

Carrying Capacity

Rachel Toor



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When he told me about the dead girl in Butte, he said, I'm really quite a good kisser when I put my mind to it. I thought about how when we kissed there was a spark but no heat and tried to decide whether he was choosing not to put his mind to it, or if he was deluded. He enjoyed, I had begun to suspect, an adulterer's relationship with self-knowledge.

When he told me how he'd warned his wife, some years before, that he planned to have sex outside the marriage, he explained, in language that felt polished and rehearsed, that they had lived in countries where monogamy did not reign supreme. The idea of being only with the same person for three decades made no sense, he said. I wondered if I was provincial and small-minded or if this was the biggest come-on in the history of the world and hoped I'd not be fool enough to fall for it.

But we don't live in other cultures, I said. We live in this one, where when someone has sex outside of marriage it's called an affair. It's called cheating.

He said, It's not like that.

He said, You don't understand. I just want this to work out for everyone, as if he were trying to find a way to split a check after an expensive meal.

He said, I have a good marriage; we've built something. He looked at me and added, But then I found you.

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Stories of the early to mid-nineteenth century frontier are replete with incredulous descriptions of swarms of buffalo darkening the plains, the size of herds reckoned not in numbers, but by days and miles. Alone among the American mega fauna, the bison survived the Pleistocene extinctions. Long ago elephants, camels, giant ground sloths, and bear-sized beaver roamed the Western plains, hunted by massive cats and colossal dogs. Then, due to climate change or, as recent scholarship suggests, human hunting, the biggest of the ancient animals went down. All except the bison, which cannily managed to evolve to evade predation. They shrank in size and grew nimble in their movements, found sustenance from nutritionally weak forage, and survived.

In 1910 naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton estimated the number of bison when Columbus began making his mistakes—of geography, of genocide—to be about 60 million. More recently, researchers working with some of the same data calculated the carrying capacity of the plains and reckoned there could never have been more than 30 million. There simply wasn't enough space to accommodate that many individuals; there wasn't enough sustenance for that large a group to thrive.

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Sophomore year in college I met a gangly first-year law student who wore an army-green jacket that smelled like a duffle bag and who, when he ordered pizza, refused to give his real name. He watched me dance at a party, but wouldn't join me. He tossed snark at my friends and complained about his fellow future lawyers—stupid and greedy, he said. I let him kiss me but that was all: he had confessed to a girlfriend back home. I called him the Evil Genius, but only behind his back; both descriptors would have made him too happy.

The next year the girlfriend moved to New Haven to be with him. This served to further his efforts to get me into bed. He told me that when he wanted to delay an orgasm he thought about his dead mother. He gave me the copy I still have of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and explained the legal concept of inchoate crimes, misdeeds of thought.

On the rare occasions when he was solicitous and kind I would get confused. I sought advice from an older friend, a philosophy major with curly hair and body odor, who said the guy was a "proven

asshole," and posed a question: If he would cheat on her with you, what makes you think he wouldn't treat you the same way?

I'm sure I said, Right.

I'm sure I thought, Because I'm me.

A few weeks after graduation I relented and slept with the law student. Once. We didn't mention the girlfriend, but I've thought about her from time to time over the past thirty years. I almost never think about the law student.

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The first time he asked me to dinner, when he'd come to my town on a business trip and well before he told me about the dead girl in Butte, I was surprised. It was not a date. It could not be a date because he was married, had been married for three decades.

I hadn't gone out in a while. I said yes, and I chose my underwear carefully, a joke I told myself. He was gratingly handsome, laughed easily, and moved with the grace of a predator. He was the kind of man you meet in the West, an Ivy Leaguer with a face weathered by years of shredding mountains and sleeping outdoors. He had traveled the world and searched for his place in it.

The wait staff treated us like a couple. He didn't wear a wedding ring and didn't mention his wife. Our talk roamed and galloped over books we both loved to discussions of trails we'd run. We ordered the same dish. Our conversation crackled over the table's candle.

After a couple of glasses of wine, he leaned across the table, confessional. He whispered that, while healthy and fit, he worried about his, well, his virility. Not that there was anything wrong, he said, and smiled in a way that made me lean back against my chair. Later I came to call it the conversation about his puissance. I leaned away from him, away from the cliché I could see in the offing.

I didn't finish my dinner and stubbed out the flame, burning my fingers and perfuming them with ash. When I dropped him at his hotel he unbuckled the seatbelt but remained still.

He said, I hope this isn't inappropriate.

I waited, eyes dead ahead, hands on the steering wheel, refusing to put the car in park, until I heard him say, I'd like to kiss you.

