

Classified

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a: a small advertisement grouped with others like it

My friend X and I tired of each other's company midway through a college summer, an ennui of classification—would we remain friends?—that eventually placed us in a café beneath a downtown viaduct, nursing a plastic carafe of cappuccino.

We waited for a stranger with whom we'd had one phone conversation. His voice was softly sibilant, his confidence assumed and effete. My pulse skittered in my throat. We'd listed our personal ad under "Friendship," but one could hope for more.

"How will I know you?" he'd asked. With a hand muffling the mouthpiece, we conferred and decided on the bowling pin that now wobbled on the varnished table, a gleaming odalisque with pale cracked skin, salvaged from a shuttered Brunswick Lanes.

He appeared amid the smoke, black garments swirling like ashes around a fireplace poker. Though he'd mentioned The Cure in his response to our personal ad, I hadn't anticipated his degree of commitment. He had bad teeth and an overbite. I considered whisking the bowling pin back into my bag, but his narrow right hand, weighed down with silver ankh rings, had already pulled out a chair.

Then something fragile in his eyes softened me.

b: arranged or assigned according to type, as in a caste system

X dubbed my new companion (for he became mine and not hers) Weird Brian. The name distinguished him from the normal Brians we knew, with his stringy black hair and the Dead Can Dance badge on his bag. We met him the summer X and I both planned to drop out but then didn't. For me, that first year, financial aid came through. The next year, I dropped out anyway when I realized I was middle class, Western, and crazy in a way that divided me irredeemably from my peers. Thus I classify myself as a dropout at two different points in time, both true and both imprecise.

When you're part of a group and then no longer part of it, the absence feels urgent, like waking from a dream of falling. You flail arms. I'd been a gothy teenager, then an Ivy League punk. Now I was a nineteen-year-old with an office job. I flailed when I looked at my receptionist costumes, not-black in my closet. Who had I been? Who was I now?

I took comfort in how others avoided eye contact or made way when Weird Brian and I walked down the street together. Each quirk I tolerated—his florid handwriting, his cigarette holder—restored me to what I considered my original self.

At one time, I'd rehearsed in the bathroom mirror so I could appear unimpressed when someone flourished their scars: puckered pink burns on translucent forearms, pills rattling in a purse, a ragged homemade piercing in a flared sunset of infection. I pretended I no longer believed that external scars equaled internal depth. After all, I'd left school when I realized that no careful shell could erase my internal mortification. I'd originally chosen goth culture because it gave me a classification, a place to be. Black clothes and black eyeliner, creepers and ankhs, permitted people to assess me and dismiss me at a glance, and empowered me to hate them for it.

In this respect, Weird Brian reinstated a home I had lost.

c: sorted by the constituents of a substance (as ore)

He was several years older; maybe that was it. All of twenty-five, perhaps. He blurred our edges, masculine and feminine, into a kind of liberation. I can imagine how his body must have looked—white, wiry, a scar or two. But my memory can't arrange the components of his face. I can't remember if he was as tall as I was.

His affectations abashed me. Twice while I knew him, he changed his name from his mother's Anglo-Saxon commonplace to add the Greek for *life*, a flash of white in the darkness. First it was complicated; then he changed it to *zzoe*, easier to pronounce. *P. Revere's dad changed the family name for the same reason, from "Revoir," he wrote me. . . . On account of the bumpkins.*

He made me feel loud, pushy, normal. He liked drugs as entryway to the subconscious; I considered them cheating. He had a GED; I'd quit Barnard. He read Kant on the bus to Boulder; I read Faulkner at cafés on my lunch break. Did psychedelics disarrange a brain or make you egalitarian?

I can't remember what caused him to ask, "Do you think you're an intellectual snob?" Accusation or clarification of similarity? I took a moment to consider his question. (If you have to think about it, the answer is yes.)

I said no.

d: withheld from general knowledge for reasons of security

Neither of us had a car. We stayed in touch via postal mail. He inked elaborately infrastructured,

triangle-based cartoons. I returned philosophy and poems. For him, I exaggerated my surreal side, wanting to impress, to keep him close, or maybe curious if I could frighten him away.

We collaborated on a comic. I was words; he was images. We pretended we thought others would care about our pockmarked, fairy-tale world. We pretended not to know they might not care. We pretended not to care about their indifference.

From my other friends, I cloaked our relationship the way he cloaked his body. *Oh, we're working on art that day, I'd say, or I've got to get back to Weird Brian about our book.*

e: organized by degree

Once he came to my place in the afternoon. Buses were safer during the day. Also, I wanted to avoid any connotations that might arise between us if he were in my apartment after dark. Seeing him again, I was struck by how he matched his artwork: not tall, built like a paperclip, all black lines and condescending wit. Against his slightness, I was self-conscious of my height, my swells, the breadth of my shoulders.

