

## Model Trains

We connected over Marxist theory and our undying love of the band, Sunny Day Real Estate. I remember when she called our 10th-grade history teacher a fascist for supporting the war efforts in the middle east with a yellow ribbon magnet stuck to the front of his chintz aluminum desk. C.J., was nothing more than another rich kid in a town of penny pinching farmers and intergenerational window factory workers. Our bond quickened and before long we were an inseparable duo spending every second together some days we would sit in the car atop the parking garage of the Mall of America watching the planes fly into MSP. Chain-smoking, listening to indie radio stations and plotting our patriarchal overthrow.

We separated for college she had slacked on her application and I went west to Seattle without her. I scraped through my first semester working at Burger King twenty hours a week. C.J. took a *gap year* using her graduation money to buy a van and drive cross country. I stayed in the Northwest in the summer taking summer working my dead end job and enjoying the city until halfway through when C.J. showed up. She had gotten herself into serious debt with a cocaine dealer down in San Francisco. He pushed himself on her. She said she kicked him the groin and drove north to her *Veera*. I tried to convince her to seek help but all she did was make the switch from coke to weed.

She called her mother for money and after a month we were living in a two-bedroom downtown. As time passed the insecurity of wealth in her dwindled she would go on shopping trips that exceeded my yearly earnings at the time. Eventually, she enrolled in cosmetology school and began to thrive at something it clicked with her the chemistry of color and symmetry

of cutting resonated with her. She was gone within a month of finishing school leaving me with a check for three months of rent. She ran off to New York preaching about how she was going to create a name for herself then move me out there with her.

We stayed in touch for the first two years. Facebook friends were all we became after the third—sending each other birthday wishes on wall posts. I stayed in Seattle taking a job in human resources for a home improvement store filing paperwork and mailing off little bottles of piss for drug tests. I met my first girlfriend there, Nicole. She was a graduate student in the architectural program at Seattle University. She worked at my store in building materials her hands always smelled like cedar and were filled with splinters. We would make out in the family restroom where she would prop me up on the baby changing station whispering *good girl* in my ear while fucking me. It lasted until she wanted to sign a lease together.

A month after the breakup I put in for a transfer to anywhere in the Northeast landing a gig in the suburbs of, Bean Town. I was cordial with Nicole but I felt like she set ablaze what was now to be my new life moving forward. And for that to commence, I needed a change of scenery. I texted C.J. to let her know I would be on the same coast as her again. She didn't respond until a month after I arrived in New England texting, *I'll be there this weekend*.

She showed up in the late evening smacking the steel door to the studio loft above a sports bar I lived in.

"The free Wifi must be nice?" she said when I opened the door, gesturing to the laminated sign taped to the front door of the bar.

“Look at you!” I said with a dumbfounded look on my face. Her hair was bleached white blonde and shaped into an angular asymmetrical bob. I pulled her in close for a hug. Her head resting on my chest I took in her familiar scent of jasmine, stale cigarettes and, cinnamon mints.

We collected ourselves I helped bring her bags the overstuffed canvas totes upstairs. We quickly fell into our usual routine—me standing in the kitchen making her food and listening to her tell me everything about New York. She was working at a salon in The Village. After the first year, they started raising her chair rental monthly in response, she started slipping herself a little extra from the register. She started with twenty dollars here and there but after a few months, she was taking hundreds a night. Suspecting theft the management installed cameras and she was caught immediately. She had been without work for three weeks before she showed up at my door in Boston. As her story came to a close with her breaking her lease that same day the understanding that she was to again live with me had already been established.

A month into her stay she had found a job at some strip mall salon doing kids haircuts. We talked every night about dating me avoiding the gender of whomever I was seeing. Until she came home early from work on a weeknight to me going down on a British tourist I met on Tinder. She walked in saying, “Hey honey I’m home,” the girl popped up from the couch her pelvis smacking my forehead so hard it nearly gave me a concussion. C.J. gasped and shouted “Sorry,” while running back down the stairs. The girl yelled at me for not telling her I had a girlfriend. I said I don’t but she still left. C.J. was waiting on the stoop outside our apartment door when the girl came ragging out the door carrying her patent leather Doc’s stepping out barefoot onto the chilled concrete. She apologized and C.J called her a lobster back—a

revolutionary war insult tossed at English soldiers—and threatened to throw her into the harbor. We laughed about it later.

