

IF SHE COULD SAY ANYTHING IT WOULD BE THIS

MADELINE GARFINKLE

They'd only been seeing each other, like...what? Five weeks? Maybe six? Whatever. He said I love you. She said it back. Who knows if either of them meant it. She knew he was moving to Seattle. Yeah, it was never a secret. In fact, he told her on their first date. She felt like asking "then why are you here?" As in next to her, in her apartment, in her life. Why are you here if you're leaving? Of course, she didn't ask that. How embarrassing would that be?

Right, how they met—a party for a birthday girl that neither of them knew particularly well. They'd both been dragged, by that friend, who is always dragging their less-fun-friends to places they promise will be outrageously fun. When people promise that a place will be outrageously fun, it is wise to hide in a dark room. Nonetheless, this is how they meet and all else shrinks to bite-size irrelevancy, so it doesn't really matter what the party looked like, right? Here it is anyway: the birthday girl's boyfriend's cousin's SoHo loft, which doubles as a showroom for his boutique brand of leather body harnesses and glow-in-the-dark sex toys. Everyone, and I mean everyone, is uncomfortable. What do they do? They get drunk. Some people do drugs.

They collide about an hour in, by the counter crowded with half-drunk bottles and red cups, as people do, when they find other guests looking to escape their sober, arm-crossed awkwardness. As it turns out, the girl knows the friend who dragged the boy there. Small world! They all get talking. She has lost her own friend who dragged her, but it's for the best, she's trying to Irish exit anyway. Except now the boy doesn't want to stay at the party without her. Or maybe he's also seeking an exit strategy. He asks if she'd be interested in a slice of pizza. She was just thinking about a slice of pizza! They leave, eat, talk about how very little fun they had. Their lack of fun is almost convincing, except they are laughing so hard their stomachs could burst open. But now we have a problem: the girl realizes she's left her keys at the sex dungeon birthday party. This is the first time, in all her three years of living in New York, that she has ever lost her keys. What a night to break a spotless record! Does she want to go back? No. She'd rather light her hair on fire. But her keys. The most important item that one should never, ever lose, especially when going to outrageously fun parties that they have been dragged to. He feels an acute urgency to protect her—but they just met, how can he do so without looking pushy or predatory? He can't offer that she sleep over, that'd be too much. Maybe he should insist they go back—that'd be the right, respectable thing to do. Ha. Fuck it. "Do you want to sleep over?" She does—maybe she would even if she hadn't lost her keys. She's prone to trusting men she's just met, it's something she's working on.

His apartment is nice, for a boy, which is something she didn't mean to say out loud. He laughs. She blushes. He wants to kiss her, but doesn't want her to think he is trying to take advantage. Putting the moves on some girl who lost her keys! He wouldn't dare. But he keeps staring at the way her teeth gnaw at the corner of her lip before saying something. A habit she's desperately trying to break. She notices, self-consciously, the six times he catches it happening. He thinks maybe she should sleep on the couch, just to make her more comfortable. Yeah, less pressure. "Here is the couch," he says. "It's a nice couch," she observes. "I got it on sale," he tells her.

She pulls him down on this nice, on-sale couch, and decides to straddle him, just to see what happens. A lot happens! But listen, they don't have sex. It'd be too cliché. It'd be too inappropriate. She's not using him for a place to stay, and he's not preying on her unfortunate situation. They just kiss with their clothes on—at least most of their clothes on—until 4am and commend themselves on having so, so much willpower.

They wake up around eight, but don't feel tired despite barely having slept. Right, they are still young. Their bodies can handle the ways they blatantly betray it. "I would love to get your number," he says, "if you have it memorized." They say goodbye. She calls her landlord and gets a new set of keys. The landlord now hates her. So do the neighbors, because all of the front locks need to be changed. She may as well move, the shame is unbearable. Except she doesn't care, barely even notices, giddy with the smell of boy all over her.

Their first date, a Tuesday, is supposed to be at the pier, his idea. Except now it is raining. Classic New York summer, right? Anyway, she doesn't feel like rescheduling, so she hits him with the: "let's just do mine?" Obviously, he's "down."

