

BUMP IN

batch no. one

by Keeley Young

TOBIAS & DONNY

TOBIAS & SHANNON

ADAM & SHANNON

ADAM & LUCY

TOBIAS & DONNY

How he wished, in that moment, he was a chainsmoker. Someone could have whisked him a cigarette, a pack of twenty, like a magic trick by hand. He would be standing there on the balcony, rail-thin as it was, and the assumption would be that he would not choke on the smoke of it. It would make him look cool, impressive, old Hollywood. All he needed then to do was swivel into a tuxedo and stare, stare longingly, out at the world that was otherwise not rejecting. With a winning smile.

Tobias knew he was a loser. Plainly, fourth place was not podium, was not worthy of the metallic necklace. His chest felt bare and exposed. The wind collected itself around him and poked at the hairspray, trying to unravel what he had at first attempted himself, still inside the house, then what Hair and Makeup had adjusted, reconstructed upon his head. The comedown slapped him in the face and on the arse sitting in that chair. Being fussed with. But not for any glamorous reason. Fourth place. To be paraded onto the stage again, to hide away the humiliation of still having a duty like mandated electoral voting to complete. Doing so staring down the barrel. Feeling the target, or the noose.

The wrong little death.

He had escaped to the balcony, away from the party. Inside, you either celebrated or pretended not to mourn. He had already spent hours in a face, the camera-ready makeup still staining his. It was shock. Shock that had forced him to breathe outside, and no, he was grateful it was fresh air, not smoke. The cigarette would have looked limp in between his fingers, and had he catastrophically sent it downwards, an act of carelessness, there would be more to regret. A falling cigarette could do what, singe a man? Tobias knew he was singed. Like the final moment his *success* had hinged on was putting out a fire. Lousy fireman.

So, he lost. There were nineteen other losers. Two on the podium, and his nails scratched at the ground like begging for the earth to rise, for the concrete to levitate underneath his feet. People lose, and he was not the sort to pretend himself to be always victorious. He would glance back at those people and think some of his own upward momentum was gifted because he was white, and a man, and not immediately discriminated against. The harshest microaggression for a man who visibly looked the way he did was a comment on how burnt-red he could become underneath the Australian sun. Which was to say when you started to learn an iota about him, you started to haul around the f-slur and he would respond by offering to suck your dick.

He needed to at least grow out of the habit of that, or stop meaning it.

Tobias leaned against the railing and appreciated this silence, for however long it was meant to last. Behind him noise siphoned off but he could hear when song transitioned to song, but not the faint, excitable laughter of Tatianna Deetz. He tried to remind himself not to retain a bitterness towards her. If she had not succeeded, she would have failed—a roundabout way of acknowledging that his own thirst for having been victorious would have come at her loss, her own stewing in feelings such as these. He felt a certain way about the spin of the world. *Not everyone can win* was a criticism of the young, toward them, and it made a person more competitive. Hungrier.

DONNY: Hey, kid.

Tobias shifted round to see Donny Bunyard standing there, making a slowed approach. Like Tobias himself was a startled animal, like a frilled-neck lizard with ruffled collar out. Instantly he felt more assured in how pathetic it was to mull on *losing*. Here was another, and there was another, behind the glass, getting shitfaced on free alcohol.

TOBIAS: This is the end, huh.

His words escaped out harsher than they had sounded in his head. Apocalyptic. *End* of the world, not the season. Not his chance. Donny took another step towards the lizard.

There was a sense of an emotion like hesitation in Donny's voice when he spoke next, but removed from the associated fear. As if the man outside of the party, the men outside of it, were truly more exposed by the noiselessness and the skyline.

DONNY: How are you doing out here?

TOBIAS: [*scratching his nose*] I almost thought we would be trapped away in there for forever. I'm doing okay. As okay as a person can be, having watched their dream fall into ash, get set ablaze again, and again, and be shoved in front of a camera with barely any time to come to terms with everything. I'm a little bloodied up, Donny. I don't know how else to put it. I failed.

DONNY: Do you remember how many people got the opportunity this year to attempt it?

TOBIAS: Twenty.

DONNY: How many people are there in this country of ours? C'mon, Toby, you can do a little remembering, it's numerically around twenty-five million. Give or take. Give more, I would say. Let's go with a nice twenty-six million so we can keep on this tread. Hey. More math. How many people in this mass of a country of ours are leftover when you take away the twenty who walked into that house on the first day, presented with an opportunity to compete against one another? It's a big number, Tobes. You had a lot of competition before you even walked into the house, and that is just assuming on principle twenty-something million could have been chosen. Let's say one million might have considered auditioning. Let's say one hundred thousand did. Then let's say one thousand made an impression, one hundred got scrutinised, prodded with questions, emailed for more information—did you get an email, Tobes?

TOBIAS: [*he nodded*] It was mostly information about when I would see them next for the next stage in auditioning...yes. I did.

DONNY: The one hundred deconstructed down into twenty, didn't it? You were one of ten men selected to be in the game, making your waves, doing your best. Twenty is an impossibly small number, kid, when you break it right down like that. And out of the twenty people, you survived for longer than sixteen of them. You came fourth, you did not lose. Look around you, Toby.

Tobias gave the balcony a once-over. It looked no different than it had moments earlier, when he had been standing alone, gazing into the abyss, but that was hardly the point. Donny had instead wanted him to gear his attention to what was happening inside, behind the glass. All those people who adored him, or liked him well enough. The fond memories of having spent time in a house without worrying over what the next day of work would bring, what he would *encounter*. Still, he had wondered what the next day of the week was, certainly if he felt himself under the pressure of being nominated for eviction, which now felt inherently absurd a predicament to have been in, when the word **eviction** meant a dire thing on the outside. Donny was right. He needed to look at the world that surrounded him now, not the aching thoughts strumming like chords in his brain.

TOBIAS: What if no matter what I still feel a pit in my heart, a pit of disappointment, that I could have done better if only I had more time, or more energy at the last of the hurdles?

DONNY: Look, it is okay to stumble, Toby. And at whichever age it is we are, it is *alright*. But was it a true stumble if you did yourself proud for making it as far as you did?

TOBIAS: Years from now I'm going to be more disappointed.

DONNY: Why do you think that? When you aren't there yet. You are on this balcony. Talking to me. Amazed at the sort of insanity you committed yourself to for months, and no one booted you out the door on the first night. No one ejected you for being some screw-up. *[he paused, squeezing the other man's arm]* Trust me when I say to you, Tobes, in those years from now you will only be more and more proud of yourself. When I was in school, I never imagined turning my world on its head at forty-one to go throw my hat into a show like this. The show wasn't even on air. The possibility had not even been realised at the time, so I went about things, until it slowly climbed out the ground and towards me. Tobias, trust me when I say one day you will feel an immense weight be lifted from your body, and the weight will be the feeling that you did not achieve what you wanted. From where I stand you did.

TOBIAS: *[with tears forming]* These were already here when you walked outside.

DONNY: I am sure they were. *[he paused]* Listen. It might not be what you necessarily want to hear from anyone, in case you are hoping one of the other psychos inside will instead validate your feelings of passionate fury. It might not be what you want, but I am here, out in the air, to repeat it until my mouth becomes dry. As soon as you can be hysterical, or at least laugh a little, about having done the thing even without the success you dreamed of...that, Tobias, is when you will feel normal again.

TOBIAS: It's like therapy hour with Donald Bunyard.

DONNY: Donald is disgusting. It won't ever be Donald.

TOBIAS: Donovan Bunyard. I'm glad you told them to make sure it was always Donny for everything. The press release, the screens, when we would reach into that dank pouch and pull for the competitions. Donovan might have made me lose sight of the aura.

DONNY: *[he laughed]* Donovan was what my mother liked. Donny is easier to shout out when you see me far away at some farmers' market or something, and then you realise maybe that isn't him—

TOBIAS: I wish there was ever a chance I could think it was you, off in the distance, smelling an orange.

DONNY: Soon enough we will be in separate states, kid. Isn't that a drag.

TOBIAS: We never spent an entire day not in that house together. With me crashing out—*[he paused for a grin and a minor chuckle]*—at the very last competition, I was only away from you, away from Ophelia and Tat for a few hours, really. While you prepared speeches and what you would say to sway my vote. I'm sorry I didn't vote for you by the way. *[he exhaled]* You would have won if I did. Now I can let that stew and simmer instead. I cost you that money. You lumbered towards the finish line, and I dashed to meet with the jury of our peers, and I didn't know how to split hairs between you and Tat. I didn't. Maybe the others were already convinced, but I wasn't sure until I stood there, about to cast my vote, and I...I thought about the entire season in the fastest, flashiest snapshots, and instead of thinking about giving everything to you, I saw a young woman who knew to take me out. *[he sniffled, wiping away a tear]* She's incredible, Donny, but so are you. I wish I would've had two votes.

DONNY: Hey, kid, you weren't alone in the decision-making. Right? Seven people had the weight of defining someone's new status, as winner, runner-up, what-have-you. It is a small number of folks deciding, and whether you knew what they all were doing or not, it does not matter. I am not bitter, or angered, because you voted for someone else over me. Scot and I would have loved all that cash. But you are not scorned because of it. *[he smiled]* Anyone else could have changed their vote over. Your vote was not expected because we grew close in our months together, Toby.

It felt like the sort of moment for an embrace, a warm hug shared between two friends, but Tobias lingered against the rail, strangely nervous. Or the thoughts still permeated in his head, which made him worry something like a nervous breakdown would come along if he let down his guard enough. Of course he knew all these things, and then some, because he had spent the better part of his twenties learning what it meant to grow up. To change.

But those words still felt like rhetoric you simply told yourself. I am older and wiser, as though saying something made it true, as if words written out on a box could not possibly lie to you. Although of course they could, and did, and do, and have. Etcetera. Tobias knew he like everyone lied to themselves. He was still going to be even just a little bit defeated. Deflated. Popped like a red balloon.

TOBIAS: It still feels like the end of the world.

DONNY: Wipe the blinds of dust. Go on, physically wipe them.

TOBIAS: *[hesitantly, he pretended to wipe the air with both hands]* Better?

DONNY: Is it better for you, Tobes? What will you do with my point of view? *[he sighed]* I know I came closer than you did. Had the chance even more so and blew it. But hey, why so glum all the sudden? Is it the quiet, is it the night? Do you need sunshine and light?

TOBIAS: I need a drink, maybe.

DONNY: At least you didn't say a time machine.

TOBIAS: *[he shrugged his shoulders]* The thing you learn from any time-focused movie is you could repeat the same event over and over, meticulously trying to change the outcome, but the physical thing is never the solution to set you free. Realising some part of yourself is, and fuck, here I am whining and moping about having *lost a game* and my concern is so less focused on what I could have done with the money, but rather that I am just another loser to the crown. To the victory. *[he shook his head]* To me it was always about being able to say I outmanoeuvred everyone else to the top, and I won. So, if I could hop in a time machine with all the answers, it would feel less like winning, real winning, because I had not made it there on my own. You can't win on a loophole.

DONNY: You just spent the time explaining why you choose Tatianna over anyone else. *[he smiled, like beaming]* It is hard to decide which of your pals deserve that mass of money in the form of an oversized cheque. You understand the game, Tobias. I would say you have your victory.

TOBIAS: *[he chuckled]* They're gonna ask me to write a book on it.

DONNY: Have you ever considered writing?

TOBIAS: Um, gosh. I was always alright at it in school. But it was never something of a major passion, not really. You get a little praise from a teacher but it doesn't mean you ever think about pursuing it for real. No, I think I'd have to sit down with like, a ghost writer and tell them what I think, and what ghost writer will jump off the ground for a book about the art of war, as told by someone dedicated to the study of competitive reality television? *[sudden aha! moment]* God, I want to go back to the hotel room now and watch hours and hours of everything I missed. Every reality show, with a format almost like ours, competitive and brutal, that I have missed since walking into the warehouse. I want to swallow it all up. Being apart from it makes you greedy.

DONNY: When the party ends, that is what you can do, Toby.

TOBIAS: Do we really have to dance all night?

DONNY: There is, in part, a contractual obligation to make appearances, yes. *[he chuckled at himself]* But no one will be forcing you. Listen, in the morning you might regret it if you left behind these memories. Some of these people, you may not see them again for a while. Some of them are here out of the goodness of their hearts alone, because trust, this is not the type of party a person like Eleanor enjoys, nor is it all that comfortable for Carly. But these are our people. Our twenty. And their families, and friends, and whoever got the invite simply for being in the business of watching. They watched us. Soak it all in before it goes, Tobes.

TOBIAS: *[he glanced back inside]* I love our people. It may be nineteen losers and a winner, but we knew what we signed up for, huh. A wild ride.

DONNY: I should have expected the further reaches of back pain.

TOBIAS: *[playfully]* You'd seen the show before, right?

DONNY: There was no time for bionic muscles. All organic, all aching. All the time.

TOBIAS: *[smiling]* Thank you for coming into my life, Donny.

DONNY: And thank you for coming into mine. You, I could not predict.

Tobias's attention drifted once more back to the amassed crowd through those doors, and he wished he could have seen them all gathered inside, waiting for him to return like he were the main character of a video game that strangely hinged on your importance, above allowing the other NPCs to have interactions of their own. That was selfish, self-interested, but it would have been like a snapshot image, a photograph he could have climbed into. All of them. Tatianna in the fur coat. Ophelia. Geordie. Isobel. Will, and Zayn, and each and every one of them. Some he was less aligned to—a remnant of the time he had spent being so competitive he thought his brain would explode.

Now it was, he knew them less. Were they all friends, or were some mere acquaintances, people he barely knew? Some of them he had spent weeks and weeks in such close proximity to and without so much as a definable moment where he felt they connected, really, on a level that felt like *friend*. He might simply have been overthinking it in this moment, idling outside, talking to Donny.

Twenty strangers dancing the night away.

Tobias wanted to drift inside and spend time with each and every one of them, grow a little close to their families, too, although it would have felt like a real-world version of attempting to make alliances. He knew now he needed to shift gears again, track back to the way people interacted when there weren't eliminations, when there wasn't the looming threat of voting someone to walk out the front door. Although having roommates could be like that, willing the existence of a mechanic to boot the stinky one out, hope he takes the stench of cat piss from the bathroom with him.

He knew he had to talk to Tatianna again. Not to ostracise her, not to lament.

Tobias meant only to celebrate her.

DONNY: You want to know something? Sitting in the chair, waiting for Greta to announce each vote, I realised all the sudden there was a pit in my chest. In time, there would be a result, and there was no going back from it. In that moment, Toby, I realised I would do fine without it. It might have been a truth of my life all along. I will do fine *without it*.

TOBIAS: But without what? The money?

DONNY: Opportunities. Grand success. See, I spent my thirties chasing after everything I could not get in my twenties. Which I had spent flourishing around in all the lakes I could not splash in when I was in my adolescence. Growing up as a black kid who couldn't quite get a grip on his sexuality. Sitting in those chairs, Tobes, made me realise I did not want to spend my forties chasing the things that eclipsed me in my thirties.

TOBIAS: What does that mean you want, then? If not the things you haven't accomplished yet.

DONNY: Do I have to run? Should I force myself to want everything? It all sounds like a hokey attempt to justify being first loser, but my mind became clear in the moment. Trust in that. I would have been over the moon as the victor, but I also feel chuffed with the journey. [*he again squeezed the other man's arm*] I know you do too.

TOBIAS: I could have stood to win more often towards the end there...

DONNY: For your stats? [*he laughed*] You spent all winter quietly murmuring about *stats*. I don't believe for a second you care so much.

TOBIAS: If I'd won a handful more times. Maybe I could have paved myself a path towards being recognised amongst the greats. Other icons of our show who get mentioned in conversation, the best to never win. I don't know. *[he laughed at himself]* It all sounds so peculiar. It's a game. Now I go back to looking for new work, because I bet everything on this, and I liked where I was just living so much I...well, it would've been nice to stay there for good.

DONNY: I know it is an impossible suggestion, but our guest bedroom is available for as long as you need. *[he paused]* Stay with us for a few days. Extend the vacation. I can sense it on you, kid, you need to take the time to process the comedown. I have leeway with work that is running itself down, but it does not require me coming on right back.

TOBIAS: I can't run for too long.

DONNY: What did I say? *Do I have to run?* *[he points to the other man]* Do we have to run? It isn't running. You are reassessing your life.

TOBIAS: I need to find somewhere else to live.

DONNY: You cannot go back in there. Door's locked, locked us all out. The adventure's over. Is that a scam, a scam of the century? Nope. It's just the process.

TOBIAS: Do you remember the night Isobel left? We were all so exhausted, and in mourning, in a sense of it at least. She was one of my closest allies, and those numbers were starting to dwindle for me. Geordie gone, Isobel gone, now I was only really relying on you and on Tat, because I could imagine everyone else in that house targeting me. *[he laughed; the words sounded different outside of the house]* Anyway, do you remember what we talked about that night? I wasn't in tears so much as I was solemn, and moody, and everything felt different without her there to remind me to lift my head. You held me in your arms and reminded me of the numbers. When you made the game like maths it seemed smaller. Like you did just before. One, one, one, one. Whatever it was. There were ten people left. Ten of us. It made the house feel gigantic. It made me feel singular. Nine other people. I could weasel my way through and past nine other people, including you, the man who was soothing me with his words, with the warmth of his body. *[he glanced away, into the night]* I was in the sort of state that night where so much would have happened if there hadn't been cameras. You're lucky, or unlucky.

DONNY: Oh really? *[he chuckled]* You think I did not notice how often you adjusted your body?

TOBIAS: I had to get perfectly comfortable –

DONNY: There wasn't much of a place for intimacy in that house.

TOBIAS: It still happened. In the private suite.

DONNY: Oh that I know.

TOBIAS: Not that it was either of us.

DONNY: I never would have defaced myself on television to get *[and drawing out this last word]* laid.

TOBIAS: Neither would I. Not on television. Not when there are cameras.

DONNY: *[with a tilt of his head]* Are you heading back in there soon, or do you need more time?

TOBIAS: I'll come back in. Dance a little. Hope everyone has forgiven me for when I voted them out, or didn't. My track record was a little shaky at the beginning.

DONNY: Go easier on yourself. You should remember how brilliant you are.

At this, Donny grinned, squeezed Tobias' arm for the final time, and disappeared back into the thrill of the afterparty. It seemed like there had been enough chatter around the *game*. Tobias himself was getting weary of it, and weary of himself. He needed to think less about whether it mattered, and whether he should care, or should want to. Of course, the weight of a loss sunk your shoulders no matter the expected, exposed timer ticking away in the corner. Losing ached. But was he going to waste away this night, or any other, thinking so many miserable thoughts about *what if*?

No. Unsurprisingly, Donny had been right about everything. It made the man more appealing, and it made it all the more faux-frustrating that Donny himself was a married man who could not simply make Tobias' life better by patching up the holes in the wall, in the construction.

It was right that Tobias would have to find someone else to marry. That part of his life, his so-called journey, had not yet come, and unlike certain heterosexual people, he had not met the love of his life the first night in the house with a beautiful love story blooming by the fourth week in.

Even if he scanned the gathered crowd, attempting to single out someone he could fall in love with, there were not visible, noticeable options. A relationship forming between himself and Zayn would end poorly. It would also be uncomfortable to moan your brother's name, he thought, skipping through names. Not Fletcher, which felt insulting, but there was no attraction. Not Diesel, only because Tobias himself felt incredibly pedestrian beside such a gorgeous specimen of human being. Was there a point to these antics? He hadn't come on the show for love.

He hadn't come out dancing for love.

He was happy being single, he liked being single, why was this plaguing him all the sudden?

The answer was plain and obvious, at least. He had spent months of his life being unable to even touch himself without the fear of being seen, or interrupted, if someone else needed to use the toilet. As a general rule Tobias simply avoided getting aroused, but after months, and after flirting on occasion with some of the men in the house, like Donny, like Zayn, so playfully, he knew it was impossible to sever completely. Arousal happened.

He had only moments ago reminded himself how close he had been. Had there not been pesky, lurking cameras. Had his life been entirely normal, removed from being on a reality television show.

It would all be different now. Wasn't that strange to imagine?

Tobias stared out at the city one last time before he headed back inside.

He glided around the room, making idle conversation with people he had shared months of time with, others he had only known for a week or two before they had been eliminated and collected their luggage from around the side of the building, away from prying eyes.

He found Tatianna and they found a quiet corner, although *quiet* translated here to "less riddled with noise but still capable of making your voice hoarse." In that corner, they talked, almost entirely about what had happened hours ago, in between waking up and eventually falling back asleep. In a different bed, a changed atmosphere. Tatianna listened, for a while, and Tobias waited for a response. It was a conversation that made sense. It was a conversation that sounded awfully like Donny Bunyard had co-written it. But not every poetic word had to be your own. So long as it was human.

Time passed and Tobias found himself out on that balcony again. It had been second nature, or this he told himself as he stared out, again, on a beckoning horizon he could have kissed. He wanted to be whisked away, then, and if not back there, then where? He was noticeably growing more tired, but he had staggered himself with the drinks. This was not a tipsy, nor a drunk Tobias, but he noticed the alcohol coursing through his body did in fact make him feel more assured of himself.

That was good. It replaced those feelings like he had failed, like his attempt to be all that bit more impressive had been for nought. One last reminder, then: you didn't come in zero, you came in fourth. It would be the last time he thought about it for the rest of the night. That much he promised himself.

Donny came wandering back out, and the atmosphere did not suggest they would be making a repeat viewing of their conversation from earlier.

DONNY: Diesel is passed out, I would assume asleep. Drunken. He's so young.

TOBIAS: He will get slapped around a little and wake up, then forget, or pretend, it never ever happened. He's having fun. Men like that do this and you never see them sweat at all, not for a second. He'll go to work the next day without a hangover.

DONNY: And men like you?

TOBIAS: If I wanted to be sore, and sour, and exhausted for the entirety of tomorrow, I would be going apeshit. *[he laughed, covering his mouth]* How I have missed swearing so freely.

DONNY: Be my guest if you need to expel them out, into the night air.

TOBIAS: *[he contemplated it for a moment]* I'm alright. It is probably expected of me to scream out the f-word into the howling wind, or unmuffle some inappropriate language as I hurl a pillow away from my face. You'd think I'd be thrilled to be able to throw around expletives given how disappointed I've been in myself all night. But, no, I'm okay. If anything I'm tired.

DONNY: Everyone was so buzzed to be out partying we all forgot today has not been a press day. That small handful of people run ragged from competing either had no sleep last night or are running on the fumes of having still competed, further. Further and further.

TOBIAS: I can't wait to climb into bed and peel off my clothes, or, in the opposite order, actually. Then, I sleep. Then, I wake up, a changed man. Again.

DONNY: How changed have you become?

TOBIAS: Very changed, actually. It's almost child-like to live in that house, it reminds me now of playing in a toy kitchen as a kid, or pretending a stuffed animal was my poor, sick, needs-rest baby, and I tucked it into bed and gave it a kiss on the forehead. *[he shrugged his shoulders]* Feels like a restart. The computer rebooted. Tobias...something point zero. I've lived for too long for it to be the second model, but I couldn't quite tell you which number we're at now. Maybe that's the beautiful thing.

