

THE FULL STORY

CHAPTER I

Before the Fall



CHAPTER ONE: BEFORE THE FALL

OCTOBER 2023–JANUARY 2024

This story does not begin with the moment someone hurt me. That would be wonderfully convenient: introduce the villain, establish the victim, and quietly declare the moral complexities resolved. Unfortunately, I am responsible for the first consequential choice in this history.

Before there were accusations, there was affection. Before the silence, there were conversations. Before the unanswered questions, there were moments when I believed I had found someone extraordinary. And before any of it, there was a decision. Mine. An uncomfortable admission, certainly, but one worth making before I begin examining anybody else's conduct.

This story began with an affair. I was in a committed relationship, and I knew the danger I was introducing into the life I had already built. Medical scares, difficult circumstances, and prolonged stress formed the context, but they did not excuse the choice. By October 24, 2023, after quietly browsing hookup applications for some time, I was preparing to act.

Browsing, mind you. Like some peculiar Victorian gentleman admiring forbidden merchandise through a shop window, fully aware that entering the establishment would create problems that could not be resolved with an apologetic letter and a firm handshake. I looked. I wondered. I occasionally entertained the possibilities. But I never followed through.

Until him. He had appeared before. There had been messages, photographs, invitations, and opportunities that I had declined. He was attractive. Quite extraordinarily so, at least to me. And something about him had lodged itself in my imagination. I couldn't have explained precisely what it was.

Attraction is an irritatingly irrational phenomenon. The human brain can perform extraordinary feats of reasoning and still surrender its dignity because somebody has a handsome face and an appealing smile. Mine was apparently no exception. I knew that I was concealing something important. My existing relationship wasn't disclosed on my profile, and the conversations took place within a context where secrecy had already become part of the arrangement. I won't pretend that I was unaware of what I was doing. I was.

Nor will I attempt to present the difficulties in my personal life as justification for the choice I eventually made. They provide context. They do not absolve me of responsibility. Nevertheless, after a particularly difficult stretch, something in me shifted. I began entertaining a proposition that was simultaneously simple and catastrophically foolish. *Just once*. Two words that have undoubtedly preceded an impressive percentage of humanity's regrettable decisions.

Just once, I told myself, and then I could return to the life I knew. Just once, and nobody would have to know. Just once, and perhaps whatever restless, frightened, curious part of me had been demanding attention would finally quiet down.

The trouble with that reasoning, of course, is that it presumes you can predict the consequences of an experience you've never had. I couldn't. But on October 24, I decided to proceed anyway. We began discussing logistics. Times. Availability. Where to meet. The mundane practicalities of arranging something that felt anything but mundane. There was excitement in the exchange, and I felt it too. Fear, certainly. Guilt, undoubtedly. But also anticipation. An unfamiliar sensation had begun to make itself known, something electric and almost adolescent in its

intensity. I wanted to meet him. Finally, after all the previous hesitation, I finally intended to do exactly that.

The following afternoon, October 25, I made my way downtown. At 3:53 p.m., I sent a message.

"Here." He was finishing a work meeting. "Wrapping my meeting." A few minutes later, another message arrived. "Coming in a sec. Michael here. What's your name?"

I answered. "Jared." Four ordinary letters. A name. The simplest introduction imaginable.

I sometimes return to that exchange and wonder what I would have thought if someone had told me what the next thirty-two months would contain. The affection. The laughter. The nights away. The gifts, the letters, the poems. The apologies. The departures. The returns. The extraordinary accumulation of moments that would eventually become an archive I never wanted to have to assemble.

Would I have walked away? I would like to think I could answer that question. But the truth is considerably more complicated. Because the person standing there that afternoon knew none of those things. He knew only that he was about to meet someone he found extraordinarily attractive, that he had made a choice he could not easily undo, and that his heart was behaving as though it had forgotten its most basic responsibilities.

We met. We entered the building and went upstairs. And for the next couple of hours, the world became something unfamiliar. When I finally left and made my way home, I remember the electricity. That almost unbearable sensation of having experienced something I wasn't entirely prepared to understand. I had crossed a boundary I could never pretend hadn't existed. But I also felt something I hadn't anticipated.

The beginning of an attachment. Not love. Not yet. I knew far too little about this man to make such a declaration. But there was something there that I wanted to experience again. And therein lies the first uncomfortable truth of this story.

I did not know what would follow. I did not know how important he would eventually become to me. I did not know that I would one day write poems inspired by our experiences, spend mornings together in a cabin in the mountains, or come to associate a stained-glass window with the memory of someone I once trusted. I certainly did not know that nearly three years later, I would be sitting alone attempting to reconstruct the entire history, wondering how the person who had once seemed so familiar could eventually become so difficult to recognize.

All I knew was that I had met Michael. And I wanted to see him again. That was how it began. Not with cruelty. Not with betrayal. Not with a prophecy of catastrophe. Just two people, a decision, and the dangerous assumption that whatever happened next would be something we could manage. We were, as it turns out, rather spectacularly mistaken.



