

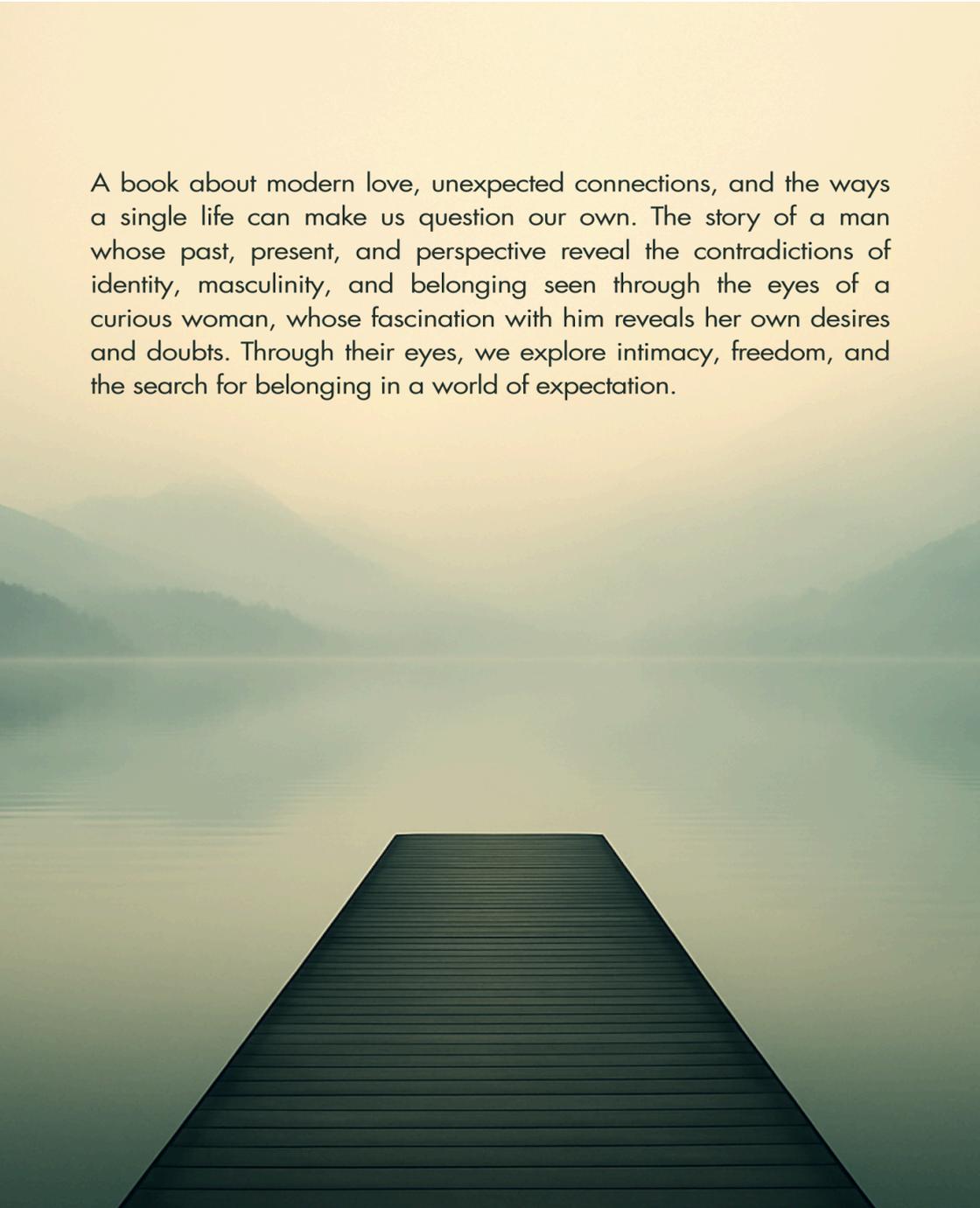
# Like a life stolen from a movie



Emma Marlow

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A book about modern love, unexpected connections, and the ways a single life can make us question our own. The story of a man whose past, present, and perspective reveal the contradictions of identity, masculinity, and belonging seen through the eyes of a curious woman, whose fascination with him reveals her own desires and doubts. Through their eyes, we explore intimacy, freedom, and the search for belonging in a world of expectation.



# Monday

*“No don't cancel. I have a plan!”*

A message popped up on my phone. Hinge. Next to it a photo of a guy half naked flexing his biceps while biting into an apple. Welcome to dating in 2025.

*“How about I pick you up and drive us out to the beach?”*

*“You can air out from your long day there.”*

Urg. With a slight feeling of wanting to roll my eyes that actually sounded like a pretty nice idea. I should just get over myself and go. Why am I even trying to resist? Sure, he'd previously made it clear he wanted to fuck me, but right now this felt more like a casual reset with an easy way out. A small treat after a long day of pushing through a pile of work, a change of routine. Worst case, I get some fresh air and another story to tell.

*“Why do you have to be so convincing?”* a smile betraying me as I hit send.

*“19:30”* I add, followed by a google link with my address.

*“That's the spirit”* he replies.

I put my phone down with a slight smile, finish the last bite of my toast and jump into the shower.

## The first date

I step outside and there he stands. Tall, curly hair and more beard than I remembered. We had actually crossed paths before in “real life” before. I noticed him the first time I saw him at the gym. He had shorter hair back then. It made him look younger, more boyish. Still, then and now he has quite the presence. His jacket open, just enough to reveal a button up shirt underneath, matched with some dark blue jogger-like pants - an interesting combination.

I walk up to him and he smiles as soon as he sees me. I smile back. His arm stretches toward me, in his hand - a helmet. A helmet for his MOTORCYCLE!?!? When he said he would pick me up, I had pictured myself in the passenger seat of a car, music playing, windows down. Why? I don't even know. Slightly nervous about this machine I lean in for a hug.

“Hi!”

“Nice to see you!”

What am I doing?? I don't know this man. And I am wearing flipflops! I cannot get on the back of his motorcycle.

“You know,” I say, half-joking, “my parents taught me never to get into a car with strangers. But this isn’t a car... so maybe it doesn’t count.”

“Are you nervous?” he asks.

“A little. And, I need to change my shoes.” looking down at my bare toes.

I sprint back up to my apartment, laughing at myself, already sensing that this would be a story my roommate is going to love hearing about. But then again, what the hell am I doing? Yes, he is cute. And very tall. But am I actually going to ride on the back of a motorcycle? Also, the helmet is totally going to ruin my hair and I had just washed it...

When I returned, he held the helmet out again. I put it on, he looks at me with his warm brown eyes and makes sure it sits tight enough. I clumsily swing my leg over the bike, the least graceful mount imaginable, and finally settle in behind him. My arms circled his waist, hesitant at first, then tighter as he steps on to the gas and we pick up pace.

The familiar streets of Copenhagen blurred by speed and wind, and under the hum of traffic my heart was beating in my

chest. The initial panic faded almost instantly, replaced by a tingling exhilaration, a sense of flight I hadn't expected to feel. Holding on to him, leaning forward, I relax. We talk through the helmets. Small talk, but not really. Quickly we go from how long have you lived here to why I wouldn't want my kids to grow up in this all too perfect place of a city. As we pull away from another red light he asks "What's your best quality?" Unexpected as this question was, the answer doesn't come right away. I end up saying something like being extremely caring and thoughtful, which is true. I do consider that one of my favorite qualities about myself but it can also easily feel like a burden. Always thinking about other people's feelings and trying to accommodate everyone, which is not actually my responsibility. And sometimes I have to call myself out because overthinking, which I also tend to do a lot, does not equal thoughtfulness. I return the question, but I'm too caught up in my own head, spiraling on what my ideal answer would be, too hear his answer. He's making me think...

The next question snaps me back. "What about your most random party trick?" That one's easy. "Okay, suuuuper random - but I can smell the difference between Coca Cola and Pepsi."

We leave the familiar streets behind, off the highway, winding onto smaller roads, then dirt. Now we're joking about him kidnapping me. For a second, I remember, I don't really know this man. Nobody knows I'm with him; I've barely been social the past few days. He could legit be kidnapping me. And yet, I am calm. "It's okay," I tease. "I've lived a cool life."

We park the bike and walk across a field. The air was fresh with a hint of rain, the grass carrying a damp, earthy scent of late afternoon. A hidden swimming spot reveals itself, the sky shimmering red from the sun sinking lower. In the distance the skyline of the city with all its weight and expectations, yet far enough to feel unreal in this moment. Only two other people linger nearby, but I hardly notice. Determined to go into the water, I strip off my clothes. I did not bring a swimsuit, but feel too alive at the moment to care. Only in my underwear, I walk towards the water. He follows. I ease into the water, cool but not biting, and steady my breath. He follows. We float as the sun drops further. "Thanks for taking me here." As if this wasn't already like a scene stolen from a movie, his eyes meet mine. Trusting brown eyes. Warm, with a hint of wit. He must love this, I think. This moment he

created by bringing me here. Still floating in the water I admire the ease of it all.

Eventually, he pulls himself out of the water. My eyes trace the lines of his muscular back before I follow. He hands me his towel first, and I dry myself off quickly before passing it back.

With proper clothes on again, we sit down. “Did you eat?” he asks as he fishes around in his bag. “Yes,” I say, explaining my “girl dinner,” which he immediately dismissed as not a meal. “Well, I actually brought burritos,” he said. I stare at him for a moment, surprised. Burritos. Out here. At sunset. How did this go from casual banter about hooking up to swimming at sunset and homemade burritos like some kind of picnic? I guess you can want to fuck around and still be a decent human being. Perhaps you can be a little egoistic and still be nice to others. He wants his freedom but still cares. There is some sort of genuineness in his selfishness I didn’t expect. I like that.

“So you had a long day at work?” he asks. “Yeah, kinda.” I sigh. “I’m trying to get more into what I actually want to

do...or at least what I think I want to do. Which means extra work on top of the work I already do.” He nods agreeingly, waiting to hear what else I have to say. “My job is fine, and I am trying to focus on what it teaches me and how it helps me figure out what I like and don't like but it has also been really draining.”

“And what is it that you want to do more of?” The big question. “I want to be more creative. I feel like if I have to write another freakin 'email I am going to lose my mind.”

“It’s funny cause only yesterday I remembered that when I was like 14 years old I wanted to make music videos.I continue, surprising myself by saying it out loud. “Like, that was my dream once. And somehow I just... forgot. Buried it under the expectations from everyone else. Everyone else, but me. How does that happen? What kills that kind of excitement?” I feel the sadness in my own words. “Now I really want to buy one of these old vintage camcorders and just-” He interrupts, “you know, If you wanna make music videos, you just have to find a small band, start there. Put something together, see where it goes.”

I know he's right and it sounds so easy when he says it. Like you can just do it and the rest will follow. Normally that's exactly what I would do if something excites me. Just start somewhere, give it a try. But right now, I felt too depleted, like my energy was going into all the wrong places. It's not the lack of ideas that holds me back. It's the weight of everything else.

“What about you?” I ask. “What did you want to do, back when you were young and didn't feel the weight of the world? When anything was possible” He looks down at his burrito. “You know, anything is possible.” A pause. “But I didn't really grow up with this *classic* idea of working and careers.” “What do you mean?” I ask. “My parents split when I was really young. It was mostly just me and my mom. She never worked in the conventional sense, not a nine-to-five or anything like that. I guess I picked up the same thing. I never had that blueprint like that, you know. Study this, get that job, climb that ladder.” He gives a small shrug. “I didn't go to university, I've never worked an office job. I traveled instead. Picked up whatever work along the way. Lived in places most people just pass through on holiday.” He looks back at me. “That gave me a lot of freedom. Maybe too much sometimes.”

I nod silently. I wonder what he means by that but don't feel like I should ask.

It had gotten darker. The red sky had turned grey. We were still sitting by the water when a few first drops start to fall.

"I can bring you back home," he says while quickly wrapping our things together, "or... we could go to my place. It's closer." I look again in his warm brown eyes. I feel so light, unburdened, intrigued by how different his life was from mine and too curious about where this story might lead.

"Okay, let's go to your place."

We head back through the field. Within minutes it was pouring. "Don't worry, I'm prepared," he grinned, pulling a pink raincoat from his bike bag as if this was all part of the plan. "Got this when I was in Nepal, hiking in the Himalayas." He said it with a kind of boyish pride, handing it to me like a prize. I put it on, laughing, only to realize my red shoes matched its color perfectly.

After another ungraceful sit down, we start driving. It keeps pouring, soaking through our clothes, dripping from the edge of my helmet, but I cannot help but grin. You know what, I'm

just going to trust him, I think, and let myself go. We take the last turn into his street. I recognized the last bit of the drive. We're in a newly built residential area close to the canals. I have been in this area before. Loads of modern apartments with glass balconies. Two of my friends live down the same street but more so a sudden realization hits me as we enter the driveway towards his building. Oh no. I have been in this backyard before. I have been in this exact building. With another guy. Wait, didn't he say he has two male roommates? Shit. What are the chances I am going to walk into the same apartment but this time with a different guy. I can feel my heartbeat go up with that thought. He stops to park, I get off first, slightly tense, spinning through the possible, very awkward scenarios. He unclips his helmet and runs a hand through his hair, a few wet strands sticking to his forehead. A smile covering my nerves. I follow him to the entrance. He holds the door open for me, a small polite gesture that somehow makes me more aware of how tense I am. The suspense builds as we step into the elevator. He presses 2. Phew. We're clear. The other guy's place was definitely on a higher floor. I remember the view from up there. Not that it would have been a problem per se but still I feel relieved.

Up in his apartment, we change into some dry clothes. He hands me a pair of shorts and I pull them on quickly as I hadn't bothered putting my wet underwear back on after swimming. My eyes get caught by the printed-out photos stuck to his dresser. Pictures from his travels. The freedom he was talking about is very obvious in each one of them.

I move around the apartment trying not to peek as he is getting changed. The place was unmistakably a boy's apartment. Minimal furniture, no decorations, and of course the glow of color-changing LED lights on the ceiling. Really? At thirty-two? I had assumed that by this age, men would have traded neon ambience lights for, I don't know, proper lamps or at least a framed picture on the wall. Maybe even a plant. Instead a gigantic stuffed unicorn is watching over the living room. I settle on the couch next to it. The kettle beeps and he walks over with two mugs of tea. One bat man shaped, the other one in bright colors.

“I think we have Netflix and Disney,” he says, “but I don't even know if they still work. Some other girl I was dating set them up.” Honesty, blunt and disarming. “That's how it goes, huh?” I sound way too cocky, trying to match his nonchalant energy. “Have you watched anything good recently?”

“Not really. I’m not much of a TV person.”

“Same,” I admit, changing the topic.. “So... how’s it at the restaurant? Do you like the people you work with?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. “They are good people. And I’ve been there long enough now that I can actually feel I’ve gotten good at it.”

“How long?”

“About a year.”

“And before?”

He leans back, stretching his legs out. “Before that I was traveling, all over.” he pauses.

“But I met a girl while I was hiking in France. We ended up in the same group so we spent every day together for a while and it was super cozy.” he starts telling me. “Then I went on to Turkey. I told her she should join. She said she would if I bought her ticket.” He gives a short laugh, almost at himself.

“So I did. She came and we continued traveling together for a while after that. Eventually she wanted to go home, settle into ‘normal life’. I however wanted to keep traveling.” He talks with such calm. I listen closely. “We tried it. But within schedules, work, and trying to see each other we grew apart.” He looks at me “I mean, even meeting up with you took like

two weeks. And you almost cancelled.” I laugh softly “That’s true. But well, I’m glad I didn’t.”

“What about you?” he asks. I just look at him without saying anything for too long “I wouldn’t know.”

The unavoidable next question follows. “You haven’t been in a relationship?”

“Noup.”

“Never?”

