

# Where'd All My Fish Go?

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*For my girls, the right fish is swimming to meet you.*

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**Abstract**

Where'd All My Fish Go

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Where'd All My Fish Go is a collection of essays detailing my abnormal love life. It serves as a journal, safe space, and dating guide for women. Reflecting on failed relationships, I learned to forgive, never forget and accept my faults. Where'd All My Fish Go is as a reminder to single, twenty to thirty something women we're not alone.

Keywords: essays, non-fiction, love, humor, drama, women, relationships

### **Author's Notes**

I'm pretty darn awesome. That may sound conceited, but your perception of me may change if you continue beyond this page. Contradictory of the essays, I'm a lady and I was raised well in a traditional, Southern household. My mother, Jackie, taught me to cross my legs and to use common sense. My father, Rob, always tells me how beautiful I am. Both of them have more than five siblings. My family is huge. I have a slew of alternate parents, a lot of cousins, and a whole lot of love to give.

I'm drawn to kind men with hearts as big as the South. Their Southern drawl and charm make my heart vibrate like the pipes on an old truck. But, like that raggedy, pick-up truck the Southern gent continuously breaks down and makes me walk alone. I don't want you to feel bad for me, if anything you should feel bad for my family because they will be more embarrassed than I am. In my twisted mind I chose to protect the identity of the self-absorbed, strange, yet boring men that have come and gone, while my family and friends remain exposed. Sooner or later they will realize this is a learning opportunity for women like myself. Single, Black, and no signs of additional grandchildren for my parents in the near future. Learn from my mistakes.

P.S. Don't get it twisted, I'm a proud feminist.

## Lesson 1: Flirting

Flirting is complicated. The act of flirting always warrants one of two reactions. Either you're flattered someone is looking your way or you're disgusted by the audacity of the initiate. Secondly, it can be the start to a blossoming relationship or just an activity to pass the time. I've been the initiator or the victim.

We'll call him Tee, which is his nickname, but I have no idea what his first name actually is or what the Tee stands for. Nor do I remember what he looks like. This sums up a few people I met in high school, so I think I'm safe to share this story.

Tee was a Dapper Dan kind of guy. He dressed to the nines; slacks, bright socks, with matching suspenders and bowtie. I'd never seen anyone like him. It was high school, but he dressed like he was Rihanna's date to the Met Gala. But I know that wasn't the case because we had a standing appointment after school. Never to hang out or exchange notes, just to flirt (with the occasional make out session).

That was our thing for a full, spring semester. Fifteen minutes later the bell rang and the hallway cleared. We met at the bottom of the steps in M building around 2:30 p.m. We greeted each other as if we were long term lovers, but we were barely friends. I'm not sure how we met or how our dates started. I just remember our twenty-minute love song, nothing more or less. Neither of us asked for a longer commitment, phone calls, or real date nights. We never told a soul we even knew each other. It was nothing, but something all at once.

Without titles, Tee was all I needed. The passion was perfect. I know what you're thinking, *OMG, you were just a child*. Yes, you're right. I was sixteen and by no means am I

advocating for sexually active teens, but the flirting saved me. I was a pimple faced, big toothed (this hasn't changed) teen with raging hormones, and zero fashion sense. Oh, let's not forget I never weighed over 100 lbs. Tee made me feel sexy without the sex, teen pregnancy, or a case of mono (which I thought only happened to beige people). Sure, an all-girl camp with daily affirmations could have done the same thing for my self-esteem, but I must give credit where credit is due. The key is to flirt wisely. If it'll give you the energy boost to feel good about yourself, by all means go for it. If you flirt seeking validation from others, start googling feminist camps.

## Clown Fish

“What happened to the friend you brought by the house the other day? He was cute,” Michelle asked with enthusiasm.

“He said I was crazy and never wants to talk to me again,” I replied. The confused look on her face let me know she didn’t want me to elaborate. I wasn’t sure if she was bothered because there’s a seemingly manner able young man roaming the streets calling her elegant niece crazy or because of my nonchalant tone. My family hates how blunt and careless I am with words. The one thing I do know is she was surprised. A gorgeous, teen girl coined as one of those psychotic chicks you see holding a peach on *Atlanta Housewives*. I didn’t care.

Out of five aunts, my Aunt Michelle is the most optimistic. She sugar coats things and tells you how much she loves you. She and my uncle act as newlyweds even after 30 years of marriage and they’re ready to drop relationship advice faster than Usain Bolt. She buys you small gifts and calls them “little happies.” The gifts are always pointless, but I assume that is the point. She just wants to see you smile even if it’s temporary. She swears she knows what we like and sometimes the gifts are just what I needed and other times I wish she saved her \$5. One summer she gave me a small snakeskin credit card holder. It was fluorescent green and the skin couldn’t possibly be real. I have never seen a snake shimmer with glitter. It was hideous and by far the worse “little happy” ever gifted. *What in her mind made her think I would like this?* Then it hit me, my taste. She finally met a guy I was interested in and his exhausting personality and shiny sun baked skin must have reminded her of a shiny snake. She can only pick something I like based off the things she has seen me do or wear and he was the only thing different. I

decided to bring someone home for the first time and it ruined my future in receiving gifts. My poor choice to bring Jackson home to my family earned me a pet snake to store in my purse.

We met in high school. Back then we were just friends. We sat next to each other every morning in homeroom and he got on my last nerve. I liked it. He was spastic. Imagine a teenager jacked on Red Bull and three shots of tequila before 7:15 every morning. That's him, but sober. Instead of tequila it was the natural high of life plus an oversized cheeseburger from Sonic. I could always count on his breath to reek of extra onions and mustard. He was a clown. Our friends made fun of him all the time. He was an easy target from his quirky dance moves, perfectly arched eyebrows, and obsession with track season. We laughed at every word that came out of his mouth and every move he made. He never seemed to mind, he would laugh along with us, which always lead into another joke.

I, on the other hand, admired his confidence. He had the sexiest peanut butter brown skin, beautiful white teeth, and strong calf muscles that a teenage girl could ever imagine. He was hot and I wanted him and I don't mean in a cute Britney Spears' "Hit me one more time" kind of way. At the time, I worked at an ice cream shop and I made eight bucks an hour. I was rolling in the dough. I blew every check on the bare necessities: lip-gloss, kitten heels, and Victoria Secret.

I bought my first all-black push up bra just for him. I knew with the extra help he wouldn't be able to keep his eyes off of me. Without my mother noticing, I wore my busty bra with a low-cut tank, within school dress code, and I raced to school in my oversized '00 blue Ford Taurus. I got to homeroom first, he got held up at Sonic. As soon as he sat down, without warning he yelled across the room, "Dannnnngggg girl, where you get them thangs from."

*Goal accomplished!*

My friends and I had a pretty tight group. The summer after our freshman year in college we reconvened as if we never left the city. We continued to laugh at him instead of with him as his immature comments and childish antics ensued. He and I spent a lot of time together even without the group. Casually, we decided to be more than friends, not in a relationship because I had just gotten out of a messy relationship with this screwed up college boy, but we were definitely more than friends. I'm unsure if that summer classifies me as a whore, but we had sex. A lot of it. Maybe, a bit too much for barely legal eighteen-year-olds but seeing as colleges house dirty, porn- watching adolescents it wasn't shocking. Anywhere parking was permitted, we were there in the backseat of his car, the movies, Target, Wal-Mart, a friend's house.

It was the best summer I had ever had, but it wasn't enough to convince me to be his girlfriend. I wanted James, screwed-up college guy. Every day he would ask and every day I found a new reason to decline.

“No, I just got out of a committed relationship.”

Though there is nothing committing about college relationships built on booze and popularity.

“No, I can't handle a long distant relationship.”

