

## Brown Eyes, Busy Mind

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“Sorry I’m late, Professor!” He was already standing in front of the projector screen—maybe he’d just started lecturing or was about to—when I walked into the classroom, eyes still scanning my phone. “I was on my way but got distracted by a really cool looking leaf.”

My eyes flickered up at the sound of a few snickers, and I rushed to a seat near the back, fumbling to turn off my phone, on which I had been staring at photos of the odd-looking geometric vine I’d seen crawling up the bricks of the building.

I’m Leah: college junior (girl), smallish, brunette, and just pretty enough to have never received an autism diagnosis. For a long time, I had too much ADHD for anyone to notice I had social anxiety, and then in high school, I finally started some antidepressants, which stifled enough of my anxiety disorder for my parents to realize I had ADHD (although it took a few years, until Sophomore year of college).

Now I’m on meds for both, along with too many other pills to count, because I also have POTS, which means my heart beats a little too fast, my blood pressure is a little too low, and when I stand up or tilt my head, I lose vision for a little bit. The symptoms of POTS and all this other crap wrong with me have gotten so convoluted and tangled it’s impossible to tell which of my issues is responsible for which of my oddnesses.

In class, I’m daydreaming about Prague. I think there’s a discussion of the death penalty going on, or at least that’s what they were talking about last time I zoned-in to the lecture. It’s fine though, I don’t really think I need to pay attention to what’s being taught. My professor likes me, because sometimes when I am feeling extra focused, I’ll participate in class and ask thought-provoking questions he hasn’t been asked before, one of the circumstances in which my tangential brain actually throws me a bone. That’s on the days where I doodle instead of daydreaming, because I can focus on one brain thing and one hand thing at a time: either I’m sketching in my notebook and listening thoughtfully to the lesson, or I’m daydreaming about Prague and writing detailed notes based on the slides up on screen (although writing notes with my hand and not my brain means I’m basically just drawing the shapes of letters, the slides might as well be in Russian). I’m not worried about failing though. When the test comes around, either my hand or my brain will know the answers, and what I don’t remember I can just make up, which I’m really good at, especially when the professor likes me like this one does.

Sometimes I feel like I’m secretly an idiot, I’m getting through college by sheer luck, grasping at pebbles and pulling myself up the cliff with bloody fingers, knowing however many times I almost fall, as long as I’m still alive and moving people will be telling me I’m a natural, a prodigy, while all of my peers learned to tie a harness, strap themselves to the cliff face, and steadily, safely ascend. I’ve made it as far as I have by BS-ing assignments, charming teachers with my interest in topics (read: unsustainable, brief hyperfixation), and letting my grades fluctuate between the average Fahrenheit temperatures of the Equator and the North Pole, having developed the specific intuition to know almost exactly when in the semester I need to start

working my ass off to bring my final grade back up to an A or sometimes a B+. If you've ever watched someone almost drop something fragile, and fumble it between their hands back and forth for an eternity before catching it right before it hits the ground (and of course look around to make sure no one saw, and walk away as if it never happened), that's the grace with which I handle my college education.

It sucks to think about, to question whether I deserve anything I've ever accomplished, whether I'm lying to my friends and my teachers and my parents who believe in me wholly, which is why I am instead daydreaming about Prague. Like I said, I can only do one brain thing at once, so I'll bury the noise of my imposter syndrome under the whooshing flow of the river Vltava under Charles Bridge and the cacophonous melody of drinking songs wafting out of Nove Mesto bars at twilight.

I'm not thinking of Prague for no reason, or because learning about the death penalty made me think of criminals and crime, and debt evasion is a crime, which reminded me that I need to pay my landlord for next month, so I should probably order some checks from the bank this week if I want to get them in time (because my landlord doesn't take electronic payments, which is dumb. It's 2021 dude, get with the program), and anyway, I'll order checks after class, I'll have so many checks it will be like I'm the president of the Check Republic, hahaha, then I could increase the nation's capital and declare that I am a champion of Prague-gressive economics. I'm so funny and so underappreciated. Prague is a nice place.

