

may contain traces of bone

by Keeley Young

part one

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Annie: "What do you think I say when I go to the feedstore in town, "Oh, now Wally, give me a bag of that F-in' pig feed, and ten pounds of that bitchly cow corn"? And the bank do I tell Mrs. Bollinger, "Oh, here's one big bastard of a check, give me some of your Christ-ing money?""

- **Misery (1990)**

While the washing machine spun, and I sorted through the toiletries, one of my friends started to ring. I answered after a beat, initially hoping to use the jetlag as an excuse to not talk. Her voice came through eager. ‘Everything went smoothly then?’ She sounded like she was in the car, but I couldn’t be certain. I drifted away from the laundry and leant against the pale beige wall with the phone in my hand.

Gretchen asked the routine questions: how were the flights, what was the trip like, did I have any stories rearing to be told in that very moment. Someone beeped their horn in the background, barely audible. I told her I would be able to talk about the trip more when I saw her.

I’d just gotten back from a month-long vacation in Europe, which cemented me as enviable until the next person went anywhere in the world. Gretchen suggested I come around soon for dinner with her, her longtime partner, and another of our friends, who she had once upon a time tried to set me up with because we were both single and lonely. Something could have happened, but he seemed more interested in everyone else but me, romantically.

‘I’ll get some wine, we’ll eat cheese and stuff our mouths with meat,’ she said nonchalantly, and I heard the car park, again hardly audible except for a thud. As Gretchen rummaged around in her car for something, she continued: ‘It’s been what, a month since you saw anyone? Aren’t you lonely? Wouldn’t the people in Europe have been barking at you in languages you don’t recognise?’

I quickly retorted: their languages weren’t unheard of things. ‘I know a little Dutch,’ I said, half-convincingly. She laughed a little, and I waited the moment it took her to climb out of the car and move towards what I assumed was her house. ‘I know a little Google Translate.’

‘They were all strangers,’ she mused, and I moved from the spot with the shoulder against the wall so I could start pacing back and forth near my own front door. ‘You must have things to talk about with us. Stories to tell, of your little adventures.’ Gretchen paused, then, ‘Did you meet anyone?’

Now she didn’t mean foreigners with indistinguishable accents and languages. Now she meant did I flirt with someone overseas, did I make a connection somehow and get his number. I tried to remind my longtime friend I was slow on the upkeep, that I didn’t tend to talk to many people when I was here, let alone overseas in countries I hardly knew how to experience.

‘One of us should be meeting new loves,’ she said, sighing. ‘Do you have plans for Saturday, because I will be sitting here nursing a bottle of wine and I don’t want to do it alone.’

The easiest thing to do was agree to come. When she hung up—I liked to wait for the other person to end any call, in case they had something to say at the last minute—I set my phone down on

the kitchen bench and returned to the washing, looking at the little digits flashed on the screen. Still ten minutes to go. I swore then that ten minutes ago it had ten minutes to go.

I had been a different human being before going off to Europe. It had been planned well in advance, but when none of my friends could afford the time off work, I decided to go alone. For several months, I planned where I would go, what I would do, counting down hours on the clock like waiting for summer break. Summer...summer. And it was summer in Europe while I was there, although the heat was staved away by overcast weather and the occasional rain shower. The day before the first flight, I broke one of the zippers on my suitcase and ambled around the house trying to figure out a way to fix it. It was makeshift, but my zip tie fix made it halfway around the world and back. It was hardly a major issue, the zip for the less important front pocket where I hardly kept anything anyway out of fear someone would see it as an easy target while they robbed me.

But I had been different, compared to the person who now was hanging up washing outside on the line and grumbling when a sock flung out and landed on the concrete. Not to say I had become angrier: this was merely a moment, when mostly I had become a little more knowledgeable of who I had wanted to be. Maybe I worried telling the stories would undermine that, but I had a wealth of memories about the trip and hadn't shared much beyond pictures online and the occasional message, if someone really wanted to listen. I collapsed most nights over there into bed with exhaustion coursing through my body, but I understood now it was completely worth it.

I passed the rest of that day doing the odd job to settle myself back into being home: I did more washing, folded the dry clothes, attempted to clear out some of the unread emails in my inbox, but inevitably ended up on the couch in front of the television rewatching a movie I'd thought about for two weeks but couldn't quite access while I was in Europe. I blinked back the residual jetlag. Thought about what to bring to show Gretchen—souvenirs, pictures, the lack of a real proper European tan. Would she be disappointed I brought back nothing for her?

When I woke up, it was an hour and a half later and I'd missed the movie and napped on the couch. I still felt groggy, but with enough energy I paced to the kitchen and made myself a toasted sandwich on rye bread.

Then I napped again. Unintentionally.

After folding the last of my washed underwear, I collapsed back against the couch and took a breath. More than anything I needed to break to relax, but I spent most of the so-called vacation wearing down my feet. This is the moment that calls for a butler. Someone to swing in and deliver me something to drink. In anticipation, I let my left hand swoop into the empty air, hand shaped like a C. Nothing.

‘Those flights kill, right?’ Gretchen was pouring me another glass of wine, although there were still at least five sips at the bottom. ‘Being in the air for such a long time, cramped in the seat.’ She paused, sitting back down in her own seat across from me at their outside dining table. ‘You had an aisle?’

It was Saturday evening, sometime after four. Gretchen was beside her husband Luke; I was opposite the two of them beside Cormac. The four of us were through with one bottle of wine, at least, although none of us were really keeping track. Keeping score.

‘Aisle for every flight, I need the freedom to be able to get up and pee,’ I replied, taking another miniscule sip of the wine. It was deep and red and made me feel the rebellion striking up inside of me. Something I’d had a dalliance with while I was overseas: the idea, or the art, of letting go and letting loose. So far it was only coming to fruition while I sat around a table with three other people, and we were only drinking wine and talking about me.

Gretchen carved an overindulgent wedge of camembert and fingered it onto a seaweed cracker. ‘I hate the aisle,’ she said, between chewing. ‘For a woman I’ve got these broad shoulders and if I’m not careful someone is whacking into me every time they walk past. Or the trolley collides.’

We snacked, drank, and talked the mystery, or miragery, of being overseas. Cormac wanted to know where I’d gotten up to mischief, like a cat burglar or a cartoon character leading themselves into hijinks. ‘If I was over there I’d be meeting guys every night,’ he said, not bothering to hide a laugh. ‘Call me a whore, whatever. Call me trashy for being lured in by European men, the British accent, the French accent, the...Dutch accent, I guess, the German accent when you don’t think too much about the history of the world, Nazis, etc.’ Cormac sighed, like he was orgasming. ‘It is the nearest you get to a clean slate of new, horny, beautiful, beautiful men and for the both of us, we would be having the time of our lives. And doing it naked.’ He shot a glance at the couple opposite. ‘Sorry, monogamy.’

Gretchen took another sip with her eyebrows raised.

‘But Finn is waiting for marriage, no?’

I felt in the moment like I truly was animated, gulping down the visible lump in my throat. Before leaving for Europe, I had repeatedly, humbly, confessed to Gretchen, to any of my friends who would listen, that I didn’t want to have sex when I wasn’t with someone. Having a track record for relationships that was almost zero, I was inexperienced, hauntingly so. Virginal. The confession, like sitting in a booth in a stuffy church talking to someone much cooler, someone far more experienced in sex, came always as it should, at least to them: that I was in my twenties but desperate to be betrothed and experience thrilling sex on the night of my wedding.

‘I just don’t like to hook up,’ I began, but they quickly cut me off.

Cormac said: ‘You don’t need to use the “gross” apps to find someone to fuck nowadays.’

‘Gee, language, what if we had kids already,’ Gretchen chimed in amusingly, glancing around the empty, mowed, perfectly-ordinary backyard.