Coming out changed our dynamic. We had always been the kind of friends who would lay in each other's laps and the apartment was small and drafty so we shared a bed. She began to nuzzle up next to me in the mornings, hug me every time she left and she started to refer to things as *ours*. It all lasted less than a year.

I remember waking up late to the news of school shootings in Connecticut. C.J., had already left for work her straightener still on and melting the linoleum countertop. I texted her about it receiving a brash response. In the months preceding, she had started coming home later or not at all. After a little back and forth bickering she told me that we needed to talk and she'd be home around six. I spent the whole day watching the parents sequestered behind yellow tape while they slowly learned the fate of what they held most dear as cable news squawk-boxes yapped about solutions. The cancerous lump the media left on America was still in its beginning stages then as people began digging their trenches with rears plastered to office chairs and fingers at the ready on their keyboards.

As people gathered for candlelight vigils I waited for C.J. She showed up hours late with her breath vaping of grenadine and vodka. We sat down on the opposite ends of the sofa.

"You know I love you Veera," she said, "But, things are different now and I think we're getting a little old to keep playing house."

"I never asked you to move in," I stated.

"No need to get that way," she said in her yoga instructor voice, "Look I've been seeing someone and he wants me to move in."

“Did he leave his wife already?” I asked.

“What the fuck Veera that was a one-time thing,” she said, “Look, its never going to happen with us I’m not gay Veera”

“What are you talking about!?” I shouted at her. The accusation was resounding. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t thought about it on those mornings where she would lay with her head on my breasts as I read her the headlines from my phone. It was something that I would have jumped at but I wouldn’t ever suggest.

I stood up and walked over to the kitchen with my hands weaving together against the back of my head. I grabbed the handle of the refrigerator when my crying started and my typically stable emotional levels blew the regulator. Without moving I stated, with vibrato “You need to leave C.J.,” and she was gone minutes later without a goodbye leaving her key on the coffee table.

I packed up the clothes and other belongings she didn't grab when she left and out of spite mailed them to her mother’s house in Minnesota. I blocked her on social media for about a year until my curiosity got the best of me and I started to snoop. She didn’t update anything for six months I had all but moved past her leaving until I saw a picture of a man on one knee in front of her. I deleted all of my accounts that night and went off the grid in a millennial sense. He was a *waspy* New England bro the type who wore Polo shirts and backward Sox’s hats daily.

I stayed in Boston a couple years dating around and wasting time but after C.J.’s engagement, I figured Boston belonged to her now. My dad eventually coaxed me into coming home, “We all leave Veera,” he said, “The river, it brings us back.” I told myself it had nothing to do with C.J. that, I needed to reset my life. I had gathered old photographs and yearbooks to burn and for fire

safety's sake, I hastily tossed the bag in the dumpster outside my apartment. The next morning after locking up for the last time and handing the keys over to my landlord I snuck behind the bar taking out bags of half-eaten french fries and soiled bar towels until I found the tightly tied Target bag stuffed with memories. I pulled out the stacks in large handfuls carefully tossing the unwanted pictures back into the dumpster until I came across the one I was looking for. A picture of C.J. and I at a Dashboard Confessionals concert.

