

**More People Once Thought
I Had Potential**

by Keeley Young



Some people might consider it deranged to write a sequel to a personal, emotional, self-indulgent piece about my own past instead of some character's I had made up. When I started *People Once Thought I Had Potential*, I had not even known I would post it anywhere. I was considering it first and foremost as an opportunity to write something that felt true to how I have processed the last few years of my life, but also with room for expansion, always. I didn't initially think I would *finish* the document, not in such a complete, rounded way. I found a structure and a narrative to the work and now it sits on the digital shelf for anyone in the world to go and read. Although, with my small audience, *anywhere in the world* is prominently Australia. This swelting rock.

So! We will be making this up as we go...which is somewhat of an insane thing to admit from the beginning, but that is how I write, how I create, and surely why people inevitably get tired of me. It was a lightbulb moment to realise I could tack on the word *more* to the front instead of opting for the easy *People Once Thought I Had Potential 2* like a blockbuster sequel. Not that this will ever amass to blockbuster status, or be recognised beyond the small audience who reads this as an opportunity to peak into my soul. I do this—I write this—because the ideas suddenly spark. Because if I keep things bottled inside, perhaps I will give more people the opportunity to lose faith in my potential.

Thank you for reading this far already.

The next page is really quite a short read. It's the table of contents.

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1. God Can't Exist Because Why Would They Give This Thick Meaty Dick to An Aegosexual

a genesis story

If we were to consider human-life creation like a factory, where a gender-neutral god wields the tools of invention and creativity, why would they have fished 'round in the bin of human penises for this thick cock when simultaneously plotting the future of my brain? It's a complicated process. I understand that. Perhaps there are two separate divisions of the factory that have a difficult time communicating with one another. Division A didn't exactly remind Division B that an aegosexual man shouldn't necessarily have a bigger penis than an ordinary allosexual one.

For some context: aegosexuality is like the horny little brother of asexuality. Or little sister, true. Little non-binary hornbag. An allegory I like is the idea of a pantry of cereal, but as much as I enjoy admiring the cereal and watching other hot men devour it, I see no real reason for me personally to partake in a bowl. I watch porn enough to have favourite videos, although in the sense of like, if you watch enough movies you know what you like and you keep those specific movies on rotation when you don't feel like branching out to see what else is on offer. I have been semi miserable this month [January 2025] dealing with the side effects of an antidepressant trial that has made it more difficult to ejaculate. Too much information, certainly, but did you read the title of this section? Look where you are. We're wandering down a corridor of too much information, and you're about to come to the door labelled Birth.

When I was born, it was doubtful anyone understood the plight of this child. This little thing, something they would call Keeley. The origin of a name: I hear tell of a story in which my parents knew another boy named Keeley, although at this point I feel like the personification of the title *A Boy Named Sue*. This other male Keeley has never presented himself forward, a pure phantom floating in the wind. I don't know him, or anything else about him. When I was younger, dumber, I would make up inconsequential stories about how Keeley was Maltese for Michael. Being of Maltese heritage from my grandmother, I pretended to have this intimate knowledge that a name like Keeley could just be a placeholder for a boring Christian name like Michael. Who clammers to secretly be a Michael?

This dumbass, already desperate to be a secret comedian too.

When I was born, you could have looked into that face, the face of a beautiful infant boy, and thought the entire world held possibilities for him. You might have thought he would grow up, get married to a woman, have a few children of his own, and die peacefully in the middle of the night because old age is secretly just a cover story for *didn't sleep enough throughout his twenties and thirties*.

Somewhere along the way people were informed I was queer, and somewhere along the way, I realised how isolated from the normalcy of being queer I really was. My sexuality was complicated, because I didn't feel pleasure from sex like other people seemed to. Coming to terms with my aegosexuality has meant I have veered even further from the norm of what you could imagine for your child—I can't even pretend to be trying to make a baby. Unless I pretend I'm a starfish.

When I was born, I held these things within me. A piece of my genetic construction was geared around the future of my sexuality, not just as a gay man, not just as a queer man, but as a homoromantic aegosexual man. Someone groaned, yes? Complicated configuration.

When I came out to friends, to family, I was simply put: gay. People understood it without having to do any Google research, or ask me what the hell I was on about. I was, I am, a man who is attracted to other men. But there are so many layers and onion-peels to being gay, to being queer, that go beyond simple attraction. Being gay, being a homosexual, means being romantically and sexually spurred towards other men. The want to touch them, kiss them, fuck or be fucked by them. Being gay means not having such a complicated relationship with your sexuality that you have entire relationships that only ever involved hand-or-mouth stuff. I wrote that and immediately thought of hand, foot, and mouth, which is both a truly unfortunate common-name for something infectious and gives me something to think of comedically. A person limberly reaching down with their **hand**, to grab their **foot**, and shove it right in their **mouth**. Perhaps maybe not a person, but a toddler, with sticky fingers and a snotty nose.

I always felt uneasy on Grindr. Being designated as a body, someone to have sex with, it was something I could understand for other people but not for *me*. This idea of me being the one someone would want intimate yet unemotional sex with was wrong for me, and I ducked out of making solid plans with almost everyone on Grindr from the fear I would be uncomfortable the entire time. I met up with someone once and we never did anything but touch each other's dicks and give each other oral and now whenever I see him at my literal place of work I feel a certain sense of discomfort around it. Not that I regret what we did, but I regret that it was me who did it. Me who still has the thoughts and memories around being wrong in his presence, around being a foolish barely-legal teenager who couldn't, wouldn't let him stick his circumcised penis inside me.

The last time I saw him at least I wasn't terrified he'd make some flirty comment. Once, when I was still frequenting Grindr but lowkey hating it, he messaged me from his typical no-pic profile he probably deleted every time he fucked someone to say, 'your butt looked good in those pants.' I'd known he was there at work, known he'd probably had plenty of time to see me from behind, but the overlap felt uncomfortable. I would have said something inconsequential and flirted away from it, and he would have asked me to come meet up with him for a quickie.

In some other universe, because it isn't possible in this one, we would have at least been able to have proper conversations. I have always found him attractive, although the more I process my feelings around being aegosexual, the more I find he looks a little predatory. There is something unsettling about men sometimes, and I find I can say that as both a man and as someone who is supposed to fall in love with them. Maybe it is the subtle trauma of him being so horny for an eighteen-year-old. Like back the fuck up, go find someone who can legally drown themselves in America at the very least.

In some other universe, maybe I could have processed my feelings on sex earlier, not wasted his time, or anyone else's. To my first boyfriend: I came to know frottaging so well, but we were never bound to be lovers. To the man who gave me the confidence to buy two dildos that no longer get any use whatsoever: there is a chance I couldn't be the Instagram whore I am today without you. Also, I genuinely think being your friend still would have been nice but now I sometimes just forget you existed entirely because pre-2020 is a haze to me. To the man I accidentally promised birthday sex to: why did you want to hang out with **me** every single day?

To my most recent ex, as of January 2025: I wish I had not been so afraid of losing you. I could have spoken more clearly, could have explained myself without pointing to my writing, could have helped you understand the intricacies of a sexuality people don't really hear of.

To the man who ignored me when I told him I wanted nothing sexual and still inappropriately touched me: I do not blame myself. A month ago I would have said rot in hell. Or, rot in a boring 9 to 5 job until you're seventy-two. But now.

Now I am healing.

I was not wise enough to keep a journal of how I came to terms with this new version of myself, this understood version of myself. One day I read the word *aegosexuality*, assumedly while I attempted to find a version of asexuality that fit right, like trying on clothes in a fitting room. Asexuality didn't hug my body, didn't make me feel certain and comfortable. There was always something *uncertain*. I was too horny to be completely avoidant. I liked looking at dick too much. Maybe I even wanted to touch other dicks that weren't my own. Just touch.

I identify now as a homoromantic aegosexual to check the right boxes, to make things more certain. Split into parts: homoromantic, meaning I am attracted romantically towards people of the same sex as me, for example really fucking attractive men. Aegosexual, meaning my sexual needs are met without participating in sexual acts with other people. It can be amusing, to a degree, how unobtrusive the horniness flits out of my body the moment I orgasm by myself. The cleaning crew comes in, the shopfloor opens, and it is business as usual.

Complications: other men still want to be sexual with me. I am coming to terms, or more aptly, becoming more confident in how I approach letting people down easily. *Sorry, babe, but I don't feel that way about you—we can fall in love though?* Too overly romantic, you are right. The sweet spot is honesty. The sweet spot is explaining, reiterating, and being vocal about what I am comfortable with and what I am not. Do's: kiss me, hold me, wrap me in those arms of yours and listen to my insane ramblings. Do Not's: try to do anything sexual without consent, pretend it accidentally slipped in, get pissed at me when I suddenly start talking publicly about my sexual assault because I have no real off switch when it comes to my ramblings.

You fear you are a disappointment, more than you already are: the aegosexuality comes with uncertainty, confusion, a throbbing dick going to apparent waste. My body will I suppose only go to waste if I let it. You fear, still, you are a disappointment for what you can present and then tuck away, hiding in your own comforts instead of someone else's.

Men will see my naked body and immediately think about what they could do to it. I cannot, and don't, avoid the possibility of this behaviour, these thoughts to rattle around in their heads. Men think it exciting, compelling, masturbatory, to see my naked form and tell me what they would do with it. *Come and sit on my face. When will you ride my penis? I could pounce.*

I am so loudly aegosexual but people, like customers, because they are the same thing, do not read. People who see me as something who could be potentially for sex are not destined to read and understand, not destined to pay attention to the poetry I write or the avoidance around their horny comments. I could brand myself with the words, or begin every new conversation with a warning, but there is still a semblance of hope within me that I am not seen merely as something potentially-sexual. That people don't climb the posts to talk to me because they solely want to see my nude, vulnerable body pressed down against the sheets while they have their way with me. Call it a sense of hopeless romanticism, maybe.

I hate to be pigeonholed.

Hate to be given a once-over for how I look, or for the sexuality you know of because I call myself queer. Or for the size of my penis.

You would send someone to hospital with that thing. A joke, but from someone else's lips:

Please fuck me with that thing. Why do you not top? If you want to try...

Hate having to listen, having to read those words.

Cannot change the size of my penis.

Perhaps it is a little vulgar, a little crass, to comment on the size of my own penis and be semi-proud of it. Not that I had any hand in sifting through the bin of genitals at the Human Factory back at the conception of a little kid named Keeley.

This penis of mine...

Lonely nights [when it] comes, memories that flow, bringing you back again,
hurting me more and more.

Sometimes someone will ask me “how big” like I have entered my throbbing cock into pumpkin contest, see who has the biggest pumpkin...once upon a time I would have cared about measuring, but now the value is just a foggy number in my head that bears no weight. No one should care how big my penis is by inches, although I suppose the men who want to hold it in their hands, want to push it inside their mouths, want to leap on top of it, they want to know whether the image is to scale. Whether their eyes doth deceive them.

