

The Clip

I lay in his bed, alone. If we were at my place I would have assumed he had already gotten out of dodge, but one of the last things he told me before he fell asleep last night was that he gets antsy in the morning if he lays in bed for too long, so to not be concerned if I were to wake up to empty bed. Which I had. I was half asleep when I felt him rustling. The creak of the bed, the light in the hall. But the tired brain didn't care and fell back asleep. There's something sweet about his last thought before falling asleep was thinking of me, and thinking ahead to any concerns I would have after sleeping over at guy's for the first time.

This was our third week of dating? It was one of those things that feels a lot longer than it actually is. The beginning of things usually do, at least in my experience. I think I read something about how if we do the same thing every day, after a while our memories compress to make it easier, but that makes it feel like time is going faster. So when you do something new, meet a new person, start a new job things start to go slow as you experience a bunch of things for the first time, but slowly those things become part of the routine, so it feels like it's going faster, but it's just that you have less to remember, because it's all the same.

It was the first time we had sex last night, and it was nice. Only a little awkward. Definitely the best first time I've had with someone. I always liked to wait a little bit before sleeping with a guy, and I think it helps, to know each other a little better. Also makes me feel a little more sure, always worried about being labeled as a slut for some reason. Not that I have ever been called one, but I also just don't want to throw it away on just anyone. But sometimes I just get horny, and last night we were fooling around, and I was having a good time so I went for it. Trying to decide if it's more "feminist" to have a timetable for when you want to get intimate with someone, and sticking to it, even when you get horny or caught up in the moment or if its

silly to have the idea of a timetable and you should just sleep with whoever you want whenever you want. Part of me wants to be that sexually liberated girl who has no remorse or ever second-guesses herself, but sometimes I wonder if that girl even exists? Sure, we ladies can go sleep with whoever we want but there's still gonna be some heartbreak, a pregnancy scare, higher risk of STDs and I hate all the media that makes it seem like there's no consequence. I'm also a pretty picky person, so I can't imagine finding that many people that I would 100% want to have sex with? Like there's gotta be a couple of people in there that were just about getting off for a night or not feeling lonely. You can't have that much sex and have it all be good.

I need to get out of my own head, I also really need to pee. So I finally get out of bed, his bed. Part of me is stalling because I'm mad we didn't get to get up together. I'm not sure where he is right now honestly. Part of me still hoping he just got up first to make us breakfast and so long as I lounge in bed I can keep up the fantasy of him returning to bed with a plate of something that will definitely get crumbs on his nice sheets. So there can be a moment where I look at him and tell him that I'm afraid to get crumbs on his nice sheets so that he can tell me its sweet that I care but he doesn't mind, he was going to do laundry today anyway so I can make as much of a mess as I want.

Sometimes I think my imagination is too active for my own good. That at any moment I will spiral too far in either direction, that eventually Ben will just not live up to my wildest fantasies or he won't text me back for an hour and I'll assume he's done with me.

There's no mirror in his bedroom. At first I find it odd, but then I decide it makes sense. Ben's not a vain guy, it's never good to date a guy that is. And he wouldn't go out and purchase a mirror when there's a perfectly good one in the bathroom. I feel like we've all been ruined sometimes by the way that Hollywood sets are always perfectly designed, that even a poor, well

“Hollywood poor”: the kind of person who jokes about not being able to make rent but also lives in an apartment that they shouldn’t have even been approved for on their “writer” salary that’s perfectly decorated with all these rugs and lamps and wall art that no one with the social life these characters have would have time to buy and perfectly place. I look beneath my feet and see a cheap rug that I’m almost positive I saw at Target the other day. Just something to keep your feet warm when you get out of bed: cheap, practical, all a guy really needs.

As much as my internal findings agree that a mirror in the bedroom is a bad sign I wish I could check my appearance before I wander out in the hallway looking for the bathroom. I don’t want to use my phone camera because the mirror always seems to be kinder and I would rather think I look ok and not know, than think I look bad when I don’t, cause that kinda self-esteem just makes you look worse. I fluff my hair and wipe my face to wake it up and to rid myself of any possible schmutz. I pick my T-shirt off the floor, look around for yours but you’re either wearing it or you already threw it in the hamper. I debate looking in your drawer for one, but I feel like wearing a guy’s shirt only works if it’s the one from the night before, and I’m more worried Ben will be the kinda guy that would want me to ask than think it’s sexy. Especially since I would have to dig into a drawer. That feels possibly invasive. I decide against pants though, still need to be a little sexy.

