

## I.

The thing about meeting someone online is that I'm not sure when I "met" Ted. After liking him back on OkCupid on August 7, 2018, I look closely at his entire profile: an undeniably handsome grin in the profile pic, and he's being kissed on the cheek by a brunette. In another of the photos he's got his shirt open by a pool with his arm on the hip of another brunette, the kind of perfect petite Sarah Jessica Parker body that suggests anorexia on the part of anyone who didn't grow up a dancer.

I decide I like Ted because he uses semi-colons in his lists of things he likes the way I do, and because he describes himself as an "enemy of schlock." I do note that he's thirty-two and handsome and gainfully employed in Santa Barbara, which means that he's had no reason to treat women well as long as he's lived in a small city overrun with tan co-eds. He probably can't make it two blocks without getting laid. The girl posing with him by the pool really is perfect, and I find myself glad that since Matt's messages and texts and emails have started to scare me, I've lost weight. I'm a walking adrenaline cocktail, and I do yoga daily to manage the stress, so while I'm usually a medium girl, more of a Marilyn, I currently look good to the sort of men who like Audreys.

Ted says in his profile he's working on his second book while promoting his first, and I figure this will be the only time I can hit on someone by asking them how I can promote my book and whether they have any advice. *Haha sure*, he responds. I link to my book and can almost sense him sit up in his chair. *O I'd like to read this book*, and then *This might be of interest*, he says, and links to the magazine where he works. It's *Pacific Standard*, and their offices are on Garden Street, four blocks from my house. Messaging, it's clear we have a rapport immediately, and I find him on Twitter. He and I have already favorited the same Lyz Lenz essay on the *Rumpus* just that day. Pretty much every feminist writer and thought leader I have admired and followed for years on twitter follows him. A bunch are clearly friends with him, and a bunch more sing his praises as one of the best and kindest editors they've ever worked with.

*Annnnnnd a little light stalking reveals that we both read from our books on the same night at AWP this year, only at different bars*, I write.

*Talk about ships in the night!* He responds.

I find him on Instagram, too, and see right away what his feed shares with mine: we're both obsessed with our cats. Mine are two short-haired bonded brothers and his is a regal, long-haired princess kitty who he brings into work sometimes.

Reader, *that's* when I knew I might be in trouble.

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A founding figure of Western psychology through his pioneering work in psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud fundamentally altered Western conceptions of representation by tracing the source of psychological maladies to the unconscious – to those memories and desires repressed behind the curtain of conscious experience. Freud posited what may be thought of as "the intervention (that took a century to be) heard round the world" in Vienna in 1896 with a tract called *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, which he presented at the Psychiatric Society. In the paper, Freud wrote that "at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of

premature sexual experience.” One Richard von Krafft-Ebing responded that it sounded like a “scientific fairy tale.”

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I send Ted my number the day we start talking on OkCupid, and he texts with his name and a little hand-wave, and I respond with a kitty emoji. Around 10pm, he texts photos from the Bon Iver concert he’s at with a friend.

Reader, it’s a little bit boyfriend-y, right at the top, and I am thrilled. *Did they play Brackett IV?* I text excitedly. He responds with the most gorgeous description of Bon Iver’s music I’ve ever read, and mentions he’s got a 3:45am wake-up call for his flight to D.C.

I’m still awake at 3:45am, so I sent him a little video of one of my cats ambushing the other one and the words *GET UP*.

*Lol*, he texts back, and I make sure to let him know I was up anyway, doing laundry when it isn’t punishingly hot.

I don’t tell him I can’t sleep well these days without Ativan, because Matt’s messages only multiplied after I’d blocked him on social media. Every time I get one of Matt’s communications, my body hammers and throbs. And now I’m getting form submissions from Squarespace, reporting that Matt’s using my personal website to make sure I see things like *The hurtful and violent way you’re cutting me off is killing me*.