Maybe, perhaps, the two divisions were in close communication after all. They were worried, you see, about one of the dicks they found at the bottom of the never-ending abyss of loose penises. Girthy, wide, thick, beautiful—sometimes I can be quite self-obsessed when it comes to my genitals. But I see them as merely that—genitals, not something to be shy or startled about, not something to be precious over. So long as there is consent, showing someone your penis should not be a lude, uncomfortable, or deeply sexual act. I don’t send pictures of my dick to entice someone to want to have sex with me—but I do want them to pleasure themselves, enjoy themselves, because of this act of sharing.

My penis will not be wasted—typically, if a queer man around my age or older is curious about seeing it, I am happy to oblige. This is not a public announcement I am making that I want to be seen as a slut—I could write an entire separate section about how I view body positivity, about I consider relieving yourself to be necessary and beautiful, about how comfortable I am becoming being naked and letting other people see it. Nudity is a complicated taboo sort of subject—we are the only species on the planet that cares about covering up our genitalia, and although I feel comfortable wearing clothes all day, I feel comfortable being naked too.

I was sitting by the pool shirtless one afternoon, shaded out of the heat, when two complete strangers walked into the yard talking about wanting to spray for fire ants. Taken aback by their intrusion more than anything, I didn’t find a need to cover myself up. For a moment, I hid my nipples underneath my arms, but let them fall once the moment passed. I am not afraid of other people seeing me shirtless. I post pictures in speedos on Instagram. I am attempting to become better at the art of the thirst trap. I pause, for only a moment, when I send someone a picture of my juicy, plump, thick penis when we agree to share.

I pause, wondering whether they will ask me if they can: suck it, fuck it, bounce up on it.

I pause, wondering if I am making myself an enemy to myself by inviting that in.

But, too, I pause knowing my actions are not limited by how others will perceive them.

So my genetics blessed me with this penis, this aegosexuality, this complicated tapestry.

Ask not what God did for you, but what being comfortable in your sexuality can do for you.

right: photograph of the author entitled
“undercompensating”



left: photograph of the author wearing
skimpy underwear. also featured: a
dolphin in the background.

2. Mug of Queertose

nighttime ritual: poetry

Friday, 24 January 2025.

Creative juices are spent, my dear. I have not been writing a piece of fiction that has connected, melded in my brain, in some time—I worry this is the end for me, I have used all of the good ideas in my brain? No, not the ideas—the manifestations.

I write to you in the hopes that I will suddenly come to a realisation about how to process forward with my writing. Could it be possible to write some poetry?

I stood up, away from the typewriter, staring down at the letters inked on the page. No, I was not in the past, no I was not near a typewriter, no I could not give up on my writing because the inspiration would strike at just the perfect moment — —

On Friday, 24 January 2025, I wrote a short piece of poetry, which I soon afterwards posted as an Instagram story because it would perfectly fit within a screenshot:

in between holding in breaths,
and trying to blow out a headache like a
candle,
I dream of being held without fear and
danger.
holding a belief in words and nodding.
when they say, I will only do what you're
comfortable with — can I believe it?
will I believe it with the hands somewhere on
my body
find myself telling a boy two states away I
want to hold him in my arms and I believe it
how, how on earth, when on earth,
it is the liking of straight men,
the liking of unavailable men,
far far away men,
cannot-hurt-you-because-they-are-behind-
a-screen men.
I want to be held.
want to be held without dismissal.
can I be naked without a thought of sex
thrusting itself up against me
can I be naked in someone's arms
and not take two months to recover from it

and not take two months to recover from it
can I be naked in someone's arms
thrusting itself up against me
can I be naked without a thought of sex
want to be held without dismissal
I want to be held

In understanding how I loved, how I am cherishing this break out of the creative block I was experiencing, I typed up and edited the short piece of poetry. Below is the latest version of the piece, which is unnamed, but comes within the so-called Queertose Suite.

in between holding in breaths,
and trying to blow out a headache like a candle,
I dream of being held without fear and danger.
holding a belief in words and nodding.
when they say, I will only do what you're comfortable with
— can I believe it?
will I believe it with the hands somewhere on my body
find myself telling a boy two states away I want to hold him in my arms
and I believe it
how, how on earth, when on earth...
it is the liking of straight men,
the liking of unavailable men,
far far away men,
cannot-hurt-you-because-they-are-behind-a-screen men.
I want to be held.
want to be held without dismissal.
can I be naked without a thought of sex
thrusting itself up against me
can I be naked in someone's arms
and not take two months to recover from it

Truthfully, this one required very little editing. But suddenly I had myself a new tradition, albeit one that could be short-lived if I wanted of it to be. I set myself a new sort of task: everyday, write a piece of poetry short enough to fit the screen of your phone. Exhaustingly so, some of these works within the Queertose Suite are uncomfortable, depressing, bleak, but at least somewhat hopeful.

I wish to share them all with you now, alongside some photographs.

Saturday, 25 January 2025

I do not hold blame to the boys who kiss me goodbye,
when they realise they cannot fuck me.

human desire is a mistress, unrobing into her lingerie.

I am television-boxed at the crotch,
flicking between rock-hard penis and Ken doll flatness.
no ordinary boy.

flatlining in an ordinary world.

I do not hold blame to the boys who decide getting to know me without a hope for sex
is pointless and meaningless

you have to hold onto your purpose,
a more-comfortable thought process,

to avoid thinking you are made of disfigurements.

this waiting game to find out if I will be enough without being a hole,
being a penis,

being a release of sexual frustration and lust motivation
is strange. morphing.

sometimes like the drip of morphine
increasingly numbing me.

I do not hold blame to the boys.

they should be happy.

Sunday, 26 January 2025

a little bit like a philosophy,

life is too short — a chord to be cut

when I started posting myself like I was posing for an old school magazine

I thought about the people who would think.

what thoughts

what thoughts?

Fashioned from seaweed and self-importance I thought people would cut through the air

with dismissive chalk

that people unaware of a certain side of me would shudder.

oh no he's not got any prudish clothes on.

oh no he's a queer whore (no I'm not omniscient I didn't know he is aegosexual I don't even know what that looks like)

sharing for the attention of men and the attention of a *conversation* are of the same,

cut out of the jockstrap I don't wear so that someone can sneak up behind me...

life is too short — *don't be afraid of liking what you see*

a little bit like a philosophy

so this body goes to less waste before the bin

day.



Monday, 27 January 2025

suffering as the word is wrong,
I hinder from — pause, out of panic, from,
this want to flirt, to tease, to be romantic
with the men I find impossibly attractive
but I haunch back, reserved — too much and these men will find me:
aggressive, excessive,
wanting of too much.
I only want to tell you you're pretty.
run my fingers through your hair.
make you feel noticed, even if the notice
comes like a late rent slip
comes like a Big Brother nomination
I just want to make you aware, respectfully,
of the dusted moth flutter of being liked
by someone like me.
liked in the complicated sense —
maybe there is hope I won't feel startled away
from your embrace.
I want to tell these beautiful boys
just how much their *grace* threatens to unbalance
my scepticism
'round being vulnerable. uncertain. passionate.
I hinder from: thinking they will reject it.
find me like one of their brothers.
baby and dummy and stupid.



what do you do for work?

what do you do to not kill yourself.

it is unbalancing to have to admit as the fourth statement in a conversation

that your life is an upended mess,

you work a job that makes you suicidal,

and you no longer have the energy for life to be ambitious.

clinchingly.

aw no you're at work. how long do you work. what do you want to do with yourself.

what can that degree get you. you still have time —

— fuck off. I feel hopeless, helpless,

tangled up in a wreck of cords and wiring

I no longer know a nook to crawl into.

the screaming has to be dulled, funnelled,

until you are saying the same methodical repletion like a sociopathic answering machine.

when another handsomer man merely wants to get to know you.

how do you afford to keep yourself afloat

is a quietened form of

how do you make the money to purchase

the chocolate you house down [fatty]

the skimpy clothes you feel desirable in [slut]

the entertainment that keeps you breathing [little

kid.]



blink and you'll miss it
the moment you think for a second you could have steamy,
thrilling sex with someone from your past
who has flitted back into your life only if for the night.
you picture the sex to be gaudy, brutish, dirty,
made only of the finest quality lusting.
he does a complete reshuffling of a somewhat well-maintained ecosystem.
but you'll never be comfortable with this brain in this body
in this world
to be even his fuck buddy.
The desire for some pornographic fantasy with a man you probably once assumed disliked you,
thought you weak and naïve and unintelligent,
is the same sensation you get when you lie
down undressed in bed
wanting scripted pornography.
this shit is not real.
you're giving yourself something to taste in the
head,
a morsel, something to give you a boner later,
when his face is already fading away again,
and so is yours. it's not your sex.



Wednesday, 28 January 2025

we taste blood either way,
me and the gnatty voice inside my head
when again I am told: you're an incredible person, Keeley,
worth more than your talent and your body.
I bathe in compliments until they become overbearing.
until the paint irritates flesh and scratchy red bumps form without restraint
like an AI installation.
you tell me again, and again, how *worthy* of a being this soul in this vessel is,
you remind me too many times.
no we do not move any mountains,
make no leaps and bounds in deviating
from the complicated person you may not see
when I am over here without you.
with the metaphorical razor blade in hand,
demons cannot be vanquished
not with indulgence.
thank you for believing me to be something
worthy of attention.
yet.
I cannot believe hyperbole to be true.
not yet.



Thursday, 30 January 2025

why live life from dream to dream
when the dreaming is all but dead.
boxes packed away into the storage
of the ideas for life I used to have,
like being a proper functioning member of society.
now I sit on my phone considering
a Contiki tour of Iceland
even before I have a passport,
or some semblance of stability,
or a yearning to be surrounded by strangers
late night whatever-ing.
being bold, ambitious, excited, carefree.
why pretend to yourself you know anything,
when your existence is a burden
constructed out of the loose materials you find
at a torn-apart campsite in the woods.
probably was a bear.
ravenously hungry, to feast on your parts,
before they could even come to any fruition.
I make new decisions that throw caution to the very
wind I was carried in on.
when I die, in my late thirties,
all I'll ever be is forgotten.
so let me go Icelandic.



Saturday, 1 February 2025

knees that scratch against bus seats,
legs trapped in a hook by a sleeping kitty,
someone asks you seriously,
“why do you keep yourself stretched so much?”
when you think you do not stretch yourself enough,
when the film screenings and the two-hour train rides
are security blankets, protecting you
from shaking yourself out of a sense of believing in you.
torsos comforted in embrace,
hands clasped together to test the temperature,
you want nothing more than for the right someone to ask when they can hold you in their arms
and only let go when it would cut off the circulation not to.
weekends become a getaway from everything,
for everything,
to the point you want to stop coming home,
grumped, bothered, you had places to leave.
thrilling — to have a life with newfound confidence.
thrilling — to be so *in love* with the time you have with
your exit row companions.

