

# The Strangers I Still Love

Sharon Nicole Cole



**stranger (n.)**

late 14c., “unknown person, foreigner,” from strange + -er (1) or else from Old French *estrangier* “foreigner” (Modern French *étranger*), from *estrange*. Latin used the adjective *extraneus* as a noun to mean “stranger.” The English noun never picked up the secondary sense of the adjective. As a form of address to an unknown person, it is recorded from 1817, American English rural colloquial. Meaning “**one who has stopped visiting**” is recorded from 1520s.

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**Felicia**

I don't remember your last name, but I do remember the floral windbreaker you wore to second grade everyday. I existed quietly lost in my own head and you were a perpetual new kid. In our oddness, we clicked. You just know with some people, that they're people like you, even when you're itty-bitty. I felt guilty because I liked you better than my forever best friend. You went to school with us for less than a year and never came back after the summer. I kept your picture, I wonder if you kept mine.

I've tried to find you since but I have no idea where to begin.



## **Daniel**

My first “real” boyfriend, my high school sweetheart. I took your virginity and gave you your first heartbreak.

We dated our senior year and continued to date for two years after high school. In my selfishness at the end, I left because I was bored. I missed my friends. I missed Kearney. I wanted to feel rubbed raw by living and you wanted to play video games. I had another not-even-quarter life crisis. I fell out of love. Before you, I didn't think it was possible to fall out of love with someone. You did nothing bad to me, and maybe in messed up way, that was the reason it fell apart. Routine. We were an old married couple at 20 years old. We were growing up in different directions. Another boy started to write me letters, that's all it took. You hated me for a long time after.

I saw you in Casey's not too long ago and you apologized for your hate. I'm still not sure why. You deserve to feel every inch of bitter towards me.

I had moved to Kearney at the end of our relationship to chase happiness, we decided to try and make the distance work. I fell in love with that other boy. I cheated. I came back to visit and broke up with you in the middle of us fucking. I started crying, I couldn't do it, I didn't want to be with you, I didn't want you touching me anymore. It felt forced and dead. I was thinking about the other boy the whole time.

In that Casey's reunion we made awkward small talk, we hugged, and we both went on. I thank you for the gift you gave me that day, you didn't have to do that. Peace. I realize now that I still love you, I realized it in that hug you gave me, in your kindness. It's evolved into something other than romantic love, relationship love, typical love. It's a love in knowing that you simply exist. That we were given the privilege of learning from each other, knowing each other, finding meaning from our mistakes on this frayed string of time.



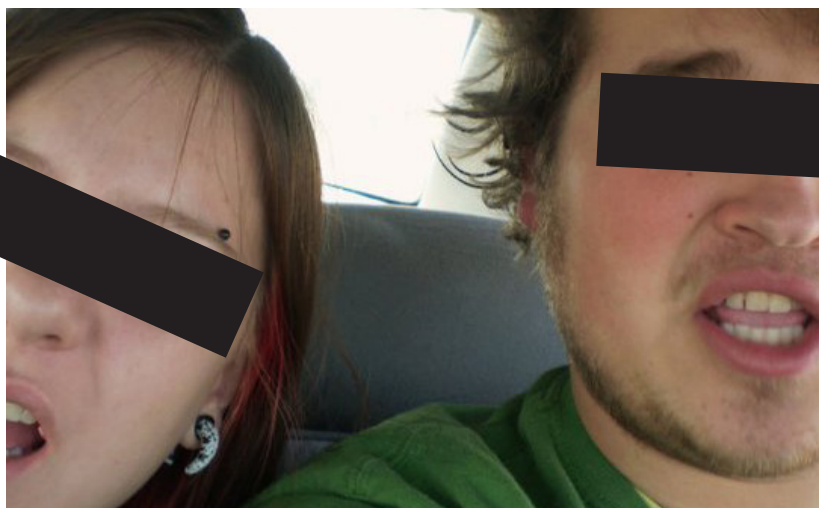
## **The Girl On My Bus Ride Home**

I don't remember your name. Actually, I'm not sure I ever knew it. I can't remember what you look like anymore. You exist as this blurred figure in my memory, bits of movement and color, like what I see when I'm not wearing my glasses. I don't remember much from those days, I was 14 and very sick. There are no photos from this time in my life.

