

MATCH: A POST-MODERN LOVE STORY

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Everyone looks for love, and in recent years, many more people are using online dating sites to help them find the perfect match. *Match: A Post-Modern Love Story* is my story of looking for love online, and finding it with Dave, whom I married in 2011.

DEDICATION

For Dave, who is my heart.

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Match

Five years ago I sat in a fluorescent-lit Wendy's, eating ketchup-drenched French fries and making a Major Life Decision with my friend Nina. It was a few days after Christmas and I had just come from cat-sitting for my former high school guidance counselor, who has a chair shaped like a high heel in her living room. She is married. I was not, and had a spectacularly tragic track record with men. At the time, my latest contact was when a middle-aged man wearing a wedding ring asked if he could buy me a drink. I looked pointedly at his ring and said no. He didn't seem to get the connection.

I was only twenty-four, and had no grand dreams of marriage and babies, but no matter how many jokes I cracked about the bottom-dwellers who laid their scaly tentacles in my path, I could not ignore the aching pain of loneliness that cut at my bones. I wore my loneliness like a shroud; it suffocated me and sucked my energy, leaving me shattered and wasted. I had to destroy the shroud; I had to tear it and wrestle it the ground.

"Julers, you should go on Match.com. It'll be hilarious. You can basically shop for a boyfriend at home in your sweats with a bottle of vino," Nina said as she chomped on her ice.

Her words stopped me mid-bite. Drinking Sauvignon Blanc while wearing elastic waist pants definitely sounded appealing, but the Internet dating part? I had always been slightly wary of it, frequently discussing the creepiness level of Internet dating with various girlfriends, talking about how we'd never do it before we all eventually decided it was something we would do, but only as a last resort. I pondered this. Was this it? Was I ready for the last resort? In the phony cheery brightness of the fast food restaurant, I

claimed that I wasn't quite ready to make that leap. I still was relatively optimistic, relatively sure that I would fall in love with a man who would consider me his everything.

My so-called optimism was short-lived. Later that night, as the clock neared midnight, Nina and I ended up at a dingy local bar, where we downed Yuenglings and signed a paper napkin contract stating that we would join Match.com, for a three month minimum, once we rang in the new year. Everything looks different in the dark.

*

A few days after the New Year, Nina plunked me down in my desk chair, and together we filled out my Match.com profile, in which we tried to strike a nice balance between bookish nerd and sassy spitfire. For my final flourish, I chose a quote from possibly the best movie of all time, *Caddyshack*: "A flute without holes, is not a flute. A donut without a hole, is a Danish." I figured if they didn't get it, it would be fine. Men who didn't understand the finer points of *Caddyshack* were really not my thing.

Allowing myself to divulge personal information— even if it was something as seemingly harmless as listing my favorite books — was an unusual act for me. I hated feeling vulnerable, knowing men were judging my looks, my background, my hobbies, even while I was judging them at the exact same time. Despite my hesitation over this whole process, I also couldn't help but feel giddy over the possibilities that were available to me as soon as I handed over my credit card information. Once my profile went live, Nina and I started to troll through the pictures of available guys, marking

profiles with “yes,” “no,” “maybe,” and “oh my God, we went to high school together; please don’t remember me.”

After Nina left, and while I was looking through the emails that Match.com sent me, with lists of guys they thought would make good partners for me based on my profile, I began to reevaluate the whole matchmaking process. While the guys may have met some of my basic criteria (they lived locally, were in between the ages of 25 – 35, were male), I had a hard time imagining a blissful future with some of these guys just because we were both Phillies fans. It seemed like Match was taking something intangible and trying to turn it into a mathematical equation. And since math has always been my number one nemesis, I had a hard time agreeing with this logic. I’ve never been particularly good at logic, either, though, so maybe I should have stopped while I was ahead.

Nevertheless, I plunged forward, thinking of both the money I had already spent and of my girlfriend, Kay, who had met her very cute and very smart boyfriend through Match.com. They were still going strong one year after they met. She was the only person I knew at the time who had taken a gamble on Internet dating, but it obviously had worked out for her, so I decided it was a promising beginning.

After a few weeks, I grew more comfortable with the idea of Internet dating; however, my other problem, the fact that I was still living at home, hadn’t changed. I always felt awkward discussing boys with my parents, and so through my teenage years had remained almost totally mute on the subject, though I had no problem discussing my

crushes and occasional dalliances with my friends, and even with my friends' mothers. I was particularly comfortable discussing my passion for Prince William with the mother of two friends, who are sisters, and whom I've known since I was three years old. She thought it was cute, and nearly every birthday gift and card had some kind of Prince William reference that I felt the need to explain away to my mother. Sex and love, kissing and crushes were not discussion topics at the Strasser household, and I think in some way that stifled me, making me embarrassed by my feelings rather than knowing that they were natural.

Because of my discomfort in having my parents know I was legitimately seeking love, or at least a good time, I had to resort to James Bond-type maneuvering in order to get my money's worth out of Match.com. At the time I didn't have a computer of my own, and so I stayed up long after my parents went to bed in order to get on the family computer, which was conveniently located in the open space of the dining room, providing absolutely zero privacy, in order to scroll through my matches and to find guys to either casually wink at, or to email, or to have a phone conversation right that minute. I never chose the phone conversation option. Along with the obvious privacy issues, it felt a bit too phone-sex operator for my tastes. Despite these logistical problems, eventually I got the hang of the whole Internet dating thing and was notching my bedpost with some seriously awkward encounters.

“Greg” – Also Known As Serial Killer Guy

One guy who winked at me, whose name I can't remember, but whom we'll just call Greg, seemed non-threatening and somewhat interesting. He was in grad school, lived in Bryn Mawr, was Filipino, and I can't remember what else. At the time, he was the first guy that I thought could possibly work, but I was a little gun-shy because he was essentially popping my Internet dating cherry. I weighed the pros and cons for over twenty-four hours before ultimately going for it, clicking the wink button with my eyes tightly shut, and jumping away from the computer as soon as my finger successfully clicked the mouse. For all you Internet dating novices, a wink is a way to show your interest, but is not as much of an investment as writing an email. It's casual, with less risk than putting words on a page.

Very shortly afterward, he responded to my wink with an email, and I remember being alarmed at his pace. I was only about a week in to the whole thing, and for the moment I was content to just trawl through the pictures, making mental notes of who seemed worth pursuing and who seemed like an axe murderer. Greg's email was kind of blah, except for the fact that he suggested we meet up, a suggestion that sent me into a panic. An email relationship was all I felt ready for, while to my exaggerated senses he seemed ready to move in together and host a family holiday dinner. There was one guy on Match.com whose screen name was "NextStepMarriage," and so that handle made it very easy for me to stay far, far away from him. This Bryn Mawr guy was like a sniper. He *seemed* non-threatening, but before you knew it he'd pop a ring on your finger and call it a day.

Rather than respond, I felt that the best way to handle the situation would be to wait him out. (I am very experienced in the art of avoiding confrontation; I'm naturally an anxious person, so I do whatever is necessary to avoid any extra distress.) It had only been about two days when Greg emailed me back, lambasting me for not emailing him. I don't know if he signed up for just one month of membership and was determined to get a girlfriend before his time was up, but I knew his pace and his tone were totally wrong for me. I wrote to him in what I hoped was a kind, but firm manner, and told him I thought it seemed we were looking for different things, and so I would pass on the chance to meet him for coffee. I wished him well on his search, like I was a job he applied for but didn't get, and then quickly blocked him.

A little later that week, I was returning home from the movies when I noticed a car parked directly outside my home. I didn't recognize the car, and when I drove past I could tell that there was someone – the silhouette appeared male - sitting in the driver's seat. Cherry Hill in general, and my street in particular, is a family-friendly place where people are in bed by eleven o'clock on a Saturday night, so this situation was highly irregular, and more than a little unsettling. I zipped my car into the driveway, got my house keys out and ready before leaving my locked car, and raced into the house. "Fuck," I said aloud, as soon as I locked the door behind me. "Obviously the first guy I piss off on Match.com turns out to be a serial killer."

I ran past my bewildered cat and up the stairs to my bedroom, where I closed the door, flung my purse onto the bed, and flew to the window to peer out the curtain. I debated calling Nina, but ultimately decided against it, because then she'd know for sure

that I had lost it. Anyway, I was ninety-nine percent sure that Greg was not the weirdo sitting outside my parents' house late at night, especially since I never told him my last name, my address, or any other identifying information, which I kept telling myself even while I entered a def-con level freak-out, and then promptly passed out from the combination of exhaustion and panic.

Clearly, I made it out alive, but the experience put my guard up, though, and for the rest of my time on Match.com, I wanted to be the one to call the shots.

Matt

The next guy, whose name I also can't remember, but whom I will christen Matt, was an Air Force pilot stationed at McGuire Air Force Base, about a half hour from Cherry Hill, where I lived. My brother, who was also in the military and stationed at Fort Hood in Texas, had mentioned that a lot of guys on his base were on Match.com, and that it was a popular thing for them to do because they were usually far from home, without friends or family nearby, and they had a lot of time on their hands. Lonely and idle didn't seem like a great combination for me, since I was a proponent of moving any possible relationship along at a glacial pace, but I liked Matt's crew cut, and I couldn't deny that his job was exciting and kind of turned me on (for the record, I hate flying. Not the "I need to be boozed up, plus taken an Ambien, in order to get on the airplane" hate, but the "I'm nauseous, in a cold sweat, and will not unbuckle my seatbelt nor remove my death-grip on the armrest" hate.). I thought *Top Gun* was one of the worst movies ever, but the whole pilots are sexy thing was right on.

The emails flowed back and forth with ease, and his turn-around time was long enough that I felt he hadn't picked out baby names, and short-enough that I knew he was genuinely interested, and not just stringing me along. He suggested we meet up for coffee, and rather than running for the hills like I did with Greg, I was actually excited to take this next step, and to take my burgeoning relationship with Matt out of cyberspace and into the real world. We picked a date and time, and agreed to figure out the location when the date got closer.

The morning of our Saturday afternoon coffee date, I woke up with the realization that I didn't know Matt's phone number, and that we still had no location for our date. I logged on to the site, trying to puff up my shoulders to block the screen from any possible passersby. I sent him a quick email, hopeful that he would wake up with the same realization as me and would send me an answer soon. Rather than wait to find out what the plan was, I decided to start the grooming process, since it would take at least a few hours to blow dry my hair (my hair is incredibly, disgustingly thick. I had my first haircut at four months old, because my hair is so completely excessive. It's terrible, and I hate it.). A few hours passed and I decided to check my email again to see if Matt had written. He had. He canceled the date.

After reading the email, I logged off and went to the family room, where I curled up in my father's recliner, wrapping myself in one of my mother's afghans. I needed comfort. Matt's rejection of me woke me to the realization that while Internet dating has its advantages, most of which revolve around the fact you can shop for a partner while

watching terrible reality TV and drinking wine, the pain of dating is still there. The pain is just lurking behind a screen, rather than being right in front of you.

Now that five years have passed, I can't remember what rationale he gave, though I do know it wasn't something I could forgive, like having a wrenchingly graphic episode of food poisoning. I do remember having a very exaggerated feeling of worthlessness. In the back of my mind, I knew I was blowing things out of proportion, that I was worthy of love, blah, blah, blah. At the time, though, I felt like he kicked me in the gut with steel-toed boots. My sadness quickly turned to anger, and I wrote a couple of dramatic emails about how he was scum and would always regret breaking our date. I never sent any of those emails, but the raw power I felt putting words to the page helped lessen the blow of his snub.

At the end of my three-month membership, when I was doing a last scroll through potential matches, I noticed that Matt winked at me. I couldn't figure out if he was sorry that he hadn't taken me out for coffee, or if he legitimately forgot we had talked and planned a date two months before. I considered writing him, for a last, triumphant blow-off, but at the time I was happy, and I thought it would be a shame if I ruined my blissful moment with a slew of angry words; and so, I just give him a silent middle finger, and logged off.

Jim

Not long after the Matt debacle, when I was feeling particularly low, I forced myself to drag my tired ass to the computer and check out my new matches. One guy,

who I'm pretty sure was named Jim (victory! I think I remembered someone's name correctly!), seemed to have potential, so I went in for a closer look. His pictures were odd; unlike most people, who use pre-existing pictures that they simply crop the other people out of, Jim had done a series of self-portraits, holding the camera out at different angles: straight-on, a right profile, and a left profile. His white undershirt and light wash jeans weren't exactly the wardrobe choice I would have made, but he had a nice face, so I decided to send him an email and see what happened. At this stage, I was past winking. Let's just get this party started with an email so we can end it that much quicker when it's obvious that this will never, ever, work out.

He emailed back the next day, riffing on the same topics – Phillies and Will Ferrell - I had brought up in my email. Every sentence made me more and more interested in him. I was excited by his wit and humor. Not to be ridiculously hokey, but to me, laughter is the key to life. If I cannot laugh with you, then what the hell are we doing? Greg and Matt had not made me laugh, but I figured humor could be hard to convey through email, so I gave them a pass. The fact that Jim was making me laugh when we weren't even face-to-face was a definite plus.

After a few more emails, I asked him if he wanted to get together for coffee. He said yes, so I suggested we meet at a Starbucks in Haddonfield, which was probably less than ten minutes away from my house, and thirty minutes tops from his. His response? "That's a little far from Marlton, where I live. Can we meet somewhere else?" Essentially, he was telling me, up front, that he was too lazy to drive out of his way to see me. Gee, thanks. What a great way to start things off!

So, as pissed as I was, I compromised, and we met at a Barnes and Noble Starbucks on the Cherry Hill/Marlton border. If the date was a bust, I reasoned, I could still maybe pick up a good book and then I wouldn't totally have wasted my time.

I was browsing through the new arrivals when I saw him come in. He had a nice face, with light freckles sprinkled across his pale skin, and brownish reddish hair that highlighted his hazel eyes. I was, however, startled by how short he was. Before meeting him, I figured I would at least come up to his shoulder. Instead, we were the same height, and that's only because I was wearing flats. "Okay, snob," I thought to myself. "Height is not the marker of a great man, and does not determine a fulfilling relationship. After all, Katie Holmes seems very happy with that Hobbit who kidnapped her" (clearly, this was before their epic espionage-style divorce).

I greeted him with a handshake, and we went over to the café, laughing over how neither of us really drinks Starbucks coffee except for Match.com-related purposes. Once I ordered my drink, I rifled through my purse and pulled out my wallet, trying to set the tone that I was not a girl looking for a free ride, but if you offered to pay for something, that would definitely not be a bad thing. He gestured for me to put my wallet away, saying, "I got this."

"Oh, thanks," I said, stuffing my wallet back into my purse.

And then, he tried to pay for the coffees with a gift card. I am all for saving money, and I love me some gift cards, but on a first date, do you really think that's a smooth move? Obviously not, because it's been five years, I still remember that you did

that, and now I am writing about it. The barista told him that his gift card would only work at stand-alone Starbucks, which clearly annoyed him. I stood silent, hoping he had come prepared with some extra cash. “If he starts paying for the drinks with quarters and pennies,” I thought to myself, “I will either start laughing or crying hysterically.”

