

“Being young means being resilient. Being a young woman means being strong and vulnerable. Within the folds of *What You Have Taught Me*, you encounter a soul that's yearning to live and find meaning. Her narrative, drawing on a semi-autobiographical account of her early adulthood, shows an author capable of entertaining and reflecting. Laani's debut book is bound to linger, like the last sip of a cup of good Syrian coffee drunk on a balcony overlooking an ancient city coming back to life.”

Matia Press Editors



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Author's Note

I've had enormously eventful periods. From being heartbroken over a four-year-long potential relationship, to seeing my soul in a stranger's eye and getting lost in a summer romance, to finding healthy, but unsustainable love. Each one of these experiences was a whole rollercoaster ride. One of them brought me to the low, put me in the dark tunnel, and made me doubt if healthy love existed. The other unexpectedly elevated me to the top of the world. Yet, I remain grateful for each person or moment that inspired this account.

I hope this memoir will take each reader on a separate journey. Love is different for everyone but can also be felt collectively. May the black letter on these white papers help you realize that.

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For My Dad

“My dear, you made this girl all to yourself!”

These were the words my grandma would say when I sat next to my father at any family event. She'd always rave the moment I first saw daylight. My dad held me in his arms and walked to the nursery observation window to show me to my grandma. From that moment on, everyone I have met has mentioned that I look like my dad. I've always taken it as a compliment.

I chose to write the first chapter about my father because he showed (and keeps showing me) the highest and most selfless level of love. He is also the man I will always be the most grateful for.

My earliest memory is of my dad and me lying on the living room floor in the late afternoon, when it was already dark, trying to solve a cube puzzle. I think that moment had the greatest impact on my perception of love and the world in general. I was fascinated by how simple it was for him to solve the puzzle, and how he didn't hesitate to choose the right cube. The picture formed perfectly. He could also turn the little wooden cubes arranged side by side without causing them to fall apart. Something I never succeeded in doing.

This one moment left such an imprint on me. It taught me that my dad was smart. He always had the answers and

could make wonders. Ever since, I can only measure someone's love by the time they spend with me. It became an unconscious standard: If I were to love someone, he had to be smart. His intelligence must captivate me as much as my dad's did in that moment.

When I was in kindergarten, my father worked a lot—from early mornings to late nights. Even with the long working hours, I could never say that he was absent. Because each night, when he'd get home, he'd have the grocery bags in one hand and two little presents in the other, one for his daughter and one for his son. While my mom prepared our dinner, the three of us unboxed the sacred gifts and pressed a kiss on each of his cheeks.

Learning how to ride a bike without training wheels was a long process. I'd ask my dad to take them off, try to find balance, then return to him with bruises, asking him to put them back. I did this about three times a week, if not daily. He never complained about it and taught me that love is patient.

Time also proved this. As I got older, whenever I'd see him and my mom argue (once every two years), he'd always be patient with her. No matter how hurtful my mom would get, he would never, not a single time, retaliate. Instead, he used the kindest, honey-like words. I came to the conclusion that no man will ever be allowed to talk to me in a

way that my dad did not talk to his wife, my mom. I will never tolerate any man's disrespectful words or hot temper.

My dad hates dancing and never does, not even at weddings. It's weird that he dislikes dancing but loves music. At each wedding, my mom begs him to dance. She'd even try to make him drink alcohol so she could get him on the dance floor. Yet, he was the one who taught me how to dance the waltz.

I was around fourteen, and we were celebrating my godparents' anniversary. I can't remember how, but we ended up on the dance floor and started stepping on each other's feet until our laughs became louder than the music. He told me the secret was to take big steps. I finally caught onto the rhythm, and we swirled flawlessly. Since then, at each wedding, when the waltz played, we took the big steps together.

He wiped my tears away every time I fell while running around in the garden in my early years, when I chaotically tried to explain how a guy hurt my feelings, and when I moved away for college. Life has its sense of humor: I never saw him cry, and I never had the opportunity to wipe away his tears like he had wiped away mine before I turned eighteen.

He came towards me with a big bouquet of colorful tulips, then he asked me to dance. He let me choose the music we would dance to. *Should I be selfish and choose a song that*

relates to me, or go for the classic waltz since we never miss a chance to twirl around when the violin starts to play? I thought

I chose Billie Eilish's "What Was I Made For."

After a few steps, I noticed that he was blinking rapidly. He fought back his tears. But those naughty, sneaky teardrops started rolling down his cheeks, until my thumb wiped them away. We both giggled.

So, for me, love is patient, gentle, tender, and kind. How could I ever accept someone's unacceptable behavior when my dad showed so much love from the moment I opened my eyes? How could I ever settle for hurtful words and aggression when my dad was nothing but soft and delicate.

*The salty tears
That I never let you see
Led to the
River
That we drowned in.*

My Best Friend

I wondered for a long time if I should write this chapter. If I should talk about this person. I promised myself I would write only about positive experiences in this book. But after all, this book started with a deleted chapter about him. This chapter! He was my best friend. Maybe that's why everything that happened between us hurt so much.

We met in 2017. We were in the same group at a summer camp. Our team won every single competition that week. He was the one who helped us win every challenge that involved physical strength, even as a kid, he paid much attention to his physique. He had red freckles over his cheeks and nose, a nose that awfully big nose that everyone made fun of. Surprisingly, he embraced it rather than being insecure about it. I remember that each summer, everyone would have a boyfriend by the third day, then break up after getting home. We lasted so much longer: five years. We didn't talk in the beginning. In 2018, at the second camp, we did and could talk about everything—religion, TV, sex, school, friends, and everything in-between. But never about our feelings for each other.

This hurt me more than I could ever explain. I knew that he felt something for me, but he was too big a coward to ever even admit it to himself. I thought at the time that by hurting him, he might snap and come clean about everything

he thought and felt about me. Being in love is dangerous. When you're out of it, and you look back, you are stunned by everything that you let slide. I found myself letting him push my boundaries, accepting the crumbs he occasionally gave me. While there were others that I could've given my attention to, he didn't even bother being honest with me. All he gave were cheap excuses and tipsy messages.

I was so in love with him. He was the one who had been around the longest and got me. The only person to whom I didn't have to explain myself, who understood all my desires and wishes, what I ached for, and instead of questioning it, he supported me. During times of doubt, he would reassure me that I was capable of achieving, and during glimpses of insecurity, he would help me regain confidence.

I always lived in my dream world with him. Where we would be together, living our happy lives. We would spend our days bathing in love, a love in which I almost drowned. Simple love, where I would rush to him when he opens the door as he gets home, carrying dog food and groceries. I fantasized about a world of togetherness. These delusions were comfortable and easy. We had the same plans: getting out of our miserable hometowns and moving to a huge city—to New York, for example. We would live together in a small apartment, pursue our dreams in acting, and live happily ever after. Such fantasies are also comfortable and easy.

The real world is not as easy. Nights were troublesome. He'd drink a lot, and I'd check his location and stay awake until I made sure he arrived home safely.

I used to sit each night on my balcony, under the starry sky. Regardless of how relaxing that might sound, my inner world was the opposite. My shaky hands struggled to hold my cigarettes. I felt terror and worry and thought of every bad outcome possible.

I saw him lying on the side of the road. All alone. Looking at the dark sky with empty eyes.

I saw him pass out on the bar table. I saw the bartender throwing him out. I saw him tumble home and barely making it.

He picked up this habit of getting drunk every single night. At that moment, our relationship changed. He would go out with drinking buddies who were worse than him. The problem is, when you have that substance in your system, you neglect the others around you. He would come home totally intoxicated and tell me the words he knew I wanted to hear. We never said our feelings or what we were to each other out loud, even though I have a feeling that he knew how in love I was with him.

To be fair, I wasn't a saint either. At that time, I thought that if I hurt him enough, at one point, he would crack and admit everything he felt. I stabbed him, then twisted the

knife, took it out, let him bleed, then, when it was healed enough, I did it all over again. I told him that I wasn't a virgin when I actually was, thinking that this would make him perceive me as desired by other men, and maybe it would unconsciously trick him into wanting me. Maybe if he felt as if he was losing me, he would snap and will no longer take me for granted

I told him I got with a few boys each day during a festival, hoping he would tell me to control myself because he wants me more than those guys do. Once I was drunk and told him that I hate him and to kill himself. I don't remember what I hoped for or what he had said. I started going out with his best friend, hoping it would hurt him enough to see me as "genuinely interested" in someone so close to him, and finally admit that he sincerely loved me. Nothing worked. The most it did was push him deeper into his addiction.

One time, he called me under the influence. He was flirting with the idea of suicide. Claiming that the only time he feels good is when he's high and looking up at the stars. He was talking to me as if it were the last time we would be talking. He knew how to push my buttons and keep me around—his way of manipulating me into staying a bit longer, even though I was slowly slipping away from his reach.

The night it all came crashing down is still vivid in my mind. It was the usual routine for me: sitting outside,

lighting my cigarette as I was waiting for him to get home. But he didn't. That night, I smoked more than I usually would. As I lit each cigarette, my hands shook.

He also drank more than usual. He was proud of it, I guess, otherwise he wouldn't have posted it all over his social media. He got stoned and did some drugs also. How do I know about this? "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." One of his friends, the one I couldn't stand, sent me a picture of my best friend with empty bottles around him, weed, and white powder on the table. His eyes were blood-red as he stared into the dark nothing, his face expressionless, his clothes wrinkled, and his hair messy.

He looked unrecognizable. It was like a slap in the face. *I should have known better.* The sad, funny thing was, the day before, I warned him that he either quit drinking or we'd go our separate ways. He said he would. Except he was drunk when he made that promise. He tried to avoid eye contact by looking at his feet on the ground. But I knew his eyes were red; his breath was stinking of beer.

I disappeared from his life that night. Packed all the bags with all my emotions and left without an explanation. Four years down the drain. I have wasted four years on somebody who'd slowly become a stranger to me. I cut all forms of possible communication with him, blocked him on

all social platforms. But he found a way to contact me only to tell me I was a whore, and the only thing he was sorry for was not getting to fuck me or see my naked body again.

We have had fallouts before, but we would always find our way back to each other. Not this time. I'm not naïve. I have never been. It was a long time ago when I realized that nothing lasts forever and pleasure is momentary.

And if fate

Exists

We'll meet

Electric Castle

Last summer, among the many other things I did for the first time, was going to a festival. The five-day-long event was centered around an old castle in the middle of a huge field. The main attraction and the center of the festival's brand is Banffy Castle. It's old, in some places decaying walls remind us of the past and the fragility of our present. In some places the windows are missing, and it's only the window frame that is present which gives us an unfiltered view of the few acres of land and the small pond right next to the building.

Since the branding of the festival and the venue itself is already rustic in a way, the lineup is also following this idea. The artists are usually for people born in the early two-thousands. The biggest stars of the festival, without a doubt, were the Twenty One Pilots. That night, there were nearly ninety thousand attendees. To nobody's surprise, I did get lost in the crowd and drifted away from my friends.

When the boys got on stage, my friends were long gone, and there I was, getting pushed around by people who seemed giants to me. I stood on my tiptoes, desperate to see something other than shoulders and backs. After a few songs, I gave up and decided to just enjoy the music and seize the moment. Unlike others, it was only a girl and I next to me who were singing our hearts out in terrible voices, unashamedly.

In the throes of my joy, I realized how deep the lyrics were. When Josh hit the first beats of “Chlorine,” something struck me.

“I’m running for my life,” the song said. *Since I was fourteen, I’ve been doing the same, running from hometown.* That was the reason I had always wanted to move so far away from home. I wanted to escape everything that had to do with that horrible place, including my reputation the old, toxic friend groups, and even myself. I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I never found people I could unapologetically share myself with or truly rely on. I never had the typical high school experiences everyone had. I spent every afternoon in my room on my phone.