He brings over two bottles of wine, which he is embarrassed about, but only kind of. Is she going to think he's an alcoholic? I mean, it's t u e s d a y. Well, when she pushes his Pinot aside to pour some straight tequila on ice, his drinking insecurities dissolve like breath on a windowsill.

She is a heavy drinker, it's true. People are always telling her how much she can drink "for her size." She never knows what to do with this kind of statement—I mean, what are they trying to say, really? He is also a heavy drinker, more true. A product of his British upbringing. Wait. Have I failed to mention that? Here it is: born and raised in London and yes, he has an accent. The girl knows this only means trouble.

Her roommates aren't home. In fact, they hadn't been home for weeks. One splits her time between Philly and New York for a long-distance boyfriend. The other, well, she's always geographically unpredictable; she pays rent, though—well, her dad pays rent—so as long as the lights stay on, the girl doesn't mind spending most days alone. So, here they are: an apartment all to themselves, clutching tequila in coffee mugs and exchanging stories they hope the other will find interesting. She studied abroad at Oxford when she was only 16. He started painting when he was only seven. She once stole her parent's car to attend a college party six hours away from home—her one and only act of teenage rebellion, a thrill she will cherish forever. He once ran away to Brazil, only told his parents once he was there, and in the company of a culture he knew nothing of.

Suddenly, and without much warning, she is very bored of the living room. "Let's go to the bedroom," she suggests. He gets up, footsteps behind her with the venture of masked urgency. They lie down and take an inventory of each other's face. She loves his hair, which falls at his shoulders. He loves her one dimple, which he pokes with his index finger. She loves his teeth which, for some reason, make her giggle uncontrollably. He loves her eyes, which he gets so close to that she feels as though he is about to fall down into them. How many times has he called her beautiful? Surely too many, but it doesn't matter, self-loathing women have a tendency to forget that sort of thing if not immediately, at the very least the next time they look in the mirror. They kiss. It is she who makes the first move, as she usually does with men. Are men shy around her? Do men even like her? It is also quite possible that she is just very, very impatient. She has never been good with timing, it's something she's working on.

He is embarrassed that he did not make the first move. He says this once, and she ignores it. He says it again, and she tells him to stop talking. He kisses her torso and pauses to ask: "is this okay?" She nods. But what she really wants to say is: stay there, that space between my heart and my belly button, forever. Of course, she doesn't say that. How embarrassing would that be? She stays quiet, breathes, and wonders if heartbeats can be heard through walls.

The first fuck is always a little awkward. Also, they have been drinking. Tequila! She asks him, mid sex, "are you okay?" She feels that he's distant, which doesn't make sense, because they don't really know each other. How can someone be distant when they've never been close? I don't know, but it is possible. He asks for water. "Do you have water?" She does. Then: "I'm sorry," he says, "my mind is playing tricks." "Magic tricks?" she asks. He laughs at her cheap joke, then admits it has "been a while" and he is nervous. She admits that it has "probably been longer" and she is, too. They give up on sex for the evening, maybe for life, and for a moment they forget they even like it.

They stay up past three anyway, but no longer tell the interesting stories. Let's be honest, they weren't that interesting anyway. They tug at the ugly ones instead, pulling them out like weeds, in a whisper with the lights off. The boy's father is coarse and cold. He isn't even sure he could draw his face from memory—no, not literally, but it is possible they've never looked each other in the eye. His mother is sick and frail, practically shatters anytime that it rains. The girl's father a depressive workaholic, living season to season. Her mother addicted to plastic orange bottles, living script to script. All of this is said without judgment—by the way. There are many ways to be someone's parent. There are also many ways to be someone's child. It's unfortunate, really, that the world often makes it hard to be anything that lasts forever.

This is when he tells her: "I'm moving to Seattle at the end of September." She feels like yelling at him. She feels like throwing him out and screaming. She is mad at him, which doesn't make sense, because they don't really know each other. How can you be mad at someone, if you've never been happy with someone? I don't know, but it is possible. She collects herself, she is always collecting herself.

"That will be nice," she says, "to have hills."

He lets his lips rest on the back of her neck as they lay on the edge of sleep, fighting to stay up for as long as they can, like two kids boycotting bedtime.

They embed each other into their lives immediately, which is impulsive and childish, except it feels like there is no other option. The last days of August roll over them like credits after a film, and they float into September.

