

THE FULL STORY

CHAPTER VI

The Conditions of Return



CHAPTER SIX: THE CONDITIONS OF RETURN

At some point, you would imagine, the human brain might develop an adequate defense against repetition. A warning light, perhaps. An audible alarm. Some small internal clerk rising from his desk to announce that the present circumstances bear a suspicious resemblance to three previous catastrophes and that the appropriate response might therefore involve declining further participation.

Mine had apparently been dismissed for misconduct.

November 2, 2025. 3:22 in the morning. Sniffies. Again.

I had kept Michael's old profile saved. It had no personal photograph attached, but I recognized it.

There was something almost absurd about the familiarity of the circumstances. An anonymous profile. An unexpected message. A person I had spent months attempting to place safely in the past. And once again, the past had decided it was not finished with me.

"I know you."

That was his opening. I recognized him.

"Yeah. Michael."

There was no need for the elaborate revelation that had accompanied his August 2024 return. I knew who he was. More importantly, I knew what had happened the last time.

The response I gave him was not the delighted explosion of affection that had characterized our previous reunion. I was guarded. Confused. And not particularly pleased to discover that the careful distance I had maintained was about to be disturbed.

I asked what he wanted. I told him that I was already struggling and that his sudden appearance was not helping. I reminded him that my number had never changed. That I had never blocked him. That he could have contacted me directly.

He explained that he had not blocked me either. Then, sensing the reception was less enthusiastic than anticipated, he suggested that saying hello might have been a mistake.

Perhaps it was. Perhaps it wasn't. I did not know.

But I was no longer prepared to treat a message as sufficient evidence of a repaired friendship. We had already established how badly that assumption could go.

Still, we began talking. And eventually, as had happened before, we arranged to meet.



November 3. I saw Michael again. Seven months had passed since his March goodbye. Seven months during which I had lost my job, navigated difficult personal circumstances, founded a publishing business, completed major creative projects, and begun attempting to understand myself differently.

And now there he was. The familiar face. The familiar manner. The strange sensation of seeing someone who had continued occupying a place in my memory suddenly standing in front of me again.

There is something deeply unsettling about that transition. Memory softens people. It removes the awkward pauses. The inconvenient realities. The complications. Then the person returns, and the mind must reconcile the living human being with the version it has preserved.

I was trying. I was also carrying things I had written during the separation. Letters. Artwork. Pieces of a life he had not witnessed.

I brought them with me. Not because I believed a collection of beautifully prepared objects could repair everything. But because they represented the time that had passed. I had not spent those months sitting motionless in grief. I had made things. And some of those things had been inspired by him.

Then, during our encounter, something happened that would remain with me for reasons both ridiculous and painful. In the elevator, Michael wished me a happy birthday. My birthday is June 15. It was November.

I remember my disbelief. He offered an explanation involving his calendar. I cannot reconstruct precisely how that happened. Perhaps an old reminder had resurfaced. Perhaps he confused the date.

People forget things. It happens.

But this was the same person who had remembered my birthday during our first separation in 2024. That unexpected greeting had meant so much to me. And now, after returning to my life again, he seemed unable to place the date correctly.

I laughed through the awkwardness. But the moment hurt. Not because I believed remembering a birthday was some extraordinary obligation. Because the contrast was so difficult to ignore.

I remembered October 25. January 20. March 18. The little details of our weekends. The things he had told me. The places. The gestures. And I was discovering, painfully, that the same memories might not have occupied comparable space in his mind.

That did not prove indifference. It did not mean the friendship had been false. But it confronted me with an imbalance I had spent a long time attempting not to examine too closely.

I wanted to know whether we could move forward differently. And this time, I was determined not to assume that tenderness alone would answer the question.



We met again in November. There were conversations about what had happened. About the earlier departures. About what rebuilding might require.

I was trying to be more careful. More deliberate. Less inclined to treat a delayed response as immediate evidence of rejection. I wanted to bring the things I had learned during the preceding months into the relationship rather than simply resume the habits that had made our earlier attempts so difficult.

