

THE FULL STORY

CHAPTER III

In the Flesh



CHAPTER THREE: IN THE FLESH

CYCLE II | AUGUST–DECEMBER 2024

By August, I had spent three months teaching myself not to expect Michael's return. Hope survived anyway—not as confidence, but as the humiliating reflex of checking a silent telephone and imagining that one ordinary morning might undo the ending I had accepted. Not because hope is inherently foolish, although history provides an almost inexhaustible collection of evidence suggesting that we might benefit from exercising a little more restraint. No. The cruelty lies in how quickly it returns.

You can spend months attempting to make peace with a loss. You can convince yourself that the ending was reasonable, that the separation was necessary, and that the person you miss has continued living a life in which you no longer have a place. You can do everything expected of a mature, emotionally competent adult. And then, one ordinary morning, your telephone lights up. And all that carefully assembled composure goes straight to hell.

August 9, 2024. It was approximately 6:46 in the morning. I was preparing for another workday, moving through the familiar rituals of the morning while carrying the private grief that had followed me since May. Nothing about the routine suggested that the silence was about to end.

Three months had passed since Michael ended our involvement. He had remembered my birthday in June, an unexpected kindness that had meant considerably more to me than the five words themselves could reasonably explain. But afterward, silence returned. I had no reason to believe that would change.

Then a notification appeared on Sniffies. An anonymous profile. Nothing particularly extraordinary about that. The application was hardly renowned for its commitment to meaningful personal introductions or carefully considered emotional disclosures. But this particular stranger seemed to know something about my schedule. Something oddly specific. My morning commute.

I was confused. How did this anonymous person know when I would be heading to work? Then a photograph appeared. A familiar face. The beard. The eyes. The man I had spent the previous three months trying to stop thinking about. And beneath it, a message.

"How ya been? 🤔"

I stared at the screen. Surely not. Surely my brain had finally decided that ordinary waking consciousness was no longer sufficient and had begun manufacturing its own extraordinarily elaborate hallucinations. I responded, "Ummmmmm....Michael?"

And then came the answer.

"In the flesh!"

Jesus fucking Christ. There he was. The man who had said goodbye in May, whose departure I had accepted even while grieving it, had apparently decided to reintroduce himself with all the ceremony of someone returning from a particularly uneventful trip to the grocery store.

I couldn't process it. Not immediately. My body seemed to recognize the significance of the moment considerably faster than my mind. I had spent three months trying to accept that I might never see him again, and now he had appeared before seven in the morning, smiling at me through a photograph and behaving as though he'd simply been away for the weekend.

I told him exactly what was happening to me. "I'm so fucking confused now." And then, "And my heart is racing. This must be a fevered dream."

His response was almost disarmingly casual. "That makes two of us. Text me when you're able 🤔"

That makes two of us. Apparently, neither of us had anticipated this particular reunion, although one of us had possessed the considerable advantage of knowing he was about to initiate it.

I moved our conversation back to the familiar text thread. Seeing his name at the top of the screen was strange enough. Discovering that we could simply resume talking was stranger still. I asked what had happened. Why now? His explanation was brief.

"Fairly sure I'm single again."

There it was. The relationship he had chosen to pursue when we separated in May appeared to have ended. I expressed sympathy. Whatever complicated feelings I might have carried about losing him to someone else, I had never wished him unhappiness. And despite everything, I still cared about him.

He told me that I had been on his mind as well. I admitted that I had been reading one of his books during our separation and told him how much I admired his writing. It was a surprisingly ordinary conversation, considering the circumstances. Two people catching up. Discussing books. Exchanging little updates. Except one of those people was me, and I was having what appeared to be a small neurological event before completing my morning commute.

I asked whether this was genuinely happening. He assured me that it was. "Sure is hotstuff." I confessed that I had believed everything was finished. That I had even wondered whether he had blocked me. And then, finally, I told him what I wanted. I would love to see him again.

He said he would love that too. Perhaps Monday would work. My response was not particularly dignified.

