

CHIAROSCURO

by Keeley Young

PART ONE

DARKEST

In the pencil house, there was utter darkness. It was nearing midnight, but where a video game would have displayed a string of zzzz's like rising steam, no one here was asleep. Tobias banged the torch back to life. He was sitting on the floor in the den, the torchlight aimed upwards at the ceiling, spilling a dome glow. Enough to see in front of him—Gavin smiled back, brushing the hair out of his eyes. Jokingly they had talked about *going insane* enough to trim the fringe, a signature of the boy Tobias was still adjusting to calling his boyfriend. His partner, because he was in his thirties, not on the playground. They had been dating for three months now. Enough to have met the roommates, although this transition was not so severe as meeting the parents, unless you were fussed with by Isobel. Everyone had welcomed Gavin rather graciously, and this was the umpteenth time he was spending the night—it, of course, aligned with a thrashing storm that tripped the grid and caused the neighbourhood to lose power. They had been without electricity for five hours.

‘Time for scary stories to tell in the dark?’

Tobias pointed the torch at the roof in the corner of the room, waiting, or willing, something spooky to crawl into the light. Even a spider. There were no noticeable bugs in the house, although a week ago Adam lifted an eight-legged beast outside into the garden with a Tupperware lid. He was calm the entire time, unlike the other three roommates, who bolted as far from it as possible, peering through hands covering faces, the high art of fearing spiders so specifically when they were inside your place. Tobias liked them behind walls of glass, alive at the zoo, dead and pinned in museums. When he was younger, on a trip with his parents to the museum, he became enamoured with one spider in particular, its legs crinkled, creased, not spread out fantastically like the other spiders. It more notably looked *dead*—spiders do not become collectable trophies at death, perfectly splayed, not at least when they are killed by a pesticide in the house. His father, unlike Adam, killed spiders. Either he saw them lurking, statuesque on the pale beige wall, and went kamikaze with his white-knuckled hand, or else he waited, the thought of the creature dead lingering in his mind, soon to be expelled when the spider ingests too much of the scattered poison. There it would be. Crumpled. Legs making the letter c.

The spider in the museum was part of a display about household pests, of sorts. Insects, bugs, arachnids you were likely to find in your very own home. Little eight-or-nine-year-old Tobias could have become depraved from staring at this ordinary specimen, not particularly beautiful like the pinned butterflies over on the other wall, the Chequered Swallowtail, Imperial Jezebel, the Cairns Birdwing. They say a serial killer begins first by becoming surgeon on animals, on smaller, easier to catch prey. That is a scary story to tell in the blanketed dark. Is there potential within everyone to become a

murderous creature of the night because of a little interest in the macabre? Or is eight too old to **start** slicing up puppies?

Tobias and Gavin sat in the den, the house's study, with their spotlight reflected onto the ceiling, and they chatted about the banal: the weather. The rain had begun to subside, becoming a minor patter song on the tiled roof, the wind less thrashing. Earlier, when the power first circuited, they watched out the windows as neighbouring trees whipped round, colliding with brick walls, echoing their thumps indoors. It was an overwhelming sound, frightening, and Tobias held Gavin not because they were fearing for their lives—cyclones happened north—but because what was love for otherwise, than to seek comfort, to distract from the truth. Blackouts happened. It was the first in this house, with these four people living under one roof here, but it could happen again.

'We could have a scary shower in the dark together?' Tobias offered, winking, hoping his wink was entirely seen in the light of the flashlight.

Gavin smirked, inching closer. 'We showered separately earlier, when there was still sunlight.' The gap between them was closing, but they had to avoid the light burning and shining in their eyes. Their knees hardly touched, and even moving the torch out of the centre of the room still made the scene something of an adjustment. Up-lights instead of down. 'Let's preserve water.'

'That's what people say when they want to shower together, not when they are denying the opportunity and laughing in my face about it.' The reaction was not harsh, it was playful, and the two men glanced at one another with smiles on their faces. Perhaps they would have moved to the bed if they were in Tobias' bedroom, but neither moved an inch now, taking the other in. Their relationship was blossoming. They had met where most queer people met, on a dating app, not the slimy furball beginning with the letter G, but one more civilised, where they both felt comfortable getting to know each other until they had a first date. It was wholesome, and rather sweet—they met by the water, the brown forgivable for the company, the Brisbane River known to be rather an uninteresting colour most of the time. Tobias and Gavin spent most of their stroll looking at one another, at least, and the path ahead to avoid cyclists, idiots on electric scooters, and small children. After a while they got dinner and it was then, finally, the first time Tobias spoke about how he had been on a reality show—it's insane, right, he said, feeling insane talking about it, because by now they were inching towards another season of the show and becoming inherently even more obscure. Gavin did not watch it, hardly knew it was still airing, but he could have said that to ease Tobias' stress. Who could say. They talked very little about the show, its relevance to *the now*, their date, almost zero. What mattered was getting to know one another, and everything felt correct, the way wanting to be with someone was.

He liked having Gavin in the house.

Even without the lights on.

‘Okay, no shower,’ Tobias said, teasingly. ‘How do you kill time with no power, hardly any light, and a handful of roommates which negates the idea of dangerous running up and down the stairs naked?’

Gavin glanced around the room at the useless items, except of course, the alcohol, which could be useful despite the situation. Neither of them proposed to drink, and neither did, but the hour was growing later and the obvious answer was to go to sleep. Give in, but not give up. This was not a challenge, to stay awake while you waited out for the light to come back, although now Tobias tried to predict whether any of the lights had been left on before the power went out, or if anyone in the house had accidentally flicked on a switch, forgetting nothing would come from it.

The two of them sat there in the den buying time, but no one in the house slept. Not yet.

Ophelia closed the bathroom door behind her and looked at Jared still splayed out on the bed, naked as the day he was born. She had slipped back into her underwear, but still felt bare, exposed, cold. Like withering-away rabbits, it was the second time that night they had sex, and although sex with him was distinctly *not boring*, Ophelia hoped he would not ask for a third go-around. She crawled back into bed and hugged the sheets to her body, nestling herself against Jared for warmth.

After whatever shite disaster had happened with Adam, and the moving on, meeting Jared had shifted the course of things. She started waiting tables, it was employment and paid an income, but Jared worked there too, in the kitchen. This had been a month or so after the trip down to Sydney. Ophelia’s grand scheme of moving to Melbourne collapsed, frustratingly, because having dreams was frustrating. Watching them crumble. Having to be the adult. Although the duty was more or less Tatianna’s, she who severed ideas, she reminded Ophelia it might be more realistic to build her future first before abandoning everything for the bright, shiny pebble at the bottom of the wellspring. Trust human beings to change their minds. Ophelia tore her hair out for a handful of nights—this is my life, Tat, where do you get off thinking you know better than I do—but a handful of days later she got a phone call from a restaurant she sent in an application for. The interview process was harmless, or she was fascinating, well-spoken, a dream, and it was an uninteresting job that asked for her tax file number.

Jared flirted early, the way heterosexual romance is. He asked her out one night after the two of them had finished their shifts, making little jokes about having a coffee over breakfast because they would be working nights for the rest of eternity. If she squinted he reminded her of Adam—dark hair, white, handsome—but why was she squinting? Only if someone had snatched away her glasses. Velma Dinkley patting around on the carpet. *Jinkies*.

‘You’re freezing,’ Jared said, wrapping his arms around her body.

‘I’m fine.’ Ophelia responded. ‘I have to put something on to go downstairs.’

Jared leaned in and kissed her neck. ‘Why go downstairs, there’s nothing you need in bed except my company and this overwhelming darkness and my hard—’

Ophelia peeled away from him, laughing, not taking him completely serious but not appalled either. ‘They say men are horny, and they are never wrong, we aren’t going to bring back the power through the repeated vibration of my, uh...down there.’ She pointed to her underwear, a fashionably-ordinary pair but not unattractive, because when she invited Jared over, a rare night off they both shared coincidentally on the night of a torrential storm, she wanted him to at least be semi-enthusiastic. The truly unexciting underwear could be for practical days, working shift, going to the doctor, getting a pap smear, being around your ex. Ophelia did not own *sexy* underwear, or not anymore—she tossed out most of it after her time on reality television because there is something inherently humbling about the general public having thoughts on how you look in it.

‘Was that a trash joke?’ He glanced at her with concerned eyes, and she waved him off, smirking, as she collected up the discarded clothes and started to get dressed again. Before they realised the storm would be entrapping them in the pencil house, Ophelia and Jared had planned to take a bus into the heart of the city and act like devoted idiots in love, scampering through the streets, preferably eating slices of takeaway pizza and scoops of dulce de leche gelato, but alas...neither of them had glanced at weather forecasts, or trusted in them to be entirely accurate, and neither wanted the mood killer of a staying-in shower. Now it was too late, too dark, and Ophelia fashioned the idea that if she were to shower with the flash of a torch she would regardless feel like she was showering in prison with the guard listening in from the door, or peeking from there. Neither liked the idea of resigning to a *slumber party*.

‘It could use some work. It could use some work.’ Ophelia was hungry, too. They had avoided opening the refrigerator, because they had no power, so the two of them nibbled on crackers like mice at dinner time and deeply regretted it. ‘Come down with me,’ she said, crawling across the bed towards him, more attractive and sensual in her head. ‘If we make zero noise, we can squeeze open the fridge and, I don’t know, steal whatever looks edible without speeding up the process of making everything in there go off.’ She made a face at Jared. ‘I’m so hungry.’

He resigned and they snuck out of her bedroom, as if they were carrying out an extreme heist. Of course, no one was in the bedroom beside hers, but Ophelia and Jared lacked the knowledge, and heeded caution with each step, noiselessly worried some part of the half-alive house would be the alarm bell. The objective was simple. Down two flights of stairs, find food, collapse on the couch out of the faux-exhaustion of having been so precious about each and every step.

Jared set his hands on her hips as they moved down the first flight of stairs. Ordinarily, there would be light pouring out from underneath the doors of Isobel and Adam's bedrooms, but now there was only a dull puddle more akin to moonlight. It could have been purely moonlight. Ophelia hoped everyone was asleep—although the company of someone else beyond Jared would not have been rejected either. It was **nice** to be in love, to be partnered, the traditional overabundance of joy when you started seeing someone and were far, far removed from loathing them, wanting them to be torn out of existence, wanting them to be erased from memory. Ophelia liked to think people approved of Jared, too—he was yet to meet her family, aside from Romeo, who was more likely to invite him to another one of those murder mystery parties than he was to reject the idea of his sister finding something genuine. A man genuinely interested in something with her. Jared Haessig had learned how to communicate. That was an important feature for a man to have.

Down the second flight of stairs, and the kitchen was in sight. Ophelia and Jared were secret agent spies—she watched *Ocean's Eleven* with Jared one day, he said he adored the movie, and she made secret glances at him to see whether his lips would move along with the dialogue. She was impressed by people who could quote anything to an exact—quotable lines, phrases, weren't stored in her brain, at least not in a reachable file, if her mind was an organised library and she was without one of those impressive, slidable ladders, skating about the place.

'Quiet,' she said back to him, although neither of them was making much noise at all. The door to the den was open and there Tobias and Gavin were, sitting opposite each other like Victorian ghost children, in the muted dark. 'Shit,' she muttered, worried they had spotted her. Either you act like you are invisible, or you go say hello, she thought, glancing at Jared, ever attracted to him. She had a type, and it just had to be white boys.

'Ophie,' Tobias whispered harshly into the hall. He stumbled to his feet and swiped up the torch, pointing it out towards them. A glaring *busted!* 'Are you hungry too? I was thinking we eat dry cereal, makeout with each other, and summon the demon most likely to take pity on our souls.' He laughed, glancing briefly over at Jared with what could be assumed to be compassion. 'I'm joking, about most of it. We don't have a whole lot in the pantry that requires something else—cheese, a toaster, butter, a microwave, the entire contents of the fridge. I don't like the taste of plain, untoasted bread at the best of times, and what are we going to put on it, Peanut Butter? Come shoot me.'

The four of them scampered into the kitchen and used the flashlight on their phones to scan whatever was leftover in the pantry. 'My phone is getting low on battery,' Gavin complained, holding the phone at the required angle while Tobias set various packets of crackers, Arnott's Shapes, Doritos, a bag of marshmallows, and a bottle of Toffee Apple cordial on the kitchen counter. 'Does that taste any

good with warm tap water?’ He asked, flicking the glow projecting out of the phone round to the assortment splayed out on the bench.

‘Fuck this blackout,’ Ophelia said, snatching up the packet of Doritos.

Upstairs, Isobel and Roxie were staring at the ceiling. Had they been in the mood like Jared and Ophelia, they might have had sex earlier, but now all they wanted was to fall asleep, and in each other’s company they should have. Body warmth. Isobel and Roxie were warm underneath the covers, but neither of them seemed destined to fall asleep, not then. The ceiling did not spin. It was a rare burst of insomnia for both of them.

‘Still awake?’ Roxie said, rolling onto her side.

Isobel sighed and rolled too, the two of them staring into each other’s eyes. They had been seeing each other, in an official capacity, for three weeks—this was only the second time Roxie had stayed the night, and when earlier she moved to use the bathroom she stood perplexed when the light refused to switch on. She called out to Isobel after a couple seconds of hesitation, flicking the switch back and forth, back and forth. Nothing. Completely forgetting the *blackout* of it all. The realisation whacked in her face by her girlfriend was an embarrassment, but they both laughed. It was to be an early sign in their relationship, exposure of the newness.

‘I am,’ Isobel said, her voice grumbly and noticeably tired. ‘Sorry. Today was exhausting, which is no excuse, but when I came home to the weather only getting worse, I...sorry, the first idea you resort to when you cannot fall asleep is to complain. To whine.’ She snaked her arm underneath the covers and found Roxie’s leg, caressing it gently, an act without needs or wants.

‘You are allowed to complain.’ Roxie smiled and leaned forward to give her a kiss. ‘When you were in the bathroom earlier, when we were downstairs, your roommate warned me you would still apologise for airing your own grievances.’

‘I assume that was Ophelia.’

‘Her name is so very old-fashioned,’ she said with an askew wink. ‘I like it, it feels so historically-relevant.’ Roxie shifted her body around, moving the squished arm from underneath herself. ‘I don’t get hardly enough people telling me they see my name up in lights, that my name is on everybody’s lips, etcetera.’ She paused, leaning forward. ‘Do we know many famous Isobels?’

Isobel pondered it, unable to wiggle away and check her phone. It was the easiest thing, to search for knowledge somewhere else except inside your own head. She had not fashioned herself after someone, although there had been the perfect opportunity, an opportunity more divine than any. There was always a myriad of Isabelles. Isabelle Huppert, who Isobel liked in *8 Women*, an absurdist concept,

really, a murder mystery musical from a French filmmaker which managed one beautiful aspect most of all, having almost entirely forgone the need to cast men. She blanked on thinking about famed Isobels. It was a lovely distraction away from not being able to fall asleep.

She shook her head, and Roxie closed her eyes, either to think or count sheep.

‘Your other roommates were...’ It came out less like a question than the beginning of sentence left unfinished, but Roxie went blank and her eyes remained closed. She looked like a clairvoyant scrying in her crystal ball, mystical, mysterious, tired. ‘I’m joking, I remember Tobias and Adam too, I haven’t yet earned calling him Toby and somehow you live with a straight man after having already, separately, lived with him.’ She peered out of her eyelids with a grin. ‘Did you ever play *The Sims*? He’s older than the game, so it’s impossible for him to have been named after a character from it, but what do you think? Grandpa Tobias? Someone in the war, died too young, there’s a burial plot with Tobias on it.’ She paused. ‘Does this sound insensitive? I guess they died so the bigger, more potent destruction happened in other countries, where the people speak less English and could therefore be less aggrieved towards the white man on the street who comes later for his holiday.’ Roxie flipped over onto her back and stared up at the ceiling again. ‘Sorry.’

‘Oh I think we are both allowed to air our grievances without apologising for them.’

Roxie rose into an upright position, sitting in the middle of the bed. The room was blanketed in darkness, the curtains drawn, it would have been difficult to make out much beyond her hands. Isobel’s earlier attempt to caress Roxie’s thigh would have been a heist mission of its own. She thumbed around for her phone and flashed the torchlight at the ceiling. This was all becoming too normal.

‘Ordinarily if we were both bored I would suggest going to annoy someone,’ Isobel offered, inching in the bed towards Roxie’s body, which she could now make out more clearly. Roxie turned her head and looked as worn-down as she did. This was not how she imagined their second night together in this house to look like. Although there could still be candles—although there would **have** to be candles, Isobel had not even considered candles, her idea of romance more developed than the typical candlelight dinner with, what, rose petals and a curated playlist. The wind had quietened, which was soothing, pleasant enough for falling asleep. What were the chances of four roommates all deciding on inviting their significant others over the very night a violent, electric storm struck and killed the power? Isobel at least had no qualms with Gavin, or Jared, and to an extent Natalie—it was not blasphemy to say she and Natalie were different people, and where there was a surprise Isobel got along with Adam, she barely knew his girlfriend of however many months.

Roxie began to shift position again and swing her legs out from underneath the blankets. They both wore pyjamas, thankfully not matching—although it was expected of lovers to eventually share

clothes with one another. Ritualistic. 'I thought I heard someone coming down the stairs,' she said, moving towards the bedroom door. 'Are you coming?'

Isobel scampered to her feet and felt the bareness of her body. She could stand to be in her pyjamas in front of her roommates, people she felt comfortable unleashing her rage on, when they were back in Sydney, but Jared, Gavin, and Natalie still remained *strangers*. When it came to her body.

This momentary pause, it made her shiver, or it made her queasy, one of the two. She was comfortable in her body—lately she had been returning to working out again, more thoroughly, more often, now that the back pain was subsiding enough for her to focus. She went jogging, which was an excuse to listen to music. In: the AirPods, Corinne Bailey Rae's self-titled album. *Having trouble sleeping*. Out: feeling gross when you look at yourself in the mirror. Isobel glanced quickly at her body, the intense want to wrap herself in a one of the heavy blankets, something weighted, and greet whoever was downstairs without them glancing at her thighs.

She shook herself out of it and followed behind Roxie, which was strange, given it was her place. There was hushed noise coming from downstairs, in the kitchen, the low rustle of packets, respectful whispers. Isobel poked her girlfriend playfully in the back, then withdrew, suddenly anxious around the flight of stairs. No one yet had taken the death tumble—no one yet was found curled and crumpled at the base, their neck an entirely wrong direction. Dead. But that was a *yet*. She still anticipated it. Her parents had been around to visit one day. They poked, they stared at the staircase with blank expressions. They pondered aloud: 'None of your roommates are idiotic, no? Tell them, make sure they do not behave like indoor animals just because you are all young and spritely and full of life.' Isobel reassured them, Tobias was not like that, Ophelia was not like that, Adam was...older now. Twenty-eight now. Adam's birthday. That had been interesting.

It was in April. Born on the ninth. He had met Natalie, they were orbiting each other, a fancier way of suggesting they were flirting, undressing each other, making it official. She occupied his time, Ophelia hardly complained, Tobias was distracted, Isobel had been the one to negotiate something of a celebration for him. They could have gone to Ginball Wizard, but it closed, unceremoniously. Nobody noticed. Had it been difficult, prying him from out underneath the cum-stained love bubble?

She can't entirely remember.

Adam and Natalie were unsurprisingly naked. Her blonde hair fell in her face and she peeled the hair-tie off her wrist to tie it into a loose bun on top of her head. What do you do when the choices are sleep or have sex? You don't go loiter downstairs.

Adam moved to the window and searched out in the darkness for something to latch onto. Had the world been brighter, maybe an unsuspecting neighbour would have caught a glimpse of his softening erection, but the hour was late, the world was dark, and Adam was not being monitored.

‘You have such a heavy grunt,’ Natalie said, watching his shape in the moonlight.

Adam turned, drawing closed the curtain, light evaporating. ‘What, like a trucker’s? And you don’t like that I’m masculine and rough and verbal?’

Natalie sighed. Talking in the dark about this was strange. ‘Having sex with a trucker isn’t a kink of mine,’ she muttered, then inched towards him, feeling around until the mattress disappeared. ‘And verbal’s better than silent. I wasn’t insulting you, Adam. Your grunt’s heavy.’

‘If my *grunt* was light and weak like a pussy’s—’

‘Careful.’

‘I mean. If my grunt had no weight, it made me sound more feminine, I wouldn’t be the sort of man you wanted to have sex with. We don’t have to role-play like I’m a fucked-up trucker with deep-rooted homophobia, but if you have something to say about how we have sex, phrase it like a compliment or an insult, not like a statement that could be misunderstood.’

‘Someone is getting in your head,’ she said, standing up, although it was still difficult to see him in the cracks of light coming underneath the curtains. Natalie moved to draw the curtain open entirely and she took Adam in. ‘I like your sexy, heavy grunt.’ She cocked her head as if to say *better?* But he had to squint to judge her facial expression.

‘Why are we talking about this now?’ Adam, bathed in the moonlight, seemed unable to move out of it now. It made his expressions obvious and clear, but Natalie paced away from him. His bedroom was navigable, and she gathered up clothes and began to dress herself.

She sighed and shook her head. ‘It was just a thing I noticed, Adam. Nothing more, nothing less. *Your grunt is heavy.*’ Natalie stepped into her underwear more delicately, with a stability unseen for a clumsy person—she did not quiver or stumble. It was all very deliberate, poised, and she was not rehearsed but assured. Someone else would at least have slipped into the clothes after having first slipped forward or back, but none of this from Natalie, and maybe none of this from Adam either, which made them compatible. They had sex the first date, a night in late March, and maybe that was rehearsed, the right words to say to ensure two people were not unattracted to one another, were not ashamed to wake up naked together. They made coffee together in their underwear—it was more of a necessity than anything—and Isobel came downstairs at the same time, shocked, surprised, those unexpected emotions. She thought Adam was finally having rebound hookups, *moving on*, getting back in the saddle. Then the perfume of Natalie lingered...

Adam brushed it off. 'Next time I'll grunt louder,' he said, and she laughed, sauntering back over towards him. They were not the sort of couple to shower each other in affection. Leave that to Tobias and Gavin, leave it to Isobel and Roxie, perhaps even the other two, Ophelia and Jared. But Adam and Natalie got on fine without the infinite kisses, the traced hand on someone's back, the pet names and the endless confessions of love. They were together for how long now...at least five months. They were not the type to remember anniversaries, certainly not in halves, did they even remember the exact date of their first date? It did not make them cold and distant towards each other. Just different.

'You ruin a good thing by trying too hard.'

Natalie, more clothed, went to the bathroom, leaving Adam alone in the bedroom. He started to dress himself, found the underwear that had been tossed to the side haphazardly, his movements a tad erratic, as if he expected to be tormented if he were still undressed when she returned. Adam calmed himself and glanced back outside, although nothing particularly interesting had changed the landscape. Fences, shrubbery, brick walls plastered over, tiled roofs, stars, stars, more stars. It was surprising how noticeable the stars were now, if he tilted his head and glimpsed at the blanket of black above all of their heads. A pocket above.

Adam sat back down on the mattress and thought. Their relationship, the thing crafted between himself and Natalie, it was stabilised and healthy, yes? He rarely thought about the bones of anything—the makeup, whether it was standing on a regulated four legs or the chicken-scratching two of a Baba Yaga house. There were not stories told of her anymore, she was made a mockery in insurance ads instead, a house running on legs. Where did the fear go, the terror? Baba Yaga should be legendary.

But why should he care, he thought, reverse-engineering the question back towards himself, towards his relationship. Natalie seemed to have a harder exterior than other women he dated, the nameless one, even other people he fancied. She was unafraid to comment on the way he *grunted*, lacking the fear of him lashing out because of it, turning her down until his feelings patched themselves up from hurt. She was the mocking, the taunting, of a centuries-old witch, except Adam was never afraid of her. *Love* was more of a challenge. Fear made sense, logically. If you are afraid then you are afraid. If you are in love...it was only five months, and not five months having spent it chained to the spot, to one location. He went to work. He took Natalie out to nice restaurants, except they were nice to ordinary folk, they were not Michelin star places with insane reviews because she would have dumped his ass for treating her like a princess.

So, there was no discernible way for him to tell whether or not he loved her. They were not that sort of couple. He did not buy her flowers, although he contemplated it once or twice, standing in the front of the local Woolworths looking at the arrangements. He was with Tobias, which some months earlier might have been convoluted, but was now ordinary, normal, plain. Tobias stuck his face

in the flowers, sniffing their scents, beginning to tell Adam what certain flowers represented. The white lily, of course, was closely linked to death, not exactly the brightest idea for a romantic offering. The rose was the traditional symbol of love, but *The Bachelor* franchise had weaponised it, “giving a rose” to someone synonymous with dating twenty people at the same time while you unpacked your inability to fall in love without getting applause, praise, and a pat on the back for it. Although who were we to judge, Tobias had mused, glancing over at the sunflowers. *Now this screams be my very bestest friend, is she your very bestest friend?* He had laughed, they both had, and Adam left for the bottle shop.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, where six were gathered, there seemed to be a hole. A gap. One by one the four roommates noticed, but the words went unspoken, as Ophelia passed the bag of Doritos to Jared, crinkling the plastic. Tobias and Gavin were idling near the eight-year-couch, the torch positioned against the cushions, splaying its light out on the ceiling. Isobel poured herself and Roxie semi-identical ratios of cordial to water, heavy on the cordial—the sugar intake could be forgiven when the water was room temperature without means of getting ice, and no one could do much of anything to change it. In the dim light of multiple flashlights, they made glances at one another, the three roommates, somewhat surprised their repetitive coincidences were not once more coinciding with him being down there, whether shirtless or not...no one cared either way. But he should have linked up, sensed it, were they not becoming more in-tune with one another after...whatever that moment had been back in Sydney, sitting on the floor, *discussing* everything.

Someone should go get him, they all collectively thought, but ignored it, until Tobias’ glance met Isobel’s and he spoke up, breaking the idle chatter amongst them. ‘I’ll be right back,’ he said, moving towards the staircase, there being no true purpose to bolt or be hurried. In the darkness every single step was dangerous, perilous, but Tobias guided himself with a torch and made his way to Adam’s door. It was largely silent, and he knocked, waiting for a sharp response or, truthfully, none at all. Adam’s voice came through clearly.

‘Room service?’ He said, and Tobias opened the door with hesitation, expecting some form of nudity even without the rustling of bedsheets and the frantic redressing. It was nice to not think about the past. The bedroom was lit only by moonlight and Adam was the sole occupant, Natalie quite clearly having either ducked into the bathroom or impossibly leapt out of the window. With the security screens still intact, she must have been a kind of traveller, too, blipping herself away without even the slightest tear.

Tobias let the door swing and refrained from stepping over the line and across the threshold. The two men glanced at one another, but it was the sort of half-focused glimpse of two roommates,

nothing more. There of course was nothing awkward or strained between them. Tobias glanced back at the stairwell, then to Adam, wordlessly conveying something that would not be understood. He would have to use his words. He smiled. ‘Everyone’s downstairs trying to outlast things,’ he said, glancing at the staircase again, trying to make out the sentences and phrases from everyone below. ‘You and Natalie should come join, it feels incomplete now that everyone wanted a midnight snack except you two.’ He lingered in the doorway, not entirely wishing to try to beg or plead. There would be no point in trying to force something to happen, trying to force this moment of bliss where everyone in the pencil house came together and sang an impassioned song together akin to any teamwork-is-the-dreamwork musical number somewhere near the close of the musical.

Adam moved across the room until he was only a few steps from Tobias.

‘We were going to have sex again.’

Then, a pause. He laughed. ‘I’m joking. Lighten up, Toby. Don’t be so miserable because the situation is grim, because you can’t plug your phone in. We’ll come down, but this isn’t an excuse for you to break out a board game in the candlelight. Especially not Clue. Your Gavin is going to spook because of a sudden flash of lightning and stab one of us in the leg with a fork.’ He winked, stepping away from the door and back towards the bathroom, where no doubt Natalie was scorning not having an overhead. He glanced once more at Tobias, nudging his head, and his roommate found the handle again and closed the door, heading back down the staircase into the kitchen. Adam will come, he thought, as the first thing to come from his mouth when he returned to everyone, but swiftly he was distracted, leaning in to kiss Gavin’s soft lips. They tasted like Doritos.

With Adam and Natalie downstairs, the eight people resembled a gathered horde in a cyclone bunker, ducking around the sole sources of light while a world beyond remained stagnant. Isobel was off to one side checking once more for updates, but it seemed unlikely the power would come back overnight. At this point it had ticked over, in all technicality, and somewhere in this blackened city a kid was celebrating their birthday with far more candles than expected. Isobel locked her phone and set it down on the kitchen bench nearest to the refrigerator, eyeing off its closed, sealed door. A barred entrance to a world of deliciousness they all had to restrict themselves from opening. Not locked, unless you counted the chain of integrity, the keyhole of responsibility.

Tobias began to clap his hands low—he was sitting on the couch with Gavin, and the sound echoed through an otherwise quiet room largely populated with the noise of chip packets and glasses clinking against bench-top. He was replicating a song stuck in his head, making noise, and it was only partially distracting to everyone else. Jared squinted, trying to recognise the tune. He leaned over towards Ophelia and whispered, ‘I know this,’ but the lack of realised expression on his face proved he

was struggling to place it, and eventually gave up. Tobias stopped the exercise, moving his hands to his thighs, where he more softly made new sound, a new rhythm. Different song. This one Jared hopelessly listened to and shook his head. Too soft. Tobias was in a separate lane.

‘Officially bored,’ he said, glancing at Gavin, throwing his glances around the room, too, at his three roommates and their respective partners. It always, to him, felt interesting to take in this image. The four of them in healthy, stable relationships at the same exact time. Interesting as a positive, not as a temperament of how confused the world could be. It would have been interesting as a negative if, say, one of them, most likely himself because he was harsh that way, was still struggling in his singlehood while the others flaunted their love. But no. Here they were. ‘Any ideas folks?’

Someone threw out the suggestion of an all-time classic: Truth or Dare. It was teenaged and said with a high laugh, and it was Ophelia who said it, perched to her side of the room, her hip grazing Jared’s. She smiled, expanding on the thought. ‘What do people do when they’re bored and excitable? They make up nonsensical ideas, boast about the chance to watch two of their friends kiss, try to weasel out confessions. I don’t know. It’s better than getting drunk on air and waddling back upstairs to try and fall asleep again.’ As if considering questions and dares, Ophelia tipped her head with a finger to her chin and avoided making eye contact with anyone, in case she dropped and burst into unending laughter.

‘I don’t think we need to be kissing each other,’ Tobias said, glancing around the room. Cornily the only person he wanted to be kissing was Gavin, and he could, without having to choose from a drop-down menu or spin a bottle or anything else that reminded him of the sort of adolescence he avoided because he was too busy being a nerd in high school. ‘But there are no bad ideas, only discarded ones for the heap in the corner.’ With a wave of his hand, he gestured to an invisible pile of crumpled up paper where a lamp desperately begged to be, and then be switched on proper.

‘So, no childhood whimsy,’ Gavin said, smirking.

‘I’ve had a glass of lukewarm water, so I might just go back to bed...’ Natalie replied, briefly looking to Adam, although likely not because she wanted his permission. She was not the sort to require it—frankly, she was not the sort to ever be bossed about by a man, an admirable quality for a woman to have, certainly while other women in the world lacked the supportive husband required to retain their individuality, free-will, and identity beyond being a wife, mother, or homemaker.

‘No, no, stay, if one person caves and moves their complaining to their dreams, no one will take up the space like we could.’ It was Roxie, suddenly contributing to the presented opportunity for the eight of them to *do something* while the house was struck to darkness and the unique circumstance of a blackout persisted. There was something compelling to most of them, perhaps, about a randomised blackout—more common than before, a blackout, darkening the world, inviting creativity in the form

of new ideas on what to do without electricity. Gone was watching the television, or spending countless hours playing *Stardew Valley*—yet again were Tobias and Ophelia hooked on it, their co-op farm gaining quick momentum. Gone was the freedom to do whatever your heart desired, because there was no wireless internet so even watching porn in your room became super reliant on whether your mobile data was more resistant to the bolts of lightning and crashes of thunder than, say, a car perilously attempting to get home but caught in the rain had been.

‘Only because you said no twice,’ Natalie said, giving a quick glance over to Roxie. This collection of people remained odd, or jumbled together, at least. They knew each other by proxy. It was not like friends reuniting at the beach. It was far more clothed. Reserved.

Adam moved towards the front door. ‘I sort of want to see what the street looks like at this hour without any lights on,’ he said, slipping on a pair of thongs set aside neatly—not perhaps organised by him, but more likely someone else in the house nudged them side-by-side to maintain tidiness. He made a glance to suggest if anyone wanted to join him, and Natalie shrugged, or shifted on the spot, it was neither here nor there as a movement. Isobel and Roxie were talking amongst themselves quietly. Ophelia and Jared had moved to sit on the floor near the couch, and it was the former who was eyeing Tobias and Gavin, as if expecting either of them to follow suit. It seemed almost pointless, this pursuit—no one wanted to fuss about, slip shoes on, wander the streets aimlessly, looking for an unreachable dawn—until Tobias, out of obligation more than anything, rose from the couch dragging Gavin by the hand behind him.

‘You’re going to chase a magical glowworm if you go by yourself,’ he said, finding a pair of shoes in the rack by the door and slipping them on his feet. Gavin, sock-less, stared at the sneakers with a grimace on his face, then glanced at the darkened staircase. He seemed to decide to bear the discomfort of the shoes in his bare feet. The three men chatted amongst themselves as they wandered out the door. ‘Watch out for fallen branches, too,’ Tobias said, the door closing behind him.

Soon after that did Natalie disappear upstairs, and Isobel stopped mid-conversation, quietly reflecting to her girlfriend. ‘I know we are not her friends,’ she began, dropping her head somewhat, ‘but sometimes I get the impression that she comes because she is dating my roommate and this is where he lays his head, and that’s the end of it, period.’ Isobel scratched her neck. ‘She is not an awful person, never rude to me, but would it kill her to see we are trying, see that we want this sense of community that maybe I have gotten too used to with big families, with bigger groups of friends.’

Roxie had placed a hand on Isobel’s lower back. Her smile was sympathetic. ‘Maybe it’s as simple as her not clicking as well as, say, I have with everyone else. Maybe it will take longer for her.’ She paused, beginning to trace a finger on Isobel’s back. ‘Meanwhile, yes, I’m trying to organise when

to go see the production of *Next to Normal* at the little box theatre I like with Tobias, and so strangely specifically not *you*, for some reason.’ She laughed. ‘I’m not complaining. If you don’t want to see a depressing examination of mental health and how it affects a suburban family and the suburban family’s daughter’s on-again, off-again boyfriend, because you think I should specifically spend time with just Tobias for once—’ and she lifted her hand off Isobel’s back to do a *backing-off* gesture ‘—then that’s not something I oppose. Because I like these people, even Natalie who I hardly know because she has erotic sex with your roommate and then disappears in the morning before I can talk to her about whether she watched Nurse Emma get briefly-but-traumatizingly strangled on *The Pitt*.’

They both froze momentarily, then broke from the silence to laugh—they were certainly not laughing about chokehold violence, but Roxie’s string of sentences was at least amusingly honest and Roxie had been talking about that production of *Next to Normal* for at least a few weeks as the date neared. It was not necessarily a cast recording to listen to together to set an ambiance, frustrated cries of being terrified you have lost your chance at a healthy marriage, a healthy family life, but Roxie played one of the songs again to Isobel that very night, earlier, while the power was still out but it was not yet a brand new day. “A Light in the Dark” was a cheesy sort of selection, given the circumstances, but Roxie gave a preamble first about how teary-eyed she got listening to it. Not because she was miserable, no. It was because she found a certain sense of **hope** in it—Diana and Dan can at least believe their situation has the possibility to improve. A blackout is probably far less complicated than being bipolar depressive, unless perhaps if you lived in a region without a stable source of electricity. But. The light would come back here.

‘You are so behind,’ Isobel said. ‘The rest of us are impatiently waiting for the third season while you are *just* finishing binging the second.’

‘I’m busy!’

They both laughed. ‘It’s understandable really. I am still somewhere in the middle of the first season of *The Gilded Age*, and I have not even started *Bridgerton*, although they are telling me the next season will prominently feature lesbians, and you know how much I love women making out.’ Isobel leaned in and kissed Roxie, briefly, on the lips. ‘But I will never finish *Stranger Things*.’

‘You won’t miss much,’ Roxie replied, kissing her back, again brief. It was this quiet moment of intimacy between them, almost entirely unnoticed by everyone else—Ophelia and Jared were distracted in the middle of a conversation of their own—that reminded Isobel how safe the pencil house was. No prying eyes. No disgust, no determination to disrupt this relationship she was continuing to build with someone who she was deeply attracted to. It was all just *nice*. Isobel liked to think about her love languages: having to devote yourself to only one seemed like boxing up love, and this, quality time, this was what she treasured so dearly. Time with Roxie. Even in darkness, her face illuminated only by

that torch that will start to fade out eventually. Time with her partner, hopefully not in crime, unless of course the crime was something absurdly innocent like *loitering*. Let them loiter together.