Luckily, he was able to cover the cost of the drinks, and we were able to finally get to the most important part of the date: the chat. This is when you find out if that person with whom you’ve been emailing is a fraud or legit. The date hadn’t started spectacularly, but I would definitely be able to brush that aside if I felt a connection. I never got to find out, though, because HE TALKED THE WHOLE FUCKING TIME. We sat there for two hours, and I began to wonder if he’d notice if I got up and left. It seemed rude to try it, so instead I listened to his monologue about his apartment, his car, his baseball card collection, and everything other topic that is totally, completely not interesting. I perked up when he asked me about my writing, since I had just gotten accepted to an MFA program in creative writing, but after about four seconds of me talking, he broke me off to tell me that he thinks he could also be a writer, because he has really crazy dreams. Note to the reader: don’t ever say this to someone who is a writer. It’s like telling a NASCAR driver that you could do what he does because you passed your driving test the first time you took it. Nice try, but it’s a little different. Additional note: I don’t even like NASCAR, but I know for sure that that comment would be insulting.

I then proceeded to watch him use his hand to wipe his runny nose. Even though I felt like he was a jerk, I felt bad because I suffer from terrible allergies and so can relate

to any drippy nose-related issues. I rummaged in my purse for a tissue, which I tried to hand to him, but he was so into his story (at that time, I had completely stopped listening, but I assumed he was talking about how he hates tissues and prefers wiping his nose with his hands) that he ignored my offer. I shrugged and stuffed the tissue back into my purse.

When he finally motioned to his watch and said we had better get going, I nodded enthusiastically, finding it hard to talk after two hours of forced silence. We went out to our respective cars, and I waved to him, as he stood about two feet away, as I unlocked my door. “This was fun! Thanks for the coffee, and drive home safe!” I said as I threw myself in the car, terrified that Jim would try to give me a hug, or worse, kiss me.

*

Time can make you do funny things, because in the few days between the coffee date and when Jim next contacted me, I had forgotten about how terrible the experience was, and agreed to go see the newest Will Ferrell movie with him, since one of our bonds was our love of the tall, hairy actor. We planned to meet at the movie theater Friday after work, and in my hustle of getting home, showering, dressing, and finally getting back in the car, I was running a bit late, though still with plenty of time before the movie started.

I was a little more than halfway there when my phone started to buzz with a text. I figured it was Jim, and waited until I got to a stoplight to check. Yep, Jim, who seemed to be unable to call me, had texted me, asking where I was. I quickly wrote back that I was on my way, and threw the phone on the passenger seat when the light turned green.

When I got to the theatre, Jim was standing in the lobby. I was late by about ten minutes, which in my book is considered being on time, but I apologized anyway, and told him I was looking forward to seeing the movie.

“Did you get lost?” he asked, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes squinted.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Did you get lost? Is that why you were late?”

I was so stunned I couldn’t answer right away. Once I recovered my senses, I decided to try to make a joke of it. “Well, I’m not gonna lie, I’ve never been great with directions. Luckily, though, I’ve been here before, so I was able to find it!”

He just looked at me.

“Ugh, so I just got out of work a little late, and then I needed to, ugh...get ready to come here, so that’s, ugh...why I’m a little late.” I paused, wondering what would happen if I just turned around and walked out.

“So, I see that you got the tickets?” I asked, gesturing to the stubs he held in his hand, wondering if he used a coupon or gift card to get them, or if he just stole them outright from a twelve-year-old.

“Yep. Do you want popcorn or anything?”

“No, I’m good,” I said, sure that whatever food or drink came my way would end up being dumped on his lap in my fury over one of his next stupid remarks. “Thanks, though,” I said as I smiled my prettiest smile.

We made our way to the theatre and he chose seats toward the back, which made me cringe. I tried to project my toughest, “I will mess you up if you try to touch me,” attitude, but was quickly thrown off-guard as the previews started and he made a smarmy comment about each one. I am a huge *Sex and the City* fan, and I squealed with glee when the preview for the upcoming movie came on.

“I will never understand that show, and why people like it,” Jim said. He gestured to Kim Cattrall’s character Samantha, who was looking sexy and gorgeous on the screen. “I mean, they are so *old*. Who wants to watch them have sex? It’s gross.”

I wanted to stand up and scream, “You’re gross!” and storm out of the theater, a very mature move, I know. Instead, I gritted my teeth, and said, “Well, I love that show, I can’t wait to see that movie, and I think they all look amazing.”

By the grace of God, the movie started, and Jim didn’t talk for the next hour and a half. It was blissful. When the movie ended, he asked if I wanted to get a drink and a bite to eat. Because I am a masochist, and because I really wanted a beer, I agreed, and we walked over to the Applebee’s near the theater. I was about midway through my beer when abortion came up. How this came up, I have no idea. It is not my idea of a fun conversation, ever, but for Jim, it was apparently a natural second-date icebreaker. Only after he questioned my navigational ability and criticized my favorite show. Obviously.

At this point, I couldn't care less about what he thought of me, so if he wanted to get into a heated battle, then game on.

“Well, I'm pro-choice. I mean, if a woman is going to get an abortion, she's probably going to find a way to do it if it's legal or not, so in my mind it might as well be legal so that it's safe,” I said as I took a sip of beer.

He looked at me, and carefully enunciated each following word: “I don't believe in abortion, even in cases of rape and incest.”

At this, my eyes bugged slightly out of head, I chugged the rest of my beer, and stood up. “Let's call it a night, okay?”

In my mind, I would never see Jim again, but he must have thought everything was going great, because the next day I got an email with his ideas for our next date, which included 1) dinner at PF Chang's; 2) him cooking dinner for me at his apartment; or 3) going to a party and meeting his friends. I stared at the screen in total disbelief before clicking delete.

Zach

Around the same time I was talking to Jim, a guy whose name was not Zach, but who seemed like a Zach to me and whom I insisted on calling Zach, though not to his face, reached out to me. Based on his profile, it seemed like we had some common interests, and according to his picture he was tall, with dark hair, gray eyes, and model-esque cheekbones, so I decided to go for it. At this point, I reasoned, it could not get

worse than Jim, aka Abortion Man. The day we were supposed to meet I came down with a terrible head cold, so I called him to apologize and to ask to reschedule.

He was incredibly sweet about my need to postpone, and we talked for about forty-five minutes about our backgrounds, our love of the Philadelphia Flyers, and his hobby of appearing in movies as an extra. When I got off the phone, I smiled, sure that I had finally met a nice, non-aggressive guy who would not 1) stalk me; 2) stand me up; 3) insult me.

Once the night of our date arrived, I walked into the Starbucks and saw a tall guy, dressed in black, wearing glasses. “Shit,” I thought. “I don’t know if that’s Zach or not.”

The guy standing a few feet away was very cute, but the glasses totally threw me off, because Zach’s profile picture was glasses-free. There weren’t too many other people in the coffee shop, so I was pretty sure it was him, but knew I would feel like a giant doofus if I asked him if he was Zach, and it turned out he wasn’t, especially since the guy I was meeting was not named Zach, contrary to my insistence that he was totally named Zach. So instead of asking we kind of circled one another for five minutes before he finally asked me if I was Julie.

“I am!” I said with total clarity, glad I could positively identify one of us.

We went to sit down, and had a few minutes of pleasant chitchat about the weather, and the traffic, and other non-controversial topics that strangers talk about when they know they need to talk but really have nothing to say. It turned out we talked about everything we could talk about during our phone conversation a few days prior. Zach

was sweet, but my God he was boring. In his defense, I'm sure shyness played a large role in his inability to sustain a conversation. However, I'm shy, too, and a first date is not the time to retreat to your safe place. In desperation, I took the lead in the conversation, but any question I asked him was answered with, "It's pretty cool, I guess", leaving me to believe I'd have a more stimulating discussion with my cat.

He was also the best looking guy I had gone out with so far through Match.com, so that's probably why I agreed to go watch a Flyers game with him at a bar that upcoming Saturday afternoon.

I've tried to remember details from that day, but it seems that date was literally so boring that I've blocked it from my memory.

Jeff

Jeff, who may or may not have been named Jeff, was the guy I totally lost it for. He was tallish, and dark and handsome, with a mess of dark brown hair, olive skin, and eyes the color of almonds. He taught at a Catholic high school, coached their baseball team, and played in a band. I totally imagined myself as his groupie.

I reached out to him with an email, and it was the one time I was really hopeful that he'd write me back, and say, "You're amazing. Let's get married and have lots of babies." After a week, he did write me, and though he didn't mention marriage or babies, he did seem interested, though he also did not mention how amazing I seemed.

The emails continued to volley back and forth, though not with the speed I had hoped for (I was in my second month of Match.com membership, and my original snail pace had slowly ratcheted up to the speed Greg the Serial Killer had been looking for).

While I waited for him to write back, I mooned over his profile, and probably violated some kind of number of looks-per-day rule that Match.com should really institute if they haven't already. Despite my stalker-ish behavior, Jeff didn't move any faster. He did think we should meet up, which sent me into a state of delirium, and while I waited to hear about the allegedly forthcoming details, I met another guy.

Dave

Dave's wink came while I was in full-blown crush mode over Jeff, a guy I had never even spoken to. I knew all about the old adage about putting all my eggs into one basket, though, so I wasn't ready to dismiss all other possibilities in favor of a guy who clearly wasn't as into me as I was into him.

I checked out Dave's profile. He was a pile driver. I didn't know what that was. He liked boxing and horseracing. I didn't know anything about those sports. He listed that he was very conservative. My profile listed that I was very liberal. His profile was grammatically incorrect. I am a grammar nerd. Despite the fact that we appeared to be totally and completely incompatible, I found myself not reaching for the delete button. I was curious about him, curious why he seemed to be interested in me, albeit wink interest, not email interest. I wasn't quite ready to let him get away, but also I wasn't quite ready to chase after him.

Nina came over that same afternoon, eager to show me some of her clothing purchases and to catch up on my dating disasters. After she modeled her new skirts and dresses, I pulled up the profile of Dave, aka Rexflexall (a profile name I was confused by and later found out was a reference to the Chris Farley/David Spade movie *Tommy Boy*), and asked her to take a look. She skimmed his profile, reading while I tried to explain my hesitation.

“He just doesn’t...seem to be...what I’m looking for,” I stammered, searching for the right words.

Nina looked at me long and hard. “Julie, he is a Ventnor lifeguard. He is an actual lifeguard at the Jersey shore. I have tried my whole life to hook up with a Ventnor lifeguard. You will respond to him, and you will go out with him. If you don’t, I will find him and marry him, and you will forever wonder if I’m married to your husband.”

I stared at her, openmouthed, hurt that she would marry my maybe-husband just because he had amazing arms and passed the lifeguard test. I had to take charge. “Okay. I’ll wink back.”

*

The next day, Dave wrote me an email, which, true to his profile’s form, was full of misspellings and terrible grammar, which, word nerd that I am, I winced over. However, his email was also sweet, sincere, and funny, and in that moment those traits stood out as being much more important than knowing the difference between “there” and “their.” I took Nina’s advice/threat to heart and emailed him back, answering his

questions and asking plenty of my own, including “what the hell is a piledriver?” (For those keeping score, a piledriver installs foundations for bridges, buildings, ports, wharfs, and piers.)

He wrote back quickly, and he never made me feel like a moron for making it through twenty-four years of life without figuring these things out. Even through email, I could tell that he would be special in my life; I knew he had the potential to be the one I had been seeking. I knew, even without meeting him, that he would never rush me (Greg), stand me up (Matt), insult me (Jim), bore me (Zach), or ignore me (Jeff).

We emailed and texted during that first week, and we finally came to the one phone call that would decide our fate – if it was excruciatingly painful, it was over; if it was clumsily enjoyable, we would meet.

When his number flashed on my phone, I froze. The emails had been passing back and forth with ease – after all, I could email like a champ. Put me behind the safety of a computer screen, and I could flirt with the best of them. Gone was the nervous spazz. In her place was someone with a cool confidence, someone who knew what she wanted, and knew that she was worth being wanted. A phone call, though, started to get personal. Your voice could crack, you could sneeze, you could have a coughing fit. There was no place to hide in a phone call. It was all you, just hanging out, with your mispronunciations and stutter.

As the phone continued to ring, I took a breath and grabbed my cell before his call went to voicemail.

“Hello?” I answered as breezily as I could, as if I had just passed by my ringing phone instead of staring at it for the past ten seconds, my top teeth gnawing at my bottom lip with the strength of a grizzly bear tearing open a salmon fresh from the river.

“Hey, Julie? What’s up, it’s Dave.”

“Hey, yeah, everything’s good. How are you?” I cringed, inwardly cursing myself for choosing the more formal “how are you?” as compared to his infinitely cooler “what’s up?”

He didn’t seem to notice my obvious nerdiness. He seemed to be totally calm, telling me about his day, asking me questions that I answered carefully, trying to preserve any dignity that I may have had left. That is, until I asked him if he had any pets, and he answered he had a pit bull. Whose name was Princess.

“You named your dog Princess?” I asked, my genuine interest winning out over my desperation to seem hip and sexy.

He laughed. “Yeah, I get that reaction a lot, actually. When I got her from the pound, that was the name she had, and it seemed to really fit, so I just kept it. We get some weird looks, but she’s happy, so it’s all good.”

I melted. I’m a cat person, but I’m down with anything with a tail and four legs. I prayed he would ask to meet up.

“What are you doing tomorrow? Want to get together?” he asked.

I fluttered my free hand in a spastic wave in excitement. “Um...yeah, tomorrow should work. How about Starbucks?”

The Obligatory Awkward Coffee Date

It's a little known fact, but Match.com was actually created to supplement the already enormous profit that Starbucks enjoys. This is totally, totally false, but every first date I went on while I online dated was at Starbucks, and it seemed my date and I would be surrounded by other couples also awkwardly shaking hands and pecking cheeks, laughing in a high-pitched tone and wringing sweaty hands, their hopes either dashed or uplifted once they met the person on the other end of the email. When I was about to meet a guy, I knew Starbucks would be the ideal meeting spot. The pluses were many: it would be crowded and full of potential witnesses in case the guy was a psychopath; no alcohol would be available to blur my judgment with beer-goggle vision; and it takes less time to drink a coffee than it does to eat a meal. I admit I approached every date with an extreme wariness, certain that the man I had spent the week pleasantly chatting with would, in the flesh, be a total cretin. But still, I kept going back for more. Also, I had paid for Match.com in full at the start. I was getting my money's worth.

The afternoon after my phone call with Dave, I pushed open the door of a local Starbucks, ducking the giggling troupes of thirteen-year-old girls, their manicured fingers clutching gigantic iced coffees, and joined the other singles in line, wondering if their predicament mimicked my own: that they couldn't find a cure for their loneliness. I was out of college, back living at home, trying to pay off some student loans before striking out on my own. My co-workers were middle-aged women. My friends were either living it up in some far away city or stuck in the same slightly depressing situation I was in. So here I was, in line at a Starbucks, nervously glancing around for my Match.com

date, Dave, before I realized I didn't really know what he looked like. The focus of his pictures was his arms, his face a blurry dot hovering over some very impressive muscles. It was freezing cold in the miserable early days of March. In the slim chance he'd walk in with nothing but a t-shirt, I could probably identify him. Otherwise, he'd have to find me.

I got my tall hot chocolate (there was no way I was taking a chance with a venti) and settled into a seat by the window, pulling out the magazine I stashed in my purse so I could look relaxed and confident, just out for a coffee and some light reading on a Sunday afternoon, rather than like a total wreck about to meet a person who could either be her soul mate or a psycho killer. I tried to focus on my copy of *Entertainment Weekly* but was interrupted by two women that I hadn't seen since high school. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have minded a few minutes of catching up with some people I once had been friendly with. But in this case, I was having a total meltdown. Katie and Mary Beth were not mean gossips, but the idea that they would be watching my obligatory awkward coffee date in action was unbearable. I plastered a grin on my face and tried to get them to keep moving, when I saw a man standing slightly off to the side.

