

REJECTION

Fiction

TONY
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The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

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Dedication

To Jenny, Alice, and Anthony

Epigraph

—but dearer are those who reject us as unworthy, for they add another life: they build a heaven before us, whereof we had not dreamed, and thereby supply to us new powers out of the recesses of the spirit, and urge us to new and unattempted performances.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

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The Feminist

If you ask him where he went to high school, he likes to boast that, actually, he went to an all-girls school. Which is sort of true—he was one of five males at a progressive private school that had gone co-ed just before he'd enrolled. People always reply: *Ooh la la, lucky guy! You must've had your pick.* Which irritates him, because it implies that women would only date him if they had few other options, and also because he hadn't dated anyone in high school. (In junior year a freshman girl had a crush on him, but he wasn't attracted to her curvaceous body type, so he felt justified in rejecting her, as he'd been rejected many times himself.)

Still, the school ingrained in him, if not feminist values per se, the *value* of feminist values. It had been cool, or at least normal, to identify as asexual. And though he didn't, he figured it was a better label than "virgin." His friends, mostly female, told him he was refreshingly attentive and trustworthy for a boy. Meanwhile he was grateful to learn that *female* is best used as an adjective, that sexism harms men too—though obviously nowhere near the extent it harms women—and that certain men pretend to be feminists just to get laid. When he graduated, he felt slightly sheepish about never having even kissed anyone. Everyone knew, though, that real dating started in college, where nobody would be aware of his track record.

But in college, he encounters the alien system of codes and manners that govern flirting, conveyed in subtextual cues no more perceptible to him than ultraviolet radiation. Learning in high school about body positivity and gender norms and the cultural construction of beauty had led him to believe that adults aren't obsessed with looks. This turns out to be untrue, even

among his new female friends, who complain about how shallow men are. Now that he's self-conscious, he realizes he can't compete along conventional standards of height, weight, grip strength, whatever. How can he hope to attract anyone with his narrow shoulders?

The women he tries to date offer him friendship instead, so once again, most of his friends are women. This is fine: it's their prerogative, and anyway, lots of relationships begin platonically—especially for guys with narrow shoulders. But soon a pattern emerges. The first time, as he is leaving his friend's dorm room, he surprises himself by saying: Hey, this might be super random, and she can totally say no, but he's attracted to her, so did she want to go on a “date” date, sometime? In a casual and normal voice. And she says, “Oh,” and filibusters—she had *no idea* he felt that way, and she doesn't want to risk spoiling the good thing they have by making it a *thing*, she thinks it'll be best if they just stay . . . and he rushes to assure her that it's valid, no, totally valid, he knows friendship isn't a downgrade, sorry for being weird. Ugh!

Right? she replies, dating's so overrated and meaningless in college anyway, and she knows that *he* knows he'll find someone who deserves him, because he's great, really great, so thoughtful, so smart, not like these SAE sideways-hat-wearing dudebros, of course he must already know that, and she really appreciates it. Then he thanks her for being honest, because it proves she respects him, and don't worry about him, he gets it.

He does get it. It sort of kills him, but he knows his rejector was only trying to spare his feelings, since men often react badly to “hard rejection.” So he validates her condolences and communicates them back until she's convinced he'll be fine. “Grrr, friend-zoned again!” he says, shaking his fists toward the ceiling, and they laugh together, and hug, and he walks back to his dorm at sunrise.

He gets into bed and sighs. While he's confident he handled everything respectfully, the girl's praise only reminds him that none of his ostensibly good qualities are attractive enough to even warrant him a chance, which makes them seem worthless. He also suspects her flattery was . . .

exaggerated, and a bit . . . patronizing? Like, if she didn't think friendship was a downgrade, she wouldn't have said she "just" wanted to stay friends. By persuading him to reject himself, was she simply offloading her guilt? He stewes at the one-sided familiarity of the situation: once again, *he's* got to be the one who accepts, forgives, tolerates, pretends not to be wounded, pretends he has stopped hoping—all this sapping emotional labor to preserve his dignity and assuage her guilt, and also because he doesn't want to spoil his chances of dating her in the future, since it's her prerogative, after all, to change her mind.

