

A Matchbox of Our Own

Musicals, Their Songs, and the New Works of Fiction Spawned From Them

by Keeley Young

INTO THE WOODS

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER

THE LITTLE MERMAID

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET

THE LAST FIVE YEARS

CHICAGO

MOULIN ROUGE

WAITRESS

MURIEL'S WEDDING

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

what to expect: a page of introduction to each musical, a page of introduction to a specific song from said musical, followed by a piece of prose fiction interacting with the themes and content of the aforementioned song.

INTO THE WOODS

I was introduced to *Into the Woods* the way I've been introduced to many musicals—the film adaptation. Disney's *Into the Woods* already sounds like a misstep: despite being a musical about fairytale characters interacting with one another in a sprawling, dark-and-scary woods, the musical itself is bleak, murderous, and mature. In early productions, the Big Bad Wolf had an enlarged penis prosthetic. Nevertheless, after many failed attempts to bring the Stephen Sondheim musical to the silver screen, the 2014 version found its way to the eyes and ears of a budding theatre kid. I fell in love with the music. Sondheim is a master composer and lyricist. As an introduction to his work, *Into the Woods* is almost impossibly universal—and yes, despite the adulthood of some of its themes. But Sondheim and James Lapine (book for the musical) weren't focusing on the honey-washed fairytales of Walt Disney Studios. They naturally drew their inspiration from the darker, grimmer original fairytales. Cinderella's stepsisters cut off parts of their feet to fit into the slippers. The Big Bad Wolf has a fetish for young girls. Rapunzel is squashed underneath the foot of a giant...oh, wait, no, that doesn't happen in the original story.

Into the Woods centres on The Baker and The Baker's Wife, two ordinary, nameless peasants who desperately want a child. Their lives are soon to intersect with a slew of fairytale characters—Jack (and the Beanstalk), Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.—when the witch from next-door surprises them with some lore. Alas, The Baker's father was a bit of a neighbourly-nuisance and stole from the Witch's garden. She set a little curse upon them, kidnapped Rapunzel, and forgot to mention that Rapunzel's hair is lowkey required for the spell-to-reverse-the-curse. Too bad she can't have touched any of the ingredients.

I could write dissertations on my adoration for *Into the Woods*. The film adaptation was the perfect stepping-stone into loving the proshot version that aired in the 1990s. Where the 2014 film makes some questionable choices and feels a little too Disneyfied, the 1991 filmed-from-the-stage version starring Bernadette Peters as The Witch is charmingly deranged. Rightfully, Joanna Gleeson is recognised for her brilliant, Tony-Award-winning performance as The Baker's Wife. The character, despite lacking a first or last name, is perhaps the most organic of the characters as an entry point for the audience. She's not so foolish as her husband—she reminds him of the ingredients for the potion, the cape as white as milk, the hair as pure as gold...I mean, the cape as red as blood, the hair as yellow as corn. I'm showing my masculine bad-at-memorising-things trait again. No, The Baker's Wife is a reorienting force in *Into the Woods*, determined to make a better life for herself and her husband by breaking the spell on ~our~ house and falling pregnant with their first child. She is softer than her husband, but passionate, courageous, insanely endearing. When your introduction to The Baker's Wife is Emily Blunt, and then Joanna Gleeson, and then Sara Bareilles, there's something so inherently *connecting* about her character. I heard the Baker and The Baker's Wife once described as Americans transported from someplace like New York straight into a fantasy world, without much of a moment of disassociation between them. They accepted it, like we strangely accept their placeholder naming. They're ordinary people, mingling with witches next door, and giants, and Little Red Riding Hood. They want a baby.

They'll do anything.

“Moments in the Woods”

Disney should’ve realised they were the wrong company to adapt *Into the Woods* when they focused on understanding the source material. *Moments in the Woods* is The Baker’s Wife’s big moment, if you will—having just made-out with Cinderella’s Prince in the midst of the woods, she panics, thinking herself a right adulterer for this brief affair on her husband. Sondheim’s wordplay is apparent—The Baker’s Wife is not merely spending her moments in the literal woods, she’s dense within the figurative *woulds* too.

Back to life, back to sense // back to child, back to husband // no one lives in the woods.

No one lives in the woulds, neither. The Baker’s Wife represents this almost sense of choice. She can have her husband, her child, this life she has so desperately fought for over the course of the musical, and potentially she can have a different life entirely, too. A prince, this vision of nobility and lavishness, paid attention to her, kissed her, and swooned over her. To a measly peasant—and I say that lovingly—this is a bizarre, out-of-place turn of events. For a character that has until this moment in the musical been the representation of the audience, or at least in part shared with The Baker, here she makes a questionable decision. She considers the passion of an affair. She considers how promising a life of adventure could continue to be. Not merely how she spent the entirety of Act I, in search of the ingredients to break the curse placed on her home by The Witch.

Why not both instead // there’s the answer if you’re clever.

Sondheim asks you to spend this moment with him, with The Baker’s Wife, questioning why you couldn’t simply have everything you could possibly wish for. The thrill of kissing a handsome prince may end, and has—Cinderella’s Prince flees from the scene to go hunt for the giant, but we soon enough find him swooning over another woman, distracted by his own conundrum of *woulds*. There’s a lot of adultery in *Into the Woods*. Although, in the case of The Baker’s Wife, she is not being shamed for her decision to want the affair. To even consider the affair. Blinded by her admiration for nobility, and a very handsome man in front of her, she strayed from the path. Strayed from her marriage for a moment, as one can almost expect from someone whose life prior to the beginning of the musical would have been rather ordinary and childless. Now, The Baker’s Wife can consider everything. Her life is adventurous, she got pregnant rather quickly and already gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby boy, and now she’s tracking down a small child who enraged a giant. She is afforded this life, but she is also burdened by the worry and strain of being a mother so suddenly, all the while a giant woman is killing people purely by accidentally stepping on them. The woods are chaos. Kissing a prince is strangely like blending in with the scenery.

For The Baker’s Wife, this conundrum of ifs-and-maybes is frightening—because she doesn’t mind what it presents. She isn’t necessarily the sort to have an affair on her husband, but she’s complicated, like every character in *Into the Woods*. It’s an important discussion the musical makes—in the song “*Last Midnight*”, The Witch calls our heroes *nice*, but not good. They make complex decisions, like trading “worthless beans” for a cow as white as milk, effectively lying to a child. The Baker’s Wife tragically faces a sort of immediate karma for her actions: in kissing the prince and kind of thriving because of it, she can make no claim to *good*, nor could she previously. She deceived Rapunzel to snag a length of her corn-coloured hair. She lied to Cinderella’s Prince to protect Cinderella, but almost entirely to earn Cinderella’s trust to snatch the golden slipper. The Baker’s Wife presents herself as a reflection of an ordinary human-insert—she makes sacrifices to better herself, and her family. Soon after she confronts this idea of kissing the prince AND still staying loyal to her husband and child, she dies a tragic death falling off a cliff. You really can’t have everything.

Oh, but how we wish...

...

When we checked into the resort, I watched the concierge avert his attention from Brad to me. Not a single word escaped my lips. Being the one who didn't pay meant I was sort of secondary, but comfortably so. I wasn't poor, or desperate to be recognised as on par with all the other guests. Brad just liked to organise things. He would prop a laptop up on the lounge in front of him and compare flight prices, assess the pros and cons of one resort over another, consistently glancing at amenities like the size of the television screen, or whether the room had a jacuzzi bath spacious enough for the two of us to swim around in, maybe fool around in. It was rare for us to do anything in the bath that wasn't me giving him a handjob, though.

The concierge was a man in his early forties, already balding on the scalp. I figured if this was a comfortable conversational setting Brad would recommend the hair transplant place he knew was a proven success from the evaporated bald spot on his brother's head. The concierge had a nametag that said he was called Howard, although he seemed the type to go by Howie. The uniform was crisp and white and tailored. Brad didn't like hotels, resorts, places like this, where the *costuming* distracted him from the experience. When he was a little boy his parents were not well-off, and he describes in crass detail at dinner parties the motels he once stayed in when they would road trip from one side of the country to the other. Pale golden uniforms that actually looked like piss, really. Brown crumbled pants likely stripped off the clothesline ten minutes before a shift. I was familiar too.

Brad told me to go ahead, check out the room without him. He lingered outside, on the phone, pacing back and forth on occasion. If it was something work-related, he was upset, frazzled, wondering why it wasn't someone else's problem at the minute. If it was something personal, he was calm, understanding. Strange, how I've learned to see the same expression two different ways. Brad was stolid, at times. He was a masculine, forward-facing man. He should be dangling a slew of women off his arms, but the fact that he came to resorts with another man could sometimes startle the man or woman behind the desk. Sometimes they must think I was bought—a baby, making choices at the dessert bar. I paid for my credit cards. I wanted to sell the car for the rising costs of petrol, and every time a stray rock flung itself in the path of the windscreen and clinked with the glass. An eventual replacement. I could have driven less like a maniac.

Immediately I collapsed on the bed. Without him around, I felt within myself, which was a strange sensation. Like the inner monologue peeled back and engulfed the room. I thought, oh how lovely it is to be helplessly in adoration for this man, and I thought, oh can I glimpse myself in the reflection of the mirror above the bed and recognise the person I used to be before I met him. That was one year ago, give or take. A year and three months and thirteen days. I wriggled out of the jacket I was wearing—an unsexy act Brad would only see if he'd already hidden a camera in the room. We met some months after I'd swiped right on his profile. We'd talked for a little while, he added me on Instagram, then silence, the occasional like on a picture. When we started again talking, the chemistry returned—I knew I wanted to be in his arms, and within three weeks we'd aligned our schedules to meet for dinner in a restaurant that overlooked the river. Brad offered to pay. He walked me to my car in an underground parking lot and kissed me, pressing me against the driver's side door.

There was a little knock on the door before Brad entered. That smile, it melted me. The knock gave me enough warning to straighten myself out, perched then on the edge of the bed complete with expectation. He lifted me up. I was suddenly weightless, another strange sensation. This is a good decision, I remember telling myself. There wasn't time for thinking.

I was lounging by the pool, carefully distracted. Sunglasses on my eyes. Brad was ordering a drink at the bar, no doubt occasionally glancing over to me, a sort of protective. He thought there was always a chance he would lose me, but he would never admit it. He would always hold jealousy—he knew he had reason to be jealous, I dangled that carrot in front of his face like the two perceived asses we were to be. Brad and I weren't in an exclusive relationship. I didn't invite him to meet my mother, because she would likely scream uncertain thoughts in our direction. I kept her largely in the dark about my love life, but she knew plenty about Winston. There were pictures of Winston wherever you turned—framed photographs of the two of us at amusement parks, holding hands on walks on the shoreline, even pictures of the two of us lying around at home on the sofa, cradling our dog Maika in our arms. I invited him as a plus-one to my sister's wedding—he impressed family, danced with my grandmother, kissed my sister's new husband on the mouth after all the celebratory speeches. Winston, he liked to believe I was on vacation by myself, desperate for some isolation. A lie to him was uncomplicated. We'd never been an overly clung-together couple, tied so defencelessly to one another. I would disappear to another state for a week and it became a reliable habit. Brad is always out of frame, always grabbing a drink at the bar, or showering out the sand, or making some phone call that could be to some twink. I presented myself as alone in all the pictures—*I miss you baby* was the cliché, and the truth. I adored Winston...but I adored Brad too.

