

EVERY TEN YEARS

1989

When I was fifteen I lost my virginity to a boy I'd never marry.

It wasn't because he was a bad boy—a smoker or a cusser or some other bad-habiter I couldn't settle down with. It wasn't because we were too young to make those kinds of commitments. It wasn't because he was from another culture, or a different religion, or a way of life that couldn't mesh with my own.

It was because I'd never marry anyone.

I'd seen my share of marriage, and I wanted nothing to do with it. My own parents screamed profanities at each other while I squeezed into the hallway linen cabinet to hide. Their mission in life, as I saw it, was to avoid showing affection for each other at all costs. My Aunt Jo threw two husbands out, one for drunkenness and one for cheating. I thought the couple that sat next to us at church was happy, until the gal showed up one day with bruises on her neck and watery eyes. When I asked if she was okay, she just whispered, "Stick to the Bible, honey," and bit her lip. Her husband was a real Bible man. He put his arm around her and scooted her away from me.

Cal wasn't a bad kid. He didn't have any self-made tattoos. He did drink plenty of Coke, though. He lived on my street, and we were friends. Friends with curiosities—that was how we wound up together in the ditch at the end of our street where only the smokers came out in the evenings to throw their cigarette butts. They wouldn't be here now, because it was the morning—they'd be at work, and everyone else would be at school, since we were playing hooky. We made a little bed out of our clothes and figured out the way these things work. We had an okay time, and thought maybe we should do it again the next day.

Eventually our parents got a call from the school about our truancy. From then on I was personally chaperoned to school by my pops. If he had to go in late to work, so be it. His

daughter needed to be at school. And he damn well hoped I hadn't been getting into any foolish shit while I was out galivanting the town during school hours.

Cal and I didn't see each other much after that. Our awkward gropes and thrusts on our pile of clothes weren't quite worth the fight, I guess. But once, we ran into each other at school near the bathrooms, both of us with hall passes in hand. We decided to saunter over to the tree by the fence at the edge of campus, to catch up. We started kissing, then laughed a bit and pulled back.

"So, what have you been up to lately?" he said. "Still kickin' rocks around?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Hey, I had an idea. You know how we always said we'd never be able to tell the future, how we don't have a clue what's comin' for us?"

"Yeah." Hanging around our neighborhood we'd often talked about our not knowing, the big question marks of adolescence and life. "I still feel the same," I told him.

"Well, who knows what could happen, right? Maybe we'll go on some wild adventures. Maybe we'll fall in love. Maybe we'll make a ton of money. I'm curious to see what happens to you. Are you curious what'll happen to me?"

"Well, sure, yeah."

"I say if we lose contact, we make a pact to get in touch every ten years, and tell each other what's happened."

I thought about it, and I supposed he was right—in ten years we wouldn't be living on the same street anymore. Maybe I would have traveled to Japan, or had a child out of wedlock. That would be fun to tell Cal.

"All right, let's do that," I said.

We were still young enough to pinky-promise on it.

1999

I said I'd never get married, but then I did. Jimmy was a friendly guy, the kind that was easy to like. I found him at the hardware store—I needed light bulbs for my new apartment. He knew all about light bulbs and explained the differences in watts and sizes as he straightened his orange apron with his name marked on the corner. He knew how to screw, too, as I saw in my apartment the following night. I wasn't normally that easy, although I know it sounds like I was. In fact I hadn't even kissed a guy since high school and the truth was, I was lonely. And here was a fellow who offered to help me around my apartment and had some ideas about movies, too. An eye for cinematography. He knew all the classics and the most famous scenes. A hardware boy *and* a film critic—I thought that was pretty unique.

We started going to the movies together every weekend. Soon enough my apartment was our apartment—he paid his half of the rent—and we were watching movies at home. Almost every night, we went down to the Blockbuster to browse the aisles before dinner, then we'd come home and make some chicken-fried steak or spaghetti and meatballs, and we'd watch our movie while we ate. It wasn't a bad routine.

But one day he said, "Why don't we go somewhere fun, do something a little different?"

"Yeah, I sort of wanted to say the same thing," I told him. I'd been itching for a little bit of change myself.

"How 'bout Vegas?" he suggested. I'd just turned 21 and had never been to Vegas before. Sounded as good an idea as any to me.

So we arranged for a long weekend and set out in his Chevy pickup on the five-hour drive to Vegas. While we drove we told each other stories of our childhood, and if I'm not mistaken we allowed ourselves to daydream about what it might be like to have kids of our own. "Billy and Tommy and Janie," he said.

