

MIA CARON

AFTER JEROME



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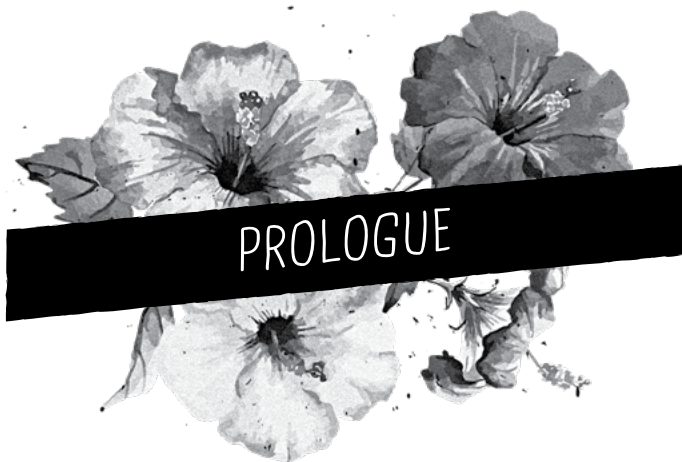
MIA CARON

Mia Caron studied communications at Université Laval and she has now been working as press attachée in the publishing industry for over twelve years. Her first book ***Amorous Pursuits: Trapping Humans in their Natural Habitat*** (*Chasses amoureuses: trapper l'humain dans son habitat naturel*) is a humoristic comic about approaching people in the real world.

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I met Jerome at a Halloween party. I was dressed as Miss Idaho 1993 and he, as a Mexican wrestler. He struck up a conversation with me near a bowl of Mars minibars by chatting about the Higgs boson discovery. I instantly felt an intergalactic spark light up behind my sky-blue eyeshadow and a crystal globe forming around us. Quantum physics seemed to be on my side, but just as I was stocking up on more Rockets candy, his girlfriend showed up. It ended there.

Shortly after Memorial Day, he blazed back into my life, newly single. He asked me out repeatedly.

I declined. The Holidays were approaching, I had gifts to buy, and I had zero interest in rebound theory.

But when the countdown to the new year ended, I began reevaluating my resolutions: I decided to do away with wheat germ juice, navel gazing, and attempts at mastering telekinesis. I said yes to him. I needed a spark of excitement. Except what was supposed to be a small jolt to my ribs ended up electrifying me to my core.

I fell for him over a plate of Tex Sweetie Mex – sweet-salsa ham and salted-caramel churros – at the only neighbourhood restaurant open the day after New Year’s day. Not only did I admire how easily he opened up to me over a mountain of potatoes griddled in duck fat, but I also loved that he earned my trust just as quickly. It felt as if I’d been eating toast with him all my life.

With each passing month, I learned more about Jerome.

I knew that he took tissues to the cinema because he’d tear up just as much over a romantic musical-dance comedy as over the sixth film in a superhero series.

That a Ginette Reno song playing on his car radio late at night could get him to change directions to come snuggle with me in bed.

That he could make me laugh so hard, my breath blew out the lamps on restaurant tables.

That he brought me not roses, but rose-coloured tulips.

That his kisses entranced me to the point I'd spill my gin and tonic on him without knowing it.

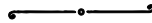
That, in his top drawer, he kept the pashmina shawl that smelled of my first vacation and that I'd forgotten at his place the night we first made love.

That he celebrates Valentine's Day. On January 14, I received the travel edition of the *Guess Who?* board game in the mail. In the accompanying note, he told me to pack my bags because we were going on a road trip to California in the spring.

Ever since then, I had eyes only for him.

But my glasses proved rose-tinted.

Despite his lovely qualities, our relationship suffered from one ugly fault that I'd learned to ignore. Until the incident.



At the end of June, on Saint Jean-Baptiste day, Jerome and I got dressed up in blue to attend a friend's barbecue. The smell of grilled meat mingled with the aroma of the woodfire burning on

the backyard lawn while some thirty nostalgic fans of 1980 and 1995 drank, smoked, and danced.

While my love got a fleur-de-lis painted on his cheek, I went to get us some hot dogs made from the meat of calves that had been lovingly raised on a local farm. While in line for the BBQ, a guy slam dancing to The Cowboy Fringants's song *En Berne* crashed into me, toppling over my Dijon-mustard-smearred paper plate. I looked towards Jerome to see if he had witnessed the accident and fell victim to another attack – this one not on my person – but to my heart. The assault took place exactly at noon, Eastern Standard Time. The enemy target: the make-up artist.

I watched her perform her mating ritual: unfurling her peacock tail, bellowing out her stag mating call, puffing up her magnificent crimson frigatebird throat.

