



# **Pregnant Seahorse & Other Stories**

**A Collection by Keeley Young**

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ACT I

# Childhood Houses

You are sitting on the front porch you thought burned down when you were nine.

It is an odd sensation, the way the wood scratches against the back of your shorts, and the way you still expect to smell smoke, despite everything. The only thing you smell is more of a feeling, really. All around is the familiar waft of being at ease, of reliability, and probably weedkiller, but the scent is so strangely comfortable. You're not a poison-huffer, but maybe other people would think so, because you came here.

Home.

Except it isn't real. Visuals online of the address show another house now. When your childhood home went up in smoke, so to speak, a company came in and bulldozed the place and slapped together a new place. The curves and the square cuts are all the same, and you combed over the real estate listing for twenty minutes or so when your brother forwarded it to you. It made your stomach turn, and without much else between the two of you, you started to assume your brother must not really have the connection to the old place that you did.

It was on this very porch step that you slapped a rock-hard bag of frozen peas on your knee and squealed out to your friend, one of the kids from down the street, that he really hurt you this time!

It was on this very porch step that you saw how the world could be yours, you just had to grow up first. Then the place was ash and rubble, and you were a nine-year-old shouting FOUL PLAY because you heard the term on the news, whenever the serious-looking people shared their spiel about the residents who could have lost their lives. Heroes or idiots.

Your father liked to reason the house could have been saved, but it had already become a *house* by the time you moved out of it, and none of the adults ever properly looked back.

It wasn't their problem.

You know you could spend hours of your life inside the house, refamiliarizing yourself with your memories. The house exists now in a strange medium—parts of it have been stripped out of your memory, and parts from old pictures still left in the depths of the internet, and even still, parts of this very house come from your parents. Your father thought you were a little silly, a little off-your-rocker, for wanting the memory of a place for Christmas. There's nothing wrong with the technology we've got, you would probably hear him say, if he stuck to the topic long enough. You think your dad likes to talk too much about what he finds interesting, and eventually he sighs, and starts to pick apart what you're going to do with that degree now that you have it.

Someone's left the packet of peas on the step, and they're defrosting. Whenever peas were on the menu, you tried not to think about how thin plastic was all that had separated vegetables and your bare skin, and your dried blood.

'The colour is wrong,' he says, picking up the cold package. 'Did you bring these in with you, to make it more authentic or something?'

Your brother is a few years older than you are, and initially didn't understand why you wanted to *go back*. It isn't time travel, you reminded him a couple times over the phone.

He takes a seat and glances out at the empty road. There should be an occasional car or two, but you wanted the quiet. You just pretend it is the middle of the night on, say, a Tuesday, but the sun is still out. It is convoluted but it doesn't break the immersion.

'The colour?'

'Of the house. It should be darker, the colour of it.' Your brother sighs.

'I'm sorry it isn't perfect,' you say, taking the peas from him. 'I thought it would help.'

After the fire, your family of four moved a few suburbs over into a smaller place than before. You were nine, trying to figure out how to become ten. Your parents fought. They were always spending money, not that you understood anything about money. You didn't get along with the neighbours much. Your parents fought. They divorced.

Your brother is getting married soon, although there isn't a set date yet. Wedding planning sounds intense and dramatic and sort of like a brawl to the death, except formal, and intimate, and blood is strictly prohibited. He has been with his partner for some time, at least ten years without an engagement ring. He is enveloped by the quiet of a street you never really saw again.

'This house was nice,' he says suddenly. You don't get it—nice? Nice is an empty word, a nothing word, something guests would say when they visited for the first time to be polite. He spent a lot of time in this place, formative years and such, and all he's got is nice...you think all the effort you put into remembering it for what it was is just an unruly waste of time.

You press the peas against your right knee and bite your lip.

'This house was everything to me.'

Even if the memories are hazy to you now. You remember those times your dad would blow up the inflatable pool and fill it up with the coldest water imaginable, and you would pretend you were sharks with hand-fins. Once upon a time, your parents were together—how insane is that?

Birthday parties were in the backyard; cricket was played on the road, and you would rush out of the way if you heard a car coming. There would always be a packet of peas in the freezer, even if you needed to climb up the black step stool to open it.

Your brother turns his head towards you, and you think, here he is, about to confess that all you are is sentimental about the past and you wish your life growing up had been completely different, because it would have been if you never experienced a single trauma all the way through it.

But he says: 'I think I get why you did this, and it wasn't just because you missed sitting on this step, as comfortable as it kind of is.'

You hired someone to make a rendering of this very house, stripped right out from the past. He is this tall, handsome-ish man in his 30s who took the information he needed from your brain, and your father's, and the pictures he found on the internet, and created the bare bones of the house you saw had burned down on the news. Your parents loved you so much they didn't have the guts to let you see the house in person, and why does it matter anyway? You don't have any spiritual connection to the charred remains of things... (a divorce is not the end)

You slam the bag of peas against your forehead, and it doesn't even matter if your brother glances over at you like you're a moron. The cool sensation is *right*.

# **Backpack Backpack**

I was nervous. I met them on the sidewalk outside of the nearest train station, and they were friendly enough. I didn't say much, so they didn't say much. Someone I had known in school had reached out one afternoon, asking if there was still the room in the back of my place, that a couple could stay in when they returned to the country. She hadn't said how long they would stay, or where they had come from. They came from out of the country, is all. They were people who squinted—first, to find me, idling on the corner wearing a white baseball cap and slobbered in sunscreen, then, second, as we wandered off down a path in the opposite direction to the central town.

'How long have you lived out this way?' He asked, the taller of the two. They both looked in their thirties, hadn't packed hats, and squirted cream out of the tube as they walked the first part of the trail. She carried the larger of the packs.

'A couple years now,' I replied, stepping over a jutting rock. The trail was a comfortable hike to my house, although I only frequented it for work, supplies, and the occasional appointment with the local doctor. A typical, clean bill of health, mostly.

It was the middle of summer and I had left the air-conditioning running while I met with them. There was nothing more I craved than escaping back inside, putting my feet up on an ottoman, and closing my eyes. We skirted past a small stream and Denis pointed out a brown bird perched in the trees. It was silent, mostly, not frenzied like other birds typically are. His partner, Kat, gave it a nod of recognition and kept moving forward. I sensed if he had a camera on him, Denis would have stooped or perched himself on a rock and lined up the perfect shot. Found the right composition, or at least frozen stiff for a minute or so, unfazed by a jib from Kat.

'Thank you for putting us up,' she said, as we eased down a sharp decline. The house was in what could have been considered a gully, although when I purchased it, the realtor had simply classified it as "a picturesque pocket of the region". I had no close neighbours, although sometimes I waved to Erin when she passed the place taking a walk in the woods. The ground evened out and Kat readjusted the straps on her backpack, smiling at me as I patiently waited for them both to catch up. Her hair was darker in the woods, somehow. Compromised by the shadows. I had said they were very welcome to stay with me—I rarely had overnight visitors. I wasn't in the habit of finding someone interested.

They spoke very little of their decade-long stay out of the country, except that it wasn't a vacation, at least not in simple terms. They had holidays here and there, exploring, enjoying the change of pace. Words that lingered made the experience sound incredible, but unpredictable, too. Denis paused to retie his shoelaces at one point, and he glanced up at me with a toothy grin and said, 'You'd



be surprised by how similar certain things are.’ He never said where it was they lived. Somewhere foreign, I assumed, but they never mentioned even the slightest clue. I could have journeyed somewhere myself with a mention of what they ate at mealtimes—I felt like a small child, clinging to cadences, waiting for Denis to slip up and say, *I’m sick of rice by now, I think*. When I spied the roof of my house, I posed a question to them both, a true cheeky schoolboy: ‘Is there anything you’ve been craving since you landed back here?’ He said, *everything you’ve got in the pantry would suit the both of us, I’d think*.

I fumbled around in my pocket for the key and quickly unlocked the door. They seemed antsy to get inside. Kat wiped sweat off her forehead and sighed the moment she felt the cool air-conditioning. I pointed them down the hall for the bathroom, the guest bedroom they would be sleeping in, and my own bedroom. ‘Wake me in the middle of the night if you have to, but don’t be startled if I’m rubbing my eyes with a startled panic, and if I’m sleeping in the nude.’ Denis and Kat laughed, heaving their backpacks off their shoulders. I immediately hid my attempt at a joke by offering them both glasses of ice-cold water. Sleeping naked is the sort of thing you feel completely at ease with when there’s no one around to notice you.

For half an hour, I heard very little from the two of them. I brewed myself a tea in the kitchen, staring out into the garden as a crow patrolled in a loose oval shape. There wasn’t too much to the garden, really. Some trees planted by the previous owners. A garden shed the size of the bathroom. A bird bath. I would go out in the morning and refill the bath if it had dried up, on mornings I remembered to check it. Denis knocked on the door frame and asked what else there was to drink. Wine, tea, water, I said, offering to pour him a glass or a mug of something. ‘No beer?’ He said, shrugging. ‘I stopped liking beer a few years ago, thank god, but I thought it would be funny if we cheersed over two beers to celebrate us being back home.’ He used the word like it truly had been a simple vacation, ten years long. *Home*. I’d hoped he didn’t mean to permanently move in.

In the freezer I fetched two ice cubes from a tray and slammed the door shut, albeit a fraction too flimsily. When I glanced back at Denis, a sort of apology, he laughed it off and held his hand out, accepting the glass. I poured red wine from the bottle I uncorked last night, apologised if he expected freshly-uncorked wine for this sort of celebration. My friend had said, in a series of messages, not to make miraculous their return. Treat them like new, brief tenants, please, she’d typed, before sending me a picture of the two. Denis had looked taller, then. Heat can shrink a person. Kat had worn sunglasses in the picture and she was how I realised the photo was likely from a decade ago. There was an unmistakable ease to her, which reminded me of looking at high school-age pictures of my sister.

With the glass of wine, Denis wandered around the living room, glancing at rectangular portraits of my family, an eleven-year-old dog I lost before moving out here, and myself, dressed in cap and gown, graduating from university. ‘I thought about studying, being trapped in school for longer,’

he said, holding the picture frame in his right hand. 'What did you study?' With the wine in his left, he took a swig, making it known his pleasure in the act. I would be remiss to not consider how attractive Denis was, despite the worn-down expression seemingly permanent from whatever occupation he held outside of the country, or perhaps, from simply the extended stay itself. He set the graduation photograph down and made for the armchair. 'I studied English Literature,' I replied, expecting him to wonder why I was no longer in some lecture hall, unpacking thematic overtures and what the author meant when they described a certain tableau, or the upturned inflection of a character's voice. Denis, from the armchair, nodded his head. *A big reader, then, you'll have to recommend me some new reads.*

I suggested I could get up and flick through my record collection, see if anything piqued his interest. It would have been a slip of the tongue, but I almost asked him if he'd listened to the same sort of music over the course of the last ten years. Maybe, with so little information, I was assuming he and Kat had been sheltered in African communities, dedicated to supporting the starving, the dehydrated, and the unhoused. I desperately wanted to crawl off the sofa, out of my skin, and worm into his ear canal and scream for something. Some inkling. Tell me where you have been, give an outpouring of overshared stories and overwhelm the finger of the turntable. I kept to my polite self and stood in the opposite corner of the room, thumbing through the limited collection I'd brought with me on the move out here. A handful of *The Supremes* records. Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*. Carole King's *Tapestry*. I wondered if he questioned each vinyl I showcased to him. I wondered what his favourite song was, and if somehow conjuring it for the record player would reinvigorate him even a smidgen.

Kat wandered into the living room while Denis danced, or at least made an attempt to. It was slowed-down arms and swaying hips, and the music and the red wine was loosening him up. *But you're so far away // doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore.* It was obvious by her frazzled appearance that she'd been napping, and I was grateful at least she felt some sort of comfort in the place. Or else she was the type of person to sleep anywhere, which had to be refreshing for these walls to see. Kat meandered towards Denis' almost empty wine glass and swigged down the remnants of it. 'My mother likes music like this...' she said, then, hesitating, 'This song reminds me of agreeing to leave Australia.'

As the album was swung from Side A to Side B, Denis and Kat sat side by side on the loveseat, barely looking at one another. I suppose I expected them to be all lovey-dovey with one another. I expected his arm draped around her shoulders. Her palm caressing his bare knee. A quick, passionate peck when I mentioned the beauty of a couple standing by one another over the course of such an extended period where everything is unfamiliar, unsettled, and, probably, with a language barrier he began only partly versed in, and she had been half-fluent in. In the strange silence, I found the courage to ask them: 'How far did you have to travel to return here?'

I should have said: *is there some reason you hadn't the money to afford a hotel room in the city?*

‘Far,’ Kat said, billowing out her exhaustion. I figured the nap only recharged her to a certain point, and her indifference to him beside her made sense. She was just too worn down to give him the sort of attention you assumed would come, out of the heat, on solid ground. ‘The flight felt double the length they told us initially, I couldn’t sleep much on it, everything was too loud. The engine sounded like someone’s heartbeat thumping right up against my ear.’ Beside her, Denis had quite the reserved reaction—it was wordless, almost soundless, and featured an adjustment of his grip on the arm of the sofa. He glanced over at me, and I wondered if for some reason he felt like part of what she’d said was about him. His eyebrows arched unnaturally high, and he gestured towards the wine glass, too. Nothing he said had any real relation to drinking alcohol, however.

‘Have you ever thought about visiting Norway?’

‘Did you live in Norway?’ I asked, hopeful.

‘Oh, no,’ Denis said, shaking his head. ‘I visited before I met Kat, when I was fifteen.’ He mouthed, sharply, but politely, I suppose: *can you refill my glass?* Then he grinned. ‘Norway is beautiful,’ he continued, as I rose from the armchair and fetched the bottle from the kitchen. ‘You make a valid point though, at least. I could have lived two decades in Norway if I were prompted to, but if you can believe it, we’d moved somewhere even more exotic than Norway.’

Kat whispered something I didn’t catch as I wandered back into the living room with the bottle. I began pouring into his glass, waiting for him to tell me when to stop. He mouthed, *we’ll share it*, half-heartedly, then told me to stop pouring before the glass overflowed. ‘Norway isn’t very exotic,’ Kat said, swiping the glass before her partner could even bend forward for it. ‘White people, almost completely, so I would stand out like a redhead in Japan.’ She swilled the wine, before raising it to her nostrils for a whiff. They didn’t act as if they had been unable to have even seen a droplet of wine in their sabbatical overseas, and yet, Kat seemed at least somewhat entranced by it.

I think she probably craved getting tipsy.

When the glass was almost emptied, Denis rose to his feet and asked for a reminder where the bathroom was. I told him again, it was the next door past the one to the guest bedroom, and he acted suddenly like he had made the most foolish error in forgetting something like that. ‘Oh, duh!’ he said, disappearing from the living room, humming *Beautiful* by Carole King to himself. A melody floated. I’d completely forgotten the uncomfortable heat outside. Half an hour or so earlier the mutual friend who had brokered this whole arrangement, Olivia, had texted me to ask if they were settling in well. I’d considered asking them if they could pose like it were a volatile, silly, hostage situation, faux-nervousness and rope-bound arms, as the sort of prank I hoped Olivia would immediately call me about.

That was the reason I scratched the idea out completely. Plus, it was disturbing to consider.

A few hours passed. Denis called out my name from the guest room, at one point, and I wandered towards the sound of his voice, carrying a plate of cheese and crackers. They weren't for my guests. Denis lay sprawled out on the bed, bespeckled with a pair of square reading glasses. There wasn't a book in sight. I assumed he'd been reading something on his phone, amidst scrolling through ordinary posts about adopting dogs, most likely. Denis noticed the plate and got distracted. He shook himself free of it, but his eyes continued to wander. 'Can I borrow a novel?'

I wanted desperately to decline him. I thought of the book tumbling into the heavy rucksack of his, the front cover bent achingly in the wrong direction. Raindrops finding each and every page. Or, otherwise, I would loan a novel I treasure and there would be not once a mention of it again. Completely thrown to the void. Missing in action. Instead, I ushered Denis back into the living room and became museum curator again, giving an enthusiasm-thrusting tour of my novel collection. Hesitantly, Denis made his selection and brushed his hand against mine. It was almost as if I expected him to grasp it. Without reason. It was all completely off a vibe and I felt so incredibly disgusted by myself.

'Thank you,' he said, turning away from me.

Denis lingered like a stalking grey crowned crane.

'I want so desperately to sleep in anyone else's bed but hers.'

He carried the book in his right hand and crept back into the guest bedroom.

Forlorn, miserable, draping like fabric pulled off curtain rods.

Denis and Kat didn't appear like a happy couple at dinner. Denis carved into the clumsy mattress of lasagna without asking questions about whether I had made anything by scratch (I had not) or whether I enjoyed cooking (I did) or whether I often had guests to cook for (no, of course not). Kat didn't seem very hungry at all. She would slice thin julienned portions of the lasagna like she was in a prestigious sort of restaurant, and her first question came when I offered her a piece of garlic bread. 'Have you thought about moving back to the city much?' I had mentioned earlier, on the walk, that most of my family lived three hours from here, nearer to the skyscrapers that had only made me nauseous.

'I was too depressed in my old life,' I replied, before tearing into the bread with my teeth. 'Not to say the depression has completely evaporated in the wilderness...I don't know, I don't miss being surrounded by human faces twenty-four seven. Bird faces they squawk, not speak.'

They gawked at me. I thought, here is the moment I quickly smoothen over the edges of mentioning mental health problems proudly with the full of my chest. Blame the wine, none of which

had been poured into my glass that evening. Denis wiped a puddle of deep crimson sauce with the bread. 'I know depression,' he murmured, shooting his partner a short glance.

Theirs was a game on a schedule—he would give her a curt smile, and she would select the strategy that suited. When I asked them both what they clung to, now, back in the country they grew up in...the thing they wanted to reach in and uncover again, like lounging out on a blue striped towel at a true-blue Australian beach, or visiting one of the theme parks, they both stared at me. Denis posed; Kat cocked her head. 'Neither of us has a car,' one of them said, but I cannot be sure which. It held the same tone a grieving person held when someone spoke out of turn at the funeral. *No, I'm in a state of shock, my husband is dead, why would you ask me something like that?* I wanted to ring out this tension like it were a saturated hand towel, over the bathroom sink. Suds burrowing underneath my fingernails. A glance at my reflection in the mirror, and I've got an amalgamation of their faces transmorphed over the flesh. His raised eyebrows. Her pursed lips. 'It wouldn't be something like a fifteen-minute drive to the beach, really.' Again. It was one of them.

I rinsed each plate in the sink, waiting for some polite chatter in the distance behind me from them. They seemed adverse to bothering one another, and I remember thinking, here is a reason to be grateful for your loneliness. There. There's the depression again, seeping in from underneath the floorboards. When I inevitably woke up too early in the morning, I could do the dishes while a million new thoughts drummed around in my head. Denis and Kat lounged in the living room, listening to a different record. I briefly erased them from their positions and saw the room as it should've been—vacant, mute, reminiscent of a cool breeze nowhere near a plummet off a cliff. Denis was reading tracklists from the flipside of vinyl casings, making quiet *hms* when he recognised a popular song hidden amongst other titles. Kat rested her feet on an ottoman and called out to me, her voice raised, despite the fact I stood a few feet away from her in the doorway.

'Jacob?' I stepped forward, summoned. 'How far can the trains take me from here?' She began a short bit of an explanation: she wanted to spend the next day trying to look for a place, and maybe something to do for work while she settled back into a different routine, as it were. She knew she didn't have much cash, in general, but as soon as she got back in contact with her family again, and some generous friends in the city, she would be back on her feet enough to afford a month or so of rent. Never in her meticulous outline did she mention what Denis would be doing. I think she would have settled for an apartment with a cramped single bed shoved against the wall. He factored not at all, and wordlessly, I stopped referring to them as a couple. Denis and Kat, but not Denis & Kat. I explained the train would eventually get her to the city, but she knew that, having come from the airport. Kat lifted her head and chuckled. *I hadn't been focusing properly then*, she had mused, glancing bleakly at Denis.

Once she had squirreled the important information out of me, Kat left the men in the living room. It wasn't long before I heard the abrupt stream of the shower, and Denis glanced at me as if to say, *she's calling it a night then*. I wasn't opposed to spending the rest of my night with him. There was a certain nervousness, though, because I had become so accustomed to being by myself, alone, talking to an invisible audience if I had to. An audience that had no reaction, no judgement reserved or not. I remember trying to piece together a conversation tactic from the mosaic of Denis' eyes, and the way he slightly adjusted his position on the sofa. His hands.

'Thank you for letting us stay,' he said, remorsefully.

I only half-understood the way he spoke, then. 'When I moved in, I assumed I was furnishing a room with no purpose. I could have turned it into a second study, or just made it a room for awful clutter and storage. But the previous owner left some furniture, like the bed frame, and...for whatever reason, I felt compelled to buy a new mattress for it.'

'It's a comfortable mattress,' he continued, arching his back forward to rest his arms on his thighs. 'Kat and I stopped speaking much to each other, what, almost two months ago. Seven weeks.' I'd thought there was slight chance he'd cry, but he wiped his eyes on his sleeve. 'We fought, we probably fought, steadily, for three weeks before that. It's exhausting as hell to grow, over time, so irreparably mad at the person you once loved. Kat wanted to go home. I wanted to convince myself I should stay. There wasn't much inviting me back here, to Australia.'

I was stumbling on how to approach it, how to say something that would suit the reaction he expected from me. Did he want to be comforted, or told he made the right decision? Did he hope I would find the validity in both of their actions, or just his? Instinctively, I thought about rising out of my seat, taking the few steps over to him, and nestling beside him in an attempt to be the warmth he might've also been longing for. I fidgeted in the armchair and asked him how he felt, having returned now, with Kat willing to assume the relationship was over—Denis glanced at me, relieved, I think, that I hadn't tried to assure him he could be the seamstress that patched together their disaster of avoidance.

'You have a lovely home,' he said, taking in his surroundings once again. In lamplight, Denis did look like a barn owl, almost rotating his head right around his entire body. His movements were still hesitant. Now his stare returned to me. 'I'm going to sleep on this couch tonight, I can sleep anywhere, please don't try to convince me otherwise, really.' There was something reassuring about his tone—it was probably the most welcoming Denis had been all day, and I simply nodded my head, scanning a mental image of the linen closet down the hall for everything I could offer him to make the night's sleep more comfortable. Somehow I figured Kat wouldn't even notice. Denis patted the empty space beside him. I went to bed an hour later.

I had barely kept a journal since moving away from everything, but underneath an eye of light I dug around in the bedside table for a brown-and-gold book I kept as nondescript as possible. I wrote, at first, about meeting them at the train station. Kat had swatted the heat away with her palm, as if it were a nosy horsefly. They were both dressed for a longer journey, and I immediately clocked how sweaty their arms and legs would be by the time we reached the house. Kat paused outside the train station, gesturing to a small building in distance. ‘Can I change someplace?’ she had asked, beginning to unzip her backpack. She withdrew a pair of shorter pants and waved them around like a mopey flag, all energy beaten out of it by the wind. I told her there was a toilet block a little further into town, and she scrunched her face up, wondering, I assume, how far *a little further* would be. Denis didn’t speak much. He nodded in agreement, adjusting his own backpack as we wandered down the old, fading road. While Kat changed in the public restroom, he leaned heavier on his left foot and said, ‘They give you nothing to eat. On the, uh, plane, I mean. We didn’t have money to spend on in-flight food or anything. We had to save the last of it for the train ride out into the middle of damn nowhere.’ Denis gave me the sort of look that said *I’m not trashing your community, man, but really, the only person willing to help us on the first day back in the country lives, say, \$40 away from the airport.*

Neither of them questioned how out of the way the house was to my face. If they were wondering whether I plotted to tie them to exposed piping and leave them for dead, or worse, torture them, they did not say a word about it. Of course, they barely spoke to one another at all. Kat poked around the garden with a charming sort of curiosity, when I opened the back door in the midst of a tour. She beckoned me over with a smile and pointed to a messy cluster of overgrown weeds. ‘When I was younger, I loved being in the yard, yanking out the gross plants my parents told me were the weeds.’ She bent down, in a squatting position. ‘May I?’ I nodded. Kat pulled sharply on the first of the weeds, dirt and dried mud sprinkling out of the ground. She coughed into her shoulder, laughing, softly. ‘Sorry, some dirt went into my mouth.’

The journal entry felt skewed. I was judgemental, cruel, mocking the collapse of their relationship as if it happened before my eyes, and not two months earlier. But then, I was blatant and distant, too, making little notes about the certain ways they had both treated me, like minute dissections of how I presented myself. How people felt, standing opposite me. How they wanted to react to my hospitality, to my curiosity, to the clean sheets in the spare bedroom and the opened wine bottle in the refrigerator. I thought about aggressively tearing the piece of paper out and starting from scratch, but that felt too performative, like I would be doing it purely for them. Expecting them to rise

out from where they've hunkered down and come following the rustle of paper, to catch the act. Look, there he is, trying to save our feelings while we mourn a ten-year relationship.

Morosely, I wondered if it had been dead for longer.

I switched off the light and stayed, stiff, in one uncomfortable position, staring at something in the corner of the room. It was a shadow, nothing more, but I imagined far more from it.

For the first night in a while, I was fully dressed in bed. There was no fear one of them would knock on the bedroom door and intrude, but I startled myself to think that night of all nights would be the time my peculiar body would choose to get up and stalk the halls while I wasn't conscious at all for it. At least I didn't sweat a drop. I had the duvet pulled to my throat, nestled underneath my chin, and I kept myself awake thinking about the sliding doors gearing open on a different Denis and Kat waiting at the train station. His head resting on her shoulder. Her grin unmistakable. They make cute, flirtatious remarks and swerve with each other as a car careens down the old, fading road. While Kat changes in the public toilet block, Denis barely takes his eyes off the blue-and-clay building and says, 'We should go to the beach together, the three of us. Pack a picnic, maybe. Caw out like seagulls.'

Maybe I found an hour or so of solace in sleep, but I gently and as quietly as possible opened the bedroom door then and tip-toed down the hall towards the kitchen. I wanted a glass of water, and I would get it in the bleeding darkness, fumbling around for the cabinet first, then the tap at the sink. Behind me came a hushed, groggy voice. 'Jacob?' I squinted into the darkness leading into the living room and saw the outline of Denis' shape as he approached me. He was slow, restrained, but eager, too. He wore the white shirt he had carried with him into the bathroom, and a pair of checkered black-and-white underwear. 'Don't rush straight back to bed.'

I lingered unnaturally in the kitchen, sipping from the glass of water. Denis was outlined by moonlight. He suggested to flick a light on, but I shook my head, then whispered low enough for only him to hear, *no, it should be fine*. A light would slam me awake and I couldn't imagine myself simply drifting back asleep beyond that. I downed the last mouthful of water, setting the glass down on the counter, and with a sort of sense memory about things I traced my usual steps from the counter to the loveseat. I'd accidentally kicked Denis' foot, but he made little noise, fumbling in the darkness for my hand. It was considerate, more than anything. In the darkness, he found confessional. A pair of ears that weren't hers. Denis wasted no time.

'There are only so many attempts at an apology you can make before you start to feel the apology is cold, dead on arrival,' he said. 'I think we are both so drained of one another.'



Denis drew an illustration of the two of them once, and the two of them now. He accentuated her visible scorn, he mimicked the sort of mime he had become, not a rather enjoyable one, but a successful one. The mime you would see on the sidewalk of a bustling street, gathering stray tips. Grinning from ear to ear behind a shroud, a door, and then, withstanding without any elation or joy, too. He'd lost Kat. And in a foreign place, too. If he were a father, he would be a spanked one.

'That's how I saw myself. Wasting away in a relationship, but thriving everywhere else.'

He paused.

'I agreed it was time we came home, but the process of packing up what little we could bring back, and getting everything in order, and...doing all of this without speaking a word to Kat, it knocked the wind out of me.' He sought out my eyes. 'A stranger asks little of the questions that are resoundingly rude and impolite...that's my way of saying I am gracious to you, Jacob.' I couldn't figure out why he worded things in such a way, unless he hoped to avoid yet another thank you. It was nice, to hear words not completely butchered. To not hear gruff amalgamations of words, or text-speak. Maybe he was trying to charm me, having seen the growing library, but it hardly mattered. I was already charmed, strangely by them both. That might have come from their distance, their subtlety. For a few hours in the day the house had felt like itself a library, and I had been in complete peace.

I had almost said, you're welcome here for as long as you need, but I hesitated. Muddled it over, realising it could be like offering him a roommate application without realising it. I valued so much my loneliness, my solitude, and I couldn't understand the sedation that was coming over me to simply avoid more torn suffering for Denis. Instead, I said: 'I'm glad I could help out.' I felt the cold rising inside me, remembering a memory from when I was younger, when I'd helped sort through the old belongings of a dead aunt, and her sister glanced to me and said, *thank you for all of this, you might not understand just how much of a grace this has been for us*. She half-gestured to her husband, and her son, who was eleven years older than I was. I had frozen, although not physically, as the corners of my lips twitched, and my fingers felt around in the air as if looking for something to grapple onto. I should have said: 'I'm glad I could help out'. Instead, I didn't speak, and I understand now it was because I didn't realise anything I had done throughout the day had been all that worthy of celebration, of thanking. I'd sorted through oversized cardboard boxes, opened the drawers of antique chestnut dressers, and distracted myself, at one point, making stupid conversation with my adult cousin in the bathroom. He'd asked me if I'd ever kissed someone, and started on a too-much-information story about sticking his tongue down a girl's throat when he was fourteen. I'd thought, *I did what I was told, then took a break*. Maybe I was surprised to be receiving any sort of gratitude from a woman who typically paid me very little attention and relegated me often to being *one of the kids* at the family reunions. I was thirteen, but she had almost noiselessly been a cruel aunt to me since I had known her.

Denis set a hand upon my shoulder. 'Kat and I will get out of the way soon enough, out of your way, and out of each other's.' He shook his head, and I couldn't recognise the expression on his face as he turned away from me. In the darkness of that living room, Denis was drifting away, but he'd constructed his raft out of boomerangs. He was Australian born and raised, after all. 'You'll have this proper escape from the trash of everything to yourself again, because you don't need our trash.'

If I knew how best to comfort him...

I reassured Denis he was not putting me out, as best I could without sounding too artificial. I thought of the quiet mornings where the only thing thrusting me out of bed was the need to use the toilet. This caused me to freeze up, tense, stare off into the distance of the darkened room as if each pocket of pure black stretched on and on. A confusing rush into a tunnel system. I bet they both wondered what I did for work, to afford to live in an all-natural bubble. I had been taking a few weeks of leave at that point, completely unrelated to Denis and Kat's arrival, but typically I worked short shifts in town, in the post office. They paid well. I also wrote romance novels under a pseudonym and sold them online.

'What are you going to do with yourself now?'

Denis glanced at me, our faces inching closer by the minute. He was clearly conflicted, but the moonlight pulled tricks on me. Sometimes I was certain he cried a few tears; other times I couldn't tell the difference between a droplet of water and a freckle. 'I'll probably spend a few months living with my brother, at least,' he said, leaning into the backrest of the loveseat. 'Comb through real estate listings for something of my own, hopeless, listless.' At this he smirked, and I squinted to be sure. 'Eventually I'll find a small place, an apartment or a unit, which I'll share with a grumpy son of a bitch who complains I don't vacuum the place correctly. Then I will be on my feet. Some feet.'

He was painting a picture, but of course the arts and crafts supplies store was out of all the bright, luminescent colours. I saw him there in the sparsely-decorated living room of a two-bedroom apartment, forcing the elephant-trunk vacuum underneath the sofa. He's berated a little. He thinks about the last time Kat squealed out his name, told him to navigate it further in, until he slammed up against the wall and skirting. I feel queasy, thinking about how accurate of a life it will be. Back in this country, Denis had not much of anything leftover—no house, no job, and no Kat.

Yet I barely knew him.

It was the equivalent of overhearing someone's ordinary-day woes in line at the supermarket. The most I felt qualified to offer is the roof over Denis' head, for now, until we both felt like strangers encroaching on one another, or otherwise became too familiar. One morning he would walk in on me in the shower and I would feel embarrassed until he booked another train ticket. One morning I would

realise it wasn't so horrible having more company in a person's life. I could be sitting in the kitchen enjoying having a roommate all of the sudden.

Denis and I spoke for a while, although I would catch myself beginning to blink too often, desperate to stay lucid, focused. I fidgeted in my spot, then spoke, 'I'm going to see if I can get more sleep.' I could hear the mattress from down the hall, soft pillows making whimpering noises.

'You don't have to sleep out here on the couch, though,' I said.

I had a strange dream I was on the street I grew up in, or at least the street where I made memories for eight years of my childhood. Think suburban, but comfortable, the sort of area that boasted about the walking distance to a few local schools that had reputable reputations within the state. We lived in a two-storey place, and when I was nine I went through a *phase* of being terrible at walking up that staircase. It was boxy, with thin steps, and I would be in an overactive rush to get upstairs and slam my bedroom door. I'd taste carpet, here and there. The dream positioned me outside, in the middle of the bitumen road. I was calm, at first, casting my view out on a clementine sunset turning blossoms of the sky a piglet pink. Very aesthetically pleasing dream. Brief, though. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something writhing around in the short-bladed grass of a neighbour's lawn. A python contorted its mouth around the body of a tabby cat. It was almost humorous—this overwhelming shape taking up space in the jaw of a snake, one that felt so largely out of place in this part of Australia. Snakes, of course, are such a common norm of the country, but this was not a humble brown snake come slithering from the bushes, where it could hide. This was not a python that could hide in the suburbs.

When I woke up, more concerned than anything, Denis' head was on the other pillow in the bed. He still wore the white shirt, the underwear. We had climbed into bed, said goodnight to each other, and he'd passed out in what felt like ninety seconds. I stared at the ceiling, contemplating my feelings. Part of me felt like a trashy imitation of trope—here I was inviting a man into bed with me, what was I thinking? Another part of me felt foolish for not attempting anything with him first.

Denis woke when I was idling by the closet, trying to decide on what to wear. He lifted his head, smiling. There wasn't much hair on his head to give him bedhead, but he nevertheless had that look to him—someone who slept well, I suppose. Denis said good morning, asked me how I slept. I gave him the sort of lie you tell any old soul that asks: *I slept well. I feel slightly rejuvenated.* I started picturing how Kat would respond if by some chance she confronted this tableau. Her former partner waking up in the bed of the complete stranger that had welcomed them into his home. She would assume, I'm certain, that something indulgently sexual happened, and that Denis had been coaxed into

it. I couldn't be thrown out of my own home, but the sensation of it would course through me. The throes of an establishing shot like this. All I'd wanted was for him to sleep properly.

Denis sat up, leaning against the headboard of the bed. 'The first thing I wanted to do when I woke up was lean over and kiss you,' he said, before rubbing his eyes. 'But then I realised you weren't Kat.'

Once upon a time I had been attempting to grow tomatoes, but I was only half successful. Orbs sprouted off thin green vines, but never burgeoned to full shape. I started to think I'd bought the wrong seed packet, which seemed at the time very much something I would have done without noticing. The remnants of tomato vines dwindle in the patch, mostly overlooked, except for that morning. Kat poked around near them, somewhat intrigued by my failure. She lifted her head, squinting over at me. 'I always think I'll be a better gardener than I am,' she said, using a spade to create uneven divots in the earth. 'For ten years I took care of only myself and a house plant. And Denis, I guess.'

*You weren't Kat.* Denis had sharply backpedalled on that. He explained he wasn't attempting to resolve the bitter feelings between the two—he didn't want her back in his bed, he didn't want to caress her left arm as he moved in to snuggle close, he didn't want her. I was still shivering. The *other person* still felt like a faraway trope I could never apply to myself, but Denis had soured a moment by mentioning Kat. In the shower I'd tried to wash off the scent of sleeping in the same bed as him. He had shifted, inching towards me without clambering out of the bed. 'If I'd just kissed you without thinking, you might've slapped me across the face and ditched me at the train station.'

I gave in, briefly, to the what-ifs.

Kat was leaving for the city in an hour or so. She'd shower and change after briefly giddyng her inner plant child, and I wasn't sure where Denis had disappeared to. When I returned to my bedroom after taking a shower, the sheets were half-thrown, a low effort attempt to make the bed. He wasn't lingering in the living room, reading the book he'd borrowed the afternoon before. An hour later he came wandering in trying to pull threads of spider web off his clothing, a wide-eyed, stunned expression on his face. He was completely in on the joke; how overblown he was. How minor a comment it had been. How we could overlook anything. Everything. He barrelled down the hallway for the shower, shouting out, 'I feel so, so sticky!' Denis left the pile of his clothes on the floor.

'I wanted to do some exploring,' he explained, now freshly-dressed. 'I wandered around town for a while, putting myself into those shoes of yours.' He pointed down at my bare feet. Out of instinct I followed his finger down, and it was like for the briefest moment my feet were something to gawk at. It was like waiting for an audience of belly laughs, and I remembered how little anyone has seen that

benign, normal part of my body. Feet. Having company in the house again seemed to have been knocking me around, a breeze siphoned through the ears, and I realised I'd stopped giving a shit about something Denis had said half-consciously that morning as soon as he walked back into the house. Him drawing threads of air with two pinched fingers, shaking out his hair, a Best in Show poodle. 'Sometimes you can't see the damn web until you've walked right into it, and you're thinking, okay so there's a spider somewhere on my body, probably? Maybe I left a spider in your shower, Jacob. Sorry.'

Kat was off in the city. Denis was curled up in the living room, reading. I shoved a handful of their clothes into the washing machine and wrote on a thin yellow sticky note that I needed to buy more laundry detergent from the general store. It felt quaint that way, calling it a general store. This life of mine, it was out of the way. I was no obstruction.

Tranquillity, for a while.

I collapsed back down on the bed and started browsing for books, reading through the wish list I had saved, reminding myself of what I would read sometime in the future. When I spent the money. Denis should have poked his head into the room, asked me if I wanted to do something with him to pass the time. Anything, really. I don't know why I expected to receive any sort of response from Kat, on her adventuring in the city. Something like, *can you believe it? I got the job*, which felt entirely too rushed. Too kinetic. Even, *the train is stopped for a while in this tunnel. Track issues? I'm going to be late*. But I was getting too in my head about these things. Expecting too much. If Denis and Kat had avoided talking to each other for so long, they could avoid me, too. We had exchanged phone numbers in case of emergencies. That was all. Was I expecting either of them to add me on Instagram? I no longer kept the account very updated. There weren't interesting echoes of my life that needed posting, unless you counted the two strangers in the house. I paused, then. Saw a future version of myself posting a conspicuous image of the both of them from behind, something I would have snapped when they weren't paying me any attention, but not paying each other attention either. Two wanderers. Then, you hollow out yourself for a caption. Something to brighten up the place. Don't you want to explain your circumstances? They didn't. Not in broad strokes, not in daylight.

Caption it: *we're not the only ones lurking in the woods*.

Tree emoji.

Kat would lean over my shoulder the moment I hit post, appearing out of nowhere. Say something disparaging about the use of emojis nowadays, how there's a certain sort of etiquette about them. There would be a four-string of them in the bio on her profile. Her sister would be directing her on how to rebrand everything. Delete the handsome photographs of Denis. His arms draped around her shoulders. Captions like *I love you forever baby*. I love you until seven weeks of silent treatment, baby.

I wanted to rebrand myself with new book purchases and months-long sabbaticals...somewhere. Before they had arrived, it would have been here. I was so certain Denis was not complicating things.

The refrigerator probably needed restocking, but there was enough for now. A slice of cheese. Torn—accidental—cuts of ham from the store's compact deli counter. A slather of mayonnaise from an oversized tub. Toasted on both sides. Denis must have smelled something. A hand reached out from behind me, two fingers on the bench as if it were walking. 'I think we can share, yes?' He said, smirking. I was clutching a knife in my left hand, about to slice into the sandwich anyway. It was becoming more difficult to deny him. This was mere food. A sandwich I could make a few times over, at least, before I ran out of ingredients. We locked eyes. I ran through a series of different responses: no, it's mine; I'll just make you another; okay, fine, because you asked nicely; anything for you, babe. Denis was only asking you for half of a sandwich. I turned away from him, slicing cleanly on the diagonal. Was I making him drool over it? Was there a dragged-out tension, or was barely a moment passing between the question being asked and answered? We were salivating.

Sitting outside, shaded underneath the small porch roof, Denis and I shared a sandwich. He very rarely mentioned his ex-partner, as we drifted from topic to topic. I asked him if he remembers a movie I had watched so frequently when I was little, on a VCR tape my grandmother had. One of many in a chocolate-brown wicker basket in the living room. It told the story of Thumbelina, in an awful animation style children were so easy to overlook. Bright colours spilled across the screen. Sometimes I'd remember a scene or two, let them replay in my head. I would start to think the entire film was brain-created, a dream moulded into a memory, because no amount of searching online for it ever truly connected the dots. Denis hadn't seen it—he wasn't familiar much with Thumbelina, either. He just laughed, as I stumbled through an explanation of this inches-high girl and her wild adventures in a world so astronomically larger than she was. Maybe, like so much else, it was a fault of memory. Of perception. Denis bit into the crust of his half of the sandwich.

'Can I ask you something?' I said, setting down my half of the sandwich.

Denis glanced over at me with curious eyes. 'Of course you can.'

'What first attracted you to Kat?' I think my question caught him entirely off-guard. There had been a few alternates: the obvious (where had you lived?); the insincere (why did you choose to stay here with me?); and the desperate (did you actually want to kiss me?). The weight of her name seemed to distract him, although he caught himself in the middle of it, and smiled.

'We got along, that's all it was at first.' He paused. 'Of course I knew she was beautiful, and the attraction physically was there. I was younger, hornier, and I could picture myself in bed with her,

you know, in the dirtier sense. But...I could picture myself not tiring of the time we'd spend together. Obviously that's a moot point now, but we spent a lot of time together, the two of us. People have disagreements, people realise they cannot score a place in a perfect world, unless they completely construct it inside of their head and ruin their relationships in the process.' Denis leaned forward, as if willing to tell a secret. 'We just stopped desiring to put the effort in. We tired of each other.'

Denis ate the rest of his triangle of sandwich quietly, but there was no pretence of discomfort or regret for what he'd said. It was a rather peaceful day. I thought about what it would have been like to live in a cramped apartment with either of them for ten years.

I thought about one night in particular, really. I thought about myself caught in a fierce argument with them, Denis first, then Kat. One of us always louder, more overblown and overdrawn than the other. There was picturing, and conclusions being made, and I had to colour in between what I knew of the two of them, and what I didn't. What I might never know, for they were on the whole complete strangers to me. Two people I hadn't known existed until the day before. That is how you must see new acquaintances. Truly. Their existence becomes fruit on the vine once you meet them, once they're standing on the train station platform, hiding their glances underneath an arched hand. Denis and Kat. Would I ever become louder than either of them, or the both of them? I saw myself idling in an apartment kitchen, hovering by the stovetop. A pot of water boiling, a torn packet of fettucine sitting on the cabinet top. Maybe we begin arguing about something so insignificant—*you're waiting too long, put the pasta in*—maybe we dart in, dart out, skirting around some wholly larger issue, like one of us hiding something from the other. I could keep a secret from him, from her. We could keep beautiful secrets from one another. I could experience that. Losing a person for pretending to be the ordinary me they had first met, no, that part was not uncommon to me. Losing a person like Denis, like Kat, maybe that would be the sort of experience to compel me to flee the country I had lived in for time, and time over. Would I give them a parting kiss goodbye? Maybe I would adopt muteness, too.

Denis and I were in the bedroom, in separate worlds. He was reading a book, one I have never read. I don't know that world, but I could make broad assumptions about it. If only I could remember the blurb beyond the general key words. A story told from the perspective of a man. Our world. As opposed, I supposed, to a fantasy realm where the author could make up the allegories of everything they experienced in this world. Disguise your damp, soggy split, the end of a relationship—it was the fall of a kingdom, then, at the bruised knuckles of a waring king and queen.

Denis and Kat weren't anyone's king and queen. I hardly knew them.

I was letting my mind meander too often.

There was something strangely comforting about lying in bed with Denis, without expecting anything from him. I'd stopped thinking about how easily he'd toyed with me, how sharply he'd

confessed in bullet points, in broad strokes, about his relationship with Kat. I could have fallen asleep, or I wanted to, but the curtains were drawn wide open and I'd never fall asleep surrounded by that light. Denis was light, I'd thought, catching myself in the way I would've been back in high school. I remember having feelings for someone that was never going to love me. Cameron was light. One Wednesday afternoon I watched him halfway down the path outside the Art Building. He was flirting obliviously with a girl, but in my head I saw them kissing. So publicly. I saw Denis kiss me that morning, then shake himself, like a wet dog. It was the sort of reveal at the end of an episode of *Scooby Doo*...jinkies, I thought, listening for his voice, it's you. My landlord. Oh how foolish.

In bed, Denis stuffed a bookmark in his place and turned to me. I must have had an extreme expression on my face, for he looked a little puzzled. I wanted to stab my own eyes out for having any feelings at all for him, but it wasn't as if I wanted to love him, or be with him, or stay with him. Maybe all I wanted was to kiss him. Denis started to talk, again.

'What do you do with the time in your life that you consider you've wasted?'

I didn't think he meant his relationship with Kat. I thought he meant tiny, inconsequential moments, like staring for hours out at nothing. Like scrolling on your phone trying to cling to a resemblance of joy you found at first in a video about an American tourist visiting a copybara onsen in Japan. 'I forget about them,' I said, truthfully, thinking on things. What I remember the most is my embarrassment. And then the true joy—moving here, reading excellent literature, graduating with the degree, proceeding to not overwork myself with it. *Not* meeting him. What I remember the least is how long it has sometimes taken me to shower or roll out of bed. The day a month before when I barely dressed, barely wandered around the house, and masturbated probably a little too passionately. I would not confess that to him, unless I found being laughed at sexy. 'I don't think every moment in a life is going to achieve something, at least not on a grand scale.'

Denis agreed. 'Say you've worked for a company for five years, and you realise you had only been getting paid. True, getting paid isn't nothing, but it isn't getting promoted, it isn't making lifelong friendships with coworkers, it isn't someday being the one who makes every important decision.'

I still didn't think he meant his relationship with Kat.

'Do you regret being in love?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'This isn't about Kat.'

'What about experience, then? What about something to put on the resume?'

'I'm not talking about my actual work, either.'

'What, do you regret telling yourself you're straight?' I wanted to poke my tongue out, but I hoped the tone spoke it enough. Waiting for his response, I started to worry he thought I was purely judging him.



'I'm not straight, Jacob,' Denis said, closing his eyes for a moment.

'I don't know what you're talking about then.'

'Sometimes I consider life the wasted moments, and the flashes that flicker right past my eyes my actual life. I loved what I did for ten years, although I never talk about it. I used to love Kat so much I would wake in the middle of the night thinking the horrendous things I did to her in my dreams were the reality. I'd waited for the day she stopped forgiving me, and then for seven weeks that was our truth, and I couldn't forgive her anymore either. I am home, I'm in Australia again, fuck, and all I want to do is snatch away the life you've somehow made for yourself and forgive myself afterwards for it.'

How could I ever have said to him, *you can stay with me?*

I stared at Denis as if he had both confessed to wanting to murder me and said he was doing fine all at once. I thought of Kat somewhere in the city, maybe waiting in line at a *Starbucks* for a coffee and a biscuit. I wondered if anyone stopped to stare at her, as if the allure of having spent so long outside of the country was a physical alteration to her form. Or a scent. Like she smelled of a faraway place. I blinked at Denis. 'Where did you go?' I said. 'Where did you live?'

'Would you believe me if I told you we were trying to colonise Mars?'

'Was Elon Musk there?'

'Has he been MIA too?'

There was silence between us for a moment. I wanted to ask Denis what he meant about snatching my life. I had a strange urge to ask him what compelled him to work in a post office, or rarely have the genuine sorts of conversations that we'd been having since he opened up to me the night before. I wanted to slap a palm across his mouth, too, and tell him to stop talking all this nonsense, nonsense I completely believed, and just hold me in his arms properly like I could only dream about. I realised looking at Denis made me understand my sexuality some more.

'Did they serve you astronaut food on the rocket ship?'

Denis just laughed. 'I told you, we were starving. They didn't give us anything.'

'I can't imagine Kat living comfortably so long on the surface of another planet.'

'She was having good sex for most of the decade,' he said, grinning.

'Fuck off, Denis.'

'Hey.' He said, moving his arm. 'Come here.'

I inched forward awkwardly on the bed. Our faces were closer. I could smell him; I loved smelling him. I hated that I loved his scent. It felt so animal, it made me feel like I was desperate and too horny and too obsessed with him. Denis leaned in and kissed me. I kissed him back, and I never thought of Kat once, the entire time his tongue was inside my mouth. It grosses me out, thinking of her now.

He had a hand firmly on my ass. We stopped kissing, and he whispered to me, ‘Fuck off, Jacob.’ We both laughed, but I wondered if he actually meant that, in a roundabout way. I think the most he hoped for was a rebound, a light-hearted fling that ended with him leaping off a cliff and closing a book and every other clichéd marker. There was Kat, then there was blank. Which would have been nothing, a flash in his life if anything. Maybe I was there giving him a depressing impression that I would ask for his phone number or let him snatch my life away but stick around to haunt the place like a clingy ghost that couldn’t get the message. I was losing interest in wanting sex with him.

Denis pulled me on top of him and snaked a hand underneath my shirt. I pictured Kat standing on the train platform in the city, carrying overloaded shopping bags. I don’t know where she found the money. I guess I assumed they’d been lying to me about being effectively broke. Denis only wanted to place a palm where he understood my heart to be, and he uttered, without breaking eye contact from me, ‘Pledge to come live on the moon with me.’ I knew he was joking. Could I imagine a serious thing from him, a serious comment of something like this? I would spend every moment of the journey imagining how poor of a substitute I was, how ungodly my body would look rotting on the surface of the moon, in a crater perfectly hollowed out by time. Men would be on the moon. My last thoughts would be of how easily, how simply, I could have said *I don’t accept strangers into my home, Olivia, and when was the last time you invited me out for brunch? How even are you?*

Denis’ hand lingered on my skin. I wondered if he could feel the thump of my heart, if he could somehow translate it. If only he could hear the noise.

‘You need to wake up, Denis.’ I imagined him in a dream cocoon and I was attempting to stir him back to a world where he was still in outer space with Kat. Oh how we love to bully ourselves for fun.

He laughed, slowly retreating his hand. ‘Pledge you’ll worship me, then.’ I assumed he was still joking. I wanted to laugh the loudest I had ever laughed before. Maybe if I laughed hard enough, chaotically enough, I would tip backwards and crack my head on a sharpened edge, the frame of the bed, and he could snatch up my life with all the ease of the world. *Pledge I worship him*. Almost like saying I love you, to some people. It felt impossible to love him. Or it felt simple.

