

When he was in his mid-twenties, Aaron met Jen. She was working at the New England Anti-Vivisection Society when Aaron walked in and offered his services as an expert on mad-cow disease. She hated him immediately. He was aloof and arrogant and had terrible manners. He was already beginning to be something of a celebrity in the animal-rights movement, and there were always girls hanging around him. But a couple of months later, they were seated next to each other at a dinner, and he decided to be charming. She was duly charmed, and when he asked her out on a date, she accepted.

At the time, they felt they were quite similar. They both were wholly dedicated to overcoming injustice. She had come to animal rights by a more circuitous route than he had— she had started from feminism and moved through ecofeminism to an appreciation of what animals and women had in common in terms of being trampled upon— but they had ended up in the same place. They also laughed at the same things; they loved twisted little cartoons. To Jen's surprise, Aaron was funny. Even when he was giving talks about veganism, he could make people laugh. He had a chart with pictures of the seven different kinds of human poo, with descriptions of which poo was healthiest— and of course the best poo was the poo pooped by vegans.

Aaron and Jen moved in together, and then the trouble started. For one thing, Aaron was messy. Not just untidy— dirty. Laundry would pile up in his room, dishes in the sink. He would make huge batches of food to save money— pounds and pounds of lentil stew or hummus— and leave crusted pans and bowls all over the kitchen. When she complained, he told her that time spent washing dishes could be time spent working for animal rights, which were more important. She couldn't think of a good counterargument to that— in fact, she thought he was right, from a moral point of view. So all she could say, when she felt herself going crazy, pressed to the brink by the filth in the kitchen, was, "But I need it, I want it, I'm asking you." Years later, she would wish she'd thought to yell at him, "You know what? It's all about balance, and we live in an imperfect world, and you're right, doing these dishes will take away from the animals, do the fucking dishes before I have a nervous breakdown." But back then she was young, and she wasn't sure what was right or normal or what she deserved. What killed her, too, was that she had always thought of herself as an extremely ethical person, and now she felt like the selfish one, the bourgeois one. Dishes? When animals were being tortured and people were starving? Dishes?

... All through school, she worked for money to help her mother with the rent, and during college she sometimes recycled cans to earn money for food. She started racking up credit-card debt. But she believed in the women's movement, so when she graduated, instead of trying to get a high-paying job, she went to work for a battered-women's group for practically nothing. Still, with her history, Jen felt that if she wanted to make herself feel better by buying a pair of shoes occasionally, that was okay. She was careful with money, but Aaron was so much more so that he made her feel guilty. He kept the heat down low even in the middle of winter. He whittled his spending down to twenty-four thousand a year, then to twelve thousand a year, then nine. He never said anything when she came home with some purchase that he would have called unnecessary, but he didn't have to. She knew what he thought.

Jen worked hard, but Aaron was always working, and work always came first. He felt that there was so much suffering in the world— he felt the weight of it almost physically— how could he stop? How could he relax and watch TV when people were starving? Even when he was with her, she felt that he was itching to get back to it. If she objected, he was astonished that she could be so selfish. If she got upset, he would get upset, too, but he stuck to his principles. Sometimes she thought he was right to do that, but sometimes she thought that she, as his girlfriend, deserved special

treatment— that people owed more to those they were close to than to strangers. Sometimes they would discuss this issue philosophically: Suppose there were two people drowning over there, Jen would ask, and I was drowning over here, and you could save either the two people or me, what should you do? These discussions always ended badly.

... At a certain point, Jen discovered to her astonishment that Aaron had money— not a huge amount, but a trust fund that was his to do what he liked with. She asked him to pay her credit-card debt. It didn't make any sense financially for the two of them for her to be paying all this money in interest, but, more than that, it was driving her out of her mind to be in debt after all these years. She was terrified of poverty, traumatized by her period of homelessness. But he wouldn't pay it. He told her that there were other people who needed that money more. He told her that she was well fed and had a place to live and there were people in the world who were starving. He had already allocated the money to a charity. It was blood money, in Aaron's eyes— his mother's father had started a company that manufactured gold bathroom accessories, and his father's father had amassed a fortune making fur coats— its taint could only be expunged by spending it to alleviate the worst sorts of suffering. There was Jen, and then there was Somalia. Or animals in cages. How could she compete with them? She couldn't. She knew he was right.

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