



**LANDING
MEDIOCRITY**

Reflections of an Underperformer



**JOSHUA
STEWART**

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For Buster, the best person I have ever known

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps someday I will cheerfully give away my collection of painful memories. Maybe I'll let go my disappointments and leave them behind. Anyone who knows me would agree, I could stand to be more graceful, more tolerant, more forgiving. I'm not. I'm rigid, indignant, and bitter. I fear that my ongoing life experience continues to harden these very things. Any "work" I do on myself seems to barely keep up with my natural tendencies toward inward collapse. I often feel as though I can only postpone the inevitable moment when I lose to myself.

I'm coming for me, and I'm gonna get me.

I'm a runner. I'm a seeker. It's not always obvious which I'm doing. The cause of the former is usually easily identified, the subject of the latter is often a mystery. But one thing is clear, I'm not okay here, not now, not like this. Externally I'm fine, blessed even. In my head, not so much.

This discontent is not new. I recall coming home from third grade class and bawling uncontrollably. The girls weren't giving me enough attention. The boys seemed to have learned how to play sports and fight. Perhaps I missed that day. There was a sense of separation, that I was missing something

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greater; a feeling that I didn't quite get it, that I didn't quite belong. I wasn't getting enough. I wasn't enough. I was unable to relate to this world. At eight years old I was already depressed. Little did I know that this anxiety, this sense of separation, and this pounding fear would dog me the rest of my days. Little did I know that my discontent would fuel a need for departure that would ultimately wreck me.

I was lonely. I was unhappy. I wanted something different. I wanted out.

I sought escape in the bottle, the pipe, the bag. That worked. I got out of "right here, right now." It also dismantled anything worthwhile I may have realized. It stunted my financial, spiritual, and emotional growth. It forever warped my mind. It permanently fucked me up, even more.

I quit everything. I let all the chemicals go. I honestly examined my life, my actions, my relationships, and my spiritual status. I grew up. I changed. I got better.

Years later, though, I grapple with a bitter reality: despite my efforts and many notable improvements, I suffer the same depressive, pessimistic mental state I always have.

I am lonely. I am unhappy. I want something different. I want out.

I believe that perception is reality. My perception is thus: life is a series of struggles, disappointments, and pains punctuated by moments of joy and hilarity. I have these moments, I do. I have moments of pure joy, connection, and understanding. I love and feel loved. I then settle right back into the heavy, grey fog that characterizes life in my head. It's not enough. I'm not enough. Forty-four years of practice and I have yet to master maintaining contentment on this planet.

Yet I want to be alive a tiny bit more than I want to be dead. So, I continue to make efforts to more happily relate myself to this world. I share honestly and openly. This results

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in connection with those who understand me. It diminishes my sense of isolation. I continue to arrange my externalities to satisfy my internal experience. I attempt to convince my internal experience to find satisfaction with my externalities. I pursue anything that might help—anything to make “right here, right now” a bit more tolerable.

1. FUCK GRATITUDE

I hated this summer. So much. It started with a heartbreak and ended with the passing of my very best friend Buster (the black Lab). Then in mid-fall, for dramatic flair, I blew out of my job! I am now unemployed, again. It has taken all my coping skills to navigate this last year. Most recently those coping skills have included working out like a crazy person, writing, and seeking constant sexual gratification (with or without the participation of others).

Maybe it's the mid-life crisis talking, but I can't help but wonder how I have arrived here. I mean, what the fuck happened? What was supposed to happen? I think about suicide several times a day now. Have I been operating on some fantastic hope that "this" gets better? That there is "more" to be enjoyed? Is that fantasy finally shattered? Is that what this is? Am I just stepping off the pages of my self-authored fairy tale and seeing the world for what it really is? Does reality's arrival necessitate hope's departure? There is a wake of disappointment behind me which makes it difficult to believe that good things are waiting ahead. This is what hope

choking feels like. This is why at 44 I pretty much want to be dead.

Just like every American, romance and finance are the leading cause of my woes. This is especially true for alcoholics and addicts. Not to suggest that our woes are greater, only that our *sense* of woe is greater. We tend to be particularly sensitive and self-focused. I'm currently searching for my next job, wondering if I will ever find and maintain the love I crave, and grappling with the mediocrity that seems to characterize my entire life experience thus far. Really, just trying to muster the enthusiasm needed to carry on. Woe.