~

While the reception to his efforts was less than warm, Freud clearly grappled with the stories of incest abuse nearly all of the ‘hysterical’ female patients in his study shared during his attempt to perform ‘the talking cure’ of psychoanalysis with them. Freud proved well ahead of his time when he theorized that the women whose ‘hysteria’ had left them unable to function normally or cope maturely had its roots in these women’s experience as victims of incest and other sexual abuse, often chronic abuse beginning when they were very young. Recent trauma research corroborates this century-old claim so closely that Freud deserves some credit for the prescient compassion inherent in his argument.

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After we finished our drink on our first date, Ted suggested we walk in the park, so we ambled in a haze that was odd for August in Santa Barbara toward Alice Keck Gardens. I already thought he’d said the sexiest thing he could have that night, which is that he voted for Clinton in the primary as well as the general. It was the closest thing to a checklist I’d ever had: it boded well that he wasn’t a Bernie Bro like Matt. When Ted and I were done looking at the ducks and wondering who the fuck would cheat on Emma Thompson, what the fuck was Kenneth Branagh *thinking*, he took me in his arms and he kissed me. And then he asked softly, “Have you really been in Santa Barbara this whole time?”

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In short order, Freud discredited his own thesis; Herman interprets the nominal public pivot Freud made in the late 1890s, from a focus on psychoanalysis with abused women to a focus on repression (looking at dreams as representations of the unconscious), to be a turn he took out of fear. Herman claims that this fear was one of the possible social ramifications of connecting the sickness of his female patients with a public story of incest that implicated the men in their families, who were the men in Freud's own social circle. This lack of a social reality that would reflect accurately the truth these women were speaking about their experience, one that would support Freud in his assertions, is precisely why, Herman argues, the eerily spot-on idea he had founded for the next decade or two.

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*One by one, we're hewn away.*

## II.

On the morning of the first restraining order hearing I am smoking a menthol cigarette. I am in a black blazer over a grey dress, with my hair brushed and parted down the middle in a bun.

Deborah is there within an hour, disrupting her morning by accompanying me, a friend of her adult son, who's not in town, on a restraining order court case because her own mom is gone. Gabe and I have always thought our parents' being teachers, along with growing up in Santa Barbara County, gave our hearts a certain emotional language. I am so relieved, after parking and heading toward the courthouse, to have a Deborah to smile wryly at. She knows my heart language.

"Feel like going to court today, Deb?"

She smiles wryly back. "Nice day for it," she says.

After the metal detectors, we sit on a bench outside the courtroom. It's in the basement of the building. There are several of us, waiting for family court cases. I only look at Deb, because I know Matt will be there.

And after five minutes, he is. I can hear him say, "She's not here...oh no, she is. She's over there."

Stiletto clicks approach. I finally look up.

"Stacy Cruz," she says. "I'm Mr. Smith's attorney." She has a soft voice and absurdly high heels. She wants to know what I'm looking for. I remember what Erin, the lawyer my old high school science teacher's wife found the phone number of for me yesterday, counseled me to say on the phone as she fed her children at a barbecue over the holiday.

"I just am going to ask for a continuance," I say, "because I haven't had time since getting your letters Friday evening to seek counsel."

"That's reasonable," Cruz nods. "What I'm asking for is for Mr. Smith to be allowed passage to campus because his classes have started but he's had to miss them. Does that seem reasonable to you?"

"I'm...not sure," I falter. I can see him in the corner of my eye, and he isn't receding.

"Can I be a part of this conversation?" he asks.

He's standing about six feet away. I look up and then down quickly—all I clock is that his suit is blue, and he's cut his hair. His hands are in his pockets.

"I'd rather not," I say, and stare at the floor.

He walks between his lawyer and me, not behind her. My face is inches from his fingers as he passes by.

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Reader, did I mention that Ted and I were in a gazebo in the mist and that he had a long-sleeved button up shirt on because he was the only man in Santa Barbara willing to dress nicely for a first date? I'd even managed to mention the restraining order before the kiss, because I was a good girl and Ted deserved to know. I don't remember if I told Ted I'd just obtained the restraining order two days prior. I know I didn't tell Ted that I was reading his memoir at the beach when I got the text from my friend that reversed the earth on its axis – that Matt was

ditching his PhD program at Duke before it even started and moving back to Santa Barbara. I know I did tell Ted that I read his memoir on the beach for so long, and imagined what I'd say on our first date as I played with other people's dogs in the water for so many hours, that I got the worst sunburn of my adult life. The kind that left what looked like a tire burn mark on my ass, navy blue scales. I had to demote my outfit to soft cotton things for my first date with Ted, which was irksome, because Reader, I was aware that it might be one of the most momentous occasions of my life.

