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One of Those Endings

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You are a brutal person.

You are the one who will always give a ride home, even ten minutes out of the way, so that people will say you're selfless and later won't notice that you can't cry for them, no matter what happens. When tragedy strikes, what can you do but offer cantaloupe and 30 Rock DVDs? You know that this too shall pass, but you can't say that. You only know because you are good at pain. You practice. You make it work for you. When you move your tongue onto that canker sore, you go in "knowing full well." You don't rip off Band-Aids because you don't wear them. You figure, "what gets in, gets in." You always remind people to put sunscreen behind their ears to avoid melanoma, but you never put it there yourself. You don't like the feel of the grease in your hair, and you don't mind risk. Risk makes things fair.

Your mother is a brutal woman. She never had a female relative die from a cause other than cancer, and

she never knew a good man. She used to lie for you and tell you that your father was one, but you could tell she didn't really mean it. "He's good in the ways that count," she'd say. Then she'd glance down and peel an entire potato—in one motion, you could swear. Her hands could do anything, your mother's hands. The skin was so rough she once put a pinky through the sewing machine and didn't notice until she got to the end of the seam. Her knuckles were knotted from piece-work making Christmas wreath bows at the green house and she'd dip her fingers in boiling water like it was nothing. You caught her with stars in her eyes only once, in the middle of the night watching *Saturday Night Fever*. "He's just so young," she said, quiet as sock feet, and then she sent you to bed. The big thing she'd do for you, the thing you'd be thanking her for all your life would be the Books. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* instead of the puberty talk. *Lit* instead of the alcohol discussion. *Catcher in the Rye* instead of "Are you happy?" *The Bell Jar* and *Anna Karenina* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* instead of "Do you understand that happiness is luck?" *Holy the Firm*— in addition to Sunday School. But Sunday School was only because your grandmother liked it and because your mother never had a female relative die from a cause other than cancer. And because she never knew a good man.

You like the way this sounds, and so you say it too, over and over “I never knew a good man.” You think about whether or not it’s true. There was the Mormon. But he thought that “faggot” was okay and “shit” wasn’t. He told you he would write you all those letters and he never did. He sent a picture postcard with Santa hats and palm trees and on it he Sharpied, “Miss ya,” and nothing else. How different if it had said, “Miss *you*,” and yet how not different at all. There is your Uncle Ken, who you could swear you inherited all your social ticks from, but when you said you were making phone calls for Obama he said “Don’t call my house,” with all the sternness in his eyes. And an hour later when you drank out of your banned books mug he said, “Anything subversive is right up your alley, huh?” There was the red-haired boy who took you to your Senior Prom, but one night when you were very sad and scared he made you watch a movie in which many young people went on an ill-fated ski trip and were eaten by wolves. There was your father, but he was never going to believe that his daughter wanted to be a writer. Of all things. Of all the other things like doctor, lawyer, game show host. Engineer, optometrist, green grocer. Pharmacist, vet tech, courtroom stenographer. Magician, politician’s mistress, computer scientist. Jumbotron operator. He would comment on your blog,

“I don’t remember this happening.”

“And then there was him,” you say, and roll the words around in your mouth. And then there was him. You’re not trying to be dramatic. Chronology is chronology.

Meet in a coffee shop. Meet in a coffee shop because you come home from school for the summer to work there and he was hired the September after you left. Meet in a coffee shop because his ex-girlfriend is your best friend and she got him the job. Try not to think about this.

Start by telling him you’ve only been drunk twice in your life. Start by saying that you are eighteen and he is twenty-two and making sure that he knows it. Start by realizing that you rode the same bus in high school and never even met each other. Start by realizing that you grew up six houses down. Start by drunk-texting him while you watch *Mob Wives* with a friend who has just gotten her wisdom teeth out. She’s mad at you because you can’t stop touching her chipmunk cheeks and the pain meds aren’t mixing well with the booze. First he will text back “Who is this?” but one minute later he will call and say, “For the third time in your life?” Wince at your own immorality. But then, start by saying “Yup” and smiling hard.

