

Approximately 1500 words

Imaginary Boyfriend

It took me a few beats to figure out exactly what Alex had said to me.

“You’re... what... who’s your boyfriend?” I said.

“He is,” said Alex, gesturing at the empty seat beside her. “This is Greg.” She waved her hand up and down, fingers flicking about. “He’s not real.”

“I don’t get it.” I said. “What is this?”

“I’m trying something new, okay? I’m dating an imaginary boyfriend” said Alex. She cut off a bite of her blueberry pancakes with the edge of her fork, then pointed it at me. “You,” fork punctuating the pronoun, “you of all people should understand.”

“Excuse me?”

“God, Marissa.”

“Did I do something to offend you?”

“No, no, no, the opposite.” Alex smiled sweetly enough that I believed her. “I’m just going for my type.”

“Oh, Jesus, Alex, this is - “

“Hear me out, hear me out.” She cleared her throat. “So, you’re the one who pointed out that the guys I date are - “

“Assholes?”

“Unavailable.” She glared momentarily, then returned to a sort of lilac serenity. “Like, either emotionally unavailable or physically unavailable.” This was true. I’d made this point a few weeks back after her latest conquest had ducked out. There was the guy she pined after while he backpacked through Thailand, the graphic designer with the cheap and cheerful tattoos and the emotional maturity of a twelve year old, the professor-type she’d met at a wine bar who was *definitely* engaged, and the string of meet-once-date-virtuallys that I would’ve chalked up to the old “girlfriend in Canada” ruse had I not known her better. On the surface it was perhaps quite difficult to discern a pattern, but once lined up each was unmistakably linked by a single common characteristic; they just weren’t *there* enough, in their own ways, and weren’t going to be any time in the near (or far) future.

“This is true,” I said.

“Right,” she said. “I know. And I have to thank you for pointing that out.” She blinked.

“Really.”

“Okay...”

“Anyway, after Josh left, I thought, well, why not take it to the extreme?” She took a bite and continued, hand covering her mouth as she chewed. “Like, if I have a type, why not go for the ultimate version of that type? A guy who’s emotionally and physically unavailable to the *max* - because he’s not there at all to begin with?”

I sighed a heavy sigh and poked at my remaining Huevos Rancheros. “Alex, this is grim. This is very, very grim.”

“I can see why it may come off that way.” She looked over to the seat next to her. “But Greg... I mean, I think that this could work. If this is what I really go after, I’ve got to give it a shot, right?”

I was dubious, but I know when to keep my mouth shut. “Whatever works for you, Alex.” I said. “Whatever makes you happy.”

She smiled and held an imaginary hand. “We are happy.” She smiled. “We are.”

My phone woke me up. I turned to look at my wall clock. Middle of the fucking night. I looked at my phone. Alex.

I answered. “What.” I said.

Alex was crying. “Marissa,” she said, hiccuping. “Marissa, can we talk?”

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, what’s wrong?”

“Oh,” she said, letting out a huge sob. “It’s stupid.”

“What is it?”

“You won’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She sniffled. “It’s Greg.”

“For fucks sake,” I said.

“SEE I KNEW YOU WOULDN’T GET-”

“No, no, no, no,” I made motions to calm her down which of course she couldn’t see since we were on the phone. “Sorry, it’s just the middle of the night. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Well,” she said, pausing again to let out a whimper. “Well, you know that everything was going *fine* before.”

“Right -“

“I was learning to cook his favorite meals, we joined that fantasy football league, we even took that pottery class together -”

“Yes, yes, yes-”

“But lately I’ve just been,” another sob, “I’ve just been feeling like there’s something between us. Like he’s drifting away and we’re falling apart.”

I took a deep breath, aware of how lightly I was going to have to tread. “Alex,” I said. “Sweetie. You do know that you’ve made him up. If you don’t want him to drift away, then, you know, don’t let him.”

“But I don’t want to control him!” she said, hysterically. “I don’t want to be *that* girlfriend who’s always bossing her boyfriend around and telling him what to do! That’s, like, my nightmare!”

