

A PERIOD OF TIME

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It had been such a small thing, the thing that made them split up, the thing she later cited as the reason she'd left him. At least it had seemed small to him. He'd left the stopper in the bathroom sink plugged—he'd meant to leave it open, but then the phone rang and he went to the living room to answer it. He was only gone a few seconds, but the bathroom sink was shallow, and the water filled up quickly, and soon enough, water had spilled over the side onto the counter and the floor. Some of the water had made its way into the lower cabinet, the drawers with her combs and clippers and toothpaste. He'd mopped up the water quickly, had acted quite efficiently, he'd felt—he'd been proud of how he had handled things. He hadn't hesitated, as he sometimes did. She'd been at work and he had taken charge.

Wasn't that always what she'd wanted him to do? Be decisive. *Be proactive.*

He'd mopped the water up, and then he'd dried the counter. He'd emptied out her drawers and dried each item carefully—with paper towels, just as she would have done.

He'd been meticulous.

It had happened in the afternoon and she often stayed late at work, so he'd had sufficient time to put things in order. He thought it was no big deal really. Afterward, he preoccupied himself with other things. There was a used car that he took an interest in. He went to go look at it, and he wondered if he should mention it to her. A car would suit him well, he thought. It might lend him an air of respectability, of independence. A car could do that, he thought, and thinking this made him feel a certain hopefulness. He'd always wanted to own a car.

A few days later—it was a Thursday morning, he remembers—Priscilla called his name. "Simon," she said, catching him off guard. He was in the kitchen then, scraping the bottom of a pan.

He could tell immediately that she was angry or on the verge of anger; her tone had that sort of edge, the edge she got when he'd done something wrong.

"Yes, Sweetie," he said. He often called her that—Sweetie—though there wasn't much nowadays that was sweet about her. She'd become quite brusque over the past few years, brusque and self-assured and opinionated. She kept people on their toes. She made decisions quickly, and sometimes acquaintances of theirs joked that she wore the pants in the relationship.

He worked too, of course, he had jobs, though nothing steady, and sometimes he stayed home and kept the house in order. He'd become quite a good cook actually. She herself had admitted it, and that comment had made him happy.

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He'd met her when they were still in school—back when she wore jeans and had frizzy hair. She'd been smart, of course, no doubt about it, and driven too, but she hadn't been a businessperson then, an *executive*. She didn't have a corner office and an assistant. She didn't have her eyebrows plucked or pay eighty dollars for a haircut.

They'd been students at the same college. She was a year ahead, and he'd met her at a dance. He'd seen himself differently then; he'd been on the fencing team. He hadn't been the best member of the team, but he'd held his own, and a certain degree of respect came with that. How couldn't it?

Fencing wasn't football or baseball, but people came to watch the tournaments and she herself came to see him compete. After they'd dated awhile, she'd confessed to him that she'd been a bit surprised at the interest he had shown in her. "You don't find me too heavy then?" she asked one day after they'd made love. He still remembers that day—autumn break had just begun and the campus was nearly empty; his roommates had all gone home, and it was this absence that had allowed them to spend the night together.

He'd woken up first and had tried to stay quite still, feeling her body against his, measuring his breaths with hers. When she finally woke up, she turned to him and kissed him on the nose. "Let's go up to Razor's Pass and see the leaves," she said.

He'd only been up to the mountain once before, as part of an orientation program that the college held for freshman. It was her idea to stop at a deli on the way and get some sandwiches and drinks, and when he insisted on paying and carrying the bag, she called him a gentleman. They held hands most of the way up the trail and near the top, when they were resting on a log, she took his hand and put it on her breast.

They stayed there, under a grove of trees, kissing for a long time and then they kept on hiking, her leading the way, chattering about the classes she was taking, and the various dogs her family had had while she was growing up, and the time her family rented an RV and drove to the Grand Canyon.

He liked listening to her, liked the fact that she never ran out of things to say, that even a fallen tree could prompt a comment or a story or a joke. She even got him to agree he'd do karaoke with her, though he didn't think he had the voice for it.

And then she started singing songs by the Beatles, whom she told him she adored, trying to get him to learn the words to “Eleanor Rigby” and teasing him when he finally did try to sing along with her.

He still remembers how sad he felt at the end of that day when she gave him a kiss on the lips and then headed back to her room. She had to pack her things, she said, because her parents were picking her up that night. She was going home to visit them before school started up again. He felt sad to be apart from her and when he went back to his dorm the room looked empty to him—abandoned almost—and he wished that she would call and invite him to come along with her. Her parents’ house was big, she’d told him, and it looked out across a lake.

His parents lived too far away for him to visit frequently. They lived at the other end of the state, seven hours away by car, in a small factory town surrounded by wheat fields. His mother worked from home, embroidering pillows for a mail order company, and his father worked as a mechanic in a garage, and, when Simon listened to Priscilla’s stories about her mother, who was the principal of a school, and her father, who ran a bank, he wished that he had grown up in a family like hers: a family where people told jokes at dinner and had people over during the holidays. His parents were quiet people—good people, but quiet, quieter he realized than was probably normal, and the more stories he heard about Priscilla’s family, the more ashamed he felt.

