

# Far Within Reach

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I could feel the determination of her presence before I even looked up from the espresso machine. My soul would recognize that cluster of radiant energy anywhere; she's the real cat's pajamas of souls if you know what I mean.

And as my eyes peeled from the countertop, coated in the muscle memory of countless latte recipes and stray grounds, to the shop entrance, my brain echoed: *I told you so*. Simultaneously, my stomach bellowed as anxiety shuffled in obnoxiously unannounced.

She brought in a cardboard box. One I recognized immediately as the monthly subscription package we used to open together. Upon seeing it, the familiar pit of excitement that would build up toward the end of the month sparked momentarily. Recalling the anticipating emotions of waiting for the blue and black printed box to arrive at our apartment door.

*An Indie Touch* was the name of the subscription. The small company originated in Rhode Island. I only heard about it courtesy of a talkative customer who overheard me while taking an order. I asked my routine question: *how do you like your coffee?* And they replied: *how do you like your music?*

For \$39.99, you would receive one-of-a-kind merch and a brand-new vinyl from an underground singer-songwriter. All with their famous *Indie Touch* stamp of authentic approval. At first, it felt a bit pretentious. But she and I liked our music like our occasional out-of-town adventures: low-key, quirky, and down-to-earth.

In any case, the box was full of my stuff. At least, I'm assuming it is. And she came on my one solo shift of the week. I know she remembers this because she doesn't forget anything, for better or worse. Every detail is cataloged, laminated, and sorted in Lou fashion. And as her name dares

to skip through this air of tense uncertainty and my thrown-off thoughts, I'm pulled into her marveling orbit once more.

The sight of her brown hair never failed to bring me comfort, even in the form of a stray left on my sweatshirt sleeve or gently moving it when her head was resting on my shoulder, while her hair decided to get well acquainted with my face. Sure I had seen brown hair before I met Lou, probably thousands of times. But the way Lou's hair framed her face and always appeared to be in motion from its soft, bold waves, it was like witnessing a brunette for the very first time. My eyes were wholly captivated then at first glance. And by George, they are now; even if I wasn't expecting to see her, my attention has no choice but to surrender.

Lou wasn't terrible or *crazy*, as I know some dudes would arrogantly claim after a breakup. Especially in response to the inevitable post-breakup questions carelessly prompted by the ignorant dudes they surround themselves with. Statements like: *Pft, I'm glad she's gone! She was crazy!* Yea, sure, pal. Keep telling yourself that.

No, Lou is entirely her own entity of humanity. Like a kaleidoscope of what visionaries from pure Greek philosopher times hoped and dreamed evolved humans would blossom into. A delightful concoction of witty sarcasm and vast knowledge in sociocultural anthropology that seamlessly shifts to the gears of 90's cartoon call-backs. And numerous times, she has stated that books are her choice of company over most people. Her Achilles heel was elderly folks. Specifically, the loners bundled up in the park, no matter the weather.

During most of our walks, she went out of her way to bring a warm bagel, or just the warmth of her smile, over an elderly folk's unoccupied bench. Or to the other side of an empty concrete chess table. She'd let go of my hand while my eyes and mind were catching up with

inner conversations between the shapes in the clouds or the recollection of old memories mixed with near future tasks. I always knew she was about to go over to an old man or lady; Lou would give my hand this particular squeeze. I'd watch her walk around and hear her clear words and kind demeanor while I found a seat on a bench nearby or prime seating under a generous tree.

Once, after she spent a good 45 minutes or so talking with an older woman who appeared to have impressively knitted her entire outfit, I kindly and curiously asked Lou a question. What always prompted her to stop what she was doing and talk with these strangers? With the tug of her gentle smile, I remember she said, "One conversation can do so much, and I have the time."

As for our relationship, I'd compare it to a house plant for the sake of analogies. I'm a sucker for a good analogy.

The house plant is bought with such excitement, good intentions, and plans. But without the proper care, attention, and dedication, the plant withers, dries up, and loses its intensely green self in the hands of unintentional neglect.

The wild thing is that our relationship didn't lack those fundamental necessities. Our fatal misstep was the plant's location. Some plants require plenty of sunlight or can handle their own in the shade. As for our metaphorical plant, we tried to ignore the reality of its eventual locational adjustments.