Reader, I spent the six-block walk to the classy bar Ted picked apologizing to everyone I'd wronged in the last few years under my breath. I knew that if I liked this guy half as much as I liked messaging with him that my goose would be cooked. I wanted to be clean for him! We'd already figured out we were reading from our memoirs on the same night at AWP. He'd already ruled out seeing *sorry to bother you* because he predicted we'd want to walk around and talk.

I caught my cats on camera posing in and around and on top of his book. He was in DC opening the ideas desk at the *Pacific Standard* when we first matched, so I wooed him by sending him cat photos that were also book photos. "*They are such handsome cats,*" he responded to one, and to another, "*O this is a blessed image in many ways. It may as well have been engineered specifically to delight me. By a scientist.*"

*For your flight, then!* I respond, attaching the photo I took of Mowgli and Desi the night I brought them home from the shelter. They had fallen asleep with their kitty arms around each other, as would prove to be their wont.

*Fuck they are so good they made my travel stress go away,* Ted responded.

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It took the stigma attached to soldiers returning to America from the First World War to start again the process of addressing the connection between wartime trauma and 'dysfunction' in the eyes of a society whose notion of 'functional' was rooted in heteronormative and capitalist regimes of truth and temporality.

There is a change in the brain functions of people who have suffered extremity, and a dehumanizing approach brands lessened ability to manage or cope according to social norms as a moral failing and not, as it is largely now known by contemporary Western therapists to be, an eminently understandable and even unavoidable reaction to that extremity.

Herman writes that Abraham Kardiner, a mentee of Freud's, abandoned psychotherapy for anthropology when he saw that the troubled men returned home from war were being treated as pariahs and moral failures by the society he believed was supposed to take care of them. This move was one of compassion, rooted in the observation that a socially constructed culture of stigmatization was having a direct effect on individual wellbeing. The diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD) was not formalized in the American Diagnostic Manual until 1980, when the Vietnam veterans returning home organized into 'rap groups' of social support and insisted on a public process of acknowledgement and support giving what Herman calls "dignity [to] their distress."

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The first day after moving in together in downtown Santa Barbara, Matt and I are jolted from sleep on a futon on the floor by our phones making strange noises. It's our first morning in the new place. We're on a futon mattress with a motor oil stain. We couldn't believe our luck to score a spot so close to downtown that allows cats. We blink and blear and reach for the whirring. The odd cries from our devices are evacuation alarms.

The fire would need to eat through a lot of concrete to get to our house from the Montecito hills. I need to get some cash out for a table Matt's found on craigslist, so we brave the outdoors. The sun is an orange disk. State street is deserted, but for a few other people in masks. The gutters are filled with sludge. It's impossible to see more than two blocks.

The table is in a house near the bottom of San Marcos Pass. The woman selling us the table watches me stammer as I try to explain to Matt how to wrangle the table into my van. She guesses we're just moving in together and I wonder briefly how her prognosis looks. I'm not sure how to step in and show him, or how he'd take it if we did, and she doubtless clocked that. On the way home, we stop to take photos on the overpass as others have stopped to do. On the top of the tallest peaks the smoke parts and we can see them. They are a deep, deep color. They are moving quickly.

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That first drink is a sparkling water for Ted and a cocktail for me. I immediately almost knock over a little plate as I sit down and he smiles. I've read his memoir and he is impressed that I caught the moment he admits to getting some action in the book. It's in a double-negative sort of sentence. He says his good friend, a writer, didn't catch it.

"Well if you hadn't admitted to some action, I would have been annoyed," I say.

"Why?"

