

This is How I Know:

I know that I am loved.

I know that I am loved because my mother dutifully instructs me to be careful whenever I leave home.

I know that I am loved because after Aaron left the apartment to pick up vitamins for himself, he quickly returned with a pint of chocolate ice cream, too. I know that I am loved because he can't eat dairy, and he knows that I constantly crave chocolate ice cream.

I know that I am loved because after Aaron left for London, he returned with a hat from the Tate Museum. A gift. A postcard with a brief, yet endearing inscription on the back: "May the gallery of art that is our relationship grow and age with beauty and grace."

I know that I am loved because of his sweet susurrations in my ear.

I sift through memories of this nature whenever I am alone. I find myself replaying brief, insignificant conversations whenever I sit idly on the bus. I enjoy my vain attempts to re-imagine the facial expressions of my friends and I relish in my half-sincere efforts to navigate through all of the implications each singular glance can hold. The slight raise of an eyebrow. The tight narrowing of eyes.

When I was a Senior in college, I sat with a therapist and told her that I struggled with controlling my anger. I have told this to Aaron casually; I maintain a dull idea that he does not believe me.

"On Easter Sunday, I threw a glass cup against the wall," I said. "I'm not sure why."

She narrowed her eyes in response. I was not sure why.

"I found a fog machine in the basement. I threw it at a tree in my backyard. Until it broke."

Her gaze gripped mine intently. I thought the space between us would snap in half if we maintained eye contact for a second longer. My eyes fell to my lap. I was fidgeting nervously with one of my hair ties with both of my hands.

"I am in a toxic relationship with a dull and formidable being," I continued. "I went to his house uninvited and threw his laptop across his room after I saw him with someone else." At this moment, I was trying to convince her that I needed help. I was attempting to convince myself that I needed to be there. That I wasn't taking the spot of someone more deserving. Of someone who needed the help more than I did.

"And how long have you been involved with this person?"

I hesitated, only because I was unsure how to answer. "About four years," I said without any real confidence. I was never fully confident with the relationship.

When I was a Sophomore, I asked him to go to my sorority formal with me. I remember it meant a lot to me at the time. I was nervous when I asked him. I had a girlish fear that my

request would be discussed with derision between him and his friends behind my back. But, of course, he ultimately said yes without a beat of hesitation. I remember preparing for the evening with excitement, despite the flutter of nerves circulating my mind. My friend Amanda came over before the formal to check in on me.

I know that I am loved because this is a ritual that my friends frequently practiced while we were in college.

I let Amanda into my dorm room and greeted her warmly. Despite this warmth, Amanda's eyes cradled mine with an arid rigidity. At this moment, they maintained a hint of what I later realized must have been a look of pity. I moved through my room with relative ease as Amanda thoughtfully observed my movements. She didn't speak initially, and her stillness made it hard to intuit exactly what she was thinking. I was fidgeting with my belongings on my desk as she sat down on the edge of my bed. Eventually, I grew tired of the stillness and met her gaze with mutual seriousness.

Amanda was the first one to break. "Will you be ready by about four?" she asked flatly. Amanda offered to drive me and my date, and her and her own date, to the formal venue.

I nodded and smiled. "Yea, I'm sure the drive will go by quickly with the four of us together."

"I agree." There was a slight pause. Amanda's head tilted upwards slightly as if she was expecting her next word to materialize on the ceiling. Her forehead tightened, revealing two slight creases between her eyebrows. Despite tangible hesitation, she continued. "I need to tell you something before we leave to go, though. You might know already, actually."

I continued to fidget with my belongings on my desk, turning pencils over in my hands. Tightening my grip around them. "What's up? Is it anything serious?" My mind was already sifting through the possibilities. Although Amanda's response could have been anything, I knew exactly what she was about to say. I listened anyway.

"I feel like you should know. He asked Laura to his formal next week."

I tried to push my shame aside when I responded, even though I felt as if she wrapped a coarse rope around my neck and thrown me off the side of a building. "How can I even enjoy myself tonight," I swallowed sharply, trying hard to suspend my tears, "knowing this?"

Her eyes are scales measuring the weight exuding from the painful lilt in my voice. We exchanged a few more words before Amanda left. She must have sensed my horror. When she left, I remember thinking that she looked pleased with herself. But not because I suffered, but because in her mind she had fulfilled her duty as a friend.

I closed my door with ornery disdain. I cried out of embarrassment. I cried out of risible shame. While I was crying, I thought about all of the ways that I would confront him later that night. I contemplated the exact words I would use in order to berate him.

I sat in the front seat as Amanda drove. Our dates sat in the back seat together. I laughed at all of his jokes. He always had a certain proclivity for stringing together words that made me laugh.

I smiled as we posed for a photograph together. I kissed him with eagerness. He stood by my side and gazed at me with earnest desire.

