

call in three months time

by Keeley Young

part two

Elizabeth: “Why did you marry a man like Tom?”

Gracie: “I was young, and he seemed perfect on paper. It was a different time. My father used to say, ‘You’re either leaving this house in a veil or in a box.’”

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‘Forgive me for a second for being crass,’ Cormac began, scooting towards me, ‘but I need, like, visual proof you had sex, I actually don’t believe it.’ If I reached, for a moment, for my phone I expected him to snatch it out of my hand and scroll relentlessly through the camera roll, past the date, past the last four weeks, well into last year, expecting some fraction of evidence of the escapade. Cormac thought I was pulling his leg to what, make fun of him, make him sweetly proud of me, or somewhere in between. The proof he wanted did not exist. Gordon and I didn’t pause in bed, my head on his shoulder, snapping a selfie together still undressed. We didn’t record a sextape, thinking of the profit on a platform like OnlyFans. Our brief, unintimate texts are hardly proof of anything. If Cormac got it into his skull, curving into the rhythms of his brain, that I was creating the illusion of sex for his sake, what did I have to prove it?

None of this deterred my want to tell him. For a time, Cormac had only known one side of me: timid, unsure-of-sex Finn, who stumbled through first dates and had fleeting relationships, preferring the solitude of a bedroom and the comfort of an ejaculating hand. It was new to confess to him that four days ago I had tasted Gordon’s cock and had fleeting, horned-up sex in the semi-untidy bedroom of a two-storey unit. Cormac still expected receipts. I simply laughed him off and shook my head, and began a further explanation. His questions knocked into me like life-size pinball.

‘You knew this guy beforehand?’

I nodded and swallowed a mouthful of water. ‘We worked together.’

‘You work together?’ I shook my head. ‘Oh, the old job. You used to hustle around watching this man scan groceries and now, on Sunday, you let him pack his groceries into your cart.’ At this he knew the joke only half-worked and cackled to hide it, which made me laugh, when I would have simply given him the stink-eye. Cormac and I were in the middle of having dinner together—it was Thursday night, the one night this week he was otherwise not engaged. I figured at least two of his booked-out nights were for the men he never called his boyfriend. Cormac hated the term *roster* but he was pretty, gorgeous, and sexual enough to hold the attention of a few boys who didn’t mind sharing him. They were nothing official, but when Cormac mentioned a familiar name, I figured I remembered it because he had told me they were sleeping together. He would show me pictures of the dinners, of the alcoholic beverages they shared with one another, of the naked backs of these familiar men in his bed every so often. He made time for his friends and his lovers. It suited me fine.

Cormac shuffled in his seat. ‘And the sex was good?’

I didn't know how to articulate sex. The expected answer was something along the lines of, *well it felt incredible, he knew what he was doing*. But with so little experience there was a recency bias—sex with Gordon was incredible because it was liberating, freeing, unnoosing me from my desire to wait until I was saying I love you. If I attempted to screech back to whenever last I had sex, my first time with someone I since stopped loving, it would be comparing too different ideas of intimacy entirely. My first time I was nervously afraid to do something wrong, to be the fault and the reason why neither of us enjoyed it together. We would go our separate ways if the sex was god-awful. Sex with Gordon was hardly intense, hardly like skydiving, but it was like the first time again. Loss of new-virginity.

'It was great sex,' I said, mostly truthful. I'd imagined being with him again since that night, but never felt compelled to send him a message. I don't think I imagined wanting to be tied to what had been experimentation, likely for the both of us. I told Cormac he was not exactly a "gay man", and he snorted, pushing the food around his plate.

'Some guys are so sensitive about the word bisexual, like it strips them of their masculinity to be labelled the type of bloke who wants to even grab a penis without it being a joke.' Cormac fed himself, chewing before he spoke again. 'It doesn't change anything about the sex itself, right? These guys, they can make you seem like you're somewhat of a perv for having agreed to even flirt with them. Oh, you like a straight man then?' He scoffs. 'I do like a bisexual man, bub. I like someone who isn't afraid to own their sexuality, of course. These blokes who don't want a label don't need to accept it if it upsets the balance, but they have to at least acknowledge they aren't straight as old Big Ben. *I'm straight and I want you to pull your cock out of your pants*. I'm queer and I want you to shut up and be pegged.'

Cormac was only so loud as to draw a slight bit of attention from the few people near us. He had selected tonight's restaurant, a semi-quiet Italian place on the esplanade. He had ordered a penne pasta with meatballs; I had ordered the lasagna, but amidst the chatter was largely ignoring it. 'I don't really know what his idea of his sexuality was,' I responded, remembering to eat some of my own dinner instead of merely salivating over his.

'I know you didn't kiki after sex,' Cormac said. 'Although we still have to get to what happened once he was finished and the novelty wore off.' It felt bizarre hearing Cormac talk about the sex like I was merely a plaything for a bicurious man who found me on Grindr. I knew not to think our intimacy meant more than the surface, but I saw the fragments of meaningless sex I was avoidant of. Experimentation without a care, a head replaceable, a body replaceable, everything replaceable. Gordon had to exist truthfully. Which was complex. Cormac could leave the dinner thinking I was his protégé, when what I wanted was for him to see a version of Finn evolving. I started to worry I would always be a protégé to someone, a little assistant, unable to climb the ladder without sucking someone's

cock. It was complex. I, too, had to exist truthfully. Which meant the complete retelling, leaving out only names, only the one name.

No need to say *Gordon*. 'Right. We had sex in his room, with the lights turned off. Most of the time I only really saw him bathed in a smidgen of light, not I don't think because he was shy or wanted me to disappear into the dark, but because it wasn't so harsh, having sex under the sun.' Cormac looked at me like I was spouting complete nonsense, and I quickly shoved food in my mouth to keep myself from trying to explain what I meant. He took a sip from his glass of wine and smiled.

'It was night-time, Finn,' he said, laughing. 'But your intimacy was new. Fledgling. Putting it under the microscope of the overhead would have made things more noticeable than they were, and not to call him a bicurious straight boy, but he wasn't exactly taking the steps to invite you to meet his mother.'

'I didn't hate how shielded it was.'

'It made it obvious he only wanted sex, right?' Cormac bit into a penne pasta tube.

'That was all I wanted anyway.' I replied, trying to sound nonchalant. 'Once it started, once he started to take his clothes off and he put his hands down into my underwear, I knew having sex with him would be the limit. Things would end when we did, and I thought about going back to my car, putting on some music, and sitting with the fact I did. Do you remember what you did when you lost your virginity? What you did immediately after?'

Cormac took me in, having processed by the look on his face everything I had just said to him. Maybe some ounce of himself wondered whether I was the same fanciful boy who wanted the world, and love, but it mattered little what he saw of my image. It mattered what he thought, and it mattered what he had experienced. Cormac took another sip of wine. 'I was a teenager, Finn, it's all becoming more or less a blur the older I get.' I wanted to tell him he was young and beautiful. 'I had sex, as you know, with one of my brother's friends. He was only a year older than I was, we were of legal age—' this he said almost to an audience, the people who dined at the restaurant around us, although no one paid him attention, '—and afterwards I leapt up, cleaned myself off, because he came on my back, we fucked lying down because he probably, secretly, didn't want to look me in the face, and I went and pissed in his toilet, because we were at his house during the day and I felt like it should have been my brother there instead, not having sex with him because that's an insane idea, but...hanging out with him, I meant, this friend I knew almost zero about. The sex felt good because I was inexperienced, although at that age I believed my extensive, copious research accounted for an actual sensibility in sex, but for some reason my first time was with him, bottoming, which I hardly do anymore. You could probably say something about a power dynamic but I wouldn't believe it. He never made me feel like he didn't want it. And all I did afterwards was piss in the toilet, steal food from his refrigerator, and act

like we'd been just hanging out, like that was something you did with the boys.' Cormac paused, smiling so wide. 'The next time I had sex I made this skinny brown boy moan so loud he slipped right off my dick, and that time too I wandered off out of bed, pissed in the toilet, and ate something out of the fridge. Sex makes me a little hungry, but never dying for food. I just like a half-time snack. An orange wedge, babe.'