I can understand why you'd think that was my thought process, if you did. That *is* how the majority of my thinking happens, but I've actually been thinking about Prague nearly nonstop for three weeks. It's outlasted the status of a hyperfixation now, like when I decided to paint all seven members of the K-pop group, BTS, and sketched them out on canvases that cost me like \$40, which doesn't seem like that much money but then I painted one and a half of them and totally forgot to do the rest, and they are still at the bottom of my closet because maybe one day I'll get inspired to paint more of them (I won't).

I'm thinking about Prague—and *have been* thinking about Prague—since I got back from Prague three weeks ago. Well, obviously I was thinking about Prague during the two weeks I was *in* Prague, and before I got to Prague, when I was booking tickets and researching and stuff, but that's not the point. Basically, Prague (the more I say it the more the word loses meaning in my brain... Prague, *Prague*, Prog, P r o g) was a city in which my entire life got turned on its head, and now it seems like I don't know anything I thought I knew: about myself, about the world and where I stand in it. Okay, I will admit it. I am thinking about a *boy* I met in Prague.

I know it's not exactly uncommon for a girl to be daydreaming about a boy during class, but it is kind of revolutionary for me. Before I even reached middle school I had come out to my parents as asexual. Understandably, they were a little bit skeptical, and I hate to be proving their skepticism was valid, because it really felt narrow-minded and condescending to me while I was growing up, and I know that asexual people are real and face that same skepticism all the time. In general, though, they accepted me, and seemed to believe me more and more when middle school had come and gone, and then high school, and two years of college, and I still wasn't

interested in boys, dating, sex, or any of the romantic connection all my friends seemed to constantly seek out.

If my parents struggled to understand my sexuality, I without a doubt struggled ten times as much. Hiding behind the poker face of asexuality, I examined my hand of cards, turning over kings and queens in my head, imagining what each would be like to kiss, to love, to spend life with. It was not repulsive to me so much as uninteresting, and maybe a little bit uncomfortable. I never went out with anyone, or downloaded a dating app, or watched porn. I didn't like talking about sex, never really understood what it meant to have a "crush" on someone. I would sometimes think that maybe I could picture myself as someone's girlfriend, if there were someone who I thought was a good friend and had a pretty smile. A few people during my school years fit that description, but never anyone interested in me, and if they were—if they started to talk to me more, to walk with me between classes and smile at me and bring me little tokens as young teens do—I would begin to feel awkward first, then uncomfortable, and then after a week I would feel nauseated by their presence.

I only realized later that my discomfort with the thought of sex and romance might have something to do with my health, rather than my sexuality. Shout out to the therapist who pointed that one out to me; it both gave me a new, miraculous sense of understanding, and completely ruined my life.

Of *course* my social anxiety made me feel uncomfortable when I received attention from someone. Of *course* my ADHD meant I never got stuck on a person for long enough to call it a crush. And obviously being autistic would mean that no one was able to explain the feeling of love, or lust, or attraction to me. Somehow they would always end up using annoying metaphors about "having butterflies in your tummy" (which is how I feel literally all the time, with the combination of nausea in social situations and digestive symptoms of POTS) or "seeing fireworks when you kiss" (fireworks trigger my migraines, plus the noise and light make me feel overstimulated and agitated).

I once asked my mom what made romantic attraction different from platonic attraction. She said:

"It's just... something that you feel." No I don't.

"You will want to spend all of your time with that person." Well, I want to spend all my time with my friends, does that mean I am romantically "into" *them*?

"No, it's different. You feel like you can tell them anything." I tell my friends everything. I tell *you* everything (She was getting frustrated at this point).

"When you are in a romantic relationship you always want to give things to them, you want to make them happy, make sure they never feel alone or upset. You always want to be close to them, to touch them." My parents give me everything, they are constantly telling me they want me to be happy. Dad told me that when I was a baby, he would pick me up and just hold me and it would make him feel calm. Even now I have a very huggy family. We are always comforting each other with a strong embrace or a forehead kiss.

Eventually my mom conceded. She told me “It’s not something that can be explained. You will understand when you meet someone and you feel with your whole body that you want to be with them.”

I hated that answer, because it meant one of three things.

