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Kissing in the Rain

Chloe Hechter

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Kissing in the rain is romantic, but we didn't kiss in the rain. We never kissed at all. It was more of an emotional affair, if it was anything—a psychological affair, even. We just sat on a bench in Riverside Park on a rainy summer day, me suppressing this absurd and frankly unwarranted love I felt for a boy who had run late because he'd been up till three the night before reading about philosophy on the Internet. He was, by any definition, my first love—I pretended to hate him to anyone who bothered to ask, he had played my boyfriend in a school play, and when he texted me, I would scream into my pillow, hoping that the plush filling would somehow absorb my feelings, my angst, and my extremely apparent virginity. I would say that I'm upset that we never kissed because doing so might

have provided some much-needed relief for my frustration, but I'm glad we didn't—who knows what would have happened if we had. Maybe it would have ruined this picturesque rainy park bench that I'm making sound a lot more idyllic than it actually was.

Before I never saw him again, he left a note in my high school yearbook. It wasn't a love note, but it was certainly something that stuck with me so much that it still plays over and over in my mind during moments of anticipation or importance. The note read:

Chloe,

Keep having a big heart and your intense motivation. And don't try too hard. Let people come to you. They will if you make sure you're doing what's right.

So, to recap: I was eighteen, I did musical theater for fun, and the boy I liked had just told

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me, “Don’t try too hard.” But I don’t *try too hard*. I only *try too hard* when I get insecure. And when it comes to love, I’m really fucking insecure.

~ * ~

From a young age, I romanticized *everything*. In third grade, I called myself a “love doctor” and tried to set my classmates up with one another, desperate to create the next great American love story. I was obsessed with my babysitter’s engagement and took legitimate offense when her now husband didn’t let the nine-year-old she babysat for help plan it. Romanticizing everything is never dull, but it’s incredibly disappointing. If the story or the person you’ve built up in your head doesn’t turn out the way you doodled it in your diary or sang about it in the shower, you may find yourself fatally attempting to romanticize watching *How I Met Your Mother*

alone in your room on a school night.

Sag Harbor, Long Island, is one of my favorite places in the world. The summer before I went to college, I was being a pensive eighteen-year-old girl in her high-ponytail phase, just watching the people pass by the little book shop on Main Street—a couple walked by holding hands, and the girl was kind of leaning up against her boyfriend’s arm. Everything about them looked so calm, happy, and effortless—meanwhile, I was anxious, lost, and trying *way* too hard. I knew from that moment that *that* was what I wanted: to stroll hand in hand with someone down a pretty summer block on a pretty summer day. I invented “The Main Street Test”—from then on, a means of determining whether someone was worth my time. Could I picture them holding my hand on Main Street?

Layout by Rachel Raposas. Art by Christine Raposas.

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Kissing in a college dorm isn't so romantic, but we kissed in my college dorm. It was my first night there, and I was pretty much convinced that I had just met the love of my young life at a party for Jewish students. I'd say it's not as lame as it sounds, but I was far more focused on the cute boy who had his hand in my back pocket than the basement filled with sweaty, beer-soaked college freshmen, so I'm not one to gauge the lameness quotient. Suddenly I was no longer a frizzy-haired 4' 11" theatre nerd who cried in the locker room, but a hot, savvy college girl who was making out with a cute boy on her first night of school. He basically caught my eye across a crowded room, and from then on, I let myself be in love with a scenario that I was nearly convinced I had made up in my head. And so what if he never treated me like anything more than a friend after that one night? He'd come around, right?

In the meantime, while you wait for him to "come around," what do you do? You go out of your way to try to prove that you've become this new woman when really you're still a little girl. You're not cool and confident, even though you try to be—you're still terrified of everything and naïve enough to believe that even though he's dating someone else now, she's just the antagonist in the story who comes along before you live hap-

pily ever after. You wear low-cut tops and makeup to class, even though that isn't you, and you start to feel as if you can't even trust your close friends. You think you've moved up in the world because at least you *did* kiss and at least you never told anybody that you hated him like you did with boys in high school—but by allowing yourself to be vulnerable instead of deflecting, you allowed *him* to break your heart. You know you have to move on. But for someone who romanticizes everything, sometimes just moving on when you have a fairy tale playing in your mind is impossible.