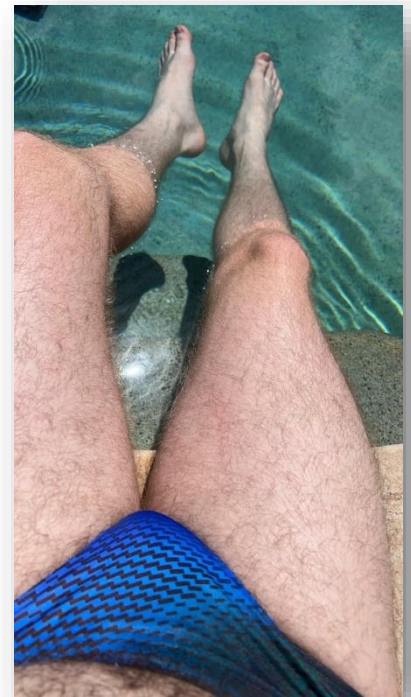


when you last developed feelings for a man,
someone you had to sideline and obliterate,
push out the brain,
you killed the want for affection with thoughts of playful aggression —
a knee to the back, punches to the arm,
a swing of something ice cold and freezing.
because you couldn't wrap your arms around his body, or kiss his neck,
or stare into his soul wondering why he was ever possibly staring back at yours.
so — it becomes a reckoning, a shield,
protection from wanting to be too affectionate.
don't wish // don't start
don't kiss // don't hold // don't fear
instead
think of your balled fists playfully bouncing off his
back, whack-a-mole style,
or...
how you can replace a want to be *affectionate* with a
want to be somewhat *childish*,
somewhat...other-ish.
the protective skin of not thinking about the
displacement of wanting.
I want to kick // I want to fall in.



Sunday, 2 February 2025

I know how to make the bicycle go faster,
without breaking a speed limit,
without skidding forward into the dead-end wall and tearing back the skin on the shin.
in my time in university, I attached myself to a side,
memorising the words to Cathy's soliloquy
[vengeful, rageful, opposite and unbound]
getting out of one relationship,
going after another [and another]
I knew how to click against the asphalt
how to make third place get a shade more silver,
a shade more golden.
but the supplement limb can come untethered,
unbound,
from the passage of time.
I know how to make the bicycle an imbalanced tricycle like 21st Century's monster.
professional third wheeler.
when I see the world around me falling in love, settling into an
intimacy,
I spasm in my foot to fight back from braking.
when I don't merely want to sit in the cinema,
watching two wheels do everything without me.
I suddenly don't know to ride at all.



Tuesday, 4 February 2025

maybe all the world would see it for its lewdness,
a desire to want other people to be comfortable, too,
to be carefree in their bodies the way I am
maybe a want to see more nudity is whorish,
desperate,
some internal mindset to speak for the penis
instead of only having the pleasant conversations,
but I think I like an uncomplicated balance,
we talk about art and how riddled with scum the whole of
the earth is,
then trade pictures of ourselves stripped back from
restrictions
— no costumes, no lies, no prohibition.
for me nudity has not become a symbol of wanting to make
someone's eyes
roll back in the sockets.
shirtlessness. clotheslessness.
might make me hot 'n' bothered,
yes...
might strip back mindless stigma, too.



you have seen me scantily-clad, almost nude,
seen the innards of my brain fleshed and poked,
danced, dreamed, laughed at,
even cried,
the world is a kooky place and I might yet want to die,
so I thank you,
for looking, smiling, laughing, hurting,
grieving with me.
drink this mug of queertose,
like milk but gayer,
and riddled with self-obsession,
self-criticism,
self-pain, self-regret,
self-wanting-to-kiss-men.
drink this mug o' queertose
and know you're better off alive
than dead.



3. A Lesson in Giving Back

on the topic of (not) believing in the potential of others

Sometimes I think other people have more potential than is honest.

This is not an elaborate mistake, or something blown out of proportion—people simply surprise you by not being an exact representation of what you want from them, and if I expect a certain energy on me, I must similarly get comfortable with the reverse.

To set the scene, we go back a handful of months into late 2024, a night shift with weary bones and a relative ease to *confess*. A coworker of mine had confessed some truths about a man I had similarly had *feelings* for: she was talking to him about hers, whereas I had buried mine because he was obviously straight and we basically had nothing in common and I don't know what I ever expected from him. Focus point: she was being honest with me, about their honesty, and I had a sharp pang in my side that for once wasn't pain. *Just say something strange and out-of-the-ordinary.*

At the time, it was confusing. Out of the blue, I was attracted to someone I worked with because he was *talking to me more often*. I was noticing him more. This seemed enough for the attraction to form: he's attractive in a goofy sort of way, which feels slightly insulting to him but I think at this point he should hear that people at least find him *attractive*. [I promise you I am not being cruel towards him—the man is perpetually self-deprecative, and that too fucked with my brain because morose people are my kindred spirits.]

These feelings for him seemed random, questionable, but worth-mentioning-enough because my coworker who talked about her romantic feelings—we'll call her Heidi—knew him too and probably far more than I did. Most of the time when I'm attracted to someone, the entire world around me would never be able to pick him out of a lineup, unless they started making reaching statements about the type of men I was eager to screw over my heart for.

Those feelings for him were nothing but surface tension. But Heidi gasped and recalled the shortest of anecdotes—he mentioned wanting to talk to you more too.

Here is a lesson in giving back: when you think the world, the people in it, should give up on having high hopes for your future, you should do the same for someone you work with. Not his future, but his future specifically with you. As someone who never flirts with anyone in person first, the *potential* was too hard to resist. Here is a lesson in giving back: don't spend too much of your time mulling over whether a coworker could be queer, could be into you, could be inviting you to indoor rock-climbing to soft launch anything but a friendship. Could be thinking about you at all once you walk past him in the aisles.

We are too quick to become excitable, too quick to hold hope for anything. Humans are naturally selfish, and naturally drawn to the what-if of attention. What if he could mean more to me later than he does now? In those early moments of liking him and suddenly getting invited to spend time with him outside of work, even amongst a group, I sought out the *what-ifs*.

What if he is bisexual and had been too shy and awkward to say anything until now?

What if Heidi relayed the fact I'm attracted to him to him and now he sees his opportunity?

What if we're both attracted to each other and then I completely blow it by telling him I'm healthily aegosexual and also do not want a relationship?

These what-ifs were not healthy when I knew so little of the *facts*. Quickly, I was learning what we had in common—photography [he knows more]—but plenty we did not have in common too—I basically feel like an entirely different person, except I like cameras too and work in the same building.

For every suggestion he could *enjoy my company*, I found another reason to be comfortable with the idea that he was merely a heterosexual man who could just *enjoy my company*. Or, at least, at work.

The dilemma of hoping for too much, considering the idea of more, is facing what will come when it becomes more than just fighting words. If he turned out to like me back in some romantic sense, I was still caught in feelings for someone else and I could virtually only offer him affection and someone to snuggle up to and passionately makeout with. If he turned out to be disgusted that I was attracted to him, I would have just fucked it all up and made working together awkward as hell.

By New Year's Eve, I was largely accepting that all his mentions of unsuccessfully finding a wife were indicative he wasn't burying the bisexual side but one of the cursed straight people you hear about on the news. I wish them well in finding their "life partners" and "having children after unprotected intercourse". [Please don't cancel me for making jokes about straight people.]

By New Year's Eve, a foggy screen of uncertainty meant I couldn't find anyone else attractive or interesting until I buried whatever *hope* was left in the questions. I needed to be a lion and ask him for clarity. Ask him whether he was bisexual, more than anything.

We are too desperate to have our feelings be respected, after they are heard in the middle of the night, with the clock shifting over from one year to another. He has never been harsh or judgemental, never treated me any differently after I messaged him something inane like 'do you kiss more than just your dog and women...?' It was how you would ask someone whether they are bisexual without using the term, how you reference an earlier conversation by making it fresh, permeable.

No, he is not bisexual. Yes, I never have to contemplate again what I would do if we kissed and he wanted to do more than kissing. [*Although, through its own traumatic event, I have gotten increasingly better at telling people to not inappropriately touch me without consent.*]

Here is a lesson in giving back: people will not intend to hurt you because they aren't everything you want them to be. I was never *hurt* when I had clarity—not being able to even kiss him at least cleared away the delusion for good. I see him at work and I don't think about kissing his neck. I think about punching him in back, playfully, and how foolish I ever was for letting **thoughts** distract me from doing my job. Which isn't working there, mind you. My job is this. Writing. Not losing perspective. Reminding myself first, before others, that the only potential we should be worrying about is our own.

Giving attention to wondering whether a man is straight or bisexual is eventually pointless—you move on, he was never on the train station platform to begin with. Expecting certain things from the people in your life can be like waiting for your train when they've cancelled the service and switched to railbuses instead. Someone could be waving you down, offering some assistance in guiding you to the correct bay out in the parking lot, but if you're stubborn enough you can overlook anything.

You could spend an eternity waiting for someone to catch up to your rhythm. Picture yourself there, stuck in repetition, waiting and hoping and pestering for the person you want to give the sort of response that would prove...something. I find sometimes people can't even communicate on a basic level. Cannot find the words to simply say no, or I've changed my mind, or *maybe in a month*.

I do not know why we have done it to ourselves. Gotten caught up in the pressure of romance, in the bait-and-tackle of wanting to be incredibly intimate with a person. Over the course of our silly existence, we have made it more and more complicated to manage expectations. I feel the weight of being a disappointment because too many people have been impressive.

I have to not allow myself to struggle under the weight of what I imagine people place on me. Specifically, other gay men. ‘Born into the wrong era’ feels disgusting considering the politics of being a gay person in any century than the twenty-first, but maybe there is no correct era for trying to fall in love, or at least for flirting. ‘Born into the wrong era’ implies there would not have been suffering and idiotic men any place in time otherwise—men have always been complicated, frustrating creatures.

Men want you to be: the perfect weight, height, age, balance of masculine and feminine, type of personality, happiness level, state of existence, and heaven fucking forbid if you’re not a top when they’re a bottom. Men want you to exist for them, but have enough of a life outside of their offering of sex to not be disappointing in the streets. Don’t be disappointing in the sheets, but that is a basic rule that can almost go unspoken. I mention my aegosexuality again not merely to annoy everyone who has had enough of hearing about it, but because I can never expect a man to understand it without a lecture about it, which inevitably becomes less sexy than if I simply lied to them and then ghosted them in a week so as to never have to actually perform any of the acts these men want from me.

I am disappointing from the offset—men want you to be this version of a sexual adult who, if you’re a bottom, will douche before the date and barely eat a thing while you sit there listening to them talk about themselves out of obligation. Men get stereotyped and categorised, true, and there are bound to be men who want you to be you, want you to get comfortable, want you to get the best experience out of things. [I am trying to avoid letting this sound like a queer-men-centric version of the speech towards the conclusion of Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* btw.]

For all the stereotypes and generalisations you could put on men from the beginning, there are pitfalls for trying to avoid even thinking about them. Maybe there is no true way to glance at someone—you give them leeway in this direction or that and it can be a slippery slope avoiding some form of disappointment. Men can be better; men can be worse. I can be better than what you have come to expect of me; I can be so much worse.

Laundry cupboard demon.

Orchard apple-picked demon.

Sleep paralysis demon.

Bearing the weight of trying to fit in...

Demon.

While I was attempting to figure out if my coworker was anything but straight and had anything but friendzoned me, he invited me to hang out with him in the city. I reassured myself it wasn’t a date, but spending seven or so hours with a person is confusing regardless. Never did he give me any indication it was anything *more*, but statistically I was not *familiar* with straight men wanting to be my friend. Maybe if we were doing a university assignment together and he prayed I would do the majority of the work for him if he appealed to my ego. I asked myself logical, self-deprecating questions: what did my coworker really gain from befriending me?

