

He was a flicker of light and darkness

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While you were at home

He asked how many...

While you were sleeping

How many how many guys I've destroyed emotionally. Left them in ruins and ran away. I thought that was a good thing. My daddy had always said, "My little girl is going to be a little heartbreaker"... But him standing in front of me, with tears in his eyes, was not what I expected.

When I cheated on him, all I could think of was Nick. My boyfriend, Alessandro was unaware, sleeping. He had gone home that night, tired, didn't wanna hang out or talk, so he just slept. So, I went to Nick's house and we slept together. Alessandro didn't understand my appreciation for Nick. How special he made me feel and how sweet his kisses were, how soft his lips were, and how much he appreciated me in his life. Stuff Alessandro never did.

The first time he slapped me it felt like a kiss... I fell to the floor, and out of shock I stood up and pushed him back. I got worried when I saw his head hit the AC... I saw blood, so I defended myself: "my god, don't be such a baby." I said, "you barely got anything."

He "forgot" his shoes that time at my place, that's why he had come to "talk." It was the last time we ever saw each other; I will never forget the last thing he told me...

"Hope you don't get any diseases, there's a lot of them going around nowadays."

The Room of Every Person You've Ever Pissed Off

There is a room, people have walked into it since you were born. These people all hate you, despise you even. Most of the people might be exes. Alex clears his voice and speaks; “Hi, my name is Alex. I’m new here,” he scratches his head “They told me in the entrance that there’s really no point in being here, we just shit-talk—”

“Yeah, *so-and-so* is a horrible person, there is no point to the room other than *it* existing,” says number 21.

This room is filled with everyone who hates you, everyone you did wrong and wishes you nothing but bad things... and this is their arena.

Alex, number 39: Just broke up with *so-and-so*, he goes into *so-and-so's* brain becoming part of *The Room of Every Person You've Ever Pissed Off*. It was a messy breakup, Alex had called you a crazy bitch because of being insecure... for you, it was cheating if he liked other girls’ pictures on Instagram, if he looked at other girls in the street, even if he was kind to a random stranger who happened to be a girl. “*So-and-so* was crazy, I introduced her to my family, and we planned to have kids together,” he paused. “I hate her. I hate her. I hate her. Why did I put so much importance on this person?”

Number twenty-one speaks. “Nice to meet you, thirty-nine,” he says reading the number on his chest and then shaking his hand. “My name is Ray, I was *so-and-so's* freshman landlord.

She's such a bitch, she left the wet towels on the floor, brought strangers to the house and drank with them in the kitchen, snored loudly, an overall nightmare really..."

"She was in my creative writing class and said my characters were 'unrealistic.' Can you believe that?!" Said 24.

"When we were in school, we hooked up and she said that I raped her. Which is totally not true, we literally just hooked up..." said number 20.

20 and you in fact did *not* hook up, you know this story all too well, but you had this party at your parents', he was invited and after the party, he took you to a room in your empty house and bad things happened. You don't like talking about it a lot 'cause it gets you down.

Changing topic, Alex and you were really close... as he said, you saw a future together but what you just can't understand is why exactly he hates you so much because he *does* hate you so much and you just miss him.

Number 1 is president of the haters of *so-and-so* (You) she was there first. Let me explain her real quick, she's not that important other than the fact she was the first. Apparently, when you were in preschool you pulled her hair... You were angry at her for not sharing her toy Thomas and Friends' train, so you did it. She gets to be president because she was the first person you've pissed off.

"Guys," Megan, 1, said. "Settle down."

She was a pretty girl, can't deny it. "Let's start the meeting saying goodbye to the *move-ons*, this month we have number three and twenty-eight."

The *move-ons*; the guys who got over your actions and do not longer choose to live in *The Room of Every Person You've Ever Pissed Off*.

“Thank you guys! Your being so petty about *so-and-so* made me realize just how much I wanna live life, it's not like I'm moving into *The Room of Every Person Who Wishes You Well!* I'm not there yet since I haven't heard from *so-and-so* ever since she called me stupid in grade school,” says number three.

