Out of Touch

She was an ideologue of the highest order. She tended toward all extremes, and judged those who would not do the same. She was arrogant and implacable, ever convinced that she knew the best course of action. She was easily offended, and insufferable when she explained the offense. And she would never believe it, but in all these ways, she was like me.

She appealed to the worst in me, when I am at my most condescending and competitive. Perhaps for that reason I should have avoided her. Indeed, I should have known that we were on a collision course, when no room ever seemed large enough to contain the both of us, and every attempt at collaboration devolved into a pissing contest. Our pairing was unlikely, our ending inevitable—and just as explosive as I had imagined it would be.

All the same, I was mesmerized by my own reflection.

She wrenched everything out of focus. Before her, I did not have to reconcile the feelings I had for women. Conventional courtship has always been so much easier, for I have been taught its patterns my entire life: how to get his attention when you want him and feign interest when you want something from him; how to escape when you feel unsafe with him and deal with feeling unsafe when he has all the power. And yet, for all the comfort of familiarity, where have those rituals left me? I have lost myself while cooking dinners for soldiers; I have locked myself in bathrooms when fearful of booze-soaked parties; I have been left abandoned at the side of the
road after a date went awry. After so many mishaps, my interest in her came with the potential to build something exciting and authentic, with a different set of rules.

But the dance was delicate, the way untried. She tortured me with what she claimed were platonic caresses and tiny kisses upon my cheek. We reflected upon our connection (We’re soul mates, she would coo with her usual dramatic flair), only to dismiss that connection by stumbling through sports team analogies. We jested over our attraction to one another, but neither of us made that first move to reach over the table, to cross that line, to bridge the gap. She might have never intended to do so, and I had no idea how.

Our interactions were thus riddled with misunderstandings, complicated not only by feelings—feelings that forced my attention yet were difficult to make sense of—but also by our embodiments. She had just enough vision to see the colour of my hair when she buried her face in my neck. Her engagement with the world came with accommodations, many of which she spurned. Stubbornly self-sufficient, she was resentful of walking canes and guide dogs for all the dependency they represented. As she was so often underestimated, she set out to prove she was more than what many assumed her to be. I, on the other hand, strive because I have to. My OCD calls to me and demands that I do more, that I do better, that I am no less than perfect. Far from her brazen efforts at self-presentation, I spend much of my life hiding the pieces of myself that most shame me. Both of us are disability theorists, and so one would think we could let go of the identities most criticized in our field: the proud super-crip with a bootstrap mentality, and the pseudo-normate who leaves much in the closet. But far from an instruction manual, perhaps this is a cautionary tale.
When I asked her about her love life, I fumbled through the question. I wanted to share with her how much I struggle with intimacy, how difficult it is for me to make a connection, how much I dread dealing with others. But it had not occurred to me that hers was an entirely different struggle, given how much more ostensibly she must wear her disability on her body. *It is not your right to pry,* she responded, since doing so involves treating her sexuality as a spectacle, a freak show. *It is not your right to assume I lack experience,* she continued, as such an assumption stems from the association of disability with undesirability, an all too socially entrenched association. I knew not how to explain my intentions, nor did I know how to insist that far from finding her undesirable, she was all I ever thought about.

I too was made to feel undesirable during the time we spent together, when she made assumptions about my body type. *I thought you were heavy,* she noted nonchalantly, *by the sound of your voice, and the feel of your arm.* Coquettishly she joked about how she might come to know my body better, and suggested I describe myself to her. The conversation may have felt inconsequential to her; how else would a blind woman know body types without using touch and description? Nor could she have known that when I am at my lowest, when I feel out of control, I skip my meals—a habit which, fifty or so pounds ago, looked a lot like gradual suicide by starvation. She could not have known any of these things, for I kept them all from her. And yet, her efforts to evaluate my body were symptomatic of a practice that is just as common and problematic as likening disability sexuality to freakery. It occurred to me in hindsight that even with the opportunity to try a new way, we still run the risk of reproducing old oppressions.
The worst of our miscommunications happened through physical contact. Unable to visually read facial expressions and subtle gestures, she communicated with her hands. Perhaps it was because she was always smoothing my hair, petting my shoulder, and resting those elegant fingers on my thigh, that I assumed too much. Our intimacy might have simply been borne out of her regular rhythms; perhaps she touched merely to understand, rather than to express a romantic impulse. I, on the other hand, have developed rules precisely so that I might avoid contact. I have built up rituals around keeping clean: my hand sanitizer is at the ready to save me from door knobs; and twenty flights of stairs are far more preferable to a full elevator. It took much effort to push my own hang-ups aside, to leave behind my daily struggles with handshakes and hugs, to resist the urge to recoil and withdraw, whenever she drew near.

We fought often while together, and several more times since we came undone, but our turning point was the night of a snowstorm. She meant to travel home for the month and I, eager to spend time with her before she left, offered to drive her to the airport. We argued, as was our custom, and rode out much of the journey in steely silence. *I never asked you to drive me,* she maintained. *I would have found my way without you. I owe you nothing for this.* When I finally pulled up to the terminal, I hesitated to help her with her luggage and to guide her to the door. She assumed I was punishing her for the fight. That is, she assumed I was forcing her to ask for help, so that I might demonstrate just how much she needed me. She later explained in the drawn-out and dramatic fallout that having to ask for my assistance that night reinforced the power differential between us. My reasons were not vindictive, for within that long moment of hesitation all my insecurities around touch resurfaced and shut me down. But no matter my intentions, my inaction rendered her vulnerable, and transformed human contact for her—she
who regarded contact as an intimacy among friends, perhaps lovers—into leverage. For that she has never forgiven me. And I cannot fault her, for I too know what it feels like to be left lost on the side of the road.

I would like to think that I now better recognize my own privilege so that I might not hurt anyone as egregiously as I once hurt her. I would like to think that I am more open to negotiating my own limitations, lest they crash into the needs of another. I would even like to think that I am more forthcoming with others, and honest with myself, regarding my romantic inclinations—especially the unconventional ones. But I have dated only men since her, which may confirm the worst lesson I took away from that emotionally exhausting year: better the devil you know than the one you don’t. The old ideology that permeates so much of the dating world is still much easier to handle because I understand it well. And yet, with every risk I fail to take, with every opportunity I let pass by, I wonder what I am missing.