Are we even supposed to think about what someone else gains, what someone else might be losing? Focusing too much on his thoughts, on his objective or motive or whatever game-speak I could apply to it, that meant overlooking that forming a bond with someone shouldn’t be about succeeding in a goal. There is no ultimate end-result for friendship, which sounds corny, but is mostly true. The end result is companionship, is someone to lean on, is not feeling so alone in the world.

Straining to wonder where a relationship could progress was only doing me harm. I was telling myself he was just bad at flirting, which now feels like a self-centred pat on the back that I think I know better. I was telling myself I desperately needed to fill the void left behind when someone else I liked left the country for three months.

Putting these limitations on a relationship, hoping for certain things from men, caused only to cloud my brain with fog. I wanted clarity, but hesitated for a time to say anything because I assumed he would be grossed out at the idea of a silly little gay boy being attracted to him. We haven't ever spoken about that conversation again, but at least in resolution I am not pining after him or lingering on the little things that **could** mean something.

As an emotional, emotion-focused person, no amount of therapy or internal analysis will change the fact that I get attached easily enough to need a metaphorical bonking over the head. I talk about my attachment like this: I am an introverted person who chooses who he obsesses over by minutely narrow things, but when someone sparks my interest, I want to know more. Learn more. Be in their orbit more. Disappointment comes when you start to wonder if the other person really acknowledges your existence outside of the moments they're talking to you.

Someone I have been talking to recently only seems to have the excitement to talk to me when he's *not busy*. It borderlines on hyperbolic excitement, the way he can treat me when we talk. Yet. When the time does not align, and he's swamped with work or figuring out his life, I get left on read or replied to with a flippancy that from anyone else would be completely normal. This two-toned behaviour is what confuses me most. He could send a million hearts and kissing-faces, moan out my name when he strokes his penis, but comfortably go an entire week barely acknowledging me.

And I remind myself to not be contentious about it.

We attempt to make plans, but he is distant, vague, only excitable at face value—*I can't wait to spend time with you baby, I can't wait to kiss everywhere on your body, baby*. The one time we settled on an exact, on a date and time, he confessed on the very day he had double-booked the evening and that we should absolutely reschedule.

I have given up trying.

Here is a lesson in giving back: do not waste the energy you put towards other people if they are trying desperately to be a disappointment.

I can enjoy talking to him, find him among the handsomest of men who wants to kiss me and who I want to kiss back, but the energies do not align. He is preparing for a life that could never have me in it—without some dire need for the dramatic, this is a core truth. He doesn't possess the energy to maintain himself. Life is headed down another trail. I can enjoy his presence in my life without thinking he could ever be someone I will consider reliable.

Here is a lesson in giving back: people will be just as disappointing as you are.

People will be just as disappointing as you are because of EXPECTATIONS.

The only thing I was when my coworker confessed at 12am in the morning that he wasn't bisexual was calm. I had ceased *expecting* anything—I merely needed a chip of clarity to move the hell on. The only thing I am now when I sense I am expecting too much from someone I might be catching feelings for is cautious. Cautious to let my hopes and fears get in the way of connection. Time is real and fake and caught in-between. *Our day will come* is a song by Ruby & the Romantics.

Find the balance in where to place your expectations of other people.

No one should be expecting grand things from a complicated mess like me.

I should not think a boy will be completely impressive.

Or even queer, at this point.

4. You Gotta Get a Gimmick

the musical episode project

Get yourself a gimmick—get yourself a side project that distracts you from the world. Somewhere along the way, I set myself a new task: I would watch an uncertain amount of musical episodes of television shows, write up findings in response to five questions, and further understand the *gimmick*. I give musical episodes this flashy title of being a *gimmicky* episode because for the wider audience they do exactly what a gimmick does—stand out, for better or worse. Not everyone loves a musical number. Not everyone is successful at landing one, either.

Musical episodes link to pop culture’s love for musicals—they’re pure escapism, and the same can be said not merely for episodes with musical performances, but for the characters who intercept with them too. Musical numbers are often dream-like or spun from some form of curse or affliction or anomaly—they’re disturbances from reality, but not typically uncomfortable, unless you’re a guy who doesn’t like musicals.

I did not consider any television show that is musical in nature—no *Glee*, or *Smash*, or *Galavant*, where musical numbers are more frequent than the characters going on a peaceful vacation away from the cameras. I did rewatch several musical episodes I have seen before, out of the context of rewatching the episodes around them. Out of a possible forty-two episodes that I considered for the project, I watched a total of thirty, and from that thirty, deemed twenty-six of them to be within the rules I established. A musical episode has to feature a ratio of musical numbers to the length of the episode—when I was researching, for example, several lists mentioned *Schitt Creek*’s “Life is a Cabaret” as a musical episode, but upon rewatch, it is more a “episode where a musical is performed”, and the characters only really perform half of two numbers. There wasn’t enough meat on the bones.

The five questions I posed to each episode are as follows:

1. How does the episode itself navigate me, someone who is perhaps unfamiliar with the program, with the content, the characters, the plot-lines and overall atmosphere of the show?
 - 1a) Am I confused by what is happening? Can I follow along with relative ease? Do the songs speak to the interior thoughts of the characters?
2. How out-of-place is the framing of a musical episode to the overall style of the show? Has careful consideration been put into why the characters are now performing musical numbers?
3. How is the music? Are the songs original or covers? If original, are the songs well-written, interesting, able to stand on their own outside of the framing of the episode? If covers, do they adapt well to the moment lyrically?
4. Is the cast of the television show strong vocally and/or as dancers and performers? Is any particular member of the cast the highlight?
5. If I have never seen this specific television show before, how likely am I to continue watching based solely on this musical episode?

I realised towards the end of the project how infrequently I knew nothing about whatever I was watching, and therefore question one could likely have done with a rewrite, but alas, it is too late now. Out of the twenty-six, there were only really three television shows I had never watched before in some capacity, and only one of them [*Fringe*] was complex enough for me to be half-confused about the

episode's plot. But then again, *Fringe*'s musical episode hinges on getting high and telling a noir story to a child, so I wasn't too shoved into the deep end. More on "Brown Betty" later.

The questions helped to construct ideas around the musical episodes and how they engaged with the *gimmick*—and again, I say that lovingly. I enjoyed myself thoroughly watching these episodes, but pivoting myself to sit down and write down my thoughts allowed me to engage with what worked and what was merely an attempt to do what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "Once More, With Feeling" did so flawlessly. It was fascinating to see whether the cast of a show seemed suited to singing or not—shows like *Once Upon a Time*, *The Flash*, and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* were blessed with casts who had genuine musical talent, while *7th Heaven* was blessed with perhaps the most tone-deaf collection of people who were forced into singing ever imaginable. Perhaps that is a harsh overstatement, but I implore you to watch "Red Socks" and come out of it with your sanity intact.

The twenty-six musical episodes I will be referencing here are as follows:

"The Song in Your Heart", *Once Upon a Time*
"Once More, With Feeling", *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
"Regional Holiday Music", *Community*
"Immortimas Patrol", *Doom Patrol*
"Ally McBeal: The Musical, Almost", *Ally McBeal*
"Song Beneath the Song", *Grey's Anatomy*
"Subspace Rhapsody", *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*
"Daria!", *Daria*
"Nightman Cometh", *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*
"The Operetta", *I Love Lucy*
"Simpson-cali-fragilistic-expiala- (Annoyed Grunt)-cious", *The Simpsons*
"Influenza: the Musical", *Even Stevens*
"Brown Betty", *Fringe*
"Duet", *The Flash*
"My Musical", *Scrubs*
"Yasper", *The Afterparty*
"The Bitter Suite", *Xena: Warrior Princess*
"Elementary School Musical", *The Simpsons*
"The Star of the Backstage", *The Simpsons*
"Next to Normal", *Riverdale*
"A Night to Remember", *Riverdale*
"Lunchtime! The Musical", *Teachers*
"Archie the Musical!", *Riverdale*
"Bloody Celestial Karaoke Jam", *Lucifer*
"His Way", *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*
"Red Socks", *7th Heaven*

This was a monumental project and is technically incomplete—as mentioned, the original list included forty-two episodes, but I ditched watching four other *Riverdale* musical episodes because that is truthfully very unnecessary, I couldn't quite get through the *Psych* one, and I delayed the end long enough. This is my set of data. Here are the findings.

SUPERLATIVES.

Best Musical Episode: “Once More, With Feeling”, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

“Once More, With Feeling” is the benchmark for musical episodes and understandably so. It is smartly executed, with original music perfectly suited to the characters, and features Sarah Michelle Geller fighting vampires and demons whilst singing. There’s so much to love about an episode that strikes out against the norm of its tone, but still sits within what you expect from the show. “Rest in Peace” is a personal standout for me—giving Spike an angsty solo about his complicated feelings for Buffy is the essence of why a show utilises the musical episode gimmick. The whole reason these characters are singing too is just another side-effect of the monster-of-the-week format: a demon named Sweet is a musical theatre kid at heart. It’s unfortunate this episode is linked to Joss Whedon, who we hate.

Worst Musical Episode: “Red Socks”, *7th Heaven*

“Red Socks” is poorly-constructed and comes from a cast who has no business singing or dancing. The cast is pitchy and under-rehearsed, or at least that is how it feels watching it. The episode is a Valentine’s Day special, but the singing is never quite explained and none of the songs give much extra depth to the characters. I was reading a list of “best musical episodes” and there was an honourable mention to “Red Socks” as the absolute worst, and I cannot help but agree. Perhaps the only saving grace is Thomas Dekker as Vincent, whose singing is at least a solid distraction from his dance moves when he performs “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” on the football field.

Best Original Songs [unranked]:

“Revenge is Gonna Be Mine”, *Once Upon a Time* – all of the musical in this episode is perfectly Disney-fied, but there’s something special about the combination of the sea shanty vibes and Colin O’Donoghue’s smooth voice. *Revenge, revenge, revenge is gonna be mine* is just too fun to not sing along to.

“Rest in Peace,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – as previously mentioned, I have a soft spot for how hard this Spike solo goes. Lamenting that Buffy only sees him as a dead man, he tells her to just let him *rest in peace* – through song, of course. James Marsters has a gravelly quality to his voice that just works for Spike’s character.

“How Would That Feel”, *Star Trek: Strange New World* – perhaps this is recency bias, but Christina Chong’s solo as La’an Noonien-Singh is beautifully written and performed. Chong’s voice is powerful, and a song about letting go of the wheel to take initiative in your life is something I truly need to embrace. Full body chills.

Best Covered Songs [unranked]:

“The Story”, *Grey’s Anatomy* – what Sara Ramirez does with this Brandi Carlile song is truly something special. Nevermind the fact she is singing to her unconscious body as a spectator while she’s in hospital herself after a car accident. Ramirez’s voice is gorgeous and conveys the deep emotions of the moment. It’s a beautiful close to a wild musical episode.

