

At World's End, Falling Off

For his beauty, I would have crouched at his feet and shrieked like a jackal.

I avoid beautiful men normally, for I am not beautiful. As a rule, I favour the style of man who will date me, the style of man who hovers in corners at parties, looking nervous, or cultivates off-putting habits, like cleaning his ears in public. Three years ago, I went out with a man who would open up sugar packets in restaurants, empty the sugar onto the table, lick his finger, dip it into the puddle of spilled sugar, then lick the sugar off his finger. Again and again. Lick. Dip. Lick. Dip. Even if he was eating with new acquaintances he would do this. Lick. Dip. Lick. Dip. Needless to say, he was not beautiful.

I ended that relationship and time passed.

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◆ I began pursuing couples through the galleries of the ceramics museum where I work. Among the 18th-century tureens from Chelsea, part of our permanent collection, I cornered a man and woman. They had stopped in front of a display case that held a soup tureen shaped like a rabbit. They stood on one side and I stood on the other, squinting at them through the glass. Their hands met and joined. I rarely stand still, but at that moment, I wanted to root down and begin a secure lifetime with somebody else.

So I bought the beautiful man from a matchmaking website.

The men using the site had been kind enough to explain themselves—their heights, ages, desires and goals—in under 100 words. These words appeared beside their photos. I could imagine sorting these men into a stack with a rubber band around it. I could imagine collecting and trading these men with co-workers. In fact, the photos with their corresponding blocks of description reminded me of the museum: The men looked like artifacts on display.

This was comforting.

Human existence, it seems to me, is a forlorn clutching after short-lived things. Artifacts remain in cases, unchanged year after year; so much else just slides from my hands.

◆

Here is where I should say what I do at the museum. I set up display cases and write the descriptive cards that will be mounted on the cases or on the walls beside them. I write the cards using the fewest sentences possible. These sentences contain short, simple words. I pile the simple words on top of each other—like beads on a string or pennies in a roll or fetishes hoarded in a cabinet—and connect them with a series of coordinating conjunctions (ideally ‘and’ and ‘and’ and ‘and’; ideally not subordinating conjunctions like ‘unless’ or ‘although,’ which demand more complex turns of thought and a backward hiccup in logic). The logic must surge forward, as it does when a child tells a story. I do not want our patrons bored. They like to move quickly from one item to the next, without pausing or pondering. Luckily, even complex thoughts can be expressed with simple words and logic. I believe that to be true.

For instance, I might write, ‘The vessel is the oldest ceramic form used today, and some of its uses include serving food, drinking, storing items and decorating.’ I would never write, ‘Although problematic, three broad categories of functional, sculptural and conceptual can be identified; however, a functional piece can still be sculptural in its form and conceptual in its intent.’ The woman I replaced wrote sentences like ‘Human folly in all its manifestations is never far below the surface of these painted scenes.’ She was asked, gently, to leave.

I believe in what I do and why I do it. Sometimes, though, when I write a card that surges forward in a short burst and then stops, it does not remind me of a story told by a child, but the noise an adult might make at world’s end, falling off.

Anyway. I posted a blurry photo of myself on the dating website, stated that my age was 39, and invented a nickname, for members of the site did not use their true names. The important thing about my photo was the setting—a park with tall trees and inviting grass. I called myself ‘Country Wife,’ after the William Wycherley play. The play is over 300 years old, but I thought the name hinted at my simplicity and sweetness. I do not possess either of these wifely virtues although I felt that I might with the right accessories. Perhaps a sundress. Perhaps a necklace made from shells. The name did not hint at my jealous rages or need for fastidious hygiene in lovers. I was climbing into a box, the Country Wife box, and if I did not follow through, if I slipped out of the box for even a minute, anyone who chose me would have just cause to complain. Then I saw the beautiful man’s photo and stopped worrying.

His nickname was ‘Happiness.’