Regardless, I loved our relationship and our memories. I even love Lou now, as she's stomping those Converse soles right up to the register. Where I stood in my own holey drawn on Converse, wishfully descending in nervousness through the flimsy bottoms and to an alternate reality. A quaint timeline where everything worked out perfectly and this moment wasn't happening.

Louella, Lou as I like to call her, has worked her tail off the past few years en route to pursuing law school. We met and started dating while she was in the middle of this challenging path. Lou made it *very* clear that I was in no way going to change her plans and decisions. And I made it *very* clear that she was one heck of a woman who could do literally anything, and I'd never want to change her mind.

And I didn't. Neither of us expected to fall for one another like we did. Which made everything messy.

A beautiful chaos, with movie nights under a tag-teamed homemade fleece tie blanket, hiking adventures through state parks, long dead-end conversations that seemed to end up in delirious laughter, and morning rooms flooded with natural light and half-asleep inspirations. But messy nonetheless.

As her plan was to unfold, she reached the part where she would move across the country to attend law school. She made a tweak in her plan unwarrantedly, a change I wasn't expecting her to make. Lou asked me to move with her.

When we started dating, Louella discovered I was a folk-punk homebody who was perfectly content with my low-stakes barista job, my apartment above the shoe store, and un-monetized hobbies. I liked staying within walking distance of my comfort zone.

My friends, her friends, they all looked at our relationship like this odd pairing that was fun for the season but not everlasting. Like when two unlikely TV show characters get together, and the audience knows it's not written to work out. Still, they get a few funny bits and episodes out of it. And it appeared we were all cool with that, including Lou and me.

Obviously, I'm an idiot who thought *somehow* everything would just remain unruffled and smooth sailing. And in a way, I think she thought the ambitious parts of her had been easing inside me, and I was slowly becoming more like her. So then, I'd be right there with my wicker luggage ready to go by her moving time.

But to her dismay and my indecisiveness, I was still very much my old unmoved self. And with every odd and jagged piece that makes me the bizarre puzzle I am, I am still in love with this ambitious, straightforward woman.

"Hello, Hawkin" Lou set the box on the countertop and folded her arms. Not aggressively, though. That's her *I'm uncomfy* body language. Her hair was rockin' its natural look; the defiant, groovy creature I know and love. And I could feel the warmth of familiarity trying to fill my chest as my mind fully registered her presence. I did my best to put the yearning aside; mixing that with this situation didn't feel right.

I could now read my name applied with a thick Sharpie on the side of the box. Something about that stunned me. Partially because I thought it was my Sharpie she used, which is ironic. Mostly because I remember using that Sharpie to make a homemade T-shirt that said *Lou Crew*. I'd rock them at her debate competitions. Which she always crushed with flying, vibrant statements, and statistics.

Lou quickly cleared her throat and took the floor, again taking me back to those afternoons at her long but educationally entertaining competitions. "Inside this box is two flannels, one book, an ABBA album, and 5 T-shirts. I'm pretty sure they're yours."

The cafe wasn't bustling, thankfully. But it still felt like we were the last two fish at the pet store, and it was national buy a fish day. I could feel the observing gawks, and I'm sure

bystanders admired Lou for what looked like quite the power move. I mean, shoot, I even admired her fearlessness. I can't knock the general cafe public for that.

"Hi *Lou*, thank *you*, you didn't have *to*."

She almost smirked, but it was quickly covered with a glare. "Please don't, don't, why would you do that," Her stare didn't portray annoyance, though. I'm quite fluent in Louella Linguistics.

"I'm not sure what you *mean*. I'm not trying to make a *scene*. I'm trying to keep things *clean*."

Lou's eyebrow gestured up in recognizable warning. "Hawkin." She wasn't angry, more on the side of slightly amused, which was the goal.

A giddy surge traveled through me, like an electric current from an accidental outlet shock, by the sound of my name coming out of her almost smiling mouth.

Lou's eyes shifted to the box on the counter and then traced back to me. "You *know* I get a kick out of your rhyming sentences."

"This I very well *know*, which is why I started when you said *hello*." Whether she could see it or not, and let's be honest, she totally can, I was nervous to see her again.

An unexpected sigh came off her softly, knocking my on-hand rhyming dictionary out of my brain's impromptu grasp. "I actually came to try and say goodbye, which is making this a lot harder." Lou looked down at her Converse and then glanced around the cafe to brush away any lingering eyes. Maybe she was second-guessing her drop-off decision.