“I...” I shook my head. How to respond? “Okay.”

“But at the same time, it’s like, I don’t even know what we’re getting out of this anymore. It’s like he’s never around. And when I talk to him it’s in one ear, out the other - it’s like I’m talking to a wall.” She started winding herself up. “So then what’s the point? If he’s being so distant, I know there’s got to be a reason, but I don’t want to *make* him tell me, so what do I do? And is there any way to even save this whole thing, or is whatever I do just going to fix this one

issue, and is every single thing going to be this whole freaking battle again just trying to figure out what's going wrong? What have I gotten myself into? What's going to happen to us?"

"Alex." I said. "Alex. You've got to slow down here."

I heard her take a deep, ragged breath in and out. "Okay," she said.

"Alex," I said. "Please don't take this the wrong way. But this is literally what you signed up for." I paused in case she blew a gasket. Hearing nothing on the other end of the line, I continued. "You created this imaginary boyfriend based on the fact that you were attracted to unavailability. If it's not working, well... you can get out at any time. Maybe it's worth sitting down and really thinking through what's meaningful to you. Or why you're attracted to unavailability in the first place."

It was her turn to sigh. "Oh, Marissa... I know. It's so hard, though. I keep forgetting he's not real, you know? He's real enough to me."

"I know," I said (I didn't know). "I get it." (I didn't get it).

She laughed, her nose stuffy. "God, I must just sound so *crazy* right now!"

"Nooo..."

"It's okay," she said. "It is a bit crazy."

"It is a bit crazy," I said. "But crazy's okay."

"You think?" she said.

"I think," I said. "Try to get some sleep. Deal with it when you wake up. Things will feel much more manageable in the morning."

"You're a good friend, Marissa."

"Only cause you are," I said. "Now go back to bed." And I hung up the phone.

Alex leaned in, conspiratorially. “So, what do you think?” Roger had just excused himself to go to the bathroom. Three months had passed with no phone calls, and then there was this.

I smiled, genuinely. “He seems great, Alex. Really great.”

She beamed. “I know, right?! I keep on pinching myself practically, like maybe I’m dreaming, or maybe I’m hallucinating. He’s too good to be true.”

I chuckled and took a sip of my coffee. “Well, I don’t know about that.” I figured now was as good a time as any. “So... that Greg stuff...”

Alex flushed slightly and rolled her eyes, all self-awareness. “*God*, yes, that. Oh boy. That. Yes, that’s done.”

“Like, *done* done?”

“Done done done,” said Alex. “Finito. Caput.”

“How’d you come to that?” I said.

“Well, it was rather childish, wasn’t it?” Alex stared at me, waiting for an affirmation, but this seemed like dangerous territory. I kept my mouth shut. She eventually continued. “I was just hiding from the real problem, which was, you know, *why* was I into unavailable guys anyway? Like, why?” She paused again, looking to me.

“Are you asking for an answer?” I said, after about 5 seconds of silence, and she started laughing in this jovial way, hand to chest. I’d forgotten how goddamn unnerving conversations with Alex could be. It’s like she always had everything scripted out in her head. Anyway.

“No, silly. I figured it out myself.” And she smiled.

“...Care to elaborate?” I said.

“Oh,” she said, and then looking over my shoulder. “Oh, not now. Later, later.” She grinned at Roger as he sat down next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

“What’ve I missed?” said Roger.

“Not much,” said Alex in a sing-song-y way. “Just catching up.”

“It’s been so long!” I said.

“It really has been,” said Alex. “And so much has happened! Like me meeting a gorgeous, totally lovely man.”

“Yeah, where is that guy?” said Roger, miming a search in a crowd, and then they both laughed into each other. Christ. A relationship of stilted, predictable exchanges for their audience’s benefit. They were really made for each other. Eventually they stopped.

“So,” said Alex. “Enough about me. How are you? Are you seeing anybody?”

“Well.”

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