"You just want them all to sound like your name," I told him, and we laughed.

After a night of slot machines and margaritas, we fell onto a firm bed in the Stratosphere hotel. Jimmy reached for his wallet. "Looks like we already used up most of our spending money." Thumbing through the last couple bills, he said, "Got about 40 bucks left

when you subtract for gas. We could gamble the rest away, or we could use it to get married."

Well, that was an idea I hadn't thought of. I kind of liked how it popped up out of nowhere, though. Jimmy had never hit me or yelled at me. He didn't seem like the cheating type. He liked to talk, rate movies. A good guy. Maybe we could actually make it work.

The following night we didn't even get to the hotel room--we were so drunk on our wedding excitement and the booze that went with it, we only managed to stumble giddily into the bed of his truck in the parking lot. We fell asleep there within a minute, and that's how our marriage was consummated.

"And where are Billy, Tommy and Janie?" Cal asked. We were at a diner in our old hometown. He'd called me after asking around until he got ahold of my number. I was embarrassed that by then I had forgotten our pact--but I didn't tell him that. I just told him how glad I was that he kept it. Ten years out and he still remembered.

"Aww, they never came around," I answered, swirling the ice in my raspberry tea. "Not yet, anyway." Jimmy and I had decided to wait a couple years after getting married, to save up and buy a house. Once we got there I stopped taking the pill. But nothing had happened in the way of pregnancies so far.

"How about you?" I asked.

"No kids for me either," Cal said. "No wife." He straightened out his baseball cap and told me how he'd been in a relationship after high school, but they went their separate ways after she decided to take a job on the east coast. Cal was a local kind of guy and wanted to stay where he was. He'd started his own business selling bike parts and doing repairs. I myself was working as a waitress a few towns down.

"Well, you've got plenty of time," I told him. He looked good in his tight T-shirt—I could tell he took care of himself. I pictured him bent over an upside-down bicycle doing his thing. It put a smile on my face.

2009

Another ten years and Cal filled in his T-shirt a little thicker, but it was still more muscle than anything else. Now he brought a beard along as well, which made him look like more of a man. This time I'd made sure I was the one to contact him. We sat in a coffee shop over a latte and an americano.

"Still happily married?" he asked.

"Happily divorced," I declared. I had envisioned, a few or more times, what his face might show when I told him that. As it turned out, his lip curled up a bit on one side—just a bit, though. "I guess I should say congrats, if you're happy."

As I'd neared my thirtieth birthday, Jimmy and I had started to question what we were doing. There was still no sign of Billy, Tommy or Janie. He was unhappy with his work and mine too. He'd wanted to get into the film industry doing something there. But he wasn't an actor, and he wasn't a screenwriter. Truth be told, he really didn't know what he was. We moved out to Los Angeles to chase the vague dreams he half-envisioned and find some window of opportunity for him somewhere. But the only cinema-related job he wound up in was at the movie theater. He started out in the box office and worked his way up to the food stand.

Eventually he was taking his frustration out on me: "Why don't you have bigger dreams? You've been waitin' tables for years. Is this all you're ever gonna amount to?" Looking at him in his work uniform with the little popcorn logo on it made him seem like a hypocrite. I told him as much, too.

But he got me to thinking—maybe it was true, maybe there was something missing. I thought about how we hadn't done anything but watch movies in years, how we didn't even talk about much else. Come to think of it, we'd never had a deep conversation about our real selves in our entire relationship. It was always the movie stars and the special effects and famous lines—but what was behind all of that? Dust and an empty pickup bed.

I didn't like L.A. I'd gone there for him. I'd bought the house he wanted because it was supposedly the gateway to Hollywood—a small, old house we could afford that was still close enough to somehow get him in. I'd put my share of money into the bills, made his dinner every night, endured the painful years of not getting pregnant and watching his disappointment grow.

On my thirtieth birthday, I told him quietly that I wanted a divorce. He sat for about a minute, and then he nodded his head.

"I'm sorry," Cal said.

"Well, what's there to be sorry for?" I told him. "We weren't happy. Probably never shoulda gotten married in the first place. When we split up we sold our house and I bought another one of my own, closer to home, with an extra room I could rent out. I managed my money well and eventually bought another condo I could rent out too. And now I've just purchased a third property. I plan to use it for vacation rentals."