After school, there was no doubt they’d stay together—Priscilla took an office job nearby so they could see each other while he finished up his studies. Things went well for her at work. Her bosses said she was talented with numbers, and clients seemed to like her.

Occasionally, after they settled in the city, he noticed differences in her: how she carried herself, the authority she took with him. She started eating only healthy foods—salads and things like that—to keep herself trim, or trimmer.

He himself didn’t have such an easy time of it. He bounced from one job to the next, told her he was still figuring out where his passions lay. He didn’t tell her that some days he’d watch TV for several hours at a stretch. Sometimes she’d call to check on him, and he’d tell her he had just come back from an interview or had gone through the want ads in the paper.

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The day she called his name, she wasn’t fully dressed. He still remembers that. His memory of certain things is vivid.

She was in her bra and slip. He already knew she was in one of her moods; she was running late, and her stockings had gotten a tear in them, and she raised her voice while she was searching through their chest of drawers.

Simon kept busy in the kitchen, cleaning up, not wanting to get in the way.

When he heard her calling him, he did not think, at first, about the water he'd spilled. Three days had passed since the accident, and the truth was he'd put the incident out of his mind. "Simon!" she shouted.

He put the pan down and hurried over to the bathroom where he saw her kneeling on the tile floor, examining the woodwork. He felt his heart beat faster.

"Something's happened to this drawer," she said, running her fingers along the inside of the wood.

"You've spilled something here," she said, trying, it seemed, to contain her anger. "*Didn't you?*"

His thoughts bounced around in his head, like pin balls, and, while he searched for the right way to tell her what had happened, she stood up and pointed. "You had some kind of accident!" she yelled. "Didn't you, Simon? Look at this. This cabinetry is ruined! Tell me what you did!"

He was standing a few feet from her, just outside the bathroom, not wanting to get too close, not wanting to see the wood himself. He watched her examine the cabinet again, not sure exactly what to say. He wondered whether it might be preferable to feign ignorance or cast the blame elsewhere. He said something, or tried to.

"Jesus Christ," she continued. "I work hard all week while you sit on your butt and here you go and fuck up the cabinetry. Do you know how much this cost me? *Do you even know?*" She stared at him, trembling, and he wondered whether she might throw something—one of the brushes on the counter or the toothbrush charger.

"Really," she said, finally, turning away from him. "You act just like a child." Those were the words she used, he still remembers; they had a sting to them.

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Apparently, there was mildew on the wood. She could smell it, she said, though he thought that was impossible.

Later, before he actually moved out, he took the drawers out to look at them—carefully—and, yes, smell them. He felt funny putting his nose close to the wood,

but he wanted to know whether she'd made that up, the part about the smell. The wood smelled fine to him. It had been an unusually hot summer, quite humid, and in some ways didn't everything take on an odor then?

She said something about discoloration too, and he'd had to admit—she'd made him admit—that he could in fact see the stained portion of the wood. She'd paid almost \$3,000 for the cabinet, she said, red-faced.

The fact was, he decided, he was better off without her. He'd gotten to the point where he could say that to himself. It took some time, but he got there. He'd go out to a bar with Ed, his friend from school, and they'd both remark that it was probably for the best that he, Simon, and she, Priscilla, had gone their separate ways. He was better off without her, happier and more confident in himself. He said it and Ed said it and they had a few more drinks, and still he felt quite sad.

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That night, the night after she confronted him, he lay in bed, awake. He heard her breathing and he wondered if she was asleep. He often lay there next to her, letting his mind wander.

Sometimes he wanted to roll over and hold her in his arms; they used to sleep that way, nestled together, but he knew not to disturb her. She'd told him she needed to sleep well that night. She had a presentation the next morning. She told him there were things they needed to discuss, and he wondered whether she would run through the inventory of complaints she had: times he'd locked the keys inside her car by accident or marked up the kitchen tiles. She liked to complain too about the newspapers and magazines that sometimes piled up. Perhaps he'd buy some kind of bin to put them in, he thought. He wondered if that might be a good idea. He felt brittle then, like a twig so dry that the wind itself might snap him into pieces.

He tossed in bed for hours, until he finally decided it was too hot to sleep. He got up to use the toilet and then he got into bed again and lay there. It was only 3 a.m., but he heard his stomach growling, the acid churning inside of him. He heard her breathing next to him, more deeply now—throaty, even sounds—and he wondered whether, if he got up, the disturbance might wake her. He was afraid to wake her. *We need to have a conversation*, she said to him. *I've got some things I need to discuss with you.*

Morning seemed like it would never come, until, eventually, he made his way downstairs. He went into the kitchen and turned on the lights. It was, in any case, almost breakfast time, he thought, getting out a skillet and some bowls, taking a carton of eggs out from the fridge. He'd make an omelet, he decided. That would start the day off right. With grated cheese and bits of sausage he'd picked up at the store. Maybe he'd toast some bread and make a pot of coffee. He set to work

on the preparations: cracking the eggs, cutting up the meat, adding salt and butter. He felt excited then and sensed his salivary glands begin to work. He felt as if he'd never been so hungry.

He still remembers the omelet's taste and smell. It's funny how, even years later, the memories persist.