I laughed.

He gave me a tight-lipped kiss and I drove away.

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Fewer than fifteen years after the end of the Civil War buffalo were brought to the edge of extinction through the ruthless cupidity of invading white men who sought skins and tongues and laid waste in their wake. This destruction has provided an enduring narrative of the West.

But things are never simple. In addition to greed, other factors account for the buffalo holocaust, among them cyclical climate change, the introduction of the horse (which, unlike the bison, didn't survive the Pleistocene extinctions but were reintroduced with stunning success and competed with them for forage), and exposure to Old World diseases.

It's also possible that changes in Indian hunting well before that sanguineous decade and a half caused the buffalo population to dwindle: there were simply more people on the plains, having been marched in from the East on Trails of Tears and resettled on reservations. Environmental scholars say that where there was tribal warfare, animals congregated in the safe space between the tribes, buffer zones between contested lands. Cessation of warfare among tribes due to alliances opened these previously safe animal spaces to human predation.

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Just after we shared that candle-lit dinner (it was not a date; he was married), he had to travel for work. For weeks he emailed me from hotel rooms in different time zones. He'd describe what he was doing, what he saw. Then, what he saw in me.

He began to call me from the road and we talked for hours, like teenagers.

He asked questions, attended to me.

I reminded myself that he was married and tried to date other men. Yet every night I waited to hear from him, anticipating his calls like a dog who knows how to tell time.

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In the 1950s ethologist John Calhoun conducted experiments with rats. In the wild he noticed that rats live in groups of about a dozen—like a jury, like Ben Franklin's Junto, like donuts. The scientist created a rodent utopia: he gave his subjects shelter and plentiful food and water and watched as they multiplied.

As their numbers increased, chaos ensued. "Behavioral sink" is the term Calhoun used to describe what happened when too many individuals tried to live together. The rats began fighting and marauding. Some outcasts became artists and crafters, some turned homosexual. Some hid and waited for everyone to go to sleep before they dared to venture out. Females formed cliques and endlessly groomed themselves, sometimes until they went bald. Males formed gangs and raped and pillaged.

And they also just died.

In a similar experiment, another researcher, John Christian, studied silka deer on an island in the Chesapeake Bay in 1960. Each individual required three acres. During the six years of the study, the deer population on the 280-acre island reached 300. Hale and fit deer died. Autopsies revealed they had succumbed to stress.

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A friend spoke about the woman her ex-husband may or may not have had an affair with as their marriage was breaking up. She said she'd heard the woman, her husband's coworker, might have cancer. My relentlessly upbeat friend, who refuses to partake in even benign gossip, who has staked her tent in the it's-all-good camp, said, I hope she does. My ever-smiling friend said, I hope she does have cancer.

She knew her marriage didn't break up over this woman, and didn't know if her husband had had an affair with her or just sought something that he felt necessary, something she hadn't been able to give him.

Still, she hoped this woman had cancer.

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I said no to him for months.

Each night our conversations went new places, and kept covering the same ground. You have a wife, a family, I said.

I know that, he said. And then, This could be good for everyone.

I don't want to be a marital aid, I said.

It's not like that, he said.

I wondered what it was like, wondered if I could resist him, could survive him. He said, My wife will understand.

Then, I think my wife will understand.

We lived a couple of hundred miles apart. He had always spent time away—wandering, exploring, adventuring. Constantly on the move, stopping now and then to dig in to a new place, he always returned home to the woman who supported his family.

He said, I think we will be able to come up with some kind of arrangement.

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Carrying capacity is the maximum number of individuals of any particular species that can be accommodated by a habitat or an environment on a sustainable basis. In his essay, "Getting Along with Nature," Wendell Berry wrote, "If lynxes eat too many snowshoe rabbits—which they are said to do repeatedly—then the lynxes starve down to the carrying capacity of their habitat. It is the carrying capacity of the lynx's habitat, not the carrying capacity of the lynx's stomach, that determines the prosperity of lynxes. Similarly, if humans use up too much soil, which they have often done and are doing—then they will starve down to the carrying capacity of their habitat."

The difference between lynxes and humans, he says, is that one hopes we have the sense to act on our understanding. Berry writes, "Whereas animals are usually restrained by the limits of physical appetites, human have mental appetites that can be far more gross and capacious than physical ones."

It is provincial to underestimate the rapaciousness, the bodily hunger of humans. Even when there are too many individuals to be sustained, we will try to get what we desire; our appetites will not be denied.