“Mmh” I confirm while shaking my head, followed by a panicking “I guess I am too picky”. The critical look he gives me is unexpected, and for a moment it unsettles me. He seemed like such an open and accepting person. Suddenly I feel weirdly defensive, like not having been in a long-term relationship by twenty-six is some sort of flaw. As if that fact alone says something is wrong with me. “These days people barely commit anyway,” I say quickly, half-defensive, half-remembering that he’s the one who made it clear he wasn’t looking for anything serious. A serial dater, if anything. The irony.

“I guess so,” he replies after a pause. “I mean, I grew up in the countryside where there weren’t that many people around and it’s not like anyone there was all that put together. Then you get to a city like this and everyone looks so perfect and just

hot.” He doesn’t continue on the topic. Instead, his hand moves toward my arm, his fingers tracing lightly over the lemons tattooed there. “You’ve got a bunch of those small tattoos” he says. “Are there more?”

“One” I reply, watching him also inspect the small designs on the other arm.

“On my back”

“Oh yeah, I noticed some writing there earlier”. As he shows curiosity or simply an excuse to touch my back I tell him “I don’t really like when people ask about the meaning behind my tattoos.” Not directed at him actually, more at the memory of the countless times people have asked with funny comments, like they’d figured out some clever interpretation of my tattoos. However, he holds back from asking and in a slightly awkward moment of silence he goes “Let’s make out.”. Not as a question - more like an announcement. He leans towards me and I meet him half way. He moves very slow, with his touch, with his tongue. Like he’s trying to slow down time. Instead my thoughts pick up speed. Not good.

I move my hands underneath his t-shirt, slowly up on his back, before pulling it off over his head. Why does he look so perfect? “Let’s go to my room” he says, holding my gaze.

After more pieces of clothing are dropped on the way he gently pushes me onto the bed. I let myself fall and he shuts the door behind him. His kisses move all over my body and I can feel the warmth of our bodies moving together after being outside in the cold rain. However, what should have been heat becomes confusion. Despite the mutual attraction our bodies feel out of sync. Like we're speaking two different languages. His eyes stay locked on mine, fully present in the moment. I try to let go, to lose myself by closing my eyes, by just feeling and enjoying what's happening in the moment. But the spark keeps slipping. Eventually we laugh softly, agreeing to "give up," though I can't help feeling a little insecure, as if I had failed some kind of unspoken test. We get up to gather our clothes. Here I am standing in his living room completely naked. Large windows to the street and no idea if one of his roommates could walk out of their rooms any second. I look at him laughing "I am missing a sock". I just stand there, still no clothes, just one sock in my hand and a big slightly confused smile on my face. He scans me up and down and walks towards me again with a certain look in his eyes. Grabbing my waist with one hand and slipping through my hair with the other one. So, we try this again, but I guess being pushed up against the fridge doesn't exactly make it easier to

relax and to find the right spot. Finally we slip our clothes back on and lay again on the couch where we had left out tea. I fish out my other sock from between the couch pillows, pulling it on with a quiet laugh.

“Well,” I say, trying to break the silence, “guess we’re not exactly porn material.” He smirks. “What do you mean? That was not the best sex of your life?”

I laugh, rolling my eyes. “No yeah, unforgettable.” In a way it was.

“You know, sex is funny.” he goes.

“Yeah, it’s also funny how much people talk about it and make it such a big deal proportional to how much sex they actually have. Also everyone acts like it has to be this perfect performance”.

“Yeah, but sometimes you just gotta figure it out. It shouldn’t be awkward. That’s just normal.”

“Not sure I feel better hearing that,” I tease. But I do, a little.

The atmosphere had shifted slightly. Less charged, just two humans.

He stretches his arms behind his head, more relaxed now.

“You know, back in the days men and women had it easier.

Roles were clearer. There was a natural distribution. Everyone knew what was expected. Made things much simpler.” I watch him for a moment, curious. “Simpler, maybe. But I’m not sure that’s the same as better.”

“Maybe not,” he admits. “But at least people knew the rules. These days everyone’s making them up as they go. And that’s... messy.” I let the thought linger. Some of his lines definitely had an effect on me today. “I think it’s time for me to get home.” I say. “ Will you take me back?”

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In the elevator down he goes “Well, if you want to go on a date again, you can just text me” Oh! A little surprising, after all, we hadn’t exactly clicked. I thought casual sex was all he was after. But his openness keeps throwing me off it seems, in the best and strangest way.

During the ride home, I lean with my chin on his shoulder as I am holding on to him. The air, fresh from the rain, and despite everything, I find myself smiling. This is actually so fun, I think to myself. Why was I scared?

“This is so much fun!” I tell him out loud and we both chuckle.

With a cheeky “thanks for the ride” I pass the oh-so-scary helmet back to him and wave goodbye as I walk to my apartment building.

## Monday night

I walk up the stairs ready to tell my roomie about this unexpected evening I just had. Part of me was still a bit confused because, yes, the sex had been... not exactly cinematic. But he was even more so.

“Where were you?” I hear from her room as I open the front door. She sticks her head out. “You are not gonna believe this.” I laugh and I start to tell her everything. I tell her about the motorcycle, the ride, the hidden swim spot and the rain. I try to explain how he carries himself with ease, how he’s been so bluntly honest with everything he told me, and how despite being attracted to each other, it hadn’t quite clicked. I mention how we talked openly about it and it didn’t feel awkward at any point but that I do feel a little irritated, like maybe I was the “problem”. I can read from her face that she thinks the whole thing was kind of weird, and it was, in a way. Yet, there

was something undeniably compelling about him. His openness. His straightforwardness. The way he treated me with kindness and no ulterior motive.

## Sunday

As the week wound down and I returned from a work trip I again thought about the man with the motorcycle. The man who seemed to challenge me without even trying. I decided to text him: *“Do you want to take me on another little adventure on your motorcycle this week?”* not even thinking about having sex with him but a fun trip and something unpredictable happening.

When I received a simple *“Yeah:)”* I considered it agreed and moved on with planning my week in my head, figuring we’d settle on a date and time later. A few hours later another message popped up.

*“Btw have you ever tried bondage?”*

*“I am eager to learn and I need a play partner in case that’s something you’re open to.”* A cheeky grin appeared on my face. Not entirely surprised, of course he’d have a bit of a

kinky side, but also a little thrilled. There was something exciting about feeling comfortable exploring this curiosity of mine with him, even though I didn't really know him yet. I loved that he had just asked - how simple it can be. A little thrill running through me, I reached for my phone to let him know I'd be down to try it.

## The second date

When I wake up, his day seemed to have already started. I have a look at my phone where I see a link to a google maps pin followed by an *"I'll be here"*.

So I move myself out of bed and into the shower knowing damn well I will be back in this exact spot in a few hours. After, I hop on my bike and follow the direction to the marked spot.

From afar I recognize a tall silhouette with curly hair standing on the dock. I park my bike and walk toward him. There he is, doing morning stretches in the sun, on a random Tuesday

morning. In his bathing shorts with his adonis body. Just like he is living in a movie. Or am I?

“Good morning!” we both say, smiling at each other.

Instead of going down to the pier I lay down on top of the edge of the wall and just watch him before he turns to me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. The sun warms my face. It feels good to be outside, quiet, and peaceful. I stretch my arms above my head and my sweater rides up slightly. He sees an opportunity and starts moving his fingers up and down the side of my stomach followed by a few gentle bites. “Wanna join for a swim?” he asks. I politely decline but follow his movements, tracing the outline of his body slowly sinking into the water before closing my eyes again. “Let’s go and have some pancakes” I hear and open my eyes to see him standing on the dock drying himself off with a towel. “Or do you want to lay here a bit longer?”

“5 more minutes.” I exhale.

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With only a towel wrapped around him we walk the short path back to his apartment building. Up in the elevator and into the flat. I look around. All the doors are closed except his. No roommates home, I think. I sit down on one of the kitchen chairs, leaning back against the wall, feet up on the seat, facing him. He was way too big for this tiny kitchen. Broad shoulders, still only in his bathing shorts. I can't help but notice how his muscles shift as he wipes up the pancake batter.

He pours the first ladle of dough into the pan, and the sharp sizzle fills the silence. Then he pops into his room and returns with a long, black rope in his hands, as if it's the most normal thing in the world. "This is my ropes" he brings it over to me and I take it off his hand to inspect it.

"Where did you get that?" just one of many questions I have in that moment.

"Actually?" he grins. "Just a home store. I even have two. The other one's out there right now." He points to the balcony, where I notice some clothes hanging from a line. "I'm using it for laundry."

"Multiuse, great" I shake my head, laughing at the absurdity of this casual mix of pancakes and ropes. He starts explaining, turning the rope in his hands. How complex the technique is,

how the knots require practice. “I tried it with a girl before,” he admits “but most of the time we just ended up using a scarf. It gets complicated if you’re not an expert yet, and if you actually want to have sex and enjoy that it takes a lot of focus away.” I raise my eyebrows. “Interesting.” My fingers fidgeting with the rope, playing with its texture.

My eyes drift to a handmade bowl on the drying rack. A whale painted on its side. “Did you make this?” I ask. “Nah,” he chuckles. “But it’s a funny story. This girl I was seeing, her ex-boyfriend made it for her. Things between them ended badly, and it was just some unnecessary baggage for her, you know? Every time she saw it, it pulled her back there. So we joked she should smash it, or that I’d just steal it one day. So one day I actually did take it. And then, well... I actually didn’t see her again afterwards.” I turn the thought over. “So you kinda freed her of the weight of it.” He shrugs. “I guess.” And collected a little trophy from a past hook up at the same time, I think, but don’t say out loud.

Our conversation drifts between playful and pointed. I keep playing with the rope in my hands. “So you don’t need to go to the office today?”. ‘Strong and independent’ me decides to let her guard down a bit more. “Noup. I called in sick.” I

admit. “Really?”. He seems surprised. “Yeah. I already wasn’t feeling great yesterday and I worked all weekend so I felt like I needed ... a breather.” I pause, then sigh. “I like having a purpose, or more so even need to feel like I have some sort of purpose. And the structure a job brings can be nice as well.

But I am seriously so tired of this and starting to question how ‘strong and independent’ I want to be right now.”

Just in time to keep me from getting into a full on rant he slides a plate with a pancake in front of me. Topped with melted chocolate and banana - yummm. I take a slow bite. It’s warm and sweet. Following up on what I had said he goes on talking about how men had “tricked” women with emancipation and career ambitions, and now they were left to juggle taxes, responsibilities and expectations of themselves. His words... and in there a mix of humor and dry observation. “Women all want to have their careers and independence. Men don’t even know where they stand in this world anymore; and we are all just adding more burden and expectation to everyone...”. He sits next to me at the table and starts cutting his pancake. I watch him for a moment, trying to make sense of what I feel. Maybe he’s not completely wrong. Maybe there’s some truth in what he’s saying. We fight for

freedom and then fill it with structure, ambition and self-imposed demands. Have we mistaken our independence for some kind of performance? Does none of us really know what freedom could feel like? And maybe that's why, every time I think I'm close to it, it feels out of reach again. I'm kinda tired of trying to make what I'm doing make sense and feel right.

Earlier he'd warned me I couldn't stay all day, since he had a meeting in a nearby town at 12:30. Curious as I am, I ask what his "meeting" was about.

After an initial hesitation he admits "It's actually a date". With another girl. Obviously. Another *new* girl. But I really couldn't care less. I feel nothing. Not even a pinch of jealousy or upset. Just... neutral. I was almost a bit surprised by myself. Once he finishes eating he stands up and reaches for the rope again. Without saying much he positions himself tall in front of me, takes my wrists gently and starts looping the loose rope around them. The fabric is brushing lightly over my skin. Still sitting on the chair I first glance at his hands movements and then up. His face is focused as he tightens the knot before leaning in to give me a slightly chocolaty kiss. He loosens it again slightly to not hurt me and uses the established thread

between us to pull me up from the chair. Almost as if under a spell I instinctively follow it and stand up. We are now face to face, where I can feel the warmth of his breath against my lips. We start kissing faster and more passionately. His tongue slowly traces over mine, teasing, before our mouths meet again. He loosens the rope further, slides it off over my hands but keeps holding it. His fingertips find the edge of my sweater and slip it off over my head, onto the floor. We leave the kitchen.

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Following his soft but steady push, I kneel down on the mattress. He stands behind me, trailing his fingertips up and down my arms all the ways from my shoulders to my wrists. I get goosebumps almost immediately. He grabs my wrists and ties them together with a first proper knot. Carefully and focused. “I might laugh”, I admit “just because this is new and I don't really know what I'm supposed to do. I'm curious to find out though.”

“That's okay. And it's good that you're curious” he responds calmly. He's caught up in the knots, concentrating on getting them right. I'm caught up in the feeling of it. The rope sliding against my skin, the pull as it tightens. Around my wrists, then

my ankles, at one point even connected to my hair and directly to parts of the bed. Strangely, the restriction of movement only increases the feeling of release in my body. The less I can move, the lighter I feel. “Tell me if they start to hurt” he mumbles. I feel safe and enjoy him playing with me like that. With care and control. I like how seriously he takes it. My body leans into his as he draws it toward his own rhythm. And yet, even as I give myself over to the ropes, to him, something between us still doesn’t quite connect. Eventually, he takes my own hand, guiding it to help his movements, and that becomes the way we finish. We both let out a deep breath, our heads pointing in opposite directions. Not long after, he taps my legs lightly. “I gotta go.” Right - man’s busy.

He jumps into the shower as I put my clothes back on. A few minutes later, he’s rushing around the apartment, half-dressed, gathering his things. By the time he reaches the door, I’m already ready to go, leaning against the frame. He bends down to pull on his shoes. “Your zipper is still open” I say, nodding at his pants. He’s wearing light blue jeans with little patches of flowers on them. Cute.

He grins. “The life of a fuckboy, huh?” He’s joking, but also not.

Outside, he swings back on his motorcycle and gives me a kiss before I throw him a sassy “Bye, have fun!” and jump on my bike to paddle back home.

## Tuesday afternoon

On the bike ride home, I glance down and notice the faint bruises already forming on my wrists. Long, parallel lines, undeniable traces of what just happened. I’ve never even had a harmless hickey on my neck, and now I’m about to show up at the office tomorrow with these marks along my arms. The thought makes me laugh out loud. It feels absurd and funny, and somehow ironic.

I’ve always had a bit of an image problem. People think I’m *too* cute. *Too* nice. Innocent. It’s strange how quickly others decide who you are. Just because I don’t always need to have the last word, or be the loudest in the room, or because I like

helping people. As if that was a weakness. I know, I shouldn't care. But I do. I care. Maybe that's why this whole experience with him feels so freeing. Because I get to step outside of the box others built for me, or maybe even the one I built for myself.

Right now I feel so good. So light. Almost buzzing, and again like I glitched into a movie. And he... he didn't put me into one in the first place. Casual hookup box aside, of course. But even that one feels different this time. If anything, he helps me out of my box, just by being the way he is. Letting me into his strange, cinematic version of life. Then I remember the fact that he just went off to another date and I basically just got a feature in one scene of his movie. This whole encounter with him continues to be unexpected, fascinating even. And I don't think he is a fuckboy. He's being too nice and too honest for that. He's not promising anything that he won't do. And maybe that's the point. Maybe me being so captivated by this isn't about him at all. Maybe it's about me wanting to feel alive again. Wanting to be seen differently, the way I want to be seen. To remember that I can still surprise myself. And somewhere in all of this, trying to find the version of life that brings me joy.

## Thursday

I keep on with my week but can't help but notice I want more. More of that freedom, that release, that refreshing openness. More adventures. More daring, more trying new things and hearing more stories so different from mine.

So I text him again. "*Are you working this weekend?*"

"*Yes, every day*". Inconvenient but that also somehow works in my favor. "*What if I come pick you up after one of your shifts? Then we can find another little adventure outside*" I type. A few minutes later, his reply comes: "*Sure:)* *I wonder what you have in mind*". Now I just need a plan.

