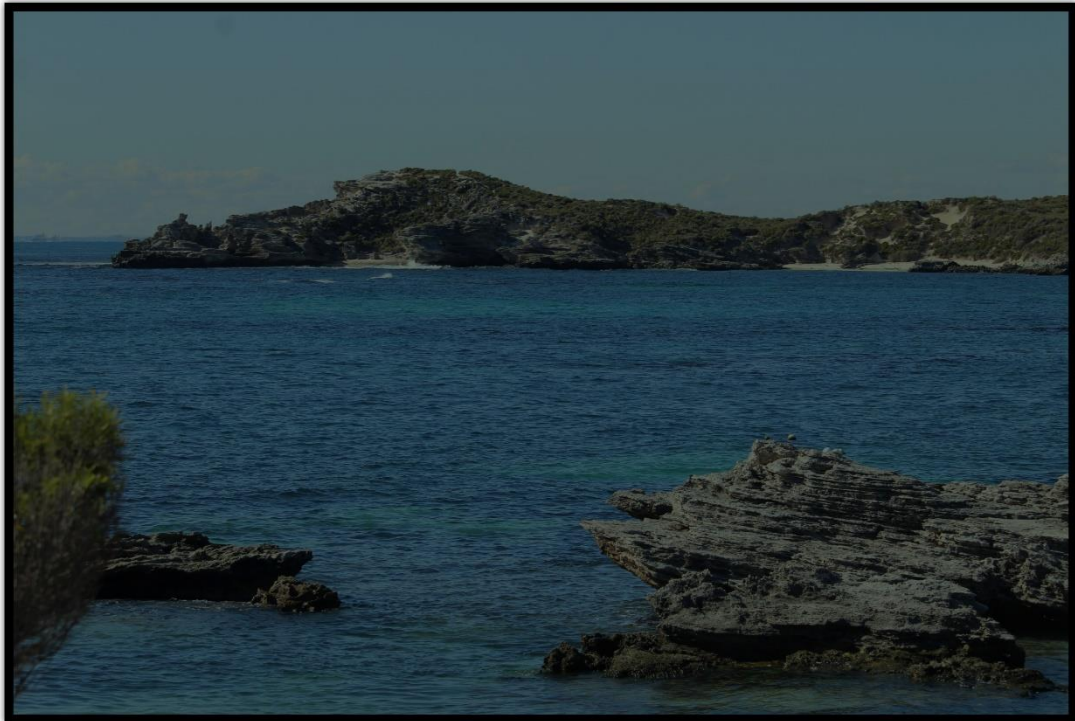


# TOBIAS & OPHELIA & ISOBEL & ADAM



by Keeley Young

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## TOBIAS

The first night sleeping in that bedroom, the knocking at the window not unlike someone tossing stones to get his charmed attention, he slept very little. It wasn't what he would call sleeping, but he was used to worse conditions, used to tossing around with five other people in the same bedroom, some of them obnoxious snorers, others with their own eccentricities. One of them would talk in the middle of the night, mid-slumber, start to mumble a few phrases in repetition at different speeds, different volumes. This he became somewhat adjusted to, until they were gone, and he found himself missing it when the house was too quiet. Deathly quiet.

The first night in that bedroom was better than the second, part of which he spent sitting on the carpeted floor at the foot of the bed occasionally tapping on the screen of his phone, waiting for a message. After an hour and a half, he resigned, climbing, or more like clambering back under the covers with the phone like a hot water bottle on his chest. Someone, maybe an aunt or uncle, had told him when he was younger that an overexposure to technology and the skin, the body, would give you premature cancer. This came with a general warning to expect the disease, a natural function of the body, to become sick and *cancerous* no matter if you clutched to your square of tech waiting for a silent nothing. A text message, and the worst part, the deranged part, was lying awake in the middle of the night left on delivered by one of the people right down the hall.

The third night, he smoothed himself out, flat like a tortilla wrap, ghastly pale as an uncooked one too. During the day, he had stripped the bed, again, and washed the sheets, which either spoke to how unfortunately bored he was, or how drenched in sweat he had become lying there, staring at the ceiling, refusing to mope about the lack of a ceiling fan. The pedestal fan whirred breaths of air on his lifeless body but in the Queensland heat he suffered, retaliated, and flung every fabric off his body, including the white singlet and underwear he was sleeping in. The third night, with sheets firm and tucked underneath the mattress, he left his phone on Do Not Disturb and slept through the night without a whisper of interruption. But for the first time since moving in, he felt the pang of regret.

What the hell was he doing.

When Tobias moved into his former residence, everyone celebrated with alcohol-content-appropriate champagne and toasted to the next-however-many-days of what was promised to be a complete adventure. His luggage—which made it sound extraordinarily like a vacation—was whisked inside by a porter, of sorts, because he entered the front door suspiciously-vacant. No keys, no mobile phone, he wasn't even technically wearing his watch, he borrowed something from his brother as a last-minute

attempt to make himself look, what, more prepared? He never wore watches. Maybe that was a subconscious rejection of the nerd-type. He shuddered in pre-game-press when asked about the chess club he had been in during the last few years of high school. Been in? He kept the floundering thing alive. That was something else to sweat through the sheets about.

When Tobias moved into this three-storey pencil, his new-old roommates clapped him on the back and told him there was a Coca-Cola can in the fridge and maybe some rum in the cupboard, although maybe Adam had downed it the other night. Not last, the one before. Two of them had spent the past three days splayed out across the three floors, splashing themselves with water, staring at the numbers in their bank accounts. They were surviving, or thriving, off the checks from their time on reality television, but in the same breath they were unemployed and nipping at the potential at cashing in on being bit celebrities. Adam and Isobel still had their jobs, their shiny employment, and the two of them could hopefully remain semi-unnoticeable. Being a one-time contestant who made it somewhere in the middle of a reality show no longer in its heyday gave them a sense of anonymity. Tobias and Ophelia had lasted—survived or been lucky—for longer, but they quit their bland professions for something more compelling. Now they lounged in the third-floor living room and kicked each other's feet when they wanted a dopamine hit of attention.

Sometimes he craved what once was. The noise pollution being the sound of footsteps, the soft, almost unnoticeable whirl of a camera or microphone, people talking quiet strategy with a keen eye on the door, waiting to be busted talking behind someone's back. Waiting to forcibly shift the conversation from one thing to an ordinary, generic topic, like a conversation about who left the bathroom in a state of disarray. This was never him. In the apartment he shared with his brother, before booking the show, the bathroom was like a gated community constructed along a train line, and there over the crossing the so-called *wrong side of the tracks*. Toothpaste stains on a metal mug ringed with rust. A knotty hairbrush. Mouthwash bottles collecting like a cult. Tobias' side of the sink bench-top, which on the whole took up more space in the room than anything else, was *safe*. Never quite so clean as to expect a professional responsible, but organised, tidy, adjusted. Sharing with nineteen other people required more wiggle room, more purposeful adjustment. Roommates would always be challenging.

With too much time on their hands, Tobias and Ophelia spoke everything aloud, or at least via text message. On the second night, when he found himself dreadfully unable to sleep, it was because the silent phone on his chest refused to alight for Ophelia. What had he said, what had even been worth waiting for a response for, days later it seemed like a tool for the body to trick the mind into staying dreadfully awake.

It was one in the afternoon and the pair of them, taking a leisurely break from job-hunting, were lounging in the third-floor living room with a pedestal fan oscillating between the two of them. The room, which was nothing more than an open-space hallway connecting the thin staircase with two of the bedrooms and their ensuite bathrooms, had only one window that opened out on the left side of the house. The other windows, peeping tom slits of glass, let in rectangles of light but made the hallway-room feel less like prison than being on a reality show had been. Tobias, reading something on a post-show purchase, a Kindle, lifted his head when Ophelia made a sort of grunt and wiped sweat from her brow.

‘Can’t we tell them we know a half-millionaire?’ She attempted, limply, to fan herself with a tawny hand. *Them* meant the air-conditioning company, who had reminded Adam over the phone their next available call-in appointment, or in their words, “visit,” wasn’t until the end of next week. The *half-millionaire* was a misnomer—while their friend and former roommate, Tat, had walked away with a cheque written out to her for a noble \$500,000, once she was taxed and organised she would hardly be able to tote herself as a half-millionaire for the sake of rushing a *visit* to understand why they had all moved into a rail-thin building with fritzzy air-conditioning that worked for an hour before suffocating the two who had nowhere else better to be.

Tobias straightened himself up and set the Kindle down on the ground, fishing around in his pocket for his phone. ‘She’s not getting stopped on the street for photographs,’ he said, although he hardly believed himself as he said it. Tatianna Deetz was someone who referred to herself as only slightly more introverted than she had once been, the type in high school to be noticed, to be flirted with by the boys, to have at least auditioned for every single school production with the ambition of always being in a lead role. But she hadn’t overnight lost the lustre for the spotlight. Her charisma was natural, oozing charm. Someone would recognise her, notice her, and pause her dallying for a selfie, where she would be beaming the widest smile, because she hadn’t just paraded herself on camera for weeks on end to then fade into obscurity. The fans remembered Tat. The fans were not necessarily employees of whichever company Adam, pillar of straight men everywhere, found online with good, solid reviews.

‘We still know her,’ she reiterated, slowing down the speed of her hand-fan. Ophelia was very obviously sweating, and without a word she climbed out of the low-to-the-ground chair and disappeared into her room, presumably to do something akin to splashing her face with water without ruining her makeup. Tobias didn’t move an inch. He was tired of being too warm, too hot, tired of feeling like a void of himself ever since the greatest experience of his life was torn from him. Applying to be on television was an early midlife crisis, a clutching at freedom he craved. *Employment* had been chasing the bone, a hollow, opaque-then-translucent and back again bone. He spent money and then he

earned a little more. His brother was more successful, and remains so. Even fourth place on a reality show well into its twenties proved to be a stepping stone, but to what? Another bone.

Ophelia and Tobias shared the upper floor of the house, the self-identified children of the proper adults. No one who wasn't Adam or Isobel cared to learn about what they did for work—it would have been mentioned months ago, or in passing, but one of them wore a tie and the other always looked gorgeous no matter the day, and Tobias was in a red polo he never packed for the show because there was a half-moon chipped out of it near his waist. Noticeable, but forgettable. The doomed reality for someone with his statistics.

She was taking some time, some personal time, so he meandered downstairs staring at the screen of his phone, narrowly avoiding a collision with his face and the carpet at the base of the stairs, had he in fact missed the last of them by air-peddling instead of stepping. The afternoon blues stung. The strangely-named group chat for the alum was noticeably quiet—it was Thursday, things would likely become rowdier on the Friday when everyone clocked off from work early, or became overly eager at the idea of pouring a cold beer down their throats and occasionally splashing their necks. The barely-named *queer men* sub-group chat, which included himself, Diesel, Zayn, Fletcher, Donny, Will, and Dylan, was the previous day inundated with *hump* pictures, somewhat of a tradition Zayn had kicked off the week or so after the season wrapped. At first, only three participated—Zayn, initiator, then Diesel, endlessly celebratory of his body, and Tobias himself, covering up in a fairly ordinary pair of underwear. This past Wednesday everyone had been involved. Fletcher was modelling a new pair of black underwear, almost too obviously something Zayn would have fished out from a start-up online somewhere. Donny, whom everyone seemed to forget was in his forties because he was effortlessly attractive, left the boys a tinge thirsty by semi-obscuring himself behind a thick white sink. Tobias knew the sink well—when he spent the night, platonically, at Donny's place a few days after the finale, it was an overlooked corner-piece of the grand tour. The thick white sink was featured in many, many of Donny's aptly-named thirst traps. Will, the oldest of the group and text-shy, opted for underwear too, and nothing newly-bought, nothing slipping between the crack. Dylan was mooning the camera. It was a surprise he knew there was even plump flesh down there on the backside of his body.

As noiseless as the lines of communication were, Tobias knew regardless there would be conversation throughout the day. Aside from a few—the early boots, the older folk, Sunni—those statements of finding lifelong friends rang true. With four of them now living together, the psychosis of something akin to Stockholm Syndrome seemed to ring true too. They were clinging to one another. Obsessed with one another. Tobias had sobbed when, in back-to-back weeks, Geordie and Isobel were eliminated from the game. The sentence alone sounded absurd. He avoided saying it aloud.

When the air-conditioning was fixed, maybe they ought to think about reverse-installing an elevator. The place was barely sizeable enough for a flight of stairs, it would have been more wisely plotted to have included a ladder instead, but the staircases were steep and never-ending. Once he was back on the first floor, opening the refrigerator, contemplating how nutritious eating pickled European-style baby cucumbers off a fork would be, Tobias heard the faint call of Ophelia's voice from above.

'In confessional without me?' Then the audible patter down the first of the two staircases.

Tobias felt he had moved into a house out of a Dr Seuss drawing. Or at least the one out of *The Lorax*, which he had coincidentally rewatched while in the lockdown period before going in. Sometimes he wondered if every experience now had a periodic label to it, pre-game, post-game, before-fourth-place. Ophelia was about the same level of self-aware as he, buried in her phone on the certainly-dangerous stairwell, visibly and openly, aggressively awaiting to claim another murder victim. She stumbled in on Tobias succumbing to urges, plucking a baby cucumber off the fork with his fingers. 'Hungry boy,' she said, readjusting the one-colour black headband keeping her hair out of her face. 'I want to go somewhere tonight, but then who goes anywhere on a Thursday, and I want to invite the half-millionaire we know, but she's in Melbourne, claiming she can't take another holiday because her boss didn't refill her vacation days, even though she could just take unpaid leave again because she won a freaking reality show!' Ophelia made a show of being overdramatic, collapsing with a sigh onto the couch brought by Adam. Not bought—he claims to have owned this very couch since he was twenty, and it is depressingly obvious, but no one dare say anything. At twenty-seven, with an allowance from placing ninth on a reality show, he ought to be able to afford something beyond sentimentality and nostalgia. The very suggestion he might have wooed a woman on the very object... Tobias shuddered.

'She's not a half-millionaire.'

The term was one of endearment, and Tat would beam when you said it around her. Literal, physical golden glow would emanate off her. 'I want another reunion of everyone, already.' Ophelia lifted herself up, shoulders less slumped, posture less deplorable. 'Remember when they brought back the exact cast from one season for a version of a redo, although it wasn't to shame the winner, it was more an attempt to capitalise on how everyone had loved being in each other's company and they made great television, and what's something the world loves?' She paused for emphasis. 'Great television.'

It had only been a few months. Tobias rejected the idea she was suggesting they replay the winter of discontent and backstabbing merely because they all, what, loved one another? He knew for one Isobel had appointments she wasn't delaying any longer. Waiting lists are not patient. He screwed on the lid of the glass jar and cocked his head at a girl clearly rejecting her unemployment.

'Need me to help you write a resume?'

Ophelia cackled, then groaned, grimaced, faked a sarcastic smile, spinning out into an acting exercise for an amateur actor in desperate need of learning the basic emotions of facial expressions. One of them was less certain of their future, and it was the no-vote finalist who had broken up with their partner about three weeks before lockdown. Ophelia walked into that house deflated. Tobias always attempted to pretend he hadn't noticed it, that her confession the fourth night in the house, when she couldn't sleep and couldn't imagine dreaming, had been a complete and utter surprise. Delusion to spot the longing eyes, the little flirtations, with Adam especially. *I never actually wanted anything with him*, she'd whispered then, although meeting nineteen strangers meant you were almost destined to find one of them hopelessly attractive. Tobias crushed hard on Dylan and Donny, which proved pointless on his front, because one was in a steady, stable relationship and the other was happily, deeply married. When Tobias stayed with Donny for the one night, those handful of days after the finale, he felt like their son returned home from university. *I hope you don't mind we converted your bedroom into a personal gym*.

Tobias sat down in front of his new laptop, bought about two weeks after the finale. It was shiny, it purred like a kitten, it never whiffed anywhere close to having an issue or displaying an error message. His last computer, a brutish beast he had never bothered to replace because it would have cost him employment money, had been phased out now, scrapped, buried, forgotten. His brother Zane was more likely holding it hostage. Stringing it up like Nebula.

His own resume looked drab. Applying for jobs felt equally dull. The gap in his timeline was not something he could be employable for, not unless he dreamed of being a sick influencer making videos about which brand of detergent cleaned out the stain on his whites, or which theme park had the scariest ride. Ophelia, just the other day, suggested the four of them take a Saturday to go to an amusement park, she was fond of the water-based ones, they would at least keep everyone cool from the miserable weather, but Tobias shuddered. He wondered if one of the deliveries she signed for was video recording equipment, a little GoPro she could clip onto her head as she dove onto an inflatable and swirled down towards a faked, highly-publicised future.

When he applied for something, he felt somewhat confident—confident he was not void of skills, of achievements, but there was a nagging feeling. A lull in his pride. Tobias refused to call it agony, or refer to it as pain, when he knew other people walking the planet suffered worse than he did. He wondered what Ophelia was doing. When she messaged late at night, confessing these were the same feelings she experienced the very first week. Thinking you have no potential is like a breakup.

Tobias caught himself staring at the series of humps. There was Donny, not blocked by the thick white sink, shielded by it. Protected. There was a king, when Tobias was nothing more than the errand boy, trying to fetch a new dream.

## OPHELIA

The night before, she was on the phone to Tat, in her city-skyline apartment no doubt. The two of them had grown close during their time as handpicked roommates, as it were, but neither had naturally thought about the possibility of moving for a friendship. Of course, Ophelia with her inexperience and lack of an actual job could have—there had been a handful of emailed influencer opportunities, phone calls when she was lounging about the place, but these things were never necessarily tied to this city, this state. The sunshine state, as it were. Ophelia didn't feel bright, or colourful, and neither was her wardrobe. Purples, greys, blacks, the splashes of red and sometimes blue. She despised wearing yellow and orange because it made her complexion look like the filter they plastered over any production set in Central-or-South America. Her parents raised her on a lot of movies, wanted her to be experienced in culture, not merely their own—her mother Bolivian, her father Honduran, both the children of immigrants. The stories were interesting, perhaps watered down by the Americanisation, the saturation of yellow, orange, dust, but these films paled in comparison to works of art specific to the countries. Ophelia liked to know where her heritage came from. Although she regardless felt separate from it, living in a different country, different continent, having grown up specifically to understand and appreciate what it meant to be Australian. It was the promise of a life of opportunity, but it was unavoidable to think about who she would have been in Bolivia, in Honduras.

In this country, she was a woman in her early twenties, one of the youngest in the cast for the season, who had half-attempted to make a little pocket change from streaming horror games while she studied something generically helpful—business. She majored in marketing and boasted about hating it, so far as to permanently delay the course load in favour of sitting in waiting room, in front of interviewing panels, talking about herself and answering their psychological mindfuck questions. Would you lie to someone's face and then later gaslight them about it? She came to those casting sessions aware she wanted to betray people, wanted to slip into the alias of her gamertag and assassinate if her own neck were on the line. The horror games had given her the thrill of confronting fear, the phobias others would cower in the face of.

None of this blocked the potential to fling aside everything and journey south, akin to one of the fantastical-world games she used to play on the sofa with her older brother watching on. With names like Romeo and Ophelia, they realised in adulthood, a little late, how romanticised their parents were about the works of Shakespeare, a poetic genius especially in the eyes of their father. He would rarely consider himself a scholar—he had never studied the plays and the sonnets, but Ophelia sneaks a Shakespearean-themed gift under the Christmas tree and his face illuminates.

Ophelia, late into that phone call, had considered asking Tat whether there was a couch she could sleep on, just until she found a place of her own down there, and some sort of employment. Her parents wanted her to resume her studies, but she had not spent the better part of a year in the whirlwind of something unexpected to return to drab, dull monotony. Return to business, ironically, forcefully. She considered what more *training*, learning in marketing would do for her *pitch*: her argument, persuasive and well-constructed, delivered to Tat without the crumbling pretence of purely their love for one another, their friendship. Best buddies, right until the end.

She didn't say anything over the phone. Didn't dare. It would have been difficult to gauge her friend's expressions, her immediate reaction, how her face would have changed before even a single word was spoken. None of this Ophelia would have been keen to notice when all she could listen for was a change in breath, and then words, which could have been lies, half-truths, a concoction meant to dissuade her from quitting her day job. The irony of not having one, of having nothing but a bank account and the rummaging around for something. Anything. She acted polite and excited, enthralled, when she had answered the phone to a likely scam. It does not even make sense where they would have gotten her phone number from. Production, maybe. Zayn, maybe.

The very night of the finale, Zayn was cuddled up—there was an arm around his thin, twiggy shoulders—to someone apparently worth something, a damn, maybe. It was the after-party, rarely deemed an official gathering sponsored by production. No cameras, no pristine lighting, no crew, no catering. The bill for alcohol and food typically covered by someone greedily clipping the shoulders of cast with sticky fingers. A Mr So-And-So. Zayn, who paraded around the house in the weeks and weeks before his elimination in skimpy underwear and a cloth tied around his waist as swimwear. Laughing in the ear of Mr Important. With enough distance to avoid deafening the man, but enough proximity to make him feel like Mr Very Important. Zayn, beautifully shameless, practically with one leg thrown over this man's lap, and Ophelia would have watched him thinking, it will happen, it will be strange, private, the two of them isolated in a hotel room later that night, sobering with plastic bottles of water. Zayn's petite black body moving from sheet to flesh. She liked to believe they would keep things business-professional, maybe only kiss, maybe only a hand rising up underneath the gorgeous silk shirt.

But this attention, this appealing to desires, was how Zayn found productivity and Ophelia sat in front of her laptop thinking up something corny but charming to *appeal*. A production assistant mentioned former contestants make a lot of cash, a lot of dough, recording short videos in response to prompts written by fans. The roar of the crowd at the sound of her name on finale night had to mean there was some interest, unless genuine excitement was dead. Ophelia was still rebuilding her setup to stream the latest horror release. She worried a fan would ask her to scream, to scream louder. To howl. Give us a cry of desperation, you are completely mortified, and then I will believe you. Then I will pay.

She could go bother Tobias, but all the pair of them did was twiddle their thumbs or distract one another. She tossed out the suggestion of one of the water-based theme parks, hoping no one would recognise her—she hoped for a day completely with anonymity, and maybe Tobias and Isobel were queer enough, and maybe she was ordinary enough. But Adam was too attractive, too much the image of the female gaze, he would be recognised anywhere or else every straight woman would at least threaten to host an Adam Affeldt look-a-like contest in their bedroom with him as the sole attendant. He was stereotypically handsome, white, with brown hair, a scattering of nonsensical tattoos on his body in obscure locations, like the sea star halfway up his leg, almost impossible for him to see without bending at a sharp angle. Contorting his body, flexing his muscles.

Beautiful boy.

The four of them would garner a smidgen of attention. Tobias finds the subreddits where people post *content* of former contestants—Instagram stories, mostly, a barrage of shirtless pictures of Diesel, and the third-placer from the season before, Matt, who is thirty seconds from launching an adult-only tier. Footage of Zayn in the skimpy bikini, too. Those desperate enough to crave for whatever you might have of Donny Bunyard, of Geordie, who is the exact same age as Ophelia is, albeit younger by a few months. Geordie born in December. Ophelia could stalk these salacious pages if she craved his v-line, Adam's, but he's shirtless every morning before work, and she doesn't like him anymore, not like that. Not since he talked about his then-girlfriend Sophie while he was on the show, to a small crowd who would listen, and every screaming teenage girl cried in it-never-would-have-been-me-anyway. But there were pictures of Adam. Shirts made him itchy.

She could go bother Tobias, but he seemed, since moving in, to want to further himself, better himself. When he sat out in their makeshift third floor living room with his sparkling Kindle, Ophelia imagined him reading guided self-help books about utilising your strengths, maximising on your weaknesses, coming to power with what others would consider to be an ordinary gift of the human race. Just by the intensity of his gaze. He was almost certainly not reading a trashy hardcore porn hockey novel. Maybe he had been squinting. Uncertain. It seemed, at least to her, impossible to shatter this focus, this determination to better himself or whatnot, by asking something pedantic. Like: 'Can't we tell them we know a half-millionaire?' That had been so incredibly stupid. Childish. Her age worn on a scout's badge, pinned to her chest. I am twenty-three but I had my birthday when I was not existing in a normal state of being. Ophelia sighed aloud just thinking about Tobias' internal reaction, how she had centred yet another conversation around her friend's newfound wealth, around her absent friend. Tat.

It was difficult to focus without air-conditioning.

Ophelia started a message to Tat, but when the idea had finished presenting itself, had been written out on the screen, she laughed at herself. The motivator of her words was this lull in being productive—if she sat in front of a webcam and a microphone and gave her thoughts and review on a moisturiser, maybe the thoughts would vacate. Tat, who was busy, Tat, who was successful, beyond merely the title. Ophelia, who was ordinary. Unextraordinary.

Like those children allergic to the sunlight, she closed the curtains of her third-floor room and lied down on the bed, imagining a nap. She closed her eyes and tried to count sheep, although instead of sheep it was woolly, multi-coloured llamas, an invention of her mother's when she was very little. Maybe sheep were a white person's thing. Ophelia, who was exhausted, felt the ache in her ankles, the places which held her aloft, kept her from tumbling down the flights of stairs. It was sometime in the afternoon on a Thursday, and she willed the world to knock on the bedroom, no specific person, but the world, an embodiment of earth and stone and the squishy, squeezy warm centre of it. A chasm of oozing magma. Somehow, she would see this physicalness of the planet and see this red-and-orange core, this heart, or stomach, made of determination to reach the summit, the peak. For a school camp when she was eleven, there was a mandatory mountainous hike, which they had taken a half-hour bus ride to reach the base of. At eleven, Ophelia liked the sound of Mt Everest, although not in the pursuit of climbing it. She wanted to bear witness, although the words were muddier, primary school sense of *I want to watch*. A drone above. Bodyless, caught by the wind, astral spectator, waiting to be joined. Joined. Ghostly. She wanted to see if it were true, if someone would perish on Mt Everest. The same year she dyed the tips of her hair jet black and laughed when some of her friends, four or five of them, suggested a playful, nothing-official talent show during the lunch breaks. *That's dumb*.

No one slept. Not she nor the llamas projected in her head. It was—Ophelia leaned over and checked her phone, which was on 31% battery—3:58pm. She knew the prison break escape was the keys in the front door, Isobel and Adam, whoever arrived first. At the rhythmic sound of their voices, Ophelia could escape, briefly, from thinking herself useless, and pointless.

There were still a handful of small words in the text bar in a message to Tat, so she deleted those and close out of the app completely, worried her friend might have noticed. She shook her head. *No one looks*, she thought, glancing at the time again. 3:59pm. Ophelia and Romeo had grown up watching the Disney Channel, the pair of them glued to it, glued to the playfully-unhinged drama of teenagers and cartoon recreations of animals. In the sequel to one of the Disney Channel Original Movies, the students sat there at their wooden, architecturally-bizarre desks, counting down to summertime. Summer. Summer. Summer. It was a repetitious chant. Signed in blood, they wanted summer. Maybe I took summer for granted, Ophelia thinks, glancing at the clock again. 4:00pm.

It was difficult to focus without air-conditioning.

‘Having fun?’ It was Adam, suddenly keeping her company. He was unbuttoning the first button, freeing his neck. It was obvious he needed a shave, but Ophelia found it attractive, the scruffy look on him. But she wasn’t attracted to him anymore, not on a personality level—aside from being definitively masculine, and definitively appealing to women, he had the habit of pissing her off.

Ophelia was in the downstairs “den,” a combination study and arrangement of seating for Adam to sit in the evenings pondering and having a beer. She was resetting the router—another failure, the internet buffering too frequently now, although someone in the house was blaming this specifically on population density and an overworked network. This disembodied voice, suddenly becoming a blur and a shadow and grey whenever he talks about an unavoidable problem. At that moment he was upstairs, presumably in his bedroom, maybe jerking off. That was the joke: if you were unsure where Tobias was, assume he could be caught with his pants down. Assume that of most men, at least under the age of forty, at least if they are single and reclaiming their privacy.

Her phone dinged as she stood waiting to switch the router back on. Adam was somewhere behind her, lingering in the doorway. ‘How was work?’ They were going to ask each other back-and-forth questions, then, and ignore the sensation of an interview. Her response would have been a mumble and a groan, anyhow. Adam said work was fine, which meant he was likely twiddling his thumbs too, distracting himself by talking to coworkers and texting Diesel. Diesel, who lived in an inner-city suburb in Sydney, who licked salt off the stomachs of pretty white boys in dingy clubs on Oxford Street. The gay clubs, yet another place Adam would be picked clean off the bone for looking that good. Ophelia bent over again to fix the router and hid her sigh.

She watched too intently at the corner of the screen, waiting for the 5G to kick back over to the perfectly-designed Wi-Fi symbol. There was still the message, from someone, but Ophelia started to wonder whether it was an unimportant Instagram notification telling her someone interacted with one of her posts preloaded from before she went into the house. Various unedited pictures of herself waiting around outside in the lunch hour, wondering whether she landed the right impression on the auditioning panel, and Romeo unseriously packing her luggage mere days before she received the final word. You did it. Ophelia Sylvis, maybe you’ll be a half-millionaire.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, she thought, at the exact same moment she was staring over at Adam, scratching at his throat. ‘What are you having for dinner?’ It was an attempt at a save, her expression hindered by thoughts, by thinking of blurting out something stupid yet again. Instead, no, she thought, I should climb back upstairs to the bedroom I call the personal sauna and flick on *Dead by Daylight* until I am swallowed whole by a Demogorgon.

Adam was serene. ‘Split a pizza with me?’ He grinned. Being alone with him was tumultuous. Not because she wanted to make some attempt of a move, but because she felt it unavoidable to not be

commanding all his attention. If at work he had been distracted by his phone, desperate to free himself from the shackles of wearing a button-up shirt with thin blue stripes, at home he seemed to require attention. Ophelia wanted his mouth-hole to open up wide and swallow her.

But that sounded too erotic.

They lounged on that seven-year-old sofa and flicked through the menu for a local pizzeria down the street. ‘Meatlovers?’ He glanced at her with raised eyebrows, and she thought about punching that handsome jaw of his. Their friendship dynamic had become cheekily flirtatious but never advanced from that—Ophelia would sooner hurt herself than let him have the honour. ‘Chicken supreme? Oh, nah, not with the olives.’ He was likely talking half to himself, nudging his shoulder into Ophelia’s as if reading a word aloud required his body to move ever so slightly. He irritated her. The night of the finale party, Zayn unaccounted for but I-promise-you-I’m-safe, she texted Tat with one hand, the other refusing to set down the vodka soda.

*He spent the entire time as if he knew.* Purposefully vague, waiting for someone to look over her shoulder. And where was Tat, if not right beside her, an ear for whispering? The vague remembrance of her with an overindulgent faux-fur coat, impossibly surrounded by family. Her sister. Ophelia liked to worry Robyn **disliked** her. Disapproved, maybe. There were how many episodes of filmed TV content where she was paraded around, leaving an impression, leaving a purpled mark. *Sophie’s not here anymore*, Tatianna texted back five minutes later.

‘Pepperoni like Will’s nipples, you remember the first time he went shirtless in the backyard pool, and all of us, we felt ashamed for making it immediately an environment where he felt like the older dude who should be made to leave his shirt on?’ Adam struggled to choose an expression. Ophelia was beside him, half-frowning. Will was the oldest amongst them, late forties, but he was beloved. This was the sort of backhanded anecdote you memorised when you wanted to become unforgettable on reality television. Hilarious and sympathetic outside of the moment. You remember his nipples?

‘Me and Tobias should eat a loaf of garlic bread like that, uh, I know it doesn’t work because they’ll have sliced into it already, but we can beg and plead? Like those two Italian dogs.’

Ophelia fought back the strange reflection. ‘Lady and her tramp,’ she said, wondering, then, if that was one of the movies she and her brother would have adored when they were younger. For now she could distract herself not with her roommate, not with Adam, but with the coloured-in image of him and the one more likely to enjoy it, Tobias, playing a game of garlicy Chicken with the whipping tongues. This is why she stayed, she thought, closing her eyes for a split second, just to exhale.

‘I want cheese.’ Adam just laughed.

## ISOBEL

This was not the right appointment.

Isobel sat in the waiting room at the ordinary doctor's office, waiting what was now at least fifteen minutes longer than she expected. Work finished, an infernal buzzer heard only by canines, and she fled via bus to the general practitioner's, willing to complain about the lower back pain long enough for them to sign into effect a care plan for a handful of sessions with an osteopath. The handful of massages, professional and not, had seemingly made the evening agony worse. Pseudoscience could accomplish something, or at the very least a semi-attractive man would be kneading and threading and unknotting. This was the frustrating appointment. An unwanted, unwarranted frustration, rather than something to be resolved. Isobel was sweating. She booked the appointment with a doctor she had seen only twice, a fresher face, someone more likely to take her seriously. Potentially the avoidance of a head-tilt and a confused correction meant she would be respected. This was the wrong appointment.

Waiting for the doctor to call her name, the correct one, she felt the ache of her lower back and winced. This, from years of sitting behind a desk—first, the medical receptionist job, then the other medical receptionist job, albeit then it was in the dead-centre of the city and the uniform was nicer, crisper, whiter. Name change. Then the office job, offensively working for the government, with the coworkers who loved to misgender her as if the driver's licence floated above her head. Name change, again, almost—it was her sister, Ava, who halted her that late October night with their legs dangling in the pool, and said, 'I still think Isobel is beautiful.' The current job. One which afforded her "leave" for a winter vacation as assured and *convincing* to her as realising, or knowing, she was always trans, from the day she was born.

It was eighteen minutes after her appointment time and the female doctor in her thirties brought Isobel in, apologised profusely, and had the paperwork sitting there, awaiting details, awaiting the appropriate clinic, awaiting to be signed off. Isobel felt a sense of relief. This no-good appointment was to be manageable and unspectacular, but it was still not the appointment she longed for. You were supposed to be ordinarily-excited for everything, the same level of intrigue, interest, but when she was younger Isobel had loved waking up Christmas morning to see which of the Bratz dolls on her wish list to infamous Sandy Claws would be unwrapped and unpackaged. It was the same excitement, running in socked feet through the house, she had for the actualised mirage of her bottom surgery appointment.

It was six-fifty-five by the time she was on another bus. Rightfully exhausted, Isobel plugged the earphones into her ears and started another listen of Lily Allen's *West End Girl*. Start to finish. It would be paused when she stumbled inside, expecting Adam on the couch, but for now she needed to mouth

the lyrics to herself and wait for the right stop. The bus was relatively crowded, she was surprised to have bagged a seat, but her companion in the third row from the back was a ten-year-old boy on the way home with his mum, who sat one row in front and never seemed to worry he would be frightened of the complete stranger beside him.

There is peace when the world moves behind you and there is nothing tethering you to it. An elderly man with a brown-trim fedora heaves on the sliding door of a Laotian takeout place. A woman with her teenage son, him lagging behind with a pair of oversized black headphones, her ahead with two Coles fabric bags, one in either hand. A communion of pigeons on the lid of an underwhelmed bus stop. Those spikes, prods to deter birdlife, they make her squirm. It's the obsession human beings have with existing in a world that must interact and understand them, not the other way around. Heaven forbid a human being pause for a moment, take a glance at what the humble pigeon receives from taking perch, and forgive the collateral of a nest. Of droppings, of guano. The squeal of a newborn bub, a chirper, the little offspring. Heaven forbid we coexist, she thinks, eyeing the flashing Bus Stopping sign overhead. The next alight is hers. About seven minutes from home.

Adam and Ophelia are lingering in the central living room, waiting for pizza delivery. 'The gang is back together,' Adam says dryly, moving to the fridge for something to wet his tongue. Isobel glanced around for Tobias, erstwhile expecting him to be bent at an angle, cushioned underneath the sofa. A frightened cat. He was nowhere to be seen, for now. She shouldn't feel the need to be territorial, protective, wondering where one of her recent close friends was the very moment she arrived home, exhausted, deflated. Maybe the sight of him would make her feel more comfortable. Queer people tend to flock together, like pigeons on the lid of an underwhelmed bus stop. When he said, *Hi, I'm Tobias, thirty-something*—he's thirty-one—and *I'm queer*, or maybe she is misinterpreting her memories, who knows, but he said he was queer, gay, and her shoulders stopped tensing. There could have been transphobic people in that house, watching her, disgusted by her, but there was at least one ally, one friend. Although, and the research feels less like research but betrayal, sometimes she would come across queer men, particularly cisgender gay men, who opposed transness, who either didn't understand the *thought* of it or thought **that** was the betrayal. Isobel's stomach turned. Tobias was comforting.

Albeit, absent.

'Is he upstairs?' She heard herself say, instinctually, and the other two nodded and gave sort-of responses and Isobel began to climb the first of the flight of stairs, the fabric of her clothes melting off her body. At the summit of the first, she shed the shirt, unafraid of those she shared a private world with seeing the bareness of her stomach. It felt comfortable, for a second. The second floor and she was

standing without a shirt. *Fuck*. Everything felt exposed to her. She rushed into her bedroom for one of the men's tees she wore around the house, usually in the evening. Never one she wore before she started calling herself Isobel, proper. It had been important to sever.

