

Animal Behavior

I met him when I was thirteen. Straightforward as a pair of twin beds. That was where I wanted everything to commence in one full-orchestra *sforzando* attack. We met. It sounded simple and sharp and beautiful in its restraint. But I didn't know what to say after that, and still don't. We met. Dead end.

Because everything I've written since *we met* has sounded like some ersatz Romance novel nobody reads, full of conceit and manners and moors. I haven't been able to write well since him. I haven't been able to answer the phone or cut vegetables either. I still think I see his the back of his head on the train, or hear his cough in my bedroom, or step next to his muddy footprint in my front yard. I still find myself picturing his tattoo, tracing the contours of each shade and line with my tongue. These stills are the worst of all. Still mouthing his name when I find myself in an empty room. I still anticipate his knock. Still look for his car in every lot, notice when its gold changes to a muddy taupe when unwashed. I still feel like Pavlov's sick dog every time the phone rings, except it's my heart that begins to drip. And even now as I write this I still can't help wondering if you'll ever read it, and what you'll say.

I've tried to continue. I mean, I did continue and I do continue, because I keep thinking that maybe if I continue, actually write what happens next, the cortege of you and me could finally end. We could flick the house lights back up and escort the crowd out. I could have the big breakdown in the bathroom while you bang on the padlocked door, the pounding

rhythm adding to the buzz of hair clippers. I shave off all my ash-brown locks in front of the mirror while watching my eyes, the purple crescents beneath them so dark and imprinted I wonder if I managed to beat myself in my sleep. Then I dig my knuckles into the indentations of my swollen, sleep-deprived eyes to check, ringlet curls still inert in the sink like dead baby mice. Everything slows down, and all I feel are the prickles of my newly exposed scalp and the shaking from your red-faced yells on the other side of the door. Eventually the yelling recedes, but I stay there, in the safety of the bathroom, and revel in the sensations from knuckles and prickles, the heat of my puffy eyelids.

Or you could leave me in the airport. I clutch my fingers around your cardigan like a squirrel, nestle my face into the wool. Then you rub my scalp and hum, and I cry into your chest because I'm too short to reach your shoulders. Finally I lift my face to take a breath and you take advantage of the moment to pry my tear-sogged fingers off your lapels, hand the flight attendant a one-way ticket, and scurry down the fold-out jetty towards the plane. I scream at you as you dwindle away down the tunnel. I don't want you up there. I don't like the idea of that much air around you: the overbearing blue, the clouds that feel too solid. The hermetic density, the isolated metal. I tire of screaming and allow my body to crumple into the carpet, followed by the montage flashes of us. This is my broken in-flight movie, square after square of our relationship in flashing rows that I can't stop. The blitzkrieg of limbs and genitals, teeth biting into still raw napes, slices of vegetables from your garden placed in each other's mouths by each other's fingers. My sobs grow louder as the flashes get brighter, and the anonymous flight attendant watches me as she would a dog with rabies. After awhile I sit in an empty row of airport chairs with my feet on the

faux leather. Two hours later the feet come down. Eventually I manage to follow the escalators down to the baggage claim and out the sliding doors.

Or I smash your glasses. Translucent brown rims made of thick plastic and 1960's Mod. You take the thick monsters off to kiss me, and I take the opportunity to snatch them off the counter and shove them in the blender. The stainless steel blades slice through them as easily as butter. We both watch the glass and plastic pieces whirl around, listen to the crunches and cracks with a strange eroticism. For the first time, I feel you must be proud of me. I turn the blender off and you kiss me without restraint, sloppily, your tongue across my ear and lips smashed into my hair and neck. I kiss you back before remembering why you came here, the thought forcing my body to turn aside and to reach towards the blender. I pour your glasses into a paper coffee cup. Hand you the cup. Open the front door. We never see each other again.

Our beginning:

I met him when I was thirteen. I was disastrously cutting tomatoes on a pale wood board in the kitchen, the juice spilling over the counter and the pulp pressed flat against the skin. My parents had guests in the other room, and so I decided to hide out in the kitchen in my sweatpants and make myself some dinner. He took my knife away and gave me one with a serrated edge. Told me his name and I told him mine. He commented on my mouth, saying that someday a lucky young man will get to gaze at those puckers all day. I don't think he was trying to flatter me then—although if he were I would have been too young to take

note anyway. Everyone commented on my mouth. It was twice the size of anything else on my face and always dark and wet, like I'd just finished a cherry popsicle.

I nodded politely and continued to wedge my knife through the skin and into the flesh, my fingers slippery and tinged red from mashed pulp. I don't remember when he came behind me to help me cut, or if he asked before placing his hand on my knobby wrist. I assume he did, and I probably conceded. With the guidance of his hand, my slices began to look like I originally imagined. Perfectly big red coins—like the ones in a deli sandwich. I remember his hand being dry in the same way my father's hands felt dry, the oils pressed out over time. I also remember noticing the hairs on his knuckles. Three years later, the second time I met him, I saw those hands and instantly imagined him knuckle-walking like a chimp or a gorilla, hips high above the rest of his body.

Unlike from a can, the juice running from the tomato was light and translucent, which surprised me at the time because I had never actually cut a tomato. The tomatoes felt rebellious, a defiance of my urbanite upbringing, of the nightly restaurants and take-out phone calls. I had never truly cooked before or prepared food of any sort, usually shooed out of the kitchen like a cat that finds its way into the top-shelf china. No one ever figured I would fall in love with the sensuality of cooking, imagined that my ears could tingle and tinge at the lubricated texture of a skinned fish. Yet I do, and now it all feels so destined. I like learning to tilt my hand a few more degrees to the right, to decipher a dash from a pinch. I like the order in the entropy.

Once we finished making red deli slices he helped me line them up on a platter. He said something classic like *presentation is key*, or *flaws only exist in the details*, and winked. He

winked a lot, always the right eye, relishing in the aroma of his own charisma. He picked up one of my initial slices, ragged and incomplete, and popped it in his mouth. I think that was when I first fell in love with cooking. He smirked—closed mouth, all charm. I picked up another failure and fit the whole demented slice in my mouth, smiling back with closed lips while my chin shined with juice. He folded his arms across his button-down in mock-petulance. *I can't believe you get to eat here while I have to go tolerate the old people.* My parents and their other guests laughed loudly at the end of his sentence, perfectly on cue, the living room becoming the playback tape to our own personal sitcom. I knew that my mother would roll her head back in a perfect display of elongated neck, the measured tilt angling her diamond earrings towards the light. He and I looked straight at each other with an all-knowing angle of our own. When the living-room laughter simmered, cocktail glasses began to clink. I suddenly felt horrible, the pulp nauseating. I didn't want to hear that sound. The glass reveille signaling the adults to get up and leave. For him to get up and leave, and for me to return to being alone and thirteen. I suddenly sensed the bagginess of my oversized sweatpants on my stalk-like legs, the metal of my braces piercing against my swollen gums. After everyone left, I ate the entire caprese salad with my hands, my father's Hazel Scott CD still singing in the living room. The chiming glass was my figurative clock striking midnight.

That was the first time we met.