I'd mention his true name, but that would slow me down. A name calls up a whole host of individual traits. These traits change and multiply the longer you know someone, and they multiply in confusing and contradictory ways. His photo is what I noticed, long before I learned his name. His photo made my eyes moist and my pelvic floor tighten. He looked like the actor on that commercial for life insurance—the same square jaw, the same thick brown hair, cut short except for a ledge of bang jutting over his forehead. Under his low brow were deep-set brown eyes and tawny skin and a full mouth, like a woman's except for the tuft of hair under his lower lip. In this beautiful face lay a kind of blankness, a lack of commitment to any one expression. I could write on this face whatever I wanted.

I paid 10 dollars to send him an email. True, I had never dated a beautiful man, but I had never used my credit card to meet one either. As I punched in numbers on the computer keyboard, gawking at his picture, anything seemed possible.

A few days later we met outside the movie theatre. He wore a turquoise suede jacket and three silver rings on the fingers of one hand. He stood before a movie poster, one hand on his hip, his head tilted back. The poster showed a sunny porch filled with baskets of apples. When I approached, without turning his head he said, 'Simple things make me happy.' He had written this same sentence as part of his 100 words, and I liked it because I thought it matched my Country Wife ambitions of hearth and home.

'Simple things make me happy,' he said now, but he squinted at the poster as though it were every minute receding from him. In those minutes, with his low brow, his soft mouth pinched at the corners, and a tick in his jaw bone, he looked neither simple nor happy but miserable in the most complex of ways. Right then, I could have confessed my own desire for a happiness that never came, but I did not, because right then I felt angry. I hoped I had not been a victim of false advertising. He had promised happiness as though he already possessed it, as though it were on offer for any woman to acquire, with him. I wanted to stamp my foot and shout, 'This was not disclosed in your profile!' I wanted to file a report with some consumers tribunal. In my vision of the beautiful man, he spoke smiling gallantries and looked only at the woman beside him. But now when he turned from the poster to look at me, he was not smiling, and his eyes widened in surprise, as though he had just woken up and found himself in a movie theatre. Furrows ran across his forehead, like deep riverbeds of woe. Tragedy had washed over him for years, I imagined, and his life was a struggle and a struggle and a struggle.

Then he smiled shyly, lowering his chin and looking up at me from under raised and bushy eyebrows. I love men who look up at me from under their eyebrows because I feel it implies a gentle nature. He spoke my name softly and did indeed move toward me with a yielding grace. I was beside myself with wonder. I had never been close to a beautiful man before and now one was meeting me at the movies. He was so beautiful that, when he smiled, people with their backs to us turned around and stared. That's how beautiful he was.

And was I beautiful? I had worked hard. I had maxed out my credit card. Under my parka, I wore a new white peasant blouse and a necklace of wooden beads and wooden hoop earrings to match. I had tousled my hair with an expensive mousse so it fell down my back in loose, unbrushed waves. I had bought makeup in light beige and pink to look as though I was not wearing any makeup. But I was. It had taken an hour to apply. My nose was still too pendulous, and my lips too thin, my smile too gummy. I was not beautiful, but I was passable and wearing the right accessories. Perhaps he could see beyond me, the awkward woman standing in front of him, to the vision my profile had promised.

Otherwise, I had already made up my mind about who he was and the kind of life we could lead together and, as I picked out candy at the snack bar, everything I thought I heard him say rang with the import of the future. He told me that he managed a small bookstore, and I delighted in this news because our both working in the arts meant we shared something and someday, when we both had time, we could sit down and talk about Art and Ideas. But mostly everything was a blur except my vision of him standing beside me in life through thick and thin, and dandling our children on his beautiful knees. I could not see further or deeper and did not have time to try. Right then, we had to get on with the business of courtship.

We took our seats, the lights dimmed, and I hoped we were about to see a movie where a loving couple gets everything they always wanted.

The movie started. It was a movie about the climate crisis. The beautiful man looked at me from the corner of his eye, frowning his brow, and I suspected that he was tired of being a beautiful man and wanted to be a different style of man altogether, one who was concerned about the climate crisis. He had suggested the movie and now readjusted the collar on his suede jacket as though embarrassed to be wearing such an opulent material. Up on the screen, a dull, non-beautiful man was speaking about how much extra carbon dioxide filled the air and what this meant for the weather. Scenes of New

Orleans after Hurricane Katrina came on the screen. People who had lost their families and homes stood in the flood water and cried and raised their arms skyward. The beautiful man took his arm from the armrest between us and leaned away from me. He started twisting one of his rings around his finger, around and around, and then just covered over his ring fingers with his other, naked, hand.

