

Waterfalls

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Three weeks after our first date, I found myself half asleep on Mariana's sofa. I was desperately trying to pay attention to *Mulholland Drive*, which was apparently her favorite movie. Thunder crackled, the camera moved shakily, and the leather of the couch stuck to my thighs. Finally, after two and a half grueling hours, the credits rolled.

She turned to me expectantly. "So, what did you think? Did you love it?"

"It sure was something," I said in a way that was evidently not convincing enough.

"You hated it?" Her face physically hurt to look at.

"No, I didn't. I'm just not sure I got it, you know? Who makes a movie about Hollywood, time travel, and lesbians? It's too much for my brain to comprehend." The words were flying out of my mouth, hot, fast, and utterly unhelpful.

"It's fine if you didn't like it, it's just that this movie means so much to me. I just hoped you'd understand me better once you saw it . . ."

Dread filled my stomach. I watched her eyes for a second more before looking away, focusing on the blank space of the wall behind her and then—

Thunder crackled, the camera moved shakily, and the leather of the couch stuck to my thighs. The credits were rolling again.

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When I first met Mariana, it was maybe one or two a.m., I was drunk, high, and a bit sloppy. My fingers pressed into the arm of my friend Aster as he dragged me along. It was the

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first week of our sophomore year, and the weather in Boston was still pleasant. My chest felt tight as the strap of my bra dug into my shoulders. We were following the vague sound of music, the kind of bass that radiates through your feet. We'd heard it from three blocks away and had followed the song to a large house covered in yellow chipping paint. There was red light illuminating the basement. We crammed five-dollar bills into the jar at the top of the steps and fell into line behind the swaying crowd of young people. The "stage," if it could even be called that, was a slightly raised podium with a drum set and microphone. The brick walls were covered in scribbles and stickers, and pipes hung precariously from the ceiling. Aster had to duck his neck so as not to knock his head. A purple-haired woman meandered across the stage. She had a large, black ring hanging from her septum.

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"Hey, everyone, thanks for coming out! For our next act of the night, we have Mariana Trench!" Three figures strolled onto the stage, their faces shrouded in darkness. The tallest of the three approached the mic, and it was then that I saw her for the first time. She was wearing a cropped T-shirt that revealed an expanse of warm brown skin. Curls fell into her eyes, and her belly button was pierced. She opened her pink mouth and began to sing, her tongue darting back and forth as she danced to the beat of the drum. She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.

The band performed a slightly slowed version of TLC's "Waterfalls." It was jazzy and smooth. By the first chorus, I was lightheaded.

Little precious has a natural obsession

For temptation, but he just can't see—

If I had been a little less drunk, I might have frozen the moment in time. I would've

stayed there forever, watching her over and over again.

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Don't go chasing waterfalls

Please stick to the rivers and the lakes that you're used to

I know that you're gonna have it your way or nothing at all

But I think you're moving too fast

I don't quite remember when the song ended, or if they played another. I was too preoccupied coming up with a way to talk to her, something, anything I could say to catch her attention. I had made a mental list of sixteen possible conversation topics when someone grabbed me from behind.

"Can we please go? I'm starving. I need a burger, like right now!" Aster's breath reeked of cheap tequila.

"Yeah, yeah, just a second, I just . . ." I turned back around and realized in horror: She'd escaped! Disappeared! Poof! I glanced around desperately, but the beautiful girl was gone. I swerved, tilting my head back, trying to focus my cloudy mind.

"Can we please go? I'm starving. I need a burger, like right now!"

I didn't turn my head around this time. Instead, I followed the girl with my eyes as she crisscrossed the room, beelining for the bathroom. A new band began to play, a steel drum echoing around the small room.

"Just a second," I told Aster.

I followed in the direction of a gray door crudely labeled with a drawing of a toilet bowl. I stood outside, flushing and fixing my hair before I walked to the sink beside her. She

glanced up at me; my skin burned and blistered under her gaze.

“What do you think of the band?” My voice came out smooth and confident.

She lifted her head, her eyes sparkling. “They’re definitely something.” They were a Bob Marley cover band made up of four white teenagers with colorful dyed hair and six earrings apiece.