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From the start, he had conversations with me in his head, which he conveyed with relish. He would recap what he had already told an imagined version of me, even supplying my responses. I was, from the start, a character for him.

And for me he was a man who looked, even in late middle age, like the prep school boys in college who would never have glanced my way, who wore their father's long black cashmere overcoats and used summer as a verb.

His well-heeled manners, his insistence on dinner-table candles, the yacht-club way he flipped up the collar of his polo shirt—close to a caricature. His interest in me seemed improbable.

I could see how it would play out, could predict the obvious and inevitable ending. In my head, it played in slow-motion, like when you're falling off a horse. In the seconds before you hit the ground, you calmly and abstractly wonder how much damage will be done and hope it will not be catastrophic.

I could see it all. And yet, after months of electronic messages and battery-draining phone calls, I stopped saying no.

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In population dynamics and population ecology, exceeding carrying capacity is called an "overshoot," which can lead to a "die-off." In the 18th century Thomas Malthus wrote, "It is an obvious truth, which has been taken notice of by many writers, that population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence; but no writer that the Author recollects has inquired particularly into the means by which this level is effected."

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He was so adept at saying exactly the right thing, the elegantly expressed sentiment I needed to hear in each moment, that I accused him of having a stack of index cards with perfect lines to pull out for any occasion. His comments made me feel seen, understood, tended.

He was riding a professional high and he took me with him on business trips. We shared his paid-for hotel rooms and told each other the stories that sculpted our lives. We ran on mountain trails and he and my dog swam in lakes that smelled like forever while I watched and laughed, watched and felt full.

He wore baggy boxer shorts that hung off his chiseled body, a body far too beautiful for a man his age, a body I never tired of looking at, of touching. I could never stop touching his body. He was easily and often delighted. We built a library of captured moments, private jokes that led to hysteria. I would replay them in my head and laugh again so hard my stomach hurt.

He brought me flowers, bottles of wine, jewelry, jerky for my dog. When he left, I could feel a dent in the couch, in the bed, the places he'd been. He gave me an old cashmere sweater that smelled like his skin. I slept in it.

In the dark he whispered to me, his lips hot against my ear. When he called from his office he would never let me rush off the phone when it was time to go. He'd slow me, make me wait to hear what he wanted to say, make me wait so he could tell me he was sending me a kiss, make me wait while he sent it. I was always waiting for him.

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Malthus: "The passion between the sexes has appeared in every age to be so nearly the same that it may always be considered, in algebraic language, as a given quantity...The different modes which nature takes to prevent or repress a redundant population do not appear, indeed, to us so certain and regular, but though we cannot always predict the modes we may with certainty predict the fact."

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He said, Maybe I could spend a week a month with you. Would that be enough?

I wondered what enough would look like.

I talked to him every night and saw him often. He came to events as my date. We developed routines, patterns, our own coded language.

He said, You would get tired of me if I was around all the time.

I wondered if that was true.

From the beginning, he promised he would tell his wife about us. I invested in believing him, in trusting that he could predict her response, though I also knew he was a little afraid of her. It became a rare point of contention for us. I didn't want to keep sneaking around, and I didn't think that was who he wanted to be, someone who looked like a liar, a cheater.

On our last trip, he began to speak of us in the past tense.

As we walked down a street in a city a few states away, together because we both had business there and we planned cannily, I said I suspected that when I thought back on our time together I would say to myself, Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He stopped walking and said he thought he would say this was the great love of his love.

Later that comment felt like he'd read it off his index cards.

After he told his wife, he called and offered clichés of words and thought.

I said, Will you please stop talking. Please. Stop talking.

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Buffalo rub, roll, and wallow. Wallowing creates saucerlike depressions in the earth, places that can no longer produce vegetation. Divots from where the animals drink and roll show up as scars in the ground.

Bison move continuously as they eat. The females lead family groups. Bulls remain solitary or in small groups for most of the year, but come to the cows during mating season. Females reach sexual maturity at age three. It takes the males twice as many years to be ready to mate.

Bulls will "tend" a cow, single her out and follow her around until she relents and consents to mate. During this courting period, the bull blocks the cow's vision so that she can't see other bulls. He bellows at others who strive for the cow's attention.

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A year or so before he met me he had been traveling and stopped for the night in Butte, Montana. At a bar, he met a vibrant woman decades younger and convinced her to kiss him. I'm really quite a good kisser when I put my mind to it, he explained when he told me the story.

As he drove to see me the first time, he stopped at that same bar and asked for her. He thought he'd like to kiss her again.

She died, he was told. Something wrong with her heart.

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