

spread a little sunshine

by Keeley Young

part three

Jonah: “If it makes you feel any better, I turned down sex with a hooker for you.”

- **Superstore** [2015-2021]

Toby and I dated for less than six months, but like many a romantic love story, I had seen a forever including him. The honeymoon period lasted longer than it should have. Our reunions began with passionate kissing, followed by passionate over-the-clothes touching, because he always wanted to shove his hands down my pants to be reminded I had the parts down there. Toby and I strangely did not have much sex. It was an era of modesty and restraint—I wanted every time I let him inside me to be something special, to remind me of some grand ambition of being his forever and not burning out his desire for me. I like to believe he understood. Toby was doting and loving, we had extensive conversations about our boundaries without calling them that. It was a comfortable, adjustable relationship, but after a time it ended, and I hardly spoke to him for five years.

You never forget an ex.

Cormac was attempting to get through to Noel, first with a message, then a ring. The call dialled out and he sighed but hardly looked defeated. Our expressions confessed the truth—we were not agitated, or alarmed, frustrated or fuming, we were simply stunned. To rarely hear about the man and suddenly he was out on dates with one of Cormac's friends. Stunned, confused, distracted. If anything hearing about him again let me be **distracted**.

'It's too late,' I said, leaning against the wall, sleepy and sheepish.

Cormac scrunched up his face. 'In the night or to stop those idiots from being idiotic?'

I shrugged, which would have looked more or less like I was attempting to caterpillar myself up the bathroom wall. Their dalliance mattered little to me, or should have, but I saw flashes of our intimacy, our once-intimacy, and the mental photoshopping of Noel into these flashbacks, into this future with Toby for however long, gave me pause. Made me question whether I still harboured feelings for Toby no matter how long time had passed. Made me question whether his arms should be reserved for me or a total stranger. No in-between, no familiarity if it isn't someone by the name Finn.

I tried to remember how often Toby had met Noel. Truly little, but where I went Cormac went Noel went. We were all young idiots. Foolish early-twenties boys, openly queer, celebrating that we could want and define lust and rattle off the whys of the deadly sins, why we committed them instead of thrusting ourselves away from them. When I would kiss Toby I would think about him naked. When I was around Cormac I was greedy of his time, a glutton for his company, envious of anyone imposing on the two of us. But it was ordinary for the age—the worst of the woes was being home alone in your parents' house eating dinner with your siblings and watching the broadcast news.

‘Dumbass is probably getting his ass eaten,’ Cormac said, then rolled his eyes, then realised and pulled me close to him, enveloping me away from the very idea. I pictured them, quickly, being intimate with one another. The image of Toby in my head was warped and younger. I couldn’t imagine him now, brushing shoulders with the rest of us, living in a different house, wearing different clothes, working a different job. I put to bed the notion of seeing him again the longer I mapped out every character flaw I remembered Noel had. It would be fleeting, this romance worshipping the past. Not theirs, but ours, tethering Toby back to me when I least needed him. Just let me have sex, I thought, and if I saw his face I imagined I would say it, overdramatic and self-indulgent. Just let me fuck, I would actually scream, ripped out of a sitcom not a telenovela or a soap. You have to be welcome to swear. A character on a soap was not welcome to be naked.

Cormac and I stood in that bathroom for too long, and I imagined Gretchen and Luke on the other side of the door trying to listen to the whispers. Trying, failing. My lips were almost to Cormac’s ear when I told him, ‘I really shouldn’t care.’ Strangely, the emotion seemed to have been invented between the two of us. Neither seemed hurt nor frustrated. Still stunned, still shocked. Still sleepy. We ambled out of the bathroom and said our brief goodnights to the lovebirds, and once more Cormac walked me down to my car and leaned with his ass against the car door.

‘What if they fell in love?’ He asked charmingly, amusingly.

‘Noel would find him insufferable.’ This was a joke, but no one laughed.

Cormac wasn’t looking at me. Was he worried about how I was taking it, I thought, although the expectation I should crumble into a thousand pieces and wail out of every jagged edge seemed antithetical to the Alanis Morissette plate of armour I was attempting to construct around myself. ‘And when they come to some gathering, I don’t know, a party for New Year’s Eve, when they come together, his arm looped around Noel’s waist, will you think the same, my boy?’

I resisted the urge to breathe out deeply, heavily. A part of myself will always prefer the shield of contradictions. ‘I can stay on my side of the room,’ I said, which felt disingenuous. I knew myself. I knew I would take the quirky, complicated opportunity to face Toby again and say hello to him, make some quippy remark about this new relationship, ask him for the crude one-liner that kept him rapt and captivated. I knew myself, the twisted fondness for becoming all-knowing, all-seeing.