Our colleges were only 1.5 hours away from each other. He received rejection after rejection and still stuck around. Today, I couldn't pay a guy to be that loyal.

It was a reoccurring cycle. Summer ended, we went back to our respective residences of dorm rooms and drama-filled apartments. Jackson visited, I kicked him out of my apartment, and ignored his phone calls until my phone just stopped ringing.

Douche-bag college guy continued to show me how douche-y he was by looking at every girl with two feet and a Facebook page. Now, I wanted the clown. During our winter break I

went home and he was avoiding me. I called and he rushed me off the phone. Crying hysterically in the middle of the mall, I called over and over demanding he talk to me. He didn't want to talk. Passing the phone to Ashley, my only friend that was used to my antics, she took a message from him.

“I'm dating someone else and I'm with her right now, I wanted Lauren, but she's stuck on that guy that doesn't care about her. She's crazy and I don't want to talk to her.”

## Facebook

I asked Morgan a million questions about my senior paraphernalia purchase.

*I think I'm about to get in trouble, please tell me everything you remember. Ok, was she blonde or brunette? What's her eye color? Did you get her social security number?*

Morgan is a close friend and the most responsible. I knew I could count on her. While my fellow classmates submitted order forms for caps and gowns I was three stoplights away from the school gymnasium playing a different sport—hooky.

In high school, I was bat-shit, boy crazy. Technically, I was boy crazy at every grade level, I'd reached a new level of crazy after Tee. Boys were my extra-curricular activity. I spent valuable time plotting how and when I'd see my boyfriend of the month. My parents weren't exhaustingly strict, but one rule stood true. "No boyfriends until you're married." My dad's rule was just as serious as it was ridiculous, so I didn't dare challenge him, well not intentionally. I created my own rules to make sure my parents and I both got what we wanted.

1. Always use discretion.
2. No PDA.
3. Only call after I call you first.
4. Don't buy me anything I can't take home.

Boys never had a problem adhering to my guidelines but looking back it's probably because I made it easy for them to date me and a million other teenage girls simultaneously. Let's face it, who wouldn't want a beautiful woman you can consensually fool around with without buying her anything or taking her on a date? Exactly. I unintentionally transformed into ideal, side chick material.

Facebook was major in 2006. My senior class waited on acceptance letters from colleges across the U.S. We weren't excited about the new chapters we were embarking on full of booze and weed, well we were, but we were more excited about our new college email addresses. The infamous ".edu" was all you needed for the members only club, Facebook.

The night I interrogated Morgan I was doomed and thanks to Zuckerberg my only safe space was Facebook. Earlier, I received everything I ordered in my senior package from graduation invitations to my alma mater mug featuring the names of each of my classmates. Well, I thought I had everything until Jackie looked in the box.

*Where's the tassel?*

*What tassel?*

*Your red tassel that goes on the cap? I thought you checked the box.*

*I did.*

*How does the lady look?*

*What lady?*

*The lady you gave your order form to?*

*Umm, I don't know, white.*

*If I take you up there, can you point to her?*

*Yea, sure.*

*Ok, we're going by there tomorrow.*

Panicking, I ran to my room to call Morgan for the full scoop on the lady "I" gave my order form. I can't believe how careless I'd been over one guy.

Kenny was a year older and taking classes at the local community college. Whenever his class ended early, he'd call me to hang out at his cousin's two-story house, a few miles west of my

high school. My friends were prepping for one of the best days of our lives and I was responding to a booty call. I was getting busted for not knowing the color of the sales associate's hair. He got my goods, and my goods were about to get whooped.

Morgan told me everything she remembered about the order taker. There was nothing left to do but wait for my mom to discover I never actually met the sales clerk. I pouted in front of our family computer all night waiting for Facebook to load, drowning my sorrows with the annoying sound of dial-up. It was the last reminder that I'd soon be free and college bound. Every phone call to the house phone line slowed the connection.

**\*Inbox Alert**

**James: Hey, I see you're coming to UT this year. When will you get here?**

He noticed my profile picture while looking through a mutual friend's contact list.

**Me: Hey, I'm visiting in a couple of weeks if I don't get killed first.**

**James: What do you mean?**

**Me: I'm about to get in trouble.**

I went on telling James the entire story about skipping school and the missing tassel.

**James: Ha Ha that's hilarious, you're going to get your ass whooped. But you'll be fine.**

We continued to message each other for an hour.

For the next few days, James and I talked non-stop in between classes via Facebook, text, and phone calls.

The following Saturday morning, my mom drove me to the Jostens office.

“Hi, how can I help you?”

*I scoped the office in search of this mystery woman.*

*Brunette? No*

*Tall? No*

My mom answered, “Hi, my daughter didn't receive her tassel, I have the receipt.”

“No problem, which school?”

“Germantown.”

“Ok, Linda will bring one out.”

Linda didn't waste any time bringing out the new tassel without asking any questions.

*That's it? No interrogation or saleswoman hunt? James was right.*

In that moment, I fell in love with James.

\*\*\*

My college visit to my soon to be alma mater was the start of our relationship and lasted my entire college career. Four years of a solid foundation built on lies, but I couldn't see it through my lavender colored contacts.

**Lie #1**

The entire trip James acted as my personal tour guide, pulling me out of informative seminars and possibly important college orientation stuff. He introduced me to student athletes to show he was the man on campus (or at least he thought). We drove around sight-seeing in a truck I thought was his. He was quick on his feet as I asked inquisitive questions like,

“Why is there a Z on your key chain?”

“Oh, my little sister could barely pronounce my name when she was little so James sounded like Zames, my mom thought it’d be funny to buy the keychain.”

I naïvely thought, *makes sense; he’s such a family man.*

Turns out he was adopted. His little sister barely knew him as a child.

Eventually, I met his friend, Zach, the actual owner of the truck and the “Z” keychain.

**Lie #2**

When you get to college, students often settle into a crew. Your crew may consist of people from your hometown, classes, or organizations based on similar interest. My crew was all of the above. We had a nice mix of guys and girls, which made each game night the ultimate battle of the sexes. One night my crew reserved the basement of dorm to make rotel dip and chill. Rotel was an unwritten necessity for Black gatherings across campus. You can never go wrong with a pot of cheese that’s easy to make and will feed ten plus people.

I invited James. He worked the room like a champ. So much so, I never noticed he wasn’t showing any PDA. He occasionally sat next to me throughout the evening to crack a joke or two. I was clueless.

That night, sitting in room packing a bag to make my nightly trip across campus to James' dorm my roommate says, "Hey, we need to talk. I didn't want to tell you, but after tonight in the basement, I have to."

"Umm, ok," I responded with confusion.

I was unsure of what she had to say. We weren't as close as before because she hated James. I always thought she was jealous because her boyfriend left her for this sassy Latina with wavy, brunette hair.

"He's cheating on you with Jasmine. He's been sleeping with her. Whenever you left the basement he'd go sit next to her. Why do you think he was running around the room all night?"

I was embarrassed. He wasn't getting along with my crew, he was scamming me.

The late-night study sessions, the lunch dates we skipped because he had to go to "football practice." The yeast infection that wouldn't go away. It all made sense. I cried in my roommate's arms.

### **Lie #3**

James was my man. Our vicious cycle of making up and breaking up was on heavy rotation. We secretly couldn't stand each other, but our relationship was so convenient. I had the perks of dating someone with connections and he got to be with me, period. We fought over everything. Massive brawls of throwing his silver wire trash can against the wall until it dented the can or wall, whichever first, was normal. James' mentor, Perkins, sat us down for weekly talks that traditionally ended in "y'all are toxic for each other". Instead of never seeing each other ever again, the talks

fueled our fire to give it another try. Maybe it was the “I’ll give my all for Tennessee today” poster plastered in his office. It felt like walking out of church on a sunny day knowing you’re going to slide back into your old habits.

