

Matters of Convenience

We started dating in the spring. There was no particular reason why. None of our friends, most of whom we shared, knew why it happened either, or at least why it happened when it did. After several years of knowing each other, it was easy to be attracted to him, and making my interest known was an uncomplicated process. And his desire, like all of his emotions, came not in bursts but in one steady release, a stream of affection I'd been subtly aware of for months, if not years.

I don't remember the formal offer of a date, or extending one. We appeared at a chain cafe two blocks away from both of our apartments, which were also exactly two blocks apart, on one of those early spring days, at the same exact time. He ordered a sandwich with leafy greens and tomatoes and an unidentifiable white slice of cheese while I drank a latte, poking around in the swirl of steamed milk with a wooden stirring stick.

I'm not a huge fan of lunch, I said, embarrassed by my order. I did not want him to mark me down prematurely as the kind of woman afraid of indulgence, however true that might've been. He made a face, one that combined disdain, humor, and a third, secret emotion into one quizzical frown. It was only later, after he walked me back to my apartment and brushed his knuckles against my shoulder as a parting gesture, did I realize that the third emotion was concern. I was so pleased, I blushed the rest of the day.

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The first time he kissed me was not, truly, the first time — we'd kissed before the start of our formal relationship, innocent pecks shared at a party after too many sugary alcoholic drinks, something I'd secretly, selfishly found a relief. I was relieved because I knew in advance the way he liked to be kissed, and thus how to please him. Like all other aspects of his life, he enjoyed control — holding me still, my face in his hands, his mouth over mine. I found that the stillness gave me a secret pleasure. Repeating the practice several times over allowed me to recognize his taste, a presence memorable beyond just the movements made by his hands or body or mouth. It reminded me of wood-crackling fires in cold cabins, snow-bound winter evenings, spearmint stick gum. He breathed through his nose. His mouth was always cold. I remember these things about him so clearly because they became my idea of him, though I never found a reason to tell him this. I thought he would find my insights creepily observational, like I was reading a private diary without permission. Worse, even — that he would say nothing in response and I would find out he had none about me.

Our relationship settled into a comfortable, easy pattern. I liked its automatic predictability, the routine of it all — seeing him for beers at a draft bar on Thursdays and martinis at a jazz bar on Fridays, walking around the neighborhood with hot black coffee early on Sunday mornings, regardless of the weather. The pattern made clear why I was initially attracted to him — I liked his assurance, the intentional way with which he conducted himself. His confidence was infectious, and he was determined to pass it onto me. You have it stored right here, he said once, tapping my temple. I'm just helping you pry the box open.

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Monday nights were spent together too, watching a movie of my choosing that he rarely paid attention to as he cooked dinner for me. It was a request he'd made long before we'd ever progressed into something more than friends, a service he performed as much for himself as he did for others.

His cooking was extensive, intricate. Elaborate meals made with herb blends he brought back from summer trips abroad to Paris and Sicily and spices sent from family friends who traveled in Asia. Curries and cream-rich pastas, roasted whole chickens and savory vegetable soups, dark chocolate mousses and Thai noodle dishes, French salads drenched in rich, garlicky dressing and vanilla ice cream made hand-shaken in an empty jam jar. His presence in the kitchen was that of someone living with the burden of extreme confidence, and he made it known that he owned the counters, the oven, the stovetop, as he grated and sauteed. He would give me tasks and tell me if — when — I did them wrong. *This* is how you chop an onion, he'd say, and he would take the chef's knife out of my hand and show me how you cut $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into the body of the vegetable to give your fingers something to hold onto when you slice in the opposite direction. *This* is how you clean mushrooms, he'd say, as he dampened a paper towel and patted down the pieces, one by one, until the dirt began to disintegrate. *This* is how much salt you need to put in boiling water for pasta. *This* is how long you cook salmon filets, and *this* is how much lemon juice you need for that marinade. Don't just listen to the recipe, he'd say. Didn't your parents ever tell you how to use your intuition, to trust your gut, to take risks?

