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I'm the One

“Can’t repeat the past?” he asked incredulously. “Why of course you can!”

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*

At twenty-two, I remember startling awake in the threadbare sheets and rented room of my then boyfriend, a thirty year-old, ADD-afflicted geology PhD candidate. Newly graduated, I was about to leave both him and the state of Oregon, and as I looked at my neglected surroundings I thought, “When *I’m* thirty, I’m going to be married, own a house, and be writing for a living.”

I believed myself to be independent because I spent a lot of time alone in the sunset fields of Finley wildlife refuge, reveling in the shimmer of green-gold grasses and the lonely honking of southward geese. I once lay down for a long time in the giant, frozen imprint of a tractor tire, watching the sunset clouds feather above me, happy that no one knew where I was. But I was far from independent—in fact, the reason I was leaving the state was because I couldn’t walk down the streets of my small college town without running into somebody I’d dated. I was ridiculously open to the possibility of love, and could see its seed in everyone—soulful, shaggy-haired poets, muddy mountain bikers, charm-schooled frat boys, tattooed baristas, straight-laced geology students or the impossibly beautiful boy with a stack of gun magazines under his bed. And my fruitless and sometimes frantic search finally rendered me unable to remember who I was, what I loved, or why I considered the attention and opinions of men the only proof of my worth in the world.

So I drove to Savannah, Georgia, where my best friend was in art school, and where I planned to take a year off before graduate school, take a year off men, and get myself back. Speeding across the windswept expanse of Nebraska I wept with relief at being so free, so alone under the wide, bright sky. I didn't speak to anyone for three days, save the Indian woman at a fleabag motel who loaned me her clock radio, and I imagined my own voice incubating, growing stronger.

It took me just over three weeks to abandon my self-improvement goals for a guy I worked with at the coffee shop inside Books-A-Million. He was funny, he was nice, and we were sitting in the dark corner of an Irish pub on the riverfront when he told me he knew he could assuage my relationship fears and untangle my issues.

"Won't you trust me?" he asked, pushing aside our basket of fries to grab my hands. "Sweetie, I'm the *one*," he said.

The band began "Whisky in the Jar," which at that point I'd only heard twice in my life and still really appreciated, and the subsequent clapping muffled the voice in my head that said, "*Him?* He's the one? Shouldn't I get to decide?"

Now, at thirty-two, with far too many similar incidents behind me, I was on the flip side of that familiar crossroads. For the last two years I'd been in an agonizing, confusing, all-consuming, on/off relationship that was suddenly, finally, and truly over.

Weeks after the break-up, I was still waking at four in the morning with my heart pounding. The ache behind my breastbone could be pushed on and dulled for a moment, though I certainly knew that this heartache was in my body, my mind. I wandered the darkened apartment, as if to make sure everything besides me was still in the right place,

and in the kitchen I stood in the pale refrigerator light until the infuriating horde of late summer fruit flies drove me back to bed. I remembered how a week before the new girl appeared Henry said he'd never felt closer to me, that he envisioned a future with me, and I'd fallen asleep with his feet pressing mine in a Morse code of tenderness. Thoughts and memories of him circled and hovered like the fruit flies—no matter how many I killed, they multiplied, seeming to feed on air.

I likewise fed my sorrow by thinking about the trip Henry and I had recently taken to Lake George for a friend's wedding. A week after his tender words and two weeks before the trip, he'd simultaneously announced that he finally saw all the amazing things in me he'd mostly been blind to before, and that he was seeing someone else.

After a few hours on the beach, we lay on our motel bedspread looking at guidebooks. Our bare feet touched. The electricity of proximity was nearly audible. I imagine he'd told the new girl, "Oh, no, we have separate beds, separate rooms; we're separate."

His shoulder pressed harder against mine and we moved closer. His hand holding the guidebook was a hand I knew by heart, by touch, texture, sight. The words swam before my eyes; I wasn't even pretending to read. I knew he had a date the night we came home, but said I didn't care. I didn't. I could only see this moment, this room, this man I'd wanted for so long.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I was.

"Then I guess we don't need this," he said, dropping the guidebook and pulling me close.