I smiled. “If I never hear this rendition of ‘Three Little Birds’ again, I’ll die a happy woman.”

It was then that I made her laugh for the very first time. When she laughed, her face scrunched up, revealing two rows of pearly whites and a flash of pink tongue. She was an angel on Earth, glowing golden in the sticky, dimly lit bathroom. She offered her hand to me. “I’m Mariana.”

I took it. Her hands were soft, and her palms were lightly calloused. “Jess.”

“Well, I’ll see you around, Jess.” She turned to go, and I felt my stomach hollow out. Her hand opened the bathroom door, and the loud electric guitar of what was inevitably “One Love” washed over us. Her pant leg rode up to reveal a silver band around her ankle. The door closed with a swish. I stared at the place she had just been, making myself cross-eyed in concentration. “I’ll see you around, Jess.” She turned to go. Her hand opened the bathroom door.

I gathered all my courage. My brain felt like scrambled eggs. “Would you want to hang out sometime?”

She turned back, eyebrows raised. She paused. Then, after a moment, she said, “Sure, I’d love to.”

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The first time I discovered I could time travel was the day after I'd gotten my very first period. My seventh-grade English classroom was small, humid, and tangerine-colored. My teacher was a perky first-timer, Ms. Fletcher, whose blonde hair was highlighted with baby pink. The class was reading *Lord of the Flies* and Ms. Fletcher was excitedly gesturing to a hastily drawn diagram of the island. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. My pad felt heavy, and the sticky part had attached itself to my thigh. The discussion turned into high-pitched babbling as it bounced around the room. My head ached and my insides felt as if they were fighting a war against themselves, liver against gut. The clock read two-thirty, which meant there were still thirty more minutes before the emancipation of the final bell.

I raised my hand, the fabric of my T-shirt sticking to the underside of my arm. My fingernails were painted blue and chipping.

"Jessica?" Ms. Fletcher's voice turned the rest of the class's attention to me. Their sharp eyes suffocated me.

"Can I go to the bathroom?" At twelve years old, my voice was soft, a quiet mumble.

"Yes, but please go fast."

I stood, and that's when everything went wrong. A stream of blood dripped down my leg, leaving a trail of red staining my pink tights. There was a tiny *splat* as it hit the ground, a drop of blood on the white nylon floor. It looked like cherry corn syrup. I stayed there, frozen, my chest twisted into tiny painful knots. Panic was taking over my brain. I could see the dust particles in the air; they seemed to pull at the seams of the room. There was a sharp pain in my temple and then—

I was sitting again. The class was once again immersed in the discussion of the

underlying messages of *Lord of the Flies*. The clock had returned to two-thirty. I remained in my seat for the rest of class.

After a few weeks of practice, the limitations of my newly discovered power became apparent. Usually when I traveled, I only went back thirty seconds or so, but if I really concentrated, I could go back a few minutes. It always came along with sharp pain and a migraine that would set in after about an hour. If I traveled too many times in a short period, I would get discombobulated. As far as I could tell, no one else knew and no one else could do what I could do. I kept my secret to myself. It was better that way. I told myself it was less of a superpower and more like a giant undo button. I told myself that anyone in my situation would take advantage of it. I told myself a lot of things.

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On our first date, I took her to an art gallery that split the difference between our respective dorm rooms. As we entered through the glass double doors, into the pristine white walls, Mariana spotted the cafe next door and her face lit up.

“Let’s get something to eat before we go inside,” she said insistently. “I want us to get to know each other better.”

I had spent all night studying every artwork on display, ready with hilarious commentary and witty banter. I was not prepared for the compatibility test Mariana pulled out of her purse: a double-sided quiz ripped out of some old copy of *Cosmo*. “I didn’t know I was going to be examined,” I said indignantly.

“It’s not an exam! It’s just a bit of fun. I do it on every first date I go on.” Mariana was wearing a dress that was the color of crushed raspberries, her hair bouncing across her collarbone.

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“And just when I thought I was special . . .” I meant for it to come off as cheeky, but the words tasted sour in my mouth.

