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## The Entire History

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THE ENTIRE HISTORY

It happened this way: my boyfriend of two years broke up with me. Although I saw it coming, although we hadn't gotten along since we met, it felt like a restaurant bill that is too high, a thing you could take back up to the register and say to the cashier, "You did your math wrong," or "I didn't order that." But there was no bill, no register, no cashier. Only Ian standing in front of me with a serious expression, wearing his collared gray shirt and tan slacks.

"Is this because I dropped out of art school?" I asked. "Because you think I'm a failure?"

"No," Ian said. "Don't you think we're just. . . different?"

"Sure," I said. "But I don't mind."

"We're leaving this relationship with everything we came into it with. We haven't lost anything, Liv."

I came into this relationship with a 1982 Honda Accord and a print of an Andy Warhol painting. I worked as a barista—minimum wage plus tips, thirty hours a week—but Ian had supported me almost completely. He'd paid for the failed semester of art school. Mostly I sketched sullen looking women with sharp collar bones, lounging around on sofas smoking cigarettes. My instructors—name-dropping adjuncts without any real world art experience—were unimpressed. They were in their mid-twenties, like me, and rotten to the core. My ceramics teacher, Miss Kim, liked to spin around the classroom in her peasant skirt singing what she called "Native American chants." Once, a student asked about her cultural background and she said she had a "great great, great, great, great grandmother" who was a Cherokee princess. "I mean, I don't have any pictures or anything," Miss Kim said.

"If I'd known it was so important to you, I'd have finished," I said to Ian.

"Don't be myopic," Ian said. He was an engineer for Rayon, a company that built bombs and weapons that were shipped to places like Israel and South Korea. When we played Trivial Pursuit with his friends, he shouted the answers and pointed out tiny disparities in score keeping. He

finished—and excelled at—everything he tried. It was easy for him to call me “myopic” whenever I spoke about success. Success was his forte. “We’re different,” he said again.

“You keep using that word,” I said.

When I called my mother and told her that had Ian had broken up with me, she said, “Come home, then.” She lives two hours from Seattle in Aberdeen, and she sits in front of the television for days at a time drinking coffee, eating very little, letting the phone ring and ring and ring. Sometimes she doesn’t check the mail. But I agreed. When I’d visited my mother in the past, usually only for a weekend, I took comfort in the routine of her day, the thread-bare robe she wore in the morning after her bubble bath, the dry kibble with gravy she shook into the cat’s bowl, the coffee she drank out of a gold-trimmed white cup, snugly nestled into a matching and equally delicate saucer. And then the morning shows she watched, followed by the afternoon shows she watched, followed by the evening shows she watched. Morning shows were calm, educational, providing inoffensive news about modern medical issues, or the President’s dietary restrictions. Afternoon shows were trashier, fun, loud, totally non-educational in every sense, and most of the people in them, at least the ones my mother watched, were poor. I often questioned this, said to my mother, “Why do they provide such horrendous representations of humanity on these shows? What’s the purpose?” And my mother curled her lips into a little rosebud. “Oh, *pooooo*,” she’d say. “You don’t have to take everything so seriously.” And I would shrug my shoulders and continue to watch.

Evening shows were scripted; my mother watched any drama on prime time, but her favorites involved lawyers, doctors, or police officers. Basically any person endowed with authority over the peasants. Over the guests on afternoon talk shows. I didn’t have any particular issue with the evening shows; they seemed artful in some aspects, if nothing else. It took time to create them. The producers didn’t just turn a camera on a crazy person and say, “Go.”

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Ian and I took a trip to the Bahamas two months before we broke up. He planned the whole thing. He said it would be invigorating, something to look forward to. My supervisor at the coffee shop gave me a week off and Ian took vacation time at Rayon.

We cruised over on a big loud boat packed with dance halls, comedy clubs, and buffets. “This is pretty nice,” I said to Ian on that first night, after we ate a dinner of black pepper shrimp (heads still attached). “Except for all the midwesterners with their flip flops and margaritas.”

“Why can’t you just say that you’re having fun?” Ian asked.

“I *am* having fun,” I said.

“You analyze things, talk around things—it’s boring,” Ian said.

“I think it’s important to talk about our experiences. To not put things into little boxes labeled ‘good’ and ‘bad.’” I shrugged.

“I don’t even know what you’re saying,” Ian said. “You *are* putting things into boxes—labeling things good and bad!” He shook his head. “Let’s get along.”

Later, we curled up together in bed. As usual his kisses were urgent, his hands soft and gentle. The sex, at least, had always been good. Of course I had reservations about going on a cruise. There are certain stereotypes about cruisers, shall we say. One, they eat a lot. Two, they drink a lot. Three, they don’t care about culture or authenticity. Four, they are old. Also, I liked my routine in Seattle. I woke up in the morning, took a walk around the neighborhood by the apartment I shared with Ian, came home, drank coffee, read a few pages of a novel, watched a movie on HBO, went to work at the coffee shop for five hours. Came home, napped. Woke up, nuked a Trader Joe’s family meal and threw together a big apple and goat cheese salad. Ate dinner with Ian. Drank some wine alone on the patio while Ian played a video game. Watched kids roller skate outside. Took a bath. Had sex with Ian. Went to sleep. Rinse. Repeat. I didn’t feel like doing anything else.