Adam was noticeably more thrilled to be out in the world at this hour in the morning than his companions. He was not visibly ahead of Tobias and Gavin, but his strides were bigger, and he was largely being humoured by the other two. ‘Unsurprisingly very dark and very quiet,’ Gavin said aloud, the sarcasm dripping like hot wax. Tobias shot him a look that said *don’t bully him* but quickly followed it up with puckered lips and a blown kiss. ‘It’s a strange vibe.’ Gavin poked out his tongue at Tobias.

There was not much to comment on in the way of the world. Streetlamps were off, where they would normally have created pools of inviting light. No one else was exploring a land without electricity. Tobias wondered how far Adam wanted to go—of course not the first time he thought this. He could already see Gavin was irritated with his shoes, the back of the sneakers rubbing against his bare skin, but whenever they exchanged glances it was like saying *it will not be for long, I swear*. Tobias tried to think of the last time it was the three of them together, segmented from the others like this, albeit entirely by choice. Oftentimes he and Adam spent time together, it was not an absurd idea, but ever since their other two roommates cottoned onto what had happened last year in the borrowed van their time together had been with side-glances until Adam made his relationship with Natalie official. Even then. Tobias still had a brain. It was not pilfered and thrifted from him, as if he were now a scarecrow planted in the fields. It still functioned, and in functioning he still thought about what had happened. Comfort when he had felt so removed from it. Then: comfort was the wrong word, it was intimacy, but not yet *passion*. And then he thought about the experimentation, how Adam had *fucked* Zayn, and why did he awake sometimes in the middle of the night, when no one was around, not Gavin, and wonder... why had it not been him? Or: why had Adam not wanted it to be?

These thoughts, detrimental, useless, even, came and went. Typically he could expel them, typically he could remind himself of how distinctly different his relationship with Gavin was, how the two of them represented a *healthy* everything, not merely a romance but a connection, a sex life... perhaps the latter was slowing down lately, but that was to be expected once they had moved out of the very beginning of their relationship. Tobias liked what was happening with Gavin. Their attention for one another. How entirely removed from anxiety it was, how being with him made him feel less depressed, made him at least feel something in the job he had found eventually. It could be temporary, he thought, about the job—but never about the boy. About Gavin Edsell.

When, really, had been the last time he questioned everything about Adam? It had been months. There was no reason to think about someone who had a relationship of their own, and Tobias had his. He thought about squeezing Gavin’s hand, but worried it would be another indication of how

smitten he was. He so feared looking helplessly smitten, but then, liking someone and wanting to affectionately express that, was it really shameful the way it seemed when other people did it?

Tobias made a mental note: when you're smitten, you forgo judgement. The four of them, the roommates, they had all made a smooth transition to another phase of forgoing the judgement of others. One battle after another. Look elsewhere: there are no cameras here.

Adam planted his feet at the end of the street and waited for Tobias and Gavin to stand either side of him, an idea planted psychically. 'Yeah, alright we can turn back now,' he said with barely a sigh, spinning round to face in the direction of the pencil house.

Adam turned his head towards Gavin as he walked and asked him a question. 'What do you think would happen if the entire planet no longer had electricity? Completely gone. No power lines to be repaired, no generators to kick in, no Energex to come to the rescue.'

Gavin pondered this, looking away into the darkness—stimulus, even, as he laboured over an answer with *umms* and *hmms* to pad out the silence before he was prepared. Tobias, on Adam's other side, simply gazed in interest and knew not to intrude with an answer of his own.

'We would all want to kill ourselves,' he said, at first, watching the colour drain from Adam's face. 'Don't you think so? Without electricity, people would start to fall back on relying on outdated, humbler technologies, like washing everything by hand, like having to read a book for every piece of information necessary instead of automatically asking an artificial-intelligence chatbot to pump you with all the nonsense you could know.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Electricity dies and suddenly the suicide rate does go up, but maybe not immediately—plenty of people will think it will return in a week, a month, maybe even three. Plenty will imagine that by, say, September it will be like the American school system—school's back from summer, time to wipe the mind of chaos, lock in, and pretend the bubble of having no electricity was like 2020, our miserable as fuck coronavirus *fucked if I remember what happened in that year...year*. We humans experience trauma and don't process it correctly—we don't have time. But that's just thinking about best-case scenario it returns. If electricity kicks the proverbial bucket for good, give it time and people will be leaping off buildings, bridges, in front of trains, drowning themselves in whatever medicine in the cabinet warns of an overdose after a certain amount of ingestion. I, um, watched *The Magicians*—I promise it's relevant. There is a season where Magic, which, you know, is inherently important to a class of people who have those five letters before a suffix in their very name, magic is twisted off. Like a faucet. There's a plumber. Anyway. Magic is electricity for someone who wields it, and the amount of suicides...not all were shown, of course, but it drove those who felt powerless to change anything, who felt their life had completely been stripped to the shell of their former self, a self without, it drove them to complete lunacy. Which is sort of hilarious if you've seen *The Magicians*, but I don't know, you don't seem like you've even heard of it.'

Stunned, but perhaps quietly impressed, Adam walked on mulling the word *magician* over in his brain. ‘Could you live without it? Electricity—’

‘Tobias wouldn’t have a job. I...I would either be out of one too, or everything would be so incredibly analog I would want to quit regardless. But then who knows what the economy would look like. Stock market? Dead. The Internet is unreachable. Like a long-lost friend. It’s what the internet is to us now, isn’t it? A friend, a pal, a *someone* not a *something*.’ He shrugged. ‘Could I live without it...I would have to adapt my entire being. Change shape. This specific Gavin is not outlasting the extinction of the holy electricity, but another Gavin might. One who likes menial tasks. Picking berries.’

Adam laughed, almost a little too loud considering. ‘I’m keeping you around when the power goes out for good,’ he said, before glancing over at Tobias. Their eye-contact lingered too long. It was strange...in that moment, Tobias thought two completely separate things. One, that there was a special feeling reserved for when someone you care about deeply, or you are at least beginning to, is appreciated and understood the way you see them, and two, that...that he understood why he used to wake up in the middle of the night.

Back inside, Jared, Roxie, and Isobel were sitting on the couch aiming their torches at the ceiling, playing a sort of game of hide & seek. Light chasing light. Jared’s torchlight raced off away from Roxie’s as it closed in—it was a wholesome moment of child-like wonder, interrupted by the front door clicking open. When Adam, Tobias, and Gavin came inside, the former inquired about where Natalie was—‘She’s upstairs, she’s probably tired,’ Isobel said, restraining herself—and the latter two kicked off their shoes and disappeared upstairs. Gavin moped about a future blister as he drifted into the dark. Isobel figured they were tired. Everyone was tired. Staying up to this hour and effectively doing nothing, nothing to be thrilled about, it was taxing regardless. No one wanted to mention what was happening anymore. *We get it. There is no electricity.*

Left once more by themselves—Ophelia was on the third floor, not using the bathroom. It was understood she wanted to be alone. Whatever that was secretly code for. Jared left her alone. Isobel could not tell whether he assumed he would be scrutinised for interrupting her, or whether he simply accepted the anti-invitation. If anything, he did not seem frustrated. She thought it pleasant being able to spend some time with him, although perpetually worried he could be classed the same as Natalie: they had nothing in common.

‘I can’t remember,’ Isobel began, switching off the torch and then quickly switching it back on again, confused by herself for a second there. ‘I can’t remember if you have met Romeo, Ophelia’s brother yet.’ She glanced over at Jared, but it was a rather harmless question. It was a statement, really, that Isobel’s foggy midnight-brain was halting her from thinking about whether the two had been

introduced. Harmless, but important, considering Romeo was becoming more and more imbedded in everything Ophelia related.

Jared nodded. 'Yeah, um, we've met. A couple times. Last time we hung out he painted my nails, and you can kinda see a trace of the colour if you squint.' He set his hands out in front of himself and all three leaned in, like his fingernails were the passport photograph. 'For work I have insane standards about my hands. You'd think I was hand-modelling, but nope, just a complete avoidance of anything blemished. And then you see her hands...' He trailed off, saving himself with a chuckle. 'Ophelia isn't obsessed with her job the same way I am.'

'Do not burn yourself out.'

'I, uh, try not to, but who's going to get paid if I don't?'

Isobel smiled sympathetically and returned to the subject of Romeo.

'I imagine what he would be like in a situation like this. Ophelia's brother, sorry. Both level-headed and gloomy about it, thinking there is no possible way for him to sleep through the night without the comforts. Maybe I am headcanoning that he sleeps with a white noise machine, which seems like the antithesis of him, actually. He would want silence.' She paused, sighing. 'Maybe he is so, so much more comfortable than all of us, or Ophelia is in her room hoping to get enough cell service to call him so they can freak out together.'

Jared smiled. 'They seem incredibly close. By extension Romeo sorta clung to me when I was over at his place, not like a child on my leg, but he had a lot of questions masked in what you were saying, a level-headed gloominess, I don't know, you know him better than I do.' He paused, shaking his head in short, sharp movements. 'Do you two have siblings, have I ever asked?'

'We're not getting to know each other like dating, I wouldn't blame you for not having asked,' Roxie said, pointing her torchlight at the ceiling. 'I have a brother, but he lives overseas, we are not as close as we were as children.'

Isobel and Roxie exchanged a knowing glance, before their attention returned to Jared.

'My beautifully-unhinged sister just got married,' Isobel began, before explaining herself, before filling him in on all the important details, about the anti-engagement party in February, about the quick little duck down to get a marriage certificate, how uneventful it was to only have witnesses but how *level-headed* it kept Ava Yanick, who otherwise seemed to be terrified of getting hitched. 'If she was going to marry anyone, it had to be Stephen, otherwise she would have spontaneously combusted and I would have been picking her guts out of my hair.' She winced. 'Sorry, graphic. My sister and I cannot watch horror movies in person together, or not so frequently, so we FaceTime while watching something at the same time and lately it has been, I would say, ninety-percent movies where

inadvertently a person explodes and the practical effects department had a field day making me nauseous.'

'Just the sister then?'

'I do not need another sibling with Ava,' Isobel said, laughing. 'What about you? And have they been introduced to Ophelia? She intermittently hates people and loves them.'

Jared laughed softly and then answered the question.

'Two sisters, and they, uh, haven't met her yet. One of them is still in school, she's nine-years-old, and maybe I'm paranoid, thinking it's too early. We are going to have dinner with Emily next week, my other sister, she's only a handful of years younger, but...that's something to talk about.'

Isobel was unsure whether to push: whether to ask what, in his heart, he wanted to do, be that wait longer, wait until they had been together for longer, or what. She waited, but only long enough for what was considered a beat. 'It is nice she will get to meet your sister Emily, at least.' She knew there was a hidden undercut to what she said, but it seemed unavoidable, the closest thing to asking outright without doing so, without offending or overstepping or seeking to be the one to resolve an unspoken tension or question or *problem*. Other people were always capable of concocting solutions. They had to be, or ought to be. Isobel gave a reassuring glance at Jared.

'I might have a little rupture when the lights come back on,' she said, changing the subject.

'Oh, please don't **rupture**,' Roxie replied.

She shook her head and laughed. 'Incredibly old-school, really antiquated. Frightened, I mean, or at least it will be such a shock I will collapse into your lap and need to be revived with kisses.'

Roxie smirked and leaned in to kiss Isobel. Even in front of company. Jared hardly seemed to mind, but he gave them the privacy of at least not looking. In the darkness, a kiss was at least more scandalous, or more accepted. 'Sorry, Jared.' Isobel said, redirecting her attention back to him. 'It's hard to ignore the perfect spot for flirting, you understand that.' She glanced over at the darkened staircase. 'Maybe you should go make sure Ophie is alright after all? She might have just fallen asleep though.'

He nodded, briefly, and began to rise to his feet. He was halfway-bent when his words shifted him back down onto the couch. 'Actually, quick question.' Isobel and Roxie gave him their complete attention. 'Is there really a right time for her to meet my younger sister?' He paused, giving them both a glance of reassurance. 'And don't worry, you're just giving an opinion, not making my mind up for me.'

They both considered it. Isobel, her mind so focused on not being propelled to solve other people's conundrum, was at least being given permission to have an idea on it. People, she knew, were all so individualised. Not every nine-year-old was made of the same atoms, for example, not made from

the exact same history, memories, thought patterns. You could be nine-years-old and see the world in an entirely unique perspective from the nine-year-old kid in the corner picking his nose, contemplating whether to eat it, and instead flicking it off in the distance as if it were a competitive snowboarder. The idea grossed Isobel out, but still. Children behaved differently—Jared would know his sister better than she did, he hadn't even mentioned her name, there was nothing to go off. But still.

'My opinion?' Isobel said, moving the torch. 'Time moves so quickly. Whether or not she meets Ophelia now, or in three months, it will happen. You don't hide away the people you care the most about, not from each other.'

Jared smiled, and listened to a similarly-worded opinion from Roxie. Then he went upstairs. Gavin collapsed onto the bed, removed his phone from his pocket, and stared helplessly at its blank, black screen. 'This is exhausting, let's go to bed,' he said, beginning to tear off his clothes from his lethargic position sprawled out on the mattress. He worked himself out of his pants until he was down to his underwear, but there was nothing sexual about his pose, or how he beckoned his partner over without another word. It was not like the *come-hither* finger wag. It was at least romantic, but not passionately so.

Tobias removed his clothes where he stood near the bedroom door, leaving a pile heaped to the side, out of the way in case there was some freak emergency and they had to rush downstairs, their necks threatened, ankles stressed—not that he envisioned the future with such clarity, but there was a tidiness to keeping things arranged out of the way of the swing of the bedroom door. Tobias did not imagine "let's go to bed" meant they would do anything sexual, not tonight when both of them had been on-edge about the power outage, an inverse of the effects of a full moon on werewolves and vampires. It closed them down, blocked them up. It was more akin to the steel bars and metal cages—the sturdy protective defences against the creatures of darkness.

He climbed under the covers and moved to kiss Gavin, a light peck, nothing serious. One touch was enough for him to crave more. They kissed for longer, then, Tobias wiggled his tongue inside Gavin's mouth, passion obvious. Tobias' hands found Gavin's shirtless torso, weaving from his chest down to his stomach, the rounded belly he found attractive not *chubby*. He moved his hands slowly, but with anticipation, with a knowledge of where they wanted to be. But when his hands drifted consciously towards Gavin's butt, there was hesitation, pulling away. Gavin jolted himself free and went quiet, motionless.

'Sorry.' Tobias blurted out.

Gavin said nothing. His breathing was soft, slow, but his head drooped, his eye-contact avoidant.

Tobias moved to comfort him but did not know exactly how to—touching him again would be a mistake, he thought, and the only words that seemed to remain in his vocabulary were apologies. *Sorry*. Repeated over and over, until he found the right string that appealed to exactly what must have been rushing and bursting through Gavin’s own mind in the moment.

‘You aren’t in the mood for anything, I’m sorry,’ he said, the repetition of the s-word unavoidable, or at least he thought as much. His next sentence felt like it would be rigidly textbook, like he was acting out a rehearsal scenario in a class: consent is always important for the both of us, and if I overstepped that...Tobias was at least attempting to avoid sounding like an article. ‘Please just don’t close off on me because I did something you didn’t want.’

Gavin inched off into a seated position with his back against the headboard of the bed. He hesitated and then scratched his forehead and glanced up over at Tobias.

‘You deserve a boyfriend who isn’t so terrified of being touched.’ Gavin wriggled his nose, as if he were sniffly or about to sneeze. ‘Normally I am so perfectly fine when you want to touch me like that, but right then I, uh, completely froze up and it didn’t feel like something I wanted.’

Tobias, too, was frozen stiff in place. ‘You know to always say no when you’re uncomfortable.’

‘This isn’t about consent, Toby, it’s okay,’ Gavin said, attempting a limp smile. ‘You are not a terrible, awful human being for wanting to touch me when we’re making out. I...I didn’t want to be touched, I realised it when you did it, not before, there was no time for me to signal to you. You are the most considerate person to me, but...I don’t understand myself.’ He sighed, raising his knees up to his chest. ‘I’m supposed to want you to touch me. Supposed to like when you do. But sometimes my body tells me I am supposed to be disgusted by the *me* of it all. That I am here, being touched, doing these things.’ His eyes darted around the room, hardly locking onto one particular spot anywhere.

Then something on the ceiling caught his attention and he stopped staring around, attention focused on the single spot. Tobias understood there was nothing interesting about the ceiling of his bedroom, unless there was a spider weaving its web in the corner.

Tobias leaned forward, cautious about getting too close, to be safe. ‘You don’t have to be touched in any way you don’t want to be,’ he said, knowing the way he would want to be comforted was to be hugged, embraced, but now he worried his hands would upset the moment once again. ‘If I am trying to be too intimate with you, just tell me to back off, okay?’ Gavin nodded, a simple, wordless response, at least at first.

‘I know.’ He said, lowering his knees away from his face, stretching his legs back out on the bed. ‘Sorry. It all rushed over me. It’s embarrassing.’ Gavin glanced over at Tobias with a pleading sort of face, as if asking for forgiveness. ‘I don’t want you to be seeing this side of me. Someone who is incapable of just accepting the attention and the hand-holding and the signs of affection. I want us to

both be so comfortable being able to touch each other, because...before I got with you, I would feel disgusting about the idea of anything, like sex or *hooking up*, with a person who would forget about me entirely in the morning. Reduce me to a statistic. Now, with you, Toby, it's supposed to only be disgusting if I have a stomach-ache, or I'm down with diarrhoea, or...shit, when I'm physically ill, not because my brain is breaking.'

'Your brain is not breaking.'

He laughed. 'How do you know?'

'Because you are allowed to not feel in the mood for something.'

Gavin smiled, a genuine smile. 'I'm a cockblock.'

'Let's be completely real,' Tobias said, inching towards Gavin. 'Without any power, electricity, I mean, as much as I would have loved to turn this into something completely romantic, sexual, sensual, and made love to you in this bed, it was not the right time for it.' He smiled and sidled up beside Gavin, their shoulders touching. Barely grazing. 'I would never force you to do something you are not comfortable with, and I will say that as many times as I need to remind you.' He paused, contemplating something. 'It's sort of a miserable rite of passage for queer people to experience something sexual with someone who misunderstands them, who disrespects a no, but you are so much more to me, yes already, than just someone I see intimately in the bedroom. I can make love to you by spending time with you, completely clothed, playing some two-person board game you bought for a sum of money I don't want to think about.'

'That was almost too cheesy.'

'Which part? *I can make love to you by spending time with you?*'

'Yeah. That was kind of disgusting.'

Tobias laughed. 'I promise I will never say it again.'

'Don't make promises you can't keep.'

Tobias and Gavin look at one another for a moment.

'It's definitely too late, and we're both tired,' Tobias said.

Gavin shrugged his shoulders. 'I have thought about falling asleep since we were downstairs in the study, talking about whatever was on our minds. I have dreamed of coming up here, to the third floor of your insane house, and falling into the deepest slumber. Instead, we had our adventures—hanging out with everyone, your roommates and their partners, and then following Adam around like two puppies, and now I might have blisters from not wearing socks, and. And. I thought about falling asleep the entire time. Because what else is supposed to be on your mind during a blackout? The lyrics to the song from *In the Heights*, I suppose. Usnavi. Vanessa.' Gavin lowered his voice to a whisper. 'He abandoned her.'

Tobias chuckled softly. 'If only we could turn a TV on...'

'I actually should sit you down and make you watch *In the Heights*. You know *Hamilton*, obviously. Same creative genius, essentially. About the people of Washington Heights...right, we should go to bed, or else I will bore another person with a forever-monologue about something nerdy. I saw how bored out of his brain Adam was.' On a look from Tobias: 'He was! I hope you never try to make friends with him by talking about some of the nerdy shit you talk to me about. He might punch you square in the face.' Gavin paused. 'And maybe I would laugh.'

'Oi!' Tobias restricted himself from playing punching Gavin's shoulder. 'I, no, don't talk to Adam about stuff like that. He does go blank. I talk to him about, like, *whatever*.'

Meanwhile...

'Dinner next Thursday,' Jared said as he closed the bedroom door behind him. 'Emily was thinking of this Korean barbecue place she hasn't tried. I jokingly suggested Barti's but she looked at me with this serious, furrowed expression and said, we're not eating with your coworkers leaning over to steal food off our plates.' He smirked and glanced over at Ophelia, who had changed into an oversized t-shirt and an unseen pair of underwear. She was making herself comfortable in bed, propping pillows, turning them over, peeling back the sheets.

'Korean sounds good,' she said, absent-mindedly.

'I can tell her your suggestions?'

Ophelia shook her head profusely and began to reassure him. 'No, I like her idea. I'm exhausted, I guess. This week has killed me, you've seen how busy work was, for no reason at all except people like eating, and drinking, and celebrating being so far from when we couldn't go anywhere, eat anywhere. Drink anywhere.' She rose from the bed and wrapped her arms around Jared without thinking, without pausing. It was a nice reminder he was here, not a figment of her imagination, a construction after past crushes and desires resulted in absolutely nothing. Ophelia held him against her body, as if his touch temporarily ended the tomorrow-morning type of conversation. Something to be had in sunlight.

They broke from their embrace, and Ophelia took a step backwards, narrowly avoiding falling onto the mattress. Jared swallowed a laugh and began to undress himself. 'Will it make you more nervous if I remind you Em has heard a lot about you **and** watched your season?'

Ophelia shuddered, an instinctual reaction, one which she quickly apologised for and laughed to herself. 'Sorry, the longer I go outside of the game, the less I think about how people would have been *watching* me. She already knows who I am, even though as your girlfriend she doesn't know me at all, really. It's bizarre, I think. I keep forgetting there's always the chance someone will have an idea of who

I am already, before they even talk to me. I keep forgetting I did that thing. I keep forgetting I did *well*, too, because it begins to feel like if I went again for a do-over I would only do so much worse.’ She sat back down on the bed and retreated to where she had once been. ‘You look at me like I’m elevating a job higher than it should be, but you don’t look at me like an insane asylum patient having broken free.’

Jared was in nothing but his underwear, but at the conclusion of her sentence he began to peel them off, teasingly, until he was stark naked in front of her with his soft penis just dangling there. It was not erotic, or sexual, and it hardly seemed like either of them wanted anything to happen. Jared slept in the nude sometimes—he found Ophelia’s reactions to this act of stripping down amusing, because she either covered her eyes and peeked through the gaps, as if it were the first time seeing him naked, or she leapt forward and knocked his dick back and forth like it was a cat toy. Had anyone been privy to this idiosyncrasy of their private life, it might have seemed bizarre, or performative, but they were merely having fun with one another, considering how fresh their relationship was and how the youthful glow of being in their early-to-mid twenties bloomed off their skin like a radioactive toxin.

‘You did get paid,’ he said, climbing into bed. ‘You did compete for promotions.’

Ophelia laughed and wrapped her body around Jared’s naked figure. It was not a sexual position, and the last thing on her mind in the moment was being pleased by him. She simply liked his warmth, especially as the weather continued to only get colder and colder, albeit in Queensland’s version of winter, which seemed avoidant of ever becoming frostbitten, of ever actually freezing one’s nipples and exposed willies. Jared, surprisingly, preferred the warmth of only her body, her covers and sheets and blankets, over long-sleeved pyjamas and flannel pants. If he was fighting off a chill, he remained quiet about it, kissing Ophelia’s neck.

The brief moment ended but they remained curled up beside one another, face to face in the darkness, making idle conversation. ‘Can I do, like, rapid fire questions with you?’ Ophelia said, failing to avoid a wide, unserious grin.

‘Sure?’ Jared said, his hands finding Ophelia’s waist. ‘What sort of questions?’

‘Not trivia,’ she responded. ‘Just questions about whatever comes to my mind.’

He nodded, and she squinted in the dark, suddenly aware his *yes* meant she would have to say aloud the one question that had really been at the front of her mind when she asked him if she was able to. ‘Do you have a favourite out of the three I live with?’ It was the sort of question she might have more likely asked about a fan who watched the show she was on, who was your favourite contestant, you cannot say me, but she liked the almost-immaturity of it being the middle of the night and asking Jared whether he had any favouritism over the people he had only known for a handful of months. Never had she actually considered to ask him—she had asked, when he first met Tobias, Isobel, and

Adam, whether he felt comfortable with them, accepted by them, but never if he very specifically had chosen a favourite, like picking which racer to always select in *Mario Kart*. Ophelia was a Waluigi girl.

Jared started to speak, then broke off into laughter. ‘My favourite?’ He giggled like a kid. ‘Am I supposed to have a favourite? They’re your friends, your roommates, it would be the same as trying to have a favourite member of, I don’t know, Green Day but you’re not allowed to say Billie Joe Armstrong. There’s only two dudes left, how to choose.’ He moved in to give Ophelia a quick peck on the lips and then pulled himself back to the sincerity and reality of the question. ‘I will answer it genuinely, hold on. Hmmm.’ He extended the sound for dramatic effect. ‘Oh, wait, easy. This isn’t a tough question at all. My favourite is Tobias.’ He started to laugh again.

‘I accept that answer,’ Ophelia said, giggling.

And meanwhile still...

Downstairs, Isobel and Roxie were sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, leaning against posts. Their arms were not linked—they were not prisoners of the circumstance. They ambled from topic to topic in a conversation about avoiding the obvious, but it was not as though they tiptoed nervously. It came rather easily for the two to *not* discuss their evening, so much so that when Isobel let her mind wander it was not about the absence of light, but the abundance of hope. It was true, her relationship with Roxie was still fresh, like a newly-cracked-open tin of salmon, and it was truer still that she found it impossible to not remind herself the last relationship she had been in, the other woman never moaned her name, *Isobel*, but. There was always beauty in greenness. In the nature of their connection, how floral she had bloomed after the very first date. Entirely unlike the ceremonial garb from the conclusion of *Midsommar*, do you remember how absorbed in *unnature* she had been? Unlike that. That was a carnage. This was romantic.

‘Back to our conversation earlier...’ Roxie’s words lingered, delicate magic.

Isobel combed her brain for what this could be: surely not a rehash of musical ticketing, of Roxie and Tobias seeing something without her, and surely not about the comment she made about Natalie, although it was not regret, in retrospect. She could not *regret* speaking the truth: it was like everyone else in the building, in this ordinary-enough house, was ghostly around Natalie, or otherwise she followed the adage once left only for the in-laws: I married my husband, not his parents. Isobel started to feel more and more grown, more and more weary, thinking about it—she never claimed to be, or wanted to be, Adam’s mother, and what, did that make Tobias his father? Foul. Ophelia the antiquated aunt still petrifyingly in belief that inbreeding would not be this time the cause of a malformed head, a wicked brow? Isobel thought you moved out of home to stop the charade of being a

child, of being controlled by your parents and their whims. To Natalie, it seemed the three of them, the perma-stays in the house, were nothing more than roommates found online on Flatmates. Not friends. It was making Isobel bitter. She felt herself more than the nutjob with the cancer-smelling cat who collected buttons and left the house at eerie hours of the night dressed entirely in white.

But why did it matter so much? Enough to permeate her thoughts.

Roxie straightened her back against the end of the bed and continued to talk. ‘If you’re serious about wanting to go to the zoo, we should start thinking about a date.’ Roxie began to list several possibilities, scrolling through the calendar in her phone. ‘Next weekend we’re obviously both busy, so we can rule that out, the weekend after I am...not available on the Sunday, that’s the family thing you are aware of.’ She pondered a couple of dates a few weeks further out and lingered with her finger hovering over another Sunday, omitting a low *hmmm* sound without glancing at Isobel.

‘This could work,’ she said, at first gesturing with the phone screen exposed, then quickly realising the tiny number was almost covered by her finger. ‘The second week of next month, the fifteenth of August.’ She paused. ‘Isn’t it miserable everything has to be done in advance of so much? Do you think in some different era they could say, I want to go to the zoo, have my carriage come round in three days time and I will arrange with my dear sweet Isobel to meet me there?’ She had pretended to be pretentious, noticeably British, and it arose a chuckle out of Isobel.

‘I would say people of the Victorian era had other engagements, too,’ Isobel said, smirking. ‘But their zoos were perhaps piddly, unhygienic squares of filth with a couple exotic animals illegally flown in from Africa from a hunting trip.’

‘But those no longer exist?’

Isobel sighed. ‘Roadside exploitation palaces do, still, you are not wrong. *Zoos*, because the name does not come with an exact definition that they need to prioritise the happiness, welfare, and cleanliness of animals. You are right. Some places look like they tracked down a tiger on the black market and created a pen out of loose scrap. Not sanitary places, but I think we are lucky here, to not see them so publicly, to have more respectable zoos.’ She paused, glancing away for a moment. ‘To stop thinking about the way people treat animals I am just picturing myself at the zoo already, walking with you, maybe we are holding hands, and there are the sounds of *comfortable* animals, and kids, always a million kids. Not the point, to jump ahead, but not the point either to be thinking about how we fail our animals.’

They continued to plot and plan, both adding a penciled-in event to their calendars—when was the last time either of them had used physical calendars? For Isobel, maybe university, to keep organised about her deadlines, assignment submissions, unskippable lectures. For Roxie...who could say. To Isobel, her girlfriend seemed the type to keep organised, but not be inconvenienced by it. A digital

calendar was permanently on hand—a calendar hung from a nail on the wall, magnetised to the refrigerator, was entirely pointless the moment you locked yourself out of the house and went absolutely anywhere.

With a plan in motion, they both became excitable, lured in by a plan for something different. Isobel couldn't remember the last time she had gone up the coast, let alone visited the zoo where, as a child, she posed in front of the ginormous cut-out [not cardboard, at least] of Steve Irwin and screeched out a forced, but respectful, *crickey* as her parents snapped the picture. Her and her sister. Pre-divorce, of course. It must have been after his death. No kid raised in Australia steered clear of at least having watched *The Crocodile Hunter* once. Isobel was not like those khaki-wearing kids who wrestled plastic crocodiles in their playtime, but now thinking about him, Steve Irwin, left her quieter than a moment before. It was just what was done.

And in the last of the bedrooms...

'I don't want to feel like I have to baby you—' Adam said, moving towards Natalie, inching, really. She stared back at him coldly.

'Then don't, Adam, because I don't have to prance myself around your friends like a show pony. I didn't with Josh, and Eric, although Jesus Christ talking to Eric is like talking to a walking slur. R-word. Comment about immigrants taking jobs. Give him the opportunity and he says the n-word without pause and justifies it, really just pulls out a dictionary and defines the thing before letting anyone explain why he shouldn't say it because, I don't know, Black people shouldn't hear a racist white dude continue to spread around the type of language that they heard on slavery cotton farms when the only allowance they were given was to breathe.' Herself suddenly out of breath, Natalie shielded her face with her left hand and looked at Adam pleadingly. 'Look, I'm a harsh person.'

'You could've avoided taking it out on my bud.'

'I said it behind his back.' Natalie forced a smile. 'It hurts less when you don't hear about it, unless there's a rat.'

Adam retreated from what he wanted to say. The gnawing part of himself, the rat-like tendencies, which could come out from the recency of living with these different people. A few years ago he would have been different. If someone, his parents, for instance, although less likely, had said something negative, something intrusive, about Eric, he would have slunk it against his chest like the plastic wrap of a fresh tattoo and forgotten about it, in time. Now, weighed down with thinking about what Isobel would do, what Tobias would do, he wondered whether Eric should be reprimanded for how different his *circumstances* were. No reality television to sharply direct him. Eric had spent seven

years in a regional primary school, then four years in high school, until he dropped out before the final year began to pursue an electrician's apprenticeship that burgeoned into a "career", was working himself to the bone, but it afforded him the house he built. Him and the missus. Undeniably the straight man, attached to ideas bludgeoned into his brain by his parents, by the boys he surrounded himself with—which included Adam, who for years simply ignored the remarks. Now what.

It was all irrelevant to this exact conversation, the sly slip away from it Natalie pulled to make the dirtier suggestion. Building evidence, really. When Adam had found Natalie in his bedroom, seemingly having been there for a while, he wondered immediately whether she even gave everyone else downstairs the chance. It bothered him, the idea. She could be in this relationship primarily for him, as she should be, but it meant...not enough, he thought, if she were unwilling to come to the table with his friends.

'Couldn't you have made more of an effort?' He was at a loss with words, the way to organise them correctly. Coming up with the correct response was not necessarily an Adam responsibility—he was familiar with saying something too aggressively and then regretting it later. His default seemed to be anger, or to lash out, come across defensive not supportive. But more than anything he required an explanation from Natalie, who seemed unaffected. Or he was too consumed with his own thoughts. It was difficult to pierce through. Adam wanted her to try more, he supposed, but maybe that was the exhaustion talking.

Natalie diverted her face away from Adam to roll her eyes. The gesture seemed petty, but it could be a safe assumption she was exhausted, too. 'I don't know them, Adam.' She paused, looking at him with earnest, or the version of it you would expect from an armoured woman, someone made not of glass, or flesh, but stone. 'They are your friends, and to them, I expect to come across as the enemy from the moment I am introduced. The icy blonde with a death stare she inherited from her mother, and frankly her father too, because that man would snap a body in two over a limp handshake. You know what I mean. Not the action, but the essence. Crossed so poorly it becomes the easiest laugh in the universe, how it bubbles out.' Natalie moved towards Adam as if the space between them had been half of the fault for their conversation becoming frozen over the way it was.

'You should get to know them, then, that's what nights like these are for. Especially nights like these, because no one is distracted by a TV screen or a video game. It's the perfect opportunity to ask Tobias to explain whatever the hell he does for work, or see if Isobel can get through to you on making some ant-sized change to better the environment.' He sighed, taking Natalie's hand in his. The gesture was not beautifully romantic—it was more for the emphasis on their bodies mingling, skin to skin, flesh to stone. She responded to it with a slight twitch.

'I don't know what to do when you run off.'

‘Listen, Nat. Ask questions. You aren’t learning how to talk for the first time, huh. They’re just people, and as much as you want people to believe you dislike them from the jump, to have this allure of being unbearably cool, or whatever, neither of us is allowed to remove ourselves from having to start conversations to get our feet in the door.’

Natalie hardly seemed like a petulant child resisting being social. She was not awkward, or closed-off. Instead, her reaction to what Adam said registered as a lowered gaze, a dropped face, but not sadness. Not bitterness. Natalie’s expression was difficult to read, at least to him, but in words it could be described as convoluted. Containing multitudes. Of course it had to be complicated.

‘If I say I’d do better, or try to, when I nevertheless fail, you’ll criticise me for it.’

‘When have I said I would?’

Natalie shook her head. ‘You just tried to bite my head off.’

‘Because instead of staying downstairs while I went on my mystical adventure to see the street at night without streetlights with the boys, you left. You wandered up here, ignoring them, and I couldn’t come back and feel like there was this complete vibe to the living room with everyone getting along, chatting, talking, sharing whatever random stuff about themselves that they wanted to.’

‘I’m tired, Adam.’

He sighed. ‘And I am too. But when Toby came to me, wondering where we were, I realised *everyone* downstairs didn’t want to see the two of us left out and separate. Suddenly it was entirely in my hands to make sure no one saw you and I as the type of couple who realises how impossibly inseparable they can be, and suddenly you aren’t making plans with your friends, you are making plans that only benefit the two of you. No dinner out at that restaurant because I don’t think Natalie wants to change whatever plan we already had, be it at some other restaurant or curled up naked in bed waiting to fuck our brains out.’

Natalie had stopped looking at him midway and now inched towards the bed, undeniably distracted. ‘...are you done?’ She said, beginning to climb under the covers.

Adam silently made an assessment: it seemed unlikely that tonight, at least, she would be swayed towards anything different than her opinion with any certainty. She was tired, he was tired, they needed to sleep off the fact of the matter: it was far too late and for no good reason the blackout had kept them lingering in a sort of twilight-zone-state where every idea he suggested was gobbled and swallowed by a grey cloud nestled in her hair like an unseemly hat. Awkwardly, Adam attempted to remember if there had been arguments like this with Sophie. Her name was bitter, of course. Her name hurt, but far less so, and by this point in the process of removing her entirely from his mind he was at least remembering her as an educational textbook. Uncanny, that he was returning to study—the idea of ever referring to himself as *student* again would have been akin to Ophelia returning to how she had

been orbiting round him before that night, in the suburban street, when a puncture wound in the bucket let the collected rainwater pour out in a gushing waterfall.

Everything flooded.

The destruction was awful.

'For tonight I'm done,' Adam said, climbing in after her.

Don't go to bed angry, he thought, but he was.

In the morning, probably not.

PART TWO

DARK

One month later.

‘Someone quickly explain why shoe sizes are different here,’ Tobias said, glancing round at the small, assembled crew heading inside the bowling alley. He was imagining if his feet were a size ten, then he was supposed to go up, rather than ask the bored attendant for a size ten that would later pinch the sides of his feet and squeeze his toes and make him groan instead of scoring strikes. Looking impressive. Etc. Really, truthfully, he was wondering who had landed on *bowling*, when Donny was in town for the weekend and they could have been anywhere else. Really, anywhere.

There was a certain whimsy to Donny’s stride, though, and he had made a quiet comment to Tobias on the train that he was a reborn child, excited to bowl again, unrestricted without the constriction of the steel ramp. Tobias remembers being little. Sticking his thin, white fingers into the germ-infested holes, ambling towards the pre-arranged ramp bang in the centre along the line. You set the bowling ball at the tippy-top, air-kiss for good luck, not dirty or disgusting enough to actually plant lips on the kaleidoscopic greens, blues, and purples of the ball. With a forceful nudge, the ball was sent hurtling down the slide, forward-momentum *weeee*, and you were either half-certain to get a participation strike or if not, a spare, with some loose guidance from your handsy father.

