

We meet in the early hours of the day, bleary-eyed and yawning. I am coming into the library to start my day and you are leaving at the end of yours. We have our Intro to Biology lecture together, so I wave. You take out one headphone.

“Hey,” you say. Your voice, rough, makes me shiver.

“Morning,” I answer.

You glance up as if to remind yourself that the sun is rising. “Yeah.” You sound sad to acknowledge it.

I stare at you for a moment, cataloging your textbooks and your dark circles and the dry skin peeling from your lips. Impulsively, I say, “You want a coffee? I’ll buy.”

Your grin lights up your face, making those dark circles disappear. “You’re a lifesaver.”

It’s the sweetest coffee I’ve ever had.

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We start dating the following year. It’s your turn to take me out and we go to a nicer place than we usually do.

You grab my hand across the table and say, “In return, for the first time.”

I laugh, like I so often do around you. “You don’t have to buy me coffee. I think you’ve more than made it up to me.”

“I’d like to keep making it up to you,” you answer, softer, more sweet. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

It makes me go still, conscious of your hand on mine. “You...”

“Date me?” Your grin is just as infectious now as it was then.

I am just as helpless to it.

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We move in together after a year and a half. We spend weeks, maybe months, researching places and figuring out our budget, planning what we need to have and what we could survive without.

We visit countless apartments, standing in empty rooms with folded arms, trying to imagine what this room might look like with a desk or how the sun will come in this window.

It takes us a long time, but we don't mind it. We're just excited to be taking this step together, to be winding ever closer together.

Our first night, we only have our mattress unpacked. We're too tired from lugging all our boxes through the elevator to put together the bed frame. It doesn't matter though. We're tangled up together and neither of us have to leave in the morning. We've got a whole life waiting to be put together around us.

What more could we ask for?

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We get married in the fall, after much deliberation.

Our cake is coffee flavored and the entire wedding is burnished copper and red. It is everything we hoped it would be.

We promise to always love each other, to stick together no matter what, to fill our lives with devotion and laughter. We thank the library and that first apartment and our little cat that curls up between us on the bed.

Our families sit on either side of the aisle, smiling and crying and clapping. Our parents can't stop talking about how proud they are of us.

We dance and we laugh and we cry and we think about how our lives are going to be like this forever. *We* are going to be like this forever.

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We have our first child four years after our wedding.

When we find out we've succeeded, we feel like we can breathe again. We've been in a fugue state, just waiting with nothing to show for it. The pregnancy progresses with very few complications, but that doesn't mean we don't fight.

We argue about how we're going to raise them, about moving out of our apartment, about who's going to stay at home, about how we're going to afford this.

We fight about how we spend money, the amount of times we go out to eat, the car we just bought before, about the new espresso machine that feels useless.

It's hard. We shout and we cry and we spend a couple weekends with our parents and we try to prepare for this change.

When the baby comes, it's like none of that matters. This trumps anything else we've done together. All of it, all the fighting and crying and wondering, *means* something.

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We have two more children in the following years. We move into a house with a big yard for them to run around in. We get a second car, new jobs.

We trade weeks at home with the kids, we shuttle them from play date to baseball game to dance practice to prom. We tumble into bed every night, exhausted and talking only of schedules and budgets and rules.

We don't remember the last time we were just the two of us.

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Someday, almost out of nowhere, it begins to unravel.

We fight. We argue about money, we argue about how much time we spend up at night, we argue about who agreed to three children, about moving the kids to a new school district, about why our youngest isn't getting good grades, about the way we look at each other, about the way we *don't* look at each other.

We're hurt, we're angry, we're unbearably sad, we're full of regret. We can't keep the venom out of our voices, we're crying, whispers have never felt so loud.

We forget the hiding children and the nosy neighbors and whoever else might be listening because this, like everything, is about us.

We raised children together, we bought houses and cars, we've been on countless dates, seen each other at our most vulnerable, promised we'd stick together for lifetimes.

And now we shout, whisper, cry because we're broken, because somehow those *promises* were broken.

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We sort through our things.

"This blanket is from your mom."

"I bought these plates after the wedding."

"My job paid for this car."

"Your couch is the downstairs one, mine is upstairs."

"Do you want the coffee machine?"

We don't talk about it, not to the kids, not to our friends, not to our parents, not to each other. That would make it too real. The oldest understands, we see the ache in their eyes when they look at us. The youngest might be just old enough to understand something is wrong, but we don't ever explain exactly what.

We pack up our house, our lives, in separate boxes. Drive our cars to separate apartments.
Nurse our hearts in separate beds.

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We arrive at the court date at almost the same time. We don't speak as we walk in, as we sit down, as the official explains the process slowly to us.

We don't speak as we read the papers, the agreements we've been drafting for several months, and sign them. We don't speak as the official makes sure we didn't miss anything.

He shakes your hand, and then mine.

Even though this is the end of a months-long process, I feel choked up all of a sudden.

You get in your car and drive away, quickly. I sit for a few minutes, feeling hollow, before I also pull out of the parking lot.

There's a coffee shop across the street. I go through the drive-through, order something simple.

I sit with it in my lap, eyes closed as I inhale the aroma. There's cream and sugar, but all I can taste is the bitter grounds.