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WENT OUT. BACK SOONISH

HANNA ZIEGLER

The best part is the simplicity, the way they move around each other, two people on the same page of the same book. The progression is terrifyingly natural. They were classmates first, sitting a table away from one another in a room without heating, then casual acquaintances chatting before and after class, then friends keeping in touch across vacations and schedules. Then they were partners. It all happened within a few months. When she is alone in her room late at night, she tries to remember the defining moments of each phase of the process, but the lines are so blurred that she starts to wonder if they haven't been dating the whole time.

She marvels at the way their conversations run the course of a river. Sometimes their words splash along the surface. At other times, they sink right to the bottom and dredge up their darkest and most well guarded secrets. She has never been one for sharing, yet finds herself answering every question with an openness that scares her. She has lied about everything from her age to her religion, is a liar by nature. He brings out the truth in her, at least at first.

If things are ever awkward it is only in public, and usually her fault. He starts conversations with strangers, people he just met, people she knows. She is torn between the woman she is to the world, and the woman she is with him, and the two have trouble coexisting. Often the result of their conflict is a stilted conversation with one of the hundreds of people he seems to know, people from work, class, professors and deans, people from Freshman year he hasn't seen in months, board members, volunteers, people he used to know or has never met but knows about. They intimidate her with their vastness. Small groups are more her style. She can talk to anyone from across a pool table, a game board. Public is just too public for her.

Behind closed doors things are different. The easiest woman for her to be is herself, and she revels in it because he revels in it. He is the best audience she's ever had, responding to her every thought, every whim, every facial expression as though it's the secret to unlocking the universe. He never pretends that he can read her mind, but he always knows when something's on it. He calls her out if he doubts her honesty. Sometimes it's justified. She loves the way the world falls away, the way time plays them for fools. She can never be sorry because she wouldn't trade any of those moments. Their value is in their irreplaceability. She replays them whenever they are apart. He is her greatest distraction even when he isn't there, and she whittles away hours lost in thoughts of him. She doesn't know how it can be any other way when he responds so vibrantly to her.

She is infinitely satisfied with the way her name sounds in the back of his throat as she covers his neck with open-mouthed kisses. He tells her that he doesn't like people touching him, that she is his exception. And she can hear it in that voice, feel it under her lips as the cords of his neck jump under his skin. Like he is losing his sanity one hickey at a time. Like she is powerful enough to destroy him, to own him. She takes being his exception very seriously, wants him to feel it all, wants him to crave her touch more than he needs to reject someone else's. She wants to make him burn for it, needs to know that she can.

Between kisses they talk about rules. Midnight on weeknights and no blowjobs. She gets to pay for herself more often than he gets to pay for her. Not this weekend. Not with the lights on. She doesn't get to help with the dishes when they're at his place, even if she makes half the mess. Always say *Goodnight, human*. No sex. Yet. She comes first to him because he needs her to. Homework comes first to her because it has to. They lay out all their lines, draw their boundaries in the sand, some together, some separate. The rules are undermined by the understanding that some of them will be blown away in days, that some of them are really just suggestions. She hasn't gone to bed before midnight in months, but she needs the structure, even if it's fake. Maybe he knows that.

He whispers soft words in Spanish, words she used to understand. She thinks he is telling her things he doesn't want her to know but can't keep to himself. Beautiful things. Terrible things. Things like *I need you*, and *Don't leave me*, but she imagines it all. There's no way of knowing without asking, and she isn't sure she's ready to know just yet because it means they are on the same page. And it keeps her up at night as he drifts to sleep beside her. She hides behind her foreign tongue as much as he does. She traces words into his skin with the pads of her fingers – *Taim ag titim in grá leat* – over and over until he might learn the pattern, learn the words and discover her secret. I'm falling in love with you.

She kicks him out of her apartment, otherwise he won't leave. He begs five more minutes that turn into twenty, thirty, an hour, and still it's not enough for either of them. Her roommates call it the honeymoon stage, but she worries that it's more than that, worries that they really just need each other that much, but the idea of needing him scorches her pride. The idea of cutting him off burns her even more. Leaving him is impossible but she does it. They stand by the front door for ten minutes repeating goodbye. Every kiss is the last until the one right after it.

She tells him he can make the next move. The soft touch on her back is a tease she's been waiting for him to fulfill all night. He says he isn't sure he can do it to himself, take off the ribbons without unwrapping the gift. But he does. *Maybe just the bow.* She hopes to never forget the look on his face when her plain cotton tee slips off. And she is amazed that her usual self-consciousness stays dormant, that her arms don't cover her stomach. It's hard to feel ugly or unworthy when he can't take his eyes off her.