We never went to his house. He lived with his mom.

One night we met at the coffeehouse to write. A pinched nerve made me squirm with pain. But Weird Brian had suffered back problems himself. Affecting clinical cool, he tucked a lank lock behind his ear.

“For me, the remedy—” his eyes swam behind granny glasses—“was sex.”

I gaped at him.

“I'd be willing to help—if you wanted to give it a try,” he said.

I smiled thinly. How badly I wanted to be wanted. At twenty, I'd never been propositioned. I'd been pawed and pressured by boys I didn't want, and not-kissed by those I did. Was my desire to be desired measurable in ounces, degrees, leagues? I slept naked in an

empty bed, as if pretending to be desirable would attract desire, and here he was.

The failing winter sun backlit his silhouette. Luminous red rimmed his Fu Manchu mustache as he pawed through his medieval magician's carryall, pretending he would find what he needed in its depths.

What decrees attraction? Who is permitted to desire? How gently his eyes skirted mine. His obliqueness moved me. I scanned my body to detect any response to his offer, but there was none.

My decorum mimicked his own. "Thank you, but I think I'll pass for now."

"Certainly." His fingers scrabbled inside his bag. "Certainly. Just keep it in mind."

I told him I would, and it's true. I never forgot he had offered.

f: assigned to a category

Weird Brian began renting a room from a sturdy blond hippie. Upstairs: parrots in the kitchen, caged quail in the yard, two chickens—Lucy and Ethel—on the back patio. In the basement, Weird Brian, in a room. Not really a room: the closet beneath the stairs. (At that moment, in England, JK Rowling was writing *Harry Potter*.)

He penned an invitation in spidery script. *She's permitted me to invite you to dinner. I'd be honored if you would attend.* He had no money. He didn't work.

We ate on a blanket on the living room floor. I've forgotten the menu, except the delicate quail eggs he'd obtained at some cost from the roommate.

I'd inveigled a friend into coming, not only because I had no car to reach the suburbs. Weird Brian wished I'd come alone, I could tell. He turned his body at a not-impolite angle, his slightly stooped, black-clad back to my friend. He was trying to show me something, show me his home, that he could have one, that he could be human. Was this love? I scanned my

emotional taxonomy; I couldn't classify him. Friend, more than friend, less. All and none. I couldn't bear to picture him without his black garments. I used him like a priest for my absolution. I required that he curtain his desires.

He wrote, *I keep seeing a woman who looks like you at Ground Zero—a dance club in Boulder. I can't think of what to say, only stare. She probably thinks I'm a pervert. Maybe I am, by now. I guess it's been a while.*

His pleading, categorical loneliness. I wanted him but did not desire him. He was a control group, between past and present. I was learning to decide what I wanted. How.

g: characterized by variation or contrast

If he had collected me, we could have dressed like Renaissance Festival refugees and listened to Sisters of Mercy twenty-four hours a day. Our skin and teeth would turn gray. In his closet, the walls painted black, we could have whiled away evenings with his pet rat, whose fur glowed luminescent under the black light.

If I'd told him we called him Weird Brian, he would have taken some delight in the word's archaic implications: the fates, the otherworldly, the eerie—traits to which he aspired.

I liked knowing the weird, I realized, but I no longer wanted to become it.

After that, we lost touch.

Four years later, when I ran into Weird Brian at a bookstore, his hair was scragglier, and a silver septum ring grazed his mustache. A woman in green velvet with black-dyed hair brushed imaginary crumbs from his sleeve. She was making excuses to touch him, I saw.

What pang is as bittersweet as the happiness of someone who offered themselves to us? Even if we declined. Especially then. The woman smirked as if I'd lost something.

My boyfriend, soon to be fiancé, was upstairs somewhere. A few promotions into a PR

career, I was taking up the yoke of standard adulthood. I hesitated to reveal anything that would let Weird Brian define me. That day, I might have been wearing Docs, but during the week, I wore Ann Taylor. I didn't want him to know that I was sliding into the bourgeoisie, indistinguishable from any other twenty-something yuppie.

Biological classification sorts organisms according to observed similarities. Brian and I had seen only our likenesses until our taxonomy stretched too thin to sustain us. How strange that I'd found him in the first place by advertising for him. I'd bought public space to call out my loneliness. *I can't find anyone like me*, I'd cried, and he answered—but meeting again, it was almost as if we'd never had anything in common at all.

That day, I felt only relief as we parted. But sometimes, still, I see a stark, witty, India-ink drawing in a gallery, and I hope it's his. It never is.