Work was informed it was the funeral of my grandfather, another cliché. My parents were always told the same story as Winston, or else they would over-ask on every question and somehow belittle him for not taking out enough time in the year to pamper his beautiful partner. Although they wouldn't call me beautiful. While Brad sauntered back from the outside bar with his drink, I closed out each tab of my thoughts. Lying to them all. Considering this love with Brad, considering that love with Winston. Loving them both.

At the airport, I had texted Winston: *we're boarding in twenty minutes*. The hidden truth of the *we* being Brad beside me, looking over my shoulder at the message. He asked of Winston like they were both facets on either side of me, arms linked. A paper line of gorgeous dolls. When we boarded the plane, the flight attendant barely registered the two of us—it was their job to be impartial, sure, but maybe I expected her to say something, or notice some glimmer I was unaware of. Silly, to think a complete stranger should question your choices.

Brad made himself comfortable on the chaise longue, drink in hand. This was peace, I'd thought, carting off the negative thoughts in the old-fashioned excrement wagon. A convoluted way of saying I tried not to think about who I'd be hurting. Brad's eyes were hidden by his own pair of sunglasses. I pictured him thinking about breasts, because I had none. It was morose. Picturing him attempting to motorboat on my flat chest. There weren't many others around the pool at the time—the only woman there was older, more mature, wearing a one-piece suit that provided no cleavage. Must it always be either this or that. The back of my neck felt hot, a sign I should slather it with more sunscreen, but I merely readjusted myself on the lounge and again moved my thoughts. He was choosing me like I was choosing him—there was an alternative, and it was a form of sanity.

He gulped down an oyster, slime dripping briefly from his lips. It was a reminder of his proximity to me: as much as he were the wealthier, he was still slobbish, oftentimes unshaven and slipshod, certainly when no one else was around him. Except for me. I think he figured there were reasons I could choose to abandon him, go back to being only one someone's lover, but I'd stumble back to starting all over again.

I didn't go on dates while I was first dating Winston. On our first date, we'd made a brief mention to how we valued loyalty, although I gave him an abridged answer. I'd been cheated on once in the past, when I was nineteen—my boyfriend at the time, a thin talkative British export named Doug,

had sex a handful of times with one of his best friends. I remember crying for hours, before the crying turned into sending him vengeful messages saying I could have sex with his dad to feel better. They were stupid threats, really—his father lived in Wales and they weren't speaking to each other much, on account of the fact Doug liked to fuck men. I scooped my way through a tub of chocolate mint ice cream, over the course of three days, because I thought it was exactly what bitter, lonely people did. I wasn't hungry. I was no longer pissed at him. I thought, maybe I should have done it first.

Brad offered me an oyster and I looked at him funny.

I knew Winston wasn't Doug, or wasn't Brad. When I ordered a non-alcoholic cocktail with dinner, Brad questioned me like I was becoming a psychopath and a *sober*—he'd said that, was I becoming a *sober*, like it was the reverse of *alcoholic*. A *plainaholic*. My explanation could have rocketed him into an uncomfortable mood: stupid to say I wasn't feeling well, because he'd steer me back to the room and dump me there in the pretence of making another phone call. Translation: he would find someone else to play with. If I said I was attempting to save money, he would stare at me as if I were broke. For a brief second I imagined this interaction with Winston. He would be polite, understanding, and if I told him I was feeling bloated, feeling poorly, we'd tuck ourselves under the covers and watch whatever bizarre thing was playing on the television. Brad shrugged my explanation off. He said he loved me enough it didn't matter.

Brad talked loudly, abrasively, with another couple at another table, as if he were a talk show host. Ordinarily I wouldn't think much of it—he made fast friends, like a toddler—but I was in my feelings, so I felt unrelaxed. The plates in front of us had been cleared, the bill paid, but I sat patiently in my seat finishing off the last of my drink. I clinked around the ice with the straw. Sometimes you plant yourself in a life that's made of hard liquor, but you refuse to get too wasted. The hangover is dangerous, the fear of blacking out worse than missing out. You try to invent yourself a way to get completely drunk, no question, but remain sober-headed, the so-called plainaholic one of your partners talks about. Drink more water and the numbness goes away. Or, not numbness, because that only welcomes the grey, cloudier skies. Those mornings where you wake up in one bed, dreary for the other. You can't tell Brad the nightmare you woke up from drenched in sweat was about Winston finding out you're a two-timing freak. The one time you mentioned the idea of polyamory he pulled some obscure reference from an old fearmongering tactic, said polygamists just liked to pollinate the earth with their bad genetics. Humping like dogs. It wasn't even a matter of if he'd be interested—you mentioned something you had read online. I took another sip of the drink, watching Brad make idle chit-chat.

'The hotel's lovely,' I said, an ear pressed to the phone. I'd excused myself from the room and wandered down the hallway, lingering near a closed-off balcony. It was nice to hear Winston's voice.

'Yes, I'm having a nice time. I didn't leave the resort today, just wanted to relax and put everything exterior behind me. At least for now.' He made a soft sound, somewhere between the first letter of the alphabet and the eighteenth. 'How is everything with you then?'

Did I feel embarrassed lying to him?

Of course I did.

'It's getting late here, you're right,' I said, glancing down the vacant hallway. 'I love you too.'

After I'd hung up, slid my phone into my pocket, and moved back towards our room, I started thinking again about my dead grandfather. I didn't have a dead grandfather. But in my head he was shorter than I am, with somewhat of an arched back. Little to no hair, although in the open casket he was wearing a toupee, which unsettled my mother. Her beautiful dad given an extreme makeover by the mortician drag queens. His cheeks plump. Someone would ask, how are you feeling, after

everything? I would fake a frown, feel like an asshole for giving myself over to happiness. I could have told work it was another vacation. They would have laughed.

If I'd never met Brad, I would be thinking about someone else. They could be an unknown entity for all I cared, this vision of someone in all other arrays of complex than what Winston was. Back in the room, Brad was half-naked on the bed watching the television. It almost looked like someone had squirted oil on his chest. I realised that was just my imagination, projecting an insane image out of my head. He adjusted the volume, beckoning me over with a wave. The channel he was watching was frequently interrupted with shopping advertisements for vacuums and blenders and skin care products, but he was only half paying attention. I made myself comfortable on the bed next to him and caught him out of the corner of my eye occasionally sticking his hand down his pants to rub his semi-erect penis. Brad was noticeably a little drunk. He became hornier with more alcohol. The credits rolled on a programme about fishing in the great, wide, open ocean, and Brad remained only half-focused on the tugging motion in his pants. I got up to go pee.

I think I understood myself: Brad could lose his charm when I questioned him. When I placed the strain on whether these hideaway vacations, out in the open, were more than just opportunities to test my lying ability. I flushed the toilet, washed my hands, dried my hands, then splashed my face with some water. Dried my hands again. In a whisper, I practiced everything. *I love you, Winston. I love you, Brad.* Neither came out forced. If he had his ear to the door, Brad would hear me faltering. But I knew he wouldn't. I knew he wanted me for the ways another person would look at me.

Smile down on me from heaven, grandfather. Or don't.

Is it good I don't care?

Not even when I know what it does.

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER

Barbra Streisand is easily hypnotised in the film adaptation of *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, a musical I was introduced to after others on the internet noticed Melissa's costuming in the second season of *Schmigadoon!* could be quite easily likened to that of Daisy Gamble's. Daisy (played by Streisand) is the plant-growing, chain-smoking, clairvoyant main character of *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, a musical about discovering the past lives your subconscious seemingly remembers. Barbra Streisand is a genuine icon of musical theatre, starring in films such as *Funny Girl* and *Hello, Dolly!*. It might be a little more obscure, something like *On a Clear Day*, because I certainly hadn't heard of it until I had, and I almost immediately fell in love. It's a chaotic musical. Daisy Gamble can speed grow plants, has a funky accent, and was once a Lady Melinda in another life, a woman of society who married multiple times, stood in front of the courts, and is apparently very attractive to psychotherapist Dr Marc Chabot. Barbra balances portraying Daisy and Londoner Lady Melinda Winifred Waine Tentrees, switching out accents, shifting her posture, looking gorgeous no matter what. It's hilarious to think Daisy Gamble only began the hypnosis sessions to hopefully cease smoking, and suddenly a licenced medical professional is singing about his lust for a woman who existed in the nineteenth century.

Sometimes I think about the title with a drug-hazed confusion. On a clear day you can see forever. Taken literally, I suppose if the sun is shining and there are no clouds in the sky, you might be able to see forever, to a degree. As a metaphor, though, the title discusses Daisy's mental state over the course of the musical—she's hopelessly attempting to understand herself, her place in the world, and without realising it, the many lives she has lived and will live. She begins these hypnosis sessions to cure herself of the chain-smoking, yes, because she wants to present herself better to her fiancé's colleagues and friends. Slowly, Daisy is morphing into what other people wish of her—the dotting future-wife, the intriguing mystery to be solved. The only person really not putting these expectations and standards on her is her ex-step-brother Tad. Played in the film by Jack Nicholson, randomly. He has like three scenes. So, on a clear day, perhaps you can see forever—when the fuzziness of your brain unscrambles itself, you're more aware of the person you are, or are becoming. Daisy doesn't really love her fiancé, nor does she want to be with a doctor who cares more extraordinarily for a past version of her who was wrongfully executed.

It's a strange musical. Dr Chabot certainly should lose his right to work as a psychotherapist. The split timelines, drifting off backwards in time whenever Daisy was clicked unconscious and Melinda would come tumbling out, serve to highlight his willingness to obsess over a medical breakthrough, and a woman of another era. They also serve to highlight gorgeous fashion and set design. No matter the time period, Barbra Streisand is styled precisely, perfectly. At one stage she is wearing a nightgown that matches her sheets, and then a vision of her subconscious appears wearing a dress that matches her sofa—and this film came out in the '70s, so the patterns are intense, bright, flowery, and a touch overbearing. Daisy's bedroom is like the garden of flowers in *Alice in Wonderland (1951)* vomited on every surface available.

It's a strange musical, but it's oh so charming to me.

Except when Dr Chabot musically stalks Daisy.

“What Did I Have That I Don’t Have”

Of course the anxious, oftentimes-frightened queer kid was going to fall in love with a song about not being able to appeal to a man in the present day. “*What Did I Have That I Don’t Have*” comes when Daisy Gamble discovers her psychotherapist is in love with a previous life of hers, that of Melinda, the charming British lady (this is important, because in a fit of frustration Daisy begins cursing him out with British slang words and an accent and it’s fantastic). Understandably, when you begin listening to tapes of your doctor (!) talking about his fascination with a woman you cannot be, you lose your mind a little bit. The opening lyric of the song fascinates me: *I don’t know why they redesign me*. Without even going anywhere further, Daisy Gamble immediately notices the discomfort around being placed into a box she cannot squeeze back into. *He likes the way he used to find me*. Taken out of context, the opening verse of the song sounds like the troubled longings of a woman displaced from a relationship that was once registered perfectly well for the partner. *He likes the girl I left behind me*. I think we can all sort of relate to this notion of changing as a person, growing out of the people we once were. For Daisy Gamble, the changes are sharper, far more distinct—no longer is she a fancier, nobler woman from London, although in this lifetime she never was. From birth she’s been Daisy, Daisy alone, and this sudden realisation that Dr Chabot was paying so much attention to her because of the woman he loves, the woman she isn’t. . .it’s like realising your partner was never prepared for you to change over the course of time. They wanted the stagnant person they once knew. Dr Chabot wants a reflection of the past, a woman he cannot merely meet on the street, someone Daisy Gamble is not.