It was important to be comfortable. Tobias was comforting.

She changed, out of the unofficial uniform, no longer smelling of doctors' office waiting rooms and sweat. She fanned herself with an open palm and texted Tobias. *Can I come up?* Just in case he was wandering back into his bedroom from having a shower, completely buck naked. Although she had seen him sans-clothes, a handful of times. He was beautiful, but they were polar opposites on the attraction spectrum. Tobias, lover of gorgeous boys, Isobel, lover of fine-as-hell women. He never sent the ugly Thumbs Up emoji, or never sent only an emoji as a response, unlike both of her parents, lovers of vague communication. Occasionally each other. They divorced four years ago.

Tobias had invited her up, and Isobel climbed the second staircase, reminded of the notion that heat rose upwards. The third floor was beginning to cool down, as time approached seven thirty, but it was humid, uncomfortable, and early December, summer. Isobel tapped on his door, secondary precaution, and moved in at the sound of his reliable voice. Tobias was sitting crosslegged on the covers, the Kindle set down beside his thigh. 'My day was not productive, no,' he began without being asked, and she smirked, making herself comfortable in a diagonal from him on the bed. His mattress was springy, only a few months old, it would have been the perfect trampoline for the two of them when they were both carefree little children.

Isobel had to admit it felt bizarre to be younger than him and yet be the successful, working-a-real-job one out of the two of them. Granted, of course, he had lasted longer on a cultivated reality show, but sometimes it made her queasy, to be more prepared for the future than Tobias. Fascinating, intellectual Tobias. She had lucked into this position after thinking the interview went about-average—there would have been more qualified candidates in waiting rooms, less gender-strange candidates too, this is how she processed the inevitable. Frighteningly, blaming her "incomplete" transition kept her from souring when she interviewed for a handful of positions some months before and heard absolutely nothing back. Not a lick. *Too early in my transition*, she rationalised, and it ached, but the ache came weeks later. The ache came when she realised this negative growth had been *protecting* her. This harmful toxin, on her side, carting the trebuchet. Flanking with the shield. *Too early*, as if she were learning a foreign language, a foreign concept. Not merely able to be at last a woman.

'I can't be third-wheel to those two,' she said, albeit her tone unserious and jokey.

Tobias had the wide Cheshire grin. 'Okay, I'll come down and be sociable.'

He went to move, but Isobel spoke again, conversation clearly not yet over.

'Toby. I missed seeing your face. Thank you for coming on this journey with us.'

It sounded a tad cultish, but she meant it in earnest. Could you kiss a friend on the mouth just for loving their presence, loving that they were here again—Tobias had spent a night or two in this very building, in this home, not long after Adam and Isobel had found it. Call it a trial run, unofficial and not dissimilar to camping out on the friends' sofa after one long, late night of being obnoxious and being a little loopy. Like a childhood slumber party. Without spinning a bottle, although if you invited round those in the cast who kept the most in contact, almost all of them would have snogged one another. Zayn, the flirt. Dylan, restrained only somewhat by a monogamous relationship with the pretty, unexposed girlfriend, Mae. Fletcher would kiss anyone, although the boys would find themselves brushing up against a sea-lion tongue. Showman-like, eager to perform a trick. Iris, her marriage was healthily-open, although whether they spoke much about what they wanted to know about... Isobel didn't know, but she knew the way Iris spoke, the way she interacted with the other boys, those cropped handful of weeks she was still in the house, and at the after-finale party.

Adam, the revved motorcycle, would nudge the bottle to land on one of the girls, but anyone except Ophelia. Isobel sensed he didn't want to kiss her. Ruin something. Disrupt something else.

'Journey?' Tobias chuckled, raising an eyebrow. 'If you're looking for the ring, I'm not interested, someone else can have it.' His reference was half-understood, and politely Isobel smiled and shook her head.

'I just mean it will be exhausting living with the three of us, individual, noticeable personalities. You know that. You have done it before, so there are no surprises, except we act differently coming home from an exhausting day trying to be advocative, necessary cogs in the function of society.' She paused, sighing. 'I can't imagine how I would have interacted with everyone had I first needed to handle business, then had an annoying appointment with an unknown doctor, and then climbed into bed with the decision of voting someone out of the house on my mind.' Talk of that time scratched the wrong itch for Isobel—instead of alleviating pain, blood clotted at the source, staining her skin. It was uncanny, to think for however many weeks she had been existing incorrectly, but then... existence had been incorrect for a while, too. You scratch and the pain does not go away.

Isobel and Tobias went single-file down the two staircases and came upon Adam and Ophelia hovering about two pizza boxes and a slender, aluminium-foil-wrapped garlic bread. Adam lifted this into the air and swung it briefly like a lightsaber, his target the other dark-haired man in the kitchen. Tobias feigned shielding himself, and it was all mildly amusing, although Isobel was only paying attention enough to write the summary. She took a slice of pizza and bumped shoulders with Ophelia. Moments like these made any patient wait worth the trauma. The four of them, delaying another day. The world was darkening outside but Isobel wouldn't sleep for at least another three hours, and that was the certain bliss she looked forward to when she knocked off work.

The four of them, gracious and likely to be mumbling about pizza in their sleep that night, settled around the coffee table in the living room. Although *settled* made things seem polite—they were not relaxing, contenting themselves on the seven-year-couch. Two of them called a spot there: Tobias, for being eldest, as if he were wise and governing, and Isobel, because *there was paperwork submitted literally two hours ago that proves my back is the Titanic crashing into its iceberg*. Hard to argue with medical professionals. Ophelia and Adam were at opposite ends of the coffee table, and the game of *Clue* was set. The four of them, they liked board games without splitting the atoms of their brains—Isobel, she hated science in general, perhaps because of **biology**, perhaps because she had never been able to focus in those classes in high school. Tobias, he was too skilled at social deception games, too skilled at a lot of strategic challenges, and the other three hated to consistently lose. Certainly if he was destined to be their roommate for time to come.

‘Okay, I’m going to go...Miss Peacock, with the Rope, in the, this room, the Observatory.’ On the last word, Adam put on an awful British voice and the others mocked him, playfully.

‘Obserrvahtree,’ they accentuated, and never one to take himself too seriously, Adam laughed at himself, then narrowed his eyes, switching his attention to Ophelia, asking her if she had any one of the three cards he required. She flicked her head down and studied them, delaying it, smirking. With a careful, deliberate movement, she began to extend a card towards him, then shrugged and retracted it completely. ‘Go fish.’

‘Hi,’ Isobel answered, having disappeared out of the room the moment she saw the caller ID on her phone. It was her sister, Ava. They talked on the phone at least once a week, typically for at least an hour or so. It wasn’t scheduled. Everything in life eventually had to circle around to the other Yanick sister. Isobel leaned against the doorframe and tried to hologram Ava into the den, sitting there in the chair, not in another part of the country.

‘Little sister,’ Ava responded, and Isobel knew the feeling in her chest was the emotion correlating most strongly with the words *I miss you*. Those were words they spoke aloud, sometimes, but primarily left in between the lines of every hardship they shared with another. The bus was late, I was late to work, I was a nervous wreck in the bathroom even when it was nothing severe, nothing to truly worry about. *I miss you*. I was misgendered this morning, when I myself think how much I look like a woman. *I miss you*.

Isobel knew there was something, a reason for the phone call. Together, they would distance themselves from it, chip away at the moulding, quietly thank the other without saying it one million and one times. The *little sister* greeting signalled Ava was not calling to wonder whether or not to watch that television series their father recommended in the family group chat. Dark, gritty, exhaustingly British.

‘Stephen and I had another fight about getting married.’ This she said without explanation at first—the two sisters had previously talked about this, previously **unpacked** this, Ava’s complicated feelings around getting married. She and Stephen, her handsome boyfriend, had been together for an assembly-line of years, a stretch of time nearing a decade. Or that was at least how Isobel saw them—long-time, committed, perhaps having overcome a period you could consider on-and-off. Society, it would clamber for the two of them to be married already, for her to rifling through the wedding magazines and contemplating whether she wanted to be wed in a pearl gown or in white dove. Or would chiffon compliment her skin? ‘I don’t have the time to be skimming through magazines, Iso, it’s such a garish thing to set aside time for,’ had been her response the first time they spoke, slash unpacked, the argument around getting married.

Isobel treaded cautiously, as ever. ‘Have a certificate ceremony.’ She hoped the tone was light, airy, a tad stupid—if her sister thought she wasn’t thinking too strongly, maybe it would lift the conversation away from frustration.

Ava sighed. ‘You can’t marry a person to please them.’ At this, it was obvious wherever she was in the world, quite likely the apartment in Sydney, Ava was running a bath in the background, the sound of rushing water beginning to drown out any silence. ‘Can’t I just be with him? We live together, we moved down here together because that city is so dull and lifeless, no offence little sister, but can’t I just...’ Her voice broke off, and a hand, likely a hand, splashed through the water, slicing the surface. Ava spoke too quietly against the stream, then realised, becoming louder halfway through her sentence. ‘...and I should be completely mature, at this age, grown ass woman, but when I said *yes* to him going ring shopping alone, that made me feel like I was saying yes to marriage without knowing whether I was ready.’ Isobel gave her a moment of silence. In turn, it allowed her a moment herself to think of the right response. Isobel was nowhere near marriage herself: the last relationship she had was pre-transition, truthfully, every *I love you* succeeded by a name she longer identified with. The last person to love her romantically, obsessively-but-naturally, had been a woman who loved a cisgender man. Genuine imposter syndrome. Skin retaliating with skin.

Thinking of a perfect solution would never come out perfectly. Isobel had previously said everything she could: he is the man you love, your life is a wonder, communicate with him, talk to him. She repeated these like psalms, an interpersonal bible. There was laughter coming from behind her, the other three roommates keeping themselves distracted, entertained. Isobel tried.

## ADAM

It was midnight, and no, Adam Affeldt was not sleeping. The twenty-seven-year-old, straight white man was in prime position to be taken seriously by just about everyone, a ripe future ahead of him, the added benefit of an appearance wage from a reality show and an already-credible savings account from avoiding splurges. He repaid the credit card on time, budgeted since he had been taught by his parents, and no longer had someone to buy cutesy gifts for since the break-up with Sophie about three seconds after his release from so-called jury duty, where he unsuccessfully voted for Donny to win the half million. Sophie had grievances. Disliked how he had been portrayed by the edit—that's just how I am, babe, he attempted, although that hardly convinced her she was making the poorest decision of her lifetime. He hadn't cheated, flirted with other girls, made himself out to be a scumbag.

He merely came across a little misogynistic.

One statement, one sentence, was typically enough to turn someone against you nowadays. Sophie had grievances about a phrase that aired in the sixth week when he was lounging about on one of the beds with two of the other contestants, Geordie and Diesel. Of course the moment aired, became a centrepiece of discussion, haunted him as a black cloud without enough hindsight to apologise. Or be taken seriously for the apology, a continued appearance of white-male cockish behaviour because he had been cast for the show in a role like that, the masculine, gorgeous-face, toned body, smiling assassin.

He wasn't awake because he thought about Sophie. In press, he had apologised, explained how one piece of dialogue that appeared in the aired program was not indicative of his behaviour, was not who he was as a person, as man. This, fed to him through the tube, media training aligning with his time as on-screen talent. Smile, be charming and charismatic, admit your wrongdoing. He wasn't awake because he had ruined a flourishing relationship by rousing a laugh from the boys. Adam and Sophie were accident-prone, stumbling into arguments because he disagreed about which route to take when perhaps the highway would be flooded—it was—and falling asleep next to one another still reeling from how they had both behaved at Sophie's former coworker's baby shower. It was a boy.

He was awake because he hadn't bothered to sleep yet, moving about his room under the soft light of a bedside table lamp, occasionally packing a duffel bag, and then stopping, scrunching up his face, changing his mind. Adam wasn't expected to be leaving until late the next afternoon, but since eleven o'clock he had been contemplating an early rise, and an early departure, sending a swift message he wouldn't be in for the day's work. The idea alone confused him. Part of himself had been existing since his university education primarily as a worker bee, diligent, reliable, headstrong. Calling in a

sickie for a weekend with his family to celebrate Shannon's birthday made him...stay awake. Half-naked.

There was little within him to resist, resist almost anything. He flirted with women, certainly when he was single, because he found the only *harm* came when they became too attached to him. This agonising was none of his business—cruel thought, childish thought, but hardly a reason to resist. When he thought about texting someone he texted them, certainly his closest friends, the aptly-named *boys*. From recency bias, the label extended to Diesel, to Donny and Dylan and Geordie and Tobias and Zayn. Although he was more hesitant to confess it, as if someone would be breathing down his neck for the truth on his relationships, it extended to Fletcher and Will. Rarely did he speak a word to Simon anymore, although the forty-six-year-old said an unnoticed goodbye to most of the cast at the afterparty for the finale night. Adam rarely thought about Simon Muang.

The men were the boys, but the women were categorised, and perhaps this secret he never admitted had stirred the comment heard across the nation. Motherly types—Eleanor, Kasha, Faith, Verity—were considered differently to the more age-appropriate girls like Tat, like Iris and yes. Ophelia. Isobel like the more understanding, more knowledgeable sister—she understood the world, where he understood his exact position in it. Isobel understood “woke” culture. Adam knew not to be a cunt or an asshole, knew not to be disgusting or say another questionable thing with zooming cameras in his face.

He knew he was wrong to categorise everyone based around how he perceived them, how he engaged with them. Instinctively he was never attracted to women he was never attracted to—when he had a late-night *burst of creative inspiration*, despite very little artistic bones in his body, he imagined the other girls, he imagined his hands on the bare skin of Tatianna's ass, although he restrained the image, restrained himself to be respectful enough to not yearn for her like a middle schooler. Post-nut clarity meant remembering how he would have felt getting intimate, any version of intimate—fucking, usually—with those girls. It would have felt like having sex with a cousin. He was firmly far, far from being an Alabama boy.

Three weeks after wrapping the show, half-regretting it yet flirting dangerously with the freedom of being without, Adam introduced Tobias to a few of his high school friends, boys with names like Josh and Jacob and Eric. All of them noticeably white, although this would have been a discussed-upon problem had the table of them been presented in front of a committee to assess whether a person is racist based solely on the people they surround themselves with. These were merely his friends within the state, now that he had a version of in-contact with the others. If he ever needed a couch to tumble onto in Perth, Adam thought he could at least pretend he and Fletcher had enough in common for a short-enough visit. He doubted there were reasons he would find himself wandering around Perth,

unless there was a pretty girl who forgave him for the comment and still adored him anyway. Perth for sex? Yes, Perth for sex. Perpetually in a state of horniness, although he blamed the human fact that men want to procreate. It was easy for him to be distracted.

His phone buzzed. Diesel wasn't awake, but someone in the group chat was, vowing to virtually keep the sleepyhead distracted. It was Donny. It was sixteen minutes past midnight. Adam wasn't asking for therapy talk, someone to explain or alleviate, and he hardly wanted someone to come knock on the front door with a bottle of wine and spoon-feed a little bit of alcoholism.

He and Donny spoke aimlessly for half an hour, a conversation not worth repeating—Adam very rarely opened up the tinderbox of his feelings to anyone, let alone to another man, someone he saw as a refuge specifically from becoming over-emotional and *vulnerable*. They spoke on the cusp of anything, which meant vague conversations about work, about the collapsing economy, about Donny's bisexuality and how it related to his obvious gay-marriage to Scot. This had been insertion from the older man, when the brief silence on a mention of Sophie created the right chasm. It was obvious he was awake a little because of his ex-girlfriend after all, although no one admitted it, no one questioned it. You left well enough alone.

When Donny begrudgingly told his friend he needed the sleep, a man in his forties with limited sick leave as it was, Adam understood, rolled over, and stared at the duffel creaked open like a mussel. 'What the fuck am I doing?' He muttered, a tad obnoxious for the early, early hours of the morning, and stuffed the bag back into his closet. The birthday weekend was still an entire week away, and he had wanted to bring Tobias along, at gun-point or not, and he turned himself over, remembering fact after fact. There was the matter of the loaned van, which he would borrow from a mate's father, which he couldn't have swiftly encroached on early in the morning. The matter of the spare mattress. The matter of speed-running an entire week away to forgive his error in reading a calendar—his brother's birthday was this Sunday, but based on scheduling it was postponed an entire week so that everyone could be there. Everyone. His two brothers. His parents, still happily married of [insert number here] years. At least thirty, he considered, given his own age. Friends, relatives, partners. Eager to not be alone Adam invited Tobias, thinking it would be less awkward, the two of them sharing the backend of a borrowed van with someone he wouldn't once think about canoodling with, wrapping his arms around for the warmth, despite how humid and awful the weather was.

Adam didn't imagine he would have a disastrous wet dream about Tobias while he was there beside him on the mattress, trying to ignore a suspicious bulge in the sheet.

It was safe. If he had to be single, the first of Shannon's birthdays without a girl on his arm, he would at least have the company of someone. Not ruin a friendship neither by humping someone in the night he shouldn't be humping. Her. The girl upstairs.

Adam flicked off the bedside lamp and shut his eyes. Being anxious was not a feeling he knew—he was agitated, man-grumpy, tired. The next day was Friday. Hooray.

Adam left the office for lunch; it was becoming somewhat of a routine. In the before times, as he amusingly called it, he would pack himself *lunch* every day without fail—lunch was typically defined as a ready-made meal he would heat in the workplace microwave, but it was digestible and cost-efficient and energy-efficient too. The moment he moved in with Isobel to escape continuing to live with one of his mates, who was noticeably, obviously, becoming a pest with how he left the apartment, Adam stopped. No more ready-made meals, because finding space to store them in the refrigerator became complicated the more roommates moved into the pencil. Now, at the four of them total, his quadrant of the fridge was reserved and somewhat crowded with beer, grated cheese, ingredients for dinners he planned, the unconventional urge to be frustrated instead of productive. No, that was conventional. He worked around other idiots.

Walking down the humid street, the thin material of his button-up clinging to his hairless torso, Adam called himself moronic for the third time that day simply for misplacing his brain, forgetting it wasn't this weekend but the next. Only anxiety-ridden, weak-willed emotion-sprinters berated themselves more than once. He had to question whether the decision he was making were the right ones—living with these roommates, stringing her along when he had no intention of anything, let alone kissing her, let alone touching her thigh longingly, like a caress not a cheerleader lift. The Adam of the before times, ready-made Adam, had only ever lived with one other woman in his entire life. His mother. There was always the gap in their ages between them, him the upcoming man, her the punishingly-wise woman who at his age was navigating herself pregnant. Careful, the child. Careful, the precious cargo of Man, capital letter.

Adam ordered from the kiosk, a beetroot salad sandwich and a Nothin' But the Greens smoothie he hoped would not stain his teeth the colour of shamrocks. The girl at the counter was too short to be anything older than eighteen. Adam was polite, but he almost immediately became impatient waiting to the side of the counter, his back against the decorative wooden slats of the building, which noticeably had no true doorway. Open, but not spacious, he found himself scooting around the handful of other office workers, extending an arm to say, *no, no, I've order already, please*. The agitation made no logical sense, not to him, probably not to his roommates. Although he kept himself distant from them—it wouldn't be their prerogative, for example, to know he texted Sophie when

there was a lull in the through-line of work and he remembered neither of them had insisted outright on no communication. It was ok, healthy, he thought, having hit send.

He didn't want another chance. The agitation must have simply been loneliness, an emotion men like Adam were not supposed to register, at least not surrounded by company, surrounded by the functioning civilisation of one of the country's bigger capital cities. Loneliness in the wilderness. Loneliness stranded in the crevasse of an unknown cave. Not there.

The green juice left a thin moustache above his lip, but he wiped it carelessly with a napkin he unsheathed from a black plastic box on the counter before he wandered away from the kiosk. Thirsty, hungry, and again agitated. The salad sandwich was noticeably dry, but he did not care. It was nutrients, although now he pictured himself housing down fried chicken and of course it only made him more agitated. Instead of having the weekend to look forward to, Adam had no idea what the next two days held, except he imagined he would be either home alone or unintentionally bothered. Isobel hadn't announced plans. The other two were off tomorrow for something Tobias' brother was hosting, or had invited them to, or...he wasn't certain, but underneath the confident exterior he was beyond elated to have been nixed from an invitation. He liked them, the roommates. But didn't love. *Love* was reserved for his mother. His future wife. If she existed.

Adam ate the rest of the beetroot salad sandwich perched on a mid-height half-wall, his butt protected from the course stone by the charcoal slacks. He would have left his phone in the office, except he had to pay—the last time he carried a wallet he was in high school, conditioned to by his mother, reminded to hold on tight to the important documentation. Now, a much larger man, a wallet was a measly scrap of fabric buried at the bottom of somewhere. Everything was digital, or otherwise he carried for purpose. Embarrassing to be seen toting a wallet. Queer, although stylish, gay men seemed to do fine without something garish.

When he finished he scrapped his trash into an outside bin and headed back to the office, still agitated. It wasn't likely to have evaporated by eating a sandwich, but it was worth the effort, the satiated hunger. In the elevator he greeted someone he vaguely recognised from another floor and thought about tonguing a woman tomorrow night instead of being depressingly grown-up. Adults, they were expected to tidy house, organise life, go to Bunnings. Adam wanted to kiss at least three women and stroke his cock into an erection and have sex with one of them. Crude, but if his vice couldn't be fried chicken and booze before sunset, maybe it could return to being beautiful women and spurts of cum. Rewire the system before he saw his parents in one week. Or for Sophie to block him after all. 'Hey, while I've got you,' his long-time friend, Josh, said clearly over the phone, 'when you come around to Dad's to pick up the van, can you not mention you're trekking off in it with another dude?'

The old fella might think you're a bit gay, because he doesn't know your roommate, he only knows the same boys who hung around each other since school.'

It was surprising. They had only been on the phone call to arrange things, Adam now acutely aware nothing was set in certain and he might've turned up to an empty house and a locked garage. Now he realised he was defending himself from homophobia, only because Josh's sixty-something dad couldn't accept the potential presence of a gay person. Adam agreed to it all, hardly saw the relevance anyway.

He'd walked out of work and called Josh the second he stepped onto the train station platform. The office, dully, was only three stations from the general area where he lived—it was a more pleasant commute than when he first found a job in the city, back living with his parents in suburban nowhere. Fifty minutes by train, packed like a sardine against the glass window, reeling from the stench of general body odour. The phone call ended and he muttered a quick *whatever*.

To have said something people criticise you on television for, public, bold, aggressive, that was the mistake he quickly became known for. He repented in one interview, confessing “you sort of...forget the cameras are there, a lot of the time.” Said he was ashamed, visually hung his head when a reputable reality TV interviewer who does the rounds in the *circuit*—this shit confused him—sat down to talk to him after his elimination. Everything is publicised. Everything is forgotten in time, broken down, certainly when it is one singular statement said amongst allies. *Friends*.

Adam, he didn't understand what someone like Tobias, someone gay, went through. Already he was agitated but somehow now he was feeling worse, feeling stomped upon. An impossible feat for a person rarely underneath the boot. This was his logic, his confession, his way of processing that Josh just told him, *hey man, hide the gay roommate in the trunk*. He chuckled at what would have been said if he invited Isobel along after all, a seemingly regular dude and what, was she slowly becoming a confidant without him realising? The trans woman.

Adam didn't recognise himself.

For whatever reason he was sitting on the train having this internal dialogue about **actually** repairing the wrongs of how he'd been in the past. The comment. Views on whether a woman was someone you have sex with or not. Men like Josh's father would say, and that's what comes from living with the woke left. In the crisis, would he find himself voting for the Greens and wearing a pin with his pronouns on it? Well, he already liked to smoke weed.

Those thoughts were extreme.

He sent a selfie of himself on the train to like, six different girls. Clarity.

## TOBIAS & OPHELIA

They parked in an empty spot on an empty lot, perhaps once employed for an old-fashioned circus, although those were now outdated and uncomfortable to witness, their treatment of animals, a horse violently whipped and the very lack of a lion's presence, now holographic. Holographic less frightening than a maned king cramped behind the metal, and yet, holographic seemed to have no purpose. A boring moan for flesh now gone. When someone wanted the holographic performance of someone since dead, all it seemed to be was the desperation for something nostalgic. Wanted, but gone. Ask for something new. See something different.

All of this from a field of grass, browned by the sun. The three of them skirted out of the road of other vehicles, four-wheel-drives and coupes, locals they would find it impossible to recognise. Zane had invited the pair of them to a regional fair, something that promised the convergence of rural farm and the urban scream of an amusement ride. Pig races and ferris wheels. Snake-and-reptile demonstrations and Ghost Houses, your ass planted into the seat of a squished-up cart with the screwed-up face of a ghoul on the front of it, or a vampire. Green-faced witch. Little children with their faces painted like witches, too. Difficult to tell the difference.

They crossed in front of similar cars looking for similar empty spots, then crossed the road at the zebra, Zane palming his wallet for a few loose notes. At the little ticket booth, an antique brick building no larger than a porta-potty, he paid for the three of them. Tobias and Ophelia gave one another the same look—when you're unemployed, despite having money in the bank, it feels refreshingly comforting to be paid for. To be wined and dined, although they were mere footsteps away from a child's dropped ice cream and the stench of horse manure. A ticket was a ticket was a ticket. The two of them thanked the world—first the ticket-cashier, then Zane, who ushered them into the fairgrounds, and then, more quietly, each other. It was nice to have the distraction be so blatantly obvious, they thought, of the same mind.

'What first?' Zane broadly motioned, perhaps a little too enthused to be guiding the others. On the drive here, after he had collected the pair of them from the train station—it really was a house carless, reliant on the ever-incompatible shift of public transport, but Tobias ashamedly liked it—Zane had talked about being there, at the fair, the night before. Stayed for the fireworks. Arrived for them too—he would have left work at five and maybe only sauntered in through the gates at six-thirty, had something to eat, made himself a nest somewhere in front of the so-called main arena. Tobias, now, was holding the unfolded area map, half-surprised they had yet to cave to digital-only information. Aside from a reconstruction of squares, rectangles, and the oblong of the arena, there were various

tangles of information around time. The time of performances, time of the crackling bang of fireworks exploding in the atmosphere, time of the various pig races spaced out across the day. He was making mental note of these, 10:20, 12:20, 2:20, so forth, one for every second hour. The twenty-minutes-past seemed an idiosyncratic decision, but Tobias wondered whether the *petit cochons* had found their lucky groove when they knew they could be finished before half-past.

In his careful study of the map, Tobias had somewhat abandoned his roommate to a conversation with his brother, although it was unlikely either of the two of them would bite. ‘He’ll give us the barking orders soon,’ Zane said, glancing over at the lagging-behind. Zane had a penchant for changing the colour of his hair—two years ago it had been a mess of neon green, occasionally tangled up in itself. Earned him a tongue-poking nickname of Swamp Thing, but he was neither slovenly nor sharing characteristics with the ogre Shrek. He let the hair Medusa itself out somewhat, then tamed it down, chopping it off like a violent storm would a tree trunk until it obscured the road. Now, those two years later, half his head was tinted a deep burgundy colour. The other half black, darker than an abyss. It remained shorter, buzzed around his ears and at the back, where someone else would grow an extensive but ungodly mullet. ‘We can wander, get something to eat soon, circle back to the alley,’ he continued, pointing out the O-mouthed clowns with a low-raised hand. ‘Are you good with balls?’ Tobias lifted his eyes from the page to chuckle.

Curse the family who only had queer sons.

Ophelia noticed the sexual innuendo and *handled* her response. There were small hordes of children everywhere. Mostly supervised, although occasionally one stormed past with an extraordinarily tall plastic flask of frozen slushie, one split second away from crashing head-first into an unsuspecting elderly person. ‘I like to think my aim isn’t shot,’ she explained, semi-interested, her eyes lingering on the clowns as they passed by at a relatively-slowed pace. The central swing of the fairground was populated with people in no hurry to be anywhere, pausing without a warning to study panda bear plushies with pink-or-blue patches, gendering them for no reason in particular. Pausing without warning to contemplate whether to purchase, as if entirely unsure, a dagwood dog dipped deliriously in unlabelled tomato sauce. Bulk-bought tomato sauce. From the tomato sauce farm. ‘Toby, fit it into the schedule: I want to lob ping-pong balls into the mouths of clowns, I haven’t done something like that since I was a kid.’ She smirked. ‘Unless you count video games.’

Tobias had no legitimate schedule. He wasn’t pulling a pencil from a back pocket and marking where he thought the three of them should go, although he was subtly pulling for them all to be interested in the same things. It would be more guaranteed with the three of them—nerd-types, or nerd-ish, because Ophelia was less of a dork and more the type to remind someone that ‘gamer’ was not a childish label but an interest, something to distract from the mundanity of life.

Of course she had experienced the criticisms. You're too pretty to spend your time in front of a screen, achievement-hunting, trying to rig the system in your favour. It's a man's sport. Why do you dress the way you do—not skimpily, not to direct the male gaze—when you're livestreaming? An audience would appreciate if they saw more of you, which became not code for longer streams but shorter sleeves, the occasional rise out of the high-backed gaming chair, a flirtatious attitude towards the men who left comments in the chat. *Unless you count video games* could have come across cringe, geeky, a verbal aid for the famed glasses-push on the nose, but Ophelia liked not to imagine herself as limited to a handful of comments and crude remarks. They were normal, expected, because despite the time—a complete twenty-six years into the millennium—the quote-unquote things had barely nudged away from being rife with sexism and an obscene glance towards thinking of women as objects of appeal. Puppets. If you are going to sit in front of the computer and earn your keep through playing video games, behave this way. Don't make any of us feel threatened, feel like you are searching for an opportunity to speak the plea of the suffragette, don't show you have not changed.

Women in reality television are treated differently, but similarly, too. Don't steal, rob, snatch the victory from a man. The likelihood of an all-female alliance dominating the game is far less possible than that of an all-male, target-women-specific alliance. Ophelia imagines herself sitting, propped, in front of the rotating O of a clown, competing against an unknown stranger. A man, specific for this vision, one in which she absolutely annihilates him because of sheer determination, maybe a handful of comments to throw him off balance: where's your aim? C'mon, there is a target, a clear target, don't aim for the back wall. You throw like a girl.

Ophelia, in the made-up scenario, this brief vision, is named the victor, but how is she depicted? More obviously, more importantly, why does she care? Why are the first thoughts for this woman, for Ophelia, to think about how people will react if she succeeds, if she is victorious at something over a man? She severed the vision. If that man, the bald-headed one scarfing down a hot dog with the ketchup and the mustard, if he glanced a second inside her head he might call her a complaining, self-interested feminist. Obsessed with thinking about how she cannot be taken seriously by men if she becomes more powerful, more important than they are. In truth, scaling her worth to men is merely a segment of how women like her have been treated over time. Twenty-six years into the millennium and if a woman becomes too competitive, too ambitious, too headstrong, she is deemed to be threatening, aggressive, a potential liability. One glance to the men who rule the world with a so-called hand of freedom and there are noticeable differences, the acceptance of men for being outwardly competitive, outwardly ambitious, outwardly aggressive. Maybe skipping out on the clowns is the better idea, if suddenly her thoughts drift, if suddenly the escape this day promised is being drowned out by the cloudy thoughts. The heavier conversations. Weight to bear.

Even from a position of no power, of no elevation. Not successful, at least not visibly, not labelled a winner. Ophelia is grateful when the trio duck inside, although because of the opened, wide doors, the building is not air-conditioned. But out of the sun, out of the heat, she can give herself a break from thinking. From sweating. It's wrong to weigh herself down with harmful rhetoric—that because of her gender, inherently how she has been since she was born, she will always be reacted to a certain way. The generalisation of humankind. These are the ideas, the thoughts, of someone else—too much time spent lying beside Isobel in the middle of the night, the two of them worrying, Isobel especially. Her transness does inherently make her existence more complicated. They talked, only the other night, keeping themselves cool with cold water washers plastered to their foreheads. Isobel, frustrated, grumpy, disgusted, mused for a moment on how it made little-to-no sense for a man to choose he wanted to be a woman. 'You wake up one morning and what, decide you are willing to accept the scrutiny, men either viewing you as prey or as subservient. Eaten, devoured by the eyes, or made to work until bleeding, and beyond bleeding. You have your period? What, like it's hard?' Isobel flicked her eyes up, the whites overcrowding.

The whites overcrowding. Huh. Ophelia laughed aloud, and Tobias and Zane glanced over at her. They were standing amongst prize-awarded photography, on the subject of animals and wildlife. Nothing seemed inherently funny, or hilarious, except perhaps the way the eye of this bird was askew, not slanted by unfocused, somewhat off-putting.

Neither of them asked her a question, as if wondering what was lightly amusing was truly irrelevant. You are allowed your private jokes, allowed to think about something someone said an hour ago, a day ago, whenever, and laugh about it. People ought to take each other less seriously, she thought, vowing to pay more attention again.

It's the bitch of doing nothing.

Ophelia just looked at Tobias. He knew.

PIG RACE PIG RACE.

Tobias was giddy like a kid again, moving as fast as he could without breaking into an actual jog. There was a small crowd gathered around the course, which felt god-like: a bird's eye view of a genuine racecourse, the sharp corners and the straight line to the finish. Albeit the finish line wasn't a line, it was a painted-red dish half-filled with water, but alas. Finish. Surrounded by bales of hay. Competitive for piggies. The racers were adorned with slip-covers advertising local sponsors, a handful of companies neither Tobias nor Ophelia recognised. Zane was listing back what they retailed, offered, or provided with relative ease. He barely paused to consider.

Pre-show entertainment for the piggy races was primarily by the host, a middle-aged balding man with a plugged-in microphone who stood off to the side underneath a tent bannered with an enticing description: pig races. The man looked like an uncle Tobias was vaguely reminiscent of meeting, not a direct sibling of one of his parents but a cousin, a second cousin, somewhere connected in the fabric of the genetic line. This man, fishing children out of the small, gathered crowd, asking them to name the pigs, rejected poorly-made puns and laughed off pop-culture references. Every little girl with blonde hair wanted a Taylor Swift-related name, if not merely the singer's name embroidered in midair above the little pink pig. Chris Hamsworth. Peter Porker. The painfully unoriginal Kevin Bacon. No one seemed to be creative enough to think of anything thrilling—some chose names disconnected completely from pigs, with an affinity for Pikachu, an affinity for *Hugh G. Rection*. This, suggested by an obnoxious trio of just-teenage boys, while the announcer dug around for something microphone-worthy. This he swiftly heard and censored, sighing and naming the pig with the black sash and the advertisement for *Whittakers* as “Hugh G.” The boys were regardless overjoyed, their cheers obnoxious, loud, like mice squealing for cheese. For attention.

Tobias watched the six or so pigs. The overeagerness was coming down, replaced for a moment with contention. The piglets were young, the image of fauna innocence, thrust into something for entertainment. Maybe they were paid in treats, whatever constituted a piglet snack, but none of them earned an income from running the race. At least he'd earned a performance fee for lasting until the bitter end. One of the piglets seemed nervy, squeal too high-pitched, not so calm as the others. They were beginning to be gathered at the start line, corralled into matchbox pens. We get happy, he thought, watching the squirming pig be half-soothed by a farmer-type. We get happy when they put on a show. Is a piglet born with ambitions for fairdom, for the winning sash, to skid round the corner of a loose maze and sip from the finish line bowl?

What was he about to do, protest? Fat lot of good protests seemed to be doing in this country.

His mind drifted to something more sombre. But instead of waving around a sign depicting a call to the end of genocide, a call to the fair treatment of all people, a call to shift celebrations to another date, there Tobias was, wielding the simplest of signs: let pigs fly.

You could interpret that in the worst way, completely wrong, but a sharp drawing, an illustration, of a pig in a sash and eyeliner and maybe a princess' tiara ought to dispel ideas he was pro-police officers getting away with brutality on the streets. Something was in the air the pair of them had inhaled walking into the fairgrounds, overcome with the hundreds of unfamiliar faces. They both could not ignore something—this mind-present, front-brained thought, more noticeable when you have less to distract you. The world was not climbing towards utopia. Tobias needed to just *focus*.

The clatter of a gate lifted released the oinking piglets, who rushed forward on the hay-strewn ground, the surrounding crowd abuzz. Kids screamed out the name of whichever pig bore their suggestion. The black-coloured pig with the golden sleeve-coat captured the lead, lost it, back and forth, back and forth, contending with the pale pink pig, with some unoriginal pun for a name. Neither Tobias, Ophelia, nor Zane remembered any of the names beyond that race. Irrelevant, unimportant. One of the little piggies was victorious. The namer earned themselves a food voucher.

More astronomical in size than anything else occupying space at the fairgrounds, the ferris wheel promised views of tamed suburbia. Neither of the three of them estimated seeing much—in one direction farmland and reconstituted farmland for housing developments, in another direction the university which had populated land once owned by a paper mill, more housing in another direction, more commercial real estate, parklands, train stations, train lines, suburbia. But at least for Ophelia this would be a previously unseen vista, no house nor home somewhere she could recognise. Tobias and Zane had lived, briefly, in one of the low-set houses over there, and would be likely to attempt to point it out, squinting in the distance.