Faith is vital. We require faith in some form lest we collapse at the first obstacle we encounter—whether it be faith in money, God, one's self, karma, a belief that everything happens for a reason, whatever. In some form faith is vital. Without faith, there is no hope; without hope, there is no will; where there is no will, life crackles and fades.

I know a lot of the missteps and wrong turns that have led me to where I am today. Actually, I know all of them. But how did these come to be? What unfortunate collection of personality flaws and happenstance have landed me here? I know all of these too, all too well.

By most people's standards, life has given me a pretty fair shake. I was born a white male in America. My upbringing was mostly middle class. I am handsome, fit, and energetic. Some think I am funny and articulate (in their defense, they've never read this book). Before I start reciting my list of grievances, I just want to acknowledge that I didn't begin my life in a deficit position. I didn't have to overcome prejudice or systemic obstacles. My task was mostly to recognize opportunity, stay away from danger, and try not to shoot myself in the dick. That's a lot of pressure to put on a child, or a 44-year-old.

My problems spring mostly from my own mind. I am at

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pains to effectively relate to this world. My thinking style isn't conducive to navigating human interactions with grace and ease. There is ample evidence of this internal trouble to be found in my externalities.

Finding and maintaining the love I crave has proven beyond me. Finding and maintaining satisfactory employment has proven beyond me. And this summer, the ultimate blow of losing my very best bud Buster smashed home with excruciating clarity that finding and maintaining happiness on this planet is beyond me.

2. HIT IN THE FACE WITH A BRICK

It is impossible to put into words the particulars of how a loving relationship springs to life and then ultimately dissolves. This is because there is no way to make sense out of that which should not be. There is an injustice to love lost, an unfairness that characterizes heartbreak that cannot be squared. There is no linear, logical explanation for love or the dissolution of a loving union. And certainly there is no accounting for who we fall for. We can't choose who to fall in love with—it just happens. We get swept away. By its very nature, love can't be diagrammed. It just is, until it isn't anymore, and so it was with Mia.

I met her when I was single and doing everything I could to rectify that—mostly swiping furiously through all of the dating sites. Now look, I would prefer to meet people organically, but I'm seldom in bars and I'm never in clubs. If I hit on a woman in a grocery store, she'd probably think I was a creep. Then she'd go home and start chatting with strangers on the internet. Folks are so comfortable with chatting, texting, and online dating these days that face-to-face approaches have become almost jarring. Although the bulk of my online dating

interactions make me want to be dead, I hardly blame the medium. It's the users that I find disappointing, not the interface.

So, I was on Bumble determining people's lovability based solely on their appearance, flicking humans into obscurity, when I saw Mia. I stopped dead, suddenly laser focused. I dived into her profile. I examined her photographs. She is unbelievably good looking. I'm talking "get in my mouth, you naughty whore" beautiful. I completely digested her pictures as I conjured a movie-like montage of us falling in love. I read the handful of paragraphs that the platform allows and actually laughed out loud at what she'd written. I reread it. She's clever and funny. It's not easy to convey much of anything on a Bumble profile, but I was already convinced. In fact, we were already dating in my mind. I was very, very interested. I tried to gather clues from her profile to determine the right approach.

It suddenly hit me that I didn't get to make the approach. I just needed to hurry up and swipe right before she met someone else. I swiped so hard I damn near ripped the screen off my phone. I wanted to call dibs on this person. Could I do that? Should I piss on my phone? How could I secure this woman?

I couldn't—I'd have to wait and hope. She might not match with me. In fact, 44 years of experience told me she probably wouldn't. But man, I think she'd like me. I am pretty damn sure I'd like her. I carried on swiping as my mind stayed with her. I was hopeful that she'd reach out. As I lay down to go to bed, I checked—nothing. She hadn't messaged. She had 24 hours. That wasn't an ultimatum, it's just how Bumble works. If she didn't send me a message within 24 hours, I died. It's a very serious dating site.