I’m just a victim of time

Obsolete in my prime

Out of date and outclassed by my past.

There’s a hopelessness to hearing some completely different version of yourself is the *preferred*. On the tape recording, Dr Chabot can be heard calling Daisy’s life *boring*, and that maybe he’d tighten his tie until he strangles himself if he hears another *I mean* come out of her mouth. These sharp juxtapositions of dislike for Daisy’s true life, her current existence, only work to knock her down even more. He wants a version she cannot embody AND he finds her borderline repulsive in this life. In a time in her life hindered by so much uncertainty, Daisy uncovering that even her doctor has grander expectations of her is mind-numbing. She takes a moment to have a projected inner monologue before Dr Chabot calls, in which she flings out a *cheerio!* And a *tallyho* and an amusingly-random mention of kippered herrings. I don’t completely think Daisy Gamble knows how British people speak, and that only builds upon the construction of the scene, the song, and her character. She’s nothing at all like Melinda. She couldn’t even pretend to be her.

“*What Did I Have That I Don’t Have*” is a repetition of thought. Constantly, over and over, Daisy scolds herself on why she couldn’t possibly be the person expected of her. This better model, as she envisions it. It’s a mental breakdown hidden within the shattering of the trust that was being built between a doctor and his patient. But things were never that uncomplicated between them.

Where can I go to repair all the wear and the tear // ‘til I’m once again the previous me?

If you cannot go to your therapist for help, where can you go?

It’s harsh, to think people will always be expecting a different version of you. They have individual ideas in their head of who you are, who you were, who you should be. Maybe it isn’t always so insane as a past life creeping back into the present tense. But who hasn’t realised someone won’t just hold them for the person they are?

Even if Dr Chabot isn’t a bad man to lose.

...

They won't notice me. Caught in their own world, a world they call *love*. To them, I'm just a passerby on the train, taking my seat out of the way. They remain in my eyesight, although I sit comfortably far enough away to not be branded as some type of stalker for occasionally glancing over at them. I've got a novel in my lap, in my hands, something I was recommended by a friend a couple of years earlier but only now picked off the shelf. An author I don't recognise. An expected cover—the same typical font choice, muted colours, but not too dull. The train ride will take me just over an hour. I'm a quarter of a way through the novel, but my progress will invariably slow. I have to look.

These two, probably in their early twenties. They're both likely in university, although with schedules that collide, a brutal reminder to appreciate the time they do get with one another. The boy on the right has red hair, cut short, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, although he almost rarely glances out the window of the train. His partner beside him has brown hair the colour of platypus fur. He gets to watch in closer detail the passing fencelines and shrubbery out the window, a softened glow of light coming in on his boyfriend. There's something peaceful about the way they interact with each other. In the past, boys like that, comfortable in their sexuality, really, would have been harassed to no end for the slightest touches. The redhead rests his fingers on the knee of the brown-haired boy. Someone with hatred in their heart would have seen something like that and lunged forward, mercilessly wanting for some fresh reason to incite some violence. The queerer you seem, the more people stare.

I try to be less obvious. A shame to be caught out as the man sitting alone wishing his love life could resemble something like theirs. An announcer informs the cabin of an imminent platform and a few people tumble out of their seats and move towards the door. I read a sentence or three, accidentally rereading the second. When I glance up again, the two twenty-somethings are in mid-conversation, although their words are a blur. Too much diegetic noise surrounds me. I don't need to understand them to know they must be making inside jokes, talking about the day ahead, maybe referencing something they read that morning on their phones when they woke up in bed, separate from each other. It's 8:37am now, and we zip past a station without stopping.

The two boys continue chatting amongst themselves. From my vantage point, I catch segments, words spoken louder over the hum of the train against the tracks. *Lunch*, and *the reading*, and *overly pompous*. *You should be taking short rest breaks*. I can't learn much about who they are from these snippets, but I shouldn't try to learn anything from them regardless. Although in age there would be under a decade between us. I've been out of a relationship now for several months—you forget things in exacts after a while, until someone at a family function asks an offhand question about the man you'd been with for a time. They only knew this presented version of him, of course. Inside my head I jump backwards on the dots, on the timeline, to remember where I was when we *mutually-agreed* to split apart. Breaking the atom.

Maybe it would have been September. The thirteenth. I'd gone to a car-wash in the morning, had a strange sort of energy to wash the thing myself. I flung out of the seat, pranced around like I was filming an 80s music video. Occasionally my thoughts drifted home. My partner of a handful of years, more than two, or three, but again, also less than a decade, he would be taking the laundry out of the dryer and heaping it mammothly on the end of the sofa we rarely sat on. Reservations for laundry, then. People do ordinary things before they do gut-wrenching things. A serial killer will pay their electricity bill, change a tire, before they drive out into the middle of a wooded, picturesque landscape and pop a bullet into the forehead of their blonde-headed captive.

I'm not giving much of my attention to this novel.

They would eat dinner together, in the city, if their schedules lined up. A table for two, preferably near a window, or outside, so they could talk while the world passed by around them. One of them would always be keeping the corner of their eye focused on the street, to watch for the rainbow of swift-moving vehicles. It would be an agreed-upon game. Don't you remember when you were younger and someone, probably your older sibling, three years older, would punch you square in the shoulder when they saw a yellow Volkswagen Beetle? Something like that.

It's an older train, outdated fabric that would chafe you if you sat on it without your clothes on. Scratchy furniture. The couple might never pay it attention, and I shouldn't. I shouldn't even be here at all. The rising thought of someone suddenly frightened by their future, I suppose. People like to judge the newly-single for their cynicism. *You're only anti-love because you just lost it.* The break-up ceased feeling fresh, I should have ceased feeling hopeless. I don't feel hopeless though, watching the two of them sit beside each other as the train zips forward, thrusting a middle-aged man forward and almost off his feet. His hands find the yellow handle on the back of a chair and he adjusts himself. Glances around. Making sure no one particularly noticed, or is stifling some laughter. I noticed—it's a strange sense of *deja-vu*, but maybe because everyone stumbles aboard a train at least once. I remember the sensation.

I remember so much. Falling in love with him, because we were two teenagers and we thought it almost impossible for gay kids to find love without all the heartbreak. We didn't want the heartbreak. Some mornings we traded secrets like they weren't our scars. Travelling into university became a ritual for us because it meant spending more time together, even if one of us didn't have class for a couple more hours before the other said a soft goodbye and entered the classroom. Classroom, lecture hall, study session. I don't remember the classes, but I remember the text messages from him during them. Vibrated hellos.

If, for a second, one of them noticed me off in the distance, trying to blend in with the scenery, they'd realise. I remember so much. How I once looked at him, and how it almost comes back now, even though he must be something like six years younger here. Staring into the eyes of the boy with platypus-brown hair. I started describing it like that when I grew out of calling it just *brown*. There were layers, and we were at the zoo one day trying to find the platypus and he leaned over to me and said I reminded him a little bit of a platypus. And I said, why, because I'm elusive? We laughed. No, he said, and paused, staring into my eyes. No, he said, you're different, when the rest of the world presents all the same. Or similar. You know, because platypuses lay eggs instead of just live young.

Does that make you an echidna then? And we giggled, like teenagers, and we kissed.

I don't like being able to remember things like that.

When we were able to be young.

It's not possible for me to follow them off this train, when I know their platform is two stops away. It was a good relationship we had, I think, trying to get distracted again by the novel. A good relationship gone to waste. I guess he stopped loving me sometime after all these good, great, wonderful times. Now remnants of memory, not experiences being lived.

The train lulls at their station, or I suppose ours. They hold hands at the door as it slides open, the cool wind rushing forward towards them. I have to go back now. They won't have noticed me, the sad, lonely figure in the corner, rewinding instead of reading. They won't have cared.

When we broke up, I didn't understand why.

Why when we have everything to remember, like these moments? When our love wasn't in tatters on the floor of the train with the rolling Coke can and the empty tissue box for some reason.

I shouldn't need a reason.

We just should, he'd said, pulling down his sunglasses.

THE LITTLE MERMAID

My memory of my childhood is rather skewed towards “I don’t remember what happened”, but I like to believe I’ve loved this film since I was a little kid. I’ve got vivid memories of swimming in the pool at the house I spent a lot of my life in, pretending I was a mermaid. It was usually something like that—you pretended to be a mermaid, kicking your legs like they were a tail, or you were a dolphin, making god-awful clicking noises. I like to hope I didn’t make those noises all that loudly.

The Little Mermaid is an adaptation of a Hans Christian Anderson tale about a mermaid who dreams of walking on land and being hopelessly in love with the man of her dreams. When they were animating the movie, they sure did make Prince Eric dreamy. The Disney film follows Ariel, who makes a bargain with Ursula the Sea Witch to gain legs and the ability to walk, but she must sacrifice her ability to speak. There have been a lot of readings of the original text as a sort of queer longing—hiding the subtext of homosexuality underneath the story of a young mermaid desperate to exist in a different space, but helpless to the oppressive culture that doesn’t believe she should succeed in being herself. The original ending is devastatingly morose—the little mermaid turns into seafoam and basically dies from all the depression. Whenever I first saw Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, I doubt I was searching between the lines for this original context, but alas something within the animated film has always connected with me. I maintain that it is my favourite Disney animated movie, and Ariel is certainly my favourite of the princesses, although I’m in my twenties now so I’m too old to really have a favourite of the princesses. Nevertheless, my adoration for *The Little Mermaid* persists.

Jodie Benson voices Ariel, a head-in-the-clouds mermaid who collects all these little trinkets from the human world and is almost getting eaten by sharks frequently. Her father is King Triton, her aunt is the Sea Witch—no one is ever taking that truth from me—and Prince Eric is gorgeous and naturally steals her attention. We suspend belief and watch the tribulations of a redhead trying to steal a kiss from the prince without the ability to speak. She can sign her name but not write it down, okay, just overlook that so that a chorus of creatures can melodically sing “*Kiss the Girl*”, which is one hundred percent coming across as a gawdy screeching to Eric. Remember that underlying queerness I mentioned? Disney have never seen an iconic camp villain like Ursula since. Inspired by a drag queen, glammed up in makeup underwater, with the vision to transform herself into a woman named Vanessa. Ursula understandably is gifted with a riot of a villain’s song about how everyone else is desperate to have what she can offer them, and it’s not entirely villainous of her to suggest they pay up if they cannot afford it. For a villain, Ursula is on the more reasonable side—she isn’t jealous of pretty looks, or uncomfortable with being left out on an invite to a party. Sure, she was exiled, and harbours animosity towards the royal family, but when Ariel signs a contract with her, she’s upfront about the terms and conditions. Except the one where she’s allowed to borrow Ariel’s voice for herself and sabotage everything by looking gorgeous herself and doing the one thing Ariel desperately needs to do, especially in a musical: sing.

Maybe I don’t remember my childhood too much. But I do remember loving *The Little Mermaid* for years, and to an extent it was crucial in establishing my love for musicals. A redheaded mermaid admiring her trinkets, singing about wishing and hoping to be a *part of your world*. The whimsy of magic, and fish playing instruments, and Ursula the Sea Witch. Voiced by Pat Carroll so brilliantly.