When I told Cormac I didn't immediately go to the toilet, or steal something to eat, expecting him to be disappointed in his protégé, he shrugged and said, 'Just do it next time.' He nodded his head at me and continued to eat, stopping at one point with food half-chewed in his mouth to say, 'What did you do then?'

'He asked me if I wanted to take a shower.'

'With him? Round two?'

'No, he lingered in his room while I washed off the sweat. Washed off the DNA evidence of him, maybe. I don't know. He was polite about it. Asking if I needed anything to eat or drink, if I was ready to head back to my car. By no means did he act like there would be a repeat—the little flirting seemed circular, like parting gifts, and he didn't message me in the morning to ask if I slept like a sweet angel baby.' Cormac scoffed. He could tell I was jokingly poking fun at a past version of myself, a version who would have died the morning afterwards, would have walked into a freshly-dug grave if he had sex with someone barely-known the night before.

'You are sweet angel my baby,' he said, grinning like the Cheshire cat. 'He sounds like a real delight, will make some woman not think about an extramarital affair for a good while.' I kicked his foot under the table and Cormac kicked back, and for a few moments we played a playful, innocent game of footsy, tapping each other, his boots hurting more than my white shoes. Above the surface, our expressions were harmless, all smiles and raised eyebrows and cheeky little echoes of laughter.

When we stopped, and I returned to my lasagna, aware we were taking an awful long time to eat our dinner, Cormac continued the conversation. 'At least he wasn't an asshole.'

No, at least he wasn't.

In bed that night, I pondered what to do *next*. Crassly, I could have imagined *who* to do next, but Gordon had merely fallen into my lap serendipitously. Cormac suggested going on one of the less frightening apps, something like Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, etc., but I hesitated and downloaded-then-deleted one of them. The idea of seeking out sex still seemed foreign to me.

In bed that night, I felt a further loosening of the noose. There was less pressure to immediately do something now that my freshly-paved-over virginity was cracked and broken and the horny queer boy from within was set loose. I could choose with more freedom, I figured, although I hardly

anticipated writing a list of the men I wanted to have sex with. It was something you would catch in a Netflix original—the beautiful so-and-so writes by hand their bucket-list dream sex partners, and the two-hour runtime works to efficiently tick the boxes. Instant smash hit for housewives everywhere.

Work the past few days had been largely monotonous but overly not painful. I wrote copy for an advertising firm, but for the most part, work was like switching on a different side of myself. When I entered the building, the switch occurred, and the focus began. Clients were demanding but courteous, never impolite and overbearing. I was friendly enough with my coworkers, although I hardly saw them outside of work hours. One of the first days working at the job, a woman named Mary asked if I wanted to come out with her for an after-work drink, to talk about how I was settling in and everything. I bluffed with ease, assuring her I had plans with a non-existent partner. If he was to be discussed ever again, I could further the lie or feign heartbreak, whatever seemed less emotionally-manipulative. And yet, gay men were stereotyped to be notoriously hard to pin down, so the concept of our breakup seemed obvious enough. This, I guessed, came from experience, too—I was a single man with a checkered history of romantic relationships that never went anywhere, and the most recent encounter of mine was the one night of sexual intercourse with an old coworker who *might* have been bisexual. There was an article at some point discussing the idea of a forged home life only your coworkers were aware of—the husband, the kids, the pets with a strict routine for feeding. The notion was you could excuse the little lies to your coworkers for the sanctity of a homelife that did not involve them. They did not need to understand how long you had known your partner, if you even had one. They did not need to understand why you were taken ill and could not come into work for the day—be it because the kids were sick, or your husband brought home a contagious plague from a business trip to Canberra, or your bird had the avian flu. The notion seemed contentious to uphold—if they asked for pictures, who would you show? Some liars and sneaks would have no ill-adverse thoughts to using an AI generator to craft an almost-real version of themselves and their tykes, all giggles and smiles. The gag, I thought, would one day be exposed much too soon before you intended on resigning for something entirely more private, where a nosy woman like Mary wouldn't be so interested in what you did on the outside.

There were no forged photographs on my desk, but sometimes for a joke I imagined showing a coworker a picture of Cormac and I, the falsified couple. If there was to be some corporate mixer, a Christmas party by the end of the year, there was no doubt he would happily pretend for the sake of reminding this tiny world of people I could play house the same as them. Mary was found one quiet lunch break pointing the phone screen round at those curious, showing off photographs of the three dogs she had adopted many moons ago. Now, they were sleepy and old, snoozing their heads into the concrete of the back pergola. Mary amused herself seeing these images afresh, but every *how cute* and

what a beauty gave her new life, too. The earnestness made it certain there was no lie to this window into her life, but I was shyly nervous of the day one of them would die and Mary would make our lives as her coworkers miserable by blubbering about it.

On the Friday afternoon, as it was, after we reconvened post-lunch, I approached Mary at her desk to talk about something work-related. She didn't notice me at first—she was excitedly tapping away at the keyboard, doing her work with sing-song energy, but when I tapped abruptly on the opened door she swivelled in her chair and beamed at me. 'Finn, good afternoon then,' she said, almost moving to stand up. I cut quickly to what I needed from her, being punctual and professional, but after having half-spun to type something into her computer, Mary sighed.

'One of my dogs, Guster, has this entirely refreshed diet, to keep some of the weight off,' she said, attempting a smile at me. 'He's alright, but I worry, I worry.'

I wanted to say something that would be sympathetic, but I felt myself realising sometimes the way I thought about her was a tad harsh. Mary was all-feeling, at an age where she saw through lenses not constructed from young-person-feelings. The complicated ideas of what everything meant, complete with annotations and footnotes. The coloured-heart emojis to young people each apparently have separate meanings, identities, and it seemed to whoosh over my head.

Mary was incapable of crafting, concocting a false identity for herself, and it was earnestly refreshing even when I found her to be grating and *just not my cup of tea*. I smiled back at her, as warmly as possible, as intended, and replied, 'You can trust in the vets, they know what they're doing.' Mary didn't, thankfully, suggest this dietary change had come from anyone else.

Later in the day, she sent through an email with what I had asked for and a little note at the bottom, almost in tiny, miniscule writing, just for me. *Guster is a strong, strong lad*.

When I pulled into the driveway, Adrian was outside without a shirt on, mowing the lawn. He was sweaty and looked a tad dehydrated, but I knew not to offer him water like I was his mother. Instead, as I climbed out of the car and gave him the bro-and-roommate head nod, I left him to the thrum and noise of the mower cutting the blades of grass. Our front lawn was relatively tiny—it took him hardly any time to mow, and then he sauntered back inside looking like he went to a waterpark and invited nobody.

I showered, got changed, and collapsed back onto my bed for a moment. The ceiling was disappointingly boring. No dentist tv screen, no twinkle of stars. When we moved in I joked about putting those sticker stars on the ceiling but never bothered to bring a ladder inside, because the best thing to do was leave the joke as nothing more than that. Being avoidant on thinking about having more sex was so far successful. I was watching episodes of *Sex and the City* to remind myself how Carrie acted

in between love affairs. She was less enthused on sex than Samantha, but still recognised the enormous presence it had in her life—she was, after all, a sex columnist who published intimate details every week without having the men she slept with sign any sort of waiver of approval. Carrie kept their names anonymous. Gordon could stay anonymous forever.

Cormac and I had texted at random intervals throughout the day about my newfound sex life. He was giddy, almost, but he restrained himself enough, although I was the giddy one to be giving away the details. I confessed of how it had felt to hear my name spoken to me mid-sex, how carnal it made me feel. Cormac typed, *there's nothing like an orgasm someone else gives you* and told me about how it felt to cum inside a pretty boy's mouth. I typed *you're foul* but deleted it almost immediately and said something the equivalent of a laugh.

