

FINDING ECSTASY

How Buenos Aires, a Brazilian, and the Blues Saved My Sex Life (and My Soul)

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To Boris, for saying *hola* to me across the patio table.

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I
LEAVING HOME

What's My Fantasy?

"WHAT IS YOUR fantasy world like?"

"My fantasy world? Well, I've always dreamed I could fly."

"Hmm, that's a lovely dream, Rebecca, but I'm talking about your sexual fantasy world."

"Oh..." I knew every question was going to be related to sex—this was sex therapy, after all—but I couldn't bring myself to address the topic directly. I felt compelled to delay the inevitable and answer each question in a deliberately roundabout manner. I sat in the corner of a floral-patterned sofa in my therapist's office. It was a sunny afternoon, but the shades were drawn to afford clients the sensation of privacy. I warmed my hands beneath my tightly crossed legs. I felt small and out of place, but I knew I was where I had to be.

"Where do you let your thoughts take you when you think of sex?" My therapist sat upright across from me, holding a cup of tea in her lap. I looked down at my own lap.

"Well, I don't really think about sex. I mean, only the fact that I 'should' have it, since I'm in a relationship and all."

She smiled and nodded, her lips slightly parting as though demonstrating for me how I might open my mouth and say more. When I didn't continue, she said, "I'm going to suggest that you allow yourself to engage in a sexual fantasy before we meet next. Try not to make judgments about what comes up—just notice where your mind takes you."

I cringed. *It won't take me very far.* My inner cynic launched forward by default, but I told Ms. Johnson that I would try. I was twenty-seven years old and tired of evading physical advances and questions about my sexual preferences from my partner. He'd even taken to leaving erotica around the apartment for me to read for inspiration. Yes, I would boldly go where I dared not go before. I would engage in a sexual fantasy and raise my therapist one by *sharing* it with my partner, I quickly decided.

Although this had been only my second therapy session, I had an unshared goal of being a scholar in my therapist's eyes—the case she would later describe in awe: "Rebecca was that rare and exceptional client whose personal advancement quickly superseded the need for therapy." The motivating factor behind my determination to rapidly move beyond therapy stemmed mostly from my deep-seated desire for overachievement. I was also afraid of what extensive therapy might demand of my bank account.

At home that night, I seized on a lull in conversation to explore this new me with my partner, Sam, while seated at the dinner table.

"So, I had this sexual fantasy earlier today," I began in between bites of salad.

“Mmm. Really? Tell me about it.” Sam leaned in, gazing at me with desire and intrigue. He had been hungry for me to finally bring up this particular subject.

“Yeah, we were lying in bed, and you were on top of me. You raised my arms above my head...” I stopped.

“Uh-huh and *then* what?”

“Oh, that was all.”

“Wait, what? That’s it? That doesn’t qualify as a sexual fantasy.”

My shoulders slumped as my gaze fell down to my meal. I was disappointed in myself. I had hoped that once I began speaking, images and words might transcend my doubts and materialize into the sexy foreplay I had been unable to summon in my thoughts alone. But it still felt wrong to me. God or my parents or some other equally unwelcome guest had entered my mind, lurked in our kitchen, and shamed me.

While I couldn’t seem to conjure in my mind’s eye the stuff so many books and movies are made of, I had long dreamed of a more significant sexual fantasy. I ached to experience ecstasy — what I defined as the divine connection of mind, body, and spirit — in unity with a partner, but without shame or fear. However, I was terrified of sex. Talking about it, thinking about it, and God forbid, actually *doing* it. In fact, for the majority of my life, my God *did* forbid it, as did my parents, teachers, and seemingly all adults I held in high regard.

I grew up in the small city of La Crosse, Wisconsin, where I attended elementary school through college. Everyone who had known me as a child continued to think of me as the little girl I had once been. Now that I had left that town, I longed for an opportunity to create a new identity — one that didn’t come attached to the labels shy, studious, and, as some of my peers saw me, sexually deprived.

