

Stuck

Anna walked carefully in her heels on the icy city sidewalk, snow flurries drifting down around her like in pivotal moments in romantic comedies. She would normally be in Uggs in this weather but she wasn't going far. Plus, she didn't want to worry about changing shoes, carrying a bag and looking disheveled in front of *him*. Marc, who she hadn't seen in around a decade, not since the day they sat in his car in silence, knowing it was over but neither wanting to confirm it. After, she had said goodbye as if nothing had happened, waving and nonchalantly shouting a "see you later!" as if it wasn't the last time they would ever see each other.

Anna checked her reflection in store windows as she passed, ran a strand of hair behind her right ear and rubbed the bridge of her index finger under her eyes to wipe away any smudged mascara. A man stood on the corner shouting news about the end of the world. Sure, people on the street were always shouting about the end of the world, but today it felt different. She had been reading and talking with her co-workers about it all day, the threats between world leaders that had been making headlines all week, though likely, she thought, it was nothing to really worry about.

She adjusted her purse strap on her shoulder, straightening her posture so that her stomach pulled in and her breasts faced upward in welcome. She couldn't think about the news now, she was thinking about Marc. If she was the first one there, she told herself, she would find a cozy spot and sit with her phone, looking important. If he had beat her, she wanted to walk in looking poised, at ease, as if this was how she looked, effortlessly, all the time.

It had been easy to reconnect on the internet, though it happened quite unintentionally. First it was the Facebook friend request - she couldn't even remember who had friended who at this point, and it didn't matter. Their only activity had been to keep tabs on each other, never liking or commenting or acknowledging each other's presence. Anna liked to collect the social media profiles of her old boyfriends in this manner. She liked to see how her future had panned out

Stuck

compared to theirs, and thank her lucky stars she didn't end up living where she didn't want to, or have to talk all day about some profession she didn't care about or understand, or hang out with what looked like probably boring friends.

It was only recently that she noticed a "like" here and there on her profile from Marc. And though innocent, enough time had passed that with each "like" came a confirmation - that he was noticing. Did he think about her often? Had she become the person who he thought she would become? Did he have any regrets?

She rounded the corner now, pushing against the heavy rotating door of the hotel bar where they agreed to meet. Once inside, she pondered for a moment at the base of the stairs - should she take off her coat? She was already what she considered "in place." Would it be more of an entrance to remove the coat in his presence, revealing her dress where she could take immediate stock of his reaction to her body? She touched her hand to her scarf and gave herself a smirk considering the possibility as she daintily walked up the stairs, holding in her abs in the way she knew drew wanted attention to her behind.

He was already there, as she had assumed. Two water glasses sat on the tiny side table. So he hadn't been there long, she thought. He looked like he hadn't yet settled in. He would be unprepared for her approach. Good, she thought.

"Marc?" she asked, nearing the table, as if she wasn't certain it was him. He had started greying in that distinguished way, and had put on a little weight, but, then again, so had she. He dressed like a man who never lived in a city in his life, slightly underdressed and untailored, but too comfortable or confident to notice.

He looked up as he shoved his phone into his pocket. "Anna!" he exclaimed as he stood.

Stuck

They embraced the way wealthy women do at parties, afraid to touch each other in case they ruined the illusion they had created. Anna unbuttoned her coat and watched as Marc noticed her body and quickly averted his eyes, looking through his peripherals the way men learned early on in life to check out women without seeming obvious. There was silence as she let the coat drape against the back of her chair, her leather dress hugging her hips and breasts, pulling in at the waist, the hem hitting at mid-thigh, revealing patterned black tights spilling into sleek leather boots. It was her go-to outfit when she wanted to feel sexy, when she wanted to feel noticed. She reveled in knowing it had the desired effect, and sat and crossed her legs in her chair as if she were oblivious to what she was doing.

“So,” she started. “What’s been going on with you?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” Marc replied.

Anna nodded, not wanting to give away that she indeed *did* know what his usual was thanks to Instagram, but tried to make it seem like she was too busy to care.

“Have you seen this North Korea business?” Marc asked.

The last thing she wanted to talk about was North Korea. “Yeah, nuts.” Then quickly, “Work is well?”

That seemed to do it. He was always easily distracted. “Yeah, busy, but good,” he said. “Same old grind for nearly 10 years now.”

Anna shook her head. “I’ve never been able to stay in the same place for more than a couple years.” As soon as it fell out of her mouth she knew it came across like she was trying to show him up, that her choices were better than his. “I didn’t mean for that to sound so bitchy.”

