

Fall From a Distance

I'm lying in the sun nursing a tequila because I woke up feeling the same way I felt yesterday. A bruise on my shin catches my eye and I stare at it trying to figure out when, how, I got a bruise on my shin and I blink away the tears blurring my strained gaze and then I feel something cold rushing along my thighs and it takes me a second to realize I'm spilling my drink all over myself. I'm still groggy from last night's Xanax and Percocet. I shift in my seat to stand and the pain in my pelvis, in my butt, makes me reach for the arm of my chair and tears fill my eyes again.

I let out a long breath. Slowly, I stand. Walking toward the house I'm squinting because when I came out here I didn't need any glasses but now the sun is aggressively bouncing off of something right into my eyeballs and so I don't see the rose bush that needs pruning and it snags my robe while scratching me and I drop my glass and it shatters. I don't move. Can't move. I'm just standing here looking at the shimmering glass, feeling stuck. I need a soft place to land.

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I don't know how much time passed until Lucy is in front of me talking fast in Spanish and she's holding a small broom and dustpan in one hand and gives me a double espresso shot with the other. She's been watching me since yesterday, hovering and I just keep muttering *gracias* and turning the outside of my lips up at her and she just keeps nodding and pushing her hands out or up or anywhere and saying *claro claro claro* and not looking at me in the eyes and I'm also saying *gracias* for that.

The espresso shot is loaded with sugar and a twist of lemon and it feels like I'm being hugged from the inside and so I'm propelled into the house. I push open a French door and am hit with a blast of cool air and if I could I would roll my eyes at the smell of fresh linens and roses that gives off the idea that this house is a home, that there is anything fresh and living here, I would. I

leave my espresso cup on a table and walk upstairs. My shoulder runs into a door frame. I go into my bathroom and open the only drawer that matters and I take an adderall and a half and pretend that the bag of cocaine hidden at the back doesn't exist and I run a bath and even though my robe is damp and stinking, I keep it on, pulling it around myself tightly and collapse onto the chaise where I watch the palm trees gently sway outside of my window and listen to the stream of water slapping against itself and then suddenly I'm hearing the sound of him slapping against me and I wince as I get up too quickly again. Steadying myself, I grab my speaker and start playing one of my favorite movie soundtracks and I revisit the drawer and pull out the bag and do a few bumps and then I'm listening to Simple Minds, forcing myself to enjoy it so I'm nodding my head and filling the tub with potions and bubbles and when I'm finally dipping my toe and then my foot into the scalding water, feeling the burning as I put my other foot in, the chilling alarm shooting through my body, I'm singing *rain keeps falling, rain keeps falling, down, down, down, will you recognize me*. And if it weren't for having to hyperfocus on telling my brain that the sensation of my feet melting, of me burning to death, is not real, that this is not a real threat, I would be sobbing.

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A few weeks ago I ran into Nick at the bar while I was waiting for the bathroom upstairs and when I heard someone call my name I turned and saw him. He was still beautiful and it caused everything in my body to turn on. I was on high alert. I was in a different time. I was vibrating, buzzing, shaking on the inside, but I smiled slyly because suddenly I was back in school and nothing could touch me. All of our almost-moments came rushing back and the air thickened around us, it was palpable.

He grabbed his chest and threw his head back and then we kissed cheeks and hugged. He smelled like cigarettes and ginger mints and the way he looked into my eyes while we were sliding loose of each other was cryptic, but I can see now that it felt like he was deciding something.

He asked me how I was, if I was partying that night or what and I said yes and because I wanted him to think I was still cool, or if he never thought I was actually cool, I wanted him to think that I was in that moment, I grabbed the almost empty bag of coke I had in my purse that I'd let strangers and certain acquaintances use and I gave it to him to finish. His eyes got huge and what I translated to be gratitude spread across his face.

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After elevating myself during my bathroom break, I found him sitting at the bar and he waved me over and I thought he looked even better than he did only moments before. Maybe it was my state of mind, maybe it was the veil of nostalgia, maybe it was because the bartender was flirting with him. When I sat down next to him the first thing he said to me was, "You still slamming Titos, or what?" and it took me off guard. The bartender was making drinks and looking at me peripherally, I drummed my nails on the bartop and shrugged and said, "Sure." Kept it cool. Kept it casual.

He ordered for us. Two double Titos on ice with extra limes, which isn't what I would have ordered because I hate limes but it didn't matter. Then he turned to me, "Who are you here with?"

"The usual suspects," I told him and he knew who I meant. "What about you?"

