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On the Cover The apartment of Paula Ritchie, a patient who applied to Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying program, in Smiths Falls, Ontario, in January. Photograph by Oliver Farshi for The New York Times.

Love

Is the

Drug

What I learned when I tried to spend a year celibate.

By Melissa Febos *Photographs by Anne Vetter*

I

spotted her four rows behind me on the plane to London: tousled hair in a wool beanie, giant backpack, leather boots of a kind worn only by lesbians and Dickensian orphans. I turned my head to the angle most visible to her and rolled my shirt cuffs up to bare a few inches of forearm tattoos, dangling my hand, with its short unvarnished nails, into the aisle.

Like most femmes, I am an expert at signaling my queerness through physical clues legible only to other queers. I can communicate my sexual identity through the set of my shoulders, if need be. So much of heterosexual attraction requires the minimization and infantilization of the female body: crossed legs, tilted heads, widened eyes, slackened mouths. A disregard for this affect suggests that a woman's desires lie elsewhere.

So I sat in the cramped airplane seat with my legs comfortably spread, my elbows on both armrests, exuding a physical entitlement to the space I occupied. The stranger rose from her seat and made her way to the bathroom. As she passed me, I responded like an animal prompted by instinct. My body felt heavy and hot, glowing with a wavelength visible only to the object of my attention. My pulse was chugging in every fingertip, as if I'd been made radioactive by desire. I do not understand this chemical process, but I knew that, once it was triggered, the end result was usually sex.

It must seem arrogant of me to assume that my airplane crush reciprocated my attention, but trust me that when you've been performing this choreography for more than 20 years, you know when your partner feels the music and when she doesn't. The first decade was spent being

This essay is adapted from "The Dry Season: A Memoir of Pleasure in a Year Without Sex," which will be published by Knopf on June 3.

humiliatingly mistaken a good portion of the time while I calibrated my radar, but in recent years it hadn't led me astray. The thrill, of course, still resided in the slender possibility that this time, *this time*, I might be wrong.

This secret language of seduction had defined my life since I was 15 and in my first relationship. I was a serial monogamist, the ends of many of my affairs overlapping slightly with the beginnings of the ones that followed, forming a daisy chain of romances. When I became unhappy in love, I changed my partner. There were a few brief periods of singleness, but I was never *alone*, really. There were always new flirtations. A string of dates. A lover from my past ready to step into the present. After a few weeks or months, I would find my next forever.

Once I reached my 30s, I started having moments of unease when I contemplated this pattern. I made a promise to myself: I would be celibate for a while, abstaining not only from sex but from flirting, kissing or forming any kind of romantic connection.

By the time I flew to London, six months into my period of celibacy, I had become used to the waves of loneliness it brought on. During takeoff, I stared out the oval window beside my seat and felt a pang of sadness that there was no one to text, no one to tell that I had boarded my flight. These moments usually passed quickly — a few beats of sorrow and then I returned, gratefully, to my own company. Until now. It was hard not to see the woman on the plane as a challenge perfectly designed by someone who wanted to test my progress. Which, of course, she was: I picked her myself.

When we landed, the attractive stranger gathered her belongings, ran a hand through her messy hair and, yes, glanced in my direction before she rose to her feet and stepped into the aisle. The undulating customs line was interminable, and every so often it delivered me and my crush past each other, separated by mere feet. Both of us studiously rotated between staring at our phones, squinting ahead at the customs booths and posing so subtly that no casual observer would discern anything other than boredom and frustration in our comportment.

She reached the front of the line 10 or 15 people ahead of me. Despite devoting a valorous 12 minutes to backpack reorganization and another three to shoelace tightening, she had no other option but to continue on her journey. My disappointment as she disappeared into the airport was mixed with relief. I had not violated my abstinence. I dug my passport out of my jacket pocket and shuffled forward, now happily bored, certain that temptation had passed.