They queued in front of the white-picketed booth, more of a symbol of the perfect neighbourhood than anything they had seen on the drive here, albeit it was fading, tackily-painted in white but rusting at the edges, if you noticed. It seemed like the three of them would squeeze into one swinging, hanging carriage, pretending they were young again, pretending they weren't the slightest bit worried the hinges could snap and they could plummet to the ground in a second, but Zane paused, an expression coming over his face. 'I'm busting for the loo,' he said. 'You two do this, instead of waiting for me, because there's a good chance I'd get up there and be jittery and impatient to get off anyway.' Saving a speech about a fear of heights decidedly for later, Zane finished his hurried be-right-back and darted back in the direction of the pig races, where they had all noticed a brick toilet block nearby. Tobias and Ophelia glanced at each other, grateful, all the sudden. Not having to jam the three of them in, not having to bump knees, not having to worry about that—it would at least give the pair of them some roommate-only time. Was that a true-to-life event, or something you became fonder of when you loved the person, or hoped you did?

Tobias and Ophelia had spent countless hours of time together, just the two of them, but as they climbed into the compartment of the ferris wheel, the whole of the world pared back. It was just Tobias and Ophelia now.

The attendant swung the door closed and assisted others. The attendant seemed to be passably interested in their job. Not negligent, but not vibrantly thrilled to be there, on a random Saturday, in the middle of summer, disconnected enough to not know Tobias and Ophelia. The carriage lifted.

Halfway round the circle, they took their eyes off the surrounding fairgrounds, the reaches of trees coming into eyeshot, the mess of a crowd, and they looked at one another. For Tobias, hers was a face he came to be comfortable around, a younger sister, the heightened cliché of a girl with an entire future ahead of her. The cliché was not a promise but a hope, an ambition, something external to latch upon. As he aged—which makes him sound grandpa-ish, which was how you became when you turn thirty—the life had slowly been sucked from his eyes, as if withered by the sun. Ophelia was younger, brighter, more clichés, everything in life was a cliché the closer to it you peer. We exist for statistics, he thought, the most unsure of himself he had ever been in his entire life, and getting too old to be unsure, to question. Another cliché—being in high school, *questioning* your sexuality, understanding yourself to be gay, ‘coming out of the closet’ because queer people must be so constructed with the passion for fashion that a straight man could never possibly possess.

For Ophelia, his was a face she came to be comfortable around, too, although because their age difference was less blatant to her, she saw him not as an older brother but as the troped gay best friend, if his existence had to be confined down to a phrase for the creation of his character in an interactive storytelling game, something where you puppet combat against the mean girls in school, whether they sprout demonic horns and practice worship of Beelzebub or not. Are heterosexual people bound to see queer people in a certain light, as a certain kind of person? Ophelia liked to think his dick-sucking, men-obsessed thoughts came second to how charming of a person he was, how ruthlessly competitive he could be, how ultimately all he wanted was to watch her become more and more impressive.

Everything in this world was cliché.

‘The two of us, what’s wrong?’ Her question was blunt, but somewhat confused. Tobias cocked his head, afraid to misunderstand. ‘How did one experience strip us back to this?’ She resists making gestures with her hands. It is not the type of person she is.

Tobias sighed. ‘I don’t know what I expected, and that’s okay with me.’ He wasn’t expecting the conversation in a ferris wheel cabin to go further than an *oh look over there* with a hand pointed off in that direction. ‘There’s nothing wrong with us, I don’t think.’

‘Not wrong.’ She blinked back at him. ‘Not wrong, neither of us seem like broken people, but maybe I thought making an incredible change would prove something of who I am. Applying, being accepted, quitting the job for something different, it was like exploding my life because otherwise I was running through the same scenarios in my head, choosing the wrong options.’ Ophelia paused—everything did not have to become akin to a video game, but it was comforting for there to be something to study, the base guideline. One certainty: there was no user manual for existing, and sometimes it truly felt only like existing.

‘We both can smell the farm,’ Tobias blurted out, also confusing.

‘I don’t know what that means.’

‘Sorry.’ He said. ‘It was an awful attempt to not say something depressing, to avoid outright saying that we’ve both lied there, our bodies frozen stiff, thinking about when it could all be over.’

Tobias shook himself out of it. ‘Remember when every word you spoke would be broadcast. The core concept of reality television comes from dystopian fiction, and suddenly our entertainment is dystopian reality, and our passion is to be visible in dystopia, visibly situated in the midst of the storm, the raging and the crashing, because watch out for the waves, the licking tide.’

Tobias could see a train pulling into the station out there, in the distance, as the wheel ticked towards the twelve o’clock. ‘Maybe that means something, maybe it doesn’t.’

‘Morbidly, it does. I wake up in the morning dreading whichever time of day I decide, this is when you get back to looking, back to figuring out.’

‘I woke up at three in the morning today and I started thinking about how the male villagers in Stardew Valley would be in bed,’ he paused, for a laugh, for a cringe, for something. ‘Sexual beings in a wholesome, kinda terrifying sometimes game.’

‘Gay men and their obsession with making everything horny.’

‘Instead of trying to fall back asleep, at three in the morning, I lied there, tossing and turning, creating any scenario in my head that wasn’t related to what the day could otherwise look like. And I knew today was different, that we would be here trying our hand at becoming rural village people, murmuring *cow* when we approached their pen, but...something about dread, regardless. Every day is dreadful, not because every day is awful. Every day you wake up knowing you are one day closer to losing your mind, cracking your skull open to see what the coconut milk tastes like inside. One day closer. But the feeling was there before, mincing through an ordinary job, you must know it too if we’re both sitting here twiddling our thumbs, reading the first sentence of every rejection email until we hit the word *unfortunately*.’ Tobias sighed, certainly seeking refuge in Ophelia’s glance. ‘Everything is one day closer. A march towards death, an April towards the only certainty beyond craving money, craving normalcy when you don’t mind being a little strange. Although there is nothing peculiar about either of us. We only started talking to ourselves **during** the time in front of the cameras, right?’

‘When I’m older than I am, that is the thing I want to be able to articulate.’

Tobias laughed. ‘Eventually you get reminded you’re not a baby anymore.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ She paused, kicking his leg. ‘No matter what I say, even if it’s something deeply philosophically, it would only be in intention. What do I know at twenty-three?’

‘More than something a person who lives only sheltered knows.’

‘Was that house not a shelter?’

Tobias mused on that. The ferris wheel came to a lull at the very top.

‘There was never rain that saturates your clothes, they kept us indoors. But there was the dreaded emotional rain, to avoid making a metaphor that’s painfully buried underneath some layers of clothing.’ Tobias inched forward. ‘I’m trying to say, there were days in there I was proper depressed, missing my family, missing the opportunity to leave the house even just to breathe in fresh oxygen and buy a sausage roll from a bakery. A shelter can protect you from one thing, but leave you exposed to another. A shelter is not a void.’

‘And we don’t want it to be.’

‘Neither of us would thrive in a void, unless the void was set to the right temperature.’

‘It’s been too miserable lately,’ Ophelia said, briefly taking in the vista beyond their small carriage high in the sky. Houses and train tracks and there it is, the university, garish and supermassive. ‘A void would become boring. Staring at blankness. I need something to keep me stimulated, to keep me from you know, doing what you did and thinking about pixelated characters having sex with me in a pixelated bed.’

‘That’s a coping mechanism, though, right? Filling your head with thoughts that are inconsequential. Things technically that won’t add to much, or don’t need to be spoken, although to prove my point I offered it up to you like a silver platter of embarrassment because now you can see, if there’s something you don’t want to admit necessarily that you thought about, it’s the same. A coping mechanism for the stress. For the emptiness, otherwise.’

The ferris wheel continued to inch itself round.

‘I don’t know what I’m doing.’

Tobias thought about moving to comfort her, but Ophelia didn’t appear frightened. ‘Neither do I, and I have had longer to figure everything out. The job I used to have, that was a slice of the equation, but you can’t exist with only slices. Imagine your life was only one piece of pie, I mean ordinarily a pie is the same flavour the entire way around, but if you ate the same taste, the same bite, for the rest of your life, wouldn’t you become so miserably tired of it?’

‘Imagine only eating the same flavour of ice cream.’

‘Something like that.’ He smiled. The cabin could feel somewhat claustrophobic at times, certainly while they spoke about uncertainty. ‘So you do something unreal, fanciful, just to outrun the feelings. I stopped dating before the show because I was constantly getting my heart broken. And not because I would get attached at the sign of romance, the sign of a man I was interested in being attracted to me too. Not because I was too trusting. We’re all so terrified of change and yet we all crave it. The new path ahead. The new lover. The new life.’

‘What are we telling your brother when we come down from this wheel of death?’

Tobias chuckled, burying his face briefly in his hands, amused by himself, too. How eager he can be sometimes to attempt to understand his feelings, to attempt to understand why he reacts the way he does. Other people at this achievement age of being in his thirties were happily married, raising children, seeing them off to primary school and beyond. He forgot his age sometimes. Forgot he was older than twenty-five, forgot time continued to babble, to brook, regardless of whether he wanted it to. It becomes easier to not mention your exact age. Instead, you say you're in your thirties, this window stretching an entire decade, although one can imagine thirty-one held more promise than thirty-nine did. Regardless, gone was being a twenty-something kid who had time, means, motivation, energy, vibrance, life, to impart themselves towards the right kind of future. Thirty meant getting older, three entire decades of being on this earth, and being unemployed *and* a very minor reality television "celebrity"—although the word would be scorned by fans who won't remember your name in six months—that was a bitter draught.

'We'll tell him the view was unmissable, unmistakably incredible,' he said, without becoming too much of the ringmaster. 'You can say you know where we once lived, over there,' and he points in the distance, at any old house, it wasn't as if Zane would be giving her an exam later. 'We lived somewhere over there. I was just a kid. That's all I was. There's no way that version of Tobias knew what the future held, or cared properly. You know how kids always give fantastical answers for what they want to be growing up. My favourite is this picture of a little boy with a bowl cut, and he's not quite smiling unless you count his eyes, and on a brown piece of cardboard he's written, or a teacher has written more likely, the word **Godzilla**.' Tobias chuckled. 'I want to be Godzilla when I grow up.'

'We'll tell him that.' They both laughed, and the carriage in front of theirs was sprung open, the mother and daughter climbing out, making big, impressive showings of stretching themselves out, as if made of rubber. The ferris wheel moved again, ticking like a clock, and Ophelia and Tobias kept returning their eye-contact with one another.

'It's kind of stupid how much time we spend together and we're not even married yet.'

'Get me a ring then, Toby!' She exclaimed, kneeling his knee, the two of them playfully flirting with each other, despite knowing it would only ever be playful. It was a familiar feeling, that. You fear a commitment so much every flirtation was far, far from being serious.

It helps Tobias was not attracted to women like that.

The two of them are helped out of the ferris wheel's cabin by the attendant, who now seemed more jovial, or maybe they were, the two with laid-out emotional baggage. Zane was waiting around outside of the gate, hands buried in his pockets. He waved when Tobias and Ophelia approached, and in short, cut-to-the-point sentences they explained what they had seen, bucketed up in the sky, protected from the wind by glass. Nobody mentioned Godzilla after all.

Tobias had a speck of mustard on the corner of his mouth, and his brother attempted a gesture to get him to wipe it. Tobias wiped the wrong side first, then course-corrected, smearing the yellow on the print of his thumb. Licking it off, the three of them returned to staring out at the fenced-in field, where two Clydesdales towed a fairytale carriage around the dirt.

‘Do you think those horses have this pinned on their calendar, the day they’ll prance around an open field not even a practical option for transporting these people, merely a joyride with no purpose?’ It was Tobias, ever burdened by the question of what was to become the meaning of life. Of anything.

Ophelia screwed up a brown napkin into a pebble-sized ball and squinted in the direction of the horses. ‘I think they only realise when the harness is attached that it’s slavery day.’ The three of them had somehow bargained spots on the four-row bleachers, in the front, but with her ball of trash Ophelia leapt out of her seat and announced she was going wandering. ‘When I find a bin, I’ll get rid of this, do my part in not killing a duck, and then go to the toilet, too.’ The brothers promised they wouldn’t move an inch, not even if the wind threatened to knock them.

Ophelia disappeared into the crowds. The Kellerman brothers were far from identical, but beside each other the resemblance was noticeable—underneath the hair-dye would be Zane’s oaky brown hair, they shared the same eye colour, they were both the same height as their father, an approximate average for men. It wouldn’t have been surprising if they both fancied the same type of man, or the same man period. Tobias had to place a stern veto on Zane fancying anyone in the group chat which was now causing his pocket to buzz...he’d check the messages and respond later, but he assumed it was irrelevant to now, to this very moment back with his brother, again. The quiet moments as important as anything memorable and everlasting.

‘Toby,’ he said, the two of them having lost interest in the horses. ‘What’s it like living with them?’ *Them*: the three used-to-be strangers, although most roommates were once strangers. Tobias held off from making the correction: he was mouthy, could be cocky, but this was nothing to be impolite about, start an argument about. No one else in his family experienced the last however months the way he did. Zane didn’t know.

‘We don’t stay up late hosting fake competitions,’ he began, closing himself off from saying *not anymore*. The late nights of filling in time, refusing to be boring for the twenty-four-seven feed. Games of Mafia, unsuccessful attempts at Charades—because no one knew some of the more obscure answers, because there was no way to write anything down on paper. ‘Soon enough everyone just becomes ordinary again and there are ordinary things to do, except sometimes you’re like sitting in a restaurant and the waitress cocks her head and says, hey, I watch the show religiously, with my sisters, can I get a

selfie? And then you're in the restaurant with the four of you, me and Ophelia and Isobel and Adam, and you remember for a second that the thing that binds everyone at the table is a shared experience that feels incredibly weird to talk about. It's not normal to be on reality TV—it used to be a spectacle, because it was rare, but now everyone has a show, everyone has a platform, everyone has the opportunity and the potential so talking about the experience feels bonkers, and stupid, because there's someone in your ear saying *and that makes you special, how?*' Tobias scratched his head. An overtalker, something he would have mentioned in the interview—again, he thinks, not an interview for a job posting, something marketable, profitable, but another television show in an industry potentially oversaturated to hell.

Zane said nothing, just long enough for the moment to breathe.

'If I've given you shit for not having a job yet—'

'You haven't.' But Tobias was reminded, sharp enough. Still can't put fourth place on a resume, he thought, wondering how long his brain would be hardwired to think about defeat. 'I like living with people who know it. I know that sounds weird, but it's like the concept of siblings bonding over a shared discomfort, say they have parents who are rarely present and travel for work and leave the eldest in charge all the time. Them, my roommates, aren't my siblings because I have you, dork-ass barely-older brother you, but if I needed extra...'

At this, Tobias had the goofiest grin upon his face. It was something the two of them did that made them more identical than otherwise noticed—this infectious happiness, sometimes rare, elusive, because for one reason or another the Kellerman brothers conflicted with the world, raged against it, or more accurately toyed with it, perpetrators of mischief. As teenagers, they could have been one and the same with the Norse god Loki, but their tricks weren't pranks, weren't idiotic, silly, hapless jokes. The trick they played? You would never know.

Ophelia waited in line, still. She figured people this side of the city, northerners so-to-speak, must have had small, petite bladders, not raised to inflate like balloons when there was bound to be a queue, a line-up. Bored, becoming impatient because of the heat, she started to tap her foot against the wall. Nothing noticeable. Don't be seen as unbearable.

It was strangely refreshing. Waiting. Being ignored. You don't need to be seen all the time, she thought, inching forward when the woman in front of her did. Almost there.

## ISOBEL & ADAM

‘Come on white boy,’ she said while tugging on Adam’s arm, not that he fought, not that he grumbled or groaned. He was lying there, comfortably so, on the seven-year-couch, unbothered until Isobel came down the stairs. Saturday afternoon and he had zero plans, nil to do but waste away time he wasn’t spending wasting away at work. Isobel was noticeably bored, but not irritated—this was the behaviour you expected of siblings, or else two people who were familiar with one another enough to know trying to drag his ass up and out of the house wasn’t bound to land someone in deep, hot shit. Broken bone or two. Who could say. With acquaintances. Strangers.

‘I want to get out of the house,’ she said, collapsing down onto the coffee table, releasing his arm from her grasp. Adam, undisturbed, was watching something on his phone without audio. Reading the subtitles. Something must be wrong with him. Isobel tapped him once, twice, thrice on the shoulder. ‘C’mon, Adam, can we go somewhere and get drunk?’ He snapped his glance over to her, suddenly interested. ‘Just kidding. I just want to drink cheap beer with you in a bar and ignore my phone.’ Adam tossed his phone onto the couch cushion near his leg but had yet to move from lying down, visibly comfortable, visibly enjoying the peace and quiet of having almost zero to worry about. Isobel made to walk away, turning her back on her roommate—this would either achieve a result or achieve nothing, but she hoped a sudden disinterest, the act of giving it up, would cause him to wonder if he was about to miss out on the prime opportunity. Don’t you want to let loose, Adam?

Isobel retreated upstairs to her bathroom, where she idled in front of the mirror questioning her eyebrows. Unplucked, or at least beginning to become untidy again—she hated those shopping centre places in the centre of the aisle, tiny women tearing at your forehead from close range. Potentially an aside of impatience, having to wait, look but don’t touch, not even look most of the time. Close your eyes and stay incapably still, no movement, no uncontrollable tap of the foot. Plucking her own eyebrows was imperfect but what was the last clue of evidence this body was perfection? Isobel sighed. There was an expectation to model yourself a certain way, and Isobel never left herself to look unkempt, messy, *dirty*, except maybe sometimes in the morning when a camera immediately locked upon your face.

There’s an unpleasant voice in her head.

*Didn’t you transition to be beautiful?* To be accepted as a woman for all of everything.

She denied the thought airtime and “gussied up.” That meant something to someone, or it had, an old-fashioned attempt at saying you were powdering your nose, reapplying your lipstick, or else splashing water on your mess-free, minimal-look made-up face. Adam was coming up the stairs.

‘Iss,’ he said, his voice carrying, although it was hardly an obstacle course in the pencil. ‘You’re right, we need to get out of the house, those two are taking selfies in ferris wheels and Tobias texted, he said tonight there’s fireworks and lawnmower races, fucking dickhead.’ From outside the bathroom door—he was standing in her bedroom now, although respectful of her privacy enough to not knock on the door, or really look at anything in the room, his eyes firmly on the door—Adam sounded only a tad jealous. Isobel knew he cheered with relief going to the fairgrounds hadn’t become a *family outing*, as if the four of them made up a sort of found-family emancipated people boasted of on Thanksgiving in American television. Found family, though, was a commonplace dynamic for queer people. The coming out story divulging into being abandoned, cast-out because your identity and your *views* fit not with the blood, with the relatives you have known since birth. Isobel was grateful for *people*. The multiple families. Not that she desired to consider Adam part of that, and he the same.

Not even my cousin, white boy, she thought.

Didn’t need to be, she thought, too, opening the bathroom door to an Adam certainly not dressed for going anywhere beyond the supermarket, the gas station, or a late-night hookup’s place. Needed to wet and brush his hair too, or at least do something with it. Hide it underneath a baseball cap. Adam didn’t really wear a hat.

‘Can you get changed?’ No build, no hesitance. Isobel could be polite without being soft. Adam was in a white shirt, which would have been folded in a drawer in his closet, and linen shorts the colour of jade rocks. He could almost be mistaken for a sand-laying surfer past his heyday, which seemed like something else she was dredging up from watching a lot of American sitcoms. At least it wasn’t the stereotype she’d watched them to learn how to speak English, although it seemed a lot of people had. Was there someone who had learned how to speak the language watching *New Girl*? She seemed to favour the show when discussions arose around comfort things—comfort watches, comfort characters, because she had found herself enamoured, a little bit, by Winston Bishop, even if CeCe was the definable choice if her entire identity had to be centred around the journey towards transitioning. There was a beautiful woman. Gorgeous, ambitious.

*I am so much more than my transition*, Isobel told herself, picking at the shirt on Adam’s back, knowing it would be strange to give him fashion advice, knowing it would be weird to police what he wore, except if he wandered into the bar she wanted to go to—not a *fucking* tavern—he would gather glances for looking like someone sprung him from a commune, or otherwise woke him up his afternoon nanna nap to return to the world of the normal-young-adult and drink a frothy beer.

‘Ok, going to change, be right back,’ he said as he sauntered out of the room, beginning to tear off the shirt as he went. Adam would at least never attempt to seduce her. At least he understood what a lesbian was. At least he wasn’t so tediously straight he thought he ought to fix her.

The bar wasn't exactly up-and-coming, or elevated chic—it was a two-floor joint, where the underground level, the dark, secluded basement, housed old arcade machines and the claw. Instead of unwanted, overstuffed animals or product placement from the latest animated movie, however, the claw machine safeguarded impossible-to-collect troll dolls. If anything, it was a statement piece, an art installation, and suckered the coins of idiot eighteen-year-olds who wanted something to barter.

Isobel waltzed in first, heaving the door open, hit immediately by the impressively-cold air-conditioning. The afternoon was proving to be cooler than the past few days, but the temperature inside the bar was inviting, refreshing, and wasn't melting her skin. Right behind, Adam, having changed, made for a noticeable entrance—the light *stomp* of leather boots on hardwood floor. This was a first for the two of them, visiting this particular bar. In the week or so after being freed, being 'rescued' from the rented vacation house they stayed in while others continued pursuing a dream, Isobel and Adam frequented many bars together, albeit often with other friends, other former housemates. They would get themselves tipsy, wasted, plastered, all of the above, then chaperone each other back home.

It was rather methodical now they shared the same address.

'What do you want?' Isobel said while pointing at Adam, having stopped in her tracks and turned round to face him. In a movie, this moment would have been overt, every other instance of movement and dialogue around them phased out, silent, but in that second it was rather nonchalant and had he been a few steps further back in the direction of the door he might not have understood her.

'Cheap beer,' he muttered, giving her a glance. An expression almost identical to the sound *duh*. Isobel leaned against the bar while she ordered from a bartender who was otherwise cleaning a glass with a red checkerboard hand towel. The spot was surprisingly quiet for a Saturday, although the two of them were what was normally constituted as early—it was only three o'clock, but from her smile Isobel was quite noticeably thirsty for something alcoholic. The bartender was thankfully not a gorgeous woman—nobody either of them wants to flirt with, which would probably have been embarrassing at this hour, with this sunlight, anyway.

They found a table away from windows and pretended they would only be there for half an hour, for one drink. This charade was only brief. Now worn down, Adam seemed taken over from the moment he had the first sip, relaxed, refreshed. For many a straight, white man, drinking beer was something like getting manicures, pedicures, and a facial at the day spa. Obliterated the thoughts of the mind, soothed and smoothed. Or something like that. Adam wasn't looking to put to words what it was like to drink when you weren't normally supposed to, or to do so in a bar that seemed to be headed towards deconstruction, or with Isobel. That was a compliment, not an insult.

‘So, Adam,’ she began again, setting the tall glass down on the tabletop. ‘How was your week?’ It was a generalised question, almost too ordinary for the two of them, who had once likely responded with something that would’ve confused and confuddled anyone whose life ticked around normally. You’re supposed to be ordinary. Opposite her, Adam made a face of consideration, but he had very little to think about—how was his week? Well, he almost ran off at the sound of the wind without thinking.

‘I worked, I slept, I ate, I haven’t had sex in two weeks.’ He was noticeably miffed, the physical embodiment of a t-shirt with the words *eat-sleep-repeat* on it. Something a middle-aged-man wore to a doctor’s appointment as an awful conversation starter, or otherwise when he was mowing the lawn and gassing wasps and peering over the fence into the neighbour’s yard. Adam didn’t want to be a middle-aged-man, of course he didn’t, and he wasn’t, because middle-aged men had a certain smell...and this is where someone who interject, Zayn maybe, or otherwise Fletcher, that middle-aged-men had a certain texture and taste too. Adam was inside his head laughing. That silly story of Zayn meeting with someone important in a hotel room was like an attempt for relevancy, and he thought it was more likely Zayn was giving head to a man in his thirties with a tiny quarter of money to throw around.

Would it have been more hopeful, more productive for him to think Zayn instead had met someone incredibly charming, loving, kind, compassionate and taken him up the hotel room for an evening of sensual, erotic pleasure, no upsetting strings attached? But where had that woman been for him. Instead he had spent the evening switching between thoughts, at once absolutely fuming over the first things Sophie said to him, as if she found it impossible to learn decency, and then with the click, saving face by celebrating, by cheersing to victory, to lifelong friendship, to winning the literal lottery, you have! No doubt he would have sounded fake, phony, wincing from the ulcer, because worse than avoiding her all evening was the girlfriend-sized cut-out in the fabric of that damn night.

‘All you think about is getting that dick hard,’ Isobel said, and immediately regretted it.

Adam sharply sighed. ‘If I’m not honest, I get a kick, if I’m honest, I get a kick.’

‘That’s not what I meant, Ad.’

‘If I tell someone I want to patch a relationship I screwed, I get a kick. Kick the lame horse while he’s moaning for once in his life.’ Adam swallowed another sip of the beer. ‘Where’s the hidden camera now to repeat this for a week? Or the psychologist to tell me it’s alright to get emotional, it’s healthy to cry, you’re right to come to me, you know that.’ He didn’t seem distraught, but it could have been the media training after all. ‘I miss Sophie.’

It came out naturally, well before he was tipsy. Isobel had known something was built-up.

‘I know you do,’ she said, hesitant to therapize him. She wasn’t trained, and only knew him so well—if she said the wrong thing, made the wrong suggestion, it could always backfire and the blame

would hover around her, like a foul stench. Impossible to avoid the guilt when you share the same front door. Isobel chose her words carefully, mostly grateful this was the topic of conversation while the two of them were still sober, only beginning to pour the alcohol down their throats that would inevitably imbalance them.

‘Has she responded to your text?’ The likely answer she expected: no. People liked to disappear. Become ghosts, although in truth a ghost would hover in front of your face, willing you to notice them. This, Isobel thought, was unlikely to be a helpful *anything*. If he missed her now, if she had responded, maybe there would be something else to say: she doesn’t want to see me, then maybe you move on. She needs more time, then maybe you respect that and move on. Regardless, she knew she would sound like the psychologist, returning to the rhetoric, unable solve the problem of *x*. Wow, math—illogical in this conversation, Isobel thought, and she wondered, too, why it was forever impossible for people to sever themselves from a breakup.

Adam sighed. ‘Stuck on delivered.’ From a lesser man, this would have sounded like the grumbling of an inconvenienced child, but Adam seemed only confused, unsure. The dilemma of modern-world texting: does an unseen message mean the receiver only saw the notification at the top of the screen and didn’t dignify even the idea of a response? Or are they just busy? Or are they *just busy*? Becoming the psychologist of an unknown, of someone not even anywhere near the table, would only have been worse. Very obviously neither of them could know what Sophie was thinking. Stuck on delivered: thinking about him wasn’t keeping her awake at night.

Isobel strained to think of the right response. Tell him to wait, watch him squirm. Tell him to text her again, impatient, unnerving, watch another message sit there, stuck on delivered. She took another sip of the beer and contemplated whether the next drink should be something stronger, to either rush the process or push her thoughts towards certainty, albeit a shaky kind. ‘Honestly?’ She cleared her throat, because it seemed like something people did when they were hesitant, unsure of themselves, but wanted to seem like they knew what the hell they were on about when they went to confess. ‘You needed this more than I realised.’ It stung to say aloud. She wanted to curl the words back inside her mouth. *You needed this more than I realised?* She never even spent time around his friends, but this was something she worried they said to each other. The fear of becoming his therapist, not his ordinary friend, flicked this specific switch: instead of advice, she was offering distraction, but what was she supposed to say to him? Isobel sensed she knew the uncomfortable truth.

She could have said it, told Adam the next person he said he missed his ex-girlfriend to would probably tell him he’s acting like the girl. Although maybe that came only from experience.

Adam continued to drink. ‘The solution is alcoholism, is it?’

Isobel, grinning, at least attempting to hide her frustration with herself, replied: ‘No, god no, we are only drinking so much so that we need our stomachs pumped later, but not forever.’ It was something. She felt the urge to finish off the beer quickly, if not by skulling it, and head downstairs to the cavelike arcade. It obviously cost real money to play any of the machines, but maybe she could fast-tap the buttons, thwack the peg, play a little pinball to loosen up a little more. Clearly all she wanted for the afternoon was to be void of problem-solving. This wasn’t work. It was a bar. It was getting tipsy with her roommate whom she would continue to hang around as if by will they would find things they actually have in common with each other. ‘Never alcoholism, my friend, never. I have seen what it does to people in my family. I had a second-aunt, I suppose you would say, like a cousin of a cousin’s mother, and she would seem different every time we saw her, at family reunions or if someone was getting married or whatnot. Gradually, event by event, she seemed to bring more alcohol to these parties, or otherwise come having had plenty to drink beforehand. There were murmurings within the family about who should say something, whether the next gathering would be dry, completely sober, so if she came already tipsy someone, an uncle or my father or her father, would say something. They would have a definitive excuse to question why she came to this island beach day already semi-plastered. But the opportunity never quite came.’

‘That’s a mood killer, Isobel.’ Adam paused, considered, took a drink. ‘Did something happen to her? Before your father could say something?’

‘Oh, no, no,’ Isobel said, shaking her head, realising how sombre her cliffhanger had left the conversation. ‘She never came to the beach, out in broad daylight, with a million and one children running around, tossing sand, making sandcastles, getting up in her business. My second-aunt—I forgot to say, her name is Louisa, she was admitted to rehab two weeks later. Just hates the beach. Loathes the sand in between her toes, or finding it in unholy places, like too near her vagina.’ Isobel hid a little giggle, but the tone remained serious, reserved. ‘Louisa is a recovering alcoholic, but no one ever said she would be perfect. No one ever said I would see her much when I grew up and moved out and started living with relative strangers neither. It has been at least a few years since I saw her, although her children, cousins of cousins, we keep in touch. They like to send reels on Instagram. Sometimes I just avoid checking the chat between us because it is like wading through infested water, so much to filter, so much to uncover, is that something grabbing my leg or is it just a dead log, that sort of thing.’

‘It’s good she got some help for it then.’

‘I am so so sorry I completely upended the conversation like that,’ Isobel replied, finishing off the beer. She sighed, the glass clinking against the wood of the table as she set it back down. ‘Instead of actually approaching what you were talking about, I decided to give you a soliloquy of my own life, and sometimes that is so absolutely unnecessary.’

‘I like getting to know more about you, Iss.’

On another girl, some gorgeous idiot, this would have been a line, a hook, a sinker. Isobel did not soften or weaken at the knees when he said this, although neither did Adam deliver it with some semblance of a sultry, flirtatious tone. It wasn’t anything but comforting. ‘Someone else’s trauma is not so much a fact about me,’ she said, a little docile. Coming out of it, she glanced over at the bar, considering another drink. ‘Certain people have this idea that you are not supposed to relate another person’s story to one of your own. I do not get it, personally. We are supposed to only listen, only ask them questions? Wouldn’t you want to see a mirror instead of a blank wall?’

They ordered more beer and returned to those seats, the topic of conversation still lingering, somewhat having shifted in a different direction. ‘Cut me off if I am getting too philosophical, it is a relic of my time at university. I spent a lot of hours arguing with the friends I made in first year classes about unit discussions and exam responses and everything else, complete extremes, one person would argue strongly that morally you should never leave a dog alone in the car with the windows wound up, for example, another person would argue that *Up* isn’t as emotionally resonant as, I don’t know, a non-animated movie that discusses similar themes, similar traumas.’

Adam was staring back at her, unsure of how to respond. He liked *Up*, at least, but the alcohol was making him feel far less likely to want to talk about morals, and ethics, and labelling something as *trauma*. He stopped himself from choking down a sip of beer and began to reply, a little hesitatingly.

‘I’m going to cut you off.’

Isobel laughed, apologising under her breath. ‘You’re right, time and place.’ She glanced around at the arcade-bar. It was still relatively empty, although at the same time the bartender was pouring two more beers a couple of men at least a decade older than Isobel walked in. They seemed queer, or at least that was what her sense of a gaydar told her, if that was something to believe in. Certainly some queer men were obvious, but some passed for straight, which was amusing.

‘There’s something I want to ask you then, and if you are not comfortable, cut me off again, I don’t mind being told to shush and be quiet,’ Isobel continued, waiting for Adam’s reaction. He nodded along, told her unless it was something disturbing he would be glad to answer. An evil inside of Isobel considered switching the question out, very last-minute, but she didn’t. Be wise.

‘What attracts you to a person?’

‘I was waiting for you to ask me what my kinks are, Iss.’

‘It’s more harmless than I made it out to be, I know, I was giving you an out anyway. I am curious. The type of woman you are attracted to. The types. I think labelling you moronic is cruel.’

‘Who called me moronic?’ He could answer the question himself: the internet, the edit, his ex-girlfriend, Tobias, maybe. There was always the straight-man idiot archetype, the one whose glory days

were perhaps in high school where this sort of behaviour, thinking he was the top dog, the big cat, was more favoured. Adam cringed because he thought himself more than the village idiot, more than a handsome piece of meat on a string, void of opinions, or worthy ones. It was the unfortunate cost of filling a blank—look like the meathead, play the meathead. Adam considered the question while he swallowed a bit too much of the alcohol in one gulp.

‘Sorry. Analytical brain.’ Isobel tapped her forehead.

Adam brushed it off. ‘My type of woman. You obviously want more than what she looks like, whether she dresses in a way that appeals to me when I see her in person for the first time.’ He paused, waiting for her to confirm his suspicions: Isobel merely nodded, giving a slight hand gesture to signal *go on*. ‘I think she should be genuinely interested in me, that’s not a self-conceited thing. She should want to spend time with me, because what, we’re not going to enjoy our time together if either one of us is forcing it, because we find each other attractive, or just because we’re horny.’ Adam smiled, a genuine sort, nothing made of bravado. ‘I’m not attracted to slobs, you know women who have no ambition, but I was raised by my mum, no surprise. Maybe if you’re attracted to a slob there’s something up there working against you,’ and this time Adam poked his forehead, winking at Isobel across the table. ‘I like when she’s got the type of personality that doesn’t seem fake, like she isn’t trying to be a different type of girl.’

‘She is not putting on a façade to impress men?’

‘Exactly.’ Adam smiled. ‘Bubbly is great until she’s too bubbly, suddenly she’s a Spice Girl with the fake hair and the overflamboyant personality, is that a word, overflamboyant?’ He shook his head, like it didn’t matter regardless, and continued. ‘If I found out anything was forced or rehearsed, I’d realise I’d prefer to be like this, single and miserable, wishing it was how it was before I found out that the moment was forced or rehearsed. Being with me, in an actual relationship, should never feel like it’s a play being performed for a wide public audience. What are they going to do, applaud when there’s curtains?’ He took another swallow of beer, his face contorting into an expression of mild disappointment. Not about the drink, no.

‘I don’t know if they all wore wigs.’

‘Huh? Who?’

‘Spice Girls. I mean maybe. Human hair wigs?’

‘What’s a non-human hair wig? Are we shaving monkeys?’

Isobel cackled. ‘No,’ mid-laughing, ‘horsehair. It is strange regardless, I guess.’

‘Those poor horses.’

‘I shouldn’t have brought up the moronic thing. It was something I saw often enough, because like before the show I read up on what people, the viewers, would say about the contestants on Reddit

and if I ever bothered to go on the forum-specific sites. I won't touch Twitter anymore.' She rested her arms down on the tabletop, hoping the gesture was reassuring if anything. 'It was cruel of me to even say it, because maybe you would have thought it was something I believed, at one point or another. Having gotten to know you, inside and outside of the game, which will always feel incredulous to say, bringing up the word moronic with a tie to your name feels I would have been looking for a way to insult you, to attack you.' Isobel's smile was sympathetic. 'Every human being on Earth knows and understands being scrutinised. I should not do it.'

'Isobel, I can take criticism.'

'I know you can—'

'Never looked at how die-hard fans were talking about me on Reddit, but who cares what strangers think?' Adam shrugged his shoulders. 'You know who I cared about, whose thoughts mattered? *Hers*. If she had called me moronic in that first conversation we had when we got our phones back, I would be thousands of points more worse off. Points like video game health? I don't know, an Ophelia thing.' He laughed, then caught himself back to where he was. 'I would be struggling to get off the fucking couch. If she had called me moronic. Really, I disappeared into a TV screen for three months to see if the distance would patch up our weird relationship, and no, it really didn't. But she didn't call me moronic. I was not her moron. I was not my mum's, or my brothers', my dad's, the boys'. Still saw the word. I didn't need Reddit to be called stupid, or so self-absorbed in his own arrogance to not paint himself like an utter tool when he thought he was in prime spot, whether it be in his alliances, or because he won something, which shoot me in the skull for getting excited about winning something, I very rarely did.'

'I think we won about the same, one competition?'