There are mornings and there are nights. There are cocktails and there is coffee. There are movies they never finish and songs they play too much. There is silence while toes touch, hair left on pillowcases. There are leaves that dry on the windowsill, haircuts given with kitchen scissors. There is her bad cooking, his good cooking. There is snoring. Laughing. There are flaws. One fight, maybe two. There is swapping of books and socks and quirks they call cute. Then, there is her birthday.

She is turning 25. She's never been weird about age, or birthdays, but suddenly she feels a thickness brewing at the back of her throat. 25! She can finally rent a car! Will she? Probably not. Someday, sure.

But she's not that excited about it. Anyway, he surprises her with a cake. He knows she feels off on this day. She has not spent a birthday with a man in three years. The last time was with her problematic college boyfriend, who showed up drunk and vindictive to her party the night before she turned 22, made a scene, then asked why she was crying if—technically—it wasn't her birthday yet. If she could say anything about this sort of incident it is this: people remember these things forever. Even if you were drunk. Even if you didn't mean it.

She feels overwhelmed with happiness, though, sitting in front of this cake and she hates herself, or him, for loving every moment of it. When he tells her to make a wish, her thoughts hide from her. She is scared to wish for something. Her dreams evacuate so she doesn't have a choice. She blows the candles out anyway, all 25 of them, that he made roots for in the frosting.

Now he is leaving in three days. Her anxiety has been building, maybe since their first night together, and it is about to spill out of her. The Friday before he goes, it does. She faints at a bar before she even finishes her first drink. No, this is not the first time this has happened, and yes, she is working on it. He is not there at the time, because they decided to go out separately that evening. Finally some independence! Mortified after the fainting incident, she gets in an Uber home. Bummer, she really felt like dancing. She texts him: "I fainted. I am going home." She hates herself for being a frail, little girl. She hates herself for looking like she needs attention. She hates herself for looking like that girl. But wait, who even is that girl? And why does no one want to be her? Because listen, she does need attention. Doesn't everyone? She does need to be taken care of. Don't we all? At least sometimes? On the really bad days?

He texts her back: "fuck. you okay?"

Something about his response stirs her stomach sideways. Maybe she wishes he'd rush over, break down the door, kiss her on the forehead for as long as he can hold his breath. I mean, how ridiculous would that be? She tells him "yeah," goes to sleep, and—if you can believe it—they never speak of this ever again. If there is a timeline, this incident may as well be erased.

But here's why it might be important. People never know what they want from love, but maybe what she wanted was this: to be rescued. Wait, that's a little ridiculous, don't you think? And not to mention incredibly outdated, am I right? She hates herself for thinking love will be the thing to hold her accountable for being "better," or worse, for feeling whole. Isn't she whole enough? Will she ever be whole enough, even when two hearts come together?

The next day she decides, impulsively, that she will not say goodbye. What is the point, she wonders, in commemorating loss while the person is still alive? Dark! She tells him to have fun with his friends before he goes, not to worry about her. "Are you sure?" he asks. There is nothing she hates more than when men ask her if she's sure. And yet, she is always saying yes. So whose fault is this, really? "Yes," she says, "I'm sure." He doesn't argue. Was he supposed to? A hard question.

Here's the thing: it might not have been love, but it was something. It's hard to see clearly, or confidently, when you're young. There is this misunderstanding with time, how much of it you have. With chances, how many of them you get. Kids are always swapping each other out like rented DVDs, it's sad and true. But at what point do people put their fear of losing something first and start spending the rest of their lives working to keep it? It's possible the girl has felt it—this quiet, settled feeling of not wondering what

life is like with other people. It is very, very possible she has felt it, luckily or unluckily, twice in her life—each time treating it as a heavy head cold.

So, he leaves. A few weeks go by. Actually, it is only two. But she misses him. She feels it behind her ears. She feels it rushing up her spine. She feels it in her loud and winding dreams. She misses him and it hurts. Badly. Or, it is possible, she is very impatient. She is always in a different time zone when it comes to the natural course of emotion. Is she allowed to miss him, when she never had him in any, real, practical, sustainable way?