“Moon River”, *The Flash* – Melissa Benoist recalls her time on *Glee* performing in the crossover special between *The Flash* and *Supergirl*. As *Supergirl*, transported to a sort of musical dreamland, Benoist performs this song beautifully. Her voice is angelic.

“The World According to Chris” and its reprise, *Riverdale* – this could be the only chance *Riverdale* has at getting a spot on any of these superlative lists. Camilla Mendes’ voice for both her rendition of this song and its unaired reprise is a highlight of all the musical episodes of *Riverdale* I’ve seen. She blends right into the character of Chris Hargensen.

Best Explanations For Why We’re Singing [unranked]:

Callie got in a car accident, *Grey’s Anatomy*

Old man is on drugs, *Fringe*

Woman has brain aneurysm in the park, *Scrubs*

Worst Explanation For Why We’re Singing:

No explanation, *7th Heaven*

MVPs [Most Valuable Performers, unranked]:

Diane Guerrero, *Doom Patrol*

Sarah Michelle Geller, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Celia Rose Gooding, *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*

Josh Dallas, *Once Upon a Time*

Alison Brie, *Community*

Ben Schwartz, *The Afterparty*

Jane Krakowski, *Ally McBeal*

Episodes I watched that did not meet the criteria:

“Variety”, *Oz* – not enough singing, or at least not singing that made a dent on the plot of the episode.

“The Alan Brady Show Presents”, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* – the singing was only performance and did not add to the plot. Hell, the episode didn’t even have a plot.

“Virtuoso”, *Star Trek: Voyager* – the doctor just sung opera here and there.

“Life is a Cabaret”, *Schitt’s Creek* – the episode features the premiere of a community theatre production of *Cabaret* but they only sing two songs from the musical, and hardly.

TV Shows I think deserved musical episodes:

Veep – Selina Meyer says something inappropriately homophobic or homophobic-adjacent and Amy gets in contact with a queer theatre company who could help in patching up Selina’s image...if she performs for one night only on stage.

You’re the Worst – Jimmy and Gretchen start to sing out every time they orgasm.

The Good Place – Eleanor knows this must be the Bad Place because every time she opens her mouth she starts singing showtunes from flop musicals.

Which Musical Episodes Succeeded Each Question Most?

How does the episode itself navigate me, someone who is perhaps unfamiliar with the program, with the content, the characters, the plot-lines and overall atmosphere of the show?

- Am I confused by what is happening? Can I follow along with relative ease? Do the songs speak to the interior thoughts of the characters?

The Class 101 Award [for a TV show I had never seen]: “Daria!”, *Daria*

I strangely had never seen an episode of *Daria*, although naturally I knew of the character. She’s sarcastic, sardonic, and bitter at the world. She’s effortlessly relatable, and the musical episode does wonders for introducing every other character that populates Daria’s world. Equally sarcastic, the musical episode feels like a natural in for the series.

How out-of-place is the framing of a musical episode to the overall style of the show? Has careful consideration been put into why the characters are now performing musical numbers?

The Musical Theatre Kid on the Writing Staff Award: “Regional Holiday Music”, *Community*

Community always did community college class parodies, but the parody here of *Glee* quite specifically is brilliantly done and feels truthfully like it is only jokingly poking fun at *Glee*’s Christmas episodes. The tone never shifts from *Community*’s usual satire. Next stop: regionals.

How is the music? Are the songs original or covers? If original, are the songs well-written, interesting, able to stand on their own outside of the framing of the episode? If covers, do they adapt well to the moment lyrically?

The Sondheim Award [for best original music]: “Once More, With Feeling”, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

There is no denying the impact of *Buffy*’s musical episode on musical episodes that came after it. While I can certainly argue parts of the soundtrack are awkwardly performed by a cast that is not quite trained in vocals, the writing of the score and lyrics is the focus for the episode. I was tossing and turning on who to give this award to, but ultimately settled on the expected. “Once More, With Feeling” has “Rest in Peace”, “Walk Through the Fire”, and “Going Through the Motions” to thank for that. But the cast can be lucky this is not an award given out based on performance.

Is the cast of the television show strong vocally and/or as dancers and performers? Is any particular member of the cast the highlight?

The Talent Portion of the Pageant Award: “The Song in Your Heart”, *Once Upon a Time*

Perhaps there is a fraction of bias here. I adore the cast of *Once Upon a Time*, and think genuinely there is a lot of musical talent spread throughout the episode—Josh Dallas, as mentioned, is a fantastic performer, as is Colin O’Donoghue. Ginnifer Goodwin has a lovely voice that suits to her princess character, Snow White. Rebecca Mader and Lana Parilla are devilishly talented performers who seem to be having the most fun. Jennifer Morrison delivers on her emotional solo. I think for a series built upon fairytales and the Disney catalogue, it’s magical to have a core cast of talent to perform these musical numbers. But perhaps I am blinded by my love of this musical episode overall, and the sentimentality it holds.

If I have never seen this specific television show before, how likely am I to continue watching based solely on this musical episode?

The Keep Me Hangin' On Award: “Ally McBeal: The Musical, Almost”, *Ally McBeal*.

I started *Ally McBeal* from the beginning once I watched the musical episode. I quickly learned Lucy Liu is not in the show from the very beginning, which was a depressing realisation, but Jane Krakowski is, and that’s extraordinary. I need to watch more *Ally McBeal*. Calista Flockhart is a star.

Musical episodes are for the theatre kids.

Musical episodes are gateway drugs for future theatre kids.

When I began working on this project, I was only daunted by one thing: doing the post-episode write-up. Watching a string of musical episodes was pure electricity and excitement for someone like me, and seeing how different creatives tackle a musical episode makes for compelling research. Political correctness goes out the window for *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*’s “Nightman Cometh”. *Fringe* commits to a storytelling narrative, where Walter Bishop tells an unrelated-to-the-plot noir musical story to a small child who should probably be reading a Spot book instead. In *I Love Lucy*’s “The Operetta”, Lucy is absolutely awful as a performer on stage and everything goes wrong because the women’s club has no money to afford anything.

As someone who consumes a lot of musical theatre—including stage productions, films, television shows, and listening to cast recordings—the one-off musical episode is a fascinating gimmick. It can piss off the straightest man. It can slip the ordinary viewer out of the belief that these events could really happen in real life when the cameras are not rolling. But it can also be something truly special.

There will always be more to watch—not merely musical episodes, but more television to love, more musical theatre, more passion and gimmicks and everything in between. A gimmick is a good thing—you want the thrill of something exciting, something different. Jeff from *Community* slowly being surrounded by the members of the study group who have gone to the darkside, the Glee Club, is fantastic television. I watched my first *Xena: Warrior Princess* and was quickly informed the rough acting is part of the charm, actually. *Riverdale* changed the lyrics of “Superboy and the Invisible Girl” to fit into their storyline and it makes me uncomfortable. [*Next to Normal* won the Pulitzer Prize, you don’t rewrite their lyrics.] *Even Stevens* did a whole song on the moon landing and I’ve still already forgotten what year it was. Always something to learn, or relearn.

I had so much fun.

Onto another thing.

5. The Lost Magician

with love, away from home

In 2023, I travelled alone for the first time. It was an exhilarating experience, and I wondered to myself why I had avoided doing it sooner. There were always hesitations: I had been a university student, I had prioritised studying and work, I would go on short trips with family occasionally. I got distracted, got busy, got anxious, got nervous. There were many hesitations. The trip to Sydney in 2023 served as a graduation present to myself—here is the promise of what is to come, now that you have donned the robe and the cap and not shaken anyone's hand because of regulations still in place since the pandemic.

I remember the nervousness of being at the airport alone for the first time. I hadn't flown since 2016, which was absurd—where had the time gone, and why had I kept myself grounded so long? At the bagging check, I overworked myself trying to stick together the tag perfectly. I wanted no wrinkles, no air pockets, overcome with the notion that it could tear in the luggage hold and my suitcase would be lost in the kerfuffle. This was the anxiety eating away at my newfound independence. My mind wanted to find new methods to suggest I was still not good enough—not courageous enough to travel alone, even if it was merely one state over.

I was a changed person in Sydney. Alone, I felt the weight of everything I had experienced slip away from me. That week, I shed the university student image I'd crafted and glued onto myself for so many years. I wasn't a kid, I wasn't a supermarket employee, I was a tourist with his camera. Sprinkling a little magic into my life. Something crawled up my leg in that city and gnawed its way into my bloodstream. There was nothing I wanted to do more than travel.

I booked trips to Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth. I stayed awake nights in Melbourne while a couple verbally abused one another in a room nearby. I spent the day on foot at Monarto Safari Park in South Australia, killing my feet, escaping into what felt like the wilderness. I went to Rottnest Island off the coast of Perth and stopped in my path to snap some photographs of a quokka who did not care that I was there in front of him. There was an earned sense of peace when I travelled around the country, for until recently I had firmly kept my feet planted on Australian soil. But there was peace. No matter where I disappeared, I was finding my authentic self in the experiences, in the moments.

Awake, trying to fall asleep amidst the latest of the verbal insults hurled from one person to another, whoever they had been, I tried to blacken out the world. Across the street from the hotel was a metropolitan police station, gargantuan in size. I was sealed away, regardless, within my hotel room, thinking about how fleeting this trip was. And yet, I had never spent this, or any, amount of time in Melbourne, freezing my ass off whenever I walked outside, regardless of the fact that it was October.

There is a shuttle bus, of sorts, that drives around the entirety of Monarto Safari Park, a parcel of land of more than one thousand, five hundred hectares. I feared being cramped up inside a bus whenever I went somewhere—look at how wide these plains are, let me explore them. I could convince myself on a trail between The Waterhole and the lions that I was somewhere else entirely, stripped away from society. The outback, where occasionally you might glimpse something alive, more alive than you are. You stand there staring out at the horizon, desperate to glimpse a sleeping lioness, and you think, this life makes sense. I was losing sight of the signs.

On Rottnest Island, there are seals. Just off the shoreline. They bask in the sun, making sounds that travel across the ocean in between, like barking. An older volunteer stands to my right and comments on the camera I am using to take pictures of these beautiful creatures I can say I have seen in

their natural habitat. In pictures they are shapes on the rock, illusions to being alive, sometimes. Chameleons when they lie. The older man knows things I will forget, things I have—never ask me to repeat what someone says when they have attempted to be a teacher of things. I was too distracted. Staring out at the brilliant sea, waiting for a seal to move. To fight.



the view from my hotel room in Melbourne



two lions hide in the grass



seals are like angles of rock

I start to mention the only capital city in Australia I have not visited is Hobart, in Tasmania. When I was ten, we roadtripped down through New South Wales to Canberra, although the memories fade with every passing day. In April 2025, I disembarked from the Ghan in Darwin. I frequent Brisbane, and with Sydney and Melbourne to compare to it, I am desperate to return to a real, proper bustling city. But I'm still lost and uncertain and half-hopeless. Travelling is an escape, but not a permanent refuge. All the magic in my veins cannot settle me someplace else.

