

Only the Good

The final time Hugh broke it off with me we drank our coffee outside the café because he wanted to smoke. He took long drags on his cigarette and then exhaled with O-ed lips. Across the black metal table I shivered, layered in a long-sleeved shirt, a sweater, my coat, and a scarf—a hand-knit green one my brother had given me the previous Christmas. Hugh and I were the only people sitting outside. Professionals in black coats and shoes hurried along the sidewalk past us, taking long strides. Each time the door to the café jangled open, I tried to make out what song was playing inside.

“This isn’t good for me,” said Hugh in his deep voice, sipping his coffee for a dramatic pause, “this going back to you whenever I’m a little lonely.”

“Alright,” I said, and I stuffed my face further into the depths of my green scarf. It was no use arguing with Hugh, who was ten years older than me, a fact he hung over my head as if you earned some kind of diploma in life lessons at thirty-five.

“You’re too easy,” he said. “No, that came out wrong. *It’s* easy. *It’s*. You’re always. . . available.”

Like a bad habit, or a whore, I thought. Could be both. The door to the café opened, and I heard a snippet of “Landslide.” Songs were like tarot cards. You could always find a way to see yourself.

Hugh had been my first friend in this vast and lonely city, the only person during those initial months who would listen to me lament about the price differences between Virginia and New York and also the unspecific, but certainly deep-seated dreams that were slipping further and further from my grasp every time I waited on another person at *The Bell* in my regulated black shirt and black pants. That job, like most of my jobs—and like most of my relationships—didn’t last long.

The reason I slept with Hugh in the first place was the reason I slept with anyone in the first place, because he had asked me to. I had already imagined the future I came to be sitting in, this break up in the cold over black coffee and his cigarettes.

“Truthfully,” he added, tapping out ash into a white tray, “it’s your lack of self-confidence. You’ll do anything anyone else wants. If you cared less what I thought, you’d have told me to fuck off long ago.”

“Well, fuck off then,” I said, looking into the bottom of my empty coffee cup. I took my coffee black those days, like Hugh did, though I couldn’t seem to acclimate to the bitterness. Still, I always finished mine first, probably because I was trying to get it over with as quickly as possible.

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A few weeks later my publishing job (better pay than the last job, but ultimately just as unfulfilling) tried to fly me to a seminar in California, but instead I got stranded in a snowstorm during a layover in Columbus, Ohio.

That night I slept with the man at the hotel bar because he asked me to, and because he was not Hugh. First we kissed at the bar, and then much later in the hotel lobby where all of the tracked-in snow had melted into dark, wet stains on the carpet.

“You’re cute,” not-Hugh said, flicking my nose as he pressed his thin body up against me.

“What’s your name again?” I asked.

“Um, Ben. No, no — Tom,” he said, laughing.

“Good. I like Tom.”

“Tom it is, then. Tom Cruise.”

“Tom Cruise, I have to go to bed,” I said.

“My bed?” he asked, his eyebrows suddenly bent in concern.

“Of course,” I said, though I hadn’t been sure which direction it was going. I took off my heels, stumbling behind him to his room where an empty suitcase lay open on his bed. He pushed it to the floor and it landed upside down on top of some crumpled up clothes. I noticed *On the Road* on his nightstand. “A reader, huh?” I said with a smile as he pushed me gently to the bed.

“Been reading that for years,” he said.

“Years?” I said, glancing at the half-inch spine.

“I don’t read, really,” he said. He flipped off the light. “Not fiction, anyway.”

He kissed me on the neck. *On the Road* was more or less memoir, but I didn’t say so.

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I woke in the middle of the night with a dry mouth and a headache. Before opening my eyes, I considered all of the beds I could be in, and I felt for a moment that I was in each one: my bright-quilted childhood bed down south, Hugh’s memory foam bed in midtown, my bed on the Lower East Side, which was actually a couch, and the bed that I was in, the one-night-only hotel bed in Columbus, Ohio. I regretted not taking advantage of the bed that I wasn’t in, the one in the hotel room that I would have had all to myself.

When I finally opened my eyes, I didn’t turn to look at Ben/Tom. I looked at the glowing red alarm clock. My brother, Will, was stationed in Afghanistan, an hour outside of Kabul. When he was in the US, he lived in a house with three bedrooms, his wife, and a cat on a military base in Montgomery, Alabama. All around the base the walls sported side-by-side clocks indicating the times in Montgomery, Kabul, and Baghdad.

