

He's Really So Sorry He Just Can't Do It

The boy and the girl met in a closet in High School. It was during a game of stand in the closet. "This feels good," the girl said.

"Good like the way peanut butter tastes," the boy thought. Then he asked her if she liked peanut butter too.

She said yes. This only confirmed that they were soulmates. They left the closet and went to 7/11 to buy a tub of peanut butter and licked it off the edge of plastic knives because there were no more spoons. This was living.

The next day, at lunch, he couldn't look at her. She was confused. Only 14 hours ago they were eating peanut butter and talking about how deep they both were. What had changed?

At lunch, Von Storm, the boy's best friend, told the girl it had gone too far for the boy. He couldn't do "serious." He was messed up from something in his history.

The girl did not ask more questions. She had heard of history. It could not be argued with.

Soon, it was late spring, and promposals were everywhere. Of course, the boy wanted to ask the girl. But how could he? Not after the peanut butter. At night he stayed awake, counting all the numbers above twelve, and imagining all the ways he might propose: maybe he could collect all the blades of grass her feet had ever tread upon and weave her a blanket. Maybe he could build a snowman and the snowman could speak to her. But it was May. The snow had melted.

Then it happened. The girl was asked by Brandon Lee. Brandon Lee did that thing where he took off his shirt and barked. The girl said yes. After, as Brandon Lee continued barking, she caught a glimpse of the boy who was standing on the far side of the cafeteria. Her mouth smiled at him, but her sad eyes told another story. "It could have been you," they said in the color green.

Two days after prom, they graduated.

It was over.

Except for that they were going to college together at Yale. Their high school had connections so everyone was going there.

For the first two years of college, the boy and the girl did not see each other. He was studying war, she was studying global warming. They were in different worlds.

For some time, the boy dated a Clementine. She was very sweet, like her namesake, the citrus. Though, she was not very deep. One time the boy asked Clementine "are you a deep person?" And she said, "I have two brothers." Still, it was a good relationship for him because intimacy made him fearful, and Clementine did not demand it.

For some time, while the boy was dating Clementine, the girl was charging her phone.

Then, the October of their Junior year, their mutual friend Sir Lyle turned 21 and threw a birthday party. It was thrown at a top-rated dive bar in downtown New Haven. The sanitary inspection grade was a B. The thermometer read room temperature.

The boy walked in and congratulated Sir Lyle on turning 21. Sir Lyle let the boy know he couldn't have done it without him. Then he said "It's not an open bar, but it's not a closed one either." Sir Lyle went on to laugh at his own joke; the boy went on to order an Allagash.

Behind him he noticed a crowd had gathered around the Pool table. There was the girl. Licking her finger, about to break.

The boy's inner dialogue turned to Mandarin. He had forgotten his English. He had even forgotten his own name.

She won the game in two turns.

Then she put down her stick and looked toward him. His heart skipped backwards.

"How's college?" she asked. He told her about the wars. She told him the planet getting hot.

He said, "just like you."

She blushed.

Has there been anyone since me, asked her elbow.

I've never met anyone like you, said his thigh.

Late that night, after Sir Lyle's party, the boy called the girl on the phone.

"Hello," she said, confused. She had been in the middle of dreaming.

"What are you doing right now?" he asked.

"I was in REM sleep."

He did not apologize.

"Want to do something?" he asked.

So she went to his apartment and they talked about all the drugs they'd done and all the consequences they'd lived through.

"You're my favorite person to talk to," he said.

She made a mysterious bird sound.

He wanted to marry her.

"Really, why did you call me?" She asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" He said.

I think you're perfect, he said in his head.

You're my perfect, the girl purred in hers.

For a week they did the whole dating thing. They bathed in the dawn light. They climbed a mountain. They pricked their fingers and bled into each other. The girl gave the boy a handjob as they read about drug cartels in the Paper. The boy touched her body and whispered about her bulletproof beauty. It was the kind of love they thought was lost in the age of computers.