"I'm sorry," Lou's eyes returned to our conversation, but they still weren't entirely focused on me. "I'll stop now. I don't want to make anything hard for you."

Lou looked like she was holding back tears; she did have a knack for withholding her emotions. Something within her was definitely being suppressed. "Would you want to talk for a little while when you get off? I'm not trying to be a creep, but I remember your schedule and know your shift ends soon. Can I buy you coffee?" Now she was focusing on me, and it felt almost comforting to be in our little fortress again.

"How about I buy you a coffee you can sip on while I wait for my coworker to come in and take over. You can pick a spot for us to sit and talk, does that sound okay to you?" Man, this human taught me so much.

She was off to scout a spot for the two of us with a nod while I started fixing her coffee. Just as she remembers my schedule, I remember exactly how she likes her coffee. Medium roast, a little over a splash of coconut milk, and a generous amount of honey. While I reached for a spoon to stir all the goodness together, it dawned on me that this might be the last coffee I would prepare for her. And that hit me deep in the well of my coffee bean heart.

I remember the first coffee we shared together. It was the first night we met, towards the beginning of college. We were both invited to a rather rambunctious party for our taste. With the uncomfortableness we both felt, we gravitated toward one another and found refuge in our mutual misery.

Wanting to impress her and provide a sense of normalcy amongst the craziness, I spotted a small coffee maker when I peeped into the kitchen, beyond the random couple making out and a few floating conversations. It was tucked behind a line of half-filled bottles and accompanying mixers, along with what would soon be their red-cup inhabitants.



Taking the machine out and Lou making an educated guess as to where the grounds and filters would be, I made some good old fashion house-party black coffee. And my intentions were met perfectly, for I remember as I handed her the cup of warm caffeine, the brightest smile graced her lightly perspired face. It was a packed house.

We sat together on a green fabric loveseat, sipped on coffee, and exchanged random memories over the horrid music. Occasionally overly loud party-goers would curiously shout at us: *Woah, sick, where'd you get the coffee from?* But their attention never lasted long enough for us to answer. Eventually, we responded to the question with ridiculous places: Florence, Neptune, Smithsonian.

When I recall that night, I remember several things. The way Lou would tell a story, you'd swear you were actually there to witness all the details that she was so enticingly good at sharing. Lou had a magical charm in how she'd make you feel included when she told you about something that happened to her, and I don't know how she does it. The other memento is Lou showing me her birthmark. A tiny smudge of dark brown behind her left ear, almost resembling a keyhole shape. With the pen I had in my pocket, as I almost always have a pen, I drew a little key on my finger and pretended to open the door to her profound consciousness. She giggled in a blush and kissed me without hesitation.

Louella found a square high-rise table for two in the back. I took a peek to discreetly check in on her after about 10 minutes, and she looked a little less sad. She pulled the book out of the box and thumbed through it. It was the only book I owned, given to me by my high school English teacher. It was their old copy that they had written, highlighted, and spilled in, but I adore it all the same.

*Leaves of Grass* by Papa Walt. It also made my English teacher cringe when I called him that nickname. To which I would clear my throat with apologies and correctly state: *Mr.* Papa Walt Whitman, where are my manners?

After another 15 minutes, my coworker came, and I was off the clock. As I took my tie-dyed apron off and hung it up with the others, I looked at the untouched scene of my sort of ex-girlfriend. Reading my beloved, treasured book with the table decorations of my ratty flannels and local punk band T-shirts made and purchased from house shows. While she was waiting for my company once again.

I wondered what she wanted with my company and what would come from it. One would guess closure, but Lou told me she had closure a few nights ago. Going into the scene blind, by the situation at hand and lingering love, I sat down across from her with my latte.

"Hope you don't mind," She said as her finger was placed on the page, saving a spot. "Papa Walt was calling." Her smile both inflated and crushed me at the same time. How was a girl so cool, ever into a speck of humdrum dust like me?

"Ah, you remembered his nickname." My voice felt coated in nostalgia and a tiny hint of hope that we would slip into old times.

"One doesn't forget such legends." Lou's finger moved just a tad, almost as if she wasn't saving a passage after all.

