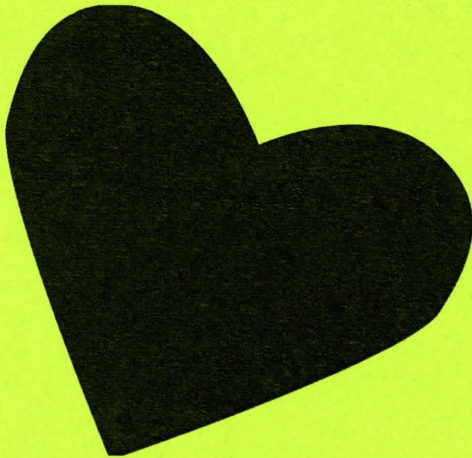


LOVE AND OTHER
SUCH NONSENSE



CSUCI Fall 2013
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Where Is This Going?

The cold breeze brushes over my skin, causing bumps to erupt on my legs like tiny ice picks. *Why does the cold suddenly bring to your attention that you have no idea how to shave your knees?* The hairs stick up unapologetically. I pull the sleeves of my jacket down, as if that will somehow cover my bare legs. Shorts were a bad idea. The sun is quickly sinking behind the peak of the mountain, an orgy of colors blanketing the skyline.

I could go inside. I sit down on the bench, hearing it creak noisily underneath me. That is like a chair's insult. "I'm too much woman for you too?" I ask it. It doesn't answer, go figure. I look up, look back down. Fidget. *Sit still, goddamnit.*

I grab a chunk of hair and stare at it. Split ends. The bright red strands splay off in a million different directions. Super attractive. I yank one out and look up at the sound of footsteps. I check the time on my beat up phone – 8:06.

"You can't be on time?" I ask him as he strides within ear shot. I'm pretending, I know. It took me almost an hour to work up the courage to ask him here. I spasmodically paced backward and forward until I finally walked up to him and said, *Meet me. 8. Revelry Courtyard.* And walked off, sure that I looked about as dumb as I felt.

"I'm here," he says quietly, sitting down next to me. Fidget. I stand up, look at him. Break eye contact quickly. Stare instead at one of the trees. It's a beautiful tree. Twists and turns around

its base, pepto-bismal pink flower petals drifting down. I'm fixated on one small one, taking its time to float its way down to the asphalt, where it will lie, shriveling until someone steps on it. Crushes it. He coughs.

I turn back. I sit back down. There's a solid gap between us and I can't make eye contact.

"Conversations go better in my head," I finally choke out. He laughs a little bit. Polite laughter. "*I'm fucking awkward, aren't I?*" I mumble this.

"What?" he asks.

"Nothing."

"So," he says, impatient after a minute's silence. Fidget. Fidget. Fidget. "What's wrong?" he asks finally, tired of waiting for me to start the conversation, I'm sure.

A stream of images of all the things that are wrong flash through my mind, and my throat feels very dry. I cough a couple times. *What am I going to say?* Rub my legs for warmth. They're basically numb. Look at those hairs.

"I know you," he says, softly. Now who's being dramatic? "What's wrong?" he repeats.

"You're breaking me," I spit out, staring fixedly at a strangely longer hair sticking straight up, right on my kneecap. This courtyard is so quiet. Even the crickets have seemed to have quieted to a murmur to listen to this train wreck that is my life.

He's hesitating, I can tell. This is the point where I would run, if I were him. I want to run, but somehow I always follow me.

"You can't give me that kind of power," he says finally. He puts his hand on my leg. I didn't notice it was shaking. I scoot away from it. I don't feel when the water drips off my face onto my legs. *Why do body parts go numb?* I try to think, over the sound of my own sniffing.

"I didn't give it to you. You took it," I say. I look up at him. I'm angry. I wonder if I look angry with tears streaming down my face. Probably not. I hope this isn't an ugly cry.

"How?" he asks. He's dumb. Why did I fall for *this* idiot?

I try to remember.

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I stumble in the door, running late, as usual. *What time is it?* I'm panicking, also as usual. One minute late, one fucking minute late. I slide into my chair, trying to gather myself. They're all chatting amongst themselves; if I hadn't been so awkward, they probably wouldn't have noticed me. The girl next to me smiles, pityingly.