Start with the big stuff, because honestly, all the stuff

is big stuff. Call him when you get done feeding ice chips to your mother in her hospital bed and ask him to see the new Batman with you. Call him when your little sister's best friend dies in a car crash the day before their Senior Bonfire and ask him to see that other Tom Hardy movie with you. Call him when you go to sit with your grandmother and can't think of anything to say to her, and sit and sit and sit and then go to Wegmans to buy her a bunch of things. Ask him if he thinks raspberry-peach pie sounds like a good combination.

From time to time, spend a few hours looking for something interesting to tell him. He will tell you things like, "Fanta is Nazi soda. They invented it during the Coca-Cola embargo," "Napolean invented the earliest form of Braille," "Pepsi owns the modern depiction of Santa Claus," "Samuel L. Jackson was a Black Panther." You will feel it is only right to compete. Tell him that you are more likely to be killed by a champagne cork than a poisonous spider. He likes the way this sounds. He likes the way your name sounds and he says it at the beginning of every sentence. Find out that you both love Tarantino, and then he will start calling you "Kiddo." *Me, I've never been nice in my whole life, but I'll try my best to be sweet.* He will drop you off at your car and say "Au revoir," and you will yell "Shoshanna!" while he smiles

back in the window at you. This should be a hint to run for your life—if you are thinking about signs at the time. But you aren't.

And when it's all over, this will be the thing you can't get free of— parking lot lighting and his sleeves at his elbows. You will sit in your car for a long time and just look down at your hands on the steering wheel. "Where did these come from?" you will wonder and smile like a Disney princess. Think that this can't possibly be the happiness you were designed for.

You will never sleep because you're too busy thinking about all the ways he might never have been hired. You will never sleep because you can sit up and wonder what he'll do with his life. You will never sleep because you are so endlessly surprised to be able to care. And you care a lot. More maybe, then you do about what you'll do with your own life. More maybe, then you do about sleeping. You hope he'll be a writer, just like he wants. You hope he'll be an astronaut, and a video game designer, and a coffee shop owner, and a landscape architect, and a fisherman. All the things he ever wanted, even if just for a minute.

His eyes are empty like an early-morning garbage can. Like coffee cups lying on the back seat. Like the fridge before Christmas break—ice melting onto the car-

pet and door hanging off the side like a tongue. Like the bus stop before the mall opens. Like the mailbox. Like the glove compartment. Like rooms.

Ignore it. You like the way he carries a notebook in his pocket and the way he laughs with his arms. You like the way he holds a whipped cream can and you like the way he moves a mop. You like his Caps Locked handwriting. You like him holding a book you've given him. You like him watching you right in the ear while you make espresso, not understanding your peripherals. You like him listening to your stories and never calling you mean. Never telling you, "You are brutal." You like him in the movie theater, even like how he chews on his nails when his mind wanders too far. Even like how he says "Sorry, we're *super* closed," to the person who comes in to buy coffee at 9:31 at night. Even like his name, and the way it looks on the schedule next to yours. The way it's on his nametag. The way you get to write it on the outsides of the notes you put behind the cash register.

He tells you that he hasn't seen his mother in fifteen years. He tells you that his best friend died of a drug overdose. He tells you that he writes. He tells you that he doesn't tell people that. He tells you that you're his tenuous connection to humanity.

This will make you want to stop lying.

Being at school will be hard, but there are harder things. Throw yourself into it as best as you can. Write twenty pages about Flannery O'Connor and neo-noir cinema. Only do the research in real, live, made-of-paper books, because the internet is too easy and you're trying to establish some discipline here. Never stop talking about it. Feel a little bad when he says "enough about Flan, Kiddo," feel a little guilty even when he says, "Alright, go ahead. I get a kick out of it when you're this excited about things."

This will be something you wish it had occurred to you to remember better. This will be something that makes you regret the words, "Kiddo? You sound like a shiftless absentee sit-com dad," as soon as they're out of your mouth. Regret it because you don't mean it and also because you know it's what he was looking for. Once in a while, he begs you to snap.

