

You're Shadowing Someone On Vacation

by Keeley Young

A stringy piece of lettuce falls into my lap, and for ten minutes or so I forget about it – I looked briefly, in the darkness, you know that feeling when you're eating, and you know you've dropped something. Chicken burger you paid for in a fast-food place you might not ever step foot in again, that specific spot of land, there's not much keeping me lingering in Gympie.

The burger is fine, the chips are fine, the Sprite is quickly just ice. In the backseat, I'm sandwiched between my luggage and the door. There's a birthday cake on the floor – it's packaged, in a white box, after a while I forgot it's there. I remember it now, as Haley merges to the right too quickly, and I hear the box slide so slightly.

The three of us in the car are doing that dance – eating in the dark, Clark holding a cheeseburger as Haley takes uncoordinated bites out of it while keeping her eye on the road. I've got a strange sort of bond with these two – for five years we worked together, until they both fucked off having found other jobs with the benefit of their graduations, their university degrees. A few days ago I put in more applications – more pleas for help.

They're not together. Clark knows it's a sort of joke, that he's making sure she chews her dinner out of the grip of his fingers, rather than requesting we pull over so she can make him drive. In the backseat, their tired passenger watches on and grins up at them when Haley lifts her eyes off the road for the briefest moment. It's funny how perpetually single the three of us are.

We rented a squashed-in place by the beach, sandy tracks no doubt a permanent, expected feature. We're an hour or so into darkness, but another friend of ours – Beck – drove up earlier, collected the keys, jingled them in front of us through a digital screen. I'd sat on my lunch break, eating a sausage roll, waiting for the keys to sway side to side. A taunt, it would have been. But we have the place until Monday, two full days at least of whatever the hell we think of. I hope at least for good weather.

Clark passes me some of his luggage when I return from carrying in mine. He's taller than I am, a rugby player back when – when he had the time, I suppose. Wide-shouldered and making the jokes about how the sea air might be what he needs to fight an outbreak of pimples he thinks is coming on. Haley lifts out the white box – she attempts to use her body to hide the perfect square of see-through plastic. Beck's birthday, tomorrow. Beck almost organised the whole thing, except the cake. She never worked with the three of us.

By now, it's 8:34pm and the car's locked. Everything is either scattered around the front door, or tucked in one of the bedrooms. Clark and I are sharing the room with two singles – Beck laughs off having picked the better of the room, quieter at the back of the house. 'Arrive earlier next time,' she says, mockingly, collapsing back onto the sofa in front of the television. For some reason, she's watching the football, and I close the bedroom door, shutting them all out. In the dark, I fumble for the light.

I don't know what time it is, and I worry checking my phone will wake Clark, whose breathing is steady in the bed beside mine. The overhead fan spins, drowning out or pairing with the crash of waves against the sand. Clark looks oversized in bed – I can see his silhouette in the light coming in through the louvers. Early morning, unconscious, and instead I see him in his old uniform, crossing the width of the store, just smiling at me as I glance up from slicing loaves of bread. I fall asleep again, ignoring the raft-life feeling of the mattress, threatening to float me off into the sea.

The shower is small but warm, and I wake myself up listening to water – the shower running, the ocean a constant white noise in the background. Haley runs the sink in the kitchen as she fills the kettle. Morning number one. I'm probably expected to dress down entirely for the beach lifestyle, but my wardrobe has barely changed, not that I wear formal dress on the regular. I creep back into the bedroom and Clark is still passed out, rolled on his side now. Every footstep sounds astronomical, and thunderous. I am going to wake him, I am going to wake him –

When he's awake and eating breakfast, I laugh at him – with every spoon lifted to his lips, he upends most of the cereal, letting it drown once again in the milk. Haley is rinsing out the mug in the sink, humming to herself – no one's seen Beck all morning, but there's a safe presumption she's out on the beach, high-tide, running further than any of us will walk. This is what Beck wanted for her birthday – the four of us escaping, like we were fleeing something, and no elaborate plans, no elaborate gifts, no grand surprises, no, Haley, I don't even need one of those gorgeous cakes your aunt bakes and sells, she'd said, but Haley had stopped listening.

There are gulls chasing each other, a whole colony with their flag planted on this here beach. Beck points out at one of the many boats idling in the water, and in my head, I hear her voice whispering, 'boat'. Clark is beside me, his eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses on the verge of falling apart. I want to ask him why he changed his mind last minute and came, but what's the point, he's here now. One of the seagulls struts close to us, then lifts its wings and scatters over the ocean.

Haley waves a stark white hand at me, sunscreen she hasn't rubbed in. 'Are you coming for a swim?' She asks me as if it is a question, and briefly I consider staying put in the holiday house, underneath the fan, waiting for winter to actually come again. But she's grinning, smearing the sunscreen on her neck, and I can't deny I love the warmth of what still technically feels like a summer. And I can't deny her, not when the water had kissed my toes, too, this morning, and then retreated, then kissed them again. Beck was right – she demands of nothing on her birthday. She changes into her two-piece in the bathroom. She'll be leaving tomorrow afternoon, and I don't even need to place any sort of bet on it.