DONNY: You are a beautiful thing, Tobes.

TOBIAS: I'm gonna kiss you on the mouth if you keep flirting with me.

DONNY: There would be no rejection from me. *[he held up his hands]* Out of the house, there is a freedom we have not been afforded for quite some time. Unrestricted, I did a little happy dance in the bathroom. No concern someone could have taped it and posted it online. For someone sad to ridicule.

TOBIAS: No one would be online ridiculing you.

DONNY: Do you really think I am without critique?

TOBIAS: I think you're a charming man in his forties the audience would root for and get behind. Name one instance in our time you think someone clipped and mocked at your expense. I can't see it personally, but I know there are multiple moments of embarrassment and shame linked to my name, linked when you type Tobias Kellerman into the search bar on Twitter. Get a look at this freak. Little guy. Little weird guy. So excitable over a reality show. This isn't me lambasting myself because I think I made a mockery of myself all winter. Nah. I know I had impressive moments, but I know people find reasons to dislike the thirty-something gay man who can act a little over-the-edge when it comes to trying to cement himself as both watchable television and an impressive statistic. *[he paused, sighing]* I want you to search for me.

DONNY: We were handed back our phones this evening and made ourselves a pact, Toby. Live tonight like we are free-flying and look at the scrutiny tomorrow.

TOBIAS: I know. You don't need to honour it. A part of me genuinely doesn't want to know. I don't need to know what people have been saying about me. I expect some mild hate, or the usual comments about an archetype like mine. A bit of a nerd, a bit of a dork. At least there are no glasses on my face, at least I don't act like the prudish virgin. It's fine. Let's not ruin the night.

DONNY: We can comb through some of it together, tomorrow.

TOBIAS: I'd like that.

The pair of them lingered out on the balcony a while longer. Tobias could not seem to drown out the part of himself that was curious to look, but the noise became quieter the longer he chatted once again with Donny. He was going to miss this, miss the frequency of it. It would be nice, true, to have ordinary conversations again, and with different people, too. It would be nice to go out for dinner with his family, with his brother Zane, again, and it would be nice to have a returned sense of freedom. But at the cost of this. These conversations so frequently, face to face.

He wasn't yet ready to say a goodbye to Donny, even though it would present itself like a *see you again soon*. Tobias knew the part of the phrase, the *soon*, could sharply enough equal *in a couple of weeks* or *in six months*. They would both become busy. Tired. Separated by state lines and flight times. It was a mere hour by aeroplane and yet he dreaded purchasing the ticket, and taking the air-train, and waiting to board, and collecting his luggage at the other end. He dreaded losing out on rolling over in his bed and seeing Donny in the single beside him, still fast asleep.

This is how he knew he was not drunk enough, not tipsy enough, that staggering his drinks had been part of the problem all along. This wedge he signed off on the construction of. Building itself in his heart. Their time together as housemates, in simple terms, was over.

Tobias glanced over at Donny and thought a cloud had passed from in front of the sun.

TOBIAS: Can you indulge me in something?

DONNY: What are you after? What are you looking for?

TOBIAS: *[he laughed a little]* We flirted all the time in front of cameras, and you spent your share of time justifying your actions, because you knew if there was a way people viewing from home could squeeze the life out of your decisions and make you regret them, they would. *[he paused]* They would find a way to contact your husband, Scot—who is lovely, by the way, it’s been wonderful meeting him—and they would crumble your marriage if they thought you were cheating, having an affair on him. But. All we ever did was flirt. We barely, or rarely, kissed. It all made me long for when we were on the outside, far from scrutiny, and it was just you and I, on a balcony, talking.

DONNY: Do you want a proper kiss?

TOBIAS: More than that. *[he shook his head, amused by himself]* I think with anyone else I’d feel comfortable to reach for it, to lean in and kiss you, but you make a man nervous, Donny. You make me reconsider whether it would be what you wanted, or what we should want from each other. I would hate to ruin what there is between us because I wanted more, because I wanted to be affectionate and in private with you, far, far from prying eyes.

DONNY: The partying is starting to die down...

TOBIAS: Tonight is an impolite night to intrude. You should celebrate with your husband.

DONNY: I will have forever with him, and we have been celebrating, all of us, together.

TOBIAS: I’m being sentimental.

DONNY: Did they give you a private room in the hotel, Toby?

TOBIAS: Of course they did.

DONNY: Then we should be there. Getting comfortable. Taking off our sweaty clothes. I can kiss you. Stroke your cheek. Indulge you, as you say. You offer me everything I could want with you. Let’s get out of here. Let’s go.

In the hotel, unlocking the door with the keycard, the two men stumbled inside with a giddiness associated with the night. There was thrill in celebration, as there was in making eyes at each other, beginning to undress. Tobias flung pieces of clothing in one direction, then another, haphazard and dastardly so. Revelling in it. It was the first time in months he had been completely removed from worry of *damage*, although not that he intended on raking up a hotel bill when this was all settled by production. Looking, glancing, at Donny he thought not of damaging him, either.

They had sex in the king-sized bed in Tobias’ hotel room that night. Naked and exposed, but comfortable in the vulnerability, the two men experienced the one thing round-the-clock surveillance had denied them both. The passion went beyond a little flirting. Tobias forgot where he was. What he was doing mere hours earlier. He forgot the days, weeks, months spent with Donny, their subtle

gestures to one another. How foretold a moment like this had been. He forgot it all to give himself over.

Tobias draped the white sheet over his bare body and made himself comfortable again, head on the pillow. Both spent, the men relaxed and grinned at each other. Donny winked. Tobias enjoyed once again being horizontal. The last of the positions they had attempted, which had resulted in orgasms for them both, had tested the part of Tobias determined to slouch. He was exhausted, now he knew it, but having sex with Donny his attention had been entirely elsewhere, there, instead of tuned into the rhythm of his muscles, and of his brain.

He still hurt. But it subsided now. It was why you experienced emotion. Why you loved. Although Tobias was well aware he was sometimes puppy dog when it came to Donny, and he was comfortable with what had been their arrangement, and could continue to be.

If he ever did fall in love again, it would be with an available man. Or so he presumed.

In bed, Tobias resisted an urge to invade too closely on Donny's personal space. They watched each other for a moment, silent and observing, laughing softly in the way you did when you could hardly believe something had just happened. They had completed a side mission, as it were.

The video game terminology had continued to bleed since he had overwhelmed himself in those final days, or weeks, perhaps, of being so competitive, so hell-bent on a victory not pre-assigned. Those last few days there had only been five of them in the house. He had less in common with Diesel than he realised. But the others he adored, or loved. It was miraculous to have been there. Comforted by Donny. Challenged by Tatianna. Given the chance to dork out with Ophelia, and at the same time come to know they had so much in common with each other. Something you could not necessarily tell from a glance.

He was excited to spend more time with her, now that the restriction of the house had elapsed. But when he would see her again, he could not know.

Tobias fell asleep in time. Beside Donny, without aching to be held by him. That he knew was a comfortable thing. He was not so weak-willed to think he needed the affection. He was not being pushed away. Not now that they were on the outside again.

And everything changed.

TOBIAS: I'm glad my head isn't pounding. *[he paused]* Should I order room service?

DONNY: I could eat. I could eat a dining room set. And the candelabra.

It was the morning afterwards. They still lounged in the hotel room bed, having both fallen asleep together. They were both still naked, shielded somewhat by the sheet. Tobias glimpsed Donny's nipples as the sheet fell from his torso, and he restrained himself from wanting to lean forward and do...something with them. Likely he wanted to kiss them, or bite them, or pinch them between his fingers and start the whole dirty process all over again.

But for now, the moment was tame, and clean, and he smiled at the older man, and he began to talk once again.

TOBIAS: About last night.

DONNY: There should be no regrets, Toby. There are none from me. It was something we both wanted, to *consummate* the connection neither of us imagined we would find with one another. *[he readjusted the sheet]* Although it is hard to fathom a version of the two of us not being so joined at the hip.

TOBIAS: Oh, no regrets either. *[he drew out the next word]* Nothing. Thank you for breaking the long, long streak. I got so horny in there, never getting an opportunity to have sex, but wanting to, god, really craving it some of those days. *[he paused]* I thought it would happen after a couple days with someone I sort of half-knew, because there was a part of myself that expected you, you and I, were at the height we'd reach when it came to how intimate we got. That's just to say I didn't actually think we would have sex, because you're a married man. Not that I self-depreciated myself to the point of thinking I was unworthy—

DONNY: Do I need to gag and bind you?

TOBIAS: *[turned on a little]* Maybe.

DONNY: Toby. I never quite whispered in your ear we would do *this* when we could, when we could again, but my intentions were never to string you along. Never were they to make you feel underappreciated, or a temporary solve while I missed Scot at home. You matter in this world even when you think you do not.

TOBIAS: Even when I think myself worthless for losing it all.

DONNY: What did you lose? Not the love of those who surround you. Not the comfort of being appreciated. Not your dignity, not your pride, not the man who I know to be Tobias.

TOBIAS: Why do they even call *pride* a sin anyway?

DONNY: We remind ourselves of everything we have not lost, when we cannot reach something that was never ours to begin with. Yes, they promise gold, riches, a title in ink and layered in history. You did not lose that, Tobes. You stopped where you landed. You weren't a petulant brat about it neither.

TOBIAS: No, I screamed out my rage to the city skyline and invited a man back to my room to screw my brains out.

DONNY: A man? Just some man?

TOBIAS: *[he laughed]* You. I want to take up that offer, by the way. To stay with you for a little while. There isn't much for me to go back to yet, and I shouldn't rush into looking for a new job anyway. Or a new place. Once I'm home again I can figure myself out. You're never too old to start fresh.

DONNY: You will never be old, kid.

TOBIAS: This is too sentimental, I'm gonna start shuddering, can we talk about something else? I'm lying here completely naked, although you could only see if you had x-ray vision, and you want me to think about my future? Come on, Donny. You could be getting a good morning hand job.

DONNY: I would not dream of interrupting for one of those.

TOBIAS: No wonder you're married.

DONNY: Because single men are all demanding for sex, demanding for blowies, demanding you finish an intellectual thought to pleasure and satisfy them? They were not always.

TOBIAS: It's unsettling how a decade is enough time to completely rewrite the way people interact with one another. *[smallest head shake known to man]* There are a lot of things unsettling about a decade. One decade ago I was just starting out as an adult in my twenties. Shit and fuck.

DONNY: Ten years is a long time. But it is those younger than both of us who are rewritten still. Kids in their twenties making awful decisions, awful mistakes, and escaping with them. They light the way. *[he laughed, heavy and harsh]* They lead us with torches towards a world more insufferable. But there are brighter spots in them, amongst them. Geordie and Ophelia and Zayn, they are young. They are not doomed to be irresponsible.

TOBIAS: I suppose you are right.

DONNY: A part of your tone makes you sound hollowed out, Tobes.

TOBIAS: A part of who I am is beginning to realise you can pretend to avoid acknowledging that there's a difference in age between you and someone else, but the difference can't be stripped from being present, being there in the background the entire time. If I was to become friends with an eighty-year-old man I would still frequently reckon with the fact that he is an eighty-year-old man who understands the world differently than I do, even if we share similar values, and we share interests, and he values good, earnest communication the way I do. We are still going to have to confront our gap. I—*[and he paused, considering something in his mind]*—I don't mean it about you and I. Or not as harshly. I think it ages me, instead. Those three you named, they're younger than I am. Not by too much, five, six, seven, eight years whatever it is. But I can't be young the way they are. My time making their mistakes is mostly gone. If I make a terrible decision, or I lack the ability to be a good communicator, I can't blame it on being young. Or maybe I have a warped idea of being thirty.

DONNY: Of being thirty-one, kid.

TOBIAS: Somehow that's even worse.

DONNY: It's only one year. I ache to know someone in this stage of their youth considers themselves to have grown old. You are not weary, nor should you be, Tobias. Trust in that. Trust that a decade is a long, long time. One day you will wake to be forty but by then there will have been the passing of many a season. Yes, summer, autumn, winter, and spring, but there will be other victories, too. Other fourth place holders who grin and bear having come so far and yet not far enough. Other afterparties. Your scent will fade from the linen. From the halls. *[he leaned over to squeeze the other man's arm, the sheet falling off his body]* I remember when the first season aired. I do not let it ache me the way it should. I love continuing to get older, Toby.

TOBIAS: I don't ever want those halls to lose my scent.

DONNY: We are all afraid of everything. You can't be afraid of nothing.

TOBIAS: I'm afraid the gap between having left and if I ever get to return again will kill me like I have been harpooned in the chest.

DONNY: And that is exactly how I feel at the end of a vacation. *[he laughed]* This was one hell of a vacation. It's not over yet, neither. I wish I could be able to tell you exactly what would be right to tell a man when a big change washes over his body, but it wouldn't matter if I was fifty-one or sixty-one instead of forty-one, I'm no wiser than yesterday. Wisdom doesn't always come with age, not when you are an average Joe like I am. And this was the biggest adventure of your life. And unexpectedly you had sex with a twink to wrap it all up. *[they both laughed]* That body of yours, Tobes, is not twink-like enough to be so accurate. What would you call it?

TOBIAS: *[trying to break off his laughter]* I don't know, I don't care about those labels, it's like...otterish? How hairy do I need to be? How skinny, how much meat on the bone, who cares...we had sex, I care about that. I care about wanting to do it again, although I don't imagine anything needs to change. Is that my problem? I want nothing to change?

DONNY: Yesterday morning you woke up with a camera zooming in on your pimples.

TOBIAS: My face is clear and bright as a daisy!

DONNY: It is. I have spent all morning scrutinising it. Lovingly, of course.

TOBIAS: Oh of course. I'm sure. *[he blows the other man a kiss]* Is your husband going to get jealous if I come stay with you both and we make eyes at each other all through the house and make loud, aggressive sex noises in the guest bedroom and hump each other on the couch—

DONNY: *When* you come stay. You horny pest.

TOBIAS: *[far more sincere]* Will he be?

DONNY: Toby. Scot has spent a winter watching the pair of us flirt on television. He will be exposed to it in person, and he will approach his own feelings, but as husbands our relationship will always be spoken through. You never mean to be a threat. This, our sex, was not meant to damage, to hurt. When you come to our house, you are as much loved by Scot as you are by me. Isn't that all you care about? To be accepted and cherished. Why do we do a reality show if not to be seen?

TOBIAS: You say three seconds ago you're about as wise as a baseball bat and then you come out with things like this while I'm still blinking.

DONNY: Baseball bat—I never said I was a lump of wood.

TOBIAS: *[beaming]* Thank you, Donny. For talking me away from that balcony.

DONNY: You weren't ever close to jumping.

TOBIAS: Oh, I know. But. Let's not make this whole thing lose its humour.

Perhaps for their own sanity, they did not have sex again that morning. Tobias started to wonder what had happened after they left the afterparty, and he started to wonder again what would happen now. Now that the dust was settling. Now that he would not be able to rely so much on speaking in the tongues of reality television. Return, as you were, to a normal person, he thought, comfortable as he was in the hotel room bed they would have to remove themselves from before ten o'clock.

It was strange and yet it wasn't at all. Tobias gently tucked his thumb against his palm and looked at the four fingers of his left hand. It was a slight gesture he hoped Donny beside him did not notice. The pinkie looked so petite. There would be exit press that day, interviews with reputable sources who interviewed every other recent contestant from the show. He would be fussed with again. His hair styled so effortlessly. Either they would have something picked out for him to wear, or more likely he would pull something from the clothes in his suitcase, which sat off in the corner of the hotel room, zipped shut. With a clearer mind he would talk about losing out, about his strategic moves throughout the game, his relationships and connections and whether he would see each and every one of his now former-housemates again.

Tobias climbed out of bed, naked, and ducked into the bathroom. In the mirror he looked the same he always did. A little dishevelled, naturally, but still his handsome self. If he was allowed to give himself that compliment. A man had enjoyed ravishing this.

He ruffled his hair.

This was the end.

He didn't know it was also the beginning. Not yet.

TOBIAS & SHANNON

Early November, beginning to stifle. It was a warm-enough day, the type to make clothes cling to your body. Tobias climbed down out of the rented bus, dressed for a wedding. He pinched a pair of sunglasses out of the inside pocket of his rented jacket and shaded his eyes from the mid-afternoon sun. There was a respectable crowd both before and behind him—the last trailed off the bus mere moments before the door shuttered closed. It was a blessing to have found the option, or to be gifted it, he supposed. Tobias, who had no car and cringed back at the idea of splurging too much on an Uber, or too often, took a train down to the station, then climbed on board. No one on the bus was familiar. It made a sort of sense. It was the wedding of a university friend he'd stayed in loose contact with since graduating, and the invitation was both surprise and gratification.

You marvelled at how another person thought of you when you worried they had forgotten about you entirely. But the invitation had spiked new get-togethers for Tobias and Liana, scattered dinners in the nine months between hand-delivered envelope and nuptials day. This day.

Tobias wandered the grassed field in front of the hall—it was barely a field, but it was not paddock, or plot, but perhaps it could be considered a lawn. He imagined it would be the sort of place you could hold a small-scale artsy market, local vendors numbering in the tens, nothing above. Inside you could put on refreshments and protect the older patrons from the heat. It was a lovely venue for a wedding.

He was trying to recognise someone, he figured there would be other friends from university he at least recognised enough for a hello, because you ought to be civilised at these sorts of things. You ought to drop the pretences of having never reached out, or never made so much as an effort if the contract of the relationship expired after the class did. He and Liana had friends in common, friends who had mentioned receiving an invite, but was that the detrimental word?

Receiving?

He was not so much afraid of being the stalking loner trying to pinpoint a familiar face as he was having been the only person to have misread he should have said *no*. But, really, was his confusion of not yet recognising anyone having such an impact. Wait - -

Tobias recognised a face. Spit take moment, actually. It wasn't anyone he went to university with—they would arrive eventually, give it time—but he could hardly pretend like the wedding event would take place and the only pleasantry he would give this specific, very specific person, was a smile and a glance.

TOBIAS: Shannon. What's this for a coincidence?

SHANNON: *[he too does a version of a spit-take, lacking anything cartoonish. It is a confused squint, really]*
Toby, hey man. The suit wasn't a disguise enough then, but wow, you know the...

He let the sentence linger, waiting for a response. You know the... bride/groom, the happy couple getting wed, just over there. On the part of the lawn near the rear of the hall a wooden arch was constructed in front of several rows of white seats. An outdoor wedding in the heat would lead to sweating guests, but ah, that's November.

TOBIAS: The bride. A friend of mine from university, but all of this is a sharp reminder of how different friend-weddings are, or are usually, to a wedding of, say, your brother's. Not that Zane has reached the aisle yet. *[he did a semi-extended-hand gesture, which meant:]* Oh, and yourself?

SHANNON: The opposite, the groom. I met Benny like four months ago. He's a friend of friend, we caught up for drinks, it was: "Benny, this is Shannon, Shannon, this is Benny," and suddenly there's an invitation in the letterbox and my mate, the one in between, Paul, he's confessing they talk here and there about how we'd get along. I guess he never changed his mind on the invite each time we saw each other after that. *[he paused to sigh]* Now Paul is on an emergency business trip. Doing emergency business.

TOBIAS: Is he in medicine or something?

SHANNON: Shit, that guy couldn't administer CPR at the pool. He's in sales, he acts like he came from money and not Aspley. *[he paused again, this time without sigh]* And Lucy, Lucy couldn't get the day off work. For a relative stranger's wedding I don't blame her.

It was a Friday, because a weekday wedding was more affordable for a couple on the younger side still attempting to *have it all*. Liana and Ben had so recently moved into a new house it was a wonder they were not instead spending the cost of a wedding on furnishing it, but then everyone dreams of a wedding. Except those who do not dream of one. Those who would rather stand in front of a gathered crowd of their beloved family and friends and proclaim, *this is an anti-engagement*.

But Fridays were becoming, still, more expensive. Temporary weekends, like a holiday Monday. There were noticeable corners cut, none which made a wedding trashy, like the absence of a sculpted aisle between the rows of seats, like very minimal decorations. It was not a wedding that someone had cut from a magazine but there was no shame in that. It suited the pair of them, ordinary people, not mega-celebrities inviting you onto their mega-yacht.

Tobias and Shannon, for a moment, surveyed the gathered crowd.

TOBIAS: I was asked whether I wanted a plus-one. I could have brought along one of the roommates, or something, figured out a plan, but it felt easier to take the day off alone, and come alone.

SHANNON: Did you think the wedding would be shorter than it probably will be?

TOBIAS: I really, truly had no expectations. Maybe I thought I'd know more people, immediately so, and I knew from weddings there would be somewhere to gather, to stand while you waited for...whatever. The last wedding I went to wasn't so middle-of-nowhere with sheep off in the distance, but neither was I there by myself. Zane and I talked amongst ourselves. *[he gestured with his hands]* Like we're doing.

SHANNON: I like the sheep. What's the word, ambience?

TOBIAS: Yeah, buddy, ambience.

SHANNON: How's my brother doing? You see him a whole lot more than I do.

TOBIAS: *[he chuckled]* Adam's himself. Complaining to me about work, but not so much searching for anything new. Stability is something we all like, really, and we like it a lot more than suffering. You lived with him longer than I have, and in what I only assume were the worse-r years of, um, growing up a boy, becoming a man, it all begins to sound so done before. Someone has said this before. And this. Adam comes home, to our little house, and he walks up the stairs, and he...he invariably knocks on my door, whether to groan or to ask me if I want to order something for dinner, a pizza or Indian takeout, and we remind each other the routine used to be...he can't quite come home, he's already there, trapped between walls, but he wanders into the bedroom where I'm pretending I'm not having a nap by occasionally moving my body around, sort of bed-dancing. Adam, he'd actually probably not say much to me at all. There'd be someone else in the room to talk to, to annoy, and instead of—shit, I'm rambling, sorry, Shannon.

He had almost said *Adam comes home, to our little house, and he walks up the stairs, and he climbs into my bed, messing up my hair, thinking about kissing me, before I beat him to it.* Tobias, with lightning-speed, remembered the truthfulness of what little they could share. The cliché was high school: queerness shunned into a closet, confessions of *I'm not ready yet*, but there was minimal fear in a man like Adam Affeldt. He was open, expressing, his rough-around-the-edges version of earnest in front of his roommates, Ophelia and Isobel both knowing that the men of the house, as it were, were *exploring each other's bodies*. It was not taboo. Neither was talking of it.

But did his brother know? That much seemed a hovering question, a cloud, something murky he would rather not wade into without the other segment of the puzzle beside him. It was, still, a tad bit of a puzzle. Halloween was about two weeks earlier. They had not agreed to terms, laid themselves out in front of a whiteboard and written up the values, or the pros and cons. What had they done, except passionately make-out with one another and have sex and sleep in each other's beds?

The so-called routine creeping into his sentences was so fresh they were breaking a barely-double-digit streak with this wedding. Tobias had no plus-one because months ago he had said he wouldn't need one, not after the break-up with Gavin.

But would Adam have come?