But I didn't want to lose that possibility, another possible memory to be created with her. "Did you find something interesting?" The desperation came a bit thick in my tone; I just hope it sounded slightly calmer on the receiving end.

"The whole book is interesting, but I did like this particular part." Lou looked to me for a signal: *please, go ahead and read*. And I was silently relieved we were still both fluent in our confidant language as she went on to read the passage out loud.

*"Not I nor anyone else can travel that road for you. You must travel it by yourself. It is not far. It is within reach. Perhaps you have been on it since you were born, and did not know. Perhaps it is everywhere- on water and land."*

As soon as she began reading, I knew the exact place her finger was lying in the book. But it sounded entirely different when she spoke it. And secretly and childishly, I wished it would somehow be a more extended version. "That's a very profound complement of words."

A soft chuckle came from her, "That it is, that it is. I noticed it's in a different highlighter color than the other pages. It's in green. The other pages are yellow highlighter."

I nodded at the evidence, "That's my handy work. I highlighted that part." Little did I know I had highlighted my now apparent foreshadowing.

With a grin, she responded, "Let me take a guess; you used green highlighter because it's *leaves of grass*, not *suns of lemons* or some Hawkin-logic of that nature."

A short-lived laugh flowed out of me as I concealed it with a sip of my latte. "You're going to make one heck of a lawyer Lou," I realize that I accidentally brought up the elephant sitting with us at the table, and the mood shifted a tad.

Lou gently closed the book, but she didn't put it back in the box.

"Did I upset you?" I uttered softly, trying to figure out what exactly was going on with this meeting of ours. "I've been kind of wondering why you came by; I honestly didn't know if I'd see you again."

"One conversation can do so much, and I have the time." The words scraped from her throat, and my eyes glistened for a moment in her recall. As Lou saw my reaction, her eyes snapped away as she shook her head, un-concentrated again. "But to answer your question, no. No, you didn't upset me. Not directly, I guess."

I could tell she was feeling uneasy. Louella is a powerhouse of notecards and articulate speeches. I knew she had written up precisely what she wanted to say to me somewhere inside her. But it's not my place to pry, and I won't attempt to. That wouldn't be fair of me.

"At the risk of sounding like a jerk,"

"Lou, come on now, you're not a jerk."

"Well, you may think differently after the exposure of my candid thoughts."

Whelp, now *I* was the uneasy one.

"I know I told you I had my closure, and we would go our separate ways. And I also know it's going to take time, everything does, but I'm not settled with- *us*. I just," Lou took a shallow breath. One I could identify as the breath she would take in a moment of collecting her thoughts and whatever feelings may be attached to them.

"I'm frustrated because I know you can do more, and I wish you wanted to for the sake of me and the adventure we've created together. The relationship we built; whether we meant to or not."

Lou placed her hands around her mug. "Sure, we both got together with the mindset that this was just a fun fling, which was cool at the time, but we both fell for each other. We *both* did. And I wish that you could imagine yourself out of this state or even out of this town."

I also put my hands around my cup to buy myself a little time to think of a response because I felt weird inside. Even though I'd been secretly dreaming of this moment, some kind of hail mary to get back together and go back to normal, I wasn't expecting this. And I'm not

even sure what Lou wants from this. Maybe she's just venting, but she's also saying a lot of wishful thoughts out loud. I guess at this point, we both are.

"You're totally right; we did fall for each other." I couldn't help but smile because a dozen little memories fluttered through my head at the release of my sentence. "I have the utmost respect for you, Louella. You're the jazziest, smartest, proudest human I'll ever meet. And that's why I agreed with you, from day one, that I would *never* stand in your way."

Lou's fingers briefly tapped on her mug as another faint exhale joined the air between us. "And I appreciate that, beyond words. But standing out of my way doesn't mean you're not allowed to walk by my side."

*Here comes the lawyer.* The phrase I coined and would use when Lou was breaking out her official tones and words. She was not a fan of that phrase.

"You are right. It doesn't mean that. I just, I don't know if I want to move across the country. It's hard to explain, and I don't want to sound insensitive. It's not because of you. I love kicking it with you, and our relationship is the best. *You* are the best. It's the part where I have to physically move and tear myself away from everything I've built and my comforts and routines that are tripping me up. It gives me this uncontrollable anxiety, man, I dunno." I drifted off a little; I wasn't even expecting myself to admit that last part. Barely knew it was squatting inside me.