So, bowling. The alley was noticeably quieter than it would have been when the loose-definition sport was booming popular, in, say, the 1980s. A handful of couples, or parents and their dragged-along teenagers, dotted the twelve lanes, with names typed into the screen like Bob, Evvie, T-Bird, and Slater. Tobias and Donny made up two in a group of six altogether—the insanity of cramming everyone into the one activity might have been disastrous, and nevertheless Tatianna too was in town, a lucky coincidence. The idea of ten people crowding round this bowling alley, which had seen better days, more excitement, at least, would have meant two lanes blockaded by loud, excitable ex-reality-stars and a handful of their partners. Along for the ride.

So, it was Tobias and Gavin, Ophelia and Jared, Donny and Tatianna, who approached the bored-looking attendant and listed off their various shoe-estimates, considering no one could quite solve why bowling shoes were just *built different*. ‘They’re made outside of the fashion complex,’ Gavin had offered, and they all seemed to ponder it, as if they understood the fashion complex, or if their lack of complete understanding therefore made it more plausible. ‘Maybe they want your feet to breathe more,’ he had continued. Now, as they slipped their feet against soles tread upon by complete, utter strangers, this flashback to the past, to childhood, crept in and overtook any imaginations of feeling *cringe*.

The attendant pointed to two lanes at the far end of the building and the six of them, like a cloud, approached it. Tobias was strangely eager, yes, to be bowling again. Eventually he would tire of saying *bowling* over and over, the word on his tongue anew. It had gained new meaning, or reheated a meaning it had lost in the many, many years since he had last slipped three fingers into the drilled-out holes. Of course, now he slipped fingers in holes elsewhere.

And, arguably, for no real cost.

They divided themselves into two trios, which was hardly an impossible task: Tatianna went with one couple, that of Ophelia and Jared, and Donny the other. They commandeered the furthestmost tip of the bowling alley and immediately began harping, making noise, but it gave life to an otherwise repetitive thrum of pins knocked down, bowling balls against slicked wood floors, animated graphics making whooping sounds when you managed to magic the solitary loner pin to disappear into the mystery chute. Tatianna sat herself down on a grooved seat and stared down the barrel of the lane, suddenly contemplative. ‘What the hell did I agree to?’ She said, to no one, to everyone. She was not morose—merely surprised. Ophelia inched nearer to her and omitted a soft chuckle.

‘It’s not your thing,’ she said, turning to watch as Jared lifted a bowling ball from the shelf and used his eyes to gesture to it, as if to say *this one?* Ophelia nodded, squinting at the number printed on the ball. ‘But everyone else is an old folk and didn’t want to go out clubbing. Besides, the Valley reeks of vape stench, black mould, and sexual assault. It’s nothing like what a night out in your city amounts to.’ Ophelia watched as her boyfriend pretended to heave the bowling ball with all his might, a show for her, if anything. He retreated to the shelving unit once more for his own, unbothered. Tatianna’s mood had not noticeably soured. Ophelia imagined she would be sulking, or uninterested entirely, but she continued to glance around at the other lanes, judging their scores, feigning shock at how low and unimpressive Slater’s was. Gutterball after gutterball.

‘Some people should invest in the guardrails,’ she said, completely serious, before rising from the seat and moving to select a bowling ball of her own. She sidled up beside Tobias and grinned at him, all lips, a beautiful shade of deep red. ‘I miss seeing your face at breakfast,’ she said, wincing briefly before rolling round the face of a psychedelic pink ball to find the number eight printed on it in white. ‘Those unfamiliar, unrecognisable ordinaries are in the house now, are you watching them, Toby? I put on an episode occasionally and try to imagine who will be in the exact same spot we were, right there at the end. It’s uncanny. The building appears to be the same shape, the same obvious layout of bedroom, bathroom, confessional booth, but a year later I can no longer see where it was I stood when it was entirely my responsibility to boot you sharp from your dream.’ Tatianna did not attempt a smile. Now

she seemed morose, now she seemed to be contemplating something with more precision. ‘If they call you, will you go again, Toby?’

He mulled it over in his brain, first the nostalgia of it having been an entire year since the premiere, then this last question, a discussion on whether he would succumb to competitiveness and put himself through the torment of reality television, again. It was not something he had thought about in months, the likelihood of a call being lessened when he remembered there were other white, competitive nerd-types who the general population might have liked more than he. Tobias’ gaze searched around until it found Gavin, and he froze. Suddenly there were other reasons to be thrilled about the outside life, not the one confined to cages and a warehouse bedroom removed of the ceiling. Those stark, harsh overhead lights giving him a migraine.

He winked at Gavin and returned his attention to Tatianna. She appeared more down to earth than she had in the immediate post-victory, the garish fur coat, her breath smelling of alcohol, her personality dialled to one hundred. One hundred percent fun-to-be-around.

‘Should I?’ He posed the question as if she were more attuned to the rhythms of the experience than he was, when it seemed like Tatianna only *occasionally* flicked to the channel airing the newest of seasons, as opposed to his obsessed must-watch attitude. He still lurked online, namely on Reddit, to see what the public perceptions were—this current cast was well-liked, too, many favouring Scott, Cary, Faroh, these ideals of attractive-but-strategic men. Repetitive complaints about Noora labelled her as a “try-hard” whose dreams of being an Indian Kate McKinnon seemed much the same as that young boy, proud as anything, with the fledgling ambition of growing up to be Godzilla.

Remember him, Tobias thought, and he continued to think.

Tatianna fingered what she deemed to be the *perfect ball* and lifted it out from the shelf. ‘Everyone thought they had the potential to win,’ she began, and Tobias trailed behind as they wandered back towards the two lanes. ‘But then, what, you told me on the show there are always personality casts with no genuine path to victory, unless the jury is bitter, hates actual strategy, that sort of thing.’ She set the ball down and faced Tobias, suddenly rendering everyone else around them unimportant until the conversation was over. ‘You would have stolen that half a million out of my hands, Toby. Don’t get caught up trying to be ordinary and make an income and live in a pretty house and forget that everything changed when you walked into that interview room.’ She paused, glancing briefly at Ophelia, then Donny. ‘I remember meeting you, or, pretending to meet you for the first time when you entered the house. It was like, hi brother, please take me under your wing. I want to be curled up on my couch watching you absolutely dominate. Except maybe it will scar, not being able to be there with you.’ She sighed, then shrugged. ‘Anyway. Destroy Donny in this for me, will you?’

She retreated to where she had been sitting, a space reserved only for her.

Tobias drifted towards Gavin, squeezing his sides. ‘Hi there,’ he said, lingering behind Gavin, his head nestling onto his partner’s shoulder. Gavin was standing near the space-age keyboard hooked to the monitor, where Donny was typing in name by name. His first, of course, he was not born yesterday. Then theirs, T-O-B-Y and G-A-V. Nicknames, cute and wholesome. Gavin smiled and leaned his face against Tobias.

‘Hi handsome man.’

‘Ahh, young love,’ Donny said, glancing up from the keyboard to eye the screen ahead. In the other lane, it read J-A-R-E-D, O-P-H-E-L-I-A, and T-A-T. No new arrivals had poured into the bowling alley, but it suited the six of them fine. It was somewhat peaceful, the clack of shoes against wood interjected with an *oh-yeah* from Bob, a man in his sixties or thereabout with a balding head and a single glove on his right hand. That must be his wife, then, Tobias thought, cocking his head as a woman of the same age ambled towards the precise black line, an expression of intensity, of laser-focus, on her face. Oh to be in love, at that age too, he thought. Donny climbed out of the chair and moved to bowl his first ball. Game on.

Elsewhere, two couples found themselves in a booth in a dimly-lit restaurant. Isobel and Roxie were noticeably close, their hands brushing against one another’s underneath the table, rested on Isobel’s thigh. Adam and Natalie were not a vision of discomfort, but something bubbled, or brewed, underneath the surface—they had spent five or so minutes before leaving the pencil house in the midst of a quiet, murmured argument that Roxie and Isobel only caught lipread traces of. It was unclear what they were furious about, but before she leaned in to close the door behind her and key the lock, Isobel gave Roxie a glance. The sort of glance that spoke, *and this is why I date queer women*.

At the restaurant, a second-floor place Roxie had found by pinching around on Google Maps for a while, the two smartly-dressed lesbians sat opposite the strangely-quiet couple. In the month since the blackout, and the aptly-named *blackout fight*, they had sparsely argued about *that*. Natalie was making a more defined effort—she reported back, like a real-estate agent or a dutiful worker ant, that while she struggled to find much in common with Tobias, and she was understandably staying mere acquaintances with Ophelia, she liked *shooting the shit* with Isobel. This little concocted plan, a double-date as traditional and anti-traditional as possible, cemented a handful of truths. Or perhaps they would be considered narrow escapes. One, Adam weaselled himself out of the tag-teaming of Ophelia and the in-town Tatianna, who of course took the side of her dearest best friend and avoided forgiving Adam if she did not have to, and two, he would not have to argue with Natalie again...

It was all a work in progress.

‘It has good reviews,’ was the typical response when everyone began to peruse the menu and wonder what they would order. It was Japanese cuisine and it was mostly inexpensive, although the specialty dishes were higher priced and Adam avoided that section of the menu entirely. He was not the sort to experiment in what *protein* he ingested—this, of course, was code for *does not want to eat eel*. He claimed himself too white, too unadventurous with his mouth, which Natalie could attest to. He continued to scan the menu, idling at the mention of chicken, at the mention of beef. Beside him, Natalie ignored his muffled sounds of interest and studied the menu herself. Isobel and Roxie were trying not to giggle. They had spent the time it took to reach the staircase entrance to the restaurant outwardly expanding their conversation to incorporate room for “monitoring.” It was safe to assume nothing had markedly shifted in their own relationship since leaving the house—maybe they half-expected Natalie to snap, or Adam to whimper. There had been minimal damage.

Everyone ordered—Roxie was the more experimental of the four of them, which was not impossibly difficult, considering Adam ordered a katsu curry and Natalie mirrored him with a *ditto*. It was interesting, watching over the two of them as if expecting them to expunge their relationship quarrels onto the hardwood table like a pus-enlarged zit burst from sheer force. Isobel squirmed at the thought. The last thing she wanted was another break-up, and perhaps Adam and Natalie were merely experiencing a backwards honeymoon period. The terror of unpacking a disorderly suitcase before unwinding poolside with a margarita.

They sat at first in silence waiting for their meals to be delivered, but the ambience of the restaurant—low-volume rock-and-roll music, American and angsty, and the various conversations of primarily white people—made Isobel itchy. ‘We’ve almost entirely organised the camping trip,’ she began, inside her mind running through the various checklisted boxes that have been ticked as of late. Last month they—she—called the campsite and booked a site for the various tents. There would be four of them, which they borrowed or loaned or caved and bought from BCF the other weekend. No one mentioned looking into snagging that white van again. It had seemed the right time to go camping again, having mentioned it in passing frequently, having wanted to shift the burned-in narrative that it caused confused, hazy feelings to rise out of the depths and overcome, overwhelm.

Isobel waited for someone to ask what else had to be accomplished, but discussion quickly shifted. It was nicer, she supposed, for the atmosphere to be *excited*, rather than *stressed*.

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ Roxie said, turning her head to give a version of heart-eyes to her girlfriend. ‘Out of everyone here, at least, I’m probably the most squeamish about sleeping under the stars, getting the bugs tangled in my hair, but no, I’m looking forward to it.’ The camping trip signified another chance break for everyone, and Roxie had mentioned how muddled her memory of her last actual vacation was. ‘Last year, in May, I think?’ She had said. ‘I went with my parents to Cairns.’

Adam rambled about the stark contrast between what had been Shannon's birthday bash and what would be a relatively quiet, tucked-in-the-woods escape from the city for the four of them, who would at least be able to skip the Friday night episode of the reality show they were outrunning.

When he was finished speaking, Natalie glanced at him with what constituted a warm smile, but naturally it seemed off, and Isobel noticed. She thought about saying something but wondered what. In a public space, calling attention to their new squabble—which she knew nothing about—would result in a visible shaming, an embarrassment, and she respected Adam enough to not lay an obvious blanket over his “potential” problems, like playing hide and seek and hiding behind a curtain at the ripe age of twenty-whatever. Isobel felt the soft vibration of her phone in her pocket but ignored it.

Talking about the camping trip was at least an in, but Isobel sobered to the persistent thought that she acted differently when it was Adam and Natalie, and not just Adam. Maybe it was this sparkling-new version of him, one that wasn't freshly out of a relationship or healing from a breakup or whatnot, but there were certain things she knew not to say around his new girlfriend...although by now she was not new, and Isobel had had time to become well-adjusted, but it was this atmosphere. The strangeness of their mini-arguments, how Adam would fill her in on various subjects, like Natalie's hesitance to “merge alliances,” like they were still on reality television. But that would be how Tobias saw it. Maybe if she thought like him for a moment. The right approach would come.

Isobel struggled to understand why she thought she was out of her depth.

The closer you become to someone...the more difficult it can be to understand exactly how to help them without hurting them. Maybe. Something to that extent, then. She considered checking her phone, although it would have been impolite, and Roxie was in the middle of talking about the trip to Cairns, and she ought to pay attention to that, although it was the repetition of a story she knew, a story she loved, but she was attempting to cue in like Tobias and it felt impossible...

Isobel took a moment, a breath, and reminded herself their problems, or “problems,” were not hers to solve. She could smell another table's food, and it made her nauseously hungry. They had been waiting for their orders for perhaps five minutes maximum, but Isobel was suddenly overtaken with a craving to eat, to devour, and she understood it entirely—it was the craving to fix, to solve, personifying itself into a literal, physical hunger. You are not their therapist, Isobel intoned to herself, wondering whether it was obvious the mental discussion she was having with herself. Was it plain on her face? She would have liked to orbit, rotate around her own body, and take a peek.

‘I would have liked to have some grander effect on preserving the Great Barrier Reef,’ Roxie said, in the midst of her storytelling. ‘To glimpse it and appreciate it is incredible, but all I could do is stand there and stare at it, knowing the coral is bleaching, knowing we are actively destroying beauty because we seem to prefer decay if it does not blemish our own skin.’

They spoke for a time on this whitening, the bleaching of corals, of morals. Roxie began comparing it to houses: ‘You see when they build new estates, the colour is entirely drained from the perfectly-identical homes. Whites and greys and blacks, maybe, if you’re lucky. It’s like coral. The colour killed, because we can’t seem to have nice things for long enough. Or we no longer care about admiring beauty if it fades—white will fade into what, a dirtier shade of white? Not a washed-out green, sickly, or a brown brick becoming more akin to, you know, the floating rafts in the toilet. White is crisp, orderly, same-samey. Sterile.’ She paused, then added with a slight nudge of her shoulders: ‘Racist.’ The white couple opposite her seemed a tad uncomfortable, but neither of them made any rash objection to it. Adam, at least, was internalising it—his time spent with Isobel meant he at least now acknowledged the privilege of his commonality in a western country such as this one.

Roxie cleared up her point in a succinct ending: ‘This obsession with everything looking identical is becoming backwards, to the point that they want us acting identical, thinking identical, being identical.’ She paused, as her words became more of a hesitant ramble off the faces of her audience on the other side of the table. ‘And, um, the corals. I hate the idea of losing corals.’

Their food soon arrived as they were winding down a conversation about the unfinished finale of a television show three of them had recently watched together. It was, of course, Natalie who was left out of the loop, claiming to have never heard of the thing entirely. Isobel recalled reading the show had been cancelled only two episodes into the airing of the now-final season, and they collectively groaned. Natalie noticed the server approaching with black bowls of steaming rice, cooked-and-crumbed chicken, two small cupped crimson bowls of miso soup, and noodles, stringy and slippery and succulent. Adam and Isobel made short, comfortable glances at one another, non-verbal communication. Isobel smiled warmly and inhaled a plume of steam. She knew she wanted to say something to him at some point, but now would be awkward, and too out in the open. The four of them had further plans after dinner, so she considered whether she would be able to pull him aside at some point then. Or, staring into the murky pool of the miso, she wondered whether it all could wait.

The four began to eat. To ingest, to enjoy. A slurping sound echoed in their corner of the restaurant, drowned out otherwise by the America rock music. Adam, improperly designed or designed as such because he was a man, ate with a fervour that counteracted the chopsticks, which he was only half-skilled in using. He fought against single grains of rice as if a military veteran in battle. Beside him, Natalie made infrequent comments aloud of her enjoyment, glancing at Isobel to say, ‘This is delicious,’ as if she herself had slaved in the kitchen, breading the chicken herself, growing the rice in the fields. But it mattered little what the comment was to Isobel. She liked seeing Natalie become more accustomed to this foursome the more she ate.

Gavin was lining up his shot—bowling, a remarkably serious sport, required from him the specific force of will and angling, or contortion, of his body to strike as many pins as possible. One could be more acutely hoping, praying, for all ten pins to be knocked clean down all at once. He toed the black line and the two lanes at the far end of the bowling alley were silent, observant, watching and waiting. Even Tatianna had frozen in place, hovering with a dangled hand in front of her Grimace-purple bowling ball.

Ophelia and Jared were sitting side by side, unfreezing as Gavin bowled a clean shot down the middle and knocked eight of the ten pins down, a bubbled-up gasp extending from him to the others intensely watching, now bearing witness to two pins in stark opposition to one another at the end of the lane. Like baby's first two teeth. Ophelia leaned her head onto Jared's shoulder and for a moment was silent, her movements her only sound—the shifting of her legs against the lip of the chair, the brush of her hair against his green polo, the softness of her breath at intermittent moments and the grazing of her fingertips against what wanted to be the flesh of his thigh, but was just fabric. It was an intimate moment only if no one noticed it. She readjusted her head but found it almost impossible to see Tatianna except for as a moving shape pacing further and further away.

'I like having her back with me,' Ophelia said, still trying to peer around at the girl she considered to be her closest friend without herself contorting her body. This would not be sport, glancing at Tatianna again and again and again. The rolling sound pre-empted the skuttle of pins, and the dark-haired beauty made one passing glance at the lovebirds on their perch before selecting another ball at random, waving her hand over them as if a seventeenth century witch. 'When we talked about moving in together, which would have meant I moved south and escaped the heat officially, it would have meant an entirely different thing for me.' She paused, her eyes studying scuff marks on the linoleum-wood floor. 'I would not have ever met you, for one. Do you believe in the idea of alternate realities? Branches where you don't do this, or you do make the impulsive decision, and crazily, an entirely different existence has played out without you knowing it.' She closed her eyes, as if imagining it, painting the backs of her eyelids with a vision of herself and Tat on the steps of the State Library of Victoria after dusk eating boneless chicken seasoned with salt, pepper, plum, from the place they liked when she last visited, an assembly chain of words, like word association. Hot Star Large Fried Chicken. Sunny and bright, like a beacon in the night-time, the bespectacled university students packing up their elaborate, child-height chess match. No vibrant celebration. Difficult, then, for Ophelia to decide the winner, but Tat is oblivious to it all from the moment they sprawled themselves out on the steps. She is, for once, ravenous, devouring the boneless hand of chicken. How marvellous it is to watch her, like the rare kiwi in the wild.

Ophelia nestled her head further into Jared's shoulder. 'Do I believe in 'em?' He said, and from her angle she was unable to tell his facial expression, whether he was seriously considering her question or not. 'What's that idea, you miss one hundred percent of all the shots you don't take? Maybe there are no other universes because the moment you make a decision, every other possibility ends, ceases, just like that.' Low, close to his leg, he clicks his fingers together. The sound travels its way up the right side of his body and finds Ophelia's ear, the one pressed against the green polo. By now, the others had caught the middle of this conversation, either from their standing position to the side, willing to bowl, or otherwise from the seats opposite. Gavin and Tobias glanced at one another.

'You think every decision is that important, overwhelmingly so?'

Jared considered for a moment before he spoke again. 'I think you pave your own path. If you weigh down the brain with thoughts of *what if I ran an extra mile yesterday morning* or *should I have ordered Sex on the Beach instead of a vodka lime* you can't help but wonder the possibilities.' He had noticed the other eyes on him, the group dialogue that had seemingly sprouted from a quiet conversation to the side. This he said in a lower tone still, to protect it, perhaps, from everyone else's minds: 'If there is this alternate thing you might think there is, where you never started the job to meet me, do you think that version of Ophelia is still identical? Just missing a piece.'

She pondered it, and across from her she briefly made eye-contact with Tobias, who smiled, before averting his attention to Donny at the black-line, standing bolt-upright with a bowling ball in his hand. Ophelia pictured herself again, this time drifting now away from the State Library, the stairs, into the Melbourne Square shopping complex, past the almost-gentrified, capitalistic greed of the Monopoly Dreams, which she had been interested in for a split second before she reminded herself she was no longer a child, and inside it would feel a form of hollow, the kind of hollow you experienced when you cracked off the chocolatey foot of an Easter rabbit and discovered the cave dwelling was no more inhabited by rich, oozy goodness, or Mini M&Ms, than it was the tendons of the hobbled creature.

She remembered, for a moment, leaning against a brick wall near a staircase, although the memory was not specific. Maybe it was not a memory at all, but this imagining, of the life that could have been. Tat was in the bathroom, then, *powdering her nose*. Such an outdated notion. She would have been squat on the toilet urinating, but the glamour of thinking it something more divine kept the illusion magicked up on the backside of her eyelids. Ophelia liked having Jared around. She liked being told she was beautiful, actually flirted with and without the change of rhythm at the dawn of another day. She liked holding his hand. These conversations.

'Does she have to be?' Ophelia paused, inching away from Jared's shoulder, as if the topic held suddenly more importance. 'I mean, she's my alternate. Her life is so uniquely her own because she decided to say *fuck it* and ran away with the little goblins at her feet. I think she's unique.'

Jared was watching Ophelia in a way that suggested he was studying her, the truth of her statement. He paused before he responded. 'You don't want to throw it all away and move still?'

Ophelia stared at him, conflicted, the pupils of her eyes suggesting as much. 'I know I can't. I made peace with that, I think, because as much as I have talked about it, dreamed about it, the only reason it is more logical now is because I have this job and I have you, but neither of those things are like arranging for a moving van to lift a bedframe and hike it to a new apartment two states away.' She sighed, suddenly curious if anyone was paying attention to their conversation now. They were not, but Tatianna had finished her turn and sat eagerly nearby studying the scores displayed on screen. Ophelia knew she was meant to nudge Jared to continue the ebb and flow of the game, but so riveted in the thought she let her silences only be temporary. 'What I mean is. I can't transfer to another exact same, stable job down there, and expecting you to upend your life for me is a psychotic girlfriend move. So. No.'

At a natural end, Ophelia pretended to act startled out of her daze and whispered his name while pointing at the flashing arrow pointed at JARED on the screen. He began to move and positioned himself for the first bowl, the blueish-green ball a heavier weight in his hand than what had just been. Ophelia knew she was not directly asking him to do anything, but she shied away into herself and glanced over at Tat, wordlessly giving her close friend permission to have heard everything, to have listened in. She'd say something aloud later, Ophelia thought, drifting her gaze towards Tobias again. They continued, pacing through to the end of the game. In the furthest lane, it was Tobias who nabbed the victory, but barely, with only a seven-point lead over Donny. They amicably shook hands and celebrated, uttering a charitable *good game* to one another, and to Gavin, who placed third with a twelve or so gap between himself and the runner-up. In the other lane, it was Jared the victor, Ophelia in second place, and Tatianna the noble sport who may or may not have upended several of her bowls in the name of not giving a rat's ass about winning. For once. It was a surprising venture for her, and she denied it repeatedly, feigning innocence, pretending to the world she was merely an awful bowler. It must have been a rare-form day for Tatianna in entirety—even her lying appeared to be suffering because of bad weather, coughing and snotting on its sleeve.

While Ophelia and Jared amused themselves watching Tatianna pretend to be believably terrible at bowling, Tobias leapt to his feet and meandered towards the alley's bar, where he ordered a tall glass of Coca-Cola with ice from the dorkishly-attractive employee. As the tap foamed out sickish brown liquid, Tobias felt a tap on his shoulder, polite but bearing the weight of an entire hand, not merely one finger. He started to wonder, quickly, whether people still tapped each other on the

shoulder with the solitary index, as if commanding attention from the type of librarian who would demand you to *hush*. All this had to end, harshly, when Donny stood beside him and began to speak.

‘Are you having a good time, old sport?’ He put on the airs of a 1920s billionaire, and it was briefly amusing, except the accent was so poorly attempted it sounded less American and more like Donny recognised there was something dampening Tobias’ soul, a version of a dress-up character visiting a primary school. He shifted into something more organic to who Tobias knew his friend to be and continued with, ‘I always like seeing you, kid. If you lived closer we would have comfy soirees or whatever every other night, and you would bring along the boyfriend of yours. I like him.’

Tobias accepted the Coca-Cola from the bartender and they wandered away together, in large part because having any sort of conversation in front of an employee at a bowling alley seemed incredibly bizarre. Imagine the thought of this dorkishly-intriguing man ambling home to his clicked-together IKEA apartment and reporting what he heard, what he saw. You would go eggplant purple if he sat in front of a whirring, ageing HP laptop, typing away the little stories he overheard. Eggplant purple.

Tobias and Donny spied the others in the distance, old and new friends alike, and without much of a decision they ducked in the opposite direction and found a table with two chairs facing one another. It was neither a quiet nor invisible spot, but as Tobias took intermittent sips of the cola, he finally answered the question of whether he was enjoying himself. His mind was distracted, though.

‘I am, having a good time.’ He paused, taking a sip. ‘You’d beat me over the head with a stick if I said this, but imagine I’m just projecting it into your brain. I got so excited you were coming to visit, because you mean an awful lot to me, Don.’ The other man sitting opposite seemed at first to shake off the nickname, a further nickname from *Donny* already, and they both laughed.

‘Okay, no, the affection of “Don” only works if we *are* supplanted into *The Great Gatsby*,’ Tobias said, hoping his laughter was not too loud, too bellicose.

Donny smirked and tapped Tobias’ foot underneath the table with his own. ‘You mean an awful lot to me too, kid. But if you catch me wanting to beat you with a stick, just know it’s not because you’re a sentimental sap, it’s because you fucked with *my wife*.’ He put strong emphasis on the close of his sentence, embracing the nickname-of-a-nickname, the shortening down. If it had been anyone else, it would have been terribly uncool. Donny kept smiling, the grin so astronomically wide, it reminded Tobias of another night they had spent together, the day after the ten of them had spent a partial day at the beach. After what could only be described as group therapy, the four of them—Tobias, Ophelia, Isobel, and Adam—sitting on the floor in the home office, he had craved, or at the very least needed, time to recover with Donny. It was just the two of them, grabbing dinner at a little kebab place a ten-minute drive away. They would have rehashed everything, Tobias would have talked about Adam, but

somehow it was all completely amusing to Donny. Like it was just human, just natural. Of course they had their fiery explosion—it was predetermined.

‘How is everything with this fresh relationship of yours?’ Donny leaned forward and slid the glass across the table with one quick motion, taking a sip for himself. He raised his eyebrows in shock-rebellion. ‘I remember when I first started seeing Scot, and everyone was like, oh shit brother he’s one of them queers, he likes men now. The women I had dated before that were either unsurprised—I had not hidden my bisexuality from them, I was no asshole—or pretended to be disgusted, because we had already had a falling out, and it was another reason to be offended I did not worship the ground they Jesus-walked upon.’ Tobias liked hearing stories about Donny’s life, primarily because it was more interesting than his, even when the happy married couple had been together for a while now, although he always forgot how long exactly.

Tobias attempted to clear his mind and focus. From this position he could glimpse where the others were, but it was difficult to make out faces. You had to assign names based on what you remembered everyone was wearing—of course Tatianna was the simplest to recognise, she never so much as left the house without turning at least one head, or two. ‘It’s not that fresh,’ he started, caught in a flashback now to the blackout, when he would have said the same thing with how comfortable the pair of them were dallying around a pitch-dark house, playing Spotlight with each other’s shadows. ‘But we’re enjoying each other’s company.’ He hated saying that. It made their relationship feel *uninteresting*, like they were porch-sitting retirees finding love again for the first time after becoming widowers. Tobias did not like to think he and Gavin were spiriting away from the honeymoon period, but it was impossible, he thought, to not imagine their relationship taking on a new lifeform recently. If it had aged from “baby relationship” to whatever stage came next, then what...

Donny slid the tall glass back towards the man sitting opposite him. ‘I like this for you, more than I liked the messiness of you and Adam arguing back and forth over whether you *meant* to do what you did, whether there was attraction, whatnot.’ It was dangerous territory even mentioning it, and Tobias feared slinking back inside himself, but he surprisingly felt nothing but the passing breeze of the subject matter. It had happened. Back then.

‘This is more romantic, now,’ he said, thinking about every date he planned, the cute glimpse of Gavin’s smile when they stopped kissing to take a breath. It should have all been so pleasant, so miraculous, finding someone to cherish and someone who would cherish you. Tobias glanced in the direction of those end-two lanes, wondering for a moment why it seemed as though time had stopped, preventing any number of them from intruding on this conversation with Donny. ‘But. I don’t know. *These things are sent to try us.* I’ve been listening to a lot of musical theatre stuff with Roxie, she’s trying to convert me, one second from dunking my entire being into a body of water and proclaiming me

gayer than I ought to be.’ He paused, as if making a mockery of his own thoughts to outrun them, avoid them, even. He shook his head instinctively.

‘Is there something in the middle of you two?’ Donny’s voice was lower, more reserved.

Tobias tipped his head and tried to enunciate the words more elaborately than he would have done if he were not focusing so intensely on them. ‘I will try not to make myself stressed,’ he began, his sentence itself meandering to the pause, the break. He blinked back this realisation, that he was purposefully slowing himself down, and why. Mostly, he thought, he did not want to come out with it, and say it aloud, in case the vocalisation of it made it slip from being something they would work out together to something another person knew about. Tobias smiled, but it was forced.

‘It’s been a while since I’ve been in a relationship. I think that’s a good first admittance, me acknowledging the gears are rusty. It’s been a while, and Gavin, he’s not any of my exes, not by name, or the way we find ourselves, the connection between us. A new relationship is meant to be treated as such, without the lofty baggage of the past, and so I disrobe everything I knew off myself, right, I unpin the felt hat and the lapel, I uncinch my waist.’ He shook his head, as if he recognised his words were becoming confused, confusing, messing with language instead of plainly saying... whatever it was he meant to say. ‘I sound like a fucking poet.’

Donny set his arms down on the table and smiled, warmly, at Tobias across from him. ‘Being with someone new is always about being bare, I know that much to be true.’ He unfolded a minor anecdote about the first time he and Scot kissed, how tender it was, and then at the same time how important the navigation of their tongues were instead their mouths, not like invading armies but like a limber vine wrapping itself around a hulking tree in the rainforest. The synergy of cohabitating space. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘how we all were once, coexisting, sharing two toilets amongst twenty people, the absurd amount of toilet paper that must have been flushed down into sewerage and how some of *them* had to be taught how to piss without affecting the next person.’

Tobias laughed, then remembered, too, where his mind had been drifting. He pursed his mouth into a screwed-up expression, then continued to speak. ‘I bear everything for him. I take off every piece of clothing, visible and not, and,’ and he does a shrugging gesture with his hands, ‘there is still a confusion that by now doesn’t feel like jitters because our relationship is fresh.’ Tobias laughed, again, but this time it sounded far less genuine, or far less baked with love and joy. The cake is a lie. ‘I need to talk to him about it, except there’s still a gnawing feeling he will remind me he needs time, and there’s the gnawing feeling in me that *time* will mean next week I have this same conversation with someone else. Isobel. Ophelia. Fuck, imagine how bad my head would have to feel before I said something to Adam.’ He paused, another contrived spot of laughter, a solitary *ha*.

‘Donny?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you think you understand what I mean even without saying it?’

Donny seemed to contemplate it, but his face had entirely sobered and he looked more exhausted now, although Tobias hoped he was not the cause of this sudden shift into weariness. His truthfulness, because he could have simply said he and Gavin’s relationship was without leaks, but it would have been a disservice. A complete disservice. It would have been worn on his face, the crack, the break, not tears but a buffering eyelid, a barely-noticeable spasm.

‘I understand enough,’ Donny responded, and again for a moment Tobias’ gaze drifted towards those far-end lanes, where it seemed as though a few of them were wondering, in perhaps concerned curiosity, why he and Donny had drifted off alone. Let them wonder, he thought, not alarmed of their gossiping, for once at least. There was an importance in the alone time he could scrounge up for his friend, and this chat between them had at least propelled him to want to attempt another talk with Gavin, who would react how he would react. Now, Tobias watched as the four began trailing towards where he and Donny sat, and he knew it was coming to an end.

Donny cleared his throat. ‘Healthy communication is always going to realign a relationship, you saw that with my attempt at a *Saw* trap in February. Make ‘em talk and they fix their problems or they beat each other with wooden sticks.’ He smirked. ‘I see how you look at each other, there is love there. But is there a blooming relationship where the pair of you understand exactly how to make it work? *That* is not so simple. That is not waking up in the morning and getting dressed. It’s...sewing a suit out of curtains, you like musical theatre now, you get my reference.’

Tobias grinned and he thought about how a hug from Donny would have melted away the lingering bite of depression, the flesh taken out of his shoulder, but before he could move out of the seat, the other four had presented themselves there in front of the table. Ophelia hanging off Jared, the pair of them adorable, Tatianna and Gavin talking quietly, surprisingly, about their individual histories of doing escape rooms. Tobias tapped Donny’s foot underneath the table with his left foot.

It would be alright, he thought.

They left the restaurant with satisfied stomachs, and wandered down one inner-city street and around two corners to get to an axe-throwing establishment, which Adam had suggested, because unsurprisingly out of everyone he was the most enthralled by the idea, the notion, of hurling a weapon at a stationary target and calling out in glorious tongues like a Viking warrior in battle. Isobel at first seemed hesitant—she made a dumfounding joke about how boy!Isobel would have found someplace to

vent out his anger, with those boy-muscles of his—and Roxie politely reminded everyone she was small and somewhat deer-like, but Natalie practically brandished a silver-plated shield already.

At the front entrance, Isobel let Roxie and Adam go inside and paused, on the curb, asking to speak with Natalie for a moment, just the two of them. She was hesitant, and it came across in how she spoke, but she already anticipated certain reactions. She waited for Natalie to curse her out, to tear her to literal shreds in the side street, to leap at her throat, to abandon the evening entirely, or otherwise rig the automatic door to perpetually refuse entry to Isobel, all because of what she wanted to say next. Isobel understood it was a conversation best had away from the others, and she had noticed Roxie's concerned expression, and she had noticed Adam's otherwise complete blasé faire response. He either had not noticed or assumed the position: *Isobel knows best*.

She was trying to not doubt herself. But it was impossible to not admit that Natalie was at least a tad bit frightening to her, although no white woman should have been, ever. Isobel was not *actually* frightened they would get into a fist-fight and tear each other's hair out like women were expected by men to do, but she was not revved up by liquid courage, she had a stomach full of noodles and broth. Natalie lingered with her on the side of the very thin road, spotlighted, and suddenly they both seemed as ordinary as each other.

'Sorry,' she began, and then wanted to apologise for apologising. She shook herself out of it. 'Natalie, I won't hold you for long.' Why was she talking like a HR representation trying to get in contact with a prospective employee? 'I wanted to say it is nice to see you seeming to be fitting in more with everyone. It makes us sound as though we are hippies, believers in a verdant ecosystem, but really it is only because I have spent so much time with Adam, say, that he is like a brother to me. We are family, and I have acted like this towards my sister's husband, Stephen. Making sure he feels like he is not an extension of her, but...you understand what I am saying.'

Isobel feared she rambled far too long, backing herself into a corner, but the words had left her mouth and she still believed in them, at least in what they represented. Natalie gazed at her with her steely glance—she would have been impossibly cool in high school, and Isobel would have never imagined the two of them as friends. Never.

'Oh,' Natalie began. 'Yeah, I've had a nice time so far.'

Isobel could have left it there. She knew as much—she spoke her piece, it was acknowledged without fuss, without frustration or the narrowing of the eyes. But she was still left with wandering thoughts, and it never seemed wise on her behalf to ignore those thoughts, or leave them to fester.

She considered: *Adam should not have to pry effort out of you*, but it sounded entirely too bitchy and rude. She would have immediately been painted as a villain bent on the destruction of their relationship because she quote-unquote knew her friend deserved better.

‘I know we are ever-present,’ she said, smiling sympathetically. ‘Always around him, inserting ourselves, making plans. I do not want that to be uncomfortable for you, because I want happiness for him.’ Isobel paused, again wondering whether she had said too much. It was difficult to register off Natalie’s face, which remained predominately in the same expression, one familiarly linked to the concept of *active listening*. Isobel shoved herself to say something else, but surprisingly the shove did not work. She would have repeated it if she wanted to. Because I want happiness for him, a mantra she actually believed in.