Taking risks became one of the many habits he tried to impose on me to unlock my confidence. We'd go to dollar stores and chain grocery stores and walk around the aisles late at night, and I

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would watch as he snuck small items — packs of gum, candy bars, note pads, pens — into his pockets and walked out with his head up, even smiling at the workers. I thought it was stupid, a childish act of rebellion, and told him so. I don't understand what any of this has to do with being daring, I said. Of course you don't, he answered. You're so hell bent on being good all the time you can't see beyond that barrier. You won't even try to.

What's so wrong with wanting to be good?

You never learn how amazing it feels to not care.

I have always had strange, elaborate dreams, set in almost mythological places. They reflect aspects of my reality but in fantasy situations — swimming among fish in a coral reef, fighting intergalactic forces on a spaceship, running with a pack of wolves and deer in an open field, all with people from classes or work or that I saw regularly at the park. I read once when I was a child that drinking a full glass of water immediately after you wake allows you to remember your dreams for hours after you have them. This is probably false, but the hypothetical effect of it seems to have cemented itself in my mind as true — I drink my glass and I remember my dreams with an intense, improbable clarity, and can describe them in nearly perfect detail to others.

Almost automatically after we started dating, I began to dream about him — running and swimming and dancing alongside me in these magical, foreign places. I would recount these

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dreams to him seconds after waking, either over text messages or, on rare occasions, when we awoke in the same bed.

I can't understand how you remember so clearly, he'd say each time. I've never remembered a dream.

No further inquiries. I couldn't tell if he was questioning my honesty or just uninterested. I stopped telling him about them after a few weeks. They seemed too unrealistic for him to understand — memories from a world he didn't belong to and would never want to visit.

He was prone to bouts of silence. Not moods, just long periods of total unresponsiveness, where my questions would be met with shrugs and nods and headshakes for answers, almost as if they were too insignificant for replies made of words. My insecurities abounded in response to these quiet periods. Questions, pathetic ones, lingered at the forefront of my brain — do you like the way I wear my hair, the style of my jeans? Do you like the way I compliment you, the way I praise you when you need to be praised? Do you like the way I conduct myself around your friends, your parents, in the privacy of your bedroom?

He favored lots of things — simplicity, the constant acceptance of his norms, routine. But he liked nothing more, perhaps, than convenience. All things had to be convenient. We should take the bus, not the train, he'd say, and he'd pull up Ways and Google Maps and Apple Maps as

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forms of evidence, comparing routes and times and mileage and distance. The walk to the station is a bitch, but we'll get dropped off closer. The train ride is longer, but we'll have to spend less time waiting for it to come than the ferry. All routes had a plan, schemes of a mastermind.

Convenience also had to do with emotions. I confronted him once, teary-eyed, about how it hurt me that he rarely asked about my day, even when we hadn't seen each other — his periods of silence often bled into his texting habits, too. It's inconvenient that you're bringing this up now, he replied, when it's 8:00 in the morning and I can't fix it when you want it to be fixed.

It was a matter of convenience not just with my emotions, but his too. I'm saving this fight for later, he said once, frighteningly calm, after I was an hour late to our weekly Friday drinks, having been caught up at dinner in conversation with friends. I'm here, I planned to be here, and I want to enjoy myself.

Often, convenience had to do with money — what was convenient was almost always cheapest, except for those rare occasions where splurging resulted in pleasure rather than anxiety. He chastised the trivial expenses of our friends — ordering more than one drink with dinner, or buying lunch at the airport rather than bringing it — but splurged in the most specific, particular ways; on loose leaf tea, wool socks, silk bed sheets, expensive cool-to-the-touch pillows, cologne oil that smelled of cardamom and sandalwood. I don't know how you drink that shit, he said once, after I'd ordered a coffee from a fast food restaurant. It tastes like gasoline and toilet water combined.

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You know what both of those things taste like?

I know that if smell is any indication, I'm on the nose.