He moves on from "Kiddo" to calling you "sport," and "champ." "Kimosabe," once. Maybe it wasn't a *Kill Bill* thing, after all. Or, Ever.

You're a terrific person. You're my favorite person. But every once in a while, you can be a real cunt. So, probably it was.

One night you go to your mailbox and find that the Mormon has finally written you a letter. It is typewritten

and at the bottom it says "Sorry this isn't so personal, it was sent to one other person as well." It reminds you not to drink. It encourages you to focus on your schoolwork. It suggests that things are moving too fast. When you write back, tell the Mormon that he is a misogynist and a hypocrite, that writing to him is like writing to a wall, except that a wall's silence doesn't feel so pointed. Except that the wall accepts responsibility for its inaction.

You've only been away for a month this time and yet you can't remember what he looks like. When you tell him about the letter to the Mormon he thinks you're overreacting.

Send him your writing. Finally. He sends you back an essay about an ex-girlfriend and a comment on your piece: "I do like metafiction." Don't send him anymore writing. Don't say anything about what he sent you except for, "You are very talented." He'll ask you if that was hard for you to say, and you won't understand why. You won't realize that he knows you think you're better than him. Not now, at least. When he starts looking for four years schools to transfer to, he will joke that his advisor also suggested suicide. "Suicide being a euphemism for Buffalo?" you'll ask, and then you won't hear from him for three days.

Start wondering why you use the word "love," so

much more often than is necessary. In sentences where it doesn't fit. About things to which it doesn't apply. Until it means nothing anymore, which can be done with any word, you realize. Kiddo, kiddo, kiddo. You call him once when you know he's at work because you can't believe you haven't spoken all day. He tells you he'll call you after his shift. He thinks he's hung up the phone but you hear him ask Chelsea if you really think you can call work to have a casual conversation. His shift ends at 9:30, but you wait until 11 before you give up and go to sleep.

Wake up at 5:30 in the morning and pull your covers over your head. Click through old text messages slow as Powerpoint and catch yourself thinking, "exhibit A... exhibit B..." When your roommate pulls the blanket back to look at you, curl towards the wall like a cockroach in the kitchen light. Tell her to be careful. Tell her you're too brutal to love.

Fight often. Always. He tells you that this is the first year in four years that he did not kiss your best friend on New Year's Eve. He tells you "you can be kind of smarmy sometimes, you know?" He tells you that you've killed your inner child with skim milk, hate, and sarcasm. He tells you that sporadic bitching at each other isn't doing it for him. He tells you he doesn't like it when you drink. He tells you that his phone is broken and then

he pocket dials you. He tells you that he read what you wrote about him. He tells you that he doesn't think he can even talk to you anymore. But you just keep telling him you love him.

One day he takes out the qualifiers. Then you know for sure:

He asks you to exit his life, stage-left.

There stopped being enough room for you and the real girlfriend. So it seems. So he tells you, as if he is reciting a recipe for buttermilk biscuits; as if he is reading a return address; as if he is ordering prescription contacts. But it's not all your fault, he assures you. He won't go into details about what he's been going through—he won't beleaguer the point. Some of the onus rests on him. He's sorry to resort to skullduggery. This is how he talks. Like a mashed-up, re-used, repurposed Koontz novel. On steroids.

I'm sorry, was that a question? Of impossible things that could never happen, in this case, yes, you would have been wrong.

You thought that you did things “for the story of it” more often than was normal, but he genuinely believes he is in *The Truman Show*. Audience sympathies and fades to black. Laura Linney —dispassionate and with fake red lips. The only people who could ever really love him—

lost at sea. His entire life an expertly-tailored narrative in which you weren't even a full arc, but a digression.

Tell him he is a sociopath. He will tell you to stop being so dramatic. He will say, “I don't like the way we treat each other now. That's as simple as I can make it.”

You don't know if you want to tell him that you've only just started treating him the way he's treated you all along, or if you'd rather just tell him, “I hate you.” Split the difference—tell him nothing.

