

The End in the Beginning

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*In the morning when I wake
And the sun is coming through
Oh, you fill my lungs with sweetness
And you fill my head with you*

—The Paper Kites

I longed for something more, drinking drowned that out.

When I met him, I saw the end in the beginning. I knew things would unravel, as if I was watching the last scene from a film first. I imagined two figures becoming smaller as they walked away from each other.

We met on a dating app. He made a funny comment about a photo of Korean pancakes, made by me, that I had added for a touch of the absurd to my profile pictures. They were arranged carefully on a plate, with long stemmed chives criss-crossing over them.

“I’m hungry now.” Three simple words that made me smile.

We messaged back and forth. An instant magical quality was present. At night, we talked for hours on the phone. We finished each other's sentences, and conversations flowed without any awkward silences. I walked back and forth from the living room to the kitchen, the phone cradled in my neck, making another gin and tonic in a small tinkling glass. With the help of alcohol, I felt charming and funny, flirty and clever.

We were in full lockdown, back when the pandemic was thought to have a trajectory like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. There was still a hope that everything would return to normal, although people kept using the phrase “the new normal.”

Things were moving too quickly, the pace felt rapid and disorienting. He made me cross over boundaries I wasn't ready to cross: sharing my phone number so we could talk outside the app, meeting up in person. We said goodnight on the phone, saying each other's names slowly and tentatively. Even though we hadn't met, a part of me already knew him.

I also felt anxious and ill at ease. It's just butterflies, I told myself, ignoring the rise of the deep down sinking feeling.

When we met in person, I felt relieved. He wore a faded blue t-shirt which I found strangely comforting. His features carried an uncanny resemblance to mine, although I couldn't quite pinpoint how. Was it in the eyes? Or something deeper behind them?

Something felt as if it was falling into place.

My best friend told me it was Kismet. A force outside was governing events.

On the date, we sat outside a bar in the afternoon and watched a band finishing their set. He ordered something without alcohol because he didn't drink anymore. I drank two beers, upon his insistence. Drinking gave me the courage to manage the experience.

I noticed the way he crossed his right leg over the left knee. Was he arrogant? Too self-assured? Maybe he was bored. He wasn't fully present.

Seeing his restlessness, I cut the date short and said goodbye and walked to my car. He walked home because he didn't have a car.

We chatted later on the phone. He told me how much he loved the silver earrings and lotus flower necklace I'd worn, and my green eyes. He spoke about me as if he was speaking to someone else. I thought about his dark eyes, and the way he ran his hand through his hair. But I was too shy to say anything.

The next day, I got an early morning text. I was making coffee and toast in the kitchen, pattering about, light on my feet. I was happy to hear the chiming sound.

Then I read the message.

“As much as I have enjoyed our conversations, I don’t see a road ahead beyond friendship.”

I quietly placed the phone down on the counter.

A rush of emotions coursed through me—shock, anger, disappointment, embarrassment, shame. In less than a minute, I went from hating him to hating myself. I had to get out of the house.

I pulled on my rainboots, sitting on the floor like a child who had no control over their life except to go off in a huff. When I was seven or eight, I learned how to walk off my emotions, as if I was boiling them dry in a pan of water.

I went for a long walk through the woods and by the river.

All around me, a monochrome lifeless color. The leaves on the trees were still and inert, no longer fluttering in a pretty yellow light. I had only known him for a week or so. But even small losses stir up deeper ones.

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He called me a few days later. The conversations resumed, accompanied by the nightly tinkling glasses of gin and tonic. I wondered if I was drinking too much.

We began to see each other more often.

The relationship was marked by perpetual turbulence. Constant break-ups and separations followed by days of numbing emptiness. Then we would reconcile, promising to stay together forever.

When I look back and examine the relationship's foundation and structure, I realize it was mostly drawn from pain, arising from a pressing need to fill an emptiness. We both grew up in the bleak scarcity of homes marked by loneliness and addiction; we both endeavored to fill the void carved out by neglect and the profound sense of abandonment we experienced during our childhoods.

We yearned for something the other would not be able to give: the love you can only give to yourself.

The longing pulled me like a river, for him to be my end and my beginning.