He made us stop at an expensive coffee shop, the kind that has mismatched chairs and feigned nonchalance, where he ordered an espresso over ice that cost seven dollars. This is coffee, he said, peering over the cup as he took a sip. That is sludge.

Anger, righteousness, pretension. When would his end? When could mine begin?

I learned quickly that this tendency towards convenience would not stop at the door of our relationship. The function of romance soon became an exercise in efficiency, a process to be expedited rather than lingered on. I would often ask him nonsensical questions — what song could you listen to 100 times in a row? What's the first thing you remember from your childhood? If you had to choose, would you eat ice cream or hamburgers for the rest of your life? — in a cheap effort to get to know him more intimately. These questions elicited short responses — “Time,” by Pink Floyd; swinging a plastic bat at a t-ball practice; ice cream. I waited for him to ask me something in return, but found that these inquiries didn't come, and could not find the courage to ask a more probing, pressing question — do you ever wonder about me?

My fantasies overrode our reality. Dreams of what I wanted us to be began to filter into the daytime. One recurring flash: seven silver dollar pancakes on a smoking hot griddle slathered in salted butter, the European kind that comes in a thick yellow block; serving them to him on

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Sunday morning with sleep still in his eyes, his hair matted from an evening of pure relaxation; him kissing me, his mouth tasting of gratitude and rest and a secret emotion I was too shy to put a name to. I imagined this scene so many times that it feels impossible to believe it never came to fruition. Whatever romance I wanted, I was scared to bring to reality. Whatever romance he wanted, he made it happen.

I never questioned his authority because I never had reason to. He spoke with such certainty that contradiction didn't feel like an option. I could argue my way out of a straightjacket, he said once. There's nothing you can't be right about if you try hard enough.

I couldn't argue myself out of a situation where I was right. Our fights, thus, all followed a similar pattern. I would express anger in the way that I knew best — through reserved silence, brooding, an explicit and pointed detachment from him, from intimacy. He would pick and prod until my dam of resignation exploded. You act like a kid when you're mad, stewing in your anger, he'd say. If you just spoke your mind, we wouldn't be having this argument right now. We'd be having an adult conversation.

What I never told him is that my silence was my only option. I knew that, if I were to speak my mind, our conversation would become a debate, his second language. And I would lose.

Something I think about constantly: I gave him my copy of "Nine Stories," by J.D. Salinger at the start of our relationship. This book changed my life, I said. I'll guard it with mine, he replied. I went over to his apartment months later and found it sitting on the edge of his desk. When he

was in the bathroom, I eagerly checked the position of his bookmark. He'd read seven pages. He gave me a card for my birthday and I read it six times in one day. What's more pathetic?

The ending was convenient. I could sense it was coming — the quiet periods had become more frequent, my silence more pointed, our fights more exasperated and useless. It happened in January, outside my apartment, on an uncharacteristically warm evening, spring-like in its humidity. When he was nervous, he would pick at the cuticle around his thumb with his forefinger. His hands were clasped behind him when he ended it. I'll never know what he was feeling.

I just don't see a path where we can move forward and both be happy and fulfilled, he said. There was no point in arguing — one of my only certainties about him was the fact that his mind, once made up, was completely and totally unshakeable. This is what's best for us, he said. I didn't know what else to do so I let him hug me as I stared over his shoulder. At the curb, a line of elementary school children were climbing off of a yellow school bus onto the sidewalk. I imagined myself shrinking down to their size, blending into the tidy filament of their single-file line. Orderly, organized. Reserved.

This is what's best for us. Even now, I stew thinking about the ridiculousness of that statement. How did he know what I thought, what I think? Was it my fault, because I never told him? Was it his fault, because he never gave me the confidence to do so, like he said he would?

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I walked into my apartment. I wasn't thinking about him but about a memory of him — something he said in my kitchen, or maybe in my bed; the location didn't stick, just the glow of sunlight or moonlight or candlelight on his face. One day, he said, I'll cook you something so fantastic you'll have no choice but to devour it. You won't even breathe.

Try me, I said.

He never tried. Or, I never gave him the chance. One of those.