As I moved through the next day, I kept thinking about

Mia. I checked for messages—nothing. I wanted to talk to her, I wanted a chance, and I wanted to not blow that chance. The likelihood of all that happening seemed roughly zero. But wouldn't that be sweet? Around lunchtime I checked my inbox. She had messaged me! I was so excited to hear from her. I was even more excited at the caliber of conversation that ensued. Even via chat she was fun, easy, and hilarious. We played off of each other. No misunderstandings, no one got offended. We just clicked. I couldn't wait to meet her. I was actually nervous. That doesn't happen often for me. I was nervous that she might not like me. I was also nervous that I might not like her. I had so enjoyed chatting and talking with her. What if there was no chemistry in person? What if she was a disgusting rhinoceros? I've been catfished before.

Our first date was at a bar near where she lived. We were both early. Punctuality speaks to reliability and integrity. Some people take a relaxed approach to commitments, schedules, and time. Those people are self-centered pricks. Mia had secured a corner booth. When I saw her, I was delighted. She was gorgeous! She had long dark hair and big brown eyes. She was petite and fit. She had perfect lips and straight white teeth. One look at her and I wanted to eat her face. She was casual, dressed in jeans and a light jacket. The bar was mellow. She was chill. There was no pretense. She didn't insist on some high-end club. She didn't show up dressed like she was going to the Grammys. She was relaxed. It was perfect. She was perfect.

We played trivia, talked, and laughed while secretly studying each other. The conversation was so natural and engaging. She knew how to play along, she could verbally joust. Her intellect kept me on my toes. At some point in the evening I switched sides and sat next to her. I was captivated by her—her mischievous smile, her snarky demeanor. She was

so comfortable. We seemed in disbelief about each other. It was as if we both wanted to reach out and poke the other to see if they were real. I was incredibly attracted, not only in an “I want to fuck you” sort of way, but also in a “my god, woman, you are amazing” sort of way. We stimulated each other on every level.

As we left the bar, I just wanted to see more of her. We paused in the parking lot and kissed. I remember her reacting to kissing me. After a tender, sweet, wet, and long-awaited kiss, she smiled a great big, sexy smile and said, “okay,” as if to affirm that the kiss was a success, a pleasant and welcome surprise. My God, it was. I wanted her, all of her. She felt so good in my arms, her body pressed against mine as I tasted those lips that had taunted me all night. After an evening of laughing, batting around topics like religion, dating, and politics, after connecting in a nearly electric fashion, this kiss was right on time. I responded to her assessment by looking into her eyes, smiling, and pulling her in for another more intense and passionate kiss. She loved it. I loved it. I wanted her. I would have lifted her into the back of her Grand Cherokee and made love to her on the spot. But I eased off and she headed home.

I was already falling.

This is how it goes for me. I attract a fair number of women, many of them quite impressive. I even come to love a lot of them. But I don't get that “hit in the face with a brick” feeling that often. I don't get swept away. Mia swept me away that first night. She was everything. I knew it. I couldn't wait to see her again. I couldn't wait for more. I wanted more. I wanted all of her. By the second date I told Mia I was off of the dating sites. I let her know that I was aware we were brand new and understood we had a lot of building and learning ahead, but that I was already convinced she warranted all of

my attention. I meant it, and I wasn't wrong. I know that was a bit fast, a bit much, a bit intense. It was also absolutely true. I saw everything I wanted within her. Much like it's difficult to explain love, it's difficult to adequately express my experience of Mia. I mean I can *tell* you how awesome she was, but I'm not sure I can effectively *convey* how awesome she was. Mia was comfortable with herself. She was fiercely independent, highly intelligent, self-sufficient, emotionally present, and gorgeous. We enjoyed rambling philosophical conversations. We sometimes challenged each other's views, but weren't diametrically opposed on much of anything. No matter the intensity of conversation, no matter where we wandered verbally, there was always a palpable physical attraction. We could be firing on all cylinders, deep in conversation about the state of the nation, and my mind would constantly drift to touching her, kissing her, tasting her, fucking her. I was enamored with her words. As she spoke I thought of reaching out, cradling her head, and pulling her in for a delicious kiss. I wanted all of her, all the time, and I would take her. She quickly became the most important human relationship in my life (Buster was always my best bud).