Clark splashes a wave in my direction and I swallow a mouthful, because he caught me entirely off-guard. Salt and the sea. I don't even know what was keeping me gazing back at the shore. Imagine if I swallowed a fish. Beck tells us about what her partner bought her for her birthday – an early present, then, and he understands apparently this is a friend trip, and none of us can ignore that the mentions of him drive us slowly further and further away from her. He bought Beck new kitchen appliances – toaster, kettle, a sparkling white air fryer, all entirely matching like they were ordered out of one of those picture-perfect magazines. They're moving in together. Haley just smiles at me. *Be nice.*

The girls walk ahead, their conversation muted by the wind. Clark and I walk close, our conversation drifting from how the wind has picked up, to him. He's glad he could make it. I tell him we need to figure out what we're having for dinner, but it's me making conversation more than anything, filling the gap. I get scared of silences around him, even though I know I shouldn't. There's nothing to be scared of – he's this mountain of a man, sure, but I've got memories of him coming over when I've been sick, propping me up with pillows, making me food. I never complain, or tell him, no no it's fine, it's okay – he is a fantastic cook. 'How's work been lately?' he says, gripping my shoulder with his left hand. It lingers there, just that moment extra.

On the porch of the holiday rental, Haley is lingering by the door, her hand holding it ajar. She's waiting for the two of us – and there's reason, for sure. 'Beck just got a call,' she says, glancing inside. 'Are you not enjoying yourself, he said, muffled, barely.' Haley rolls her eyes. The holiday house takes on a new weight, ignoring Beck's whispered conversation coming from the back room. She chose that room so she could bail from it, sneak away, Haley had joked over her morning tea. It is always jokes. Nothing's ever felt more serious.

The little corner store has one open register – a middle-aged woman with blonde hair is all smiles as she shoves, with care, mostly, an elderly gentleman's hot chook into a reusable plastic bag. Clark and I wander the aisles. I swing the plastic basket back and forth, like a pendulum not a child's plaything, and Clark motions to what's on offer. Sausages, steak, chicken drumsticks – but the rental didn't come with a barbecue. I remember the last time I went on a date, when a short dark-haired guy leans over to pick up a packet of beef mince. The coldness of going home alone and hungry – dinner was disappointing. He had been disappointing. I might not find love, and that's okay. Clark signals, I nod, and we settle for pan-cooked sausages. And potato salad.

Clark and I don't talk much about Beck. It's complex, our relationship with her, that much is certain. Long before she began seeing Eric, she studied at university with Haley. And that was our connection – her blending in was seamless, or so it seemed, I suppose...we're not so sure anymore. 'Can we not let her ruin this?' I say, almost nervously, worried on him, on Haley, more than on her. He says, should we actually place a bet on it? Will she be gone tomorrow morning? Of course. He remembers everything.

Sizzle sounds float down the halls and Haley can be heard in the shower. Beck sits at the table, sipping from a can of Coke No Sugar. 'Don't get too close to this stove,' Clark warns me, like I'm a child, and to his credit my hand has seemed to creep its way closer and closer. He pushes a couple sausages round the pan, and I forget for a second I'm not seventeen, harbouring brief feelings for the big doofus. I ask Beck if her birthday's been uneventful enough for her, but if she's enjoyed it, still, just hopeful – and she says yes, and yes, haha, you're so careful not to tiptoe too close and hurt my feelings. But no. Thank you guys.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BECK!

hip hip hooray, three times, and she blows out the candles atop the birthday cake baked by Haley's aunt. The sausages were fine. Beck is beaming, because what she really seems to have wanted, through all the stress and the plotting and the planning, is to spend a quiet time with the three people that have stuck by her through it all – the breakups after very short relationships, the new job and its hiccups, that time her dog fled and they found him cradled, soaking wet, in some distant neighbour's arms. Happy birthday, Beck, I think to myself, as the festivities settle down even just a little, as she slices into the cake. I look at Clark. He beams at me. Wordless, I think we're saying, *how worth it was all of this?*

Clark hands me the final plate to wash and I mime dropping it haphazardly into the sink. He gives me a stern look but it's playful too, he's always been so fucking cheeky around me. While I scrub the plate, he leans in and says, 'Thank you for not being pissed at me,' and I don't know what he's talking about...well, I do, but I'd never grieved over it. It's just good to see his face. He walks around me to dry off the final plate, this all a very delicate two-person operation, and his hand brushes against my thigh. I glance at him. Wordless, again. He leans in and kisses me.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and it's a message from Dom. A friend, I feel compelled to reiterate, remnant trauma from an ex that would peer over my shoulder looking for signs I was or would be unfaithful. He asks me how my day was, very polite, and I look up to notice Haley out on the porch, a glass of wine in her hand. I reply to him, cutting any mentions to the birthday girl. She's sat in front of the television again, tuned into Channel 10. There's a repetition too of her name in my head. Beck Beck Beck Beck Beck Beck. Like a headache. Dom is three little dots, bouncing up and down, like he was in the story he told me of the time he fooled around with a fifty-year-old on a waterbed. And then he is: *when you get back down here, I need to take you for dinner, while my schedule isn't so messed.*

