

THE GENTOO PROJECT

ten novel concepts, ten openings.

an absurdity created by Keeley Young



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codename: *Dreamwork*

While working together on a collective group project, six university students slowly begin to drive each other insane. It is over the course of this one semester they come into contact with one another, grow close, and then sharply drift apart.

Building P7 Room 204 – Study Session in Progress

A handful of notebooks are splayed out in front of her. She's wearing the study glasses with the square rims, the ones he thought she looked bookish in. A few of the notebooks seem like props—she hasn't touched them since she sat down and methodically set them out. She doesn't touch them, but she glances over them occasionally, rereading something, ignoring it again.

The others stepped out for something to eat. Robyn likes the quiet of it. There's peace now, enough of an ambiance to focus on preparing for an exam or two she will pass without the study, but passing is too uncomplicated. Ever since high school, she has aimed for the best she can do. Her notes detail lectures and tutorials. Suggestions from her tutors dot the margins as distractions, almost, and her eyes widen when she remembers she'd forgotten about them. There are—there were—other distractions, she thinks. Her ex. Books collecting dust on the shelves at home as she purchases new books, not books anyone has recommended to her except the internet. She's been in a sort of trail recently, reading the novels that inspired some of her favourite movies. Good distractions.

She can picture them huddled around a table at the burger place down the street. Three months ago, they were complete strangers. Before they closed the door, walked towards the elevator, and left Robyn to herself, with a sandwich in her backpack she had no intention of actually eating, the five of them had tried to plead. *Are you sure?* Jared reminded her they had the room for hours, and she feels a little gross even at that. She feels like vacating it, disappearing before they came back, because they had already been there for an hour and a half. Jared and Ava leant on each other like twins complicit in a crime. They look nothing alike, typically act nothing alike, but she had become so infuriated with them lately it seemed only fitting to link them at the hip. They echoed each other, *we'll only be half an hour.*

Her hand settles on the page of one of the notebooks, and she fidgets with it, flicking it back and forth. A headache is rising between her eyes. Three months ago, she was becoming friends with these people. They were at first grouped together for a project, the six of them. Jared and Ava and Murphy and Simone and Ezhil and her, Robyn. She flips the page and reads through another section, squinting from behind the study glasses. The last time she visited an optometrist, they said her eyesight was near-perfect. Now she feels like she's going fuzzy all over, and maybe she can blame them.

Jared and Ava and Murphy and Simone and Ezhil.

And herself, Robyn.

Building P7 Room 501

THREE MONTHS EARLIER...

ROBYN

She finds herself a chair in the middle of the room, pushing the backpack underneath the black table. Other students are shuffling in. Most of them are unfamiliar to her. Whether they are younger, or she hasn't met them before, she is unsure. After taking a year off from studying, she feels out of place regardless.

The bus had been late, and then slow, and she had avoided a call from work as the bus came to a lull in front of the university bus stop. They would be calling to ask her to come in, and for the first time in a month she understood the exhaustion. She needs to stop letting them walk over her for the sake of a dollar. The day is booked with university classes and a hot shower when she gets home to the apartment, so they could look somewhere else for someone to cover a shift.

In the room, the fluorescents overhead casting their shadows, Robyn finally recognises someone—her hair is shorter, less styled, but it's Simone, who she met two years ago in a class they had together on the stylistic choices of authors in their prose. Simone slings a shoulder bag to the ground, nudging herself into a chair in the back of the room. For a moment, she is alone, but she looks at her most comfortable. Stickers cover blank space on the lid of her laptop, and Robyn considers saying something to her. Moving over there, having some company in a uni class again, but she falters. The tutor lingers at the front of the room, adjusting a PowerPoint presentation. The empty space beside Simone is taken up by a slender boy probably two years younger than Robyn is. Or more, she thinks, grimacing.

As she had approached the building, P7, one of many in this sort of semi-circle of buildings that aren't really numbered correctly, she started thinking about the first time she came here. Specifically to P7, because she didn't have any classes in the building in the first year. The building itself isn't much to look at on the outside, but it holds a lot of memories within it. University ones, whether you deem those good or horrid.

As the tutor begins outlining the semester, Robyn sneaks a glance towards Simone. She's laser-focused on the projector screen. Robyn feels weird for glancing her way, but she can't bury the worry that if she attempted a conversation, there would be some sort of awkwardness between them. Why, because they haven't spoken in a while? It isn't like there's a strange cloud hanging above them; it isn't as if the tension is waiting to boil to the surface. It's probably just a little social anxiety, she thinks, snapping her attention back to the screen.

Great, a group project.

She has to swerve off from making some sort of groan or shaking her head violently. It was something she expected anyway—a few weeks before the first class, she familiarised herself with the unit's assessments, enough to know there is group work. The strained expression on her face feels more rehearsed and expected than anything. It's the collective groan of group work. Maybe a small handful of people enjoy it, but in the crowd, Robyn doesn't stand out. She makes a little note of it in the

notebook, suddenly unmoored even more. If the only person she recognises is Simone, she's destined to be stuck working with people that will see her as the outcast, the strange 'older' writer. Older because they're probably barely out of adolescence, she thinks. Although twenty-two isn't the new forty or anything.

Power trips, Robyn thinks, glancing up at new lists cropping up on the screen.

The tutor had randomised groups of six, or five, given the number of students in the room. Six seems like terrifying overkill, but given the assessment itself, she has to shrug it off and find her name. She scrolls around, lost in a sea of unfamiliarity. Then, there it is. Robyn. And Simone. Okay, she steels herself. *You know someone*. And Jared, and Ava, Murphy and Ezhil. You know one person.

There is a flurry of movement, and she makes eye-contact, briefly, with Simone. She's hesitant to think Simone remembers her, or recognises her at all, but there is a smile there, a polite little hand wave. Robyn collects her things and begins to amble towards the other girl, reassuring herself the entire short walk over.

'Hi,' she says, sliding into the empty chair now vacated by the skinny twig. There is always a strangeness to asking university students to find their group members.

A dark-haired boy interrupts sharply any chance at the two reconnecting. 'Hi,' he says, setting down his laptop on the table, 'I'm just trying to find my group. I'm Ezhil Nattar.'

Simone is quick on the response. 'Oh hey, sit with us then, I'm Simone, and this,' and she glances at Robyn, a brief little interlude, but she is sweet and welcoming, the way Robyn remembers her, in a sense. 'This is Robyn, so we're three down.'

Ezhil lowers into a seat and snaps his head around the room, as if expecting to recognise the other members. In his silence, he is oddly confident. He pauses, glancing briefly at Simone, then Robyn. He seems alert, but not panicked. 'I had a class with Murphy last semester, I wasn't likely to forget the name.' He grins, almost laughs at his own joke.

An olive-skinned girl wheels a chair from the back wall, bumping casually into Simone. It doesn't seem accidental, or callous either. They're chums, Robyn thinks, watching this girl pour over the stickers on Simone's laptop as if she is both familiar with them, and afresh to them completely. Maybe there are some new ones, she thinks. The girl lifts her head suddenly, laughing, affably.

'Sorry! Hi, I'm Ava,' she says, fiddling with a few strands of hair between her fingers. 'Simone and I met a few years ago, but we rarely see each other.' She turns her head, addressing Simone now, although the projection to the group doesn't dissipate. 'I think the last time we saw each other was the last lit salon, right? You read a piece based on some bullshit that happened with your ex, and you bought me a drink because I'd just paid a few hectic nasty bills.' They stare at each other as if the rest of the classroom has ceased to matter, until Simone breaks it, sharply turning her head towards Robyn.

They're missing two people now.

In moments, Murphy saunters over, and behind him is a shorter boy, claiming this must be the table. 'I'm Jared, yeah,' he says, taking the time to give everyone a little head nod and a smile. His pasty white skin is obvious against the fluorescents, but when he slides into a chair, Robyn feels a little strange in the stomach. Or the heart, she can't tell. It's an initial attraction. Maybe. She feels so odd and uncertain about it, because it isn't the first time she's gotten a little attracted to someone she's just met in a university classroom. It shouldn't happen, though. It shouldn't happen because she gets feelings, even in this barely-there form, and nothing ever happens from them.

Jared isn't necessarily out of her league, though.

She internally laughs it off and glances around at the assembled group. Other randomised assortments of people are talking over the empty gaps, the silences, and Ezhil and Murphy are having the sort of generic small talk conversation two people with not too much in common have with each other. She catches bits and pieces of the discussion, briefly slipping out of focus.

Simone's voice is clear, piercing. 'Robyn. How are you?'

She is comforting, the sort of presence you want when you're trying to readjust to being here.

'I'm okay,' she says at first, a generic response she would expect of herself at work, or with someone she barely remembers. 'I took last semester off, so it's weird to be back here.' She tries to study Simone's face for her reaction, but the only real reaction comes from what she says next.

'What happened, or did you just go travelling?'

It would be so peaceful and lovely, she thinks, to just wish it all away and pretend she was somewhere in Europe, swiftly escaping a pickpocketing and eating gelato in front of that famous fountain in Italy. Trevi. Robyn reorganises herself a little, terrified internally of starting out this reconnection on a lie.

'I just needed the break,' she says, 'from all the studying, on top of work. It was weighing me down so much and I think for a while I didn't even notice it, you know. I just let it eat me alive and that's what it did. I was left a corpse, basically.' She laughs herself off, like it's the end of a comedian's allotted time in a comedy festival. She hopes that isn't how it comes off, but she can't slip inside Simone's mind, even breathe in there for a second. Robyn lied, a little. No one needed to hear her ramble on the finer details.

Simone is smiling. 'Oh, for sure,' she says, nodding first at Robyn, then at the others in the group around her. The tutor begins a further discussion, but for the most part Robyn has drowned it out. She's read the task sheet already, scanned over the criteria, but all that matters to her now is this little moment. Not reuniting with Simone so much as reuniting with being a student again. Not that she technically stopped, nor does she think she ever will cease being one. A student.

It sounds all a little slimy, cheesy, greasy.

Robyn exhales, although she hopes it's fairly unnoticeable.

...

Leaving the classroom, Robyn idles amongst a few other students near the elevator doors—Murphy and Ava are making conversation, talking about ideas, or something. Robyn is only half paying attention. She needs to go meet an old high school friend in the library, but she feels already gross about it.

Well, she felt gross when he asked her if she wanted to meet up, but she feels worse now. There are stomach bugs gnawing on the wings of the butterflies that maybe should have been there, should have stayed alive and flourished, if she didn't feel so cramped about going to see him. A year ago it would have been so simple, laughably so, to just brush him off or ignore the message for like three months. It's the *idea* of trying to be a better fucking person, she thinks, staring at the digits on the lock screen of her phone. She feels weird about waiting so impatiently for another minute to pass, but the elevator doors remain sealed shut, and she just wants to be shoved into the back corner, pressed against the wall.

The group chat for the little team that was just formed in that classroom is hesitantly blowing-up—a few of them send thumbs-ups, and Simone attempts to organise it all with a group name, as generic as it is, and a fun colour scheme. Robyn should've been the one to name it something, but her head isn't there. The elevator doors ding open, and she files in, taking up the least space possible, as Murphy and Ava laugh to each other, and to an extent, to her. They're keeping her in the loop, at least. She smiles, she laughs, she tries to pretend she's a part of the conversation, but regardless she still keeps glancing at her phone as if there should be a message coming through on the screen.

'Did you want to grab lunch?' Ava says, glancing back and forth, first at Murphy, then at Robyn. The others had bolted down the stairs, rushing to other classes, or otherwise to flee home—Jared jokingly talked about the bus already waiting for him, idling like a roped-up tugboat.

Robyn smiles, shakes her head. 'I can't today,' she says, sounding avoidant, or at least that's how it feels. Her voice comes out sharper than she hoped it would. 'Sorry. I've just got plans already, with a friend from school.'

This friend from school. Ryan. They had a handful of classes together over the last few years of high school, because he was a fresh-faced new student in Year 10. She still remembers sitting beside him in their first ever class together. English. Fifteen years old and adjusting, continuously, to how you approach looking at boys, really looking at them. She's not certain she had a real crush on Ryan. It could have been the sort of thing you gain through close contact, through sitting next to him so much. His face was near hers, and he didn't make her grimace or flinch.

Years pass and now she exits the elevator hesitantly. It's awkward walking a few paces ahead of Ava and Murphy, trying not to cling to them as they all seem to head in the same direction. At least she isn't staring at the back of their heads, she thinks, until she turns to cross the street at an intersection and there they are, chatting comfortably. A cropping of university students is crowding the tables and chairs outside a wood-cabin-fitted coffee shop. Robyn keeps her head down and turns another corner. In a quieter part of campus, which sprawls out in the middle of an inner-city suburb, she can think a little clearer again. Ryan isn't necessarily a disgusting menace come flung from the past. It's complex, she thinks, skipping the current song and dwelling for a moment in the silence. It is complex because he represents so much of the past, and she wonders how much she has outrun it.

While practically running up a flight of stairs, Robyn can feel the stress of it getting to her. When he messaged out of the blue, she gave him a response. They kept talking, it was like reminiscing, it was like reconnecting with a part of your high school self again. It didn't feel entirely uncomfortable, but it never felt entirely comfortable either. She felt gross when he asked her if she wanted to meet up.

She skips through a handful of songs, with vibes that aren't going to cut it. The library is across a road and up a flight of stairs and she can't completely settle the feelings going through her head. This morning she looked at his profile picture to try to electric-shock her brain back into the idea of seeing him in person. It worked, for a few minutes.

The library's automatic doors are in front of her. It isn't as if she hesitates, holding up the whole of the world around her, like some cinematic nightmare of a scene. Robyn keeps walking, messaging him an '*I'm here*' as she waits to find out which floor he's on. Floor 3. More stairs, although she takes these slower, more assured. She turns off the music, tucks the earphones away, humming a little to herself when she knows she's alone in the concrete stairwell.

He looks about the same as he did in high school, and in the pictures. The face of someone you could befriend. In the past. Robyn approaches him with caution, as if she is suddenly convinced he is a grizzly bear sniffing around her campsite, and he might just catch a whiff of the children fast asleep inside the more spacious of the two tents. Ryan notices her and lifts his head. He had been in the middle of reading one of the books he swiped from the shelf—he says this, jokingly pretending to be the sort of bad boy she eye-rolls at—and the expression left on his face shows that he hasn't forgotten the little things about her.

'It's been a while, hey,' he says, as she takes a seat in front of him. They're sitting at a study table, the relaxed sort with comfortable armchairs and a table lower than it should be. Perfect for ruining posture, she thinks, testing a smile on him. It feels forced, but it works.

'Yeah.' Her short, quick response makes her feel dismissive, and truthfully she is. Being there in front of him only makes the sharp gut-feeling less tolerable. 'That's the thing about time, it just sweeps out from underneath us and suddenly it's been years since we saw each other.' She can feel the bitterness as an undercurrent in everything she says to him.

Ryan smiles. She blames her shivers on the aircon. It's too overdramatic for him to be causing such an obvious reaction, almost an overreaction, but maybe she would be more level-headed if she got more sleep last night. Or the night before. Or the night before that. Look, she can't remember the last time she had a truly blissful night of sleep, because she's no longer a teenager with less cares in the world, so the misshapen sleep schedule will have to be noted, marked, and moved on from. He isn't on his knees apologising, so the discomfort is awarded. She wishes she could silence her thoughts sometimes, even for an hour or so. Not that sitting with him empty-headed seems logical.

'Robyn,' he says, and hearing her name spoken out loud from him brings back a lot of history. 'Do you remember the last week of Year 11, when we skipped the rest of school on the Wednesday afternoon because you were starving, and we ended up at that park with the flying fox?' She hesitates. If she were to filter through the memories, it would be dog-tagged in the *Year 11* section as one of the better moments. One of the best.

There was a fast-food place a few streets away from the high school that kids frequented after school, because it was cheap and greasy and sometimes you would get a discount if you knew one of the workers. Dodgy stuff, but some of the employees of the place were those types—laid-back, anti-capitalist, free-spirited. They worked the job for what it could buy them, and what it could buy the people that paid them in attention. Robyn and Ryan ditched the afternoon classes to get something to eat, and she felt, for once, the rebellious sort. She cared so much for above-average grades and good attendance, but eventually there had to be time for boys, and a sloppy meal. Which isn't a euphemism.

Lying on an enlarged black-plastic donut swing, Robyn had thought there were proper feelings there for this boy. Was she about to start dating her first boyfriend, and was it going to be Ryan of all people? He wasn't the image of rebellion by any means. That afternoon was probably the first time he skipped school too, but they stirred each other up, edged each other to do stuff like that to make a point she didn't fully understand at the time. They had wanted to surprise each other, excite each other.

They never dated, and her crush on him filtered out amongst all of the other crushes she had on guys in the last couple years of high school. It was so uncomplicated to play make-believe. Flirt with the idea of an attractive teenage boy, not so much with the actual boy.

Robyn tenses up, listening to his recollection of that afternoon. The way he saw her, teenage her, and the way he tasted the fries as the salt brushed against his lips. The way he had thought about kissing her then, but he rejected it. How that would have been disrespectful of him, how it would have just made everything messy and sped everything up to this moment right here, with the two of them barely talking anymore.

'For good reason, though,' she says, silently wishing they cranked up the air-conditioning so her fingers would freeze up on the edges of the armchair.

'We both got so busy when we graduated, yeah.'

'But usually friends bother trying to see each other.'

'You stopped talking to me,' he says, screwing up his face.

'That's my point, I was so completely fine not seeing you again.'

He looks defeated, deflated. It's brief, those feelings on show on his face, because he sharply returns to an unreadable expression.

'I don't know how else to apologise to you.'

She wants to say, *listen to yourself, idiot*. To her, he sounds like a character from a mid-afternoon soap opera, something her grandparents watch religiously for the comfort of it. But he sounds a little like he should, too. He sounds like the teenager she knew, only a little older, and she doesn't recognise that version of him much at all anyway. It's convoluted, she thinks, to reconcile a person after they ruin all past images of themselves. He's not a shell, though. Just a blockade.

She's grateful neither of them has raised their voice.

Ryan is sitting there, and she completely comprehends the why when it came to those feelings in her stomach walking over here. You don't need to forgive the people that hurt you, or at least you shouldn't feel pressured into it by them wanting to see you again.

'I think this was an idea,' she says, hesitating before the word *idea*. She could've said *this was a terrible idea* but she's trying to trust her judgement a little more lately. She doesn't study his face, because she isn't trying to learn from him right now.

...

On the bus back to the train station, Robyn recollects herself, scrolling through the newsfeed of a social media app she desperately wishes she didn't cling to so much. The goodbye was ungainly. She's convinced he will message her in an hour with a different sort of apology, but it doesn't matter much to her now. If she never sees him again, she's got some semblance of weird closure. It doesn't make up for the way he treated her, but...her bones start to tense up, thinking about that Ryan. High school aged, treating her like shit. Four days earlier treating her like she was someone he needed to stand on two feet. Thank fuck we never dated, she thinks, pausing on a picture of a friend from high school in front of a picturesque waterfall. He's drenched, shirtless, head tilted back with eyes squinted closed. A posed shot, probably taken by his girlfriend. Someone's commented: *looking good mate, gym is paying off*.

The chat for the new group project has gone quiet, reasonably so. She stares at the tiny image of Simone at the side of the screen, almost tempted to message her, say something cringe-cheesy about how nice it was to see her again, or how it will be good to work with her this semester.

She doesn't say anything. Music is blaring into her ears, but a respectable sort of level for public transport. A Taylor Swift song, one from the earlier albums, Taylor's Version. She mouths along to the lyrics, her head turned out toward the bus window so hopefully no one really notices. Her stop is not even a minute away.

Robyn is squished into the corner of a fast-food place, by design—she doesn't want to be noticed, or at the very least, overcrowded as the families pool in, or the couples looking for an easy sort of meal that makes them feel full and slightly satisfied. She picks at a small paper bag of fries, a cheeseburger, and slurps down the dregs of a Sprite. She was two stops away from her station when the message came through. It was worded well enough, in comparison to what she remembers from when he was a teenager. Ryan will continue to be an issue, a problem to distance herself from. Maybe he means well now. Maybe he wants the joy of her back in his life, those good old days. Robyn shoves a couple fries into her mouth, chews them down to nothing, and starts scrolling back through old messages between them. Maybe he needs to just shut up, she thinks, reading over texts from herself that feel so strained, so forced. When they were planning to see each other again, how overly-compliant she sounded.

She tosses her rubbish into one of the boxy trash bins and retreats back to her car, a little red thing she got when she was first learning to drive at the end of high school. She didn't start until she was seventeen, when her dad finally found some time to sit down with her in the car and teach her the basics, and how to avoid a car accident, and how it was maybe okay to speed a little, certainly on the highway.

The message from Ryan remains unanswered.

'Careful with the way you close the door,' her mother utters from one of the brown stools at the kitchen bench. Robyn instinctively turns and utters a soft apology to the door under her breath, then cocks her head, realising how insane and *quirky* she probably looks.

Lying on the covers with her phone plugged in to charge, this is true zen. For a couple of months last year she was journaling after every day, but she went on one holiday and quickly lost interest in it. Although it was amazing to focus on escaping—the holiday meant she could zone out and destress, but she started to relax too much, she didn't want to leave, she didn't want to return back to everything. It had been incredible not worrying over university, and now it was a very sharp kick in the ass to be grouped up with mostly strangers. At least there is Simone. Familiar Simone.

One person doesn't make it much less daunting.

There's the sort of generic-but-true adage that group work during any part of your education is disgusting and gross and an absolute pain. Someone will always put all of their work on another team member; someone will always feel the weight of picking up the slack. Maybe you'll make lifelong connections, they muse. Maybe you will uncover a secret love for cooperation and support. Robyn thinks about a science project she worked on in high school with someone she probably only saw as an acquaintance. It was boring, slow with progress, and she had to spend time at their house, sitting in their bedroom and at their dining table, trying to understand science better. She doesn't remember much of the actual project—something about testing a hypothesis they came up with, to try and impress the teacher, but they were fifteen, so it wasn't exactly going to be the most groundbreaking thing to come out of the minds of teenagers.

This semester, she thinks, isn't exactly going to be the most groundbreaking thing to come out of the minds of young adults. It makes her laugh a little, the way these people talked during class today. This attitude that everything should be both serious and yet playful and fun too. Maybe it's her separation from their way of viewing everything that has truly isolated her.

It's good to be putting yourself back into it—that's the voice of her mother.

You're almost at the end, hey—the voice of her friends, one of them, or all of them mushed together like a runny puree she'll soon be able to digest for the last time.

Just do the work—her own voice, loud, clear. Precise.

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codename: *OTB*

In the days before an eviction in a show not unlike Big Brother, the mounting pressures of being filmed and scrutinised 24/7 rattle the remaining eight players, who are contending with one another following a misrepresented late-night moment between a gay contestant and his would-be ally. As Mitch prepares to be evicted, homophobic slurs are plastered across the screens of the at-home viewer, and all eyes are on reality TV.

1

He was gazing into one of the many cameras, expecting someone would be out there, watching him right now. Tears stained underneath his eyes. He'd thought the limp wipe of his hand cleared them off. It was quiet in the bedroom. He listened out for the buzz, the hum, of a microphone or one of the cameras, but instead heard the swing of the door. Mitch waited.

It was only Victoria. Her blonde hair was in a loose ponytail, and she didn't say much. Not then, not usually either. Mitch glanced at her, wiping at his face again.

'I'm just grabbing my water bottle,' she said, pacing towards the bedside table. She slept beside him each night, because she surprisingly hadn't been evicted yet.

Mitch remembered the first time he laid eyes on her, which wasn't in ordinary circumstances. You would expect maybe they saw each other when one entered the house after the other had, but with the complexities of this game, he hadn't seen her for a handful of weeks. Then they sprung a Seize of Power (SOP) competition on everyone, and he was walking into a gigantic warehouse of a competition arena, seeing six strangers he had only heard rumblings about.

Victoria swiped her bottle off the silvery surface and turned back to Mitch.

'Have you been campaigning hard enough?'

So, you've heard of *Big Brother*?

Eight people remain in a show in that vein. This is *Two Houses*—ten weeks ago, twenty people were split into two houses. It isn't house versus house, at least not this time around. Season 22.

When there were only thirteen contestants left, after rounds of backstabbing and Returning Players, the two houses merged. Mitch leant there, his fingers cracking to hold onto the slimmest shelf above his head. His back was slick with turquoise slime. It was an Under the Sea-themed competition, to find the new head of household. He could feel his knees buckling. It isn't as though he wanted to win that week anyway, but he didn't feel graceful flopping down onto the oversized cushion.

Whoever won that week, they were gone now.

The bedroom door clicked behind Victoria. *Have you been campaigning hard enough?*

Shut the hell up, Victoria, he had wanted to say, when he felt his throat tighten.

He was nominated for eviction, and you were supposed to keep yourself composed and tactical. You campaigned—if you wanted to stay in the house, you needed people on your side. Mitch stared into one of the obvious cameras in the corner and scrunched his face up. Was he trying to be relatable, or trying to contain all his emotions into one crinkled mess of an expression?

He knew he wouldn't save himself by crying like a little baby.

About an hour or so earlier, he was in the bathroom with Ophelie. He was slowly realising she was the one person that could fight for him, beyond himself. It was incorrect to compare reality television to warfare—there weren't guns and grenades at his feet. He had words, and sure, sticks and stones don't do much, and yet...

He had to begin writing and rewriting an eviction night plea in his head.

It would open with something overwhelmingly simple: I love you all, this has been an incredible summer.

It would end like they assumed it had to: Please keep me in this game.

2

His living room had started to appear less lived-in. The artificial lighting blanketed over every corner previously welcoming in the shadows, so Mitch thought, if I needed somewhere to hide, where would I go? The bathroom, maybe.

There was a camera in his face. His reflection in it was distorted and ridiculous, so he tried to ignore it, focusing on his questions. He'd introduce himself (Mitch Dearmore), state his age (24), what he did for a living (he sold records), and really try and sell himself to the viewers at home. Well, that was the directive.

He'd laboured through the audition process. Little rooms he was ushered into. They wanted honesty and your truth. What makes you interesting, because surely if you were boring, they would turn you away at the door. That's what Mitch had thought, strangely calm with his back against a concrete wall.

When he told friends and family he was auditioning for a show like *Two Houses*, they treated it with the same sort of disdain they had for someone stroking the feathers of a chicken and proclaiming they'd enter it into some pageant and win big with it. Georgia, a friend of his, had been supportive and rewatched a season and a half with him on her couch, with an oversized bowl of popcorn between them. Georgia was there in the living room, well, in the hallway beyond it, peering in the diamond-shaped gap between two production crew members.

Everything he said on camera, he just hoped she agreed it was him. An accurate representation of Mitch, because he didn't want to become cannon fodder for a bad reality tv edit.

You can just see them considering it for the white gay man, he thought, restraining from attempting to fix his hair. They'd catch that, too, maybe replay it twelve times on the monitors.

He fumbled on a *line*—the script for the interview-style introduction was pre-approved, and he'd had it all memorised for a couple days prior. But there he was stumbling on it, his skin melting under the set lights. *Just be natural, Mitch*, one of the attractive dark-haired boys behind the camera said.

It was entirely natural to be nervous. The last time Mitch was in front of a camera like this was for a university assignment, some group project where they presented it all on film, instead of in person. He was only close with one of the team members. The other two were front of the classroom nerds, but they pulled their weight without overcomplicating it. He had avoided watching playback of the footage as much as he could. One of the nerds had edited it together and deleted his fuckups, hopefully.

It was entirely natural to be nervous, but he rejected it. He knew the idea of what they wanted from him. They wanted this gay man that understood himself and was comfortably out of the closet, but that he was well beyond just being a gay man too. Lying in bed one night he talked himself into rejecting some mention of his sexuality in the introduction package.

So why are you so worried about it now?

Mitch snapped himself out it as they prepared to wrap up this segment. There were other parts planned—they wanted to film him at work, with friends, curling up with his cat, taking out the trash (or something), and out getting some sunshine. It's good for the vibes of it all.

When they were watching the premiere of season nineteen, Georgia told him to pay attention to the sorts of stuff the contestants said. Who were they, when they had a short snippet of time to introduce themselves. He was just grateful the last few seasons were so diverse, in terms of the

contestants and their backgrounds, and their sexualities, that he could get it out of his head that he would be pigeonholed for his sexuality.

Like these people have seen gay people before.

So, enough stressing over it.

‘Okay, Georgia, just sit here and start laughing, like Mitch has just said something, like an inside joke between the two of you.’ It was a different producer, a dark-haired woman with round glasses. They were killing two birds—someone had laid out a midnight-blue picnic rug in the local park, in the perfect spot for natural lighting and the chirping of birds and all that, and Georgia and Mitch were set up upon it. Like dolls. Mitch felt someone tug on his arm, make him bend forward and ruffle the plastic of a nondescript chip packet.

At first, she was too overdramatic with it. Her movements were too fluid, far too fluid. But she wasn’t the one under scrutiny, so the woman with the round glasses hesitantly stepped in front of the camera and knelt down beside Georgia.

‘Be a little tighter with it,’ she said, then tilted her head and scrunched up her face, as if she heard herself and found her confusion. ‘He’s your friend, you’re not humouring him.’

For the next take, Georgia found her groove. In high school, she’d been a performer. Dance, sure, but she took cues well. If they had told her to leap, she would have leapt.

Beside her, Mitch could loosen up a little. The dark-haired man had pulled him aside before they began filming to tell him this footage would only be B-roll. It would sit in the background of a voiceover while he talked about himself. Also, he’d said his name was Jaiden. And he wanted to get into record collection. *What’s your favourite album?*

They love filming while the contestants “pack their bags”. Mitch stood in front of a suitcase he borrowed from his parents, because the suitcase he’d offered up to production looked too small. He waved it off as another realisation he wasn’t entirely prepared for that *potential*. Yeah, duh, he could be spending a couple months in that house. Or he could be evicted week one.

The suitcase, for now, was empty. ‘Before we start rolling,’ the woman with the round glasses began, using that terminology so forcibly, ‘go ahead and fill out the bottom of the suitcase, so it appears like we stumbled on you in the throes of packing up.’ With his back to the camera, Mitch unclipped a pair of jeans from a wooden hanger and folded them up. In the bottom of the suitcase, the jeans just looked lonely. Shit, was he even ready to share a house with a bunch of strangers? It was comfortable living with Georgia. He shared the little unit with her, and with Bam-Bam, his cat.

A flood of thoughts washed over him.

He folded up a pair of underwear. *They’ll see you sleep.*

He cycled through t-shirts, trying to decide what to take. All for show.

They’ll see your dirty laundry and they’ll hear you on the toilet.

...and did he even have dirty laundry?

3

There weren't clocks in the house, but it was sometime in the late afternoon. Hugh was in the kitchen, pouring himself a glass of orange juice. The kitchen was a splattering of blues and various shades of white this season, something like a galley but at once both classier and trashier. Hugh ran a hand through his hair, minding his business.

Meanwhile, whoever tuned into the live feeds would be minding his business too.

The sliding door leading out into the backyard was pushed open and Chelsea walked in, tying her hair up into a loose ponytail. She made some light comment to Hugh and walked towards the main bathroom, completely ignoring Mitch. Maybe she hadn't seen him. More likely she was ignoring him, his legs curled underneath himself as he tuned everything out. The cushioned nook was like a shelf, and there he was, on display as still as a rock.

The toilet door slammed shut. Mitch peered round the edge of the nook and immediately made eye contact with Hugh, and it was definitely awkward and random, and he felt strange. Like he wanted to speak but couldn't. Hugh raised the glass of juice to his lips and took two gulps.

'You're an asshole,' Mitch said, staring away at the ceiling of the nook.

'What?' Hugh was leaning forward, a strand of hair falling across his forehead.

'Nothing.' He wanted to slam his palm into his forehead. 'Can we talk?'

A week earlier, the remaining nine contestants were crowded in the hot tub, drunk on house-supplied alcohol and high on being almost in reach of the grand finale. Almost. Well, not for Jaren, who got evicted by the end of the week. But there was a sense that splashed around with the bubbles—like oh you guys, we've really earned this celebration. This victory. Almost-victory.