"Same," he said and I thought I knew who he meant but I didn't ask him to clarify.

The bartender slid us our drinks. He raised his glass, "It's always a pleasure, Ms. Fitzgerald."

“Likewise,” I said even though I wasn’t sure that was the case but I didn’t feel like going through my rolodex of memories and have my instincts be proven right. We touched glasses and even though it was pretty strong and definitely disgusting I sipped more than a sip because my numbing throat needed the soothing.

We talked for twenty-seven minutes before he checked his phone and said that he had to go, but that he would see me soon. In those twenty-seven minutes he did a lot of leaning and staring and chuckling and head shaking and in those movements I felt he was trying to connect with me on a deeper level, like he was trying to tell me something, tell me that he could do more than just take my cocaine and buy me vodkas with limes, that he could love me and that maybe he was deciding on if he should or not. Or maybe I was the one trying to make that decision, I really don’t know.

I went outside to rejoin Raven and Jasper and Bobby and Blithe on the patio and they gave me shit for about ten minutes and I had already begun to mourn yet another missed hookup with Nick until he sent me a text that said it was good to see me, with a kiss face and my heart did an unreasonable thing that made my lips inadvertently stretch into a smile. Raven and Blithe exchanged a look and the boys poked and nudged me. I didn’t text him back until the next morning because I’m very cool and he ended up ignoring my good morning message. I had an instinct to assume it was punishment for not responding immediately but I brushed it off because that’s just insane but I’m pretty sure that reaching out first and not hearing back hurt his ego at least a little bit.

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I ended up running into him a week and a half later at a friend’s birthday party and I decided to take it as a sign. My insides started flipping when I saw him. He’s always looked like money

but this was the hottest he'd ever been and it was basically impossible to ignore him, for anyone to ignore him, which I noticed immediately. Wherever he went, the eyes of every girl, single or not, followed, mine included.

At some point the birthday girl announced that we'd all be participating in a tournament comprised of beach volleyball, beer pong and cornhole and that we'd need to pick a partner. As the announcement was taking place, Nick was standing directly across from me and before she was done shouting to everyone, he had pointed at me with his beer and mouthed, "You and me, baby" and I hoped that I wasn't flushed as I smiled and squinted my eyes in what I hoped was an irresistible way. I could feel daggers coming from a girl standing next to me. I remember I stood up a little taller even though it crossed my mind that Nick was just trying to poach me because I got a scholarship to play volleyball at a division 1 college, but I knew he played in high school and in college as well for a year, maybe even two, so I did my best to relax into the fact that he picked me.

I relished the feeling of the sun, the smell of sunscreen and the breeze carrying the scent of all the jasmine lining the property toward us and I remember the playful chest bump after winning an intense volley and the way our high five turned into a hand hold after I won the game for us and then he gave my ass a smack with a subtle squeeze that neither of us mentioned or reacted to in any capacity. I can hear the laughter and cheering and screaming and I can see his deep eyes closing in on me when I hit the last cup in beer pong, getting us to the next round and I can feel him grab me and pull me into him so he could wrap his arm around me and squeeze, his teeth bared, nose wrinkled and I remember my body telling me that the way he did it was a clear indication that he would be horrible in bed, that we were not a fit. My mind told me I was

overreacting because I saw jealous stares and eye rolls and God was he gorgeous, so the subtle alert was pushed to the side.

After we won the tournament we took it as our duty to get sloppy which was an easy task to accomplish since everyone wanted to take shots with the winning team or blow lines with the winning team or do a bump of molly with the winning team and one thing about me is that I don't say no to activities such as these.

Once we were permanently floating, he nibbled my earlobe, which I hate, and it made my stomach churn the way it always does when someone nibbles my earlobe, but because of the extracurriculars I was partaking in at the time, I let him do it anyway without any verbal objection.

I ended up passing out in a guest suite with my sister-in-law, Carly, and the last thing I remember was that we were discussing if it's better to live in the city or the valley and then I was waking up just before ten-thirty that night because I heard something shatter. Carly only shifted her weight but I got out of bed and when I opened the door to peek into the great room, I saw Nick holding hands with the chick that was staring at me earlier in the day, ushering her toward the front door. My heart dropped and I tried to duck back into the room but I couldn't move very fast and so we ended up making eye contact. He did a double-take when he realized I was me and he shrugged every-so-slightly, tilted his head to the side and then nudged his chin at me with a wink. I was left to interpret this however I pleased. In the moment I narrowed my eyes and smashed my lips together sarcastically before I finally slid back into the room to check my phone for something to save me and found nothing.