I finally leave the safety of the bedroom, half exposed, tip-toeing down the hall. I can hear you shuffling in the kitchen, but I sneak into the bathroom first. I confront my face in the mirror, it isn’t half bad. My lips are a little bit chapped so I rub some water on them and try to bite off the little flaps of skin. I pull a little too hard on one part of my lip and I bleed. Crap. I rub the blood off, rub a little on my lips to redden them up. I suck on the bleeding part while I sit down to pee. I rub my chilly legs and notice a patch of hair I missed on the underside of my right

leg. Damn, I always miss a spot. He doesn't have a toilet paper roll holder, at least not in an obvious spot, I turn around in the seat to see if he just has a roll sitting on the tank lid, and would you look at that he does. We can work on that one at least. Take him to home depot and steer him over to bathroom fixtures, and would you look at that, hey don't you need a toilet paper holder?

You know what you do have. You have a hair clip. A very girly-looking hair clip on your bathroom floor between your sink and your toilet. Something that might have been placed on a sink by some girl about to get ready for bed, and then knocked on the floor accidentally and subsequently forgotten as she's about to leave the next morning, groggy-eyed, walking to the bathroom with his shirt, no pants, smooth lips, and perfectly shaved hair, no, waxed probably!

Fuck, we've literally only been together a few weeks, he can't already be cheating on me when we've only just had sex for the first time last night! We briefly mentioned that we're both old-school monogamists in this world of polyamory and casual dating. I remember he told me he kinda secretly liked that I made him wait after we did it. Made him feel special.

Unless I'm the other woman? She's out of town visiting her sick mother and he's been so understanding about her being away all the time, never bothers her, and is always so sweet and attentive when she's back but little does she know that he's on the prowl for unsuspecting girls who makes the mistake of responding to his silly little pick-up lines on tinder. Even if he has to wait almost a month to sleep with one of them, it's the challenge isn't it?

Best case scenario? He's a cross-dresser, no he has a sister! That's what it always is in the t.v. show when they spend the first half making you think he totally cheated but everything ties together in a neat little bow at the end. The sister is the girl he was with, and he lied about where he was because he was buying his girlfriend a Christmas gift.

I don't think this questionably dirty hair clip is my Christmas gift. It's also August.

I rinse the clip off before examining it further. It's small and black and shaped like a butterfly. It's cute. It's probably nothing. I'm just gonna ask him. Let him explain himself. At least I'll be catching him off guard, so I'll probably get an honest reaction.

I dry my hands, hold the clip in my closed fist (no pants, so no pockets) and calmly walk out of the bathroom. My legs are a little stiff from trying to walk too normally with a balled-up fist. Is it bad that my hands are already sweating? I have to rotate the clip in my hand because I'm clenching too hard and one of the wings digs into my palm. He's got his back turned to me, which is a momentary relief as I can take stock of the room before he sees me. He hasn't made breakfast, but it looks like he made a pot of coffee, of which he's standing in front of and is topping himself off with. He also left out, cereal, milk, a clean bowl and a spoon. I remember Ben saying he's not much of a breakfast person, so the prepped bowl of cereal is his equivalent of my spread in bed.

Ben turns around and finally notices me. He smiles. That goofy smile and that nicely laid out cereal bowl are almost enough to make me forget the clip that's found a way to dig into my hand again. He sits down his mug and walks around to the counter to pull out a chair in front of the cereal bowl.

"Here, sit," He tells me, and like a true gentleman, when I sit, he pushes my chair in.

"Thanks."

He returns to his mug on the other side of the counter.

"Do you want some?" he says, lifting his Dunder Mifflin mug that was definitely a secret Santa gift at some point. I don't think he likes the office that much.

"Oh I don't really drink coffee" he looks surprised, and then also seems to feel bad for not knowing. I mean granted a few of our dates have been at coffee shops, which I firmly believe

are great places to start breaking the ice. But he must have not noticed that the only thing I ever ordered was chai teas. As much as I like surprising people, like with the fact my ears aren't pierced, you would not believe how many times I've gotten earrings from friends and family, and there's a kernel of sadness that comes with it, a feeling of being looked over and not really seen.