As I nodded without comprehension at what the girls were saying, I studied him. His buzzed hair was graying, but against his ruddy skin tone the affect was more sun-kissed than retirement home. He wasn't very tall, but he was taller than me. His chest was broad, and even underneath his argyle sweater, I could see what would henceforth be known as The Arms. Even from the distance between us, I could tell his eyes were blue –

not a bright piercing blue, not a pale grayish blue, but a blue the color of cornflowers.

This is not in any way a Harlequin romance, but my heart definitely fluttered.

Katie and Mary Beth seemed to get the hint. They said their good-byes and left me with Dave.

“Hey, what’s up?” He moved in to the spot where the girls had been, holding out his hand and pulling up a seat. He greeted me like an old friend, like we had already established a relationship rather than meeting for the first time. “It’s nice to meet you.”

I shook his hand, and matched his bright smile, so hopeful that this date wouldn’t morph into a disaster like some of my previous Starbucks runs. Given the flameouts I (and countless others) have experienced, it’s interesting to note that we keep going back for more. I never really saw myself as an optimist nor a masochist, but maybe you have to be a bit of both to play this game. Looking around the crowded Starbucks, it was clear that there were many of us who had at least a slight interest in connecting with another human being, a connection deeper than even that which we have with our very best friends. Even Dave, this man who seemed to roll through life without any hiccups, was interested enough in finding someone, even if it was just a girl to have some fun with, that he’d laid down some cash to make it happen.

With this date, it seemed like I was finally getting a return on my investment. The cautious side of me knew it was early, but he seemed perfect. He gave me his full attention, angling his body and face toward mine. His eyes concentrated on me, never dimming or drifting to something more interesting. Most importantly, he was

hysterically funny, with an ease to him that I admired and appreciated. He could carry the conversation, but was equally happy to let me talk. Nothing felt forced. It wasn't an interview, with questions peppered at the other, but rather an easy conversation that flitted between our jobs, our favorite foods, and the fact that neither of us even like Starbucks that much because the caffeine makes us feel so jittery we could rip up the floor tiles with our bare hands.

Admittedly, there was a slight awkwardness (it was obligatory, after all), but it was a sweet kind of awkwardness, the kind where each of you is into the other enough that you become a shell of your middle school self, all gangly and giggly and gawky. It was the least uncomfortable date I've ever had. After a few hours, I felt like I could talk to him for a few more, so I was crushingly disappointed when he said he had to go, that he was currently working down the shore and was staying with his parents instead of burning up the gas in his beloved 1979 Oldsmobile 98.

When we got outside, we faced one another. Before I could panic, he asked if I'd like to get together again.

"Sure!" I chirped, once again sacrificing my need to seem mysterious and cool because I was just really, really happy.

"Okay, great. I'll call you." He smiled, leaned over, and opened The Arms for a new friend hug (butts out, nothing touching below the collarbone), and then he was gone.

I walked to my car with, truthfully, a bit of a swing in my step. At that moment, I knew I had just gone on my last obligatory awkward coffee date for a long, long time.

Our High School Selves

Dave would never have gone out with me in high school. Never mind the fact we're six-and-a-half years apart in age and I was in sixth grade when he was graduating high school, a fact that makes me contort my face in disgust while Dave makes inappropriate jokes about being a man in a van, promising me candy if I help him look for his puppy. But in a different universe, if we were closer in age and went to the same high school, he would never have gone out with me. He was one of the cool kids who didn't do their homework. I was definitely not a cool kid, and I always did my homework. I never would have gone out with him, either. I probably just would have secretly pined for him, while outwardly declaring him to be a total meathead.

Despite how it may have seemed, I actually liked high school. I wasn't the classic nerd: I had long-ago traded glasses for contacts, didn't wear braces, and had no affinity for sci-fi; the lack of these qualities let me fly under the radar enough that I never had to deal with mean, bitchy girls or cruel, nasty boys. I had a close-knit circle of friends with whom I'm still tight today. We never went to any raging parties, but we knew the local twenty-four hour diner intimately, and that was good enough for us. My friends and I were the typical overachievers – we overbooked our class schedules, opting to take an extra course instead of lunch; we did homework like it was a competitive sport; we thrived on listing as many extracurricular activities as we could on our resumes; and, as our ultimate goal for senior year, wanted, needed to be elected to our high school's Hall of Fame, an honor based on high grades, an assortment of extracurricular activities, and the votes of both teachers and students. (In what remains one of my proudest moments, I

actually was elected to the Hall of Fame. When I told Dave about this, he asked me if I was serious. Then he laughed.)

Dave, on the other hand, was not interested in school. He is intensely intelligent, reads voraciously, and is in the process of teaching himself calculus. This is now. Eighteen years ago, things were a little different. He'd regularly cut class to join his friends in a locked classroom to play cards. ("Where were the teachers?" I would always shriek when he told me this.) He and his buddies ran a business where they'd go into the worst part of Atlantic City in order to buy booze at a liquor store where there was bulletproof glass and a no-carding policy. They'd sell the stuff to their fellow under-aged classmates for a profit. Truly, they were budding entrepreneurs. When he told me this, I didn't know if I should be impressed or mortified. Honestly, I lean a little more toward impressed.

My point here (and I do have a point, I promise) is that it's nothing short of a miracle to me that Dave and I are not just together, but very much in love. When I first brought Dave home to meet my parents, my dad in particular was shocked at this hyper-masculine man standing before him. He admitted to me that he thought I'd end up with some waifish guy in black skinny jeans who loved poetry and hated football. Essentially, my father thought I would end up with someone like me, only with different anatomy. Dave is nothing like me, and that's what had so many of us scratching our heads.

The notion that opposites attract isn't new, of course. My parents are a great example of this, so it's interesting that my father was so baffled by my choice. My mom and I are pretty similar – quiet and reserved - the wallflower part of our respective partnerships. The similarities between my dad and Dave are more numerous than, say,

the similarities between my dad and my brother, a lawyer whose overachieving ways out-overachieve my own. My dad may not have the same wild streak as Dave, but both are veteran partiers. The summer he met my mom, my dad was part of a group that called themselves “The Bachelor’s Thirteen,” a pack of thirteen man-boys that printed up t-shirts with their summer house street location so that girls could take note and later show up at their house, looking for a weekend of summer lovin’. (I am not making this up.) Though my mom wasn’t one of these good-time girls, she fell under my dad’s spell. She thought he was funny, even if he did pimp himself out via t-shirt.

Similar to what my mom found attractive about my dad, I find Dave’s humor to be a key reason as to why I think he’s so irresistible. His fierce intelligence and humor allow him to say outrageous, provocative things that both thrill me and make me laugh so hard my stomach muscles ache for days afterward. I am not the only one drawn to this quality. Dave can make friends instantly, while I always have a harder time forging connections with people. He is the person surrounded by others at a bar, everyone hanging on to his every word. It’s not that he wants to be the center of attention – he just *is*. He is helpless to stop it, because he is just being himself. While I never craved the spotlight, I have to admit that holding his hand while walking into a crowded room where people light up when they see him is an adrenaline-boosting thrill. I know their excitement is over Dave, not me, but that’s okay. Because Dave is excited over me, and I’d rather have that than nearly any other prize in the world.

Dave and I have our differences, surely, and they occasionally serve as obstacles to our otherwise happy relationship. It would be easier if we had the same hobbies, the same political views, the same reaction to kung-fu movies (he loves them, obviously).

But I know that a bookish, liberal nerd who loves show-stopping movie musicals - a male Julie - is not going to cut it. First off, I wouldn't be able to stand him. Living with myself can be enough of a challenge. Having two of me would be ridiculous. And I'm not saying that similarly minded people can't make a relationship work. I know of many examples of people who are cut from the same cloth and are testaments of a happy, loving relationship. For me, though, that hasn't happened yet, and I can't see it happening in the future. I need a guy who can take charge, a man who can square off with some total asshole who harassed me at the gym because he wanted to use my particular elliptical machine even though there were other ones available (true story, and it happened on Thanksgiving Day, naturally). I need someone who's an alpha to my beta, a Type B to my Type A. I need Dave.

I'm just glad we're not in high school anymore.

Single Men and Houses

When I met Dave, he had been a homeowner for nearly two years. He had a stable job as a member of Local 454, a union specializing in piledriving and commercial diving. He had never been arrested, had no previous marriages, no children scampering around the earth, no weird mother issues. After a string of losers, a genuine winner. I was ecstatic. Then I went to his house.

From the outside, his Gloucester City rowhome seemed normal, traditional even. The siding was pale yellow, and pale blue shutters framed the windows, matching the other houses on the block. A black wrought iron railing bordered the two concrete steps that led to his front door. Attached to the front of the house was a shiny brass mailbox, a few envelopes sticking out of the top. The house sat close to the street, so there was no front yard. There were no smashed beer bottles or thrown-down tricycles littering the sidewalk to cause concern. Like a private investigator, I sat in my car on the opposite side of the street carefully taking it all in, painstakingly examining every detail. I breathed deeply, unlocked my car, and stepped out.

Dave greeted me at the door in shorts and a sleeveless undershirt, a Miller High Life in hand. I smiled at his smile, happy to see this man who was still new in my life, who made me laugh so sincerely and made me feel at ease despite my shyness and nervous energy. Then I walked inside and looked at his living room. The smile faded. A large dog bed cut from what looked like an old mattress was shoved up against the dark wooden wall. It crowded the doorway. An old wooden table stood against the opposite wall. A computer and junk mail covered the top.

He led me down the hallway to what was supposed to be the dining room. A glass-topped coffee table with a twisted tree trunk bottom sat prominently in the middle of the room. Magazines about gardening sprawled across its top. A wooden bench that had been gnawed by Princess also sat in the room.

“This is nice,” I said, my voice upbeat and perky, masking the panic.

“Thanks,” he said, leading me into the unfinished basement so he could show me the dive gear he wore when he had to go underwater for his job, welding bridges and piers.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Uh, about two years. Pizza guy came to my house a few weeks ago, thought I just moved in. I said ‘no, man, been here a couple of years. Just been busy.’”

Dave laughed, and so I joined in haltingly, momentarily glad he put the dive helmet on my head so I could shut my eyes. In the two rooms he showed me, there was no lighting other than a naked bulb in a fan, no table and chairs, no framed pictures. That boy must have really been busy.

*

There is something I should point out. I am the kind of person who bought coasters for my college dorm room. What does this mean, exactly? This means that I am a perfectionist nut. Obsessed with perfection, I have always spent hours cleaning, straightening, tidying. My college might have assigned me an awkwardly shaped dorm

room in which they put a crappy desk, but water rings from sweaty glasses would not do. Flawlessness was my goal, and had been for as long as I can remember. Perfection was not reserved for material items, either. When I was in high school or college, I would regularly engage in my own personal contests, trying to see if I could win this trophy or earn that grade. I was tenacious (probably a little annoying, too), but I usually got what I set out for. It was a high, a craving, and it became a lifestyle, even if it occasionally made me anxious and those around me exasperated. I wanted flawlessness to permeate every aspect of my life. That included my house.

Dave's house didn't exactly jive with my coaster mindset. After that first visit, as we were driving across the Walt Whitman Bridge to nearby Philadelphia in his 1979 Oldsmobile 98, I felt like a snob, a bitch, a complete ass. I hated my reaction to his place and I racked my brain, trying to come up with excuses to explain it away. I boiled it down into stereotypes: I figured that as a member of the single male species, and particularly macho at that, he was prone to live in a cave-like dwelling; as for me, since I was a member of the single female species, and was in the perfectionist subgroup, I was conditioned to watch interior design shows, examine furniture catalogs, and basically strive to be Martha Stewart. I felt a little nauseous as I considered these differences, troubled by the thought that they would break us apart.

Exceptions exist, of course. When my single brother, Nick, was living alone in Texas, his two-bedroom apartment was, if not immaculate, clean and well-lit. Definitely not a cave. At the time Nick was a captain in the army, and so he dutifully moved from New Jersey to Texas because he was assigned to Fort Hood. He was by himself, and yet

he picked out, furnished, and cleaned the apartment all by himself. He even hung up a few pictures. Our parents and I took turns trooping down to Texas, each returning with a report – “It’s pretty clean. There are places to sit, I wasn’t scared to use the toilet, and he even deflates and stores the air mattress. He did good.”

*

Despite our differences, Dave and I continued to spend time together, and slowly our relationship progressed from casual to serious. Truly, he was my antithesis: relaxed, charming, and comfortable in his own skin. I couldn’t get enough of him, and so I began spending more time at his place. My home was not an option because I was still living in Cherry Hill with my parents, desperately trying to pay off my student loans and saving for a place of my own, and so every weekend I would pack up my suitcase and drive to Gloucester City, eager to see Dave.

Months later, his house was in the same state it was when I first visited. When I came to see him, during the car ride, my brain would be awash in rosy hues, and I would convince myself that it wasn’t that bad. Then I would walk through the door mid-whistle, see the foot of dust on the desk, and knew that I had to do something. Even though I felt comfortable and relaxed with Dave, his house still sent me into perfectionist shock. One day when I was hunting for a pair of scissors in a drawer that personified the definition of junk drawer, I made my move.

“You want to help me clean my house?” he asked, as he fed carrots into a juicer.

I paused. “Yeah. Nothing crazy, just give you a hand. This drawer, for example. When did you last clean out this drawer?”

Dave just looked at me.

“Right. So, I could help you with that. I could go through the drawer for you. I mean, I’d ask you if you’d want to keep something before I’d get rid of it. But I could make it less messy for you.” I paused. “It’s something that I would really like to do.”

He continued to look at me. “Okay,” he said. “If you want to, sure.”

And so I started small projects around Dave’s house. Nothing big, no dramatic changes like adding curtains and setting out placemats. I cleaned out a few drawers, threw out some things that expired a few years ago, introduced the idea of hand soap. Dave got on board, too, and started doing laundry more regularly, and cleaning the bathroom before I visited. He bought a couch and a loveseat (both in black leather, naturally – what else would a long-time bachelor choose?), and a dining room table, complete with four matching chairs. Things were starting to shape up and the projects helped to relieve me, let me feel productive. I had a nagging suspicion, though, that whatever was accomplished would not measure up to what I had imagined.

At the time, I was addicted to HGTV. It was a constant onslaught of house perfection. Homes were either already gorgeous or are not so gorgeous and then became totally gorgeous. I sat mesmerized for hours, reading and watching seemingly ordinary people give tours of their pristine living spaces, and I found that, depending on what kind of day I had, I’m either inspired by what they have or irritated by their picture-perfect

master bedroom suites, complete with walk-in closet, Jacuzzi tub, and balcony. This loveliness, which in high school and college seemed destined to be mine, now seemed out of reach.

After graduation from college, life took a downturn. It started out as planned. I was accepted into The Publishing Institute at the University of Denver, and flew out to the Rockies where I got my first taste of life post-graduation. After the summer program, I moved home, and then began applying for jobs. At first I was enthusiastic and motivated, imagining that I would be able to have some fabulous job in the big city, with an amazing home that showed off my quirky personality and deft decorating skills, and my life would proceed like some *Sex and the City* episode (without the tears and the occasionally insane outfit, of course). But then the job market started to get dicey, and my college loans were staring me right in the face, and I took the first job that I was offered – which, while decent, was not the publishing job I imagined, nor was it in the big city - and my amazing home was the one I grew up in.