'Don't piss me off Iss,' he said, although his face hardly gave an expression of anger or resentment. He was smiling, grinning, really, and he took the tall glass in his hand and poured most of what remained of the beer down his throat. 'Why does it matter? None of it does. That's not our lives, and yet we'll be sitting in a bar, trying to enjoy a Saturday afternoon, and it's unavoidable because the thing happened so recently I still get messages from girls saying they either saw me *this way*,' and he flips both of his thumbs down, 'or they're reacting to a shirtless picture with the fire emoji, one lick of courage away from asking whether the only reason I was cast to be on TV was because I look attractive-enough and if they caught me in the shower, there would be minutes and minutes of content, shots of my ass, a tease of the v-line down to my penis, even just a shirtless body in frame. And fuck, I wasn't as hot as Donny, or Diesel, my boys are beautiful.'

'Now that's homoerotic,' Isobel said, smirking.

'Don't you repeat a word of that to either of them.'

She giggled. ‘This is not your queer awakening, I know that.’ She paused, briefly wondering if he would interject. It is fun to amuse yourself. ‘I am so *tired* of talking about that show. Not trying to diminish what you said, not at all, it is something I agree with you on completely, but damn, for people whose existence continues and has relevance beyond those three months, let’s just loosen up like we promised we would.’

Downstairs, in the arcade portion of Ginball Wizard, Isobel and Adam hovered in front of an old Ms PAC-MAN machine. Briefly they considered the physicality of the two of them playing at the same time, but it seemed impossible and almost certainly the excuse for an awful, terrible score, so Isobel was on the controls, and Adam was there for the occasional burst of moral support. He whispered, or mouthed, *c’mon* and *yes yes*. Cautious about disturbing the rhythm.

The off-white puck of ghost-annihilation was wearing off, and soon Inky and Pinky would continue their panicked chase of the bowed girl-version of the iconic arcade video game character. Isobel was attempting to maintain a level-head, keep herself focused, but she was not exactly perfectly sober. At least one thing was known—she had inherited the Yanick male-line resistance to alcohol, although whether or not the hormones were tampering with this was the business of scientists, and the most she knew right now was she could drink more beer and still obliterate Adam in a friendly game of let’s eat the white dots.

Or she hoped.

Isobel was enjoying herself, that much was obvious.

When she ran into the yellow ghost, Sue—insane name—and lost a life, she exclaimed: ‘Not dead yet, little boy.’ Adam glanced at her, half-amused, half-confused.

‘Little boy?’

‘I don’t know.’ She began to laugh, briefly breaking her focus, very narrowly avoiding another collision with one of the pursuing ghosts. Isobel narrowed her eyes, as if this changed anything but limiting the field of vision, but she hoped she looked focused. She hoped she looked impressive.

When the illuminated **GAME OVER** text flashed on the screen, Isobel jumped back with obvious disappointment, but she restrained herself from acting like a sore loser. It was an impressive score—nowhere close to the high score registered to this machine, but for someone who hadn’t played Ms PAC-MAN in forever, and hadn’t fiddled with the knobs of one of these machines in forever, too, she eased back into a smile and was proud of herself. It seemed to matter less what Adam scored, although now he was locked-in, confident, actually seeming to enjoy himself.

If there had been a goal to accomplish, this was victory. Watching Adam, trying not to be creepy about it, Isobel would not have imagined this friendship lasting, certainly not when they first met. What did she think of him then? Not *moron*, she hoped.

No, first impressions are important, but temporary. The image of a person in your mind can shift, but Isobel must not have disliked Adam, or at least must not have had any definitive reason to. But still. If you apply the world to stereotypes, and you wonder which pairings make the most logical sense, she was hardly masculine—and never really was—and her queerness seemed to oppose how plainly, obviously, straight he was. It was potentially damaging for her to think a man like him could befriend a woman like her, a trans-woman like her...but what was life if not a minefield of potentially damaging ideas? None of her friends were straight men. She lingered around other lesbians, met other transgender people at pride events and then through common friends from there. Queer men, at least, were disarming and she considered them brothers, unless they actively attempted to scissor themselves away from her. Men who liked being fucked in the ass, but disrespected, disregarded trans people just made no sense at all to her.

Adam fell short, shorter than Isobel's score, and she knew—respected, even—that this was something to be inwardly proud of. It wasn't like besting one of the other roommates, because Ophelia and Tobias seemed to be part-computer, but you had to be proud of yourself for accomplishing something. Even if the something was Ms PAC-MAN.

'What are your kinks?' Adam asked, the two of them lingering at the front door while Isobel inserted the key into the lock. He guffawed, almost immediately retracting. 'No, no, I meant, what attracts you to a woman?'

Isobel, ignoring him but unable to avoid laughing softly to herself, unlocked the front door and they filed inside. It was, by this time, six-thirty and they had excused themselves from the bar purely because it was beginning to get busier and both of them agreed lounging on the seven-year-couch watching television would be more enjoyable than overhearing the conversations of dorks. Harsh, but they were certainly a bit tipsy at that point.

In the living room, collapsing down on the sofa, Isobel weighed out her answer. 'What attracts me to a woman?' She was thirsty, this time at least for water, but made no actual effort to move again for a glass. Neither of them was outright drunk. Neither of them had realistically wished for the hangover that would come tomorrow morning if they had been. 'I like beautiful eyes. If I can stare into her eyes for hours...beautiful eyes. And do you know how incredible a pair of breasts can be?' She realised, quickly, she was only describing physical attributes—but maybe, subconsciously, she was

doing it on purpose, because Adam was less likely to judge her. Ordinarily she was expected to say the comfortable truths: she liked a woman who appreciated every inch of her, including and most importantly the personality she sculpted over the course of the entirety of her life, becoming a more interesting person, attempting to be certain her transness wasn't the only thing people understood about her, because it was certainly the only thing a person could begin to see when they wanted to demonise her. I want a woman who is patient, I want a woman who is forgiving of the minute mistakes I am sure to make, for I am forever changing and changed by the world. These would be what Adam had expected. It was refreshing to be so blunt, to objectify a woman, sure, but she could forgive herself when she was sober in the morning.

'It's absolute B.S. to not consider how attractive you find your woman, physically,' she said, glancing over at Adam, waiting for him to say something to cut her off, but he didn't. Those university friends, one of them would have made alterations to her sentence: "your woman"? Gross. "You shouldn't be primarily governed by physical beauty, Isobel." Being politically-correct was important, and again she would forgive herself from the language, *your woman*, but couldn't it wait for now? 'What I mean is, if you don't find them attractive, because you found the perfect person who is patient, who doesn't hold you to impossible standards, how will you kiss them if they don't make you blush when you look at them?' She paused. 'Don't shoot for the supermodel of the world, but we can avoid saying it is only what is on the inside that matters, because listening to rhetoric like that made me date girls I didn't find that attractive just on the fact that we had a lot in common, and they treated me like I was a proper human being—'

Isobel had cut herself off, moving off the couch to fill a glass with filtered water from the insert in the refrigerator. She made the required *ahhh* sound after the first mouthful and glanced over at Adam. She didn't know whether what she had just said was right, or worded correctly, but at least she didn't have to worry about whether it would be absolutely dragged through the mud by the fans who expected her to be morally perfect in every single conversation.

'Why should anyone care who we love?'

'Oh my fucking god!' Isobel screeched out, either orgasmic or like the preacher in a church. The two were certainly never mutually-exclusive. 'We did it, Joe.' She mimed wiping a tear from her eye. 'Okay, what are we watching? Bad TV? *Love is Blind*?'

## TOBIAS & ADAM

Tobias realised this was the first proper exposure he was receiving with Adam's family. Briefly, he'd been introduced to Adam's mother, Bobbie, and his brother Shannon at the afterparty, but nothing more than a passing greeting before they swallowed up time with Adam and he was whisked away to recuperate with Zane. He would have been infinitely more nervous if this were an initiation into the family because he was dating someone, but the tension eased. The idea of dating the heterosexual Adam seemed so completely out of the realm of belief, even as a fake-dating scenario, that meeting his roommate's family contained little evidence of pressure. They only need to think you're normal, he thought, as the van rolled into the campsite.

The drive had taken three hours total, although the two men had stopped briefly at a gas station to refuel and get something to eat. Tobias was feeding himself fries as they returned to the highway, listening to a playlist he'd spent the night before fine-tuning, avoiding anything he was worried Adam would listen to with a scowl on his face. The van didn't have any fancy-tech Bluetooth capabilities, but Tobias nestled a squat speaker on the dashboard, and it had felt, already, like the two of them were getting back to the basics of things. Escaping to nature. Only objects that ran on battery power. When they arrived at the campsite, already dominated by the Affeldts and the friends of birthday boy Shannon Affeldt, the two of them were exhausted for separate reasons. Adam had steering-wheel joint pain, cracking his back as he stretched, digging his feet into the soil; Tobias had a sore throat from singing along to his music the entire time.

The van required little set-up. They would sleep on the mattress in the back, eat meals with the family, shower in the communal bathrooms, go to the toilet there too. The hanging lamp in the back of the van ran on batteries; Tobias felt like sometimes he did too. It was hardly the first time either of them would be this intimately close to one another, but it was the first time without cameras tracking their every move. Adam wandered off to check in with the family—there had been no ordinary run order of every member who would be present, Tobias would be introduced to them as they appeared in front of him, eyeing off the only other person who had been on television they knew. But for now, he would get a second of peace, sitting on the edge of the mattress with his legs hanging out the door.

'Tobias?' The voice snapped him back into focus. It was the birthday boy, Adam's brother, having wandered back from the camp bathroom with a towel slung over his shoulder. A small cylindrical bag of toiletries in hand. 'We met before, but I've seen a lot of hours of you strategizing and talking into the late hours about how competitive you are.'

It was a little embarrassing, to be summed up in a sentence.

‘I heard someone was turning the big three-o,’ was the first thing that came out of Tobias’ mouth. He was a little starstruck himself—it was easier to deny your roommate’s handsome features, but this almost-stranger in front of him was charmingly attractive, and it was impossible for Tobias to deny he wasn’t immediately attracted. Adam had mentioned Shannon was in a committed relationship to Lucy, the girl he was soon to be marrying, but a boy could at least ogle. ‘Happy birthday, is what I meant. Thanks for letting your brother have a plus one. I cannot wait to be a pale substitution for a beautiful woman.’

Shannon laughed. ‘Of course you’re welcome, I was glad to be honest, that he’d have someone his own age.’ He grinned wide. ‘I joke, there’s not much separating you and I from what I remember.’ Shannon paused, adjusting the towel. ‘I feel younger. But then Lucy reminds me she wants to have children soon and suddenly I don’t remember what being in my early twenties was like.’

‘Oh, children, you’re a braver soldier than I.’

‘Isn’t it the sort of thing we’re all supposed to want? No, back then I never thought about them, probably because I wasn’t in the right relationship. Now, I think I’m excited to be a dad.’

Tobias smiled. There was nothing he wanted less at this age than to be grounded down by children, not even one of them. But his ambitions stood separate to anyone else’s. ‘Do you think your brother wants kids? Adam, I mean.’ He couldn’t believe he was getting into a conversation like this immediately, let alone with his roommate’s brother he barely knew. It was a tad inappropriate to ask, but he had, and waiting for an answer was unavoidable.

‘I don’t think Adam’s ever thought he wouldn’t.’ He paused. ‘In the whole scheme of things, I think he wants the wife, the kids, the house that Jack bought. I think that.’

‘Yeah.’ Tobias paused, wondering what part of the conversation they would be in the middle of when Adam appeared as if out of thin air, and suddenly be embarrassed because of it. Or frustrated, or annoyed. This isn’t your business, Tobias thought, looking for a way to switch the conversation. ‘I could see him with all of that.’ It was a nice moment to let linger. Adam actually living happy families, not playing it. Other people had different dreams.

Shannon gently shook the black toiletries bag. ‘I’ll let you get comfortable in that creepy white van my brother would never in his life get laid in, but when you want to, come around and I’ll introduce you to everyone.’ He paused, smirking. ‘None of my friends watch your show, so they will not know who you are at all, you can feel completely normal.’ He wandered off in the direction Adam had, and Tobias leaned back as if he had just met a Greek Adonis. Shannon’s nose was more pronounced than his brother’s, and he altogether looked more noticeably interesting—this was all to say Adam’s face was almost too ordinarily handsome, and Tobias was far more likely to be attracted to someone who didn’t seem grown out of the cookie-cutter lab. Nothing mattered, anyway. But he could look.

Adam came sauntering back to the van with a mildly surprised expression on his face. ‘My brother just heckled me for leaving you all alone here,’ he said, making a gesture with his hand to say *scoot over*. Tobias shimmied his butt over and suddenly there were two pairs of legs dangling out the side of the van. ‘I’m guessing he came past after his shower. Gave you trouble? Hazed you?’

Tobias shook his head, a lame reply, but he was figuring out how best to avoid mentioning the topic of children. It had been merely a distraction choice, a way for him to talk about someone else long enough so the conversation never rolled around and flattened him underfoot like fallen leaves. ‘He was welcoming.’ Very welcoming, Tobias thought, but kept the v-word out of there. Unnecessary, and he wouldn’t need anyone, meaning anyone, at the campsite to know the dark caverns of his mind. Was it dark to be attracted to your friend’s brother? That was practically the average high school experience of a queer teenage boy. ‘Although he did say this van reeks of pedophilia. You’re lucky it isn’t a permanent fix. What are you, a painter or a knotty, old candyman?’ Tobias poked out his tongue. Adam considered lunging forward at it, at the tongue, he thought about attempting to bite it off, but he subsided. A response like that made no sense, but there had always been this playful tension between the two of them. Rivals, although not bitterly, not borne of hatred and a sick despising of one another. They were merely enemies on a battlefield purpose-built. Simulated attackers. The cry of the loon signalled the end of the war, and Tobias and Adam dismounted their horses. Now, it was mere teasing, mere tongue-wagging. *I’ll slice and I’ll dice and I’ll create blood clotting all the way down.*

Why on earth Tobias brought out the morbidly curious machinations in him he might never know. Adam would barely have to lunge. The two of them were touching shoulders. Tonight, sleeping beside one another on the mattress, they would be touching ankles. Touching feet. They would be touching each other’s hands, accidentally. Maybe touching each other’s butt cheeks. Everything would be a mistake, a movement of the body to pivot away, to avoid making a proper embarrassment of the situation. A true hazing.

‘Before I murder you, come meet the family. Have something to eat.’ He paused, poking Tobias in the back. ‘Then I’ll suffocate you in your sleep. Knotty old candyman.’

The morning afterwards, Tobias and Adam were roused out of a quiet breakfast by Adam’s two brothers, Shannon and Lewis. Everyone was mandated—although a politer word was used—to go canoeing in the river, or otherwise go on a leisurely hike because there had only been *x* number of canoes that could be hired out for the camping trip. ‘You’re paddling with me, man, I’m not getting stuck with Aunt Tracey again.’ It was Adam’s orders. The idea of disobeying them to be on a nature walk with strangers, or otherwise to be on a nature walk with an agitated Adam who wanted instead to be floating down the river seemed to be a moot value. He wouldn’t be likely to oppose canoeing either.

Instead of reclining on the mattress in the stalker-van reading a good book, Tobias found himself in the front of a crimson-and-marigold-coloured canoe, synchronising up the rhythms of his paddling with Adam behind him. In the canoe ahead of theirs, Shannon and Lucy had their own tempo, but they were beginning to lag in speed, which made catching up a breeze. It wasn't by any means a race, or a test of strength and ability, but with their canoes parallel, the two siblings could naturally taunt each other. 'A game of poker later?' This from Adam, who narrowed his eyes in fierce competition. 'It's a pity there isn't a Ms PAC-MAN machine here. I brushed up on my skills last weekend and I would demolish you before you could even squeal *Sue*.'

'We can play poker, I brought a deck of cards.' Shannon squared up against his brother, the best one possibly could while sitting down in a canoe. 'But no chips. Betting real money.'

Tobias remained clear out of it, and so too did Lucy by the looks. They made short, hesitant glances at one another, as if figuring out whether to signal for some form of interference, but as far as Tobias could tell neither brother sought to make this anything more than a playful rivalry. If there was to be a poker game that evening, it was very unlikely to be winner-takes-all—as far as he knew, Adam very rarely carried paper money on him, he sort of seemed to have a strange disdain for wallets.

They continued down the winding river, and occasionally Tobias wondered down a thought: if the canoe were to capsize, who would be to blame? Neither of them seemed ill-advised to be in the canoe, guiding it along—if anything, he imagined someone else behind would capsize theirs, perhaps Adam's mother, or this aunt previously mentioned, Tracey, whom he had only met briefly the night before and had noticed the fascinatingly-handmade earrings dangling in a bed of frizzy brown hair. If there was a scream, a holler, maybe it would be Tracey. In the rear of the canoe, Adam tried for serenity. There had to be balance, serenity and focus, considering an ounce too much of bliss would upend forward momentum and then he would be to blame, he would be the one who absolutely drenched Tobias, and there they would be on the edge of the riverbank drying each other off, towelling their hairy legs. Adam scratched out the thought of a saturated roommate—any which one of them.

When they climbed out of the fruit-bowl canoe, neither one altogether that wet, Tobias perked up and glanced at Adam standing next to him. 'How busy is this weekend exactly?'

Adam shifted to begin to haul the canoe up onto the riverbed. 'It's busy enough, but the old man, my brother, he doesn't want to ruin his baby-making back.' The feat had been an opportunity for Adam to expose his muscles, but it was more than likely he should have accepted the help offered to him, as he stumbled back and rubbed his hands together. Visibly a tad drained out. 'You can relax for now, while everyone gathers together again, but I'd say give it an hour and he'll probably want you losing to him in a medieval joust.' He laughed. 'Or a game of Hide and Seek.'

They returned to a communal area in front of the Affeldt family caravan and sat in foldable camping chairs around an unused fire pit. Considering the season, and the bans, it was unlikely anyone had started a fire here in some time, but it made for an obvious centrepiece for the family to gather around. By association, Tobias was one of them now, although only because Adam wanted to spend time with his parents and his younger brother. He had cause to sit back, observe, not centre any of the conversations on him—gratefully, there was someone to celebrate, an obvious candidate for attention and a charismatic, charming one at that. Shannon stepped out of the caravan having donned a Birthday Boy pin on his shirt, and the parading seemed fitting, to an extent, for a birthday at the turn of a decade. Thirty. Tobias remembered his. Arguably toned down, sans a weekend getaway, before everything. Zane inches from giving him the required brotherly bullying and taunting. Reserving himself. Questions about when he might think about getting married. Scoff.

Tobias picked up conversations between Adam and Bobbie, Adam and Carl, Adam and Lewis. It was all relatively relaxed, ordinary—no one awkwardly attempted to mention their middle child’s choice of companion, a slightly-older gay man, and no one harassed Adam on how he was finding his current job. ‘What a shite week,’ he had said in the car on the drive up on the afternoon prior. ‘The same thing every single day, and if you catch me complaining to anyone there, it’s the mate who’s got no authority to do anything about it.’ He had done everything but puffed smoke out of his nostrils about it, and through some intervention with the stars, no one seemed to feel compelled to discuss it. Adam’s father Carl had asked Tobias what he did for work: his answer, polite but unoriginal, was that all the interviews he attended lately proved mostly pointless. *They just won’t hire me.*

He had an interview in two days, but he was losing patience, or interest, perhaps. Enthusiasm.

An hour and a half or so after returning from the river, Shannon, sporting the embroidered pin and its greenish shades and hues, gathered everyone together. The game, Tobias thought, lingering now beside Adam, who had remembered he existed. He couldn’t quite act neglected, Tobias the tag-along. The hermittant thing to do would be to return to the child-abductor van and retreat himself underneath the covers, reading the great Australian novel, like one dreamed for a destination holiday, but alas. The game. Rear yourself into that old-fashioned competitive spirit, but seek poise, seek respect amongst relative strangers. Give Aunt Tracey slack of the rope.

‘The game,’ Shannon announced at the front of the gathered crowd, ‘is Capture the Flag.’ This thinned a substantial portion of the group—the older family members in particular, and Tobias and Adam both imagined this was the birthday boy’s entire intention. Keep them included, give them an out. With this divided-down assortment of people, including a determined Lucy having tied her blonde hair into a tight high pony, Shannon explained the basic-but-known rules and teams were evenly segmented. Tobias and Adam, further joined to the hip, began concocting strategies. On the opposing

team, Shannon and Lewis hurled competitive takedowns at their brother. ‘Ready to eat dirt, Addy?’ ‘Good luck getting anywhere near our flag, posers.’ ‘I will knock you out!’ The third retort seemed alarmingly aggressive, but no one present seemed to take it seriously, or to take it as a believable future-action of either brother. Tobias and Adam glanced around at their compatriots. It is an honour going into battle with you all, Adam thought, albeit somewhat concerned he was dolled the underdog squad without his brothers and without Lucy, who was only lacking the camouflaged war paint.

What the campsite lacked in an obvious field for such a sport, no fenced-around area with earmarked flag posts, it made up for in a confusing sparse of land that only made navigating it towards victory a challenge. If you ran too fast, you might come barrelling into a person, or a thick-trunked tree, or the side of a caravan. If you swerved, you could end up in the river. Shannon had outlined the objective, and it had felt entirely combative, and Tobias and Adam glanced around at the faces in their miniature army, wondering who would be best suited for the offence and the defence. War-like. Or like netball. Whichever seemed more realistic to you.

Later, with the two of them flanking trees askew from one another, Adam glanced over to Tobias and made a slight signal, barely noticeable. ‘What does that mean?’ Tobias mouthed, then whispered when the other had no idea what he was trying to say.

‘Move to the next trees ahead,’ Adam whispered hoarsely. The two men scampered forward and ducked behind another set of trees, although these were closer together and gave the two of them another chance to strategize. It was odd for them both, to slip back into the mindset they had actively avoided since their time on the show ended. The flag was somewhere off in the distance, not straight ahead but round a bend in the forest, guarded, presumably, by one of Adam’s brothers—someone unafraid to get their hands, feet, stomachs, and asses dirty when capture was threatened. Tobias leaned against the tree, backwards hugging the bark. They had been running around for half an hour at this point and without a bird’s eye view of the playing field it was impossible to know if anyone was close to victory.

‘Are you enjoying yourself, genuinely?’ Adam said, taking his eyes off the silent woods for a moment to look at his patient roommate beside him. Tobias shot him a warm smile, or as warm as it could be without shattering the illusion of being bloodthirstily competitive.

‘There’s nothing else I want to do on a Saturday except run like mad trying to prove my worth and see your brothers squirm in defeat,’ he replied, exhaling. ‘I am. I won’t thank you for inviting me though, I know you straight men hate sappy stuff.’ They both laughed, and Adam threatened to punch him in the stomach. ‘You’re faster than I am, so if there’s an in for the flag, please just take it and I’ll pretend to have early cardiac arrest if I have to.’

Adam did a militant nod, and then he smiled. Someone ahead, on the opposing team, darted around the trees and moved in their direction. It was impossible to tell what you were supposed to do when the lot of you had nothing to steal from one another, both flags somewhere in the distance—it was a duplicate of rugby players running about the field without the ball, except it would have been bizarre to see the hunks of men hiding obviously behind tree trunks scoping out nothing. This enemy, this racing stripe, appeared nearby then passed Tobias and Adam, poking his tongue out as he went. One of Shannon’s friends, a fawn-skinned guy taller than the pair of them, he had been introduced to Tobias earlier as Wayne. Save the cockiness, Tobias thought, you don’t have the flag. He would have been rushing in the opposite direction if he did. Suddenly the thought flashed in his mind: here is strategy. There is something to their plan, some unknown idea—maybe Wayne was plotting something, fitting in the puzzle piece. Tobias and Adam glanced at one another, the consideration coming into their minds at the same time, but their only intrusion would be to tackle the bloke to the ground completely unwarranted.

They didn’t flinch. It mattered little. The brothers’ uncle Jason became averse or merely shrugged his shoulders at wriggling the flag out of Lucy’s hands as she stole it away from the once-well-guarded spot and disappeared without a trace back into the woods. Along the way she reunited with her future-husband and the victory was secured. Tobias and Adam slumped down in their spot. They had witnessed the lovebirds secure victory from bushes a stone’s throw from the flag. It was devastating. Having showered, eaten, and crawled underneath the covers of the mattress in the rear of the borrowed van, Tobias and Adam were illuminated now only by the hanging, battery-powered lamp. It cast shadows on their faces. The afternoon had been spent similarly riddled with activity and participation, and now the two men were exhausted, but perked up by birthday cake—chocolatey, sickly-sweet—and vanilla ice cream, but surprisingly no alcohol. This, to the two of them, seemed to be a dangerous indicator of what was certain to come for their Sunday morning, but for now, they relished in relaxing their bones and being sheltered away from biting mosquitos.

‘Shannon thinks I would have been a lump of coal if you hadn’t come.’

Tobias turned over on the mattress so he could look at Adam when he responded.

‘You are a lump of coal.’ He laughed. ‘I’m joking, you’re not. When was the last time he saw you? If he only has this idea in his head of you lazing about in a state of misery after the breakup, which you’re moving on from, even if you don’t internally think you can do.’

Adam glanced at him with a concerned expression. ‘Is that something you believe?’

‘I know depression. I know heartbreak.’ He paused, long enough to know he had to correct himself. ‘I’m not saying you don’t. To me, and don’t take this harmfully, to me you seem like the idea

of a person holding their recent pain hostage.’ Tobias shifted once more on the mattress, suddenly thinking complete comfort for the conversation was deranged. He propped himself up. ‘Charismatic kidnappers are able to pretend there is no agony chained to the post in the basement.’

‘You’ve got to stop comparing me to criminals.’

Tobias began profusely apologising. ‘Oh god, sorry, sorry. Ribbing you is like a combative attempt to not feel complacent—it’s like a friendship between the nerd and the jock with you. Although I hate the idea of being considered a dork and you sit on your butt at work in front of a computer all day.’ At this, clearly striking a certain nerve with the man he shared the bed with, Tobias found himself playfully punched in the stomach. The act finally realised. Tobias feigned realised pain, too, and dramatically clutched at his stomach. ‘Ow,’ he groaned out, but neither of them took it seriously.

*‘Combative attempt? Sounds like a nerd, talks like a nerd.’*

‘Let me explain myself properly, caveman.’

Tobias and Adam were now beyond the faux-violence and lying side-by-side on the mattress, which would have been romantic had either of them been interested in each other. It was more reminiscent of brothers forced to sleep in the same bed on a family camping trip, and the two of them were inches away from kneeing each other in the groin or refusing to fall asleep if the other wasn’t facing the other direction, towards the hard shell of the van. ‘I’m too old to be afraid of getting bullied by you, it isn’t that. It’s just how I think I can communicate with you.’

‘Toby, you can talk to me without ripping into me.’

‘Impossibly, I think too much in archetypes. Men like you, void of any queerness, not toxically masculine by any means but comfortably not-queer. That archetype of person has passed me off as irrelevant and unworthy of getting to know, because I say something gay eventually.’

‘And I don’t know what you’re talking about sometimes, but whatever.’ Tobias sighed, burying his face in his hands. It was certain he wasn’t struck by any emotions, except maybe embarrassment, but he peeled away his hands soon after and revealed the attempt at a smile. ‘Hey. You’re talking nonsense again. I wanted to spend the weekend with you. I don’t look at you and go, hey look there’s my gay bud, and isn’t it toxic for you to think of yourself only by your sexuality anyway?’

Tobias glanced at him gratefully. He had a point—Tobias was certain sometimes to hold his sexuality too importantly over his head, a prominent label more than an element of his existence. He knew there was a chance he talked about it too often, certainly around Isobel—the pair of them ingested enough queer theory and regurgitated it in conversation to kill a pony. If that was possible, if that made any logical sense. ‘Time to knock off the serial killer references, though.’ He laughed softly to himself. ‘It’s just, you remind me so much of Ted Bundy.’

That in itself would have earned a gut punch. Adam restrained himself, his eyes flickering up to the glow of the lamp. He was growing tired, and their sole intention of retiring to the borrowed van was to bid goodnight to the world and each other, not continue chatting into the early hours. ‘Can you turn out the light?’ His eyes continued to flick up towards the glowing bulb overhead. Tobias readjusted himself to flick it off, and the cabin became blanketed with darkness, flakes of moonlight coming in through the windows. ‘Thank you,’ he finished, making himself snuggler on the mattress, flipping his pillow over underneath his head to the cold side.

For a time, silence enveloped the rear-end of the van, although neither of them fell asleep. Tobias shifted occasionally, then flipped from his right side to his left, facing away from his roommate. Adam was on his back, staring at the inner-side of the roof. Maybe it was loneliness that plagued him. Missing the intimate company of a love, missing Sophie not so secretly. It was baby-ish, he had concluded since about one week after the break-up, but it seemed altogether impossible to snap the twig, to remove from himself the feelings that had blocked him from going on a date with a girl he could match with on Tinder, or Bumble, or Hinge. Adam had spent the previous week wracking his brain, making work seem worse than it was, more laborious than usual, more painful, all because there was nowhere to run from how confusingly **stuck** these feelings had become. Constant craving, he thought, turning over onto his left side, eying Tobias’ figure underneath the sheet.

‘Toby,’ he whispered, then repeated louder, and added: ‘Are you awake?’

The other male muttered out a reply, a yes, but didn’t move. Adam snaked his hand underneath the sheet and began to caress Tobias’ thigh. ‘What are you doing?’ He said, but still he hardly moved, confused more than anything—he figured Adam was having a sudden episode and thought he was back in bed in another apartment with a woman beside him. Adam scooted closer on the mattress. It was strange, how Adam had yet to respond to him—maybe he was sleepcaressing, Tobias thought, and mostly thought nothing of it. The hand on his thigh was comforting.

‘Can you let me grind against you, Toby?’

Tobias went to move his head, in part to shake himself out of it, in part to check to see if he someone had possessed his roommate, but he hardly moved. A thought immediately occupied his mind: nothing would convince him Adam would mention this in the morning. Both of them were in relative dry spells. It made a certain sense. Tobias murmured out an accepting *yeah* and felt Adam spoon him, slow, subtle motions at first. They were both shirtless, their bare flesh touching, but they wore underwear while they slept together in the van, and Tobias could feel through the fabric Adam’s semi-erect cock against his butt. Adam continued to grind up against his roommate, and it was the longed-for experience he had been missing in what you called his grief. His own rock-bottom.

Tobias could find pleasure in this whether it was Adam or not. He had closed his eyes, leaning back into the rhythm, the movements, of the other man humping against him, and without forcefulness he began to moan. He felt Adam's hot breath against his ear. 'Oi.' He whispered, which unfortunately turned Tobias on more than he expected it would. 'Don't enjoy this so much that it makes you cum.' Ordinarily, a comment like that would have killed the vibe entirely, and Tobias would have curled up or otherwise pulled his clothes on and vanished, but there was no anticipation with Adam, and there never was. All it would be was one touch-starved body against another touch-starved body. They could ignore what this meant philosophically. Tobias could practically hear the ejaculation of *I'm not gay*.

Unlike other instances of this, although so few while he was camping, Adam never reached around to take Tobias' cock in his hand and begin to stroke it. It wasn't sexual. It wasn't romantic, neither, and they never shared a kiss when Tobias flipped over onto his other side and they faced each other when a natural end had come to that very specific moment.

'So.' Tobias said, afraid to break eye-contact. 'I can pretend that never happened if you need me to.' In truth, he was terrified of the very-unlikely possibility Adam would want what felt suddenly like a pity spooning to be discussed after that night.

Adam choked on a laugh. 'I think we're grown adults.'

'Grown enough for you not to avoid me every night now for the rest of our time living together?' He paused, hesitating, but he wasn't unsure. 'I won't ask you to redefine your sexuality because of this. I made-out with Zayn multiple times in the house, I kissed Geordie on a dare. Neither time did I ask them *what are we?*' He laughed, covering his eyes. 'Still in absolute shock you asked. But nothing has changed between us. If it were a woman here with you, you would have had sex with her.'

Adam knew what Tobias was referring to.

'I watched you kiss Zayn at least twice. You two just liked to kiss each other. It was probably a benefit it happened most of the time around other people, so they saw how horny you both were.' He laughed, then moved closer to pull Tobias into his arms, which seemed at once comforting and surprising. Tobias was certainly taken aback. 'If Isobel blackmails me for more rent because she finds out about this, I will squish you to death.' But the embrace was hardly violent or aggressive.

He held him for a time, and Tobias never quite lost his surprise. It was not romantic. Tobias resisted anything he would have done with someone he was attracted to, someone certainly queer—no pressing his lips to Adam's skin, no tracing unidentifiable shapes into the skin of Adam's back, no longing glances or wishful thinking. They never kissed. It would have spoiled it, or been overtly confusing. It was not romantic. But the two touch-starved men lost that defining adjective.

'Thank you, Toby.'

Tobias smiled at his roommate. 'I hope you usually say that.' He got poked in the stomach.

He broke off his laughter to say something more complete, albeit a tad more sentimental. ‘Of course.’ He paused, waiting for the anvil to land on his head and shatter the cartilage of his skull. ‘I don’t want to be terrifyingly unnatural to you. Or the enemy. There’s always the chance you will take this as me getting suddenly attached to you, because stereotype I know, but straight men like to think queer men are unable to not be attracted to them,’ and he paused again, for a breath, but mostly in case Adam turned away. ‘But. Transparency. You don’t seem so startlingly different to me now.’

Adam looked at Tobias.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We never had this much time together, you kind of always seemed like a clashing personality. I don’t know. Forgive me if the tone is wrong after you were dry-humping me and you heard me moan—’

‘Was going to let that slide.’

Tobias laughed, which caused Adam to laugh too. ‘Nah, I talk about things. I thought about not saying anything else, just going back to trying to sleep after you poked me, again, in the stomach, but. Yeah, I don’t know. I’m still completely in shock.’ They were staring at each other in the darkness. ‘Thank you, Adam.’

In the morning, neither spoke of what had happened, but they didn’t skirt around each other avoiding any acknowledgement of it either. They ate breakfast with the family, Carl in a jokey apron tied around his waist at the portable barbecue cooking eggs, bacon, and sausages. Bobbie sitting in the caravan with the toaster browning bread. Adam brought Tobias a plate, which was the only romantic thing that would ever occur between the two of them. They seemed to need their strength for something. Between the two of them, ideas flowed, river rapids, from a cheerleader pyramid to a proper rugby match to an elaborate obstacle course Shannon must have hid deep within the woods for no one to have noticed it. It was cute. They reminisced on everything they had both succumbed to, every pitfall of a competition, the victorious cry awarded to someone else along the row. Tobias cut into one of the sausages and fed himself, wondering when he last truly did go camping. It would have been in a tent, he thought, the idea of the flimsy fabric soaked by the rain. There had been that awful, terrible, no-good storm the very first night they—himself and a few friends, half of whom had since moved interstate—camped underneath the stars just over the border.

They should do it, he thought, meaning to mention the possibility of pencilling in a camping trip for the four of them, the illustrious roommates who no doubt would never seemingly get sick of one another. You see, the growing pains had been run through. That is what Tobias thought, right then

in that moment, chewing on a sausage and sitting right beside Adam, who he had spent part of last night narrowly avoiding having sex with.

After they ate, after paper plates were collected and disposed of—harmful for the environment, but Bobbie reassured everyone she bought the biodegradable kind that cost a tad extra at the supermarket—Shannon huddled in between Adam and Tobias and told them he wanted to talk in private. If this meant a certain confession, Shannon’s ambition was not to propose—everyone in the world knew he intended to marry Lucy, and surely, she wasn’t already pregnant. Oh, the scandal, Tobias thought, although in the year 2026 it was hardly an outrage if a woman in her late twenties was knocked up in a committed relationship before the official wedding. No, Shannon and Lucy were already headed down the aisle, but perhaps, and there remained the potential, perhaps the two of them had done something awful. Or been overheard. Or...who knew.

Shannon whisked his brother and newfound acquaintance off in the direction of the communal bathroom, and they lingered to the side, out of the way of passing foot-and-car traffic, sheltered by some overgrown trees. He glanced between them both, but definitely did not seem nervous or in the face of his own vulnerability. Tobias’ guess was a special role of some kind. Adam thought that perhaps his brother was just pulling their leg. Shannon smirked.

‘Before everything becomes completely hectic,’ and he looked to the both of them with a serious expression. ‘Thank you for coming to this shindig we put together. I know I don’t show gratification enough.’ Shannon smiled. At this point he had his arm around the two of them, scrum-like. ‘My brother, of course, the biggest support system I could ask for who didn’t have a hand in puttin’ the sperm into the egg. My ugly, ugly brother. And a new friend.’ Tobias was certainly attracted to him now. Again, not that it mattered at all, ever. ‘I know Adam can be quite the something-or-rather. Keep him in line. Whip him if you have to.’ Shannon winked.

You really did miss out on all the handsome men you could never have.

Driving the van towards home again, with just Tobias and Adam in the front seats, there was a mood unmistakably alike to any classic road trip movie. Wind in your hair. Music singing out from the radio, or in this case, the squat speaker sitting on the dashboard. Everyone driving the speed limit.

‘Do we need a code you could knock on the bedroom door? For when you want to grind up against me instead of sleeping?’

Adam would not take his eyes off the road. ‘Don’t wait around for it.’

His mood was unmistakable. Lighter, brighter. Improved.