You get to be a kid again. Kicking your feet.

“Poor Unfortunate Souls”

Those poor unfortunate souls // so sad, so true // they come flocking to my cauldron // crying “Spells, Ursula, please! // and I help them // yes I do.

There is something so spellbinding about a villain song. “*Poor Unfortunate Souls*” is boldly obsessed with itself—Ursula sings of the treachery, the debauchery, the villainy, of her underwater domain, flanked by her electric eel henchfish. She does a little potion-brewing, a little deal-persuading. Some may say she’s purely manipulating Ariel with her showoctopusship but in truth, Ursula spills the contract plain and simple. If you cannot afford the cost, swim home to Daddy.

The song was altered for the recent live action remake of *The Little Mermaid*, and foolishly so. An entire verse is removed—it makes several comments about men preferring their women to be silent, beautiful in body and face, and justifies that Ariel surrendering her voice is unlikely to sway Prince Eric from loving her. But here’s a morsel of truth: Ursula is a villain, completely. Her words are not comfortable gospel. She is cruel, bitter, and this verse is a glimpse into her powers of manipulation. When Ursula suggests, “*it’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man*” she is not representing a universal truth of women, she is merely nudging Ariel towards the greatest asset to her in this bargain. Ursula gets the voice. Unfortunately, there must be people who are uncomfortable with the idea of a female villain remaining anti-feminist, certainly in a Disney family film. The shift leans further from what Ursula gains and more towards what she can offer Ariel. She mentions the alternative: you ignore this wonderful contract and you go on home, back to your underwater castle and King Triton ruling over you. But I, Ursula the Sea Witch, wouldn’t get my happy customer.

That’s right! But you’ll have your man. Life’s full of tough choices, isn’t it? Oh! And there is one...more...thing! We haven’t discussed the subject of payment. You can’t get something for nothing, you know?

Ursula knows her own trickery. In pushing Ariel towards leg transplants, she can steal Ariel’s voice as payment, because what else does Ariel have to offer, a dinglehopper? Think of *Poor Unfortunate Souls* like going to the bank to ask for a loan: you need to sell a part of yourself to get what you want, because free money doesn’t come free. Human legs don’t grow on trees.

Ursula could choose to speak, to sing, like the branch manager of a national bank, but instead she seductively slithers her way into Ariel’s senses. Her sultry voice promises everything a mermaid girl could desire—it’s almost like Ursula has spies to follow Ariel around and report back. *I’m not asking much. Just a token, really, a trifle. You’ll never even miss it.* Ursula employs a certain kind of reverse-psychology to convince the little mermaid—Ariel must certainly be aware her voice is recognisably an asset to her, but what she is not so aware of is Eric’s specific attachment to the sound of her voice. The sea witch somehow just knows everything. She’s the cruel, calculating villain with the electric eel sidekicks—of course she’s omnipotent in the ocean.

“*Poor Unfortunate Souls*” is an opportunity for Ursula to underpin how advantageous this success could be for her. She details various other seafolk who have flocked to her with larger-than-life ambitions, who have been unsuccessful to meet her demands, and secretly lumps the naïve Ariel in with them. Ariel is a helpless, poor, unfortunate soul for even considering the contract—this is how Ursula sees it. From her advantage point, the daughter of the sea king is the one in dire need of rescuing. The Sea Witch brews her poison. And goes down in history as an iconic Disney villain.

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Hevie ducked her head to enter into the lower-ceilinged backroom of the shop. It had been constructed like this, according to the floorplan she'd been handed when she traded coin for keys. The roof slanted downward, and someone irresponsibly chose this corner for the square door. She sighed, making the required lowercase-r shape with her body. Shelves line the walls of this room. Mangled shelves, sometimes, pieces of wood hacked into their shape. Storage space. Hevie's back began to ache, until she could straighten up in the tallest corner of the room, leaning her spine against the point where two walls meet. She only came into the backroom for some toenail clippings.

The customer's voice filtered into the storage room through a vent near the ceiling. 'I'm a little impatient, you see.' It's high-pitched, but somewhat deceptive, like an undercover fae. The customer had no wings, no visible sprinkling of pixie dust. No proper faerie would be seeking out her expertise, she pondered, accidentally nudging one of the glass vials too far to the left. A close call, nearing the edge of the shelf. Hevie slid it back in place. The customer must have known there was a clear shot for hearing, or else thinks the witch had cast some listening-in spell on the store to attempt to catch any potential thievery. Little kids, they like snatching her wares on the front tables. 'It has to be the exact specifications or the amulet will be blemished, you understand.'

Hevie grasped a wooden container, a souvenir from her travels to Ikvain. A peddler had lured her attention with a strange birthmark upon their upper lip, yet she remained hovering around their wares for the craftsmanship. The wooden box, unremarkable except for the clasp, now held an assortment of unsorted toenails. She knew the large majority were goblin toenails, at least. The customer—a potential reject of the fae community—needed three of those. A deal would be struck; Hevie would not be left disadvantaged in the trade. Goblins need their toenails trimmed regularly, but frequently they go without breakfast, and a gnawed toenail tastes better than a mossy rock.

She lingered a moment with the box pressed against her chest. The strategy was split in half. For one, she had to compose herself to be convincing that any selection would prove successful in magicking the amulet, and two, she had to ready herself to crouch down again. The storage room space truly was awfully uncomfortable to access.

'I found it, I found it,' she proclaimed, straightening herself out as she approached the customer once more. In a new light, a confusing aura became suddenly clearer. The use of an amulet suggested attracted attention, or future combat. A desire to be protected. Hevie knew the feeling—a silver chain hung around her own neck, the weight of the upended triangle occasionally hitting her breast. It had initially been a gift, from a man she had once fallen in love with. Now she assumed neither of them gave much thought for the other, although, of course, he was deceased. Hevie set the wooden container down upon the glass-case bench, fiddling again with the clasp. A work of beauty, the clasp. Intelligently scorched into the emblem of a sea-lion. She remembered the one and only time she had spied one of the creatures, baking on an elongated stone on one of her jaunts down to the seaside. The sea-lion hardly moved. It widened its jaw, made a foreign sort of sound, and seemed remarkable to Hevie. The clasp hadn't seemed like destiny, or fate, or even some astrological sign of relevance. The peddler, too, must have seen the beauty in that sea-lion, although it being the same one seemed near-impossible for an ordinary like him. Unless the birthmark meant something like she believed it to.

The customer slipped on a pair of gloves and sorted through the goblin toenails. Hevie thought it certain at least an assortment were gnome toenails, or otherwise old-man toenails collected from beggars in crumbling town squares. She always forgot to mark things down. They would be pocketed into a purple satin bag, closed with drawstrings. Toenails all had similar qualities and uses.

‘These are great quality,’ the fae said, ‘or I assume so, Never observed a goblin’s foot myself, or maybe I wouldn’t be outsourcing like this.’ There was a little bit of hesitance to the way she spoke, and it amused Hevie. Witchcraft and sorcery were all a different magic to the sprinkling of pixie dust. Nevertheless, this was not the first fairy to wander into her boutique at the end of a row of similar-ware stores. Her neighbour offered seer insight and a certain type of porridge that would reveal a truth of your future if you left only a thin layer of it at the bottom of your bowl. They were good friends, Hevie and Carakse. ‘I will pay you as required for these three,’ the customer spoke once more, removing three toenails from the wooden container and placing them down on the opaque plastic sheet Hevie had previously stretched across the countertop. It was bad for the environment. But all her business was.

The presumed undercover-fae left the store pleased and content, brushing a painted hand against the frame of the door as she went. It would stink of spring blossoms in an hour, Hevie thought, collapsing down into the spiral-framed chair she had installed in the corner of the front-room. She had a good vantage point there, in case someone came knocking, or soliciting, but otherwise it offered solace from being immediately noticed. This was good comfort.

Bang, bang, bang. It thrust her off the stool, it shook the cabinet beside the door, the one which contained a selection of empty vials. A do-it-yourself suggestion. Was she really offering to the world an opportunity to bring more witches into the overgrown coven? Hevie paced forward as the door opened, swinging on rusty hinges. This new arrival entered first with their disgust, a soft grunting sound which began in their feet and coursed through their afflicted bones. She recognised him.

‘You sold me a bogus spell,’ he grunted out, shutting the door behind him. It was Ingrod, a local barkeep a head taller than Hevie was. His anger could be stomach—he wasn’t a brick wall of muscle; he was merely a tall man whose expressions felt somewhat insulting. Hevie sifted through her brain, briskly, to find what she might have sold him recently, how it might have backfired. ‘I could get your licence revoked.’

It was all chatter, she thought. ‘I’m the witch here,’ she said casually, trying to ease him down. ‘And that could be all nonsense too.’

Hevie sighed, half-preoccupied. ‘I can refund you.’

Ingrod looked insulted, babied. A refund would mean he would be out of her hair, metaphorically and a tad bit literally, but maybe the spell had been unsuccessful AND ruined something in the process. Flattened his house, killed somebody with a bolt of unseasoned magic.

‘I don’t want a refund,’ he said, rooting around in his trouser pocket. ‘When I came to you, this was supposed to be the thing that revitalised me relationship with me son.’ Out of the pocket came a glass vial dirtied by its long-gone contents. Smearings of dirt and mud, that would be what you assumed from the offset. Hevie nudged her head towards it, a silent question of permission, before she took it from his larger-than-hers hands.

Something clicked. Ingrod, his son, the spell which required fingers to be smeared with dried-out swallow guts. Maybe she’d been unable to see any swallows this time of year, or to catch one of them. Flighty birds. She was conscious about using her magic all the time to procure ingredients. It felt somewhat boring to her. Then again. Ingrod snarled at her patient twirling of the glass vial. Hevie was buying herself time, that much was obvious.

‘Your son, he still despises you?’

Ingrod chuckled deeply. ‘He’s not kissing my feet, witch.’

‘It was forewarned not every spell was immediate,’ she said, with a smirk.

‘You said this would change, er, the atmosphere between us. “Bring in some light”, you said.’ Ingrod looked paler, reciting the words spoken by a witch of her enchantments. She simply set the vial down on the counter, blank of expression.

‘Never immediately fix the bond, yes.’ Magic is always fickle, she remembered. Something her mother would have spoken to her—that was the compatibility of learning from family, the passing down of traditions. Although, her own mother would not have sold such unclear instructions. She would have said, *no, I cannot mend the uneven earth between a father and his son. Are there no women in your lives to tell you to speak like proper gentlemen to one another?* It all made Hevie smile. Remembering old times.

Ingrod took the vial once more and shoved it deeper into the pocket he had retrieved it from. ‘The inn is a drab tunnel of a place, witch. You have been there once or twice, perhaps spelled the drunken fools who cannot notice your shiftiness in their own bloodstreams.’ He sighed, as if attempting to find a stool to sit upon using only peripheries. ‘If I could be any more scornful than this, I’d ask you to show me the hands now, make sure you aren’t magicking me into finding me restraint again.’ Ingrod made a solitary glance behind the counter, but all else was limp.

Hevie ought to be careful. Her mother would scold her from the depths if she made an enemy out of the sort of man who, when soothed, would become a frequent client to the store. One success would lead to another, or she would continue to be paid handsomely enough at least. Barkeeps don’t make a fortune refilling drunkard’s mugs.