~ * ~

I met a boy on the first day of sixth grade, and I'm pretty sure he was shorter than I was at the time. I'll never forget when he broke the awkward 11-year-old silence by saying, "This is like rehab!" and then the teacher had to explain what rehab was to the class. I was at his sports themed bar mitzvah, he was at that same party on my first night of college, and he could be seen exchanging pleasantries with my mother on my back deck one summer almost ten years after we met.

That summer, he and I stopped for ice cream on Main Street. That should be romantic, right? I tried to be graceful as I ate a mediocre cup of mango sorbet that was really just sugar and water by the time we



drove away. We moved through winding backroads for a while, and as we passed trees and estates and cornfields, I thought about how he'd known me when I wore thick prescription Ray-Ban Aviators and a neon pink shirt that said peace, love, cupcakes.

"This reminds me of the drive up to camp," I mused.

He scoffs. Every time I say anything, he scoffs as if to say, "Oh, Chloe. You just say the darndest things."

"Where did *you* go to camp?"

"Theatre camp. Duh."

"Okay, *theatre girl*." I hit him a little. "Watch it, I'm driving."

"You know I'm not *theatre girl* anymore!!"

He pulled over into the parking lot of a golf course somewhere between Sag Harbor and East Hampton. What looked like miles of emptiness at the time wound up being the beginning of the trail for my next family hike, but in the dark, I never would have noticed. He had teased me about not being able to drive while we moved through backroads on the way over, but I always thought of the teasing as older-brotherly.

"If I were to kiss you..." he started.

"I didn't know you thought of me like that," I said, the *trying too hard to romanticize* coming out like word-vomit.

"Maybe I didn't before, but I am now," he

said. "But I'm not just using you. If—if you think that."

"I've never hooked up in a car before. I'm from the city. It's not like we just—hook up on subways."

"I'm from the city too. I can actually *drive*."

I playfully hit him again.

"What's with all of the hitting?"

What was with it was that I was just then discovering that I wanted him to kiss me for a lot longer than I initially realized, and I wasn't mature enough yet to know how to cope. There comes a moment before every first kiss that there is just nothing left to say, and you can either run away or lean in. What was I supposed to do, jump out the window and play a round of midnight golf? In a moment of intense bravery, I crawled over the glove compartment so we could share the driver's seat.

Not even 24 hours after the back-seat-golf-course-extravaganza, in true sitcom fashion, we had a family barbeque. I took to his thirteen-year-old sister for a bathing suit, and the A-cup desperately trying to support my solid C-cup, the fact that I didn't eat all day so I could look skinny, and my drinking copious amounts of frozen vodka-lemonade to overcompensate for my discomfort were already shaping up to be a recipe for disaster.



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I struggled to appear even remotely seductive as I sat on the edge of his parent's hot tub, dangling my feet over the edge, and watching him sip on a hard seltzer as though nothing had ever happened. I was starving, spilling out of a prepubescent girl's bikini, and starting to feel the alcohol, which was probably the only thing I'd consumed since the mango sorbet the night before.

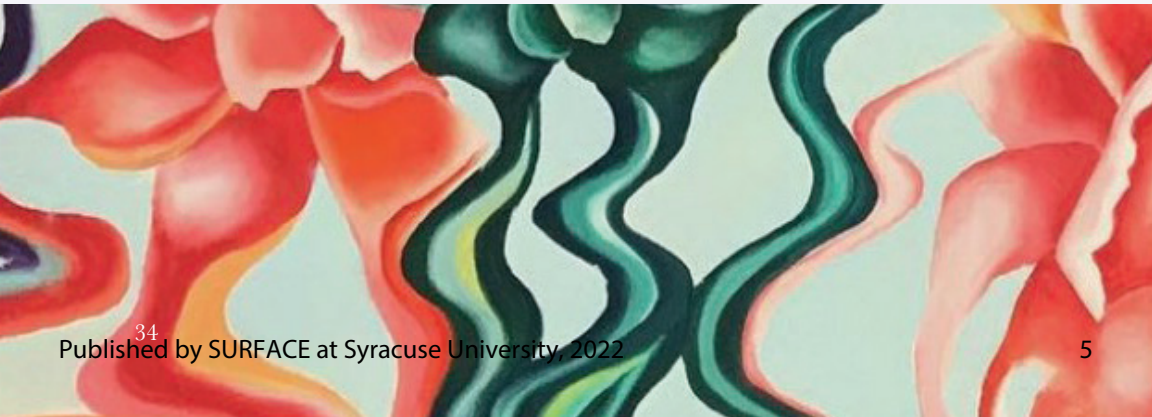
In a sorry attempt at flirting, I stuck my leg out to reach his. I was beginning to feel dizzy, and the thought of the winding backroads, the lack of food, and the way he kissed were playing like an overwhelming merry-go-round in my mind. I felt myself start to teeter over the edge, and I fell right into the hot tub. And he just laughed. Despite our shocking chemistry and years of unspoken tension, it's safe to say that he did not fall madly in love with me.