It's not that I have a yearning for a walk-in closet, Jacuzzi tub, and a balcony off of my bedroom (it's not that I wouldn't accept those luxuries if they were handed to me, either); rather, it just seems so surreal that I'm no longer a girl playing with her dolls in Barbie's Dream House, but a woman trying to create a home for myself and my boyfriend, and finding that reality is a lot dirtier and more imperfect than expected. When I met Dave, two years after college graduation, this frustration was boiling. Silly and commonplace as it may seem, I was still raw and reeling from the realization was much different than what I had expected.

Years later, the frustration has not totally disappeared. It's hard to accept that reality is different than the image you have created; it's hard to try to disentangle yourself from the life you have built in your daydreams, to realize that you may not have what you have mentally prepared yourself for.

But I readjusted my expectations in a happy way, too. There's no way I could have predicted Dave, in all his messy glory. Our differences did not break us apart, as I feared. Rather, we each took strength from the other's traits. He has accepted me, neuroses and all. He has even tempered me, encouraging me to be a little messy, and letting me find that nothing will fall apart because of it. The bed can be unmade, there can be a crumb on the kitchen counter, and nothing bad will come of it. After years of working against this principle, it is challenging to agree to this thought, but I'm coming around to it. My life is not flawless, not TV-ready, and I can appreciate that. But I'm still going to set out the placemats.

The Fourth Dimension

The summer after we met, Dave dropped a bomb on me.

“So, uh, people down the shore have been asking about you. They want to meet you. Why don’t you go down me with next weekend?” he asked.

I looked at him. “Next weekend is Labor Day weekend, though.”

“Yeah, it’ll work out great. Plenty of time to go to the beach, barbeque, all the good stuff.”

I panicked. “But that’s three days! Are we going to stay over at your parents’ house, your parents whom I’ve never met before, for three whole days?”

The answer to that question, which I already knew, was yes. Needless to say, I went into extreme panic mode at that very second.

To be fair, it was about time that I met at least someone from Dave’s side. Since we lived near most of my family and friends, in the past few months Dave had already been bombarded with my parents, brother, sister-in-law, grandfather, aunt, and four close girlfriends. These meet-and-greets were always events that I loved. I’m the kind of person who loves giving gifts more than getting them (okay, maybe I love giving gifts as much as I love getting them), because I’m sure the recipient is going to be so totally thrilled with whatever present I chose for them that they’ll jump up and down with utter delight, and I can jump up and down with them in a sharing of sheer delirium. That’s how I felt about my friends and family meeting Dave. I was so enamored with him that bringing him to dinner or drinks was, in my mind, akin to me wrapping up the Hope Diamond and ceremoniously presenting it to the recipient. I knew he’d make them fall in

love with him every time, and he did. True, there was no jumping up and down, and some of my friends asked me if he was nervous because he was so freaking loud (nope, he just always projects), but all in all, the nights always ended with my family and friends declaring that he was great.

My feeling was that it wouldn't go down quite the same way when I met Dave's people.

I can't say why exactly I felt negative about the situation, other than that I'm not the greatest about meeting people for the first time. It usually takes me a while to warm up, and by the time I do I've usually ruined it with my slightly standoffish attitude. The fact that I immediately felt comfortable with Dave was one of the reasons I knew he would be so special in my life. I doubted that I'd have the same reaction with his friends and family. Dave's eagerness for me to meet everyone was a big step, though, and I knew this meant two things: 1) he had been telling them about me, so I wasn't some phantom that had been preoccupying his time, but had a name and was his girlfriend, or at least a girl he had been spending time with for the past seven months; and 2) if I was meeting these people, Dave was in this relationship for the long haul. Those two things were exciting enough to convince me to get my ass in gear and head down to Ventnor with Dave for the weekend.

*

After work on Friday, I raced home and started to pack. I am an epic packer. In college I studied in England for a semester, and took trips around the continent with nothing but a backpack stuffed with clothes and toiletries. Triumphantly, I thought this total packing pare-down was the ultimate cure. I didn't see how I could go back to my

old ways of lugging totally over-stuffed suitcases and bulging carry-ons filled with stuff I knew I didn't need. Oh, I was so wrong. My European travels actually seemed to have made things worse. Now, instead of wearing just the shoes on my feet, I would pack not one, not two, but at least three or four pairs of shoes on a long weekend trip. I needed options, I would whine, when anyone questioned my packing skills. It could be cold. It could rain. I could buy a new outfit and not have any shoes except for the fourth pair I packed to wear with it. So, needless to say, for these next three days filled with meeting Dave's family and best and oldest friends, I ransacked my closet and drawers, looking for the perfect combinations that would make them all fall head-over-heels in love with me. Three suitcases later, after a shower, shave, and freshly applied make-up, I carefully chose a modest-but-cute sundress and my favorite new gold gladiator sandals. I stacked everything by the front door and waited.

A half hour later, Dave pulled up. One of our few shared traits is that neither one of us is great with either directions or getting places on time, which in this regard makes us a perfect pair, but a complete nuisance for everyone else. He walked up to the door in a stained undershirt, mesh shorts, work boots, and huge, '70s-style glasses that my eighty-seven-year-old grandfather wore. I looked down at my sundress and back up at him.

"Is that what you're wearing?" I asked. "Aren't we going out when we get down there?"

He looked down at his clothes. "Yeah. Don't you like it?"

I shook my head slowly. "No, I, uh...don't think it's going to work. And what's up with the glasses? Where did they come from?"

“Aren’t they great? I had them a long time ago and just found them again.”

The fact that he thought they were great, that he had found them after some ex-girlfriend probably had hidden them to save her the embarrassment of his wearing them, and that they were now going to become a staple of his wardrobe, was a lot to take in on an already stressful day. I took a deep breath and tried to diffuse the situation, knowing we had many hours of sitting in shore holiday traffic to get through and not wanting to make today of all days become the day of our first fight.

“Well...they’re...not really my favorite thing, but if you need them to see, I guess you’ll have to wear them. You brought clothes to change into, right? You can change when we get down there?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Dave seemed oblivious to my less than enthusiastic attitude. I sighed, and looked to his car, where his dog Princess was howling, upset that no one had invited her to the party at my front stoop. I sighed again.

“Okay. Okay, let’s go.”

*

I have a confession: I love long car rides. Ever since I was a child, I love the idea that I would have hours to spend in the car napping, reading, or just staring out the window. There were no chores to do, no instruments to practice. It was just me and the books and toys I had meticulously chosen from my bookshelves and toy box. I haven’t changed. Now, I bring my little pink bag and load it up with the magazines and books that I’ve been meaning to get to, plus my little travel pillow. I get so excited about the relaxation I’m about to embark on, even while I know that everyone else in the car – the

driver in particular – has the exact opposite feeling that I have. Still, it doesn't faze me much.

Dave and I, though, had not yet taken a trip together. The farthest away we'd been was to Philly, fifteen minutes away. He was starting to know my neuroses, but this particular tic hadn't been revealed. I didn't think it would be the most polite thing to settle in, pull out my pillow, and take a nap for the next two-plus hour drive, though I was dying to do it. Instead, I drummed my fingers along to the classic rock we had playing on the radio, and cooed to his dog, who had sat up like she was navigating traffic in the first twenty minutes of the trip, but was now making me insanely jealous by the way she was spread out in the backseat, ready to take a deliciously long nap, and made small talk with Dave while trying not to fall asleep.

“So, will your parents be home when we get there?”

“Um, maybe. My dad will probably be there. My mom is probably out with her friend, Susan.”

“Oh,” I said, surprised. My parents had formed a reception line when they met Dave for the first time, shaking his hand vigorously before ushering him to a seat and asking him which beverage he'd most enjoy. I had expected something similar, and was a little put off that my arrival wasn't going to be heralded by trumpets.

“So when we get there, we're going out? We're going to meet up with some of your friends?” I asked.

“Maybe. We'll see how late it is when we get there. I'm pretty beat. I could sleep for a week.”

I tried to keep my exasperation in check. “Okay. Well, um...” I knew it wasn’t great timing, but I couldn’t help it. I gestured to my travel pillow. “Do you mind if I take a bit of a snooze?”

A few hours later, Dave shook my arm. “Hey, Julie, we just got off the Expressway. We’ll be there any minute.”

I blinked my eyes rapidly and squinted, trying to see Ventnor in the dark. I had been there a few years before with my friend Nina, whose grandmother had a place in town. All I remembered was the great sushi and the fact that a cop had parked his car outside her grandmother’s house, his lights flashing and the siren whirring, and we had a total shit-fit because we were sure we were going to get busted for one possibly illegal infraction that had occurred over the course of the weekend. Nothing had happened, of course, but now I couldn’t help but equate Ventnor with my brief life of crime.

We drove down Dorset Avenue, the street that connects the mainland with Absecon Island, and passed an ice cream stand. My spirits immediately perked up. I’m like a five-year old. Any situation that involves either napping or ice cream cannot be that bad.

A minute or two later, we pulled up to his parents’ house, the home where he grew up. The modest brown-shingled white-shuttered house sits high up from the ground, a row of steps leading from the driveway to the front door. Potted plants dot the steps leading to the front door and twinkling lights strung around the beams surround the deck on top of the garage, which sits next to the house. I smiled, imagining a little Dave, a pint-sized hellion, scampering up and down those same steps, knocking the flower pots over, and swinging from the deck beams, trying to get enough air to land on the adjacent

roof. I turned to him and gave him a quick kiss, suddenly happy to have taken this trip with him, to get this chance to learn more about him.

Leaving Princess to slowly wake up from her nap, we got out of the car to unload my many suitcases, which, much to his credit, Dave didn't comment on. After we unloaded my stuff, the trunk was empty except for a plastic grocery store bag.

"Oh my God, where's your stuff? Did you forget your stuff?" I asked, the horror evident on my face (he was after all, still wearing his stained undershirt, mesh shorts, and work boots).

"Nope. Got everything I need all in here," he said as he scooped up the Shop Rite grocery bag. "Board shorts, underwear, toothbrush, and vitamins. I'm all set," he said as he slammed the trunk shut.

Oh. Sweet. Jesus. While I felt the color draining from my face, I offered up a pretty smile and point to the steps. "Let's go in."

"Hey, anybody home?" Dave shouted as we waddled in, bogged down by my massive array of luggage and his one teeny tiny plastic bag.

A short, slight man with white hair shuffled into the room. "Hey, how you doing? How was the traffic?"

"Oh, you know. It's the long weekend, the end of summer rush, so it was pretty brutal."

The two of them continued to chat like this for about five minutes. They took occasional pauses to pet the dog and comment on her bowel movements. I stood quietly next to Dave, not sure what the proper etiquette is, but pretty sure it was being ignored.

“So, uh, Dad, this is Julie,” Dave said, putting his hand on the small of my back, a gesture both reassuring and pushy, like he’s shoving me forward.

“Hi! How are you! Thank you so much for hosting us over this weekend!” I exclaimed. I sounded like one of those robotic baby dolls with the pull cord in its back. I held out my hand. “I’m so excited to get to know you better!” I smiled, sure any parent would totally melt over my undiluted enthusiasm.

“Hi, how are you?” his dad said, totally not buying into my perky cheerleader persona.

Momentarily stunned, I’m thrilled when Dave suggests we go across the street to have a beer with his neighbor Eddie. I’m desperate to change scenes, to win someone over so I’m not already batting zero.

“Sure! That sounds great!” I said, determined to keep sounding cheerful, no matter how much I’m annoying myself or how miserable I am at the fact my prediction is coming true, that I will not be as universally loved by Dave’s circle as he is by mine.

“Let’s go!”

As we walked across the street, I threw as many questions and harried explanations as I could at Dave in a five second time span.

“I don’t think he liked me! How could he not like me? Parents love me! My friends’ parents always love me. I am always their favorite. I’m responsible, and polite, and I can’t believe he doesn’t like me-”

Cut-off mid-sentence, Dave gave his neighbor a handshake that could break bones as the two whoop it up for a few minutes while I’m again Dave’s useless appendage. I tried to snap out of my pity party, reminding myself that since Dave and I started to date,

he hasn't had a chance to get down to the shore much and visit with these people who obviously like him very much.

"And who's this pretty little lady?" Eddie asked, bringing us up to the front porch and offering us a beer.

"This is Julie, my girlfriend," Dave answered.

Suddenly, my irritable mood vanishes as I moon over Dave, giving him my biggest, brightest smile. Even though we've been acting like boyfriend/girlfriend, doing boyfriend/girlfriend type things, we've never had a conversation about what we were. This was the first time he had publicly called me his girlfriend, or at least the first time he did it in my presence. The joy I felt at hearing those words coming out of the mouth of someone I truly liked, was even starting to love, was mind-boggling. This little island town was starting to look like a rosy oasis.

"So, Julie," Eddie seemed to shout, "what's your background?"

His odd question interrupted my reverie, where I was imagining Dave and I skipping into the sunset. "Sorry, what? My background?"

"Yeah, your ethnicity."

"Um, well I'm mostly English and German."

"Really! That's really interesting. You don't hear that combination much." He pondered this thought and then turned his full attention to Dave.

I restrained myself and didn't tell him that there were actually so many of us white Anglo-Saxon Protestants that we had our own acronym. I drained my beer and settled back into my chair, coming to grips with the fact that I had entered what I like to call the fourth dimension.

*

Ventnor seems to me to be a bit like the wonderful world of Oz. Except at times it's not so much wonderful as it is weird. The weirdness isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it is something that catches me off-guard. Growing up in a stable household, in Cherry Hill, a town that I would also call stable, Ventnor's quirks (or, more specifically, Ventnor's residents' quirks) throw me for a loop. Truthfully, Cherry Hill is probably home to at least a few dozen nuts, but since the town is a large, sprawling development with 70,000 plus people, they are hidden among the masses, a fun treat to discover at the bottom of your cereal box. In Ventnor, a small city whose few residents know each other intimately and can easily walk the city's sidewalks, the zanies are live and in living color, living and breathing among us.

There's the 90-something-year-old woman who lives down the block, always dressed in a brightly colored Adidas track suit with some kind of towel turban/snow cap combination on her head, who walks to the grocery store every day and shuns Dave's offer of his freshly grown grape tomatoes because "the skin's too thick." There's the woman who pushes a shopping cart full of random items (a high heel missing its mate, a baby doll that looked like it had gotten its ass kicked by a My Little Pony) around the neighborhood, and who once hitched a ride with Dave's unsuspecting aunt and cousin before they realized they let the woman who pushes a shopping cart full of random items around the neighborhood into their car. There's the swarm of outside cats that essentially own the street, plunking their fat little bodies in the middle of the road, on top of your car, or, if you leave the window down, in your car, who randomly make appearances in

the house before someone realizes a cat that is not their own is in the house, and chases them out.

I once tried explaining it to Dave. “Did you ever notice how Ventnor seems...a little off?”

He looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like once you drive over the bridge from the mainland to the island it gets a little funky. It’s like you enter an alternate reality, like the fourth dimension.”

He laughed. “Yeah, we got some characters down in Ventnor. Also known as the best town in America. Yeah!”

I rolled my eyes at his over-the-top love and loyalty for his hometown. “So you’ve noticed that it’s a little different than, say, Cherry Hill?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. Ventnor’s got some color. Cherry Hill’s a little more...drab.”

“Ventnor is like a fun house version of real life,” I retorted. “It doesn’t make sense! Why doesn’t anyone else get this?”

“You just gotta relax. Don’t think about it so much. Just enjoy it for what it is. Don’t try to put the round peg in the square hole, you know?”

