

AND THEN I MET ADAM

written by Danielle Ma | October 26, 2015



When I was in the 8th grade, one of my teachers told me that if I was hooked up to machines, I could power the school with my energy. I've always been the excitable one, passionate about all the things in my life, people especially. People are everything to me. More than knowledge or success or truth or honor or fame or good-doing, I live for people. They are the reason life is worth living. To love and be loved, that's purpose defined. I've been consistently shown what unconditional love looks like (thanks Mom and Dad!) and have mirrored that in my closest relationships. There's always been this innate curiosity to know others, to drink in their stories, uncover their vulnerabilities, and find the humanness that makes us all wonderfully weird.

Really, it was no surprise when I found my bags packed for Manhattan, the little, over-stimulating island full of creative and driven people rich with ideas and experiences. I was always ready for it. They say the city's not for everyone. But it's definitely for me. In my first year, I frequented festivals, researched restaurants, befriended bouncers, and dated half the island. Eventually, I fell - hard - for someone, and up I went, swirling into the clouds and pink sky and shooting stars. That relationship came and went, my heart swelled and broke, but this story is not about that. Not about that love or loss, but about my winter after the breakup.

It wasn't a sparkly white winter, but a dead one, dull in both color and feeling. The sadness, the heartbreak, the longing, the loneliness - those were all familiar feelings, things I had dealt with and overcome in the past. But this time around, I lost my curiosity, my wonder, my thirst for people that had until then been so resilient throughout my life. I woke up everyday feeling numb to it all. If you didn't know me - know me, you may very well have never noticed, because it wasn't that I walked around visibly broken or crying. It was more that I let the smart analyst lock up when I left work, but didn't sit with him and ask about the project that was keeping him late all these nights. I declined party invitations with guaranteed cool, creative company in Greenpoint. I didn't go out with the cute guy who walked me home from work. I never resumed hooking up with my uncomplicated best gay friend who had always been my go-to.

And then one night, on an ambiguously labeled "hangout," I met Adam.

I was running late, as usual. He seemed a little peeved about it, but I couldn't really tell. After all, I didn't know him. I mean, I knew of him, but we'd never met in person before. Many months ago, we had a serendipitous weekend during which we - completely of our own accord and unbeknownst to the other - ended up at the same exact events catered towards a niche group of New York hipsters. He noticed me first in person, then later on Instagram while looking through event photos. Our first interaction was an innocent comment left on my photo that included the hashtag #smallworld.

Well, maybe not so innocent. The flirtatious air grew thicker as we started emailing about other fun events in the city. He wanted me to go dancing with him. Thinking he was damn cool at the time, I wistfully abstained from meeting, from letting anything happen between us. I was happily in a relationship, head and heart still in the clouds at the time. I remember wishing we could be just-friends, but I also knew the dangers of that wish.

Having then gone through the worst breakup of my life, I was newly single and out of the danger zone. Thus, a hangout was born.

The little dive bar was largely unmarked, but I tried my luck with the dark, heavy, promising door since Google Maps put RPM Bar on that corner. I didn't have to wait long for a sign that I was in the right place - he stood in the center of the room, almost as if he was waiting for me, watching the door. I realized he had just walked in too, jacket still on and hair slightly disheveled.

"Perfect timing. Was killing time when you said you'd be late, so I just got here."

"I'm so sorry for being late - do you hate me?" The phrase came out in a flash, all strung together. I had said it a lot.

"Not at all. What are you drinking?"

He ordered wine for himself and beer for me as I headed for the bathroom line. He was cute like his pictures, but gave off such a different vibe than I was expecting. Only knowing his Instagram persona until then, I had expected someone deeper voiced, stupidly charming, and potentially possessing a British accent. Someone I would immediately want, but also mistrust upon first meeting. None of those things were true. He was mildly soft spoken, laid back, not at all aggressively forward or flirtatious towards me. He was pleasant, funny, and genuinely likable.

As we began talking, we immediately fell into the familiar cadence of conversations with a best friend. We told stories of lost love, childhood abandonment, growing up, growing down, and navigating New York. Through colorful descriptions, we introduced each other to our friends and families. There was an immediate vulnerability and trust between us, the kind that is absolutely necessary in the realness of conversations. Partially a product of us both going in without any defined context for meeting, without any expectations. Partially a product of the natural and undeniable compatibility between us. There was never a forced moment as we talked for hours. Five hours without even touching or relying on flirtatious banter.