Her partner, Luke, finally joined in on the conversation. ‘Is he hurting anyone staying a virgin?’
‘I don’t think virginity is much of an anything.’

Gretchen raised her eyebrow at me—it was her expression of curiosity, beckoning me to continue. The other two seemed eager to interject, but didn’t. ‘Think of it at least from a gay man’s point of view. The sacredness of that, um, hole isn’t exactly sacred. Things come and go frequently. Things go, at least—you shit, is what I’m trying to say. If anything you have to be purged before you can have sex, not during, not after. For the man who is doing the fucking, shoving his penis inside someone, he’s not doing anything when he could just as easily shove his dick inside of anything else. Toys. Tissue box. Uh. Watermelon. Anything that’s hole-shaped.’

‘Why was your second suggestion a tissue box?’

‘I didn’t come prepared with a list,’ I said, glancing over at Cormac with the glass of wine in his hand. He smirked, and didn’t seem offended. ‘I’m not a woman, but for a gay man, what virginity is there to lose? It’s social, connected to how we perceive sexual intercourse, sexual activity. Sure, you could say someone has not lost their virginity because factually they haven’t had someone stick their penis inside their asshole, but I could stimulate that without needing some random stranger.’

Gretchen grimaced. ‘Incredibly graphic, Finn.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Oh don’t apologise,’ she continued. ‘The first time you have sex is never about shattering something, you’re right. It is a new experience akin to skydiving for the first time, or getting your first job. A tick of the old box. A lick of the...’

‘I’ll splash my wine on you,’ Cormac said, interrupting her.

Gretchen narrowed her eyes. ‘Do it.’

The sexual tension in the air was palpable, despite it being between a queer man and a straight woman. She crunched down on a cracker. The atmosphere broke, and Cormac finished off the last of his glass. ‘So maybe I don’t have a sense to rush to skydive,’ I said.

‘Are you the sort to wait until you find the man of your dreams though?’ Luke offered, leaning forward in his chair. In that moment I hardly even felt the marrying sort, but it was something else that had been on my mind while I was away. Being away, like vacationing from everything but your mind, gives you time to process, to think. Being someone who is not religious, or obsessed with the sanctity of a piece of paper, I wasn’t clinging so symbiotically to the concept of waiting for the right moment. I wanted only to have sex with someone who didn’t plan to disappear into the night. Vampiric.

Luke seemed genuinely invested. 'I'm not Christian,' I said, hesitating to wink. Beside him, Gretchen was tipping back her head with the glass to her lips. A droplet of red trickled down her chin, barely noticeable. 'If I was in a committed relationship, I'd be having sex,' I continued, and believed it, for the most part. Cormac grinned at me. While I was away, in a hotel room however many mathematical miles away from home, I masturbated naked on the bed with the curtains open, bathing in the light that remained of an evening at eight o'clock. I thought about being there, naked, with another man, his paws lifting, holding my legs in the air. He too would be naked, thrusting himself back and forth, a rhythmic motion as he fucked me on the bed. Virginal, but suddenly overcome by my horniness, thinking about sex more than what dinner had cost me, I contemplated the breaking of the pact. This invisible contract. To want intimacy to be restricted for a relationship I was struggling to find, whether it was because my standards were too high, or because I found men to be too painful to navigate without an instruction manual. Not the IKEA ones, all pictures and no words, for men required pages and pages of a thesis no one had the energy to write.

I wonder now whether someone has written a thesis on men.

Cormac was grinning at me. 'Is it finally time?' He said jokingly, his manner unserious. He was a clown, honking his nose. I brushed the idea off, because when I looked at him right then I wasn't attracted to him, certainly not because he wanted to get it over with and make sure I was fucked already.

Gretchen moved out of her seat, whispered *bathroom*, and disappeared inside the house. Left with only the boys, with a Luke whose laughter was dying down, with a Cormac who had stopped making eye contact with me and was glancing round at the garden, I felt the need to continue to explain myself. 'I just think I want sex to mean something to me.'

'Every time I have sex with someone, it means something—even if it's just with some stranger I just met in a club, even if he doesn't buy me a drink because he thinks he's better than that.' Cormac paused, eating a piece of cheese by itself. 'Sex doesn't lose the sparkle because I don't want to think about having a joint bank account with the man.'

'Sex with you would always be sans sparkle,' Luke chimed in, reuniting with his laughter.

Cormac swallowed a grape whole.

'Alls I'm saying is, while I value your decision to not have sex purely for fun, I value how everyone has their own reason for sex. If I was in Europe, now or any time, I would be so horny and I would be acting on it, because if a man comes up for air from sucking my dick and slips back into French with whatever *I want to make you cum* in his language is, I'd orgasm twice.'

Luke, aghast, making a small O with his mouth, didn't have anything to offer then.

'Is it weird if I want to bear witness to that?'

‘See, you’re a horny fucker, but you want monogamy.’ Cormac nodded his head at Luke, who merely tipped his head in agreeance. I moved to take a sip from my glass of wine, almost empty. ‘You want monogamy, porn, the in-between, and you’re comfortable not having sex with someone who bullied you in high school. At least it’s modest.’

‘Modest is hottest,’ I mumbled, almost entirely to myself. I didn’t entirely believe it. My modesty came from a want to enjoy myself—I expected sex with strangers to be enjoyable for other people, whose brains functioned in such a way as to make them slip out of focus while they got ploughed by a stranger, or a semi-stranger whose name they could pull from the out-of-fashion rolodex. For myself, it seemed too carnal, too without-intention. Like staging a series of shots, making sure the camera caught the necessary angles. Then I remembered how unexciting the dating pool was. I would go on dates with a man, think there was a connection, then receive a text the next morning, the potion having worn off. He would say, we should stay friends, better that way. Comparable to thinking of how to save the environment, be more eco-friendly, recycle a plastic bottle. Better that way.

When Gretchen returned to the table, brandishing another bottle of wine in one hand and her phone in the other, the conversation had shifted briefly from sex, but she was curious about what had been said while she was squatting on the toilet.

‘These two have zero filter,’ Luke said, extending his glass.

Cormac laughed, sliding his across the table, glasses flocking to a skylight watering hole. Funnelling wine from the heavens. Without thinking I nudged mine, too, although I felt myself not wanting to get any closer towards tipsy. Something was sobering within me, either a thought or a decision. ‘No one is a baby here, we can have the sorts of adult conversations people are expected to have in private.’ He paused, retrieving his wine glass. ‘Even if your neighbours could listen in over the fence, and make assumptions about the freaky-as-fuck people you hang with. All I’m saying is, why put up a filter when you’re with friends? The both of you have sex with each other, you can make assumptions about how sex between two men is. The absence of something leads to...’ and here he purposefully trailed off before taking a swig of his wine.

‘You’re that word, rambunctious,’ Luke responded, bemused.

‘I’m a fag.’

Luke made the sort of face like he’d heard something offensive, but no one else at the table reacted much. We, as a community, were reclaiming the word enough that hearing him say it didn’t rock me to my core. Gretchen, at least, was enough of an ally to probably utter it to herself like secret liberation for the gays.

‘A butt-fucker,’ I retorted, and he smirked at me knowingly.

‘I like to have fun, I like to take less care with life, ignoring the rule that states I should grip to the handrail when I walk down the stairs. If I fall over and graze my face, split my head open, bleed out in public in front of the oldies and the little babies in their strollers, I did so without it having been a fall *because* I was holding on tightly to that damned rail.’