I had no such set of clocks, but whenever I looked at the time, my brain calculated to account for my brother’s location. Right then, my brother was in the middle of his day. He was

out there blending in with the hot sand, or maybe just eating a crappy lunch. Alive, I always imagined, though the catastrophes that happened out there happened in an instant that you couldn't take back.

Through the opened blinds the yellow hotel lights illuminated a black banister topped evenly in snow. I thought about returning to my own room, but it seemed rude to wriggle around under the covers searching for clothes. I thought about getting up for water, or shifting around until I found a comfortable position, but I didn't want to be the kind of guest you wished you'd never invited in, so I just lay there, thinking, my temples pounding.

I thought about how I was so frivolously in this stranger's bed, while my brother was leading such an austere and purposeful life. I had a hard time integrating this version of Will with the rambunctious older brother with whom I'd been raised, but there he was in pictures, straight-faced and uniformed, flanked by flags. Even his wife, since he'd been gone, had been collecting money for conservative charities by taking long, themed walks and knocking on doors asking for donations. They had gotten married young, as organized people often do, and decided not to have children until my brother found a safer profession. Every year since they'd been married I'd thought, "Well, they're older than I am. I'll get there." But I keep arriving at their previous age having progressed neither in their direction nor in any particular direction whatsoever.

In less than a month, my brother would be on leave, and after going home, he would come up to New York to attend a wedding and then to stay with me for a few days. I knew that he was staying mainly because my mother had written him worried, and because my brother was dutiful in each of his roles, whether chosen or assigned.

Every time my mother called me, I answered in a hoarse voice. This was because she called early in the morning, and I was often hungover, or at the very least extremely tired. What my parents didn't understand was that while in Virginia I might've been considered wild, compared to the rest of New York I was tame. My former co-worker Zona, a tall and attractive woman, had had a threesome with two of the office boys, after which she quit in order to create handmade paper quilts out of ripped-up Harlequin romance novels. How could she afford such a pursuit? Apparently, she was living with an old man who watched her through a peephole that they both more or less pretended didn't exist. Financially, the threeway sealed the deal. How did I know this? I don't remember. Maybe it was just a nasty rumor. Her father had fucked her when she was eleven. She told me this one morning by the Keurig, the corporate coffee maker, as her little K-Cup of dark magic blend coffee tumbled into the wastebasket.

"Fucked you?" I repeated.

She shrugged as if to say, "Fucked shmucked. Shit happens." Zona did make a lot of things up, so you never could tell with her, about any of it, but shit does happen, and it was just

such an incident which could set one's life on a course in which it seemed reasonable to have a three-way for rent money.

When I returned to my desk with my own cup of dark magic blend coffee, I thought about the summer I turned eight, when a friend of my father's stayed with us after he had just been kicked out of the house where his wife and two daughters lived. I'd called him Bee because on Saturday mornings he'd take me—just me!—to The Ice Cream Shack for honey ice cream. After I'd licked off the drizzled honey and smoothed the ice cream scoop into a beige ball, he'd say, "Honey," so I'd laugh, and then ask "Can I have a lick?" I'd offer him as much as he wanted, but he'd only take one slow lick and then hand the cone back to me, saying, "You're my girl!" I would finish the entire thing myself, sticky everywhere, while he watched with a smile.

Very late at night, he'd come into my room, closing the door behind him. "Bzzz," he'd whisper, waking me up. "Can I sit here?" he'd whisper, and he'd sit there on the corner of my bed, or sometimes lay there beside me in his boxer shorts under my bright quilt, his knees resting in the crook of my knees. I knew that this was a secret between us, a trade for the ice cream. His fingers would stroke my bare arm so gently it was as if they were hovering above me, the way it might feel if a bee were to fly a millimeter above the skin.

One hot summer afternoon, Bee was suddenly standing in the driveway beside his packed car. Before driving off, he nodded at both my parents, then shook my hand. His hand was so large that it enveloped mine completely. I ran down the driveway waving after him until he disappeared.

