

## Plot vs. Character

**H**E'S THE ONLY GUY I ever met at a bar and then took to bed. He was twenty-nine and in town from Baltimore for the summer, overseeing the renovation of the old courthouse, living out of a Holiday Inn. I was twenty-one, a broadcast cinema major with an acceptance letter in my back pocket from a film school in England for a year of study. I was celebrating. He bought me a drink and asked if I knew the bar we were in was once the town's cathouse. He was tall and lean and green-eyed, but not pretty—nose had maybe been broken, chipped front tooth, some nice wear and tear. Smiling, yet very serious about his history lesson. He stamped the floor. "Solid," he said.

Kissing him on what occurred to me was a rather rickety footbridge over the river, I realized I was with what appeared to be a grown man. Compared to the beer slugging, monosyllabic fratheads comprising the college selection, he was good with words, good with his hands. I decided to trust him not to kill me, and took him to my place.

For the rest of the summer, we went to bad movies, then to the river's edge and had sex so hard our bodies turned nearly 360 degrees on the blanket. Sometimes I went to his motel room, but he liked it best outside, and I found I did too. "I enjoy a little dirt in my hair," he said, and I obliged, pressing his shoulders into the damp ground.

At summer's end there was no breakup, just the two of us

wrapped in a polyester bedspread on the concrete slab balcony outside his room, his breath still coming hard, hands on my hips, as he told me he couldn't believe I was leaving. Of course, he was leaving, too. But this was part of his appeal, how he could appear to be heartbroken when this was not in fact the case. And I fell for it—for him. I'll just admit that now.

I went to England, distracted myself with red-cheeked British boys, came home, graduated, and took a job with a small video production company where I edited low-budget corporate presentations, commercials, product demos and the occasional soap opera episode. He became the story I told my friends. I said, trying to sound nonchalant, "The best thing about it was we knew how it would end."

But of course I should've known better, right? How does knowing the end help anything? There are women who would've moved on from this as neatly as a housewife trades out her old detergent when a new brand comes along. I've met them, but I could never be one of them, no matter how much I tried to convince myself. Here's the truth about me: I was a clingy sort, hoarding old toothbrushes and my stuttering TV, things that begged retirement. I tried the usual strategies—working a lot, rearranging my apartment furniture—but inevitably my mind rolled to the builder like a marble on a slanted floor. The feeling emerged like hunger, or being too cold, and usually at the end of the evening, after I'd gone from work to gym to errands to the freezer for another pre-packaged dinner.

Eventually, a fantasy took shape. It went like this: A location shoot takes me to Baltimore, where the builder lives, still single. We have dinner. He invites me back for a long weekend (but now, looking back, I wonder why did I have to come to him, even in the fantasy?) There are sizzling nature walks in the Shenandoah Valley. We get married.

Here's what really happened. A year passed. I got back from a location shoot in Atlanta and there was a voicemail from Baltimore.

The builder was in Winston-Salem for the weekend, pitching new business. He took me to dinner at a restaurant in an historic inn, and we sat in the candlelit garden room with floor-to-ceiling open windows. He was still lean and well-muscled, and yet he also looked older, tired around the eyes, which for some reason made me want to exhaust him further. He looked at me as if he might pull me with him to the floor at any moment; instead he tipped back his chair and stroked the wainscoting with a fingertip. The message was clear: *this fingertip wants to trace your lines, too, honey.*

How *done* this was, really, the long gaze, then the eyes averted as if he was frightened by his desire. If you outlined the average soap episode, which I unfortunately did often, for pay, you'd see at least three of these loaded stares, and not more than five, in forty-four minutes. And yet I must admit how well it worked on me. After we ate, he insisted on walking to my car, to protect me, of course, from the many roaming men the city teemed with, who would want to kidnap me on sight. I knew very well how much danger I was in, but when he took me in his arms I froze like a netted rodent, heart flicking in my throat, wondering what he would do. But the builder was interested in an innocent full-body hug, of which he determined the closeness and the duration. I walked away, still clinging to certain notions about the smart, carefree woman I wanted to believe I was. It was a conflicting persona, though. The carefree woman would sleep with a man because she wanted to; the smart woman knew her limits, and this man exceeded them.

Why? Here's what I knew about the builder, which is to say, what I'd started to suspect about myself: I was in love not so much with him, but the idea of him, which strongly featured the dual characteristics of handiness and a love for modern literature (well, he'd hinted at reading Hemmingway and had asked me if he should dare to eat a peach once, but I think he'd been talking about something other than the paralysis of desire). He was an image to me, not exactly a man. I knew this, but knowing didn't make me want him any less.

Nevertheless, when he called the next day I showed up, and—surprise—he led me up a shady trail above the Blue Ridge Parkway. It was sunny but humid from recent rain; I watched him wind through rhododendron and I got all confused, turned on by the smell of wet earth. Then dinner again; I was so hungry I was sweating and my legs were wobbly from all those slippery inclines. I was exhausted, but when he suggested a movie I heard myself saying yes. What was the movie even about? I don't know—there was a green dress, a blown-up car, subtitles. But I did know the storyline from there: the arm sliding around my shoulders, the voice dropping to a whisper, all that nutritious blood my brain needed draining straight to my crotch.

Back at his hotel room, I realized I had no idea if he had a home, or if that leather bag on the luggage stand, the same one he had two years ago, was all there was. He laid me on the bed fully clothed, took his shirt off. I could feel how hard he was as he pressed down on me again.

The phone rang so loud we both jerked away from each other, startled. He sat up, answered it, listened for a moment.