"PLEASE AND YES"

All capital letters. Apparently, the emotionally composed adult I had spent three months attempting to become had abandoned his post and been replaced by an overexcited golden retriever. Subtlety has never been my most reliable talent.

We exchanged a few more affectionate words before the morning's ordinary responsibilities finally demanded my attention. By 7:02, we had agreed to speak again. And just like that, the day continued. The buses still ran. People still went to work. Seattle continued its daily operations with a frankly offensive disregard for the extraordinary event that had just occurred in my personal life.

But something had changed. That morning had begun with me trying to make peace with the possibility that I would never see Michael again. Now I was wondering what I should wear when I did.

And for the moment, that distinction felt magnificent.



The first few days were not entirely smooth. We had discussed reconnecting, but the weekend passed without the follow-up I had been anticipating. And I reacted.

On August 11, I sent a message expressing my fear that perhaps nothing would come of our unexpected reunion. It was a premature conclusion. I can see that now. A few days of uncertainty did not justify assuming that I had been forgotten again. But at the time, I had only recently emerged from a separation that had hurt considerably more than I expected. I was afraid that the return might disappear as abruptly as it had arrived.

On August 12, Michael apologized for not following up. He explained that he had an opening in his schedule and suggested that we meet the following afternoon. I agreed. We originally planned to meet outside his apartment building. Then, on August 13, he asked whether I would mind coming to his office instead. The Fairmont. His office was located within the business center, and he provided instructions for navigating the building. Through the main entrance. Up the escalators. Find the elevators. Select the appropriate car. Proceed to the twelfth floor. A reasonably straightforward operation, one might imagine. Naturally, I managed to become temporarily confused about the elevators.

At 4:43, I informed him that I was on the mezzanine and couldn't find the correct car. Less than a minute later:

"Never mind found it"

A triumphant moment for contemporary navigation. I arrived. He asked me to wait a moment. And then, finally, we were together again.

There are memories that become important because of what happened during them. Others become important simply because they happened at all. That afternoon belongs to the latter category. I had imagined the possibility of seeing Michael again so many times that I was almost unprepared for the reality of his presence. There was no great public declaration. No extravagant reconciliation. No theatrical apology delivered beneath a stained-glass window while a choir burst into spontaneous song. We were simply two people who had known one another, separated, and found ourselves occupying the same room again. And for me, that was enough.

I remember that meeting as one of the purer moments of our friendship. It was not merely an encounter arranged around physical desire. It was an opportunity to reconnect, to talk, and to experience the company of someone I had genuinely missed. The distinction mattered. Because throughout the preceding months, one of the things I had grieved most was not the loss of physical intimacy. It was the loss of my friend. Someone whose company I enjoyed. Someone whose writing I admired. Someone who had shown kindness during some of the most frightening moments of my life. And suddenly he was there again. When I left, I sent him a message.

"Thank you friend, the crows have stopped fluttering and my heart is full."

That was how I described it. The crows. Those restless little creatures that seemed determined to take up permanent residence in my mind whenever I became anxious. For the first time in months, they had gone quiet. I thanked him for the afternoon and told him I looked forward to seeing him again. We began making plans for the following Monday. For a little while, the future looked remarkably uncomplicated.

Naturally, the universe found this offensive.



August 18. Charles suffered a stroke.

I have become intimately acquainted with the peculiar language of medical emergencies over the years. The terminology. The tests. The cautious explanations. The way doctors discuss potential outcomes with practiced restraint while the person receiving the information attempts not to disintegrate in front of them.

But familiarity does not make such experiences easier. It merely makes you more efficient at being terrified.

Charles was admitted to Harborview for observation and testing. The initial assessment suggested that the stroke had been relatively limited. But limited is an exceedingly strange word to hear when the subject is someone you love. A stroke is still a stroke. And suddenly, whatever emotional confusion I had been experiencing about Michael became considerably less important than whether Charles was going to be all right.

I was frightened. Exhausted. And alone with far too many thoughts.