"I'm Crystal," she smiles, whispers to me. My throat is dry, but I am saved an introduction by a young woman, in her early thirties, standing up and smiling at all of us. She smiles longest at me, and I know she was waiting for me before beginning. *Great start.*

"I'm glad you're all here!" She clears her throat, small and cutely. "I'd like to welcome you all and start by introducing myself!" She seemed to exclaim after each sentence; her professional cardigan and pencil skirt – she is everything I thought I wanted to be, when I still aimed to be a

size 1 – *perfect* in society’s eyes. I wonder what she thinks her flaws are, I wonder. I’m fidgeting. *Sit still.*

“My name is Rachel, I’ll be your advisor” she says, and suddenly I zone out. I look around the room as she talks, trying to familiarize myself with the faces I will now be working with. Crystal, the girl next to me, looks on attentively, pushes her oversized glasses up her nose and smiles. Her hair goes on for days, in loose waves down her back, and her smile holds both warmth and...I can’t pinpoint it. The girl next to her has her hands folded on the table and is the epitome of professional, yet couldn’t be more than my own age; her blazer matches her dress pants, and her accessories are color-coordinated. Although shorter, her hair almost matches Crystal’s perfectly, besides the difference in her auburn to Crystal’s deep brown. I brush past more faces, of the blonde girl glancing down occasionally at her cell phone, hidden beneath the table; the broadly built boy quietly drumming his fingers on his thigh, who stares attentively, not at Rachel’s face, but at her...other assets; of the serious girl who looks bored, as if she’s heard this all before; and finally of the guy on the end, in a ruffled button-up, hair slightly disheveled, glasses at the tip of his nose and a genuinely attentive smile splayed across his face. I spin back to Rachel, who seems to be coming to a close on her speech.

“Now, I’d like you guys to get to know each other. I know some of you know each other already” she nods to Crystal and the professional girl to her right, “but just so everyone is on the same

page, we can do some introductions!” she says cheerfully.

Crystal smiles at the girl next to her, who I come to learn is named Anna, sitting next to the blonde Talia, the finger drumming Robert, the obviously bored Shayna, and the ruffled Phoenix.

Rachel returns to the head of the table when she seems satisfied that we have exchanged enough smiles and handshakes and says, “Your next stop is your tour, but before you leave, I just wanted to say...welcome to the tutoring center!” I grimace while she bounces off, so much joy oozing from her every pore. Phoenix is the only one that catches my expression and grins, as I look down into my lap.

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“He spelled totality wrong ten times,” Anna scoffed, shuffling her papers and laughing to Crystal, who sat poised on the edge of the desk giggling along. I learned over time that they were best friends – so close knit that it seemed that if you made one laugh, you made them both, and if you upset one, the other bared their teeth in support.

“How was he spelling it?” Crystal asked, scrolling through her phone as she spoke.

“Totally,” she laughed again. “And it’s one thing to misspell the word, but another to use it *ten* times AND misspell it all of them, like jeez, what an *idiot*” she replied.

I found it hard to focus on the paper I was looking over as I listened to her go on about the boy who had left the tutoring center a mere five minutes previous. I looked up from it and saw Phoenix looking at them with an uncomfortable expression,

obviously bothered by the words they were speaking. I stared a second too long and looked down quickly as he turned his gaze on my own. I stared at the same sentence I'd read six times, *In James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" he writes...* I underline the quotations and quickly write, "Italics for novel!" in the margins.

I hear his footsteps but don't look up until his shadow obscures my reading light. "Hey," he says, smiling kindly at me. For the last two weeks, he was the only member of the center that I was sure I liked as a person, either because I was fully ignored by the others, or as in the case of Crystal and Anna, was uninterested in getting to know further. I had tried to talk to Crystal alone, the one time we had worked the closing shift, but the person I found to be charismatic and caring shifted back into Anna's best friend the next shift as I overheard them talking about the bad jokes I had told her, to waste the last hour of the shift away. She had laughed when I had told them, but not the same as she laughed now – loud and unkindly.

I decided it was better to say little, so that my words would not be held against me. "Hi," I replied, fidgeting a little in my seat. My fingers shuffled the paper as he pulled a rolling chair next to me and sat down.

"How's your paper going?" he asks, nodding towards the papers I am now absentmindedly wrinkling in my fingers. I put them down and smooth them out as I look into his big brown eyes, partially obscured by his thick glasses.

"It's going," I respond, looking down at the unimaginative title: "James Joyce" *Hmm, I wonder what the paper is about?* I smile to myself at my own sarcasm. Wow, am I dumb.