“We don’t have to play,” she said, voice flat. “I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“No, no, let’s play.” Her smile returned, just not quite as bright.

“Question one: What is your sign?” She turned to me expectantly.

“My birthday is in September, so I think that makes me a Virgo.”

Her smile faltered. “Oh, well, I’m a Gemini, which is like the least compatible match.”

I let out a harsh, squeaky laugh; my stomach felt like lead. “Well, I’m sure I’ll nail the rest of the questions.”

The next question asked if we were animal people and how we felt about pets. Mariana sat with her elbows pressed together. She had chestnut eyes and long dark lashes.

“I’ve never had a pet before,” I admitted. “But I guess I’m not opposed.”

Mariana’s eyebrows bunched slightly. She was terrible at keeping a poker face, something equally endearing as it was insulting. “I’m such an animal person. We had three dogs growing up. I just have one cat at the moment, but once I get my own place, I want at least one more dog as well. I honestly feel so sad for people who don’t have pets; it must be so lonely.”

I turned around so that she couldn’t see the expression on my face. The wall behind me was painted lavender, but it was peeling in the corner. I traced the cracks with my eyes.

“Oh, this is a good one!” Mariana exclaimed as I turned back to face her. “Are you an animal person? How do you feel about pets?”

I bit my lip slightly, scrunching up my face as if trying not to cry. “My childhood dog,

Spot, died last year, and I took it really hard. I haven't even thought about getting a new one; it's too fresh."

"Oh no!" Mariana reached out to touch my shoulder. Her palms were warm. She was wearing perfume on her wrists that smelled like sweet grapefruit. "I'm so sorry, Jess, that must have been so hard for you. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"It's okay," I said, sniffing for effect. "It's just hard to talk about."



The first time we slept together, I was so nervous I almost threw up. We sat across from each other on her rickety twin bed. Her sheets were red with black polka dots; they reminded me of ladybugs. I kissed her, not on the cheek, but between the bones of her jaw. Her skin smelled like citrus and tea tree oil. She smiled into my mouth, ran her fingers down my spine, and pushed my hair out of my face.

As I helped her undress, I noticed a constellation of freckles on her back and a trail of dark hair on her stomach. Her bra was lacy and black, and her underwear was purple and fraying. When she kissed me, her lipstick left splotches of wine-colored residue. My stomach felt tight and warm.

She was on top, straddling me. The yellow lamp light made a halo around her face, like she'd come down from Heaven just to touch me. Her breath was hot against my neck, my heart beating against my chest. I ran my tongue across the back of her ear—her skin tasted like salt. I felt a shuffling on top of me. When I turned back to look at Mariana, her face was contorted, her lips pressed together. She was trying not to laugh.

"I'm sorry!" she said between giggles. "I'm just, uh . . . not into ear stuff." My body went cold, my face hot. Humiliation filled my lungs and dripped down my neck. There were holes in

the walls left over from the last tenant, clumsily filled in with white putty that didn't match the paint. A searing pain ripped through my skull. The second time around was less embarrassing, but also less exciting. I fell asleep with one arm around her and a pit at the bottom of my stomach.

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It was late afternoon, and Mariana was sitting on my carpet, taking hits from a dog-shaped bong. Her legs were sprawled out over my own. Her hair was in two perfect French braids. I was trying and failing to pay attention to *The Call of Cthulhu*. The prose was dense, the light was low, and what was meant to be scary felt terribly soulless. When Mariana exhaled, she pursed her lips in an *oh* shape that made me smile. She was posing for an imaginary photographer.

Mariana turned to me, tilting her head inquisitively. "Where do you see yourself in ten years?"

"I don't know, employed hopefully." I turned my eyes back to Lovecraft, squinting at the tiny black text.

"Married?"

"I guess."

"Do you want kids?"

"Maybe, I'm not sure."

"How do you not know what you want?" Her voice was sharp, accusatory.

I shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it. Where do you see yourself?"