“Maribel,” he said. I sat up, cheeks hot, nipples hard, underwear soaked. *Maribel?* Who the fuck was that? Who had a name like that anymore? Oh, I could see her—she was small-boned and dark-haired; she blushed easily and owned pottery. I wanted him to say he'd call her back—because it was too much to ask the gods for him to say *I thought you understood, it's over; I've found who I want*—and right then I realized that for all my fantasizing, I'd really been waiting for this one scene. I needed dramatic tension, and there we were.

He was hunched forward, elbows on his knees, one palm propping his forehead, the other clutching the phone. Not even an apologetic glance my way. *Get up get up!* I screamed at myself, but I was still sitting there, straining to hear her voice, trying to figure out what she was saying that had such power over him.

“You fucked me,” he said then. “You fucked me over.” Not an

accusation, a complaint begging consolation. I managed to swing my legs over the edge of the bed, my toes digging into the worn carpet, searching for balance. “Wait,” he said, turning to me when he felt the bed shift as I pushed myself to my feet. He reached for me, missed.

I slid on my shoes. “Look,” he said, “I’ll call you back.” He hung up. So I got my wish, right? He said he’d call her back! Let me tell you, *that* felt like a victory.

“Is that your wife?” I managed to ask. I knew to keep going for the door; he’d follow. It was in every script: Chick runs stage right crying [*holds damp hankie*]; guy runs after her [*wears lipstick-stained shirt and rumpled pants*]. I had entered one of my own productions.

“Please come here,” he said.

I knew this one. I was cued for my line: “Don’t. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Just sit with me for a few minutes. I know you’re going to go.”

Tugging on my hand, he led me back to the bed. I allowed this to be enough persuasion to sit. I wasn’t even sure I could drive. I was too exhausted, drunk, turned on. And another part of me, distant as a moon, orbited the planet that was myself, curious. What would he say? What would I do?

“I’m sorry,” he said. Sticking with the script so far. He turned to me. Was he going to kiss me? I was about to laugh. But no, he hugged me, and this was worse. It was the break-up scene I thought I’d avoided. This ruined him as a good story, the one that made me look sexy, confident, free. It erased a future plotline I thought might be available to me. From then on, he could only be a flashback.

He slid his hands up the back of my shirt, talking into my hair, which I love. When he said he’d always felt he had to treat me with kid gloves because I was so young, I couldn’t even raise an eyebrow and tell him to go back to his makeup trailer. *Up, up, up!* I could hear my muscles shrilling, but I let him hold me until he

was ready to let go, and as I walked to the door, I knew there wouldn't be any speeches to stop me.

An unexpected scene a month later: Hallway of the low-ceilinged office building where I work. Guy in suit stands in front of the open double doors of the suite next to mine—heavy black-chrome eighties décor within—talking on a cell phone. I realize there's a pattern: guy in hallway, me passing, small talk, repeat. That morning he gives me his card, then asks me out. This is a new one.

The following Friday evening: A Japanese restaurant, warm and rainy outside; candlelit table, funny waiter is generous with sake. Guy looks better out of the suit. Brown hair, wide-set brown eyes, not too tall but taller than me. He tells me he's an engineer. I ask him if they still give out those striped caps. He laughs. He takes me home, the two of us sit on my bare wood floor and listen to music. I keep my distance because now I don't trust myself; the carefree/smart woman bit it that night in a hotel in Winston-Salem. She'd died young, barely formed, and now I'm an alcoholic at a martini bar when it comes to men; I have no judgment. This is what I've come to believe. When he leaves we're both playing it so cool we nearly shake hands.

The next morning, the phone wakes me but I miss the call. I dial voicemail, and who could it be but the builder with the cinematic sense of timing, taking my breath away with his casual hello? I call him back that evening, eager to keep a wounded but still vigorous fantasy alive. Of course, this all against my better judgment. Somewhere in my mind there resides a delicate connection with reality that knows I won't be satisfied. But the body remembers its desires long after they make any sense. You recite the old motions. Just like riding a bike.

So first, I prepare: a few glasses of wine, some jazz. By the time I call him, I think I *am* Billie Holiday. The builder tells me it's over between him and Maribel the potter. I don't miss a beat; I ask when he'll be in town next. He's not sure.

Then it comes to me, seeping somehow through the snowy

static of alcohol and hopefulness I've wrapped myself in. A moment of clarity: I know there's nothing I can say. Eventually I'll forgive myself my desires. So I tell him to let me know when he is sure, and hang up. I don't know if I'll hear from him again, but I do know this: the builder is interested in my admiration only so much as it feeds his ego. I can tell he's lonely, maybe a little desperate to know what his future holds—will he get married? Have children? Perhaps he wants these things, but not with me, that much is clear.

A week later. Sharing a six-pack with the engineer on the grass next to the retention pond behind his apartment building, watching the moon rise, just shy of full. This town is prickly with new complexes with names like Duck Run and Fox Hollow. He has no furniture. I ask about it. He asks me where mine is. I say, "I like the minimalist look." I don't tell him I never bought much because without realizing it I had been preparing for a move that wasn't going to happen. He nods. He's scared to kiss me; I know this. It used to turn me off, shyness in men, but now I like it. I decide I can wait for him to work up his courage.

Of course, there's one more message. The builder says he wants to "continue our previous conversation," which probably means he'll tell me he's not sure he wants me, but he'll say it in a way that will allow me to translate it into possible affection. My salvation is that I won't settle for it.

And what will not settling mean? This is fresh territory, a room so new I can smell the cut wood and drying plaster. I test the floor, open a window. Throw the script out, one page at a time.