"Well, I'll have to bring my family there for a vacation sometime," Cal said.

His family. As with last time (and ever since we were teenagers, now that I thought of it), he'd let me go first. I'd spilled my story before I even realized he had a family.

"Been married six years, and I've got two boys," he said. He showed me their pictures: Jake was four years old, and Austin was one-and-a-half. And his wife, a pretty blonde, Sharon. I wanted to meet them—I felt like picking those boys up and hugging them, all of us going to play outside together. But I knew there would be something not quite right about that, and when he offered as much, I told him it might mess up our ten-year flow.

2019

Shortly after that meeting I fell hard for Gavin. I had dated guys for a few months here and there once the air cleared after my divorce, but I was so mistrustful of long-term relationships that they didn't end up lasting. I always kept a little bit of a wall up, and when men wanted to move forward I'd back away. It wasn't like that with Gavin. He was a painter

with dark eyes and wavy hair just long enough to tuck behind his ears. I felt so pulled toward him. His impressionistic paintings with their textured color blends were fascinating to me, and I loved to watch him work. What's more, I opened up and showed him the drawings I'd been sketching for years. Unlike other men who either shrugged them off or dismissed them as a cute hobby, Gavin really encouraged me. He genuinely liked my drawings.

Eventually I moved in with him. We were passionate, two artists working next to each other. I quit my job working at a bakery, where I had migrated after waitressing, and made my living by my property rentals. This gave me more time to explore my drawings as an art. Gavin showed his work at galleries and helped me network enough to get some showings of my own.

We cooked salmon or stir-fry or some other wonderful meal together while we listened to new music artists we discovered. We created our art alongside each other without talking, but always connected. It felt like we were creatures linked from a previous life.

Lucky for me, he didn't want kids. He wanted to focus on his art. Personally, I would have liked to have had kids if I could have, but I was too afraid to go through the agonizing process of trying again. This way was better. We could keep our love stronger without that bitter defeat hovering over us.

And it was true--I'd found my secret to a love that could keep burning. We got a system going, sold prints and canvases, went on weekend trips to keep us inspired. We were happy.

The problem was, he found another secret to happiness that I didn't know about.

It took me eight whole years before I realized he'd been having affairs all along. He'd been good at slipping around quietly in discreet places, with women who apparently knew how to keep quiet. And I, in my naive attachment, didn't have the eyes to see it. But finally, when I was out of town visiting family and decided to come home a day early to surprise him, I found him with another woman. Right there at home, on our own living room floor—the space we had converted together into our makeshift art studio.

Later he told me he'd done it several times over the years. He acted like it was normal. "People weren't meant to stay holed up with just one person. We're polyamorous by nature," he said. But as much as I'd come to like his free-spirited and artistic lifestyle, I didn't buy that shit.

"I hear you," Cal said across the restaurant table. Those words were good to my ears. We sat in front of each other once again, at our faithful ten-year meetup.

He told me that his wife Sharon had gotten increasingly cold and distant after they had the kids. She was tired, which was understandable. She refused to talk to him about things, which was less understandable. They settled into a routine of paying the bills, taking care of the kids, and otherwise not communicating much. Eventually she wanted to start sleeping in separate rooms, saying he moved around in the bed and she couldn't sleep. Then, one day, she suggested they have an open relationship. "It'll make things better between us," she said.

He didn't buy that shit.

"Congrats on your divorce," I told him, and we clinked our wine glasses together. By now there was a little salt and pepper to Cal's hair. He wore it well, I thought. I covered up my own grey with home-kit hair dye. When he complimented my hair and I told him the color was fake, he laughed and said it should be fun to be able to pick and choose it as I please from here on out.

After a few quiet bites he said, "You know, I can't help wondering if we should just forget about the ten-year intervals, and you could come and meet my boys this weekend."

It didn't take any more than that—I ended up spending most of the weekend with them. We went to the park, out bowling, played catch and went for ice cream. I thought his boys were fine kids, and I felt proud of him for raising them to be so.

After three more weeknight dates on our own, we wound up in his bed. And it was a hell of a lot better than it was thirty years before.

As we lay curled up after lovemaking, he asked me, "What do you think—do you have it in you to give another relationship a try?"

The offer had a sweetness and a warmth that somehow felt different, felt like home.

"There's one thing you'd have to be okay with," I told him.

"And what's that?"

"I'm never gonna marry you."

He gave me that half smile I'd already grown addicted to. "That's fine by me."