

My Own Private Brexit

“These days you can get some pretty decent cheese in the States.” His serene London accent gave the sentence a pleasant crescendo.

“Yes,” I said. “But it always comes with a side of hubris.” I winked at my own competence as he belly laughed.

Hubris is the result of subdued arrogance upgraded to business class and given room to spread its legs. According to the Greeks it reveals a better-than-thou character flaw, the escapable agent of one’s downfall. Think of the United Kingdom’s delusional dreams of boundless growth as it set out to shake loose of the European Union.

The state of my own union: divorced for five years. Having grieved that sixteen-year relationship, and then luxuriated in the freedom that followed, I was ready to tackle commitment again, standing firmer on my own two gladiator sandals.

The Englishman and I had been sitting next to one another at my friend’s book release party when I struck up a conversation about Knausgaard’s ode to solipsism. That was me trying to adhere to the protocol of toney book launch parties. He invited me out for a drink; drinks became dinner. We picked from a single bowl of spicy shitaki mushrooms and pungent lemongrass pork, unhesitant, as if preparing each other’s microbiome for the kissing that was to come. His chestnut hair was due for a trim, yet it worked nicely with his coppery eyes. Like me, he no longer called his birthplace home, and that’s a biggie. Unlike me, he was based not too far out in New Jersey, and happened to be in Brooklyn cat-sitting for a friend. I was steadily rooted in my brownstone hipsetrhood.

I shared my thinking on Brazilians being recklessly easy-going, what it means to grow up Jewish in a mostly superstitious country, and how I felt about the pasteurization of Bossa Nova, the required soundtrack in pretentious restaurants. We got so lost in conversation that the waiter had to broom around our table to get us moving at closing time.

He walked me home, then asked for my number and expressed the desire to see me again, if I liked the idea. I liked it all right. He was older and it showed in how he put his cards on the table. No one in their early-forties does that these days, no matter the level of attraction. As if playing ones cards close to one's chest made one bullet-proof.

We texted throughout the week making fun of boutique Bourbon, Boris Johnson's flawed rhetoric, We-Want-Our-Country-Back English isolationism, in short, imposters. We made plans for the following weekend. I carried a jolt of possibility.

It was a blustery walk up Tenth Avenue to the Lebanese restaurant. I yanked the heavy velvet curtain open to find him already there, near the hearth, toasty. I tucked away my fuzzy hat. His eyes tracked the inviting drape of my dress.

"You look nice, thank you."

"Thank you?"

The limey unbuttoned his cardigan, I slid off gloves deflecting palpable tension, our hands and eye line found busywork.

"The sisters are doing it for themselves, Mister."

"I'm sorry, you're right, I just meant, it's nice to see when one cares enough—"

"Cares enough to what? To like what one sees in the mirror? These are post-colonial times, Limey."

He beat the waiter to pull my chair.

"Fair enough. Try the wine, it's marvelous."

He wanted to improve his game as much as I was prepared to defend mine. I tested his capacity to take on an assertive Latina even as I welcomed his seduction. I had to—there were reasons to be hesitant: he's fifteen years my senior, he's a scientist, I'm an artist, I'm Brazilian, he's English. I took his arm as we walked up to the movie theater, lobbing verbal softballs at each other, then withdrew a bit as I took notice of his droopy, older ears, and reached out again, snaking my hand down his arm to find his palm. The physical dialog evolved smoothly, we ended up by finding our lips joined.

There's a language to kissing. A couple might engage in languorous, alternating soliloquy or snappy repartee. His mouth spent a fair amount of time seeking the perfect

angle and settling for none, while at the same time his eager fingers were full of questions. There was the moment when he let my tongue roam like an uninvited guest at the Manor, neither effusively welcomed nor escorted out. The least original of men's sins followed. Repeatedly. We went at it deep and fast, and the carnal engagement thrived into sparkling intimacy.

