off work from what I imagined was a mid-tier gentlemen's club where the lighting was more flattering than what they were facing in my hallway.

“Eric said you should come party with us!” one of the women said through the slit.

This is how I imagined every porn film starts, and the sum of the night flashed in front of my eyes. If I had set out to play *Welcome to Denver Bingo* — with the booze, the beautiful women, the drugs, the guns, the prostitutes and now this, the strippers as the center square — I had the chance to be a big winner.

But I folded. I thanked them for the offer, bid them goodnight, and shut my door for good. I was happy to be alone and alive.

If the night had been a movie, this is where the credits would roll.

And, if you stuck around through those, you'd get to see one more scene...

CUT TO: Three years later.

INT: Loft (different than first one)

There I am, watching the evening news when a story comes on that catches my attention. A Dallas policeman had been arrested for his involvement with a homicide in Five Points. And there he was — Handsome Eric in his uniform smiling back at me from the screen.

“I bet he did it with the gun in his boot,” I thought to myself.



Shown actual size.