Mia was a mortgage underwriter for Key Bank. She did this from home some days, other days she went to the office. She also had a six-figure side business—a mail order skincare company specializing in soaps and scrubs. She had recently bought a lovely house in a fancy neighborhood. She didn't want kids. She had never been married.

I hesitate to say that I am drawn to the dynamism of self-made people, but I can't ignore that I have fallen for self-employed, charismatic, business owner types before. It is possible that I am of the same ilk and therefore attract them as well. Don't misunderstand, I am certainly not among the "self-made, successful, entrepreneur" class. It is fair to say that I

have largely underperformed in life. The roughly fourteen years I spent digging a physical, financial, and spiritual hole has forever impacted my career opportunities and decisions. But I suppose it is likely that behind all of that, I am one of these dynamic, power driving, go-getting, self-made types—I just missed the starting gun.

Mia's independent spirit, her intellect, and her very legitimate accomplishments were in no small part fueled by the awful mistreatment she had endured at the hands of so many men in her life. Her stunning good looks certainly allowed her a broad field of ill-intentioned men to choose from. And they all played into a narrative that seemed to drive her. I watch people for tells. I gather little glimpses into their thinking. I saw bits of this narrative early on. Some of the results of this appeared to be positive. Surely her solid financial life was influenced in no small part by a general belief that she was going to have to figure out how to make a living. She was reliant on no one to meet her monetary needs. On its surface this doesn't seem all bad. She surely did what she had to in order to assure herself a comfortable life. Some of the less attractive symptoms of this narrative would become more obvious and unavoidable later.

Mia was different—she was everything. Being with her and nurturing a relationship with her was simultaneously easy, organic, scary, challenging, exciting, and exhilarating. I was incredibly stimulated by conversing with her: she was sharp, witty, thoughtful, and insightful. She was insanely good looking. She had her life together. Her views on deep, nuanced issues were reasonable and interesting. Not for a minute was I unclear about my desire to make something work with her. From very early on, I knew she was amazing. I knew she was all I sought. I was committed.

In our early conversations we disclosed ourselves to each

other. We talked about our childhoods and previous relationships. We spoke of our emotional wounds and unfortunate tendencies that caused us trouble. We admitted our faults and illuminated the thinking behind them.

I told her how my direct, matter-of-fact delivery is often construed as short, curt, or even mean. I explained my objections to this characterization. I believe myself to be emotionally generous and deeply concerned with the well-being of others. When discussing non-emotional subject matter, if I dress it up, I come off as disingenuous. When discussing matters of the heart, I try to communicate with tact and compassion. Being aware of my capacity for inadvertently hurting people, I try to adjust. It doesn't work. I am still perceived as too blunt. As it turns out, almost every topic can become emotional if people feel attacked or criticized.

While I cannot deny that my opinionated, vocal, direct nature can cause hurt and discord, I also can't shake my belief that if people were more emotionally aware, if they were more introspective, if they were just a bit smarter, they would understand as I do. They might even come to appreciate my honest input. Yes, if people weren't idiots, they would like me (self-righteousness is just self-preservation masquerading as superiority). But this little quirk of mine, this superhuman ability to inadvertently hurt people, would prove far more impactful in our relationship than I could have imagined.

She opened up to me about her recurring relationship issues, the most significant being that she doesn't trust men. She told me about Dad abandoning her and his continued absence, "One day he just left! He actually moved out of state and started an entire second family. That hurt so much more. It wasn't like he didn't want to be a dad or a husband, he just didn't want to be those things for us." She recounted a handful of trust-shattering experiences with past partners. I didn't fully

understand how consequential these experiences would prove to be.

So, I'm an asshole and she doesn't trust men. I was far more reassured by our honest disclosures than I was alarmed by the content. With every step closer to her, I wanted more.

For one of our early dates I took her to a climbing gym. My previous girlfriend was into climbing and through her I had become enthusiastic about it. Admittedly, I was never great at this sport. I just muscled through it and trusted my rope and billetes, so I would launch up these walls without too much concern. I picked up Mia for this exciting date, making sure that whatever I was wearing would look good in a climbing harness. This is very important. I picked her up in the demo I was driving from work, a loaded Chevy Tahoe, which would also prove very important.