## OPHELIA & ISOBEL

Ophelia and Isobel were ushered into the apartment as if part of a cryptic conspiracy. Romeo's eyeliner was two thick black rings around his eyes, raccoon-like—his nails were painted a shade of midnight, and he wore a dressing gown pulled taut around his waist. 'I see we ignored the invitation,' he said, rolling his eyes. It was unclear whether he was genuinely bothered or not. Ophelia knew of her brother one thing—being positively agitated by something was a sign of his rejection of the world, but the last time he was fuming with rage he was a child and she had snatched off him a fragile figurine and shattered it when she tripped over a toy laid haphazardly on the ground in front of her. Otherwise, the siblings kept a peaceful relationship, because Romeo claimed how minuscule in this world he was, and Ophelia was typically frustrated with anybody else. A different man, most likely.

Ophelia and Isobel had at least gone to the effort of gussying themselves up, dressing nicely for the occasion, but the invitation had specified their host expected formalwear pre-2000s, likely because he wanted no one to wear tired formal dresses from high school or appear as if waiting on the curb for their prom date. Romeo himself seemed to be excused from the exact but loose confines because he was chaperoning everything, unless there was something gorgeous hidden underneath the newly-bought dressing gown. Unsurprisingly, Ophelia felt the pang of being disappointing—but the invitation had been somewhat last-minute and neither of them wanted to look *too* invested in the make-believe in front of an assortment of mostly-strangers. At least they were not bedazzled in sequins with their hair waved and curled to an over-excess. With tacky matching jewellery.

'Come, let me introduce you to everyone.' Ever the charming host, Romeo steered his latest arrivals into the living room of the shared apartment. 'Ophelia, Isobel,' and he motioned to the first person nearest them as they approached a gathering of strangers. Romeo began to royally announce his guests. 'This is Alesha, Clarence, Kelsi, Wes, Kash, and Nasreen.' Everyone waved politely back. Ophelia had meant to lean over and ask her brother the estimated number of guests, but at least this seemed a feasible group. Not that she anticipated being overwhelmed—one would like to be prepared. She and Isobel slunk off to the other end of the room, the corner where a respectable smorgasbord of snack food, glass dishes of sauce, and platters of fresh fruit occupied prime real estate.

Isobel leaned forward to whisper to Ophelia. 'Remind me again what the rules are.'

'Someone is dead, I think,' Ophelia replied. 'Someone is dead and we have to deduce from clues and such which of us is the predetermined murderer. Romeo will explain it better, he hosts one of these once a month, except I'm not usually invited because I'm family, and family is usually deeply embarrassing.' She laughed, concluding with: 'That's a joke. We're seatfillers.'

‘I understood the dead part,’ Isobel responded, skewering a grape with a toothpick. Juices spilled out onto the plate. ‘No one is detective? Everyone is detective. Surprisingly we never had a whodunnit-themed challenge.’ Ophelia and Isobel stood around observing the other guests. They were all dressed according to theme, which was refreshing for a costume party of any variety—there tended to be someone who disliked the idea of pretending to be something they were not, although Ophelia and Isobel must have, for now, fit this bill. With an extended deadline, the two of them would have arrived decadently in style, draped in gorgeous fabric, intriguing enough to impress Romeo. Where had he disappeared to? Ophelia scouted around for her brother. *The kitchen*, she thought, and excused herself. Isobel lingered by the food. ‘Of course, you go, I will study my character card.’ She fished around in the petite purse she had slung over her shoulder for a laminated rectangle of paper their host had offered to her when he opened the door. *Madame de Beesmonth*. That was her name now. She was at least thrilled to not have to pretend to be an impoverished peasant all evening.

Ophelia found her brother in the kitchen sniffing a glass of wine.

‘I expected you with the robe hanging open, billowing the smoke aggressively away from an oven on fire.’ She laughed at her own comment, waiting for Romeo to set the wine glass down before she wrapped her arms around him. ‘I’ve missssssed you,’ she said, dragging out the hissing sound of the middle consonant. They rocked back and forth in their over-elaborate hug.

‘Neither of you feel this is beneath you?’

‘Pretending we are capable of solving a murder? Of course, I’ve played the video game adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *The ABC Murders*, I know how to sleuth for clues.’ She cringed at herself, leaning forward to snatch up Romeo’s glass of wine. He did not object, watching over her as she downed a sip. ‘Isobel loves the character. A madame. She would prefer an actual madam, you know, a lady of a brothel, but she gets to feel posh and demure and you might’ve created a monster.’ She paused, setting the glass back down on the kitchen counter. ‘I just don’t know yet.’

For a moment, Romeo’s composure slipped and he smirked at his sister. ‘Next time you all come? I want to flirt with Tobias again.’ But in another moment he had returned to the serious, unassuming, borderline-rebellious kid he had always been. To a degree, Romeo had always seemed as though there were the remnants of a pirate in him, found between the lines of his otherwise dark-punk personality. He made little sense as an amalgamation, but others would simply have called him *weird*. ‘Are you in character, have you got the guts?’ He sounded like a pirate alright.

‘Romeo.’ She pretended to be confused, or concerned. ‘You’re rigging this for your sister to win, no? I can win with my own determination, but there must be a game-revealing clue you have stashed in the apartment I can get a hint towards.’ The bribery was failing, alarmingly so. Romeo did not seem disappointed, but his expression did not wane either.

‘If I rig this for anyone,’ he said, leaning in to whisper to Ophelia, ‘it would not be for Miss Reynton.’ She cocked her head at the name. ‘It’s your character, Felia, can you read the card and go back out there and talk to the other guests and refrain from revealing the important information until the correct moment.’ Romeo winked at her, then turned back to the glass of wine and downed the remainder of it without sparing a drop.

‘I love you, Romy.’ Ophelia said as she darted out of the kitchen, her voice startlingly more high-pitched than perhaps anyone has ever heard come from her. She rummaged around for her own character card, having been informed she was an unwed woman named Miss Reynton, first name Sarah-Marie. Two first names seemed excessive, and the entirety of the name seemed too *white*, but she liked the challenge of exploring the shallows and the hopeful depths of a white woman from nondescript twentieth-century place that was not England or America. The card was vague about where Miss Reynton was from, other than that she had moved ostensibly throughout her life and loathed the idea of curling up to die in the same place she had been birthed. Ophelia liked her, this mysterious woman with two first names. She only knew one other person at this currently-unknown gathering—that was Miss Reynton, a relative stranger herself, something she could find comfort in. Ophelia, attempting to remain focused and committed—she promised herself she was actually interested, she was just distracted with thoughts and was slightly worried some of Romeo’s friends would be ex-drama students—reminded herself to keep an eye out for a *Mr Eddleston*, who she (Reynton) was close personal friends with, or had been until a recent disaster involving a runaway bride. Were there runaway brides in this nondescript time? *What happened to them when they were caught*, Ophelia thought, imagining an old-timer cattle herder with a shotgun.

She returned to Isobel, who had been herself courageous—she was chatting to Wes, a twenty-three-year-old First Nations poet who was unsure whether they were supposed to be in character yet or not. He almost flashed his card for the name, then realised, slightly nervy already. Isobel explained that they had been talking about poetry submissions, and rejections, and Wes tried to seem optimistic about a piece he had recently submitted to a local lit magazine in the city.

‘I tend to focus on my culture, the heritage of my people, having come to age underneath the guidance of Elders and the misguidance of the Australian education system in relation to its discussions around First Nations people.’ Wes directed most of his attention to Isobel, whom he had been engaging with for what had been the entire time since Ophelia ducked into the kitchen. ‘The industry, and by that I mean writers and their writing, has been welcoming of Indigenous voices, but there is an expectation that work is supposed to be *revolutionary, new, unexpected*. It can feel limiting, questioning whether your language and your perspective is **unexpected**.’

Isobel felt the warmth of his expression, his passion. Not an artist herself, or not obviously one—she could draw, or liked the escapism of it—it was impressive to hear an artist explain themselves like this, without sounding entirely self-obsessed. Finishing his train of thought, Wes once again reread the character card and mentioned his name: ‘Dr Henry Nestor,’ he offered, daringly extending his hand, unembarrassed. Isobel shook it, and when offered to her, Ophelia did too. They introduced themselves. It felt somewhat off-centred, to call themselves by a different name but not feel properly attired, or at least not feel like they completely understood the character yet, mining new details as they progressed, but they both seemed to have silently committed to being Miss Reynton and Madame de Beesmonth. Isobel figured she must have had a first name too, but had forgotten it. She scanned the card—Viola. It was beautiful. If she had not been Isobel, maybe she could have been Viola. The name was worn like a glove.

Romeo, in the dressing gown, came into the living room of the apartment with a velvet sack. From this, he handed an assortment of props to his guests—Alesha was given a long, thin pipe; Wes was given a stethoscope, which looked almost too modern but no one spoke; Isobel was handed a faux-pearl necklace; and Ophelia accepted the pocketbook with the words *The Bible* taped to the front on a Sticky Note. Unsurprisingly, her brother had not physically bought a prop Bible for the murder mystery party, which was entirely on brand. To hell with accommodating religion. Neither of them had grown up to be very welcoming of religion, having not been raised by religious parents neither. The placeholder Bible made Ophelia feel more comfortable about her character’s seeming obsession with the cult of Jesus Christ. Maybe, she thought, I can work an angle that Miss Reynton was a calculated pretender, attending sermon very little, lying to close friends in letters about her devotion to the god. Romeo had still as of yet mentioned a time period—Ophelia pretended it was the early 1900s and everyone had very minimal access to technology, and they were yet to experience the tormenting brutality of the two World Wars.

‘These will help you identify with your characters,’ he offered, taking a prop for himself out of the velvet sack. It was a sheathed knife. *Murder weapon?* Ophelia and Isobel glanced at each other, playing into their characters, surprised and concerned. ‘I am Mr Percival Teether, the wealthy but illegitimate heir to a railroading family fortune. I came to money in my own means, but my father and his family have recently perished. This is common knowledge to you all, my guests, who were invited here because you do not believe in the claim that I was sired by Mr Bryon Haversmith. My father.’ He bowed his head, whispering just loud enough for everyone gathered to hear. ‘May he rest in peace.’

Romeo stashed the sack in the corner of the room, out of the way, and made arrangements for everyone to be seated comfortably in the living room. Then he continued to explain the story.

‘The truth is,’ he paused for dramatic effect. ‘My wife is dead in the grounds of this gorgeous estate. Someone amongst us has murdered her. No one in this room is shielded from questioning, including myself. My beautiful wife Lauriette was stabbed from behind three times and plummeted forward. Her body was found scratched up in the sculpted shrubbery our gardener, Darnell Qicking, is boastfully proud of pruning.’ Kash, taking a cue, introduced himself as Darnell and multiple party guests suddenly and outrageously accused him of the crime. *Darnell* fought back the allegations, entirely in character, and some whispered amongst themselves that it was odd to begin with that the house gardener be present during a dinner party amongst other town citizens. But he was, of course, a suspect. Everyone was. Ophelia and Isobel glanced at each other suspiciously.

‘What is a madame doing murdering pretty women?’

Isobel scoffed. ‘I daresay you are more likely the guilty party.’ She leaned forward, whispering as quietly as she could as she broke character. ‘Your brother would want the big dramatic reveal from you, no?’ They continued to chatter, politely so, at first ignoring the other guests to quiz each other mindlessly, asking questions neither exactly knew the answer to, or couldn’t possibly say, but it kept them entertained and interested.

Romeo reigned the conversation back in. ‘As a reminder, your character cards include personal connections and *clues*, things you may have noticed, witnessed, overheard, or discovered since arriving here at my abode.’ He paused, glancing around at the array of suspicious evening guests. ‘Over the course of the evening, we will piece together who murdered Lauriette. It was one of the very people in this room.’ His expression turned sinister and morbidly depressing.

They lingered in a frozen stasis, hinging on whether Romeo would have more to add to tide the conversation, but he instead scooted off towards the corner of the room with refreshments and had something to eat. Ophelia cocked her head. ‘Is it back to normal now?’ She said, directed at Isobel. The two of them were fresh to the concept of a murder mystery party, as previously established, and still relented on waiting for him to do *something else*. Reveal something, say something. Both consulted their character cards and wondered whether this information of theirs could be revealed yet. There were several truths between them:

1. Miss Reynton was close personal friends with Mr Eddlesting—who Ophelia assumed was Clarence, the BFG, blonde friendly giant, sitting a distance away from them. A runaway bride had splintered their relationship? In character, Ophelia thought to herself: was I supposed to marry that man?
2. Miss Reynton had been second to arrive, although suspiciously Miss Wincote seemed rather comfortably arranged and darted upstairs to change her attire. She did not live at the estate.

If everyone who had gathered was in severe opposition to Mr Teether's claims of being the illegitimate son of the railroad tycoon, why was Miss Wincote a personal visitor?

3. Madame de Beesmonth knew everyone **except** Miss Reynton, as she (Reynton) had only recently arrived in town. She knew of her, of course, but they had not been formally introduced. Viola de Beesmonth was most familiar with Dr Nestor, her primary physician. She had been frequenting his practice with repeated concerns of her health. Isobel mouthed 'cancer?' to her roommate, and they both shrugged absent-mindedly. If the illness was something serious, gravely so, maybe she would be dead before a hearing.
4. Madame de Beesmonth has a keen eye for the finer details. Upon entering the estate, she noticed an entrance hall door propped slightly ajar by a foreign object, ie not a doorstep of any kind. She bent to inspect it, which caused some minor back pain, but she discovered it was half of an old book, although it seemed unlikely the door itself had caused the book to be so cleanly torn.

Ophelia and Isobel glanced at one another. Their strings of clues were mild pieces of evidence, as if the two of them—Sarah-Marie and Viola—had been conked on the head upon arrival and had hastily developed amnesia about their entire existences? It would do no good to sit beside one another and shrug their shoulders. Isobel turned to Wes with a beaming smile, put-on but comfortingly natural, and the pair of them began discussing the lady's ill health. Ophelia was zoning out. It was confusing, but mostly she couldn't outrun herself, no matter how desperately she wanted to be the most supportive sister in all human history.

Her week had not been so productive. Handfuls of rejection emails, a phone call with her mother about the flubbing prospects of her existence, although of course she said: 'Mum, I don't know what I'm doing with my life, okay, can we give it a rest?' She regretted this. She apologised profusely, and the remnant conversation was laden with Ophelia repeating the word *sorry* as she had most likely done when she was a much younger girl and her chasing round her brother in the backyard resulted in a shattered pot, a squashed flower, an aggrieved neighbour. Ophelia had not booked any job interviews, unlike Tobias, who lined one up because he had prospects, because he had a resume of experience and skills, because he was *smart*. She was beginning to tear herself down, the rise of the inner saboteur, the chipping at her nails, the hesitance to let herself be enveloped by the silly yet amusing, playful yet demanding, make-believe of Romeo's construction. She had spent Wednesday ignoring text messages. Phone on silent, phone tossed across the room, phone underneath the pillow. Instead of filling out yet another impossible application, Ophelia watched budget horror movies and picked at food from the fridge she imagined no one would notice if it were missing. It was religious.

Nasreen approached Ophelia from across the room—she introduced herself as Madame Gauthio, an elderly woman of measurable means who had spent several decades teaching children but now sought out to have nothing to do with them. ‘Overexposure, dear,’ she said in a put-on accent, which somewhat annoyed Ophelia, but she said nothing out loud. ‘I was wondering if you might have observed anything when you arrived, whether your outsider perspective might shine light on what had happened to Mrs Teether, dear.’ She was developing the habit of ending every sentence with *dear*, another slight annoyance, another unspoken complaint. Ophelia introduced herself in character but went about answering the question in an elaborate way, questioning internally whether she could trust the former governess or not. Everything is reality television. She had the faux-Bible in her hands and for the first time considered whether Romeo had written something within it, either nonsense psalms or a clue to the grand reveal. Either would do.

She ducked her head to consult its pages, and Nasreen-as-Gauthio said, ‘Oh, will you be attending out church?’ Ophelia nodded along, uttered a polite *I have thought about it*, and struggled to find anything inside of the pocketbook worth mentioning. It seemed specifically bought. Empty, empty, empty. She was left bare-handed and forced to consider whether that information about Kelsi-as-Wincote was worth parting with already. Maybe they were having a secret affair! Ophelia thought it was a little basic for her brother to concoct, the estate owner having an affair with a younger, more divine woman, but anything goes. Ophelia lamented internally—*do I really care who knows what?* It still took a mammoth effort for her to not feel the straight urge to stop bothering, which in turn would only disappoint her brother. So much of her soul wanted to impress him, wanted to make sure he was living the most impossibly chic life he could...but here she was, weighed down by the rocks in her stockings. Pebbles and stones in her pockets. If only she had pockets.

‘I would personally finger the blame on Miss Wincote,’ she said suddenly, then remembered she technically, in character, only knew Miss Wincote by face and not name. ‘The girl over there, I overheard her introduce herself. Miss Wincote.’ *Lucky*, she thought, crawling back out of the woods. ‘Ask her why she was here before all of us, and why there are tennis clothes stashed in the lavatory.’ It was fun to play pretend, to go along with the absurdity of being old-fashioned character born out of creativity and imagination. Kelsi had overheard the conversation—Ophelia wasn’t exactly afraid to lift her voice when she was making a point, and what is the true difference between making a point and accusing someone of faux-murder?

Everyone was suspicious of both of them, and Isobel had rejoined at Ophelia’s side, silently intrigued, a little impressed, too. ‘I got nothing out of the good doctor,’ she said with a subtle sigh. ‘I mean, Ms Viola is probably hallucinating her symptoms, so let’s ignore everything she thinks she witnessed jammed underneath doors.’ A pause. Nasreen was questioning Kelsi. ‘But. The only thing he

seems to have noticed is that your *close, personal friend* Mr Fiddlestick keeps glancing longingly at you from across the way and tried to intercept you when he wandered in, but you were having none of it. I think we already established you left him at the altar, now we know he is desperate, needy, and can't keep a bad bitch.'

They both laugh, moving out of the way of the clustered group to get themselves something else to eat from the table of assortments. Ophelia yanked off the cap of a Bundaberg Lemon, Lime & Bitters and poured a mouthful of the tangy liquid down her throat. Imagine, she thought, glancing around at the group, if we were trying to do this solve-a-mystery thing while inebriated. Isobel dipped a fried mozzarella stick into a saucer of sweet chilli sauce. It was strangely like being reunited with the self who attended birthday parties for the other kids in school—without the abnormal stack of tightly-wrapped presents, without the germ cultures, without having to sing in the end. Ophelia imagined her brother simply didn't want to go to the trouble of making such an effort and having half of it left untouched because people were so distracted trying to unravel the complicated web of his mystery.

'Well, I don't think Miss Reynton did it,' she offered, setting the glass bottle down on the table. 'And that's pretty much all I care about.'

Isobel had bitten into the mozzarella stick, oozing cheese threatening to string itself out and down. She scooped it into her mouth, clearly satisfied. 'My bet is on the gardener as a sort of fake-out, considering he is ruled almost entirely in the clear because he was accused first. Plausible? Maybe.'

Their chatter around the murder mystery soon died off.

'Think we can make up an excuse to bolt for the bathroom and lock ourselves in there?' It was another of Ophelia's fervent ideas, but she looked at Isobel with the glimmer in her eyes.

'You are going to disappoint your brother.'

'These things take hours. Guests have to disappear sometimes.' She smiled, then concluded, 'Disappear, not die. I just want to hide out in the bathroom for a second.' In her mind, Ophelia thought about pouring the remaining contents of the bottle on herself, staining the dress, but that would be more than a bother to deal with. She imagined shards of the glass poking out of her feet, but that would almost certainly involve a trip to the hospital. Not the bathroom in Romeo's apartment. She couldn't remember who he shared this place with—Clarence, maybe, and she vaguely remembered Wes moving in. In truth, she rarely came to his apartment. It felt like an invasion of his privacy. They were not the type of siblings to lounge about at each other's places, although more recently lounging about was something Ophelia was becoming alarmingly successful at doing.

Ophelia and Isobel set their character cards down behind them on the table in a neat, orderly stack and disappeared down the hall to the bathroom, which was the only other room in the apartment she remembered. They shoved open the door and locked themselves away.

The bathroom was quite noticeably shared by three men—shaving razors, deodorant aerosols, not overly feminine in any sense of the word. It was gratefully also not themed. No seashells, no framed landscapes of the sunrise or sunset, no spectacularly-bold tiling. The apartment building was older, which meant the bathroom was equipped with a two-in-one shower and bathtub, and without thinking Ophelia and Isobel climbed into it, splaying their legs out over the edge. It wasn't the most comfortable position to be in, but every movement seemed purposeful and exact, and Ophelia relaxed.

Isobel had a first question in mind: *did you want to be here?* But she understood the answer could be complex, and it could be coming at entirely the wrong time. Pretending to be a different person for the benefit of the group might not have been the escape either of them necessarily needed, but she wasn't rejecting the immersiveness of it all quite like Ophelia was. Isobel knew her roommate, her friend, enough to know this was not a rejection of Romeo. Too performative? Isobel attempted to figure out the right thing to say first, but maybe there would never be a *right thing*.

Instead, she opted for a statement, rather than a question: 'I'm looking forward to seeing everyone again. Or. Mostly everyone. The ones we stay in contact with.' She was talking about plans that had been set into motion, for everyone—the circle of friends collected from having been on television together—to reunite in Sydney not the next month but the month afterwards. It would be a hodgepodge of sleeping in spare rooms and on couches or taking cheap hotel rooms, but everyone was eager to pretend they were on vacation again. It dovetailed perfectly with Isobel's sisters' engagement party, or anti-engagement—Ava was certain on deconstructing tradition, another example of "not your ordinary bride" except certainly less obnoxious and pathetic about it. Ava would not be the type to make her originality her personality. If anything, she and Stephen would elope.

'Should I really be going anywhere while I'm not working?' Ophelia was slumping in the bathtub.

'Tat already said you're crashing with her.' The argument seemed to half-convince. 'Whenever someone I have known has been unemployed, it was important, to me, to remind them that life does not press pause when you have to navigate it differently. Enjoy yourself, while you are still here. See everyone. Make sure life is not boringly ordinary again just because we are back for our greatest adventure.' She knew she was starting to sound like an ad campaign for a retirement village, but her point was still nestled in amongst the potted ferns and hydrangeas. Isobel had hoped they wouldn't have immediately launched into the uncertainty like this, but maybe it was unavoidable, first.

Ophelia sighed. 'Great adventures are supposed to make your mind clearer.'

'The weight can't be forever on the adventure.' Her way of attempting to be philosophical.

'I'm supposed to be able to sort myself,' she said, glancing at Isobel. 'I'm worried I won't know how.' She moved to rest her head on her roommate's shoulder.

Isobel tried to soothe her with the sound of her voice as well as the words she was saying. Whether it worked she was unsure of, but it was at least a distraction for the somewhat uncomfortable position she was in, physically, in the bathtub. ‘I was never handed an exact manual on anything, and I haven’t done everything perfectly either.’ Ophelia lifted off of Isobel’s shoulder. ‘You are giving your best, aren’t you? Waking up in the morning with positive spirits and a passion for at least the joy of being yourself? I like that part of my friend. Your passion. We are nothing without passion.’

Ophelia paused, a smile working its way onto her face. ‘I try,’ she said, failing to hold back laugh-at-yourself chuckles. ‘Watching you, watching Adam, too, leave the house in the morning with genuine reasons to propel yourselves forward...it can make me, it does make me, feel unexceptional. We’re at that point, maybe we have been since people left caves or whatever, we’re at that point where if you aren’t working a job, **contributing**, then what a waste you are. It’s true, don’t look at me like that.’ Isobel tried to course-correct her expression. ‘I accidentally start watching news clips and see the way homeless people are treated by the media. *Disgusting, filthy, it turns out four of them have already been exiled from shelters or other places of refuge...*you can fill in the gaps. Do you know the unemployment rate keeps rising and it’s only going to climb and climb because of the integration of AI in the workplace. You can use ChatGPT to write that email for you? Do you...need a job, actually? I think we skimp on paying a salary and just,’ and she made a thumb-jab signal to the empty space beside her, ‘hire the semi-accurate digital robot. Entry-level positions will be disintegrated, Iss. Suddenly I’m expected to have years of experience because the only hiring positions are supervisors to lord over the AI processors. I almost said aliens, actually. Oops.’ She sighed. ‘Feels like I have woken up on a foreign planet some mornings.’

‘I count myself so grateful I am in such a firmly anti-AI house,’ Isobel began, leaning back against the side of the tub. ‘It is fucking filthy. Mind the language. Falsely-generated videos that are either impossible, or disturbing, or take away the agency of someone in the public eye. Celebrities who have previously had their privacy stripped because of invading paparazzi waiting outside their property, now their privacy can be imagined crassly by, like, a thirty-nine-year-old man in his basement named Vernon who wants to, on the bare minimum, interact with these celebrities like they are his close personal friends, but in a sexually dark turn, watch them have sex with each other. I would hate to be in the limelight in any possible way and find the Frankenstein’s Monster videos of me making a goon face as someone splatters cum over my face.’

‘Extremely graphic, Iss.’

‘But I get my point across. Creating your own pornography, or even appearing naked in something you consented to, is completely different to what AI is becoming.’

‘How’d we even get onto this?’ Ophelia and Isobel laughed at themselves.

‘Sorry, I don’t know, it is leftover from university. A passion for knuckling on a topic I have serious opinions on. I do not see the benefits of generative AI and it is frustrating like the way you say it is, because we could be looking at an industry where the more exciting candidate is the robot you don’t have to pay as much, the robot who does not need sick days, the robot who you can reprimand and it will not report you to HR for bullying and abuse.’

‘I like the sound of not working too much though,’ she said, thinking about herself splayed out and requesting an ice cream sundae be brought out to her on a silver tray with a perfectly-polished spoon and maybe a bowl of marshmallows, brought out by the robot maid who reminded her faintly of Rosey from *The Jetsons*. In the same blink she saw herself morbidly obese, a background extra in the Pixar movie *WALL-E*, wasting away all the oxygen. The hero, then, were the droids with more autonomy and free-thinking than she would have. An uncomfortable thought.

‘There has to be another way of having more freedom without more of the population struggling to afford basic necessities.’ Isobel was beginning to depress herself too. The weight of having these serious conversations in a bathtub in Romeo’s apartment instead of, I don’t know, being out there with the other guests investigating a fake murder.

‘Iss, can we talk about something else? I want to shank myself.’

Isobel readjusted herself in the tub and laughed. ‘Yeah, of course, although you are not going anywhere. I am not sharing that place with two men, even if one of them is a tidy fellow queer like me and the other is...susceptible to a little hypnotism? He’s not hopeless, Adam.’

Ophelia’s head drooped for only a moment, unnoticeable unless you had been a fly clinging to the wall. ‘Do you want to know something about thinking about killing yourself?’ It was a sharp sentence—Isobel was immediately concerned, protective, her body flinching at the words that rose with the infliction of the question mark. She nodded; it seemed to her like the only reaction she could have without immediately stepping in with a cautioned PSA against suicide. Ophelia’s expression was sympathetic but increasingly reserved. ‘The idea of going through with it is nauseating. You sit there in your bedroom imagining various solutions, knife, rope, poison, pistol, lead pipe, it starts to feel like playing the board game. But when you take up a pair of scissors, slide your finger across the blade of the knife when you are drying it from out of the dishwasher, you feel terribly afraid of yourself. Makes you want to vomit. I can’t believe I am thinking of mutilating yourself.’

The bathroom was silent.

Ophelia was staring at her arm, the untouched flesh. Isobel wrapped an arm around her body.

‘I am so glad you never do.’ This she whispered, tears already welling.

‘I am so glad you are still here.’

The bathroom was warm.

Wiping her own eyes, Ophelia let out a stifled laugh. 'I told you that conversation was making me want to shank myself.' Isobel couldn't wipe her eyes on her dress and turned away to blink rapidly, hoping the tears would disperse or disappear down her cheeks.

'Okay,' she said as she turned back to the other woman in the bathtub, the two of them still holing up in their makeshift bunker. 'What sort of happy, wonderful conversation topics do you like? We need suggestions. I'm not crying all night with you, run out of tears.'

They morphed, very briefly, into two Thinker statues, frozen and pondering. They both quickly realised how difficult it was to concoct a conversation that was not laced with something horrifying—the state of the world, as it was. A positive was inevitably a tunnel to a negative, out with the concept of a bright shimmering light casting you out of darkness. Out with thinking so extraordinarily pessimistic about everything. Ophelia leaned her head once more against Isobel's shoulder. If anything, they knew they could be comforts for each other. This was peaceful. They were weighted, crawling back inside shells, but the bathroom was warm.

'Okay, here's something: Iris might actually be pregnant.'

Ophelia contemplated it, turning the idea over in her head, turning it again. In the midst of the thought process, there was a soft knock on the bathroom door, and Isobel called out that it was unlocked and whoever was obviously searching for them—likely Romeo—could scold them for disappearing without saying anything. He appeared in frame, a head poked into the room, a black-nail-painted hand propping the door ajar.

'Oh great,' he said, smirking. 'You found a clue in the tub.'

The women laughed, stumbling to get out and onto their feet.

Romeo pushed the door open wider and Ophelia passed out of it, apologising softly. But it was Isobel who stopped beside him, offering more than a sorry. 'Ophelia is doing her best. I know you know that. People expect her to have everything aligned. Maybe because it seemed to have been, earlier. You matter to her more than she can speak in words.' She paused, checking the time on her phone. 'We were hardly missed, I know as much too. She might really like being brutally murdered if the killer struck again. Then maybe she can just nap in your room, and I will be more present knowing she's not forcing herself to be out there.'

Ophelia had turned and was watching them talk, but she heard very little of what was said between. When she locked eyes with Isobel, she poked out her tongue.

## TOBIAS & ISOBEL

‘This is technically our engagement party, yes,’ Ava announced in front of a semi-circle of her family and close friends, which happened to include Tobias by proxy. ‘Stephen and I have been together for eight years, but I am regrettably afraid of ever divorcing a man so wonderful, charming, and incredibly supportive of me, so we waited. Waited until our bank accounts were prepared too, I joke, because a wedding is not entirely practical anymore.’ Cue the laughter in the room. Everyone was gathered around holding champagne flutes, although not for toasting, not necessarily. Ava was not one to miss out on an opportunity to float alcohol around the room, and off in one corner a hired bartender was preparing the standards. Tobias reminded himself to order a gin and tonic once the speeches were retired.

‘Stephen,’ and this she directed to her handsome fiancé standing to her right, ‘you did not have to tolerate me for eight years and however many months. You didn’t, it’s that simple. But when I have been my most uncertain, it is my love, my adoration for you, that I have been certain of. I call this an anti-engagement party not because I respect or love you any less, but because the only way you could convince me to get married was if we pretended everything was only an excuse to gather everyone together and eat delicious food and **not** toast.’ More laughter, but Ava began to swing her arms around with a flat palm out, playfully ordering her guests to stop what they were doing. ‘I promise you some of this you just need to humour me on—Stephen and I have decided to get married, and I know you will all continue to celebrate us.’

There was rapturous applause as Ava finished speaking, signalling to her guests that they could clap. It was not rehearsed but a certain element of the gathered crowd felt *perfect*—either Ava had arranged the guest list without a fumble or mistake, or everyone was completely enamoured by the couple they became well-behaved extras. Isobel and Tobias were together in the middle of the pack, stepping out of the way as the crowd dispersed. Many wandered towards the bar and the model-gorgeous bartender. Isobel and Tobias had been here for an hour or so. It was a rented venue, but it exuded class and made the happy couple appear wealthier than they were. A certificate ceremony seemed almost guaranteed, although Isobel didn’t put it past her sister to at least scout out the perfect wedding dress.

‘I love you,’ Ava said as she took Isobel’s cheeks in her hands and kissed her on the lips. ‘My makeup is too pretty so you will not make me cry but I kept glancing at you while I was up there being sentimental and I couldn’t stop thinking of how proud I am of you.’ The words held more than they seemed for Isobel. The word *proud* from her sister...crying already, my gosh, she reined herself in.

Ava turned to Tobias standing beside her sister. ‘I won’t kiss you, don’t worry,’ she said to him, practically glowing. There is something about a wife-to-be...although that sounded like the exact phrasing that restrained Ava from wanting to be a *wife*. ‘Isobel was telling me you went on a date before you flew down. I love hearing all the trivial details of first dates, should we go outside and make Stephen panic and think I’m having jitters?’ Tobias went a shade of red. The three of them ducked out through glass doors and stood on a balcony overlooking the city skyline. They were not penthouse-level, but it was an impressive vista with the harbour in the distance. He wondered whether it was too late in the early-evening for anyone to be climbing the bridge.

‘Okay, so, did it go well?’ Ava looked thoroughly entertained and the story hadn’t even started.

‘Ava, don’t embarrass him,’ Isobel warned.

Tobias shook his head obediently. ‘No, it’s fine, the date was normal enough, I won’t hang my head in shame about it. Lovely guy, we’ve been talking since, um, my life returned to normal. Normal enough. Very pretty. He is. But the spark I’m not sure about. I might have been worried about it, because when we messaged each other, it was tame but too tame. Questionably normal. He wasn’t taking my breath away.’

‘Maybe later in the night he did?’

Isobel whacked her sister, the way you do with your siblings.

‘No, no, if your sister wants to hear about my sex life, she is welcome to. Open book. Open legs? We didn’t have sex, because I was worried he would be about as copacetic in bed as he was when we were talking. But we kissed. It was a very nice kiss. If anything was romantic, it was the kiss.’

‘Maybe the kiss is an indication of better things?’ Ava raised an eyebrow.

‘He was texting me earlier, so nothing is ruled out, but I’m not sure. Now might not be the right time to try to be dating anyone. While I’m rearranging the guts of my life.’

‘Keep yourself open to the possibility.’ Ava smiled warmly at him then glanced through the glass doors at her fiancé waiting inside for her. ‘Well, my gorgeous sister and about the only person I know named Tobias, I should continue to be paraded around like the state fair pig while Stephen makes me insatiably salacious and I can’t do anything about it.’ At this, she waved them both a brief goodbye and disappeared back inside. Isobel’s parents were inside, and she had greeted them when they arrived, but talking to them right now was low on her priorities. There was no argument, but she felt uninspired to be lumped with them for most of the night and leave Tobias to awkwardly linger by her side getting in a word when there was a lull. Her parents loved to chatter. They always found a question to poke, or more likely prod—yes, she knew where the habit had been developed from.

Left alone on the balcony, Tobias and Isobel leaned against the railing and stared out at the horizon. It would have been enchanting. But this time together felt necessary.

‘I shouldn’t be so worried about Ophelia with him, right?’

Tobias was unsure at first—on who this *him* was—but it would not have taken an etymologist to figure it all out. *Adam*. He rearranged his thoughts, first on why she had interrupted the peace for the conversation starter, then on what his opinion was. It had been nearing two months since the camping trip for Shannon’s birthday, and nearing two months of confusing mixed signals from the both of them about the stability of their friendship. Tobias wasn’t sure it was his business. But he was a sticky-beak too, or could be, because it was stereotyped to be in his very blood. It was more impossible to avoid mentioning his sexuality around Isobel—if more than impossible was possible, and if he could blame how important it felt to remind himself there could be a forcing back into the closet *in the future*, without a chance. The state of the world. At least they were not burning queer cinema in bonfires in the street and at least Jonathan Bailey had been sexiest man alive. That was, uh, something for the community.

‘I don’t think you should be worried.’ Was he talking out of his ass? Maybe. What did he know? A weekend of unpacking **one** aspect of the tapestry that made up Adam was not the same as having an internal double-agent inside his brain, feeding him information from kilometres away. ‘My words weren’t convincing, sorry. Ophelia’s not experiencing the first time trying to comprehend a man.’ He paused, curious. ‘Is there actually something there?’

‘It’s been a good four months of waiting to see if he has healed from heartbreak.’

‘I try to look away.’ Tobias realised how that sounded. ‘When they work to understand each other’s signals, I mean. I try to look away.’

Isobel stared out ahead of her. The world was unknowable, completely so, and she could only ascertain so much of it. ‘He seems changed lately, but the two of them spending time alone in a different environment makes me feel like I am a scientist, shifting the variables, waiting for a different reaction.’ She sighed. Of course it was not her business, she knew that, but regardless they were two of the people she saw the most of on such an extreme regular basis and it wasn’t *extreme* to consider them an area of semi-expertise. No reasonable need to be overconfident, she thought, wondering where they were right now, not physically, but in relation to one another. She should not be so protective. Isobel knew the tools of psychology enough to know an obsessive thought process lingering on something out of her control, out of her hands, was not healthy...and yet, she thought of them, in the absence of another focus, because Ava had disappeared inside to so proudly, so frighteningly, be engaged.

Tobias was equally occupied. So rarely did he think of exposing what had happened in the stuffy borrowed van, so little did he think in this moment it would amount to anything reassuring to either of them. He and Adam had spoken about it exactly once in the two months since.

‘They’ll be fine,’ and he attempted to sound certain, and he was convincing himself in the moment too. ‘My actions are my own, right, that’s the dogma of growing up. My actions are mine to make, to take, and how someone interacts with me, and treats me, responds to what I do, that is not something I can control. Totalitarianism over other people is reserved for reality television.’

Isobel scoffed. ‘That was a dream we had.’

