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# Thank You For Your Time

Rachel Kaplan

\* \* \*

My brother left when I was ten.

My dad left when I was fifteen.

My mom left when I was eighteen.

Then I left.

\* \* \*

Eye contact is important in social situations. It promotes honesty and trust. It shows that you care.

When I met you, it was like looking in a mirror.

You said you were afraid of water, and so was I. We talked about pools and that lifeguard guy who we think we saw the same day the pool when we were seventeen.

You said you hated fancy clothes and I said I preferred pants to dresses. I laughed at how I would have made fun of you when you were freezing walking into a bat mitzvah in seventh grade. We laughed for hours about that.

We talked about horrible teachers, and my old English teacher who failed me because I forgot a comma. You failed

math because you never memorized the multiplication tables and couldn't do long division.

The only thing we didn't connect on was parents. I hated mine, because they always seemed just one word away from being out the door. You had a perfect family. You had a brother, like I did, but he was closer to you than I ever became. Your mom reminded you when you forgot you were going to meet with me for lunch a week later. Your dad taught you how to throw a baseball. Mine taught me how to watch someone walk out the door.

I brought up the topic of romance three weeks later, about six months before my twenty-third birthday. We were talking, and it came up. I had a boyfriend three years ago that left, just like everyone else. The only thing you said was that you weren't a romantic. You hated all that junk, you said. You wouldn't fall unless you were tripped.

I had to trust everything you said. That's what it's like being friends with someone. You have to have faith in what they tell you, and hope that they do the same for you. Maybe I was what you hated. I trusted before thinking.

We stopped talking ten days after that conversation.

I had a new job. I was working at the junior high school. You were at the elementary school, just a block away. My class had a blast listening to my stories about how we would just get each other.

\* \* \*

"Ms. Harper?" It was Danny.

"I said you could call me Ms. Karen, remember? I hate formalities."

"Okay. Ms. Karen. Do you think everyone can find a friend like that?" The odd part was I knew whom he meant.

"Yes. For sure."

\* \* \*

You forgot that we were going to meet for coffee that day. I waited for a half hour, then left. I assumed you had too much work to do, but I wasn't sure.

We eventually got together for dinner. I got a burger and you got a salad. You let me talk most of the time. I kind of ran out of things to say after ten minutes, though. I'm not good at remembering cool things I've done, especially since there haven't been many in the first place.

Then you brought me to the department store and dragged me through aisles and aisles of clothes. I hated it, but I didn't have anything else to do.

Plus my feet hurt so I had to limp a step behind you the entire time. Good thing I'm an efficient limper.

\* \* \*

You met some dude at a club just over the Wisconsin border and accidentally tripped into his arms because you drank too much. You told me a few days later that it was magic. It wasn't. It was sloppy and exhausted. He tried to hold your

hand and you slapped him, then you pulled him out of the club and forgot that I came with you and I was your ride home.

The messed-up part was that you tripped over my bad foot. The one with tendonitis so I needed to ice it for two hours after, because you dragged me to a club in the first place and there were no places for an awkward person like me to sit away from the crowd.

Let me get this one thing straight. I thought we were friends. I thought you wouldn't leave. But you did, just like everyone else.

\* \* \*

Five months passed, and I didn't hear a word from you. You were always on the phone with that guy. What was his name?

\* \* \*

*You are cordially invited to the wedding of Donald Green and Jessica Parker.*

\* \* \*

I got the invitation when everyone else did. I had no idea it was coming. You never said anything about it.

March eleventh.  
The date was set.  
You were ready.  
Thanks for remembering my birthday.

\* \* \*

But I went and I enjoyed myself. Your mom forgot too, so don't worry too much. Apparently I'm not worth the three seconds it takes to check the calendar, so don't even bother.

You and I did talk a little bit.

"I'm happy for you." Lying.

"I'm glad. What're your plans, now?"

"I don't know. But really, how did you end up here?"

"I grew up, Karen."

"You don't have to." I clenched my fists and looked you right in the eye. You met my glare with contempt.

"Well, if that's how you think, then maybe I shouldn't have invited you."

"Like that's supposed to make this better? Friend?" Without letting you respond, I turned and fit myself into the corner of the reception hall, away from everyone else. My feet were killing me.

I heard you talking with other people a few minutes later. You said we met a week ago, and you had to invite me, because I was "vulnerable" and "needed help." I heard "fragile" and "on the edge." "Dangerous."

I heard loud and clear that you lied. I know a fake when I see one, and I figured you out.

I don't know why you did it, but you must get a sick laugh out of it. Maybe you get a sense of pride, convincing yourself that I was troubled. Either way, you defenestrated my trust.

Thumping filled my ears. It was like a double heartbeat, one from the heavy bass of the music, and the other from my own chest. Ticking like a time bomb.

Three.

Two.

One.

"JESSICA!"

"I'll be right back," you said to your friends, because I didn't deserve time.

"You lied. About everything." You told me so many lies; I stopped counting.

"You needed a friend."

"Yeah, kind of." This was getting nowhere.

"So what, now you're going to pack up and move to get away from everyone who left you?"