Mitch was sober, entirely. He was gouging himself on fizzy lemonade and no-brand cola, and stealing glances at Hugh, because he was flirting back, it was obvious. The hot tub was tucked in the corner of the backyard area, screened off behind bronze patterning. No one felt entirely secluded or private. They were in a goddamn goldfish bowl.

Victoria stepped out of the hot tub, her slick-wet feet almost causing her to slip on the tiles. She caught herself, slinging her arms out like a surfer. Mitch felt like he was the only one who noticed. As she reached for a towel, he asked her if she was alright. 'I'm fine,' she said, tying the towel around her waist. 'It's not like I fell over or anything.'

Everyone seemed to drift away from one another into various spots in the house, and Mitch and Hugh ended up talking behind the hot tub, pressed against the greyed wall. Their knees were touching, but neither moved.

'What are we really celebrating anyway?' Hugh said, setting down his glass of water.

Mitch accidentally nudged his knee against Hugh's. 'Um. Travis and Chelsea did some dumb task right?' He was freezing his hand off holding onto an ice-cold glass. Earlier that afternoon, everyone had been called into the living room for an announcement, and he and Ophelie shot each other grave looks. Turns out Travis and Chelsea had just spent the morning stealing pieces of clothing of people's backs, but those two had feared the worst. Double eviction, maybe.

'Right.' Hugh didn't seem to notice the knee-bumping. 'I'm absolutely exhausted.'

'Past your bedtime bub?'

Hugh laughed and playfully shoved Mitch sideways. 'I'm tired of this game.'

He sighed, lifting his glass up. 'You ever just wonder if all that money is worth all this?'

Mitch saw money flash before his eyes and nodded a little. 'I do want the money.'

Mitch felt strange about every glance toward Hugh now. They'd been so chummy and comfortable in that moment back then, like the oversaturated lighting of the house had dimmed for the two of them. Hugh left the kitchen, his bare feet slapping against black. The conversation was never going to be relaxed—they weren't going to squish into the little nook, ear to ear, willing to spill each other's secrets.

Hugh didn't deserve that right now.

The thought kept clanging and banging in Mitch's head like a noisy miner running into glass windows. He scooted up from his woe-is-me position and sat on the edge of the cushioned seat, unsure. *You're an asshole* was the worst start to the conversation, but he'd stepped in that already.

'I don't get you,' Mitch began, resisting the urge to scratch his head like a cartoon character.

Hugh just stared back at him, which made him feel stupid. 'Mitch,' he said, hesitantly.

'You threw me under the fucking bus.'

'I didn't put you on the block—'

'This isn't even about the game, Hugh.' Mitch restrained himself. If he started yelling and screaming, he would draw attention. People would come and make a bigger moment out of it, and then he supposed it would end up on Twitter as one of the season's most dramatic messy moments. The world would have something to talk about, and he shuddered at that.

'Patrick thinks I'm a sexual predator.' Mitch hated how gross speaking those words aloud in relation to himself made him feel.

Hugh burst into laughter, turning away as he attempted to rein himself in. 'I'm sorry, that's not funny—'

'Yet you're still laughing. Asshole!'

Ever get that feeling that the good times were coming back, but all the tension in the air cannot be quashed by good vibes and pixie dust? Mitch gulped down his smile. For that brief moment, he'd phased out of everything, and it hurt like hell.

'I don't get the lie,' he said, and he made sure Hugh was squirming from the eye contact he held. It was almost obvious a camera was zooming in on them right in that moment.

'Okay, humour me: which contestant will you never talk to outside of the house?' Hugh had just sculled down the last of the water like it was booze. From their spot, Mitch and Hugh couldn't see anyone, or be seen by anyone either. It was a corner all to themselves. Chelsea was probably passed out by now; Travis would either be refilling, or dry humping a pillow, as a joke obviously.

'Kallum.' Mitch said without hesitation.

'That barely counts,' Hugh said, 'he was literally the first person to leave.'

'And I didn't like him.' Mitch shrugged, bumping against Hugh with his shoulder. Purely intentional. They were still dressed for the hot tub, both of them shirtless, and Mitch felt his attention drifting toward Hugh's bare chest. He had a medium amount of hair, nothing in comparison to the bushland forest growing around Patrick's nipples, down to his belly button, and disappearing under the rim of his palm-tree shorts. *Stop staring*, Mitch thought to himself, snapping out of it.

'What about you, then?'

Hugh paused, as if he were considering it long and hard. 'I don't know, you?'

He was so unserious about it. Laughing burst out almost immediately, and Mitch shoved him playfully again. All he wanted to do was kiss him, then. The tension for it had bubbled to the surface

over the past few weeks, and what, was anything really standing between them right then? If he had completely misread the signs—surely not, right?

He set a hand upon Hugh's thigh, touching the cool flesh. Tiny droplets of water that were yet to dry sent a shiver down his spine, but maybe he was just cold, too. Mitch leaned in and planted a soft kiss on Hugh's lips. Was it romantic? Maybe. Was it a little messy? Without a doubt.

He felt the cameras zoom in on him, like here you go world, here's two men making out.

But maybe that wasn't how Hugh saw it, Mitch thought, those nights he silently rocked himself back and forth in the shared bedroom.

I've got custody of this discomfort, if he'd wanted to feel poetic, and stupid.

They had relocated from the hallway into one of the bedrooms, for some extra privacy if they could get it. It was late afternoon, and most of the remaining contestants avoided the bedrooms by this time unless they were trying to sneak a nap. For one thing, Travis was in the pool, tanning his shoulders and laughing at all of Monte's jokes. The bedroom was quiet, but not in design. Colour thrashed into itself. Where the house took on a nautical, oceanic theme, this bedroom felt like a deranged attempt at embodying coral. Mitch saw the vision, but still heightened his enthusiasm the first time he saw it. He had reminded himself it was the experience he was there for, not the tacky décor.

'If it was so gross kissing me, speak up, tell me,' Mitch said, suddenly nervous to direct all his attention to the other man in the room.

'I was tipsy, Mitch,' and something like venom coursed through Mitch's veins. Tipsy my ass, he thought, eyeing off the drinks fridge in the back of his head. Little remnants of that night that seemed totally unimportant—the fridge, stocked with low alcohol content booze so none of the contestants would feasibly pass out blind drunk, and Chelsea's bikini strap briefly coming undone, and the unusually-shaped puddle in the middle of the kitchen he'd noticed coming inside after he kissed Hugh. Which he now had to regret, truthfully. It was simple like that.

'You'd been drinking water most of the night,' Mitch said.

Hugh just sighed, resting his forehead on the palm of his hand. 'So maybe I was sober, but you still kissed me, and I still rejected it.'

'You didn't reject it, though,' and he wanted to add, *did you*, but it felt like an asshole move. Combating one asshole move with another just felt like a trap while he sat in target sight at the shooting range.

That night, when Mitch kissed Hugh, there wasn't some awkward sense of tension. There wasn't that fabled moment where they sharply stared off into opposite directions and forget what proper communication was. Mitch waited for it, though. Waited for bared teeth. Instead he felt Hugh's tongue inside his mouth, and he prayed he wasn't growing hard from his first kiss in however many months. Last time he'd kissed someone was his ex.

'If you'd said, "no thank you" and shoved me into the water, I would've understood and gone and washed my mouth out with soap, but you just sat there, smiling at me, and I felt like if we weren't being monitored twenty-four seven, you would've taken me into the fancy bedroom upstairs and fucked me on top of the covers.'

Hugh just looked. He didn't stare, his mouth wasn't agape. He just...took it all in.

'I know you're stressed right now,' he said, inching closer toward Mitch, which was the strange thing. 'Maybe it's good you'll be out of this silly place soon.'

Maybe it's good you'll be out of this silly place soon. Die in a hole, Mitch thought, thoroughly pissed.

The computer screen was starting to hurt her eyes, but it was 4:13am and she didn't want to go to bed until she had submitted the application. She'd checked her name was spelled correctly about eight times. *Victoria Isett.*

She was sat at the desk, which didn't really have much colour to it now that the moonlight hid behind some clouds and the only light in the room was piling in the corner. That lamp she'd gotten from her uncle, second-hand but barely used. It was dome-like and the colour of an oyster. There was an episode of *Restaurant to Another World* playing on her propped-up phone. It was a light distraction, an episode she'd seen before but it kept her from swaying off to sleep.

Before Victoria hit the submit button, she suddenly felt nauseous. Her stomach twisted. It was nowhere close to that feeling just before you vomit, but she felt disgusted in herself regardless, because she'd been doing well lately. Not having anxiety nausea, is what she meant. Most of the stress had subsided, so why did submitting this earliest form of application make her quiver?

She paused the episode and started doomscrolling through her Instagram feed. Ten seconds ago she had hit the button and blocked out any other thought about it. Not even, *you're probably not going to get a response.* One of her high school...peers, probably the word for it...was posed in Fiji in front of the ocean waves, a half-empty cocktail glass in their hand. They probably only had a few classes together in high school. Eva was gorgeous and supermodel thin and definitely a little airbrushed. The caption was something boring and unoriginal, but it wasn't the focus. Victoria didn't want to be her, either. She rejected the idea of throwing all of her money at a touristy vacation someplace like Fiji, although she was sure she would love the peace of a private beach somewhere. No. She'd sooner throw some money at airfares that got her inside one of the *Two Houses* houses.

She was paying all of her attention to Eva's boobs.

They weren't the same boobs she used to cup in the pool in the backyard of the last house she'd lived in. The childhood place, where all the memories were stored and then destroyed. Victoria felt gross accusing an image of getting a boob job. It could be the bikini.

Victoria and Eva had stopped being friends sometime in Year 8, and truthfully, Victoria was ecstatic about that, at least now she was. Back then, she probably whined for weeks. She would've sought out new friends to dull the pain, and those friends would come, in time.

The scrolling continued and she put Eva and her boobs right in the back of her mind, in some secret pocket where all the things you really don't need to bother thinking about go to die. It was her fourth year applying for the show, and she'd fucking get on it this year. *Oh, I'm not interesting enough? Screw you. I'm hella interesting.*

She reined herself in. She was interesting, she told herself, because every season needed the sort of girl she saw herself as. The sweet, loving, girl-next-door type. Victoria closed out of Instagram and moved over to the only dating app she had left installed, because the men on there weren't creepy stalking weirdos. Mostly, they weren't. Every now and then she updated her profile—it felt like the best way of identifying herself.

She swiped right on the first guy on the screen, not just because he was hot, but because he seemed like he would be easy to get along with. He had a cute dog too.

It was a match.

It was two hours before the conversation in the bedroom, and Mitch was eating lunch. A late lunch, and his arms felt the weight of the knife and fork as he tore into a chicken breast he'd reheated. It was atypical for there to be leftovers, but he hadn't really felt like eating the night before.

Patrick was at the sink, washing his plate.

A small crowd of people walked into the kitchen from one of the bedrooms, stripped down into their swimsuits. Four of them—Chelsea, Monte, Travis, and Hugh. The sound of splashing water droned out Mitch's thoughts, because the drumming in his head was telling him to get out of the way and go hungry again.

Patrick turned the tap off at the sound of mixed voices and feet against the hard concrete floor of the kitchen. 'Everyone's going outside then?' He said, looking over at the four, a dumb grin on his face. He was probably thinking about that bath in his current bedroom suite again. The first night this week it'd been his, no one had known where he was for a couple hours. Mitch had almost walked in on him lounging naked in the bath, and they would've called him a dirty fucking faggot for that, there were no questions about it.

A couple of them just nodded. Chelsea went to make a sarcastic comment, or there was an attempt, but all she said was, 'Yeah we are, dumbbo,' and tried to ignore the very obvious glance at her ass Patrick made when she was sliding the glass door open.

A couple of them glanced at Mitch. Hugh made an awkward sideways glance, and you could almost see him gulp. Travis hesitated, as if to ask Mitch if he wanted to join, like they were in school again, but maybe he was just stretching his neck a little.

'Is it hot out there?'

Chelsea leaned back inside, attempting to dig her polished toes into the astroturf. 'It's fine, probably the same temp as yesterday.'

'Right.' Patrick said, running a hand down and lifting his shirt over his head. Mitch felt strange being a viewer in all this. Monte, Travis, and Hugh had moved to the doorway leading into the backyard. Monte was playfully shoving Chelsea outside, briefly leaving his hand placed a few inches below her bikini top. Patrick was angled off from Mitch, but only a few days ago there had been the first instance of this muscle jock cussing him out for being a thirsty gay reject.

Patrick had given his reason for nominating him—you've overstayed your welcome if you think you can make moves on other guys in the house and expect them to be okay with it.

Disgusting freak, he would've said in private.

The five of them were outside, splayed out in various positions in the backyard. Owning the place, it would appear. Chelsea, Travis, and Monte were in the pool, one floating on their back, another two leaning against the pool ledge clearly in mid-conversation. Patrick was in the shade, presumably napping. Hugh was swinging himself back and forth in the hammock.

Mitch could try to talk to them, sure. What a plan, what a dumb, silly plan.

He imagined himself walking outside and approaching say, Travis first. Travis has got a sports background, said he used to play a lot when he was younger because his body just...moved. He's fit, but not an image of a beefy muscleman that could bend you in half and snap you. Mitch would slide

down into the pool beside him and try to find some way to level with him. They couldn't talk sports, but they could talk game.

'We need to get Victoria out.'

Travis would hesitate, looking at him with uncertain eyes. 'She's only won that one challenge like five weeks ago.' Then, a pause. Chelsea would be so distracted; Monte would be playing with his abs like he had just squirted them with baby oil. *Gosh, it's hot out here.*

'Let's ignore her for a second.' *Like usual.* Mitch would stare ahead, his eyes focused on something off in the distance. He would need aviators to really sell the idea. 'What can I do for you?'

And of course there would be that thought that Mitch was offering him something sexual, something *gay*, and Travis would curl in on himself and shudder, even underneath the burning sun. Mitch would scramble to explain—I'm a vote, I am not a threat to anyone, I've only been in Patrick's position once and you all saw how small the consequences were.

He was parched, and all of this dreaming up escape plans was just making him thirstier. There he was outside, Travis in the swimming pool, floating on his back. On their first day in the house, in the whole entire thing, Mitch pulled Travis aside into the pantry just to talk about how thrilling it was to be here. There were undertones, sure. Little nudges like, should we work together? Inside, Mitch had been all nerves. Was it a scary move to form an alliance that early with an athletic Asian man? The idea made him a little horny, strategically. Travis was attractive, sure, but their alliance would be entirely game. He wanted someone beside him that could lift the debris out of the way.

Here is a snippet of a conversation Mitch and Travis had, post-Patrick nominating the former for being a "gay faggot that is trying to weasel his way through this game by kissing Hugh and trying to have baths with me in the afternoon":

'You didn't even come near me,' Mitch said, biting his lip. 'The girls treated it like any other nomination ceremony, hugged me, told me there was still a chance, but the men acted like I would spread my disease just by touch.'

They were in the pantry again. Fitting, really.

'I was standing right beside Patrick.'

'You were, yeah.'

'That isn't what I meant—'

'Fuck,' Mitch said, glancing at one of the cameras in the corner of the tiny square room. 'I mean, beep. I feel like every conversation I've had with him recently achieved nothing, because what even was his excuse for putting me up?' Mitch restrained himself from immediately burying his face in his hands. At least he didn't burst into tears right there.

'Who else was he going to nominate?'

Mitch turned away from Travis, he couldn't even look at him.

Like he was right, but it didn't matter.

An hour or so later, a wave of homophobia would roll through the house, and it didn't matter that two years ago, a gay man won the show without having to rely on his sexuality once. A happily married dude. Not a wild competition beast by any means, but successful enough.

It didn't matter.

He supposed that sick twisted feeling in the pit of his stomach was the feeling that he should really regret the kiss, but where's the thrill in that?

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codename: *No One Sleeps in the Woods*

During rehearsals for a community theatre production of *Into the Woods*, the cast confronts their complicated relationships with one another all the while constantly shifting roles and dynamics. A series of midnight rehearsals expose the darkest of secrets.

The Thirtieth Theatre Company Presents

Moorvale's Best in...

INTO THE WOODS

the Stephen Sondheim Musical

CAST SHEET

The Witch...	Heidi Paustian
The Baker...	Ian Gadsby
The Baker's Wife...	Lindsay Almond
Cinderella...	Bonnie Glenn
Little Red Riding Hood...	Marta Orland
Jack...	Ramsey De Golyer
Cinderella's Prince/Big Bad Wolf...	Ford Wallis
Rapunzel's Prince...	Sinclair Gallik-Tobin
Rapunzel...	Nakia Taffet
Jack's Mother...	Sandra Irons
Cinderella's Stepmother...	Lanna Ferris
The Narrator/The Mysterious Man...	Jock Voorhies
The Steward...	Bradley Stone
The Giant's Wife...	Annemarie May

1

I wish.

The youngest three are in a crude semi-circle, hunched over. They've all got a copy each of the script, eyes pouring over it. Marta already has a cape strung around her neck—it's not red, far from it, really. The cape is an off-white and she'd dug around in the costume and prop room for it. It's from a previous production, but everyone gawked at Marta when she strutted out with it wrapped around her. To put it politely, the ensemble gave her a Christmas sense of style, and all she needed to do was flounce around sprinkling snow and Sandra would cry out, SHE'S CLARA FROM THE NUTCRACKER!

They're so quiet, so hushed, so maybe theatre isn't in the worst hands. Marta in her cape, Ramsey with the darkest painted nails, and Bonnie with hair to almost rival Rapunzel's. It was almost down to her waist a few years ago. The three of them aren't new to The Thirtieth Theatre Company. In their little half-circle, they sing lyrics under their breaths and try to drown out a piece of action occurring right now in the hallway outside...

'Cinderella's Stepmother? The b— ...madame who doesn't sing?' Lanna's voice is obnoxious and incredibly in-character. There is certainly this conversation has happened before.

Next comes the voice of someone unexpected. It's Ford, trying to calm her down. 'We don't need to bring in mindsets like that, really.' He's surprisingly level-headed for someone about to pull off a double casting. Creepy adulterer prince and creepy predator big, bad wolf. He says something none in the circle can hear, and Marta leans in comically.

Lanna's silhouette is in one of the windows, and thankfully she is keeping her composure. It isn't a tantrum; she isn't dabbing at her eyes, wiping away the tears. After a beat, Ford holds open the door for the pair of them, and the atmosphere in the rehearsal room shifts. To anyone not so familiar with Lanna Ferris, last seen on stage in the last production, *Next to Normal*, her grand entrance is a quick but blanketing introduction. She might've been Diana, but the spotlight has shifted.

Ramsey glances over at Ford as he sets down a leather satchel in the corner. Here is a man that really suits the casting. Ford is six-foot-three and a natural brunette, although two weeks ago he bleached his hair and has hidden it underneath beanies for half the time since. Ramsey seems to be working on a trick—he can look over at Ford for a moment, then glance away, then return the glance, and it's a little like that game you play at children. *What's the Time Mr Wolf?* Even childhood follies have their comeuppance, Marta thinks, bumping his elbow.

'Are you excited about being a little boy again?' Marta snaps him right out of it. Her voice is unnaturally high-pitched, somewhat of an ode to the Little Reds that have come before her. The director will probably strike it down immediately, because she's not all that successful with it. But in her eyes, you can tell she's unfazed. The cape is awkwardly coming loose.

Ramsey picks up his copy of the script and shakes his head, laughing.

'Did I ever really stop being a kid?' He pokes his tongue out at Marta.

Marta and Ramsey both got their start in the chorus in their teens. They're all too familiar with the concept of having a very limited number of lines. They glance at each other, very briefly, as if to acknowledge that they get it. Red and Jack are meaty roles. The past is important, but it is very firmly the past.

But it still holds with talons. Marta remembers wanting to pull her hair out multiple times during rehearsals for the last show she was in. *Shrek the Musical*. She was The Wicked Witch, and although not a substantial role, hovering in the background and singing a couple lines here and there, it didn't mean the production didn't have its flaws.

Marta sighs, glancing around the room at some of her fellow castmates. Lanna has dragged a chair out from the corner and set up beside Sandra, who was cast as Ramsey's mother. There isn't much family resemblance, but that's community theatre. Sandra is leafing through the script. With Lanna beside her, the two quietly chat. If you dug around in the programmes for shows through Thirtieth Theatre's past, you would find their faces splattered here, there, everywhere. They're seasoned regulars, and close friends.

Ford is over there. Talking to Sinclair. Marta can hear sprinkles of their conversation. They're talking about the show, why they are drawn to *Into the Woods*. There's the obligatory mention of one's obsession with Stephen Sondheim, the genius that he is/was/no I'm not crying, you're crying. Her ears prick up. What would it be like, listening to those two talk? To her, they don't seem as quirkily obsessed with theatre like she is. Straight boys, she thinks, with a little laugh she's betting no one really noticed. She's never seen Sinclair in one of these productions—he must be new to performing here, but she can't be certain how much of a newbie he is. He's what, in his early twenties too? He certainly looks green.

The door opens and Ian and Lindsay step inside the rehearsal room, already thick as thieves. They know each other, of course, from past productions, but there's a new energy surrounding them. Not like they just shagged and are pretending to hide it, but more like they've stumbled into becoming their characters with such relative ease. Certainly early Act I at least.

Marta turns back to Ramsey and Bonnie. They've closed their scripts for a moment. Bonnie has got something pulled up on her phone and she's leaned over to show Ramsey. His eyes widen. Before Marta can even lean in to take a peek, the phone is tucked away in Bonnie's pocket, and it's a complicated set of feelings that brew inside the girl with the white cape. Her distraction got the better of her really, but the three of them are pretty well known for goofing off when the attention is all over the place. As soon as rehearsal begins, sure, she'll be laser focused.

But already there's distractions leaking out.

They're taking a break for lunch and Marta is sitting outside on a bench eating a sandwich she packed for herself. She feels a little like a child—her hair is in pigtails now, too, which Bonnie did while they sat around listening to Ian and Lindsey discuss the motivations of their characters. The Baker, The Baker's Wife. They brought forth a question—why do we never bother to wonder what their names are?

It was performative, of course. Marta shakes her head and laughs thinking about it, and now, besides looking like a little kid nibbling on an egg and lettuce sandwich, she probably looks like an insane person too.

That's musical theatre.

She's sitting alone because Ramsey and Bonnie disappeared, completely, as in they both headed to the parking lot and hopped in Bonnie's car. There was an offer: *Marta, do you want to come get food with us?* But she smiled and shook her head, gripping to the strap of her shoulder bag. It's little, tiny moments that make her question things. Am I the one causing problems? Does this cape make me look

like I don't ever want to stop being a child? Before they left the rehearsal room, she tossed it off into the corner. The white fabric fell limply into a heap. *I don't want to be a kid forever.*

But now I'm playing one, she thinks to herself, hearing the first few notes of *I Know Things Now* in her head as she takes another bite of the sandwich. The egg salad is her own personalised little recipe. She mixes a handful of sauces together, sprinkles in some salt and pepper, and never forgets the special ingredient: pickles. Finely chopped, of course.

'You eat like a kid too.' She glances up, meeting the gaze of Nakia Taffet. Her hair is short and dark, a sharp juxtaposition to the character she's been cast as: Rapunzel. It's a cooler day than most days recently, so she shivers without a jacket. 'I'm kidding, I'm kidding!' Her voice is so airy and sweet and perfect, and Marta still anticipates getting her head petted like a dog. Even with the pigtails cramping her style.

'We missed you this morning,' Marta says, beaming at her.

'I was just running late.'

'You're just in time for lunch then,' she says, laughing a little. It's an awkward sort of laugh, like she immediately regrets saying the first thing that popped in her head. Nakia is so cool and carefree about things. Marta is insanely grateful she tossed the white cape. I looked like a dumbass, she thinks to herself, taking another bite.

'Where's Bonnie?'

'Getting some food.' She pauses, glancing in the direction of the parking lot. They've barely been gone five minutes but she's already regretting this empty space that's left behind just so she could eat her plain old egg-lettuce-pickle sandwich. 'They shouldn't be too long really, she's probably craving a cheeseburger because she didn't eat breakfast.'

Nakia shielded her eyes with a hand and smiled at Marta. Their little sisters are close friends, so they see each other sporadically, but a few years still separate them. Nakia is the older of the two—she is about to graduate university at the end of the year. 'Tell her I have something for her, okay?' Nakia says, waving with her other hand down low at her waist. She wanders off towards the rehearsal room, her dark legs refusing to ever let her blend in with the ordinary weather of the day.

Marta wanders off to the carpark and coincidentally there they are, laughing as they awkwardly squeeze out of the car parked in tight between...probably Ford's car and Nakia's. Ramsey is flexible enough to narrowly avoid skimming his thigh against the side of Nakia's car. Off the bitumen, he stretches his limbs and spots Marta, waving with a painted hand.

'Hi Red,' he says, ambling over to her. He had set down a disposable coffee cup on the hood of Bonnie's car before he did the performative stretch act. Now, he takes a sip from it, and the pair idle as Bonnie sorts through her bag for...something. She's quiet and focused, but clearly a little stressed out.

Ramsey swings round and calls out to her. 'All good, Cindy?' He scoffs at himself, turning back to Marta. 'Okay, I'm gonna stop with the nicknames now, it's going to get old so quickly.'

Bonnie lets out an exasperated *fuck* and slings the bag back over her shoulder. She paces over to the pair and sighs, like she just ran a half-marathon. 'Sorry. I thought I lost my lip balm.'

On their way back, Marta leans in and says, 'Nakia needs to see you.'

'She's finally here,' Bonnie says, laughing.

From the carpark to the rehearsal room, Bonnie unzips and zips her jacket up again at least four times. It's a short walk, in which their topic of conversation shifts from Nakia's tardiness this morning to the unbridled effect of a cheeseburger on the soul after not having eaten since 5pm the day before, and unsurprisingly, to the weather.

'It's just really strange,' Bonnie starts, 'hot, then cold, too warm, then cold again.'

'I think you're just stressing yourself out too much, Bon.' This from Marta.

‘No, I’m fine, really.’

Marta welcomes other faces so readily she feels, in that very moment, like she’s about to collapse into Sinclair’s arms. Wouldn’t that be a shame, she thinks, smiling politely at him.

The cast is all here—there is such a wide assortment of characters in *Into the Woods*. The princesses, the dashing young men, the nasty old crones, the voice of a freaking giant. The director for this very production is a woman in her early forties. She’s seasoned within the community theatre community, having started out as an actor herself. There’s that sort of underlying assumption that maybe her voice never really cut it, but maybe Marta is just catching little references more than she should be. It isn’t as if Sheridan blurts out *I just can’t sing very well, okay??*

But at least she’s not insisting they refer to her like they’re children, or worshippers, or something completely out of the ordinary for a community theatre production about fairytales and their beginnings, middles, and endings.

Marta doesn’t touch that white cape again.

The trio has reunited in their semi-circle on the floor, speaking their lines like religious manifesto. Today is the most relaxed of all days. There’s an atmosphere that feels reminiscent of something without structure, without strain. People bound to the front of the room to perform moments in the woods unrehearsed, unorganised. Reading off paper, making little markings with pen.

Marta can’t believe it, really.

2

The alarm runs through her body like a train clattering through a tunnel. For five or six years now she's returned to some ordinary, unexciting melody provided to her by the phone. It shakes her awake, always, but at least she isn't craning at the PTSD caused by a song she used to like stirring her. You lose the love completely, she thinks, rubbing at her eyes.

Outside, on the side of the road, Lindsay leans against the wheelie garbage bin. Everyone in her well-maintained street has lined their bins in a sort of dot-to-dot fashion, as the road weaves around a corner and disappears out of view. There's still sleep in her eyes but only because she rushed so frantically through her morning routine, and why?

To her, it felt both in character and out of it. The Baker's Wife, that is.

Who's to say what sort of character Lindsay Almond portrays nowadays.

...

With a warm coffee in hand, Sinclair waits in the car. The heat soothes his frozen hands. He's been borrowing the car off his dad for the last couple weeks, and the central heating is busted. Or it's weak, because he feels colder than he should, if the temperature on the screen is anything to go by. There's a light on in the upstairs window—if he were a betting man, he would think it were a bathroom, given the size of the window. Nothing you could climb in or out of.

But it's been years since he did anything like that.

With the car still running, Sinclair fiddles with the radio station. They talk about the most asinine things, and he comically shakes his head as one of the hosts makes a joke that truly couldn't be any stupider. He pauses on a station playing out an old operatic standard. It is busty and loud and strangely comforting. There's movement out the front window—she clicks the front door locked behind her, but Sinclair barely notices.

...

Once upon a time you would hear a name like Jock Voorhies and think he was some fellow out of a slasher movie come to take his revenge. Come to murder innocents, and not sing *Agony* in a small room at the back of his house. *You're a little too old for that part*, he thinks to himself, or sort of hums it, really. Maybe when he was in his thirties he could've been Cinderella's Prince.

He pauses, taking a breath. As he clears his throat, he tries to picture the perfect voice for a narrator. Am I stately, noble, deep and precise? Or am I myself? Is the Narrator a little on the nose Voorhies? He coughs. His throat is a little too dry for all this, right now.

In the little room, an old ironing board leans against the wall. Beside it, the window throws sunlight through the slits in the blinds. *You're not too old for theatre, no*, he thinks to himself.

You're not the ironing board.

...

‘Your shirt is on backwards, baby,’ she whispers, lifting up the baby blue tee off of her daughter’s stomach. Three-year-old Harper scrunches up her face as she raises her little arms above her head. Lindsay likes when her kid dresses herself, or at least attempts to. It’s cute and sweet, but Harper stumbles like this, and somehow doesn’t notice one bit. She’s three, you learn to forgive it.

Her husband is already gone—to work that is, although in the mornings it can feel distant between them. He no longer even sets an alarm, his natural body clock on schedule. The weekends are the same, unfortunately, but it typically means Lindsay can wave a half-asleep hand at him and tell him to go feed Harper, go take her outside, go keep her distracted and out of mummy’s way.

There isn’t even a doubt in her mind about some things, like performing. Becoming the Baker’s Wife, a woman so desperate to start a family, properly, with her unnamed husband in a home famously right next-door to a literal witch’s cottage.

It’s all drawing from experience, isn’t it?

...

She fiddles with the temperature settings, and he just laughs. ‘I’m fucking freezing, Sin,’ she says, but for the most part just shakes him off. ‘Thank you for the lift, though.’

And she still is beautiful, he thinks to himself, reversing down the driveway.

There isn’t much conversation to be had, though. Weather talk ceases the moment she realises the car isn’t getting warmer, and that cackle of his was truth, just unspoken. Neither of them really bothers mentioning the musical—what would they do, rehearse scenes they don’t share, or bicker in character? The silence, those moments of it, aren’t distant, though. Bonnie stares out the window, almost looking for something, but he doesn’t believe it’s some roadside lodge she can stake shelter in.

‘Have you eaten anything yet?’

Bonnie barely flinches. But he notices: he notices that slight flinch, how her brain recognises but her body refuses to acknowledge. ‘I’ve got stuff to eat in my bag. I’m not hungry in the mornings, Sin.’

‘I’m glad you said yes to these morning drives again.’

...

As an old schooler, it’s the original Broadway cast recording that sits on repeat for him. Jock settles into a comfortable recline as Bernadette Peters delivers the first of her gorgeous symphonies in the show. *The Witch’s Rap*. He mouths some of the words, his eyes tightly shut. At the kitchen bench with a coffee in front of him and a bowl of yogurt and muesli half empty, he is entirely awash. There’s everything from that filmed edition you can now find on YouTube for free, except one minor detail has changed: he is there.

In the role of the Narrator, tonight it will be played by: Jock Voorhies.

He’s a smudge, though.

Maybe it is the banging in his head, or the change, the sharp change. Something is different now than before and he feels an uncertainty around performing in a role that offers a strange sense of performance. During Act II, they kill him. Mutilate him. Well, that’s what murder is, or can be.

That’s what ageing is too, or can be.

Jock’s all tangled up in his head and he’s not anywhere close to being Rapunzel.