Many years later in New York, I was whispering to my mother on the phone under a hot, dark cocoon of covers. I had come home too drunk to pull out the couch, and all night my limbs had sunk down through the cracks between the cushions. I told my mother I'd seen a movie starring a guy who looked a little like Bee. It surprised even me when I said this, as if Bee reappeared in my memory the very moment his name came out of my mouth. "Whatever happened to Bee?" I asked. I brought my mouth to the edge of the blankets, surfacing for air, and then went back under. Finally she said, quietly, "I wish I'd said something about that. I wish I had."

But nothing had really happened with Bee, and even if something had I wouldn't talk about it around the office Keurig.

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In New York, I met Hugh for lunch. Even before leaving the house I felt unwell. No matter what we were or weren't doing in private, meeting Hugh in public felt like meeting an enemy on a brief and unwieldy truce.

Hugh stood waiting under the blue awning of the Fourth Street Diner, almost knocking his head on the scalloped overhang. I walked toward him with what must have been a pained expression because he immediately wanted to know if I was sick.

“I’m not sure,” I said. He backed away from both the diner and from me, out onto the sidewalk.

“Why did you come then? Why didn’t you call?”

“I always feel a little sick when I come to see you,” I said.

“It’s self-centered, to get other people sick,” he said. “I pick up bugs very easily. You know that.” We talked about this for a while, or he talked about it, his voice deep with authority, and eventually I just stumbled home without lunch, which I didn’t want anyway, and curled up tight on my bed like a fetus.

Which, it turned out, was the problem.

I was informed of this in the bathroom at work by two little parallel lines, which appeared before me like two paths I could take. The instructions were folded over and over like the church bulletins I had transformed into fans as a child. I kneeled over them, flattening them out by zipping my finger down the middle, searching for some fine print I might have overlooked on my first reading not five minutes before. Eventually, I gave up and leaned against the yellow bathroom wall, picturing the future branching out before me in two directions, and then beyond that, millions more. I wished Zona still worked here. She would say, “Baby Shmaby. I had a baby when I was thirteen and I threw it in the garbage.”

It was unsettling that a thought such as, “I will sleep with him, I guess,” had the potential to become a dot that had the potential to become a baby that had the potential to become a person that had the potential to, who knows, burn one hundred people to death in a fire, or save one hundred people from death in a fire, and that each one of those hundred people, burned or alive, could also have been born or not born, depending on a decision that his or her mother had made, once upon a time, while sitting on the cold linoleum floor of a bathroom at work.

Someone knocked on the door. “Busy,” I shouted back. I could faintly hear a song playing in a nearby cubicle—who was it? Billy Joel? “Only the Good Die Young”? Perhaps I’d live a long life. I thought about what I had brought for lunch, or if I had remembered to bring lunch, or if somewhere along my path that morning I had decided I would eat Pop Tarts from the vending machine. If I hadn’t remembered my lunch today, would I remember my lunch tomorrow? Was there anything in the fridge for dinner? Had I flossed even once that week? If I didn’t deal with these little lines, would I have to raise a baby? How would I get home today? Presumably, the same way as always: the walk to the subway, the changeover at Union Square. Sometimes it was all too much to bear. Maybe Hugh was right. Maybe at thirty-five you just

started to believe it, that daily living itself was supposed to be a trial. But I didn't want to believe it, and I certainly wasn't going to raise a baby from my couch-bed on the Lower East Side.

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"Just the size of the tip of a pen," the doctor said, holding his pen vertically for me to see. "So small that you can do this at home, two pills. You can be very discreet." I looked at the tip of the pen and then up at the heavens where it pointed. The doctor followed my eyes to the ceiling, which was made of that white foam board with hundreds of misshapen black dots in it. "If you're sure that's what you want," he added. The world was absolutely brimming with little dots—add one, subtract one, still brimming. "It is," I said.

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"So it wasn't contagious after all," I told Hugh over the phone. "Unless you believe in viral conception." I was avoiding my roommates by phoning from the stoop of my apartment building, shivering in the cold in my pajamas and green scarf.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"I'm sorry. I just thought I should tell you. It's not yours, of course. It's all being taken care of."

"Someone else," he said flatly. My behind was as cold as a block of ice. I rested the phone between my cheek and shoulder and sat on the stoop, hugging myself tightly.

