

# How Those We Once Loved Become Strangers Again

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Sagittarius is located in the southern hemisphere of the sky between the constellations of Scorpio and Capricorn. It is the only constellation that I can recognize, and it is because a boy pointed it out to me in a clear, dark sky when I was 15. He told me the archer's bow and arrow are aimed at the scorpion's heart to keep him from wandering. I thought this was both fascinating and cruel and wondered how tired the archer must be, constantly forcing someone to stay when they want to go. But what if the Greeks had it wrong? Perhaps the archer had other reasons for acting with such threatening force.

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"He's not very nice to you," Amy said, sipping her latte. Capricorn is an earth sign and when paired with a fire sign they tend to provide balance and grounding. Amy had provided me with such a service since we first met in the fifth grade. At twenty-two, our schedules made it difficult to connect as often, but we made it a point to meet once a month for a "real, grown-up breakfast."

"He's not mean," I said.

"I didn't say he was mean. It's just that, no matter how much we try to deny it, we are each the center of our own universe." At this, I rolled my eyes, but Amy pressed on with her theory, "I'm not saying we are all selfish, terrible people; I just mean that we're only able to really understand ideas that we can relate to."

"So, we are different. Why should that be a problem?" I asked, "I mean nobody is the same. And, in all honesty, why would I want to date someone exactly like me? How boring would that be?"

"I'm just saying there has to be a middle ground. There is healthy different and unhealthy different. When you are with someone, your

two worlds unavoidably overlap,” Amy put one hand over her other halfway, “Like those color charts we learned about art class. And that’s okay! That’s normal. You are red, he’s yellow, and that tiny part of you both that overlaps is orange. That part is compromise. That’s your relationship.” She looked up with her eyes to make sure I was following. I stared back, confused, but with intention. At this point, she turned each hand palm side up one at a time, “But you will always still be red, and he will always be yellow.” She weighed each hand with a bounce, “Compromise is good, but if you force him to be a little too much like you or you try to be a little too much like you, that’s where the breakdown starts. If you both become orange, I mean, well then neither one of you can be happy.”

I stared at her for a moment while a lone cricket chirped in the oleanders next to us, “Amy, you are always so eloquent and yet I have no idea what you are actually trying to tell me,” I teased. “Are you saying I’m not happy?”

I could see Amy choosing her next words carefully, “I’m saying that when you are with him, you are not you. And I can see that being a problem.” I wanted to tell her she had it wrong, but I couldn’t. So, I took a long sip of my coffee. “You know he’s a Scorpio, right?”

“Huh,” she answered, “Yea, that makes sense.” She laughed, made pincher claws with her fingers, and attacked my hand as I reached for the last piece of a cinnamon roll.

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Josh and I met on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2000 when The Cure played a concert at The Greek. Amy and I sat near the top of the amphitheater, she at my right, and three rows back to my left sat a young man in ripped jeans and worn boots. As the band played “A Letter to Elise,” I focused in on Robert Smith’s bloated, sweaty face. His heavy eyes melted like black crayons down pasty cheeks and I thought of my own eyes three days ago when I realized Bryan De Franco would never call me back. I needed a cigarette. I excused myself from Amy and proceeded down the thousand vertigo-inducing stone steps, breathing in mixed fumes of spilled beer, garlic fries, and clove

cigarettes. I went on a walk to be alone, not to make a new friend. But as I descended the last flight of stairs, my foot slipped off the concrete edge, sending my hands skyward to grasp the aluminum handrail. My soft pack of Marlboro Lights went skidding across the ground, landing at the feet of a young man in ripped jeans, worn boots, and a black t-shirt.

He asked me if I was okay and helped me to my feet. I brushed off my pants and assembled my pride as he handed me my cigarettes and made a snide comment about lung cancer. I thanked him, turned to leave, and he asked me to hold on. “What do you make of this concert so far?” he asked.

I looked him up and down and smiled, answering him with another question: “Did you know that eleven years ago The Cure was the most famous band in the world?” Josh smiled and when he did, his gray-green eyes smiled, too.

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After getting a tour of Lindsay and Kevin’s new two-bedroom condo, Josh and I settled down on a porch swing, each with a Corona sans lime.

“Their house is so nice,” I commented, “They seem so happy. I’m really happy for them.”

“Yea, dual incomes are great,” Josh replied.

“We have dual incomes and it doesn’t seem to help us,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You have a roommate, I have a roommate,” I counted on my fingers, then held them up, “two each – dual incomes.”

“Okay then,” said Josh, “but when was the last Jessica paid you her half of the utilities?”

“Touché,” I replied. We sipped our beer and swung our legs. Every few swings, my right foot would accidentally hit his left.