Adrian was in the shower now, the sound of rushing water coming through the bathroom door. Never thought for a second to mention I had overheard him having loud, obtrusive sex with his girlfriend, but I knew it was not my business to listen in, let alone give him grief about it. Adrian's grunts and her moans hadn't killed my evening. I could keep quiet and move along, until I uncomfortably caught them having naked, erotic sex in the kitchen at midnight when I wandered out to refill a water bottle. I wandered into the kitchen to start on my dinner, expecting some sort of conversation when he came back out, expecting him to ask how my night had been with Cormac. These rhythms with Adrian were forward-moving. He felt like less of a stranger, while still restraining himself from opening up to me completely. We were, intrusively, doomed to never be close friends. I made my peace with it.

'Do you want to drink tonight?' Adrian mused as he opened the fridge and grabbed himself his first beer of the afternoon. He fished out the bottle opener from the second drawer.

Drinking with Adrian on a Friday night came when he either couldn't make plans with his girlfriend or didn't have the energy to go out with his friends. We would sit on the ground outside, the beer bottles, or beer cans, beer somethings, collecting in an array behind his ass. I would either drink beer to soothe him or pour myself glasses of wine and pretend he wasn't thinking about one of the slurs while I did it. Not that I thought Adrian found me disgusting. Not that he hated me.

'You don't have anything on?' I replied, although it was nothing more than an extension of the conversation. Of course he didn't. I knew my place. Not coldly, not harshly. Adrian sighed and took a swig of the beer, leaning back against the counter.

'Do you really think I should be hanging 'round her every night, or going out with the boys every day that doesn't end in more work and more exhaustion?' He sighed, but it was half-assed and put-on. Adrian was hardly grumpy or frustrated. He just seemed *fine*. 'Just have a drink, I hate drinking alone.' He took the beer with him down the hallway, shutting the door into his room. I saw him very

little while I cooked dinner, until afterwards when he came for another drink and nudged his head out towards the backyard. Without caring, I took a beer from the fridge too and followed behind him, his little tail wagging. The concrete of the small courtyard patio was cool at night and Adrian took a swig of his beer as I sat down beside him. We had a pitiable view of the neighbouring fence and what constituted as our back garden. Neither of us had a green thumb. His was only coated in the clippings of the lawn; mine looked pale and pink.

He didn't care much for how my night had been with Cormac, but he was curious about work. I gave him anecdotes, spoke briefly on the life of Mary. His ears perked up at the sound of seeing pictures of dogs, but I had none for him—sometimes Adrian flipped into a digital-only brain, imagining every dialogue as having occurred through messages, no matter the situation. For a time, when work for him had been virtual and extreme, it was his complete norm. His following, however tiny, would send him pictures in instant messaging of their pets, of their accomplishments in video games, sometimes of themselves. He used to mention the girls who seemed to have grown attached to him. I would wonder if he asked them for anything inappropriate, knowing Adrian, but then unknowing him too. I couldn't read the subtext of any of his relationships.

If he had been curious about the dinner with Cormac, he never would have been interested to know what we talked about. Where Cormac was the Samantha, thrilling in sex and revelling in the unabashed discussion of it, Adrian was reserved around me, not a Charlotte but an unknown, where all I knew of what happened behind that closed door was only known because I had been out having sex myself. This newfound freedom, or rebellion, came with new territory—now I was suddenly more interested in the sex lives of other people because I could see how it responded to mine.

We finished our beers, then had another. I offered to pay for more, to drive down to the bottle shop the next morning or afternoon, sometime, and pick him up what covered at least my share for the evening, but Adrian shrugged. 'I didn't want to drink alone,' he said, at first, without a whisper of actual emotion. 'It's this or I morph into some alcoholic, the way everything in life is going.' He whittled the conversation into a belting of what he hated about the world: the price of alcohol, his pay getting taxed, slow idiots taking up all the lanes on the roads, the hole in the ozone layer "or whatever", how much he longed for what once was his life, playing video games until the early hours of the morning, drinking energy drinks and being carefree. Adrian sighed, earnestly now, and clinked the bottom of the beer bottle against the concrete. 'I'm going to bed,' he said, leaving his emptied bottle in a semi-circle outside. He was silent the rest of the night. He really did go to sleep.

Saturday was spent shaping my life to some degree of new-order. Before the vacation, I had settled various things on hold until I came back, but now there was no ignoring the trigger had been pulled. I used to attend a monthly book club meeting, but my contribution could range from being heavily interested to making vague assumptions based on the style of the book someone had selected. They nudged me occasionally on Instagram about whether I was to be expected for the next meeting, which was at the end of the month. There had been no time to read whatever was selected—a long-haired twink around the same age as me had chosen something romantic and airy, by an author I had never even heard of. The book sat in an online bookstore’s wish list, waiting to be purchased, and I tried to narrowly avoid being a disappointment when I worded my response to say something like that. I mused, or wondered, whether at this point a story about Europe would suffice instead of actually discussing whether I thought the love between X and Y was toxic or not. But I wanted, soon enough, to return back to the book club—it was somewhat out of the way, but was queer-specific in its membership and never resorted to tropey selections like Colleen Hoover’s *Verity* or even *Red, White and Royal Blue*. Anyone too generic had been rooted out by some of the more obscure, genre-exciting selections coming from some of the other members of the group. I was largely responsible for anything capital-L literature but I’d lost interest in the classics ever since I graduated university.

I attempted to craft a message in response: that I would love to be there, but not to talk about the book; that I would love to make an appearance, like I was attending a swankier function; that I would start reading the next book immediately upon its reveal. Every thought process seemed superficial until my actions could speak louder, but I wanted to slip further into the groove of my once-life. I agreed to be present, to listen, to be open-minded about a book I had never read, which all gave the illusion of being in therapy for anger management.

Hollis, our unofficial co-organiser, fired back a quick response, a *looking forward to seeing you there Finn*, and I closed out of the app and went about whatever business I had for the rest of the day. There was a skin doctor appointment on Monday, but the remainder of my weekend before Monday morning was freed from Friday’s shackles. I loathed the idea of leaving the house. A brief respite from thinking about...I hardly wanted to mention the word, for the fear that complicated thoughts would eat away at the simple idea of kicking back my feet, pressing play on something on the TV, and likely laughing at the idiotic decisions of plain white men in a reality competition.

The waiting room was half-empty or half-full, depending on perspective. From mine, it was half-full, a potential small-time crowd waiting ahead of me to see Dr Bernard Jemmott, the man who had been pressing a dermatoscope to my sunlicked skin for the last five years. These visits were infrequent—he

complimented my use of sunscreen, the most intimate thing beyond his polite manhandling of my body. I was missing a morning of work for the appointment, which seemed only miserable while I sat waiting on the plastic green chair, froggish in colour. The receptionist took a phone call and seemed uninterested. She rattled off various facts: the cost of an appointment, the rebate, the name of the doctor they would be having the appointment with—not Dr Bernard—the address of the practice, and the phone number. This last detail she rolled her eyes at, repeating every number twice. When the call ended, I breathed out for her, and a dark-haired man in a baby-blue button-up called my name from across the room.

Dr Bernard Jemmott would have been in his early fifties, with cropped hair the colour of burned ash. He was a respectable man, although of his personal life I knew very little. These appointments were impersonal and professional, but I never felt confident the man wanted me to leave as soon as possible. Ours was a doctor-patient relationship only—he checked my body for potential skin cancers; I lied helplessly on the examination table and rolled about when he required me to. The cool of the metal would touch my thigh. He would brush away my hair with his fingers. The snapping sound of a photograph taken of a cluster of freckles and marks on my flesh would echo in the compact examination room. He would avoid staring at my bare chest.