A brief distraction, then: I head into the bedroom I am currently sharing with Clark and plug in my phone to charge when I hear footsteps behind me. He traces a hand around my side, it is soft, unexpected. Unexpectedly intimate. 'Hi,' he says, and I crane my neck to look at him. It's a cruel sort of loneliness to want to ask a man if he's been drinking when he shows you a sudden burst of affection. Everything gets buried. Soon enough things indeed do die. But Clark has been surprising me lately.

In a heap on the tile of the bathroom are the clothes I wore today, and to its right and ten centimetres away, are his. Everything is wordless because he understands me, and I understand him – we're not blind, there's always been that hinting of tension between us. Except I suppose we have been blind. No use lying to yourself. I flick the shower on, water going from warm to boiling hot, and beckon him in with my eyes. Or my stance might do something, too, me dripping like a melting candle, stark naked. Our lips find each other. His tongue is in my mouth when I remember Haley would be the one to notice. But she wouldn't care.

Awkwardly, one towel wraps the two of us together, drying our behinds. 'Can I explain myself?' he says, combing the wet hair off my forehead. He'd called me the day before we left to explain, but here with intimacy and tenderness, he explains: he almost hadn't come. Never was it for fear of seeing you, he says, and there's a pained expression on his face. There was an argument with Beck. He had called her out for how she acts – how she pretends she is better than thou, how she is waning in her friendship with Clark and me. How we rarely see her but for birthdays, and even then. But...life is short, he says, kissing my forehead.

The first time I hung around Clark outside of work I was eighteen, and he was a year younger. Him being younger than I am makes me feel mature, somewhat, barely. Constantly he appears older than he is. Anyway. We were alone for the first time, you know. Not in that way. It was never like that back then, it was just comfortable, it's natural to just assume everybody around you is un-queer and remarkably not attracted to you in the slightest. We were at a party, so *alone* meant in some corner tucked away with a few backs turned to us. Clark was drinking, but he was staggering it – he told me this before he downed the last of his beer. We didn't talk about work once.

He says *thanks for not being pissed at me* for how we left things the last time we were intimate. Not sex, keep your mind flatly on the footpath, or the road, but tonight wasn't our first kiss, our first embrace. Haley threw a party for New Year's Eve, decorating her place with silver and gold streamers, filling plastic flutes with champagne, hiring out a karaoke machine – in a way, she told me, whispering when she'd pulled me aside, it's themed around the very beginning of *High School Musical*, you know when they awkwardly first meet and sing with each other. Clark and I didn't sing together. I kept making eye contact, little glances that would linger, the whole time I sung *Losing My Religion* by R.E.M. I don't know why. I wasn't drunk. Clark staggers his drinking – his father's an alcoholic, they don't keep in contact much. I guess time came to collect some debt off us.

The first kiss was passionate, intense, I felt his hand snake underneath my shirt and sit there on my skin, warm and soft. He would inch me closer to him with a tug, the hand on my lower back a guide. We were in the bathroom, him pressed up against a wall of tiles, and he withdrew for a moment, gazing at me, and I anticipated words, I anticipated some bonkers out-of-nowhere confession, but he didn't speak. And I thought, fuck of course this is that great big regret that completely kills a friendship, I should have pushed him off me, but there was no rage on his face. Clark brushed the hair off my forehead and kissed me again. I thought I was sixteen again, making up nonsensical stories like, *we've been single and miserable all this time because it was building to this moment*. The start of something new.

But I woke up in the morning alone, with four unread text messages from gay boys I just call friends, and one I'd thought ghosted me two weeks before. Clark was a little distant for a week or so. It's work, he said, and truthfully he owed me no explanation, no rhyme or reason for pretending we had solved our every little problem that evening. We had solved nothing, of course. So I had discovered he was a fantastic kisser. So what. Right? He apologised in time. *I've ghosted a part of us, in a way.* Clark was three dots, and then he was a vibration – *do you have time to call?* His voice echoed out over speaker as I sat there by the window, watching a crow perched on the neighbour's shingled roof. 'Beck's planning a birthday getaway,' he said, and it felt like a distraction more than anything.

It is all so complex and complicated. I can't be pissed at you for this, I say, wordlessly, into the crook of his neck. Here, on the couch in the holiday house, in the middle of the night long after Beck and Haley have gone to bed. I can't be pissed at him for this *anymore*. The truth. Kisses can be ignored. Misplaced, like socks. The last thing I can expect from him right now is some perfect romantic relationship, which is followed by an engagement, and a wedding, and a honeymoon, and him realising it was all just because I was *there* for him. Be in the moment, then.

