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The Aftereffect  
Word Count: 1100

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I never thought that I would see myself in the position I was in now. All of my childhood years spent in front of the television, soaking in the romantic stories and themes of various movies, had set up unrealistic expectations in my mind for my future relationships. I trusted too quickly. I gave too much of myself for little in return. I expected perfection when it didn't exist. Now, I was in a less than perfect situation.

John and I had met in college during our sophomore year, immediately bonding over the ridiculous amount of work that our history professor assigned us. Our hours spent in my dorm and the college's library eclipsed everything else for me. I felt like I had finally found the person that would be the costar in my romantic storyline. To me, he was perfect: smart, handsome, thoughtful, and everything I could imagine. Everyone around us thought we were going to be the couple that lasted until we died peacefully in our sleep together.

The first big argument we had was the start of everything I later realized. It led to the cause of all the aftereffects that followed. During our junior year of college, John blew off our usual Friday morning ritual: a cup of coffee and a study session in the library. I brushed it off, understanding that the end of the school year was going to be busy for both of us and thinking that he probably just had a club meeting. Then, I received a message from my friend Anna with a picture attached that made my heart drop into the depths of my stomach.

The picture was of John and his ex-girlfriend Ashley sitting very close together on a bench on campus. He had his arm on the back of the chair, fingers just slightly brushing her shoulder as her legs angled toward him. It felt like I was interrupting an intimate moment by viewing the picture.

John and I hadn't talked about Ashley very much throughout our relationship. Whenever I would even jokingly bring her up, he would immediately change the subject. She felt like something forbidden I wasn't supposed to discuss. Maybe that picture was the reason why. "Are you getting back together with her?" I asked him when he came back to the apartment two whole hours later.

"I'm not, Molly! She just needed someone to be there for her! She's going through a rough time!" John defended himself, always trying to cast himself in a positive light.

"There are counselors on campus for that! Why were you sitting so close? Did you blow me off for her? Do you know how that makes me feel?" I cried out, unaware of the tears

streaming down my face. I felt a crack in my heart and my composure. It was the first crack of many.

We made up that night. I gave in to him, his tears making me automatically feel protective over him. How does that happen? One minute I was yelling at him, threatening to kick him out, and the next, I was hugging him so close, pressing comforting kisses to the crown of his head. Things were beautiful for a few days, but something dark lingered in the back of my head. Something told me to dig deeper, so I did.

One night when he was asleep, I turned on his phone. I hit the power button, and a text from Ashley was there on the screen, sitting right above his background picture of him and I. It was hard to believe that they were still talking after our fight. He promised to cut her off! Guilt flooded through me, but I had to know for sure what was going on between them. I quietly unlocked his phone and glanced through their text messages, finding messages saying, "I love you," "I miss you," and "My biggest regret was losing you." Feeling the cracks splinter through my soul, I couldn't help but cry.

We fought again, but he deleted her number this time. He blocked her on all social media. He swore up and down that he didn't feel that way about her anymore. He claimed that those texts were from months ago. Although, the more intimate ones were from farther back in his text chat.

"Don't give up on all of this. Don't give up on me," John pleaded. I didn't want to give up on our life. I didn't want to give up on our post-graduation dreams to move, get a house, get married, have kids. I didn't want to lose who I had deemed was my ultimate soulmate. I gave him one more chance, unknowing that would cause the aftereffects that followed.

John acted like he did when we first started dating. He was attentive and sweet. His actions were as if the previous situation hadn't even happened. At first, I reveled in the feeling of being the center of his attention, but I couldn't fully enjoy it. I felt like there was lingering darkness in my mind, poisoning every sweet attempt he made. I couldn't help but think he was trying to kiss up.

It felt like he tainted everything he touched. I couldn't bring myself to look at him the same anymore. Whenever he was on his phone, I couldn't help but think he was texting his ex. When he took longer to come back home from class, I thought he was sneaking around to see his

ex. With every accusation that filled my head, I felt the cracks splinter more and more, and I felt like I was hanging on by a thread.

His actions caused me to be paranoid and angry. I was no longer my playful and bubbly self. I was resentful and suspicious, and the anxiety from that made me want to curl up in a ball and infinitely sleep. He had poisoned me with his lack of loyalty, and I knew there was only one cure, despite how somber it made me feel.

Our lease was ending next month, thankfully. While John was away all day at the college for class, Anna and I moved all of my things into her apartment. I put my half of the rent and the bills on the kitchen counter along with my key to our studio and the silver heart necklace he gave me on our first anniversary. I had to end our relationship. I had to save myself. His poison had too many pestilent symptoms, and his actions had too destructive of an aftereffect.