I think about myself sitting in the lounge carriage on the first day of The Ghan trip, drinking a Lemon, Lime & Bitters surrounded by no one else my age. It was a surrealist moment, aboard a train departing Adelaide with a destination the other end of the country in writing. I longed to avoid the moments that reminded me I was an ordinary person outside of the being a passenger on one of Australia's most well-known trains. I am the person who goes to work to make the money to afford the

travel. I am intrepid, head in the clouds excitable, comfortable to watch the outback pass by out my window. I miss the cell reception when it goes, but I love the quiet, the occasional announcement startling me, interrupting me. Aboard, I was jumpier than perhaps I realised. I could become so comfortable getting lost in tiny moments. If only I had packed a novel without such depressing material. [I was reading *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh and it ached how relevant and relatable the unnamed main character's thoughts and feelings were. I could have forgotten everything about society to stay on that train, in that cramped cabin, forever and ever, sleeping away all my fears for the future.]

The strange sensation I feel when I travel is really, merely, belonging. It's somewhat of a stereotypical thing for a queer person to suggest they feel out of place in the world, less so if you're a white male queer person, but when I distance myself from the life I have to live when I am *on the clock*, I belong. Or I come to terms. The fine print of being alive is that much more bolded, enlarged, and I want to live. I am not sitting on the ferry darting around Sydney harbour thinking about offing myself. I am not crocodile-spotting and crocodile-eating in Katherine and thinking about the jaws of the beast tearing me off the boat and rolling me around underneath the water. Death roll, babes, save it for when I'm seven hours into a nine-hour shift.

Travel is freedom, independence, a relief from policing myself. Regular-life me, the version everyone expects, this attempt at being a normal adult human...it's an exhausting façade. You have to blend in, or else you feel the eyes lingering on you. My therapist is sure to remind me that I have the bad habit of *presuming*—that I make assumptions around how people are reacting to my decisions, to how I walk the earth. Internally, I can sense that people are disappointed in me. It's devastating. Sometimes. This idea of how people perceive you. *People once thought I had potential*—the idea ringing in everyone's head by now. Potential, for me, is tied with a ribbon to when I am free of expectation. Travel carves out a bowl from the wood of my brain. I slice a piece of chocolate mud cake and eat it with a spoon from the plate. Travel is freedom, it is pure independence, and all it costs is airfares, accommodation, tickets to the zoos, and whatever the fee for public transport is.

In May of 2025, I boarded the plane with my mother, destined for Melbourne, where my brother now lives. The flight itself was something special—my sinuses were on the fritz, and near to landing the entire right side of my face burst out into excruciating pain. I pleaded, internally, for the plane to land immediately, so I could hide the worst of the pain behind a turned-away face. Being in pain is a norm for me—someone who lives with chronic headaches and a permanent sore throat understands being comfortable was something I was when I was twelve. I shielded my face with the hood of my H&M wool-lined hoodie. This was agony. My ear was blocked, and my hearing was halved until later that afternoon.

But in Melbourne, I never quite felt my independence. I was travelling, but without the capital T. It reminded me of holidays I long since could only remember fragments of—say, for instance, the 2016 trip my mother and I took to Sydney for my birthday. Back then I was still a teenager, but this trip I felt time loop back over. Teenager again. Restricted, again. I got to be alone when I slept, showered, and the forty-five minutes I spent meeting Hutan, a fifteen-year-old Sumatran tiger who only had one canine tooth. I could have stood there forever, admiring from behind the protection of the enclosure's fence. I would have looked delicious.

Being on vacation with family is limiting, as much as you get to experience things with other people. My mother seemed to be having a wonderful time, but I was flip-flopping between feeling dulled by her presence and feeling thrilled to be in Melbourne again. Melbourne can be like a mirage in the desert, except it's an actual fucking waterhole and you splash your face with its waters and see *Hadestown* for the third time in one year.

I spent a Sunday in the Dandenongs incredibly depressed. The steam engine train, cornily named Puffing Billy, did nothing for the cloud leaking onto my face. People were hanging out over the edge, kicking their feet in the wind, and I was thinking about killing myself, and fuck, I am not supposed to be meeting the two separate feelings in the middle. I am on vacation.

On the return journey on the Puffing Billy, after eating an almond croissant in a train museum, I listened to the end half of the *Smash the Musical* cast recording and attempted to understand what the hell they did in adapting the television show. The musical's finale, aptly titled "Smash!", is an insult to musical theatre in general, but that was an entire other conversation I was having, while I moped and tried to force a smile on my face. It was Sunday and instead of being AT WORK, I was sitting in a train carriage that had windows you could stick your head out of and thinking about how little life was bringing me joy. While on a train! With random passersby waving up to us like we're in the movies! Depression is an overwhelming headache.

Depression makes you hungry, too. Makes me hungry. I housed down a parmigiana, Italian-style, at an Irish tavern in a town called Olinda, and it was hardly a struggle. My stomach is a food child because when I am miserable, I feed the demon inside as well. Eating for two, but it is the starved creatures inside your body, staring down at whatever is in front of you. I tried to escape the cavernous thoughts of my depression. We wandered down to a waterfall, and I closed my eyes, hoping for something magical as distraction. The waterfall was a puddle. But I was in the Dandenongs for the day. Camera in hand, I snapped a picture of words scratched into the wood of a fence post. *I love gay sex* ♥

A phone number and *HMU*.

I thought, the only way I would ever be able to post it would be if I blurred out the number. Although, maybe just maybe, she'd love the free publicity.

Coming back from Melbourne was a complete circle. The right side of my face ached again on the plane, although for shorter a time frame, and less painfully. Although sometimes my ear seems to "click" like a part of it remains blocked [as of writing, it has been two weeks since the flight home.] Life returned. I went to work, I stressed over my future, I went back and forth on a major life decision. My therapist understood the feelings I had over the course of that trip down to Melbourne—the loss of independence I felt while I travelled with a parent, a family member, strained me because there was a stoppage from how valuable I saw, see, being on holiday in another state. Another world.

No one can criticise me when I am alone. The lost magician can embrace getting lost when the road twists into several meandering paths. No one can expect a certain version of me. I plot out my itinerary, then disappear within it. No one is on my tail—I was so desperate for the freedom of norm while in Melbourne I started getting frustrated that my mother walked slower than I did, and I started this on the very first day of being there. Being on vacation is my domain, my positive obsession, and having to match someone else's energy, or piss them off instead, brought down my energy. I was forced into showing that I could do what was expected.

It was no different than the uncomfortable grooves of life.

I wanted to be alive.

I always want to be alive, and despite my suicidal references, I see so many reasons to want it. Meeting Hutan, watching him paw at the black bucket, under which a large morsel of meat was hidden. Seeing *Beetlejuice the Musical* for the first time and experiencing "No Reason" live and in person. ["No Reason" is a song between Lydia and Delia, in which Lydia argues there is no explainable reason for the things the universe hurls at people, and Delia argues the opposite, because there was clearly motive for why every miserable thing in her life led to this very instance, living in a house haunted by a demon in a prisoner's suit with green hair and maggoty teeth.]

I want to be alive, but I want to be left alone.

It might be too painful of a thing to willingly admit.

I enjoy the company of the people in my life who add genuine meaning, but there is moderation to it, too. I wonder, or worry, whether travelling with friends would have the same effect—I want to imagine I would feel less like a toddler on a leash with someone I met through a dating app, but the freedom and the independence of having an itinerary I planned entirely on my own is the liberating thing. Suddenly other people have ideas, other complaints, and it's more difficult to ignore another person. I tell myself, suck it up, toughen up, your feet can blister and rest when you're back in the hotel room. Nausea settles in when I remind myself of how bratty, how impolite and cruel I can act when I am worn down by other people. *Leave me alone, bitch, I want to have fun* – Renéé Rapp.

This might be why I cannot comprehend how adults go through their time being terrified of doing things by themselves. Going on vacation by themselves, going to the movies by themselves, making plans without another person attached. For me, being alone is the natural—I wake up in bed alone, I make plans without consulting another person, and I don't picture how the world could suddenly shift if I got into another relationship. For some people, you could hardly believe they came out of the womb by themselves—but I never attempt to be harsh on them. People are complicated. But when you close your eyes, you're alone. Everything behind the eyelids is dark and lonely. But there is a difference between alone and lonely. Of course there is.

I become a different person when I adopt that new moniker—the lost magician. I cannot take complete credit—I'm the Magician in a group chat, named for the tarot card. The Magician tarot is a sign of confidence, the ability to adapt to change, the path forward and the initiative to follow it. I might not always see myself as confident or an effective communicator or an inspiration, but it instils something in me to believe that words can be twisted. The ability to adapt to change can mean what has been adapted is the show of confidence, or what that means, to be confident. I have social anxiety and am in general terrified of coming across wrong, but I am passionate, I have overpowering body confidence, and travelling by myself is liberating more than anything else. Although I could never abandon my first love—writing. The place where we are right now. ♡

But you get lost, you always do. What am I doing with myself...except living, and writing, and masturbating, and posting pictures of myself shirtless, and playing video games in the morning instead of staying in bed. And planning vacations overseas, and watching musical episodes of television shows, and singing along to my favourite songs. I am “just chilling” more often than I am figuring out what my great purpose for existing is. But perhaps, I simply am.

Simply am lost.

Simply a magician who surprises everyone.

Not because he has immense purpose, but because he disappears like the rabbit and reappears on a train in the middle of nowhere, staring out at the expanse of outback, waiting for this so-called Iron Man statue to appear, too. And the statue is not what you expect, or not interesting enough to clamber for. But that's okay. Don't let those expectations get too high.

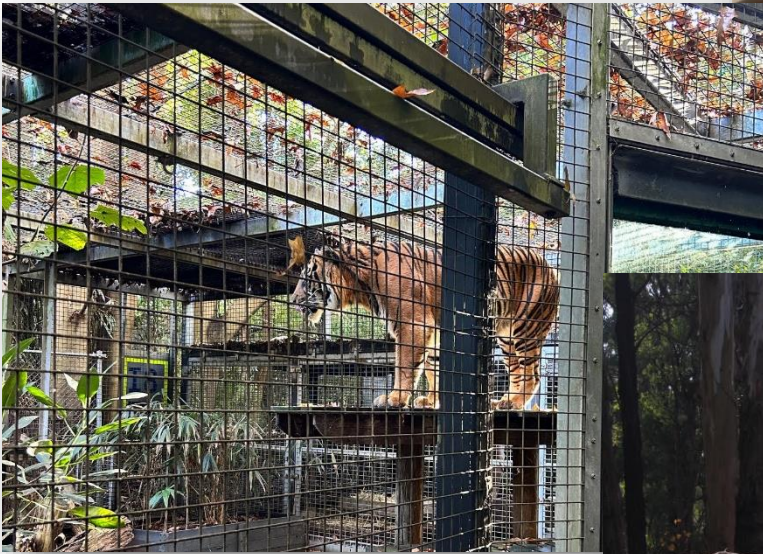
Just enjoy the ride.



a lemon, lime & bitters in the
Ghan lounge



the view from my single sleeper
cabin on the Ghan



Hutan in the backstage area,
hunting for meat



the woods of Olinda



the famed Iron Man, sans his suit
of armour

6. Tendencies

life can be a time loop if you're obsessive enough

In a time loop movie, the main character, or main characters, have to reckon with their lives and find the flaw, the reason for improvement. Something in life must budge for the time loop to break. Infrequently, a time loop is the heinous act of a supervillain bent on making the life of the main character miserable—time loop narratives are like video games. There is an objective. You must learn how to navigate the world around you. Frequently translated as: *you need to grow up*.