"What?" he asks, and I realize that he's looking closely at me, utterly engrossed in my facial expression.

"Oh," I reply, dumbfounded. "I was just looking at the title," I reply dully. I push the paper towards him and let his eyes run up the page.

"Oh," he chuckles, "very imaginative." He smiles widely, and looks me straight in the eye, causing me to look down and turn a violent shade of pink as I connect the fact that he had thought the same thing as I had. "You wanna grab a coffee on our break?" he asks, catching me again off guard.

I look up at him, eyes widen and nod without thinking.

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We work together on three out of my five shifts each week, me occasionally sharing an awkward spelling error (the student who wanted to write an in-depth analysis on the mindset of sext's, but didn't realize that her autocorrect had changed half of them to sex, completely changing the topic) and him sharing a math formula that I told him flat-out was gibberish to me, but he continued to try relentlessly, convinced that I would one day come to love math the way he did. *I definitely would not.* But I never told him that.

Coffee breaks became a tradition, him with his same exact order – vanilla lattes, three extra

pumps of vanilla – me trying to find something I could make a regular, but was too picky to settle.

I tried not to notice the goofy smile he gave me, when I ran in panting to work, always *needing* to run in, in order to not be late. Or the way he hugged me extra-long when he walked me to my car the two days we ended shifts at the same time. Or the way he occasionally worked after his shift was over, in order to help someone really struggling with a math problem. I tried not to notice these things, because I knew I would like him, and I knew I would then like him too much, and I knew it would cloud my judgment of any of his flaws.

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“You haven’t seen Jurassic Park?!” he gasped, on the way to my car, randomly discussing topics that had been brought up in our classes.

“This is always what happens. I read, I don’t watch movies,” I reply, shrugging.

“Come over this weekend, we’re watching it. Your life is severely deficient without the important educational lessons that giant dinosaurs teach you,” he says, trying to sound all-knowing.

I smile, “Because dinosaurs will help me study for my test on Freudian theory,” I laugh, but agree to go over that weekend anyway, excited to be invited out. *In, technically, but still.*

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“Why don’t you have a couch?” I laughed, noticing the oversized chair, half the size of a loveseat.

“Don’t judge me,” he said, smiling, twisting the lids off the beers he had just taken from the

fridge. He gestured to sit down and then squeezed in next to me, handing me the beer as he did so.

I laughed again, to hide what I felt being so close to him. I was hyper aware of every inch of skin that was in contact with his. He sipped his beer as he fumbled with the game console, turning on the movie. I took a large gulp, and then another, to try to take my mind off the heat resonating from his forearm.

It's a forearm, you idiot, I thought to myself. But it was a slowly formed thought and I realized why as I looked down at my beer, almost entirely gone. "Whoops," I meant to think, but said aloud.

He looked to the side at me, looked down at my beer and laughed. "Were we racing?" he asked, taking a large gulp of his and getting up to grab another.

"I really shouldn't," I say, laughing. "I'm sort of a light-weight."

He laughs, but returns with two more beers and sets it down next to me, for when I've finished the first. I look down at the beer in my hand, three gulps worth left and think *fuck it*. I chug the rest and twist off the next cap, ready for anything.

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I probably shouldn't be drunk right now. This is embarrassing. What is even *happening* in this movie? I'm fidgeting. *Stop it.*

"Are you okay?" he asks, and I realize he's been looking at me.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I can't even focus on the movie." I start giggling at my stupidity, and then suddenly can't stop and he's laughing as well, but

we both don't know at exactly what. He wipes a tear from my eye, and I'm wheezing with laughter because "**what**" *gasp* "**are we**" *gasp* "**laughing**" *hyperventilation*, "**at?**" I sound ridiculous and he himself snuffles and wipes a tear from his eye, just shrugs because he can't get a word out.

We finally manage to stop laughing, mostly because my abdomen feels like it's on fire and I look up at him to see him staring intently at me, with an expression I can't quite place. "What?" I ask, not that he's said anything.

He doesn't hesitate, but leans in, maybe encouraged by alcoholic confidence, and kisses me. My eyes are still open, but the second his lips touch mine they close and I grab his face, like I've been waiting for this – and maybe I have been.

We were already so close to each other, it was easy to wrap our hands every which way, and then he surprised me by standing, lifting me in what I had thought were scrawny arms, and carrying me to his room and laying me on the bed. My brain, slightly less fuzzy, focused on his lips, on the way his body felt pressed up against mine, of the way he would break from kissing me to gently stroke his thumb against my cheek. I thought that I had been gradually getting sober, but the longer we rolled around, the more I felt intoxicated by every move he made, my brain getting less clear. *Indecision*.