I don't fall asleep in his arms, I don't dream of him, I just sleep and I just dream. Or I don't, I haven't remembered a dream of mine in months. Clark is on his side when I wake in the morning, sunlight pooling down on him. If he woke now, he would grin at me, and I'd know it wasn't another cruel imagining that we danced with one another, him spinning me out, him lifting me in the air like nobody is putting baby in the corner. (no we didn't dance; this is a metaphor.) I put my mind at ease by walking to the kitchen, peeling a banana, and tearing through it with my teeth.

Last night, when the initial pang of romanticism wore off, Clark and I sat there cross-legged facing each other on the couch. ‘It doesn’t matter that you kissed me first,’ I said, pausing, ‘I shouldn’t have assumed it was on you to say something, because you had made a move.’ Wrong of me to assume I was blameless for all that weird, strange semi-silence. The absence of talking about the THING. And I sound so childish for the phrasing, but it is honesty, it’s the stripped back word and the THING, all capitalised because one little kiss caused more. Caused him cradling my cock in his hand because he *didn’t know where else to place his hand*. It’s funny.

‘When I called you, apologising and being careful not to, like, promise you the world or anything, we agreed we didn’t want to be together,’ he said, and it wasn’t cold, and it wasn’t guarded or closed off. There was no alert awareness that we wanted to be together – so he paused, last night, thinking things through. ‘I don’t want a label,’ I said, and it wasn’t cold, and it wasn’t guarded or closed off.

Communication is important, and it should be said that anything healthy thrives off active participation in the conversation – jargon talk, sure, but the concept is there, and you understand it. Where’s the sense in misplacing kissing and ignoring facts when there’s no harm in a relationship just a little more passionate than it was? If we communicate. If I tell him all I care about is his company. If he tells me people always rush him around or abandon him roadside otherwise. So before I sound too much like walking therapy, one last note from last night: just keep on caring for him.

Beck is tying up the laces of her sneakers, stretching out her legs, overplaying. Except there's no audience, and I'm even unsure she knows I'm standing in the kitchen, watching behind her back, silent and still. Morning number two. I sip from a mug of warm coffee, one sugar, and I hear Haley's voice waking him up, shaking him gently but abruptly, a muted alarm clock. More of a vibration. Beck bounds to her feet like the character selection screen of an arcade combat machine and smiles, an unsettling sight. 'I'm going in an hour and a half,' she says, disappearing down the hall. *Of course she is.*

There's a hose round the side of the rental, and I spray my feet until the sand dissolves into the sharp black gravel and rock. I didn't walk on the beach long, long enough though to see two overexcited pups leap toward me, tugging on their leashes. Heaving open the front door, there's Clark sitting at the compact dining table in the kitchen, biting into a square of toast smothered in Vegemite. 'Morning,' he says, extending an arm with toast in hand. I mock leaning in to swallow whole the remainder of the piece, and the expression left on his face...he's gorgeous when he's feigning shock, horror, terror, his whole face overcome with faux dread. Haley's witnessed this odd mime, a French-Australian blur, and shakes her head. 'You two are weird as hell.'

The three of us are huddled in front of the bathroom mirror – Haley is smearing sunscreen under her eyes, around her nose, down the lines of her neck. Clark and I are paying close attention, as if she were teaching us how to apply our makeup imperfectly perfectly. In reality: she's reminding us why we cannot let Beck ruin the weekend. 'As soon as she leaves, I'm going for a swim in the ocean again, I don't care,' she says, pissed, understandably. I listen to footsteps by the front door. The light thump of luggage dropped down on wooden floor. 'I swear to god if I see a single post from her this afternoon about that pretty boyfriend, I'll lose my mind.'

9:30am, and Beck is abandoning the birthday weekend she planned for herself. Thankful for the second car, we huddle near the front door to see her off. Clark, Haley, and I. *Did you enjoy your birthday*, we say, although it feels like a pointless endeavour at this point. Beck is thankful/grateful/touched/glad she could see us and spend the weekend with us. No one really bothers to count the hours, how cut short of a Sunday her departure is. I hug her and I start thinking of how little I actually hug her. When the door is clicked closed behind her, we glance at one another like there is some sick inside joke hanging in the air, stagnant, upside like a bat. Beck drives away.

Haley disappears briefly underwater before she surfaces once more, beginning to ring out her hair. On the shore, Clark and I linger. His feet are buried in the sand, two soldier crabs startled by sound. 'You know I breathe easier thinking you would never want to know what dating me is like,' I say, laughing at myself, mostly. Clark looks at me with a scrunched-up face. The sun's in his eyes, sure, and I wonder where his sunglasses are, and I figure there's something underneath the expression too. Things get caught in your wrinkles, you're getting them even though you're only twenty-one, or twenty-two. 'I'd fucking marry you, you idiot. But I don't have the money for a divorce lawyer.'