1. It could mean that I had *never* met anyone to whom I felt romantically attracted, either because I didn’t find *anyone* romantically attractive, or because all the people I *would* find romantically attractive were like... trapped on an island somewhere (or maybe I just have extremely high standards that no one has ever met).
2. I *had* met people I would want to date, but couldn’t differentiate the feeling from regular friendship feelings, and would therefore be waiting my whole life to meet someone who would make me feel that unexplainable, whole-body whatever-it-is, while I missed out on opportunities to create real connection with people I couldn’t tell I liked.
3. *Or*—and this was the scariest option to me—something was biologically preventing my body from having that feeling, leaving me with only the emotional attachment to the concept of dating someone, but none of the physical desire, the bodily cues, or the instinctual ability to pursue a relationship and to enjoy one if I were in it.

Not only could the symptoms of ADHD, anxiety, and autism (my own AAA, like the insurance company, although the only thing they are insuring is my annoying neurodivergence) mask any attraction I felt and turn it into something stressful and nauseating that I would try to avoid, but the combination of POTS and all my medications had the potential to be an added barrier for my body.

At least half of the medications I take—and had taken for years—listed among their side effects things like “reduced libido,” “difficulty becoming sexually aroused,” “anorgasmia,” “decreased sexual desire,” and “fear of sexual failure.” For the record, “anorgasmia” is the inability to reach orgasm, also known as orgasm dysfunction. I had to look it up, so I wanted to define it for everyone reading, even though now that I know the definition, it seems obvious just from looking at the word itself, so maybe I’m the only one who didn’t know what it meant. I’d been taking some of these medications since before I really hit puberty, so if they were really to blame for my lack of sexual interest I can’t even really compare my experience to what it was like before I started them.

And POTS, along with giving me headaches, stomach aches, chills, bad circulation, dizziness, brain fog, and plenty of other delightful character quirks, leaves me chronically frigid. It’s an illness that indicates what is scientifically known as a screwed-up parasympathetic nervous system. My hormones are out of whack, I feel tired and unenergetic essentially all the time, and I’m uncomfortably sensitive to any stimulation (I mean that in the non-sexual way: the feeling of clothing against my skin, my hair on my neck, wind, noises, lights, etc.). Also, since my average resting heart rate is the same as most peoples’ during a high intensity workout, the

whole schtick where your heart beats fast and your pulse races when you fall in love or are getting down ain't gonna fly for me.

It happened again; my brain found a tangent to chase and I lost the thread of my mental narrative. I was talking about Prague. It's been a long enough tangent that the word now has meaning again, but I'm sure that won't last. I'm daydreaming for the twentieth consecutive day about a boy I met in Prague who made me question everything I know about myself.

His name is Bekhruz, Benny for people who don't care enough to pronounce it, and he's not actually from Prague. I met him online, while looking for people my age to hang out with while I stayed in the city. We chatted a little bit and he asked me on a date, well, sort of. He told me he would be working until late in the evening (he explained that he works in logistics for a company abroad, so his hours are always strange) but that once he got home he would love to take me on a walk around the city. There was enough subtext that it was obvious he was asking me out, but not so much that I couldn't pretend I was accepting the invitation to hang out as a friend, just to throw off my anxiety. Gotta keep your mental illnesses on their toes, you know.

Honestly, there was no reason for me to say yes. If you saw it in a movie, you'd scrunch your nose at the bad writing. "She would have absolutely said no to that, this is so out-of-character, the director only made her say yes because it was convenient to the plot!" I'm still not sure why I said yes. It wouldn't be the first time I rejected an invitation because I thought someone might be interested in more than friendship, it wasn't even the first time I'd rejected someone for that reason *in Prague, that same day*.

Sure, from the few pictures of Bekhruz I had seen on instagram, he was attractive, and from our messages, I could tell he had a sense of humor, but neither of those things would generally sway me to do something so crazy. I was in a foreign city that I didn't know, for the first time, I was alone except for one friend who came with me from America, I was accepting the offer to walk in this city, at *midnight* no less, with a boy I had never met, and I didn't even have a way to share my location in case I got kidnapped or something, because the friend I brought with me to Prague was an Android user.

There has to be some weird particle in European air that targets one's inhibitions, because my anxiety wasn't setting off its usual obnoxious sirens and flashing lights. I didn't even feel the need to find a bar—not that it would have been difficult in Prague—and take a shot or two or twelve just to feel like I could go out without having a panic attack.