The following morning began much as the previous evening had ended: with an increasingly explicit exchange of messages about everything we wanted to do to one another. I couldn't get him out of my mind. It was intoxicating, exhilarating, and perhaps most troublingly, something I had never genuinely imagined myself doing.

I had opened a door into one of the darker corners of my own desires, a place I had kept hidden away for years. And now, rather than simply entertaining the fantasy, I had stepped through it. There was, of course, one rather substantial problem. I was being unfaithful. To my partner of nearly six years. Did I feel abject regret? Shame? Disappointment in myself? Absolutely.

I was betraying someone who had stood beside me through some of the most difficult years of our lives. Someone who, at that very moment, was recovering from foot surgery. One operation among what had begun to feel like an endless procession of medical procedures, hospital visits, recoveries, and complications that seemed determined to arrive with the regularity of a particularly sadistic subscription service. And there I was, entertaining another man. Burn me at the cross, you heathens. I had certainly earned my place in the congregation of sinners.

We met again the following day, after I had made sure my partner was settled comfortably at home. That remains one of the more difficult details for me to revisit. It is one thing to acknowledge infidelity as an abstract moral failure. It is quite another to remember the actual circumstances surrounding it. There was someone at home recovering from surgery, someone who trusted me, and I was planning to see another man.

I knew what I was doing. I did it anyway. And somehow, despite that knowledge, the excitement continued to grow.

Our conversations became a steady exchange of flirtation, innuendo, and anticipation. There was something almost absurd about how profoundly a simple notification could affect me. His contact card contained only his first name. Michael. Five letters. That was all it took.

Whenever his name appeared on my phone, the surrounding world seemed to lose its urgency. Whatever I was doing could wait. Whatever occupied my thoughts a moment earlier would briefly disappear. It was as though someone had reached into the machinery of an otherwise ordinary day and interrupted its operation.

He frequently reached out at hours that were inconvenient for me. Our schedules were practically designed to avoid one another. I worked early mornings while his working hours extended well into the evening. Sometimes his messages arrived when I was already asleep. Sometimes I would wake to discover that he had been thinking about me while I was unconscious, blissfully unaware that my phone was holding another invitation to temptation.

October eventually surrendered to November, and our clandestine arrangement continued. Then, on November 12, something happened that briefly interrupted the usual nature of our conversations. He reached out to ask what I was doing. I told him I was having a few drinks before going to the hospital the following day. An innocuous statement, perhaps, though hospitals had become such a recurring feature of my life that I could practically have requested a loyalty card. This time, however, the appointment was for me.

I had been experiencing a mysterious physical ailment involving pain, tingling, and an increasingly uncomfortable sensation throughout my right arm. It had been worsening for some time, and I was beginning to worry about what might be happening.

Ultimately, the medical explanation seemed to point toward nerve irritation or damage associated with an old injury, compounded by muscular tension and my spectacularly inadequate posture. Apparently, spending one's life shaped like a question mark has consequences. But the physical discomfort was only one part of what had become an extraordinarily difficult period.

My best friend's husband had died by suicide shortly after their Halloween wedding. The shock of it was devastating. Here was a couple who had only just celebrated the beginning of their marriage, and scarcely ten days later, she was confronting a loss of almost unimaginable cruelty. I was grieving alongside her while attempting to navigate my own circumstances, which already felt as though they were collapsing under the weight of one crisis after another.

I was exhausted. I was depressed. And, if I am being entirely truthful, I had become somewhat disconnected from the world around me. So, when Michael asked what was happening, I told him.

I wasn't expecting anything particularly profound. We were still relatively new acquaintances whose interactions had largely revolved around physical attraction. Whatever emotional significance I had begun attaching to him was something I had scarcely acknowledged, even privately. But he listened.

He expressed concern for my health and sympathy for what had happened to my friend. He encouraged me to take care of myself and made it clear that I could reach out when I wanted or needed to. It was a small exchange, perhaps unremarkable to anyone reading it without context. To me, it meant something.

For a moment, I was not merely the man he wanted to meet behind closed doors. I was someone experiencing genuine distress, and he responded with kindness. There was no grand declaration. No extraordinary promise. Just compassion offered in a moment when I hadn't expected to receive it.

And naturally, being the emotionally well-adjusted creature that I was, I promptly redirected the conversation away from my suffering and toward the considerably less philosophical problem occurring inside my trousers. God forbid I allow a tender moment to exist without immediately setting it on fire. We met the following day.

The weeks continued slipping past, and on November 26, I awoke from a particularly vivid sexual dream involving him. Naturally, I felt compelled to share this information. Some people wake up and contemplate the meaning of their dreams. Others consult books on symbolism or ponder the mysteries of the unconscious. I apparently preferred direct correspondence with the subject of the dream. We began coordinating another rendezvous, and during those exchanges he asked whether I had any poppers. I didn't. But I could obtain some, and I offered to make a quick trip to do so. It was another small accommodation in what was becoming a growing series of arrangements around the time we could spend together.