‘You can’t, you’d jump the doofus,’ Cormac replied, and now he laughed. ‘For however long I have known you, Finn, I know the heart of this person here is someone who feels intensely, and while I am loving the change in personality, loving hearing about your new bites into the apple, I can’t imagine you have taped over your own history. Those are sacred recordings, damaged by the floods, but sacred. All I’m saying is, you go home tonight and sleep off thinking about Toby again, but try not to trick yourself into thinking you won’t be hurt if you see him with loving-up Noel.’

Instead of immediately driving home, I wanted to pull into a service station, refuel, and buy two donuts. One to eat, I thought, and the other to save. Save for when? Sometime. I would eat the first, a chocolate and custard number, in the carpark, sans shame, and then hold out on the second until I got home. This would not have been shame. This would not have been me feeling self-conscious, embarrassed, wrecked, miserable, missing him. I would be feeding myself instead of feeling things you could imagine feeling if you still remembered how things had once been. Being nostalgic would have been humiliating. I would have been hungry. The donuts, albeit slightly stale from sitting in the display case all day, would still have tasted delicious and tempting enough to complete the double-act. But it was well into the middle of the night, at this point the very next day, and I could not imagine anything was open or that I had the energy to confront explaining myself to myself.

I made the mistake of going to the supermarket on a Sunday again. It was bustling with people with more important lives than mine, of course according to how fervently they expressed their need to be ahead of me, or where I stood in the aisles. No sight of Gordon. Mothers with stacked trollies and fathers hopelessly trying to wrangle children made me feel claustrophobic, but I avoided them and picked the emptier aisles, brainstorming the week ahead in my mind. An announcement overhead called someone named Ruth to the online department for an immediate and short-lasting One Run. The nostalgia of last night had been exterminated with rat pellets.

Some of the old coworkers of mine, familiar faces, I said brief hellos to, but I could duck my head down and pretend I was genuinely interested in buying a head of lettuce or a plastic bag of carrots to avoid everyone else. Ed and Roscoe were making idle chatter in the Produce Department while they unloaded bunch after bunch of bananas. Neither of them would have been offended if I said not a word to them for the rest of my short, fleeting life. It was simple to avoid making small talk that would progress no further than asking them how their day was, and what the weather they did not get to bask outside in was like, because they were tethered to handling fresh fruit and vegetables for half the day. Ed and Roscoe were attractive older men, somewhere in their early to mid to late forties—the difficulty of never quite becoming too close to your ex-coworkers was making rough estimates of age, knowing their appearances could have perhaps misconstrued the truth. What did mid-forties truly look like? Maybe I was beginning to become too attracted to older men.

Gwen was on one of the registers, deep in conversation with a customer. They were both women, likely both in their thirties—maybe they were both mothers, too, and this was an opportunity for Gwen to share and trade product suggestions, bullseying that Customer Service Target. Whenever I had flashbacks of getting in line, of wanting to be a worthy employee, I shuddered and dreamt of caving in on myself. It was a dangerous place to return to once you had moved to another pasture.

Ghosts are bound to haunt you. Whether you believe in them or not. Scary stories to tell in the dark will creep into the light even if you fear watching a horror movie. The supermarket was a ghost story because I could turn the corner and be confronted with a beheaded clown with blood spurting into my mouth and feel powerless to turn back in the direction I came. A cleaver-wielding freak, blood-relative or not, wearing one mask or another. You confront them and you turn corners and something else happens, because the path ahead is wooded, not certain. The alternative is screaming and running away.

The head-tilt was unavoidable. Seeing him here, again, reverted things back to three years ago, when he was the boss and I a nothing boy, a corridor-person, a quick hello and an even quicker retreat. Omar was the store manager for the supermarket for a good eighteen months. He was openly queer, married to a man who often attended Big Store Events, anything themed around the holidays or promotional releases, anything that gave him an opportunity to be boastful and proud. Having a queer, brown-skinned manager seemed like the sort of thing to be labelled as a diversity hire, which depressed me to acknowledge. Omar was a wonderful boss and a wonderful man, but I could not understand why he was wandering around this store again dressed in what constituted his uniform—a crisp white button-up shirt, slacks, and occasionally a tie, if he felt adventurous and insane.

Approaching him again and saying anything felt bold, out of my comfort zone, but suddenly I was saying *hi* and *Omar* without reservation. He surprise-smiled at me and briefly stopped walking. ‘Finn. I’d heard you left us,’ he said, as if I was a spectral of myself come back to Earth for a day. Like in *Carousel*. We lingered briefly in the middle of open space, being intrusions, only giving enough time to have this interaction with no end goal. ‘You look good,’ he said, and then off he went further into the stomach of the supermarket, and I turned to get a glimpse of his ass as I now could, no longer objectifying my boss, or a fellow employee, my anything. Maybe I was objectifying a man, but after the brief compliment, who was really checking out who?