Each time I left my room, it was only to meet up with the dearest friend of mine. She was the only person who seemed to feel the same way about our terrible hometown. We had the same experiences, we didn’t get along with anyone, and we weren’t the type of people to kiss other people’s asses only to have people to hand out with, that would make fun of us when we weren’t there.

Looks wise we were complete opposites. I had straight blonde hair in High School, which contrasted her black curls. Not only that, while she only wore black and listened to alternative rock, I was listening to Taylor Swift in my white and beige outfit.

I was singing the lyrics and dancing with a random girl who was just as short as I was.

“I bet you don’t see more than me,” I broke our rather tragic performance.

“You won the bet already. I was trying to convince the others to come here sooner. How nice they listened to me.” She pointed at the three guys surrounding her. I had locked eyes with one of them a few times since I got shoved into their group. He was lucky enough to be fairly tall. His hair was long enough to be tied into a man bun, and his skin was an olive tan color. Bingo! Just my type. When he noticed we were talking, he interrupted our conversation.

“Hey, she’s mine, I saw her first.” His smile was relishing. It was so contagious I could not look away.

“Come on, Alian. If you saw her first, why didn’t you make a move? You missed your chance.” She tried to wave him off. B

“Better late than never.” He handed me an unopened can of beer.

“You know, people usually ask the other if they would like to have a drink. I don’t like beer.” I took it anyway and opened it.

“Okay, well then, all I can offer is my much-wanted presence.” He put an arm around my shoulder and clicked his beer to mine.

“What happened to the shy boy I know? Who are you?” My singing partner burst out laughing. “I’m Julie, by the way,” she told me.

We continued singing and dancing until my favorite song came on. The only minor inconvenience was that I could not see anything happening on the stage. It was time that I took advantage of my new friend’s height.

“If you are so tall anyway, won’t you lift me up? I would rather accept this than a can of beer. This is my favorite song.”

“Look at me once again with those eyes, and I will lift you up to heaven.” He wasted no time and squatted down. I sat on his shoulders.

I was stunned by how everything looked from up above. Tens of thousands of people gathered only to see two people play for two hours.

I’m sure among them were people whose lives were saved by the two of them. Music really does save lives, or artists. I know that. An artist once saved mine.

To be honest, we were not stable. I could have fallen at any point; he was grabbing onto my calves, and I was holding his face. At one point, I didn’t know if he was dancing or losing balance, so after that moment, I asked him to put me down.

That was the moment we fell. It was funny. We laughed it off. The concert ended. Everyone turned around and tried to leave as quickly as possible, and I lost him in the crowd. I caught a glimpse of him on the last day from afar, but that was it. And if fate exists, we will see each other again.

*Strangers yet so acquainted
From the first glance
Until the last breath
I will always know you*

Rebirth

“You ever wondered why the kindest get the roughest ride?”

Hero Baldwin

On a chilly Saturday morning of the Electric Castle festival, my friends and I couldn't do much other than dance in order not to freeze into statues. It was already dawn, and the unique house beats travelled through us. The sky grew lighter as the sun rose higher in the east, behind the castle.

The BooHa stage was one of my favorites, not because I listened to the artists from behind the DJ bar, but because it was small. The bartenders would fill my cups to the rim without asking for my ID, that I would've proudly shown. The music was decent, and I could show off the dance moves I practiced every night in the comfort of my room, in front of my mirror.

As the calming beats streamed through the chilly air, my eyes found someone who happened to glance over at me at the same time. Eye contact can be super powerful: You lock eyes, and everything else freezes. You realize that every step and decision you made led you to that moment. As the two artists continued to play, we somehow found ourselves getting closer, until we were suddenly standing and dancing right next to each other.

It started off as something shy and innocent. Even if we locked eyes through our dark sunglasses that we were wearing, I

could feel that there was something between us from the start. Most probably, this is what some call “chemistry.” I didn’t really pay attention to the lyrics; his gaze was that mesmerizing.

Then, I heard a song that was as familiar as that stranger. He must have felt it too because he touched me. He took my hands and put them on his shoulders. I took it further and intertwined them behind his neck. From that moment on, every second felt like an eternity. Time became slow and gentle.

“We had so many dreams

I guess we planned to live a life

Somehow, we all ended working up a 9-5.”

As we heard Hero Baldwin’s angelic voice, something moved within us. He took his hands from the small part of my lower back and lifted my sunglasses. I did the same. The tension turned intoxicating. We were barely moving, lost in each other’s eyes, getting closer and closer.

“The highs and the lows

Are better with somebody.”

When did love become exhausting? How many disappointments did it take? Why did we give so much power to the other person? Why did one take advantage of the other’s vulnerability? I guess all the things that broke me in the past now make sense. Love and pain. It’s always about these two.

I would have never learned how love can not only bring me to the highest, most ecstatic minutes of my life, but it can also cause months, if not years, of agony and faithlessness.

He broke the staring contest and looked at my lips.

“Keep falling in love.” The lyrics of the song caught my ears

His lips reached mine. Our souls met and devoured each other. This simple action and its timing made up for every disappointment I had, every tear, every unsent message, and every unsaid “I love you.” It was that moment I realized that my love would never be kept a secret. Nor any of my other emotions. I will be vocal. I will say them out loud and no longer live in a what-if world. I had done that for long enough, and let my pride get in the way.

I made a promise to myself in that moment, when his lips reached mine, that I will keep falling in love and be unapologetic. I let go, and the right people will know how to handle my emotions.

The humid air filled my lungs

And our lust my heart

Drenched in our and desire

It did not last only a moment.

It lasts centuries.

The Brazilian

“Hot summer nights . . . when you and I were
forever wild.” Lana del Rey

It is such an amusing experience when you find the man of your dreams. At least that's what I thought at eighteen. He had everything I wanted in a man. Long, black curly hair, which he would wear in a man bun, beautiful brown eyes, tan skin, and tattoos. He was so sure of himself, always. His unbridled masculinity overwhelmed me.

It was my last day at the warm, coastal city of Romania. Six days passed by, and each day the only thing that was on my mind was the Brazilian guy who lived just fifteen minutes away from the place I was staying at. I met him at the beginning of the summer and was all over him. Our only obstacle was that we had a whole country between us, so our relationship was cut short, and we stopped talking to avoid any kind of attachment, feelings, or longing.

I was hopeful we would just bump into each other while I was at the beach. After all, we had every chance since we were just a short distance away. After six days of waiting for faith to intervene, I chose to take matters into my own hands. Some things must not be left to chance. I sent him a

message that I'm leaving tomorrow, so if he wants to see me, now is the time.

He called me instead of wasting time with messages and said that he would set off in an hour or so. At the time, I wasn't looking for red flags and didn't run a background check on him. Now, I know better. So, I don't go through the same thing again. But that's for another story.

I was sitting on a bench facing the Black Sea, waiting for him. A few complications later, we managed to find each other. Maybe this labyrinth game was the universe's attempt to protect me. I greeted him with a hug, and he pressed a kiss on my cheek. I waited for such a long time to see him face-to-face. From the first conversation we had, my mind was only on our first meet-up.

We chose a comforting terrace for our playdate. As soon as we sat down, the first to greet us was a black cat who lay down at our little glass table and wouldn't leave. Maybe it was a sign that we weren't off to a good start.

"You know, I was afraid to meet you at first. I remember once you showed me the books you read, and there was one about body language. I feel like you can see through me right now," I said.

"This is not the first time you remember small details. Can you even get any better?" He laughed, leaning back on his chair.

“There are other things I remember more vividly.” He knew what that was: our first encounter.

“Tell me more about it,” he came closer, and for the first time, he looked into my eyes the way I was waiting for him to do so.

We were back to the staring contest that we practiced so many times through our screens.

“Do we really need words for this?”

“You know I like it when you use your words.” A smirk appeared on his lips. I refused to give in this soon.

“Do you ever get homesick?” I changed the subject. I knew he moved to Constanta from Lebanon a few months ago.

“There are times when I wish I could go out with my friends from Lebanon, and I do miss my sisters, but I really like Constanta, too. I have already made it my new home . . .”

I put my hands together and rested my chin on them.

He was quick to notice. “Hmm, your hands. I like it.”

He was reading my body language as I had expected him to. I chuckled and, in a swift move, placed them under my thighs.

“It doesn’t help.”

“I didn’t expect you to just come out here like this.”

“There are more things you don’t expect that I plan on doing,” he said as he lit a cigarette.

“Oh yeah? tell me more.” I leaned in with my fingers fidgeting. I didn’t even finish my sentence properly when he pointed at my fingers.

“See, you’re nervous.”

I was a bit, and he wanted to make it worse. He loved testing his hold on me.

The sun was setting, and the western sky was painted in purple; the air had finally cooled, and the atmosphere was much more pleasant. We continued with our conversation until a group of toddlers sat down at the table next to us. Their loud voices filled the entire restaurant, and being right next to us made it unbearable to sit. I caught his gaze.

“Do you want to go?” I asked

He didn’t hesitate to agree, and in a matter of minutes, we were out of there.

Our next stop was the beach. Only a few people were wandering around the place, mostly tourists who were desperate to take pictures. We started walking towards a runway dedicated to fishermen. From that place, we had a beautiful view of the port of Constanta, which had just lit up.

“When I was young, my dad used to take me fishing at our other house in the countryside, where we had a pond,” I broke the silence.

“Yeah, me too, I used to fish a lot.”

“Do you want to go sit down?” The beach was suffocating with plastic sun loungers. As we walked, he grabbed my hand. It took me by surprise.

“Your hands are so small, oh my god.” After taking a good look at them, he didn’t hesitate to intertwine our fingers. I was taken aback. Maybe this was the first unexpected thing he planned to do from the beginning. We walked further in silence.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked his favorite question.

I didn’t know what he wanted to hear. “About how relaxing the waves are,” I gave him an honest answer.

“You are the worst liar, have I told you that?”

In all fairness, he did—a million times before, especially when I told him I didn’t know what I wanted from him.

“No, like really. You were just expecting me to say something else.” He was surprised, and I was oblivious as to why.

“Wow,” he scoffed, “you are a smart woman.” He let go of my hand and put his around my shoulders

Once, we’d sat down on a long chair next to each other. I’d rested my head on his shoulder, but he didn’t do the same. Instead, I felt him staring at me. I got my head up and gave him a confused look. As soon as I was facing him, he wasted no time and aggressively pushed his lips onto mine. He tried

to be passionate, but it came off as rough and too eager. But it was lust after all. We both just wanted each other's bodies and everything that they could offer. Even when we were in public, we took advantage of them.

I leaned back on him, and he touched me as pleasantly as the waves caress the beachfront. But we couldn't continue. The beach was starting to get busy.

He always knew the right words to say, what people wanted to hear. So, he convinced me to jump over a fence and sneak into the yacht port right next to us.

It will be good for the plot, I thought. Not only did we sneak into the port, but we also climbed onto the top of a boat. The only thing I could hear was the waves gently crashing, the echoing music from the restaurants, and our panting breaths. As we lay in each other's arms and tried to catch our breath, we became mesmerized by the stars above us. *They are so far away yet so close to each other and to us.*

"That's Jupiter."

"C'mon, how would you know?"

"And that's Saturn." As a kid, space and its mysteries fascinated me. "I just know."

"Look, I don't know shit about stars, but this night just sent me to Jupiter." We bathed in silence and just inhaled each other's existence.

“I thought about you every night since I’m here,” I admitted the hard truth.

“Then stay with me.”

“What?” I took my head off his chest and began looking into his starry eyes.

“Stay with me. One more week,” he said it so casually as if he would just ask me what my favorite color was.

Ever since then, I have stayed there in the memory. I made it home.