Their apartments overlook a private park. They jump the fence and wander in the dark for hours at a time. She took him there the first time they negotiated the rules of their relationship. He suggested it the second. Now it's where they go when they can't stay inside. He isn't himself. She asks questions that don't sound right, don't mean what she wants them to, don't reach across the distance that's grown between them. He calls her a question dodger. He's right, but she argues, she still doesn't have the right words or the right heart. She can't figure him out, can't read him. She is not herself because he is a stranger again. They are out of sync, keep running into each other. She knows she isn't all he cracks her up to be, but she'll never get tired of hearing him compliment her. Tonight she isn't hearing anything. She wants to be what he wants and what he needs. She wants to be what he deserves. Their hands tighten like lug nuts so rigid they might crack from the strain.

Intimately they move forward. A brush of fingers along the hem of a shirt. A palm on a hip, a back. Ticklish at first, playful. A hand in the back pocket of a pair of jeans, two hands holding tight and pulling tighter. He asks if it's okay, waits for permission, won't go forward without it. She likes that. She lets him be in charge of the pace because she's worried they'll go too fast if she takes over. He wants to wait and she's glad. She doesn't need to rush. He is softly methodic, agonizingly subtle. Even if he's been there before he never assumes he's allowed to go there again. Always he waits, for permission, for affirmation, for something, and sometimes she isn't sure what. But she's glad about that too, glad that he'll never take without asking. It makes the giving easier, knowing that she can always say no.

She loses track of how many times they ask what the other is thinking. The question never

gets old. But she can't do it all, not at first. She cringes inside the first few times he tries to kiss with his tongue. The criticism from the last guy floats through her head, hard to ignore, harder to forget. But she humors him because he wants it. The practice helps. She grows confident, if only with him. The way he looks at her is compliment enough. She drives him to distraction. He can't stop touching her, kissing her. His desire is her greatest turn-on. When his hands are on her she can forget the last time until she can't anymore, and she'll never forget the way he stops everything and hugs her tight to him as she explains why he can't go down on her. And she's as weak as she was when it happened, unable to push him away, unable to claim the space as hers and force him out of it. He kisses her forehead, rubs her back until the shaking stops. Offers to get her shirt. Offers to leave if she needs it. Offers to be her pillow. She lets him stay. They grow quiet. The clock reads 5:30. She doesn't sleep.

He enjoys having her on top. He tells her he doesn't mind being owned. He tells her she's amazing at all things erotic, jokes that it's all the romance she reads. She doesn't believe him, especially not at first. Her entire life has been an exercise in self-doubt. He isn't the first person to believe in her, to have faith in her abilities, and she wants to trust him with everything she has but fears it won't be enough. So she tries to make it all about him. It's the easy thing to do, natural for her. The power is thrilling. She can drive him crazy with her hips, make him weak without taking off a single layer. He calls it torture. She knows he loves it.

They grow comfortable in each others' spaces. She knows where he keeps his journals, what he has on his desk, his bookshelf, which cupboards belong to him. He knows where her dishes go, where she keeps her knives. They become friendly with one another's roommates over games of pool and movie marathons. As a group they have conversations about politics, pranks, the past, the future. They talk about movies, shows, music, school, old friends, family, whatever comes up, wherever the conversation goes. Alone they struggle to find things to sustain them, words to keep them going. She wonders if it's because they would rather be kissing, but she's afraid they might be running out of things to say, so they talk less, turn to food. They make dinners and breakfasts. He wants to spoil her by refusing to let her help, but she insists. They delegate. He is in charge of bacon because she cooks it wrong but she makes the eggs. They do steak in a frying pan because neither of them has a grill. She makes pasta. They stand side-by-side, back-to-front, hands around waists, on shoulders, down arms. Kiss on the cheek, the back of the neck, the forehead, the lips.

She is self-conscious when they aren't alone, when anyone could walk in, walk by, and see them. When their roommates are in bed, when the drapes are shut and the lights are dim, that's

when she comes alive. She kisses with abandon, sits on the kitchen counter and pulls him into her. He likes it when she wraps her legs around him. She likes the lights off. She can't see him without her contacts, but she can blame the dark if the lights are off, if the only illumination is the muted streetlights, the breaking daylight filtered through drapes. She knows he hates it.

