

sixteen

## CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

I'm doing it again. I hate myself in a way, but I'm also excited. I took extra time this morning getting dressed, applying my makeup. I tried on several outfits, settling on a feminine bias-cut slip dress and sweater. Am I going to a fantastic party? An important meeting? Is this a radio station visit? Nope, I'm going grocery shopping. I'm going to Trader Joe's.

I know perfectly well that the staff at Trader Joe's is instructed to make friendly banter with the customers. I know that the atmosphere in the store is informal and convivial by design. I know that what I am doing is utterly pathetic and a little unhealthy, but I am currently in so much psychic pain, that going to the grocery store and flirting with a guy who looks like my ex is better than sitting at home crying in my pajamas. This is like training wheels, I tell myself. This is just you practicing getting out of the house and doing things normal people do again.

Ever since my boyfriend Rory and I broke up, I've lost all confidence in myself. His betrayal was so devastating that I don't want to leave the house. I feel transparent. I'm so self-conscious that I think everyone who looks at me can see exactly what he did, and I imagine that I must look pitiable to them. Every secret fear I have about myself feels like it's written on a big sign over my head:

I WASN'T PRETTY ENOUGH TO DATE A GUY LIKE THAT.

I'M THE ONLY ONE LEFT WHO IS SINGLE.

IF I WERE SUCCESSFUL, I WOULDN'T BE DOING MY OWN SHOPPING.

THINGS THAT ARE REALLY HARD FOR ME SEEM TO BE EASY FOR OTHER PEOPLE. I WILL NEVER FIT IN ANYWHERE.

IT'S TOO LATE TO FIND LOVE.

I'm lonely every day, and I don't want to be. I don't want his actions to break me. I want to get out and engage with the world again, but I'm too shaken up to risk it. If I were to run into friends or acquaintances that I haven't seen in a while, I would feel obligated to lie about what's going on in my life, and I don't lie very well. There's no way I could put on a brave face and admit what happened. I would burst into tears on the spot. I'm that emotionally fragile right now.

My close friends call to check in. They try to get me to join them for dinner parties, but that inevitably means hanging out with couples, and my singleness feels like a scarlet letter emblazoned across my chest. Rationally, I know that everyone is ultimately self-centered, and they couldn't care less what's going on in my love life. A few women I know might even take some satisfaction in seeing that, indeed, you *can't* have it all. You don't get to be a rock star and have people clap for you, have magazines photograph you, go to awards shows, and still have a happy homelife, do you? You don't get to sing about sex and call men out and still be part of a happy, committed relationship. I wonder sometimes if my own mother agrees on that point. You make choices, and those choices have consequences. Maybe love is not something that is destined to come my way, after the things I've done and the person I've been in the world.

If you think this sounds self-pitying, you're right. This latest heartbreak solidified a fear of mine: I was too far outside of society to ever crawl back in again. I would have to live out the rest of my life on the fringes, always being the odd one out. I was too straight to be deeply enmeshed with the artists' communities I knew, and too bent to settle down with the mainstream suburban crowd I'd grown up with. And now I was alone. Again.

I was a sham, a fraud. The world saw me as a renegade, a fearless maverick, and here I was nervous about making the one big jaunt of my day to the grocery store to flirt with a checkout clerk. This Trader Joe's guy was paid to be friendly. It wasn't even a challenge. I didn't care. I needed something to make the pain disappear for half an hour, and this worked. The pot didn't work, the booze didn't work, but this did. I would come home from Trader Joe's on the days I'd seen him feeling happy and attractive, like I had something to look forward to in life. Where was the harm in it? In the grand scheme of things it seemed like an innocent if embarrassing indulgence. What could go wrong?

When you exit a long-term relationship suddenly, you go a little crazy. The ripping away of someone you love leaves your heart hungry and your arms empty, and you're at a loss as to which way to turn. The only thing you know for sure is that you can't go back the way you came. You must go forward, or sideways, or up, or down; anywhere except home again, because that's not your home anymore. You are temporarily homeless.