P

A

T

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C

E

A1 Highway

“Baby, put on heart-shaped sunglasses ‘cause we’re gonna
take a ride” Lana del Rey

Sibiu has always had my heart, where I found inner peace and self-love. Each time I need a break or just reassurance from the universe, a moment of peace, I go there and recharge my soul. Some people fall in love with their looks, others with their material belongings, some with other people, and so on. I fell in love with a place. I don’t know if it is any better.

This old-fashioned city brings me an unparalleled calm. Its colorful buildings breathe life into my colorless thoughts. One afternoon, I went out with my cousin and his friends. It was the first time I met them; they were in their late 20s, and all of them arrived in black leather on motorcycles. We crashed at a broken-down bar among billiard tables. The sound of the crashing balls and Nirvana songs made me feel out of place and too young. The strong scent of beer and alcohol made it worse. They talked about newly released rock albums, politics, and motorcycle stunts.

“Do you like pace?” it was a familiar voice, but I couldn’t tell where had I heard it before.

“What?” I was totally zoned out, thinking about any possible excuse to get out of that place, so I didn’t bother paying attention to their conversation.

“Do you like speed?” The youngest member of the group must have noticed that I wasn’t really present.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to show you something.” He grabbed my hand and walked me to the exit. The warm, humid summer air hit my face; it was the usual August weather.

“Do it for the plot?”

Even though the weather was quite hot, he told me to wear his jacket. We finished up with him putting a helmet on my head and kissing it.

“Why’d you do that?”

“For luck.”

I sat behind him on the jet-black vehicle and put my hands around his belly.

“I don’t mind if you want to hold me, but it’s safer if you hold on to this little thing here, and if you feel like the force pushes, rest your back on the top box here. Also, put your legs here on this hook; that’s a must. We can get back to cuddling later.”

What a cocky mother fucker.

“Aw, never thought that a tough surface hides such a sensitive inside.”

“You know your life is literally in my hands, right?” he said as he flashed me with a smile that revealed his slightly crooked teeth.

“Just start this run-down piece of iron.”

“I’ll show you just what this piece of iron is capable of. Try not to scream.”

“You think you can make me scream?”

“You would be surprised.” He said as he put his helmet on his head that hid his long, blonde hair.

When he started the engine, something familiar fell out of his pocket. We took off towards the city.

It was when the sun was just starting to set, but the lights were already on, emitting a hallow glow that mingled with the orangey rays of the setting sun. *My favorite time of the day: When the night hadn’t arrived yet, but the day is already gone.*

We began going too slow.

“Is this all you’ve got?”

“You’re not only playing with fire, but you also just poured oil on it.”

He took a sharp turn at the intersection. Instead of tightening my grip on the handlebars, my reflexes kicked in and I clung to him.

“What’s happening back there? Did you get scared?”

I could see his satisfied smile in the rearview mirror. “I’m just getting bored right here. I thought you were more fun.”

As soon as we were on the almost empty highway, he started accelerating. I rested my back on the top box and

placed my hands on the hook again. He only accelerated more and then a bit. The wind twirled the strands of blonde hair that snuck out from under the helmet. At this point, we were at almost 200 kilometers per hour.

“You see that, little girl?” He looked at me in the mirror, waiting for my answer.

“Yes,” I mumbled

“What? I can’t hear you,” he yelled. He wanted to feed his ego, and I wanted to push him off.

He took another unexpected sharp turn and made us get closer to the ground yet again. It was already nightfall, and the sky was embellished with stars and a waxing crescent moon. He took me on a road that was suspiciously familiar, as if I had seen these trees and heard these chipmunks’ sounds before. Then it clicked. *How could I forget?*

As we reached the top of the hill, he helped me take off the helmet.

“Look, I messed up your hair already.” He placed the helmets on the top box. “Not the way I wish I did, but it’s good for now.”

After I was done detangling my hair, he took the opportunity to mess it up with his huge palms once again. While he was busy focusing on making my hair a nest a bird family could comfortably lay their eggs in, we lost balance and fell on the grass below us.

“Now look what you did.” I stood up, looking down at him, but he dragged me back down. This time, I landed on his chest, and he was quick to embrace me. I had no chance to escape from him. It was playful and funny, but these actions were long expired.

“I missed this.” He said as he still held me close.

I might have left out the part where we knew each other. Very well.

“Cut the bullshit. I didn’t think we would be having this conversation at the same place we started our short-term relationship.”

It was about a year ago when there was a house party there. As always, I went with a few close friends and met him when they all found someone else to hang out or make out with.

“Oh my god, all alone?” he’d said.

“Could you please find a more cliché phrase?”

“It’s a classic.”

“And never works.”

I took myself to the kitchen and made myself a drink. The house was filled with cigarette smoke and the intoxicating smell of sweat and alcohol. I went back to him. He was waiting for me at the same place, but now with greater confidence and the same cocky smile he still had on his face.

“If it doesn’t work, why’d you come back?”

“You’re the only one who’s not drunk. But if you are not keen on keeping me company, I can simply bless someone else with my presence.” I had already turned around when he gripped my hand and pulled me down.

“Sit your ass down. I see it in your eyes that you don’t want to ‘bless’ anyone else with your presence other than me.” *Cheesy.*

“Nice tattoo by the way.” *Patience* was inked vertically on the right side of his neck.

After a few hours of constant talking and laughter, the feast was interrupted by screams, a big cloud of smoke, blue and red lights, and sirens. That was when the fairytale ended, and I came back into real life. Everyone started running to evade responsibility and, obviously, a hefty fine. He did, too. He got up and ran towards his motorcycle.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled, running after him, trying to understand his sudden cowardness.

“Baby, I must go now. I’ll see you around.”

He took off with a loud noise and left me in the forest with a few dozen other people around a burning house now surrounded by firemen and police officers.

“You would’ve looked for me if you did.”– I said. I stood up with a provocative smile and walked over to his bike, running my hands along its side as I circled it. “This jacket is so old,” I said as I put it on. “And smelly.” I pulled

up the zipper. “I’d look good riding, don’t you think?” I was already on the motorcycle.

A familiar sound echoed through the forest. As it got louder, I was already with the helmet on my head and his jacket on my body. He noticed and got up when I turned on the engine.

“Nice tattoo by the way.” I remembered the magic phrase, “*Baby, I must go now, I’ll see you around.*”

*My thoughts are infected by you
Only you.
From your golden skin
To the deepest part of your soul.
Our separated bodies on earth
Yet our intertwined souls
out
in the universe.*

Brazilian Rebound

What does a Balkan woman do when she's searching for answers? Look for it in the tarot cards. It had been a long time since I heard from my favorite boy, the Brazilian. Unusually, for a few days, the only thing I could think about was him. His voice, his gentle yet sure touch, his confident appearance. Everything about him. He was definitely a certified player of mind games; he always knew what to do or say to keep me coming back for more. I let him.

No matter how many activities I tried to distract myself with, my mind would take me back to the moments I shared with him. It would take me back to that unforgettable day we spent together, the nights we couldn't hang up the phone, the sweet, arousing things he would say and do to me.

My stubbornness wouldn't let me text him. I was in doubt whether I should. The best way to find the answer was to ask the universe and a tarot deck.

"He has been thinking about you lately. He has been in denial about his feelings for you, but deep down he knows that you mean something to him. Though, he is very hard-headed so it is unlikely that he will reach out," my dear friend, Iluzia, said. Her name is already very telling about her. She herself is like a shadow, an illusion, mysterious and dreamy, like you can't touch her. She always does a great job searching for answers in the shadows.

“I knew it!” I looked at her, as a friend and as a witch, waiting for her advice to tell me whether I should make the first move.

“Girl, I don’t know if I should tell you to text him or not.” We both frowned, then I asked her to do so. She spread the cards again.

“Yes! Do it! You have nothing to lose. Like, look, this card is basically a straight-up yes.”

I was so happy. I had been debating contacting him for some time now, and this was the final push I needed to do so. I took the leap of faith.

“I know you are looking at my profile the same way we looked at Jupiter that night. You might as well text me already,” I told him.

I didn’t have to wait much for the reply. “Now you’ve got your answer. My turn to ask a question?”

“Would you like to?” I didn’t get a reply to this message; instead, my phone started vibrating, and his name lit up my screen.

I was longing to hear his voice after this phase of separation. After letting it ring for a few seconds, I picked up, and our conversation began.

“Hi.” I was shaking on the inside.

“Hey. First off, how do you know I was looking at your profile?” *In medias res. Getting right into it.*

“Hmm, good question, can you guess?” There was no way I was going to tell him—a Christian with two cross tattoos—that I knew it from the tarot cards.

“I mean, I don’t know, did I accidentally like something?” The unsureness and shyness in his voice were something new, a pleasant surprise.

We caught up on what we had been up to. It turned into a contest about who had been busier, more productive, and less preoccupied with thoughts of the other.

“Guess what. I’ve learned some Arabic. Listen: Mahraban (Hello). Keyf halak (How are you doing)? ”

“Who the hell taught you this?” he sounded jealous.

“Khol khara (Eat shit). I’m not finished.” He was taken aback. I continued on with the phrases I learned until he stopped me.

“I asked, who taught you this?” His voice was now firm and loud.

“It’s a secret.” I bit my tongue as I was waiting for him to answer. I always liked this game.

“Tell me who taught you the khol khara curse. Where is he or she from?” His obvious way of finding out whether we’re talking about a male or a female here.

“Saudi.” I left him wondering.

“By the way, I cut my hair.”

“Wait, what? You did what?” His hair was my favourite thing about him. I thought back to the times when my fingers would get tangled in his long curls, when I would wake him up in the morning by playing with his hair, and when I would pull on them before, in the late night.

“Yes, all of it. I got a buzzcut.”

“Who hurt you? Why would you do such a thing?”

“It just got too long, and I got tired of it.”

After a few minutes, we ended the call, but this time it didn't end it all. It gave us another chance. Sadly, it turned out he was not the same person I met back in June or August. He'd become a stranger to me.

*Seasons change
And so do people
What once was
Hot fiery summer
Falls apart
Like golden leaves
of autumn*

Déjà Vu

He always accused me of being in love with him, and I always told him I was not. Not yet, at least. It wasn't the only time that I went over to talk. It always ended up with our bodies conversing, not us.

“Why are we talking about this again? I told you last time, and I will tell you again that I wasn't in love with you,” I said to him.

This topic was all-consuming at that point. When he started talking about it, it always deepened into something that almost drowned me, something hurtful that carved new scars.

“Because you keep lying, and I hate lies.” He was always very serious about this. “You just have a big ego and won't admit it. I remember that day. I remember how you looked at me and everything you did.”

“You wish I was in love with you. That was not love. I was really into you, but not in love.”

He still couldn't accept it, and this conversation made me wonder if I still wanted him.

Because this really went too far. The sharp ways we used to express ourselves and frustrations were well below human decency. To be so insensitive as to bring up everything that was already buried in the soil of the past was a different kind of devotion to leave a mark. He was always so desperate to prove his point that he forgot about the means he used.

After the loud yelling and sound of plates breaking, silence took over the room as we sat facing each other. The words we said had cut too deeply. It was the first time I've seen him like this.

"I have déjà vu." It reminded me of what we left off and how we left it last time. It's the same thing all over again: Him saying I want way more from him than he can provide. A vicious circle I could never escape. It just kept spinning and took me with it. He was my most harmful vice.

"What kind?" He came towards me and sat next to me on the floor. He took the same position that I was in: head leaning back on the wall, and my hands resting on my crunched-up knees. "Did anyone take you to Jupiter lately?"

No one did. No one came as close to me as he did so long ago. Nobody's touch felt like his; no one's words were so convincing as his. And I missed it as I always did. This was not something I wanted him to know. To him, I always wanted to seem like someone unbothered and uninterested in him, even though I ached for him. *Déjà vu: make-up sex and sweeping the real talk under the carpet.* After a brief interval, he gently put his pouty lips on my temple and his arms around my shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I never wanted it to end up like this. You're making me feel things I've never felt before. I don't know how to handle them."

