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CHANGE FOR A TEN

THIS NAME WAS JOHN. NOT ACTUALLY. BUT IN AN EFFORT TO protect the innocent—could be him, could be me—that’s what we’ll call him. So his name was John, and I met him when, let’s say, I was eighteen and he was nineteen. I was working at a record store that might have been in the San Fernando Valley. He worked at a vintage clothing store just down the block. We were young, and we met, and we fell for each other.

He was the most beautiful boy I’d ever dated. Beautiful boys weren’t necessarily my thing. I mostly went for rough ones. Ones I couldn’t quite get to. Who seemed like something was wrong and that if I did just the right thing maybe they’d become happy and could love me the way I yearned to be loved. Wholly. I found them beautiful in their own way. Sadness, theirs and mine, seemed like beauty to me then.

But John was different. He was actually physically beautiful. Reminiscent of Gael García Bernal. He was also sweet, thoughtful, and present. He paid attention. For some reason, he liked me.

I was reminiscent of myself, and maybe early Molly Ringwald. Some people surely thought I was pretty, or cute, but I didn't. I didn't feel very pretty on the outside or the inside. But I had recently found a place where I felt right. At the record store. School wasn't speaking to me and I thought I wanted to be out in the working world. After one year of junior college, I followed my love of music east on Ventura Boulevard and got to be surrounded by it.

I'll be honest: I don't remember our first encounter. I wasn't shot in the heart and birds didn't suddenly appear. It was probably something along the lines of my working an evening shift and needing change for the cash register. Maybe I went down the block to his place of work to see if they could spare a roll of quarters in exchange for a ten. Some of us at the record store knew some of the people that worked at the vintage store. We were of the same ilk: Uncomfortable misfits who liked music and dressing unconventionally. We were, at our core, "un."

John and I started dating. He probably came to the record store and asked me out. He wasn't one of those annoyingly vague sorts. He'd let you know he was interested, and sweetly took you in his hand and led you along with him. He was romantic and passionate and light. He could kiss. Not sloppily. Attentively. We kissed for long stretches of time. He looked unflinchingly into my eyes.

Soon after we started dating, I got sick. Some kind of head-cold sick. Runny nose, pinhole-size pupils cushioned by red baggy eyelids sick. Pretty.

I stayed home from work and holed up in my house. I still lived at home with my father and younger brother. My father was around-ish. Like me, he also worked, and since he was in between wives and not tied down to anyone, he had a social life. So I was left to my own devices, but I wasn't entirely alone.

Anyway, after a day or two of being sick and at home, a cold sore appeared on my lip. Violent and humongous, with topography very similar to that of the city of Los Angeles. If one looked closely enough, and I'll admit not many did, so I've no one to corroborate, I swear you could see palm trees and a trail of cars on what seemed to be the 405. The cold sore planted itself in the corner of my mouth, which, in the ensuing days, started to crack and bleed whenever I laughed or smiled or ate or breathed.

John and I spoke on the phone multiple times a day. He'd check in during his lunch break and when he got home at night. John had a different living situation than I. He lived with an older gay man we'll call Lewis. Lewis was probably in his early thirties, a clothing stylist, and it didn't take long for me to realize that Lewis wanted John. It didn't take me long because Lewis was blatant about it. He was somewhat hostile to me and stated openly to both John and me, together and on our own, that he thought he could turn him. John laughed it off. They met and became roommates when John got a job interning at the clothing company Lewis styled for. John grew up with a single mother and some sisters and making clothes was something he was evidently bred to do.

When it became clear that my virus wasn't going anywhere soon, John said he missed me and wanted to visit. I told him how awful I felt and how awful I looked. If I'm not mistaken my period

was also due. I was the whole package. He insisted none of it mattered and that he knew just the thing to get me feeling more optimistic. He inquired as to whether I'd ever seen the movie *Swing Time*. I had not. He said it was a film his family would watch over and over, a classic and a surefire mood elevator. *Mask* might have been more appropriate, given my current state, but with my body's defenses down I was no match for John's enthusiasm. I asked if he was sure he thought he could take it—my heinousness. He was sure. And so I relented.

He came over that night with the movie. When I opened the door he pulled me close, and I sank into his chest. When I looked up at him he said, "Your eyes look even bluer when you're sick." He sat next to me on the couch and I rested my head on his shoulder, partially watching Fred glide with Ginger across the dance floor, but mostly thinking about how lucky I was to have such a nice guy want to be with me. A guy who didn't flinch one iota when he saw me. Who emitted only joyfulness at being in my presence. Mr. Astaire jumped from a table to a chair, landed just out of reach from Ginger, then held his hand out for her to grab it. John mimicked the last part of the gesture from his sitting position and I reached out to hold on.