"Sure, yeah, I'll move to Montana and live on 1576 Boulevard Road. I'll leave, because that makes sense. Because since everyone left me, I'm prone to leaving, too. Yeah, that'll happen."

I left that night. I dropped off a gift card at the gift table and didn't look back.

At age twenty-three, I ran away.

\* \* \*



I was right. Just for kicks, I looked up 1576 Boulevard Road in Montana. You wouldn't believe it, but I got the place. Turns out it was a small house with one level and a basement, but nice enough and it didn't smell like my old neighbor's dead cat that he kept under his front porch. It sat in an old neighborhood. I'm not sure if there are rednecks in Montana, but where I was, there were. The town was it's own isolated island in a sea of corn and wheat.

You would have said I was being over dramatic, what with leaving behind everyone and moving to a town across the country.

Joe was an over dramatic guy, not me. Joe was my new neighbor. He had a son and a wife, like any normal family. Four days after I got to Boulevard Road, his liver gave out from too much drinking, and he died. Joe was a good guy. Sure, he made a scene when I pulled into my driveway the first time, but he was a good guy.

Mary died a week later, shot through the chest. She lived a block away, on the other side of town. Rumor was that she was wearing fake antlers, and some hunters accidentally shot her. But people also say that a deer hasn't shown up in town in years. Still others say there was a bird in front of her, and the hunters were aiming for that.

So, I settled in with some minor interruptions. But I wasn't ever really settled. You never tried to contact me, except one time.

\* \* \*

I'm pretty sure I had a mid-life crisis when I was fifteen. Two people had walked out of my life, and I was barely in it myself. I made a deal, though, when I got to Boulevard Road. If I wasn't happy or dead by the time I was thirty years old, I'd move back to Illinois where you were still going about your life, none the wiser about mine.

\* \* \*

Boulevard Road was filled with people. Each house was occupied, although there weren't many houses.

I talked to a few people. Harold wanted fresh air. Anne was looking for a sign. The dogs were all stray and carried hitchhiking fleas.

No one seemed like they were there to stay, or even intended to be there in the first place. It was more of a pit stop town that had spikes three miles past the exit, so people would always come back before they got too far. Or the repair shop would never have the right parts, and they forgot to order more, so people just sat around waiting for everything to come together.

I imagined it all like a classic coming-of-age movie with no music montage. To be honest, there were enough troubled adults and antsy kids to make six of those movies.

\* \* \*

On my twenty-ninth birthday, I went to the museum and looked at fossils. I got old pasta in the museum food court and drank too much pop so I burped during a tour.

On my twenty-eighth birthday, I sat alone in my house. The cat died.

On my twenty-seventh birthday, Joe's son and Mary's daughter got married. They made a good couple, and they talked about their parental losses. I said Joe was a good guy, and the crowd or guests nodded. That's all I ever really could say about him.

On my twenty-sixth birthday, I got a cat.

On my twenty-fifth birthday, I stared at your number in my phone and almost deleted it.

On my twenty-fourth birthday, I sat in the park and watched the kids make friends.

Three weeks after my twenty-third birthday, I got a card from you. It said "Sorry for the late card! Still thinking of you. Happy 30th!"

\* \* \*

I still waited until I actually turned thirty. Turns out I was miserable and lonely. I packed up and moved back to Illinois. My mom gracefully let me stay in the apartment she kept in town to "check up on me" because I seemed "lonely." Great senses, mom.

When I got to the apartment, I saw you walking with your kid. Donald trailed a few steps behind you, tapping away on his phone. He almost ran into a fire hydrant.

I'm not sure how you're happy like that. All you do is act like you're a mom in a modern female-based movie

with sassy friends and no obligations. You said you hated those movies.

But that doesn't mean anything now, I guess.

I don't know why I left. I think it was to see if you were right, that I was alone.

\* \* \*

I met up with you a few days later. I told you we needed to talk about something important, and you seemed concerned. At the coffee shop you bought my drink for me and wrinkled your eyebrows when I started to talk.

"Is this about the wedding? It was so long ago, now, I—" You faltered when I shook my head.

"I just wanted to say that no one else has come back, and they're still miserable. I know that for a fact. You stayed and I see that you're tired and bored." I didn't know where I was going with that.

I know you've listened for long enough. You know all this. You were aware the entire time, and I bet you've done it before. Why would you do it just once, with me? So, you don't need me telling you this. But you've stuck around, and you've been patient. For once, you actually gave me your time.

"I actually came back. I saw and understood and brought it back. What's the point in leaving if you don't get anything from it? If you're just running away, you get nowhere. If you sit still and pretend it's okay, you'll never actually be okay." Words just kept falling out of my mouth. I wanted

to write them down; they seemed like they'd be important later. But I didn't. You let my rant fog up the space between us and you kept trying to push it aside. "You're just waiting for something to happen. Don't do that. That's not how it happens."

You looked at me like I was insane. I had strayed so far from whatever it was I wanted to talk to you about that I was sure I was having an existential crisis. Or another mid-life crisis. Maybe I was having both. I can't be sure, but I know that it was well worth the time it took to figure out I was better off without you.

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