"Is this okay?" he asked, panting a little as he again brushed his thumb against my cheek.

"Yes," I answered automatically, unthinking. *What are you saying?* This is too fast, but I fear for the moment when it stops.

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"Hey," he says, smiling, nudging me awake. I squint at the sunlight pouring into his bedroom window.

"Hey," I croak a little, my throat raw from dehydration. I gather myself and realize that I'm lying on his bare arm, thin grey sheet the only thing between me and the rest of his room. I can see my bra awkwardly hanging off his bookshelf and I snort a little.

His eyes follow mine and he smiles, then kisses me on the forehead and rolls out of bed. "I've got to work on my speech project," he says, pulling on his pants and I pull the sheets up as I sit up, realizing that he's asking me to leave.

"Of course," I say, thinking of my own two hundred pages to read by Monday. "I have to read half a novel by tomorrow," I say. I'm not sure if he's listening, as he jingles his belt and throws me my clothes.

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"Hey," I say smiling at him as I walk up to his desk. He looks up from the math sheet he's correcting, sees me, nods his head and continues working.

Oh. He's busy, I shouldn't bother him.

But he seems to be busy all day, unable to take a break at the normal time, and doesn't say more than "how are you" in passing. And I start to feel this shift, look back at the moment in his bedroom and wonder where everything changed.

The next day we end together, a night shift, and those are the quietest times in the center. "Dull night," I say, almost to myself more than anything.

"Yeah," he says, looking up and smiling at me for the first time. He looks around a little and then motions me with his head towards the back of the room. A little confused, I get up even though the only thing back there is Rachel's now-empty office and a storage closet with brooms and other cleaning supplies.

"What's up?" I ask, hope obvious in my voice. *Shut up.*

He doesn't say anything, just opens the door of the storage closet and grabs my hand, pulling me inside. We kiss, but my mind is on the broom stick pressing into my back and the quietness of the last two days. *What are we doing?*

He pushes the broom farther into my back and then pulls away at the sound of the bell, announcing a visitor. He puts his finger to my lips, and then slides out of the door, leaving me in the dark.

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It worsens over time, coffee breaks becoming non-existent, but storage closet breaks becoming more frequent. Suddenly, I know what this is, as he smiles at Anna and Crystal, but I follow him anyway, my closed eyes bringing back images of shared conversations over vanilla lattes. I pretend that we're there, with his hand up my shirt, moaning my name but surely thinking of others.

Today I'm not working, but I know he is. I stand outside of the center, pacing back and forth.

Go in there, what are you doing? You came here for a reason. Pep talks to myself never work. My hands are shaking and I feel ridiculous. Someone walks into the tutoring center and gives me a strange look as I continue to walk back and forth, telling myself that this is dumb.

How much time has passed? I don't even know. But finally, after seeing the person who gave me the strange look leave, I walk inside, up to his desk and say, "Meet me. 8. Revelry Courtyard," and I walk out. I know my voice is shaking, and I sound dumb, but I leave to prepare myself.

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"You can't give me that kind of power," he says. I scoot away from the hand he tries to place on my shaking leg and ignore the tears that fall quickly onto them, dripping off my chin.

"I didn't give it to you. You took it," I say, looking up at him. The anger finally floods in, but I'm sure it doesn't show the way I wish it would.

"How?" he asks. He's so dumb.

"You're so dumb," I say out loud. He laughs a little, like I'm joking. He tries to smile at me, tries to scoot in closer.

I stand up and he frowns. "What are we even doing?" I ask him, anger finally showing in my voice, as it raises to a height I've never used with him. I push myself to ignore the shock as I continue: "Is this just...some joke? How did we get here?"

"I-" he tries to interrupt, but I shove on, unable to stop now that I've started.

"I'm so tired of *every* unspoken word! Everything you *don't* say, every kiss you don't explain. Just tell me already." I take a deep breath. "Just fucking tell me how you feel," I force out. My inability to think has made fidgeting impossible, my whole body concentrated on yelling at the boy in front of me. The pause is long enough that it feels like time has slowed, and if I couldn't hear the sound of my own heartbeat, pulsating in my ears, I would think that it had stopped entirely.