‘Something stronger then...’ she mused; a thought spoken out loud. It kept Ingrod intrigued, so therefore it worked wonders. Perhaps. Hevie questioned herself. There must be something to keep him preoccupied, without having to bend down into the storage room again. A brain collecting different spheres. This won’t do. That’s a bore. Ingrod, well, he simply wanted more. She pursed her lips. He’d said something, sarcastically, about the kissing of feet. ‘Free of charge, Ingrod, I insist.’

She was on her hands and knees crawling around the storage room, attempting to snatch at a grasshopper that had escaped from captivity, her captivity, when the door was wildly flung open once more. She’d seen to Ingrod’s dilemma yesterday noon—it only seemed right for him to have returned with the flames of discontent now.

‘Get out here, witch,’ he snapped, although she heard multiple pairs of feet, not merely his own. Hevie stretched her shoulders, almost banging into the ceiling, and pounced on the grasshopper. It calmed itself down in her hands, chirping apologetically. *That’s right*, she whispered inaudibly.

Hevie approached the men—Ingrod, a shorter male she believed to be his son, and the town physician, an elderly man without any hair on his head. Immediately she felt constricted into a new shape. She had to be poised, but welcoming. Something like this required a wicker basket lined with straw and a small selection of her goods, her wares, things she could part with as gifts. The grasshopper in a rusted metal cage, perhaps.

‘Hello, gentleman,’ she uttered, hesitant to fold her arms against her chest.

Ingrod spoke first, narrowing his eyes. ‘My fucking son woke me up by jizzing on me chest.’ Oh how serious you are, father, she thought, holding in her laughter.

‘He’s a young man finding out who he wants to be, and you were stifling him with talk of the rigidity of his future. You wanted your son to be more respectful, have a stronger connection to his father.’ Hevie had to pause to restrain herself from saying the wrong thing, certainly in front of the physician and an innocent-looking son of Ingrod. ‘I don’t claim to understand men, Ingrod.’

‘The doctor thinks he became unwound by your dark magic,’ he spoke, casting a grey look at the boy standing beside him. A man of about twenty years, really. The physician merely frowned.

In the store the afternoon prior, Ingrod had agreed—something stronger ought to be swifter. She kept various elixirs in a locked stone chest behind a loose panel in one of the shelving units in the main room. She figured people would root around at the obvious first, then see the conveniently-placed rear door and assume the valuables were in there. Not behind a stack of old tomes, behind a wooden plank with screws she could undo with a flick of her wrist. In the chest, Hevie removed the label of the potion she only considered ‘valuable’ because it had been given to her by a dear friend, now deceased. Burnt to a crisp by a dragon. It was a crude ‘love’ potion that was oftentimes used when two black bears were unhurried towards mating with one another. All hormones, no romance. Assumedly, Ingrod did not want a son who actually kissed him.

‘How does the good doctor propose to cure him?’ She was having fun.

The physician attempted to speak, getting out an “I—” before Ingrod cut him short. ‘Why don’t you just reverse it all then? Then I have you driven out of town for these affairs you are meddling in.’

Perhaps her idea of a town prank had gone awry. Hevie clenched her hand into a fist, then unclenched it, all behind the sight of the three men before her. Ingrod’s son had barely moved, his attention solely on his father. ‘It will wear off,’ she said at last, with a sigh. The bears usually fucked in the woods, the female impregnated, and by morning they were distracted by the scents of their surroundings, not each other. A little waft of salmon stench. Hevie assumed Ingrod had slipped the elixir into supper, and it was at least lucky his son had not consumed a complete dosage.

‘It will wean,’ she repeated, plastering a concerned expression on her face.

‘Ye shall hope so, witch,’ Ingrod said.

The son, who had yet to be introduced, and the physician, both smiled in agreeance. Although who they agreed with completely it was hard to tell.

‘Keep your malicious tricks to yourself from now on,’ the physician finally said. He stood the furthest away from Hevie, and his voice travelled across the room much quieter and more cautious than that of Ingrod’s. ‘You put young Liens in grave danger.’ But nobody in the store seemed to be standing in any sort of harm’s way, except perhaps the grasshopper she had quickly locked away before smoothening things out with her customers.

Liens had nothing to offer, so he was shuffled out with the physician. Ingrod and Hevie stood alone, the morning sunlight coming in through the windowpanes in the door. ‘You listen here, witch,’ he said, pointing a finger at her. It was almost comical. ‘You got your laugh, you got your hooks into me and me family, but never you forget...’ His voice trailed off. He had not been watching where her hands were. A slight wave without him noticing and he couldn’t speak for a few seconds, enough to stop the regrettable threat.

‘Talk to your affable son, Ingrod,’ she said, swinging the door open, also with magic. ‘No one ever comes to me asking for assistance in taking down an entire army or slaying a dragon with enchanted arrows.’ Hevie waved him out of her store. There was an expression on Ingrod’s face she enjoyed getting the opportunity to witness. He was dumbfounded. Or maybe it was more complicated than that. Here she was so concerned somebody would hex her.

The door swung back towards closed but seemed to reject sliding against the frame where it normally would. *The fairy*, she thought, at once noticing the pink tinge of the wood.

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET

Times is hard. You're just out of prison for doing no wrong, except being married to a woman, and the landlady you rent an upstairs room from is pestering you about getting married and not wasting a good human corpse. It's London in the 1800s and Sweeney Todd realises he can have his revenge on the man who unjustly imprisoned him, the dishonourable Judge Turpin. Mrs Lovett, she needs business—meat is expensive, and some woman down the way is *poppin' pussies into pies*, so maybe the pair can work together to get what they deserved. Murder, business revenue, it's all the same beast. Throw in the fact Judge Turpin 'adopted' Sweeney's daughter Johanna, and Mrs Lovett freshly hired a small child named Tobias Ragg to sling pies for her—amid the business boom—and that's our show.

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street is a Stephen Sondheim musical, with a book by Hugh Wheeler, based on a play, and a penny dreadful character, and a history of men seeking revenge by murdering other men, really. There was a film adaptation directed by Tim Burton but it pales in comparison to the proshot filmed in 1982, featuring the likes of Angela Lansbury as Mrs Lovett and George Hearn as Sweeney Todd. There's something so enduring about Angela Lansbury's performance as Mrs Lovett—the character is lovesick, skittish, ambitious, and animated, and Lansbury strikes gold in her balance of nuance and comedy. Mrs Lovett's introduction is a self-deprecating cheer about how she cannot afford quality ingredients anymore. She's somehow proud, a little bit—if you can claim a title, like being the home to The Worst Pies in London, you're at least attracting some attention. It's a fitting welcome to her character: Mrs Lovett is assuredly overconfident, scrapping around for the positives in life, all the while keeping secrets of her own. Haven't you ever hidden something from a man you're deeply in love with?

Sondheim's score and lyrics are divine. "*The Worst Pies in London*" feels like a panicked advertisement for a terrible, collapsing business. "*My Friends*" has Sweeney getting horny over his silver shavers. It's a man reunited with his utensils after a long time away and you'd almost think he loved them more than he did his daughter. "*A Little Priest*" is an insane piece of wordplay about baking various occupations into pies. "*By the Sea*" lets a woman propose marriage, the seaside vows and the occasional murder of a guest. Mrs Lovett squawks like a seagull and imagines this wonderful life on a beach in England, which doesn't completely sound appealing, when half of their beaches are just rocks and pebbles. Maybe she's dreaming of 1800s Australia. "*Not While I'm Around*" gets intruded upon by a kid realising his previous employer definitely got murdered, but otherwise it's a gorgeous song about protecting each other in the dark gloomy world. The original cast recording has a thirteen-minute song entitled "*Final Sequence*" which feels at once a fitting closure to the musical, and also an insane anxiety-inducing dream with high-pitched whistles that startle you if you are not paying close enough attention. *Sweeney Todd* is rich in reprises, callbacks, and repeated lines—Sondheim plays on the cold brutality of revenge, and lust, and murder. Beautiful murder. The mind can be distracted by the tunnel-vision of wanting your vengeance, or your newfound happiness, albeit if that happiness comes with the caveat of *poppin' human meat into pies*.

Horror musicals are chaotic—some people have a skewed vision of musicals as overjoyous, bright and colourful, but *Sweeney Todd* challenges this preconception. It is bloody, vicious, sombre, and forces you to witness the hazards of clinging desperately to the idea of getting everything you think you deserve. If musicals were only supposed to be cheery, we'd be stripped of Angela Lansbury exclaiming, 'Ah! A customer!' We'd be stripped of '*no, you see the trouble with poet, is how do you know it's deceased?*'

“A Little Priest”

Sometimes “*A Little Priest*” is called the comedic relief in an otherwise dark, morbid musical about murdering men who come to a barbershop for a shave, all in the pursuit of vengeance. Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd stare at a bloodied corpse and the pie-maker suggests a stroke of genius, *well, we could always do something useful with the body*. What follows is a playful spot of banter about what occupations in town could prove to be delicious stewed up and served beneath pastry.

It's priest // have a little priest

Is it really good?

Sir, it's too good, at least // then again, they don't commit sins of the flesh // so it's pretty fresh

The ultimate duet—you and the man from upstairs sing about cannibalising for a profit. There's something so devious in loving a song like this. You've got no premonitions towards licking your lips at the mention of imbibing a morsel of human flesh, and yet it's the gruesome silliness that draws you closer. Sondheim's lyricism balances the eerie with the humorous.

Now this might be a bit stringy, but then, of course, it's fiddle player

No, no, this isn't fiddle player // it's piccolo player

How can you tell?

It's piping hot

Then blow on it first!

Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd are unhinged serial killers, but prior to *A Little Priest*, they are merely stewing in their emotions. When Sweeney murders Pirelli—a fellow barber who recognises Todd as his former identity, Benjamin Barker—he gets a taste for how he can avenge his imprisonment, the presumed death of his wife, and his hatred for Judge Turpin. Mrs Lovett may not necessarily get her hands bloodied in the killing, but she is his loyal accomplice, disposing of the bodies with her lightbulb idea. We bake them into pies. See, Mrs Mooney does it with pussycats, so why can't they use the men no one will notice have gone missing? There are airholes to the idea—how on earth are they selecting their victims without so much as a single shave before Sweeney Todd slits their throats? But you ignore it: this is nineteenth century London, where people go missing all the time. Appointments are made without a calendar pinned to the refrigerator. The price of meat what it is...isn't this just the sanest choice for success?

There's something to be said about our collective morbid curiosity—a song about baking different types of men, the different roles they can have in society, into pies shouldn't be so grandly charming and playful. With “*A Little Priest*”, you forgive the horrid deed of murder, for you have no real connection to any of the nameless, generalised professions Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd dream of butchering and poppin' into pies. Somehow, it could be even more perverse. In the second season of *Schmigadoon!*, there is a spoofed version of the song entitled “*Good Enough to Eat*”, in which the characters of Miss Codwell and Dooley Blight muse about skirting 'round the costs of meat by shifting their gaze to the orphans in Miss Codwell's orphanage. It is high-camp, endlessly silly, and horrible to think about in context. These two characters, on the verge of sacrificing orphans for business. Instead of rhyming professions to their taste—*Potter? Hotter. Butler? Subtler*—they rhyme the children's names with a different cut or preparation of meat.

