

The Incredible Expanding Man

I had this friend Meg who got into one of those relationships that gets serious fast.

They'd matched on an app, I can't remember which, and hit it off over texts. They met for drinks at a bar soon after, and she was swept up in him almost immediately; his smile, his easy conversation, the gaze of his eyes as he listened to her go on about books and her work that made her feel like she was, in this moment, the center of the universe.

They finished their drinks and then got dinner, and after that one more drink at her place, and then somehow a week later he was apologizing and saying he really had to go back to his apartment, but just to grab a change of clothes and his toothbrush, and then he would be right back, he assured her.

And she wanted him to be right back. And then pretty quickly, maybe a month in, after she noticed that half her closet was filled with his clothes, they sat down and had the talk:

Should we just move in together, she asked.

Is this too fast, he asked.

Is it weird that this feels right, they said together.

They went through all the pros and cons, talked about expectations, you know, dirty dishes, the preferred position of toilet seats (seat down, lid up - they compromised), clothes not to accumulate in that one chair by the bed, etc. After going over everything, they reached some satisfactory understanding and to which he added, I know this is quick, but I have loved all my time with you. And this feels like a chance for more of that.

It was perhaps not the most resounding statement of affection, but she believed it, and she felt the same..

And hell, he said, we'd be saving a lot of money on rent.

Well that was definitely true, she thought. The lease was coming up soon, and she just knew her landlord was going to hike her rent on the renewal. Money was tight - she was an assistant at a talent agency and, honestly, could only afford her one-bedroom walk-up in Bedford-Stuyvesant because her parents paid almost half the rent. So this also seemed like the chance to achieve that secondary dream of many of us young aspirants trying to make their way in NYC, which is to finally be able to reject our parents' money.

Let's do it, she said.

And so they did, and they had their small problems, and they made adjustments, and overall Meg believed the joys of living with this man outweighed the inconveniences, his tendency to maybe leave the dishes in the sink longer than she would like, his occasional forgetfulness in regards to the toilet seat, and that she lost the lovely mid-century armchair in the bedroom to a pile of his once-worn shirts and pants. All things considered, no big deal.

It was about a month into their living together that Meg noticed something different about him. At first, she couldn't quite give the difference shape or definition. But one day, there it was, he seemed to be getting larger.

It started with his clothes, let's say, with a bit of tightening.

He mentioned it first actually. One morning as they were getting ready for their separate work (he was some kind of analyst?), he kind of chuckled as he had to suck in his stomach to button his pants.

A little out of breath he said to her, I think I've gained some weight! And there it was. He certainly had.

It doesn't look bad on you, she said reassuringly, I like how big you are.

Well, that's good, he said, because I have to be honest, I blame you. I think it's because of how much I love living with you (smiling) and how well I've been eating (haha!).

She kissed him and left for work and on the train she kind of glowed with a strange feeling that was, though she chastened herself at the thought, 'domestic bliss'? Meg had never considered herself the type of person to need or want that. In college that had always seemed like something for other people. And after college, living and working in the city, always meeting guys who seemed happy to be dating and allergic to anything more, Meg's sense of independence had become mingled with an unnamed insecurity at the back corner of her mind, a tab on her browser she could never quite bring herself to close. The social media of those college girlfriend's she'd always dismissed and the increasingly dad-bodied crushes she thought she'd moved past, all of a sudden, seemed to be the brightly filtered clues to the mystery of 'What Meg Was Missing'.

So now that she was in a real relationship, living with a man - my god!, and making the kind of meals that have him looking healthy, as her mom might say, and when what happened next - at each stop on her way into work another and another passenger came onto her specific subway car until it was filled with all the men she'd ever dated, the 'underground' DJs and junior attorneys, the urban agro-entrepreneurs and couch-surfers, men who seemed to be professionally employed as crossfitters, and one too many first-year financiers (which, before you go and judge her, was in fact only one), every man she'd know for at most a few evenings and rarely a morning, she felt a kind of giddy relief to find that perhaps the problem, all along, had not been her. She had a man who didn't mind spending all his time with her, who genuinely liked being around her. No.

Loved, he had said.

But that night she had a hard time sleeping. She hadn't realized it before, but he seemed to be a bit of a bed hog. It was three a.m. and his body sprawled over onto her side. A couple of times

she politely coaxed him off of her slim square footage, but within a few minutes he was back, and she found herself engulfed in a tangle of limbs and the warm cloud of his gulping breaths.

She barely slept a wink.

And all that next week she couldn't help but feel like he was somehow always in the way. In the morning when she was trying to wash her face and do her hair he was stooped over the sink shaving. When she went to make coffee in the kitchen she had to compete with him and his blender. At night, on the couch, as they watched TV she was constantly asking him to reposition himself. Could you not lean on me so much? Could you lower your knees? Please, will you not put your feet on the table, I can't see the screen.