SHANNON: These are the parts of my brother I don't see anymore, since we stopped living together. You have all the fresh, recent experience, and I tip my hat, we caused enough mischief as three boys living in one house, disappointing our ma, pissing off our dad sometimes but mostly just making him laugh.

TOBIAS: I'd wager this version of Adam is the tamest, post-experiment.

SHANNON: Right, yeah. You two will always be insane for that.

TOBIAS: None of the people here seem to give a crap.

SHANNON: You want them to? Congrats loser?

TOBIAS: Hey, that's harsh. Only I can call myself a loser. *[he pauses]* No, I don't. All the same I didn't necessarily want to come to the wedding and know every single person, which must be exhausting for the happy couple. Talking to every single one of them. Hi, hi, hi, repeated until death. It's the burden

you bear when you host any sort of gathering, if the centre of attention is always meant to be **you**. All the eyes.

SHANNON: You want a wedding like this someday?

TOBIAS: If someone will have me. I don't know how much your brother is into gossiping, he's probably a pipsqueak sort of amateur at it, but a couple of months ago I went through a bit of a breakup. What's the right adjective? If nasty doesn't fit. Sad, tragic? But not disappointing. Aching. If aching breakup works. I just think of *don't break my heart, my achy breaky heart*.

SHANNON: I'm sorry to hear that, man.

TOBIAS: Are those the lyrics?

SHANNON: I don't like country music. I don't like men with long hair.

TOBIAS: Like, as a trust thing?

SHANNON: I'd say surely I can trust a guy if he's rocking a ponytail, or a real net of hair flowing down his back, it just doesn't look like my type of thing.

TOBIAS: But you're not attracted to men though, right? This isn't an attraction thing—

SHANNON: Whoa, you're trying to decide my sexuality for me, gay boy?

It was said with a playfulness Tobias never took as insult, but neither did he imagine, or want to imagine, that Shannon could shift into the type of person to suddenly criticise Toby for being queer, and for being the sort of person to lunge forward with a curiosity that didn't make him freeze back from simply asking. Years ago perhaps he would have felt impolite for asking a guy whether he was locked-down in his heterosexuality, but after time living with several gay men, and reading the situation a little skewwhiff on Adam, he was...whatever the opposite of *sobering up* was.

Getting fruitier.

SHANNON: I'm just teasing you. Homosexual man. [*he laughed*] I would have thought you would have been a firm believer of the idea that sexuality is a line, not like a queue, but more along the possibilities of what sort of colourful towel you could purchase from the Bed & Bath store.

TOBIAS: Oh, he's a poet?

SHANNON: Are you gonna be like this all night?

TOBIAS: Irritating? Probably. I intend to enjoy the party.

SHANNON: And so you should, and so you should. I'm getting thirsty, do you want anything from the bar inside?

TOBIAS: [*he spent a few moments pondering*] I'm not drinking tonight, so like, a glass of water? The sun is going melt out most of the sixty percent in my body before Liana even enters the building. Or. Walks on the scene. Onto the grass.

SHANNON: I'm not drinking either. [*he shrugged*] I have to drive back. Which. I watched you saunter off that bus. Let me give you a lift later, now that I know.

Shannon disappeared inside the venue, the rented-out community hall, which from Tobias' perspective seemed to be one lengthy middle room, likely a small food preparation area with refrigerators to keep the beer cold, and the tucked-away restrooms down a short corridor. He was familiar with the type of place. Unlike, say, somewhere more unexpected for a wedding—a private function room in the state library, for instance—community halls closely resembled one another. There was room for a petite stage, oftentimes the battleground for ballerina-pirouetting seven-year-olds. An eclectic myriad of entry and exit points. All the space in the world for drunken, disorderly dancing.

Tobias had time to sit alone in why he'd decided he wouldn't be drinking. There was no immediate excuse, he had planned otherwise to hike back on the bus and stumble back home at a forbidden hour. It would be early, early Saturday morning and he would endanger himself on the steep staircase, attempting to make little noise, then pass out for hours and hours. He could do so tipsy, perhaps not completely drunk, but he cautioned himself. It was a slipperier slope getting yourself even a little tipsy. It became a thrill. There was part *a*. Tobias' second reason for staying sober, when almost no one else would, was more personal than that.

He knew other people could be their worst selves drunk, and he knew he wasn't ever too heinous. But there was something like a tie of good behaviour on him, for now. Maybe he attributed it to what he was doing with Adam. Maybe that seemed like falling over when you were far too tipsy, at least for now.

Guests continued to gather, and Tobias spotted one of his other university friends climbing out of the driver's seat of their car. He thought first to pace over and say hello, but remembered the glass of water—or undefined case of water—coming his way, and waited, instead, for Rob to spot him too. They said a quick little hi, and Tobias wondered whether Rob would be tagging along, now the three of them with Shannon only half-knowing a person and having never met the other. But Rob saw someone he knew, and it suddenly seemed he was more familiar with half the invited guests than Tobias ever could have imagined. But that was nice.

Shannon soon returned with their drinks. He said he lingered inside for a second, out of the sun. It really was quite warm. Novembers were only getting more brutal.

SHANNON: Your water. It comes pre-packaged.

TOBIAS: I love plastic water. Thank you. [*he studied the bottle*] They really went out for the good stuff. I promise I'm not being snarky about our friends. Did you go congratulate the lucky man?

SHANNON: When I arrived, when he had a second, yeah. Benny gave me the sort of look you give a guy you don't know too well but like having for company, you know. It wasn't inspiring but I didn't feel unwelcome. Now when I see the bride—

TOBIAS: She'll like you a little more when she sees you talking to me.

SHANNON: Your good influence rubs off on me.

The celebrant—a woman the same height as Tobias, her light, blonde hair in a tight bun at the back of her head, wearing pale, ghostly colours—centred herself underneath the archway with a microphone in hand. She announced the bride was on her way, presumably not on foot, and asked the guests to find their seats. Tobias and Shannon meandered over to the rows and sat themselves in the back, in the corner, like they were either in trouble, or meant to be ignored.

In the same row sat various other strangers and Rob, at the end, on the aisle. To Tobias, it now seemed only a little obvious they had remained a lot closer than he and Liana were, but he didn't mind too much. The honour was being invited. He saw himself differently than he had in university, and now he had different friends. People he met in a house. Their siblings, apparently.

SHANNON: We are gathered here today...

TOBIAS: Is this the sort of thing you will want, when you get married? I know you're likely thinking about when to pop the question officially. Adam pretends to be stunned you haven't yet.

SHANNON: Yeah...everything can take time, obviously. We say, why rush? You don't have to be baby-faced with your *youth intact* when you walk down the aisle. But it won't be anything big. I think Mum might argue you should go bold, make statements, throw money, but she's not living like we are. At this point in our lives. *[he paused, turning his head round to squint in the sun]* You know, I almost proposed. Earlier this year. I hadn't found the ring yet, or anything, but I knew the perfect moment. All throughout my twenties I had such terrible luck with women I know what I've got with Lucy, genuine greatness, a lot of love, but...yeah. Not yet. It's funny, my parents were already a family unit at this age, and Lucy and I we're imagining kids in the middle of our thirties.

TOBIAS: I keep wishing I was still in my twenties.

SHANNON: You should be. Because you're asking for it.

TOBIAS: That sounds too much like wish fulfilment. I don't know, am I destined for a tick of the box? Other than, getting the job, the application being approved, falling in love a little. When I met her at your birthday weekend, camping, I understood why you love her. That's corny, but like so much of finding and fulfilling a wish relies on the right match. Compliments.

SHANNON: *[there was something to his glance]* Thanks, man. I guess we need to both stop being so busy. So controlled by our work, and going to the gym, and thinking it's enough.

The celebrant announced it would not be long before the bride made her appearance, and time ticked so unnoticeably it was brief before they all heard the only moving vehicle behind them. It pulled onto the grass and Liana, draped in white, stepped out of the backseat, almost stumbling on the train. She was quickly caught by her mother's hand. Liana would be walked down the aisle by her. Her father had died when she was only four years old. There was no father-replacement quite like a determined woman.

Liana looked the kind of beautiful you reserved for people you had seen looking decidedly *normal* for many, many days of your life. It was enough to bring tears to the eyes, for Tobias, to see her this way, when in memory she had often looked fresh out of bed. She was gorgeous. Had always been.

The ceremony proceeded, vows were exchanged, Tobias made short glances to see if Shannon was crying, or at least shedding a tear—but then he hardly knew either of them. Tobias discreetly wiped his eyes during Liana’s vows, but there was something odd about Ben’s. He only prayed they weren’t written by an AI, but they felt at least heartfelt enough to have been tightened up.

After the officiant announced they could make-out passionately in front of the gathered audience, the happy couple wandered together down the aisle for the first time as husband and wife, as wife and husband. Tobias hoped the pride had drenched his face. It was worth almost being alone to have seen Liana marry the person who made her the happiest he had ever seen her.

There had been a few months in university where she had dated a true narcissistic asshole, and returning to those harrowing days, of listening to her complain, of holding her hand when she cried, would have likely been worse than losing out on half a million dollars. At least right then, watching her be happy.

TOBIAS: Weddings are worth the moments when I stop believing in love.

SHANNON: Give me a break, you never stop believing in love for even a second. You’re not a cynic. I can’t even look at you and think that, because there’s always a light in those little eyes.

TOBIAS: You’re not supposed to flirt with me — *[he pretended he was blushing]*

SHANNON: I wasn’t. *[he playfully poked out his tongue]* It sounds like the breakup was shitty, and you were miserable for probably half the time Adam was over Sophie, or half of half, a quarter. A quarter of the time. Because you bounced back, maybe you’re already trying to find love again.

TOBIAS: Gavin was really great. But not perfect. Or. I need a different word there. Not *right*. When you’re supposed to find Mr Right.

SHANNON: Okay, they’re waving us over this way again, grab those two chairs, Toby.

TOBIAS: *[as he picked up two chairs, one in each hand]* Nickname basis, are we?

SHANNON: *[he laughed]* You have an old man’s name. Gee, I pity the fool who gets to scream out Tobias during sex. Tobias! It must be like fucking one of the royal guards, or an aging geezer with a crown on his head.

TOBIAS: That’s awful. I truly hope they did not sit us next to each other inside. If you’re going to curse me with reads like that. While I’m getting over a breakup.

SHANNON: Still!

TOBIAS: No. *[he laughed]* I’m well past mining it for pain. You know, there’s a good chance they lumped you with complete strangers, considering Paul’s off selling antique jewels worn by Cleopatra or whatever you said he does. Meanwhile I can warn Rob about you...

SHANNON: Hey, put that chair over here where there’s a gap. Or literally anywhere else. What do I care...it’s not my organised wedding.

The latter Shannon said with a flippant tone, not in any sort of sarcastic, disappointed way. The true disappointment came from Tobias, who at his own returned mention of the breakup, wished he could have said *now I get my back blown out by your brother* but instead felt a cold flush in his blood that told him simply to continue pretending like his life was the same version of ordinary it always was.

Did it feel like lying? He wasn't sure. They were sneaking around, almost, given how *in private* their relationship was. Sneaking around but you could afford to get a little caught at home. Sneaking around or fooling around, something like that. It felt immature to be back-peddling on anything. But with Shannon right there, Tobias felt more **single** than he had since Adam climbed unexpectedly into his tent that early September morning.

They migrated back outside, behind to the rear of the community hall. For refreshments.

TOBIAS: Gorgeous ceremony.

SHANNON: Really quite something, wasn't it?

TOBIAS: *[he picked up a square of cheese on a cracker]* Does feeling like a fish out of water make a person start to lose the ability to talk in fully-formed sentences?

SHANNON: There's only one fish out of water as far as I can see. Nothing fazes me about being the near-stranger at a wedding. Hell, when I went to grab you the bottle of water—don't lose that, by the way, don't litter—I started up a conversation with someone's dad about whatever's going on with the coach of one of the football teams. I don't know any more than he does. I've forgotten the coach's name, even. But you start a conversation like that. *[he clicked his fingers]*

TOBIAS: Forgive me for not having football gossip sitting on the shelf in my skull.

SHANNON: I get invited to a lot of weddings. High school friends, especially, got married at an alarming rate for a handful of years—when we all around twenty-six, twenty-seven, it was the rush. I remember I went to a high-school reunion of a wedding when I was twenty-one. They already had a kid, though, so maybe it was for their own sanity. It was the sort of venue you sort of imagined they would have their honeymoon at, too, and maybe continue to live in for like, the next couple of months. *[he made a shaking gesture with his hands]* That's not a compliment. In the last however many, I'd have Lucy beside me, in case I got bored talking to you know, old friends and parents who knew me when I didn't know how to style my hair and got bad grades in History.

TOBIAS: It's a bummer she couldn't make it today. I liked her, in the fleeting time I got to meet her. She just seemed genuine.

SHANNON: I'm glad everyone got along then. It was good for Adam to have some company.

TOBIAS: He stuffed his roommate into a van. *[he paused, thinking something over]* Your family was very accommodating.

SHANNON: Adam always mentions how polite you are, likely because he has no manners himself. *[another pause, another conversation change]* We've been having these massive conversations lately. Lucy and I. Talking about everything we want out of our relationship, being together, the type of bloated

stuff you expect from two people so crazy in love with each other. *[he smiled, taking a drink from his water bottle]* We decided to test out being open.

TOBIAS: *[quietly stunned]* That's very *queer relationship* of you. I didn't expect those words to ever come out of your mouth. Really. *[he paused]* No one pressured no one?

SHANNON: No, none of that, we're, what is it, consenting adults, who are capable of talking things through. Not like we would have come to the wedding on the prowl though, Toby.

TOBIAS: Oh, I know, I'm sure you weren't. I think mostly I was unaware people like you moved like that without it being intensely uncomfortable for one of the party. Most likely the woman. So. I can soothe myself if Lucy wasn't pressured, because she shouldn't be, and you get that, right?

SHANNON: Of course I do, damn right. Trust that I don't need to go out of my way to flirt with someone else, press myself against someone else, but it's not an embarrassing thought either. Wanting it sometimes. I kinda sat back, after we had the conversation and everything, and even without planning anything, I just thought about it without heaping on feelings of guilt. Guilt fucks up a relationship. *[he laughed]* But I bet you'd say something sincere like "human beings fuck up relationships" and we'd both laugh so heartily we'd be satisfied 'til dinner.

TOBIAS: This feels inappropriate for a conversation at a wedding. They're going to start listening in, all these relative strangers.

But as he said this, Tobias glanced over at Shannon with a sly grin on his face, not at all shunned by their conversation together. He thought to himself, what one person calls inappropriate, he just sees as liberating. That might have always been the way it was for him, or maybe this was an example of how he had changed since his university days, when he had first met Liana. She was now rotating through the crowd, chatting to family members, work friends, people she had known for a very many years. Ben was separate from his new wife, working in a loosely-counter-clockwise movement. Eventually the both of them would reach Tobias and Shannon, standing off alone, oblivious to how Statler-and-Waldorf-coded they could be together, if they had only wanted.

TOBIAS: What's the time exactly?

SHANNON: Look at your phone.

TOBIAS: *[sigh-huffing, jokingly]* Fine. It's half an hour to six. I'm starting to get hungrier than wanting more of the little snacks they've provided.

SHANNON: You don't want to fill up on cheese, meat, and crackers? You, not wanting to fill up on meat?

TOBIAS: Hey, fuck you. *[little laugh]* I think when I tell your brother I spent the night trying to understand you better he's going to look at me all confused, like how did I stumble into the one wedding you also happened to be at. Then maybe he'll feel threatened, because what if you end up being the more interesting brother...

SHANNON: Of which I am.

TOBIAS: ...and he'll threaten, weakly, to stop talking to me if I think that's the case, or maybe he'll query about moving out of the building entirely. And I'd laugh, realising it was all an elaborate hoax, that there's a rivalry that runs between the two of you, three if you include your other brother, who I met once, but it isn't probably a strong enough rivalry to, um, dismantle how peculiar it is to have gotten closer and closer to someone like Adam.

SHANNON: Why's it peculiar? He's nothing unlike normal.

TOBIAS: He's ordinary in a good way. Over time I've met many a guy like Adam, which makes a certain sense. I've met a lot of Adams. It's a real *ordinary* name. But, um. Yeah. I'm getting too sentimental on it, and that's where Adam and I, this Adam, have been finding ourselves lately. Thinking too much. Or I have, because I keep asking myself, *did I ever really think I'd get along so well with a guy like him?* I don't know why I care.

SHANNON: It's insightful, though, isn't it? Adam wouldn't spend so much time around people who think that much. Not calling his friends from way back when *dumb*, but none of them mine what do you call it, shows like the one you two went on, for the psychological data of strategy and all that. [*he paused, smirking*] I watch it sometimes, you know. Outside of his season, [*and with a gesture of his hand*] yours. I think I understand the path. The path ahead, how to *calculate* a move. I'm not a meathead just because you saw me win at Capture the Flag.

TOBIAS: I've never once called, or thought, you were a meathead.

SHANNON: In another life I'd have probably lucked myself into a final two, and won.

TOBIAS: Okay, cocky.

SHANNON: [*he chuckled*] What? You can tack anything onto the end of a pointless phrase like that, no one cares. *In another life* is like saying "yeah, and, brother, I could do that if I was stronger." If you were stronger, come on then, gain all that muscle without lifting one weight. Just blink. In another life, let's pretend there's some version of myself unrecognisable. Or just...a few years younger. Doing the show before Adam even got the chance to audition, however it works. Don't you think I'm fascinating enough to at least make it further than he did?

Shannon glanced at Tobias with a charming sort of grin, and it was impossible for the man, who had all but confessed to himself those months and months earlier that he'd found this other man attractive, maybe slightly because he and Adam shared genetics, to not *shift* because of it. For Tobias, there was a complication in having any type of feelings, big and astronomical the way he was suddenly having for Adam, or tiny, miniscule, petite the way he was having for said man's own brother right in that very moment. This feeling he wouldn't act on. But it was nice, to have rosy-red cheeks at a wedding.

It all reminded him of a man he had once known, who throughout a relationship with a woman, made comments about how nice it would have been to exist on a separate plane where he could be kissing men, too. Some late, drunken on his behalf, nights the man would text him about kissing Tobias in particular, but Tobias never gave it weight. It would never quite happen.

Even if you argued the possibility of its being.

You ought to quit it.

When Liana came around to the two men standing to the side, chatting mere nonsense to one another, she embraced Tobias in a hug and asked him if he was having a wonderful time. You could glean the overabundance of joy plastered on her own face. It was quite magnificently the time of her life, and one of the happiest days in her recorded history. Tobias smiled, a genuine smile, and responded with something that had felt a little scripted, but only because he recognised Shannon was still standing beside him, and would have likely never let him forget it if he said something even benignly sweet and honey-coated about their miniature reunion here and then.

When Ben, Benny, came around to the two men, he slapped Shannon on the back with such a force it could almost have knocked him stumbling forward, perhaps had it been anywhere else but outside of a wedding venue. Those two, Benny and Shannon, chatted amongst themselves about something almost undecipherable to Tobias, who lingered and checked his phone every so often. He sent a text to Adam, and one to Isobel—the latter was really a handful of texts, completely unrelated to the wedding at all, as the pair of them continued a conversation that had been going on since that morning. Ben and Tobias didn't have much to talk about. So, it made sense.

Time ticked on, and most of the party had wandered inside to find their seats in the community hall. Tobias and Shannon followed suit, checking the little nametags. Tobias was near the end of one of the extended tables, but he couldn't have been sure where Shannon ended up. Somewhere over there, near the middle. He'd lifted his tag and swapped it for someone beside Tobias named *Jackie*. A bit of a misery if Jackie ended up entirely alone. Swarmed by strangers.

TOBIAS: I'm craving some food real bad.

SHANNON: No one notices anything when you're not at the table of great importance. [*he flicked a glance at where the bride, groom, and co were sitting*] They'll bring round dinner soon, boy. Then we'll be out on the floor dancing, me and you, and then they'll be noticing.

TOBIAS: I'm a lame dancer.

SHANNON: It's a wedding, no one's expecting you to have done freaking ballet all throughout your early years, until you moved onto "contemporary," which always to me seemed like an excuse to just thrust your body around in a way the dance teacher called hypnotic.

TOBIAS: You're right. And it's a white people's wedding too. Most of the dancing will be jumping up and down, throwing arms around, trying not to hit other people in the face and break their noses.

SHANNON: A bloody nose might keep me excited without the booze.

TOBIAS: [*genuine*] Are you craving it? Is the whole thing less appealing if you can't sip from something?

SHANNON: The older I get, the less I feel like I need it to enjoy myself, and I think if all I'd known was Benny maybe yeah this entire night would be not the least bit appealing at all. [*he made a knowing glance at the man beside him*] Grateful I'm not alone. Grateful I'm not sober alone.

TOBIAS: Can I get you something else that's not water though?

SHANNON: Right, we should at least be hitting something, like a *soft drink*, like we're still so young. Remember school discos. Although at those I think they just laced you with watered-down cordial.

TOBIAS: I'm going to go find you something random and just slide it in front of your face.

SHANNON: That sounds horrific, Toby.

TOBIAS: You're right, sorry, something random that you can drink, not the father of the groom's piss collected from the toilet stall or anything. You would hate that.

SHANNON: *[he makes a disgusted face]* I'd vom all over ya, Toby. Go just get me a plastic cup of the passionfruit-flavoured stuff, what is it, Pasito? It looks like they just got generic-brand though, another way to easily cut some costs. It's smart, really. These mouth-breathers aren't so worthy of the expensive stuff when they might just spill it on the ground because they're purposefully drinking it to get a little less tipsy. *[he grins, making a shooing gesture]* Go on, go on.

Tobias excused himself from the table and wandered over to a designated area near the temporary bar stockpiled with buckets of water bottles, bottles of soft drink, plastic cups, and an extra icy bucket of beer, which mostly made Tobias less thirsty. He set two cups on the tablecloth and began to pour a drink for himself and for Shannon. It was still something of a surprise, the two of them being there, and being there almost alone. Rob's namecard was on the other side of his, and no doubt the pair would interact over the course of the evening, but Tobias liked this lurch in attention from his roommate's brother. It made little sense. But many things in his life hadn't, so what was one more?

Tobias let his mind wander, too. He wondered what Adam was doing as it drifted past six o'clock on a Friday night. Mostly he hoped the other man was out of the house, getting himself a little boozy, and mostly he felt it respectable to hope that Adam wasn't really thinking much about him. He mused how many times he'd already told himself they weren't steering towards being a couple, not like how romantic it had been with Gavin. When he had thought himself lovely.

It was alright he was not *lovely* now. Was not a dream dressed up.

Tobias was meant to be of a maturity level where he would snatch up romance when it came, but otherwise he would not claw for it, or make a demand that could not come true, not when he faced reality from across the street. He clasped the two cups, one in either hand, and glimpsed Liana coming up towards the door from outside on the lawn. In university, he ignored an unrequited crush until it went away. He would have simply done as much with a man like Adam. Until it changed. Like it had.