Now remember, I was falling for her. I already held her in the highest regard and was trying to garner her affections. So far she seemed to like me, and I saw everything I would ever want in this woman. This date meant a lot to me. The caliber of our communication, our connectedness, how charming I was, how much laughing she was doing—all of this would inform my understanding of how “we” were doing. Through every back and forth, I would gauge the connection and level of ongoing attraction.

I picked up Mia in the most impressive fashion I could. As we hopped in the Tahoe, I realized I hadn't yet entered the destination in the GPS. I had only lived back in Denver for about three years, but mostly I suck at navigating. I started driving toward the climbing gym while fiddling with the GPS on the dash. I tried to maintain the appearance of control, command, and competence while begging the onboard computer to tell me where to go because I was lost. I wanted her to feel safe and protected in my vehicle, but I was clearly

preoccupied with attempting to conjure information out of a GPS that refused to let me enter an address. I laughed at how much I was struggling with this thing and asked her to put the address into the system. She took a quick whack at it and then picked up her phone and entered the address there.

Now I will absolutely acknowledge that her figuring out a way to navigate is all I could hope for. She identified the issue and solved the problem! What a fantastic co-pilot. No better person to have at my side as I explore the climbing gyms of North America.

Although I immediately knew she had handled our navigation problem, I now felt a bit reliant on her to verbally tell me where to go. I also felt that the consensus was that this Chevy Tahoe sucked as a vehicle because the navigation system was so challenging to use—an accurate appraisal to be sure. More importantly, this woman, whom I desperately wanted to impress, was unimpressed by my vehicle and my triangulation skills. I was experiencing the emasculation that accompanies my lady companion safely navigating us through a world I was clearly lost in. I was a total failure as a man, obviously.

This was laughable. I am confident she didn't care. She was excited about the impending rock climbing and didn't seem to hate me as a person. None of what was happening was particularly concerning to her, as was appropriate.

To me, however, this combination of developments was terrifying. This spoke to my inadequacy as a partner. It must be understood that I already regarded Mia as the most impressive human I had met in years. I needed to be “enough” for her. I was determined to capture her affections and love. In order for this to happen, I had to come off as self-sufficient, capable, and even dominant. I should be the captain, at least for this trip—my car, my idea, my place. I should be in command here. I was not. I was immediately consumed by fear that I had

failed. I clearly was not performing like a “real man.” Mia had come to my rescue with her phone’s GPS. The image she was getting of me was all wrong! I am better than this! I will rescue you! I am the strong, capable one! At no point in this still lighthearted drive had she given me any indication that she was losing interest or confidence in me. She seemed amused by how crappy the GPS was but that was about it.

I should pause here to explain that I am really high energy and intense. People feel my energy, even when I say nothing. This trait can make me quite influential and surely has its benefits. It can also be problematic.

Although I don’t recall saying anything out of line about the GPS situation, Mia definitely felt my disappointment and discomfort with how the navigating was going. I was experiencing some fire and some fear back of this. Things started to get tense. She was picking up on the general vibe that I thought she was doing it wrong. I had inadvertently managed to let it be known that she wasn’t navigating correctly, that if only she’d done it differently, if she’d only figured out the Tahoe navigation while I drove there would be no issue here. Understandably, she felt she had done just fine and we were in fact en route. I was experiencing a disproportionate response to this scenario because to me it spoke to a general failing on my part. It spoke to how she can’t count on me to safely get us from here to there. Clearly, if that was her perception, I would not be man enough for her. She couldn’t possibly have any long-term interest in a loser like me.

I know how my mind gets to these places. I can watch it go there, I just can’t stop it. The best I’m able to do is explain it. But there it went. If I didn’t care about her, if she was just some chick I was fucking, I wouldn’t have had anywhere near this kind of charged fear surrounding such a laughable scenario. But in my mind, I was losing her.

Upon arriving at the climbing gym, it was obvious I had ruined this trip. I had made a giant issue out of something amusing. She felt persecuted. I figured I would likely be dismissed. I was pretty sure she thought I was a crazy person. She would have been correct.

We walked inside but I stopped her and asked her to come back outside and sit with me for a minute. I tried to get current with her, I explained my crazy. She seemed to understand. She assured me it would be okay. We went inside and had just an okay day of climbing. The day was tainted due to my insane need to be “enough” in every way. She did think my reaction was disproportionate, but didn’t think it was a deal killer. She just didn’t understand why any of it mattered and obviously didn’t like that I had tried to pin my disappointment on her. But she was forgiving and reasonable.