"I'd have been disappointed if it hadn't gotten you laid. Because it's a book about cosplaying as Mr. Darcy, basically. And you're accomplished and you're handsome, like, come on."

"That's very sweet," he says.

"I would have been like," and I point at his face across the little table, "Ted, cough it up."

He laughs. He doesn't have Matt's bountiful brown curls, his long lashes, his dimples for days. Looking at him in the yellow bar side-light, though, I think 'this is a face I could marry.' And I know it with a certainty that was never there with Matt. When I first met Matt I thought, *Holy shit. What a beautiful man.* When I met Ted, I thought, *that's him!*

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The first rape crisis center in America opened in 1980 in Boston, and Herman's work, which was rooted in the second-wave feminist movement, aimed to create spaces where traumatized women could gather in similar groups for a similar purpose. Herman notes, however, that while the Vietnam veterans had memorials through which to process *their* pain, raped women had no such public monument to function as a legitimizing testament to their own. While the monuments that helped Vietnam veterans feel seen and heard by society undoubtedly served

other functions that deserve to be critiqued as problematic – such as glorifying neoliberal narratives as well as those of traditional, Western notions of masculinity – the comparative silence around what raped women suffered contributed to the environment of silence that Herman argues helped keep them traumatized.

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The first time Matt shouted at me was after he left in the morning to get us coffee in Atlanta. I was there for a conference and Matt joined me after taking a look at the University of Michigan. I was in a cheap Airbnb room in the house of a dude who had bunches of paper in rubber banded piles all up the stairs. He looked in his sixties, and did not wear shirts, it seemed. He put the people who'd call him about paranormal activity on speakerphone.

So when the guy, Sam, opened the door to the room later that morning, I was naked under the sheets and a little taken aback that paranormal guy was standing at the door instead of my new handsome young boyfriend with our coffee.

"I'm sorry but I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave," says Sam. "Matt and I kind of got into it. And I had an abusive dad, and I just can't be around it, you know?"

"Uh, yeah," I say, holding the blankets to my chest. "Can he come get his stuff? It's all in here."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask him not to come back into my property. You're clearly a real sweetheart and I have no problem with you. But yeah, you need to get his stuff too. Sorry."

Sam backs out and I am bleary.

*You choose our next Airbnb*, I text Matt.

His reply makes me laugh. It says simply: *omg*.

According to Matt, he asked Sam to turn down the music that morning so I could sleep.

Matt sees me look up Sam on my Airbnb app, it's my first time using the service and I don't want a bad rating. Matt tries to commandeer. "Don't—just don't *concede* anything," he says in his lawyer voice.

He gets us a real swanky Airbnb—an apartment in a trendy neighborhood. We're going to a show later and I've got a crop top on. I'm going to walk to Walgreens a couple blocks away for antibiotics because our sex has given me a urinary tract infection. I have a long red jacket on over the crop top.

The jacket isn't zipped. Matt looks at my belly ring, stands between me and the front door, points at me, and shouts, "HEY!"

It's more like a bark.

He's glaring at me.

~

“I promised myself I wouldn’t let you see me naked yet,” I moan into my pillow that first night as Ted applies the coconut oil to my thighs and my ass.

“I think that ship has sailed,” he says softly, with a hitch in his voice.

The first thing he does when I turn to face him is go down, and meet my eyes while he does it. I am shy with new lovers and unused to eye contact and I close my eyes until pulling him up to return the favor. He calls me baby, and tells me how good it feels, as though we’ve been making love for months already. He asks if he can get out a condom. I nod. The first thing I do is move on top of him in a few different ways. His voice matches every change.

“You feel just right,” I whisper to him.

“Oh my god,” he whispers back, again and again and again.

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To be traumatized is a reaction to an overwhelming event ‘outside the range of ordinary experience,’ characterized by intrusive memories that destabilize a linear experience of time and a coherent sense of agency. The memory of the traumatic event will not recede into the past, as it does in the inner life of an empowered person. Rather, it lies in wait as an ever-present danger to the psyche, robbing the subject of a sense of self-ownership and internal control. A subject of dehumanizing treatment will remember, either consciously or bodily, what happened. The subject will react to reminders of such abuse as though the event is happening once more, right here and right now, in ‘intrusive memories.’ This doubling-back effect on temporality produced by experiences of distress and extremity is a primary feature of the traumatized condition, whose effect Laura Lipsky Van der Noot, in her work on trauma stewardship, memorably compares to being trapped in amber.

