

## Her

\*Content warning: sexual assault, rape\*

After telling Maura that he had raped her the night they met, Connor slept well for the first time in weeks. The bed felt comfortable with he finally lay down, not bumpy or too hot like it had been, and the pillows cradled his head softer than her thighs ever could, more easily because they asked no questions. Connor did not dream. His body, worn down from running during the day and drinking at night and drinking again, alone, weighed heavy in the blankets like a settled peace. A negotiated peace, one-sided. He did not thrash or writhe. When he woke at eight the next morning, the guilt was gone, disappeared in a white smoke that dissolved among the treetops where the leaves died and crisply fell. It was late summer; they would all come down soon.

By his first cup of coffee, Connor was a good man again. Not that he wasn't before, though the way Maura always spoke about rape and the college and greek life sometimes made him think so. They had both been drunk, anyway, a little high between the two of them, and Maura seemed to enjoy it, curling around him like a weak flower sprung open too soon at the first sign of temperate weather in March. She was so soft (except for her mind). If she knew something was wrong--and she would have known if something was wrong--she would have confronted him, would have made a scene instead of running back to him again, again, again, clutching harder at his sleeves when he said *he had to go*,

*I won't stay the night*

*I'm not looking for anything serious*

*I'm just using you.*

Connor could still like her while he used her. Maura was gorgeous, she was smart, though maybe a bit too much, and she indulged his depressive days, coming right over when he asked because he made no assurance that he would be okay otherwise. She fucked him like she loved him (which she did), and it was alright that he didn't love her back because his brokenness appealed to her, lit her up with excitement. She would fix him. She *wanted* to fix him. His doctor, his clockmaker and alchemist. Connor burned his lips on his first sip of coffee.

Of course he was a good man, he knew, cracking eggs into a cast iron skillet. He was a good Christian, loved Jesus with all he could offer and all he could not, had only ever had pre-marital sex with a few women--no more than ten. If ever he feared he may not be good, Maura assured him of it, noting his kindness and softness, the gentle worship of his hands overcoming the urge to hurt or break. "So what you drink," she would tell him, running her fingers through his beard. "So what you smoke. You're going through a lot of shit right now, and you're not hurting anyone. And you treat me well."

(He did not treat her well.)

Glad to have his appetite back, for the guilt that had built up over the weeks since they parted had turned into a slow anxiety, Connor ate quickly, swallowing what he could of his coffee and dumping the rest. It was disgusting without sugar, absolutely vile, but that's what sad

poets drank, he figured, when it was too early for whiskey. Anyway, he comforted himself, Maura had not even sounded mad when he told her how he raped her that night so many months ago when their breath left their lungs and their bodies folded together for the first time. The scratches on his back took a few days to heal. She wanted to keep talking, in fact she did keep talking for almost two more hours until she noticed the clock spouting 4:30am and insisted she get some sleep before work tomorrow. If she was angry, she would have hung up the phone. If she was hurt, *really* hurt, she would have hung up months ago.

For the first hour Connor worried. He paced to relieve the pain in his gut, recalled story after pointless story about nights in the frat house basement to quell the tremor on his lips. Maura's voice did not soothe him like it once did. Instead, it scratched like sandpaper at the edges of his ears, clawed at the inside of his gut and made him shiver. He did not want to hear about the unconstitutionality of that new abortion bill or about the feminine presence in that new Marvel movie. So he spoke over her.

Silence followed, finally, and Connor interrupted it with a brave--that's what he was, brave--sigh, a signal. "There's something I gotta tell you."

Maura listened. She had inhaled so much foul noise already, so many iterations of *I can't be with you now, maybe later, probably never but wanna fuck tonight?* that no potential word or phrase could hurt. When everything felt like burning, burning became bearable. She listened; if it was bad news he had to tell her, she would survive because she had so far, for so long, and if it was good news, life would begin<sup>1</sup>. Again, for the first time.

"You were really drunk that first night we had sex," Connor said; he remember this while he cleaned his breakfast dishes. "And, oh," he stretched the words until silence bubbled up between the phonemes; "I've just always worried that it wasn't okay." *For my sake. For my fraternity's reputation, we are NOT rapists. You all just lie for attention.* "I don't know, just...I know you've been treated badly by other guys before, and I don't want you to think I'm like that."

Connor stared at his reflection in the bathroom while he brushed the coffee off his teeth. He liked the way he looked, slimmed down from all the running and the heat, but still clinging to some of the college football bulk around his arms and shoulders. Placing a hand over the tattoo on his chest--his newest, a lion--he remembered Maura's gushing forgiveness.

"Of course it's okay." She sounded sweet and cloying, insecure. "We talked about it that night, and I've been telling you since then, it's okay." She may have been smiling over the phone, across state lines. "We discussed it before the fact, anyway, and we were both drunk." Her voice trailed off, then, making room for fear. "I mean, are you okay with it? You were really fucked up, too."