One year later, lying in the full-size bed of his pricey condo discussing likes and dislikes we made a new discovery in our relationship. Porn.

In a bashful tone I mentioned my occasional viewing pleasure.

*You watch stuff like that?*

*Yea, it kinda gets me in the mood.*

*That’s not lady like.*

I’m sure I had a look of embarrassment.

*You don’t watch it?*

*No.*

*Ever?*

*No, why would I? It’s disgusting.*

Two weeks later, I was sitting at James’ desktop in the corner of his room. James was on campus studying at the library. Attempting to do some work of my own I took advantage of the time alone to snoop. James is extremely organized, each file folder on his desktop was neatly alphabetized and aligned. I looked over the photos in the photo folder, scanned the documents in the “recent documents” folder.

*Hmm, this one’s untitled. Clicks on folder.*

*Eyes widen.*

I fell knee deep into a folder full of “Big Booty” volumes 1-10. Endless categories featuring ebony women like Karrine Steffans before she dominated Mr. Marcus.

I’d like to say I remember his response when I mentioned his porn compilation. Most likely a lie about a computer virus or something stupid my gullible ass believed. Per usual, lie three was overlooked by lie four. Girls and more girls. The night I discovered James’ hidden fetish was the same night he met lie four.

#### **Lie #4**

Three years into our relationship and I was counting off more infidelity strikes than the tootsie roll owl counts licks. Not just on his part, but my part too. I was just way better at it. I had a strict schedule. I cheated in between classes or late at night after James and my traditional “goodnight” phone call. To avoid moving my car from the dorm garage, which could be easily spotted. I snuck out of the side door where the man of my choice (Brandon) would be waiting with the engine running.

It was clear by lie four that I was the ultimate oxymoron- a dumb, college student. Four’s name was Brittany. She lived on the same floor I lived on and I never saw her coming nor did I ever see James leaving. I thought I was getting away with my dirt, but I only realized he was ok with my “busy” schedule because his schedule mirrored mine.

Brittany wasn’t my wake-up call. It was actually another woman (that James wasn’t dating). My feelings for Brandon grew. I no longer wanted to spend any time with James. I

searched for excuses or started fights with James, so I could find an excuse to spend nights with Brandon.

“Not tonight, I really have to study.”

“I need to stay on campus tonight cause I’m meeting my study partner before class in the morning.”

“Looks like it’ll be another late night, I have a paper due that I haven’t started.”

“Tonight? No, we’re having a girls’ night.”

Quickly, my nights of studying turned into nights with Brandon. We stayed up eating crappy late-night snacks of broke college students: ramen noodles with crackers covered in peanut butter and honey. Well that’s what we did until our nights began to dwindle. Brandon felt bad for assisting in my lies and infidelity that he began ignoring my late-night texts. After several texts, he responded to my previous text with,

**“Sorry, you know I care about you, but I’m dating someone else. I don’t want to hurt her.”**

Jealously, hit me like a pound of bricks. What was so special about this unknown girl that I deserved to be cheated on and lied to and she didn’t? Is she prettier? Is she light-skinned? What makes *her* girlfriend material?

I missed out on another loyal, good guy because of James. It was time to choose myself over a man. Fuck Jam

## Red Mustang

If anyone asks you to play a game of “Power Hour” say no. It’s a drinking game impossible to defeat. Out of sheer nervousness because I was standing in the kitchen of my crush, I said yes. Everyone scattered like little ants to take their places. One girl started looking for the best of the best YouTube countdown playlists. Another pulled shot glasses from the cabinet and lined the beer cans along the table for easy pour in between minutes. It was the start to yet another obnoxious college story.

My girlfriend, Krys, and I were pre-gaming before a party at a hood ass lounge in Knoxville. Any African American UT alum knows there aren’t any decent places for young, Black people to have a good time. It was either a muggy, old, school portable rented out during homecoming season—The Broker, which always shut down early even if it was the only building on the quarter lot, or possibly the Malibu, better known as the Bu, a shabby night club that may have been a strip club in its heyday. Whatever the location, I knew this party was going to be epic. It was the talk across “Black” campus, and I had to be there.

I’m unsure how or why, but the difference between this pregame and others is that Krys and I were invited to drink with some older students at the home of one of the finest jocks on campus—Ed. He wasn’t the coolest because most of his jokes were lame, but he was definitely attractive and that’s all that mattered. I always knew how to spot Ed on campus. He owned a gorgeous, fire red Mustang with silver wheels that beamed under the sunlight. It was often parked near mine near the communications building.

Our run-ins were always painless, a quick “Hey, how are you?” or “You ready for the game this weekend?” without stopping for the response. Little did he know, I wanted more, I wanted to be one of the sexy upperclassmen with a long weave and wads of confidence. I just

knew that'd be the kick our friendship needed. Instead of the PG13 greeting, I preferred something like, *Hey, Ed can I ride you this weekend?*

Finally, this was my chance standing with a group of random girls in his kitchen.

*Y'all ready to play?*

*How do you play?*

*You take one shot of beer every minute for an hour.*

*Oh, wow, that'll be easy.*

Trying to hide the fact that I only wanted the liquid courage to build my confidence to keep the conversation going.

*45 minutes later*

*Lauren, you sure you still want to go to the party?*

*Hell yeaaaaaaaaa.*

*I'm going home, I'm fucked up.*

*Me too, but I'm not ready to go.*

Ed jumped in the conversation. *I'll take her home.*

Krys looked at him with an incriminating look.

*No, I got her.*

*Nahhh, Krys, Ed's got me,* I said with a wink.

Leaning my weight against Ed's beefy body, he slowly guided me to that red mustang. The windows were tinted black as the night itself. We zoomed in and out of traffic while my

head rested against the creamy, peanut butter colored seats. I think I was more excited about the car than Ed.

*I couldn't believe it, this is happening. Ed and me. Riding together.*

My mind raced with questions.

*Why did I drink so much? I wonder if we'll date after this? What if he goes to the NFL?*

*Am I ready to be a stay at home mom?*

He escorted me inside, helping me to my bed. Like the gentleman I knew he was, he asked if I wanted him to stay. Now, you guys know me well enough to know my response.

We laid in bed together, waiting to see what the other would do. I sat up, leaning over him for a kiss, when the wrong words came out of my mouth, "I have to throw up."

That was it, mood over. He offered to grab me a bottle of water from the kitchen and that he thought it best to let me rest. I shook my head. The door closed. "Damn."

### **College Girl Looking For Daddy<sup>1</sup>**

age: 20

Looking for a daddy who can provide for me and treat me like a princess. I am a 20-year-old college student. I'm a thick AA 5'2" in height and I work in a daycare. If interested email me with a picture and your budget. Include your favorite food in the subject. If you don't have a picture in your email I will not respond with mine. If you are cheap don't bother emailing me either. This can be as discreet as you want it to be & I'm not looking for short term thanks!

---

<sup>1</sup> (Craigslist 2008)

## Lesson 2: Sugar Daddies

Candice, Kenny, and I were chilling in our townhouse when I got a text from Tim. Tim was very giving, so I made a point to spend time with him.

**Come to the restaurant and have a drink.**

However, spending time doesn't mean I took it easy on him. I kept him intrigued with my sassiness. It was the only thing I was willing to give. Tim is sweet, thoughtful, and loaded. He owns a couple of bars and a restaurant in the area and there's nothing he wouldn't do for me.