The difference mattered to me. Because I had spent seven months examining my own reactions. I knew there were things I needed to change. I wanted those changes to be visible through my conduct rather than announced through another enormous letter.

And then came Thanksgiving. November 27. Michael sent me a message outlining what he envisioned for our renewed connection.

We would spend more time together. At his place. At mine. Or elsewhere. We would become reacquainted. The relationship would develop gradually. And eventually, perhaps, we would return to overnights and the cabin.

I remember reading it carefully. There was no promise of immediate romance. No declaration that everything would return to the way it had been before.

But there was a direction. A proposed sequence. Time together first. Comfort. Trust. Then the possibility of deeper closeness.

That seemed reasonable to me. More than reasonable. It was precisely the kind of gradual approach I had hoped we might establish. Not an immediate demand for everything. Not an assumption that the old relationship could be restored without discussion. A process. Something we could both understand.

I was willing to move slowly. I simply wanted to know that we were moving. And for a little while, I believed we were.



December brought several genuinely pleasant encounters. We talked. We shared meals. We became reacquainted. There was Sunday Sauce. There were conversations that seemed to suggest the friendship might finally exist without requiring constant negotiation over its meaning.

I wanted to believe that. But I had also become more conscious of the difference between enjoying someone's company and knowing whether they intended to maintain it. So I began asking more direct questions.

On December 20, I reached a point where I wanted clarification about our connection. Not a declaration of love. Not a promise of lifelong devotion. A straightforward answer.

Was Michael actually available for an ongoing, clearly defined relationship with me? If the answer was yes, I wanted us to establish a workable structure. If it was no, I wanted to know. Because I had already experienced the consequences of attempting to navigate a relationship whose availability changed without clear explanation.

The following day, he responded. And somewhere in that exchange came a sentence I would remember with extraordinary clarity.

"Boundaries are for cattle."

I remember being taken aback. It was such a peculiar statement. Particularly from someone who had explicitly established boundaries earlier in our relationship.

I had never thought of boundaries as instruments of confinement. To me, they were a way of making expectations understandable. An opportunity to say what was acceptable, what was not, and what each person could reasonably expect. Without that understanding, how were two people supposed to know whether they were respecting one another?

Michael regarded my questioning as unreasonable. From his perspective, we had only recently begun rebuilding the friendship, and I was already challenging it because communication had not occurred as quickly as I wanted. I could understand why that might feel discouraging. I could also recognize that some of my anxiety remained unhelpfully acute.

But I was not asking for constant attention. I was asking whether the relationship had terms we both understood. And the answer remained difficult to establish.

The holidays continued. There were gifts. I had prepared things for him. I remembered the people who mattered to me through objects, books, and little gestures that might make them smile.

Some people give gift cards. I apparently construct entire ceremonial offerings and then wonder why the wrapping paper becomes emotionally significant.

But these were not obligations I placed upon him. They were expressions of affection. I wanted him to enjoy them. I wanted to continue being generous without using generosity as a

substitute for the communication we still needed. Whether I always succeeded at keeping those things separate is another question.



January 2026 arrived. The gifts remained undelivered. Eventually, I brought them to the Fairmont. I had hoped to deliver them directly, but Michael's office was closed when I arrived. I encountered his assistant and passed them along.

Later, Michael asked whether leaving them without speaking had been intended as a message. I was surprised. I had simply been attempting to deliver Christmas gifts. But by then, I was beginning to understand how easily even an ordinary gesture could become open to interpretation.

There were more conversations. More attempts to arrange time together. And then an unexpected encounter on Sniffies during a period when we were already communicating directly. This time, Michael acknowledged that he had just texted me. A strangely comical collision of two channels that seemed perpetually incapable of agreeing about the nature of our connection.

But the more significant exchange came on January 17. We discussed the possibility of physical intimacy. He said he was comfortable with the idea once our friendship had reached a level at which we both felt comfortable.

Again, the future remained open. Not immediate. Not guaranteed. But possible.

I was not inventing that possibility. He had introduced it. And I was trying to understand what practical steps would allow us to reach the level of comfort he described. That was where the difficulty began returning.