But at the end of the week, the boy remembered that he was an avoidant. Growing up, the boy had lived on a very loud intersection. His father would punch him in the stomach and say, "why'd you crash the car?" Because of this, he was uncomfortable with loving.

At the end of the week, in the middle of their tango-class, he told her. "We have to end things."

She didn't understand. Just a day ago they were naming their future children after wildflowers. Just ten minutes ago they were biting their lips.

But then she remembered how her mother always said, "if you love something let it go." She used to think this meant flush your fish down the toilet. But now it meant more. The boy must have loved her a lot. She understood that now he had to let her go.

The girl blew him a kiss, did a somersault, and walked out the door. "I'll wire you the money for this tango class," she told the Federico.

A few days later, the boy's friend, Von Crystal, asked what was going on between him and the girl. It was not so easy for the boy to explain. So he explained via analogy: imagine someone who hates himself. What would they do in a good situation?

Some weeks later, the boy and the girl were at the same party for a good cause. She went up to say hi to him.

“Hi,” she said.

“I can’t do this right now,” he screamed, fluttering his arms like broken butterfly wings. He disappeared in the whirl of a moment.

In response, she climbed onto an elevated surface, bringing with her a man she thought looked like Michael B. Jordan. He was a ginger. He was good at breathing. Then she began kissing him. The boy saw this. An unnamable feeling exploded up his spine. He would later name it sadness.

The next day the boy texted her on iMessage.

Are you awake, he said.

Yes, she said.

I’m sorry I ran away from you, He said.

Shit happens, she said, *I’m sorry I was kissing Michael B. Jordan*.

What? He said.

No response.

Come over? We can talk about it. He said.

Coming, she said.

When she entered his apartment through the window, the boy was watching some Zombie show. She curled up next to him like a little lamb. She was waiting for him to look at her and finally tell her what he hadn’t been able to for many years. But he didn’t look at her. He was consumed by the zombies fighting on screen.

“Do you like Zombie shows?” He asked.

She began to cry.

He didn’t know what to do. He had to pee. He went to his bathroom, stopping at the fridge on the way back for a TV-beer.

“Want one?” He asked.

She continued crying.

“You’re a knockout,” he said and then fell asleep.

In the morning, people opened their eyes. He opened his eyes first. She had such small hands, he noticed. He wondered how she could hold large things; she would never make a great waitress.

She opened her eyes second. They lay in bed with eyes open, doing nothing. She was waiting for him. He was waiting for her. Two days passed and then the girl said, “I have to go feed my cats.”

“But you don’t have cats,” he said.

“You know nothing,” she said. She was fostering two Siamese kittens. If he cared to ask, he would have known that.

They did not talk for a while after that. The boy was busy studying the wars. The girl was doing a lot of thinking. Time was fleeting. Math was a word with four letters.

A while turned into five years.

One day, the girl — now a household name in at least seven houses — was taking a walk with someone else’s son. The son belonged to her older brother. That same day, the boy — whose salary was in the two-hundred-thousands — was counting the Benjamin Franklin’s in his pocket on the side of Fifth Avenue.

The girl’s nephew was seeing if he could walk with his eyes closed. Doing so, he ran into the boy who was counting his Franklins.

The nephew began to cry. The girl picked up her nephew and comforted him by criss-crossing her eyes. That's when she saw the boy's face.

Is it really him, she wondered, or are my eyes still crossed.

She has her own son, he thought, regretting everything. If only he hadn't messed up so many times, that son could be theirs.

They spoke about inflation and the cost of living.

A pedestrian walked by and said to them, "what a lovely family you are." Then the pedestrian took their photo and made it their screensaver.

"We're not a family," the boy called after the pedestrian. *We're just us,* he thought.

Fifteen years passed.

Sir Lyle sent an invitation. He was throwing a sleepover.

When the girl received the invitation, she felt a sense of renewal. She was getting to the age where many of life's big moments seemed passed and now impossible. She had not married. She had not had a child. She had not had a second child. She had not had a teenager.

The boy felt the same. He had never had a son to toss tortillas with in the backyard.