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In the beginning, we spent all our time together. We knew all the words to the same songs; we owned the same camping socks. The first night he stayed at my house, he carefully arranged the contents of his bag, like an orphan, as if he was building a miniature city next to the bed. I had the preternatural feeling of watching myself and therefore couldn't help but fall in love with him. In this simple act, I recognized his pain and fragmented sense of belonging, the feeling of always being adrift, abandoned, ever vigilant. I saw all the things you really carry when you carry trauma.

His belongings matched my own: a vial of lavender oil, sandalwood body soap and deodorant. A grey green pullover. I ran around the house bringing him the Sarah version of the objects that he took out of the bag. I felt like a child, giddy with excitement. He took one object from my hand and placed it quietly on the dresser. He pulled me into him and I felt that I was home.

Pink light drifted through the window.

In the early morning, I traced the outline of his face as it lay still on the pillow, facing in my direction. He told me stories of ancient forests. I heard the sound of the wind flowing through silent woods.

He filled my lungs with sweetness.

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In time, I completely lost myself in him. It didn't happen all at once, I lost myself piece by piece. It was a slow and gradual realization that I was gone, like running out of something you need without noticing until it is too late to restock.

When I looked in the mirror, I started to picture his reflection instead of my own.

I was afraid to lose him before we even met. From the start, I had a disaster plan for not getting hurt; I would not fall in love with him. I completely neglected to make a plan for losing myself.

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The relationship was hinged, predicated, on the "strong connection" I thought we shared: the synchronicities. When my friends started to worry about me, I started every sentence the same way.

"I just feel that I have such a *strong connection* with him."

In an attempt to spend time with them, which always unsettled him, I made a habit of silencing my phone and hiding it in my bag. When I went to the bathroom to glance at the phone, I was met with a volley of missed calls and unopened messages. I felt a surge of fear. The messages declared conflicting emotions, leaving me torn and uncertain.

I love you.

I can't be with you.

It's over.

I need to see you.

I love you more than anything.

My mind faltered, unable to fathom the depths of the attachment. A dizzying spiral formed.

The deepest part of the connection was shared childhood trauma. We grew up in chaotic alcoholic homes where the foundations were in such trouble that the windows and doors pulled away from the walls. When he told me his mother left him as an infant, I traveled through time to love him as a child. I wanted to take care of him. The need was primal because deep down I was trying to love myself. I abdicated my current self, entering another dimension of reality.

I started off on a road I did not know how to navigate. Night fell quickly. I should have remembered to take care of myself because younger parts of me ended up leaving altogether—walking off down winding roads with high hedgerows, just outside a childhood village, with heavy packs on their small shoulders. I watched their silhouettes fade into the darkening light of the dying day.

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Due to the pandemic, the relationship was lived out in my kitchen. Bars and restaurants, theaters and cinemas remained closed. In a recurring scene, we sat at the table. He liked to make me drinks.

“What can I get you?” he’d ask, flashing a smile, a towel folded over his arm to play the part. It was strangely intoxicating.

Maybe I just wanted to be alone in a bar.

I watched him slice a new lemon with a sharp knife before slowly unscrewing a fresh bottle of Tanqueray Gin I had hidden in the cupboard. Eventually, he found all the booze. He was a recovering alcoholic so I worried if the game was a good idea at all. But he liked to watch me drink because it was as close as he could get to watching himself drink.

“Let me make you another. Come on. Remember, you’re drinking for two.”

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There were tangible signs that the relationship would end badly: the way he flew into a rage if I didn't return his calls right away, how he always needed to know where I was, whether I was drinking.

"I just need reassurance so I don't spiral," he offered as a prelude to his own impending loss of control.

I kept asking myself if I had a legitimate reason to feel so suffocated. What was fear? What was reality? What fears were grounded in reality? Was it just my own fear of getting close? Or was it my actual fear of getting close to *him*?

I failed to heed the constant signs, the warnings, the red flags. Perhaps I wanted to test the warning system. I brushed off his criminal record, probation, and the remote alcohol monitor he had to breathe into each night before bed. I pushed aside the history of substance abuse and violent episodes. I disregarded the room in the boarding house where he lived.