I paid for my groceries and walked out to the car, loading the reusable bags into the boot. I bought some snacks for when Adrian and I went to the beach on the weekend. It felt like preparing for a field trip: look down the checklist, think about sun safety, be the boring one while Adrian didn’t so much as think about the back of his neck getting burnt or having something to eat while he drove. We would be in his car, stroking the ego of *Shirley* or *Rebecca*. I would remember her name eventually, or I would ask him while I sat perpetually *within* her. The closest I would come to some semblance of straight sex, and now I thought of sensual car-intimacy, thought of *Titane*, remembered watching it late at night with a friend from university on the floor of their share-house bedroom, watching on a laptop screen, reading the subtitles. Be pleased by the car. Moan and scream. *Your inhibitions were gone? Well, that’s not quite true, I kept the [car] radio on.*

Until this point, I had been stumbling into sex surprisingly, although the surprise was that these men were merely just horny, or loved-up, or wanted me because I wasn't saying no. I had to remind myself I wasn't looking for something beautifully romantic, but with a tilt of the head, everything could be romantic. It wouldn't kill me to have sex with someone I hadn't flirted with on accident, met in some public place, invited to somewhere unfamiliar, fucked in the dark. Once I downloaded one of the apps again, and created a halfway-decent profile, I started browsing through everyone else. People are gorgeous. Some impolite. The trick is to find an attractive-enough man who can make good-enough conversation and isn't desperate to make you their possession. A fraction of myself worried I would start talking to someone nice, someone lovely, and be swayed into imagining a *life* with him. Where the beach excursions would be ours, holding hands as the seafoam licked our feet. Everything is romantic. I used images, playing on loop in my head, of jizz on my face and the thrust of a cock to distract me from being soft-hearted. Play dirty. Move with rhythm. Have sex for pleasure.

I stopped on his profile when I saw it. Out of what he wore at work, Omar looked ordinary, albeit an older man in a young man's market trying to find...I quickly checked what he was looking for...not a romance, not anything serious, just conversations, new friends, and maybe a hot, steamy lay. The idea of matching with an ex-coworker was odd, but matching with an ex-boss felt inappropriate and as if I could be fired from the grave. My mere presence of having worked there wiped from the slate, years of experience rendered irrelevant because I thought my once-boss attractive and slid him a saucy message. Omar was 56 and liked to fish, perhaps because he could sit in a camping chair without a shirt on while he did it. He was accurately represented in his pictures—a Pakistani man whose family had emigrated here and adopted the customs of the culture to an extent, who now himself appeared to unfortunately prefer khaki shorts on the weekends and drinking beer with the man I recognised to be his husband. His bio said he was in an open relationship. Some of the pictures had him clean-shaven, but when I saw him in the supermarket he was sporting some stubble and the beginnings of a salt-and-pepper moustache. I hovered over swiping right on him. Omar was in every sense the perfect sort of man to have a spectacular love affair with—he was a queer man with a presumed amount of experience, he would be unattached, he already seemed slightly interested enough to make a comment, and he was very attractive. Or he was attractive enough. He was handsome.

He was not ugly.

I think I looked at his pictures for too long, picturing it without making a decision. *Should I stay and be caught, what would be his response?* My mind was complicated with song lyrics. My dick was complicated with wanting to cum by his hand.

I swiped, knowing it could never come, any indication he was even still on the app itself. This an informal job application, an informal attempt to return to the place I had once worked, but now

nefariously, dirtily, the idea of our naked bodies making everyone who had expected civility and tabooism groan. It had turned me on, imaging the relationship I had once known as only loving, between my former boss and his involved partner—whose name I was forgetting again—to be liberated, sexually-liberated, more compelling and interesting now that I could uncover little truths about it. I petted my boner through the shorts like it was a garter snake.

It was a few hours before Omar and I matched on the dating app. In the interim I did ordinary boring things, ignoring my dick, going to work, surviving through work. I checked my phone again when I was leaving the office, wandering out into the late afternoon sun, although it was fast approaching evening. *You have matched with Omar!* It was aggressive and cheery, pretending itself to be a notification of potential love and wholesomeness. In truth, I waited for him to ask for a picture of my hole and tell me to bend over and take it. The image of sex with your boss, or your former one, would forever be synonymous with a submissive and dominant relationship, you the lowly employee taking one for the team and surrendering to the whims of someone with more authority and more vigour. Omar retained no power over me, but picturing him in uniform, or his semblance of one, barking orders to me and slapping his erect brown cock against my face was arousing. If only for my imagination, and the masturbation session I would have when I crawled into bed after an exhausting day of being a plain adult. *Start a conversation with Omar.* He wasn't the sort to like a premade introductory question, but typing *hi* to the former store manager seemed tentative. We could do the dance of ignoring an opener until I deleted the app all over again.