That evening, I reached out to Michael. I explained what had happened. I apologized for bringing such distressing news into our newly reopened correspondence. And I admitted that I was not doing particularly well.

I wanted company. I needed someone to help me remain grounded. It was an uncomfortable admission because I had spent much of my life attempting to manage difficult circumstances without asking other people to carry any of the weight. But the weight was becoming unbearable.

The following morning, Michael responded.

"Always happy to help in any way — just let me know what you need."

It was a kind message. Simple. Direct. And extraordinarily welcome.

We arranged to meet that afternoon. I remember asking for something almost embarrassingly modest. A hug. Good company. A little time in which I wasn't required to be the person who knew what to do next.

He agreed to meet me outside his apartment building shortly after noon. And we did.

It was another moment of genuine support. Something I want to preserve accurately, because the eventual deterioration of our friendship does not give me permission to erase the kindness that preceded it. He made time for me. He listened. And I appreciated it.

That evening, however, the reality of Charles's hospitalization remained. The doctors were continuing their investigations. The possibility of further complications had not been eliminated. And I was still struggling with the prospect of returning to an empty home.

I asked Michael whether I might spend the night with him. Not because I expected him to solve anything. I simply didn't want to be alone.

He explained that his former partner was expected to visit that evening to discuss their relationship. He was exhausted, and the timing was uncertain. But he left the possibility open, encouraged me to consider other available support, and told me to reach out if I found myself in difficulty.

I understood. He had his own circumstances to navigate. Still, I wished I could have been there.

The following day brought additional uncertainty. More testing. More waiting. More information that seemed to produce questions rather than answers.

I cried. Frequently. I took time away from work. I found myself repeatedly refreshing messages and waiting for updates from the hospital.

Michael continued checking in. He asked how Charles was doing. He acknowledged how frightening the situation must be. And late on August 20, when I was once again struggling with the prospect of spending the night alone, he offered me a place to come.

There was another guest with him, so the arrangement required some coordination. I waited. At approximately 1:07 in the morning, August 21, he told me the guest had left. I could come over. And so I did.

I arrived a little after one. For a few hours, I was no longer alone with the machinery of my own imagination.

That mattered. It mattered as much as the earlier messages. And it deserves to be remembered alongside them.



August 21 was also Michael's birthday. A detail that introduced an almost comical contrast into an otherwise miserable week. Here I was, emotionally disintegrating while Charles underwent a series of medical investigations, and the man whose birthday it was had apparently decided to spend a portion of his evening helping me navigate my anxiety.

I told him to stop worrying about me. It was his birthday. He should have been celebrating.

But he continued offering reassurance. At one point, he asked whether I wanted advice or a virtual hug. I told him that an actual hug would naturally be preferable, although I did not want to burden his evening.

His advice was practical. Worrying endlessly about possible outcomes would not change the outcome itself. Charles was receiving medical care. I needed to find some way to interrupt the cycle of catastrophic possibilities running through my head.

Then he made a remark about joining me at the hospital to eat gelatin and pace if the situation ultimately required surgery. It was a humorous image. Two people haunting a hospital corridor, surviving on institutional desserts while waiting for news.

I understood the spirit in which he offered it. He was attempting to comfort me. Not drafting a legally binding attendance agreement. And it helped. For a little while, I could imagine something other than disaster.

I thanked him repeatedly. Probably more than was necessary. But gratitude has never been something I ration particularly well. Especially when I am frightened.

The days continued passing. Charles remained under observation longer than initially anticipated. The doctors were investigating possible causes and determining what further treatment might be necessary. There were moments when the uncertainty felt intolerable.

Michael continued corresponding with me during that period. He asked for updates. He offered reassurance. He made himself available in the ways his circumstances permitted. He did not come to the hospital during that episode, but he had met with me, welcomed me over, and continued offering support. Those things are part of the record. And I remember being grateful for them.

I also remember the extraordinary contrast between the fear I felt for Charles and the relief I experienced at having Michael back in my life. Two different relationships. Two different kinds of love. Two people whose importance to me could not be measured against one another without reducing both to something smaller than they deserved.