A few days later, our conversations began turning toward the possibility of a longer encounter. Something less constrained by the narrow windows of availability that had defined our meetings. This was dangerous territory. Every additional hour required another explanation, another adjustment, another carefully arranged absence from the life I was still living at home. The logistics of adultery, I discovered, are astonishingly tedious for something advertised as spontaneous excitement.

There were also increasingly candid discussions about drugs and the role they sometimes played in sexual experiences. The subject had surfaced early in our correspondence, but as December approached, those conversations became more substantial. There was a vulnerability attached to that topic for me. I had previously experienced being drugged without my knowledge while out drinking, an incident that ended with me waking in a hospital with a head injury. It was a frightening experience, one that had left its mark on how I understood personal safety and trust.

When I explained this history to Michael during our discussions surrounding December 11, he was understanding. He did not insist that I participate in anything I was uncomfortable with. We agreed to hold off. Again, I remember his compassion. I remember it because it mattered. In a relationship that had begun almost entirely through physical desire, these moments of consideration were beginning to accumulate alongside the more explicit memories. And that accumulation was changing something in me.

Our December 11 encounter was one of the first extended periods we had managed to arrange together. Without the usual urgency of a brief meeting, there was more room for conversation, experimentation, and simply enjoying one another's company. The flirtation continued afterward, growing increasingly familiar. Then came another development. I learned about Andrew, his former partner.

There is considerably more to that history than I intend to recount here, because it is not my story to tell. I was beginning to learn that Michael had lived an entire life before our paths crossed, filled with relationships, memories, losses, and complications of his own.

I was curious about him. Not merely his body, though I certainly wasn't about to pretend that particular fascination had diminished. I wanted to understand the person. And on December 14, he expressed something that made the possibility of spending more time together feel suddenly tangible. In his own words:

"I reeeeeeally eventually want you alllll night."

Such an ordinary wish, dressed in the gloriously excessive spelling conventions of modern courtship. But I remember what it represented. Until then, so much of our time had been borrowed from the margins of our respective schedules. A little time before work. An afternoon between appointments. A brief window before I needed to return home. Now he was talking about an entire night.

I wanted that too. Desperately. But wanting something and arranging for it to happen were two different matters, especially when the relationship existed under circumstances that required secrecy.

We continued discussing the possibility, even as I acknowledged that I wasn't certain how I could make it work. Still, the suggestion remained. An entire night. The possibility of falling asleep beside him rather than watching the clock and preparing another departure. It was an idea I found increasingly difficult to dismiss.

We managed another meeting before the holidays, but travel and our respective obligations soon intervened. Michael had plans to leave town, and I was housesitting outside Seattle, making another visit impractical. December came to an end. The year turned. And on January 9, 2024, we finally saw one another again.

By then, I was beginning to recognize something about the time we spent together. I didn't particularly enjoy leaving. The anticipation before our meetings was wonderful, certainly. But the moments afterward had begun developing a peculiar melancholy. There was something about his physical presence that lingered long after we separated. His scent. The feeling of his body against mine. The warmth of being held. These were details that refused to remain confined to the encounters themselves.

On January 15, I sent him a message that, looking back, reveals considerably more than I understood at the time.

"I like that I can still taste you on my lips, and smell you on my hoodie. I want to bottle up your scent so bad."

It was an intensely physical observation, but there was something almost embarrassingly sentimental about it. I wanted to preserve him. Not in the grand, dramatic sense of everlasting devotion. At least, I wasn't prepared to admit anything resembling that. I wanted the smallest remnants of our time together to remain with me after I left. A scent trapped in the fabric of my clothes. The memory of a kiss. Something tangible enough to make the distance between visits feel less pronounced.

I had begun carrying pieces of him home without recognizing what I was doing. And perhaps that was the first indication that the arrangement was becoming something I could no longer neatly separate from the rest of my life. January 18 brought another small milestone.

He sent me a photograph of himself—a selfie. Ordinary as that gesture was, it felt different from everything we had already exchanged. I had offered him countless glimpses of myself while receiving comparatively little in return; now his face looked back at me from my phone, making the man who occupied my thoughts feel suddenly present. I remember how handsome I found him, how I smiled, and how astonishingly happy so small a gesture made me.

There is something almost painful about revisiting that period now, knowing what would eventually follow. But I refuse to pretend those moments were anything other than what they were to me. I was happy. I was infatuated. I was behaving selfishly, certainly, and the moral consequences of my choices had not magically disappeared simply because another person made my heart race. All of those things were true at once. And for a little while, I somehow managed to inhabit that contradiction without forcing myself to confront what it meant. But secrets have a particularly irritating habit of refusing to remain where we put them.

By January 19, the truth I had been keeping from Michael could no longer remain unspoken. And January 20 was when the spell finally began to break.