Still, he respects her decision. He gets out of bed, feeling compelled to check in and let her know where he stands, so he composes a long postmortem email, reconstructing everything that happened from the beginning, assuring her that he knew nobody was to blame for a lack of attraction, and that if it isn't clear, yes, he is interested in her, but he's not one of those fake-feminist guys who snubs any woman he can't fuck, so, sorry if this is *completely* graceless and exhausting, by no means is he making his embarrassment her problem, he just wants to get everything out in the open. He hits send.

An hour later he sends a second email: Just out of curiosity, could she say a little about *why* she rejected him? It'd be really helpful for him. Is it because he's narrow-shouldered? Is that a dealbreaker for her? Because he can't help that, as she knows. Or is it a specific thing he did or said, because if so, they could discuss that, clear up any miscommunication. Anyway, he'll be fine, hopes everything's cool—and if she ever changes her mind, he'll be around!

Considering his tremendous effort to be vulnerable, it seems unfair, *rude* even, when a day passes with no reply. Fearing that he might not receive one at all, he writes a third email clarifying that she's by no means obliged to reply, though if she wants to, he'd love hearing her thoughts. He is somewhat annoyed when she again doesn't reply, though he's glad to have given her that option. At least nothing's been left unsaid.

This exact scenario happens four or five more times, with different women. Later, when he relates these incidents, lightheartedly, to his other female friends, they assure him he's interesting, smart, thoughtful, good-looking (though they never say *hot*). They say nothing's wrong with him. "It's so bizarre that you're single," they say, trying to mollify him with optimism, as if their romantic experience has made them experts in his lack of it. But they have no experience of *having no experience*. He figures that even bad relationships are better than none, since they prepare you for future relationships, and heartbreak is romantic and dignified, whereas rejection only makes you a loser. Short of abuse, their worst case would be to be in *his* position.

Anyway, he doesn't want pity; he wants not to need it. All of his female friends have rejected him before, though not always explicitly: more often, when he's out with them in public, someone will mistake him for a boyfriend, which gives him a sky-blue moment of joy before his female friend laughs, blows a raspberry, and says, "Oh my god, ha, no way, that'd be like *incest*!" But he takes these insults nobly, and later consoles himself by masturbating to the idea of having incestuous sex with them. Sometimes he drops hints to his friends to set him up with their friends, but for some reason they never follow through.

He decides there must be other ways to stand out and be attractive. He cultivates academic achievement in his Gender Studies major, surmising that status and intellect will enhance his appeal. But, just like in high school, he finds himself overlooked even with the paucity of men in his major, and outside of it, the rich, handsome, and broad-shouldered guys still get all the attention.

Then again, so do the terrible and ugly ones! His female friends keep dating these guys with cratered skin, awkward manners, poor hygiene; talentless schlubs identified by their hobbies and tastes; philandering worms; controlling, abusive dirtbags. Even his gay first-year roommate had a girlfriend back in high school, before he'd come out. And yeah, maybe these guys all deserved love—but surely no more than him? At a house party,

one friend talks about going home with a guy the night before who said all he wanted was to sleep beside her, then around 1 a.m. she awoke to him grunting as he ejaculated on her leg. When she cussed him out, he claimed he was “overcome by raw animal passion” and “couldn’t help it,” and she still let him stay. “Whatever, we’ll probably be married in three years,” she says, rolling her eyes.