In a porno, Omar would swipe through the brambles and follow in the footsteps of what I knew of older men: here is an address and a time, come be my bitch. Bernard was never so direct, Bernard was always more tender, but these men did not intend on wifing me up. In a porno, Omar would be forward, direct, and the pretty bottom would follow suit.

His first message came across like he was an old friend struck by a missed connection: *Hey Finn, it was good seeing you the other day.* A pause. *Didn't think I would see you on here.* The tone was polite, so I was polite, respectful, calling for the poison boy to drink from the chalice before I did. He wanted details about where I was working now, whether I was loving it, what I'd been doing since I resigned. I gave vague details, told him I was absolutely loving it without weighing anything up, and surprised him with the Europe trip. Although by this point the time spent overseas was no longer recent and fascinating, and I hardly spoke about it with anyone who had heard the interesting stories or seen the gorgeous photographs. But Omar had known nothing, and Omar was once more the store manager after the recent one went on maternity leave, and Omar liked the third picture on my profile, how sexy I looked with my hair like that. We flirted occasionally in breaks in the conversation, but Omar seemed to like to regard me like I was just an old employee who was also handsome and attractive.

After talking periodically all evening, when the clock struck sometime around 9:30pm, Omar began to wonder about my sexual kinks and fantasies. He explained his relationship with his partner in great detail, once I gave him permission to talk about it at length without judgement. Sometimes Tom liked to watch. Often Omar's husband was in another room, listening out for muffled moans, or somewhere else in the country entirely, waiting for a poorly-taken picture of Omar's cock buried in some twink's asshole. Theirs was a romance built on loving and worshipping the alter of sex and I was undressed in bed playfully stroking my dick while I talked to him, thinking about when it would be appropriate to ask if he wanted something to make his evening more exciting.

Omar said he was a strict top, but unlike many he was not insensitive, or a jerk, about it. He said he loved breeding, which made it sound like we were tigers and he wanted to mate. Which only aroused me more. He wondered aloud whether I had any specific desires for where I would love to have sex, and I couldn't ignore myself while I looked at the tiny circle of his face at the top of the screen. Of course I wanted to be fucked at the supermarket after hours. It thrilled me to think of myself completely dirty and raunchy somewhere I was not supposed to have ever taken my clothes off. I told Omar and waited for him to message back that I was depraved, or that it could never happen because of the cameras, but he simply said it could happen if I wanted it desperately. Was I free tomorrow night?

Omar told me he would come let me in the side door after the nightfill team had left at 11pm. Staying up until then was no challenge—for a while, I talked to Adrian out on the concrete, about nothing in particular, until he got tired or bored and disappeared into his bedroom. Then it was a matter of keeping my eyes open by watching random tv shows on the couch and thinking, occasionally, about what I was getting myself into. I completely ignored the insanity. Of sleeping with my former boss, although there would be no sleeping. Of public sex in a supermarket. Of it being almost midnight in a place I no longer could say I belonged at past the end of trading hours. None of this I wanted to deem insane, because I wanted the thrill, the sensation, of breaking some rules and being penetrated by a man who could have been anywhere else, who could have been with his husband. One day, I thought, I will have passionate sex with someone who doesn't give the world complicated mixed feelings, but then, one day the world would be over and none of this would matter.

At ten minutes past eleven, I waited around the side of the building again, remembering all over how many mornings this had been an understood norm. An uncomfortable, unforgiving norm. At least this time I will be having sex. Omar opened the staff entrance door and stared down at me with warm eyes and a smile that registered as 'I can't wait to fuck.' Our first interactions again, seeing each other afterhours in the dim light, were overly friendly and non-sexual. He didn't touch me, or compliment me, or steer me towards his office with a hand on my waist. It was professional and

genuine. I'd worn skimpy underwear, a thong, and wanted him to rail me more than I wanted prices to stay at a reasonable fixed amount. There was no one around, the lull in time before the bakers arrived to start preparing bread and rolls and cookies to sell. Omar walked slightly ahead of me as we cut in an L-shape towards the offices, the sexual tension thick in the air. Anxiousness only felt natural.

In his office, behind closed doors, he didn't kiss me or even seem to think of it. He unzipped his pants and his soft brown cock came out through the new gap in his trousers, flopping down. Omar told me to kneel down and service him, as if he were an automobile in the repair shop, but his willingness to be dominating I found at once made me hornier for him. With my knees on the linoleum, I started stroking him until he became much more erect, and I imagined the view he would have from up there, staring down at this pleading ex-employee with big, round eyes and a hungry grip on his growing penis. When I started to suck his cock, he moaned out, but it was not overly loud, and almost sounded put-on. I knew this would only last so long—he had a husband for oral, and a husband for anal, but some lucky twenty-something boy's ass would be more exciting than anything. Omar ran his fingers through my hair and I imagined someone walking in on the two of us, startled, slightly turned-on. He tasted amazing, his cock hitting the back of my mouth.