## Friday

I am sitting at dinner with three of my close friends. The vibes feel a little off. It might be the kind of evening where everyone's here because we said we would be, not necessarily because they really want to be. We sit around the table, each of them half-present, half-lost in the fog of their long workweeks. We each study the menu a little longer than needed. Silence stretches for just a bit too long that I feel the pressure to fill. After all it was me who initiated the dinner. But I don't want to tell them about how I am not doing well or the doctor's appointment that I had earlier today, about how everything in me feels off lately. So instead, I start telling them about *him*. The man with the motorcycle. The man that brought me to the hidden swim spot. The man who seems to live as if he's directing his own movie. The man who's so different from me, who makes me think, and the man who tied me up. That last part catches them off guard. A smirk from one side, a raised eyebrow from another. One quite curious, another one more repelled by the idea. Curiosity with a hint of judgment. It doesn't fit into this table of people discussing deadlines and watches. Different from me, they seem

comfortably settled inside their boxes, defined by job titles, by weekend habits, by a sense of knowing who they are. Their world feels solid, mapped out. Mine feels upside down. And while they are genuinely happy that I'm having "a good time," I can sense their surprise. The quiet dismissal. Being the only woman here makes me wonder if they're now comparing themselves to this man, wondering if they're supposed to be more daring and bold too, the way most women probably question themselves when hearing about another woman's allure?

"Wanna bet that in a month she's gonna be dating this guy?" one of them says, half-mockingly. Why does it bother me? Maybe because I knew this reaction was coming. Because I expected it and still hoped for something other than the predictable joke, for them to listen without labeling, without turning it into a punchline. I would've loved him to be a bit more open minded and less rigor in his reaction to me showing some unpredictability in my personality, to doing something exciting and new, and being in the center of attention at the table. Not the reaction I'd hope for after I share something because we otherwise have nothing to say to each other. But I bet they didn't even realize that. Normally, I

wouldn't think twice about sharing with them, but right now, I do. Maybe it's because I already expect the judgment. Or because I judge myself. The same reason I didn't mention the appointment earlier. Still, I joke with them. We get a good laugh out of it in the end, of course. I'm glad I could entertain them, with my oversharing.

*"I am seeing him later tonight"* I add. "Oh, okay so you got other plans?" one of the guys raises the question. Correct. "Well" I look at him first and then around the table to the other guys "Knowing you guys, we will be here for like one hour and a half max, and then you're gonna wanna go home. But I don't want to be home at 21:30 on a Friday night so yes I do have plans after this." They are quiet for a moment until one of them responds "Fair enough." "At least then we don't have to entertain her" another one adds jokingly. I smile sarcastically. Classic. I love these guys. I know it's all in good humor, but still, a part of me wishes they'd meet me halfway. I love their ease, the jokes, the simplicity. But sometimes I want to be taken seriously too. Not just as the one who tells the funny stories or plays along to keep things light. The dinner continues quietly, mostly me and the friend next to me rating the food. Just as I predicted after an hour and a half

they are ready to leave. At least that gives me time to go home and refresh my perfume.

## The third date

*“On my way”* I text him as I am biking.

*“Oh and I am not wearing anything underneath my dress”*

*“thought you should know”* I notice how I’m turning myself writing this and with an idea of all the things we could do.

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From the outside I can already see him through the windows as I pass the restaurant to park my bike. Not gonna lie it was a bit of a chilly ride with this specific part of clothing missing. I walk into the restaurant, find his eye contact and sit down at his table. As I cross my legs on top of each other my dress slides up and like a scene from a movie I can trace his ganze on my skin, curious, then back to looking me into the eyes.

“How was your shift?” I open the conversation. “It was good. Not as tiring and we had some fun customers. Now I’m just having my after-meal.” he says looking down at his plate. He seems a bit tired though. “How was your night so far?” he asks back. “It was nice. I actually went for dinner with some friends. We have this tradition in our group that whenever it’s someone’s birthday they get to choose a place and we go out to eat together. And then that’s the treat. That way we get to try loads of new places and get to spend time together. Now that everyone’s working you don’t see each other that much anymore...”. “But wait, is it your birthday?” he sounds surprised. “No no, it was like 3 months ago. See, that’s what I mean with it can be hard to find time together.”

He is taking the last bite of his steak. “I would offer you a drink but I guess we’re gonna get outta here rather soon, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

“I don’t actually have a set plan”. I say a little disappointed in myself and insecure saying it. “I was hoping something would come to my mind but...”

“It didn’t?” He finishes my sentence. “We can just go and see. I need to get my motorcycle from up the street. Do you want to keep your bike or drive with me?”

What a question. “Oh, I’ll park it down by the metro so I can go with you. I’ll meet you there!” I walk out with confident steps and my head. When I open the door I turn around again. His eyes still locked on me. I toss him a mischievous glance before I turn back and leave.

I park my bike and after a few minutes he comes rolling on his motorcycle. A few minutes too much for me to question whether this was a good idea or he is annoyed that I didn’t come up with something. Is the vibe off? Or am I just in my head? Again.

“You’ve got the right jacket on today.” He is hinting at my leather jacket as he passes me the helmet. “I’m trying to think if there is anywhere around here but I really don’t know. There’s also so many people out...” I say with a disappointed voice. “I mean it’s a Friday night. But it’s okay. I liked the initiative. Come on.” following the nod of his head I swing on the back of the motorcycle. A little bit more elegant this time trying to hold my dress in place. Before we start he hands me one of his headphones “You can pick the music if you want.”

So we drive through the vibrant Friday-night streets, listening to British rap in one ear. Random, but then a song, I used to play on repeat a long time ago, comes on. Suddenly, it feels a little like we've slipped back into a scene of a movie again.

Almost at his apartment building we pass by what seems like a random rave. "Should we check it out?" he asks. "Sure. Why not." He makes a sharp turn, and a few minutes later we're slipping through the entrance. There aren't that many people. A scattered crowd, a few already drunk, others shifting in place like they're waiting for it all to really start. I notice right away how stiff I feel, standing there like an observer instead of a participant. Why can't I just relax? I force myself to move from side to side, to dance a little, swaying to the music in a way that probably looks more performative than natural. He's quiet too. Not awkward exactly, just... still. Almost like he's waiting for me. Are we both holding back? Or am I just being in my head again. After about ten minutes he leans close to my ear and says, "Let's come back in maybe five hours." I get the hint and we start walking towards the exit.

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I had noticed it before, but now I consciously register it - he always opens the door for me to walk in first. Simple, but classy. Maybe just basic courtesy. Either way, I actually really appreciate it.

In the elevator up, we both catch our reflections in the mirror. I try to tame my helmet hair, smoothing it down with quick fingers, while he watches.

We enter the apartment and I zip off my knee-high boots. I was just about to say something but I immediately forget as he grabs my waist and slowly moves me backwards against the kitchen counter. His body close to mine, I place my arms on his shoulder with my hands behind his head and start to play with his hair. I look into his brown eyes. "I am a bit disappointed because I really wanted to be naughty today". Leaning into his touch I let the words hang, curious to see what he'll say.

"So, you are not wearing anything underneath that dress, huh?" he responds in a low and calm voice. His hands travel upward, slow but certain, brushing over the fabric of my dress until they're cupping my breasts. I look at his face while he is looking at my body. At the same time as he bites his lip, he

presses his body harder against mine. I slightly lean my head back inviting him to kiss along my neck. He takes the invitation and kisses start trailing from my collarbone up to where our lips and tongues meet.

He groans quietly and with a fast but directed movement spins me around. Now with my back against his chest, he tucks my hair behind my right ear and places his hand loosing around my jaw and gently tilts my head towards him. I follow and find his mouth again. After an intense kiss, I carefully bite his bottom lip before I release him, move my head back slightly and open my eyes again. Teasingly he whispers into my ear “you naughty girl” and continues to bend me forward over the counter. One hand anchored on my hip, the other one slips up along the inside of my thigh, slow and deliberate, as the hem of my dress rises higher. The sound of a housepart hums faintly through an open window, but it feels like everything outside this small kitchen has faded away. I feel my breathing becoming faster and a little louder as I breathe out of my mouth. With confident yet unhurried movements his fingers are trying to test how much anticipation I can bear. Then I hear the sound of his zipper. That tiny metallic note cutting through the air. It feels impossibly loud, like the whole room

is holding its breath. But it's just me. Next I feel him thrusting inside of me and exhale. We both let out a small moan and for a moment, neither of us moves. Then he continues in a steady rhythm. His hands on my hips, my hands holding on to the edge of the counter. With one hand he reaches for my neck and gently pulls me back up, my breath still a little uneven, his head resting close to mine, his chest pressing lightly against my back. His touch drifts down the length of my arms, fingertips grazing my skin down towards my wrists. "Let's move to the bed, should we?"

I nod and we take the few last steps over to his room. I let myself fall backwards onto the mattress, pulling him with me just by keeping my lips on his. He quickly takes off his shirt. I reach for the zipper on the side of my dress as he tells me "Keep your dress on", leaning over me with a kind of authority. "Just don't rip it or something, I borrowed it from a friend."

"Don't worry. But take all this bling off" he reaches for my hands, his fingers brushing over the rings I wear. His voice, almost dismissive, throws me off for a moment. I push it aside, sliding the rings off one by one and setting them quietly on the nightstand. Not exactly the moment to read into this and better to leave the comment unaddressed. Better to stop

talking and keep kissing. He stops and quickly connects his phone to the speaker, and before I can realize what he was doing, we're kissing again, fast and intense this time. The remaining of his clothes come off and I feel his warm skin on mine. Trace my kisses down his body, from his mouth to his ear, his neck, his chest, his annoyingly defined sixpack and further. He let's out a soft moan and his hands trace along my back. We move around, switching positions, his body pressing into mine with a sensual feeling. As he presses me against the wall, for a split second, I catch the beat of the British rap we'd been listening to earlier playing from the speaker. Kinda funny. My mind drifts off again and only the feeling of the weight of his body and his grip remains. Drawn into, almost hypnotised by the rhythm of our breathing and continuous movements. He lets out a few low groans, and before I really expect it, he is close. A little to my surprise, he pulls back and decides to come on my dress. Well... not even *my* dress. In the moment, I can't bring myself to care. I just want to keep feeling him as close as possible. He lays down next to me and after a long exhale I look at him and happily admit "My head was completely empty." a smile tugging at my lips.

We jump into the shower and I attempt a quick clean up of my dress. No actually my friends dress. Wow. How am I gonna tell her that? The thought alone makes me laugh.

Back in his room we just lay across the bed. Just two relaxed bodies on a mattress, breathing calm and steady. My head rests sideways on the pillow, his arm draped above him, one knee bent, both of us staring at nothing really. I look around and only now realise there's actually quite a bit of personality in his room. A Sup-board paddle, Books. I must have been very thrown off by the color changing led lights before. A few frames on the wall with what looks like handmade paintings. A sunset, a travel memory? "Where do you want to go next?" He starts talking about wanting to go to Africa. "There, I'll buy a motorcycle and just drive. No plan, no schedule. But if I go, I know myself. I'll never come back. I'll have nothing left." The motorcycle again, It's definitely more than a vehicle for him. It's a symbol. Of escape, of control, of wanting to belong nowhere and everywhere. And I feel it more and more now, the pull of that freedom. The desire for something unknown and exciting echoes in me. "My friend is going to a wedding in South Africa and I might join her after". I know it's probably not the same kind of traveling he imagines but he

simply continues, totally disregarding my potential trip. “Take marriage. It’s like a golden cage. Everyone thinks it’s this big win, but it’s a cage, just painted in gold.” His hand makes a small gesture, like it’s locking a door. “You enter it because you think that’s what you’re supposed to do. And then you can’t leave without tearing yourself apart. And probably also hurting another person.”

“By nature, we’re not made to be with one person forever,” he adds. “We’re made to spread, to reproduce, to move.” When he says ‘we’ he clearly means ‘men’.

“You’d have *many* babies out there,” I tease, glancing up at him. He grins. “But now everyone’s on birth control,” he says, almost like he’s revealing a conspiracy as if we’re not supposed to. Not accusing, just... observing.

I trace the edge of the pillowcase with my finger. “I mean some things have changed in society, how people act and what they say they want but I don’t think that the need for a partner, the need for connection, and for not being alone will ever disappear so I would argue differently. We still want to be chosen. To not be alone. To feel like we belong with someone. Someone that makes our life better.” A pause. “But also you’re right. There’s crazy high divorce rates and also less

marriage these days. More people simply leave when it gets hard.”

“Exactly.” Not fully sure what we are agreeing on, we move on from that thought. Somewhat following a red thread the topic tumbles naturally further into women. “His women”. He doesn’t hide anything, almost seems to enjoy letting me into his dating selection. And I am curiously listening. Intrigued by how openly he moves through these stories, how unbothered he seems by the lack of intention, structure and commitment most people would look for.

“This one girl I’m dating right now. A Danish girl.” he starts, his tone casual but with a hint of something more thoughtful underneath. “I really like her. And she really likes me. I think for her the next step would naturally be to get into a relationship. It’s what makes sense to her. She has her life pretty figured out. Big job, great apartment, a circle of friends, her family close by. Everything sort of in the right place.”

“We have a really nice time together but our lives are so different. Hers is structured, stable. Mine’s... not. If I became her boyfriend, it’d be this sweet little addition to her life. Something that fits neatly into her already well-arranged puzzle. But for me, it wouldn’t change anything. I’d still be

here, in this same apartment, working shifts, living day to day.”

He leans his head back against the wall, eyes tracing the ceiling. “Eventually, she’d realize that. That her life, the way it’s set up, won’t change and won’t be able to fit mine. She’ll still go to work in the morning, meet her friends on weekends, plan trips six months in advance. And me? I’ll still be a waiter who doesn’t really know where he wants to go next.” I only nod. Even though he doesn’t finish his point, I understand what he means. “I mean, come on. What can I really add to her life in the long run? Not what she needs.” There’s no self-pity in his tone, just quiet certainty. It makes me a bit sad that he thinks that. I want to believe that human connection can be stronger than the different paths predesigned for us. That who we are to each other can outweigh expectations around us. But I guess not the expectations within us. The ones shaped by how we aspire to live our lives and the standards we set for ourselves. And yet, when I hear him say this, I realize how much we let those standards, both ours and everyone else’s, dictate how we see ourselves and others. Why does what we do define us so much? Why do our titles, our paychecks, our schedules decide our value? Here right now none of that seems to matter. He doesn’t really know

what I do, he doesn't care. Not out of disinterest, but because it's irrelevant to what's happening between us. And here I am, terrified of falling into a life that was scripted before I even chose it. Some days I feel like I am marching straight toward it, forgetting my own dreams, letting the potential of myself and what life could be like for me, drip out of me like water through an invisible crack. And then there is him, doing quite the opposite, refusing the 'this is what you are supposed to be doing' path, I'm scared to leave, still but wrestling with the same questions. About worth. About purpose. About where, or with whom, we're supposed to belong.

"And as much as I like her, I just cannot imagine not being with other women."

"Why not? If you really like her then you don't want to sleep with anyone else?" I question his statement.

"Hmm, not really. I still get horny. And then I get a text like from you and then I don't want to say no." I raise my brows trying not to judge. That I do not understand and want to hold on to the belief that men think the same. Maybe not him but some out there. "I'm not out here trying to be a player. I just want to enjoy life and I like to meet people. And honestly I meet really interesting girls. They're all so different as well. Like this other girl, she's doing all this crazy coding stuff.

Really nerdy, but so impressive. Programming things I don't understand. But she's also super kinky, and wants to go to these public things." He shrugs. "But I don't know if I am comfortable with that. I don't think orgies are for me." He keeps talking. "Then there's another girl. She had a bad experience, really bad, with an ex-boyfriend. She started crying during sex. And it was so beautiful that she could be so vulnerable there with me. She just needed to feel comfort in this kind of intimacy again." Wow, I swallow. Two thoughts cross my mind, one uncomfortable truth after the other.