Everyone has a room *Piss-off room*, just like everyone has a *R.E.P.W.W.Y.W. (Room of Every Person Who Wishes You Well)*. You don't go into the ladder very much, you think it's a waste of time. But you *do* like going to the *piss-off* room. In there, people get to stay there go into like a separate room, paying a fee every month, and it is easier to pay it because people in the *Piss-off* room hate so much, that they create so much negativity, negativity is what powers the room. You say you like going into the *piss-off* room because it helps you learn from your mistakes, but that's not it is it? It's because you hate yourself a little bit and you find it comforting to visit the *piss-off* hotel, the *heartbreak* hotel, the *shitty person* hotel. The past.

At that moment, doors open and you walk into the room. Silence is deafening, you start talking to them. First is Alex. “Do you wanna go to the food truck festival with me?” You said. “Let's get it over with, rip open the bandage, address the elephant in the room!”

The food truck festival was nice, it was mainly Asian food and you didn't have the heart to tell Alex that you don't love dumplings even though that Pixar short film was freaking adorable. But you eat them, regardless. Alex flirts with you, a previous hater who doesn't hate you anymore, so after the date you go into a *piss-off* room with Alex, everyone yelling at you or looking at you with despise in their eyes. This time with Alex you go to the front desk, there's Annie working there. She was a girl who you had a rivalry with in middle school but now has been done hating you. She now works in the *piss-off* room.

“Hi,” says Alex to Annie. “I don’t really know how this works, it’s my first time here.”

You tell him it’s no biggie, then you ask Annie for a sign and release form, Alex takes 5-10 minutes to fill it up after he’s gone he shakes Annie’s hand, he hugs you and he leaves.

Just like that.

That’s your job. You invite people in the room of everyone you’ve ever pissed off to dinner or lunch, and sometimes they say yes, most times no, though. Interestingly though, you don’t go into the room of every person who wishes you well, you think it’s cheesy. Your sister goes into her own room sometimes, she takes pride in it, she loves being in a room in which she’s appreciated and loved, it’s kind of corny. Your sister doesn’t like going to the piss-off room to sign and release people so they become move-ons.

And everyone has these rooms. You learned to access yours when you’re sleeping, right before *actually* falling asleep you think about someone who hates you and is in a piss-off room, closing your hands really hard and keeping it that way. *Boom*, you’re in the hallway of the intangible realm of existence. Waiting room music plays, music disgustingly upbeat but not loud enough to drive you completely fucking crazy. You walk into the *Piss Off* room, it’s big, and there are bunk beds all around, on the top of it there’s money that will be donated to Charity, thank you very much, with all the money gained by the rent of the piss off room in a giant transparent ball. The looks of the people scare you, sometimes they hurt you, they scratch you, shove you... kinda makes you happy they get body searched before going into the room, otherwise you would have been stabbed by now.

After that, Alex found self-love, and when one finds self-love you cannot be in any *Piss Off* room, you just can’t. That’s the same case for number 1, Megan. After she left, people

realized it was kinda silly that the first person who hated you first was the leader, so it became a matter of *how* much they hated you. They each got a paper and were told to set a number from 1 to 100 about how much they hate you. Unsurprisingly, number 20, Liam, was the one with the highest score. He was always so salty about you opening your mouth to express just what he did. You told the principal about the sexual assault and the principal felt for you, she really did—but there's no way you can prove that, so, that's that. Anyway, when Megan left, Liam became the president, he's the one that keeps the haters actively hating you, he made a wall with all your bad character traits in bold letters pinned to the wall.

Liam is a great hater, he has so much potential as an active hater.

And with time, people either move on or keep the funding for the room going, they place their money in the desk and Annie sends it up to the ball. People come, people go and the one thing you take comfort in is the fact that everyone has a *Piss Off* room.

You're not a horrible person.

Are you?

No, you're not.

But what about that time you got a kid expelled because they were bullying you?

That's not that bad is it?

Well, I guess not.

No

Everyone has a piss off room. How many people are in yours?

Girl in a ditch

After: Ernest Hemingway's "Cat in the rain."

The Argent family was the only French one in the *A praia* hotel. Their baby girl had gone missing two weeks ago and it felt hopeless already because of the incompetent job of the Portuguese police.

"Je manque mon bébé, mon cœur," the wife was crying.

"Je sais, chérie," comforted the husband. *"Je sais."*

There was a knock at the door, the husband let the person in.

"Sir, there's someone in the lobby asking to talk to both of you about Ma..." he cleared his throat. "About the situation."