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The next day I was still kind of fucked up and was feeling competitive, so I texted him “good morning, champ,” like a real loser and he never responded, which should have informed me of the way things would go, which was that for the next few days I texted him something lame and psycho and he would actively ignore me by responding with just an emoji or an “lol” or some other non-response. After the third day I had given up and stopped texting him even though by that point, I had memories replaying in my mind of when we were on summer break from college and we’d stay up all night talking and laughing and watching movies and not even hook up. We’d just fall asleep or one of us would sneak away while the other was passed out and we never even mentioned it. So when he reached out three days later asking if I wanted to go to dinner I said yes. He canceled and rescheduled the dinner four times until we just stopped communicating with each other and then, of course, I ended up running into him at Bobby’s nearly a week after we last spoke.

When we made eye contact my insides felt suffocated and I thought he was going to ignore me in person, in front of everyone and make me feel like an idiot. Instead the exact opposite happened and I felt quite special, actually because instead of ignoring me and playing the game I assumed he would play, he saw me and then gave some slack to his knees, dropped his shoulders, leaned his head to the side and opened his arms wide, as if seeing me made him weak in the knees, that I was exactly what he needed in that moment. Bobby and Adam and Sonny and Kitty and Kaethe were there and they all saw it, too. I didn’t imagine it. In fact, they all copied him and ended up enveloping me in a group hug saying, “Elizabeth, Eliizabeth,” over and over along with other sweet nothings in exaggerated voices.

A few hours later I went to the kitchen to grab another drink with Kaethe and Nick appeared. He came over to me, his arms outstretched again. "I didn't get a real hug," he said and then to Kaethe, "Everyone else wanted to join in."

"We love our girl!" Kaethe responded with her back to us.

I felt so special and was smiling when he squeezed me into him. He looked down at me and for a moment it felt like I was in a movie and I had forgotten my lines and what came next. I felt like something was expected of me but I didn't know what it was and so I just kept smiling at him in what I hoped was a really gorgeous and seductive way and it worked I guess because then he kissed my forehead and squeezed me again with the arm draped over me. I noticed a girl watching us and when she realized she was caught she rolled her eyes hard and walked back out to where the rest of the party was. I thought about how it seemed that he was in such high demand and I didn't want to think anything of it but inevitably I would and then I would get a flicker in my stomach that I would, inevitably, ignore.

For the rest of the night he showed me a lot of affection and I didn't object to any of it. Sometimes it felt off putting, but if I'm honest, it somehow felt familiar, so I let it slide. I would be standing near him, talking to some friends, catching up and suddenly I'd feel a hand wrap around my thigh. I'd turn and it would be him, sitting on the couch next to where I was standing. If I was sitting on the arm of a couch or chair he'd suddenly be on that couch or in that chair and his hand would be on the small of my back. He would bring me drinks. He would kiss the top of my head. He would stare. He would wink at me from across the room.

Kitty dragged me to the bathroom. "What is happening?"

I shrugged and did the drugs she lined up for me. "I actually have no idea."

She nodded for a long time. "Right." I shrugged again. "Well, if it becomes... an *issue*..."

“Yeah, of course.”

I knew what she meant and she knew I wouldn't say anything about any issues that arose but at least we'd been ceremonious about it all and to that we drank.

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That was the night I went home with him. He was so sweet and opened doors for me and helped me in and out of the car and I remember feeling fucked up and gorgeous. I remember him texting someone named Sara on the car ride. I remember he made me laugh so hard I started crying. I remember walking into his apartment for the first time and smelling cinnamon. I remember there was a large framed photo in his bathroom of a naked woman that had a clear shower curtain pulled over her head like maybe she was being suffocated. I remember the look in his eyes when he seemed to turn into something else.

I was having a lot of fun at first. Feeling drunk and high and gorgeous will basically always be the beginning of me being open to doing almost anything and so when he put some porn on in the living room after we had been laughing non-stop for what felt like an hour, I thought it was kind of hot and really no big deal. He adored me and I could feel it in his hands, the way he removed my clothes, gentle and firm. I ignored the scratching of the wool rug because the way he slid into me was delicious and supple and full of so much care and when I opened my eyes and stared into his, I couldn't help but smile. And that's when I felt him losing his grip and he started becoming flaccid. I didn't mind initially because that's just the way it goes sometimes when there are drugs and booze involved and anyway, most guys that walk around like they're the shit have all had a hard time staying hard or getting hard and even having sex in general so I wasn't shocked and I wasn't going to embarrass him.