At the late afternoon wedding luau on the shores of Lake George, most guests wore grass skirts over their jeans and were happy to let the rented hula girls teach them a few steps. But Henry and I remained at our table, refusing the many hollered requests to “Get out here and dance!” until the bride herself forced us onto the carpet of fake grass to be taught the movements and hand gestures— a pantomime of fishing. We’d never danced together before, save for one ballroom dance lesson in the gym of a local community college, but we laughed and I blushed, giving it our best. Henry mimed casting me off, reeling me in, and then casting me off again. We were giddy and good together.

We danced until the sun glittered and sank over the lake. And after we said our goodbyes Henry put his arm around me tightly, keeping me close as we walked through the summer dark to our motel room.

Our weekend together changed nothing, of course. On the flight home we were more tender with each than usual, and when we touched down on the runway Henry smiled at me, sadly, and pressed his forehead against mine. But, as planned, he went over to the new girl’s house. She gave him an ultimatum, which he believed. And early Monday morning I woke, alone, to the bodily sensation of being cast off and reeled in. It was like my childhood days at the beach, when the pushing, pulling motion of the waves stayed with me, and at night, rocked me to sleep.

But now I was wide awake. And I ached.

I also understood, finally, that the very motion of come here/go away is what I had been steeping in, and what I’d come to expect, during my years with Henry. Even

though I knew well how it always ended, each go-round inspired hope. “But this time is different,” I’d say, earnestly. “He really wants to try.”

“You said that last time,” they said, tiredly, sadly.

I didn’t really like Henry when I first met him. We were at a local winery, listening to a mutual friend crooning Radiohead covers, and though I thought Henry very handsome and fairly charming, I also thought him rather vain. He had come on his motorcycle, and carried his helmet around to mark the fact. He clearly had a trust fund. And talking to him I had one of those moments where you receive a message from yourself so clear it’s as if it were tapped out in chalk on a blackboard: *Do not get involved with this guy.*

It wasn’t an unfamiliar blackboard or a new message, but, as usual, I ignored it.

For months Henry and I went out once a week—to wine bars, to horse races, to see live music—and sent each other long, playful e-mails. I didn’t know exactly how he felt about me, but didn’t think he’d pay me so much attention if he weren’t interested. And his knowledge and opinions and stories and bright smile literally *mesmerized* me. He seemed to suck the air out of a room; sometimes, around him, I found I was barely breathing, or rather, breathing shallowly, as if frightened, waiting, always, for the inevitable dropping of the other shoe.

One night Henry took me home and then, ten minutes later, rapped on my front window. I’d had far too much Rioja, and so had stripped off my clothes and essentially passed out the moment my body hit the bed, but his knock jolted me awake like the whine of a tornado siren. I knew it was Henry, knew why he’d come back, and was so

afraid he'd change his mind and leave that I didn't waste time getting dressed, just wrapped myself in my bedspread and ran to open the door.

He looked disheveled and shy. "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

"What took you so long?" I said, nearly feverish with gratitude, pulling him inside.

And over a year later Henry revealed he'd come back that night not because he felt compelled by love or passion but because he knew I was getting impatient. He wasn't sure he wanted me, but he wasn't sure he didn't, either.

Coming back is one of the oldest tricks in the book. It illustrates both reserve and passion, and plants the seed of never quite knowing what to expect. And this seed blossomed. But with time, our lives became increasingly enmeshed. We'd stopped dating a few months after that first kiss (he'd broken things off by phone on Valentine's Day) but had continued a physical relationship that hinged on his moods, his needs, or his opinion of me. I was ever attuned to the subtle and regular energetic shifts between us, and knew, within minutes of seeing him, where we were headed that day. But even on the days it was clear we were headed nowhere, I didn't leave: I knew it was only a matter of time until he'd come back.

Soon, I began freelancing for the magazine he edited. Then he offered his basement apartment in exchange for thirty hours of work on his in-progress house each month. Everyone knew it was a horrible idea, but I believed then what he much later admitted was actually true: He was scared. He cared so much about me and was offering as much as he could give. And I wanted whatever I could get.

Toward that end, when he decided to run for public office, I slipped into the role of campaign manager. Campaign headquarters were my apartment, his campaign lawn signs stacked high on my kitchen table and cluttering the backseat of my car. I spoke his name many, many times, every day.

“Henry’s ideas are clearly better than any other candidate,” I’d say. “He’s the only one saying anything at all. This city has so much possibility! Do you really want things to stay exactly the way they are?”