We had moved to Tea, South Dakota in the beginning of the school year. I had already began my spiral into mental illness before this, but the move from small town nothing to big foreign school was the break in my dam. The social anxiety and depression was bad before, but now it loomed over every piece of me, I couldn't eat lunch because I couldn't handle sitting at a table of strangers. I had no friends, I had no enemies, I had no bullies, I had nothing. Some days I'd barely utter more than 10 words to anyone. I was un-existing. The eating disorder exploded at this time. I was living with just my mom in an apartment. My father wasn't there to police me, my mom was absent often as a nurse. My behaviors raged. But the internet was always there, and so were the Ana Mia forums, the chat groups. People like me. People I could relate to hundreds of miles away. Other people who felt dead too. We'd share our tips and tricks of un-existing. I wanted to die, I was trying. I had lost all ability to connect to anyone, and didn't believe I'd ever gain that back. I fantasized about my funeral, what I'd be wearing, what the weather would be like.

You knew me when I weighed 86 lbs, right before the Big Breakdown and my mom driving me to the clinic. Right before our move to Kearney and The Big Wake-Up. We only knew each other on the bus ride home, I never saw you in the school. But you were the only person there I had ever had a real conversation with.

A boy bullied you one day, I don't remember what or why, but I remember you hurt, you crying. I remember burning with hate towards the boy, wanting to say something, anything to him so badly. But I couldn't find the courage. I said nothing to comfort you. I am so sorry. It's a deep regret I still hold closely, one that twinges every time it rolls to the front of my memories. I am so sorry. I'm so sorry. I still think about you often, I hope you're happy and loved, wherever you ended up.



## Derek

Where do I begin?

We were the weird kids, the speech kids our sophomore and junior years. I feel like our relationship really evolved when I moved back to Kearney for college though. I have so many memories to thank you for: Late night bike rides on the blacked-out bike paths staring at the stars by the archway monument with trips to the Chinese buffet afterwards, jam sessions belting shit pop tunes in your car on dirt roads burning incense sticks and smoking cigs, scratch-off tickets, talks about hair plugs and the future, edible panties, synthetic weed, stupid voice mails, getting our first tattoos together, you giving me the privilege of drawing your tattoo memorial to your mother that rests on the back of your leg, taking controversial art and natural science class together speaking in doodles and scribble on note paper during class, the time you spent the night with me cracking jokes and drinking cheap wine when Jacob left for school in New York and I was broken by it, art projects, inside jokes, deep fried Snickers, conversations and conversations and conversations. You are such a good friend, such a beautiful human being. I miss you so god damn much.

There is too much space on this planet, I really wish I didn't have to call you a stranger. I hope someday we can be close again, that you can meet my daughter.

I am so sorry you didn't feel like you could come out as a gay man when we were near each other. I'm sorry if I ever hurt you or offended you in regards to your sexuality. The signs were there. The time you told me about trying to have sex with that girl and being unable to get a hard on for her. Our talks about sexuality. Your jokes about being gay. I ignored them because I knew how often you had been accused of being gay in high school, how often you had to deny it. I know you were afraid of what your father would think. You called me out of the blue a while after I had moved back to Wayne and it seemed strange. Like you had something to say but couldn't. You came out shortly after, and I was so proud and so in love with you for it. I'm sorry you had to hide who you were for so long. You are one of the strongest people I've had the privilege to know. You are going to be a kick ass lawyer my friend, and someday I'll track you down for another late night bike ride, looking at the stars.



Sharon - Dakota and I  
appreciate your staying at  
the farm .... nice for me to have  
someone that Dakota likes and  
can give him attention ....