This was one of my first experiences with Mia that left me shook. She seemed to recover quickly and just wanted to move on. I wanted to address it, deal with it, or somehow walk through it in what I perceived to be a complete fashion. I am so much a processor. I want to talk, explain, be heard, hear the other party (okay, mostly be heard), and hopefully land at an understanding place. There have been times when I’ve left this process feeling closer with someone than I did going in. Other times it seems I am dragging the other party through an unnecessary piece of surgery—they feel fine and don’t know why I want to cut us both open.

Bearing in mind that I was already convinced Mia was my person, you can imagine how concerned I was about “navigational apocalypse.” I felt so stupid. I just wanted us to be completely recovered and somehow get to a place where she was enamored with me. I wanted this woman to love me. I needed this woman to love me.

One of the components of my personality that at times can

be a bit intense is my desire to be loved. There is a lot here. There is a lifetime here. This desire at times masquerades quite convincingly as a need to be loved. Or perhaps it's a need to be loved enough, or loved in the right way, or loved completely. This desire has in no small way colored my life experience.

This seeking, this pining for more, this need for proof of love was first evident in my relationship with Dad. I just always wanted more from him. I always wanted more attention, affection, time, adoration, support, understanding, and appreciation. I wanted more love.

My childhood provided clear, fertile ground for the roots of this phenomenon to take hold. Mom and I moved a lot. We moved from Texas to Colorado, back to Texas, back to Colorado, back to Texas, back to Colorado. Different houses, slightly different locations, different schools (sometimes due to relocating, sometimes due to changes in school district boundaries, grade tiers, etc.). Some kids are more likely than others to have lingering, negative impacts from these moves than others. For me, I mostly lived with intense anxiety. Life seemed chaotic and out of control. Every time we moved, I felt like an outsider; as it turns out, I was. I consistently felt unbalanced like I was trying to get my legs under me while figuring out the new social and academic structure. With every new town came the sense that I had missed big chunks of development, learning, and shared experience. I had—I was legitimately out of step. I was always the new guy, trying to become a “part of.” The feelings I experienced through these events were fear, loneliness, a sense of disconnection, a desire to be embraced, accepted, known, and loved. It's clear to me now that my experience of Dad and the frequent moves alone could have easily left me pining. It's easy to see how this childhood experience is likely to result in a nearly desperate desire to be loved, to finally feel the elusive feelings I'd chased. I can see where I

might have a bit of fire and intensity driving my efforts to connect, to relate, to grow close with others. It's easy to see how a sense of calamity and uneasiness might go hand in hand with isolation. It's understandable how feeling deeply and completely embraced, understood, and loved might have a profound and much sought-after settling effect on my soul.

I tend to think in "if" statements. I think linearly, logically. So, this is my best effort to trace the origins of what appears at times to be a misshapen and disproportionate appetite for love. It is also totally possible that none of this had much to do with anything circumstantial and that I am just a very lovey, affectionate, needy soul. This could absolutely be my God-given temperament and my childhood experiences couldn't have changed it anyhow.

What I do know about myself is that I crave undeniable, unwavering, unquestionable, overt, obvious, demonstrations of understanding, appreciation, adoration, affection, and adulation—Love! I have half-jokingly commented that I can't tell if a woman likes me unless she currently has my cock in her mouth. I have a very tough time enduring any sort of apathy or passivity toward me as a partner. If I meet a woman and she seems on the fence or just generally ishy toward me, I'm out! I can't seem to stand that feeling. I'm not sure if this is some base level issue of my self-esteem being tethered to what others think of me, or if it is more that I have endured a lifetime of feeling unembraced and can't emotionally handle any more of it.

The very best feeling in the world is being in love—being loved completely by your person. The opposite of that is being dismissed by your person or someone you wish were your person. Apathy and passivity carry a dismissive component that's almost worse than hatred. Apathy and passivity say, "Nah, I don't hate you, you aren't even worth the time needed

to investigate whether I should hate you or not. I'll just glance at you and pass." It's somehow worse than being hated. At least hatred carries a reason. Apathy and passivity directed toward a potential partner generally carry a message that the person is unworthy of serious consideration. They are dismissible on a wholesale basis. It's rough. I know, I may be a bit deep into this particular philosophical rabbit hole. This is where my mind takes it.

