

Another Universe

On the TV, Hugh Laurie is diagnosing someone with lupus. Between our bodies and my school-issued twin mattress, the memory foam topper I took from the dumpster molds itself to our forms. Later, when you leave, the impression of you will remain and I'll curl up in the warm divot you left behind. Right now, though, I have you next to me, on top of me: a solid mass. Your head is on my chest. My hand is resting in your hair, tangled in your curls. Our legs are intertwined, like the roots of two neighboring trees, clinging to each other deep underground.

When you laugh at a joke, my heart vibrates. I look down at your smiling eyes, and I think about leaning down and kissing you. I don't. Instead:

"Do you think we know each other in other universes?" I ask.

We meet in kindergarten. We're on the same bus, and we're in the same class. You get scared walking down the long hallway from the front door, where the bus drops us off, to the classroom, where our teacher waits, so I grab your little hand with my little hand and we walk together. At lunch, you share your fruit snacks with me, and, during recess, I give you pointers during kickball. We sit next to each other on the ride home on the bus that afternoon, and the one after that, and so on till high school when you can drive and you drop me off every day. Our last names are next to each other alphabetically, so we walk one after the other at graduation. We go to college in different states and we lose contact, only catching brief glimpses of each other in the supermarket when we're home for Thanksgiving. We get dinner once when we're 25, but we're different people now. You don't have any fruit snacks to share with me, and I haven't played kickball in years. We never speak again.

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We meet in the seventh grade, when you move into the house next to mine. It's the summer and my family has a pool, so I invite you over. We hang out every day and I let you eat some of the lime popsicles my mom buys specially for me. When school starts, you try out for the soccer team, and you realize I'm not very cool. You never come over to swim in my pool again.

We meet on the first day of freshman orientation at a college neither of us is rich enough to afford. Both of our roommates have parents who are producers or directors or something equally impressive and lucrative. My mother is a secretary and your father teaches high school chemistry. We sit out on the lawn and talk until you start to fall asleep. I walk you to your dorm and I think about kissing you. But I don't. By the fourth week of classes, we've forgotten each other. When we sit next to each other at graduation, we introduce ourselves as though for the first time.

We meet at summer camp. Our cabins both go to the arts & crafts cabin at the same time. We make a birdhouse together and you tell me to take it home. We sit together during campfires and I roast marshmallows for your s'mores because you always burn them, but I can roast them to a nice golden brown. We make each other friendship bracelets, and sign up to be each other's buddies at the waterfront. At the end of the summer, I give you a kiss on the cheek before scurrying over to my mom's car. When I arrive the next year, I try to wave at you, but you don't see me. We don't have arts & crafts together. I see you sitting with someone else during the campfire.

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We meet through my brother. The two of you work together at an ice cream shop and, when I have no prom date, he convinces you to ask me. We take awkward photos and slow dance to one song. Afterwards, when I won't sleep with you, you leave me stranded at the venue. My brother comes to pick me up and finds me sitting on the curb with streaks of mascara on my cheeks. He frames you for stealing money out of the cash register at work and you get fired. I take your job.

We meet at a bar. My friend hits on you for me and then you pull me into the bathroom. You finish in under a minute and forget to pull out. I take a pregnancy test the next morning and cry when it's negative. I've never wanted kids.

We meet on a dating app. All of my friends are in couples and I'm sick of being the single one. We match after months of fruitless swiping. We go on a date, and then three more. I finally feel comfortable enough to invite you to my apartment, and we have sex on the couch. You're there when I fall asleep, but you're gone when I wake up. You come over my apartment often, flitting in and out when you want to fuck me. We never go on another date.

We meet when you're assigned to be the at-home nurse for my grandfather. When you're not listening, my grandmother calls you handsome and pretends to swoon, fanning herself with the newspaper. Once, when my grandmother is in the bathroom, you put your hand on my thigh, but then you seem to remember my grandfather is dying on the other end of the couch and you never touch me again.

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We meet in church. We're both altar servers. I just made my first Communion. You're older, almost in high school. You train me for mass. My cheeks get red around you and my hands shake as I pass the priest the sacramental wine with you watching over my shoulder. The rectory schedules us together for mass most weekends; the congregation thinks it's sweet to see an older boy helping a young girl. One day, before mass, we're left alone in the sacristy. Before I know what's happening, you shove me to my knees. I block out what happens next. Everyone in the congregation wonders why my eyes are red during mass, but assume I must have allergies or something. I never go to church again.