The bleak, stark vision of Cormac at the base of a concrete stairwell, head split open, flashed in my mind for long enough. Men, women, and children seemed to have been in sheer attendance. If I lingered long enough on the idea, I thought, I could give it context and meaning, why this crowd bore witness to something the direct effect of one man being a little reckless. Sports fan, hurrying down. Cormac hated stadiums unless someone well-known was selling out seats for their concert. He didn’t know the names of the teams, not to an exact, so if you asked him who to rally behind he would drum through his brain for an animal he knew linked up well enough, like how he knew there were tigers someplace, crows someplace, sea eagles and swans and anything that screamed out to be threatening, or majestic. No team, therefore, in his mind, settled on something timid and tame, like the Fairywrens. The Bunnies were a laugh, a joke, squished into the dirt and mud by their overwhelming opponent. The concrete staircase.

‘Life is short, then,’ Luke mused.

‘Will any of us have the damned capacity when we’re in our seventies to fuck like this? Maybe we’re in love, maybe we aren’t. Maybe after an endless stream of having a screw loose about things, we want at last to make sure we won’t be tasting the pavement any time soon. But right now, the things I want most are to not be thinking about my seventies, and to be making someone feel pleasure regardless of whether they want all of my love.’ Cormac leaned forward to grab something to eat from the cheeseboard. ‘And I wouldn’t mind feeling some of that pleasure too.’

An hour or so later and the ideations were still at the forefront of my mind. In my time overseas, I’d be having the sinful thoughts Cormac would be proud to know of: I’d thought about sex without shame, meeting someone just for the attention and the pleasure, as he said, the pleasure. Sex was meant to be pleasurable, to be loosely based on objective. When a woman and a man fucked, there was some added benefit, the blessing of a screaming child, but for men and men? It ought to be sinful, or at least concocted with sin as one of the core ingredients. As a kid, I watched re-runs of *The Powderpuff Girls* with my little sister. In that intro, as the whacky straight man designed his magnum opuses, he left out *sin* because it was a children’s television show. But that was how you could envision sex. Constructed of pieces, of ingredients commonly found on the shelf.

I had thought, in between packing my schedule and packing my suitcase, about wanting sex for everything Cormac stole from it. Doubt played in mind, coming from inexperience, coming from

perception. I thought about whether they would think differently of me if they learned I did one thing because we talked about it now, because some part of myself spurred the conversation on by not acting prudish, by not acting like I was ashamed of my romanticism. I didn't know.

The four of us had moved inside, closing off the world as the sky darkened on the horizon. Illuminated by a kitchen spotlight, Gretchen continued to pick at the cheese and crackers, intentionally oblivious to the men drifting around her. Cormac was down the hall using the restroom, and the sound of a flush echoed as he wandered back towards us. Luke was standing nearby, clutching his wine glass.

'Did you have a favourite spot?' The topic had floated back to my time in Europe.

'Um,' I began, shifting my gaze between Luke and the kitchen countertop. 'When I was in Amsterdam, I spent an afternoon in the Van Gogh museum. Maybe spent just under two hours there, taking in his work, his legacy. Learning about his family, his brother, how consequential his sister-in-law was to bringing forward his art and making him the recognisable name he is today.' I paused, sort of half-checking to make sure Luke was interested in the conversation. 'Without her, the artwork could have been just scattered around amongst buyers, not well-intentioned into a legacy. Some manor house in the country would boast of having a "real Van Gogh" because of the elusiveness, not because he was acclaimed like he is now.' I smiled, making a little head nod at Cormac as he walked by. 'I don't know, it's something to consider. The way things conclude. Paths.' Luke nodded his head in what I assumed was understanding, agreeance.

Luke took a sip before he spoke again. He made a remark about how fascinating it all sounded, and Cormac hovered in the corner of my eye chewing on grapes. Bursting them in his mouth. 'Did you ever feel unsafe, like someone was lingering around, waiting to try their luck at striking on you?'

I chuckled, then, and saw the flash of how often I had heard this question, albeit before I left for the vacation that time ago. I answered him politely, half-distracted. In truth, while the fear of being robbed, slashed, hacked, attacked, stayed in my mind whenever I left the hotel, nothing ever happened. Nothing frightfully exciting.

And that was my life until these moments. Dredging through the unexciting, working a job then seeing friends and lamenting on one of the myriads of things: the tedium of work, not having enough money, coming home to domestic singlehood and the wanting for someone to give me something, give me pleasure or anger or a fieriness otherwise lacking. Or comfort, but even comfort was fleeting. Standing naked in a hotel room somewhere foreign, you look at your body through the eyes of a person losing the touch of excitement. Losing the memory of touch.

Cormac fed me a grape, playfully, stupidly, when he held an invisible bowl of them in his hand while we sat beside one another on the couch. It was the least sensual thing, an action akin to two brothers putting food in each other's mouths to be a bother, an annoyance. But my mind slipped into

thinking about him seductively, thinking about the both of us naked in a bedroom, and soon enough it was the Amsterdam hotel room, with the curtains drawn. Dim lighting, for the ambiance, and his hands on my body and mine on his. The strangeness or weirdness of sex with someone you know so personally breaks away because, after all, I was searching out personal sex for so long. In the flashes, I saw him press the head of his penis against the hole, keeping eye-contact, making sure every moment wasn't uncomfortable. It was overdramatic, but it was reassuring, and it was pleasurable. When Cormac fucked me in my mind, I felt a sense of relief, a part of myself break away. I was having senseless quick sex with a man who wouldn't want an entire future with me—he could get passionate, almost abrasive, and toss me around in the bedroom if he pleased, and maybe I wouldn't be so offended because he was a friend. I was confusing myself, fogging up a window shield while the road kept unwinding, but I hoped more than anything I wasn't getting hard in my pants.

Gretchen pulled me aside ten, fifteen minutes later and we huddled in the corner, gossiping amongst ourselves. 'I'm envious,' she began. 'Luke and I can't afford to go away like that, because of the house. We just want to keep doing things to it, or doing things to each other...'

I attempted a reassurance, a *you'll get there in time*, but I didn't believe my own words. I'd been risky then, staking so much to travel in foreign countries, but it spurred me now to think with less caution. Less fear. What I meant with a *you'll get there in time* sat beneath the surface, complete with passion and certainty that wasn't at all just something people said. In turn, I think I was speaking to myself, too.

Gretchen half-sighed, as if hiding away her hesitation. 'I know, there's a whole stinking future,' she agreed, running a hand through her white-blonde hair. It was loose, draped down her back, incredibly straight not unlike its host. 'I was watching everything you posted, or everything I caught when you posted it, because time zones, and...'. She trailed off for a moment, watching her husband across the room. 'I wanted to be there, living that life. The schedule or whatever would be different, and I would want him to be there beside me, or you, probably not just Cormac if we didn't have a buffer...but it's a pure escape, and you did that, babe. You ran wild.' Gretchen beams at me with a wide smile, and I think, when people feel some sort of beautiful optimism for your life, for what you have done, it means so much. I always think of hugging people at inopportune times, and Gretchen and I are not usual to hug, although we do when we see each other again. No matter if the wait was a week or a month or the eight months we were both too swept up to find the time.

'I ran wild,' I repeat, thinking about those nights lying in a hotel room bed watching tv and jerking off under the sheets.

'And yet you came back.'

‘I had to,’ I began, about to list the various reasons I could not cancel the flights home. These things were bound to make an appearance again when I spoke to anyone—from Australia, the allure of Europe presents itself as heady and strong, beckoning with the finger the size of Olympic swimming pools stacked one on top of the other. There is history, beyond the sense of returning to the motherland, stepping on the soil your ancestors once departed to make for a new life for themselves. Now, the new life is there, adjusting to new currency, escaping the dying heat, waiting out for snowfall, the first snowfall of the season. ‘Stay, I could have stayed. An old coworker of mine said I could have found a job overseas, instead of coming back to the place I deserted them for.’ I paused, smirking. ‘Whether that was some form of punishment or not, who can say.’

‘I like having you back,’ she said, with just enough sentiment as not to topple either of us over.