Natalie glanced at the entrance of the axe-throwing establishment, then back at Isobel. Pause for the right-hook, Isobel thought, almost offering her left cheek up into an invisible spotlight. Natalie did not become physical, she was not a leopard in girl world, baring her teeth. ‘Most people kinda don’t give a fuck about their roommates,’ she said, smirking. ‘I thought that might have been the truth of it with him, that like buried underneath this initial statement that he really fucked with you three, he actually secretly found every social event you planned to be another distraction from him being alone in his room talking to girls and talking to me.’

She paused, taking a step backward, as if wishing she were closer to the wall than she initially was, hoping to lean the soles of her shoes against it for extra support. ‘Suddenly he’s giving me shit for not making enough of an effort with everyone, and I realise, no he’s soft for you, and for the lovable dork, and *maybe* the girl who wanted a relationship with him, I can’t tell.’ They both laughed, but it was muted, hesitant, a confused laugh. Isobel made a face she hoped expressed the complicated vibes between Adam and Ophelia, and she was relieved she did not have to do the same, or explain, what had happened with Tobias. A couple—a short Cambodian woman and a much, much taller white man without any hair—squeezed past the two of them and wandered inside the axe-throwing establishment.

‘Adam is very rarely soft.’

‘But he wants me to not be an asshole. He’s at least got feeling.’

Isobel paused, smiling at the thought. ‘I was surprised he ever let me get close.’

‘You clearly fought like mad,’ Natalie said, turning towards the entrance doors. ‘I think they’re going to be waiting for us, standing around watching instead of doing, so c’mon, let’s stop swallowing all this cool air.’ With one hand she motioned for the two of them to follow on inside, now idling somewhat behind the couple, who had slowed to the speed of two languid capybaras sunning themselves in the heat of northern Argentina. Natalie, the more assertive of their pair, asked to squeeze past and they soon rejoined with Adam and Roxie downstairs, who had almost pressed themselves into the black-painted walls waiting for the last of their group.

The splintering calls of masculine men excitably tossing axes echoed into the relatively small “reception” area, where now Adam was discussing basic details with a tatted ginger with a buzzcut. He

had *Mary* tattooed on his arm in a font meant to make the feminine name seem more butch than it was. Isobel watched the two men talk, without training her eyes enough to hear what either was saying.

They attended the safety demonstration, where a burly beer-bellied fellow who seemed at least descended from Vikings, and not merely because of his thick accent, tossed around rules in a voice louder than a bullhorn. He explained the various axes to choose from, wielded them like battlefield weapons, and had the four of them each take a stance as if they were stalking prey in the wilderness. Adam looked most accustomed to it, and Natalie appeared to be fearless, but Isobel and Roxie both lacked the height to avoid looking like Red Riding Hood boastfully having lifted the Wolf's murder weapon out of his furry, blood-splattered chest.

Afterwards, safety-checked and spiked with adrenaline, the four began to take turns hurling axes at the target in the dead centre of the pitch. Various exclamations erupted from whoever's lips, a menagerie of sound, and for a moment they distracted themselves entirely from any earthy catastrophe, like the bleaching of the corals, or whether a human being willingly wanted to interact with another. There was a perch, a bench, set away back from the throwing line, a safe distance in case someone hurled the axe in the wrong direction, which was entirely possible given the upended state of human existence. Adam, king of an impressive army, his stature complexly mythical and dazzled in a beacon of unknown sunlight, limberly heaved an axe at the target. It whizzed through the air and lodged itself one inner ring from the dead centre. He beamed, boasted, then retreated to the perch, where Roxie was sitting nursing a glass of honey mead.

'To the mighty *konungr*,' she said, watching his face pale when he misunderstood. 'King. Old Norse. I, um, pick up words occasionally and store them in my brain for occasions exactly like this, where I dork out and say *konungr* without thinking.' Roxie sipped on the mead and directed her attention, briefly, to her girlfriend like a junior lumberjack making sheepish glances backwards, as if afraid instead of lumbering the great old oak she would instead cleanly behead one of the inattentive young children playing in the forest. 'This completing fantasies for you?'

'I grew up athletic,' he said, and waited for Roxie's face to sour, as if she had expected him to be so completely and traditionally masculine like that. 'I know, it's an unsurprising fact. For a while I played a lot of AFL outside of school, my local team was the Robins, and we, uh, called the team captain Batman, either to show our respect or as a part of the big-dog mentality. I was never captain, but not that I ever wanted to be. I liked the comradery, yeah, that's the word for it. But something clicked in high school and I started focusing on myself as the athlete, then I was running, then I liked marathons and Tough Mudder, there was an older kid I knew from the Robins, a former Batman, who would drive me around until I bought my own car, passed the test at the Department of Transport, all of that sort of thing.' Adam paused, and smiled, assured he had answered Roxie's question and then

some. He had always considered himself to be nimble, agile, albeit he was less in-shape now than he was in those high school years. Of course, now he worked a gruelling office job, paid bills, and came home to a pencil house he ought to keep clean, tidy, and stocked with his portion of the groceries. It had been long enough since he participated in a Tough Mudder he could hardly acknowledge whether they were still operating or not. He thought, sometimes, he saw an advertisement scroll past on Instagram, or otherwise heard from a friend of a friend who still shrugged themselves out of bed at four in the morning to be prepared for an onslaught and mud crawling up inside both nostrils. Earlier in the year Eric had participated in something called Hyrox, or more likely HYROX entirely capitalised, which he had mentioned in passing to Adam, to bolster interest. Adam had brushed it off. He felt less and less like a bodybuilder with each passing day. He felt like a man just trying to stall weight gain.

‘You saw yourself back then as heroic?’

‘Doesn’t every teenage boy with self-confidence?’ He paused. ‘Or self-obsession.’

‘I mean, you’re not wrong. I can see you being the type to get hyped up by his peers, by the other boys in your cohort who recognised how much of a man you already were, at like fifteen and sixteen. Four years off from actually being a man, but already growing the beard, already dropping the balls.’ Roxie laughed, softly, inoffensively, and glanced over at Adam. ‘I have no doubt you were popular back then, but that does not make you frightening to me. It doesn’t make me believe you were inherently too vain, either.’

Adam watched as Natalie hoisted an axe in the air and aimed for the target down the netted corridor. He thought about whether he had ever said he loved her, for some strange reason, and then whether he had meant it the first time or if it was just something you said. But love, he knew, was complicated—some people said the word *love* without hesitation, some people said it after the first date, he knew moments in cinematic history where *I love you* preceded sex, preceded first arguments and squabbles in the car when they suddenly realised they were lost, but it was neither one’s fault, they were merely lost, it could not be helped. Not that Adam watched as much as Tobias did.

‘Do I come off aggressive?’

Roxie tipped her head in contemplation. ‘Look, I don’t tend to really get along with straight men, but as a lesbian, you’re sort of always a little *frightening*. If you aren’t harassing us, you are trying to convert us “back,” and obviously it’s presumptive of me to think that of everyone, but, um.’ She paused, glancing out at Isobel, who was wandering back towards the two of them. ‘If she’s comfortable around you, then I am, and I think beneath this idea that you should be masculine, that you should maintain this identity of being physically strong, you’re only human.’

Isobel stood now beside Roxie, a hand placed delicately on her shoulder. The conversation dwindled, but Adam continued to watch Natalie as she retrieved an axe, her slender legs in those tight-

fitting jeans. He sighed. Then he stood up, a sudden burst of new energy. 'Should we?' He said, making eye-contact with Roxie and a sweeping sort of movement towards the target at the end of the row.

Was anyone keeping score? Unlikely. They would individually cheer, make a remark, with every successful throw of an axe, but otherwise there was no scoreboard, no tallied lines on a slip of a paper later to be folded into someone's pant pocket and forgotten about in the wash. All for the love of the game, Adam thought, although secretly he had been tracking his own progress, weighing whether his own ability was impressive or not. Infrequently he missed the target entirely, the bulk weight of the axe thudding against the straw, but he considered that a miss, not a zero. To him, there was no concept of scoring *zilch*—you either made striking impact or you tried again, shifting your grip, emptying the cavity of your mind of every living thought. Now was not the time to think of what day it was—Saturday—what time it was—somewhere between 7pm and 10pm—or what menial chore was on offer in the morning, whether it be the vacuuming, cleaning the toilet, calling his brother about a family dinner he could not recall whether it was at his parents or at Shannon's. Although the call would be less chore, more a comedy of errors between the two of them, and they would realise in time neither of them had remembered Aunt Tracey had been invited.

He pelted another axe and felt a bead of sweat trickle down his neck. It was hardly a puffing-out-of-breath activity for him, but now he wanted to be in even better shape again, and now he wanted to set some standard for himself to reach, or at the very least ask Eric how a person went about doing a HYROX. That idea aged him older than he was—it was the sort of thing his father would have said, but then, we all become our parents, don't we? Adam pondered on this, wiped the sweat, and retreated back to where Natalie was leaning against a wall, sipping from a glass of mead herself. The four of them had committed to trying it—how often were you transported back in time? Mead, a far more traditional, old-fashioned alcoholic beverage, seemed out of style in comparison to doing a shot of vodka off someone's stomach and sniffing amyl nitrate.

Isobel was worn-down, already willing to admit axe-throwing was the type of activity she excelled in only for a short period of time before it became like golf to her, repetitive motions labelled as skill, the skill to be patient, mostly. Isobel considered herself a patient person, but she would rather sit herself down in a cosier nook, warmed by a fireplace, crocheting a blue-ringed octopus than attempt to prove herself to her father, the king, and evade the litany of male suitors asking for her hand in marriage. Their timed session would be coming to an end, and she was beginning to crave a different kind of warmth, too, her body snaked underneath Roxie's, the image of their naked splendour putting to shame the very word *scissoring*. It was not right to be visibly horny in public, but she was only

thinking it, only waiting to plant a kiss on those lips. Roxie looked tired, too, but she remained beautiful. Isobel held Roxie's hand in hers.

You forget how wonderful it is to have affection, and to keep it, until there is someone at your side inventing new forms of warmth at every turn of the corner.

'I was thinking,' Isobel said, amusing herself at something she remembered from a movie: *that sounds dangerous*, or something like that, this notion that having thoughts was positively irresponsible, which in turn reminded her of *1984*, a separate notion that having thoughts was punishable by flogging, maiming, rat-in-cage torture, and death. The future, she thought like a sigh, and continued speaking instead of plain thinking. 'It had not yet hit me how it was chain-reactive for myself and my roommates to find love, one right after the other.' She smiled, and thought about twisting her body to see Adam, but maybe that would have been too tongue-in-cheek. 'That should all be normal, I suppose. Four single people looking for romance, obviously the heterosexual people were bound to find it easier than I was, than Tobias was. Although how hard is it for a gay man—they all seem so sexually-excitabile and eager, albeit maybe they are closed-off like many queer people are, considering...' Isobel trailed off, then caught herself in an idea and continued on. 'But it is the specific people. Myself, Toby, Felia, Adam. Of course we would find our version of this connection, intimate, passionate, I never imagined it would be all at once, but maybe I thought I would take a lot longer to find someone like you.'

Roxie perked up at the word, the sound it made, how it was nothing alike to her own name and yet it almost twisted itself into the five distinct letters. *Roxie*. 'I wouldn't have wanted to be in hiding when you came around,' she said at first, like she was parroting a romance novel, or a big romantic gesture scene from any number of movies. 'If this is at all you wondering whether this is a dream, babe, I can promise you it isn't. Just because you were worried it would take you months and years to find someone who understood you, doesn't mean that was the truth of it. It's a worry.' She smiled and squeezed Isobel's hand tighter than perhaps she expected to. 'If the four of you were all straight, no one would bat an eyelid at four friends sharing a house, all with stable, exciting relationships. But suddenly, yes, with two queer people mixed up in it, suddenly there's a nagging feeling it's more unrealistic. That like, one of you should be struggling through awkward first dates at restaurants with hideous menus, and one-night-stands where the stranger steals a decorative, painted slug from your living room. Fuck realistic.' Roxie was grinning now, and Isobel squeezed her hand back, unintentional morse code.

'To hell with realistic,' Isobel replied, finding herself to be more refined, as ever.

'I used to have this friend of mine. We don't talk anymore because he was,' and she paused, 'transphobic, among other things. Rude to waiters, actually, snapped at this really quite thin, blonde waitress who looked like she would one day be on television.' Roxie shook her head as if to sharply get the story back onto its rolling track. 'He broke up with every single one of his girlfriends for absurd

reasons. One of them wore too much purple. The colour. One of them, um, had a safeword he didn't like. It always pissed me off, because if I grilled him on the *why*, it seemed like something that could have been discussed, or ignored with time, like if they chewed on lettuce like they were Esio Trot.' Roxie smirked. 'To hell with realistic, but to triple-hell with the surrealism of a man like that.'

They both burst into a fit of laughter, overheard by Natalie and Adam, who lingered nearby. Their time at the axe-throwing establishment came to a thumping end and the four of them climbed out of the basement back into the darkened inner-city mall, only a handful of the people wandering around at this hour. Most of the populus of the city would have been someplace else—either traipsing their way through round after round of drinks in the Valley, or spending hundreds away gambling at the casino, but what the four of them craved most now was to meander home. Isobel could practically drape herself in the lilac sheets from her bed, just by recalling their texture, their scent, which now was so much like Roxie's.

Into the night the six of them fled, like vampires, hungered and throwing out suggestions like McDonalds, over there, which seemed strangely satisfying as time ticked on and the sky only darkened even further. From above they resembled toned abs, two by two by two, with Donny talking Jared's ear off in the front and Ophelia and Tatianna dangling at the back. If not a hunk's rock-hard bod, these two women were glittering earrings, and they shifted from attractive laughter to whispered slices of their lives. Tatianna spoke about the latest purchase she had spent some sliver of her half a million on. Ophelia talked about why she still ached at having never left.

'I wanted so badly to move, goddamn!'

Tatianna was the voice of reason, or somewhat. 'But it wasn't going to work, you said that. I thought we ironed all of this out, babe.' She paused, shrugging her shoulders in an airy sort of way. 'You had the money, or you have, but it was a psychological thing, right?' It almost seemed as though she cut herself off from saying something else. But Ophelia had not noticed.

'Psychological? What, like I needed therapy to understand why I couldn't leave this crumbling apart city, where, look, this fountain turns into a bath like twice a week. I'm surprised there isn't a floating dump in there right now. I'm surprised half of these stores are still open, I'm surprised anyone can afford their rent, I'm surprised I haven't flung myself out of a window—'

Tat looked at her with a curious, concerned expression and moved to hold her close, close friend by the shoulders. She was inches away when Ophelia jolted, not unexpectedly or shockingly, forward and kept up pace with the other four ahead of them. 'If not that, then did the reason change?'

'No, I just couldn't do it,' she said, smiling.

The escalator to the McDonalds was so unhurried it seemed stalled, and Donny gestured theatrically, like a *ladies first* bout of courtesy and chivalry for Jared, who accepted, almost blushed, even. Tatianna looked at Ophelia unseriously with an overindulgent expression on her face. It was performative, but it was charming, too, especially between the two of them.

‘You know, I paid, like, \$2,500 for a toddler, or he was just nineteen, I think, to carve your name into a tiny plaque I hung over the sofa. Embossed, or whatnot.’ She laughed. ‘Whenever you want, my darling, come rest those pretty, pretty eyes in the equivalent of a doggy bed, and maybe I will feed you some treats.’ It was almost flirtatious, and Ophelia made a sudden, facetious O-shape with her mouth and glanced at Jared, who was higher on the escalator. Flying away, even.

‘Don’t flirt with me!’

‘Women always think I’m flirting with them!’ She feigned innocence. ‘Just because I’m gorgeous and bisexual and pay for the bill on the first date...because I have money!’ She flung her arms out—it was all far too dramatic and flamboyant for a McDonalds, but why would she have cared? There were certain aspects of life that seemed minor and irrelevant when you had won a reality television show. Tatianna nimbly stepped off the escalator at the top, almost as if expecting a sea of paparazzi awaiting her arrival, but of course there was merely a gaggle of teenagers in baggy clothes—torn jeans, fan-cam t-shirts for celebrities no one recognised—and a hunched employee mopping a Lemonade spill with thin, petal-like paper towel.

Ophelia and Tatianna darted towards a self-service screen together, laughing, tipping their heads backwards—it was amazing how elated the pair of them were without a drop of alcohol in their bloodstream, but that was the power of friendship, or something incredibly gauche like that. They giddily, drunkenly, scrolled through the entirety of the menu once, twice over, audibly letting slip ‘no, I don’t want chicken nuggets,’ at, thankfully, a reasonable tone of voice not disrespecting the handful of diners. It was later than they all expected it to be. Ophelia tapped on an ice cream sundae with caramel sauce drizzled too artistically-perfect in the square image. ‘I can’t wait for this to disappoint me,’ she said, before bursting into a fit of giggles.

Tobias said he wasn’t hungry, and mostly he was not. A thought was chewing on his stomach enough to wear it down, to make the gap inside of it smaller, less noticeable, although it neither entirely made sense nor described exactly how he was feeling. When everyone else was eating—Donny devouring a Big Mac, like breaking a diet, Jared dipping chicken nuggets into special sauce, Ophelia spooning the sundae into her mouth with salty fries—Tobias, his back tense and ultra-straight, sitting beside Gavin, said a few quiet words to him and they ducked out into the moonlit air, wandering through the mall in the direction of the Victoria Bridge.

‘At least you don’t have much to eat,’ Tobias said, watching as Gavin took bites out of the cheeseburger as they passed closed-for-the-night shops and the occasional homeless person. It was not necessarily the best spot for a conversation like the one he planned on having, so the delay with the burger was an assistance, truthfully. There were certain moments that could be avoided, and Gavin with half-chewed scraps of hamburger meat, processed to oblivion, in his gums was the bar in this exact moment. Side by side in the quiet, for now, was peaceful, and Tobias made passing glances at his boyfriend. He’s so handsome, and kind to me, and warm, he thought, acutely aware now that he worried he was about to become the villain in their relationship. They waited for the pedestrian crossing to flash green, the little waving man, and crossed the road. It was mostly empty.

‘I don’t even know where to start,’ Tobias said, at last, as Gavin tucked the burger wrapper into his pant pocket. ‘I, uh, care so incredibly much for you, already, I’m so worried if I talk for too long I will just start crying, but,’ he paused and scrunched up his face, ‘I should be alright.’

Gavin looked at him as they walked together, but it was not an expression that seemed confused, or unaware of what was barely being brought up to the surface. In truth, they had either darted around or approached one conversation for a handful of weeks now. They awkwardly bumped into it the night of the blackout, and Tobias had retracted into himself, so intensely worried he triggered every single failsafe in Gavin’s body.

‘You will never be forced into anything with me, just know that. But we don’t talk about why you never want to be intimate more than we are. More than the light touching, the kisses, snuggling up to one another in bed.’ The wind was stronger as they neared the river. ‘We haven’t had sex yet, and of course a relationship can survive without it, but...’ and he hesitated now, or he had already been hesitating, because like every conversation they had had about their lack of sexual intimacy, it ended soon afterwards. ‘I never know why you don’t want to. I assume I do the wrong thing, touch you in an incorrect place, fail to ask for consent and then feel like a future reference in a therapy session.’ Tobias went quiet by the end of his sentence, half-expecting Gavin to turn around and disappear into the night. Half-expecting him to launch himself onto the road, the abysmal oncoming traffic, or then into the river.

Gavin looked at Tobias with a fractured expression on his face. ‘I know,’ he said, his voice weak already, tipping itself over at the second letter. ‘The entire time we’ve been dating I have assumed I was the absolute worst possible partner because instead...instead of just giving you what you want, sex, I do an interpretive dance, make birdsound, and reject you.’

‘I just want to know what you do want, and how I can help you with everything else.’

Gavin was silent for a split second, but to Tobias it felt like forever. ‘I like when you kiss me. When we share those affectionate moments together. But then I freeze up. My body reboots itself when

you squeeze my ass, or ask me if I want you to suck my dick, or even if you just notice the bulge in my pants. I freeze. It...feels wrong for me, and it has, all the time, with anyone.' Gavin, blank-eyed, stopped beside Tobias at another pedestrian crossing, the Victoria Bridge ahead of them. The putter-putter-putter jolted him back, pacing ahead. Maybe it was the wrong conversation to have walking.

'We can avoid those things.'

'Can we forever?' Gavin stared at him with a dropped expression.

Tobias, internally, had his reservations. They were walking the sidewalk of the bridge, the darkened river like pitch, and at least it was not murky and stained brown like it was during daylight. The river was far more romantic at night, but then romance was reserved now for other couples, not for Tobias and Gavin as they spoke, as Tobias closed thinking about every instance where he had wanted to be intimate, deeply so, with Gavin and the quiet rejection had villainised his thought patterns. At least he had always stopped, always been patient, he thought, but was that good enough?

He scratched at whether his next question sounded like a moronic attempt at figuring out when next he would get laid: *Do you think this will change when you are more comfortable around me?* It was impossible, he thought, to understand what *more comfortable* looked like, how long the pair of them would have to anticipate this quiet undertaking of the unknowing, of repeating this conversation every few weeks, or months, expecting at some point or other for Gavin to yank him into a closet and the two of them to tear each other's clothes off. *Do you think this will change when you are more comfortable...* did it matter if it was around him, or someone else? Tobias started to wonder whether **he** was cause for a staggered concern, whether he was the numerical value in the equation preventing *x* from equaling...what, sex? $X = \text{sex}$. How babyish, how idiotic, how childish, how so very *high school* of him to suddenly think their sex life equated to a successful, thriving relationship.

And yet. Tobias thought about the last time he had sex. It was when, sometime nestled in between his release from jury duty and the first date with Gavin, or was it before. Hookup culture bored him, cruising he reserved for the *founding fathers* of the queer revolution in the later decades of the 1900s, although of course queer men having sex for pure pleasure extended well beyond two men with handkerchiefs sticking out of their back pockets. He wondered whether there had been much documentation of cruising in, say, the 1910s, amidst the first of the world wars. Men would have dallied with one another, the trauma of war scarring them, unholstering their amorous passion for one another. They either returned to their wives, burdened, perhaps, or a puncture wound changed everything. Death as a means of relieving the queer temptation.

Could they, forever? Tobias took in Gavin beside him, how much he wanted to be with him and continue to see a picture of his adorably handsome face every single morning, the smile plastered on despite how grey and dreary waking up on planet Earth could be.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, and it was in earnest. He didn’t. He could not predict the landscape of the road ahead in any exact, conceivable way, not emotionally, not theoretically. Physically, yes—he and Gavin were in clear shot of the remainder of this bridge, then they would turn briefly to the right, either wander in the direction of the various art galleries or the museum, the bus station, the train station too. Physicality made logical sense, for now. Physicality was exactly their roadblock, too.

He didn’t know if it was physically possible for him to ask the question—it felt, instead, like an affront of what was genuine about the two of them. Their care for one another. If he could rework the idea, then, alter the wording. Tobias at least had the glittering river as distraction. He could spend minutes upon minutes of his time glancing out at it, waiting for it to swallow him whole, but never asking for it to. ‘Are you sex-averse?’ He paused, convinced every word out of his mouth was inappropriate, or would stun Gavin into complete silence for the rest of the evening.

‘I have stopped understanding myself, Toby,’ Gavin responded.

Each idea: inappropriate. ‘Have you had sex in the past, did it ever feel *alright?*’ He was practically on tiptoes.

‘I, uh, did, in my first relationships. Have sex, I mean. It was always okay, the sex was, I never experienced the type of orgasm that makes you scream out your partner’s name and nearly break the bed.’ He paused. ‘Maybe these internal feelings prevented me from ever wanting to try it with a woman, like a lot of gay men do in high school when they think their brain is simply confused. I thought myself at least aware enough to be spurred away from it, and then, with my first boyfriend, Jamie, we had sex often enough that I had to reckon with it. Why I was not enjoying it as much as he clearly was. For a while I assumed it was because the person with their cock buried in the other’s ass was supposed to experience all of the pleasure, and me, I was supposed to be the vessel, or, no.’ He paused again, as if stammering around in his head for the correct word. ‘Not the vessel, but the orifice. The *tool*. It made me feel like a tool. A numbskull. Instead of enjoying pleasure, my body was rejecting it, and instead of ever really mentioning it, I pretended to be the sheepish virgin when I met someone new. The act seemed over-worn and unbearable when I met you.’

Tobias wanted to hold him, then, but they were in the middle of the path and as with every single thought at top of mind, it felt inappropriate. How would Gavin have reacted. He sighed.

‘I will never pressure you into anything,’ he reminded, but it felt hollow out his mouth. ‘I understand.’ He could not allow himself to become robotic now, it would be cruel, it would be floodworks in seconds. ‘Gavin. If I ever come across pushy, or too excitable, I am sorry. So incredibly sorry. I never wanted you to feel like our relationship would eventually devolve into the exact sort of discomfort you had experienced in every other relationship, with every other man.’ He was hoping his words embraced Gavin when he could not, but there was no telling what happened inside another

person's brain. He pinched himself for asking such a plain question like *are you sex-averse* when it was so much more layered than that.

'It's okay, Toby, I'm not deeply scarred or traumatised.' He cocked his head. 'Not that I think. This has just been something I realise. I don't know exactly what it means, if it means I am supposed to be in unfulfilling relationships with men because I cannot offer them sex, or if it means I should be forever alone sitting on the couch watching other lustful people accomplish the deed without batting an eyelid. I, um, watched *Heated Rivalry* when it came out and thought, it's not supposed to be impossible. They recognise their instant attraction to one another, the Russian whispers a room number in Shane Hollander's ear, and jump-cut they are passionately romping with one another. Intense, insane passion, no accusation of *will you report me for sexual assault if I stroke your cock without asking?* I know, it's a scripted show where you never once see Ilya Russian-last-name walk into a clinic and ask to be tested for STDs, but...it is an entire circus and the monkeys and the clowns if I want someone to be impressed I had sex with them.' Gavin froze up, stopping in the middle of the path, at the middle point—or thereabouts—on the bridge.

'I really never want to disappoint you, Toby.'

Tobias smiled sympathetically. 'You haven't. All I wanted was to know what was going on inside that head of yours.'

'It's a shitstorm, Toby. Inside my mind I imagine how offensive it would be to have sex with you and not enjoy a whimper of it, and you would notice plainly, on my face, how much I would rather be anywhere else. Would rather be curled up with you on the sofa in your living room, listening to the barely-audible sounds of your roommates having sex with their partners, than being the exact disappoint I am to you.' He sniffled, his eyes welling with tears. 'I would have to break up with you if I forced myself to grunt, and moan, and touch myself to cum afterwards.'

He attempted to fight back tears, but Tobias noticed it would have been impossible, too. Gavin's face was slick, wet, and he kept shaking his head, as if the slow movements short-circuited his tear ducts, or otherwise dried him off like a bathed dog.

'We can't do this forever,' Tobias said, himself shedding a tear. A single, lonely tear at first, but he was finding it more and more impractical to deny himself an accurate representation of how he was feeling. It was obvious to him their relationship was buckling, and to pretend everything was ordinary, normal, and turn around for the awfully-garish McDonalds now would have been a sin. Having ever stepped foot in there might have been.

Through reddish eyes Gavin glanced over at Tobias and wiped his face with the back of his left hand. It was slobbish, imperfect, but to Tobias his boyfriend still looked effortlessly handsome. 'You

shouldn't have to be in a relationship with someone who will always come with a warning label.' Gavin clutched his arms to his body. The night air was cold, bitter, and unrelenting.

'Everyone has a warning label,' Tobias said, attempting a smile, 'I'm hazardous too.'

'Hazardous to a point.'

'And what's the point?'

Gavin seemed to consider this, continued to wipe his face with his hand. 'Do we go through more of our life expecting another person to completely change on us? You, Tobias, got back into another relationship because you wanted everything you had been missing—the comfort of an embrace, the quality conversations late at night when no one else was awake or around, the kisses and the passion and the sex. That's just what you expected when you met me, and there's no part of myself that could ever be furious that you wanted *normalcy*.'

'We shouldn't hold each other back.'

Gavin shook his head, but it did not seem like a fit of denial. 'Should we, uh, say it out loud just so it is obvious what we're doing?' He looked exhausted, the red of his face fading into a pale white, but he attempted a smile. It was the only thing holding Tobias back from bursting into tears.

'Breaking up.' He heard his voice snap in half like a twig.

Gavin sniffled. 'But I want to stay friends, if we can.' He paused. 'I know there is an expectation because we're exes we shouldn't. I know the whole world thinks you can't recover from having dated someone, but...I care about you more than I normally would when I have to let someone go, Toby. Maybe we were doomed because we want different things, but I still want to talk to you, to see you sometimes, unless I am only coming across like the clingy type of ex secretly waiting to get back together.' He wiped his face again, this time with his other hand. 'Tell me to shut up already.'

'No, I'd like that,' Tobias replied, and he believed it of himself. They would have to have some semblance of a waiting period, because he knew of himself he would spend time sobbing, he would spend time moping around, wondering if he will ever be worthy of a great romance, but in time...he could see himself still friends with Gavin, not because they both wanted to repair themselves, but because at the very least two people should not make an irreparable mess out of their connection over something as primal and carnal as *sex*.

It was an imperfect end: they were hardly stranded on the Victoria Bridge together, but they were there, together, and Gavin had left various things at Tobias' place, and the absence otherwise would have been unusual. Without Tobias collapsing in the middle of a McDonalds, an embarrassment he would never forget. He quickly sent Donny a text message, that he was heading home by himself, and he had hesitated, he had almost said something then, in a text message, but he couldn't. It was improper, and he was cold, and tired, and deflated and defeated. He said goodbye to Gavin, but there

was no animosity between them—it was the cleanest breakup of his entire life, and he felt no shame, no humiliation. In the morning, they would talk again. They hugged each other, and Gavin walked in one direction, and Tobias walked in the other.

At the train station, Adam and Natalie sat at the far end of the platform on a steel bench. Roxie was up the flight of stairs in the mostly unsanitary public bathroom, Isobel waiting for her outside, leaning against a wall. They were neither fussed to be home quicker nor panicked about getting the next train, and it suited them all not to hurry. Natalie was leaning back against the cool metal, her head tipped. She looked overly comfortable at a train station, although not enough to warrant attention—she was not bolt upright like people tended to be in the earlier hours, rushing to and from work, avoiding collisions with one another and avoiding conversations about the weather, the union strikes, yet another planned track closure next month aligned to the September school holidays. Adam briefly checked his phone—no new messages from anyone, but it was 10pm. He was tired, but he was older than he once was. Maybe you were meant to assess your fragility in your late twenties. He made a mental note to talk to Eric, a mental note about *jogging*.

‘Did you ask Isobel to employee review my engagement tonight?’

Adam snapped his head around to Natalie, who had now become far less fluid and relaxed. Her body tensing up. It had seemingly come from nowhere, but he understood she must have been thinking about it, and not for very long—Natalie was never the type of person to stew on whether or not to say something. She came right out with it.

‘What?’ Adam was far removed from a characteristically-interesting response.

Natalie sighed and scraped her feet against the dirtied tiled floor of the train platform. ‘Did you ask her to watch me over, to interject if I seemed like I was fitting in more than usual?’ She paused, and Adam scrunched up his face. ‘I’m not pissed at you. I didn’t realise we were still coming to a head about that.’

‘That you don’t put in effort? I don’t puppet what Isobel does.’ He shook his head in response, in case his words were not enough. ‘Is that what she pulled you aside for before we flung medieval weapons around the place?’

Natalie smirked. ‘It was.’

‘That’s Isobel, I don’t know what else to say. She wouldn’t let someone like me walk all over her, that much I do know, so it doesn’t matter what I’ve said or not said to her in the past. She clearly spent tonight noticing you were more comfortable around everyone, and shouldn’t it be a comfort she mentioned that to you, instead of saying, *Natalie, do you hate me, we never talk.*’

‘No, that’s your job.’

Adam furrowed his brow. He was beginning to think she wanted to have an argument with him, and sure, in public seemed like the absolute perfect place for it. They could appear to be unhinged and psychotic together. ‘All I said was I wished you would participate more.’

‘And if I forced myself to be a different person, would you be happy?’ Natalie said, lowering her volume. They were talking to avoid escalation, but the biting tone of their voices made it nevertheless obvious they were in the midst of an argument. ‘But if you set Isobel to watch me, to make sure I was contributing to the conversation, I won’t be bitter you talked to her about it. You’re allowed to talk to your friends about your relationship, Adam.’

‘I didn’t ask her to *watch you*,’ he said, bitterly. ‘But we’ve talked.’

Natalie smoothed herself out, calmed herself down, and it was a miracle no one had seemed to notice, or care, they were having such a discussion in the open. Of course, the train station was not incredibly crowded, there were only a handful of people nearby, the majority of them further down, nearer to the escalator. She glanced at Adam but said nothing, not yet. He was wiping the snarl off his face. The next train was now a minute closer.

‘You’re allowed to, Adam,’ she repeated, although by now it sounded less assured.

‘Let’s not argue about this all the damn time.’ He was in a more playful mood now, hence the *damn*, which was not an aggressive shove towards hell. ‘You enjoyed the night, dinner was delicious, neither of us shot an axe into someone’s breast, by the sounds Isobel was showering you in compliments and enjoying your company.’

‘Let’s not push it,’ Natalie responded, stifling a low hum of a laugh. ‘But sure. I had a great time tonight, so there is no point spoiling that by getting up in each other’s business and throwing the steak knives around.’ Neither of them was quite the type to apologise with the word *sorry*, but this seemed to have been enough. They skirted around the very word, but came to a neat, fashionable conclusion to this argument in particular and all seemed to have resolved itself. Their initial animosity faded, and they scooted closer together, in part because it was less distractingly disconcerting, and in part also because coming round the corner was Isobel and Roxie, looking entirely ordinary. Of course nothing had changed between them—they had not been upstairs outside the restrooms having a reheated dispute over anything, but maybe, secretly, Adam had wanted them to be trudging through a valley in their relationship too. It was weak of him, numb, even, but the lingering feelings did not vanish immediately. He would spend the rest of the evening mulling over what he had said to Natalie, and what she had accused of him, but they the pair of them were unlike minuscule animals with minuscule lifespans. If he had to call himself an elephant, then he would, because an elephant never forgets. That was something Adam had held onto, back when a segment of his time in high school was

carved out solely for watching animal documentaries because the teacher, a fuzzy mid-forties man named Mr Toews, became too bothered by the end of the week to reconstruct lesson plans.

Isobel offered Roxie the spot on the steel bench beside Natalie. She stood, lingering, while they waited for the next train to come. It was strangely, bizarrely, peaceful.

The living room of the pencil house erupted into sound as four of them crashed inside, their conversations never-ending. Donny looked drained, out-of-focus and waited three milliseconds before he slipped out of his shoes and bolted upstairs, expecting Tobias to be exactly where he found him, in his bedroom. Donny did not bother to knock. He collapsed onto the bed and wrapped his rather muscular body around Tobias, who was shaking, in-between obvious sobbing fits. His face was hot with tears, which he buried in Donny's shoulder, the perfect deterrent from yet another bout of crying.

'It's okay, kid,' Donny said, with the stature of a bodyguard protecting his client.

Tobias muffled another aggrieved sound into the other man's shoulder.

'It's okay,' he repeated, and they remained in this frozen tableau for an indistinguishable period of time, and no one intruded, although of course there was downstairs a shift in mood when everyone began to realise Tobias had not disappeared into the night because of illness, sickness, or a general feeling of disheartedness. Donny had flung the door open in such a state it had not been closed behind him, and now it swung on its hinges, and Ophelia stood off to the side, near the staircase landing, herself wedged inside an iceberg. Her leg tremored. She feared another step would sound, severing the silence of the third floor, but from there, her frozen position, she could hear Donny's repeated attempts at calming Tobias down. She glanced at Jared, who stood a handful and a half steps down the stairwell, but as much as she could not move an inch, she could not speak either. His warmth, that comforting expression, not murky and clouded like hers, was enough—Ophelia squeaked to Tobias' bedroom door and closed it, encasing Donny and Tobias inside.

The click of the bedroom door was not acknowledged to begin with. Never, never ever, had Tobias thought he needed to be in Donny's arms more than right in that moment. He pulled away enough to finally scan Donny's face, although what for he could not entirely be confident. His texts had been sparse, briefly-worded, missing gaping portions of context, but he had only waited ten minutes to tell Donny that he and Gavin had broken up. It ached. He knew it was meant to. There were not many words. Tobias imagined who would be curled on his bed with him right in this moment if Donny had not serendipitously been here on semi-vacation, but then he theorised perhaps he would not be single again otherwise. It was cruel. They would have been crueler to each other. Tobias pictured a version of

himself gasping for a breath, and it seemed narrow-minded to compare wanting *sex* to breathing, but unless asphyxiation was your kink...

It was cruel. But he did not want to be single again, not yet.

PART THREE

LIGHT

One month later.

Four wispy flaps of fabric joined to a point, the needle of the pyramid. It was this tightened, empty space in the tent Adam watched in a daze, still half-asleep. It was unimpressive—the tent did not budge, there was barely a September breeze, it was mildly cool to him but he was shirtless, a burgundy sheet draped over his torso and lower half. He was atop a blow-up mattress which sank with every movement, although he was not the kind to toss and turn in the night. It was a double, but he imagined it would have been uncomfortable to share, diverts sinking one or the other to the dirt-and-mud ground. The tent's thin, tarpaulin carpet did not distract from the ant mound they had set Adam's tent upon, although in the night he had not shaken himself awake covered in bites. It had looked disused. He wondered whether ants abandon mounds from time to time, purchasing new real estate. If so, was there a realtor-ant, was there a worker ant who specialised in staging, in manufacturing the image of home and hearth, framed photographs of stock-image ants at a best friend's thirtieth?