My religion had taught me that sex before marriage was a sin, that masturbation was dirty, and that nudity was something to be embarrassed about. I attended a parochial school for the first half of my elementary school years, where I witnessed the church’s hypocrisy — or at least the imperfection in its teachings. After the principal and his wife (my kindergarten teacher) were accused of child abuse, my parents moved my older brother and me over to the public school system. Though my interpretation of the institution of church remained foggy, I continued to believe the Bible to be the primary source of “right” and “wrong.”

I had a strong, private relationship with God throughout my youth and young adulthood. I’d been taught to say my daily prayers, and the practice was one I continued into my adult years, beyond the point of parental expectation. It was a nightly ritual in which I found solace. I would habitually begin my prayers with, “Dear God, please let me have absolutely no nightmares and absolutely no bad dreams, and please forgive me for all the sins that I have done today.” I didn’t necessarily reflect on what these sins were — surely I’d committed *some*. I would then continue on to humbly ask for whatever it was my heart sought in the moment. My requests evolved from

getting straight. As to not being teased by my middle-school girlfriends to—by the time I reached high school—nearly begging to feel loved.

I'd always felt unconditional love from my family, but it wasn't enough for me—they were obligated to love me. I wanted to be looked at and held by someone unrelated to me in such a way that I'd be left with no doubt that I was worthy of love. That I was beautiful.

I felt anything but beautiful as a teenager. I hadn't yet learned how to tame my curly hair, and I'd inherited my father's oily skin, paving the way for severe acne by the time I reached fourteen. As a freshman in high school, I finally went to see a dermatologist. My mom went with me into the examination room. I sat on the edge of the exam table as the doctor closely explored my face. She spoke directly to my mom, as if I weren't my own person but merely a subject of study—a specimen on which the latest drugs could be tested.

"You can see how the condition has spread from across the forehead down the sides of the face to the jawline. The only surface that has been spared is the sensitive tissue around the eyes." She used a metal tool resembling a pen to point out the affected areas to my mom, who dutifully nodded along with great interest as she too closely inspected my face.

"What do you think can be done about it, Doctor?" my mom asked. I know that her intentions stemmed from love—she didn't like seeing her daughter suffer. But I felt like a disappointment. I was ashamed of my appearance, so I thought she must be too. I went home with several prescriptions, which helped to a degree, but ultimately the condition was one I would simply have to wait out through puberty. At least I was lucky that it was a temporary concern. If only future me could have told that to teenage me.

As for my hair, it wasn't until my senior year in high school that a friend of my mother's showed me how to embrace my curls and offered me her hair product in encouragement. What seemed like a small gesture made a significant impact on my confidence. Part of me resented the fact that my mother had never been one to French braid my hair or teach me a thing about fashion. It wasn't her forte, I would realize, but at the time it just seemed like she didn't think my looks were salvageable. I'd always hated sitting in the stylist's chair, the bright overhead lights accentuating my blemished skin that I was forced to look at in the massive mirror in front of me. With the help of her friend, however, going to get my hair cut became a bit more bearable.

I relied on God for comfort a lot during those days. His love was the conditional kind I sought, and I did feel loved by him. However, the downside of that kind of love was that I feared his judgment. Not only was he constantly watching my actions, he was listening to my thoughts. I had to keep them pure.

Though by the time I reached middle school my family no longer attended church, the public school system did a good job of making it clear what being "pure" entailed,

especially when it came to sex. The sex ed curriculum emphasized the social, psychological, and health gains of practicing total abstinence and grossly exaggerated the dangers of sexual activity outside the context of marriage. By state law, contraceptive and safe-sex techniques were not to be discussed, except to warn of their risks and failures.

While in eighth grade, I witnessed the shame and the stigma applied to people who broke the rules. A girl who sat in front of me in study hall was becoming visibly rounder in the abdomen. Whispers of her potential pregnancy gave way to vocally charged accusations of immorality—and not just impurity but *dirtiness*. Fellow students were afraid to touch her, to talk to her. They simply stared and talked about her behind her back. She was well aware—that was painfully obvious. I felt sorry for her, but I dared not offer my support or I'd risk being made fun of too. I didn't want people to think I hung out with *that* kind of crowd.