For both of them, Sir Lyle's sleepover invitation came with the promise of youth again.

The sleepover took place at Sir Lyle's ranch in cowboy country. Minutes into their arrival, the boy and the girl saw each other. They looked so much the same as that day in the closet. He threw a peace sign. She stuck her tongue out.

"You look great," the boy said, walking over.

"Shut up, stupid," she said, slapping him in the face.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Good. Living in New York."

"Where in New York?"

"Near the subway station."

"That's my favorite neighborhood."

They shared a bunk-bed at the sleepover. She was on top. He was on the bottom. She could hear him staying awake below her. Why was he staying awake in Mandarin?

At four in the morning, the girl and the boy woke up. The sleepover was going on an early-morning rabbit hunt. The first rabbit was shot by four-thirty. It was cooked by five-twelve. So there they all were, sitting around a flashlight because they had been unable to start a fire, waiting for the sun to rise.

"Do you like to hunt?" The boy asked the girl.

She made finger guns with her hands and shot him.

"You crazy hunter," he said.

They ate their rabbit with local jam. She remembered how much he loved meat. He remembered how much he loved the sound of her swallowing.

"So, you ever get hitched?" the boy asked the girl.

"No. You?"

"Never."

"You never found anyone?"

"I guess not."

“Well, let me set you up.”

“Okay. As long as you set me up with yourself.”

Her face became more colorful than the sunrise.

The boy and the girl were on different flights back from the sleepover. But when the boy explained the situation to the TSA agent, the TSA agent said, “Run, boy. Get on that girl’s flight.”

So the boy ran through that airport, the TSA agent slowly jogging behind him for dramatic effect. He boarded the girl’s plane with no questions. There she was in 26A. The seat next to her was occupied by a fish tank.

He walked right up to her.

She was having a shot of tequila and a snacking on candied cherries.

“What are you doing here?” She said.

“Shhh,” the boy said, taking the cherry stem from her beautiful mouth and folding it into a ring.

“Marry me,” he said.

She turned and said, “I think you mean, *Marry I.*”

“Sure, maybe I don’t know grammar. But I do know one thing.” He took her small hands in his cinnamon ones. “I like you more than anyone else. And I think it will always be that way.”

“Don’t you mean love?” said one of the fish in the tank in 26B.

“It’s possible.”

Tears began to fall down the girl’s face. “It’s possible I love you too,” she said.

Even though it was the afternoon, the night sky was visible through the plane windows. The planets were right in their orbits. A shooting star flew by, but there was no more need for wishes.

Six months went by.

The boy and the girl were living in a bungalow on the Hudson. In the mornings the boy went shopping for money. While he was out, the girl practiced her winking. She still had her own place on 21st street and was making passive income by subletting it for five thousand times the price. Sometimes, she reminded the boy that she was rich because of this. But he wanted to make money anyway.

On a Tuesday, the girl came home from a landlord gala.

The boy was sitting on the couch reading a book. The girl was impressed.

The girl opened the pantry. She began to read a box of band-aids.

“Want one?”

“I’m good.”

“What are you reading?” She asked.

He began to stutter.

She walked towards him and took the book from his hands. It was called, *How to Run Away.*

“Why are you reading this book?” She asked.

“Uhhh,” he said, “for medical school.” But they both knew this: he wasn’t in medical school.

“Are you planning on running away?” She asked.

He stuttered again.

“Do you not want to get married?”

There was no response. There they were, standing there in silence at high tide on the Hudson.

I grew up on a loud intersection, I grew up on a loud intersection, he wanted to say. But the words were lost in his throat.

You wasted my life, she wanted to say, *just tell me the truth*. But the words were impossible to even form.

Slowly, the boy stood up. He opened his phone, and sent the girl a text message. Before she could look at what he'd sent, he took her phone and threw it across the room. The girl galloped to her phone, but by the time it was in her hands, the boy had swam away down the river Hudson. She looked at the message he had sent: "I'm so sorry, I just can't do it."