Adam wondered how long an ant could live. He stared up at his ceiling, his for-the-time-being ceiling, which ended in a point. Tired, he wondered whether he could have hung a lantern from the tip of the pyramid, whether the taut space between the four fabric walls would have held a clamp or hook or hanger without damaging the integrity of the shape, the form. The tent.

If he had not been alone. This thought occupied more space than he was willing to admit. Yes, the original plotted idea was for him to be here with Natalie, for her to be asleep as his body clock sharply disorientated him, as the blow-up mattress sagged and withered underneath their weight. Natalie was over, by then. He broke off their relationship the afternoon before, so it was not yet twenty-four hours since he had been in a monogamous, engaging, fulfilling relationship with a woman who had, at times, scared the living shit out of him. If he had not been alone, she would stir the moment he breathed, the moment he murmured inside his head about the pendulum lantern, its non-existence. Swing, back, forth, not for some early-spring breeze but because it was unstable, heady, balanced by paper palm trees.

Adam sat up on the mattress and questioned, genuinely, why he was alone. Sure, he had been the flamethrower, dousing their oil-saturated clothes, but now he wondered whether or not he should have idled on the thought until after the camping trip. The thought numbed him like the buddy system, as if his being in a relationship with Natalie had been worn to the point of selecting someone from an order to go to the bathroom with, to go to bed with. That was incorrect, but still. He was here, alone, and someone else was, too. Adam scrounged around for his phone and checked the time: it was 5:54am. He slipped off the blow-up mattress and unzipped the flap.

It was cool outside, and Adam half-regretted not slipping on a shirt, but he would hardly be out in the elements for long. His tent was second from the right of a short semi-circle, and he moved with unhurried steps on the bare dirt, tufts of grass in patches. It was an obviously well-worn campsite, which suited the arrangement of campers, most of whom had not braved the great outdoors for some time—it became increasingly more apparent that if any of the foursome labelled themselves as “reality stars”, they had not ever conscripted themselves to *Survivor* or *Alone* or *Naked & Afraid* or any other identifiable “survival in the wildness” show, for there were so many nowadays it could have been a subcategory of Netflix, although of course the big-time streamer only maintained its awfully-premised concepts like marrying yourself to someone’s voice, or celibacy-ing yourself like an easy-to-crack safe. Adam tended to avoid the type of reality show that would have bait-and-snatched him had he not auditioned for the one where everyone lives in a house for an extended period of time and narrowly avoids becoming convinced the shower drain is feeding their secrets to the Illuminati.

He paced from his one tent to the tent furthest to the right, every step with intention. He knew what he was doing, and he reminded himself, although the concept of an angel and demon on either shoulder seemed restrained for a person without conviction. Without spine or heart. But this was not a matter of the lovey-dovey heart. It was pure movement. It was Tobias’ tent.

‘Morning, Adam.’ He heard his name and pretended he had not been caught. *Caught* meant he feared discovery, meant he would have been embarrassed, but there was no lick of *embarrassed* inside Adam. He recognised Isobel’s voice and greeted her with a smile, although in restraining himself the smile was not arrogant, and expressed nothing of what he was feeling, standing there, half-stranded, wondering whether she understood or thought him a lunatic. He called upon everyone but the angel and the demon, they were useless, they were concepts reserved for torn-of-heart people in worse situations than he was. Adam sighed. No internal element of his had ever known *shy*.

Isobel was sitting in a collapsible camping chair, wearing a thin grey sweater she pulled tight to her body. It was only cold because it was early, but Adam did feel exposed. He sidled up beside her in another camping chair and smiled warmly, wiggling his toes in the dirt. ‘Good morning.’ He was too chipper, but it offset what he assumed came next.

‘He isn’t awake yet, but you want to wake him,’ she said, shrugging. ‘Or was it early morning stumbling?’ Isobel was only attempting to understand him. Two days earlier it had seemed like he would be sharing the tent with Natalie, and now she was a ghostly apparition with no explanation of how she died. How their relationship had. She glanced at him for answers, found none.

Adam sighed. ‘Talking through what woke me up, with him, helps.’

‘Am I a poor substitute?’ Her expression was difficult for him to read, but she was not irritated.

Adam shook his head. ‘No. Of course not.’

Isobel paused—she was of half a mind to tell him to go find a shirt first, but instead she knew he would disappear for a second and the moment would be broken. This open-for-discussion tone she felt like an undercurrent between the two of them, that ebbed and flowed periodically. Isobel assumed what she had said to Natalie had been reported back to Adam, scouted back, and she had assumed an inch of it was overstep enough. But so what, oh well.

‘What is on your mind then, Adam?’

He flinched, almost unnoticeable. ‘The breakup was the right decision,’ he said, like it was a question without the question mark at the end. Adam was not confused, not entirely. The breakup *was* the right decision yesterday, when he sprung the news on her like an acquittal. ‘It was good, for a while. I liked being with someone again, with her. Nat, she felt secure, she reminded me what it was like to be committed to someone who knew what they wanted.’ Adam scratched the sleep out of his eye. ‘I thought about like, what’s the word, *masquerading* this whole weekend with her asleep beside me, with her making an effort, she’s whatever about it and I’m over here thinking about the actual thing I want instead, which is a confusing want, which doesn’t make sense.’

‘You’re allowed to outgrow a relationship.’

‘You don’t need to remind me what I’m *allowed*, Iss. I know.’ He paused, softening his tone. ‘Living with the three of you makes me so aware of what I allowed to do, maybe it’s dangerous. Growing up with brothers, with my parents being middle class and working stressful jobs I didn’t quite understand at the time, I think there were limits, and I respected them. There were certain caps. It’s the cause, if anything, for me thinking and expecting a relationship to run smoothly with Natalie, even despite the fact we loved to argue. About dumb shit, too, like me expecting her to immediately be comfortable around you and Toby.’

‘Arguing is normal in any relationship.’ She sounded like she was on salary, and noticed it. There was no point, Isobel knew, in passing Adam off as a stranger on the other end of a phone line—he was closer in reach than many had come, and yet she was still terrified, sometimes, of blatant honesty. ‘I am going to drop this façade that I am supposed to have, and talk about what I saw with the two of you.’ Isobel inched forward on the camping chair, the edge line briefly cutting into her thigh. ‘It was a genuinely positive experience for you, a proper relationship again after...you know, a miserable torment last year. But it came with its cons. If you wanted to break up with her because it was weighing heavy on your soul, Adam, there was no moral god casting a shadow on you who said you must endure that which you got into in the first place. A break-up is not a cheap quit, a cop-out.’

He smiled, limply so. It was part of a façade of his own, he recognised it—if he presented himself as chipper, as having come out unscathed, maybe the stories of the breakup would have him painted as the villain, the bad guy. But he wanted to quit it. He had. Now he was seconds from doing

that, from unzipping the door-flap of Tobias' tent and stirring him awake, but to "talk" was half of a lie. It was no mere coincidence his mind wandered at the reprisal of a camping trip, except they were sans the van, which did favours to the experience, in truth. Without interruption, Adam knew he would have unzipped, climbed inside, figured out how to wake Tobias without giving him a god-awful fright, and at first they would have talked, and maybe Adam would have embarrassed himself then, but after the talking would have come...this part he was unsure of. Another bout of humping, another shameful attempt at walking off his failed relationship with a woman without any of the actual walking. This he was so vaguely incoherent about, because the thought of kissing Tobias felt factory-floor incomplete, as if there were core components missing entirely, and did he ever really want to have sex with him—

'I know that much.' His voice came across gruff, but mostly tired, worn-down. It was early in the morning, after all, and neither of them should have been awake. This was supposed to be a weekend of rest and relaxation, or in that variety, he had had lofty ambitions of hiking trails to keep himself on this reformed fitness journey, but no kayaking, at least.

No scaled-up game of Capture the Flag. At least.

'So is there no other reason you were off to intrude on his sleep?' Isobel made a lingering glance at Tobias' tent, which remained undisturbed. She smiled back at Adam. They were at least in tune with one another to know when a signal meant it was a sign, or a sign meant it was a signal.

Adam came to a halt with his logical thinking. He knew what he was doing, and he knew how effortless it would have been had no one noticed, had no one known this time around. But it wasn't effortless, and it was always going to be known, eventually. They were, the four of them, *this* tight. 'The bond I have with Tobias is new for me, with another man.' It was the first time he was actually being honest—everything he said back in Sydney in February, the harsh realities he claimed to lay bare, had been deceptive, ignorant, and other words that meant he was, yes, confused. 'All I wanted when I woke up was to not be alone. I was cold. Dumbly, I thought about him, instead of anyone else.' He paused, shaking his head, at himself. 'And he's still dealing with his own stuff. His own breakup. And I just want to make it messier by pretending, like last time, confusing him scratches an itch until another woman comes along.'

Adam searched Isobel's face for reassurance—he knew a part of what he was saying, or confessing, made him sound like a broken cliché. The foolish man who craves attention, seeks it from someone who is far less likely to deny him, when denying will only blemish their friendship. He regretted saying anything. Then he did not. Isobel was not abashing him, hoisting him by his own petard. That was something.

‘Hey, Adam,’ she said, smiling warmly, ‘it is the closeness you two share. There is no shame in closeness, like there is no shame in talking to him when you feel lonely.’ She sniffled, because of the cool breeze. It would be much warmer in an hour or so.

‘I feel like you think it means I’ve been deceiving myself my entire life.’

Isobel shook her head. ‘No, I don’t,’ she said. ‘Look, it is never my place to decidedly judge where a person’s head is. It should be on your shoulders, though, Adam, and it is.’ She chuckled softly to herself. ‘I know you are capable of trusting in yourself, and I cannot imagine ever suggesting you should bear being alone by yourself. If he helps... Adam, it’s Toby. He is not a stranger. The two of you used to pretend you were merely foes vying for a title, but as soon you started living together, it became obvious there was trust there, and loyalty, you were never going to be cruel.’

It all sounded more sentimental out of Isobel’s lips. More than it simply was, that was the trick of her magic. She sniffled, again, because of the breeze, again, and leaned back against the fabric of the camping chair. Adam wished he were drinking something, even if it was a cold glass of orange juice. His lips felt dry. But he stopped thinking about himself, because suddenly he was acutely aware Isobel had been awake too, and before him, and for one reason or another she had embraced the aloneness too. Far more clothed than he, Isobel wore a sombre expression on her face, and while his interlude had been a cause of distraction, she still seemed unsettled. He was not blind, nor as dumb as he ridiculed himself to be. Adam stiffened.

‘Now it’s your turn,’ he said, scooting the camping chair closer. He hoped internally that the decision, instinctual more than anything, had not come across threateningly. ‘Why are you awake so early, there’s no work, you don’t have to stoke the fire.’

Isobel shrugged, wordlessly, and scrunched up her face.

‘My father went to the hospital in an ambulance.’

Immediately Adam’s expression changed, harshened, and he became paralysed in the fear of not knowing how exactly to react. ‘Is he alright?’ That felt stable, stable enough, but Adam feared, too, that the next words out of her mouth would mortify him for asking. And yet she sat here, wrapping her arms around her body in the grey sweater.

‘It was nothing serious, or otherwise I would be in the waiting room drenched in sweat and wondering which doctor, nurse, whomever, was coming to deliver me some kind of news. Any kind really.’ Isobel paused, becoming calmer and at ease with herself. She reminded herself: it was nothing innately serious, but he had to go to the hospital, as is what happens when your ex-wife receives multiple text messages that ring alarm bells in her head. ‘He will be fine, I have been told,’ Isobel murmured, her voice low, uncomfortably quiet. ‘I asked my mother if I should be there, if Ava should fly up to be there with him, but she replied in typical mother fashion: *do not fuss, Isobel, your father is*

recovering from his little stumble with the best doctors and nurses in all of Brisbane. Somehow that is supposed to calm me, the best of Brisbane.’ She laughed, and the sweetness of her laugh was enough for Adam’s mood to shift, for him to join in and laugh with her. Isobel smiled, an earnest smile.

‘He stumbled?’ Adam asked, suddenly remembering how bare and unclothed he was.

‘My father can be a clumsy man,’ she said, hesitating. ‘He had a fall in his kitchen, and was pulling at the handles of drawers, leaning against the oven, to get himself up. My mother did not even arrive on the scene, she dialled triple zero and they let themselves inside and found him bleeding, which apparently was a separate injury, but he was concussed.’

Adam breathed a sigh of relief, which came out heavy amidst the quietness of the morning. ‘Good he’s okay,’ he began, in typical male fashion, short sentences and reassurance with the emotion of a badger. Although were badgers aggressive? Now he was thinking about badgers, and he wondered whether he could feasibly ever have seen a badger, which seemed to be negative, he likely had not. Isobel was sitting opposite, thinking. ‘Is there service, can you get in contact if there’s something else going on with him?’ Adam had only ever met Isobel’s father, Jon, a handful of times, but they had amicable conversations, although their likes and interests differed significantly—Jon had very little interest in sport, or reality television as it were, and Adam knew very little about botany and the world of pharmaceuticals. It was a wonder, to Adam, how Jon had ended up bleeding at all, or at least noticeably so when the paramedics burst into his home and rescued him from himself. Who could say. The concussion likely had the effect of confusion.

‘We have one singular bar,’ Isobel responded without checking her phone. It was clearly not nearby, either, she had not set it down anywhere and there was no lump at her thigh like there ought to be. Not that Adam wanted to be searching her thighs. ‘My father is very likely awake now discussing his medication with one of the early-bird nurses, talking about how effective or ineffective it is, whether he can count *dizziness* as one of his side-effects. An excuse for the stumble, my mother would interject, if she were awake when he entered himself into the conversation.’ Isobel smiled, a cloudier reminiscence fogging up her eyes. ‘He will be fine, I just woke up stressed for no reason.’

‘You should go back inside,’ Adam said. He meant the tent, the temporary shelter. She shrugged, sniffing again. The cool morning weather, or the stress. The anxiety. It was clear now it was not merely one or the other.

‘It’s spring, Adam, it will be blazing hot in fifteen minutes,’ she said, sighing, digging her hands into her pockets. ‘Besides. I don’t want to wake Roxie, if I clamber back into bed and shake the metaphorical boat. She will fuss, and I am fine, I promise.’ Isobel gave Adam a reassuring glance and the conversation seemed almost finished. He wondered, still, whether there was something she was keeping at bay, the rope tightened round the bollard.

It was nice, the two of them sitting there together in the early hours, contemplating everything and nothing, anything that was encompassed between. Adam made a passing glance to Tobias' tent. He figured himself far from a coward, and far from manipulated by fear of judgement. Isobel had caught him, but he could have as easily been caught an hour later, unzipping his way out.

Adam had thought for a moment of covering himself up. It was not lost that the delay, his pitstop with Isobel, made him rethink his approach—the spur-of-the-moment decision to flee from one tent to another, as if lilypadding in a pond, suddenly to him seemed layered in decisions now that he was standing on solid ground, surveying the water, sniffing at the lotus blossoms as they grew. His shirtless torso made him visible the way he was—half-naked, lonely, a touch horny. But he thought about every morning Tobias had seen him without his shirt, and he thought about that moment they had shared together, the uncomplicatedness of skin against skin, and for Adam it was enough not to shame him into how it would look if he was covered up, regressing back. Tobias might think there was some emergency. Tobias might just think he felt shame.

Peeling back the curtain, Adam stepped inside and there Tobias was, asleep, his body splayed out underneath a sheet loosely draped. He was shirtless, too, and his bare white shoulder was plainly visible. It was the first thing Adam had noticed. Tobias' dark brown hair was short, practically impossible for it to be ruffled by tossing, by turning. There was hardly room for Adam to stand straight without brushing against the polyester of the tent. He kneeled down, off the mattress, and it still remained a question mark in his head how he would wake the sleeping man. Muttering his name to varying volumes seemed creepy. Adam was starting to think his grand concept was more comforting in his imagination than in execution.

He committed to it, the name Tobias parting from his lips. He repeated once, and then Tobias stirred, fluttering his eyelids. It was still bizarre, what with Isobel sitting in the camping chair outside, knowing, and Tobias' limbs beginning once more to remember their function. He rolled round until he was squinting up at Adam, and for a few moments those first pauses of being awake again passed. Tobias inched over and beckoned Adam to lie down beside him. It was sweet, innocent. Their shoulders touched. Adam was pulling the sheet taut against Tobias, but it was only snug, like being burritoed.

'What time is it?' Tobias murmured, staring up at the pyramided ceiling.

'Six something.'

Tobias scrunched up his face. 'Why did you wake me then?'

Adam could feel himself freeze. 'You could call it guilt,' he began, eyeing Tobias in his periphery. 'It'll be a while before I can go to bed without feeling like an asshole for how I treated Nat,

when she thought she would be here, relaxing and refreshing. Or as much as you can when you're sleeping on the dirt and there's no electricity for a coffee machine and bug bites inside your ears.'

'Do you regret it, genuinely?'

Adam shook his head, which meant he bumped into Tobias, brushed up against him, over and over. 'No.' He exhaled, as if a weight were being lifted over his head. Adam ought to renew a gym membership. Lately he had been easing back into his athleticism, slinking around the neighbourhood in a trot, galloping like a horse. It was less dignified than a treadmill. He missed treadmills. This was his version of *dork behaviour*. 'Being with her wasn't what I wanted anymore.'

'I'm glad you realised that.' Underneath the covers, Tobias scratched his leg. Bug bite.

'So, you just wanted to talk?' Tobias' expression was blank, and he made a passing glance at Adam beside him. He found it strange, but not unnatural. They were close, and it made a certain sense Adam would choose his tent out of the others, considering neither Isobel nor Ophelia would have been alone, and there was still tension between him and Ophelia. Of course there was. Neither had seemed to want to quash it, and it was not Tobias' business. Soon enough it had become irrelevant entirely. Tobias was not reacting to Adam's shoulder touching his. It was pleasant, lying there with him, talking a little, but silence occupying some of the space too. Silence not like stillness, but peace, the two of them both noticeably tired, both noticeably sleepy.

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'Because we're both bitter and stumbling out of relationships that failed.'

'I guess you could say that,' Adam said, quieter than usual.

Tobias would have hugged Adam if they were not horizontal. He had wanted to, the moment Adam confessed he had broken things off with Natalie. Of course he did, Tobias had thought, everyone gathered inorganically in the living room of the pencil house, packed bags at their feet. It did not take a special kind of interpersonal mind-reader to assess Adam and Natalie's relationship—they fought, true, like any couple with differences in opinion, but Tobias noticed the cracks in the concrete pavement, even when he was not around. Part of himself knew he was just grateful someone else was plunging down the way he had been, a month ago, although he and Gavin reminded each other it was mutual over, and over, and over again. Mutual did not mean painless. Mutual did not mean he was glad. They did not text, he and Gavin, although he thought about it. Maybe because he was lonely.

They said they would be friendly with one another. But knowing when was nightmarish.

'The last time I was single again on the back of a relationship I made everyone miserable around me with how devastated I was,' Adam said, and there would be no denying those words that had come out of his mouth. Tobias, foolishly, thought about finding Adam's hand to squeeze it, but that was something girls did, or people with romantic feelings did, it was not something he ever imagined he

would do naturally with another man unless they planned to have sex afterwards. It was cruel, to think two men could not hold hands without some played-out assumption about them. Tobias did nothing. He tried to imagine the perfect response, but he still ached all the same.

‘You know, it doesn’t matter that you ended it,’ he began, turning his head to look at Adam. Their eyes met, and for a brief moment it felt wrong, or impolite, somehow. ‘It does not matter. You can still be just as devastated if you want to be, because you didn’t liberate yourself. For all you know you still lost a person, and I saw the moments when Natalie did make you genuinely very happy.’

Adam smiled, weakly, and they seemed incapable of breaking eye-contact. But it was not romantic. It was sweet, sure. Tobias could not deny now, nor then, that he was attracted to Adam in a way he could not textually explain to himself. Or anyone else. Nor had he attempted it. People certainly believed that what had happened that last camping trip was experimental, was circumstantial, and meant so little now that the both of them had started dating again, fallen half-in-love again. Moved on. You were not supposed to return to before.

Tobias ignored, mostly successfully, whatever strained feeling ballooned in this moment, watching Adam do absolutely nothing at all. ‘How did she take it?’ His voice was quiet, reserved, and he half-admitted to himself it would be the last question he asked about them.

‘She was apathetic.’ Adam said, at first, scoffing. ‘There was surprisingly little fury, no tears. Nat could have killed me with one look, but she didn’t want to look at me. We were in her apartment, where else did I want it to be, and she probably always expected we would one day. Break up. I’m not exactly husband-material.’ It was odd, Tobias lying there on the uncomfortable blow-up mattress, waiting for Adam to shed a tear when it seemed impossible for him to ever do so. In their entire time of knowing one another, had Adam cried in front of him? Adam could at Shannon’s wedding, he thought, but otherwise the notion seemed unfamiliar, and now there were tear-stained tally marks etched into the beige-coloured walls of the pencil house for the unknowable amount of times Tobias had broken after his own separation from Gavin. He wanted to have been apathetic. He wanted to be all the time.

The reality of this moment thudded into Tobias from behind, and he realised how long he had been watching him, without the discomfort of staring. He had blinked an uncountable number of times, too, but this moment had seemed like what Adam had mentioned wanting, a soothing, unambitious conversation between the two men about what had stirred him awake at near-six in the morning. Tobias remembered how it had been, one month and a handful of days ago, when in this exact position he could have leaned forward and kissed Gavin without expecting an implosion.

‘There is no hurrying to anything, you know that.’

Adam paused, nestling himself deeper into the pillow. It was manageably comfortable.

‘I had an ulterior motive,’ he said, trying not to smirk arrogantly. Tobias raised his eyebrows. They seemed to be teetering, without knowing it, and suddenly, again, Adam remembered Isobel had been privy to what he was doing, the absolute insanity of even thinking about following through with the forward momentum of an action thought of while he was scrubbing the sleep from his eyes and missing body heat. Craving it, really. ‘I thought if we were here alone together I could ask again to snuggle up to you, and if you didn’t reject it, we could be comfortable.’ He paused, closing his lips, retracting his tongue into his throat. ‘Then it would be more twisted repetition when I eventually tell you it meant nothing to me.’ He had wanted this to be a joke, but now he worried it sounded worse, sounded cruel and mean-spirited, and laughing would not have helped, and neither would have leaned in to do anything affectionate. Adam knew he had to keep sticking his foot in it. ‘I didn’t knock on your door soon enough.’ It was half of something, but Tobias smiled, and his heart palpitated.

‘You want to cuddle?’ Tobias eyed him with scepticism. This seemed like a trap, although what Adam would gain from hobbling a man without any legs to begin with Tobias did not know. He anticipated rejection, he anticipated worse, but nevertheless he waded into water too murky to see the bottom because he wanted to, and that was excuse enough for him. ‘You know I said you could.’

Adam laughed, under his breath. ‘We weren’t single for a while there.’

Tobias had a sudden thought: now he wondered, or worried, whether Adam had sabotaged an entire relationship because he woke one morning with a pregnancy craving. That would be all this was, to him, maybe to Tobias too—something you craved because your hormones were out of whack. He attempted to swallow the thought, but in vengeance it crawled back to his uvular and swung, a threatening wrecking ball to the gums.

‘Is there a reason you like my warmth, or will it always be convenient?’ He had hoped it would not come off biting, because Tobias knew a moment of venom would spell the end of the sweet spot, the two of them ignoring time, space, and whatever a random September Saturday promised. He was hardly, barely, waiting for a response from Adam, but he already believed he ruined it.

‘I like your warmth,’ he said, almost mocking the words, but still it remained genuine. It was just not something Adam would have ever come to himself, nor would it have been something he would have said to Natalie, or even to Sophie. She was so obviously buried in his psyche by now, but occasionally she surfaced for air, curious, observing. Sophie would never have imagined this. Her version of Adam finding it unnaturally easy to say he *liked* someone’s *warmth* like this.

Physical warmth, of course. That was what he meant, and then maybe he had confessed to Sophie, to Natalie, really, that he liked how protected from the elements she made him, although he would always be the meat shield, protection, his arching back a blockade from penetrating wind. Icy

frosts. The high UV rays of the Australian sun, certain to devastate with cancerous, bulbous mounds on the flesh. He was losing himself.

They inched towards each other, Adam climbing underneath the sheet, until they were snuggled up against each other, flesh to flesh. At first it was awkward, face to face, Tobias' arm crushed against Adam's chest, his bare chest, but they reorganised themselves and Adam was spooning Tobias. Gone, now, was the excruciatingly-touch-starved nature of one grinding against the other. This was subtle. Tobias did not feel like speaking. Adam was right, it was comfortable, and he was surprised, albeit a touch offended, there was no stiff erection pressed against his perky ass. It was nice.

'Toby,' Adam whispered into his ear, his breath warming up as he did.

Tobias wanted to tell him to be quiet. The sound of his voice broke the spell, whatever form of hypnosis he was under to believe this was not another fabrication of the mind of a man still recovering from an apparently-mutual break-up. He sighed out, but said nothing. Curiosity, maybe it would kill him dead. He waited for Adam to finish whatever thought was brewing inside his mind, be it unpleasant or not. Tobias wanted to blame it on Adam's remarkable inability to keep his hands to himself, but, he reminded himself again, this was nice.

'This is what I wanted,' and he paused, his body warmth suddenly more noticeable on the spring morning, inside the tiny little tent, two grown men against one another. 'I don't know what it means, and you can be pissed at me for that. But I've craved this ever since we came home from Sydney.'

A rustling noise behind her was only half-startling—there were no bear species in the country, and the frightening critters underfoot would not have made such an obvious creep-up on her. A spider should be so alarming. There had been one in a pair of shoes she left outside a week or so ago and she threatened a scream out, but it was a tiny, harmless creature webbing itself from above and she swatted it away and went about her day, albeit without wearing that particular pair of shoes, in case a newborn crawled inside her sock and bit the inside of her pinkie toe.

Isobel assumed it was Roxie, and glanced briefly, eyeing the dark hair of her girlfriend. It was still early, but the cooler breeze had evaporated and she was wiggling herself out of the grey hoodie. Mostly she was grateful everyone else had the decorum to sleep in, to let the elements as they were be undisturbed. With her back towards other campsites, Isobel made zero eye-contact with anyone besides Adam, a handful of minutes earlier, when he had all but confessed he was a little fruitier than he once seemed. It was not her business, who he cuddled up to, but her eyebrows were raised. He was the assumed heterosexual, but what, had two breakups dulled his loyalty? Isobel laughed to herself. If

anyone had noticed, she would look insane, but it was semi-worth-it, because the poster-boy of *I'm not gay but there's nothing wrong with it* was losing his footing.

'Good morning, rise and shine,' Roxie said, pulling one of the camping chairs closer, the same one Adam had sat in moments ago. Roxie was wearing a matching set of pyjamas and she looked well-worn, too. It was a wonder why anyone was awake already, but alas, the perfect getaway weekend might have looked more idyllic had they sprung for a cliffside bed-and-breakfast with a handsome young live-in maid. She fussed with her hair, running her hand through it as if a comb, and winked at Isobel.

'Worried about your dad?'

Isobel nodded, laying out the jumper across her lap like a blanket.

'I wonder, what if it had been oh so much worse?' She frowned, finding it at once impossible to avoid the feeling of hopelessness around being here, and not there. 'My parents waited to have us, my sister and I, so I worry, are they going to be gone sooner than I think?'

Roxie set a hand upon Isobel's knee, a quietly intimate gesture, and shook her head. 'You said he was okay, yeah. Then he's okay. He's not in any sort of worrisome danger. Don't think about the maybes of the future, Iss, your dad is good. He's just fallen over, who doesn't fall over?'

Isobel laughed, a soft, silly sort of laugh attempting to expel out all the fear and worry in her voice. She sniffled, no longer able to blame it on the cool breeze, and gave her girlfriend a sweet smile. 'I know,' she began, her glance briefly drifting to Tobias' tent. 'I get myself worked up on it. What if he is gone, one day, and there is no more time between my dad and I?' Isobel thought about the last time she saw him, and it weighed on her, this concept of that memory being the last they shared. It was so ordinary. She was helping him set up the new internet router, of all things. It was incidental, she noticed it sitting unopened in the corner of the room, she was merely there to spend quality time with him. Jon. But he fussed, they fussed, back and forth, about whether he would be entirely successful setting it up himself, and he argued he would do it, which she argued was code for *in time I will call your sister and berate her with it*, because everyone of the family Yanick believed Ava to be the dazzler of technological solvings, which Isobel did not mind so much because it meant typically she was only called for anything that absolutely necessarily required help in person. Isobel crouched on the floor, meddling with the white box, while her father sat on an ottoman imparting wisdom.

'I do not like them getting older, Roxie. It makes me feel older, too.'

'No one has a healthy relationship with age.'

'Maybe I would rather not have toxic arguments with the thing I cannot do anything about,' Isobel said, lifting her head. It was thankfully not impossible for her to fight any sort of tears right now, which loomed, and threatened. 'I want to be able to accept that my father...' and she paused, swallowing down the terror, the anxiety, the discomfort of her feelings, 'won't always be here when I

need him, or my mother, either, but...it is so impossible to think of a future without them, and I am oh so lucky they did not disown me because I transitioned, I know that, but I am so lucky they have supported me through everything I have done, being on a chaotic television show, those long, endless nights sitting in the dark with just a dim overhead light waiting for absolutely brutal phone calls where other queer people confess to me that they are thinking it is all not worth it because they have no parents, they have been disowned for simply loving someone of the same sex, or wanting to paint their nails and wear a dress.' Isobel paused, her face having lost some of its colour. She began to fidget with her hands, smoothening over the nail of her thumb with the fingerprint pad of the other, a repetitive motion she did without thinking, without noticing. She was looking somewhere else, not at Roxie.

'You have incredibly admirable parents, Iss.' Roxie said, squeezing her hand. 'But you will always have admirable people in your life. And your father is okay, you said he is.'

Isobel attempted a smile. 'I did. I know.' She shook her head. 'It is just that time of the morning.' There was no possible way for them to embrace, not while the two of them sat in separate chairs, although Isobel contemplated climbing into Roxie's lap, although then she worried the averagely-made camping chair would give way underneath them and they would be rolling in dirt and in would surprise everyone else, Tobias and Adam and Ophelia and Jared. She hoped, at least, the latter pair were still fast asleep, and would remain as such for the next hour or so. She wanted more time alone with Roxie, without having to restrain themselves to the stuffy tent. It was a nice morning.

An image replayed in Ophelia's head. She was at home, living with her parents still, sitting on the sofa, sipping up opaque boba pearls, when a pigeon slammed into the glass window, and alarmingly so. This was a handful of years earlier, she was twenty, the bird was motionless. Ophelia hovered near the heavy glass doors that led out from the lounge room to the backyard. She thought about what to do with the pigeon, whether to stand over it and call an animal hospital or wait, see, wait again, until it flapped those grey wings and disappeared over the fence into the neighbour's. She was frozen, the bird hardly moved. Maybe it was dead.

Without noticing it, a magpie had begun a slow crawl from the edge of the yard towards the injured pigeon. Predatory, a plumage of bravado, the magpie taunted the pigeon. Pecked at it. Dangled a gruesome claw in the air and pinned the injured creature to the grey tile. Ophelia had waited too long. She could feel herself grow faint, numbed by how pointless she had felt, how helpless. Watching was half the agony. Ophelia darted down the hall and feigned to vomit, but the magpie had not yet drawn blood, had not yet dulled the light of the other bird. By the time she returned, it had.

Why the image had returned now she did not know. Ophelia had stirred awake, thinking at first it was a falsified nightmare, that she had never lived it—had never gloved a hand and lifted the corpse of the limp pigeon into a canary-yellow binbag—but the memory was intact. She never thought of it when she visited her parents, although it was becoming far less routine. It was Romeo she saw more often, and their bond was not wounded, although she still wondered what had happened between him and Tobias, how fleetingly adorable it was believing they could have been something. Maybe now, she thought, but swatted it away. Romeo was swearing off men entirely—*please don't act like it's his fault, I went on enough dates afterwards to know he's a rare find, but men, they make me nauseous*, he had said when they met one morning for coffee and a chocolate croissant. The flaky pastry dusting his all-black attire. He was practically gothic. It was a shame it had not been a raven.

In the tent, Ophelia checked her phone for new messages and found a handful scattered throughout the earlier hours from none other than her brother Romeo. He had been out late, getting woefully drunk on a Friday night, but he must have spared the details if he walked back his rejection on men. At 2:01am, he messaged: *Wes fell asleep in my bed and he's snoring, lol*. This was followed two minutes later by another message, except in all capital letters: *YOU PROBABLY REMEMBER HIM AS HENRY NESTOR!* The capitalisation made her eyes sore. She remembered Wes well enough, enough to remember, too, that them falling asleep beside one another was the least possible erotic thing, but it was cute, sweet, and adorable, and Romeo seemed at least to have enjoyed himself.

Ophelia checked a notification on Instagram then grew bored of sitting on her phone, waiting for Jared to wake up. If she stirred him now, he would grumble later about not getting enough sleep on a weekend he purposefully took off work so the two of them could riskily shift their body clocks for two days. God, she hated that job. The awful hours, the sore feet, the blisters, the shame of being a waitress, even when she knew waitressing was how many, many people had first made any sense of an income. Maybe it was the stark contrast—the glamour toading itself into yet another customer asking hastily for their bill with or without the snapping, and she wanted to will another person into clicking their fingers so she could lift a taloned foot upon their neck and dull the light...

It was likely she missed being unemployed, because it freed her to forget. Yes. She was losing autonomy, she was losing herself, the core intricacies of her personality that were deeply, impossibly interesting. Her relationship with Jared was not cookie-cutter, and neither were they, but for every example of smudged eyeliner there was still a girl who liked romance. They rarely experimented in bed, unless you counted switching positions scientific. Jared seemed the sort who would choke a pretty girl if she asked for it, but Ophelia did not want to be choked, she had never wanted even a semblance of angst or drama. It made her think only her aesthetic was rock-and-roll, but her personality was wounded pigeon.

She did not move, not really. There were the subtle sounds of conversation outside the tent, what she recognised as Isobel's voice, then very likely Roxie's, but abandoning the tent would have meant beginning the day. She would make herself get dressed, semi-doll herself up, and it was still too early, too light out. Romeo was obviously asleep by now, he did not respond to her message, but it was irrelevant anyhow: *I know Wes, dumb, he's your roommate. Every time I see him I make a cringe face so he thinks I'm just as insane as you are.* She should have ended it with a *lol* so she sounded like she was still his age, although twenty-four was not quite dinosaur.

Ophelia was bored. Bored of being awake, mostly, but this camping trip had yet to enlighten her on how magically adventurous it would be. Camping was more synonymous with betrayal, although perhaps she was still lingering with bitterness. She wondered if everything with Adam would ever feel normal again, or if she was destined to always want to bitch-slap him on bad mornings. He must have hurried to date someone else, she thought, worried Natalie was just another woman scorned. He cannot help himself, can he? Ophelia knew if he were waiting out there, merely muted in the conversation, she would find it difficult to make real eye-contact with him. It had been months since their street-fight, but they argued occasionally. Mostly because there was no milk, or he tracked dirt inside the house, or the sex with Natalie was so nauseatingly loud she figured he was doing it specifically to make her life miserable. They were like an old married couple that had experimented by having an open relationship and realised they much preferred their new loves, their new finds. Except marrying Adam made Ophelia now want to exorcise herself.

Jared started to stir awake, blinking over at Ophelia in her sitting-up position. At first, she barely acknowledged him, so clearly unfocused, but his voice brought her new comfort. 'I thought the last dream I had was a rollercoaster ride, but it was just the mattress.' Everyone disliked these mattresses. They were an obvious bad decision, but they were inexpensive and no one imagined camping would become a frequent pastime. Now owning an abundance of bouncy mattresses meant more obviously they could invite friends around for an adult slumber party come the next New Years Eve, which was only a handful of months away. Ophelia shuddered.

Jared stirred some more, waking himself up, and momentarily he was upright kissing Ophelia's bare shoulder. 'Good morning,' he said, giving her another kiss. How romantic, she thought, and it did a miraculous job of simultaneously helping her to forget the birds, and ironically remembering them. Well. The birds and the bees, as they were. He had a marvellous touch. Jared was behind her now, nuzzling her neck, and if they were in her bedroom, or his, or some seductive hotel room, she would have let him undress her. Right then and there. But she heard Roxie's voice and remembered where she was, and the mattress lifted and fell underneath her, and she did not know if she was the type of girl to

have sex just about anywhere. She did not want to force herself to be silent, or muffle her moans into his hand. Although he would have liked that, a fragment more control over her.

Ophelia let Jared fondle her breast, the left one, for long enough before the mood shifted and he seemed more awake, more alert to her mood. She sighed, and he did not seem disinterested or dejected, and they collapsed back on the mattress, her head on his bare chest. 'What do you think the break-up was about?' He, of course, meant Adam and Natalie. Ophelia, her gaze directed away, towards his toes unsheathed atop the sheet. She imagined him wriggling them, like juicy worms, although she did not think she genuinely wanted to suck on them, she had never thought of herself turned on by someone's toes before. Maybe it was because they were his, Jared's, and she felt so differently about him it altered the very state of things. She might simply have been distracting herself.