We made plans for lunch. On January 21, the meeting was canceled approximately an hour beforehand. Personal circumstances. We rescheduled for the following day.

Then Michael was late. Considerably late. He explained that he was helping a friend escape a domestic violence situation. A serious matter. Not something I wanted to dismiss.

But I was sitting there waiting, and the expected arrival time kept changing. I began feeling that familiar uneasiness. The difference this time was that I was trying not to turn the feeling into another confrontation. I waited.

We eventually met. The gifts were opened. There was still kindness. There was still the possibility of enjoying the afternoon. But I was beginning to notice how much energy I spent managing my expectations around meetings whose arrangements remained uncertain until the last moment.

February brought more cancellations. One related to a public event. Another because Michael overslept.

On February 17, I arrived for our planned meeting. I waited. I sent a message. Then another. Eventually, I left.

Later, Michael apologized. He had overslept. He offered to make it up to me.

I accepted the apology. But I also wanted a small practical change. If we arranged to meet, I wanted confirmation at ten in the morning.

Nothing elaborate. No legal document. No ceremonial oath administered beneath the judgmental gaze of a Victorian magistrate. A confirmation. At a specific time.

He agreed. And on February 20, he sent it. Exactly when requested. We had brunch. The arrangement worked.

It was a small success. And perhaps precisely because it was so small, I found it deeply revealing.

We had established a simple expectation. He had honored it. The meeting happened. Nobody died. The republic survived. It was possible.



Then came March 3. We met for approximately six hours. Six hours. A remarkable amount of time compared with the brief, uncertain appointments that had characterized much of our recent contact.

And we talked. Not simply about the immediate question of our friendship. About people. Experiences. Connections. The complicated, overlapping social world in which we both lived. There were disclosures that surprised me. Some involved people whose names were already familiar. Others introduced connections I had not previously understood.

I learned things I had not anticipated learning. And somewhere in those hours, I found myself wondering how many details of our respective lives had been developing independently while we were trying to reconstruct this friendship.

It was an unusually substantial meeting. I left with a great deal to think about. And, once again, the sense that perhaps we were finally making progress.

But the following days brought another interruption. I reached out to arrange our next meeting. The conversation did not develop into a plan. On March 11, Michael asked whether we could remain *TBD* for the time being.

To be determined. Three extraordinarily efficient words. They communicated that nothing could presently be scheduled while preserving the possibility that something might happen later.

I understood their literal meaning. I had simply grown tired of living inside them.

Because my life was not indefinitely available. I had work. Responsibilities. People. Projects. A home. A publishing business. And I could not reasonably organize my time around arrangements that existed primarily as future possibilities.

I wanted to know whether we were actually rebuilding something. Not because I needed constant reassurance. Because our stated intention was to spend time together. And spending time together generally requires two people to agree to be in the same place at approximately the same hour. A maddeningly complex concept, apparently.



By April, I had reached a point where I wanted to place the chronology on paper. Not simply the painful parts. The commitments. The meetings that happened. The meetings that didn't.

The plans. The explanations. My own reactions. The things I had attempted to change. And the things I still could not understand.

The result was the Accountability Packet. A written account of what I believed had gone wrong during this latest attempt to rebuild the relationship. It was not an invitation to romance. It was not another request for physical intimacy. It was an attempt to establish whether our repeated difficulties could be discussed directly.

I knew it might be uncomfortable to receive. A packet of documents explaining the practical failures of a friendship is not exactly the customary gift one expects from someone who previously arrived bearing coffee plants and poetry. But I had spent months attempting to understand the discrepancy between what we discussed and what actually happened. And I wanted the discrepancy to have a name.

On April 8, I arranged to hand it to him. I waited outside his building. We coordinated his arrival. There was some unnecessary confusion about where we were supposed to meet, even though I was already standing near his home.

By the time he arrived, I was exhausted. I gave him the packet. He began checking his schedule. Then he suggested dinner the following Tuesday. Seven o'clock.

I was surprised. After everything I had written, I had not expected an immediate invitation. I told him that he might feel differently after reading the material. He said he would decide that for himself. We made the plan.