First, intimacy. What he says strikes close to home with my own issues with intimacy, physically and emotionally, and how, without even noticing, I keep a certain barrier up. It's not that I don't want it, but that I somehow keep a quiet distance, even when I think I'm not. I can hold eye contact for hours in conversation, but the second it turns emotional or physical, when it's closeness and all of a sudden feels like everything is at stake, something in me hesitates and it's like my body resists. When he kept looking into my eyes the first time we slept together, I remember glancing away too quickly. I couldn't imagine crying...

It annoys me that I feel this way. Especially because he doesn't judge. If anything, he creates this space where nothing

needs to be hidden. But I judge myself for being in my head, for not knowing how to just *be*.

The second thought hits. It's the way he talks about all these women. He describes their stories, their pain, their curiosities. But it almost sounds like he's trying to be what they each need. Offering a piece of himself to soothe their different kinds of loneliness. Or is that a way to fight his own loneliness? With a caring concern I say. "It sounds to me like you're really trying to be there for all these different girls. Trying to give them what they need. But what about you?"

"Yeah," he admits, looking at the ceiling. "But I've learned not to cross my own boundaries just to keep someone else around." That point lands harder than he probably intended. *Boundaries*. Such a simple word, so hard to act out. It sounds empowering in theory but can feel very disarming in practice. However, I don't ever want to de-prioritize myself for putting someone else on a pedestal.

Besides these critical reflections I joyfully conclude in my head: Wow. Us women - we are incredible. We do badass things. We take on so much. We stretch ourselves in a thousand directions just to prove that we can, and then wonder why we're exhausted or lost. We carry everyone else's

emotions and call it strength. I do it all the time, at work, with friends, even here. Always wanting to show that I can handle it, that I'm easygoing, grounded, unbothered. But that's also a boundary I cross, on my own.

"Are you reading anything at the moment?" He asks, steering the conversation on.

"No. I wish I was more of a reader. I tried to get back into it with some fantasy stuff, but..." He reaches over to the little DIY nightstand beside him and picks up a paperback. "I'm reading this one with a girl." Another one? I can't help the thought. Not judgmental, just fascinated. The time management skills of this man alone...

"Whenever we're together, we read it. We're almost finished." He places it back down before I can catch the title. Why is he telling me this? Or maybe, why not? But also how wholesome reading a book together.

"How many relationships have you had?" I gotta find out more about this mystery of a man.

He thinks for a second. "Mm, three". I am surprised by how many, having met him as a "free-spirit" and not exactly with relationship energy. "My first girlfriend, I was very young. We were together in high school. But she had the perfect life

planned out for her. Good grades, nice family, all that. And I couldn't fit into it. I always felt a bit like a brat compared to her." I am listening with growing curiosity. "Then when I was twenty, I dated this woman fourteen years older than me. And she had a five-year-old son."

"Oh wow." I say, genuinely surprised. "how was that?" digging a bit deeper. His tone softens. "Honestly? It was really nice. Since I grew up without a dad, being there for this kid, encouraging him, showing up...it gave me a lot too. When he was scared to climb a tree, I was there and supported him to show him that he could do it. There was so much pride and joy in his face when he made it up on the branch. I also taught him how to ride a bike. We both felt really proud of that one." I nod, feeling the pain but also joy. I start to hear the past that lives in him, in the way he answers my questions, in his silences, in the way he is now. There is something unresolved behind the charm.

"What about you?" he asks, turning the focus. "What does your perfect boyfriend look like?"

"Perfect boyfriend" I repeat, half-laughing. "I guess... someone who makes me laugh, a lot. I want to have fun with them. Someone that supports me, that trusts me, and that I can trust and rely on." fiddling with the edge of the towel wrapped

around me. “Someone who’ll hold my pinky finger when we’re sleeping.” I add. He seems amused. “That’s oddly specific.”

“Yeah” I bring myself to show a little smile back, a hurt smile though. I take a breath. “Someone that makes me feel safe.” I conclude. “I actually think friendship’s the best base for a relationship. You get to know someone so differently when you’re not trying to impress them. There’s no pressure, no performance, it feels more natural because it is happening without you pushing it.” I pause for a second. “Only if the feelings are mutual, of course.”

“I was kind of in love with a friend once” I add, a bit too quickly. Wow, I’ve never said that out loud before. It feels less like a confession than I expected. Probably because he doesn’t know that person and will most definitely never meet them, which makes it feel safe to tell him. Anyways, he’s putting his cards on the table so why shouldn’t I. He looks curious. “Did he know?”. “No,” I admit. “And he never will. That was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter anymore.” “But I had hope, you know. Because of how we were together, how he acted towards me and because of how close we were, if you know what I mean... I felt so safe around him. His presence made me feel calm and a little nervous at the same time. And that’s the

worst part. I thought he saw me. But he didn't. Not like that." My voice lowers. "It didn't mean anything. Or maybe it did, but not in the same way." I keep the rest of that thought to myself. Looking back, I realized that sometimes waiting feels safer than wanting. You can pretend something's still possible that way. A belief in the "not yet" or "eventually", instead of the "never." But in the end there was nothing to wait for. Nothing to fight for. Nothing to have. Just me, holding on to the version of something that never really existed. The same way fighting and denying are two very different things, but can trigger the same desperate, clinging state. Both keep you from accepting what is. However, fighting at least acknowledges there's something there to resist, while denying refuses to admit that something is not how you want it to be. Being in denial can have you fighting for all the wrong reasons, and the wrong people.

He tilts his head. "Have you ever actually initiated something? Like, made the first move?" I try to keep my tone light. "I have, yes." Still the question pokes again at my fear of intimacy and with it the feeling of a possible catastrophe leading me to wait for things to happen to me instead of making them happen. It might be cheesy but I want the movie moment. Someone asking me to dance like in Dirty Dancing or standing outside my window with a speaker like in Say

Anything. And the more time I spend with this man makes it seem not so unrealistic. I just need to find the right men. He unpacks another story “There was this girl once at the restaurant. She came in for a date, but it didn't look like it was going well. They were not really getting along. When she left, she came over and gave me her number. I could tell she felt proud doing it.” He chuckles softly. “That’s a bold move. Especially while you’re on a date.” I say. “Yeah. And we actually met later that night. I thought she would be fun and spontaneous. But she just wanted to disagree with everything I said or did. You know, debate for the sake of it.” He sounds slightly annoyed now. “Hmm, fair enough. You want to be challenged by someone,” I say, “but not feel like you’re constantly arguing. But that was a pretty good move from her still.”

“Yes, definitely.” He nods, “Shoot your shot. And what I’m trying to say with this is, I think you’re kind of manifesting what will happen in how you act and present yourself. The energy you give off is also what you’re going to get.” I raise an eyebrow. “I guess being here isn’t doing me many favors then,” I tease. He shrugs.

There's something about the honesty between us. I notice how our conversation is stirring something inside me. Empathy, maybe, or recognition. And care. A connection based on the shared understanding of what it feels like to not know what you want in life and the conflict of feeling like something is expected of you, but following that would mean not being you. I move my leg on top of his body to close some of the physical distance in how we are lying next to each other. He slides a hand under the towel wrapped around me, his fingers gently stroking up and down my back. A sudden tiredness washes over me so I close my eyes as I am listening to his voice and the thoughts that continue to spill out.

"Honestly, most women notice me because of how I look" he says after a pause, "I'm a great hook-up story." I roll onto my side, propping my chin in my hand.

"I'm a good looking, tall, fit guy with a six pack. That's what they want. It makes a great story to tell their friends about."

"Do you really think that women objectify you like that?" I ask him skeptically. "Because when I told my friends about you, I didn't say *that*. I said, 'This guy lives like he's in a movie.' You do. At least from my perspective. You romanticize your life in this effortless way. Of course, I'm not in it but that's what it seems like from the outside. I mean that

as a compliment. You really live in the moment, creating these vitalising moments, simple, but they hold so much joy. You do things that make you happy and seem to have a great balance. And on top of that you have a cute girl on your bed.” He smirks. “Yeah. It depends how you look at it, I guess.” I let his response stay in the air and in the silence. Not sure if he took the compliment and is just being humble or if he’s deflecting. He tilts his head toward me. “But if I flipped it around, take you, for example. I’d be telling my friends, ‘Yeah, I fucked this Pilates teacher.’ I roll my eyes, laughing. “Charming.” He’s not wrong though. In my head that’s what men sound like. Before I can respond he adds, “But I don’t have any friends.” My head lifts. “Really?”

“Yeah.” he seems unbothered. “I don’t believe in the concept of friendship.”

That statement hits me and I feel very much awake again. Friends are everything to me, anchors, mirrors, lifelines, you name it. “Why?” He shrugs. “People leave. People change. I don’t want to depend on anyone. I have always moved around a lot so there are also different circumstances...” That’s all valid but no reason to close yourself off from human connections that add so much to life. “My friends are... the family I get to choose. They’re the ones who see me through

every version of myself. I am not super close with my family, but especially living abroad...they give me so much support.”

“Yeah, but for how long?” he pushes back.

I sit up a little, looking at him. “For as long as I’ll let them. Of course not all will stick around forever. But it’s about trust in the moment. I’m not saying that comes easy, and definitely can’t be forced, but trust can only grow if you give it. And when you realize someone chooses you without any obligation... You definitely don’t get that easily. But it’s worth it. At least for me.” He tilts his head, studying me. “You really believe that?”

“I have to,” I answer. “Otherwise, what’s the point of letting anyone close to you at all?”. For a second, something flickers across his face, hesitation, maybe longing. Then he looks away. I study him, torn between empathy and sadness.

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Our lives are so different, but again somehow the questions haunting us are the same. What do I want? Where do I belong?

A longer silence stretches between us, not uncomfortable, more peaceful. His breathing slows, and I can sense the night starting to settle in. “I think I am going to sleep soon.” He turns his head toward me. “Do you want to stay, or do you want to go home?” I hesitate for a second before answering. “I think I want to sleep in my own bed.” He nods, no offense taken. These hours of conversation aside, I don’t feel connected enough to imagine sleeping comfortably next to him. Not for what this is.

As I slip back into my clothes and check the bus times on my phone, he leans over my shoulder. “No way”, frowning at the screen, “I’m not letting you take the bus for twenty-seven minutes if it only takes twelve by bike. I’ll drive you.” His tone is firm but kind. No showmanship in it, no need to impress, because I decided myself to take the bus. Of course I don’t mind a nighttime ride on the motorcycle. I secretly love it. It makes me feel so alive. The fact that he offers, though, that simple act of care, makes it even more enjoyable.

I smile. “See?” I say, glancing up at him. “You’re not a fuckboy. You’re a very decent human being.” He doesn’t want my compliment, it seems. “Nah, but you’re also nice. I wouldn’t just do it for anyone.”

In the elevator down, he looks at me through the mirrored wall. “Clothes are kinda funny, don’t you think?” Not exactly knowing where he’s going with it but I agree. I’ve had that thought before. “Yeah it’s like we are playing dress-up every day. “And I hate to admit it,” I add, striking a half pose in the mirror, “but these boots make me feel very cute.” That earns a final laugh of the night from him. As the elevator doors open, I wonder if I’ll see him again. Either way, I walk out smiling. Tired but content.

## Saturday

I wake up tired after a night of sleep, probably still better rested than if I would have stayed over at his place. I was up for a little while longer after he had dropped me home. With the remaining rush of adrenaline I kept replaying his movements and the confidence in his touch. So, the night was short. I have a class to teach in an hour. After all, he *did* quote “*fuck a pilates teacher*”.

I can't stop thinking about what he said about manifesting. Or how I'd call it - *predictability*. Predictability of people and of the future; of myself. It's about how small behavioral patterns become these invisible rules. Knowing but without knowing what's going to happen. To some it's reassuring and comforting. To others it's scary and restricting. That's why when people or plans do change some might not respond well to that. He is not predictable. And I don't think the rest of his life is either. I like that. My brain goes into overdrive. Do I want to be less predictable? Not in behavior, necessarily, but in the trajectory of my life. But then, if I keep doing the same things, the outcomes stay the same. So maybe it's not about being different; maybe it's about thinking differently first, so my actions actually change what comes next.

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The rest of the day, I spend at home. My roommate is in the living room watching something. I walk by and she pats the spot next to her. "So tell me." I sit down on the couch. She knew about my "plan". "How was it?" she asks curiously.

I need to rip the bandaïd off first. “It was fun! Didn't go exactly as *planned*, so we just went back to his apartment in the end.” I say casually. “Okay, but it was good?” she keeps digging. “Yeah! I really enjoyed myself. And we had some really interesting conversations. This man...I'm telling you...he keeps on surprising me. Stuff you simply can't make up.”

“I also need to confess something.” I look down. “He might have released himself on your dress.” She looks confused for a second, then it clicks and her eyes go wide “But OMG! "So he came!" I burst out laughing. The fact that this is her reaction...Iconic. Not at all what I expected. “Yes” I confirm laughing. “And did you?” I look at her, press my lips together and shake my head. “But,” I say, pushing myself up from the couch with a sudden burst of energy, “I'm feeling very inspired.” She laughs. “Inspired?” “Yes!” I turn around again, smiling wide. “It's not about the outcome. It's about the material.” “Spoken like a true artist,” she smirks before adding “Oh, and the dress, you can keep it. It looks way better on you anyway.” Lovely.

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Later in the day, it hits me. I've spent so much time critically analyzing his interactions with all these other women, dissecting his behavior, trying to understand him - I didn't realize that I was probably one of them. I am one of *his girls*. And suddenly I'm forced to ask myself: what void is he filling for me? What am I looking for in him? What kind of need is he supposed to fill? What pain am I numbing or avoiding?

Is it excitement? Fun? Distraction? Or am I simply continuing to run away from the intimacy I claim I want. A relationship with someone who makes me feel safe. That's what I said I am looking for. But this kind of safety comes from letting someone in, being vulnerable, opening up fully, and being unapologetically yourself.

He is, again, the *easy* fix. Stimulating, yes, giving me the sense that I'm doing something, that I'm at least *seeing someone*. But that's not true. These are old patterns I thought I'd moved on from. Patterns built out of loneliness, boredom, and a tendency to seek validation in all the wrong places.

No wonder - if I'm constantly judging myself, I am not exactly being great company for my own mind at the moment. I thought I was ready to open up, but messages, interactions,

even small silences show me I'm not. Maybe people don't ask me things because I give off the feeling that I don't want them to. It's easier to hide than to risk being misunderstood.

We don't know much about each other's current lives, like what our routines look like, because our worlds don't intersect in those details. He doesn't ask, and I don't either. I assume his would be a lot about girls, and mine about the reality I am currently trapped in. We don't have that much in common. But we are learning about each other's values, scars, doubts. I know way more about him to be fair. At least from what he is telling me. I'm sure he draws his own conclusions about me from the bits and pieces I say out loud.

Something I've always wondered - How much of knowing someone is their own responsibility? How much should I offer, and how much should I expect them to seek? And vice versa. It's a balance I'm still figuring out. But even with so little knowledge about the everyday, this feels honest. Almost grounding.

## Thursday

Almost a week had passed since our little attempt for an outside adventure. I have thought about the mysterious man and his stories a few times. Life had quickly pulled me back into its usual rhythm, which is why, when my phone lights up with a “wyd?” followed by a “wanna do something?”, I’m caught off guard.

A small pulse of excitement runs through me.

“*I can’t this week,*” I type back. Then quickly add, “*But let’s do something next week!*” I press send and smile.

## Sunday

By Sunday, I catch myself checking my phone a few more times than usual. I’m feeling curious again, ready for another glimpse of whatever it is that keeps pulling me back.

I open our chat and finally message him. “*How’s your time looking this week?*”

*“I’m free Tuesday,”* he replies.

*“That works. Let’s get out of the city. Go out in nature?”*

*“I’ll pick you up at 10,”* comes as his answer almost instantly.

*“You bring the snacks,”* he adds.