Losing love can turn you into a ghost in your own life. You go to all the same places, do the same things, but you're not really there. You're surrounded by friends and family, people with whom you intimately belong, but because your heart is broken, you listen to their laughter and conversation as if from a great distance. You're physically present, but emotionally, you're in some parallel dimension from which you cannot escape, no matter how hard you try. Time will refasten what's come unmoored inside you. In the meantime, you exist in the netherworld, with your face pressed up to the

glass—wishing you could be like those happy people again, so oblivious, seemingly secure, and self-satisfied.

It could be worse, I tell myself as I drive to the store, feeling foolish. I could be home drinking. This is better than that. I park the car and feel like the poster child for low self-esteem as I walk toward the entrance. I know I look good, in that way that turns heads and has no business pushing a grocery cart around. Being in the entertainment business has taught me how to shine when I want to, and I do it so well that I almost consider it an unfair advantage. It is too effective. I can feel it working already as I wipe the cart handle down with the disinfecting wipes. I look lovely; I smell like somewhere you would want to vacation. My perfume floats on the breeze. It's all superficial. It signifies nothing. It's just a way to present myself that garners a reaction.

I push the heavy cart up the brief incline and through the doors, annoyed that I got one with a bum wheel that perpetually sticks. I can't go back and exchange it for another, because that wouldn't fit with the effortless, happy-go-lucky image I'm working so hard to project, so I smile and force the damn thing forward. I feel my long skirt flutter around my bare legs. I scrutinize the produce, my face carefully composed in a mask of equanimity and sweetness, with just a little bit of vulnerability thrown in to make me approachable. I frown in the cutest way as I gently squeeze a mango, taking a quick sniff to assess its ripeness. A man tips his hat at me, and I light up—as if this is the most relaxing and enjoyable experience. But I am stealing surreptitious glances around the store the whole time, scanning the checkout lines to see if Mr. T.J. is working as a cashier. He isn't.

I float down the aisle, checking my shopping list. I stop in front of the refrigerated section where the milk and butter are displayed. I stay there for an extra minute, knowing that the staff in the back can see through the slats. Sometimes when you open the door to reach for cream or yogurt, you see disembodied hands reaching out, restocking the shelves. I'm trawling myself through the store like

angler bait, a shiny and tasty-looking morsel that's hoping to get a bite.

He's not working today. I've made sure to waft around the premises several times, but it's clear I've gotten all dressed up for nothing. I'm disappointed, and also angry with myself. I can't pretend that this isn't a ridiculous waste of money and time. What is it that I want to have happen, anyway? I don't really want to date a Trader Joe's cashier. I want my boyfriend back. But not the person he actually is; I want the person I thought he was—a person who doesn't technically exist. I can remember one day in the car, close to the end of our relationship, when he looked at me and said, "You don't really love me. You love the person you wish I were." I told him that wasn't true. I assured him that I was in love with him. But it turns out he was right. I was in love with a made-up man; involved, once again, with my own imagination.

I see one of the women who works the same shifts as Mr. T.J. She recognized me from my music career, and we've said hi a couple of times. She's definitely noticed my uptick in shopping habits, and I wouldn't be surprised if she knows why. I decide to take a chance and strike up a casual conversation. I ask her about Mr. T.J. She says he's supersweet, goofy, and almost childlike in his naïveté. I've noticed that from our brief interactions. That is part of what is so appealing about him to me, I guess: that he looks like my ex but in a completely nonthreatening form. A declawed version of the body I'm pining for.

Do you remember that movie where Michael Keaton clones himself so that he can have more free time? *Multiplicity*. The first iteration he makes is a tough guy, a real all-American male. The second clone is effeminate; a sensitive, gay version of himself. The third is a simpleton, a replica that came out wrong in the most cheerful, idiotic way. That's what Mr. T.J. reminds me of: a soft-minded stand-in for the guy who broke my heart. I guess, in some weird way, I'm trying to find closure with a look-alike, because I can't ever reach out to my ex again.

The moment I latched on to this crazy notion was swift and unexpected. I was in the checkout line with my son after school. We were waiting for our turn at the register and I said, “Hey, doesn’t that guy look like Rory?”