Stare at the shower head for ten minutes before you remember what it's for. Forget how to open your dresser drawers. Tell your roommate that you're going to class and then sit in the laundry room for four hours instead. A stranger hugs you with his backpack on and you think “If this isn't an *SVU* episode waiting to happen...” And that's when you cry on the laundry room floor because you can hear him saying, “the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad, known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.” That's when you ask him how he can live with it and he says, “We don't owe each other a thing.” Feel your stomach leave the room. Look at the dryers and think about him telling you that autistic children are fascinated by front-load washers and by blenders. They find the circles comforting. *I didn't say I was going to ex-*

plain myself. I said I was going to tell you the truth. But if that's too cryptic, let's get literal— I'm a killer.

One day you will defriend him on Facebook and then he will block you. When you see this, you will let go of the book you are lifting, too suddenly, and hit yourself hard on the mouth. Your lip will look like an eggplant for two days. Or longer, because you can't stop chewing on it and pulling it back in the mirror to see the mashed part on the inside. "Someone really carved you up," you say in the mirror. All you wanted was not to see his statuses, and what he has given you is an internet restraining order. You will alternate between thinking this is a good thing and that it is grossly unfair. After all, he asked you to stop treating this like a real break-up. Being as you weren't the real girlfriend. A "block" seems like the dramatics of genuine severance. Not the dissolution of a casual agreement. Hover a cursor over an old comment on an old photo— it's you in black and white when you were sixteen, cheek to cheek with a high school friend and making a horrendous blowfish cross-eyed face— the little black box says "No one currently likes this."

"And then there was him," you say, and roll the words around in your mouth. "And then there was... and then. There. And then, and then, and then, and was." When you look at yourself in the tiny mirror in the bathroom

on the sixth floor of the stacks in the library at school, you will watch the mouth make these words and wonder who it belongs to. You will think— that haircut is not familiar and neither is how puffy those eyes are, and neither is the fact that this sweater sleeve is so full of snot and tears. "I am not this," you think to yourself. Your freckles and lips will look like they do just after a long airplane ride. Like if they were made of cloth they would be full of static electricity— thin to the point of being nearly translucent. Translucent to the point of being nearly not there. You will not be able to see the continuity. You will only have a few minutes before someone walks in and hesitates in the doorway.

You will tell your best friend that you're going to start going to the gym and spending less time on the internet and spending more time reading for fun. You've heard *Lolita* is worthwhile. You've heard it is about rebounding. Or at least sex.

You will do a lot of catching early movies.

You will be far enough gone to watch *Inglourious Basterds* and think "I need something that I can't take off," but you will not be far enough gone to neglect pragmatism— "Put it as close to the elbow as you can. In case I need a cardigan to cover it for Professional Life." You will remember afterwards that you need to put air in

your tires and the gauze will fall off and under your car. You will wrap your arm in saran wrap and call it a night. You will be far enough gone to pour red and white wine into the same glass and take drags of Chelsea's Newport in between sips, but you will not be far enough gone for beer. Beer will still taste horrible. You will be far enough gone to read his text in the middle of the night, "My life is coming apart at the seams, here."

You will not be far enough gone to say anything but "I don't care."

You will never use the word "smarmy" again.

You will read *Lolita* and discover that it *is* about re-bounding. It is also about destroying someone with your love for them, or your non-love for them, or your profound ability to oscillate between the two. It is also about writing as the single most self-incriminating a task a person can take on. Even when what is written is just some meager twisting of what is really felt. Even when what is written is just dripping with ignorance. And especially when what is written is the full-bodied truth.

It is also about not having any responsibility.

Your best friend will try to get you to do a lot of "dancing it out." She will want you to do this to angry lesbian bands and to that "Christian rock" group that is an oxymoron but that you loved in middle school, and to

tacky campy kitschy freedom music. Icona Pop. Robyn and Pink and the Veronicas. It will sound like it came out of a bottle, so you'll put on Jackson Browne. Your face will go blank as drywall and you'll think Diamond was wrong— music, not agriculture, is the worst mistake in human history.