Tobias leaned his arms against the railing. He could make out distinct humans down there, scatterings of people wandering the sidewalks. It was the right time, the early evening, sun having so recently set. People drawing energy from the streetlights, the threatening draw of the abyss when they crossed the street without an intersection, the flashing green man. ‘The first person I felt instantly connected to was Geordie, you remember that. Sort of inseparable we became. You latch onto people, we all latch on. *I’ve found my new best friend*, do you remember being like that when we were in like primary or kindergarten or whatnot?’ He sighed. Thinking about Geordie was layered, that was a certainty—they had dreamily been a mathematically-incorrect pair of musketeers, or else their bond with one another seemed akin to becoming glued to the first person you met in university who appeared to be far more than simply **likeable**. Geordie might have been nearby, once. Now where was he?

‘You don’t talk much anymore?’

‘Could I tell you about his life now? I guess, maybe I could, catching certain details from what he posts online, but a picture of him and his girlfriend bungee-jumping doesn’t tell me if he still values a friendship with me—I know that sounds insecure, and I hate the insecurity of any relationship, nevermind a friendship relatively fresh.’ He paused, sinking against the railing. ‘Maybe it ran its course already.’

‘And you still try, you still send him a message occasionally, without obviously being the spammer everyone seems to have collectively decided is insane behaviour?’

Tobias shook his head. ‘I’ll text him, forget about it, get an empty reply, and then otherwise we just don’t talk. Obviously, we can’t hang out together in person. Maybe that’s enough for him to relegate me back to internet friend, you know how you have different tiers for people without stopping to categorise specifically? Long-time friends, the people you’re closest to, work friends—not that I currently have those—internet friends, those types of friends where if you reply to something on their Instagram story they’ll heart-react it but never continue the conversation because you are without question beneath them.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Isobel responded, glancing over at Tobias, taking in the confused expression of his face. Although, in the same breath, he seemed to her to be at peace with the idea of it, or at peace enough to not have a completely mental breakdown over it. ‘He isn’t going to be there at the beach, is he? Closing himself off. *That* is not your fault.’

‘Of course it isn’t.’ Tobias straightened himself up. They had hardly taken their eyes off the skyline or each other—there was an entire world behind them, too, at the anti-engagement party. He wondered the details of every single stranger’s connection to a woman he himself only knew at arm’s length. Ava Yanick. So much of what he knew of her, from the stories Isobel told—how when they were children, they would wander into the woods alone together on acreage property friends of the family had inherited, oftentimes forgetting their trail of breadcrumbs, or stones, or the thread, the twine—to the two introductions, reminded him of the very girl leaning on the railing beside him. Headstrong women. Tobias could not fathom how someone could glance at Isobel and not accept the validity of her identity. Throughout those stories—how when Isobel confessed she had spent the entirety of her adolescence battling against body dysmorphia, the inability to love her flat chest, her very obviously male genitalia, it was Ava who understood more than anyone—Tobias had seen distinctions more valued, more relevant than the banshee cries of transphobia. She was more than impressive. Ava Yanick was not separate from this brilliant woman—he could feel himself continue to get more and more sentimental, but it was a noble distraction from thinking about the void that was Geordie. Giant question mark.

‘For now, I shouldn’t bother him. Wait.’ It was clearly defeatist of him, but Tobias would not let himself budge, not in that moment. ‘Impossible to know what someone’s thoughts are.’

Isobel slung an arm around her roommate’s shoulder. ‘I remember in one of the early weeks of you two knowing each other, you were both outside in the backyard at night sitting around, lazily so, both of you shirtless. I remember distractedly thinking about anyone watching the show, in general, being blessed with how half-naked a lot of our cast was often, but that is less relevant to the story than the two of you. Lounging there in the yard, on the daybed sofa they had there, trying to count to one hundred without saying a number at the same time. It was completely nonsense, but it was escapism to pass the time, and I watched both of you make absurd faces at each other when you blamed them for stuffing it up, for both of you saying twelve at the exact same time.’ She squeezed his shoulder. ‘The amount of pure joy the two of you exuded together in those early weeks especially, without your backs against the wall, when it was just two boys getting closer and closer. It makes me the optimist, Toby, it makes me the optimist that a friendship is not dead, dead, dead just because you are not talking so much.’

Tobias could have admitted he saw the flashes of their friendship in the darkness behind his eyeballs, but nobody would have thought an unsure friendship was anything near the end of a lifetime. It was not so serious, so devastating, so vilified, so cruel—but, regardless of comparison, he was caught thinking about *lifetimes* because inside there was a woman selling herself on a forever of her own. *She’s really getting married.* The last two months or so Isobel and Tobias had talked at length about these

upcoming nuptials, the marriage of Ava Yanick and Stephen Grauberger, an actuality of a future and a forever. True, a marriage can be a disaster, come tumbling down and splinter itself on the rocks, less certain than death and taxes, but you promise a certain amount. *I give you the rest of my life*. Tobias, true, hardly imagined himself wedding to a person for friendship alone, tying the knot round a bond forged because they were two silly men without the attraction to make them abhorrent. Being close with Geordie was nothing like **engagement**. But he wanted to be **engaged**. Acknowledged, again.

He made himself vulnerable because of it.

Geordie looked happy. But Tobias could only look.

Maybe that was the expected now. They had counted to one hundred; there was no prize. Brilliant work. The game ended.

Tobias and Isobel lingered out on the balcony, rifling through various topics, keeping themselves entertained, or at least focused. When they spoke about Tobias' continued unemployment, he froze up, listing various job applications he had filled out, or interviewed for and been rejected. The market was closed, dried up, abandoned, vacant—one of the above, or like he was more apt to select if it was an option without really consulting the choices, all of the above. Wiser to encompass everything. More engulfing. When he so desperately wanted to be engulfed less.

His energy soured, Tobias glanced in the presumed direction of the bar and confessed to Isobel he wanted something stronger to drink. He ducked inside, snaking his way towards the attractive bartender, at last ordering the gin and tonic he had almost forgotten about. He made quiet small talk to the man mixing him his drink, but it was unlikely they were romantic soulmates, their destinies at last tangling together at this gorgeously-done event he was only invited to because Isobel was allowed a plus one. It should have depressed them all more to be single and clutching so limply to their search for love, Tobias thought, trying to pinpoint the last time he considered himself *in love*. Before he was shuffled into hair & wardrobe for the premiere night of the show, before he stood upon the stage and the affable host asked him if there were any loved-ones in the audience tonight cheering him on. And that was Zane and his parents, not somebody to love, love like *that*. How different the timeline of events could possibly have been had an effortless romance begun even a week or so before the tumultuous lockdown period? He would not know.

Isobel smiled warmly, only a tad put-on, at the various friends of her sister's she had met previous, including the two sisters, Becca and Angela, who had driven from Sydney across the border for a music festival the year prior, and had invited Ava and Isobel too. Although only one had been sitting in the backseat, texting her sister the whole time, *I miss you and can't wait to see you, Isobel*. Maybe it veered away from the sentimental, but it was, as completely expected, between the lines.

Isobel's parents were tucked into a corner inside, both of them with a glass of champagne in hand. She meandered to them and all the while wondered what the first thing to come out of their mouths when she was within earshot would be: an adamant celebration of Ava, another charmed appreciation of the venue, or a querying venture about where her partner-in-crime had disappeared to. By all accounts, her parents seemed to at least trust Tobias not to lead their daughter astray, but they only knew the televised him, the cut-and-paste him. If the person wandering around ordering drinks from the handsome bartender was instead Adam, there would be genuine cause for concern—but then, her parents were not able to genuinely block who she lived with.

They always had reacted perplexedly when she called with the news.

About the tv show.

'There you are,' her mother began first, while her father sipped the champagne. 'We just saw your sister, again. I think she will break those heels if she does not sit down and take them off in the next ten minutes.' It was neither celebration, appreciation, or venture, but Perla was indeed known to be unsettled by noisier, busier events such as these, and stopped wearing heels when she turned forty—*blistered feet do not bear the weight of a woman over the age of forty, Isa, it is something you want to have learned from watching another more patient woman before you.* Isobel's mother was the only person to call her "Isa," considering her name lacks an "a" entirely, but this was another of her mother's doses of imparting wisdom. *You should have been Isabel; there is an Isabel in the family in...one of the directions.* After that she fluffed about as if the vague admission could not be argued with.

It was always peculiar seeing her parents idling about together despite the divorce. Neither had remarried, neither burdened themselves with the weight of bitter resentment, anger, fiery hatred. Their relationship was admirably civil, which meant they invariably acted like they had remained married without the living under the same roof of it, and without the bickering of having the same domestic nightmares. Isobel oftentimes felt the onus was on her to calm the storms.

'A drag queen will clomp around for the runtime of brunch in worse, Mama, I think Ava knows herself.' It was an attempt, and a rather queer one at that. It was, truthfully, a rather glaringly obvious difference between one generation and the other. Perla would have said, in the inverse: *Young girls, they have not hit forty. Suffering is character.* And then, of course, a moment of biased compassion: *Ava looks beautiful and so much taller.* Pick your battles, Isobel thought.

'Is your friend enjoying himself?'

'He is.' Isobel scanned the gathered crowd for Tobias and found him drinking at the bar. 'We're both having a wonderful time, not just because of this party, but because being in Sydney again is such a treat.' She was only half-concerned with her words, only half-believing in them too. *Such a treat* sounded so incredibly forced from the moment she said it, but oh well. She smiled at her mother.

‘You wouldn’t think there would be awful turbulence on a one-hour flight,’ Perla continued, before taking a sip of champagne between sentence-halves, ‘but it really was quite lumpy and jumpy. A toddler, of course there was a toddler, started howling. Jon beside me was almost blissful, really. You are insane once you have boarded a flight, that is something I am not likely to forget.’ Isobel found it peculiar, too, that her parents had flown down together, but they were of a different breed than a lot of divorced couples. Still kin, to a degree, still tight knit and welcoming. Warriors of *Save the Planet!* Save the separate exhaust fumes, save the nervousness of flying beside a complete stranger too. There was a story Jon used to tell about a long-haul flight overseas, here to somewhere in North America, maybe Toronto. An exorbitant number of hours, an entire day ripped from underneath you—but Jon was sat beside this upset-stomach-type of nervous flyer, and he tapped on Isobel’s father’s shoulder every half-hour on the dot, until he later miraculously passed out. Whether her father ever actually timed these polite interruptions was lost to the beast of memory, but there was one less person to worry about when you fly with a known entity like your ex-wife.

‘I get comfortable, that is all it is.’ Jon said, the first time he had spoken since Isobel rejoined with her parents at the anti-engagement party.

Isobel caught, in the corner of her eye, Tobias now having been joined by Stephen, the groom to be. They vanished out of sight when they drifted away from the bar, although she imagined the two of them recuperating on the balcony, trading various ideals on the concept of love, or horror stories from the dating world. Isobel would grill Tobias later.

‘I’m going to find Ava,’ she said, abruptly, cutting through the comfortable silence. She couldn’t immediately find her sister in the crowd, but there were hardly very many locations a girl could hide herself away in with a venue like this, as opposed to an apartment, where you could lock yourself in the bedroom and sob underneath the covers. Not that Isobel believed her sister was searching for somewhere to bawl her eyes out. But. She ought to be somewhere.

‘There you are,’ Isobel said with welcomed enthusiasm having found Ava in the hallway outside of the technical boundaries of the venue. She was leaning against the textured walls near the elevators, although fortunately without the intention of stepping into one. The downwards button had not been pressed. Ava was distracted by her phone and at first did not hear her sister’s voice, but turned her head when Isobel continued with: ‘No one blames you for needing a breather for a milestone you are still so apprehensive of.’ Ava lowered her phone to her side and glanced up at her sister. Her expression was not an obvious one. Not so obviously plagued by the passion of romance.

‘Nope. I’m not allowed to be jittery, Iss. I’m not allowed to have cold feet.’ Her voice wavered as she spoke, and she pivoted to face her sister completely. ‘Go back in there, please.’

Isobel refused to retreat—not a single bone in her body urged her to return to the party and pretend her sister was not out there in the hallway, having practically confessed she was doubting herself. ‘Cold feet? This is not a formality, this is not you tying yourself down to him forever.’

‘I get that. I want to be with Stephen for as long as he will have me, which is why the nervousness makes no sense to me. I don’t understand why I’m unable to walk into the room and be proudly his future wife, the next Mrs Grauberger, although fuck I want to keep our last name, his makes me feel icky, it makes me sound German.’ They both started to laugh, and for a second it had a calming effect on Ava, who inched towards her sister. ‘Mrs Grauberger. Am I a witch in a cottage waiting to nibble on children? Am I losing who I was when we were younger, am I going to lose my youth, it’s serious like that even though it sounds beauty-model vain. I know I can’t look the way I look forever, but suddenly you are a Mrs and there is this **need** for children, and you narrowly avoid divorce, or else you end up like they did,’ and she pointed vaguely in the direction of their parents inside. ‘I’m not saying I feel the regret for them, or think you become your parents.’ Ava glanced at Isobel with a knowing expression on her face. ‘What, Iss, you would have said a millisecond later that this was your assessment of the mental state I am in. I know you. The way your brain operates, waiting to unpack and explain the inner intricacies of this thing up here,’ and she pointed to her skull, her head. ‘You explain it faster than I can, you know it faster than I ever do.’

Isobel stepped forward, approaching her sister with measured caution. Not that she anticipated anything, but she was familiar enough with how a person could react to sudden, sharp movements and their personal bubble being popped with a swift lack of precision. ‘I’m not inside your brain.’

‘Well, you should climb in there and take a look.’

‘Ava. You adore that man, and you have for eight years. He will not ask you to change.’

‘One day I wake up, then, and I am a forty-nine-year-old woman who outran every possible moment to start herself a family with her husband because she knew, in her loins, she was not *made* to be a mother. Not born with the right instinct. I don’t even look like one, look at me, not this gorgeous dress, not the impossibly-uncomfortable shoes, look at the shape of my face. This is not what a mother looks like. This is not what a wife looks like, Isobel. You remember those British crime dramas Dad recommends? This,’ she circled her face with the trace of her finger, ‘is the face of the pretty little dead things, the girls discovered lodged between rocks on the riverbank, the girls stripped of their clothes in the woods, left only with a tear of fabric curled up in their cold, dead hand.’ Ava sighed. ‘Do you think Mr Grauberger, the man who wants to marry me, wants to see someone who should have been murdered?’

‘You seriously think anyone takes notice of you and thinks you’re dead weight?’

Ava scrunched up her face. ‘No, they want me gone, Iss.’

‘Nobody wants you gone! Look at every single person inside who is ferociously on your side and would have rescheduled their entire month to be here for you. Do you think those people see you as the fucking murder victim for one of Dad’s grim-dark tv shows?’

‘I think I’m on borrowed time. That’s it. That’s all of it.’

‘Because you won’t have children?’

‘Maybe I want them! Fuck. Maybe I will wake up one morning and the headache of having convoluted feelings will be done, over, finished, and I will want to be a mother, I will be able to see myself as a mother, but just please can you not say I won’t have them, it’s supposed to be never say never, and you are supposed to be the person who listens to me and goes back inside and pretends I have gone for a cigarette, even though I don’t smoke, or gone to buy a pint of milk, even though it’s like 7pm and the idea of drinking a coffee to stay awake tonight is drowning me.’

‘Ava. I want to stay out here with you.’

‘So you can lecture me?’ She sniffled, briefly glancing up at the ceiling. A little obviously fighting off tears. ‘Sometimes it is impossible being the child, now the grown adult, who understands themselves infinitely less than you do. Okay, brilliant, I understood I was not boringly, awfully straight and experimented with girls in university because it felt like a time-honoured tradition, like learning how to ride a bike. Ride a...and then you say the lesbian-related slur here, I’m not falling into the trap of saying it right in front of you, you will annihilate me for it. My beautiful only sister, how incredibly, graciously proud I was when you trusted me enough to tell me you were not a boy, because you did not know what it was supposed to feel like to be one. Fuck.’ Ava spun away to wipe the tears welling in her eyes, repeatedly blinking as if the movements of her eyelids evaporated them faster. She turned again to look at Isobel standing there, in the hallway outside of the venue.

‘I wrongly assumed you came to this with an ease I hadn’t had with my bisexuality, because outside of your head I only knew so much. All throughout being in university, after high school where knowing my identity was a tad irrelevant to me, I would say, is it normal to experiment, is it okay if I enjoyed eating a girl out more than I thought I would, what are the societal assumptions around being bisexual—the last one is completely your fault, Iss. You made me question everything, that was not our parents, it was you, because when I am awake at midnight thinking I’m a nuisance for bickering with Stephen, for not having married him already, I think of disappointing you.’ Isobel took the cue and snaked her body around her sister, comforting her in a warm embrace. ‘I do not love a person as much as I love you. My soon-to-be-husband is not my blood. He is ground, stable earth, but you are the blood in my veins, Isobel. You contain pieces of both of our parents, you carry with you their spirit, even though they aren’t dead, they’re just through those doors pretending we don’t find it slightly odd they still...pick up their prescriptions together. God I really hope they don’t.’

They separated from each other, although the distance between them barely grew. Sister and sister side by side, they stood in the hallway like a duo of troublemakers resisting turning the other in. 'I really thought we were about to physically fight for a second there,' Isobel uttered out, her words drifting off into laughter. 'I love you too, of course I do.'

Ava set her palms on Isobel's shoulders—they were about the same height ordinarily, except now the high heels supported Ava up taller than her sister, and she revelled in it. 'Maybe if we were back in my apartment.' She smirked. 'Which reminds me...' Ava wiped her eyes. 'You definitely secured yourself somewhere else to sleep tonight? I don't have to lie to you, Stephen and I are treating tonight like a practice for the wedding night, and I will moan loudly so the pervy neighbours feel like their sex lives truly did die when they had their children.' She glanced away, a sour expression coming over her face. 'Do you think our sex life will die?'

Isobel attempted another reassurance tactic. 'Maybe when you have a one-year-old.'

'Stephen!' She shouted to the abyss, assuming he was somewhere nearby to hear her. 'We're adopting a teenager who already hates everyone, or a nine-year-old without any complexes, or three cats, I don't know!' She turned to her sister with a jokey smile plastered on her face. 'Let's go find that beautiful man, I need to tell him you pulled my hair and that we're slaving at our jobs long enough to be able to afford a night-nurse. Loosely I think I understand what they're for. So I can sleep and have sex, right?' She grabbed Isobel by the arm and dragged her back inside the venue, the two Yanick girls weaving through the crowd, saying a polite hi to anyone and everyone, Ava's giraffe-like over-exaggeration helpful in narrowing down exactly where Stephen wasn't.

On the balcony, Tobias and Stephen were leaning against the railing facing back towards the gathered crowd inside. Each was drinking something, but it was clear to not be their first and only drink of the night. At this point, various other guests had circulated outside onto the balcony, but none encroached on the future-groom and, by their accounts, the stranger.

'You know what I have never understood,' Tobias began, half-resting his drink on the rail. 'The stag night, bachelor party, tomato *tomato*, is considered this one final night of **freedom**, as if being in a committed relationship without a wedding ring is still **free**. Yet a committed man, a committed woman, will be the first person—the first!— to screech jealousy, wedding ring or not. Those parties are like society's excuse for not having serious conversations about how we're raised to be jealous, afraid, controlling, obsessive people. You need permission to mourn the death of your freedom! What are we really doing about all of that?'

Stephen, visibly a little startled, downed the last of his drink and shouted something unintelligible. 'My boy! Don't let the booze muddy your soul!' He laughed. 'We are not *jealous* people,

you and I, and Ava and I, and I would hope my sister-in-law. Almost!’ He leaned in and whispered softly, ‘Do you think I should take their last name? It’s much cooler.’

‘We’re tipsy,’ Tobias said, as the doors were flung open. ‘Isobel! Isobel’s sister!’

Tobias barely felt tipsy, and he hadn’t consumed that much alcohol at all, but leaning into the atmosphere, the sparkling moonlit sky, his more-obviously tipsy compatriot, only served to make the evening even more enjoyable for him. He craved another drink though, and another, and another. Then maybe he would be properly tipsy, or drunk, off his horse enough to pass out without a struggle when he booked an Uber back to Donny’s. No. He needed to be sober enough to climb into the car, or otherwise save the money and take the train back. Gratefully he had a spare key, so there would be no awkward, embarrassing thrum on the front door wailing about how thoroughly exhausted he was.

Isobel and Ava joined the two men on the balcony.

‘Are we having fun out here?’ Ava proceeded to lay a wet kiss on Stephen’s lips, then leaned over towards her sister and murmured, ‘This is what finding a stubborn man looks like. You just need to find yourself a stubborn girl.’

They kissed again, and had it been any other evening, it would have been an overabundance of public displays of affection and the two singletons beside them would have likely gagged multiple times. They gagged once, dramatically, and giggled to each other, waiting for the tongues to be once more sheathed inside the right mouths. It was like being children again. Playing with the evil witch in the woods, leaving breadcrumbs. Stones. The tangled rope.

‘What did you two talk about?’ Isobel asked Tobias.

‘Marriage. He was trying to convince me to marry the next man I fall in love with. Must be some residual trauma coming through. Don’t take no for an answer type stuff.’ He laughed. ‘I kid, I kid. About the last sentence. The rest is entirely accurate, he wants a double wedding. Or honeymoon. I couldn’t tell.’ Tobias paused, watching Ava and Stephen subtly flirt with each other in the view of their guests, at their anti-engagement party. ‘And you two?’

‘Marriage. Can you believe it?’ Isobel sighed, but her smile was reassuring, sympathetic. ‘There is something so innately human inside of my sister, that much I know: she does not want to be like her parents. I mean, I love Perla and Jon, but every time I think I have to stress that they are divorced. I don’t think they remember they are!’ She chuckled, leaning against Tobias’ shoulder. ‘Please don’t go on a double-honeymoon with my sister.’

## OPHELIA & ADAM

Ophelia and Adam, sitting in a tree, not kissing, not flirting, because when she attempted to five or so minutes ago he brushed it off like a leaf having fallen onto his shoulder. She was slightly pissed, not from alcohol, she wasn't in the mood to drink, hoping it would rub off on Adam and he wouldn't become a disorderly mess because it was more attuned to his personality of late. No, he was leagues away from becoming an alcoholic, but after that afternoon at Ginball Wizard with Isobel he wasn't opposed to burying his emotions with alcohol. It was two or so months since the day, and at least five months since Sophie had broken up with him. Adam was on the mend. He thought about her less and less, signed up once more for the dating apps he liked—although he knew he would be an oyster pearl on Grindr, but had no interest in it. The house party they were invited to was a Saturday night thing half an hour out of the city centre hosted by Craig, a member of production they met officially at the after-party. He manned the cameras, which for a reality television show confined to a single house—single warehouse—meant he pressed buttons and straddled knobs. They barely knew Craig, but he treated the pair of them like longtime friends and made them believe he was a king of house parties, crowned in gold and toting the sceptre. It piqued their interest.

Ophelia followed Adam through the house into one of the bedrooms—an invasion of someone's privacy, undoubtedly. She called his name several times but he never responded, or at the very least was ignoring her and waiting for her to give up on getting his attention. In the bedroom—presumably Craig's, but who can tell without his name done in cutesy lettering on the door—Ophelia shut the door behind her, giving themselves the privacy. Noise drowned out. She stood near the closed door, waiting for a signal to move towards him, knowing it was unlikely there would be one. Adam sat on the edge of the bed, his face turned away.

'Now you're what, pissed at me for talking to you?' Ophelia began, inching forward. It was a test, it was calculated, but nonetheless risky and hesitant. Everything with Adam in the past few months had been *hesitant*, *risky*, as if seeing him as anything but the person who slept in a bed the floor beneath was an act of wading into the titanoboa-infested waters. Did they historically swim? Ophelia only knew them from a movie. Maybe. Comparing Adam to an extinct gargantuan snake seemed awfully naïve, but he had not been a penguin lately, he had not been an otter.

Adam snapped his head around to look at her. 'Talking? You're practically waiting for me to let down my guard because of the alcohol so I'll flirt back with you.' He rose from the edge of the bed and stepped towards Ophelia. 'You must be lonely, O. Don't take it out on me.'

'How am I *taking it out* on you if I'm just trying to communicate with you?'

Adam sighed and took another step forward towards her. ‘We were sitting by the pool and you leaned towards me and told me it was nice we had time just the two of us, before shit became distracting and you said I would be off with the boys and not pay any attention to you.’ He shook his head. ‘And you’re not drinking, so this is a sober thought from Ophelia, you’re trying to suss out whether or not I have finally come around to feeling the same feelings about you.’

Ophelia grimaced at Adam and fiddled with her high pony, loosening it a little. ‘Neither of us are preteens, or preschoolers, we don’t need to look at the world in *crushes* and whether a person has blossoming feelings for someone else, we just see where the cards fall.’

‘You haven’t been there to worry over how I felt after the breakup.’

‘Give it a break, Adam! Sophie dumped you when the relationship was not healthy, you have told everyone who will listen that it wasn’t working, but you continue to mine this narrative that with superglue and an ambitious dream it would have been the most exhilarating love story ever told again. Don’t tell me to grow up and then act like the first caveman to have his burning flame snuffed in the next breath.’

Adam huffed, and he might have puffed and blown a house down if he wanted to. ‘Of course you think I’m not allowed to be miserable over a breakup for this long because of how you think about me. Waiting for me to swoop in and be romantic with you because you don’t really care how I am, you just think this handsome man should give you attention, should adore you, because maybe the public didn’t the way you thought they would.’

‘Fuck off. None of this is about how we were talked about on social media. Why would I want to be with you? The country hated you for being a sexist fucking dick and not apologising for it. Not until someone called you out about it. Not until your girlfriend mentioned it in her breakup speech. If I wanted incredible publicity, Adam, I would go snuggle up to, I don’t know, River from the season before ours, or Lenny before that, you would hate my absolute guts if I came home with Lenny on my arm, although I guess you would warn me of the *optics* of that, too, isn’t he old enough to be your father, Ophelia?’ She burned a hole in his face with her stare. ‘And it isn’t because we live together either. I just instinctively like you, and your attitude makes me feel stupid for it. You’re an asshole half the time I am around you, Adam, because you flirt with me and play with my hair and wrap your arms around my body and then pretend none of that fucking means anything to you. I have never wanted you to be some interim body to play with while I stumble and struggle to piece together my life again. You’re an asshole.’

‘You want to be in love, is that it?’

‘Men act like being in love is the cringiest thing in the world unless they are.’

Adam scoffed. ‘I don’t—can’t—love Sophie anymore.’

‘Cool, Adam, cool. A confession for once.’ Ophelia let out an emotional sigh. ‘Unless you turn around and apologise for stringing me along, for making me think there was something there when you quite obviously knew all along there wasn’t, I don’t really give a damn if you have moved on from loving her. What does it mean instead? You find another girl to dangle off your arm, and then downstairs in your bedroom I’m plagued with the sounds of your aggressively inorganic sex noises. Every little word out of my mouth right now is me becoming less and less attracted to you. You’re an asshole. Go find some generic white girl who makes you a promise she will suck your toes and do the dishes with her feet while cooking you a roast turkey dinner.’ She backed herself into the corner. ‘Just don’t mention Sophie. Don’t let some other girl feel sorry for you.’

‘When did you show me you felt sorry for me?’

‘What the hell am I supposed to do? Write you a letter confessing I understand the trauma of a breakup and I will slave in the kitchen over a hot stove to make you consolation brownies? Adam, I didn’t baby you. That’s what I did. I didn’t baby you, and I didn’t pressure you into making a decision about whether you could see something between us, a future or otherwise. We could have gone on one date, had semi-interesting sex because we were horny for each other, and then I would have been gutted, devastated, when you never spoke of it again but I stayed humble and quiet.’

‘But as my friend, you wouldn’t want me to do anything my head is not in the game for, right?’

‘I get it. I really do. You aren’t attracted to me, not enough to justify something.’

‘There’s really no point in us not talking about that. You know now.’

Ophelia sighed, again heavily, and turned her body away from Adam. ‘Then you have to stop touching me. Stop tickling my back, placing a warm hand on my neck, giving me eyes when we go somewhere for dinner and sit opposite each other.’ She was curling in on herself. ‘If you have to, if you really have to, bring around a girl who understands. No strings attached girl. Or flirt all the time with Tobias, move on from one target to another, too.’

‘Ophelia—’

‘If you move closer towards me, I will feel incredibly uncomfortable and panic thinking you want to sexually assault me. Stay back, please, I’m already pissed at you enough.’

‘I’m not going to assault you like that.’

‘I know you wouldn’t.’ She swallowed. Bit her tongue. ‘I wish I severed the part of myself that was attracted to you the moment you said you absolutely adored the girl who should not be named. It would have been easier than this.’

‘Oph—’

‘Can you move to the other side of the room so I can open this door and leave?’ Ophelia stared at him with panic and fear visible enough in her eyes. ‘Please.’

Adam stepped back, then retreated to the position he first sat in, on the edge of the bed with his head turned away from her. Here, his brain was noisy, overwhelmingly so. Furious with himself, furious with Ophelia, too, for making him out to be a complete villain when he had never intended to be. She was right on many things—Adam had not been rational in how he treated her over the past few months, because the thoughts then clogging his mind had been the misery and the mourning of a relationship he did not realise could not be fixed. Pained, scorned, this was the figurative bed he now had to lay in—but if this was Craig’s literal bed, he wanted to be somewhere else, far from it, slamming his head into a brick wall or otherwise. The soft click of the door closing interrupted his thinking.

Adam would have felt incorrect for crying, certainly because nobody had made him feel terrified enough to curl against the wall in the corner. She had only screamed truths at him, painful truths he at first refused to confront, sitting on the edge of the bed, wondering what he was even supposed to do next. He scrambled around in his pocket for his phone and started to text the first person he thought of. The last thing he had said to Donny was more uplifting, more akin to a message between two quote-unquote *bros*, but now he attempted to self-edit his thoughts and funnel them into a long-winded paragraph. He sat there, his ass supported by the mattress, waiting. Waiting. For something that would convince him not to chase after Ophelia with more nonsensical bullshit.

Ophelia tried to appear normal, natural, as she stalked out into Craig’s cramped backyard and searched around for...something. She was buzzing, but not with adrenaline, but intoxicating rage. *Scumbag* was on her lips waiting to be spoken. The first person to ask her a single question about her infuriating roommate—she had to continue living with him while she was pissed at him—would hear the word. *Scum*. Nothing would appease her more in this exact moment than to be home, back in her bedroom in the pencil house, which was in another state entirely. Ophelia lingered near a navy-blue esky stocked with petrol station ice and cold beer, but she wasn’t thirsty. Not for anything liquid. She glanced around at the unfamiliar faces. Some of them had been introduced to her via Craig, or otherwise by shouting their name above the blasting music, but she could really only think of the one word. *Scumbag*.

Some of the men were unattractive, or had women hooked to their waists, and Ophelia wasn’t really attracted to women, not enough to wander over to one of them and kiss her on the lips. This is what she ultimately craved: a passionate, non-committed, sloppy, flamin’ hot make out session with a stranger, or a semi-stranger if his name came to mind while his tongue slobbered on her teeth. The idea of kissing Craig gave her the opposite of a boner—she didn’t have a penis, but she imagined men could retract their penises when they were turned off, or she imagined Adam’s had retracted every time she called him an asshole. Oh, it had felt incredible. Ophelia wondered how damaged his ego was. She also didn’t care. She paused, her eyes meeting with an attractive unknown. *He’ll do*.

Ophelia approached the stranger and introduced herself with a hand on his chest. It felt as if the opening move of a porno sex scene, the hand set on the fabric of the crisp white shirt. Neither of them needed a conversation to begin kissing. His lips, this mystery man's lips, tasted like cigarette smoke but she drowned out the thought of being repulsed because he was an insatiable kisser, and Ophelia wondered whether he had been waiting all evening for this kiss, this change of scenery, his tongue meeting hers. Her hands found the skin underneath his shirt. Considering their altogether public-adjacent position, she tamed herself from lifting it over his head and rendering him half-naked in front of the other straight white men and their girlfriends who made up the majority of Craig's industry-adjacent friends. She sucked on his tongue as it writhed around in her mouth—it was the first time she had this aggressively kissed a man since...sometime last year, actually. The reminiscence threatened to ruin the moment, but Ophelia let this unknown man grab her ass and it shifted her mindset entirely.

Five minutes later, she and Laurie—his name was Laurie, she found out—were in the pool in their underwear. Ophelia had stripped down without inhibitions, flinging the jeans and the band t-shirt into a puddle away from the water's edge. It was darker outside by then, the pool illuminated by underwater sconces, tackily fixed at measured distances from each other. Ophelia's legs were the strings of jellyfish tentacles. Laurie swam near, hooking her with his right arm. *Isn't this romantic*, she thought, glancing at the sliding glass door.

'Do you live nearby?' Laurie questioned. He was taller than her, with a thin pipe-like nose and a scratchy buzzcut. It was the colour of dead grass.

Ophelia was giving him attention, perhaps the attention she expected from someone else. But none of that mattered now. Laurie was attractive, at least enough for her to be interested in his asinine questions. Once she let slip she was from Queensland—*yes, of all places*—she became worried his next train of thought would be what her favourite colour was, or whether she would rather live in the mountains or by the beach. Either she was still irritable or Laurie had an awful sense of getting the conversation going, or a smashing car crash of both. She cared less about getting to know his music taste—she assumed he liked white boy rappers—and the trauma he experienced in the third grade when the teacher called him to the front of the class and the hullabaloo of laughter indicated he had indeed pissed his pants when he thought it had somehow been raining indoors.

She wanted him kissing her neck.

'Come here,' she said, tracing on the skin of his waist. Leaning against the lip of the pool, exposing her neck, inviting a vampire's bite, Ophelia closed her eyes and waited. Laurie took the bait and began to kiss her neck. His touch was soft, surprisingly gentle, but occasionally he would suck on her flesh, undoubtedly hoping for a mark he could later claim. Laurie, poor boy, assumed he would be seeing Ophelia at least a second time while she holidayed down south.

While Laurie tongued Ophelia's neck, Adam remained behind the closed bedroom door, texting back and forth with Donny. It was a wonder no one seemed to notice him in there, although the very likelihood Craig would need something from his bedroom while he got himself more and more drunk in the company of relatively-safe lunatics. House parties were rather void of surprises—the most alarming occurrence was typically someone behaving badly, breaking a glass door or punching a black hole in the wall or mistaking a no for a yes. They ran on their schedules. Arrive sober, become drunk, blackout off the property, crown Craig king of the hill for long enough to make a charitable bump in ego, a tiny, unnoticeable fraction. Adam assumed it would be weird if he made himself comfortable and lied down on the bed, but he thought about it, repeatedly. The numbing idea of curling up underneath covers. Simply becoming one with the log.

This was the last text he had sent: *She has to understand not everyone is going to want a relationship with her.* He was spiralling, somewhat, but his mood variably shifted with every response back from Donny. Donny, who had experience from years past dating women and experience in general—there was at least a decade between them, a decade at least of going about life longer than Adam, who would have otherwise considered himself “experienced.” Donny texted him back: *There are more reasonable ways to explain that without making her avoid you because you showed your true colours.* Three dots. *You aren't the worst person in the world, hey, so don't act like one because a person you've got a history with got frustrated with you first.*

It would have been beneficial, at least for one of them, if Donny Bunyard were standing there, hovering above, sent from above like a guardian angel. True, Donny was not dead, but neither had he invented a teleportation device in his spare time, so the text messages were the manliest form of moral support Adam could receive from him. Telephone calls, to Adam, felt like communication reserved for his parents, for his girlfriend—and he didn't need reminding he was painfully single and just finally moving on from the girl who should not be named. He—Donny, but Adam tricked himself into believing it was a group effort—was calming Adam down from the so-called ledge. If there had been a text message come through, a *what is the worst thing you think you would do right now* message, Adam imagines he would type back: *I would punch a douchebag, the first one to step in front of me.* Or else he would snatch someone's car keys and drive off into the distance. Reckless, careless, forgivable enough.

His anger was not as intensified now. He left the bedroom behind and wandered around looking for something to drink, brushing off generic concern from Craig, who by now was plastered and slapping a mate's ass as the epitome of his humour. Adam fished a beer out of a navy-blue esky, hand freezing up against a stiff chunk of ice, and squinted at the girl in the pool being attacked by the hickey monster. Of course it was her. Adam contemplated dive-bombing into the water to ruin the apparent romantic vibe crafted by the mood lighting and the house music. He was still pissed off.

Adam retreated back inside. He thought about retaliating, as if the sight of him humping on some girl he equally picked at random from the swarm would have caused the jealousy in her to rise to the surface and boil over. But she wasn't watching him. Ophelia had severed her attention from him for tonight, which only made thinking of the next few days more confrontational. The plans to spend an afternoon at the beach with everyone—Tobias, Isobel, Tatianna, Diesel, Donny, Fletcher, Will, Zayn, Dylan, Ophelia, and himself. There were whisperings the group would be split down the middle, and now he knew wherever Ophelia wasn't, he would be. Fermenting a grudge. At least they had not opted to share a hotel room. Adam might have slept in the hallway.

