

Lukewarm

Best Of Fiction

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#1

The subject line reads: *The Man*, and you know exactly who it is. The email showed up in your inbox one night while you were scrolling through Instagram while trying to fall asleep. He broke up with you right before prom your senior year. Or did you break up with him? Your twenty-three-year-old brain can't remember. You open the email and lines of profanities and obscure language flood the screen. It was like he was trying to write a rap song to the beat of some unknown rhythm. You're not sure why he's emailing you out of the blue. It's been years since you guys broke up, but you guess he's still not over the fact that you were dating behind your parents' back and your mom found out.

He'll never get over the night he wrote a fourteen on the back of his hand (fourteen is his lucky number, it's the track number of the song he sang to you off of Taylor Swift's Red album, and it's the age he first spotted you with his indigo eyes). He'll never get over how he loved you. He'll never get over the fact that you were his first kiss, and he was yours. That afternoon in the kitchen cutting strawberries and pretending that, just for a few split moments, nothing mattered except for your body on his; no one knew but the two of you. He'll never get over how, once you turned eighteen, he bought you a wedding ring, but you told him not yet. It was always *not yet*.

And then slowly it started to decay. The night that your mom took your phone away he flipped and started to call you names, your mom names, your dad names. He threatens you with sharp words because you were his possession, yet you were away. You had gotten away, and you were wearing his Batman sweatshirt with old stains of java and crimson red lipstick around the bottom of the sleeves. You still have the sweatshirt, and as you read his nasty email, you put it on and smell it like he was still there in your bed with you. You wonder what it would be like if he was still in your bed with you. Because sometimes you miss the warmth of body heat between cold

sheets.

You hit reply and let the cursor stand there for a while, blinking. You fall asleep with the phone beside your head. When you wake up in the morning, the battery is dead.

#2

Don't fall in love with a boy who just broke up with his girlfriend. All he wants is sex. Trust me. He'll FaceTime you; he'll tell you that you're pretty; he'll want to go to a movie with you at ten o'clock at night and then invite you over to his house after. You'll say no, of course, at least the first few times. You are a good girl who was taught better than to go out with a man who just broke up with their girlfriend and then over to a boys house after a first date. Your mother raised you well and — every time you get confronted with a difficult situation — you hear her voice in the back of your mind, telling you what to do. She told you stories of her mistakes. You don't want this to become a mistake.

Yet, the third time he asks you out, you say yes. You couldn't resist his voice, both boyish and deep, through the speaker, telling you that it would be just as friends. So he takes you to the movies, but you buy your own ticket. In the bold, black theater, you sit in chairs where the fabric is hard and crunchy from soda spills that were never cleaned up. Popcorn litters the floor. He leans away from you, his elbow resting on the arm of the chair, hand in a fist with his chin resting on top, like the statue of *The Thinker*. When the movie is over, and he's walking you back to your car, his hands slide down your waist. He tells you your ass looks great in those jeans, then asks you if you'd like to come back to his place. You tell him no and part ways, but he texts you once you both get into your cars. Then he FaceTimes you when you get home. He calls you the next weekend, and you do it all over again and again. Each week, you talk a little longer. He starts paying for your popcorn, then the movie ticket, and then, one week, you go home with him.

He pours you a glass of rosé which had been sitting on the shelf in his room since he broke up with his woman. He chilled it just for tonight because he knew you'd say yes. Its taste is sweet, though a little acidic, like strong coffee without any sugar. Maybe you're just

not used to drinking. He pops a DVD in, and you guys make out with it in the background, it was something with subtitles and nudity. His hair, although naturally black, is a starless sky without the lights on, just the TV illuminating the both of you. You guys do more than just make out. You do things that your mom would never approve of. But it's ok because he's whispering that he loves you in your ear, which blocks out her voice and all the common sense you have in your head. He says he'll treat you like Anastasia Steele — you cringe, not knowing how to reply. He does, though, treat you that way — at least what you imagine it's like to be that woman. And then it's over; you fall asleep, and even though you were on the couch last night you wake up in his bed, the sheets ruffled. He is lying beside you, head on the pillow, black, matted hair a wild tuff on his head.

