

The Beginning

Margo meets Ellis when she is 19. They are both at a house party thrown by a mutual friend with whom Margo is staying with temporarily. She immediately notices a man leaning against the wall by the sliding glass doors. His leaning looks attractive somehow. Maybe it is the way his defined shoulders hunch casually; maybe it is his long hair partly obscuring his face that exudes a mysterious aura. Or, perhaps, it is the way he is looking outside in what Margo imagines is a pensive and philosophical session of pondering. He looks important. Unavailable even. Margo is particularly attracted to important and unavailable young men.

“Who is he?” she asks her friend Linda. This is her house. Linda tells her his name is Ellis, and he graduated college last year. He is an intern at a property law firm. Margo wonders how he can keep his long hair in a professional setting. This makes him even more attractive to her. She imagines him in a suit and tie, hair pulled into a low ponytail, bent over a case file at a desk. The desk is probably mahogany.

She abruptly sees Linda’s fingers snapping in front of her face.

“Get those stars out of your eyes.” Linda says.

Margo is often told she is a romantic. She is a dreamer, head-in-the-clouds type of girl. Well, those are some of the phrases friends have applied to her. Of the less savory words her friends have applied to her, Margo dislikes the word *unrealistic*. What is unrealistic about knowing what you like and what you want out of life? What is unrealistic about knowing what sort of people you want to be around? She looks at Ellis again and decides she likes him and wants to be around him.

When Margo moves to talk to him, Linda catches her arm.

“Don’t even,” Linda says.

Offended, Margo questions why she should not talk to this Ellis. And Linda says (in an annoyingly *reasonable* tone) that Margo just got out of a relationship with Bill. Ha, she thinks harshly. Bill is hardly a reason to stop her. Bill, like Linda, is unceasingly reasonable.

Shouldn’t you go to college? Bill asked.

Shouldn’t you call your mother? Bill asked.

Are you going to wear *that*? Bill asked.

“Bill who?” she asks Linda, jerks her arm out from her grip, and walks toward Ellis. She says hello, to which he nods her way, as if she is just passing by. But she does not walk away, or shy away. His glance finally substantiates, and he turns towards her. Margo imagines he is now noticing her green eyes, her form-fitting halter-top, or her smile (people have told her she has a great smile). She is not worried that she will not catch his attention. He does not smile back and Margo wonders why this makes him even more appealing. But he does say hello, which she appreciates because rudeness is not desired, either.

“How do you know Linda?” she asks, glancing downward, towards her toes. Earlier she painted them turquoise, with little cherry blossoms, and the tips of the petals peek out from her

open-toed pumps. He says he met her at Tulsa University in his senior year. He then asks Margo what her major is.

“Oh, I’m not in college.” She tries to make up for this information by inserting a subtle depth to her voice, almost like a low purr. Nothing overt or tacky, like she sees some girls do. Guys catch onto that sort of thing right away and they do not like noticeable disingenuousness. Margo has learned that men like to be flirted with, but under the illusion that women are acting naturally. When Ellis finally gives her a little smile, she knows the theory has won out again.

“I’m Margo.”

He takes her hand, his thumb brushing over her knuckles carefully.

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The next morning she awakes in Linda’s room. Only after the usual stretching and yawning does she notice Linda sitting in the desk chair across the room, already dressed for the day, and staring at her.

“You scared me,” Margo says, sitting up. Linda’s expression is already exasperated. She does not think this is a good sign so early in the day.

“What are you doing?” Linda asks.

“I just woke up.”

“No. What are you doing?” The repeated phrase is punctuated in a way that makes Margo wants to sigh. She considers Linda her best friend, but feeling a lecture coming on, she now just wants to throw a pillow at her and go back to sleep. Or call Ellis. Oh, Ellis.

“Ellis,” Linda says suddenly, as if reading her mind, and Margo shrinks back.

“What about him?”

“You! You just broke Bill’s heart earlier this week. And you were all over Ellis last night.”

Margo thinks it is important to point out that she was not all over him last night, and says so, because remaining initially cool is an important rule of hers. Guys do not like clingy girls, not until they have become more dependent. Then, Margo knows, men are more likely to become the clingy ones.

“Spare me your stupid rules,” Linda replies. “Just keep it in your pants.”

She does not know why she should keep anything in her pants. Linda thinks ended relationships should have a mourning period, but in Margo’s opinion, if you ended things then your relationship was the mourning period.