Nick glanced up briefly. “Kind of. I guess. A little.”

But I was struck by the similarities. He really looked like a gentler, friendlier, slightly heavier doppelgänger of my ex. I couldn’t stop staring at him as he chatted affably with the person ahead of me, whose groceries he was packing. His voice was loud. I think he liked showing off. He seemed so unselfconscious and eager to engage. My wounded heart started to beat a little faster. I missed the way my boyfriend had completed me. I missed having his strong presence around, protecting me; the way our personalities balanced each other out.

When it was my turn at the register, Mr. T.J. chatted loudly with me, too. I can’t remember what we talked about. We just made casual conversation. But there was a moment when I was pushing an item forward on the conveyer belt, and he was reaching back for it, and our hands touched. I swear to God, I felt electricity shoot through my whole body. I pulled my hand away quickly, but it left an impression. My interest in him went from curiosity to full-blown attraction. It didn’t matter what my logical brain told me anymore. The injured, hurting side of me got a hit of what it was missing, and all of a sudden I had a hankering for the Trader Joe’s dude.

This has to be a common occurrence. I can’t be the only one who falls for these affable hipsters who work half the year and travel the rest. There are a lot of lonely people out there— stumbling through the daily grind, moved to the point of tears by somebody’s unexpected interest in them. It feels like a cold world sometimes. We can go days without anybody touching us or noticing how we’re feeling. Seeing a familiar face in the neighborhood, particularly a young, nice-looking one, and having that person ask you about yourself is intoxicating when you’re low, and the next thing you know you’re stopping by the store too often. Smart business plan.

But now I'm taking the ill-advised step of trying to make the fantasy real. I've run out of things to say to the woman who works with Mr. T.J. I know this is my one chance to broach the subject before I think better of it and run away. I finally muster the courage to let her see my need. "Do you know if he has a girlfriend?" I ask, like I'm the kind of person who inquires about men all the time; like I'm someone who behaves in totally the opposite way from how I actually do.

"Yeah, I think he does." She winces sympathetically, which is about the best reaction I could hope for.

"Oh well," I say, shrugging. I am grateful that she doesn't register any judgment, any tiny glint of mocking superiority.

"But I can ask," she offers helpfully.

"No, no, please don't," I beg. "Don't say anything. Don't even say I asked."

"Of course not!" She's very understanding. I feel a kinship between us now. A simple human gesture of empathy can mean so much when you're out of alignment. I head toward the checkout line, strangely relieved to know that my interest will never turn into anything more. I guess I know deep down that I won't find what I'm looking for in a Trader Joe's store. But I am confused as to why he gave such special attention to me. In the past few weeks, he's been very solicitous. When we bump into each other in the aisle, he tells me about his travels—how he works part of the year to be able to take the rest of the time off, visiting places all over the world. I listen, nodding, staring at his face trying to see a better, kinder Rory in it.

One day when I came in, he brought out a painting from the back storage area that he'd purchased for me somewhere in Indonesia. It was a hideous example of its genre, one of those dark, acrylic tourist items depicting palm trees in front of the ocean at sunset. I felt really weird leaving the store with a big painting in my cart, but it was so nice to have something a man carried halfway around the world to give to me.

He told me he was one of those guys who brings presents to all of his friends, so I didn't read too much into it. Still, now that I know

he has a girlfriend, I think it's a bit shady. I've seen this dynamic before. My career has this effect on people. Celebrity, however minor, turns people's heads. I try to be the person that I am, but my public image hangs around me like a fog. I can see it in people's eyes as they're talking to me. Once they figure out what I do for a living, they start working out how they can benefit from knowing me, calculating how much access to other celebrities having me in their life would bring them. I don't get mad or feel exploited; I usually just feel dismayed and sense a gap widening between us. It's not their fault. Celebrity is like a disease. It has a predictable pathology, and it's catching.