He wants to see her, all of her, good and bad, but she's glad he can't in the dark because that's when they tell each other secrets. She's afraid of him and he's afraid of being alone. They are both afraid to die. He never tells her that he needs her but she knows that, in a way, he does. And she wants to be anything he needs, doesn't mind being the light in his dark some days because he'll do the same for her without question. No request is too big for him, the sky is her limit. The sky and a little extra time. He makes his own requests too but never pushes, never asks why if she says no. She likes that she doesn't always have to explain herself, that he's willing to trust her judgment, willing to wait, willing to ask permission every day if that's what it takes to make her happy.

And it's worth all that waiting when she opens up to him in a new way, when she strips off her panties and tells him with confidence exactly where she wants him. His expression is every holiday across the world as he kisses his way down to her. She knows how much it means to him because he can barely string two words together. He's wanted this for ages and she's finally ready for it, can finally want it from him. And it's better than anything she imagined, better than she deserves, and she's so surprised that she pushes him away before she's really ready to. She could grow addicted to a feeling like that, like her body is winding itself up, stretching and compressing, like she can't control herself anymore. And she's still possessed when she pushes him off, pulls him up, kisses him. She has to know what he's tasting. Has to know if it's worth it.

Most of the power is in her hands, and it starts to go to her head. Uncertainties bred from a lifetime of mediocrity melt into the molten gold of purest confidence. She hardly recognizes herself in the mirror after four hours in bed with him. He tells her that he wishes she could see what he sees, and she can in the bathroom at four-thirty in the morning when they struggle to keep their laughter down. He shows off his battle wounds in the mirror above the sink and her smile is satisfied, a little evil. And even though they're supposed to be sleeping, all she can think about is giving his back another set of scratches.

She knows she can ask for anything. He doesn't like his stubble, but she can talk him into leaving it for a few days because he knows she likes it. And he must like it a little because he smiles every time she runs her hands along his jaw, but he'll only keep it for a few days at a time. He warns her when he's about to shave it too, and she's sure that it's only so he can laugh at the way she

moans and groans, protests as if he's stealing something from her. It makes it that much worse the one night he shaves without warning because she's used to being in the loop now. And it shouldn't matter because it's a days worth of facial hair, but as their eyes meet in the bathroom mirror she knows that it's a test and she's just failed.

When they're apart she feels the claustrophobia. He needs her more than she needs him and it shows. He demands more and more time together, time she can't afford to give him, but she does. Her work builds up on her desk, starts to swallow her under the weight. She knows she'll have to cut him off eventually, have to push him back, establish lines of concrete instead of rules written in sand. Midnight on weekdays only works if one of them enforces it, and that falls on her. Leaving her is the only request that she can count on him to never obey the first time. But it's hard to be upset about that when they're together. She pulls him down for one more kiss as often as he stays for one more minute. He'll consume her if she isn't careful, if she isn't the responsible one. She doesn't feel smothered until he's gone, until the house lights come on and illuminate all the work she hasn't done yet, until she realizes that she's grown dependent on him. Every day is just moving from one room to another while she waits to see him again. She wants to be disgusted, feel pathetic for wasting all her time and thoughts on him, except it never feels like a waste.

She won't stay over on weeknights, not at first. Even as she's insisting she doesn't understand what's holding her back. Maybe fear of how fast it all happens, how small of a step it is from sleeping together to sleeping together. It should be silly. Most couples their age sleep together first and worry about catching a few z's later, but they aren't most couples. She feels like a hypocrite for asking him to stay a few nights later. Maybe she needed time to get used to the idea. He leaves, comes back with a cheeky smile and shows off his retainers. You said we were just going to sleep. They do. It's the first time they've ever gone to bed before midnight and they joke that it's the secret to staying over on weeknights. He doesn't make fun of her lisp. She doesn't make fun of his pink retainers. He ditches his sweatpants. They wake up around six the next morning and get caught up in the sheets. His hand under her shirt, his lips on her skin, it's the only persuasion she needs. He brings her to orgasm three times before she has to get up and go to class. He still tastes like her when she sees him four hours later. Her and the mint of toothpaste.

He says that the best way to keep her interested is to keep things from her until later. But she can't always remember the things he does, she forgets parts of past conversations, forgets the context of a comment, forgets to commit every second of their time together to permanent memory. It's her greatest flaw and it hurts him. She knows it, even though he never says. What he does say

is that he wants to learn to love it all, the good and the bad. He points at her heart and tells her he wants to know her. And she worries because he isn't returning the favor. She feels like he's keeping part of himself separate and distant, and just because she is allowed to ask doesn't mean she always can, doesn't mean she always wants to. Some days she'd rather he say what's on his mind without prodding from her.

He leaves in the morning while she is in the shower. The lights are off, the bed still unmade, everything exactly where she left it except for him and the piece of paper in the middle of the bed.