

Rhetorical Questions

By Jacie Farris

Oh, Max.

Is there any way to make this letter easier to write? No, I don't suppose there is. Well, I guess I deserve that. I deserve some fraction of the pain I've caused you.

Just know, I'm feeling that pain, too.

I never meant for this to happen. I mean, of course, I didn't! What kind of masochist plans to turn down the most amazing man when all he wants is your love and commitment?

I'm not sure I can explain myself...but I'll try. You deserve that from me, at the very least.

Remember when we used to play that game late at night at your parents' ski lodge, asking each other the silliest questions we could come up with?

If you could be a swordfish or a puffin, which would you be?

Would you rather slow dance to Achy Breaky Heart or Livin' La Vida Loca?

Is it better to play an April Fool's prank on your boss or your CPA?

Oh, the laughs we shared, our legs curled up together, wrapped up in wool socks and cable knit sweaters and shaking with fits of giggles until our eyes watered. My sides used to hurt for hours, long after we'd gone to bed. Sometimes the gang would join in – our gang. Laura and Dan, Lucas, Belinda, Charlie. Nothing Charlie asked was ever appropriate, and we were so glad there weren't any adults around! I mean, we were all adults, but just barely. Early twenties doesn't count.

That lodge was a magical place. The cracks and hisses from the mammoth stone fireplace. The cozy quilts that littered every overstuffed couch and loveseat. The staff who always knew when to dim the lights and bow out, fading to the background and letting us bask in the warmth we felt when we were all together.

Of course, you brought your own kind of magic to everything you did. Especially that night, when the gang couldn't join us, and it was just you and me. You looked at me so sweetly, with that look that made me feel so special and cared for. I never used the word *mirth* before I met you, but it's the only word I can think of to describe the glint in your eyes and the happiness in your voice. Mirth. Magical, memorable mirth.

And then you asked me that question, and I thought it was rhetorical, like all the others.

Why was I caught off guard by a proposal? Especially from someone who had brought me so much happiness, someone who had been with me day and night, someone who had shared with me dreams for the future. Why was I surprised?

Clearly, marriage had been on your mind for ages. I should have seen it earlier, even in the little things. Like the way you lit up when I wanted to adopt that stray cat we found behind the dumpster on 5th Avenue. I'd expected you to roll your eyes and tell me to leave that poor little thing alone, but instead you started Googling the nearest pet store for cat food and litter. That should have given me a clue.

I miss Lyla. But you and her, you belong together. I couldn't ask to take her away from you. And you're probably a better cat parent than I would be, anyway.

Through everything we've done together, please know that my heart always loved you, but my mind was never on marriage. Not at all.

Maybe I could blame my parents for this mess I've created. You know, they never gave me a good example of a healthy relationship. I experienced two childhoods: one with a mother and father always screaming in the next room, and another with a divorced set parents who could only find joy in tearing each other apart from afar. Looking back, I think they actually enjoyed the contention, like the anger and the fighting fueled them as people. They always came circling back to the madness, and they dragged me right along.

Through it all, I met too many dates who never became stepparents. I was embarrassed too many times by parents bickering publicly at restaurants and parties. I was bribed too many times with presents on holidays, just to get me to like one parent more than the other.

Coming to New York for college was so freeing for me. I think many people see New York as a harsh city, a cold, unfriendly place. But for me, all I saw were the glittering lights and the opportunities I'd never had before. All of a sudden, I had chances to have stay out until all hour of the morning, talk to strangers on the subway, and waste money on terrible seats for off-Broadway shows. I could go in a million directions and never leave the city! I loved finding my own way. It didn't matter what I tried or if I succeeded or failed; this city would still embrace me. It was an exhilarating feeling for my soul.

Of course, my parents didn't understand. They had wanted me to go to Duke or Vanderbilt or Chapel Hill. Good southern girls should stay at home in the south, they said. But I broke away. In a moment of fiery glory, I told them there was never a home for me in the south, and I left, with a cliché slam of the door behind me.

That dramatic moment stirred something deep in my spirit. Some people are defined by singular events in their lives; I felt like I was writing a new definition of myself right then. I was going to be a girl who went on adventures, who laughed too much, who sought out love and joy with careless abandon.

As if I needed any more reason to feel validated in my journey, you suddenly appeared in my life, shining like a beacon for me to follow. There you were, in that NYU shirt with your Mets baseball cap, leading a study group for undergrads in mechanical engineering.

In that moment, the student library felt like hallowed ground, a chapel where Fate and Destiny and the Universe joined together for the good of humankind.

I walked right over to that big mahogany table and sat down with your group. It took you weeks to realize I was never majoring in mechanical engineering. Other girls were smitten with you, that was easy to see; I was enamored from the get-go.

Eventually, you asked me what I knew about current greenfield projects in the northern part of the state and if I could offer a cost/benefit analysis. Finally, I had a moment with you zeroed in on me, those bright eyes catching mine as you looked up from the textbook. I countered with the first of our silly questions.

“Would you rather teach an art major about greenfield projects, or take an art major out on a date?” I asked. Your eyes lit up like they could hold laughter in their depths, but you didn’t miss a beat in the conversation.

“It depends,” you said. “Would an art major rather grab a cup of coffee or try the new froyo place around the corner?”

“I have a better idea,” I said, and I took you to Wisteria Way, that old diner with the ‘70s carpet and the really good banana splits. We talked and laughed for hours, not about engineering or art, but about music and traveling and bad hair days. I knew you more deeply in that night than I’d ever known anyone.

That’s all it took for both of us to fall, deeply and overwhelmingly. My feelings and emotions became so quickly intertwined with yours. On days you were happy, the sun shone brighter for both of us. On days you were down, I fell into the pits of your depression. I took on your interests and habits and mannerisms – all of it.

At first, our all-consuming connection seemed good. It seemed remarkable even, like a cosmic sign that we were meant to be. I liked sharing life with you, and it seemed like a perfectly normal thing to live the beautiful life you dreamed up and created for us.

Now that I think about it, I really can’t blame my parents completely. They left me woefully unprepared for navigating relationships. But really, it was me. I was losing myself in you and your life, as wonderful and magical as it was.

At the lodge last winter, after everyone had come in from the slopes and warmed themselves with a cheery fire and mugs of hot cider, Dan had started a round of “Would You Rather,” the game we’d started sharing with our friends. He asked me if I would rather spontaneously drive to Vermont for fresh maple syrup or fly to Florida on a red eye flight to get freshly squeezed orange juice for breakfast.

Before I could reply, you placed your hand on my knee and said, “Oh, Mel would choose a flight over a drive, no matter what the goal was. She hates long car rides.”

We all laughed and moved on, with you asking Belinda if she’d rather ski for 48 hours straight or take a boxing class with Mike Tyson. It was such a small moment, a blip on my internal radar.

But in that blip, my head remembered that I love long, winding car rides. With your motion sickness and laser-focused mind, you never liked the journey that comes with car travel; you were always thinking about the end goal, the destination. Not me. I loved discovering the unique places and the beautiful things you can only see when you slow down, take your time, and enjoy the experience of wandering.

You are not a wanderer, Max. But I think that I am.

I’m sorry if it ever felt like my heart wandered from you and the future you so lovingly planned for the two of us. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even realize where I was going or what road I was on, until I saw you pull out that ring.

Like I said, New York offers a million different directions for each of us. You and are just going different ways.

I started writing this letter to give you answers, but now I see that all I can leave you with are questions, the crazy kind that I wish were rhetorical but are all too real.

Can you forgive me for saying no?

Can I forgive myself leaving?