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### ALMOST STRAIGHT

The first time we kissed, it was raining.

Not storybook rain. Real rain. Wet rain. A cold October drizzle, to be precise—the kind that brought out the earthworms and the smell of New York dirt. It thrummed against the asphalt of the parking lot, rhythmic enough to pass as music, loud enough to give the illusion of privacy.

She held the umbrella. I stood half underneath it, half exposed to the elements, wearing a sodden grey coat which I called a raincoat but which was really just the outer shell of a rejected winter coat. The nearest roof couldn't have been more than ten feet away, but we stood in the rain anyway. It seemed like the romantic thing to do.

The kiss had been her idea. Not that I objected. I should have thought of it first, probably, but I didn't. So it was up to her to say bluntly, "Why don't you kiss me?" as she jangled a set of imaginary keys in front of my face.

"Why don't I?" I answered. And I pulled off my sodden grey hood and ducked my head all the way underneath the umbrella, tilting my chin awkwardly to keep our noses from colliding.

My lips met something warm and soft and strangely human. I held my breath and tried to be in love.

"How was that?" she said.

"Wet," I said, so unromantic I could pass for romantic if I smiled just right.

"For me too. Maybe we need to try again?"

"Let's."

Lips. Warm. Wet. For all the sexual tension I felt, I might as well have been kissing a grapefruit.

I tried adding the tongue. Still nothing.

"Sorry if my technique is poor," I said when I finally pulled away.

"I don't think it's supposed to be about technique," she said.

"No," I agreed. "Of course not."

"But it was nice," she said, giving me the look I should have been giving her.

"Yes," I lied. "It was nice."

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Growing up, I thought of myself as a bad actor. But in college, I realized the truth. I was a brilliant actor who had mastered only one role. I was my own alter ego, a bit funnier than the original, a bit friendlier, a bit more resilient. And of course, much less gay.

I played the role well, so well that sometimes I couldn't tell where sincerity ended and acting began. I started to wonder, was there really a difference between the two? Or did I simply become whoever I acted like for long enough? Did I take on the substance of the person I chose to be?

Whenever people asked me why I was still single, I would deliver a carefully worded and well-practiced response: "I feel called to singleness right now. But God is welcome to change my calling any time."

It was an open-ended answer, and people loved that. "Of *course* you'll get married," they would reassure me. "You just haven't met the right girl yet. Someday you'll meet a girl and she'll make you forget all about your 'calling to singleness.'" They would make the scare quotes with the tones of their voices, as if they doubted there really was such a calling.

Maybe they were right, I thought. Maybe I was just waiting for the right girl. Maybe the right girl would awaken my desires, set me on a course to heterosexual marriage, fix me in a way that all my teenaged prayers could not. If that was the case, I was determined to find this girl.

Equally, though, I was terrified. Terrified that there was no such thing as a right girl for me. Terrified that even if I found her, dating her would make me no less gay, and I would break her heart in the end. Or she would break mine. Or I would break my own.

Before college, the closest I had ever come to dating was having what I called "crushes" on girls. They weren't the kinds of crushes my friends were having. There was nothing physical about them, nothing that even came close to approximating heterosexual desire. They were, instead, an especially advanced stage of friendship, an almost clinical assessment of compatibility. If I had to pick a lifelong female partner, I figured, it might as well be someone whose faith and personality and interests aligned neatly with my own. Romance, to the extent it existed in my

brain, was an intellectual phenomenon.

I doubt it ever would have occurred to me to develop these kinds of crushes if I had been left to my own devices. But when it comes to romance, teenagers are never left to their own devices—especially not in the evangelical church. “Who do you *like*?” people would ask me, and I would need a name to give them, a character synopsis, an imagined romance for them to cheer me on in.

“Is she pretty?” they would ask.

“Sure,” I would say.

“What does she look like?” they would ask, and I wouldn’t have the foggiest idea.

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I attended Roberts Wesleyan College, a small Christian liberal arts college in western New York. Homey and nurturing and academically rigorous all at once, it was the perfect environment for a timid kid fresh off the airplane from Indonesia to learn how to belong. Like any Christian college, Roberts had its share of romantics, those people whose mission was to leave with diploma in hand and spouse on arm. My classmates joked about getting a “ring by spring” or an “M.R.S. degree,” and they weren’t always joking. The ratio of women to men was about two to one, which meant (as my friends were only too eager to remind me) that the odds were in my favor.