But it's also still pretty early in the relationship. I backtrack.

"I really like the smell of coffee though, ever since I was little." He listens, I feel the need to go on: "I actually always wanted to live with someone who drinks coffee so that I could smell it every morning without having to drink it."

He smiles again. And I start feeling goofy again. I hope that wears away fast cause I'm not going to be able to get anything done around here with that. He doesn't respond, instead leans against the counter and sips his coffee.

Was that too forward? I hope he doesn't think I want to move in this early. I'm also trying to lean into the idea of comfortable silences. Partly because my track record shows that when I try to fill awkward silences I just make more of a fool of myself. The next logical step would be to just start making a bowl of cereal. I go to reach for the cereal when I remember the clip. I quickly move my hands back down to the safety of my lap. Ben notices my jolting. I want to conceal my hand, I haven't even prepared my confrontation. Or exactly what I'm confronting him about. But there's no turning back now.

Before I give him a chance to say anything I slowly pull my hand up and place the butterfly clip on the counter in front of me. Ben can't tell what it is at first so he leans forward to take a better look. His face falls and my stomach drops. Any hope of 'ah nice, my sister was looking for that' has left. And if he tries to pull anything like that, I'll know what I'm dealing with at least.

Ben puts down the mug. Takes a breath. I hate seeing him nervous.

“Ok, so I’m going to be honest with you. That belongs to a girl I dated before you. And I really want to stress that, before. I really hate cheating and cheaters and I would never do it for my own self-respect and especially for the sake of anyone I *really* cared about.”

Does he know what he’s doing? That ‘anyone I *really* cared about’ line. Knowing it was the perfect thing to end with, and exactly what I wanted to hear. I’ve learned from interrogation videos recommended to me on Youtube that sometimes it’s just better to stay quiet. Nervous people want to fill the silence.

He walks around the counter to sit next to me on another high-top chair. He holds my hands and looks into my eyes. He knows what he’s doing. My hands stay relatively limp, I feel like squeezing him back would be accepting the apology when I still want to learn more.

“Listen I know we hadn’t really talked about it, but I think you know I’m not really a casual dating person. That’s what she wanted. And so it ended. That was way before you.”

I break my silence.

“How long before?” I guess not long enough for him to have done a good bathroom clean and find the clip and dispose of it on his own. But sometimes guys surprise me with how gross they can let things get. Or what they consider clean. I know my brother would wipe down the mirror and pour cleaner in the toilet bowl and call it a day.

His grip loosens as he looks up and thinks. I try to remember a video about lying that tells you if a person looks up to the left or right it either means they're recalling a memory or making something up and I can never remember which one is which and I tell myself to check that later.

“I’m not sure, we were never really dating, so it wasn’t a decisive breakup, we kinda just drifted apart.”

He didn't really answer the question, but if the point is to show that he doesn't care about her, I guess that's coming across.

I look at the unmade bowl of cereal laid out for me. I wonder how long the milk has been sitting out. It's probably room temperature by now.

I don't like that Ben is staring at me. I'm bad at making eye contact in times like this. Instead I look at the milk.

"Ok," I say, half surprising myself. The discussion doesn't feel over, but I don't want to stretch this out when I don't know what to say myself. It feels too soon to have a fight. And it's not really a fight, it's a discussion. It feels too soon to have a deep dive into our exes. As much as I'm painfully curious about what happened, and mostly what went wrong, I don't want to push him.

"I believe you"

Ben pulls me into a hug, it's awkward because we're still half sitting on the stools. Ben realizes this and stands up so he can hold me better, but he's awkwardly squished between the two stools. I appreciate the discomfort he puts himself through for me here. I stretch my hands up around his neck and hold him tight. His hands move down to the small of my back. He pulls back, holding on to my waist, I keep my hands on his shoulders. We're bracing ourselves against each other. He looks into my eyes, and I can't look away when we're like this. I think he knows that.

"Hey, I really like you, and I want to see how this goes. Just to be clear, I'm not seeing anyone else right now."

"Me neither," I say, even though he doesn't really ask.