For her part, Mia was fine. She generally understood (she's not stupid or unfeeling) and was ready to move on and have a good time climbing rock walls. But she wasn't "fine" solely because she is inclined to be well-adjusted and graceful. She was in part "fine" because she is used to operating at a safe distance.

I didn't realize it was happening at the time, but nav-pocalypse lightly reinforced her need to protect herself, to stiffen up, to fortify her emotional walls. She still wanted to hang out, she wanted to climb rocks, she still liked me, she still wanted to fuck me, to keep getting to know me, she was still excited about me. But subconsciously she was feeding the narrative. She was collecting evidence to support a case she had been building for a lifetime.

Mia's mistrust of men informs her behavior in intimate relationships. She prefers to wade cautiously into the emotional pool. If she had the power to dictate her feelings, she might very well postpone falling in love forever. She tends to keep men at arm's length, allowing them into her life to the exact extent that they don't interfere or cause unnecessary emotional distress. She prefers the sense of safety and control that comes with being alone over the exposure that comes with allowing someone in completely. So she has boy toys. I don't mean that she uses dudes solely to fuck, but she has learned to view men as expendable accoutrement. She likes controlling the depth of

the connection and maintaining distance where needed. She's monogamous, but she generally likes a man who will come when called: enjoy a movie or show, fuck, eat, hang out, and go home. She has enjoyed long-term relationships that lacked intellectual and spiritual stimulation but allowed her to meet her base needs while maintaining autonomy. Better alone or with optional companionship than exposed to the pain and heartache she views as an unavoidable consequence of emotional entanglement. She is subconsciously driven by the fear of being hurt by a man. To her credit she has adopted a fairly complicated dance allowing some intimacy while satiating her fear.

We were getting to know a bit about each other's tendencies in intimate relationships. I sought open-chested disclosure, transparent confession, and communication. I openly acknowledged that I was exposed, that I was falling. I wanted to know and feel the same from her. She was clearly moved by me, she wanted to be moved by me. She told me regularly how fascinated she was by my mind and spirit, how I was different from anyone she'd ever known. She thought I was sexy, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. She gobbled up my thoughts and was particularly impressed by my emotional presence and ability to articulate. She was excited to see where this thing went. She loved how I made her feel.

I found it comforting that every red flag I saw was one that Mia herself pointed to. Not as a warning, more as an admission. Everybody has their own shit. We both appeared to be reasonably self-aware, and awareness is key. The more she revealed herself to me, the more attracted I was. Her broken parts and twisted thinking humanized her and allowed me to connect more deeply with her. Her ugly truth made her that much more beautiful. Her imperfections made her seem perfect. I was in trouble.

We became physical fairly quickly. Which is necessary. I mean, for me. I won't do any protracted courtship bullshit while waiting for sex. I guess I just won't do bullshit generally. When people try to explain "waiting to have sex" to me I can't help but think the philosophy is based in bullshit. I understand that it's reasonable to not be guided by our base physical desires and act on every whim. But I also take serious exception with any philosophy of dating that includes holding off on sex for extended periods of time. Sure, I'll tell you why. First, sex isn't the end game in dating, it's a prerequisite. If we don't move to fucking fairly quickly after meeting, I will assume one of two things: either she's not that into me, or she's using sex as some sort of bargaining chip or tool. Either way, I'm out. So, there's that.

Further, having "rules" about waiting for the _____ date or until after _____ has happened to engage in _____ is certain to interrupt the organic progression of a relationship. Ideally, we would all show up armed only with our emotional availability, good humor, common sense, and intuition. We would be present, take in what is, and be available to proceed as the way opens. I think that most deviations from the natural progression of a relationship are likely to stunt the growth of the union or cause unnecessary problems. And my greatest objection to the arbitrary waiting-to-have-sex philosophies is really the thinking behind them. These philosophies are ill-conceived and based on faulty reasoning. People who subscribe to these "rules" are shallow thinkers and not my people.