I grin at the screen. Sounds like a plan. Simple. Effortless. As much as my analysis of his thinking and stories and my constant thoughts make all of this seem like such a complex situation, it really isn't.

## The 4th date

I walk downstairs and step outside. The air is crisp. It’s the first proper fall day. I look around and there he comes driving toward me, the low rumble of the motorcycle rising above the quiet street. He pulls to the side in the nook near where I’m standing, turns off the engine and takes his helmet off. His eyes scan me up and down “You’re all layered up?” he says. His hand comes to rest briefly on my waist. “Is this going to be warm enough?” he asks with a caring tone. I glance down

at myself - a turtleneck under a black zip-up fleece, and my new brown leather jacket, plus ankle boots. I thought about bringing gloves but decided against it last minute. "I think so," I smile, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. "It's not that bad yet." I'm excited for our little trip.

He nods, and reaches for the spare helmet hanging from the handlebars. "Your hair looks darker," he says as he hands it over. "Probably just the lighting," I reply, flipping it back once more before pulling the helmet on. I close it with a clicking sound. This time totally okay with it ruining the volume of my hair. He slides the backpack off his shoulders and hands it to me "That's for you." I stuff my own bag inside, put it on and swing on the back of his bike. Routines, almost like a natural, by now. The sun is out, reflecting off the windows. The weather is just perfect for this. "I feel like we should have a coffee somewhere in the sun." he says slightly turned back to me. I give a short enthusiastic nod, but he can't fully see me behind him, so I give a just as enthusiastic reply "Yes, that sounds great."

We drive through the city, heading up north. It's past rush hour but the streets are surprisingly busy. The wind cuts through my layers, crisp and fresh, I can feel my eyes tearing

from the cold, so I lower the visor on my helmet and rest my body lightly against his back. As we get further toward the edge of the city, the apartment buildings thin out, replaced by single houses, stretches of green and the occasional bakery or gas station. I love looking around, seeing how other people live, imagining their lives through a glimpse in their gardens and windows. We continue on to a familiar looking area and turn on the main road where the view of the ocean, wide and blue, opens up right in front of us. The feeling of freedom amplifies with every second, the city now far behind us, replaced by the endless horizon ahead.

He slows down and parks near the only café in sight. A humble but chic place. Small inside with a larger outside terrace. We get off, tuck the helmets onto the bike, and start walking. It's not crowded but there's a handful of people scattered across the terrace, soaking in the last sun of the season. We scan for the best seats before settling on two lounge chairs in the front row, facing the water. The wind toys with my hair as I sit down, so I put my sunglasses up to keep them in place. "I'm always so curious about people's stories," I say, watching a woman with a book and a man in cycling gear sipping on their steaming coffees. "Like, what are all these people doing that they can just sit at a café on a Tuesday

around noon, enjoying the last bits of sun of the year?” My voice half-curious, half-envious. “Maybe they just figured it out,” he says simply. What is that supposed to mean? I’m too relaxed to get into it right now so I just let out an indifferent “Yeah, maybe.” I lean back, let out a big sigh and close my eyes. The sound of seagulls is cutting through the conversations at the other tables. I can’t remember the last time I sat somewhere this peaceful in the middle of a weekday. I turn my face toward the sun, thinking about how light I feel sitting here.

We’re both looking at the menu for a while. Me because I am a little indecisive, even though I know I always end up going for the same boring cappuccino with lactose-free milk anyways. I always do this - scan every option like I’m genuinely considering the turmeric latte or a matcha. Him because he is holding back. He’s not taking the initiative and I get the feeling that I am going to be the one paying. That’s totally fine. It is! I shouldn’t just expect it from him either.

“What do you want to drink?” I ask.

“I think I’m actually going to have a matcha” he decides.

“Okay then. I’m going to be a gentleman.” I say playfully and get up to go order out drinks inside.

When I turn back toward the door, I catch sight of him through the window. He's lounging, one arm draped over the back of his chair, face angled toward the water. The cap pulled low, loose pants, a denim jacket worn soft on the elbows. I also noticed some silver rings on his fingers earlier as well as a bracelet on his left wrist. I've gotta admit, he does have a cool, somehow distinct but very fitting style.

I settle back into the chair next to him, really sinking into it this time. The sun right back in my face. "So how has it been going?" His voice appears on my right. "How's life?" Not a simple question these days. We haven't really talked much about our current lives, mostly stories, observations, things that happen in the moment. According to the photo library my life is a collection of aesthetic moments, the ones you tell people about, when actually you should picture it more like a colouring book, where someone constantly coloured outside the lines. Somewhat colorful but in a chaotic way and with a lot of confusion. He doesn't know much about my day-to-day life, and I don't really know his, beyond the assumptions I make on my own. Assumptions I'm increasingly aware might say more about me than him. And I haven't shared much myself, if I'm honest. I don't want to bore him. Not that my

life is boring, necessarily, but maybe not interesting *for him*, since he lives in a different world. Though that's probably not true either. Again, just me. Still, I'm happy to tell him.

"I had some friends visit from Australia and Brazil last week. That was really nice." I pause "And, well", I say and make a vague gesture, "I am not at work as you can tell. Instead of being in the office, I'm sitting here, in the sun, with you."

I say it lightly, but something in my chest tightens. The truth is messier: I'm frustrated with work, with life, with not knowing what I want compared to what I am supposed to do. Or knowing, maybe, but not knowing how to get there. Happiness feels both uncertain and impossibly far away. "My mental health has been shit lately" I say laughing. Not because it's funny, but because I cope the way I always do. I make jokes and pretend that humor can fix something to the outside, while crying to almost feeling numb on the inside and in solitude. "Sorry, laughing is my coping mechanism." I add. He's watching me now, and there's something knowing in his expression. I can't even look him in the eyes. "I know," he says quietly. "Because before, you were almost going to cry." I look down towards my hands folded together in my lap. "It's okay to cry." he continues. "It's good actually, important

even.” “I know” My voice comes out small. “And I do. Trust me, I’ve cried a lot this year. But I don’t like crying in front of people. I don’t want to be vulnerable like that with just everyone.” A pause. “Especially not with my boss. He doesn’t deserve to see me cry.” “Your boss?” he’s asking for some clarification. “Yeah.” I exhale sharply, almost angry. “It’s such a silly job I have. I hate being in that office all day, writing silly little emails, just...wasting my time away. It has zero meaning. And it’s sucking the life out of me. This is not at all what I envisioned adulthood to be like to be honest. I achieved what I worked hard for and now it’s such a disappointment. A painful daily reminder that I forgot about my dreams. What hurts even more is the feeling that you kind of have to eventually give them up.” I catch myself. “I mean, there’s many other things too, but that’s a big issue.” He nods slowly. “What exactly is it you do again?” I tell him, and even as I say it out loud, the things sound so hollow. Emails. Spreadsheets. Meetings over meetings. But he listens without judgment, his face angled toward me now instead of the water. “That does sound... boring,” he says finally. “It’s not boring, it’s...completely irrelevant.” I correct him. “Sometimes I wish I wouldn’t look for a meaning in everything I do. That I could just function.” “What about you? Do you ever think about this kind of

purpose? Or is this existential overthinking a me-problem?" He tilts his cap back slightly. "Sometimes. But in a different way, I think." "I don't really get caught up in the big questions, like what's the meaning of it all. For me, it's more about... I don't know, whether what I'm doing feels right in the moment."

"What do you mean?" I get the idea of what he's saying but need to hear more about it.

"Like, I was talking to this girl I was seeing, she worked at a psychiatric hospital. The stories she told me..." He shakes his head. "What she saw there was crazy. Really heavy stuff. People in full crisis, every single day."

"That sounds intense."

"It was. But she said it felt meaningful, you know? Like even on the worst days, she knew she was helping people." He pauses, turning back to look at me. "I think about that sometimes. Even with what I do. Serving people, making sure they have a good time, enjoy their meal, leave satisfied. It's simple, but it matters in the moment. And it makes me feel good."

Now I understand. And he's completely right. It doesn't need to be some grand purpose. "I can feel that with my Pilates classes. There I have a real impact on people. That one hour. Even if it's small, it adds to someone's day. And if they take something positive with them or come back, it can be even more than that. I can facilitate something that helps them feel better consistently. And that also makes me feel good."

"You think I need to find work with meaning?" I ask, half-joking but not really. Our drinks arrive. We pause our conversation. The waiter sets them down with a friendly smile, breaking the moment. I wrap my hands around my cup, grateful for something to hold.

"Maybe." he continues. "Or maybe you just need to figure out what makes you happy first." He looks at me directly now. "You know you can quit, right? Do something else while you figure it out." The suggestion hangs in the air between us. It sounds so simple when he says it. "Just quit?" I say it as if it is impossible. "Why not? You're miserable. Life's too short for that shit." I want to argue, tell him about rent, about expectations, about how it's not that easy. But then I realize that is exactly what he is doing. Against expectations and for personal fulfillment. Ultimately allows him to create his life

how he wants to the extent of what he can afford of course. But that's one of the things I admire most about him. "When did you become so wise?" I say it teasingly, deflecting. He grins. "I'm not *that* wise. I just think... I don't know. Mental health is important. More important than a job that makes you want to cry."

"Mental health," I repeat, as if I'm testing the words. "More now than I used to." He shifts in his chair. "Being in the city, in the never stopping flow. you have to be way more mindful about living consciously so you don't lose yourself in it."

"Doing things that felt good instead of things I thought I should be doing." He glances at me.

I nod, absorbing this. "I think I do the opposite," I admit. "When things get bad, I just... push through. Keep busy. Laugh it off."

"Yeah, I've noticed." His tone is gentle, not accusatory. "But that only works for so long." "Yeah." I know that, and I feel like I am about to hit that wall soon.

Eventually, I change the topic before it gets too heavy on this beautiful and still very random Tuesday. "You remember what I said about wanting to get a camera." I look at him. "Yeah?"

“I did. And I brought it.” I rummage around in the backpack.

“Oh, nice! You’re gonna make your first big production today?”

“Yes, and you’re gonna be my muse!” I give him a little wink. He laughs, shaking his head, but doesn't protest.

We become restless sitting at the café. After all the plan was to go out in nature and I'd finished my coffee like 20 minutes ago. After he takes the last sip from his cup we get up and decide to head over to the beach. There's a dock that extends out into the water with a small lookout tower at the end. I let him lead the way and stay behind with the camera. I want to get a scenic shot of him walking. He glances back at me, amused but playing along. The light is perfect, catching on the water behind him. When I reach the tower, I lean against one of the wooden pillars, the camera still in my hands. He's already settled, looking out across the sound. You can see Sweden on the other side, a hazy line of land in the distance. "Have you ever been out on the water here?" I ask. "Actually, yeah. A friend of mine has a boat. We went out there some time ago." I raise an eyebrow. "So you *do* have friends." He catches my tone—the reference back to our earlier conversation. For a moment, I wonder if he remembers

everything he's told me, if he's as conscious as I am of every word that passes between us. "I mean, I know a guy..." He corrects himself, a slight smile playing at his lips. "Hmm, fair enough." I shift against the pillar, genuinely curious now. "Can I ask—what are you looking for in a friend that makes them so hard to find?" He's quiet for a moment, considering. "I don't know. Someone who's real, I guess. Who doesn't need something from me. Who can just... be." He pauses. "Most people want to talk about nothing, or they're always performing. It's exhausting." "That sounds lonely." He shrugs. "Maybe. But I'd rather be alone than pretend." Before I can respond, he stands abruptly. "I'm going to take a swim." Conversation over, I guess. He pulls his shirt over his head in one smooth motion, and there it is again—his perfectly built body, all lean muscle and clean lines. He's not going in naked this time, though. Not this time. Instead, he wraps a towel around his lower half to change into his swimming trunks

I didn't bring a swimsuit, so I am torn. I take off my shoes and socks, roll up my pants to wade in. The stones are smooth and cold under my feet. I carefully make my way from one to the other, dipping my toes into the water. It's cold but not freezing. He's already fully in, breathing slow and controlled.

I sit down on the edge of the dock and watch him, fighting the urge to turn the camera on again. He takes a dive under water. When he surfaces and shakes his hair back, I call out, "Your hair is getting long." He runs a hand through it, slicking it back. "Yeah, I know. I want to grow it a little longer.." He stands tall, his defined upper body appearing out of the sea. Is he simply that confident, or does he just like me looking at him?

There are kids playing further down the beach. An old lady walks past with a small dog, nodding at me friendly. It feels surreal. This ordinary beach scene. When he climbs back out, water's streaming off him. He grabs his towel and dries off before pulling his clothes back on.

"Now I can have some food." he announces, sitting down on the edge of the dock. I start unpacking what I brought - buns with cheese, grapes, chocolate ricecakes, water and juice. We spread it out between us, our feet dangling over the stones at the end of the dock where stones lead like steps into the water. What a perfect picnic I think to myself. I haven't actually done a picnic in ages. Especially not on a date. We eat in comfortable silence for a while, the sun warming our bodies. Then I remember the thread we'd left hanging back at the café.

"So what would you do?" I ask. "If you could do anything."

"Right now?" He considers this, eyes back on the water. "I'd probably travel more. See places and just... be, without worrying about what comes next."

"That does sound pretty great. I just don't think I could do it. Not worry about the future. "

"Then what? What about you?" he returns the question.

"I don't even know," I say, completely honest and a bit hopeless. "That's the problem. I don't even know what would make me happy. I just know *this* isn't it."

"Then maybe that's the place to start," he says. "Knowing what you don't want."

"Right now I don't even know if I want to be here. In this city that I always loved so much and that is supposed to be my home. I wouldn't know where else to go, where I feel like I belong. And that's the scary things about leaving, let's say for traveling, not knowing where to return to."

"But during that time so many things will happen that you cant even imagine yet. And what you'll Find that on the way

will probably give you a new perspective and maybe even an answer.

“Where is home for you?”

He start going through places thinking out loud.

Scary for me because here right now not sure but I also don't know where else to go

I nod, letting that settle. I brush the bread crumbs off my lap and we start packing up the remains to continue to the next part of our trip.

As we're gathering our things, I keep thinking that I feel stuck in a way he doesn't seem to know. Or did he also just learn that with his adventures and experiences. So I dare to ask "Where is home for you?" He goes quiet, and I can see him thinking it through. "Hmm. I don't know. Maybe back to..." He trails off, listing places like he's testing how they sound. Somewhere warmer. Somewhere cheaper. Somewhere that isn't here, but also not where he is from. Hearing him talk like this scares and comforts me at the same time. At least he has options, places he's been, places that might take him back where he feels a sense of belonging, acceptance and ease. But hearing and seeing that it is possible gives me some peace. He is the living proof of.

We walk back along the beach toward where he parked the motorcycle, our shoes in our hands, the afternoon stretching long and golden around us. We drive a bit further to the entrance of a park. As we pass a wide open field, he slows down slightly and calls back over his shoulder, explaining the history, how the king decided centuries ago that no one would be allowed to build here, to preserve the view of the sea.

After just a few minutes, we arrive at a parking lot and stop at the spot all the way at the end. We get off and start walking towards a small tunnel, then through a high wooden gate. He reaches for the backpack I'm still carrying, lifting it by the top handle. "I'll take that," he says. "I can carry it." I respond. "I know. But I want to." A gentleman after all.

The path ahead winds through trees and open grass, and something about the rawness of it, the wildness barely contained, makes me feel like a child again. Playing outside. No worries. Just open space and discovery. "I want to climb a tree," I announce suddenly. He laughs, a real one. "Nice. You can definitely do that." "Will you climb with me?" "Maybe. Let's find a good one first." The path leads us upward, gradually, until the trees thin out and we emerge at an old castle. It's pretty, in great condition but it's the view that stops

me. "And this" he says, making a sweeping gesture with his arm "Is why no one is allowed to build anything here". I stare out across the open space and just smile. It's stunning. We both stand there watching. Kids are running across the field below, their kites lifting and dipping in the wind. My smile gets bigger. It's so pure, that kind of childish joy. "So cute," I say. "Yeah," he agrees quietly. I step behind him and pull my camera out of the bag, wanting to capture this. It almost looks even cooler through the lense and I can already feel the nostalgia of this shot.