It's an old joke – two people could marry comfortably but eventually they would tire of each other for some reason or another. *They're old friends* – they can't be helplessly in love. But the idea of being old, and sagging, and helpless makes me gag. And maybe I would tire of things being *reasonable*. It must be the wrong word, because I wouldn't, wouldn't get exhausted from being comfortable. It's the endurance of marriage – one day he'll wane and get rid of me. Toss me overboard on a Polynesian Islands cruise. Hello, it's me, swimming with the fishes.

A red-headed child chases after a black-and-white dog yapping with every bounce. Haley whips sand into her face, disturbing the dune to retrieve her towel. She squints her eyes at us. ‘Did you two kiss again?’ she says, and I wait for her to correct herself...did you two fuck yet? *No*. Wrapping the towel around her abdomen, Haley doesn’t wait for a response, finding the well-worn path of sand that cuts through the grass back out to the road. I lean in and plant a kiss on his cheek. The little red-headed boy bends down to hold slimy seaweed in his hands. He squeals with delight.

The room at the end of the hall sits vacant and distant, as if the rest of the holiday house picked itself up on little plastered feet and inched closer toward the shoreline. The room is the last of Beck – it might smell of her, or otherwise a corner of the bedsheet might lay untucked. Or there might be a ghost image of her, leaning against the window with her phone to her ear, calling out to the void. And someone is answering, she’s listening, they’re right, she should leave, she should flee. Clark comes up behind me and places both of his palms on my shoulders, a weird and soft comfort. Something to keep me from drifting off into the sea salt atmosphere. ‘It’s not like she’s dead,’ I mumble to myself.

For lunch, we nibble on sliced cheese, crackers, and French Onion dip, and Haley pours herself another glass of wine and says she has earned it. Our phones collectively vibrate – Beck has messaged the group. *Stopped for a break. What sort of pointless shit is this. Thanks for celebrating with me, it’s a lovely place, hey.* As if she left the keys in hand, as if she were a finely-dressed real estate agent for the coastal town. Not a deserter, not at all. ‘Don’t be petty,’ Haley says, when I make a joke about being passive aggressive. Or about being aggressive, too. I look at Clark with that foolish laughing grin of mine. He’s biting into a cracker. All this food’s hiding his frown.

‘Clark, it’s too fucking hot,’ I shout out from underneath him, squirming round. I was lying there uninterrupted, replying to a message on my phone, when he dived onto the bed on top of me, my lungs retracting. I go to bite his neck, playfully, semi-aggressively, and he counters swiftly, moving his head at the perfect moment. On the tiny single bed, I flail my arms out, banging one palm against the white wall. ‘Haley’s going to think we’re fucking,’ I whisper, making full eye contact with him. His laughter erupts and travels across the ocean, finding ears amongst fishermen (and women), and whales, and little plankton, if they do indeed have ears. Instead of kissing him, I worry about kissing him too much.

The three of us walk a concrete path to the boat ramp, weaving behind fishing rods and the amateur fisher-people carefully threading on bait. They’re in clusters on a jagged black-rock wall, casting out into the depths – or the shallows, I can’t be certain of the depth of the water, not from this angle with the heating sun reflecting off sparkling rays. At the boat ramp, Clark keeps an eye on an older gentleman reversing his boat in, perfectly straight. He shushes me when I begin to speak. Haley and I have too much fun irritating him.

Little blue boats bob in the distance, the picture of a life here. This slice. Although I am not sure the word is paradise, when tourists line the caravan park, and then you remember you’re just a tourist too, making noise, taking up space. Clark and I sit on the grass of the park, getting crawled on by tiny ants, getting circled by this one annoying piece of shit fly. Haley is somewhere else – the bathroom. ‘Who invented having to work, having to have a job and provide?’ I say, sounding like an old-timey comedian making the same sort of joke for the fiftieth time. It is comfortable here, pretending this won’t all end. Even everything with Clark. Especially everything with Clark. He laughs, he sighs. ‘You’re not stuck there forever, James.’

I didn't work either of their final shifts, their final days – it was strangely coincidental, or strangely cruel. The promise of freedom – it sounds tacky. I messaged Haley when I knew she would have clocked out one last time. Three little dots, then: *fuck that place, I'm free*. We ordered pizza and ate on the floor, *Frozen* on the big screen. Not for metaphor's sake, not accidentally – Haley wanted to belt out whenever Idina Menzel sang. She stirred round the Coke mixing in with the bourbon. If I let her, Haley would have torn the uniform into floating-in-the-wind strips and dangled them lifelessly over a trash can blaze. Clark hadn't asked for anything special: let's just have dinner, to celebrate. He'd gotten a new job.

How can I not just look at him, stare at him, question everything? Embedded in my DNA is that want and that lust for romance, for a comfort more than what he has offered me as the friend that lifts me out of depressive episodes crueller than he thought I had in me, and even just simply, smiled and waved across departments. No, I haven't fallen madly in love, because I don't sit within the narrative of a sweeping romance. I already love Clark – the kissing and the nakedness and the jokes about ruining what's healthy come flooding in, and I don't know am I imagining a tsunami knocking me off my feet? Mouthfuls of salt water and the seaweed plastered against my forehead and covering my eyes. Platonic love can expand out like a rung sponge. I don't know if my heart is retaining much love for Beck.