There are a couple of issues that accompany a serious waiting period. For one thing, the pressure to perform becomes fairly intense. Plus, it's likely that D-day will be a semi-formally planned event. There are few things less sexy, less organic, and less likely to go well. The contrived "special day"

loses the natural chemistry, spontaneity, and connectedness most of us would hope for. These are manufactured hurdles being erected (pun intended) along the path we walk together toward our shared destination.

Life has enough problems, I don't need a partner creating more. If we agree we want to be at the top of this beautiful mountain making love, let's have a wonderful walk up the mountain together and make love. There's no need to make the journey to the mountain top so fraught with peril that by the time we get there we are exhausted, frightened, and angry. I understand waiting if it's warranted. I just don't understand waiting for the sake of waiting. One of the most attractive traits in a person is authenticity. If you want to kiss me, kiss me; if you want to fuck me, let's fuck. If you are in love with me, act like it!

There is a beautiful dance that a new couple engages in. We all have the same fears. We ultimately want the same things. We seek a connection that requires a level of vulnerability that can be downright terrifying. But we all want it. We are all the same person.

Mia and I shared a wonderful electric sexual energy from the beginning. We always wanted each other. She brought her transparent self to the early days of our relationship. She was bright-eyed, present, and available. Very early on we explored each other sexually. I was so excited that it went well. And it went really well. She was just lovely. She was petite and feminine. With her perfect, gorgeous, devious smile, her long brown hair, her delicate frame, and beautiful physique. I wanted her in my mouth. I wanted her on my cock. I wanted her coming out of her skin with ecstasy. She felt amazing in my arms. I could lift her up and toss her around, flip her over, fold her up. There was no part of her I didn't love. I loved kissing her, touching her, licking her,

nibbling on her, sucking on her, making love to her, fucking her. Our physical connection was just perfect. I was so happy. I knew I loved talking with her, I knew I was incredibly attracted to her, now I knew we were compatible in bed. I was in love with her. I was trying to convince myself that I was in the process of falling. In reality I was already there. My future was now tethered to this woman, to this relationship.

My primary focus, the most important fact of my life, was this captivating woman that I felt incredibly fortunate to have met. I was elated to be garnering her affections. I was determined to grow closer to her.

We immediately started sharing a wonderfully active and fulfilling sex life. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. As we began exploring each other's bodies, we continued to explore each other's minds. And as we did the chemistry got stronger. The more she spoke, the more I wanted to fuck her brain. We would be sitting at my dining room table talking about religion and I would reach out, cradle her perfect head in my hand and pull her in for a passionate, wet kiss. I couldn't talk to her without wanting to touch her.

One evening over dinner we were talking politics. She was eating, talking, smiling, and being amazing. I casually set my napkin down, walked over to her and extended my hand to hers. She placed her hand in mine, dabbed her face with her napkin and set it down. I lifted her out of her chair and marched her a few steps to the kitchen. I spun her to face the counter, reached around, unbuttoned her pants, and pulled them down around her ankles. I gently rubbed her ass and then spanked her hard. I bent her over the counter as I wet my fingers with my mouth and rubbed her; she was already soaking wet. I slid inside of her and fucked her until she came. I flipped her around and lifted her onto the counter, legs

spread before me; we kissed and fucked until we came together.

We couldn't get enough of each other. I couldn't get enough of her.

One tendency I have when I become captivated with someone that can prove problematic is that I tend to lose sight of nearly everything else. I am not embarrassed about this. The fact is, little else matters. I think sharing our lives, our hearts, our struggles, our pains, and our triumphs with another is actually the most fulfilling and valuable experience we can hope for. It is appropriate to me that a relationship with someone I love should take precedence. There is, of course, a balance that seems ideal wherein we hold our person over all else, but continue to pursue other important things such as career, spiritual fitness, relationships with friends and family, hobbies, etc. I struggle with that. Historically, I can get laser focused on "her" and let most other things crumble. I really tried not to do this with Mia. I know that the intense focus on "her" can prove too much. I can make my person my everything. I can ask more than one single person is capable of providing. So I try to keep my life bigger. I needed to stay active in other arenas so that I could draw satisfaction and fulfillment from those areas and not be hyper reliant on Mia to make me okay.