She stood, oh so dramatically, towering over me with all five feet two of her. "In ten

years, I'll have graduated law school and I'll be clerking under Sonia Sotomayor, or maybe Elena Kagan." As she talked, she gestured grandly with her arms. "I'll be engaged, of course, with plans for a baby in the next couple of years. Mariana Trench will release our first studio album to moderate mainstream success, but one of our singles will go platinum in Argentina or maybe Poland."

"Sounds like you got it all planned out." It came out snider than I meant it to.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Her voice sounded sulky, maybe even hurt.

"No, I just—" I reach up and take her hand, pulling her back down to the carpet with me. "I guess I find it easier not to set up all these expectations for myself. That way I'm never falling short."

Her eyes were wide, the color of gingerbread. "Sometimes I don't know how we even found each other. We're so different."

"Secrets of the universe." My voice sounded hollow.

"Secrets of the universe." She leaned in for a kiss. Her mouth tasted like weed and breakfast cereal.

We stayed like that for a while, kissing softly, hands clasped together. I liked the way her eyelids looked when they were closed.

Afterward, I laid my head on her shoulder, tracing the inside of her thigh with the tips of my fingers. They looked so pale against her leg. I drew stars and spirals. I wished I could tattoo my fingerprints there. Announce to the world: *She's mine*.

"I love the way your skin looks next to mine," I whisper. There was a pause, and she turned to face me, pushing me off her.

"What do you mean by that?"

“What? I just mean it looks nice, is all . . .” A familiar twist began to dance around my stomach.

An accusatory crinkle between her perfect eyebrows. “If you’re about to reveal some weird Mexican fetish—I don’t want to hear it.”

“No! Of course not. I didn’t mean it like that.” There was desperation in my voice, plain and obvious.

“I’m going to go.” Mariana stood once again, her movements sharp and cold.

“Wait, please. . . I’m sorry!” The air behind her head was full of static and easy to pull apart. A tiny needle hammered into my brain. In an instant, she was back beside me, my head on hers. I let my fingers graze her skin again, stars and spirals, and this time I said nothing.

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Mariana’s twenty-second birthday crept up behind me when I wasn’t looking. It was only two years, yet it felt like an insurmountable amount of space between us. We were out at a bar with all her friends. There were about ten of them—all beautiful, strange, and totally drunk. Mariana flitted around them, bright-eyed and glowing. I barely saw her the entire night, only glimpses of her red dress, whiffs of her perfume, and echoes of her laugh. She was overwhelming, and yet I always hungered for more. It was times like these that made me want to bottle her up and keep her in a snow globe.

“Hey. . . I don’t think we’ve met.” It was Dylan. He was a classmate from Mariana’s sophomore-year seminar on post-colonial sexuality.

I held my hand out. His palm was damp and hot to the touch. “We haven’t. I’m Jess.”

His face contorted as though trying to pull a memory from his head manually. Then, slowly, it dawned on him. “Oh! You’re . . .” He gestured wildly to Mariana, then laughed out

loud, hiccupping. “You’re with Mari. Sorry, I’ve had one too many.”

I smiled indulgently. “That’s me.” It was the same conversation I’d been having all night, and the same one I continued having for the next four hours. In a room full of intoxicated strangers, the time passed in increments of cheers and stumbles. I sipped too-sweet cranberry juice and dutifully entertained, making vapid conversation that would all be forgotten in the morning.

Finally, as the sky was beginning to gray, I found myself alone with her. After a long party, Mariana’s face was shiny and her bangs stuck to her forehead. I held her face in my hands. “How was your birthday?”

She wrapped her arms around me, her chin digging into my shoulder. “It was wonderful.”

“I’m glad.” I took a deep breath, a chill of anxiety moving down my back. This was it, this was the moment. “Mariana?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.” The words slid out of my mouth, sticky with saliva. They fell onto the concrete next to my heart, red and raw.

“Jess . . .” I didn’t need to face her to know her expression. How wonderful it is to know someone so well you can see them without seeing them. How terrible it is to find out they can’t see you back.

The sky was lighter then and the air was soft and impressionable. The throbbing in my head felt like an old friend.

Mariana wrapped her arms around me, her pinky fingers grazing my waist. It didn’t matter how many times I redid it. She never said it back.