3

that's another story, nevermind

'Just take it easy for me, mum,' she says, her voice soft and low. The room is sheltered in the darkness of blackout curtains. Her mother is hunched over on the edge of the bed, bending down to pick up something that had scattered down out of reach—a bookmark, flimsy and bending-near-tearing at the point of it. It is a paper-thin feather the colours of autumn. On the nightstand, a paperback is set down upside down. Heidi's mother is approximately fifty pages in and loving it.

'You're treating me like I'm ill.'

'Right. I'm sorry for caring,' Heidi says, watching her mother grasp the bookmark in between two fingers and bend back upwards. She leans over and marks her place and slides the novel closed.

'You're going to be late for your fairytale show,' Kathleen whispers, climbing back underneath the covers. She tugs flowers up to her ears. It's childlike, almost, but also an incredibly mature act. It makes sense we'd all want to hide ourselves away underneath the sheets, stopping for long enough to smell every single little pink-and-red-and-white rose.

My mother looks comfortable, she thinks to herself.

Her mother has been staying—no, living—with her for a few months now. When things went haywire with the place she'd lived in for at least twenty years, Kathleen didn't love the idea of finding some other new house that she had no real attachment to.

In the hallway, Heidi finds her phone where she'd left it, lying face down on the kitchen counter. Two new messages, one from her ex-husband and another from Ian. *The Baker*. She could quickly run her eyes over both messages and understand the gist of them. Ian wants to talk about something theatre-related, because their relationship is sharply returning to this mood and tone, at least for now. Her ex-husband is probably intoning about something to do with the kids. The likelihood of him *checking in on her* is slimmer than the possibility of Ian shooting her a message in-character.

She pauses, considering that. Would it be something lengthy, or would he just send, 'I had a sister???' Yes, with at least an extra question mark or two.

Heidi responds quickly and politely to both, pacing from the kitchen into the hallway by the front door, and then back again. It is cautious of her, the way she interacts with these mostly harmless men. The divorce had finalised five years ago; Ian is a colleague and a support system, not a competitor or an agitator. But there is so much energy drained from her already, when it comes to the subject of men. She'd been seeing a man on and off for a few years after the divorce and now all that remains of him are memories, a scattering of his things throughout this house, and that silly fucking fear. A discomfort around men, almost, but not something she can track back to her dead father. God rest his soul—although neither Heidi nor her mother are very religious, but you do certain things just to respect the man that raised you.

Back in the hallway again, Heidi catches herself staring at the neat row of shoes left in the two-tier shoe rack. Most of them are her mother's. Worn-in colours, like greys and whites and clay browns,

nothing showgirl, or Broadway. Heidi keeps most of her own shoes in her closet, except for the muddied sneakers and two pairs of slide-on shoes she wears when she couldn't care less.

The one thing keeping her stagnant in the hall is her lack of shoes. Her bare feet are frozen stiff on the tiled floor. She almost feels like leaning forward on tiptoes, which, after a fashion, might give the impression she is an ageing-gracefully Barbie doll.

There's the old adage that in order to understand someone better, you step into their shoes. You see the pinks of the world through someone else's glasses for a change. Heidi isn't exactly going to strut into rehearsal wearing her mother's sandals, but she understands there is one last barrier blocking her from embracing a character that, like many, doesn't have a first name. It's a nasty twist of a job description and an insult, and Heidi needs to wear it on her feet, she understands that now. Not literally, of course. When you invite the daunting history of the show into your bones, of course you will terrify yourself without noticing. The *Witch* has been performed by many iconic performers—Bernadette Peters, Vanessa Williams, Hannah Waddingham, Donna Murphy, Meryl Streep, Patina Miller, and Heather Headley, among others. It sort of, crushes you under the weight of talent, really.

But you're one performer, one woman, and with that, Heidi repositions herself.

Her mother said, 'You're going to be late for your fairytale show,' and *perhaps it is best to remind yourself of that, Heidi*. You aren't them but you don't want to be. You're a goddess in your own right.

And it's like a mantra, isn't it? She sits and waits in her car in the carpark, dialling down that nervous energy. Yesterday went seemingly well. Remember the excitement of hearing you had finally been cast in this role, this elephant-in-the-room-in-the-best-way role. It calms her down. Heidi kicked Jesus Christ out of her life in high school and found meditation and her own gods in her early thirties.

Step into the woods.

...

Consider this: what are *her* motives?

The *Witch* presents her *handsome* neighbours with the opportunity to break a curse that she placed upon them. Out of the goodness of her heart? Of course not. In breaking one curse, she lifts another, but it comes with baggage of its own. There are many layers to an onion, and all that.

Heidi sits with a thumb to her chin, breaking down the character in her head.

What are *my* motives?

There is a rich question.

Some actors take the approach of finding what they share in common with their characters.

What do I share with a possessive sorceress that keeps a young woman she stole locked in a tower?

Maybe on the surface it doesn't seem like much, but there are character traits beneath the surface that are connecting. Pieces on a puzzle board that unite an ordinary human being with a larger-than-life fairy tale character. The *Witch* is a vulnerable, frightened woman—when the last of her claims to the world are threatened, at least. She can feel the tug of her *child* pulling away from her.

Undoubtedly, she clambers for her mother's approval. She is not good, she is not nice, she is just *right*. An inflated ego paired with the desire to...it almost feels as though she wishes to set the world on the right course, but it truly is masked beneath that sharp desire to control her narrative. Her death is a sacrifice—albeit also an earned victory for our heroes.

'There you are.' His voice travels across the room, despite the gap of space between them. She sits in the very corner of the room, furthest from the door, on a wheelie chair. One of several in a line across

the back wall. Ian proceeds across the room, swinging a script in his right hand. There's a slight breeze falling in through the open window behind Heidi. She's so comfortable in her spot his intrusion feels just like that—an intrusion.

'Do they need me?' She lifts her head up, meeting his gaze. Ian has the charm of a leading man purely on his glance. Handsome face, sparkle in the eyes, but grounded, too, considering the community theatre of it all. He takes a seat beside her on one of the other wheelie chairs.

'Not right now.'

They probably met for the first time ten or so years earlier, in a theatre production of some sort. Memories start to blur, but if the two of them sat down together and rehashed it all, they could come up with the exact moment. There was and never has been a moment of romantic tension between them. Ian married a few years after they met, and Heidi was there at the wedding, mopping away tears with a white handkerchief, as expected.

'I figured now would be the sanest time to mention this sort of thing,' he says, and she immediately connects it. The text message. The undertone in what he said, at least.

'Do you think I can crash on your couch for a few nights?'

It's a strangely comfortable thing for a grown man to ask a grown woman, at least this grown man, and this grown woman. Heidi stares at him with welcoming eyes, and sharply forgets that sickening little spiel from this morning, about how men are disappointing and threatening all at once, all the time.

'I would have a bed for you, if it weren't for my mother,' and she means it as a sort of joke, but the punchline doesn't quite land. Heidi glances off to the sealed doors of a cupboard on the wall adjacent to hers. It's like all he does is skirt around it, she thinks, quickly darting back to smile at her long-time friend. 'Are you doing okay?'

But he's a man. 'I'm managing,' he says, leaning back, 'I just need somewhere to stay, for now. It's not entirely like she's kicked me right out, but I'm not sleeping on the damn couch in my own house.'

Find the connection between yourself and your character. Heidi watches the slightest of twitches upon his face. Initially, the Baker rejects help, real help. A couch is just a couch, not a (bed)frame. The text message he sent Heidi this morning read: *It's good we're getting to work alongside each other like this again. Be on stage with each other like we used to.*

And it isn't as if they grew up alongside one another, and there's still a good ten years between them in age, but he meant something, with his words. Throughout auditions, when she had been wishing him good luck, she felt that undertone there, too. He mentioned his wife but mentioned her fleetingly. Oh, she's going well. *She's been a little distant lately.* Heidi heard him open up, even just a little, one night after auditions went late. She dragged him to a bar and cornered him on how flat he could become, the moments after he walked out of the room with that little table of, well, almost talent-show-judges, if they were being honest at this point. Heidi already had some alcohol in her system.

He was so certain of himself then that there were fixable problems in his marriage, but what, you go through therapy and talk—you fucking communicate (he was a little tipsy)—and then the problems get a little better. And he said, setting the glass down with a clink, it wasn't like anyone cheated, or hates the other person, or... *I don't know.*

Having been through a divorce of her own, Heidi understands it. The complicated nature of a tumble down.

All of this eclipsed performance, and the stage, and the genius of *Into the Woods*. Five minutes ago, she had been knee-deep in analysing a character. Heidi breathes out a long exhale, almost without noticing she is doing it. It won't be simple. Hopefully it will be *right*.

373

codename: *Carousel*

For these five people, the one thing they have in common above everything is really quite simple—they're dead. In the afterlife, where chances are unlimited, or so it seems, changing your tune is on offer—but so is living out the fantasies you never got the chance to step into. And so, as the carousel spins, and the twinkling music of the dead plays, meet five people forgoing hesitation. Now is their chance to find fame in underworld reality shows; feel the thrum of hot, dirty sex; buy a boat and sail the unliving world with a different woman each day; raise a child that will never age; or go on an unexpected apology tour accompanied by their own personal *demon*.

In the light at the end of the tunnel, there is a carousel. Even lifeless it is glowing. Bouncing light splashes like a mermaid against the horses, which should be riding themselves round in circles. Oh, conductor, won't you turn them on? Let them tire themselves out?

But the conductor won't listen.

The first horse here has been coated with a fresh layer of paint. There is chipping down one side, but when the carousel is first approached, it cannot be noticed. Blue speckles adorn the cheek of the horse—this is a feature, not a mistake by the artist, or some haphazard child with a tiny tub of blue paint. There is a saddle of worn leather, by design. It is of course a painted wooden seat. No one seems to know where this horse is headed. That glint in its eye is aimless and boundless. One could just assume this horse is chasing its tail and not the horse in front of it.

The second horse is newer, prettier, and streaked with mint green. Green pokes itself out from between a painted-white mane. The horse appears to be wearing booties, the same colour green, kicking out in the air. Feisty and fiery, until you realise this passion has been harnessed by those two cords nuzzling the creature at its mouth. With every glance you notice the horse is deteriorating rapidly. Everything is made so cheap nowadays.

The third horse is older. If wood could sag, it would sag for this horse. The paintwork is rather unmarked but has faded with time. Simple colours were used—crimsons and oranges and yellows. Maybe the horse does seem like a sunset, but to children it's a little more like a sunrise. Old-fashioned is what a carousel like this one was constructed upon, and this horse in particular appears ripe from the age of the dinosaurs. Is it winking at you? No, it has sleep in its eye.

The fourth horse is all white. A blank canvas of a statue, which is rather strange to stare at. You wonder, who forget to paint this horse? Who forget to adorn it with colour and vibrancy? However, the horse is not reminiscent of a colouring book, or a little clay figurine nestled near a stack of paint pots. There is detail in its carving. Stories are told in the waves of its manes. There are ferns and bromeliads carved to appear flush with the horsehair. A sort of botanical flourish.

The fifth horse is an interesting specimen. Horses don't usually wear thick eyeliner. Nor do they wear skirts, typically, and yet the horse you see before you is dressed only in a short, pleated skirt the colour of acid-washed denim. The horse, if it could speak, would remind you the skirt is not made of denim. The mane is a deep black colour, reminiscent of an abyss. Once upon a time, the darkest tone of black was created, and perhaps used to paint the mane of this horse. Rebellious would be the wrong word to describe it. Sure, dark tones and flares and an ageing skirt are out of place in the herd, but all of these horses are far from where they belong.

For now.

- P o n d e r a t i o n , 1 1 : 5 2 p m -

TEA

‘Ponderation, what’s the time?’

She rubs at tired eyes. Ponderation reads time in its bolded letters. She offers a laugh, the sound bouncing back from the walls of the octagonal room. Every which way she could turn, all she’d see is the purple, like a shun of lighter tones, an embrace of sickly-midnight the shade of 11:54pm.

‘Right. Almost bloody midnight. Um.’

It’s cold, dull, and Tea is lonely in the afterlife.

‘Sorry, we’re all going a little insane already, especially at this late hour. You either say, screw it, I’ll try to fall asleep like I used to, try to feel how it once was when there was that shot at shut eye, but some of us sit, lie, stand, wander around, whatever it is we think could be helpful, just to pass the hours. Sleep is harder, and what are we, four weeks in? Last week the slice of torture they called a challenge was slaughter. Be the last man or woman standing, but don’t you worry, nobody can die anymore. We’re already dead, done, dusted. You gut a man, supposed enemy, supposed friend, and the wound heals over, or he cleans himself up in the bathroom and we are set back to zero. Of course, then I was one point ahead. I won last week, for anyone just tuning in out of the sheer boredom of almost-midnight. I won. I was last left after everyone else got speared, all sixteen of them.’

She pauses, rubbing her eyes again. Her hair is tied back into a loose ponytail, but the colour is indistinguishable from brown or blonde, from black or blue, at least under the glow of the Ponderation light. Everything floats back to the screen at the front of the room.

‘Then you have power for a week. What does that even mean down here. What does any of this mean? I could have done something like this when I was alive. Put myself in front of the world every night. But it’s a different world that sees me now, man, it really is the latest hours in the night that make you think about everything. Never thought about something like this, a life like this, until I woke up in the waiting room wearing my work uniform, a little crumpled from the day, and I thought, whatever fall I had, whoever knocked me over the head, they sure did a clean job of it.’

For a split second, she wears the uniform again. She used to work for a big box store, paying rent, paying her phone bill because she raked up the minutes calling her mum, and calling her girlfriend, or texting either one of them. The uniform was the colour of those postcard oceans, aquamarine. Her favourite department was the outdoor gardening mishmash they called their “Under the Sun Spruce” section. The name made her vomit.

‘I didn’t realise I’d died, you know. I thought, okay, there’s emptiness down here and then a thousand people surround you and there’s a song playing in your head, almost elevator-music tunes, but not jazz, it would’ve been heaven if whoever had kidnapped me knew how I much I love jazz, man. Learned pretty quickly this isn’t either – the way they like to spread what this would be, heaven, hell, the in-between. I auditioned for a reality show in the afterlife. You do what you want down here, what you might not have done above the surface. We aren’t underground, apparently, but it suits me – I wanted to be buried, so here I am, chewing on worms and blocking out the sun.’

Ponderation dings, spilling out turquoise light from wall to wall. Tea lifts her head, reacting to the light. She sits with one foot underneath her butt.

‘Ponderation, what’s the time?’

12:00am.

The octagonal room dims, returning to the glow of purple. It slams Tea back into the sorts of shadows that surround her, not the puppy dogs and bub crocodiles from when she was younger, no, shadows now that creep up and sit, sit behind her back with talons outstretched. She leans back, reclining like she’s in the dentist’s chair now, not some comfy lounge in her parents’ house, or when she had the recliner in her apartment before it broke, because it’d been cheap anyway. It’s like, open wide and let me take a look at those molars, and she closes her eyes, seeing black. Shutting out purple. Shutting out the red, how realistic they made their blood when you drove the metal rod like a spear through their torsos.

‘I can’t answer a lot of things, even if I try to understand why I chose one door over the over. Soon enough I understood I had not just been kidnapped. There was a bruising, transferred over with the whole being dead thing. I forgot what happened, for about three hours *afterlife time*.’

She’s sitting up now, feet planted on the floor of Ponderation. She’s staring straight ahead at the camera. The *afterlife camera*. Her own image is clear as day. You wear whatever the hell you want, you pick out whatever is to your liking, even the pantry in reality show cableland is stocked with everything under the sun. But the answer escapes her, at least tonight, on why she applied when they stood her in the hallway, limitless, never-ending, and asked her, what will you do in your afterlife first?

Tea scoots her butt on an *afterlife sofa*.

‘It’s like we take turns in this room, this little hub. In the late hours, I mean.’

She’s changed the subject.

‘I know Sherry was awake for a while, walking in and out of Ponderation. What a silly name. We’re not in the future, this is the afterlife, folks, Ponderation isn’t your robot friend! It’s just another dead person talking to you through a wall because down here walls can be anything – see-through, penetrable just like that, gone in an instant. Sorry.’

She pauses, shaking her head. Enter in silence. Suck out that dry spot. Reset.

‘Ponderation is important, I need somewhere to go to just talk. So does Sherry, Isaac, all the people in here. Not *here* here, this house. Someday soon another person is set loose into whatever sort of world this is. The train finds the station. Who’s nominated this week? At least it’s not me.’

When she’d woken up that first day down here, she found a mirror and squealed like a child again. The bags under her eyes were gone. That infernal rim of purplish-grey. Gone, like that. Her eyes looked—look—young again, babyish again. No more hiding them ever again.

‘You know, I don’t think I want to leave. I know I came in here contemplating that, but you are keeping me sane, this whole place is, and I think if I stick around for another however many weeks, I’ll either win this whole thing, or I’ve spent time doing something new and I’ll step back out into the world like it’s 2010.’

Tea freezes, folding her leg underneath her butt again. She bites her lip.

‘Ponderation, show me January 12th, 2004, again, please.’

Her pupils gloss over white. The octagonal room fills with magenta light, streaking through her hair. She closes her eyes, sitting in silence, and starts counting backwards from ten.

PERCY

She'd been sitting in that chair for an hour or so, dead-eying him through the camera. Focus stays on her, and she monologues on and on, the hurt and the heart right there. At some point she falls silent, and so does the room, blanking out itself but the camera stays trained. Then, gone. The others are wandering the house, coffee mugs in their hands, trying to remember back to when that drink jolted them upright after a late night down at the hidden bar you find through the two wardrobe doors in the back of the coffee shop.

His brother had told him about that place.

Otherwise, the reality television contestants are trying to sleep. Some of them look out like lights, switched off, and there's the idea that you can—if you were a heavy sleeper alive, you're a heavier sleeper dead. There's no feeling tired. Percy seems to have kept everything intact from before, now in after.

He lies in bed, staying awake past midnight watching some stranger in a reality show talking about her existence. Her non-existence.

Percy gets up to stretch his legs a little, for his soul. He finds an old, worn pair of sneakers tucked into a cubby-hole that's home for a spider, too, weaving a web like a welcome home banner after a few weeks gone. A few weeks of homesick heartache. It's a dead spider. He plays back in his head every time he sees it. You don't get some miraculous chance to transform once you reach the world beyond waking – the appearance you had is the appearance you keep, with some exceptions. The sneakers are all for show. He knows he could walk barefoot, risk stepping on a nail, but all pain like that, physical pain, it's fleeting. But the heart still aches.

With no sun or moon, all light in this world is artificial. Beyond the deadworld apartment he can call his own, most of the connections to and from other places, other apartments, and other complex imaginations, most of that is connected by hallway. Set into walls are lanterns that burn like the sun, or otherwise white light that exists without containment. Floating like cuboid orbs. His neighbour, Owen, is lying down in the middle of the hallway, barely dressed, staring at the ceiling.

'Middle of the night to you, Owen.'

His neighbour doesn't react, or move his head, or sit up. Nothing. He's eclipsed by whatever he's reminded of. Whatever has crept inside of his mind.

Suddenly, he parts his lips to speak. 'Couldn't sleep, hey. I thought about knocking on your door, seeing if you wanted to have a drink and just open up about our lives, because I barely know much about you.' Owen's voice is warm and smooth like honey. 'Tell me something, anything.'

He doesn't glance Percy's way even for a second. He scratches his bare chest, teasing his fingers through some of the hair. Percy tries to think of something that would make him sound interesting. *I'd have thought all this talk would've died when I did*, he ponders, *but I'm sitting in that circle again, trying to come up with an interesting fact. I still feel made up of only what I'm living through, or lived through.*

Life had been for living. Some cheap greeting from those cards, but not the cards he ever saw. No one ever slapped a “life is for the living” card in his lap as if it had weight. As if it could have weight. He figures he remembers them from movies. *Keep on living life to the fullest*. Has the wrong weight to it now as they lull in the after.

‘I have an older brother and an older sister, sort of a basic fact about me, really.’ Percy tenses up. ‘Doesn’t it feel weird to you to be still feeling alive?’

Percy thinks about lying down beside Owen, brushing his shoulders against his. That moment of hesitation and Owen starts to shift and sit up, staring over at Percy, taking him in.

“I don’t get bogged down on that, man. I can go play tennis for hours and nothing snaps or cracks after...there’s no fear of the reaper left in me. But you have two siblings, hey. Me too. Oldest of three boys. The suckers outlived me.”

Owen lies back down, staring up the ceiling that could give way, that could upend and reveal a constellation or a void of black or both, or neither. It could show him his childhood again, or the queue at one of the registers in one of those five-floor department stores. There’s enough room beside him, on his right, for Percy to sidle up next to him and pretend this is some after-effect of a meet-cute, but he brushes that all off. Even with the chance to just completely disappear to some other hallway on the other side of this place if Owen rejected even the suggestion, Percy strains at the idea of waiting for the backlash.

He pauses, thinking, *I have the rest of eternity to find something, whatever I dream of*. He glances at his across-the-hall neighbour, lying there on the carpet like he’s stargazing, like he’s taken off by a cloud into some other imagined world. Percy shakes himself out of it. How much of that will he have to do down here?

“I’ll let you enjoy your night then, Owen.”

He tells Percy they’ve got to keep getting to know each other, as neighbours, like the frivolousness of it all should and would keep existing as long as they let it. In truth, when he was told he could have whatever dream he imagined, within reason, he just wanted an apartment. Someplace he could be comfortable in. Either Owen wanted the same, or similar, or behind his door was an entire other world that just presented like a plain hallway door. But the hallway seemed to stretch for forever, and Percy never took much notice when others disappeared through the doorframes. It can be fairly complicated to ascertain how similar or dissimilar the afterlife was to a hotel. You checked in, you found your room key, you knew this whole set-up with its bells and whistles wasn’t designed just for you. It isn’t meant for one guest, one king.

After awkwardly stepping over Owen, Percy continues on down the hallway, turning a corner maybe ten paces after Owen’s head. If you wanted the hallway to be a trek, you just asked. The carpet could change to vinyl.

He starts to tap dance.

Sometimes a door would offer no soul. No writing, no style, no substance. You were left piecing together what could be behind it, who could be behind it, without a clue. Sometimes, and you’d be inching toward killing the cat, you’d peer behind the door and see nothing but the tools of a janitor’s closet, like a sick joke, a prank handcrafted. Mostly, though, you’re searching for some place, and you turn a corner and there the door is, with the plaque, the words written in black ink the way you imagined them in your head. Searching for a park from your childhood. Going looking for a restaurant that served a dish you hadn’t eaten since you were thirteen.

Or, he supposes, the physical manifestation of those dating apps you never had much of a chance to try out. And they squeezed the words on the chocolate-brown door without hesitation. And you have your hand gripping to the door handle.

There is an uncertainty as if he were about to face something he is completely unprepared for. The steel of the handle makes him shiver. It would be weird if you felt no sensations at all. No feeling, no nothing.

He realises he has been standing there in front of the door, just standing. Staring. There's no line or queue. No one is waiting behind him with crosses burning into the back of his head. Nothing at all.

Inside, behind that door, he is immediately taken aback at how empty the space is. Instead of crowds of people, endless parades of the sorts of men you should avoid, or the types that his sister says 'always disappoint the hell out of you', instead of all that, the space is empty. Empty except for a table and two chairs. The table is draped in a spaghetti-bolognese-sauce-red tablecloth, like an old-fashioned romantic had walked in before he arrived and set the scene. It was missing music, but then he blinked twice and a soft chorus filters in from an invisible sound system. It startles him that he isn't in a personal hell, with a hundred bodies thrusting themselves against his leg, or drinks sloshing down onto concrete floors, but he guesses this is what he always hoped—one day there'd be chemistry and decency.

But maybe he doesn't want to fall in love.

When creating a dating profile, like when his older sister showed him, you start with the basics. So, they're important, of course. But you can lie, another thing she'd say. Percy never made himself a profile. He came to terms with his sexuality like other kids, other teenagers, and he grew up always wanting to find love. He got comfortable living out the fantasy through his sister and her failed attempts to find a boyfriend from the pool, which could've been a sea, too, or something the size of the Pacific Ocean. Here are the basics for a dating profile:

Name: Percy Arford

Age: 19

Cause of Death: Decomposition of the Live Body, Far Too Soon

He was in and out of hospital for those last few years. Somewhere along the way, Percy convinced himself there would be no time for love, no time for anything. One night he was lying awake in the hospital bed, drained completely of energy. He hadn't done anything all day. He thought he saw a flash of someone hovering outside the window, almost like Peter Pan had finally come to take him to Neverland, but with a shake of his head—which shook out some dandruff—he realised he'd been just trying to amuse himself.

He thought back, then, to a story from his childhood. He was out in the garden with his brother, who had hurt himself somehow. Probably tripped on a rock. He was covering a bloody knee, trying his hardest not to cry.

We all cry eventually, Percy thought to himself in the hospital bed, letting a few loose tears stain his cheeks. What he wouldn't have done for a bloody knee instead.

Percy sits down at the table in the empty hall. *Right*, he thinks, waiting with a strange optimism for a screen to hover in front of his eyes displaying various images of men he could possibly "date". He must've gotten lost staring at a saltshaker because a voice cut through the air, asking him if he was alright.

'What?'

'I can come back,' the voice says, and Percy glances up at an attractive man sitting in the chair opposite him. Dark hair, eyes the colour of mountains, a white shirt perfectly ironed. He is beautiful and polite. Percy felt immediately unprepared.

'Oh, sorry,' he says, with the sort of smile he imagined he would've had for any first date.

‘You’re fine,’ he replies, straightening the tablecloth, although it didn’t need it. ‘I’m Harry, I haven’t seen you around here before.’

To Percy, he seems kind of...fake. Unreal, but not in the perfect partner type of way. If he were alive and following his sister’s footsteps, sure, he would seem like any ordinary man. But there’s something to this Harry that makes Percy feel like he is on the undead version of a date with a man who lacks any real personality.

He avoids being awkwardly cliché—this is my first time attempting this whole in-person dating app thing—and settles for something a little vaguer and more unnoticeable. ‘I was taking a break from social media.’ It feels kind of gross to say, but it appeases Harry.

They talk for a little while, but the discussion isn’t riveting.

‘Were you real kinky back on Earth?’

‘Um. Not really,’ Percy says, skipping over how little experience he really has.

‘Were you in a relationship when you died?’

Why does it matter, he wants to blurt out, but he pulls himself back. He’s growing so bored of talking with Harry. Maybe it would have been wiser to stay at home and continue tiring himself out watching whatever was on Afterlife TV. That girl talking to herself in Ponderation.

‘No, I wasn’t,’ he replies, his stomach rumbling. In this fake empty restaurant, no waiter comes to check on whether they are ready to order or not. Hell, I’m dead, Percy thinks, trying to conjure up a plate of something, or on the reverse, conjure up a reason why his stomach should rumble.

‘Do you just want to get out of here?’

If Percy had been so much more than himself, maybe he would have flung himself down the hallways with this man. Maybe he would have slipped his arms out of the shirt he’s wearing. He’s never had sex before, but it seems about right he loses his virginity getting fucked in the ass in the underworld.

With a flick of his wrist, Harry disappears. *Not like this*. He drops his head, a little ashamed. He likes to think he would’ve been able to just go for it like that. *You’re not going to die*, he thinks to himself, sitting in the darkness of whatever this place is. He snaps his fingers, and the music dies down. For at least a second, he wants the silence of it all. He’s already bitten off more than he can chew, and he just turned down some guy that doesn’t care that he’s barely an adult.

He barely notices the empty space change around him. Blackness becomes sterile whiteness. He’s crammed into that uncomfortable hospital bed and there’s something unsettling on the television high on the wall opposite him.

It’s a male mannequin, no noticeable sexual organs—no penis, no curvy butt. Someone is spinning it around slowly, as if it rests perched on a platform on wheels. ‘Is this you then?’ The stranger whispers, and Percy feels a chill run down his spine in the flimsy hospital garment.

‘Where have your balls gone?’

TEA

In a backyard more reminiscent of the ocean, Tea paints her toenails.

‘Good morning,’ one of the other contestants whispers, rubbing their eyes. There is a gaping hole in the floor twelve paces from Tea, and the contestant hovers above it, swaying back and forth. In a few moments, without real hesitation, the hole spits out a travel mug of coffee and burps. The sound is neither animal nor machine—it is a weird amalgamation, something intrinsically *alrighty then*. After a few days, everyone got well-adjusted to the sound. And to the gaping hole in the floor, too. But when a part of the house essentially offers whatever you desire, you get acquainted with it.

Last night had been strange.

When she had exited Ponderation, she almost bumped right into Isaac. He was a sleepyhead but the shock of it all woke him right up, and he shook himself out of it. ‘I’m not even tired,’ he had said, then walked into Ponderation with a wink. For a moment, Tea had forgotten the looping observation of the cameras and leaned in, trying to listen to what Isaac was drumming on about in the little room. She hadn’t been able to hear much. But when she walked to the kitchen, there were two contestants spooning raw coffee powder into their mouths and bending themselves into the downward dog.

The colour she chose for her nails pulls in some light off the ocean, and for a brief moment, Tea stares out at that ocean. The first day it was entirely bizarre how sprawling and never-ending the so-called backyard was. Now, watching the splash of a multi-coloured porpoise, she realises the calming nature of it all. I guess this is why people live near the water, she thinks to herself.

Isaac wanders out into the yard, dipping his toes into the water.

‘Good morning,’ Tea’s voice comes out soft and hesitant. At the water’s edge, Isaac rounds his head to smile at her. He’s young, barely twenty years old, with a mop of hair the colour of a meerkat.

He was young, before he passed.

Tea fans her toenails with her left hand. ‘Morning,’ he says, his eyes widening. ‘I almost ran right into you last night and I didn’t say a thing. Sorry about that.’ He sounds young too. Innocent.

‘It goes both ways, Isaac.’ Tea smiles up at him. ‘Did you watch a lot of reality television when you were alive?’

Isaac steps away from the water’s edge, a pondering expression on his face. ‘You know,’ he says, standing near her now, ‘I liked it all, but I never watched much of those shows like *Big Brother*.’ He starts to list a few of the shows he claims he was *obsessed* with: *The Amazing Race*, *Taskmaster*, *The Traitors*, etc. He begins on a sweet rant about why he wishes *The Mole* was a bigger, broader success, and how it was the sort of show he wish he had the confidence to apply for.

‘Is there no show like that in Hell?’ Tea laughs to herself, shaking her foot out.

Isaac laughs back, shaking his head. ‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘I just wanted somewhere to go.’

Why does that hurt so much? Once he’s retreated back inside, Tea’s left outside with her painted toes and that thought—why are we so desperate to find that place we’re supposed to be? When she’d been living, there was never a week she didn’t think about quitting that tiring little job and trying to do something with more meaning. For herself, mostly. What do you get for yourself from all the men and women that fling their thoughts back in your face and wish to tell you how your job should be operating? Well, anyway, she thinks to herself, craning her neck, *I got out*.

Tea thinks back to the first real memory she has of watching a reality show. Specifically, really, one where money was on the line and you needed to shove everyone else out of the way to get it. She was twelve or thirteen and a new season of *Big Brother* sucked her older sister in. Maybe there had been episodes here and there, but that season was the first time Tea felt glued in too. There was this beautiful black woman that made it until the final five and then got evicted. Tea idolized her. Maybe she watched less feverishly once the doors closed behind this woman.

There wasn't that automatic sense that she should follow in her footsteps and try out for the show when she was old enough. All through her late teens and early twenties she never thought, *fuck it, I'll audition*. But then she realised she had died, and she was waking up in an underworld waiting room and it was all, what next?

Really, truly, what next, Tea?

At breakfast, Tea and Isaac spoon mouthfuls of cereal in their mouths purely out of habit. She still enjoys the sugary taste, at least. But it isn't as if anyone in the house goes hungry, and all dietary requests are basically out of a fervor for replicating the past.

Tea glances over at Isaac with that subtle little smile on her face.

'Do you think this was somewhere you should've gone?'

In her head, she skewers the last of the contestants in that elaborate arena. Special-effect blood squirts out and sloshes against her cheeks. It's cold and metallic.

'Are we supposed to know?' Isaac replies.

'Don't answer my question with a question.'