I think it was the first time he discarded his know-it-all attitude and admitted his mistake.

“Ever since the break, you’re so cruel and insensitive to me. I was always careful with you.” It was hard to talk while sobbing, but enough was enough. This was not even close to how it used to be in the beginning.

“Let me make up for it.”

His kisses were the same, but his touch was significantly gentler and more careful. He held me like a fragile porcelain doll that could break at any time. I wish he was as careful with my feelings. I wish he’d paid more attention to them because they were there, they were strong and fragile. Our saliva mixed with our salty tears; till this day, I don’t know if they were tears of sadness or happiness. But they were for- and because of him.

We made love that night. There was nothing else to hide. Our grudges were long torn down by the words of the other, and there was no use in trying to protect ourselves.

The pillow talk was also different. There were no giggles or laughter this time. None of us dared to move, let alone say something. It was as if time froze after it had already expired. Naked fear was the best way to describe it. Summer was just about to end and take us down with it.

“I love you.” One of us broke the frightening silence between us.

When the sweet turned sour

And I had to leave you

But

I loved you

So much

Such a shame it wasn't

Enough

See you again

Love is a dangerous thing. When you are out of it, and you look back, you are stunned by how many things you let slide only because you were captivated. It was the same way with him; I always forgave him, no matter the agony. We were best friends for four years, and things got complicated in the last year until I had enough and had to leave him.

After a year, destiny stood up and decided to test us again. Our lives crossed. We were at the same place at the same time. Just two different people and two completely different lives. I felt everything go quiet around me when I saw his blonde mullet. I felt my body freeze, and all I could do was stare. He caught my gaze. Time froze. We stared at each other with the same surprised expression.

Until his new girlfriend noticed me. She looked at me, and I had a feeling she knew about me. Of course, she knew. She looked at me with disgust as if I wasn't the one who made him the person he is now, as if it was a crime that I loved him,

as if it was my fault that he loved me, as if it wasn't for me that she had him now.

She was tall and skinny; her eyebrows were thinly plucked and painted black. Her lashes were also done, and her long black hair reached her waist. It matched her all-black, tight clothes. Therefore, I was on the shorter, curvier side, with mid-length blonde hair and thick brows. I couldn't even compare myself to her because we didn't have anything in common. *Who was his type now? Me or her? Could he have been attracted to the both of us?*

I guess it explained why he never complimented me. Why he never wanted to be with me. He never found me pretty.

It was as simple as that. He liked my personality so much that it never crossed my mind that he wasn't attracted to me.

It all made sense now.

It would've made me sad back then to know this. Now it didn't exactly have the same effect.

It was over then.

No more going back to each other for forgiveness and comfort.

No more second or hundredth chances.

The moment she noticed we were lost in us, she put her hand on his face and turned it towards her. It didn't do

much. I saw him whisper something in her ear and head towards me. I felt bad for her. In her place, I would have been exasperated.

Everything in me told me to run. The moment I saw him coming my way, I turned the other way to get out of the crowd. We really had no business talking. So much time had passed that we no longer had anything tying us together or in common. I tried to be fast, but he was faster.

When I was out of the pool of people, he grabbed my wrist. I froze. I wasn't ready to meet him. I did not want to do that.

No matter how healed I was, each time I saw him in a picture, all I could think of was the nights he would be drunk and high, make promises he would never keep, and never apologize for giving me false hopes of him changing or having a future in which we would have been together.

We hadn't said anything for a long time. No words were left for us. We just stood there looking at each other, waiting for the other one to break the deafening silence. After a few exhaustingly long seconds, I started to walk away, but he followed me.

"You didn't even want to say hi."

"It's okay. You don't even deserve a goodbye."

"Why are you like this? You ran away as if there was nothing ever between us."

“Because there was nothing. Imagine how your girlfriend must be feeling now. You shouldn’t have come after me.” The air around us grew thick. I took a seat on a bench; he was quick to sit next to me. I took out a cigarette and lit it in hopes of it calming me, but instead, it just took me back to those nights I spent worrying about him.

“Oh, so all that meant nothing to you?” He was facing me, but I just looked straight ahead. I couldn’t look at him. Not after all the pain.

“It might have. Not anymore.”

“Good to know. What made you switch so fast?” he scoffed.

“You. You did.”

“What did I do exactly? You were the one who left without a word.”

“You can only heal a wound if you stop touching it.”

“So I was a wound to you?”

“Didn’t you notice you were hurting me all along?”

An unnerving silence followed, which was broken by my quiet sobs, and after a while, his phone’s ringtone. It was her. He didn’t pick it up.

“Why are you still here?” The more he stayed, the more it hurt.

“With you, it was different. I think of you when I touch her.” His eyes were glassy. “You know, everything I ever wanted... I wanted it with you.” At this point, neither of us could hold back our tears.

He reminded me of the time I was grieving our relationship. I was lying on the floor, curled up, choking on my tears, barely getting any air, and screaming out his name. First screaming, then whispering it. Once, as the screams left my body, something else accompanied them. I still can’t tell what it was. But it was the last time I cried over him.

“You are hurting me. Still. Let’s forget all of this and move on with our lives.”

“I don’t want to forget you. We always found our way back to each other; we can’t end it like this,” he said.

I got up and looked at him hopefully for the last time. Destiny’s cruel sense of humor sometimes forces you to smile. Destiny sometimes gives you the things you would have given up everything for when you no longer want them.

“You already found your way to someone new.”

Leaving him was already very hard. I knew if we even stayed friends, it would take me back to how it was before. It took me years to build up the power to leave him and to partially heal.

I was no longer about to hurt myself again, to walk back knowing that each painful step would turn into a building

block of my personal hell. It hurt me to leave him again, but I knew it would've been suicide to stay.

*Time is tricky,
If you try to catch it
It will slip through
Your
Wrinkled hands.*

The Lake

This one was mysterious. He occasionally liked a few of my VSCO pictures, but never contacted me. He just made sure to give me a sign: “Hey, I’m watching you.” Maybe this was what caught my attention, but I never wanted to break my rule of never texting first, so months went by with only subtle signs from him every now and then.

“I can’t believe you! How come you’ve never been here?” he asked, puzzled as we sat in his car’s trunk facing a lake.

This place was quite popular among the people from my hometown, but as I always tried to avoid them, I’d been avoiding that hangout spot, too.

“I had other lakes to go to.” Our loud laughs and quiet words were the only ones interrupting the symphony of frogs and grasshoppers. The lake served as a mirror for the setting sun, and the surrounding animals sang her a lullaby.

“And I guess you had other guys to go with. How come we live in the same place yet never come across each other?”

My head was resting on his shoulder, and his arms protectively went around my hip. Whenever I touched other people, it was always flirty or purely physical. Something about us getting so close felt so protecting and comforting. It

was something new. It was the first time we met, but I really liked him and loved his sense of calm.

“The universe only lets you meet new people when the time is right, when you’re both ready, which meant we were both at a stage of our lives where we were compatible with each other.”

“What if you do cross paths... when the timing isn’t supposed to be ‘right’?” He asked me while frowning.

“There will never be peace between you two,” I said remembering the time I was desperately in love with someone for years, but our relationship was merely a roller coaster of emotional abandonment. “Speaking from experience, you’d better not agonize over what’s not meant to be.”

“Wow, so philosophical after a few puffs already.” – he laughed as he took the cigarette from my hands

“Don’t you agree?” I might have been a bit high at this point thanks to his strong, special cigarettes.

“So, you don’t believe in the ‘right person, wrong time’ either? – he seemed very intrigued of the topic.

“It’s hard for me to. I think it’s total bullshit. I did for a while, then realized it’s just a delusion. So don’t worry, the timing is most probably right for us now.”

We continued watching the sun paint not only the sky but the surface of the lake an orangey color.

“Do you want to go for a swim?” He caught me off guard.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Come on! Give me your hand.” He helped me get up.

“Okay, but I will only get in knee deep.”

He took my hand and led me towards the edge of the big body of water. I took a seat on a big stone while he jumped right in, splashing me with warm drops. When he reappeared, he grabbed my ankles.

“You have two choices. You take off your clothes and come in by yourself, or I’m going to pull you in fully clothed in a matter of seconds.”

“You can’t do this,” my protest was useless.

“Are you sure?” his words were followed by him tugging and pulling slightly on my feet.

I had no choice. I took off my dress and hopped into his open arms. I was clinging to him because my feet couldn’t reach the bottom. His strong, inked arms were laced behind my back and continuously pulled me closer to him.

“Don’t be nervous, don’t shy away.”

“I’m not.” *I’m a terrible liar.*

“If you are so sure that the time is perfect for us right now, why don’t we give ourselves a chance?”

“I already did.”

I met him again four months after this interaction. It was at a theater festival where I ran into an old friend. There were tens of theater groups invited from all over the country to showcase not only their talent but also their passion for everything that means drama, theater, plays, and performances. While the groups performed their plays, the volunteers oversaw the preparation of dinner for the guests, actors, directors, playwrights, and so on.

This old friend of mine took me to the place where the dinner was made and held. As I entered through the gate and moved forward, I noticed him. He was holding a spoon and portioning the Goulash into smaller pots. He only looked up as I greeted him on my way to the dining room stairs.

When I came down, he was standing facing the door I was about to exit through. I felt his gaze through the glass door as I walked down the stairs and took a few steps to get to the door. He was more than surprised to find me there. I always avoided such gatherings and was never to be seen anywhere.

“What even brings you here?” he asked, approaching me.

“Wait, girl, you know him?” my friend asked. Our knowing each other made no sense. We didn’t have any friends in common and never went to the same places.

“Of course I do, haha, I’ll tell you once.” My eyes embraced his.

She noticed it, so she went over to talk with his best friend, whom she knew very well. The guy had been enamored and trying to get with her for a long time. This girl took every opportunity to get even a crumb of attention.

“You’re drinking all by yourself?” I asked, pointing to his cup. It was my subtle way of inviting myself for a drink. I didn’t have to drive myself home, so I wanted to take advantage of that.

“I have two more beers in the trunk of my car.”

“I’m more of a wine person.”

He took the bottle of wine next to him, poured some, and mixed it with Coke.

He asked me about my plans and so on, and he scoffed when I told him that my plan was to move to the other side of the country. I like to believe that he wanted me to stay closer so he could call me every now and then.

He told me about his plans to change his major, get hired at an IT company, and keep his hobby of making music. Initially, when we started talking, I was leaning against a wall, facing him, and he was facing me, leaning on the same wall with one hand. It took me a while to realize that we were in the same pose as high schoolers usually are in most teen movies.

We changed positions by sitting on a wall cutout. It was a terrace, and the walls had large openings cut for windows that had not yet arrived and were not yet installed.

We were facing the glass door, looking at each other through it. He bumped my shoulder with his, and then I did the same to him while we were dangling our feet.

We didn't stay sitting for long, at least I didn't because the concrete was too cold and I didn't want to return home sick, so I stood up, and he pulled me between his legs. I wasn't facing him. I kept looking ahead to the door until I felt his chin resting on my shoulder. I turned to face him, and he grabbed the left side of my face and kissed me.

I must admit, even if he wasn't that great himself, he was the best kisser I've ever come across. I didn't deny myself the pleasure, so we continued kissing, interrupted once or twice by people entering or exiting the dinner hall.

The funniest moment was when the mayor and two of his party members came to have dinner. We quickly stopped and pretended that nothing had happened. It was clear that it was too late for that, but we just shook hands and smiled.

"You know who to vote for, right, youngsters?"

After he entered, we continued our previous activity. His kiss was pretty much like his personality. Calm, gentle, even nonchalant. It made me think if our personalities reflect in the way we kiss. Sadly, it was time for me to take the bus

home. He walked me to the bus stop and, while we waited, gave me countless goodbye kisses.