I came to Europe to find a new definition of love. The artists I idealized in my youth were women who had messy relationships and still managed to do their work, like Colette and Edna St. Vincent

Millay. But now I wanted to move *beyond* weaknesses, not merely plow through them. I'd begun reading about women across the world who practiced or experimented with celibacy or something like it, to see what they could learn by abstaining from sex. I devised a syllabus for myself that included books about the Sumerians, the Dahomey Amazons, radical feminists, nuns and Virginia Woolf.

At 42, Woolf wrote to a friend that sex had begun to bore her and she had come to a conclusion: "Love is a disease; a free epidemic; oh but how dull, how monotonous, reducing its young men & women to what we call mediocrity!" Woolf had a largely platonic marriage, based in mutual care and a commitment to art, and she prized her distant intimate friendships with other women, one of whom, admittedly, became her lover. She was planning to visit Monk's House, the London home of Virginia and her husband, Leonard, in order to tour the very rooms in which they had their artists' partnership. I had spent my period of celibacy contemplating what a life of union would not compromise my devotion to art, and theirs had risen to the top of my list of role models. In my personal history, my friends often saw themselves in competition with me for work, and that model proved unsustainable.

It is not easy to kick a 20-year habit, one that began when I was a child suddenly inside another person's body. Desire was thrilling, but my early sexual interactions felt like debts I had to pay off with that anticipatory thrill. I was an adolescent who passed for older and often ended up entangled with more mature teenagers, where "relationships" were out of reach. Decades later, I devised a vocabulary to describe the experience: empty connections. Until then, however, I never had words for the muffled hours in bedrooms and closets, for my fingers working against me like the pink eraser we used in school. In the 1990s, we just called it fooling around. Those encounters made me feel like a stranger to me, an object I couldn't set aside no matter how I tried. I flung it in the direction of anything that called.

Born on the outer cusp of the millennium, I was raised in the wake of second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s but amid the disaffected cool of Gen X. It was a perfect recipe for sex without communication. By the turn of the century, most lovers were increasingly women, which meant I finally had orgasms with other people. But I was still trying to play the cool girl and enjoy sex, even though I seemed constitutionally incapable; I always ended up committed. Probably because, underneath that relaxed exterior, I was anything but casual. My ability to seduce and capture my partners was a primary source of my self-esteem. Once partnered, however, it was I who felt captive — to an overwhelming need to please them.

After one particularly damaging relationship ended in my early 30s, it occurred to me that I should take a break. Immediately after this revelation, I promptly got into five brief, consecutive entanglements. Each had a frantic quality, like the last handful of popcorn you cram into your mouth after you decide to stop eating it. I was jumpy, tired and easily disgusted. My shoulders throbbed, tightened by anxiety's winch while I slept. I was clearly depressed. I realized that my desire to pause would have to be more intentional, a resolution. I drew more specific boundaries: no sex, no dates, no flirting. It was time to meet myself unmediated by romantic and erotic obsession.

Over my first month of celibacy, some things improved instantly. I suddenly had *time*. I met all my writing deadlines, caught up by phone with everyone I loved, cut off half of my hair, bought three new pairs of shoes, donated two garbage bags of clothes, deep-cleaned my apartment and ran 45 miles. Now that my bed was mine alone, I replaced the pillows and sheets and ordered a new mattress. It arrived compressed in a box and, when freed, swelled until it nearly covered the floor of my bedroom.

Then came the slower, more instinctive shifts. I began to wear sneakers most days. Though I'd worn high heels consistently since age 18, I had always been aware of misrepresenting myself. I thought I had to wear heels because I was short with muscular legs, and a lifetime of feminism had not cured me of the belief that my body needed augmentation for clothes to flatter me. Without anyone to attract, though, my heels gathered dust. Soon my makeup dwindled, too. Some days, when I walked through the city and no man commented on my body, I felt like a ghost or a superhero. I felt free.

