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I Was Engaged To A Man With Commitment Phobia

by Amy Paturel

When I met the cute blue-eyed surfer who lived in my apartment building—we'll call him Max—we clicked immediately. I'm a workaholic by nature, but I set aside my writing while he and I stayed up until dawn in fits of side-splitting giggles, thumbing through photo albums, playing music and talking—about everything. Politics, religion, sex—nothing was off limits. He even told me about his ex-girlfriend. She was eight years his senior and ready for marriage and a family. At 25, he wasn't.

"I would never pressure someone into marriage," I said, with the wisdom of all my 26 years. "Not to bash your ex-girlfriend, but how could she want to marry you if you weren't thrilled at the prospect of spending the rest of your life with her?"

Over the next four years, I found out. I became her: the embodiment of everything I pitied.

Even though we'd just met, I felt a level of emotional intimacy with Max that I hadn't experienced before. Our conversations were deep. Intense. Meaningful. But I still tried to maintain our friendship status; I didn't want to be his rebound.

Then one night while we were drinking a couple of beers with Keith Sweat's "Nobody" playing in the background, he asked me to dance. Before I knew what was happening, our faces were inches apart, hands were roaming and we were nearly kissing.

"This is getting dangerous," I said. He pulled me closer.

In the midst of the exciting romance that ensued, I completely lost my footing. Like anyone in love, I began to float through life. Everything I knew about myself became negotiable. Example: Two weeks after that first kiss, he whisked me away to Joshua Tree where we stayed at a campground with no running water—and I had a blast. Pre-Max I would never disappear for a weekend with a guy I had known for such a short time. And, without running water? Please.

Max stretched my comfort zone, or maybe I was just willing to be uncomfortable if he was by my side. His free spirit released me of the self-imposed chains that kept me confined to a safe, simple and, dare I admit, boring life. And in the process, he introduced me to a part of myself I didn't know—a part I liked. We surfed in ice cold waters, hiked up Angel's Landing (an incredibly tall mountain with nothing more than a chain link railing to cling to as you spiral up to the top in single file) and cruised through America's heartland on a Harley. I felt like I was living someone else's life. And I loved the person I was becoming. [15 Signs You're Meant To Be](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

He was everything I thought I wanted—the cowboy, the artist, the guitar player, the dreamer, the romantic. When I came home after a long day at work, I found rose petals scattered in the entryway of my building and hundreds more strewn throughout my apartment. When I left for a day with the girls, he completely remodeled my apartment—new couch, new accents, new lighting. How could I resist a guy who rides a Harley, excels at interior design and paints landscapes?

If I hadn't been blinded with the rush of new romance, I might have surmised that Max was overcompensating for an unsteady heart. His statements about marriage and forever were pessimistic at best. Six months into the relationship I wrote in my journal, "If this guy ever gets married, he's going to have to be dragged down the aisle kicking and screaming." But even my intuition couldn't shake me of the desire to heal his wounds, erase his fears and prove to him that love can last. Like most women, I was sure I could change him, that in a few years, when I was ready, my love would make him want to get married.

Over the next three years, our friends found partners and got hitched—some even met, married and divorced—in the time we were still just dating. We watched friends break engagements and marriages, thankful that our relationship was solid.

But over time, I began to question why we hadn't jumped on the marriage track. Sure, Max was full of fun, laughs and adventure—and I loved the carefree girl he brought out in me—but I wanted more. I was ready to grow up, buy a home and have a family of my own. He wanted to maintain the status quo—a responsibility-free party zone.

"How would you react if I delivered an ultimatum like your ex did?" I casually asked one day, hoping he wouldn't recognize the question for the ploy it was.

"I would do whatever it took to hold on to you and buy myself some time," he said sweetly, averting my gaze. He bought three more years. [Waiting For A Marriage Proposal? Advice You Need](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

In the same way that love took me to a new high, it also showed me how much I would sacrifice to save the part of myself I found in Max, the part of myself I held inside all along.

The more I obsessed about marriage, the more I felt our life together slipping away. My need for commitment and children began to color everything we did or didn't do. I dropped annoying hints about tying the knot, felt a pang in my chest when friends announced their engagements, and began to view our rock-solid relationship like it was teetering on top of Angel's Landing.

It was my 30th birthday when Max played for my family a highlight reel of our relationship, Norah Jones' "Come Away With Me" playing in the background. Slowly, the images changed from our reminiscences to pictures of him walking on the beach—and then leaning down and writing in the sand.

"He's going to do it," I thought. "He's going to propose!" My heart was pounding. My palms were sweating. I was coming out of my skin. It felt like a dream come true, an answer to my prayers.

When the camera panned back to the words "will you ..." imprinted in the sand, he got down on one knee. My parents popped the champagne, we toasted with plastic glasses, and he gave me a ring!

After the proposal, Max was like a little boy on Christmas morning, sharing the news with friends and family, the way a child shows off a shiny new bicycle. He was so proud of himself. I shared his excitement, but in the back of my mind, I wondered if he was buying more time.

Once we set a date, I had to drag him to appointments, remind him to design the invitations, prod him to get a guest list from his mother. He became reclusive, quiet and irritable, and I began to feel like an unwelcome guest in his life. I tiptoed around him for fear that he would snap at me, or worse, snatch the fantasy away altogether. So I backed off and gave him space while the clock ticked away.

As the wedding drew closer, he stayed at work later and later, went on weekend adventures with the guys and disappeared for hours to run simple errands. I could sense he felt trapped, like he was gasping for air, but I was clinging to the commitment I thought we had. I nestled into his chest one night and whispered, "I don't know who you are, but I want my boyfriend back."

"I'm trying to find him," he said.

Then he pulled me close and drifted off to sleep while I silently bargained with God: "Please let him come to his senses and realize that we are meant to be together." [15 Signs You're Meant To Be](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

Two months before the wedding, God answered my prayers—and he said no. Max finally told me, "I can't get married."

I packed my things and left. Max went to Mexico.

In the weeks and months afterward, I tried to visualize what my new life would be like without him. Where would I work? Where would I live? Would I ever fall in love again? I stayed, temporarily, a few hundred miles away in my niece and nephew's playroom with a giant stuffed Elmo as my roommate. I was safe there, sandwiched between my sister's family life and the single life I was terrified to re-enter. I lived my days in a fog of tears and spent nights as a walking cliché, nose-deep in break-up books with Chardonnay and chocolate to numb the pain. All of this against the backdrop of my one-year-old nephew's cries from the bedroom next door—a deafening reminder of the family I craved.

On some level my devastation was comforting because it was definite. Limbo was over, and I finally had a grasp on reality. The waiting, wondering and trying to be strong for both of us had come to end. And I was slowly realizing what I had given up for him—the chance for something better.

While Max helped bring out my adventurous, silly side, he also suppressed the safe, play-by-the-rules side that thrived on tradition and family. And eventually, he robbed me of my deepest desires.

"You deserve a man who could never let you go," said my brother-in-law.

And that's when it finally clicked. To be truly happy, "my" guy would have to honor both sides of me—the free spirit and the nurturer. Living with my sister and brother-in-law, I saw how a real partnership works, how both people in relationships sacrifice for the good of the team, but how neither sacrifices the other. That was missing for Max and me.

For the first time in my life, I knew exactly who I was and what I would and would not compromise for love. And I knew that, when God denies your prayers, he often has better plans.

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