He had to reason with himself to stop thinking in absolutes. That they would have absolutely not had an attraction to each other in another time, that they are absolutely dashing this way or that. Tobias carried the plastic cups back to the table in the middle and sat himself down beside Shannon, again. It was being in the presence of Adam's brother that made his brain a little squeamish. That much he knew.

TOBIAS: Your non-alcoholic beverage.

SHANNON: *[smiling]* Thanks, Toby. *[he took a sip]* Hey, I've got a question for you. It's not a test or nothing. Just a question.

TOBIAS: Yeah, shoot.

SHANNON: What's your favourite type of cake?

TOBIAS: Oh. You're right, not a test at all. I always think the hardest part of the wedding planning would be choosing the cake. I don't really, I rarely think about wedding planning... I don't know why I said it like that. *[he paused, laughing a little]* How many types of cake are there, even? I just like eating a big slab of chocolate mudcake and forgetting about the sugar, just for a sec.

SHANNON: You had some cake on the camping trip?

TOBIAS: Oh, yeah, of course. Adam snuck a second piece and we split it in the back of the van. I think he could have stolen another piece, so we didn't have to share, but maybe he wanted... *[he cut himself off]* Nevermind. I don't know what he wanted.

SHANNON: You two are close, right?

TOBIAS: If I had to tolerate him every day living with him I'd lose something. Sanity, or else my temper, my rage.

SHANNON: You can just say *yes*.

TOBIAS: *Yes* bores me. I say yes when someone blurts out my name, or I'm responding over the phone to something benign for an appointment. For a conversation, shouldn't I want to make it linger longer? Give you something else to work with.

SHANNON: It really is no wonder you got a start on television. Very charming. But natural about it. Not in a used-car-salesman way, and not like you want to convince me to stand in the middle of a flaming circle for one hundred hours just to earn a buck.

TOBIAS: Is the circle really flaming?

SHANNON: Flaming, or blimmin', it's something Dad always said, so he didn't swear around the kids. You know how to spell a word like blimmin'? What are the letters?

TOBIAS: It sounds decidedly British. I've got no idea. *[he shook his head]* I won't go trying to convince you to stand in the middle of some circle, though.

SHANNON: Not if it's on fire. You know, I'm a master blaster with a fire extinguisher. Put that circle out in record time.

TOBIAS: Oh really? What are we doing at a wedding then? Let's see that in action.

Dinner was served, and conversation became fragmented as the two divided time enjoying proper food and listening to the various speeches from the bridal party, the groomsmen, the parents, and the groom's childhood best friend who was seemingly not a groomsman but still held an incredible importance. It was a lovely time. The food was delicious. Tobias had completely forgotten there was a thread in his brain. It still amused him he was sitting at a table, at the wedding of Liana and Ben, and here was Shannon Affeldt sitting beside him like it was to be expected.

Even though it decidedly was not.

Time moved like a river and the DJ announced the beginning of what was to be his set. Classic rock blared from the sound system, the bride and the groom let loose their inhibitions and noticeably began to have more fun. Shannon was still eating. Tobias was all out of drink.

After a while, their own inner chaos beginning to unsheathe, Tobias and Shannon edged each other out onto the dance floor. It was like they were in high school again, egging the other to remove the mask, to do what every single other able-bodied, free-spirited person at the wedding reception was doing. Having fun. Letting their body become putty.

The music was transparent—it was a coercion to get everybody to move their hips, to cease the fretting over whether a free-flowing hand would look bizarre, or out of sync, if someone from across the hall paid any close attention to it at all. But the coercion ended with getting the bodies to encircle one another on the wood. Alcohol might have made Jenn flirtier with her moves, a hand set upon the waist of the man she called her boyfriend, but it was Jenn who leaned in and kissed him as one song trickled into another. Masterfully-stroked by the deejay.

Tobias felt himself give into noise he had not heard in at least a handful of years, although these songs sounded awfully alike to the sort of music that had played the night he wandered back into the real world again. Everything had changed then. He knew that. A blasting of “Tubthumping” loud enough to burst an eardrum had never been required then, and wasn’t required now for what happened next. Although it helped.

They seemed to inch closer to one another with each passing song. Subtle, like Tobias would have dreamed of being way back when he was trying to lay the moves on this boy he fancied a year or so after he graduated university, the two of them on the couch late one night watching an inexcusable remake of something previously brilliant. Maybe that was all a metaphor then. Don’t do a new thing when the past is just as vivacious to reminisce on. Maybe take your own advice, Tobias thought, as he contorted his body away from Shannon, without making it noticeable or obvious.

This, as diversion, scored low marks. It was weak, and Tobias was attention-seeking, built like so from birth, or so he believed. The pair continued to dance, their bodies in close proximity, until Tobias could feel Shannon’s hot breath on his face. The community hall was warm, aided barely by the ceiling fans recycling warm, sweat-filled air. Shannon let a hand linger on Tobias’ hip. It seemed neither of them cared so much about what their three or so friends, those known entities at the wedding, would think about the sudden act of intimacy.

Not that it appeared to be anything truly intimate. Less intimate than anything Adam had been capable of. Or has been, with memory fresh. It was a waist-hold as if it were the first person Shannon had touched in a time, and the need, the longing, to simply touch another human overcame him as the primary, passionate desire. It was not like they slow-danced, not like you very well could to “Low.”

Tobias strained his voice screaming out the lyrics to “Mr Brightside,” which seemed to renew some invisible membership he’d been a part of since he was born, born in Australia to white parents, at least, and he watched Shannon do the same, the two of them very rarely stumbling over a lyric. Somehow he found himself becoming more attracted to the other man on the act alone, but the residue of their almost-grinding was still at the top of his mind, too. He wandered away from the dance floor as the song shifted into something he didn’t recognise.

Shannon followed after him.

SHANNON: I need to piss. I’m going to the bathroom.

TOBIAS: *[he winced]* I guess I’ll come wait in line behind you then. Suddenly busting.

SHANNON: You go first then, Toby.

The pair of them skirted the dance floor and tucked into the thin corridor connecting the hall to the three restrooms. The ladies, the mens, and a wheelchair-accessible stall at the very end. A taller gentleman exited the men's restroom as Tobias and Shannon approached it, giving them a look-over which implied he wasn't entirely still with them. Mind-function speaking. Tobias and Shannon rounded the corner and saw the empty stall. A man flapping out the tail of his coat stood at the urinal, pissing a steady flow. Shannon made a quick passing glance at Tobias.

SHANNON: We'll go in together, then. Get out of the way.

As he said this, another man did in fact start to come up behind them to join what now was becoming a miniature queue for the toilet. It gave Tobias little time to really deconstruct what was happening, except he understood he was filing into the stall in front of Shannon, who had pressed a hand on his shoulder and was guiding him like he was a horse, or a dumb-founded donkey. It happened in a manner fast enough that he had no time to say, "what are you going to do, watch me pee?" Shannon swivelled around to latch the stall door closed behind them, and Tobias suddenly wondered what the stranger would think, two men tucking themselves into one crowded space, at a wedding, with the lights on.

Shannon seemed to linger facing away, and Tobias unzipped the smart trousers and poked his flaccid penis out. He worried for only the briefest of seconds that he would be pee-shy with someone standing right behind him, but it came out in a stream, hitting the bowl. His shirt was now a little untucked. Tobias blocked out his surroundings long enough to focus on the aim of his piss, then to shake off the last few unbothered splashes.

He was about to zip up his pants when he felt what was noticeably a man's crotch against his ass. Shannon had turned, pressing himself against Tobias, a hand snaking around, down from his waist, towards his soft cock just peeking out from his pants. Another lightning round. Little time to consider much. Shannon took up Tobias' member in his hand, soft, cautious, and started to slowly stroke it from behind. Any time he readjusted himself he grazed his own penis against Tobias' behind, fabric and fabric separating flesh.

This lasted for a short time. It was almost inconsequential. Tobias found himself getting semi-aroused, but by the time Shannon eased backwards and unzipped his own pants, eager to use the toilet himself, the vibe had shifted completely. Like the moment had elapsed. Tobias listened to the stream of the other man's piss with his back turned, for respect or privacy, and briefly he considered whether Shannon would have wanted it in return, to be touched, gently, like that, himself. Or like so many men experimenting, like Adam had been too, like it ran in the family. Shannon might have wanted to feel no difference at all. Like he was being slobbered on by a woman.

He was making himself feel *odd*. He wanted so little to feel embarrassed. Tobias arched his body so his building erection was not pressed against the other man's butt, the fabric of the pants, but he reached around, too, and started to stroke Shannon's cock the way he had been stroking his mere moments ago. It surprised him how noticeably absent the pushback was. Shannon muffled his pleasure, true, but he was clearly into it. Tobias wanted to jerk off the other man to completion until he remembered they were idling in a public bathroom, at a wedding, and it was not yet eight o'clock.

They took turns washing their hands at the compact, for-short-people sink and laughed to themselves as they wandered out of the restroom. Clearly nothing had penetrated the vibe between

them. But it was unavoidable that what had happened was something which lingered around them, somewhat alike to an odour which could become attached to a person after having visited any old restroom, at any old time. It was not so much a stink, but it wafted all the same.

When Tobias and Shannon rejoined the others on the dance floor, it seemed no different. Not to them, not to the unknowing, not to the bride and groom, who drifted away from one another from time to time, but seemed no different than they had always been. In love. Happily so.

This was the biggest day of their entire lives. Unless you counted having been born as *major*.

An hour or so later, dancing having become a competitive sport, exhaustion wearing them a little thin, Tobias and Shannon wandered outside to a short staircase off the side of the community hall. They sat apart, one at the top of the staircase, the other two steps down, almost at a diagonal from each other. It felt comfortable to Tobias, there being no attached reason for the pair of them to sit on top of one another. For a split second, he let himself enjoy the peace of the November night. The little dribble of a breeze. The pitch-black surrounds, gulping him up.

TOBIAS: Are we going to talk about that?

SHANNON: *[he chuffed]* You and I were both clearly enjoying it, or at least the rush of it. Doing something like that when we could be overheard. It felt good, Toby, what's there to talk about?

TOBIAS: I'm not looking for an explanation for it. So long as you don't come back to me regretting it.

SHANNON: I don't do things and regret them. *[he smirked]* So it happened, so we put our hands on each other like that. Does it make me any less in love with a woman, or you any more of a perv?

TOBIAS: *[after a beat]* The night's so beautiful out here. Peaceful.

SHANNON: *[after another beat, competitively longer]* Lucy's in the doghouse. I put her there, because I'm so enraged by her right now. I keep hesitating when I go to say **Luce** because it feels wrong, invalid, to be both affectionate towards her when she isn't here and still so incredibly pissed off. So it's Lucy, tonight. And I'm making her sleep on the couch until I convince myself I can forgive her.

TOBIAS: *[concerned, his head turned like a snap]* I didn't know something happened between the two of you. Here I've been all night mentioning her and it's been tearing away at your skin.

SHANNON: You couldn't have known. I don't go around publicly sharing anytime someone in my life is making me so angry I tell them to take a hike for a while. *[he sighed]* I proposed. Like four days ago. Incredibly stupid thing for a guy to do, apparently. There she goes being grateful it wasn't being filmed, or we weren't surrounded by other people, even strangers. In private she could say to me, *no, no, Shannon, that's not a good idea right now*. What is it, the cost of living crisis, Lucy? *Do the crime, adult time* not working out for us? No matter how she spun it, it made no sense to me. You don't want to get married, or you don't want to marry me...why am I at a fucking wedding right now, with this swimming 'round in my head? *[he glances over at the other man]* Toby?

TOBIAS: Yeah?

SHANNON: If you want to blame a poorly-timed decision on me acting the fool, do that. I swear to you we talked about what it would look like to be *open*, but maybe that shot our chances of getting down the aisle with grace in the damned foot. *[he laughed]* What did you say, that's an awfully queer decision to make? What's something I do, when I'm bored? Make a move on my brother's roommate. Let me be frank, Toby, it wasn't just because you were right here, and I'm lonely and frustrated and wondering what about me is so much of an issue Lucy has to make herself my enemy and land herself on the couch. I'm in control. I wanted to touch you, and I expected you to be receptive, because like everyone I just assume that of gay men like you. Not prudes. Not afraid of another man getting a little handsy. If you tell Adam about this he's gonna look at me differently. Not a one of us has strayed from wanting to just be touched by a woman.

It amused Tobias, how silver-platter this had been presented to him. An opportunity for confession, like he was suddenly religious, if his religion was invoking secrets. Of course Adam had been mum to his family. There would not have ever been an opportunity to confess he liked to kiss another man on the lips, with a gentleness that could morph into a version of passion like burning up from a fire at the base of your feet. It was all so recent, too. Adam hadn't even seen either brother, or his parents, since before Halloween. It was after all only early November and the climate only got steamier.

He could have mentioned it then, the falsity of a statement that had an essence of poetry to it. It was the word choice, *strayed*, which Tobias lingered on the most. If someone else had said it maybe he would have felt betrayed by the implication he was something wrong for having gleefully strayed himself from wanting to just be touched by a woman. But no part of his opinion of Shannon changed.

Maybe it wasn't part of their nature, the Affeldt boys, to make a man feel used. He liked to think he was absolved, himself, of feeling as though an act as consensual as it was could wound him because it came with a caveat.

How different were these acts, Adam grinding against his ass, Shannon taking his cock in hand? Visibly they looked similar, at least from afar. Maybe, and this he wondered jokingly, without an imagination of it ever happening, he needed to suck the third brother's dick to spice things up, keep it interesting. Suddenly he couldn't remember his name, which felt comfortable. Like this was as a convoluted as it would get. Because Shannon had stumbled into the orbit, and he had an Affeldt brother at home he could play with instead.

It gnawed at him how much he wanted to say, "there is just so much alike between the pair of you." But it cheapened him to think about exposing something that wasn't his. He couldn't reveal what felt sometimes, almost, like an affair. Just as much as he couldn't go home and tell Adam that it was likely the only reason Shannon was alone there at the wedding was because of a proposal gone wrong, and how being human meant being volatile, meant sticking your hand in someone's pants.

Because you could. Brothers like brothers.

How he hated to be *polite* all the time.

TOBIAS: You could've just skipped out on the wedding, no one would have blamed you for that.

SHANNON: And miss out on this night, with you?

TOBIAS: I lucked into being friends with your brother.

SHANNON: I steal my brother's friends all the time. *[he paused]* Usually we go jogging.

Shannon stood from his perch on the step and wandered into the darkness, eyeing off a picnic table in the distance. If he had been tipsy, or worse, he might have staggered his way, stumbled a little, maybe fallen face-first. But his movement was balanced and a straight line from one point to another, and Tobias wasted little time following behind him. The silence of the night further still threatened to drown out the sound of music pouring from speakers. It was "Sweet Caroline" now, and a raucous crowd screamed out the chorus, but for Tobias, all he heard was the part of his conscience that still believed two people could be in love. Shannon had reached the picnic table and clambered onto the tabletop, his shoes planted where a person ought to normally sit. Without really thinking, Tobias took Shannon's face in his hands and felt the bristles of an unshaven jaw against his palms.

TOBIAS: You need to make things up with your woman, Shannon, and I need to...stop thinking I'm capable of all this shit. Marriage. Falling in love with the right person. *[he rolled his eyes into the back of his head]* I'm happy for them, but maybe it won't ever be me underneath the arch, reading my vows off a printed piece of paper.

Without warning, they kissed. It was sloppy, and definitely not romantic, which felt like a *fucking* trend for Tobias lately. He wanted to enjoy it more than he was, but the kiss would not extend into something, anything, beautiful. It would end, and potentially be apologised for, and Tobias would climb into bed at an unfathomable hour in the morning and try to paint his sleep with thoughts of anything but. In the morning, or in the day, in the light, he would try his best to not see Shannon in Adam's face. It was not a kiss that ached, but it felt like it should have.

When he first met Shannon, of course he'd been attracted to him.

But this kiss was like a band-aid.

SHANNON: Lucy should have been here, and someone should have been climbing all over her to look at the engagement ring I picked out. Now I can't even tell you if she wants to be with me.

TOBIAS: I need to stop ending up around people who feed into the anti-marriage propaganda.

SHANNON: If you had someone in your life you loved completely, entirely, wouldn't you want to marry them if they asked you to?

TOBIAS: Thanks for reminding me I'm all alone.

SHANNON: Well, is there someone you haven't told me about then?

TOBIAS: *[he sighed]* No. There isn't. I don't need to be reminded. *[he shook his head, taking a step back away from the picnic table]* It's whatever, Shannon. We can pretend tonight didn't divulge into more of the same from me. I accidentally make someone horny, they remind me I'm not marriage material, rinse and repeat. *[he scoffed]* That isn't me saying you did anything wrong.

SHANNON: You deserve to actually be in love again, Toby.

TOBIAS: No god or monster thinks I do.

SHANNON: Do you think it's up to someone high above? I didn't know you were the religious type.

TOBIAS: I'm not. But if there is divine intervention, my story lately is either sexless or the only thing I am good for is sex. Is there an in-between, does it exist for a messed-up boy like me?

SHANNON: Sounds like you've been going out for too many lousy hookups lately.

TOBIAS: *[he paused before he spoke]* They aren't lousy, not really. *[thinking made his brain hurt]* How do you tell someone you want more than just the fun with them? Even if it means the arguments, and possibly wanting to tear them to pieces for sport, not in the bedroom. Even if it means you realise in a few months' time that the few little things you have in common aren't going to be enough to keep a healthy relationship stable. I'm not built for casual.

SHANNON: Propose? *[he laughed]* Then together we can be in the shit.

TOBIAS: *[he would never be able to explain this expression]* I know you're just joking because you're tired.

SHANNON: No one here's tired. The night's still young!

TOBIAS: Drive me home. Go talk to her.

SHANNON: Let me crash at yours tonight. We can explain it all to Adam later.

TOBIAS: Where are you gonna sleep, on the couch?

SHANNON: In bed with you. I won't try to touch you in your sleep. That's assault.

TOBIAS: You aren't thinking with your head, dude. That's a terrible idea.

SHANNON: I can't look at her asleep on the couch tonight.

TOBIAS: Then wake her up, and talk. *[he paused]* I'm not helping you explain to Adam why you couldn't face going home, Shannon. You're not weak-willed like that.

SHANNON: You barely know me.

TOBIAS: What is left for either of us tonight? We've congratulated the happy couple, ate, watched them cut the cake. Screamed at the top of our lungs singing along to whatever song. Your mate isn't here. I don't know if I actually cared about catching up with Rob again. He seems like a different person. Or he's just the same Rob I joked around with when I was a younger man. *[he shrugged his shoulders]* Come on, bud, drive me home. Drive yourself home. At home you can get less sober, after you've talked to her.

SHANNON: I want to talk to my brother.

TOBIAS: What's Adam got to do with it?

SHANNON: He's not so whingey lately. Do you know what's gotten into him? Has he met some new girl? *[he laughed, climbing down off the table]* I'm sure you would know if he was sneaking someone into that house. Walls paper thin. He's not keeping a thing from you.

TOBIAS: There's no girl. *[he considered being chaotic again]* Don't harass your brother. Let's go, Shannon. I'll give you a blowjob in the car.

For a moment, Shannon seemed to genuinely consider it. Tobias was only half-joking around, so conscious that it was the absolute wrong decision for either of them, but he tiptoed across a trapeze line that would get him in trouble with someone, eventually, and he almost felt it the responsible thing to stuff something in his mouth so he would stop fucking speaking.

They wandered back inside the hall and said their goodbyes to a handful of people, in particular the bride and groom, Liana and Benny. The pair of them were disappointed, somewhat, to be saying goodbye to two of their guests and so soon, but they understood, and Liana squeezed Tobias into a warm embrace and promised him they would catch up again sometime soon. He doubted it, but the sentiment was nice, welcoming. He snatched up another piece of cake as he left the building. Shannon was right behind him.

Whether something happened behind the closed doors of the car, who could say. Shannon drove Tobias home in the darkness of that November evening, and when he parked in front of the pencil house, they had another argument, playful in its tone, about whether Shannon would come stepping inside behind Tobias and the two of them would pretend it was right, and normal, for a man rejected to continue to stew and fester in his disappointment. His bitter frustration.

TOBIAS: Go home to her. She'll have a reason for not saying yes then.

SHANNON: I know you're right. *[he paused]* You know, technically I was right, when I said you barely know me. But I know so much about you. I watched you for far too many weeks on the telly, even after Adam got himself voted off for being too obnoxious. I kept watching because I was hooked by then, rooting for several people, including yourself. It was like knowing a celebrity, you get what I'm saying. There was no connection but I knew all these little things about you. The way you care about a person. The way you lie. *[he winked from the driver's seat]* I won't stay over tonight, because you're right. I don't need to explain that to Adam. He'll just think you did something horrendous like worm me into cheating, because you don't tell your own brother the decision to open a relationship to potentially save it, and you don't tell him you've thought about having sex with another man.

TOBIAS: But you could.

SHANNON: I won't stay over, but I'm coming right back here tomorrow. I want to see my brother.

Tobias thanked him for the lift and wondered, aloud, whether the promise to come back would stick. It was thankfully not yet midnight. It was still that Friday night in November. Tobias wondered, to himself, in his head, whether he would have to explain everything, or if he could handpick anything that wouldn't feel so fantastical to anyone he told the story to. To Adam, at least, he would keep out everything that had gone beyond the two of them just bonding as newfound friends. Which meant he could give himself the grace of thinking less about how much fate wanted to entangle him with the Affeldt brothers.

Fate's not real, he thought, unlocking the front door.

ADAM & SHANNON

then.

ADAM: Oi, careful, watch out.

SHANNON: I'm the one carrying this thing backwards, brother. Let me put it down. We're through the door now. I'm gonna break an ankle trying to go your pace.

The brothers were navigating a dresser into the living room of Adam's new place, a three-storey, four-bedroom house that more closely resembled a child's drawing of a fire station, one equipped with a lengthy silver pole from top to bottom. One could imagine the burns on raw flesh if you attempted to slip and slide down from the third floor on a hurried attempt to not be late for work. Although that suggested you had uncovered arms, or thighs, whatever clung to the metal on the descent.

Adam resented a moving day. Not because he loathed hiking a series of boxes from one place to the next, or because he groaned at straining muscle to move the seven-year-couch. When he paused to understand what he disliked about a moving day, it made sense to him: he simply did not like unpacking everything. The hours spent unfolding, unwrapping, unfurling. For Adam, it simply ate away at time. The precious time he had. Before he returned back to work.

Isobel was conveniently not home when he was moving everything in. It was a strange turn of events, he thought. They hadn't too much in common. He thought Isobel was reliable, which sounded like he compared her to an appliance, a *reliable toaster*. She seemed like the type to pay rent on time. To monitor the bills. He needed someone reliable like that, and with the way out, a path cleared ahead, living together after wrapping the show seemed like he had stumbled upon an *in*. The more he finessed on the agreement, the less unarranged it felt.

Or Adam was really just putting board to the rapids and holding on for dear life.

Or now the board was materialising into boat. Life raft, but sturdy. Sturdy enough.

SHANNON: It's a nice place. [*he glanced around the room, the dresser an eyesore in the middle of it*] Are you going to be comfortable here, brother o' mine?