'Oh.' Isaac is obviously in serious ponderation. 'Yes. This is the most certain I've been about something all my life.' Then he pauses, chuckling. 'That's so funny to say.'

17 *(in the Vaykha universe)*

codename: Orli Orli

The ten sons of a miller recount the mysteries surrounding the disappearance of their only sister, Orli, hoping to shed light on what could have possibly happened to her. Orli's childhood love begins to believe there are discrepancies in the stories the brothers spell out, and that perhaps they are not as innocent as they want to appear.

1

In the bitter frost of the morning, he was awoken by a rapping at the door.

This little home of his had been inherited when his parents trekked eastwards to visit a fading relative. They had not perished, his parents. He received a letter from them on occasion, although they had warned him the letters would become less frequent, now that Aunt Ika was on the last of her bouts of, in her condition, good health. It meant she was dying at last, he understood it.

He figured now that the rapping could be an urgent letter addressed to him, although he couldn't guess if the messenger was advancing on his expected delivery times. The sun was nestling itself through cracks underneath the dark curtain, and the bed underneath him was stiff. He groped around under the covers, disgruntled a little that the first thing he would need to do that morning was throw himself out of bed. It could wait.

Qinn Jeetha scrambled for a cloth covering for his chest, slipped his bare feet into a pair of loose moccasins sitting at the base of the bed, and jangled a set of keys from the hook above a foreboding cupboard in the hall, that he had been terrified of all throughout infancy. It would swing and rock in the worst of the storms, or the nastiest of winds, truly. Their town of Mön Fex was on the northern triangle of Vaykha, where the weather was uncontrollable and busy. That was how his mother described it—out of sorts, like your father in wintertime. Qinn sighed at that. Remembering hearing his mother talk in the morning.

It was nice to be a reverse sort of empty nester, though. He had been spending lonely, dark hours lit by candlelight, attempting to fix the home up before he became a husband himself.

As he opened the front door of the house, he reminded himself: I am soon to wed Orli, the miller's daughter.

A freezing-cold messenger boy stood in the doorway, clutching tightly to the overflowing coat that must have been thrust onto him by some neighbourly woman, worried for his health and all his appendages, yes, even that one. Qinn without hesitation ushered him inside. 'Get out of the cold, Aarburd.'

'I need to talk with you urgently,' he said, stuttering on the third word, then the sixth.

Qinn pulled out a chair for the lad, then arranged himself in the kitchen to prepare something. He felt a little underdressed, compared to the messenger boy. His bare legs were cold, failing to adjust to the temperature out from under the covers, but he hadn't the time to go dress for the day. The ablaze fire could only do so much inside, it seemed. He needed to throw another log on it.

Aarburd nestled into the chair, teasing the coat off one shoulder awkwardly. A bare patch of skin was exposed near his neck. He looked rather pale, really, but the stuttering was gone by the time he spoke once more. 'It isn't your parents, there is no letter, ease yourself down from that,' he said, glancing at the other man in the kitchen, busying himself with a pot of a mellow black substance. Qinn moved to set it down beside the fireplace. Another log, another log.

'Qinn, please, it is serious.'

'You are going to freeze up out there, you need something that will settle inside your stomach until evening and tide things. News can wait, will wait, I am certain there is nothing I can do immediately that will change matters.' He froze at the front door. The wood was outside, still, because he was so burdened with constantly sweeping up shards and splinters lately. It just seemed tidier, keeping the logs in a stack arranged only a few steps from the entrance. But he was dressed for summertime flings and nonchalant slumberings, not for this frozen weather. Winter would wear off

soon, he knew it. There was the calendar he had purchased from Gaio in town—it was hand-painted, she was so talented at the drawing the strokes of local flora.

‘Qinn,’ Aarburd pushed, rising from the chair.

‘I am sorry,’ Qinn said, turning on his heels. ‘I figured this was news I didn’t want to hear, seeing as you have woken me up, shaken me into hopefully not the worst distress of my life.’

Aarburd lowered his head, inching forward. He pulled the coat tight on his body, and Qinn was ashamed in the moment to recognise that it now suited him, complimented his thin, twiggy body.

There were certainly things—people, he supposed—that he protected so compactly within his heart, he promised himself the news would not pertain to them.

Aarburd cleared his throat. ‘Orli is missing, officially.’

Some words make the world feel colder, split you off from everything that modulates the temperature in your body. Qinn leaned his body against the cool wood of the door, stiff, collapsed, as if in desperate need for the support of a structure, of structure itself.

They first met when they were children, Qinn and Orli, the miller’s daughter. They were the same age; however many months separated them. It was that the miller was not certain of the date of any of his children’s births. He knew the months, seemed to string them in his head next to the name, but numbers, as he said, conflicted too severely banking beside his work, his profession. ‘He mills, he mills, what other numbers is he really remembering,’ Qinn suddenly remembered, something his mother whispered under her breath when her son had first talked of his intentions with Orli.

He was so deeply in love with her.

Now she was *missing*.

‘Who informed you?’ He suddenly spun around, directing an unsettled stare in Aarburd’s direction. ‘Where have they searched for her?’

Aarburd shook his head, lowering back into a shoulders-slouched position in the chair.

‘Her father has not seen her for two days.’ Aarburd hesitated. ‘I am surprised you did not notice, Qinn.’

Now he was being called a languid lover. He had spent the past few days preparing the home, and he did not feel guilty about spending time alone. How was he to know she would go missing?

How was he to know...

‘No one came to tell me until now?’ Suddenly, of course, there was anger. A gross mismanagement of fright, anger, and some third emotion that bordered on a fever inside of him.

The messenger boy unclipped a small satchel from his waist and emptied it on the table in front of him. ‘Orli’s father, he, he wanted to be certain she was missing, and not off galivanting with someone like you.’

‘Someone like me? Does he not approve of us after all, then?’

‘Those were his words,’ Aarburd stammered, sorting through a handful of folded letters that had been sitting loosely in his carrier bag. ‘His words, not mine.’ The messenger glanced up with warm puppy dog eyes, seemingly trying to comfort Qinn. ‘You know I don’t disapprove of the relationship.’

Qinn set a hand covering his eyes, and he knew there were far more ginormous problems right then that knocked the miller’s thoughts like a rock into a pond, or a stream. ‘She left nothing behind?’

‘She left everything, Qinn,’ he said, sighing. At last he located the letter, which to Qinn appeared to be more torn scrap of paper than anything. The miller was not the sort of man to splurge on fancier writing materials. There was a good chance this was torn from the bottom of a paper bill, or a letter he received from one of the mothers of his children. He tried not to laugh at his own little joke.

Aarburd smoothed out the corner page and offered it to the other man, as if serving him any ordinary letter. When Qinn held it in his hands, he felt weight. It was an invisible heaviness to this thin

paper, this crumpled paper. Anyone could have guessed the paper was not the burden. Qinn began to read, moving his feet forward, then back, all without realising.

‘When she didn’t come home that first night...’ Qinn couldn’t finish his thought. He felt duplicitous in it, despite his complete separation. The letter mentioned nothing of blame—it was rather polite and formal, for a miller, spelling out how anyone in town who may know anything should immediately come call upon him, or let one of her brothers know when they inevitably ran into them in the village. Orli has ten brothers, so many masculine bodies crowding around her growing up.

And yet she still fell in love with me, he thought, rereading the note.

There was another knock on the door.

‘Can you...’ Qinn motioned to the door with his head, stepping further into the kitchen. The messenger boy passed by him, anxiously approaching the front door of a home that was not his.

The door opened with a clunk, heavy and brash. Aarburd stood stiffly in a gust of chilly winter’s wind, clutching to the corner of the heavy overcoat with his spare hand. ‘Good morning, sir,’ he said, tipping his head. In the kitchen, Qinn Jeetha pressed his forehead against the cool pane of glass of the window that faced into an empty patch of grass. ‘Come in, please,’ Aarburd offered to the figure lurking outside in the wild.

The man scuffed his boots against the entrance hall floorboards, measly and peasant-like as they were. Not that he knew better, of course, as the son of a miller. Qinn hardly reacted. The man untied the laces of his boots and scattered them without much care, giving Aarburd a sort of look that implied he was complicit with the impolite act. It was all very informal, to which Qinn still hardly reacted. He hesitated himself—he wanted to say, who is it, tell them to tie those boots back on, I don’t want any company. He was presuming her mauled by a wolf or swallowed alive by a sea monster. My lovely Orli is dead.

‘Where’d you put her then?’ His voice was abrasive and peevish. The man was much taller than Aarburd—it was like comparing a field mouse to a striking blade of wheat, and Mön Fex’s farming community was known for abnormally towering stalks of wheat. Qinn’s father used to farm wheat.

The man leapt forward and gripped Qinn’s collar, shaking him free of such a trance of depression and hopelessness as it was. Finally, he registered who had been welcomed into his home. Orli’s brother. One of them, anyway, it seemed at this rate Mön Fex would become too incestual in a few generations.

‘Havaak,’ Aarburd warned, stepping forward. The man had a tightened grip on his sister’s childhood sweetheart. It was almost comical—the fellow could have lifted him in the air without question, given his size, given his rage. Qinn pressed one hand hard against the glass, terror implanting itself on his face.

‘Aarburd, be quiet and check she isn’t asleep naked in his bed.’ Havaak’s intense stare did not rattle with his words. He was intent, it seemed, on retaining this presence, this wildly severe and uncomfortable presence, as if aggression and punishment would be the clear answer to finding his sister. The messenger boy idled in the hall, slowly unbuttoning the heavy overcoat. ‘Go on, Aarburd.’

There was no one, of course, in the bedroom. Or in any of the other rooms in the home, not that it was all that spacious of a dwelling. Where exactly would I hide anyone, Qinn thought, now slumped in one of the chairs, tucked into a corner to keep his attention on as much of the quaint little space as possible. Havaak lingered in the hall, resting his head atop Aarburd’s. There was something faintly intimate about the pose. This tall, broad-shouldered man was known to collapse himself into the support of people he was familiar with—it figures such an exhaustingly-capable sort of person needed some compassion—but there was that undercurrent. His sister was a giant question mark hovering in the clouded sky.

‘Storm is coming,’ Qinn said, making a cautious glance toward Havaak.

‘If she slunk here, or slunk away, she would have left a note,’ he said, before burying his frown in Aarburd’s hair. The messenger boy looked at once shrinking under the weight and acknowledged, perhaps more than the tall, broad man had ever really acknowledged him.

A few moments passed in silence. Qinn returned to his dreary spot at the window, ignoring Orli’s brother. Aarburd made a series of uncomfortable groans, sporadically, all the while pretending, in the stance of his body, that the weight of the other man did not faze him.

Havaak removed himself with a tussle of the shorter man’s hair. The expression left on Havaak’s face was much the expression he had the moment he made a shared glance with Qinn. He was vengeful, discomfort ripping at the corners of his mouth, but it seemed only natural for such a feeling to be overcoming him. ‘You never saw her then?’

Qinn stiffened. He wished he could say anything to ease any of their minds. ‘I was going to arrange something soon,’ he said, although it sounded out of sorts, misplaced. Like he was attempting to forgive himself for something, like he could spell out the future, or the truth, already. ‘No,’ he corrected himself, ‘the last I saw of Orli was five days ago. I took her for a picnic.’

‘So you could kiss her and convince her to betray her family?’ Havaak’s tone was disgruntled, he knew he was betraying the moment, but he seemed to be torn regardless.

‘Your sister would not betray her family!’ Qinn spun from the window, a cold expression planted on his face, cooler than the outside weather. But his fists were not balled. Everything showed on his face; nothing showed beyond, on his body, as if the air numbed his limbs.

Havaak took a step toward the shorter man. Both seemed to have forgotten Aarburd or were ignoring him regardless. ‘How can you prove she did not come here one evening and the both of you did nasty unknowable things in your bed, the bed once of your parents, too,’ he said, using his stature to remain in strength and dominance. Qinn knew a weakness or two of his. There were only a few years between them—Havaak the older, the last of the miller’s children with a woman that had seemed to crawl away after her last birth. It had become a sort of joke to humanise Havaak, who was not all that godly beyond his height, which was merely inherited. The miller is such a towering figure, or he was, before he was entrusted to raise eleven children from the women that were worse off than he was. There was even rumour one of the ten brothers were born of a swamp witch, but that he inherited absolutely nothing of her prowess. He just smells quite rank sometimes, Qinn thought to himself, burying such a thought deep inside himself like he was carving out an abyss.

Qinn never dreamed of demolishing the sort of standing he had spent years trying to build up with Orli’s real, true protectors. Her brothers raised her, alongside that father of theirs.

‘I cannot prove it, if it were true she crept here without a word,’ he said, bowing his head. If they wished to accuse him, it would be the second worst news he heard that morning. ‘You are welcome to search this house for as long as you would like.’ Now was not the time to protect his workmanship—if they wished to tear up the floorboards in search of whatever clue that would somehow link her to him, he would look guilty in trying to prevent it.

He truly had not seen her since the picnic, which now felt cold and lifeless to imagine.

He prayed silently that she was concussed in a neighbouring village and would awaken in moments to return to her father unscathed, and he was not a religious man at all. Gods and monsters, he thought, tempted to grin. It was fun and thrilling to imagine they might exist, but from his silence and his comfortableness, he never quite figured they would pay him any mind or attention.

Havaak breathed out, taking a glance at the messenger boy. ‘Aarburd, go return to my father, let him know the village is aware she is somewhere unknown.’ He paused, then suddenly wrapped his arms around Qinn. It was a tight, unorthodox embrace—it was not merely of grief, of seeking a

semblance of comfort from another. Havaak and Qinn both desperately needed it, and they did not realise.

‘I am sorry, Qinn,’ he said, kissing the shorter man’s hair. Tenderness, even if it was brief. Havaak gently patted the fall of Qinn’s back. ‘I should not assume you were responsible. You are such an easy suspect, because some of my brothers think you are boring.’

They stood there, holding onto one another, for a length of time that felt appropriate, but not distasteful, or romantic, or uncomfortable. Aarburd had left unceremoniously. He was largely unconnected to the miller and his family, and to Qinn, after all—it was a depressing sort of tale, everyone in the village recognised and knew him, but only the family of his own claimed him. His family included him as one of six children, so it was not as if he were miserable or alone. Just unmarried, and perhaps unburdened.

Havaak moved through the kitchen, fiddling with the doors of several of the cupboards. He stared blankly at the assortment of letters left scattered on the table. ‘That Aarburd, he is hasty,’ he said, flipping over an envelope, reading out the addressee, huffing quietly to himself.

Qinn shook his head, taking a seat in front of the letters. As he began to put order to them, slowly, delicately, he spoke once more, addressing Havaak. ‘Who was last to see her?’ It was more painless to forgo her name. If she were to be a she, he could separate that every vital organ was pulsing him towards the bedroom, to slumber in the filth of his tears, although crying felt the cleanest way to wash off this sudden exhaustion.

‘My father did, when he bade her goodnight,’ Havaak said, sitting down opposite Qinn. ‘In the morning, he let her sleep, and he assures that he saw her figure leave the house.’

‘So no word from her for two days?’

‘He’s...’ Havaak froze, leaning in. ‘He assumes you’re planning to wed his daughter, so he never questioned her stray from him. My father thinks the world of her, but he is too stubborn a man to deny her the clasps she desires to pin to herself.’ It was a wordy sort of thing for him to say, but it reminded Qinn of the sort of woman that lived in a seafaring shore town. It felt so nautical, even the inflection in his voice. When Qinn’s parents had still lived in Mön Fex, they would all, on occasion, travel the three hours by cart to Osceemma. It was a beautiful seaside town, although the rank of fish lingered in your nostrils for at least three days and three hours.

‘As long as he does not hope to publicly trial me,’ Qinn said jokingly, as he finished carefully organising the letters into Aarburd’s satchel.

‘He does not despise you, Qinn.’

Qinn set the satchel upon the table and made a strange glance in the direction of the house door. ‘I am not, and maybe will never be, the sort of person your father will like.’ His voice was not cold, but it dripped in a sort of lukewarm resolve that made what he said next startle Havaak. ‘I do not blame him for assuming I revealed true colours after all this time. That I am a lowly usheekar, stealing away his daughter and slitting her throat while she sleeps.’

The taller man had no words to respond with, no manner to sift through the heavy insult Qinn had thrown on himself as he dealt with the pre-emptive grief. Someone had left the door swinging open—well, that was how he felt, as winter continued to hose him down, shiver his bones.

‘I never would have hurt her, Havaak,’ he said, slowly rising from the chair, making a snail sort of retreat to the bedroom. With the sound of the door closing, the house was warm again. Qinn crawled into an egg-shaped speck woven beneath the sheets, and he closed himself off to everything but a pagan sort of prayer, thinking of his dear Orli.

In the kitchen, Havaak laced his boots and wept.

...

In due time, he woke himself up.

He craved something to eat, and he craved the rapping on his door once more, from the messenger boy again, in part because he still possessed the satchel, but largely for the question that still hovered. He wanted news of Orli, sweeping celebration, sanity and clarity, and a thunderstorm to wash away the horrors of the morning. Instead, he found two slices of bread and made himself a sandwich.

Qinn dressed himself properly. This was no occasion to wander the village looking like a distraught mess or drop any sense of how to display the intensity of her disappearance in public. He could be bereaved, but not tide away his politeness. Which became code for: save the heavy sobbing for long nights.

He slung Aarburd's satchel over his shoulder, determined too to find the messenger boy and try to determine whether anyone in the village had acted uncertainly at hearing the news. It had likely been presented as a plea, a bulletin board message left in the hope others had paid more attention than her workaholic father had. It would be properly impolite to say to his face that his memory, or actual efforts to care, were lacking as of late.

There were rumours, too, that he could not even recall the name of the woman that had given birth to Floy, his youngest child. Some of the elder women whispered about how cumbersome it would be to not outlive him. *What a dreary state of things*, they would mutter, aiming their good arms to playfully pester the young children with rocks.

Qinn did not think Piinthoo would hurt his children, or at least he wouldn't murder them.

His blood ran cold.

Was he assuming now that someone had killed Orli?

It was not entirely out of the question.

The village of Mön Fex was moderate in size—much larger than Osceemma, which was from afar a few lanes of stilted homes on a sand dune. Tourist destinations were not frequent or common in Vaykha as a continent, but Osceemma would qualify, and shacks and bungalows were rented to rake in industry where fishing seemed increasingly unexciting. People didn't want to eat those tiny little cretins that inevitably floated onto the shoreline anyway.

Mön Fex had the usual conveniences: a schoolhouse, an herbalist, a small room that resembled a mail office, a mill, and a slaughterhouse—which was out of the way, and Guuvan was the only one who lived nearby. From time to time, Qinn offered his help at the herbalist, although it was seemingly more and more frequent that he was told to do the sort of tasks that related very little to herbs and medicines. The week prior, they had asked him to fix a fence behind their home that had been torn down in a nasty thunderstorm. Strange, yes.

Qinn assumed he would find Aarburd in the mailroom, which was simply a square front room of his family home, where he sorted letters delivered to the village. The letters typically seemed to come in a tight bundle amongst other supplies, sometimes in the arms of another village's messenger. Qinn rapped on the door, setting a hand above his eyes as he glanced through the square set window. Aarburd was not there, which was unfortunate.

He contemplated knocking on the rear door, which acted as the entrance to the familial home. Aarburd's parents were lovely folk, peaceable and welcoming. But they were likely to give vague offerings—that boy of ours, he must be busy, bolting around from doorstep to doorstep, oh, my, dear, we are terribly sorry to hear about what is happening to Orli. Then it would sound as if things were desperately happening *to her*. He could not help the deranged thoughts that leapt into his head. It ached, to think of Orli in danger. Her light voice becoming an anguished scream.

Qinn spun around, the satchel dangling in the wind. He felt exposed. A voice shot towards him, catching in his ear. He knew that sound, it was repeating his name, in a new sort of desperation.

Tovmachin and Yarall were quick on the approach, or Qinn was slow to notice them, distracted in his thoughts on where to find the messenger boy. Two of Orli's brothers now stood close, but the tension between them paled in comparison to how Havaak had interacted visiting him earlier that morning. Neither brother stood to the height of their younger sibling, Havaak, but height almost seemed unnecessary. Tovmachin had the weathered sort of appearance that suggests many, many hours of outside labour—he spent many years of his adolescence working out east, farming for okra and potatoes, and he appeared to be largely displeased with wearing a hat, or a shirt. Yarall, four months younger, was thin-limbed and very familiar with the townsfolk that flocked to the tavern of a drunkard evening. He seemed to hold his liquor well, or else his family kept locked lips about his misadventures.

There were no reports of him drunkenly attempting to engage sexually with a shrub, that was certain.

Qinn stared at the two of them, conflicted. Anxious, for sure. He did not feel renewed from the morning, when Havaak accused him of everything but treason against the king. What is a well-comforted nap supposed to do? Yarall set a hand upon Qinn's shoulder, a brotherly sort of greeting that made him shiver.

'We aren't here to kill you for our sister,' Tovmachin said, glaring at his brother. Without pause, Yarall withdrew his hand. It was obvious the conversation could not be simple, could not be the sort of conversation a few men would always seem to have in the middle of the village.

Qinn tried to assess body language, the pauses. He saw two brothers there in front of him, flanking him almost, but not as an intimidation tactic. They were missing a sister, and the absence shook them. Tovmachin looked like an ageing potato.

'I want to help you where I can,' he said, although he was unsure of where his strengths would lie. He was not adept at tracking, locating, uncovering secrets of the sort—he had a familiar sort of bond with the herbalist, at least, but he was certain she was not necessarily well-equipped in sorcery. Did he think she could swill some herbs around in a little porcelain teacup and predict where Orli was? He gulped down the thought. He was thinking about her, specifically her, because in her two brothers in front of him he saw little reflections. Orli and Yarall have the same eyes.

He did not want to show brazen emotion in front of them, they had plenty of reasons to distance themselves from him regardless, or they seemed to believe so.

'Don't lie to us, Qinn,' Tovmachin said. He eyed off the satchel but said nothing about it.

'I swear. The last I saw her, we were sitting in the grass, and she made no comment about wanting to leave, or wanting her life to change, at all.' Qinn sighed, reassuring the brothers with a sympathetic smile. 'She was so content with everything in that moment.'

Yarall scuffed the ground with his right foot. 'You will have to convince her father,' he said, with such emphasis on *her*. There was no doubt that Yarall was his child too—the same frame, only shorter, the same eyes, the same penchant for women. A year ago, it was thought he would marry, until the rumour was flipped entirely. His would-be bride was marrying an Mivigge man, which startled everyone. What was he doing this far north?

'We are starting searches in the woods,' he continued, glancing off into the direction of the wood that separated Mön Fex from Osceemma. 'One of the crones suggested someone begin the journey to the crown seat, as if the mighty lord would give one grievance about a missing daughter.' It was true, unfortunately, and Qinn knew it. The kingdom was quite familiar with the ruling on their king, bound and weighed down upon by his actions in the most recent act of war. They were lucky, in Mön Fex and beyond, to not witness any skirmish on their own grounds. That crown seat seemed forever changed. Qinn shuddered at the thought.

‘Where you need me, I will be there on foot, searching for her,’ Qinn said.

He saw himself frantic in the woods. He would become a sort of joke, searching high and low, tearing off the bark of trees, hurting himself to unhurt her. It was a sort of cruelty on his heart to imagine, and to assume, that she, Orli, was harmed, and could be lost to him. Could be lost to her brothers, to her father. To Mön Fex, which he assumed had not loved her the way he had.

Qinn did not feel like the sort of person that could uncover real truths.

He felt helpless otherwise.

He did not want to occupy a home that was refigured with someone else in mind, someone that could not be there for it. He felt it, then, swiftly enter his heart that reoccurring thought: believe she is alive, that she is alright.

He knew he had to uncover why no one claimed to have seen her in two days.

The miller was an unreliable father, it was known knowledge in the village of Mön Fex. He adored his children, for their existence, but he raised them only to a degree. It was understood why he would oftentimes forget to see his children—a few of them lived on their own or cared only for themselves (in the practical sense, not the loving sense). Yet the brothers would have come in contact with Orli in two days. They adored her, cooked for her, wanted everything to remain in the order that it was unless the change revolved around them. Qinn seemed certain of it, from the way she talked about them. Especially that last morning he spent with her.

He persevered. It would not be the last I see of her, he thought, having departed from the two brothers after a fairly typical end to the conversation.

Three of the ten brothers had approached him already.

He started to construct a little list in his head, trying to remember names pinned to faces, stumbling on a few at first. Was he crafting a sort of suspect list, or was he hoping to rule them all out, realise it was true, she had fled to Osceemma instead? There was always a possibility she was securing passage on a boat, although from that seaside town she would likely just be setting sail for a fishing venture.

He took a blank envelope from Aarburd’s satchel and leaned against the outside wall of the mail office. At first, there was remembering all their names, then second figuring out the order in which they were born. His dearest Orli was somewhere near the bottom, but she was not a suspect.

Qinn felt, if anything, he would more easily be able to identify them.

There would always be a chance one of them would let slip something about those two days, some truth about what happened to her. *Where have you gone?* His day was exhausting him already.

On the back of the blank envelope—assuming it was entirely some error on Aarburd’s part that it was left there—Qinn wrote a list of ten names.

Zan

Mannew

Ke’el

Tovmachin

Yarall

Nidmeon

Lehnn Georg

Havaak

Crawleis

Floy

375

codename: *There Are Men Who Want Me*

A shapeshifter engages in salacious affairs with several wealthy or important men, all of whom he is certain are under the impression he is as depicted – a gorgeous dark-haired woman with a scarred backstory and a fall from grace. Things become complicated when one of the men—a politician gaining momentum—leaves clues to knowing the real, male identity of his lover.

You close your eyes for a moment, listening to his breathing matched with your own. There are sounds of the ocean, yet you are far, far away from it. The last time you visited the shoreline of the sea you were eighteen, digging your toes into the sand and avoiding uncomfortable glances from your father, who had plenty of reasons to dislike you. For one, you were fooling around with an old friend of his, although he could not have known, nor could your father's old friend. In an apartment in the city that is poorly furnished and newly renovated, you lie awake with your head upon the hairy chest of another man. He is in his late thirties. He has tattoos scattered in strange places on his body—there is a chameleon on his pinkie, the head of a bull on the underside of his knee, and a mathematical equation printed near his scrotum.

This is not the sort of romantic scene that perhaps you are conditioned to want, to lust after. The last time you were lying with a man and it was for the pure comfort and beauty of the moment was when you were twenty and you dated a boy a year older than you were. He was sweet. You guess he must have been attractive enough, although the image plastered in your mind of him is far less defined and detailed than any other man's. This apartment is something you have rented out specifically to pretend it is your own. There are flourishes that make it seem lived-in, that make it seem like you had an influence in the redesign and in all the current furnishings, for which there are not too many. Most of the men seem at ease to see an apartment that pales in comparison to their own. They are probably envious a woman like yourself could choose to live like a man wishes he could—simple paint colours, the bare necessities scattered around the place, a television larger than the dining room table. You think you must be doing a fantastic job fooling these men into thinking you are a woman, then.

Rourke sits at the kitchen bench, spotlighted by an overhead bulb. He's in his late twenties. His apartment is bare bones—it was cheap on the market, and a bargain of a deal considering he's on the twentieth floor of the building and in the heart of the urban sprawl. There was a hole in the bedroom wall the size of both of his fists nestled against each other, and he paid some online stranger to fix it for an incredibly cheap price. Rourke sweetened the deal by pulling down his pants, flashing his asshole, and letting the internet random have sex with him up against that very wall.

It was something he expected from such a sleazy website called NaughtTAAB0.

He kept the traditional look for the hole-fixer. This boyish twenty-seven-year-old, living in the city, failing upwards and downwards on a passionate and passionless schedule. He washed his hair the night before. It hadn't been the first time he subjected himself to the website, and probably wouldn't be the last, but if you positioned yourself well to it, you could get quite an enjoyable experience out of a sweaty, likely-married man coming to your apartment far too horny on the doorbell ring. Rourke didn't give out his number afterwards.

Open on the laptop in front of him is a camming website. A few years ago he was a regular, in the old apartment he lived in on the outskirts of the city. It was a trashier place, with a front door that didn't always lock properly. He would work weird hours at a small e-magazine stall, where customers spent most of their time there scanning tiny cuboid barcodes for digital downloads. He made most of his money streaming live in nothing but his underwear, or often enough, completely nude. He was younger and more foolish back then—he remained completely himself on his central account, hiding only his name and his location. It was the thrill of men, usually much older men, getting off on the vanishing act of his inhibition.

He holds you in his arms, his beautiful, gorgeous, tragic, flawed and flaunted brunette darling for the evening. Sometimes it would be longer, often it was longer. One man in particular you have been seeing for a few years now, behind his wife's back. You see them in darling pictures on social media spreads and sometimes in the far back of the e-magazines you used to sell. He cups your breasts and whispers something dirty and skanky in your ear, like how your pussy tastes so much better than any pussy he has ever tasted before. He is in his mid-forties, and the sexy slutty talk he offers to the conversation is very rarely A-grade capital-L literature that would get nominated for any of the prestigious written-word awards. But he is fantastic in bed.

Your orgasms are strange. When you are female-presenting, it is oftentimes easier to just fake most of them. The men rarely check, or ask, 'did you cum, baby?' Most of the time he will look at you, a distractingly-pleased grin on his face, and assume you have enjoyed yourself just as much as he did. Because your dick is at that moment technically non-existent, there is no present worry your genitals will betray you.

Sometimes a man will be so impressive in the bedroom that faking it is unnecessary, and you will peel yourself back into the boy you are later that evening, in the deep hours between midnight and the rise of the sun, and think your cock leaked too, somehow. A sort of internal pleasuring, like an ejaculation from the void.

You are showering with the man in his mid-forties—he is 45 exactly, his birthday was two weeks earlier, you let him finger you underneath the dining table while you both ate the raw sushi you had prepared for dinner, like the good mistress you are. You made sure he never swapped hands and always ate with the chopsticks. In the shower, he leaves an imprint of his large left hand on your stomach. He seems to hold you in one position for a long time, as the soapy water pools at your feet and your shoulder blades burn under the scorching temperature of the overhead rain. Your shower in this apartment is a sacred escape. Yet presently you feel like a prisoner.

There is always an abundance of men on these sites, poised in front of the camera, on display like zoo animals, except much hornier. Thumbnails depict shirtless figures wearing thin black earpieces, or beefy dudes stroking their penises, or otherwise just an empty abyss known as the sofa. Sometimes, and Rourke knew it to be fairly commonplace, a user would leave his streaming view online and open while he went to piss in the toilet, slurp down half a bottle of water or alcohol, or simply just stare out at the horizon, feeling a little down on himself.

It can get a little exhausting, exposing yourself to a limitless audience.

Rourke scrolls through the most popular of offerings. Thin, white, barely-legal boys sitting naked beside one another, posed somewhat naturally in the screengrab. Dark-skinned older men sitting in high-backed chairs, exposing the tiny electronic toy plugged up their asshole. A few mixed-race couples having penetrative sex online, on candid camera. A beautiful trans-man wearing all white on a background reminiscent of an outdoor scene, a park or a field, a meadow, even. It startles Rourke a little, to think of the sorts of comments that have nevertheless persisted with transgender people. Sites like these are the worst for them.

He isn't completely horny. It sprung out the boredom, the thought to dive into the past like this. If he could find the old password for his account, he could boot back up, see if any of the users he

followed were still active. Users felt like the wrong word for the men, boys, guys, and dudes that did more than just lurk. Streamers felt too pedestrian—everyone that lacked the energy for the worst of the industry could resort to streaming. Lately there was a craving, an incessant penchant, for the types of streamers that rifled around in old-school media and simply reacted to it. Sometimes it was just facial expressions and knee-jerk reactions and expletives. Audiences loved it though.

A text message blinked across the screen of his phone and sharply reminded Rourke the days of exposing himself on the internet were well behind him. For five months, he has been fooling around with a married man who lives interstate. Fake, unceremonious nicknames are important and regulated. He tells Rourke—well, the dark-haired woman Rourke is impersonating—to call him only by Jaguar. Here, kitty kitty. There is something to be said about the sexual nature of big cat species names. Tiger, a lion in bed, leopard, cougar, he's a dirty stinking cheetah. Well, the spelling is different.