Eventually, I got better and my "Aqualung"-like state became a distant memory. A faint redness in the corner of my mouth persisted for a while but it wasn't anything some matte white powder and dark red lipstick, my look at the time, couldn't disguise. John and I were now a month or so into our relationship. Because of our living situations we didn't have a ton of privacy. Coupled with my weeklong sickness (plus healing time for the cold sore), and my not actually

stated but more kept in mind and sometimes up for discussion "wait three weeks" rule, we had yet to find the time or place to "do it." I'd stayed late at his apartment a time or two, but Lewis was there, lurking, possibly setting fire to a crude doll made from strands of my hair, and thus, circumstances were somewhat tricky to maneuver.

This one night, however, we knew Lewis was going to be out at some event for a while and that we would have some time to ourselves. We'd both worked until about nine o'clock and by the time we got to his apartment we were ready to be with each other, to push everything else that wasn't us out of the way and just be. I remember that John's room was dark, with the exception of the light coming in from outside. His apartment unit was on the ground floor so when we were lying down the street light hovered just above and next to us like a bedside lamp. He was so handsome. Under fluorescent or natural light, a pleasure to gaze at. As we held each other, becoming ready for our next step, John told me he had to tell me something. He seemed to be steeling himself while also becoming softer. He looked at me square in the eye and said, "I have a pretty small penis."

I thought for a moment before speaking. "Come on," I probably said. "Don't worry about that."

But he insisted.

You may be wondering at this point how I might not have had an inkling about this up until now. How we could kiss and spend late nights together but for me not to have known anything might have been ... out of sorts. As mentioned, I had that rule, so the first week or so I was probably trying not to tease him. Then I got sick and all cold sorey. And then we're back into the story. I may have

brushed my hand across the front of his pant leg a time or two but I probably thought I was feeling the zipper area. Or that he was favoring the other side that I wasn't pawing at. I was young. And perhaps blinded by his kindness and beauty.

So then I probably told him just to kiss me.

And we kissed and we touched and we eventually were undressed and then I touched it and then I saw it. It was small. It was the size of maybe a seven-year-old's penis. It was the size of a pig in a blanket. I felt bad for it. But more because it looked like it needed caring for, not because I was so experienced and thought I wanted or needed a big fat penis to be satisfied. I honestly hadn't dealt with that many penises up until that point, though the ones I did were lovely and nice. But I hadn't yet had the kind of sex that made me think, "Oh, that's why people do it." And I wouldn't with John, either.

We tried to have sex. Or rather, we did have sex, though I couldn't really feel anything. I felt his pelvic area against mine and I felt his lips on mine and his hands in my hair, but I didn't feel a penis inside of me. He asked how it was. I told him it was great, and we fell asleep there together with the street lamp shining its light of recognition upon us till dawn.

That morning when we got up and it was time for me to get home to shower and change before work, we crossed paths with Lewis in the kitchen. He was clearly bothered that I'd gotten to the finish line before he could, but he covered it with an overwrought account about the extraordinary night he had and how much John would have enjoyed it. It was probably a blessing. We didn't have to deal with our newest development. As I stood there awkwardly

sipping a cup of coffee and taking on a supporting role while this scene unfolded, I noticed that John looked more vulnerable. Like he was seeing everything through my eyes.

John and I lasted for a few more weeks after our night. We went out and had mindless fun. Saw bands and movies. We went through the motions of having sex a couple more times, but eventually the intensity of what we had dwindled. It wasn't because of any sort of conscious disappointment on my part, and it wasn't about the penis per se. It just felt like there wasn't anywhere else for us to go. Something was both missing and haunting us. What was promised now seemed to be a closed door.

I thought about John over the years for this reason or that—when I'd see a Gael García Bernal movie, for instance, or find myself at a kitschy party where mini hot dogs were served. I wondered if he ever found a way to make an intimate relationship work. I hoped that his situation wasn't a lifelong frustration. And that maybe there was such a thing as a mid-twenties puberty spurt.

Ultimately, it would seem we each possess our own version of a small penis. Our particular something that would make life easier if we could just overcome it. Fear, self-doubt, viral infections that blister... bad taste in music. All of us wandering about in this life together, trying to get by, hoping someone will see past what we know is less than ideal and be there to make us feel beautiful, make us feel fine, when we can't for ourselves.