Have you any mutton? // That would be Sutton // Perhaps some foie gras // Voila, c'est Francois

“*A Little Priest*” is just endlessly charming, despite the fact it discusses so plainly its cruel intentions. As someone in the audience, you feel a sense of unease within yourself—they're asking you to gaily enjoy this tune about cannibalism, but underneath the surface you can smell the danger of giving into bloodlust. Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd appear almost too arrogant with this decision.

• • •

‘What do you mean, you just left it there?’

Higgins stood there slack-jawed, to convey his full expression— something like *well, what did you think I was supposed to do with it?* His associate—for now the title would have to stick—craned her neck backwards, shutting him out of sight completely. They’d killed together. Come upon a dark-haired man in the graffitied tunnel underneath the bridge and stabbed him a handful of times. It was late at night, and Garter figured it was probably long since past his bedtime. She was understandably red with rage.

‘I disposed of the knife,’ she said, waving a hand around in his face to show him it was empty. ‘All you needed to do was move the body out of the path, into the tall grass, and make sure he was dead, too.’ Garter was paying more attention to her associate now. There was a red stain on the corner of his shirt, like he had used it to clean something up. ‘Did you wipe his fucking mouth?’

Higgins noticed the spot too and ashamedly tucked it into his trousers. His face said *I don’t know what you’re talking about* and he was likely relieved she’d shifted the attention away from the dead body. Briefly.

‘It’s too late now,’ she registered with a sigh. Garter busied herself in the makeshift apartment. It was a warehouse converted down into several living spaces, and she’d acquired this one-bedroom unit a few months prior. It was lamp-lit, with only two windows—the smaller in the bathroom, the larger in the living room, above the couch. Her shoes clicked on the floor of the apartment, as if she were stepping through puddles of water. ‘Someone’s gonna find the body in a few hours now, maybe less. Some junkie looking to make drugs out of dandelion weeds or something, and there’s the body right out in the open.’ She turned away from Higgins to murmur out a ‘*dumbass*’ on the end of it.

At this point, it was 2:05am and Higgins moved to sit on a plastic chair in the kitchen. Shirt coming loose from being tucked in, he took out his mobile phone and started to text someone a response. Garter stood by the fridge, watching him like a hawk. ‘Who are you talking to?’ She said, taking a step forward. Her eyes were narrowed.

‘Is it the love of your life? Or a wound?’ The voice startled them—as did the body materialising from behind the curtain in the living room. Garter took in their visitor. He was of average height and build, although somewhat chubbier than the two of them. Dark-haired. He wore an overcoat of deep red, almost the colour of blood, which Garter and Higgins were quite recently familiar.

Instinctively, she fumbled around for something on the kitchen counter to wield as a weapon, and her hand found the handle of a frying pan. Garter gripped the frying pan and lunged it forward. ‘Who are you?’ She said, trying to appear threatening. The man chuckled—his laugh sounded almost symphonic. He brushed the curtain off his leg and inched forward.

‘A heart that could not be broken,’ the poet said.

Higgins slid out of his seat and leapt behind Garter. Her expression was apparent, she was wordlessly calling him an idiot once more. It complicated her face, trying to be distracted by Higgins’ foolishness and remain focused and guarded, on attack, towards the stranger who must have broken the window without making a noise. Maybe he’d been there for hours, maybe he’d stalked them for weeks.

But he looked so familiar.

The man they’d killed, he wore a similar costume, which had made him blend in with the darkness of the night too. He would’ve been hidden amongst the grass. Garter came to the realisation quick. ‘You’re not dead,’ she said, taking a step forward with the frying pan poised out. She could hear the tap-tapping of her shoes against the tile. ‘You’re not dead,’ she repeated. The poet grinned.

Garter jerked herself forward as Higgins' hands moved towards her shoulder—he was acting like a terrified little child. This was a grown man of twenty-three, rocked by one murder and one resurrection. She swung the frying pan as a warning.

'A fellow once warned me, do not travel too far in the darkness,' the stranger said, replacing the grin once he finished speaking. It was an eerie smile. Like the curve of a crescent moon. The living room could use some moonlight. The figure could hide half his face in the darkness. With a flick of her wrist, Garter gestured for Higgins to move away from her, or more accurately, towards the front door of the apartment. He scurried to avoid getting hit, really.

'I am armed,' Garter said, swinging the frying pan again. Fluid movements. It wasn't her first choice of weapon, but she'd tossed the knife after scrubbing it off in a pond. No, she didn't toss the knife in the pond, talking aloud in whispers about some semblance of a plot in which two and two could be put together. In a panic, she'd thought the blood might've lingered in the water. She had said this aloud, and the miniature fish swimming round in the pond heard her. No, the knife she tossed over a bridge into the river. It had been wrapped in newspaper.

A sharp bang. Garter almost dropped the frying pan. The poet hadn't moved.

'Sorry,' Higgins said, when she glanced over at him frozen in fear clutching to the lamp he'd almost knocked over. They communicated with their eyes. It was somewhat frantic, her head pivoting from idiotic Higgins to the mystery guest who strangely seemed to be getting further away from them. Garter shook off her irritation and reached out behind her for Higgins' sweaty hand. It was a bit of a stumble, trying to avoid colliding with the lamp post herself, but she found his fingers and dragged him in the direction of the bedroom. Her attention never left the eerie presence of the poet. Their murder victim. Hurriedly, Garter shoved her associate into the bedroom and shut the both of them inside. She breathed out a sigh of relief. Somehow the frying pan wasn't rattling in her hand. Garter rested her head on the wood of the door, taking deep, audible breaths. She didn't care what Higgins was doing. He was rubbing his head as if he'd bumped it and hard on the wall. 'There better not be an egg-shaped lump there tomorrow,' he muttered out, and she ignored him some more.

The bedroom was a standard affair—a double bed, unmade, with a set of mismatched end tables on either side. A chest of drawers, with one drawer still half-open. Wall sconces that looked like snowcones. 'Hiding is but closing yourself off to sorrow.' Garter swung the frying pan behind her without looking.

'Get out of here,' she shouted, her voice cracking. 'Be happy you've got accidental freedom.'

The poet was lingering in the middle of the bedroom with his hands behind his back. Higgins was on his knees, unsteady, staring over at the open door the opposite end of the room. *The bathroom*. There were two doors in the bathroom—one that led from the bedroom, and one in from the living room. It was the only bathroom in the apartment, so functionality must have been important. Now it merely left Garter shaken. *So much for a good plan*. She inched around to face their intruder. The frying pan felt heavier.

'Freedom?' He cocked his head. 'Freedom is never accidental.'

Garter wanted to strike him again, and again, and again.

Higgins wasn't moving from his now comfortable, but defenceless, spot on the ground. He'd adjusted his position, off the weight buckling down on his knees. There was nothing within reach for him. He could crawl hastily to the bedside table and then what? Attempt to hoist it over his shoulders, on the ground, and use it then as a melee weapon? Garter didn't need to waste another thought on him. She could sacrifice her accomplice. Then she wouldn't need to worry about him ever explaining to anyone why the apartment was left in complete disorder.

Garter took a solitary step forward, with the frying pan raised. 'Round two,' she said, her motion steady and alert.

She swung wide, but the stranger had been anticipating her movements and ducked out of the way. Noticeably, she'd been practicing the beginning motion without realising he could see her hands. No bother. Garter took an inch of a step forward and swung the frying pan again, but again he saw her coming. He had no weapons of his own. There was something annoying about the loose smile on his face and his sly ability to know her rhythms. Fake-outs didn't work. She pretended to swing, then followed through when she thought the poet blinked: another miss. She aimed for his ribs and heard a piercing scream. This was it. She'd collided. But the man didn't clutch to his flesh or recoil in agony. At least he didn't laugh. The frying pan had drifted through his torso without fuss or worry.

Garter froze. 'We – we did get you –' she said, taking a cautious step backwards. Higgins stumbled to his feet, his jaw slack. The poet passed his right arm through his body.

'Death came for me,' he whispered, his words floating out of his mouth like fog.

Garter pelted the frying pan at his ethereal form and jumped when it clanged down on the bedroom floor. A screech of a sound. She flicked her hand around in Higgins' direction, hoping he would understand some sort of message. They had murdered this man. But now he was haunting them.

'Missed me,' he said with a wink.

Garter bolted for the bathroom, swiping the frying pan awkwardly as she went. Her mind wasn't on Higgins, or even what the ghostly stranger could potentially do to her. She needed to plot some sort of an escape, or exorcism, to be free of this evening. The idea came to her in a flash, like faulty fireworks. Maybe if she returned to his body, something...and then it all trailed off. She could do what exactly? Stab him a couple more times with a different murder weapon? Garter leant back against the flimsy glass door of the shower—it swung inwards, and she caught herself before she fell against the tiles. Higgins voice rose out of the bedroom.

'Hey,' he shouted, although it came out like an exasperated whimper. 'You can't leave me alone with 'im.' There was a soft knocking on the floor, hesitant movements. She knew that wasn't the poet. She realised locking herself in the bathroom achieved almost nothing either. *Move*, she urged herself. Back into the main room. Garter walked like a slow spinning top, aiming the frying pan in every direction. Useless, really. It wasn't a proper weapon against a spirit. She needed, uh...sage, or something. Holy water. Whatever the priests and ghoul-banishers used to cleanse an apartment in a warehouse building. Garter didn't understand why he wasn't following her.

She listened out for Higgins.

A sharp creak flung itself out through the open bathroom door.

Heavy breathing.

Higgins almost crawled out of the bathroom, his mop of brown hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. Strands went this way and that, like a toddler's impression of a Picasso painting. Something black stained his left hand. Garter narrowed her eyes trying to understand it. Higgins had written something in Sharpie on his palm, but he was still too far away for it to be even close to legible.

Behind him came the ghost.

Suddenly the only thing coursing through Garter's mind was the notion that they hadn't even killed an ordinary man, but some spectre from—and she had to guess—the late 1800s? 1880s! He didn't look modern. His costume was plain and ordinary, except for the long, dishevelled coat. Garter only hallucinated a top hat or something grand like that. Maybe he needed a cane too, to completely sell the garment. She backed away from them both, thrusting out the frying pan.

'Leave me be,' she said, now afraid to go anywhere near the tunnel where her associate had merely left the body to rot. Maybe the stabbing had been a hallucination too.

Garter snapped herself out of it. No, she thought, I'm finally sober.

This job is *fucking* important to me.

Outside, the darkness crept into the living room of the small apartment.

No one stole her attention. She rummaged through drawers, in shoeboxes she'd refurbished into cases for her weaponry—she'd actually sort of cherished the blade she had to toss away, but it was foolish of her to use it for an actual murder, really. Garter flung open the refrigerator, looking for something acidic. Throw that in his ghostly eyes? She banged the frying pan down hard on the kitchen counter. 'You're stupiddddd!' She let out, ignoring Higgins as he stumbled to his feet, wiped his brow, and made a beeline for the front door. The handle shook violently with his force. Suddenly he had energy then. Used it only on his potential escape.

The stranger laughed and it sounded like music.

Poetry always has the potential to be beautiful.