When he left, I threw up.

One of my acquaintances, who was my best friend's co-worker, saw me throwing up but wasn't sure if it was me.

She texted my friend to ask her if I was out in the city, because if yes, there might be a chance I threw up after making out with a guy.

After this, I became a timeless inside joke between them.

Turns out, the time was never right, because he was never the right person. After all, I threw up after kissing that familiar stranger.

*We learn through experience
Even through dreams,
That we let ourselves live.*

The Unexpected

After I turned eighteen, life never stopped handing me unwanted gifts. Experiences that shaped me, wrapped in colorful wrapping paper, tied with a ribbon, and shiny stuff that rusted and rotted, with a big fat bow on it.

For my eighteenth birthday, my dear friend gifted me a trip to Paris. Don't get me wrong, that was something I asked for since I was six: just the two of us in the city I always dreamed of as a little girl. When I was young, my dad worked in Paris for a few months and always sent me pictures of the Eiffel Tower sparkling, the Seine's waves, and the bright lights of the Moulin Rouge.

As I looked at those pictures, I dreamed of seeing them myself, wearing little twirling pink skirts and a pink-and-purple-striped blouse, paired with heart-shaped sunglasses. It was my first dream destination.

On my birthday, after I blew out the candles, my friend handed me a black box filled with confetti. I dug my finger in it, trying to find the gift, when I sensed something flat on the bottom of it. I pulled it out. It was a pink ticket with 'Paris' in big capital letters.

I threw the box in the air, and the confetti fell on me while I jumped into my friend's arms. It was unreal. I never traveled without my family, and as soon as I officially became

an adult, life took me on a trip where I could do anything I wanted.

As we were heading to the club and passing by the Arc de Triomphe, we noticed people gathering around speakers blasting French songs. At first, we got frightened thinking we were going to be robbed or stabbed until we noticed that all these people had something in common. They were all wearing orange jerseys and dancing. They meant no harm; they were just celebrating their team's victory of the night.

We had no idea which football team "we" were celebrating, but we got into the crowd and danced along with the happy strangers. In the blink of an eye, the whole monument was surrounded by at least a thousand people, and traffic got blocked.

As soon as the first people heard the sound of sirens, everyone desperately tried getting away from there, and it resulted in people falling and getting stepped on. Thankfully, our only damage was my white pair of jeans, which got dirty when they were pushed onto a car that hadn't been washed recently.

We didn't have to run for long; after a few steps, we got to our initial destination: Le Duplex. It seemed to be a well-known nightclub in Paris. When we entered, there were about a dozen people. We sat at a table, hoping for the club to

get busier. There were two girls who didn't choose this boring way out. One of them was dancing in the middle of the empty dance floor. Sober! That inspired me and made me realize, maybe for the first time since I arrived in France, that I could be myself here. There was no one from my hometown to tell someone who would tell her friend, and start a chain of bland gossip.

So that night, I chose to go by a new name and a new life and forget everything I knew about my old one. I started to practice this when I went into the special room for smokers. As soon as I entered, I could feel his eyes on me. I didn't shy away. I looked straight into them. When I passed him, I broke our contact and started focusing on getting the pack of cigarettes out of my back pocket. As soon as a cigarette landed between my lips, he was already standing in front of me holding a lighter. I rolled my eyes as he lit my cigarette.

"I saw you looking," he said as he let out the smoke.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I just entered." I giggled. I loved playing this game. As I made small talk with him, his friend already made a pass on my friend, and she took one for the team.

"You're not from Paris, right?"

"No, I'm from Argentina." It just felt so good to make up a life that I would have rather lived than the one that I had. "Are you from here?"

“Well, kind of, I’m from Morocco, but I feel like I’ve lived here long enough to feel like a true Parisian. But I still didn’t get your name.” He came gradually closer to me as we spoke until I could feel his breath on my neck. But he wasn’t exactly my type, I’m not a fan of buzzcuts. But I kept it friendly.

“I have a lot more questions because I would love to get to know you better. What brings you to Paris?”

He did have a cute smile; I’ll give him that.

“It’s an adorable story.” I smiled. “I got it as a gift from my friend for my birthday.”

I love bragging about being casually gifted a trip to Paris for my birthday. I never would have thought that I would celebrate my birthday five days in a row in Paris. He raised his voice and started speaking French with his friend. Soon, they started singing “Happy Birthday” in French! After a few lines, everyone in the room started singing along. When they were done singing it in French, they sang it in English.

It was such a great surprise. I was surrounded by strangers who sang for me in a city I always fantasized about. It really was a dream come true. After we smoked a few more cigarettes, we went back dancing. There was a tall, tattooed, very well-built guy with whom I had already exchanged glances. We spent the whole night dancing next to each other,

but without taking it further. The attraction was there, but the bravery wasn't.

This went on until two gorgeous brown girls came over to us to cheer up the mood and provoke us into some kind of dance battle. We danced for a few minutes, then they took us over for shots. Who were we to refuse? We lost the two girls in the crowd, but the two friends we made in the smoking area found us instead. In the club, 50 Cent was being mixed when my smoking partner came closer.

"The DJ is my friend. I made him play this on for you."

Adorable?

When they left, Blondie found me, and we were very much eating up each other with our fiery stares. But he still didn't make a move. Meanwhile, the two brown girls found us, and I got quite close to one of them. She picked up a ribbon from the ground and tied us together with it. My legs were between hers, and her hands were all over me. Her smile was the one you see in toothpaste commercials. She had a nose ring just like me. I kind of wanted to be like her, beautiful and carefree. Before she tied us together, she danced with every person in the club. I wish I'd done that too. She might have tried to kiss me, but must have noticed my eyes gulping the Blondie.

She dragged me over to him and tied me to him while she cheered us on. I hesitated to kiss him. After all, he didn't make a move all night. I wasn't going either. When she noticed this, she undid the bow, took the ribbon, and tied all three of us together. I was in the middle. Tied between two extremely attractive people. It was one of the most surreal things that had happened to me in that city. I had decided that it was time to step out of my comfort zone and not shy away from new possible strings and ties. She was pushing my body up against his crotch and chest with her body, but pulled my head back from my neck.

The tension was unbearable. I didn't know who to kiss first. *Will either of the two get upset if I kiss the other in front of them?* She reached over me and pulled him closer to me by his shoulders. His hands went from my hips to my jaw. His breath was caressing my lips, and his rings felt cold on my hot cheeks. My hands were on his stomach, and I could feel his abs through his shirt. It was a painfully slow process. She noticed this and moved her hands from his shoulders up to the back of his head.

That was when our lips touched, and his tongue immediately started exploring my lips and everything between them. She was still behind me. When he pulled away, she turned my head towards her. She was braver and didn't wait much—only a few seconds to look me seductively in my

eyes. She had her hand on one part of my waist, but on the other side of it, it was his hand grabbing me. I felt his hard chest against mine, and her breasts against my back. She was a passionate kisser. A very passionate one. With every bite, peck, and touch, she devoured me.

When she was done with me, she pulled him by the shirt and gave him a peck. Then left. After we broke the ice with the help of pretty significant external interferences, he was no longer as shy as before. His hands were firmly grabbing onto my waist and hair. His kisses traveled down to my neck as he pulled my head back, holding my hair.

His movements were very rough. He bit every piece of skin he had access to, my lips, my cheeks, the lobe of my ear, and my neck. He pulled my hair, grabbed my waist, all in the middle of the dance floor. This went on until his friend interrupted us when he noticed that two people started filming.

It turned out he was a very popular influencer in France. Maybe that was the reason his friends were always looking around while they were in the club. I haven't heard from him since we left the club, nor have I found him on social media. I didn't even get his name, but I got a story about a stranger.

*A puzzle piece that
Doesn't fit anywhere.
Once you remove it,
Everything falls into place.*

*The picture you wanted to create
Wasn't the one you needed to see.*

The Trailer

By the time I was in college, I had gone through the ugliest, most disrespectful breakup of my life. While I was with him, he had all kinds of rules for me, and one of them was that I was not allowed to go to parties at all. I sadly listened. But after we were over, it was only obvious that I went out and recovered each wasted night that I had spent alone in my room when I could have gone out and had the time of my life.

It was a freshers' week party organized by two student councils: the student association from my faculty and one from another faculty. I had gotten ready with my new friends, a huge group just like in the movies. I will always be very grateful for the people I've met there. They saved me and made me feel like I finally belonged. Everything about college felt fulfilling and dreamlike. I finally moved away from my suffocating hometown, where I had almost no friends.

I was finally in a huge city where I no longer had to pretend to be someone I was not. People here liked the real me. It was something new. I finally had the friends I always wanted to have, my smaller, girl trio, and the other bigger friend group that occasionally gathered some nights to catch up. On these nights, our laughter and the clicking of our glasses echoed through the halls of the dorm.

We were in the dorm's kitchen, all dolled up, mixing drinks in our mugs. Once we were tipsy enough, we set off for the

club. It was my first time out in Bucharest. It was fascinating to finally feel free. The yellow streetlights and red neon lights from the restaurants and clubs were reflected in the highlights on our faces. We finally found the place, pushed our way through the crowd, and made our little circle.

It was an amazing feeling to finally do everything I had wanted to do for so long, knowing I could do them and that I was 'allowed' to do anything. I didn't have to fight anyone before leaving over how I dressed. I didn't have to send a timely message that I had left the house. I could finally be in the moment instead of always checking my phone and being on demand whenever my boyfriend texted me. Also, I wasn't given a PSA about the benefits of dancing modestly. So, I twerked in the middle of the circle.

My friends were glad to see me not agonizing over an asshole, but rather getting out of my comfort zone. When my gay best friend started screaming my name with such shock, it just added oil to the fire. I had an amazing night dancing and having fun. For the first time in my life, I felt I had found my people and belonged. But everyone gets tired while dancing. And to be honest, the coolest people are always outside the club smoking. As the cold air hit my hot skin laced with drops of sweat, I sobered up a bit.

As I was smoking and talking with two of my girlfriends, someone pushed a pair of sunglasses into my

hands. It took me by surprise, so I gave a confused look to my friend, who was saying something I couldn't hear over the music. So, he said it again. And again. But I still couldn't understand him. He motioned towards a guy who held up his phone to my face, and I realized that I probably should just hit a pose with the pair of glasses. I put on the white glasses which had '141' and '24' written on the lenses. I gave the biggest smile I could have possibly given. Sadly, my smile couldn't have been big enough to express how happy I was.

Pictures capture a moment. It captured the moment I saw him.

He was just so cute and had every physical characteristic on my list. A cute face with a mustache above the lips and dark, curly hair. He was cute, but he didn't make a move, and I strongly held to my principle of never making the first move.

I made it indirect. Instead of asking for his Instagram, I found an innocent excuse. Since he took my picture and it was about to be posted on TikTok, I approached him with my brown, doe eyes and asked for his TikTok. He showed me his username after he realized I still couldn't hear a thing from the loud music coming from the inside.

I followed him. But he never followed me back. Maybe it was a sign from the universe that it was not the time, that now I should face myself instead of using people to distract myself.

The taste of freedom

Hits like a drug.

You never forget

The first time.

A Trip to Spain

When moving to Bucharest, destiny made sure everything was in my favor. One of the luckiest things that happened to me was getting Clara as my roommate. She was the type of girl that people would assume was from another country. Technically, she kind of was; she was born and raised in Spain, but both of her parents were Romanian. Her hair was chestnut brown and curly as the waves of the beaches of Barcelona. Her skin also screamed, “I’m Mediterranean.” Even in the winter, it looked as if she just gotten back from sunbathing.