I'm coming to your neck of the woods in two weeks.

Rourke's phone number is encoded and jumbled when he allows these men to contact him through it. He isn't entirely certain of the process, but he paid a chunk of money to feel secure and protected, in a bubble of sorts. He doesn't need any of the men reverse-searching the phone number and finding out it belongs to a twenty-seven-year-old man with a seven-inch penis and a less compelling story than what he tells the lonely and the squirrely. He sought out this red-haired tech-dork who lived in an apartment the size of a richer person's closet, asked him for the best security his money could buy, and tried not to look too absent-minded about it. Rourke didn't have the brain for understanding it, but he had the brain for keeping himself anonymous. Hell, these dudes though he was a woman, who sometimes gave out her name as Anneke. Oftentimes however her name was Baby, Sweetheart, Girl, and he sort of preferred the unsettled pet name system. Baby could be anyone. Sweetheart could bend over and flash her pussy and moan and shrug him off when she needed to go to the bathroom.

Girl could tell him to fuck off.

Stop making me chase after you, he says, playfully darting around the apartment as you narrowly avoid stubbing your toes on a black coffee table. The table is positioned next to the sofa, a squat thing about half the height of the sofa. When you set down a drink upon it—in the company of men, it is always lemonade, clear and bubbly—you never forget the coaster. It would be such a waste if ring marks damaged something you paid very little for. The coasters you love at the moment are shiny blue-and-white, they look like vinyl records that have been painted and sheened. You try to imagine the sort of music they would play. Spinning on discs, round and round. Something light, airy, distracting. His mitts are on your waist and you let out a squeal, to show him it's almost frightening that he's caught up to you. Fun and games. It's fun and games.

Some of the men you fool around with love pretending it is the beginnings of a relationship. They will treat you like a princess, because they know it has been a few years since you had the money to really treat yourself (a lie). This rich tapestry you have created for yourself includes coming from a well-enough-off family, who still live down south, and assumedly as uncomfortably as you do. If they were well-off still, it would make no logical sense why you remained in the crummy city, a place where dreams were not feasibly made. You could always craft an excuse like that or say something cheesy about how if you were anywhere else, you would not be here. He grins at you. His smile is disarming.

When he is asleep, you cup your breasts. Her breasts. Things begin to become personal with these men that crave your attention, and a truthful element of this attention is that a beautiful yet just human enough woman is the one presenting it. This is heterosexuality and you are not admired for your own beauty, unlike how the past had presented itself. Cameras and black leather chairs and comments like *let me swallow your cum baby. Let me choke you.* Wholesome stuff.

Can I drive to your city and meet you? Pls.

You imagine the reaction he would have if he awoke in the middle of the night, to go piss in the toilet bowl, maybe miss a little and stain the tiles, and there you are. There he is. Peeling off the skin while he snores softly, the surprise would be startling, understandably. You are not the only shapeshifter in the world, at least. Although genetically it is unusual, and rare, and completely hereditary. If people were unsure of trusting one another beforehand...

You stroke the hair that falls upon his forehead. If this was his apartment, you would slink out down the fire escape staircase—if it were easily-accessible, as some buildings have started ‘accidentally’ blocking them off—and get a drink from a local bar.

You are simply too worried he will steal those coasters.

He closes out of all the tabs after jerking off, and ejaculating to, a user probably also in his late twenties. The naked man had been lounging in bed, splayed out, with a subtle horniness to him. He was not animalistic, not coarse and rough and bruising his penis with the speed for which some men like to jerk themselves off. He had been personable, almost. His face always remained in frame.

After cleaning himself up with a ten-minute shower, Rourke stands in front of the bathroom mirror, smoothing out the matted wet of his hair. He got distracted in the shower, let the water soak his body as he pressed his butt against the cool tiles. He recognised he was almost punishing himself.

He has nowhere to be today. The semi-schedule that lingers in his brain consists of expelling some horny energy, check, cleaning the apartment, and going out to fetch a prescription. The vacuum is charging in the hall closet. He runs a hand from his neck to his stomach, making a brief detour to his right nipple. Imagine if one of those men wanted to fuck me, he thinks, flicking his nipple.

Rourke vacuums the apartment frequently, often uncertain when the next gentleman caller will send him a message asking if he’s free in the evening. Even late at night, he worries the apartment smells and acts like it is owned by a man. He starts to worry there are cum stains, his cum stains, burning into the carpet. There’s something feminine and sweetening about a clean apartment, and when Rourke flops down on the queen-sized bed after furiously vacuuming the carpeted floors, he moans out more boisterously than he ever does when a man penetrates him with an eight- or nine-inch penis.

The neighbours must think I’m such a freak, he thinks, opening the hall closet door.

It’s interesting to contemplate the neighbours, though. The building is not known for families or the older generations—it is affordable, standard, and reasonable enough, but the storefronts on the first floor are owned by a sex shop, a French café that leaked the details of an affair between a high-profile tennis player and the babysitter that looked after his children, and an e-magazine stall that also sells marijuana. There are also regularly homeless people camping underneath the flimsy sails the colour of unripened oranges. Rourke likes to believe the ambience turns on the men that come to visit him. Sometimes they will wander into his apartment carrying a little golden bag from the sex shop, or otherwise reach into their carry bags with the alluring promise of showing Anneke a smutty digital copy of whichever celebrities’ nudes are now circulating, whether uncomfortably leaked or not.

He whizzes the rectangular machine around the living room floor, taking brief interludes to dance to the low-volume music playing out of his laptop. For a few weeks he contemplated an automated

vacuum, a modest toything robot that charts a course across the floor while he busies himself scrubbing the tiles in the bathroom. Rourke started to worry the thing would constantly get stuck on the black coffee table, or in the corner of the room, or it would try to figure out a way to commit suicide, somehow.

The music is soothing, quiet enough to not irritate the downstairs neighbour, who stuck a barcode underneath his door one morning that linked to a digital download with the words *knock off the racket* bolded on a grey background. It was a Sunday morning, Rourke had just had sex the night before with a man in his fifties, a greying businessman-type who likes to watch true crime television in bed after he orgasms. With the apartment fresh to himself, Rourke set to capitalise on how incredible his skin felt. He felt like every single blemish had vanished overnight and he was as beautiful and jaw-dropping as Anneke is. It felt impossible, though. Anneke was modelled after a woman from an e-magazine from the stall he once worked for. She had been posing for an article on the dangers of artificially-designing video games. The intention of the article was to have this model, a blank canvas for the photographer, to appear both entirely humanistic, entirely personable and genuine, and yet also as if she stepped right out of a video game console from, say, the early 2020s. The industry has evolved greatly in twenty years.

Anneke evolved, too. He moulded her face, changed her hairstyle, created a voice and the way she moved and walked. She was created to be beautiful but not threatening. She is a perfect foil for the sorts of men that are searching out something organised, something with an intense sort of stealth, but also sex, sexy, high-class comfortable and messily-horny.

That morning he had woken up in her body, stripped out of it as soon as he was alone, and noticed absolutely no change in the way he spoke, the way he moved, and the way he existed. Rourke had stepped out of the video game screen, not the other way around.

His downstairs neighbour's little petty complaint was a rush-job in a free editorial software that automatically is installed on every personal computer. The font was basic. The background was selected to be grey for some inane reason, and Rourke scratched his head trying to understand why the man hadn't simply handwritten a message and slipped that underneath the door instead. Everyone always wants to use technology, to prove the necessity of its existence.

He keeps the music at a low, unless he plugs in the slim, white earphones. Destroy his eardrums, in time, but the more he can drown out the outside world, the better. Rourke pushes the head of the vacuum into the corner, bumping methodically into the plastering at the base of the wall. Everything freezes up and he sneezes into the sleeve of his shirt. It's almost an imitation—his head is the vacuum head, shoved into the corner between his arm and shoulder. He cleans a lot, too, for the dust build up. When he was little, his mother said *bless you* after every sneeze of his but blamed it most of the time on the dust collecting in his bedroom. Unless the weather was frightfully drab, of course. Then she blamed climate change.

Rourke flops down on the bed with a heavy sigh. After vacuuming, he went around the apartment with an old-fashioned sort of duster he bought off an online bidding website. It is in remarkable quality, unused when he bought it. Now it inevitably accrues a peacock-frill of dust that he cleans out semi-regularly. He could always tell any of the men he sees that he is the live-in maid if he happened to open the door for one of them looking the way he is, looking like Rourke. Dust, dust.

It is late afternoon, with the chemist a few blocks away closing in an hour or two. The walk takes ten minutes, fifteen if he makes a scenic detour through a small park that seems artificial the closer you glance at it. He always takes the scenic route; he never closely examines the strands of grass, or the flower petals. The cushiony squish of the bed soothes him into a lull. He could reasonably stay here for the rest of the afternoon, let the golden haze pour down on him. Let the walls get a good snapshot of how languid Rourke the human man can be.

He buzzes the elevator button for *down* and lingers in the dim hallway, his feet sore. A neighbour from down the hall exits their apartment, keeps their head down, and walks off in the opposite direction to the elevator. The hallway ends in a dead end, but there are a handful of apartments scattered in the corner. He could be visiting a friend or looking for sex. People in apartment buildings like these are more disposed to leaving their apartment doors unlocked.

The elevator zips down a floor and then freezes in place, doors opening for the downstairs neighbour that once complained about the music. Rourke believes the music was never even that loud to begin with, but he politely smiles as the man in his thirties sidles up beside him in the cramped little box. Their shoulders aren't touching or anything, at least. But there isn't an ambling amount of room in the elevator, either. Rourke hopes for no conversation, no slight mention of how the weather has been, or something obscene and concerning from the news on the television.

The downstairs neighbour, Peter, sighs and reaches for his phone in the back pocket of his old-fashioned jeans. 'I should apologise for all the complaints I've been making over the last year,' he says, scrolling down a list of names on his phone. He reaches the name *Rourke* and double-clicks it, opening an internal folder littered with various QR codes. Each code is annotated.

'I've been, uh, seeing a new therapist, who suggested I was taking out too much of my anger on the people around me.' Peter taps on one of the codes and the bolded letters of *KNOCK OFF THE RACKET* covered the screen like the cut-out letters of a ransom note. It sends a shiver down Rourke's spine. When he first saw the note, he thought someone had been overhearing every single time he had sex with the men...and the thought raced through his head of every man, every single time he had sex in the few months beforehand, and the overdramatic sounds that he must have been making to elaborate on his disguise. He kept a password-protected file on his laptop with the names—real or fake, not that he minded—of the men he was currently fooling around with. If he remembered correctly, it was four.

'Sorry, sorry, about the noise one...sometimes I take naps during the day, and I like to blame everyone else for not keeping it down for me. You're probably having a fantastic time, dancing around naked I bet.' Peter adjusts his grip on his phone and deletes the note, angling the act for Rourke to see. The mention of Rourke potentially being naked didn't come across creepy or awkward, but not flirtatious either. It is true Peter has complained a handful of times before. His complaints would read, here and there, a little sexually-frustrated.

Rourke knows a thing or two about sexual frustration.

Peter runs through a few of the other things on his list, apologising without overdoing it. He never begged for forgiveness, never fell to his knees in shame. He doesn't seem ashamed, not really. There is honesty to his voice. The elevator dings open its doors and Rourke is quick to step out into the lobby of the apartment building, smiling briefly at his downstairs neighbour. Peter paces behind him, but never hastens his walk to catch up. A breath. The sun slaps Rourke in the face.

...

Overhead, the sky is thin of clouds. Loose, vacuuming-out threads of fairy floss swim around a blue backdrop, and Rourke steps off the pavement to cross the street. The blocky, claret man flashes back at him, pulling up his trousers. In a sense, he thinks, green is a symbol for nudity. He starts to think if a person took a glance into his mind right now they would startle at how strange and convoluted it is.

He is one street-crossing away from the nature strip. Nature strip is an accurate description of it, an elongated patch of grass that attempts, to a degree, to keep the air quality stable in this part of the city. Rourke has never felt himself clutch at his throat for air, unless there's a cock deep inside of it.

Deepthroating is one of Anneke's specialities, however. She likes to tell men that she sucked a lot of nine-inch penis in high school, when she should have been studying biology (the subject) and keeping her grades higher than her tits. Men like to hear things like that. The gross sort of talk that makes them feel superior. Of course, Anneke is no dumb brunette. There is a balance to things.

Real peace exists somewhere in the city. Little ladybirds sometimes land on your outstretched hand in the garden, if you can call it a garden. The trees throw shade, and some late afternoons Rourke will collapse down underneath one of them, distracting his eyes. The shade offers him some peace, until he scrolls down his newsfeed and comes across some tidbit of news to throw him off-balance.

Keeping his head down, Rourke cuts through the park towards the chemist. There is barely a wind—the day is cool, but not close to cold. Seasonal temperatures are like an unsure review for a restaurant only visited once. Hesitant. Behind sunglasses, Rourke is in his own world. He has to remember to call his mother, his true mother, not the AI-created mother for the woman he pretends to be for the thrill of other men.

Speaking of other men...

He freezes, or at least his face does, determined to not draw any attention to himself if he stopped in his tracks on the path. The park is quiet, at least—other pavements are busier, including the one parallel to the park, which runs in front of a metropolitan supermarket, an out-of-business dentist, and an accident lawyer's office, amongst other things. Ahead on the path is a man he has affectionately called *babe* more than he might be willing to admit. Jaguar. His real name is Anson. Unlike many of the other men Rourke has frequent affairs with, Anson struggled to keep his name a secret early in their relationship. He's a very public-facing man, although of course an affair with a very sex-positive young woman in a barely-furnished apartment is something he keeps firmly off the books. Anson texted Rourke earlier that afternoon...

I'm coming to your neck of the woods in two weeks.

It reverberates like a ripple across a pond.

*why the fuck is he here already
why would he say 'two weeks'*

It makes a certain sense. Rourke figures there are plenty of reasons someone of his standing—Anson is a political man, rising in rank as political men do, not that he cares much for their position, just their attention and their money—to be in the city, without needing, or wanting, to see him. Some frightened part of him triggers, some thought that Anson might recognise him, might notice some part of him that is inherently Anneke...and what, be frightened himself, into thinking that a cover could be blown if the two are seen anywhere near each other? There is still space between them, and Anson turns, and Rourke realises he is on the phone, using an earpiece to speak with someone on the other end. Someone important, or otherwise his wife.

Rourke rushes off the path underneath the shade of a tree.

The funny thing about language is that you want to use it even when you cannot. Your voice begs to form nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, full, complete sentences. Instead, all you hear is chirp chirp. Your body is not the imperfection of a twenty-something woman; you are a bird. You adjust to the wings, again. It's been a few years since you've shapeshifted into a bird, and yet the comfort overtakes you, overwhelms you, almost immediately. *Chirp*. You flap

your wings and navigate upwards, perching on a branch. The wood of the tree branch does feel a little unrealistic, although it could be the bird feet. You...pause. Your heartbeat slows. All this, to avoid a man that you cannot be certain would recognise you in the slightest. You make a series of chirps that could be interpreted as a mantra, of sorts. A calming-down. Bird eyes take this strange new world in. This strange new-perspective world. Jaguar wanders past. You try to distract yourself by picturing him naked, although your brain wanders and instead you find yourself picturing him in bird-form, with an enlarged bird-penis. Anson, the man, is gorgeous. You think of that cringe one-liner from those old movies...*I hate to see you leave, but I love to see you go*. From the branch, you watch him disappear across the street, into the bustle of the city. Night-time in bed, with your head on his shoulder, dark hair draped over white sheets. Telling him, Anson, all of the beautiful sexual things that you would do with him until the very end of time. Your devotion. You are devoted to being an island for him, which makes keeping Rourke a secret paramount. You are not Rourke, you cannot be Rourke...not around him, you cannot be Rourke around him. For now you are a bird.

You are Rourke. Under the surface of all of these disguises, there is this other person you cannot fully acknowledge when you are different. When your wings do flutter, when a man stares at your breasts...you breathe strangely. The shape of your breathing is new. Another bird hovers around the tree, taking an interest in you. Friend, or foe?

There is peril in your existence, and yet you find the loopholes.

No matter how close a man could come to unravelling you, you will always want to undress yourself, slip under the covers with him, and pretend your multiple identities can live in harmony. They must. Your beak gapes open. You're hungry.

You are a bird.

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codename: Dawn

Dawn and her two children, George and Elias, are moving further inland to a rundown farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. Bearing some of the load, the family members of the three are caught in uncertainty and decide to turn around and drive back to the nearest town to await on the keys to unlock the house, which are in Dawn's possession. But when she isn't answering any calls, hours on end, nothing could look more inviting than the old farmhouse that to them, even from a distance, seems like so obviously a haunted house that they worry has already swallowed Dawn and the children whole.

1

Out in the country, you can hear yourself think real clearly.

Tamara rolled down the window further and let a fly buzz around her ear. It was humid and dry, and beads of sweat were running down her forehead. The car's air-conditioning worked but made an awful noise, so Greg switched it off and ignored complaints. A cool breeze whistled every so often. In the backseat, a stuffed beagle lazed with its head poking into Tyson's thigh. The eleven-year-old hardly seemed to mind. He was so distracted by the notepad he always seemed to carry around. Tamara had bought him a series of notebooks for his birthday, and she guessed he started with this one, or loved it, or something.

'Is Dawn there then?' Greg spoke, laxing one hand off the steering wheel to scratch himself.

Tamara didn't even flinch. 'I couldn't get her,' she said. She had tried Dawn three times—the first, it went straight to voice mail. The other two times it rang on and on, and then out. Nothing, nobody, she's not home. She wasn't answering the phone.

'How long did you wait between trying?' It seemed to her like he didn't think they were in the same car anymore. She was seated right there beside him, unless he had the worst blind spot known to man.

Tamara sighed, checking her phone. 'I waited like ten minutes each time, alright?' They had been driving for two hours, at least, probably two and a half hours all up. They knew the name of the town Dawn was moving to, some backwater place in the middle of nowhere with shocking phone reception and very little for the kids to do. *They're kids, for god's sake, they can play outside*, Dawn's mother had mused when the family was all together for dinner a few weeks back.

So far, the reception was fine. That wasn't the issue.

'Is she ignoring you then?'

'Is that what your sister does? Leave people waiting?'

Greg scratched near his eye. There wasn't anyone around on the road, and he didn't fear he would swerve off it and kill somebody. Or kill them, by crashing into some cumbersome eucalyptus tree. Tamara searched around for a gargantuan sort of eucalypt, but her point fell a little short.

'She'll have a good reason for not calling back.' It all pieced together for him, slowly but surely. 'She's already there, I'd say. Already knee-deep in unpacking and the phone's not even ringing and the boys are in the...yard?'

Yes, the place has a yard, she wanted to retort, examining the hesitation on his face. George and Elias have always had the yard, the specific place for them behind the house, sometimes in front of it too. Whether or not they seemed to enjoy possessing it was something Bella, Dawn and Greg's mother, always seemed to ponder. *And yet they play in your yard when they visit for a week and a half*, Dawn would say, with that half smirk that kept other people's reactions in check. Well, a little, at least.

Greg drove on. It was so endless and not at all enduring, and Tamara wanted some form of a pause, be it a surprise truck stop or for the journey to be at its end sooner than it actually would be. The radio needed to be louder, she thought, fiddling with the knob. In the backseat, Tyson was fervently writing something down in his notebook. Tamara glanced up into the rearview mirror at the sound of his voice, a soft, almost deranged muttering that began with a repetitious *no no no no no*.

‘Everything okay back there?’ She recognised immediately she sounded like the sort of mother she rejected when she first found out she was pregnant with him. So cardboard and lifeless and 1950s.

Tyson didn’t react at first, busy finishing off the sentence he was writing. His handwriting was so boyish and messy, and she never dared touch that notebook. But she could always read his homework just fine, so the curiosity lingered. ‘Tyson?’ She’d changed pitch, changed tone, tried to sound less frazzled by the weather, and the nowhere-ness, and the phone that didn’t ring. He glanced away from the page as Tamara twisted in her seat toward him.

‘I’m writing a story,’ he said, his voice no longer out-of-character either. ‘It’s keeping me distracted, I just thought of something really good to write down.’ He held up the notepad towards the front seat to show his pages of words, stringing line by line to form a story of sorts, although from her awkward turned position she couldn’t make out more than a few words. He wrote *barnacle* a couple times in one paragraph. He must love the word. *Uncle. Happy.* One of the characters must’ve been someone named *Jack*. Tyson looked proud of his work, and Tamara just smiled, long enough that she hoped the point really did get across.

But the heat was draining a lot of energy out of her.

The heat, and this road trip in general.

Dawn had bought a new house. *She could’ve bought a damn zoo*, Tamara had joked. She was splayed out on the sofa then, her head in Greg’s lap. Apparently his sister had called him frantically that afternoon with the news. Some modest bargain of a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, but *oh yeah, she won’t be doing any farming*. Tamara had wanted to burst out into a loud cackle, but that felt disrespectful with him right there. She cared for Dawn. She wanted *happiness* for her sister-in-law, but gosh, she thought, Dawn made it difficult for herself.

Tamara and Greg had offered to help with the move, but foolishly, neither of them had really searched up how exhaustingly tedious the trip would be.

‘How many bedrooms is the place?’

‘Three?’ Greg said, with a tilt of the head. ‘It came pre-furnished, but for a nowhere sort of place, that’s not lavish or nothing.’ It made her think of the pictures you’d see for real estate agency postings. Couches that you could bounce on and crash through the ceiling from. So cushiony, my gosh. Everything was polished to perfection, even the camera lens. Dawn’s place, then, would be *not that*.

That would be quaint.

Yes.

Tamara didn’t completely hate it. If anything, it suited Dawn, and it was true she needed the escape. The break. She was the sort that could comfortably move into the sticks and get a job in town and make do with her savings and a little light scrimping. The kids would be *alright*. The sun will shine down on them, give them tans and tomato sunburns, and worst case, she thought, we can leave Tyson there with them for some extra company.

She was kidding, of course.

Another glance in the rearview and her son was fine, just fine. Maybe he was making up an idiosyncratic tale about an old man uncle from under the sea, a Jack fellow, and his quest to be happier.

She was called in once to the school guidance counsellor’s office.

Tyson’s a great kid, it had begun with, which felt like code for: *don’t take this the wrong way and think we’re saying he’s being parented terribly*. Tamara had made as if to brush invisible crumbs off a pair of pants she only wore to work. They were stiff and ugly and a dark navy colour that from a distance seemed entirely void of personality. Just one blob of blue, but Greg said they made her look very professional. Oh, how horny he could get with some navy-blue foreplay.

Tyson is a great kid. The guidance counsellor had just noticed a few things, that was all.

It threw her off balance to think about these things right then, but it was so incredibly easy to get distracted. What was there to look at, kangaroo shit?

The road meandered onwards, still, and Tamara tried to think about logical things. There was no use longing for anything that came before, or anything that would come...

Her phone's mapping app told her she was currently plodding along somewhere near Killmut.

What the hell is a Killmut.

Get me out of this damned car already.

Greg was always so stoic when he drove. A man of cars, well, almost. From the other direction came a white something-something, and Tamara peered through the tinted side window to glance at the driver. It was an older man, although probably only ten to fifteen years older than Greg was. Both men seemed so at ease on the road, whereas she felt if one awkward change happened while she was driving, it could spell complete disaster. Maybe she'd careen off the edge of a cliff if a possum ran out onto the road, or even the slowest of echidnas. She'd been lucky nothing had run out in front of her just yet.

'Greg, fuck!' Her voice leapt out of her mouth so abruptly and sharply, because he'd taken a turn without much warning at all. Sure, he was comfortable always on the road, but it didn't always translate when she was distracted thinking about... whatever she was thinking about.

In the middle of the road ahead, a woman was folding damp clothes.

'Is she going to move, do you think?'

Greg turned his head for a moment, giving his wife a look that she read as "*well I'm not going to hit her*". Tamara would've already been slamming on the breaks, but Greg merely slowed down and rolled towards her. Patience. The woman was of a similar skin tone to Tamara—she wasn't freckled-white like Greg and Tyson were. Her hair was in a loose ponytail that fell down her back. She looked young, maybe in her early twenties, and as the car inched toward her, she finally glanced up. Her nose was bleeding. Droplets fell onto the damp clothing. She exhaled, like it was some great relief.

'She needs help,' Tyson said from the backseat.

'She needs to get out of the middle of the road,' Greg replied to his son, both hands gripped firmly to the steering wheel.

'What if you asked her nicely?'

His father slammed on the breaks and both parents whipped around to greet their son. It was not a malicious sort of stare—really, it seemed more that the parents needed an excuse to stop staring ahead at a woman wringing out clothes in the middle of the road. His response was a good distraction, that's all.

'Just stay in the car, I'll go talk to her,' Greg said.

Tamara noticed how quiet she had gotten, but the noticing meant she had nothing to say. She had no quippy response for her son, no reason to follow her husband out of the car, and nothing surprising to blurt out to make herself feel any less nauseous. A stagnant car was nice. That was enough.

When Tamara and Greg turned back towards the road ahead, there was no one there.

The woman had vanished, or bolted into the surrounding bush.

But Tyson hadn't taken his eyes off her.

'She ran into the bush, she got off the road, it doesn't matter.' They were parked at the side of the road, because the boys needed to pee. Tamara was still in the car, leaning on the windowsill. 'Sure, your son thinks she just blipped out of existence, but we were half in the way, all it would take is for him to blink and her to duck behind my head and the illusion would be there.' She was staring at her husband's bare ass, not that he needed to pull his pants right down. He liked the humour of it, she thought. Tyson, on the other hand, had wandered a little to the left so he could have some privacy.

‘Are there houses near here?’

‘I guess so,’ she said, turning her attention to her phone. Reception was shot by now. Nothing showed on the digital map, and the pair were so modern and techno-focused they didn’t own anything physical, anything hardcover or paperback. Something they could’ve held and be comforted by.

‘We’re almost there,’ she lied, which was pointless. He was driving.

With his pants pulled back up, Greg had two hands on the steering wheel again, and after ten minutes, the woman in the middle of the road was forgotten about. Well, no one mentioned her, so that was close enough to it.

‘Is she going to be alright out here by herself?’ Tamara glanced up from the word search she was filling in with a ballpoint pen. ‘Your sister, I mean.’

‘She’s got George and Elias,’ Greg said.

‘Her children, yes, but it’s not like she can have the same conversations she’d mull over with you, or Bella, with them. What do they know about the shit she’s been through, or going through?’

Greg didn’t say much for a while. She figured something she said had gotten to him, but of course it had. Had anyone even said anything to Dawn about disappearing into the bush for a cheap house and an escape route?

‘People in towns like these are so tight-knit, or whatever the word is,’ he said, as the car passed a squat little building the colour of the dirt. It had an open archway instead of a door—it looked more like a bus shelter than anything else. There were a couple metal benches along the far wall, but no one was sitting on them, or waiting near them. How often was a bus trudging along in this direction anyway? The shelter was a miserable representation of the town, as the very first structure they noticed as they rolled into it. There were other buildings, other establishments. A two-storey building with an old-timey wrap-around porch on both levels seemed to double as both a bar and a hotel.

‘This is it then?’ Greg spoke, as he slowed the car down. His tone was strange. Tamara thought that surely he knew where they were, because she definitely didn’t. Middle of fucking nowhere.

‘Now I need to pee,’ she said, but it wasn’t as if she spotted a fast-food place or a public toilet block easily. There was a general store of the corner, but was it likely to have a toilet? *Piss on the side of the road like the rest of us*, she expected her husband to blurt out jokingly. They could have strung up a curtain in the empty gap at the front of the bus shelter thing and made do there. She shuddered at the thought of it.

So they pulled over, again, because of the human bladder.

At first, she thought it were a ghost town. No one was outside in the street, or lingering in the window, curious at the new arrivals very clearly from the city. Or close enough to, really, because they were suburb folk, Tamara and her husband and their kid. But it wasn’t long before a short-haired woman shoved open the door to the general store and made as if to approach them, then passed by with a head nod and a quaint smile. Nothing strange about that, then.

‘I’m sweaty,’ Tyson blurted out, wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt. They had all stepped out of the car, to make sure they found a toilet for Tamara and to do some exploring, although it was entirely possible they wouldn’t find much in this town. Greg looked both ways before crossing the road, and it looked unnecessary, and humorous, to his wife. Overly cautious for the blindest strip of road. Maybe he was still hung up on that woman wandering into the middle of the road and just...standing there, drying her laundry.

They were crossing for the tavern-bar-hotel, which seemed like the most obvious of spots for a toilet that wouldn’t require them to go too far out of their way. They could buy a share of hot chips if the old, bald proprietor said something along the lines of *only paying customers can use the dunny*.

There was nothing too extravagant about the place. Greg entered first, palming the wooden door, and they were all immediately greeted by a sort of sawdust smell, sloshing around with beer by the tap and barbeque sauce, probably.

‘I could go for something to eat actually,’ Tamara said, unzipping her purse to draw out her phone again. She kept her credit card in the back of her phone, for ease, and because she loved the design of the black and gold case. Her husband turned his head to glare at her. *Toilet first*, she knew he was saying, just by the look. I haven’t forgotten my bladder, she wanted to argue back to him.

A bald, old man did in fact loom behind the bar, although he seemed polite and friendly enough as the welcoming face to the tavern. ‘Where are you folks supposed to be?’ He said, which caught them off-guard. His tone had been hearty and light, though, so Tyson was the only one who stepped back a little hesitantly.

‘We were just after a toilet.’

‘My sister’s moved out this way, we’re just passing through.’

‘You both sound like you’re out of that movie, from the 70s,’ the older man said, setting a palm down on the benchtop. ‘Toilet is down that way, you can’t miss it.’ With his right arm, he pointed left, past a scattering of wooden tables and chairs and a very retro jukebox that had certainly seen better days. Tamara gave her husband one last glance before weaving her way toward a clearly marked restroom, underneath a sign that read *Ladies*.

The bathroom smelled like bottled scent. Someone had been in there recently and emptied half of the air freshener in the place, which to Tamara felt like an environmental waste, but she clenched her nose—which wasn’t all that successful without using her fingers—and beelined for a stall.

The silence was a little unnerving.

Maybe Dawn would regret this in a month. A month of being isolated and seeing the same faces over and over again. A conversation fiddled its way into the empty space that floated above Tamara’s head in the bathroom. It was a few nights after a relationship had derailed—Dawn liked to attempt some sort of navigation of the dating pool, but it seemed sure the move would keep her from caving for some of the lousy men that, well, existed, really.

‘I introduced him to the kids, which feels like such a silly idea now.’ Dawn had said, flinging an arm out to wander towards a glass of rosé. Fingers brush against the rim. ‘They don’t need to know about him, or about any man, but then I feel like a flirting teenager, sneaking men in the house when they’re asleep.’ She had successfully manoeuvred the wine glass to her lips without taking her attention off Tamara, which was strangely impressive. Her face was all scrunched up, conflicted.

‘So they meet a man sometimes,’ Tamara said, rustling around in a packet of honey soy chicken chips, ‘so what? That’s not going to scar them for the rest of their lives.’

‘I always, and it’s so stupid, I always worry I’m just not enough parent for them.’

Tamara wandered out of the restroom to see her two boys sat at the bar, digging into a plate of hot chips, certainly a larger serving than the place probably served on the regular.

‘Impatient boys,’ she said, plopping herself down beside her son. She took a chip from the plate and snaked it into her mouth, as if she were teasing him, taunting him, breaking down some invisible wall that had risen while she was on the toilet. He chuckled and for a moment, the three were comfortable. It was an entirely unfamiliar environment—sure, pubs and taverns aren’t, Greg loves a good chicken parmigiana—but this town, they hadn’t adjusted until this very moment.

The comfort would be brief.

Greg’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He was chewing on a chip as he dug it out and glanced at the name plastered on the screen. ‘I guess we’ve got enough service,’ he said, pretending he understood

how cell towers worked. It was Dawn. 'Finally,' he muttered, answering the call and holding the phone to his ear.