He thought about spending time with everyone while he festered away quietly fuming at Ophelia. He thought about whether it was fair at all, to be completely frustrated with her, to reject the multiple times she called him an asshole. Oh, how he would have loved to connect his fist with the jaw of the dumbo outside in the pool. The man. Not Ophelia. Funny, he never hoped to inflict any sort of violence on her. Welcoming, actually. He didn't want to see himself as *the worst person in the world*, not even the worst person in the state, or on this block. He wanted air. Different air.

Adam found the front door and walked outside into the night, having set the beer down on a counter in the kitchen. The quiet street was sobering. He didn't know where he was walking—they had come together, having caught a train out of the city, but he walked in the opposite direction from the train station. Who exactly did she think she was to, to...he was losing his train of thought, dizzied by the image of her pressing herself into the corner, terrified of him completely. This projection of a violent, harmful person ultimately shattered his heart. Adam never wanted to see himself as cruel, as someone capable of hurting a woman, anyone, like that...but Ophelia regardless had been panicked, distressed, worried. Worried he would. The world was spinning. He was an asshole, this he thought as he wandered these random streets, navigating blind. That's what they say about men now, straight men, white men, average-success-men with attractive faces. Assholes, the lot of them. He would have previously snickered at himself if he said *why bother* about anything, but if his entire existence was becoming cursed...Adam had to slap himself out of it, metaphorically.

You are not discriminated against for anything, he told himself, coming upon a park blanketed by the night. You do everything you're responsible for. Isobel really was rubbing off on him, when Ophelia wanted to be rubbing up against him...oh, give it a break, Adam, he thought, sitting his ass down on a park bench away from the playground as much as possible. He doesn't need to add creepy man waiting for children to the list, especially after the borrowed white van...now he thought about grinding his cock against Tobias' butt, how insanely aroused he was. The moan. He had thought about stripping the both of them naked and cumming on Tobias, white semen on the flesh of his ass. Truth would inevitably be exposed and someone would call him a queer *f-slur*. You do insane things when

you're horny, he thought, imagining that would be his failure of an excuse when confronted about it. *Jesus Christ I couldn't imagine taking you on a date, Ophelia, but I wanted to bust a nut listening to Tobias moan into my erection.* Oh, he looked gay with the egg on his face now, but the idea of doing anything else—truly anything else—with Tobias caused his penis to retract inside of himself, somehow.

It had been a one-time-only craving. Whole cucumbers dipped in peanut butter. Frozen pickles. Spray cheese a garnish for the hairy bush of another man. Take your pick.

Sitting in the park, settling himself down with the cool breeze, Adam realised something about himself: being able to move forward, entirely forward, meant there were certain elements he had to abandon. One of them was just his working friendship with Ophelia.

Ophelia peeled Laurie off her body, passionately kissing him one last time before she told him she needed to go pee and hastily drip-dried on the stone tiles before wandering back inside. The toilet was occupied, so she lingered against a beige wall, patiently waiting, patiently contemplating her actions. Kissing Laurie, letting him leave sweet kisses on her body, hardly accounted for much of anything—they were so distracted with the embrace portion of their night to exchange phone numbers or Instagram accounts or anything, which suited her perfectly. He was grossly a number, but more honestly a satisfying rebound from thinking about Adam. God knows where he had gone.

Ophelia went to the toilet and returned to the living room to find Craig doing a line of coke off the coffee table. It should have disgusted her, or worried her, because the man seemed to be progressively going off the deep end that night, but she wasn't his minder and barely his friend. That was harsh to admit—he had invited them to the party in an attempt to boast about having Ophelia and Adam from the recent season of *that reality tv show*, but no one cared and he was wasted and snorting coke and no one cared. It was nice.

She wondered whether finding Adam and apologising—for calling him an asshole—was the right decision now, now that she had kissed someone else to satiate the hunger or whatever you wanted to call her feelings. Ophelia glanced around, knowing if she spotted him somewhere in the corner nursing a bottle of beer, she would haul him off back into Craig's bedroom and they could have a civil conversation like grown adults. Less screaming and shouting. More apologising. But Adam was nowhere to be seen now. If she searched the entirety of the house for him, it would appear as though she was desperate to make amends, desperate to patch up their complication relationship, desperately hoping he had changed his mind based solely on what he may or may not have witnessed outside. He wasn't in the bedroom. Ophelia knew the window of her remorse was closing and she would go right back to begrudgingly being frustrated with him. It was the circle of life. The circle of emotion. Acceptance would come oh so much later.

Ophelia had grown tired of the party. All it was now was strangers bouncing off walls and burying their grievances in life under the sand. In drugs, alcohol, each other's sweaty bodies, the smell of regret in the morning. So completely boring while she wandered around sober and bored. Ophelia clicked the front door behind her and began towards the train station. There would still be trains, it was still within frame, her feet were sore but at least she had worn sneakers. They were still relatively new and she started to worry blisters were forming, but that was tomorrow's problem. Some other time's problem. She moved slowly in the direction of the station, but something halted her a few streets over. Loneliness? No. The idea of heading right back to the hotel now stilted her. The breathable air of the suburb was soothing, being out here by herself was soothing, having time to think was soothing.

Had she expected a fairytale romance with him? Never. Having expectations for any connection is complicated. A word that can be overused—complicated. A dynamic, multi-faceted word. A human word. Of course everything is complicated. Living with him already, beginning something with him, there would have been a learning curve to how inescapably intertwined their home lives were and would be. Flirting with someone you split the rent with, sneaking upstairs in the middle of the night, not that she could imagine wanting to be secretive, but there would have been adjustments. You want to ignore **complicated** entirely when you think the chemistry is electric. Tomorrow's mishap. Tomorrow never comes. Endlessly, hopelessly optimistic.

Then you are wandering the streets in a state of bitterness, as if the last words you shared with him were one and the same with biting into a plump lemon.

Ophelia turned down another street, wandering further away from where she vaguely remembered the train station was. This whole world is unfamiliar, she thought, although nothing looked unexpected, this whole world she witnessed expanding around her was an ordinary suburb like the hundreds she knew up north. In high school, she walked home in the afternoon and studied the brick houses, the bulging-out numbering on mailboxes, if the neighbours with the yapping puppy had let him into the front yard or not. High school was now a foreign concept—this behaviour, flirting with a boy and being disappointed when he didn't like you back, it happened before every fourth period in high school. *Move on, Ophelia.*

There was someone else ahead, approaching her, shadowed by the darkness of the night. She thought it was a man, but only because his hair was shorter and the way he moved seemed to be more masculine than anything. Was it right to characterise someone by their walk? Unclear. Maybe so if you were fearful of being mugged, attacked, or worse. So much worse. Ophelia thought about crossing the street to give herself space from the figure, in the likelihood it was a drunken idiot who might take advantage of a woman walking the streets alone at night. She hesitated, because the closer he came the more familiar he was, and she recognised Adam from further enough away to abandon crossing.

He was frustrated, of course he still was. After abandoning the park bench, he had begun to wander back to the train station, exhausted emotionally, but his bones craved something else. Not a house party occupied by strangers, but he thought about finding the first nightclub alive with music loud enough to burst eardrums, and there he would press himself up against a pretty girl and whisper in her ear, wanting her to guide him back to her apartment where they would have mindless sex on the sofa.

He noticed Ophelia ahead and shouted her name, too aggressively, too boisterous for the suburbs. She prepared herself for another argument.

‘Where’s your boyfriend gone?’ His words were icy and his throat hoarse.

Ophelia bridged the distance between the two of them. It seemed imminent they would have this harsh conversation on the side of the road in front of unknown houses, but she didn’t want to turn from him or pass him. This would be as good of a place as any. She scrunched her face up in confusion, but knew who he meant—Laurie, the guy she picked from the crowd to give her attention when she was low, desperate, and questionably deserving of it. ‘You saw us. It was a party, I got hit on.’ A tiny white lie. ‘You don’t care, Adam, so let’s just squash this and move on.’

‘It’s petty as hell to be told no and go screw around with a different guy who doesn’t realise he is only being used because you’re depressed.’

‘We didn’t *screw around*, we were kissing. His fault if he catches feelings from that.’

‘Your fault for catching feelings when all we ever did was talk.’

Ophelia reined in her fury. ‘You would touch me, Adam, you would place a hand on my lower back because you very obviously wanted to comfort me, and you don’t place your hand on Isobel’s back, you don’t place a hand on Tobias’ either.’ Adam scoffed, suddenly unable to make eye-contact with Ophelia at all. It would have been childish, except it seemed almost obvious there was something underneath it. ‘Now what’s your problem?’

‘You only notice the world according to Ophelia.’

Oh, she wanted to punch him in the mouth, clip her fist with his jaw, do something she would regret when they both woke up in the morning and saw each other in daylight, the bruising marking his face. Being called selfish, self-centred, the sun in her own universe only made her feel misrepresented. She was not knowledgeable to everything else in the world, she only inhabited the one body, and her feelings for him, although now depleting entirely, concerned only two people in the entire world. Ophelia and Adam.

‘What am I supposed to be noticing?’

He shook his head, once more avoiding her gaze. ‘Maybe it’s the sort of person I am. Affectionate, or what’s the thing, physical touch as my love language. You’re not the only person I touch like that. I don’t think I owe you confessions because of it.’

‘The other people, you don’t think you’re giving them the wrong impression too? What if you go somewhere with them, and they snap, and they want to understand why you hold them close to your body but call it just friends?’ Adam was at least looking at her now, clearly plagued with whether to reveal anything—of course, the glaringly obvious person he was referring to had previously been mentioned in the conversation, but saying something now, after two good months of forgetting about it...Adam needed more time to weigh the positives and the negatives. There was no time. This conversation was live.

‘No, we talked about that—’

‘Who are you going to be hurting next, Adam? Stop looking away from me.’

He had averted his attention again, staring out down the empty street. The occasional houselight illuminated front rooms, streetlamps synonymous with stars. The nosy neighbour would be curious about this conversation. This argument. This *disaster*.

‘You don’t know everyone I know.’

‘Are you being inappropriate in the office, is that it?’ The fury coursing through Ophelia’s veins seemed unstoppable, and a little regressive, but his flighty attitude was unnerving her and there seemed to be something buried she thought it possible to string out if she probed him for long enough. It was like a science experiment—an interrogation, actually, but she would have been a private investigator, not a police detective. ‘I guess you could be cupping the ass of one of your boys after a night out so he feels loved and wanted when none of the girls go home with him.’

‘It’s only happened once.’

‘What has?’ Ophelia studied him. *What only happened once?*

Adam covered his face with his hands, which muffled his words. ‘The camping trip.’

‘I can’t hear you.’ She softened her voice. Adam lowered his hands. Having this conversation out in the open, on the side of the road, in front of a house neither of them would ever recall again, it felt incredibly void of sense, of reason. They should have been inside, they should have been sitting down, as if it were a mediation, or a properly-organised interrogation down at the station, with other uniformed officers behind the two-way glass. Ophelia switched which leg she placed her weight on—she had realised the pressure was leaning on her left foot. Adam sighed.

‘The camping trip.’

‘Toby—’

‘I wasn’t thinking clearly. He was a warm body on the mattress beside me, and I asked him, I didn’t want him to turn around in the morning and despise me because I touched him like that. First it was just gentle, caressing his leg, remembering what it was like to touch someone without the fear of them thinking it meant the world.’ Ophelia’s face sunk. ‘Then I...I was getting hard, so I was grinding

against his ass, the entire time thinking if anyone found out they would call me a *faggot* and that the issue with letting go of...of Sophie was because our relationship hid away my homosexuality.' He turned away from Ophelia, the idea of knowing she was there, knowing she was watching him, becoming more impossible to stomach. 'I'm not gay, I'm not bi, I don't know what overcame me except an urge to do something because I was horny and he wouldn't have rejected it...I knew he wouldn't have, because he is gay, and that's the thing he's taught me about gay men. Being horny is like a light switch.'

'Adam, you can't fucking use your friends when you're horny.'

'I didn't use him!'

'You used me. If there was never an intention for anything to happen, if you never were attracted to me and you just liked the closeness, the physical affection...you used me, Adam, and I feel like the old, falling-apart, rotten toy you tossed aside because our friend—our close friend, Adam—looked like an easier option for you. You thought Toby would never get attached, would never imagine the moment mattered.' Ophelia's eyes were watering. 'Does he really know what you were doing?'

'We talked about it. It was fine! It was a thing that happened, and it won't happen again, because I can't look at him and be attracted to him. We're all just friends.' He stepped away from her, shouting out towards the darkened neighbourhood surrounding him. 'It just needs to stay that way, goddamnit.'

Ophelia retreated within herself. It was an obvious criticism, and all remorse had vacated her body at this point in the evening. She thought about sitting down on the pavement, ignoring him until he left her alone, disappeared to wherever he had gone the first time. Spending time with him before their flight next Friday would be complicated, but avoidable. If she saw him lingering around Tobias, she wanted to interrupt, or separate the two of them, worried entirely someone else would be hurt like she was then, on the side of the street. Raging mad. But sad, too. Tears staining her cheeks. If she saw him with any of their friends, would she worry he was finding someone else to **use**?

'I'm going back to the hotel,' she whispered, barely waiting for a response from Adam.

On the train, she broke down and called Tatianna.

No answer.

## TOBIAS & OPHELIA & ISOBEL & ADAM

The eleven of them were segmented into two groups on the Tuesday they wandered down to the beach. Tobias, Adam, Diesel, Zayn, Donny, and Fletcher had disappeared in one direction, in search of the promise of a nude beach. Ophelia, Isobel, Tatianna, Will, and Dylan lingered at the family-friendly beach, setting up underneath a pinstripe beach cabana. The five of them fit, if cramped in together, but Dylan stripped out of his shirt the moment they arrived and dove into the water. Ophelia wondered if she would get very much time to talk to him now, while they were underneath the unforgiving rays of the sun. She wondered, and worried, about certain things—there had been no logical opportunity to deny the pair of them, Tobias & Adam, their side quest to the nude beach. So she let them. Her mind refused to stray from the thought she was standing idly by as Adam inched towards hurting another one of the roommates, which only made her question why her mind believed he was the ultimate villain. Deceptive, cruel, unrelenting, unbelievably charismatic. Resourceful. In truth, pigeonholing him into a role, specifically as villain to her hero, only served to make Ophelia feel worse about paying him attention. It was better, she thought, to assume his obvious frustration with her coupled with the warm sunshine and the inevitable tan would keep him preoccupied.

Isobel and Ophelia lounged on their towels underneath the cabana. They had spent the Sunday together, alongside Ava, the blushing future-bride, and spent the majority of it catching each other up to speed. Isobel knew now why two of her roommates rarely made eye-contact, and Ophelia took first chair in the peanut gallery as the two sisters continued to loosen the knot of their quasi-fight in the hallway outside of the anti-engagement. They were now luxuriously relaxed on the sand, the only thing missing being an ice-cold glass of something refreshing, an iced tea or thereabouts, and maybe less sweating. Isobel peered through her sunglasses at the fabric roof of the cabana. She was laying on her back, alternating between closing her eyes and flicking them open to be certain she was not imagining how soothing it was to be seaside but sheltered.

‘Having everyone divided is fine for now,’ she said, glancing at Ophelia, waiting for the grimace. ‘But I’m looking forward to the complete reunion, or complete to a degree.’ The names of the absent contestants came to her mind immediately, but the invitation had been extended, although again to a degree. It was an off-the-books reunion, the priority for positive vibes and community spirit—real yoga retreat energy—and those who agreed to come, booked their tickets, were scattered around in the sunshine of that beach, they were the genuine sort of community. For now it was a balkanised kind.

Tatianna was on the other side of Ophelia wearing the skimpier bikini. She was in the middle of slathering more sunscreen on her stomach. ‘Everyone looks hotter now,’ she offered, glancing out

towards the ocean where a shirtless Dylan was swimming in the calm waters. 'I know I'm not supposed to look, he's a taken man with good values and they're boringly monogamous, but oh my goodness,' she continued, taking her eyes off him for a second to glance at the two girls beside her. 'Dylan looks more attractive away from those warehouse lights. They washed him out, my god.'

'Tat.' Ophelia spoke without raising her head.

'Our signs are not compatible anyway,' she concluded, winking at Isobel. Ophelia's eyes were closed, closed certainly to the world and everything surrounding. She had spent the day before asleep until 10am, then idling until Tatianna's flight landed at 10:30am and she caught the train into the city—although with her extravagant earnings it was a wonder why she didn't take the golden chariot and fly private, being waited on and watching episodes of *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City* on a plasma flat-screen TV. Life lived fancier. The giddy pair of them spent the afternoon together gossiping, but Ophelia kept mum on Adam. She half-assed explain the missed phone call. *I thought a man was approaching me down a dark alley and thought talking to you would keep me safe.* It was a genuine concern, but Ophelia liked to believe she could take a man down if he came threateningly towards her, and Tat believed it too.

'Made any extravagant purchases yet, miss winner?' Isobel had sat up and angled her body so she could face Tatianna and the ocean beyond the cabana. She tried not to block Will with her body, although he seemed to be enjoying the peace of not being too engaged with conversation. He was older than the rest of them, he had children who lived with their mother since the divorce, and perhaps he felt at times outside the scope of their discussions around attractive boys, relationship drama, and a nickname like *Miss Winner*, even though of course Tatianna was not married and extraordinarily wealthier than the rest of them.

Tat leaned back on the palms of her hands, a glistened stomach exposed to passersby. 'My family is teaching me how invest,' she said with a smirk, 'which makes me feel completely helpless about money, because who knew you could so quickly see the value of currency change before your very eyes.' She laughed, at the exact same time she caught the eye of a wandering six-foot-plus man with an exposed, hairless chest and clingy-wet board shorts. It was unavoidable to not glimpse the shape of his erection in his shorts. This she lowered her volume to say: 'Here I was thinking the horniness would be reserved for the nude beach.' Tatianna gave him a little wave and he waved back.

'I think maybe that was where he just came from,' Isobel said, flicking her head around to where a small gaggle of queer men were emerging from a path that veered into the coastal bushland. The cut-through to get to the other beach where the majority of the men had disappeared to.

'Must be a real sausage fest over there. I don't like exposing my boobs to the sun.'

Tat glanced briefly then at Ophelia, who had not said anything since her solitary word.

Isobel watched Dylan dunk himself underwater. He was lazing about just beyond the shallows, and when he noticed she was looking out in his direction he waved her to join. Isobel thought about it—she wanted time in the water, and she was significantly less body-conscious than she was at the start of her transition, but Ophelia was so unlikely to go for a swim, and her friend-loyalty became the brick wall blocking her path. She redirected her gaze to Will beside her. ‘Are you thinking of going for a swim soon?’ He was without his shirt, his chest hidden beneath thick, black hair, his eyes shielded by a pair of sunglasses that reminded Isobel of the movie *Top Gun*. Will thankfully didn’t look at all like Tom Cruise—in truth she didn’t like him very much as an actor, or a person, considering his Scientology background and what she gathered about how he had been in his marriages to the actresses Nicole Kidman and Katie Holmes.

‘I might,’ Will offered, adjusting himself on the towel. ‘I imagine you younger guys at the beach sort of react differently when you see an older man in clear view.’ He laughed, staring out at the sea. ‘It’s not as attractive, an older man with his flab and fat and wrinkled nipples. Before you try to be the mediator, Isobel,’ and he turned his head with a defending expression on his face, ‘that’s just how it is when you’re not an abtastic younger guy. I’m in my forties, in case you’ve forgotten since we stopped living together. It isn’t a body-positive issue either, I wouldn’t expect the girls in their twenties, thirties, to prefer a dad bod on an **actual** dad over, sure, a dad bod on a tradie who doesn’t have gradually-worsening back issues.’

Isobel had been nodding along the entire time. ‘You’re lucky not everyone at the beach is keenly looking for the catch of the day, for a lover.’ She smiled warmly at him, but it was not as though Will was suffering from a loss of faith in his self-confidence. He did not shyly close himself off, slip the shirt back over his head, he simply avoided peacocking around on the beach like the other men and the overly-interested older gay men in their speedos. Pink with the cacti on their buttocks.

‘Tell me to be quiet if this is inappropriate, but is there anyone special for you right now, after everything has ended?’ There was nothing inappropriate about how he asked, full of respect and a cautious tone and, ultimately, care about what could be considered a sensitive subject for anyone, let alone a queer person. Isobel smiled, but shook her head almost immediately—of course there wasn’t, she thought, suddenly feeling like the roommate with the least flirtatious anything. Ophelia had unsuccessfully wanted something with Adam, Adam was rebuffing but had asked for help with his dating profile the other week, and Tobias—don’t tell anyone—had confided in her about a little bit of message-flirtation with Romeo, Ophelia’s brother, although it was likely for the best no one mentioned anything to Ophelia yet, in the off-chance it went absolutely nowhere, in the off-chance she spiralled for a love life that was more blossoming than her own.

‘I’m not looking,’ she said, staring out at the surface of the water.

It made her sound depressed and dejected, but her love life was somewhat of a nonstarter of late, a train without coal, steam, electricity, a source of energy. It wasn't too painful watching other people attempt romance, find love, although the collective group of them included only one married man—Donny—and except for Dylan everyone else was distracting themselves from singledom by being exactly where they were, down at the waterfront, soaking in sunshine to avoid heartbreak. Maybe it would be nice to fall in love again, she thought to herself, pivoting sharply to think about what *love* would look like for her closest companions of late. Will was certain to meet another woman in time, unless the women his age pursued only younger, childless men for the thrill of limitless sex. Tatianna was re-entering the dating pool with designer clothes and an even richer personality. Mostly everyone would be fine, adjusted, and she hoped she would be too. Hoped.

'Should we go down to the water then?' Will offered, and Isobel glanced at Tat, wondering whether someone would be left to guard, or protect, or merely be near Ophelia while she dozed and ignored the world around her. Their communication was voiceless, but understood, and Isobel and Will meandered down the sands towards shirtless Dylan, who had ventured further out from the shore. They frolicked with him in the ocean, and it was pleasant, and Isobel soon forgot she had been thinking about whatever was becoming of her love life. That was irrelevant. She didn't need the attention of a woman to be happy with herself. That was reassuring.

Tobias felt the warmth of the sun on his naked body. It was the first time in a while he was removed of clothing, completely exposed, and it was not sexual, or for a shower, or in the privacy of his own home—that was to say it was the first time in a while he was nude and there was no expectation of anything. He was lying on his back, having slathered himself in sunscreen, including on his penis and ballsack, because the idea of bright, tomato-red balls in the morning, aching as he chafed in his underwear, made him depressed. The six of them had moved to the far-end of the nude beach and arranged their towels so as not to hog an enormous amount of the sand, three by three. Tobias was in between Donny and Fletcher in the "back row," a small window of sand separating them from Adam, Diesel, and Zayn.

They were all naked. Tobias had been initially surprised Adam stripped himself down to nothing, thinking he might opt to be one of the handful wearing tight swimsuits as a compromise. He was not, however, surprised Adam divided himself with the body-liberated men, because it was not difficult to clock his avoidance of Ophelia. Every decision seemed to be based around how he could separate himself from her, taking the backseat in whichever car she didn't gravitate towards, walking ahead to keep the distance. There was something awkward about them. It was new. It evaporated once

Adam was by the water, knocking his cock accidentally with his hand. Tobias couldn't lie and say he hated the view. Adam's body was far more toned than his. Adam was undeniably sexier than he was.

Tobias shifted away from thinking about Adam. Any attraction he had was entirely surface-level, but it had itself altered since their camping trip, how could it not have. Their combined body warmth, the sensation of his roommate, a definable taboo, grinding against his ass through the underwear. Queer men understand their desire, their horny ruminations, this was what he understood about himself pre- and post-camping. It was like the war. A conflict. He had found at least a solution to his misunderstood feelings—Romeo Sylvis, which only seemed to be yet another taboo, being attracted to your roommate's sibling. It was inescapable, the stranger decisions, but the plain idea of being miserably single or attempting to trust an unknown left him exactly as he was. Exposed.

It was not crowded on this beach, although it could not be considered quiet and lifeless either. The strategy to hug closer to the rising mountain of rock kept them separate from a larger number of people, but two women had sought out the shade further back and were topless slathering themselves in sunscreen. It was interesting to only one of them—Adam nudged his head back for a glance, respectfully, his mind clearer with renewed adoration for the feminine physique. All of this was to say he loved boobs, because he was a straight man freed from the agony of a breakup. *Sophie's done*. He wanted this to be the very last time he thought about her. Now he wanted to admire other women, gorgeous, topless women, without coming across like a disgusting pig-asshole with drool dribbling down his chin and the haunting presence of that comment. Every day he regretted talking.

Adam was surprisingly unfazed seeing these friends of his naked. Diesel had flipped over onto his back and was exposing his perky ass to the overwhelmingly-warm sun. He wondered if it was a rude interruption to say something while the two dark-skinned men beside him tanned and seemed so at peace in comparison. He of course could not escape wondering what Ophelia had said, or was saying, spreading, about their multiple arguments two nights earlier. Their fury for each other. Did Tobias know? Nothing was weird or muddled between them. He thought maybe she was avoiding mentioning it so he wouldn't feel embarrassed knowing she knew.

But he was embarrassed, Adam. As soon as the ten minutes were up, the window for letting your sunscreen set, he wanted to be soaking himself in the ocean, and maybe then he could talk to Diesel. About what exactly, he hardly knew.

'The movie we watched last night,' Tobias began, leaning toward Donny as he spoke. He was staying in Donny and Scot's guest bedroom for the week, and they had spent Monday night in, eating delivered pizza on the sofa watching a movie they selected together after scrutinising the various streaming services. 'I think it influenced my dreams.' Scot had spent the evening sprinkling seeds of intrigue about rewatching a Gregg Araki film he adored, but initially they had all been committed to

finding something neither of them had seen. Painstakingly the process wore them down, and it seemed the perfect solution to watch *Nowhere*. Tobias had spent all night dreaming about space lizards. ‘In one of them, I don’t imagine I remember all of my dreams, that ugly green lizard with a gun set his weapon down on the table in your kitchen and asked me how much time there was left on the clock before his dish had to be plated up. I didn’t even realise he was mid-preparing, I’ve been bingeing *Top Chef*, the worlds are mixing together. His challenge was to prepare a dish inspired by his home planet, I think, the gooey green liquid coming out of his fingers as he hovered at the stove waiting to stir it in and watch it harden, or set.’ Tobias was watching Donny’s rather blank expression—he was either confused or bewildered, but when Tobias finished explaining the bizarre combination dream, Donny squinted against the sun and replied.

‘At least it wasn’t concerning.’

‘Yeah. I don’t know.’ He felt the pang of his dream being rejected, as if the taste of the dish was not to the liking of the judges. Donny smiled over at him and inched closer to playfully pinch his nipple.

‘We can watch more Araki tomorrow night and you can sleep on the floor in our bedroom in case you have another nightmare, how does that sound?’ It wasn’t the least bit patronising or condescending, and if anything it turned him on. It would have been unfortunate if he got a boner at that very moment, when nothing was sexual, but he was alright. It was ordinary. This playful sort of flirting with Donny had been shaped over the course of their time together on the show, and Donny had rifled through fan comments and questions in the post-show media frenzy to reassure everyone his marriage was comfortably open, and when he lifted Tobias into the air and carried him to bed for late-night cuddles there was no rupturing of something frankly perfect.

Tobias was glad to be spending time with Donny again. There was at least a decade in age between them, and he certainly felt less successful, less interesting, and less confident than the older man, but it was like the comfort of going home sleeping in that spare bedroom/home gym. If he were another ten years younger he would have felt like the baby, the falsified adopted child of the two men, but maybe it would have only seemed creepy via the public’s perception. It became more unavoidable to think about public perception when you went on television. There were only two known *sex acts* from their season, blurred by darkness and the night vision cameras. Tobias and Donny weren’t involved in either of them—but the men on this very beach were.

‘Ok, I’m going in the water,’ Adam announced, standing up and dusting some sand off his legs. He glanced around at the other men lounging on their beach towels. ‘Who’s joining?’ Ever the life of the party and considerably jovial, Adam liked to keep things lighthearted as much as possible, no matter what was clouding his head. Diesel and Donny leapt up, after a quick glance from Donny to Tobias, an expression that meant *you joining us pasty boy?* Tobias shook his head at first, then grinned, that glance

from Donny enough to break down the walls and drag him off into the ocean. The four of them darted across hot sand and wiggled their toes in the shallows. Zayn and Fletcher flipped over.

‘They’re both quiet today,’ Donny said when out of clear shot of anyone, truly. ‘Zayn and Fletcher. You would think they would both be flirting with us, making jokes, at the very least coming into the water and splashing around and hoping they would catch you all ogling at their bodies.’

Tobias and Adam followed his gaze back at the two nude boys on the shore, their backsides towards the sky. ‘Fletch thinks he’s the outsider of the bunch, which isn’t wrong, I have nothing in common with him and he’s grating.’ Diesel replied, scratching his nose.

No one said anything for a moment, the saltwater lapping at their waists. Then Donny glanced over at Diesel and shook his head. ‘You’re all dismissive of him. Not always, but sometimes. He’s a quirkiest guy, not just *one of the boys*, you make him feel like an outsider.’ He sighed, glancing at Tobias for reassurance. ‘I know none of you wish he wasn’t here, but we can be clique-y, and Fletcher notices it.’ Tobias thought he sounded a bit like he was the commandeering teacher, or the captain of the ship. It was near-impossible to not swoon around him, but Tobias reined himself in, reminded himself getting clingy about Donny was a lost cause. ‘And I think for once Zayn doesn’t want to get wet.’

The men laughed, and quietly reassured Donny they would take his team huddle discussion to heart, although Adam’s head was elsewhere. He had kept his ears keen, but his eyes had not drifted from back on the beach. People-watching. Perhaps it was disrespectful, but he hoped the sunglasses hid his gaze from just about everyone.

Tobias submerged most of his body in the ocean, except for his head. He peered out at the vast nothingness like Veronica from the opening scene of *Heathers*, body-less, but a lot less frustrated. Obviously, there were the recurring frustrations. Still unemployed, still purposeless beyond filling in applications, attending fruitless interviews, struck by randomised moments of contemplation, his borderline depressive episodes. It was difficult now more than previously to give himself the energy and the effort to pulse forward—this was still a vacation from monotony, just variable from working a job. Donny squatted down beside him, their shoulders briefly brushing up against each other.

‘You’re quiet now too.’

Tobias chuckled, but it was forced-out, an attempt to seem normal again, an attempt to blend into his scenery instead of looking like a human head poking out of grass. ‘I have had a challenging couple of months, and I try not to weigh too much on you, because you don’t deserve to hear about how slow-moving it has become restarting from zero.’

‘From where I am you aren’t at zero, Toby,’ Donny replied with a comforting smile. ‘There’s the four of you in that house, it is a social experiment of its own. Four people living together and having

to actually **live**, not compete in silly challenges, not connive and backstab and be on the defensive from dawn to dusk. It's not zero. You don't come at life without your experiences, Toby.'

'I know,' Tobias said, unsure if he meant it. 'I know.'

Altogether once more, they piled back into their envoy of cars—eleven people divided into three vehicles, and somewhat of a shuffle around after the day at the beach. Tobias was with Donny in the driver's seat, Isobel and Fletcher behind. One less person and they could have squeezed someone in the middle without a hassle, but Isobel liked not feeling cramped against another person, their leg hair or lack thereof rubbing up against her leg. She gossiped in the backseat with Fletcher about a topic they both had a shared knowledge of—Pokémon, or more specifically the newest release and its starters. Isobel hadn't played much since she was a fresh-faced teenager at the start of her degree in university, but she kept on the pulse of Pokémon-related news and awww-ed at new designs, new creations from people with a far more interesting career than hers. Fletcher scrolled through his camera roll to find saved pictures of his favourite predictions—people on Twitter liked to imagine what the third evolution of the starter Pokémon would look like. It was a true creative art form, visual fan-fiction.

When they pulled into Donny and Scot's driveway, the other two cars were not far behind, and swiftly there was no breathing room between each of the vehicles. Diesel, Adam, Dylan and Zayn were behaving like children again, playfully slapping each other, avoiding the direct line of sight of the *grownups*—Donny, Isobel, Will, in particular, who seemed more likely to give them glances of disappointment. Will, Tatianna, and Ophelia were in the third car, the latter slurping out of the straw of an iced coffee cup from a fast-food joint they had stopped in along the way without losing much time. Scot was at work, so the only newcomer to this eccentric, eclectic gathering was the sleepy tabby bathing in sunlight in the highest reaches of a cat tree in the living room. 'Hi Jinx,' Tobias cooed as he ran a hand through her golden-orange coat. She nary moved an inch at his touch.

The once-still house became flush with chatter and reunion. Isobel squeezed Zayn so tightly she was worried about popping his fragile, thin hips out of place. Adam and Tatianna civilly traded workplace horror stories, but it was apparent to everyone they were pussyfooting around something unknown but obvious. Ophelia started to playfully punch Diesel's stomach, rightfully remembering he could probably do damage if you treated it like a punching bag. All that muscle. Tobias blew one last air kiss to Jinx the cat and started asking questions about Will's kids, never once disrupted by yet another photo of them accomplishing a major milestone for their age, like an award for nice manners and fantastic attendance, or third place at the swimming carnival in a race. There was a sense of compassion previously unseen now that they had gathered in private, away from prying eyes, out of the boiling hot

sun. This was community. No one was distanced now, no one held resentments...well, not so blatantly. Ophelia and Adam pretended the other did not exist. But oh well.

‘I’ll go round us up some snacks,’ Donny announced, ever the doting host. He disappeared into the kitchen and Tobias followed after, offering help. The two of them set to their task, while Isobel set to hers. She was watching how painfully avoidant those two were. It needed to end; she couldn’t stomach it. If this were a movie, for instance, she would trap the two of them in one of the rooms of this house, preferably a cramped space, the bathroom, or an attic if there was an attic. But there would be moving parts to attempting to trap either of them anywhere, and besides, the idea of becoming a target of their wrath because of a plan gone awry would mean three of the roommates were beefing with one another and Tobias would be left the brunt of the task, navigating intervention. No. This had to be delicate, she understood that, and she had missed the second half of Zayn’s sentence, totally distracted by how unwilling Adam and Ophelia were to notice one another.

‘I met up with him, right, he asked me to come down to a coffee shop before we, uh, went back to his apartment for s-e-x.’ Zayn giggled, which seemed a suggestion for anyone to interrupt if the conversation topic was inappropriate. All of them were, however, incredibly familiar with hearing about Zayn’s sex life as a submissive bottom. ‘He paid for my order, such a gentleman, and in the coffee shop he was so courteous, I was getting tense thinking about my head buried in the pillow.’ This warranted a slight reaction from everyone—too descriptive—but Zayn continued. ‘We go back to his place, though, and not a second after he closed the door he’s talking about how rock-hard he gets thinking about pinning me against the glass window—and it’s a floor to ceiling window, wall to wall, not that far from the next building over. I’m thinking, someone is about to have a show, or else why are we pressed against glass and you’re damaging my beautiful black penis.’

Isobel, half-listening, murmured a polite ‘sorry, excuse me,’ and stepped away from Zayn and Fletcher. Without pause, she took hold of Ophelia and Adam, as gentle as possible while remaining forceful, and led them outside into a paved courtyard.

‘You two are going to piss me off all night,’ she began, using them as shields for the conversation, although she had moved away from the door anyhow. It was like scolding children, except the pair of them were, yes, dealing with complicated emotions, albeit as if they had zero concept of bottling anything up. ‘I say be pissed at each other afterwards, but for now, while we are all together, can we be civil? Can we ignore the urge to maintain a grudge? I am close to both of you, and maybe my biases are overwhelmed by that, but every time you catch my eye I am suddenly enraged because you are making this to be life-altering, and everyone is noticing. In the car Fletcher asked me why you,’ and she pointed a finger at Ophelia, ‘are a walking zombie of lifelessness, and why you,’ and she pointed to Adam now, ‘are not saying a word at all to him.’

Ophelia and Adam stood shellshocked. Neither wanted to be the first to speak, or knew how to respond, still ignoring each other guiltily. ‘If he can apologise...’ Ophelia replied, unable to even side-eye stare at him. It was true, they were behaving without caution, their anguish plain and obvious.

‘I know the frustrations of your feelings,’ Isobel continued. ‘This does not have to be the solution, but for Tobias’ sake, for Donny’s, for Fletcher’s, can we please do the thing therapists tell you to avoid and not express our emotions?’ She was completely serious.

Adam was compelled to salute. He resisted, his arms remaining by his side, but her words—her command—rang true to him. He would have hated to ruin the time together with everyone because he was battling within himself over Ophelia rightfully being annoyed with how he handled things the night of the house party. ‘We can do that,’ he said, deflating his ego. He made a passing glance to Ophelia beside him, acutely aware he couldn’t treat her poorly forever. ‘A better apology will come, but I’m genuinely sorry. None of you deserve to be used or mistreated. I’m sorry.’

Ophelia accepted the apology with a sympathetic smile and stepped away from the other two for a moment, gathering herself. ‘Thank you, Adam,’ she said without really looking at him. ‘This is not me forgetting, but, um, if there are board games tonight they are going to team the four of us together moronically and we need to be on the same level.’ She did not sound entirely convinced, but there was the attempt, and she stepped back inside, ending the conversation herself.