I jailbroke my mind and saw myself kneeling in front of him. There was something wrong, of course there was. I almost contemplated drawing on a pair of breasts. I realised I didn’t need to think about Kat so much when I looked at him. I almost reached for my phone to send her a text message. *I hope you’re finding a new place to live*. I wanted to be alone so desperately.

‘I’m just joking around,’ he said.

I leant down and kissed him. ‘I know.’

‘We should kiss in front of her, when she returns from the city.’

‘I don’t think she’d care,’ I said.

‘About two years ago, I stripped naked in front of her one afternoon, completely out of the blue. I stood there, not expecting anything. I said to her, this is how I would look if someone wanted to draw me. I told her I had a vivid fantasy of being asked to pose for an art class, and I would be quietly admired in pencilled form. In the shades and the shadows. I pretended to pose for her. She smiled at me, told me I was a silly lunatic, that I could have told the story clothed. Clothed.’ Denis paused, pulling me into another kiss. ‘I want you to ignore the stupid things I can do.’

He didn’t really want me to pledge anything. ‘Stop kissing me,’ he whispered, laughing at himself. I thought I was having a stroke.

Denis wasn’t aggressive. He didn’t physically move me. But I eased off his stomach and collapsed down beside him, staring up at the ceiling. I thought I heard a distant creaking sound, like the door opening and closing, and I didn’t even mind that. It could have been a burglar come to shoot bullets all over my body and maybe some part of me was ready and willing for that. It’s strange how you can be both content and on the verge of a mental breakdown all at once. Being alone in a place like nowhere could be like that. Sometimes the thing I wanted most was someone to disturb me so I could be both thankful and disrespected. A range of emotions, instead of the small handful that typically just felt comfortable. I liked being happy, but I was familiar too much with being uncertain. Denis made me feel uncertain.

That night, after dinner, Kat brought out something she’d bought in the city. It wasn’t much. She had caught her sister on a lunch break from work, and somehow the two things mingled. Purchase and sister. Something bought and something returned. Kat held the thing in her hand like it meant a whole lot more than she spoke of it. Which is to say she treated it like she had paid the electricity bill. Kat had bought a four pack of donuts. Glazed, perfectly round Krispy Kreme donuts. Denis made actual eye contact with her, smiled at her, but I think he was truthfully replacing her head with that of one of the donuts. He licked his lips.

Taking a bite of one of those donuts was better than I imagined orgasming because of Denis was like. Maybe that was a cruel thing to suggest, maybe I was half-tempted to ask Kat what it had been like. Being in love with him and orgasming from him. That was assuming he had made her orgasm in the however-long they had been together, or the however-long they had been in love. I realised, then, that I had no idea how long the relationship was. Time and time spent, all to end in seven weeks of silent treatment. If Denis had stripped naked in front of her then, or now, how would Kat react? Flick him the bird, maybe. Or simply turn and walk away.

The three of us squished together on the loveseat, a couch meant for two. Two to fall in love, I imagined that was how they used to advertise these. Lean into each other and embarrass everyone else, foolhardily make-out with one another. Eventually, shut up around each other. Denis was licking his fingers now. 'Thank you, Kat,' he said, and I wondered whether it was a thank you greater than simply for donuts. I doubted it. People like Denis, like Kat, they weren't sentimental the way I was.

Kat smiled at him, at me.

I almost said, *get a room, you two*. Bad humour. Fucked-up humour.

Instead, I squeezed out from between them and said, 'I think we should play a game.'

Denis eyed me as if he expected me to retreat to another room and bring out *Scrabble*.

'I stay here, count to one hundred, and the both of you find a good therapist.'

They both laughed at me, but I wore the steely expression of someone completely serious.

Then, a smile crept onto my face. A laugh escaped out of my lips. The three of us I am sure could all use some sort of therapy, but instead we found comfort in that moment. Of them thinking I had an honest request, of me thinking their stay in the guest bedroom wasn't the last time Denis and Kat would talk to each other. In my dreams I considered the pair of them sitting at an inner-city café in seven more weeks, unpacking their moody grievances. Kat would say, *I hate your silly pledges, I thought you deserved some medicine, a taste of your own*. He would laugh, make an expression that showed he knew she was right. Denis would say, *I loved you until I didn't, but I hope you find it in you to forgive me, eventually*. She would nod, and no one around them, in the quaint café, would be staring, or poking the obvious holes in their farce. Kat would say, *forgive me too, would you?* Neither of them would mention me. Jacob would be irrelevant to them. I'd be a few days in a pile of notes.

I heard the water run in the bathroom. Denis was showering, and he wandered out afterwards in just the towel. That felt like it was out of a movie, but only because no one ever showered in the house, let alone walked around afterwards. He held the towel with his left hand, lingering in the bedroom doorway. 'Do you want me to leave?'

'No, I'm just starting a movie.' I wanted to ask if he would join. I didn't.

'I meant the house.'

I was probably pathetic, the speed with which I immediately shook my head.

'You aren't an intrusion, Denis, not really.' *So what if I felt uncertain about how you wanted to kiss me but started rejecting it too*. He walked further into the room, leaning over to see what I was watching.

'I haven't seen it,' he said. I'd pressed play five seconds earlier on *Evil Dead Rise*. Sometimes the internet could be spotty, and watching a movie could mean a lot of buffering halfway into the thing. I was familiar with it, used to it. Denis was looking at me. 'Give me a second to change and we watch it together?' I wanted to kiss him, which was stupid. Stupid, dumb, and made me eager to tie a noose

round my neck. I waited there patiently in bed, a film stuck on pause. We were about to crowd in front of an iPad and watch a horror movie together, and I still couldn't understand him. Denis was the worst puzzle because he *was* a puzzle and I thought moving out here into my isolation meant I was abandoning the half-finished puzzles I'd been finding the pieces for. All it took was one piece to go missing, to get eaten by the dog, to grow legs and wander off underneath something, or find a comfortable spot in another room. Denis was too charming.

Denis wouldn't give me a decade.

Maybe I only needed a couple of days.

Kat wanted to go stay with her sister, so she left on the train the next morning. It was definite the only reason she returned was to collect her things, and maybe there was the slightest chance she wanted to say goodbye to him. She could've thanked me via text message. The donuts felt genuine, because Kat was still genuine. I just didn't know her much at all. I never would. Fifteen or so minutes after we watched her board the train, she sent me a message. For some reason I still thought it was sent to the wrong person, despite how she addressed me by name, and thanked me for offering a roof for her tired head. And her tired limbs. Her tired heart. She hadn't mentioned the latter, not in those words, but subtext is subtext, really. Kat said she expected to be bored out of her mind, and stuck sharing a bed with a partner that stopped being hers. *I'm grateful you kept him distracted.*

On the trail back towards the house, Denis stopped me, holding onto my waist with both of his hands. Now would be the time for him to tell me everything was over, I thought. *Pledge to me you will never talk about this again or try to message me asking if I was worth a damn to you.* He could be like every other man. Surely. I was nervous about kissing him. He could be like other men and abuse me for it, and if I fell in the woods and screamed my lungs dry, no one would hear me. Life, it is for the snatching.

Denis looked at me with curious eyes. 'Pledge to me something.'

I waited for something absurd. Something uncomfortable, startling.

I didn't expect: 'Pledge to me you'll be a little overeager and text me often.'

He hadn't said he was going yet. I nodded my head like a fool, because agreeing to any of his stupid pledges felt like I was making a mistake. I expected him to sling me over his shoulder, carry me back to the house, and instead of throwing me into bed, he'd find the closest thing to the Bible and make me swear on it. A dictionary? A dictionary.

'Come and visit sometimes,' I said, without thinking.

'I like kissing those lips.'

'I'm not some whore.'

‘I also like your company, Jacob.’ He paused, taking in the green that draped around the two of us. ‘You helped, too,’ he said, returning his focus back to me. ‘I think I would have just kept hating myself and hating Kat. Now I don’t hate her.’

*But I still hate myself.* I could relate to that, as much as I loved myself too.

‘You should make another sandwich,’ he said. ‘For us to share, you know.’

When Denis left, it felt strangely overdue. He’d been in contact with his brother for a while, and they had found somewhere closer to the city to live together. A unit fifteen minutes from a train station. He said he would buy a car anyway, but he didn’t mind the train. Denis knew riding the train could lead him someplace he found comfort in—or I think I assumed he knew that. His brain still confused me. Some nights we would cuddle up to one another, but I could have just been confusing the human need to search out for warmth. Confusing it for something else. Sometimes we kissed. Sometimes he slept in the guest bedroom, and he’d give me the sort of look that suggested we needed to keep our distance from one another. He was smart, he’d gone to university, by the sounds he’d found a stable sort of career living on damn Mars of all places. Smart enough to know spending a lot of his paycheck on public transport, or fuel, any of that, it would have been the worst thing he could do. Not cry, no, if he wanted to cry he would have cried. I cried. I was walking down the path towards home and I sobbed. I thought high school was the last time I would really, truly, cry over the dumbest of things. Remember Cameron, remember how I had cried over Cameron for thinking you could have the things you wanted, and still let the natural way of things course its path through life.

I remember texting Olivia and saying, *I think I might turn that guest bedroom into something else. Do I need a proper library?* Sometimes I would check in with her. I have never wanted to visit her, though. I think that’s cruel of me, but I’m a loner. It’s the natural way of things. She sent a couple of the laughing emojis, the ones that feature what reminds me of wads of spit coming out the sides. Crazy laughter. I did, I do, all my crazy laughter by myself, sitting in front of the television.

I sent Denis a message one day, or one night, I suppose. It was 9:32pm.

‘Why’d we never have sex, then? Does your dick not work?’

He replied twenty minutes later.

‘I want to marry a boy that’s saving himself until the wedding night.’ He knew I wasn’t a virgin, though. I wanted to punch him in the shoulder, then kiss him. ‘I’m just kidding.’ I just assumed he would never give me a serious answer. Maybe he would give me the silent treatment for seven weeks.

Three dots.

‘The last thing I wanted was to think I’d scored you as some prize for not being intimate with Kat for almost an entire year.’ I waited for that to be everything. ‘You know, I think she’s happy now.’

**Kirin x James**



Kirin sat in a schoolroom desk like he could still hear the murmured voices of teenage girls around him. Whispering, making vague and not-so-vague assumptions about things heard in passing. Rumours. He remembered thinking, *if only they knew it was about me*. They hadn't paid him much attention then. Five years after graduation and the classroom didn't quite feel like his own anymore. Posters from that era were off the walls, replaced when one teacher took over the space from another. Even the placement of the desks seemed to have shifted, although he could still get a sense of where James would have sat. Off there in the distance, unable to give Kirin a smile unless he contorted his head around and disrupted the gaze of five different girls. They always liked him. The likely sort of boy to have dated whoever caught his fancy, and so therefore the likely sort to be considered gossip newsworthy. His presence and his voice could carry across the room like a perfectly-designed paper airplane.

'They said you might be in here,' he said, from the opened doorway. Tall, with a haircut not too dissimilar to five years prior, James would almost fool someone into thinking he'd been a star athlete. Except he'd been lousy at sport. He was always one of the only straight men to do theatre, slotted into the spot at the front of the stage to perform as Danny, Pippin, Fiyero. *Straight* didn't feel like the right descriptor, though.

Kirin shifted in his seat, unsure about standing up or making James walk toward him. To him, the other man looked almost the same, except that he had clearly matured in age. He didn't fully understand why he expected to be stunned by some transformations in the class. Sure, there were a handful of young mothers and fathers, some sharp transitions in style, but everyone looked much the same in the face. It was a bit of a premature reunion, too. Five years did very little in the so-called real world. Kirin had only recently graduated from university.

James crossed the room and held out his left hand. 'It's been a while,' he said, and Kirin felt the handshake unusual, but he shook James' hand anyway. Skin to skin contact, again. They'd had sex during the summer break between their eleventh and twelfth year. It was never like they were unfamiliar with one another—their parents had gone to the same high school together, this very school, so the halls reeked of nostalgia and the bloodlines. Neither family had the money to afford to pay for a library rename, though. Kirin and James spent years going on camping trips together, sometimes the only two teenage boys in a sea of younger children. They'd had sex in the summer, during a camping trip.

Kirin dropped his arm to his side. 'Hi, James.' He didn't know what else to say at first. Tension like this had evaporated before the end of high school, so what he felt now must have surfaced because any thought of seeing James again had been only in passing. Kirin expected everything that followed was

supposed to be the workings of typical, uncomfortable small talk. ‘Have you been avoiding the camping trips too?’

James laughed, and it was plain on his face that they both probably had similar excuses. On the surface: something something I’m too busy with work or university or other plans with friends. Underneath, but peeking to the surface for some air when the lungs shrivelled up: I am too old to be babysitting little children and answering a million questions about my future. Kirin got tired of the fiftieth family friend asking him what sort of career he could get from a creative writing degree.

‘I have,’ he said, lowering himself into one of the other chairs in the row. It squeaked against the floor, and he made a sheepish expression at Kirin. ‘I’m tempted to go sometimes, to see if you’re there. But my parents let me know every time that Channy and John’s kid, you, you weren’t there.’ Kirin by now was turned in the chair, sitting in it sideways, his full attention to James. Here was a face he hadn’t thought he would be alone with this early into the day. He was grateful to see James again.

‘Did you ask about me enough times they’ve started to think it’s like life or death for you?’

‘I asked once,’ James said, shaking his head. ‘They always thought we were good friends from those camping trips. My parents, they used to ask why I didn’t invite you around more often on the weekends. Like we’d been successfully conned into being best buds.’

Kirin wished there was a glass of something on the desk, so he could take a drink from it, to complete this image of the two of them trading war stories about their parents. He sighed, instead, and saw the image of James’ parents on those camping trips. Always the first to offer to cook on the barbeque, no matter the meal. ‘We were good friends for a second,’ he said, before wondering if he’d just shot himself in the foot. When everything had died down after the rumours, and the brief few days they publicly hung out at school as if there was any chance the sex was more than nothing, Kirin and James had never recuperated to talk about it. They’d fucked. They were sixteen, braindead from wrangling children all day, and singing to them, and they found their comforts in being naked with one another under the covers. At twenty-two, casual sex was talked about with relatively little fluff. People just had sex and moved on.

‘Oh,’ James said, pausing. ‘Right, true.’ He didn’t look uncomfortable, but there was an uncertainty to his reaction. Kirin didn’t completely understand it, though—if James was seeking him out, purposefully, what other reason did he have for it? Their friendship had never been completely shattered. They could message here and there—Kirin liked sending him reels on Instagram, and not just to share with his parents that he was keeping the relationship alive. It had been a few years since they really saw each other in person. ‘I’m sorry if all of that was really uncomfortable for you.’ James adjusted in his chair. ‘I still don’t even know how anyone knew anything.’

Kirin remembers the first time he heard someone mention something. They said James had a fling with someone over the break, and someone else found Luna in the bathroom with streaked mascara, wailing about how he'd stopped texting her back. She flicked her phone up for the small handful of witnesses and one of them gasped at the onslaught of bubbles. Luna had spammed him, and spammed him hard. Texts like *talk to me, please, James* and *I don't get why we stopped trying to make everything work between us*. Texts like *we're young, we can fix this*. Luna started grilling other girls for information. It was how she got an even worse reputation, although at the time she thought that impossible. People didn't like her, and Kirin felt sympathetic. She'd never really look in his direction for anything. Not for comfort, although he thought of that strange pairing. The two of them in an old-school diner, for some reason, sharing a scarlet-red basket of fries and chinking their milkshakes together. Solemnly. Luna wouldn't have thought he was the one who had lost his virginity to James Monk.

Kirin shook his head, laughing to himself at the memory of it. 'Yeah, I don't know.' It was the sort of thing girls leaked for status, because someone like James was running in the more popular circles back then, but Kirin never craved the attention. He liked being a secret, not for the fear of privacy invaded, but because his time with James hadn't been scrutinised. 'Did it screw you over? Because people suddenly thought you were queer...' Kirin hesitated on the last word. Sexuality wasn't necessarily something the two of them had spoken about much. Nestled against one another in the bed of the caravan, as two confused sixteen-year-olds, they'd not asked what it meant to fool around like that. Kirin saw himself as an experiment and when it never happened again, he recognised the failure. Not that he blamed himself.

James took in the classroom and took a moment or two before he responded.

'Girls like Luna, they just assumed it meant I was gay, then, and it helped them explain why I'd stopped giving them the attention they thought they deserved from me. By then, it's not like I wanted my relationship with Luna to be patched over and back to the way it was before the school holidays, but yeah, I think people changed how they saw me because of one thing, and because I didn't announce it after it happened. They felt deserving of that, for some reason.'

*Yeah*, Kirin thought, *they expected you to have me on your arm*. There had always been that assumption with virginity back then. That it was saved for someone special, or at least someone specific, and you'd report back on it so that other people could get giddy-crazy over it and ask you when you planned on seeing them again, your virginity-plucker. Kirin and James were never a possibility until they were, and other students were progressive, welcoming of it, they'd never thought James could boldly be the face of homosexuality during high school. Plenty of those sixteen-year-olds didn't really

get bisexuality, or thought it was a stepping stone before you came out finally. Kirin could see something in James. That he'd been able to think and process things over the years.

'It's not your one high school regret, right?' Kirin knew he was setting himself up a little.

'No.'

'I can handle the truth, James.'

'I have never lied to you once.'

Kirin thought he was sitting in rehearsal for a teenage drama, running lines with James, and yet inside of himself he saw the truth to the remark. James had never said anything to be taken at face value. Neither of them had squeaked out an *I love you* during the sex for some semblance of justification. When they graduated, James said, 'Keep in touch, hey?' and they had done just that, although without seeing one another so often. Kirin had said something boring. Something so obviously a show of their friendship, beginning when they were children, out of half-force from their families. Imagine him saying anything else, though. Imagine him jokingly saying, 'Don't call me when you're horny and alone and need a round ass and someone that genuinely wants to be around you.'

In that classroom, Kirin felt wrong picturing his sixteen-year-old self in bed with sixteen-year-old James. But it was the most intimate snapshot of the two of them. They'd taken a selfie together afterwards, naked except for the thin silver sheet, and he'd realised through the rumours the picture was responsible for them. Someone had seen it, somehow, and held the trump card to leverage their position in the social structure. It was the sort of dumb mistake sixteen-year-old Kirin would have made. Accidentally sending it to someone.

'I regret some sex now more than I regret what we did, which was teenage sex.' James said.

'Are you on Grindr, James?'

James laughed it off, but he seemed slightly taken aback.

'I opened it one day and felt exploited to hell,' he said, dipping his head.

Kirin juggled laughing and cringing all at once. The app had haunted him for a string of years and he was grateful now to have the self-restraint to avoid even looking. For a few months, Kirin had been dating someone he met on a different dating app, but things had fallen apart when they stopped having conversations that didn't end in arguments. After the mourning period, Kirin saw no real reason to re-download any of the dating apps. He wanted a break from finding love. He absolutely didn't expect anything to come from reminiscing with James. 'I'm sorry if I implied anything by that,' he said, although he was already feeling too overly apologetic.

'It's fine,' James responded. 'I never really *went public* with my bisexuality.'

He spoke about the first person he told, with the confidence of accepting the label. For a few years, he dated Kirby, who he knew from school too. They'd reconnected when he returned to

studying after a gap year, part of which he'd spent travelling around Australia on the money he'd saved from working throughout high school. In a bar, James and Kirby ordered drinks and avoided the awkwardness of once having something in between them—his best friend, her boyfriend, Max. They'd taken things so slowly he thought he was going to be outrun by a snail. Kirby was certain more than kisses would come, and he was a patient man. They dated for three years. He came out as bisexual sometime in the middle, and he struggled now to remember what triggered everything, whether it was some conversation with Kirin on a random Wednesday night, or something that maybe reignited thinking about that one time out on bush property when they kissed each other, and Kirin sucked on his nipple, and Kirin was patient and steady with him. Kirby, she was accepting of him. Made a few jokes about how the men she dates seem to inevitably come out as some form of queer. Max is a pansexual, did you know, James said to Kirin in the classroom.

Kirin remembers fantasising about Max, but who didn't. He was so, so beautiful. European-features, hair he dyed frequently, although there was always the quality that it was box-dyed and it made him more alluring, more rock-and-roll. Nothing would have ever happened between them, despite the revelation that all the fascinating people in the grade came to terms with their sexuality over time. Max's queerness was always obvious, though. He began dating Kirin's friend around the same time Kirin was trying to outrun the rumours that he was trying to turn the popular, handsome boy into a flaming homosexual. Kirin would see Hamish in the halls and go to whisper, *you're lucky you managed to avoid most of the scrutiny.*

Kirin saw himself about to respond with 'Bisexual, huh,' like an old-fashioned ad-campaign filling in the viewer on all the details of the brand-new sexuality to hit the market. He liked the idea of sitting in the moment with it, as though his interception in James' life hadn't disgusted him.

'What do you think would've happened if no one found out?'

It was dangerous to deny rumours their power.

James cleared his throat, looking off toward the door to the classroom. 'I think it would have just been normal. Not adult, because adults have their own drama too.' He shifted in his seat, glancing over at Kirin. For a split second, they wore the uniform again, or at least they saw one another in that old costume, styled completely different. 'I would've seen you at the next camping trip.'

'You would've blown it off.' Kirin said, a smile widening. 'Don't pick now to start lying to me.'

James shook his head. 'We wouldn't have talked about it.'

'I miss those camping trips.'

'I was hoping you did.' James said, pausing. 'I came looking for you to convince you to come to the next one, even if it's like a one last hurrah thing.'

‘Who knew I’d be here?’

‘It’ll surprise you, but I asked Kirbs first.’ He explained his ex-girlfriend met him outside the school gates with a silver tin box, but it wasn’t for him. Their relationship since the break-up was amicable, friendly. They saw each other sometimes for dinner, saw concerts together when bands they’d fallen in love with together came to play at venues in the city, and they’d texted each other that morning to say *meet me out front before we go in?* The girls that like to gossip, girls like Luna, they would think these two would stumble back into each other’s arms at something like a school reunion and pretend very little time had passed at all. School reunions, only half-planned ones, that took place on location at the very school, this was the sort of nostalgic dream of second chances. Kirby had slid open the lid of the silver box and lifted out a polaroid camera.

‘My partner wants to know what you look like, right this very moment,’ she joked, snapping a picture of him against the bright morning sun. ‘I’m teasing.’ Kirby told him she was happily in love, in case the occasional picture on Instagram wasn’t enough of an indication.

‘I hadn’t come to this arts festival, whatever it is, to be reminded of everything I fumbled,’ he said, leaning towards Kirin. Not an awfully romantic lean, but a comfortable one. ‘She liked you, you know. You two only talked in the classes you shared, but Kirby thought you were a great friend to her.’

‘I used to see her on campus in the city. I would smile at her like I was just her neighbour, passing through. One day I found her sitting on the staircase in L Block, drinking a coffee, and I froze on the landing in the middle of the stairwell, and we talked. Properly talked. But at the same time she was asking me about my coursework and whether I was exhausted out of my mind and now I think it would have been more productive if I asked how you were in bed, so we could compare notes.’

James leaned over and punched him playfully in the shoulder. ‘Oi!’

‘You know we sung together once and I’d never understood her more than in that moment?’

‘I remember that.’ James said, smiling at air. ‘It was at someone’s birthday party, for karaoke. Someone just handed the two of you a microphone each and you had puzzled looks on your faces, like, what’s this pairing? You’ve got a beautiful voice, Kirin.’

Kirin blushed, and now he really did feel like a teenager again.

‘I’m alright.’

‘Come on another camping trip, sing with me to a bunch of children, and let’s stop limiting the catching up to those goofy reels you send me.’ James scooted in his chair and took Kirin’s hands in his. ‘I’m not propositioning you, but if I have to go back to my ex-girlfriend and tell you I was unsuccessful, she might take a polaroid of me doing something really embarrassing. Like shitting on the toilet.’

Kirin had the mental image in his head in seconds. It was kind of hilarious.

**H**is parents had splurged recently on a brand-new, custom-fitted caravan, one that only slept two. The kids had outgrown camping, that much was obvious to the Hendries'. Kirin had contemplated an albeit embarrassing trip to the camping store for a tent, his own burner, the other various essentials so he could camp under the stars, but completely isolated from his family and their overbearing friends. He saw himself there on a campsite smack-bang in the centre of everything, stumbling out of the shoddily-constructed tent one morning without realising he was in just his underwear. Typical nervousness stuff. Instead, his parents, who were beaming at the idea of him tagging along again, offered up a *swag* for inside the zipped-closed awning. It was almost like sleeping in a burrito.

It was the first morning there, after a late-afternoon arrival the day before. Kirin helped direct his father's reversing, standing on the right side of the vehicle as he backed into the campsite with the caravan attached. Kirin and his mother shot each other concerned looks on occasion, but afterwards John dismounted from the driver's seat of the four-wheel-drive and huffed his approval of his own parking. The sun dwindled in the sky for half an hour afterwards. Kirin hadn't seen James—but that was all expected. His family had arrived earlier in the morning, then sharply set up the awning of their caravan before driving off for some excursion James' mother organised based all around the weather reports. In a text, he sent: *she thinks it's going to pour down tomorrow, but won't tell any of the other families. My mum's psychotic.*

Kirin wandered off to the holiday park's toilet block, his black thongs slapping against the concrete, then the tiled floor inside. When he was younger, they'd camp in the middle of nowhere, in fabric tents on bare squares of land up from riverbanks and streams. The less the children wanted to come, the more the adults decided on places that had real amenities, and were nearby to local pubs and taverns and fresh seafood for the purchase. This sort of lifestyle suited Kirin. He was less likely to get mauled by some wild animal. In the holiday park's toilet block, he washed the overnight sweat off his body, listening to the soft voice of a little kid in one of the nearby stalls. Talkative, but polite. Kirin felt like that was the sort of child he had been. Passive, too.

When he exited the brown-brick building, there was James, again.

'Stop stalking me,' Kirin said, feeling short, again.

James lifted, awkwardly, the bag of toiletries, the change of clothes, and the towel in his arms. They were both too congested to shake hands again, or envelope each other into a hug, which is more along the lines of what Kirin wanted. James laughed. 'I'll come find you after?'

Kirin waited in what was listed as an arcade room on the handout map his parents were given on arrival. In one corner, two arcade machines glowed neon light, but sat unused. They costed \$2 a turn. In another corner was a series of uncomfortable bean bags in various colours of a muted rainbow, splayed out in a very tight circle. Kirin felt lousy about the idea of climbing down into one of those and waiting for James to arrive and witness him there. He thought he'd look like he was thirteen again, and he only faintly remembered the Kirin at thirteen who would've definitely been an embarrassment to James.

The arcade room was an overstated play space—it was predominately empty, but there was a purple couch against one of the walls furthest from the sliding glass doors. Kirin got comfortable, where he could. He tried to imagine a time where this room was jam-packed with children, maybe a decade or more ago. Even at thirteen he didn't frequent these half-hearted attempts at providing space for kids to mingle indoors, off the jumping pillows and out of the pool. Even at nine.

James slid open the glass door, pretending to be surprised to come across Kirin alone in the corner. They exchanged a few quick remarks about the absurdity of being back for another one of these camping trips, although the location was only a vague memory, and they both missed true camping. When you were worried a snake would come slithering in through the crevice you accidentally left open in the “door” of the tent. Kirin at least had the *swag*.

‘How was the shower?’

‘It was fine, perv,’ James said, sliding down beside Kirin on the sofa. It was a three-seater, although it would've comfortably have sat five children with their knees pressed right against one another's. Kirin and James sat comfortably apart. It was peaceful, seeing each other like this again.

James began on a story about the afternoon prior—a lengthy excursion that saw the car almost bogged on the beach once, with James sat in the backseat with the wind gusting in his face from the opened window. His parents had found this beautiful little spot. His younger sister stopped staring at her phone to admire the beautiful, crystal-clear water. James had dug his feet into the sand and thought about the very next day, of seeing Kirin again. Beside him on the couch, Kirin tensed up. It was like trying to admit two truths at once, two contradictory truths—he'd spent the entire week with the jumping feeling of things returning to how they were when life had less care, and yet he had to condition himself, too. He was oh so used to watching things perish.

‘I'm just glad you agreed to come, is all,’ James said. ‘These trips could be so forced sometimes, if you get me. My parents and their friends expected a certain version of who I am, and there was no way of just lying in bed texting Max how badly I wanted out.’ He looked contemplative, at once looking in Kirin's eyes, and then staring off into the distance. Which, in the arcade room, and from his position, was out the window nearest to the couch. ‘I should've invited him, Max.’



Kirin pictured Max sitting between the two of them in that moment. It would've made everything more obvious and surer.

'Do you remember one Easter time, we were at Kenilworth...there was an insane line-up of events and activities on, you couldn't leave your spot without running into a kid painted like a bunny rabbit. I think we were both eleven then.' Kirin went walking down memory lane as he spoke, attention drifting away from James. 'You looked smitten that whole week, with the girl you'd met while you were fishing at the little creek with your cousin.' She was shorter than him, but maybe older than him, too. A name like Amy or Emma or something, Kirin couldn't remember by now. He hadn't been thinking about anything like that at eleven. Everything was a distraction to that—escaping family-mandated activities at glorified Easter camp, schoolwork tucked in his backpack, a rocky relationship with one of his school friends, although at the time he wouldn't have called it *rocky*, just that they weren't friends right in that moment. Kirin can't remember the first time he really noticed boys. Thought about them romantically, then years later sexually. Now it was all so romantic-bound he was scared of seeing himself at fifty with deep regrets of quitting these camping trips to work instead.

'Ellie, yeah, I remember her,' James said. 'I wasn't smitten with her, I was eleven.'

'You love girls!! Jamie, you've sort of always just liked their attention.'

There was a look, a moment between them, like *you haven't called me Jamie in a while*. It passed, as all looks do, but Kirin felt that continued string. Two truths can be true at once.

'Back then, at that age, there were a lot more kids our age at the places we'd camp at. You remember when the thing kids did was go into a corner, turn our backs to everyone, and pretend to be passionately making-out with someone?' James chuckled, sinking into the sofa. 'She dared one of the boys to do that, one day when we were taking a break from trying to break our ankles on the jumping pillow thing. Jackson, he faced away from this small group of boys, and Ellie, and pretended to tongue himself. He made it into the biggest, dumbest joke, while also seeming to really be enjoying himself...'

'I don't know why kids find romance like that hilarious,' Kirin began, cocking his head. 'And then I realise any really passionate kissing is sort of hilarious, the intense locking of lips, shoving your tongue down someone's throat...it's an easy, obvious joke to make. Kids aren't trying to reinvent comedy with how they impress each other, they just want it to be campy. But it would've been a different story if they'd crowded around Ellie and asked her to do it for their amusement.'

They sat in that moment, unsure how exactly they had turned a normal moment into a drearier one. Kirin studied the green backdrop out the window, like nature's curtain. He was starting to realise he'd accepted this invitation as if he were two people, sixteen-year-old Kirin seeking James' approval and twenty-two-year-old Kirin, convinced James hadn't truly wanted these camping trips to be reconvened again.

But he was getting too much in his own way, he knew that.

‘I never see you playing your guitar anymore,’ Kirin said, beaming over at him. Throughout high school, James had been learning guitar outside of his studies. He didn’t write songs much, always laughed off the ability to write lyrics that seemed impressive to him, but he strummed a cord beautifully. That was the number one compliment from the mothers and aunts that heard him play, for these camping trips were auditions and rehearsals and opening nights for him. One summer, James brought out a pair of foldable stools from a cabinet inside the caravan and gave Kirin the sort of look that implied he had no real choice in the matter, he had to sing along. James had learned how to play *You’ll Be in My Heart* from Tarzan, and Kirin held a printed-out copy of the lyrics in his hand. He surprised himself by remembering the chorus perfectly from when he was a child, loving that movie, loving a shirtless man swinging himself through the lush jungle to the harmonious tunes of Phil Collins. That was the summer. Maybe something in the lyrics, in the melody, lodged itself between the stifling heat and the willingness to experiment.

James sighed, and it was obvious the question had been asked before, at length.

‘The last time I played for you, your voice drove me insane.’

‘Maybe I should’ve sung more often in all those failed relationships,’ Kirin replied.

‘It wouldn’t have hurt.’

‘I’m sick of having regrets,’ Kirin said mournfully, although he wasn’t convincingly down. As if he was trying to keep the mood light, as if he was trying to be playful, but thoughtful, too. Come to think of it, it was something he sought out in his writing, too, although he hadn’t written a word since seeing James back in that classroom again. ‘Not that I regret anything with you, Jamie.’

It was never more obvious to either of them how alone in the silly little arcade room they were.

‘Remind me what happened after we performed together that day,’ James said, caressing Kirin’s cheek. ‘I think I’ve forgotten.’

After the performance, after the young children cheered and knew absolutely nothing of sexual tension, Kirin and James retreated to James’ caravan, a boxy affair that slept four on beds that upended out each end. From the small refrigerator, James found them a bottle of water each. Sweat stuck to their clothes. Kirin didn’t understand why they kissed, but he found himself soon enough forgoing thought. *Why* didn’t matter. *What next* did.

In the empty arcade room, Kirin snaked his body onto James’ lap. This first kiss was like the very first kiss—passionate, confusing, and this was strange, but inexperienced. They were discovering what it was like to be intimate with one another again. James hadn’t had sex in months. Kirin couldn’t remember the last time. James slid his tongue down Kirin’s throat. In retrospect, this could be considered one of the horniest of acts performed in that room. At least, during daylight.

James weaved his hand underneath Kirin's shirt, feeling bare skin on his fingertips. They broke from their kiss briefly, and he whispered out, 'Did I do this? Is this how we continued?' It was almost sheepish, but nothing was ever shy with James. There was something sexual in his tone, something repressed but clear and on the surface now. The bright, flamed wings of the phoenix. He found Kirin's right-side nipple and held his palm there, a move that seemed deeply personal. It helped that the heart lay beneath the skin somewhere nearby.

Kirin's arms had remained loosely draped by his side, but now he snaked his left up and found hold on the back of James' head. There wasn't much hair for him to weave his fingers between. They broke once more from the kiss, panting, never severing the intense eye-contact. 'I don't tell you enough nowadays, do I?' Kirin said, breathing it heavy into James' face. Within moments, he was climbing down off the taller man, collapsing into the couch. It was the sort of workout he reserved for the specific few, and he glanced back at the boy he'd lost his virginity to at sixteen with a glint in his eye. 'Fuck, I didn't want to give you a boner today, Jamie.'

James stared back at him with a stumped expression on his face. They were both likely grateful there had been no audience, or no potential surprise of one. There had been something exhilarating about being sixteen and frightened at the possibility of being discovered and shamed for soiling the caravan's bed with their lust. Kirin straightened himself out and sighed, deeply, heavily.

'A while back, I don't remember when, I realised I was asexual,' he said, and it was the sort of thing he'd only really spoken aloud a handful of times. Declaring himself gay had been different—it was still something he used as a proud and loud moniker, to establish himself away from the straight people, as uniquely queer. Over time, he'd become even more unique. The sex with James hadn't been terrible, hadn't been exhausting and that sort of mind-breaking. It was the penetration that left him feeling nothing. Every time he imagined, or dreamt, about being back in James' arms, it was just that. Being held by him. Loved by him. The sexual stuff became an afterthought the older he got.

'I didn't want to give you false hope if it came to it, even though I'd spent the entire time between agreeing to come on this trip until sitting on this couch thinking that there was no singular bone in your body that would want to see me sexually, again.' Kirin saw the quick-flash image of his head buried into James' shoulder. That all he wanted in this moment was comfort. All he'd ever wanted from James was simple, pure comfort. 'Kissing you again was incredible, fuck.'

He thought about crying, let it out baby, let go of everything. He thought of James, tall James, unsure and unable to alter the dynamic that now hung in the air between them.

James squeezed Kirin's shoulder and inched toward him on the purple sofa. They exchanged a different sort of look entirely, something new for the arcade room. Kirin's composure changed. He explained the first time he felt comfortable with the label. That he was someone who didn't need sex

for his romance, that he always felt flushed and grey about performing the sexual acts other gay guys that expressed any interest in him expected were normal for a relationship. For a first time, at age sixteen, Kirin and James' tussle in the sheets was probably far more respectful than he could've imagined. Men since have inappropriately touched him when he has told them no. Men have misunderstood his passion and his hard-as-a-rock cock and ignored his boundaries. His last boyfriend once reached into his pants one morning and stroked his morning wood without asking if it were okay. Kirin had frozen, panicked, and out of fear, had said nothing.

Now, his throat felt viscous with insecurity. James pulled Kirin into a tight hug. 'I think I have to blame myself a little, for you thinking we were only temporary friends because we never hung out alone after everything died down between us.' Kirin bit the side of his mouth.

'You were a teenager and if I wanted to say anything to you before now, I could've.' He paused, his head half-buried into James' shoulder. He spoke out through a gap between his head and James' torso. 'I'm here, hey,' Kirin said, tracing a finger in what he hoped was strangely-soothing shapes on James' back.

Fifteen minutes later, Kirin and James were sitting on the carpeted floor with their backs against the purple couch. They were both calm, now, and smiling at one another. One of Kirin's legs was crossed over one of James'. They laughed about what someone would think if they wandered into the arcade room, although it seemed more likely a tsunami would come and wipe out the holiday park from its woeful existence. At least they would not come upon two twenty-two-year-olds undressed and in the midst of an extreme display of public affection.

'So, since I'm not fucking you again, what else should we get up to?'

Kirin stared at him without an ounce of judgement.

'I want to go swimming with you, in the ocean,' he said, running a hand through James' short hair. 'Did you really want to have sex again, after all this time?' He assumed maybe some part of the taller boy's brain pictured the sex would be more experienced, more intense, more magical. Not two teenagers thinking it was the height of romance to canoodle like that. He assumed James could only think with his penis sometimes, and the flirtatious rhythm of their conversations had never truly receded since the twelfth grade.

'My mum used to say, you can love multiple people at once, because you love your parents first, and your love for them won't expire as you grow. Something like that, you know, the concept of to cherish and to hold but expanded and expanded,' he said, leaning towards Kirin. 'I will always love you, Kirin, because I lost my virginity to you. You probably always thought it was with one of the girls, but, I don't know, that was just always hand stuff.'

James kissed Kirin on the cheek.

‘You lying bastard!’

James told the story of his relationship with Luna. A series of empty, disaster dates, and they were interrupted every time they got into the mood for sex for some reason or another. Luna was worried someone would hear them. Her father would scold her for months for losing her virginity in the house. She was worried he would stop showing an interest in her the moment she slept with him. His reassuring could only last for so long before he no longer wanted to carry the worry of disappointing her over summer vacation. They spoke that day inside one of the classrooms at their old high school, and James apologised for any time he disrespected her. Luna said he was just the right amount of chivalrous.

James told the story of when he told Kirby he had lost his virginity at sixteen, and that it was anal sex in a caravan. She hadn’t been concerned; she hadn’t turned away from him. Kirby held his hand and told him the horror story of her first time with Max, how she’d moaned out *Maxim* instead of Max because it felt both biblical and badass and filthy. She was sixteen, too. Everything was on the Goldilocks scale of problems—Maxim either moved too quickly, or too slowly, and she felt too inexperienced to be his guide and pay attention to herself too. Afterwards, when they walked hesitantly into the living room, Kirby remembers having to hide her embarrassment from the entire family, who invited her to jump into the pool with them. Max’s shirtless father splashed water at her feet and she felt inappropriate, wildly so. But that was being a teenager that had wanted sex and had had it, no waiting for marriage, no waiting until they were old enough to walk into a sex shop and pick up cute matching sex toys.

Kirin laughed. ‘I want to live vicariously through you. Can I help you pick out a fleshlight?’

‘What makes you think I don’t already have one?’ James said, winking.

Kirin pretended to be shocked, before chuckling softly to himself.

‘Do you need another?’ He posed, comically tilting his head.

In the middle of the night, Kirin and James squeezed into the *swag* together, their bodies pressed up against one another. They had spent most of the day talking, or eating half of a watermelon, or swimming in the ocean. ‘You weren’t kidding, there’s no room in this thing,’ James said, struggling to find somewhere to rest his palms that wasn’t cupping Kirin’s ass. It was romantic, and yet it also reminded Kirin of going on school camps with his friends, not that they ever slept this closely to one another.

‘Neither of us is getting any sleep tonight,’ Kirin replied, accidentally whacking James in the ear with his elbow. ‘Sorry!’ He was attempting to shift in his position, with one arm already losing a little feeling. ‘When my parents wake up in the morning, they’re going to harass you.’

‘Good,’ James said, although Kirin couldn’t really see his face to tell if he was smiling.

‘I love you too, Jamie,’ Kirin said.

‘My handsome asexual.’ James leaned forward and kissed Kirin on the chin. It was too dark.

**an intermission: stories about the Garvey orphans.**

## **Death in the Family**

*trigger warning: depictions and discussions of various forms of abuse.*

Eddie

There used to be dolphins leaping from out of a picture frame on the backside of the toilet door. But when she left, it was the first thing we tossed. Or the second, I suppose. The true first, the true primary thing that went the way of the garbage can, was her stuffy, overflowing purse. Maggie had fished out her wallet, and with a little shriek as her hand brushed against a used tissue, she spun on her heels and raced to wash her hands, the wallet never leaving her sight. She claimed the physical weight of it, as much as the contents were to be divided up between us. Maggie, Pete, and me.

The last of the Garvey kids.

When Maggie and I were both seven, and Pete was only a year younger, our eldest brother shot himself. Brandon Garvey had been a baby out of wedlock, when Mum and Dad were fooling around in high school and got caught with their pants down in front of the hapless Geography teacher they'd both had a year earlier, who had failed Dad for making wildly inaccurate assumptions about how the people of Africa lived. But Mum and Dad never considered him destined to be a nightmare child, and by many degrees he wasn't, until he was caught violently humping his pillow completely in the nude, and then out of the blue bolted down the entirety of a bowling lane so that he could set the pins back up himself. A couple months later he was having a sleepover at one of his friends' places, he found the gun in the case, and he pulled the trigger.

Charlotte just had cancer.

The house would remain empty and barren, otherwise. Things needed to be trashed or packed into boxes and stored in Pete's rented storage unit, even though he complained it would probably mean he would be rearranging the floor plan every time he went looking for a book from his childhood. Some of the clutter from the kitchen cupboards I realised I could keep, once I'd rinsed off the traces of my mother. Maggie would sell the sofas, the beds, and swipe the televisions. Pete would sell the old jalopy of a car that Mum had never ceased driving, especially for menial trips to the bank, where she would most likely have been abusing the bank tellers.

When we would call her, it became like a drinking game for whether she had visited the bank that day – take a shot if she did. I would have a bottle of vodka on the table beside me, uncapped, one hand trying to read the faux-braille, the other hand clutching the phone to my ear. *Yes, Mum, but did you go to the bank today?*

A bead of sweat was making like a snail down Pete's pale-white face. "Her AC crapped itself then?" He shifted in the chair, stood up, and moved to the tiny panel on her antique in-the-wall aircon system. We'd helped a couple of times with finding someone to come fix it, and making sure she let



them inside the door. Pete banged the face of the white box like he was in the ring. Maggie and I were staring at each other, with raised eyebrows and her with her phone in her hands, as she'd already begun posting ads for the furniture online, waiting for a nibble. It was like Mum had left the oven on and died. And I felt like banana bread that was burning.

Ever the bark-and-no-bite woman, my mother died in the least dramatic way possible. She simply never woke up. We all have keys to the house; we never gave them up once we moved out not too long after graduating high school. Once Dad went the way of the dinosaurs, the three remaining kids, entirely grown now and withering away slowly too, would stop in to make sure she hadn't tried to take a wall out with the old baseball bat from when Pete played, or hanged herself with her bedsheets. I pulled into the driveway the past Thursday afternoon. Her recycling bin was knocked down. Upstairs, behind the closed door of her bedroom, she'd made a morgue out of her musty bedroom.

Pete had his head halfway into the freezer, trying to make use of it before we unplugged it. Downstairs, she'd had this fridge-and-freezer mostly for Dad's beer and her copious amounts of frozen meat she persistently would only buy from two different places. She'd still been buying his beer, though the old creep had died about three years ago. A sentimentalist would say, in her heart, the old flame had never been put out with the extinguisher of death. But she bought his beer to drink herself, because when they first met, he said he'd be disgusted if his woman was on par with how much he would be drinking.

The nights I spent with my drunken mother made me crave every single ex-boyfriend.

The frozen meat was thawing out on the linoleum. Maggie, at first, was setting it down methodically, as if she was trying to organise it all, but once Pete reminded her it didn't matter what parts of the dead cow, pig, or chicken she had crammed in the freezer, Maggie started to just toss it across the floor, playing shuffleboard with dead trotters. I don't know why we didn't just shove every plastic-wrapped chunk of meat into one of the white laundry baskets and drive it down to the RSPCA and dump it into their freezers, but Maggie said she had it sorted, she had some brilliant idea.

Pete closed the freezer door without squishing his head behind it. "Are we burning her clothes tonight, fire pit in the backyard, maybe some toasted marshmallows?" His voice was playful, but he stepped to glance out the window over the washing machine, suddenly mesmerised by something. An overwhelming, dulling stare. He was pretending to flick open a lighter with his fingers.

Some nights, when Pete and I were pouring ourselves shots of vodka and mulling over how neither of us can keep a steady relationship afloat, unlike Maggie – who can seemingly balance a few all at once – those nights we talk about how our father hit us. About two weeks before Mum died, I was sprawled out on the sofa, a blanket carelessly tossed over me, and Pete was in an armchair, with his

shirt off. We were watching a horror movie, knives piercing flesh. “Remember the roses he left on your ass,” Pete said. “Like he was planting a garden, the sick fuck.”

He’d been driving home from the liquor store when he pulled over in front of some stranger’s house and started clutching at his heart. Thought *here we go*, here’s the heart attack, the stroke by Death’s skeletal hand. He’d been dreaming it all up, the pangs, the corruption. But he died a year later anyway. Almost to the date. Someone had the painful mission of explaining to my sick, deflating father that all those cigarettes he smoked ever since high school were knives piercing flesh. Dad started to think the so-called large-bosomed woman at the supermarket who used to sell him cigarettes was now in conspiracy-swirling cahoots with the doctors, and Big Pharma. Then he got drunk one night, buckled himself in the driver’s seat, and made the local news.

Maggie disappeared in a car that was the meat substitute of the Witch’s cottage from Hansel and Gretel. She didn’t mention where she was headed, but Pete and I didn’t question her, either. We were lying down upstairs, in my old room, on my old double bed, the bed she left laid out like a trap for her future grandchildren. Charlotte had wanted kids, until the cancer. One of the windows in this room was jammed, maybe my doing, or Maggie’s. Or age, too, this decrepit grandma of a dweller Mum and Dad never moved out of, after taking out a mortgage to buy it when their first child was four years old. Little Brandon. They’d always say he took a couple extra years to stop wearing nappies. They’d also always say he *truly shouldn’t have killed himself like that*. As if they would have preferred to stumble into his room and find him spinning around like a lampshade after an earthquake.

Pete and I were lying there, our shoulders nudged against one another’s, and for once neither of us had some quippy, smart-ass response about all the death in the family. Oddly, I wanted to hold his hand, but I didn’t. I was sweating more than I had in memory. Except, perhaps, when I was sixteen and I held my breath because I wanted to ask the boy I liked if he had a crush on me too, and we were in the middle of the bush, on an excursion from school. The rejection tasted of bark, and that room, that stupid bedroom, it tasted like that too, and I’d hidden a picture of Mum and I when I was in grade one in my pocket. I felt the edges of the photograph slow and subtle, staring up at the ceiling, watching the inanimate hump of the light fixture. Pete started to hum. A song at first I thought I didn’t recognise, and then he neared the chorus, and I caught myself hearing the words ringing in my ears. It was a song she used to hate, any time it came on the radio. She would make a racket about this song, this song alone, or sometimes there were others. But because we were teenagers at the time, this harmony stuck. At birthdays, we would sing karaoke of this song, belting it at the top of our lungs, and she would either shake her head, dismayed, or she would laugh at us like the fools we were, trying to annoy her on purpose. But there was no comparison in her eyes, at least, to the petty crimes we were truly guilty of over the years. Maggie never told anyone where she was going, or she would get so cranky with Mum

she would toss things out the one window that didn't have the flyscreen. Pete would use too many swear words in the one conversation and blame Dad, or he would threaten to hit someone over the head with a baseball bat. And then they would glance to me. I would lock myself in different rooms in the house and refuse to let anyone in, unless I suddenly wanted Maggie, or Pete, or I would tell my parents that I was gay, and their spankings weren't changing anything.

Pete stopped humming. He sat up, drawing his phone from out of his pocket, and he started to tell me about how he planned to sell the car. "It's pointless keeping it in one piece," he said, imagining the little money bags he would be carting home after selling each broken-down cog and gear of the car, as if it were like taking everything separately to some old-timey medieval marketplace. He said, maybe we should keep a souvenir, a keepsake, something worthless in money but worth the memory, but then shook his head. What, will we keep the handle you use to wind up the window? Display it in a glass case in the museum remembering the deceased. No, even the handle might be worth something to someone. I'll keep the photograph. Pete will have been canvassing the place, too, finding things to pocket when none of us were noticing. He hadn't stopped staring at me. While we had been talking, it was a normal, comfortable sort of eye contact between two brothers, but returning to that silence, Pete looked as though he wanted to say something else but couldn't. I saw her cold pale-green eyes blink open where she was lying dead in her bedroom, as if I were in a horror movie, with Norma Bates. Pete has always looked more like her. It drove me insane that in something as simple as making eye contact with my brother, my best friend, it was as if I was biting down hard on the bristly lines of an old, dry towel whilst she stepped down on my foot, wearing a tradesman's steel-capped boots.

I called him first, when I discovered her body. I didn't want to hear Maggie's shrill cry first, I wanted to hear his muttered voice, while his mind shoved him in two different directions. To be mournful over the death of the woman who birthed you, or to be nonchalant, because taking care of her now was beyond necessary. In the last few years of her life, they'd stopped having conversations that weighed more than grapes. He said he was on his way home, but he'd make a U-turn and come see her one last time before we rung up the morgue together. Then I called Maggie, who cried, and then told me to make sure plenty of the windows were wide open. Check under the sink for garbage bags, she'd said. When we were all there, three paper-people in a chain, we plugged our noses or picked up the telephone.

"Do you want to tackle the shed yet?" I said that without breaking my stare with him. The backyard shed used to be a halfway split – one side for Dad, for his gardening tools and the mower, and the other side for us kids, for our backyard toys, like the baseball bat. It was sitting there still, leaning in a corner, colour fading. Pete's baseball days. A ball out of the park, and the crowd goes wild.