'I'm horny as hell now, get up here so I can fuck you,' he said, or ordered, lifting me up onto his cleaned-off desk so he could tilt me at the right angle and touch the tip of his cock against my pink asshole. Omar gave me a wide smile of approval and said, 'You know you're so sexy,' before he started to insert himself inside me. Immediately I felt the pleasure of being fucked by him—his cock was not massively thick or long, but he understood how to use it, how best to stimulate pleasure for the other person with it, or how best to stimulate his own pleasure and the former simply came with it. I thought I would destroy the edges of the wooden desk with my unyielding grip, inched around with every thrust. Omar was voracious. He never moaned my name, but swore under his breath and told me I was a very, very good boy. 'Fuck, good boy,' he would whine out while he penetrated me. 'You're a good boy.' He came inside of me with one last grunt and a scrunched-up face and I waited for him to say it one last time, before he would swiftly kick me out the backdoor of the supermarket and never acknowledge me again. He smiled, goofily, with his cock still inside of me, white cum leaking out of my asshole, and repeated, 'Good boy.' Omar paused. 'Round two?'

What followed was a montage of sexual intercourse throughout the grocery store.

We had sex in the produce section against the potatoes.

We had sex in the breakroom on the sofa, me riding him up and down while he watched whatever uninteresting shit he found on the television.

We had sex in the freezer, my stomach getting a touch of frostbite pressed against the freezing cold wall. Omar wore the heavy fluorescent jacket and told me I was a good nasty boy for suffering.

We fucked where the load normally comes in.

We fucked in one of the aisles, him naming something you could buy if you wandered down it ordinarily, if you weren't half-undressed and completely horny and covered in a suspicious substance.

We fucked on the conveyor belt.

Omar seemed to have an unlimited supply of semen, but I stopped thinking about how many loads he had dumped inside of me when I kept repeatedly being told I was a good boy, the best boy, how the motivation of wanting to hear again how *perfect* I was kept me completely and utterly sexually-charged for his cock inside of me. This might have been taboo, might have been insane, but it was justification for being adventurous, for being more carefree with myself and doing something that would label me exciting. People imagined telling their grandchildren about how they met their husband, some picturesque story involving the countryside, or falling water, or a *meet-cute* cut-out from a magazine with scissors, but I pictured telling my grown-adult grandchildren about the exhilarating time I got screwed seven different ways at the supermarket overnight.

Omar had loved the skimpy thong. Holding it in his hand, he carefully, precisely, watched me step into it and what he said was my "beautiful nakedness" disappeared before his very eyes. Omar squeezed my ass and asked me if I would ever think about having a threesome with him and his handsome husband. Inside of myself I was exhausted, and the thought of having sex again seemed now like true overkill, but now a rejuvenated slut and loving it, I would not have dreamed of turning down the invitation. Omar simply called me a good boy.

We lingered for a moment once more near the staff entrance door, ignoring the possibility we could have had sex pressed up against it, the slight chance of an alarm triggered with too much excessive force. Omar kept himself professional again, almost offering to shake my hand. Neither of us thought it entirely normal to pash now, although we had certainly kissed everywhere else in the building. The romanticism was far from removed. Omar was my former boss, dressed again we had no desire now to repeat the illusion of what was to come. 'Drive safe,' he said, and let me out through the door. His last official words for the evening were: 'Have a good rest of the night then Finn.' Although it was sometime in the morning and I expected I was not likely to be getting very much sleep. In truth, I was so exhausted I thought of yabbing Mary's dog as a faux-excuse for not bothering to come into the office. *Sorry, my dog is not taking well to the new diet unfortunately, I have to be at his bedside as if he were a dying child instead. Mary and I both have that sort of adoration for our pet-offspring. She will understand, go yab her from her desk and put the phone on loudspeaker and we will sort it out accordingly.* The lie would be so elaborate I would give myself a stomach ache. But it would have been worth it.

The house was silent and only an ageing ghost would have seen the walk of confidence.

Cormac and I had, unbeknownst to us, concocted a sort of business arrangement. He came around with information about Toby, and I had started to ween onto talking in intricate detail about the *affair* with Dr Bernard Jemmott. So far the idea I had sex multiple times across the floor of the supermarket was being kept under wraps, but I knew myself, and I knew how desperate I was to spill on anything exciting the very moment it happened to me.