The French husband stood up, walked to the door and slammed it shut; that's how he felt about journalists covering this story, because it wasn't just any story, it was *their* story. Amelie

kept telling his husband that publicity is good, that whoever took Madeleine was most likely found if everyone was searching for their sweet four-year-old.

Madeleine's brother Dumas felt guilty. He was in the same room Maddy was in when they took her, but he has a strong and powerful ability to sleep, and this deep sleep made him not hear a single thing. He went to his dad a day after the kidnapping and told him.

"C'est de ma faute, papa, c'est de ma faute." he cried.

His dad kneeled in front of his eight-year-old. *"Cher, it's not your fault,"* he told him. "You were sleeping." Dumas was crying. "You were sleeping, and even if you weren't, you're not Superman, you cannot attack a dangerous man without being hurt... Maddy..." he took a breath. "Maddy, wherever she is, I'm sure she doesn't blame you at all."

What the husband didn't tell Dumas is what *he* would have done being in that room. Probably murder him for even looking at his little girl.

He was having dinner with his wife the night it happened, in a restaurant across the street from *A praia*. They had a system in which each of them would leave the restaurant to check on the kids every 30 minutes. They were paranoid without having to be, that is of course, until Amelie went to her second check of the kids. The door was open, the window was open. She could smell alcohol solution in the room which the police told her was used by the suspect to hide his fingerprints (they hoped not something else) from the scene of the crime.

The family had gone to Portugal every year 9 years in a row, since when the French couple had just gotten married. They never thought something like this would happen to them. Madeleine was a sweet girl, she was bright; her teacher from her first year of preschool had told them. In the trip, she loved going to the beach, the sandcastles, the sun, seeing the occasional

crab. His brother Dumas though liked the pool better, this because he loved swimming, but the sea was too scary for him, fear his dad had passed on to him by saying things like “Be careful out there,” and “Use your floaties or you’ll drown.”

Dumas loved his sister, and her sister loved him. Sometimes she would wear her brother’s eyeglasses and pretend she was him, she wanted to be like him just as much as any young brother wants to be their older sibling when growing up. He couldn’t sleep at night because he would wonder what happened to her sister, he could overhear her parents fighting all the time about media appearances, the police’s work, the bills...the dammed bills. Accumulating like cancer in their lives, because they were staying a hotel and eating out instead of staying in their home in Nice making food themselves like Coq au vin, Steak tartar, and Maddy’s favorite; Fromage de Tete.

At home rested Lara, she was watching TV with her kid, João when a news announcement popped up, it was about the French couple and little girl Madeleine Argent, Amelie was speaking with an interviewer. The interviewer had asked a question: “How long will you look for Madeleine?” Without a quiver of a doubt, she replied. “I will look for her forever.” That’s when little João turned to his mom, his big brown eyes filled with innocence and a hint of fear. “Mommy,” he said. “Would you still look at me forever?”

Lara was a police officer in the Algarve region of Portugal, in the same town where Madeleine went missing. After her son’s question she had asked her superiors plenty of times to be put in the case, them saying no because she was an excellent Highway patrol and had only

done a little detective work. A week after the ceaseless and constant nagging she was put in the case. Her job was mainly to work with the parents, make sure they are safe from the media, providing a source of comfort and updating the family about the current state of things regarding the case. The comfort part of her job was complicated due to the parents' obvious desperation and anguish, especially the lack of calm towards the officers and media that believed the daughter had walked out of the bedroom. There was a chair placed next to the door which many people believed meant Madeleine had with it become tall enough to reach the handle and walk out. This theory was refuted however, because of two reasons, the simpler one being that the chair was already there in the hotel room even before the abduction and the second one was that the chair contained fingerprints from an unknown suspect that did not belong to either one of the parents, Dumas, any of the hotel staff etc.

By the second week the media died down a bit, the stories on the news TV focusing mainly on sports and celebrities as usual. The mom desperately wanted to keep the police investigation alive even though she knew the police "contaminated" the crime scene instead of preserving it to get as much clues as possible as to what happened the hot night of summer of the abduction. They also did not close the roads on the Algarve until 2 days after Madeleine had gone missing, which is worrisome because by then the kidnapper could have already fled with Madeleine or was no longer moving her, making it impossible for the police to catch him red handed.