At first, there was static. He couldn't hear his sister or make out the words if she was talking. His face was all screwed up and confused, and he whispered to Tamara, 'Bad reception', before he flicked his head towards the door, completely puzzled. Nothing. He stood up, moved towards the door, or, really, one of the glass windows that faced out on the empty street.

Tamara was staring at the back of his head when the kite flung itself into the glass.

'Fuck!' she let out, the bird thrashing its wings against the window.

Greg stood there, frozen from shock. The kite, undamaged, unharmed, cocked its head to one side and lowered itself down to the porch of the bar. Inquisitive creature, arrogant creature. None of them had ever seen such a bird up close before. A bird of prey, beautifully taloned and ravenous.

'Sir,' Greg screeched out, calling for the barman, who was nowhere to be seen. 'If someone tells me this is completely ordinary out here, I'll...yeah, I don't know what I'll do, I just hope this bird doesn't try and claw us when we leave.'

Tamara peered around the bar. There was a door off to the side, a deep green colour, although it had clearly faded over the years from the colour it would have been painted. He could have slipped through there. Her husband and son had been far too distracted by the chips, by their salivating mouths and their insatiable tongues. You're drooling, she wanted to say.

'Can I still finish the chips though?' Tyson said, before scoffing two into his mouth.

'Do humans just up and vanish?' she said, inching towards the fading-green door. Her husband had convinced her a knock on the door might do more good than all the shouting. He had convinced himself too, lowering his voice, modulating his pitch. One would think everything should be the man doing the brave, potentially life-threatening thing, but at that very moment no one sensed true danger, besides the kite looking eager for a meal outside the door. It had, at this point, ceased the staring and the glaring. It was perched on the railing of the porch, but it still felt entirely out of place for a bird of prey to be so calmly below eye-level for the average human.

Tyson was captivated by it. Well, he was for a few minutes. He watched the bird with a strange fascination, especially since the bowl of chips was now bare and he had wiped his fingers on a napkin.

Tamara knocked on the door. 'Anyone home?' She sung out, comically. She turned around and glanced at her husband with a sort of expression that read, *this is so dumb, I think we can just leave, really?* It wasn't that she believed the bird would attack her on sight anyway, that was pure fantasy. Deranged anxiety, maybe. She sighed. 'I mean, we can ask for directions at least,' she whispered under her breath, walking back to stand beside her husband. He hadn't moved much since the scare at the window. They stood there making awkward, uncomfortable eye-contact for a moment too long, until Tyson's voice cut through the air.

'It flew away,' he said, grinning.

The bald barman shoved the door behind the bar open and stepped into the pub, whistling. 'I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you upstairs, could I help with something?' He poured himself a glass mug of beer and took swigs of it as he wandered around the place, running a finger across the tables to check for dust. 'Did you want a room or anything, we've got vacancy.'

Tamara and Greg glanced at each other, almost sheepishly. They clung to their strength, what they called their strength anyhow—the sort of thing two grown adults who are married to each other have, how a twinkle from the eyes of the person that's supported them through thick and thin can bolster, can construct. She knew she could go for a powernap, or else at least lie there horizontally, staring at the ceiling. But it was only early afternoon, and they weren't lost. She knew that, at the heart of it. They hadn't made a wrong turn or anything. This was just a toilet break.

‘Is there somewhere here we can buy one of those clunky map books?’ Greg said, stepping forward towards the barman.

He paused, setting down the glass on the table beside him. ‘Store probably has something in the magazine section, I’m not much of a tourist destination myself.’

The store was poorly lit but well-stocked, and Tyson snaked down the aisles on the hunt for something. A snack, likely, despite the stomach satiated with potato all too recently. His parents wandered in search of the magazine section they were promised. There weren’t any other customers.

‘I thought you knew where we were going,’ she said, flipping through the pages of a magazine about travelling around northern Queensland. The pictures were beautiful—vistas and landscapes dotted with lush emerald-green trees, shorelines and oceans, a kangaroo or a koala or a crocodile here and there. She felt a little childish. It was the exhaustion, surely. The last few nights of sleep hadn’t been forgiving and calling them ‘nights of sleep’ felt a little too promising. When she was pregnant with Tyson, at least she could blame the baby—which she recognised wasn’t the best behaviour, and that in itself was a little childish too.

But hell, let me whine, she thought, turning the magazine over to glance at the backside of it. Most of the magazines in supermarkets back where she lived had glossy advertisements on the back, peanut butter muesli bars or butter commercials, something full of fat maybe, but also alluring for a certain lifestyle you could have, too. The back cover of this magazine was just an ad for an upcoming festival...until she looked at the date and realised they’d missed it by three weeks.

Tamara set the magazine back in the stand at the same moment her husband called from the next aisle over. ‘Do you want marshmallows?’

She hadn’t even noticed he’d walked off.

The book of maps was nestled in the glovebox, amongst an assortment of unrelated things, like a packet of gum, a few sheets of paper no one had read over in years, and a small, unused bottle of hand sanitizer. On the road again, and Tamara strangely was in anticipation to see her sister-in-law again. Her gaze kept lingering on the view out of the car window—it wasn’t much, sprawling bushland and the buildings had all disappeared, but it was like a hallucination. It numbed parts of her, especially her head.

‘Can you try Dawn again?’ Greg said from the driver’s seat beside her, and a chill ran down her spine. They’d completely forgotten about the phone call, or the attempt, really.

Tamara clutched her phone in her hand, pressing her thumb to the curve of the case. ‘Did you hear anything when she rang just before?’

‘All these questions,’ he said, releasing his foot off the accelerator.

‘You said, “bad reception”, and then hung up on her.’

‘It was static and incoherent mumbling and no, I didn’t hear a word, or else I would’ve been like, ‘Hi, sis, there’s bad reception out here in the middle of nowhere!’

‘Dad,’ Tyson said from the backseat.

At first, all they could see was dark red. Stomach-curdling red, and none of them wanted to openly admit they thought it was blood, a sea of blood the car was careening toward. Greg slammed on the brakes. There was no one around, no one to blare a horn at the sudden halting. Like a grotesque art display, three dead kangaroos blocked the road. One was more obviously a jack; the two jills were like extended limbs, their bodies limp and mangled.

‘What is it?’ Tyson asked, a worn-down expression on his face as he tried to get a better view of the carnage. Tamara shot him an uncomfortable look and shook her head.

‘You don’t need to look, Tyce.’

There was no skirting around the scene. The car lulled. Greg had a hand on the handle of the car door, frozen in place. His eyes were bulbous and the most alert they had been all day. Tamara was

watching her husband—she could almost see the cogs working in his head, working overtime, pulsating against the thrum that was likely a reverberation of what was going on in her own head. They couldn't exactly grind the tires over the corpses of three kangaroos, Thinking of something like that...it made those potato chips churn in her stomach, threaten to regurgitate up and make a right mess of the dashboard, and so what? She'd felt horrid all day, if she were to be honest.

But, no, no, I'm fine, she thought, catching another glimpse at the torn stomach of one of the female kangaroos. *Why didn't he slam on the breaks closer to their bodies so I couldn't see anything?*

'We've got to go back then,' Greg said, lifelessly, a hand gripped to the steering wheel.

'We're not going all the way home.'

'No,' he said, shaking his head, 'just to that town. Someone else can deal with this, and we can get back on the road, hopefully my sister will fucking pick up the phone—'

Tamara set a hand on her husband's shoulder. They were two angles protruding out in the spaces either side of his head. He needed to be calm now, she thought, gulping down the dry feeling in her throat. She lifted up the book of maps in the glovebox and found the packet of gum. 'Do you want a piece?'

Greg shook his head as she unwrapped a piece for herself.

In the backseat, Tyson flipped through the pages of his notebook. Finding a blank page, he fumbled for a pencil on the seat beside him and began to write something down. He was an avid storyteller, this kid. His father awkwardly reversed and spun the car round, as they began retracing their tire tracks back towards the town they had not long left behind them.

Flies flitted around the popped-out left eye of the buck kangaroo.

'Text Dawn again, please.'

Tamara blinked at her husband.

Dawn wasn't answering anything.

Why would she answer now?

'I miss good quality reception,' she mumbled to herself.

More than anything, she missed feeling *comfortable*.

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codename: Sympathy for the Spawn of the Devil

The spawn of Satan is thrust into the modern world as a baby to live with normal parents, to live a normal life. As he grows into a *sweet young man*, he falls in love, comes to terms with his parentage, and begins to plot the end of the world from his day job working in a donut shop in a bustling shopping centre.

Chapter One

‘Last time you were here, you told me a story from your childhood,’ he begins, his voice deep, masculine, adult. ‘You were in the yard with one of the neighbourhood kids, you said you only ever called him Pond. For four hours, you and Pond didn’t notice once that your parents had disappeared. They went out, they could have warned you or not, that didn’t matter to you. And their disappearance didn’t matter much to you either, you’re not here seeing me because of it. Because you had Pond, I assume?’ He shuffles in his chair, taking a sip of water from the glass on the glass side table.

‘I think what I’m getting at is that you never quite felt so comfortable as you did with Pond, so when he and his family moved to South Australia a year and a half later, it devastated you.’

‘I didn’t cry over him, doc.’

‘I’m not a TV therapist, you don’t need to call me doc, Ronan.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Did my apology sound sincere? I hoped so.

But I was speaking my truth, that’s what you’re supposed to do here, isn’t it? When Pond moved away—I never really cared to call him by his first name—I didn’t crawl under the covers and mope and whine over him. By then, I understood life a little more. People move away. Ponds dry up and all that. I was twelve, and Pond was homeschooled. At the school I attended then, the little local primary, I had other friends. Other ponds. I remember saying goodbye to him on the porch, with his parents standing behind him. It was all very normal and ordinary, but they reminded me he was leaving, for good. Apparently, there are things in South Australia that interested them all.

You see, this was my imagination of therapy. Is, my imagination of therapy. I sit there awkwardly and yet comfortably, too, the cushions are wholly inviting, and my therapist picks apart the unknowns of my little head and tells me I’ve never been the same since my childhood best friend moved away. Sometimes I get messages from Pond. Psychic ones, but real messages too, actual little footnotes from the kid that ditched me for down south.

I’m not pissed at him.

I think that’s why the therapist in my mind is peeved with me.

I’m on my break at work, slurping a strawberry thickshake through a straw, rereading old messages with Pond. He’s such a dork. I say psychic messaging because sometimes I’m thinking about him and he sends me a message in that moment, surprising and gate-crashing. The screen reorientates with a sharp flick and his new message lingers at the bottom of the screen.

I reply to Pond, checking the time once I do. I’ve got ten minutes before they expect me back to handle glazed donuts into bags again. It’s crowded in amongst the overhaul of school holiday shoppers. I got this job a few months ago, and during the holidays I’ve been eyeing off the sorts of people that have nothing else better to do than slump around window shopping, or else bolting upstairs to see a movie or go bowling. It’s all very typical and ordinary.

Waiting in line to order a burger, maybe some fries, is a tall, almost unnoticeable teenage boy. He’s probably my age, my height. I don’t know why I pay attention to him, beyond that initial sense that I’m curious about him. I think I’m attracted to him. But it’s from a distance, too. His features are blurred and I’m staring at the profile of his figure. I sound insane. I sound like a teenage boy. So I guess the world would be proud.

I forget about him by the time I'm walking over to the bin my rubbish. I don't even think about him for a second when I'm serving the well-meaning customers asking for donuts from the other side of the counter. I don't think about him when I'm handing someone their coffee with whipped cream and chocolate flake sprinkles on top.

And then I see him again. There's a small queue waiting to be served, and he's at the rear of it, patient and understanding. For a moment I think it couldn't possibly be him. I glance at the time displayed on the screen of the register. In all my fluster, I thought more time had passed. Barely an hour had gone. I wait patiently for another dreamloop to take me out of it.

I'm lousy at being patient.

When I serve him, I am delicate, which feels off. I am off-putting, I am someone else. He orders two donuts, nothing else. He is polite, he is kind. Maybe he's going off to some other cute guy, or girl, I don't know, and maybe he has *aspirations bigger than here*. I was lying. I did think about him when I was handing someone their coffee.

Late at night sometimes, I flirt a little with Pond. It starts with compliments, with nothings, and then it spews out a little into an intricate sort of fantasy that a teenage boy would come up with. I'd like to think grown adults are probably more sophisticated with their flirting, and nothing ever serious happens between Pond and I, but there's fun in it. A little bit of spice. Not that I know much about spice. My skin is so pale, and my hair is dark—I look devoid of spice, really. The piercing light of the phone screen will slowly be blinding me, but I'm testing out new muscles in those moments, those late nights. I tell him he deserves better. I tell him the world is there, in the palm of his smooth hands. I tell him to lift up his shirt, the girls will like you more if you show a little skin and a little more vulnerability. I'm making things up on the fly, and I'm playing with his hair, virtually.

Pond isn't dumb or blind. We never talk about sexuality, but he understands mine. The last time I had a real crush on a girl was the first year of high school. She was beautiful, that's the thing. Her dark hair was short and cropped—but she never seemed boyish. We were both just crowning in our teenage years, I was deeply closeted, and our first class together was History. Countries began to collide, and Franz Ferdinand was dead, and I thought she was the most fascinating girl alive.

Thankfully, I woke up from that trance, and maybe I'm a little insane for flirting with the boundaries of my friendship with a kid named Pond, but he doesn't seem to mind.

This new boy. Probably isn't even a new boy, really. He likely attends the other high school in the area, in the next suburb over from mine. It's the simplest trope to assume a person you've never met before is new, fresh, sudden, when you've only not met them because there are so many people even in a close range to yourself that are merely blips on the radar. A little reminder, too: you're not really the most social of people, Ronan. You stopped extracurricular activities after primary school because you grew more of a brain, more of a soul. You didn't get this job for the friends you could make, although it's a neat little bonus you've bonded with Harri and Mateo. They're around your age, my age, they keep me from burning this square of a store to the ground. It's more of a pod, isn't it? Compact and tight with nowhere to go.

You're stuck, Ronan.

Hello up there, mind-psychologist.

This is all so temporary. This job, this kindling feeling for a boy I don't know, will probably never see again. When I go back to school in a week, I'll find the groove again and cement myself in it and wait out graduating at the end of the year. I have enough on my mind.

'I'm losing my mind,' I say, reaching for the glass of water on the side table.

'I don't see why you think that.'

'Life's not even that insane, really, and I know there are worst situations out there. Abusive relationships, dead parents, car crashes, money issues. I'm grateful I don't have a situation like that, but maybe it's the sheer boredom of it all. Do you think I could just be unsettled by how bored I am?'

An actual therapist's office this time, I promise. It's a nice medium-sized room. Earthy colours, as my parents would say, while we wander through one of the many display homes at the start of the new-enough estate we live adjacent to. My therapist is an older man, in his late forties if I had to guess, with dark hair the colour of his trousers. Most sessions he is clean-shaven and greets me by sticking out his hand and beaming at me, like I'm a family member he hasn't seen in four months. Our sessions are every four weeks, paid by my parents.

They were surprisingly thrilled when I told them I wanted to see a therapist.

'What bores you?' Dr. Joswick begins. 'Is it your work, school, what you get up to in your spare time?'

'Can it be a combination of all three, and then some?'

'Of course it can.'

'I'm doing these things for my future, I get that.'

'It's important you know your life is for you to live, though, too. There needs to be a balance between setting yourself up for the future, and enjoying your time so you aren't constantly attempting to find an escape from every situation.' He pauses, smiling at me. 'What subjects do you do at school?'

'The basics. Math, English. Modern History. Drama. Japanese. Psychology.'

'And you're not enjoying them?'

'I like my subjects. No one pushed me into them. But. It's the assessment, really, or just the idea of being criticised and marked and prodded at like a specimen. Learning doesn't suck, but being set on a scale of who can learn better makes going to school more exhausting. I think.'

'Try to look at it then from a day-to-day situation. You aren't graded every day, but in order to progress, you have to be graded. Those are the terms, if you will.' He pauses, inching forward. 'If you focus on what you enjoy about the subjects each day, rather than the looming opportunity they will take to assess you, at least in the moment it isn't as draining.'

Dr. Joswick tends to help ease my brain. His advice is calming, like meditation sounds. Sometimes I feel so dumb repeating my thoughts out to him, expecting him to know all of the answers. I could give it a month and all the weight of these thoughts might just topple me over once again, but at least I am attempting something.

I feel so rough and coarse around the edges.

There are tiny blue flames licking at the sides of my face when I look in the mirror, but when the steam fades away, they're gone, and I tell myself a new trick to avoid them. It's not dousing myself in water, or wearing a damp scarf around my head, it's simpler: don't let them see you staring. Don't let them catch your gaze. Instead, go see Dr. Joswick, then go home, throw yourself on top of your bed, and think about him.

The boy.

Not Pond, not even the one that bought two donuts, but *him*.

A month ago, I was dragged along to a birthday party for one of my parents' friends. It was in their backyard and typical of a mid-to-late forties birthday party. There was food, spread across two foldable tables, and an alcoholic slushie machine (the kids had soft drink). I was certain I wouldn't know anyone, and I was pretty much right, except for the birthday boy (man) and his wife. She pointed with a tanned long arm towards where the kids were gathered, including the two that were her own—a scruffy little blonde-haired thirteen-year-old, and a girl maybe three years older than him, staring at her phone.

It felt a little awkward being lumped in with the kids. At seventeen, you're a way off still from being considered grown up, but it made me feel a nuisance being shuffled into a corner with the youngest of them, which was this little boy who was...seven? Eight? I've never been good at guessing how old someone is. His voice was high-pitched, and he was glued to his dad's phone. Dinner was the only thing that ever distracted him, but he barely ate much. His mum pilled a sausage and some cheese on a piece of bread, and he devoured that in three seconds. He was animalistic.

But I could overlook that little kid so easily. I know most of the time feelings get in the way and nothing happens. I'll see a cute stranger and not say a single word to him beyond the ordinary hello, how old are you, yeah I'm seventeen too. That was how it began with him. We were both clearly dragged there by our parents. I tried not to slump too much, tried to at least look like I wasn't bored out of my mind. My phone buzzed in my pocket and I checked it, curious to see whether it was someone like Pond messaging, or if it was just an unimportant notification I could brush off quickly, but at least checking had been something to do.

I can't remember why we started talking exactly. It would've been slight and almost unnoticeable, but suddenly I was getting more comfortable with him. It felt natural, the two older kids getting along, at least making allies out of each other for the remainder of the party. I was waiting on my parents to tell me when it was time to leave. But talking to him made me forget about the *when* a little more, and then I forgot about it entirely. It was like making a new friend the first day of kindergarten. There weren't expectations, risks, the awkwardness of wondering where this would lead without a map in your hands. Reminded me not all humans are actual assholes.

Maybe half an hour later, we were wandering together in the pitch-black darkness of the property, searching for the other kids with a flashlight. The seven-year-old stayed in the light, glued to his screen. Sweeney waved the flashlight from side to side.

'I thought I'd hate coming to this,' he said, glancing at me in the dark.

'There's still time.'

'I thought all the other kids would be half my age and stare at me like I'm boring and getting too old to be sitting with them. Like I'm an overgrown kid.' Sweeney points the light towards a rustling bush, but there's no one there. 'Kinda feel like one sometimes.'

'Have I not been giving you the impression I think you're boring?'

He looked ready to punch my arm and knock me to the ground, but he was still smiling.

'You don't come to these things much,' he said, finding one of the thirteen-year-olds pretending to be as thin as a twig up against the backside of a small shed. He made a sort of shocked sound, as if he were startled to come upon the kid hiding there, and the thirteen-year-old raced off into the distance, toward the light. Clearly not that interested in trying to find the other kids.

'I've usually got stuff on,' I lied.

When my parents typically invite me to those sorts of things, I come up with an excuse to get out of it. I didn't have anything then. I don't regret going.

'It's dumb I acted like I always pay attention,' he said, flicking the torchlight back up in the direction we came. A stumbling kid was caught in the spotlight. 'I found you!' Sweeney shouted out, and I stared ahead, unsure of something. Whether it was my being there, or being next to him, or something else entirely, I couldn't tell you. I wasn't sure then, and I'm not sure now.

But it was nice, walking beside him.

I know how gross that sounds.

We weren't even sure how many kids we were searching for in that game of Spotlight, but it probably stopped mattering to both of us.

Sweeney glanced over at me as I spoke next. 'Can I get your number?'

Nothing else really happened. You get in the way of yourself, I think. Or you assume the other person will never look at you that way, which makes sense really, why would anyone take an interest like that in me?

I went to bed that night giddy, well, my version of giddy. I wasn't a heart-fluttering, glowing orb of want, but I hadn't hated the night. I wanted to text him, but I restrained myself. Really, I knew by morning I'd just ask him for some form of social media and then like his photos if he posted, maybe never message him again, or do and he'd leave me hanging. I asked for his number then because it seemed like a hint.

It's dumb to assume a person is a homosexual.

Now I'm sprawled on this bed, thinking about the last thing I sent him on Instagram—it was just a silly comedy video, but it had made me smile, and my therapist says that is healthy.

[insert sarcastic grin]

Donut King—a nickname I could give that tall guy I got attracted to today at work—will slowly start to fade from view. I don't know him, and I guess in this exact moment, I don't want to know him. I want to see Sweeney again, but I feel self-conscious about it.

After dinner, my parents corner me while I rinse off my plate in the sink.

'We're going to see your grandparents on Sunday, if you want to come.'

Dad is separate from the conversation, apart from the two of us by a few steps, but he leans in. His hands are bent backwards on the counter behind him. He looks tired, a little withdrawn, but I can understand why from the murmurings I heard earlier when I just happened to eavesdrop while I was refilling my water bottle. Dad, well, he overworks himself.

I know I should go. I haven't been to see them in a few months, and the stare I get from Mum reminds me of something too philosophical for my teenage self to really comprehend. I've got an empty Sunday but a pit of dread and a gaping hole waiting to swallow me up for twelve hours in my bedroom.

I know I should go.

'What time are you leaving?'

'Not too early, really,' she answers with a kind smile. 'We'll only be there for a few hours.'

The grandparents we're planning on seeing on Sunday are my mother's parents. When I was little, they would take care of me when my parents couldn't. I remember, largely because this story is told repeatedly, that once when I was probably six or seven, my grandparents were looking after me when I was very sick. Nothing elaborately scary or life-threatening, but I had come down with a bad flu, and my grandmother wiped my forehead with a wet washer and told me I could sleep it off. In the morning, when I woke up and nothing had changed, I spent the day moping about how she had lied to me. That it wasn't even possible for me to sleep off the sickness, because sleep was nothing like the medicine that came in a bottle. My grandmother laughed and laughed. There I was, walking around the house instead of lying flat in bed, and I still had the nerve to call the person giving me so much attention and love a liar.

I can chuckle now thinking about it.

Not too long ago, my grandmother had a stroke, and it has been harder to recognise her ever since. Maybe I've changed too. My parents say that with the passing of time, and growing up, and aging, things change. People aren't going to stay the memories that we hold of them in our heads, and they all say that it is okay. That it is perfectly fine to watch the world you remember as a kid just crumble in front of your eyes.

I talk about my grandmother in therapy, and I try to keep myself sitting upright.

‘What’s the point in trying, though?’ I’m musing into the mic of a gaming headset, listening to the low background noise of the game and Pond’s silence.

He’s quick on his feet to answer. ‘Dude. Don’t give in, don’t give up.’

I’m playing with a controller on my PC, navigating on two stubbly little feet. I should be focused and sharp, but I pause for a moment too long and my avatar fumbles face-first. I don’t even see Pond’s character. He’s somewhere off in the distance, maybe leagues ahead of me, but I just focus on getting out of my head. Another player cuts me off and I curse out loud, angry and aggressive. Pond is startled a little.

‘You good dude?’

‘I’m fine.’

About an hour later, we wrap up the call and say goodnight, and I sit there on the edge of my bed confused. Angry, bitter, resentful, and confused. And I understand this is why I’m in therapy, and why I keep trying, but I feel cold, and not in temperature. In a couple days I’ll see my grandmother again, and in a couple more days, it’ll feel like all that’s happening between Sweeney and I is like, the politeness of two grown adults. I guess I expected the wrong things. I expected myself to be a different person, then, all sweeping romance and gushing with hope. The illusion of wanting so much and being ready to receive so much.

I need to go to sleep.

Chapter Two

There aren't pictures in a photo album of my parents in the hospital, Mum swaddled by the hospital gown, little infant me motionless in her arms. Eyes closed shut. My grandmother, when I was younger, would show pictures like those of my cousins. Never a filthy, saturated look at a newborn covered in blood—always this perfect image of a tired woman and her little child, my cousin, and maybe a father in the background, ungroomed and never equally as tired.

My parents are open about my adoption. There is no wild, strange story, but to them I was nevertheless a miracle. I don't spend sleepless nights wondering who my birth parents are, although I could, if I wanted to.

Don't I want to know?

Do I need to?

A couple months ago, Pond posted a picture of himself standing next to a girl, this dark-haired girl he hadn't talked about before. I waited, I think, for him to tell me he had found a girlfriend and that, understandably, we'd need to talk a little less so that he had time for her. Pond didn't mention it at first. He spoke her name once, and I saw another photo, but when he properly brought her up in conversation it was to say that they weren't really a serious thing and that he'd stopped seeing her a couple days before. She hung in the air for a couple weeks like particles of dust. *Emily*.

'Hi,' he says, taking a few more steps toward me. I'd asked Sweeney to hang out, before both of us went back to school and who knows when we would get an opportunity like this again. It was good to see him. Really, it was great, but I'm a cold, heartless loner, so I can't get too into my emotions.

We stumble through the pleasantries—how are you, how has your day been so far, are you *so* excited to be back at school for another term. I feel, for a moment, like I'm making too much eye contact, so I glance away just long enough so he doesn't feel like I'm disinterested in him talking about the school musical they're putting on in the next few months. The way his eyes light up talking about it keeps me interested, I promise.

'So, I've already gotten the tickets for us,' I say, as we walk toward the movie theatre. He smiles, and I dig around in my pocket for a good hold on the two tickets. I chose seats in the middle, off to the side a little, because they seemed decent enough. Less crowded, although it's not as if people go to the cinemas too much anymore. For big premieres, sure, but those come once in a blue moon nowadays.

We line up with two buckets of popcorn in hand, and he flinches when I offer to pay for his.

'You don't have to,' he says, the inflection in his voice changing.

'I want to though.'

Sweeney looks at me with his sweet eyes and I pay with my card and the attendant smiles and hopes we enjoy the movie. He starts nibbling on the popcorn immediately, and I wonder if he's already zoning out too. Getting into a comfortable sort of position in his head where it's just him, a bucket of popcorn, and comfort. Or good vibes, I guess. A little kid almost runs straight into him, and I freeze as he reacts, curling his body toward me.

This is a date and I want it to be.

We find our seats, awkwardly scooting past a couple already seated on the edge of the row. The cinema is still brightly lit but not overly loud. Sweeney sets his bucket of popcorn down on the tiny platform of the armrest and sighs, turning to me. I wonder what he can read on my face.

‘I need to make a confession,’ he says, starting to laugh when I react. ‘I’ve already seen this movie. I saw it last weekend with my friends.’ His grin is unmistakable.

‘We could’ve seen something else.’

‘I wanted to rewatch it, and you told me how excited you were for it, so I didn’t really see a reason not to.’ I can’t deny that, really. There’s text message proof I said I was excited, like a silly schoolgirl anxious to see someone. I guess I’m a silly schoolboy, if anything. I could so easily pretend he’s making up a complete lie, but then would I start to sound like it didn’t matter what movie we saw, as long as I saw him? That’s cheesy as hell.

‘It should be good, yeah,’ I say, trying to look a little cool. If it fails, and flails, so what.

While the trailers play, Sweeney turns to me and jokingly teases the dialogue playing off the screen. The cinema doesn’t get crowded, so I sit in amongst the empty space, being as comfortable as physically possible in those cinema seats. He’s right there next to me and like for a split second I think maybe it’s possible for gay kids to find love in high school. Like it isn’t some big myth perpetuated by watching your straight friends start dating, then break up, then start dating someone else in a week or two.

In complete darkness, I can just barely see him out of the corner of my eye. All of my attention shifts to the movie. I laugh and laugh. Briefly I forget I’m not depressed.

When we stumble out, tossing emptied popcorn buckets in the trash, he asks me what I thought. ‘I absolutely loved it,’ I say, grinning like a damned fool. We launch into all our little thoughts and opinions, wandering slowly through the shopping complex that joins up with the cinema, and as we walk past the tiny little donut place where I work, I see Harri. We acknowledge each other but that’s about it, really. Just that subtle moment of a wave and a head nod.

We’re in the car on the way to visit my grandmother, and my dad turns in his seat to face me and says, ‘I know it’s not the easiest thing seeing her like this, trust me.’ He doesn’t launch into a long speech about the depressing realities of growing older and suffering something you cannot control, but he smiles sympathetically and taps my knee, and turns back around to face forward. In the driver’s seat, Mum smiles in the rearview window and reminds me we can’t be sure of what to expect from her. She might be great today, or she might not be in much of a mood to talk at all. To me it feels like they want to disarm me, a little, in a comforting sort of way.

My grandparents’ place is a bungalow within the retirement village now. The curtains in the front room are drawn closed when we near it, and Mum tentatively knocks on the door. My grandmother, I think, loves still having some privacy of her own, but my parents remind me she can’t care for herself fully anymore. My grandfather has been buckling somewhat under taking care of her too, although it was agonising for him to admit it. The bungalow is the perfect size for them.

My grandmother opens the door slowly, peering out at the three family members on her doorstep. She’s overjoyed to see us, although she surely knew we were coming. ‘Just sit down over there and I’ll fuss over tea,’ she says, leaning into stereotypes as she moved into the kitchen, almost bumping into the corner of the bench. She lets out a groan regardless. In a cupboard, she individually

picks down four mugs, and then sighs. ‘Did you want tea, Ronan?’ Her voice is louder than expected, and I smile at her wrinkled face.

‘Yes thanks,’ I say, appealing to the side of her that loves politeness, which is surely just buried underneath the surface, still.

My parents and my grandfather unfreeze and follow after her, to which she bats them all away and tells them she’s not dead yet. Here is a woman that will not let a flash flood knock her down at the knees. Nevertheless, they persist. She ends up only carrying her own mug over to the lounge, where she thumps down into an armchair and immediately asks me how school is. She likes to hear about the little things.

I try not to let it hurt, seeing the change in my grandmother. Even now, she’s not alike to the woman I saw when we visited last. Time passes, sure, and I grow too. I hurt too. We don’t talk much to my grandmother about her *condition*. Which is to say, we don’t discuss that she is growing older, and the stroke damaged her, badly damaged her. I keep my ears turned away when my parents discuss what a doctor said, or what my grandmother might be going through. All I know is that for now she is alive, and I just get to be grateful for that.

But my heart is aching, for sure it is aching.

And here’s what comes next...

- while visiting with his grandparents, Ronan gets pulled aside for a private chat. His parents are off fussing about in the kitchen, which is the perfect time for Grandma to spill what sounds, at the time, like utter nonsense, about how she’s met his real father, how he’s strange and not altogether from this plane. How Ronan and he will meet as all do, in the end.
- Ronan and Sweeney’s relationship continues to build. They’re two gay teenagers in love, so naturally, their relationship blossoms fast and they spend a potentially unhealthy amount of time around each other. Sweeney notices though that there is an undercurrent to the relationship that seems to be threatening Ronan’s happiness...
- like any spawn of Satan, Ronan begins plotting the end of days...but mostly because the customers he serves at the donut shop can be real pesters sometimes. People are annoying. They should suffer...
 - wait, do I mean that?

267

codename: *Missing Boy Season*

When a series of teenage boys go missing, their only connection at first seems to be an online chatroom. Soon, news comes to pass that the teenager boys were all in fact gay or bisexual, or questioning their sexuality, and the chatroom was a safe space for them to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Searching for his missing cousin, Gideon Vetsch begins to string together the possibility a homophobic serial killer might be lurking in the chatroom, and certainly worse, in the shadows of these boys' lives. But without crime-solving skills, a badge of any kind, or real tact to trust his instincts, Gideon worries all he is doing is getting everyone spooked.