‘Where have you gone?’ He says, us sitting there on the grass. Clark has collected a few strands of green in the palm of his hand, but I guess I drifted off, off with the fairies. It’s such a cute phrasing – there you are, dancing around their wings, frolicking, sipping alcohol mixed in with pixie dust. ‘Oh. I was just thinking about when we went out for dinner after you got your new job,’ I say, smiling, spotting Haley out of the corner of my eye. Just the two of us, it was. So intimate! and yet of course I never imagined we would be here, weighing out what he needs, what I need. Was there a single candle in that restaurant? Probably not, fire hazard. It was a Thursday night. I scanned that awfully long menu and said to him, ‘Do you think one of the fifty pasta dishes would be delicious?’

Brief vacations end and you return to what was, pretending you’ve changed as a person, as if the compact holiday house was a rejuvenating spa with treatments for your mental illnesses and your silly obsession with love. (You tell yourself, the love thing’s been under control since you accepted that fate of perpetual singledom, remember.) I recount a fragment of that night to Clark, as if his memory is foggy and blurred, or he took stock of it any less than I did. *For now the holiday hasn’t ended.* He thinks I hang onto the past – just sit in this moment, James, you’re either sitting in the past or propelling your body forward. I understand it, I think. It’s too grand – this whole big world isn’t conditioning me to always see some big picture of a thing, and yet it is. Clark rests a hand on my knee.

He doesn't retract it when Haley curtsies down onto the ground, splaying her legs out in front of her. Weirdly, he doesn't. Weirdly, she makes no comment – and I wonder, through how uncomplicated and un-anything we are, if I need to find a moment to say anything to her. A bloke wearing loud slapping thongs swings around the catch of his day, which is not to say much – the fish is half the length of his arm, and fat on a plastic bag if anything. Haley stares out at him, or otherwise the blue and blue horizon. 'I'm not even keeping my data on. I don't care if she sends us a million messages or even just one.' Clark moves his hand off my knee, then.

I remind myself I need to go wander out on the sand at low tide and search for hermit crabs. Or search for something that isn't ruminating on human relationships, because I am wearing myself down being high in spirits one moment and then dull and drab the next. I try to block the fragments of Beck's voice in my head. I can feel the skin on the back of my neck burning. Nothing's so relevant or important to throw you off balance this weekend. It's a mantra and I'm not the sort to believe in them or repeat them but I can say it once and then dig my toes in the sand, sweep a hand up to shield my eyes, and go, look at this slice, this cut-out non-paradise that I can't call mine, it's just a borrowed thing, but I needed it.

Haley waves out across the sands – she's a beacon. We meet halfway, and for a moment it's quiet between us, the soft hellos, a comment thrown off-course about how lovely it is out here. And I know I should say something, anything, but I get tangled in facts and fictions and I settle on asking her this: 'Did they charge you a fortune to get your car fixed? It sounds healthier now.' I'm not a car person. I'm making conversation about something I'll hear and process and forget about in time, but instead of the caw of gulls I hear that disturbing thump – it's disturbing now because my mind is making it so – because I don't know a lot about cars, but it was honestly mostly fine. And maybe like everything they overcharged her.

We walk back towards the rental, and she is telling me about the jerk that almost took her out right after her car had been serviced. *Idiot wasn't watching where he was going.* It was three weeks ago, ish, someone near reversed into my car in the parking lot of a shopping centre – I was watching them, walking the fading pitch, craning my neck at an obscene angle. *Careful, idiot.* Haley glances over at me. ‘Anyway. I was thinking we leave semi-early tomorrow, so we can stop in at that place we’re always drooling over on Instagram.’ My tongue practically falls out of my mouth. Some things just aren’t related, actually.

Stop reading this for an hour or so, I don’t know, just go on a mini-vacation of your own because you need it or deserve it or want it. You’re lingering on waiting to see where the story goes. There are checkpoints across the board, across the scape. We all need some time to just fucking let loose and realise eating our problems and our stomachs for breakfast is unhealthy, why are we having so much food. They hype breakfast, they do, and it’s delicious, breaking the fast. But. I guess I can’t keep myself stalled too long. That day, I sat in the car, staring at the hunk of metal beside me that belonged to the idiot. All staring does is waste time.

But reading. Reading people can change things, and leaning against the doorway of our shared bedroom is Clark, not a Ken/Romeo/Clyde but just him. This Clark is reading me. I look slightly up at him, the small height difference between us. ‘Hi,’ I say, not giving a single iota of a care whether Haley sees, whether anyone sees, as I stand so close to him, I’m using up more energy than I had a second ago, to not shove him backwards and, yes, hopefully not impale him on an ivory-white bedpost and instead disappear under the sheets with him. But I don’t touch him.