‘Shoes and socks off for me,’ he said when I sat down in the chair, after the pleasantries. I pulled off my clean white socks and set them inside the shoes, briefly glancing at the soles of my feet. Smooth, pale, and white. ‘Down to your jocks too.’ Barefoot on the linoleum, I began to undress to no audience. Dr Bernard stood to the side, preparing his dermatoscope, fiddling with machinery. I undid button by button, the scene removed of an intimacy. I had worn black underwear without holes or sharp angles. It wasn’t sexy, scandalous underwear I would pose in the mirror with to entice a boy—I would have looked ordinary before him, and before long I was sat on the bed facing away from him. Bernard was gentle, but methodical, even-paced. I wondered what it was like to have a medical, scientific brain, processing with a steady rhythm what represented a benign mark on skin and what seemed to be something else more malignant. Bernard simply did his job. He made brief observations, repeating certain things I was certain he would have said at our last appointment. My father had a history of having cancerous marks removed from his body and I vowed to him to protect myself, to regularly see a doctor for the complete check-up, and to attempt to avoid the terrifying possibility of skin cancer, certainly in a state known for sunshine and striking heat.

‘On your stomach for me, Finn,’ he said, prompting me to flip over. My ass would have looked fat enough in the black underwear, although I assumed Dr Bernard neither cared nor felt inclined to do anything about it. He set the dermatoscope on my lower back, while I awaited the sound of another snapped image. His hand grazed against my butt, but I thought nothing of it. Willing someone to touch

me came with little surprise. Of course, again, I wanted what I had now spent a week without—physical intimacy. Non-existent since Gordon slapped my ass before we drove back to the carpark.

Bernard set down the tools and spoke again. ‘Feel free to get dressed,’ he said, moving back towards his desk near where the pile of my discarded clothes sat on the plastic chair. ‘As far as the health of your skin goes, you seem to be doing well to stay sun safe, etcetera.’ I stood at the foot of the chair, taking up the work slacks. ‘You’re a young lad, skin cancer is not something you should worry yourself over unless you aren’t taking the right precautions to protect your skin.’ He moved forward, lingered nearby as I stuck each leg into the trousers. As I was zipping up the fly, Dr Bernard and I made swift, hesitant eye contact, and I smiled at him warmly. There would have been pause on whether or not he was considered to be attractive—the skin doctor looked his age, with the creases of his fifty-or-so years lining his face. I assumed he had children, but I could not imagine the sort of father he would be. Somewhat absent, perhaps, because he worked in the medical industry, either smoked when he was younger or strangely still did. We all have our vices, I thought.

My hand was still on the zipper when he stepped toward me and smirked back. Suddenly I wanted to kiss his lips but not out of an uncontrollable passion brought on from this pledge with myself to be more sexual, to be more animalistic. Or that was what I convinced myself. Bernard placed a hand on either side, on the bare flesh of my body. His touch was neither warm nor freezing cold. Examination room temperature. He asked me if it was okay, for him to place his hands on the sides of my stomach. I said yes, I nodded, I inched towards him with a certainness. I imagined the best way to possibly kill this closeness—don’t you have a wife, I could say, isn’t it a little strange for you to be wanting me? Bernard moved forward and planted a kiss on my lips and without pause I inserted my tongue, imagining the type of man he would be to dive with confidence towards a twenty-something, a patient of his. His tongue fought against mine, ardent, tricking me into being submissive.

‘I have to get back to the other appointments,’ he said, after we abruptly pulled away from one another. ‘But go to this address tonight if you want to do that again.’ He scribbled a string of words on a rectangle of paper as I buttoned up my shirt, and I read the address and time in my head when he handed it to me. Not an address I recognised, although he was not a man with a personal life I recognised. I slipped my shoes on and said a hasty goodbye to Dr Bernard Jemmott without delay. The bothered receptionist waited at the reception desk to receive my payment, and now seemed charmingly polite, albeit a tad underwhelmed with the pay she was likely to receive for the awful, horrendous hours of being a medical receptionist. The scrap of paper was in my pocket. Dr Bernard Jemmott clearly wanted to have sex with me. He wanted to fuck me. Or he wanted to murder me for the next *Dr Death* podcast.

Either option seemed to imagine a dermatoscope shoved into my asshole.

At work, Mary was pleased to see I hadn't come down with something horribly infectious. She seemed perkier that afternoon, but we largely avoided talking to one another. There is always a sense when you arrive late to work that you have to be perfectly avoidant of slacking off, meeting targets with such a precision to be on par with everyone who hadn't taken the morning off to care for themselves. Doctors' hours ought to be different, more aligned to the hours of everyone else working their structured jobs, but then when would the doctors feel like ordinary humans themselves? They would feel robustly robotic, meeting to the needs of a society otherwise mismanaging its production of goods and services. I wondered when Mary went to skin check appointments. She was somewhere in her sixties, hair greyed, skin having tasted years of an unrelenting sun. There was a mole on her neck you could notice when she wore a button-up shirt instead of a sweater or a turtleneck and that day, of course, I could hardly avoid glancing at it when we spoke very briefly before leaving the office. I imagined how Bernard would diagnose it. The arch of his body as he examined her neck from where she sat in the rolling office chair. I had to deny myself licked lips. Mary would think I was parched, not titillated.

In my car, I plugged the address into the navigation portal and waited with something like titillation for the blue snake to weave towards my destination. From the train station, it would take approximately half an hour for me to drive to where Dr Bernard wanted me to meet him. I rattled through the potential errors in judgement I was having in wanting whatever was coming. Murder and death. Uncomfortable and neurotic roleplay meant to embarrass me. A robbery. The police waiting in the bushes with a bogus charge of taking advantage of a medical professional. He might simply fuck me too hard. Or his wife could come in unexpected. Hear heavy moaning from where she stood in the kitchen. Collapsed down in front of the bedroom door, clutching her chest, clutching her heart.

This, being under the assumption a man of his age was married. When I pulled up to the address I realised he had invited me not to his private residence, but to a small regional hotel. I mouthed to myself, *he's having an affair*, and found a park regardless. The part of myself with ethics and a moral compass was quiet, strangely. I started to think there would be logic behind his blatant admission, as if Bernard understood how obviously dubious inviting someone to a motel for another kiss looked. There was no real way for me to communicate with him, to text him an *I'm outside* like I could have with Gordon if he ever wondered I would no-show. Dr Bernard, I hoped, was lingering in the reception with a drink from the bar, if there was a bar. The motel was nothing more than a stopover for an evening. The electric sign on the painted brick wall by the reception door said an obvious "Vacancy".

Bernard was inside already, sans drink, speaking at a reasonable volume to the motel receptionist. This receptionist was around my age, perhaps a year or so younger—she was about a foot shorter than I was, with her mousy brown hair tied back into a low ponytail. The uniform on her

seemed perfectly tailored, when I expected everything to overhang. Bad generalisation, I supposed. Bernard finished his conversation up as soon as he noticed me pacing slowly towards him. He wore the same clothes, of course, that he had kissed me in. He was not toned or of a buff physique but none of it mattered. He seemed attracted enough to me to want me, and the idea of experimenting with an older man in a hotel room well, titillated me.

Bernard stopped and set a hand on my shoulder. A semi-intimate act done in public. 'My daughter works here,' he said, gesturing with his head towards the girl standing behind the front desk. There was enough distance between us for the conversation to be hushed and private, but the reception was not a spacious, overwhelming room. The brown carpet was a snaking river leading towards a narrow staircase at the end furthest from the door. The skin doctor did his best attempt at warmth. 'She's a junior with no sway with her manager, the poor thing, so I rent out a room some Friday nights to get dinner with her after she finishes her shift.' Bernard winked at me and nodded towards the staircase. The motel had no obvious elevator, but from outside seemed to only be two or three storeys and it was hardly laborious to imagine getting a heavy suitcase up the short flights of stairs. Neither Bernard nor I had any luggage. I had to wonder what his daughter imagined happened between her dad and the young stranger walking upstairs with him. Maybe the story had merely been a cover act for him, a chance to play pretend from the very beginning. All I felt was theatrical.