Then, as if perhaps she senses she was unkind, Linda laughs a little

“I’ll be in the library all day. Make yourself at home,” she teases. The joke is that Margo is, in fact, making herself at home. After breaking up with Bill, she could not stand the thought of moving back in with her mother. Linda rents out a small, one bedroom house near campus and so far has not mentioned when Margo has to leave. So she does not argue about Ellis. Margo is not argumentative, really. As long as she can do what she wants, why bicker?

After showering and eating, she accepts that she must go to Bill’s. She is wearing her last clean pair of underwear and misses her belongings, which she told him she would pick up by the end of the week. She pulls out her phone, ready to call him, when she notices the text.

What are you doing? – Ellis

Immediately she is overwhelmed with that exquisite feeling; that unique flood of adrenaline and pleasure which only comes at the beginning, before you really get to know each other. Before you disappoint each other. She wishes this feeling could last forever.

Nothing. You? – Margo

Can I come pick you up? – Ellis

Well, that was quick. He really seems like the kind of guy that would play it cool, *too* cool (like he was last night), but now thinking of it, this sudden move makes sense. She bets Ellis is just the kind of guy that would say or do something just to offset you, surprise you. She says yes and puts off Bill for another day.

Ellis takes Margo to the Philbrook Museum of Art for their first date. Despite growing up in Tulsa, she has never been. The museum is housed in a large villa that used to belong to some rich family. She does not really know. Margo scans the blurb in a brochure, but she does not care about all that. She does not really like museums, honestly, but as they enter into the first exhibit, just standing next to Ellis thrills her enough to feign interest impressively.

“Isn’t that just fantastic?” he says, making a large sweeping motion with his hand in front of an oil painting. She looks at it for a long moment, purposefully squinting her eyes as if in deep thought. *La Morte de Caton* (the Death of Cato) a small plaque reads to the side. By Matthieu-Ignace Van Bree. A nearly naked bearded man lay on the ground, stabbed and bleeding, his hand against his forehead dramatically. An array of other men surrounds him, looking shocked or upset.

Margo fails to see how it is fantastic.

Ellis says something about shadow and juxtaposition, but she just takes his hand on impulse. He does not falter for a second, but grips her hand back, his voice slightly softer.

“He was a Stoic,” he continues. She murmurs *hmms* and *I sees* in response, noticing an edge of a tattoo peeking out from the sleeve on his bicep. Somewhere around “non-dualistic physics” and “classical pantheism”, she stops listening, tracing the sleeve, hoping she sees the tattoo soon.

After the museum, he takes her to a restaurant in the Tulsa Arts District downtown. The restaurant is trendy for its vegan and vegetarian options, which Ellis seems excited about. Finding out he is a vegan almost ruins the beautiful beginning Margo loves so much. She is not sure what she is supposed to do with someone who eats meat substitute. Or talks about the different types of meat substitute and which textured protein and congealed wheat is his favorite.

“I’m studying for the LSAT, you know,” Ellis says once he has ordered his fake chicken. She can tell he wants her to be impressed, so she says *wow* emphatically. Linda also wants to be a lawyer. It then occurs to Margo that maybe Ellis and Linda would make a good couple.

No, too boring, she thinks.

“So what do you do?” he asks. It just occurs to her that he does not know her job and has not really asked anything about her so far.

“I’m just in retail. I work at the Gap.” Margo makes light of what she does, hoping they will not talk about it much. They do not. Instead, he calls her beautiful. And really, at the end of the day, she could not imagine a more perfect first date.

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“He was incredible. So classy,” Margo gushes, falling on the bed, rolling around as Linda watches her.

“You went to a museum? You hate museums!”

Annoyed that her friend is taking a negative outlook, Margo sits up quickly, her high almost ruined.

“Maybe I do, but *he* is perfect.”

“No one is perfect.”

“Yes, but he is.”

Linda sighs and turns back to her textbook, apparently done with Margo’s gushing. Margo feels her face flushing with embarrassment. She hates when Linda does this, makes her feel silly, makes her feel like a child. It is hard enough dealing with such a smart best friend. In high school, as Margo struggled to raise her English grade in order to graduate, Linda scored a 31 on her ACT and got a full-ride scholarship to TU. Margo had been impressed and a little jealous, but otherwise unconcerned.

She never planned to go to college, not seriously, anyway. Her mom did not, and they always got by okay, even without her dad. And at the time, things were going really well with Terry, her high school sweetheart. Terry was going to be an engineer and engineers make pretty good money. Of course, not long after that she met Bill, and that was an altogether different and more mature relationship. She had no qualms about moving in with him after graduation because it was a sure sign she was growing up. It was different than Linda’s sort of growing up, but still valid.