‘Someone needs to be around to make sure Cormac doesn’t say too many slurs,’ I replied, jokingly, but something about it felt too forced. Suddenly I was trying too hard to be a comedian. I was burying the fact that even if Europe had threatened to change me entirely, the right parts of myself remained. I thought as much then.

Cormac walked me out to my car after the lovebirds said farewell at the door. I’d parked a little down the street where I had found some space. These narrow new estate roads provided little parking, and the one space directly in front of Gretchen and Luke’s place was taken by the man who now stood with a palm against the roof of my car. I knew making any sort of reference to those ideations I had of the two of us having passionate sex in Amsterdam would probably leave me feeling weird and humiliated, so I made unexciting small talk.

‘I hardly asked what you’ve been up to while I was gone.’

Cormac looked at me with a scrunched-up face. ‘Nothing that happened to me makes a dent on your travels,’ he said, racking his brain for something of note. What I received were ordinary anecdotes of life, but it was refreshing to be reminded he was a human being who got stuck in traffic, spilled food on himself occasionally when he ate without paying attention so much to the plate, and disliked other people not because he thought himself superior to them. ‘When I was doing the laundry one morning while you were gone I thought, where in the world is Finn right now? The miracle of this thing,’ and he lifted his phone out of his pocket, ‘is that I could see you posted something like, four hours earlier or whatever, I don’t remember timezones.’

I tried to not trick myself into thinking his eyes meant *but I checked them for you*.

Finding Cormac attractive again after having a deluded daydream about him would be enough to break me, I thought, and I opened the door of my car the driver’s side and we lingered there, as if waiting to be the first to say *have a good night*.

‘What are you doing about your virginity?’ Cormac continued, jokingly.

‘You think I should be having more fun.’

‘I think you shouldn’t be finding restrictions for yourself if you’re lonely. If the reason you haven’t been having sex is because men are disappointing, then babe get used to being lonely. Being horny all the time. Being dickless in the ass.’ He sighed, holding onto the edge of the car door. ‘When we grew up gay, a part of ourselves came to terms with the difficulty for obvious marriage. Those straights kiss once and they probably only kissed because of church and now there they are standing in front of some dude who calls himself Priest and they marry to fuck, and they marry to have kids, which makes them stop having sex because raising a child is **hard**.’ He couldn’t contain himself from laughing, and laughing, until his face went serious and scrunched up again.

‘Alls I’m saying is, some people think marriage is when the sex begins. I’d be more worried, with statistics or whatnot, that marriage is when you get bored of it.’ Cormac concluded, nudging his head towards the interior of my car, the driver’s seat. Internally I triple-checked to be certain I was sober enough to endure the drive home, but maybe this version of myself post-vacation cared less. This version wanted to be more. As I climbed into the seat, waving off Cormac as he wandered back to his car parked in front of our friends’ place, I processed certain things in quick succession.

This life of mine I was inhabiting for *myself*, but for a time I had made terms and conditions to feel more confident about my future. Travelling so far from my comfort zone, both physically and mentally, meant I could see that outline from afar. I longed to be held, but rejected the unfamiliarity of it with someone I didn’t know deeply, madly, and truly. I was caught finding feelings again for a man I otherwise knew didn’t want my body because, internally, I wanted the slip lane towards doing something burdened by risk but incredibly exciting. Thrilling. I wanted to have unstrung sex. With someone. A man who didn’t love me.

A man who didn’t need to love me to pleasure me.

That idea felt possible, somehow. Perhaps I considered myself, prior, to be so unlovable as to be unfuckable, or unpleasurable. Feelings unmeasurable. In those hotel rooms across Europe, I wanted to be touched, and I willed the wrong thing: instead of willing a man to suddenly spring into existence, I needed to go looking for one. Sex with Cormac would be wanting sex with someone who understood me, who liked me enough to be genuine. Maybe I wanted someone who knew me just enough to be semi-attracted.

I climbed into bed that evening horny, too. I sort of awkwardly undressed myself under the sheets, kicking off my pyjama shorts, letting them disappear into the sea. I shimmied out of the shirt arm by arm, flinging it towards the opposite wall. Naked, in the dark, I touched myself. Stroked my cock, cupped my balls, fingered my asshole. I could have fallen in love.

The next morning I awoke to a heavy thud in the yard. The fruit tree, growing something like an orange, was discarding the rotting fruit, the fruit attacked by flies and weather. This tree was rather close to my window, and the thud sounded like it had come not from outside, past the wall, but right near my eardrum. I slipped outside, picked up the fallen fruit, and heaped it into the organic waste bin just beyond the side gate. It was strange, to be moving already, to be feeling the sun on my skin already, but after taking care of myself the night before I felt a sense re-energised. I poured myself a glass of orange juice made from some of the oranges before they collapsed to the dirt and stood with my hip leaning against the kitchen countertop, half in thought.

My roommate sauntered out into the kitchen with sex-hair. He was the type to only shower at night, so the look of lust would only be tempered down by a splash of water to the face and a strong, black coffee. My roommate—Adrian—had a steady girlfriend of three years, but their sex was quiet, hushed, largely off-brand for him, when otherwise he was overly loud and slightly irritating for it. He was an overexcited gamer, having spent a few years trying to become successful as a streamer, so the out-of-the-blue scream of YES and GET IN came never from intimacy, but when he likely shot someone to absolute pieces and dry-humped their corpse in the virtual.

Adrian combed at the hair on his head haphazardly and started to make himself a coffee. In the mornings we hardly spoke to one another. We were semi-friendly—we had started living together out of necessity, to afford the rent, and we only knew each other through work, of all places. When Adrian quit, people assumed it was temporary—when I quit, when I resigned, people were grateful I was getting out of the cesspool and finding something more attuned to my skillset. But it would be wrong to assume Adrian and I didn't like one another. We just found the dosage. Through the highs of emotional comfort, the lows of gaining weight through stress eating, we found a comfortable dosage of one another and settled on it. The mornings were a necessary breather.

He sat on a barstool while he waited for the coffee to brew. I watched Adrian almost begin to speak, but catch himself, go quiet and motionless. Part of me was curious what he intended to say. When we saw each other later in the day, typically after work, he would ask me how my night had been if I was out or came in after he'd already eaten dinner and disappeared into his hole. Maybe he wondered what I had been doing, even though I texted him when I pulled up into that empty space down the road from Gretchen and Luke's. Sometimes he could be like a puppy, looking for attention and assurance. I sipped from the glass of orange juice and largely ignored everything but the disappointment of returning to work tomorrow. I made a quick mental note to park at the supermarket after I ran an errand and fill a bag with the essentials. We were well out of bread. I craved more than anything a slice of toast with Vegemite on it, which back in Europe would have gotten me arrested. More or less.

Leaving the house I had hardly seen Adrian, but that suited the both of us fine. My car was where I had parked it, at the rear of the driveway, because the garage only fit the one car and he valued his more than I ever imagined I would mine. Treated the metal like an extension of himself when he spoke about it. Adrian gave it a name, but whenever I came to thinking about it I could hardly remember whether the first letter was a G, an L, or a T. Or it could have been *Shirley*. I reversed out, spotting a letter hanging from the mailbox I hadn't yet noticed, and left our little rundown estate. Rundown because of its residents, most likely—some tenants were less likely to remember to mow after thunder- and rainstorms, some tenants feared the pause in line at the dump. Adrian and I lived in a two-bedroom away from the worst of what humanity left behind because of an awful economy, and an awful understanding of money. None of the houses in our street were collapsing under the strain. Adrian actually liked the mowing.

My errand was this: before going back to work tomorrow, I needed to call into one of the office supply superstores and buy an assortment of things, including a new USB and a new keyboard. I figured turning to the place with Office in the name seemed to spark a sense of brilliance, but largely I felt sluggish about hunting around for the best deal when I only wanted products that worked. The keyboard I used at home was becoming well-worn, and I worried another series of sharp bangs and clangs on the keys could send a handful of them flying up towards my face, colliding with an eyeball. The USB would find itself useful in due time, but for now might sit gathering dust beside the mouse on the mousepad. Considering the day, considering Sunday, I felt occupied and semi-energetic, off to sort myself out proper before I became further bogged down by life post-vacation.