He only took me to the boarding house a handful of times. I never slept there. I held my breath as we walked through the smoke-filled hallways, up the creaking staircase covered in threadbare carpet. His room contained a narrow unmade bed, an overflowing ashtray by the windowsill. A can of Raid.

This is just temporary, I said to myself. Sometimes people fall on bad luck.

I thought I could embody kindness and empathy, focusing only on the best parts of him: his handsome face and quick wit, the way he understood facets of me that eluded others. He both saw and loved the shadow parts of me, the girl who just wanted to keep running.

I wanted to heal all the pain I knew we both carried. I wanted to reach a happy ending. I wanted to live my life without constant invigilation. I wanted to leave the watchtower.

I stopped listening to the voices in my head warning me to get out. I dismissed the intelligence of my mind, heart, and gut. I felt misaligned and detached from my own intuition. I sank into a sea

of swirling, scattering, repetitive thoughts; churning emotions spinning into new depths of confusion.

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I started sleeping with my shoes on. Not every night, just when I felt as if I might need to get out of the house. I abandoned my body lying next to him, and watched myself from above, as an angel would have. I lay on the covers on the edge of the bed, my coat wrapped around me. I remembered how to sleep lightly and vigilantly. I'd wake with my arms folded around my body. When I opened my eyes, there he was, watching me. In his eyes, I scanned through a range of emotions, from fondness to coldness.

The nights started to go off a cliff into a dark, unreal place in which he wanted increasingly more than I was able or inclined to give. I offered the well-worn excuses of being tired or having to get up early. I pretended to fall asleep.

"I know you're awake," he'd whisper. I could see his half-smile through my half-closed eyes.

But I knew he was seeking a high through sex and this made me feel used. I wanted to be in the scene in which he kissed me sweetly on my forehead.

"Sweet dreams, sweetheart."

Instead, he grew restless and edgy, as if he was trying to escape from a deep emotional despair inside himself. The restlessness gave way to frustration which then escalated into anger.

"This is just a damn waste of my time," he'd say in a bitter voice. A sadness welled up in a hollow inside me.

When nights went that way, I knew I should have made him leave. But he made that difficult by actually refusing to leave on account of the weather, the time, or the long walk home. Sometimes he'd drag the blanket from the bed and lie on the floor in the middle of the living room like an

angry child. Or he stormed out only to call me over and over to say sorry with words made pretty, words spoken only to pave the return.

“You’re my girl. My beautiful girl.”

When he gave me the silent treatment and threatened to break up with me, my own innate fears of abandonment took hold. I began to inhabit an impasse, feeling trapped in place by the intensity and volatility of the chemistry we shared. I was stuck in a reactive loop of trying to leave only to return.

I experienced a sense of captivity within my own body, as if I were being held hostage. I also grappled with feeling adrift and lost. The loss of my sense of self resembled a slow moving hurricane, its approach almost serene, like watching a boat sink into a beautiful, enveloping fog.

Water filled my lungs.

What would predicate the end I had seen in the beginning?

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An afternoon’s unfortunate half-light faded into night.

He was on top of me, across the bed, his right hand pinned my left wrist. Words I tried to say caught jagged, like a hook in my throat. The words were buried under the weight of his body. I slipped in and out of consciousness. The last drink he’d made me was too strong.

Then he crossed the line, finishing in his own sweet time.

Something inside me was crushed.

In the quiet of the following morning, I lay there. Still and silent under the covers. My head and body throbbed with pain. He had left early. My mind ached with the desire for time to stop, reverse its course, and take me back to the beginning. I yearned for the moment just before he

held me down, before the irreversible loss of something I might never get back. Events had unfolded to assert that life could break me, as well as my chances at love.

Sometimes the love affair contains a fatal flaw.

After a conversation the following night, I tried to believe that there had been a misunderstanding. Or rather, I tried to accept his version of reality because his version was nicer than mine.

“Babe, I just wanted you so bad. Come here. You’re so pretty when you’re upset.”

I sank into a fog of no return. I placed my trust in the falsehood, and in so doing, I surrendered a part of myself. I took the path of least resistance, allowing erosion to take over as if I was a surface worn down by water. I started to allow him to use me as a drug, to fill a desperate need to escape the pain inside him. He pursued me unrelentingly, like drugs or alcohol, in service of a transitory fix.