Cormac and I sat on the couch that evening drinking Diet Pepsi and eating Peanut M&Ms while we divulged new secrets. 'You're screwing divorced dads now?' He was hardly accusatory.

'Is it a crime?' I winked at him.

Cormac seemed to be finding my decisions amusing. 'It's not a crime, babe, but this is further proof you need to be back on some sort of dating app finding someone who is less likely to ruin you psychologically. This once-married doctor first of all shouldn't be screwing his patient, nor should you be screwing him, but that's beside the point, the very image makes anyone weak in the knees, we're not atrociously prude. But! You could at least find a gay or bisexual divorced dad who isn't inviting you to seedy motels for a screwing.'

'Can you stop saying screwing?'

'No, we'll go over our f-word limit.'

Cormac eased back on the couch and popped an M&M in his mouth. The crunch was subtle but heard, almost echoing in the living room. 'The hotel wasn't seedy.'

'He can tick off his fantasies when you're not just his patient. If you were well into the second year of being together, go to some hotel down the road and pretend to be strangers hooking up for a thrill ride, whatever, be our guest, hon hon hon. He thought he could convince you he was sane and sorted with an outward thrust gesture of *come to this seedy motel, I'll pretend my daughter is comfortable with me passing on dinner with her to have sex with a twink, and we'll call those yearly routine appointments our anniversary*. In hindsight, Finn, don't you see how weird it is?'

In hindsight everything was weird. Life could be listed in the category of weird. Intimacy with Bernard had trumped the strangeness of his fantasy, or his seemingly-interested desire in wanting someone younger to rejuvenate the part of himself that had died when he was married to a woman for too long. Was I not weird for taking the card in the first place? For not reporting to the receptionist that he had kissed me, despite my liking it, my consenting to it. Sex can be weird. An affair can be short-lived. These were the things I was learning now that I was exposing myself to new encounters, new obscurities. Finn, don't you see how weird it is to embrace some weirdness? It's only natural, babe.

Cormac swallowed a mouthful of Diet Pepsi. 'I'm sure every sexual encounter you have is completely and utterly normal and never even on the verge of being weird,' I said, and he stuck his tongue out at me, droplets of the brown liquid sitting at the corners.

‘At least you moved along.’

It was pure peace knowing I could not message Bernard when I was feeling lonely.

Cormac and I had segued out of choosing something to watch to talk about everything downright scandalous, and it suited me fine. I knew whenever his mind was bored and wandered, he would have been thinking about the unfinished segments of conversation between us, and now at least he understood why I had been somewhat sheepish around revealing every detail of what had been my most recent affair when we giggled like schoolgirls after the comedy show.

‘Was the sex good?’

‘He was married to a woman for so long, but...I’m just teasing, of course it was great, he’s a medical professional, he went to med school, he knows the human body. Doesn’t even matter that he specialises in skin like Buffalo Bill. The sex was fantastic. I felt fantastic.’

Cormac looked at me with a half-stunned expression on his face, but then he laughed, and I giggled under my breath. It was liberating and fun to be talking about sex like this. I loved sex, and my recent string of three sexual partners only yearned to be extended into more. Maybe I needed to meet someone I hadn’t previously known, but maybe the thrill of always knowing the man beforehand kept the intimacy I needed. To some degree. There was more to unpack, but I sipped on my Diet Pepsi and was wholly content talking about my sex life to Cormac without fearing he would entirely judge me for it. There was a twinkle in his eye. These stories seemed to have somewhat of an effect, and for once he wasn’t so unsure about my decisions in the bedroom. And for once, I wasn’t merely telling him how many times I had masturbated in one week.

‘Buffalo Bill—’

‘The serial killer from *The Silence of the Lambs*.’

‘And you want to have sex with him too?’

‘Cormac! No. I want to have sex with Hannibal Lecter.’

Silence, for a moment, before he shoved my shoulder, sending me sideways on the couch, unable to stifle my laughter. Cormac was watching me with a strange giddiness. ‘Young Anthony Hopkins is your type, or cannibals are...’

‘Young Anthony Hopkins! Hell, young Anthony Perkins too...’ I attempted my best suave smirk, but I felt altogether foolish and unsexy then, maybe slightly because I was picturing famous men named Anthony who had portrayed psychopaths through the history of cinema. There was likely an Anthony I was forgetting too, thinking of the rule of thirds. The only possible idea that sprung to my mind was the character of Anthony in *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, although they pronounced his name *Ant-ony* and his biggest crime was thinking disguising his love Joanna as a beautiful boy would rescue the both of them from a life of misery.

‘It’s on me to turn around this conversation,’ Cormac continued, sighing deeply. His bravado act of being somewhat offended by me was entirely put-on and he was probably in hysterics behind the curtain, but I was grateful he steered the both of us away from talking about more attractive men in devious roles. I would have gone all night. ‘So, you had sex with someone new, but he’s not new to you. Mister doctor. A couple times, it was, and then it ended because you felt, what, like a potential replacement for his doting-but-bored wife?’