Ben smiles, he wanted to ask, without asking, without putting me on the spot. Letting me be a “modern woman” if I wanted to, or letting me dodge the question if I so pleased. Not the kind of guy to turn around a conversation, point fingers at an equally unsatisfied girlfriend when he is accused of cheating.

And maybe it’s the way that he’s holding me. It’s funny how more than touching my boobs or my butt, I really get turned on by being held by the waist. I like feeling secure, grounded. I’m more aware of my naked legs, underwear creeping out from under my T-shirt. Ben looks down and he’s aware of it too. He looks unsure if now is the time to make moves after just getting out of the dog house. But right now I’m starting to forget that little black clip on the counter. I pull him into a kiss to let him know that it’s alright and he holds me a little tighter. His right hand pulls at the corner of my shirt and sneaks inside. I let him have a little fun before I pat his other arm. He pulls back and looks at me with these concerned puppy dog eyes, terrified he misread my signals and did something wrong.

“Oh don’t worry it’s fine, I’m just hungry, can I eat first?”

Ben laughs, slides off his stool, and squeezes me from behind, at an angle that makes me groan a little before he releases me. He returns to the other side of the counter to reclaim his coffee. I pour some cereal, reach out for the milk. I was right. It’s warm.

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I wake up with too much space in the bed. A little colder too because my personal space heater has left. I like cuddling in the morning; he hates the feeling of wasting time. Not as far behind him this morning, I can hear water running in the bathroom. Sometimes we’ll sit on the couch and read together after breakfast: our compromise. I only have a little left in the book I’m

reading right now, maybe I can borrow one of his. I slide off the bed and look through the books on top of his dresser. I pick one, *Thirteen Stories* from the end. Looks like a horror book, is that what I'm in the mood for? Maybe I'll ask him for a recommendation. I place it down in front of the others, a temporary hold.

My feet are freezing on the cold floor, I decide to steal one of his socks as payment for making me get out of bed this early on a Saturday. I pull open his top drawer, no socks—junk drawer: coins, old visa gift cards, receipts, a cable with a plug that I can't immediately identify, scissors, a very beaten up deck of cards, birthday cards, a crayon, matches, a small black clip in the shape of a butterfly.

I blink hard, hoping it's just something that looks like a butterfly clip. I pick it up to inspect it closer. There's no mistaking it. I feel sick.

I could have sworn he threw it away. I can't remember exactly what happened, but I definitely don't remember him trying to keep it. Justifying it with a 'she'll probably want it back'. Even still it must be three, three and a half months now? If he was going to give it back he would have by now. That would be stupid anyway. Leaving a hair clip at someone's apartment and making a point to give it back is the modern-day equivalent of a Victorian woman dropping her handkerchief for a gentleman to pick up for her.

Is that what was happening? Did she leave it on purpose as a test? More importantly why the fuck did he keep it? I slam the drawer closed. I'm still cold. I pull open the next drawer, underwear and undershirts, next one, socks FINALLY. I find what looks to be the warmest pair and slip them on. Now I really don't care about imposing myself. I check the bottom drawer, find a pair of sweats and slip them on. I do whatever is the degree below storm into his kitchen/living room, walk hurriedly while still trying to be mindful of his downstairs neighbor, it's still early.

He's already sitting on the couch, feet propped up, bare (how?), coffee mug in hand, he has a million mugs but as long as this one is clean he always uses this stupid office one. I think because it's the biggest one he has.

He looks up at me, smiles, and then looks down at my stolen attire.

"I see you've found the pants." I ignore his joke, my face feels hot, I take a breath so I don't stumble my words.

"Hey Ben", I hold up the clip, "what the fuck is this?" His eyes widen, he puts down the mug.

"Why were you looking in my drawer?" He asks. I was prepared for this.

"Yeah, I was looking for socks, because your apartment is always freezing, and you always leave me alone in the bed in the morning."

"I didn't want to wake you, I know you like to sleep in a little longer on your days off."

"Ok but the more important thing is why do you still have this Ben? I could have sworn you threw it away. Did you pull it out of the trash when I wasn't looking?" He looks offended.

"I definitely didn't do that."

"Ok but did you try to make me think you got rid of it when you just kept it?"