Despite my irritation with this Mr. Rogers-type lesson, I knew Dave was right. I am the typical over-thinker. I couldn’t conceive of this place where everyone seemed ready to put the broom down, to worry about the bills tomorrow, and just talk about the traffic on the Atlantic City Expressway and crack open a cold one. Interestingly, these traits are some of the qualities that made me fall for Dave. I relished his ability to relax. After all, I could only relax during hours-long car rides. That was a problem, and something I’d have to conquer – or at least make strides toward overcoming – if I wanted

to stay grounded and not lose Dave to my ever-constant battle with my nerves. Ventnor was a bit odd, sure, but why did I inherently think that was wrong? Why did I feel the need to whip it into submission, to make it follow the script that I had written, which involved me becoming bosom buddies with all whom we met? I couldn't answer those questions. The fact, though, that I realized that there were questions to answer felt like a solid start.

*

The day after we arrived in Ventnor for the long Labor Day weekend, I woke up to the sun streaming through the windows, and glanced to my right. His twin bed was too small to fit us both, and so Dave was sleeping below me on the air mattress. His mouth was slightly open, his arms outstretched, his dog snuggled under the sheet with him, her tail giving the slightest wriggle. I propped myself up on my elbow and stared at him for a while in a way that I hoped seemed adoring and not creepy. After a few minutes, my gaze must have started to pierce his unconscious, as he stretched and yawned, and looked up at me from his air mattress.

“Hey,” he said. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I said shyly. I reached my hand down to his. He raised his hand up, and our fingertips touched. He grasped my hand and tugged me from my bed to his.

I can remember this moment so clearly, even though it happened years ago. Saying those good mornings, and putting our fingertips together, filled me with warmth. That moment startled me into thinking – into knowing - that I loved this man. That moment made me realize I wanted many more mornings just like this with him. It didn't

matter that the night before hadn't gone as I had planned. It didn't matter if everyone didn't adore me; as long as Dave liked me, then that was good enough.

We got dressed in our bathing suits, made up the beds, and went downstairs for some breakfast before hitting the beach. I met his mom, who gave me a big hug and smile. We quickly ate and walked down the street to the beach, our chairs and beach blankets in tow, our hands joined. It was like a scene from a movie, with the sun shining, the birds chirping, the breeze gently blowing. As I dreamily stared at him, thinking about how perfect this all was, I heard his neighbor shout out to us to have a good day, and to not forget the sunscreen, because German and English people burn, after all. Dave and I began to laugh, and I waved my thanks to Eddie.

"Congratulations," Dave said. "You're officially a resident member of the fourth dimension."

No words could have made me happier.

Dinner with Friends

I love my friends. Dave loves my friends. I love my friends' partners, if only because it's the nice thing to do. (Some I love because I really do love them.) Dave does not love (most of) my friends' partners, and because he does not follow the same etiquette guide as I do, he doesn't try to pretend that he does love them. For my sake, though, he'll play along at the party or while we're out to eat, but for the most part, we are not going to have the kind of friends where we can take vacations together. Mostly because they will want to go to an all-inclusive resort in the Caribbean, and the words "all-inclusive resort" make Dave gag, because he's a bit of a food and drink snob, and thinks whatever they will feed you there will make you die.

This can make going out to dinner tricky, for multiple reasons. Once my girlfriend Andrea and her boyfriend Josh, who is now her husband, were going to the Iron Hill Brewery, a chain brewpub that had recently opened a location near us, and invited us to go for dinner. Dave is not into chain restaurants, but I told him that I had heard good things about the place, and that it's always crowded, so that has to be a good sign, right? He went along with it and me, because he's a wonderful person, and a glutton for punishment.

First, the place was ridiculously crowded, and the majority of people in the lobby were pushy and rude, which set a terrible tone for the evening. There were no major incidents, just a lot of elbows digging into sides and toe trampling, without an apology or even a backward glance. When we finally got seated, the waitress told us about their

Oktoberfest special, which was supposed to involve bratwurst and all kinds of tubed meat, which Dave just loves. He ordered that and a beer, and began to perk up.

Josh loves video games and his motorcycle, and Dave hates both things, so Andrea and I pretty much had to run the conversation, with Dave offering commentary and asking questions while Josh stared silently at his iPhone. Below you'll find an excerpt of our stimulating conversation:

Me: "Oh my God, did you see on Facebook that so-and-so from high school did this-and-that?"

Andrea: "I totally did. I feel old as shit."

Me: "Don't worry, Dave will always be older."

Dave, after he drifted back from whatever random thought had popped into his head moments before: "Wait, what? Who's so-and so?"

Josh: -----

The conversation proceeded as such until the waitress came back with our meals. She put down Dave's Oktoberfest special, and it was as if you could hear the air deflate from his body. There was some shriveled Jimmy Dean sausages and a pile of what looked like coleslaw but was technically sauerkraut. I stared at my salad, unsure of whether I should try to calm him down now or later.

I tapped his shoulder. "Do you want another beer?"

He looked at me.

“Do you want some of my salad?”

He continued to look at me.

“I’ll make it up to you later?”

He said a silent prayer (not because he really thought the food would kill him and he wanted to smooth things over with God before biting the dust, but because he does that before every meal, good or bad), picked up his fork, and started to eat.

*

In the beginning, there was peace. Dave and I were so in love, that seeing a midnight showing of *The Incredible Hulk* didn’t seem like a sacrifice, and seeing *Mamma Mia* on opening night was a fun date option, not two hours of torture (can you guess which person wanted to see which movie?). We were happy to accommodate one another, never thinking about negotiating for what we wanted. What the other person wanted was what we wanted. And then.

After we had been dating for a solid year, things began to change. The love was still the same – deeper, actually, strengthened by time. By then we both knew that even if our relationship didn’t culminate in marriage, we would be together for a long time, living our lives side-by-side. Maybe it was because of this comfort, the knowledge that the other had no plans to run away, that we began to turn up our noses at accommodation,

that we began to argue for what we wanted, rather than going along blindly with the other's wishes. The security gave us the freedom to put ourselves first.

Compromise, of course, is a cornerstone in any successful relationship.

Compromise is the reason Dave went with me to the Iron Hill Brewery. Compromise is why I sit on the beach with him for hours, frantically covering myself with 50 SPF, desperate to protect my skin. We do it because we love one another, and I can say that being with Dave is absolutely worth any concessions that I need to make. But in the moment, it still rubs raw, when you're trying desperately to create the perfect life and the other person does not agree on what makes a perfect life. For me, a perfect life includes having dinner with my friends, even at a subpar restaurant, and I want my partner at my side. Dave would rather cook a multi-course dinner at home, complete with wine and music, for just the two of us. I want to go to an author's reading. He wants to watch a boxing match. I want to sit home and read. He wants to go on a pub-crawl.

Luckily, our current accommodations and negotiations are on a basic, superficial level, involving movies and dinner and what to do on Saturday night. As we age, as our lives become more deeply entwined, the challenges will be greater. The compromises will revolve around the house we buy, the number of children we have, and whose family we will spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with. Things will get harder, not easier.

And yet, we will continue to try. Our love for one another will sometimes compel us to make choices that are contrary to what we actually want and desire. I've seen family members and friends make decisions that to an outsider seem rash, but are

powered by love and compromise. I'm not so naïve to think that Dave and I will avoid this trap; my hope, simple and artless as it may be, is that we'll never fall victim to the stress of accommodation. We will not always be happy, but I want us always to be in love.

Holy, Holy

Dave dipped his fingers into the holy water and patted his forehead. It took me a minute to realize what he was doing, and that the water was supposed to be holy, but I was aware enough of being the outsider and knew not to say anything that would make it obvious to those around me that I had never been to a Catholic church. That's not technically true, actually, but the other occasions were weddings and funerals, places where it's not all that surprising to spot a non-Catholic. This was my first Mass. Dave and I are engaged, though unofficially, without a ring or a wedding date, and before we take that final leap, we made a deal. I would go to St. Mary's, the Catholic church, with him, and he would go to the Protestant church with me, and at the end we'd flip a coin and see which one won out. Actually, no, it will not be as cavalier as that. We are both committed to our own sides, for reasons of tradition and family and values, for reasons that are childish, for reasons we don't even understand. We will fight it out. Our own version of the Troubles.

Dave glided into the church, his walk assured, as I scurried after him and settled into the mahogany pew beside him. We were late, and the Irish brogue of the priest, Monsignor Curran, filled the sanctuary, beating down on the sinners and the faithful as I fumbled with my coat. His lilting voice quickly lost me, though not before I heard him preach that those who say they can find God in their hearts or in the woods at any time they like are really in need of finding him on Sunday morning (or Saturday night, if you'd prefer) in the very same building we sat in. My cheeks flushed. I hadn't been to church in over a month. Dave goes every Sunday.

As my attention drifted from the scolding priest, I looked around at St. Mary's. It was beautiful. A little gaudy, maybe, but done with the best of intentions. It was late January, so the church was stripped of the poinsettias and other Christmas accoutrements, and stood on its own. This was the church in its naked glory, though stark would be the wrong word. Stark was my home church, Trinity Presbyterian, with its interior done in beiges and browns, its darkly colored stained glass windows the only hiccup of color. The walls of St. Mary's were pale blue and covered with plaques depicting the Stations of the Cross. Brightly colored stained glass windows of the Twelve Apostles broke up the pale blue. Beams of navy blue and gold crisscrossed the ceiling, which sloped upward into a point. Pillars in the same navy and gold stood like sentries every twenty feet or so, one directly in front of me, providing a cover for me to watch but not be watched. Our fellow parishioners seemed not so interested in me, though. They didn't seem so interested in the service happening up front, either. Only my boyfriend sang along to the hymn, his deep voice a vivid contrast to the high pitch of the vocalist at the front, not even an organ to accompany them.

The congregation suddenly stood, bringing me up with them, and in another flourish, the kneelers were released from their upright position, causing a loud thwack, like a hundred nuns rapping their pupils' knuckles with rulers. I gingerly placed my knobby knees, bruised a permanent purple, on the kneeler, wincing despite the layer of navy cushioning. Kneeling is new to me. In my church we sit and we stand, but we don't kneel. The congregation again started to speak in unison, words that they had memorized years ago, words that were mumbled under their breath, words that were

printed nowhere, words that I silently let wash over me as I wondered what I was doing there.

*

Conversion. I had always proclaimed that I wouldn't do it, wouldn't change my faith for anyone. We're always so sanctimonious when we can afford to be. Now I was to marry a Catholic, a devout Catholic. One of us was going to have to budge, and the money was on me. He had weekly church attendance on his side.

"It's not such a big deal," my friends would say. "At the end of the day, it's all the same." Not to me. To me it wasn't the same at all. I didn't look at it as gaining a new faith, a new perspective, it meant losing the tradition that I had grown up with; losing a tie that bound my family. It meant joining a faith I was not sure about, even suspicious of. The liberal viewpoints of my faith suited me; the pro-life rallies and the priest scandal of the Catholic church unsettled me.

The congregation rose again from their kneelers and after some time in silent prayer, began the Lord's Prayer. Unconsciously, I began saying it with them, speaking for the first time since our arrival. I got caught up in the familiar ebb and flow, the well-known rhythm of the prayer I had memorized in Sunday School during the third grade. I smiled, glad to finally feel that some aspect of this service was not foreign to me. My voice grew stronger as the prayer went on, and I became indistinguishable in the crowd.

I kept going, my voice clear and strong, finishing off the last line, alone: "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever." I flushed, a hotness taking

over my face, scarlet creeping up on my fair skin, as I realized that no one else was speaking. I felt cheated and tricked; the moment that made me feel comfortable turned out to be a sham, as this last line, apparently, was not in their books. Our prayers are not the same.

David nudged me and I looked up at him. He smiled and told me he loved me. I smiled at him then, at this man with the broad shoulders and cornflower blue eyes, at this man who wants to marry me, to lead a life with me. He is beautiful and kind and I am lucky to have him. He's the only man I have ever loved.

*

There was a moment in my life, when I was a senior in college and nearing graduation, when I toyed with the idea of going to seminary and becoming a Presbyterian minister. My large, fairly progressive church always had both a male and female pastor, so the idea was not foreign or radical for me. I had grown up in the church, always steadfastly believing what I was taught, never questioning or arguing. I was never interested in proselytizing, but I liked the idea of comforting my parishioners, being with them in times of need, and in times of celebration.

Ultimately, though, I rejected the idea, feeling that the life of a minister was not what I was called to do. With this denial, I felt a switch flip. The once-ignored skeptics began to be heard; I could no longer block out the noise. My once rock-solid belief began to crack. Doubt started to bubble in my veins, and the doubt still lingers there, still lightly simmering. Every day I fight to believe; and I'm simply not ready to give up, to

abandon my religion in favor of Dave's, even though it would make everything so much easier. Truly, the thought of losing my religion makes me cling to it wildly, even though in some ways I have already lost it.

I know there will be no perfect solution, no decision that will wholly please us. There are so many questions, and I have no answers.

Tugging on the Rope

“I want a baby.”

Dave’s pronouncement is not as sudden as it may seem, as this is a recurring conversation – though monologue may be a better word. Glancing up from my meal, I see Dave looking not at me, but at something to my left. Reluctantly, I turn and see my suspicion confirmed – there’s a baby sitting in a high chair, silently munching on a toy, her large eyes turned to Dave. Dave opens his mouth and inflates his ruddy cheeks, widening his cornflower blue eyes and shifting them back and forth, up and down. Then he breathes out and opens his mouth in the shape of an O, giggling right along with the baby.

I smile and turn back to my tacos, wishing I hadn’t bugged Dave to take me to Taco Bell, that we were tucked away inside his house, without a baby in sight, so we could avoid the questions, the uncomfortable silences as we try to negotiate this tricky territory. Sneaking a look at Dave, I see his eyes are still bright and shiny, his smile undimmed. This is his favorite game to play with babies, and they seem as interested in him as he is in them. He looks at me, wanting an answer. I shrug and ignore his silent question. “Cute,” I say and slurp my soda.

The baby *is* cute. I’m not such a monster that I won’t admit that. She has curly brown hair, big brown eyes, and better still, is quiet. But I do not pretend to be excited. Babies – children in general, really – have never thrilled me. It’s not even as strong as dislike, but rather a total disinterest. Even growing up, I was not terribly interested in

baby dolls, though I had a fairly large collection. If a friend wanted to play house and carry her doll on her hip while she scrambled imaginary eggs on the stovetop of the Playskool kitchen, then I would agree, toting my own doll while running the toy vacuum. Rarely, though, did I choose to do this on my own. I would rather color, or play with Barbie dolls, which I loved, because there seemed to be so many exciting storylines I could create for them, none of which had to do with babies.

But now I am twenty-six and in a serious relationship with a thirty-two year-old man who aches to be a father. At this stage in my life, the choices are more complex – it is no longer an option to shove the baby doll in its cradle and dash off to play with something else. Dave worked as a pile driver and diver, laying foundation for buildings and diving deep into dark water to build and repair bridges and piers, before becoming his union's organizer, fighting for the rights of the members of the Local 454 in Philadelphia. Dave is not weak, and yet crumbles at the sight of a baby, quietly jealous of his friends, nearly all of them fathers.