She took me out of the house when my boyfriend broke up with me, only two days after moving here. She raised me up from the floor, even though she just met me a few days ago. Something I will always be grateful for. It was on one of those cold, November days that we decided to go out. We haven’t gone out in a while. Our other friends canceled on us, but we said we deserved a night out after a month of courses and seminars.

While we were getting ready, Clara said her mission for the night was to meet people from Spain. She hasn’t visited her home country in a few years, and I guess she wanted to find a piece of it somewhere during that night. On the other hand, I wanted to show off the Arabic I’ve learned so far, even

if all I could do was to introduce myself, my name, my age, and that I studied Arabic at the university.

We set these two goals, but didn't leave the dorm with enormous expectations. We decided that, whatever happened, we were there to just have fun on our own. We drank a bottle of wine while we got ready, so we were just the right amount of "happy" when we got to the club.

When we entered, the place was packed as it usually is. My friends and I have this habit of going to the same three or four clubs each time when we go out. Since all of them were right next to each other, when we got bored, we would just go to the next one.

That night, the plot started as soon as we arrived. A guy came up to us to talk and dance, just the usual random guy who appears out of the blue. We didn't really pay much attention to him until Clara heard Spanish being spoken. She looked around and spotted a group of people speaking loudly in Spanish. I came up with the plan for her to start talking even louder to me in Spanish. Since I didn't speak any useful Spanish, I just had to nod and yell "Si, si!"

It worked. As soon as she started speaking to me in Spanish, the guy who just approached us noticed.

"Whoa, do you speak Spanish?"

"Si, claro que si!"

“My friends over there also speak Spanish, they are from Spain!” He made the connection but still stood there, pretty much oblivious of our intentions with his friends.

“And don’t you want to introduce us to your friends?” I didn’t expect Clara to be so up front, but she was the wildest I’ve ever seen her that whole night.

He introduced us to the guys, and Clara immediately started firing her words and using so many hand gestures. Their first question was how old we were. It wasn’t the most surprising thing; we always get carded wherever we go. The other surprising thing was that they didn’t believe us when we said we were eighteen.

While Clara was holding a monologue about her whole life to the most sober guys from the group, I fixed my gaze on the drunkest. He looked like a celebrity I was obsessed with when I was fourteen.

Clara started a chit-chat with him.

“My friend said you look like Aron Piper.” It was her way of setting me up with him.

“Oh, no, no, I wouldn’t say so. I don’t think so, maybe it’s the moustache, because I’m not bald.” He seemed very confused, but after the many drinks he had, I would have been in the same state.

“Well, yeah, maybe.”

“Why? Does she like Aron Piper?” he asked with a grin.

“Maybe you should go and find out.”

This was a conversation Clara told me when we had gotten home, because in the club, it seemed to me that he didn’t notice me. But to my biggest surprise, he just came over to me out of the blue, pushed me against the wall, and kissed me like there was no tomorrow. I wasn’t expecting it, but who was I to spoil the fun? He was a horrible kisser, though.

I can’t recall how exactly we ended up in a different club, but the next scenes in my memories are set in the club next to the first one. The last memory I have of the first club is us looking for Clara’s jacket because, as we were dancing, it got stolen. And it was November.

I can still feel his hands on my waist, and how he guided my waist through the music; it felt like he knew it all. It’s hard to explain, but he just had a vibe that gave off unconscious confidence of some sort. He seemed sure of himself, but it was very subtle.

At one point, I saw a box of cigarettes in one of the guys’ hands and asked if I could have one. He took my hand and led me out of the club.

“Here, look.” He extended his hand with the box in it, and I took out a cigarette. He lit it for me.

“Gracias.” I giggled.

“Look, I need to ask a favor, or let’s collaborate, let’s make a team.”

I would never have guessed what a Spanish stranger wants from me, presented in such terms. Did he want to take me on a treasure hunt? Get me to deal drugs for him? Was he an immigrant from South America who needed a way to stay in Europe? He kept dragging his words, and my patience was quite finite when I was in the club.

“What is this about? What is on your mind?”

You saw my friend? The tall blonde one? Blue eyes and blue jeans?”

“Yes, what about him?”

“He likes your friend, and I thought... you know... he is my friend... she is your fr—”

“Alright, I’ll talk to her.” I always kind of saw Clara as a mostly reserved girl in social settings if the people around her were not us, her friends. That was until that night.

We went inside after we finished smoking, and I made my way straight to Clara.

“The blonde guy likes you, go dance with him, chica!”

She started laughing. During the night, she went for her go-to drink, a Cuba Libre, and her cup was somehow always full, but not because she wouldn’t have finished them. She confidently went over to him and danced for a while with

him, and then the guy got shy, I guess, because he distanced himself and went a few people further from her.

A few songs later, a guy who we had seen in the previous club came over and approached Clara. The moment I looked to my right to check on her, they were already kissing in the corner. She later told me that he was Turkish and played football or something along those lines.

The Spanish guys got upset, and the blonde guy no longer tried to pursue her, which honestly was fair enough. Clara had fun regardless. I've always admired that she never went out because she wanted to make out with guys. She just went out to have fun with us, and even if no one looked at her (which was rare), she didn't feel less confident. She always just radiates effortless beauty and contentment.

The night went on. About an hour later, I was still dancing and kissing my celebrity lookalike when I saw Clara kissing someone, too. I assumed it was the same Turkish footballer that she had kissed earlier. At home, she told me this was, in fact, another guy.

This wasn't even the craziest part of the night! That part started after four in the morning, when we began returning home. My feet hurt because of the heels, and Clara was missing her jacket. The guys offered to take us to the apartment they had rented.

I was very indecisive about this.

I mean, two eighteen-year-old girls at some strangers' apartment. But we took an odd decision: A match of rock, paper, scissors. My winning meant going home directly. Clara's meant to take the risk. We play three rounds. The shortest guy from their group counted the score and cheered us on.

Rock – scissors. Clara won.

Paper – rock. Clara won.

Scissors – rock. I won.

Rock – scissors. Clara won again.

The guys were very chivalrous and took rounds, giving Clara their jackets because, after all, it was a night at the end of November and she was wearing a burgundy, strappy top.

While we were walking towards the flat, I had a conversation with the guy I had made out with all night and pointed out that my red lipstick was all over his face. He tried to wipe it away with his hands, but it was very resistant, and I was even surprised that it had gotten all over his face.

When we got to their place, we sat down around a coffee table in the living room and got to talking and munching on fresh popcorn. They mostly spoke Spanish with Clara because out of the six guys, only two could communicate easily in English.

At one point, they got someone on the phone. It was one of their friends who couldn't make it to Romania because of work. Not only did he not get his way with work, but he was also quite unfortunate with girls, and the guys took on the opportunity to tease him.

They gave the phone to Clara only for her to say:

“Aqui Seguro pillabas algo.”

Then the phone got into my hands, and I said the same thing my roommate had, only in English. “If you had come to Romania, I'm sure you would've caught something.”

I didn't understand what anyone in the room said. Once every now and then, I interrupted the conversation to have someone translate to me, and one of them tried, but most of them were still drunk at the time.

We left their place at around eight. It was one hell of a way to get a taste of our newfound freedom.

A photograph that's not so

Black and white.

You see what you want to see,

The dream you project on him.

Photography

“My biggest achievement is my birth certificate.”

The club we always used to go to had a photographer whom I spotted in October, the first time I set foot there. He was very tall, with long, curly hair, tattoos covering him, and a ton of piercings in his ears, brows, and lips. Later, I found out he had one in his tongue as well.

I always tried to catch his gaze, but that never quite happened. He always seemed busy taking photos, and I didn’t even know how to start a conversation. Regardless, each time I saw him, I got butterflies.

One night, I was scrolling through Bumble when his picture popped up. I gasped and looked at Clara, immediately showing her who I found. She also admitted that he really was hot, along with every one of my friends who saw him in the club.

We analyzed his profile before I swiped him right. A few days passed, and I checked five times a day if we had matched. On the third day, he appeared among the other matches, and since he didn’t take advantage of his ability to write me first, I said to myself, “He is too hot to let the match expire”.

He had a prompt. “What is your dream destination?”

I replied to this with the name of the club where he worked.

“I should change the address in my ID to the address of the club, I’m there most of the time.”

He talked about his passion for photography and sent me a few pictures he had taken throughout the day. He only talked about himself, but I put that aside. I tried to see it as a way of him just being really passionate about capturing moments. We talked for three days non-stop. About cartoons, drawing, and coloring, and how therapeutic those can be, but somehow, we always ended up talking about photography and the pictures he had taken.

I tried to idealize this as I always do. I already imagined myself being his muse. *I was in the kitchen in his shirt, cooking eggs while he sneaks some candid pictures of me sitting at the table, of me in front of the mirror getting ready, all dolled up.* My imagination ran wild, and I had already imagined how we would spend our days together.

I imagined a picture-perfect life with a stranger I met on a dating app. (It was not the first time I had done this. After three days of chatting and still not asking for any of my socials or asking me out, I decided to act.

“The girls and I are going out tonight, maybe we’ll bump into each other.”

We weren’t going out. When he answered that he would be working until one in the morning, I quickly started a group call with the girls. None of them wanted to go out, but

I was already getting ready. If they hadn't come, I would've gone out alone. Finally, one of the girls agreed to come with me, even though she was on a date.

She invited a guy she just started seeing over. They were at her place sipping wine when I called. When he heard that if none of them came, I was about to go out alone, he convinced her to go with me. I was wearing knee-high platform boots and a mini skirt in the pouring rain without an umbrella. We met in the middle of the Old Town, all three of us soaked. They didn't have time to get ready, so they came in hoodies and sweatpants.

I sent him a message about where I was, then I saw him enter and push his way through the crowd without noticing me. When he got to the other end of the club, I saw him typing on his phone. I didn't want to go up to him; that would have been weird, but my friends insisted that I do.

The only thing that made me go up to him was the thought that I had made myself pretty, that I had gone there in a skirt and heels in the pouring rain.

"Hey, we talked on Bumble."

He nodded and mumbled something. I suppose he asked me how we were feeling, and I told him we weren't really feeling the party. Since I couldn't really hear, he motioned towards the exit, and we went after him. We lit our cigarettes and started talking. Or at least him. I couldn't say

much. He started talking about how focused he is on photography, and I asked him which university he attends. I still couldn't hear much of what he said because of the loud music, but I caught a phrase.

“My biggest achievement is my birth certificate,” he said.

I just ignored it. I was too taken aback by his attractiveness. He showed me his tattoos and mentioned his piercings also.

It was a short talk because, after 10 minutes, he said he had to leave to take more pictures. I was quite disappointed because I thought he was more interesting, that he had more things to say, other than photography.

My friends tried to tell me that he just seemed busy, maybe that was the reason the whole interaction was so dry. I kind of got the idea that he wasn't interested, but I couldn't put the pieces together. *Why would he talk to me non-stop on Bumble, but act totally oblivious and nonchalant when I'm in front of him?*

I didn't want to give him up. So, my friends and I decided to go back to the club and catch him, hoping to have more luck than the other day. We chose Tuesday night because our mutual friend, Eliza, had a Tinder date at the same club that night. Everything about it was just so wrong.

What is a girl's night without wine and endless, deep shit-talk about our exes? We took turns saying things about our exes that gradually got worse. At one point, we had to draw the line and choose to mind our own business because the fun facts became too disturbing to comprehend.

Our friend started doing my makeup, and when it was done, I felt like a Barbie doll. I wore a white miniskirt, a pink top, and pink shoes. She used pink for my eyelids, and the highlighter illuminated just the right parts of my cheeks.

Eliza looked like a Bratz doll; she always had this contrast to her. Her hair was either reddish-pink or green. She had big brown eyes and strongly defined lips that could turn into a huge, adorable smile at any time. She had a captivating, dominant look, but also a sensitive side she kept hidden until she felt safe enough.