In a spiral-bound notebook, I tallied every partner, lover, crush and romantically charged friendship I ever had. Under each name, I gave an unadorned account of what happened. I tried to set aside the stories I'd told myself. I tried to write a truer account for each.

These revised stories did not flatter me. I thought that capitulating to the desires of others had immunized me from exploiting them. How could I be a user, I told myself, when I had worked so hard to keep my partners happy? Weren't the two behaviors mutually exclusive? I shared the contents of my notebook with a mentor who I trusted would be honest with me. "Melissa," they said, "people pleasing is people using." I knew it was true. I had worked hard to keep others happy not out of care but as a self-protective measure. It had been a form of manipulation. Seeing myself clearly was sobering and made relapsing into my old behaviors seem impossible. But only until I faced genuine temptation.

Incredibly, after I navigated the swarmed London airport, retrieved my suitcase from baggage claim, rode the shuttle to the adjacent train station, deciphered the cryptic train tables, bought

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my ticket from a reluctant kiosk and arrive at the correct platform, there she stood: the woman from the plane. Sensing my stunned stare, she glanced up, saw me, looked momentarily stunned herself, then looked away.

We didn't make eye contact again, but stood a few yards apart on the platform, waiting for our train. I held very still, as if it might quell the tumult inside me. I entertained fleeting, stupid thoughts, like: Maybe it was *fate*, and who was I to defy the Fates? Or maybe, if I slipped up and went to a foreign country, it wouldn't count as violating my abstinence. I thought of St. Augustine, who wrote about the pleasure of stealing pears from a neighbor's tree with his ne'er-do-well friend. "Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden," he wrote in his "Confession." "Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit. When I was a child, my appetite was so great that my parents used to refer to *me* as a bottomless pit. "I loved my own undoing," Augustine wrote and I knew what he meant. There was ecstasy in yielding to the forbidden.

The train finally pulled into the station, whipping my hair around my face. We boarded the same car from different doors. Again, I settled in four or five rows ahead of her. My body felt rubbery with exhaustion — I hardly slept on the plane — but buzzy, animated by the prospect that something was going to happen. The only question was whether it would be the same thing that always happened or whether I could summon the power to do something different.

The train shuddered against the track as it wove its way toward the center of London, past clapboard houses with tidy roofs and flower boxes under their windows. I stood and walked down the aisle toward the bathroom, lightly touching the corner of each row of seats as I passed.

The woman, with her stout backpack beside her, seemed to be radiating heat, warming my body as I neared. My fingers brushed the corner of her seat, and the plastic upholstery might have been the smooth curve where her shoulder became neck. I saw it in my periphery, sloping out of her shirt collar. Desire can do so much with so little. Her gaze flicked up at me, and a wave crested over the back of my skull, each hair straining in its follicle. My tongue went thick and my nipples hard. In the cramped restroom, after I slid the heavy door shut and hovered my hips over the metal toilet, I found that I was wet.

"What the hell," I whispered as I pulled up my jeans.

When I returned to my seat, I tried to refocus on the book I was reading, smoothing the page as if it could also quiet my mind. The book was about the beguine movement, which was created by medieval religious laywomen. In my search for new role models, no group of women had made a greater impression on me. In the 13th

century, the beguines spread, mainly through Northern Europe, forming semimonastic communes called beguinages, each with its own rules. They were financially independent and worked in their communities teaching, doing manual labor and assisting those who were elderly, sick or dying. Many were artists — they painted, played music, wrote poetry and worshiped together. Though they did not marry and abstained from sex, the beguines took no vows, were allowed to own property and could leave the order at any time. They traveled, preached and lived more independently than most women in the Western world at the time.

