

The One

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THERE WAS THE ONE WITH THE DARK HEAD OF CURLY HAIR who sat behind her in sophomore Dickens seminar and scribbled notes that she could tell had nothing to do with what the teacher was saying, and when he eventually slipped one onto her desk one day as he walked out of class, it turned out to be a very short story about a young woman with a long waterfall of brown hair, remarkably like her own.

There was the one who played guitar in a rock band that covered only Grateful Dead songs, and would look out at her from the stage, catching and holding her eyes while he played in a long, trance-like stretch and who told her later that her braids just did him in.

There was the one whose face she saw sometimes in magazine advertisements for a famous clothing designer and who had long, messy, blond hair and wore only black jeans and a black leather jacket and carried a motorcycle helmet to the history class where the teacher did nothing but read from his dissertation, and whose voice, when he finally spoke to her in the elevator one day and then over a cup of cappuccino, was pitched way too high for his masculine form.

Then, there was the one who married her. They met at a big summer party and she noticed his blue eyes, strong nose and rugged face when she caught him looking at her through the volleyball net even after he missed a spike and almost got hit on the head by the ball, and after the game they pretended to ignore one another, but later ended up around the same small fire someone had set up on the thin stretch of beach that ran along a short length of the lake, and eventually everyone else left, and they talked for hours, even though she can't now remember about what.

When they started to take drives through the countryside, she watched and for some reason she couldn't name, trusted the distant, thoughtful look that came into his eyes when they drove by old farmhouses and talked about the one they'd have someday, only they didn't yet use the word "we," talked about their singular dreams, not yet ready or sure when they could begin to include the other. But then, they noticed some parents and children one afternoon a few months later when they stopped on a sunny afternoon to get an ice cream cone and suddenly they were talking about raising children. It seemed when he looked at her, and then at the children around them, that he was considering something,

something important. That was the day, the first time, he said something that he said many times later: when he got married, divorce was not an option.

But long before that there was the one in kindergarten who made her cards decorated with flowers and hearts, and when this didn't move her he came into class early one day and wrote across the chalk board how much he loved her and even tried leaving money on her chair.

There was the one who first kissed her, asking if it was okay and brushing her hair off her shoulders and taking her face in his hands before he pressed his lips to hers and then handed her the books he'd carried for her, and turned to walk the three miles back to the house he shared with his single mom, who was not well.

And there was the one who had matching T-shirts made with their pictures on them and had braces that made her mouth sore when they kissed for what seemed like days.

The one who asked her to marry him had a lot of plans. He was doing project work now, computer programming and maintenance, but he was going to take more specialized courses, start his own business, become a high-paid consultant so he could have lots of free time to climb and hike and even start a guiding service for adventure travellers on the side. He was going to go to the National Outdoor Leadership School and help disadvantaged youth get their act together by taking them into the wilderness. Like Outward Bound, only better. He wanted a farmhouse in the country with a big vegetable garden and a barn with animals and kids picking beans and milking goats.

She didn't have plans. Only vague dreams. She imagined herself in an office with dark furniture; in a playroom painting with children who might have been hers, but could have just as easily been nieces or nephews; walking through the grass with a basket of vegetables on her hip, wiping the dirt from her hands against the legs of her jeans. He drew pictures of his future and she could see herself there.

There was the one she corresponded with for months when he mistakenly sent a message to her e-mail address who said he didn't want to meet her after all because he'd decided he was gay, not bisexual.

Then there was the one who invited her to go mountain biking for four days in the western desert who then called to let her know that he was taking someone else, someone who hadn't really said no, but hadn't really said yes until just now and, after all, he'd asked her first.

There was the one who turned into a lover after a few years of being just a friend who eventually told her he met someone he wanted to date, and when

she asked what they had been doing, having dinner and sleeping together a couple of nights a week, said, "Well, not dating," and then went on to have an affair with a woman who already had a husband.

The one who married her presented her with a ring at the top of a mountain overlooking a lake and another set of mountains off in the distance and when they came back down they'd both cried and she'd said yes and they talked about houses and children. He presented her with a single, long-stem red rose he'd hidden in the back of his truck and said that it represented one lifetime together. She thought to herself that now it was over, now she had the man she'd sleep with for the rest of her life and she'd never have to know another.

In eighth grade there was the one who, sitting on the old sofa in his basement while his mother banged pots and scraped chairs in the kitchen at the top of the stairs, taught her how to love Pink Floyd.