**I'm with my friends right now.**

**They can come too. Drinks on me.**

Not only did we go for the free drinks, but I had to stay in Tim's good graces. Candice and Kenny died laughing as they watched me flirt with Tim. Tim is thirty-three years my elder and he was my sugar daddy. Tim never asked me for anything nor asked to come to my place. Every couple of days, he'd take me out for dinner, hold my hand, and talk. Despite the significant age gap, we enjoyed each other's company. He treated me like a queen. He bought me anything I wanted from books to Tiffany necklaces and bracelets. We even took a weekend trip or two.

Our meet-ups faded after I moved from the area, but I'm a much better person for letting Tim temporarily take care of me. So much so, I encourage all of my friends to get one (without offering sexual favors). Find an older man, go on a few dates, and let him buy you nice things. If both parties are consenting parties, then why the hell not? There's a man out there that wants to see a queen smile. Don't shatter his dreams, accept his gesture.

## Side Streets

Junior and senior year of college collide in my mind. Thanks to boring prerequisites and vodka, a lot of moments are just a blur. It was a constant schedule of work hard, play harder. Days consisted of lectures, club meetings, my part time job, sorority events, followed by whatever time remaining for shenanigans with my friends.

This particular evening was abnormally lite. Taking full advantage of a free Sunday night my best girls and I decided to go to dinner near campus. There was a strip of bars and restaurants we frequented for food specials and underage drinking. A close friend, Jessi, called while eating. She was headed our way to spill the juicy details of another friend's baby mama drama.

“Girrrrrrrrl, Bianca about to fuck him up.”

As soon as Jessi and Bianca arrived the “that nigga did this” and “that nigga said” were flowing and our bar tabs were closing. We were all pumped and fed up with wack, lying ass men and we were ready for war. The five of us climbed into Jessi's black Dodge Charger to pay Bianca's boyfriend a visit.

We were in the backseat prepping bottles of acetone to pour all over his most prized possessions while Bianca sat in the front seat crying her eyes out. Turns out the entire time he was dating Bianca, he was in a full-blown marriage. Bianca believed she was falling in love when she was nothing more than his side chick. Unfortunately, for me this wasn't discovered until after I was almost killed.

We arrived at his house and concocted a plan to run straight to his car, in the driveway, and dowse it in acetone. We figured cheating men don't deserve to have nice cars

(it attracts more women). We hopped out the car and walked slowly towards the car as if four women walking in the pitch-black dark with bottles isn't suspicious enough. As soon as I raised my bottle attempting to pour, a woman throws open the front door yelling in our direction, "Who the fuck is touching my car!"

We took off running. I know women are strong, all-knowing creatures. We give life and sprinkle a little magic on the world to keep it orbiting. We beat the odds and work well under pressure. There is nothing we can't do. So, imagine my surprise when I ran in the opposite direction of the getaway vehicle. From the driveway, my girls went left and I went right towards the cul-de-sac. Jessi peeled the car off towards campus as I laid face down in some stranger's flower bed. This was an all-time low for me, my fresh Uggs were getting muddy and I didn't even know the guy.

The wife drove her car around the cul-de-sac in attempts to catch me and I'm pretty sure she saw me. I'd like to think she had a change of heart as she saw my dumb ass in cow manure. I waited an eternity (maybe only five minutes) for Jessi to realize I wasn't in the car. I heard the hemi circling the neighborhood until they made it back. Jessi touched the breaks just enough for me to hop inside, but we weren't out of the woods. Bianca's boyfriend (crazy lady's husband) stood at the edge of his driveway with gun in hand.

In that moment, I learned a very valuable lesson. Don't waste time on crappy men because they'll cheat and try to kill you too.

### **Most Popular Dating Apps<sup>2</sup>**

11. Hinge
10. Grindr
9. Zoosk
8. Match
7. LuLu
6. Down
5. Tinder
4. Bumble
3. Coffee Meets Bagle
2. Happin
1. OkCupid

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<sup>2</sup> (McAlone 2016)

### Holy Sock

I was cleaning out my lady drawer. The top dresser drawer cluttered with unmentionables. As I was cleaning I found an old sock from an ex. I can't act surprised like I didn't know it was there and it was only one of a pair so it's not likely I wore it. Plus, I hate a mess. At the sight of disorder, my OCD kicks in and I throw away anything that's within my cleaning warpath. I contemplated throwing away the rug in my living room because the vacuum cleaner wasn't close by.

I'd like to say my obsessive cleanliness comes naturally, but that would be a lie. It's Jackie's fault. That lady cleans like the Obama's are coming over for afternoon tea. As kids, my brother and I would wake up to the sounds of Whitney Houston "sho-op"ing on the *Waiting to Exhale* soundtrack or Mahalia Jackson's old-timey hymnals. It never failed, every Saturday morning we were dusting stairwells, vacuuming carpet, and cleaning out cabinets. Jackie's mantra is "Put it away or throw it away" and I will never forget it. I've applied it to all aspects of my life. Men, text messages, and old clothes.

The sock was ugly. It was once a white sock, greyed from countless days of being worn, washed, and re-worn. The red "Hanes" stretched illegibly from a hole growing where his big toe used to go. This shouldn't be here. Amidst my organized chaos of brightly colored panties there was a reminder of him. Someone I deeply cared about and loved. He was the guy I "broke." Women usually have a million and one stories about how "men ain't shit." We are brokenhearted and forced to recuperate after they lie and cheat. We can't appear to be broken because then we are considered bitter by any eligible bachelor. We have to patch up the holes with a sexy dress and high heels and run back to the dating game. We wear a fake smile in front of our new suitor as if we aren't waiting for a call from the guy that left us in this state of depression.

However, women rarely mention the guys we ignore. The ones we gave fake numbers to and are now scarred from rejection. Any time I met a guy I was uninterested in, I gave out the same number, 901-362-3333. It was the number to the Pizza Hut back home. The number was easy to remember and the guy was never wiser until asked what kind of toppings he wanted on his pizza.

It's rare we give the sweet or innocent guy the time of day. We make up excuses about him being "too nice" to avoid actually being happy. Instead, we chase the bad boy with infinite girlfriends that always "forgets" to return phone calls. It's an unwritten fact that we always want the one that doesn't want us back. I'd bet a million dollars there's a nice guy head over heels trying to build the courage to ask you out on a date. Unfortunately, you are currently fantasizing about the one unreachable prick.

I actually dated my good guy. Darrell and I attended college together. We saw each other around, exchanged the occasional hi and bye. He had a girlfriend and I had sleaze ball, James, for a boyfriend. I was in love with my boyfriend, he cheated on me with anything walking, but I always stayed. It was a monthly ritual. He cheated, I found out, he apologized, I cried, we made up. He was all I knew, no matter how many trips I took to the campus clinic for birth control and STD testing. I got used to the ghetto PA that probably breached HIPAA by filling me in on the campus gossip.

Jame's definition of a good time was a late-night trip to Wal-Mart to buy cleaning products. It was a small college town so the only options on a weeknight were drink, smoke, or Wal-Mart. Luckily, he graduated a year ahead of me. Otherwise, I'd still be standing next to him in the check-out line.

In 2010 the hype of Facebook dwindled and Twitter was the new dating site. Subtweets and direct messages were the “it” thing. With Valentine’s Day approaching, I tweeted a sad, singles joke about spending my Valentine’s Day in the Krystal’s drive thru. Luckily, Mr. Nice Guy thought it was funny and direct messaged me offering to buy my Krystal’s sack-full.

*How sweet? Someone wants to take me on a date.*

*Krystal burgers will always reign victorious over aisle four in Wally World.*

I gave him a chance. I was moving on from the trashy men I dealt with in the past to someone kind and respectful. He adored me. He introduced me to his family. He made me laugh. Our good times consisted of late nights discussing marriage and having cute, brown babies. Everything was perfect until we decided to move in together. I didn’t think it would be that big of a deal, my brother and his girlfriend had been shacking up for years. I mentioned the idea to my mother without her knowing my mind was already made. She hated the idea. My wholesome, Southern values smacked me in the face with bible verses. Constant reminders of how unlawful it is to live with someone out of wedlock and her personal favorite,

“What’s done in the dark always comes to the light.”