“Have you ever thought about it though,” Josh asked. “Thought about what?”

“About us,” he specified, “moving in together.”

I took another sip. In all honesty, I hadn’t, and the thought of it now made me feel trapped. Still, I knew I had to give him some answer, “It’s something to consider,” I said.

“You don’t sound very excited.” He paused, “I mean, I just asked us to move in together. Isn’t that like every girl’s dream? A guy who can commit?”

“There’s just a lot to consider,” I repeated. Just then Amy came around the corner.

“There you are,” she said loudly, “I couldn’t find you anywhere. Lindsay found that record she got at Amoeba.”

“The Sex Pistols one,” I asked with big eyes.

“Yea,” Amy answered, “She wants to show you. Can I borrow her Josh?”

“Yea, fine, whatever,” he answered.

“I’ll be right back,” I told Josh. As I jumped off the swing, I shot Amy a glance that said, “thank you for saving me.”

Once inside the house, the questions started. “What was going on out there,” she asked.

“He asked me to move in with him,” I said.

Amy’s eyes grew with surprise and then concern, “What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, really. You showed up right before I had to.”

She shifted her question, “What are you going to tell him,”

“I haven’t decided,” I thought for a minute then said, “I guess I’ll say yes.”

“You guess?”

“I mean, he’s right isn’t he,” I pondered, “Isn’t this what every girl wants? A guy that will commit and move forward and all that?”

“But do you want to move forward with this with this particular guy,” she asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Not wanting to sound defensive, I backtracked, “I mean, yes. I do want to move forward with this particular guy.” I paused then said, “I love him.” Amy pursed her lips to hold back judgment, but I was sure I saw pity in her eyes.

By the time I got back outside to tell Josh the news, he was drunk and teasing our friend Matt, who does not like to be reminded he is 5'3" tall. "You aren't even a half pint, Matt, you're a shot glass!" An eerie silence fell over the rest of the group nearby as Josh laughed.

On candy stripe legs the Spiderman comes, softly through the shadow of the evening sun<sup>1</sup>. I looked up in the sky to find Sagittarius, but he was hiding behind the clouds.

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On our first date, Venice Beach had never seemed cleaner. The breeze off the ocean licked our faces and blew acrid vapors from the sidewalk behind us so all we could smell was kelp and sea salt. After starting the morning in Santa Monica, Josh and I had settled down into the flat expanse of hot Venice sand that lays between kitschy shops, marijuana dispensaries, and the rising tide. We were serenaded by a Rastafarian man with bongos, whose loose interpretation of the Bob Marley catalog made us feel far, far away. Occasionally, one of us would ask the other a question about where they worked, what their family was like, where they went to high school. Josh mentioned he was a Scorpio, although he didn't really know what that meant. I laughed and replied that I'm a Sagittarius and I thought that meant that we are not supposed to be friends. I asked Josh about his dreams and he said he'd like to climb El Capitan in Yosemite, then settle down and have kids. I told him I want to see the world because life is one big adventure. We discovered we knew four of the same people through a friend of a friend of a friend. A fact that at the start of a romantic friendship always feels serendipitous, no matter how coincidental.

After hours of talking, we sat in silence for a while and it was not awkward. Sometimes, when I'm happy, I will start singing without realizing I'm doing so. "Show me show me show me how you do that trick<sup>2</sup>," I mumbled.

Josh turned toward me, and I felt flushed. Instead of teasing,

<sup>1</sup>Lyrics from "Lullaby" by the Cure, 1989.

<sup>2</sup>Lyrics from "Just Like Heaven" by the Cure, 1987.

however, Josh smiled and continued the song, “the one that makes me scream she said. The one that makes me laugh she said. Throw my arms around your neck.”

I smiled back and we carried on together, “show me how you do it, and I promise you, I promise that I’ll run away with you. I’ll run away with you.” We both laughed and Josh said, “It really was a good concert.”

“It really wasn’t,” I countered, “a last-ditch effort to hold onto something great as it slips between their fingers.” I picked up a handful of sand and let it fall between my own fingers.

“It was still a good concert,” Josh insisted.

After a moment, I replied, shielding my eyes from the glare of the sun on the ocean “Yea. It was. It was a really good concert.”

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Josh and I got back to our apartment after spending the afternoon at IKEA, wandering clearly- marked aisles lined with meticulous dioramas of bargain-priced elegance, “*Follow these arrows to find domestic happiness,*” they instructed, “*only \$19.99! (some assembly required)*” At one point I dragged Josh over to a bookshelf that stood out to me. I told him how perfect it would fit along the wall between the couch and the tv stand. “I could put my records on it. I’m running out of room for them in the closet.”