The supply superstore was unexcitingly quiet, despite the shortened hours. I nodded at the uninterested cashier, who scanned my items and offered a plastic bag, which I declined. Everything could balance atop the cardboard box for the keyboard, and I loaded it all into the backseat, taking the USB round to tuck into the glovebox. I was rather bored myself.

There was a little traffic, comparative of course to the night before, driving in darkness after a raucous night, but I navigated swiftly back to my old neighbourhood and to the supermarket I'd worked at for a decent few years while I was growing up. My very first job, practical to give me a start, but a clear image in the rearview mirror by now. Instead of being closer, and larger, than expected, the supermarket dwarfed in front of me, and I took a handful of reusable bags with me into the centre, planning to toss them haphazardly into the shopping trolley the moment I found one. I decided on more than essentials, but the smaller half-trolley would do me well-enough as a single man who predominately fed just himself. Adrian was picky about sharing meals together—he wasn't very fond of vegetables. He could house down a quarter of a watermelon, however, or a pineapple sliced into rings.

Pushing a trolley around the store, I tried to seem at least vaguely incognito. It was a strange feeling to possess, being not merely back in a place that stunk of my history, but back in the country on a whole after the month away. Certain things seemed entirely contrasting—they had moved parts of the store around in my absence of however long, and I was starting to forget what it had been like working here. Time had passed since my resignation. At least six months, giving me time to settle into the new job, settle out of what my role had been here. Shapeshifter in the background. Walker in the aisles. Early on in my time at the supermarket, they had offered to train me in various departments, and I adapted to the life of a floater, although in time they found where I was most adept.

I stood in front of the loaves of bread trying to decide whether to be healthy or efficient. Cheap, mouldable bread which sunk down in the trolley was an Adrian purchase—it sat in the breadbox for too long, or otherwise ended up frozen-solid in the freezer for months on end. Bread with seeds and oats tacked to the crust seemed appealing, until I thought about sitting on a bench in the heart of a European city, picking the pieces of seed, of oat, out of my teeth. In the end, you go with old reliable—a warm, toasty centre, name-brand but not exclusive. Also not expensive.

Around the corner, suddenly, a familiar face without the opportunity to duck away or hide. We worked together for a few years, and I couldn't say I was entirely surprised he lasted at least the six months or so since I walked away. Gordon was a little taller than I was, with darker hair he now kept shaggy and long at the back. He didn't have on his nametag and was in the midst of pacing back and forth, from rollcage to fridge, stocking the plastic containers of butter. He narrowly dodged a customer when he saw me, and gave a quick head nod, and an apology to the customer in passing. When I walked towards Gordon my mind went entirely blank. I always expected our conversations to be short and in passing. How are you going, then a response, and you, then a response. If we talked about anything significant, it was he who did so—largely I couldn't imagine he gave a fuck what I was doing with myself, certainly before I resigned and carved out a more interesting life.

Gordan pulled up to the side of the cage and I stopped in front of him, checking to be sure I wasn't blocking the path for the customers who had places to be with my trolley. I was angled hesitantly, but I expected short, flighty small talk between us. The loaf of bread looked lonely.

'Hey, Finn dude,' he said, his thick Australian accent the one quality of his not easy to forget. My own accent seemed ordinary compared to his, like he'd grown up in a house of blokes who outdid each other on the slang for the sake of it. The love of the game. Gordon was letting the hair on his chin grow out too. He seemed genuinely pleased to see me back, hanging around the old stomping grounds. I felt like a cat. 'What've you been up to?'

Of course he hadn't known where I'd been. I tried to quickly remember if we had each other on anything, on some form of social media, but realised it didn't matter. He wouldn't be the sort of

person to keep a heavy eye on anyone's social media presence, unless it was a girl he wanted to sleep with. Gordon, I remembered, had a bit of a relationship with loving women. Like many straight men do. He could slink around, find someone to love for a second or an entire month, but when the time came to move along, he never seemed to be taking mental health sick days to cry into a tub of cookies-and-cream ice-cream. Another old reliable.

I began to give him the highlights—how I had just returned home from my time away in Europe, and already I felt myself getting tired of repeating it. Each individual person never really expects that, the part of yourself that grows complacent with endless repetition. I loved being grateful for my opportunities, catching a spark in someone else who wanted to know where in the vast overseas continent they could fall in love with themselves, but I returned to feeling snappingly hinged to the one subject. This was how it had felt to resign, to boast of a new job. This was how it had felt to reiterate to every boy on earth that I didn't want to sleep with him out of convenience.

Gordon seemed bubbly and excitable about every word of my travels. He started asking little questions: 'Do you wish you could go back already?'; 'Have you planned what's next?'; 'Do you miss working here?' The latter sent a repulsion down my spine. But another old reliable came to pass: I did miss the people. Strangely, having thought about Gordon so little over the last six months, it was comforting to be talking to him again. I'd found him attractive even when I shouldn't have. When only needing to picture everything as *fleeting*, it was easy, uncomplicated, dirty. It would feel naughty, like a child, unhinged, lifting a vase above his head and smashing it without reason on the tiled ground.

But obviously nothing would happen.

I asked Gordon what he was doing with himself, besides still working here. I hoped the *still* wasn't biting, wasn't an attempt to shame him for doing what I had done for time and a half, which was *not resign*. He beamed at me with wide eyes. 'I started working a little for my dad,' he began, before trailing into a story about the family business. They did fencing. Every Tuesday he would trade the supermarket uniform for a different costume, something that made him appear more at one with the countryside. I jokingly thought that explained the hairstyle, but he suited it, almost.

At the opportunity of a lull in the conversation, I said a quick goodbye and gripped to the handhold of the trolley, and Gordon said, 'Yeah, see you around Finn, good to see ya.' Down the next aisle and I thought to myself, it will be another six months until I run into him on the coincidence I caved to the ideas of nostalgia. That was all the supermarket was now, sick nostalgia in the memory of a past job, with the beautiful benefit of potentially seeing someone I loved working with. In another aisle, I stopped to talk, again, to a coworker I had exceedingly more in common with. Kristine was in her mid-forties and had sometime recently chopped all of her hair off?? It was cropped against her head, a

foggy blonde the colour of dried wheat, but she grinned at me and we spoke long enough for me to completely, entirely, forget all about Gordon.

After unloading the groceries from the car, and having a brief conversation with Adrian while putting fresh vegetables into the crisper, I collapsed onto the couch in front of a blank TV screen and checked my phone for messages. A handful of texts from Gretchen about last night, one from Cormac about something completely unrelated—he was excited about a new-release—and an Instagram message from Gordon. I froze for a second. Brain-lag. Things did not compute. I reread the message, trying to come up with a response that wouldn't immediately be cringe, or generic, or boring. This meant, I figured, I at least wanted the conversation to not immediately fizzle out. It meant, strangely, that I cared about extending on from when we talked in the supermarket. Suddenly I thought Adrian would be over my shoulder waiting for me to type something.

Gordon had sent: *Good seeing you again. Thought you would've pissed off for good.*

I started to think the second sentence was rotting with hatred, that he was the one pissed off that I had left, but none of that suited the little I actually knew of Gordon. He wasn't bitter, certainly about someone he only talked to in passing, when one of us was filling the shelves with packaged meat and the other was shoving around an online-order trolley. So, I ruled out bitterness, snideness. It made more reasonable sense he was surprised I stumbled back into the neck of the woods that had been empty of Finn for six months.

I couldn't really understand why he messaged.