'Why should I care?' She said, absent-mindedly.

'You don't think he's going through shit because of it?'

Ophelia tensed and sat upright again, unamused, frankly.

'I don't know what's been going on with him, really.' She shrugged, and she was surprisingly not bitter than Jared asked, or posed the discussion, not like she thought she was the moment he had said it. Already she was cooling herself off, because his business was his own, and Ophelia had wiped her hands of fretting over it since February. 'I never really spent any time with them when they were together. I don't know why I would have. We live together, but he is not really my roommate.'

Jared sat himself up and all the sweetness of their posture and their position had gone, vacated, but what was leftover was not icy and frozen-over. The conversation now seemed rather ordinary, lacking in real emotion, real resonance.

'I guess that makes a certain sense,' Jared said, shifting his shoulders.

Ophelia saw a glimmer of when interacting with Adam had once been ordinary, too, but it was in opposition now to how she felt about him. She did not really need another friend. 'It wouldn't have made much of a difference if he didn't come, anyway. I thought he'd take the weekend to be vulnerable on the couch he obsesses over, waste a box of tissues, but he doesn't really seem like he's hurting because of it.' She could taste how bitter her words were, but only one of them could not retain a secret. Ophelia hoped Jared had less of a conscience about an almost-stranger because of loyalty, but there was no telling until another berating. Another chance for Adam to be miserable over something she said, rather than his own actions. She tasted her own venom.

'You don't think he's still affected?'

'I think he aches. Differently to how I do, but we all hurt, like we all bleed.' She shrugged, but it was a noncommittal type, barely registered. 'He's still hung up on his ex, or Toby, stupidly, bat an eye at him again and they will do it over again. They'll touch each other, regret it, be called out for it.'

Doesn't that man, older than I am, more grown than I am, realise it doesn't really matter if someone gives you attention once, they will never *love* you the way someone else will. Someone surer of themselves.' She relaxed her body to get more comfortable, but she hardly seemed content. 'You know, he told me why the spit between him and Gavin. Intimacy issues to the twelfth degree.'

She shook her head at Jared, pre-emptively before he had time to respond. 'It's public knowledge, really. Gavin didn't want sex, and he doesn't know why exactly, Tobias was mentioning all sorts of different sexualities under the banner that maybe, who knows, one of them could be Gavin, but he has to come to that himself, and I guess them dating can't withstand this difference, that Tobias wants to fuck or be fucked, and Gavin doesn't even want to do hand stuff.'

'You think they should have just forced themselves through it all?'

She shook her head again, quite a bit more pre-emptively. 'No, of course not, you don't torture the person you love.' Ophelia believed in that tantamount. 'This is what I see. The older I get, the more I realise it doesn't matter what age you are. You can always collide with a problem you thought reserved for someone younger. He's in his thirties, early thirties, but his most recent relationship tested him. Gavin, he, um, well he was younger than Toby, only by a few years but for whatever reason he hadn't realised himself the way he should for a relationship to work. But what do I know, I'm just some girl.'

Jared traced a finger up, down, up, down Ophelia's arm. 'You aren't just some girl,' he said, his voice like melted butter. Now she could feel herself relaxing again, but it remained still the wrong time, and she had conflicting moods, because she remained hung up on talking, on explaining her way out, and down, and through. It was like Jared knew he could be a good distraction, and it was why they worked.

'What was I saying?' She smirked over at him and winked. 'Right.' He was really the perfect distraction. From everything. 'I'm not saying Toby is immature for being in his thirties, and I'm not saying he's making a million mistakes either. Adam might be, maybe, but that's just my bias on things. Toby was like this back then in the house and he's like it now, he's always thinking about being in a version of love, with a man, and it almost doesn't matter who.' She paused, catching a glimpse of the predatory magpie with a claw on the neck of the pigeon.

'He liked Romy, but it never went anywhere.' Off Jared's intrigued expression, Ophelia looked startled, deer-in-the-headlights, but she recovered from it. 'I don't actually know why. It's like when you're talking to someone on a dating app, I don't know pick one, and then the conversation lulls and you forget. A couple weeks later he was talking to Gavin and I didn't ask. Romy tells me practically everything and he doesn't say they had icks for each other, or that the seeing each other was a shitshow.'

Man of the week? I do not know.’ She extended out her final sentence, almost adopting a quasi-accent as if she was mimicking Isobel.

‘They might’ve just fucked and hung up,’ Jared said, stifling a chuckle.

Ophelia smirked and shrugged her shoulders. ‘Well, if it was awful, my brother would have crowed about it.’ Thank god it had not been a crow, she thought, straightening her back.

She contemplated talking about something else, a memory she had of herself and Tobias two weeks after they all returned from Sydney in February, but then it seemed in poor taste. He had been flirting with a guy, a stranger, when they were out after seeing a drag show. Ophelia had thought they could have fallen in love with each other, but maybe they were both drunk. It did not matter now. She remembered the next morning Tobias did not even have his number, or as a friend on Instagram, which was far more common now. It was not love.

Ophelia did not think whatever he had with Adam was either, but they had abandoned that. She assumed. If she found out they had secretly been hooking up, she would really only want to annihilate Adam’s face into oblivion. But that is what loyalty does. Allows you to choose sides.

Tobias could forget certain aberrations when he was in another man’s arms. For one, he forgot he was in heartbreak mode, although he reminded himself in the mirror each morning that he was not distraught, that not being able to call Gavin his loving partner was not so tragic once you sprinkled in context. He could forget, too, that Adam, whose arms made him feel younger, in his twenties again, had undignified him as an impulse, had compared their shared intimacy to being *away from the keyboard*. He still had no idea why Adam had mocked him like that. But in the same breath he was willing to hurt himself again, it seemed, or else why would he be here? Tobias had spine or none, it mattered little in the heat of the moment. The heart of it. He was failing to lie to himself.

For a while, the niceness of this, the strange hypocrisy of it, was the distraction Tobias needed from the very fact Adam said he was not confused. It made him think in exclamation: *could a straight man do this?* Which felt, amusing or not, like a joke. He had wanted this for a while, although Gavin proved to be a worthy expulsion of it, but all it took was for Adam to wake him up and he crumbled. Again. This pattern could repeat forever and he would continue to crook his head like a question mark and think, maybe Adam just does not get himself.

What the fuck am I doing...

Tobias felt himself contemplate moving, not because he intrinsically wanted to, but because he should stop this, because he should move the hell on with himself and be attracted to literally anyone else on this entire planet they call Earth. He called himself pathetic, it didn’t work. It was likely a

reassurance Adam could not see his face, so Tobias could wordlessly, with only expressions, ask an internal council of owls—for their wisdom—whether what he doing was pure insanity.

Maybe it was, he thought, and he was seconds from wiggling free out of Adam's grasp and reminding him he said having wildly inappropriate sex with Zayn in the guest bathroom at Donny and Scot's was merely because "Zayn has sex with any man with a working penis", which felt like he had guillotined their friend all because of his action. His! Tobias was plotting a sort of getaway response, when Adam leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

'Don't kill me for this,' and he swivelled his head, and kissed Tobias' neck. It was not sloppy, and barely long enough to be considered anything but a peck, but suddenly Tobias no longer wanted to question whether he would be hurt again. To a certain extent you could imagine having something you wanted, and Adam had always been the one to plant the idea in Tobias' mind that there could be some sort of intimacy between them. The kiss was subtle. The kiss might have been the entire extent of it. Now he waited instead for Adam to slink away. Nobody moved.

'You know I have man parts down there, Adam.' Tobias said, concerned for his tone.

'I know.' Adam had half a mind to reach around and impractically touch Tobias' cock, although he figured it would come across like he was an eighteen-year-old in bed for the first time with another man. Come to think of it, at eighteen Adam had never been in bed with another man, and not at nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, so on, so forth. He thought for much of his life he was heterosexual, a prime example not to boast. Except there had been thoughts once, when he was twenty-four or so, but they never went anywhere. Then he met Tobias in a haze of missing his girlfriend, thinking their relationship would be bettered by the time apart, and they were adversaries, it was never an immediate attraction either time, which made it feel psychological. Like his brain was breaking being around them, certainly around Tobias, if he wanted to press himself against him in the skeezy white van. He thought about kissing Tobias' neck again.

'If this was all completely about having sex, wouldn't we have already?' This was a strange conversation to be having in their position like this, Adam's breath eventually reaching Tobias' ear. Tobias, at least, recognised it, and only wriggled himself free now so they could have the conversation face to face, sitting up on the lumpy, bumpy mattress, their voices low in case someone could overhear them through the thin, papery walls of the tent. 'Zayn's the token example. Saw him naked on the beach and couldn't keep it in my pants for longer than two hours.'

Tobias wanted to burst out into laughter, because it was correct, that amusing display of utter horniness had actually made Tobias feel rejected then. But now, he was squinting his eyes at whether or not he believed it completely. Fool me once...

‘So, I can be a cardboard cutout, or one of those boyfriend pillows? Something for you to hold in bed while you wait for the real thing again.’ He did not know whether he believed it, but he wanted Adam’s response all the same, and he certainly hoped he did not sound so whispery-aggressive.

Adam frowned, a genuine frown. ‘You’re not just a pillow to me, Toby.’ If not a piece of fabric wrapped around goose feathers, or memory foam, or that ilk, then what was he to Adam? They had never been lovers. The one memory that remained involved Tobias taking the form of, well, truthfully, a pillow. Something to grind upon. ‘Anything I say now is warped by the fact I’m freshly single, by a matter of hours actually, I’m so dumb, but,’ and he paused what he was saying, newly distracted by the thought of a frown creasing Tobias’ face enough for the entire moment to be ruined. ‘Do I need to know why I just want to hold you?’

‘Is it all you want, portioned off intimacy?’

‘Portioned off?’ He paused, realisation smacking him in the face. ‘Just holding, or just what we did last time we...’ Adam’s voice trailed off, and he briefly looked at the zipped-closed flap where the exit was. Tobias recognised it. The inevitable: time for me to bounce on back to a woman. He lingered, suspended in thought, negative, isolating. ‘You want to be an objective?’

‘I don’t want to be an objective,’ Tobias replied. ‘Tell me what this means to you. What you want from this,’ he gestured to himself and then to Adam, and back again, and back again. ‘Because I suppose if you want to get the physicality of it over and done with, we can, god knows I haven’t had sex in months. But if we have sex, and suddenly it’s even more awkward to live in that house because the only person you talk to is Isobel, who is a lesbian, then I don’t want to have sex with you.’

Adam shook his head, but it was slow and measured. It was not, however, calculated, or destructive. Tobias liked to believe he could recognise what body language meant, or at least with his friends, with his exes, how he knew when to close himself off to protect Gavin, to keep him safe and unburdened. The pause in time only lasted long enough for Tobias to exhale. ‘I’ve tried to talk to her.’

‘I know why she’s uninterested, Adam. She’s in a stable relationship now, she doesn’t need her resentment towards you to fuck it up.’ He felt his entire body sink down, as if pushed by an external force he could not register. But it did not ache. ‘Nobody wants you to hurt them, Adam. I don’t, which is why I have repeatedly let you in. Ophelia didn’t. You can’t rush her forgiveness, but you do need to be honest about why you came to me after it ended with Natalie. I don’t want an underbaked reason, like it was a lonely feeling hovering over you, and I am a good substitute, because I repeatedly let you in. I want you to say something genuine, because I can’t be an impulse, Adam. Not like you’re spending eight dollars on a block of chocolate.’

It was an increasingly difficult string of sentences to follow, and Adam was still made entirely of questions, or thoughts, or pained emotions. Although the entire morning he had not experienced

sadness towards the split, which felt earnest—he figured it cruel but realistic that he would barely miss Natalie, although for a time they had enjoyed being together. There was such a thing as the wrong person, and the wrong time, but there were also wrong words, and wrong expressions of them. Everything he could say to Tobias—and even that felt mediocre and banal—was embroidered with a *but* of some description. Sitting around in that circle, on the cooldown from you know, pounding Zayn in the ass, he was genuine about not buying himself as bisexual. Yet. Being straight, narrowly so, quite glaringly conflicted with the fact Tobias was a man and he did not care in the slightest.

Now was the wrong time to reach for his phone and start googling *am I bisexual* or *different types of sexuality what if I am not straight or gay but a secret third thing*. He must be confused, when he said he was not. Nobody would punish him for losing one label, gaining another.

If he said: *you're not an impulse*, he would do the dirty work himself and shoot himself. This entire time all he was doing was rejecting Tobias' ideas and finding whatever the exact opposite was. *You are not an objective, you are not a boyfriend pillow, a cardboard cutout, a fleshlight, a quick fix, a body, a problem, a sprung-up chaos demon left to tempt me*. Adam thought surely he could produce words that expressed his otherwise muddled idea of what this was. Currently it was nothing, and gaining traction.

'Jumbled thoughts are going to have to be genuine enough,' he began, already feeling himself blowing the lead. 'When you moved in, unemployed, taking the last of the bedrooms, finally, I imagined we would never really hang out, because we only did in the big house out of necessity. Gaming for strategy. You obviously had Donny to flirt with, Geordie to be a dynamic duo with, Zayn to remind you to be fun and forget the cameras and be half-naked. You voted me out the first opportunity you got, and I wasn't pissed, because you stood a better chance at winning than I did and I would've done the same.' He smirked, wondering just how long he planned to make this speech before he caught up to today, to now, to being completely *genuine*.

'Anyway. You moved in, and some part of it felt like a missing piece. For one thing, I wasn't the only guy anymore, which was reassuring, because I had felt like Ophelia had a crush on me, but thinking that was self-conceited, like of course the one woman interested in men living with me was interested in me.' He paused, sighing. A flashback to their argument in the street, some unknown street he never saw the name of, not even on Google Maps. Somewhere in between the train station and the spot where she kissed a complete stranger just to get over him. 'Never in my life would I have thought I'd look at you, after everything, and think it was part of my bond to not only protect you from harm, but to do so with you in my arms, like there was an attraction I did not understand.'

Adam saw them lying together, shirtless, on the mattress in the borrowed van, failing to ignore that their act of intimacy—it was intimacy—had made Tobias moan, whether he played it up or not. 'For a while I just ignored it. We weren't spending time the two of us alone anyway, but Shannon's

birthday weekend was like, what's that thing where you accidentally say something you don't mean but it still kind of implies what you were thinking anyway? From the dude, the psychologist who thinks everyone wants to fuck their mother.'

Tobias laughed, unable to break from the otherwise-serious tone of their conversation. 'A Freudian slip?' He offered, giggling to himself. 'Sure, I guess it works, go on.' He gestured to the space between them, as if allowing the display to continue, without saying anything else.

'Yeah, Freudian slip. Shannon's birthday was a Freudian slip of having to confront why I felt protective over you, and why I wanted to press myself against you.' It did not completely work, the use of the term, but for Adam it was in close proximity enough and Tobias was more so amused by his use of it than anything. He liked watching the handsome, used-to-be-jock attempt to don the circular glasses and conduct a lecture on *the dude* with the Oedipus Complex Theory.

'It was the first time I realised the feeling was actually not confused at all. Maybe I'd just assumed I was craving someone to hump, and thinking Ophelia wanted to be with me, you know, like that, made me less attracted to her. I should've stopped flirting, I know, but if I started flirting with you then someone would have found out and...well, they did, because I was angry. Ophelia thought I must have been toying with someone else, treating them like shit too, but the only thoughts I had about being with you in the back of that creepy-ass paedophile van were that I thought I had done something right in only asking for that much. Only asking to grind against you, instead of have sex with you. I thought back then if I slept with you, at any time, in any position, it would have been like I threw away the idea of protecting you.' He turned away, briefly, and Tobias knew Adam enough to know he wasn't going to cry, but it was tense inside that tent regardless. 'I mean, Zayn doesn't treat me any different, but we aren't exactly friends. You, Tobias, mean a great damn deal to me, enough that when we were lying there, on the mattress in the back of the van, I was repulsed I even thought about sex. I kinda wanted to turn you around and kiss you.'

Tobias thought: *kiss me now then*. But he did not want the moment spoiled, either.

'I think that is the longest you have ever gone without me interrupting you.'

Adam attempted a smile, but he knew some part of what he had just said had been too much, or he would at least regret it later on in the day when the sun beamed down upon him and Tobias narrowly skidded to the other side, wherever and whatever the "other side" was. He did not feel nauseous, or embarrassed, but there was a pit, black and engulfing, sitting where it could stalk prey. The pit was less abyss and more pitbull, zonked out by rabies.

'It has never made sense to me, by the way,' he added, as if that were supposed to round out their conversation. Strangely, it did not hurt Tobias to hear—your *feelings* for a person were not supposed to make logical, narrative sense, because wanting to protect someone, or hold them, was not

mathematical, or steeped in answers from numerical equations. He thought it sort of poetic that it *never made sense*, because Tobias could remember being attracted to Adam when he first saw him, and thinking then how moronic it would be to harbour any attraction to someone who looked so obviously like he was cast for the show to be the handsome, charismatic competition beast who either was voted out early for being obnoxiously too promising or made it alarmingly deep into the season by winning clutch competitions and probably flirting with the cameras. Once they were practically game-enemies, the attraction could subside, but now...he had been secretly containing himself when they hump-spooned, and he buried the glimmer in his eyes when Adam woke him up with the whisper of his name.

Of course a feeling can ebb, and flow, rise and subside. Tobias had spent two years in high school ignoring, then reviving, then ignoring and reviving again his feelings for a guy he first sat beside in English, and then sort of became friends with, and then so on, so forth, did it really matter now, when he could hardly remember this high school teenager's name but he knew Adam's, and he knew how foolish it looked to believe a man who says he's still learning what his sexuality is.

Tobias kind of found it amusing. It was pretty obvious to him he was pansexual.

Saying *Adam, you're pan* would have jolted some electricity in him.

But none of what he believed, or what he thought he understood, mattered unless it mattered to Adam, and he knew as much. It was uncertain, because no part of Tobias believed this to be a confession they should be together, that his month-long streak of being single should end just like that. He reminded himself this was no love confession. Part of the protection was likely to be: *we should keep this lowkey*. Because that was how it ought to be with men, with heterosexually-presenting men. You argue their queerness; they remind you in the end it is better to have a flamed-out romance with a homosexual man who only likes you because you are versatile in bed and don't have radical opinions about the state of affairs. Maybe you don't mind a little warfare.

'Does it have to make sense?' Tobias teetered on a potentially dangerous question—that of asking what about Sophie attracted him to her—but there was entirely something individual about the pair of them, undefined by another relationship. He wanted so little to be a reaction to Adam's darting away from Ophelia's affections. He wanted so little to be in response to the grief Adam had of losing a relationship that seemed to have mattered infinitely times more. 'I'm not being loony, I just don't know if it needs to. We aren't talking about being in love, right, Adam? All we're talking about is one connection. Your hand on my waist.'

Then would have been the perfect moment for Tobias to guide Adam's hand to his waist, for the arrowhead to bury into the pinkish flesh near Tobias' stomach, for Cupid to be on the outside of the tent, dribbling onto the polyester. Tobias half-expected Adam to do it himself, to move his hand as if cued, hypnotised, but that would have been too kismet. Too much. In one calendar year, asking for

pure beauty more than once was demanding. He had been so cautiously, and defiantly, in love with Gavin, and for some reason in the twenty-first century it was embarrassing to be. When a man and a woman in the 1950s could be in love within days. It did not really matter, did it. Gavin was gone. Adam you could peel and peel and never quite reach the dead centre, although to say the centre was corpses felt needlessly cruel. It still beat. But.

‘Should I put my hand on your—’

‘Is this the first time you’ve told a person you like them?’

Adam flushed. ‘No.’ They both inched forward, still somewhat uncertain, and Adam set his right hand on the left side of Tobias’ waist. His hand was cool on Tobias’ skin. ‘Just like this.’ It was hardly a question, but it still seemed tentative, which was out-of-character for Adam, if you believed he was supposed to forever be one stagnant version of himself, always arrogantly-confident. Tobias blamed it on an idea a man’s waist was less carved from perfect marble than a woman’s was, and Tobias’ flesh was hairier than a woman’s was, too.

‘Are you repulsed yet?’ Tobias chuckled softly to himself.

Adam smiled. It was adorable, really. ‘Am I supposed to be?’

He weaved his other hand to the other side of Tobias’ waist, and it seemed as though he was waiting patiently for the light to turn green and for him to proceed across the street and kiss the other man. But they lingered there, Adam’s hands on Tobias’ skin, and it was all the same as being transported to fairyland. Adam’s thoughts were clouded over, and he waited for the nerve receptors in his fingers to convince him of the version of events he had believed only the day after he returned the van to Josh’s father. It might have been the company, an apparently-homophobic man who thought two men brushing toes was the sort of sin the Son had died for, his calloused palms pinned in perpetual pre-embrace. Adam had felt himself coil. Of course he had only wanted his friend Toby to simulate for someone else, or else why had they not made love? But the nerve receptors made no impact on his feelings. Except he was too much of a man for feelings.

Tobias’ thoughts were painfully crystal-clear. It was as though shards of a shattered mirror had lodged themselves there, not in his eyes but his mind. It was thoroughly unpainful. If this meant he would be wounded again, he wanted the scars. Was he supposed to pretend Adam had not found words for the entire time they had known one another, which was truthfully only about a year? There was no complete history to them. There had only been fragments of time where the two of them had not shared the same living space, had not shared the same air to breathe, and of course Tobias had not missed Adam in the interims, not like you missed someone you loved, but they weren’t talking about love. It was one connection. It just had to be **good** until it wasn’t.

‘This would be less bizarre if we weren’t trapped in a Gashapon capsule.’

Adam smirked. ‘When we get home,’ he began, without realising he had not entirely convinced himself of what he wanted to say, not yet. ‘When we get home, sleep in my bed, then.’ It felt nice to call the pencil house *home*, but it felt impossibly risky, to him, asking Tobias to come sleep in his bed. That was a political move, and one that whether it had consequences or not startled even himself to say. He was not changing his mind on it, though. It might only be for one night, but they could at least reconfigure themselves in a proper bed, not on a mattress, be it blow-up and flouncy or otherwise. A bed with a headboard and slats and legs.

‘Adam, you’re going to change your mind—’

He simply shook his head. ‘Then do every cruel, nasty thing to me, everything you can think of, if I go back from this trip and regret having the balls to say something to you. I shouldn’t use anyone as a lab rat. I am a moron, Toby.’ He paused, somehow managing to scoot forward on his knees without losing a single ounce of his balance. ‘But I like this. I can look at you without expecting anything.’

Tobias could have kissed him then, but the idea of kissing Adam still had the caveat of making whatever the hell this was oversaturated. At least for now. Maybe, he thought, if they did end up in that bed together, although he would believe it when it happened. Not yet. He made himself realistic.

Tobias heard a comedian’s joke in his head: *you know what’s awkward? Walking out of a tent after you’ve just experienced an incredible orgasm and you realise your friends must have heard everything.* He had heard some quiet chatter outside, assumed it was Isobel and Roxie, but there was all the possibility Ophelia was waiting there too, to crucify him or shame him or trigger yet another group therapy session. Although where was the door to lock? Although was the door ever locked?

‘You aren’t a moron,’ Tobias said. It was sort of amusing. If you had recorded this footage and time-travelled to one of those sleepless mornings, in the seventh or eighth week, and had shown to him this moment, Adam’s hands on Tobias’ waist, how organic it actually was despite it all, he would have thought it was cruelly manipulated by generative artificial intelligence. That was what you did now, wasn’t it? Harness the depths of the world’s vast oceans to create something impossible, or otherwise a depiction which should have taken months and months to animate? Adam’s moustache almost looks identical.

It had taken months and months. It was what, September now, and Tobias had been watching the recent season of the show the pair of them had met on. Another winner had been crowned. Faroh had garnered every jury vote in a final two against the blonde-haired Marvel Ann, which seemed a rebellion against type, but she had owed any strategy to him. It was never more certain, obvious, that Tobias was fading into irrelevancy, but so was Adam. What a cold thing to believe. He was finding it difficult to place words to what he felt. ‘I like this too.’ It was simple, but Tobias did not want to be

made of so many differently-cut puzzle pieces all the time. He smiled. 'I have always thought you were the ugliest person I ever did live with.'

This elicited a loud laugh from Adam, and he withdrew his hand for a second, only to scoot himself forward on the bumpy mattress once more and envelope Tobias in his arms. It was sudden, and Tobias imagined himself pulling away, but only because he thought he ought to, as if at last this was the joke. He could have sworn with every other man he was ever intimate with he was less hesitant, but Adam truly made him nervous. He leaned into it, and they embraced until their knees hurt, and they collapsed down beside one another, and Tobias shoved Adam playfully away from him.

'You're so annoying, leave me alone.' Tobias said, and Adam practically pounced on him. Certainly they thought they were no longer being inconspicuous. But, either no one noticed, or no one cared. The way they thought it ought to be.

Four had gathered around a non-existent fire, in this early morning, and it had seemed as though no one knew what it was to sleep comfortably that night just gone. Roxie was still holding Isobel's hand when Ophelia and Jared had unzipped themselves from their tent, and Jared had excused himself briefly to go piss in the campground toilet block. Ophelia and Isobel spoke wordlessly to each other. Roxie had been instrumental in plotting out what they would spend their day uncovering, and she seemed eager.

'Should we get started on breakfast?' It was still relatively early, but subconsciously everyone had decided it was wiser to begin the day rather than delay it and groan. They had bought a camping stove, set it up on a foldable table in the centre, and Jared, now returned, cracked an egg into the grizzling pan. Ophelia lingered nearby, observing him, but by now the four were all facing one another, making the space dynamic and fit for conversation. Isobel counted the eggs again, expecting a mathematical forest beast to have snatched away one or two of them in the night, but all were accounted for. She soothed herself with the number. Enough eggs. Enough bacon. Isobel assumed, or hoped, the waft of breakfast would convince those two leftover to stumble into the open, and face criticism or not.

The sizzle of bacon seemed almost impolite at 6:30am, but they were an adequate distance from other campers, and they kept their conversations to a muted, respectful tone. 'Smells good,' someone intoned, and others nodded in agreeance, as Jared patted one of the delicate eggs with the backend of a spatula. This is why you come camping, Ophelia thought, although she felt damp, inherently, even without a rainstorm having ruined their evening. She was grossed out by the idea of taking a shower in a shared, hideous toilet block, and she purposefully had not the night before, blaming her exhaustion above anything. But she would have to eventually, and she eyed the pair of thongs she

would sacrifice to the shower fungus and the loose possibility a sudsy patch had actually been soapy sperm. The bathrooms were divided, men on one side and women the other, but they were removed enough from civilisation Ophelia stopped believing people abided by signage. If they wanted to screw, wouldn't they?

She shuddered out of the thought, entirely built on her disgust now. She thought Jared looked so handsome at the camp stove, missing only the contrived Kiss the Cook apron, like she needed a different sign to remind her what to do. She moved around behind him and rested her head on his shoulder. It was plainly intimate, but it was comfortable, and she could continue to talk to Isobel without either of them opening their mouths. Ophelia half-guessed they were talking about what had happened to Isobel's father, but it was also tricky to understand completely, because neither of them used a single word. There had not been much time to mention anything. A passing comment after she received the phone call. *You can go if you have to.* All sidestepped soon enough.

'I hope someone brought a card game,' Jared said over the crinkle of the bacon and oil, and Ophelia withdrew herself from his shoulder. She couldn't tell if he was serious or pulling their legs, but she knew individually the four of them, the roommates, had all packed a portable such-and-such. Ophelia wanted to annihilate everyone in Flip 7. She figured Tobias would carry himself with luck, and strategic ease, and Isobel was not foolish, and Adam, well, she knew he was like mouthwash, sterilising, but competitive was a core part of his nature too. 'I might sound unenthused, but I don't want to waste away my afternoon if we're not going to be drinking.'

They had carted with them some alcohol, but most of the esky space had been reserved for food, and the ice would just continue to melt away anyway, and then what was the plan? They did not have one. Once it was nothing but a hot box converted into a swimming pool, they would have been through Saturday morning breakfast at the very least. Adam had suggested a portable refrigerator they could plug into the car, but they would either kill the battery, let the food go warm, or never touch the oversized box ever again anyway. It was a source of an argument, but they all moved on. Who knows when any of them planned to go camping again.

Yet, it might have become somewhat of a rabbit's foot for Tobias and Adam.

There was very little gossiping, and Isobel was grateful for it. She balanced the plate in her lap as she sliced into the blankety white of the egg, making small glances at Roxie. It was still difficult to get much service where they were, but occasionally she wondered whether her phone, still inside the tent, pinged enough to receive a text message from her mother. Isobel still worried they spent too much time together, but she thought it sentimental two people could still love one another forever—even when the hurdle tripped them over, bloodied their knees. She wanted something like that, but without the

divorce, she could do without ever having to tear up the contract. Ava had been there, her hesitation, the cyclical and cynical terror of mirroring your parents—this Isobel pondered over, and she had been all morning, as now runny marigold ooze flooded the left half of her plate.

‘You’re noticeably quiet,’ Roxie said, leaning over with a concerned expression on her face.

Isobel did look contemplative. She looked in the midst of a thought, and it was a neverending one, but she did not shake out of it to respond to her girlfriend. She loved running her tongue over those words, girlfriend, *my girlfriend*, she is mine, although possessiveness was foul and unsettling and Roxie were as much *not hers* as she was. Hers. She had passionately missed being in love.

‘Me, quiet,’ she said, amusingly. ‘You are on my brain, how grateful I am you are here.’ Isobel perused the campsite, the four orderly tents, they really were rather uninteresting and exact. Two months or so ago she had regarded the serendipity of the four of them all in serious, wonderful relationships as a stroke of excellent karma. That losing could mean winning, later. She squirreled away her own thought: the four of them still seemed to be in wonderful relationships, although she questioned how *serious* everything ought to be. ‘I love you, Rox,’ she said, smiling, and her girlfriend, this wonderful woman Roxie, leaned over and kissed her plain on the lips, and neither seemed to be worried if they disturbed the plate of bacon and eggs, although they did not. Kissing could be so precise. So beautiful. Isobel loved, truly loved, kissing her gorgeous girlfriend. It only made her giddy.

‘I love you too, Isobel.’ Roxie collapsed back into her camping chair and fussed with her dark hair. She still looked weary from sleep, but alert, alive, too. ‘You just felt like saying that?’ She winked at Isobel. ‘Sometimes I want to say it repeatedly, despite how much I know you would call it love-bombing, and you would remind me eventually it was an unhealthy thing for a couple to fall in line with, telling each other all the time how much they’re obsessed with one another.’ She poked out her tongue, just enough for the tip to protrude from her mouth. ‘Promise I don’t want to be toxic.’

Isobel grinned and forked a triangle of egg into her own mouth. ‘Promise I do not want to be toxic, either.’

‘We’re so normal.’ Roxie smirked, and Isobel could not contain her laughter. It was surprisingly louder than she thought it would be, but wanting to control the volume of your laughter is practically pointless, why bother. Ophelia and Jared glanced in her direction, themselves smiling. People do not, frankly, smile enough. Roxie broke from the moment when she noticed the two of them were being watched, gawked at, although fondly, lovingly, and addressed Jared: ‘The food was delicious, thank you, Jared.’ He nodded his head to her and responded with an *I’m glad you enjoyed*, or something to the extent, and everyone was just in a good mood. It was simple to escape the world when you were in the middle of bushland, with the dirt underneath your feet. With your good friends.

Happy. Take that butter commercial: *when was the last time you were truly happy?*

The tear of a zip briefly distracted, and Isobel made eye-contact with Tobias as he climbed out of his tent. No one assaulted Adam for following after, but there was an atmosphere, a vibe, once everyone had rejoined to form the group, and Ophelia was quieter, and Tobias and Adam didn't talk to each other too much. Whether it was a concerted effort to give the others their time was left between the two of them, but it was not awkward, and first Tobias and Adam made themselves breakfast. There was no hovering around each other, no bringing forth their flirtation into the open, public space. It was the same way it had been, for weeks and months with Tobias and Adam. No one, not even them, treated the word *and* like an ampersand. It was three letters. That's all.

After they ate, Tobias set his plate aside and moved, pacing himself, as if he were concerned she could sense his tone in how he walked, towards Ophelia. She was sitting near Jared, but she glanced up at him with reassuring eyes, and he started to believe she had not noticed where Adam had been at all. 'Can we talk for a second, Ophie?' She nodded and murmured a short *uh huh* and they slipped into shoes and started to wander away from their campsite. It was a lovely morning, pleasant and vacant of humidity, although to speak that was to curse it by noon. Tobias knew nothing of what he was about to say was about this morning—it extended back further than that, and it was barely about him.

But mediation. He was Isobel's adopted son. Somehow, that worked.

'I know you would prefer to only share a washing machine with him,' Tobias began, cautiously stepping through a field of landmines. 'and I'm not his messenger, he didn't ask me to say anything. But I like to think there is a friendship still there, between you and Adam.' The mention of his name was the kicker, the gut-punch, but *he* could hypothetically have been anyone. Not that she shared a washing machine with more than two men, but in an alternate reality Tobias pictured Ophelia bumping into a stranger who thought he had reserved the very same washing machine by leaving a quarter on it. For some reason, the alternate reality shifted Ophelia to America, but a laundromat seemed more mosaicked in a city like Boston.

Ophelia's face was glazed over. 'We are friends, what do you mean?' Her expression was overdramatic, and she hand-waved having made it. They continued to walk, and to who knows where, but at least there was a gravel path underfoot to follow. 'Someone shoot me for making video game references all the time, but we're not characters in *The Sims*, right? There isn't a bar in a Relationships tab that climbs into the green, plummets into the crimson.' Ophelia sighed, scratching underneath her eye. 'I was really pissed at him, truly mad, back then when he opened up about, you know,' and she made a general flourishing sort of gesture in the air. 'I'm over it now, but part of why we actually spent time together was because I thought he was flirting with me, and now I'm with Jared, so he's served his purpose, basically.'

'So, it would be squashed then?'

Ophelia nodded her head. 'I'm apathetic, Toby, the same as him, with Natalie.'

'Adam is hurting no matter what way it looks to you.'

'Yeah, it sounded like she was the love of his life.'

Tobias cocked his head and stopped walking. 'Natalie did not have to be, damn. You said we aren't restricted to a horizontal bar of value, either positive or negative, and you're right.' He scratched his forehead, peering over at Ophelia. 'Maybe a relationship is destined to be a mixture of good and bad. His ended. Let him at least feel sorry for losing the positives.'

'You don't have to defend him just because he wants to hump you again.'

'I'm not!' Tobias spat out, shaking his head. He had not begun this conversation wanting to argue, to raise his voice, but it was sudden, and he was not aggravated, just defensive. He wanted to laugh at himself a little. Are you defending him or not? Take your pick. 'I am on neither side. I am on both sides. It has been months of the two of you dodging each other. You think dating Jared excuses you from having to confront that, but unless you actually commit and move out, Adam is still your roommate, and I am still in the middle of the two of you, and we could have all had the same damn plans when Donny and Tatianna came to visit but you and Adam can't be trusted in the same room, or you don't want to be, or whatever, I don't care.' He covered his face with his hands, praying he could wipe the sleep from his eyes with the tension. 'I do care. It's why I'm raising my voice.'

Ophelia cautiously plotted her response.

'He probably would have liked more time with Donny.'

'It's fine, it's whatever, they still got to hang out,' Tobias said, pausing, swallowing the lump in his throat. 'Once Donny could pry himself away from me. It was better, Isobel said Natalie had a nicer time because there were less people crowded around her, not that she's introverted...' He let his voice trail off. *Not that it matters now*, he thought, and registered it as coldly negative, an actual downer.

'I never should have so publicly told everyone I wanted to move to Melbourne.'

'But you wanted to be with the love of your life, Tat.' He paused, a smile weaving its way onto his face. 'Watch out or she'll become the love of mine, too. We had a really lovely chat that night. She's been trying to assuage the guilt she has for effectively killing my dream of being a half-millionaire.'

'You know she didn't even get all of that, because taxes.'

'I do unfortunately know the scam of reality tv show prize money.'

Ophelia leapt on Tobias like she was a buffy-tufted marmoset. They hugged, quite briefly, and Tobias only withdrew himself because he felt he had not earned it, or deserved it, not for springing this conversation on her like he had. But when she stepped away, she began to explain herself: 'I don't want us to fight, Toby. Let me fight with Adam if I want to, but we won't fight, and you won't steal Tat

from me because she's my best friend, you get that?' It was faux-aggressive, a half-baked threat, say when you pull the sheet of cookie dough out the oven early because you remember the cookie dough tastes just as incredible as the cookies once baked do. Play-fighting. They were children again, and for a moment he remembered when they were jobless again, and he missed it.

'You don't need her, you hear me?' It was more nonsensical threatening from her, and Tobias and Ophelia spun round and started to walk back towards where they presumed their campsite was. It was entirely possible they had accidentally turned a corner, but they would find the row of four tents eventually. 'You have him now anyway, your rebound.'

'He's not a rebound!'

They burst into a sturdy, healthy cackle.

