

I was listening to Waylon Jennings when I remembered I had left my favorite lipstick at Jeremy's house.

Kentucky in the fall can be a crapshoot. It was early October. An unusually sticky day. High eighties. Full humidity. Saturday afternoon. I sent Jeremy a text message, asking if he was home and if I could I stop by. Surprised that he agreed, I left my apartment and got into my car, an old brown Mercedes I had recently bought from my father. The backs of my legs burned when I sat down on the hot leather interior.

“Fucking shit.”

When I pulled up to his house, he was sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette. There was a small orange box and a black Bic lighter resting on the small table next to him. His eyes were red and vacant, his thin brown hair was greasy as if he hadn't showered since we had we broken up the week before.

“You're not a smoker,” I said.

He stared at me and shrugged his shoulders.

“I bought a pack when you told me you needed space.”

His neighbors were outside drinking cheap beer and talking about video games.

After the uncomfortable silence, we walked inside his apartment. His bright red couch was almost the same shade as the lipstick I came over to get, a color I had bought for the name alone: Street Walker.

“I was going to throw it away,” he said.

For a minute, I had to remember where I was. “Huh?”

“Your lipstick.”

I reached for the side of my head and combed my fingers through my hair.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said. “It’s my favorite color. They don’t make it anymore.”

He walked upstairs as I waited in the apartment where I had recently broken up with someone for the first time. When he came back down, he stood in front of me but seemed far away. He handed me the lipstick.

“Thank you,” I said.

I walked towards the door and I told him to take care as I reached for the handle. I turned my head and noticed his body was moving farther away from me as he walked up the stairs. He did not turn around.

When I got into my car, I rolled down the windows and played Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska*. He had never liked Springsteen, considered him a sentimentalist.

God, I love the sound of the harmonica. It sounds how love must feel.

A couple years later, I heard from a friend that he had gotten married. On a random Monday spring afternoon while I was still at work I received a text message from him that said, *ever know the feeling that everything is completely falling apart and the only thing holding you together is fear of the unknown?*

It seemed he was unhappy with his life. The song “Pale Blue Eyes” by the Velvet Underground was playing in the background at the vintage store where I had been working for the last few months. I didn’t respond to his message and a couple nights later he was parked outside my house.

I drove around the block and called my friend Emma, who was in town from Baltimore.

"What the fuck do I do?" I said.

"Tell him you have plans with me," she said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Shit. That works. Okay."

I parked my car and took a deep breath. He began walking toward me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I said.

“You didn’t text me back.”

“Because it was fucking cryptic. And hello, you’re married.”

He shrugged and looked at his feet.

“What do you want?” I said. “I’m getting ready to go out with a friend.”

Emma pulled up in her parents’ car while I was talking to Jeremy.

“Can I come? I just need to talk,” he said.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. “But you have to drive separately.”

As I got into the passenger side door of Emma’s car, I told her Jeremy was coming to the bar with us.

“What? Why?” she said.

“He said he needs to talk.”

“Isn’t he married? What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry Emma. I’ll buy your drinks.”

The three of us sat in front of the well at the empty bar. While Emma was in the bathroom I ordered us both a Tom Collins. Mine tasted like dirty water. Jeremy ordered bourbon.

"Where's your ring?" I asked him.

I felt his knee touch mine, I became stiff. He reached for my hand underneath the bar. His skin was dry and calloused.

“In my car.”

“Don’t touch me, Jeremy. What the hell did you want to talk to me about?”

Emma sat down next to me and took a sip from her drink.

“This tastes like shit,” she said.

“I know, we should order something else.”

Jeremy moved his knee away from mine as he knocked back the rest of his bourbon in one sip.

“So, Jeremy. How’s married life?” said Emma.

He didn’t look at her and instead ordered another drink. She and I looked at each other and I mouthed the words telling her I was sorry for putting her in this position.

“Two bourbon and gingers?” I asked her. She nodded.

The female bartender had tattoo sleeves on both of her arms. While she was making our drinks, Jeremy had gotten up to use the bathroom.

“I know what he’s going to tell you,” said Emma.

“What? That he’s still in love with me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s ridiculous. Then why would he have gotten married?”

“Ask him, not me. I’m just telling you, tread lightly.”

The bartender handed us our drinks. The smell of bourbon was so strong I could taste it before the alcohol ever touched my lips. When Jeremy came back, I asked him where his wife thought he was tonight.

“Out. I don’t know.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because I wanted to see you.”

“I don’t think this was a good idea,” I said. “Maybe you should go.”

“I’m going to second that,” said Emma.

He stared into his glass and nodded. His hand, without the ring, crumbled up a wet cocktail napkin. He finished the rest of his drink and left a twenty-dollar bill on the bar.

Three years later, he was standing at the bar. I had gotten there early and was nearly finished with my first cocktail. He was going bald on the back of his head. His thin brown hair was slick as if he had just taken a shower. He still had his beard, although trimmer than I remembered. He walked back to the table where I was sitting and I told him we should go sit outside.