There was that yearbook note coming back to haunt me—"Don't try too hard." Because I knew that my acute overcompensation for what was sort of the norm for a couple of 19-year-olds was a demonstration of an over-the-top way-too-hard try to make someone like me who probably did before I made an idiot of myself to impress him. A mature person would know better. A girl with a lot of experience, I thought, would have laughed it off with him, ate and drank

a normal amount, then maybe pulled him away from the family fun and asked for a room tour or a ride home. But in that instance, I wasn't mature. When it really comes down to it, immaturity comes from a lack of self-assurance. The "growing pains" that we experience stem from inner conflict more so than they do from the actions of others, even if we're struggling to understand why someone doesn't like us, why someone is no longer our friend, or why we love someone. What we're really trying to understand is ourselves, and I wasn't quite there yet.

~ * ~

When the first boy I kissed in college invited me over one fateful Thursday night, I thought it was romantic. There's nothing romantic about being the Notorious Rebound Girl, but at the time, I didn't have a clue. I was a virgin in headlights. I should have run the moment I saw the unwashed gray sheets, the McLovin' poster, a stray white Converse sneaker lost by the desk without a counterpart. I should have bolted when his roommate started blasting Baby Shark from the next room, but when you love someone enough, you'll forgo rationality just enough to allow a song about hunting sharks set the tone for what some might call your official entrance into womanhood.



The boy who I'd been in love with for a calendar year got up without a moment's hesitation, stretched, and threw on a Belmont High School sweatshirt. He didn't offer me one, of course, so I was just there, in what is arguably the most vulnerable state a young formerly half-virgin woman can find herself. Baby Shark and the last hour and a half played over in my mind as he uttered the sentence that would go on to radiate in my mind at every pseudo-intimate encounter since: "huh. You know...you're the only girl I've ever fucked *casually*."

I'm not a casual girl. I would say I'm the complete opposite. I can't bring myself to meet someone on a dating app, I wipe down my doorknob twice a day, and I do my homework a week before the due date. But there I was, 10 p.m. on a Thursday night, sockless on South Campus, wondering what I could have possibly done to deserve the new title of "serial monogamist's only casual fuck." How was I supposed to respond? My initial reaction was, of course, to laugh—it was all I could do to keep from crying—and I went on, repressing this heartbreaking experience and reassuring myself of the fact that though this encounter had been doomed from the beginning, I had gratified the innocent little freshman girl who had fallen in love with the

first boy she had kissed in college.

For weeks afterward, I tried to find the somewhat redeeming moments in what was really just humiliating, somehow convincing myself that he *did* love me—he was just too scared to admit it. But that wasn't true. A few weeks later, I got into a car accident and felt compelled to text him just to say that it had happened, I was fine, and I was checking in because I cared about him. The response I received was "glad u r ok." He began dating someone else weeks later, and as any heart-broken girl should, I threw up in a sink, cut my hair, got a piercing, lost five pounds, and became the editor in chief of my school magazine. Not all at once, but you get the picture.

~ * ~

Kissing a boy whom you went to camp with while sitting on a radiator in a vestibule shouldn't be romantic, but it kind of was. I told everyone that we'd kissed on my roof, but the roof was really too cold, so we wound up sitting on top of the heating vent in the vestibule, right in front of a camera from which the doorman could have easily been watching. It was romantic because we had just agreed to share octopus on a first date and we liked making fun of the same people. It was sort of a lost connection from summer camp, the kind where we were in a picture together



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and didn't know it, and where my brother knew his sister and I'd seen him play his guitar, and he'd seen me shave my legs on my bunk porch, but neither of us really noticed.