Another girl, in my eighth-grade science class, got in trouble for passing a note. The teacher collected it and stood before the class as she read it silently to herself. Her jaw dropped, and her eyes widened as she stood in disbelief before declaring, "Megan, see me after class."

The room was rife with the glorified opportunity for gossip. It didn't take long for rumors to spread that the note had described a sexual encounter from the weekend before. And it became no secret that Megan was consequently required to attend counseling. Yes, sex was bad. I felt sorry for Megan—not just because of the unfair judgment she faced but because I liked her, and she seemed to be veering down a path of sin toward condemnation.

I didn't want either of these girls' lives for myself. I decided to avoid risk altogether and simply—so it seemed at the time—abstain from sex. It appeared the only sure way to guarantee I would not suffer from any of the following afflictions: parental disappointment and societal shame, impediment to my educational and career success due to unplanned pregnancy, slow and painful death after having become infected with AIDS or another sexually transmitted disease, and eternal damnation in hell. Having a long, healthy, and successful future and having a sex life seemed mutually exclusive, and I deemed the former the wiser of the two choices.

This belief foundation from my most formative years followed me even throughout college. I lived in the "dry" residence hall, where my peer group consisted of students with a more traditional religious background, so abstaining from sexual activity was commonplace. In some respect, it made my life easier, as moments of privacy in a shared dorm room were few and far between—and even then, the walls were paper thin and definite betrayers of "immoral" behavior. I was never asked out, anyway. I typically preferred to stay in the comfort of my dorm room, listening to music and writing in my journal, rather than attend social events.

Since sex with a partner was unobtainable, self-pleasure might have been a safe substitute for my body's natural sex drive. However, by my early adulthood, the temptation to touch myself in a sexual way was simply nonexistent. I didn't even allow my thoughts to entertain such a possibility. The whole concept seemed trivial—a mere distraction from my studies or even a decent novel.

I didn't always feel that way. I first experimented with masturbation around the age of eleven, though I didn't know what it was. I thought I had discovered a secret path to bliss that no one else knew about—and I didn't want to share it. It was the childhood kind of masturbation, fully clothed and completely quiet, beginning my habit of restraining my breath during anything sexual. It was always done in private, of course, because not only did I not want to share my secret but I thought that it was probably “wrong” to touch myself “down there.” The only time my parents referred to my genital region was when it came time to bathe. My mom always reminded me to “wash my duty.” It wasn't until I was well into my adult life that I learned *duty* wasn't really an official word for vagina. My thoughts during my early experiments were not of the sexual variety. Even if I'd connected what I was doing to sex, I was clothed and silent—so my brain was too.

Death drove my first experience with the act. I was in bed crying about my grandmother's recent passing, feeling bad that I hadn't made more of an effort to know her. I held myself between the legs; it was a warm and comforting position. As the pain became more wrenching, my body writhed with sobbing, and my hands moved my clothing in such a way that physically aroused me. I didn't know what was happening, but I kept crying and allowing the sensation to increase. Finally, I felt release, and my heart slowed from its frenzied state as my breathing began to calm. I felt soothed. I was finally able to sleep.

Though I enjoyed my secret self-pleasure sessions as a child, once I reached middle school and learned that it was called masturbation (and was not so secret after all), I refrained from the practice. I could tell by the tone my teacher used when she talked about it that it was dirty. I now knew it was a sexual act and, therefore, was definitely wrong for me to enjoy.

Also while in middle school, I experienced my first period. I had dreaded its arrival because it would mean I'd have to talk about my body with my mom. She had already started teasingly calling me “Little Boobies,” to my mortification. I'd have preferred to hide the fact that my body was changing.

“We're going to have to go bra shopping for you,” my mom said one day. Her tone demonstrated excitement for the fact that her daughter was becoming a woman. I could feel her longing to celebrate this rite of passage with her only daughter. She made a distinction between becoming a young woman and becoming a sexual being, but I did not. I so deeply wanted to deny both parts of me. There was something shameful in

what was happening to my body—I knew it, because my dad left the room anytime my mom brought it up.