I think I worry any sort of sex with Clark would mean he could shake me off with ease, you know, post-nut clarity. Any handjob, blowjob, frottage, sixty-nineing, anal, whatever other sort of sexual intimacy he could have in mind – it would be like clicking the gears and Clark would stop. Dead in his tracks. And why shouldn't he, when the passion dies out, reverse psychology because it's an abundance not a famine, and his sticky white cum is everywhere! And I – I'll understand, because vacations end, and ours was a fling without labels, of course I'll never hate you Clark you mean the world to me I never wanted to actually be with you I told you –

I don't even know where that came from. *Jesus.*

Metaphorically, I dust off the dirt from my pants and I realise Clark is talking to me. 'Did you have a good walk out there?' I recount to him what I saw in the shallow water, like a rock pool but surrounded by sand instead. Beautiful shells. Ugly shells. Greys and whites and creams and brown the colour of milk chocolate. 'I think I need to wash all this sand off me...' I say, wandering off toward the bathroom, glancing back at him periodically. Clark understands, look at that face. He can read me, I suppose. He locks the door behind him, and I help him out of his shirt.

Clark is kissing my neck, and I completely forget that a second ago I had absolutely any stresses about any of this. I entertain the thought of moving too suddenly and slipping in the shower and cracking my skull open on the tiles, and then shake it free from my head like a falling coconut. We don't have sex. There could be some passionate, intensely-graphic erotica scene, my face pressed against the glass – but this shower is tiny, in actuality, and I feel so boxed in, there is barely room for the two of us to really clean ourselves off, you know, like I wanted to, coming in here. I laugh and he just stares at me, like why are you laughing so hard? I soap up my butt crack, staring so intensely at him. I laugh and laugh.

As I pull up my underwear, strangely I feel like we did have sex – there’s an awkward silence, and I can’t decide whether it’s my fault or his. ‘Clark?’ He lifts his head from his phone, smiles at me, and waits, so patiently. I guess I have to remind myself that he’s been my friend for however many years so why would he suddenly change the way he acts around me? It feels silly. Like such a clear as day thing shouldn’t be overshadowed by the THING. I wonder how my smile looks to Clark. Then: I shouldn’t care, either. I’m smiling, yeah. ‘You’re so fucking hot, and I’m real glad I can say that seriously without having to leave a *no homo* trailing behind it.’

We’re eating dinner and I lean over the table to grab the saltshaker. Impolite, probably, I should’ve asked someone to pass it to me, but I don’t care, or mind. Haley smirks and asks for it once I’m done, and I think we collectively agree the fish and chips we collected from the little shop next door to the little general store are desperately lacking in seasoning. And we waited half an hour for it too, but it was apparently ‘relatively not busy’ when we came in to order and the employee smiled at us with yellowed teeth and the overall appearance of a chain-smoker. No, I shouldn’t generalise. The fish and chips are disappointing, though. And we don’t have any tartare, but we make do with tomato sauce and an incredible dusting of salt. I think about every little grain of salt. Our final dinner here and we’re cackling over how messy and uninspiring it is, and you just try not to feel like, sitting at this table, you’re the messiest and the most uninspiring here, are you this soggy plate of fish and chips after all? It’s not that serious.

None of us have ‘checked’ on Beck since that text message. We assume she got home perfectly fine. We assume her boyfriend wrapped his tanned arms around her and said, convincingly enough, that he missed her so very much, enough to buy her another birthday present. And this time: it’s a bottle of alcohol, probably wine because he wants to be classy. They post about it on Instagram.

The sun begins to set out there, not over the water so much as behind a few houses, staining the sky.

Clark, Haley, and I are squeezed side by side on the top step of the staircase leading to the porch of the holiday house, and I wait for someone to slightly move and for someone else to squeal out in the ouch of being slammed up against the side railing. I just accept the squeezing of my arms. Not everything will be perfect and romantic like the movies, you know, you just live in moments like these, where you're comfortable even when physically maybe you'd prefer to stand up and sit on the bottom step, at the very least. *James*. You hear it in your head. *You knew you would be ready to leave since you arrived and unloaded your luggage from the car.*

Waking up in the morning, I already feel the house edging me out of it. It's a warm morning, barely a breeze blows inside. Clark is already out of bed when I roll over, sheets smoothed down in his bed, that I suppose had ceased being his the moment he tidied it. It's been like five days since I've masturbated and if I wasn't worried someone would burst in shouting I was sleeping in too long, I would probably take the chance, with him not there ready to accuse me of being fucking creepy for jerking off while he got some shut-eye. I clamber out of bed, then. Morning number three. One last shower. The sound of crashing waves drowns out a neighbour, a little child wailing at the top of their lungs – back home, what will there be to drown out children? I'll listen to music, like I always do. Everything will just be returning to its cycle, and the feeling of sand between my toes will be phantom.

Everything is packed away in the car. Unsurprisingly, it barely looks like anything changed – the duffel bags are lighter, dirty clothes are shoved into plastic bags Haley thought we probably needed, and did, but the space beside my backseat is still packed in. The birthday cake box is gone, though. Folded down and thrown away. Haley went and bought aluminium foil from the store and wrapped the half we didn't eat in it. 'I need foil anyway,' she says, swinging it around before tossing it in a green Woolies bag.