I cannot say the same. When someone presents a baby to me, I smile politely but I do not coo or beg for a chance to bounce the baby on my knee. Truly, I would not be entertaining the idea of having children if not for Dave. Prior to meeting him, it was not on my radar, never even an entry on my mental to-do list. I wanted to travel, to go back to Europe, this time without a backpack and a bunk in a hostel, but rather to stroll glamorously and leisurely down the streets, a visitor but not a tourist. I wanted to write, to do well enough to support myself through writing alone, to find pride in my accomplishments. I wanted love, to find a man who would be my perfect complement.

Travel and writing are still on my list, still dreams that I have but whose time may never come. The one thing I managed? I found love.

If people were laid out on a scale measuring personality, Dave and I would never meet. Dave is rambunctious and outgoing, the person who enters a room and the crowd lights up and cheers. He is a fervent Catholic, a proud gun owner, a guy whose mailbox is stuffed with catalogs for sausage-making equipment. I am quiet and shy, a Protestant, pro-gun control. I hate sausage. Yet I took a chance when he asked me out. Cautiously, I suggested we meet on a Sunday afternoon for coffee, not quite willing to give up a Saturday night for a man I wasn't sure of. When I got home from our first date, I thought my face would break from the smile that was stretched across it. He was hysterically funny, telling stories about barbacking and lifeguarding, making me shriek and cry and hold my stomach from laughter in the middle of a crowded Starbucks. He was interesting, carving a path that began in Ventnor, a shore town next to Atlantic City, moving to South Carolina for college and then up to Boston to break in to the pile driving business before moving to Gloucester City, a small town in South Jersey right outside of Philadelphia. But most of all, he listened to me. When I spoke, his eyes were on me, not wandering, not glazed over, but focused on me, paying attention. It sounds saccharine and corny, but he made me feel special. That was two years ago.

Our differences still exist. In some instances, they've mellowed, and in others they've hardened. We have had our share of fights and disagreements, usually stemming from my obsessive-compulsive nature rubbing raw against his relaxed attitude. At the same time, his calm has tempered me and my need for order has given him structure. It is

as if we are playing a game of tug of war. We are each on opposite ends of the rope, pulling at one another, but we need the tension in order to not fall down. We keep one another upright.

And so when Dave declares that he wants a baby, I fasten my lips into a tight smile and give a clipped nod. Here is another pull, another tug from his side. I yank back, telling him bluntly that kids have never been on my agenda. We make the other pause, a startling realization that life isn't the perfect fairy tale, that our planned marriage will not just be lazy afternoons on the beach and walks with the dog in the park, but also negotiation and compromise.

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His desire chips away at my ambivalence. I do not have the certainty he has, the certainty so many of my friends have, that parenthood is a non-negotiable, something they want, and therefore something they will have. In high school, my friend Allison and I would wait in line at the local movie theater's concession stand and watch the kids dart between adults carrying large sodas and too-full popcorn containers. The kids would shout, pull at their mother's coat, beg for attention. They would sidle up to us in line, keeping pace with us as we crept up to the counter, underfoot as we tried to walk to our theater. Allison and I looked at one another in shock, baffled by the scene before us, and agreed that kids weren't for us. She had her horses, I had my writing, and that would be enough. I can't speak for Allison anymore, but as the years passed I never felt my feelings change. As I moved farther from adolescence and my peers started to marry,

some even having babies, I never had a jolt of panic or a twitch of envy. Scrolling through Facebook, looking at the pictures of ultrasounds and baby's first birthday, my reaction was along the lines of "Wow, really? Why would you want to do that?"

Now, I try to imagine myself with a baby on my hip. Brief scenes float through my head: how I would look pregnant, having the baby baptized, passing the child from relative to relative at a family function. But I can't quite wrap my head around being a mother. It seems like such an adult thing to do, something completely out of my range. Dave, on the other hand, claims to be ready for fatherhood. I ask him why he wants to be a father and his voice takes a higher pitch, saying he cannot give me a list of reasons; he has no perfectly formed argument. He wants children, he wants to be a father, and that is the beginning and the end. There's a pause.

"I am apprehensive," he says.

I pounce. "Tell me why."

"It's a big deal. You don't know who these people will be. You don't know what you're going to get. It's a little scary."

I exhale, relieved to discover that a seed of doubt lives within Dave. I'm not a freak, not the only one who is scared. But his concern is a blip, a small itch that is easily scratched. Still, I caution him, asking if he knows what life will be like once we have a child, that our nights will be sleepless and our hair unwashed, our house a wreck and our nerves frayed. Nights out with friends will become nights in with the baby, our calendars will be filled with pediatrician appointments rather than restaurant reservations. The

picture in my head is not serene and happy. At work, in the grocery store, on the TV – all the images of motherhood I see, all the images I take in are of the frazzled, stressful moments. Joyful moments must exist, I'm sure. Occasionally I'll get a glimpse of this, when a mother bows her head to nuzzle her sleeping baby or when I see a child running, his arms outstretched, reaching for his parent - these moments lay heavy on my mind.

Naturally, I look to my mother when I debate motherhood. Growing up, I was lucky enough to have both parents present in my life, but my mother handled the grunt work. While my father coached Little League and volunteered as a timer at swim meets, it was my mother who left a full-time career in favor of a part-time job as a substitute teacher. Consciously choosing home over work, she decided along with my dad that we would cut back and live on my father's salary, and she would take jobs only when she had to, taking advantage of her parents' offer to babysit when needed. She stopped taking night classes, took a leave of absence from her church group so that she could make cupcakes for Halloween parties, drive my brother and me to choir practice, and help us figure out long division. I didn't think anything of these decisions at the time. Most of my friends had mothers who stayed home, so nothing seemed unusual or uneven. Now, I'm incensed. I think of what she had to give up and I'm angry that she had to do it, though still grateful that I was not a latchkey kid, that I had someone to pick me up from school and make me a snack.

Tentatively, I ask her about this, and she says that while she wishes she could have kept taking night classes and not put friendships on pause, she isn't bitter about the sacrifices she had to make for us. She reassures me that it wasn't our fault and she lays

no blame at our feet. I'm startled by this, thinking of the differences between us, because I am already pointing a finger, assigning my imagined son or daughter responsibility for what I'm sure I will lose. I think of what I want – to write, to travel – and already I feel troubled, sure that something will get the shaft. Someone – me, Dave, our kids – is sure to be disappointed, whatever I choose. And the responsibility will be mine, though I have no doubt that Dave will be a good – a great – father. At a recent pool party, Dave was busy cannonballing off the diving board into his uncle's pool, playing the cool big brother to two twelve year-old boys. The other adults had long ago forsaken this activity for another cocktail, but Dave picked cannonballs over martinis. As he bounded out of the pool toward me, looking for a towel and a kiss, I felt at ease, knowing that he would never dismiss his child, that he would always choose playing with his kids over idle chitchat.

While this reassures me, I still declare that I cannot be the primary soldier, the one constantly going into battle. He nods his head in agreement, tells me that he won't ask me to give up writing, that we will travel, that we will be equal partners in this venture. I nod in thanks and relief, but a part of me doesn't quite believe it.

My maternal grandfather once told me when I was young, maybe twelve or so, "having it all is bullshit." Cockily, I had announced to him that a woman could have it all – a family, a dream job, anything she wanted. Why I decided to bring this up, I don't know. But my grandfather didn't ignore me – he took me on. Never one to mince words, he said it was impossible, a pipe dream. You couldn't have everything – you had to pick. I argued with him, weakly, my brain overloading, soaking up this information only

reluctantly. I was too young to know the magnitude of his words. Now I am grown, and his words ring in my ears. The decisions I will need to make are never far from my mind.

Now, my choices are forever tangled up with Dave, and his choices with me. He makes my life infinitely more complicated, and that is both frustrating and exhilarating. Thinking about not being with him makes my knees weak, like I'll collapse right onto the sidewalk, and I know that he is who I want to spend the rest of my life with. With Dave I will have love, but no easy answers. We'll both just have to keep tugging on the rope.

Fireworks and Magic

Whenever Dave is in the mood to be ridiculous, which is often, he'll wave his hands in front of his face like he's Stevie Nicks and whisper the words "fireworks and magic!" before collapsing into giggles. Yes, this man, who is six feet tall, over 200 pounds, and can knock someone out with his pinky finger, giggles. His giggling gets me more than his goofy mantra, which essentially means to let go and enjoy the spectacle, whatever it happens to be at that moment.

Dave also happens to have a very special relationship with fireworks, if not magic. Though he'd probably argue that fireworks are magic, and so I will refine my initial statement to read that Dave has a very special relationship with both fireworks and magic. As a boy growing up on the Jersey shore, the Fourth of July was by far his favorite holiday, blowing Christmas, Halloween, and any other kid-centric holiday out of the water. When the Fourth rolled around, school was out and the beach was his playground. He spent hours diving in the waves as a young boy, his pale skin burnt to a blazing red crisp. Years later, he became a beach lifeguard, a sort of god-like figure to horny women everywhere. And yet, his true love was fireworks.

You cannot buy or discharge fireworks in New Jersey. The fireworks in Pennsylvania and Delaware are, to quote him, "weak. You can't buy anything there that you can blow a leg off with." Naturally, he finds that despicable. So, every summer, he and some of his friends go on a road trip to Maryland, where there's a huge warehouse right over the state border that specializes in selling fireworks to non-Maryland residents.

In the world of fireworks, that's a big thing – many stores aren't cool with their own residents blowing off their own limbs, so they'll only sell to the morons that will drive a couple hours and spend upwards of \$500 on explosives that are potentially life-threatening.

As someone who hates fire and cannot light a match, much less set off fireworks, this whole sub-world was not one with which I wanted to acquaint myself. Rather, I'd prefer to let the professionals do their business and sit on my beach chair a safe distance from any fireworks and magic happening in the sky.

Dave, clearly, disagrees with my sissy attitude. For him, the town-sponsored fireworks were great, but there was always more fireworks and magic to be had. Late at night on the Fourth, after the mommies and daddies had packed up their Madisons and Todds and headed to the local ice cream stand, Dave and his friends would troop down to the water's edge, fireworks in hand. Weeks of planning were about to pay off, as they staged elaborate shows. Pinks, blues, purples lit up the dark night sky, their colors mingling with the sparkling stars up above. Lights flashed, rockets popped, and the appreciative gasps of those who decided to stay for the encore were louder because of the dead silence of Dave and his friends. They treated this activity reverently. They were paying respect to their past, a time when setting off fireworks was the only thing to break up the hot summer days and lazy summer nights. They were celebrating their present, commemorating the fact they had all maintained their adolescent bonds and were now dealing with a decidedly different kind of growing pains, pains much more adult and heavy.

I only went to the beach with him once when he set off the fireworks, preferring all the times after that initial trip to stay up on the blacktop by the beach's entrance, letting him enjoy this ritual with his friends without the burden of making sure I was comfortable. When they came off the beach, their smiles stretched across their faces, their joy at setting off the fireworks matched only by the fact that the cops who inevitably came after someone called to complain about the noise were people they knew in high school, and ended with a nice little chat rather than any kind of law and justice smackdown the caller had probably wanted and expected. It was another kind of fireworks and magic, called connections and charm.

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Two year after we had start dating, Dave and I were down the shore for another epic Fourth of July weekend. This particular year the Fourth fell on a Sunday, giving everyone the chance to fully enjoy the day before we all crammed into our cars and jammed the roads heading back to reality. Dave and his boys had planned a huge feast – a cookout on the beach, especially in good weather, was a mandatory summer holiday event. Truthfully, I was never wild about this particular part of the plan. It always seemed that in their joy of making Jamaican jerk chicken and spicy Italian sausage that they forgot to make anything that hadn't once been alive, leaving me, a pseudo-vegetarian, digging into the potato chips for some kind of sustenance. But this was Dave's holiday, and so I went along with the plan. Usually.

This particular year I was more than a little cranky. I have never handled the heat well, often spending the months of July and August holed up in some darkened, air-conditioned room with a cold compress on my forehead. On this Fourth of July, the heat seemed to be even more oppressive; the ocean temperature, on the other hand, was icy, more suited for a January Polar Bear Plunge than a summer holiday. I packed tons of sunscreen, my big sun hat, and my Jackie O sunglasses and prepared to camp out for the eight-plus hours we would spend on the beach that day.

Dave delivered me to the beach with my reading material, and the promise that he'd be back shortly with our friends Jim and Mary, who were coming down for the day, along with their four young sons, ages six, five, four, and three. Yes, really. Even writing that sentence is hard; I can't imagine how the two of them do it, but they are excellent, loving, patient parents. Relatively oblivious when it comes to all things child-related, I couldn't picture how long of a day this would be for young children, which is kind of silly, really, as I knew this would be a long day for me, at a somewhat mature age of 26.

When I say it was a long day, I don't know if I am providing sufficient information. It was a dancing near the fire pit long. It was taking off halfway to Atlantic City long (true, we are the next town over, but my God that's a long walk). It was half a dozen near-drownings long (or at the very least, half a dozen total panic attacks after we were sure the kids had wandered into the ocean, chasing some matter of sea creature, and were now lying in some entombed old ship at the bottom of the Atlantic).

By the time we had returned to Dave's parents' house, which was our headquarters for the weekend, we were (miraculously) all in one piece, but (not so miraculously) utterly exhausted. Dusk was nearing, so Dave and I urged Jim and Mary to use the bathrooms and get their kids washed up and ready to go back down to the beach for the fireworks. Jim in particular did not want his kids to miss the fireworks (the point of the entire trip) and when I walked into the kitchen, desperate for a glass of water and then maybe something similar in color but a little stronger, I found him using the spray nozzle on the sink to wash down Aidan, the five-year-old, standing naked in the sink and giggling hysterically.

I looked at Jim. "Um...do you want a towel?"

"Nope. Got it covered." He brandished a roll of paper towels in one hand.

I gave him the thumbs up and slowly backed out of the room, where I went to sit down on the couch, a still mass in the midst of a chaotic circus of children. Around this time, my allergies began to act up. To everyone involved, it seemed like I was literally having an allergic reaction to children.

Once they left, I looked pleadingly at Dave. "Listen, your parents aren't here. We have the whole house to ourselves. Why don't we just shower, and then hang out and watch a movie? A little wine, a little time on the couch... Doesn't that sound totally wonderful?" My little plea was punctuated by huge, snotty sneezes. How could I not win his sympathy? How could I not win this battle?

His eyes grew big at my totally non-patriotic statement. “It’s the Fourth, though. Any other night, you got it. But tonight...we have to go to the boardwalk.”

I gave a deep, pitiful sigh. “Okay. If that’s what you really want.” I was sure this last sigh would ensure my victory. I was so wrong.

“Thanks, my little trooper.”

A half hour later, my hair still soaking wet from the shower, Dave hustled me out of the house. I was miserable – completely, totally, one hundred percent miserable. Normally, I can’t stand whiny, pouty people, and would be the first to tell some to snap out of it, to get a grip, to take a break. Nevertheless, I whined and pouted the entire way to the boardwalk, periodically stopping and asking him if he didn’t want to just take a detour and grab some ice cream before the stands were packed.

“We’ll get some ice cream later, my little sugars,” he said, half leading, half pulling me up the street.

By the time we got to the boardwalk, the fireworks were more than half finished, and I couldn’t help but feel bad for Dave, who waited all year for this day. This year, due to his increasingly busy work schedule, he hadn’t even had the time to drive to Maryland and buy his own supply of fireworks. Surprisingly, he handled this news better than I did, who was shocked at this lapse in tradition. “Are you going to be okay?” I had whispered dramatically.