After we take a loop around the castle we start walking in the opposite direction of the view we just admired. Ignoring the paths I cut straight across the field. He follows without question. The grass is long and catches at my ankles. "Do you ever feel like your life is like a movie?" I ask, turning back to look at him. It's a feeling I've had about him since the first time we met—this sense that he exists slightly outside normal reality, like he's the protagonist in something I'm only watching. "I get why you're asking, I think." He's quiet for a moment, considering. "But actually, a movie wouldn't do it justice." I wait. "It's more like a dream." The words hit me harder than they should. Wow. This man is so content, so genuinely happy, to a level that could almost seem cocky if it weren't so

obviously true. How is that even possible? To move through the world like this unburdened, this present, like every moment is exactly where he's supposed to be.

And here I am, standing in the same field, under the same sky, and all I can think is: he's living the dream, and I'm... what? Depressed by the very thought of it? Envious of his ease?

I want to ask him how he does it. How he found this contentment, this freedom. Whether it's something you stumble into or something you build, piece by piece. Whether it's available to people like me, or if you have to be born with it - this lightness, this lack of weight.

But I don't ask. Instead, I keep walking, the wind in my face, trying to feel what he feels. Trying to be here, now, in this dream instead of watching it from the outside.

We walk a few hundred meters further until the other people by the castle and on the path appear small enough that it's easy to pretend they're not even there. That we're the only two people existing right now.

I stop abruptly. "Wait". He turns around. "I just wanna lay here for a bit.", I say while already sitting down, then stretching my legs out to fully lay down on the grass. "Alright, let's do that

then.” He doesn't hesitate, doesn't question it. He just puts the backpack down and lays beside me - close, but not too close. There's still space between us.

I close my eyes and just breathe. A deep inhale. I feel my ribcage expanding against my sweater. Followed by a slow, long exhale, releasing everything I've been holding. I reach out and touch the grass around me, running my fingers through it, then rip a few straws out of the ground. It's like the world stands still. There is no noise. Like no one else exists. I remember when I was walking by the water in the city the other day, seeing the constant flow of traffic on the bridge in the distance. We never stop. The world never stops. But I need a stop. And right here right now it's like someone pressed pause. We lay on the grass in silence for a while. “What are you thinking?” he asks eventually, his voice quiet, not wanting to disturb whatever this is. “Nothing.” It's true. “My head is empty. But it's really weird. I feel like I should be thinking something.” My eyes still closed. “No!” he says with gentle emphasis. “That's good.” Another pause. I can hear his breathing now, steady and even beside me. “What's on your mind?” I ask back, turning it back at him. “Nothing either.” Good, I think. At least he's not thinking that I'm weird for being quiet. Clouds must be passing overhead because I can feel the sun appear and

disappear against my closed eyelids, warm then cool, warm then cool.

“Look!” He whispers, gently tapping my shoulder. I open my eyes and turn my head. “Wow!” Two deer have appeared, maybe ten meters away from us. They're moving slowly through the grass. I want to reach for my camera, but I don't. Some moments aren't meant to be captured. They're meant to be lived, held in memory rather than film. We watch until the deer move on, disappearing into the line of trees at the edge of the field.

I sit up and pull my shoes and socks off, wanting to feel the grass directly on my skin. The blades are cool and slightly ticklish against my bare feet. "Oh, that's a great idea," he says, sitting up too. He starts unlacing his boots. I wiggle my toes in the grass, then spot a long straw and pick it up between my toes, holding it up. "Can you take it with your toes?" He moves his foot over, and grabs the grass from between my toes. "Easy." He reaches into the bag and pulls out the grapes. I lay back down, closing my eyes again. A few moments later, something hits my forehead. "Ejj!" I laugh, opening my eyes and sitting up slightly to see him turned on his side, munching grapes with an innocent expression. "At least aim for my

mouth so I can eat it." I say, opening my mouth wide. He throws a second one. This time it hits my nose. "Almost" I'm laughing as I turn to the side to find where the grape landed. That's when our eyes meet. And something shifts. I can feel it immediately - a change in his energy, in the way he is looking at me. He leans on one hand, bending forward toward me, and reaches with his other hand to the back of my head, fingers threading into my hair. He pulls me in slowly, and kisses me. We start making out, mouths opening, bodies moving closer together. He pulls back just enough to look at me. "You said you had a thing for having sex outside, right?" I bite my lip, look him deep in the eyes and can only nod. With his hand still cradling the back of my head, he leans more over me, guiding me down until I'm flat on my back again. The grass presses against my shoulders, my spine. His hand trails slowly from my neck down to my chest, then to my stomach, slipping underneath my sweatshirt. They are a little cold. He kisses me again while his hand moves lower, his fingers finding the button of my pants. He opens it, and his hand moves even lower. I inhale sharply, my breath getting heavier. His fingers move lower, and I shift slightly, trying to find a position that feels more comfortable for the both of us. "Let me get on top of you," I say, my voice more determined than I feel.

"No way," he says immediately, shaking his head. "Then people are definitely going to see what's going on." He's probably right. From this angle, we're already visible enough. Me on top would be unmistakable. "Maybe we need to find a different spot," he says, lifting himself up slightly to scan the area. I follow his gaze toward the tree line. "Should we go more towards the trees back there?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

We pull our clothes back into place. Zipper up, bra closed. I grab my socks and shoes but don't bother putting them on. He does the same, shoving his boots and the bag under one arm. We walk quickly across the field toward the trees, barefoot, I can feel the grass cool and a little poky under my feet. It almost feels like we're teenagers sneaking away. And maybe about to get in trouble.

The tree line is dense enough to provide some cover. We move past the first few until we find one with a bit of sunlight reaching in. It's more private here, but I can still see silhouettes of people walking on the path on the other side of the open field. He drops the bag and boots, then turns to me. No more hesitation. He kisses me hard, pressing me back against the rough bark of the tree. I can feel it catching on my sweatshirt, the texture biting

through the fabric. His hands are at my waist, then my hips, pulling me closer. I reach for his belt, fumbling slightly with the buckle until it comes loose. Everything is faster now, clothes pushed aside rather than removed. Just enough access, just enough skin. He lifts me slightly, and I wrap one leg around him, using the tree for support. The bark digs into my back, uncomfortable but not enough to care. My breath comes in short gasps against his neck. "You good?" he murmurs against my ear. "Yeah," I manage. "Don't stop." The world narrows to this moment. The warmth of his body, the feeling of his touch, the tree behind me, the slight breeze and the rustle of leaves overhead. It's raw and imperfect and nothing like I would have imagined, but it's real. I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensation forgetting about the logistics, the angle, the balance, and the constant awareness of where we are.

When it's over, we stay pressed together for a moment, catching our breath. Then slowly, carefully, we disentangle and fix our clothes again. My back aches slightly where the bark pressed into it, and I know I'll have a mark there later. He looks at me, a slight smile playing at his lips. "You okay?" "Yeah. Very!" I laugh softly, validating that I enjoyed this but still processing what we just did. Impulsive and careless.

As we're gathering our things, I notice a tree nearby with a thick branch extending out to the side, perfectly positioned. I remember what I said earlier. "Wait. I said I wanted to climb a tree." He follows my gaze and laughs. "Go for it." Like a child, I approach it, testing the branch's strength before attempting to jump up and hook my legs over it. I manage to grip it, pulling myself up until I'm hanging upside down, my hair falling toward the ground, blood rushing to my head.

He's laughing, genuinely amused and takes a photo of me hanging there like a bat. "Nicely done." I grin, before unhooking my legs and dropping back down, landing somewhat ungracefully on my feet.

We move to sit near the edge of a small, muddy pond. The water is pretty dark. It's so peaceful here, the only sound an occasional bird call. After a few moments, he reaches for his jacket and pulls it on. "Come on." He stands, grabbing his backpack. "Time to get back to reality." He's ready to go, I guess. Fun's over. "Is it?" I say, unable to hide the disappointment in my voice. I give him a sad look. He pauses, then holds his hand out to me. "I'm afraid so." I take it, letting him pull me up.

We walk back over the field, pass the castle, the same path now in reverse. He starts telling me jokes. Something about a man and a sheep, and another one I don't quite catch the punchline of. I don't really get them, or maybe I just don't find them as funny as he does. I like listening to how he is telling them though. It's not that they aren't funny, exactly. We just don't have that giggly vibe together.

He looks at his wrist to check his watch. "I have Japanese class later," he mentions, "and I still need to prepare." "Japanese? Really? Why did you decide to learn that?" I did not see that coming either.

"I don't know, I've always been interested in the culture. And it's such a complex language - new letters, a whole alphabet." "Even two," he corrects himself, warming to the topic. "Hiragana and katakana, plus kanji. It's challenging, but I like that." "That's impressive. But do you just do it for fun or do you actually get to use it?" "Actually, yeah. We have some Japanese customers at the restaurant sometimes, so it's fun to try and talk to them in their language. They really appreciate me trying." There's something endearing about this.

The sun is still high, surprisingly, and it feels warmer now than it did earlier. He looks at me, I can tell he is considering

something. “We could take one more swim.” He looks me into the eyes, waiting for me to agree. “I mean, then I’ll be home after, so I can be wet and a little cold.” Less hesitant than earlier, I respond “Let’s do it!” “Nice! I know just the spot.” Of course he does.

It’s literally thirty seconds on the bike before we stop again. We get off and walk down a narrow trail for maybe three minutes before suddenly emerging right by the water. Large, flat stones reach out into the sea like a natural platform. We walk carefully across them until we’re surrounded by water, small waves splashing against the rocks. The last bits of sun hit this spot perfectly before the trees will hide it completely. He has no hesitation, strips down completely and gets into the water.

I take my pants off but then lose my bravery. The air is cold. “Take your top off,” he calls from the water. “But it’s cold!” I return. “Come on. It’s gonna be good for you and you know it.” I don’t move, just sit on the edge of the rock watching him in the water. “It’s really not that cold.” he goes on, clearly sensing my hesitation. “But of course you don’t have to do it.” I’m torn. Do I want to, or do I not want to? Or do I want to prove something, to him, to myself? Why does it even matter?

I move my legs back and forth, just my feet in the water, testing it.

He climbs back out. I stay. He comes up behind me and grips my sweater with one hand on each side slowly pulling it up. "Come on, it's gonna be good for you." I raise my arms and let him slide the shirt over my head. His fingers find the shutter of my bra, unhooking it, and he slides the straps over my shoulders. I guess I'm going in. I turn and slowly lower myself down from the rock. Just as the water reaches over my belly button I can stand. That's good. It's nice. Not too cold. I don't need to go all the way under, I am in, that counts. He's watching me with what looks like approval. "See? Not so bad." "It's terrible" I counter, but I'm smiling.

When I climb out, I scrape my hand on the rough edge of a rock. "Ouch." It's not terrible, but enough to draw a thin line of blood. "You okay?" "Yeah, just a scratch." "Wait here." He hands over his towel for me to dry myself and stay warm, "I'll get our clothes". He goes and grabs them from the other side of the stony platform.

The magic is almost over. I can feel it. Like it moves with the sun, which is also almost setting now, casting everything in that particular golden light that means the day is ending soon.

We walk back to the motorcycle, almost in complete silence.  
"Thank you for taking me here." I tell him on the last stretch.

On the ride back to the city, I hold on to him and think: if I could only stay away from reality a little longer. Just a little longer in this state where nothing else seems to matter. I also find myself thinking, almost laughing to myself, about the amount of times I've been skinny dipping, and outside without any underwear since I've known this man. It 's drastically increased. Funny how one person can shift your sense of what's possible, and what's normal.

He drops me off where we started, back in the real world. I climb off the bike and pull my helmet off.

"Thanks again for this day. I really needed that."

We hug goodbye. A firm, genuine hug that lasts a beat longer than necessary. When we pull apart, he looks at me with a gentle expression. "I hope you get to do something nice with the rest of your day." he says. I smile and nod. He pulls his helmet back on, kicks the bike into gear, and drives off, waving goodbye.

## Tuesday evening

I drop my bag by the door, kick off my shoes, and head straight for the kitchen. The apartment is quiet and it's just me again. I put water on the stove, then walk to the bathroom and let the shower run hot. Steam fills the air, washing off the wind, the grass, the salt. It's 5 p.m. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until now. Even though my body is still a bit cold and slightly tired, I feel energised, inspired and happy. My cheeks still warm from the sunny day.

Different scenes from the day keep replaying through my mind. The way the light hit the water at the dock. The texture of the grass under my bare feet. The exact tone of his voice when he said "you just need to figure out what makes you happy". The way water was running over his body after swimming and the way his cold hand wandered over my stomach. I don't usually walk through life like this. I am aware of my surrounding, sure. I notice things. But never this observant, remembering all these little details, even the smallest things he says. It's like my brain is subconsciously

trying to solve a puzzle, collecting pieces without knowing what the final picture is supposed to look like. Or maybe, if I pay attention to every detail, maybe I can figure out the secret to his dream.

With the buzzing sound of my phone I zone out of my thoughts back into the present. *“Did you also just have the best hot shower?”* he wrote. A follow-up message - that’s new. A non date-organizing conversation over text. Hmm. *“Yes. And now on the couch with a tea.”* I reply.

Then I remember the camera. I take it out of my bag and hook it up to the laptop, curious to see what I captured. I just held the camera up now and then, trying to catch some nice frames and moments without thinking too much about it. But as I look through the clips, I can already see it in my head. I’m going to turn them into something nice. I’ve always had a hand for this kind of thing. It doesn’t take long before I have what I’d call the perfect little music video to an indie song- slow pans of the sea, him walking along the width of the fields, a view, his face, the light catching this overall beautiful day.

The man lives like in a movie, so I turned him into one...

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I keep rewatching the video. It makes me smile again and again. Not because it's perfect, but because it captures a feeling. That lightheartedness, the joy and ease of the day. I decide to share it with him. He's the main character afterall. "*Here's your movie:)*" I write and attach it.

Then...nothing. No response. He had just texted and now he's MIA? Sharing it feels strangely vulnerable, even more so now that it's out there with no acknowledgment. It's something personal, it clearly means something to me and I expected a reaction, a smiley, a comment. Anything.

Hours pass. It takes him until late at night to tell me he thinks it's pretty cool. I only see his message when I wake up in the morning. That's it? Fine, I guess. God knows what he was doing in the meantime.

Wednesday

It might be the cinematic magic lingering, the combination of thrill and inspiration or maybe just some hormones, but I start to feel a strong craving for cuddles. I tell my roommate, partially looking for validation that it's not weird to text him for that, partially for confirmation that I am not coming across clingy or annoying. She just looks at me, shrugs, and says, "Honestly? I feel like he wouldn't say no. And you don't have any feelings for him, right? So if you want cuddles, might as well use him for that." Bluntly honest, as always and just what I love about her. She's right. There's a part of me that agrees he wouldn't say no, and yet another part of me hesitates. A little bit of strong-independent woman pride? A little bit of fear of rejection? I push all that aside. I don't care about that right now. I don't want a relationship with him really and I don't have anything to lose. So why not ask for exactly what I want? Just some genuine human contact, the feeling of being held, without any complicatedness attached.

*"This might be greedy cause I just saw you but I really want some cuddles. Maybe later?"*

I hit send before I can overthink it. Again, a few hours pass without any reply.

I can feel a mix of vulnerability and impatience building up. With a growing frustration I wonder why sharing something so simple makes me feel so exposed.

## Thursday

The next morning, still no answer. A little sting, but I push it aside, I tell myself not to read into it. I go on with my day and later while I am in the supermarket with my friend my phone finally buzzes from his text.

