

She'd Love Him Forever

She dumped him. A decade together, all they'd been through—the on-again, off-again years she lived at college (she cheated with the maintenance man from her dorm); the “break” that followed; her parents’ divorce; his dad’s diagnosis; the reunion, both of them living, staying, at home to save for a house and a wedding (her idea)—yet now, “after some thought,” she chose Hollywood. Yep—that Hollywood. The girl who’d never acted in as much as a Saint Bernadette’s Christmas play claimed that *acting* was her dream. “But what about—” “Since I was a little girl,” she said.

Pat Best’s world seemed stolen, hopes demolished. Twenty-nine years old. What was the point now? But time passed. Time is really something. Friends helped, too. Happy hours at nudie bars; constant invites to Phillies and Sixers and Flyers games; a buddy’s bachelor party made to feel as much like Pat’s. Pat certainly had supports. Even Dad. Big Pat. *Moose*. He tried. A new (used) F-150 for his boy, the company’s insignia—*Good...Better...BEST & Sons Painting*—already decaled across the sides and the tailgate. Happy thirtieth, pal.

More time. An entire summer as a single man. Fall felt different, sure. The smells weren’t what they used to be. But Pat kept at it. Joined Fling and Flirt and Tinder. His friends would tell him to trust the process, a joke—this was the Sixers motto that hadn’t really panned—but it was a motto, Pat thought, so it must have worked for someone. He plowed forward. He found an apartment that didn’t do credit checks. Adopted a German Shepherd. He even went as far as a prepaid phone—a flip phone—to stop from hawking her social media.

The change came in winter. A realization. Dad was sick again—more specialists and treatments and wait-and-sees. The hectic holidays were over; the cold, slow days were there to stay. He'd started thinking—carefully—about his life. Walking through the gloomy parking garage at the hospital. Or late nights alone in his musty apartment, a place he'd painted her favorite color blue, decorated with overpriced nonsense from HomeGoods and Crate and Barrel—places she'd shopped—places he'd never stepped foot in before.

What the hell was he doing? He'd been prepping, he realized, prepping for the inevitable: her return. He'd been getting his haircut the way she liked it (a little bit longer on top) and dressing in “serious clothes” instead of the T-shirts and hoodies and sweat pants that made him look, her words, like he didn't give a shit. He'd become obsessed, was light years more in love than when they were together; his senses were overloaded with someone no longer there. He'd followed strange females—he did this a few too many times—followed women wearing her perfume, through malls, through the concourse and corridors of the ballpark and arena, just to smell his ex's scent. He'd slept with a girl who had a tiny bump, like ex does, on the bridge of her nose. Even Rocky was with ex in mind—the breed of dog she always talked of adopting. She'd come home—he knew this the whole time. No matter the amount of dark, dark roads his mind would wander—and there were many miles of sleepless regret, retracing of steps—she always came home in the end. He could see it, the scenes: the phone call and the knock on his door, how sorry and confused she was, how she loved what he did with the place, the walls looked— This color blue, wow! A real decorator, huh?

It was only a matter of *when*. *When* was she coming back?

She wasn't coming back.

He'd been delusional. She'd never texted or called. Not once. And nothing online. Every day after work he'd use a computer at the library to see what she'd been up to. And in all these months—in nearly a year—there was only one post. One. The same photo on Instagram and Twitter and Facebook: she was holding the Hollywood sign in the palm of her hand. “Dream Big” was the caption. She was happy. Happy people steer clear of social media. Certain friends of his did; the ones with passion for actual people in their lives. The ones searching for and finding and fulfilling dreams. She was out there in La La Land, with who knew who, living a life—the life—she wanted. She had told him this precisely—“my dream”—and now, finally, a year later, he believed her. He was not a part of her dream. His common sense was back. So was his pain. His dad stored a .45 in the bedroom closet with Pat's mother's abandoned dresses and shoes and pocketbooks, the bullets in the coffee can on his armoire. *Does a fatal gunshot wound cause pain? Do you die on impact when jumping from a bridge? How many Percocets would it take to overdose? Carbon Monoxide . . .* These were some of his searches. This was where he was, the mindset that arrived and kept coming, as the winter persisted.