He'd come in from New Jersey twice weekly, stay the night at my place, even though I had offered to travel over myself, and we'd take on the joys of pies from *Four and Twenty Blackbirds*, Flamenco at *Joe's Pub*, bike rides through the waterfront, we even went dancing when Prince died. I once stared at his toiletry bag on my bathroom counter and considered placing his toothbrush in my cup, to seal his presence in my life. Somehow, my hand never made the move.

I glided past his world, while he frequented mine.

Three months later, he left for England to visit his brother. I asked for pictures and I got them regularly: storefronts in Oxford, gardens in bloom, a selfie in formal attire at a family function. I wondered if there was anything to be read in his easy acquiescence—his eagerness to please me, but only if I asked it of him—but once again credited this to our generational gap. My requests were met with nary a squeak, but hey, they were easy, I wasn't asking him to wage a secession war or anything.

A week and a half into his trip, he mentioned he was stopping in Tel Aviv on his way back home. He had to take meetings on a research project, and doing it in early June would free him up for our own planned late July travel. A two-day digital silence followed—then on the third day, an urgent request for a Skype call.

Anticipating cold feet at best, a drunken one-night stand at worst, I sat on my good chair, cup of tea in hand. His confession seeped out of my speakerphone, causing the room to shut in on me: he was in Israel to do a face-to-face break up with a woman whom he had been in a long distance relationship with for a number of years. His voice crackled as if he were holding back tears while scrambling for words. The relationship had been going nowhere for a while, but when he announced he was leaving her, she threatened to sue him for abandonment.

“What abandonment? Are you married?”

“No, but we did cohabitate while I was here for a year on sabbatical, therefore, Israeli law....” His voice, carrying the conviction of day old-falafel, faded in my ear.

I had crash-landed into a triangle I wasn’t aware existed. My desired destination was happy coupledness with a mature, older man, who had actively pursued me. Breathing felt prickly and my mind spun.

He announced he was staying in Israel the rest of the summer so they could work this out in couples’ therapy.

“She refuses to be dumped,” he said.

“Why didn’t you *disclose* this relationship before?” I asked.

“I was afraid to lose you and I am ashamed of this relationship, because—”

I drowned out the particulars and then ordered him to hang up, unable to do so myself. The answer was clear I merely had to extricate myself from this bewildering situation.

Beck sings a good paradox: “Loose ends tying a noose in the back of my mind.”

Questions nagged at me. I found her threat of a lawsuit insubstantial. Rather than sit with this background noise in my head, I demanded a full story, complete in details. I needed to close the gestalt and archive the whole ordeal effectively. Silence followed. And yet, I persisted in my Elizabeth Warren moment, *avant la lettre*.

A few days later, the email answer came. It opened saying, “I think it is better that she explains the whole matter.” Just like that, a full-grown man handing the conversation to the Israeli woman, who, writing from his account, strong-arms the dialogue, his and mine, into a monologue, hers.

She had the second of two miscarriages in January. She affirms that I took for prey a man who was confused by the tribulations of IVF and lost his better judgment.

I figure he never told her that it was he who invited me to drinks, and asked for my number the night we met. She pictures me the embarrassing sex object that he did not know how to dispose of after the deed was done; I look at the thoughtful gifts he

brought me and explicit text-message declaring that he was thinking about me every twenty minutes. My dejection passes to resentment, then to male entitlement rage and finally into festering contempt.

January miscarriage with one woman. February pursuit of another. This was the quaint English biologist who refused to drink alcohol when I had to give my liver a break. Once, lying naked on the carpet of my bedroom floor, he stared right into my eyes to tell me that the last three years had been a dry spell for him. I remember, too, driving back from Storm King, saying that I found Hebrew to be a terribly harsh sounding language only to be met with silence, which at the time I credited to languid Sunday evening fatigue. Had I really missed so many prominent signs, or was he a particularly skilled hypocrite? All of the surface niceties were eclipsed now that I was able to cast light on the tributary lies and omissions that stemmed from their main deceit.