*“Sorry”*

*“I didn't see this yesterday. I had some issues with my bike”*

*“You can come over later if you want”*

I don't want to move my plans around for him, don't want to seem too available. But I don't really have plans and I do still want physical touch.

## The 5th date

I am downstairs waiting for him to text me which number to ring. The buildings all kinda look the same and I can't remember which one was his. Call him which house number. I guess, I wasn't really paying attention the last few times.

No reply after a few minutes, so I call his phone. He finally picks up "Which number are you again? I don't remember."

"Twenty-four," he says.

"Oh, that's where I am. Will you buzz me in?"

A few seconds later the door clicks open and I enter the building. I head to the elevator and ride up to the first floor, stop in front of a closed door. Shouldn't he be a bit quicker to open it? I knock. Out of habit and awkwardness while waiting I look at my phone.

A text from him. "3rd floor". "Oh, damn it," I whisper to myself, make a quick turn and get back into the elevator.

When it stops again on the third floor, his apartment door is already leaning open. I knock before I enter. He approaches the hallway from his room.

"I just knocked on the 1st floor" I laugh as I step in.

"Did they answer?" he asks. "No".

He turns, walking back into his room. I take my shoes off and follow. Not really knowing where to place myself I drop my jacket and purse on the floor and let myself fall backwards on the bed with a soft sigh. He's sitting at his small desk in the corner, fidgeting with a stack of flashcards.

"Do you want some tea or anything?" "I'm good, but thank you."

"You can help me study Japanese." he says, eyes still on his cards.

He grabs the full pile, gets up and walks over to the bed where I'm still lying across. I don't move so he lies down the other way, his legs over my stomach. The weight is calming. I let out a small breath I didn't realize I was holding and rest my hands gently on top of his legs, palms warm against the fabric of his pants. He starts explaining the cards and their system to me while I'm scanning the handwritten characters and the tiny notes in the corners on the back. "There's hiragana and these are katakana, plus kanji here." I pick up the first card from the stack and show it to him. He answers correctly and I nod approvingly. Next card. "One push up for every wrong answer." I tease, pretending to keep score. We go on through

the whole pile. By the time we finish the second round we haven't said much else.

The paint from his craft session is still open on his desk. He looks at it and asks "You wanna make some art?"

"Yeah! Always." I respond with real enthusiasm. How cozy, we're gonna paint together. At least so I thought.

He grabs a small canvas and some paint, sets it up on the coffee table in the living room. "I'm gonna make you some tea," he adds, already moving toward the kitchen.

I sit cross-legged on the floor, arranging the paint like it matters, staring at the blank canvas. I never know where to start. My thoughts drift to our trip two days ago - the field, the sun, the view. So I start painting, or more trying to, blades of grass and a crooked unproportional tree.

He reappears, leaning over my shoulder to set down a mug and a little bowl. "Here you go. Tea, and some nuts and chocolate." I blink, caught off guard. "Aww... thank you." Why is being so nice? "I feel so spoiled". He laughs, "Well, you're my guest." It's a kind gesture but I somehow also feel slightly belittled. Why can I not shake the feeling that this is awkward, is he taking care of me or pitting me? The confusion makes me stiff.

He sits on the couch beside me but instead of joining in on the art session he picks up a gaming controller and turns on the TV. I blink. Now I am even more confused.

“I have been trying to get past this level for ages.” he says  
“Can’t manage to kill this huge monkey monster.”

I look up from my canvas slowly filling with something that could very well have been made by a ten year old. He’s leaning back, focused, thumbs flicking across the buttons. His character dies with a dramatic grunt. I don’t know what I am doing here. I mean with the painting, but also in this whole situation. I look at the game on the screen. I don’t get it. I look back at him. His character dies again.

“How fast do you get frustrated?” I ask.

He doesn’t look away from the screen. “That’s a weird question”, His tone has an edge I can’t read.

“I mean, I’d get annoyed if I couldn’t move on,” I explain.

He shrugs. “It’s just a game. And I’m pretty close now”

Okay, way to kill a conversation. I take a sip of the tea. Then I guess we won’t talk. I will just continue with my “painting task”.

He is scrolling on his phone now. He laughs. “Have you seen this?” He tilts the screen toward me. I look. I don’t get it. I

laugh anyway, politely. Wow, I think. We really don't have the same humor, do we?

“Oh, I have to get ready for work” he says, stands up and claps his hands together. “Time to get back to reality.” I watch him move. He's right, I don't feel like reality with him. Maybe because he's different, maybe because there is no future here so I don't think about things that usually cross my mind. Maybe because when I'm with him, I feel this strange mix of distracted and numb, quiet inside, but still buzzing somewhere under my skin. I like that feeling. I need it, actually. I don't want to go back to reality. My reality. The one filled with constant self-analysis and little loops of overthinking. I'd rather keep looking into his reality for a little longer. He always seems so unbothered, so free-spirited. I mean he is learning Japanese and he hand painted his own flashcards.

Since the floor is not the most comfortable place to sit anyways, I take his hint and get up, leaving my little art station. As I turn from the living room to the open kitchen area he walks back out of his room in his work attire. A black shirt tucked into a pair of black suit-like pants, all tightened

with a belt. He opens his arms wide, we hug goodbye and I leave.

## Thursday evening

What was that? A part of me can't stop wondering - did he just completely reject me, or is this what being comfortable looks like for him? He made me tea, gave me chocolate, seemed calm and relaxed beside me, but not really present with me. Even though we were in the same room it felt like we were in two different realities. Not once. I did say what my reason for coming was. I made it clear. But I got nothing of that. No kiss, barely a touch. Why do I still feel like I missed something here? I am very confused. Why did he invite me over? To then play video games, by himself. He seemed unbothered by it. And he was still very polite. Is he not thinking anything when he's being so nice to me, making me tea etc. or was he just keeping me comfortably busy? Now I am questioning his ulterior motive.

I've also come to the realization that I feel this strange combination of being alive and numb at the same time when I'm with him. Alive through the things we do, the glimpses of his thoughts, the way his world makes me feel. But numb in a way that leaves me just there in those moments, following his script. Almost more observer than participant, like a passenger in a car, watching him drive. Drive me.

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I can't sleep. I've been lying here for what feels like hours, trying to keep my eyes closed and focus on my breath so I can fall back asleep. In my head I can't help but keep replaying some of things he had said. The way he described his life as "more like a dream" like it was the most obvious thing in the world. I reach for my phone, the screen brightness assaulting my eyes in the dark. I open Instagram and type his name into the search bar. Something I've thought about before but never actually did. It didn't tempt me enough before I guess. But now slowly I start to feel like I need some more insights. His profile loads. Let's see what his digital footprint can tell me.

Very few posts. No photos. Just videos, spanning quite a few years. A variety of compilations of clips from his trips lined

up with shaky transitions, moments captured without much context or explanation, all the way up to glimpses of the new city life. Very raw and a little chaotic.

The tagged photos are where things get really interesting. I scroll through them. Photos other people have posted of him, at parties, gatherings, festivals I don't recognize. There are so many people in these. He's surrounded by bodies, by life, by more chaos. Naked people swimming in lakes. Group shots around fires. That hippy life aesthetic with loose clothes, wild hair, no inhibitions. Everyone looks free in a way that feels both appealing and slightly unsettling. There's one from what looks like a commune or "intentional" community. People sitting in a circle, someone playing djembe, bodies swaying. He's in the background, barely visible. Another one at a festival, everyone covered in paint or mud, dancing. He's front and center, paint across his cheeks and chest, arms up in the air. This is him? Or was? I keep going, almost compulsively now. There's a photo of him and his girlfriend, the same one who appeared in a few of his videos, lying in a hammock together, her face buried in his neck.

I click back to his main profile. The aesthetic shifts as I scroll. There's definitely a contrast, from nomadic freedom to more

urban-heavy impressions. Wild life in those tagged photos versus the view of someone living in a city, working, following at least a little more routine. I wonder how he feels about this change? If he misses it. Which way he would rather live.

There's more that unsettles me. What shakes me isn't that people live like this, naked and free and communal. I actually admire it. But my brain can't comprehend how it's possible. How do you just... live like that? Without structure, without security, without a plan? How do you trust that it'll all work out, that you'll be okay, that the community will hold you? And then, how do you go from one to the other? He talked about not having friends like it was a conscious choice, not a loss. But these photos tell somewhat of a different story. He had a whole community. And then... what? He left it all behind?

I stare at a photo of him from three years ago, surrounded by people, laughing, ecstatic in a way that feels very different from the man I know. I want to ask him about all of this. About whether the dream he's living is the one he wanted or just the one that was left. But I know I won't. Because that would mean admitting I was here, in the dark, scrolling

through his past like I have any right to do it, just because we've slept together a handful of times. I close the app with the feeling that I know him less now, not more.

## Saturday

Unsettled and unsatisfied from how that last time we saw each other went, I reach out again.

As someone with an anxious attachment style that just shows me that he is triggering that exact insecurity right now. I guess I need to get that validation before I can let it go. A need for resolution, for clarity, for something. If we're even going to let it go. Or are we just about to jump into another loop. But I shouldn't be attached to him in the first place. I mean I am not. Not on an emotional level. But I like to spend time with people and being with him always made me feel ... something. Was it really good? Like good as in healthy, or good as in what I thought I needed but only because of toxic habits that actually don't serve me at all? Good because it was exciting, good because it was different and distracting? Again, what am

I looking to get from him in this very moment? A rush or a sedation?

My thumb hovers over the screen. I've typed and deleted three different messages already. Each one trying to sound casual, unbothered, like I'm not sitting here overthinking every word. Still hesitant, but finally I send a text.

*“Can I sleep over tomorrow evening? I like the idea of a morning swim“* as if I needed to add a justification, give myself permission. *“And I still want my cuddles”* I add cheekily. Like I'm not desperate at all.

*“Hey! Yeah, sure:)”* That's it. That's all he says. So easy. So uncomplicated. Why does his ease make me feel more complicated?

## The 6th date

“Are you asleep yet?”

It's 10:48pm on a Sunday night. I definitely should be sleeping. But here I am in a nightgown, pretending like that's what I normally wear to sleep and fighting my tiredness with another movie.

*“I’ll be off in 10 minutes.”* That’s the text I have been waiting for. When he agreed to me sleeping over, he might’ve forgotten to mention that he is working a late shift that day.

But now I am really looking forward to some cuddles. So I reply proudly “Still up!”

“What time will you be home?” I should have just told him to come over to mine.

It’s okay to text and ask him for help. Just make sure that you are the one using him and not the other way around. A friend of mine told me that some time ago when I was too proud to ask a certain man to help me fix something around the house. Not that I fully agree with her. I don’t want to be using anyone. But I should just be looking out for myself and maybe sometimes that means keeping the upper hand. So in this scenario I am the one that wants something from him, and I’m okay to go get it instead of having it delivered in front of my door. He might drive a motorcycle but he is not a Wolt courier.

“Let’s say midnight. Then I can also take a quick shower.”

Uff, that’s still more than an hour. I am already struggling to keep my eyes open.

I’ve been laying in bed for like 2 hours. I did prepare my bag for the next day and put clothes for the day in as well as a

swimsuit. So who am I kidding? I was planning on going anyways but am I totally crazy for biking half way through the city at this time. Whatever. I play around on my computer for another 20 minutes and then get dressed to leave.

It's actually not that cold. And there are quite a few people out still. Makes me feel less crazy. I put some good music on and enjoy the bike ride.

I arrive with the idea of going to sleep. I figured since it was so late I would just go straight from my bed to his. I get up in the elevator. The front door is held open by a shoe placed in the frame. This has become a bad habit of not welcoming me at the door. I enter the apartment, and instead get greeted by the hint of the smell of weed. I head straight to his room. He is standing there, dressed in all black. Just as when I left him the last time. Looking good.

“Is it just me or does it smell like weed?”

“Yeah, I smoked the last bit of a joint I had left.”

Hmm. I really hate the smell of weed. And I truly don't like it when people smoke. Especially people that I am likely to be kissing.

He looks at me “You're more less ready to go to bed, aren't you?”

“Yes!” I very much am. It’s past my bed time. “I came in my pajamas.” I say as I start taking off my clothes. I drop my sweater and pants on the floor and then stand there in my little lacy black night gown. I know it looks good and I know it is tempting but I really just want to cuddle and sleep. He however might have just gotten a different idea. He comes closer and streaks the back of his hand and fingers against my waist.

“We could go for a swim now actually.” Why did I know he was going to suggest that? He doesn't seem to care about the fact that it’s past midnight. His place is near the water, and he's already proven many times he'll swim in any conditions, any time. “*You* can definitely do that.” I make it clear that he’s alone in this one. He doesn't try to convince me, just nods and disappears into his bedroom. When he comes back, he's wearing a bathrobe and carrying a cup of tea. He heads to the fridge to add some milk in the cup and hands it to me without asking if I want it. “No, thanks.” I pull only my jacket over my nightdress and follow him outside. The air is cool and fresh but there’s no wind. Down at the dock I pause and look up. “Oh, look,” I say, pointing up. There are actually a lot of stars visible in the clear night sky. He follows my gaze up, standing beside me in silence for a moment. A guy walks past

on the path with his dog, greeting us in Danish. There's still light in a few of the apartments in the buildings behind, lining up by the waterfront. As the dog walker continues on, he turns to me and gestures toward the dock with the same tone the man just used with his dog. "Come here." I walk towards him and laugh, but seriously question whether this is actually funny. Am I really just his accessory? His pet? Am I that passive in our dynamic that he sees me like this?

He sets his mug down on the railing and without ceremony, he drops the robe. To my surprise he's wearing swim trunks underneath this time. An adjustment to the semi-public setting, maybe. With calm steps down the latter he smoothly transitions into the water. He swims out a few strokes, then floats on his back, looking up at the same stars. I wrap my hands around the warm mug and wait. When he reaches the ladder, I pick up his robe, holding it open for him, arms spread wide so he can slide right into it when he climbs out. But as he comes up, he shakes his head. "I'm going to do some stretches first." I stand there, slightly awkward, holding the robe over my arm while he starts stretching his arms across his body followed by a series of movements reaching up, bending down, reaching up, bending down, and so on. He shakes the water out of his hair, droplets flying over, then

finally reaches for the robe."How was it?" I ask. "A bit cold, but good."

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Finally back inside I directly slip under the covers while he dries himself off fully in the bathroom. When he comes back into the room he's completely naked and just slides under the covers with me. I scooch closer to him, seeking his warmth. I lay one arm over his torso and my head on his chest. His skin is still cool from the water, but I can feel the heat returning. Underneath, I can hear his heartbeat.

He pulls me in and wraps his arms around me. One hand on my back and the other moving up and down the back of my head. I can't shake the feeling of discomfort. A feeling that I am not supposed to be here and that I should have just stayed home and gone to sleep. That I don't deserve to be here.

I swallow, and can't hold back this burning question "Why are you being so nice to me?" He is quiet for a moment. I feel his chest rise and fall beneath my cheek. Then he stops stroking through my hair. "Remember when you told me that I seem to

be trying to give girls what they need?" So he did take in what I said. And it stuck. I feel a flutter of nervousness about what truth I am about to hear, even though I have thought about this myself many times.

"Well" he continues, his voice softened, "you need someone to be there for you right now." I hold my breath. "Someone to take your mind off things, someone to distract you, take you out of reality." A pause. "Someone to hold you and to tell you that everything is going to be okay."

There it was. The sentence I have been so desperately wanting to hear.

*Everything is going to be okay.*

My chest tightens. But from him? Someone who doesn't even really know me. Someone I've only met a handful of times. Five? Six times? Someone who is probably not even going to be in my life anymore in like three weeks. "And you want to be that person?" My voice cracks slightly on the last word. His hand moves on my back, a gentle pressure. "Right now, here, I can be." Right now. Here. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not in any permanent, lasting way. Just in this moment,

in this bed, with his heartbeat under my ear and his arms around me.