But then came Brenna. Sweet, smiley, dimple-faced Brenna. Not as pretty as he liked. He knew the second she came to his table, asked if she could start him with some coffee—those big brown eyes, that smile, the surprisingly thick thighs, an ass that awakened him as she headed back behind the counter—he knew then she could never replace his ex. Never. You know this sort of thing. But Brenna helped. All the obsessions, the what-ifs he thought might haunt him forever—Brenna dulled them more than Pat thought possible. Three months with Brenna. Those nights on his couch. Deep discussions after documentaries, presidential debates (she was a liberal, he a conservative). The kissing. Once it started, there never seemed the time

to pull out the sofa bed or trek the fifteen feet to the bedroom. The sex was something. Her tiny moans. That ass! The different positions and places. The stupid bowl chair—was it Pottery Barn? West Elm? Half a week's pay was all he remembered—put to use at last! His no-sleepover rule was out the window by the second date; Rocky was nestled between them like their little newborn. The dark, lonely mornings were over. Brenna worked the early bird shift. She tiptoed around his bedroom, blindly fishing the floor for her panties and socks, pants kicked inside out and flung beneath the baseboard heaters or the nightstand he kept the condoms they never got around to using, atop one of the many bins of crap Pat had yet to unpack—the baseball cards, the CDs and cassettes, the old hats and sneakers stained with the past—things we all keep around for no sane reason. The way she stopped back to bed, kissed Rocky, then Pat—“It's not an official sleep over if I leave before the sun's up.” He'd caress her face. Hold both cheeks as he kissed her. Her face was Pat's favorite place to touch, the greatest way to start a day. It awakened, enlivened him. “Hang on,” he'd say as she walked away. And despite her pleas, laughing, pouty pleas that he go back to bed, he'd always follow her down the hall in nothing but his boxer briefs. With Rocky on his hip, he'd kiss and hug her in the dark doorway till she giggled free and headed for the stairs—“Pat, I have to leave. Pat!” “See ya tonight?” “Maybe.” That sly smile, that little skip down the steps.

Then the texts. The texting would sometimes start before her ignition even did. “*Lock your doors,*” Pat reminded her one morning, “*you pass like 4 bus stops full of crazies.*” She looked up to see him in the window above the fire escape, shook her head and snickered. That smile! It took her from a seven to a nine. The way it lingered longer than most, how she bit her

tongue and caressed her upper lip a little, still smiling, as she typed back her texts. *"Crazy???*
Who's crazy? You got bed head like Harry Styles . . . and one of yur nuts is hangin out."

All day texts came and went. He'd imagine her leaning against a pillar in the Schillcrest Diner's kitchen, hiding in the walk-in freezer or the opening in the wall where staff scooped the ice, smiling and smiling in her little uniform as she read a reply. *"How's waitress life today?"* Back and forth they went. Jokes, flirts, the fishing for feelings they never discussed in-person. *"Ugh...so tired—hate my customers!"* *"Well, wasn't staying up so late worth it???"* Buzz after buzz in his back pocket. Up on ladders and scaffolds, rolling and cutting, buying materials, explaining an estimate to an old lady his competitors thrived on swindling. All day it buzzed. He sometimes felt it buzz when it wasn't buzzing. The anticipation of seeing her! He checked clocks like he was twelve again and wedged in an ancient wooden desk, prisoner in some dank Catholic classroom. Knowing he'd be seeing her soon—knowing this every single day—changed every single thing in his life for the better. She lessened—oh how much she lessened—the obsessing, the loop of regret, the pain, that had been playing on and on since ex had left. Eight months with Brenna. His second holiday season without his ex was fast approaching. Yet Brenna—Brenna dominated his mind. Where to go tonight? Which movie to see? Which restaurant? *These* were the questions now, what followed him around. Today, tonight—the now.