I leave Trader Joe's knowing that whatever unhealthy impulse took me down this road has reached a dead end. I'm sorry not to have the distraction of my crush anymore. I start shopping at Whole Foods instead. The next time I go to Trader Joe's, I'm back in my sweats and T-shirt like a sane person.

One day about six months later, around Christmastime, I'm in the store with my friend Tracey. Mr. T.J. comes bounding up, glowing with excitement. He says he has something special for me. "You haven't been here for a while, and I was afraid I wasn't going to see you before the holidays!"

Tracey and I glance at each other. What can he mean? He runs off to the stockroom and comes back out carrying a giant gift basket with an assortment of gourmet foodstuffs that he's assembled for me. He's carrying it over his head, obviously proud of himself, and everybody's watching us. Seeing this interaction through my friend's eyes is mortifying. She instantly knows that I must have been doing something I shouldn't have to warrant this lavish display, but I assure her that I'm as surprised as she is. In fact, I'm so embarrassed by my earlier state of mind that I'm almost dismissive of my part in starting this madness. I want to erase any of my own responsibility in getting this guy all agitated.

In my defense, his gestures are always outsized to the circumstances. It's just the way he is. I've probably only ever talked to him



at the store four or five times. He told me when we met that he's generous, that he likes to do things for people. But still, this whole basket delivery is odd. I take my enormous basket and try not to blush crimson. I feel ridiculous walking toward the checkout. My mind is racing. What does this mean? Why would somebody act like this? What does he want? Tracey is smirking. She thinks he wants to sleep with me. I wish I had never flirted with him. He asks for my number, and out of obligation, I give it to him.

"Maybe we can go get coffee sometime," he says. I say sure, and he looks satisfied. There's something in his eyes at that moment, something much harder and more calculating, that snaps me back to attention. He's not the innocent goof that he pretends to be. I've gotten myself in way over my head. Once again, I've zeroed in on the guy who's presenting a false front, a personality trait that I apparently find very sexy.

He calls to ask me out to lunch later that week, and I accept. I don't know why, whether I'm still in thrall to my crush or feel like I owe it to him. After all, I'm the one who started this mess.

We meet at the Northside Café. We sit out on the sidewalk, dining alfresco. The conversation is awkward. He tells me way too much about himself, about his family and his abusive stepdad. His childhood doesn't sound happy. I listen, but I am very uncomfortable. I'm acutely aware that I should not be having lunch with him. I'm trying to think of how to get out of this situation, of how to prevent things from going any further. He's telling me about his motorcycle.

And then comes the kicker: He pulls out his cellphone and, with an excited look on his face, formally asks me to attend his wedding in Mexico. "It's going to be great," he enthuses, showing me a picture of his fiancée, and another one of their wedding invitation. "If you give me your address, I can send you a proper paper copy."

I'm stunned. I thought he was trying to hook up with me. Is this guy crazy? Why on earth would he think I would want to go to a

stranger's destination wedding in Mexico, let alone to the marriage ceremony of a man I've just been flirting with?

The threads of our interaction are unraveling fast, and he can feel it. He tries to keep my attention focused on him, but I'm calculating how much longer I'll have to remain seated before I can get up and flee. He natters on about his fiancée and tells me that they live over a mortuary on Sepulveda Boulevard. This detail strikes me as particularly morbid.

"Aren't you scared?" I ask him. "Doesn't it creep you out to know that dead people are lying in coffins right below you?"

"Not at all," he assures me. He loves their place. It's cheap and big.

And haunted, I think, but I don't say anything. I thank him for the invitation but very firmly decline to attend their nuptials. He looks crestfallen. How could he have thought I would come? I'm suddenly scrutinizing my own behavior over the course of this ill-conceived romance, looking for clues as to why I find myself in these absurd circumstances.

I stop shopping at Trader Joe's altogether. It's too bad, because it was convenient, but I'm glad I can exit the situation so cleanly. I really have no one but myself to blame. This is why, I tell myself, you have to stay in your own lane, try to do things properly. After a while, I forget about Mr. T.J. I still have issues to work through about my ex, but I'm past the excruciating phase of the breakup, and I don't feel so lonely or needy anymore.