When they found Maddy's body though, the couple didn't blame the police for their (in the couples' opinion) a *merde* of a job, but instead they blamed themselves. She was lying in a ditch, with her pajamas still on. Kate howled a sound that can only be described as animalistic

when she saw her baby girl. On top of that, it had rained several times in the two weeks she was missing, and the husband hoped she didn't lie in the ditch for a long time for her to be cold, even if she was already dead.

Her funeral was back home, Lara went, leaving João with her mother (She was a widow), they appreciated her attendance very much, especially because the funeral was a small and intimate one; they didn't wanna attract too much attention. The clergy spoke: "Precious jewel, you glowed, you shone, reflecting all the good things in the world."

Bread and wine

His dimples were carved by angels, and then there were his eyes... so, so sad. Locked behind a metal curtain. His voice was raspy and empty, tired but full of sorrow. He hadn't eaten or slept very well for four days now; he told me he liked my feet, he said they were very cute. He liked my glasses, he said they were sexy. With woe of martir he developed a sloth so consumed by sadness and grief encapsuled in his 20 by 20 room, smelling of pity, erasing of a voice telling him to off himself, and instead of that he called me he called me.

Funny? Did you hear that? Yeah, the guy said "Honey, you're a funny girl." And that's all I ever was to him, because in that heart there was already somebody living, the girl in the picture. What am I supposed to say? That she's pretty? There's a reason why you love her and keep choosing her over me. We kissed and it felt like empty, I've never tasted borrowed lips before. Maybe that's why but I'll keep falling for the unavailable ones and keep rejecting the ones to lovey. Because I was taught to choose who didn't love me and they obeyed who didn't appreciate me. "Thank you for coming," he said. "You saved my life." God I hope it's not true, suicide makes me so sad because only the kindness and most interesting people do it.

Some people won't give up their spot on the bus, but these people feel so deeply that they would give up their lives. And alex was no exception. Voices kept telling me he was just another face I was gonna forget, another number on the list. But the first time I saw him I pictured the life for us, in which we took care of each other.

In that movie, before killing herself the woman made a bucket list to accomplish. "Salvar una vida y cuidarla," it said. Now I just need to do the second part, that's it, if he lets me. Anf for every mistake a consequence in my life hit me in the stomach, life felt like 1000 miles an hour and at times so slow as a turtle. But there was only one thing I wanted to be sure of, that was

you, with your magic spell and your kind words, drinking wine and eating bread like it was a whole ass meal. Maybe he thinks he's Jesus.

He caressed my face and my hair and it sent a tingle throughout my spine, his fingers were soft like the sun in a quiet Sunday morning, and I couldn't get enough. Please touch me again, please *love* me. Let me show you how happy you can be and how you'll never feel lonely. And I promise I wont write you another love story.

First date

Maria got into the car, her heart beating in her ears. Michael said hi. It was her first date since breaking up with Isaiah and she was more nervous than what she expected to be. “Your Tinder bio seemed kinda vague,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me more about yourself, gorgeous.”

Maria flinched. Hearing the out of scenario compliment.

“Well, I have one kid, Luis,” she swallowed. “It came out of a toxic relationship but he’s the love of my life. I like books. My favorite color is orange, but the type of orange you see in sunsets. I am 5’2, I like karoake thought I suck at singing and love runway shows, thought I could never do one myself. I’m kind yet brave when I need to be.”

Michael nodded. “Thank you for your candor. Tell me about your kid.”

“Well, he’s shy. Dirty blond like his father, loves languages. He knows English and Intermediate Spanish, and now he wishes to learn some Portuguese since his new dream is to watch a soccer match in Rio.”

The man looked at her for a second, then for a split second looked at her skirt. She had chosen a green flower dress which sitting down in the car appeared shorter than she would like

“I’m not gonna lie to you, Maria,” he smiled. “You seem like a very interesting person.”

“Well, now tell me about you,” Maria said.

“To your surprise, no one calls me Mike, other than my siblings when they are trying to annoy me, or the occasional new person you meet without them knowing better. I like video games, consider myself classy *even* though I pick up shorts to wear for almost everything. I like laughing... and making people laugh. I’m an orphan, my parents died in a car accident a few years bac. Which is sadm but I don’t let myself get too sad about it since my parents were the

happiest people I've ever seen. This ring," he said pointing at a silver ring in his anular finger. "Was given to me in my favorite bar for eating the most chicken nuggets in a chicken nugget eating competition."