It was still early in the morning, but Tobias and Ophelia both agreed they liked this camping thing. It was simple. You traded sleeping well for the hallucinogenic toxins of whatever cantankerous bug had died on the square of dirt you slept upon.

PART FOUR

LIGHTEST

One month later. Halloween.

“Kill for Love” by Lady Gaga was playing out of a Bluetooth speaker in the living room of the pencil house, the hauntingly gothic opening notes attempting an honest glamour of the sunlit space. It was midday, or thereabouts, and Ophelia was dressed entirely in black, for without question it was her favourite holiday all year, despite the complete commercialisation of Halloween in Australia and how little it seemed to represent beyond trading candy, listening to the “Monster Mash”, and finding a cheap Penny Pushers shop wig to dress up as the *most meme-worthy character of the year*. Ophelia flung herself around the room—she was alone, and entirely distracted, having sixty seconds ago pinned a sash of faux-spiderweb in a diagonal across the corner. The spiders will live here, she had thought, but now her mind was entirely occupied with the frenzied chaos of movement. Her limbs projectiled through space. If someone dared an approach, they would be beaten, bruised, and in all possibility, bloodied.

She was erratic, formless, spinning and twirling herself without getting dizzy. Her dance was concocted with little thought, trusting the body to move when she willed it to. Nobody in the house was around, or on the same floor as she, and her movement expressed as much, an unbothered quality that Ophelia surrendered to. She was at once aware of her surroundings and unrestrained from them, narrowly missing the kitchen counter with a swept hand—her eyes had been closed, and Ophelia decided then and there she would prefer if Lady Gaga was her rhythm, her seeing eyes, predictors of the next thrust of energy and the future.

Suddenly—a knock at the door, and Ophelia broke, ambling forward for her phone to pause the music. A lyric was knifed in the middle and the living room grew quiet, lifeless. It did not look the least bit frightening in the daylight, the early workings of a Halloween party that was timed for that evening, although she had delayed the decorating out of exhausted procrastination. The restaurant had naturally wanted the evening shift filled, but Ophelia was tired of working there, waiting on tables, making idle chitchat with well-to-do men and women who made her reality stint income on an incredibly frequent basis. Ophelia harboured most of it in savings and shrill-screamed at herself for touching it. Those patrons did not fear bank statements.

The knock, the knock. Ophelia paced to the front door and held the handle, spinning it organically, wondering in a children’s television sort of way who it could be. She herself was not expecting anyone yet, although it was a tad disrespectful Jared and Romeo were raiding her closet for a costume for the latter and loitering there, in all possibility enabling for themselves a fashion-makeover montage she was not privy to. Lamenting with her own procrastination. Although she would have hated

to notice a single tear, or degradation of the craft store materials had she spent a Wednesday morning near-snapping her neck standing on a plastic stepping stool.

‘Oh hi!’ Ophelia said, a stunned sort of surprise coming out in her voice without her particularly realising it. With the door swinging open, inward, she had peered round the wood and met the warm, sunlit-glow of Ava Yanick, unseasonably dressed in a scarlet-red, knee-length coat. The two greeted each other with an overabundance of pleasantries and Ophelia found herself unable to stop saying *come in, come in*, as if she were filming a 73 Questions video for Vogue. Or as if Ava were, because there was no denying who appeared to be the lavish, decadently-draped celebrity with an absolute ease in front of the camera. Come to think of it, Ophelia could believe Isobel’s sister to be a true success story, had she traded one life for another.

‘The Uber driver might have thought I was overdressed and going to meet a rich married man who is having an affair with me, but he’s forgetting this is the only possible time of year for a girl allergic to seriously awful B.O. to dress like Carmen Sandiego intentionally.’ She gestured to the elaborately-gorgeous coat, which upon closer inspection was neither rented costume or cheaply-bought from a sweatshop factory outlet. It did, however, belong to a vintage aesthetic and Ophelia wondered whether Ava had found it thrift shopping, which seemed in spirit for the house of Yanick. As much as she imagined Ava liked to hold herself higher, they were not a naturally-occurring wealthy family, and Isobel had spun stories of spending Saturday mornings, say 10am onwards, fishing through the assorted racks at out-of-the-way thrift stores with her sister. Isobel would find genuine-article vintage pieces she was too young for, and Ava would predominately look for comfier, baggier t-shirts she would either sleep in over a pair of underwear, or tuck into skinny jeans.

‘Come in,’ Ophelia repeated for what felt to her like the one hundredth time, and she felt on the clock for it, too, welcoming the one hundredth customer into this nonsensical store she operated from her home. Ava was quick to make herself comfortable, asking after her sister, but by now Ophelia was half-distracted. An outside decoration had toppled over, from the wind, a gentle breeze. The plastic mini-cauldron was hollow and propped up not by short stumps, but two black spray-painted posts that gave Ophelia the impression of the chicken-or-bird-otherwise legs of Baba Yaga’s house, had they of course been flamed to oblivion.

Ophelia left Ava to her devices in the living room and shut the front door behind her, pacing across the narrow concrete path from the alcove to the mailbox, where the plastic cauldron lay unenthused on the dry grass. The fluty scratch of an aggravated magpie jolted her out of a thought on how she could wedge the post-legs into the ground, somehow, like tent nails. Across the road on a neighbour’s property, a magpie was accosting another smaller, inoffensive bird which had been otherwise pecking at the grass for worms. Ophelia hastily set up the mini-cauldron again, anticipating

another tumble, and turned back for the front door. She hated that she was becoming once-more haunted by magpies, but she knew they could stand to be less evil in her presence.

‘You look pale, Ophelia, did you see Shakespeare’s ghost?’ Ava tipped her head back in a laugh, but by the time she made eye-contact again with Ophelia she was giggling more softly, and far more respectful of the way in which the other woman’s face did indeed look. Ophelia shook her head, and shook off having any sort of delayed reaction to the vicious in-fighting between the birds. She was not pale—if anything, the dark black of her ensemble had washed out the tones of her skin, but Tobias was pale. She was not. This was not repetition—she was still disturbed thinking about lifting the corpse of the pigeon. It was top of mind infrequently since the camping trip revived it. Talking with Tobias one night, their voices low and gossipy, she had reawakened the narrative, but lied a little, said she hadn’t stumbled on the body until after it was certainly deceased.

But now he reminded her infrequently, too. Remember the death. Bird-corpse. Evil magpie.

Ophelia crossed into the kitchen and thought about whether it was too early in the day for a shot of vodka, unrelated to the birds. It was Halloween, and she refused to allow anything to impede on the day—not birds, not a knocked-down plastic mini-cauldron, not Adam, and certainly not her brother having an unfinished costume.

‘I think if I was named *Ophelia* I would grow so endlessly tired of people reminding me it was like the Taylor Swift song.’ Ava sighed. She had discarded the red coat onto the eight-year-couch and nestled herself beside her. Underneath the coat, she looked verifiably ordinary in a crème-coloured tee and a pair of white linen pants. She had slipped out of her shoes, and her bare feet were on the cushions of the sofa. ‘Does everything have to orbit around that woman? Maybe I would care more if I were white.’ Ava laughed, a muted laugh. ‘Or I had never heard other genres of music.’

Ophelia pretended to be shocked. ‘It’s opinions like those that get you attacked on social media for *coming for their faves*. As if a single person, like you and me, two individuals can’t have an opinion.’ She fetched a glass and poured herself not vodka but water. ‘To them their idol is unharmable. I guess they have the free-will to adore someone, but there’s this whole mindset for celebrities that they should be forgiven for their mistakes because they’re only human too, or else a mistake they made ten, or fifteen, something years ago should haunt them whenever they book a new project. I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.’

‘Oh, believe me, I stopped venerating celebrities when they did “Imagine” in the pandemic. Because of course in the pandemic we were all so jaded, there were only so many times Stephen and I could have sex, you know, before the lube became too thin and he started complaining it was like pinching a starved goat’s *you-know*.’ Ava made a teat-tugging gesture and smirked wide. Surprisingly, Ophelia was not quite offended to be hearing about Ava’s sex life in such graphic detail, but months ago

she would have been craving it, not experiencing it like she was. 'I put a YouTube video as my screensaver for a Zoom and no one bothered me. Global sickness. Like Opposite Day.'

Ophelia swallowed a mouthful of water and stepped around the kitchen counter towards the couch, which Ava made look irresistibly more comfortable than it was. 'As a kid I always liked annoying my brother with Opposite Day. But he never cottoned on when I was a teenager, like sixteen and seventeen, that when I puffed up the schtick and pretended I really hated him, loathed him, I was actually telling him I loved him.' She let the moment sit for a second before she intruded upon it with a cute, girlish laugh. 'I'm joking, I'm joking, I never told Romy I hated him, even when I didn't understand why he was so quiet all the time. Like he was a chorus at nine and then an orchestra at nineteen but for four years he was shuttered up, like an abandoned house.' Ophelia paused and glanced ponderingly over at Ava, who impressed her the way it was to talk to a zoologist whose efforts had been instrumental in raising the wild population of a species, say, the wolves in Yellowstone.

'You know I feel grateful for your sister,' she added at the end, albeit a little sheepishly.

Ava took the scarlet coat off the sofa and piled it neatly in her lap. Ophelia suddenly realised the look was missing a hat, although she was not determined to confess the fact and be reprimanded for not letting a gorgeous woman simply adapt an idea. 'Young people either like to express their feelings or don't,' she said, then smirked as if in on some noticeable joke. 'I'm young too. I either tell Stephen I love him every time he leaves for work in the morning, or I forget to and I feel positively alright about it. To adapt or not to adapt, that,' and she paused, tapping the spot on the sofa beside her, 'is another Shakespeare mention. I can't look into your eyes without thinking about him. Such an old, old man, although he's dead, so an old, deceased man, and everyone either thinks he had the greatest literary mind of all time or his works are so consequentially-important that it could not have been physically possible for him to write them without the help of the butler, his wife, the neighbour, and the candlestick-maker.' Ophelia allowed herself to be ensnared by Ava's allure, trailing to the seat on the eight-year-couch. She wanted them to replace it so badly. 'What do you think?'

'I don't know if it matters.'

'Whether he was a sham or wasn't?' She tipped her head in contemplation.

'Either he did or he didn't. I don't have that talent, I'm just a girl named after a victim, or a literary character of importance, as my dad would say. He's the fan.'

Ava contemplated this too, a glimmer in her eye, curiosity wedged in. 'Fathers, am I right?' Briefly, for a moment, she tensed up, and Ophelia glanced at her with a sympathetic realisation. Jon, of course, had recovered admirably from his miniature stint in hospital, and Ava had ventured up north to spend time with him, father-daughter bonding as it were. She was making a much-needed pit-stop. 'Don't start fussing over it, Jon's not like King Duncan. We read *Macbeth* in school. I have a copy in the

apartment, but do you think I read it? No I do not.’ She took the last sentence with humoured precision. There was a playful quality to it. Ava patted the coat in her lap.

At that very moment, there was a building crescendo of noise from the staircase, and Jared and Romeo came down into the first floor, mid-transformation into a viper’s den. Romeo, similarly dressed in all-black—it was as if the siblings Sylvis were running away to do stage-handing for a roving theatre troop—had rooted out of Ophelia’s closet a previously-forgotten lace dressing gown, the colour of pomegranates. It gave the ambience of lust, and seemed Persephonic, which caused Ophelia to flush a shade darker than the robe itself and avert her eyes.

‘I want to take a lover to bed,’ Romeo announced in a sultry voice, beginning a poised runway walk until he noticed Ava wide-eyed and highly amused. He stopped dead in his tracks and for a moment acted embarrassed and exposed, coyly wrapping the lacy fabric around his body. ‘Sister, you did not announce we had a guest!’ It was very theatrical, and Romeo began to tear himself out of the elaborate ruse, becoming more and more himself with each passing moment he re-introduced himself to Ava. They had briefly met, of course, the night Ophelia became a no-vote finalist and sauntered out of the house in the shadow of Tatianna Deetz’ success. ‘Isobel’s sister, of course. I am going to assume you do not remember me, I’m this one’s,’ and he pointed at Ophelia with a lace-wrapped hand, ‘brother, Romeo.’ Quieter, he mumbled to himself, ‘I wish I could commit to poisoning myself.’

Ophelia had still avoided glancing at the lacy dressing gown, although by now it was jokingly, the immediate mortification wearing off. The garment had been something she ordered online in her very early twenties, before she had decided to go on national television, and she had likely wooed a man or two while draped in it, thinking herself sexually-thrilling, but now the glance at it made her chuckle to think she had been so naïve. The thin-fabric robe looked rather like an embroidered tissue and actually suited Romeo more plainly because he was wearing it with charming whimsy, rather than as a gimmick for something sexual. Jared made no jokes about leaving it out on the dresser for later in the evening. Ophelia liked the idea of her brother disappearing it into the depths of his own closet, for use in a Dungeons & Dragons campaign with a salacious barmaid come stalking in the night, or to be stashed in his pouch of murder-mystery props.

‘Are you two identical twins?’ Ava asked, earnestly.

‘I don’t think we look that alike,’ Romeo said, glancing at his sister. Ophelia was shaking her head as a response, but it was all playful, silly, light. She never quite looked to Romeo as her identical, because she found in him differences, but they were and had always been a version of inseparably close. It helped, too, that Romeo’s hair was longer now and threatened on her length, although Ophelia very rarely liked to cut her hair, because she hated to wait for it to grow back out again. She made a quick

glance at Jared, who at least had not been corrupted into wearing any of her clothes, which had been a genuine fear of hers. Romeo was far more persuasive than she could ever be.

‘I’m just talking out of my ass, you two. You’re both adorable.’ She shifted her glance towards Jared, suddenly ingratiating him into the conversation. ‘And this must be the loverboy! Isobel has of course given me an elaborate explanation on everyone I did not know, and also what has been happening between everyone, far more interesting than being a wife am I right?’ She played up for her captive audience, and Jared, unashamedly, stuck out his hand to greet Ava properly. He could be quite gentlemanly on his own accord. They shook hands, and she complimented him on his grip. ‘Keep him around. He can give you compliments and be mechanic to your car, which is incredibly important when you inevitably move to the suburbs and have two children, lovebirds.’

Ophelia hardly could have *become* quiet, but she sunk deeper into it. The situation prompted itself: they were sitting around with a married woman, but a young one, one who very recently had tied the so-called knot. Ava was not a split-in-two mother harangued by her wifedom—she was barely older than Tobias was, older by a margin of months, and she seemed no more wizened than any of them. Ophelia tried to shapely imagine herself in the ‘burbs, her hair siphoned through a crisp, white handkerchief, or bandana. Her only point of reflection in the moment was the tradwives of a technologically-repressing world—women set in front of a camera with neat, trimmed unpolished nails, grating washed carrots over marble cutting boards, a blonde-haired child murmuring the politest form of *uppies* maniacally-rehearsed in the hours before the record button. She did not imagine herself ever as traditional, because she caught sight of the electronic panel beneath the strings tied at the back of the apron. *The Stepford Wives* was in fashion. Ophelia felt too young to be thinking about marriage. But would it be with him, with Jared, because there had not been issues or problems or conundrums to solve between the two of them?

She remembered meeting his sister, Emily. With the absurdity of how familiar Ophelia was, already, behind them, she relaxed her shoulders and made pleasant small talk. The conversation very rarely drifted towards something she had done on reality television, and she was grateful. Ophelia hated to watch herself over—she thought she looked obnoxious, or she was obnoxious, or otherwise she looked out-of-focus and heinously awkward. It was a mirror that moved. A mirror that did not shatter. On the occasions she saw Emily, Ophelia felt an ease in their conversations, and whether it was acceptance or kinship, it mattered most that she could see herself wedging beside Jared and attempting a version of a future with him. Because that was being together, no? Imagining the narration and agreeing with the narrator and believing there are no flaws. None that could not be patched.

Ophelia excused herself and continued to absently decorate the room with the cobwebs and the spiders and the black scorpions Isobel had drawn. Jared watched after her, but did not intrude. No one

did—Romeo was mid-conversation with Ava, and none quite knew where the three other roommates were. Upstairs, perhaps.

Isobel leaned against the door frame, her body mirrored by the painted wood. She cast one eye back to her girlfriend, Roxie, who lounged atop the covers of the freshly-made bed. ‘It is hard to believe this is the first time you will be meeting my sister,’ she said, the close proximity of the house amplifying Ava’s voice as it floated up the flight of stairs. There was a canvas bag of dirty laundry at Isobel’s feet. She nudged it with her toes, careful not to upend it. ‘When I was in university, when Ava still lived here in Brisbane, she would invite me to celebratory dinners to help me destress over a presentation I had thought went poorly because of jitters, or because I relied too heavily on remembering the words in my head. I always memorised a speech, I thought palm cards or notes were, well, for the weak. For people who could only narrowly skate by, and I impressed on myself an idea I would glide, not skate.’ Isobel smiled, nudging again the canvas bag with her bare foot. ‘My sister would reassure me no one gave a hoot if my face seemed mired, tranced by thought.’ Isobel paused and straightened herself up, letting go of the door frame. ‘This one time, I had been convinced I had bored every single student in the stuffy classroom with windows like a prison cell, and Ava stared back at me and said, “Of course they were bored, you were lecturing them for fifteen minutes when they would have much rather been getting so black-out wasted they forget even what a *camel* was.’ At this, she giggled to herself and hiked the canvas bag off the bedroom floor. ‘I will be back, try not to miss me too much.’

Isobel lugged the dirty laundry down the flight of stairs and made brief, excitable eye-contact with her sister. It was a wonder they did not immediately cast aside everything and envelope one another in an anaconda-grip hug, but they had been on the phone only half an hour earlier and there was comfort for Isobel to see her sister in her house like a neighbour come round to boil a lobster.

She set the dirty laundry down beside the laundry door and twisted the handle, the door opening inward. Immediately she gasped, not out of shock-horror, but pure surprise, the kind of reaction one would have if there really were enough balloons to inflate a person’s lungs like living airbags and hoist them towards the sun. ‘I need to learn how to knock,’ Isobel said, idling in the space between the two rooms, lacking irritation, mostly. Tobias tapped Adam repeatedly on his shoulder and whispered out his name. The pair had been in the midst of a passionate make-out session atop the washing machine, its front-door closed, Tobias’ legs knocking against it. Adam peeled his arms off the other man’s waist and faced Isobel with a look of complete nonchalance.

‘We can go somewhere else,’ Tobias said, scuttling out of the laundry behind Adam. Isobel cackled and heaved the canvas bag’s contents out onto the tiled floor, her dirty clothes spilling into an

unrecognisable sea. She started to methodically move each item into the washing machine, neatly organising them, flipping t-shirts inside out. Her mind raced at having caught them kissing, but it was only the first time since she had spoken to Adam in the hazy early morning while they were camping that, publicly, she understood there was something between them. Even just passioned kissing.

In the hall, Tobias and Adam shuffled into the open, denying themselves the shame of exposure—neither was really all that alarmed at Isobel having caught them, but they did not link arms and carry themselves together either. There was a gathering crowd. Tobias and Adam became the fifth and six in the living room, and for a moment Tobias made lingering eye-contact with Romeo, a subtle, sugar-and-honey smile that went without exposition. Ophelia had found the stepstool and was politely asking Jared to scoot over so she could plant a furry, fuzzy spider on the small partition of wall above everyone’s heads. Ava and Tobias hugged, and she enthralled him with a tale of hers and Stephen’s honeymoon, skimping on the intimates but giving lavish, extensive detailing to their hotel suite, the very first dinner they shared at a swanky restaurant as jet-setting wife and husband, and the taste of a pineapple margarita slipping down her throat. She paid little attention to Adam, but raised her eyebrows at Tobias and nudged her head in his direction, as if sisters truly had a telepathic way of communicating from a separate room.

‘How many people have you invited to be crammed into this one room?’ Ava posed, glancing in Ophelia’s direction. Ophelia was now by the front door affixing a detailed cardboard tombstone to the back of it.

‘Ummm, it’s intimate,’ she began, wandering back towards the gathered group, now either seated on the sofa or idling by surrounding it. Tobias and Jared were making hushed chatter about their costumes, which awaited them upstairs. ‘Everyone here, plus a few of my friends, a few of Tobias’, a coworker of Isobel’s, but that is about it.’ She relished a little in excluding Adam, but in truth none of his friends had been able to make the time to call into the pencil house. He was somewhat glad about it—they might have killed the vibe with their overt boisterousness, and Adam did not feel entirely up for the version of himself that emerged when his friends lured him into drinking one too many alcoholic beverages. Ophelia did still seem hesitantly unnerved by him, he noticed, although they had had one conversation and a half about their bickering, their feud. It had not proved enough.

In truth, it seemed a tight squeeze—there would be an overflow, and the roommates unconnected to decoration and planning, that would be Tobias, Isobel, and Adam, feared the spill would trail up the staircases and feel entirely unlike a party, and instead a handful of small gatherings listening to the drowned-out volume of music Ophelia had deemed to be spooky. She was at that moment studying the playlist, “Kill for Love” sitting unfinished in waiting. She half-focused clambered up onto the step-stool again, head in her phone, and certainly someone noticed and thought it

precarious, questionably dangerous. Ophelia herself would have said she was surveying the room for where she had gotten decorating it, but first, of course, there had to be a distraction. A phone in hand.

‘I tried to warn her, you know.’ Jared piped in. ‘Someone will be leaning against the refrigerator, or pressed up against the laundry door.’ At the mention of *laundry*, Isobel filed into the living room with the emptied canvas bag tucked under her arm. It was, undeniably, already becoming an occupied space, what an overdramatic soul would label to be limiting their oxygen. There was space, of course, on the arm of the sofa, flush against the wall, idling by the staircase, but with seven bodies in the room it became more noticeable that they no longer lived in the luxury of a purpose-built set, warehouse ceilings overhead. This was the house of ordinary people. Although the four of them did not feel very ordinary, and as of late, a definition of ordinary had become certainly more strained.

Ophelia tucked away her phone and glanced over at Jared, taller now than he was, which she had noted felt impossibly off-kilter. ‘No one will notice when it’s dark, Jared.’

He cocked her head at her and looked puzzled. ‘Wouldn’t it be more noticeable?’

‘And what, you have theories on light now, Jared? How you are told to paint a room a lighter shade to trap out the shadowed corners, to keep people from internally believing the room is as confining as it is?’ She surprised herself with her quiet distress. ‘I just thought about padded cells. Completely white. Traps out everything, supposed to trap out the heaviest of a person’s thoughts, but it wouldn’t.’ She wobbled for a moment on the step-stool, but regained her balance. ‘And so what if we feel crowded in here? No matter the size, the shape, of a nightclub, they pack bodies in like sardines. It could be the underground caverns of a forgotten tomb and there would not be the space to do a pirouette.’

‘Come down from there,’ Jared said, raising his hand out towards her as if to lift her down, despite the gap of space in between where he stood and where she was, positioned above him, almost angelic. The dark, tonally-shifted black of her clothes said otherwise, and Ophelia did not move, or balance upon the air to accept his hand. ‘Won’t the darkness hide these decorations?’

‘Everyone isn’t arriving at nine o’clock, Jared.’

He shook his head, his hand having been lowered when it was rejected, when she had spoken once more. Everyone else in the room was silent and observing, although their observation was itself unnoticed. ‘I like the decorations, I didn’t say I didn’t.’ She was void of anything in her hands to fiddle with, so Ophelia stood straightened-out atop the step-stool, her hands cupped together loosely as if she were kneading dough in her palm. ‘Can you get down from there, you are going to lose your focus and fall.’

Ophelia thought to reject it once again, but she climbed down from the stepstool, despite losing the height advantage. She admitted to herself she wanted not to argue with Jared, but his decision to be

in opposition, to doubt her decisions, made her moodier, hauntingly so. It was Halloween, of course she felt imbued with spirits altogether not her own, and when she studied his face she only found herself frustrated, increasingly so. It was like she was willing him to not press her, to not trigger her still.

Ophelia shoved the stepstool out of the way and fussed with the paper bag of decorations.

Isobel and Ava had been quietly poking each other in the hips, and the lull in motion, or commotion, however it had been seen, meant they talked amongst themselves in a low whisper. Isobel knew she ought to race upstairs and yank Roxie out of bed, into the hullabaloo, but this risked missing something said between Ophelia and Jared, the space between them seeming to naturally or otherwise become wider and wider. Isobel did not want to spend her minutes attempting to solve whether Ophelia was growing pissed with her boyfriend or not, his brief meddling, but she also didn't want to sever what clearly was the perfect bubble around the living room, pinched to one side at the stairwell. Ava, taller than Isobel with or without heels, made a hushed comment: 'I'm sorry I even asked. About the guests.' Isobel shrugged politely and made a sweeping glance at Ophelia, who was removing the last decorations from the paper bag on the single bare space across the kitchen countertops. Otherwise, it was a menagerie of snack food, the festive spooky season edition, and the concept of preparing a meal at any point in the last day had become foreign to the four roommates. They ate Indian food the night prior and shovelled the dirty dishes into the dishwasher, Tobias left in charge of popping in a capsule and pressing Start.

'She is stressed, there is an amount of pressure she has on herself for tonight to be successful, not to mention she is especially unnerved because Tatianna cannot come, and there is only so much reminding *she would if she could* that imprints on the heart.'

Ava squeezed her sister's hand. 'If you could buy the perfect party in a box, plant it on the ground and watch it sprout out in front of your eyes, everyone would be elated. But it would also not be your party. It would be pre-determined, and you would be complacent.' Ava had said this to Isobel, but she was louder than a whisper, whether she anticipated it or not. Ophelia had overheard, and ceased completely what she was doing and retrieved a can of Coca-Cola from the refrigerator. The crisp *crack*, the breaking of the seal, echoed in the pencil house's living room. She swallowed down a mouthful and then glanced over at Jared, freshly re-energised.

'Let's not have a public argument about whether or not I can organise something,' she began, inching toward him but barely closing the gap between them. Her voice was not particularly loud, but Tobias, Adam, and Romeo had no other choice for entertainment. 'I know I'm only subpar, especially when it comes to following these tiny earthworm dreams chewing up the space in my brain. Finally got a job and I hate it. Didn't move.' She sighed, now closer to Jared than previously, but his extended arm might have barely grazed her. 'Let's not do this here, in front of everyone.' She glanced quickly at

Tobias, searching in his face for reassurance, perhaps, a simple nod would have sufficed. He smiled sympathetically but felt the shift in the atmosphere. It was becoming more difficult to ignore, and Jared's body language became colder, one sentence from folding his arms against his chest. Tobias thought about ushering them into another room, but it was the last opportunity he had to truly think.

'Do you want to talk upstairs then?'

Ophelia glanced over at Jared tentatively. 'Is there something we need to talk about?'

They were asking each other questions, speaking only with the inflation of their voices at the end of each sentence, and neither seemed yet to be reaching a conclusion one way or the next. 'Do you think there isn't?' Jared paused, making a short step towards Ophelia. 'This could have been a small gathering with us, with Romeo and Isobel's sister, and no one would have fussed if there was no interwoven central theme, or if the food was not tailored to the specifics of a Halloween trick-and-treats menu you discovered online late one night after you clocked off from work.' He broke the streak in two, snapping it unevenly down the middle. His voice sounded calmer than it had, removed of any acidity, but no one moved an inch. Not even Jared.

Ophelia took another swallow of Coca-Cola and set it aside on the kitchen counter. 'So I stop putting in the effort. I stop fussing, getting excited, planning out something I don't get paid for.'

'No one said you give up your excitement,' Jared said, 'but if you're getting stressed—'

She scratched her forehead and made a brief glance at Isobel. Then back to Jared. 'This is not me stressed. At work I am stressed.' She sighed, wondering what he thought of her in that moment, whether he understood her or not. 'I think I can plan and organise something that is not the extent of a ball, a gala, an engagement party.' Ophelia threw a held glance at Ava and lifted her hand limply, as if pointing but not wanting to be overt, or direct. 'Let me count everyone, Jared. One.' She pointed to herself, and then began to point at everyone in the room as she continued to count. 'Two, three, four. Five, six, seven. Eight.' She gestured upward, almost as an implication it was God she had invited, not Roxie, who had yet to even sneak into the stairwell to listen, unobserved. Now, Ophelia began to hazily count on her fingers, attempting to recall the exact number. 'Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.' Ophelia whipped her head around to meet Tobias' gaze, and he smiled back. 'Thirteen. Fourteen.' She stopped counting and dared to glance at Jared—it would have been a mockery had he counted on his fingers alongside her, but he remained motionless and listening. It was not the first time she had counted out the guests to him, but it was the first without detail, minoring the Halloween party guests down to numbers to be counted and played with, shoved around, moved. 'It doesn't even crack twenty, and everyone thinks I am stuffing the people I want to be here, the people I care for, even if I haven't even really met Isobel's coworker—I don't remember her name right now—and I wish Wes could have made it, but then we would be at fifteen, and that's over-capacity, is it, in my house... where I

live...where I am capable of making decisions, Jared, even if it means I appear stressed. *Stressed* is something we face. I was unemployed for months, and I was stressed. I don't like what I do for work, and I am stressed. But aren't I doing something?'

Ophelia turned away from everyone, briefly, and let out a soft chuckle.

'Of course you're doing something.' It was Isobel, but it had barely an effect on Ophelia. She either did not register it in words, words attached to their definition, or she entirely blocked out any noise external to her. She took another sip of the Coca-Cola and then stared at it, deeply unimpressed, although was it the can or was there another reason for the grimace?

Jared took a hesitant step towards Ophelia. 'You could support yourself if you ended up unemployed again,' he said, although the tentativeness in his voice could have blown over a cartoon mouse. 'No one's forcing you to stay there, I mean.'

'At my age, I am not supposed to be so anti-work, not when I have an entire life ahead of me of slaving away for a measly wage that affords me a loaf of bread, a new iPhone because the old one drains battery the way you hurry to outrun an apocalypse event. A hellmouth, maybe.' She sighed again, shrugging her shoulders. 'Maybe that is what becoming complacent has done to me. It's not as if I, by my own merits or talent, made it as far as you can possibly go in a reality show because I could persevere in a harsh sort of climate. Give it a few years and there will be video essays on where Ophelia Sylvis ranks as a scapegoat, not a prodigy. I was just lucky I was Tat's closest friend, and even then she nominated me before she nominated Tobias, and I was just lucky Tobias was more impressive than I was, and I was just lucky, and I don't really know how, and I think some part of myself was manipulated by another force, not that I believe in a god.' Ophelia moved to lean against the lip of the kitchen countertop behind her, creating a further gap between herself and Jared.

'Sorry,' she said, bowing her head. 'We've moved on.'

It was an isolating sentence, and in a distant realm there would be a sudden flicker of life on the television and an image of herself would appear, back in that house, laughing or otherwise tense and uncertain, perhaps the week she was nominated and left to flounder like trout, to be voted to be kept safe or not. No one would react, or not visibly, of course, the sharp juxtaposition burning an aching branding mark into Ophelia's flesh, but she would turn her head, and her expression would be noted down in some producer's book as: *see?* Will we ever move on, she thought, reminding herself the distant reality did not exist, but a wicked sense did, never a god but a perception that would be carried and passed, fleas on rats.

'The months of experience will help you land another job. Don't stay out of fear.'

'For a bunch of people who try not to make a reality show their entire personality, we're absolutely awful at it,' Ophelia said, ignoring Jared entirely.

‘Ophelia.’ He went to reiterate himself, but her glance implied she had heard him, but was ignoring the statement he had made. Jared’s temperament grew once more colder, but there was minimal change in the volume or tone of his voice. ‘Just going to ignore me then?’ It was barely registerable as a question, but everyone anticipated another, another question as response. The captive audience limited to their places on the so-called chessboard.

‘The experience will get me another restaurant job, then,’ Ophelia began, partway between looking at Jared and averting her attention from him. ‘Now I’m not ignoring you. Another place to wait tables, to feel like a complete drone meant to make money, except at this new wherever-I-land there will only be strangers, and I want to be surrounded by people who spike me back over the volleyball net.’ She laughed at her own remark, inching now back towards Jared. ‘It’s a repetition. I’m depressed, not just stressed. It’s awful.’

Jared’s next question came hurtling through the brief silence, and perhaps he forgot, for a moment, there were ten other eyes watching him, and ten other ears, beyond simply just Ophelia’s. ‘Do you think you should go see a therapist?’

‘Why, because if there’s a problem only a paid professional can fix it?’

‘That isn’t what I meant, Ophelia.’ But it hardly seemed to matter to her. She glared at him, visibly, shakily hurt, and her feet were planted so firmly on the ground it would have taken a forklift to move her, or a tiny crane, leveraged into the living room of the pencil house.

She sighed. ‘When there’s a problem, suddenly it doesn’t matter who cares for you. Depression, no one believes they can make much of a dent on it if they don’t have a certified licence. It’s *get a new job*, which is all the same for anyone who can work and filter themselves down to an unrecognisable machine. My mind won’t quieten when I work. Therapy is just another expense, when it is unbearable having to fork out the majority of your income on every little chaotic thing.’ Ophelia paused, having completely blocked out the presence of the others in the room. It was so dully quiet in the space you could forgive it. No one squeaked. ‘I feel ashamed for even saying it, because I’m not poor, because I was paid for my appearance on the show, because I have parents who own their home and are not struggling paycheck to paycheck. Should I not complain about the rigor of working an exhaustive week only to be rewarded with a few measly days off, wherein I spend most of that time doing the laundry, running errands, buying Halloween decorations, wondering whether my boyfriend is satisfied with me because I numbly crawl out of bed to accept his affection at the front door...’ Her voice trailed off, and she turned to the can of Coca-Cola, sliding a tawny hand around the red, restraining herself from downing the remainder of it.

‘If it’s such a struggle for you...’

Ophelia had waited for him to respond with: “Of course I am satisfied.” But it had not come, and she numbly stared at him, unaccepting of his voice, too, trailing off into an awkward lull between them. That was not what he was supposed to say, she thought, again, willing the can to be colder to touch, but it only grew more lukewarm by the second. Ophelia hated how she felt. Hated that he was not soothing her, but opposing her, as it was. Hated that his face had not contorted into one she could vilify and loathe, but that he remained handsome all the same, and she still wanted him to say *it*.

‘You’re supposed to tell me you’re satisfied,’ she said, her shoulders deflated. ‘Jared. I know my life is not a straightforward tapestry, it doesn’t always make sense. You think there will always be a way for me to shape and mould it into something I can be proud of, but I continue stumbling. You said, “If it’s such a struggle for you” and I waited for you to trip me over. As much as you make yourself look like you’re considerate of my safety, telling me to climb down off the stool so I don’t stumble and crack my neck. Blood pooling everywhere in this house not big enough for fourteen people to stand around in, listening to “Season of the Witch” on low, talking amongst themselves.’ Ophelia paused, shutting her eyes, briefly, so very briefly, powering down. ‘Hell, were you really going to cycle round the room talking to everyone? You’ve got nothing in common with Tobias’ friends and you’re not going to be buddy-buddy with Adam. Why would it have mattered if you were pressed up against the damn laundry door, wouldn’t you love me manhandling you like that?’

‘Real classy, Ophelia.’

At first it was all Jared said, a cloud of grey floating in from underneath the cracks in the front door, but then he began to defrost, noticeable enough because the only other true reaction was Adam making himself appear smaller, less visible in the room. He was hiding behind Tobias, although it proved difficult, given his height against the other man’s, how discombobulated it would have looked if Adam cowered, shrunk himself physically. He was not a cowerer, neither. But the moment gave him a brief window to lean against Tobias, and despite the thick tension the deep green of hailstorms, the slightest spot of affection was not unnoticed by Tobias.

‘You know what, it’s not worth it. Staying for tonight, for one thing, because it wouldn’t matter my opinion now and it certainly won’t later, when someone utters a complaint because another person has knocked them, bumped into them, and there is spooky purple whatever all over their costume.’ Jared ran both of his hands through his dark brown hair, noticeably aggrieved. ‘I’m not going to say I’m satisfied with our relationship just because you want me to, because frankly it’s boring. Our entire relationship is boring. We go to dinner, when we aren’t working dinner, and we have unoriginal sex in the same couple of positions. You expect me to be the dream man, with the roses and declarations, but you exude a completely different energy that you do not give a crap about traditional

love, which is why I liked you in the first place.’ He blew out one heavy gust of air and took a threatening step in Ophelia’s direction.

‘What’s the point in being with a person if the love is merely because we can? I take a glance back at what there is between us and I see some fun, but when we went camping together, all of us, you looked more alive with everyone else. And when I went upstairs, just today, with Romeo, I felt restarted again, because you and I, we are **bored** of each other. That’s how plenty of relationships end. You realise you need to move on.’

‘I’m not bored of you, Jared.’

But he shook his head and began to move off from their corner of the room, a path breaking out amongst the gathered crowd, a path towards the front door. He parted them wordlessly, barely acknowledging whomever he walked alongside, until he stood a few measly steps from the front door, still clear in Ophelia’s sight, and he sighed again. ‘Life’s too short to be unhappy. I know you get that.’ And with that, Jared left. The heavy front door slammed closed, although whether it was intentional or not was unknown, for he had not seemed altogether too angered as he went. Ophelia froze, unable to control herself, her breathing becoming heavier. She scrunched up any trace of an expression and leaned against the kitchen countertop for support, as if believing she would collapse, or faint, at any given moment. Instead, she stood there, first, propped up, a shell of the girl she had been moments ago. It was like someone was whispering in her ear, repeatedly, “that means he’s dumped you. I know you get that.” Ophelia would have decimated the Coca-Cola can if she had instead reached for it. Its aluminium scraping the flesh of her palm. There’s the blood.