-- from a boy named Lee --

There's this man I started talking to online, his name on the profile says Nick. He's the sort of guy I could have imagined I would want to date in like ten years' time, but I wasn't looking for anything serious when I met him. I was also in school still, high school, so I didn't think dating someone seriously was something I should have been considering right then. He was older than I was, said he would be graduating high school next year but he liked talking to me, so once he graduated it wouldn't change anything. He looked so beautiful in the pictures. I feel wrong for using the word beautiful, actually. It makes me sound like I'm really old and as if I had an actual grip on what the word beautiful meant then, which I didn't, probably not. I was only fourteen.

We met on this online site where you customise a character and move them around through rooms, whatever room you like really, although it's better to follow the crowds of people as opposed to anything that looked empty and cool. Beside the usually-long name of the room there was a player count. Each room will have a limit, so sometimes a room will be completely full and you know then that either the room itself is decorated beautifully—pretending that I understand that word—or the crowd knows how to party, digitally. People don't confess their ages, don't need to use their real first names, and don't tend to stick around for too long. Nick had, though. He told me about a chatroom website he uses to talk to other fans of a sci-fi tv show from the 90s he loves; I forgot the name though. The chatroom site is called *Unmouse*. He told me to scroll down until I found a specific room, and then he would say who he is, which room we met in, and from there we would talk more and get to know each other, I guess.

It didn't take long before we started talking on an app on our phones—well, at the time I was using an iPod. On there, we could share photos too, and this is how I first saw a picture of Nick. I immediately thought he was cute. I hadn't come out yet, as gay, but Nick reassured me that one day it would feel comfortable to tell people that I'm not straight, that I find other guys attractive. It's scary, thinking that without him I wouldn't have had a lot of confidence in revealing these sorts of things. Nick sent me pictures of himself in a towel when he had just had a shower, and he liked seeing me in my school uniform, because it's not as ugly as he thinks that his is. The colours are dull and gross, he would say, and then send me a picture of him wearing the brown-and-blue shirt with a grimace on his face. I kind of have to agree really, his uniform was ugly.

I was always grateful he never asked to meet in person. For one, it would have been complicated to achieve—I couldn't exactly steal the keys to either of my parents' car and drive off to meet him. He lived two hours away, down south. My parents weren't going to understand the sort of relationship I had with Nick.

At that age, too, I don't think I was anywhere close to navigating anything mature or grown.

NOVEMBER 10th, 2018

On a vacation last month with my partner Jon, I started to think about how I used to see myself, when I was first starting to date. I've been with Jon for five years, but before I met him I went through a string of relationships that tested my resolve, made me a better person, and sometimes a worse person, too. We were wandering through an art gallery, on the third floor admiring the European collection from the sixteenth century. Jon made a comment about a piece he liked, and he pointed out a detail with the point of his finger. It felt strange, then, to be on holiday like this, but when I brought that up in the hotel room later that evening, Jon just stared at me and said, 'You deserve a fucking holiday.' He looked so gorgeous. And he was right.

Sitting in the car in the staff carpark along the side of the school, something compels me to not leave. My body aches from the day. A ten-year-old kid vomited up his lunch in second break, and although he narrowly missed his clothes and only got a splattered mess on his shoes, he held a queasy expression on his face. From the concrete path to the bathroom, to the nurse's bay. He made eye contact with me when I turned to him to check if he was okay. I left him alone after Nurse Emma—affectionately named by the kids—called his mother and made sure he was propped up on the bed with a white bucket by his side.

These things happen. Denton's not the first kid this year I've made sure wasn't continuing to vomit by the time I got them to the sick bay. You feel protective though, and it's not an odd feeling, as much as this isn't your kid. You spend so much time with these kids, watching them grow over the year, and if you're lucky, years.

I think unfortunately I'm in a position where a lot of things remind me of my cousin, although our age difference made him feel more like a nephew. That could be me aging myself too much, though. He would've been eighteen this year.

Jon is in the bedroom, on top of the covers, reading a book. He greets me as I walk in, pass by him, and close the bathroom door. My aunt messaged me while I was at work, letting me know she'd be having a small memorial of sorts for Wesley in a few weeks. I didn't expect the sort of whole-body reaction I would have suddenly thinking about him, again, although I think about him every so often when I remember that time in my life. I was in my mid-twenties, navigating what came after an undergraduate degree, sharply trying to process the disappearance of my cousin. Wes meant a lot to me. He asked me questions I didn't expect from someone his age, and he always seemed so intrigued to learn things.

After I wash my hands, splash a little water on my face, I sit on the side of the bed furthest from Jon, reaching out a hand towards him. He gives me a slight smile from behind the book. I think he can usually tell when something is upsetting me—he will take in my appearance, the way I sit or the way I stand, and capture a mental sort of image of how I am carrying myself, as opposed to an hour before, or even a minute. It's cheesy to confess in shouted-out words what you're grateful for, but I'd be more lost than I am without Jon by my side. Honest truth.

An hour later, I give Wesley's mother, my aunt, a call. For a few seconds the call rings out, and I think it's too late by now, she could be in the middle of making dinner or watching the news, and I almost hit the hang-up button. Her voice comes through, clear, a little soft-spoken to begin.

'Gideon. Are you alright?'

I should be asking her the same, spinning the conversation before we can even get to me. When my cousin disappeared, the first conversation I had with Liz was so miserably mutual. I'm so sorry this happened to you, and then, I'm so sorry this happened to you, too. *I'm so sorry this happened to us.* Devastating, the effects of losing someone that meant different things to different people. And he had only disappeared too. There was no body yet. It's strange to reflect on. I think at some point I accepted that there would be a body, instead of a rescued little kid with the biggest smile on his face. It's fucking miserable to think like that.

'I'm okay,' I say, holding the phone out in front of me. She's on speakerphone. 'I think I just wanted to check in with you, Liz.' It can feel so unsettled, trying to find the words even now. You never want to sound insincere or like you're reading from a manual on how to process grief with other people.

Her voice is a little shakier. I can picture her in the living room by the window, staring out at nothing in particular, trying to get a little lost in all of it. Picturing Wes, of all things, which makes her fingers tremble as they hold the phone to her ear. 'Time does it's damn best to heal, hey,' she says, trying to laugh a little. 'I miss him a lot, a whole lot.'

We talk for maybe half an hour, before I hear one of her other kids in the background and use it as a good enough reason to suggest we wrap things up. Liz is thankful and appreciative and looks forward to seeing me at the small memorial ceremony, and I set my phone down with the screen to the wood and walk toward the other side of the apartment. Jon is in the kitchen pouring himself a glass of wine. He gives me a warm smile and lifts the glass to his lips.

'My memory gets so hazy sometimes, maybe it's all the wine we drink.'

Jon glances over at me with a guilty expression on his face, lowering the glass to the benchtop after he takes a sip. I know it's silly to blame the wine. Wine-drunk nights certainly didn't help, but nights lacking in sleep didn't help either, nor did all of the stress of getting through a university degree, and coming to terms with my depression, and fearing the worst for the cousin we couldn't find. When you're little, hide and seek is the absolute best. I feel like there are parts of my brain still in hiding, and parts that still seek out things that I want to know to be true. People started convincing us, the family Vetsch, and every extension, that one day Wes would be found, as if he were playing an elaborate game and we were just counting and counting.

Jon places his hands on my shoulders and kisses my hair. I fear even the one mention of Wes has slingshot me back into that time in my life, but grief has a strange sense to hold on. It follows the rules, I suppose—it keeps all hands and feet inside of the moving vehicle, keeps a seatbelt strapped around itself, and around you. I want to turn to my partner and tell him everything is fine, because thinking about the past is all in my head, but every time I see some news story about the mistreatment of the queer community it reverberates.

Jon and Gideon live in an apartment. We are two openly proud gay men, which feels like an over-simplified assessment of us. It feels like a burdening ideal, that two gay men in a relationship with one another feel an ode to their queerness come on when they define themselves. Jon and Gideon could get married if they wanted to. Everything feels up in the air, a lofty airplane with a destination uncertain. Wes was a queer kid trying to understand his sexuality, and he was only fourteen.

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After getting about three hours of sleep, I lie awake, staring the backs of my eyelids. Jon is silent and still beside me, potentially having a dream about going on an all-expenses-paid trip to Iceland or something similar to it. Jon keeps a journal in the second drawer of the bedside table on his side, filling it with the dreams he has, and the times he wakes up from them. Sometimes, in the morning, he'll tell me about the dream he had, and woke up from, at say 1:05am. His dreams are relatively tame on the regular, but occasionally he'll laugh that laugh of his and tell me about an unearthly vision of a landscape out of an arthouse film. I'd pretend one of his quirky dreams comes close to rivalling the nightmarish hells I have pieced together over the last few years.

I grab my phone and stumble into the bathroom, flicking on the overhead light. I squint and feel sick and try to throttle myself into adjusting, but the exhaustion in my body weighs me down. I used to eat a lot of carrots growing up, hoping I would have expert eyesight in the darkness, but no one ever promotes some vegetable as the solvent for adjusting to harsh lighting after being asleep.

Maybe everyone wants you to suffer for at least a minute a day, especially if you've bought into the whole bunny-eyes thing.

I sit in the living room watching an episode I've seen before of a show I love, just to calm myself down. Trying to fall straight back to sleep tonight would probably have been a mistake, and I would've felt Jon beside me sleepily trying to help me get comfortable again. He does this thing where he draws shapes on my back, unconscious nonsense shapes that have no meaning, but it can soothe me. Sometimes.

When Wesley was eleven, he had a birthday party in the backyard of our grandparents' place. An ordinary birthday party. It wasn't themed or a large-scale event; there wasn't a blow-up jumping castle, or someone hired to paint faces. There was a piñata, however. Wes liked smashing things up, in a wild, carefree, excitable way, though. He wasn't angry when he went Hulk-Smash. It was more the joy and glee of this kid that was walking into a candy store, almost quite literally, considering the contents of the piñata. He also really liked superheroes, like the Hulk, because he had grown up watching animated shows about the Avengers and similar squadrons of save-the-day players. I'd watch those shows with him. Sometimes even when he was thirteen and fourteen, he would ask me, via his mother Liz, if I wanted to come around and sit down in front of the TV watching those older cartoons we watched when we were much younger. I've always felt older and droopier than him, because there was so much life and voice in that kid.

People say stuff like that, to mourn and to grieve, and it never accomplishes enough.

It was at this eleventh birthday party that Liz pulled me aside to tell me she was divorcing her husband. My face dropped. I was twenty-two at the time, and I'd grown up spending Christmases with Liz and her then-husband Patrick, visiting their home for birthdays and other more obscure holiday parties, too. It was startling to watch their marriage dissipate, but from a distance. Liz was all hushed voices and subtle glances at her kids, and she was worried about their reactions. Worried they would crumble and crack, I suppose, learning they would start spending holidays with different parents, and spending time in different houses. Patrick would live in some new place, probably smaller than they could all imagine.

From eleven to fourteen, I think the divorce played with Wes. My own parents separated when I was sixteen, and I felt the effects of it throughout the end of high school, and through my time at university. I would wake up in the middle of night wondering if teaching younger minds had now been sharply disadvantaged because of this harsh stigma of being a child of divorce, even though it had come when I was in my late teens.

If I could talk to him now, at eighteen, I'd like to believe he would tell me at the very least he wanted to go to therapy to talk through everything. It's too overly hopeful to think about, though. I start to sound like through my own process of grief, I became a mother on her knees praying for him. I crawl back into bed beside Jon, who sleepily places a hand on my back. I'm far too alert and awake, but I force my eyes closed and try to think of what tomorrow will bring. Which is to say, I think about checking on Denton, if he comes to school, and peeking in at whatever Leanne has brought in for lunch. Usually leftovers or an impeccably-made salad. Jon runs his hand up and down my back, wordless and slow, but smooth, reassuring.

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OCTOBER 19th, 2014

I haven't been to the post office in a while. I came home to one of those slips of blue and white paper in the messy handwriting, saying a parcel wasn't left while I was out. There's a four-person queue waiting in the post office, all tired in the body, some impatient and some clearly not. In the car ride over, I tried to remember what I ordered. Probably some late-night purchase, or otherwise something I bought months ago from an overseas vendor and promptly forgot about, what with how chaotic life has been lately.

At the start of the new year I'm off for an interim teaching position in a small town an hour and a half from here, so I've spent the last week or so sorting through my current apartment, packing things up. My roommate is staying in the place, and he's spent an equal amount of time already trying to find my replacement, essentially. We stay up late some nights laughing about the eccentricities of our personalities when it comes to sharing a place together. The little quirks we'll miss about each other, like how often he replaces the dead plants on the windowsill in the kitchen, and how, before I started seeing Jon a year ago, I used to bring home someone new every month like an unhealthy spending obsession. Heath and I have roomed together for three years, so it is bittersweet to be moving out without him, losing the moments when he would shout an obscenity as he stubbed his toe on the kitchen island in the middle of the night.

It's a true bitch of a kitchen counter.

When I reach the front of the queue and hand the short Asian woman my slip of paper, the door swings open, ringing a little metal bell. The woman disappears into a small backroom. She is not rushed, not frenetic. The person who has just entered the post office presumably lines up behind me, or otherwise wanders past the celebration cards, past the calendars for next year already set out, and past the magazines depicting nature scenes, car models, and blonde celebrities promoting crossword puzzles.

'Gideon.' I hear my name from behind me, in a voice not all that familiar to me. I flick my head round, greeted by a face I do recognise, though. I played soccer with him, briefly, before I quit the sport, or he did, or maybe we both did. He is taller now, his voice deeper, and for some strange reason he not only remembers me, but feels an urge to reconnect, even if just to say hello.

His name is Kyle. He was an early crush of mine, when we were all getting sweaty out on the field, and I wanted to, I don't know, snuggle up to his shirtless body, probably. 'Hey man,' I say, attempting to slip back into how I might've spoken to him back then, albeit probably without the *man*, considering we were both twelve or thirteen. 'How have you been?' Small talk with him feels strange,

almost too pedestrian. During practice and on the field I never would have asked him how he was, how he had been.

Before he can answer, the small woman sets the rectangular package down on the countertop with a thud. It startles me, and I spin back around and collect it from her, two arms settled underneath it. Kyle gives me a smile as I turn back to him. 'Sorry, man. I've been well. My dad lives in the area, as do you, it looks like.' He holds up a magazine in his right hand, a limp offering for show and tell. 'Dad gets bored on the toilet.' We laugh, the sort of laughing in unison you would expect from two people that don't really know much about one another anymore. Or maybe they never did.

'It's good to see you again,' I say, an easy fib, or half-fib, and stick out the wrong hand for him to shake. Kyle fumbles with the magazine and shakes my hand. 'Take care of yourself, dude.' I sound like an amalgamation of my aunts and grandmothers, and the bro-fist-pumping blokes from high school that placed the word *dude* after every sentence to look cool. As I walk to the car, I repeat those words out loud once or twice...take care of yourself, *dude*.

Take care of yourself.

Dude.

In the driveway at home I poke into the cardboard with a pen and open up the package. It's true, I had forgotten when I ordered this. Digging through some bubble wrap I find a small ornamental owl wearing reading glasses and carrying research tomes underneath its wings. I realise at once I bought this as a Christmas present for my mother, but I ordered it extra early. In August, I think. It took a few months to arrive, or my memory is going hazy and I only ordered it last month, or three days ago. I'm not sure. Not certain, even, if the owl had such brightly-coloured glasses in the pictures online. Glasses the colour of bioluminescent limes ready for squeezing.

Heath is on the floor in the living room, legs spread off in either direction, wearing only a singlet and navy-blue shorts. Controller in hand, Heath fires at will, no doubt slaughtering a slew of other men that look just like him. It's war, he'd say, when I asked him what he enjoys about games like this. Shooters. Bang, bang.

He gives me a brief nod before returning his attention to the screen, to the shoot shoot shoot. His cat, a dark grey kitty with a slight limp, is half-concealed by the curtains, fast asleep. Jon texts me as I collapse down on the bed, eyes meeting the ceiling again.

He writes, *has your aunt heard anything yet?*

I think he just wants to be considerate about it. Hesitantly, cautiously, all those careful adverbs ending in -ly. That is how he approaches talking to me right now, the past few days since Wes went missing. I hesitate on how to respond. Liz is barely responding to family. She will give brief updates, typically a *he has not come home yet* online, plastering her Facebook page with unsettling notes begging for him to appear out of nowhere. When I spoke to her last, she couldn't even be certain of the last person to see him. It makes sense consciously—he wouldn't have just vanished when he left the house, not immediately like that, after she had said goodbye to him not realising what would happen.

Who can read the future? Not you or I...

I open the messages shared between Jon and I, and I stare at the screen as if trying to comprehend my own thoughts completely. Trying to comprehend them anew, I suppose. I start to compose a message: *no*.

She hasn't heard anything.

How the fuck am I supposed to just go about things like normal while he's somewhere out there?

I delete all of that, of course. I re-type 'she hasn't heard anything', add in the word *yet* at the end, and hit send. I try to dull the heavy breathing. I close my eyes and try to imagine Wes sitting on the corner of a quiet street someplace, without a phone, without any way to call someone. But then a

friendly neighbour slows, and he tells them, I've been lost for a couple days...but it doesn't make any sense to me. It is all delusion and no substance, no beacon of truth that makes total sense.

I realise I left the owl in the car.

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I was a different kind of person in high school. The easiest way to differentiate between us is age, of course. Back then I was a teenager, now I am an adult.

This morning I was sitting on the floor tying my shoes up and I felt like a kid again. When you're grown, fully-grown as they believe you to be, maybe you put your shoes on most of the time sitting on the edge of the bed, or in an armchair, or you give in to the idea of effort and just slip your shoes on without ever really untying the laces. Tying them back up only when they come undone or are at peril of unravelling.

I think without a lot of things to comfort me, to ground me, I would be at the peril of unravelling. Not solely because someone I grew up around is missing, gone, somewhere out there in the world. The whole notion of moving to somewhere completely foreign, despite being in the same country that all looks the same in the end, is frightening. I can find my footing, and then lose it three seconds later.

I was tying up my shoelaces and Heath came in from the yard, the smell of a cigarette hanging around him. I think sometimes he believes I pursued primary school teaching to blend the more childish things of my life into a setting that was like a forest of trees for a stick insect. At the same time, he'll get drunk and blame how single and lonely and depressed he is on women not tolerating his sometimes-garbage behaviour. So who knows.

It will be nice not living with him, for a change.

It's been a month, maybe a week or so extra, since I saw Wes last. Our grandparents invited that side of the family out for dinner at a Japanese restaurant, and I invited him out for some ice cream afterwards. In truth, I invited a few of my cousins, and my sister, but he was the only one to express a real interest. I noticed the comfort of that, the glance he made as he headed to the passenger seat of my car. At fourteen, I expected that he wouldn't really want to be seen much hanging out with his older cousin. He spurned spending too much time around his parents, a coming-of-age thing to sever the ties some more. I remember being that age and starting to feel unsure about how much of your privacy you once gave away so willingly you now want to cling to. Of course, you used to let your parents see your entire naked body when you were a tiny kid. Now the idea of that is terrifying.

I told Wes I would pay for whatever he wanted, within reason. He had that wide grin regardless, the look of a maniac willing to ask for five scoops of ice cream and a takeaway container packed to the brim. There were probably too many flavours to choose from, but I was comfortable just having a scoop of Cookies and Cream and watching Wes's eyes light up childishly when the server sunk a silver spoon into the Rocky Road ice-cream. Let him be younger than he is, I remember thinking.

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captainfOnny

Hi. I'm new to this website but I just needed somewhere to talk. I would like to just go by my username if that's okay. I'm not sure how to open up about any of this stuff to anyone I know in person, and I even have a gay cousin but what if he teases me for being young and not understanding things...I guess I just found this when I typed in *gay chatrooms for teenagers* because I'm a dork that wants to talk to someone about thinking I'm gay...

getoffmeGeoff

Hi *@captainfOnny*, haha cool name. My name is Tyler btw. I joined on here three months ago and it's been really good to just talk about random stuff on here, not just like thinking I'm gay and trying to understand it stuff. You're in good company.

captainfOnny

That's cool. I guess I wouldn't even know how to come out to anyone. Like would my parents understand? Am I even gay? I used to have feelings for girls all the time but I don't want to date them, not really.

getoffmeGeoff

You have to understand all of that yourself, really. Idk I came out to my parents because of this site and they were really understanding of everything. They just told me not to go around having s*x yet, as if I'm anywhere close to that haha. (They didn't use that word though, they just sort of darted around it and it was weird)

captainfOnny

Oh that's so brave of you!

getoffmeGeoff

You can be brave too, hey. Don't rush it though.

captainfOnny

Can you imagine if I went downstairs right now and said, hey mum I'm gay...that's weak though, I can probably come up with someone better. Or is that what you did? I don't know...I'm not even thinking about all that stuff. I just see guys at school and I'm like, what are these feelings. They're so sudden and new. Lol. I'm just grateful someone else gets it.

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Do you have like Kik or something?

366

codename: *Sitting There, Looking Pretty*

While navigating a new job and working with a co-worker he first met in primary school, who had bullied him for a time during their schooling years together, a 22-year-old begins to understand the complexities of his sex life – or more, the complexity of always feeling at least a little uncomfortable when he engages with any sexual act in person with another man.

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In his arms, I felt five different emotions, all rapid, all at once. First, and it began as the whisper, a sort of breathy undercurrent like the touch of air from his lips near my earlobe, I felt passionate. Of course I did. I wanted him to hold me, I wanted to know what it felt like to be loved and to be comfortable like this. Comforted in the sort of way I imagined was possible for me, had I found the right person.

More on the discussion of *right people* later.

Second, I felt anxious. Not the most comfortable of feelings after such a warm feeling, but two streams meet. That was how, from a bird's eye view, it felt. My embrace of him met with the gushing waters of continued anxiety, never-ending anxiety, go-see-your-therapist-again anxiety. Normally an anxious person, I can persist through it, for the most part. Lying with him, naked, therefore exposed to him, completely, I was learning more and more then how to navigate the collision. Two heady, burgeoning emotions would have been enough. One for each eyeball, one for each half of the brain.

The third and fourth were a lot alike. Discomfort and melancholy were mimics, feeding off the umbrella that is anxiety. I've told you I loved him, or from context you have known – but nevertheless it soured me, somewhat, to be held in his arms for more than the one minute I thought myself allocated. I felt arms and legs—mine, weighing down my body—itching to be flung out like wires of electricity, dangerous, unstable. My heart, beating inside my chest, still, somehow, was scouring the pebbly bank of a river, looking for the heaviest of rocks to tie itself down to. All the streams, all their connections. Perhaps a nice new technique, something to clear my head, would be that reminder that all streams lead to the ocean. The sea. A stagnant sapphire blue line. A settled down thing, settling me.

One more emotion, and I glanced over at him, boyfriend of nine months, watching the stillness of his pupils. I thought then to myself, he must be clear in the head. Enjoying himself, loving me, something like that. One last emotion. I felt disgusted. A nasty blend of anger and contempt. I carried with me the taste on my tongue of moments ago, our reason for being naked. His body thrusting into mine. How easy it felt, to be penetrated like that. People call the act dirty, filthy—two men engaging in anal sex. Two men positioned upon a queen-sized bed, one on his knees, the other bent to take his penis in his mouth. Passionate, slobbery, welcomed orgasms. Somehow unpalatable, too. I'd wanted to curl up, with him outside the room, outside of space, to give me space. Look at the smirk on his face, I'd thought. Him giving me a moment to clean off the sticky white from my body before I lay down with him again. He was familiar with it all by then.

In some sense, I was sure he was familiar with how I felt. How it had taken me a while to warm to having sex with him, because I'd been so unpractised when we first met. My past few partners suddenly seeming so untalented in bed by the time we first had sex—although our relationship was the first time I ever dated someone for more than five months. He seemed so comfortable in waiting, in being patient with me, in how I must have seemed like such a tease, leaving him lingering every so often when suddenly a switch in my brain flicked over and I wanted to be dressed again, or I wanted to go stand in the bathroom under the rain of the showerhead. He seemed willing.

About two months later, Curtis and I split.

Eleven months in, and we both decided it was the natural course of things. A strange way to punctuate a relationship, but for the most part, the honest truth. Our relationship was built on strong foundations, sure, but neither Curtis nor I saw a complete future in it. Some mornings I would want to go back to sleep to keep him from asking me more questions, or pestering me about something. There were plenty of things he found to complain about with me, and I couldn't fault him on that. I keep myself awake at night imagining just how accurate he was and is—but that is neither here nor there. My therapist knows little about those evening end-of-the-world talks. Me fearing for everything Curtis warned me of, me adding in my two cents. The things he left out. Me fearing death.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Curtis came around for the last of the things he had left at mine. We hadn't moved in together, so perhaps he thought himself lucky, having avoided overdosing on time with me. He snapped every time I made a self-deprecating remark like that, on that Tuesday afternoon. He got inches from pushing me onto the bed and kissing me, but he would have said it meant nothing, and I would have agreed. Our romantic relationship was over, officially, but we'd flirt over text after the breakup, it was still a comfortable thing. To everyone else, it would have seemed the most desperate form of grieving and moving on, but neither of us really seemed entirely depressed over splitting up. I wouldn't tell Curtis I cried myself to sleep a few nights, had a panic attack sitting underneath a tree, or finished off a block of chocolate without realising it half an hour after he left that Tuesday afternoon, and I'm sure there was plenty he was keeping from me. We could keep secrets from each other now. I worshipped it like I was experiencing proper religious conversion for the first time in my life.

There was never an implosion—or explosion—that rattled our relationship, which a few people took strange offence to. I suppose there's an expectation when you're young to have relationships that are messy, and complicated, and illuminating. Illuminating is a truth, because I did learn a lot from being with Curtis, nestling myself beside him like the other end of a bookend set that resembled a giraffe, or a caterpillar. Nothing about loving him was messy, because it wasn't the love that was complicated. It was the growing apart, in an under-the-surface sense. You don't realise it until you wake one morning and spend the rest of your day pondering the why—why are we still together, why am I clinging to something if it's meant to be let go.

When I was younger, I loved this falling-apart blanket my grandmother knitted, really clichéd and unoriginal stuff. I remember dropping it off the balcony of a third-floor resort suite on the Sunshine Coast, watching it get tangled in the bushes below. I was small, I was clumsy, I am clumsy but still—I told my parents, still together at the time, and we all raced downstairs without a thought. Protecting me, I think, worried I might throw a tantrum without the blanket, but it was love, too. Downstairs, after a moment's panic of forgetting how space and angles and the world works, we found the bush, the blanket, and an unfriendly stare from an elderly man lounging in the pool area in his swimming trunks. The blanket had passed through a spider's web, the remnants of one, at least. It was a sticky feeling—I've never liked touching spider webs. I always inevitably feel as though the web is snaking itself around my body or clinging to my skin no matter how much I attempt to string it off and flick it out into the wind. But the blanket. A wash and the moment would be forgotten, that was the hope. That was the way to move forward. To cling to something that matters so much, even when you're little and it's just a blanket. It was mine, my blanket.

To say that Curtis was mine would be some foolish illusion that implies you can own a person, that when you hold them, you are keeping them close not just physically. Curtis was never mine to drag around, or accidentally lose off the side of a balcony. But with every breakup, you process every little thing, sometimes without even properly noticing. That Tuesday night, hours after he left, I sat on the floor in the bathroom, wrapped up in a towel, and I hovered over the trash can symbol of my favourite picture of the two of us. Had I not been kissing him, maybe I would have wanted to keep it without

restraint. Without fear, really. Told in one picture was a romance that had ended, and to process it all I knew I should delete it once, and then once more. Wipe it all clean.

The funny thing about loving someone is that sometimes you keep pictures you took together, tucked away in the middle of your exhaustive digital photo albums, in part because sorting through them all is a chore, but true, in part because you worry you'll soon after forget that those memories did happen. Maybe I won't forget kissing Curtis, and I won't forget him, but when I rescued that picture from the Recycle Bin, it reminded me of that specific day. There was nothing more potent for bringing me joy than spending time with him. We were in Toowoomba for the weekend, for the flower festival. We're both plant lovers, but also terrible at keeping plants alive. Curtis invited along two of his friends, who had been dating since high school, senior year. The picture wasn't in front of some elaborate display of flowers, or anything rather exciting really, but I can still recognise the brick wall, for some reason. It was the wall of the little house we stayed in, just around the side from the front door.

We took a few serious ones, standing comfortably beside each other, and then I snuck in a kiss at the last second for this picture, catching Curtis off-guard, but the picture makes it almost seem as though he would have surprised me with one, had I hesitated for even a second. This one picture has landed itself in the Deleted album over and over again. Like it was a repeat offender for a crime. I will be the first to admit that while I was comfortable letting him go, I still didn't want to lose him completely.

Two nights before that Tuesday afternoon, I was finishing up at work, clocking out from the shift, and I saw a message had come through while my phone was off. A few, actually. Curtis was still nicknamed in Facebook Messenger as *Curt Von Trapp*, the sort of dumb love-affair nickname that was also a reference. I don't remember why, though. Why I linked him to one of the children in *The Sound of Music*—not a movie we would've watched together, despite our shared love of musical theatre. Bit of a gay stereotype, that, but when we saw something together live...there's a bit of a bellyache there now, how the months after the split I only saw things by myself, sitting in the crowd with the program on my lap. Comfortable, yet uncertain. Imagining someone ogling me from another row, remorseful for me.

So he had messaged me while I was at work. *Can I come over Tuesday instead?* That was his greeting, a sort of hello that lacked the usual warmth of a *hey handsome* and a kissy face, but it didn't feel cold coming from him. It felt friendly, and the cut-off was there. You are my friend; I want to see you on Tuesday.

His second message was an explanation: something came up for when we were originally seeing each other again, the Friday afternoon slash night. There were two ideas to it, or at least that's how I thought: one, that he wanted the promise of work the next morning to steer him away from spending the night at mine, drinking whatever alcohol he expected to find here, or would've brought himself; and two, that maybe he had lined himself up a first date with someone else on the more thrilling night of the week, and so Tuesday was an empty, dreary afternoon that'd end harmlessly.

The third message was an hour later: a link to a video of a child, probably six or seven, getting absolutely clobbered by their foam baseball bat-wielding older sibling, and then toppling backwards into the pool and floundering around like someone who has forgotten how to swim. The little kid suddenly stops struggling, glares at their older sibling, and paddles over with two arms outstretched, vengeance in two pupils, before the video cuts off. This message he gave no caption to.

I guess from all of that Curtis awaited my response, probably guessing I was still at work.

On that Tuesday afternoon, I greeted him at the door with maybe the cheesiest smile, pretending all the change between us was entirely comfortable. I didn't want him back in bed with me, naked with me, but I would have killed then for us to slip underneath the covers and hold each other.

Maybe I would have thought it would soothe some part of me fearful at being alone, at looking again, trying for love again. Whatever the case, as I closed the door behind Curtis that afternoon, I glanced down the hall, either side, as if making certain no sneak observer was waiting to catch me out.

There's that common idea of the splitting-off partners. One goes this way, the other another path, like bent-back fork prongs on some mangled utensil. That might just be my interpretation of it. The idea of completely severing yourself from your ex, to me, should be reserved for when they're a complete clown, face painted in white with the red splotches of their cheeks, and the rainbow-coloured wig. Or they do something unforgivable, naturally. But when you're left with two people with only positive, beautiful memories, why am I saying goodbye to you completely? What, because we made out and saw each other naked? I suppose my body is that scarring.

I will never position myself to be clingy about Curtis, but I will, in truth, never position myself to make grand promises about my behaviour either.

With the door closed behind him, Curtis made himself at home, entirely familiar with the place. Like an extension of his own for eleven months. I fetched him a glass of water, without asking, and he looked at me unexpectedly, that grin somehow keeping me grounded. You can be friends with your ex, I told myself then, handing him the tall glass. I had everything I knew was his in a box in the bedroom—I had to go to Bunnings for the box, and got myself quickly distracted by paint colours, and lighting fixtures, and strangely, that row of toilets they have in one aisle. All at once it was in my head. The last of you is in that box. He made my stomach bloat, and shrink, but inevitably I realised I was doing that all on my own. Blaming him was easy. It was stupidly easy.