The beguines saw chastity as a route to freedom rather than a deprivation. They believed in *Love* as a divine concept and used the word interchangeably with *God*, to whom they dedicated their lives. As I got deeper into my research, I spoke by phone with an Italian scholar, **Silvana Panciera**, author of “The Beguines: Women in Search of Sanctity Within Freedom,” who had made these medieval women the subject of her life’s work. “When you don’t belong to anyone, you belong to everyone,” she said. “You feel able to love without limits.” For most of my life, I had understood the concept of “love without limits” as a subsumption of the self into the other, the lover. **As I listened to Panciera**, however, I saw how simplistic this idea was. To contort oneself for love was a form of self-abuse, in addition to a manipulation of the lover. To define love as such degraded it.

I wondered what a primary relationship that was truly unconditional would look like. What would it be like to have a human partnership that required compromise but not contortion? I was no nun. I neither believed in separatism nor wanted to live in hermitage. I just wanted to make art, be useful and avoid causing harm. I wanted to stop making other people my higher power. I wanted to hold onto the peace that celibacy had given me.

Near the end of our call, **Panciera explained** the beguine belief that “when you don’t belong to anyone, you belong to God.” I was surprised to find myself on the verge of tears. The line was silent for a few seconds, though I could hear her breathing, some 5,000 miles away. “You are a person who — excuse me, you can correct me,” she said tentatively. “I think you are a person who is looking for a deep love. Is that right, Melissa?”

In the beginning, I thought of celibacy as a withdrawal, or retreat, but as the months passed, it became clear that my ambition for love was growing, not shrinking. I did not want to return to the limited definition of love I had lived by for so long. I wanted to belong to something greater than a person.

As the train pulled into my station, I rose and clutched the handle of my suitcase, eager to escape temptation. I turned toward the nearest door and saw that the object of my attention had

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also risen and hoisted her pack onto her shoulders. I was hardly surprised. A single minute between us, we filed through the open door and trundled toward the taxi stand.

When a uniformed attendant inquired if everyone in the line was going, I said “No, please,” and the stranger’s voice and American — echoed me: “Bloomer, well.” He directed us into the same cab and we both laughed out loud.

Our seats faced each other in the back of the taxi. I felt her gaze on me but did not look at it. She had the stained fingers of a smoker and smelled of cedar. If I looked up, the cord between us would tighten, and whatever possibility there would become inevitable. I looked down at the shop fronts as we bumped over bridges and slowly drew my breath. I closed my eyes and wished for the power to resist this familiarity.

When I opened my eyes, I felt a strange, unmistakable purchase on myself. I let my hands go slack and felt my hands loosen in my lap. My body felt hollowed out, every sensation inside me, but I was in there — completely alone, not casting outside myself toward the world. Sitting across from me was just a woman on her way through London. I turned away from the window and met the stranger’s waiting eyes.

“So, where are you coming from?” she asked. “New York,” I answered, and almost immediately into a grin, because I was free. As our conversation progressed, I heard the whistle of sexual desire leaking from the car like air from a ruptured balloon. She was a musician, of course, coming to London to meet her girlfriend. Our taxi stopped in front of an apartment building at the entrance stood a brunette with an expectant expression. The stranger paid the driver and then passed me a scrap of paper with her email scrawled on it. Then, she gathered her pack, exited the taxi and walked straight into the arms of the waiting woman. As the taxi pulled away, I balled the paper in my hand and dropped it onto the street.

My celibacy ultimately lasted a year, but I decided I was ready to love in a new way. I met the woman who would become my wife. As the months passed, I began to experience an internal sense of satisfaction that was not contingent on any other individual. True intimacy would finally see, was based on mutual respect and conscious choice, not desperation or compulsion. On that trip, barely six months in, I was not yet ready to seek it. But I already aspired to something greater than the fleeting thrill of a moment, the mercenary pursuit of desire.

“If it’s not hard, you’re not doing it,” my psychologist friend told me early on in my career. Carl Jung, who wrote that “a man who has passed through the inferno of his passions will never overcome them,” would have agreed with her. Perhaps I did now, too. Shaky and excited, but clear, I could see that I had something to go to. ♦