I wasn't some pretty girl, someone he never had the opportunity to bed while I worked alongside him. If I had tits and he clued in that I split from my partner since quitting the job, this slide into my inbox would have made sense. But I had been dressed ordinarily, only possessed the thrilling excitement and potential glow of having been in Europe, and I had a flat chest and a penis. To Gordon, I would have looked like talking cardboard.

The message I typed back read: *yeah, good seeing you too. I guess I still have to get my shit from somewhere.* I'd retyped it a couple times, changing groceries to food to *shit*, in the end. I could feel myself trying to be like him, at least talk like him, like I had done when we passed each other on the shopfloor. Things could be awkward if I presented myself like I thought I was academically better than him—having a philosophical conversation did me well when I was trying to keep some pretty bespectacled white boy interested in me, but Gordon had the blisters on his hands from putting up fences, and from refusing to hold a tub of ice cream when he was vulnerable. I wasn't dumbing myself down. But I didn't want to say the wrong thing, either.

Half an hour passed and nothing from Gordon. I started to meal prep for the week, boiling a wide pot of water to cook pasta, and Adrian slunk out into the kitchen carrying an empty white bowl. The fork clinked against the side of the bowl as he stepped. At the sink, he rinsed the bowl and shot hasty, intrigued glances at the stovetop. ‘Can I have some?’ He sounded less like Oliver and more like Violet Beauregard. With his waist against the kitchen counter, Adrian and I stood diagonally from one another. It was the second time we were talking all day, which was relatively typical for a Sunday. He leaned forward, expecting something to be hidden in the water. The expression on his face quickly turned to one of disappointment, and I merely gestured to the packet of pasta to the right of the stove.

‘My girlfriend is coming over,’ he said, changing the subject.

I asked a series of half-interested questions: when? are you making her dinner? Are you going anywhere together? How’s her work? Adrian studied me as if I were attempting to study him, casting me briefly in the role of the curious but interrogating parent. Despite the fact we were the same age, he always felt younger to me. His responses were: tonight, soon, when she’s finished with what she’s doing; we were just going to order pizza, do you want something; she’s going to be too tired to go out; and, yeah, work is okay for her, she doesn’t hate it. At the end of the fourth question Adrian leaned back and almost caved in on himself. Bothering him too much left him sluggish through our conversations. I required too much from him. I almost felt compelled to apologise.

‘Get you a garlic bread then?’ He offered, flashing his white-enough teeth.

‘Yeah, I’ll chew on it while I jerk off to gay porn.’

Adrian gave a faux-disgust expression and laughed it off.

‘You could watch some straight porn for once and tell me what you think of it,’ he said, inching forward. There was a researcher buried underneath the surface with Adrian—he liked hearing what other people had to say about the things he was deeply fascinated by, and like most straight men, he got incredibly turned on by any porn where the girl made high-pitched noises while an abnormally-large cock was thrust deep inside her. On nights we would drink together, typically when the two of us were miserable at the end of the week, he made these confessions, truths he said his girlfriend didn’t want to hear about. She was fine with him watching porn, she was no monster, but she didn’t want to see the opened tabs and the bookmarks and a picture of an OnlyFans creator with her boobs out sucking on a popsicle. I hardly could blame her.

I never would’ve asked ordinarily, but I was curious. ‘Have you watched any gay stuff?’ My voice wasn’t a whisper. There was a confidence I collected from this new version of myself, world-travelled and compelled. Curiosity could kill a cat, but it might only wound me into avoiding Adrian for a week. The two of us making sharp, angular darts from our bedrooms into the kitchen for food from

the pantry, from the refrigerator. Adrian didn't make an expression of disgust, neither faked nor realised.

'I don't know, maybe.' He wasn't entirely convincing of anything.

'It's a safe space with me,' I attempted, trying not to sound genuinely interested. In truth, it mattered to me very little what his habits with porn were. I knew he probably liked everything I didn't. He wanted girls moaning so loud they blocked out the putrid sounds of the universe. Adrian looked at me, scrutinising whether I planned to report anything back to the people who wouldn't be his safe space on this—his boys, his mother, his girlfriend of three years.

He paused, sighing, his hands against the countertop edge. 'Sometimes,' he muttered, at first just the single word. He grinned sheepishly, then shook his head. Little bit of a laugh. 'If the boy getting fucked is really feminine it hardly counts, dude,' he said with another little laugh. Adrian, all giggles. 'I don't cum to it, I'm not bisexual,' he continued, breathing out. 'When we moved in together it was like an exercise in understanding or some shit. I was looking at the categories and some of the stuff you dudes are turned on by makes sense, sure, but I could never get a stiffy from it. I was soft, thank god, the whole time I was looking. But some of the fem bottoms sound identical.'

He went on to repeat how little this changed of anything—he maybe looked at a petite, high-pitched twink getting pounded like once every two or three months. 'It's like keeping it varied,' he explained, listing the various different types of porn he likes. White girls, black girls, white men, black men with cocks too long to comprehend, role-playing stuff, public sex, orgies, facials, a woman giving a man a footjob, the classic "teacher-student". I didn't really know why he was being so graphic with me, but by the time the thought came into my head Adrian paused and back himself away from the conversation. 'You just watch a girl giving a blowjob tonight and get back to me,' he finished, and without a hurry or a fuss, he disappeared down the hallway back into his bedroom. The door closed rather politely. My phone buzzed. One new Instagram message from Gordon.

yeah so true.

Nothing for a minute. I thought, here's the end to an extraordinary short conversation.

But then the three dots.

come meet me when I finish my shift.

I waited for: *oh shit wrong person*, but he was waiting for something from me instead.

Immediate question: *what time do you finish?*

But to ask that meant I was actually taking him seriously. I froze with a finger hovered.

Next question, for myself: *what do I expect to even talk to him about?*

Mental image of the two of us sitting in the front seats of his car talking about nothing and staring off into the distance, having spent the few questions we actually have for each other.

I replied, asking him what time he finished, anyway. A force of curiosity was still inhabiting my body. And I was horny. Maybe I thought there was a chance he would fuck me feelingless and move on. Gordon finished at 8pm and I spent the afternoon and early evening at home distracting myself from thinking about what was bound to happen. I figured there was a sizeable chance I would look too sentimentally into things, and he would either prop up the opportunity to mumble about a girl he used to like or otherwise just keep things so banal I start nodding off again. The first few nights, at least, after journeying back from Schiphol Airport I caught myself on multiple occasions each night blinking myself awake. The subtle head tilt. The abrupt shake. My body forcing itself to focus, and nobody around to snap me out of it. Adrian found me half-asleep making myself something to eat and he wondered aloud why I was bothering to actually make myself something. I grunted out that I wanted a grilled cheese sandwich more than anything in all of Europe and he nodded in complete understanding and flicked on the overhead light. It had been 2pm but the overcast weather was only helping to lull me into wanting naptime. Forcing yourself into staying awake was supposed to kill the jetlag. But I was regardless still exhausted.

While I waited for Gordon around the back of the building, where I had once been let inside many a morning for an opening shift, I reflected a little on how small this made me feel. Being back there again. Thinking, reminiscing on the same-height-but-smaller version of myself who only knew income from the supermarket. The shelves, the aisles, the painted-blue walls. A bright, aggressive shade that coloured the backs of your eyelids when you went to sleep at night. I hated thinking of myself as incapable. But I had been, and remained so until I resigned. Even sitting in the darkness of my car around the back of the building at this age, losing the stench of travel by the minute, I felt incapable of a great deal of things. Foolish, I had been, to think myself on the verge of finding absolute love. Of getting married. Of having sex with perfect intention. Even Cormac saw how swift it would crumble.