But then *her* question, a text: Did he want to come to her parents' for Thanksgiving? They'd discussed their situation. *"We're having fun—that's all I want, too"* is what she said in bed the night he told her he wasn't looking for a close relationship—he'd too much going on in his life. This was long ago, the end of the second month maybe. It sounded so honest, the way

she replied then patted his thigh a bit before cuddling her head back into his chest. And not one word since. But now, out of nowhere—*family*? Family, Pat had always believed, meant commitment, the point of no return. Why family? Why now? He hadn't led her on, had he? No, he hadn't. He never bought her jewelry or double dated with his friends. And he never said he loved her—God knows he never said this—as hard as that was in the heat of passion. He stared at his phone as if she was going to send another text: *Just kiddin* 😊. He couldn't just ignore her. He liked her way too much to hurt her—he knew what pain was. He wanted Brenna McCallister in his present forever . . . but not his future. Be a man, Patrick. He made the call.

Brenna moved to New York City. For Art school. Left the twin home she shared with her parents and her little brother for twenty-eight years to rent a two-grand a month box about the size of her bedroom. She never did the whole going away to college thing, and wasn't Manhattan just one big college campus for adults? She'd been saving for years, waiting for . . . For what? What had she been waiting for? It was time to do—do something. This one hurt just way too much. Here was the chance to make lemonade—or something sweet—out of lemons. She took some afternoon shifts at the Friday's near Times Square, went out just about every night. Met new people. New guys. Older guys. None were Pat but . . . Cute bartenders. Guys from all over the country—the world. She missed him bad, but the living there was real. Her Color Theory instructor, Kyle, thirty-nine from Rhode Island, asked her out when the semester was over. She could feel how much he liked her—then loved her—how much he appreciated all that she offered, how talented she was. Someone, finally! She felt OK again, different, but OK. Pat's

texts, his saying *Hey* and *How are you?* every so often, kept her hopes for the future alive while Kyle loved her in real time.

Cynthia was the most beautiful girl Pat had ever dated. More beautiful than even his ex. Prettier than Pat ever thought would be interested in him, belong to him—be *his*. It was dreamlike. A ten—his! They met on Match. A suburban girl from Richboro. She said she loved him in less than a month, wanted him to meet her mom. Cyn was too pretty for rules to apply. He loved her, too. He looked into the blue eyes of her mother and wondered if he'd be calling her Mom one day.

Kyle wanted her to move into his Upper East Side apartment. “Oh my God, Ky . . .” Brenna would be thirty in two years. She refused to be hanging in bars, settling for a semblance of love at thirty-five or forty, a step-kid as her flower girl or ring bearer, being prodded with needles in order to have a baby. Kyle loved her. So much. His family loved her. His sisters, his quaint hometown—all perfection. And she loved that. “. . . Oh my God—yes.”

An Italian dinner for their two months together. White table clothes. Glasses of red. An older man playing the harp. Where did he see himself, Cynthia wanted to know, in five years? In ten? “See myself?” Pat saw himself living in a great big twin, maybe a single, in Bucks or

Montgomery County—a huge yard for Rocky, an in-law suite for Dad (Regardless of the company name there was only one son, one child altogether). “Yea, like, I dunno,” she said, “still painting for your dad’s company? Hanging out at Mickey Finn’s or The Schillcrest every day after work, playing shuffleboard . . . darts . . . softball?” He was thrown for a loop. Her eyes were trying to say something, something more hurtful, blunt, her lips weren’t willing to commit to. “Well, no,” he said. “I obviously won’t have the time for those things when I have a family. And the business . . . the business will be mine when—” “But do we, I dunno, Pat—do we have enough in common? I just—I just don’t see our lifestyles meshing, ya know, big picture.” It was a similar feeling, a pain, that came after his ex said what she had, a similar tightness, stiffening in his chest—but different, worse in a way. He almost asked, *But—but what about the way we feel for each other?* then remembered the day he questioned ex’s decision, how each follow-up brought on new versions of the answer he didn’t want, worsened the pain, turned the knife a little bit more.