You will wear leggings as pants and dare your roommate to say anything about it. She will sneak looks at your mismatched socks. Look at her like your eyes are blades and your name is Kiddo, so you know how to toss them. Call your mother and tell her "You are a brutal person. I have a tattoo and I'm not coming home for Spring Break." You know that it is her fault that you have never known a good man.

You will spend a lot of time on Facebook. You will stalk people who you knew only by name and mention and never cared about before, except to know if they were prettier than you. Strangers. You won't be upset anymore, if these girls are thinner, or toothier, or smarter, or funnier, or better at puns. You look at their status updates. You look at what they listen to on Spotify. You look at the things their friends post to them. You look at their "About" sections. You look to see if they are still whole.

They are, but it's not enough.

Go to a student production you have been assigned to review for the school paper. Do not pay very close attention, but hear an actor suddenly say, “You are always both the leaver and the left.” Cry in the dark of the auditorium, just long enough to get good and hiccup-y. Just long enough to need to wipe your nose on your sleeve and repulse the woman next to you. She will inch away and you will just barely stop yourself from sticking out your tongue. Write about her medicated powder smell instead of notes about the play. Go home for the weekend and be nice to your mother. Do not roll your eyes when she says “Do you want to watch this... *Perks of uhhh, a Wildflower?*” Give all the ice cream she bought to your friends and say, “Here. Pity ice cream.” Wear a long-sleeve dress to church so that she will not have to explain the tattoo. Thank her for Jo March. Thank her for Francie Nolan. Thank her for Flan. Thank her for being a brutal woman.

Read *The Adderall Diaries*. Identify with nothing except for, “I can see now that there is a conclusion but no arc.” Write that on something with a Sharpie. Throw that something away, unless it’s a notebook with Calculus notes in it. In that case just put the page in the recycling. Either way—enjoy the chemically marker smell while it lasts and decide that it’s time to dye your hair.

Your roots are showing and boxed dye makes your eyes water in a purely physical and never physiological way.

Sleep for a very long time. Catch up on all the *Glee* episodes you’ve missed. Beef up your cover letter and send cards to girls you’ve known since nursery school. On Valentine’s Day, watch *Jurassic Park* and drink tequila mixed with Gatorade. It’s a horrible idea. Gatorade has so much salt and you hate tequila. But nothing makes you sicker than you already are. Go to class the next day anyway. Dare it to be too much for you. About once every forty-five minutes, it is.

Could you do what you have done? Of course you could. But I never knew you could, or would, do that to me.

What you’re angriest about, if someone were to make you take a guess— knowing all of it all along. Knowing all along that a person who makes you sit two seats away from his real girlfriend and lie to her face about how you feel about him, makes you do this after you’ve gotten done feeding your mother ice chips in her hospital bed, does not love you after all. Or, Ever.

Well Kiddo, you thought wrong.

One day, your roommate will come home after class and you will be dancing in your desk chair. Well, not dancing— just wiggling a little because you knew this song in high school. She will drop her bag on the bed

and yank your earphones out of the jack. She will hug you around your neck from behind like she could strangle you—so relieved to see you moving that she could murder you for it.

Hug her back. Say “this too shall pass.” Almost mean it.

Ask for your books back and nothing else. You’ve had to take certain jokes, puns, fun facts and vocabulary words out of your mouth forever. But take your DeLillo and your McCann and welcome them back like refugees—put them someplace warm and dry; pat them on their spines and remind them that nothing is their fault; say that scars are okay, that scars mean trying, no more, no less; instruct them to put on their fight faces, because it’s still going to be brutal from here on out, but now you know that a set-jaw and eyes like blades are a recipe for something. Survival, probably.

Eventually, you think, this will all be an out-of-context journal entry that will take twenty minutes to place. It’ll be a letter to a wall. It’ll be a photograph taken in a living room you don’t remember being in. It’ll be a sweater in the bottom drawer that no one put there and couldn’t picture on their body if they spent all day trying. It’ll be the hideous brown coffee stain that you think ruined your graduation dress but that your mother blots

out like it’s nothing. It will be irrelevant to the happiness you were designed for.

It’s not enough, but it’s something.