

I was unfamiliar with this section of Chinatown, as much as anyone can be unfamiliar with an island on which one resides. The area a few blocks over was experiencing a mini-resurgence in the form of vegan provisions and upscale boutiques manned by Parsons students (the prices could be guessed by multiplying hanger distance and overhead). This was perplexing to me, as there was nothing to resurge. The neighborhood had been fashionable for years. Whatever businesses opened now did not arise from cheap rents or a triangulation of community and so ladling on layers of practiced nonchalance made it feel as if people with no sense of history had planted a flag in a neighborhood where the denizens had been drinking natural wine since 2005.

All this cool I wanted to avoid. All this cool made me tired.

So I made a left, toward Houston, into a less self-consciously trendy zone. There were remnants of a street fair, racks of stiff leather jackets spilling out onto the street. I passed an art gallery with no art, a dive bar with no sign, and buzzers with no names. Eventually, I spotted the telltale yellow of an electric awning. This was a high-class bodega; the kind with enough energy bars to set the mind to calculating how long the body could last if trapped inside. I waited behind an elderly man as he selected lotto numbers and a pack of Merits. The hem of his pants dragged along the floor as the cashier suffered him patiently. Atop the register was a wide-eyed plastic cat, its paw moving up and down in silent protest.

When it was my turn, I felt compelled to be extra sane. I forwent matches in a tone that suggested I was giving up my inheritance.

"I'll take a lighter, too," I said. "Please."

The cashier slid one across the plastic counter. I gave the metal wheel a quick roll.

“Don’t light that in your pocket,” he warned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Actually, I would dream of it and often did. I worried that I’d be mindlessly playing with a lighter in my pocket and set myself on fire. I thought about it so much, it was a miracle it never happened.

I walked back along the same side of the street, packing the cigarettes against my palm. I got a disproportionate kick out of pleasant interactions with strangers. I suspect it’s because these were the kinds of interactions I wished I could see performed by every man I’d ever dated. Or vice versa. So many of my past relationships devolved into fights on public transport or long chains of undignified texts and I’d think: If only I could see you, flipping through your mail. Or booking airline tickets. And if only you could see me, wishing the driver a good night. Or either of us, reciting our social security numbers to prove we are ourselves. Where did these seductively functional people go when sex got in the way?

It was then that I spotted my ex-boyfriend Amos.

Amos was standing outside the restaurant with a taller friend. The two of them shared a square of sidewalk, the friend running his thumb under the strap of a messenger bag to relieve the weight. I could tell they’d just come from inside. Larger forces had protected us from seeing each other, but larger forces had done all they could. When I left and came back, they’d washed their hands of me.

This was not a place I would’ve expected Amos to have heard of, forget patronize. When we were together, he was dismissive of the “fetishized expense” of Manhattan. Manhattan was soulless, gentrified, once for the very young and the very rich, now only for the very rich and the very soulless. Reduced to a high-end strip mall, all the city’s personality

was in the past, all its pride delusional. I was too tired to mount a defense—tired, probably, from having to schlep to Bed-Stuy to see my boyfriend. Dropping our near-identical rents or the pilates studios of his neighborhood into conversational evidence bags didn't seem worth it. Besides, what Amos never understood was that with each pronouncement of my home as a dead zone, he made me feel better about living here. The eye of a hurricane may be inaccessible, but it's still the eye.

Toward the end of our relationship, I felt a reactionary love for all the things Amos hated. Not just Manhattan, but streaming services, nature videos, expensive toiletries, pop music, smartphones, beaches, throw pillows, bottled water, alternative milks, kitchen gadgets (a strawberry destemmer—who knew!), and cats. So completely did I commit to these things (was this the first time anyone adopted a kitten out of spite?), I convinced myself they were more indicative of who I was than the deeper things Amos and I had in common. I became resentful of the books and politics and niche references that had brought us together, as if they had betrayed me by leading me into the arms of a man who diagnosed Clive as a charlatan and my friends as “morally impoverished.”

Our relationship never would have lasted for the two years it did were it not for Kit. Amos had a twenty-something cousin named Kit, a Hollywood starlet with a penchant for filters and quotations. But she was a blood relation, which made her tolerable to Amos, which, in turn, made him tolerable to me. When Kit was filming in New York, the three of us went out to dinner. She ordered food as if she and the waiter were working on a project together. She recounted stories from Amos's childhood and demanded our conversion from tequila to mezcal.

“You’re such a good proselytizer,” Amos told her, “too bad you’re Jewish.”

Kit flicked the straw wrapper she’d been balling into Amos’s face and he cackled. She unlocked a less captious Amos. He refrained from deriding the Hollywood industrial complex in front of her. When the bill came, Kit grabbed it like it was nothing. I’d never seen someone take a check like that, without momentarily losing track of what they were saying. Amos didn’t flinch. Whereas whenever I grabbed the bill, we had weird sex afterward.

After we broke up, I found myself watching the multicam sitcom on which Kit appeared, searching for his jawline in hers. I wasn’t trying to torture myself, though I did manage to do that, only to search for evidence that Amos had been real, that I had kept this person’s contact lens solution in my medicine cabinet. I often felt like this after breakups, no matter who had cut the cord—that fresh shock that life does not end from a single blow. A comforting concept in the long term, a jarring one in the short term. Resiliency is overrated. To get hit by a truck and ride the subway the next morning is not commendable, it’s insane. But thanks to Kit, I could postpone this mourning process indefinitely. I watched her show so religiously, my interest in it took on a life independent of Amos. At the magazine, Zach and I shared a cubicle wall, so I foisted plot summations on him, despite his having zero interest in hearing about a sitcom meant for teenagers. I read the recaps, scrolling for Kit’s name to see if any of them had isolated her performance. I closed out of these articles if I sensed Clive or Vadis behind me.