At 11:17 PM, I left my friend doing homework in our AirBnB, and stepped out onto the cobbled streets of Prague (aaaand, the word just became meaningless again, Prague-prague-*perr-ogg-p-r-o-g-g*). The streetlights—of which there were many, thankfully—were all warm yellows, and the old buildings outside my apartment on Na Zborenci Street were dusty browns. Or they were dusty and brown, but it came across the same.

Brown is my favorite color, which I know is a weird trait of mine. Add it to the list. There's something so comforting though about the warm tones of chocolate and hot coffee, mahogany and raw wood and trees, overturned soil and walls made of stone or brick. I like brown eyes, they are softer, less piercing than blue or green, and my dog's fur is a brown like

burnt caramel, which means when I curl up next to him and put my face in his fur and block out the world around me, I am surrounded by the color brown; it makes me feel calm and cozy.

Prague is a very brown city, though it has far more bright colors than American cities, at least during the day. New York is all grays. Philadelphia, where I live, is at least a little bit more brown, but at best I would call it ash or maybe taupe. Prague is a golden brown, like hot apple cider, and I wonder if that was part of why I felt so calm there.

Bekhruz stood out against the sepia backdrop of the old buildings. He was facing away from me, because I had given him the address of a place across the street and a few numbers down from me as a half-baked attempt to ensure he wouldn't turn out to be a creep or a murderer and know exactly where I lived. I was glad for it then, because I got to see him before he could see me, which was a relief though I don't know why.

He's tall—I think I reach the tip of his nose when my posture is good—and he was wearing a black suit, though not the sharp kind that makes you think of lawyers and corporate functions and men who have secretaries. Bekhruz's suit was a heavier fabric, and well worn, so its edges had lost the crispness and corporateness of a fresh tux, instead folding softly and molding against his body. It looked like it was keeping him warm, and—it being mid-September—his thin arms were pressed close against his sides and I could tell he appreciated it.

It didn't occur to me at the time—yet another example of my social obtuseness—that he had worn the suit because he wanted to look nice for me. A week afterwards, I came to that sudden realization and panicked, hastily scrolling through my phone to find pictures from that day to see what I had been wearing, because what if I looked like a sloppy mess? Was I wearing sweatpants or something? How had my hair looked? It turned out alright though; luckily I had been wearing a denim dress with billowy sleeves that I really like, and I had fixed my hair and done a little bit of makeup for a nice restaurant I visited earlier that day.

He heard the scuffle of my shoe on the cobblestones as I walked towards him, and turned, a smile immediately filling his face.

“Hi,” I gave him an awkward little wave as he walked towards me and held his arms out for a hug. I had thought on my way down the stairs from my apartment that maybe he would want to greet me with a hug, and I was a little terrified of it. As with most things, though, the anticipatory anxiety was far worse than the actual experience, which was actually alright, even though I was definitely a little bit stiff at the feeling of physical contact. He whispered “*Hi*” into my ear (or into my hair, really, because of his height) before pulling away to look at me intently.

Eye contact is not my forté, in fact it is kind of the worst thing ever, but for some reason it wasn't so bad when he looked at me. Maybe it was because he had brown eyes, or the European air was doing something to my anxiety again. Plus, he looked at me kind of like he was staring at the most beautiful girl in the world, which, even as I looked away to avoid his eyes, made me feel kind of pretty. I liked it.

There was a boy in my high school who used to look at me like he was trying to imitate what Bekhruz was doing now, but I had hated that gaze, maybe because it felt fake. That boy

looked at me like I was a cute puppy, or a child. When I would babble on about a hyperfixation he would listen—a rare occurrence, so I talked with him often—but his eyes seemed condescending, like these were my first words and he knew so many more but was proud of me for trying. I stopped talking to him, but I hated when boys looked at me after that; they all had the same eyes.

Bekhruz was different somehow, he looked at me as though I inspired him, as he gestured in a direction and I fell into step beside him. I knew from our messages online that he was not Czech, but was born in Uzbekistan, or Kyrgyzstan, in a village on the border where no one really knows or cares which country should hold their allegiance. He calls himself Uzbek though, because, he says, more people know of Uzbekistan, even though few people have heard of either. He told me he moved to Prague for culinary school, became a Hilton chef, and then turned to logistics after the COVID pandemic hit and he lost his job.