I could look at Curtis and remember the stress he caused me. How much he could irk me in an afternoon, and I wanted none of that for that Tuesday afternoon. One of the reasons we mutually agreed to break up was because he no longer understood my depression. Neither did I, sure, because there are many complexities to being depressed, in some twisted sense of mourning that isn't so much sad and heartbroken as it is lifeless and pale and dull. A thunderstorm sky more than a thunderstorm. He would always be attempting to be supporting, because on every level of a supportive relationship that was natural, but sometimes I think the curiosity in me overtook. The curiosity that he wanted me to be suddenly better, to pay attention to him, to comfort him. But it would be cruel to say Curtis didn't know depression like I know depression. We both had our own demons, and they both tormented each other too much. For both our sakes, being apart was the healthy way to focus on ourselves, now that we both realised being together was only stunting some of the growth.

On the phone one night, Curtis paused, silence on his end. Then, he began: you'll never love me even close to how much you love yourself.

It was a lot to unpack for someone that spent a lot of their formative years pulling at the threads and strings and wanting to unravel it all and start over. I used to hate myself. But I grew into myself, met Curtis, fell in love with Curtis, started understanding my brain and my body—only started—and through the eleven months I dated him, he was so unashamedly right. I wanted myself to feel correct, centred, somehow Zen. It was how, I think, I found a way out of being lost in having split from him. Suddenly there was all the time in the world for me to focus on myself, find a good therapist, figure out my anxiety, and my depression, and the five different vibes emanating from my body when I lie there naked with another man. But that's too much to process now, all at once.

Tuesday afternoon—it's early autumn, everything is beginning to cool down, settle from whatever heat wave blew in in the summer and made me consider moving states, maybe countries. Curtis swallowed a mouthful of water before he started making conversation with me, proper.

'How are you, really?' The simplest of questions but I knew from the look on his face he didn't want to know I was managing it well, nor if I was barely holding on either.

'I'm okay, I'm tired, but not any more than usual.' Curtis watched me as I spoke. It wasn't awkward, or a strange feeling—it was comforting, and I moved to sit beside him on the sofa, feeling the weight lifted off the soles of my feet. I asked the question back to him, out of pure politeness. We could've spent the entire afternoon being what other people call *neighbourly*—polite, respectful, getting out of each other's hair at the drop of a hat. Neither of us knew how to act, not completely. We'd only been broken up for a little while. I still felt as though I had been bitter, too bitter, when we had that important conversation about the ending of things, so...I wasn't sure whether, if I apologised suddenly, things would suddenly be a whole lot more comfortable between us.

Curtis looked away, staring ahead at the black mirror of the television screen.

'You're such a dumbass,' he said, the biggest grin growing as he shut himself up, leaving me hanging on the words. At this point our legs were brushing up against each other, but neither of us mentioned it, or pulled away, or anything. He briefly glanced over at me with that cheeky grin, me trying to figure out something to say that wouldn't just come out like a half-baked apology.

'Do you want your stuff or not?'

He laughed me off, nudging my leg with his. 'You won't hold it hostage,' he said, looking over in the direction of the bedroom, where he knew it would be. Most of the stuff he left at mine was in the bedroom—spare clothes, a couple books, a hat, for some reason. He only ever wore the hat when he stayed at mine, throwing it on randomly during the day, or if we went out for a walk, or if I had some exciting thing planned that he'd said wasn't some excuse to get sunburnt and tomato-red.

'What do you call what I've been doing then?' I responded, and he juted his head round to look at me, really take me in again. In the past, we would play a sort of game where I pretended he walked on water and I sunk to the trench at the bottom the moment my entire body left the shore, following after him. 'Sorry, bad joke.' His smile by then was waning, and his head had tilted, slight enough you could've been standing in the kitchen, leaning against the refrigerator, and you wouldn't have noticed. I'll take my chip then: I wasn't exactly a shining example of why relationships work.

Imagine then it was an hour later, and we were in the bathroom, me bent down taking the things off the shelves that he pointed to, and as I stretch back up, straighten myself out, he presses himself against me. Holding my body in his hands, resting his head on my shoulder, he stares at me in the mirror.

'They make things too difficult,' he said, turning his head as if to kiss my neck.

Goosebumps ran down my arms, but I didn't react otherwise—I didn't throw him off me, I didn't snap him out of it, I wouldn't have wanted to. I let him hold me. His embrace was the most comfortable I had ever felt in someone else's arms. Once I was in bed with another man, who seemed to be wanting to squeeze the life out of me while he fell asleep. It was never passionate.

'Who's this they,' I said, looking at him in the mirror. His hair was growing out. I couldn't remember the last time he said he had it cut. He was still so fucking beautiful.

Curtis sighed, our eyes meeting in our reflections. 'I don't know, the straights. The other gays. People that want monogamous, boring relationships, where they expect exact, certain things, and then put on so much pressure too when they don't even have the right to decide how the other person should react, at all.' He was paraphrasing something I'd messaged to him one night, a little after we broke up. Or I thought he was. I remember saying something similar, asking him to stay in my life. Curtis sometimes kept what I said to him on the brain, as someone would repeat their favourite quotes from their favourite movie. But he liked to toy with me too. Change words, change the order of things, say something just slightly similar enough I'd start some strange spiral of things, thinking he was taunting me, playfully.

'And don't you tell me to just be myself,' he said, squeezing my hips. I'd waited for him to start tickling me, but he didn't, not then. We lingered there, wordless, me unsure what to say. I was so

certain I would spoil the moment. That was it with Curtis – why did I always wait for how I would ruin things? I can't contain that to him alone. I've grown into that, how you grow to suit the skin you've slipped over your shoulders. Waiting, waiting patiently, for the moment I ruin something.

We could all see it coming.

Curtis was crouched over the box of his belongings, down at the foot of the bed. I was lying down on top of the covers, my phone near my elbow. It was probably something to keep his hands busy—cataloguing the last of his things that were left at mine, contemplating whether he thought something was missing, like I was the sort of person to pinch a keepsake of his to remember him by.

If he thought as much, he didn't say anything.

'Thanks for reorganising,' he said from the hall, him supporting the box's weight with two palms underneath it, me leaning against the door. He knew he didn't have to explain anything to me anymore.

Of course, I thought to myself, and said aloud, 'No worries. If it makes it easier...' with no real intention of finishing the sentence. What else was there to say?

When you break up with someone, the common thought is *good riddance, see you later*. Or else, *please come back, I'll be worth it*. Or some other grandiose monologuing moment, where a person laments on their entire relationship and why it had to end/shouldn't ever end. The two extremes, really. When I woke up the Wednesday morning, I'd moved on from the day before. Completely severed it. Well.

Neither of us messaged the other for a few days. We weren't going to run into each other in the street, either. I felt guilty, and damaged, and sane, a merry-go-round of emotions flicking me into dizziness. And yet. I spent a few nights, here and there, trying to remember what it felt like to be dating him – and it was like standing in a walk-in freezer without purpose, icing yourself cold.

In Toowoomba, when Curtis and I stopped to grab something for lunch, he looked over at me, sitting on the other side of the table, and he said to me, 'I'm glad we did this.' For a second my stupid brain thought he meant lunch, that he was glad we were eating solid food instead of just snacking on the packets of chips I shoved in my backpack because I knew he'd get hungry eventually. Of course he didn't. 'It's something we talked about since we met, isn't it? Here you are finally getting a chance to take pictures of these flowers.'

I'm glad we did this. Reflecting on everything, there's a sentiment that reaches its mitts over the entirety of our relationship, at least certainly when everything was romantic and *coupley* between us. I was sitting in therapy one morning—an appointment at 9am—and I said to my therapist that I was grateful for him. As cold as the loneliness could be, and as much as I didn't want to be putting up with him as my partner, I was grateful—because it happened, because I grew as a person through the experiences we had together, and some that we didn't.

Weeks turned to months and Curtis and I eventually stopped talking to each other. For a while after the breakup, we'd maintained our friendship, so there was hope it was possible. One morning we caught up for coffee—not that I drink coffee much—and he told me about the sorts of things I was *missing out on* now. There was his brother's birthday dinner, which ended with his brother, Brian, announcing he quit his job and broke up with his girlfriend because he was just really unhappy, okay? There was his friend Lauren's pregnancy announcement—how no one was supposed to talk about how the father wasn't in the picture anymore. Before we parted in the street, we hugged, and it felt comfortable. Friendly. I slipped my earphones into my ears, crossing the road with music weaving its way in, and it felt possible to ignore that idea that your ex-boyfriend needed to be some ghost that haunted you. Curtis then didn't seem like he would ever don a white sheet and float around in an unseen space behind my ears, down the back of my neck.

But gradually he stopped responding to my messages as quickly as he once did, and gradually I forgot there was much reason at all to talk to him.

It's interesting to think about how a person can slowly take a backseat in your life—a way, way back seat—purely when you aren't noticing. Curtis and I would argue sometimes, after the breakup, about little, stupid things, petty arguments that never derailed our *love* for each other. I start to sound so pathetic when I talk about wanting to keep him in my life, when naturally people move on, move forward, no longer feel the need to tell you everything. I was moving on from him. Four months after the breakup, I started seeing someone else—Trent—although after a month and a half, and a handful of dates, I figured he'd ghosted me. Total silence.

Which, truthfully, isn't all that unexpected anymore.

I've had a couple of relationships since Curtis. Short ones, mostly, none as intense and exciting as what I had with him. Sue me if I'm mentioning him too much now.

We don't even talk anymore. Yes, he is my past—constantly remembered when someone wants to know about my love life, the history of it. I don't message him; I don't send him cute videos of children falling over or animals playfully co-existing. I don't think about being in his arms ever again. You let the past sink into itself.



My phone buzzed in my pocket, the soft vibration that is almost unnoticeable. I'd been talking with someone new, but we were still in that stage of talking only on the dating app we started messaging on. He was a genuine sort. He showed interest in actually learning about how I spend my time, rather than just asking me what my hobbies are and then forgetting to really follow up on any one of them. His name was Lincoln. We hadn't planned anything yet—no date, no meeting up—but it was comfortable, just getting to know him first. I shot him a reply, walking with my head down to the screen. Slightly dangerous, if people didn't keep out of my path. But I seemed relatively alone that morning. I was at a train station, waiting on the driver to pick me up and take me to the first day of my new job. I hadn't even mentioned the job to Lincoln yet, in some strange and hushed attempt to not jinx it. Only a handful of people knew I was starting that morning. It felt, to me, like I needed to get through the first few days before I could start to feel more comfortable, more certain I wasn't about to be fired for being incompetent.

I found an empty bench and reached into my backpack for a drink of water. The cold water was soothing, but I still felt on edge. First day jitters.

I reminded myself I wasn't incompetent.

I briefly saw him standing there, like the first day I met him, that dumb grin on his face.

Yes, Curtis.

There's just no point being in this life if I'm not trying to live through it.

2

When I went in for the interview, it was a dull, overcast day, and I'd been rained on walking from the train station. I shook my umbrella out before I went inside. The woman interviewing me was lovely but to the point, increasingly observant and focused. We laughed a couple times. Internally, I was hoping I wasn't a complete misfire in our conversation, giving her no reason why I should be hired.

I was in the backseat of a black Jiminy, and I felt strange. They'd seen potential, I supposed, but I still felt that nervousness of waiting to be sacked the first day on the job, or making a complete idiot of myself while trying to just do my best. I reminded myself I wasn't starting a job with the crazed promise of getting me further in life, in a career that would fully satisfy me. I was working to get paid. Like most people my age, I needed the money, and what the later interviews had promised was work that seemed ordinary enough. I'd briefly worked at a cinema before this, for a few months—the pay was poor, the business was floundering like a fish taken out of the ocean, and when this new opportunity presented itself, I was glad I'd quit serving popcorn in cardboard containers.

The work would be sporadic, I was warned, but it would pay well. Well enough for me to afford to keep paying for the apartment I was sharing with a couple friends. The backseat of the Jiminy smelled of air freshener, and I quickly noticed the little blue penguin dangling from the rear-view mirror. My driver was an older blonde woman, probably in her 50s, and we made conversation for most of the drive from the train station to the house, which was truthfully in the middle of nowhere. We were up north, probably an hour or so from where my grandparents live.

'I have a son around your age,' she said. Her name was Caroline; her son was Jordan, and she wasn't with his father anymore – *thank fuck*. 'He's living in Canada right now, he plays hockey. You watch footage of him in the rink, and you're proud, but if one of those sticks collided with his face you'd be terrified.' She kept her eyes on the road, telling me about how he'd started playing hockey in his teens, and it just stuck.

'People find what works for them,' she continued, smiling. 'For me, that's working for the Cheema's.' We made eye contact in the rear-view mirror, and I tried my best to seem certain, to seem confident. They could have hired anyone.

Outside my window, as the green dispersed for open space, and the two-storey home, I took a moment to properly level my expectations. In an interview, the dark-haired woman told me a few vague details about the place. Her main point, really, was that I'd have everything I needed on the premises, but if I needed to leave for whatever reason, there wasn't anyone waiting to alert the owners over a short departure. The wording was formal, punctuated with care and attention to detail, but I understood through the lines what was expected of me.

First, I was to keep the house occupied.

The owners would frequently be travelling, not just around Australia for business, but around the world for vacations with the kids, too, who were home-schooled. My driver ran through details of the family while she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

‘You won’t really see them all that often,’ she said, sighing as she remembered a vacation they took recently to Bora Bora, and how she’d love to show me pictures of the beaches sometime, maybe if I had spare time this afternoon when she delivered some groceries.

‘Teresa and Divyesh might pop their heads in when they return, ask you how the weather’s been and whether Nena behaved herself, but don’t expect to see the kids.’ Caroline said the two very much kept to themselves—Dakota, from Teresa’s first marriage, was fifteen, and Markus, from Divyesh’s first, was twelve.

Nena was their cat. Caroline joked she’d be the family member I became the most familiar with, because she very rarely left the house, and liked attention when she awoke from a nap.

Caroline walked ahead of me as we entered the house. Beautiful was likely an understatement, but I found myself enamoured already by how the house seemed to camouflage itself with its surroundings. It wasn’t an eyesore in the middle of lush foliage and tree canopies—it was made of brick a shade or two lighter than the dirt, and the roof was a deep green the colour of ferns. Inside, the house made no attempt to pretend it was in the suburbs. Ginormous windows opened out on a rainforest backyard—although Caroline was quick to joke that there was a remote for blinds so you could have a lot more privacy in the living room. Of course the place had a pool. A middle-aged woman with her dark hair pulled back into a loose ponytail was in the kitchen slicing up tropical fruits. The smell of pineapple hit my nose and I glanced at Caroline with a silly grin on my face.

‘This is Essa, she’s here from time to time as a private chef.’

Essa smiled and shook my hand, offering me a slice of pineapple.

‘It’s nice to see a new face around again,’ Essa said, taking up the knife in her left hand once more. The tour continued as we headed for a door leading off the kitchen.

In a stairwell, Caroline glanced at me with a quiet expression on her face. ‘The Cheema’s prefer to cook themselves most of the time, but when they’re away from the house, bringing in Essa is sort of a sweet bonus for anyone spending their days keeping this house well-maintained.’ She laughed to herself softly, remembering something. ‘And the cat too, they’re not big on sending Nena to the kennel or a pet hotel or anything.’

Upstairs, we toured the bedrooms and the bathrooms, and Caroline indicated a guest bedroom I’d be staying in. No one slept in the kids’ bedroom, but typically someone slept in the main suite. It was just part of their job, then, to keep it clean and wash the sheets after their stay and scrub the ensuite toilet. Essa had the main bedroom for the next four days.

‘There’s only three of you here until the Cheema’s get home on Sunday,’ she said, as we stood in the main bedroom, staring out at the gorgeous view of an entire rainforest behind the house. There was a grassy lawn, presumably for the kids, but it abruptly ended with thick foliage. There was what looked like a muddy unofficial path branching off to the left. ‘You, Essa, and Adrian.’

Caroline told me Adrian must be somewhere outside already, muddying his hands. She joked he preferred the sorts of chores that kept him on his feet, or at least kept him working with his hands.

‘Adrian’s a decent guy, he’s been working with us for two years now.’

She’d laughed before, but when we stepped out through wide glass doors and around the side of the house, there was Adrian, pulling up weeds and tossing them in an oversized black garbage bag. His head was down, his eyes shaded by sunglasses, his short hair tucked underneath a red and white cap with a small logo of a sleeping bulldog on it. So, I hadn’t recognised him yet.

Caroline called out to him, waving briefly, a comfortable greeting. Adrian glanced up, drawing up his hand to slide off the sunglasses, and I had that flash, that recognition from his eyes. I knew him, I remembered him, we were in school together, but I wouldn’t have seen him really since graduation. Nowadays, you’re not cut off completely—you see life updates in the form of social media posts, little

uploads, photographs tagged from their friends, maybe they would pop up in the People You Might Know scroller if you've avoided adding them as a friend. Adrian and I would be social media friends, as much as I hadn't said a word to him in years, and neither had he to me.

There had been no reason to talk.

Adrian held out his hand, grinning, and I waited for him to pretend like I was a new stranger hired for the job. 'Hey mate,' he said, as we shook hands. He turned his head toward Caroline as he continued speaking. 'We were in school together, Layton and I.' Then he turned back to me and said, 'It was grade four, right, when I moved to that school and I was put in your class?'

My memory got a little foggier when I thought back on primary school, but I know he must've been a new student one year. He was one of the more athletic kids in primary school, and I remember annual school sport days where he held out colourful ribbons every so often – third places, I think, mostly. I wouldn't call our relationship back then a friendly one, but he wasn't my sole bully, and by high school we barely interacted.

It was nice he hadn't forgotten I existed.

I set down my things in the bedroom I'd occupy for the next few days. I sat down on the edge of the bed and withdrew my phone from my pocket but I didn't unlock it, not yet. It was a surprise seeing Adrian again, the one I knew from school. Well, one of them—there were a couple Adrians. This Adrian had called me a girl, a fag, had said all my friends were girls so I should just become one. All his insults were verbal, but some days it felt like he had shoved me onto the concrete and told me to take a bite out of the concrete. Eat the mud, eat shit, you're annoying and you're weak. P.E was a torment, I hated it, I hated being mocked for how out of breath I could become, or how red in the face I would get. A constant in primary school was the bullies, and there he had stood, with his friends, other brown-haired skinny boys eager to make fun of a kid for just trying to be himself.

I don't know, it's painful to reflect on that.

Seeing Adrian resurfaced it all, even without him muttering out a slur, or kicking my shins, or reminding me I used to be so much more frustrating than I might be now. The latter is a reflection, I suppose. You build up a thick skin, you learn how to improve on yourself, and one person surfaces it all again.

I picked up my phone and checked for messages from Lincoln—from any guy on that dating app, really, some sort of boosting pick-me-up—but there was only one reply, a short unexciting *I'm doing good* from someone I'd matched with the day before coming out to the house.

I reminded myself I didn't need a message from Lincoln, a guy I barely knew, to keep me from thinking this was all some big mistake because a childhood bully was outside pulling up weeds. Maybe I thought he would recycle old material from when I was ten.

Making a mental note to not automatically assume he's still a terrible person, I slipped my phone back in my pocket and headed for the staircase. I heard the gravelly click of the Jiminy down the driveway as Caroline headed into the nearest town for groceries. Waiting for me on the third step down on the staircase, Nena froze, as I bent down to let her sniff my hand. She gave my knuckles a lick. Caroline hadn't understated when she told me jokingly in the car that Nena was almost a houselion, not a housecat. She was a Maine Coon, a lengthy fluff of fur the colour of a Black Forest gâteau. She slunk around my legs, pausing to gently paw at my ankle. Nena followed me down the staircase and into the kitchen, where Essa was now sitting at the breakfast bar, eating a bowl of yogurt topped with some of the fresh fruit she'd been cutting up when I met her a little earlier. She nodded her head when she noticed the cat's instant impression of me, and whispered, 'Nena knows good people quick.'

About an hour later, I was in the pool, scrubbing the pebbly step with a bristly brush as I attempted to combine business with pleasure. There was no formal list for chores, yet, although Caroline had warned me some stays in the house would be well-organised and almost continuous rehearsals of the past, repetition and repetition and repetition. For now, that Wednesday, Caroline listed off a few things I could get sorted before she returned with the groceries for Essa and me to unpack. I'd bumped into Adrian on my way upstairs again, and he mentioned the pool.

He said, jump right in if you're hoping to impress, and I knew he meant more than just scrubbing the tiny black patches that had sprouted up since the pool was last cleaned.

It was lovely weather for it – mid-Spring, not parchingly-hot, but warm enough that the splash of water on my bare arms made sitting out in the sun more bearable. The Cheema's pool was not shaded, except for the reaching trees that surrounded it on two sides. They cast their shade over five pristine-looking loungers, almost brand new in quality, as if they had been both never used and never exposed to the outside. Nothing was frayed or discoloured by the sun. They were neat, although not in a straight line, splayed out in a sort of semi-circle around one end of the pool. I could see myself there, absolutely sticky to the touch with sunscreen to prevent skin cancer (remember to slip slop slap), music drifting out from a speaker inside the house. Forgetting I'm supposed to be working, although I do get spare time, and I can just chill. Bliss in the tropics.

Adrian broke me out of it, leaning up against the pool gate as he said, 'You missed a spot.'

I turn round to face him, lifting the brush out of the water. 'I'm getting there,' I replied, hoping I didn't sound annoyed, although looking at his face right then had made me so. It was what, the fourth thing he'd said to me since I had arrived at the house, but the turbulent memory of him was still in the forefront of my mind. The asshole bully, the clown.

He clipped open the gate and wandered into the pool area, his thongs slapping against the pale terracotta-coloured concrete. I paid more attention then to what he was now wearing—he'd changed out of the more appropriate work gear, the closed-in shoes, the khaki shorts and the maroon polo, and he walked around to one of the loungers in black boardshorts and a thin white shirt. His sunglasses hid his eyes.

'Can I join?' he said, although his asking was more playful in tone, as he knew no permission was needed. I hadn't brought out a second brush, but I doubted he meant to scrub alongside me.

He came around to the steps and dipped a foot into the water, testing the temperature. Adrian made a sort of blowing-out face at the initial shock of cool, but as his second foot went in, his reaction shifted. The water wasn't particularly cold—the Cheema's obviously didn't heat their pool, or at least not in the warmer months. He lowered his body down into it without scrunching up his face at me or cussing it out and splashing it away from himself, like Curtis used to do.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I had my head down, scrubbing away, and I assumed Adrian was there with his eyes closed, picturing somewhere even more paradisiacal than this. Bora Bora, maybe.

I was wearing my arm out scrubbing at one spot that might've just been a feature in the pebble when Adrian turned his head and said to me, 'I know I was a dick to you in school.' I saw myself for a moment sitting in the metal bleachers undercover somewhere in that primary school, him walking past, calling out some insult. Cringeworthy stuff, for sure, but it was never the situation that mattered, it was the hurt.

Adrian was trying to begin an apology, and I wanted to hear him out.

'I was shocked when I saw the new hire was you,' he said, pausing. 'Only because you think once you graduate, you won't see much of the people you never really became friends with.'

Adrian paused, as if to say something else, but he didn't. He became quiet, but not tense—he gave me a quick smile before he glanced off toward the grassy yard and the rainforest beyond it.

It wasn't as if he had forever scarred me since back in those days at school. For the most part, he wasn't a thought that crossed my mind, because the focus was always on what happened, not who did it. I was bullied, the scars cropped up from the words, and the little bruises on my shins when I'd go too fast trying to get away from them. If suddenly I was faced with everyone who had bullied me, I would react differently—but with just him, just Adrian, there wasn't the desire to tear him apart the moment he attempted to make right what he'd said back then.

'I didn't think I'd see you either,' I said, laughing it off.

You make friends easier with strangers.

'They tend to keep the same people around,' he said, refocusing, 'so I'm sure you and I will see each other more, and it's gonna be easier if we just talk it all out now.'

'Yeah,' I said, glancing over at him, 'I don't want you thinking I've still got it out for you, or that I want revenge or anything. Time's passed and all that.'

Reminding myself of that was important. I didn't suddenly see Adrian and think this was the perfect opportunity to sabotage his job, or his personal friendships, or suddenly transport us back to school. If we could be civil, if we could work together, I could go home with money in my pocket and a little bit of released stress, knowing the past is the past is the past.

'The same from me, man.'

'So you enjoy working here, working for them?'

'Yeah,' he said, 'I used to work at McDonalds, back in high school, and the start of uni. I got so worn out by people getting in my way, and the heat of the kitchen, you know? Or I'd be working drive through, and a customer would have the nastiest mouth and I'm like, what am I doing, feeding this? It's shitty to say, but yeah, I wanted out.' He told me he worked another job after that, but similarly it made him feel like he was serving no real purpose—except making people greedier for his attention and his work ethic, really. Adrian didn't use the words *work ethic*, but that was the gist of it.

'When I got this job,' he continued, 'they came across right, if that makes sense. No bullshitting, and it just felt like honest work, while also having a vacation up north away from all the clubbing and stuff that just gets me drunk, and horny, and like fuck it's a good time, but I end up on the couch with a hangover and less money on my card, and I have to earn that money back with a job that pleases lazy people?' He paused, shaking his head as if he knew what I had ready in waiting to say.

'Sure. We're maids and landscapers and butlers and pet babysitters for a family with way more money than any of us make in a year, but I can't stumble into a job that changes everything. You know. Here I get some more freedom to do what benefits me, and we're making sure Div and Teresa's place doesn't become messy and untamed while we visit.'

I got changed in my bathroom, slipping back into what I'd been wearing when I arrived at the house that morning. I heard the engine cut in the driveway. Caroline's voice called out from the downstairs hallway, and I realised then that I hadn't seen Essa downstairs when Adrian and I crossed through to the staircase. She was probably in her own room.

Caroline and I unpacked the groceries, and she told me more about her son. He had to be taller than me, she said, eyeing off my height. Her son Jordan was bisexual—she told me about the first time he invited another man around that wasn't just a friend but was his partner. They'd split up about five weeks later, but Caroline laughed that off—*kids these days, with partner after partner after partner*.

'Anyone wondering where you've gone for four days?' She said, with a sort of nonchalant, relaxed tone in her voice.

'Not really,' I said, carrying a bag of tomatoes over to the refrigerator. 'No partner.'

‘I never remarried after Albert,’ Caroline said, closing a cupboard door with her thigh. ‘But there’s been a few men, here and there. Nothing ever too serious.’ In between her fingers, she held a couple thin cans of Coca-Cola, a balancing act as I held open the fridge for her. Caroline said she’d been married to her ex-husband for a lot of their kids’ childhoods...but, and she sighed, staring me in the eyes, ‘Don’t ever think you should sacrifice so much just to stay together for the kids.’

I was reorganising some of the food in the fridge, trying to make more room for a carton of eggs that Caroline said better last us four days, you only need one a morning, if that. I heard the front door close. I think she must’ve stepped outside to the car again. Essa came in from upstairs, wiping her forehead with a wet washer. ‘I’m here, hun, I just had to go lie down for a few,’ she said, opening up one of the overhead cabinets in search of something. ‘I’ve got a raging headache again.’

She found what she was after—in amongst a cupboard of vitamins and over-the-counter medicines, Essa clutched to a small opaque bottle she told me helped with the headaches. She squirted a few drops of the yellow substance into a glass of water. ‘It’s saffron,’ she replied to a question unasked—except for the expression on my face, one of curiosity, mostly.

Caroline re-entered the kitchen carrying a small package. ‘Forgot this under the seat.’ She gestured with the package towards Essa and I, then noticed the glass yellowing in colour. Essa picked it up and swallowed the liquid down quick. ‘I never know if that stuff works for you.’

Essa smirked as she set down the glass near the sink. ‘Don’t come knocking on my door and you’ll find out.’ With that, she disappeared out of the kitchen once more, her soft footsteps against the staircase. The carton of eggs stared back at me. I made room for them in the refrigerator—compelling stuff, really, nestling them beside two rectangles of butter and a punnet of strawberries.

There was more to be done, but I was theoretically left to my own devices. I went hunting for the vacuum cleaner. Walking into the main living room, I set the vacuum down, plugged it into the wall, and set to it, wishing silently that the least the rich could’ve sprung for was a silent vacuum cleaner that did most of the work for me. But alas...

When I checked the messages on my phone next, there were a few from an older man I had been talking to on the dating app. Asking how my week was going, whether I was staying cool with this humid weather. He had dark hair, was in his late 40s, and worked in the city for one of the universities as a professor in the School of Computer Sciences. Technologically minded and handsome, he told me about what he taught, and he complimented me all the time. I sent back a response: my week was going well, and hopefully should improve now, or at least not bottom out, and yeah, I was absolutely loving this horrible weather, I was practically melting from it.

I almost hadn’t noticed the new message from Lincoln.

What are you doing all the way out there?

I hadn’t mentioned the house yet. I was still on edge. I was hired as a caretaker, and I felt like I would completely fail at taking care of anything, because all I did was kill plants without watering them enough, and I was very familiar with my track record when it came to relationships.

I’m trying not to jinx it.

Five or so minutes later, he responded. I was in the middle of dusting a windowsill.

Jinx what? You’re not making some illegal shady business deal in the sticks without consulting me first, are you? I would never forgive.

I leaned back on the windowsill, texting out my response – probably looking like an idiot, with the smile on my face.

No no no no. It's for a new job. That's all I'll tell you right now, I need to get back to a super important drug deal, actually. Talk later x.

The bluish cloth I had been using to clean the windowsill was covered in dust. I took it to the bathroom sink, began rinsing it out, and avoided eye contact with my reflection in the mirror.

The cloth was saturated, and as I squeezed it out, streaks of cool water sprinted down my arms.

Whenever I start to imagine going on a date with a person, start even just picturing sitting down in front of them, in person, I get a little clingy. Not to a point of spamming them with messages, or demanding we meet as soon as possible—I've got the patience and the reserved nature to wait—but it's when I start to think silence for a longer period of time means I have finally shoved the person out of the way of my oncoming traffic of an existence.

Lincoln and I talked, but in hoping for a future *something anything* with him, I could see the two sides of the coin—and this was probably an uncomfortable and unlucky choice of coin. One side was the slow disappearance, a vanishing act, as the other person slowly but surely stopped talking to me. The other side...the other person sticks around long enough for me to regret opening my heart to them. Look at it differently. They say you can either die a hero or live long enough to become the villain. Is that a foolishly over-the-top cliché for anyone I express interest in, or am I secretly onto something?

Probably the former.

Downstairs, Adrian was framed by a window, trimming the hedges. The sleeping bulldog cap shaded his eyes as he worked, and I rounded a corner, and he disappeared from view. It was early afternoon and the house was quiet. Nena was under a couch cushion, her thick tail poking out like the lure to the sort of nefarious trap a cat would set, or certainly one they would set if they miraculously became human for an afternoon.

Essa was still likely upstairs, sleeping off the headache, and I'd made myself some lunch earlier regardless, rifling through the contents of the fridge for the easiest thing to make to rush back to getting everything sorted. I refilled my water bottle, staring out from the kitchen into the yard. As I'm sure I mentioned, I was settling in well to what this new job promised—an escape, a chance to think while I pretended I was rich but not rich enough to afford constant hired help.

'What are you escaping from exactly?' I recognised that voice, as startling as it was to hear. No one else was in the kitchen with me.

Three months after the breakup from Curtis, I met a tall, slender, tanned-skinned music student who did home deliveries on the side. Nat. We never dated, nothing like that, he just threw me around in bed and complained whenever I asked him about his future or, really, what he thought about a future with me. I was naïve, I think. I wanted to love him and I wanted to hold him, longer than what he offered out to me like it was an olive branch sent from the heavens. It wasn't, not really.

Nat liked to talk about escapes. There was always something he was running from, I think, even if he didn't realise it, or even if it wasn't something so realised as a physical thing, a physical place, a physical person. Because eventually he escaped from me, and maybe it was for the best.

(It was for the best.)

It was his voice I heard, and I thought I'd forgotten how he sounded.

He is gone from my life, I told myself. *Just remember that.*