She scared the crap out of me and I thought for sure I was doomed to hell.

*It’s God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 KJV).*

I began to resent him. He wasn’t supposed to be there, but he didn’t understand. I only asked him to move in as an act of kindness. He wasn’t supposed to actually say yes. Because of

my inability to be alone I was breaking every rule in the bible. We were intimate out of wedlock, we disobeyed our parents. I planned to go to heaven one day and he took that away from me.

*Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"*

*"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments."*

*"Which ones?" he inquired.*

*Jesus replied, "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 19: 16-19 NIV)*

I did everything I could to push Darrell away. I yelled at him daily. I didn't want to see his face. We fought, I called the police. I wanted the devil out of my home. He refused to leave. During the day I left the house and stayed out all night in a new city I barely knew. I became the bad guy that I was trying to avoid. My fear triggered my "bad guy" radar. Your "bad guy" radar is an intuitive radar that alerts any guy that is completely wrong for you that you are moving on to a nice guy. You know when the radar is triggered because your ex or the previous guy you were fawning over will text things like:

**Hey bighead**

or

**I miss you.**

I returned the texts from Mr. Wrong. I spent the nights in the living room awake on the couch having “Remember when...” conversations with an old love interest while Darrell slept in the next room.

*It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.*

*This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom. (Galatians 5:19-21 MSG)*

I was mad at God. He dragged me down memory lane and out of my happy place. I put a hole in my good guy's heart. Yet, he never fought back and he was never unkind. Darrell forgave me.

*For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:14-15 NIV)*

One day, after work, I came home to a beautiful red card. He was gone. He said he loved me and was optimistic about us. *How could someone I made out to be my enemy be so kind?* I made myself believe Darrell kept me away from my happiness and I hated him for it. My heaven was gone.

*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. (Romans 1:18-19 NIV)*

Darrell appears happier without me. Facebook and Twitter are not buzzing with direct messages but pictures of his beautiful wife and adorable, brown kid. Pushing my nice guy away worked out in the end, but I must say seeing pictures of my ring on her finger is a cruel punishment.

I threw the sock in the trash.

### Lesson 3: Rules of the Game

**Learn the game.** To love any sport is to know it. You have to know the ends and outs of the game; boundaries, rules, score keeping. When you're in the sixth grade you won't understand how serious the game can be, the only thing you'll know is it feels good. In the sixth grade, you'll doodle his name with little hearts all over your wide-ruled notebook. The colorful gel pens you beg your mom to buy for class come in handy. Your mom will see your doodles, the hand-written notes, and the red blotches on the top of your hand where you scrubbed off "I love Marcus" before you got home from school. She will say things like, "you better not have a boyfriend" or "you only love me." You will think she is bitter because she's been hurt by the game, but to you love is not a game. You think you and Marcus will live happily ever after. In high school, you won't even know Marcus anymore (he will move further north). You will continue playing the same game, with puppy love victories and heart-shattering losses.

**Research the players.** As a college student, you will dream of the major league and the oversized diamond. You watch as the sorority girls with perfectly clear skin recruit the top talent. You will quickly realize through all-nighters and after-hour tutor sessions that none of them are a great catch. You'll debate their stats and trade them out like trading cards. A full roster, all L's.

**Run the bases.** You will lose to the frail, light-skinned girl with the wavy ponytail. Your once favorite sport will begin to push you harder than the opposing team. You approach age twenty-five. You will feel like an unfit competitor for the first time in your career. Consider retiring all together.

**Timeouts.** You will go to another wedding ceremony of a childhood friend, get teary eyed, and wonder when you will make it to the championship. If only you could get over that last tragic loss, that you thought was a for sure victory.

Prep for the next contender with a new, confident, "I can keep a man" attitude because the matchmaker books tell you you've been playing all wrong. Your new fan favorite promises to take you to The World Series, believe him. You'll want to wear his jersey instead of your own. You will feel uneasy about stepping back out onto the field with all the resurfaced dirt and bright lights, but don't worry, you will win.

### **Don't Eat the Sub**

You ever have a man bring you a Jersey Mike's sub? A Philly with provolone melted just right, lettuce, onions, and peppers. I have. And it was the most shocking thing that has ever happened to me.

It was great because it was a start to a new friendship and showed he cared about my nourishment and well-being. It was not so great because you never really know someone until they buy you a sub. Think about it. You have to consider the type of cheese, bread, toppings, mayo or no mayo. It's a big responsibility for a first date. I'm not sure why I'm surprised because everything we did was a step too fast. Even the day we met.

Sydney and I met at a gas station. I was pumping gas at the gas and he spotted me as he was walking out of the store.

*Hey, you look nice. Where you headed?*

*Thank you, I'm going home actually, I was headed to a party, but my directions led me to the wrong place.*

*You should come with me.*

*Where?*

*A comedy club.*

*Umm, I don't know.*

*Look. My name's Prince, you can trail me in your car. If you feel unsafe or like we're going too far you can turn around and go home. You don't even have to give me your number.*

*Who said I was giving you my number?*

*You will by the end of the night.*

*Whatever. I'm down.*

We had a great time that night. Not only did we exchange numbers, but he brought me a sub over for an impromptu lunch date the following day. As a Southern girl, I don't waste food. We eat every part of every animal, so you know I didn't turn down a sandwich. One dip into the au jus sauce and the next thing you know, we're ripping each other's clothes off. I opened my eyes to take a look at the scrumptious man in front of me (as well as checking for any visible signs of herpes) when I noticed his stomach.

In true Tupac fashion, "Sydney" was tatted in an arch over his stomach. The mood shifted from hot, overflowing passion to strangely hood-tastic as I yelled, "Who the fuck is Sydney? I thought your name was Prince."

### Mama's Boy

I don't take many people home to meet my parents, but Richard was different.

"If you need any help or legal advice, call me, any time. Just get my number from Lauren."

I cringed watching my mom talk to him. She used her "Jackie" voice. You know the voice your parent uses to sound more professional when normally she pronounces every word incorrectly, including your first name. I wanted her to like him, but this was over kill. I know I'm twenty-seven years old, but what happened to the conversations with a friendly face but a stern tone, which usually begins "What are your intentions with my daughter?" I'm waiting on interrogation and she wants to be friends with the guy. The whole introduction was abnormal. My mother has different thoughts regarding my love life. I believe she is mentally preparing me to become an old maid. How do I know?

Here's a composed list of things Jackie says. I'll let you be the judge:

1. *"I don't like your dog, but you should keep her for protection."*
2. *"Having children isn't all that great."*
3. *"You don't need a wedding, I'll just give you some money to buy a house."*
4. *"I don't want to hear about another proposal."*
5. *You don't need a man, just focus on your career.*

Sadly, I'm starting to believe her. Even conversations with people I meet don't go over so well. Most people hear my age and the conversation goes as follows:

*Stranger: So, you don't have any kids?*

*Me: No*

*Stranger: Are you married?*

*Me: No*

*Stranger: Are you at least dating?*

*Me: Sure*

*Stranger: Well, what are you waiting on?*

*Me: A ring*

*Stranger: People don't do that anymore.*

*Me: What? Get married?*

*Stranger: That's not what I meant.*

*Me: Umm, ok. Nice to meet you.*

As you can imagine, these conversations get depressing. This relationship with new guy had to be different. This fellow turned my hardcore, “women-don’t-cry” mother into a sappy, “call-me-later” teen. He had to be Mr. Right. It wasn’t love at first sight and I didn’t get a warm and fuzzy feeling whenever he looked my way, but he was smart and made a nice amount of money. It seems women easily consider a life of matrimony when there is money on the line. Consider the Anna Nicole’s and Kim K’s of the world.