Still, I was here. I was with Ian. I decided to relax.

We ate more black pepper shrimp. Our waiter was from China. He said, "Eat the heads! They're the best part!" So we did. The eyes and antennas were crunchy and sweet like fried pork skin. We drank cheap wine that tasted expensive because we were so drunk, went out at night and danced in clubs located in the boat. We danced together, and we weren't joking. We met another couple (about our age!) who gave us cigarettes which we smoked while standing on deck. At night the water was black onyx, lapping in deep, hungry waves. "I wish we had some coke," I said to Ian, who said, "Liv!" But he said it with humor, he was glib, it was no big deal.

I'd done cocaine before I knew him, in a friend's apartment. We invited men over, from the bar where we worked. The men laid out lines on hand mirrors. I lowered myself to my hands and knees on the old, smelly carpet, told this guy Ricky to do me. He looked confused. "But I thought we were just hanging out," he said. I met Ian at that same bar. He'd never had a girlfriend before. He was funny, uptight, unfashionable. I was reasonably pretty and talkative. He asked me out. On our first date, I told him about how rabbits screamed when they died. I'd just seen it in a PETA infomercial on TV. I guess I was nervous. "You're a barrel of laughs," he said. Still, we had sex later that night. To my surprise, he knew where to touch, how to kiss my neck. And he didn't say, "But I thought we were just hanging out."

Ian and I had one day in Nassau. The ocean, the damp smell in the air, the green, green foliage. The packs of sickly stray dogs that stared at us as we walked down the road, eying us with disdain and regret but making no move toward us. I clutched Ian's arm and said, "What if they attack us?" I have a deathly fear of being attacked by dogs.

"They're not going to, Liv," Ian said.

"How do you know?"

Ian shrugged. "You can tell. They signal before they attack. I grew up with dogs. You didn't." He said it as though he were insulting me.

We found a bench and flipped through The Nassau Guidebook. “The Queen’s Staircase,” Ian said, pointing at a tiny square picture of a staircase. He took the book away from me and began to read aloud: “Built between 1793 and 1794. Slaves constructed the staircase, cutting through limestone with axes and hand tools. The staircase is one hundred feet tall and has sixty-five steps. Tourists can walk up and down the steps free of charge.”

“Kind of depressing,” I said. “The slaves and all.”

“It’s historic,” Ian said. He looked at me, unblinking. There was sweat on his upper lip. “Do you just want to eat the food or do you really want to know what makes Nassau, Nassau?”

“Oh, Christ,” I said. “So now it’s our duty to see the staircase? Like it means a damn thing to the people who live here, if *we* see the staircase?”

“You say you want to talk about our experiences,” he said. “So, let’s have an experience we can talk about.”

It was our second to last day on vacation, and we were hungover, edgy. Using a small map Ian had purchased on the ship, we walked to the Queen’s Staircase. We passed more packs of dogs, people in front of crooked square houses, barefoot kids in American t-shirts. They looked at us with a disdain similar to the dogs’. “Hi,” Ian greeted them. None of them responded. I had the distinct feeling that we were not welcome here. That we were fools, parading through the neighborhood with our expensive backpacks and Canon camera and our map.

Eventually we found the staircase. We stood at the top and looked down. I had to admit, it was beautiful. My eyes had difficulty moving up the steps which never seemed to end. Moss slithered across the rock walls that surrounded each side of the staircase. I knelt and touched it with the tip of my finger. Furry jelly. Tender green and spongy.

“Walking down could be dangerous,” I said, standing up. I had a slight—perhaps a significant—fear of falling downstairs, which I had not identified until that very moment. “My balance is poor.”

“We’ll be fine,” Ian said. “I promise. Will you just believe me? For once, will you just believe me?”

Instead of believing him, I pictured the townspeople waiting at the bottom of the staircase; they’d take their opportunity to kick *me*, to beat *me*, when I fell. I—we—deserved it. I recalled an essay I’d read by Jamaica Kincaid, about tourists, in which she said that a tourist is an “ugly human being.” It had been back in art school, in a required introductory English class. It was the only class I liked, where I didn’t feel intimidated. At the time, the idea struck me as horrifying: the tourist can never be moral, ethical. The tourist is always consuming, leaving their trash around, staining everything up, pissing in toilets, throwing pizza in the ocean. And then catching a flight back home. I got a B in that class. I did all the assignments, unlike in Ceramics.

“Can you imagine building this staircase, Liv?” Ian said. “Building this staircase with your hands? Can you imagine?”