He led me to the railing overlooking the beach, and propped himself behind me, with one leg in between mine, his arms wrapped around my waist. I tried to twist around to face him, wondering why he chose such an awkward position. Before I knew it was happening (partly because at this point my head was so congested it was becoming detached from my body), he was down on one knee, a ring box in his hands.

“Oh my God,” I murmured.

“Julie, will you marry me?”

Cliché though it is, the tears started to well in my eyes. I brushed them away, and looked up at the sky, where the grand finale was lighting up the sky. I looked back down into the eyes of this wonderful, wonderful man, who was looking back at me with the sweetest, shyest smile.

“Yes!” I whispered, before dropping to my knees and wrapping him in a hug. I kissed the side of his face. “Yes, yes, a million times yes.”

And Then We Got Married

Everything about planning a wedding is ridiculous. I knew this, up front, from hearing and seeing women whom I know to be rational beings turn into fire-breathing dragons from a heretofore-unknown level of hell. And it really is always women. Men might freak out about the booze quality, on the depth of the appetizer spread, but these episodes are short-lived blips. Women descend into madness for months; in some cases, years.) Despite this knowledge, I knew I wanted a wedding where Dave and I could celebrate our love and decision to try for lifelong happiness with our friends, family, and a few guests contractually obligated to be there. A quickie courthouse wedding or eloping to Las Vegas would be practical, yes. Romantic, no.

To be honest, I'm not the most romantic girl in the world. Valentine's Day ranks below Groundhog Day on my scale of importance. (Groundhogs are adorable. Seriously.) If my guy threw rose petals on the floor and lit candles everywhere, I'd be more concerned with the cleaning and safety aspects than to really enjoy the moment. But here was my chance to right this wrong. Here was my chance to publicly say, "I choose *him*. I love *him*." I wanted that moment.

And so, as the prayer goes, we descended into hell.

After our engagement, I wanted at least a month to process the huge step we were taking, and just bask in the glory of it all. However, when you tell people you just got engaged, they smile, hug you, congratulate you, and then want the down-and-dirty details. Not about the hot sex you had after he slipped the ring on your finger (in my

allergy-stricken case, I spent the night doped up on Benadryl with dirty tissues littering the bed). They want the stats on your wedding: the who was been answered (Dave and me); the what, where, when, and even possibly how are still unknown. They don't care that you just got engaged yesterday. It's like they think you're a desperate high school girl who buys the dress before she gets a date for the prom. In this case, unlike most others, I did not plan ahead. I have not had my wedding mapped out since I was six years old and watching Cinderella roll off with Prince Charming in a horse-drawn carriage. I had been engaged for twenty-four hours and already failed.

I hated feeling like I was behind the curve, so I plunged into serious Internet research. I subscribed to a bridal magazine, I went to a bridal expo, I went to a DJ demonstration. Did you know they had those? It's almost like speed dating. The DJs have a certain amount of time to show you their skills before you choose which one you want. It's a little disturbing, and probably the most fun I had with the whole process. Wedding planning can be overwhelming, but at my core, I'm a color-coded, binder dividers, label-making machine kind of gal. I was up for the challenge.

On the first day, Julie and Dave chose a venue.

Choosing a venue is probably the most important choice you'll make in the wedding planning process, right up there with finding the dress. It sets the tone for the whole day, and sets the tone for the bitchy comments you may receive – “I can't believe she chose that place” will either be snarky, because the place is tacky, or wistful, as in “that bitch stole the venue I wanted!”

Since Dave and I were paying for the wedding ourselves, there were definite financial parameters we had to consider, which ruled out the palatial city venues we checked out for shits and giggles – places like the Union League, famously featured in the Eddie Murphy/Dan Ackroyd movie *Trading Places* – or some of the more opulent hotels in Philadelphia. Sticking on the Jersey side of the river was a key move, but that meant we had to dodge some fake Greek statue bullets. I had been to some weddings – the weddings of lovely people who are my friends – where my “I can’t believe she chose that place” was one hundred percent snarky. Huge, glitzy chandeliers and faux Venus de Milos are just not my thing, and that severely limited our options.

Luckily, as part of my wedding planning gusto, I signed up for theknot.com, a website created entirely to aid in the wedding planning process. I clicked through their featured South Jersey venues, and found one that didn’t make me gag: a country club – an Arnold Palmer country club, ooh la la – a few towns over. I called for an appointment, where we were instructed not to wear jeans, as such poor-people clothing was not allowed on the premises.

At this time, Dave was still living his bachelor pad lifestyle. We would talk during the week, but due to our busy schedules, we wouldn’t usually see each other until Friday night, and then we would spend the weekend together. Friday night, while lying in bed, I reminded him about our early Saturday morning appointment at the country club, and that he couldn’t wear jeans.

“No problem,” he mumbled, his eyes already closed.

It should be pointed out that neither Dave nor I is an early riser. We manage to roll out of bed a little after six a.m. during the workweek, but we don't become functional humans until after 9 a.m., long after we're at our respective destinations (God help those who are on the road when we're driving to work). On the weekend, we revert back into mangy teenagers. Waking up before 10 a.m. is not an option. When we have appointments on Saturday morning, I will set the alarm like a good little soldier the night before, but we will pound the hell out of that snooze button in the morning. The morning of our country club visit was no different. When we finally dragged our asses out of bed, I gave Dave strict instructions to put on clothes that said "respectable and financially solvent." While I was waiting for him downstairs, he descended the stairs like a prom queen, but instead of a sparkly, tacky dress, he had on dirty, wrinkly khakis. (He also had a shirt on, but the shirt was fine, so I didn't want to point that out because I thought it would ruin the emphasis on the terrible, terrible pants he was wearing. But with this long parenthetical statement, I totally blew that. Whoops.)

"What are you wearing?" I stuttered.

He looked down. "Not jeans."

"That does not say respectable and financially solvent!" I shrieked. "Do you really have nothing else? Is this it?"

I knew by his look the answer was yes.

And that's how we found ourselves in the parking lot of an Old Navy, with Dave in his long briefs, changing hastily (not as hastily as I would have if I were in a public

space in my undies) out of his cruddy khakis and into clean, pressed ones, complete with store tags and a size sticker, ten minutes before our meeting with the club's events director. Whether it was the fact that we never wanted Dave to be half-naked in a parking lot again, or the fact that we could bring in our own alcohol for the reception, we were sold. We had found our venue.

On the second day, Julie and Dave found someone to marry them.

On the whole, my life with Dave had been the easiest, most uncomplicated relationship I've ever had. Like movie stars who in gossip magazines try to portray their relationship as the picture of normalcy, we would truly only fight over stupid stuff, like what to watch on TV, or what restaurant to go to. The one issue that settled in my stomach like a rock was our religious divide, a gap that will probably never be bridged. The "who will marry us?" argument would typically end with folded arms and pursed lips. There was never a consensus on where we would get married, or who would marry us.

A year and a half into our relationship, Dave decided he wanted to be confirmed into the Catholic Church. As a child, he was such a pain in the ass that his parents decided to spare both themselves and the priests the grief of corralling him into being a good, obedient Catholic, that they dismissed the CCD process entirely. And so, the most Catholic Catholic I have ever met wasn't an actual, to the core Catholic, and he wanted that to change. He had been going to the local church, St. Mary's, and had developed a totally platonic (I hope) crush on one of the ancient nuns, Sister Christine, who ran the

confirmation program. He approached her about being confirmed into the church, and even though it was late fall and the program had started in September, she agreed to let him in; assuming he could find a sponsor. (Come to think of it, maybe Sister Christine had a bit of a crush on Dave, too.)

His best friend Jim agreed to be his sponsor, and the first Sunday of his class, Dave came home with a pile of about twelve books with titles like *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Essentials of Faith*. I was in the living room, sitting on the couch, when he dumped the books next to me.

“What are you supposed to do with all these?” I asked.

“Read them,” he said, studying the titles.

“Do you have quizzes on them? Do you have to write papers? Is this like *for real* school?”

“Yeah, I think so. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out.”

I nodded my head; somewhat surprised that becoming a Catholic required so much effort.

True to his word, Dave figured it out, and that following May he was set to have his confirmation at his church’s Easter Vigil service. I like to fancy myself a supportive partner, so I insisted we make a big deal of things, even though I wasn’t thrilled that he was doing this, because he was burying himself deeper in his faith when I wanted to pluck him out of his and place him firmly in mine. Nevertheless, I knew he had worked

hard, and I felt the need to celebrate. We invited close family and his sponsor, Jim, and Jim's wife Mary to join us for a reception at a local restaurant after the service, which I assumed would be about an hour. God, I was so wrong. Protestants don't have Easter Vigil services, so I didn't really know what I was getting into, but these services are two hours minimum; plus, they light a fire at the back of the church – *they light a fire at the back of the church* – without really giving you warning that that's happening, and so you're sitting in your pew, facing front, and all of a sudden you whisper to the person sitting next to you, "Do you smell smoke?" If that person, who may or may not be your mother, is also Protestant, and therefore has no idea what's going on, and maybe a bit of a fire-phobe, then things might get out of hand before you realize the fire is on purpose, though you're still not sure what the purpose is.

Despite the fact that the church almost burns down, and the fact that everyone is confused when Monsignor Curran calls Dave "Peter" because that's the Catholic name he chooses for himself – another tradition that I'm confused by – and Dave's aunt starts whispering loudly, "He called Dave Peter! Julie, did you hear the priest call Dave Peter?" the service proceeds without a hitch. Dave/Peter's voice clearly rings out in the church when the priest calls on him, and I blink back tears, because I know that Dave did the right thing by being confirmed in the Catholic Church. Even though I wish he didn't want it, I could not have taken this away from him. He simply wanted it too much.

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You can imagine my surprise, then, when Dave easily agreed when I mentioned to him that I thought we should get married at the reception venue. While I had harbored a hope that we would marry at my childhood church, I knew it would be unfair to Dave, and I didn't feel like pushing this issue, especially when I knew there would be so many more issues to push. He had spoken of getting married in the Catholic Church, but knew that since I wasn't Catholic, we wouldn't be able to have a full Mass. He hid his deflation well, and so after he quickly and unexpectedly agreed to my proposition, I felt I had to play nice. In an effort to be bi-partisan, I suggested we not have a minister or a priest preside at our wedding, but instead hire a justice of the peace, or better yet, convert to Judaism so that neither one of us got our way. Plus, one of Dave's best friend's father is a rabbi. Deal.

Dave didn't go for either idea. Shocker.

I hesitantly suggested we see if one of the two ministers at my church would be willing to marry us. He bounced his head around in a way that wasn't really a nod for yes or a shake for no, so I made the call to my church's office, and found that the young female minister, the Reverend Kristine Aragon-Bruce, was available and willing, though we would need to meet with her a minimum of three times before the wedding for pre-marital counseling.

"Are you cool with this?" I asked, to the answer of more head bouncing.

The first time we met with Kristine, I was nervous, and felt like we were going to the principal's office where we'd have to confess Dave's Catholicism. Dave and I sat

quietly across the conference table from the bubbly Kristine, who grew serious as she asked me what about Dave attracted me to him.

I looked over at Dave, and began to smile. “He’s funny, and so kind, and intelligent...” with that, the floodgates opened and I ended up crying tears of happiness over how much I loved Dave. Essentially, the meeting ended up being a Kumbaya session, minus the guitar and campfire.

And that is how we found our minister.

On the third day, Julie found a dress.

Years ago, before I met Dave, I was helping my mom clean out a closet when we thought it would be a riot if I tried on her wedding dress. My parents married in 1977, but my mom has always been very low-key in terms of fashion, so she bucked the 70s trends in favor of a dress that was technically a mother of the bride’s dress. It was long-sleeved and high-necked, but in her wedding portrait she didn’t look like a Mormon prairie wife, like you may expect. She looked beautiful.

As I stepped into the dress and put my arms in the sleeves, my mom began to close the back zipper. She got about maybe halfway up, when she said, “Ugh, I think that’s it.”

“That’s it? It’s still midway down my back.”

“I know.”

To be clear, I am not a big girl. I'm rather thin, actually. All through high school I was teased over my stick-like limbs. Apparently, though, when my mom was married, she was the American version of Twiggy. I looked at myself in the mirror. The dress ended at my ankles, and the neck ended at my clavicle. It looked like I fell asleep as a child in her ivory-colored nightgown, had an overnight growth spurt that would land me in medical textbooks, and woke up two sizes too big for the dress. My first wedding dress experience ended with me near tears and my mom in hysterics. Awesome.

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After Dave and I got engaged, my mom and I hit up a local bridal expo, which included a bridal fashion show. I was most excited about this part, partially because it meant I could finally sit after hours of walking, and partially because I like to pretend I'm a bit of a fashionista, even though I look schlubby most of the time. (I subscribe to *Vogue* and think Anna Wintour is a hoot, so it counts.) When the models came out, my face fell. If the dress wasn't puffy, it was slinky. If the model didn't look like a princess from MTV's *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, she looked like a skank. The options were not great.

As an avid watcher of *Say Yes to the Dress*, I knew there was a dress out there for me. I just might have to try on hundreds of dresses, travel thousands of miles to find it, and shell out what's equivalent to a down payment on a house to get it.

The wedding was only getting closer, though, and I knew enough that waiting until the last moment would be a disaster, so I sucked it up and made an appointment at a

local bridal salon. When I sat down with the “consultant” – I love how in the wedding industry, everything is bumped up from what it actually is to something that sounds professional and vaguely pretentious – I gave her an ad for Estee Lauder perfume, with a gorgeous woman in a simple and elegant dress, surrounded by adorable puppies.

“This is the kind of dress I’m looking for,” I said. “Bonus points if it comes with puppies!”

She looked at me and didn’t crack a smile. I am assuming she knew it was a joke, and that I meant puppies as in small dogs, not puppies as in breasts. I already had enough breasts for the both of us.

She disappeared with my magazine ad; leaving me to undress and have my mom help me put the special bra bustier on. I awkwardly sat in the dressing room, half-naked, thinking I was really glad I shaved my legs the night before when Diana came back with five dresses held high above her head. I may cross my eyes at their titles, but bridal consultants have some serious upper body strength.

When I put on the first dress (a long, drawn-out process that involved me trying to be as modest as possible while having a stranger wrestle me into a gown) and looked into the mirror, I took a long moment to take it all in. I was waiting for tears or shortness of breath or hives or some kind of reaction that I thought I was supposed to have. Wasn’t the dress supposed to make it all feel real? Wasn’t the dress supposed to crystallize this moment, to represent this huge step I was about to take?

Whether the answers to those questions are yes or no, I felt vaguely excited, like I always do when I'm trying on something that could be mine with the easy swipe of my credit card. I looked at my mom, expecting her to be dissolving into a mess of tears like they do on TV, but she just sat primly in her chair, looking relaxed, like she was thinking about what to have for dinner.

I felt like I had to say something. "Wow. It's really nice."

My mom and the consultant took my lead and began to chirp their thoughts, but I couldn't help but feel thrown off by my totally uninspired response to the whole wedding dress process. I knew that I wanted to marry Dave, that marrying Dave was the right decision to make, and my lack of enthusiasm over the dress process was not a sign that I was making a mistake. But still. I was missing the moment I felt had been promised to me, and that was a tough thing to accept.