Pete sighed. "After you," he said, making a grand gesture with his hands, like out of one of those fancy ads for a luxury five-star resort, where the staff treat you hopping into an elevator like a celebrity boarding their private plane. I stepped in front of him, creaking down the staircase. Surprisingly, the stench of her corpse vacated the building by the end of Thursday. We kept candles lit, turning her bedroom into a shrine, the one night it would be, before blowing every candle out as we retreated down those stairs and locked her heavy white door.

It was late afternoon by then, and the shed in the backyard stood like a vulture gnawing at the flesh of a rotting zebra. Or, alternatively, it looked exactly like a shed would look in one of those junk mail Titan mini booklets, except older, and more unique. Opening the door had started to feel like you were shaking a man who'd been caught pickpocketing, because it was set on a track like a train carriage. Pete moved out of the way to let me do it, to watch me do it. I felt the little laugh building in his throat before he'd even started to stuff it back down. A butterfly was flying around his head. When the door finally clicked to the edge of its track, Pete lunged immediately for something collapsed in the middle of the stuffy shed – a rake. He stood there for a moment, looking like he should be knee-deep in crops and chicken feed, before he set the rake outside on the grass, forgetting about it entirely. If the kitchen had been the inside of the oven, the backyard shed found us swimming around in magma. Everything we found begged to be thrown in the trash, or taken to the dump, or easily could have stayed in the shed for whoever bought the house next to throw in the trash, or take to the dump. Pete joked that maybe Maggie needed some of the sharper tools for her bear-sized meat sculpture she must be at home assembling.

When Dad died, Mum refused for anything of his to be touched, tossed out, even glanced at. Three months later she filled the boot of her car with all of his clothes and dropped them in a heap on her brother's doorstep, without a second thought. But she only seemed to spend time in the backyard to hang out the washing. Nobody touched his decaying, decrepit shed, only because she paid no attention to it at all. There was still a half-drunken can of Pepsi sitting under a folded-up ladder in the shed. Pete poured it out on the concrete near the stairs up to the porch off the back of the house, shaking his head sullenly. Pretending it was all Dad's fault he forgot to throw out the trash before he swerved all over the road. I'd found a baby shovel with lips of crusted dirt, and I was lying down in the grass flicking off the dirt, ants crawling all over my legs. Pete nudged me in the side with his bare foot.

"You get fascinated by weird shit," he said, turning his back to me as he continued rooting through whatever he was finding in the shed. The mower was sitting in the middle of the backyard like a holy landmark, where all paths of grass lead. I propped myself up on my hands after tossing the little shovel aside, staring into the corner where I'd found the baseball bat. He'd noticed it too, but neither of

us said anything. If we'd kept it in a glass case in the museum of Pete, at least it wouldn't have ended up covered in all that figurative blood. Well, can't intercept the past, *old sport*.

Pete was wearing gloves by then, sorting through things, holding them up to me like he was presenting Show and Tell in kindergarten. This is a stuck-shut tin of paint, this is a nail bent backwards, this is...something. He crooked his head to one side, his face scrunched up. "Is that Maggie's car?" I was surprised I hadn't heard the car too, but he was right, she had just pulled into the driveway again, hopefully sans meat. Maggie's car was little, like her. But it had an enormous boot, because she liked making on-the-whim purchases and shoving absolutely everything in there. One night she came over with a corpse in the trunk – that's what I'd thought, until she ripped off the white sheet and displayed it all out, one gigantic artificial-but-felt-real cactus in a pot. She'd bought it on sale, she said, with puppy eyes, on brand. I can't remember why she stopped first at mine – but I invited my twin in for dinner, and she said yes, and once we sat down in front of our plates of spaghetti and started talking, it didn't matter.

Pete was yanking hard on the shed door when Maggie poked her head out into the backyard carrying a take-out bag from McDonalds. "I feel like being fat and leaving greasy pawprints on the dining table," she said, giving the bag a little shake.

The swivel fan blew its breath at the three of us sitting around the table, as Maggie handed me a wrapped cheeseburger, and then a sleeve of chips, half of which had been emptied into the bag first, probably from a fast-food worker who couldn't care less. Pete slurped a mouthful of Coca-Cola through the paper straw and made a loud *aaahhhh*, purposefully over-the-top and dramatic. He glanced over at me with that full grin and winked.

Maggie had grabbed down a small round plate from one of the cupboards above the oven and she'd set her double cheeseburger on it, out of the wrapper. She'd offered the both of us one, but we'd shaken our heads, running our fingers through smears of tomato sauce. "Is someone going to tell Charlotte?" Maggie said this without looking at either of us, right before she gnawed into the burger and chewed on it, glancing up only once her mouth was swishing like a washing machine.

Our sister Charlotte had died of cancer when she was sixteen. But when our father died, Maggie visited her grave in tears and laid flowers and confessed that there had been another death in the family. The last had been hers. Charlotte had been feeling more exhausted than normal, but our parents shrugged it off, because Charlotte was just in bed earlier each night, and she wasn't wandering off in the middle of the night to go meet up with an ex-boyfriend who was two years older than her. Those meetings she confessed to Maggie, the two of them sitting two steps down from the top, out on the back porch. *So Charlotte's tired, whatever, leave her alone then*, Mum would say, but Maggie was just so worried, so confused why a sixteen-year-old girl would suddenly want to act like a grown woman. On a

thunder-cloud Tuesday, Charlotte was trying to pay attention to her English teacher explaining the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet when she fainted, without the flair of a sigh and a hand across the forehead. She had leukemia. My parents, on purpose, kept Pete and I in the dark on everything, and I never wanted to ask questions, or receive answers. Maggie would know everything – especially, always, the why. Why they couldn't save her. Why my parents had already visited the cemetery three months ago.

I tore through another chunk of the burger with my teeth, letting Pete take the question first. "It shouldn't be you again, Mags," he said, offering her a chip. I set my burger down on the wrapper and raised my hand, well, figuratively.

"I found Mum," I reached out with my right hand to hold Maggie's. She was looking at me with a smear of tomato sauce in the corner of her lips. She squeezed my hand. "I can do it before the funeral."

Charlotte's grave always had more flowers than our father's.

I would tell people that he hated them, flowers. I never so much as had a chance to ask my father if he cared for them. That's not the sort of thing I think would've granted me much.

Maggie unthreaded our hands and took another bite of her burger. There was a cooler breeze circulating in the kitchen-and-dining now, tasselling her hair. My twin, who barely spoke yesterday. Who learned how to speak and sing before anything else, seemingly.

Pete and I washed and dried that one little plate of hers, as if only one of us would have buckled under the effort of it. She was in the bathroom washing the day off her skin, so I stood there beside the sink with a hand towel slung between my hands, smirking at my brother.

"We should head home soon, all of us," he said, drenching his hands in suds. I shook my head, and he laughed, he said, you're tired, we're stumbling back here tomorrow morning anyway. And he was right, about everything. Pete said he would load everything he could from what we dumped out of the shed into his car, or store it under the house, like the mower, he didn't know what to do with that just yet. Maybe he'd have to disassemble it. Or tie it to the towbar and drag it down each stretch of road, clanging it against the asphalt. Then you should go home, he said, once you've finished helping me. I could've used that baby shovel. When I found her lying there in bed, and I knew there would be no pulse, I thought about asking if it were possible to bury her in the backyard, so she could remain at the house like a ghost. The little no-good shovel would have taken me a lifetime to dig the hole deep enough, but it would have felt like a last punishment from them, my parents.

But then both would be in the ground.

It startled me to think about another family staking claim on the house as theirs. It would go on the market sometime after the funeral, once it was stripped back to a shell. Dad had left the house to us – the exact name he'd signed off to never mattered to us. The house had been in his name when they bought it, our parents, so it would fold to his children once she died. Now her ghost watched

everything get shoved into the trunks of cars and her ghost would watch the For Sale sign be stumped into the front lawn. I supposed, in some way, her ghost would linger on the property anyway, despite the body being carted off with the ambulance, and the body decaying in the morgue, and the body soon to be buried in the ground beside every other gross-and-disgusting body.

I heard the shower stutter out, and the squeaky screen bump on its tracks. Someone should probably fix all the doors in this house before we sell, I'd thought, downing a sip of Pete's drink while he was distracted watching the news. There was a landslide that killed twelve, and there was a stabbing in a suburb down south, but the victim was recovering in hospital. Pete had his feet up on an ottoman, and he reached for his drink, glancing at me as he finished it off.

Maggie was in her old bedroom, the childhood bedroom. I'd wondered where she'd gone when we sat just the two of us without her for a while, and the news lapped back to talk about the landslide again. This time, a reporter from the scene had the fear of death in his eyes. Or he was just tired and exhausted, maybe from the jet lag. Maggie was sitting on the unmade bed, folding a blue-and-white dress into an uneven square. "Every time I tried to throw this out, it was like she had a tracker on it," Maggie said when she noticed me lingering in the doorway, leaning against the wood. It was a formal dress she wore for Grandad's birthday one year; I think when we were thirteen. She held a shoulder in each hand and flung it out, unravelling it again. For a second, the image of Mum holding the dress, beaming about it, flashed in my head. Then I saw Maggie wearing it, shorter and with more freckles and a hairstyle she'd grow tired of in a week. I saw her standing at Grandad's shoulder, him in that chair, blowing out the candles. Then there was Maggie getting her hair pulled by our cousin, two-years-older-than-us Olivia, who called Maggie a little brat and would probably want to swing her around by her pigtails if she ever had them, so she avoided them. Maggie got her first period in that dress. It was flushing around in the washing machine the next morning, and Mum pretended it never happened, and she shoved the dress sitting on a hanger into the closet again, and she leapt out in front of Maggie whenever she tried to throw it in the bin or burn it in a petite wastebin fire.

Olivia should've been my parents' kid.

"It's ugly," I said, stepping into the room.

Maggie just laughed. "It's not, not really. It's ordinary." She crumpled it into that awkward square again, running a finger over the fabric. "It was ugly once it turned red."

She tucked the dress underneath the pillow, almost like blocking it out of her memory entirely, if that was at all possible. I sat down beside her. Her room always seemed to get the most sun, but it sat mostly in darkness now, except for the bedside lamp casting out its rings of light. "What are you doing with all that meat?" She looked at me and she couldn't stop laughing.

She stopped and took a breath. “I was going to do something with it,” she said, pausing to stifle a chuckle, “but I, uh, changed my mind and drove down to that new estate and just started pelting meat at all the houses they’re building.” She couldn’t stop laughing, and neither could I, and we sat there watching a mind-version of Maggie gripping tight to thawing-out steaks and pork legs and blocks of mince that had started to look like a brain, and then she’d aim her arm and let the meat collide with wood and concrete and metal, and mind-version Maggie would be cracking up laughing too.

We re-joined Pete out watching tv, the three of us in a line on the couch for a split second pretending all our feet would fit atop that tiny square of an ottoman. He’d flicked away from the news, moving from channel to channel, being unimpressed with everything. It was Saturday evening, but free-to-air tv bored all of us. Pete, Maggie, and I split the cost of every streaming service we wanted, but our parents stayed blissfully ignorant in their land of Australian reality television and ads and Foxtel, Dad had loved Foxtel. But when he died, she drove her squeaky jalopy down to the bank and harassed them for an hour, begging that they cancel the payment for Foxtel because she had no use for it anymore. She’d called Pete that afternoon, yapping on, and I sat within earshot, her voice echoing out of the phone. After ten minutes, I got up, walked outside, and thought about crossing the road without looking both ways. When I went back inside, he told me she’d hung up on him, right after asking him to drop in as soon as he could to help her look for wherever the phone number for the company was, wherever it had been lost in any of the piles of white paper shoved in shoeboxes. He took the bottle of vodka down from the top cupboard and poured himself a shot.

He stopped on a rerun of an old sitcom from the 90s and I realised why I didn’t want to go home tonight. I had barely slept last night. I hadn’t slept at all Thursday night. I couldn’t take my eyes off something on the ceiling, and it wasn’t something real and physical, either, just something purely dreamt up in my head. I was watching home movies that were obscured by the ceiling fan. I wasn’t missing my mother, or Dad, or either of the siblings I’ve lost over the years. I saw those beatings again, and I saw Maggie when she was four, clutching a teddy bear tight to her chest after she’d stumbled down the last of the stairs. I saw Pete when he was eighteen get in that car accident with his girlfriend at the time, and how he stopped driving for six months, and that look on his face when we went to the speedway a couple weeks ago and he remembered it all over. And then I saw them, my parents, clawing their way out of the ground. Not for a second did they appear as zombies or ghouls – they looked like their ordinary selves, and they were taking everything back. Somewhere between witching hour and dawn, I stopped trying to sleep and watched the entirety of a sci-fi movie about aliens lying in bed with earphones in.



Maggie's phone started ringing, and she flipped the phone upside down, saying it was Jett. He's a guy she'd been seeing for a couple months now – he doesn't know her mother just died. He probably wanted her to come around to his for dinner and sex on the couch, in the bedroom, and in the shower.

"I'm not in the mood to have sex," she said, leaning her head on my shoulder.

She whispered in my ear once, a couple years ago, that she was never with these guys for the sex. The phone stopped ringing. She flipped the phone back over, staring at his name on the screen until it faded off into the black.

Pete turned the TV off as the credits rolled for the 90s sitcom. He stood up, went into the toilet, and when he came back, he told us it was about time he sorted out the things from the shed and loaded up his boot. And he glanced at me, and said, "You can stay tonight at mine if you want." Maggie feigned her version of envy, but we all understood she rarely chose to sleep anywhere else besides the luxury-made mattress she spent a nice chunk of her pay on. She always chose to express her fear-of-missing-out without words, giant gestures taking up space. We made our way downstairs, pretending to take upstairs in one last time, as if weren't coming back here tomorrow morning to sort through everything else. We were realising how much time we had wasted today, simply by remembering the past. I'd wasted ten minutes alone staring at a stain in the carpet that had been there since I was born. That was Brandon, Mum would say. His vomit was like permanent marker.

Pete tossed the shovel in the boot, and the paint tins, and the baseball bat. At first, he'd made slow progress with some of the bigger things, like wedging the rake in, but soon enough he was clearing it all up, and wheeling the mower inside to sit awkwardly in front of the washing machine. He took a few pictures of it, wondering if a work friend of his would pick it up and take it off his hands without another location change. He was texting someone else when I came back downstairs, after realising I'd left my keys upstairs in the back bedroom. Something about leaving them alone for the ghosts unsettled me. Pete glanced up, smiling at me. "Let's say goodnight to Maggie and drive back to mine," he said, and we walked out through the garage to the driveway, where she was standing there, on the phone. She rolled her eyes at us, listened for a minute more to whatever he was rambling on about, and then hung up on him.

"I wish I could shove him in the hole before we shovel the dirt back in," she said, wrapping her arms around me. She shoved the phone back in the pocket of her jeans, making a half-assed promise she'd stop seeing him, but I could never be sure with my sister. Maggie liked to keep people close, even when she severed some part of their ties. She would be seeing this guy, and flirting with other guys from her past, and they would all know about each other, and they would all size each other up but be fine, and okay, with it. Maggie stroked my hair as we parted. "If I'm awake again at four in the morning, I promise to call you," she said, giving me one last grin before she turned to Pete, wrapping him up. I

supposed in some sick twisted way, if we'd both woken up early in the morning, and I wasn't worried Pete would throw a punch if I tried to wake him up, we'd be there at 5am on Sunday morning throwing her clothes down the staircase.

We waved as Maggie drove off into the darkness. We were waving at nothing, expecting Maggie to glance in the rearview mirror at the two trunks standing idle on the footpath. Swaying a hand back and forth. On the drive back to Pete's place, he let me pick the music, and I played one slower song until I felt the entirety of my chest sink, and it left a gross tang in my mouth, so I skipped through in search of something Pete and I could scream-sing along to. The car ride was four minutes of quiet and then time was unacknowledged until he was pulled up in front of the garage door, watching it creep upwards like a flamingo raising its leg. I checked the time on my phone: 8:39pm.

Pete had taken a couple *scenic routes* without asking me. I think he wanted to keep sitting in that loud sound for longer than the trip would usually take, and I never said anything. He'd make me smile the most when he sung every word in a song.

I climbed in beside him in his bed. He was sipping from a glass of water, sitting up, leaning back against the black bars of the headboard. Sleeping in the same bed felt natural for us, ever since we'd go camping, and when we road-tripped through two states. He never gave a shit that other boys thought I might grope them in their sleep, or pull their boxers down and take pictures of their dicks. Hell, Pete would wrap his arms around me some nights when we were camping, if I'd thought the flimsy material of the tent would rip from the claws of some mythological creature they thought didn't exist. Other kids would say Maggie and I were the Scaredy-Twins. But Brandon had his fears too, and Charlotte would sob into her pillows those nights out of the hospital, and Pete locked away the baseball bat.

He set the glass down on the bedside table and inched down so that we were face to face, lying on our sides, and he told me again about the baseball bat. He'd loved the feeling of scoring a home run, always. It's electric – the wind is levitating you off the ground as you near the final base, dirt kicking up at your heels, a million other little boys trying to catch the ball to pelt it at the back of your head. It was the one and only sport he wanted to play, because other sports just missed the mark for him. Pete spent birthday money on the perfect baseball bat – and he'd spend afternoon after afternoon, once he'd finished his homework, just practicing on his swing and nudging me into throwing the ball square at him. My aim improved because of him.

But he'd brought a weapon into the house. Mum liked to practice her swing too. He started noticing the way I would walk some days, like stepping on eggshells, moving at a snail's pace. It made him exhausted, he said, it made him tired of playing baseball – he had no dream career in it, he would never imagine himself the grand champ to step out onto the pitch, so he quit. Mum started to swing for that home run when he would speak, because his words were starting to come out clearer, and he

talked back. She would beat him with the bat, and he would wrestle it out of her arms and swing it around, only dreaming of scaring the living daylight out of her. But sometimes she would bruise. And you would think they were the twins, with matching purple marks taking shape on their bodies.

I never spoke a word when Pete made any form of confession. He would finish the story, and he would say, always, “Don’t let this force you to see the world any different.” He would never be pretending I saw the world in a shade of ecstasy – but he would hope, perhaps, that I did not choose to fret too much on the part of us that wants to grieve. That wants to be devoured.

• • •

We chose a picture of our mother from when she was in high school, before she gave birth to our brother, Brandon. She was young, and naïve, and her mother must have helped her style her hair. Late one night, we were sitting on the floor in front of the swivel fan, trying to keep photos from flying everywhere. Pete was holding up a picture of our mother looking ghastly thin from a year ago; Maggie was rifling through the older pictures, shaking her head at him. *She looks deceased in the coffin – the least we can do is make her look alive for the little booklets.*

The service was too long and it was a sweaty and stuffy day, all I wanted to do was stop wearing black. It was the first time I’d worn black since she died – I think Mum would have killed us all if we trampled around her house dressed like mourners. Pete, Maggie, and I stood there at the front of an audience and shared a eulogy that would settle her body. Behind us, in the coffin, she said nothing.

I was starting to get a headache from the sun, and Maggie held my free hand with hers as we stood outside on the lawn. We appeared to her in that row, the three of us again, always repeating, and we were reared for one last Show and Tell, because history had requested it. That one sacred memento in our hands, which could be torched or buried or scattered within a breath. Maggie with the dress. Pete with the baseball bat. Me with that photograph.

It was the first day of grade one for me and Maggie. Our parents walked as far as they could with us, telling us with sweet remarks that this would be another year of making new friends, and keeping the old ones, and running around in the playground, and scraping our shins. It was the perfect first day of school. I’d spent preschool being tied with string to my sister, but now I was making friends without the noose – for a kid in grade one, it felt like a noose, being tied down by their sister and befriending her friends. The photograph was of my mother and I in the morning, before I waved goodbye, before Maggie and I promised we’d never leave each other’s sides. It was the perfect first day of school, because nothing went wrong. Not once. Maggie would complain, say one of her friends from

last year was ignoring her now, but I had the widest grin and there was no containing it. Over the years, my mother had the chance to change the narrative of the day, say I was a bully to my twin sister, but she didn't. She reminded me each time that I was the boy that wouldn't shut up about his day. There was some of that young naïve girl left in my mother.

As they lowered her body into the ground, I slipped the photograph in my pocket and reached out to hold Pete's hand. It was sweaty, and a little calloused. It lasted all of thirty seconds before he stepped toward an outstretched shovel, heaped an anthill mound of dirt onto it, and did his best to cover her face. He was humming as he handed me the shovel, soft for only the Garvey children to hear.

## **It's a Prehistoric Ritual**

Eddie  
Maggie  
Pete

## The Wedding

The flower girl tossed oval-shaped white-and-pink petals in a dysfunctional array, letting petals fall onto laps and under chairs and wherever the gusts of wind would take them. She wasn't any child they knew, or else maybe they would've been watching on with awe. Instead, as she passed them by and tossed a handful of petals right into Maggie's lap, the three siblings were looking back at emptiness. Everything to them seemed slower than usual. As if the bride was still asleep in bed, or still washing her hair in the shower. It was an outdoor wedding in a garden, it was a cool autumn day, and the little flower girl had reached the end of the aisle. The groom bent down, awkward in the suit, and gave her a hug much shorter than her anarchic trot carrying the little knotted basket. Eddie, Maggie, and Pete were sitting towards the back of the Bride's Side, each with a date slotted beside them, like an unoriginal coded pattern.

Maggie, and then Logan. Eddie, and then Calum. Pete, and then Jada.

They barely knew the groom. He was a dark-haired Christian who worked in marketing and had moved up from Melbourne, ironically right after the bride had spent two weeks in the Victorian city visiting her cousins. The bride – Alicia – is the daughter of family friends, old-time next-door neighbours of the Garveys, until they moved away after Alicia's parents split up. The wedding invitation came as no surprise – it seemed like it was practically love at first sight, and their Instagram posts of each other rung through like wedding bells long before the envelope. Maggie sat at her little dining table, pen in hand, ready to tick the boxes off the menu – half the choices weren't to her taste, it made it very easy – when she suddenly had that light-bulb moment. The wedding would be the first time she actually met the groom in person.

Another little girl had started to walk down the aisle, this time floating the petals more delicately, watching in awe as each petal cascaded in front of her eyes. The little girl locked eyes with Maggie and tossed a furling-up petal to her, and it nestled in her palm, and Maggie froze up, staring at the flower girl without words. She knew, of course, there was no need for any – and yet she'd felt a silence overtake her anyway. Then another tight squeeze, and the groom's little sisters squatted in the front row, and there were taller, slender figures stepping up onto the wooden deck. Bridesmaids.

Pete's knee bumped into Calum's, and they glanced at each other, nodding their apologies, uttering them softly as a goddess with red hair sniffed at her bouquet of flowers. Perhaps the wind had

swilled a potent perfume, and it caught her off-guard – but she was in the front, the shortest of the bridesmaids, and she straightened her back and pretended she had never had allergies in her life. Maggie scanned their faces like she worked the security detail – she didn't know a single one of them.

University friends, maybe, or work friends. Or girls who were getting married too, she thought, tasting something in her mouth. Logan, by then, was holding her hand, the one not clasping tight to a crumpled flower petal. She knew how it'd look if she brushed off his hand, as if all the attention might just shift to her - but it didn't change how, regrettably, she'd only invited him after her brothers told her they were bringing along plus ones. She'd woken up that morning beside him, in their little rented Airbnb, telling him she'd made that little shriek from a nightmare. It was barely anything, she'd said. But in her dreams, all she'd seen was herself standing in a Hollywood Glam wedding dress, half-coated in a green liquid. The image repeating in a carousel, green dripping from her hair.

In her silly dream, she'd been slimed.

The last bridesmaid was standing in line, balancing unconvincingly on one foot as she adjusted the strap of her heel. She looked in one moment as if she were about to topple over, and then the next she was straightening herself out, reminding the other bridesmaids she was the tallest, a whole two inches taller than the woman beside her. She and Eddie made eye-contact, briefly, an awkward exchange that was forgotten as soon as he turned his head, grinning at Calum. Weddings have their own secret language, almost. One simple stare, and the two understood one another – nothing had happened yet, but everything would happen soon, or later. Calum winked at him. The bridesmaids in their perfectly-rehearsed row suddenly loosened, awash with that boastful pride and rosy-red sentiment.

The bride was walking down the aisle. She clung to her father's arm, with every speck of attention drawn on them. It was like doves were flying overhead – but someone pressed the speed-through button, and she made it to the love of her life standing there in front of the crowd, and they didn't have even a split second to stare into each other's eyes before the something-new officiant was beginning in on a spiel, her voice sweet and breathy. The bride and groom laughed and smiled and cried and wiped their eyes and kissed. Maggie and Eddie looked at each other, as if agreeing with an unspoken thought shared between their brains.

The wedding was boring, and short. The married couple kissed again as they disappeared down the hill for more photographs, and the guests stood like they were dangling on the edge of a cliff, waiting to be told they could step back, pass each other up a flight of stairs, and start to get drunk at the reception. At the base of the steps, Pete gripped tight to the phone in his hand, pressed against his ear. It's radio silence from him as he listens to a voice on the other end, a voice running like rapids. His eyes, similarly caught in one place, hadn't broken their stare from looking up at Eddie, who was leaning against the railing of the balcony, waiting on him.

Inside, already, Maggie kept her eyes closed, her underwear around her ankles.

There was a knock on the bathroom door – she deflated with her sigh.

“Surely you literally watched me come in here,” she said, grabbing at toilet paper.

## **Photo Booth**

There was a photo booth in the corner, a crowd pleaser, swarmed over and over by the little kids and still popular enough with the adults, although they never seemed to sneak their little heads into the bottom of any of the snapped little squares. You could glue one of the copies into the wedding guestbook, if you wanted, and they nudged you in the direction of the little book – Eddie, Maggie and Pete were standing in the opposite corner to the guestbook, sipping at their first drinks of the reception.

“Where’s Logan?” Eddie said, glancing at the empty spot beside his sister.

Maggie was watching two little girls leap out of the photobooth, almost falling over as they halted to make sure they didn’t leave their strips of funny faces and peace signs in the tray. She shook herself out of it, answering Eddie. “He’s exploring, I think.” Maggie took a sip. “He wanted to go check out around the corner over there, probably thinks they’re hiding the good food that way.”

Jada was straightening out the skirt of her dress as she sidled up beside Pete, giving him a grin that was flushed with uncertainty. “I just said hello to a hundred different people I don’t know,” she said, staring out at the crowd of people moving around catching up with one another. An elderly woman walked by and complimented Jada and Maggie on how beautiful they looked, almost lurching out to pat the two men beside them, as if to say, you chose well, boys. As if the twins didn’t look similar at all, although ever since Eddie hit puberty and Maggie started wearing bras it wasn’t like they did anymore. The one physicality they seemed to share most noticeably was seemingly never knowing what to do with their hands. Weddings weren’t an exception – as Maggie polished off her first drink, she dangled the glass in her hand, awkwardly looking around for a table to abandon it on. Everyone else seemed to be guarding the compact circle tables, and she figured facing off against a dragon had no logic to it. She started staring at the ice, four petite cubes she suddenly wished were crystals instead, and that the glass was the vial to protect them. She let the ice somersault and crash into itself – and without noticing, she’d completely tuned out the soft twine of the music and her brothers and Jada and the little girls that made her fallopian tubes whine. Maggie wanted to stab her fallopian tubes, and she thought of the glass she was holding in her hand, surely sharp enough to cause some damage. She’d just have to do it while she was dreaming tonight, shelving that wedding-dress-dream for as long as she could.



Pete and Jada were telling Eddie about how the bathroom door in their motel room doesn't open completely, and the way Pete was describing it when Jada was unzipping her suitcase made her think she would have to become a contortionist just to be able to take a shower or sit on the toilet. Maggie excused herself to go look for Logan around the corner. The date. Logan said she was more stunning than any other girl he's ever been to a wedding with – and he laughed it off, like don't stress too much on that Maggie, *I've only been to a wedding with two other girls*. Of course, she didn't care, she almost thought about pretending to be jealous just to stroke him without needing to touch him, yet. Around the corner, she immediately saw him, standing next to a complete stranger, in the middle of some fully-formed conversation. She met Logan after they matched on a dating app, and after two dates she flung him the plus-one invitation and told him maybe he'd get lucky.

The weirdo said it didn't matter to him, she remembered, taking another step forward towards her date. Suddenly the glass she was holding felt heavier, and she set it down on a table without a single hesitation. Now her arms hung limply at her sides, but she'd passed off the crystals to a server, hopefully, and maybe the weight in her body could slowly find its way down to her feet again. Logan and the stranger hadn't noticed her yet, and wouldn't, until she stood beside them both and the only words she could think of saying were, "I thought this man had pulled a runaway bride on me."

Calum was pulling Eddie and Pete into the photobooth, with a cheeky little grin on his face. They squished against the felted back wall as Calum fiddled with the screen and selected 'Black and White' and they waited for the countdown. 3, 2, 1. Snap. Pete squinted against the flashing lights, caught off-guard as Calum gave his hand a squeeze.

Looking back at the wedding, it was as if a little voice spoke like a cricket all around their heads, whispering out,

"The electricity between them was always noticeable from the moment they met."

Another flash of the camera. Eddie left the booth first, suddenly blasted back by the shrill scream of someone's daughter, a little girl in a cream dress with shoes that sounded like she was tap dancing around the other party guests. "Can I get you a drink?" Pete said, smirking. Calum didn't take his eyes off him after that. It was an answer, in some sense, before he could spit out a yes, and before they both walked out of the photo booth and saw Eddie bent over the guestbook table, glue stick in hand. He'd harshly torn off one of the three greyed-out photos, one little square in the corner of a fresh page. Pete poked him in the ribs on each side, and whispered into his ear, "I'm stealing your date for a drink". Eddie chuckled as he tried thinking of something poignant and original to write beside the photo. He turned to ask his brother if he thought 'call me if there's ever a divorce party!' was too over-

the-top, and he realised everyone was gone, and there was just an elderly man staring at him from the corner. The blank page stared back at him.

He started to write. *Congratulations!* Generic, he thought, trying to figure out how to end the message without eventually saying ‘*Love from Eddie, Pete, and Calum (I guess you don’t know him)*’. He flipped back through other responses – the shorter they were, the more ordinary they seemed, with some people writing out ALL THE BEST in big, blocky letters. And then, a little more subtle, ‘You’ll remember this day for the rest of your life’, which warranted, he thought to himself, that it could be the happiest day of your life or the day you made the greatest mistake possible in committing so strongly to this one person. Eddie was stumped. He figured that maybe if he used his full name, Edmund, maybe if his message felt empty alongside the other million messages, the bride wouldn’t remember that next-door Eddie is really an Edmund, that maybe Edmund is an old-fashioned gentleman who stumbled into the wedding party looking for a whiskey and a chance to shed a few tears over how beautiful the union between two people seemingly always is. Well, within reason, he thought to himself, committing pen to paper. He jotted down something that felt right, that felt true – he wanted the best for the couple, he didn’t want to be on the invitation list for a divorce party, because he’d be pretending to be overemotional about another relationship falling apart, when his did all the time.

Eddie thought about ducking back into the photo booth by himself, even just to avoid the attention of standing alone out in the open. He couldn’t help himself watch Pete laugh off something Calum said, and wait for the drinks, and strangely, Eddie didn’t think he was losing a date at all.

He’d texted Calum about a week before the wedding.

*Hey, I need a date for my old neighbour’s wedding. You in?*

They’d met back in university, kept in touch in the sort of way two old coworkers keep in touch – they would message each other here and there, bump into each other in random places, occasionally invite each other over for dinner and wind up making out on the sofa. But they never wanted to date each other, because there were creative differences, is how Calum always liked to put it. They’d tried for a week or two, back in their second year of university. It was like they were piecing together a production of an original play, but the actors couldn’t figure out how to pretend, and the costume director was fired too soon. So, they would stay friends.

*Let me drive at least.*

On the trip up, because the wedding was two hours away by car, they took a detour at just over halfway there to lick their lips of grease. Calum came back from the toilet suddenly deciding they make another detour still, but the destination would stay a surprise, just to add some spice into your life, he said. They drove away from the small towns and the train stations and Calum pulled up at a lookout

point halfway up a mountain, and they gazed out at the trees and the fields and the ant-houses and he glanced over at Eddie and said, “I need to get laid at this wedding, Eddie.”

Pete watched the baby bubbles rise in the glass, forgetting for a minute that he’d just handed a drink to an attractive gay guy that had been flirting with him for most of the wedding and its reception so far. He only seemed to want to drink champagne at events like this – weddings; birthdays for his sister or her friends, if he was invited; after Maggie had graduated from university. He liked the taste enough for the celebration, but he never found himself sitting around one Friday afternoon after the worst week – before another worse week rolled around – thinking to himself, gee I could really go for some champers right now. Calum took a sip, glancing round as if he were back atop that mountain view, admiring the scenery. He felt strange in silence.

“So, you’d know all of Eddie’s secrets then?” He said, clutching to the cool glass.

Pete stopped imagining himself floating around in a pool of champagne to answer. “I guess so,” he whispered, mostly to himself. Then, speaking to Calum clearly, “But shouldn’t you care more about mine.” His line came out smoother than he thought, but he wasn’t straight out of a rom-com or a comedy sketch about how to fail at picking up the person you want to fool around with.

Calum paused to consider it, hiding a chuckle that kept slipping out from the corners of his mouth. He took another sip from his champagne glass. “I guess so,” he said, laughing it off.

Pete thought that maybe he could’ve said something else, but he didn’t.

## Swing

Eddie patted his stomach like he’d swallowed the entire carcass of a dead horse, but he’d filled up largely on the *hors d’oeuvres* before even the entrée had come around. One of the kids at the neighbouring table was watching him, laughing their head off, and Eddie slid upright, unsure whether to be embarrassed or make a bigger fool of himself if he played it up to entertain a kid he didn’t even know. Unsurprisingly, though, he’d enjoyed the entrée, the main and the dessert, and he didn’t even want to glance at the cake. Once he’d finished dessert, Pete had excused himself to the bathroom, and Maggie sat on the other side of Calum gliding her spoon around the plate, scraping up the little crumbs of cheesecake base. She hadn’t really spoken much to Logan the entire time they were sitting down next to each other – it was hard to not notice it.

When chatter picked up once again, and no one seemed to be left swallowing down their food, everyone seemed to start floating around like clouds, or make their way to the dance floor. Calum and Pete had headed back to the bar for another drink, pretending they were both on accident thirsty for a refill at the same time. Maggie laughed off having to hike up her dress again in the bathroom, and Eddie

looked down at his bladder, grateful he went before they came and probably wouldn't touch porcelain until he crashed back at the rental. Jada said it didn't even matter she didn't know anyone else at this wedding, she could get up there and swing her hips and sing the lyrics alongside the wedding party and the families. Eddie was watching everyone else figure out how to have fun at this wedding without him, and it was strange, but not in a self-deprecating way. He could figure out the rhythm if he wanted, or disappear into the night, or...and he supposed Maggie was peeing, not exactly having the time of her life. He looked up, catching Logan's eye.

"Then there were two," he said awkwardly, starting maybe the fourth conversation he'd had with Logan all day. It was friendly between them, but they were mostly distracted by other people, or sitting silent as someone delivered a speech about how they'd waited for this day since little Alicia was crawling around trying to destroy the furniture with her little kitten claws. Logan let one of his walls down. He needed to remind himself he came here to let loose, even just a little.

He set down his glass and scooted his chair closer to Eddie. "Let's not be two strangers then," he said, glancing around the room for a second. He didn't know anyone, not even the married couple. "You know my name, right?" He chuckled after that, scooting his chair a little bit closer again. There were two chairs in between them, tucked in, but Logan didn't make the move to sit right beside Eddie, at least not yet.

"I know enough," Eddie replied. His smile curved up into a smirk, like he was gripping onto a piece of information in his head he could use against Logan – but really, truly, his mind was blank, and he wanted to egg Logan on out of boredom more than anything. He'd brought a date that was more single than he was – what did he expect?

Logan set his arms down resting on the back of the chairs in between the two of them. He smirked too, and he said, "I know Maggie only wanted me here so she'd have a date. Apparently, her last couple boyfriends didn't work out, and maybe you didn't think they were good enough for her too," and he paused, tapping the chair with two of his fingers. "I didn't mean that to be rude, though. I don't mean to be annoyed that I'm a puppet."

"It's like she should be swearing off men lately," Eddie said.

"I don't want to pry."

"You're not. Maggie's open about everything."

"I like being around her, but I've been talking to you for about a minute and there's about 90% less of a haze, of a confusion about where things stand." Logan stops himself, drawing his arms backward away from Eddie.

"10% because I'm still a stranger you've barely met?"

Logan paused again, trying to lighten himself up. He felt his shoulders relax and he eased his arms onto the backs of the chairs, remembering he was at a wedding, and the first notes of *Summer Lovin'* started ringing in his ears. "Something like that." He listened to Olivia Newton-John sing like she was the ocean herself. "Tell me more about yourself though, I guess I'm curious."

*tell me more, tell me more.*

Eddie started rambling on not about his job, or his siblings – trying not to involve Maggie in any of the forks he led Logan down, to spare the reminder that she'd disappeared into the night like a bat. Out of nowhere, really, he started first by telling Logan that his family hadn't always lived in this country, as if he were telling a dramatic immigrant tale that would go on to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars. But he let the grandiosity of it all fall away when he said that he didn't feel like he belonged outside of Australia, because he'd been born here, and his parents had too. It was his dad's parents that had immigrated, migrated here when staying in Latvia could have meant they wouldn't gain much of anything, or worse – would have lost so much more. Eddie didn't know much of his grandparents, except that they had his father only five months after arriving in Australia, and that they died before Eddie was two years old. His grandmother was first – she died before he was born, the year after Brandon was born. She'd been sick for some time, Eddie's father would always say in recounting their lives. Eddie's grandfather died when Eddie and Maggie were one – he rolled over in the middle of the night and did not roll back.

Eddie suddenly snapped out of it, realizing he'd been telling a depressingly long story that ended in death to Maggie's date, who was intrigued, more than anything. Logan asked a question that threw him even more off balance: "You have another brother?"

He'd forgotten, even for a second, that Brandon would be amongst those clouds in some sort of perverted loop trying to explain to those grandparents that he'd blown his brains out on purpose. From stories, Eddie supposed they wouldn't seem to understand how complex Brandon seemed to be – even Eddie himself didn't fully know how to remember his brother, because he had been so young, and Brandon had been so man-behind-the-curtain.

Eddie thought about shoving a guard in front of the drawbridge to his heart, but then stopped, realising fancy wordplay or navigating around his brother's death just made him more uncomfortable.

"He was older than me, yeah. He died when I was little."

And that covered it well, and he noticed it was one of the few times he'd mentioned his older brother, because most times he skirted the topic, pretending he was the oldest, even though it felt clunky and off, because even Pete seemed to feel older to him. He remembered how one of his aunts, Cynthia, kept making those remarks one Christmas when she was drunk on brandy and non-alcoholic

eggnog – *you've got triplets, not twins, triplets!* In other ways, though, Pete was always one year younger. Maybe he liked being separate.

Logan took the silence to slide out of his chair and into the one right beside Eddie, so the two were face to face now, closer than they had been, and Eddie unashamedly took a more intricate stock of Logan's eyes. They were a green-blue colour, like an untreated pool, but he tried to think of them as oceanic, turning the whites of his eyes into sand dunes and clouded skies. He caught himself red-handed in finding this new way of being attracted to Logan, but he'd spent too many years already getting used to sealing up vaults of emotions. Like the vault he had for his brother, he supposed.

It wasn't too difficult for Brandon to cry out for him.

But he hadn't cried at this wedding yet, no one at their reception table had, really.

Eddie cleared his throat and told Logan that he was okay, and he was, in truth, no longer on the verge of a breakdown. He'd become too adept at burying his emotions, his therapist said once, in a session that ended with him letting a few tears roll down his cheek at the mention of Charlotte's fourth birthday. Sometimes he slipped – but he picked himself back up, and now his ears were being violated by an old party-playlist song from the 00s he'd thought he'd escaped when they stopped with the school discos after Year 7. It didn't matter that he didn't remember the name of it.

Jada swerved past an elderly couple with a glass of Lemon, Lime & Bitters in her hand, making her way back to the table. She took a sip, told Eddie and Logan she'd basically just won a dance battle against someone's teenage son – *in this dress!* – and dipped out toward the photo booth and the scattering of people staring out at the darkened view. Within seconds, they could no longer see where she'd disappeared to. Logan laughed, and they both realised out of everyone that had been sitting at this table, Jada was enjoying herself the most – and they paused, thinking, why are we just sitting here talking about ourselves?

They knew why, in a sense, although neither of them needed to speak it. They'd have time for dancing, and laughing, and making fools of themselves in front of the wedding videographer. They would have time for that, give it time, but Eddie still knew next to nothing about Logan, and it made him feel self-centered. But not for tonight – he was caught on why, when Maggie said her plus-one was a guy he and Pete hadn't met before, Eddie had halted the enthusiasm right at the idea that maybe Maggie was moving on from those other insane asylum lunatics. It felt, he realised, awkward to focus so extremely on her mistakes – dating them were mistakes, but she'd be patching herself up with every step, he hoped, and still he was looking at Logan half-indulging on the past. It was wrong to, he knew that. He knew he wanted to know more about Logan, and it wasn't selfishly. He hoped.

Logan jokingly said he wouldn't start all the way back at whatever his grandparents had been doing when they were in their 20s, because it was probably just a lot of sex until they popped out

another baby. His dad's parents had eight children, but his mum was an only child, so there must have been a sort of stalemate, he said, grinning, where his parents decided two children was not only enough but meant Logan wouldn't be one to grow up alone. As he started to tell Eddie about his favourite subject in high school – it was Modern History – and about how much he loved his job – he was a primary school teacher, teaching grade four at the moment – Eddie felt that weird rash of guilt again, wishing it was Maggie who was forging this connection with Logan. Guilt, too, for feeling any sort of attraction to someone that is probably just looking to at least leave the wedding with a new friend, a buddy – Eddie felt his skin become rubber. Or jelly that would puddle and pool.

Logan was telling him a story about one of his students, a girl named Aaliyah. She struggled when she was forced to read aloud in another class, so her parents had her moved into his class, hoping that maybe a different teacher could steer her in another direction that didn't involve forcing her to read aloud all the time. But that detail suddenly dropped off an edge and became irrelevant – because the story started once she was his student, and once he was making sure she wasn't struggling like she had been. His story, actually, was about the day she turned up with violet hair. She was beaming, like it wasn't a mistake, or a prank gone wrong – and she walked up to his desk and said, 'my hair's purple now like my mum's, and we're just trying to make my auntie smile, because she became a girl and got fired for it.' Or it was something like that, he said, saying he got an email later in the day too from the student's mum, with a donation link at the bottom and a note mentioning that if the hair colour is against school policy they can dye it right back, but maybe she'd just start wearing purple socks instead.

It made Eddie feel weak, made him feel sympathetic and numb. But he knew it was supposed to only make him feel proud, and he didn't want to think anymore about his past. Parts of it made him shudder, like it took stepping across a frozen lake to reach them again. Maybe he started to regret bringing Calum along to the wedding. Maybe you can accept being alone in a different way, he thought.

He didn't realise he'd just been staring at the table, silent, but he wasn't thinking about Calum anymore, or the girl from Logan's class, or his siblings, wherever they were. He was suddenly thinking about dancing now, about shaking out the cobwebs that were trying to make a mess in his head. Eddie knew he was a pretty ordinary dancer, but he shifted his gaze and caught a clearly tipsy redhead with glasses losing his mind on the dancefloor, so Eddie supposed he at least probably wouldn't poke someone's eye out or break their nose with his elbow.

Logan seemed to read his mind, although it wasn't as if he were being coy with where his mind seemed to be wandering off to. "Do you want to dance with me?" He said, and Eddie looked at him, smiling, as if it were the first time someone was asking him to dance. But he had to remind himself, he's not coming to sweep you off your feet –

Out on the dance floor, little kids were flailing their arms around, almost spinning tops in chaotic whirls, and the bride and groom were letting their hair down, figuratively, because the groom was almost bald. The bride's bare feet hit then left the wooden floor of the reception hall as she bounced off invisible springs. As Eddie moved forward, he switched his phone off, hoping he didn't need to be distracted by it at any time during the rest of the night. Logan and Eddie squeezed into a gap in the crowd, finding their groove amongst the loose and out-of-sync dancing that a song like *The Best* by Tina Turner warrants. Eddie couldn't help himself, mouthing along to the lyrics, barely a footstep away from Logan. Logan would laugh at his dance moves, but Eddie would laugh at his too, the sort of dance moves you'd probably catch the teacher doing at those school discos. Eddie would close his eyes, doing whatever he wanted to do with his body, singing out the words just quiet enough to not drown out the music or sound like he was doing karaoke hands-free, and he would open his eyes, catching Logan staring at him with that grin, a grin that – without words – said...something. He wasn't entirely sure how to read it. He thought, probably, at least Maggie's date – that she wasn't paying any attention to – was having plenty of fun without her. Logan blurted out a "YES!" when the next song started trickling out, and Eddie let the music move his arms, and his legs, and his eyes, everywhere from the ten-year-old kid doing the worm in a corner of the room that was empty to the bride getting a kiss on the cheek from the groom to Logan, moving in front of him, staying.

"The bride has requested another slower song," a bearded man spoke into a microphone, lining up the next track to be played out into the reception hall. It was an updated classic, a cover, made much slower with the singer's deep, potentially auto-tuned voice. Eddie and Logan looked at each other, and without words, they were pressed against each other, and it became virtually impossible for them to not stare into each other's eyes. Logan took the lead.

"So, the three of you brought dates you had no plans of actually dating?"

Eddie laughed, and then he felt himself tense. He thought of it all like he was locked out of the house and his house keys were sitting on a little table in the hallway, just out of reach. And yet he didn't want to go inside, because of flash flooding. *Of course*. He smiled. "Calum's an old friend, so at least I knew him long before the wedding," he said, immediately regretting it.

"Ouch."

"Oh – sorry about that, really," Eddie said, trying to smooth over the pothole.

"It's fine, to be honest. You feel like my date now."

He winked, and he laughed, and he changed the subject.

"I haven't danced like this since...the last wedding I went to, actually." He paused for a moment, before he started to tell Eddie about a wedding he went to with his ex-girlfriend two years



ago. It was a cousin of his, who was getting married. Eddie zoned out a little by the time Logan was describing the wedding but caught the reason why they broke up – she wanted to move to Canada, and he didn't want to leave his family and his home. *Reasonable*, Eddie thought, getting lost in Logan's eyes for a second there. Logan shrugged the past off, and they danced without words as the song drew to a close. They hadn't been paying attention to see if anyone noticed them, or stared or glared, and they didn't care in the slightest, and they had their reasons not to. The bearded man announced it was about to get back to the rave it ought to be, and the crowd did a sort of cheer, halfway between a rowdy exclamation and a whistle. The little kid did a vertical worm this time, thrusting his arms like he was more of a scarecrow out in the fields, forgetting to mind the crops – which meant, more or less, that he accidentally whacked into a couple people that were trying to move past him to sit back down at their tables. Eddie and Logan parted, but they seemed to agree without words that they'd had enough dancing for one night, and they tried to navigate around the little kid, who was singing the lyrics all wrong now, shutting out the world around him.

At the table, Eddie collapsed into his seat, and true to his word, Logan sat back down beside him, taking Calum's spot once again. They caught each other's attention for a moment, before Eddie turned away, watching the bride and groom disappear out the glass doors the opposite end of the reception hall. "Do you want to get breakfast tomorrow morning," Logan offered, drawing Eddie's gaze back to him, back to those emerald-city-in-winter eyes.

It was like they were making brunch dates, but they weren't dating, and what would Maggie even think of this? Eddie tried to distance his sister, because she was distancing herself, anyway.

"I guess we really are abandoning our dates," Eddie said, staring at his empty glass.

Logan cleared his throat. "I don't see them around fighting for us." He chuckled, and Eddie laughed too, waking himself from whatever had been fascinating him with that glass. It was uneventful and empty and there wasn't even a fly clinging with desperation to it, it was just some glass. He was just some stranger, then, he thought to himself – and we've had this amazing night with each other, but all I feel is guilt, guilt, guilt. Eddie tried to clear his head without giving off fresh signs to Logan, like he was trying not to alert the security guards on a prison break.

"I'll hopefully be hungry by then, we'll see," Eddie said, grinning. They took a weird moment to realise they didn't have any way to really contact each other, so they exchanged phones and typed in their phone numbers, and shrugged at each other, saying they might as well add each other on some form of social media too, because it wasn't like they planned on calling each other. They laughed at the world before it had texting and messaging, like all the world had to just hear each other's voices or wait weeks on end for a piece of paper to come in the mail.

The bride and groom were nowhere to be seen, but the celebration raged on, and an elderly man was passed out in the back of the reception hall in a chair pushed against the wall. Eddie and Logan were trying to keep themselves entertained without moving out of the chairs – they figured, were there many games you could play without a single prop, without a single item at all? Eddie laughed through a Never Have I Ever suggestion, telling Logan they could be tipsy teenagers again, getting all worked up over whether someone had their first kiss or not. It made him think about how he'd never been in a room to play Seven Minutes in Heaven, but almost every American tv show about high schoolers seemed to find a way to trap two of its characters in that tiny, cramped closet and force them to confront whatever feelings they had for each other. Sometimes it would be panting, sweaty make outs, and other times they would just aggressively glare at each other, ignoring the very obvious sexual tension between them. Eddie supposed those moments just passed him by, and that was alright – it wasn't like he'd stayed a virgin forever. Eddie couldn't think of anything else, and thought for a split second that maybe weddings needed to have more things to do this late into the night, because how many hours did the bride and groom really think people wanted to dance for?

It was Logan's serious suggestion that won it – Red Hands.

Eddie knew it would probably only entertain them for five minutes, but that little kid out on the dance floor was almost taunting him with his unwavering commitment to grooving his way into the hearts of all the other guests at the wedding. By the time the kid took a break to lie down on the floor, staring at the ceiling, Eddie wasn't paying attention – he was trying to avoid getting slapped by Logan's hands. He was flailing, compared to Logan's swiftness. For every near-miss or slap Eddie would stress through, Logan would avoid Eddie's hands without struggle, and it seemed like the game wasn't even a calculation for him. No wonder he chose it, Eddie thought, not lifting his eyes off the two sets of hands in the middle of the faux arena. And then what seemed like the impossible – Eddie's hands collided with Logan's, his lightning reflexes somehow off-guard. He felt like a child for cheering – they were playing a game for children, after all – but he celebrated his victory, breaking off the game for a split second. Their hands didn't part, and Eddie caught Logan staring back at him with those eyes.