He’s about to insist she shouldn’t devalue herself by deploying sarcasm to suppress trauma, that she’s been violated and shouldn’t be out tonight—and is astounded when everyone, including her, starts laughing. He joins in, figuring that this is some cathartic part of the healing process, even though it sounds to him like a clear case of sexual assault. Even more confusing, he’d asked her out once before; so, a literal *rapist* is more appealing than him? He keeps silent as another female friend says, “Men are dogshit.” And sure, fair, he understands they mean the patriarchy and not him specifically—but why’d she say that with him standing *right there*, unless he didn’t count as a man to them? Not wanting to seem fragile or impugn their judgment or center the conversation on himself, he says, “Ugh, yeah, we’re *total* dogshit,” and files this incident away in a thickening dossier of unfairness, a piece of insurance he will be able to use as evidence of their own imperfect principles if they ever try to call him out in the future. Privately, too, he reasons that if they’re going to keep dating assholes, what do they expect.

Later, gut-checking himself to make sure his concern for his traumatized friend is legitimate, he texts her: hey, I’m around if you need to talk about what happened. or even just watch trashy TV :) whenever wherever!

She doesn’t reply.

Dragging his virginity like a body bag into his mid-twenties, he watches a certain amount of domination-oriented porn, probably due to internalized sexism, though he’s read that porn is a safe, healthy venue to explore kink, that sexuality is neither a choice nor shameful, especially if the studios follow good labor and aftercare practices. His female friends agree. He does not mention that he seeks out actresses that resemble them, which he deems

victimless and acceptable as long as he consumes it critically, demarcating fantasy from reality, and maintaining his sensitivity for the performers.

He's more worried about *physical* desensitization: he doesn't use lubrication, since his roommates would overhear it. He comes to prefer the intensity of this "dry" method, but feels the friction is somehow eroding his psyche, and possibly dulling the nerves in his penis. Resolving to wean himself by using a condom while masturbating, he wonders in what other ways touch, or the lack of it, has warped him. He's read about that study of baby monkeys who were denied soft physical contact and grew up disturbed and sickly. It's hard to believe chastity was ever associated with purity, when it feels like putrescence, his blood browning, saliva clouding with pus, each passing day rendering him more leprously foul. What about those venerable virgins like Newton, Dickinson, Kant? No, their virginity was a matter of will. They believed God loved them for it.

At lunch one day, two of his male coworkers offer unsolicited dating advice, relishing the chance to showboat their sexual proficiencies. He's too honest and available, not aggressive enough—friend-zone shit, they say unironically. Don't be a fucking pussy is all! You gotta challenge them, be a puzzle for them to work out, that's how girls' brains work, it's evolution. They offer grotesquely specific advice about eye contact and hair touching. Learn palmistry, they say, bitches love getting their palms read.

Then they ask him how he makes a move; he says he asks first. "Wait, you *ask* if you can kiss them? My man," one says, laughing and slapping his back, "you don't *ask*." With jagged touchiness, he calls them out, insisting that consent is nonnegotiable, that even if they're joking, or *especially* if they're joking, it's textbook rape culture.

"Well, what makes you think you can speak for all women," one says, smirking. "You're a guy too. Why do you know better than us what women prefer? Especially considering they're dating us."

He's *not* speaking for all women, he says—unsure of how he'll answer, but certain he has something to say—he's . . . speaking, as a man, *against* men who're speaking against women.

“Go ahead then,” his coworker laughs, “ask your *female friends* what they think.”

He composes a long email reporting them both to HR, and later that night, bristling, he calls his QPOC agender friend from his college co-op, whom he’s always gotten along with, in part because he’s never been attracted to them. He repeats what his coworkers said, performing their dialogue with a “dumb guy” voice. His friend says, “Well, that’s gross,” and makes him swear never to become a mind-gamey asshole, going on to say that the so-called friend zone is a sexist canard that lets losers (like who, he wonders) blame their own unattractiveness on women.

He agrees, then asks if it isn’t true that some guys simply lack charisma or attractiveness, and are thus more prone to getting befriended?

“Maybe,” they say.

He asks his friend if mind games work.

“Sure, sometimes,” they say, “that’s why they’re so common. But they never lead to anything good.”

Never? he asks.

