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I have never been in love.

I have never sought out a relationship. The nerdy, self-loathing, socially anxious girl that I was in high school had accepted that I was too unconventional to fit in and be like everybody else. My time would come, my parents told me, and that when I met the right person I would know it and they would be The One I Settled Down With.

This mindset stuck with me up through college, until, by total chance, I befriended a stranger while studying abroad in Australia. It was a sunny day but a little chilly for the dress I was wearing for my cousin's lunch party.

This stranger wasn't feeling well that day and had decided last-minute to take my cousin up on her invitation by dropping in just for a bit (my cousin's cooking is just that tempting). Upon arrival, he noted my unfamiliar face and misplaced accent and proceeded to strike up a conversation with me that lasted four hours. So much for a quick pop-in.

I had never clicked with somebody so quickly, so easily, than I did with him. He was a little weird, in a refreshing way, and I saw myself in that. We reveled in the discovery that we had similar interests and attitudes towards certain matters. I'd been worried about being bored at the lunch, but talking to him was the most fun I'd had talking to anybody in a long time. He was endearingly perceptive; he suggested we move when he noticed the light rising up to my eyes as the sun set, and asked if I had a sweater when he saw goosebumps on my arms from the autumn breeze.

At some point I agreed to go mountain biking with him. I didn't know what would ensue; I was just excited to have a new friend.

"You could've dragged me out there and left me to die in the woods," I joked later, weeks after our muddy bike ride.

He chuckled. "To be honest, I was surprised you even agreed."

"No, I think it's very normal to agree to be driven an hour away from campus in a foreign country by some rando I met just once before to ride around in the mud through a forest, where I could've crashed and fallen to my death," I deadpanned, earning an abrupt laugh.

He's got this laugh that's contagiously charming; it bursts out suddenly like he wasn't intending to let it out but it was teased it out of him anyway, unfiltered and unabashed. It made my breath hitch whenever I elicited it.

I loved it.

The more we spent time together and got to know each other, the more I realized I loved a lot of things about him.

I loved that our senses of humor matched perfectly and that usually we'd be formulating the same jokes in our heads before blurting them out and realizing we completely understood each other.

I loved the patience and gentleness with which he treated not just me, but everybody.

I loved the blatant honesty he chooses to live by simply because he would rather you be stung by the truth than be hurt by a lie.

I loved how we were both astonishingly similar, yet different enough that we could spend hours together and not get bored.

I felt myself stepping closer toward the edge of a chasm, staring straight into the depths of the unknown.

And I briefly wondered if he could be The One.

One problem quickly became apparent, though: bad timing. My semester abroad was coming to an end.

We'd hung out a couple times, flirting a little but not quite sure where things were leading. I have no patience for uncertainty, so I asked to meet up to discuss it.

We walked along the coast eating ice cream. The sun went down, but we kept walking. He took my hand, led me to an outlook along the beach line. It was then that I had my first kiss, with the sea breeze whipping through my jacket and the sound of crashing waves on the beach roaring in my ears. That evening we decided to be in a romantic relationship, but only for the remaining 1.5 months I was in Australia. Neither of us wanted to drag the other along in a relationship in which we didn't know if we'd ever even see each other again.

"We'll keep talking over the internet after you leave," he promised on the way home. "See where the future takes us."

I nodded, staring down at my water bottle and fidgeting with the lid.

"It'll be hard," he continued, his eyes not leaving the road.

"It'll be worth it."

"Absolutely." He glanced over at me then. "It's what's practical. If we're meant to be, we're meant to be. But we can't know the future."

"It's practical," I echoed, "and mature."

He pressed his lips together tightly in agreement.

I kept repeating that to myself silently in the car as we drove in the pattering rain, our clothes damp from being caught in the storm that evening.

Practical. Mature. It's what I told myself over and over every time I watched him smile or listened to his random anecdotes or held his hand.

The chasm grew deeper and more tempting, beckoning me to jump in.

He and I made the most of the time we had. I told him about life in the United States. He let me in on his slight obsession with collecting flashlights and took me on rides on his motorcycle, whom we affectionately called Natasha. He showed me musical artists he liked (I'm hooked on synthwave as a result). I shared with him my poetry that I was too afraid to show anybody else. We sipped bubble tea while people-watching. We cooked meals, made smoothies, and laughed at each other's antics until our stomachs hurt. And when we were tired, we dozed off in my bed holding hands and listening to each other's heartbeats.

We talked about deep topics like mental illness and love and our goals in life. Then we talked about not-so-deep affairs like whether the correct term is "chips" or "fries" when it comes to fried potato snacks, and

bantered over the irrationality of eating 1.5 pieces of toast (seriously, why would you bother toasting half a slice of bread?).

I did my best to cheer him up when he was down and he taught me to live in the present, which was especially helpful when I could feel my impending departure creeping closer and closer.

He stayed with me at the airport until the very end. We walked parallel but apart; he along the airport's windowed wall, and I along the windowed jet bridge. I was the one to turn away first. My fingers trembled, my legs moved reluctantly, my clenched jaw ached from fighting back tears. I forced a smile at the flight attendant checking my boarding pass, and then there was no turning back. I left my newfound home to return to my old one in the States.

"Hey, look at that, we can still talk. Neither of us ceased to exist," he texted me after I'd settled into my seat.

I smiled because it was true. Just because we weren't physically together didn't mean everything that had happened between us would be erased from history. The feelings were still there and the memories remained intact. Most importantly, he was out there somewhere and I could still talk to him.

It was comforting. But seconds later, I watched the city skyline fall away from my window while I felt tears fall down my cheeks. I stared outside until all I could see was the inky blue-black of the night, avoiding the concerned gaze of an elderly man in a nearby seat. Comfort doesn't erase pain, only muffles it.

Sometimes we hear sage quotes about the importance of putting down our phones. The blissful relief of disconnecting. I agree. It's healthy to live life off-screen, to go AFK. But some say this is because digital interactions aren't as important as what happens to you IRL. That's what I'm not so sure about.

It's been two months of being back home. We still have feelings for each other, but are adjusting to being nothing other than friends in our communication over the phone and text messaging. We're still the same people. All that's different is the medium, the canvas of the relationship. All relationships between any given individuals are nuanced; they vary in hue. Since ours has turned into a digital friendship, does it have less color? Less value and validity as our romantic "in real life" relationship?

I miss him. I miss our IRL romance. It's a bittersweet ache that makes me want to stop just for a brief respite every time I find myself with a friend and repeating a phrase he'd often say, or the sound of a decelerating motorcycle outside my window on a hot night, or whenever I pass by a stranger wearing cologne like his but not quite his. But this is my reality now, and I can't press play and pause as I please.

Was I in love with him? No, not given the two months we had together. But the potential was there, and I think that's what matters most. Maybe a love story doesn't need a clean resolution where you find "The One" and settle down with them for life. Maybe it's just about finding someone with whom you feel at home. Happy and safe, whether you're with them for a long time or if you're just passing on by. I think I found a home in this stranger I met abroad. That's why it's difficult for me to let go, to accept that our over-the-internet relationship will have to suffice until we meet again.

That is, if we ever meet again. We could cross paths later on, or perhaps we were meant to exist forever parallel to each other, never touching again after that last embrace at the airport boarding gate. Like he told me, we can't know the future.

Maybe that's okay, because there are two things I do know. I know the identity of what I faced while standing on the brink of that chasm. It was love. And though I never fell in, I know that it was there and it was very, very real.