She decides, impulsively one morning, that she will book a flight to Seattle, just to see what happens. Besides, her sister just moved there, which she uses as an excuse. An excuse for what? A hard question.

She tells him, the day before she leaves: I am coming to Seattle. To see my sister. “Oh,” he says, “well, it’d be nice to”... what does he want to say? It’d be nice to what? I mean, the two of them never even said bye. He settles for: it would be nice to “kick it for a bit.” Fuck. Did he really just say that? She looks at the words on her phone. Kick it. Is that what they were doing in New York? Had they just been “kicking it” all that time, when she thought they were dissolving into each other like milk in warm coffee? She lets it go. She packs her bags. She arrives on a Tuesday.

It’s an early flight and no, she does not sleep on the plane. She just holds her own hand the whole trip and thinks about how odd flying in an airplane is, really, if you let the thought turn over in your brain a few times.

Right—her sister, her older sister. She loves her a lot, that’s true. Maybe more than she will ever love anyone in a practical, sustainable way. If she has a biggest fear it is this: the way the world might sink should her sister ever leave it. This is a lot of pressure, she knows, but at least she is confident that when her biggest fear inevitably, one day, comes true, she will never be victim of having wasted any time. Dark! she knows, and is working on it.

But now we have a problem: the boy wants to see her, obviously, but he’s somewhere new now. He’s trying to move on now. The whole point of him moving, before he met her, was to start over somewhere. Why should he change that because he got to know someone for five, maybe six weeks before? He has contacted her since he left, each time her acting cold and defiant. (But what was she supposed to do? Did he ever think that, maybe, giving her everything before leaving pushed her into an emotionally uncomfortable corner?) Nonetheless, he texts her when she lands: welcome to the big city! Fuuuuck. Did he really just say that? No one, and I mean no one, calls anything on the West Coast “the big city.” But remember, he is British, so we let this one go. They text for a little while, each saying how so, so busy they are that week, and yet! they make a plan for the following day.

They go for a walk, then sit by the water. They are nervous, a little stiff. Something feels weird, awkward even. They talk—yes, they remember how. They hold hands. They kiss, but only lightly, like suddenly they’re worried people will know they have slept together. How embarrassing! Why does it feel this way? What are they trying to prove? Or maybe, it’s possible, it was nothing. Maybe, it’s possible, they were acting like kids that whole time. They only see each other for two or three hours, then the boy needs to go back for a meeting. They hug, awkwardly, and he says he’d like to see her again before she leaves. She answers, flatly and biting her tongue: Okay. But she wishes he would beg. She wishes he would tell all of

Seattle that the love of his life has flown all the way here for him (even if her sister lives here) and she has finally made it and he never wants to live without her again! I mean, how ridiculous would that be? But listen: she wants it anyway.

After they say goodbye, she feels tightly wound and frozen in place. But what did she expect? Here she is, imposing herself on his new life, completely unprompted, forcing him to confront their undefinable and somewhat childish love affair. She texts him anyway: "That was weird. Let's try again." They try again. She goes over to his apartment. He is happy to see her, to try again, but he doesn't know what to do with her, in this new place. He barely even knows what to do with himself, in this new place. He shows her his room, his living room, his balcony and his books. Then, they have sex. Probably a mistake. I mean, what a cheap way to bring someone far as close as possible.

Now she has to go. Dinner with her sister. But she feels weird, sitting in a restaurant. She cannot be present, as much as she wants to. She is unsettled. Okay, so she doesn't love him, not exactly, but she knows she can, or at least thought she could. It is whatever comes before love, when that space inside you opens wide and shows you the capacity you have to fill it for someone. She knows she can, if she lets herself, if he makes her feel safe. She knows she can love with every inch she is and every inch she will ever grow. And she will be good at it. If not, she will work on it. All she needs, all she asks, is to feel safe to do so.

But the boy is also thinking.

He feels off. He doesn't know what to do with her in this new place. He had just started getting settled and now here she is, putting his world in her hands and shaking it up like a snow globe. He lets the thoughts turn. He decides to make some dinner. Maybe a chicken. No, pasta. He puts some water in a pot to boil and decides to text her: "I have been thinking" he starts, chops some tomatoes. "I am in a new place," he writes, "and felt I needed to see you because you were here," did he just say needed? "But I have distanced myself.." mentally? No—emotionally, there we go. He checks the water, which has not come to a boil yet. "...distanced myself emotionally from what we were doing in New York..." What were they doing? "...because it is hard to hold on to all of that here." All of what? He adds the tomatoes to a pan. "I didn't expect to be nonchalant about us.." ouch! Oh, don't forget olive oil! "but I am quite busy also," he adds the olive oil, "so I think it's best if we don't see each other again."