“Mom! Winter is coming, and winter means *sweaters*.” The last word rang with the critical disgust of teenage rebellion. How funny that my rebellion was against grown-up things when most teens wanted more of those. I wanted to move on from the topic as quickly as possible and retreat to my bedroom to put on multiple layers of clothing to cover the two offending parties.

“Little boobies, ha-ha!” I could hear my brother snickering from the next room on my way up the stairs.

As much as I feared my mother’s enthusiastic reaction to my period, a greater fear was that it would come while I was at school. I was sure the blood would leak through my pants for everyone to see, thereby making me an urban legend of my middle school—if not the entire state of Wisconsin. Horrible stories had circulated among my female friends of similar situations happening to fellow classmates. Whether they were true or idle gossip, no one knew for sure.

My period ended up coming on a weekend when I was fourteen, to my great relief. After flushing the evidence down the toilet (or so I thought), I slowly made my way downstairs to the kitchen, where I warily told my mom what had happened. She was indeed excited, but thankfully did not overreact. That position, however, was readily employed by my brother.

“Ohmigod! There is *blood* in the toilet!” My whole family heard him yell from the top of the stairs. You’d think he’d discovered a dead body.

“*Gross!*” The shouting continued.

My mom looked at me with sympathetic eyes. “Enough, Matt!”

My insides coiled, but I maintained a silent reserve. I was too humiliated to defend myself. I waited for my brother to retreat to his room before withdrawing to my own room, defeated.

I dreaded the return of this monthly experiment with torture. That dread manifested into something very real: I did not get a single period for the next two years.

I was relieved to not have to deal with a monthly cycle and the accompanying reminder of my sexuality, but I knew it must mean something was wrong with me. Eventually my family doctor confirmed that assumption when I went in for my annual sports physical. The gymnastics season was about to start. I’d wanted so badly to be one of those strong, self-confident girls whose Olympic careers I’d followed with zeal since elementary school. My favorite event was the floor routine. I aspired to express my creativity, strength, and grace in response to music. I envisioned myself actually feeling pretty in the competition leotards; I thought their sparkle and shine might make up for the uncomfortable skin I wore underneath. As it turned out, I ended up dreading competitions; rather than feel pretty, I felt publicly displayed. I endured the discomfort for two full seasons, but not before getting through the physical exam.

“You’re menstruating regularly now, right?” the doctor asked as a matter of custom, with the tone that it was an unnecessary question to ask someone at the ripe old age of sixteen.

I felt my face flush as I admitted, “Well...no.” I told her I had gotten my period only once, two years before.

“What?” she exclaimed, dropping her pen. “We have to get you on birth control right away! You could get osteoporosis!”

Osteo-what?! Whatever that was, it sounded bad. I marveled at the realization that to have a regular period meant risking getting pregnant, and to not have a regular period meant risking some horrible disease. Everything related to sexuality was dangerous.

She continued to tell me that if I ever wanted to have kids, it might be difficult for me to get pregnant, but technology was evolving, and there might be help for my “condition,” never really explaining what that condition was. My mind interpreted her words as reinforcement that there was something inherently wrong with me, with my femininity and my sexuality.

I was put on birth control and would remain on it for ten years. Sleepovers with friends or overnight gymnastics meets now required strategic planning. I would sneak into the bathroom with my pill pack to take the prescribed daily dose. I couldn’t let anyone know I was on birth control. Not only might they know there was something wrong with my body, but they might also think I was sexually active, and *that* would mean I was definitely going to hell.

In the end, my secrets were uncovered. Teenage girls should be international spies. Before bed during one sleepover, I didn’t try to hide the location of my journal. I trusted the one other person there, one of my closest friends. I pulled it out from between my mattress and box spring and wrote a few reflections before placing it back in position and going to sleep. The following morning, the lock that had recently been installed on my bedroom door to keep my brother out was used against me. I stepped out to go to the bathroom, and when I returned, I found that my friend had locked herself inside my room. At first I thought she was simply being playful. My initial laughter gave way to nervous anxiety, followed by panic when I heard the sound of pages turning. She’d retrieved my journal and was leisurely settling in for a good read.

“Sara, let me in.” I pounded on the door. “This isn’t funny!”