Time was running out, and she still had to wash her hair, dry it, and do her makeup. The city sabotaged us: There was no warm water, and her not washing her hair was off the table. It was nothing extraordinary in Bucharest for us not to have warm water. It was routine for us to boil water on the stove and mix it with ice-cold water from the tap.

As we waited for her to dry her hair, we finished the wine that was left and smoked some cigarettes. By the time we were ready, it was already past one. We took a taxi to the old town, and it was pouring again. We still didn't bring any

umbrellas. We got soaked again, and he wasn't even there; his shift was already over by the time we got there. Our intention was to get even luckier than last time, maybe get a goodbye kiss or at least ask me out, so I no longer had to hunt him down, but the prey had already escaped.

At least, we knew for sure that one of us had her date there. But that didn't turn out better either. In my opinion, it was romantic, but according to her, words cannot describe how embarrassing it was.

We met up with two Italian guys; one of them spoke some basic Romanian, but the other, Eliza's date, couldn't even speak English. His friend tried to translate what he knew into Romanian, but after a while, he got fed up and gave him his phone, with Google Translate already open.

Eliza and her date decided to go out for a smoke, so we let them get some time "alone." While we were dancing, the other Italian guy came back:

"Come, Maria is not feeling well.

"Who is Maria?" We were so confused, we always used Eliza, and we completely forgot that her middle name is Maria.

When we got out of the club, we saw her sitting on the stairs in front of us, with her date next to her, with a very sad face. I was already upset that I didn't catch the

photographer in the club, so I told her we would go home if she wanted to.

She didn't hesitate for a moment and was already on her feet. On our way out of the Old Town, she told us that she had fainted and fallen on him in front of the club out of the blue. We told her that it was just like in the rom-com movies, but she felt embarrassed and left us no chance to cheer her up.

When we got home, we ordered three intoxicatingly oily and spicy pizzas and ended the night with all three of us in the same, small bed.

I loved you the most.

And I will always do.

Khaled

Khaled is the man I will never get over. I accepted this. This story is the hardest. For me, he and what we had (or could have had) was not just a potential temporary fling, it is a love story scarred on every piece of me. He is the one I keep in the most hidden, secret room of my heart; maybe that is why, until this day, he haunts me and everything around me.

Years ago, I saw a movie in which they were talking about how not only is it crucial for the timing and the person to be right, but also for the place. I never thought that was a possibility. A few days ago, I rewatched it, and sadly, it all became so obvious. It is very bittersweet when you meet the man who loves and treats you the way you deserve, gives you the princess treatment, goes above and beyond to fulfill your needs, and lives on a different continent.

We accidentally met on the internet on the third of January, 2023. Now it's the end of 2025, and he is still the one I love the most. Now, I have accepted that I will never be able to erase what I feel for him, ever. Even though I'm pretty sure he already did. His feelings must have already vanished.

I always felt like I had known him forever. That our lives had already been intertwined before. I'm convinced that we shared a past life. At least one. The love I felt for him was so deeply rooted that I consider it impossible to be new; it has to go back lifetimes. It is impossible for me to believe that this

connection was by chance. Maybe in another life we had been happy, but the possibility that we didn't stand a chance in that one also exists.

Once, I was crying, and the only thing I could think about was how many times we would need to be reborn before we were blessed with a life that gave us the possibility of being together. We must have been connected before; our connection had to transcend physical reality. Many things happened that led me to believe so. I felt him and his presence, even if we were separated by physical distance. I would wake up in the middle of the night from my deep sleep, seconds before my phone would light up, and I would see that he had sent me a message. His energy woke me up.

What we had had to be special. I'm afraid it might have been a "once in a lifetime" special. I would have sacrificed everything to give us a chance. He is one of the most intelligent men I know. He was a medical student when I met him. He was so passionate about medicine that he spent countless nights studying. I always enjoyed listening to his stories about what had happened at the hospital that day. What he did fascinated me. He sacrificed so much for his studies. I remember one year he stayed home all alone for Eid, studying, while everyone else was celebrating with their families. I tried to cheer him up and tell him that the sacrifices he made now would pay off later.

Despite coming from different cultures and backgrounds, I always hoped we could have a future together, no matter how delusional that might sound. He was the sincerest, truthful Muslim I've ever met, and he really tried everything not to sin, but being with me might have been one. The cultural barrier was never an issue for me. He made me fall in love with a culture I never got to know and showed me every corner of a country I've never been to.

Somehow, I walked through the streets of Nablus, visited the patients in the city's hospital, drank *kawhua* and smoked a cigarette on the balcony overlooking the Palestinian city, played with his cats that looked just like mine. I felt a part of his life in the Levant, even though I had never been there in person. I don't know how big a role I played in his life, but he was present every day I lived since we met.

At first, because of him being a stranger, I had lied to him about my age, and then I lied about what I did for a living. My mistake was never telling him. I had set up a checkpoint for us, where I was about to tell him, but we had never reached that point. The checkpoint was the day he told me he was coming to see me. I always waited for him to say the words, but that never happened.

I understood the difficulty he had with travel while living in Palestine. He challenged me to fast a day with him during the holy month of Ramadan, and we agreed to break

the fast together with a shawarma. I like to think of it as our first date. We had talked about our love and admiration for shawarma before, so it was the perfect option. We had spent hours on the phone talking about everything and anything. It was the best first date I've ever been on, even if it went down through the screens of our phones. I read something I wrote to him, and he told me I was talented and that I should continue writing. That was the moment I told the first person I was writing a book. This book. He got very excited. I promised him I would write a chapter about him. Now, I could write a whole book about him. I wonder what he would feel and how, and whether anything will change when he reads this.

It was the first time I felt I didn't have to hide the unusual parts of myself or my controversial political opinions. I felt like every part of us connected, that everything had fallen into place with him. Nothing was left out. He later admitted that this was the moment he fell in love with me.

One night, I asked him in his native Arabic if he liked me. His voice still echoes in my head, "*I adore you, Iza.*" While I was still processing this declaration, the next one came: "*Szeretlek (I love you), since our shawarma date.*" Since then, I couldn't erase these words from my memory, no matter how hard I tried. Every time I tried to say I love you to someone else, his voice echoed in my head, "*Szeretlek.*"

Each time I thought I finally moved on, these saintly promises resurfaced. I've tried to get it out of my head by listening to music, but the only playlist that my heart knew was the one that we made so long ago. I'm afraid that he is the man I will never be able to get over, and the one I will still think about when I'm sleeping next to my husband in our bedroom, while our two kids sleep in the bedroom next to ours.

In the beginning, everything seemed so much more than perfect. For years and years, I always thought that he was the one. He didn't leave my mind even when I was with someone else. I always wanted it to be him. He gave me reasons to believe this. He was the first person to offer me exactly what I wanted.

In the time we had together, he taught me and showed me so much love, more love than any guy ever. After a four-year-long toxic situationship, this connection was like a breath of fresh air. Not only did he tell me the most enchanting words, but his actions also matched them, and I was not left with unkept promises.

He was very attentive not to make promises he wouldn't keep. Maybe it was my fault for making them up in my head and waiting for them. He didn't throw a tantrum when I spoke up about my boundaries; he validated my

feelings, told me I was right, and, overall, treated me like his treasure. That's how everyone is supposed to be treated.

I will always be most grateful for it. He raised my standards. He showed me what a healthy connection looks like and got me to take my feelings seriously. He healed me.

We made so many plans that we had never fulfilled. One of the most important ones was for us to eat shawarma together again, as we did on our first date. Years after the first one, we still haven't been able to repeat this significant event. *Who knows... inshallah.*

The second main plan we made was to travel to Japan together one day. One day. We used to joke about how we would never get there if we went by car, and I was the one driving. Before we would travel to Japan, I always wished that he would travel to meet me. He always said he couldn't travel because of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. I believed him and patiently waited. I had imagined so many times the day he would just send me a message saying, "Guess what, the restrictions are lifted, I'm coming to see you."

Never happened. I remember it was the month of June that was the hardest. I felt like no one had understood me, and the only person to whom I wouldn't need to explain myself was him. I miss him so much. I scrolled through so many conversations between my friends and me to find the pictures of him I sent them as a brag. I did this because I had already

read our old conversation so many times that I had memorized almost every message, and I listened to his voice messages as if they were love songs.

I had suffered so much that month, and I knew that the only one who would have the power and know me enough to put an end to that hard period was him. Each night, I thought about reaching out to him, sending a message, giving him a sign that he still knows I think about him, more than he can imagine, that his presence still haunts me, and his shadow follows me even at night. It took everything in me not to do it.

I couldn't do it. How could I?

Just pop back in six months after I disappeared from his life, that

“Hey, I actually still feel so much for you, miss you so much that it hurts.”

I wouldn't have been fair.

But I wrote down every thought I had in my diary. There is one line I wrote that I usually remember when it comes to him: “(And I pray...) I can't finish that. I wrote too soon.” I still can't finish it. I think he is the one I wrote the most about. And the one I always tried to keep a secret because talking about him felt like being exposed naked in front of the whole world, even if I was only in front of my closest friends. I felt like if I talk about him even a bit, I share

a piece of him and that piece gets taken away from me the second I speak about it.

One thing sadly no one took away from me was my deeply rooted feelings for him that I tried to get rid of for so long. Not like I haven't tried to do it before. I never succeeded. I accepted that he will be the person I will never be able to move on from. Two days after I left my relationship, I texted him. I was out of my head with joy that I could talk with him again. I was dying to know what he was up to, how he was doing; I had enough of the Facebook stalking. We slowly started talking. The conversations were nothing like they had been before. He was dry, rude, and indifferent.

I couldn't blame him. I texted him out of the blue, months after going blank. He later told me that he just tried to protect himself and me by keeping his distance. I chose to wait. I was patient. I thought that time would fix it, and maybe as it passes, he will open up more as he did before.

Didn't happen.

But at one point, I couldn't bear it any longer. I said *one last push*.

I wanted to be able to say that *I did everything*. I didn't want to have to bear the thought that maybe things would have been different if I were honest about how I felt about him. About everything I would have done for us to have a future. "What ifs" are heavier to bear than failure.

After many months of reconnecting, I called to tell him how deeply I felt for him and that I was still willing to wait for him. I told him every single emotion I've felt, every hope I had about us. I told him how much the months we had spent separately ruined me, that I had missed him more than he will ever know, how much I thought about him, how much I cried for him, and how much I ached to finally talk to him and hear his voice.

I told him that I knew it was a lot to take in at once, so I didn't expect him to give me an answer right away. I was hoping that after he'd take his time to process everything, he would come forward about his emotions, too. I didn't want to push him or force him to admit his feelings or tell me that he never felt anything for me. I thought that as the dust of my feelings settled down, he would start building on them.

He didn't.

He told me about his plans to go to London for work, and I told him I would wait for him until he got there, and from then on, we would figure it out. I still would have waited for him after two years. He told me he had to postpone his plans about London due to family issues and the Israeli occupation getting worse.

I said, "No problem, I'll wait."

Then we got to short-term plans.

He told me he was planning to go to Japan for a month in a few months. It was like a slap in the face. I had taken his excuse for a real reason why he couldn't come to see me all these years. *Why couldn't we have been together?* I believed every word he said.

This was what I needed to snap out of it to realize that all the love and all the emotions were one-sided—my side. He never wanted to commit to me or have anything to do with me. He was just happy to be embraced, occasionally even choked by all the love I had for him.

I hope he will one day be able to read these lines and, despite the distance between us, feel the love I have always felt for him, even though he caused me pain.

Checked all the boxes

Then

Checked out of

My life.

My Love

A little while before making our relationship official, we were lying in bed, cuddling and planting kisses on each other's faces, when I just couldn't contain my curiosity.

"Look, let's be honest now. Why did you send the follow request on Instagram? My account is private, with a random-letter username, an Arabic name, and a cat profile picture."