It would have been the briefest of moments between them. But, caught in the moment, their faces inched closer together and not a single brain cell changed their minds, and they kissed.

Immediately after, Logan withdrew his hands back away and closed his eyes.

“Second time I've kissed a guy at a wedding,” he said, shaking his head, laughing the decision off. He took a second to regroup himself, and then he added, “Neither time was the worst thing I've ever done, but the first time was a definite joke, at least.”

Eddie sat in that chair in silence. He felt, first, a very strange embarrassment, like everyone at the wedding was watching someone dump pig's blood over his head. But then he felt a cool, calm wave

rush over his body, and he felt inside the ocean, not floating atop it, but inside it. Underneath the surface, down in the depths, sinking to the bottom but he could breathe, he had gills. He was human with gills – he wasn't a mermaid; it didn't feel like a fantasy like that.

He exhaled out. "Look, I think that's just my fault," he said, glancing at Logan.

"It takes two people to kiss."

"You came to the wedding with my sister."

"I've never felt lonelier than how it felt realising she asked me here to just disappear after dinner, and to barely talk to me at all in between." Logan was staring at him like he was pleading a case, and Eddie was looking back feeling like he wanted to just pass out and fall asleep on the curb tonight, like he was warranted a bad night's rest after this night. He was projecting a nightmare, and the projection was a life-like replica.

"Can we go outside, please?" Eddie said, casting a quick glance around the reception hall. No one was looking at him, every single other person was distracted by something else, but he wanted fresh air, and he didn't want to abandon Logan to be all by himself.

Logan was happy to join him under the moonlit sky.

"This entire time, once Maggie disappeared – and there she was, outside, standing with Jada while she smoked a cigarette – this entire time, you've felt like my date, I wasn't lying about that," Logan said, as they walked side by side out the gates from the wedding venue and down the road. "I've had a really great night, and stupidly, I forgot who I was, who you were, where we were – all that."

The heartbeat of the wedding, the ear-numbing music, blared from somewhere behind them, and it slowly started to drown out with each step. There was space between them, a sort of courtesy to keep them from stumbling into each other and having to apologise for another thing.

Eddie was smiling to himself at this point, staring out at bushes and the darkened night sky. "Stupidly, the gay guy thinks he stands a chance with someone pretending to be instantly close with him." He laughed at himself, taking a second to look beside him, hoping Logan wasn't stopped dead in his tracks laughing right at him too.

"I still want to have breakfast with you tomorrow," Logan said.

"But it's not a date." Eddie grinned, and then without pause, his gut twisted in on itself.

Sometimes, they've said, you can find love at a wedding. Sometimes the best man is caught with his pants around his ankles, and he's in there doing the nasty with one of the bridesmaids, and then he might call her the next day, or he might never see her face again. Under the moonlight, Logan was looking at Eddie with an expression that wasn't readable. Eddie was piecing together a puzzle that left him feeling nauseous and thinking cold, hard concrete could be comfortable.

Because, of course, Pete and Calum were probably locked up in the rental, making banging noises and not worrying about muffling their moans.

It didn't make him feel anything though, which was a relief. A strange feeling, really. He could draw on that numbness if he needed to, and it became a side-kick in the inevitable – he knew he'd spent all night betting on odds that seemed impossible. Logan would go back to his schoolteacher life, staying on dating apps looking for a girlfriend to take away the feelings lost on his ex, and Eddie would just have a new friend he could maybe make plans to hang out with again, but it would be different this time, them laughing off that kiss they shared at a wedding, or never mentioning it ever again. It was strange. But he was hungry, too.

They walked for far too long into the night, forgetting where they were. Somewhere behind them was a wedding they no longer cared about, but it meant something, at least.

Eddie thought it meant something that their kiss wasn't a joke, even though to him it felt like it had been. A cruel prank. But it wasn't, he knew that too, because he wasn't in high school anymore and surely Logan hadn't just spent his entire night bullying him like that.

But he didn't know what else to say about it, so all that replayed in his head was how he told Logan he thought he stood a chance, and “but it's not a date”, and the dance they shared, and Red Hands. It was a lot to shuffle through, a medley of hits. Hits and misses, no doubt.

## Swing II

He was too busy being distracted by the sudden *thum* in his pocket to realise Calum was downing the rest of his drink without a hesitation, clinking the glass down on the wood of the bar. It was a notification, so there was a chance Pete was getting something completely unimportant, but he couldn't change his mind once he started thumbing around for a tight grip on the phone in his pocket. He read the notification in his head, a message from a coworker, actually his second-in-charge.

Pete glanced up for a second, noticing the empty glass. “Did you want another drink?” He asked, trying to hold Calum's focus while he tried to process the message. She'd caught something, but not like she was in the stands at a cricket match – he could almost hear her pause, in between upchucks into the toilet, to type out the message she'd sent through. She was supposed to be in charge tomorrow, too, but now his head spun trying to piece together *something*. He shoved his phone into his pocket, clinging onto the bitter taste in his mouth – he'd barely registered that Calum said he was fine, that he'd need another drink later, after he'd dragged Pete out onto the dance floor.

“Should we make it a private dance floor,” Pete said, as more of a suggestion than a question, as he glanced over at the other guests at the wedding, and there was his brother, Eddie, sitting at the table still, talking innocently with Maggie’s date, Logan. The four of them had driven the two hours together – Pete and Jada up front, Maggie and Logan in the backseat. Pete made jokes at the start, when they were merging onto the highway – don’t get too touchy-feely back there, you too. But he’d watched them spend most of the wedding so far as two people that just happened to be sitting beside each other, so it warmed him, a little, to see that Logan wasn’t just twiddling his thumbs or drowning the thoughts out at the bar. In the car, at least they had seemed to be chatting, and playing I Spy out the windows to waste the time – like he and Jada had been, although sporadically, mostly just talking about work and Pete would try to haphazardly explain how the three siblings had kept enough of a friendship with Alicia to be invited to her wedding. From the backseat, Maggie had piped in, reminding him Alicia had probably invited them *because* she was inviting Maggie, but after an hour and a half, she waved that decision out the window and said something more along the lines of “maybe her other old neighbours just didn’t want to drive two hours to see her in a white dress.” The sudden pessimism came from somewhere, and Pete knew it – when they’d stopped to let her out to use the toilet, she’d come back a changed person, gripping her phone in her hand and asking they just drive off now. A six-foot-two man with dirt brown hair refueling beside them stared at them as they left the petrol station, but the only person in the car to notice him was Jada, staring out the passenger seat window. She hesitated, weirdly, thinking about waving to him – but it made no sense to her, she was just bored, having grown tired of talking about whatever came to mind while she watched other cars sit at the same speed beside theirs.

Pete and Calum found their quiet spot out in the compact parking lot that only managed to house five cars – one, of course, was the tackily-strung wedding car, although they hadn’t painted the words “Just Married” anywhere on the vehicle. Streamers, though, dangled limply and seemed like future ocean décor more than anything. In the middle of the greyed concrete, they stood with only inches between them, and they didn’t dance. Pete leant in and kissed him, keeping his tongue at bay, for now. The stars had eyes and were peering down on the two men, who might’ve stripped off their clothes in the open, in the cool air, if their hands didn’t stop them.

It would’ve been a moment with flash if this were a movie.

“I was scared about thinking you were bi,” Calum said, their hands retracting from each other. They felt awkward holding each other when they weren’t kissing, at least out where a million eyes seemed to be casting their gaze on them. Calum couldn’t retract his stare, at least. Pete didn’t even contemplate it. He was forgetting what was left dangling in his pocket, too.

Calum paused before he spoke again, his voice soft but without that fear. “Eddie told me on the drive here, but he said you were bringing a date, a woman, so I let it shift away without a thought.” He was, inside his head, trying to contend with two parts to the whole – one side wanted to be logical, wanted to make it all like he were presenting a pitch, but the other side had spent part of an unusual night getting to know a man taller than him, probably more dominant in bed than he was, and a definite top, at least, again, another assumption he made just by studying his eyes and the way he had been acting all night. He supposed that both sides of his brain were being methodical, in their own turned-on sense. He couldn’t deny their chemistry made the hair on his arms quiver.

Pete couldn’t help but grin. “Jada and I are just friends,” he said, and like he was an animated character, Calum’s eyes lit up. Pete didn’t want to linger on his love life too much – he hadn’t tried to date someone in a couple of years, and he couldn’t even exactly pinpoint what caused him to shut out the idea – there was no incredibly traumatic break up, no fiancé that abandoned him at the altar, no true string of horrible dates, although horrible dates were something the two Garvey brothers seemed to have in common. Maggie liked to pretend she never seemed to go on a ‘horrible’ date – but when one of her relationships fell apart, she’d admit with a Cherry Ripe in her hand that all the men she usually goes on first dates with have the charm of a cult leader when she meets them. They do their dirty work later on, when she’s let her guard down.

Pete didn’t want to be thinking about his sister right now, why was he? He refocused on Calum, standing right there in front of him, who just told him he wouldn’t mind kissing him again, and maybe again, maybe even again? “Oh, really?” He said, and their lips met again, and Pete thought about his tongue, and then he thought about Calum out of that suit, even though he thought he looked incredible in it. He pictured what Calum’s butt would look like without fabric covering it. He could feel his dick getting harder in his pants, and imagining what might be running through Calum’s head if he brushed against it made him hornier than he had been all day. He’d woken up in bed alone, because they’d split the cost on a room with two beds, but he laid there in just a pair of black boxers with Jada’s soft breathing in the other corner of the room, and he’d thought about jumping out of bed to masturbate in the bathroom after he shimmied past the wonky door. His dick throbbed in the boxers, but he didn’t move from the bed, stuck thinking she’d wake up and hear him anyway, and be plain grossed out by the *thwip-thwip* from behind the closed door, as if he were just Spider-Man in the sheets.

Pete planted one last kiss on Calum’s lips before whispering, “I can’t imagine the bride and groom need tucking in.” It was his breath against Calum’s ear that made them abandon the parking lot without question, and they stepped outside the gates searching around for where they had parked Pete’s car earlier in the day. It stood out behind a Mazda that was parked awkwardly half up the curb, his four-wheel-drive the colour of the surface of a lake at midnight. He’s had sex in this car twice, with the same

guy, but tonight wouldn't be a third time that would break the streak. Pete felt around for the keys in his pocket to unlock the car, eyeing the other male as he sidled up beside the passenger door, quicker on his feet than Pete would've thought – but he supposed Eddie had been right, Calum had come to the wedding with intentions, whether they be cruel or not, after all.

There couldn't be anything too cruel in lust, he thought as he slipped the seatbelt over his torso and buckled himself in. Always the first thing he did when he hopped in a car, no matter what. Beside him, Calum was fiddling with his, slower and almost seductive, but Pete realised he must've just been imagining that every little move the other male made was in an effort to oil him up and strip him down. He twisted the key in the ignition, and they drifted further away from the wedding and closer to a darkened bedroom of the rental Calum and Eddie were sharing.

Pete felt around for the light switch in the main room of the rental, illuminating what stood in front of them for only a moment – when he suddenly remembered why they were here, he switched the light back off, moving around in the darkness like it were a memory game. Calum, right behind him, uttered almost-silent warnings right before Pete was about to stub his toe. It was a little messy, until they stumbled into the bedroom with each other in their arms, and their lips pressed against lips, and Pete's tongue down Calum's throat. Calum kicked the door closed with his feet. They couldn't just tear each other's clothes off – but Calum had started to strip himself down as they made a path toward the bedroom, his suit jacket thrown somewhere limply. He unbuttoned Pete's shirt, pausing to plant kisses down his hairy chest, and then the button-up was flung into a corner, and moonlight caught on Pete's naked torso. He had been skimping on going to the gym lately, but his figure was nothing to complain about. Calum started to unbuckle Pete's belt without much of a glance downwards – his eyes drifted between Pete's chest and his eyes, until he was swept up into a kiss and the belt almost tumbled out of his hands. They were both shirtless now, and Pete was slipping out of his pants, revealing a pair of mauve boxer-briefs. His cock bulged out against his leg, and without a moment's hesitation Calum had a hand wrapped around it, pulling down his underwear with his free hand. He took Pete's six-and-a-half-inch cock in his mouth, bobbing his head back and forth, his knees now scratching against the cedarwood floor. Pete ran his fingers through the kneeling male's hair, then gripped to it, thrusting him faster as he heard Calum made no sound to come out like complaining. Pete closed his eyes.

The next time he kept them open for longer than thirty seconds, they were moving from the door toward the bed, and Calum was dropping his pants at a rate he was jealous of – no struggle, no stumbling around like his knee was caught in an invisible crease. Calum stripped until he was naked, and stood in the moonlight, his dick shorter than Pete's, but thicker. Pete moved to him, and they kissed for the first time both completely nude, their skin meeting with skin. There was an intensity to their touch.

Pete cupped Calum's butt with both hands, and he craved to skip the waiting, skip everything that could be skipped and feel his cock slide inside of Calum. With a glance at the bedside table from the shorter male, Pete slipped his hand into the drawer, pulled out a wrapped-up condom that he hoped was just his size, and let himself exhale for even just thirty seconds. He listened to the silences, and somewhere behind him, he suspected Calum was standing expectantly with his hand on his own dick, stroking it softly to keep it standing to attention.

They knelt down opposite each other on the bed, the covers tossed frantically to the floor. A short kiss broke off after only a few seconds, and Calum let out a high moan, a cue for something else, something more. Pete wasn't gentle with himself, thumping down on the sheets with his throbbing cock sticking upward like it were the North Pole in a rugged tundra. Calum knew what to do. He began sliding his smooth ass against Pete's dick, playing out little sounds, eager little noises for how desperately he wanted to be pummeled by the taller male. And then he slid down, feeling the six-and-a-half-inches penetrate him, a euphoria beyond anything he'd witnessed today, or the day before. Calum rode up and down, forgetting all manners that would ask for an inside voice, his screams intense and lustful. He couldn't care if someone heard him, or shunned him, or turned up their television on him. There was always an intensity to how he felt when he was being fucked, a feeling he couldn't describe, and he wanted to bounce on a pounding cock like his for the rest of his life.

Pete had his eyes closed, letting the other male do most of the work – but it seemed natural, as he listened to Calum's heavy breathing adjacent to his moans and to the slapping sound as his butt cheeks hit against Pete's crotch. Sometimes he would thrust himself deeper inside of Calum, and the other male would let out a groan, a passionate groan, and Pete would open his eyes and see Calum turning his head. They would make eye-contact, and it would linger, and Pete would make a comment he thought was sexy – something like 'you're so hot', or 'fuck yes', or 'I'm gonna cum inside you'.

He had to slap away a sudden image of his brother burned into the back of his eyelids – Eddie coming into the rental, flicking on all the lights, exposing them bare naked in the bedroom fucking each other's brains out. He didn't want to think about his fucking brother – and he slapped Calum's thigh, and he became hornier to block out the idea of getting interrupted, and he blurted out that they should change things up and change position.

Pete tried not to squish Calum under his weight as he bore down on top of him, thrusting his cock inside of him once more. He knew he wasn't hurting him – but something gnawing at his brain made him suddenly self-conscious, far more than he thought Calum could ever be. The other male handled everything with a lustful ease, moaning brashly as Pete thrust back and forth, and roles were reversed, to a degree – he was no longer able to just relax back and close his eyes, but it made him focused, and alert, and he felt himself inch closer and closer toward finishing. The tension in his



shoulders had disappeared, replaced with blood that burned like fire. He planted his wet lips on Calum's mouth, their tongues almost twisting together. Pete forgot everything about where he was. All he knew was the sweat and the panting of the man beneath him. He thrust his cock deeper and felt himself climax into the condom. Moonlight danced on his sweaty torso. He exhaled louder than he had all day, but for a few moments he didn't move, staring down at Calum, whose mouth lay half-open.

Pete rolled off of Calum and collapsed down beside him, reaching with his left hand for the other male's still erect cock. He began thrusting it back and forth, up, down, his hand gliding against Calum's foreskin. Calum let out another soft moan. Stringy squirts of cum spouted out and onto his bare stomach, and coated Pete's hand, and they both fell silent. It was a relax, lying there naked with their legs brushed up against each other's. Neither really contemplated moving, until Pete fidgeted with the condom, slipping it off and tying it up, and the moment of absolute nothing seemed to have passed. But Pete lingered in the doorway, gesturing with his sticky-white hand, "Want to join me in the shower?" He said, and Calum grinned at him, leaping out of bed.

After they showered together, they collapsed back on the messed bed in only their underwear, and Calum inched closer toward Pete until they were cuddled up. Calum traced a hand through the hair on Pete's chest. They forgot, for even just that moment, that they were strangers not so long ago, and that this wasn't forever. But the idea of them together forever scared them both, so it came circling back around, threatening their bubble. This was still a stranger – and where you could expect their minds were a million miles apart, they weren't. Both were wondering if this weekend would be the first and last time they saw each other, and the surprising relief that came from that, never having to worry over the stresses like going out on dates, and falling in love, and trying not to hate one another. In each other's arms, they were strangely excited to let this be unique, but their expressions hid this out of sight, and Pete, with his eyes locked on the ceiling, paused to whisper, "I could go for a nap."

Five minutes later, while Calum got himself a glass of water, Pete scrolled through the newsfeed on his phone. He was ignoring the text message from Lena, mostly. He'd reread it as soon as Calum left the room, but he couldn't come up with a response that wouldn't have sounded disingenuous – he didn't want to just reply back with something half-heartedly wishing her back to good health, but he had sent that anyway, because the part he was really ignoring was how on earth the store was going to cope without either of them there. He just wanted to call every other employee scheduled for tomorrow and tell them to stay home, they wouldn't open, people can go one day at least without needing activewear or a basketball or whatever else they wanted. He was halfway through checking who was rostered on tomorrow when Calum came back into the room, carrying the glass of water. He set it down on the bedside table and climbed back into bed, slipping underneath the sheet.

He darted over to his messages and typed out a quick apology to his brother. He'd realised when they stumbled into the rental that it was only a one-bedroom, probably to save on the expenses. Eddie and Calum were close friends, so they mustn't have cared about sleeping in the same bed – but now that bed smelled like their sex. He waited for a few seconds for a reply, but got nothing yet, and so he returned his attention finally back to Calum, who was taking another sip from the glass.

They talked for some time, about the trivial sort of thing you would've expected to happen at the wedding, and not in bed after they've just had sex. But a weight of sorts had been lifted between them – the will-they, won't they of whether they would have sex after all had, well, climaxed. Pete felt more comfortable with Calum than he would have anticipated – so, then, his lips parted and his mind had already decided the words before he could have realised.

"I've been having sex with Eddie," he said, watching for Calum's reaction. Calum didn't move – he was studying Pete, too, but for a different reason. He supposed he was searching out to see if Pete had suddenly morphed into a perverted weirdo that enjoyed passing through whatever bloodline could have been a barrier – but he saw Pete no differently now, knowing this truth now, if he continued to believe it. He paused as Pete's lips parted, waiting for more, and he realised he wasn't entirely disturbed – who was he to judge, when he's gone home some nights and searched through the gay tabs for simpatico stepdad-stepson porn. Calum tottered between thoughts – and so did Pete.

Calum had to admit to himself he didn't know how to respond.

"Does it make me a fool for saying I love my brother more than I've ever loved anyone else?" Pete paused once he finished, knowing it would've come out as if he had crazed romantic feelings for Eddie. But he understood what he meant in his head, and tried to explain it more to Calum, who listened without too much judgement. What he meant – his brother would always have his back, and perhaps now they shared a bond that transcended what he had with Maggie, but they were both responsible for that and didn't regret it, at least that was what he believed. Eddie never seemed to express a regret for it either – but Pete tried to settle things before he started becoming an anxious freak – pull an Eddie – and worry Calum was trying to collect all this information on him to start a smear campaign. He could already imagine how neighbours would react, or how friends would, or anyone at work. Alicia would start cropping out the Garvey siblings from any of the wedding photos, no doubt. It was a wonder she had invited them after all, he mused again, and suddenly his mother was sitting beside him in the row at the wedding ceremony, instead of Jada. His mother, wearing white at a wedding no doubt, scolding him still for all of his failings, brandishing the baseball bat in her left hand. His mother, and now his father too, parents risen from the grave, ogling him but he didn't feel an overwhelming anxiety. He was, oddly, letting it all wash over him, and maybe it felt like his eyes had

rolled all the way back in his head, but he breathed out. He breathed out and looked calmly at Calum beside him in bed.

“Everyone’s going to think you two are disgusting if they know,” Calum said, as if he had read into Pete’s thoughts, but he was a minute slow.

“I should go,” Pete said, starting to slide out of bed. But Calum gripped to his shoulders, spinning him back around with the strength he had, although Pete became light and feathery in his hands. They were once again staring into each other’s eyes, but there was no malice. There was an uncertainty, of course, but the uncertainty had been there between them all night. The uncertainty had only disappeared when they were having sex, but otherwise it clung to them like another pair of hands on their waists. Calum couldn’t tell what he wanted, or needed, to say. But he thought he would regret it all if he didn’t at least keep an ear for his curiosity, for him to understand why the two brothers had started having a sexual relationship. He had an otherwise dull life to contend with, and he’d spent all night at the wedding edging Pete to have sex with him, so maybe he could end the night on some note that felt not like he was just thinking of life as serving to what everyone is told to serve to.

“Don’t go,” he said, and it sounded without a tinge of selfishness.

Calum drew Pete into a tight hug, and it all felt out of place, but he thought he understood.

Pete was left without words. He wanted to talk to Eddie, to talk about...something. He thought about the night that they buried their mother. They hadn’t spoken a word to each other, and they hadn’t had a proper conversation until around 12pm the next day. They’d talked a little about the sex, of course, but they didn’t want it to end, even now that another ghost would be watching down on them. People would be judging them. But neither of them wanted a big, lavish wedding yet, they didn’t want kids or to settle down and they didn’t give a fuck what other people thought of them. They were giving up on dating, at least for now, so they’d invited dates to this wedding that were old friends, people they could count on to not get wound up on the chance of being their soulmate – because Pete and Eddie had pretty much given up completely on ever finding someone to be with like that. They don’t need the romance now, they don’t need the mystery and the new things learnt and the dates to romantic places like restaurants and little cruises down the river. It struck him just like that – they wanted what they had, someone they could rely on and trust and never feel scared of, never feel the way Maggie would end up feeling constantly with her boyfriends that deserved the penalty of death, and then, truthfully, they did want the sex. They both knew it would topple one day, and one of them would find someone to start a proper life with – but they thought, was it so disgusting if it wasn’t hurting anyone? They couldn’t exactly accidentally give birth to a deformed baby.

It had started like it was a cyclone blowing in – and maybe it would end that way, too, but he couldn’t be certain. He checked his messages – nothing new had come through, but of course it hadn’t,

he would have heard the vibration. He had felt so often lately that he was on some other plane entirely. All he wanted was the happiness and safety of his brother, and of his sister, too. But things were meant to go sideways when they were meant to go sideways, and Pete knew just one last thing: he would be waking up tomorrow morning and want to be driving off home far, far away from this wedding without a second thought, and he realised in that moment he likely wouldn't get that godmother wish.

### **Swing III**

Out of the corner of her eye, Maggie noticed someone was watching her.

He was tall, muscular, with a sleeve of tattoos she wanted to trace over with her fingers, asking him what each drawing or illustration meant to him. Sometimes a guy would look at her, straight-faced, and say something she thought was so silly, like 'this dolphin is my mother, because she is part of my pod more than anyone else could be'. But in those moments she would feel herself recoil, feel herself realise the sensitivity was what she should admire – and the muscle man would seem more human to her. Dolphins – she thought, ignoring this man perched in the corner of her eye, moving away from the bathroom door. She was stomaching the bloated feeling that had come on from the three-course meal – ignoring someone, or a multitude of someones, really, was a form of aid like a bandage more than anything.

She cut a glance at the tattooed man that had been in her periphery – but he was no longer looking her way, and she talked it to up to the little booze in her system that he'd ever been staring at her anyway. The likely story, she thought, readjusting the strap of her thin peach-coloured purse, was that she was paranoid about something else. The tattooed man was standing with two other men, at least one of them was one of the best men, although she couldn't exactly remember – all she remembered was noticing that the groom had very attractive friends, or brothers, and then she'd looked away out of fear of any one of them getting the wrong idea. It bummed her out to feel like that – that a shared glance might mean they would stumble over and hit on her, or try, and she'd tear herself in two trying to decide if she would go home with some stranger again or keep playing against her type, take herself home instead. Maggie found it simple to forget they were there – but it was difficult, then, to suddenly see Logan still sitting down at the table in the reception hall, chatting away to her brother.

On the toilet, she'd berated herself in her head.

You stupid asshole.

You're pathetic for inviting him.

You won't even let him fuck you.

You can just close your eyes.

She'd started to imagine the expressions on people's faces if they discovered her passed out on the toilet like some dead drugged-up celebrity. An image of herself dressed like Elvis flashed in her head, and she almost convulsed right there on the porcelain. She saw a series of mental images flash around, circulate, a zoetrope of every single tumble. She tore off a length of toilet paper, far more than she needed, but it wasn't the length she even cared about – it felt like a revolt, ripping at paper, and she'd spent weeks, or months, or longer, who could say, she had spent all this time wanting to destroy things, smash something and then something else. The toilet paper was a nothing action, especially out in public, and she'd imagine this place could afford all the toilet paper in the world, but it was a release, of sorts. She thought about sitting back down beside Logan and doing herself a favour, getting to know him beyond the times they texted each other, the couple dates they went on, or the conversations they'd had in the car.

But as she stood watching him, she could have been in his periphery instead. He was laughing at Eddie's jokes, he was smiling at Eddie, he seemed infinitely happier than he had been in any of those moments they shared together – and Maggie felt her heels tighten against her toes. She saw a flash of herself fleeing barefoot, and the colour of the dress mattered little, it was the fleeing that counted for everything.

Outside, where the wind would tickle the back of her neck, there were two other guests huddled beside each other already, both with a cigarette in between their lips. She considered the girl she'd become if she let herself solve her problems with a puff, or one hundred puffs, and with the worst mental image she turned around away from them before the shorter of the two, a woman in her late 40s with charcoal-black hair down past her shoulders, blew out what might've been a rhinoceros in the smoke. Out of everyone's way, standing in a square patch of grass, Maggie slipped off her heels and left them to imprint beside her feet. She didn't writhe her toes around, pretending it was the first time she'd stepped barefoot in such a softness, but she sighed, the sort of sound she used to make when she'd collapsed into a window seat on the train after any day in the city for university. Sometimes, back then, she imagined the future as her head toppling off her body, a public decapitation. There was some ancient folklore she would conjure up like it were a spell of protection, a tale about a woman with a ribbon around her neck, but she couldn't properly remember anything else about it, and she didn't mind that. It was the insignia that Maggie clung to, the idea that she had no ribbon to fear of, to keep tied around her pale throat. Sometimes she would scratch at the bare skin where she thought a ribbon could have been – she wore turtlenecks and scarves for a month or two in her third year at university, and she'd sighed, because it was winter, and no one would notice.

Going through her purse, Maggie pulled out her phone and shuffled through some of the pictures – there were selfies, sure, but photographs of nature too, from little trips she would take with ex-boyfriends where she was lost and distracted in green, and blue, and not the colour of their skin or their hair, or the bright or the dull of their clothes. Haphazardly placed among a sea of green was a snapshot that pulled her right back into the past – it was him, Jett, kissing her on the cheek. Maybe subconsciously she knew she was being drawn back in to stare at that picture, after she'd rescued it from the Deleted folder about a week and a half after they broke up. His eyes were closed and she still wanted to stick knives in them. She shoved her phone into her purse, covering her mouth with her hand.

You can let it out, a voice in her head whispered to her.

As long as what you're letting out is your vomit, girl.

Come on, puke.

Be disgusting, you should know how to be disgusting.

The smokers weren't on the lurk, watching out for her, when she'd made her way back to the balcony porch that wrapped around the reception hall. In a small crowd near the doors, a blonde woman wearing an olive-green dress was rocking her child back and forth, lulling him to sleep. Maggie hadn't noticed how many children were at the wedding until that moment – suddenly she thought she must have been imagining a few to fill in gaps in the empty space, and tried settling herself back down from the cliff that was her thinking she had been looking over all their little baby heads during the ceremony. She didn't want to think that one was sitting behind her then, kicking at her back, making her jolt forward instead of cry, instead of beam and smile.

Splinters can come easy. Maggie used to believe something her uncle told her, with a look of fear he concocted in his eyes. He said, splinters can come easy, when you rest your arms on the wood and start snooping on what your neighbours are getting up to. When she started understanding things – things like sex, and what neighbours could be getting up to – she thought her uncle was a perv that bore his arm down on the wood while he masturbated to the neighbours fucking in their bedroom. Her uncle had made some joke, some seemingly unrelated joke another night, that the neighbours didn't like curtains. When she got her period, Maggie steered clear of her uncle, and she stopped being terrified of splinters, mostly.

She was leaning on the wood when Jada tapped her on the shoulder with her free hand.

“Your brother might have a thing for your date,” she said, with a high little laugh. She set her Lemon, Lime & Bitters down on the railing and leant against it beside Maggie, the two of them staring out at the world together. The small piece of the world that belonged to the wedding venue.

“Eddie?” Maggie said, pausing. It hinged inside her stomach that she never asked Logan whether he was only interested in women, or if he was bisexual, but she expelled it all out – it never mattered to her, anyway, and here she was avoiding him for most of the night. She felt cruel for convincing herself it didn’t matter. Her brain had the twist locked in – he was nobody, not while Jett loomed over her shoulder like puppet master with his strings.

Jada smiled off Maggie’s blank stare. “I think we’re all everywhere tonight though,” she said, turning back to the darkness. “You’ve been a vanishing act.”

She could feel the silences in her voice, the accusations other people have cast off on her when she’d disappear into the bathroom for what they considered too long. Jada watched to see if Maggie noticed too, to see if she suddenly acted completely different, compelled by what it means to be called the vanishing woman – but then she felt another sentence tired of waiting its turn.

“Tell me you want to be alone, and I’ll leave.”

Maggie found herself becoming part of the wood, like it was her roots, and she sought out the comfort in it more than she would have growing up. There was something she wanted to call spite that tied them together, woman and wood. Woman and dead tree. She shook herself from it just long enough to respond to Jada, to not appear completely taken away through a hollow.

“Really weird question,” she said, her gaze lingering on Jada’s dark face. “Can I have some of that, your drink?” In her voice was only pure curiosity – Maggie supposed she was thirsty, and the effort to dance through the crowd inside for something, she couldn’t even figure out what, made her feel lethargic. But here was a drink.

Jada glanced at her, at first in understated shock, and then the corners of her lips rose up, and her smile became familiar as she pressed her hand to the cool glass. “Don’t down it,” she said, miming as if to slide the glass across the railing. Maggie wet her lips with citrus. There was a strong aftertaste of alcohol, more than she expected, and she winked, the sort of wink that said, *that was just what I needed*. Bitter is the taste in your mouth that has never left. She thought of the winding scribble that encapsulated her list of subjects and objects that would pair well with lemon and lime. Yellow, green and distaste the colour of her first period, and every subsequent period, every single full stop.

The abortion.

She sets the glass down. Her fingerprints are left at every scene of the crime. A blink and the colour swilled in the glass was nothing she didn’t expect, and she wondered if the sharper taste she swallowed was a figment of the con. Heart protecting heart. Maybe I’m losing my mind, she thought, and she felt like she was losing her mind for thinking she was losing her mind. Jada had been telling her about a production of a play from the 80s that was being put on in a few months, and Maggie had drifted out of focus for a moment, thinking about big hair and shoulder pads and Wake Me Up Before You Go-

Go, which she assumed was from the 80s and thought about digging around for her phone in her purse to check, to be sure.

She eased herself back into the conversation, but the subject was changing. “Do you think it’s foolish to be in love?” All I do is ask questions, she thought, but she didn’t retract it. Jada was mulling the question over as if swishing wine in a glass, careful, considerate, delicate. Here was a woman asking her whether it would be a more logical choice to free out some storage space in her heart. Make room for emotions like nonchalance and indifference. She thought of something, it noticeable on her face, and then she pressed a hand to the cool of the glass again before she spoke.

“I think it’s foolish to not try,” she said, breathing out an invisible thread. It dangled in space. It wanted to latch onto another, someone like Maggie, but it kept dangling in space and time. Jada was noticing it silently, patiently.

Maggie bit the thread with her teeth.

“I’ve been foolish,” she said, as if she were confessing in church. She didn’t know that feeling, how it existed or didn’t exist, the sorts of things other sinners would confess. She felt herself a sinner, although she couldn’t be certain what her most egregious sin was.

Thinking about sin made her glance to Jada’s lips. It would be cruel, she thought, if it was all the pure straight Garvey kids that had died, and the sinners were left to fend off the world with all their baggage. But she couldn’t say why she was doubting her sexuality at this wedding – something about the touting of true love and sacrifice and forever and ever that made her think she could pretend to be lusting after a woman if it meant she could find a workable *forever and ever*. Love is about sacrifice, she read in a thought bubble like she was reading giant block letters on a billboard above her head.

Love is being invited to a wedding you could’ve skipped.

That felt wrong in her head, though, what with how every interaction she’d had with Alicia since she moved away being completely an out-of-body experience that she can barely remember.

Love is getting married when that could’ve been skipped.

Jada smirked, stifling a small laugh. “I would have turned away from you if you tried to tell me you’re some brain scientist with every decision you make.”

“I barely passed through university, and I barely know why I did it,” Maggie said.

“The pressure, right?”

“To pass, or to do it?” Maggie asked, thumbing the wooden railing.

“Both, I guess.”

Jada let out an elongated breath, something of a sigh without the collapse of the shoulders, or any sort of movement that would have made her seem overly animated, complete the opposite of who she is. She shifted slightly on the spot.



“For hours, it’s been a joke that I’m here,” she said, without glancing back for Maggie’s attention. “Maybe I would care more if I could tell Pete cared to be here, at this wedding, but he was so unfocused through it all I started to think he invited me to dry work training from when I worked with him.” She paused, as if to pick back up again, but in the next moment she shook it off and rested her arms down on the wood.

“It was a pretty ordinary ceremony.”

“It’s not only that.”

“I know what you mean. I could be at home in bed with leftovers and an amount of alcohol I can’t be judged for when I’m alone, but I guess I came here instead.”

“Pete told me he was surprised you got in the car,” Jada said, pausing.

Maggie exhaled. “He’s protective.”

“You know none of us belong here.”

“It’s always so funny to me when people are like, I belong here, like you always just think of that joke stupid shows make with the whole *oh, I don’t see your name written on this floor!* Well, I always think of that. I’m glad you feel like your name is written in the corner of the room in mouse font, or under a floorboard, or something.”

Jada takes a sip from the glass, the ice melting into condensation. “Let’s tear up the floor,” she said, her voice without a hint of sarcasm.

“But you know what I mean,” Maggie seemed to ask, although it came out less a question than her committing to herself, to what she’d just said to her audience of one.

“Do you feel like you belong within yourself?”

The question shocked Maggie, only in that she rarely heard someone ask her something like that. It always felt on the exterior – where are you in the world, do you see where you might belong in our company? But she always thought about herself. Remember the ribbon.

“Shouldn’t I, because I can’t see myself jumping out of my skin,” she said, unconvinced.

Jada was stuck staring out into the nothingness. “I used to work with my father,” she began, as if she were delivering her story to some floating, invisible specter. “He worked in a different department, though, so it felt more like I was on the same train as he was, but he would depart at a different station before mine.” She straightened out her back, as if he were there, reminding her to. “The work was boring, and I lasted maybe six months. But while I was there, my grandfather’s brother died. I suppose our relationship was distant, but in his last, maybe, three years, he spent a lot of time with my grandfather.” She paused, clearing her throat.

“In those three years, he was there a lot of the time when I visited my grandparents. He told me about the time he worked for a white man that could not see past his race. Maybe his name was John,

maybe he thought he owned the whole company. My grandfather's brother, he told me, when they start to lace their compliments with slurs, you find your way the hell out of there."

Jada turned to Maggie with a muted smile. "The day I said I quit, I thought of him. I was hoping my dad was happier where he was, but I'd been spending six months taking a job that was chewing me up and spitting me out." She sighed, taking another sip from the glass, before she continued. "I was out of work for three months before I started working with your brother. You take the opportunities you get, sure, but you find your reasons for believing in your mind and your body, always."

Out on the grass beyond the porch, the evening wind tugged at an unmoving mowed lawn. Maggie would've loved to have seen something move, thrust about under starlight, but not even a twin pair of moths found the cool. It was empty, and it was dull, with her back turned away from the glow of the wedding party, but she had listened to every word Jada had spoken and was assessing her own damage. Beside her, Jada was finishing off her drink, the glass wetting her palm.

"Some days I'm so afraid of being a woman," Maggie let out, like popping a balloon. She felt herself deflate for a moment, and then expand back again, her ends tying up once more.

Jada was caught off-guard. "I don't see either of us lasting as a man, though," she said, setting the glass back down, wiping her icy hand across the edge of the wooden railing.

"I want my body, and my mind, but not my heart, sometimes." Maggie felt it thrash in her chest in response, a child unloved.

It makes her think of children. "I don't know how to see myself as a mother, even more now that mine is covered up with dirt and can't do anything about how she tormented me but called it tough love," Maggie said, clutching to the edge of the railing. Her voice had shaken when she said the t-word, both of them, as if they were uneven scales fluctuating between tipping down or tipping up. They sagged down. She caught a glimpse of her mother in hospital, in one of the photographs in her baby album. Day One of Maggie, there she is, being cradled in her mother's arms swaddled in a sickly-pale green that had long since ceased pretending it were pastel. She was born hairless. Now she had spent the weeks since that doctor's visit regrowing everything. She had shaved her legs and under her armpits for the wedding, but that had been a deception, a trick played on her to be more presentable and the ideal standard of beauty. It is a scary thought to be hairless again, to be blank and baby-smooth and have either had someone tear away at every part of you, undoing your age, or have woken up some morning having been cursed by a witch and thinking, I stand too tall to be mocked like this.

"Don't be a mother then," Jada said, without regret.

"I don't want to hear their cries for every word I say."

"Are we talking babies, or men?"

“Both,” she said, pausing. “But not always men. I can’t be alone.” She studies Jada’s face for a moment, considering her response, what it might be. She didn’t think of love lost when she spoke again, keeping her eyes on the other woman. “Sometimes I – I belong with myself because of my brothers, and without them I think I would be a mother without a choice.”

Maggie feels the first tear of the night well and droop down her cheek.

Jada hesitates to wrap her arms around the other woman. They feel like strangers to each other still, as much as the old, dead skin has been shed. Deciding against it, she attempts to hide her arms, to no luck, but Maggie’s attention is elsewhere as she sifts through her purse in the hopes for an unused tissue. A loose, empty packet is scrunched up in her hand, and she wipes the tear away with her finger, a sharp and sloppy move.

“Can you promise me something,” Jada said suddenly, her voice an opening in the silence.

Maggie paused, watching her with the anticipation of a deer hunter. “I can try,” she replied, nudging her purse from side to side with the tap of her index finger.

“Promise is the wrong word,” Jada corrected herself, taking Maggie’s other hand in hers. “I don’t need you doing anything that’s feeding out of the wrong hand, be it becoming a mother or falling in love with a white man or going to the wedding of a girl you barely know anymore,” she said, with a sympathetic smile to the other woman beside her. Their grip on one another was soft but strong, far from the grip of one woman dangling off the edge of a cliff and the other rescuing her with the scrape of her fingernails. Jada loosened her grip on Maggie’s hand. “You can call me if you want to.”

Back to rifling through her purse, Maggie fished out her phone and handed it Jada without being prompted – they hadn’t exchanged numbers, they’d never even considered the possibility of being friends. It felt silly, again, to Maggie, to be talking about the prospect of friends and a shoulder to lean on, it felt much too young or too old for her. As if it were only children or ageing, dying women who needed the constant care and the constant support – which, she considered, she knew was incorrect, but she was swilling around her mother in liquid form in her brain and it was laborious. It felt like homework, to describe the differences between herself and the young/the old.

What age did she feel then? Mid-twenties and she was waiting with a sick repulsion for the bride to call everyone inside to make some grand announcement, and suddenly she would stir and she would wake up in a gender reveal party, and she would want to gag herself with fistfuls of pink/blue cake. Around her, it was still wedding season. Thankfully, she could not see Alicia on a podium.

Jada handed back her phone and Maggie’s eyes trailed down the contact info, very sparsely filled in. She’d left her phone number and an email address, although Maggie doubted she would email a friend ever. Jada had set her contact name as “Jada Pete’s Date” and it made her chuckle – she didn’t know another Jada, really, but it was like making fun of the whole night. The three siblings had all

brought along a date at the pleasure of being offered up plus-ones on a silver platter, as Alicia and her new husband seemed to be tossing their money around like at exotic dancers. Maggie felt herself tense – she was twirling round the pole, stripping off her Old Hollywood gloves, and letting them forget her too, as she stood outside on the porch forgoing the celebrations. She felt like a reject from the past invited out of sympathy, but it felt subtle, and largely ignored. It wasn't a joke they played for their cruelty. It was simply like adding an extra set of names to the guest list to fill out the crowd.

So it never mattered that they weren't pretending to be everywhere all at once.

She imagined Pete was off fucking Calum, because they had been flirting all dinner and it was plain obvious in their faces. She thought it would have been miserable if Jada had been pining for Pete.

Jada rested her arms on the wooden railing once more, staring out into darkness. "It wasn't a lie. If I wasn't here tonight, I'd be at home in sweats drinking something anyway," she said, gliding a finger through the air, an uncoordinated conduction of an orchestra invisible.

Maggie swallowed some of her silence. "I would be asleep," she began, caught imagining her head on the pillow, her humidifier plugged in with the scent of falling under, drifting off to the charted and the known, rather than anything that would rock her and thrust her. There would be a half-filled water bottle by the bed, upright on the carpet, and her phone flipped over for only the dimmest glow to sneak out with each notification, like a crack of sunlight in a cave. Her bedroom would be impenetrable, if she could come by some occult magic to seal out outside forces, like old boyfriends. And the baby she killed.

Maggie thought her throat was dry, that she needed something to drink to wash out the taste of the thick air and wedding season and what must have been an old blue-and-orange carriage drawn by horses, bottled. She didn't taste regret.

Sometime later, Jada mumbles something to herself, digging around in her own purse for something else. She draws out a pack of cigarettes, arm extending as she offers one to Maggie.

"I'd rather get hit by a car," she said, shaking her head.

As they stepped down the stairs and found an empty patch, the same spot those two women had been standing and smoking in, Maggie wondered again if she would become exactly their spitting image if she took up their smoking and never found herself settling down, having the children and the perfect life and the house firmly cemented into the ground. She knew nothing of those women, and yet she assumed from their stout posture, their hunching shoulders and their yellowed or blackening teeth – she didn't get close enough to truly tell – that those women wouldn't be boasting about having the *right* life. It was like whipping herself, reminding herself that she didn't need to aspire to checkmark every

seemingly ordinary woman urge – the husband, the house, the baby, the other baby. She shared a rental with a friend from university. Her baby, she thought, well it was her job.

Jada puffed out a cloud of smoke. Maggie stood there watching Logan and Eddie wander off on the blackened driveway, wondering if she had spent the night ignoring a genuine guy just to shove him straight into the arms of her handsome, put-together-enough twin brother. He who knew how to be a man, even when the world told him he ought to be a girl, or he ought to forget about it. She felt herself shake, and she didn't think it was from the cool breeze. She was inhaling the smoke, too, and turning away to gag or make the silliest of faces to her audience, the bushes.

Charlotte poked her tongue out, her face protruding from dark green.

“You should be glad you don't want to be a Margaret,” she said, her cheeks a flushed scarlet-red. Her nose was pale, her eyebrows unshaped and a little bushy.

“Maggie,” she said, or Maggie had thought she said, but it was Jada this time, stomping out the cigarette with her heel. The act was so unfeminine it made Maggie suddenly perk up, although she couldn't entirely explain why. She had seen her sister, and she felt beautiful now. She felt unhinged, too, but it was freeing to not feel so much like a closed door sealing in such uncomfortable torment.

No more lingering out on that porch, she thought, as they passed a couple hovering behind two chairs at one of the tables. Many of the older guests had retreated to their tables too, sitting down, some hunched beside one another talking about how tired they were, or worried that tonight would be enough to finally send them on their way to the nursing home. They laughed. Maggie was dragging Jada forward by her hand, weaving their way through the tables to the dancefloor. Music echoed out into the night, and Maggie started to match her body to the rhythm the moment all space opened out for them. Her hips swayed and she closed her eyes, paying no attention to where her arms jolted or whether her feet inched her closer, or further from Jada. Maggie thought she was even starting to forget who Alicia was. It was a surreal feeling, that nothing truly phased her. That nothing mattered now.

**You Must Have Lots of Better Things to Do**

Eddie

“You missed the bride and groom stumbling back out after a lousy lay,” Maggie said, leaning an arm against the door. “They annulled!” She laughed with the force of her chest, and I invited her in, a stunned expression on my face, no doubt.

Maggie found something new to lean upon – the rise of the lounge. Her breath was uncoordinated, becoming shallower, then deeper, as if she was recovering from a sprint from her rental to mine. “They didn’t do anything scandalous, actually.” She settles herself against the uncomfortably rigid lounge-head, slipping her phone out of the shallow pocket of her leggings. “Really I think I forgot I was at their wedding,” she said, holding the phone closer to her face when it seemingly refused to identify her. She stared at it intensely until her face softened, and she glanced up at me with a brimming smile, almost manic. “Did you really have to leave me there almost alone though?”

My sister explained to me that no, she hadn’t just sprinted through streets and down paths and into ditches to scold me for ditching an exhausting and overwhelming wedding.

“We didn’t even know the groom,” I’d said, stupidly missing her point.

She sighed, glaring at me. “Shut up, Eddie.” There was a sweetly playful cadence to her voice, hidden beneath the surface. She readjusted against the lounge, and then paused, irritated, and moved completely. It was hurting her butt, she said, before plonking down on one of the cushions and knowing I’d follow suit without needing to be told to. Maggie set her phone down on the coffee table.

“It was just a morning run.” She leaned back, nestling her neck where she’d been sitting. She described nothing of the actual run in detail, instead focusing all of her attention on the moments where she would slow down and take in everything around her. On the strip of stores and restaurants and motels, including the motel where Pete and Jada were staying, she slowed to a walk to keep her breath in check, and so she didn’t need to weave in and out between other people gazing in shop windows and listening to the soft chirp of birdsong. She’d caught glimpse of her unkempt hair and shaken herself out of it, out of being depressive over how she looked bright and early in the morning after having kept herself so prim and tidy the night before. Turning away from the window, the first thing she saw was someone’s adorable little puppy – although I couldn’t figure out if she meant it was an actual puppy or an enormous full-grown adult dog that she’d been aweing at as if it were the tiniest, most perfectly-beautiful thing in the world. I realised I didn’t need to know either way.

“I thought I’d gone far enough, I may as well come see my no-good brother,” she said, grinning stupidly, before she sprung up off the lounge and went searching in the kitchen for a glass. As she filled the glass with water, Maggie started to hum to herself, tapping her foot. I thought of Calum still asleep

in the bedroom, passed out with the sheet swirled round his legs. His dark blonde hair messed up from sleep – but more accurately, too, from last night when he was fucked by my brother. Maggie came back from the kitchen with her glass of water. She took a few little sips, seemingly polite motions. There was an intensity to her glance, as if she wanted to dump the water over her head, shower in this rented-out living room. But she sat back down and closed her eyes, readjusting everything. It seemed to be true, her readjusting of every single thing.

Maggie opened her eyes again and regarded me as she always has – her twin, her similar but her opposite. “Is Logan bisexual, then?” She said this with a sort of smile that teetered somewhere distant from both being optimistic and sinister, and I suppose you could read a few different meanings from it, the more you got lost in the curve of her lips.

“I don’t know.”

There’s nothing blurry, foggy, unsure about how last night ended, at least. When Logan and I walked away from the wedding together, I eventually found my way back inside this little house, thinking I was about to walk in on *something*. Either a rush-job to pretend appearances could be kept, or they could’ve forgotten time themselves and could’ve still been in bed, cuddled up to one another. The latter seemed less likely, but there were clouds in my head the size of extinct crocodilians, so I decided not to put it past Pete and Calum if they decided I should wear off the wedding on the couch.

I did anyway.

I left Calum to sleep in the bed, because the last thing I needed last night was being able to sense that even in the air, the reminder of sex with my brother hung around. It felt wrong to classify it as a form of jealousy, the green-eyed monster – I’d felt like a matchmaker, like Cupid, only a day, or hours, earlier. But it’s hard to completely understand your emotions when you’re tired. Different feelings blur together to create fun hybrids, like confusion-elation. You’re walking through a field of wheat, and you come upon the farmhouse once more, as if you walked in a circle without noticing, without possibly having turned yourself round, and this repeats and repeats, and then there’s a everything you ever wished for on the porch of the farmhouse. A birthday cake, too. You thought, maybe, it might’ve been a slasher killer trapping you in the loop. But you suppose not, now. We’re foolish, us humans. Blending all sorts of emotions to exist in a million different moments all at once, the uplifting and the anxiety ridden.

Calum would probably be hungover, too.

Maggie told me Logan was already awake when she battered her eyelids, when she stretched out her arms and reached for her phone for the time. “The bed was disappointing, really,” she said, nursing the back of her neck as if it was badly bruised from the few hours I can imagine she would’ve gotten. He was in the kitchen cooking himself some breakfast, and by that, she meant he was popping



down the two slices of bread in the toaster, waiting with butter and Vegemite ready to slather on. While they ate together – Maggie poured herself a bowl of whatever cereal was there in the pantry – he told her the story of his night, which danced hand-in-hand with mine.

I played an image over in my head – Logan telling my sister that he and I kissed, and he stumbled backward on it, but he paused too, and I was there in the corner, somehow, slamming my head against the refrigerator. The vision seemed to blur too much. I wanted out of it, so I tried to refocus on Maggie beside me, as she took another sip – more like a gulp – from the glass. “I don’t know how to explain anything.” It came out wonky and complicated, which felt right, which felt natural. Maggie set down the glass again – she made a little comment in passing about how she felt like all she’d been doing lately was drinking out of something, and maybe it was time something drank out of her.

We stopped everything to fall into a laughter we couldn’t seem to control. It ended as abruptly as it began, and there she was, staring at me with a look of helplessness. It was like looking in a mirror, and I knew that felt entirely, completely wrong.

I was playing out on the twin identity too much recently, and it was enveloping me.

“Well,” she started, scratching her neck. “I don’t own him, Eddie.”

“Don’t make me feel like a twelve-year-old in with a chance.”

Maggie paused. There was something she wanted to say, but I figured she cared more for my feelings than for whatever else buoyed inside her. She’d figure out how to say it.