The room was on the first floor up from the reception and straight down the hall. It was old-fashioned and required a key which he jammed into the tight hole. Bernard stepped aside to let me in first, a gentleman, and as the door closed behind him, he made a move without pause, kissing me with a passion unseen in his examination room. He was now sloppier, rougher, but there was a tenderness I imagined which came from being a father figure. There would be no denying this was a horny man craving sex. Bernard kicked off his shoes in any direction and began to fiddle with the zipper of my pants. The idea of being freed from my work clothes made the anticipation heavier. Bernard undressed me with an eagerness, and at first I stood there naked, only myself, a repetition of this morning. I imagined he liked to be the one observing the vulnerability first. Me standing there with a semi-erect penis, waiting for him to retrieve the dermatoscope from some previously unseen location and scrutinise my ballsack for marks on the flesh.

Unbuttoning his shirt gave me flashes of an unorthodox marriage between the two of us, and I saw nothing wholly romantic right in front of me, just desire. Sure, I could imagine spending time with Bernard when he wasn't my doctor, but not because I loved him. He slipped his arms out of the sleeves and tossed the shirt limply towards the bathroom floor behind him. In between taking his pants off he took hold of my cock with his right hand and started to tug on it. From little things big things grow. I

was aroused and erect by the time he was completely naked in front of me and we rekindled the kissing. Bernard, he loved to scratch my back when he kissed me. His fingers meeting my skin.

Bernard continued to stroke my cock, edging me towards cumming already. He was fervent and excited, thrusting his hand back and forth on my dick. Why he wanted to do it standing in the middle of the room was lost on me, but when we made eye contact he was burning with an intense lust. I nodded my head towards the bed and we moved, his hand losing contact long enough for him to position me on the edge of the bed so he could jerk me off while we passionately kissed one another. His tongue fought a legendary battle inside my mouth. Soldiers died on the frontline, bullets wedged into flesh, the white flag was rolled up and shoved into a skinny white boy's underwear. We parted lips long enough for him to ask, 'are you close?' and when I nodded my head, he stopped stroking my dick completely. I understood he wanted to make sure I didn't lose interest in having sex with him if the cum squirted out into my lap and maybe, just maybe, I realised I was stark naked with a man old enough to be my father. He couldn't peer inside my head. He couldn't see how badly I wanted something I had not known possible until that very morning.

Bernard was not aggressive, but he knew what he wanted from me. He lifted me up off the edge of the bed and flipped me onto my stomach, my ass in his face. He started to lick the pink hole, making me moan at the pleasure. *Pussy like ice cream*, I thought, something Cormac would jokingly have said if he was colour-commentating this sex. Bernard thought I tasted delicious. He was preparing my tight hole for his cock, which was long but slender. I knew he would feel good inside me. I wanted him to feel good inside me. This was proof of the concept, proof Gordon was not a happy little accident meant to sway me into making unenjoyable mistakes. Another man had to make me feel like the Red Sea had parted or else I worried for my sanity, worried for what I would say to myself to attempt to bandage the blisters and the bruises. Bernard was moaning into my ass.

He surfaced for air, taking in breaths like a porpoise. Wordlessly, he tapped my thigh and began to move up my body, pressing his bare skin against mine. His penis was rock-hard at this point and dug into my ass cheek. Bernard started to kiss my neck, never bellicose but not soft and romantic. It was rich in lust, he wanted me so. The scent of his cologne was thrust into me before his cock was, as he aligned the tip with my asshole and humped me from above, down and up, down and up. My moans were automatic. 'Fuck,' I panted out, burying my face into the pillow, biting on the fabric. Bernard's weight made me sink into the mattress. He started to thrust his hips faster, but for a man his age he wasn't in leagues with the pornstars of the videos I watched in bed, stroking myself off. He found his agility, groaning with pleasure, his hot breath on my ear.

'Can I come inside you?' He grunted out, before repeating my name twice.

I nodded into the pillow, twisting my head for air, moaning louder than expected, and then replied a short, breathless *yes please* before he started to squirt inside me, the warm cum dribbling from the head of his penis. Bernard's moans reminded me of how different he sounded when he was checking my body over for freckles and marks. His cock started to soften inside me, but he hardly moved, panting against my ear. He cussed and left his body upon me, heavy like a weighted blanket. I was more attracted to him that I realised, or wanted to confess, and I felt no regret with his unwillingness to want the moment between us to be over. The sex had been brief but not disappointing. Bernard seemed at the age where edging and drawing out the moment he came was something of a young man's sport. When he at last nudged himself off my back and wiped his cock with a conveniently-placed hand towel, Bernard waited for me to walk into the bathroom before he did anything else. I quickly pissed in the motel room toilet, wiped my ass of the leaking cum, and stared at the sex hair portrait of myself in the mirror. This Finn seemed carefree. Strange promise. I could boast of sex with an older man, someone who once only knew me professionally, a likely father, could-be husband. The more I considered his life beyond having sex with me, the more I thought myself in a vortex of flinching decisions. When I had sex, I broke an unofficial oath, a promise to be celibate out of habit, out of comfort. None of these men I wanted or who wanted me were giving or presenting themselves as *great decisions*. If I continued to navigate down this path, say took in a struggling-with-identity priest or a newlywed husband the next time I wanted someone to give me attention, I would be continuing to doom myself. Imagine then, I thought, gazing at my reflection, combing through my hair with my fingers unsuccessfully, that someone could bounce to a future version of yourself and ask, *has it been worth it?* Is this a decision the future version of yourself will so comfortably associate themselves with?

In front of the mirror, wondering what Bernard was doing, lying on the bed, I stuck out my tongue and quietened my thoughts. What I wanted now was to be in his arms, if he wanted me. No romance, no expectation. Just the scent of his cum in the motel room and the pretence of intimacy.

The next time Dr Bernard Jemmott and I saw one another, he invited me to his home, instead, and ploughed into my ass against the kitchen counter. He explained, first, that he was divorced and lived alone, but something about having sex in a hotel room thrilled him enough to book the room and concoct a fake roleplay scenario to make him hornier than he expected. His daughter, he continued on, was studying to be a midwife and worked part-time at a pet supply store. My stomach dug into the kitchen counter as he thrust into me, his inhibitions stripped back. He grunted several *oh babys* and manoeuvred me like a delicate puppet, his hands on either side of my body. 'Good boy,' he whispered, sighing with pleasure. I imagined myself having sex with him periodically, coming some late evenings to the office to lie down on my back on the examination table and let him ram his erect cock inside me

with the bright fluorescents dimmed down. I imagined him making wordplay out of the normal progression—you need to lubricate yourself with sunscreen on this spot, and on this he would stick three fingers up my ass and make me cum without warning.

‘Good boy,’ he whispered again, thrusting further inside me. Half of me expected someone unannounced to surprise on us, for his reveal-of-truth to have been another concoction meant to make me forget all my disillusion about having an emotionless affair with him. Bernard moaned and it became obvious he was pacing himself, attempting to slow down when he came, wanting to draw out how long we *made love* in his well-lit kitchen with one of the windows wide open. He slapped my ass. ‘I’m about to finish,’ he grunted out. I pushed myself back onto his cock. I imagined his hands were gloved in pale green and made a *thwap* sound every time he held onto my hips. Bernard operating on his naughty, horny, dirty patient. Skin cancer was the least sexy thing he could have trained in, but his speciality mattered little while he was thrusting inside me. ‘I’m about to finish,’ he repeated, having been somewhat early to jump, surprisingly. Bernard came. His moaning heightened, an orchestra of sound that seemed hyperbolic, but maybe I had restrained myself, grunting out as I felt the sticky white fill in the gaps. He was quicker to remove himself this time, dribbling cum on the kitchen floor.

‘That was incredible,’ he said, once we were curled up on his sofa, only half-dressed. Once I cleaned myself up I slipped back into my underwear and pulled on a t-shirt. Bernard had offered for me to stay the night, and I had contemplated it for a while, waiting to text him back the right response. He might have wanted something more frequent after all, and I was suddenly more hesitant than anything. In the end, I packed a small backpack of the necessities for staying one night someplace and waited for a freeze in my gut to tell me what I was supposed to be doing.