'Oh daddy,' he murmured, scratching his head. 'You get a little lightheaded, when a blade penetrates your flesh.' He strummed his two longest fingers against the leg of his pants, trying to find a rhythm, a melody. 'All I think of in this moment is those poetic attempts, like riding a bicycle wearing five dozen helmets.' The poet drew back Garter's attention. She no longer held the frying pan in her grasp. '*Find your escape. Home is wherever there is a wine bottle of my blood in the refrigerator.*'

The fridge door swung open and unmistakably there it was, the tall, shapely glass bottle of blood Garter had collected from the corpse mere moments before she directed Higgins to drag it into a hidden pocket of grass away from unwanted attention. The blood was their evidence. Proof some hopeless stranger was murdered.

'Is that what you want...?' Garter whispered to herself, entranced in new thoughts.

The poet chuckled as Higgins slid down to the floor, drained of that newfound energy. He couldn't get the door to open. Garter had locked it with the key.

Garter lunged for the bottle of blood. She liked to concoct ideas of a higher-up, The Boss stylised with capital letters, uncorking it like wine and swilling it in a glass. *Mmm*, notes of plum and forest fruits and lyricism. A rich aftertaste of longing and regret. The bottle was cool to the touch. Half her mind thought about hurtling it in his direction instead of the frying pan again. Nothing would happen, and the apartment would smell like blood for weeks. It would ruin the resell value, because she no longer intended on staying here longer than she needed to.

Bad fucking vibes.

With the bottle in hand, Garter faced the ghostly poet. With both hands on the bottle, she expunged herself of all excess weight and emotion. It felt good, actually—she felt maybe a little too self-confident, but hey, there was a ghost illuminated by the moon hovering right in front of her.

Higgins was covering his eyes with his hands.

Garter didn't want to give the intruder his blood back.

The poet eased forward. 'You traded the wrong soul for victory,' he said.

She didn't get it.

She didn't get any of this. Ghosts don't exist. That's what she always heard. Certainly from her grandparents, two old, stuffy English folks who didn't believe a place could be haunted. Ghosts do not exist. *You killed him*, she thought to herself, her hands going a tad numb from the cool of the glass bottle. It had barely been in the fridge, surely. She was shivering, just a little, in an apartment with no open windows and terrible air-conditioning that rarely worked. Ghosts do not exist.

The poet went nowhere.

'Now, put down my blood and grab the frying pan again. Go on,' the intruder urged. Garter almost dropped the wine bottle, her fingers slipping. Ghosts do not exist. She set the bottle down on the kitchen bench and once more held the frying hand with a firm grip.

'And correct a wrong.'

Garter spun towards Higgins.

THE LAST FIVE YEARS

A musical about the beginning, the middle, and the end of a relationship, and a marriage. Whenever I talk about *The Last Five Years*, I always have to mention its slightly-unusual timeline. Everything from Jamie's perspective plays out in chronological order, but everything from Cathy's plays out backwards, opening the musical on a sombre, exhausting note as she boxes up the last of her things and leaves her marriage to Jamie behind. *The Last Five Years* is a musical by Jason Robert Brown—it's largely well-established that he was inspired to write the musical based on the collapse of his own marriage. The interesting thing is that he never paints Jamie, who would be based on himself, to be the perfect, do-no-wrong victim in the relationship. Both Jamie and Cathy make mistakes, poor decisions, and play their own role in the destruction of their relationship. It's, are you team Jamie or team Cathy, but you can without question argue that attempting to narrow them into those boxes misunderstands the complexity of their relationship. Sometimes people aren't meant to stay together.

Understandably, it's no spoiler to talk about *the ending*. You immediately see Cathy's perspective—she is heartbroken, crying by herself, singing a song entitled *Still Hurting*. It is abundantly clear she aches over the divorce but acknowledges the pain has persisted for a while now. Jamie didn't decide in the middle of the night to hurt her. Our introduction to him is through her lens: Cathy sees her now-ex-husband as the man who left. *Jamie's decided it's time to move on. Jamie has new dreams he's building upon. And I'm still hurting.* She refers to him only by his name, as if both watching him like a narrator, no more an exact part of his life, and also addressing him too. It's a cold opening to a musical. Without any of the context, we see this uncomfortable picture of a woman facing the realities of her love life. Over the course of the remainder of the musical, we see her perspective become more and more hopeful, and in due time, we understand Jamie's exact perspective in the moments that lead to *Still Hurting*.

One of the lyrics I will always randomly sing is from the midpoint of *The Last Five Years*, in a song called "*The Next Ten Minutes*". It's the point where the two timelines converge—Jamie and Cathy are getting married. It's a bittersweet moment. Prior to the song, you've spent half a musical either wallowing in Cathy's distrust of her husband, or comfortable in Jamie's blossoming love for Cathy and his career as an up-and-coming writer. The lyrics *I am not always on time, please don't expect that from me* feel like the beginning of Cathy's vows in the wedding ceremony. I don't relate to the exact sentiment—I'm always early to everything, out of anxiety-induced fear of being late—but I linger around the second part. *Please don't expect that from me* connects with the part of myself that will always worry I am avoidable because of my flaws. A centrepiece of Cathy and Jamie's relationship is the expectations they place one another. Cathy wants desperately for a successful career and begins weighing Jamie down when he becomes more successful than she is. She is jealous, she fears lagging behind. Jamie has a string of affairs when he fears Cathy has become *a wife*—a symbol of the perfect household figure, his forever woman, the nagging presence in the background. He is self-indulgent, lustful for every breath of life without her in it, certainly when it comes to bedding other women. Neither of them is perfect. Their wedding vows speak to their insecurities—she is often late, but he quips that he doesn't believe himself to be complete until he spends the rest of his life with her. A wedding cliché, really. Cathy vulnerably expresses her self-doubt, but Jamie is caught in a hopelessly-romantic tide pool. It's only fitting the remainder of the musical, through his perspective, sees Jamie come apart because of the restrictiveness of marriage. He sings a whole song about hiding the affairs he has with all the other women.

The Last Five Years is like peeling through the pages of a scrapbook after a breakup. It fucking hurts.

“See I’m Smiling”

I’ve joked this song would be brilliant on *RuPaul’s Drag Race* as a lip-sync song. Part depressing anthem about not wanting your marriage to fall apart in your birthday month, part angry soliloquy about how much your husband cheats on you, ‘*See I’m Smiling*’ is the third song in *The Last Five Years* where usually it would fall in at least the second act. Cathy is performing in a small community theatre production, trying to keep her acting career afloat, when Jamie flies all the way from New York to see her for basically half an hour. It’s her literal birthday and he’s about to jet back to the city to party with his publishing house and all the women he desperately craves romantic attention from. Cathy is justly pissed. The brilliance of Cathy’s perspective being in a reversed timeline means there are subtleties to their relationship portrayed within this song that become more noticeable as the musical progresses. Your context for their relationship prior to “*See I’m Smiling*” lies entirely in “*Still Hurting*” and “*Shiksa Goddess*”. The former a depressive expression of a shattered marriage; the latter a heartsong about what Cathy represents to Jamie—a non-Jewish woman, completely against type for the sort of girl his parents expect him to fall in love with and marry. In a sharp juxtaposition, Jamie no longer even bothers to make the time to spend an entire evening with his wife on her birthday.

He tells her he has to fly out that night, instead of in the morning, and she responds:

You know what makes me crazy? // I’m sorry, can I say this? // You know what makes me nuts? // The fact that we could be together // here together // sharing our night, spending our time // and you are gonna choose someone else to be with—no, you are // Yes, Jamie, that’s exactly what you’re doing // you could be here with me // or be there with them— // as usual guess which you pick.

The entire rest of *See I’m Smiling* is nasty, bitter, aggravated and tinged with the grief of Cathy’s emotions. It isn’t the first time Jamie has disappointed her, but this insight into their marriage comes on her *fucking birthday*, one day where she incorrectly assumes Jamie will shove aside everything to comfort her. We hear our first hint to Jamie’s infidelity—and *I know in your soul it must drive you crazy // that you won’t get to play with your little girlfriends*—and our ears prick up. *So she knows*, we think. The Cathy we recognise from “*Still Hurting*” makes more sense with new context. She could see the divorce coming, because she knew he was having affairs, the two were already having heated arguments by a river in Ohio, and both Cathy and Jamie expected *better* of one another. Or maybe they expected different.

I won’t deny Cathy takes the opportunity to deliver some blunders to Jamie. She calls him narcissistic for almost an entire verse, digging into his almost god-complex devotion to his writing.

Isn’t he wonderful, just twenty-eight! // The saviour of writing

You and you and nothing but you // miles and piles of you

It’s a nod to another moment in the musical later on, where an earlier-in-the-relationship version of Cathy sings about her devotion to him. This back-to-front reprise splays out in clear writing just how sharply her perspective of Jamie has changed. No longer is she claiming that “no substitution will do”—here she establishes that Jamie is so narrow-focused on his career as an author that he couldn’t even for one evening dismiss everything else to pretend their marriage isn’t flailing. In this moment, Cathy realises no amount of attempting to patch things up will force a change in how he now perceives her. He no longer sees the woman who represented an escape from out underneath his parents’ specific ideal for a wife.

I swear to God I’ll never understand // how you can stand there, straight and tall

And see I’m crying // and not do anything at all...

• • •

From above, we look like a work of art, a stylised painting. I lay motionless on one side of the bed, staring upwards at the ceiling. My left hand is outstretched towards his side of the bed—I'm holding his hand, although my grip is loose, comfortable. I don't squeeze as if to give him a show of moral support, that's not something I think he needs, or wants. Keep the balance. He is beside me, on his half of the bed. He's completely naked, a body I struggle to believe I can see like this. The creeping in of self-deprecation. After all, the image is not complete without a woman. She too is naked, perched above him, visibly putting in the most effort. Her ankles must be tired. He is fucking her, his eyes closed, his erect penis unseen, somewhere inside her body. In this portrait of domestic bliss, if you would believe it, her face remains unseen. It doesn't matter who she is. It matters that she keeps him happy.

I stand in line at a home and electronics store with the box weighing down my arms. I'd come in looking at DVDs, half thinking I could surprise him with a movie night, when I'd noticed the sale price of the VR headset. Something to entertain myself with, I thought, and I think. Ahead of me, a white-haired woman shakes off the idea of a digital receipt—*just print it out, I'll lose it otherwise*—and the employee doesn't react, at least not externally. No heavy sigh.

I fit the headset over my eyes and picture what this will be like. Me, fading into an oblivion of jumpy triangles and floating virtual hands, which I have to convince myself are my own, and him. Him having sex with the same woman, or someone new. Women who don't react negatively to my blanked-out presence. He must tell them, don't worry, my partner will lie there like a dormant volcano. *He won't touch himself*. I never think about whether they feel any sort of way about that.

Our relationship began two months or so ago when he flirted back with me at work. We usually spend a lot of time together, sometimes in complete silence. To be a grown man and have these feelings you could call a crush felt idiotic, and I'd largely buried everything by the time I assumed he was straight. But it was late, we were working overtime, and I become a more flirtatious sort of person after dark. The exhaustion, perhaps. He looked at me with an earnestness I'd not seen from him. Maybe some girl had given up on him. I was conjuring excuses. Maybe he was lonely, seeking something out, and any pass he made towards me could only cross a toll road so far. We flirted like teenagers, went on a 'first date' because I thought he was pulling on my leg, and he confessed he'd had feelings for me for a while. Confusing feelings, because he'd only started considering himself a bisexual six months ago. *Was I the first*, I asked, almost laughing it into his shoulder, because I found myself so stupid for putting it out there into the universe. No, of course I wasn't. He'd fucked a couple guys while he was on vacation. Went on a date with someone who took their shoes off at the restaurant table.