It should feel like not enough. It should feel like a consolation prize, a temporary fix, a band-aid on something that needs stitches. But instead, it feels like the most honest thing anyone has said to me in months. He's not promising me forever. He's not pretending this is more than it is. He's just offering this moment. And that's what he is for me - a temporary shelter from whatever storm I'm trying to outrun.

"Okay," I whisper and press my face harder against his chest, letting myself accept it. Letting myself be held by someone who might not stay, but who is here now. His other arm comes around me, more secure this time, and I feel his chin rest on the top of my head. We don't say anything else. And in this bed, in this strange man's arms, I let myself believe, just for tonight, that everything is going to be okay. Even if I don't know what "everything" means anymore. Even if "okay" is just another word for "surviving." Even if this moment, right now, here, is all I get.

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But it's not a movie. And this didn't happen. After his little midnight swimming action we stayed up way too late, for me at least, because he was not tired. Once he slid under the covers with me I scooped closer to him, my arm over his torso and my head on his chest, listening to his heart beating. Only after we lie like that for a while, his hand comes up to rest on my back, not pulling me closer, just acknowledging I'm there.

"I can hear your heartbeat. It's going quite fast." I say to him.

"Yeah, I'm still a bit restless." tired as I am, it annoys me a little that he is not giving in to relaxing. So, I ask "What makes you restless?"

"Having a girl in my bed." Oh well. Here we go. His fingers trace down my arm, a light touch that makes my skin prickle. When he reaches my hand, he takes it and guides it down, clearly placing it for me to touch him. There is a shift. From whatever tenderness we had to this. A transaction. We have sex. It's fine. Efficient even, if you now what I mean. But he doesn't kiss me, the whole time. Not once. His mouth stays away from mine, like there's an intimacy in kissing that this doesn't require.

Afterwards, he doesn't tuck his arm around me, let alone hold me. He just lies on his side next to me, already drifting toward

sleep. I stay on my back, staring at the ceiling in the dark. What the hell, I think. This is not what I came here for. Not what I asked for. I wanted a sleepover. Cuddles. Connection. But lying here in the silence, in the aftermath, now with his back to me and the space between, this doesn't feel like connection at all. It feels like the opposite. Like I'm more alone now than I was in my own bed, in my own apartment, with no one. What am I doing in this bed with this man who just had sex with me without kissing me. He got what he wanted and now he's asleep. The whole night I don't really manage to fall into deep sleep, too aware of the sheets, the temperature, the strange bed, his breathing beside me. Tossing and turning, trying to find a position that feels comfortable when nothing about this feels comfortable anymore.

## Monday Morning

After snoozing my alarm several times I finally give up on the sleep I never really had. I slide out of bed as carefully as possible, trying not to disturb him, and grab my things from where they're scattered around the room.

In the bathroom, I splash water on my face and stare at myself in the mirror. Surprisingly, I don't look as tired as I feel but you can see the inner turmoil in my expression. Nothing a little bit of extra blush can't fix. Hopefully.

I tiptoe back into his room to grab my bag. He's still deep asleep, now spread across the whole bed, taking up the space I left, like he's been alone all along. Like I was never there. I can't just leave without saying anything. That feels wrong, cowardly somehow. So I lean over him, getting slightly closer to his head and whisper "I have to go.". He jerks a little and seems to wake up for a moment. "Wh-what?" his voice sleepy and a little confused. "I have to go. To work."

"Is it that late already?" he doesn't open his eyes, just squints at me. The morning light is shimmering through his curtains. "Yeah."

"Okay." He's already sinking back down into the pillow, back into sleep. I stand there for a moment, bag in hand, watching

him drift back to sleep. Waiting for something, but I don't even know what. Okay. That's it. He did not go swimming with me as he said. He didn't even get up.

Maybe that was it, I think as I let myself out of his apartment, quietly closing the door behind me. Maybe this isn't going to go on much longer. We're not on the same wavelength. We never were. But we're both nice people, open, and trying to understand each other while having a good time. I think he enjoyed my company, and so did I. Most of the time. But more often lately, I'm left feeling more alone than before, more unsettled than satisfied, more confused about what I'm even doing.

Walking out of the building feels symbolic somehow, like the credits rolling at the end of a movie. Unsure if it was a happy ending or a sad one, just that it's over. Or almost over. The screen fading to black while you're still trying to process what you just watched.

I unlock my bike and swing my leg over, bag in the basket I start pedaling, joining the stream of other commuters, all of them moving in their regular lives, their routines. Back to reality, as he likes to say.

## Monday Night

In the evening I text him. I tell myself it's because I forgot something at his place, which is technically true. My favorite hair tie is still on his nightstand, or tangled in his sheets and my perfume plus brush on the side of the bathroom sink. Rookie mistake. But that's not the main reason why I'm texting. I'm a little mad. I'm mad that I didn't get the cuddles I asked for, multiple times. Mad that I stayed over and didn't manage to sleep. Mad that he took what he wanted and then rolled over and fell asleep like I was just an additional part of his evening routine.

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I type and delete several drafts. Maybe there's no non-pathetic way of saying this. I press send on something that gives him a chance to acknowledge what happened without forcing a confrontation I'm not ready for, before I can overthink it further. Then I wait. God, I hate this. I hate that I'm spiraling over a text

message. I hate that I can't just accept whatever his response will be without dissecting it for hidden meanings. I hate that I'm here again, in this anxious space, waiting for validation from someone who clearly isn't capable of giving. Someone I shouldn't seek validation from in the first place.

My therapist's voice floats into my head. Something she said months ago that I needed to hear then and now again: *If someone makes you feel like you're acting crazy, they're not someone you should have around. You don't want anyone making you doubt your sanity.*

Am I acting crazy? Or am I having a completely reasonable reaction to being treated like this?

I put my phone face-down on the couch and try to focus on something else, anything else. I put on a movie but I'm not watching it. My phone buzzes. I grab it too quickly. It's not him. Just a notification from some app. I toss the phone aside again, frustrated with myself. With this whole situation.

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He responds eventually. Brief and practical about when I can pick up my stuff. No acknowledgment of anything else. No warmth. Just logistics. Fine. Whatever.

## A few days later

A few days pass. I don't reach out again, and neither does he. The silence feels unfinished. Then my phone lights up with his name.

I open the message, my stomach already tightening in anticipation.

*"Hey. I've been thinking... maybe we shouldn't keep doing this. I think you should probably figure out what it is you actually want."*

I read it twice. Then a third time.

I feel upset. Mad that *he's* the one ending it when I was already feeling done when I left his place the last time. Mad that he gets to be the reasonable one, the one setting

boundaries, when he's the one who couldn't even give me basic affection. But underneath the anger is something else. Revelation. Because he has a point. I say I want one thing and then act completely differently. I agreed to casual but then got upset when it actually was casual. I said I was fine with no expectations and then felt hurt when he didn't meet mine.

I don't respond but entertain the thought for a while. What do I actually want? I try to walk through it logically, like I'm solving a math problem. But if I'm honest with myself logic has been long gone when it comes to how I feel and what I might want.

I don't see a future with him, I never did. But I like having someone to spend time with. Someone to text. Someone whose bed I could sleep in, even if I didn't sleep well. I like having someone around regularly. And even though it was not amazing, it was not horrible either. Not at all. But ... I shouldn't settle for that. I mean, I wasn't going to. That was never an option or the idea with him. But what I realize now is that I *was* settling, just in a different way. I was accepting "not horrible" when what I actually want is *really f\*cking good*.

Slowly, the tangled mess of my thoughts begins to loosen. What I want is companionships. With the right person. For as long as it lasts. For as long as it's real.

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Later that same day, I tell my friend about his message and my thought process. I expected her to say something comforting, or validating. Instead, she laughs. Not meanly, just... knowingly. "You know you're talking about a relationship, right? What you want is a relationship. "

Hmm. "Everything you just described: companionship, someone to spend time with regularly, someone who's actually present and cares about you. That's what a relationship is."

It sounds so simple when she says it like that. So obvious. And now his text, this simple, direct message, showed me something I hadn't realized: even though I thought all this time I was ready, I wasn't. I thought I had it all figured out. I thought I knew what I wanted and was just waiting for the right person to show up and fit into that plan. But I was lying to myself. I wasn't ready. I didn't know. And maybe that's why I kept gravitating toward people who couldn't give me what I

needed, because I didn't actually know what I needed in the first place. All this time I'd somehow convinced myself I wanted something else. Something more complicated, or more casual, or more... I don't even know. Something that wouldn't require me to be vulnerable or to ask for what I actually need.

While I am contemplating she puts her hands on my shoulders, with a waking grip. I look straight at her now. She's still smiling. "You're allowed to want that. You deserve all of that!"

"I know." I mumble it off. "Do you?" she persists.

I've been so caught up in trying to be this perfect version of a person that I forgot it's okay to actually want something. Something else. From life and from people. To not want to climb the corporate ladder, to not want to own expensive things, to want a life I am genuinely excited about waking up to in the morning, with someone who wants me back. Instead of whatever performance I've been playing along with.

"Yeah," I say finally. "I do know that. Or I'm starting to."

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I finally respond to his text.

*"That's totally fair if you feel that way. Thanks for being honest."*

*"And maybe you're right. I do need to figure that out. Wish me luck..."*

No drama. No trying to convince him otherwise. No asking for more or trying to explain myself.

Just... acceptance.

## **A** week later

A week later, I go to pick up my things. I bike over at our agreed time since I have to do some errands anyways.

When he opens the door, he looks the same. Of course he does. Why would he look any different? Hair still a bit too long, that easy posture with his calm and unbothered aura.

"Hey," he says "Come in." I hesitate and take only one step inside. "Do you want some tea?" The question surprises me.

He was the one who officially put an end to this. Why is he offering tea like we're friends meeting for a catch up? "No thanks." I politely decline, "I'm just here to grab my stuff." "Okay. Let me go get them then." without any pushback he grabs my things and comes back handing them to me. "That's all right?" "Yes, thanks!" We look each other in the eyes and I can't help but give him a genuine and sort of relieved smile. "I could go for one more swim." I say it teasingly, tempting him, curious for his response. "It's pretty cold out."

"Since when has that stopped you?" I know the look that is showing on his face. That slight, knowing smile. "Fair point." That's a yes!

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The water had definitely become much colder since we last dipped in the sea. "Can I tell you something?" I hear myself saying in a moment of silence. He looks at me, slightly surprised, then nods. "Of course." I take a breath, trying to find the words I've been rehearsing in my head all week.

"A lot of things you said, the values you carry, the beliefs about how to live, the way you make your life work, I needed

to hear all of that. I needed to be reminded that there are other ways to exist. As cheesy as this sounds, I think the timing of meeting you... it was really important for me."

He's listening, really listening. "You helped me feel joy again. Adventure. You got me outside, into nature, out of my own head. Even if it was just for moments at a time."

I pause, gathering courage for the next part. "Do you know why I went on that first date with you?" He shakes his head.

"The days before I felt so worthless. Completely and truly hopeless about a lot of things in my life. No desire to keep going as it was and a total absence of the possibility of excitement for the future. Agreeing to go out with you, was like the punishment for my worthlessness. A way to feel something else and to numb what I was currently feeling. I went for validation, like at least I can get with this hot guy, like a way to gain back some value. And then you showed up like this... I don't know. Like you'd figured something out that I hadn't. Quite quickly that urge for validation turned into a search for answers to some fundamental questions. I think I was hoping more and more that being near you would help me figure it out too. Someone to tell me what to do, how to get

things right and feel happy again from within myself. As content as you seemed.

"Did it?" he asks quietly.

"In a way."

"And I also figured out what I want. What I've been looking for this whole time without knowing it."

"Yeah?" His voice is gentle, curious.

"Companionship. Real companionship. Not just someone to distract me or make me feel less alone for a night. Someone who's actually there. Someone who's there to stay." He nods slowly, taking this in. "That makes sense."

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All this is what I should have said in a picture perfect world. What I should have done if I wasn't too scared. But then again it's him living in a movie, not me. What actually happened was this: I stood in the doorway, kept my shoes and jacket on,

just waiting to get my things. When he asked if I wanted to come in for some tea, I was very surprised, a little shocked, even, that he was being so casual and friendly. Did he think we'd sleep together again? I don't know. But I knew I didn't want to go in. I didn't want to, and it was clear we weren't going to continue this so what's the point of dragging it out. No more distraction. No more excitement. I'd already come to terms with that when I left his place the last time.

I'd prepared something to say to him, even written it down in my notes. About how I feel like he panicked that I double texted him, how I am not going to fall in love with him because I don't think we are a match; that yes, I was annoyed I didn't get cuddles after I specifically asked for it, but also that I believe he is a good person and I had a good time with him. I'd rehearsed it in my head during the bike ride over, finding the right words to explain what this had meant to me, what I'd learned, how I was grateful because that even though I am still kind of lost he started opening new perspectives to me again, and finally how I felt misunderstood in the end. But in that moment, when I saw him standing there in his hallway, I felt nothing but peace. Not sadness. Not longing. Not even anger anymore.

"Have a wonderful life!" I say.

"You too." he replied with a big genuine smile, followed by a friendly hug and that was it.

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As I biked away, I thought about all the things I could have said. About companionship and timing and gratitude and growth. About how he'd helped me without meaning to, just by being exactly who he was, someone so different from me that it forced me to see myself more clearly.

But maybe some things don't need to be said out loud. Maybe the lesson is in living it, not in explaining. I still struggle with this kind of intimacy, this kind of sharing. It's still scary. I can't just say these things out loud, not easily, not without feeling exposed and vulnerable in ways that terrify me. Maybe I should have. Maybe in the future I will. But for now, what he showed me was enough.

He showed me what I don't want. What doesn't work for me. What beautiful, dream-like contentment looks like when you're watching it from the outside, and how empty it feels when you're trying to live a life you don't feel like actually belongs to you. He showed me that I need more than moments. More than someone who can only be there occasionally.

And most importantly, he taught me that some people can live like life is a movie.

I guess I should focus on making my own movie from now on. One that doesn't require me to borrow someone else's contentment or live in the margins of their story. One that's actually mine.

*The End.*

## Author's note

*Writing this book became more than a creative process - it became a mirror. Somewhere in the process of hiding in my room and late-night writing sessions, I had to come to the realization that I was dealing with depression.*

*It crept up on me quietly. All these moments that felt like exhaustion, like being "off," until I realized it wasn't just another bad week or stress. It was something deeper. I didn't know what to call it at first or how to act on it. I only knew that I felt lost, completely stuck, unworthy, and overwhelmed by the constant pressure I feel, partially from myself and partially from the society we live in.*

*Opening up was hard. Until I did. In tini-tiny baby steps. I didn't know how to lean on people. How to not judge myself. It took me months to even accept what was going on.*

*Now on an almost daily basis I have the voice of a friend in my head (you know who you are <3). When I first came to her for advice and comfort she told me: "You're already so strong for facing this. Now imagine how powerful you'll be once you get through it. It'll feel like a superpower." That became my anchor.*

*If you've ever felt worthless, stuck, or like you've hit rock bottom, I want you to know that you're not alone. The truth about mental health is, it's so f'ucking real. And I'm glad we*

*are talking about it more and more as a society. But to be honest, it is also much harder to fully understand how it feels until you've faced bad mental health yourself. I know that now. But that doesn't make your experience any less real.*

*This book has been a light for me. A distraction, but also a way to lose and find myself at the same time. I'm still going through it, still figuring it out, but deep down I know now that there's something waiting on the other side of pain, if you let yourself believe it's there.*

*So if you ever feel like her, like the main character in these pages, take her confusion, her searching, and his hope as proof that it's okay to feel everything. Every thought, every dark corner, every shadow. As long as you don't close yourself off from the possibility of sunlight.*

*The characters in this book have no names for a reason. I want every reader to be able to see themselves in them, even if only in a fragment or small reflection. My hope is that somewhere between the words, you find comfort, curiosity, (re)direction or simply the reminder that it's okay, and that it's possible to start again.*

*With love,*

*Emma*