The dull man went on about how floods would soon bury immense tracts of land and create millions of climate refugees. I thought of all those displaced persons, the dispossessed, and how crowded the remaining land would be with us and all our things. Wouldn't we suffocate crowded together, trying to breathe air filled with extra carbon dioxide? Panicking, I looked at the beautiful man. With his rings, turquoise jacket and cultivated patch of hair under his lip, shaved just so, he no longer looked like a human being.

He looked like surplus goods, cluttering up the earth.

Right then, something fathomless happened in that movie theatre.

Right then, some vast, unknowable thing put its mouth to mine and kissed me.

Then it inhaled.

It inhaled with a gulp, and a cold slithering came up and out of me, leaving a chilly hollow in my abdomen.

Shivering, I squeezed the beautiful man's arm. 'We have to go. We have to get out of here.'

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I do not like to think about sickness or speak about sickness. My father lies dying in our basement apartment, as he has for the past three years, and I can do nothing for him except the tedious, daily routines of caretaking and sorrow. The dying could be finished tomorrow or it could be finished in two years from now. The doctors do not know. His dying, the deterioration of his body, represents a big portion of my life that only bears thinking about when I am in it. Otherwise, I do not think or talk about sickness. That is why I left the movie theatre.

We walked out of the theatre, me ignoring that feeling in my belly I could not make sense of. I had eaten too many Licorice Nibs, that was it. As for the vast, unknowable thing...a mind irritated by indigestion plays strange tricks. I did not feel uncomfortably full though. I felt empty.

I tried to think about the movie instead and how it was not a good piece of art but, rather, a PowerPoint presentation by a dull speaker. It was not the most dramatic way to present the facts, but as the facts seemed indisputable and dire, how trivial to point out that the movie was not a good piece of art.

'It was not a good piece of art,' I said anyway.

The beautiful man's mouth pursed as though he were sucking back some words he wanted to say.

Looking at his fretful mouth, I guessed that even though he was beautiful he was picked on in high school—shoved against lockers and in the boys changing room, with his feminine and docile manner, probably worse. Standing beside me he was only an inch taller, not a large man at all, more like a girl than a husband. I looked away.

Still, he insisted on speaking, on saying the most ready-made of remarks: 'I thought the movie was powerful...' Then softly, '...what we saw of it.'

To save the evening, desperate measures would be required, but after all, these were desperate times.

'I will show you where I work,' I said. 'I will show you some real art'—for I had the keys to the museum and the pass code to deactivate the alarm. I also hoped that being in a familiar environment would calm my stomach.

I took his hand and pulled him along the street a few blocks to the museum. We went in silence to the side door, through the staff entrance and into the galleries, where we walked past Chinese porcelain and English pottery, earthenware plates and stoneware vases, teapots, bowls, chargers, and porringers, tankards, mustard pots, tobacco jars, and pedestal jars, fuddling cups and chocolate cups and ewers and snuff boxes and confectionary dishes and figurines and scent bottles. We walked without stopping, past all my labels too: 'Mug with a wagon, a man and a horse,' 'Posset pot with Chinese figure in garden,' 'Dish with scene symbolizing fecundity,' 'Dish portraying the Crucifixion of Christ.' We walked past without stopping, through one gallery after another, not at all like the couple I had seen standing still beside the rabbit tureen.

Then he did stop. He asked, 'Were any of these things ever used?'

'Some were. Some were just for looking at. Now they are all just for looking at.'

He started to pull down his eyebrows, sending lines across his forehead.

There was no more time for talking, I decided. I took him through a locked door and down some stairs into Collection Room A.

Collection Room A is a massive concrete room, the length of two gymnasiums, with shelves of ceramics and boxes packed with ceramics. The shelves stretch as high as the 24-foot ceiling. Every day we pull small boxes down and replace them with larger boxes. Soon there will be no room left, but nobody talks about this. We just pack the boxes tighter. The same is true of Collection Rooms B, C and D.