He turned me over and I obliged as he was wagging his dick in his hand and I said, "it's okay" to comfort him as I leaned down so he could see all of me and he made a sound that I think now was fury because he slapped my ass so hard that I yelped and then the television was playing something different. There was a man behind a naked woman and her face wasn't visible because it was covered by what looked like a muzzle and her moans and screams didn't sound sexual exactly and I breathed, "what is this," with a little laugh and he grabbed my hair and yanked so hard that my neck cracked and he told me, through gritted teeth, to shut the fuck up or else *I'd* be in a muzzle and did I want to be in a muzzle? Huh? Did I? He was hard again and slamming himself into me and I kept my eyes shut until I got too dizzy and needed to open them to find a sense of balance before squeezing them tightly again. I tried hard not to squeal because that seemed to make things worse.

I needed this to be over and I tried to turn over because my knees were burning on the rug but before I could he forced himself into my ass and heat rushed through my entire body and I saw stars and when I tried to move away from him he grabbed my hips and lifted me up to him with a rageful ease. I grabbed onto the coffee table and watched the coasters and coke bounce around and I did my best to focus on them and clenched my jaw so hard that days later it's still sore. I could hear that he was almost finished so I shut my eyes again and suddenly he pulled out of me, whirled me around so fast I thought I was going to fall over and he shoved his dick so hard into my mouth that I felt my eyes bulge and I nearly vomited and if that wasn't going to make me yack the taste of myself almost and but he seemed to enjoy the ordeal and came almost immediately. Somehow through my choking and gasping and swallowing I kept everything and more down. He collapsed onto the couch and shut the television, panting. I can't remember exactly what I did after that.

He seemed proud of himself. He shut the tv. He said he was going to shower and asked if I wanted to join him and I said I needed a second to lay there and he laughed and said, “Of course” and winked. He touched my chin gently and I fought the urge to jerk my face away.

When I heard him get into the shower, I dressed quickly, grabbed the vodka from the table to gargle into the sink before taking a swig, then went to the cookie jar where I saw he stashed his drugs, stole a bag and ran outside with my shoes in hand. It was 4:19 in the morning and I walked down the street as fast as I could, ignoring the pain in my butt, legs, knees, feet, neck, throat and while I waited for a car to pick me up I saw I had a text from Kitty telling me to text her when I made it home safe so I messaged her back and said *omw home -xo* and I wiped my face when the car finally pulled up next to me.

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Soaking in the bath, the water so hot that I'm sweating and I feel like my skin is melting, I see flashes of the woman being suffocated. I can hear him telling me that he'd see me soon and I feel his hand on my leg or my back and I can see the sweet smile he would give me when bringing me drink refills or sliding a mirror of lines my way and I can't stop thinking about him keeping me on the edge of my seat, waiting impatiently for the word. I think about when he was ignoring my texts. How I was so pathetic in how insistent I was on seeing him, on needing to feel like I was winning something, but also how he somehow made it seem he wanted to see me. I'm wondering how often he plays this game. Those other girls, the girls whose eyes I'd catch, were caught up in it, too. Does this always work? Does he always bring girls back to his place that smells like cinnamon and start off with laughter and then fun porn that turns to scary porn? Is the suffocating woman a warning sign and those who heed it are rewarded by keeping their dignity and asshole intact?

He is the guy that keeps you on the edge of your seat, waiting impatiently for his call and when you get it, you jump, but he isn't there to greet you. He's not there to catch you or save you. He lets you fall. But you don't fall to your death. He lets you fall from a distance that breaks everything from the waist down and then he disappears and you have to find a way to put everything back together. And he doesn't worry about if things will ever work properly again. If everything will return to the space it's meant to be in. That isn't his problem. Even if he fucking pushed you, and let's be real, he does push you, it would never be his problem.

I don't realize that tears are streaming down my face and my chest is rising and falling with great effort until my phone goes off and snaps me back to the present moment. I dry off a hand and see that Blithe is having a last minute girl's night. Dinner, party bus, karaoke and those that are able are welcome to day drink at her place and get ready. She needs a pick me up, she says and everyone is responding that they do, too. I suddenly feel my heart being revived from my girlfriends and the uppers I've ingested in the last thirty minutes and so I let out the water and my shaking hand grips the side of the tub so I can stand up, droplets of water falling back into the tub and onto the floor, and I turn up the music and then I see myself in the mirror and actually, I look really great.