We dated for a few months and spent a lot of time together until he went missing. I knew he liked alone time, that’s understandable. It’s impossible to spend every waking moment with someone and not want to kill each other. I noticed new guy never liked to come to my place. Any time he came over, he prepared a reason to escape. Excuses from having a busy workday to not liking my roommate were a part of our day-to-day interaction. One night we planned a full night together. He came over with a duffle bag of his things because we knew we’d stay in for a while. We were snuggled in and dozing off until his phone rang. It rang several times. In a panic he

jumped up, got dressed, and raced down the stairs and out the front door without an explanation.

*WTF!*

The next day he explained his mother wasn't feeling well and thought he would have to drive home to take her to the doctor. Being the best, understanding girlfriend I could be, I accepted his apology. It doesn't matter that his mother lives three hours away. I would do the same thing for my mother, I think. It doesn't matter that he doesn't want to spend the night with me, that means he's a gentleman, I think.

Shortly after, he began to visit his mother for days. I thought, he is the only child; he has to take care of his mother. If he didn't respect his mother, then we would be breaking up for a total different reason. He would leave randomly in the middle of the week or in the middle of the day without any notification. After work, my calls to say hi were interjected by "I'm not sure when I'm coming back." It was official, I was jealous of his mother. Eventually, my after-work calls were ignored, text messages unanswered. It was a new thing for me. Instead of considering how weird it was, all I could think was, Jackie likes him. I began to question myself. "I'm too needy." "I need more space too." "Should I file a missing person report?" "How do I issue an Amber Alert for my boyfriend?" I was losing my mind. I didn't know a single person that wanted to fall off the face of the earth, intentionally. I called my closest guy friends and ask a rehearsed series of questions, "Am I needy?" "Annoying?" "Would you date me?" After the third degree and a compilation of mixed reviews, I was back at square one. I was alone in a committed relationship.

A few days later he emerged like a bear out of hibernation, refreshed and clueless to the chaos of the previous days. He called, "Hey, want to go to dinner?"

## Hardware

Men know how to get under my skin. Their intense levels of testosterone and lame jokes can either be sexy and flirty or just down right egg-na-ramous. I work in a hardware store. Sorry to shock you, but I'm not a glamorous Instagram model with sponsorships and flourishing travel blog. Five days and forty hours a week I'm fulfilling the needs of musty, sleazy contractors covered in sod, paint, and stains from today's lunch.

They strut into my assigned department and assess my qualifications to give them advice (as if either one of us has a choice). They ask stupid questions like, "Do you know anything about this stuff or is there someone else I can talk to?" In my head I rip them a new one. *No, I've never installed hardwood floors, but I doubt the homeowner knows you haven't either you sexist, pig-headed, Robert Riggs look-alike.* Then, I gracefully escort them to the products I suggested multiple times as they sized me up. I flash my pearly whites as they begin to feel like an idiot forever doubting a woman in the first place.

At one point, I tolerated the jive, unnecessary comments by convincing myself "It's all a part of the job." I guess I'm quite convincing since I haven't flown off the deep end and shared my true feelings any time any they ask, "Does your boyfriend let you have friends?"

The difference between now and a few years ago is that I walk away. Mid-sentence.

*Me: Hi, how can I help you?*

*Customer: I'm picking out backsplash for my bathroom. You're a woman, which one looks like a panty dropper?*

*Me: \*Smile. Walk away. Approach male employee.*

*Hey, there's a douchebag on aisle ten that needs help.*

I figured it's the least I could do. It's not his completely his fault he's not the sharpest tool in the tool shed.

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*Me: Hi, how can I help you?*

*Customer: Standing next to his wife, he says, "Do you plan on staying a while?"*

*Me: Yes, sir. I'm scheduled until nine.*

*Customer: No, like do you know this stuff? I need someone to tell us what we need to know, not just take our order. You didn't even tell us your name.*

*Me: \*Looks down at large name tag on uniform in bold font that reads 'Hi, I'm Lauren.'*

*"Ok sir, I'll be right back."*

*I didn't go back.*

\*\*\*

*Me: Hi, how can I help you?*

*Customer: You must be new here? I've never seen your pretty face.*

*Me: Been here about four years.*

*Customer: Do you cook?*

*Me: No, but I can cut blinds. How can I help you?*

*Customer: Hmph, I can't date a woman that doesn't cook.*

\*\*\*

Every day on my way in the building I look for the bins labeled "leave manners here." I don't see it, but I refuse to believe men can be so rude. Some of them.

I have another co-worker. His advances are welcomed, but only because he's tall, dark, slim, and fine as hell. If I had a dirty, "men at work" calendar, he'd be April. No shirt, oily skin

glistening in the spring heat with a smock covering his genitals and beefy thighs. Throwing bales of wheat straw off the back of a Ford 4x4 pick-up.

We mildly flirt in passing, the eyes lingering a little longer than acceptable for the work place. We talk to each other long enough to know each other's thoughts on today's weather, but not long enough to know what the other brought for lunch or his son's first name.

It's 2 p.m., break time. I catch him leaving the break room with a co-worker and a honey bun from the vending machine.

In my most sultry voice, "One of these days you're going to turn into a honey bun." Less than two seconds into our daily eye gaze, his friend chimes in, "When that day comes, we'll be thick like you."

### Mr. One Week

My sorority sisters and I talk quite often, mainly about relationships. Most of them are in long-term relationships, engaged, or married. Maybe, I was missing something.

Sisterly Advice:

1. "Do nice things for him."
2. "Be mean to him, they like that."
3. "What you won't do, another woman will."
4. "Don't chase him, he will come to you."
5. "Don't be afraid to approach him."

I did everything I thought I was supposed to. I read the dating guides. I listened to Steve Harvey. I took a long break from the dating scene to date myself. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, in more ways than one. I know exactly what I like and what I want. I treated myself to all of my favorite restaurants. I let myself pick all of the songs on the radio. I went to the movies. I never argued with myself. It was riveting. Things were looking up. I felt amazing and my confidence was at an all-time high. It felt even better to turn down dates without my biological alarm clock ringing in my ear. I soaked up all of the advice possible and I was ready to get back on the dating scene.

Men were all over me. My new perfume "la self esteem" exuded from my pores. For the first time in my life I tried to think like a man and play the field. I was going out nightly. Going on dates simply for a free meal. Responding to text messages with "hey babe" because I couldn't remember names or where we met. My sisters greeted me with "Who is it this week?" or "How is the Asian Guy?" They were referring to Michael. He was the only guy I ever dated outside of my race. I was the only one out of the entire group that even considered dating anyone other than

a Black man. I'm unsure, yet almost certain, that this innate loyalty to Black men derived from slavery and the Clinton Administration, but it's rare to find an African American woman dating outside of her race. I figured why not, he was actually a good time.

Sure, there were cultural differences in which I was not prepared. For instance, he actually liked living with his family. After his father passed, he, his brother, sister, and his sister's kids all lived in one house. In many cases, the Black family is ripped apart by death or forced to move out and on by age eighteen. Secondly, his entire neighborhood was a tight knit Asian community. I admired that, an entire community focused on growing each other's families and businesses. Whereas, Black neighborhoods are impoverished and saturated with liquor stores.

Like the others, I dated him and kicked him to the curb in less than six months. I know my sisters were judging me for moving on so fast. Our sorority set a standard that we pledge to uphold. A standard to always be poised and ladylike and I was letting them down. I didn't care. My sisters were planning weddings and having babies. I was having fun.