"Honestly," he says, half a question. He hesitates. I can hear it in his voice that there is still kindness there and he stands up to get closer to me, and I let him. "I feel nothing."

I back up, but he comes forward, hurriedly. "Right now. I just, I don't feel anything...right now" he says, but my brain has gone as numb as my body. *Run*, it begs, but he's caught up to me and hugs me tightly. *Run*.

I try to push away, wrapped in his warm embrace. "Don't patronize me," I say, and it's then that I realize I'm crying, the type of cry I know is an ugly one. My whole heart feels like it's collapsing.

"I'm not," he says, squeezing tighter as I struggle against it.

"Why won't you let me go?!" I yell, finally breaking free, not from my own strength but from his own shock at my scream.

"Because you're my best friend," he says, his own eyes alight with water.

"You don't...you don't fuck your best friend," I say, and turn away.

But I stop, *no more fidgeting*, I think. "You don't hold her hand, or kiss her in the storage closet. You don't look at her the way you look at me!" I yell between tears. "This isn't some game! I'm not some game," I say, starting to shake so badly that I can't tell if it's cold, anger, or the manifestation of the break in my sanity. *I feel nothing*. "Nothing," I repeat, looking him dead in the eye as he stands frozen in front of me.

"We can be exactly what you feel," I say. "Right now," I add, glaring at him, then turning and walking away.

Rules to Dating In College:

1. Don't fall for the same type. Don't even have a type. Try all the types - taste the rainbow.
2. When you're getting to know each other and you're thinking to yourself, *God, I like him* – don't sleep with him. Don't sleep with him even though he's cute and he's sweet and he's giving you those eyes, because suddenly he wakes up in the morning and tells you he has to go and you've suddenly realized that you've defined your relationship by sex.
3. Unless you think he's into you, don't eat anything that's going to end up all over your shirt. Unless it's in your shirt. And you are gonna sleep with him anyway (refer to number two, just saying). But snacks after sex are always rewarding.
4. Don't get hung up on who pays. I mean, shit, let the man pay if he wants to pay. You're a college student, you're broke. But remember that he probably is too, so don't you use those puppy dog eyes for a free meal unless you're willing to buy the chicken strips next time. Equality.
5. When participating in small talk, have a better answer for "What do you like to do for fun?" than "Fun? Homework? I don't get out much" As *exciting* as you'll sound...
6. If you're into him, the best way to approach him is not at the massive Halloween party

that your friends are throwing. Either you're dressed too provocatively to have had that much alcohol (and we'll be back at number two. Again) or you're in a banana costume. Which is hilarious in theory, but he's also too drunk to think of anything besides how hilarious you look. You will be defined as a banana forever.

7. Sharing isn't caring. Unless its food, and it's with me, then go ahead. But don't gossip, don't be that person that tells your entire dorm room about how he kissed you last night. Be the adult I know you can be. Privacy is a beautiful thing, especially early on.
8. You will especially appreciate number seven when you have roommates. They will know who's in your bed at night. I would recommend you getting enough dirt on them, so that you have a good amount of trust on either side. Blackmail makes beautiful friendships.
9. Until you're sure they're interested, you probably shouldn't let them see the voice you use around your dogs. It's weird man.
10. Be honest with them. Tell them what you want. If you want this to be serious, go in that way; you're less likely to get fucked over if you both know where you're coming from.
11. Be honest with yourself. Don't stick around putting effort into the really good-looking boy that wouldn't mind hooking up, but

doesn't want a relationship like you do. The likelihood that you sticking around will change his mind – it's real low. I'm not saying you're not pretty enough, or good enough but you're not gonna change the mind of a guy in college who wants what he calls 'freedom.'

12. Also if you meet a guy who thinks being single is 'freedom.' Don't even hook up with that guy. He's a D-bag.
13. But if you want to hook up, do it. It's college. The only person's whose judgment matters is yours - if you don't want anything serious, go for it. Don't count. Don't let anyone call you a slut. Be safe, be smart, and then do whatever the fuck you please.
14. Don't be talked into following the rules. Rules on rules on rules. Follow your teacher's guidelines to writing that paper, but don't listen to your roommate tell you that you have to wait three days to call him. Where is this written down? Why does it even matter? If you like someone, call them. If they think that's weird, you just saved yourself the trouble. Bam. You're welcome.

Yes, I realize I just told you not to listen to anything I just wrote. Well. I give you the *freedom* to do what you like. You see what I did there? I used it in the correct way.