Charles was the person whose medical emergency had consumed my entire world. Michael was someone I had only recently regained and whose companionship helped make that uncertainty more bearable. Both mattered. And neither relationship could be understood honestly by pretending the other did not exist.



By September, the immediate crisis had begun giving way to the ordinary complications of life. Work. Schedules. Appointments. Bills. The endless administrative indignities of adulthood. And, increasingly, plans with Michael.

One subject began appearing in our conversations with growing frequency. The cabin. Camp David.

I had heard about it before, of course. It was a place he had invested time, energy, and considerable effort into making his own. There were projects to finish. Repairs to undertake. Improvements to make before the weather became too severe. And he wanted me to accompany him.

I was delighted. Not simply because it offered the possibility of another overnight together. There was something meaningful about being invited into a part of his life that existed beyond the apartment, the office, and the familiar arrangements of our earlier encounters. I wanted to see the place he spoke about. I wanted to understand what made it important to him. And, perhaps most importantly, I wanted to be useful.

I come from a family with practical skills, and I have never been particularly opposed to getting my hands dirty. Carpentry. Tools. Repairs. The occasional battle with an object that refuses to obey the laws of physics. These things are not foreign to me. So when Michael began discussing what needed to be done, I was enthusiastic about helping.

I arranged time away from work. We discussed departure times. Friday evenings. Saturday mornings. Sunday afternoons. The exact amount of time required to pack everything into the car, travel to the property, and return before work resumed.

At one point, he accidentally recorded our planned weekend on the wrong date. On September 13, he messaged me as though we were leaving that evening. We were not. We had planned for the following weekend. I reminded him. He realized the mistake and laughed at himself.

It was harmless. Almost endearing. The kind of ordinary scheduling confusion that happens when two busy people are attempting to coordinate their lives. I wasn't particularly troubled by it. I was simply happy that we had plans.

On September 20, we finally departed. Before leaving, Michael asked whether I had certain tools. Wrenches. Something that could grip firmly. I checked what was available and arranged to bring what he needed.

It was such a small exchange, yet I remember the feeling behind it. I was participating. Not merely visiting. Not just arriving at an appointed hour for a carefully limited evening of intimacy. I was helping him with something that mattered to him. And for someone who has frequently measured his worth through what he can offer other people, that felt particularly satisfying.

The weekend was wonderful. Not because anything extraordinary had to occur. But because we were together. There were projects, photographs, conversations, and the welcome interruption of familiar routines. The cabin offered a different rhythm from Seattle. A different relationship with time.

I could imagine returning. Helping finish the work. Watching the place gradually become what Michael envisioned.

When the weekend ended, I thanked him. I told him that it had been perfect the way it was. I sent photographs. And I asked him to let me know when he would like me to join him again.

He responded warmly. He appreciated the pictures, although apparently not all of the photographs of himself. He also expressed interest in another cabin weekend, particularly if I was willing to lend a hand. I was. Enthusiastically.

I began coordinating additional weekends away from work. There were discussions about doors, flooring, wood, tools, coffee, and other wonderfully mundane things. Things that made the connection feel less like a series of isolated encounters and more like a friendship occupying ordinary space in two people's lives. I was becoming familiar with his projects. He was becoming familiar with my eagerness to contribute. And the cabin was slowly becoming a place I associated with happiness.



October arrived. And with it came one of the more revealing conversations of that period. On October 10, Michael was discussing another cabin weekend. A friend of his, Rob, might also be joining us. Michael explained the possibility before the trip and asked whether I would be comfortable with the arrangement. He specifically made it clear that it was acceptable if I preferred that we spend the weekend alone.

I appreciated being asked. It was a simple courtesy. An acknowledgment that changing the people involved in an anticipated visit was something worth discussing rather than assuming.

I told him I was comfortable with the possibility. We discussed the sleeping arrangements and the practicalities of having an additional person there. Then, somewhere in the middle of that entirely ordinary conversation, I wrote something that revealed how much uncertainty I was still carrying. I mentioned that I hoped to obtain another of his books before our friendship ended again.