On the road, straight line down the middle, Gordon came around the side of the building with a black backpack in his hand. His grip on the looped handle meant the bag dangled down and subsequently whacked into the side of his leg as he walked towards the row of parked cars. I started to climb out, unsure whether to wave him over. We spoke non-verbally, agreeing to move towards his, a silver Corolla Sedan he quickly noted was the car he had learned how to drive in six years ago. The passenger seat was as far back as physically possible, which hardly made me feel tiny and small. He uttered, 'You can fix that if you want,' and for a moment I groped around for the metal bar underneath the seat, but I hesitated with my hand on it. I don't think I really fucking cared. Neither of us seemed to know what the hell we were doing together, sitting in his car, pulling out of the supermarket carpark.

For a while we drove and he asked me about the trip. What was my favourite city? Did I get wasted there? Did I hook up with any guys? I told him about a bar I went to in London that was overpriced, naturally, but served pretty decent beer. In truth, I rarely drank beer, preferring other alcohol, but I'd woken up that morning feeling a strange urge to be like one of the boys—and now the story seemed to appeal to Gordon in a way, as if it peeled back my queerness for a moment to make me seem more ordinary. He asked if I flirted with anyone at the bar, took them back to my hotel room, and I imagined this next part, him asking if they bent me over on the sheets, shoving my face into the mattress, the strong odour of hotel detergent and past-cum course against the stubble of my beard. He only wanted a quick yes, a sharp no, whether I made the men of Australia proud with a British-sounding man in the bedroom. My response was underwhelming: I told him the hotel room was small, cardboard-box-accurate, and it had made for a lousy place to even...and I paused, before I said *masturbate*, like I knew it would kill the conversation more than revitalise it. Joking about masturbation with Adrian was banter, but I hardly knew Gordon. I found some quick remark to say about sex and hoped he would just drop the topic altogether.

Gordon didn't seem to have noticed.

'I'm starving,' he said, and we pulled into the drive-through bay of a fast-food joint and he ordered himself a cheeseburger with fries and a regular Fanta. Gordon looked over briefly at me and asked if I wanted anything, and unflinchingly I said, *ditto*. He just smiled. 'Yeah, two of those meals.' The floating voice coming out of the speaker repeated everything in a droning tone and I thought about my car sitting idly back in the supermarket carpark, confused about where I'd gone.

'My mates would be thinking we should be out by now, getting destroyed or something,' he said, between chews. 'Sometimes I just need a night where I'm sitting down eating something and the other person in the car with me isn't telling me to hurry up.'

We ate mostly in-between small conversation. Gordon asked me what the flights were like. I took a bite of the cheeseburger, a sip of the Fanta, and tried to avoid being loud and over-exclaim when I talked. Gordon wanted to know more about being in Amsterdam. 'Why didn't you smoke any weed?' Mostly I forgot, I told him, semi-serious, and then shoved two chips into my mouth at the same time. There wasn't the forced need to feel delicate and polite around him. But I didn't want to be gross and disgusting either, I still felt some sort of desire to impress him, even if just by naming the places I had been that sounded completely foreign to him. Zaanse Schans. Jurbise. Gordon slurped on the drink and fidgeted with his black slacks. Sitting in the car, in the random spot on the side of the road he pulled into, the uniform made him look ordinarily human. I remembered staring at myself in the mirror with that expression, exhausted, tired, forlorn. He took another bite.

Gordon had found a quiet spot in front of a property with acreage and killed the engine. In semi-darkness, we ate until the scrunched up wrappers were stuffed inside our empty plastic cups. The tiny overhead light cast shadows around Gordon's face. He smiled and said, 'Do you want to suck my dick?' I thought he was pulling my leg, edging me into saying something embarrassing, something he could laugh about with those mates he spoke of. But his expression was genuine.

I thought about how it would feel if I merely leaned over from here, the manual gearstick poking into my stomach as I sucked his cock in front of a stranger's place. The house was set back on the property, hidden by a dense treeline. I figured maybe he came here often, knew how secluded it could be without alerting the girls he liked into thinking he intended on hurting them and leaving them for dead. I figured maybe that explained the pushed-back seat, the empty space, enough room to slink your body underneath the glovebox. Gordon seemed sincere. He seemed horny, a little flirty, and I buried the compulsion to wonder why. *Why me.* But then why not me. I wanted something without frills, without lace, sans the girdle. I could start with sucking Gordon's dick in front of a random place in a random street in the very car he learned how to drive in.

He came tentatively around to my side of the car and climbed in when I positioned myself on the floor. There was just enough room for me to move, although it wouldn't take long for me to feel cramped. He no doubt tricked this out for girls who were shorter than I was. Gordon had pushed his pants down to his ankles and was rubbing his cock through his underwear, getting himself harder. I tried to think of the last time I had given someone a blowjob. A couple years ago, definitely not recently. I was tentative, too, but exhilarated, excited. I licked my lips when he removed his underwear and his throbbing dick poked up, freed from its shackles. He continued to stroke it, making small head nods down to me, waiting for me to leap. When I held his penis in my hand for the first time, I no longer felt the strangeness of what was happening. I wanted to take him inside my mouth. My own dick was pushing against the constraints of my own underwear, but I had no room to do anything about it. This restriction, all movement reserved for him, felt overwhelmingly rousing. The overhead light hardly bathed either of us. I put my lips to the head of his cock and without pause he gripped my head, burying his fingers in my head. The back and forth rhythm of sucking him off. Thoughts turning only to the movement, the moment, the crazed feeling of tasting the flesh of his penis as it bobbed back and forth down my throat. Gordon wasn't rough. But he loved this feeling. Nothing else mattered to him.

When he came, and I swallowed his seed, I started to wonder if I was any good. If the thrill matched the skill, the so-little experience. With his thumb, Gordon wiped my lips. My legs were quivering from having been kneeling for a time. He smirked down at me. 'Gay guys are good at it,' he said, with a wink. He ruffled my hair like I was a dog. 'If the girls are getting boring, I'll message a dude on Instagram and when his lips are around my dick I don't even remember he has the same as me.' With

nowhere to move, I nudged my head onto his bare thigh, and he didn't react or move it. 'Maybe you all know how to do it because you know what you want.' He occasionally rambled about the typical qualities of a gay man. That he knew what pleased him, and repeated it. The fabled spot. Gordon didn't seem uncomfortable at all.

Opening the car door, he climbed out and hiked up his pants, and I expected the end of whatever pleasurable experience we just shared to be over completely. He'd drive me back to the carpark and wordlessly see me off, left to think about the emotionless pit inside my stomach. Gordon climbed into the driver's seat and set a hand on my thigh. I was sitting upright again, my hair a mess against the headrest, and he wasn't ignoring my existence. Even mollified. 'People at work, they probably talked about me like I was a sleaze,' he said, staring ahead into the darkness.

I remembered the multiple occasions I felt odd hearing about his love life.

'I don't think you're heartless.'

'Things have a habit of not working out with me. And I don't even blame the girls.' Gordon glanced over at me, looking for sympathy. 'They want to hold on tight, and if I don't, then I think it's the right thing to poke their fingers and let them go.' He sighed. His hand was still on my thigh.

Commitment issues, I thought, but didn't say aloud. Every question I had sounded pressing, or emotional, or as if I wanted him to confess everything. If anything, I wanted to understand why he thought I couldn't ever possibly care for him. But I didn't say that, either.

'Maybe it's all a waiting game,' I said, half-convinced.

Gordon looked at me and thumbed my thigh. 'I don't know.' I couldn't deny that he was handsome. On paper, looking at a snapshot of the man, he could and would make some brunette girl with a nice personality happy. But he seemed stuck in the rut of being a straight man, and they had their priorities. Gordon tried to smile. 'If you come back to mine, I can drop you at your car later.'

I nodded, said *sure*, and we drove back to a suburban unit he shared with his older brother.