‘Something like that.’ Cormac didn’t need to poke and prod around my brain in those moments when I stirred in his arms, or awoke in his bed. ‘I don’t want anything serious.’

‘For the very first time in your life, Finn.’

‘I didn’t want anything serious with, uhm, the other guy,’ I said, with a slight handwave. Almost, I had almost said his name, not that it would have mattered. But sometimes holding onto a secret kept you sane. If Cormac did not know it was a man named Gordon, then Gordon would never think, somehow subconsciously, that I spoke jeopardy into how unattached our sex had been. A gentle reminder: he was someone, some guy. ‘People are allowed their changed moments in life.’

‘You’re a butterfly now, babe,’ Cormac said, fishing around for a peanut M&M.

It was altogether cheesy and expected—a former version of yourself was the crawling caterpillar, struggling to exist, stumbling towards a hurdle of a cocoon. Suddenly, whisked into protective casing and the cylinder, a new version of yourself emerges and people seem to like this one better. Men, with a throbbing this-or-that, liked this one better. The version of myself less fascinated with the word *no* than once before. Of course men liked another man who would be less likely to decline. I was not stupid. Not naïve, or green, or completely braindead. I was interesting now **because** of sex. You are interesting back then, coming of age, maturing a little, because your proximity to sex moves from predatory to relevant, to common and allowed. I remember being a teenager and wanting sex more than wanting to learn how to drive, although both presented freedom, presented the allure of being more accepted, more desired. If you could fuck and you could drive, you could get some sort of honorary degree with the patterned wings and the antennae. Letters and numbers and an entire chequered face meant to deter your own predators. You are a butterfly now, babe, so go off and be dazzling in the bedrooms of these men. But keep intact your short lifespan. Don’t overstay the welcome.

Our discussion sidestepped towards talking about Toby and suddenly I was aware of my hesitation around thinking about it. Earlier, the idea of caring about what Toby and Noel did was nothing but something to ignore, not my business to root around in like a cabbage patch. Now hearing his name brought complicated thoughts I could not merely express on my face in a mirror and move away from. ‘Noel’s texting again, maybe he caught wind you heard,’ Cormac said, sympathetic.

‘Doubt it,’ I said, attempting to be nonchalant.

‘How do you feel if they continue to see each another?’

How did I feel? Why did I suddenly care? Toby’s life and his decisions were firmly unrelated now, unconnected, but I thought of the distant possibility of a Cormac wedding, and how Noel and I would both be in attendance, and there Toby would be in all the photographs, the doting partner to an in-love Noel completely abandoning the unspoken ideals of society that suggest you cannot scoop someone’s trash out of the ocean. It mattered little now, little then, that Toby had once been committed to me—he ought to have happiness beyond the chapter in the expansive novel labelled *Toby & Finn*. I was happy for them. My facial expression should have comprised only of that. How did I feel?

‘Toby is a genuine guy,’ I began, waiting for a kick in the groin to change the trajectory of my sentence. ‘If they work out, at least more people in the world are happy.’ Was I being too simplistic, too optimistic, too caught on my hope that other people would find the comforts of their life while I hoped to find those in mine? Seeing Toby & Noel in bliss, in a state of unfettered romance, would be more endurable than seeing two queer men sobbing into their margaritas at happy hour. I could stomach watching them find comfort in one another, or at the very least, a hole and a reliable plough with which to sow the seed of crop with.

Cormac watched me, studied me, this was something undeniable and unavoidable. ‘You are an interesting one, truly.’ He hid a smirk. ‘The diplomat. Wanting to watch people find the romance you are steering away from, because sex is more attainable than hoping a man will consider your feelings for longer than the, say, five minutes it takes him to orgasm.’ I shot him a dirty look and he raised up his hands comically. ‘Don’t shoot the messenger. You’re out having sex with older men who use steel-metal tools to check lumps on the body that aren’t genitalia.’

‘Dermatoscopes.’

‘The metal things?’

‘Yeah. I googled it, after the appointment, before I thought he would shove it inside me during sexy roleplaying.’

‘Only you would find the idea of roleplaying out the appointment you had that very same day as *sexy*, but sure, Finn, go be free, have sex with men who are much older than the two of us, who may or may not plunge you with their inappropriate metal items, dermatoscopes. Anything is better than imagining your ex sloppily kissing my friend Noel. Anything is better than thinking of the two of them in bed together, blissfully ignoring history, how once it had been you, adorable you, in Toby’s arms, although good riddance by now because his taste in men is loving Noel.’