“Just go have lunch with him,” she said comfortably. It felt weird, having something you could call *feelings* for your sister’s date to a wedding, but she told me again and again that whatever could have been there between them had fizzled early. But it hadn’t meant they were suddenly distant strangers who couldn’t hold a conversation with meaning, at least. I was grateful for that. If he’d had anything brand spanking new to say this morning, maybe she would have persuaded me to follow her off on another meandering run, where we would inevitably dive off some cliffside someplace and meet our ends at a jagged graveyard of rock. Maybe.

Sometime last night, when we were walking into the darkness, Logan and I agreed we’d be too exhausted in the morning for breakfast, so we settled on lunch, or at least we settled on eleven. I was licking my lips at the thought of anything but the typical lunch-time fare – I wanted eggs, bacon, buttery toast, pulpy orange juice, and I didn’t want to have to lift a finger for it. Well, I’d lift a hand to hold the menu, and another to pay, but that would be the end of it. A hand to hold cutlery, too, I guess. A hand to slap myself if I read too deeply into the two of us sitting there for brunch.

So, I needed to keep my hands steady then. Maggie had sprung up from the lounge again, as if she had the intention to snoop around, but she did so at first only by glancing around the room, perusing. My sister likes to sticky-beak when the people around her aren’t likely to judge. I was in no

position to suddenly take claim to privacy in the rental, when it barely felt like I'd paid for any in the first place. I could feel the stiff corners of the couch still. Like the cushion supporting my butt, I too felt a hump growing in a totally wrong place. But Maggie wasn't frozen in place.

"Sorry, I'm still a little jumpy," she said, walking back into the kitchen. She started rooting through the pantry and the cupboards. She closed everything with a dissatisfied grunt. "Yes, I'm acting like a troll right now." Her hunger could've been printed in bold on her face. "The cereal they left for us has got to be some of the weakest stuff I've ever had in my life." I didn't have the guts to tell her there was nothing of substance in our kitchen either – or it was wedding-brain that had left us craving delicacies after such an elegant and sophisticated meal. Nothing could compare the next time you found yourself starved, and there was no perfectly cooked steak, no plump and juicy chicken breast, no New York-style cheesecake coming to you from the swift hand of a server.

I was, at least, making myself starved for the meal part of spending time with Logan.

Maggie came back to the lounge with an orange juice popper in her hand.

She sucked on the straw, clementine colour sipped up through the see-through.

"I'm shit scared, Eddie," she said, setting her empty hand on the lounge. She started to strum some sort of melody with her fingers, tapping soft on the upholstery. "Do I get to admit stuff like that to myself, do I get to be so open about it I can figure out who should know, and who shouldn't?"

She took another sip of juice, closing her lips tight around the straw. Maggie would have stepped outside her body and called herself a child for this, but she would've listened, too, to the words she was speaking in between guzzling sweet-tang mouthfuls.

"You know," I started to say, feeling the vibration of my phone. "I think I'd freak if it were Pete telling me he was losing the plot – he doesn't act out quite so much like we do." Maggie broke out into a laughter enough to squeeze squirts of the juice out onto herself, and she froze up, only for a second, before the panic found the humour too. It was strangely comforting to laugh, then – but if Pete turns to me with his world crumbling, he turns to us both, and it all dissipates. When my brother crumbles, we all crumble – but Pete's never lost the plot, something so absurdly anarchic only for the Scaredy Twins.

It'd only taken a few words and all I wanted was Pete's arms around me.

Maggie passed me the popper and I gulped down the last of it, tasting oranges that'd been plucked off limping branches, bearing the weight of bulbous fruit. Oranges that left field for storage, or a warehouse, a factory, where some gargantuan juicer pulverised everything. Everything all at once ends in this square of cardboard. When Maggie was pacing off to the white-plastic bin in the kitchen to toss it out, I checked my phone – a text message from Logan. *Just checking you're not still asleep.* I hated and I loved how I heard it in his voice. I'd stayed awake an hour after I pulled close the front door to this place, contemplating a few different things. How I could be acting foolish, how I might just need a new

friend who was beginning to understand my sister more, too. I sent back a reply, something short, as Maggie hovered near the couch, a sly yet sweet smile on her face.

“Well, thank you very much for the orange juice.”

I told her she was very welcome, and she asked me if I knew where Pete was.

“I haven’t heard anything.” It was the truth, that I presumed he would be in the motel room still, sleeping in longer than either of us, or at least sitting up in bed, doing something. Scrolling through Twitter or reading a book; I suppose Pete surprised people sometimes with what he’d be reading, but he’d never much liked the idea of presenting himself as illiterate, or worse, an avid reader of some generic fare like Matthew Reilly or Lee Child. But I assumed that were the case, that he was with Jada, at least. I didn’t have a text message or anything to prove otherwise.

Maggie shrugged it off, too, and we figured there was no reason to fling him a text message that suddenly expressed our frizzled states. Make him worried for you, go on, is how it felt. Or find new reasons to be worried about new woes, if Pete messaged back something that could distract us from Logan, or from...everything that was clogging up Maggie’s head. She paused. She was perching her hands on the arm of the lounge. Freeze and you can hear our hearts beating.

“I just need to pee, okay?” She said, waiting for a nodded response before she turned to head toward the bathroom. With the click of the door, I sat alone in the silence of a room I was realising more and more was unfamiliar to me. I’d never had time to sit in it. Never had a true chance to feel it out, find a spot where I didn’t feel like an imposter in a home that wasn’t mine – because it was a home that wasn’t mine, would never be mine. In a day it would be completely gone from me. Like it was washed out with the tide, almost, though we were kilometres and kilometres away from any ocean and any tide would have to rise itself out from sea level, up mountainous ranges and come wipe me out. I was startling myself, or, more so, starting myself up, bracing myself for what would come. What I imagined would come, and what would come. I waited for Maggie to pee.

He’d said he found a little café along the main strip, perfect for brunch, apparently. Maggie came out flicking the water off her hands – I jokingly scolded her – and she mocked how thin, how paper-like the hand towel in the bathroom was. You couldn’t dry a finger with it, she said.

He’d gotten there first.

Logan had chosen a table outside, just off the sidewalk, square grey tables with thick black edging. He made a show of how unbalanced they could be, if you were shake and bump and nudge. It was cool, the breeze, but warmer than it was when we walked side by side after the wedding. Logan was wearing a sweater the colour of cranberries. It made him look warmer, somehow, residue

temperature branching out toward me. It made him sit without slouching, too, or he was naturally more comfortable in sitting with his back straight, more than I am.

“Morning, Edmund,” he said, barely hiding a stupid grin. He’d said the night before that it was special I wasn’t just an ordinary Edward, when I told him the long form. Some days you like to pretend Eddie is all you ever were and all you’ll ever be.

“Hey.” I replied, adjusting my butt in the seat. It felt sufficient as a greeting, even if it felt awkwardly short and awkwardly awkward, and as if I was piling on too much worry and carelessness all at once. “Really, though, my sister should be sitting in this chair, she’s strangely incredibly hungry this morning.” I didn’t tell him how glad it was, seeing Maggie with a stare that seemed to want to devour an entire aisle in a supermarket. When I said goodbye, walking in the direction toward the café, I told her to do just that: go raid the tiny little IGA in town, find something better than the toddler’s breakfast she snacked on between waving off Logan and waving off me.

We scanned the menu and ordered, getting the simple, the easy part, out of the way. Easy only because you couldn’t be so confused about eggs and bacon and toasted bread. With a glance, I suppose, we understood that the night before had been for the food, but this day would be less so, at least for the two of us. I could picture Maggie already, back in the rental – mine, probably – with a shopping bag of much more adequate groceries, stirring Calum out of the room with all the rustling.

We could have waited for our food in silence, like lunatics.

Logan spoke first. His voice was soft, but there wasn’t some undercurrent of fear that attempted to feast. I think it was a politeness, how he managed to speak without centring all the attention on him. I found myself caught remembering how nobody had paid us any attention last night, and it was a relief, to not be gawked at.

“I’m sorry I don’t know what to do with myself sometimes.”

“Don’t you dare apologise for that,” I said, and my voice felt too loud, gaudy. I didn’t consider how the conversation sounded outside my head. It felt like a balancing act I would fail at, no matter what. Logan crossed an arm over the other on the table.

“On the, uh, app I met Maggie on, I’d set it to allow me to match with women and men, because I’ve been willing to explore my sexuality,” he said, pausing for a breath. “I’ve never been on a proper date with a guy before. I wasn’t even sure I could see myself dating a guy.” He had sent me back to high school, almost, without realising – and it wasn’t necessarily such a torturous wrong thing. I remember myself walking those grounds, the literal and the sort of quasi-spiritual, and holding myself different to how I am now. Your feelings are complete and incomplete. Realised and then broken.

“We shouldn’t need to force each other into anything.”

He looked at me with a reserved silence.

“I wanted to kiss you, get that in your head, silly,” he said, leaning forward a smidge.

“Didn’t come to a wedding weekend thinking I’d be blushing more than the bride.”

“She was insanely too tame the whole time,” Logan said, before he started laughing.

Picture the sort of surprise that comes over a person’s face when they realise they are walking a dream. Pause, give it a few seconds to settle in. Branch it out from surprise, because a single emotion is never the singular reaction for something like dreamland or nightmareland or just simply existing as a human, even though existing has never been simple. Pause again, maybe. Eddie, there’s truth and there’s you imagining the only happiness you could see for yourself is in the brief lulls between the last trauma and the next. I imagine you’re pausing, Eddie, because you expect the worst of it all – you lose two siblings, your parents – albeit abusive parents – and you lose boyfriend after boyfriend. You see friends misunderstand everything – and why shouldn’t they? There is an abundance in media of siblings being unnaturally close with one another – there is a growing abundance, too, of media showing you that you can find the sort of happiness that can be presented right to you right now. Look! Other customers are served their surprise. There is joy in tadpoles.

Logan was staring out at the road, at a smallish pothole, he’d just pointed it out to me. A squat parakeet-green car careened by, blocking out the pothole for that brief moment, but he’d not lost any of his focus. Some part of him, I suppose, might still have been paying attention to me.

“Eddie,” he said, shooting me a glance. “There’s something so boring about putting any sort of pressure on two people eating a meal together.” He grinned to himself mostly, following a flitting bird as it darted across the road and back toward us. “Right?”

“You’re taking words out of my mouth now.”

I realised how starved for that food I really was, despite gouging myself on wedding food the night before, and it was truly a gouging. There’d been a jammed dam in my stomach and then I’d slept it off. It somehow felt that simple, without needing to think of all the logic of things. Logan stopped searching out a distraction in the natural world and came back to me smiling. Our food would be set down in front of us after he spoke one last thing.

“I call shotgun in Calum’s car on the drive back.”

Then came the short brunette with the raccoon eyes with our meals. She set the plates down after a brief pause, asking who ordered what, which seemed strange since she’d taken our order not all that long ago. But I wasn’t fussed over that. I couldn’t have been, trying to keep all my good thoughts aligned and all the negatives out away from that porch. There’s that silly birthday cake, just keep it there. Logan and I grinned at each other. We were two children rewarded with candy from a sweet old lady. Only the candy was bacon. I stabbed my knife and fork into the bacon without pause. I was

chewing on it, swallowing it down, when my phone vibrated in my pocket, and then continued to vibrate. I was dumb for only a second before I realised it was a phone call, with a phone perpetually silenced. I felt around the edges of its bulge in my pant pocket. I guess Logan noticed. He was shoving a forkful into his mouth, chewing, swallowing, and then he was setting down his knife and fork, staring at me. There's always something to his expression. Maybe you'd call it comforting. Maybe you'd just call me a downright fool. He asked me something and I sat there getting lost in trying to understand everything about him. An awkwardly massive task for a late morning, a few bites into brunch.

I sound like a housewife.

“Won't you answer the door for me?”

I glanced around at first, confused, because we were sitting down at a table outdoors, eating our in-between meal. There'd be no need to rush off to opening doors and running off from each other, unless, I supposed in the moment, he'd needed to use the bathroom, or he needed to flag down the blonde with raccoon eyes for something else. I felt myself blink several times over. The blinking did it. I was fluttering my eyes open to a living room completely opposite to the quaint-and-squat little square of the rental. There were the makings of a house in the suburbs – overstuffed couches with cushions that didn't seem to fit so well anymore, giant vases with nothing in them, a TV unit stocked with old DVDs and console game cases. Stock family portraits in oak frames. Someone was knocking on the door.

Handles turn crookedly but sharply when you're in some house you've not recognised in the steps from beside the drab lamp to the door. Out through an archway first. The Scottish fold cat purred at your feet and then darted off into the garage, little bell ringing. Little bell swinging back and forth. You palmed the door handle and start on turning it. Won't you answer the door for me, like we've been transported back in time, like I've been watching television and I didn't realise it. I play out this whole charade waiting for a pin to drop. I open the door.

He hadn't changed. The man you've loved the most, he was standing there on the doorstep, looking all the same. He wasn't beaten down for it. He looked like he did in pictures and memories.

It was like driving a cleaver down the centre of my everything. Cutting through the core.

“Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.” His voice was clear, and a waterfall of noise all at once.

I met Kinny when I was nineteen. I suppose I don't talk much about him. When we were together, I almost thought myself a different person – but in the right way, not in the destructive chaotic completely changing your own identity sense. There was that secret part of myself that was completely awakened because of the happiness of him. Being around him. Being pressed against him, and it was always called making love with him. He was studying architecture, or something in that realm, but he'd say to me, he'd say he's studying the sorts of things years of video gaming set him up

for, and he'd wink at me, because we both knew he meant building houses in the Sims. And he wrote me poetry, and the poems that sucked I wouldn't lie to him about, but he'd send me back all the appreciation in the world with his eyes. Kinny made sense of the world for me. I spent years of my life wondering if I was wasting the time I was supposed to be finding a career, and there he was, to come assure me I could keep stumbling and still clasp tight to his hand.

Kinny and I broke up over the course of a brisk July Friday. I suppose I don't talk much about him, about how things end, how everything changes abruptly but also, truthfully, over the course of weeks and months. But not years, no. Kinny and I were happy for a long time. I never called him anything except Kinny, although it wasn't what many other people called him. And then I stopped calling him, because he told me it might just be best if we pretended we were out of each other's lives. I suppose we told each other that, sitting there on the sofa, our legs brushed up against the other's. I had to keep making the pointed effort of inching myself away from him. Our wasn't a breakup that could be spelled like gutter-punch, or one person left completely in shambles, or annihilation – it felt completely mutual, until about three months afterward. All I wanted then was Kinny back in my bed, back in my life. But I'd sit staring at the Add Friend button as if I were unsure I knew him, unsure if he were the Kinny that I'd seen and saw in the back of my head. There's Kinny, dangling from one finger to the next. In between every memory. There he was. Something hadn't been working between us. Now, we'd said, there was something stupid about saying we love each other – but I'm certain the love between us never stopped, hasn't stopped, right up to that moment seeing him standing on the front porch, in an instant grasping to the clasp of a bouquet of tulips and then...nothing.

“Take my hand, Eddie,” he said, extending a white-gloved palm through the doorway.

Then we were running.

I tried to tell him we could slow down, take in the world around us – nothing was making sense, and keeping up with his fast footwork made it all the more confusing. I was convincing myself it was all real – that I didn't have to make a single decision or a single move toward Logan – because here was Kinny, in the flesh, rushing me past memory after memory. There was our first date, and our last. Pete and I sitting on the back steps at our parents' house, as I told him more about Kinny, about how gruesomely in love I was becoming. I tried not to bury him in the details, but he asked questions attentively, and he wouldn't stop smiling. The first vacation Kinny and I took together, and the panic attack I had in that hotel bathroom. The next night, he was hunched over the toilet bowl.

There were some first dates with other guys too, failed first dates. Me lying flat on my stomach in bed, staring down at the carpet, or at my phone. Thinking about the what if of a message from him, always him. The thought of someone else in my stead began first as the sickness I needed to expel from

my body, hunching over the toilet, and then I wanted only for someone else to be what he required to feel complete. Started to understand it would never be me. Kept sleeping with my brother.

For a millisecond, Kinny had Pete's face.

I barely registered it, I suppose.

It became the most comfortable thing in the entire world to cave. To be with Pete in the way I had been with Kinny, with other men who fumbled with the lighter. I wanted to keep seeing stalactites and stalagmites, and I think suddenly thinking of Pete made me realise the world where Kinny was dragging me behind him, us racing through the streets, this could only ever be a daydream. Or something my mind created while I slept, too. I snapped myself out of it, and then from my pocket the continued thrum of a phone's vibration kept me back at the table. Logan was there still, in front of me, finishing off the last corner of his toast. I had a couple of bites left too, having apparently dazingly ate through my food while I thought of him. *Kinny*.

I had no clue where he was, what he was doing, and it left me surprised. Surprised that I hadn't thought of him for months. Would it only do damage to reach out to him now? I pocketed the thought. Tucked it neatly beside the phone, until I yanked that metal right out and stared at the name in white lettering. My sister was calling. I gestured to Logan that I needed to take the call, and I stepped out away from the table, ducking behind a tree. I've learnt you give Maggie the privacy she deserves, no matter the day. But her calling now, not so long after we last saw each other in person, it felt like she'd found something she couldn't hesitate to tell me about, or something had happened. I caught a glimpse of Logan sitting there. All I wanted for him was for him to stay.

"Maggie?"

Her voice broke out from a wind-gust echo. "Has Pete texted you where he went?"

It was silly of us to worry about him, but he was at least two people's ride home, so his disappearance was suddenly fairly newsworthy. I listened to her pause, change the subject briefly, a panicked fluster as she retraces her steps first. She'd went to the IGA to gorge herself. The little middle-aged woman behind the register apparently followed her around the tiny store with her eyes. Name badge said she was a Charmaine. Or Charlene. "She had that judgy look on her face when I slapped down what I was buying, like she's thought I was throwing away my petiteness for the love of sweets."

Maggie explained she carried the flimsy plastic bags all the way back to where she was staying with Logan before she got a text message from Jada. "She hadn't seen him since last night, he was still awake when she got back to the room." Apparently he hadn't felt like sleeping yet, he would've been getting back with her at that hour anyhow. If he hadn't snuck off with Calum. Reminds me to shoot him a text too, see if they're off in some distant street making out in the car.



But I doubt that. When I texted, Calum said he hadn't seen him since they parted late the night before. My brother was becoming a mystery to everyone, but for once that day there wasn't alarm to something – him being a mystery, him not leaving notes with every person he knows in proximity, it's nothing out of the blue for Pete. Takes me right back to when we were teenagers. For all three of us, truthfully, needing a window of no followers, no one waiting in the wings – it was what kept us sane, especially after Charlotte died.

Maggie was climbing in her woe again. “I know he doesn't need to tell us shit, but –” and she paused, and probably realised there wasn't a but to it. You go weeks on end not stressing about what your siblings are up to, but then you spend a few days attached at the hip again and suddenly their every move makes you feel stranded in a mostly unknown place, sharing a rented space with someone you don't want to be sharing a bed with anymore. Or the feeling is more complex than that. Or you just want to talk to your brother.

On the phone, my sister started to list where he could be – maybe he drove all the way home already. “Up and abandoned us,” she said, but there wasn't any scorn or panic in her voice anymore. I'd like to think I calmed her – but Maggie settles herself by speaking everything through, rambling if she needs to. We agreed we wanted to know where he was, but he hadn't answered her text. Yet. I tried to remind her that if he was driving, at all, the last thing he would ever do was distract himself. That helped her, too. I stole another glance at Logan, his plate clean, trying to distract himself. He was doing something on his phone. He looked handsome. I felt the tug of someone on my arm.

Maggie and I agreed we'd just wait it out for a message. There wasn't alarm bells ringing in my ears yet. There wasn't some out of nowhere fear that Pete was needed searching for. I sent him a message myself, after Maggie ended the call, but my message was hopefully a little more laced together – no outright where are yous, no tinge of worry, just wonder. Full-bodied wonder, because suddenly I felt like he wanted me to care, without the stressing. I was sitting back down in front of Logan, grinning at him stupidly, when Pete messaged me back – *steal Calum's car and come find me.*

Maggie said he messaged her, too, just without that version of playfulness. He told her he was just needing some time away from everyone, but he was fine. He was okay, not bruised up in a ditch someplace, and not speeding the way home, as much as he desperately wanted to. *I'll be there to drive you home*, he typed to her, and her comfort was one of the last texts from her I received before I saw her later in the afternoon.

I returned all my attention to Logan. It would've been impolite to rush off to find Pete, as if he was some giant emergency after all. I had time to finish a meal and settle everything with Logan, because if anything all the zoning out and a phone call from my sister and just glancing at his face had

left me inherently conflicted. Wedding talk had me thinking about the foolishness of walking down the aisle myself, alongside making me think of the future more than ever.

“Is everything okay?”

There was a beam of sunlight shot right in my eyes. I squinted at him, remembering the pair of sunglasses in my other pocket, awkwardly protruding. Suddenly he was less of a struggle to look at.

I smiled, picking up my knife, setting it back down again. “Maggie thought Pete had abandoned her or gone and thrown himself over the edge of something,” I said, nonchalantly, the sort of humour I’d share between my siblings but maybe not the most normal thing to say to someone so disjointedly connected to us now. I explained a little more to him. He asked me if I needed to go. I almost leant forward to grab his hand, but rejected the thought. “I texted him I wanted to spend a little more time with you.”

“Do you now?”

I laughed a little, watching him edge me on like that. “Tell me something about yourself that I should know. I won’t put you on the spot with something like, something no one else knows.”

He paused, thinking, but holding his eye contact with me. “I can juggle.”

“Why is that something I desperately need to know?”

“You never said desperately,” he said, stifling a loud chuckle.

“Fine,” I said, grinning at him. Almost asked the idiot for a demonstration. Felt like I was being shoved into a romance novel with every word he spoke, but he pulled away out of the silly and the cheesy, and he told me things far more interesting than whether he can throw some balls in the air and catch them again. Sometimes you want playful innocence straight from something cringe. Almost makes you forget about some things in the world, things you’ll mention when the time is right but otherwise you know you can keep to yourself.

“When I was seven, I almost drowned in the ocean.”

He finished speaking, seemed to hold his breath, then broke a smile. He said he hadn’t learned how to swim until he was nine, but if he’d learnt sooner, maybe there’d be no trauma with the ocean. He’d fallen over the edge of a jetty down the coast, flailed around in the water, hopeless, helpless, until his uncle dived in after him and rescued him, swimming them both all the way back to the shore. Those moments, he said, where you’re flapping your useless little fleshy arms around, those moments made him comprehend things beyond what’s capable for a seven-year-old – and then he broke away again, saying he doesn’t really remember a thing from the day beside the story, which his uncle tells him almost every Christmas if they spend it together.

“It’s stupid, but I’m glad you didn’t drown in the ocean that day.”

“It could happen any other day though, I’m sure.”

I took another glance at our pasts, how unmingled they were. How unmingled the future could be, too, if I let him close off this weekend as an event, as the end of something, as conflicting as moving forward could be. Would be. You can't build something so easily when your head and your heart are lost in the labyrinth. Logan was sitting there opposite me, we were holding up this table in a fairly quiet café, and I saw the sun high above the waves. And the clouds, too. The reaching-up seaweed.

"Should we walk back to yours then?" He said, a quiet comfort, nothing inherently swayed. We pushed in the chairs, waved off to the server whose name we forgot, and started down the main strip. A little girl was licking the face of a lollipop larger than her hand. A little white dog with a glittery pink collar was sniffing at the roots of a tree. People were minding their own business in the world, too, one woman underneath a canopy, reading a thick paperback through the lenses of her glasses. Logan told me more about his uncle, and then we changed the subject. He didn't want to push, but he wanted to know more about me, more about my childhood and those awkward teenage years, about my two siblings that I'm sure are looking down on me from some form of a heaven, although far and far from any religious view of it. I got comfortable enough to talk more about Charlotte. A little, before I changed the subject again. Sometimes I worry I let the trauma define parts of me. There's just no point in that with Logan.

When we walked in the door at the rental, Calum was in the kitchen, sculling what we both assumed was probably just a bottle of water. If it turned out to be anything else, with how he was acting, throwing his body everywhere, like a marionette, then there wouldn't be surprise from me, or judgement. He seemed tired, if anything. He gave Logan a nod, then they spoke briefly, and I thought maybe the clouds would part once Calum made an easy joke about waiting his turn for Logan to be passed onto him. Calum waved again and disappeared into the bathroom. The sound of him peeing suddenly seemed like the only echo left.

I didn't want to leave Pete waiting for too long. I sent him another text, short, simple, and felt that unsure feeling of not knowing whether it would be right to say he could stay here and wait if he wanted to. Maybe he'd make some sort of connection with Calum, messaged me if there was actually something going on I'd want to snoop around about. Of course I'd probably be overstepping if I did, without him turning to me. Overstepping with Calum's always been our thing. One of many.

It's a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book, almost. Do you stay there, wait for your friend to come out of the bathroom, try to talk to him, even just make a promise you'll be back to hang out with him later, or do you leave then, go discover where your brother had gone, and why he wanted you to be there with him? I felt the tug of the drawn-out cord. There wasn't enough of a reason to keep him wondering where I was, but I had to cement myself. I wasn't rushing off to him out of some need to make sure his feelings weren't getting hurt. Time has a twisted hold on us. Then, now, in the future it

still will. It's silly, almost, to view things as this-or-that, as if there wouldn't be a chance to dart backward and take the other door in only a few hours.

"What are you up to now, then?" I was looking at Logan, who had made himself so comfortable on the couch, and I thought to reach for his shoulders, just to rest a hand there. It would've just been that gesture, a comfort, but I saw a tugging-back and I was regretting wedding night again.

Logan paused, smiling at me with a twisted neck. I moved around the room, so I stood in front of him, near the window. "What time are you two thinking of driving back?"

"We don't really have a time between us, maybe 3pm?"

"Then sometime before that I need to grab my stuff," he said, pausing. "And talk to Maggie, too." He smiled, nudging his head toward the door. "You go, go on, don't let me stay in the way."

There was something my father used to say about having a brother, because he'd had a few. He'd say, having a brother, well, it's like having a rival that can truly see inside your head. An enemy with insight. He'd tell sprawling epics about how his brothers and him once chased after the same girl, seeing who she was attracted to or who she thought would be the best in bed. Or it would be a story about them all trying to learn how to drive as soon as the eldest was old enough to go for his license, like fuck the rules, like it mattered more who was the poster man over whether a mailbox still stood firm in the ground. He'd tell these stories like it were something Pete and I could look forward to, or should be emulating, but I'd glance at my brother when Dad wasn't looking and there was a different expression entirely on his face. He didn't see me as opposition, I think, the same as I didn't of him. It'd be years before we slopped the dirt down on our father's coffin and called it a day. We'd had no inkling of the future back then, of course not. But I think maybe if there hadn't been the abuse, Pete and I might have feared each other, instead of sought out each other.

I still hadn't budged from the car yet.

I'd driven with the voices of two radio hosts in my ears, tuning them out. If I'd have been bothered, I could have cranked up the volume on my own music and drowned out the roads and the signs and the pedestrians instead. But I'd focused on every detail ahead of me with a comprehension of things, and so then I was being confusing just staying there in the car, staring out the window.

Pete was sitting with his legs stretched out on the grass, reading a book. It was one of my suggestions, but I only noticed when he lifted it up as I plopped down beside him, the strands of grass tickling my legs. He was just under halfway through the book. Pete looked round for his bookmark before slipping it in between the pages. "Hey, Ed," he said, reaching out to ruffle up my hair with his hand. He'd found this almost perfectly quiet spot, except for a woman with a small stack of textbooks

set up on a wooden bench underneath a tree. She was intense and laser focused. Pete set the book down in the grass, letting it get devoured by green, before he exhaled deeply. “Did you bring any water?”

“Bring your own water, Peter.”

He grimaced at me; he hates when anyone calls him Peter. It’s only a name I use when I want the rise out of him, when maybe I want to draw out attention from Dad’s ghost, which is always searching and searching for us pitted against each other, not falling into each other’s arms or anything. I paused, looking at Pete. *Right*. Remembering if ghosts exist then ghosts have seen.

“I drank all of mine.” There’s a backpack behind him, he’s almost using it to prop himself up. I gesture with my hands that I brought nothing with me, except keys, and my phone. Pete doesn’t react much, except for a quiet sigh. A sort of realisation sigh, if anything. “Sorry if you all thought I went on my own honeymoon or something,” he said, before we both noticed an ant crawling over the cover of the novel. He knew any apology like that never went anywhere. He had nothing to apologise for.

“How’d your night go last night?”

As much as I knew what had happened, I didn’t know a thing about how he’d felt all night, and there’d been some reason he drove off without even letting Jada know where he’d gone. I had to remind myself again that the curiosity wasn’t born out of him not telling anyone anything – it came from a place more within myself. Truth be told, I wasn’t ashamed of that.

Pete hadn’t known where to start. “Calum and I had sex,” he said, getting the obvious out of the way. I told him properly about the kiss between Logan and I, as if it were like matching each other in competition. Dad wouldn’t have predicted this, brothers sharing so openly the sort of romantic and horny rendezvous they had the same night with other men. “I won’t go into detail, though,” he said, but he said he had an incredible night, nevertheless. He just wished he could have spent more of it with me. “I should’ve raced back to the wedding afterward. I was just so frazzled.”

Because he told Calum about us, about the times we fucked. Those couple times in his car, and however many times in bed, once or twice on the couch. We’d kiss in the shower, but all through our life it never felt awkward to shower together. Dad would tell us to strip down naked and shoot the blast of the hose at us, high pressure water leaving some sort of bruise on us no matter what.

I was surprised Calum hadn’t darted off in the car early in the morning and blocked me on everything, but I suppose I was caught up so much in that idea that as soon as anyone knew about Pete and me, it’d be the assumed response on taboo: WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?

Pete noticed, then, that a million thoughts were sent like letters in a complicated web of tubes. “Are we still okay?” He said, with a comforting smile. I could tell he wasn’t worried or frazzled now. He hadn’t come here to concern himself, to stare out at nothingness and let it consume him. Maybe he’d just come to read a book in peace.

“Of course we are,” I replied.

Sure, I wanted to curl up in his arms. I didn’t need to, though, and I settled myself in knowing nothing had been like crossing minefields. “What kind of people are we when we do the kind of things everyone laughs about when they make jokes about Alabama, and when you hear them talk about abortion, how rape and incest sit side by side, like comparable reasons to pluck out the fertilised egg?”

It came out of nowhere, such a spiel to coat the existence of Logan right there in front of me, and I was still sitting on the rise of the fence, like I couldn’t figure out which backyard was mine anymore. Such piddly little fences out the back of my parents’ house, too. I felt myself recoil. Like entire limbs were retreating inside my body, and I thought in those empty silences that, out of everything, he thought I was calling us sinners – calling us the zoids that traipse over rule and law out of cruel whim. More collapse, more chaos. I needed him to tell me something, but I needed my own voice out of my head first.

“This whole damn family’s never given a shit about what people think of us,” he said, inching toward me, to comfort me. He pushed the book out of the way, toward the backpack. “Dad would scream at us in public, or he’d have us bent over his knee almost with our pants down for the beating. Mum wasn’t better. She preferred to keep it private sure, but she never whispered at home, unless Charlotte was asleep.” He placed a hand on my knee. Pete and I wouldn’t stop looking at each other, from his mention of our sister. That competitive edge could’ve come in, see which brother could cry first about the repeated trauma of having a death in the family, like we were the only people to ever lose someone that wasn’t chaos incarnate. If there are scars you trace with your fingers, invisible, in the air, then the scar is named Charlotte, and there’s some miserable reason I can’t stop thinking about her. Thinking about how different things could have been if she’d made it to this very wedding long weekend. Maggie told me she thought she saw our sister in the bushes in the parking lot, but she figured that was the alcohol coursing through her veins. It sounds the likely story. There aren’t ghosts hanging over our heads. They aren’t watching us while we sleep, while we sleep together. You put the taboo on yourself, most of the time. Because of course you do. Everyone is out here slamming you into this gigantic rubber wall with the words *TABOO IS SACRED* written on it. Slowly, though, you see certain things get the warm embrace of the self. Not everything works. Not everything doesn’t work. Double negative. They want you to feel so negative.

Pete removed his hand from my knee. But he was still smiling, still looked at me the same he’s always looked at me. “So, how was your date, then?”

All I knew what to do was laugh, but it was playful, and Logan would’ve been beside me cracking up too. Think we both knew whatever the lunch was, it would never have been the sort of

thing you know to be the normal. Not something you see ripped from the screen, or even from other people's stories. It was no 'Maggie's first date with a guy'. Her charismatic cult leaders.

But they're not all that bad.

"Are weddings supposed to make you so terrified of commitment?"

Pete laughs with his gut, and he winks at me, and I feel myself stupidly blush.

"I think typically they want you to come away from it feeling happy, joyous, etcetera," he said, leaning back on his hands. He paused, looking out at an empty but pretty landscape in front of us. "But when it isn't your wedding, perceive it how you want, too." There are a few snapshots caught in the reel. The vows the bride and groom read to each other. Them sneaking off in the middle of a party all for them. Even back to the invitation, as twisted as it is. Them inviting such old friends. Such wasted friends.

"Do you think I'll ever understand myself?" I said, another splash, again, out of nowhere.

Pete was looking at me with some sort of smile that felt like a twang. Like a chord.

"So many questions," he said, leaning in closer to me. "I think you like to expect big solutions to everything. Last time someone broke your heart, you wanted to know if it would happen again. Maybe you never spoke that, but I heard it." He paused, leaning back again. "Remember when we were kids, and we'd pretend we'd made up a whole new world. A kingdom outside of this place, where I was some fancy captain, and you were a prince. Or you were a pirate, sometimes, too." I started to wonder where he was going with, even though the memories seem to flood in without a moment struggle. It never hurt to escape into some other world. When your little, a rock isn't just a rock, a tree isn't always just a tree. Maybe a bruise is still a bruise, but now it's from some elaborate high-flying tussle between the captain and the pirate. Pete was there in my head, way back when, distracting me as much as I was distracting him.

"Back then, we understood ourselves all the same while we were in someone else's head," he said, and then he scrunched up his face, confusing himself. "I meant like, we weren't crazy good actors, those characters were just extensions of who we were."

"You're still not a crazy good actor, Pete."

"Wasn't saying I am," he said. All at once, we glanced over at the woman sitting on the wooden bench, as she dropped one of the textbooks down at her feet. She grunted, leaning down to retrieve it. Then she was completely silent again, completely out of focus, for us. "You aren't either."

A wind lifted up, carrying a scattering of leaves down the path. With daredevil leaps and thumps down, the leaves let themselves carry on – let themselves be taken with the journey, whatever it may be. Was I making a wild metaphor out of the world around me? Maybe. Letting my own mind take an elaborate journey to come to a conclusion branched off from Pete, from what he has been saying

to me today, and in time. Doesn't make you know everything all at once. Doesn't make you feel which threads in the dark will lead you down which path. You're eating all the carrots in the world, and it isn't enough, maybe you're thinking they've tricked you into thinking eating carrots will suddenly give you superhuman sight in the darkness. You're training for it in case, then. Squinting in pitch-black rooms. Digging your way through burrows like a naked mole rat. Except you're prettier.

Pete is plucking a strand of grass between two fingers. He's studying it, almost, but I know he's most likely just paying attention to it, changing his sight from the landscape, or me, for something a little different. Something close up even still. "I think you understand yourself perfectly," he said, setting the thin streamer of green down on my knee. "You know I've never regretted anything with you, and I won't, until I hurt you in any way at all."

"It's not the regret I'm worried about, or even what the whole world thinks."

"If you're gonna go be madly in love with Logan, I want that for you."

I froze. "I want to be stupid and ask for both," I said, without giving it even a second thought.

"Yeah, don't know how he's gonna feel about being in a polygamous relationship with your brother," he teased, and maybe that's the first time we've belly-laughed about all the knotted stuff we've got going on with each other. Once, when my brother and I were teenagers, I told him about a crush I had on someone I worked with at my after-school job. He joked and teased about how he could go talk to him, check him out from up close for me, see if he was at all the right sort of man for me. Pete flirted with him, I found out a few years later, when Pete was talking more about understanding his own sexuality. He'd surprised himself, I think. He thought he'd had game all the sudden, a shot at making waves with another dude. Nothing ever happened there for either of us. I skirted around talking to that co-worker, and then one day, he'd found another job anyway.

"I should go date him, be in a relationship to get married one day," I said, but it felt hollower than those vows from yesterday afternoon. Marriage. The fuck is marriage. The fuck should I feel like I need it, that I need to crave it, when all I want is to lounge around all day and do whatever makes me happy. And that's just a simple thing. It's wanting to be comfortable and not stressed out over this and that, and anything in between. I get that the idea of incest is repulsive to the world. Pete and I aren't barging down doors to have the world's opinion changed.

When I lied there, after the first time, I stared at the roof in the back of his 4WD and thought myself the next closest thing to Satan crawling out of a crack in the side of a volcano. But there wasn't regret. I think all my life I've just embraced being the enemy, even in the fraction that it was. I would oppose my parents, we all would, the Garvey children. We'd never be their puddles. Or their twisted version of angels. I just want to laugh at everyone.

"I should go date him, yeah?" I glanced over at Pete, completely, entirely uncertain.



He didn't move an inch. I thought, good gods, hell is freezing over. Would it be so painful to go on another date, then maybe another, with someone I do have a genuine connection with? Even with the idea of an actual relationship being so incredibly terrifying. Good gods –

“What would you do if time suddenly stopped moving forward?” Pete said, taking a hand in his.

“I'd quit my job,” I replied, staring at him dead on.

“What else?”

“I'd retreat underneath rock, hide from everyone. Or fall in love with everyone.”

“Where does Logan factor into this?” He hesitated, then he finished with, “Don't even think of me.” He still held tight to my hand. It wasn't a romantic thing, none of this was. Pete speaks to me forever and always as my brother, as the closest thing there is to a genuine paternal comfort, as complicated as it seems to continue to become. I suppose I don't see the blood dripping. I see the comfort and the care, the warmth, the connection. Not something forged from DNA and two absolute assholes fucking over and over, until they popped out yet another baby.

“There's always going to be a chance I cobble a makeshift future with him together,” I said, squeezing his hand. Makeshift because everything with me feels entirely constructed out of driftwood, palm fronds, and pebbles and stones. “But time's not stopping anytime soon.”

“And we're not getting younger, what's your point?”

I was stumped. Did I even have a point?

“This isn't an awkward love triangle thing,” I said, and it felt comfortable to say. That I wasn't choosing between two people. I was choosing between being by myself, or giving someone a chance when it came to that concept of love. Whether I stop hesitating so much with Logan. It started to feel as though it would be infinitely times simpler if he'd rejected me plain and simple. That the kiss meant nothing at all. But seeing everything in binaries is how we continue to tangle ourselves up. And yet certain things can only be that binary, too, or else you risk hurting absolutely everyone.

Pete let go of my hand, reaching for the book and the backpack. He began to tuck the novel inside the larger of the pockets, but I assumed he hadn't completely left everything behind.

“I know it isn't,” he said. “I just want your happiness, Eddie. Always.”

“I didn't come to this wedding looking for anything.”

“I probably could've had sex with any of your friends whenever I wanted.”

He chuckled, and I shoved his shoulder, knocking him against the backpack.

“What I mean is,” he continued, getting comfortable on the grass again, “things happen for us without really much say from us. I know you're smart enough to know that on your own, I've always just wanted to say a huge and powerful phrase that makes me sound philosophical.” He chuckled again,

ruffling my hair again. “I think me getting to see you happier than ever means you’ve got to admit to yourself this cringe wedding is shoving you in the right direction.”

Pete paused before he spoke again. “Towards Logan.” He slung the backpack over his shoulders and began to move to stand up. Just like that he was propelling the conversation only to me, but it felt right to end it, without a chance for me to drag myself under time and time again. I remember when Dad screamed at Pete, called him a dumb idiot. Can’t even remember for what. It’s little moments, sure, that people throw their stones on, but he’s never once seemed dumb or an idiot to me. I like to think I’m not blinded by my own protection of him. There are just too many ways to count of how someone could prove themselves.

We walked back to the parking lot and he jumped in his car, and I climbed into Calum’s. I pulled out my phone, checking for any new messages. One from Maggie, something she apparently heard about on Twitter. One from Calum, too. He wanted me to hurry my ass up so we could leave this place finally. *You better not crash my car or drive it off the edge*, he’d typed at the end.

I couldn’t exactly make any promises.

....

Someone was strumming the chords of a guitar in my head. It was an absurd juxtaposition. There was noise blasting from the stereo, synthesised harmony, electronica, a voice crafted out of nature and a smoothening. A voice like a polaroid, and I was sitting in the back seat behind Calum in the driver’s seat, so I could kick his seat if he was being an almighty asshole. Or if I simply felt like being a dick. He was some hybrid of a prom-night chauffeur and an Uber driver, on occasion sticking his arm out the window as if he were in the opening, or closing, scene of a film about coming of age. He’d offer us food, then say he was fresh out. We’d stop in at a service station, refuel, stuff our stomachs with grease and sugar and moan about how shrunken a burger could be. Calum looked over at me, then, with a splash of tomato sauce on the corner of my lips, and he said, “You’re gross and I love you.”

Back on the highway again and Logan was there right beside me, well, there was that awkward middle seat between us, reserved for the tiny little human that’ll take it like a champ. If we’d crammed us all into some car, Maggie would be that middle, brushing her legs against whoever was beside her. She’d rest her head on a shoulder, never would have mattered which, if she got tired of lifting her head. Logan pulled up something to show me on his phone, and we were in the back seat like two teenagers carving out a spot in the universe just for us, and it reminded me of any time we went camping when we were younger, us kids. Parents up in the front, focused, grumpy, but everything pulling behind was so

completely distant, despite how we could reach out and tap either parent on the shoulder. I could poke out my tongue at my brother, Pete, and say to him, “I spy with my little eye, something blue.”

There were more clouds in the sky. We passed another exit as it started to rain. I’m never one to bother much with weather forecasts, figuring out how large and expansive a band of rainclouds could be. I’ll look out the window and see, is it sunny? Is it clouded over, is it dull, greyed to a blurred version of what’s familiar? In the car, with the windows rolled up, Calum started singing out the lyrics to the song, his voice so bold and anarchic. Out of pitch for a moment, then beautiful again. Logan and I followed suit, three men belting out, unafraid of some toddler with their tongue stuck to the glass, or a mother noticing, suddenly worried her child could become just like us. Afraid of a little dick-sucking, are we? Don’t want to get your feelings all caught up.

Then, suddenly, Logan is holding your hand again.

ACT II

## **I Am Above Sea Level**

*Linus*

It's cold where I am, because I won't put on a shirt.

There are plenty in the closet, mind you. The one I bought for myself when I was last in town, for instance, is hanging onto the chipped wood of its hanger. I stared at it this morning.

Maybe I don't want fabric on this skin.

I went online the other evening, while I was lying in bed naked, and I searched for a place that would help me grow the hair on my chest. It is looking awfully splotchy, like a toddler's painting of a shirtless man.

I think my neighbour must think I have a sick obsession with pornography.

But I can't tell him that when he overhears the moaning and the screaming it isn't actually me watching it, consuming it, but my cousin who partially lives with me.

He is a little hard of hearing, sometimes, although I never go to the doctor's appointments with him. I listen to him, and I plug into far-too-expensive earphones when he masturbates.

I am alone in the mornings until 3pm, and on weekends.

I am shirtless, holding a coffee mug in the shape of a walrus.

When I glance out the window above the toilet, while I piss, I bare all my teeth at my neighbour. Yes, hello.

It's just me.

*Jennie*

My therapist doesn't get to hear about my strange neighbour, but my father does.

He has dementia.

The retirement village he lives in was where he was married for the third time, although he does not remember that now. All of his wives are dead.

I scrub the toilet with a yellowy detergent I bought from the store around the corner. It still smells terrible, despite the advice that maybe over time it will improve, like living in between an enlarged ashtray and the place where every neighbour swings their plastic ribbons of dog poop in an unclassy game of cornhole.

The yellow is cheap, so is the toilet. The house was not.

When I go to therapy, I talk quite predominately about anything that steers me away from talking about how my father is doing. You don't want to see a grown woman cry, I think, when my therapist cocks her head in quick-response to something I have just said.

I remember a kid I used to babysit in my early 20s.

He had curly hair, too curly, his parents could never seem to convince him to go to the barbers down the street. He was convinced, I think, that he could never have curls again.

They invited me to his high school graduation and I sat in a plastic chair in the back of the auditorium picking at my fingernails. I barely recognised him when he walked on stage.

*Saskia*

Sometimes a patient will request a video-call appointment, and you stare around in the background of their apartment, house, what-have-you, and do your best to not fall into that trap of psycho-analysing their furnishings.

Which sounds far too clichéd, but do you think I can avoid being a cliché sometimes when I spend so much of my time doing the best I can with my job?

I am in the background of a video call with family that lives overseas, in Canada.

My mother is awkwardly adjusting the position.

Briefly, you see a too-close shot of her nostrils, a glance up them. It is almost like she is toppling off the barstool, and the phone, its camera, are her chance at saving herself. She just needs to cling on.

Gabi, my sister, cannot stop laughing.

I think it must be her husband in the background, making a racket.

They have two children, both adopted.

Mike, he bought a green screen for some fake hospital photos. They look absolutely terrible, a mishmash of skin tones and of course he had to be wearing a shirt with green on it, which washed out most of the potential for it to look, well, not staged.

My aunt, who loves Toronto more than any other place in the world, calls my name like a warning. This is my fifth video call of the afternoon; you would be tired too.

I want to meet your new roommate, she says, rambling about her next visit here.

In my twenties, I'd lived with my sister.

Never thought she would marry, given the men she dated.

*Mike*

I feel uncomfortable at church.

The first time I went was with an aunt when I was twelve. It could have been earlier, I don't know, but I remember this time. My parents didn't care about God.

My aunt doesn't say parts out loud, like her belief that this anti-credence was cause for their deaths. She's deranged in the head. I see her at Christmas.

We go to church with the kids, although I reassure them in the car that no religion is definitely theirs until they decide for themselves. No lock-in contracts. It isn't so bleak.

Instead of driving home immediately after work, I stay parked by the office.

I could light up a cigarette.

I haven't smoked since I was nineteen, though.

For a vacation down south, before the kids were born, I downloaded a handful of random mobile games out of boredom. I kept them around, dangling, waiting for play when the kids want to snatch my phone out of my hands. I stare at the screen of colour.

Bored.

In church with my aunt, she taught me the hymns we sung.

I was quiet, but not silent, listening to the grating pitch of my own voice.



*Linus*

It's just me.

The house to myself for an evening, and I feel dreadfully alone.

The thing they do not mention about being single, and vulnerable, is how difficult it can be to invent a reason for someone to hold you.

The text message I received from my cousin this morning:

You should invite over that one man you met last year, in the sauna.

Remember him?

Instead I sit on the couch with the curtains drawn closed and I make use of the lube Shawn bought me for my birthday, which was four weeks ago.

Yesterday morning I called out to my neighbour when I was wheeling the bins down to the curb, and she at first pretended not to notice the sound of her name.

We had a lovely little chat about noise levels.

I threw my arms in the air, as if surrendering, and flashed a picture of Shawn on the screen of my phone. He's attractive, she might have said, if I had not just informed her he's a serial masturbator that now is collecting girlfriends like stamps, or Olympic green-and-gold coins.

At midnight, I walk to the refrigerator, pour myself a glass of lactose-free milk, and cry.

*Jennie*

I barely recognised him when he walked on stage.

He must be in his late sixties by now, dressed completely in black, gripping a microphone.

One of his concerts was the first time I almost got trampled to death by passion, by passionate people. Nowadays it is mostly during protests and rallies. If you do not keep yourself at the same pace as everyone else, you break an ankle.

I like his music about the same as I did when I first saw him—very little.

My best friend, a high school buddy I see twice a year, would have lost her virginity to his music. She invites me to all of his concerts, and I stare at the clock first, as if it is some indication that my life is getting shorter and shorter by the minute hand.

My neighbour is hosing his car.

I have a thick hangover.

While I ran out to grab another bottle of orange juice, amongst other things, I looked at the DVD section of the grocery store for something for my father to watch.

I feel like I am still his cheeky daughter if I sneak in a movie for him to play, even though he never remembers any of them.

I was mouthing along to the few lyrics I do remember, from his most famous songs.

My best friend, Mikayla, had been wearing his face on her shirt all evening.

At the concert, I told myself I should look for somewhere else to live.

Closer to him.

*Saskia*

Never thought she would marry, given the men she dated, although there was the brief period of time my parents were convinced she would marry a stuffed crocodile she named Fergus. I believe she won the crocodile from a regional fair, and it smelled like popcorn for months. One of my patients is running late and I am drinking another tea, my third for the day. Off in the distance a crack of lightning burns a split in the sky, and when the car crunches along the gravel drive, I see a glimpse of him drenched in rain before he even knocks on the door. He has depression. It grows worse with every day, he says, fidgeting with the pocket of his pants. They have zips. I hesitate sometimes, to tell my patients that I am a proud lesbian woman who came out to her parents when she was studying in university, dreaming to help people. I loved the school guidance counsellor, which is the wrong phrasing, for sure. She was a comfort, when I stressed over exams, over boys, over the impeding financial strain our family would go through once my mother had lost her job. Most of the family became quite religious because of it. I sought the guidance of the counsellor. You remember, I'm sure, the way it felt to receive an exam paper back with a grade that would have made you weep, had you been in your bedroom instead of the classroom. Had you been in enclosed space, a little laundry room, a broom closet. Instead of enclosing my patient's name, I'll call him Fergus, like the crocodile. Fergus the man stands next to his car for a few minutes, getting drenched in the rain. I think about joining in.

*Mike*

I was quiet, but not silent, listening to the grating pitch of my own voice.

Finally he pauses the rewind-and-rewind speech and stares at me. I assume I'm supposed to give my opinion, before he tells me how disappointing it all is.

I was in university, before I met Gabi.

There was still so much anticipation, or less pressure. I did actually want to be a high school teacher back then. I was probably less bored, too.

A family friend, Lee, was himself a teacher and was giving me notes on a speech I would be delivering in a few weeks. He was always so uncomfortable to be around. I think, probably, because I saw the way he treated his wife.

My aunt once whispered into my ear that she had fancied Lee in school, when he 'looked more like a badass'.

He never seemed like much of a badass to me. Just an ass, and bad.

I try to imagine how I would apologise for my sins in confession, if his sins were mine.

Gabi comes over, kisses me on the neck from behind, and tells me our youngest is tired.

Family events are punctuated with snoozing little children, wanting their father's shoulder.

Gabi says it's important, to her mother, to stay an extra few hours.