Pat had stopped texting her months ago. (Brenna had been pretty cheap with her replies—she had to be, for obvious reasons: self-preservation.) But then one night, after weeks of having moved into something new, believing the wounds Pat left would soon be healed, Pat’s personalized ding played its tune. She was an Uptown girl now. The jingle of the ringtone, though, just hearing it, seeing the name—Pat B—on her screen erased what New York had given her and took her straight back home—a beep of a horn, a peek out her window, sports talk radio booming from his truck, the way he rubbed her thigh while driving. Those pulses in

her skull were back. Pressure everywhere. She was in bed with Kyle—she was ovulating and they'd planned to try, again, after *Downton Abby*—and she excused herself then stared into the bathroom mirror—a pit in her stomach, trouble getting breaths. She sat on the toilet seat rereading his “*Hey. How’s the Big Apple been?*” The power of such every-day words. Breathe, Brenna, breathe. She didn’t reply. She blocked his number before climbing back in bed. She dreamed of him all night long. He was hers again. Reunited, he was holding her. Crying with her. Rocky was there. A family—back together. He would never let her go again, he kept on saying. Never! And as soon as she woke, realized it was all a dream, she hurried to her phone. He could be texting her—right this very second—and she’d never know. Stop it, Brenna! It is over! *I’m not looking for a close relationship. I’m not looking for you* is what he meant. He doesn’t want *you*! She kept him blocked.

Cynthia was in D.C. now. Her ex was down there studying to be a dentist. She was engaged to him before she’d met Pat. Pat didn’t know this till after, till a *deep* dive online, a trip to his research facility—the library. There were multiple posts—inspirational quotes, some sad-song lyrics—that pointed to her being cheated on the year before she’d met Pat. Darren Ashdale. Clicking on his profile brought an attack of shivers, nausea even. All the pictures with Cyn making her diamond visible across his torso. He was her high school sweetheart from some stupid suburban school. The ring that tickled Pat’s knuckles while he pinned Cyn’s wrists to the bed was this douchebag’s grandmother’s, an heirloom, an engagement ring she’d never removed. Pat was her rebound—he knew this now. He was her Brenna.

Brenna and Kyle were in a fertility clinic on the Upper East Side. As the doctor spoke all she heard was the same word over and over, the same word that almost knocked her to the kitchen floor when a nurse first called with blood results, the word she then came to Kyle with, shaking, crying as she told him that she—and likely he—had it, a disease, a disease that this doctor here—Dr. Fateh, with all his Penn and Johns Hopkins degrees hung behind his desk—seemed afraid to just say, was replacing with “our fertility issue,” “our infection”; the real word sounded like an insect, a bug with long tentacles and dozens of little legs, a bug with big eyes laying big eggs deep inside her, eggs that compromised her eggs. “*Chlamydia!* That’s why we can’t get pregnant—I have chlamydia.” Kyle’s expression barely changed the night she told him. He held her, kissed her. No probing questions. Just: “We’ll be fine, Brenni.” And here he was now, holding her hand, finding out their fate. Together.

He had his iPhone Back. The flip phone—*flippopotamus* Brenna called it—was now in one of the boxes full of crap still unpacked in the bedroom. “*Bren, please text back!*” . . . “*I am so sorry. I made a huge mistake.*” . . . “*I need you.*”

Kyle was with her every step of the way. Every appointment. All the blood work—hers and his—vial after vial; his semen; his whole medical file was vetted. But Pat, too. Every day Pat followed

her through a chaotic city, a city that suddenly seemed much too large, full of too much possibility to possibly be true. He followed her to IUI and IVF appointments. To Cocktail parties. To the dank studio Kyle had leased for her to work whenever she wanted. Pat lingered everywhere. *Best*. His last name made things no less easy. There was Best In Town Pizza. Best In Town Bagels. A guy held a sign on a stick—*Best Views of the City*—and handed out pamphlets with *Best* printed everywhere—*Best price, Best experience* . . . And this was just her walk for morning coffee. The neon sign of the bar across the street, out her bedroom window, said *Curran's Tap Room* (Tap is Pat spelled in reverse.) And the cathedral—the steeple she saw the second the street emerged from the subway stairs at Forty-ninth and Seventh (she kept a few shifts at Fridays so not to feel too much like a moocher)—the name of the cathedral, yep, you guessed it: Saint Patrick's. She even saw him—Pat himself. Glimpses in second story windows. Shirtless. Texting her, smiling his smile. She couldn't shake him. She didn't want to. Even the day Kyle stopped, went to one knee to tie his shoes on their run across the Brooklyn Bridge and Brenna looked down to see a ring—even then Pat was there, standing there, rolling his eyes in a paint-stained backwards hat, that cocky smile. But Yes, she said. Oh my God, Ky—yes!