He also offered me the opportunity to come upstairs. It was the first direct invitation into his new residence during this cycle.

I declined. Politely. I did not want to take up more of his time. And, perhaps more importantly, I wanted the conversation we had just arranged to occur after he had actually read what I had given him.

I went home.

The following day, I asked whether Tuesday was still happening. I received no answer. Then another day passed.

Eventually, Michael responded. But the response was not a confirmation of dinner. It was a statement that he could not presently offer the kind of relationship I needed. He explained that circumstances in his life prevented him from meeting those expectations. And he suggested that when those circumstances changed, he would reach out.

There it was again. The future. Still available in theory. Unavailable in practice.

I read the message. And I felt something in me collapse.

Because the question I had been attempting to resolve was not whether Michael could guarantee me a lifetime of friendship. It was whether he wanted to participate in one now. And whether that participation could include the ordinary courtesy of reliable communication.

Instead, I was being offered another indefinite interval. When circumstances changed. When time permitted. When life became less demanding. Somewhere beyond the horizon of the present.

The Tuesday dinner was never separately addressed. It simply ceased to exist.



I had spent months trying to respond differently. Trying not to turn fear into accusation. Trying to allow more space. Trying to recognize that people have obligations and that not every delay constitutes abandonment.

I still believed those efforts mattered. But I was also beginning to recognize that changing my responses could not, by itself, produce consistency from another person. A relationship required participation from both sides.

I could become less reactive. I could become more careful. I could ask questions more directly. I could apologize for the moments when my distress made communication difficult.

But I could not confirm a meeting for someone else. I could not answer a message on his behalf. I could not transform an indefinite suggestion into a plan simply by wanting it badly enough.

On April 20, I sent a further explanation. I asked a question that had become central to my understanding of the entire relationship.

Was Michael unable to provide what I needed? Unwilling? Or did he simply not want to?

Those possibilities were not the same. And I wanted to understand which one he meant. I had spent too long treating different explanations as though they were interchangeable. I no longer wanted to do that.

I also began recognizing a painful contradiction between the friendship he said he wanted and the limited practical opportunities through which that friendship could exist. The relationship was always something we might return to. Something we might develop. Something that could happen when circumstances improved. But the present remained frustratingly difficult to inhabit.

Then, on April 27, another message arrived. Michael described the situation through an A/B formulation. He expressed feeling attacked by my criticism. He suggested that our needs and expectations might simply be incompatible. And he placed conditions around the possibility of continuing the friendship.

I read it carefully. Then I read it again. Because I still could not determine what, precisely, the alternatives required.

What was A? What was B? What practical arrangement was being proposed? What behavior would make the friendship possible? What behavior would make it impossible?

I wanted definitions. Not because I believed every human relationship required a contract. But because the absence of defined expectations had already become one of the recurring difficulties between us.

I responded. I explained my position. I attempted to distinguish criticism of conduct from an attack on character. And I tried to make clear that I was willing to accept an ending if that was what he wanted. I simply wanted the ending to be named.

The conversation did not produce the clarity I had hoped for. And by April 30, I had done something I previously would have considered almost unthinkable.

I closed the file. Not merely metaphorically.

I had created an actual case study. A chronology. A record of communications. An analysis of the relationship's repeated beginnings and endings. And a formal instrument of closure.

Apparently, the only way I could finally persuade myself to stop negotiating with ambiguity was to establish a bureaucracy powerful enough to deny it further permits.

There was absurdity in the process. I knew that. But there was also a genuine purpose.

I needed to distinguish what had happened from what I feared had happened. I needed to know which commitments existed in writing and which expectations I had supplied myself. I needed to acknowledge my own conduct without accepting responsibility for every difficulty between us. And I needed to understand that an ending did not require both people to agree on the interpretation of the past.

I could accept that the relationship had become unworkable. I could recognize that Michael experienced my attempts at clarification as pressure. And I could still believe that many of my questions had been reasonable. Those conclusions were not mutually exclusive.

The case file was closed. The correspondence was over. I had finally decided that the uncertainty would no longer determine my next action.

Six days later, I reopened it. Because naturally.