ADAM: Why are you talking like that? Like you're in a play.

SHANNON: Gee. Sorry for spicing up what's otherwise just an ordinary moment in life, moving into a place, moving out of the last. I don't know Irish, or Gaelic or the same. The best I can do is an o' and I shame our forefathers or whoever watches down on us when they can peer through the Safe Browsing filter and make sure we're not sitting on the toilet, or in bed doing...it.

ADAM: Only one of us is doing any of *it*. I just shit on the dime, as they say.

SHANNON: There's a tonne of your stuff in the van. Can you stop gabbing and get out of the way?

ADAM: Who's gabbing? Not me—

SHANNON: [*he shook his head, faking disapproval*] Sure thing. C'mon.

Adam and his brother descended out to the borrowed van out on the street. It was a friend's, which Adam had almost begged for at late notice, because he had otherwise forgotten to hire anything to transport the various things which could squeeze within it. The bed, deconstructed, lay in its various pieces wedged in between other assorted items of furniture, although the dresser had taken up a significant amount of room. They would go back for the couch. Adam had not wanted to fuss over a moving truck, or the hire of one. He barely had much to his name. Most of his belongings were fabric—in the form of clothes—and glass—in the form of bottles of alcohol, unfinished.

The process of moving exposed how few physical items of memorabilia Adam claimed. His last apartment was filled with the various junk of roommates. While he felt strangely protective over some of the coffee mugs, particularly if they were jokey and humorous, in a dad sort of way, Adam hadn't had the space for much. His bedroom in the last apartment was small and would have looked overcrowded with *belongings*. The idea should have made him grimace, but it didn't.

If anything this was a fresh start. His technical last residence, a warehouse like an outer shell to a fake mansion for twenty complete strangers, had felt like living in a department store. The furniture matched, but then it also sniffed out like an absurdity catalogue he imagined a girl like Alice would rummage through if she lived in the modern-day. But even his vague recollection of *Alice in Wonderland* felt outdated. Maybe they would have movie nights here, he briefly thought, and then killed the idea. It sounded too sickly-sweet in his head.

He barely knew Isobel. They had the two other bedrooms to fill, and it seemed almost arranged Ophelia would take one of them. Which seemed to complicate the notion they would be buddy-buddy with each other. He wasn't so used to living with women he wasn't related to. He expected they would think he was making a pass just by suggesting they sit on the couch and watch something together.

All these thoughts, and he was merely lifting in the headboard of the bed.

Adam hoped the mattress would fit in the van.

SHANNON: Alright. When's this going up that staircase?

ADAM: *[they both glanced at the staircase]* When we run out of room down here.

SHANNON: You have to confront the beasts, brother.

ADAM: Are you calling me afraid?

SHANNON: Are you not afraid? Are you not pussy? *[he paused]* Ever since you returned I have seen a brother who is *afraid*. I get it, though. I get the want to be sadder than you let on. Breaking up with someone is—

ADAM: Sophie is going to change her mind.

SHANNON: And if she does, there was never an issue, was there? You don't think I've been dating someone before where you believe, and deeply, that you and the girl are made for each other, like it's written in the stars?

ADAM: I don't need to listen to this.

SHANNON: You want to argue about it, Adam? Is my tough advice for your love life too harsh?

ADAM: We need to finish this up.

SHANNON: You came out of that house with a new perspective on being with her. I know that, I know the episodes didn't necessarily cover it much, but a friend from work, she loves the show, and she linked me anytime you said something interesting on the feeds. *[he smirked]* I know, I was surprised you were capable of that. Most of the time it was about her. Your relationship with Sophie. You said being away from her settled any doubts you had about whether it was working between the two of you, and sure, sometimes this was through a conversation you had with someone—Donny, a lot of the time—but it helped you out. You come out and she immediately says, I saw everything and I still want to piss on what we've got and call it quits. Duh, of course you think she missed something and she needs to be away from you again to realise it. This time completely away, no expecting anything when you're back again.

ADAM: Are you done?

SHANNON: I show you what it looks like to mature as a person and you ask me if I'm finished? *[he shook his head]* I don't want to be arguing with you. Believe it or not there's compassion here, and you could have been the type to land himself in bed for weeks because of a breakup, but you're still going. Don't chew on delusion for breakfast.

ADAM: We didn't get to talk enough. She approached me, said what she wanted to say, which felt like something she rehearsed at home the entire time I was locked away in the jury box watching edited clips of the people still beating me, and then she acted like it was too late to even try. Like fuck, we weren't some old married couple who clung desperately to therapy sessions with a miserable, judgemental guidance counsellor but we could have still tried. We didn't talk enough.

SHANNON: Maybe that was her problem, then.

ADAM: I didn't have a phone for months.

SHANNON: And whose choice was that?

ADAM: Was it either I go on a reality show for some money or I stay back and argue with my girlfriend?

SHANNON: If you saw there were issues with the relationship, you could have at least stayed to patch them up. Take it from a man who stumbled a hell of a lot in his early twenties. Or just, in general, man. Now things are different and as a rule to myself I don't want to ruin it all by being an asshole to Lucy.

ADAM: The opportunity might never have been here again. I'd gone out on a limb to compete on the show—

SHANNON: And all I'm saying is you should have gone out on a limb to see if things with Sophie could have been fixed. Maybe they were doomed no matter what. But still what you did was run away. You know how they say a man will pretend to be going out for a pack of cigarettes and never be seen again in that house? You did that with reality tv, man. I don't shame you for having been on the show and you really did prove to all of us, all the family, you were capable of doing it. But of course Sophie spent months being miserable wondering if some production assistant was reading her messages when she sent them through late at night.

ADAM: She knew I'd never get anything. So she rarely sent anything.

SHANNON: If you have to admit you applied for the show because it presented an easy out, just say that. What am I going to do, call you afraid again?

ADAM: I got sick of just waking up and going to work and coming back to an apartment and doing it all over again. Shame me for wanting something different.

SHANNON: You're skipping over the fact Sophie was unhappy dating you—

ADAM: Were you there? Were you one half of who we were together? No, you weren't. As soon as we both moved out of our parents' place we stopped knowing everything about each other's lives, and good. Sophie had this idea of what being together was like, and she said had been for a while, not only while I was gone trying and failing to win a reality show on TV. I didn't see it the way she did, Shannon. I didn't think we were incapable of fixing the holes, covering over them, but not just like a temporary fix. Because next you'll say my ideas were only these minor solutions. Like I didn't know how to properly treat a woman, like I'm a sexist, misogynistic asshole, like the world sees me now because...that's what happens when you let yourself be unfiltered.

SHANNON: Don't give yourself migraines listening to what people who don't know a speck of you have to say.

Adam darted back outside and rummaged through the back of the borrowed van. He tried to calm himself down, worked and overworked by comments he might have otherwise tossed aside like fallen rubble from a landslide. When his brother said them, he started to listen. He followed through on listening, and he paid close attention to every vowel and consonant. It was his brother, and his older one at that. Adam figured he had lived longer, knew more, and had experienced a wider variety of personal anecdotes he could later cash in for older brother points. It was equivalent to hand-me-down clothes. Hand-me-down advice.

Shannon came down from the front door and for a time neither spoke, making soft grunt-like sounds to indicate a yes as they navigated another piece of the bed frame out of the van and towards the house. The quiet was peaceful. After a minor argument, so sudden and unexpected, Adam liked processing inside his head. Although what he intended to process was beyond him. Sophie had witnessed a version of their relationship he himself had not seen, or known—he thought needing space was healthy, and he thought his twenty-something version of love and romance, of being *in* love, made complete and total sense.

A knife to the heart would have at least dulled the onslaught of emotions to come. First, pure agony. He masked it all evening, then collapsed into the hotel room bed, dulled, incapable of rescinding his masculinity to shed a frog's pond of tears. Adam cried eventually. It reminded him he was not a stone statue. He disclosed of this to absolutely no one. Why give them reason for another torment?

Already he was tending to his wounds. Sophie might or might not have been the love of his life, who knows, he was young enough to acknowledge being a twenty-seven-year-old guy in this world, this specific era of time, meant he did not have to know whether she was or not. Soulmates might have expired from use in the twenty-first century.

Adam and Shannon carried the foot-end of the bedframe into the house and set it down beside the previously-carried-in head. They glanced at one another, as if wondering whether with each piece another miniature argument would break out. What had been the trigger last time? The word *afraid*. The concept of confronting the *beasts*. Wasn't he doing all that?

ADAM: [*his voice casual, a smidgen contemplative*] It's going to be weird living here.

SHANNON: Why weird? This is like they're spinning you off, unofficial.

ADAM: I'm starting to think you watched more than the clips your "friend" sent you.

SHANNON: Hey, we're talking about what's so weird about moving in with people you know.

Friends, buddies, people you have more in common with than being complete strangers. Like that part is over, Adam, and now you just get to live with people who are going to be better influences on you than Eric, and the other ones, Jacob. Josh. I forget who you lived with and who was constantly just over on the couch playing video games and eating from almost-stale bags of chips. You guys were teenagers still. You needed to leap right out of there. *[a pause, a laugh]* These are the conversations Lucy and I have in bed after we see you.

ADAM: Great to know you both think so much about me. *[he scratched his head]* I guess we know each other. Isobel went about a week before I did. Stupid fucking fast forward bullshit. I thought I was riding high after saving myself from the block and then in the span of a couple of hours four people voted me out, all except, well now I know, Diesel my mate and Donny.

SHANNON: I was right there as you said you were "ignoring a pact" and washed the taste of the breakup out of your mouth by looking at the Wikipedia page for the season and saw how everyone had voted, over the entire season. The only week you could have gotten votes isn't bad at all.

ADAM: We're not back to talking about Sophie.

SHANNON: It's a silent truce. I'm just giving context.

ADAM: I wanted to look. On stage after I was kicked out they didn't say who voted for me to stay. Whatever. I nicked getting to come out and see her again. I bet you think I should have given up the week Isobel went so I'd have time to patch up my mistakes with my ex-girlfriend.

SHANNON: *[resisting temptation]* We're not back to talking about Sophie.

ADAM: If I want to bring her up, I should be allowed to. Just me.

SHANNON: You set the rules in this. Never would I have wanted you to quit out on something at the very last minute you could. Those other people would have killed to make it to the jury phase. *[he chuckled at the absurdity]* I'm still not there with talking like it's something you did, not something you might do, or will do, or are doing. There's a freaking chapter of your life that's about you being there. Now I'm glad you can move in with people who don't make you look even less classy. I'm not *dogging the boys* but really, you became a nicer person in there.

ADAM: I must have been lousy before. You think I became nicer.

SHANNON: It's the company you keep. Around family, us, no, you weren't a complete buffoon. Around Lucy you've always been a delight. Around Sophie, maybe a little inattentive, but sure, a nice enough boyfriend, you loved each other for a while there. But around your mates, Adam. It's like they chugged down your ability to be a decent man. At twenty-one I was a car wreck. At twenty-six you were too, around them.

ADAM: I don't know why you wouldn't have warned me sooner.

SHANNON: There's no chance I'm coming up with the words on how to warn my brother to ditch his friends and start from scratch.

ADAM: *[shocked]* It's that bad?

SHANNON: Alright, maybe I'm going overboard. Don't ditch them. I sound like Ma. Fussing over you. Being worried you're not in with the right people. *[confession time]* I watched the episodes, I accidentally liked enough posts online to see what was happening with you from time to time, when I went on Twitter. You know, I could agree with what people said, about that comment everyone judged for a week or two to be uncomfortably sexist. I could agree but I also thought people cared too much about what one guy was saying when he forgot he was being watched by so many people. Or by whatever number of people actually tune in for the feeds and not just clip-watch like I do. Did. It's not gonna happen again next season. I stopped when you left. *[he shook his head]* I stopped in the final week when I got bored of just the five of them moping around the place. You know, Tobias is from here. He might move in, make the place a bit more man-friendly, he didn't seem to talk to you much though.

ADAM: So it could be two women, a gay guy, and me.

SHANNON: It's the perfect sitcom. *[he paused]* Well, for the comedy. Imagine how uncomfortable the one straight guy gets.

They both laughed, hearty and honest. Adam could envision it without closing his eyes. There wouldn't be much romance within these four walls, what with the asterisk that Isobel, one of the two women, was a lesbian and firm on it. He never saw himself the type of brooding narcissist to want to *turn* a woman straight, so he saw his broken-hearted self merely left to consider Ophelia. He wasn't so sure he saw romance. He wasn't so sure he saw anything, and perhaps he did need to close his eyes after all, to truly see. Sophie had shattered and shuttered the shard of his heart devoted to romance. Now he was single, alone, a debate club dork wondering whether Sophie would change her mind or not based on the pros and the cons.

The brothers returned to the van and carried various smaller items inside the house, separately, although there seemed no visible animosity between them. The dust had settled on the earlier argument, or vague interpretation of one. Adam took a break and searched the fridge for something to drink but came up empty. He didn't want a glass of water to wash down the rising heartache. He wasn't sure if he wanted Sophie there, though. He was tender, but unwilling to admit it.

SHANNON: You're not rushing this?

ADAM: *[setting down a cardboard box]* Moving? No, nah. I was away long enough to kind of just realise I needed out. Plus, those guys would spend every single day, or night, really, trying to get me to hook up with some new girl. They think a guy doesn't have any regrets about a breakup.

SHANNON: I was just checking in.

ADAM: They're still my mates, even if they think I've gone soft moving in with, I don't know, their more mature replacements. *[he sighed]* The first night back in that apartment I barely spoke. I just felt them shaking me, trying to shake me awake. That's how it felt. I was asleep and I played back everything she said to me over and over again and I hated it enough to send her a text message. *[he found the closest thing to lean on and shook his head]* Hey, Soph. I'm a coward.

SHANNON: The times I've sent a message to a girl after we've broken up. Wanting to get back together, regretting something I said, not regretting even a word. Thinking about the sex. It happens. What did she say?

ADAM: She just paraphrased herself again and I stared off in the darkness like I couldn't function.

SHANNON: You decided right then and there to move out?

ADAM: Nah, I decided right then and there that something was wrong with me and I needed to be whooped and nudged back into place. That's what I thought. Clearly no amount of pleading was going to change anything with her. I forced myself to sleep off what the boys would call being a bitch-ass and the next morning, because I wanted it, I felt a bit more on the side of normal. I can only imagine Isobel, if she'd been there, would have side-eyed it completely.

SHANNON: Well she's not an idiot doofus.

ADAM: You're the people you hang around, right?

SHANNON: *[inspired]* You are the company you keep.

ADAM: You're smarter than I am, cool. You are the people you hang around. Those idiot doofuses kept me from driving drunk into a tree trunk for a while, I think. But this should be good. Living here, I mean. It'd be cool to think about who the perfect roommates would be. From the show, I mean. Diesel is like an idiot doofus minus the idiot and the doofus part. A real mate, except he wants to get his dick sucked by other men and tries to explain to me what the hanky code means and why he'd run far, far away if he saw a man with a yellow bandana in either of his pockets. But you gotta be good with your colours, because he likes a gold handkerchief, especially worn on the left. Whatever the hell all that means. It's gonna be a sausage fest two point O. Do I live with Donny and his husband because I'm not a shitty type of guy who divorces a man in his alternate reality? Or do I make sure I'm not just surrounded by gay men? Isn't it insane how many gay people they were allowed to cast in one season of tv? I guess that's a good sign things are progressing. In like, 2001, there would have been one girl who might have enjoyed kissing another woman when she gets drunk. Am I right or what? *[he paused, laughing]* I had dinner last night with Isobel. We got to talking about stereotypes, gender, sexuality, I mostly just nodded my head because what the hell do I have to add, but I guess I was paying attention. Huh. I guess I could live with Dylan.

SHANNON: I've never heard you talk for that long.

ADAM: Don't laugh at me, dude.

SHANNON: Hey, no one is laughing. It's kinda nice seeing my brother keep on growing up.

ADAM: You're a shit-stirrer.

SHANNON: A year ago you weren't talking about how you're getting an education from a gay man. Or a lesbian woman. To be fair to you, a year ago you weren't a complete knucklehead either, but still, Adam, the show did you some good. *[he bowed his head]* Not that it didn't make a mess too.

ADAM: *[shaking his head]* There's still more stuff in the van.

SHANNON: I'm coming right behind you.

These interludes, back and forth between the house and the borrowed van, were course and form against the broken-up fragments of conversation between the two brothers. Adam opened the passenger-side door only to give himself a second for a break. He leaned up against the seat and took out his phone to text Isobel, wondering when she would be home. He hadn't typed *home* to mean *his*, because there was a part of himself that knew it would take time before he adjusted to living here, and living with new roommates. Or old roommates. Whichever it was.

While he waited for a response, Adam scrolled around through his phone, bored and meandering. He opened his photos, expecting to find something he had forgotten about, but it was primarily pictures of everyone together, tipsy, at the finale after-party, and then some assorted random pictures of things he found while he was clearing out his closet and packing it up. It pleased him to see a selfie from the morning after, when Diesel had come to his hotel room and crashed what should have been a slow, lax wake-up by ordering them room service breakfast and charging it to production. The selfie wasn't to be expected—their faces were not close to one another, with Adam in the foreground of the shot and Diesel far into the recesses standing near the hotel room mini-fridge contemplating downing a squat tub of milk like a vodka shot.

He smiled, a little, at the picture and swiped away from it. Adam was not the type to do much with the Notes app, but he vaguely recalled writing the handful of things he typed in the night of the finale, mere moments after he was handed back his phone. Now the words seemed like gibberish, or had come up later in conversation without prompt, and Adam felt a strange warmth in his gut.

Sentimentality. Unless you were damaged or soulless, you had it. Gnawing away at the lining. He had convinced himself there was no use in being sentimental about friends like Eric, Josh, and Jacob, but he knew, peeling the layer back, that there were memories he treasured with those boys simply because they had happened, and he had been there. The four of them attempting to flirt with girls at a night club in the Valley when they were freshly eighteen might not crack the top fifty, but seeing the errors, the faults, had prepared, or hardened, him for when he met Sophie.

The ex-girlfriend. Now. Adam wondered what weight it held, Shannon's theory that the disappearing act, going on television on a reality show, was responsible for the very end. The bitter end. If he had stayed, would they have patched over their mistakes? He couldn't know. He didn't want to know. He expected to ache for a while. If anything, he welcomed it inside his chest like a stray dog standing out in the cold, in the sopping rain. That stray dog sheltered in his heart and patted down the blanket of rags, slobbered on the furniture, took a shit in the rose garden.

SHANNON: Can you stop texting your boyfriend and come help? It's not my move.

ADAM: *[he shrugged and tossed his phone onto the seat, closing the car door]* I'm loveless now, remember?

SHANNON: You're not denying the *gay* part. I could see it for you, a nice little boytoy on your arm, he does everything you say he should, maybe that's what you've been missing. A twenty-two-year-old who thinks he hit the jackpot to date a brown-haired, brown-eyed white man who pretends the twink is a woman.

ADAM: *[helping his brother lift another section of the bedframe]* How do you know the word twink?

SHANNON: Lucy and I watch Drag Race, ya gatekeeper.

ADAM: And somehow I'm the one with the boyfriend?

SHANNON: I have a girlfriend! And she's gorgeous.

ADAM: I have two fists, idiot doofus.

SHANNON: If you had dropped this on me to make a show, I'd have killed you—

ADAM: *[he laughed heartily]* Oi, careful! You're gonna run into the wall.

now.

Adam tensed up on the curb. He was alone. Somehow that felt like the most crucial piece of information, for being alone here, now, meant he was without backup, or any form of moral support. He imagined this was how a lone police officer felt approaching an obvious murder house, or home to a psychotic serial killer known to kill first, ask questions later.

Adam was down from his brother's new apartment. Shannon had sent him the address the night before, and he had woken up in the morning, thrown on clothes he didn't really care about, as if he for whatever reason assumed they would be painting, or sloshing around in mud, or leaping at each other with medieval weaponry. He could do with a mace. A partially-decorated shield, for protection.

Adam felt neither guarded nor about to approach a wool-wrapped old grandmother disabled at the waist. He wielded a homemade bomb, strapped to his chest, and expected the apartment to be a genuine minefield itself. He was not the type of person to fear, to break out into the hives of anxiety, and yet at no particular point had he stopped to gaze upon a flower growing out of a garden bed, or listened to the call of a magpie, which could opportunistically swoop him if it dared.

Adam wanted to tell his brother he had recently found himself very attracted to another man, to Tobias, although there was no real intention to mention Tobias at all, or to imply there had been anything between them, not even the sex. He didn't want to tell his brother he was having passionate, fulfilling, exciting sex with his roommate, Tobias. He really did not.

Shannon was single again.

SHANNON: I don't bite.

ADAM: I know. *[he took another two steps forward]* I can come visit you more often now. You're a five min walk from ours.

The brothers stood inside the furnished living room of a two-bedroom apartment. There was barely any navigable room to move furniture or large boxes, but Shannon had either decided to leave the bulkier items in his former apartment, still to be occupied, or in a storage unit hastily rented out a few days earlier. A friend had offered the spare bedroom of their apartment in the short-term. Shannon moved towards the couch and lingered beside it, his hand resting on the rise of its back.

SHANNON: I guess there's a positive to every tragedy then.

ADAM: Hey, brother—I didn't know it was heading in this direction.

SHANNON: Me feeling stupid and worthless and a failure? Me neither. Me fucking neither.

ADAM: *[he almost felt outside of himself]* Do you want a hug?

SHANNON: Those roommates really have made you sensitive. *[he smiled widely]* For the better. Get your butt over here.

They hugged. For Adam to have even suggested it felt like a surge of someone else's energy, but he was not opposed to having suggested it at all. He felt Shannon's weight collapse into him. The breakup had been sudden. Shannon and Tobias had seen each other at the wedding, and then Shannon had come round for breakfast the next morning, and all had seemed well-suited, and unstressed. A mere few days

later, two days, perhaps, Shannon sent his brother a string of confused, frustrated texts and there was no denying it was not an elaborate prank meant to what, scare Adam into never talking to women ever again. No. Their relationship was over, and Shannon was searching for somewhere to stay for a little while until he found something else, or until the temporary simply washed into permanent. Adam had consulted with his roommates on whether the pencil house could endure a fifth, and Tobias and Adam had raised their eyebrows at one another. All knew the two of them could happily cohabitate in the same bed.

But Shannon did not. It hadn't mattered. He scoped a spare bedroom with a friend named Rhys and now, waiting downstairs parked on the curb was a rented moving van stockpiled with boxes and the few smaller pieces of furniture he would need while he numbed the pain with work, exercise, and hopefully not too much alcohol and ice cream.

ADAM: I'm not sensitive.

SHANNON: Let's not immediately have an argument around whether or not you're allowed to cry. *[he turned until he was facing entirely away from his brother]* I was on the toilet this morning having a bit of a sob. It's only natural, right? Having a bit of a sob when everything's gone to the toilet with you.

ADAM: What are you talking about, everything?

SHANNON: You're the younger brother, you can't start to lecture me about how much I should still be thankful for— *[he couldn't finish whatever his sentence was; he let out a sound that seemed like he was trying to avoid crying again]* I'm fine, Adam.