But probably worst of all was his reaction to her small requests. He would sometimes become sullen and uncommunicative or he would say something like, "I thought you liked that I was a big guy", or he would get annoyed and ask her why she needed so much room. And so Meg found herself in delicate dance around him in their little bathroom, their little kitchen, what felt like their ever shrinking apartment.

A couple of months living together and it could no longer be ignored. He wasn't gaining weight so much as he was growing physically larger.

His feet hung off the bed. He'd had to buy all new clothes, new shoes. He had to duck down for door frames. And he was constantly bumping into things. Meg's things, all of the thousand things she'd done to make her apartment a home.

It was difficult, but they talked about his alarming growth more directly now. Meg spent innumerable hours on the internet looking for possible answers. Maybe it was a strange tumor, she would posit, and feel his neck for possible swelling. Had he been exposed to radiation at work (no),

or perhaps some experimental chemicals (doubtful). Was there something strange he was eating? Perhaps it was hormones in the smoothies he made in the morning.

He tried to temper her concern. I think it's stopped actually, he said, and then, well, this can't go on much longer. Maybe it's a late growth spurt, he said, My father grew two inches his senior year in college.

But you're 31, Meg said in a tone that existed in a quantum superposition of incredulity and not wanting to sound incredulous, And you've grown a foot!

To which he gave a little shrug with his enormous shoulders.

After three months of this, Meg was living with an almost constant feeling of claustrophobia.

It wasn't just his physical size, it was the worrying about him too. He had lost his job by then or had been placed on furlough - he wasn't working or making money. And so Meg had to ask her parents again for money, which was one of the worries. But more so she worried about his days - what he was doing. He'd accidentally kicked a tremendous hole in their apartment's wall while he was sleeping in the living room, but this was actually somewhat fortuitous, seeing as how he couldn't fit through a normal doorway anymore (although the management company did not share this perspective, or at least not in their emails to Meg and tight-lipped letters taped to the front door).

So everyday he would kind of scramble down in the mornings and wander around the neighborhood, visit Prospect Park. He was especially fond of crossing the East River and spending the day overlooking the Bronx Zoo (he liked to spend time with the giraffes). Sometimes he would visit her unexpectedly at the downtown publishing house.

Isn't that your boyfriend, her boss would say, gesturing to the window.

And sure enough, there he would be, several stories high, vying awkwardly with the midday downtown traffic, knocking over a historic building, and, as always, apologizing profusely.

If you'll excuse me, Meg had to say to her boss, I've got to go deal with this.

And her boss nodded but in such a way that Meg could see her running a red-inked line through all of Meg's dreams at the agency: promotion, the chance to get off her boss' desk,, take on clients of her own, do work she could actually believe in.

Meg sighed and went to her office and opened the window and shouted out to him, waving her arms until she got his attention, which took a second because he was mostly consumed with trying to fix the building he'd destroyed, and let me tell you, it was not going well.

Stop, Meg yelled.

I've got this.

Just stop, you're making it worse.

And sure enough, when he took his hands away the whole thing fell over again and rather unfortunately flattened a few bystanders.

What are you doing here?

I thought we could go for lunch, he said.

I'm at work. You can't just show up unexpected.

I'm sorry! Really. I didn't think I'd be a bother.

It's alright. It just isn't a good time. I was in a really important meeting. Why didn't you call?

I thought I might surprise you.

Well shit, Meg had to admit to herself, he certainly had done that.

And I can't press the little numbers on my phone anymore.

Go home, Meg said, I'll see you there after work.

And so he would turn around, his shoulders slumped like the ears of some great dog, stomping back across the river to the vacant lot across from their apartment where he'd started camping at night. And Meg went back to her meeting and the unspoken disapproval of her boss, the judgment of her colleagues, and her infinite concern.

It was in this way that her boyfriend, who was always somehow on the periphery of her mind, grew and added and took over the foreground, so that she could barely read a paragraph or listen for one half minute or form a complex sentence (which was understandably not great for her work at the talent agency).

Still, in the evenings, when she came home from work, he would make some grand gesture, give her a tremendous magnolia tree all in bloom that he had uprooted from the park, or he would pick her up and take her to the tallest building in the city, climbing up the side of it with her on his shoulder, and there atop the skyscraper, with all of New York city below them, make a little picnic of it.

She would lay in his lap as he patted her head and talk about anything except his size, telling stories of the city based on landmarks they could see, or she would tell him the bright stories of her day at work (never the bad).