Paul &  
Dakota

## **Pearl**

I wasn't sure why you liked me so much when I started taking your art education classes way back in 2009. I wasn't a very typical art ed. kid, I had short black trying-too-hard-to-be-punk hair, wore Global Threat t-shirts, and got a C- minus in my first drawing class. I didn't know who I wanted to be anymore. But you scooped me up and loved me from the beginning. You are the kindest, most well-lived woman I have ever met, and I am continually amazed I was given the privilege to know you, to be advised by you. I don't stay in touch like I should. I'm writing you a letter after this.

You let me baby-sit your house a few times, giving me the task of taking care of your big old muttly dog Dakota (who needed company and his pills) and all the proud turkeys roaming freely on your farm yard. It was magic, I loved your farmhouse, I loved getting to wander, examining bits of your life through photographs and knick knacks, the organic foods in your cupboards and the art that lived on your walls. You always paid me way too much to do it, I would have done it for free. At first I wondered if you were lonely by yourself in that big house in the middle of a field, but now that I'm older, I understand.



## Uncle Mike

I hope you know that we miss you, my mom misses you. She's tried to find you since you left the family but hasn't had much luck. Me and my dad and my sister are all she has now, you know. Everyone else is dead or crazy. Tony has fallen off the deep end, bipolar disorder and a detrimental semi crash has scrambled his brain permanently. He tried phone my mom, speaking almost illegible chicken-scratch, and explained how he can't remember what our faces look like anymore. Your father is the same as he's always been, lost in space, only he writes kids books about Buffarillos now, did you know that? An absent, mentally ill father writing kids books about buffalo gorilla hybrids. Mom and I stalk him on social media sometimes and laugh. Out of all of them, you and my mom seemed like the most stable ones. I hope you know that if you walked back into our lives we'd all welcome you with open arms. I was pretty little when I knew you but I still remember bits about you, small details. Your love of bowling and pistachios. Sports in general. The way your bedroom looked in grandma's apartment. Your interest in the Gameboy games I used to play. Your big glasses and your facial hair.

I don't remember the sound of your voice anymore. I wish you could have seen your mother before she died, that you both could have cleared the air of whatever bitterness still sat between the two of you.

Do you remember the time you came up and visited us in Allen for Sarah's high school graduation? I was still pretty shy with you guys and didn't talk a whole lot, but you went for a walk with me and our dog Bubba out in the pasture behind our house, just the two of us. I don't remember the details of our conversation, but I remember the way the grass looked and the sound of Bubba panting, your smile. I remember feeling comfortable with you for the first time and talking your ear off. It is one of my favorite memories.

Do you ever try to find us, Mike? Or are we frozen in time to you? Am I a perpetual 9 year old living in your memories of the days when you were unhappy?



## Mark

Well, in reality, we've always kind of been strangers on the verge of knowing each other. You hit on me at a speech meet in high school and I fell aimlessly in love with you immediately after, for many years, as seems to be tradition with the way I love. We talked on the phone after that, since you lived in Shelton and I lived in Axtell. You were into punk rock and ska then, you'd sing me disjointed Rancid tunes over voice mails. I asked you to prom that year. Afterwards at my house I awkwardly quit trying to give you a blow job in my room because I was scared and it was my first time. We fell out of touch when that happened, but I still loved you. We were fuck buddies every so often the years following, but nothing more.

We reconnected when I moved back to Kearney for college. You apologized for making me feel uncomfortable on that prom night long ago. It was your first time too. You shared your current music with me, Of Montreal and Pavement, Elliot Smith and other sad songs. You shaped my musical interests again. I came over to your parent's house in the country and ate steak with you and your mom and dad. Hard working farm folk who were probably to lenient with you. The two of us sat on your roof that night smoking cigarettes as the june bugs pelted our bodies. We ate some mushrooms afterwards and fucked and buzzed. It's a night I still hold close. I had just found out my boyfriend had been cheating on me with everything that moved, shattering my perception of him as my forever, and you were close and warm and didn't drunkenly abuse me with your words like he did. You were strange and kind, and you were there. I still went back to him for some reason. I was almost your girlfriend so many times, it just never worked itself out quite right. We made a pact that if we were both single by the time we hit 50 we would get hitched.