Isobel and Adam lingered outside. ‘Well,’ Isobel said, palming her forehead, ‘that is better than nothing.’ She sighed, looking at Adam with the mixed emotions she still currently held. The story she had been told was laced with bias, having come from Ophelia, but she believed every word of it. But interpersonal relationships always come with warning labels—beware, this will not be straightforward, this will be competitive, there will be winners, losers, and non-participants on the sidelines with decisions about who to support. Isobel knew already it was the both of them, but it was a steeper trek without an exact enemy. ‘You hurt her. Now she is becoming more resilient around you.’

Adam bowed his head. ‘I’m an asshole.’

‘You said it, not me.’ She smiled at him, but he wasn’t paying attention. ‘Adam,’ she continued, and this brought his focus back to her. ‘Look. It will be a while before either of you can truly stomach being around each other without thinking about the regrets of that night, without having an allergic reaction to each other, but...how many weeks did we all live together and actively feel threatened by one another? Surely at least ten.’ She sighed. ‘We get by. You hurt someone who genuinely cares for you, but Ophelia is only protecting herself.’

Adam knew it was the absolute wrong time to add *and she’s protecting Tobias too*.

They wandered back inside. Donny and Tobias were carrying platters of cheese, crackers, grapes, cured meats, olives, etc., to set down on the coffee tables in the living room. Food always

unites people, Isobel thought as she plucked a white grape off the vine-branch and listened for the perfect crunch as she bit down into it. It was incredible to be surrounded by ten other former housemates. But she made the effort to think of the missing nine in her silence.

The soundtrack to the conversation was “Hot” by Avril Lavigne playing on low volume in the background as the eleven were gathered around the food. ‘Alright, ladies and gentlemen,’ Diesel announced to the group, kneeling to make himself more level with those seated on the sofa—he was amongst the younger crowd, those with less back issues. ‘There are some rumbling theories about the afterparty that must be put to bed, and with everyone involved sitting around me, now is the only time we can settle the debates.’

Several people flushed red, as if embarrassed by an event not broadcast on television, but most let out an excitable, curious *oooooh* and leaned in as Diesel continued as ringmaster. ‘The first: where did Zayn go? Was it a profitable producer, a sleazy cameraman who wanked off to him all season, an old friend? The secret boyfriend we have all assumed he has, some loaded bazillionaire who only travels to the country four times a year?’ Everyone except Zayn played into the theatrics. Zayn, not blushing or shying away, grinned widely and set his hands underneath his chin, the *who me, little old me* routine. ‘Spill your secrets to the peanut gallery!’

Zayn pretended to tuck his hair behind his ears and smirked. ‘You want to know? You really want to know the truth?’ The hooting, hollering, and screams of **YES!** echoed through the house. Everyone was leaning forward in anticipation—it was impossible to have begun with a different situation, a different secret, although it would soon become increasingly obvious there was *plenty* of them from the afterparty. ‘We had a drink together at the bar, and I thought he was handsome, and he told me he had been in the exact position I was in once before, a whole decade and a half earlier. Which I knew. I remembered him, vaguely. I mean. He didn’t exact win. 12<sup>th</sup>? Not exactly the same position I was in. He did worse. But the size of his—’ Zayn cupped his hand over his mouth pre-emptively and the roar of surprise, shock, and laughter erupted over Fergie singing about how foolishly clumsy she is.

‘That’s one reveal, ladies and gentlemen.’ Diesel filled out the shoes respectably. He paused to scoop a sliver of camembert onto a water cracker and the crunch could be heard around the world. He swallowed and cleared his throat. ‘There was another mystery less salacious, but it involves our drunk-and-a-fool winner, everyone give a round of applause for Tatianna Deetz!’ Tat stood up and curtsied inorganically, brushing off the applause, flirting with a non-existent camera. ‘Tat, no one remembers you leaving for a man’s hotel room, but they do remember thinking you were in the bathroom vomiting into the porcelain. Confess!’ It was a strange thing to drum on your thigh for, but Fletcher began the ramp-up before Tatianna silenced everyone by standing up once again.

‘The rumours of me getting white-girl wasted after winning half a million dollars are false,’ she said, shaking her head at the naysayers. ‘I was in the stall beside the girl, and if I wasn’t in heels I would have stood on the toilet lid and asked the girl if she needed me to hold her hair back.’ She paused, giggling. ‘I did, however, kiss every single person in this room and no one said *vomit breath*.’ She leaned over to kiss the person beside her on her right, which just so happened to be Tobias. They kissed for a split second, a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it smooch, but the room erupted once more into the excitement of the evening. ‘It’s very safe kissing this boy, because he likes a humping, if you know what I mean.’

The atmosphere in the room shifted instantaneously. Tobias flushed, but was mostly confused, confused why Adam immediately reacted and left the room. He hadn’t noticed Tatianna had addressed the last sentence entirely to Adam, winking at the end. Ophelia hugged her arms to her body, the colour drained from her face. Isobel was watching Tobias for his reaction, but out of the corner of her eye saw Adam disappear down the hallway, the bathroom door slammed behind him. Silence. Ophelia and Isobel caught each other glances. Tobias was not slow on the upkeep. Within moments of the initial kerfuffle, he realised another hidden truth had been exposed, and there were now three more people who knew what had happened in the borrowed white van.

‘I guess he needed to pee—’ It was Dylan, completely unaware.

Tobias made eye contact with Ophelia and she nodded, a slow, confirming nod. He blinked his eyelids back at her, then glanced in the direction Adam stormed off, then sharply looked away, nervous someone else would clock something deeper than the desperate need to *pees* was happening around them. If one of the three of them suggested they would go check on him—and it wouldn’t be Ophelia—there would be alarm bells. Tobias wanted to check on him. So did Isobel. Tatianna collapsed back and registered the immediate regret on her face. The soft music was the right distraction.

The vibe was off, but Diesel ignored the silence, shattered it in fact. ‘Ladies and gentlemen! The soul train of revelations continues to chug, chug, chug along, and this one is about...’ Tobias had zoned out, the words becoming blurred together syllables. So five people in this room knew what happened two months ago. He was not ashamed, he was not a young thing in his twenties making mistakes, he was a grown man who made the consensual decision, and yet here he was. As if Adam was the one to experience the embarrassment alone, as if he, Tobias, had been responsible for souring the plain-and-ordinary life of a straight man. These were the thoughts climbing in ranks through his brain, overpowering the depressive thoughts of no longer accomplishing much of anything, overpowering thinking about the next time he could text Romeo, overpowering why Ophelia was quieter...of course. Adam told her, he realised. It was uncomplicated to piece together when. Why. She was smitten with him, if such a word as *smitten* was still used in the mid-twenty-twenties. Ophelia liked Adam, wanted something else to blossom, and Tobias had said *yes* to a harmless humping in that *fucking* van.

No deed goes unpunished. It was hardly a **good** one.

Adam had not surfaced, and when a reasonable amount of time had passed, with minimal suspicions, Tobias wandered off to find him in the bathroom. He knocked on the door. 'Please don't go ape on me,' he said, slightly hesitant, waiting for a harsh response or to be told to get the hell away from him. It was the typical response when you made a masculine sort of man look foolish and a lesser man because of it. Tobias leaned his head against the door.

'You can come in, Toby.'

He pushed the door open and found Adam sitting on the tiles leaning against the cupboard underneath the sink. Adam was in no state of disarray, but he was unsettled and buried his face in his hands the moment he saw Tobias standing there with a concerned expression. 'I'm fine, stop looking like I came in here to overdose on pills.' Adam said, yet he continued to look strained.

'Let's not get ahead of ourselves.' Tobias swept a motion with his hand, wordlessly telling Adam to scoot over so there was plenty of room for the two of them to lean against the cupboard door. 'I take it baby's little mistake is no longer a protected secret.' He sighed, subtly shaking his head. 'Sorry. Let me talk like a normal person. You told Ophelia.'

'I broke down over it,' he said, scratching his nose. 'It was either explain why I was acting like a lunatic who had too much to drink, or look like a lunatic who—'

'I get it.' Tobias replied. 'You weren't sworn to secrecy, if it explained why you were acting funky, it was a prime example of an out-of-character decision.' Adam glanced at him with a panicked look. 'You don't have to defend it. Do you think you are the first straight guy who thought he would experiment and forget all about it? I'm older than you, not by much, but without sounding arrogant I'm wiser too. Dust yourself off about all of this.'

'I would have thought you wanted me dead too.'

'Why are you miserable all the sudden? So you did something unexpected while your heart was broken, but the real damage is with Ophelia, not me. We had a whole conversation about how totally normal I would be about you experimenting.' Tobias paused, nudging Adam with his shoulder. 'Ophelia is hurting because that conversation did not exist for her. From you. You see how important talking to someone is. If I didn't come freeze my ass on these tiles, where would you be? Making more jokes about suicide. You're hurt too. We're just people, not heroes and villains.'

Tobias set a hand on Adam's thigh, and the moment would otherwise have been romantic if it were two other people entirely. It was sweet, but it was safe to predict neither of them wanted this to become any more twisted around and knotted. This was not boy scouts.

When Tobias and Adam returned to the living room, Donny was cradling Jinx in his arms like a swaddled child while Isobel booped her on the nose. Tobias and Isobel caught each other's glance and nodded, an acceptable sort of reassurance that everything was going a-okay. The larger group had dispersed into several smaller groups—Ophelia and Tat were outside in the courtyard sitting on the pavement. No one surrounded Adam with concern, because it was likely most assumed he had really needed to use the restroom and then stopped to talk to Tobias on the way back, which wasn't out of the realm of things. Jinx squirmed out of Donny's arms and he let her disappear somewhere in the house, down the corridor. It was presumed her little secret was a slumber more rewarding than being surrounded by people with sticky fingers.

Diesel was sitting with Dylan and Zayn and he hollered out Adam's name the moment he saw him, splitting a conversation in two. They reunited, again, and Tobias took this opportunity to wander back towards the kitchen, his throat dry—staying here for the week made him feel an honorary part of this adorable family, and he knew where almost everything was. From one of the higher cupboards he fetched himself a tall glass and poured out the last of a bottle of Sprite. Back in the living room, Isobel and Donny were discussing a tragic landslide in Korea they had both been reading about online last night, coincidentally. There were a handful of casualties, unfortunately. The sombre tone between the two of them was unnoticeable to the others—Fletcher and Will were sitting with plates of food reminiscing on their time on the show, mentioning favourite competitions and near-injuries from competing in others. There was a vibrant atmosphere, certainly from a glance, from the corner of the room. People getting along. Chatting, laughing, bowing their heads in respect. Isobel and Donny noticed how much heavier their conversation was becoming and switched to talking about how nice the weather was. Not a raincloud in sight. No storm, no thunder. No lightning.

'I have an announcement to make,' Ophelia said, coming inside through the sliding glass door. Tatianna was behind her, quiet and observant. Everyone gathered around—that was to say everyone in the living room, for three people were noticeably or unnoticeably absent. Ophelia hardly seemed to be bothered by the smaller crowd, and stood at the front of the semi-circle missing only the champagne flute to toast herself. She smiled, and it was maybe the most self-confident she appeared all day. Gone was the Ophelia from underneath the cabana, miserably aloof, beyond herself, agitated into single-word responses. 'Most of you know I have been struggling ever since I left my job because they weren't going to give me the leave to be on television.' She was radiating an excitement in anticipation, clearly unable to withhold her announcement for longer than this very afternoon—although Tobias and Isobel had

absolutely no idea what she was talking about, she had made zero mention of *progress* and groaned all morning. But here she was. Tatianna stood a step or two by her side.

‘It was a decision without frills or question marks. I have decided I’m moving to Melbourne to live with Tat, and we will figure everything out from there, I will find new work in a city that is far more productive, I will be happier, I will not think my life is over.’

Isobel’s jaw dropped. It was momentary speechlessness, and she stood there with two disconnected grapes in her hand, completely puzzled. This she knew was not pre-organised, this was not a best laid plan, it came from the heart and from the moment, when those two girls were sitting outside on the floor inches away from playing patty-cake. Maybe she did immediately register it as childish, worried for Ophelia only because the decision seemed to come out of left-field and seem against every conversation they had about Tatianna. She lived by herself, and true she was splashing in money now, but spending it would be unrealistic for her future, but a new apartment with another bedroom was not disastrous, why had Tat not wanted a roommate then but wanted one now? Ophelia hadn’t completely trusted in herself to move interstate and start over, figure out what this entirely new concept of Ophelia looked like. Isobel picked her jaw off the ground and joined in the collective congratulations, but she remained hesitant.

‘We’ll figure it all out together,’ Tatianna offered, resting a hand on Ophelia’s shoulder.

This Ophelia addressed to her present roommates, Isobel and Tobias, both still surprised and brimming with new questions: ‘I don’t know what this means for us, I don’t know how leases work, I love our little pencil house, but I’m breaking free, and living in that torture-state, having to apply for the four jobs a week I actually like, it makes me think I will never amount to anything there.’ She glanced around, unable to find Adam. He was not in the living room, and she sighed, unsure whether it was of relief or vexation, unsure whether leaving him behind in general was relief or vexation.

‘This will be better for me than weighing you down, Toby,’ and she stepped towards him now, as if already she was saying her goodbye to him. Tobias was standing off to the side at the edge of the semi-circle with an empty glass in his right hand. ‘Us being together in the house is like double the trouble. Two misfits unable to sort themselves right. When I’m bored, I annoy you, and when you’re bored, you come make me feel so content it is wholly possible I forget that my life needs purpose beyond being your friend.’ She stepped closer to him, wrapping him up in a warm hug, solely a ploy to whisper something in his ear. ‘I wish you could have told me, instead of protecting him.’

Ophelia and Tatianna returned to the courtyard no sooner than they had come inside with the reveal. They sat on the pavings planning out the details of her impending move, the brilliant life they would have as best friends in the big city, this whirlwind as if they were both only a year out of university, the

youthful glow brighter than the shine of their teeth. Isobel and Tobias stared stunned at each other. He was still dangling the tall glass by his side, so he retreated to the kitchen with the intention of washing it up in the sink. Tobias did not get far. He stopped a step or so inside the room, frozen stiff, fighting the intrusive thoughts begging him to shatter the glass and use a shard against his flesh.

He moved to the sink and washed the glass out, his mind entirely distracted.

The glass slipped from his hands and clattered into the bottom of the sink, undamaged, but all the same he was unresponsive and the water gushed from the faucet. The clattering sound had been noticeable from the living room, and Isobel and Donny wandered into the kitchen with clear concern on their faces. ‘Everything okay in here?’ Donny asked, the one to approach Tobias first. Tobias’ entire mood had shifted—he was distant, silent, staring down in the sink at the sideways glass.

‘There is no use in me stealing her idea,’ he said, monotonous and dull. ‘What else am I supposed to do to make life more interesting? Ask you to take me into the bedroom and spank me because I have been a naughty boy? Fish a knife from the top drawer and hold it against the flesh of my throat? Walk back into that room and start a nonsense argument with one of our friends for the sake of my uneven mood?’ Every word he spoke possessed no emotion, no enthusiasm, simply drab delivery without eye-contact. Tobias calling out to the void.

‘We,’ Donny was gesturing between himself and Isobel, ‘don’t want any of that.’ He slung an arm around Tobias and pulled him close, and this time the embrace was meant to deliver a sliver of more practical advice. ‘Don’t do anything drastic, hey.’ He held Tobias in his arms as Isobel walked slowly backwards. She waited for a muffled sob into Donny’s shoulder but nothing came.

The kitchen was in a state of cool, calm, and collected until Tobias made a sudden move and wriggled himself out of Donny’s arms, slamming his fist into the countertop. ‘Why don’t I act my age already, dammit.’ He winced at the pain and immediately ran his knuckles under the cold water at the sink. ‘No job yet, that’s all my fault, all because there is still a part of myself inside that house, gnawing for better than fourth place, because I just, **JUST**, missed out on the final three and losing like that is criminal with a brother like mine, I *knew* Zane was disappointed in me and everything has only gotten worse.’ Isobel did not move. Donny fussed over his guest and found the first-aid kit in the kitchen and held Tobias’ hand in his to assess the damage. There was surprisingly little, nothing severe, but he bandaged Tobias up and kissed his palm.

‘Are we calming down?’ He said sarcastically, and it made Tobias giggle, and he started breathing, in, out, in, out, bringing himself off the edge. Isobel had remembered how to walk, how to move, and backed further away, pressing at her temples as she disappeared down the hall towards the bathroom. Overwhelmed and feeling the very beginning of a headache, Isobel needed this escape from the absurdity of the afternoon. She found the bathroom, gripped the door handle, and twisted it,

pushing her way inside. She sought out water to splash on her face and an opportunity to raid Donny and Scot's medicine cabinet, which she prayed was not in the kitchen.

'Oh shit,' she exclaimed, spinning on her feet. 'I should have knocked, or you should have locked the door, someone should have been competent...' Isobel closed the door behind her with a thud. The image was scorching itself into the wood of her brain as she returned to the living room.

In the bathroom, removed of their clothes, she had first noticed Adam's bare ass, hairless, moving rhythmically as he fucked Zayn against the sink. Their moans were soft and unnoticeable with the bathroom door closed, but it explained their absence from hearing Ophelia's news and overhearing Tobias have a minor meltdown. Adam pounded into Zayn, but the intimate act was not void of passion—it was true, Adam channelled the word *experiment* and flirted with Zayn when no one would notice, and it was true Zayn had no qualms about having sex on short notice with someone he had been attracted to since they had noticed each other in the group interviews, well before their every moment became television. Zayn was not tight—but the eroticism of a well-oiled machine, as it were, made Adam's suspension of belief more than possible. He thrust his erect cock inside the tinnier, dark-skinned twenty-three-year old, and he surprised himself with the continued stares, having previously thought he would only want to look at a woman when he was having sex with her.

Adam started to justify himself—Zayn was not masculine, was not built for manual labour, had the petite feminine figure he was more familiar with. Having anal sex was not a novel experience—he and Sophie, dreaded Sophie, *experimented* a handful of times when they subconsciously knew their relationship was floundering and coming to an expected end. Adam grunted and Zayn, slipping into a further-still feminine voice, moaned the requested *yes daddy*. And yet. There was still a sour taste in Adam's mouth with every thrust. He was just not attracted to men. *Right?* Glancing down at Zayn's penis flopping against his hairless belly did absolutely nothing for him.

But at least the sex was spent. Adam came into the condom and tossed it.

Isobel collapsed down onto the couch. Her face felt burning-hot, and she was struggling to calm her breathing down to something normal, something not registrable as that of an anxiety attack. She stared up at the ceiling, attempting to focus on her breathing, but there were at least four other people in the room with her, continuing their conversations around her. Isobel wanted to go somewhere, walk outside, find a safe space to clear her mind, but—

'Are you alright there, Iss?'

Dylan had moved closer to her to be supportive, reassuring, but being acknowledged was enough for Isobel to crack, to snap in half. Her voice came out in frustrated huffs, laced with spice, wobbling at the end of each of her sentences.

‘No, I am so exhausted from being everyone’s mediator.’ By the word *mediator* Donny and Tobias had returned from the kitchen. ‘Here is a problem, Isobel can you fix it. You spent your spare time in university debating problems and correcting them, elaborating on the solutions, so peer into my life and mend the fences too.’ She paused, noticing the small handful of worried faces gathering nearby. This she said loud enough hoping it would penetrate through walls: ‘Isobel, I bless you with the knowledge that the boy I liked rejected me but now I hold it against him because it turns out he is questioning his sexuality.’ She screwed up her face in the physical representation of a question mark, reminiscent of the meme. She scanned the assorted faces for Tobias, finding him lingering awfully close to Donny, a bandaged hand behind his back. ‘Isobel, I—’ but the sight of wounded Tobias froze her. She shook her head. ‘I won’t baby you, because you are not a child. But you are not blameless. I live in that house and wait for the next moment in time when I have to be the all-knowing one and solve everyone’s moral conundrums.’ She huffed, rubbing her forehead.

‘I am starting to think you know something about why Adam is in the bathroom having...sex...with Zayn, when I spent collective hours trying to pry him out a breakup coma because he said Sophie meant the entire world to him when he never gave any example why.’ This she had clearly directed at Tobias, but she was not looking at anyone in particular. Timing, of course, naturally amused itself and Adam reappeared from down the hallway, once more dressed. Everyone wordlessly glanced at him as if he was still buck naked, exposed, indecent.

‘What’s happening—’ he said, moving further in the room.

‘Cool, he’s here now,’ Isobel responded, flopping against the couch cushion.

Diesel stepped towards Adam. ‘Um. She said she caught you with your dick inside Zayn.’ It seemed obvious to everyone they had staggered their returns to the living room to bring less suspicion, but perhaps the cat was well and truly out of the bag now. ‘I, uh, don’t really know what’s happening...’

Adam stood pale-faced with his mouth ajar. ‘Isobel?’

‘I know. I intruded on your privacy, you’re an adult, you can have sex with anyone, most of us here are queer and hold no judgement, but...hell, we came together for the first time in a few months and I had this idea in my head, crazy for a woman to have an idea, that we would **stay** together and not disappear every fifteen minutes to go bonk each other, or try to abandon ship and run away from our problems, or fucking SLAM our fists into the bench-top, I don’t know, Toby, maybe you should have just punched me!’

Tobias inched forward towards Isobel, at the same time Will, closest to the sliding glass door, tapped on it and indicated that maybe, just maybe, Ophelia and Tatianna should come inside. Zayn had rejoined from the bathroom, and suddenly ten people were spaced out around Isobel, who was coming down, calming herself. ‘This wasn’t how we were supposed to behave around each other,’ she murmured, glancing nervously at Dylan. ‘Like carnivores hunting the same piece of meat... I don’t know if that’s the right analogy, I do not care, I’m so agitated.’ She turned her head to find Tobias and their eyes met, a fragile glance. ‘Toby, don’t be so scared of me.’ He moved to sit beside her and in his presence she calmed down, silence enveloping the living room.

### **An hour later.**

Tobias and Ophelia and Isobel and Adam were sequestered together in neutral space, the study. It was here they found Jinx curled up in a cardboard box sound asleep. Donny lifted the box with her inside and exited the room, and although the door was not locked, they were not trapped, the four of them registered it was about time they addressed everything.

No one knew where to start, or who should start talking first. There was at least a shortlist of discussion points, and these were as follows:

1. The camping trip, and what happened on the mattress in the van.
2. Ophelia confronting Adam, part i (Craig’s bedroom) and ii (the street like thuggees)
3. Ophelia’s “big plans”
4. Tobias whacking his fist on the counter, and everything he mentioned wanting to do
5. Adam screwing Zayn in Donny and Scot’s guest bathroom
6. Isobel in reaction, overwhelmed, losing her mind.

‘Now that we all know what happened in that van...’ Isobel began, breaking off, cutting herself off at the end. The four of them were sitting in a circle on the floor, which certainly reminded them of being in high school. It was just like drama class. ‘I know why you didn’t mention it earlier, Ophelia. Was not your place to explain what happened between those two. I guess this connects well to what I walked in on. Sorry, by the way. There was no need for me to blurt it out in front of everyone.’

‘You were justified.’ Adam replied.

‘No one here can force you to make a decision, but are you questioning?’

Adam shook his head. 'It was an after-effect, I think.' He glanced at Tobias. 'I haven't ever thought I was something different, I don't know what existing is like for either of you, I mean there's nothing confused about who I am attracted to, or my gender—'

'You don't need to say confused, Adam,' Isobel interrupted, and he nodded in understanding.

'Adam isn't bi, cool. Let's stop making that any more relevant than it needs to be.' Tobias shrugged it off—maybe he was taking this less seriously, Isobel thought. But Tobias truly saw no reason to feed Adam's ego while the conversation centred on him. And he was moody. They all were. Instead of enjoying the evening as it unfolded, they had to do jury-mandated group therapy in the study **and** without the kitty for company.

'This is easier than we thought,' Adam said with a cheeky grin.

'I refuse to moderate the entire time, you all need to take responsibility,' Isobel said.

Tobias brandished the bandaged hand and flashed his teeth. 'Get her to anger management, right? I'm sorry I terrified you enough to walk in on a sex act, Isobel. Sorry.' He ran the non-bruised hand through his hair. 'Hearing Ophelia talk about moving, having an actual idea for herself broke me a little. It was something. No one with a functioning heart wants to talk about how purposeless they feel all the time, with failed interviews, failed mornings spent thinking LinkedIn is secretly just assigning your name, skills, and employment history to an AI who isn't dreaming about going on vacation to Nicaragua.'

He paused, smiling weakly at Ophelia. 'You've become my twin, two souls in limbo. The last three months, around about, the only refuge from not having a job offer to accept has been knowing you understand too. It almost made me ask Donny if the guest bedroom could be mine permanently, you making your insane-timing announcement. I was nervous.' Tobias shook off the excess feeling of that moment earlier in the kitchen. 'Are you genuine about that by the way, moving in with Tatianna?'

Ophelia shrugged. 'I want to be. Believe me the intention was never to burn you three, but do you think this is working? Us living together. We wanted to believe because it was possible in a land of make-believe, it could be possible when the cameras turned off too, but without someone peeking on us twenty-four-seven we are riskier, bolder, and more insane. I can't believe I wanted sparks flying with you, Adam,' and she gestured to him, 'because despite your good looks, you don't understand yourself. You don't. I was the girl you snuggled up to when it was another *horrendous* day working in that stifling office typing random sequences of data into a computer, and I thought it meant you *liked* me.' She shook her head, shifting her position on the floor. 'They wanted honesty, right?'

'For the sake of every person out there,' he pointed at the door, 'I played nice with you. Knowing I was still pissed at you for Saturday night, pissed at you for running to tell everything to Tat and Isobel, waiting for the moment I would be the laughingstock.'

‘What do you genuinely have to be mad at me about?’ Ophelia spat back. ‘You didn’t have your feelings hurt, you didn’t realise how naïve you had been, you, what, saw me kissing some other guy and called me petty for it and found payback in Zayn’s boypussy.’

Adam screwed up his face in shock and leaned away from everyone. ‘I can’t be mad now? Mad is an emotion reserved for you. I can’t be horny now? Horny is an—’

‘—emotion reserved for me. What are you doing, delivering a soliloquy?’

They both went quiet, refusing to look at each other. Were they becoming childish people? The unpacking, somewhat resolving felt necessary, and Isobel and Tobias glanced at one another with hesitant expressions on their faces. ‘I don’t know how to resolve this,’ Tobias confessed, shifting his focus between the three other people in the study. No one responded. Isobel shrugged.

‘The word *boypussy* is disgusting,’ Adam muttered, grumbling.

‘Stop whoring out my friends because you’re sad.’

Tobias wanted to interject—at least to have his understanding of the situation made clear. Although he was only one cog in the machine, and the least affected cog by the obvious appearance of things. He opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, then changed it again. ‘I think it’s important to remember I consented to all of it, and I have no doubt Zayn did too.’

‘No one is denying that everything was consensual,’ Isobel inserted.

‘Sorry,’ Ophelia continued. ‘It’s the age of casual sex, I know that. If Adam feels himself more comfortable having depression-curing sex with the gay men in his friendship circle who deserve romance, for once, I...am in no place to crucify him.’

‘I think we could be in love if we wanted to be,’ Tobias said, knowing there was text message from Romeo he was ignoring to participate in this long-winded exchange. He was taking it seriously, that much he was certain of, paying attention to the points-of-view, catching the nuance.

Adam sighed. ‘Let’s not turn this into whether someone is loveless or not,’ he began, scratching the bridge of his nose. ‘I thought we were past this. I mean no disrespect, but Tobias was an impulsive thing, I was away from the keyboard, and Zayn has sex with any man with a working penis and any man who isn’t a slobbish baboon.’

‘One day being told I was a reckless decision won’t feel inhumane.’

‘You know what I mean, Toby—you aren’t attracted to me either.’

‘I vote we stop insulting Tobias,’ he announced of himself, glancing over at Isobel once more. She was getting rather adept at shrugging. ‘We can spend all evening dredging through Adam’s reckless behaviour, but we aren’t learning anything new. He experimented, he’s had a *play*, I should have said something immediately to Ophelia so she wouldn’t blame me later—’

‘I don’t blame you! I’m not angry at you!’

Isobel had closed her eyes and tipped her head backwards.

Tobias sighed. 'Sorry.' Maybe he had misunderstood what she whispered to him after the bold, bright announcement she was moving to Melbourne to be entirely reunited with Tatianna. Maybe he didn't. It was difficult for him to remember the tone of her voice, whether she had sounded vindictive or defeated or merely reflective. 'I need a chart of who is angry at who, and I think Isobel is severing herself from the three of us, because do you want to talk about the meltdown?' He paused, suddenly alert he needed to handle this last question with a steady hand and far less sass. 'We're taking what you said and applying it. You don't need to be the mediator of every conundrum.' He glanced at his adjacent neighbours, Ophelia and Adam. 'Right, guys?'

They both nodded, slow but not uncertain, or cautious. Stilted. There was beginning to be levels of worry unseen in the atmosphere, but it was nicer than the screaming.

Isobel had been sitting in avoidance, at peace that the four of them were collectively ignoring what had transpired in the living room an hour ago. Or her reaction, at least. The piece of the puzzle she corresponded to. Her memories were already beginning to split off, confused whether she had reacted on her own or because Dylan was merely too close to her face—when he was sitting away from her, asking if she was alright, being considerate. How had she calmed herself down? Isobel was grateful at least her hands were not bloodied, her soul not petrified, her underwear not stained. But something was dirtied. Her brain? Can you dirty a brain? Of course you could.

'You are supposed to leave the tedium of work out there, at work. I am not a psychologist, but you all know I work with people, I interact with others without asking to. Whether I tripped on the wrong profession, who can say, but I come home to our pencil house and I antagonise myself. Pick at the fear two friends of mine are corrupted by a system of unemployment that will not work for them regardless of their privilege, regardless that one of them is an experienced white man and the other, while she is inexperienced, is my Latina sister and so incredibly self-assured and driven and **passionate.**' Isobel sighed, leaning back on her hands. 'Adam and I are feeding capitalism, which is *absolutely fabulous*, but nobody in that house can claim their joy, their unbridled happiness, not while there are countries continuing to bomb one another, not while repugnant elderly care-home men are cursing our futures to cling to their futile power. No, we are the futile ones. Our true achievement was not being an early boot on a reality show losing fans because nobody in this country watches free-to-air television anymore when there are endless, unnecessarily-tired advertisements about the same twelve corporations. The same schlock half-spoiler about the new season of a competing reality show, except a general audience will watch the wedding-themed one, the lovesick one, because people do obsess over the shiny, beautiful things. Riches, extravagance, the stupid bullshit *tallest tower in our county* in honour

of the world's most celebrated child-molester.' Isobel let out an agitated, bruised sound, an extended groan, a symphony of music of its own. Damaged, hurt.

'There is a footage of the moment I was eliminated, of course there is, it was the closing toast of an episode. I watch it sometimes when I cannot fall asleep, or I am awake at four in the morning and I want to remind myself there are worst things I could do—I have come eleventh, the humiliation ritual of bombing out not because you are not loved, not respected, or the alliances you have are failing, but because physically, mentally, you are weaker than your competition.' She shakes her head without giving Tobias, Ophelia, or Adam an opportunity to correct her, disagree with her.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Isobel bowed her head and spoke her next sentence staring down in her lap. 'You are all so selfish for competing against one another for the attention of your peers while we are all gathered together, but I do not blame you for it.'

She lifted her head, taking a moment to look at each of them individually.

Tobias.

Ophelia.

Adam.

Had there been a mirror, she would have found herself. Isobel.

'If anything, I am more surprised we have not fought like this sooner. The social experiment is always to see how different personalities interact under one roof, and while our circumstances may seem obviously similar, we are still *different*. We differ in how we think, process, criticise, challenge one another.' She flicked her head around back to Ophelia, her shoulders deflated. 'Please stay with us. With me. I have no power over your life, but...there is no *but*, actually, holding you as my roommate is never going to be a victory when I know you are struggling.'

'Fight harder for me, dammit!'

Isobel laughed, wiping more tears from her eyes.

'Is that everything out in the open?' Tobias questioned, glancing around the study at the three sitting adjacent to him. No one knew how to respond to what Isobel had said, but this was not a text message conversation, where one could hit Reply on the block of text and spill out each and every reaction to something that rung true for all of them. They sat in silence for now.

'I have a question,' Adam said, suddenly, leaning forward.

He hesitated, then scooted towards Tobias and plucked his bandaged hand in his, tracing gently over the presumed area of pain. 'Do you think this makes you look badass?' They locked eyes and Tobias poked out his tongue.

'Shut up, idiot.'

Adam feigned shock and let Tobias' hand hang unassisted in the air. 'I'm offended by idiot,' he said, backing into his original spot in the circle. 'Just because I have all these muscles...' They waited for him to stereotypically flex, but he laughed them off and shook his head. 'Too many people in this room are attracted to me, I couldn't take my shirt off—'

Tobias and Ophelia rolled their eyes at each other. 'Okay, I'm hungry again, I say we knock on this door and beg Donny to let us out,' Tobias said, launching himself to his feet and crossing the room. Of course, they were still not trapped in the room, and the door handle wiggled with ease, but oh the theatrics. No one was waiting on the other side of the door with a tall glass pressed to the wood. If anything, the other seven former houseguests were completely removed from the conversation that had just taken place in Donny and Scot's study. The ghosts now lingered there for centuries to come. Memories of the sort of melodramatic events human beings argue over when they continue to exist around one another. It's cohabitation, baby.

Tobias and Ophelia and Isobel and Adam were welcomed back with open arms.

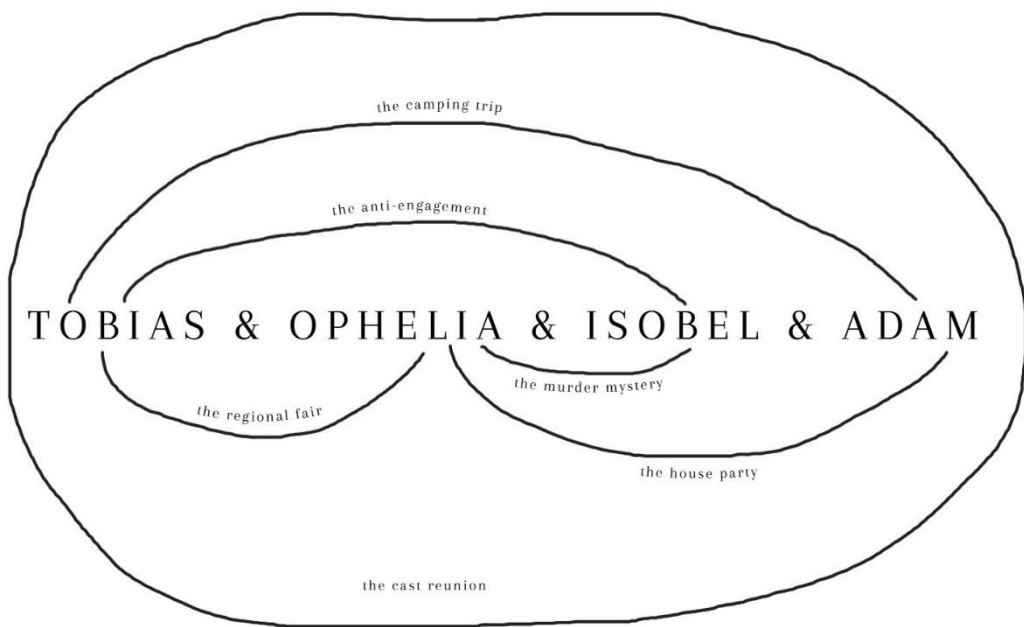
### **Three hours later.**

Tobias, in the courtyard, was on the phone to Romeo. There would be steady developments—a first date that does not go horribly awry, text-flirting, pictures sent back and forth of each other naked. They liked one another, enough to stay up late for one another, and now the topic of conversation was when to shatter the illusion that they could be romantic without telling Ophelia about it.

Ophelia, in the kitchen, was refilling a glass with more white wine, restructuring her plans with Tatianna. Their dream to live together could still be possible, but realism, the truth of being a human being and having to navigate the world, meant she found the roadblock of not merely changing her airline ticket to arrive at Tullamarine. God, she loved the chance to do life with such a sudden best friend. It is platonic love, she swears it.

Isobel, in the study, again, was talking at low volume to Donny and Scot with a purring Jinx in her lap. She was realising the last three or so months have been spent in delay—waiting for appointments, waiting for work to end, waiting for the fogginess to clear around her head, her shoulders, fuck it, her knees and toes too. Life is not merely about falling in love, but when was the last time she met a woman and let the connection flourish? She stroked Jinx's fur and stayed the way she wanted to be: grateful.

Adam, in the bathroom, again, was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, explaining himself to Zayn. There was nothing to apologise for, he was reassured of that, but it was *wrong* to merely say you had moved on from your ex-girlfriend. It had to be felt, earned. Five months was too long to still think about her. He sighed. There was no expiry on feelings. Like there was no expiry on connection.



**protect queer art**  
**even when it is as awful as this diagram.**