I saw a flash of Noel being restrained back from launching, playfully, at Cormac. This could be the something they would quarrel over—don’t you toy with Finn right in front of him. This, however,

felt supremely self-centred and focused of me. To think my own feelings were the priority. When they instead could merely just be civil with one another until one of them, Toby, Noel, broke the other's heart and something would be my fault after all. Not loud enough, outspoken enough, you could have warned me, Finn. Or else, the queer men who seem to know each other in this neck of the woods are all completely destructive. They are heartless, or they should be. Restrained to passionless fucking. Oh, how I am keen to overuse a word, strip it of meaning. Fuck.

'At least they're only flirting around each other right now.'

'Right,' I said. 'They're not madly in love...yet.'

'They might never be. Gay men, we have a track record of making awful decisions, hell, the amount of gay men who trust the Republican process in America and think they won't be the next target when those bigots are satisfied with their emotional and mental genocide of trans people...gay men can be the dumbest people I know.' He sighed, sipping on Pepsi. 'All I'm saying is, we could see the changing of the guard sooner than we know it. What are Toby's worst qualities?'

The last question slammed me into the wall. Mostly I had not expected it, but I was already in a depressed, exhausted mindset thinking about insane politics and the putrid state of affairs. I didn't expect to have to think deeply about Toby, reflect on what I had disliked about him, or even simply found annoying. Our relationship was the definition then of small potatoes—a mountain turned back into a nothing molehill, devoid of unspooling all over again. Once I had loved Toby. Once I had been broken, saddened by a great loss, relieved. Once I had sex with a man in every place imaginable in a supermarket and completely realised how little you could make a past your present concern. Toby & Noel could find a happiness that was never meant to be possible between Toby & Finn. This was healing. Or this was what was meant when you said were healing. Or healed. It can take an awful long time when you blossomed into the sort of man who would accidentally, unironically, say he loves *love* when he has had too many drinks, or even sober when the vibe just seems immaculate.

I told Cormac I didn't want to talk about Toby anymore and excused myself to the bathroom, which likely seemed like I was choked up and wanted a chance to be alone and splash water in my face, but I didn't care. His worst qualities were associated with a version of him from too many years ago. There was an episode of *Sex and the City* where Carrie regurgitates the flaws of a man she dated many moons ago when she runs into him again at a wake for a man Miranda thought stood her up, but secretly just died instead. His flaws are constructed from stories of the past, but when this version of himself is at last exposed again, proving he changed extraordinarily little down at his core, Carrie laughs. *I told you so*. There does not need to be an *I told you so* when you have no stake in the game. Whatever is to happen with Toby & Noel is entirely none of my business. But I'm hardly Noel's close friend.

When I returned from the bathroom, not dripping wet at all, Cormac was rooting through the packet of peanut M&Ms with his phone beside him, reading something displayed on the screen. A wall of text, some uninteresting article I imagined would be about a celebrity couple's marriage or who was dating who. Cormac liked to keep knowledgeable on other people's flounders into being monogamous. The last time he was strictly committed to a relationship was...too distant in the past. Cormac was motivated by his gorgeous freedom. He would have called it gorgeous, and several other positive-affirming adjectives. Sensational, darling.

'I'm going to the beach with Adrian,' I announced on my return to the living room. My roommate was not home at the moment, otherwise I would have kept mum on his name in case I accidentally summoned him into the room and then proceeded to bore him by mentioning something gay. I jest, this perpetual love to annoy Adrian by reminding him of his straightness. Either that or remind him he could still be a streamer and keep him miserable. I was actually excited for a day at the beach, although I was still struggling to really separate the perpetually indoors-cat Adrian with someone who wanted to spend time with me at the beach, sand between our toes, wind blowing sand in my face, the chance sight of dolphins less and less likely the longer we are all on this very earth. Maybe it would be wise to expect something even more unexpected on Saturday, I thought to myself.

'Oh really?'

'Think of this like I'm putting a tracker in myself, for this weekend.'

'In case you...'

'Get swept out to sea, *accidentally*, or get buried alive in the sand, come across a snake in my shoes, swim out too far and get circled by a shark and he doesn't alert the, um, lifeguards on duty.'

I laughed, then mouthed *do you think I should have sex with a lifeguard?* Cormac shook his head.

'But if they're off duty, go right ahead,' he replied, completely audible.

Cormac and I finally settled on something to watch, and I selfishly wanted to be held by someone, anyone, although right in that moment of course he would have been the closest and easiest person. Something buried inside of me knew I could not ask him, or suggest it, or even comfortably joke about it right now. I was starting to think this perception of myself as more carefree, more excitable about sex would wash off like a temporary tattoo the moment I asked someone to *just hold me*. I wondered if you could still smell store manager of a supermarket semen on me.

Did that have a specific smell?

Cormac would know.