"I don't remember what exactly I did, but I know I wasn't trying to make it seem like I was throwing it away, or hiding it from you. I think I just kept it."

"Ok, but why did you keep it?"

"Wait, don't you have letters your high school boyfriend wrote you while he was in summer camp?"

"Why do you keep throwing this back at me? Can't you see how that's different?"

"How is it different?"

“Cause that was a letter, it was personal, I’ve kept almost every letter anyone has ever written me. I have every birthday/Christmas/holiday card my grandparents ever wrote me and there’s not even a note in that, just ‘love, Nana and Pop-pop’. It was my first relationship, it was sweet and I haven’t seen my high school boyfriend in years! You are keeping the hairclip of a girl you ‘just hooked up with.’ Were you planning on hitting her up one of these days ‘hey I think you left this at my place a while ago, do you want to come get it? *wink wink*’.”

“I haven’t talked to her since we started dating if that’s what you’re asking”

“How long before? You never answered that”

“uhh...I’m not sure, especially now that it’s been so long”

“Give me an estimate then”

“A few weeks?”

“Better yet, check your phone, timestamps and all that”

“You really want me to do that?”

“You really want to argue with me?” Ben pulls out his phone and starts scrolling through his messages and now I don’t know what to do with myself. I look over to the electric kettle, there’s an empty mug sitting next to it, my favorite of Ben’s mugs, a dark blue one from his family’s yearly cape cod trip. Bones Coffee, with that speckled foam paint that looks like it drips down the top of the mug and a big cut-out design of a mermaid hugging a skeleton. The box of earl grey tea he bought just for me, my coffee boy, sits next to it. I don’t know why he feels the need to prep it for me. It doesn’t take long for me to pick out the mug and grab the tea from the pantry, but now if he ever didn’t do it, I would be worried.

“Uh, the last text I sent her was on July 30th.” I snap back to his misdeeds.

“Ben, wasn’t our first date August 5th?”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, because that’s my friend Ellie’s birthday and everyone was asking about my date over dinner.”

“Oh”

“Ben that’s less than a week.”

“In my head, it always seemed like longer because it was different months.” He’s still sitting; I’ve been standing this whole time. We’re at a standstill. I feel like I need to push him for every answer, it’s exhausting. I don’t know what else to ask him.

“But why? Why did you keep it?”

“I told you, it’s like a memento.” I feel like I’m getting nowhere with this. I think back to his previous answers.

“You said that was the last time *you* texted *her*. Did she ever text you back?”

“No.”

“If she had texted you back would we have ever gone on that date?”

He looks at me in a way that I don’t want him to answer now. I thought I was feeling sick before, but now my stomach is really turning. I really need to eat or drink when I first get up in the morning or else I get nauseous. But I’m not gonna start pulling out frying pans and making myself an egg. I run to the bathroom, and you know I hope I throw up because then he’ll feel bad.

“Wait Chlo, can we finish talking about this?” He calls after me, but I’m not sure if he gets up to follow me, I’m too focused on getting away.

I slam the bathroom door, lock it. I lean over the sink and take deep breaths. I don't think I'm gonna throw up anymore but there's a tightness in my chest and I go to rub it and I realize my hand hurts and I notice I've been holding the clip in my balled-up fist the entire time.

I'm mad at the clip. For throwing a wrench in my otherwise solid relationship with a guy whose ideal morning is making a cup of tea for me and reading together on the couch. I wonder what she was like? How she got into his head so well? What she did differently, (better?!) and why she never texted him back? I can almost picture her with this clip, cutesy in a sexy way. She pulls her hair out of her face so she can suck your dick better. She takes really good photos because she knows all of her angles, and never feels weird about asking her friends or strangers to take photos of her. Knows how to make a guy fall in love with her with a simple tilt of the head, a widening of the eyes. Makes herself look small so he can feel big. She doesn't get self-conscious when he goes to eat her out, she wants to have sex every day.

I look at myself in the mirror and I hate how red my face looks. I hate the shape of my eyes. I hate how frizzy my hair is every day except the day I wash it. I run my fingers through it to straighten it out, but I slept weird, so it's flat on one side.

I look at the clip in my hand. I pull back my hair, fasten the clip, tilt my head to the side and down, look back up at myself in the mirror.

I like it.