ADAM: You sound like you're coughing up a lung.

SHANNON: *[he turned back to face his brother]* I said I was fine. Am. Am fine.

ADAM: What do you want me to help you with then?

SHANNON: *[he sighed]* I don't know. I have the truck all day. So. Let's not rush ourselves, shall we? Let's not go as fast as possible so everything is here and then we have nothing to twiddle our thumbs with. I... *[he scratched his head]* I should have actually talked to you the morning I came by. Instead of pretending everything was good, great, as usual. *[performative]* How was I at acting?

ADAM: You know you're a good liar.

SHANNON: Too good. I'm too good a liar I tricked you into thinking you didn't have to actually ask. And I sat there with Tobias half-hoping he'd say something for me.

ADAM: What would he have known?

SHANNON: Don't worry. Nevermind. *[flippant]* You said he's intuitive. Or you said he was that but in a couple of sentences because we're not supposed to know the word *intuitive*.

ADAM: *[he laughed away his slight confusion]* He is. Intuitive but in a couple of sentences. *[after a beat]* Talk to me next time then. If your...you know...is falling apart. I've gotten better at giving advice, you see, because I've lived with actually inspiring people for about a year now. Now that's not something you get to say every day.

SHANNON: You don't have to walk around like I'm going to punch you for saying Lucy and I split. I proposed, she hated that, we argued for a while, and then we split. We split, Adam. We split. C'mon, say it with me. *[he gestured for his brother to repeat the words]* We—

ADAM: We split.

SHANNON: You're single. You have been since you broke things off with Natalie. Jeez, she was scary by the way. Always looked at me like I wanted to chew off the head of her cat, like I'd confessed it to her in private and she had to eagle-eye observe me in case I did. *[he paused to consider]* Or she had confessed it to me, that she wanted to chew off the head of my cat. I don't even have a cat! But still, unnerved. Terrified. *[he laughed quietly]* And then at the same time I just thought she was an imitation replacement to Sophie but a little bit more uninteresting.

ADAM: Are you drunk?

SHANNON: Nope. I'm bitter and hurt, that's what I am.

ADAM: *[sterner]* Are you sure about that?

SHANNON: *[he sighed]* I don't have a drop of alcohol in me. It's ten in the morning. You want to keep babying me? Do you want to piss me off right now, when I'm right on the very edge of smashing something up? I thought I was going to marry her, and she was like, nah, no thanks! *[he sniffled]* What's that about?

ADAM: What was her reasoning, for calling it all off?

SHANNON: We had different priorities, apparently.

ADAM: How different?

SHANNON: One of us wants kids, the other doesn't. One of us wants to get married, the other doesn't right now, or doesn't anymore to a man like me. *[he shakes his head]* She didn't say, "like you", I'm just digging around in my feelings and painting you a pretty picture. If you go back a month I swear to you Lucy wanted to do the entire life-fulfilled thing with me, but now there's something in the water. Your entire house was sacrificed to the Black Death of Relationships and by association Lucy and I went next. *[he glances at the ceiling]* There are gods. Bullying us.

ADAM: Since when did you believe in God?

SHANNON: Toby had a theory there was divine intervention or whatever—

ADAM: Is this all from the wedding? *[slightly panicked]* How much did you two talk?

SHANNON: Barely. We barely talked. I didn't know anyone there, and he knew a couple people, but it was easier for the two of us to just hang around each other. I don't even remember why he told me about his theory of someone watching over us. I put it to rest straight away, though. There is no one looking out for us, or cursing us. I made one wrong decision after another and the great embarrassment on my part was thinking she still wanted to forgive me for every single one of them.

ADAM: Maybe she will. In time—

SHANNON: I won't let you parrot my advice. We went over this with Sophie, Adam, we thought maybe, just maybe, she would in time realise her mistake. Being in a relationship can't just be forgiving each other for the mistakes the other person makes over and over again.

ADAM: Sophie wasn't the love of my life. *[he exhaled a heavy breath]* Lucy is yours. Don't ask me how I know, I just know.

SHANNON: Don't let me get my hopes up on all of that.

Shannon collapsed down onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands. Adam could not say the last time he had seen his brother this way. Defeated, visibly exhausted, shrinking in on himself. The hilarious thing was how when he had opened the door to the apartment, after his brother shouted out that it was open, Shannon hadn't looked any different than normal. The same affable, loveable guy incapable of a frown. Then all it took was a single conversation to erode him.

Adam felt awkward lingering and standing upright in the centre of the room. He paced over the couch, but felt particular about sitting down, too. If they both resigned themselves to "being comfortable," would they want to get up again? A wave of confusion splashed at Adam's knees, and he wondered what this conversation would look like if it were between five people, if it were in the kitchen with his three roommates, each present and willing and able to weigh in.

Instead, he had himself. Himself and dwindling priorities. It seemed less and less relevant to mention his own life, his own questions of mortality, what he understood to have been a positive shift in owning his sexuality. That alone felt surreal when sitting beside his brother. As he was. The sofa was firm underneath him. He remembered the last time he saw Lucy. It was only a month or so ago. Nothing had seemed skewwhiff about her, or about how she interacted with his brother. But people were capable of deceptions, hidden and torturous beneath the surface. Adam wondered, then, whether the last time he had seen Lucy she had been wondering about the very future of her relationship.

The idea made him nauseous.

ADAM: *[out of nowhere]* Not every relationship ended.

SHANNON: What?

ADAM: It's been a rocky year for our house, yeah, but not every relationship fell to pieces.

SHANNON: This isn't inspiring any confidence in me, bud.

ADAM: I'm just saying. Isobel and Roxie are still together, they beat the...what did you call it, Black Plague of Relationships? They're still off being cute and adorable and lesbian.

SHANNON: The Black Death. *[he shrugged]* It's all the same. *[he rubbed his eyes with his palms]* I guess you can know too. Lucy and I, we thought our relationship felt too same-same. For a couple months. Things used to be incredible between us. But maybe every relationship is doomed to find a period where the sex is uninteresting and every decision is a baby argument, and you either figure out the exciting...I don't know what word to use. Resolution, I guess. You either figure out the resolution to your miserable little problems or you're like, shit, I think we call it quits before I have an even more plague-ridden marriage. *[he shook his head]* Lucy and I, we looked at websites listing sex positions together. She read a...she read a self-help book about how to spice up the relationship. She hated that, by the way. It was written, she said, like the person reading it was incapable of using their brain to make a decision. Really babied her. *[he sighed, resting his forehead on the palm of his left hand]* I started to think maybe we were trying too hard to make the sex work. Suddenly, without either of us really suggesting it, we were wondering if having sex with other people might ease off some of the pressure. "Open relationship." *[he laughed softly]* Tobias said it was very queer of us.

ADAM: You told him a lot at the wedding, then.

SHANNON: *[grinning]* What, are you jealous?

ADAM: I didn't know you'd gotten that comfortable with him.

SHANNON: I was a bit of a loose cannon that night. A lot of thoughts swirling ‘round in this noggin of mine. *[he tapped his temple]* But I would have told anyone who wanted to listen. Or. I would have told you, or any one of your roommates, or anyone from the show, frankly anyone who knew you and sort of at the same time knew it probably wasn’t their business to go talking about it to you, because they knew I’d want to talk about it with you myself.

ADAM: He didn’t say a word to me.

SHANNON: He’s good at keeping a secret.

ADAM: Tobias is a good liar.

A window swung open for Adam and he contemplated poking his head out through it.

Shannon, by the sheer coincidence of a springtime wedding in the middle of nowhere, had confided in Tobias before having even had the chance to talk to Adam. Or Lewis, but Adam knew seeking advice from the youngest of the brothers about anything related to a relationship problem was next to ignorant. Lewis was a classic example of a fumbler. He was still young, still naïve, made repeated, similar mistakes with his girlfriends, none of whom lasted for longer than two months. For the past four months he had sworn off women. He was surprisingly devoted to work, which, too, became a convenient excuse to very rarely see any of the family. Adam himself had seen his younger brother...once in those four months. Once in four months, and for half an hour, too.

Adam saw the opportunity to strike. It felt inappropriate to strike the same hour the man writhed on the floor, himself already wounded, but he wondered if the shock like a gunshot would land softer if it involved Tobias. Internally, he cursed himself out. He had walked up the steps of the apartment building specifically reminding himself to leave Toby out of it completely. To make up some fabricated lie if he must.

There was so little time to construct a paper airplane, let alone a house of cards.

SHANNON: There is no solid sense in my eyes that us talking about *maybe* having sex with someone we met at a party completely threw into disarray our entire relationship. Does not make sense to me. *[he shook his head, and himself out of why he was talking like that]* Unless she thought I was going to fall in love with someone else after screwing them like a Disney prince.

ADAM: It’s sort of like wanting to cheat—

SHANNON: You know it’s religion that marks cheating the way it is. Why’s there an expectation of loyalty in a relationship, but less in a friendship? *[he sighed]* We talked for hours, hear that, we talked for **hours** about what it would mean to be *open*. It sure felt like hours. I was sleepy the next morning. We went to bed late. Each of us reassuring the other it was not committing the relationship to the slop factory. I was sure Lucy and I knew what we were doing. *[he scratched his head]* I only ever did something once. And not sex, not, uh, you know, my dick in a—

ADAM: Just remember I’m your brother.

SHANNON: Yeah, you’re supposed to egg me on to talk about this shit.

ADAM: How’d it feel? When you did something with someone else while you were...

SHANNON: I didn’t fall in love like a Disney prince. It felt like a rush. It felt completely different.

ADAM: Did it change how you felt about Lucy?

SHANNON: Not for a second. I left the—I left afterwards feeling more committed to her, actually. It properly made me feel justified, for having tried it, for having given the idea of being in an open relationship a fair go. I mean, I expected someone to breathe down my neck and tell me it was plain cheating and plain wrong and egotistical and all that, but then when it felt actually refreshing, I don't know. I started to wonder what Lucy would think, whether she'd actually considered doing something with someone. It didn't matter.

ADAM: Maybe I'm dumb to how it moved from there to here, then. *[he sighed]* There must be more to the story, is what I'm getting at. If that wasn't an issue for either of you.

SHANNON: She never said it was, and I told her, truthfully, that something else happened not between us. Me and her. So how did we suddenly break-up? The proposal must have been a knife. She knew I wanted to marry her, that I wanted a proper affair of it with the wedding dress, and all the family gathered together. You and Lewis would be best men, groomsmen, and she'd have some of her girlfriends as bridesmaids. Going to Benny and Liana's was like getting inspiration, and maybe we'd do something like that, real cosy and in a community hall out the back of someplace. Cut the cake, do the speeches, kiss so aggressively in front of everyone they get a little envious. *[he shrugged his shoulders]* Lucy's more like the keen-eyed detective. She senses things and sniffs around at the base of them. *Murder on the Orient Express*. Lucy would've been clued in, there's something not sitting right with me. That's what I thought, when, despite me in one of my best attempts, she still said getting married would not solve our problems.

ADAM: What problems?

SHANNON: *[he studied his brother's face carefully]* Adam. I'm not a naïve man. Lucy didn't want to make herself compromise. She didn't want to go about life having to sacrifice parts of herself to keep me happy. Why get married if this nugget of truth is staring you right in the face? I know I'm right in thinking she would have wanted to marry me months ago. Imagine me proposing on her birthday, or at Christmas, or when we were on the camping trip and you nudged into me and said, when's the time? When are you going to propose to Lucy. Imagine.

ADAM: So you think you waited too long, and suddenly there were problems you couldn't fix, and there was shit in the relationship she couldn't ignore?

SHANNON: I think I waited too long. She didn't get impatient, or lose interest, I mean not completely. But. *[he exhaled a heavy breath]* Do you think we would have simply contributed to the divorce rate? Maybe a quick pregnancy would have distracted her for nine months and then a screaming baby for a couple more until, I don't know...she realised one sleepless night I'm not a wonder boy? I feel empty without—I feel empty without being able to think I'll be coming home to Lucy. We finished work at the same time, so some days I'd be home before her, but. She'd be there. In our apartment. Saying I'm a wonder, boy.

For a time, there was complete silence between the two of them. Now, Adam knew, was no longer the time to mention an iota, a single iota, of his own personal life. He felt his body tense at the thought of inching too closely to his brother, their capacity for physical touch feeling capped after the brotherly hug when Adam first entered the apartment. But Tobias, Ophelia, and Isobel would have hugged him then. They would have soothed him how they thought they could. Rubbed his back. Reminded him he

was going to be alright, even though it seemed a mammoth responsibility to heal from. A breakup was a breakup no matter what stage you found yourself in. Adam reminded himself of where he and Sophie had been the fateful night she tugged him away from flashing lights and gawking family to tell him, it's done. We're over. It panged in the gut to know now he never really thought about marrying her. True, he could still call himself young, avoidant of the very concept of being a husband, or a father, or both, but in retrospect now, he hadn't ever wanted that with Sophie. Or if he had, maybe their proximity had confuddled him, brainwashed him somewhat. Or the space and time between that night had painted over the mural of their relationship, and now he merely thought they had never been headed for the aisle at all.

Adam knew there was a version of himself that wanted to be married. He did feel a slight sense of jealousy at having been left out of the wedding, when his brother and...roommate he was sleeping with had both been in attendance. Not that it mattered. Not that he hinged thoughts on it since, when it was merely a few weeks ago.

His brother had always seemed quietly excited to be a husband. To be married. Now, it looked as though it was all shot in the foot. The high-pitched wailing. The blood gushing onto the pavement, staining concrete with crimson-red. Oh how he agonised to watch his own flesh and blood, his big brother, lose who had been his everything.

ADAM: If you need anything. Just come over.

SHANNON: *[he laughed, soft, subtle]* Of course. It'll be good to see you more often, Adam. I feel like I hardly know what's going on with you. Other than what we talked about the morning after the wedding, but even then, you droned about work, didn't talk too much about whether you were still getting over the last breakup. I've a feeling Natalie was less painful, I suppose because you ended it and then what, went on holiday?

ADAM: The six of us went camping. Me, Toby, Ophelia, Jared, Isobel, and Roxie. Yeah. The bushes feared the six of us. When we weren't all that loud, or irresponsible, or what.

SHANNON: *[teasingly]* Did you and Tobias share a mattress again?

ADAM: No, we, I had my own tent and he had his. I would've been there with Natalie, you know.

SHANNON: Yeah, that makes sense. *[he paused]* Look, obviously you don't have to want to talk. If the war wounds are still fresh, or there really is nothing going on with your life besides work, paying the bills, going grocery shopping, and flirting with girls on dating apps until you get bored, then that's all there is. I guess the distraction is nice, hearing about your life. Me I'm a bag of bones waitin' for cremation, but I don't believe there isn't something you planned on saying today. Even if it was, "I cut this woman off in traffic and gave her the finger right back." Or "Instead of buying the cheap homebrand at the supermarket I went for the most expensive shit and now the roommates think I secretly got a promotion at work but I'm embarrassed about it because one of my new duties is to be someone's personal butler after hours."

ADAM: Nah, none of that, none of that. *[he shook his head—was this the moment, then?]* There was something I was thinking about, actually. It's probably unexpected from me, considering I've never said anything even remotely like this to you before. *[he paused]* Please don't burst in with a joke about whether I'm eloping to Alaska or something. It's weird and important and putting it into words has always felt like accepting a job offer for an industry I have no real experience in, like astrophysics. Yes, I know what astrophysics is. Shannon. *[another pause]* I'm not straight. I'm not gay, either, but there's a

part of me that is attracted to men, or at least some of them, sort of like how I'm not attracted to every woman on earth, but some of them. A lot of them. It's less men, so far, which Tobias and Isobel say is normal and natural. I don't have to be an even split down the middle, and I don't have to be attracted to a wide range of different men, you know, bears and twink and otters and giraffes and hippopotamuses and zebras and tigers. Or whatever all the different types are, I don't know. They're both trying to like, welcome me in as gently as they can. But I've never known anything besides being a man attracted to women. It feels overcomplicated, but it feels like it shouldn't be. *[he sighed]* Sometimes, when I was younger, I'd be a little attracted to a guy and usually it meant the friendship was over, because what the hell did it mean to have goosebumps in the wrong sort of way? There was a transfer kid in Grade Nine I probably missed out on becoming a real mate to because I looked at him, I realise now, I guess, the same way I would look at a girl at the same age. Like I wanted to kiss him. And also screw him into the pillow. At fourteen I was already kinda horny. By fifteen, sixteen, I was a nuisance. But I never had sex with a guy. I assumed it wasn't a real part of me.

SHANNON: Oh, I had no idea, Adam.

ADAM: No one has ever really thought I was capable of questioning my sexuality.

SHANNON: Have you, I guess, picked out a label for it?

ADAM: I don't hate *pansexual*. But I think if a stranger asks, for whatever reason, I'd just say I'm bi. Toby says some people don't understand the difference, or some people think being pansexual is like taking on the brand of a mental patient. *[he bows his head]* I'd be absolutely nowhere without him sitting beside me and listening, Shannon. Like it's a miracle I actually have been able to process any of this. If I'd not had him, or Isobel, man, I'd still think I was just filling a gap when I got lonely, or that some perverted part of my brain is so horned up it finds anyone attractive as a potential mate. But. It's not like I find everyone attractive.

SHANNON: I will vouch for you, if people think there's something wrong with your head.

ADAM: *[he chuckled]* Thank you.

SHANNON: And you're not alone in this, hey. *[he cleared his throat]*. I don't think you actually knew, but I am bisexual, Adam. I experimented so little in university it didn't register in the census.

ADAM: *[surprised]* I did not know that.

SHANNON: I, uh, did some stuff with a guy, when Lucy and I were testing the waters with the open relationship thing.

ADAM: I am learning so, so much.

SHANNON: We didn't have sex. Although I know it's really not that different...

ADAM: It's just a different hole. Yeah. *[he laughed]* I had sex with my first guy late last year. It sounds so weird to say it just ordinarily like that, it was a whole thing, it came as a massive surprise to some people, they were taken aback by it, I sort of shrugged it off like it was nothing, like a failed experiment, which I guess it sort of was, but...yeah. Feels very weird to tell you.

SHANNON: I think surely Lewis isn't fruity, right?

ADAM: *[he laughed]* All three brothers? Holy shit. No. He's causing too much trouble with the ladies. Do you think there's some psychology I don't understand there, for the two of us? Rocky relationships because we fought against not caring whether a person was a woman or a man.

SHANNON: If there is—which I don’t know, although shit, I’d probably benefit from therapy—that would be like the one sign all three Affeldt brothers are struggling to accept that they like dick. I think Lewis is fine. Just a plain old guy. *[he smirked at his brother]* You and I are refusing to ignore who we are, deep down, and you had pretty impressive guardians to look over you while you came to accept it. Me, man, I had to watch the TV to get any idea of what being bi looked like. Lucy and I watched men perform in drag, we watched *Heartstopper*, which was sweet, and I never tried to hurt myself over the experimentation in uni. Like not literally hurt myself, but also, you know how some people spend years and years of their lives torturing their minds to say they aren’t *this thing*. I just told the people who cared to listen I was straight. Lucy gave me the chance to ease off the breaks and actually think about it. Like you said, Adam, there was more to me being attracted to another man than a tingly feeling. There are men I genuinely have an attraction to.

ADAM: This is truly a side of you I have never seen.

SHANNON: No duh. I don’t go ‘round telling everyone I’m part of the alphabet mafia. *[showing off almost, boastful but ironically so]* I got a bit of a rep to protect, huh.

ADAM: You sound like you’re imitating me.

SHANNON: Self-aware all the sudden. I’m terrified you spending so much time around your house of mafiosos is just completely rewriting who my brother is. *[he laughed]* I’m jokin’. I’m teasin’. I’m messin’ with you. *[he paused, adjusting his spot on the couch]* Can I say something?

ADAM: Yeah, shoot, of course you can. Give me more to process.

SHANNON: It’s light, it’s like me giving you proof that I’m attracted to other men. That I didn’t convince myself I’m bisexual because I woke up one morning and looked in the mirror.

ADAM: And when I’m the handsomer brother of the three of us?

SHANNON: You wish, idiot doofus. *[he laughed, then said:]* I find Tobias attractive. It was hard to ignore in the suit. At the wedding. I know he’s your roommate, maybe you don’t want to hear that your brother was ogling him—

ADAM: *[still processing, surprised]* He is single right now.

SHANNON: I just—I just got out of a long-term relationship with the woman I thought I’d marry. I’m not thinking about surprising the world, surprising our Ma and Dad, when I walk into the house next with your roommate on my arm. *[he chuckled heartily]* I’m just saying he’s good looking, and I think he’s not blind to that.

ADAM: You didn’t say something to him at the wedding, did you?

SHANNON: *[very expressive]* Say? Oh no, no, I didn’t say anything.

ADAM: *[mildly concerned]* When you said you did something with another man—

SHANNON: Alright...we kissed, briefly, for all of ten seconds. I almost seemed like it was an accident, like somehow both of us stumbled forward onto each other’s lips. *[he laughed]* And I kind of watched him piss. There was a queue for the bathroom! I kind of tested the waters. I was going through brain fuzz with everything that was happening with Lucy. I wasn’t drunk. I just liked thinking about it.

ADAM: Nothing else happened, then?

SHANNON: Nothing else. I drove him home that night. The next morning I came over to your place, again, but this time actually stepped foot inside and we had breakfast and I pretended everything was fine between Lucy and I, and I avoided looking at Tobias too much because if you caught us looking at each other you would think **something**, I have no clue what. You might think I was losing my mind, actually. Or that the wedding had secretly turned us into best friends. When really all we did was kiss, once, on the mouth, accidentally, because he's a handsome guy.

ADAM: I feel like I knocked my head on the low ceiling of a submarine.

SHANNON: I haven't spoken to him since.

ADAM: Oh, okay.

There had been a school excursion when he was in primary to a maritime museum, and he remembered the submarine, a nuisance for the six-foot-something balding teacher chaperoning them. He would either remember to duck his head, or proclaim altogether too-loudly of the growing bump on his head, which amused most of the other kids. Adam had counted himself a rebellion, and refused to giggle at a repetitious joke that, too, signalled an air of queasiness. The balding teacher would have to nurse himself or else get wheeled off with a concussion.

Whether or not younger Adam thought of concussion then was unknown to him now, but in this moment, learning his own brother hadn't merely become a closer friend to his roommate-and-giant-question-mark Tobias made him look for the symptoms.

Of course, Adam had no reason to lurch forward jealously. They were not in an exclusive relationship, not as far as he understood, and Adam's own feelings about his sexuality were so entirely fresh he barely thought about what it would *look* like to be in a relationship with another man. So, he thought, and rather abruptly so, Tobias was free to slip into an accidental kiss with Adam's brother if he so desired, if he so wished, if a porky fat little pink thing on Old McDonald's farm suddenly sprouted wings and flew off. Off into the sunset, then.

In complete honesty, Adam was stunned into a silence only broken by his brother's next sentence. The new fragments of information were exploding like off-kilter fireworks in his head. Bisexual. Kissed Tobias. Watched him piss? *I just liked thinking about it.*

SHANNON: Now that I live just down the road, I will be 'round for dinner more often.