It was our senior year of high school and with popularity growing for the band C.J. decided that we could no longer be associated with such a commercialized group. I kept listening. And she kept trashing the *Ashleys* who would sing along at their concerts. This was until she found out that they were playing in Madison, WI in March. We graciously took the keys to the Lexus from her mother and hit the road for the capital of the dairyland. It wasn't the concert that I remembered most but the trip back. The drive was only three hours the roads were clear and the weather was nice for the time of the years. Somewhere around EuClaire, we were tailing a semi when we heard a loud boom followed by the screeching sound of an 18-wheeler's breaks C.J hit the breaks immediately but the rack of the buck the truck had crushed and left in pieces scattered about Highway 94 punctured the tire of the Lexus. We sat in the car waiting for someone to stop and help us. We had cell phones but service in the desolate wasteland of western Wisconsin was inconsistent at best. It was then that the dynamics of our relationship were crafted to what they would persist as. After about half an hour, I opened the glove box, read the manual, pulled out the spare and changed the tire. All while she sat in the car dialing phone numbers only to end up with the same robotic operator, *your call can not be completed as dialed*. When I hopped back into the car rubbing the dirt off my hands on my parka C.J. leaned over towards me

and kissed my frigid cheek. It felt like her lips would stick to steel exterior an icy bond that would keep her with me.

She shifted back in her seat sinking her into her hair against the headrest, “I love you, V.”

“I know.”

My dad's house had been empty since his last wife had left him taking with her the two prized cocker spaniels he had come to love. It wasn't much—a post WWII rambler in Bayport, MN, two bedrooms, one bathroom and a basement where he built his model train sets amongst posters of Pam Anderson or Tommy Kramer hastily duct-taped to the concrete foundation. He spent most of his time down there creating small cities out of plastic—little empires of americana where the girls wore poodle skirts and the boys skipped rocks or played baseball. In the winter he would bear the cold dungeon wrapped in layers of tattered sweatshirts and long johns. In the summer I would need to announce my presence before coming down there if I wanted to avoid seeing his girthy gut sag over dingy white briefs..

I had interviewed for dozens of jobs around the Twin Cities over the phone landing on a position with a local department store running on its last leg in the dwindling retail world. My dad was excited to have someone around who would remember to throw away the coffee filters left growing mold in the sink and clean the bathroom. I took the spare room where my dad had set a daybed he inherited from my grandma when I was in high school it sank in the center and bruised your elbows against the thick brass tossing in your sleep.

I made him dinner most nights occasionally meeting with tinder matches for drink or a late night rendezu in my room slapping the bed frame against the wall. My dad was a *don't ask*

*questions* kind of parent. In my teenage years, I would sneak out to smoke pot at the park my dad would catch me fully clothed in the kitchen at three a.m. eyes bloodshot rummaging through the cupboards he would only ever say, “It’s late Veera, keep it down,” I always believed this was the key benefit that outweighed the lack of participation he gave in any aspect of my life. He had been telling me before my move that he kept seeing a friend of mine at work—a window factory that had employed him since his eighteenth birthday. He was awful with names. Terrible with faces. And never spoke to any of my pals growing up. He described her as the, “Pretty rich gal from the north hills of town. I didn’t need many guesses to realize it was, C.J. I pulled out my phone and flipped through the social media apps until I found her. I sent off a message to her account, *Hey girl, I’m living at my pop’s place we should get together?* The next morning I woke to an alert, *Hey! Your dad told me but I didn’t think you’d wanna see me. We should definitely link up! I miss you so much!*

I sent her a message requesting that she meet me at a local place once renowned for cheap potato pancakes and thick muddy coffee. It had been endorsed by some television show in my absense and was now overrun with Minneapolis hipsters and heterosexual couples that desperatly wanted something to connect over. C.J. was one who planned to be late for everything lines made her uneasy. I grabbed a table and watched the clock. She was only twenty five minutes later I had already finished a cup of coffee and was working on another leaving my hands to shake uncontrollably whenever raised. Her amber hair tied up in a top bun kept in place with a neon green bandana. No makeup other than a spattering of liquid foundation and the reminits of eyelash extensions far beyond their viability. Skinny black denim wrapped her legs tunneling down to her sorrells and heathered grey sweatshirt reading BE GOOD in emblazoned



letters. We hugged. I took in her sent of stale cigarettes and, organic shampoo—lavender jasmine and sweet orange danced across my senses as I pressed head into my chest letting her shift until she found the familiar spot, cheek pressed against my right breast.