“Okay, yeah, shit’s complicated. Some people are old-fashioned, or mistake abuse for affection. Doesn’t mean we should *encourage* it.”

He asks if it’s wrong to ask permission to kiss someone.

“Depends more on how you ask.”

He asks if they personally would prefer it.

“No, but I’m not all women. I’m not even *a* woman.”

He asks if they believe most women would prefer it.

“Who knows! Every woman’s different and things are always changing. Listen, I’m not sure what you’re trying to get out of me here. Again: I’m *not* a woman.”

Sure, he’s aware of that, he replies, but it’s important to him, especially as a cisgender heterosexual white man, to avoid placing the burden of educating him about women’s experiences on a woman, which is why it’s so great to have friends of other genders.

His friend says, “Yeah, I guess.”

He thanks them for taking his call so late at night.

In spite of his QPOC friend's ambiguous advice, he decides that more experience will improve his odds. So he resorts to online dating, cropping out his narrow shoulders from his photos and carefully wording his bio:

He/him/his (or whatever pronouns you are most comfortable with). Unshakably serious about consent. Abortion's #1 fan. Loves books, Thai food, a glass of vinho verde on my balcony, endless conversation . . . and did I mention books? 😊 I can usually be found haunting the bookstores and bakeshops of our fair burgh, when I'm not dismantling the imperialist male supremacist hetero patriarchy. But I'd also be fine saying "To hell with it!" and staying at home for an Agnes Varda marathon sesh followed by discussion . . . and perhaps a wee snogfest? 😊 I *always* do my own cooking (thanks Mom!) so I'll make a killer brunch for you! Trans women are women, duh. All races, ethnicities, and body types—but NOT all ages—very welcome! Mutual GGG.

He suspects some of it risks sounding tryhard, but he prefers sincerity and clarity over fake mystique, and what reasonable woman wouldn't be attracted to a vocal ally? He sends thoughtful, grammatical messages, like a link to a *Psychology Today* article about limerence, followed by: Fascinating topic. I'm a total sucker for the intersections of psychology and romance. Would love to talk it over at the public venue of your choosing! The few dates this brings only yield more rejection: three postpone indefinitely, then ghost; three more are no-shows. One leaves while he's in the bathroom.

Dating online, he realizes, one has to choose between fraudulence, or the sort of honesty that can't compete with fraudulence. But then he thinks: Isn't the idea that women don't know what's best for them sexist, informed by his own petty resentment? Troubled by this paradox and unable to sleep, he texts his QPOC friend and asks them, Be honest: Has he actually been a creep this whole time? Is he . . . is he a *dudebro*, and has he, therefore, *deserved* to be single for the last thirty years?

His friend texts back, ok but can you really count the first 16 years, then adds that he *should* feel weird about his concerns, but he hasn't done anything, and a real creep probably wouldn't agonize so much over whether he was a creep, goodnight.

Then he replies: But if agonizing about being a creep is what proves he's not a creep, and he stops worrying about being a creep, wouldn't *that* make him a creep?

His QPOC friend doesn't respond. He's still unnerved, though relieved someone who was once female-identified has given him a pass.

He withdraws into work. Whereas before he only went out in hopes of meeting someone, now he stays in so he won't have to see anyone: the allopreening couples, the untouchable women, the broad-shouldered men; even a passing whiff of aloe lotion on a woman's skin makes him feel structurally unsound and shivery in his linings. When he does go out in public, he avoids looking at any woman's face, convincing himself it's respectfully uncreepy, but aware in the gloomy sub-basement of his mind that the real reason is because if she is beautiful, then the image of her face, and the question of how he might have introduced himself, and the beautiful life they might have had together, will torment him for days.

At age thirty-one he has sex. One day on social media he happens across the girl, the woman, he rejected in high school. She's cleaned up; her body type is no longer curvaceous, and he likes how in all her photos she wears a skirt and leggings, a thin dark cardigan over a blouse—a personal uniform suggesting fidelity to figured-out principles—but dislikes how her dyed red hair pinches off in a tiny bun that reminds him of the meaty tail-nubs on docked pit bulls. Though that's fixable. Seeing that they live in the same city, he messages her and suggests they meet.

