

# Short Story

## AUTONOMY

A novela penned in real time

Chapter 1 – Mrs. Fix It

I thought of 1000 things today and all but three of them had something to do with Ezra.

Ezra is a younger woman who I was attracted to the first moment I saw her. Actually, she was a much younger woman whom I met within one month of my divorce from a somewhat younger woman.

See a pattern yet?

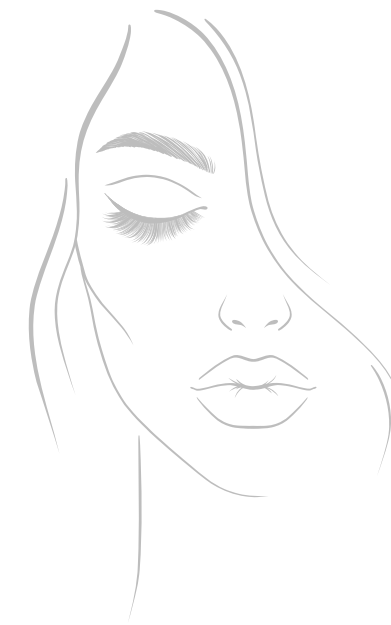
Ezra's age difference isn't of the range that people get jealous or judgey about. Our May-December romance would be more like the kind you see in fetish porn.

I met Ezra when she was happily engaged to the man whom she eventually got happily married to. So my concept of her has always been the benchmark the next special person in my life would have to reach. All this became an easy way for me to never date, at least not seriously, ever again. Because no one could ever be ... better than Ezra.

This past weekend I spent the entire weekend hosting Ezra. We seemed tied at the hip the minute she walked through the door, word vomiting the tech book she was listening to on the ride up from her hometown Boise to my new town Bellevue, a small Idaho city at the lower banks of the Big Wood River. She was befuddled by something called black boxes, how they magically work and don't work, and how to go about finding the problem and fixing it. Ezra wants to—and probably could, if everyone would just listen to her—fix the entire world.

We weren't unsociable. We mingled well and enjoyed all the company who had visited Laio (that's my friend/co-homeowner/business partner and someone I'll address later) and me. But there were moments when everyone knew all they could do was look outside-in at the bubble our giggles and geek chat were creating.

By Saturday morning it was clear Ezra and I would need to traverse the Wood River Valley, leave my adorable turn-of-the-last-century house in Bellevue and head up to Sun Valley and Ketchum, the part of Idaho Ernest Hemingway decided to spend and end the last years of his life.



Ezra and I both had writing work to do. Hers needed to take precedence. She was writing her application essay for hopeful entrance into a doctoral program at Cambridge. Yes, that Cambridge. And she wanted my help. Insert back pat here.

We started the day at the Starbucks in Ketchum. But it's not what you think. The Starbucks in Ketchum occupies an old, A-framed, exposed-log bank building that was voted one of the 20 most beautiful Starbucks in the world. Yup, that's a thing. The bank's vault has been turned into a conference room with images of the Sawtooth mountains, the valley's windless blue skies as Hemingway called them, and images of Papa at everything from a typewriter to a hunting rifle. And get this, the room has something almost never seen in a public space: more than a dozen outlets to charge your phone!

We got a lot done on the essay, especially considering how much non-essay things we discussed, including two Black Mirror episodes we're going to write on spec. And I think it was then that Ezra got her best glimpse yet into how my brain ticks.

I'm not as smart as Ezra and I joke about her having a 150 IQ. I couldn't possibly solve the dilemmas she's about to conquer. I couldn't tell sine from cosine if it hit me in the face. But she knows it doesn't matter and that genius comes in many forms. Ralph Waldo Emerson said in every work of genius our own rejected thoughts are rendered back to us with an alienated majesty. So I've come to accept that I should not automatically reject--or repress--my thoughts. It's not that all my thoughts are genius, far from it. Sometimes I can barely find my car. I just realize now it's my job to vet out only the non-genius ones and to remember that even a broken clock is right twice a day.

So when people far smarter or more talented come to me, they usually, whether they realize it or not, just need some vetting of all the thoughts they see. I'm really not a good sounding board. I'm more like a squelch key.

After Starbucks, we paid our respects at Hemingway's grave just up the street and shared a beer with four nice gents visiting from the Bay Area who heard about the cemetery and were passing by. People leave rum and whiskey and other alcohols at Papa's grave, so a cooler of beer to share is not an uncommon event there. After the guys left, Ezra asked to read lines from The Mammal Problem, a play I wrote about my deceased wife and me. Lisa, my wife, died at 23, meaning Ezra—a seasoned performer—could give the role a certain synchronicity.

Her reading was good. Her desire to keep reading and make it better was perfection. I sat cross-legged at the foot of Papa's grave and she sat stretched out and barefoot repeating her lines over and over until she nailed it head to toe. If I forget all the things that happened that day, that moment would be the final one to go.

We ended the day sipping cocktails, people watching and eating roasted brussels sprouts and truffle fries at the swanky lounge of the new Limelight Hotel as we continued to let our typing fingers hack away. We began the night by having a late dinner back at the house with Laio, her boyfriend and her aunt. There were kalimoxos (Coke mixed into red wine) and Laio's deliciously weird lasagna that paired well with bong rips of pot. There was laughter and reminisce, bawdy bar talk and political rant, and—like any memorable event—even a dose of tear.

And even though Ezra and I did everything together, from breaking bread and sleeping for a moment in the same bed, it didn't turn romantic. At least not in the per se kind of way. We brain fucked, I suppose, instead. We surrendered to IQ rather than id.

It's not that Ezra or I don't have strong ids. In fact, I think mine's higher than my IQ. As for Ezra, she's polyamorous, the only—at least openly one—I know. I'm confused by that word. It's not that I can't define it. It's that I can't in my romantic history find it. I think I know what it's not: a poor excuse to sleep around. "I sleep with less people than my monogamist friends," Ezra points out. I believe her without a doubt and she probably has a file in Google Drive that proves it with an algorithm and a chart.

I suppose that makes my experience of love the codependent kind. I hate that word: codependent. Every time I hear someone try to define it, all I hear is a description of deep, true love. The kind you'd die for.

And perhaps that's what makes it so hard for me and Ezra to connect physically, far more than the deviance of our age. At least for me.

Ezra believes in autonomy over jealousy, letting people be with those to whom they want to give and receive love. It's a great system. If it can work. I know my system doesn't, at least not typically or for long. And based on everything I know about humans and nature, monogamy is like fitting a square peg into a round hole.

But polyamory, regardless of how you codify it, is a clusterfuck (pardon the pun) too. Ezra's marriage? That didn't work out. And the man she had recently been dating for six months fell in love with someone else the day after he and Ezra finally made love. Perhaps poly life is just a square hole into a round peg.

When I walked her to her car so she could leave Sunday before dark, I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel like I should kiss her. But I chose a sincere hug instead; it lasted forever and not a second too long. I was choosing autonomy, a respect for hers and a safe-keeping of mine. For now at least, until maybe the two of us can find some time to reconfigure a few things in our hearts and minds.

"I don't believe people are the problem. I believe it is the systems they are in that aren't working," Ezra writes, more or less, in her Cambridge essay.

I hope she's right but my experience tells me otherwise. Our life instinct says to us the grass is always greener on the other side. The systems that need fixing are not external from us. Rather, they are our internal personal ones, our ability to focus on what exactly and actually matters. Most are broken. Maybe including mine.

But I might know someone now, who can fix it.