“Did you ever wonder if maybe you have too many records?” Josh commented.

“No. I don’t ever wonder that,” I answered, “I think we should get it. It could be my Christmas present,” I turned my head and winked. He rolled his eyes and sighed.

He said I could get it if I loaded it into the car by myself. I told him fine, but he had to help me assemble it when we got home. He said fine.

“You have to read the instructions,” I said to Josh as we sat on the living room floor of our apartment, “you’re holding the wrong part.” He wouldn’t listen. I screwed in a metal dowel with the provided Allen wrench and changed the subject. “Did you hear that Jeremy is

moving to Japan?”

“I did not hear that. When did you talk to Jeremy,” asked Josh.

“This morning when you were in the shower. He got a job teaching English at a high school in Okinawa.”

“Can you hand me that,” Josh asked, pointing to a long strip of metal.

“That’s Part A, you need Part C,” I said, handing him the correct part. I continued my story, “The company he will work for pays all living expenses. Room and board, food, and he gets a stipend.” Josh did not reply. His face was skewed as he tried to fit together two pieces of pressboard that would not marry.

“Anyway,” I carried on, “they’re looking for more applicants. He gave me the information before we got off the phone.”

At this Josh stopped what he was doing, the two parts loose in his hands. He laughed, shook his head, and said, “We are not moving to Japan.”

“Why not,” I asked, “wouldn’t it be nice to try something new? Move on to a new adventure? Think of all we could see and experience. You always say how much you hate your job.” I knew if I stopped talking it would be over, so my story quickened pace, “We could save that extra money and maybe get a house when we get back. We could get out of this crappy apartment. We could be a family.”

As I rattled on Josh grew impatient. He waited for me to finish, readying his sharp scorpion tail and when I stopped talking, I was struck right in the shoulder blade by his stinger. “I have a family and they live here, not in Japan.” He said the next words with conviction that told me the conversation was over, “I am not moving to Japan.”

The poison set in and I felt the blood drain from my face. I was wounded, but I did not cry. I went back to the task at hand as *Disintegration* played on the hi-fi. The pops and clicks of needle on vinyl usually felt like a warm hug, but at that moment they stabbed at my patience, taunting me. I felt nauseous like I had spun around too many times myself.

“You are never going to get those two parts together,” I said as

Josh continued to struggle.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said.

“They aren’t the right parts. Part C connects to Part H with those short screws over there.” I pointed to a spot about a foot away on the carpet. “The ones in that little baggy marked with a ‘3’”

Through gritted teeth, Josh repeated, “I said I know what I’m doing.”

I laughed, “I don’t think you do, actually.”

Josh’s face hardened into a shiny crust of armor. With a giant serrated claw, he pinched the plastic bag and flung it across the room, missing my face by inches. Without any hesitation he turned his head back to me and said, “You know you aren’t really as smart as you pretend to be, right?”

“Excuse me,” I asked.

He stood up and I followed suit. “All those facts you throw at people to sound smart. We are building a case for records you barely ever play just so when people come over, they can see how “smart” and “interesting” you are,” he pinched his fingers into air quotes and shrugged ugly when he said these words. “People you don’t even care about. People you don’t even like.” Josh reached for the top record on a pile near the couch, grabbed it, and before I could stop him, he threw it at the wall in the direction of the baggy marked ‘3’. I ducked and covered my head, then I heard it crash and shatter. Jagged shards of black vinyl flew from the record jacket, landing in a pile of melancholy. My arms suddenly ached and my heart raced; I clenched my fingers into fists—short, thin nails digging into my palms. I let the pain fuel my hate.

“You don’t even know me,” I whispered, still staring at the record. I turned and looked him in the eye. “You don’t even know me! But I know you. You’re just a selfish, ignorant bully.” I contorted into a form no longer recognizable as I became the centaur, the hunter, the archer. I pushed him with my front hooves, steadying myself on strong, rear legs. “You try to be funny, so people find you interesting but really, you just insult people. You make them feel terrible about themselves, then you laugh at them and try to get others to join in.”



“Don’t you dare push me again,” he said.

For once I felt solid and powerful, “But you know what’s really funny? People laugh when you leave. They laugh behind your back at your pathetic attempts to be funny. To be liked.”

“Shut up,” Josh warned.

I steadied on three legs and kicked Josh with my fourth, my hoof catching him in his scrawny front leg. “You don’t even realize it, do you? You try to make people feel weak so you can feel strong. And then when you leave, they laugh at you. THAT is sad. And you know what else?” Josh swung around to grab my arm with his chela fingers, but I swerved, and he missed.