She shows up forty minutes late, which he forgivingly tolerates, knowing that women's time is taxed by the pressures of female grooming. For about fifteen minutes their catch-up chat is small even if promisingly pleasant. He insists on paying for drinks, joking that it's not chivalry, it's reparations for

sexism. He soon regrets it, however, because on her third whiskey ginger (and his first), she starts rambling about some guy who dumped her ages ago, then jokes about her eating disorder. Every few minutes her face scrunches like she's about to cry, then reverts weirdly to normal. Her blouse untucks, and when a guy playing pool nearby positions his cue close to her face, she slaps it to the floor.

Lonely as he is, does he deserve someone unstable? He'll have to reject her again, like in high school. What will he say? That he doesn't want to waste her time, that he thinks she's super great, but he doesn't feel a spark? Having seldom been in the position to reject anyone else, he feels terrible for having to inflict on her the same pain he's always felt himself.

Hours later, he still has not figured out a compassionate enough way to phrase it, and at this point, as they're leaving the bar, he decides he might as well kiss her goodnight for the sake of casual experience and then let her down nicely over text message. He asks if he can kiss her.

She says, "Uh, no."

He asks why not.

"What do you mean *why not*?" she says. "Because I don't *want* to. Who the fuck asks 'why not'? Fucking asshole."

He wonders if she is testing him. He asks if she is testing him. This time she gives him a two-armed shove, sending him to the ground, and instead of yelling, she smiles like a sock puppet and says, "Oh my god, are you wearing *shoulder pads*?"

Getting up, he briefly considers shoving her back, though not as hard as she shoved him, since that would not be fair. But before he can do anything, she is doubled over and clutching her calves in laughter, and when she recovers she says, with unbelievable nonchalance, "Okay, wait, I'm sorry, dude, I didn't mean to push you that hard. Come on, is this happening or what?"

The sex disappoints; her moans and arches feel contrived and uncomfortably "dirty," and when he tries to maintain eye contact in missionary position to establish a bond, she closes her eyes. Something—

maybe his dulled penis nerves?—keeps deferring his orgasm, until she gets impatient and pushes him away. He acquiesces, not having finished, his embarrassing frustration mitigated only by the unburdening of his virginity, and the prospect of telling everyone about it. To reassure her that his sexual awkwardness was not her fault, he tells her she's beautiful. She waits nearly ten seconds and replies, "Uh, you have an interesting mind."

After this incident, he develops thoughts of self-harm, which are sharpened by his awareness that rejection, loneliness, and sexual frustration are nothing compared with institutional and historical oppression. His sadness, he knows, is a symptom of his entitlement, so he is not even entitled to his sadness.

As a thirtysomething, he feels too young to give up but too old to adapt. His self-reliance has ossified into a lifestyle of craved, defended solitude. He can't imagine having to share a bed every night, not being able to read or wake up or leave parties whenever he wants. No, this is not mere solitude. Solitude is fine, inescapable aloneness is not. Taking trips and seeing movies and attending events all seem pointless without anyone to experience them with, so it feels like his life cannot progress or even truly begin until he has found someone who will return his love.

And as he's aged, has his intimacy with his female friends deepened? Did these friends, who always maintained that romantic love was overrated, who said friendships were what mattered in the end, provide him an alternative to romantic love? No. After all his years of talking them through each and every breakup and gendered work dispute, sending them thoughtful gifts and memes, loaning them money for rental deposits, taking their dating app photos, reassuring them of their beauty when they hated how the photos came out, and supporting them when they were fighting with their boyfriends, after all that, these female friends of his have all moved on to cohabit, marry, and breed. Even if they're miserable, at least they're living real lives, with partners who prioritize them above all others. Lately he sees them once a month tops, even though he's known them far longer than their partners have. They've all stopped inviting him to dinner parties because *It*

was a couples thing and you would've hated it, which, while true, was still exclusionary, backed by the hegemonic and regressive institution of monogamy. He realizes that these female friends have, at last, completed their long-term rejections of him; that, without ever having had a girlfriend, his life is strewn with exes, friends without benefits. But he can't complain about his friends to his friends. His male coworkers would roast him or pretend to sympathize yet secretly think he's a pussy. And his female friends might think that he's passive-aggressively implicating them, and also that he's a pussy.