We discussed food, because I also love to cook, as we walked towards the river, and if ever there was a lull in our conversation, I would turn to see him staring at me with that same expression of awe. I would laugh nervously, and he would smile, or tell me I was beautiful (he did that a lot) until I stumbled into a new topic to discuss so that he would start talking again.

At one point, he admitted that I was the first girl he had ever tried conversing with in English. I told him his English was amazing, and it was. He had a few little quirks in his speech but I found them cute, and I couldn't help but admire him for having the courage to talk with me anyway. I think it also made me feel a little bit better knowing that he had reason to be at least as nervous as I was. He would have had my admiration even if his English was atrocious, because it was his sixth language, and I dream of knowing as many languages as he does.

We reached the river Vltava and walked along it. For the first time, but not the last, I realized that I had been so caught up in conversation that I had been blindly letting him lead the way, and not once had my eyes done their usual anxious flicker to the street signs or landmarks or the map on my phone. He was easy to talk to, despite the language barrier, and we had a lot in common.

The river, coated in the lacquered reflections of offshore clubs and brightly lit bridges, was stunning, and Bekhruz, with his hands on my shoulders, guided me to stand on his left side, so I was between him and the water and could take in the view of the city as he stared fixedly at my face. A swan floated past us—almost blue in its whiteness against the black water sprinkled with stars—behind it, ripples in which the lights of the city danced and distorted. I told Bekhruz that I love birds, kept talking even though the small part of my brain that had sealed itself in an airtight case against the liberating European air was muttering “*shut up, SHUT UP!*”

Usually I would listen. I can get weird when I talk about birds. I have two, a galah and a conure, and I love them both more than I love most humans. It's another fixation that has lasted longer than most. I'm often hit by inspiration to do random bird-related research, and am fascinated by how intelligent birds are, how *human* they can be in their emotions and personalities. Bekhruz listened intently as I described my galah's sense of humor, how she will bob her head with me to music, and ask to give me a kiss but nip me instead and laugh at her

own trick. When I glanced up at Bekhruz, his gaze had new depth. It seemed like he wasn't just looking at my face, but like he was trying to see the gears in my brain, so his eyes could trace my mind with the same amazement as they had held when tracing the features of my face.

He led me over a bridge, to the other side of the river, and down a trail that diverged from the main riverwalk, down some stairs to water level. I was not worried—the road was still in view, people were sitting on benches and the area was well lit by the moon and the streetlamps—but I asked Bekhruz where we were going, and he explained that he wanted to show me something. We rounded a bend in the path that led to a small beach alcove under the bridge. I inhaled a reverent breath. On this beach, shielded from the view of the riverwalk by the vigilant stones of the bridge, were dozens of swans, white feathers bathed in the moonlight, long necks tucked against their wings in sleep or open-eyed relaxation. The pebbles of the beach were hidden under the blanket of birds, which looked, together, like rolling banks of snow.

“I am coming here whenever I feel depressed. When I feel like no one is appreciating me,” Bekhruz quietly admits, to not disturb the swans. That's one of his English quirks, using verbs with *is* in their *-ing* form, “I am coming here” instead of “I come here,” “is appreciating” instead of “appreciates.” I think it's sweet, and technically not incorrect, so I don't correct him. He continues.

“I like to bring bread or...” (he scrunches his face as he tries to think of a word) “Seeds. Flower seeds. For the birds. When I am feeding them, I know that they are thankful, and they appreciate that I am giving to them.”

I hadn't taken my eyes off the swans, but I looked up at him then. He was looking at the swans too, which I liked. It meant he was not only interested in people, but he cared about the world too. It's hard for me to be comfortable around people whose motivation is purely social. It's one thing for someone to seek connection with me, but without any connection to nature, or to places and experiences, I start to feel as though when I'm with them, I exist in a vacuum. When Bekhruz looked up and met my eyes, it didn't feel like he was choosing to look at me instead of the swans, but like he was looking at the swans through me, staring into my eyes so he could feel my wonderment at the beauty of the scene in front of us. I felt more connected to him in that moment than any eye contact had ever made me feel. We were sharing a moment in time, not meeting eyes so much as meeting minds.