When the show was canceled, I felt a second wave of remorse about Amos that felt a lot like the first wave. Details

that should've cycled through my memory long ago came rushing back in—the holes in his clothing, the scratches in his records, the disability that prevented him from wringing out a kitchen sponge. I remembered the layout of his apartment too well. This included the musty sofa on which he explained that monogamy was a vestigial construct gifted to us by the Puritans. It wasn't me, I had to understand. Except that it was me because there was only one of me.

We sat there, like guests of the furniture. I told him that I did not like the way he was talking about this, as if he had some kind of affliction that required him to put his penis in multiple people. I said that I could forgive someone, even him, for cheating, but I could not forgive someone, even him, for plotting to cheat.

“Why do you have to call it ‘cheating?’” he asked in that redoubtable tone of his.

“Call it whatever you want,” I said. “Pancake. I am not going to sit here while you pancake every woman you meet.”

“*Every* woman is unlikely,” he said, scoffing.



The breakup was about six years ago. Kit's show was canceled two years ago. As I approached, I worried this discrepancy in mourning would be palpable. I also happened to have on the same shirt I'd worn the night we broke up, as if I'd been walking around in a mausoleum the shape of Amos Adler, breathing stale Amos Adler air. I reminded myself of the full life I had now. I had a steady job that I didn't completely hate. Old, good friends. Ten fingers, ten toes. I had wiped all the sleep from my eyes before noon. Also, I'd been having sex.

More important, the sex I'd been having was with my fiancé. My fiancé to whom I was engaged to be married, a person I'd swindled into a lifetime of mutual tolerance.

Here was a man who would never pancake on me (though I sometimes worried this was more a failure of imagination) or disappear for weeks, breaking the silence with a three-thousand-word screed or, better yet, the insistence that there had been no silence. May our gaslights illuminate the bridges we burn! Here was a man whose snobberies were logical (buy the more expensive concert tickets, vote early, make your own coffee). Here was a man who asked me about my day because he wanted answers, not credit. A man who intuitively sensed the relevance of my summer camp stories. A man who let me refer to him as "Boots," a nickname that began during a conversation about parents who give their babies nonsense names in utero. Never mind the implication he was the *child* of our relationship. He didn't care. Because here was a man who did not think of himself as woefully untapped by the world, who was not driven to an existential crisis by an unread literary journal. Here was a calm, nonjudgmental soul who knew of Amos Adler only because I'd mentioned him once, in passing.

"Famous Amos?" Boots asked, mulling it over. "Like the cookie?"

"More or less," I said, balling up the old sweatshirt of Amos's that had inspired this exchange.

"I've never known an Amos."

I wanted to add "me neither," but I knew I had to end this conversation.

When we first got together, Boots and I made an agreement never to speak about our exes unless absolutely necessary. Say, one of them died in a freak accident and one of us

was tapped to deliver the eulogy. Or one of them was elected prime minister of a small country. It was his suggestion that we move into the future with only each other. He'd been scarred by a girlfriend who was obsessed with her ex. It was exhausting and scary, trying to predict her triggers. She "carried around hatboxes of baggage, like a cartoon of a woman with steamer trunks behind her."

"And a poodle!"

"What poodle?"

"Nothing, go on . . ."

"Well anyway, I guess my baggage is baggage."

And so I agreed to this arrangement, even though I thought this policy was too strict, not to mention robbing us of imagery that could be pocketed for sex. But I was the one who stood to benefit: Boots had been in two serious relationships, college girlfriend and scary girlfriend included. We were never going to be seated at a table with someone who required an explanation. I, on the other hand, had nothing but explanations. Some of us get smaller denominations from the romance ATM than others. In addition to the flings, I'd had about fifteen five-month relationships, not to mention the six- and nine-month relationships, not to mention the ones that came to life in the night like haunted toaster ovens: *You up?*

I had tried to explore the why of it. Thanks to *Modern Psychology*, I had access to the most complete therapist database on the planet. My parents were still happily married. No one had abandoned me, beaten me, or withheld their love. Was I enamored by disinterest and disinterested in affection, set on giving my heart to people who didn't deserve it? See-sawing between desperate and inscrutable like a deranged child? Was I trying to find replicas of my father and then smashing those replicas? Had Cupid's bastard brother snuck

into my bedroom and whispered in my ear, “My child, never commit”? I’d begun to suspect that my search for an inciting incident *was* the inciting incident. But before I could get to the bottom of it, I met Boots, who made it all stop, who could not unbreak me but who could protect me from the narrative of the broken.

The night we got engaged (along the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, the lights of the city winking in approval), we were in a cab going over the Manhattan Bridge. I was drunk by then, flirting with nausea in the backseat. I cracked the window and looked down my left arm, following it to its natural conclusion.

“Whose finger is that?” I asked.

“Who put that there?” Boots laughed, teasing me, declaring me wasted.

But I was not talking about the ring. I was so drunk, I was talking about my actual finger.

Boots had asked my parents for my hand, if it *was* my hand, in marriage. This conversation was easy to imagine, one of them screaming at the other to pick up the kitchen phone. They are not tough people. A phone call is all that would be required to sell the house and pay off the terrorists. Or marry off their daughter. But he and I had not discussed marriage, not seriously, only implicitly, in the way we kept filling up the calendar, facing holidays head-on. So while the question did not come out of left field, it was no fastball to home base.

I knew I’d spend no small amount of time, working it out in my head, wondering if I’d be just as disturbed by him *not* getting permission. I often felt my prime years to figure out if I subscribed to the concept of marriage were when I was a child, back when all of life was hypothetical. As an adult, it’s hard to come down on a common institution to which you