Being in Bernard’s arms was confusing. He seemed to want to treat me like a lady, a woman he met someplace nice, but I was a boy and a patient. He kissed me on the forehead but only when it seemed as if I had prompted it. We cuddled briefly until his limbs seemed to have frozen in place, then he wanted to move and position himself differently. We largely avoided the topic of his sexuality, although I was beginning to think I only attracted men who weren’t comfortable with labels. Suited me fine until I wanted something more earnest, but I think it thrilled Bernard to have a boy toy, someone to fling around, someone he could carry. He attempted to lift me from the bathroom, after we showered together, back into the bedroom, but awkwardly flung me onto the king-sized bed with a thud. He climbed on top of me and hovered above me, as if to kiss me, but did nothing but stare. I kissed him, out of spite or not. I wanted to taste his tongue in the back of my mouth. Being in Bernard’s arms was like leaving the house but realising you forgot something. But what did you forget. What did you forget.

The house was blanketed in darkness and Bernard and I were lying in bed, underneath the covers, hardly touching one another. It was difficult to look at his face sometimes without seeing the

man I infrequently saw to look over my body for marks. It was easy, it was simple, to look at his face sometimes and see a man who could not possibly be interested in me for more than what I was indulging him in. Raw, revved-up *love-making*, but he wouldn't want to love me. I was a case study. I wondered if I was a test. A plaything to reimagine whether it was possible for him to have sex with someone who wasn't his ex-wife, who wasn't interested in him for something long lasting. Other women would have seen the father figure, the doting ex-husband who could be reeled back in for another round, another serving of domesticity. I saw him as someone to go to bed with. I drove to the motel, smiled at the receptionist, wandered into the motel room and let him devour whatever parts of me he wanted. I loved it. Being in Bernard's arms felt fleeting. Like an appointment.

'Can I ask you about something?' The entire time my body was fighting to be still. He seemed, from appearances, to be the sort who rejected opening up about the things hidden beneath.

Bernard blinked back at me, but did not seem uncomfortable. 'Go ahead.' His voice was obviously tired, but not annoyed.

'What happened with your divorce?' Maybe I was tempting fate, hurrying my expulsion from his bedroom, from his house, his life. Maybe I was merely curious and thought our closeness, physical more than anything else, forgave me somehow. Bernard blinked again, but his spot in the bed remained warm. He looked worn, looked the way he was, older and maturer, but still young. Nothing could ignore how desperately he was clinging to this notion a younger man still wanted him.

At first I thought he would pretend to have fallen asleep, or that his ears could suddenly no longer work. Bernard looked strange in this light, although all that counted for light was the small lamp behind his head on the bedside table. Enough to see you with, to pick at what must have been an insecurity, or a blemish. His marriage. Bernard attempted a smile. 'We had nothing in common, as things were.' His voice came out abruptly, and almost too loud for the context. 'Things were stale between us. People often say they stayed married for the kids, and I think much of ours was that, raising and sleeping and having mediocre sex on our anniversary.' Bernard sighed. The covers lifted and fell. 'We might have tried to fix it, but the effort could have been pointless...' and his voice trailed off, and I thought, if I kissed him now would it only be to silence him from saying something depressing? I had asked what happened, but I was realising I wanted a simple answer, not something that exposed the inner depths that made Bernard seem far more human than ever possible. I wanted him to remain the semi-attractive doctor who stuck his dick in me. Which made me want to go to sleep.

In the morning, Bernard was awake early, standing shirtless in his living room with a cup of coffee. He wasn't unattractive. The more I attempted to give him an identity, the more I wanted to call him fatherly and it made me less sexually-excited about him. He asked me how I slept, I told him I had an

average sort of dream I was already forgetting. ‘Was it about me?’ He asked, and I laughed, or giggled, seeing the in-between joke: he thought an average-quality dream would be about him, neither utopian nor dystopian. Was he putting himself down or hoping I meant I dreamt of sex on the regular?

It was Saturday again and clearly neither of us had anywhere to be. Bernard finished his coffee, fidgeting with his bulge the entire time. Ours was a hushed morning, making idle small talk about random, unrelated things, leaping from lilypad to lilypad. Out of pure curiosity, I asked him whether his daughter had always had ambitions of working in the medical industry, waiting for a cute story of a five-year-old girl playing doctor with her stuffed animals. Bernard laughed. ‘Did she want to be like daddy when she grew up? No.’ He paused, laughing again, although not because he had heard something absolutely hilarious. ‘She didn’t get why daddy wanted to stare at people’s skin every day. I think when she was little the only thing on her mind was being young, being able to explore the different possibilities. There was no definite idea she wanted to help deliver babies, but she’d pretend to be a new mother with her dolls, push them around in the fake stroller.’ He smiled. It felt weird talking about his daughter while he was wearing thin underwear and no shirt.

Bernard offered to make me breakfast, but I wasn’t hungry, at least not for anything from the fridge or the pantry. In between talking about his plans for the rest of the weekend—he needed to do some landscaping in the garden—and if I had anything interesting to do once I drove myself home, I lifted my leg up underneath the table and touched his half-boner with my toes. Bernard grinned, staring into the empty coffee mug. He loved to do things wordlessly. In moments I was kneeling in front of him with his cock in my mouth. He bobbed my head, his hand tight on my scalp. My knees would be scuffed by the hardwood of the open-living flooring, but everything would be worth it to service him. For once in our infrequent relationship I was the provider, and I imagined myself billing him at the end of the session with a receptionist in waiting, sitting behind their desk, tapping away at the keys.

I wondered if Bernard would want sex again, and my asshole shrunk inside of itself.

I would stop him, shove him away if necessary, and leave him with the parting gift of the pleased cock. His cock was hitting the back of my mouth. I blocked out anything he said—mostly loud moans and my name and *oh baby* and *keep doing that, you know my wife hated doing this for me, she was embarrassed, she thought someone would walk in on her giving me head and think it ruined the very idea of her*. A complete fabrication, while I tuned out his sweet praises, how excited he was for his twinkiest patient, because most of his patients would be older, with wrinklier, sunburnt skin, to be going down on him on a random Saturday morning. You should be so lucky, I thought, and I imagined a porno of the two of us leaking online, immediately seen by the hornier of his other patients, other men double my age stroking it to the idea of their doctor having a more exciting sex life than they could have imagined him having. I

wanted to fall back and let him pleasure me however he liked, but I thought of the laundry at home, sitting in disarray instead of in the hamper. Adrian would not have touched it.

I let Dr Bernard Jemmott cum in gooey spider's webs on my face.

'You can get dressed again now,' I thought I heard him say, but I was the one rushing myself out, not him.

Bernard showered, the water slapping against the tiles. I sat on the edge of the bed, mindlessly going through the backpack as if I expected something miraculous to pop out at me. A strand of rope, a chastity belt, a certificate for being good at sex. Still, I had no idea if I was pleasing these men or if Bernard was just glad to be having sex again. With a human being instead of plastic. The night before, he showed me the fleshlight he had bought soon after the divorce, partway between a serious purchase and a dare from the one friend who seemed to have unfiltered access to what constituted his sex life. I figured I would be heard about, unless Bernard was suddenly insecure about bouncing a twenty-something man against the kitchen counter.

On the weekends it seemed the dutiful doctor dressed casually, plainly, although he seemed averse to showing off his legs. In a pair of jeans and a chocolate-brown t-shirt, he gave the appearance of someone whose image was tied to the uniform of their job. Bernard was slacks and button-ups and leather shoes, but he seemed to embrace the clothes when I let him wrap his arms around me. Kisses on the neck. Ass squeezes. I couldn't imagine myself in a committed relationship with someone I had nothing in common with. No matter if he made a sizeable income and made me believe I was perfectly adequate at sex and should stay in his arms.

He knew, too, we crossed a certain boundary.

Bernard walked me to my car, the few steps from the front door to the driveway. He lived in a nice neighbourhood and had obviously not suffered tremendously when he and his wife separated. He had a stable career and could afford a thrilling life, perhaps several vacations throughout Europe, but we had nothing in common. Except a desire to have sex with each other.