He gave me a sly, hidden smile and put his hands under his head.

"Look, I don't know for sure if it was you or not—"

"But—"

I was desperate to find out the answer.

"But I don't know... There's a party in October at this place in Old Town, organized by the student association."

I was all ears. I was starting to think we might have met at that specific party, but I couldn't recall giving out my socials to anyone.

"And I had this idea of taking pictures with as many people as possible with a pair of white sunglasses, and I think I took a picture of you, too. But I don't know if it was you or not. If it was, you followed me on TikTok.

"And you never followed me back, you traitor!" I was angry with myself ever since that day for making the first move. I never ever do it.

“So, it was you! That’s crazy!”

It was really crazy. We accidentally met in the city. We had been living in the same building since the beginning of the year, only separated by a set of stairs, but we had never seen each other since then. He started searching his phone to see if he still had the pictures and to confirm it was really me. A few moments later, I was already on his screen, smiling, not knowing then that I would be crazy for the guy who was taking my picture.

Maybe it was a sign that divine timing really exists. That there was never a right person, wrong time possibility. The universe works in unpredictable ways and only offers us a silver platter when every single box is checked, and that is when we have the privilege to meet the people who are meant to be with us. Maybe it was a sign that autumn is a time of letting go, and the falling leaves that rot on the pavement were symbolic of people leaving our lives. Maybe it was a sign that winter was our hermit mode: for us to mourn the fallen leaves and the death of nature, for us to stay back and find comfort again in ourselves, lick our wounds, and make room for the gifts of spring.

I remember I told him this once.

We were saying our good nights in the hall, after he had already asked me to be his girlfriend.

“You know, I’m sure of us. I believed in this right person-wrong time thing for so long and then realized it’s just a delusion. Now that I think back, if we had started talking in October when we first met, I probably wouldn’t have been ready to be with you. I trust the universe now. The time must be right. I’m ready now.”

He looked at me and didn’t say anything for a while; he just smiled. I felt like he discovered and interpreted everything my eyes had hidden. I felt naked.

“I can’t really remember what I was going through at that time, but I probably wouldn’t have been ready either.”

Autumn was the one who winked and smiled at me, knowing the things that I didn’t at the time. In May, after a period of silently stalking each other’s socials, we finally started chatting, but we had difficulty meeting because we were almost never at the same place or time. Life’s labyrinth. But he seemed very convincing even through messages. He pointed out the cliché to me when he asked, “And for how long will we keep running from each other?” He left me speechless; he had a way with words.

He seemed like a full package, and time further on proved this. He checked out all my boxes. Tall. I remember the only time I didn’t have to get on my tiptoes to kiss him was when I was wearing heels. Dark, long, curly hair. I would have loved to play with his hair, but I was always afraid to touch it when it

looked so perfect and defined. Intelligent. Very much so. I remember one time when I was watching him code an application. He was not only academically intelligent, though. He gave me the impression that he was also good at figuring out and handling emotions. He helped me figure out what I felt, even when I couldn't do it. I really admired this about him. His moustache gave him more character. I loved to smooth it out with my fingers after we made out and were cuddling. He also had a septum piercing with tiny, shiny rocks.

I always used to tell my friends that you can't have it all. Each man must have a bad trait that we don't like or isn't convenient. It's the law of my universe. And initially, I couldn't realize what his fault was. He really seemed perfect, too good to be true. I knew that if something seemed too good to be true, it probably was not. As soon as I thought to myself that maybe he is the one guy who has it all, life proved to me that he wasn't.

We spent the most perfect days together.

Ones straight out of a coming-of-age movie. We shared our rooms, but not only. For me, it came to a point where I felt our lives were becoming impossibly intertwined. Maybe it was because we studied, cooked, and slept together every possible time, when Clara or his roommate weren't there.

I still think of the first night we spent together as my favorite.

We agreed to make French fries and eat them with cheese and fried eggs. We went shopping beforehand (we went grocery shopping daily). After beating three sets of stairs, we arrived in his room. Our lungs weren't in the best shape, and we were out of breath, so he suggested we give ourselves a break and lie in bed for a bit. After our daily dose of screen time and our batteries were recharged, I snuggled further into his arms.

A kiss was somehow not enough. Everything was wanted but not insisted on. He always asked me if I was okay and comfortable with anything we were doing. I think he was the first man with whom I had never ever felt any type of sexual pressure. I was really stunned by this. I thought that it was a feeling that was normal and inevitable to arise in every girl when daring to steal a glance at a boy. That you automatically owe him something. Everything on earth that I had done with him felt safe, sure, warm, and emotional.

His touch was also different from everyone else's. The way he put his hands on my back and pulled me closer, it was so indescribably gentle, yet wanting and eager. I never liked it when someone put their hands on my belly, and I never let anyone do so. But with him, it was different. When he did it, it felt comforting and lovely, and somehow his hands always ended up on my belly. It used to be one of my biggest

insecurities, until he told me he actually liked it after weeks of resting his hands on it.

Something similar happened with touching my back. When we would make out, he would always put his hands under my shirt and rub my back, then pull me closer to him from time to time. There was just something about this move that made it so passionate, visceral, and honest. Like he really wanted me. It was a level of passion I had never experienced before. I remember he once told me I made him feel something he never felt before.

Each night when the lights were already off, and we were in bed, after the “good nights”, when we were just about to drift off to sleep, he would start placing gentle kisses on my neck. My breath would always get deeper when he would do that. Somehow, to his touch, my body could never be indifferent. Even from his placing his hands gently around my belly and pulling me closer to him while placing gentle kisses on my neck and down my collarbone, almost invisibly caressing my skin with his breath, my mouth would always let out moans that he very much liked to hear.

In the kitchen, we smoked before making the French fries. He got closer to me and blew the smoke into my mouth, but without even accidentally touching my lips. He got so close I felt his hot body even without touching any part of it. Blowing smoke into each other’s faces or mouths became our

unspoken gesture of indirectly expressing our desire. He stayed that close and waited for me to kiss him, I suppose. I leaned back and took a drag from my cigarette. I locked my eyes on his. He bit his lip. I never told him, but it was a move that made me lose it.

I put my hands behind his neck and pulled him closer until our lips were close, until I could feel his breath on them. Then I leaned back again, while dragging my hands down his shirtless body.

We broke the tension and simply decided it was about time we peeled and cut the potatoes. It was so mundane. He prepared the French fries, and I made him eggs. While we munched on them, we watched a show that our moms used to enjoy a decade ago. After that, we slept together.

Sleeping with someone for me always held greater emotional value than having sex with someone: the simple fact of sharing a bed and trusting the other person enough to let them be next to you in such a fragile state. Letting your breathing sync, your temples touch, and your arms and legs hold onto the other's body is undiluted intimacy. I hadn't slept with anyone before that, and the first time was quiet, endearing, and memorable.

On another date, after spending an entire day together, he proposed going for a walk. It was already late at night, and

both of us were exhausted from studying, and I would have had classes the next day, but I couldn't resist the temptation.

"Will you let me hold your hand?" he asked as we left the courtyard.

We set off without a destination, and we were just wandering around the city. I bombarded him with endless meaningless questions: day or night, summer or winter, black or white, and so on. After I ran out of *opposites*, the questions changed: What is something you have given up on? What is your biggest fear? Somewhere between the *two extremes*, I had a poignant question:

"What is your dream destination?" He remained silent for a few moments.

"I would say probably New York."

I stopped my steps.

I couldn't believe what I've just heard: New York! It was *my* dream destination. Ever since I heard about The Big Apple as a kid, I have always wanted to visit the city that never sleeps.

Maybe it wasn't something extraordinary, but it felt like a confirmation, a sign from the universe that he was it. We ended up staying out until three in the morning, blurting out everything that crossed our minds.

The nights when we would cook together were my favorite. He didn't expect me to do everything; he was always

looking to help me. He always offered to help me clean the vegetables or, basically, do anything, just so I didn't have to do it all alone. This challenged me. I was used to doing everything on my own. He taught me that I didn't have to take care of everything on my own.

It was the first time I'd seen a man who wanted to help rather than wait for everything to come to him. It took me a while to get used to it, but I gave in after a few times. We were a team, he'd insist. And he really was.

He was always very attentive and was terrified of ever making me feel uneasy or uncomfortable. I noticed this the first time he kissed me. We were lying in bed, cuddling. He had been away for a few days, and we needed to find a way to show how much we missed each other. We did it in the most innocent way. We were just looking at each other, smiling, when he broke this silence:

"Pretty, I really, really want to kiss you, you don't get how bad."

I was out of my head with happiness. It was unexpected because, days before, he told me he didn't want to rush anything. I leaned in closer, but stopped before our lips could have touched. I let him kiss me.

One thing I really liked about him was that he used a term no one had ever used for me before: *Iubita* (my love).

I don't think anyone had ever called me *my love*. It made it all seem more real yet confusing because he had never said that he loved me.

And I wondered, how can you call someone "my love" if you don't love them?

Eventually, I realized that besides the picture-perfect times we had shared, he didn't feel much for me. I guess he just liked the selfless amount of affection and endless kisses he had received. After a month, he broke my rose-colored glasses. We went on a picnic. We got a coloring book, ate sandwiches and strawberries, and took pictures and videos together. Everything seemed so perfect, like nothing was wrong. But shortly after, my intuition signaled something when we got home.

We were in his room, cuddling, and after we said our goodbyes, something felt off. I wanted more attention and affection, so I started nagging him.

"Come on, I know you won't miss me as I will miss you."

We were supposed to go to our hometowns the next day and be apart for a few days.

"What do you mean, I won't miss you? How do you know how much I will miss you? Don't be silly! Of course, I will miss you."

He was acting weird, but I brushed it off. He made me feel needy.

After we said our final good nights, before I would've let him go, I mouthed "I love you," then immediately buried my face in his neck, afraid that he might not say it back. Maybe I was hoping he didn't catch it. I suppose he didn't. He asked me what that was, and I just said nothing because I knew he wouldn't say it back.

If something is too good to be true, it probably is.

I hushed the questionable thought I had about him and how he felt about me away, the moment it appeared. I felt bad about questioning anything about him or his feelings, since he never gave me a reason to doubt. I shouldn't have had.

My intuition was right when it told me it was too good to be true. As soon as the academic year was officially over, he terminated our relationship in a way I had never expected.

He might have forgotten how old he was, because after this, he acted like a fifteen-year-old. As soon as he got rid of every academic responsibility, he felt like he didn't need the responsibilities of a relationship either.

He ghosted me for two days, and when I told him I felt something was off, he broke up with me in messages, saying he had been thinking of breaking things off for a long time because we are too different.

I had analyzed that message down to every letter, comma, and period, and there were just countless things that didn't make sense.

First, he used an excuse that was nowhere close to the truth. He didn't even sugarcoat the truth. He chose to lie. It is impossible for me to believe that his issue was that we were too different and had nothing in common. That's such a cliché excuse for a breakup.

He could've told me he didn't want commitment for the summer, that he wanted to have fun and not be tied down, because in his messages, he said that we shouldn't hold each other back.

He could've told me he got afraid of the intensity of his emotions, given that I mouthed "I love you" to him two days before he broke up with me. He could've told me his friends didn't like me, since he started typing the grand novel at twelve in the morning when he was with his friends. He could've told me he missed his ex because he was still following her on all of his accounts.

But he *chose* to lie.

It turned out that his breakup message wasn't the first time he lied to me, either. He wrote to me that he had realized a long time ago that we are just too different and incompatible. This means he lied to my face, pretending everything was okay, even though he knew he was going to break things off

when *he* felt like it. He also must have liked the idea of my having no idea about this, since he didn't give me any signs. He also said that he hoped we would meet up every now and then and stay very close friends. Little does he know that I no longer spend time with strangers.