He was surprised.

"What makes you think that is going to happen?"

I answered with an expression of intuition rather than evidence. I could feel it in my bones.

That was not particularly fair to him. Nothing in the immediate conversation established that he was preparing to end the friendship. I was allowing the memory of May to intrude into October. But the possibility of another goodbye frightened me. I had already experienced one. And despite my happiness at having him back, I had not entirely recovered my confidence that the relationship would remain available.

Michael responded. He described the earlier separation as a compromise made during an unsuccessful dating period. Then he said something I would remember for a very long time.

"You're a good friend and you'll stay that way as far as I'm concerned."

There it was. An assurance. Not a declaration of romantic love. Not a promise that we would spend the rest of our lives together. Just an acknowledgment of friendship. And at that moment, friendship was what I wanted most.

I wasn't asking him to abandon his independence. I wasn't asking him to redefine the relationship. I wanted to know that the person who had returned to my life intended to remain part of it.

His response made me happy. The conversation continued, and when I asked directly whether the weekend was still happening, he answered enthusiastically.

"We are absolutely on."

And then:

"We're friends always ❤️"

Always. A dangerous little word. One whose emotional significance has a tendency to exceed its practical usefulness.

People say it casually. They say it affectionately. Sometimes they say it because, in the moment, they genuinely cannot imagine circumstances changing.

I don't know precisely what Michael intended beyond reassuring me. But I know what I heard.

We were friends. And he expected that friendship to continue. That was enough for me to let myself relax again. At least for a while.



The following weeks were filled with more ordinary exchanges. We made plans. We discussed the cabin. We checked in on one another.

There was even a rather prolonged investigation into an unidentified creature visiting the property. The trail camera eventually revealed the culprit. A rat. A thoroughly uninvited little bastard who had apparently developed an interest in the structural possibilities beneath the cabin.

Naturally, the situation called for further investigation. And perhaps traps. Apparently, even a retreat into the wilderness required the occasional confrontation with urban politics.

Meanwhile, I continued thinking of small ways to contribute. One involved coffee. Michael enjoyed it, and I had access to some particularly good varieties. I arranged to bring him a special blend.

When he learned how much it had cost, he offered to reimburse me. I refused. It was a gift. I had purchased it because I wanted him to enjoy it.

There was no debt to settle. No exchange to balance. I simply liked giving him things. I liked remembering the small details about someone and finding something that might make an ordinary day a little more pleasant.

Then, on October 18, another planned weekend was disrupted. Michael became ill. Quite ill, by his description. He had been struggling through his workday before finally acknowledging that his body was no longer interested in cooperating. He canceled his remaining appointments and went home to rest. Our plans would need to change.

I understood. Charles was also feeling unwell, and I had already been tending to the various ailments circulating through our household.

I offered to bring supplies. Medicine. Soup. Whatever he might need. I told him that his health was more important than our plans. And I meant it.

He thanked me. He rested. Over the following days, I checked on him. Eventually, he began improving.

On October 19, he wrote that seeing me and having some close time together sounded heavenly. Again, such a small expression of affection. And yet it stayed with me. We arranged to see one another after he recovered sufficiently.

There is a memory from around that period that I remain particularly fond of. I arrived one evening to find him presenting himself in an altogether unexpected state. A white clay facial mask. A bathrobe. A towel wrapped around his head. The overall effect was less distinguished gentleman and more Robin Williams conducting an emergency domestic performance in *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

I was delighted. I half expected him to offer me cucumber slices.

We spent the evening relaxing together. At one point, we watched a film about Sigmund Freud, an entirely appropriate selection for two people who apparently believed that a quiet evening should also involve the psychological excavation of the human condition.

We settled into bed. I rested against his chest in the familiar position I had come to enjoy. His arm around me. My head tucked near his collarbone. The ordinary comfort of another person's breathing.

He eventually fell asleep. I continued watching for a while, drifting in and out of sleep myself.

