

[Originally published in 'P.S. I Love You' in 2020](#)

P-Something

“Let me show you my Bumble profile, I want to know what you think,” Pete said as we lay in bed still naked from the night before.

He rolled over to grab his phone from the nightstand, offering my first properly lit view of his butt, which was happily just as cute and perky as it had felt in the dark.

“Okay,” he said, pulling up the app. He began scrolling through his photos one by one, looking at me in between each to await my reaction, the same way you’d read a book to a six-year-old. He stopped on the last photo, one featuring him in a suit standing next to an elderly woman who I assumed was a grandparent. He gestured at the screen.

“I need girls to know I’m tall,” he pointed, indicating the clear height difference between him and the ailing woman to his right. I nodded, deciding not to bring up the fact that I was a girl, and given that I was lying right next to him and we’d just had sex, I did, indeed, know he was tall.

This brief interaction indicated that he clearly wasn’t looking for anything serious, a message he’d easily managed to convey without explicitly stating it. I was impressed with this subtle maneuver until he ended our pillow talk by actually explicitly stating it, driving the now redundant point home.

The fact that he wanted nothing more than sex came as little surprise, given that we’d met after midnight at a dingy bar downtown, barely exchanging drunken hello’s before going home together. I’d chosen Pete that night because it had been a while since I’d had sex and he was the only boy within my line of vision who wasn’t already flirting with someone else. By those standards I could have ended up going home with more than half the bar, but I had to admit there was a small part of me that had been hopeful when I’d woken up and heard how friendly his voice was, seen how green his eyes were in the light. But after our conversation that morning, I let that hope quickly deflate out of me.

Two weeks went by and I heard nothing from him. Then one day he called me, asking if I was free for dinner that night. His voice was familiar and warm, as if we talked on the phone all the time, as if it was still completely normal in 2018 for a boy to call a girl he barely knew. He went out of his way to pick me up at my apartment and paid for the entire evening. At the end of the night, he walked me to the door, kissed me goodnight, and then said, “Feel free to add me on all social media accounts.”

That dinner began a series of weekly dates, during which he’d tell me he enjoyed my company and that he wasn’t looking for a relationship all in the same breath. He was the master of this these contradictory sentences, the words fitting a formula he’d invented for the sole purpose of leaving me confused but curious enough to continue.

Usually, this sort of relationship would bother me more. Usually, I would call it off as soon as the word “casual” dripped from his lips. But I couldn’t really bring myself to be troubled by it. Something about the softness in his voice when he said we weren’t serious paired with his ever-present arm around my waist made it seem like maybe he was trying to convince himself — not me — that he had no interest in something real.

But when we were apart he treated me as an afterthought, placing just enough time in between each answered text to make sure I knew not to get too comfortable with the idea of having him around. He dropped hints of affection here and there, little threads of compliments that would be just enough to keep me hanging on until the next. We stayed comfortably in this stagnant state for months — first two, then three, moving neither forward nor backward. It seemed like he was capable of staying in this state forever, and I began to wonder what it would take for something to change.

I posed this question to him one morning while we were having breakfast together at what was now our regular spot.

“Well,” he said in between bites, “you’ll obviously meet someone else and fall in love before long.” He said it with such assuredness, such finality, that I didn’t bother to question him.

Another month went by and nothing changed. We saw each other once a week, maybe twice if you counted the morning after as a full day, and though he still avoided my eyes as we lay in bed, he never hesitated to hold me against his body when we slept. He was cautious, precise with his words and actions, constantly dropping reminders of the possibility he was seeing other people and that he was free to do so.

“Are these yours?” he’d ask about some earrings or socks I’d left at his apartment. “Are you the one I came here with?” he’d say when we’d visit a new bar. The comments were seemingly innocent, but they were oozing with the masterfully crafted subtext that I might not be the only one. He was careful not to let me too close, careful to say things like “I like your personality” instead of saying “I like you”, as if the two were different, as if my personality were some other entity entirely that was safe to compliment without fear of me getting too attached.

But when asked point blank he’d tell the truth — he wasn’t sleeping with anyone else. Neither was I. The rest was a façade that I let him create if it put his mind at ease, and after five months it seemed the only difference between what we were doing and being in a relationship was his insistence that we weren’t.

“He’s only 26,” my friends told me, and though I knew they meant it as a way to explain his childish behavior, I wondered how old a boy would have to “only” be until we stopped making excuses for them.

Then one day, after six months and a few days of casual, I texted Pete to hang out. And he didn't respond. Not for a day and then not for two. After the third day of silence, I texted him again, figuring he'd just forgotten. He still didn't respond. Two more days went by.

I thought about all the "open" conversations he'd initiated, all the times he'd placed his hand on mine and told me if I ever became uncomfortable with our "situation" all I had to do was say so. I texted him one more time, saying that if he was still comfortable ignoring my messages for five days after this much time together, I was done with whatever this was.

To that, he responded immediately. I'd expected an explanation of where he'd been, what had changed. Instead, all he wrote was:

I understand.

It was what I said to my friends when they explained why they had to cancel plans. What I said to my mom when she finished telling me something I hadn't been listening to. And it's what I'd planned on saying to Pete if he'd told me why he'd been ignoring me for days. Instead, it was the only sentence he had to say to me when ending what had essentially been a six-month relationship. With two final words, he'd managed to communicate one last time just how little he cared.

His response made it seem like my decision, like I was the one who wanted to call it quits. After all, he was just a passive participant in our relationship, using honesty as a free pass for any missteps made. But the truth was he'd decided our fate on that first morning when he'd asked me to help him curate his dating profile. And he'd continued to seal it every day since, every time he used some iteration of the word "casual," every time he introduced me to someone as his "friend," every time he freely let his phone show that he'd read my text and just wasn't in the mood to respond. With his last two words our relationship ended the same way it began — quietly, unceremoniously, and without romance.

In the weeks that followed I thought maybe I'd miss him. Not a lot, but maybe here and there — when I went to wash the sweater I never returned or when I ate bagel sandwiches on Sunday mornings. But I didn't, and he slipped from my mind without notice or discomfort, only creeping back in when I'd see a picture on his Instagram, carrying about his life the exact same way he had before we met and for all the months since.

In the rare moments that I did think about it, about him, it made me wonder what all those days we'd spent together meant. It didn't feel like a waste of time necessarily, but a relatively insignificant span of it.

In the end I had to accept that it was the type of relationship that didn't really leave a mark, that he was nothing more than the guy who a few years down the line I'd laugh about while reminiscing with my friends and say *Oh yeah, I completely forgot about that guy. What was his name again? Patrick? Pete? Paul? Definitely P-something.*