No matter, the milk was spilled and now here I was scalding with self-reproach. Up to this point, I had taken pride in my intelligence and trusted my capacity to steer out of imbroglia. My role as *collateral damage* just did not fit with my impeccable résumé—I had lived a previous life as a Fulbright fellow; I know how to tie the loose ends. Yet, I struggled to understand how a man with a PhD from Oxford had failed to connect his deceit with inevitable unveiling. Isn't the capacity to see the consequence of our actions confirmation of intellectual endowment? I was wrong: intellectual pedigree doesn't always walk hand in hand with moral rectitude.

I became aggressive and vulgar, distilling insults and aiming them at him. It seemed paramount to correct the distortion of facts. This woman ought to know whom she was trying to have a child with, and I was consumed with the need to be the one to set the record straight. I demanded her email address so I could reply to her directly and not have him intercept. I was ignored.

I sent her a neutral message via social media asking for her email address. Nothing. The situation played out much like a Western showdown, with one party gagged, one hiding inside an empty barrel, and the tyrannical Sheriff imposing herself

over an invisible constituency. I needed him to offer me the other cheek repeatedly until my slapping was spent, instead, I was left to shadowbox.

Adam Phillips, the English writer, asserts that all violence stems from experiencing exclusion. At that moment, all I could see was my exclusion from a forum I did not even care to integrate. My choices were to feel sorry for myself or make room for anger to express and exhaust itself. Something in me chose the latter. I let rage explode. I unleashed shrapnel, I threatened to publicly shame him for his wrongdoing and insulted him with a scornful ardor.

The second message from her, still from his email account, threatened to press charges for harassment. It made me wonder that should they have a tantruming kid one day, would she sue the poor toddler for parental mistreatment as well? Only someone who has never grappled with the expense and inefficiency of court proceedings goes around throwing legal threats like darts in a pub.

The upside of spewing my bile was that my supply started to taper out. A more level-headed version of me returned, and I saw I had no business trying for the last word with a woman I had never shared matcha custard pie with or shimmied around on the dance floor. Besides, I could only read despair in her dogged attempt to minimize his offense by pinning the illicit on me. I assumed the closing doors of her reproductive years fueled this despair, rather common in my generation. I understood her ticking clock, but why she treated this man as the last one on the planet is anybody's guess. I'd place my bets on his willingness to play doormat while under duress. If my fight was to recalibrate a balance of power in the conversation, hers was to hold up a spineless Britton, her last hope of childbearing.

I wrote him a final missive telling him not to contact me again, and letting her pursue in ignorance. A bit pathetic to tell an absent person to disappear, but whom was I kidding: this final letter was aimed at her. I gave myself closure and accepted that I would never come to understand the perverse gains of cowardice.

Iceland beat England on the Eurocup. Who's to say celestial justice doesn't speak to us in hushed tones?

I reminisce in an attempt to thin out the memories. I re-read texts from the early days. Seems so hard to be original in our purple sentiments, they do reduce us to a lower common denominator; we think we are inventing the wheel and that it belongs to us alone. I uproot the thriving flowers he bought for my yard and trash entire boxes of fragrant, clueless Earl Grey. I try to corrupt the memories by pointing unapologetically to the aging evidenced in his body, his toneless limbs, his grey hirsuteness. I fantasize about leaving him on the dance floor to favor a *with-it* dancer. I exhume his clichéd sense of humor. Listing is purging.

I look at my toothbrush cup and I am reminded of how prescience shows up in the most unlikely venues. I push the hubris around my plate and try to digest it, one bite at a time. It remains that unsolicited side dish most of us have to contend with at some point, because nothing makes us immune to the immense risk inherent in opening oneself to the unknown quantity that is the other. Yet, what choice is there? To me, the project of self-sufficiency always seemed to have the credibility of penis-enlargement ads.

This season taught me that none of us can vote out of feckless reality. In opting out, we avert imagined perils while foregoing mutual benefit. It might take me a while, but I hope to resume my trust in sentimental mercantilism, staying true to my Brazilians penchant for connection. The alternative is to live how poet George Szirtes captures the Brexit: *Smaller, meaner, frailer, poorer, but strutting about our own bunker.*