To hell with the hot dogs, I took a sip of my Maudite beer and charged into battle to reclaim my territory. I threw my arms around Jerome, he kissed me on the cheek close to my ear. The girl didn't leave. I had left, at the Halloween party. Why was she staying put? I would never do that to another woman. Jerome introduced me, first

name only, with no possessive noun or title. I'd have had a more descriptive introduction had I been his sister. I took his left hand. He withdrew it and pulled away from me as he continued talking about the formation of black holes in the universe.

I saw red. I fumed. I exploded. I grabbed him and dragged him aside.

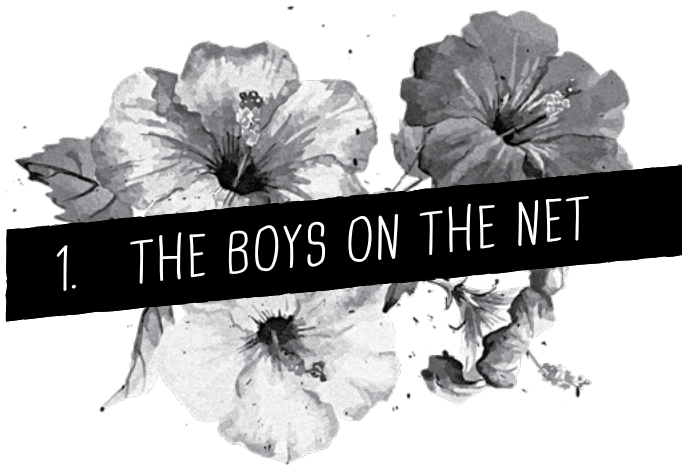
And out it came:

You've been playing this game for six months now. I'm your girlfriend only when it suits you. Your hostage rather. Seeing you flit from girl to girl. Knowing you don't care that I can see you flit from girl to girl. Watching you. Obsessing over you. Being jealous. Torturing myself. Not feeling like myself anymore. I've had enough of you evading questions about our relationship. I want to be with you and you alone. Do you want to be with me and me alone? Yes or no?

He remained silent after my ultimatum. I waited for a bit. Still nothing. Radio silence. I had to face the truth: his answer was no. Shit. I wasn't ready. But I couldn't go back. It was too late. I had gotten myself into this trap.

So I stole his *Fin du Monde* beer and retreated. He stayed behind and didn't come after me. On the

far side of the battlefield, I turned around. My eyes met his for one last look. Then, he turned towards the other girls. All of them.



Jerome had a choice: other women or me. He chose them. Too bad for him. I was going to do the same thing to him.

I was going to replace him by the end of the summer.

That didn't leave me much time, so I did what everyone does. I downloaded dating apps.

On top of being a redhead, I have an acute sense of humour, a reflexive charm, and an angular face that's proportional to my body. I'm looking for a man who enjoys a dinner with friends (on-Fridays-only-because-I-need-two-days-to-recover)

and good wine (a dry-not-sweet-slightly-mineral-white). To conclude, I prefer dogs to cats.

My screen was soon overflowing with notifications in the form of candy pink hearts, Cupid's bows, and bright orange flames. The day I signed up for these apps, I had no idea that I'd need management experience to juggle all these dating sites.

My index finger no longer knew in what direction to point; a small callus formed on my fingertip. His nose is too far from his ears. Swipe. His chin doesn't suit his trousers. Swipe. If I swept my floor as often as I swiped over guys on those apps, my house would be so spotless Mr Clean would be green with jealousy.

A plethora of "Sup. Lol. You're pretty cute. Lol." idled in my inbox. I decided to stop responding to these messages because it was all so much white noise.


It was like perpetually having a phone call in an elevator: I couldn't make out one word in two. It might have been easier communicating in sign language, but ultimately, I had other fish to fry.

The faces parading before my eyes could keep me hypnotized for hours. Just the other night, I even turned down a happy hour with friends because I had an unhappy addiction to my mobile screen. I

preferred to spend my nights phone in hand, reclining on my grey couch, texting strangers and feasting on raisins. Except, unlike the Greek goddesses, I didn't have a servant to hand feed them to me. Woman seeks man to hand feed her grapes: a fairly popular request on the Net.

At some point, I had to make the transition to real life. I had chatted with every decent-looking male the platforms had to offer. I had exhausted every topic of conversation that two people who had never met could have. They all wanted to meet me in the flesh. Or else, they would cut me off.

And that, I could not allow. Not after the answer – or rather, the non-answer – Jerome gave me after my ultimatum. I had to replace him. I needed a shoulder. A warm body. Someone to help me forget quickly.



I fell for Jerome in front of a breakfast plate, the morning after New Year's Day. I admired how easy it was for him to reveal himself while eating a mountain of potatoes. I cherished that he knew how to gain my trust so quickly. It felt like I had been eating toasts with him my whole life.

For half a year, Jerome was my boyfriend, even if I never dared calling him that. He and I had very different visions of romantic relationships. After six months, I had enough. I gave Jerome an ultimatum: the other girls or me. He chose the others.

The bittersweet tale of a heartbreak with comical overtones.