I could hear her snickering. Tears laced my eyes. I knew I’d never forget that moment. I feared that my faith in friendship would be forever tainted by this one broken bond.

When she finally opened the door with a smile on her face, as if nothing had happened, I understood the following days at school would be hell. She told all the girls in my circle of friends everything: my current crush, the shame I felt about my skin, my being on birth control, and my fear of never being loved. She’d told me some of her secrets, but I kept myself from retaliating with them. I instead just stopped hanging out

with her—and several of the other friends in the group. I began to turn from investing in social relationships to cultivating a deeper relationship with myself.

I escaped inside my own private world by listening to music, writing, and talking to God. I favored gospel music at the time—namely early albums by Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston. I harbored a secret fantasy to be a Southern black woman. Not only did I revel in the vocal expression of their souls that seemed intrinsically unique to their culture, but I felt being a black person would offer me a socially accepted opportunity to fight against oppression. I wanted a justifiable reason to be seen as a victim. I felt oppressed in my own little, middle-class, white-girl world, but I did not feel worthy of compassion and consolation from others; I hadn't suffered enough.

If I could not be black, I at least wanted to be Jewish. My writing at the time consisted predominantly of short stories told by young Jewish girls escaping Nazi persecution. I was obsessed with this era in history—the epitome of worthy victimhood. I felt such profound compassion for what Holocaust victims had gone through that part of me yearned to be one of them myself. While other girls my age were dreaming of vacations in Florida or California, my prevailing travel aspiration was to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. I wanted to see the artifacts with my own eyes, to sink into their owners' stories and their suffering and feel *one* with them. Reliving their pain would make me feel alive.

I composed various journal entries to God. Mostly I asked questions regarding entry into heaven or hell. I came up with imaginative scenarios where acts that were labeled a sin in the Bible might be dually considered circumstances of defense and innocence. What of the parent who murdered someone who was about to attack her child? And what about the child who hadn't yet learned what was "right" and "wrong" when he died? I just couldn't grasp how eternal happiness or suffering after death could be determined by absolute standards. Nonetheless, I didn't want to take any chances by violating rules myself, especially the ones such as sex before marriage for which I could not think of good exceptions.

The rules I applied to myself, I didn't think necessarily applied to others. My brother, for example, was allowed to date and be alone with his girlfriend in his bedroom. I had once even uncovered a duffel bag of porn magazines in his closet, to which my mom simply said, "I'll let your father decide how he wants to handle that." Dad discreetly shrugged it off with the reply, "Boys will be boys." Several of my friends had been in committed relationships throughout high school and college, were sexually active, and had established sex-positive attitudes.

I, on the other hand, felt like an outcast in the realm of sex and relationships. Sex intimidated me. All of the messages I'd received in school—the threat of STDs, teenage pregnancy and, worst of all, the shame of having premarital sex—was enough to make me want to lock myself in a cave where no one could ever penetrate me, screaming like Eliza Doolittle, "I'm a good girl, I am!"

During the spring before my final semester of college, one of my sex-positive friends introduced me to the idea of using sex toys. We had been sitting at a quiet café in downtown La Crosse when I whispered I had never used a sexual aid.

“*What?* You’ve never used a dildo...or a vibrator...or *anything?*” she exclaimed.

I sank into our booth, shielding my face with my hands.

My friend took no note of my discomfort, however, and generously offered, “That’s it! I am going shopping for you!” I was about to leave for a summer job in Colorado, and she insisted she was going to mail a box full of “goodies” to my place of employment. I begged her to have mercy and not follow through with that idea. The staff accommodations would consist of one large room with twenty bunk beds—I could predict my future should such a package arrive, and it involved an exorbitant amount of teasing and the end of my blissful summer job. She finally agreed not to send the package.

I was ashamed to have sex yet ashamed not to. I thought I was the only twenty-two-year-old virgin in my town—and perhaps the world. I hadn’t even been in a relationship. Sure, I’d been kissed a few times, but that was it. I tried to comfort myself with the words of some of the men I’d been interested in: “You’re the kind of girl a man marries, not one that he just dates.” I figured I was supposed to be flattered—and part of me was. In private, however, I entertained a truly dark desire: to be taken advantage of. No, *really* taken advantage of. I wanted to be raped. I could finally lose my shameful virginity, yet still go to heaven because *I* had done nothing wrong. The scenario would serve another purpose—it would also make me a victim. I’d finally be worthy of comfort, of love.