I thought about harming myself once I returned home. I didn't. I laid in my bed staring idly at the ceiling motionless like a worthless poltroon.

I know that I am loved because the first time Aaron and I ever spent time together, he opened the door and greeted me with an excited smile. I know that I am loved because we sat side by side at the bar and he positioned his body towards me and asked me questions about my job.

“What are the sixth graders reading?” He smiled and asked his question with sincere interest. His body was twisted towards mine on the bar stool, each of his elbows propped up; One elbow on the edge of the counter, the other on the edge of his chair.

“Tuck Everlasting,” I responded with a light laugh, even though I didn't say anything close to funny, and I knew it. I was amazed that there was an interest. My body was cloaked with a shroud of nervousness.

“Ah,” he responded with light recollection, “the man in the yellow hat.”

“The man in the yellow suit,” I clarified with a lazy wave of my pointer finger in front of me, with a new air of dignity.

The villain without a given name.

I know that I am loved because he placed his hand lightly on my back as he kissed me. Nervous about how our first contact would be received.

I smiled the whole drive home.

When I was a Junior, he told me that he loved me. He pinned my neck and my legs back so I couldn't move. He pushed himself inside of me and looked at me with eyes devoid of emotion. I asked him to stop, but he was not finished. I accepted the restriction and tried to think of something to distract myself from the pain as I remained as motionless as a skinned bird. An ornamental piece mounted to a plaque on an otherwise barren wall. Completely empty. Awaiting the prodding and examination of anyone, whenever they pleased.

I cried myself to sleep.

“Has he ever taken advantage of you?” My therapist asked with eyes as soft as fragmented pieces of chalk, close to disintegration.

My head was tilted towards my lap. Without realizing, the palm of my hand was pressed against my sternum with the clumsy adamance of an iron smoothing inexpensive fabric. The

events returned to me in a spate of flashes, but there was no hint of a past incision from my collar to my belly. My feathers were, for the most part, still intact. “No,” I continued, “never.”

I know that I am loved because Aaron hugs my whole body and kisses my forehead. I know that I am loved because Aaron leans into me and tells me about his depression. He knows that I love him because I hold his body as he moves through his emotions. He knows that I love him because I relinquish my body to him, and allow him to move through me. I am comfortable with his body pressed against mine and I do not resist when he asks to watch me touch myself.

When I was a senior, he told me that he wanted to see other people. I did not want to accept this. I no longer wanted to be told what my position in the universe would be. I wanted to smash the globe with a baseball bat and watch it spin and spin and spin until it capitulates and destructs.

“You deserve better than me,” he said with a soft voice, attempting to convince my unshakable desire.

“Why would you think that?” I pressed on, “we are happy together.” I knew that I was lying even as the words poured out of me. We had never been happy.

I walked home alone that night, mindlessly kicking the rocks scattered across the sidewalk and watching the movement around me. I thought about how easy it would have been for me to jump out in front of one of the cars speeding past with the swift confidence that is only held by hands on a clock. I thought about how quick it all would be as I walked in silent earnestness, contemplating my own weightlessness. I thought about astronauts orbiting the earth and the sensation I used to have as a child riding roller coasters at the amusement parks. For a moment, my mind transported itself to a time forgotten, where I relished in the colossal thrill of descending the rickety slopes as my body was suspended in the air and as my hands gripped the safety bar of the cart tightly.

And as the cars moved past me this is what I thought about:

Balloons buoyed in the seamless sky and the way children grip the slender strings.

Boats interrupting the still waters perfection with adamance akin to the creases created by my folding of book pages.

Boys bouncing and laughing through the library like a pandemonium of parrots.

His purposeful clamor of contempt and his dutiful glances of disdain.

Aaron’s smile and the subtle squint of his blue eyes. The small cowlick on the back of Aaron’s head that spirals and swirls clockwise, resembling the inner cream of a Swiss cake roll. Aaron’s laugh and the way the eyes simultaneously widen. All of the jokes. All of the love.

“I think the most important thing to do,” she began, “is whenever you are feeling particularly angry, or whenever you feel as though you might put yourself in a dangerous situation, just try to think of ways that you can protect yourself.”

I have been thinking about this advice for years. At the time, I shrugged at the suggestion. I did not know any strategies for self-preservation. Part of me wanted to continue living a life of self-destruction. Part of me relished in the sadistic twitch of my movements. The harm that could be so easily inflicted, if I found only a glimmer of courage.

And as I write this, I am *still* contemplating my own weightlessness. I am still imagining the thrill of free-falling through space. My tight grip around the roller coaster safety bar. The wind pushing my hair away from my face with the urgency of a quick hand. And it is urgent. It always has been.

This is how I protect myself:

Loving Aaron

Allowing Aaron to love me.

Allowing myself to jump into the depths of his mind.