He and I are now in our thirties. He is divorced. I am single. We sit at a yellow picnic table. I look around to see if I know any faces. I am glad that I do not because I can't explain why I am here with the man who broke my heart at nineteen, twenty-one, and twenty-six.

“So, what’s up?” he asks.

I laugh. His feet are jittery and the table is slightly shaking.

“Well, I was recently accepted to a graduate program for my writing,” I said. “I’ve also been working as a baker for the last two years or so.”

“I saw that,” he said. “I looked you up online. Are you still making doughnuts?”

“Not really. I wanted to pursue writing.”

I notice his feet are trying to touch mine so I put my feet up on the empty seat to my left. The tequila and soda I’m drinking has turned into water but I drink the rest of it anyway. Some of the sweat from my cocktail glass is dripping onto my jeans. His phone rings and he steps away to answer. After a couple minutes, he comes back.

“Sorry about that,” he says. “Work.”

“No problem. Where do you work these days?”

“I’m the night manager for a produce company,” he says.

“Do you like your job?” I ask while I move my legs back underneath the table so I could cross them.

He shrugs. His dark brown eyes and long eyelashes are probably what I missed the most about him. There was something sincere about them, even though I would never use that word to describe him. The air is quiet and there are questions I need to ask. His feet are looking for mine again. Our shoes kiss and I straighten my back. Someone is smoking a joint. For a few seconds, I am not sure why I wanted to see him.

“I have to ask,” I said. “Why did you get married so young?”

I am trying to look at the spot on the back of his head when I ask the question. He is having trouble looking me in the eye while he shifts in his seat.

“I asked you a question,” I say.

He runs his hand through his balding hair. “I thought it was time for me to be responsible and grow up.”

“At twenty-years old?” It’s a bad time for my drink to be empty.

He looks around the bar as if he’s ashamed.

“I thought we talked about all this six years ago,” he says.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He says nothing, so I get up and go inside to get another drink. It takes me less than an hour to realize how little he’s changed. Something inside of me still needs closure after all these years, and so I take my fresh tequila and soda and go back outside.

“When did it get this cold?” I say. “Let’s move inside.”

He nods and follows me into the darkly lit bar.

He gets back in touch with me a month later and offers to take me on a date. I agree to it because I can get a story out of it. He picks me up at my house and opens the car door for me. I give him directions to the restaurant and his hand that isn't on the steering wheel slowly moves towards me. I keep my hands together to prevent contact. He parks the car and we look both ways to cross the street. My hands are inside the pockets of my stonewashed jean jacket because I know he wants to hold my hand. Going out with him feels different now because I'm not as attracted to him as I used to be. He's halfway across the street when he turns around and notices I'm still standing on the sidewalk. He loops his arm in-between the opening I accidentally created and we walk towards the restaurant that used to be a church.

The dim lighting soaks into the refurbished wood that is everywhere: the bar, tables, stools. There is not much of a crowd tonight, and I pick a table by the stained-glass window.

"I don't know," he says. "You seem too cool for me these days."

"How so?"

"You're more self-confident. More...sure of yourself."

The server delivers our beers and walks away. I ask if we should get an appetizer. Maybe pretzel bread and beer cheese. The order is put in and we make small talk. He leans slightly over the table to show he is interested. His feet try to kiss mine again. I lean back into the church pew and stay distant. I don't remember what we are talking about and then suddenly I say, "Sometimes I forget you have children."

"No, you don't," he says.

"How many do you have now?" My hand doesn't leave the beer glass.

"Three."

We have another round of beers and finish our food. It's still early as we leave the restaurant and drive back to my house. We park outside and I finally let his fingers touch mine. It's been over two years since I was intimate with anyone, which is why I said yes to going out with him.

"Do you want to come inside?" I ask.

He turns the car key and the car doors open. Then close. *Beep.*

"Let me kiss you," he says.

I'm on top of him when I realize I'm bored. He pulls my head towards his and I want to revolt. Too much tongue. I quickly change positions and ask him to try something different. He's awkward about this too and unable to perform what I want. No talking, until finally we are done.

"Could I ask you a question?" he asks.

"Go ahead."

"What was with that fuck-you face you were just giving me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe it was just the angle," he says.

"This is what my face looks like."

The air is quiet. I lay my head on his chest with my arm across it. I'm staring at the tattoos on the inside of his arm. Specifically, at the one that is written in red barbed wire with his initials plus the initials of his ex-wife. After a few minutes, he asks if I want to smoke some bud and watch television. When he touches my back, his hands make a cold chill go up my spine. I tell him I have work in the morning and need to go to sleep because it's close to midnight. The room is silent while we pick our clothes up off the floor. After I dress I watch him tie his shoes.



He looks up and his brown eyes make me think of marbles. He throws back his hair and runs his hand through it. I'm thinking about his bald spot.

He goes to the bathroom and I sit and wait for him in the living room.

"I had a great time," he says.

"It was fun."

He steps onto the porch and down onto the sidewalk. I briefly watch as he walks away.

With both of his hands in his front pockets, his head slightly angles towards the ground.

Suddenly his back becomes unfamiliar and distant. I smile, close the door, and turn off the porch light.