I wondered if he'd ever kiss me.

We spent those hours talking about people and relationships. Not just romantic relationships, but the endlessly complex ones that require context and more words than one usually allows themselves in a casual encounter. I told him about my brother, his girlfriend, and my parents' somehow cold but disingenuously sweet relationship with them. He told me about his two father figures that came and went, and how the day he lost the second one was the actual worst day of his life. I hadn't met anyone to do that with in a while, to just muse over humankind and our idiosyncrasies. We had a lot of those "I haven't told this story in a really long time" moments, and that was the other thing - he was an amazing storyteller. Thoughtful, detailed, quietly funny, and opinionated. With each passing hour, he would stand, wearing an unmistakably surprised expression, and ask if I wanted more water, if I had anywhere to be. Neither of us wanted to leave, shockingly content with each other in that little comfy corner, more strangers earlier that day.

He's such a caring, kind, self-reflective person. He speaks of his job with healthy passion. He values human touch and sexuality so much. He's a cancer and wants to live near water. He is a self-proclaimed, foolish romantic, and he truly believes in love. Some of these things remind me of my ex. All of these things remind me of myself.

After those hours of stories and laughter and explorative hard-gazes, my fingers eventually found his and stayed there. And finally, he kissed me. The first time we pulled away, he looked stunned as he turned to me.

"Wow. I didn't know. I just didn't know."

"Didn't know what?"

"This. Any of this. I didn't know. I didn't know that this is who you would be. Or that we would be doing this. Incredible."

I paused, smiled, then said, "It took you long enough to kiss me."

"It took me all night to figure out that that would be okay. I just thought there was no way. I thought we were here as friends. You canceled dinner, showed up late; I felt like an afterthought."

"So why did you meet me?"

"I don't know. You seemed interesting enough. But I had no idea. I can't believe I'm kissing you."

We continued to kiss and he continued to tell me how unbelievable it all was, how incredible I am. In bed later that night, he told me I was perfect, that it was hard not to fall for me. I know the mind of a hopeless romantic well, and I questioned if what we had was a crazy long-lasting passion or a short-fused flare. But either way, I drank in his adoration because truly, I was pretty high off him myself. We barely slept. Our bodies played together like a symphony, and I told him that somehow, I would miss him the next day when I got on a plane to California. It was a strange thing for me to admit to myself, much less say aloud. I was spending the week with my family for the holidays, and all of a sudden, I didn't want to go. In one night, my world had changed.

When I got back, he had entered officially into serious-relationship-territory with someone he had previously been non-exclusively dating. I read the heartbit, ships-in-the-night explanation with the unmasked tug of disappointment and a visceral flush of anger. As I therapeutically cleaned my apartment, the anger subsided into understanding. No matter how much I wanted to pretend that "timing" was not a thing, I couldn't. I couldn't deny the very thing that kept me from going out with him last summer when he first asked me to dance.

It's true that we didn't know each other then; I had chosen someone else because Adam was a fragment of my iPhone's imagination. It's different now. He knows me. Not well, but he does. He just didn't pick me. And that's okay. It's not beyond my realm of understanding. Why would he take a risk on someone new to his life with such a precarious risk to return ratio?

Sometimes I wonder about the couple we would make. We would have been that hot pink, whirlwind, cotton candy, insanely passionate, effervescent couple that explored together, got lost together, shrugged off responsibility and took sick days to stay in bed together. We would have swept each other up, two hopeless romantics with the same love languages, the same fatal need for touch and affection. And who really knows? Maybe we would have been too much, too hot, too prone to burning up in flames.

Regardless of our lack of happily ever after, Adam was the one who thawed the ice. The one who made me feel again. The one who reminded me of magic and wonder and the sparkly white version of winter. I'm thankful for that, for his endless gaze, soft lips, and the warmth I can feel when I close my eyes.

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Danielle is a passionate twenty-something living in New York City with too many interests and not enough time in the day. She works at a boutique ad agency next to her favorite building, the Flatiron, and spends a lot of time in parks with coffee. She frequents food festivals, listens to science podcasts, explores comedy clubs, and writes, a lot. She diarizes the moments and conversations in her life, writing mostly about dating, love, and sex in the city on her blog. Here's The Thing.

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