Many nights, late, we sat on the back porch, debriefing. We’d hug goodnight, then stand breathing against each other’s cheeks and ears, not acknowledging what was about to happen, what always happened. We’d have weeks of closeness, but at some point he’d hug me goodnight and without a word we’d gone back to being companions, friends, housemates. We didn’t talk about it. And once we did, over a year later, the drama and confusion increased as I tried to connect the dots between his actions and his words: *I’m in love with you, but don’t know if you’re good for me; I think of you mostly platonically; You are the woman I want to come home to, my constant; I’m interested in someone else, but mostly because it’s simple; I’m not ready for you—not yet.*

We came together and parted so many times the pain of each ending became familiar, as was the energy and hope of beginning again. Sometimes I thought that had we been on smooth waters for more than five minutes, and I’d had the chance to examine the relationship without the distraction of trying to keep my balance, I might not have wanted it. A few times I woke next to him, slightly panicked, thinking, “*He’s the one? Shouldn’t I get to choose?*”

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My gentle therapist finally gave me an ultimatum: Henry or her. A few friends did, too. So, since I couldn't see Henry, I spread the Lake George pictures on the kitchen table. We'd bought a disposable camera, and upon looking through them the first time, in the car outside Camera World, I was surprised to realize they were nearly all of Henry—Henry clowning, smiling, posing as a fashion model or a secret agent, the sun glinting brightly off his golden head. The few pictures of me were dark, unfocused; in one my head had blended with the background as if I were in the initial stages of vanishing.

For the first time in two years, I truly, deeply understood there wasn't going to be another beginning, a next go round. This end was the real deal, and an old friend said, evenly, "This is the best thing that ever happened. *You* are interesting, but *this* is boring."

I was horrified. Both from hearing such a stark and true view of my sad, fruitless pursuit and from the raw, howling, animal pain I felt, but also because I realized my friend was right. This relationship was just a new version of the same dance I'd been doing my entire life. Going through the spiral bound journals I filled through my twenties, I kept finding repeating phrases and epiphanies. I found unsent letters I assumed were to one boyfriend then realized, no, in fact they were to another three years later. Same issues, same words.

I don't remember what I felt previous to discovering that my epiphanies were not really epiphanies, but this time, at thirty-two, I lost it. I cried intermittently for three days, both from the lost possibility of Henry and the yawning, embarrassing realization that I'd spent an inordinate amount of mental and emotional energy plowing hopefully through the perfected pattern of running from men who loved me, while pursuing men who didn't but were happy to keep me around. And despite myself, I'd managed to live and work

and maintain friendships but this was despite *myself*, the very ‘person’ who should provide support and self-preservation. This time, I had to change my life, or lose it.

That day I drank too much red wine and had soggy, sad, slightly hysterical phone conversations with seven friends and three ex-boyfriends who conferred with my findings. What a *waste*, I kept thinking. And that night, standing against the bathroom sink, I swirled my toothbrush with blue gel then looked up to my face in the mirror, my sad, soft, beautiful eyes, and suddenly felt enormous compassion and tenderness for myself. It was like seeing a picture of yourself as a teenager and recognizing how lovely and perfect you’d been, though you clearly had had no idea.

Then one of the fruit flies from the kitchen zigged in front of my face, having followed the wine glass, and I remembered the small army massed in the kitchen. “That’s *it*,” I said, aloud. I was through being apathetic. I climbed on counters, chased them from refrigerator to cupboard door. I squished them with sponge and fingers. It took nearly two hours, but then, they were gone, and my kitchen was clean and empty.

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The next morning I woke with a throbbing head and the clear remembrance of a conversation with a lithe clothing designer who did NIA, a dance form that incorporated yoga, tai chi, jazz and aikido with modern dance. She was obsessed with it. She was also dating the instructor, so it was free. I recalled the class ran every morning at nine-thirty, and I knew I had to be there. I drove to the downtown studio, crying the whole way.

The sun broke through the clouds in a jagged golden line over the autumn hued hills, and it seemed like a sign. And waiting for a light I pulled alongside a fifty-ish

woman in a purple beret, who, instead of turning away, embarrassed at my tears, smiled at me kindly, as if she understood, as if she cared.

The woman at the desk was a dancer, thin-shouldered and calm, and before buying a month-long pass I asked her if she thought it was a good workout. “It’s simply transformative,” she said.

I started to cry again. “I just think I need a month of healing,” I whimpered.

She touched my hand, “I know what it’s like,” she said, more sincerely than I knew it could be said.