“Maybe he’s not perfect. But he could be perfect for me.”

Linda looks back up, staring at Margo carefully. She opens her mouth, closes it, and then sighs a little.

“I’m happy for you.”

* * *

Over the next few weeks Margo and Ellis go on many dates. He takes her to nice restaurants, local concerts, and only one more museum. She imagines he must have family money, as his internship does not appear to be very glamorous or lucrative. The thought that he has an impressive inheritance excites her. She is so happy that when her mother calls and persuades her to visit by way of a skillful guilt trip, she almost looks forward to telling her about Ellis.

“I haven’t heard from you in awhile,” her mom says as she pours iced tea into two glasses. They are sitting in the kitchen nook of the miniscule house Margo grew up in. She watches ice cubes and slices of lemon float to the top as the liquid rises. Focusing on these details carefully, choosing her words carefully, she replies that she has been caught up in things and that she is (though truthfully not very) sorry.

“You could at least call every now and again.”

No, I can’t call, Margo thinks. I can’t call. I can’t talk to you.

“How is Bill?” her mom continues on, emptying a packet of Splenda into her tea and stirring, the *clink clink* of the spoon hitting the glass upon every rotation and taking Margo back into her childhood. But she is not a willing victim of nostalgia. She rarely indulges in melancholic memory.

“We’re not seeing each other anymore. Actually, I-”

“What? But you love Bill.”

“I broke it off, so I doubt that.”

Her mother is silent for a little while. She stares outside, fingers tapping against the sweating glass. Margo watches this movement, looks at her mother's expression, and an old fear, deeply rooted, begins to resurface. She feels as if she is caving inwards, inverting her skin, exposing her insecurities in a vain attempt to hide them.

"Bill brought out a better side to you. He wanted you to fulfill your potential," her mother says.

There it is. The illusive potential that has always evaded her. What is potential, anyway? Are you not who you are, from the day you are born until the day you die? Why must she always be running after Potential?

"He was supposed to love *me*, not someone I could be," Margo says.

"Don't be stupid."

Then: a deep, frightening, bitter laugh erupts from her chest, clawing its way out, and filling the room.

"But I've been stupid my whole life, haven't I?"

Don't put that on me, her mother says. Don't blame me for things I never did, her mother says. Old, stale words that they were, Margo revels in them. If you have to say it is not your fault, then there is some guilt there, right?

Well, there should be. Margo's father called her stupid almost every damn day of her life before the bastard died of a heart attack when she was fourteen. Her mom watched on, listened on, and continued being a good wife.

"Please," her mom sighs. This is different. She reaches for Margo arm and rests her hand on it. Her fingers are cold and damp from the glass of tea now.

"I was eighteen when I met your father, you know. I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. It didn't matter to me, either. I just loved him. I always loved him. I still--"

Margo rests her hand on top of her mother's. She imagines how she must feel, alone in this house, and for a small moment, a torrent of shame and loneliness washes over her.

"I know, Mom. I know."

* * *

Lying in Ellis's bed that night, Margo fully traces the phoenix bird tattoo on his arm. He says he got it because it represents rising from the ashes. She thinks that even knowing shit about mythology that his comment sounds pretty clichéd.

"What ashes?" she jokes, poking fun at the fact that he already told her about his charmed and idyllic childhood growing up in a lakeside home with loving parents. People often tell Margo she has a great sense of humor. But, perhaps once you get to know her better, her humor turns a little sardonic, a little less charming. Ellis does not really respond, though, and simply kisses her temple. She wonders if he might be dumb. Then, she thinks perhaps the euphoric beginning of the relationship is over.

"Don't get mad," he says then, pulling back. "But I noticed you've been wearing a lot of the same clothes recently. Should I take you shopping?"

She groans, burying her face into his arm. Going to Bill's cannot be put off any longer.

When Margo arrives at Bill's apartment that night, his calm is so flaccid that she cannot help but see how contrived the situation is. He happens to be wearing her favorite shirt of his, a

navy blue button-down with burnt orange stripes. His blonde hair is perfectly messy. The living room is spotlessly clean, and his attitude is so blasé as to be utterly affected.

He says hello and immediately welcomes her to gather her clothes and other belongings. Of course this leads her into the bedroom that used to be theirs. She sees he has not switched out the bedding or area rug, which he always complained were too feminine. Pulling out draws and setting clothes into the boxes she brought, he asks if she needs help, to which she accepts. They are kneeling side by side at the dresser. Margo remembers going thrift shopping for this piece of furniture. It was the one item they had agreed on and was their first purchase together.