More bachelor parties, nudie bars. Fling and Flirt and Tinder. A stripper named Brianna. The girl who sold Jell-O shots in a half shirt at Mickey Finn's. His dad died. Seven days a week of waking up with a massive headache, forgetting huge chunks from the night before. Brenna's remnants—her hairpins, her doodles on the backs of receipts (his doodlebug), pillows and towels loaded with her scent, her long strands of hair—lingered in every crevice of his life. His

truck would rattle past the diner, her Neon never in the lot. He'd crash this truck right this second, he thought, crash into a pole, at ninety miles per hour, for the chance to start over, show Brenna how much he loves her. *"Bren, please don't ignore me. My ex broke my heart b4 I met you, it screwed with my head. I wasn't ready. And my mom didn't die—she left us when I was 9. I never told you that either. I never told you lots of stuff." . . . "I need you, Bren. Let's start over. I love you."*

She'd been off of social media. But Brenna's friends from home would see him, see Pat in pictures—weddings, parties, Eagles tailgates. He'd gotten fat. Was losing his hair. There were rumors. A DUI. Drugs. What was she ever thinking? Live and learn, Brenna. Live and learn. She had learned so much. *Grown* so much. She was pregnant.

When the text came, only a phone number flashed on Pat's screen. He had erased her contact long ago. He remembered the digits though, and they haunted him now the same way seeing her might (these ten digits were playing the part of the first encounter since the breakup). He was stopped at a light, heading to a job, the thought of Mickey Finn's, a cold Bud in a frosty mug, willing him through a mood these days that seemed to move, rise and fall, in concert with the sun. He pulled into a shopping center, closed his eyes and took a big breath. Shocked, surprised didn't even describe how he felt after reading the message. She just wanted to say

hey. She was sorry to hear about his dad. She'd be home for Christmas . . . "*If you wanted to get together. Well, LMK. Miss you ☺.*" It was his ex.

When she rocked the baby to sleep, sang him lullabies, Brenna often thought of Pat. Lying on his couch. How safe she'd felt in his arms. The tiny valley between his pecs her head seemed to fit like a puzzle piece, where she sometimes fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat. That was over. They'd never rewind scenes from *Wedding Crashers* or *Hall Pass*, replay one-liners from all sorts of comedies they'd both seen countless times before they'd met, scenes that seemed that much better watching together. The way he kissed her, fucked her, the sound he made as he came, the way she dreamed while intertwined in him. His smell. The way it stayed on her clothes, was with her when he wasn't. Nothing else mattered back then. Her cunt boss. The retired pervs who called her hun and sweetie, drank eighteen cups of coffee, pulled out calculators—not phones but *actual* calculators—before leaving her five percent. None of that mattered. I have Pat and you don't, she'd think as she looked down at two-dollar tip on a forty-dollar check. *I won the jackpot.* What a time in her life! She'd been transported to a place where worry and regret . . . where hopelessness ceased to exist. Being with him! An addiction. The green apartment door. Climbing the steps two, sometimes three, at a time. His mildew-scented hallway. And Rocky—Rocky would never greet her again, spin in circles and jump and howl, roll on his back, even dribble out some pee, as if to say he'd surrendered to her love, he could not control how much he loved her. None of this would ever be—ever. She'd never again leave that apartment, begin each morning like the rest of her life had at last begun—the life

she'd waited and waited for, wanted more than anything. He was only a stage—Patrick Michael Best—a step, a moment. He'd never love her. She'd love him forever.