One night, I wanted to go out, it was my new thing. I decided to meet my friend Sterling, for dinner. Sterling had different plans. He invited along one of his friends. He said something about this friend being a friend of a friend. This was all very odd for me considering it was always just the two of us. *Who is this new friend you have? We've been friends for ten years; I thought I knew all of your friends.* Thirty minutes into dinner, in walks this gorgeous man. Not the universal meaning for "gorgeous man," tall, dark, and handsome. Gorgeous by my standards: taller than 5'5, light, and skinny. I spent the night mesmerized by his features as he memorized the stats of the Braves game on the TV above my head. My self-absorbance evaporated and I was no longer the sexy woman that walked into the bar less than an hour before. I wanted this man

and I was determined to see him even if he didn't see me. I started accepting invitations to places I wasn't remotely interested in going.

Friend: "Hey, want to go to the North Pole without a coat?"

Me: "Yea, sounds great, see you there."

After each meeting, we slowly began to hang out without the group. We were thinking about each other nonstop, but nothing was happening. He was dating other women and I was still dating the Asian Guy.

Searching for the Lauren I took time off to find, I decided to tell my sisters about this mystery guy I failed to mention. He and I were just friends, it seemed unfair to lump him into the same category as the nameless contacts flooding my inbox.

A year later, we were sitting at a bar gazing into each other's eyes (like any other cliché couple). Stammering through his words, he asked me to be his girlfriend. Finally! Maybe my girls were right when they said they had a good feeling about him.

From that moment my girlfriend senses kicked in and things went downhill from there. The calls were fewer, time spent was awkward. I chopped it up to him being busy. *Things will feel more natural soon.*

One week later, my phone chimed with a new text notification that read:

**"I WISH I NEVER ASKED TO BE IN A RELATIONSHIP."**

#### Lesson 4: Time

Life is truly what you make it. If you choose to be happy things will work in your favor. If you choose to be a bitch, karma will be a bitch right back. You have to take the test and trials and make them work for you. Situations occur at work, at home, with your friends, strangers, even with your exes. Learn to take your losses and turn them into victories. How you ask? First, be honest with yourself, everyday won't be roses and lilies. It's the way you handle the bad that determines the good. I am sure I sound wise beyond my years, but I learned this the hard way.

Let me tell you a little story. Once upon a time there was a naïve, little girl that thought her knight in shining armor would sweep her off her feet in his apple red mustang and ride off into the sunset after the big Friday night football game. Ten years and a few messy break-ups later she is writing to you from her plushy bed made for one, toasting to the ones that got away.

During my most difficult break-up (which at the time, all of them where the most difficult) I was hysterical, melodramatic, and the world was ending. *How could I move on? He was the one. Will I ever get married? Our argument wasn't that bad.* Your mind tackles the 7 steps of grief for your dead relationship. But I'm here as a living testimony. With a little space and time, you'll be a lot happier. Taking a few tips from the tough times I discovered some valuable lessons. These are the things I learned from my ex:

1. Be patient.

Your heart aches right now and all you want to do is respond to his five million phone calls, texts, voicemails but wait just one minute. After arguments or break-ups, we can be very vulnerable. Take a few days to yourself to calm down and think rationally. Don't get riled up by your bestie telling you what you should or shouldn't do. Allow yourself the opportunity to

meditate on your own decision. Deciding to continue to date or that you just can't seem to forgive and forget will make a lot more sense once you have had time to think things through.

## 2. Compromise, but don't settle.

Relationships require work. In order to withstand a long-lasting commitment, both parties have to learn to compromise. There will be things you dislike, but you tolerate them because your S.O. loves them. For example, he has no clue you hate watching *Wrestle Mania*. Or you may not realize he isn't the best at yoga, but he downward dogs anyway. It's a compromise. Don't let major issues such as your happiness go to the wayside because you are afraid to stir things up. My mentor once told me, "in relationships you have to pay attention because the yellow flags become red flags." If something bothers you, don't be afraid to speak your mind, you will either be able to agree or disagree. If you disagree, tell him to keep it moving.

A couple of months pass and you may be thinking you could have done a few things differently or what you disagreed on doesn't seem to matter anymore, it is natural to feel this way. That's the whole point.

Look at the bigger picture and take inventory. *Are you happier now than you were before? If you take him back, what are my deal breakers?* There are more fish in the sea that are more compatible. No need to disregard your happiness to end up in an unhealthy situation again.

## 3. It's over!

At this point, two things will happen. You'll see him with a new person and you'll either be happy for him or punching him in the face and yelling obscene things at the new love interest (this option never ends well). Pull yourself together then move on, consider this a new chapter in

your life. Date yourself, reconnect with your friends, set a new goal, or pick up a new hobby, I mean hobby.

Being single is not a bad thing, it just gives you time to remind yourself how amazing you are before Mr. Right comes along. Later you'll thank me for the bullet you dodged.

## Birth Control

My alarm rings at 10 a.m. every morning with the caption “pill.” One would think your body would adjust to hearing the same sound at the same time. You don’t. I get a faint, nauseous feeling before taking each pill. I’m tired of it. I’m tempted to throw the whole three-month supply away. I’m not ready for kids, but at the age of almost thirty, I’m willing to take my chances.

I’ve tried damn near all kinds of birth control and they all suck once effectively inserted into your vagina, swallowed orally, or injected directly into your arm. There’s always a weird side effect to remind me (despite my pro-choice stance) that controlling your uterus is just unnatural.

My OBGYN is annoyingly nonchalant. I think it’s a tactic to keep patients calm, but I find it weird. God forbid, she tells me I have a life-threatening illness. I can see her standing in front of me in her white coat saying, “Ah, it’s no big deal.”

No matter how nonchalantly Dr. C lists the effects, none of birth control options are perfect. I ask her to run through the side effects like I’m ordering food at a restaurant,

“Ok, one more time, the Depo-Provera does what?”

Then making my selection turns into a game of Go Fish.

“I’ll trade sporadic spotting for mercury shattering mood swings, thanks.”

I hate B.C. because it’s yet another pesky reminder that women have more to add to our list of worries than men. “Alex, I’ll take low wages, voting rights, the #MeToo movement, and a birth control prescription for 200, please.” Men skate by asking simple questions, “You’re on the pill, right?” I don’t even know why they ask, the answer doesn’t change the outcome of the evening.

I've been on the pill a long while, maybe been twelve years or longer. However, if you count the number of days I've turned off the alarm without remembering to actually take the pill, it may be more like ten or eleven years. I don't have any children, so I assume it's working. But the more I think about it, I'm only taking the pill to save myself the embarrassment.

Jackie, isn't the most endearing woman. She helps hundreds of people through service, time, and money; but she does it without cracking a smile. It's as if she's thinking, *I'll help you, but I don't have to like it.* As you can imagine, it makes it tough to confide in her, even though she's the only person that can help. Whenever I get baby fever, I think about telling my mom I'm pregnant. My mother and I live in different states and she still terrifies me. She has strong views on all the southern, "that's just blasphemous" things like children out of wedlock and gay marriage. So, no matter my age, I'm in for a good talkin' to.

When I was 17, I asked my mom for birth control. The timing was perfect. She was on the phone gossiping about her co-worker's teen daughter getting pregnant. My mother's exact words were, "She should have bought the pill when she asked." I figured, great, this is my cue.

"Hey mom, you think I could get birth control?"

"Why, so you can have sex?"

"I mean no, like, just in case."

"No."

"No?"

"Yea, no!"

*Great talk, mom.*

### The Break-up

I never thought I'd see him again. Seeing Michael's face, the Asian Guy, after all these years made all those old feelings fly into the pit of my stomach. Feelings of "Did I do the right thing?"