Almost immediately after college graduation, I departed for Nashville, Tennessee, where I hoped to fuel my passion for live music. Though I’d excelled in my coursework, I considered my real college education to have come from my leadership role in bringing live music to campus. I took great pride in bringing an event from concept to fruition, making connections with booking agents, tour managers, and musical artists themselves in the process. Standing in the back of a venue on event night was magical. I could feel the excitement and energy circulating among the audience in anticipation of the band’s arrival while I reflected on the activity board’s hard work. *We did this. We brought joy to these people’s lives tonight.* I felt such a rush from providing opportunities for others to experience the deep gratification that music brought to my own soul. I experienced concerts as a reprieve from the monotony and occasional pain of everyday life.

I used the connections I established in college to obtain employment with a booking agency shortly after my arrival in Music City USA. I supplemented my income with a part-time position at the Ryman Auditorium—an internationally renowned music venue that was once the home of the Grand Ole Opry. However, after one year working in the music business, I became disheartened by the bureaucracy. My soul sought

deeper fulfillment. I maintained my evening position at the Ryman Auditorium while I spent the next two years working full-time for Big Brothers Big Sisters. Though I loved the service the organization provided for at-risk youth, I still felt empty. Work of any kind was not my answer. I wanted a partner in life. I wanted to feel loved.

I had the first relationship of my life early in my first year in Nashville. It only lasted six months, but his overpowering energy attached itself to me for years. At first I basked in the glow of being pursued by a man. He hunted me with remarkable persistence. He called me repeatedly throughout each day; it took great effort on my part to carry through with a farewell. Though I recognized that the frequency and duration of his phone calls could have been seen as red flags, I was flattered that someone felt compelled to show me that level of devotion.

When Ryan and I established ourselves as a couple, I felt such relief that I was finally someone's girlfriend. But I realized that label came with expectations. Initially, he appeared very patient and respectful of my sexual inhibitions and told me he was in no rush. I felt so blessed to have found someone so willing to wait until I was ready. But his early veneration gave way to contempt before long.

"I always end up with virgins." He smirked. "I'm so tired of this."

I surrendered to his physical advances a month into our relationship. I was twenty-four years old and I figured that even God would approve at this point. People had babies at age twenty-four. I wasn't looking to get pregnant, but maybe just being at procreation age was enough to render the act acceptable in God's eyes, or so I tried to convince myself.

Ryan and I had been sitting on the living room couch, paging through an atlas of photos taken of the earth from space and cities taken from airplanes high above. We both loved geography; we wanted to understand our own place in this giant universe and perhaps make sense of the purpose of it all. When we finished going through the book and the animated air in the room gave way to silence, he gazed intensely into my eyes, picked me up, and brought me to the bedroom. I knew this was it. I clung to the fact that I had felt connected to him while leafing through the picture book, sharing our dreams of world travel. I prayed that connection would transfer to the physical realm, so that my body might intuitively know how to respond to his.

He gently stroked my body, my inner thighs, my stomach, and subsequently reached down to the folds and crevices between my legs. He moistened and massaged my clitoris. *I am actually turned on*, I thought with surprise. I was amazed he knew exactly where to go—for I had hardly known myself. But then he removed his own pants and attempted to penetrate me.

"Oww!" I quietly exclaimed. I had expected it to hurt, so I was exceedingly sensitive to the stretch of my vaginal muscles. He pulled back to attempt to reenter more slowly.

"Ahhh, that hurts!" I repeated.

He sighed in exasperation. “Rebecca, it has to go in sometime. It won’t hurt once I get past your hymen. You’ve got to let me just break through it.”