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When our case is called, the commissioner explains he’s filling in for the judge who was assigned to the case, and do both parties agree. I’m afraid if I say I do, then we’ll just head into the case.

“I just wanted to ask for a continuance,” I say haltingly into the mike.

“This is just to make sure you’re okay with me overseeing the case.”

“I am, your honor,” Matt says.

“Ms. Holden?”

“Yes, your honor,” I say.

The judge asks if I’ve had a chance to read Matt’s response.

I turn to Cruz.

“Is that the email?” I ask. She nods.

“Yes, your honor,” I say.

Cruz says Matt has expressed regret for causing any distress but that he hasn’t been allowed on his own campus now.

I tell the judge that I have a 75% teaching contract, almost full time, to teach in the same building as the history department: Humanities and Social Sciences Building, or HSSB.

I can hear Matt and Cruz whispering quickly as the judge looks at me.

The judge asks what building Matt needs to be in.  
Cruz mixes up the acronym, but the judge figures out it's the same building.  
The judge asks if I think I could arrange to meet my advisors off campus.  
I am so stunned, reader, that all I can say is:  
"...I....don't know."

I can hear Matt shift in his chair. It's just his lawyer between him and me. It's the same immediate physical movement he'd do if I mentioned Gabe, Deb's son. Gabe is also the man Matt tried to kill himself over with bourbon because I'd gone to a family YMCA sauna with Gabe our second month into dating. Or really if I mentioned anything Matt had done that bothered me. He was both too quick to feel anger, and too quick to react.

~

When he asks if he can come, I am so enthralled that he has the stamina to control that sort of thing that I can't manage any words at first, I just look back at him, speechless with delight. He puts a forearm on either side of my head again, and keeps his eyes open. I look back at him as he pants, into the slightly glassy blue.

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Van der Kolk asserts, simply, that "the brain is a cultural organ." For such a simple sentence, the implications of it are wide-ranging. To paraphrase prominent literary theorist Terry Eagleton, without others, there would not be a need for language, which is what creates reality. Without others, there is not a social reality to reflect back to me, for good or for ill, what I am, or even *that* I am.

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After the hearing, Deborah and I stand on the sidewalk outside the courthouse. She's shaking her head. She saw me get creamed in there.

"I'm going to need to ask that lawyer to represent me," I say. "I don't think the Legal Aid Foundation can act that fast."

Matt charges into the corner of my field of vision, across the street, leading with his head, leaning slightly forward, on his phone. The last time he'd been walking that way was at the beach the last time we'd spoken ten weeks prior.

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Unbidden from the depths comes a memory of the past spring. We were at another Airbnb in Brooklyn that Matt paid for, while we checked out the schools he'd gotten into for his PhD. He was more likely to go for Syracuse or Duke than UCSB, because they were ranked more highly. I'd woken up with the ring I'd fallen asleep with still on my finger stuck there. Like, really stuck. And my finger was red, and swelling. With my other hand, while Matt slept, I looked on my phone for answers to the question "get a ring unstuck."

Olive oil, said a 2006 yahoo forum. Ice water to make the swelling go down, said reddit.

I put my trapped finger in the air, like I was asking to answer a question in elementary school.

Matt stirred. I knew I would need to tell him before he saw.

“Honey,” I say, “don’t freak out, because I need not to get stressed about this. But my ring is stuck.”

He bolted up. “What?” he hissed.

And that’s when it becomes present tense.

I sigh and go to the kitchen. I get ice. I get oil. I hurt my own finger more than I think I’d be able to. I remember that scene in James Franco’s movie about the climber who gets his arm trapped between two rocks. I watched it on a flight to somewhere and usually I’m not keyed into those in-flight movies, but the sequence wherein Franco’s character saws off his own arm to survive has always stuck with me. Not only for the visceral dread the viewer with mirror neurons feels, the empathetic contortions, but for the flashes forward and back in the sequence. To the most important people in his life, to the son he’ll have someday.