To avoid repeating myself, tangled in a loop of my own, I will not be reviewing a series of time loop films for what they offer the genre, or not exclusively. Instead, like any good essay, I will be unpacking my own reflections on the subject: my tendencies.

Since my life has looked like **This** for some time now, I see the flaws and cracks in everything I do. I wake up too early in the morning, unable to fall back asleep nine times out of ten, but I don't quite change much about my bedtime routine. There are the vague remnants of an attempt to craft a routine, but it was an overwhelming failure. The last thing I crave at night is rigorous processes, like a To-Do list for powering down. If someone chose to interfere, to force me into a time loop of trying to fix my sleep, I wonder how successful they would be. I am a tired, grumpy mess who would delay sleep for much longer if the headaches didn't persuade me to close my eyes. To at least make attempts. I regret in the morning, when I check my phone for the time and see 5:23am, but alas. The clock of my body is only correct twice a day.

A time loop movie's main character is stuck in their ways—they go about life the same, perhaps the same as they always have. Forgive me, for it has been years, but what I recall of *Groundhog Day* is this: Bill Murray's Phil is an asshole until he's forced to relive the same day a million times and he begins to slowly become a better person when he realises his actions for consequences. Time loop films sit in this assumption about their characters: a deeply-flawed person must become **Better**. [Whether I consider myself deeply-flawed or not is irrelevant, because I do not exist in a personal *Groundhog Day*, but I could be if I was obsessive enough.]

In the *Happy Death Day* films, Tree, whose name is insane, is a regular asshole and she acknowledges that, or close enough to it. She's self-centred like Phil. But she isn't unlikeable, really—as a character in a movie, she's more enjoyable than some of the other characters, because she has personality and no filter. In *Edge of Tomorrow*, Tom Cruise is a coward who needs to be toughed up by Emily Blunt to outsmart the aliens—but his character is still just human and relatable if you're a straight white man who thinks he ought to be taken seriously just because he has credentials.

I start to imagine what a day of my life would feel like, if I was forced into replaying it countless times. Yesterday served no inherent warning for the path I've been heading down, but on Tuesday [the 10th of June, as of writing this] there is a moment some natural shift in the atmosphere could have used as the trigger. A child was left alone in the store when her father went home to get his debit card to pay for his groceries—but imagine if my inability to figure out how to handle the situation had a worse outcome, and the father never returned to the store, and I was left to figure out how to support a child who couldn't get in contact with her family. The truth is nicer to stomach: he eventually returned, albeit later than he should've, and we breathed a sigh of relief. But the trick of a time loop can stare you in the face—am I letting the world abandon me without warning?

I have the tendency to let life dole out its punishments to me: I have been over four years with an unexplainable headache, of which I took my time to talk about, and let doctors walk over me for for far too long. I have worked a job for x amount of years out of an inability to figure out what I should be doing with myself. Now I think myself undatable, half-unlovable, without ambitions for the future beyond wishful thinking to continue travelling, continue to spend time with the people I love, and write in the cracks. I have a tendency to be terrified of change. I call my body too exhausted for it. But sleep seems like a waste of precious hours, beyond whatever I get in between 10:30pm and 6:30am.

There are certain things I confess between tears. I do not feel like much of a successful adult, because I cannot find a new job, because I still live with my parents, because I live my best life when I'm riding on the eagle's wing and burrowing into the dirt. [*Code for: travelling, and giving into my desire to do nothing but mess around with my hobbies at home.*]

People like to ask me why I don't try again for my licence when I tell them I failed three times when I was sixteen. At twenty-four now, you would think enough time has passed—but I feel like a changed person everywhere but there. The same boy inside of me gets the jitters when someone talks about how I should drive, except now I don't merely blame my overactive anxiety. Now I blame the headaches, and the stomach pain, and the depression, and the comfort. How comfortable it is to not have to wake up and think about driving someplace. This, this is a tendency of mine: the tendency to just want to be comfortable. Except I live a life that frequently makes me uncomfortable.

But hey, life is uncomfortable.

Someone at some point decided we needed an economy and taxes and employment and boring meetings that achieve nothing.

Tendencies are more than routines. Routinely, I go to work, come home tired, sleep, masturbate, carve out time to write, or at least sit in front of a screen trying to string sentences together. I listen to music, repeating songs over and over—I listen to Annapantsu & Chloe Breez' cover of "Would You Fall in Love With Me Again" for the umpteenth time as I type this. I tell a boy I'm watching a movie on the couch when he asks me what I'm doing on a Wednesday night. These are my routines, habitual progresses that keep me grounded in a reality where I only think about suicide.

Tendencientally—that's not a word—I go to work and find reasons to wander off, or make conversation with the coworkers I like. I make mention to wanting to quit, but don't. Not yet. I come home tired and sit on my phone responding to messages from boys who will only be disappointed in me eventually, even when they tell me they're comfortable with not having sex, even when they only ask me how my day was. Or else I watch something to delay trying to fall asleep, delay the inevitable feeling of helplessness as I lie there paralysed by wonder.

Tendency: I delay responding to someone when I don't know how to respond to them without being blunt, or somewhat off-putting, or plain annoying. Or desperate.

Tendency: when I don't like the job opportunities staring me coldly in the face on *Seek* or whatever, I have a minor panic attack and pull at the skin on my face. Sad clown-like.

Tendency: I don't speak my mind because it has more often than not achieved nothing in the past. Or it has been devastating. Or I've regretted it in the weeks, months, years afterwards.

Life might seem steady, pacing, moving forward, but there is a loop to everything. I work, then I find freedom in my travels, then I come crashing back to real earth with another shift the afternoon after a flight home. A morning could be spent in the pure harmony of remembering what life was like when I had less responsibilities—where my responsibilities lately have been so vital as "figuring out what I'm doing with myself—and then I stumble through the front door and check my emails. Nothing new, not of importance. The very rare occurrence of an email where someone invites me to an interview, and I

reject it internally, recalling whichever job I applied for. The idea of cramping myself in front of a random desk and attempting to present myself as Part of Society, when realistically I am just an audience member for an obscure game show. My job is *just watch*. I have such a tendency to refuse to believe there is a career path forward for me. At least in university I could pretend I could write more often, or at least I pretended that for the majority of my degree, until things crept up and became **Serious**. People I once sat in classes with, people whose work I read in between writing my own assessments, they talk about how little they write now and I want to claw my eyes out and vomit out the fragments of myself that care about being *happy*.

Let me be blank-faced and productive.

Let me figure things out. Let that be my tendency—proper problem solver.

When I was discussing, internally, with only myself, what I envisioned for a section titled *Tendencies*, I thought about my relationships. I thought about the tendencies I have within who I see, who I spend time with. There are periods of time where I convince myself I am branching out, spending time with people unexpected, but they fluctuate. Newness, strangeness, can be complicated—there are people I have been internet friends with for years and years, but perhaps have only really seen once or twice. Or not at all. A creature of habit.

A creature who values time, the relentless flow. I tend to friendships like carrots. They grow in the ground, their leafy greens sticking out of the soil, and I am never quite so certain what will be in the beneath. How lengthy a carrot. How orange a glow. I bore of—sometimes—being the only one to cultivate.

I make the same mistakes, or decisions, over and over again—I get too comfortable with the wrong people, coming to later realise I was growing attached to them for the wrong reasons, or else that they grew to realise they could not overlook my peculiarities. The latter is perhaps not entirely my fault, yet I wonder why I let myself relax into them. Gone now is my willingness to believe someone when they say it's *alright* they can be affectionate with me without the sex, without the blowjobs and the hand stuff and the *sex*. People say things while they wait for me to change my mind.

I was hoping it would be alright is not the same thing. I shouldn't get myself hurt over a belief that someone who craves sexual activity will be able to just punch their boner out of existence. Or see mine and not react to it. I talk about myself with earnestness, then I wait to be throat-punched.

I had something comfortable for a little while. But my tendencies are to cave in on myself, and because I act the way I do, awkward the way I am, I knew in the back of my mind there would be an inevitable end. He asked if he could call, a message with the writing on the wall. It can get so pointless to bother being anything more than a neutral friend to other people. Men want someone they can have sex with. If I start to flirt with them, they want sex. If I get comfortable and rest my head on their shoulder and slip my tongue inside their mouth, I'm shooting myself in the foot.

Those weeks, months, I go without being intimate with anyone in any capacity, those are the times I can at least avoid regret. I can be (un)comfortable in the depression of not having what I want, but nobody disturbs the heart.

Nobody disturbs the heart.

I will make the mistake again, let someone in, let them put their hands on my body and hope the part of my brain that is broken will right itself because of their touch. People assume trauma is the reason I don't want sex. But I lose my closeness to anyone the moment they try to fuck me.

And yet I repeat, repeat like a million patterns. Talk to someone new, inevitably flirt with them, then feel dejected and rejected the moment they ask me if they can put my penis in their mouth.

Why do I do it? Caught in a personal time loop of being reminded I'm nothing.

If I wound up in a time loop, these are the imagined events I would be forced to contend with:

1. I am waiting for the train and at the last minute leap out onto the tracks and get obliterated into a million pieces. When I awake in bed, shaken, the taste of blood in my mouth, I replay the day, realising no matter what I am destined to kill myself that day.
2. I am on a flight overseas and the cabin crew is seated for landing, the entire right side of my face in agonising pain. The moment the wheels hit the tarmac, my head explodes. I wake in shock, after the few minutes of sleep I got aboard the aircraft. Some exterior force is determined for me to die in a foreign country, alone, lonely.
3. Walking home alone at night, I suddenly recognise the person walking ahead of me. He's somewhat lagging in speed, slowing down bit by bit, and occasionally looking behind him in the guise of checking for cars on the road. I remember I blocked him for being annoying. In the darkest part of the walk home, he pulls out a knife, stabs me, and I wake up clutching at my stomach. Shit repeats.
4. Thinking a man has the best of intentions, I go home with him after dinner and some other extracurricular activity. I reject his advances, and he murders me in my sleep. When I wake again, terrified, realising the plans will repeat, my social anxiety halts me from cancelling on him, but now what the hell do I do when he puts his hands on my body?

Imagine this then: every human on earth is born with the condition that some all-knowing force will bestow upon them one (1) Time Loop within their lifetime. [This is not me considering the existence of God, this is me suggesting a figure like Loki could be meddling in reality.] Your personal Time Loop could come at any possible moment in your life once you reach at least the age of eighteen—legally, there is the assumption you need to be able to rationalise the various pathways of the day and be able to properly legitimise whatever you learn from reliving the same reality at minimum ten times.

It's all so dystopian. Children fearful of their eighteenth birthdays, curious when the fate will befall them. Decisions made with the behind-the-eyelids thought of what outcomes will betray the trajectory of a life—a day in the life of an accidental comic, Keeley Young.