We both have kids now, which is funny, I don't think either of us ever thought we'd have kids. Just, I ended up with a soul mate and you ended up with a bitter ex, I'm sorry it happened that way. You've had a hard road since I last saw you, I guess I did too for a while. We aren't strangers virtually, but I haven't seen you in person for many moons now. You sent me a mix tape not too long ago of your music, entitled Sad Jello. It sits happy and loved displayed next to my record player. I love you always, I'm always her to talk even if we live 400 miles away from each other, I hope you know that. I hope are kids get to be friends someday.





## To the Bear, For the Moon

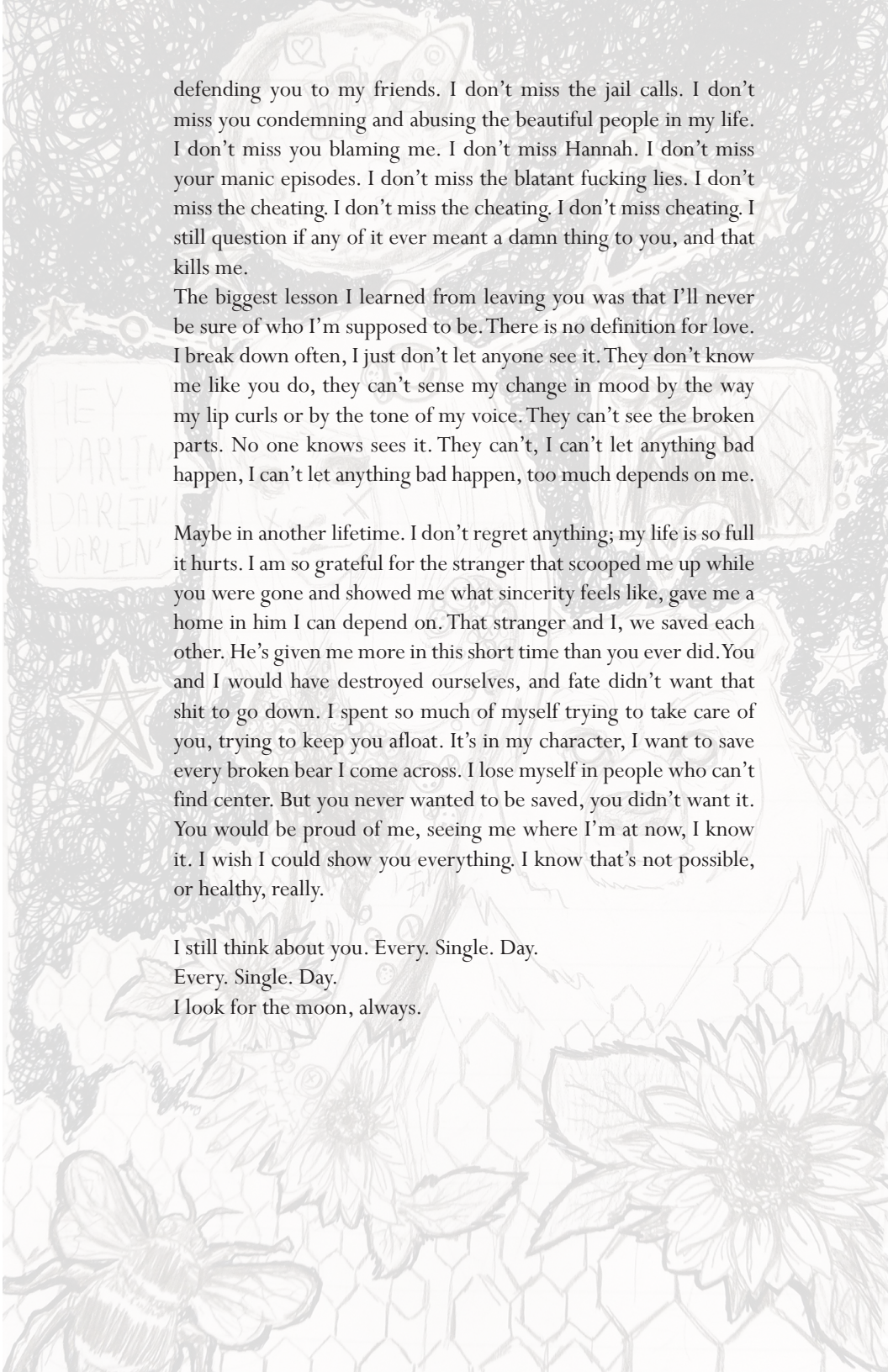
Hey,

do you remember when I first started hanging out with you, the times in your old apartment? All you had in your room was an air mattress and a stereo, and you pulled out the album, Rated R. You said it simply, "I think you're gonna like this." and we made love until the song Auto Pilot, when you had to go to work. You said I could stay there while you were gone, and I did. I laid there naked in your bed, breathing it in, high on new love, believing I'd found the soul I was gonna get tangled up in for the rest of my time on this earth. You were my first love, the first dizzy, all-encompassing kind of love I'd ever felt.

I didn't plan on this. I didn't plan on any of this, truly. I thought I was in for the long hall, a lifetime of bipolar tendencies and broken promises. That was okay. I wanted to feel everything you'd throw at me, even the ugly, bitter bits. Because I despised normality. Because a love so scattered and so fucked up was worth it, right? Right? Worth the bruises and the bite marks because it was tremendous. I miss car rides to faraway places. Talking my ear off the entire way, I miss our conversations. I miss exploring abandoned houses with you, I miss your reaction to it. I miss movie nights and homemade hummus and fried pickles. I miss the drawing game. I miss you happy, you passionate. I miss the dirty talk and the hotel rooms. I miss late night Perkins runs and trips to antique stores. I miss the way you'd surprise me on the days I needed it. I miss your grandma, and going to the zoo with you. I miss your impressions. I miss your sharp sense of humor. I miss the simple parts. I miss the way we'd fit together. Because when it was good, god damn. It was magic.