There was nothing intimate outside, where the neighbours could catch us, not merely overhear the moans and the grunts and the *oh baby* screams. I opened the car door on the driver's side and climbed in, sinking into the fabric. 'Thank you for having me over,' I said, sincere, flirty, grateful, professional. I wanted to say, *I will take care of my skin* as a joke but it would have merely made things awkward, and it was nice to be ending things without the complications of what constitutes a break-up. There was nothing to be broken—instead of having sex once in a motel room where nothing mattered, we just did it again, and then almost again.

On the radio someone was trying to win tickets to a concert they otherwise would not have been able to afford to go to, and I rolled down the window until I remembered how horrendously the

wind blows right back in your face. The woman, Liza, was stumbling through a series of questions she narrowly got incorrect. One wrong word. Something missing.

‘You’re not going to get the tickets.’ I closed my eyes just brief enough to avoid a collision.

The house was eerily quiet when I wandered in through the front door, wondering if Adrian was out instead of causing a ruckus. His car was still in the garage, but he could have gone somewhere in his girlfriend’s car, drumming his fingers against the dashboard while he played passenger princess.

Annoyed, thinking about driving himself, thinking about burning rubber and whatever men think about when they name their cars and softly flirt with them. I threw the backpack on my bed and attempted to listen out for noises from his bedroom, until I realised it was weird to be snooping, and to care. There was no part of me yearning, or aching, to tell him of the highs and lows of having a cheeky affair with someone who gives you a clean bill of health, but there was some other reason why I wondered where he was. Maybe I didn’t want to be alone.

The washing machine spun with a fervent rage and I thought about hopping onto it, the tropian wish to be rocked, massaged, thrummed above the vibration of a machine constructed to rattle like a rocketship. With my left hand, I could feel the shuddering move through my body. It was weird alone, but I understood no one would catch me in the act. I shut my eyes just for a second.

While I was hanging out the washing on our thin, semi-unstable washing line, Adrian poked his head outside and called my name. It was unexpected, but everything with him was, and I replied with a grunted *yeah* which he took to be the beginning of a conversation. He came round, dressed as if he had been out at the beach, sandied thongs on his feet. ‘We’ll go to the beach next weekend,’ he said with a grin. His hair was mostly dry and shaggy again, a pair of sunglasses tangled in the strands near his forehead. ‘Just the two of us if you want, so you don’t feel like a tag-along third wheel.’ I expected to hear his girlfriend’s voice drifting through the house but there was the slightest chance they had grown sick of one another and she feigned an excuse, like shopping for feminine hygiene products, to leave him at the front door of his place and drive off into the midday sun.

I asked Adrian which beach he was thinking, and we talked loosely about what he’d been up to, whether it was crowded or empty, whether he saw dolphins dancing on the horizon. ‘I didn’t see dolphins, nah, no whales, no scary sharks come to bite your head off.’ He laughed, leaning with a palm against the brick of the house. ‘There were these kids in the water who kept getting knocked over with every wave, but it never seemed to bother them. They kept falling, and laughing, and then their father dragged them out of the water because the younger one was coughing and spitting constantly.’

His girlfriend had clearly left when we wandered back inside, the smell of salt water still strong in the air. Adrian said they were collecting shells for what felt like an hour, and she found every

beautiful yet flawed one imaginable. At this he beamed, but he always beamed talking about her. Seeing him in love suited me better than seeing him distraught and broken down. Adrian went to the sink and filled up a glass of water and skulled it right in front of me. 'It's really damn hot, surprisingly,' he said, then his eyes went wide and he raced back to the front door, where'd he had left his keys on the floor.

'Your roommate is an interesting creature.' It was Cormac who said this, as we walked two by two behind Gretchen and Luke. The four of us had gotten tickets for a stand-up comedian's show in the city and were wandering from the restaurant where we had dinner towards the venue. I was giving the PG version of events over the past twenty-four hours, including Adrian's return from his day out at the beach. 'What's her name, his girlfriend?' I made a face of pure confusion and shrugged my shoulders. Swiftly, it dawned on me how inappropriate it was I knew so little about her to not be able to even recall her name, but it wasn't like we sat down for lavish dinner parties or that he had introduced me to her the first time she parked in front of the house.

'I should know it,' I blurted out, and he laughed, and I struggled through the gaps in my memory for something that sounded familiar. These were the names I couldn't remember: his girlfriends' and his car's, and luckily in that order for importance. With Adrian, I did not know his mother's name, or his father's, or what they looked like. He kept the truths of his history to himself. As we rounded a corner and waited for the light to turn green at the pedestrian crossing, I gasped and exclaimed loud enough for the four members of our party to hear, 'It's Caissie.'

Gretchen and Luke turned their heads, noticeably confused—it was the only part of our conversation they likely would have heard, considering Cormac and I had years ago mastered the ability to talk in a hushed whisper to each other regardless of what the topic on our minds was. 'Who's she?' Gretchen interjected, more intrigued than weirded out.

'Adrian's girlfriend, who's frequently around.' I thought about being crass, making a little mockery of her, but it felt disingenuous, like I was forcing gossip to appeal to my queer friend and my interested-all-of-the-sudden coupled friends. In truth, I hardly knew Caissie and only understood her as his girlfriend because we didn't talk to one another. 'They devour each other's spare time, sometimes I imagine myself moving out so they can makeover the place as their honeymoon love den.' Cormac cackled and mumbled something that bordered on gossipy connivery. But he was silly and joking and I didn't feel compelled to defend anyone.

'How I see it, they're obsessed with each other because it's comfortable attention. Maybe from the outside we're disgusted because they don't stop humping each other's legs, but if it's not broken...' Cormac trailed off, tilting his head. We were approaching the venue, the city's performing arts

complex right on the waterfront. ‘We can’t all do the doom and gloom of the picket-fence love, although does Adrian want children? Is he going to play Minecraft with them?’

‘I don’t know,’ I let out, thinking too resourcefully about what Adrian’s future would look like. Eventually, we would stop living together, and an entire new timeline would stretch forward for the both of us. Whether he married Caissie or not depended entirely on whether the clock struck midnight and the glass shattered into a million pieces.

After the stand-up comedian’s show, I waited with Luke away from the stream of people exiting the building as Gretchen and Cormac went to the bathroom. I imagined the queue for the ladies’ to be astronomically long, but Cormac would seemingly appear without any time having passed at all. Luke and I chatted about nothing in particular—he I had the least in common with, and sometimes I worried the things I knew about him, remembered or attempted to remember about him, were muddled in my brain despite how long I had technically known him. I always spent time with him when Gretchen was around, but this brief interim of time only the two of us reminded me we got along well, albeit I was likely to stick my foot in it.

‘I heard you’ve been cooking with gas,’ he said, our eye-contact brief, switching between making quick glances at one another and looking out at the mass of people hurrying to be nowhere in particular on a Saturday night after laughing their guts out. I laughed, partially unsure what the hell he was talking about. ‘Cormac told me you’ve been getting back out there, meeting people, breaking promises.’

The weasel. ‘Nothing really counts as “getting back out there”, I’m not going on dates.’ Luke stared at me, and I worried I had said something irresponsible like *I be fucking* instead, and that my mind wiped any knowledge of it to protect me from the embarrassment and shame.

‘How are you meeting these potentially nefarious men? They’re not hurting you I hope.’

It surprised me how protective he suddenly seemed. A behaviour I would not have expected from him towards Cormac, or maybe even toward me when I would announce I had been seeing someone for a couple weeks and things were “going well”. He seemed to soften when I started to speak, perhaps half-expecting I would utter a word he didn’t want to hear.

But I couldn’t be completely truthful.

Luke would be standoffish about me having an illicit affair with someone who is supposed to be merely my doctor, a relative unknown until the moment I attend an appointment. Suddenly the complexity of telling the truth was heavier than if I was telling Cormac, who would laugh when I said I imagined sex through the lens of a medical practitioner, plucking up every implement to consider the hornier, sexier use on my body.