You get up and make yourself coffee. Bare naked and all. The kitchen cabinet is filled with a variety of coffee mugs; you take one that has Mount Rushmore printed in gold and, in vibrant colors, says *The Black Hills of South Dakota*. The taste of wine and men still remains in your mouth, so you pour in a lot of cream and sugar to mask the night's joy ride that you don't remember willingly participating in. Your underwear, jeans, bra, and shirt are still in the living room; his boxers still draped over the lamp. You leave his boxers there for him to find, but you put on your clothes. He's still asleep when you walk past his room and out the back door. You walk home and never hear from him again. He had gotten what he wanted. And you still have his Black Hills coffee mug.

#3

It's 8 a.m., and you hold your coffee while driving. The coffee cup doesn't have a lid on it because you didn't have time to find one in the cabinet; you woke up too late. Never do this. Never keep coffee in your hand without a lid while driving because traffic is not your friend. The person in front of you will slam on their breaks, causing you to slam on your breaks, causing the hot liquid to roll up the side of the cup — like a tsunami after an 8.1 earthquake — and out over the rim and then down again, through the air, landing on your lap and staining your white t-shirt. You will then be so mad. First, at yourself for not putting a lid on your coffee cup that morning, second,

at the person in front of you for slamming on their breaks. This small incident will throw off the rest of your day.

You're seeing the guy that you like, too. You're seeing him along with all your other friends, and you need to be in a good mood. Because you don't know this, but he's going to ask you out today. He's going to ask you out today and every day after that, but once he sees you with a giant coffee stain down your shirt and a glazed look in your eyes, he decides to forgive the coffee stain but note in his mind how you look when you're frustrated. Lips pressed together, eyes hazy, hair starting to get fuzzy from the humidity. You're trying so hard, but he doesn't see it. He decides not to ask you out that day. Men are scared of women who are a mess. Maybe you just weren't ready for him to whisper that you are the Pam to his Jim. You weren't ready for him to ask you out to get donuts on Market Street, j-walking across all the roads, then on the way back, sneaking onto the roof of this one old building that you don't know the name of but love its architecture.

Except, you were waiting for those things. You were waiting because that's all you wanted him to say, those soft words in your ears, only to you. But he didn't say it. Instead, a few weeks later, you see him with another woman, his hand around her waist, her blond hair up in a high ponytail — her white t-shirt stain free. Your friends say he's the one missing out, but you know the opposite is true. You know that you're the one who spilled hot liquid on yourself in the morning traffic. Because you were running late. Because you didn't put a lid on your coffee cup.

#4

Pungent coffee fills the Black Hills mug that you hold in your hands. You're trying to break away from the sugar and creamer and only drink black coffee — it's the only way to keep yourself from feeling numb. The acid etches into your teeth; whitening strips are on your grocery list.

You sit on the balcony, breathing in the fresh air. At least, mostly fresh air. Your neighbor on the other side of the divider is smoking a cigar, and you breathe in the secondhand smoke. There's a black plume rolling off the smokestack in the distance — letting the ting

of rotten eggs linger under your nose when the wind blows to the east.

Your thighs stick to the metal chair, your feet up on its edge and legs bare, top half covered in a stained batman hoodie, bitter black liquid in hand, secondhand smoking while the morning is peaking over the horizon. A car honks down on the street below, and someone yells: "get the hell out of here." You imagine that they are talking to you and wonder why you're here in the first place. How did these pieces fall into place? You don't know. But you're content because this is where you willed yourself to be. Soft and alone and willing to take on the smog that surrounds your new home. Your coffee is becoming lukewarm; you drink it anyway. This is as close as you can get to serenity.