I pulled the beautiful man between the two shelves farthest from the white emergency light above the door, and we walked to where they ended at the concrete wall.

He leaned back against the wall, eyes lowered, head turned, as though he were posing in a magazine. I leaned myself against him and kissed him on the mouth. He kept his head turned, not looking at me, but letting me look at him, for that's how it works. If one person is looking, the other person does not often do the looking in return.

We kissed for a long time. Most men treat my body as though it were a machine with buttons. The harder they work the buttons, the more I know they want from the machine. The beautiful man did not work my buttons at all, but merely stood against the wall and let me look at him and kiss him.

Then he tugged on his fly and pulled down the front of his pants, while holding up the tails of his shirt. I could not believe how beautiful he was against the concrete. In those monochromes of the dark—the varying shades of blue and grey and black—his skin glowed. Dark hair, light skin, dark clothes. His eyelids were white, and his mouth was black. He looked like a sculpture, a part of the concrete, and at his waist, through his shirt tails and zipper, the thrust of his penis. He did not put out his hand to touch me, to take anything or try to give it. He said only, 'Please, please.'

I put my hand on him, but it was not enough, he was so beautiful. I knelt on the stone floor and put my mouth around him, but it was not enough, he was so beautiful. I pulled him down and gently lay him on his back on the concrete, with my hand under his head, and he tucked his face into my neck and disappeared into me, and it was almost enough.

He was so beautiful.

I think I said things then about how beautiful he was and how I adored him. I said them over and over so they would become true and lasting, but before I had time to say everything, I was finished and then he was finished.

We got up and set out back the way we came between the shelves. He did not kiss me or take my hand, only looked at me shyly from under his eyebrows. I felt wetness between my legs but not much. I could not even tell if it was mine or his, there was so little. I know I should say that we used a condom, but I had decided that since he would be my husband some day whatever happened would happen, and what could one do?

As I reset the museum's alarm, my indigestion returned, worse than before. Perhaps I was not full, but hungry. That made more sense. That explained the cold hollow in my belly.

'Let's go grab some food,' I said.

We left the museum and walked out into the broad world.



On the steps of the museum, a man slept, wearing a torn rag of a T-shirt. His arms and hands were bare. I flinched. The sight of even one homeless person discourages patrons from entering the museum, so during the daytime the police keep the sidewalks in front of the building clear. That was my initiative. The desk clerks at the station now recognize my voice when I call.

I encircled the beautiful man's waist with my arm and pulled him closer, but I could see that we were falling away from one another in all the ways that count. It did not help that he wanted to talk. The more he talked, the farther away he seemed.

He said, 'When you see a movie like that, it's hard to think about bringing someone new into the world.'

He looked at the ground, with his fretful, nervous eyes and wrinkled forehead. Oh, how I wished he would stop talking.

Then he said, 'I try to live a compassionate life. Do you think I'm compassionate?'

I allowed myself to study him. In some ways, in his calm and gentle manners, the grace of his movements, he could be taken for kind.

Instead of saying this, I spoke another truth, which was horribly dawning on me just then. I said, 'I don't know you.'

It was his turn to flinch.

A bloating pain filled my abdomen. Pain. A new development. I buckled slightly. I pretended I was bending over to adjust the zipper on my boot. I started to shiver also, but this was probably from the cold wind, which had blown in suddenly.

While the beautiful man stood waiting for me, he was peering down an alley across the street.

'There are people in there,' he said, jingling some change in his pocket. He jingled that change, staring down the alley, as though he were struggling to be the style of man he wanted to become.

I stood up and examined the back of his head under the streetlight. I noticed white streaks in his hair. The photo he had posted online showed dark brown hair and a younger face. That whole night, I had been seeing the young man from the photo, and not the man who stood before me, a salt and pepper man, an aging man. His beauty would have such a short lifespan. For the first time, I felt that quality of tenderness toward him that I've seen adults devote to their children in childhood and other fleeting things, things you cannot put into display cases. Things you must let go. Some new understanding was just beyond my grasp, but before I could throw my mind into the void, he spoke. 'I'll be a minute,' he said, turning toward the alley.

'Don't.' I grabbed at his turquoise sleeve and held it.