I’d tell him I knew them, I thought.

‘They’re people I already knew,’ I said, suddenly sheepish. I worried about how he would react if I told him I must have been subtly flirting in the old supermarket I had worked in, enough for the ex-coworker to drive me off to some new location and beg me to suck his cock with my knees digging into the thin carpet of the car floor. ‘Just old friends I reconnected with when I thought about trying the new approach of things, to be a bit more carefree with how I found my pleasure.’ Luke glanced at me and I reassured him I was using protection. I had already started lying. Lying in partial, in halves.

‘You’re doing something different,’ he began, ‘which is a positive. Don’t feel like you have to be caught in the trappings of the same life, even if you feel you ought to because people expect you to behave a certain way. I hope I never offended you for the way I talked about your choice to wait for a relationship instead of sleeping with any man who wanted you. If I was single, somehow without the beautiful Gretchen in my life, I wouldn’t be a completely changed person, sleeping with pretty girls because they like the size of my, um, muscles or whatever. I’d be looking for the right woman, say if Gretchen simply did not exist and I couldn’t fight for her to come back.’ Luke had a dopey sort of grin on his face, and I thought about how wholesome their love was, I remember having those silly thoughts of how they represented the goodness I wanted out of a relationship despite the goodness of not being in one and having the capable freedom to run with the wolves. Sex with half-strangers, that was what I had known in that very moment, making up half-truths to keep from blurting out reality. Cormac, he would have slithered the truth up out of my throat, but I would have still felt comfortable confessing to him about Dr Bernard Jemmott. I still hadn’t decided if I should be looking for a new skin doctor, but that seemed like a problem for the Finn of two years in the future, who could look down at his skin and either trace for new imperfections or remember the man who roleplayed that his daughter would know he was up in a motel room having passionate sex with someone around her age. The man who confessed to me why his marriage collapsed, a fainting spell, one which left him with new ideas of experimentation. Science is not supposed to be straightforward.

‘Cormac is going to keep telling me things if you feed his hunger for your Boy Gone Wild stories,’ Luke said, the last thing he could squeeze out before Cormac squeezed my waist and almost began lifting me up in the theatre lobby. He made sporadic, strange noises, softly as to not embarrass any of us, but none of his movements were swift or caught me off-guard. He only wanted to see me briefly squirm, maybe giggle a little from the sensitive spots on my hips. I genuinely did consider punching him just for playful, bit-flirtatious payback. Our friendship would always have an air of cheekiness, naughtiness—we had seen each other completely naked on multiple occasions, so his body was not obscure, not hidden from my view always by his clothes. That sort of intimacy, before sex but after friendly closeness, twisted the ways in which we were comfortable with one another. Cormac could have asked me to go to a nude beach with him and I would have slathered his back with sunscreen,

touching his ass without flinching. We never thought of our intimacy as foreplay for anything sexual. Or romantic. Even the suggestion of falling in love was hilarious, fit of laughter-inducing, roll around on the floor to find a pocket of air somewhere to breathe again. But I loved him.

Of course I loved Cormac.

He could have proposed as the world's funniest joke and I would have said yes, even if it meant everyone and the camera crew would be laughing their asses off. I loved him like that.

Gretchen came out exhausted and scowling, albeit dramatically so. 'A woman in there was taking her sweet time farting up a storm while the rest of us waited for the other stalls,' she said, staring out at the procession of people beginning to dwindle. Without much thought, we squeezed into the crowd and filed out the glass doors into the street. It was around 10:30pm and the city hardly seemed dark at all, flooded by streetlamps and the glow of commercialisation. The four of us had come in the one car, on principle, and Luke had parked in the underground parking across from the venue, or underneath it. I was forgetting where we had parked, number, colour of the post, letter, whatnot. My stomach seemed to still ache from laughter—the comedian was someone we were all familiar with, having watched videos religiously in the weeks leading up, reels we sent to one another when we were caught in an endless stream of content. Luke steered us towards a well-lit staircase and we descended into the belly of the beast, metaphorically, although in times of flood this carpark did in fact become a raging, tumultuous pit of carnality if you were brave enough to risk wading through its waters.

His car was parked amidst other, similar cars—everyone seemed to drive a grey-or-black car nowadays. Cormac raised his eyebrows at me and we climbed into either side of the back seat, the bratty, playfully-annoying children of the car ride. It was a quiet nuisance for Luke navigating out of the underground carpark, avoiding uninhibited drivers who rounded corners without pause, until he came to the ticketed exit and a camera read his licence plate.

For a while we listened to music from Gretchen's phone and sung along to the lyrics we knew, our volume matching whatever Luke was comfortable with while he steered us out of the bustling inner-city. We sung along to Sabrina Carpenter's "Nobody's Son" and in the rearview mirror I could see a look of strange confusion on Luke's face, like he had never heard the song before but was somehow surprised a woman and two queer men knew almost all of the words to it. He listened to music none of us recognised and complained when we democratically agreed to skip through to something with more of a dance groove. At least for drives, when all you wanted was to let your hair be blown in the wind frantically, strands catching in the corners of your mouth.

About fifteen minutes from Gretchen and Luke's, the music was drowned out by steady conversation, although I paid little attention to whatever mindless discussion of the upcoming workweek the lovebirds were having. Cormac, beside me, his palm on the seat in between us, was

attempting to speak in code, for fun, about the last person I had sex with. Juicy details he craved, but I was keeping hushed, still somewhat hesitant with the idea of letting in too many people into this new world order I was creating out of nothing.

‘Does it begin with an M?’ He quizzed, a stupid grin on his face. We would be there all night and all morning, sitting in the backseat of the car, asking and answering these nod-for-yes, shake-for-no questions. I knew, or at least believed, that it was another person Cormac would not have seen whining to be fucked on any one of the dating apps. Bernard, like Gordon, seemed to be more restrained, which was beginning to make me feel like a free trial, a credit card swiped through thin air. ‘Does it begin with a P?’ Reverse I Spy, I thought. In the pitch-darkness you could hardly tell whether the shapely figure in shadow was a shrub or a man. I used to imagine myself getting shanked wandering down a darkened alley, mistaking a famed serial killer for a dumpster. He, or she, would lunge out at me and with complete body force overwhelm me, limbs a-struggle with no weapon of my own. Whatever the killer would possess—hatchet, machete, switchblade, rusty scissors—would hack away at me until I was left bloodied, defeated, and dead. I spy, I thought, with my little eye...the improbability of getting out of this alive without a few scars. Bruises. Blisters, even. Deep, deep wounds.

Cormac yanked me into a room, any room, once we were back at Gretchen and Luke’s. I was drained of all energy, this puppet poised up by its shackles. I figured he would use my sleepiness, my fatigue, to snatch some piece of information out of me, but when I pushed him for why, he shook his head. ‘You’ll tell me later when you want to,’ he said, shaking his head once more for good measure. ‘I was texting with Noel all night, he was giving me a play-by-play, he was going on a date with someone but he was being cagey about it because he didn’t want to ruin the good energy, you know how fucking cagey he gets about the *mojo* or “karmic vibe” or whatever he calls it.’ Cormac took a break for a breath, the two of us almost pressed against the wall near the bathroom light switch.

‘Noel gave me little updates whenever he could, ducking to the bathroom just to text me, because he is psychotic and just can’t enjoy a date like,’ and he gestured to me with a wavering hand, ‘like you can, or could, now you’re living life without so much as a fear of even one droplet of cum getting in your eye.’ I wanted to shove him hard against the wall for taking detours on what was obviously important. I fought a yawn. Unsuccessfully.

‘I spent all night trying to get information out of him that wasn’t *he’s so hot* or *I can’t wait to be his little bitch in the bedroom* but Noel was being a Grinch about it.’ Cormac laced his fingers with mine. ‘Now I know why, Finn. Now I fucking know why. He was on a date with your ex. With Toby.’