ADAM: *[awoken, groggily]* To see Toby?

SHANNON: Are you paying attention at all anymore? To spend more time with you, of course. A guy can't confess he kissed his brother's roommate once without it becoming a much bigger deal than it needs to be. *[he sighed]* Adam. In the car driving back from the wedding, we talked. Tobias and I. We agreed this didn't need to happen again, us overstepping the boundaries—his words, by the way. He explained it all away far better than I ever could. Toby isn't looking to make his relationship with you complicated. Even if we fucked and you never found out about it, the two of us would still know. That we agreed on. It would lurk. Our sin. *[he laughed]* It wouldn't be sinful, I'm just joking around.

ADAM: I don't need to be imagining the two of you in any sort of position like that.

SHANNON: See? Unnecessary complications. We're just friends.

ADAM: *[quieter, almost to himself]* I can't believe he didn't tell me everything that happened that night.

SHANNON: Do you two have the sort of friendship where he has to tell you everyone he's kissed?

ADAM: Oh. Of course not. *[he laughed]* He wouldn't have been ashamed about it. You're right, we just don't share everything with each other. He's my friend and my roommate. Right.

SHANNON: It doesn't matter, hey. I'm left picking up pieces, I made a quick decision and no one but me got hurt. *[he shook his head]* I'm sure Lucy is hurting too. I barely told her this. I didn't say, it was with my brother's roommate, you see, and it was mindless, or maybe it wasn't mindless but to say it was was good enough. We didn't break up because I kissed someone else, but maybe it would be better if I believed we did.

ADAM: I'm sure it was more than that.

Adam's heart raced in his chest. There had been the opportunity to shatter the glass, to break the mirror. Instead of saying something unhinged like, *I beat you to it*, or *Tobias and I have been kissing each other since I climbed into his tent early the next morning after I ended things with Natalie*, he simply said nothing. He avoided confronting it. Or at the very least avoided exposing Shannon to another facet of his life before he felt **right** for it. Prepared, or at least eager.

An affair was his to protect if he wanted to. Climbing into bed with Tobias at the end of an exhausting day at the office felt both akin to an affair, and as if he was merely skirting away from having an openly-known relationship with a gay man he had lived with for a year and then some. With only the absence of a few weeks. It was hardly a romance that had endured in private for even a quarter of that time. It was, truthfully, about two months old. It was still in the crib.

Did it even have its eyes open?

Adam was childless and a man and had no nieces or nephews. He knew so little.

Now he knew all of this.

Bisexual. Kissed Tobias. Watched him piss. *I just liked thinking about it.*

Do you two have the sort of friendship where he has to tell you everyone he's kissed?

ADAM: *[still taken aback]* Do you think we should be moving things inside from out of the truck?

SHANNON: Oh, the reason I asked you to come round, yeah, sure. *[he grinned at his brother]* You aren't still dazed, brother? In a tizzy from learning everything you learned?

ADAM: No, I'm fine. What's there to be in a *tizzy* about? What even is that word?

SHANNON: Can't a man be educated?

ADAM: *[he rose off the couch]* Can't a man get off his ass and finish moving into his new apartment?

SHANNON: His just-for-now apartment. I won't get too comfortable.

ADAM: Give your heart a chance to heal. *[he stuck his hand out to his brother]* My big brother taught me that. Back when I thought the world died when I became single again unexpectedly.

SHANNON: *[he smiled weakly and rose to his feet with the assistance]* Thank you, Adam. You know, maybe I'd thought she would be there forever. But I guess not. *[he turned his head away]* There's stuff in the truck, and I want to move it out of the street. C'mon. We don't have all day to be oafs on the sofa.

ADAM: C'mon then, brother.

They exited the apartment and went down the stairwell, out into the air, out onto the street. The moving van was parked on the curb and Shannon lifted up the roller door at the rear and started to root around, sorting the boxes here and there, seeming to ignore for a moment that he would need to lift them out of the truck and down onto the sidewalk and into the new, but only temporary, apartment. Adam stood for a moment having a strong sense of *deja-vu*. He was reminded, then, of when Shannon helped him move into the house he shared with Tobias, Ophelia, and Isobel. The place he called home.

It sobered him how cruel being alive could be. But he wondered too whether it was a cruelty at all to want to love, and then love someone for whatever length of time you were given with them, even if it ended. A couple months ago you could have asked him to describe in specific detail how he imagined his brother's wedding to Lucy would have looked. And he would have been there, ignorant to any flea-on-rat infestation scurrying its way towards the happy couple.

Now it was the very thing people listed as *end of an era*.

Here lies the relationship of Shannon Affeldt and Lucy Jacquin.

Adam was not a crier. This he repeated to himself like a mantra. Except perhaps not in third-person. He considered himself at least ninety-nine percent normal, and ordinary. Although maybe that made him a few percents shorter than that.

Was this the truth of expecting a love to last forever? That it couldn't, or wouldn't.

Adam looked at the wreckages of the last year. Tobias and Gavin. Himself and Natalie. Ophelia and Jared. Shannon and Lucy. He wanted the year to end without another casualty. He knew himself incapable of doing very much of anything to prevent it.

If nothing ever started, nothing could ever finish.

Adam helped lift out one of the boxes from the moving truck and manoeuvred it upstairs into the apartment. For a second, he was alone in Shannon's new bedroom, and he leaned hard on the cardboard box, steadying himself. He told himself he wanted to be single for a long, long time. Heartache was like hitting your head repeatedly on the low ceiling of a submarine. And you told yourself until the end of time that you enjoyed the periods in between, waiting for the lump and the concussion.

He resolved: there was no need for *more*.

Curse the Black Death of Relationships, as it were.

ADAM & LUCY

LUCY: I'm glad I caught you, Adam. Can I say something?

Adam was cornered, now, although it was practically impossible to corner a person in the middle of any given space with no visible corners present. Yet he still felt himself tense up. Call it the instinctual reaction you had when you came in contact with someone you felt a moral obligation to feel a tad uneasy around. He was meant to only be loyal. In front of him was his brother's ex-girlfriend, his brother's ex-almost-wife, although the story went she had turned down the proposal because she quite obviously had lost her sense about what a good, honest, noble sort of man she was tossing aside like gutter trash.

Adam clearly had lost all ability to be impartial. He felt the crook of his body reject the conversation even before she spoke. Her side of the story seemed a forgone conclusion. He knew her rhythm. He knew she didn't want this, she didn't want that. Kids, marriage. Or the Shannon of it all had frightened her away.

It was the first of December, actually. The heat was immense and sweat dripped from Adam's armpits, but graciously it was not leaving a noticeable damp stain on his pale green button-up. He was out, alone, after having grabbed dinner with Jacob. The two of them having a meal together without the noise of other friends, the sloshing of alcohol, seemed like a rare treat in their lengthy, changed friendship. An entire year had passed since they stopped living together, and it rendered them both more mature, certainly less clung-together as they once were. Dinner was pizza on paper-thin crust that whiplashed against Jacob's jaw and stained his semi-successful beard that deep tomato-red colour.

Now, he wandered the inner-city with no real urgency to find the train station. Now, he heard first Lucy's call, her voice above the heads of strangers, and any pretence of gracelessness on her behalf seemed to trail away instantaneously. Adam had to adjust.

LUCY: I've been thinking about you since Shannon...moved out of the apartment. Well, I've been thinking about you both, of course. I've been thinking about your parents, and Lewis. Everyone has been top of mind for me.

ADAM: *[thinking before he spoke]* I'm sure they have all been thinking about you too.

LUCY: It's good to know you're well.

ADAM: As good as I can be, you know. Everything is a disaster at work heading towards Christmas and the holiday season. *[he paused]* But that is just work stuff.

LUCY: *[shifting her weight]* Is he furious with me, or just heartbroken?

ADAM: He's devastated, Lucy.

LUCY: Has he told you everything?

ADAM: Everything and then some. I didn't know my brother was bisexual. And I didn't know everything had shifted so completely in a matter of months. *[he averted his gaze]* I don't get it. The last I heard the two of you were so completely in love it made my eyes hurt.

LUCY: Not your heart? *[pause]* Sorry. It's not the time for jokes.

ADAM: He'd want to laugh, but he's been different since he had to move into the spare bedroom of Rhys' place. I won't ask you to fix everything up. I never told my brother it was going to right itself, but I guess that comes from the experience of realising if something ends, it just ends.

LUCY: Sometimes things don't work out.

ADAM: I don't understand why.

LUCY: Do you have time, Adam? Do you want to grab a drink and we can talk?

He agreed, and the two of them wandered around the corner and down until they reached a bar, which they entered and found a small booth towards the back, but not directly near the toilets. Adam sat with a view of the exit, but amongst the faces of strangers it was frequently hidden behind a head, or the sturdy back of another, taller man. Lucy ordered their drinks and they sat, at first, in a strange but peaceful silence, readjusting to their new surroundings. The bar was occupied predominately by middle-aged white men in similar button-up shirts, now untucked, who whorled about the state of their marriages. But Adam heard none of it, not from afar.

It had been a few weeks since his brother and Lucy had broken up, split, and a little parcel of time since Shannon had moved into his new place, which he persistently reminded his brother was only to be temporary. Shannon had come round to the pencil house for dinner a handful of nights—Adam had studied his behaviour for cracks, and for noticeable little signs he was trying to flirt with Tobias, but all seemed ordinary for a man going through a true heartbreak.

This chance encounter still irked him, but Adam wanted to hear her out. You were supposed to want clarity, both sides of the story, as much as your internal cogwork machine wanted to be biased and only respect what the person you were closest to had to say. This Adam reminded himself. He wanted the intricacy of Lucy's side of the story, despite the expectation it would leave him feeling even more hollow, when he expected a repetition of what his brother bemoaned.

LUCY: I know this might feel like talking to the enemy. You very likely thought you would never see me again after he told you, after he moved out. I get that. I can't imagine a world in which either of us would feel comfortable being friends because the space between us is, you know, Shannon-sized.

ADAM: It's weird being here.

LUCY: I get that. I don't expect much.

ADAM: Can you explain the why to me?

LUCY: Why we broke up?

ADAM: Yeah. He had his ideas, or the way he could put them into words from what the two of you talked about. But it felt like something was missing. Or maybe I'm dumb.

LUCY: Could you tell me what he said?

ADAM: *[he sighed]* I don't know if I've got the energy to repeat everything—

LUCY: Adam, I trust him, I trust he's telling you an accurate version of events, I do. I want to understand where you are, and where things are with what he's said. That's all it is.

At that very moment, an eruption of noise shook the bar, and Adam and Lucy became distracted by whatever inane argument had broken out between two of the men, one of which was now drenched in what had presumably been a glass of lukewarm beer. Perhaps it had been cold. The argument quickly ended in the two escorted outside, and Adam laughed, somewhat like a chuckle. It was a Tuesday night, and yet the rowdier kind of folk still broke out into a fervour he remembered from when he was younger, but not now. Not at this age. He was inching towards his thirties, and no promise that his life would not be over muffled the noise. The noise of an hour he would find himself cracking his back. The noise he would have become an elderly gent without blinking.

Adam stumbled around in his head for everything Shannon had progressively said over the last few weeks. Some nights were spent reworking the same few thoughts, renavigating the same rivers, until they came to the same conclusions. Other nights Shannon spoke not a single word on the matter, and those nights he seemed completely relaxed. A lot happier. Adam spent his time steering his brother in that direction, and it was hardly difficult. Shannon hated to dwell.

Now dwelling was required, but Shannon was not here.

It felt irresponsible to tiptoe. Sometimes you make the loudest noise when you are attempting to be quiet in the night, stepping through the house on the front of your feet, without light, except perhaps the flashlight of your phone. Adam was about to bang purposefully into a wall, then stumble around and slam a door, reopen it, stub his toe on the end of the bed. He wanted to. Strangely, it felt less like gossiping over a drama and more like reading a toxicology report.

ADAM: Shannon told me things had been stressing the two of you out for a while. Things weren't working, he said, or the relationship had become stale and the two of you realised it. Maybe you didn't want to acknowledge it, either of you. *[he shook his head]* I just haven't decided if I believe it. Because you both seemed so happy with each other, and the idea you completely lost that spark makes me think something else happened. And not the open relationship idea. And not him kissing someone else at a wedding. Something else. That he doesn't know, or he's too embarrassed to talk about with his brother.

LUCY: *[after taking a sip of her drink]* It's your perception, though, Adam, that we were both so incredibly happy with each other.

ADAM: So my perception was incredibly wrong then?

LUCY: We were able to put on happy faces around family, friends, if we had social engagements or whatnot. You're right, I'd say, we probably weren't always aware it was a happy face and not an actual expression of the two of us happy together. You can, I suppose, use the happiness you have for other aspects of your life to pretend the relationship was working in a more favourable condition than it was the last few months of it. *[she paused, holding the glass but not lifting it]* We were never miserable. We were just coming to our senses a little bit.

ADAM: So you got tired of each other? Tired of being in love.

LUCY: That makes it sound a lot worse than it was. I've never had a reason to be tired of him. I couldn't hate him if I tried. But it wouldn't have been right if I married him—I assume he told you he proposed, and I said no, and I was really grateful we were alone and not out in public because I would have felt so much worse if the rejection was broadcast to the room.

ADAM: Why are you afraid of saying his name all the sudden?

LUCY: *[surprised]* Adam, I'm not, I promise you.

ADAM: It feels like you're avoiding something.

LUCY: Shannon and I talked about what was happening between us for a long time.

ADAM: I feel like the bratty child in between a divorce. *[he chuffed]* Sorry, it's inappropriate to be getting all bothered when the both of you are the ones in pain here. You're the ones dealing with a breakup, but I can still be on the outside of it wondering what happened. Just...not too much.

LUCY: You try to keep it interesting, you do. We wanted to be together for the longest time. But I thought, should I really marry a man just to make him happy? *[she sighed]* It feels anti-woman to lie down and accept my fate when I am afforded so much choice here in this country, as opposed to, say, women in Sudan and every single person in Palestine. Shannon and I could have had a beautiful marriage starting in 1952 and ending when first he died, then I did six years later. But we are given so much freedom it would be a disserve to him and to myself to not realise he deserves to be with someone who wants everything he does, on the timeline he does.

ADAM: You don't think you'll change your mind?

LUCY: Adam...

ADAM: I don't mean, when are you going to take him back? I mean, you are certain on this choice, and someone else hasn't swayed you on it.

LUCY: The only possible person who could have swayed me would have been him. Shannon. We were together for five years, I know his thoughts, I know what he liked and didn't like—that he could become ravenous for anything with pickles, that he hated watching the news and was particular about how his steak was cooked, he hated it too bloody. No one on the outside of us had any control over what has happened, and I will look you dead in the eyes and tell you nothing shifted when your brother told me he kissed someone else. If anything I was glad he was having fun again.

ADAM: Did he tell you who he kissed?

LUCY: I didn't know anyone at the wedding, he hardly knew anyone there himself. *[a pause]* I figured it was someone he started talking to, you know Shannon. He'll strike a conversation with a starfish. One thing would lead to another, and maybe you know less this side of him, but he's such a kisser. He either jokingly leans in to smooch someone, or does it. Don't you remember on the camping trip for his birthday he kissed a couple of his friends, or had you gone to bed?

ADAM: I think I'd thought it was all just joking. Like they were birthday presents of the Gag Snake in a Can kind. I don't know. I didn't know he was bisexual back then. *[he laughed]* It's the funniest sentence to say. My brother's bi, and I'm a frying pan. *[he laughed again]* Joke. I'm kidding.

LUCY: Obviously there hadn't been a single crack during that camping trip, and everything had been good between us. You remember what we talked about?

Flashbacks to the camping trip over one year ago typically functioned differently for Adam. He rooted around in the cellars of his memory for the conversation, or two, or more, he had with Lucy back then, when the visions of what the world would look like twelve months later, give or take, had seemed to brim with more peace, and for Adam, less getting his dick sucked by a brown-haired boy who was actually older than he was.

Back then, Adam had joked the happy couple were practically signing the marriage certificate with the way they lounged about together, typically with Lucy perched on Shannon's lap, although it was not out of the question for Shannon to be lifting himself just off Lucy as to not crumple her underneath. They had looked like their love was eternal, and maybe Adam idolised it, certainly in the wake of things, but wasn't he meant to? Shannon and Lucy had separately whispered like secrets how excitable they were to be parents to a boy, or a girl, it wouldn't have made a lick of difference either way to them. Now...now Adam was sitting in a bar in the thick of the city at the beginning of December, staring down the barrel of all that remained of his year, and Lucy held together her memories.

ADAM: I'm not blind to how everything can change in the time it takes, well, a baby to be born. Of course things were different all those months ago. [*he thought on it, then said it:*] On that camping trip I was still wrecking up myself thinking things, and I'd be lying to say those *things* haven't become clearer and clearer ever since.

LUCY: I wouldn't have been lying to you back then.

ADAM: Oh, I can't imagine you were. Lucy, I know people can change.

LUCY: I think your brother regrets that I did. That I didn't remain the person who whispered those things to you while your roommate was in the bathroom, or wherever he was. It's hard, or impossible, to not hit another birthday and not become a slightly different version of yourself. I am in my thirties now, and I know the woman I was on that camping trip, I know she wishes she had said yes when Shannon proposed, but I *didn't*. I am so convinced he misses who I used to be, and I hardly think I've changed at all. This is all just the agony of being a human, isn't it?

ADAM: [*slightly overwhelmed*] Shit, I don't know, Lucy. [*he paused, for a moment's breath*] That's all too philosophical for me. You changed your mind, that I can understand.

LUCY: I think you have to give yourself more credit. You're not a braindead sack of potatoes.

ADAM: I'm braindead, some of the time. Definitely not potatoes. Being more active again has been good, has been keeping me focused. On anything but work. I'm trying to motivate Shannon to come jog with me and Eric, trying to get him to do some of the park runs, although all of the ones in the dead centre of the city are so crowded, and he's not sad but he's slightly overcome by a desire to be competitive at the moment. He's about to start betting real money when we play board games with my roommates. Him and Toby stare at each other intensely, and I think, I don't know, are they going to—eat each other? Something like that.

LUCY: Why would they eat each other?

ADAM: I don't know! People do unexpected things!

LUCY: I guess people do. You aren't wrong.

then.

Shannon was another year 'round the sun, and all were in attendance to celebrate. All that mattered to him, and Tobias in tow, who was...elsewhere. He'd told Adam he was going to the bathroom, the public, potentially-contaminated restroom that boasted of little rest and was more reminiscent of a dowdy tin-roof shed than a place you went to relieve yourself. Adam sat alone with his feet overhanging out of the rear of the borrowed van. Left to his own devices what felt like a mere second ago, he was himself moments away from physically figuring out what it meant to twiddle your thumbs. It was early in the morning. A dullness hanging overhead made a mist, a fog, more preferable, and Adam watched now as Lucy approached from the direction of her shared site with his brother. The birthday boy.

A friend of his had recently pondered on when you were supposed to stop celebrating getting a bit older each year. When did it become simply another ordinary day of the year, except a certain period of time had exactly elapsed since you slid out the birth canal all covered in blood and guck with the umbilical cord still attached. His friend, of course, didn't quite ponder as think aloud, and made an obvious fool of himself when he stumbled on arguing his point after Adam spat back that he never wanted to stop irritating someone by calling them a birthday boy/girl and he hardly expected an exemption. The words he used were *free pass*. What, you were supposed to lose every trace of jester-and-the-fool behaviour because there was a sudden three at the beginning of the digits when you wrote down your age?

Adam had to cut his train of thought short as Lucy sidled up to the van and made a subtle gesture to ask, *can I sit down beside you?* He obliged, and she made herself comfortable, taking in the cramped tunnel as if she were being welcomed into a person's home for the very first time.

LUCY: Hey, Adam. [*she beamed at him*] Enjoying yourself so far?

ADAM: Of course I am. He made a good decision, forcing everyone to sleep in the elements, groan about getting a terrible night of sleep so he can win at everything without exerting too much energy himself. Nah, I'm enjoying myself. Toby seems to have been accepted in pretty quickly, I guess some people recognise him to an extent. That guy who did the thing you did too. Aunt Tracey doesn't like watching the sort of nonsense Toby is so, so defensive of.

LUCY: I'm glad you brought him along. [*she paused*] You know, your brother might not ever talk about it, but he probably knows just about as much about Tobias as you do. [*she laughed a little*] I'm kidding, mostly. He was a tad addicted to watching the show, checking in on the feeds. He would take a lunch break and just keep his head down, alert and focused, if something frankly entertaining was happening between a crew of relative strangers, who were now best friends or enemies, living together in that house of theirs.

ADAM: He actually did confess to liking it, I was surprised he wasn't pulling my leg.

LUCY: It would have been like a confession!

ADAM: There's nothing to be embarrassed about, I told him, you're allowed to spy on your brother and be impressed he's not making a complete tool of himself on TV.

LUCY: I could never do that—go on any sort of reality show. But I can't imagine the opportunity would ever come up for me. Unless, out of complete craziness, Shannon and I did *The Amazing Race* together, because he would have to drag me out of the house and in front of those cameras.

ADAM: The two of you would be killer on something like that. Teamwork, you know.

LUCY: I think I would become too concerned about how I was presenting myself to such a wider audience. In my everyday life I have to keep myself presented well, I have to maintain a proper image for the company and beside my colleagues and superiors. There is a visual mark to everything I do, everything I present. But none of that is broadcast to every television set in the country—well, if the country wants to tune in. Your ratings weren't terrible, but people are more likely to have been distracted by the streaming services. It's a wonder why they haven't shifted entirely to the streaming model, especially because the feeds still have their impact structured the way they are. *[she shook her head, having become distracted]* None of that is the point, sorry, Adam. If Shannon and I did *The Amazing Race* or something like it, it would certainly test our relationship. But I've never loved another man more. Never say never, really, especially if he got down on one knee and proposed to me. *[after a beat]* We have talked a lot about it.

ADAM: Wedding bells at last?

LUCY: He knows I want to marry him. I start to think, what are we waiting for?

ADAM: The right romantic moment?

LUCY: I'm just an ordinary woman. What could I possibly expect, fireworks? I whisper to Adam I don't want anything so grand I forget my exact importance. *[she laughed]* It makes me sound banal. It makes me sound like I am giving myself only a banal consideration. Instead, I am sure, I should be excited for him to propose however he wants to, or however he will.

ADAM: If he proposed tomorrow, you would say—*[he gestured with his hands forward into the empty air]*

LUCY: He could do it in front of everyone and I would say yes, of course I would. So much of my concern over the *how* would fade away when I realise in the moment that our love, Shannon and I's, is more important to me than whatever the story is. Some people, I think, are more excited about what they will tell their family, their friends, their dentist. Me, I want only to start planning the wedding, and labouring over that. Is that insane?

ADAM: I don't think it is. Not insane, insane is like hounding him every day, leaving clues you're desperate to be a married woman. Insane's not anticipating it because it's time.

LUCY: I'm glad you think so, Adam. *[she sighed]* We could be together for another handful of years and maybe our families will throw rice in the air in elation, in *finally!* There is no real timeline for getting engaged, don't you think?