My first college crush was a city girl, smart and personable and energetic. We had long heart-to-hearts late at night, discussing life and theology, exchanging stories and secrets. Before long, I was offering her name up to family and friends from home when they called to check in

on my love life. She was my shibboleth, continuing proof that I could be normal.

Our relationship-defining talk came on a late fall evening in my freshman year, during a walk around the perimeter of campus. We were just passing the soccer field when I started trying to ease into the topic, as my tongue turned dry and grainy.

“I know we both said we enjoyed being single in college, and we wanted to stay that way for a while...”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, rendering my whole script beyond that point worthless. I regrouped.

“But I’ve been thinking,” I said. “If I ever were going to date someone here, I think I would want it to be you.”

“I guess I feel the same,” she said. “Not that I want to date anyone. But if I did, you’re definitely my closest guy friend here.”

We went on talking about friendship, about life. I walked her back to her dorm room and said goodnight. That was the end of it.

Lacking experience with romantic conversations, I simply assumed that this one qualified. She desired me in exactly the same way I desired her: as a good friend, the sort of person I wouldn’t mind sharing apartments with for the rest of my life. Wasn’t that love?

It took me by surprise when, several weeks later, she announced to me her interest in a mutual friend of ours. “Do you think he likes me?” she asked. “Should I be more obvious? Am I being too obvious?”

Meanwhile, our mutual friend was asking me the same questions. “She sent me this text message... what do you think? Should I make a move?”

My crush was suddenly a different person than the one I had circled campus with. Her ambitions of singleness in college had all disappeared. And so had my status as the guy she was most likely to date. This new guy had what I didn't, an allure, a spark I didn't understand.

So I did what I assumed any caring friend would do in the same situation. I helped set them up with each other. I hinted to each of them that their feelings might be reciprocated. I helped organize hangouts for the three of us and then made myself scarce once we were all together. I watched their relationship blossom.

And it barely even hurt.

That was love, I thought, wasn't it? To care enough that you just wanted her to be happy, even if it wasn't with you? That didn't make me gay.

I watched them start dating, watched them fall in love, watched them get married. It was beautiful. It was easy. Too easy.

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If my "crushes" were girls I could imagine marrying, then I had no word to describe the people who made my head turn and left me feeling weak in the knees. They were all guys. There could be no future with them. As long as I didn't have a word—as long as my brain lacked a category—I could pretend they didn't exist.

But they did exist. I admired them from a distance, greeted them as we crossed paths between classes, chatted with them over meals. I rarely became very close with them. They seemed mystical and unreachable. Maybe even dangerous.

In the college vocabulary most familiar to me, same-sex attraction existed only as a punch line. Homoerotic banter and behavior were seen as normal ways of reaffirming masculinity. Some residents of Miner Hall, the all-male dorm where I lived during my freshman year, roamed the halls in various states of undress, embracing each other, riding scooters naked, wolf-whistling and catcalling. When guys offered me compliments, they were usually joking come-ons: “You’re a beautiful man. What’s cookin’, good-lookin’? You sexy beast.”

I absorbed the culture, chameleon-like, and learned to return the compliments with equal levity. “Hey there, hot stuff,” I would say, trying not to notice their sometimes beautiful bodies, trying not to mean what I said any more than they did. I almost always succeeded.

Almost.

“Almost” is a cheap word, a Benedict Arnold, ready to abandon you at a moment’s notice. There’s no assurance if you’re only almost sure. There’s no rest.

As soon as I got the chance, I moved out of the dorms and into an apartment, where the nudity was less ubiquitous and no one pretended to make sexual advances on me in the hallways.

I took an introductory psychology class one semester with several good friends. We were studying for an exam in the library, going over the chapter on sexuality, when we ran across an infographic that showed the professions with the highest concentrations of LGBTQ-identifying individuals. Second on the list, at 26%, was fiction writing.

“Hey,” said one of my friends, looking up at me. “You write fiction, don’t you?”

I winked. “Oh yes,” I said, “I am a fiction writer.”

We all laughed, and it became a running joke. In our group parlance, “fiction writer” became synonymous with “gay.” The fact that I really had written fiction – that I could be the butt of this meaningless joke about sexuality – that was the best part of all.

It was hilarious. At least, my alter ego thought it was hilarious. And when he laughed, I laughed.