It was so strange, that this boy, who spoke a quirky English and called me beautiful and had always lived on the opposite side of the earth as me, could do nothing at all and yet my anxious thoughts, which usually flung themselves around my head like those diagrams of gas molecules from science class, slowed, quieted, as though suddenly moving through molasses. Is that what attraction feels like to people? I find it hard to believe that's the case. Everyone I'd ever asked gave me a description that completely contradicted the way I felt with Bekhruz. They repeated phrases like “*heart racing*” and “*adrenaline rush*” and “*butterflies*” and “*jolts of excitement*” and “*burning desire*”. I felt none of those things, I just felt like I had found a person I could be around and still breathe, and maybe like he saw all of the weight I carry on my shoulders and offered to lend me his strength.



My three ‘A’s of neurodivergence all pull my brain in different directions. Anxiety thinks and overthinks every word or action of every human with whom I share space (and myself). ADHD focuses on every detail of my surroundings except whatever *should* be the focal point, it amplifies every whirring AC unit and car engine, every color and light and tiny movement, until anyone trying to talk to me is drowned out by a cacophony of stimuli my brain can’t tell are totally unimportant. Autism is hyper-aware of *me*, reminding me at the most inopportune times to pay attention to the tag on my shirt, become annoyingly conscious of my own breathing, tap my finger against my thumb rapidly so that I don’t forget that I have arms.

As Bekhruz and I continued our walk and fell once again into easy conversation, I felt like my mind was trying to send its usual cascade of intrusive thoughts, but they were so dim that against the planes of Bekhruz’s black suit I could barely see them. My triple-A battery was low on juice, and somehow Bekhruz was the reason.

We had been walking for hours, and I had received none of my usual exhaustion signals, no aching feet, no conversation fatigue, no social headache. So it wasn’t until I took out my phone to text my friend at the AirBnB a quick “Hey, I’m still alive in case you were worried” that I noticed it was nearly 2 in the morning.

As we started heading back in the general direction of my apartment, Bekhruz told me about his interest in astrology. I never cared much about the zodiac, only knew enough to tell people my sign and that I didn’t really feel like the traits matched me at all. My horoscope is actually complicated: I was born at 11:59 on March 20th, which is the day of the cutoff between Pisces and Aries, but I don’t feel particularly connected with the descriptions of either one. Bekhruz seemed to think the signs fit me perfectly though. I asked him why he believed in astrology, and he smiled up at the sky.

He always paid close attention to his friends’ signs, and their daily horoscopes, he told me. Whenever he saw that someone’s horoscope predicted they would have a bad day, he would call them, and check to see if they were doing well. He said that it always seemed to be the right time to call, it would coincide with a time when that friend was struggling or had been feeling down, and they were always grateful to hear from him. He would tell them not to worry, that their luck would change soon enough, that the stars predicted it.

We had stopped as he was talking, at the center of a footbridge, and were leaning against the railing side by side, watching the edges of the river meet at a single point on the horizon, surrounded by daunting and gothically elegant castles built centuries ago: the “thousand spires” that have sparked one of Prague’s many nicknames. Bekhruz seemed lost in thought for a moment.

“I think that if horoscopes are real or if they are not real, it doesn’t matter.” Our shoulders were nearly touching, and as I looked up at him I could see that his face was flushed from the chill of the autumn air. I hadn’t noticed the cold, I was used to temperatures much lower. “If I call my friend, he will always be happy, and maybe there is always something making us feel worried or depressed, so it is good to remind my friends that I am caring about them always. And if I tell my friend, ‘do not worry, tomorrow you will have a good day, tomorrow you will be

lucky' if they believe in the horoscopes or don't, they will at least believe in me, and that will make them have a good day."

I couldn't help but feel a little starstruck by that. Enough for my anxiety to creep back in with the classic "he's totally making all this up to impress you. Think about everything he could be lying about". I shoved the thought down because hey, I'll always give people the benefit of the doubt. I'm too trusting, which at some point I mentioned to him, and he grinned at me.

"You are just like fish."

I laughed, because that had quickly become my favorite of Bekhruz's English quirks. He adores the zodiac, but he refers to them all by just *slightly* incorrect names. Pisces, of course, is fish. Bekhruz himself is a scorpion.