There was nothing remarkable about it. And perhaps that was precisely why I loved the memory. No grand gesture. No elaborate declaration. Just a quiet evening. The kind of experience that makes another person's presence feel familiar rather than extraordinary.

I was happy. And I was beginning to believe that happiness did not necessarily have to be temporary.



November arrived. We continued seeing one another. On November 3, Michael invited me over for dinner. Chinese food. Chicken fried rice, and something else I might enjoy. It was another ordinary evening. The sort of thing friends do without requiring an entire philosophical discussion about what friendship means.

A few days later, he teased me about having forgotten my lunch again. I apologized. He responded playfully.

We were discussing another cabin weekend, and I had managed to obtain the necessary time away from work. I was excited. Winter was approaching, and there were still projects to finish before access to the property became difficult.

On November 10, he told me about the progress he was making on the bathroom. We began coordinating the following weekend. I wanted to arrive Friday evening. More time together. More time at the cabin. More time helping him with something that mattered. He agreed.

I remember the excitement. I had arranged my schedule. I was looking forward to the trip. I expected another weekend resembling the ones we had already enjoyed. And there was no particular reason, at that moment, to think otherwise.

Then came Friday. November 15.

Michael reached out that afternoon. He explained that his day had been extraordinarily busy. One appointment after another. And now something had arisen that might affect our plans.

A friend had been hospitalized and needed transportation back to Seattle. Michael might have to drive to Marysville after work to collect him. The friend might also need somewhere to stay overnight.

This was a legitimate competing obligation. Someone was leaving the hospital and needed help. I understood that. But the arrangements were changing, and I needed to know what to expect.

Michael explained the possibilities. If his friend needed a ride and somewhere to sleep, we could meet Saturday around noon rather than Friday evening. He also had items to collect from Facebook Marketplace before heading toward the cabin. If the friend did not need help, our original arrangement might remain intact.

I acknowledged the information. Then I waited.

As the evening progressed, I still did not know which version of the weekend was happening. I reached out to say that I would assume we were meeting the following afternoon. Michael explained that he was still awaiting confirmation. Later, he informed me that he would indeed be collecting his friend and allowing him to spend the night. We could meet at noon Saturday and proceed with the other errands.

Then came another complication. A winter storm warning. The forecast suggested substantial snowfall near the cabin. Between the medical situation, the changed schedule, and the weather, the weekend had become considerably less straightforward than either of us originally anticipated.

I answered.

"Ok."

One word. A remarkably economical contribution from someone who could ordinarily write an entire funeral oration in response to a question about dinner. But I was disappointed. And I was trying not to make that disappointment someone else's problem. At least, that was the intention.



Something happened that Saturday that I have never been able to reconstruct entirely from our written messages alone. There was a conversation. A change in the atmosphere. And a reaction on my part that I later recognized as unpleasant.

I do not want to invent the missing portions of that interaction merely because the subsequent silence became painful. The text log gives us the aftermath. And the aftermath is revealing enough.

On November 18, I sent Michael an apology.

"I want to apologize for my attitude Saturday."

I acknowledged that the situation had caught me off guard. I assumed our upcoming plans might no longer be happening. And I told him that I would see him whenever he wanted to invite me again. I wished him a pleasant trip to Victoria. Then I signed the message.

"Warmest, your friend Jared."

Your friend. Two words I had come to regard with particular importance. Because despite my disappointment, despite whatever tension had arisen, I still regarded him as my friend.

I was apologizing for my conduct. I wanted to move forward. And I expected that, once things settled, we would be able to discuss whatever had happened.

He had reassured me only weeks earlier that we were friends always. I believed that reassurance. Or at least I wanted to.

But no response came. A day passed. Then another.

The silence began developing a familiar quality. The same uncomfortable uncertainty I remembered from earlier in the year. The same internal questioning.

Had I said something unforgivable? Was he simply busy? Was he traveling? Did he need time? Was the friendship ending?

I had no answer. And without one, I began supplying my own.