We meet in an art museum. I'm there for class, taking notes about the paintings for my art history seminar. You're the subject of a painting in the European Renaissance Paintings wing. I pass by the other paintings quickly, but I linger on yours. I had never understood art—I was more of a literature person—but something about your painting speaks to me. I think I understand art now. The next time I go to the museum, you've been put in storage. I forget about the painting and stick to books.

We meet in high school and date through college. You propose to me after we graduate. We have a big wedding and a beautiful honeymoon. We have five kids. We retire early; we're set to have a comfortable end together. We've only been retired for a year when you start forgetting things. At first, it's just small things, like where you put the remote. And then it's bigger things, like your own birthday and the names of our neighbors. I watch you forget our five kids, and our eleven grandchildren. When our daughter tries to help you out of your chair, you bite her shoulder, hard enough that she bleeds. I'm helping you into bed one night when you hit me the

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first time. I watch you forget who I am. Years later, when you pass away at hospice, I have no tears left to cry. I had already watched you die.

We meet in the Middle Ages. You're an emperor and I'm the virgin martyr who won't have sex with you. When I refuse to renounce God, you threaten me with the wheel. When I still reject your advances, you have me burned at the stake.

We meet in 19th century London. You're my mother's brother's son. You're my cousin. Our relationship is distant for most of our younger years, but, when you return from traveling abroad, I'm struck by your dark hair, and you by my light eyes. We fall in love, but we're from the same poor family. We need to marry rich to survive. Cousins never work out.

We meet during the Salem Witch Trials. I accuse your wife of consorting with the Devil so I can get you to myself. She's hanged for being a witch. You're hanged for being married to a witch. I'm hanged because I must be a witch too if I knew she was a witch.

We meet through a friend of a friend's roommate's high school friend. I ask you out, but you ask to kiss me after our first date. We date for five years, through grad school and internships and the year when you think having a mustache is a good idea (it's not). Our parents get along and my younger sister tells you everything (sometimes I think she likes you more than me). We buy a house. We adopt a cat, and then another. You propose to me on a Tuesday night. There's no ceremony to it; we're just on the couch watching the news while we eat leftovers. You're in your pajamas and there's soy sauce on your shirt. I think you've never looked better. Rather than

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saying yes, I run to the bedroom and find the ring I had hidden in my underwear drawer that I had planned to give you. We laugh and kiss and we're engaged. We have a big wedding and our friend of a friend's roommate's high school friend officiates. We have two kids and we live long, happy, healthy lives. It's the only time we get it right.

We never meet at all. Your twin absorbs you in the womb and I commit suicide when I'm 24. Somehow, this is a better ending.

We meet in college. We meet through mutual friends at a party. You walk me home and kiss my cheek under the lamppost in front of my dorm. I had mentioned to you, in the LED lit living room of someone's off-campus apartment, that *Dead Poets Society* is my favorite movie. You asked if I had seen *House*, another one of Robert Sean Leonard's greatest hits. I haven't, so you come over to watch it with me. Within half an hour, we're lying in my bed, cuddling as we watch the show. It goes on like this: you coming over to watch *House* and us ending us in a tender embrace. You kiss me on the forehead before you leave, every time. I start to feel like maybe I'm special, like the way you hold me might indicate something. I confess my feelings for you, in a letter that I slide under your door. You tell me that you don't want our relationship to change, that you like our dynamic how it is now. I take it well. The next time you come over to watch TV, I don't initiate anything. I sit up straight. You massage my shoulders and coax me into cuddling with you again. I pretend this is normal. You hold my hand while we walk through campus. I pretend this is normal. You give me a pet name, one that you reserve only for me. I pretend this is normal. You insist I take one of your sweaters when I'm cold and you refuse to let me give it back to you. I pretend this is normal. I start to hate you, hate how you make me feel

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like I'm crazy, like I'm imagining that you're flirting with me. But then you smile at me and kiss my cheek, and I ask you to come over again. I try to imagine other universes, ones where we're actually together and happy, but I can't. I think you will always matter more to me than I do to you. In a couple weeks, I'll stop reaching out. You never text first. When I'm not fawning over you, you forget I exist. When I see you at a party, you'll look through me.

"I don't know," you respond. "Maybe."

Your eyes don't leave the TV. I take my hand out of your hair. Hugh Laurie tells someone else they have lupus.