I shook my head, rocked on my heels. He was talking about the experience—he was getting under the surface of the experience. I couldn’t appreciate it, though, because I was dizzy. The humidity was so thick my curly hair stuck to the back of my neck, and sweat dripped down my spine. My thighs were chafing. I took off my cardigan to reveal a plain black undershirt. I felt fat, greasy, monstrous. “No,” I said. “I can’t.” I really had nothing else to say. I wasn’t sure how to feel: shame for being a tourist, sadness for the slaves forced to build this masterpiece, awe over the beauty of the staircase. Maybe I could feel all three things. In a way, my anxiety wiped me of all nuance, and I became a living, throbbing nerve. When I was a child my mother said I literally stunk with sweat, I’d get so nervous. She said my mind would blank and I’d mutter, “*Time out*,” about whatever we were doing.

I followed Ian as he walked. One foot over the other. One foot over the other. Down, down, down the Queen’s Staircase. “Should we take a photograph?” I said in a thin voice. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to act the way people acted on vacation. Ian whistled. Down, down, down.

He didn't respond. I wouldn't take a photograph.

As we reached the bottom of the stairs a man came into view as if out of the shadows. He was in a wheelchair, waiting there for us, calves folded like umbrellas beneath his knees. He smiled a black toothless smile. He was a local, not a tourist. "You know you're required to pay?" he said, but he said it like he was offering a gift.

We finally reached him. I still felt unsteady, out of breath, confused. There were beads of sweat dripping down my back. "Are we?" I heard my voice say.

"I know the entire history. Would you like to hear it?" the man wheezed. He lurched forward in his chair. One eye was yellowed, wandering. I wanted to get away from him.

"No," I said, swallowing.

Ian stepped forward. He reached into his pocket and counted out one, two, three, four, five, six dollars. He offered it to the man. "Thank you," the man said, tucking the bills into a small leather pouch clipped to the side of his chair. This was unlike Ian; he was not particularly charitable. In the States, he wouldn't have given this guy the time of day. *I* was always giving money to homeless people, in the median or on the side of the road.

The man began: "Slaves were forced to cut through rocks with axes. This is not something they wanted to do." He closed his mouth, fixed his eyes on me. Smiled. So this was the history—this was the entire history the man had promised.

"Thanks," I said quietly.

"Why'd you do that?" I asked Ian when the man was out of ear shot.

"I don't know." He seemed embarrassed. "Why the hell not?"

We did not climb back up the stairs. We went the long way around Nassau, got ice cream cones, walked back to the dock, drank margaritas on the boat.

Later in the evening, Ian said, "That guy was interesting." I thought about this. "He needed the money, didn't he? Probably has a

family, and all that. Don't you think?" It was like he wanted my approval.

"You got tricked," I said.

"Tricked?" he said. "A few dollars? You go to a foreign country, you can afford to throw a few dollars at the locals, right? I mean—right?" He looked incredulous. "Right, Liv? I'd think you, of all people. . . ." He trailed off.

I blinked. I thought of the Jamaica Kincaid essay. "Of course," I said. "Of course."

*Of course.* What was wrong with me?

We didn't speak of the stairs, the man, again. The stairs didn't trigger the fracture of our relationship. But things changed, got even worse, soon after that, once we were home. The sex became mechanical. Less tender.

I wouldn't have helped the man in the wheelchair. If Ian hadn't been there, I'd have walked on and on, I'd have wanted to get back on the boat, with the clean people in their clean clothes and their perfected happiness, notes on a piano. I hated them and yet I wanted to join them. All the fat midwesterners. High note, low note, high note, low note, meant to build a crescendo of emotion. If I drink this drink, dance to this song, wear this bikini, I will be *happy*. It's possible—no, in fact, it's definitely true—what Jamaica Kincaid said about tourists. But you could really replace "tourist" with husband, girlfriend, wife, daughter, mother, lover, cruiser.

\*

Now I'm living with my mother. In her small white house on her small white street with her small white cat beside me on the couch eating a cockroach. My mother looks over at me once in a while. "I never liked Ian," she offers. I don't say anything. I *know* she liked him; she said he was the nicest guy I'd ever dated.

"We weren't right together," I say slowly.

"Don't beat yourself up," my mother says. There's light on her face

from the television. It's getting dark outside. She's watching the TV more than she's listening to me. I lean forward on my elbows. *NYPD Blue*.

"I'm not," I say.

"You should never blame yourself," she says. "You seem sad." Eyes still on the TV.

"Let's just watch," I say.

For the first time since I arrived in Aberdeen, I relax. "I can't believe he cheated on her," I say.

"That actor's pretty handsome," she says.

"Yeah," I say. "I guess he is."

For an hour, I feel everything around me. I can feel—I can actually feel—my mother's lungs. I can feel her breathing in, out, in, out, in time. I can feel her chest fill with air as she sighs.

The fact is, I like this show—all the shows—as much as she does. No matter how I criticize them.