There was the one who was dark and silent and had just gotten his licence and took her for long drives that always ended up in some park or rest area where he'd kiss her hard against her mouth and move his hands over her clothes but never, ever touch her skin.

There was the one who told her three days before he was marrying her best friend that if only he'd met her before, things might've been very different.

They took their honeymoon in the mountains, and she wanted to, thinking it would be a chance for her to learn to love camping, and at night, in the tent, feeling herself held in the cave he made of his body around her, his legs entwined with hers, his chest rising and falling against her back, his arms tucked around her breasts, his breath and two-day's stubble against the back of her neck, it seemed that the impatience he tried to hide with a twisted smile when she was slow on the trail, or nervous about climbing over rocks, or clumsy with the ropes that tied down the tent and held up the food, was not very important at all.

They found their old farmhouse and for months he put in weekends and evenings stripping wallpaper and putting in new supports under the front porch and tilling the sunny patch out back that would be perfect for the garden.

But then on weekends he started going into the mountains and sometimes he wouldn't come back until well into the week. The courses he wanted to take always seemed to conflict with a trip he already had planned, or a commitment he'd already made to his buddies. Though many of his clients wanted to hire him for his casual skill, he kept doing just project work because a full-time job would interfere with his time in the mountains, testing that backpack and ice axe, snowshoes or backcountry skis.

He told her to hike with her friends, or the girlfriends of his buddies, but he never asked her to come with him again. He only nodded and said, "Sure, sometime," when she suggested they try something together, maybe canoeing so that she wouldn't hold him back. She had a job, worked in an office full of lawyers who told her she should get a law degree, that she was a natural, so she had signed up for a course that kept her busy a couple of nights a week and studying on the weekends.

He told her he loved her, even when he started sleeping in the spare room when he came back late from a climb, saying he hadn't wanted to wake her in the middle of the night, even though she told him that she wanted him to wake her, that she loved the smoky, dark smell of him after he'd been in the woods for days.

There was the one who talked to her for an hour about the wife who had left him for a video store clerk. She stood in the street on a cold spring morning while he spoke and the sweat that had accumulated during her jog cooled and dried, causing a chill that only a long hot shower could remove and after that, he'd drop off homemade maple syrup and a dozen mismatched eggs on her back doorstep every few weeks.

There was the one from the other direction down the dirt road who cut up a tree that had blown down in a storm and took the firewood, but also asked her if she'd like to make him soup because he hadn't gotten his new teeth yet.

There was the one who lived across the street, retired now, who borrowed things from their garage and sometimes took their dog for a walk with his own, but without asking, without telling her, only bringing it up casually later when she bumped into him at the post office or the local store, saying how much better his own dog minded when he took hers along.

She asked her husband about children, asked him when, meaning not just when will we have children, but when will you get a full-time job, when will you be home more regularly, when will you stop falling asleep in the spare room, with the television on even though the sound is turned off, surrounded by bookshelves filled with backpacks, crampons, guide books and gaiters, with sleeping bags and tents spread over the floor and furniture to dry, with bike parts soaking in the sink and the ironing board set up to wax skis.

He told her to go ahead, to have the kid. As if it was something she could do on her own, anytime. He said he was ready. He'd get a pack to carry the kid into the mountains with him. She looked at him and thought: I married you not for who you are, but for who I hoped you might become.

There was the one in her office who asked her how things were going and

showed her pictures of his own wife and kids when they were on vacation together down in Disneyland and then a few months later on some Caribbean island, all tanned and blond and smiling, surrounded by the bright colours of sea and sky and forest so incredibly, densely green that it hurt her eyes.

There was the other one from her office who brushed up against her when he lifted some papers off her desk, who asked her to stay late to help him prepare for a case, who drove a fancy car and looked at her long and hard when she was sitting in a meeting with him and the other partners taking notes.

There was the one, so much younger than she, who worked at the coffee shop where she stopped in the mornings and always called on her, sometimes even over the heads of others in line in front of her.

When she told her husband that she wanted a partner and not a roommate, he looked up and said that she was right, it wasn't working out, and he even gave her a few tears to remember him by before he moved everything that had been in the spare room into the basement of a friend's house and left her with all their wedding presents, even the monogrammed glasses she hadn't wanted, but his wealthy mother had insisted upon and the silver candlesticks his oh-so-proper grandmother had sent them from her retirement home in Florida. He even left the sofa they splurged on with some of the cash that her parents, who worked hard, (but after all, her father was only a schoolteacher and her mother a secretary) had given to them, and they had made love on, over and over, in those first weeks after they walked down the aisle, and stopped only when he got rug burns on his knees. After he left, she wondered what the "it" was that hadn't worked out.