Perfect!

Mature. To the point. Necessary, even. He peeks at the boiling water, adds the pasta. Stirs in the tomatoes, olive oil—wait, don't forget the parmesan. He looks at his phone and re-reads his text, wonders what she will respond. He stirs and stirs those noodles. He peeks at his phone once more. Oh! She is typing. Now he knows she has read it. Good. She will understand. She is good at understanding. Wait, but now she has stopped typing. She was typing, and now she has stopped typing.

Aw. Did he make her cry?

Pasta is ready!

He checks the text again. Was he too harsh? No, no. He needed to say it. They were being a little

ridiculous, right? I mean it was only five weeks! Maybe six! What do they know about loving each other? He turns on the television. He lets his eyes look at a movie. There is a car chasing scene. It is the only thing he can remember when he realizes the credits are rolling. He checks his text again, decides to send another: "if you want to take a walk tomorrow and chat, I'm done with my first meeting at 9am." Then another: "I feel like I was abrupt." I mean, he was. But so was she, coming here, imposing herself on his new life, forcing things to be confronted. He never asked her to come to Seattle! Who cares if her sister lives here!

So, tell me: whose fault is this, really?

He has hurt her. That space inside her will begin to shrink and harden. Asking to chat makes her feel as though he is pitying her. He has made her feel stupid for thinking it was something when it was nothing. But was it nothing? If there is anything she hates more than men asking her if she's "sure," it is when men make her feel stupid.

She doesn't respond. She goes back to New York the following day. Impulsively, she decides to block his number. It is possible he has tried calling, and it is also possible he has not. She will never know. She never wants to be reminded of this silly, stupid decision to follow a man, just to see what would happen. But would it make a difference, if he did call, and she did know? Now that! Is a very, very hard question.

So here's what they will do: slowly lose track of each other. They will try online dating. They will continue to be dragged to parties. They will get married to other people. They might get divorced. Or, they might be very happy. They will have children. They will do their best not to hurt them. They will think of the other from time to time, with and without reason. They will google the other's name. They will be happy, and they will be sad. They will exist, faintly, in each other's bones—the five, maybe six, weeks of their life that they owe—and only when they have lines on their face and years behind them will they be confident enough to look back and say: maybe that was love. But sometimes people only collide in the space of too late or too early, and all we ever get is what could have been.

But wait.

Sorry.

What if I said that none of this were true?

Okay, maybe not none of it, but that he never said I love you, and so she never said it back? That she really did want him to say goodbye and he let her down? That he pulled away the second she moved one notch closer, opened up, began to trust him—something she didn't exactly expect a gold medal for, but maybe an acknowledgment that she was trying, a kind of trying that was hard on her, a kind of trying she wouldn't try unless someone made her feel safe to do so—which he did—only to decide he was just kidding around, probably didn't mean all of those things he said that made her feel protected and seen. And what if I said it wasn't five weeks, definitely not six—but closer to three, maybe even two and a half—an absolutely ridiculous amount of time to feel so much so soon. And what if she just wanted to try it? What's so wrong with that? To see what it's like, for once, to put that beating heart of hers first, to finally swim in those expectations and promises she'd so strictly been taught to swallow in doses. What else? Oh, that she never blocked his number. That she patiently waited for him to call, to chase after her and fight, which—of course—he never did. And so she started to hate her stupid phone for never ringing with the digits deleted but memorized. There are other things, too, little ones. The party, their parents, and, I

mean, does it really matter that he's not even British? And what if I said that the most heartbreaking stories are not the ones with an alternate ending had one person arrived a second earlier, made that other decision, declared their love the one time it really mattered, but the stories with the same outcome, the same fate, every single time? Because here is the truth: all she wanted was him, and he didn't pick her. And he would keep not picking her. Over and over again. In every way this story ends.

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