Gordon parked in the garage and we entered through a side door, passing quickly by the living room to turn down a hallway and up the narrow staircase. In his bedroom, he shoved off the worn clothes on the bed and stripped out of his uniform, down to his underwear. Gordon tugged on my shirt, but he was gentle, flirtatious. I thought about kissing him. I wanted to kiss him. Without another thought, I lifted my shirt over my head and tugged down my pants until we both stood in front of each other, almost naked. He slipped a hand into my underwear and cupped my ass, pulling me toward him. Closer and closer. Closer until our lips touched and his tongue tasted the residues of sperm left on mine. Gordon moaned into my mouth.

With one swift move he pulled down my underwear and waited until I wrestled them off my ankles and tossed them somewhere into the abyss of his room. All I could see in front of me was

Gordon in the moonlight coming through the blinds of the bedroom window. I felt his finger slip between my cheeks and he began to finger me, slow at first, somewhat hesitant. Gordon was finding his groove, likely remembering how it felt to finger a man. It seemed to come easy to him, the motions, the thrusting. I knew then he wanted to fuck me, and maybe he had since he had seen me earlier, under the burning fluorescents of the supermarket.

We stopped kissing long enough for Gordon to say, 'Please let me fuck you.'

Now, he stripped out of his underwear and fished around in the darkness for a condom. He found one on the floor in the corner underneath a black-or-blue baseball cap. Little Gordon was becoming once more erect, throbbing out towards me. The insanity of standing naked in his dimly-lit bedroom thinking about the taste of his cock in my mouth and how soon it would be spreading my cheeks apart. Gordon fiddled with the condom on his cock. He was average-sized, although for my experience I couldn't remember a cock any bigger. The first man I ever slept with had a rather ordinary penis, and if I hadn't been obsessively in love with him, I would have given it up completely.

'What's your favourite sex position?' I asked Gordon, and he looked at me pleadingly. I knew he wanted to fuck me and fuck me like it was ticking off every desire.

He smirked and slapped his cock against my thigh. 'You're gonna ride my horse cock,' he whispered, pulling me onto the bed with him. He laid down perfectly flat and straight as an arrow, his rock hard dick pointing upright at the ceiling. His bedroom was somewhat stuffy, but I was naked and soon to be drenched in something, be it sweat or cum if the condom broke. Maybe it would if his cock reared up and neighed loud, snapping through the latex. He panted as I steered myself on top of him, my tight, pink asshole kissing the head of his penis. Gordon must have thought he found the easiest lay. I was saying no to nothing. As he started to fuck me, my limber body bounding up, down, up, down, I gave myself over to the adrenaline of sex with someone I had once only worked with. Flashes came of the two of us in uniform sitting in the breakroom together talking of nothing of importance. Him saying my name in a crowd of customers, ordinary people. As he fucked me, pleasure intense, pleasure again, I moaned his name just to hear it out loud.

'Gordon.'

His stare was intense and incredibly sexual. I waited in between moans for him to say my name, but then I waited for him to say someone else's. A girl he flirted with at work. Someone else he knew, some gorgeous blonde woman he was secretly picturing. His hands were on my hips, guiding me up, down, up, down. 'Finn,' he moaned out. We moaned each other's names like we hoped they would lose their meaning and become only instruments of sex.

'Gordon.'

'Finn.'

Our names had no meaning. But then again so did our sex.

I came first, splattering his chest with white, thick semen. Gordon wasn't far behind. The condom didn't break. He lifted me off his body with caution and care, the condom heavy on the tip of his penis. While he tied it off, slung it into a wastebasket, and cleaned himself up, I collapsed back onto the pillow beside where he had lain, staring up at his plain, beige ceiling. The comedown might have killed even the thought for Gordon, but I was comfortable, relaxed. At peace. He rejoined me in bed and pulled the sheet up, covering our naked bodies.

'Damn,' he uttered, bumping his shoulder into mine. 'I never thought about sex with you until I saw you today, and there was a glow around you like it would be insane if I didn't.'

His hand found my bare leg under the covers and he traced nonsensical shapes on my flesh.

'You don't sound anything like a girl.'

I hesitated to say thank you. Was it even a compliment? Jokingly, I laughed, a giggle that was almost feminine, and said, 'Next time I'll scream.' Gordon chuckled.

For a while he said nothing. Neither an agreement nor a denial. I wasn't certain I wanted there to be a next time, but I didn't want the discomfort of stepping around each other's toes either. This, I reminded myself, is the era of not caring, feeling less, but I couldn't detach myself from the fact that sex with Gordon hadn't been disappointing. He didn't adore me, but he wasn't a cruel, narcissistic monster. He was an ordinary boy, a straight man with queer dalliances. Our sex was far removed from god. I stared at the ceiling thinking about how my name had sounded coming out of his mouth. Like it was a sound capable of sounding horned-up, stuffed with passionless passion.

Gordon asked if I wanted to have a shower while I was there, and handed me a half-folded black towel and pointed to the bathroom down the hall. As I cleaned myself off and wondered why the fuck he thought I should shower while I'm here, I was somewhat grateful, too. The scorching-hot water was yet another peace while I processed having sex with him. The next time I saw him around, in the one place I knew he existed, maybe we wouldn't even speak all that much. The glow of having been a temporary foreigner will be scrubbed off my skin the longer I remain back here in Australia. He would flirt with a new girl, remember how his name sounds in a voice made from sweetness, and now that I remembered how not to be virginal, I could go off and have sex with someone who might want me for longer. A relationship with anyone was frightening. They could tie Gordon down if they wanted.

He drove me back to the carpark and let the ruse finally die. When I had come out of the shower, he called me beautiful and placed his hands on my hips. When we kissed, again, our tongues had an intimate wrestling match. When he snuck me back downstairs, back into the garage, he squeezed my ass before I climbed into the passenger seat. It seemed as though he couldn't resist flirting. I was

learning how best to forget it. In the carpark, as I said goodnight and climbed out of the silver Corolla Sedan, the last message I would receive from him on Instagram would be, *I finish at 8.*

Adrian and his girlfriend were having sex when I got home. I could hear the attempt to be quiet through their door—for once there was actual noise coming from the two of them, and I quickly realised they stayed silent when they knew I was home and would probably be bothered by it. The idea of my roommate and his girlfriend hoping not to disturb me, or make me grow wearier and more desperate for sex, made some part of myself feel sorry for them instead. I was a growth on the house and I needed to shrink, evaporate, or have obnoxious sex when the two of them were curled up on the sofa watching a movie. At least, in that moment, I slunk into my bedroom as silent as possible and collapsed onto the bed, listening to the sounds of her wordless moans.

Adrian could have been watching porn without earphones.

But the moans didn't sound digital.

Instead of being creepy, I put earphones in myself and thought about listening to something void of sex, void of flirtation and the thrill of being drawn to other people. An old woman reading the pages of the dictionary. A squeaky little troll repeating the weather forecast. Anything but the sound of a man. The sound of a man would make me wet, again.

My finger hovered, instead, over the play button for a porn video I knew could have me finishing in five minutes, but I heard Adrian's voice loud from the bedroom down the hall. I thought: *straight porn*. It killed my boner, watching a redhead with medium-sized boobs bouncing against an unseen penis. The man, whose face remained frequently off-screen, was nothing exciting to look at—but he was having sex with a woman, and it was the last time I gave a single fuck about Gordon.

In the morning, I glanced at the flashing time on my phone. I'd set an alarm for 6:30am. I groaned my way to the shower and on the way out caught Adrian sitting on the floor near the toilet door. He nodded at me without saying a word, and I just kept walking.

Monday morning.

Dressed for work, hair combed. Freshly shaved from Friday. Not so fresh, then. I thought about sending Cormac a text message, wide-awake after the night before, but did nothing. I poured myself a glass of orange juice and sighed. That was it for the orange juice.

I felt reborn.

Ah shit, here we go again. I'm horny.