

FOR SALE

By Shannon O'Neil

He's leaving today.

This always happens to me. I always let people into my life, I let them see me in my entirety and then I wait. However long it takes, I wait patiently until they find themselves loving me—not for the good things about me, but because of my faults. They love me because of my cracks and my age spots and the other imperfections that separate me from all the others. And just then, right at that moment when they fall in love with me, they leave me. They collect their things and they walk out the door and what was once us, becomes just me.

I thought he was different, I really did. I thought that after we got to know each other, he would break the mold. I remember the day he first saw me—I remember so clearly the look in his eyes when he looked me over from top to bottom and I heard the awe in his voice when he said that I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He certainly wasn't the first to say that about me, but he was the first to say it with an emotion I'd never heard before. He said, right there and then, that he would give everything to have me. That no matter the cost, he would not settle for less. Suddenly, I felt loved, like maybe I should stand up a little straighter and smile a little more.

At first, he was hesitant to open up to me in the same way that I opened up to him. He cautiously held himself in, kept his things guarded at his side, and seemed not to know what place he served in my life. Then, slowly and almost unnoticeably, the things that he loved and cared about most, started to take up permanent positions in my life. They became things that we shared, things that belonged to both of us equally.

As he became more at ease with me, he also allowed me to see more of himself and his real personality. I started to notice a pair of jeans tossed haphazardly on the floor, or a stack of dishes that didn't find their way into the washer for a few days. If he thought I'd love him less for these things, he was wrong. I loved him more for letting me see what he was

really about, for trusting me enough to show me who he really was and give me the opportunity to reject him. I did not, and would not, ever dream of such a rejection.

Every once in a while, he would bring me gifts. Beautiful things meant to make me feel and act more beautiful than before. Expensive rugs in beautiful colors chosen to match the natural beauty he said that I held. He bought me lamps, that he said gave off just the right light to accent my best features. He was so flattering, so complementary. He brought his friends and family to see me, and he was always so eager for them to love me like he did. He tried so hard to make them see me just exactly as he did, and for his efforts I could not have loved him more. I could tell that these people that he loved wanted to make him happy, and so they complimented me, but there was a certain sound of hollowness in their voices that he never had when he spoke of me. It was okay though, we still had each other and at the end of the day I think he knew that that was all that mattered.

The days, weeks, and months trickled by steadily. In fact, more than a year passed before he saw the first sign of my imperfections. The tiniest crack, the slightest hint of aging that I tried to so hard to hide. I feared that he would be upset, that he would feel that I had deceived him or that his love for me might grow less. And he did indeed get upset, but not in the way I feared. He got upset because he was scared for my well being, he so deeply loved me that he was afraid that this imperfection was the sign of a deeper ailment that could cause both of us a lot of hurt and anguish in the future. He sacrificed a lot of his precious time in order to search out the answers; to assure himself (and myself as well) that this problem we had was nothing serious. We were both relieved to find that it was not.

On several occasions, the two of us found ourselves suddenly and unmercifully caught in a raging storm. It happens to everyone, unrelenting rains and winds always sneak up on us and do their best to test our strength and determination. I knew how much he hated these storms, I could sense it, and so I made it my duty to protect him from them. I became the designated protector in our relationships, and I would do anything to shield him from everything that those storms could bring. Once those terrible troubles had passed, he

would show his appreciation by tending to any wounds I may have suffered in my efforts to guard him. That was how we were; it was always one of us taking care of the other.

And then, right at that moment when it seemed we could not have been closer or better together, *she* came along. The first time we met, I saw something of disgust in her eyes. She did not like me, and it did not take long for me to feel the same way toward her. She made cruel jokes about me. She said horrible things right in front of my face. She said I was ugly and old, and that he could do so much better.

At first, he fought back. He defended me, he told her how much he loved me despite all of my cracks and imperfections. But she was ruthless and evil. He started to spend less and less time with me, and more and more time with her. I would grow angry while he was away, but each time he returned my anger would fade as I looked upon his familiar face. The second I saw him coming up the front walk, I could not help but smile. As long as he kept coming back to me, I forgave him.

Then one day, under one of the bluest skies I have ever seen, he did something so callous and low that I knew I could not forgive him for it. He betrayed me in the most painful of ways. With little subtlety or circumstance, he began trying to cover up all of those imperfections he said he'd loved about me. He tried to hide them, or worse to fix them. He tried to make me into something different, the kind of thing that *she* wanted me to be. Suddenly, he didn't seem to care about all the time we'd spent together, all the memories. He only wanted me to be a certain way so as to please her and make her feel for him what I had all along.

It didn't work.

She still hated me, she saw past the things he'd tried to do to change me. She said I couldn't be changed, that I couldn't be fixed. She said that I was a useless cause and that he needed to let go. Despite his betrayal, I thought surely he would put his foot down now. Surely he would not let her come between us, between what we'd had for so long. He would not tolerate the fact that she could not see the same things in me that he once had. Surely...

But then I started to notice the boxes.

It took only a few weeks for him to collect his things, all of the things that we had once shared. He took back the gifts he'd bought for me, the things that he had complimented me with. He looked at me differently, like instead of her seeing me through his eyes, he had grown to see me through her eyes. I heard him tell her that he didn't know what he'd ever seen in me, that I was not what he wanted anymore. And yet he left behind the marks he'd made in his attempts to change me. He left me in the middle of the mess he'd created in his selfish efforts to make me into something else.

And now, today, he's leaving. The truck pulled up to the curb just after the dawn broke, and I watched him take away everything we'd worked so hard to build up. I watched him empty me from the inside, out. He took everything and left nothing but my bare skeleton to stand in the same way I once had when he'd first seen me.

At the last minute, just as he was packing the last of his things into the truck, *she* had the nerve to show up. She looked happier than I had ever seen her, and I was jealous because I knew what that happiness felt like. I had had that same happiness once, the kind that could only come from being loved by someone like him. Now she had his love and his things and his compliments, and I had nothing.

He looked at me one last time, in almost exactly the same spot that he'd stood in that first time he looked at me so very long ago. The look was so drastically different than the first one I almost didn't recognize him as the same person. He looked at me, directly at me whom he'd shared five years of his life with, and all I could see in his eyes were the judgments of a stranger who knew nothing of my insides. He left with her, the smile that had once belonged to me, suddenly belonging to her.

She's moving in today.

Not the same *she* that took him away, but a new she—someone who looked at me differently than he had in the beginning, and yet somehow the same. She is afraid, I know, I can see it in her eyes. Unlike him, she has come to me because she has loved someone before and that someone left her behind, just like he left me. We have that in common, she and I.

Where he was young and innocent, she bears more signs of age; more cracks and imperfections. Her hair has faded to the color of a wispy cloud, and hands curl with pain and simple intention. In her eyes I see understanding of what time does to each of us each and every day.

While many men bustle about the two of us, merging our lives into one and bringing forth the things that we will share now, she stands and just looks at me. She is alone and I am alone, and now we will be alone together. She turns her back to me for a just a moment, just long enough for her to remove the plastic square that stands before me. She picks it up and walks it to the curb, leaving it for someone else. That sign once signaled that I was empty, ready to bear my heart and attempt to be loved by someone new. Now that it's gone, that last symbol separating the two of us, it's time for us to start anew.

She and I. Back at one.