We’re All Mad Here
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Falling in love was never part of the plan. The realization hits you while you're sitting on a stool in your teeny-tiny kitchen, picking at the de-canned and reheated meatballs your roommate forced you to buy. You know for certain that you won't finish them. Or even start them, really.

You end up forcing two down your throat before tossing the rest into the trash. They taste like failure. So does love.

You know it will only get worse. This distraction will interfere with your plan. Your agenda. Your meticulously laid-out timetable. You will become immersed in the experience. That's what happens every time you find something new to play with. You know it won't last.

Except it does.

Weirdly enough, he likes you too. You're both weird, so that works out perfectly, at least in his mind. He counts the stairs every single day on the way to work. There are twenty-three. He doesn’t step on the spaces between pavement tiles. His underwear is organized by color and style (he only wears boxers, anyway, the rest are neatly placed on the very edge of the shelf, never to be touched for the fear of an existential crisis stemming from having worn the wrong kind of underwear).

The first time you have sex is a disaster. You're freaking out over the fact that the sheets may be stained. You know you shouldn’t care, nobody’s going to see them. Your mom is thousands of miles away. Dad is dead.

He kisses your forehead and tells you it’s going to be okay. You count each other’s breaths together.

Then you google how to put on a condom.

Holding hands is uncomfortable when both of you are sweating. His hand twitches in yours. Yours twitches back, as if it knows the right way to respond to this: almost like a mating call. You learn to ignore the sinking feeling of dread every single time he reaches out his hand to curl around yours. He only holds your left. Always on the left. The right just feels weird.

You start living together three months into the relationship. Perhaps that's a bit too early, but who cares? You don’t want to overpay for a studio apartment.

The first thing you learn about him is that he had to spend exactly thirteen and a half minutes in the bathroom every night after dinner. You stop watching the clock a week later after the realization comes. Copies of The Economist begin to pile up beside the toilet. You don’t throw them away in case he has a fit.

He tries not to say anything that will make you go off on him. He fails when you sneak out of bed at four in the morning to down an entire gallon of Coke and a bag of pistachios. You don’t even like pistachios. Why did you even have them in the pantry? You cry. He cries a bit too.

You clean up the shells together.
Traveling together is hard. By the time you reach passport control he is shaking. You have been driving yourself crazy wondering what kind of food they would serve you on the plane.

The two of you spend most of the flight pretending to be asleep, curled around each other. Just so that the flight attendant would walk right by and not push you into an existential crisis over still or sparkling.

You’re parched by the end of it but at least you’re safe.

The two of you argue about who’s going to talk to the cab driver. The man looks intimidating.

They all do.

The hotel is dirty.

He holds you why you break down.

While he naps, you sneak out and steal bleach from housekeeping.

At dinner, you order a salad without cheese, pine nuts and tuna.

You order lettuce.

He gently manipulates you into getting fish as well. Well, you eat half of his, so maybe that doesn’t count as a real meal, right? It’s the thought that counts.

You share a brownie. It doesn’t taste much like failure. Just a little bit, maybe. Failure and some weird raspberry jam thing that they put on top of it. You make a face.

His mother calls. You listen to him not speak while she talks on and on about her day. Eventually, he nods and murmurs something that sounds like I love you, bye. His parents are happy he has someone.

A week after you return, he gets an email from the firm he applied to.

He didn't get the job.

You hold him while he talks to you about how much of a failure he is.

Then you tell him he isn’t.

You get evicted a month later.

That makes you realize that you don't have any friends.

His parents help out. You move into the old apartment they'd been renting out to someone else.

You strip the walls bare of the wallpaper and paint over the cracks.

He gets a job.

You pick up smoking.

Both seem fine.

Your wedding day is a chain of stressful events. His best man ends up screwing the waiter in the bathroom. One of your numerous aunts is high on weed (hopefully just weed). Public speaking makes both of you want to die on the spot, so you’re anxious about the upcoming circus. You lean back when your mother tries to hug you. She gives you a pitying, resentful glance that you've almost learned to forget with him.
Everyone gives you that look.
Everyone but him.
As you hold hands and say I do, you wonder if you are marrying him just for that.
You wonder if he wonders that.
You wonder if the others wonder that too.
His lips on yours ground you.