We were too far along now, I agreed. I let him infiltrate me as I softly cried. It wasn’t long before he came. We cleaned up his semen and my blood and that was it. Where was the pleasure? He promised it would come after the first time. He went right to sleep, but I lay awake for quite some time. All those years of anticipation and lecture on the sacredness of this first time. It didn’t feel so sacred. I had sex so that I would finally feel like the woman I believed my age signified. But I still didn’t feel like a woman. I didn’t enjoy it, so instead I felt damaged. *Did I make a mistake?* I thought. But maybe he was right; the next time would be better.

It never got better. I dreaded each sexual encounter with the anxiety I had experienced before an important exam. I did feel I was being tested. My sexuality was put on trial. If I didn’t enjoy his advances, or pretend like I had, I was met with his scorn. He looked at me like...there was something wrong with me. I’d been discovered. My doctor’s reaction from years before was reaffirmed.

Beyond that, our relationship tested my individuality. Ryan wanted to see me every night after work, even when I was exhausted or had other interests I ached to pursue. His demands chipped away at my identity, and I left pieces of me in his musky old apartment each time I guiltily consented to his phone call demanding I come over. I would have preferred to go out dancing. My high school gymnastics classes had given me rhythm, and in a brave moment in college, I signed up for a swing and social dance class. I soon realized dancing was an opportunity to experience intimacy without sex. I could remain fully clothed, in public, and I could be touched without immediately recoiling, as I’d become accustomed to doing while wearing my protective “no sex here” shield. In Nashville, the abundance of opportunities to dance inspired me to dance more. I began attending lindy exchanges, rather like a dance conference, where dancers from all over the region—and sometimes the world—took lindy hop classes and participated in evening dances that often extended until sunrise. I had less and less time for dancing because of Ryan’s demands on my time.

I felt good after sex with Ryan only once, and it was with a perverse pleasure that had nothing to do with a boyfriend or love or, certainly, my own self-worth. I was still on the birth control pill to regulate my cycle, so Ryan felt it wasn’t necessary to use condoms. Then one morning I realized with panic that I’d forgotten to take the pill the night before. When I told him, he paced across his apartment in a fit of rage.

“What? You forgot to take your pill? I can’t believe you forgot! Ohmigod, Rebecca...”

“Wait, you’re the one that never wants to use a condom! Why is protection solely *my* responsibility?”

He stopped yelling. He knew I was right. I was angry with him and scared about our mistake, but part of me felt like a character in a soap opera, which actually made me

feel somewhat proud. I was arguing about sex. I was *having* sex. Finally. At least I could now fit in with my peers.

I knew it was an unhealthy relationship. I tried to end it several times over the course of our six months together, but every time I would start to state my decision, he would interject:

“You’re not breaking up with me, are you? You can’t do that. I love you.”

“Why do you love me, Ryan?” I’d ask. I didn’t feel loved.

“Because you’re beautiful. And you’re nice to me.”

That’s it? That’s what love is?

Maybe I had it wrong. Maybe I just didn’t know how simple love really was. It did hurt me to see him cry, after all. I thought I needed to demonstrate love to another in order to be lovable to myself. I didn’t know any better. I was well educated in the realm of books and standardized tests, but I knew nothing about love and the value of self.

“I love you too,” I’d reply. I wanted to try the words on. Perhaps if I spoke them out loud, I’d know if they rang true for me or not. I still wasn’t sure.

“Thank you.” He held me tightly in desperation. We were still a couple.

After a visit home to Wisconsin, however, away from his overwhelming energy, I realized how relieved I felt to be away from him. I agreed to meet him during my lunch hour on my first day back in Nashville. He approached me in the parking lot outside the café and embraced me. I let him hold me as I stared off into the distance with empty eyes.

“I missed you.” He sighed with deep emotion. I said nothing.

We entered the café, and as we stood in line for a seat, he stood back and lifted my face. “You didn’t say that you missed me.”

Here was my moment. I looked him in the eye and replied, “No, I didn’t.”

He began to cry. I held my ground. We didn’t make it to a table to have lunch. He drove home. But he called me later that night, crying and begging that I still remain his friend.

“I need you, Rebecca. You’re my only friend. What will I do without you?”

What kind of person can I be if I deny him even a friendship? I thought. And so our relationship went on. We weren’t a couple, but everyone thought that we were. I owed him nothing, but he thought I owed him my most intrinsic gift. I continued to allow myself to be subject to his needs and responsible for his happiness. His taunts continued and progressed.