Would I live the same boring miserable life if someone reminded me a single choice could be the flick-of-the-switch to awaken my own personal Time Loop Day? Would I give people second chances if I woke up again on a repeating Saturday with the experience of a trauma but not yet the lived-through part of it?

Truthfully, I...do not know. Life is short, complicated, layered like an onion, and yet out of pure convenience I repeat the same trajectories because I cannot afford to blow everything up within an instant. I craft the walls around myself, tear them down in the evening, and rebuild them in the morning. I have these tendencies on how I act, on how I interact with the world, because there are expectations for what a functioning human being in society looks like. I must go to work, I must sleep, I must talk to people even when they say something out of my control.

I let people wander around inside my brain, and then they reject me or find it hilarious. Something sentimental and earnest is mocked. I should not take it personally, but I want to be understood, even when I am confusing and repetitiously-idiotic.

I have other time-loop films to watch, so I will go, and I will be quiet. A tendency of the world—we are taught to be quiet. Or else we're obnoxious.

7. What Comes Next?

as sung by Jonathan Groff.

You're on your own // awesome, wow.

The awful, awful reality of being an adult is remembering countless times that life is yours to sculpt, by yourself. There is no one else to do the organising and the figuring-out for you. There is no one to pluck the right chords for you—learn the instrument yourself, dumbass.

On January 1st, 2025, I had no idea what to do with myself. I was forcibly moving on from an idiotic crush and trying to piece together an existence that ~still~ made no sense. I get older but not wiser, at least not in the ways that matter for this economy. I get wiser in avoiding relationships that are harmful for me, and then, still...there are the tendencies.

What Comes Next: not merely the song from *Hamilton*, but a genuine reflection on how I need to proceed with my life. As I type this, I am in the middle of organising and planning a trip to Europe. By August 12th, I'll be leaving the country and looking back only to make sure there's still a soft place for me to land in early September.

As someone who has never left the country, this alone is daunting. My passport currently sits unused, like the *Animal Crossing* Monopoly sitting on the shelf I have yet to play because asking your friends to play Monopoly is asking them to slit your throat. I sent a picture of my passport in recently so I could be granted entry into the UK. I stared at the picture of myself printed there, wondering even how different I will look when I land in England in a few months. My hair is longer, my facial hair somewhat overgrown, giving me the scruffy appearance on the outside too.

The life I have right now is wearing out all my energy. The same job, the same existence since I was in university, except without the studying. It's embarrassing to confess. The twenty-four-year-olds going on reality shows are more interesting than I am. The invention of AI and ChatGPT means getting a university degree is surely less of a success. The idea alone is miserable—for all the effort, I would hate to know someone else put in almost zero and still succeeded. A coworker of mine, a teenager, confessed they don't take notes in class, don't study, and simply turn to ChatGPT for their assessment. I wanted to gag. Why do they deserve to graduate for that?

This dream trip to Europe, this crazed idea to half-blow my life up, came about when I realised two things. One, that I wanted to do something with my newly-obtained passport, and two, that a suggestion a friend had to go to London with him might actually be the ticket. Plans shifted, or never came to fruition, and the idea crept up. Instead of waiting until October, I could go to London alone in August, but linger around on the continent for a couple weeks longer.

London, Amsterdam, Brussels. A plan brewed in a LAB.

This is the trip of a lifetime, when you consider that my *lifetime* prior to August the Twelfth involved working in a supermarket, getting an education, and being a little baby. Eighteen-year-old me, twenty-three-year-old me, would never have considered how quickly life would come at him. But life is still running at a snail's pace compared to the world.

In order for this blue moon vacation to work, I am sabotaging the part of my life that is most economically-stable: my job. *Europe will change me* is the sort of thing you would find tapestried onto a pillow, but there is an aching part of my soul which believes in this notion of spiritual regeneration. A new version of myself, one that does not involve certain elements of the past. Gone should be the me who had nine years of the same workplace tacked onto his shirt like a nametag. Europe, it will set you

free. But the answers are not plain. I quit, and I face the terror. The nervousness of being without a job in a job market that has yet to cushion my neck and tell me I studied even half of the right thing in university. People are reassuring—you'll find something else—but aren't these the same people who I have disappointed over the course of the last five years of my life?

That is a question that should remain rhetorical.

The gears and cogs keep turning even when the brain can function without the noise. I am more frequent to tear myself down than I am to oversee the construction process and have zero opinions on it. I find everything wrong and make it the report card at bedtime. There are still mistakes I made in high school, in primary school, which haunt me when I am walking down the street. Waiting for the train. Distracting my mind at work. Someone makes a little comment about something and the trigger upstairs fetches the relevant reference point.

It takes about five hours by train from London to Amsterdam, shorter if you can snag the option to avoid disembarking for a switch. On a lovely Monday in August, instead of getting ready for work, I will be halfway to The Netherlands in what I imagine will be an alright economy-class seat. It's the busiest travel day for the entire trip—I wake early, catch a train from Liverpool back to the heart of London city, then catch another train across the channel to the windmill-and-tulips country. I will be exhausted, antsy, sore, grumpy, nervous, excited, jittery, entirely in pain. But I will be doing something I have never done before, something I never imagined I would be doing this time last year. June 2024 feels completely removed from the present. I always consider myself a different person from one year to the next. Shaped by my experiences, shaped by the world around me. Always learning.

The world will always be a classroom. In August, Europe will be where I study.

But while I see theatre in the West End in London, and visit the Sex Museum in Amsterdam, and cry over how beautiful Paira Daiza in Belgium is, my future will always loom. But it is the future. You either have one or you don't, and you know little of how much time is promised. Weeks and months have been spent attempting to future-proof my life, with little progression...I wake up, attempt to figure out what to do, then get distracted by work, which exhausts me. I try to completely distract my entire body by spending time with the people I love, but they remind me without even noticing how miserable and uncertain I am. All I want to do is to flee to Europe and never be seen again.

Which isn't helpful, or positive, or uplifting. These fanciful ideas of doing away with myself. The very notion that I am so exhausted from not feeling like I can belong to the point I want to just cease the need for it. Sometimes I question exactly what I am. If not normal human, then alien. No one should ever label themselves something without knowing, but I think about getting myself tested for things like autism, wondering if a better understanding of who I am could come from clarity. There is something wrong with the way I perceive things, but I'm without diagnosis. Nothing to describe the headaches, neither, nor the throat pain, the stomach aches, the complicated way I can't just buy into reality like everyone else does. Our lives are so incredibly short, and they want me to spend most of my time in a stuffy office building typing things out on a computer.

All I have is my anxiety, depression, and a delusional spirit. The belief that things will work out, even if I have to take triple the time everyone else does.

I will be a different person when I step away from one life and embark upon another. The Europe kid first: I need to finish organising things, continue spending money, and practice French and Dutch. Time will tick over and the extraordinary experiences will be had and I will morph, again, into something less desirable: the Unemployed Kid. These labels remind me of a character I was once crafting. I called him Sympathy Kid, and he had somewhat of a BDSM fetish but soothed anyone down with like, a physical representation of sympathy? I have no idea. Buried in the recesses of my mind is Sympathy Kid. Buried in the recesses of my mind are a million versions of myself.

People like to talk about the future. Inherently. There is always the circling question, like vultures, about what we are meant to do with the remainder of our time on this planet. Do we have children? Do we think about home loans and shared bank accounts and investing? Do we amble through everything with an uncertainty like I do?

I resolve to thinking I ought to live life the way I intend to, and not let other's expectations overwhelm me. Children seem like the antithesis of my being—I find myself hard enough to keep under control, let alone a being that came into existence like four months ago. Maybe I don't want the house, and the lawn, and the nine-to-five job, and the Christmas cards.

But where does that leave me.

I think, sometimes, about the traditions I would abandon. As a largely not-religious person, Christmas to me has never once meant *birth of carpenter dude*, but family, gathering together, eating delicious food and laughing away a year of mistakes and torments. I could do away with the month-long obsession, the over-indulgent spending, the pestering. Just time spent with family because everyone's job gives them time off for it. Easter has no meaning to me. In Australia, it is still celebrated, regardless, in the first half of the year in what is our autumn. A celebration of new life, birth, eggs and baskets, in the season of leaves falling and the oncoming winter. Make it make sense. I do not mourn a man who arose from a cavern rejuvenated.

But those traditions are neon-signed, in-your-face examples of the cocoon I construct around myself when I watch the world around me embrace the strangest things. Man evolved to want to own the roof over his head, to pay off the debt of it, at least. Man evolved to want to get swept up in the economy, but when my head rewired itself, or as it continues to rewire, I realise I am not the sort of man everyone expects of me. And that is okay. Or I convince myself it is.

What comes next: a threat from King George about independence. Apt, truly, as I break free from the stable-enough job I held for something like nine years because I was too afraid to quit without something else lined up. It is exhausting to be rejected time and time again. My friend the other day suggested I come back from the Europe trip and become something like a dating coach for writing messages on the apps. Added context: I was helping him craft what to reply with, and he was complimenting my ideas, my thoughts. I want a fake, fraudulent job like matchmaker, like in *Materialists*. Not to lie, manipulate, deceive, but to earn money for something so specific I actually have skill in. Something I want to be alive for.

Do you have a clue what happens now?

No, King George, I am not sure I do.

I travel the world, then realise the bank needs to be replenished.

When I am halfway across the globe, so grateful I have the opportunity to live this life, I will delay thinking about the future. No, King George, I should care less about how hard it is to lead.

Just face the unknown.

Know you made the *Hamilton* fans happy with a reference.

closing statements

the return of the classic

There's always something else to be said. I'll never get tired of opening the wound of my heart and engulfing the three people—ambitious—who read this. This manifesto of a desperate clawing for clarity is an equivalent to *Untucked*, and much like *Untucked*, it's probably gotten repetitive. Whiney little child. Forever unsure of the world. Be quiet, little baby.

I drag myself through the mud to stay above water. Someone has to shove the body down into the recesses of the ocean. Sometimes I am too harsh on myself. Other times I am soft enough I don't do anything but sit here and write these projects no one really needs to experience.

I wasn't sure I would ever finish this one.

I slacked off on watching musical episodes, went travelling instead of writing about it, and contemplated whether the writing was really worth it if I only received one or so comments every now and then about it. I am so scared right now that I am wasting away to nothing but the boy who runs away.

I need someone to sponsor me so I don't have to think about all this money I am spending on my vacation to Europe, which will end soon enough after it has begun. The thrill will renew my lust for life, but will the thrill be enough to keep me breathing in the salty air, or will the thrill be the reason I replace the body? Negativity persists. Negativity will keep me awake and render me blind from staring at my phone in the darkness.

WWDD? — what would Dora do?

She would stare at the camera, at her invisible audience, and ask them,

'Do you see a certain future on the horizon?'

She would shrug, and there would come no response.

'Oh well then, Boots!' she'd say sarcastically to her monkey. 'Let's blow shit up.'

Love, Keeley

below: fashion from an exhibit at the National Gallery of Victoria



below: a mural in Maryborough



below: a slice of Black Forest tart from Tarts Anon



above: an emu and some juvenile emus at Monarto Safari Park



above: a wilting sunflower, much like the insides of my soul