‘Are you alright, Felia?’ It was Romeo, who had eased himself closer to her, taking patient, measured steps. Nobody else had moved.

She snapped her head towards him, tears staining her cheeks. ‘Of course I’m not fucking alright.’ Her voice was deep, fractured, guttural more than anything. It was louder, too, and it echoed in the smaller space of the living room. It was noticed, and Ophelia wiped a warm palm against her cheek, the movement long, forceful, pained. Her mouth wide open in a combination of shock and rage. She wanted so desperately to scream her head off, pop it right off like that, the decibels working magic on her own anatomy, or otherwise the stretching-out of her own jaw unhinging it, which reminded her, briefly, of the movie *Beetlejuice*. She wanted to scream, and so she did. A continuous note. It was imbalanced and nowhere close to a perfected slasher scream, but it did its job, and she was too caught in her own theatrics, her own release, to notice the strained, feared, and worried expressions of everyone around her.

The scream came to an exhausted end, and Romeo enveloped his sister in a tight embrace, and she calmed in his arms. The tears still trained down her face, leaving impressions like in mud, but he

soothed her without words. Maybe he believed he did not need them. Ophelia had memories of her brother, the sweetest boy she knew, Romeo, calming her down just this way when they were still living together those years ago. Practically children, but being a teenager compares little to adulthood, to its rages. Their closeness in age meant they saw each other always as equal. I fix the boo-boos for you, you fix the boo-boos for me. She buried her head in his shoulder.

‘I need to keep talking to him,’ she said, almost muffled. Ophelia began to peel herself away from her brother, calmer now, wiping the last of her tears.

No one dared to approach her as she moved towards the front door herself, calmly, without the panic of moments before. Ophelia did not slam the door, but the inevitable thud, like a snapping click, thawed out the room and suddenly instead of being frozen in place, the five remaining began to move, began to drift, like the floor had upended and become ice and it was impossible to stand in the one spot, doing the one thing they had all been doing, unable then to interject but not now. Now the spectacle had been sucked from the room the way you were meant to suck venom out of your hiking buddy’s leg. From the staircase Roxie came peering out at the leftovers, almost childlike. No one quite knew where they were, for the living room had ceased transforming itself, or being transformed—it looked partway undergoing its descent into the den of a vicious mother spider, but now nothing could come quite so close to spooky as the lurch of sadness knocked them upright.

Isobel moved in the direction of the door, beginning with: ‘I have to go make sure she does not embarrass herself in front of him.’ But she was halted, swiftly, but a raising myriad of other voices in the room, all echoing the sentiment, on the verge of arguing they were more suited for it, be it because they were blood-related, or another friend, another ally, a different stroke. Isobel had stopped and lingered and was searching for a version of an answer from Roxie, who, having merely caught the end of the argument, and the succeeding break-up, could not form anything with her mouth but a frown.

‘Someone has to go,’ Tobias said, ‘but we can’t all storm out there, a passionate mob without their pitchforks, when she’s hurting, we know she is, the way she is.’ His voice was low, but not muffled. He glanced at Adam, nervously.

‘I want to go.’

Most were surprised when Adam suggested himself. It made a certain sense he was an unlikely candidate—their friendship was shaky at best, at worst non-existent as of late. The one genuine conversation they had in months was beginning to appear to have been either an illusion entirely, or at least marred by a string of generic entries into their dictionary of back-and-forth. Had he apologised enough? No. Ophelia was not to the passable stage of forgiving him, and they had spent another month avoiding one another, not unlike roommates. Romeo’s face twisted into an uncertain grimace, but Isobel loosened up and stepped away from the path, giving Adam a supportive glance.

‘It might seem absurd, but I trust in the four people who live here. Two of them, through a bias or not, support this idea, and there is no part of myself that does not think that you are capable of repairing the damage.’ Isobel paused, considering. ‘Adam, please hurry up and go make sure she does not fall at his feet and beg. She might just see your face and...’ She let her voice trail off, and everyone noted it seemed most likely Isobel would have made an inappropriate joke about Ophelia punching him, or tasselling with him, knocking him onto the bitumen ground, but she shook her head instead and made an ushering sort of gesture. ‘Come on, there is not a forever in a day.’

At first, Adam was dumbfounded by which way Ophelia had run off, following in whichever way she assumed she would find Jared, too—this would be it, he imagined, his gesture of improvement becoming one of disappointment when he immediately buckled and stared around, helpless puppy, trying to spy her off in the distance this way or that. Squinting was, however, enough to bullseye the all-black ensemble wandering on half-energy to the left of their house, further enough on the bitumen road Adam broke into a jog to catch up with her.

‘I come in peace. Can we talk about this?’

Ophelia did not flinch. ‘Leave me alone, Adam.’

She had, however, slowed herself further and was pacing forward. Jared was not visible in the distance, but there was every possibility he turned down the next street, cut through a park, disappeared into a territory previously unknown. Who could say. Ophelia and Adam were marching to somewhere, but lacking in determination, and she unexpectedly found herself listening as he continued to speak. ‘I know I’m the enemy, and I imagine to him I was too. This exhausting example of a moron, the moronic bro. I know the last person who should be giving you comfort right now is this same guy, and the last time we talked on the street you were inches away from shanking me in the stomach with a sharpened toothbrush and being boastful and proud about it.’ They walked side by side, but Ophelia was yet to meet Adam’s eyes. The sun burnt down on the pair of them—late October was humid, hot, and not unlike summer in this blistered country, and the fabric of her clothes would have only attracted the heat. Ophelia was squinting, her head bowed down.

‘But those are my cons,’ he continued, trying for a smile. ‘I should have apologised better. The day of, the day after, when we were at the beach, when we were sitting round in Donny’s home office and I couldn’t avoid making jokes about myself, but not in the expense of myself. Just because I thought I could pull the humour out of the dickish way I treated you.’ Adam stared out ahead at the bitumen road unfolding in front of them. ‘The worst of my sins was not fighting to be your friend after I had hurt you already. Instead of confronting it all, again, and again, until the distance shrunk to the size

of a purple pruned-up, wrinkly grape, I accepted there was no way you and I could be friends. Not while you were dating him. Not while I was dating Natalie.’ He paused, scratching his cheek. ‘It was like we’d already dated, and I was a betrayal, and there was no possible way to patch it up. But of course there was. I should not have waited until you had such an obvious fight with Jared to realise it.’ Ophelia stopped walking, and Adam noticed, slowing himself down right to a halt. They stood at the side of the road, finally both looking at each other at the very same time.

‘But those are my cons,’ he said.

The red puffiness was apparent around Ophelia’s eyes but she did not move. Nor did she speak, although Adam hoped she would, even if to reject his apology, even to spit in his face, curse him out, scream too at him. He could listen out for her heavy, strained breathing but it remained the least bit of a response to what he had said, and how he had found those words he was still confounded by. Adam knew in himself he was not wired to be brilliant in a conversation, and so repeatedly he called back something worded the **right** kind of way as being something he learned from Isobel, or from Tobias, maybe even a little from Ophelia, too. But this felt authentic to him, not weaved from someone else, not because he now had friends, uplifting people in his life, who shaped and moulded the way he ought to respond to someone’s feelings. Maybe it did not mean he was the ship of Theseus, the old wood replaced plank by plank, an entirely new conceptual image of Adam walking that bitumen road. But. He liked to believe there was function within him that produced the right thing to say, or thereabouts, without having to consult a dictionary, or more aptly a manual.

Then again, he thought, was it ever possible to know the right thing to say? People were not identical. Ophelia was not Tobias, Isobel was not him, not Adam. All he could do was realise inside himself he cared about Ophelia, and the distance they had both willingly placed between themselves was the moronic thing, but they were not. Because they individually had hurt, and what was that thing he had heard somewhere, or Isobel had whispered to him when she was pretending to stay out of it but really she could not change herself simply by *saying* she would stop mediating in other people’s lives as much as she did? Hurt people hurt people. Written out, it looked like the sort of thing Microsoft Word would flag for being repetitive. It sounded aloud like a blanket statement void of meaning, almost sing-songy in nature, and then he caught a small part of a jingle pre-written, set to a tune, and he imagined it on *Sesame Street* or something like that. The dangers of bullying. The steering away from trauma.

‘Apparently I make an awful girlfriend,’ she said.

Adam shook his head adamantly, but inside of himself he understood he could never leap into Jared’s brain and understand why he had decided in the moment their relationship was over. It had just happened. Whether it would change or not was a part of being a human being.

‘He never said awful.’

‘He said boring. I’m boring.’ Ophelia’s stare went distant for a moment, but she was merely distracted by a trampled patch of dirt and a discarded shoe, left alone on the side of the road. ‘You know sometimes I wondered what about Toby made him more special than I was, and then I would realise the cruelty of comparing myself to anyone.’ She met his glance once more and Adam wondered if the intensity was meant for him, or if she was merely burning it out, like a pumpkin spice-scented candle, because there was no longer anyone to scorch with the wick. ‘I don’t even know if you want to be with him like that. It’s hard to believe Adam Affeldt could fall in love with a man.’

That had seemed strangely enough like an acceptance of the apology, or as much as Adam could gather in the same breath. Ophelia weighed the thought in her hands, but there came no sudden realisation in either direction. Adam himself had been taken aback. His mind flashed to the two of them, himself and Tobias, caught kissing in the laundry—they had been there for some forgotten reason, Tobias needed to check one of the cupboards for something he thought they owned, but there was more of an undercurrent to the what. The danger of getting caught made everything more interesting, and when Adam’s tongue slipped inside Tobias’ mouth they stopped thinking, or Adam knew he did, a blanketed space taking the room in his head. He likened it to how, in university, you could book out a study room and for that limited, exhilarating-or-not time, the room belonged to you. He thought about clearing everything off the table in the reserved room and kissing Toby so passionately it threatened to morph him with the wood. But he knew all of that could mean nothing, except that he embarrassed himself when he lied. Adam liked the idea of lying less, although to a coworker he would lie the same, as if it were going out of fashion.

He saw himself saying: ‘You’re only saying that because you’re heartbroken.’ But that would not have served anything. That was something another version of Adam would have said, the Adam who himself was still heartbroken over Sophie. He thought of her less now. But she would always exist. The same way a businessman in Japan exists. Adam had given himself a second longer to think, or thereabouts, and he said, instead: ‘I guess I can surprise everyone.’ It was stupid, but he had used up his storage of everything interesting to say, and he was alright with that. There could have been something poignant to say, but Adam was not the poignant sort. Until the year before he had never thought he would have much in common with someone like Tobias.

There was not much point in being stagnant.

Their numbers had dwindled to five, and no one cared anymore whether or not fourteen people could fit comfortably in a room of the size the living space in the pencil house was. Roxie stood, still somewhat unsure of what had happened, beside Isobel, and briefly her girlfriend had zonked out

completely on something important. ‘Oh my goodness, Roxie, this is my sister, Ava Grauberger.’ Ava winced somewhat at the announcement of her married name, but there was no way to tell certainly whether she was merely poking fun at the overtly Europeanness of it. Although *Yanick* was hardly uniquely removed from its own European origins. Mostly it amused Isobel.

‘I would have interrupted, but it seemed inconsiderate.’ Ava smirked. She was noticeably taller than Roxie, too, although that was not difficult either. They thankfully did not shake hands. ‘It’s very lovely to meet you. By the sounds, it’s a sprig of luck you two haven’t broken up yet.’

Isobel poked her sister in the side. ‘What?’ Ava said, smirking. ‘Maybe you shouldn’t call me with the trade secrets if you don’t want me commenting on how it’s like dominos here.’ She paused, laughing politely, mostly to herself. ‘I wouldn’t wish the demise of any relationship of my sister’s. I know how much of a support you have been for her, Roxie. With Dad, especially.’

She and Isobel shared a long look—but not a sombre one.

‘He doesn’t even act like he was in the hospital,’ Ava continued, and began regaling a story she herself was repeating from Perla, her mother, about her father’s first day back from being in hospital. The brief visit that had not borne much alarm at all, although of course his daughters fussed, stressed, and did the very closest thing to praying two atheists could: they watched grimly-depressing detective shows, somehow managing the multitasking of eyes glued to the screen and to their mobile phones as they texted each other their theories. Their father, returning from hospital, experienced little tenderness about the kitchen and set himself at the cutting board, after having found various essentials in the refrigerator—butter, sliced cheese, wrapped ham, mayonnaise. He made himself a simple ham & cheese sandwich in the very spot he had fallen, or somewhere near, and in a blink-and-you-will-miss-it moment he might have danced, swung out his arms, performed for an audience of one. Perla had merely meant to ensure he made it safely into his home. The story made Ava smile, and in turn Isobel, too. Sister to sister, Isobel knew distance would never separate the two of them—but now the fate of the evening vehemently hung in the balance, and Isobel thought to harbour her sister in her bedroom, the two of them curled up together watching a movie together they would have thought to be the height of spooky-scary when they were children. Life is too short to not cherish every moment of it. To fear the very reaper who comes a knocking, when instead you can dance.

‘I can’t really say what I was inspired by, except I like vampires and I found these gorgeous pants,’ Tobias said, gesturing to an outfit laid out on the covers of the bed in his third-floor bedroom. Romeo had followed in behind him, having disrobed of the lacy dressing gown—there had been no time to remove it in the flurry of conversation, of argument, but now he appeared far less like an eliminated girl from *Flavor of Love*. Tobias’ costume was a remix of thrift-store threads he presumed resembled a

gentleman from the 1920s and a pair of vampire teeth, fake blood he hoped to paint at the corners of his mouth, and a faux-vampire bite he would apply to his neck, a temporary tattoo he would then eagerly await to fade. At the end of the bed, Tobias and Romeo idled beside one another, closer than either might have predicted. There was a glimmer in Tobias' eye, and he parted his lips to whisper a 'hi.'

Romeo's voice was soft, and too whispered. 'I heard you weren't having sex.'

Tobias hardly reacted. They were close, their faces near-touching.

'I was in a relationship,' he uttered. Tobias caught a glimpse of Gavin, torn from memory. In an entirely different timeline he would have been there, another costume laid out beside, perhaps matching in some regard—but then again, in that alternate world, was it sinister to imagine nothing had changed? These thoughts could be dispelled in an instant. Tobias felt himself foolish, but then that too cleared away, because there was no agony to be had, and when had been the last time he had found himself this close to kissing someone new?

Oh. He would have to giggle inside his head.

'That doesn't seem to make much sense,' Romeo replied, the corners of his mouth turning up. How simple it would have been for any number of people to climb the two flights of stairs and interrupt them, but the echoes of downstairs never sounded any nearer.

Tobias thought about it. There had been liberation since loss, there was loss in liberation. Or was there—was that the nihilism of someone meant to be hurting, where he no longer wanted to be, because hurting served him no purpose? He had thought Romeo attractive the first time he met him, at the first glance, and he would have felt something inside himself looking over-shoulder at framed pictures when Ophelia moved into the main suite and read the letter from home. He reckoned with the irony—in another world, another timeline, they would have invented themselves a love triangle, although it would have been incomplete, a love funnel if anything.

He leaned forward, thinking about it. 'Excuse me for a second.'

Outside in the October sun, Ophelia and Adam wandered back in the direction of the house. Now she regretted, minorly, the theatre blacks—but it would have been less distracting than if she had been costumed up, the teased-up blonde wig, the marmalade dress she ordered online, the splotchy black Rorschach test spat onto her cheek, which reminded her of a unicorn. How ironic, she thought—here comes the jilted girlfriend. Wearing it that night, she imagined, would have to be out of rebellion, out of her own rejection of the sudden oncoming traffic careening towards her.

I would prefer not to.

‘He wasn’t entirely wrong,’ she began, her eyes trained on the horizon laid out before her. ‘Being with a person is supposed to be fireworks, maybe not all of the time, but there is only so much I could do when being miserable sucked the life out of me.’ Ophelia bit her lip, falling silent. The space between them did not increase. ‘We were bored because we couldn’t afford to do the things we wanted from each other, whether that was monetary or not, whether that was because I was just the entirely wrong person for him.’

She sighed. ‘Or he was the wrong person for me.’

‘You made each other happy, though, even if that ended.’

She glanced at Adam, the briefest of looks. ‘People always tell you to remember the best of being with a person, but all of it becomes sepia-tone tainted after the breakup. The truly extraordinary memories still ache, because no matter what they will not be repeated again, not even in imitation. I...I know maybe it will change, Jared only **just** broke things off with me, but you remember the relationship I was in before we did the show together? I remember all the beautiful little things. Being in bed with him, just kissing him, I think about it sometimes and I don’t recognise myself in that girl. Because she had him, and she could not have predicted the joy of those memories would be shredded down to regret, down to a snorted heap of ash that flames your nostrils. Sometimes I want him again, but I think in order to ever be simply in bed with him again, just kissing him, I would have to figure out how to revert myself to the factory settings.’ Ophelia sniffled, wiping her cheek. ‘I miss him, but because it ended, I know I shouldn’t ever ask him if he misses me too.’

She shook her head, meeting Adam’s eyes once more. ‘That’s what I know to expect with Jared. Already I miss him, already I want to struggle free from realism, from letting him walk away. But I will miss him. I will miss him when I want to be held. I will miss him because someone else’s laughter is coarse, scratching up my eardrums, making me realise the joke was not funny at all. I will miss him because it ended. Saying goodbye will always be awful, goodbye is not like good riddance.’

Ophelia was only mildly annoyed there were no tissues on the side of the road, but she wiped at her face with the back of her hand all the same, thankful at least there was no globe of snot wedged at the opening of either of her nostrils. She imagined herself to not be pretty, then, but there was always too much expectation on a woman to be beautiful always. She ought to be allowed to look a complete mess, certainly on Halloween, although the festive holiday never quite felt the same in daylight, hours before the sun disappeared on the horizon and werewolf cries soundtracked the broomstick trials of fledgling witches. Ophelia sniffled again and wiped underneath her eye.

‘Shit, I need to find a new job again.’ She laughed, but noticeably Adam had remained quiet, observing her, respecting the new order blossoming between the two of them. It amused him how long they had stayed avoidant of one another, time passing because it passed, and they were the two of them

far too inundated with the throes of life to really notice they had slipped back into becoming acquaintances, and almost strangers. Adam was yet to know whether he would think about Natalie like Ophelia would think about Jared. Good riddance is not like goodbye—but was he earnestly believing the former, instead of the latter? Watch the fox scurry into the henhouse so soon after his tasty meal. He had thought about calling her, or texting, but then a month passed. Tomorrow is November, he thought, *second-to-last month of the year*. It's almost all done.

'Did your opinion of me change when you found out about what happened on the camping trip with Tobias?' He paused, considered, then added: 'The first one.'

Ophelia moved the question around in her brain. It came with its caveats: she was forced to recount the night of the house party, the striking viper of Adam's words, the confession and retraction of ever having been affectionate towards her. But now she no longer wanted to be teary-eyed over a guy. 'I was more offended you led me on.' They could glimpse their house now ahead of them. 'It never would have been a competition, ironically. Nor did I make the leap to think you were queer, and that it was insulting you might have used me to hide from it. Adam, all you have to do is think about how the other person will respond, and then you get to live your life. You injured me because I'm a romantic, and I thought maybe we'd bond over our exes. You didn't injure me because you chose intimacy with someone else. Or because maybe you like men, too.'

Adam knew he still had plenty to think about. His costume for the Halloween party was aptly the Devil, horns and all, but it might have been warts, and it might have been his search history, too. The most recent of camping trips had resulted in several occasions where he lied awake in bed googling various terms, after Tobias wink-winked at the word pansexual, which sounded a little more resonant than bisexual, and to him he noticed the difference. Those late nights meant scrolling through gay porn, too, although whether or not that was research for sex positions he could not say. Years ago he might have been subconsciously disgusted, rejecting the mere sight, but he could watch two men masturbate beside one another and feel a tinge of arousal, at first, and then it built, and then he hesitated. If he closed his eyes he pictured Tobias beside him, and sometimes he did invite him into his bed, but they never had sex. And was that strange, or his fault, or was that one and the same?

He liked to kiss him. He liked not to ruin their bond, which sounded like the meeting-place of pre-show Adam and ninth-place, living with these strangers-turned-friends. Their bond. Their friendship, first, was a downpayment on a rental property they would not see ever again if their cat pissed so substantially on the carpet it seeped in and left an odious, toxic stench. Adam was half-surprised they had not slept together in the tent, although it would have been screwing, or fooling around, whichever one was removed of having dinner. Tobias never asked for it, despite how intimacy issues had been the fault of his last relationship, but in that moment Adam wondered whether it was him

who should have asked, him because he had truly, genuinely, never had sex with another man. All there was was the grinding. Tobias' moan like a ringtone. An alarm clock.

Then you get to live your life, she had said. It was as simple as that for him, too.

They walked up to the front door and Adam took the handle in his fingers and twisted, making sure to gentlemanly step out of the way for Ophelia. She imitated punching him, a sharp, but sweet, sensitive, cackle escaping from her lips as she re-entered the living room. Exposed again to her chaos.

The cycle had run down, and Isobel sat on the laundry room floor emptying her wet, draping clothes into a white plastic basket. She had almost forgotten entirely it was there, waiting for her, amidst her frozen feet, and reuniting with her sister. Roxie sat on the other side of the basket, her hands folded in her lap.

'I like your sister,' she said, moving her hands onto the rim of the laundry basket.

'Ava cannot help herself,' Isobel responded, and lovingly so.

She had almost finished lobbing the rest of the wet, saturated clothes into the basket. It was a menial task, but she preferred it this way, piece by piece, rather than heaping everything at once and keeping it all tangled together, an eclectic mess of colour, fabric, shape, and design. Isobel gently wrung out a pair of her underwear before setting them aside, in amongst everything.

'Are you going to change into your costume early?' She posed to Roxie, glancing her way as she awaited a response. The costume would frighten someone, perhaps, if they worked in a mental institution in the 1960s—Roxie had fished around for a monochromatic, loose-fitting dress which she planned to pair with a similar-colour cardigan. She would stress her hair, really make it uncomfortable, one degree from electrocuting it—although the concept was either ill-form or just the right amount of inappropriate, dependent on how you grappled with the painful, traumatising history of mental health patients and their treatment throughout history. Roxie had recently rewatched the second season of *American Horror Story*. She wanted to be awake at midnight and scream down a long, claustrophobic black-brick hallway, *the killer is escaping!* And then the night would be a success. And then she would go to bed. This she had narrated to Isobel earlier that day as she unfolded her costume out onto Isobel's bed, before moving it onto the lavender-coloured upholstered chair in the corner.

'No, probably not, not yet,' she said, with a laugh. Isobel finished emptying the washing machine and climbed back to her feet, closing the front-loader door, switching off the washing machine at the wall. With the basket of wet clothes, she halted, facing the screen door leading out to what constituted the pencil house's abysmal backyard. It was a small concrete rectangle with a clothesline attached to the brick, then a patch of grass considered miserable to any canine. It was smaller than a cricket pitch and took a single minute to mow. It was depressing, but required so little maintenance

most of the residents of the house forgot entirely about it, especially considering its only access was out through the laundry. Whoever had designed the pencil house had clearly only considered how to cram a three-storey monstrosity onto a thin, hideous block. They thought little on comforts.

Roxie followed Isobel out into the mediocre courtyard and the two worked to complete an uninteresting chore, that of hanging washing out on the line. Isobel blew her girlfriend a kiss as she pegged one side of a pair of her pants. ‘Next we have to do our taxes,’ she joked, before taking up another peg, another piece of clothing.

‘I love keeping receipts,’ Roxie replied, smiling wide.

Isobel could see this being her future, in a roundabout sort of way: she and Roxie completing the menial tasks of life beside one another, although it was presumptive, she thought, to picture them only expanding upwards. Maybe it was the change in recent wind, her sister getting married, becoming Ava Grauberger. How she wanted that for herself, and it could be another certificate wedding, something intimate and private, if that was what Roxie wanted too. It was bold, to imagine her future this way, unchanged from now, except at some point in time she would move out of this canal of a home, a lengthy corridor, and the perspective would be different. Instead of peering from a ledge, not perilous but confined, reminiscent of a castaway story, she would be at the pinnacle of the mountain gazing down, impressed with herself. It came as a striking wave, and Isobel reminded herself to heed with patience, to appreciate the current, as it guides you in one direction or another. She was not eager to have children, to forget entirely what having been on reality television had meant, and did she want to go again, the eternal vested interest in changing your personal best?

Did it matter now, whether she made a decision?

Standing there, in the sunlight, hanging washing to dry, Isobel remembered how it felt not to lose, but to have tried. Participation is a trophy of the present day, but the sensation was not that she had participated, much the same as it was not to be participating in life. It was trying. When she would be on late-night phone calls for the helpline, reassuring anxious, depressed, exhausted queer folk of all ages—although predominately teenagers and those in their twenties—she would remind them they were trying their best, and it was never to say their best was not enough. It was never to say *participating* in life would always be anxiety-inducing, depressing, exhausting. You ought to try.

Isobel glanced at Roxie and she wanted, then, to say something buried underneath cheese, mountains and cliffs and grand monolithic peaks of it, but she did not. She simply leaned forward and kissed her. That could have been worse, or better. Isobel just liked this.

Tobias was sitting on the eight-year couch turning a furry, faux-spider over in his hands. When he had come down from his bedroom on the third floor, it had been lying belly-up in the middle of the floor, as if poisoned and rotted by pesticide. The creature stood no chance. He studied its inaccuracies, the plainness of its undercarriage, and waited there, the lone soul left in the living room. He set the fake spider down on the coffee table and wondered whether Ophelia had planned to move it out of the way entirely, tucked in some corner, so another two bodies could have idled near the sofa, mingling and comingling. He listened out for noise, and heard the click of the front door, Ophelia's lifted laughter filtering into the room. Tobias was not surprised it was only she and Adam, but a part of himself withdrew, at least tinged with the disappointment. They were all alone again.

'Toby.' It was Adam, and he stopped in his tracks. Tobias rose to his feet and dwindled down some of the distance between them. It brought forth memories of romantic comedy characters meeting one another in the street, the park, the airport, on the doorstep. These fantastical moments where two people stop the forward momentum of time to make an elaborate declaration, except Tobias' head went completely blank when he saw Adam, and he barely recovered in himself why he had come to wait on the first floor anyhow. Except he knew he should, to be there for Ophelia, to be there when Adam returned. Ophelia noticed the Coca-Cola can sitting on the kitchen bench, still, unmoved and untouched. 'We talked,' he said, glancing briefly at Ophelia, who downed the remainder of the Coca-Cola. 'Where did everyone go?'

The peace of the house was broken by a question. Tobias glanced around the emptied-out living room, sans for the spider, and he wondered whether or not to ignore Adam entirely to give Ophelia a hug. But then he wondered whether touching her, overwhelming her with his affection, would have brought forth again what she had clearly dispelled. Ophelia was no longer in tears, no longer threatened a great banshee wail, although in typical fashion she was not beaming either. One sudden comment and she might have raged and destructo-crushed the can with a clenched fist. It was perhaps an Ophelia dream. 'Somewhere in the house,' he replied, making a subtle gesture to the staircase. This peace was sweet. To Tobias, it tasted like whipped-up fairy floss.

Ophelia, having disposed of the aluminium can, leaned her palms against the kitchen counter. 'Well, I'm going to go find my brother,' she said, making hasty glances at the two men before her. 'Was that your idea, to send him out? Did you wrestle him into making it better?' She set her sights on Tobias, but interrupted him before he could get out much of a response beyond the letter 'I'. 'I don't care much either way, Toby. It was necessary, for me, for today. I, um, never want to be annoyed or frustrated with either of you for wanting to spend time with one another. I'm not your mum. You're older than I am, and don't worry, I'll always remind you of that.' She smirked and shrugged her shoulders, nodding briefly to Adam, before trailing off and disappearing up the first of the flight of

stairs. Ophelia had yet to know where she would find Romeo, *wherefore art thou Romeo*, but she would find him where he was and maybe, if it weren't disturbing, garishly weird, for siblings to have what should have been reserved as a couple's costume, he could instead be Frankenstein for the evening.

She could promise to stand at the very opposite of the room.

Shouting obscenities to him over the noise. Just to annoy him like siblings do.

Oh, how swiftly he would turn it all down, and tell her he wanted to be Miranda Priestly instead. Ophelia would laugh, and say *thank goodness*.

'Do you know what we're doing?' Tobias said, stepping forward, bridging again the gap.

Adam looked taller than normal, his back not slouched, a sense of confidence to him not earlier seen, or diminished at the very least when Isobel had failed to knock on the laundry door. Rapping on the laundry door of course ought to be more familiar, commonplace, but Isobel had failed on the memo. Adam carried himself now with one less weight, one less turtle, and he wondered whether he did understand what they were doing together, he and Tobias. The kissing he loved, sharing a bed together, Adam caressing Toby's body which had become second nature to him, which had ceased feeling ever like a thought to be hesitated upon. Did it make narrative sense? He imagined what the version of himself first shaking Tobias' hand when they entered the house, the taxing-and-sprawling warehouse with film-studio lights, what that version of himself would think of the past twelve months? Until they invented a time machine, he would not know, but he liked himself less then, he appreciated himself more now, and there was no version of events where Tobias had not shifted that, a kitty-cat pawing at a stuffed little feathery birdie.

'I like what we're doing,' he said, without taking Tobias' hands in his, without making it nauseously sentimental. 'It feels natural to me, and that surprised me, at first.'

'Neither of us should be face-planting into something serious anyway.' Tobias thought he heard motion behind him, but no one interrupted. They were hardly making-out with tongue, but it was nice to be alone together for the sparse handful of minutes there would be no action in the to-be busiest room in the entirety of the pencil house. 'But that's not what you want, right?' He was grateful to himself that the question lacked spice and snark, but he waited on his metaphorical tiptoes for the answer, although he told himself neither answer would change a lick.

Adam smiled. 'You're responsible. That's an awful response, Toby, but there is no way to say yes or to say no, not when the last of my relationships ended with me blanking and telling her to forget all about a camping trip, and the last of yours still needs the time to heal.' It sounded too philosophical out of his mouth, but Adam hated the idea of pigeonholing himself because he was meant to be the

handsome, charismatic competition beast without vulnerability. He wanted to peel away the skin. In truth, he had flopped, and embarrassingly, as a wannabe comp beast—maybe it was time to pivot.

‘I made a point to never underestimate you,’ Tobias said, briefly averting his eyes. ‘First, because I thought it would mean you could beat me, my vision so narrowed on winning there was no possibility in my mind we would connect the way we have. Then, second, because there was something about how you looked at me when none of your family were around on the first of our camping trips together. You don’t fucking love me, Adam, but you meant it when you thanked me, for whatever you were thanking me for. It kind of made me feel nice, to be one of Adam’s girls but not at all, like there was a special space inside your arms reserved for the guy you could hump without making a supermassive deal out of it.’ Tobias scratched the centre of his palm and just looked right back at Adam.

He had not meant any of it to sound bereaved, not even the curse word, but it felt alright if Adam did not correct him. They were not in love—love you reserved for something more substantial than this, Tobias thought, suddenly uncertain whether he had loved Gavin, or if they had been falling in love until it backfired on them, an exhaust spluttering out grey fumes. In the same breath, had Adam loved Natalie? And did it matter, did it truly matter? In the same breath again, why were there limitations or restrictions on love, when it was a pure form of appreciation for someone, when it was only tainted when you bled, and you hurt, and... Tobias lost his train of thought, mostly. It was simple too, when he looked at Adam. Two white boys seeing whatever it was they saw in one another was not revolutionary by any means, but the revolutions should be happening elsewhere, not in a random house, not in that random house on Halloween in the middle of the day.

Couldn’t a revolution happen with the people who held power?

Tobias liked to think the only power he had was over men, and then, whether he was successful or not was not an exact science, because his heart ached and yet it was healing over, patching the holes itself, and wouldn’t it be alright if he did not explain exactly what he wanted from Adam, except he wanted to kiss him, and lick his moustache, and bite on his earlobe, and admire his shirtless form, wondering how he had become the first man on this moon, this specific orbiting moon, trailing him but then not at all, because this was what they were to each other. Two moons, orbiting other planets, and then glancing at one another through space, pitch-black and dotted with stars.

‘You really can’t strip the sentiment out of the Tobias,’ Adam said, laughing.

‘Would you like me to strip?’ It was Tobias’ attempt at flirting, then, and he made what he hoped were something like *bedroom eyes*, giving merely a beat before he jokingly tugged on the waistband of his pants. It played odd in the middle of the living room, but there was no denying Adam severely considered it, the slightest of nods registerable by a body language expert. Or a boy who wanted to do it anyway. Tobias teasingly slipped his pants down enough for Adam to see the band of his underwear,

then pulled them back to his waist and glanced around the room, twisting his body, as if embarrassed—but there was no part of himself that was, and there was no one else nearby to be scandalised, nor had Adam seen the soft bulge in Tobias’ underwear, growing out of the minor jolt of excitement.

Tobias smiled, and cleared his throat, and respectfully so. ‘Is it just a gentleman thing that we haven’t had sex yet?’ That would have been the question to stumble down the stairs upon, but the only noise was the steady, patient breathing of the two men.

‘Me, a gentleman,’ Adam replied, stepping closer still to Tobias. There was, of course, no denying now the intimacy between the two of them, Adam one inch forward from stepping on Tobias’ bare feet. ‘The first thing we did was imagine what it would feel like to give each other orgasms.’

‘That’s true, no, you’re right.’ Tobias took a beat, then said: ‘do you have any plans right now, roomie?’ It was like a line out of an awful porno, and Tobias had felt, saying it, a sort of rehearsal quality to his voice, but half of the world’s fantasies had been ruined by a cringe opening line in a video you clicked play on, in the dimness of the night, wanting the entrée, then the main, and then dessert. He could not care less whether he sounded insane, or if the whispery, Marilyn Monroe-quality to his bravado came across entirely wrong. He hoped, in some majestic sort of way, he tickled in Adam what would be enough for him to follow up those stairs, just the singular flight, and enter into Adam’s own bedroom with him. They would close the door, hastily strip each other of their clothes, kissing, and passionately so, until they fumbled and stumbled into bed. Tobias would find a condom in Adam’s bedside drawer, stick it out, wave it round in the air, and Adam would tear the packaging open with his teeth. And then, like movie magic, the screen would fade away, and there would be nothing left to be seen. Nothing except afterwards, Tobias’s head on Adam’s chest, and one would remind the other this is what they meant when they imagined their sex pressing up against one another in the borrowed white van. This was their sex, dream-like, almost, but entirely real, because you would notice the absence of your heart beating in your chest otherwise.

It made sense that it had not made sense. Tobias was noticeably queer, this much was true, but Adam was mere dark horse, trotting along, making the decisions of which at first seemed to be that of a donkey. The van, the exposing sex with Zayn, of which he feels what resembles discomfiture, although sex is sex, and he believes as much to be true. Maybe, he thinks, the sex with Zayn only felt disappointing because he had been thinking of Tobias, but it had not been Tobias. And it had not been tempered. It had not come when the exact perfect possible moment had been, months later, two separate relationships having worn off. The two men thinking only of one another, but without confession, without a realisation that their entire world began and ended with the two of them together. Because there had been Adam without Tobias, avoidant to explore his sexuality but in malformation for his love of someone who should have known this Adam, this different man. And because there had been

Tobias without Adam, barely changed at all, except there had not been this very feeling for a long time, a very, very long time. It did not need to be love, but mostly it did not need to be spoken love. They could avoid saying it forever, but if you went to carve either of their hearts in two, into quadrants, into tiny, ineffectual nothingness cubes of the human heart, there would still be the pieces of why Tobias found Adam to be important to him, and why Adam found Tobias to be important to him, too.

They at first only walked, then Tobias sped himself up to not be trampled by Adam, and they laughed to each other as they climbed the stairs and closed Adam's door behind them. It did not matter, but the sex was mind-blowing. To any other man, Tobias would have let slip an *I love you*, and to any other man it would have been the pure insatiable lust of an inverted post-nut clarity. It was kind of romantic. It was romantic. It would not have aired on their season of reality television.

Ophelia reconnected to the Bluetooth speaker and pressed play, again, on the middle of "Kill For Love" by Lady Gaga. Now, this time, she was not alone—Romeo waited for the music to funnel out of the speaker, filling the living room with sound, and not people. They made brief glances at one another, and Ophelia began to let herself come untangled, unspooled. Her movements fluid, she possessed a freedom of her spirit so noticeable it was infectious. Romeo flung himself into similar, but impossibly comparable dance movements, hair falling in front of his face. Ophelia yearned for the moonlight to overtake the schedule of the sun and bathe her, and for the fake plastic spiders to come to life, crawling over her flesh, underneath the black t-shirt, and perhaps one could lay its eggs underneath Jared's pillow.

But really, was she thinking about him at all? It is the stain of remembering what you want to forget that reminds you. It is only human to hurt. It **hurts** to be human.

It aches.

But we keep doing it. If not for love, if not for the game, if not for the people we care so deeply for, then at least for another Lady Gaga song.

Ophelia caught a vision of her brother losing his mind, dancing without restriction. If this was the last thing she ever saw, it was worth every single thing. Everything.