“I expected you sooner,” Bill says.

“Sorry, I was caught up in things.”

“You didn’t have to leave. You could have waited until you found your own place.”

She does not say anything.

“I thought we would talk again...about things,” he says very quietly. He has become her Bill, the one she knows.

“I think maybe you misunderstood some of the things I used to say,” he continues, no longer transferring stacks of her sweaters. Margo, instead, works quicker, not caring if the materials are wadded or stuffed in. She says she does not want to talk about it. He tries to brush it off then, like he did not want to talk about it, either. Eventually she has everything and he helps her load the boxes into her car.

Then, standing in the parking lot, Bill blurts out, “I don’t care. I don’t care that you work at the Gap. I don’t care that you don’t read and hate your mom and like to drink.”

She thinks, you do care, you just miss me. Margo considers how missing people can make you transform them into beings not at all like the people you came to resent. Missing

someone can also change you. You tell yourself that the situation is not as bad as you thought it was. Margo did this with her father, briefly, right after he died. For some time, she could almost believe that he was a good father, that he was just encouraging her to be better, like fathers tend to do.

"I just wanted you to be the best you can be," Bill says, and his words throw her painfully back into darkness and into this moment at the same time.

For the second time that day, she explodes.

"What does that even mean? I'm just me. That's who I am. I'm not anything more."

"You are more. You're so much more."

She starts to tell him about Ellis, to dig the knife in, but stops short. Because he is staring at her. His clear, blue-gray eyes dart across her face, as if looking for something. This expression is so familiar. He is trying to read her, trying to understand her. He always wanted to *get* her. But he cannot. Like she did with her mother earlier, she abruptly takes pity on him. She buries her anger and says goodbye.

When she gets back to Linda's, Margo feels like she has taken a beating. Her friend seems to notice and stops studying to sit with her on the bed. Linda asks if she is okay. She says she does not know, because that is the truth.

"Is it over with Ellis?" Linda asks.

"Why do you sound happy?"

"I'm not. I just don't think you two are suited for each other."

Margo is about to tell her she is mistaken, make her feel bad about the presumption, but she wants to know what Linda really thinks. Half the time your girlfriends will not be honest

about the men you are dating until you are not dating them anymore. She asks why they are not suited for each other.

“We’re not great friends, but I’ve known him a little while. He’s not a bad person. I think he just wants veneer, or plastic, you know? Someone to stroke his ego. I think you’d be selling yourself short, Margo. You’re really smart, and funny.”

Margo wonders if that is even true. She does not feel smart. And whenever she feels funny, she also feels bitter. And what Linda says about Ellis is true about all men. She has this theory.

Men only want one thing. And it is not sex, though sex is a part of it. They want you to make them feel necessary. Bill wants her to be different because he wants to know she changed because of *him*. He wants to mark her, brand her somehow. Her high school boyfriend, Terry, loved her because she made him feel masculine, like he could take care of her. She asked him to open the salsa jar, or change her flat tire. Her favors were crack to a nerdy kid like him. She made him feel important. The one flaw in her theory, the one she has been trying to work out for years, is her father. He did not want anything from her, not really. Making her feel like a piece of shit just seemed like fun to him.

Well, it is only a theory.

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Margo and Ellis are celebrating their one-month anniversary at the first restaurant they had a date. After careful deliberation, this time he orders the fake beef. She watches him closely, wondering if he is a mystery anymore, remembering the enigmatic aura that drew her to him at

the party. Come to think of it, mystery may not be the best reason to get to know someone. Are you not inherently trying to dismantle the reason you are attracted to that person?

“I have something I want to ask you,” Ellis says, looking down at her hand that is grasped in his. A lit candle sits between them, and it casts a faint glow onto his face. He is so handsome. She wonders how it is possible to feel horribly wrong and excited at the same time. To cover up the confusion, she smiles (people say she has a great smile). She asks him what the question is, using the tiny, subtle purr he loves. The one that caught his attention the night they met. He thinks it is unaffected, that the voice comes out when she is particularly attracted to him.

“Will you move in with me?” he asks. She is not so surprised. And truthfully, it works out perfectly. Things at the house have been awkward since Linda found out she lied about dating Ellis. Why shouldn't she say yes? Her friend may be cynical, but she always holds out for the best.

Margo is often told she is a romantic. She is called a dreamer. She does not see how that is unrealistic. What is unrealistic about knowing what you like and what you want out of life? What is unrealistic about knowing what sort of people you want to be around?