The instructor, Carlos, welcomed me as I took off my shoes and stepped into the studio to join the circle. Small and wiry, with curly, shoulder length hair, Carlos was wearing gold nail polish and a rhinestone-studded belt. In his gorgeous Mexican accent he talked about moving from the heart, about the difference between getting lost in the movements and getting *lost*.

We spread out on the smooth wooden floor. I stood near the back of the room, watching Carlos as he pulsed his hips to the thumping drums—feet wide, then bending to scoop the air and then whoosh it over his head. His movements seemed very silly, but I couldn’t just stand there—all around me, women in bright leotards and men with long sideburns and unfortunate tank tops swooped and grunted. “For fuck’s sake, just move,” I told myself, and joined the mix of colorful, moving bodies that now were dancing around the room in a big, counterclockwise circle. We kicked toward the window like warriors, we crouched and crept like cats stalking a bug in the grass, we pretended to be throwing and catching imaginary beach balls. I was aware of the wood beneath my feet, the women breathing next to me, the smell of lilies in a vase in the front of the room. We crouched

and twirled and shimmied. And I stopped thinking it was silly and was swooning in pleasure how good it felt to *move*. Then all of a sudden I was weeping. Only the loud music kept my keening from ruining everyone's good time, but I didn't want to stop moving, or stop feeling, and as quickly as the tears came on, I felt rage rising in me, through my stomach and arms and toes. We followed Carlos, forcefully karate chopping the air, and yelling, "*Uhh! Hail!*"

The air from the ceiling fans glanced off my arms and chest, and I felt myself moving with an abandon I'd long ago abandoned, or maybe had never had. We were all sweating and smiling, and I was seriously in love with everyone in the room, including myself, and moved by the bright sheen of the wood floor and the sheer curtains billowing from the tall, east-facing windows, and the nearby clatter of early morning sidewalks. I was exactly where I was supposed to be at that exact moment, and I was taking myself back, god damn it. I was going to heal myself if it killed me.

I left the class sweaty, spent and without any ability to don my normal-person façade. I cried in the car, thinking about the ridiculous, horrible war we'd started, and the genocide in Sudan and the terror of the hurricane victims and my mother's sad childhood. I cried at the Verizon cubicle at the mall, and while waiting in line at the Post Office and on the street corner while signing up to sponsor twelve-year-old Julie in the Philippines. At dinner with friends that night, I tried my best to keep it together but welled up talking about whales being killed by sonar testing. "They're found dead, bleeding from the ears," I cried.

"We know, honey,"

These things cannot be cancelled by a dance class, certainly, but the next day I woke the opposite of hysterical. I felt a calm stillness I'd forgotten existed. At dance class, I only got a little teary during the deep breathing. By the third day of class I didn't simply walk from place to place—I swayed. I heard music in my head and my hips. I couldn't stop smiling. My body could scarcely contain my hope, or my heart. I thought of how often I'd filled myself with men, literally, and that suddenly I felt full of myself.

On the fourth day, during our warm-up, Carlos shared some of his own history. “For thirty years I lived in my head, and was unaware of how much happiness and joy and power I was missing,” he said. We followed him as he changed his steps to a cha cha cha. “You understand, you and your body are co-creators—your body connects you to the world! And you are *creating* your world, through your body.” His hands reached heavenward, and then out to us, and we mirrored him. “With your hands you are creating nature! Now big strokes like a paintbrush! Now little wiggles of your fingers—you're creating the trees and all the little creatures!”

Someone speaking with a beautiful accent while wearing a rhinestone belt and gold nail polish can get away with saying things that most of us can't, and we were all grinning at him and each other like idiots. But he was right—we do create our world with our thoughts and actions. And with Henry, and those before him, I had created a lot of unnecessary suffering.

“Now, you can either dance a dance you know, or you can dance a dance you *want* to know,” Carlos said.

I smiled at myself in the mirror and thought, “You get to choose. Do something *different* this time.”

The next day a few fruit flies came back, but I got out the Simple Green and killed them calmly, almost cheerfully, before leaving for dance class. I realized I couldn't expect them to be gone for good so soon; it would be, like most things, a process. On the freeway I was overwhelmed by the gorgeous morning. The golden light illuminated the edges of buildings and trees, and their dimensions were strange and immediate, as if they were cutouts in an enormous pop-up book, and looking around I teared up for the millionth time in months.

But this time, I cried in sheer joy. "This is where you *live*," I thought.