And if they talked about his growing size, it was him sharing his fears, and her trying to soothe the gentle giant.

I feel, he said while trying to hold back a great big tear, like some godzilla motherfucker, trampling around, knocking things over.

No, she said, and squeezed his finger. That's ridiculous, you're not a godzilla.

Thanks, he said and sniffed back a tremendous gob of snot, but I think I am.

No, you're not a godzilla. I mean, look at where we are. You're much more of a king kong type.

Fair point, he said, and laughed. And his laughter kind of vibrated in Meg with the force of it.

I love you, Meg. You're the most important thing to me in the world.

It was the first time he had said it, like that, unqualified. Those immense words. She felt the great weight of them and the great need of them.

I love you too, she said and then added, squeezing his index finger close to her, My king kong.

And he laughed, and she shook.

This went on, their new dynamic, until one morning when Meg awoke to find herself surrounded by stars, floating weightlessly in space.

As you can imagine, she was not a little unnerved by this. That is to say, she began to have a pretty solid freak out, yelling and hollering silently in space, spinning around looking for something, anything to orient herself, and that's when she saw him beneath her, a hundred thousand miles away, but so massive, large, the size of a planet.

She had become his satellite, locked in an orbit around him.

He was turned away from her now but slowly his body was revolving to face her. And perhaps it was only sun, but when he finally revolved completely he seemed to light up all over.

Meg! he said, Oh my god! I thought I had lost you.

What happened, Meg cried out.

He stared at her and furrowed his brow and said, What?

What happened?

Meg, I can't hear you. What are you saying?

You can't hear me?

I can't hear what you're saying. I'm sorry, Meg, I don't know what you're saying. Can you hear me?

Meg nodded and tried to gesture to him that he didn't need to shout.

Oh, right, I'm sorry, he said, I'm just so glad to see you. I woke up and I guess I must have outgrown the Earth. And I thought I was all alone. I thought I was going to drift through space forever all by myself. I'm gonna be honest, I had some really dark thoughts there.

Meg tried to nod sympathetically.

I want to hold you, but I'm afraid I would crush you.

Meg nodded.

At least we have each other, he said to her, I love you.

And Meg forced herself to nod.

And floating like that, with no way else to spend her time, she stared at him, really looked at him in a way she never had before. She noticed now everything about him, every pimple on his back and every hair on his ass, his one yellow toenail and his one dead tooth, his propensity to drink too much, the way he would apologize and apologize but not really do anything about it, how he left all the cleaning to her, that he was always talking about working out, getting in shape, right after he finished a bag of Doritos, my god, that he couldn't cook, that he was basically an oversized child even before he had become an oversized man.

The way he only said 'I love you' when he needed to hear it back.

The sun slowly moved behind him then, and she found herself in the dark shadow of him. I'm so sorry, he said once more and then there was a great hush between them. They had become blind to one another in the eclipse. Meg, another small black dot in a sky of mostly black. And him,

an undefined silhouette amongst the stars. And in that moment, in the nearest approximation of solitude, as it dawned on Meg that she would never have it again, she began to cry.

She cried and cried, noiselessly, the tears freezing and falling off her skin like snowflakes. She cried and then as the sun crested over his right shoulder she ran her sleeve across her runny nose, brushed the tears from her face, breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, swept all the rubbish into the corners of her brain, and smiled at him once more.

They spent months like that, as he became the size of the Earth, Saturn, surpassed Jupiter. He became so massive that he couldn't really make her out anymore. She became only a small speck flying around him, and it changed things. He would still talk to her but, unable to hear her voice or see her face or even make out her body language, he stopped asking after her.

Instead, he spilled himself out to her. All his insecurities, his fears, his longings, he retold the story of them to her, gilding the good and cleaning the tarnish. He spoke and his spittle formed a giant ring as if he was surrounded by his own luminous speech and one moon, Meg.

And he continued growing.

He grew and grew. He grew to be the size of the solar system, the galaxy. As improbable as it sounds he grew until he became the size of the whole universe, touching everything at all points everywhere, so incredibly large that the gravity of his mass caused him to collapse into himself. And so, in those final days, he became a super massive black hole, sucking in everything, all the stars, all the planets, and of course my friend Meg, as well as everything about her, the passion for books and film, her unharmed disarming wit, the way she always seemed to show up for a coffee or a drink when a friend needed it, and of course all of her dreams for herself and good she wanted to do in the world - finally pulled together across the plane of his event horizon.

I think about her sometimes. I think of her trapped in his gravity. If the scientists are right about black holes, then she is falling further into him even now. She is falling endlessly towards the center of him, his dark, inescapable singularity.

It's too bad, really.

I haven't heard from her in years.