That was not always fair. I recognize that. My anxiety could move considerably faster than the available evidence.

But I was also responding to an experience I had already lived through once. In May, communication had diminished before a formal goodbye. Now communication had diminished again. Only this time, no goodbye had been offered.

On November 22, I sent another message. I told him that I wanted to ask for closure. I wanted to understand what I had done wrong. I described the silence as deafening. And I apologized, yet again, for the possibility that even asking the question might be unwelcome.

Looking back, I can hear the fear in those words. I can also recognize the self-defeating quality of some of them. I was already describing myself as pathetic for attempting to understand what had happened. I was taking responsibility for an entire relational rupture without knowing whether the other person even considered one to have occurred. And I was frightened enough of losing the friendship that I seemed prepared to make myself the sole explanation for its deterioration.

I told him I wished him well. I said I hoped we might someday be friends again. And I ended with the words:

"Love you my friend."

I meant them. I had meant them in May. I had meant them in August. And I meant them now.

There was no answer. No explanation. No reassurance that we weren't. Just silence.



There is an important difference between a goodbye and an absence. I had been hurt. But I understood the decision. And I respected it.

November was different. The person who had reappeared in August had told me that we were friends. He had invited me into his life again. We had spent time together. We had traveled. We had laughed. We had discussed future visits. And when I became frightened that the friendship might disappear, he had explicitly reassured me.

Now the conversation had simply stopped. I did not know whether to mourn something that had ended or wait for something that had merely been interrupted. And there is a particularly exhausting kind of grief that exists between those two possibilities.

You cannot quite put it away. You cannot confidently call it over. You cannot move forward without wondering whether you have misunderstood the situation. So you wait. And then, eventually, you become embarrassed by the fact that you're waiting.

The rest of November passed. December followed. The holiday season arrived with its customary insistence that everyone participate in displays of cheer, generosity, and emotional togetherness. A charming tradition, particularly for those of us whose emotional lives have begun resembling an abandoned railway station.

I continued living. Working. Spending time with Charles. Attempting to remain occupied.

The relationship I had built at home still deserved my care and attention. Charles had endured a frightening medical crisis, and neither his recovery nor our shared life could be reduced to a

subplot in my grief over Michael. There were responsibilities. There were ordinary pleasures. There was a life to continue.

But I missed my friend. I missed the conversations. I missed the little exchanges about books and coffee. The jokes. The cabin. The strange, wonderful comfort of being able to rest my head against his chest and forget, briefly, that the world outside contained anything troublesome.

I missed having someone I could send a ridiculous news article to and expect a suitably ridiculous response. More than anything, I missed the feeling that we had successfully moved beyond the uncertainty of our first separation.

I had believed we were rebuilding something. Perhaps we had been. But whatever it was, I could no longer reach it.

On Christmas morning, December 25, I sent one final message.

"Merry Christmas and Happy New Year"

That was all. No accusation. No lengthy apology. No elaborate emotional declaration. Just a holiday greeting. A small acknowledgment that I still remembered him. And perhaps, buried somewhere beneath those ordinary words, a quiet hope that he might remember me too.

The message was marked as read. There was no response.

I looked at the record later and realized how extraordinary the contrast had become. On June 15, he had remembered my birthday after ending our relationship. In August, he had unexpectedly reappeared. In October, he had reassured me that our friendship would continue. And by Christmas, I could not even be certain whether he wanted to hear from me.

I did not know what had changed. I did not know whether there would be another conversation. I did not know whether I would ever see him again.

For the second time that year, someone who had become familiar was suddenly absent. But May had given me a decision I could respect; December gave me only silence. I did not know whether to grieve an ending or wait for an interruption, and that uncertainty made this disappearance harder to understand. But this time, I had no final message to read. No stated decision to respect. No explanation to accept. Only the strange, unfinished feeling of a conversation that had stopped in the middle.

And the memory of something he had told me in October.

"We're friends always."

I had believed him. Perhaps he believed it when he said it. I cannot know.

But I remember how much those words meant to me. And I remember the silence that followed.