ADAM: I'm not the right person to ask.

LUCY: Don't count yourself out on finding the right person. Your parents raised wonderful men, the three of you, and if Shannon can miraculously find himself a girl to settle down with—hopefully, fingers crossed, when he proposes at last—then I fail to see how his charming brother cannot either.

ADAM: Yeah, I don't know about that. Shannon and I are different men. He is so certain of where he is headed in life, and I have a job I can...tolerate, most of the time, and I went away for a few months to be on a reality show and it was like an extended vacation that ended with me deciding where to cast my vote to give someone else half a million dollars. *[he laughed nervously]* Maybe the madman is me all along. Not you, Lucy, never you. Never Shannon. *[he shrugged]* Probably not even Tobias, as much as he

has to tolerate being unemployed right now, which I know completely drains him of every ounce of his energy. He persists, though. He needed this camping trip. More than I did. No. The same amount.

LUCY: I find if I compare myself too much to other people, I get nauseous. [*she sighed*] I am in a good space right now. Here, at the very least, physically, I'm surrounded by good people, the man I love, his insightful—even if he doesn't realise it—brother. [*she glances at the man beside her, smiling knowingly*] Zoom out a little and everything else seems **good** too. All that I want is the very next step. Whether it be getting married, or having a child, or living abroad for a few months in a sudden, unexpected pivot for my career that comes highly recommended by my boss and I guess, "industry peers," then that will be the next step. Yours seems to be that house.

Adam gave it another once-over. Lucy's point. In examining himself, his life, the very next phase of it as he could see physically, right here and now, was continuing to adjust to the life afforded to him by living in the three-storey house with the three roommates he was growing to consider irreplaceable, or at least to his definition of the word. No person was completely *irreplaceable*, not when a connection could strengthen or diminish in time, not when you could realise other qualities and similarities in other people, in other human beings glued down to this earth by gravity.

The feeling he most closely associated with Lucy was relief, but he understood now it encompassed the sense that Shannon could find—and was capable of being victim to—a love that corrupted itself from the inside with mistake after mistake. Instead, he eased around Lucy, trusting the protective side of himself to find another soul to bodyguard. Toby, perhaps.

He never would have anticipated the strange forces tying them closer together. They lived together for several months and treated each other like foreign bodies, threatened and yet strangely ambivalent, too. Adam had worried a crack in the wall would *cost him everything*—which, of course, had happened inevitably, Tobias-as-friend or not.

Adam wondered what was keeping the other man, but an interruption to his conversation with Lucy would have dulled him, when he now was realising every detail of what came from respecting, and cherishing, even, the person your brother sought love in. It would be pride, of all the sins, he would feel the most—and hopefully the only—when he was hypothetical best-man at this all but confirmed wedding. Pride, and maybe a smidgen of greed, because he was hoarding the better form of a family for himself. Or at least he fashioned himself to believe. Family could be worse than this lot.

ADAM: Is it the normal thing for a man to not think about getting married?

LUCY: For a man like you? I mean, a straight Australian man with career ambitions instead, or at least ambitions for himself to some regard, to some extent. I think you're allowed to not think about, the same amount as a woman is allowed to liberate herself from thinking about if she wants to. I don't speak on behalf of every woman in the world, but we spend a lot of our childhoods anticipating the white wedding. [*she paused, thinking*] I like the Billy Idol song. *It's a nice day to start again*. Getting married is a new chapter, for a lot of people, but if you have no real desire to start over...of course you have no intuition to get married. You aren't an embarrassment of the species for not having brainstormed how you would have proposed to any of your past girlfriends, or for not writing on your dating profile, "looking for my future wife who similarly is in search of her future husband."

ADAM: Shannon has talked to me about how marriage has always been something he mulls over when he's with a woman. That he sees himself as a husband, the way he respects our dad as being husband to our ma.

LUCY: There is only so much good you telling me all of this does for my impatience. *[she laughed quietly]* I joke. I don't feel like our relationship has been me waiting to get married. No hurrying.

ADAM: Obviously marrying Sophie would have been a mistake.

LUCY: You two weren't toxic together though, at least from my perspective. I know I only saw what surrounded me when there would be a family gathering, or the four of us would go out for dinner together. She's a sweet girl. Nothing like that changed because she decided to break your heart.

ADAM: You're lucky to get to take that position, being unrelated to me and all.

LUCY: Your brother's protective of you. The two of you aren't dissimilar enough for your teenage years to have been riddled with bullying, narking on each other, him yanking out the Big Brother card. What was it like, wrestling for supremacy instead? *[she paused, smirking]* So when something crumbles completely out of your control, because a relationship is never to the responsibility of just one or the other party, of course Shannon's going to be there to tell you to pick your head right back up.

ADAM: And you get to be impartial.

LUCY: I know you more than I knew her.

ADAM: You won't curse her out.

LUCY: I hope Shannon didn't, she didn't ruin your life, Adam, she decided to go in a different direction with her life. Life has a funny way of reminding you of your own core beliefs. If you'd stayed with Sophie for another year or two, maybe she would have started to wonder when you were going to propose, and you would have to confront those feelings. *Am I not the right sort of man if I am not excited about getting married right now?* I thought you were forgiving yourself.

ADAM: *[he pondered on it]* Forgiving myself...about how I've been treating myself since the breakup? I don't know I can forgive myself yet. *Forgive* feels wrong.

LUCY: I had a truly awful breakup when I was twenty. We'd been together since high school—we got together about five months before graduation, actually. He took me to the school formal, paired the colour of his tie to the colour of my dress. It was maybe the wrong colour for my skin tone, too pale and pastel, but I very much had loved the style of the dress, sort of shorter but respectable and didn't make me look like I was swimming in fabric, and we found it relatively cheap because my parents had given me a budget of sorts. Anyway, irrelevant to the story, isn't it? *[she shrugged her shoulders]* I dated Cole until about a month and a half after my twentieth birthday. The collapse of our relationship came at a complete surprise to both of us, because we had that sort of bliss you get when you are young, dumb, and think you're indestructible. Cole, he might have proposed himself if you gave him another four months. His father was caught in a strong current and drowned at sea—he had been swimming far from the flags, which had been his first mistake, I suppose. Cole had been almost enamoured, if that's the right word, by his father. They were really, truly best friends, and the death of someone he had known for twenty years, had depended on for twenty years, absolutely devastated him. Of course it did. *[she sniffled, turning away briefly from the man beside her]* It devastated our relationship, too. He became distant, ignored my texts, completely. I was in no position to argue with a boy who had lost his father whom he loved so incredibly. What could I say, *there is a space hollowing out between us and I miss when you talked to me about your emotions and what was happening in that brain of yours?* The next time he came over, it could not have been more obvious he wanted to talk, and of course I did too. All we did was argue for hours. Argue, or sit in complete silence. I held him. He held me.

ADAM: Oh, Lucy—

LUCY: *[she wiped a teary eye]* I lost contact with him over time. I don't know where Cole is. But after a while, I forgave myself for feeling heartbroken. That is my point, after all that talking, going back to the girl I was. If you reprimand yourself for wasting time being heartbroken, all you do is waste more time being sick with the anger.

It took the wind out of his chest, thinking about a loss so great. Adam counted himself lucky to have all his family close, with the exception of a great-aunt or uncle who passed, and one of his grandparents when he was very little. Seven or eight. The weight of losing a soul. He felt a certain sense of sympathy for a boy he had never met, now a man he would never know, too. Cole was somewhere out there in the universe. He tried to think of any Coles he knew, but other than the supermarket he drew blanks and fired empties. Adam reorientated himself and tried to think, too, about friends he knew who had lost their fathers. That, too, seemed an inconsequential little list, which at least made him feel more grateful than before.

His own father, healthy. He had not met Tobias' at anything since the pair met each other on reality television, but the man was certainly still alive, and he wondered why Tobias saw him so infrequently. Not his business, he thought. Ophelia's father was around. Isobel's too, and he had met Jon on numerous occasions. There was Josh's somewhat homophobic father, Eric's dad who loved a spot of cricket far too often, Jacob's who he was rarely in contact with but that was different entirely from death. From mourning someone you loved.

Father's Day just gone, a handful of months ago, Adam, Shannon, and Lewis slacked on gifting their dad anything particular, anything you could not fish out from a retail store for a reasonable price that one hundred other fathers could receive. Their dad was a difficult man to purchase for, because he wanted so little and was comfortable with just enough. Adam had paid for dinner. The four of them, sans their ma and Lucy and whichever girl Lewis was courting at the time, sat in the booth at the sushi train restaurant and the company was the ultimate gift. Although he realised that now, sitting on the lip of the borrowed van with his legs planted firmly on the ground.

It was nice, for a second, just to cherish that he still had a father.

That he could still find another great love.

That his brother would be married, someday, one day.

ADAM: I'm sorry you had to experience all of that when you were only twenty.

LUCY: It could have happened last year and it would have hurt all the same. We hurt and we heal. We hurt each other and we watch each other heal. *[she glanced around the inner tunnel of the van]* He's a good friend to you. Tobias. How was sleeping together last night, he didn't snore, did he?

ADAM: *[he laughed]* No, he didn't, nah.

Speak of the devil and he will appear. Tobias came wandering back towards the van, looking entirely unchanged, and Lucy smiled at Adam and bid him a short, hurried goodbye, waving politely to Tobias as she went. A conversation interrupted, but not abruptly in the middle of anything in particular. It comforted Adam, hearing what he had heard. He felt so incredibly mortal.

now.

Adam and Lucy, a year or so beyond the camping trip, sitting in a booth at a bar having an alcoholic beverage. It was indeed true, the world had upended. Adam had envisioned with such a clarity his brother and this girlfriend of his, this Lucy, getting married someday, one day, but now every person involved in the dream had been altered completely. Lines had blurred. Everyone was getting queerer, and weirder, and more complex without noticing it.

Except, maybe it was more nuanced for the woman sitting opposite him, knocking the ice in her glass around with a straw she had swiped from the bartender when she had gone for another drink. He would be remiss to not at least acknowledge that in the months since their conversation, one of many and many about getting married, having children, being in love, letting yourself be happy and free and content, she had not merely switched from a vote of yes to a vote of no. Hers and Shannon's entire relationship had crumbled, and he was still uncertain as to why. Whether the proposal had ached, or embarrassed, or reminded one or both of them how little time was left.

Adam was not caught in doomsday terror, waiting for the end of the world, but as a twenty-eight-year-old man as of April the ninth he saw the metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel, albeit far enough away he had to squint, instead of vomit. It was truly all downhill from here.

ADAM: So, where to from here then? Are you staying in the apartment?

LUCY: Until the lease ends. Then, I don't know. I'll try to find a new place with a friend, make a fresh start. Not because I think my current apartment is haunted by ghosts. But it feels appropriate.

ADAM: So long as you don't come around asking to crash at mine too.

LUCY: *[she laughed]* I promise I won't. *[a pause, hesitant]* This doesn't have to be a divide, Adam. If we see each other on the street, or browsing the same aisle in the supermarket, we don't have to duck behind a stack of Coca-Cola cartons and pretend we're invisible to all who occupy a given space. We can say hi, wave, ask each other how we're doing. It's not like there is any animosity between the two of us—and I hope not between Shannon and I.

ADAM: I stopped to talk, didn't I?

LUCY: I know you did today. But that could have just been the curiosity of wondering what from my side was missing.

ADAM: It's not like you were a mega asshole to my brother or anything.

LUCY: Right, exactly. Eventually I guess we might become mere acquaintances who notice each other in the crowd at Riverfire, and go to wave but someone beside us nudges our shoulder and we almost lunge into a small child eating a dachshund dog. But, I think it's silly when a breakup only makes everything feel so awkward. Awkward between family and the ex, I mean. I assume I'm supposed to feel like your perception of me has changed completely just because I rejected Shannon's proposal. There is too much lethargy to that, altering the way I swerve away from you so there isn't a repeated reminder the wedding bells have been shattered on the ground with the stomping of my feet. *[she sighed, sipping the remnants of the drink with the straw]* But please, if I stop you in the lobby of some event and want to chat and you're far too busy, don't feel reluctant. I'm not your brother's girlfriend anymore. *[she is suddenly stunned]* That's weird to say.

ADAM: Do you miss him?

LUCY: I don't know if I can answer that—

ADAM: I don't have a wire on, Lucy, I won't run back to Shannon and report like there's a chance he can win you back like a prize at the fair.

LUCY: *[still somewhat uneasy]* Gosh. I don't know. The mind likes to weasel out a thought, doesn't it? Do I miss him like I think I made a terrible mistake? I think everyone has some percentage of themselves that wonders what the alternative would be like, what it would be like to be still with him. Can you be one hundred percent confident on any decision? *[she rested her chin on the palm of her left hand]* I miss Shannon at night, when the shadows dance on the walls, and they look like malformed goblins. But not because I'm scared of the dark, I'm not, or because I think he should be there to hold me. Sorry, Adam, this all just sounds like it's coming out wrong. I miss him sometimes because I think we are all coded to miss the past more than we are to be excited about the present, especially when we're alone, and especially when the future looks entirely hazy. It's a fantasy to think we're not destined to grow out of our own skin.

ADAM: Like snakes.

LUCY: Yeah. Something like that.

Without realising, without noticing, Adam himself had unravelled an upper skin and shed it on the dusty, wooden floorboards of the urban, middle-aged-men-frequented pub. There, at his feet, was the version of himself that had merely an hour or so ago unconsciously been determined to put Lucy out of his mind completely. Like she was the past because the world said so. His brother's ex-girlfriend sat opposite him looking warm in a long-sleeved blouse she had clearly worn to stay professional in the workplace, mistakenly as the weather continued to annihilate the inhabitants of planet Earth. Karma is a rattlesnake, Adam thought to himself, still lingering on snake similes and the cracking skin underneath his leather boots. He felt like a cowboy.

It was now twenty-four days until Christmas. There would be an empty seat, metaphorically, at the table this year. Adam understood his parents, his grandparents, wouldn't leave the blank mark for Lucy when she was so officially removed from Christmas Day, or Christmas Eve, plans already. Shannon would not be miserable, Mr Moper, but he similarly would not have a new girlfriend or boyfriend on his arm, someone to distract and entertain him. Someone for the family to interrogate. Adam, too, would go stag, and lonely, unless he cumbersomely invited Tobias to ditch his own family's plans, and for what? To pretend to be an orphan, to call himself *the friend*, to sit there in front of a plate of baked ham and turkey stuffing and peeled prawns and pretend he hadn't kissed two out of the three of the Affeldt brothers, current generation.

The fact Adam wanted Tobias there at all made him feel vulnerable. All he was doing was substituting a real, genuine love, a partner, with the man and the roommate he was being intimate with semi-regularly. Adam counted himself lucky he could spin the latch on whatever emotion would otherwise clog the pipe and ruin their ability to have sex with one another.

It was only casual sex, and he couldn't complicate it.

LUCY: I am not so sure anything has become more apparent with why it had to end, and why it couldn't fizzle out for a couple more months, at least until the new year started.

ADAM: Is there more than your mind changing, you realising you don't want to lead him astray?

LUCY: I definitely never wanted that, to lead him astray. *[she seemed distant]* I read a book on what you should do if your sex life was out of whack. I know, it's not details you necessarily want, details about your brother's sex life and what he does in bed with a woman. The book—I can't remember what it was called, which is for the best—it prioritised challenging each other. Not in a competitive way, but by proposing new ideas, by being adventurous. It was definitely written a lot more passionately and sensually than I could ever describe it. Nor would I want to in front of you, Adam. *[she bowed her head for a moment, staring into her glass]* To me it was such a farce. Complete nonsense for us, particularly for us. Of course, this book had no conceivable way of mind-reading and knowing the type of people reading it.

ADAM: Did you tell him you thought it was bollocks?

LUCY: I tried to, and I ranted and raved about how insecure it made me, when we had our overdue conversation about what was going on in our relationship. Well, the one that segued into talking about opening up our relationship. *[she paused]* I assume Shannon's done the autopsy. Told you about how we were both more than willing to trial it, not that either of us felt sexually-inexperienced. It was never that. It was never an anticipation to feel something more exciting with another man, well, for either of us. *[she smiled over at the man opposite]* Please tell me if I ever say anything Adam hadn't told you yet, but the two of you don't really keep secrets, or not that I can imagine. If there is something he hadn't told you yet, well, he never told me either.

ADAM: I already mentioned I knew about you two being open, and Shannon liking men—

LUCY: Right, sorry—

ADAM: It's fine. *[he smiled]* I have nowhere to be.

LUCY: Gosh, I don't even know what time it is.

ADAM: Seven something.

LUCY: I think it might even be later. I don't know. I don't really care, it's sort of, so what if I'm exhausted for work tomorrow. By Wednesday half of the week is already gone.

ADAM: Hump day.

LUCY: *[she snorted]* I used to call a Wednesday "Camel Day," I have no idea why it left my lexicon.

ADAM: I have never said the word *lexicon* before in my entire life.

LUCY: Well, now you have. I'm not really ashamed to admit it is just a word numbed into my brain from work and I have no actual attachment to it. I guess it's not like words are close friends, or comforts on the tongue. Nothing like that. We just speak them.

ADAM: I have a question. *[he waited for her to react, to shift in her body]* The decision to open your relationship, and when Shannon told you he kissed someone else, even just briefly. It didn't decide it for you? You didn't right then decide you would never marry him, much less stay with him?

LUCY: *[pondering]* I wanted to get back to what resembled normal, when it came to how we talked to each other. Shannon proposed so recently, I knew it was me who he should worried about, not the other way around. Why would he propose and then run off with someone else, only because I said I needed time to think?

ADAM: It doesn't sound much like the type of man I know my brother to be. You're right.

LUCY: It's like his eyes were set ablaze when he talked about what a future together could look like. I wanted for him that expression to never die, but inside of me I couldn't keep the fire alive. I love your brother, like I have never loved another man ever before, but he deserves someone who makes him feel the way he seemed when he came home from the wedding and tried to pour the flame out from his eye sockets. He wanted to ignite the curtains. *[she sighed, stirring up the melting ice cubes]* When I told my sister we split from each other, and she heard this confession, that I still cared so deeply for him even though I let him go, she questioned me as if we were awaiting trial for murder. Our relationship was not trapped in amber, though. He wanted to get married as soon as we could, and I wanted to be the person I was a year, two years ago, who wanted to marry him as soon as we could.

ADAM: I think there's an alternate universe where the two of you get to live that life.

LUCY: There might be. But there also might not be any other universe but ours.

Lucy shrugged her shoulders, and stared down at the melting ice cubes in her glass. She had finished drinking the alcohol content that had remained, but with the straw she sucked up the little puddles of water beginning to form. To Adam, she seemed to be adjusting well to the separation, although too he imagined her career in marketing trained her to a degree on how to present a positive outlook on your face. She was hardly falling to pieces in front of him. She was hardly coming undone.

The rowdiness of the bar had returned, unavoidably, and Adam made a passing glance towards the exit. The stiffness of his work garments made him feel like he was catching up with a coworker after-hours, but somehow around Jacob he had felt relaxed, almost forgetting what he was dressed in entirely. The truth was obvious, then: the longer the night dragged, or kept him from stripping down to his boxers, the wearier of the button-up, the black slacks, and the leather boots he became. Hell was an evening preventing a person from becoming naked. Hell was sipping alcohol but getting no tipsier.

Adam noticed on Lucy's face her own eagerness to be done with the conversation. They had talked at length about the breakup, and no person with a sane, ordinary level of charisma wanted to drain themselves across an entire evening talking about what it took to say goodbye to someone they had loved, someone they slept in the same bed with, someone they had briefly co-parented a foster cat named Bam-Bam with. He still wondered if there was something she was leaving locked in the chest, in the gilded cage, but more than ever it seemed less and less his business.

He was grateful he had yet to order another drink. You could not wander the city streets with a to-go glass of bourbon on the rocks. Or whatever he might have had next. It seemed like the sort of Tuesday he might have selected to live dangerously, or a version of dangerous that simply translated to mixing up the drink order. Adam glanced over at Lucy opposite him and smiled, but it was hardly gleeful. He would miss seeing his brother with an arm draped around her.

ADAM: *[only half serious]* I'm sure the roommates will be wondering what's keeping me.

LUCY: It's been good to see you, Adam. Thanks for listening to my side of things, at least.

ADAM: Take care of yourself, Lucy.

LUCY: You too. Please. *[she began to scoot out of the booth]* It was good to see you.

ADAM: Which way are you headed?

They wandered out of the semi-crowded pub into the December night air. It was far from cool, but it was not stifled by the humid heat of what had been the day. All of December would be dry, miserably oppressive, or otherwise tropical thunderstorms would threaten the power and drown the garden beds. Adam thought briefly of that insane, freak storm earlier in the year that had left eight people in one house in blanketed darkness. How different times had been then. Everyone paired off, that had been a force of nature unexpected too. He somewhat missed the populated nature, being surrounded by friends he knew and mobilised question marks he would come to get to know further.

Adam wondered whether New Year's Eve would feel like that. Crowded, but safe. The planning, the organisation, the assorting, he left all of it to everyone else. There was something about scheduling that psyched him out, or he was simply eager to admit it was no strong suit of his own, and pretending to do something successfully that you were rubbish at was never the victory path. Pretending to stay with someone because it was expected would never wash away your own strange feelings. Strange feelings that persist.

On the pavement, Adam and Lucy attempted to dart around the awkwardness of both needing to head towards the train station, which was a few streets in that direction, further back from the brown, snaking river. They wandered together, the topic of conversation completely avoidant of everything they had spoken of at the bar. Over drinks. Instead, she asked questions of work, and he volleyed them back, and they pretended it was riveting, riveting stuff.

Some of the slow waltz to the train station was held in silence, which Adam liked. It opened him to his thoughts, although he invariably preferred not to linger on them. Fragments of what Lucy had said clung to his skull like aluminium foil plastered on with glue. Suddenly he was mourning the horses that had died so valiantly to paste on new mantras, new mottos, direct and underneath brushed and moussed brown hair. He needed a haircut. When he would arrange an appointment at the barber he liked, which was a twenty-minute bus ride from the city, because he struggled to shift, to rearrange, he didn't quite know. Adam let his hair grow.

At the train station, down on the same exact platform, they bid each other a proper goodbye and respectfully went to opposite ends. It might have been stranger to wait together the eleven minutes it was until their train arrived. Lingered together, counting down time. Adam started to think he was stringing Tobias along too much. Their living together complicated something casual, something with the cords and strings ripped clean out. They saw each other every single day, except if one or the other went on vacation, which had not happened in the last few months. They saw each other so much.

This path he wandered down now, metaphorically, felt like the path he was taking only to hurt Tobias later. The train neared the underground platform. Adam's feet were planted so firmly on the gritty tile, and if he were some other man he would think, *imagine all the clinging germs, festering away amongst their own rot*. He was not another man.

He wondered if his sway mattered, if the tug of the current were meant to be ignored when you could foresee the hindsight. As he stepped into the train carriage, the ugly yellow light settling on his shoulders, Adam saw a hallucination of Sophie, following him. She did not take a seat. She gripped a dangling handle and held on.