“What kind of a friend are you, if you see me suffering from not having my sexual needs met and don’t do anything about it?” His words were like daggers to both my heart and my self-esteem. I knew in my head they were twisted and sick, but I lacked the courage to walk away. I didn’t want to hurt him, so I instead hurt myself. I thought that by saying no to sex I must not be an adult, a woman. All adults wanted sex, right? And I wanted so desperately to be a woman.

I cringed every time he approached me, desire burning in his eyes, extending his hand for me to take so he could lead me to the bedroom. I came to loathe that room—the blankets, the mismatched sheets, the smell of his sex. I lay there, going through the motions. I allowed my mouth to be forced open by his penis. I had no voice.

I had to escape. Not just emotionally—that wasn't enough—but physically, geographically too. All my life I'd dreamed of faraway places, places in which I thought I could avoid my anxiety around boys, reinvent myself. Those fantasies had encouraged me to study abroad during college, so I knew what good travel could do. They'd even gotten me out of La Crosse, finally—even temporarily. But I credit my background in dancing with what little courage and self-confidence I finally mustered now, to get me out of Nashville. I knew I had grace. I had once kept my own schedule, untied to another's demands.

I picked Argentina—the farthest inhabited country south—as my country of escape, and plotted my departure for six months later. But even before departing on my international adventure, my world began to change when I moved out of an apartment I'd shared with two women, and into a house with three male lindy hop dancers—one of whom was my dance teacher, Micah.

Micah and I developed an intimate rapport during my final six months in Nashville. We even took a road trip to New Orleans, staying with a friend of his, during which we crossed the line away from just friends while indulging in hurricane drinks on Bourbon Street. Dancing on the bar's balcony, we broke the “touch barrier.” When I leaned in for a hug, we progressed to a full-on make-out session well beyond any duration I had ever experienced. It likely would have continued even longer, had we not been interrupted by an admiring man at the other end of the bar.

“Excuse me, but I've been watching you two make out for the last, oh”—he glanced at his watch—“hour and fifteen minutes, and I've just got to say *wow!* Way to go!”

I was impressed, too. Not just at our commitment to the cause at hand, but at the fact that Micah had wanted to kiss me. He was highly sought after in the dance scene. I'd never felt pretty enough for him. The shift in our dynamic did not cause us to consider developing a committed relationship—I knew I would not be returning to Nashville after my travel adventure. But we allowed our new physical connection to extend throughout the New Orleans trip. The second twin bed in his friend's spare bedroom experienced no use after the first night—but we did not have sex.

At the time he too was God-fearing, and though Micah's lifestyle blurred the biblical lines more than mine did, he did not want to “damage” me any further than our encounters already had. I was not seeking sex, anyway. I was craving the feeling of being worthy of being someone's sexual partner. If we articulated it wasn't anything about me, that it was God who kept us from having sex, I could relax into the beauty of simply feeling desired.

I reveled in what we shared. I would lie with him and ponder with gratitude, *I get to be his girl for tonight*. I knew it wouldn't be likely to have him alone like this once we returned to Nashville. Our house was a landing post for not only the four of us roommates but a plethora of local and out-of-town dancers on any given night. We did try, however. He would discreetly sneak up to my second-floor bedroom or I down to his basement unit. We wanted to keep our nighttime sessions private. We both felt guilty about the nature of our relationship. My departure from Nashville was an awkward one, in that regard—things felt messy and unresolved. He feared he was corrupting my purity—leading me down the path of casual foreplay he was trying to no longer choose for himself. I sensed that he also was afraid I would become attached to something he wasn't capable of giving me—a sense of belonging.

I, on the other hand, felt I was selfishly tempting him away from his preferred state of being. But the relationship did offer me something very important—a lesson in self-worth. Many a night, Micah would hold me and repeatedly assure me that I deserved better than what Ryan had offered me. Not only did I gain a new level of comfort with simply being held, but I began to believe in my own value as an individual.

I took that message with me as I left for Argentina—where the first day of my transformative journey began.

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