"You and I weren't together," I said, though we had never, officially, been together.

"You get yourself into these situations," he said.

"What situations?" He knew about many of the people I'd been with in New York, at least the few I'd been with in those initial months when Hugh and I had talked on the phone as friends, but none of them, I thought, had become situations. "You're the only one I'm going to tell about this."

"What about the guy? What about your roommates? Who's going to be with you when you do this?"

The guy? My roommates? "Nobody, I guess," I said. I bit my lip, to stop myself from making the tearful noises that I knew were coming.

"Also," I said and then paused, realizing what I was about to say. I bit my lip harder, hoping to achieve some poise, and when I felt the stale iron taste of blood in my mouth, I tried again. "Also," I said. "I guess I don't want to see you anymore."

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There was no way I could adequately prepare for my brother's arrival. I had to take the second of two pills the following day, on the first full day of his visit. It wasn't the kind of thing you could time conveniently. Kill Pills, I thought, shaking the bottle so I could hear the lone pill knocking

up and down, trying to escape. That second pill was the one that really did it, the ultimate undo button. For a moment it seemed easy to get rid of something you didn't want.

My roommates were gone for the weekend, to this cabin in Vermont. Cherry had brought along about five books about edible mushrooms, and I kept imagining the dramatic scene in which they would all be poisoned and I would suddenly and miraculously get to live alone.

We'd never gotten much furniture. Instead, we used books piled high as bedside tables and shelves, topped them with knick-knacks and water glasses and my red-eyed alarm clock. There was no way to make this room presentable, so I moved onto the more manageable kitchen where I balanced my laptop on top of the fridge and played "Stairway to Heaven" on repeat while washing the dishes.

When I heard the heavy knock at the door, I was half-asleep on the couch with my yellow plastic kitchen gloves still on, my hands hanging off the edge so that a puddle of water had formed on the wooden floor beneath them.

I opened the door and for the briefest moment I wondered what this uniformed man was doing here looking so stoic, but of course it was Will, straight from the wedding. He had our father's broad, sloping nose, and our mother's thin, rectangular mouth.

"Someone let me in downstairs," he said. "You've got to be careful with that."

I threw out my arms for a hug, but he held out a hand to stop me.

"Not in uniform," he said.

I directed him to Cherry's room. There wasn't much floor space, so he tucked his suitcase neatly alongside Cherry's painted burgundy dresser.

"I'm sorry it's so small," I said from the doorway.

"It's like. . . a barrack for hipsters," he said, glancing around. The word "hipster" sounded remarkably Southern coming out of his mouth. New York had already worked the twang out of me.

He changed in the bathroom, emerging in gray sweatpants and a T-shirt. "Now?" I asked, giving him a hug. When I brushed my teeth later, his uniform was hung carefully from the hook behind the bathroom door. It was so flat and unwrinkled that it didn't seem like anyone had worn it at all.

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The next morning Will was up long before I was and when I looked at the alarm clock there was nothing I had to account for. I could hear him in the kitchen, washing and drying my dishes, clinking them quietly on top of one another and humming a little. I wondered if he was humming for his own benefit or for mine. In our childhood, no matter how mercilessly he had been torturing me not hours or minutes before, he would know when I was really upset. Sometimes he

would simply retreat, but other times he would switch the game to something gentler and start humming songs in his own version of “Name that Tune.”

When I was in eighth grade, a classmate I’d known for many years was hit by a car while riding her bike. Three days later, she died. When they told us this in the morning at school, I was unable to assimilate the information. I walked around all day in quiet, silent denial.

But that night, I started crying and couldn’t stop. I cried until my brother entered my room without a word, began scratching my back and humming. He hummed just one song and I didn’t try to guess what it was. Hours later, my mother found us both sound asleep, my arm flung gently and haphazardly across my brother’s waist. She woke us up, shaking me by the shoulder. “You have your own beds,” she said in a whisper. “Use them.”

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I ambled into the kitchen without bothering to brush my teeth or look at my face. My brother was still in his sweats, but he looked wide-awake. He hummed around the kitchen, stacking dishes. “You don’t need to do that,” I said. “I’ll do it later.” But he kept on stacking, and before I knew it a plate of eggs was staring up at me.

“Want some?” he asked.