We spoke for hours waving off sardonic looks from the staff needing to fill our booth with paying customers. We caught up swapping work and sex stories and laughing over old memories. By the time our date was over we had exchanged numbers snapping new photos to match the contact info we had for each other. On my drive home I was pulled over running a stop sign as I stared at the picture of sitting across from me hand arched under her chin, head tilted looking thousands of yards away.

The next week my dad left on a vacation to Mexico with a few of his work pals. Middle-aged recently divorced male factory workers running around the beaches of the gulf coast in ill-fitting board shorts and homemade muscle tees with Vikings logos and grease stains. They did it every year in something that my dad explained as, “A suburban version of the hangover movies,” really they just golf in the morning and drink themselves to sleep in hammocks once the sun goes down.

C.J. and I had been texting all week establishing new inside jokes and refamiliarizing each other with the structure our relationship. Her needs first. Her moods, succinct. And they way she roped me in tugging at each knot with mastery. We decided by Thursday that we had to see each other again. The idea of being in the same city and not right next to me was, killing her. For traditions sake, we decided to head out too First Ave and see Brand New who was in town touring their most recent album. I picked her up outside of town she had been renting a *mother-in-law* apartment from some elderly couple her parents knew out in the country.

When I picked her up, she was waiting for me outside she said something about how her place was a mess and she'd had been too embarrassed to have me come in. She had taken to wearing headbands—paisley ones loosely haloing around her head. We spent the car ride blaring Brand New's older albums singing along, out of tune.

The crowd at the show was small and orderly an experienced bunch of elder millennials commiserating over the smoking ban and the loss of the community that was formed by the second floor balcony smokers. One couple mentioned to us while we packed butts outside that they had met there in '04 at a Thrice concert. C.J. clammed up to me at every excuse—holding my hand as I led her through the floor crowd and wrapping herself next to me as we stood outside shaking filters at our frozen lips. We left early by final song we were already inches from the door. She fell asleep with her head resting against my shoulder on the drive home only waking when I had to hit the brakes hard to allow a doe to cross only a few miles from her place. She popped up surprised she had fallen asleep and asked me if I would come inside when we got there.

She made me wait on the porch slamming the door shut quickly insisting I not look inside. I chain smoked, listening to her rustle around until I heard music. She opened the door slowly—wearing a black polkadot robe her hair was teased and her face glowing with delight. She had done it all. Rose petals tossed about the living room, candles bunched on every ledge wax bleeding on the floor. A pseudo romantic cliché of magnificence. She didn't say anything I tried breaking the silence telling her how radiating she looked as she pressed her slender finger against my mouth and pulled my head down to meet her lips. She knew why I was there. I wrapped my arm around the small of her back and pushed her past the threshold and into her

living room. We walked locked at each others mouths over to the couch as my clothes fell off in layers. She pushed me onto the cushions and untied her robe and straddled me her thighs pushing with friction against mine as she rocked back and forth to the beat of the music. She lowered herself between my legs and valiantly tried to navigate the unfamiliar territory. I flipped the script. And with one hand on her stomach I felt her breath keep pace with my meteoric heart beat. I felt every bit her as she moaned past ecstasy. We made our way to her bed her wrapped in my arms as we slept. Waking every three hours to repeat my performance.

We peeled ourselves off the mattress around noon the next day. She had called in and insisted on making me breakfast. I stood in the kitchen leaning on the fridge and watching her flip eggs in nothing but an oversized t-shirt. After an extended moment of eye contact she pushed the skillet contents onto a plate walked over to me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She gripped me harder every time I shifted until I returned the embrace at the same magnitude.

“Stay?” She asked me with her head buried in my breasts.

“In Minnesota?”

“Yes, here with me.”

“I’m not moving anytime soon if that's what you mean.”

“No V, stay with me,” she reiterated.

I gave her a puzzled expression. And she paced over to me pushing her body against mine. Her hands cupped the small of my back.

“That’s not why,” I gently pushed her off of me and walked over to the couch sitting down, elbows on my knees and face in my hands, “I’m in Minnesota to be with my dad, I didn’t even know you were back here.”

“He told me you talk about me all the time.”