I see our last fight replaying in my head. I don't remember why I broke up with him, but I set the whole thing up. I only started a fight with him because I realized I'd jump the gun with him. He was in love with me and I had a crush on Mr. One Week.

I could think of one hundred and one reasons to end it all. None valid, but I knew it had to be believable. I started with his elementary need to take a nap every day after work and his discouraging words about me going back to school. No matter what I actually said, by the end it was clear he needed to get his shit out of my house. I didn't have plans for the evening, but I had to make my "storm out" look real. He had to get upset enough so I could say my line "You know what? This isn't going to work." That's always my line:

"You know what, this isn't going to work cause you're crazy."

"You know what this isn't going to work cause your baby mama gets on my nerves."

"You know what this isn't going to work because we don't like the same tv shows."

The reason never matters, you just have to be confident in your delivery.

You have to find what works for you, but I raise my voice, ignore important questions, and demand "you get out now." Michael didn't deserve it, but it worked like a charm.

This is not my brightest hour because I broke a good man's heart for one week with a guy that didn't want to talk to me on the phone. I make myself feel better by freeing him for the other fish in the sea.

## Airport

“It’s the weekend baby!”

A hometown radio legend, Stan Bell, would say that every Friday evening right before the weekend. I’m sure he got it from someone else, but I distinctly remember his voice whenever I hear the phrase. In a city like Atlanta, weekends are where it’s at. Festivals, brunch, parties...you name it, it’s going to be lit. Everything in the city is packed with people stuck in traffic and long lines, including the airport.

It was a Friday evening. I paid \$30 for a ten-minute Uber ride to the train station for the train station to take me to the airport. I hadn’t gotten on a plane and I was already exhausted. It was 4 pm and my flight was scheduled to board at 5:49 p.m. and I was in panic mode. Fresh off the train, I was speed walking toward the Spirit check-in desk (because they make you pay for a ridiculous, carry-on bag) when I was stopped.

“Miss?”

“Ma’m”

“Excuse me”

Still walking, I look over to my left and there’s an airport employee flagging me down with orange, alert flags. He looked the part: a black and red collared shirt, black pants, with a red and yellow fluorescent vest like the ones school zone crossing guards wear. He was an official, power toting, rule monitoring member of the TSA and he was flagging me down. Now, I’m freaking out! *Did I drop something? Am I going the wrong way What could it be?*

I walked over to the side where he was standing, and he says,

“I just wanted to tell you, you look stunning today.”

It took every bone in my body to not kick him in his knee caps and risk getting thrown out of the airport. I scrunched my face and fixed my mouth to only say, “Thank you.”

I returned to my brisk walk to the check-in desk, ranting.

*How dare your little, barely two-feet-tall, I can't see over the wheel, arrogant ass stop me for some bullshit. I wouldn't want to date you on my worst date. You don't deserve to tell me I'm beautiful. I knew that before I left my house today. Men always thinking they can abuse their power. Don't stop me unless my shoes are on fire, douchebag.*

## Thirty

My soul died. I'm not sure when, but that's what I hear. A close mentor and my even closer therapist both mentioned my dead soul in the same week. It was the week of February 18, 2018. I specifically remember this because I was still on a high after seeing the highly acclaimed Marvel movie, *Black Panther*. I felt like the beautiful, Black warriors in the film, but what I heard was that I was mildly depressed and broken. Their "I'm only telling you because I care" tones convinced me that it was indeed true.

I know how this happened. At twenty-nine, you feel you have one too many things to worry about. After twenty-five there's a steady downward spiral called a quarter-life crisis. Your body aches for attempting the stupid things you were doing before age twenty-five. It's like a biological clock ticking towards death.

I'm tapping on thirty years old and have no idea what I want to do for the rest of my life. In my early twenties I kept applying for jobs that I didn't want, just because after college, you need a job. Some being in retail and the others as step mom. I was climbing the corporate ladder of retail management and trying to figure out how I'd balance as a working mom if the time came.

I dated four guys sequentially. Each of them had children. There was Joseph, who I fell for while in college during one of my cheating escapades. He has two children by two different women. I spent valuable time buying gifts and trying to prove that I could be baby mama number three. Syd has two by two women. His second was born on my birthday a year after we started dating (strange timing, right?). Chad has three, but I was technically his rebound while his children's mother was getting her life together. I wish he would have told me that before I started babysitting them for free. And last but not least, Richard. He has a daughter that I never got the

chance to meet, thankfully. By this point, I've reached my quota for taking care of men and their children.

At first, I thought I was bored with retail. Instead, it was my body telling me I was out of fuel. I've tried it all: spiritual healing, crystals, yoga, meditation and nothing seemed to work.

Men take note: your lover doesn't do things only because they care. Yea they care, but they ultimately want a wedding proposal. I was drained of unnecessary love, resources, and creativity that there was none left for myself. I blame insensitive men and their kids for killing my soul.

*Have you ever felt warm on a cold, cold night? That's how it gets you when you least expect it and you can't reject it. That crazy little tingling feeling pain in your chest yes, that's love.*

*-Jazmine Sullivan*

## Love

Love- ləv/

*noun*

**1.** an intense feeling of deep affection.

"babies fill parents with intense feelings of love"

*synonyms:* deep affection, fondness, tenderness, warmth, intimacy, attachment, endearment

**2.** a person or thing that one loves.

"she was the love of his life"

*synonyms:* beloved, loved one, love of one's life, dear, dearest, dear

one, darling, sweetheart, sweet, angel, honey

*verb*

**1.** feel a deep romantic or sexual attachment to (someone).

"do you love me?"

*synonyms:* care very much for, feel deep affection for, hold very dear, adore, think the world

of, be devoted to, dote on, idolize, worship

Ever think about love and one face comes to mind? That's him. Happy or irritable, I want to be by his side. After all the games, rules, lies, and meaningless connections, it all makes sense. The bible says, love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves. And I finally get it. Hell, even Webster gets it. It's not about who can out scheme who or how many notches you have under your belt, instead he or she's the one you're willing to fight for.

I fight for him every day. I fight the old me because he makes me a better person. I should fight him for always managing to be nice when I'm on his last nerve. He's my favorite person. And our love story was unexpected.

\*\*\*\*

**"I WISH I NEVER ASKED TO BE IN A RELATIONSHIP."**

I read that God-awful text a few times more, then I deleted it. I decided then and there I wouldn't get upset. *I know what I want and he's immature, he can't handle all this woman, end of story.*

Things went back to "pre" normal. Mr. One Week and I were back to hanging out in groups, he was seeing other people, and I was telling myself I wasn't upset. My actions said otherwise. He talked to me, I gave concise answers. He reached for bear hugs and I gave church hugs. You know, the infamous side hug where your bodies are two feet apart as you reach one arm around for a gentle pat on the back. Yea, I couldn't risk getting too close and ruining my "I'm better without you" demeanor. I couldn't give him the power of knowing his words or text hurt my feelings. I was the new and improved me, remember? The me that learned to love thyself and embrace single life.

I did not ask, but I think my cold shoulder got to him. After a while, he began to ask questions:

"Is everything ok?"

"You're not mad, are you?"

"Want to meet and talk, just the two of us?"

His genuine concern was sincere, I couldn't resist. I did something I'd never done before. The same night, I put my big girl panties on and met him for a drink. In true, mature woman fashion I put my pride aside and talked about my feelings.

Two years in and I feel the way I did the minute he walked in the room. I knew he was unlike the others before. There was a glow around his face. My voice shut down. I spend nights mesmerized by his features as he memorizes the stats of the Braves games on TVs above my head. He makes my self-absorbance evaporate. He tells me I'm the sexiest woman in the bar.

*Hi, I think you're my fish.*

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