Maria laughed.

"I'm on Tinder because I broke up with my ex 6 months ago 'cause she cheated and the last thing she said to me was: "You'll never find someone better than me," so I'm actively trying to prove her wrong. That's how I came to match with you, sweetie," he said and winked.

Maria, charmed, smiled.

In the depths of the Tiber River

It feels like you're being drowed but you don't have the energy to care, feels like life is just a 1.50 euro bus ticket you can use and dispose of. Things are black and white, you don't even remember what color was like. You remember "Loving him was red," missing him was blue and crying for him was grey. Fighting for him was like drawing a beautiful picture in a school drawing board and then realizing it's a permanent marker. When she jumped, from Ponte Sisto the dream of faalling her became real, and now everyone who hates her gets to ignore her.

Loving him was red

We were gonna break up, I don't know if she knew this already, but I did. Her face was tired and long after a hard's days night, my boo, my Lisa. She said it didn't feel like before, that it was all bullshit because she wanted to return to the beginning, when we had just fallen in love in high school; when we were kids who didn't know any better. The magic was gone and remained two strangers only connected by the need to express love and be happy. Life was a pen that was pressed too hard and made a mess. A soliloquy, a dying monologue. Lisa felt herself falling, she dreamed about her teeth falling at least once a week; insecurity. That opening her eyes was her punishment, she was at her mom's house when sleeping back home with Marcus when she woke up. Why did she have to wake up? Why can't she just sleep forever? Remain a little dead like that, always. But she did wake up and so did her need to download a dating app, see all those people who would swipe on her, who would love her better, want her more.

"I wanna break up."

And he knew she meant it as she said it. He thought about those were six years he would never get back when he sobbed alone in the bathroom. Reminiscing of everything, she's lost and all those days he had in the future that he didn't know what to do to fill them up with now. Park walks, museam visits, coffee runs? Nothing compared to her absence and her kisses, nothing was the same and there was no color. All color removed from life, all life removed from him. He wondered about what would happen to their love without her.

Sex room

Mara walks into a room, she doesn't know anyone in it, follow the lighted path. She does, and at the end of it there is a desk. "Welcome to Pleasure Inc. Can I see your badge?" She pulls out her phone and shows it to the lady. "Come on in," she walks in the room within the other room. The moment she does a cloud of smoke smacks her head like the hand of God. Nevertheless, she keeps walking.

People are doing it all around it, shamelessly. "Oop, sorry I forgot," the lady from the entrance catches up to her. "No phones allowed from this point on." She hands in her phone.

In that moment, she missed Alex, but kept walking. People were all around her in the sofas doing it, with confidence, the kind of confidence only possible with no phones allowed. The room was slightly lighted, there was no light other than the blue and red led lights on the wall. It smelled... no it reeked of weed, she didn't know why it was that she decided to go. With all her clothes on, she felt exposed. A friend told her about Pleasure's Inc and since she hadn't hooked up since the breakup, she decided to come. She took a seat in the sofa, a waiter approached her with a glass of prosecco he set on the table, the table was sticky. "Tha- Thank you," she said.

The waiter left, then she sipped her prosecco, not really knowing if it was a prosecco or just regular wine... maybe champagne. She became uncomfortable at the sex noises she could hear, nervous and horny. A man approached her. "Hey."

"I'm married," she said. *Where did that come from?* She realized how ridiculous it was to go to a sex party without having sex, yet it might be exactly what she was doing, she missed her ex again. Remembered about the times when they made love and how nice it felt to be not only wanted but cherished, she wondered if anyone here tonight felt cherished, probably not. As she went off on this tangent, she had not realized a different man was staring at her, it was a man

standing in the opposite side of the room. He was wearing a tuxedo and she couldn't help but focus on his very nice watch. She noticed because it was in the hand that held the glass of hard liquor that he raised up to his mouth every minute or so.

She smiled. A difficult—no, a bold thing to do in a room like this one, but she felt charmed so she did. Then she signaled him to come to her. He walked slow and steady towards her. When he was in front of her he spoke: “Hi, I’m Howard.”

“Stacy,” said Mara.

They shook hands.