He was someone I went from never thinking about to thinking about more than I thought about anyone else. I agreed to go out with him in the first place only because my mom thought it would be good for me, since I'd kind of been holed up in my room ever since my non-breakup. I told my friend who'd kissed him at camp that maybe I'd kiss him so we could bond about it (because there is truly no stronger bond than that of two girls who have kissed the same boy), but that would be *it*. And less than two minutes into the date, I found myself thinking that if he didn't kiss me by the end of the night, I'd just kill myself. He even said he'd been to Sag Harbor—a restaurant on Main Street, to be exact.

~ * ~

Kissing in the rain is romantic, and we kissed in the rain. But this wasn't romantic at all. I wouldn't have even kissed him on my own, but I told my best friend, Phoebe, I'd kiss my sorority-date-night date if she kissed hers, and she had a lot more confidence than I did. Phoebe dragged her date off to the side and made all the moves on her own—I could never do that—and while they kissed, my date and I waited patiently

for the DJ to pack up and go so he could kiss me without anyone watching. It happened to be raining, but we were outside a Japanese restaurant in the middle of Syracuse on a Tuesday, and he was the social chair of a low-tier fraternity.

It's hard to find genuine romance in college. People kiss in sticky-floored houses and twin beds with unwashed sheets, and you're lucky if it doesn't taste like cheap beer or blue raspberry nicotine. Romantic moments are few and far between, and I find that to be incredibly sad—but maybe it's the apparent lack of romance on a day-to-day basis that makes the little things, like forehead kisses or sharing appetizers, all the more special.

Kissing someone at a frat party is never romantic, and neither was this. I choked down a disturbing concoction of tequila and grenadine and half-heartedly listened to a boy with three brain cells go on about “his boys” and how he thought we had “unfinished business.” After about half an hour of mindless conversation and his hands around my waist, I kind of thought, *Fuck it*, and I let him kiss me. It was, without question, the worst kiss I've ever had aside from maybe the kiss in my senior musical which gave me a low-grade fever. Immediately I grabbed this poor dude's face, anxiously apologized, and, oh, yeah, ran out of the house crying.

I've always felt as if something is missing. It seems stupidly ironic that someone so obsessed with romance hasn't ever so much as had someone *like her back*. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder if it's because I look like I'm fourteen or maybe because I *think* I look like I'm fourteen and so I try to overcompensate by seeming like I know everything when I really only know as much as the 20-year-old (albeit, with above-average intelligence) that I am. Am I doing something wrong?

After the frat party, my friend Bridget followed me into the parking lot, where it was far too cold for May and far too embarrassing for me to be in a fit of hysterics. But I wasn't crying because of the stupid boy in the frat or my date night date or even because of Baby Shark Boy—I was crying because I felt totally stranded, totally used, and totally alone. I was disappointed. Bridget told me that romanticizing everything was, in part, why my friends loved me—I kept things interesting—but the more pressure I put on myself and everyone else to romanticize absolutely everything, the more disappointed I would become. I knew she was right.

Legend has it that you can't love anybody else until you love yourself unconditionally. I had so much love to give, and yet with every little mistake, I wasn't giving any of it to myself. I wasn't alone. It was clear that night

in the parking lot just how much Phoebe and Bridget loved me. In fact, Phoebe and I vow to settle for nothing less than boys who love us like we love each other. Maturity is learning to just exist, no matter how difficult the simplicity of existence becomes, we can take a deep breath, approach the conflict, and move forward from there. Love wasn't missing from my life. I had friends who loved me enough to chase me out of a party, to watch me blow my nose into my hand and wipe it on my favorite jeans, and to tell me I still looked hot in a messy-but-fun way with mascara and snot running down my face.

There are moments that are romantic even if you're not experiencing them romantically. Watching fireworks is romantic, even if you're just watching them on your roof deck with your dad. Driving with the top down is romantic, even if you're just doing it with your friends because your parents let you take out the Jeep. Really pouring your heart out to someone is romantic, even if it's to the security guard of your freshman dorm when you lock yourself out of your room. Love letters are romantic even if you don't send them. But kissing in the rain? Honestly, sort of gross. I'm learning to romanticize things in a non-romantic way, because there *is* love in my life even if it's not *that* kind of love yet. That part will come. I just need to stop trying so hard.