Stuck

“Not at all,” Marc replied. Satisfied, Anna turned her attention to the cocktail menu, scanning quickly for anything that was bourbon forward.

“You’ve certainly had the whirlwind life,” Marc said.

Anna shrugged. “I guess I just get bored easily. I’m always thinking how there must be something else out there.” Marc nodded, considering. Anna knew she should change the subject quickly, bring them back to neutral territory. The less they focused on her the better.

“And how’s your wife...Danielle, right?” Anna knew what her name was, knew it since he started dating her shortly after they broke up. Still, she pretended to search, as if her name didn’t matter to her.

“Good, coming up on 10 years if you can believe it,” Marc replied. She could believe it. Did he even remember what had happened between them 10 years ago? How torn up she had been watching his new relationship blossom while she nursed her wounds with vodka and inappropriate men?

“How about you?” Marc turned to her. “Married and suburban life treating you well? Maybe a kiddo on the way?”

Anna’s well-practiced answer fell out of her mouth the way it had with inquisitive friends and family over the past year. “No kids yet, but we’re working on it. That was the whole reason for the move to the suburbs, but, you can’t plan these things.” You certainly can’t, she thought, thinking of the empty room she and her husband had yet to paint. “I’m sure you get that same question having lived in the ‘burbs for so long.” She winced at her own assumption. She really couldn’t help herself. She was saved by a waiter coming by to collect their drink order.

Stuck

“Kids aren’t for everybody,” Marc replied in a way that left Anna uncertain whether it was for his benefit or for hers. She took a nervous sip of water while she wondered yet again if she had made the wrong choice with her life, if motherhood wasn’t what she was supposed to be pursuing, even after all the time and investment she and her husband made to adjust their lives to make it possible. And did she even *want* to bring kids into this world with everything going on?

“Believe me, if you had told me five years ago I’d be married in the suburbs trying to have kids I wouldn’t have believed you.” Ugh, was she *trying* to be awful? Anna welcomed the interruption of their drinks arriving. They smiled at each other as they clinked their glasses together.

“To reconnecting,” she smiled. Marc had gotten a beer. They were at one of the foremost cocktail lounges in the city and he had gotten a domestic beer.

“You know,” he started. “I’m glad we could do this. I think I’ve wanted to catch up for a long time.”

“Oh?” Anna raised an eyebrow.

Marc gave a half laugh. “Just...how we left things. I know we were just kids, but, I realized later there were some...” he searched for the words, “unresolved feelings, I guess.”

Anna took a sip of her drink. So they were already at the casual flirting part of the evening.

“I mean, I definitely could have handled everything better,” she said. “If only I knew then what I know now.”

“What do you mean?”

Stuck

“Well, just my patterns of handling conflict. It took a lot of therapy to figure out what I wanted a relationship to be, what to accept and what not to...” she trailed off. She was creating an opening to The Ex, but really didn’t want to go down that path. She was too late.

“When I saw what you had went through, what that guy did to you, I just felt so bad.”

Anna again answered on autopilot. “The messed up thing is that I very much thought I deserved it.” She sighed. “You know, I’ve always thought fondly of you,” she admitted. “In hindsight, you were very emotionally mature for your age.” Flattery always won. Butter them up, give a little, and they were more likely to shine their praise on you in return. Why did she always need to be validated?

Marc paused, looking as if he wasn’t sure he should say what he was about to say. Anna knew better than to break a man’s train of thought when he was about to divulge a secret.

“Do you ever think about us, what could have been?”

There it was. Anna smiled a smile that was a mix between comforting and assured.

“We had a good thing,” Anna said. “We’ll always have those memories.”

They sat with their drinks as the snow fell around them outside, chatting about the people they knew and who got fat and divorced and sober. The wind howled against the windows but inside with her bourbon, sitting across from Marc after all these years, Anna felt incredibly warm. After a time she excused herself to go to the bathroom. Like she always did, she snuck a look at her phone while finishing up in the stall. She flipped past the latest CNN alert about the President and clicked on a notification from the emergency weather service. She returned to their table and Marc was looking up from his phone, their faces telling the same story.

Stuck

“So,” she started. “The storm has shut down all the trains and roads for the night.” They both turned to look at outside at the once beautiful scene that had suddenly turned on them. Anna ran through some options in her head. “I don’t know anyone who lives in walking distance that I could stay with...” She scanned Marc’s face, watching the wheels turn in his head and hoping they matched her own.