She nodded at the pieces of evidence I was presenting, her hands still wrapped around her mug, and her eyes fixated on the grain of the wooden table. "I guess, logically, I get it. It just sucks to hear. It sucks to hear that I'm not a big enough reason to cancel those things out. That's selfish, I know; I'm just getting everything off my chest, so I don't regret not expressing anything. I'm sorry, Hawkin."

At the use of my name, I looked at her, and she gazed up at me. That wave of brown falling at her shoulders winked at me in playful waves. Her eyes practically played a speed slideshow of all our precious moments and memories while I looked into them. And there's Lou. There's my Lou that I love. "You have nothing to be sorry for. This situation is just,"

"Gruesome?" She finally lifted her cup and took a swig.

"Yea, exactly that." I joined in her action like we were cheering for our mutually agreed-upon tragedy.

A memory of ours popped in my head while I took in her entire appearance, both inside and out. There was a small hole-in-the-wall pub by campus that we liked going to with friends on Wednesday nights for trivia.

One time the trivia guy, also known as the fedora guy, brought a new challenge to the fact-lover regulars. He had made a scavenger hunt, it was wildly unorganized, but the prize was \$150 and free beer for the week. So naturally, as poor college students, we put our souls into this night-long competition.

Instead of collecting traditional-type items for the scavenger hunt, the objective was to capture pictures of the 25 funny things the fedora guy listed. I don't remember all of the ridiculous listed goals. But a few that stick out is a picture with a passed-out college student with today's paper and a photo of a 5 person cheerleader pyramid made entirely of strangers. Everything was absurd and hilarious to try and find.

It was pretty much impossible, but we spent the whole night laughing until our stomachs hurt and running around campus from midnight until almost 2 in the morning. We felt like we were 16 years old, like the night couldn't possibly end, that no weight of midterms or essays

could dare out-weigh the importance of this obscure contest. The weather that night was perfect, my smile had never been more full, and I told Lou I loved her that night for the first time.

Sitting across from her now, I couldn't imagine retelling that story and not having her by my side later in my life.

My entire perspective felt changed like my purpose had been reinstated; something snapped into place. "*Lou?*"

Lou's eyes, a view I would choose a million times over, focused on me in anticipation.

Now was the time to be vulnerable. "This much is *true*; I need *you*, but I don't know what to *do*." A knot of nerves tightened in my chest, waiting for her reaction.

She looked down into her coffee for a moment, then let go of the mug and reached for my hands. I met her halfway, a much-needed, comforting retreat for my palms. "I know you're serious. You're always serious when you're rhyming. You're so backward." She smiled a little, kind of guiltily. "Hawkin, I don't know what to do either. If I'm being completely vulnerable here,"

Lou stopped talking, cutting herself off. Our hands were still holding each other. My eyes focused on them, like a beautiful marble depiction of love displayed in a museum.

"I don't want to let you go." Lou bluntly but so softly said. "That's why I came back. I guess I brought your stuff as a disguise because I was scared. And part of me was trying to force myself to say goodbye to you, but I knew that's not what I really wanted."

"I'm going to thank you for a long time for coming back to see me." My thumb gently cascaded her fingers like a curious hand greeting a wind chime. "I was thrilled but super nervous to see you," I admitted.

A quick chuckle came from her in return. "I know, I could tell."

"What gave it away?" I asked, fully knowing the answer.

"The rhyming." She responded in a playfully sarcastic way, her hands intertwining in mine just a bit tighter.

I never wanted to lose the touch of Lou's hands on mine and the feeling of holding her in any capacity. And I can't believe it almost happened.

Looking up, just before Lou opened her mouth, she began to talk without hesitation. And I knew that look of hers anywhere. "We can still be within reach of each other."

I have always been able to tell when the brilliant lightbulb in her mind clicks on; it astounds me. And she knows that I'm a sucker for analogies and quoting Pap Walt. The smile that shamelessly covered my face would have been closely related to the smile on the trivia night if smiles had any relation connections.

"It is not far." She smiled back, hopeful and proud.

I had absolutely no idea what we were going to do. If one of us would compromise. If long distance was in our distant future. But beautiful-messy was always the aesthetic of our relationship, and we can learn to keep up with that.