'Hey, money comes and goes.'

'But time just goes,' I said to his back, as he walked away and his sleeve slipped from my fingers.

I stood by myself under a streetlight and watched him walk into the mouth of the alley. I waited.

The man who had been asleep on the museum steps sauntered past me, across the street, and into the alley, but the beautiful man did not come out. I wrapped my arms around my belly and watched three more men go into the alley. Then I retreated to the doorway of a darkened storefront and whispered, 'Shit.'

'Shit oh shit oh shit,' I whispered again as two more men went into the alley. Still, he did not come out. My whispering moved inside my head because I did not want anyone to hear me, but it was louder, much louder, Oh Shit Oh Shit!

Then it became much louder indeed: OH SHIT SHIT SHIT OH PAPA SHIT SHIT OH HELP SHIT OH PAPA HELP!

After I had watched a group of men leave the alley, none of whom were the beautiful man, I tiptoed over to the opening, arms wrapping my stomach, and peered in. There was nobody there, just a long narrow passage formed by two windowless, doorless brick walls with a 20-foot chain-link fence at one end.

When I saw the torn scrap of turquoise fabric on the ground by the fence, I entered the alley and plucked the scrap from the ground. It was suede.

As I stood alone holding that material, the cold hollow in my abdomen seemed to inflate. It grew so large that I felt it outgrow my body, and I became lost inside the empty space of it. I stood there in an emptiness that was all pain and coldness.

Two men walked past the mouth of the alley. They looked in but not at me. The wind picked up the tails of one man's scarf. It was turquoise. The other man, from the steps of the museum, now had his lower arms and hands wrapped in two short tubes of turquoise, like the sleeves of a jacket.

He said to his friend, 'He was beautiful, man. He was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.'

Or I think this is what he said, so nonsensical are the dispossessed. I had shrunk back against the wall and turned away.

With my father, some days are better than others. This is not one of those days.

The bedridden patient who cannot change position should be moved every two hours. Otherwise, sores may develop on the skin because of pressure from the bed. Moving the patient is easier with two helpers, but not impossible to attempt by yourself.

What happened on the night I went out with the beautiful man? I've retold myself the story countless times, using all the simplest, most threadbare words I know, but I cannot make sense of it.

Consider the patient's comfort at all times. Place a pillow under the patient's head before starting the turn. To turn the patient onto his or her right side, take the left arm, bend it at the elbow, and rest it on the stomach. Then bend the left leg at the knee and tuck a pillow between the two legs. Place one hand behind the patient's buttocks and the other underneath the shoulder. Roll the patient away from you, then place your hands under the patient's hip to pull the body back into the centre of the bed. The patient will now be in a fetal position.

When my time ended with other men, I would wake up in the morning and have to remind myself they were gone. I would say, 'Oh yes, so and so is no longer in my life. We will not walk through the park this Sunday.' Or, 'I expect I shall miss so and so but I will try to busy myself with other things.' With the beautiful man, though, as soon as I open my eyes in the morning, I know that something is gone. I feel empty. When I say empty, I mean just that. I do not mean lonely or despairing on a spiritual level. I do not mean that my body is a symbol of something else. My body is not art. My body is just a body, earthy and base, sour-breathed and polluting.

When I say empty, I mean that the cold that hollowed out my abdomen in the movie theatre has never left. I walk around with a hole inside my belly.

What I mean is that I have not bled in four months.

I took a pregnancy test, with hope, three times. Negative, negative, negative. I should go to the doctor soon.

For some patients, help with toileting may cause embarrassment. Be matter-of-fact. Replace diapers as soon as they are wet or soiled. After a diaper is used, clean the patient's genital area using soap and water, working from front to back.

Through our basement window, the twilight sky looks like a garish fluorescent sign, advertising...something. Night is coming.

Night is here.

The space between the two was so small I did not have time to prepare.

I drop my washcloth into a bucket beside the bed and say to my father, 'This is my funeral oration.'

'Nobody's dead yet, girl,' he murmurs, smiling slightly and patting my hand.

I stroke his dry cheek with my thumb.

'It's just an old art form,' I say. 'It's the art of letting go.'

And I begin the story again.