I don't miss you wasted, one liter of vodka down. Finding bottles hidden all over my room. I don't miss the constant verbal abuse, the attacks on my character, my art, my writing, the essence of what I stand for. I don't miss crying all the time or feeling guilty. I don't miss the suicidal talk. I don't miss you questioning my love, my sincerity. I don't miss you cruel. I don't miss you refusing to let me drive, crashing the car into a pole on purpose. I don't miss





defending you to my friends. I don't miss the jail calls. I don't miss you condemning and abusing the beautiful people in my life. I don't miss you blaming me. I don't miss Hannah. I don't miss your manic episodes. I don't miss the blatant fucking lies. I don't miss the cheating. I don't miss the cheating. I don't miss cheating. I still question if any of it ever meant a damn thing to you, and that kills me.

The biggest lesson I learned from leaving you was that I'll never be sure of who I'm supposed to be. There is no definition for love. I break down often, I just don't let anyone see it. They don't know me like you do, they can't sense my change in mood by the way my lip curls or by the tone of my voice. They can't see the broken parts. No one knows sees it. They can't, I can't let anything bad happen, I can't let anything bad happen, too much depends on me.

Maybe in another lifetime. I don't regret anything; my life is so full it hurts. I am so grateful for the stranger that scooped me up while you were gone and showed me what sincerity feels like, gave me a home in him I can depend on. That stranger and I, we saved each other. He's given me more in this short time than you ever did. You and I would have destroyed ourselves, and fate didn't want that shit to go down. I spent so much of myself trying to take care of you, trying to keep you afloat. It's in my character, I want to save every broken bear I come across. I lose myself in people who can't find center. But you never wanted to be saved, you didn't want it. You would be proud of me, seeing me where I'm at now, I know it. I wish I could show you everything. I know that's not possible, or healthy, really.

I still think about you. Every. Single. Day.

Every. Single. Day.

I look for the moon, always.