It’s not an identical trance I go into, there in icy March in Brooklyn, with my over excitable boyfriend banished to the shower. It hurts like the dickens, and I just keep going. And the ring slides off so suddenly it doesn’t even skitter, it launches to the floor under the kitchen chair.

“Thank god,” says Matt, toweling off. “I was about to take you to the emergency room.”

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Those who work in the humanities and social sciences will likely agree that culture is important, and that it determines an awful lot about how and why people do what they do. Van der Kolk gives those of us with such a vested interest in the business of cultural theory a way to think through culture’s effects as bodily ones, and as a result, a way to think through its enactment, and reproduction, as a bodily effect of being a subject formed by a culture that either reflects its subjects’ humanity accurately or doesn’t. Van der Kolk plainly states that the way a person is treated has a direct effect on the brain as it develops, determining “not only how we think and what we think about, but our very capacity *to* think.”

And, I would add, to think about ourselves in particular.

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As Matt shifts too quickly I look the judge in the eye. *Please tell me you saw that*, I think. Tell me you clocked his reactivity here in the courtroom upon hearing that the ex-girlfriend who’d been working for five years where he suddenly wants to go to school wasn’t sure if she could have her meetings off campus instead of him. He moved to Durham for a five-year fellowship and moved all the way back and got special late admission to UCSB *after* I filed the restraining order.

I said none of this aloud. At the time, there weren’t words. I could neither pluck them from the ether nor vomit them out. And Cruz makes it instantly about Matt’s right to get his

education. I don't have a lawyer. I'm vaguely aware that I'm getting creamed. The judge tells me he's just trying to be fair, because he can't deny Matt his right to an education. But that if Matt even looks me in the eye, let alone approaches me...

I must have nodded. I'm not sure.

He asks if I have anything else to add.

SO MANY THINGS, JUDGE! But I can't seem to organize them in my head right now. My ex is three feet away from me. He just asked to talk to me right outside the courtroom. At a hearing for a restraining order, which he's fighting tooth and nail. You think the honor code will work with someone like this? You didn't see him shift uncontrollably in his chair?

What I can manage is:

"Just that I don't see how I'll be able to finish my program and focus on teaching around someone who behaves like this."

I swear I can hear Matt shift quickly in his seat again.

~

Before we go any further, Reader, you need to know about the shit I took after breaking my lease according to the statute that makes doing so legal when there is a protective order in place and getting the email from Title IX that they had determined, based on a preponderance of evidence, to initiate a formal investigation into Matt's stalking behavior. I got that email as I drove my cats down to Escondido. Joey had come over earlier and benefited from the last food in my fridge, and I gave him the freezer grocery bags, too, and the sweet mattress Matt bought. I occasionally regret gifting the mattress, but Joey's the type to appreciate it, and he's the hero who helped me bring the cats to the car and get them into the big cages from Petco. We'd both had a couple beers that afternoon while packing and lugging and cleaning, but that wasn't new. And the pesto pasta with fresh basil from her garden that Lauren thoughtfully had waiting for me because she knew I grew up on exactly that dish wasn't new to my system either; that was the point.

But this shit wasn't even shit. It was Hershey-colored molten lava that projectile-shot out of my asshole and drilled into the water beneath like a reverse geyser. It sounded like a horse taking a piss. It got on the toilet seat.

Reader, it got on the *wall*.

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That first night, before he goes home to get some sleep for a dentist appointment before work, I ask Ted if I can read him my favorite essay, the one from the Times called "A Man and His Cat." Ted is delighted that I want to, and I am delighted that he knows how to pronounce *raison d'être* with the French "R" at the end that I can't do.

He messages from the magazine offices the next day. *Hello from a boy with very clean teeth*, he said, and then, *I had an amazing time last night*.

Reader, I didn't plan on writing about this.

Ever.

I was certain that I would never have to.