I was a thin line of crack on a dirty table.

This was the new normal.

“Baby, I love you. You’re my girl with the pretty green eyes.”

In a few months, I went from hating myself to hating him. I used alcohol to dull my senses. My inclination to seek numbness was gathering momentum. I had to get out.

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I knew the hurricane would soon make landfall. Time was running out. I made preparations for the wind and heavy rain. I measured the distance from the tops of the tall poplar trees to the roof line of the house. I dragged an old wooden trellis from the garden and leaned it precariously against the windows of the living room. I was ever vigilant—always tuning the radio out of static.

Dead silence.

The storm came in the dead of night. The leaded panes of glass rattled in their old wooden window frames. I woke up with a start. I dreamt he had overdosed. When I tried to bring him to consciousness, I couldn't tell if I was the one who had taken the lethal dose. Unable to tell, I couldn't rescue either one of us. The dream faded into a sea of red.

I got up and found him in the kitchen, tensely sipping a cup of coffee with the lights off, his right leg crossed over the left knee. He looked at me in his dead-eyed, mean way. The room was cold. Sheets of rain hit the windows sideways. I went back to my bedroom to get dressed. He followed me and sat in the crumpled covers, wearing his coat.

"I just need to have more of you," he said, in a flat, resigned voice.

I wanted to explain that there wasn't any more of me left.

The argument, as if already rehearsed, followed its path, its own familiar trajectory—like a storm that knew its own way through a field. Gusts grew stronger, whipping through the tall grass.

My voice was trapped in my throat.

Everything began to collide. With harsh words, we danced around each other—like twin storms rotating around a common center. I suddenly pulled all the twisted sheets and blankets from the bed and threw them to the floor, screaming for him to get out. He got up to leave, in silence, slamming the door hard.

Everything collapsed toward the center.

Outer rain bands begin to coalesce. Through the window, the sky turned a greenish gray. Dark clouds towered over rooftops. Against my best interests, I grabbed my coat and ran outside to find him. I caught up to him. For a minute or two, we trudged toward the bus stop like children. Tears ran down his face. I ran alongside him like a child to keep up. When we reached the bus stop, I stood on tiptoes and tried to wrap my arms around his neck.

I was so lost that I went to the second most dangerous thing for comfort.

I looked into his eyes. I saw the end there. It was the end in the present moment: the love that was no longer there, just a dark still nothing. Everything was calm and quiet.

We were in the eye.

I felt a rising churning and spinning panic within my body. I had to leave.

I ran away from him toward the river. The early petals of spring felt cool upon my face. The rain started sideways. I wrapped my thin coat around me. As I walked, I grew even smaller. I wrapped the coat closer because I felt as if I didn't have a body. I couldn't find my edges because I had disappeared.

The end of us grew heavier for me to carry.

I was left with a singularity: I no longer want to live.

I was the most dangerous thing.

*

I was unprepared for the immense depressive episode that followed. A gyre of darkness, an endless rehearsal of all the nice times we had shared. The memories flew around me like sharp objects.

I heard the roof shingles tearing loose from the gale force winds.

I needed to drink.

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Heavy curtains swung open, and with them came a wave of engulfing pain. Someone I loved and lost was gone, leaving an emptiness that cut deep.

In my mind, I saw syncopated splices from childhood. A steady hum as the film advanced frame by frame. Then a high-pitched whine raised in pitch, the sound of the film-reel spinning ever faster, racing toward its end.

I tried to rearrange the shuttering images.

On a bed, I saw the rehearsal of a scene. My small body pinned down.

And then the reel flew off its spindle. The film fluttered and clattered for a moment—then only silence in a dark room.

I threw back another drink and stepped out of myself like a ghost.

At night, the ghost slept beside me, whispering sweet nothings.

*

When the grief came, it came like a hurricane. It even created its own power. It blew through the glass of the lead-paned windows of my conservatory. Broken glass was everywhere. The next morning, I tiptoed through it, cold and numb, wearing his old boots. As I picked up the pieces of glass, I saw his face in my mind. In his face, I saw the beginning.

I saw a beginning in the end.