About a year later, I stop by Trader Joe's to pick up some quick necessities. I don't even think about Mr. T.J. while I'm there, but I do run into the woman who worked with him, the one I'd spoken to. She pulls me aside, a concerned look on her face.

"I don't know if you heard what happened," she tells me, "but I know you guys were close."

I feel all prickly with anticipation, and defensive, too. How could she think Mr. T.J. and I were close? What has he been telling everybody?

“John committed suicide.”

I stare at her. She can't mean the same person. She can't mean that friendly, happy-go-lucky, handsome young man. “But he just got married . . .” My voice trails off.

“I know.” She checks to make sure I'm handling the news okay. “It's really sad. He killed himself about six months ago. I just thought you should know.”

We look at each other for a while. In the silence, we both communicate our understanding that, beyond the formalities of social norms, people who shop or work or live near each other know a lot more about one another's lives than they let on.

“We weren't close,” I feel compelled to state. It's a stupid, petty, vain thing to say in this moment, but I need her to know this. “We just saw each other at the store, and had lunch once.”

“Yeah, but you guys were friends,” she insists.

I stop myself from correcting her. There's no point. I roll the cart down the aisle in slow motion, trying to imagine how someone so alive and engaging could be dead, gone, buried or cremated. He doesn't exist at all. I'm in the world and he's not anymore. What problems, what issues, was he hiding behind that happy exterior? I flash back to that first touch of our hands. I can see his blue eyes clearly. I can see better now that he was reaching out from a place of pain, just like I was—only I was too wrapped up in my own misery to notice. That must have been the electricity, the spark of connection between us. We were both among the walking wounded. It's terribly sad to contemplate.

I realize that this guy whom I barely knew is now permanently part of my story. I have no choice but to remember him. I'll bet a million bucks that was part of the logic running through his mind when he decided to take his own life, the assurance that every person he'd ever helped or tried to get close to would be shocked, would reevaluate him after he was gone. We would all have to carry him with us in our memories forever, whether we wanted to or not. I

pass the canned tomatoes and pasta, the olive oil and the spices. I hear the bell above the office ringing, and the checkout people laughing and calling out to one another in that affable, warm, uniquely Trader Joe's atmosphere. The sun streams in through the windows and the flowers outside the doors burst in a profusion of color, little honeybees buzzing around the blossoms. What a world.

The next time I see the young woman who worked with Mr. T.J., she's manning the checkout line, bagging my groceries. She looks drawn and tired. I ask her how she's doing, and she tells me her mother's been in the hospital with a serious illness. She's been going to visit her every day after she gets off work, sometimes staying with her all night, and she isn't getting any sleep. I read between the lines that her mom may not recover. I listen and try to comfort her. I'm glad to be able to return the caring and empathy she showed me when I was at my lowest. And I'm touched that these human connections can be made out of barely any interaction at all. It just takes a sensitive and perceptive outlook. In the end, we're all going through the same shit, trying to make it through the day with our own private struggles. The stranger next to you is so much more like you than you think.

I start shopping at Trader Joe's again. There's a new Mr. T.J. who's even better-looking and more socially adept than John. He and I have a light, flirtatious rapport, but I know not to take it any further now. Sometimes when I see him, he does outrageously cute things, like blow me kisses from his bicycle when he's riding home from a shift. Once, I bumped into him at Vons, a competing grocery store, and he accused me of cheating on him. He definitely makes my heart beat faster, and it adds a sparkle to my day, but the specter of the former Mr. T.J. hangs like a curtain between us.

It may not be fair or ideal, but these arbitrary divisions in society—customer versus worker, older versus younger, established versus just starting out—they exist for our own protection as much as to maintain the social order. Without meaning to, we sometimes scrape

the safety layer off and end up penetrating one another's lives more deeply than we intend to. Certain collisions, it turns out, are just too hard to take. I'm not saying you should abide by the rules society lays out for you all the time, but I sure as hell recommend not flouting them heedlessly. Just do your shopping and go home and cry in your pajamas like a winner.