Since any rejection now paralyzes him with rage for weeks, he stops dating. He resents his married friends, his contently single friends, his unhappily single friends who nonetheless have casual sex, and his parents when they gently question his sexuality. He also resents the grotesque fixations that have cropped up lately, like: If he's only ever used condoms and *the epidermis of his penis* has never made contact with *the mucous membrane of a vagina*, if he's never *ejaculated into a birth canal*, does that technically mean he's still a virgin? Have his possibly dulled penis nerves entrained a vicious cycle of "death grip syndrome," adding yet another obstacle to love? Was masturbation lowering his testosterone levels, contributing to his narrow shoulders? And does that give women the impression that he has a small penis, which he *statistically doesn't*?

All he's doing is sharing some of these valid gripes at a picnic one afternoon when his QPOC agender friend asks him, why doesn't he call that girl from high school who took his virginity? He replies that just because he wants to be in a relationship doesn't mean he has to settle for a sociopath.

"See, you're moving the goalposts, like always," his QPOC friend replies. "It's easy to feel sorry for yourself when you keep redefining rejection. You refuse pity but crave it so much that you won't admit how strongly you invite it."

He says they're being facile, though he knows their point is rather nuanced and specific and he hasn't even considered it before, but he can't walk it back now.

“I’m *facile*?” his friend says. “Nah, I’m tired. That’s what it is, I’m tired,” they say from behind their sunglasses, waving their mimosa. “I know you identify as a reject, I know that’s like your ‘brand,’ like it’s some unprecedented form of suffering that gives you secret saintly wisdom. All this nonstop high-frequency whining, that’s what’s *facile*.”

He presses his lips shut while his brain feels like a swirling case of lottery balls, as his friend, pausing to hit a spliff, continues: “I mean, what the fuck do you want? Somehow you got a shit deal. Nobody knows why. Maybe you never really grappled with this because you thought you were exempt. But you refuse to change and are *shocked* when nothing changes. You keep doing all these unsolicited favors, putting in all this effort, and because the only forms of repayment you’ll accept are love or sex, you always feel cheated. And it’s not like you enjoy this, but you *do* enjoy pushing other people’s faces in it, that’s your main consolation. Wild how you’re always right and nobody’s ever had it worse, nobody’s as pure and as wronged as you. Yo everyone! Check out the Woman Respector! Last principled man right here! And that’s why you need it, because you get to convince yourself you’re being rejected for your virtue, not cause you’re a bum. You’ve turned your loneliness into this, like, fetish necklace of martyrdom. And all of us”—they glance around at the other picnickers—“have to sit here and rubber-stamp your feminism. If we don’t indulge your wallowing, we’re being callous and, like, complicit with some diabolical global conspiracy that’s keeping you from getting pussy. But if we do, then we’re ‘disingenuous’ because none of us will fuck you ourselves. Right? Am I right, ladies? Hands up, who agrees?”

Three women’s hands shoot up, followed more slowly by the rest.

His QPOC friend gestures at them like, *Behold*. “I dunno what to say, man, except, motherfucking cishets! I for one am bored of your scab collection. I’m sorry your dick is sad or whatever. Suck it up, you bitter little boy, and move on.”

Fantastic. That’s fucking great. The clearest example yet of how even his friends dismiss him with straw-man arguments out of sheer intellectual laziness. Because he refuses the easy consolation of playing along with the