I'm bored in the car, listening to some Billy Joel, and there is a new post from Beck – new, as in, from last night, some hours ago as the bottom of the post says. There she is, posed with her partner and the kitchen appliances he bought her – the toaster, kettle, the sparkling white air fryer, it's all there. It's actually kind of hilarious to look at, how predictable she can be. And I still care for her, as a friend should, but...you start to see your friends in new lights, harsher spotlights, when they just appear so fake and impractical. Bending like a straw. The caption is some cutesy bullshit about how she's grateful to have him in her life, how he's always there for her, and you churn your stomach because where's a post like that for Haley, or for Clark – who I guess she's probably still pissed with – or even for me, not that I really crave the attention of one. But. It's partners. They do seep with attention, and just who knows how healthy it all is.

I took one moment, before we locked the place up, to say some sort of goodbye. Really it didn't feel like a big moment or anything. I didn't grow fond of the rental so much as I had a couple naked showers with Clark in its bathroom, laughed a lot with Haley in its kitchen, and at its front door, watched Beck do what she's becoming synonymous for, which is leave early, and with the bigger goodbye. Clark cranes his head to look at me sitting there in the backseat, and he says, 'We should do this more often. Shove you in between all our luggage.' And I give him the snarkiest grin I can summon from inside me, and Haley doesn't take her eyes off the road, but she's composing herself, trying to not burst out into laughter again. I don't mention the post from Beck, I'm certain they'll see it later, when they want to, or really, when they will, when they've stumbled upon it just trying to look at touristy locations and what their friends from high school are doing, and hot men, I guess, now that we know Clark isn't afraid to touch another man's cock and make out passionately with me, very much a man, and hopefully a hot one.

This, this is my breakfast, an overflowing plate of waffles and bacon and eggs and spinach and hollandaise sauce and those sprigs of some sort of herb that I push to the side of the plate to get to the main attraction. Are my eyes bigger than my stomach? No, I don't think so – no one ever really said you couldn't have your cake and eat it too. Clark has hollandaise in his moustache. Haley is sipping a chocolate milkshake out of a straw and I realise that girl is always so thirsty, but it's not exactly a new development, not really. I want to see her happier, but she shrugs it off, not the idea of being happier, but the idea of...falling in love, I think. I want to drink this chocolate milkshake and not gain any weight, she would say, if I asked now, threatening to ruin this pretty perfect moment of just enjoying being with each other before she's back at work, and I am too.

Romantic relationships are complicated, and delicate, and not always for everyone, well that's something I've been learning. I guess I could see myself one day in something healthy and stable and I won't tie any man down with it now, not Clark, who I would never want to hurt, never. Life's short and yet it isn't – if I want to spend a year and a half figuring myself out some more, I can, and maybe I've not moved on from this job yet, and maybe friends with benefits is all this will ever be, I don't know, do I care then? I tap his shoe with mine, enough for him to glance over at me, grinning. So many things are in looks, brief stares, it's how you can read a person. I want to say to him: *I'm glad you came, and you don't need to kiss me again.* But why am I so desperate to ruin a good moment? Like nothing is so serious. I'll never be in some corny romance movie where this ending would've been the two of us realising it's unhealthy to not commit to each other. *Nah.* It's unhealthy to stumble drunkenly into a relationship with one of your closest friends because you think old movies tell you what you should do, I reckon.

Remember when you're a kid and you stare out the window counting cars of a certain colour, or you play I Spy With My Little Eye and try to guess shit starting with the letter L, or the letter M, or, woah, now here's a trickier one, the letter Q. I think I saw so many more punch buggies as a kid – yellow Volkswagen Beetles that were somehow worthy of leaning over and punching your sibling in the arm over. Kid-on-kid violence with a reason, honestly, and it was never not fun, unless you were the one constantly getting whacked in the arm. Every now and then I glance up from my phone to look out the window, see the sorts of cars that are in this stand-still of traffic with Haley, Clark, and I, and there's no real excitement out of the window now, is there? Oh, that's an interesting sign, and it's gone already. Oh well.

So the holiday is almost over, or its over, really, because you're not having a blast in the backseat of the car, thinking about all you're going home to. You said goodbye to the crabs, to the gulls, to the sea air and the pigeons that landed in the yard of the neighbour's place, because they had a birdfeeder that seemingly always had feed in it. There were ibis, too, and you'll see them again, at least you know that. Coming home from a vacation is an exhausting feeling, even though you can't wait to sleep in your own bed again. I can't imagine I'll be inviting Clark to spend the night too often, we have lives and we're busy and we're not in any sort of relationship beyond the friendship that I reiterate to myself, I never want to fuck up. Drinking wine with Haley while we put some solid distance between the woes over Beck and ourselves won't really feel like we're beachfront unless we drive to another beachfront, and even then...it won't be there, it won't be there.

Fuck it. You need more holidays; you know you do.