We meandered along the bridge, pausing every few steps because I kept noticing gorgeous spiders that had made huge webs along the rusted metal scaffolds. The overhead lamps turned the lines of each web into strands of gold, and at the center of every spiral was a crowned orb weaver, *Araneus Diadematus*. I love spiders, and especially orb weavers, which had never scored me many friends, and in fact on occasion caused my existing friends to back away from me, so I mostly just researched spider species online and rarely told anyone about that inclination. I couldn't help but express my excitement to Bekhruz though, because I had never seen so many glittering webs with patterned spiders, swaying in the breeze like streamers adorning the bridge.

By the time my brain caught up with itself and I realized I was showing my weirdness, it was too late. I froze and looked at Bekhruz with wide eyes, wondering if he would be grimacing or gawking at me. His mouth was open, like he was mildly surprised, and I stuttered out what was probably an excuse or apology, I wasn't really thinking about what I was saying. Bekhruz shook his head.

"You are such an amazing girl." my mouth opened in mirrored mild surprise. "I have never met anyone who has..."

He seemed annoyed at his own inability to find the right words, and mumbled something in what sounded like Russian. He tried again.

"You have something here, something here, something here," he gestured in random directions. "You know all about birds, you know of history, you are chef, you are interested in spiders, there are... so many different things! And you are beautiful, and smart, and kind, and *fish*."

He trailed off. I felt like I was snuggled against my dog's fur again, encompassed by a blanket of brown that made me feel safe and comfortable and strong and cherished. I wished that I could have expressed that feeling to him. I wanted to show him that I was not the same girl with everyone. If I was so passionate, it was because he made me feel like I could be. If I was beautiful, it was because of the way he looked at me. I said none of that, though, could only offer a whispered "thank you" and an awkward "I really like spending time with you," but from the way his eyes sparkled I think maybe he liked that answer a lot.

We walked to my apartment, despite me never really paying attention to the directions; he knew all the streets and led the way by memory. At the front door of the building, we both stared at each other, neither of us knowing the right way to say goodbye. He gave me another hug (I still felt a little bit stiff, but not as much as I had the first time) and asked if I would want to go walk again the next night. I nodded with no hesitation. He said “I think I am going to be very sad when you leave Prague.”

I hadn't thought about that. I didn't really have the energy to think about it even then; being in front of my apartment had ignited all of the exhaustion of the day and the prospect of reaching my bed and collapsing began to sound very appealing. I don't think he would have understood, though, if I could have explained that missing people, feelings of loss or grief, those are emotions I struggle with. Psychologically, I move on very quickly, I distract easily and sometimes get confused why other people can't. When I don't see a friend for a long time, my feelings about them don't change at all, even though sometimes they will think of me as less of a friend afterwards, and they will say that we've “drifted apart”. Despite all that, I thought: whenever I am able to see Bekhruz, I will be happy, and so I told him “I will come back to Prague.”

He seemed satisfied with that, and after too long a pause, I added “see you tomorrow?”  
“Yeah, definitely.”

I turned to unlock the door and he turned to walk back to his home, and until I had completely closed the door behind me, I could feel him turning to look back at me. There was a residual calm as I walked up the stairs to the apartment. I was alone with my thoughts but they were at rest like the swans on the beach.

They came back slowly, after I had told my friend “I... think I just went on a *date*.” (my friend was as surprised as I was) and had laid down in bed and was staring up at the ceiling. I felt kind of disappointed, not with the date itself, but with the fact that it hadn't been at all as enlightening as I had expected.

I was pretty sure I hadn't felt the indescribable *something* that my mom had said I'd understand once I'd felt it. Did that mean I wasn't attracted to Bekhruz? I didn't think so, or at least if I wasn't, it was because of some sort of bodily inability and not because he wasn't the right kind of person. And where was I meant to go from there? Did that mean I was leading him on by showing interest even though I might legitimately have no romantic attraction to him? What would happen if we kept dating?

I tried to imagine kissing him and couldn't really decipher my thoughts about it. I settled on thinking that I wouldn't be opposed, but I wouldn't expect to really enjoy the sensation of it. I couldn't even make myself think about anything beyond kissing, it just made my stomach turn. I didn't know if it was revulsion at the concept, or just anxiety about my own inexperience, but either way I avoided the thought, for my own sanity.