With his morning playlist sounding softly in the background, Connor got dressed, pulling on a blue button down that he chose to bring out his eyes and his gold, sunlit hair. His arms and

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<sup>1</sup> Such it feels to be twenty-two.

their black ink looked powerful, not just strong but influential, as he had been when the fear of hurting him swelled from Maura's lips. She would do anything to protect him. Again, he had the upper hand.

"No, of course not, Jesus, Maura. I wanted exactly what you did." From the other end of the phone, a sign of relief that hid the tears he would never see. "I just..."

As he pulled on his jeans, the image returned to him that morning, as it did the previous night on the phone with gin in his blood, as it had every night for a long time: her body, normally strong for something so small and avian, laying bare and limp beneath him. Short breaths filling her belly. She could not keep her eyes open.

"Maura," Connor proceeded, "how many times do you think we had sex that night?"

He put on his glasses. In the mirror was a strong man, a good Christian, and in the background was a shaking bed frame, violet marks of violent love around thin wrists. Maura asked what he meant. He knew she prayed he would not answer. Staring again at his reflection, Connor could not remember exactly what she had said to him when he told her on a phone five hundred miles from her trembling fingers, alone in a basement with a deep blue desperation that echoed in her belly, that they had sex twice that night, that the second time she was in and out of consciousness, that she clearly did not remember it because the tequila had turned her blood to tar and he was too heavy to push off, almost two hundred pounds heavier than she. What did she say? Connor threw his backpack over his shoulders. *I'm fine, I'm not upset, I still care about you, I still love you, I still love--*

Her arms lay strewn above her head. She was surrounded by lavender and clear quartz that could not protect her this time, while Connor sacrificed a body that was never his for a depression that was never hers. She saved him. Had he worn a condom? Connor didn't remember. The next morning, Maura woke up alone. The lavender oil in her diffuser had run out.

"It's okay." That's what she said the night before. "I'm not mad."

"Are you crying?"

"I'm not crying."

She had gone on, telling him that she might have remembered it, honestly, it was just such a long time ago, that she hardly, if ever, blacked out when drinking, that she meant to say "two, we had sex two times. No, I'm not crying. Yes, I'm sure."

When she asked to change the subject, Connor let her talk, but she did not flood the phone with chatter about the unconstitutionality of that new abortion bill or the feminine presence in that new Marvel movie. Instead, she reminisced: "Remember that video project we made when we were stoned? I can't believe we didn't fail that. Remember that time I saw you at a party and you picked me up like that scene in *Dirty Dancing*? I'm still amazed you didn't drop me." On and on until 4:30 she gleaned the conversation dry. *Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh?* It wasn't, she thought, praying that Connor was still listening on the other end of the phone. It could not be, for if she fought back now, all would be lost. *Ma nishtanah halailah hazeh. Stay calm. Don't push him away. This is normal now. This night is no different than all other nights.*

Heading back downstairs with ten minutes to catch his bus, Connor got a call that rocked his chest, if only for a moment.

“Everything okay?” he answered, praying Maura had not changed her mind.

“Hi, yeah, of course. I just wanted to call and say good luck.”

Connor thanked her and stepped outside, nodding along to her praises and encouragement while he climbed up the bus steps and rode to campus. A woman he had never seen before, pale blonde and gleaming, stole a look at him before her eyes darted back to her phone screen. He smiled at her, only to be jabbed in the gut when she stepped off at the next stop. There would be more pretty girls, he thought, as Maura’s voice droned on through the phone about work and not being able to afford graduate school and how jealous she was. Droning, stalling. Still, her pleasant background noise quieted and comforted him, as it always did, and Connor let her talk louder than the worries to which he still clung until she could almost drown out the anxiety of a new city full of strange people, beautiful women but no one else to talk to until he stumbled across *her* at a coffee shop, *her* who would peer over his shoulders and ask what he was writing and they would know, instantly, that they were meant to split life together. *Her* would be lithe and thin and birdlike. *Her* would stroke his hair and tell him he belonged, and *her* would fuck him like she loved him, and Connor would love her back.

But Maura would do for now.

“Hey, listen, I gotta go,” Connor spoke as the bus pulled up toward campus. “Thanks again for calling. And...” he paused to step down to the sidewalk. “Maura, are you sure you’re alright?”

Maura assured him that she was.

“And you don’t hate me?”

Maura assured him that she could never.

“Well,” he sighed, staring up at the sign that read *Beasley School of Law*. “I’m going in. I’ll let you know how everything goes, or if I need you to mercy kill me by the end of the day.” From the other end of the line, a giggle.

“You’ll be great,” Maura said. She must have been smiling. “I’m really proud of you. Good luck. Work hard. We’ll talk soon. And Connor.” Philadelphia sped by while Maura paused. “You’re a good guy.”

*He was a good man. A good Christian. They had both been drunk. This was just a trial, a hurdle on the path to find her, and when he did, Maura would forgive him because she loved him.*

“Thanks, bird.”

Connor hung up. He walked into administrative law class. Hundreds of county lines away, Maura put her phone down and stared. She could not remember that night. She would wait until he called again.