*Linus*

I pour myself a glass of lactose-free milk, and cry.

My cousin was in a serious car accident and is now back living with his parents.

I never see my neighbour anymore.

My salty, salty tears poison the glass of milk. I am still trying to convince myself he isn't dying, although I spent a definite few days thinking the car accident had broken his legs.

It only broke his arm, which actually makes me laugh, and cackle.

I called a hair growth place about my chest hair, but I chickened out waiting to be taken off hold. Someone will laugh at me. Someone will laugh because I want more chest on my hair.

Hair on my chest.

There is an unnatural tumulus of tissues here, there, by the bedside, next to the bin by the toilet. I am tired. I am so, so horny. I am crying, and crying.

I have to clean up the tear marks on my face and get in the car and go vote for whoever will be the next politician for the area, not that I care at all, or will be around too much longer to worry.

I'm not going to kill myself!

I could always get hit by a car myself, though.

I suppose my neighbour is moving out.

*Jennie*

Closer to him, now, I listen to his heart thump in his chest.

My father sometimes forgets who I am.

I cherish the moments he knows this face, calls me George without hesitation.

I never took it as some cruel reminder that he wanted a boy.

He never treated me like he was ashamed I wasn't.

We are watching *Phone Booth* and it is strangely so comfortable.

The sore throat I had lasted longer than a week, and it still lingers around in my throat, suffocating me when I know I have barely touched the water bottle I have almost tied to me like a keychain.

One of my coworkers is a forty-something man from Northern Ireland, who's divorced.

He asked me if I wanted to go for a drink sometime after work, it doesn't have to be like that, I notice you're not as talkative as you used to be, is all.

He's lovely.

In my tiny new flat, I scroll through an online magazine of coffins for my father.

It's a real pity there is no 'express delivery' button burning into the back of my retinas.

Of course I'm not being serious. I'm going to lose my father soon.

Mikayla tries to get me to go back to my therapist.

I don't have the money for that anymore.

*Saskia*

I think about joining in.

My sister, her husband, and their kids are swimming in the pool, and I am standing out of the way, half-shaded by an oversized umbrella. I have forgotten sunscreen, so if my patients notice anything stop-sign-red about my skin...I don't have much of a story, no.

Mike is doing better for the kids, I think.

When we were kids, Gabi and I, one of the kids in the grade below us drowned on a school field trip. Scarring stuff, but neither of us had been there to witness it, or the initial reaction to it all. I had come down with chicken pox. Gabi didn't leave my side—she insisted on screeching out whenever I went to scratch myself. You don't want scars, do you? Silly sister. Behave.

Aunt Valerie arrives by plane in a week.

She used to ask me why I had not yet found myself a husband. She is the sort of older woman to deny a truth no matter how many times you reiterate.

She has been introduced to my 'roommate' countless times.

Sometimes I think about whether Amy and I would take unsettling, faux-portraits of ourselves in stock-image hospitals, cooing at our children. Amy wants to give birth.

Do you think I made the right decision waiting this long to have children?

*Mike*

Stay an extra few hours, I say, before taking another puff of the cigarette.

I am nineteen, naked under the covers, in bed with a woman that won't be my wife.

Who's Gabi, I would have said.

She doesn't stay. I showered, threw on something old, with holes in the socks, and called an old buddy to come furniture shopping with me. I was already living out of home then.

I had this roommate that was already going bald, but you couldn't tell him.

I am waiting in the carpark outside my daughter's school.

I see her beautiful little face as she toddles towards me, skip, hop, jumping.

The opportunity to be baptised as an adult was presented to me when my wife was six months pregnant with our eldest kid, and I chickened out.

This is what I told her.

A bare lie, with my wife by my side claiming she would never force the baptism. It would fracture our marriage, would it not?

I think about how unscathed my forehead is.

Hasn't been cracked open yet, despite how much fooling around happened when I was a teenager, play-wrestling with my brothers, I mean.

The few years I played rugby.

The injury I sustained in the pool at the place we lived in from when I was ten until I was fifteen. Lovely place. Bit dangerous. The window that overlooked part of the roof.



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*Heddee'm*

Overhead the three suns give me unique scars on my skin:

Meterra, the largest of the suns, burns a violet colour that washes off in the streams.

Kemea, the smallest, leaves white dots on my aquamarine skin. I cannot rub these off.

I hear my name called out in clicks of the tongue.

Oxam briefly interrupts and disturbs me, and I am shaken from every thought.

I just find them so breedable. Oh, no, did I say that out loud, during anti-season?

Forgive me.

The sun the same size as our own planet is called Yelkiy and it only serves to darken me.

My ancestors all went to their last isolations five tones darker than they were when they were birthed. I so admire that.

No one should be out on the surface for longer than three cycles of the suns at a time.

That suits me well.

I have found a bungalow for myself, a nest carved out of the walls.

It is not so cold and uninviting when I am not alone in it.

There was an important notice streamed into our consciousnesses while we dreamt pretty little dreams of flying aortesaxias and repeating images of a gamaneis gnawing on the feet of our handcrafted tables. I was only half-listening.

*Oxam*

Hi my name is Oxam.

I am non-binary and I was born with every set of reproductive organs that our species could possess. I am common, or at least no one gasps when I pull down my vermilion overalls.

I try not to do that too often, only during season when I am supposed to mate.

During the last season I felt a strong twinge I have never felt before.

I was growing comfortably closer to the fellow I was bedding, and it made me pause, and reflect. Which is a complicated set of feelings for a Polyaxiaad like me.

I distribute my trash into the large, overhead suction tubes. Everything must be sorted.

I am sane this way.

Not so much thinking about that vague new experience, of wanting to...

Snuggle up to the fellow?

Spend long, long nights in each other's arms, discussing mainstream things, like taxes?

My parents were indeed briefly in a unison of sorts, but it did not last.

My mother absorbed my father.

I had thought, they must have all their trash sorted and organised perfectly.

The way her mouth became a vacuum of time and space.

*Jia Mooa*

I teach the youngsters how to read our language.

One day I will birth a descendant of my own, but I am in no hurry.

Yyha-Meel, a student in my class, presents me with a gift while the other children are fast asleep. It is meditation time, and this child with the egg-shaped head is disobeying my commands, but I can forgive them.

The present is wrapped in yellow-and-black wrapping paper and smells vaguely of what I ate for breakfast this morning. Yyha-Meel nods her little head, and I violently shake the gift.

We both listen to the sound of cracking.

We are overjoyous, enraptured, our ears burn a vibrant white, and I can ignore something that has been bugging me for a few cycles of the suns.

Things should not bug me; I am not an insect (although we have started to learn about those.)

When all the children are in deep meditation, I wander off to the rear of the room, pressing a bare palm against the clay. It is ice-cold this time of year. I am at peace.

I find it difficult to see myself as something other than an educator.

That is the role I was dictated when I was in meditations of my own, as a child.

You teach, and you teach, and I do frequently converge with the parents of the children in the halls, and we say polite remarks to one another, and they of course know I am a tutor.

Yyha-Meel's mother once knocked the stack of ancient texts out of my arms, but it was of course an accident, and nothing was damaged except perhaps her delicate toes.

*Wihja*

There is still the scar on my stomach from when I visited the neighbouring planet, Cavesta.

I was exploring the planet unaccompanied.

I do not remember being terrified of my surroundings. Cavesta reminds me an awful lot of home, except everyone can comfortably walk around on the surface without all the chemical poisoning and errkia maulings. So terrifying, the errkia maulings.

The scar, I tell my children, all nine of them, is from giving birth to the third eldest.

They wear it like a badge of pride.

I was on Cavesta for, I suppose what I am learning is called a vacation.

One evening during slumber I was informed we would all need to report immediately, upon waking from our dreamscapes, to the science and research building.

I love those lectures. A mingling of bodies and voices.

I was on Cavesta to expose my third child to an alternate culture.

They were in my womb, gnawing at everything nutrient I digested.

Isn't it a miracle to be blessed to have so many children?

I was on Cavesta because I am frightened for the future of my planet.

The air is difficult to breathe on the surface, and once, as a child myself, I had learned all about the ecosystem of the planet. How important it all is, for science and research.

*Heddee'm*

I was only half-listening.

A towering, brawny figure loomed in front of me, warning me. I was not supposed to be heading above to the surface this soon again. I resigned.

But the curiosity!

I so desperately want to learn more about the world above, where my ancestors once lived.

In bed in the evening, I find the old aofebound journal I keep for note-taking and start to write a series of events, unfortunate and great, and terrible.

It feels, now, gross and unsentimental to keep a tally of the times I've ogled Oxam.

Instead, I would prefer to write in languishing prose how I anticipate we might react to one another during the next season.

How our bodies would brush against one another, completely in the nude.

I am supposed to label these feelings as *being horny*.

This morning I was ushered into a small room I had never seen before.

Which is not surprising. I am not allowed into the Science and Research Hall much.

They stood me in front of a mirror twice my height and I was forced to ogle my own body.

I do not look like Oxam.

I look positively ugly. Hideous.

This must be how other people feel. Downtrodden.

*Oxam*

The way her mouth became a vacuum of time and space—I was impressed.

In one of the lecture halls they were showing us a motion picture they called *The Devil Wears Prada*. The actress on screen was speaking to me, but I was not always recognising every word.

A few rows in front of me was the fellow I had once thought I was falling in love with, but...

I am not so certain anymore.

I think he might just be a Nate to me.

I think it makes little sense that my mother swallowed whole my father.

Small children remember things incorrectly, make tiny mistakes, have strange perception.

There is a chance I will be much, much older than this, and think that my mother broiled my father on the tethacta-cooker and fed him to the children as a form of nutrients.

It would not be that absurd.

In my small unit, I have fashioned a hammock out of various items that were for sale from the belongings of a neighbour, I suppose, who had passed on into his isolation.

He had been a collector of things, it seems.

This reminds me of the gazes I seem to collect, purely by walking around and existing as myself.

I was told as a young thing that I would not be treated strangely or differently for possessing both male and female genitalia. It is normal for our species.

Romantic attention, it must be. Out of season.

I wonder how Andy would have reacted to having both instruments.

*Jia Mook*

Nothing was damaged except perhaps her delicate toes.

We were in a practice room, in the rear of the Science and Research Hall.

I had never seen a contraption like this before, and I had become too obsessive with it.

My supervisor sharply informed me I was to be slower, because when there were real ingredients, and various amenities we would need, such as toothbrushes, the contraption would become quite heavy indeed.

I have never cooked a meal for myself.

I do not teach being a *housewife* in my classes—I teach the youngsters how to read our language.

The gift is still in its beautiful, gorgeous, yellow-and-black wrapping paper.

I have set it down on the lowest of my shelves, beside another gift from a youngster two cycles of the three suns earlier. It is wrapped in green-and-red tape.

These are Christmas colours.

Considering how much I shake in my boots for gift-receiving, I am supposing that I will absolutely love Christmas. Snowflakes on my eyelashes. When I have those.

It is claustrophobic underground.

I sneak off during mealtime, often, to study the very few books in the universal-access library that are about windows, doors, chimneys, and flaps in the lower quadrant of doors that are very specific for little creatures, but not of the wild kind.

Wouldn't you love to picture yourself sitting by a bay window, admiring the world beyond?

*Wihja*

How important is all this, for science and research, I ask.

It is my routine observation. They will ponder over every orifice of my body.

I must be healthy and my womb must no longer be fertile, for I have had children enough for the future of our species. I get a thank-you and a warm hug for my contributions.

Today they are requesting that a large quantity of the liquid inside my body be extracted out and kept safe and secure.

I am untrusting of new procedures. A warm hand is trying to reassure me.

I am so untrusting of the future for my children.

While I had waited for my appointment, I could not cease picturing them early in their graves, and because of what came before them. History.

There is a saying in our language that I utter to myself when I first step out of the house in the waking hours: *laxa ev mo-mel laxa, syncree dom.*

It means: the end will be the end when syncree feast.

Syncree are a micro-organism that exist within our bodies, but are stabilised by our environment.

I see yellowed corpses of my children, and I do wonder, is it the true solution to abandon our home planet to the toxicity above?



*Elliott*

This must be how other people feel. Unbothered.

I never wear clothes anymore—the world must be alarmed I am always strikingly nude, but what is a body for if not to flaunt it to everyone?

People have called the police on me several times.

The attendant at the sex toy shop shrieked when I proffered I would be ringing up a large purchase of lubes, dildos, vibrators, ball gags, leashes, and butt plugs.

(I plan to use them with Jon, but do not tell him yet, it will be a surprise this evening)

Once, when I was arrested for public indecency, I collapsed down onto the cool concrete of the cell wrapped only in a woolly blanket, and I prayed.

Not to God, mind you, but to a gigantic pyramid-shaped being that has ascended from Hell and now frequently visits me by perching on my windowsill and sips coffee out of a mug shaped like Santa Claus.

Praying did not achieve much.

I am like an oversized baby with an enlarged fetish for sexual activity.

I want to believe Jon still loves me.

I am convinced he is fooling around with other men.

And women. And tissue boxes and the waterbed in the rear bedroom.

I wake myself up in the middle of the night and stand in the middle of the train tracks that are behind our apartment and wait for something to collide into me.

I am not convinced it would kill me.

*Jon*

I wonder how Tyler would have reacted if I had told him I had indeed eaten his tuna sandwich the last four days, and that I did not regret it one bit.

Tyler is a coworker of mine. He has a tooth ache.

It makes for a funny sort of story, to go home after an exhausting workday and set the table for dinner and tell your partner, Tyler could not believe his sandwich was missing for yet another day! Even after he had labelled it extra clearly that it was his sandwich!

When I am chewing through a gristly slab of steak that my partner has not prepared properly, because he will not let anyone else cook the steak but him, I think:

Hi my name is Jon.

I want to start seeing a therapist.

I am worried that I am beginning to forget who I am.

When I am standing on train platforms, waiting to embark on the journey home, proper, I am listening to a podcast I downloaded the night before, and the host tells me a fascinating story about how Colin Farrell prepared for his role in *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

I really, really want to see a donkey in real life.

Before I forget what a donkey even is.

Nicole

Wouldn't you love to picture yourself sitting by a bay...

I live in the city now, in a basement apartment.

At least I had a few windows, but sometimes all I am able to see are the rats marching on the sidewalk, scurrying around in search for something to eat. I'm sure.

The first thing I did when I moved into this apartment is searched for a roommate.

I had never lived with one before; I had only ever lived with my parents, when I was a small thing. I could already imagine, then, the two of us sitting at the breakfast bar, talking about how we wished to vacation off to some inlet somewhere and watch the dolphins swim up to the shore with their snouts to the air, click-clacking in their tongue, asking for food.

There are so many things that I do regret: a nipple piercing, not making sure the nipple piercing was kept clean, missing a flight because I did not set a sentient alarm that would scream at me when I ignored the alarm to sleep more, and drinking wine.

It is supposed to say, *too much wine*.

It's when I drink too much of this wine that I realise I am so desperate to have a child that I have even considered breaking into a hospital one evening and stealing one of the newborns to keep for myself. When you see filmed footage of hospitals, there is always such an abundance of sweet, silent newborns...it is a beautiful sign of the life in the world, and the parents that are indeed willing to raise them.

Would you agree far better than I ever could?

Teaching is such a noble profession. You can win awards for it, you know?

*Marian*

It is the true solution to abandon our home planet to the toxicity above.

I am sitting in on a lecture series about the possibility of establishing a colony on Mars, and I chuckle to myself. What is so awful about Earth that we refuse to rehabilitate it?

I have a part-time job at the supermarket and I secretly stash as many packets of cigarettes as possible and set them ablaze in the carpark after my shift.

I am engulfed in flame and I am liberated.

I am not literally engulfed in flame. Although having children is all the same.

Two of my children are renting out an apartment of their own, and I sobbed for hours on end.

I am killing these trees for the tissues and I do not even care!

No one understands how a single mother can raise her nine children.

Well, one of them has died.

In fantastical dreams I could never have imagined myself having, I see her face again.

There is nothing more empowered for me than tracing the lines of the future in the slight creases of a child's precious face. Not even eating an impressively-delicious cheeseburger.

I am not a religious person, but I am grateful to the above.

To space.

I raise my glass of cigarette-ash.

## **Pregnant Seahorse**

In high school, it was Forrest and Gregory. The two met in the eighth grade, the flung-together way two twelve-year-olds would meet one another. A boxy seating chart projected out onto the whiteboard with their names side by side. Forrest had braces. Gregory, with worse teeth, would mention *Minecraft* in passing and come late to class once in a while. He would stutter through an explanation. Most of the time, it was his mother's fault—she would make them run late, she would eat up time in the morning struggling to get out of bed, although Gregory would frame it as *the late shifts made her exhausted*. She was raising three boys. One of them liked *Minecraft*.

Forrest and Gregory started dating in the tenth grade. It was strange for them, to be out in their sexualities, holding hands as they walked down the undercover pathways from where Gregory had bought a meat pie and an orange juice, to the crop of concrete that constituted somewhere to sit. Somewhere to notice. Be noticed. Sometimes a classmate would shove their teenage-greasy hands against Forrest's shoulders, slamming him into the tiled walls of the toilet block. He started to avoid them. He started to train his bladder to retain the need for him to go to the bathroom until he caught the bus home, and he'd wail out, internally, when he sat at home on the toilet. Like the homophobia of it all clung to his skin regardless. He was fourteen and he felt fourteen.

Billy was a friend, then. No one spoke of their sexualities unless you asked them about it, but Forrest and Gregory and Billy would have infrequent sleepovers at that age, since the three of them met at twelve. No one questioned boys, no one thought boys talked about kissing and what it meant. When Forrest and Gregory started to date, Billy readjusted. It was comfortable, then. He had other friends, in other classes, but he was oh so sweet on the friendship he had with the two boys who were falling in love with one another. Billy thought himself *lucky*. He was weaving for himself a transition from hanging around the primary school friends that couldn't quite *get* him—they talked so much about the shit he didn't know anything about, and by fourteen they just wanted to *fuck bitches* (or something a little less crude). Billy looked at them like they looked at him. One of us is a freak, and it's not me. He couldn't have the freedom that Forrest and Gregory had, but he could ogle it. He could bear witness to it. This ritual, this stance of accepting that the crushes on girls were just truces with his old friends, could be possible. He figured he would have to persevere until after graduation, but that thought hadn't come to him yet.

It was late in the year, the weather beginning to warm. Forrest and Gregory and Billy overlapped, then quietened down as they prepared for a series of exams each dreaded for different reasons. Forrest spent a few sleepless nights running ideas through his head, falling back on old memorising techniques.

Gregory studied until nine at night, then shut the lid of his laptop and collapsed into bed. Billy furiously masturbated, paused to drink a glass of milk, then opened his notes and stared at them with an overwhelming headache. Sometimes he woke up in the morning and he couldn't remember if it was Forrest or Gregory he'd been kissing in his dream. Sometimes either Forrest or Gregory would wake up and send a sleep-around-the-eyes selfie to the other.

It was late in the year, the weather beginning to warm, and the three boys were figuring out how to be men. Forrest had this ambition: he wanted to get through high school, get accepted into university, go through the motions of becoming qualified to teach. He saw himself in a classroom, younger children than he is now, little minds inside little legends. The thought of teaching high schoolers, remembering what he thought about at sixteen versus what they would be thinking about while they stared at him half-unfocused, petrified him. Billy would study. Something like a gap year sounded promising and exciting but his parents would shame him for it. A silent shame, really. They'd wonder why he couldn't make it work. Vacation plans would revert into getting hooked on the latest RPG and drinking at parties. Gregory took a career-aptitude test and it printed results labelling him the dream crematoriumist...he just thought he was making up words in his head. A scene replayed in his head for an hour or so, jerking a silver metal tray back and forth, back and forth, watching the lifeless corpse of an old woman like a distant cousin to his grandmother become a lit cigarette. Gregory took the test again. It said: slacker. He liked that.

Gregory quickly realised he was this time just playing *The Sims 2*. His little humanoid figure had left the sofa, moved to the computer, and spat *job search* from the menu. The slacker career had a little symbol of a coffee sitting on a saucer. He salivated.

During an exam, the three of them glanced up at the exact same time. They all took note of the time on the clockface: half of the test time had elapsed.

Their relationship was the typical high school fanfare. Forrest and Gregory fought over the mundane things, but neither ever cheated. On graduation morning, Gregory dropped his pants and sent a picture of his semi-hard cock to his loving boyfriend. Forrest was already dressed, tying his shoes in the hallway. He'd already seen Gregory's cock plenty of time. He was pissed this was his boyfriend's reaction to the last of their fights, which had ended sourly the night before. Forrest still salivated.

A year passed, and Forrest was celebrating four months of being single. Although celebrating was an awful word for it, as he stared at his naked body in the mirror and couldn't remember the last time someone really took in his assured-beauty and complimented him genuinely on it. Every little text message flirt could only be taken on its face value, and sometimes he would read a comment about how gorgeous he is, how pretty his face is, and think it was just something they regurgitated to anyone they wanted to sleep with. Like an -insert name here- phenomenon. Forrest and Gregory kept in touch, but there was no touch. A brief hug, a drunken handshake, maybe. They went to the same university, they were still friends, they were still devastatingly attracted to each other. Gregory was always sitting in intimate cafés, stealing the WI-FI, reading up on mind-numbing texts about marketing strategies and target demographics. He'd convince himself he liked this sort of stuff, and if it killed him, it killed him. He bought so many condoms after the break-up and barely used any of them. Gregory's depression stunk like the cum-stained sock underneath his bed in his room in the cheap student housing he moved into to outrun his mother's depression. He'd go to therapy if he could afford it.

Billy wanted Forrest so bad it haunted him like a poltergeist. They'd slept together once, about three weeks after the breakup. Billy burned the memory into his brain. Jokingly, they laughed off matching on a dating app, and conversation sprung again. Billy was surprised Forrest wanted to date again, although if he checked the time spent apart it would clock in at four months and eight days. He navigated talking to them both, dangling a carrot in front of the boy he thought he would never have a chance of being with, and distracting the other with a good time so he'd go off and be distracted in someone else's bed. He thought he could love Forrest forever.

In university, it was Forrest and Billy.

The thrill of the pursuit was never lost on sweet, charismatic, down-to-earth Billy. He stayed in the same boring, exhausting, necessary job to support himself, to take his new boyfriend out on dates, and to plan for whatever future he could position himself for. One without pause, maybe. He gushed over Forrest in front of a half-made presentation, the look of pure excitement giving him anime eyes. They went on a romantic getaway for Valentine's Day, stayed in a cute bungalow with views of the mountainous horizon, and tried to one-up each other with their I-love-yous. They had sex underneath the faux-rain of the showerhead and it was only slightly awkward.

Gregory started to like their Instagram pictures out of genuine support.



At some sort of family event, perhaps a birthday or an anniversary, Forrest's aunt asks the pair if they have any plans to get married. It's the refreshing sort of thing neither expected from their relatives. They were a homosexual couple mingling with Christian, faith-based people, who devoured pigs-in-a-blanket without question, and now seemed genuine about Billy's involvement in the family long-term. Forrest and Billy had been together for two and a half years. There were complications, delays: Forrest deferred his studies for a year when his mother got sick, and he wore the stress of waiting to lose her plainly on his face. She recovered, briefly. Billy failed his way through a semester, then slapped himself silly to recuperate. Redoing the subject meant redoing his personal torment. He'd stumble out of a late-night essay-writing session using his phone as a torch while he searched for something to drink. He liked vodka, gin, rum, bourbon, beer, Baileys, red wine, honestly he didn't discriminate too much. He would pair the alcohol with squares of chocolate, uneven slices of cheese, grapes, Easter eggs from six months ago, or he'd bite straight down on a carrot. He liked to think of it as late-night grazing.

Gregory was in another relationship, and he hadn't spoken to Forrest in months. They were feuding exes, without the speaking. In university, it was Gregory and Lee. Gregory worried talking to Forrest could look nefarious, a spell to incite angry, bloody sex—bloody because it would scar and slice and ruin the pretty complexion of his partner, Lee. Forrest was peeved at Gregory. If this were some overdramatic television show from the nineties or the naughties, there would be a print-out of Gregory's lovely face on the backside of the bedroom door and Forrest would take shots at the eyeballs with red-and-blue feathery darts. What was Billy to do but show him some support? Gregory gave Lee the sort of orgasm you'd write about fifty years from now in your memoirs. Lee went home to his parents' place and journaled all the details, but he wrote about something else too. The affair he was having with the pretty boy who mowed the lawn, shirtless, three houses down.

Billy would have collapsed to his knees to propose the moment Forrest made offhand hints he wanted to be swept off his feet. Did gay men want sparkling engagement rings? Billy had to remind himself he was twenty-two, barely employed, and spent so much of his paycheck on alcohol. He went cold turkey immediately. Friends sent him messages in all-CAPS: COME OUT BRO! DRINKS ARE CHEAP. He wanted to be on his knee for Forrest.

Forrest booked himself a solo vacation overseas and went silent for two and a half weeks.

Gregory wanted to kill Lee. He felt like a dumbass.

He messaged Billy, again: *I want to talk to you and Forrest again. Please.*

They were all twenty-three. Billy was in the middle of vacuuming the kitchen when arms snaked around his body and he jolted upwards, almost flinging the vacuum out of his hands. Gregory had gotten a haircut the morning before, was shirtless already, and had the stupidest grin on his face. He was the happiest he had been since he was sixteen. The two rented out a flat together in an inner-city suburb they could hardly afford, but there were plenty of things they rejected needing: alcohol caused problems, going on vacation was time-consuming anyway, they could just share each other's clothes, and neither of them felt like bothering to go to the dentist. Some nights Billy would flash his coffee-stained teeth and ask his roommate-slash-partner if he needed any work done. They just bought teeth-whitening toothpaste at the supermarket instead. Billy and Gregory had been living together for three months. About a week into living together, they stripped each other naked and "explored each other's bodies", which was true code for licked every single inch of skin and flip-fucked for what felt like four days straight. Gregory called in sick to work one morning so he could suck Billy's cock and they could binge a season of *Taskmaster* in bed together.

Forrest was a little distant, at first. He'd panicked and fled a two-and-a-half-year relationship because it started to get too serious, and now he watched his two exes flaunt their healthy co-dependency the few times they all met up to reminisce about high school. One dreary, rainy night, they met in the city in a restaurant a street away from the waterfront, and Forrest scratched at a rash developing on his left thigh as Billy and Gregory sat in front of him, more normal than possible. They weren't lovey-dovey romance-y. They didn't hold hands at the table. They didn't even kiss in front of him. Forrest was frozen in his seat, unnoticeably so, picturing their dicks and their firm asses, himself completely retracted from any and every picture. He retreated to his apartment and stalked the dating apps for someone to remind him he could be loved again...someone started asking him what he was looking for, and he felt his face flush and warm up. A panicked scream escaped from his lips and he tossed the phone across the room. It landed face-down in the middle of his bed. Lonely. Sinking into the divot made by his body.

BILLY: I know this isn't a serious thing – we're just having fun.

GREGORY: It's been freaking Forrest out. Maybe we should stop.

It was like protecting the heart of a sensitive child. Don't confuse him, don't confuse this. They would have their fun in private. Gregory was too depressed for a relationship anyway. Billy didn't want to feel like the relationship would have to take a side-step once he started to work more and prioritise a better future for himself. It would just be him now, he knew that.

Forrest was so addicted to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. It used to be their thing, the three of them. They would watch reality television together; it was an attempt to keep the friendship alive once they stopped seeing each other every single day in high school. Graduation happened, four days later they were marathoning a season of *Big Brother* they'd found on YouTube. They all got something out of it, something different, but something similar, too. Now he was obsessing over lavish gowns and comedy challenges and watching the mouths of these drag queens move along with the lyrics of whichever song was selected for the week. He started focusing too much on the movement of the mouths. He was rewatching a season he'd already seen. The queen was poorly rehearsed, flubbing the parting of her lips. Forrest mouthed at the television. His phone buzzed beside him. It was Gregory.

Billy and Gregory kept living together for the split rent, but they moved further out from the city, trading proximity for space. There was a new group chat. The three of them texted every so often, but communication had its rules. They didn't dredge up the past, they didn't go around fucking each other just because it was a convenience. New beginnings or something. Gregory liked to try inviting Forrest to see movies with him, or otherwise they would sit in the park in the city and people-watch. Forrest would pack himself a sandwich or a strange assortment of snacks, like muesli bars and packets of sultanas and wholemeal rolls with nothing on them and tins of tuna. They saw horror movies together and brushed arms, accidentally. Forrest was trying to convince Gregory to start a Letterboxd account and write reviews for all the movies they saw together, or saw apart, but Gregory only nodded along and winced internally. It's all just more effort for him, and he was so sleepy a nap could happen every time he rides the train into town. Billy dated someone named Troy for five weeks.

There was a romance drought. Forrest and Gregory and Billy seemed to align at once, a harsh snap that saw the three of them each delete any dating app off their phones and spend the weekends making their spaces pretty and tidy, and saving money so they could all afford a planned holiday to Sydney. Forrest reconnected with someone he met in his first year of university, and they kissed. It was brief, fleeting, and Forrest rejected him when he attempted to tug at the waistband of Forrest's pants. Gregory was eating up his personal leave days, and this was even before the weeklong vacation in the New South Wales capital. He cancelled appointments at the last respectable minute. He broke a dinner plate. Billy stumbled forward for what he thought was the miraculous appearance of a mirage but all he lapped up was the miserable memory of how life could be absolutely fucking cruel. He was good at bouncing back, though.

At twenty-four, it is Forrest, Gregory, and Billy. A string of names separated by commas.

A patch of sunlight finds itself a new home on the carpeted floor of a twenty-something-year-old's bedroom. The curtain was left open just to peek, doubtfully on purpose. Gregory sits cross-legged on the bed, the sheet loosely draped over his hairy legs. He has a pair of scissors in his hands. In his head, he pictures himself sharply impaling his stomach with the blades, twisting to elicit a more pained scream. He can't move his eyes off the scissors. They're a light blue pair he bought from a stationary supplies store three months ago, in some phase of attempting to get back into art. He would draw whatever it was he thought of drawing, either something helplessly sombre or a realistic rendering of someone's penis, then use the scissors to cut out the image in a square box. Trapping it, or releasing it. He pinned a hurried drawing of a penis to Billy's bedroom door one morning, before he slumped into the kitchen to pour himself too much of the full cream milk.

The scissors.

Gregory's got nowhere to be. He could take the train into the city, wander the cobbled paths along South Bank listening to an assorted playlist that he'll frequently just skip through. He thinks about the cost of that: a zapped payment for the train ticket, straight off his card, then the cost of lunch, or else his stomach growls like *The Hungry Tiger* from the second or third *Wizard of Oz* novel. He can't bend to his knees and nibble at the ground, he can't so pretend to be the grazing gazelle now half-limp but completely eager. Worst case, he ducks into the local Woolworths supermarket and hopes they have something for like, \$4.50 that'll sustain him until Billy screams out his name hoarsely from the kitchen in the evening. They've taken to eating dinner together, an old married couple without the sex, or the sweet nothings, or the true bickering. He loves that. Not wanting to tear his best friend's hair out. They adopted those monikers together, *twinsies*, a rite of passage for twenty-four-year-olds who live together for long enough. Who remember teenage versions of themselves, of the other, how simple and idealistic and quaint and less volatile they were. Gregory holds the scissors.

He doesn't think about the movements. It could be swift in one direction, or the other, but he'd gurgle at the blood and clutch at his *wherever* and yell out for Billy and realise the very next step would be for someone to lock him in a mental health ward and prepare him for improvement. The scissors still feel warm in his grip. Pretty scissors.

In the living room, he collapses down on the couch and begins flicking through the only streaming service he pays for. The boys look beautiful. Gregory is half unclothed, still, and occasionally reaches for the bulge in his skimpy pyjama shorts to readjust his cock. He thinks about pulling them off, the shorts, and masturbating right there in the living room. It's not like Billy would care very much.

About a week earlier, they spent one late, late evening on this very couch completely naked, sharing between them a bottle of Sprite and a packet of Crispy M&Ms. Occasionally they would allude to this freedom, this nudist-colony lifestyle that sparked all of the sudden. The temperature explained very little—it was comfortable clothed or not. They weren't thirsting desperately for one another, times like those had passed some months ago. Gregory never made suggestive glances, and if Billy made them, he wasn't paying enough attention to notice. They skimmed for the gayest thing on the streaming service and pressed play. Maybe subconsciously they wanted to be hornier. Maybe subconsciously they wanted to be rejected by a screen, by actors in character. It was one in the morning and Gregory edged himself. He glanced over at Billy, who was passed out in an uncomfortable position on the couch.

'I'm fucking pathetic,' he whispered to his ex, his friend, his ex's ex, his friend's friend.

On the sofa, Gregory left the pair of light blue scissors beside him. Half-tucked underneath a pillow, their curved loops poking out like a childish W. He hit play on the next episode of an adult-animated show about government conspiracy theories. His morning made for an awful teleplay: an uninspired episode of *Gogglebox*, a life-drained portrait of modernity, one male of the species in close quarters with a papercut on his finger and a gaping hole in the space between his ears. Not even the energy to point at something hilarious. Gregory laughs, as if on que, then realises he doesn't even know why he's laughing.

There are beautiful memories. A few weeks before the break-up, when things were content with Forrest. All is fair in love and university. They had dinner plans, in the sense that it was Forrest's brother's birthday and the parents had made a reservation. Sitting in a booth, leaning against the plumped wall, their hands clasped together, it had every right to be a normal memory. A forgotten thing, because they would say *happy birthday, Cohen*, and forget about the evening. It's easier to remember something when there is less complication, less adult-world seeping in. Forrest's mother was in the bathroom. Cohen was only half paying attention. The happy couple got lost in each other's eyes. They were, what, eighteen-years-old and could forget for a moment that time would pass them by. That mistresses like past, present, and future would come into their beds and seduce them with forehead kisses. Forrest leaned close to whisper in Gregory's ear.

'My brother is frustrated he doesn't have something like what we have,' he said, talking like a teenager who couldn't possibly see the future.

Gregory is on the couch, watching television, overwrought with dreadful thoughts. Billy is awake now, busying himself in the kitchen. Brewing a coffee. Looking at pictures of men and women sitting around

in half-filled cafés, hands petite on oversized coffee cups. Mornings unsettle Gregory. They must be an almost unnoticeable part of the day for Billy.

Two hours pass. The television glow competes with the picture rectangle of his phone, but Gregory remains on the sofa, after an approximate half hour back in his bedroom, splayed out on the bed trying to convince himself to get the energy to masturbate over pictures of his exes. There is still an unhealthy collection of Lee's nudes on his phone, but sometimes he passes them over for pictures of Lee in an immaculate suit for a cousin's wedding, or, rather, the singled image of him waking up from a nap in an apartment that becomes more and more unfamiliar by the morning. They ceased any sort of contact not long after the breakup. As opposed to the sometimes-symbiotic relationship he maintains with Forrest. Beautiful Forrest. All those trees. The lanky branches swaying blissfully in the wind, now not at all lanky but the perfect size, the perfect shape, nature that will evangelise.

His mother would have something to say: do something else with your life, Greg. Get out into the sunshine and imbibe the rays, stuff any of the excess into a hollowed-out pit in your stomach for the wonderful sort of pick-me-up you could find yourself needing on those rainy Brisbane evenings. Get out of the house. Like a lingering ghoul is plaguing your walls, and giving into these thoughts only makes the it/them latch on stronger.

He could photoshop pictures of himself at the park, or the beach.

If only he had skills. If only he could prove successful, with such a lie.

An hour passes. Gregory watched the first twenty minutes of a movie called *Never Been Chris'd* before he realised he still had a brain and could actually do something more exciting with his life than watch something constructed out of arts and crafts supplies and the algorithm. He was knee-deep into an episode of *Snake in the Grass* instead. The general concept of the show involved one player deceiving the three others during a series of challenges. A blonde-haired woman dangled from a cord, flinging her arms out towards something tied in the canopy. Gregory thought she looked a little familiar. He brushed his hand against the pillow beside him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the pair of scissors, slightly less obscured now. He scorns looking at them. They are ugly. They at the worst thing in this apartment. Or. The worst thing in the apartment when he leaves it.

The host of the reality television show is on screen, blurring into the background. Gregory isn't paying attention, playing a mindless mobile game that requires him to flick his finger back and forth, up and down, on the screen without requiring much brain power. The morning is becoming much of a repetition. Gregory is wasting his time. Gregory is loving it...the slipping away feeling of barely paying a moment's notice to the minutes passing him by, the casual comfort of a ceiling fan's breeze tickling the hair on his chest.

It's 12:12pm and Gregory stands at the bathroom sink with two pills in his palm. His head is only half-convinced of a headache, but he aches, or he complains of the aches. The Panadol will soothe. The Panadol will at least convince him it soothes. He pops one of the pills in the back of his mouth, staring at himself in the mirror. The gluey consistency of the coating of the pill mixed with the water he also tipped into his throat sticks to his teeth. The pill sits in the back, wedged between his tongue and the gum. Something today is prodding at him. When he was younger, his mother spent precious time training him on how to swallow down pills with relative ease. It's a gradual thing, sometimes. Practice makes perfect. Swallowing down a pill. He would never get in his head about it, but he would be too flippant, too adventurous, and try to slam down the pill without any water at first. The scrunched-up look on his face meant he'd been unsuccessful, then he'd gulp down a mouthful of water and feel the pill slide down with the smooth belly against the front of his throat. His mother would scold him: next time, just do it with a glass of water, Greg. Her scolding would be playful, light-hearted. She would wink when she said it, then turn on her heels and move toward the kitchen, where she'd find the bottle of wine waiting for her in the fridge.

Gregory gags. Swallows down the pill. He raises his hands to rub both temples, but instead his hands seem to react on their own, planting themselves over his eyes. The bathroom, from his perspective, becomes muted in darkness. He doesn't have to look at himself, see himself, acknowledge any part of himself. This darkness, it is peaceful. The slight aftertaste of the Panadol tablets is the only thing reminding him he is on Planet Earth. Otherwise, he can picture himself whenever he likes—a void will do, not an outward escape from everything he's feeling, but a hole in the wall of space and time. Surely. There's a quiet knock at the bathroom door.

'Gregory,' Billy says, knocking once more.

Behind closed eyes, a mask made of his hands, and a hole in the *wall*, Gregory lets out a polite response. 'Occupied.' There's no sound or movement for a few seconds. Gregory is doing his best impression of a patient stranger in a public restroom, determined to be left uninterrupted. The door is locked, or he thinks it is. The sharp adjustment to paying attention to his roommate's voice has shaken him out of things, and he lowers his hands to his sides and recuperates with the mirror. This is a face a mother could love. Not a boy, not how it seems. This is the face of someone who has to reject absolutely everything to be happy, and yet, what the hell does he know about *happy*?

At the door, another repetition of that name— 'Gregory.'

Billy sounds confused more than anything. 'A package came for you.'

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**WEDNESDAY. 1:31PM.**

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Propped up in front of his laptop, Forrest is like a marionette. If directed, he moves his head this way. With a fling of a string his arm comes into frame, and he takes caution to brush his fringe back without lingering too much, without seeming disinterested. This is a therapy appointment. The last six have been entirely online—he suddenly lost the ability to travel the distance to the appointment, or that is the story he compounds at the end of every session. Forrest does want to quit. Stripping off the expense from his bank account summary would be brilliant. He'd only been seeing this very therapist for a couple months: the first three sessions happened over a span of two weeks, a flimsily-arranged schedule so he could attempt to combat an anxiety attack. Now he feels weighted. He would spend entire sessions talking about one conversation, something that had barrelled out of a few choice words he said to his then-partner, Billy. Forrest to Billy: I was just surprised you're so committed to us. Billy to Forrest: I love you, dumbass, and we've spent conversations alone, in the dark, talking about working on this future together. The silence would then clear its throat. If it had lips, it would take a drink. The silence to Forrest and Billy: love is just a word people say to excuse themselves. Did you mean it?

Forrest listens to his therapist. He is a tall, light-haired Scandinavian man. Tall, Forrest remembers from the in-person sessions. This towering figure extending out his hand. Forrest had swiftly buried any sort of attraction—the first appointment came at a time where he couldn't rise out of bed without having some sort of sexual fantasy, jerking off his cock with some lube from the bedside table. The night of the first session he tried picturing the therapist in the nude in that office, straddling a wheelie office chair, still wearing his socks. Forrest was horny until he wasn't. Eventually the projected image became too sterile. Too Sigmund Freud. The therapist was rejecting his process of thoughts, running a hand down his thigh and communicating to Forrest that it was problematic to set the wrong boundaries with your exes, even your friends.

With a healthier perspective on imagining his therapist sexually, Forrest thinks he's waned off needing this therapy. He doesn't want to leave the apartment for it, he doesn't want to get dressed for the laptop sessions. Sometimes he's completely naked below the waist and he never feels strangely uncomfortable, or wildly inappropriate. Mostly he covers his entire body in a blanket, though. He hates his skin. The light brown hair on his arms and legs. The freckles. The scales that have formed on the underside of his knees. The apartment is too miserable sometimes to only wear long-sleeved clothing, or slather himself in fabric, so the thin blue sheet from the bed is sometimes the most reliable fix. During a therapy session, he has a distraction. He positions himself in front of the webcam, flicks the



annoying switch in his brain, and figures out the responses he wants to give, but also the ones everyone expects of him. He treats this session as the grand finale—loose questions to be resolved, a winner to be crowned, a lengthy hiatus. He'd tell the tall Scandinavian this would be the last of their sessions, and he'd pocket the cost of therapy from now on. Like a squirrel and nuts.

Forrest briefly bends out of the view of the camera. He scratches at the patch of skin on the left side of his left ankle, aggressive, unsettled. Fragments and flakes cling underneath his fingernails. His therapist's voice is still in his ear, following through with a short monologue about how to combat anxiety around getting into another relationship. Forrest had made a passing comment about his loneliness—a probable mistake, he thinks, contorting his body to continue on this tangle of himself.

'When you meet the right person, that's a complicated narrative, isn't it?' The therapist says, as Forrest freezes awkwardly in his place. 'If you spend all your time looking for this so-called right person, are you judging a potential partner on how you feel around them, about them, or the boxes that they tick for you?' Forrest adjusts himself back upright, like an unfurling of a dusty Moroccan rug. He tries to avoid making eye-contact with the video footage of his therapist. He has to wonder how his image reflects back on the other screen, in that office room he loves no longer frequenting. Although was he ever really there? There's a brief moment of lag. Forrest scratches his knee.

When the appointment begins to wrap up, and the therapist reminds the patient he'll send the invoice through to his email, Forrest adjusts in his seat and taps the screen of his phone. He notices the small string of messages, including a couple from Billy. Ex-boyfriend Billy, close friend Billy. Billy who posted a shirtless picture of himself the other week as if Forrest wasn't supposed to thirst over it. Thirst but do nothing. He lets the screen plummet into darkness again, gathers his nerves, and begins a new sentence. 'I want to find a new therapist,' he lies, avoiding eye-contact. There's no plan for anything. Forrest hasn't started searching the internet for someone else, nor has he returned to his doctor to reject the initial suggestion. He doesn't even dislike this therapist. But if he said *I don't want to be in therapy anymore, it was a mistake, I reject unpacking my problems and the faults in my relationships and whatever is coursing through my body, trying to undermine me* he would be judged. There would be a stern look plastered on the computer screen, no mention of lag or an end to the appointment. He could lie. He could say he had been slowly packing away his life into cardboard boxes this whole time, anticipating a move to another state, another bustling city, where he could find another therapist he could actually visit in person. He would make it sound like visiting an elderly relative in hospital, fearful of an afternoon nap becoming eternal, but that would just be his tone. Inescapable. He would make it sound promising, albeit uncomfortable, because a therapist was losing a patient, a patient who certainly needed the grounded support of a medical professional. Forrest scratches his knee. 'You've helped me a lot. Truly.'

Forrest is lying on the floor, draped only in a towel. After a shower, he scraped at the flesh of his legs for far too long, scratching until he drew blood. They look worse, to him, his lean, long legs. He can't be the only one who notices the seaweed-green scales, but no one else really visits him in the apartment. The border of the towel is stained red. He took the edges in his hands and wiped at the little mess he made. The ceiling fan above his head is stilled, mucked in dust, and displays back to him a warped reflection. His legs aren't too noticeably green, not yet. The scales began at the ankles. Or, more technical, the scales began first in an uneven patch on his back. As if they had a twisted sense of humour, rearing themselves someplace he wouldn't notice until he was posed in the mirror, admiring his figure.

He has become increasingly self-conscious. He wears long trousers most days, even in the warmer weather, or otherwise he draws the curtains completely closed, sits in the dreary darkness, and wears only a pair of grey underwear. It takes every ounce of self-control to avoid staring at the scales all day. Forrest is already dipping too much into his savings. Last night, he ordered Chinese takeout and groaned at the price of delivery, but he was certain to not leave the apartment. He barely inched the door open to accept the food. His entire body cloaked in a dressing gown, the fuzzy fabric belt strangling his waist. In the towel, he feels like a murdered beach-goer. Or else a drowned child. Undried hair, a shaved face smoother than ever, the towel scratching his nipples.

Billy had sent some message about wanting to make sure he was okay.

Forrest responded after the appointment, before the shower. He tried drafting a response four times, continuously typing then deleting, shaking his head fervently. At one point he audibly gasped and thought of simply typing *SORRY*, like that, all capital letters and bolded if he could. No period, or three in quick succession. *SORRY...*

Instead, he sent: *BILLY!! Sorry! I just broke it off with my therapist!*

Then, after briefly considering himself insane, he typed: *Is Gregory okay?*

Sometimes he told people he thought about them more often than he thought about himself. Billy's first response to this had been: *that's awfully sweet of you, Forrest, but take care of yourself too, hey.* Forrest said it to him again, when he was drunk and clingy, and Billy changed his opinion entirely (he was also drunk, but sobering): *you know you don't have to just say that to make people care about you.*

Forrest sits up, off the carpet, the towel falling off his chest. His torso is clear of seaweed-green, at least for now. The room is still blanketed in darkness, and he fumbles around for wherever he flung his phone before he started daydreaming. A few days earlier, he'd downloaded an app that surprisingly helps soothe him. You sort various assorted items into various assorted tubs, calmly and

serenely picking through a mountain of someone else's treasure. He swipes a perfume bottle, breakable but inexpensive, from the centre of the screen into a baby pink treasure chest in the lower left corner. Forrest's mind clears. For a moment, he gives himself over to this new lifestyle, one suitcase heaped closed on a Thursday morning and a flustered drive to some inlet up north. There, barely unpacked, he folds his legs underneath his butt and begins this process, sorting an assortment. An estate sale means there is a cardboard box, poorly packed, of an old woman's unwanted trinkets. Pure sentiment. Gripped by oily hands and musty perfume. The moonlight trickles in from a dining room window and he realises a handful of hours have passed and he's been in a trance of admiration. One moment please. The overhead lamp is switched on. In this fantasy, he's not unwillingly morphing into a sea monster. But he sniffs the salty air, at ease.

Over the course of a month, Forrest had nineteen nightmares about *pursuing the dream*. In some, he would be standing in front of a classroom of ten-year-olds and one of them would politely raise their hand and question why sir's feet were bare, and why his hair was falling out in clumps, and why there was a piss stain the size of a family meat pie in the front of his pants. In others, truth would bleed: he would bend down and the leg of his pants would rise and one of the seven-year-olds would startle and scream. *SIR YOU HAVE SCALES LIKE A DINOSAUR!*

He would wake in sweats, but instead of trying desperately to fall asleep again, he would climb out of bed and eat something from the fridge. Or the pantry. Sometimes he'd think about ordering something, but then glance at the time, startled not by the thought but by the *deja-vu*.

His dream is losing steam as his dream. The framed degree is now tucked underneath the bed—he occasionally checks it, running his palm over the clear plastic, making certain it isn't cracked. Occasionally someone will ask him how life is like post-university. It will come through as a text message, of course, and he will give pause as to how to respond. It's an uncertainty, sitting in this room, trying to mobilise. Trying to outrun things, like the fear that gills will be next. It's late afternoon on a Wednesday and Forrest is lying in a three-quarters-full bathtub, most of his body hidden underneath bubbles. There is a good distraction: a little white Bluetooth speaker is playing music from a playlist he has titled "Settle In". Music to soothe, music to transport him someplace else. Here's to hoping the next number in the playlist can force those thoughts of his future to retreat...

In the bathtub, Forrest eases himself down until his ears are just above the surface of the water. His legs are bent, knees crowning high above his body, but he feels content in the position. Content is a strange word to him. So he's *managing*. So, he's in the bathtub. His skin is breathing. This is the closest he can come to the ocean.

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**WEDNESDAY. 8:49PM.**

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A crowd has gathered in the street, swerving out of the way when a car at last approaches them. Billy figures it's too early for all of them to be plastered, but at least one pre-gamed harder than anticipated, especially for a Wednesday. They'll regret it, he thinks, stifling a laugh that'll just read as confusing. Gregory is silent beside him. The crowd, albeit a smaller one than the word implicates, starts to disperse when three of them turn a corner and disappear. Presumably there was a goodbye, maybe even a good luck, but only Billy could have been aware of it. Gregory is staring at his phone, occasionally lifting his head to make sure he doesn't get ploughed down by oncoming traffic, or headbutt into a roadside column of some kind—be it streetlight, metal post, or tree. Billy likes to think, in a worst-case scenario, he could patch up Gregory's split forehead and try to coax out something else from him. A reason for the scissors on the couch. An explanation for the earlier-than-usual nights, and the half-eaten bowls of oatmeal left in the sink, and disappearance of his ramblings.

They are on a collision path for the gay club, not that Billy is looking for the attention from other men, and he doubts Gregory would even notice. A night out, a bit of excitement, it seemed necessarily, but now in this quieter side street he's hesitating. They should've gotten off a couple stations later and found a restaurant empty enough for a hushed dinner between them. They could have shared a bowl of chips. If Forrest were here, things would be more assured—this is the rhetoric he tells himself, rehashes it in other words, but it doesn't plainly ring true.

What the fuck does he know about rhetoric anyway, he thinks, nudging Gregory to cross the street when everything is still, dead, lifeless. Billy begins to drag Gregory along like a toy on a string, wheels clicking against the concrete of the sidewalk. After some time, they end up in the middle of a park, standing underneath the gaze of a statue. Some historical man, a figure whose name makes little to no impact on Billy. Gregory sinks into a park bench. Plans cancelled. Billy feels himself buried inside of his body. He doesn't know why he thought a night out, on a fucking Wednesday, would do either of them any good. They couldn't even get to the door. Billy lets out a muted groan. He's got work in the morning, not until ten o'clock at least, but he'll wear this sort of shame regardless. Back in that apartment, he fought to nudge Gregory out the door. Pressed his hands on Gregory's back. Dug around in his head for words of motivation, found a couple curse words, a couple of grovelling pleas. It was the least romantic thing they had ever done together. This back-and-forth bargaining. Billy just wanted one night. Here's to hoping one night could spiral into another, and another, and there would be brightness on his best friend's face again.