They sat in silence for a moment.

“I mean...” Marc started. “We are at a hotel bar. There are rooms here.”

Anna waited a beat, not wanting to sound too eager. “Of course,” she said. Then, unsure, “I’m sure we could find two rooms here tonight. I mean,” she thought for a moment. “It is a fancy hotel, I don’t know what your budget is,” there it was again--judgment, assumptions, “but maybe if it’s, say, less than \$200 a night we could do our own and if it’s more we can split? With two queens, of course. I mean, we’re just friends.” Was her suggestion too bold? Was this what he was hoping for when he invited her in the first place? Is this what *she* had hoped for? The pause before Marc’s answer was killing her. She had to know if he was on the same wavelength or not. But it was just a friendly proposition. It was a matter of economics.

“Sure,” Marc started. “I can go to the front desk and ask.”

Anna texted her husband while she waited. “Trains stopped/roads closed, looks like I’ll have to get a room here for the night.” It was the truth, after all.

“Okay, keep me posted,” her husband texted back. No questions asked. Trusting.

Marc returned. “I got us a room with two queens,” he said. Anna nodded. What was the price, she wondered. What went into his decision making? She could only guess.

Stuck

“Well, since we’re here for the night, should we get ourselves some room service?” Marc asked.

Anna smiled. A change of location.

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They sat on the edge of one of the queen beds in their room, wearing athletic shorts and Chicago Cubs World Series t-shirts that were slightly too big, but was all they had at the drugstore attached to the hotel lobby. They had picked up beer and candy and were listening to the music of their youth on their phones, laughing and sitting a bit too close and talking about anything and everything they could remember.

“So,” Anna started, breaking the spell of nostalgia. “Does your wife know you’re spending the night in a hotel with me?”

Marc was quiet. “No,” he admitted. “Your husband?”

Now it was Anna’s turn to go silent. “No,” she said. “I said I would have to stay here but not that I was with you.” She paused. “In fact, I didn’t tell him I was seeing you tonight at all.”

Marc tried not to let his face betray him. “Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Anna said, searching her own thoughts. “But we’re both adults, it’s not like anything is going to happen.” She took a swig of beer like it was a challenge.

“Of course not. We’re both happily married,” Marc concurred.

The playlist started a new song, one they had considered “theirs” back when they were dating.

They both held their breath, still as statues.

Stuck

“Well that was eerily timed,” Anna joked. Marc didn’t say anything, then suddenly leaned forward and kissed her square on the mouth. Anna was at an awkward angle, beer still in hand, but reciprocated in kind. After a breath, she gently pushed Marc away to place her beer securely on the shelf, move their phones off the bed, and then sat back down, closer this time, throwing her arms around his shoulders and kissing him deeply, inhaling like she would in yoga, when she was looking for her true inner purpose, waiting for a great wisdom to wash over her.

Next it was Marc’s turn to push away. “I mean, we’ve already done most everything, it doesn’t even count.”

“No,” Anna assured him. “This has all been done before.” The leaned back on the bed, grasping at each other like they used to. Outside, the snow erased everything.

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The morning light crept in through the window, waking Anna and Marc earlier than they were used to. He spooned her, kissing the crook of her neck while Anna interlaced their fingers together. In this position, without seeing his face, he could have been anyone.

They dressed in silence, Anna’s once seemingly magic leather dress lay crumpled on the floor. When she put it on like this, her hair messy, her makeup smudged away, she no longer felt sexy. Her breath tasted stale in her mouth. Her head pounded.

They leaned against each other in the elevator but already they could sense it felt wrong. Anna felt a knot growing larger in her stomach with each passing floor on the way to the lobby. She twisted her wedding ring around her finger, a nervous habit she picked up shortly after she received it to make sure it was still there, that she wasn’t careless and had lost or misplaced it.

They walked together to the street.

Stuck

“Well,” Marc said.

“Yes,” Anna said.

He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, tenderly, slowly, but still chaste enough the way grown men with feelings for women who aren't their wives must do to still be considered publicly acceptable.

“Goodbye then.”

They wouldn't be friends. Maybe it was never about that. She watched him walk away from her for the second time in her life.

Anna couldn't help but glance at the headlines in the newsstands as she passed on her walk to the train. A compromise had been reached between the two countries' leaders. Everything would remain unchanged. The world would continue on as usual.