

The Bad Boyfriend (EP)

There hadn't been cowboys in The Valley since the early nineteen eighties, but they were re-emerging. At shopping malls stocked with shoe stores, cell phone kiosks, jewelry retailers, and airbrush photography studios, you could find them. Even though it had been forty years since their boots clicked against the cold, shiny floors, the cowboys were comfortable because the shops hadn't changed much. And shoppers still had fancy hair, big earrings, and credit cards just like in 1983. On any given day in 2017, there would be a cowboy leaning up against the wall of an ice cream vendor or with his arms propped up on a corn dog stand. It was home.

To be sure, the cowboys of the modern era didn't ride horses; they were into motorcycles. And they didn't rob saloons with double-barrel shotguns while patrons drank whiskey; they did it with semi-automatic rifles even if every customer was sipping a top-shelf martini. Maybe even, especially then.

I met one of them on a March day I wish I didn't remember. He was wearing a wide-brim hat that was dark black and his eyes didn't seem dangerous. It was a normal Thursday after work and I was on my way to the candy counter to get my favorite bag of honeycomb chocolate squares. I noticed him eyeing me as I waited in line. He was in front of the sporting goods store with a toothpick between his lips and a casual scowl on his face. Then he walked over.

"Today's my birthday," he said evenly.

I was tapping my foot and waited before looking up at him. "Happy Birthday," I responded.

"Have you ever been to this mall before?"

My foot found this confusing and tapped harder. "I come here all the time."

I really tried to brush off his presence, but there was no way to do it. His voice seemed to erupt into my ears and his body was energizing me. I thought I'd lose my balance if I didn't get close to the counter.

"What?" I managed. "What'd you say?"

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The influx of cowboys caught on in the news. All the networks were talking about the grand resurgence of westerners dressed in spurs and chaps.

My own wide-brimmed bad boy was asleep on the couch, his heels wedged into a pillow. Two months had passed and now we were at the mall every day, eating two-scoop sundaes and throwing dollars away in the movie theater photo booth. But during the third month, my cowboy stopped being an outlaw and started to be a magician. He disappeared. In an instant.

From then on I saw him every few months, when he was near enough, even though we lived next door to each other and he had never left town. He'd hit a hard road, he said. I asked if he wanted to visit the department store windows, but he told me he had to get back to his front porch.

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Five years went by. Cowboys lingered around, but their day had passed and many were catching rides to Miami, New York, and San Francisco.

The next time I went to the mall, I thought about the cowboy I'd known. He'd been so demure and then so extravagant. He wore his hat so proudly then hid at home behind a fly-screen door. Boots were always polished and always at the mall, but nowhere else. There was a night when, together, we took one too many shots of alcohol and got angels tattooed on our shoulders. His was simple and mine more majestic, but somehow they matched. He told me I was just like that, an angel. He said it in his big hat. Then he stopped talking altogether.

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The cowboys have left The Valley, but it's not considered a mystery or even a news article. They were more like a fashion trend, gone with the times.

The Bad Boyfriend (LP)

On the second floor of the house, up the stairs, to the left, and through the double doors, there was an enormous closet. Gigantic in size. Like a hotel room. Even if you stood with your arms straight out to your sides with double twirling batons in both hands you wouldn't be close to the walls. They would be a dozen double batons away. Every time I walked into the closet, I felt like the whole world must be so much bigger than I realized. If a room like this could be made just for shoes and dresses and custom watches, what else were people creating? Limitless possibility. I would stand at the entryway and forget where I was going.

My bad boyfriend liked to go inside and leave his things on the floor. He would drop his homework and his laundry. Like the gorgeous closet was a garbage can. I saw him go in there with a bag of chips one time and the chips never came back. He didn't care about the custom shelving or the sheer magnitude of space available to him. He was a bad boyfriend, a careless one.

One time when the boyfriend was downstairs heating up pot stickers I said I was going to change into pajamas upstairs. Then I went to the closet. It was intimidating in stature and I actually dropped my head when I got there, like maybe the doors were judging my entry. But I pushed them open and walked inside.

What a scene. There was trash all over the place, a cell phone charger lodged into a pair of hundred dollar shoes, a soda can tipped over onto the carpet, tee-shirts and socks sprawled everywhere. Some of the shelves had a few shoes or folded clothes, but many were just empty, like no one needed them.

I'd met my boyfriend a year before and he was someone that played the game of love and escape. Like, he'd say I was an angel and then disappear for a week. The spark caught me initially and when I saw his house, his three-storied family mansion and four-car garage, I was more entangled. I felt like really fine jewelry when we were together.

Looking around the closet, I wondered who was worse. Sure, he stood for nothing, but here I was trying to run his campaign anyway. I'd been dead-set on being his designated girl. But what would I do with the authority? Rally for the right to promote glorious homes and their luxurious spaces?

I spread out my arms in the closet because I knew it could be the last time I got to be there. And then I tossed the emergency ladder through the window and climbed down the side of the house. My boyfriend was at the microwave, pushing food onto a plate, a dish he would probably leave next to a pair of shoes upstairs. I wished I could bring the closet with me.