They grab something to eat, Billy housing a slice of pizza while Gregory sits opposite, taking slower, more empty-eyed bites. He's not the zombie of trope. He's a little vague in the eyes, but there's still some life to the boy Billy's known since he was a teenager. Meatlovers pizza smell wafts around their bubble, the one park table they could find, coincidentally vacant. Gregory's phone is face up beside his elbow.

Billy wipes sauce from the corners of his mouth. 'You don't need to talk,' he says, biting into the crust of the pizza. 'But I just want to say to you that I'm concerned.' He tries to find the way to navigate a conversation like this, teetering between sounding compassionate and sounding like he's reading from a memorised pamphlet on intervention. Not that he thinks he could be wholly successful in intervening.

Gregory finishes a slice and immediately takes another into his hand, letting the tail hang awkwardly toward the table. Toppings threaten to leap off in an act of rebellion. He doesn't respond immediately. He doesn't make a whole lot of eye-contact with Billy.

'Concerned about what?'

'You, mate,' Billy replies.

'I'm doing fine.'

Billy bites down hard on the pizza—largely impossible, given the weak base, but he feels it in his teeth. He hates being any sort of angry, bitter, frustrated with Gregory, and he isn't, but this moment gives him all the conflicting thoughts. He wants Forrest there, sitting beside him, his head on Billy's shoulder. It would be awfully strange, true, almost an embarrassment in front of Gregory, but the support would be slightly revolutionary. He knows he can admit feelings don't always die.

'I don't wanna overstep, Greg,' he says, setting down the slice of pizza back in the box. Out of some sort of reflex reaction, Gregory stares at the half-eaten slice like it is an interrupting intruder come to stink out the rest of the pizza. 'I just want you to know we can talk like we used to. Open up about what's going on in our lives, our heads. Forrest is worried about you.' He plants the latter as his secret weapon, and it disturbs him to be weaponizing this mutual friendship. This mutual, tangled love for the missing party. Neither of them could actually claim to *have* Forrest in their pocket at this very moment. Neither of them knew what was going on.

'Tell Forrest to come see me in person then,' he fires back.

Billy searches for the right response. Of course he wishes one swift text would change their circumstances. Forrest sits behind his closed doors. Like clockwork, these boys fall into an uncertain silence. Billy takes the half-eaten slice out of the box once more and eats the rest of it, keeping his attention on a distracted Gregory.

'You look a complete mess,' he says, trying to convey all his sympathy in a crooked smile.

Gregory takes another slice of pizza but doesn't bite into it. The narrow end limply hangs before he lets the slice slip out of his grip, landing face-down on the concrete. He barely reacts. No frown, no killer smile. His voice is low, disruptive, bitter. 'I did another terrible, terrible thing.' He mimes as if he is about to pick up the slice off the ground, as if waiting for a response telling him to do such, but Billy is slack-jawed, confused, exhausted. There are obvious bags underneath his eyes. 'You don't want to tell me I'm a fuck-up, because mess is a basic fucking word?' Gregory spits out his words, his back slightly hunched, an eyebrow tilted higher than the other. 'Forrest hates me and I do not blame him.'

Billy closes the pizza box, slides it off to the side so the space between the two boys is emptied out. If he were wanting this vibe to be shifted to complete comfort, to romance, he would extend his arm across the wood and try to convince Gregory to hold his hand. Something like that didn't feel like it would be a success in this moment, so he folds his arms on the table instead, softening his expression. 'You're not a fuck-up, you're just a mess, Greg.' Billy says, closing his eyes for just a moment, to see the two of them in the past, in a healthier state, frankly when they were teenagers and they didn't have to put exact labels on every single one of their problems. When he opens his eyes again, Gregory has his face buried in his hands. 'Can we just go home?'

They leave the park, Billy carrying the unfinished pizza, his mopey friend beside him, distracted once again by his phone. Every once in a while, Gregory glances up at the world around him, catching a view of a shadowed bat cross the moonlit sky, and murmuring something under his breath. At one point, he says, 'Thanks for not taking me into the gay club, you idiot.' Although Billy wonders if he heard all the words correctly.

Gregory disappears into his bedroom without another word, a burdened monk. The living room light is glaringly bright, and Billy checks the time on his phone. It's late. Far too late to be making house calls, to be expecting tea and biscuits, which makes it the perfect time. He idles for a moment, tapping the bristly carpet beneath his feet. Tomorrow, he'll vacuum it. Tomorrow, he'll dump every chore onto himself, leading the frantic sort of life he's growing accustomed to. He needs to go buy new coat hangers, which makes him feel truly like a flummoxed adult. Never enough.

He requests an Uber and waits outside in the humbling darkness, scrolling through the varied reactions to a movie he hasn't seen, probably won't see for a couple of months now. Sometimes someone with an actor's portrait for a profile picture, a clear-as-day glamour, will announce spoilers in a sentence without commas or periods. At least Billy gets the gist.

The ride pulls up in front of him and he repeats his name out to the dark-haired man sitting in the driver's seat, who has just began adjusting the volume knob on the stereo. The driver nods, repeats his own name back. It's a weird sensation, an introduction with all the formality already stripped away by a mobile app on a phone. Billy makes himself comfortable in the backseat, sending a text message to Forrest. It reads: *I don't want to startle you awake with a knock. The low thrum of your phone is better.*

*I'm coming over.*

At the door, Billy leans his head against the frame and knocks, politely. He thinks himself stupid for expecting to be let in immediately, to be embraced and explained to, as if the events of the evening hadn't already happened. He is squaring off with two people hellbent on brandishing their silence, weaponizing their desires to ignore him, ignore his obsession to help them. 'Forrest.' He says, croaking out a note almost to the wavelength of begging. 'I don't want to berate you anymore.'

There is a brief silence, before Forrest's voice is heard from the other side of the door. 'Give me a second.' Billy closes his eyes and pictures himself seeing Forrest again, the first time in at least two months. He would have to root around in his memories, in Forrest's calendar, maybe, to find the last time they looked at one another. Time's a drag, anyway. Time just happens.

Billy hears a short reply, an 'Okay, come in,' and he opens his eyes, turns, finds a strong grip on the handle, and turns it, and opens the door. He is greeted immediately by darkness—there aren't any lights on in the apartment, the curtains are drawn completely, and he can only barely make out the silhouette of his close, close friend. Forrest is stagnant in the room. As the door clicks behind him, Billy's confusion becomes a form of uncertainty. He thinks, Forrest can't afford power anymore. He thinks, I've been lured into some trap, some seductive semblance of an apology meant to make me forget how distant he's been acting, and reacting, and toying with our feelings. He pauses by the door, trying to remember where the light switches are in the main room of the apartment. Forrest takes a single step backwards.

'Can we just talk in the dark, please?'

'What's happened to the power?'

'Nothing,' Forrest says, clutching at the dressing gown tight on his body.

Billy fumbled in his pocket for his phone, the bright white light of the screen scarring his unadjusted eyes. He couldn't see how Forrest reacted, but he would've seen this: a quiet, restrained shiver, a boy trembling, some courageous part of himself wanting to edge towards the light. Billy switched the phone's torchlight on and screened the room, adjusting the both of them to its gaze. The glow found Forrest, found skin poking out from behind the fuzzy robe, found the glimmering scales.

He could have gasped. He could have been mortified.

'I don't understand either of you,' Billy says, inching himself forward.

## WATER AS A FORM OF HEALING

They rented a place that sat on the water on stilts. By they, what was meant was this: Billy searched the internet for somewhere close to the water, or on it, and bundled his stuff together, along with enough clothes, underwear, and toiletries for Gregory, who at this point seemed almost catatonic most mornings. It was like smuggling an illegal package out of the city with Forrest: he refused to wear anything that could reveal any skin, so he was swaddled in blankets, wearing squarish sunglasses that hid his crazed pupils. They left in the dead of night. Billy had expansive dreams of the three of them submerging in a submarine, living out peace on the bottom of the ocean. Playing house without windows. Forrest able to live his two lives. Gregory left to whine about the lack of good cell service. How the internet had been his one escape, how *mingling* with the boys he was supposed to still love felt hopeless, in the end. *'Don't say that, don't say supposed like that,'* Billy would interject.

One of the bedrooms overlooks the shore. It isn't anything to marvel at—Billy stands there at the window, staring at sand, dirt, grass. He spent the car ride distracting himself with the road. If he thought too clearly on anything else, he'd have attempted to convince Forrest to move out of his apartment, or Gregory to go see a therapist, and he felt he would be pretty worthless on either front. He is having those wicked thoughts: Forrest will be evicted first; Gregory will drain himself of blood first. Worrying about the both of them this much is extraordinary new territory.

Billy closes the window and leaves the bedroom, listening out for the other two somewhere in the house. There's a tapping from the kitchen, the flush of a toilet from the bathroom. Forrest opens the bathroom door, a beaming smile on his face. [Is this a trap?] Billy hesitates.

He could say: 'You're awfully chipper this morning', spoiling the game. Instead, he adjusts his mindset, which feels vaguely impossible, and says, 'Hi.' Forrest leans back against the door, most of his skin covered by one piece of clothing or another. His pale hands settle against the frame, his nails chipped and uneven. The smile softens.

'There was a bird at the window,' Forrest begins. 'I whispered to it, I don't have anything for you, bird. Fly off.' He recounts the slight hopping motion the bird made, inching back and forth on the terribly-thin windowsill. 'It flew away, eventually, and it was the first moment I realised the curtains were drawn open, because you must've been in my room during the night.' Forrest's eyes didn't tear away from Billy's stare.

Billy straightens himself out. 'I thought you'd like the sunshine coming in in the morning,' he explains, unsure whether to step forwards or backwards. 'No one would have been out on the water so early as to catch a glimpse of how uncovered you were fast asleep...'



‘You are bold,’ Forrest says, scratching at his forehead.

That was to be the end of his response, as for the next thirty minutes the two spoke of many other things, but not the bird, the windowsill, or the parted curtains. Forrest permitted Billy to take a closer observation of the scales, although he wasn’t any sort of specialist himself, and was largely perplexed. They continued to keep Gregory largely in the dark. Gregory, seeming at least a little more content away from everything, is enjoying his solitude. In the half an hour that passed, he only once made it known he was there. Passing Forrest’s bedroom, he poked his head into the room and asked Billy why the internet was becoming increasingly spotty. Billy just shook his head. In the corner of the room, slinking back into the dressing gown, Forrest was beginning to blend into the cream-coloured wall, or that was the intention, at least. His movements when the door opened were frantic, springy, a blighted field mouse. Billy kneeled beside him afterwards and kissed him on the forehead, whispering, ‘Being terrified of him knowing only makes you nauseous, you grove of trees.’

This must be what fatherhood is like, Billy thinks, after having forced Gregory out of the house to go for a walk through the beachside town they were staying in. With Gregory, at least he could stress less about the lingering stares of these ordinary people who didn’t know his life, this life. There is a corner store, he can purchase some more food for this family of his. Infantilising the problems of his closest friends doesn’t give any reparations. Gregory is walking beside him, the mobile phone left on a bedside table the colour of muddied sand. He wears a grey baseball cap with an insincere message of positivity stamped onto it. It may as well say *breathe air*.

‘You know, I keep pausing before I almost ask you if you think there’s a point to me,’ Gregory says, without making any glance upwards from the gravelled road. ‘I want to say, am I just wasting time while I waste my money? I want to say, this is just my life now, and I hate it.’ A small child on a bicycle with training wheels rides past them, performing a dangerous balancing act as they pat down their wet swimsuit and giggle at the squelchy sound it makes. Billy shifts his eyes from the kid back to his friend. Gregory doesn’t seem to expect any sort of response.

Billy doesn’t know how to be a therapist, he’s struggling to even be a proper damn friend to the boys he really, truly loves. A few cogs, a few springs, are coming loose inside his brain, and he fights against the urge to stop the pair of them in the street and just...what the fuck is he supposed to do? Make an ass of himself and kiss Gregory, try to prove something romantic is the reason he should continue on living? *Pointless*. Gregory is telling him he feels oh so pointless. Billy continues along the path, footsteps on the road, and tries to hide any expression of his complicated thoughts on his face.

‘There’s a point to you. You’re not a piece of code, sure, you’ve got freer rein than that.’

He catches himself—there is fear in telling someone they are worth the world, that some greater purpose exists for them if they just persevere and persevere. Billy could admit to Gregory that he would be floating in an ocean with no raft if he lost him, but what good could that accomplish? Make a person guilty. Make a person feel themselves splintered, bound, set onto the water with a bamboo shoot poking out of their back. A wave of a white flag in another sense. Billy feels like he is flipping through the pages of a book extraordinarily fast, desperate to find the sensible sort of ending. He's choking on water.

Imagine the tide for: *if you took your own life, I'd understand.*

He has to refocus things. Too many of his arguments have skewed to how he feels, or how Forrest would feel. Billy clears his throat, shoving a cough into his confidence. 'I could stand here and tell you everything will change, but I don't know. It is impossible to know what to say to you to make a difference, but you should feel comfortable to just talk.'

Gregory briefly shifts his glance to Billy.

'This weather isn't horrendous,' he says, smirking self-consciously. This begins a series of spoken-aloud thoughts, haphazard in their delivery, nestling into the breeze like they were greeting old friends.

'When I was fifteen, I had to bury feelings I had for someone. Ended up hating him for it.'

'There used to be a song that would come on in my playlist and I'd remember how *good* things used to be before my parents divorced.'

'I've sucked both of your cocks, and I can't ever tell you whose I like more.'

'One night, when I got blackout drunk, I offered to spank a friend. I can't remember how he reacted to that. Never have the guts to ask, or even mention those nights. Just stew.'

'There's something Forrest isn't telling me, and I wish it was polite to just shake the fuck out of him because it.'

Billy had remained silent. They are still wandering, meandering, really, towards the small general store, avoiding any courteous conversations with the locals. Gregory rubs his right eye with his palm and feigns winding himself up again, like a toy with only so much energy. When they enter the store, a middle-aged woman blocks their path as she bends down to retrieve a rolling tin of baked beans. Billy and Gregory look at one another, and this is when Billy gives his response only in glances: *I like this weather. I'm sorry you couldn't confess your feelings. Don't you wish music could fix everything? It's perfectly fine to tell me my cock is superior.* Billy winks. *Want to spank me to forget about it? Forrest will come to you in time.*

The middle-aged woman straightens herself out with the tin in both hands, an uncertain smile on her face as she passes the two men heading for the rear of the small corner store. Billy lunges forward at the sight of a packet of marshmallows, completely overtaken by his inner child. He starts to

picture the three of them forcing out the words ‘chubby bunny’ with a mouthful of gluggy, quarter-chewed marshmallows in their mouths. Something they’d done as teenagers, when Forrest and Gregory were still dating, so their taken glances always hid a flirty playfulness. When Forrest spat out a marshmallow onto the carpet, desperate to contain some laughter and not choke, Gregory wandered a hand onto his thigh and Billy tried to pretend he wasn’t hopelessly attracted to this charming silliness. Marshmallows digested, Forrest’s head on Gregory’s chest, something so unbroken like a chain of paper-people with drawn on faces, and no fear and loathing.

In the aisles, so unlike the sprawling ones of any suburban supermarket, Gregory is eyeing off the tinned tuna, tinned chicken, and SPAM ham. He’s unemotive, his eyes flicking from side to side in slow motion. Billy’s hands grip to the cold plastic of a milk bottle. ‘We could be hunters, cast out our lines and catch our own tuna,’ he says, leaning the milk against Gregory’s bare forearm. The other male reacts, shivering at the touch, but he doesn’t budge from his spot in front of the tinned goods. Gregory pushes against the cold plastic, a polar bear on its iceberg. He let out a quiet grunt.

An hour or so later, they are in the water, sinking to their bottoms. Billy and Gregory are shirtless, slathered in sunscreen. Forrest wears a wetsuit that leaves only his head exposed. The neoprene is the colour of an oil slick. Despite this precaution, the three of them are in a more isolated area of the beach, keeping an eye on one another. A seagull purveys the world from overhead, its voice boisterous and frankly somewhat alarming. Gregory cannot keep his eyes off Forrest’s figure in the wetsuit, eyebrows slanted on angles, lips parted. For all he is concerned, he believes his former boyfriend to be suffering from some mysterious form of skin condition, or else absolutely terrified of getting bitten by some mysterious fish swimming around in the ocean. Or of getting sand in all the crevices.

They sit with the water to their stomachs, a poorly-formed circle leaving room for the waves to lap in around them. Forrest runs a hand through his hair, a new expression forming on his face—it’s freedom, to some, but ecstasy to others. The invisible gills start to breathe again. Billy reservedly places his hand on Forrest’s shoulder. To any onlooker, this intimate ring would appear cultish. From the first sentence spoken, the average onlooker would realise there is more healing needed in this trio than the uttered runes of witchcraft, or the manipulative speakings of a charismatic white man.

‘I know I dragged the both of you out here pretending we’d just ignore our troubles,’ Billy says, smiling first at Forrest, then at Gregory on the other side of him. He removes his hand from Forrest’s shoulder and places his other hand on Gregory’s. ‘I’ve never properly been like this, like some sort of mediator, a moderator of inner feelings and exhaustion.’ The water is cool against his skin.

'I'm not paying you for this,' Forrest mutters, making brief eye-contact with Billy, then Gregory. At locking eyes with his high school boyfriend, he shies up, bashful, retracting into himself. It's noticeable, but only because the other two men are standing right beside him, scrutinising the tiny movements. Billy feels the cold of the water lap against his belly-button and has to condition himself to not simply expect either of them to be changed because of a hug, or some sort of physical moment of comfort. He nods at Forrest, ever the support-group-circle leader. With the soft bobbing movement of his head he is saying, *go on, tell him. Go on, be unafraid. Monster is only a word written into our language.* Of course, he's no English scholar, but it's something Forrest would say to him, and this symbiotic relationship of theirs needs to come into certain existence, right in this moment.

Under the golden sun, Forrest picks at the wetsuit's edges, pulling the neoprene off his neck. 'This guilt is painful, incredibly so,' he begins, licking his dry lips. 'I should have said something to you, Greg, at the same time I said something to you,' and he glances over at Billy, those sweet, admirable eyes that are truly reminding the two boys in this moment how difficult it is to not fall hopelessly in love with this wetsuit-wearing grove of trees. Forrest fights the tears welling in his eyes. 'I, uh, have started to morph...' On Gregory's confused face, he tenses up, afraid of his own words. His left leg begins to itch. 'I don't know if I can call it morphing really,' he continues, splashing at the water as he scratches at the scales hidden underneath the neoprene. 'There are scales on my legs, on my back, I am deathly afraid of being away from water for too long, I think I should expect to have gills soon enough, and crave living sheltered with all my fellow sea beasties.' Forrest sets the teen-beach-horror-story of the first scale he noticed, becoming slightly hyperbolic on the startling moments, watching Gregory's face for some indication he's losing the connection they share between them. In old mythology, sea monsters resembling humans, to an extent at least, lured men to their deaths with vocal strummings. Forrest's voice is beautiful enough to be alluring.

'Did something bite you or?' Gregory utters, biting his lip.

'I live in a city apartment, rarely go to the beach, and don't even think conversion like this is possible that way, so...'

'You were born like this?'

'Could it have really laid dormant until I turned twenty-four?'

Forrest thinks aloud about his mother, first. She isn't the sort of woman to wear a wetsuit to the shoreline, he says, or the type of woman to last an extraordinary length of time in an underwater breath-holding competition. His father, similarly, doesn't itch at invisible scales, or crave shredding the flesh off a saltwater fish, or a human, at least not noticeably so. Gregory's eyes narrow at a point on Forrest's wetsuit. His two friends seem to deduce he's zoning out, hellishly thinking on something just said.

‘It doesn’t matter where it comes from,’ Billy interjects, half-confidently.

There is some silence, a lingering kind, as Forrest sinks down into the water and submerges his head, letting the salt cling at the roots. Billy glances at Gregory. Forrest splashes back up, shaking his hair off in the opposite direction from the boys. He’s got the sensibilities of a freed dog, or an escaped one, careless and lapping up the nonchalance of being without a fence, a barrier, even for a moment. When he returns his focus to the boys, there is a stern, almost mournful expression on Gregory’s face. Billy’s shoulders are tensed.

‘I’ve thought about killing myself,’ Gregory says.

Without thinking, Forrest bounds through the water and wraps his arms around Gregory. It is the first time the two have hugged like this, embraced one another with this amount of compassion, in who knows how long. Gregory forgets himself and places his hand on Forrest’s lower back. It’s a romantic hug, the sort to silence its only observer. Billy, slick with flicked-up water, inches himself backwards. Strange, how old habits die hard.

They part, although the circle remains broken. Gregory, a tear sitting in the crease underneath his eye, lowers his voice and begins to talk about his depression. ‘When you start to fear less, about death and everything, you don’t realise the misery you’re just welcoming in.’

Forrest makes a passing glance at Billy, apologetic eyes and the slightest frown, and inches backwards in the water, kicking sand up with his feet. The circle reforms. Despite nudges, comforting smiles, Gregory is more subdued in his discussion than expected. He jokingly refers to the therapy exercise of digging around in one’s past for the first example of both the cause of one’s depression and the first depressive episode. He doesn’t mention his parents, his series of breakups, or the light blue pair of scissors. His skin is wrinkled, and his shoulders shake as a shiver trails down his spine. Staying out in the ocean is wearing itself down on the three of them, but like a captive audience, Forrest and Billy await for *something else*. ‘I just don’t know how to help myself,’ Gregory finishes, falling silent. He severs their little cult circle and begins wandering up to the cluttered heap of beach towels on the sand. Forrest shrivels up inside the neoprene as the cooler afternoon wind whips against his body. Billy is left alone in the water, a headache forming above the eyes.

A sea monster, a walking rain cloud, and a man walk into a bar. Only fifteen nanoseconds pass before the bar is immediately flooded with water. The glass windows had splintered, shattered, and now tiny imperfect-shaped shards swim around the darkened space with the sea monster, the walking rain cloud, and the plain, boring, ordinary man. A cheek is sliced. A stomach is sliced. The man, unable to breathe underwater, feels his lungs become new vessels. Vases for seawater.

## PAPIER-MÂCHÉ AS A FORM

It is a patchwork. Forrest is in the upper left corner, dressed in greens and muted blues, a sliver of gold careening from under his armpit down to his toes. Something so loose on his body, something so flowing, makes him appear jellyfish-like. There is a pregnant seahorse at his feet, turned away from him. Coral is bleached. A sea turtle is chewing on the fabric billowing off his right arm, an unnatural scene, a voracious creature with bloody murder behind the eyes. It is an underwater bridal moment, the thin golden band of a wedding ring on Forrest's finger. Left at the altar, unfortunately. Left to defend himself, unfortunately. Darker waters paint the recesses of the patchwork. If this were a tarot card, and perhaps it is, it would heed a warning: *maybe you will not die, but you will attract those who benefit from death.*

In the bathroom, with the wetsuit slung out over the bathtub, Forrest can feel how dry his skin is. His lips are chapped. This mirror is thankfully too small to perceive his legs, his scaly legs, but he can notice the discolouring of his stomach. A blueish-green tinge, something sickly, like a bruise navigating the body. Spreading. He quickly dresses, slipping a black turtleneck over his head. The weather will mean he's uncomfortably warm the moment he wanders into the sun, but he no longer plans on leaving the holiday dwelling, at least not until true darkness blankets the streets and he can wander down to the sands and pick at seashells.

Gregory is napping on the couch, Billy is sitting with his back to the world, staring out a window. It's a fascinating tableau—no one will pay much notice to Forrest as he opens the refrigerator and takes out the milk and pours himself a glass of it, not that he expects or wants them to. He's grateful for now to not find human creature comforts, like drinking milk from the udders of cows, repulsive, or gag-worthy. There is an evenly-stacked pyramid of tinned tuna on one of the kitchen counters, tucked in the corner against the beige walls. He can't make out whether it's a supportive, considerate gesture from Billy, from when he and Gregory walked down to the store, or a cruelty meant to taunt him. Sent from a god of the sea. It is 5:52pm. Forrest carries the glass of milk over to where Billy is perched. He sets the glass down on the faux-wood floorboards and sits on the ground beside the chair, folding his legs underneath his butt.

'Can I ask you something?' He says, trying to will Billy to look at him.

'Of course you can.'

For a brief moment, they smile at one another.

'Can you tell me what it's like living with him? I want to see the patchwork of it.'

‘With Greg?’ Billy pauses, rubbing his right eye. ‘It’s lonely, sometimes. When I don’t know what demons he’s dealing with, and I’m just watching him lull on the lounge, forgetting about everything else. We don’t bicker like roommates, only like friends.’ Billy swivels his body so that he is sitting on the chair sideways. Forrest pivots on the floor to face him. ‘I didn’t know how to help him properly. Most of the time I think there’s something like the dream you have when you’re a kid, this idea of moving out from your parents’ place and living with your friend and having the right amount of freedom when you clock off from work. It’s peeking out. Except I come home and find Greg pissed at himself, and at least he’s not pissing himself, you know?’ He stifles a laugh, twisting his head to catch a glimpse at his sleeping friend of the couch. ‘He doesn’t talk about it, he just makes quippy jokes about what good it would do the world if he killed himself. Until the next bright spot. Then, he kisses my shoulder like we’re lovers again and makes an apology so brief I can tell he’s only doing it because he thinks it’s what I expect, that he is part-depression and there is no helping that.’

Forrest extends his hand out and grasps Billy’s.

‘I find it hard to imagine him kissing your shoulder,’ Forrest says.

‘Usually he slaps my ass.’

‘There’s my Gregory.’

They take turns projecting an image on the beige walls in front of them—happy, elated Gregory, and then his miserable side, limp and vulnerable. Then, as a shadow flickers in the corner of the room, the resentful Gregory from after the breakup, the very first heartbreak in the trio. How it hadn’t been the fault of this boy, or that boy, but something had shattered so effortlessly between them. When constructing a house, you begin with the foundation, the slab of concrete poured out from the cement-mixer. Or there are other steps, too. The levelling of the land. Finding your pipes. Purchasing the land. Forrest and Gregory had fallen in love when they were in the middle of pouring the concrete, waiting for it to set. The era of his life defined by this love for Gregory was littered with sickly-sweet love texts, and bites, and folders of nudes taken with the precision of a teenager. Like tracing your initials into the drying concrete, his adoration for Gregory is set underneath the frames, and the hardwood floors, and the bathtub in the guest bathroom. This aching he feels for the boy he loved, hopelessly loved, until seventeen, or eighteen, maybe nineteen, it is like rattling the tiled roof of a one-storey home built in a flash, in a rush. It is like driving your car through the closed garage door, headed straight for the guest bathroom. *[I can draw you a blueprint of this hypothetical house if you would like].*

Reminiscing, it’s like seeing old friends. It *is* seeing old friends, inviting them inside for coffee. Billy finds a Saturday six weeks ago, him and his roommate out shopping for new clothes, new socks. New underwear. ‘There’s nothing so incredible about that day, though,’ he says, and glances away from Forrest for sixty long seconds. Maybe more. Probably more. Forrest is just enjoying that thought.

There's a clear memory of childhood, his own body almost buried underneath the sand. Head poking out. His cousin, only two or three years old at the time, wets sand in an upturned sandcastle-making bucket, firming up some sort of paste. The little kid slaps this on Forrest's face. Right on the cheek. It's melodrama at eleven. Forrest's mouth forming an over-surprised gasp, as if this didn't happen the last time the older kids had buried Forrest in the sandy beaches of whichever coastal town their grandparents lived in at the time. Frequent movers, frequent deserters. He was never left in the hole, torso thrusting against the tented-on sand to wiggle his way out. There's no residual trauma from grandparents finding no reason to stay in one place, stay planted like growing-out palm trees. In a sense, there's a sort of accuracy to this mutation—a family of sun-ripened, salt-water drinkers. The backseat of the family seven-seater constantly requiring the closest thing to a gurneyed hose-down without damaging the leather entirely. Maybe he would have preferred morphing into a wood sprite, finding the first of a series of 'shrooms and fungus sprouting out of his ankles. The insane waft of being alone in a forest. Maybe he could have found comfort in retiring to the middle of somewhere dense, unafraid of the groans of bears. Plant himself in a dampened square of dirt and maybe understand where Gregory's slow welcoming of death comes from...

There's dried blood on his legs. His nails are growing too long. He scratches too deep on the scales, peeling them back without noticing, chipping back at this alternate hybrid of flesh and fish. His body makes little sense to him. There's a speck of dried blood underneath the fingernail of his left-hand thumb. Someone will notice, if not the fingernail, then his legs when the pants he's chosen to wear do drag upward when he bends down to do something. Glance at a seashell. Tie his shoelaces. His clothes are starting to look wrong on his body. Too ill-fitting. He's too ill. A sickly little baby boy. A creature from the fucking ocean!! Drown him already.

'Forrest?' Billy says, leaning against the door frame.

It's mid-morning, and instead of staying on his feet, staying in a semi-alert state, Forrest is back lying down on the unmade bed. His feet are hidden underneath the sheet. There's a novel on the bed, a bookmark in the shape of a nurse shark poking out at the top.

'Can I ask you something?' Billy continues, poking out his tongue. It's a gesture that is largely unnoticed—Forrest makes a brief attempt to look over at the boy he once dated, but the weight of his head slumps him right back into planking position.

'Sure.'



Billy takes a solitary step into the bedroom, leaving ample space between the two of them. If he were more vigilant, Forrest would sense this space, consider whether to shorten it or widen it. Instead, he's working on the patchwork in the lower right corner, stitching new ideas seamlessly with a thought. Symmetrical pregnancy seahorse. His stomach making him so proud.

'We've talked about it before. How I would mention our future together and you would tense, seal yourself off like a clam.' He laughs, barely, like a drag queen bombing a comedy roast. 'Terrible timing. Sorry, Forrest.' An expression registers on Forrest's face, something in the middle of flatness and consternation. He wants to say, *where is the question?* He wants to say something else, too, but doesn't. Billy rests his hands on the rail of the bed frame. 'Sorry, I'm getting to the question, I promise you. It was always important to me that we could talk about everything. You told me things about being with Gregory that I didn't want to repeat, or make those mistakes, and my friendship with him evolved, I guess, because I could watch him clearly fucking regret ever hurting you.' Billy sighs. Billy seems to break a little. Billy takes his time. 'I...I could ask any question right now, and I'd feel like I was clobbering you over the head instead of making sure you were okay first.' His shoulders slump. A frown creases. From his wooden position, Forrest inches up into something of a sitting-up position—his body is contorted, and he leans back into the head of the bed potentially hoping it will create deep divots in his back. 'I'm a dumb bitch for thinking I'd ever get a chance to try for some future with you, because it has always been about Gregory, and now it's about you completely closing yourself off from us because we don't have an exact solution to the sea monster problem.'

'You don't have to call me a monster too,' Forrest replies, hollow in the eyes.

'You don't have a tail.'

'I wish I had a tail! At least I would fucking know something about myself!'

Billy stares at him. 'Forrest...'

'What? You don't seriously think I can exist like this,' he says, gripping onto the right leg of his trousers. He drags the fabric off his skin, rolling the pant leg up uncomfortably towards his waist. He grimaces as the pant becomes taut against his thigh. A shimmering sea of scales rises from underneath his sock, emerald-green and sapphire-blue, ending abruptly just above his knee. 'You still want to marry a fucking freak of nature. When I'm filing any sort of paperwork from now on, I'll have to write into a little box 'absolute disaster' and 'identifies as a sea creature' or else what? Some hospital nurse will think I'm dedicated to the art of tattooing my body, or I should be taken to the damn zoological society and have someone test my DNA to make sure my mother didn't fool around with Charybdis in the late 90s.'

Forrest takes a breath, a droplet of sweat on his forehead. He rolls down the pant leg again, his lip quivering. Without warning, he crawls across the bed and folds himself in Billy's arms.

Imagine if this was everything. If they continued in this moment for another hour, longer, if one enveloping embrace could shatter this conception of a human-fish-something...for who can be certain what a body can do. In a few days, they would become dehydrated, starved, lethargic, aching in the body. Oxygen would never be a worry, but unless someone came to feed them, to dampen their tongues, they would wither away in time, so the tableau could not last for months, or years, or the next twelve decades. Imagine if it could, briefly. How in *The Sims 2* they could consistently reset the needs of the household they had control over. Billy played too; Billy had the cheat codes scribbled down in a notebook he hadn't used from a year of school. He had a handful memorised, and maybe he'd be whispering them in his head in this moment, or maybe his head would be entirely empty of thoughts. Maybe the chaotic demon thoughts would take over and he would weave his fingers along the skin and the scales on Forrest's back, finding the grooves and the sharper edges. Searching for everything that was once Forrest, as the caterpillar becomes the butterfly. It's a slow process.

As quick as he had scampered, Forrest retracts from the end of the bed. 'There aren't places I can go to even get a semblance of an answer,' he says, beginning to unbutton his pants. He shimmies on the mattress, wiggling out of the tan-coloured pants. Comfortable, now, there's an element of beauty to the scales, that much he can recognise. An element. If only they were temporary, if only they could be scrubbed off in the shower. 'You know the stages of grief, yeah? I don't care about the order, I go through all of them in the span of an hour. Miserable because I look like a freak show act. Pissed because I can't expect to ever be naked in front of a complete stranger again, or even one of you two, without knowing the despised sort of look is going to be on that man's face. Bargaining, always, for an anti-anxiety medication that rids me of hallucinations. Acceptance of what Gregory barely fucking talked about. Suicide. Just getting away from everything.'

Billy hesitates.

'I don't want either of you giving up on everything,' he says, weakly, like a frightened child.

Forrest shakes his head. 'It's only a passing thought for me...I'm too committed to living out my suffering, I think. Hopefully less alone, too.' He knocks the tan-coloured pants off the bed and glances at the open door. 'Can you close the door and just crawl into bed with me? If you're afraid to touch my skin, the...green and the blue...I can wrap myself in the sheet first.'

Billy climbs off the edge of the bed and approaches the bedroom door. Somewhere in the rented place, Gregory is likely alone, stuffed with the crepe paper of his thoughts. Glued to his phone. Billy lingers with his hand on the door, staring down the hallway. Forrest wants to scream at him, *isn't this what you've wanted since I decided to run and hide? Isn't this how we solve all the riddles left unsolved between us?* But he doesn't budge. There are complications. His own heart will swear to tell the truth, only the truth, then confess he would linger in that doorway too, magicked towards the boxed-away.

Billy closes the door. He's climbing in beside Forrest as he whispers, 'I'm not afraid of your body, no more than I was the first time I realised I didn't have to just admire you from afar.'

Forrest smiles, becoming a tad more at ease. 'Thank you.'

He shakes his head before Billy can make any sort of reply.

In high school, it was insane to think he'd found someone that wanted to date him. Gregory felt, at first, like a flirty whim, a check-box to further the realisation that he was gay and comfortable with it. They'd kissed at some party. Looking at him now, Forrest is routinely cleansing the part of his mind that is determined to see the depression. To see the broken, crumbling figure from profile-view only. Those little stories—Gregory unable to lift himself out of bed, Gregory grumpily dirtying up the place without thinking about Billy on his heels—feel like new fictions invented to reconcile the pure, vengeful anger he sometimes felt for the boy he'd loved. To say, look how he suffers now. Look how desperate he is to repent.

They're on the couch, watching an episode of a house-hunting television show on low volume. Gregory is paying extraordinary attention, pursing his lips at one decision, breathing out a sigh of relief for another. People age, their faces change over time, but if Forrest squints, he can still see his first boyfriend sitting shirtless beside him on a Saturday morning in the house on Garven Street.

'Truthfully, I feel hopeless around you right now,' Forrest says, staring at the curve of Gregory's nose. On the television screen, a white couple peeks into the too-small bathroom of a two-storey home well within their budget range. 'Like I can't ask how to make your life any better, because you and me both, we *get* depression. We get how everlasting it can feel.'

Gregory scratches his forehead. The white couple on screen deliver a few choice statements to the camera on a presumed-green-screen. *My husband is just going to hit his head on the showerhead every morning before work, so we'd have to bargain with what's cheaper: hiring someone to change the fixtures, or taking him [she points to the bald-headed doofus beside her] to the hospital.*

'Help me kill myself,' Gregory whispers, then pauses, laughing it off. 'I'm kidding.'

'For a split second, I considered it.'

'We could do a suicide pact.'

Forrest sets his palm down on Gregory's thigh. 'You don't want that.'

Gregory glances over at his ex-boyfriend. 'I want more of this,' he says.

## PASSION

It's natural to clasp onto feelings. Natural to feel an overwhelming grief, natural to gasp as the pang of the heart for the love left for an ex-partner. It's natural to be think about your foreshadowed death.

Gregory and Forrest sit at the edge of the world, at the end of the world, sipping on their glasses of orange juice with the pulp. With a quick, sharp revision, Billy is there too, an extension added to the wooden bench. Their pupils burn. Their nostrils quiver from the smoke inhalation. No one is thinking about how to approach their life, or how to make money, or what to do about the plethora of issues that sprang into existence when it was no longer just an assignment that needed to be written. Gregory closes his eyes and listens to the piano of the wind, delicate keys. It's natural to want to say goodbye, sometimes.

In the rented place, he sifts through his luggage, the shoved-together heap Billy arranged for him before they left their home further towards civilisation. None of this makes him feel desirable, or beautiful, but in the throes of any sort of depression does he want to be? He felt beautiful the moment Forrest's eyes were truly on him. Something about the way a person can reconnect with another's soul, like plugging in the charging cord for a mobile phone. He felt desirable because the miserable bleakness of what he had become wasn't the loudest thing dwelling in that room, in that moment. Gregory hadn't thought to look down at Forrest's legs.

He isn't packing away anything, nothing so certain. There's an old grimace lying around in the bottom, giving him a new appreciation for *being*. He doesn't feel certain about this staying alive thing—one hand on his thigh doesn't change an entire world. There are still the earthquakes. There are still nuclear codes getting shuffled into the wrong hands and atomic bombs being wedged into the empty space between his heart and his lungs. But. *You cannot be depressed forever, Gregory*, he hears himself mutter from a recess in the brain. A tiny politician man in a mesh-and-wire suit stands to attention at a podium and delivers a newer, updated address. *Be chirpier, maybe*, or that's something the bluebird nestled behind his mother's ear would say, the tattoo she got when she was in her late twenties with the kids already a nuisance, the husband already a fucking nuisance. The world at a stage. Whatever stage it may be. Peaks, valleys, the desire to be in love again with the boy, or boys.

Gregory wipes a stupid tear from his eye and thinks about the logistics of crawling into the luggage and zipping himself up inside of it. There, he will be hidden, a decision made for him. Whether he commits, or doesn't, someone will take him home, wrap him in silk, and tell the stories of how he is loved. It's a morbidity. Having feelings.

After another afternoon swim, the glazing sun reddening Billy's pale shoulders, Gregory draws down his shorts and stands completely naked in the doorway to the bathroom, eyeing off the both of them. Seawater is in his ears. Some of it has seeped into his brain, altering his perceptions—he doesn't see himself as a morbidly-worrisome creature out searching for meaning, he sees himself as a spritely young man with an interest in his own happiness. Naked is happiness. He wants to say, *we don't need to pretend there are rules anymore*. That this spark of something in him exposes Billy's concern as an attempt at having it all, and Forrest's fear of his transformation as his attempt to be complimented again. No cruel negativity to either, Gregory thinks, gently taking his semi-erect penis in his hand. Don't people deserve to run headlong out of the torments of their minds?

Three naked bodies crowd the shower. It's almost the equivalent of hosing down the kids—they take turns underneath the scalding heat of the water, giggling as it prods the flesh. Occasionally, one will lather their hands in soap and smudge it down the back of another. Forrest is a startling display of blue-and-green, more than previously noticed. Three slits in his neck breathe in, breathe out. Gregory places both of his hands on Forrest's waist and thinks about kissing him, making so much of his desire so obvious. But in this moment, he's not unequivocally horny, lusty, wanting to rewind to those foolish times where he thought going to bed frustrated and despondent was better than going to bed with a raging boner.

If anything, they save some water.

Maybe.

The decision to stay naked is an uncomplicated one, although Forrest tugs at his flesh as if he's already wearing an uncomfortable outer layer. Billy and Gregory kiss in front of the bathroom mirror, their reflections fogged up. Forrest's hair is still drying, and he leans the side of his body against the bathroom wall, eyeing off the boys in front of him. Was there much of a conversation for this moment? No one seemed to have found the need. Their lips part, and Gregory glances over at his first boyfriend, the beautiful slow evolution of him. Those gills are an adjustment, but he feels the same way he has always felt—how on earth do I get to exist at the same time as someone who makes my heart flutter like I'm a chubby baby preschooler?

Gregory is sprawled out like a starfish on the bed. Forrest's body weight presses down on his. Their initial kiss is awkward, reserved—Forrest retracts briefly, sporadically, to apologise for his nerves. There doesn't seem to be any chance of his forgetting. He occasionally flings a hand off towards his legs, scratching at the scales—he never once draws blood, but Billy watches on, and Gregory inside of

himself realises this isn't a passion of perfection. Billy is kneeling on the edge of the bed, steadying himself. He fluctuates between gently jerking himself off and looking on with uncertainty.

*[Are we making a mistake, they all collectively think.]*

They stop. They inch forward together, a tight and enclosed circle, of the sea once and of the land now. Of the sheets. Gregory clears his throat, for once a sweet smile on his face. 'I can go back to being a grouch on the couch,' he says, making the other two laugh without question. They don't laugh at him, but with him, picturing the version of events where Gregory slips into an aluminium-grey onesie and manspreads over on the sofa instead, watching puppies lose their lives in car accidents and teenage girls slowly tumble down flights of carpeted stairs. Forrest shakes his head, a hand covering his noticeably-discoloured cock. No one can really imagine what the genitals of a half-human, half-sea-monster hybrid would look like...but Gregory can notice the tinge of self-consciousness that remains.

'A person hasn't told me he wants to fuck me in so long,' Forrest says, his chest rising and falling as he too attempts to maintain his balance on his knees. 'It almost feels too late for all of this.'

They don't speak about this other what-if: the three of them so in love with one another they deny the ways of society and just accept what was staring them in the face this whole time.

Billy runs a hand over Forrest's chest, a stark contrast to his own. Hairless, slim, the figure of a once-upon-a-time swimmer, that is Forrest, beautiful Forrest. Billy's skin remains burned and tanned and speckled with freckles. Worn down by the sun. 'I brought you both out here because I don't believe in too-lates. Just not how I see my life.'

'I'm just hurting my knees,' Gregory says, his voice cutting into the space.

Forrest pokes out the tip of his tongue, a lightning-speed reaction. 'Our bad, daddy.'

It's organic, this reunion of bodies. Billy's hand on Forrest's thigh. Someone's breath punctuating silence. Gregory's nipple being bitten. When Forrest repositions himself, the room repositions itself too. When Billy moans, the floor heaves its sigh of relief, the ocean tides make a galivanting thrum against the walls, or else that is how it appears, with eyes closed tight. Or else a narrow blindness, lustful, oystered, pearled. When Forrest orgasms, he clicks from the back of his throat, the high-pitched intrusion of dolphin noises, but neither of the other boys disarranges to notice. It all feels so very Old Hollywood...*then you mean, all this time, we could have been threesome-fuckers?*

Lovers. In some holy queer union beyond the complications of thinking this way or thinking that. Yet while Billy penetrates, he doesn't think of his regrets, of his missed opportunities. Yet while Forrest feels the pleasure of a six-and-a-half-inch erect cock in his boy pussy he doesn't think of a seaweed dinner or the worry of an abandoned life if he had held commitment those years ago. Yet,

while Gregory wiggles himself backwards and steps down off the bed, he doesn't think about the future he wants to exclude himself from. Doesn't think about the past. Just thinks about *them*.

An hour or so later, in bloated darkness, Gregory lies awake in the queen-sized bed, taking up the least amount of room. Beside him, peaceful bodies—Billy, asleep, and Forrest, asleep, their limbs arrayed underneath the sheets. He doesn't want to wake either of them, and for a moment there's an addendum. An extra word, an *ever*. He doesn't want to wake either of them, ever, for in the moment he's the sort of precise and unrelenting god people in a congregation could talk about. Someone who is loyal and observing. Protective. Doesn't want the harm of an unforgiving life. Time passes, though. In school, he'd gone through his parents divorcing. He was troubled attempting to understand every little fracture, like chaotic bone shattering once a skier had tumbled from way, way up high, perched not so carefully in the chairlift. Becoming his own man, growing up and falling in love, meant he made a handful of dumb, shithead decisions to bear his own trauma. He couldn't say, *I'm so sorry Forrest, I made those decisions because I frighten myself*. He didn't have language like that at sixteen, seventeen. Gregory thought he could make mistakes, make as many as humanly normal, then patch them together with some super-strength glue and be like the role models. His parents, sifting through cardboard boxes. Television characters reading off scripts. Forrest and Billy. Boys who had better dreams.

He tries to slink silently out of the bed, tries to keep from disturbing either of them. He goes to the toilet, pisses in the bowl, then flushes and washes his hands in the sink. The overhead bathroom light glows against his skin and he sees two versions of himself—one who thinks himself so suicidal, the other who dances to the music of thinking himself so in love it could only possibly be gay. To think if he took his own life he couldn't be hopeless in adoration for his men like this. In his challenging ruminations on the afterlife, he couldn't comfortably envision a heaven that didn't present him an immediate escape. There would have to be photorealistic dreamscapes of a life: him, Forrest, and Billy, conjoined and yet comfortably apart, harmonising to the tune of a world without death. Without scales. Without the societal pressure to make sure your friends and your lovers aren't drowning in their own existential dreads.

These are the things Gregory would want to take with him to the grave: his phone, comfy clothes, a toothbrush, pocket-sized versions of his boys, a copy of *Interstellar*, a packet of Sour Patch Kids, a picture of himself when he was five. It's like going off for an overnight excursion, bringing the strange essentials, except there's no anticipation he'll ever come *home*.

He finds a quiet corner in the rental and sits down, phone in his hand. One night he'd written a note in the app where he's supposed to store passwords, reminders, incoherent lines of (maybe)

dialogue from a movie he had been watching. It wasn't *Interstellar*. The note could be considered incoherent too, a smashing-keys memoir he could have pasted to his forehead if he went out some kind of way that didn't obliterate his body. Now, rereading over the words, this obvious suicide note, Gregory can't help this exact feeling he feels. This exacting feeling, really. That he **should** do away with himself, because the note is so compelling. Because the truth exists outside of the void it was written in. He was in his bedroom, then, the look of a painted gothic night without the black makeup that would make the sky. He was thinking about how good endings come sometimes when you least expect them. Hell, people can't always control their orgasms either.

In the corner, Gregory sees his suicide note like its own kind of poetry. Harshly beautiful. Hardly beautiful, too, as he describes the way he could evaporate from life and leave only the better people to carry out the better duties. Things like loving, watching an intense game of a sport like tennis, if you're into sports or like the movie *Challengers*. Things like loving, watching birds fly overhead in their pointed arrow, watching a young child, your niece or nephew or cousin-nibling run around with an unripened orange in their mitts, rolling it down the slope of the driveway of the home you spent nine years of your life growing up in. He has half the nerve to scrap the whole note, delete it twice so the machine can't keep its soft recollection of it, and pretend going forward that he wasn't so perilously on the edge. On the verge. He used to have an old friend he met through Forrest who would perform at poetry slams, sporadically, dependent on whether she was in the country. She had the savings to go travelling plenty, and sometimes she would write about what it felt like to discover a person in a foreign place. Or discover a feeling, too, because she would set out this account of losing her broad-brimmed hat to the wind on an August day in Fiji. The feeling would not stem from something so material as losing the hat, but there would be the briefest of pauses while the poetry took a moment to mourn it. See, this friend of Gregory's and Forrest's, and maybe a little bit Billy's, she'd always reminded them of searching for your freedom. Taking life in strides, sure, but searching for the eclipses that weren't the signature for a soon-to-be dull moon. You're living on a dull moon, she might say now, finding an insert into this thought. A thought which for Gregory has only been spurred on because he is sitting on the floor in a place that is not his own, bathed in some moonlight, wondering why, out of everything, he can't be alive *and* dead.

'Greg?'

From the darkness peers back a shadowed figure. Billy is carrying a water bottle in his right hand. With his left, he wipes at the corners of his eyes. 'What's going on in that head of yours?'

Gregory, having finished with squinting at the glow of his phone, looks up and is greeted by a sight he's been too critical of lately. One could say he's been a little blinded, is all.



‘It’s going to take me a lot of time to ease away from this,’ he says, briefly glimpsing down at the words on the screen. Words that aren’t known to Billy—won’t be known to Billy, surely. Gregory will cast a protective hex around himself if need be. ‘Thank you. For kidnapping me.’



Gregory ties his shoes while Billy bites into a slice of toast while Forrest runs a finger along the edges of his scales. They are beautiful, he said to Forrest while they showered together that morning, while they reminisced in glances about knowing each other for years and still not being tired of one another. Billy had showered alone. Maybe there is some part of him that sees the sand dunes beyond the emerald palm fronds. He who sees the realism, then. The eventual factory smoke clogging the arteries.

‘I’m starving,’ he says, miming bites into the toast in Billy’s hand. The boys all laugh. No one goes to feed Gregory, though, and Billy only offers the slice jokingly. He resigns into a sigh—they’d told him to eat fifteen minutes ago, and he’d declined it, typical, standard Gregory sort of behaviour. He who just ignores the world to be uncomfortable, then. A rumbling stomach like a storm cloud.

Gregory takes one of the tuna cans and spins it round in his hands, almost admiring it as if an abstract piece of art. A squat cylinder of greens and yellows and whites. He’s completely dressed, completely laced-up, a startling image for a change—Gregory of the prepared, and yet not quite. There are crackers in a red cardboard box, a knife in the drawer, something like ammunition in his head. Just eat some tuna already and make at least one day of the month not about your depression, not one bit.

The other two just stand around and judge. He shoves a tuna-topped cracker into his mouth and grins at them, a cheeky little kid. ‘I thought you were going for a walk,’ Forrest says, perched on the sofa. It’s the old handmaid’s tale—walking is good for the mental health and all that. The three of them could go on walking forever, and maybe one day they would finally outwalk the ringing bells in their heads. Gregory digs the knife around in the tin of tuna.

It’s kind of funny, how we don’t realise how obvious the stomach is about its hungers. Like it’s practically screaming out for what it wants to chew on.

One day Forrest and Gregory and Billy were hungry. So, they ate.