I remembered the quiver at my back and reached in to pull out my largest arrow. I set it into my bow, pulled back, and fired, “One day you are going to look around and you will be alone. Because instead of making people laugh like you wanted to, all you did was make everyone around you feel like shit.”

I stood for a second and watched Josh stand there, his shiny black armor cracked, his insides vulnerable and spilling from his abdomen. I aimed my last arrow straight at his heart, as I was always destined to do. A kill shot to end the conversation for good. “You are a sad, weak, uninteresting person. And everyone sees it but you.”

On the stereo, Robert Smith crooned, “...and you finally found all your courage to let it all go.”

“Don’t worry about the damn bookshelf. I’ll build it myself.” I picked up a few shards of broken vinyl and tossed them at his feet. “I can’t believe you broke my dad’s record.” I sulked down the hallway and winced when I heard Josh kick the pressboard shelving, bringing an end to a piece of furniture that never had the chance to live.



In August of 2000, Josh took me hiking for the first time. I never realized such colors and smells existed so close to the hot concrete and asphalt of the city.

“It’s so beautiful here,” I said, “how do you know about this place?”

"I know about a lot of places," he replied, "spending time in nature was a big part of my parents' lives so I guess they wanted to make sure their kids experienced it, too."

"I feel like I've missed out on so much."

"It is easy to forget it's here, but you have to make time for it. This is what it's all about - all that's around us right now. You lose touch with what's important when you don't interact with it. It makes you better, somehow."

"I can see that." I looked at him with admiration and curiosity. "That's kind of how I feel about books and music,"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, just the fact that another person created it. They put themselves into something to share with others. You feel that connection to another place, another world. You imagine being there and it takes you out of where you are right then. It makes you see the world as a place bigger than yourself. It helps me understand things better. I feel that way right now, being out here with you. I remember how small I am."

We found two flat rocks at a point that overlooked a vast valley of pine trees and sat down. "And that's a good thing," he asked.

"I think so," I picked up a rock and threw it as far as I could. "It's nice that your family is so close. I wish I had that."

"It is nice. I know I'm lucky." He picked up a rock and turned it over and over again. "How old were you when your dad died," he asked.

"Fourteen," I replied, "I'd just started high school."

"You guys were close?"

"As close as you can get. I never really connected with my mom. She's hard to connect with; typical Virgo. She likes to be left alone, so that's what I've always done. I think my dad felt bad, so he made up for it in a lot of ways."

"How so?"

"He was the one who talked to me about school, friends, boys, all that." I took a moment to examine the ants crawling at my feet. As they marched on one-by-one, I passively wondered how

some creatures can interact so effectively without any intentional communication while the rest of us struggle for just the right words. “I think he was lonely, too. He’d make me read books by authors he thought were important and we’d talk about them. He bought me my first records—Miles Davis and Led Zeppelin. We’d listen to them over and over again. At first, I tried to make sense of the sounds, but after a while, it all just made me a little numb; but not in a bad way.” I realized I was rambling and looked up at Josh to see if he was still listening. He was. “We made these crazy detailed plans to visit Egypt and Venice. He’d pick up books from the AAA office and we’d mark them all up, circling all the things we’d want to see when we got there. He’s the reason I’m so easy to talk to at dinner parties,” at this I laughed and threw another rock.

“I love that you know so much about different things,” he said, “You make me want to learn more. Grow. Be better.”

“I love that you love that about me,” I said. A discouraged look swept his face and I smiled, adding, “and I love you, Josh.”

He sighed in relief. “I love you, too Lucy.” Josh pulled me to my feet, locked my fingers in his, and we walked some more beneath the trees as they filtered the city’s excess carbon.

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On a sunny Friday in the spring of 2001, Amy and I met at Tower Records on Sunset. The many televisions that hung from the ceiling were turned to the same channel where they all played The Cure’s video of “Killing an Arab.” Amy returned from the new cd section and elbowed me in the arm. “Hey,” she said and tossed her head toward the section she just passed. Josh was standing two rows away, body facing us with his focus downward as he flipped through CDs.

My attention turned to the background music:

*I can turn and walk away, or I can fire the gun, Staring at the sky, Staring at the sun, Whichever I choose it amounts to the same, Absolutely nothin’.. I’m alive, I’m dead, I’m the stranger...*

“Let’s just go,” I told Amy. We put down our CDs without paying, turned around, and walked to the exit. Before we reached the door,

I turned around once more to see Josh. His head was raised, and his eyes met mine, then he looked down and proceeded to shuffle his fingers through the plastic cases. Before I turned back around, I caught glimpse of a bit of stinger on the end of a shiny black tail as it flicked between his worn black boots.