“Who? My dad? He’s only trying to talk me up.”

“Why else do you think I asked you to come in last night? I wanted to try V, I wanted to make sure I knew this is what I wanted.”

“And you decided all of this in the last week?”

“I knew when I heard from your pop’s that you were moving home.”

We threw each word on the floor volleying them between us with our heels. I told of how she’s turned my life upside down each time she crept her way back into it. She told me of how she could never hold a relationship because I wrecked the vision of what she had for a partner. A husband. The same one that left her she said, “He told me I was obsessed with you,” for years after she left all she would talk about was how he forced her into doing so. And that she never asked to be a wife. I cried. She cried. We hugged. She tried kissing me I pulled away. She stormed into her room slamming the door and I followed after her. We fucked. We slept through the day waking in the evening. We fucked. We smoked a joint and ordered pizza. I didn’t leave that weekend, the next, or the one after that. I woke up every morning at four to drive home shower and dress for work until my dad suggested that I just move in with her.

It was three weeks into seeing her again and we were calling the same place home—divvying out laundry duties and fighting over the blanket in our sleep. We began introducing ourselves as a couple. My dad became quickly attached telling everyone at work that they were now family. We stayed in the country apartment another few months before settling into a rent to own townhouse in a neighboring city across the river in Wisconsin. My workplace saw an unexpected uptick in sales delaying the eventual layoffs at least another year. C.J. and I

attended the company Christmas party she got drunk and told stories of how we met, how our relationship blossomed and, how I was her hero the one she owed her life to. My boss cried and I was promoted months later much to my own dismay. We celebrated with champagne that she drank most of, taking all the credit and, convincing me to pull out the strap-on. Before long the drinking became more frequent and most nights I would need to pick her up from the local watering hole. The same one my old man frequented. He began calling to have long drawn out conversations about how she needed help and that their insurance would pay for rehab. We got her into a facility near us in Center City—some bougie joint known for ushering Hollywood elites into sobriety. She stayed through the whole program found her “higher power” and committed to a clean life. We fought everyday after she returned. It was over the littlest of things from me not remembering to hang up my coat to, not replacing the toilet paper roll. That's all we did was battle. Every commute home from work I was a ball of anxiety anticipating the arguments that would ensue. We stopped fucking a month before she left for rehab and never took back up at it again. She told me why six months after her stint in Center City—she had met some guy a recovered coke head a real New York type who dressed in two thousand dollar suits and called his secretary, *sweetheart*. They connected over some contrived idea of holiness they discovered through the program. She said they never slept together but spoke everyday and he wanted to fly her out to the city to be with him. He was twenty years her senior and divorced three times but he had that *waspy* northeast type of money. The never ending trust fund and inherited wealth kinda money and he would take care of her help her stay clean. She left in her usual fashion planning everything prior to telling me of her intentions. I packed our pictures into a box and pushed into a dungeness corner of my crawl space.

Several years later after another night alone streaming Dyke romance flicks and sprawling out on the sofa with my labradoodle. I couldn't stop considering what I could have done differently? I hadn't dated, moved, switched careers or done much of anything. I felt like without someone, I was only pacing through life. My dad bonded after the breakup—spending at least one day every weekend together. Returning to the river in the summer months to drive our catfishing poles into the gritty sand of the St. Croix. We would sit there for hours watching overzealous kayakers rapidly paddle up stream and old men in their john-boats putter past tipping their bucket caps at us. It was the only time I truly felt at ease with the world but that peace migrated south in October and I was left to tame my fizzling brain alone. So I decided to rip everything out of the crawl space and find my old box of photographs. Reminders of a different Veera one that left hopes hanging in her corridor. That were now only dents in the drywall that polka dotted my spinster townhome. I left the white paint untouched no new artwork or framed memories decorating my walls for years. I pulled out the pictures frantically ripping them to tiny shreds and under the moonlight I walked out onto my platform deck cupped hands filled with the newly minted confetti and with both arms outstretched I tossed them in the air watching the harsh midwest wind grab them and push them across the blank white.