

6%

Lara Coley

I am drunk when I am suddenly reminded of him by that Jo Dee Messina song where her blue-eyed lost lover comes back in the heat of July. Will's eyes are a vibrant blue, and it's July, so I relate in some sappy, hopeful way. Too little, too late, she tells him in the song. That's what I'll tell Will when he comes back, if he comes back. He went home to Sonoma for Memorial Day with his buddies and "to think about moving there." He'd promised he'd be back for my birthday, but today is my birthday, and he's not back. It had been a flimsy sounding promise, an afterthought to a friendly break-up.

I decide to celebrate the old-fashioned, single-girl's way and get drunk. I raise my glass, six drinks deep, and toast, "Screw him and his never-had-a-girlfriend-so-I'll-be-an-asshole-to-yours friends and the dumb high school bitches they're all probably fucking right now." I take the shot and climb atop the bar to dance with my friends. The bartender is a friend so tonight the bar is mine. I may dance where I please and listen to any music that I want. Unfortunately, this means Jo Dee is playing, and I am stuck with the thought of him.

I sit down at the bar and order a Guinness, partly because I know he'd like

that, but the boy next to me pays for it, ruining the sentiment. He's tall and built, with pretty blue eyes, so I guess he'll do. I introduce myself and soon we are kissing. Alcohol does this to girls who miss their ex-boyfriends. We replace them with temporary models. We don't want a new one, we want a stand-in until he comes back, because we think he will come back. He kisses well. Will was better, but he nibbles on my bottom lip, and I forget to be angry that he's not Will while he kisses me. My friends think he's harmless, sweet even, so they let him take me home.

When we get to his house, he brings me water, sets out comfortable clothes for me to sleep in, and goes to brush his teeth while I change. He comes back to the bedroom and snuggles in next to me. We kiss. He carefully traces the skin of my belly up, underneath the shirt, and follows this path with kisses. He then lightly places his lips on all the contours of my face until he finishes with my eyelids and whispers goodnight. He curls into me, his head on my shoulder, his arm and leg across me, and his hand gently placed on my chest. It's warm and his breath on my neck is soothing. I wait till he falls asleep and then I trace his outlines, his face, the muscles in his arms, each finger. I kiss him, nuzzle in as close as I can and fade off to contented, drunken sleep.

This becomes our routine. He never sees me naked and he doesn't try. He calls a lot, leaving messages like, "I miss you sweetie, long day here at work. I just wanted to hear your voice." He is so kind and tender that I don't know what to do with it. Will hadn't been like this. He'd never told me how much he cared, like this guy does every day. Will assumed I knew.

Honestly, these daily proclamations are a little stifling, but it's a problem I can deal with, this constant adoration. He fills my fridge with wine, my room with flowers, and my ears with compliments.

It's been a month, but this morning, things become complicated. There is a message from Will when I arrive home. He sounds lost and sad, and he says he misses me. I listen to it three times. I'm sure he means it. He misses me. I pick up the phone and call him. He sounds elated to hear my voice.

He tells me how much he's been thinking about me. I tell him he missed my birthday. He says he'll make it up to me. There's a cabin in Tahoe that his parents just bought. They want him to fix it up for them. He's going up there to live in it for the summer and renovate it and he wants me to come. It'll be just us, the way we used to talk about in our somedays. There is even the stone fireplace I always wanted. It sounds stupid, but that cabin—it's ours. We'd talked about it a hundred times. The two of us, old, sitting around the fireplace, still having something to talk about. I would write, and he would work, fixing and building things for the few neighbors

we'd have. I would grow vegetables, we would travel. We knew how it would be. It would be perfect. We'd even collected huge, oddly shaped stones wherever we went camping to build the fireplace.

We had wanted all the same things, until he'd decided he didn't want me. But he did, he just hadn't known it. He knew now.

I suddenly notice the J Crew boxers I'm wearing and I hate them. He'll know I'm wearing another man's underwear and change his mind. He will sense the betrayal.

But he doesn't. Instead, he tells me he loves me. I've been waiting for so long to hear him say this, for "love" to explode upon me, showers of glittering confetti and warmth, fireworks, fairytales. But now, I've heard them from someone else, and they sound so much smaller. They are just meaningless little words, the letters trickling out his mouth, drool dripping from a dog's tongue. Two years we dated without love being thrown into the conversation, and he is telling me now, after three months M.I.A., now, he needs me around. The words sting. There is nothing behind them, no city beyond the gate. Where was he on my birthday? He has no reply.

The replacement model asks me if I still love Will as we lay in bed, naked. I say that I'm 94% sure that I don't. He says 6% is a lot. I look to the corner of my room, at the trunk that holds an assortment of stones.

"It's not enough." ❀