# Magical Feelism

Airport baggage claim, Perth.

There are people you notice: the elderly women in a gaggle, a few of them tagged with name badges. A Pakistani family with oversized luggage, recently collected. A balding man on the phone.

I'm starving. Didn't eat on the six-hour flight, cautiously waiting for the next pay.

You think the balance needs to be spent on necessities—eating while suspended in the white sky, blinded by clouds, isn't so necessary compared to the train, or the early dinner in the hotel room.

Airport baggage claim, I grow a little impatient.

The conveyor belt lags to a lull, and we glance around at each other in the same confusion.

Does the woman with dark hair to her waist know anything I don't?

Does the man in the suit, because he's wearing a suit?

We wait with uncertainty. I think—coming on this trip alone, it's good for me?

Pose it like a question because I think of how outwardly alone it presents me. A young kid pushing up his glasses when someone asks him something, no, tells him that it was brave for him to be travelling by himself, as if he's not in his early twenties.

The balding man ends the phone call and begins to roam. He's eyeing off the luggage on the next conveyor belt over, suitcases and large duffel bags come in from Melbourne. Shouldn't be his. He touches the top of his head as if it were the golden stomach of a figurine. Symbol of luck. Behind him, our belt glides back into action. A pink suitcase is commander and chief.

Tugging my suitcase, I internally wave goodbye the gaggle of older women, a handful of them still waiting empty-handed. They make short glances, then gossip amongst themselves. Joan Levis, a name badge reads. Something something. President.

An unfamiliar airport. You follow the signs, the sighs of the earth, looking for the train station. It's up an elevator, down another, then an escalator or a flight of stairs.

A woman named Shirelle preloads thirty dollars onto a public transport tap-and-go card for me, and I smile my thanks, feeling the ache. I'll buy a salad if I can find one, stuff my mouth with fat and oil and grease if I cannot.

At the airport I always get this feeling I am going to leave something behind. Not forget something, not entirely. But leave something behind. Even a fraction of myself.

We wait for the train. No familiar face from baggage claim.

At the airport train station, I breathe a sigh of relief, thinking I'm soon to be away from it all.

The bustle of being airborne, wanting to be airborne. Hoping, to be airborne, or nevermore

still. There is a certain kind of freedom to an airport train station. The train doing the lifting. Carrying you to your uncertain home for the next few days. Uncertain because...the mattress could be lumpy. The AC could be too cold. You could get mugged on the street.

Doors fling open, no one steps off the train.

A wrapped-up-in-a-coat woman wheels her suitcase ahead of me, slots into a vacant seat near the doors. Her face is soft, a pale white, but her posture is upright, rigid. She coughs.

I don't feel any better sitting down again.

It's a beautiful place, Perth.

Scenery unlike back home. Trees you couldn't paint onto cardboard, or wouldn't attempt, because the school production of whatever Perth-centred play you were putting on would feel like a lifeless imitation. The train ride in from the airport makes me pause, reflect, tuck my phone away into my pocket and stare out into the space underneath the sun.

I get myself something to eat before I check into the hotel.

My stomach subsides, more at ease with itself, with me. I feel like I am rewarding it for the wait, for the tension. Sorry, I could mutter. I should have eaten on the plane, yes.

I picture myself awkwardly hunched over the tray table trying to eat a full-course meal, slicing into a medium-well-done steak. The knife screeching against the plate as the plane jolts downward, briefly, only a spot of turbulence. Nothing to frighten the children over.

Little green peas roll over the ledge. I put the fork into the mashed potatoes and narrowly avoid smearing some on the corner of my mouth, where it might stay, or get smeared only worse with another bump up, down.

I realise I'm craving the one thing I'm unlikely to get here on vacation—a steak dinner.

Unless, of course, I go stalk out a pub.

At hotel reception, I repeat my name, hand them photo identification.

Sometimes people think it a little absurd there's a twenty-something kid named Finch wanting to waste away a week in Perth.

It won't be a waste, I reassure myself, signing off on my details, maybe my rights. If I cause a major fire in the building, I will pay the damages, etc. Be careful what you do in hotel rooms.

One day I want to be in a hotel where they cart all my luggage—think suitcase upon suitcase, maybe I'm staying for the summer, or otherwise attending several weddings—up in the elevator in one of those cages on wheels. I'm sure there's a technical term.

I want to be wheeled up in the elevator as luggage.

Wheeled into a suite on the fourteenth floor, or some number more extravagant, and dumped beside the closet to be unpacked. Or, with a pause, to be rifled through on the occasion. Non-essential luggage. The nice underwear, fancy hats, pocket squares, something like that.

In the hotel room, I collapse on the bed. Kick my shoes off.

It's the right size.

This room.

Maybe even this life, if I wanted to be sort of philosophical, while I unwind from the six-hour flight, and the stomach pangs. The uncertainty.

How fine it is to be on vacation. Fine like smart, like dapper. Less well-polished I'm certain.

But fine. Well-meaning, agreeable, an invitation to enjoy myself.

I place a standard on holidaying. That I want it to be the perfect opportunity to escape *into the country*, no matter the location, the itinerary. I'm in a hotel room in the middle of the urban Perth landscape, but I'm in the *country*, too.

I guess this means I'm escaping.

Digging my way out of the prison cell.

I eat dinner by myself, naturally, but it's inorganic too.

This world isn't my world, but it is, because the ground is still the same country.

When people first invaded Australia, do you think they pictured some white gay boy trying to make his way in the world, assuredly-confident in being alone like this? Sure, there are moments. Sometimes I think of how different this could be if I'd planned this getaway for *the two of us*, a make-believe concept now, of course.

When people first invaded Australia, they probably didn't think queerness existed. White folks with their British wigs. Overzealously styled. Cruelty-please drag queens.

I eat dinner by myself, a burger sloppily made, or else like a tectonic plate it shifted as I walked from the restaurant to the hotel room. I eat dinner at the little table.

On a dating app, an attractive man, mid-30s, starts the conversation with a hum. It's familiar, altogether recognisable, but he's handsome. Attractive and handsome, dangling himself there in front of me. Giving me little responses instead of floods.

Maybe a month ago I wouldn't have found him so alluring.

Maybe a month ago...I don't know. Too much philosophy for mealtime.

I wash my hands in the bathroom sink and notice the first of the complaints—there is a crack down the front of the cupboard underneath, although maybe only so noticeable from this angle.

I guess not.

I think of myself disappearing down the hall again, waiting for the elevator, making some official complaint. Excuse me, I say, you couldn't have repaired the cupboard?

Excuse me, I say, does it matter so much? Little problems.

On this other side of the country. I pick at cupboards.

Freshly showered, the mirror completely opaque, I think of the week ahead for myself.

Think about the stark alternative of a business-related trip, where the only exciting escapism is the one night of the week where we aren't all exhausted from conventions.

Conventionalism.

The airplane-landing first evening, some of us sleeping through five of the six hours.

Myself, awake, but settled. Drinking a coffee.

We choose this night to do something liberating—but I'm about to spend an entire week liberating myself, piece by piece. Maybe tonight it will be the back, the only day before departure where it does not ache from heavy lifting. Carrying this backpack around, which lies at my feet.

I climb into bed, my phone battery at 16%.

In order to charge the phone, I unplug the bedside lamp. Think about how some hotel rooms feel like museums for an older generation of hotel visitors. People who aren't so attached to their phones. If this suddenly died, this rectangle of metal, I'd be lost without it for a week. Or I would find the nearest Apple store. I would cling. I read digital maps, digital messages, spread my life completely digital. Keep myself distracted with some part of my flesh glued to the web. Spiders, do they know me.

While my phone charges, while no message comes in from mid-30s gorgeous, I watch a movie on the television. Something I downloaded for the trip. A crime thriller with its hooks into being a comedy. Trying. Clawing.

Maybe I chuckle.

Tuesday morning.

Awake three hours before my alarm, as if on a backwards schedule with the two-hour time difference. I already miss my own bed. I toss and turn for an hour or so. The thing you always think the least about is falling asleep in hotel rooms. There's a cohesive schedule to organise, or at least somewhat of a map, like dropping pinpoint locations onto the face of Perth. Go here, then here. Find the time for here. You don't need to go wandering off half an hour that way just to see a sports stadium, you can't expect it to wow you, because sports stadiums don't.

Unless it's the Colosseum.

Eventually, I rise out of bed, craving a coffee. On the other side of the country, people are already dealing with the day's woes, or I assume so. I'm rubbing the sleep out of my eyes and thinking about how I'll be spending the day amongst animals. Protected animals, kept away from the grubby hands of little children, the grubbier hands of poachers.

Perth Zoo.

Day One.

I strip down out of the short-sleeved shirt and black cotton shorts I call pyjamas and head for the shower, settling even more into this comfort of no disturbance. No one to come upon me when I'm naked, or no anxieties of being spotted making the awkward stroll from bathroom to bedroom in nothing but a towel. I have the image of what to wear from the day in my head: blue jeans, t-shirt, sweater over the top. Socks with the elephants on them.

In the shower, I dream of the perfect day—I don't have the zoo map studied, but I can envision myself already in front of the orangutans, beaming at their muted-brown faces. Arms like human arms, almost. Tangled in fur. Imagine a man so covered in hair he could be mistaken for an orangutan from a distance. It's the vision for Tarzan you would expect. Not clean-shaven, muscles on show. A rainforest of hair.

Someday I will pay to sit side by side with an orangutan.

Our language will not be speech. Maybe I will laugh, and the orangutan will laugh.

Towelling myself off, I pre-organise for a new worst-case scenario—what if it pours?

How will I shelter my camera from the rain?

In front of the fogged-up mirror, my naked body is a blur.

Tugging on the handle, I open the door, stepping out into a sunnier room than expected. The curtains are drawn, slightly more than I thought I had opened them, and I instinctively cover my exposed crotch. I'm not alone in the room anymore.

He's there, sorting his things.

The partner I split from a month or so ago.

He looks the same, of course he does. Beautiful, charming, noticeably Scandinavian. Although I start to think if commenting on the features of his face like that is somehow a bit racist.

Presumptive. If I'd not known he was Scandinavian...he's attractive, all the same, and he is bent in the hotel room. The hotel room is bent.

I want to ask him how the hell he found me. Why. I want to kiss his fucking face.

There is no simple path to tear away some clothes and dress myself, so I flinch.

Flinch for a moment too long.

He glances over at me, startled, surprised, but not distinctly uncomfortable.

I think, is this some strange hallucination? The loneliness creeping in.

This is a new tactic, he says, laughing off my antics. I don't know why he has come.

Apparently we are on vacation together.

There was no breaking apart, although I tiptoe around the assumption in case I frighten him off.

He delicately pulls me into his arms and I feel my love for him flood back in.

I always like to think there's a curse placed on my head: you tell him the sacred three words, the I-love-yous, and he unwinds from the grasp and unspools further and further from you.

I love you, now leave. Give me haste to escape from you. Let's break away.

His suitcase is nestled near mine. I'm clothed now, upping the speed and volume of production in my brain. A factory line of thoughts. Why are we playing pretend?

Did time alter itself for my insanity?

I feel compelled to ask him routine questions, like a family member at a party: how long are we here? What's the plan for the day? Which airline did we fly with? Why do you still love me?

He soothes me when I think there's something forgetting—this was a pre-planned ritual, to be darting my eyes around the hotel room, mentally thinking of everything I needed for the day trip. He reassures me. This is the man I was in love with, maybe still am.

This is an illusion, babe. A dream where slapping myself out of it doesn't work. A recreation of the iconic—snap out of it, in signature Cher.

But dreams are fleeting.

We exit the hotel room, backpacks on our shoulders, and we head for the elevators.

We wander the streets of Perth, heading for the ferry terminal. It's a short ten-minute journey from one side of the river to the other, and he muses to me while we watch the water how



wonderful the day should be. He's always been excitable like this, excitable relative to how he expects I will be feeling. Like being amped up by the person you hope to amp up yourself, despite feeling uncertain about carrying the weight of that. I worry how selfish I can be, thinking of my own pure bliss, forgetting sometimes to be present for him. Those thoughts ended when we broke up. We set ourselves free, I embraced the deep, unsettling sadness of my own depression, maybe he did too. I flirted with men that weren't him again.

Now I am confused, on the ferry dock maybe seven minutes from the zoo. An artistic imagining of a frilled-neck lizard stands on the shoreline, aggressively-sought. The collar like old British wigs. Bold. Standoffish. Rigid.

But still something to ogle.

When the attendant at the entrance to the zoo asks for our tickets, I panic thinking everything left on my phone is the truth—one ticket, a series of nudes saved for later. But there are two tickets, and vacant space filled with not just pictures of the two of us, but clothed selfies of myself, in shifted abundance. And dinners. Flowers. I am living a different life, unconsciously. The attendant hands us two maps.

Before the breakup became official, I saw myself walking at least two different paths—this one, still in love with him, finding out how to be continuously happy with him, and the other, the real truth, the life I need to weasel my way back to. Being single, vulnerable, although every romantic decision is a vulnerability. Even marrying the man you are set upon in some arranged marriage because you were sold for three goats, two chickens, and a noble steed.

If anything, something like that is more vulnerable.

How likely are you to be resold for less?

My ex-partner and I begin wandering towards the ring-tailed lemurs.

Animals are perfect distractions.

*Please keep your voices to a whisper,*

the charming squeak of the speakers says, on a loop,

*don't frighten the animals.* I make the second part up. A child is naturally an echo spring.

A slow loris crawls across its beam, rope or inanimate snake in the darkness.

Features removed.

My ex, his name is Bash. I walk behind him, waiting for a corner where he'll disappear completely. It's concerning the sorts of feelings you have to re-examine, re-process, when your ex re-appears in your life without warning. He's been re-animated. My love, come back to me—and yet.

I squint trying to find the supposed-gecko. Bash's hand brushes against mine and instinctively I apologise, like we're not the honeymoon-phase couple he wants me to pretend to be, with him. Hey, he says, soft, following orders. Is everything okay with you?

Obviously it is obvious I am squinting at our relationship, too, trying to understand if I've been given a reprieve or I've been slammed into a fever dream constructed out of desperation.

No gecko.

How do I speak words. [genuine question?]

Bash notices everything, so maybe he is a droid sent to murder me? [there is potential.]

I tell him, I'm okay. Just tired. He's aware I have trouble sleeping in hotel rooms. There's something uncomfortable and horrible and *wrong* with that hotel bed.

Apparently I am now sharing it.

We're wandering, catching glimpses of flying ghost bats, and I start to think about what part of my life has been the dream. Having hyper-realistic imaginings of going through the depression of him saying *we should break up* feels like an unhealthy use of my imagination. This, all of this, feels too ambitious—how can I imagine the animals housed in the Nocturnal House, unless I studied the website without realising it?

Around another corner and I wait for his body to disintegrate.

Nothing.

In the sunlight, he's the same boy I fell in love with. It was a shorter flight than expected, something about the winds carrying the aircraft—that was our relationship.

He beams at me like nothing's been lost. Maybe his life has completely changed overnight, like mine, to squeeze me back in. There's this weird guilt like I've been damaging a relationship regardless. Like a pious little devotee. I should have been saving myself for the chance to be reunited with him. This chance to be reunited. Fuck, I should want to kiss him right now—I just want to see this elusive agouti. *New to the zoo*, a small sign displays.

I keep brushing my hand against his, then apologising, under my breath, like a couple couldn't possibly wander the zoo in Perth holding hands. I look for the agouti.

Everything is unsuccessful. I want to take out my phone and send SOMETHING to one of the boys I was just yesterday flirting with but they're all fucking gone.

The universe is torturing me, then.

Or I don't understand. Something.

There's no agouti, not right now. I can understand that—chilly morning, unfamiliar landscape, the presence of two gay men staring through the glass. As we walk away, frown painted on my face, I switch my camera off.

Two rescued sun bears in amongst their makeshift woods.

A caution, their back-and-forth pacing is a patterned anxiety trick from their time as wounded prisoners. Walking from one spot to another. Out of instinct, I cover the lens of my camera and quietly mourn for them. Happiness comes now, with their sheltered, comforted freedom—a sort of freedom, to be traumatised less, to not die when a tapang tree is brought down on top of them.

Bash and I stand behind two children with a disposable camera each.

I want to ask him, what do you think this is?

Worried he will say, *it's a sun bear, dummy.*

By this point, I have accepted, to a degree, that he's my companion in this. We're back together as if an entire month or so hasn't happened, and I completely imagined being on a six-hour flight with an elderly couple by my side, who seemingly packed a refrigerator of snacks for the journey. I nauseated at the stench of twiggy sticks.

I imagined that. I'm here with Bash.

At the otters (otters we cannot see), he says, well, this is disappointing. I know how much you love them. I start to think, is he an imposter with only the basic facts? Favourite colour, favourite animal. How I like to be held. He hugs me from behind when I set down my backpack for a moment at the café while I consider what to order for lunch. I don't attempt to shove him off me...but I never would, not in a million years.

Unless he was an alien imposter.

While I tuck into a cheeseburger (it's delicious, but samey, like something produced from an exact-replica machine), Bash gets largely distracted by the map. Takes small bites out of his. Sometimes I think he's not even studying the map, he's just zoning out completely, maybe to download some new piece of information about me he didn't have time previously to execute into his processing system. He takes a bite.

Albino kangaroo. Bash snaps a picture.

He's beautiful the way he is, the way we were, is beautiful.

I hate the creeping-in feeling of what the day would have looked like if I had never suddenly been back in this relationship. I don't want to think about which alternative I prefer, because I can see the preference clear, and I am putting in such an effort to be *present*.

The kangaroos laze about, unmoving except for their eyelids. Blink. Blink.

It's strange to me that half a day has passed and I've got no resolution to anything.

Nothing except, no, we're separated.

Nothing except, yes, he's still here for me.

I should be grateful the relationship didn't end in any trauma, that coming back to this moment in time despite moving forward is not wholly repressive for me. I can touch his hand; I can talk about what I don't miss about the life I've put on pause back home in Brisbane. I can do all of these things and not see the flashes of angered arguments, curse words and closed fists, or myself in complete disarray sitting on the floor of the shower. Crying my heart out.

I've loved this man but in all actuality I've lost him. This is not right.

You know, I've never seen a numbat before. I figured them to be bigger, really.

A numbat caught on camera, posed just for me. Until I remember Bash right beside me.

This is the reason you can't have everything.

On the ferry across the river, back to Perth city centre, we have ourselves a little chat.

In some dream scenario, I ask him to confess a truth: are you sent here to hurt me?

Sent here to lull me into some stable sense of being with one man, instead of wanting for a dozen. But maybe he wouldn't know how to answer. That's the scariest truth. That he would stare at me all doe-eyed and think I'm insane for questioning our comfort, our healthy, certain relationship. Maybe not certain in that it will be forever, but certain in that we care so deeply for one another. I get all caught up in my own head and instead we talk about the day, how the weather has gone from clear to grey, and I expect rain. Drenching rain.

Something to wash me all away.

The ferry is peaceful, for how short and uneventful it is. I step offboard and think I immediately forget how the chairs looked, what the colour of the seats were, if they were one standard colour at all. Bash is beside me, wearing a black cap and his dark-tint sunglasses that make him look to me like a vampire, or at least a deeply-forlorn mourner.

We're already thinking about dinner plans, and I half-freeze expecting him to announce a reservation I don't feel entirely prepared for. Cute organisation. Glasses of wine for the both of us. Him looking the same he always does, but my heart feeling scorned for seeing his beauty still now, because outside of this virtual simulation we're just friends now. I cannot blur things. I cannot confuse *us*.

This is a very uncomplicated summary: being in an unfamiliar city with the last person I loved romantically is like losing at chess. It happens. You never want it to, because you have to feel these complicated feelings, this notion that you're not good enough. But you can play again, as soon as the board is reset. I think we'll get off the flight from Perth to back home and I'll be polite, say I'm grateful for the company—because I love his company—but figure out how to remind him the spell was broken. We split up. And it was the right decision to make.

We get burritos and sit at the squashy two-seater table in the hotel room and talk about all the animals. We never did see an agouti, the *new to the zoo*.

I tell him I'm going for a shower and I make sure to take something to change into this time, to avoid another frightening. Not that I'm certain seeing me naked ruined his morning.

I wash the day off my body.

Soap underneath my armpits.

I wipe the steamed mirror and look at myself, the bags underneath the eyes, the general look of a person so conflicted. Nothing about this day has made sense, and yet I think to a degree I am okay with that. Not that I embraced him like nothing had changed.

Things have changed.

I'm not the same Finch he would have been in love with. If he ever loved this boy.

I've got clothes on for this time I turn the handle of the bathroom door and step out into a darkened room, which I find odd. He's turned out the light and I have no idea why.

His luggage is gone, and he's gone with it.

Ditched me, has he?

My phone buzzes and I get a message from a boy named Cam.

A camera roll of shirtless selfies and tasteful nudes again.

Only one plane ticket.

Alone in Perth, again.

I spent the evening watching episodes of *Derry Girls*, trying to unpack the strange trauma of living an entire day in a hallucination. I figure, if I message him (we're still on friendly terms) he'll remind me I took this trip entirely on my own and that there was no possibility for him to catch a flight six hours across the country just to pretend things were perfectly romantic between us. That's fucking stupid.

Sleep was woeful.

I found myself switching from one ear to the pillow to the other, and then back again. A glow seeped in from underneath the curtains and it was entrancing, although not out of curiosity. Entrancing like the repetition of a song in your brain, dulling out any ability to focus. And I needed the focus to focus on falling asleep.

Dumb.

At about five forty-three in the morning, I roll out of bed. Stunned, for a moment, the hallucination doesn't kick in when I peel back the wrapper of a muesli bar and suddenly hear, in his voice, *you should have something better for breakfast*. Like a new angel on my shoulder, because what else was he? I don't want to assume worse.

I shower. I tug on the door handle.

Their voices are groggy and annoyed. Multiple voices, one complaining about an alarm, another following shortly after with an innocent reminder. I'm grateful to notice them before they notice me—these friends, old friends, people I never even considered travelling to another state with. The hotel room hasn't changed, the lone king-sized bed in the middle of it, but it's obvious two people have shared it instead of one. I don't know how I agreed to that. Saving costs, I suppose, or some warped reality where I'm still deeply closeted.

No. These are the people who understood my sexuality without question, almost without warning. Friends from school. There's four of us on the trip then, myself, and Abi, and Zanetta, and Carrie.

We'd all circled around one another for years, although I couldn't be certain who I knew first. It could have been Carrie. Although I think I lost contact with her first...

This small room feels entirely overcrowded now.

I'd left my phone on the bedside table, unplugged from the charger.

It's a minefield now to retrieve it and try to make sense of things. The four of us in Perth, seemingly coordinated. Is the entire day completely gone backwards, or did I still make the same sort of plans, no matter the company?

They notice me, and smile, and begin their assessments of this outfit. Something I knew was perfectly alright alone, and in public, but for all those people who don't know me and won't

see me again. No fashion complex. Abi doesn't like the colour of the pants. They make me look washed out, she says, and I go back to remembering the way I felt around her, back in high school. Should I just turn now, go wash myself out in the shower, hope the colour comes back to my face and my legs and the pants?

I don't know.

It's suddenly a little nauseating being here, in this room.

I want to burst into happy little ray-of-sunshine tears for seeing Zanetta again.

But I don't know. I think I've outgrown all of them.

I tell them all I'm just really hungry, truly. That's where the colour has gone.

The streets are all the same except we walk down them two by two, the bears go marching two by two, hoorah hoorah. I'm checking the map on my phone, a half-distraction from continuing to acknowledge Carrie standing beside me. Abi and Zanetta behind.

Nothing with the plan has changed. It's an odd sort of fever dream—somehow I was able to convince these three to listen to me without a hitch. Although there's been however-many-years of this timeline where we kept in contact. I'm not an eighteen-year-old kid all of the sudden. My body looks the exact same—I could've rushed into the bathroom to check a tattoo if I'd gotten one recently, but at least the obvious is the same. Same haircut, same clothes.

Nothing time-travelled. Nothing except old friendships.

I have to start to underpin what's going on with me. I could be in a vivid coma for all I know.

Making up complete elaborations of this place. Perth.

Day Two.

There's a new added history: Carrie wants to peek her head into the Perth Mint, not that she has any premonitions for buying a single thing. I have an image in my head of cheap, gimmicky City of Perth souvenir coins and money banks and magnets, probably, but when we navigate the streets to come upon the castle-like appearance of the building, a city-centre castle at least, I'm confused. The Mint reminds me of a jewellery boutique. The old-fashioned smelting business must be locked out the back. No cheap silly souvenirs.

James Bond's smouldering glance in a portrait and on a coin. Pink Panther all the rage. It's difficult to ignore the extending rooms off the central gimmicky area—gimmicky only because of the pop culture references, certainly not in price.

Zanetta is caught eyeing off something ranged in the two-thousands.

We all feel a little poor in the moment.

I peel out first, then Abi does, followed soon enough by the other two.

I'm still trying to reintegrate myself with these girls. I remember the way we used to act around each other—they act like this pattern never changed, only evolved. It was like being young, because in every sense it was. The age of rebellion and boisterousness. We'd have our quieter moments, though. Now I've started trying to be an older man, not old but older, and I've tried to unpack everything. Drifting apart from them meant coming to terms with the holes in the bucket once the water started to pour in, dribble out.

We laughed over the Mint.

We hadn't even looked into a tour.

With time to kill, we wandered around.

Alone I might've just spent this time walking. Listening to music, catching myself mouthing the words because the worst thing to happen would be another passerby noticing how outstretched my lips become when I mouth the word *now*, or *blanket*.

I think the shower must be at least somehow involved in everything.

If I'm not seriously delirious.

I wake up alone, somewhat refreshed, then I shower. Nothing seems to change any other time I've been in the bathroom. I'm not delirious, surely.

Zanetta walks beside me while Carrie and Abi are off looking at things behind windows. She smiles, and I think about the last time I saw this specific smile in person. For this version, this alternate timeline of myself, it would've been merely the night before. Smiling while we all eat whatever we ate for dinner. Zanetta says, thank you for organising this.

Stare long enough at a work of art and it begins to imitate your features. You see yourself in the movements of it, despite how still-life an artwork presents itself.

I try to understand the little pauses when Zanetta speaks.

Everything in this time continuum didn't just up and stop moving. Every moment in the past six years where they could have been present maybe they actually were. I want to find a



bathroom trip excuse to stalk through my Camera Roll photos to see how much of the Finch I know is completely shifted because of this. I don't even know yet if I dated my most recent partner, although it seems obvious enough I'll *find someone else eventually*.

We're three tugboats in an endless ocean, really, three and Abi on a cruise liner of a happy relationship with her boyfriend. I shudder, a little. The excitement in her voice is so startlingly foreign again. Every little drop of her in my memory is the coiled sharpness of her bite.

Or its obnoxious. To remember her and her joyfulness.

We were looking at art about seven minutes past the opening of the gallery in the morning, and I felt entirely like I was school-corralling them. Anxiousness rising up in my voice.

Schedules to be stuck to.

I'm a relatively quiet person admiring art.

Typically I'm there alone, thinking any musings in my head. Being present.

Musing: I feel this sorrow. The artist has a keen eye for how to connect their own trauma with that of a likely viewer of the work: someone white, someone anywhere from nineteen to sixty-five, someone who has a house, an income, a relationship with other people.

Musing: these friends are not the close friends I once knew. I feel this sorrow.

We take the elevator upstairs.

If I were to take this as a parable from the universe, what do I think the world is suggesting, pairing me back up with Abi and Zanetta and Carrie? We won't be enemies. Not when we see each other at some poorly-planned high school reunion. Although I have to worry how I will see anyone at that reunion, if not a strange reminder of the passing of time.

Do you panic, thinking you're slipping back into who you were at sixteen?

Art, like statuettes and portraits of beautiful women, can hide its meaning in a cupboard until you count to one hundred. Doesn't have to, though.

When Abi disappears to the bathroom, and Carrie is over in the corner of the room studying a student's interpretation of colonialisation, I stand again with Zanetta.

I want to ask her, something's been going on, right?

No certainty she can explain shifts in time or magical-realism showers or why my ex-partner wanted to make-out with me in a hotel room...but maybe she knows everything else.

This mood she hovers in.

When I'd really known her, back in high school, you would have thought the worst thing she had going for her was parents who could be a little restrictive. Good grades, people who crowded around her for good times. When I'd really known her, back in high school, there's a really substantial chance I hadn't known her at all.

That's scary.

Who the hell are we, really, when we're sixteen and seventeen and eighteen?

I look at her waiting for something.

This truth, not painful, not raw, just real, is that it could take a whole entire week to feel like their genuine friend again. Not a morning in an art gallery.

Old, old wood of the baobab tree.

I feel a little strange with my camera out, being the one to lag behind for a change.

At Kings Park, you can stand on the cliffs of this place with the thick gargantuan trunk of the baobab tree beside you, and you so desperately want to attempt to wrap your arms around it, like you so desperately considered holding your ex-boyfriend again because the universe had almost willed it so. The universe had played tricks on me yesterday, today, but for two mornings regardless I've woken up alone, and I wonder the same: will tomorrow hold another repetition, another reflection of how swift the world revolves on its axis?

In the peace of nature you're shaken out of everything by the steady hum of local traffic, the bridged highway that Kings Park overlooks, and Carrie in your ear making sure you haven't lost your damn mind. No, she says to me, *this view is impressive. Impressive, I think, because it's completely new to all of us, and because there is so much empty space.*

It's almost odd.

To consider the water 'empty space', a construction sort of mindset, really.

But visually, when you stare out at the water, whether this is considered a bay or a lake or a manmade cove that extends out to the sea, you do see the emptiness.

It's gorgeous.

I often find myself mourning any expanse of land that to a self-centric human is simply *empty*. Void of architecture. A wooded landscape torn down simply for its location. Great views!! *Close to schools, shopping complexes, the train station.* The derailment of a home for another. The birds, the possums, the koalas, they don't picket with strike-signs because their language is Bird, is Possum, is Koala. None of the carefully-but-scrappily crafted languages of Human. Like the almost-unnoticeable language of a small group of people who once told each other every little secret, except maybe the tortured ones, but now struggle to even strike up a conversation.

While I'm walking beside Carrie again, I think about how this is the first time I've seen her face in genuine years. She has no presence on my social media feeds. Her eyes look different to memory. So does her hair.

I still so desperately want to wake up from this.

I can regret one thing, but be comfortable with the sister-action.

Do you think this walk was named for someone called Law, I say, or was it named for laws themselves? I start to think of those meme charts with intersections like *lawful sad*.

Obviously, it was named for a person.

One of them speaks it, but I've lost the focus. There's the old Swan Brewery Company building, converted into something else by now. The colour of peaches. I consider the strangeness of snapping any sort of photography of what could likely be residential, or hotel apartments at the least. I could catch a glimpse of someone hanging around at the glass door leading to the balcony, someone who awoke nude and swiftly draped themselves in the first thing they found in reach. A white hotel sheet.

It's a beautiful building though. From Kings Park, it reminds me of something I could imagine in a Margaret Atwood novel. Something stripped right from *The Blind Assassin*, converted factories. Daunting lakes.

Zanetta and Abi and Carrie are hopefully getting as lost in the world as I am.

There'd be no guilt if I'd come out of the bathroom to plain, simple nothing.

I think it completely has settled in, this feeling of leaving something behind. True, I'm not anywhere near the airport, but I almost would welcome it back. The calls to board, the chance to slip down a corridor and be alone for a moment. It's miraculous, really, that some time stream error didn't force another king-size into the hotel room so I'd have to spend the rest of the evening pondering how to fall asleep with the *bestest* of friends someone could ask for, if they were still sixteen...

For dinner, we argue.

About what to eat, naturally, and I miss the ease of the first night, having absolutely no one to compete with. You come up with an idea and Abi gives you the sort of expression which is relatively easy to read: no. I don't like that.

I remember how often I would find myself retreating inside of myself because the idea of disagreeing with a friend, or being the disagreement, meant thinking the friendship was more complicated than it could be.

Everyone seems to collectively cave for KFC.

Chewing on fried chicken and staring at old friends.

I'm not entirely surprised they've caught me acting out. Playing strange.

Zanetta dips a pencil-thin chip into one of the dipping sauces splayed out in an unorganised fairy circle in front of us, and we hold eye-contact for what is probably longer in my brain than in real-time. It's true, when I see something she's posted online I can barely remember how the pieces of our friendship once clicked together. Jigsaw, like the pedal-pushing psychomaniac. To think of myself as the same person as I once was feels like a denial.

Now that I'm certain this isn't something altogether comatose, I don't know how to close the lid of the box without ending something prematurely. In the end, yes, there was left hope.

As a science experiment, I could give them all phone calls after this day is over and ask them if they notice anything different. I'd have to flick through a phone number registry, or otherwise a simple phone book, to find something on Carrie at this point.

Is it cruel to wonder if she still exists, purely because for me she's faded into obscurity?

I probably have Zanetta's number still somewhere.

I could stand on the front lawn and be an annoying people-pleaser and I would probably ignite a beacon for Abi to find me.

As I'm stuffing the rubbish into the hotel room trash bin—a white plastic thing in a cupboard underneath the kitchenette bench—I make a mental note to check it in the morning. Maybe I won't rummage around with my head too close, but even if I saw the paper of the KFC bag there would be enough of a sign that something happened.

Twirling myself round to explain everything.

I could delay the shower, bring forth all of the joy these relationships once brought me, but time has really well and truly passed. This is a hotel room in Perth overcrowded with ghosts.

This is not what I meant when I said I wanted to go for a ghost tour.

The water flushes the redness out of my face. I want nothing more than to open the bathroom door again and find something unexciting on the television and just sit there.

Head empty.

I don't fucking care if the universe thinks I should have some more regret for everything that has happened in the past. I wanted this holiday to feel better about myself.

At three thirty, I think, *if I shower now, we get this over with.*

Seriously consider it.

The hotel room had scrubbed itself in the evening of every trace of the girls. Even right after the shower, the KFC bag in the trash had noticeably shrunken. Noticeably looked folded in on itself. Like the room is playing tricks on me, in conjuncture with the rest of the planet. I hadn't realised Perth is so cheeky.

So bitter.

I climb out of bed at maybe four o'clock in the morning and go to the toilet. While I wash my hands in the sink, I look at myself in the mirror. It's not like I look any different, except for the stubble slowly growing on my face. I feel everything. All the change, worn on the inside.

I climb back in bed without thinking about the shower again. If I didn't feel so dirty, half-asleep, in the mornings, I could go a day without showering, just to avoid it all. Aggressively shake myself out of the coma I'm in.

But I'm spending an entire day on an island in the sunlight.

I don't want to be stinking up the place, trying hopelessly to outrun these feelings in my head. If the universe just wants them to be obvious to me, then they should be obvious.

I'll shower at a normal hour. Remember to take clothes into the bathroom.

Falling asleep again is impossible. I should start to put together ideas on who will be waiting for me this next time. University friends, barely-exes, complete strangers with visions of the future. Fears, mistakes, hopeless adorations. Inconsequential desires sent to plague me like they're new horsemen for the apocalypse. My folks.

I can imagine a million worse torments than spending the day with my parents on Rottneest Island. But this cruelty of living would mean some nagging could simply be worse because it is nagging. I try to fall back asleep. I fail at that, too.

Timewasting on Twitter. Looking at Twitter porn, getting overwhelmingly bored staring at bodies, instead of something more comforting, like the face of a partner who won't abandon me eventually. I know how silly everyone must think my little self-deprecations are: *you're not doing yourself any favours, putting yourself down like that.* But life is for the living: life is for finding the people who find you annoying (sometimes) but still want to keep you around for some unknowable amount of time. Everything is unknowable, for now.

I eat a muesli bar before the inevitable. Spin the wheel and hope you don't land on "lose everything". Hope you don't wander out into the abyss and meet the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Finch Haters Convention.

I press my ear against the door and try to hear a recognisable voice, or two. Whoever is there, they are as quiet as a mouse... I like the compactness of a simile like that. Tiny creatures with tinier footprints. How this holiday should have progressed—here for a few days, gone without leaving so much as trash in white plastic rubbish bins underneath the benchtop.

I'm in the room for a moment before I dart back into the bathroom, pushing myself against the door in the sort of way you expect from a teen romance movie. Like I've just seen my crush but it's completely an embarrassment, he's caught me with a wet patch at the crotch as if I just pissed myself instead of aiming for the toilet bowl.

Eyes get rubbed. Skin pinched. Wish I could just bang my head against the glass of the shower. What the hell else are you supposed to do when you realise the universe has manifested the boy you work with and have consistently joked is your *work crush*?

The ferry to Rottnest Island takes about ninety minutes from Perth.

Austin sits next to me, half-confused. We'd quickly established the universe supposes we're together, or I did, and he stared back at me like I was reading from a science-fiction novel.

I'm convinced at this point, I say, that whenever I shower in the morning, my circumstances change. First, an ex. Then, old friends. Now, Austin from Work.

I shower in the evening and things revert to their truth—I'm single, with different friends, and assumedly after this day, Austin from Work will just go back to smiling at me and laughing at my stupid jokes, but he won't try to kiss me.

I'm sorry about that, he says, crooking his head.

You're fine, I say. I want to apologise myself, for being taken aback completely, I want to plant a kiss on his lips right here on the ferry surrounded by other tourists that'll make the parents cover their children's eyeballs.

So, you're not actually in love with me or anything.

Austin has to compute everything.

I never could have imagined doing anything with him. The simple idea of spending time with him out of work never computed for me. This felt like the truth—in some alternate universe, I had the courage to ask him for something. Maybe I'd thought there was even the possibility of just becoming good friends. In this version of events, I'd had the courage to flirt with him. I guess if I met this upside-down version of myself, I'd be able to give him at least one definite characteristic—audacious.

Although sometimes the most unexpected things just tumble out of the sky into your lap.  
Off his face, I start to wonder if I'm just creeping him the fuck out.  
Like I woke up this morning from a worse-off dream. Like I bumped my head in the shower,  
instead of washing shampoo and conditioner through it.  
In your so-called reality, he says, you just assume I'm straight and uninterested and ignore your  
feelings? When he puts it so plainly I feel nauseous. I'm being told I'm unambitious.  
But that's the expected for an antisocial queer.  
I'm not convinced this is an alternative, I say.  
You think I'm a delusion.  
I can't make sense of things.  
Austin unzips a pocket of the black backpack he's lugging around with him and takes out a  
plastic water bottle. He takes a drink, tilting his head backwards, shutting his eyes.  
You came on this holiday alone, he says. Inquisitive, a little defensive. A question without a  
question mark. He zips up the backpack.  
The Swan Brewery building was converted, eventually, into apartments, and quite noticeably  
for the wealthier of clientele. No ordinary Joe is affording property right on the riverfront.  
He looks like a puppy dog who has seen a medieval ghost.  
He seems to believe me so certainly that I'm terrified I'll wake up tomorrow realising this is  
somehow actually the life I am living, and *I've* been playing make-believe for months and  
months, and now *I've* shot myself in the foot with Austin. This fucking beautiful man.  
On the ferry to Rottnest Island, I try to glance out the window for dolphins.  
Austin says, you know what I find so insanely attractive about you?  
I think about covering his face with my hand and shushing him.

Letting the sunshine hit the back of my neck, I can appreciate a few things better:  
Austin, just being here with me. This entire holiday, something I could afford.  
Good weather.  
We beeline for the bus and I break Hades' rule a couple times.  
I make sure he's still there, following behind a little, just to enjoy the scenery.  
The thing about being on a small island off the coast of Western Australia with someone who  
stares at you like he can't help but ease off the brake and press down on the accelerator is...I  
don't know, I'm losing my train of thought just looking at him.

On the bus, my camera swings, hanging off my neck. I tell him to study the map—what I mean is to hold it for the both of us, and I'll make whatever decision I'm thinking, because I still see this as the vacation for me that it is. He's just pulled for the ride.

The bus is more packed than the last one I took in the heart of Brisbane city. Although that was in the middle of the afternoon, and there was no promise of quokkas, or seals, or even the ocean and shorelines and sandy beaches. Just skyscrapers and work, in whatever form. To be paid, to learn, to connect. This crammed-in bus is overwhelmingly and glaringly filled with dreamers, and bright-eyed tourists. Excited people. I glance at Austin and notice the giddiness threatening to choke my lungs. Too much exertion today and I might just keel over and require mouth-to-mouth. Oops.

Stop 11.

Austin and I disembark the bus, immediately greeted with the coastal winds. It made complete sense to me to head to the furthestmost point of the island and work back towards the main *settlement* where we docked. Neither of us opposed to going to see seals.

He pauses at a cliffy edge, blocked with a wooden fence half his height.

I start to think, this is all a problem created by the brain.

Because when I shake out of this spell, shower again in the evening, he'll be gone, and I'll be left with a mirage of memories that remind me I just have a goes-nowhere-crush. Maybe I thought for a second I could just stammer up the courage to fabricate a romance, but there are reasons I went back to being single. Sure, a relationship crumbled, but I'll always be complicit in it. I'll always be the weird freak with the piles of baggage, no matter how excitable I become thinking I've patched up some giant question mark set in an array above my head.

There is a metal lookout built as an extension of the cliff, with a set of standing binoculars aimed out towards the ocean. Do you see the seals yet, an older man says, dressed in volunteer-guide costume. With his eyes, he points out to the rock croppings halfway between here and the distant horizon. Their dark shapes are like tumours on the rock, but only from here, from afar. Austin is bending his knees to look through the binoculars.

I could be one of them. Hunt for fish, laze around, be admired from a comfortable distance.

I use the zoom of the camera lens to watch them, to watch one lift its head, to watch another appear from around a corner with lethargic movements.

This is a beautiful moment.

Snapping photographs of seals on Rottnest Island.



Being here with Austin, strangely, randomly, and thinking for a second that I could be an ordinary sort of person. Be in love with someone without everything inside my head rushing in with the tide to be irresponsible. To be responsible for more loneliness.

I remember to tell the older gentleman to have a good day.

It really is a gorgeous place. I always heard, *you're going to love Rottnest*. Just picture the nature already, although in my head I couldn't latch onto a focus point. I think I saw more trees, at least, but for now we wander amongst shrubbery and bushes, and I feel completely like the sore thumb I am.

I find this unusually-shaped pocket of *guts* within me and I pose to Austin a question: why me? Why come the six-hour flight with me?

He laughs, the way I remember him to laugh. It isn't so unusual to imagine a brain can fill in the minute details: how he talks in the morning, the way he can appeal to my ego, the way he acts when he's exploring an island off the coast.

You want to know why this happened, he says, pointing to himself, then to me.

All of this feels useless. Fabrications of my mind shouldn't be given this much power.

Can't you just believe one late night shift gave us more time than expected to talk, he says.

He's himself, and the qualities I love in a romantic lead syphoned through a sieve that only allows little nuances to sneak through. Of course he's 90% himself.

We talked, you completely dropped your filter, I found it effortlessly charming.

I've been exploring my sexuality lately, he says, becoming shier.

It's playful, bashful, the sort of way a person might react when their meet-cute is at least a note or too embarrassing. Except we'd already met.

We'd been walking for a while, pausing occasionally to admire the view. Calling it *stunning* feels like a complete understatement, yet there are just no words. It feels wrong to be disturbing it. I feel wrong, existing when the world could remain pristine without my feet trampling upon it. When relationships could remain intact, or never become nuisances, if I were scrubbed from the surface of things. Invasive species.

I'm first to notice the fluffy, brown-coloured sphere in the middle of the path up ahead.

On instinct, I place a hand on Austin's chest, this shift into *Jurassic Park* territory. With enough makeup I could look like an unkempt Laura Dern. *Look, I say, a quokka.*

The most notable thing about these marsupials is how unhurried they become when a human is near them. Unhurried, unfazed, more perturbed by your noise than your being.

I look at Austin, thinking how incredible this is, to be seeing a wild quokka for the first time, and with him surprisingly still beside me.

I don't need him to be manipulated into some life of loving me, or even spending more time with me, because I am wildly grateful for everything I can have. A good conversation with the real him. Loves with other men, even as they fade. Bonds that may not last a life, certainly not if I kill myself when I return home on the Virgin Airline flight tomorrow.

The quokka should be loved, protected, respected. So should the island. But...

Do I really think no one should bear witness to this?

Do I really think I should be in writhing agony with every what-if that won't be true?

The quokka disappears off the path, taking with it something of mine. It really doesn't need to just be airports, does it.

Austin and I continue, agreeing we'll wait for the bus soon. Sometime this afternoon, we'll be back on the ferry, spending another ninety minutes together.

You know what I mean by that, too.

A pair of shelducks are out there on the rocks, minding their business. A bird's life...

We ate lunch with a quokka nibbling on the crumbs at our feet.

We got lost a couple times, making unserious glances at one another, blaming ourselves before the other. It was very likely my fault, misreading signs, wanting to be hand-held from stop to stop. I didn't so much mind being the beautiful fool around him.

We looked in the souvenir shop like tourists, poor tourists.

The sun set on the ferry headed for Perth.

In darkness, except for the overhead lights making us out in fluorescents, I lean my head on his shoulder, and don't instantly regret it. The seat is awkward for this. It's foolish to want to live in this moment, a moment that won't exist in a few hours. Unless I sleep in my filth.

I'm kidding myself to think anything can be forced, rewritten, crafted out of nothing.

When I was in university, I remember a friend of mine telling me *it could have been us*.

I don't know, I strangely didn't hook tightly to it. I think I'd learned enough—in high school, another friend said the same, only I had to possess the female genitalia, or he had to suddenly develop the passion for being attracted to men. It's not the healthiest, dwelling in the what if.

It could have been us, except you're you, and I'm me.

Austin is already starting to look a little fuzzy.

The first thing I want when we dock in the harbour is something to eat.

We find an Asian kitchen down the road from the hotel and find ourselves the only customers, for about five minutes. Austin and I order, find a table in the corner of the restaurant, and it feels like the first proper date I've been on since the break-up. And it's a complete fiction. But because magic happens, or it can, a crazy hotel room shower has played silly little matchmaker and I'm here with this man because I can be. Not because I will, I doubt I ever will. But because I'm allowed to be...delusional for another day.

The insane thing no one tells you about living in the what-ifs is that you don't need to mention a thing to anyone, but you might, or you will, because people will be curious.

Someone will ask you, what are you writing about? And you won't be able to lie and say, oh, just some piece about a mythical species and the lesbians who go in search of them.

You ummmmmmmmm and realise it has to be said, that you're recounting the little what-ifs you lived in just to have some chaotic fun. You're endlessly worried fiction will be more exciting than anything else you'll ever do. Maybe you're wrong, but isn't it worth it to unpack the day you spent on Rottnest Island with a man who will reject you for something?

No?

We linger in front of the couch in the hotel room, and Austin says to me,

Do you not want to be with me then?

I kiss him because in this version of the universe I can.

Fucking magical shower.

Soon enough we're making out like we want to roll down a non-existent hill and don't you just wish I could forget to think about the last time I did something like this, or the truth, how the sweat has stained my skin. Eventually the truth will be more romantic again but for now I can still describe this faux-relationship as something filled with childish glee, giddiness, an overwhelming burden for someone who is probably more child than adult and it's not exactly a comfortable position to be in.

We don't have sex.

I shower him off me.

I have to be up early to get to the airport.

The suitcase is all packed. I don't even contemplate showering.

Heaven forbid I'm trapped on a four-hour flight with a coworker I can barely tolerate, or someone I sat awkwardly in silence around in university.

Triple-check everything. Nothing will be left behind in this hotel room.

Throw out the last of any rubbish. Idle behind the door trying to find a remnant of proof of something, except I realise it's only to try and prove I've not lost my mind to insanity.

For all anyone is concerned, I was on holiday alone.

How it should be, how it is expected.

I hand the room key to the receptionist; say I'm checking out.

Always a smooth process.

On the train ride to the airport, I remind myself to eat on the flight.

Purchase something little, even, so I'm not stumbling out the other end with more stomach troubles. We always find a way to cause trouble, don't we?

I wave a short goodbye to my suitcase, certain I'll see it again on the other end.

Two hours to kill before the plane lifts into the skies, although with boarding it'll just be an hour and a half. It weighs a little, this lag between arrival and departure. Eases my mind, though, to be comfortably waiting with a coffee in one hand and a ham and cheese croissant in the other.

This is calm enough.

Plane boarding calls.

I wait my turn, head down the steps, onto the tarmac.

Find my seat near the rear of the plane, second row from the back.

Take-off is fine.

When the refreshments trolley comes by, I ask for a chicken salad sandwich and a cup of water.

I spill some of the water on the woman beside me and forget how to apologise.

She's asleep, regardless.

I barely notice the four hours pass.

Airport baggage claim, Brisbane.

There are people you notice: the woman you were sat next to, a gay couple with an oversized piece of luggage that had to be dragged out through the two doors off to the side. Maybe an instrument of some kind. Three friends, or else siblings, it's impossible to discern.

I don't really have anything left to offer you, I suppose.

I've come home.

.....

*a note from the author*

The idea came to me when I was in Perth myself. By myself.

In the hotel bathroom, I'd stripped naked and hadn't bothered to fetch anything to wear.

I figured I could do the nudie run from the bathroom to my suitcase, because no one would be around to watch. The curtains might have been drawn open, but I didn't so much as care if a random stranger caught me briefly naked.

In the shower, I had the thought: imagine if someone was waiting for me instead.

Imagine if an entire holiday could be upended because of one person, or a number of people, just because they suddenly inserted them into your plans without you realising.

I would never dream of replacing any of the moments I spent alone in Perth—I didn't need anyone at the zoo, gazing at the animals; or at any of the museums; or on Rottnest Island, using my camera to look at seals, and coming across a quokka in front of me on the path in the middle of what constituted as nowhere on the island.

I considered replicating the holiday further by including the fourth day I spent in Perth, in Fremantle, and I pictured it involving a couple friends I've only met in person a handful of times—I'm a very introverted person—but I was already making fictional adjustments to everything, so I prioritised the important notes of the piece.

Finch, a fidgeting imagining of me, recognises none of these circumstances is *right*.

You shouldn't be thinking so strongly of what could be...and I never spent a single one of those days thinking about being back with an ex, or reuniting with old friends, or trying to rush into another relationship just to avoid being alone.

Perth as a solo adventure was impeccable.

But as someone who thinks he misses many experiences because of his anxiety, or his depression, or the headaches, or the stomach pain, or the throat pain, or because he lives in a small suburb forty-five minutes out of the city, or whatever excuse he has ready to aim and fire...the what-ifs can be so tempting.

What if...I could travel Europe with the next person who tells me they're going?

What if...someone agreed to cover rent and all my spending money so I could go venture off wherever my heart desires? And come back home to a bed I can properly sleep in...

What if...I could see someone when I wanted to see them, no matter what?

But these are only illusions.

You don't need to remind me.

*If you think a character is based on you, no it's not. Smiley face.*