There was the one who was a guide on the bicycle trip in Italy who asked her for a kiss on the afternoon when he invited everyone to head up into the hills to see an old stone church, and she said yes just before all the others said no, they were tired and going back to the hotel.

There was the one who followed her out of a dark, ivy-covered restaurant after a late lunch in Rome, who held her hand as they ran through the darkening streets and told her while they sat at the top of the Spanish Steps watching the sun go down, turning the buildings all different shades of violet and peach, beige and rose, that he wanted to kiss her but thought it would be too dangerous. For her, he said. Not for him. She declined the kiss from the guide who started that very night sharing a room with a nineteen-year-old fashion student whose parents had sent her to Europe for the summer, but not before he told others in the group that he had thought of having an affair with her, but she made it so easy, what was the fun in that?

She accepted a kiss from the philosophy and mathematics graduate student in Rome, but that was not until much later in the evening, really all the way into the next morning, after they had wandered the streets, watching jazz trios in front of restaurants and lovers in dark corners, and he was dropping her off at her hotel since she had to catch a plane in just a few hours, and he held her jaw and pressed his lips against hers and then was gone, but was there again, across the street, leaning against a telephone pole, the next morning when she slipped into a cab, still in his tan shorts and bleached shirt, open to the white sunshine, with his book bag slung over his shoulder.

After her husband had been gone a few months, she thought about where they all were now. The one from kindergarten became a Hollywood mogul and she saw his name at the end of movies and in the entertainment pages, but she could never remember if he was on wife number two or three.

The one who kissed her first watched his mother wither and die and then started hanging out with the rough kids in high school and then he died of a drug overdose.

The one who taught her to love Pink Floyd went away to a boarding school.

The one who didn't think they were dating married the woman who already had a husband. The one who went mountain biking never came back from the west.

The one who married her best friend loved his wife and was about to become a father.

The one whose wife left him for the video store clerk had all his chickens killed by a fox and started taking dancing lessons and fell in love with the woman who taught him to tango.

The one who walked her dogs stopped speaking to her when she wrote him a note asking him to return all her things, including her spare key and to not come onto her property without permission ever again.

She didn't know what happened to either of the ones she met in Italy.

The one from the Dickens seminar was now a playwright getting married to an actress who had a part in an important independent film and was looking at scripts from big name directors and up-and-coming producers like the one she went to kindergarten with. He invited her to the wedding.

She had not spoken to her ex more than two or three times in the last year and then only to settle some small question of mail forwarding or a court date. There were still circles under her eyes and her cheeks looked sunken and she had had her hair recently highlighted, a choice she regretted because it made her head look aglow in some harsh light.

For the wedding of the one in the Dickens seminar and the actress she bought a new dress, which didn't look as good at home as it had in the store, and she forgot to put on any jewellery, which made her feel somehow naked. She almost fell asleep during the long service as she was up late nights studying, and she was uncomfortable in the church, paradoxically convinced that the God she didn't think existed somehow knew and judged her for it.

They brought her beef instead of fish at dinner and the meat was not cooked through, still bloody, red and cool in the centre. She had practised a toast, something about the beauty of commitment and the sustenance of art, but people started to get up and dance before she had rallied enough courage to stand and speak. She speared a piece or two of lettuce gone limp in its dressing while the tables emptied and the dance floor filled, and when she was the only one left, she got up to go to the ladies room, just for a change of scenery. She sat in the stall for a while, making no sound and wondering if there was anyone out there, waiting, listening.

She skirted the dance floor and went to the bar, and when the bartender asked her what she wanted she stared at him confused for a moment, until he offered, "Martini?" and she nodded gratefully. When she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the bar, the man sitting next to her turned in her direction.

He had pitch black hair pulled back into a ponytail and cheeks that looked as if they were shorn off ruddy cliffs and eyes that were so dark they could not be called a colour at all. He didn't say anything, just smiled and sipped his beer.

"Do you want to dance?" she asked, surprised at the sound of her own voice.

Something subtle changed in his expression and a wave of heat flipped over inside her.

"Honey," he said, his lips parting to reveal a mouth full of large white teeth. "I'm an Indian. When I dance, it rains."