The dress I ultimately chose was in that first pile Diana brought in. The color was "diamond white," strapless, with soft folds of fabric all the way down the dress. We added a sequined belt, a traditional, "fingertip" veil (there should be a wedding lingo dictionary), and some teardrop diamond earrings. I don't consider myself superstitious, but I do consider myself neurotic, so I felt I had to follow the "something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue" rule or some terrible tragedy would befall me and I would spend the rest of my life wondering if I could have prevented the disaster if I had just followed that God damn rule. The new was the earrings, the old was my shoes, the borrowed was my mom's diamond necklace (the diamond was from her

engagement ring from her first husband, whom she divorced many years before she met my father, so maybe we were putting some bad karma in the room with that decision, but the necklace was pretty, so I wore it), and the blue was some ribbon my mom sewed into my garter.

Dave and I had decided months before our wedding that we'd do all the group photos prior to the ceremony, so we could enjoy the cocktail hour and reception to the fullest. There would be no big reveal at the altar, but we both wanted a big reveal that would be private. (Except for the two photographers and the hotel staff looking on. Very private.) Dave and I booked separate rooms at the hotel where we had reserved a block of rooms for our guests, and on the morning of the wedding, we each got dressed with our bridesmaids and groomsmen, respectively. As my mom helped me into my dress, my friends all oohed and ahed their appreciation. Their compliments helped bolster my confidence, and as I left my room to meet Dave in the hotel lobby (my photographer documenting my every step), I could feel my heart start to flutter. Here were the tears, the shortness of breath, and the hives I'd been expecting when I tried on dresses. They weren't for a piece of clothing; they were for him.

When I rounded the corner, I could see Dave in the lobby, his back to me. His broad shoulders were covered in a black tux, and I longed to wrap my arms around his shoulders, to lay my head on his chest. I took slow steps toward him, oblivious to the hotel patrons who were pointing out the random bride hanging out in the Courtyard Marriott lobby, until I got close enough to him. "Dave..." I squeaked out.

He turned around, his mouth opened up, and he said, “Wow.”

That was all I needed. It was the right dress.

On the fourth, fifth, and sixth days, Julie and Dave got a florist, a DJ, invitations, liquor, bridesmaid dresses, tuxes for all the guys, decided on the food we’d serve, took engagement photos, booked a honeymoon to Napa and Sonoma, etc., etc., etc.

I have no good stories about these things, except for when Dave decided he liked blue flowers (blue flowers?) and told the florist this, after we had talked for a half-hour about having red, yellow, and orange flowers. The florist basically told Dave to stop talking (get it, girl! She earned total brownie points with me) and Dave told her a bouquet she showed us looked like weeds. A throw-down in a flower shop. Nice.

At the insistence of my parents, we went to a travel agent to book our honeymoon. When we got to the glass building, we could see agents and their clients through the double doors, so they were clearly open. Dave and I tried to open the door. We couldn’t. We pushed and pulled. Nothing. We started to argue about how to get in the building. People who could figure out how to get in the building started to look at us. We then tried the other door. It opened. This is a true story.

On the seventh day, Julie and Dave got married.

The day of the wedding, I woke up in my hotel room, and looked out at the courtyard. The sky looked like a little gray, but it didn’t seem like it was the nor’easter that the asses on The Weather Channel kept predicting in the week leading up to October

29th. I quickly got dressed and went out to the lobby to meet my mom and bridesmaids so we could travel to the salon in Philadelphia.

“It doesn’t look too bad out there!” I chirped as we hustled into the car. “I think it’s going to be fine. I totally shouldn’t have freaked out all this week. The weathermen are morons. I mean, this is New Jersey. It’s October. It doesn’t snow in New Jersey in October!”

It totally snowed in New Jersey in October. By the time we left the salon, the streets were running with snowy slush and we were being pelted with precipitation. I breathed deeply, trying not to have a total panic attack as my dad led me into the car with an umbrella protecting my veil (I did feel a little bit like P. Diddy, who has his own umbrella carrier, so that was kind of cool). On the way home, I tried to just keep my mind on the schedule, and not the fact that the world decided to end on my wedding day.

Even though I was not the kind of girl who had dreamed of her wedding since she was a little girl, once it became clear that Dave and I would get engaged, I knew I wanted a fall wedding. Fall is my favorite season. The trees bursting with leaves as bright as gold and as red as a shiny apple are to me as beautiful as any bouquet of flowers, and I thought it would serve as a perfect backdrop to our nuptials. Plus, summer was out because I hated being hot. Spring was out because of allergy season, when I become a big soggy tissue. We dismissed winter because we didn’t want to deal with a blizzard ruining everything. Obviously, the joke was on us. The country club had a beautiful outdoor deck that our guests could spill out onto during cocktail hour, and there was a

long bridge where we were planning to take different wedding shots. To say I had a mini-tantrum at the unfairness of it all would be quite generous.

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We still got married, so technically the day was a success. Truly, once I let go of my preconceived notions of what the day should be, I loved every minute of it. The photos, all taken inside the country club, turned out gorgeously. The country club had beautiful leather sofas and chairs, lush tapestries and drapes, and our expert photographers were pros in directing the whole un-photogenic bunch on how to unleash their inner supermodel.

All our guests who had said they would be there, were there, despite the less-than-desirable driving conditions, and celebrated with gusto. The dance floor was packed the entire night, with Dave and me particularly letting loose, ecstatic to finally be married. We literally danced for the entire four-hour reception and as a result were incredibly sore for the entire honeymoon. This is not necessarily a great condition to be in on your honeymoon for obvious reasons, but it makes for a cute story.

My cousin's husband gave Dave and me a great piece of advice before the wedding: "Take a moment to find one another, put your arms around each other, and just look at all your friends and family who came to celebrate." Toward the end of the night, Dave and I did just that. We took a deep breath, laced our arms around one another's backs, and stared out at the sea of faces dancing to *Unchained Melody*. As I looked at our guests, I listened to the lyrics: "Oh, my love, my darling/I've hungered for your touch/A

long, lonely time...I need your love.” I smiled, thinking how appropriate this song was – I had waited for my love, and now he was here, beside me. I needed his love, and now I had it.

Home

When Dave and I got married, he essentially lived in a hovel. While we were still dating, I visited him and stayed over on the weekends, I made it clear that I would not live in his house full-time. We had decided that after the wedding and honeymoon, we'd look for a contractor to renovate Dave's home from top to bottom in order so we could sell it and eventually settle in a neighborhood more family-friendly. Despite my earlier ambivalence, and after a lot of discussion and thought, Dave and I plan to begin a family (win for him), but not for at least three years (moderate win for me). From Dave's house, there are three bars within walking distance....not exactly where I'd love my eventual toddler tottering to when his milk bottle was empty.)

I also made it clear that we had to live together after we got married; if we didn't, we essentially just blew thousands of dollars on a really fancy party that celebrated our short-distance relationship. At the time we got married, I was still living in my childhood home with my parents. And so, Dave and I spent the first year of our marriage living with my parents. A newlyweds' dream.

Due to the cost of the renovation, and the fact that Dave was still paying the house's mortgage, we ruled out an apartment, which is why living with my parents was the most cost-effective option. This was the justification we constantly gave when people looked at us in terror and shock when we said we were going to live with my mom and dad; on the whole, the reactions we received made it seem like we said we liked to drown kittens for fun.

The upside was that I never had a bad relationship with my parents. Not to brag, but my brother and I were the kind of kids parents dream of having. We never talked back, always did our homework, and never came home drunk, stuffed in a shopping cart. Also, my parents and Dave genuinely liked one another. Dave could really turn on the charm when he needed to, and his sweet smile and compliments won my mother over immediately. For my dad, Dave was the other son he wished he had. My dad had a great relationship with my brother Nick, but he was still his father. Dave was a son-type figure that my dad could just be friends with; it was like Dave took my dad back fifty years, when he was still in his twenties and cruising for chicks. It was an automatic cross-generation bromance.

My penny-pinching parents were all for savings, and didn't blink when we asked if we could bunk with them while we renovated Dave's house in Gloucester City. They knew my feelings on the place (at that point, the whole world knew my level of detestation), so they weren't surprised when I politely (or really, impolitely) said no, thank you, to living in the wood-paneled, dropped-ceiling, dirty-carpeted rowhome.

Once Dave and I arrived home from our honeymoon in Napa and Sonoma, the integration process started. His dog Princess had since relocated to Ventnor, and lived with his parents. It was actually a perfect situation because both Princess and Dave's dad hated being alone, so now they had constant companionship. With Princess taken care of, Dave only needed to move his clothes and books, and to get his much beloved TempurPedic mattress to my parents' house. Dave is like the princess in the fairytale *The Princess and the Pea*; he will complain that he can't sleep and that his muscles ache if the

mattress isn't exactly to his specifications. I, on the other hand, could sleep comfortably on a pile of shoes.

We settled into a routine. Dave and I both worked full-time, plus I went to graduate school, so our hours at home were fairly limited. My retired parents did nearly all the chores – laundry, grocery shopping, cleaning the bathrooms, and so on, though Dave and I would pitch in when we were around. Basically, even though it was not an ideal situation, Dave and I were living like rock stars, with every need anticipated and met hours before we even knew what we wanted or needed. It was kind of awesome.

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Once the Gloucester house was finished, it was like we had razed the old house and replaced it with something entirely new. The wood paneling and dropped-ceiling were no more; both were replaced with actual sheetrock, painted a warm ivory. The dirty carpet was ripped up and in its place was Brazilian cherry engineered wood flooring. We had new windows, new doors, new everything. It was an undeniable success, and it checked all the boxes I had created in my terms of conditions that had to be met in order for me to move in and feel comfortable. I couldn't stall any longer. We were moving.

I grew up in Cherry Hill, a sprawling suburb about fifteen minutes outside of Philadelphia, on the New Jersey side of the river. It consisted mostly of houses, schools, places of worship, and shopping centers (we can boast one of the first malls in America, a statement equal parts pride and shame. Convenience! The death of culture!) The sprawl made it hard to bike anywhere, and in our particular development, there were no kids my

brother's or my age to play with, so my parents had to cart us around to previously scheduled playdates. It was a very orderly way to grow up, and I know that affected my OCD-type behaviors. To me, spontaneity is a dirty word.

Gloucester City is a small town located under the Walt Whitman Bridge, which connects New Jersey to South Philly, home to Philly's sports stadiums, the famous 9th Street Italian Market, and Rocky. It's a straight shot down Broadway from Camden, which holds America's titles for both most impoverished city and most dangerous city. For the most part, Gloucester has managed to protect itself from Camden's plight, but it's obvious that the lack of decent jobs has taken its toll on this small city. Houses show their age, old cars are parked and never moved, and people gather on stoops in the middle of the work week, with no where to go but to their neighbor's house, for a smoke and a bit of neighborhood gossip.

I hold an emotional tie to Gloucester City because it's the town of my beloved maternal grandmother's birth. She lived here for the first two years of her life, on Paul Street, not far from Dave's house on Water Street. I occasionally drive down Paul Street, trying to guess which house was hers before she moved to Camden to live with her grandparents after her mother's death. In some ways it's a bit unsettling to think that I'm back where she started. I feel like I've gone backward instead of forward. I feel confused, not sure where *my* home is, where *my* place is. I feel like it should be anywhere where Dave is, but I can't seem to get settled.

We moved into Dave's Gloucester house right after Christmas, before the New Year, which is apparently when I make all major decisions. We bought a bedroom set at a local furniture store, from which we received a fifty percent off coupon a week after we made our purchase where we got a measly ten percent off. The bedroom set purchase sent me into a tailspin, mostly because it seemed like such an adult thing to do. I had been married for over a year, but I still felt like a kid who needed to talk with her mom before doing anything that could possibly be regrettable. Buying a bedroom set meant I was setting down roots, that I was making a very vocal, public decision that I would be sleeping in this bed, putting my clothes in these drawers, and that I was an adult who would of course do these things in a house or an apartment that was my home.

Over the next few weeks, we unloaded our boxes, and began to finally unload the gifts we had received at my bridal shower and our wedding. As we stacked our plates on our kitchen shelves and assembled our wine cabinet, I began to see the empty house take on the shape of a home, but I still felt disconnected to it. I felt transient, like I was just passing by and would not be stopping long enough to make any of this matter.

Dave was thrilled to be back in his house. We occasionally popped in during the renovation, and I remember how his eyes danced as he looked at the new porcelain tile we had put down for the kitchen floor, as he looked at the actual door that was installed for the bathroom - before there was an accordion door that gave absolutely no privacy. On one of our early dates, Dave invited me over for homemade margaritas and enchiladas. While I hung out with him in the kitchen, I asked where the bathroom was. He pointed to a room right off the kitchen, complete with the accordion door. Now, all I

had to do was pee, but it was still a little early for him to *hear* me pee. So, I just smiled my thanks and proceeded to hold it for the next few hours.

He was so excited that his house was finally in tip-top shape that he wanted the chance to experience it before selling it all to someone else. I was not nearly as excited, but I knew living with my parents had been challenging for him, and I couldn't hold out anymore.

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Our first few months of living in Gloucester City were happily parent-free. Dave, who is part nudist and prefers to walk around in his underwear, was happily strutting his stuff again. I gloried in the fact I could watch TV or read or paint my nails for hours without anyone interrupting me to ask why I was still painting my nails after many hours dedicated to the task. The simple fact that we were alone, together, was thrilling, and I was grateful that this house could provide us with that pleasure.

One night, as we were settling on to the couch for dinner and a movie, Dave suddenly announced he thought we should start house hunting. This had been the plan all along, but the abruptness of his decision threw me.

“Yeah, but, we still need to fix that leak in the bathroom ceiling. We can't put this house on the market until that's repaired,” I protested. “We wanted to sell this one before we buy another, remember?”

“No, I know, but I still think we should start looking. There are some really nice

properties available and interest rates are low. If we wait, we could miss a really good opportunity.”

I sighed, knowing that once Dave is convinced of something, our fate was sealed.

An hour later, a realtor called us. Dave took the call and we scheduled an appointment to see three houses in a nearby town.

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Many Saturdays later, we stumbled upon a house in Cherry Hill that seemed perfect. The house was a Colonial, with beautiful hardwood floors, an open kitchen, four bedrooms, and a large backyard, perfect for Dave to engage in his passion for gardening.

As I walked around the house, going in and out of the bedrooms and the shared upstairs bathroom, I quietly tried to see this as my home, a place where I would raise my children, a place where I would grow old with Dave. (I’m not gonna lie, I totally had some morbid thoughts, too, like “one of us is probably going to die here.”) Dave came up the stairs and I met him on the landing.

“What do you think?” I whispered, trying to have a private moment while the realtor loitered in the background. “Do you think this is it? Can you see us in this house, raising a family?”

Dave didn’t even have to speak. He looked at me, and I knew this was the right house for us, a house that would be a home. I can’t even put it into words; after all, we’d have the same furnishings and pictures in this house that we currently have in the

Gloucester City house. We wouldn't be making any drastic changes to transform this house into a home. It just felt right.

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Standing in that house, looking at my husband, thinking about our future, I felt both connected and detached to that girl who sat in a Wendy's five years ago, eating ketchup-drenched French fries and feeling like her life needed a major jolt. I love that girl. I love that she was brave enough to ignore her shyness and leap into crazy world of Internet dating. I love that she was persistent, and that she believed in love enough that she made it her mission to find it.

In some ways, too, I find it hard to remember that point of my life. I have been so swallowed up by my love, so filled by it, that my days of loneliness are a fading memory. Though I know that girl would have been ecstatic to know she had found love, I wonder if she'd be surprised at the relationship's course? I wonder if that girl knew that her post-modern love would actually turn out to be a traditional love story? Would she have cared?

I doubt it. I know something about that girl, and to her, love is love. However you find it, however you pursue it, love in whatever form it takes is perfect. You just have to find your match.