I didn’t want anything, especially not eggs. “Sure,” I said. I took a giant bite of egg, the yellow bursting in my mouth. A book about military strategy was spread upside down on the table. I could see all of the dots of the i’s staring up at me from the blurbs on the back cover. The egg swam around in my mouth until I finally swallowed it.

If you separated us into our different environments—me in this messy apartment, he in the desert wearing fatigues or at home with his wife—you could no longer tell that we had come from the same place, but neither could you determine when we’d diverged, what choices we had made or what choices had been made for us.

It was hard to tell when people grew up, exactly, or why. When had my brother decided to stop tying my hair to the kitchen chairs? To stop locking me in the bathroom? To stop shooting rubberbands in my face?

“What happened to your lip?” Will asked, taking my empty plate to wash.

“Anxiety,” I said.

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My brother and I rented a movie, the way we used to do when my parents were both out of town and he was supposed to keep an eye on me. We were never a more united front than when our parents left us to our own devices. I took the second pill before the movie while my brother was at a lamp, picking off ladybugs and putting them on the face of the building just outside the window.

I lay on the couch, and my brother took the rocking chair.

“Are you sure you want to watch a war movie?” I asked.

“Every movie is a kind of war movie,” he said. “Everyone’s fighting for something.”

“Everyone’s fighting *against* something,” I corrected.

As usual, I couldn’t figure out who the enemy was, but I was pretty sure that Will could, though he was tipped forward onto the front of the wooden rockers in what might have been suspense. As the bodies piled up, I wondered if a life was more or less important to a soldier than it was to someone else.

I thought for a moment about Ben/Tom who had unknowingly embedded half of his genetic information inside of my body. I wondered if it was the half that had smiled so charmingly across the bar, or if it was the half that didn’t like to read. I thought of Hugh, who I hadn’t heard from since our last conversation, who I had vaguely hoped would stop by, call, send an email.

Just as gunfire broke out on screen for the third or fourth time, my stomach gave a violent lurch and then felt as if it were being tied into tight and intricate knots. I tiptoed to the bathroom around the back of the rocking chair where Will was still leaning intently forward.

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Some time later, maybe the credits were rolling, my brother’s voice came through the bathroom door. “Are you okay in there? Hey, are you okay?”

Maybe I groaned a little.

When he entered, I was curled in a ball, grabbing my shins with both hands. I felt like a sponge being squeezed dry. I could feel liquid pooling around me, which I knew was blood. I wondered about that little dot, that mysterious possible future, expelled somewhere on the bathroom floor. That was what I had wanted—I didn’t wish myself on anyone.

“Oh my god,” said my brother. He had seen all kinds of people with blood all around them, but they had never been his sister on the bathroom floor. “Where are you hurt?” he asked, on his haunches beside me.

I wanted to reach out and touch my brother’s kind, warm hand, but instead I just folded myself together tighter, so that my knees felt the thump of my own heart. It seemed to me that whenever I wanted to reach out to touch another living being I just knocked what I wanted further from my grasp, and that all I would ever end up feeling was the terrible pulse of my own pumping blood.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Was this one of those things his wife had been getting donations for, to save these little bunches of cells? Behind him, I could see the starched sleeve of his pristine uniform. I couldn’t look at him. “It’s not important,” I said to the floor. “It’s just a little thing.”

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I lay on the pulled out bed, facing the arm of the couch, my wet cheek on my wet pillow. Will had made the bed and he'd walked me to it slowly and wordlessly as I was hunched over in pain. Now I could hear him walking around Cherry's room—was he packing? Pacing? I pictured his thin, rectangular lips and wondered what expression they betrayed.

I don't know how long I'd been crying before I finally heard him at the doorframe. "You okay?" he asked in a near-whisper. I couldn't bring myself to say yes, but I didn't want to say no, so I didn't say anything at all.

I heard him come toward me. I felt the bed shift, a hand spread out gently across my back, the fingers wide the way one might carefully palm an infant. I felt it first, through his hand, the slow, plaintive hum, so deep that it seemed to reverberate through me, seemed to enter every corner of my body the way a noise might echo through an empty church. I had never heard him hum that deeply and didn't think that there was anyone else who could. I cried harder, but only because he was so kind, my brother, to lie at my side, wanting nothing more than to comfort me.