I just somehow managed to weasel myself into this.

He finds me with the VR headset over my eyes and laughs. I hear it first, an echo trying to pierce through the noise. Then, I feel his hand on my waist. I unhook myself and stare into his eyes, an exhilarating thing to be able to do. Just stare, if I want to, until he gets bored of it.

'Is this what we're trying?' He says, taking the headset in his hand. He flips it around like a child's plaything, looking at buttons and knobs and whatever he can find. *As long as you're comfortable*, he says, which is almost a mantra. Something we should have inscribed on the walls of my apartment.

I just need to be *comfortable*.

It was like writing him a checklist of what I wouldn't be able to offer him. The largest, in bold, of course, was sexual intercourse. I promised him a life of being blue-balled by my existence. A life, or however long he held romantic feelings for me. We found a compromise. He found it less complicated

to invite women around—foolishly I convinced myself a little bit that it was because I was the only man he needed. Non-sexually. One morning I was perched on the barstool in his apartment, eating a bowl of cereal, whatever he had in the pantry, and I felt his hand snake down my back. It had been a couple days since he had sex with anyone. There wasn't an uncomfortable promise that he only had sex with someone if I was there, present, lying on the mattress with or without a stomach-ache. But. He never confessed to having sex anywhere else but in one of the apartments.

His hand stopped above my butt and he moved to kiss my earlobe. Sometimes he told me he could go without sex, if we were passionate enough with one another. He would message me on nights we weren't seeing one another, he would message me with his cock in his hand, reminding me of the primary reason our relationship didn't disappoint him. Of course, I put those words into the space, the emptiness between *I'm masturbating now* and *baby*.

One kiss on my ear and we were stumbling backwards into the bedroom. I could still taste the milk swishing down my throat. Pieces of cereal wedged in my teeth. Sometimes I kissed him and thought it possible I could give him everything. The passionate sex. The complete attention. The moans and the screams. The two children. The we're-in-our-eighties fucking, only partially able to be any sort of athletic anymore. You can make up fantasies in your head, can't you? It's like dreaming to be a superhero when you're little. Where do the superpowers come from, thin air? Out of comfort, maybe.

There is a sense of comfort when I know he wants me. I'd be too sentimental to say it was love that held him there, cryogenically in place whenever a moment would normally graduate in its sexuality. I presented the entrée, proud of it but quivering at the knee, then I retreated with a VR headset set to *Lovely Walk in the Park* mode. There goes the tiniest of hummingbirds. A bee, a duckling, a world so devoid of other human beings you would think it too false.

Some research found me a counsellor who could guide *patients* towards certain new genetic surgeries. With a tick of approval from this man, your life could be improved, changed upon. For the better. First, of course, he liked to make conversation. Today is my second session. 'Sometimes,' he now suggests, drawing himself forward in the seat, 'I'd like to visit you at your home.' He explains he finds it important to understand a person's surroundings, with an assumption you spend a lot of time in the apartment or dwelling or shoebox that you spend your hard-earned money to live in. He says he cannot follow me around for everything, nor expect me to record exactly what I do. He talks about the surgery like it's a baby up for adoption. *The environment has to be right. Is your place child-proofed?*

I come home from the session and collapse onto the bed. The counsellor stared into my eyes at one point and asked, with sincerity, what I like most about watching porn. *And why can't you implement that?* He might have placed a hand on my knee if it was not breaking several codes in his contract of employment.

In bed, I stare at the ceiling and picture myself the next time 'we' have sex. My partner and I entirely naked, but I am ashamed of being there and being naked, purely a temptation for him. A woman replacing me all but in love, in adoration. Doubtful that he could adore me like this. The counsellor advised I retire the VR headset—technology is a distraction, like staring down at your phone when you have a burst of anxious energy you should be expelling by processing your thoughts and inhaling, exhaling, talking to a man who could be the love of your life. *Don't you want that?* I want to shake off the concept of needing to be fucked to be in love. I curl up underneath the covers and ignore the phone call from my partner. He'll want to arrange the next time.

The counsellor arrives at the apartment with a paper bag of takeout in his hands. I think it wrong for him to invite himself over **and** bring food, but he shrugs me off. 'You talked about liking burritos in our last session,' he says, setting the paper bag down on the kitchen bench. 'Do you live with your partner yet?' The way he speaks this question makes it seem judgemental. Our relationship is still

fresh, new, in its adjustment period. My partner has had sex with multiple different women, or I am having nightmares about that position I place myself in and I block out her face every time to avoid forcing some creativity in my slumber.

The counsellor notices one of my blank, emotionless stares and thinks it's because I don't commit to the proper intimacy couples should be sharing. He thinks the surgery would be beneficial, to open up, discard away, the stirred-around issues I am faced with when I lie naked with another man. I'm grateful he doesn't try to imply I'm actually a heterosexual man pretending to be queer, but his presence in my apartment feels like a complete intrusion. I become blank, emotionless, stuck staring at the square of carpet he places his foot upon when he adjusts in the chair. I become blank, emotionless, stuck staring at the glass I offered to him, which now contains only a quarter of the water I poured, and maybe some backwash.

I show him another picture of the man I'm falling in love with. I don't remember when I first met my partner. It would have been at work, the two of us sharing an off-hand greeting, probably just a hello. Maybe I was in a relationship when I met him, or else why wasn't the attraction there from the beginning? Maybe it was always underneath the surface. The counsellor pauses on the photograph, making his own off-hand comment: *this is a face you should feel comfortable being enveloped by*. As if my partner is supposed to suffocate me with his **sex**. His passion, the throbbing of his penis, the oozing white of his semen as he flicks the condom off and begs, no, demands me to swallow down what—for some woman elsewhere—would have been his children. *You made daddy feel good*. I feel myself gag and the counsellor switches his gaze. A librarian filled with the rage of loitering teenagers having loud conversations.

'Does he ask you why you can't find a partner who wants everything you do?'

I had a breakdown last night wanting to call and cancel this session, and every other.

'Neither of us wants to be with someone who is our exact match,' I say, and the counsellor looks concerned. Concerned like I misunderstand.

'Compromise?' This time I do misunderstand. This time I stare back at him, waiting for an involuntary hand to find the glass on the table and shatter it against his head. Or the more normal of responses. To cry. To stutter through my words, embarrassed, because the whole world seems to expect me to pass my evaluations to get a sort of accepted lobotomy.

I scratch behind my ear and start speaking again, involuntarily.

'I know a couple is supposed to compromise on everything.' I see the next few movements in dream-like mist, my body carried or propelled forward. We move from the living room to the bedroom; the counsellor closes the door and asks me if it locks. I shake my head, and he retreats for a moment, finds a chair, and tucks it underneath the door handle. Dream-like dust. *Do you want to undress yourself or should I help? Are you awake in there?* I think I mishear parts of his broken-up speech, or I've figured out a way to ignore him. *Is this too sexual for you?* I think he wants to call me a wimpish pussy. The counsellor's hands move down my body as he tugs the pants down, staring at the semi-formed boner in my underwear. *How do you explain this, then?* He pokes at it through the underwear. A hand connects with flesh. Nakedness looks incorrect in front of the man in the corporate wear. The counsellor does not intend on making me cum—his movements are slowed, impersonal—as he pays attention to *reflexes*. 'If I tap your knee, does it make you want to bend over and be fucked by me?'

When I am alone again, napping in a pile of paperwork, I feel around for my phone. It isn't underneath any of the paperwork, or in the bedroom, at all. I figure I left it on the kitchen bench when I poured him a glass of water. The glass shatters in my head.

I spend some time reading the paperwork.

There's a disconnect with the top half of my body and the lower. Like I have no legs. A phantom feeling. I picture the insanity of me crawling to the bathroom, and when I do have the capacity to walk, to persevere forward. Pulse myself forward. There is a lot of paperwork to read. I pause to go to the bathroom, idling in the darkened square of space. Without the light on, everything is just nothing. I worry I could collapse down to my knees and stay there, avoiding another line of the document splayed out on the bed. Health risks. Side-effects. Jargon I misunderstand. I pour over it all. My partner, he messages me when I'm on page twenty. *How did the appointment go? Can I come over?* His questions come without hesitation, the second after the first. Although I see everything of him as without hesitation, without pause, free of the suffering. Is it self-afflicting, I hear in the counsellor's voice.

'You could wait until I'm asleep', I say to my partner, in the middle of the night. We're in bed, cuddled up to one another. Two shirtless men. 'I give my consent.' The expression on his face makes me feel nauseous. Of course it does. No man wants to have sex with their partner's unconscious body, cautious about stirring them. I excuse myself to use the bathroom and think about slamming my head into the tiles, or calling the counsellor, despite the time. In the middle of the night, I imagine that man drafting more scripture for me to read, more torment to tack onto the construction.

I climb back in bed.

My partner nuzzles into my neck.

He didn't see all the paperwork. I tucked it underneath the bed when he texted to say he was five minutes away from my apartment. I try to sleep, thinking about the counsellor tearing the clothes off my body before I undergo his **surgery**. It's a picture of him with an ice pick or a sharpened shovel in his hand, poised, in silvery lighting. Opposite him is a nurse in faded sunset-orange scrubs. They wash out her skin, but I don't know why I focus on her ill-appearing complexion. I should be focused on myself, the cracking fracture in the skull I somehow see from above, staring down at the image. A sort of counsellor, suited, with a tie adorned in tiny dog faces and bones. The nurse, although her face is pivoted away from view, merely a shadowed figure balancing tools in her palms. Myself. Ashamedly naked. Staring at the ceiling, forehead mopped in blood. *And I would do anything for love* playing from a speaker in the distance, higher above than the platform my partner stands upon. Steel gangway. He could always just slip through one of the cracks.

When we first met, I was in a relationship with a man who was settling for me. He had these ambitions, greater than possible if he kept himself tied to the weight of me. I had told him, too, that sex was never on the table. Intimacy between us was strained. Complicated. We rarely spoke of it, but I was terrified of being scolded for being intimate to a degree. The relationship thankfully ended and we parted ways, never to speak again. I worried a burden of myself, a fleck of the trauma, would carry on forever on him, until I went on the first date with my current partner. I tried to stop thinking. Or I tried to exist beside him, bearing my emotions. Baring my teeth.

The 'surgery' presented itself like the cure. Because you are supposed to feel broken for not wanting a man to *fuck you*. The counsellor sits in front of me, listening, as I tell him about the first time I let my partner touch me more intimately. His hand down my pants, feeling around for my asshole. 'This is good,' the counsellor says, inching forward in his chair. 'And you let him finger you?'

I don't know whether to nod or shake my head.

CHICAGO

For quite a long time, Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon circled around the idea of adapting a play now known as *Play Ball*—ironically, it was forced to change its title when the musical became a big hit. *Chicago* is the story of Roxie Hart, a wannabe starlet who murders the man she's having an affair with because he was a no-good, lying sleaze. Roxie lands herself in prison and schemes to be acquitted and remain in the spotlight by any means necessary. *Chicago* is a long-running staple on the Broadway stage, infamous for its stunt-casting, although it's humorous to think a show like this would remain a certifiable hit since its revival in the 1990s. A musical about murder, jazz, the 1920s, and faking a pregnancy to improve your odds in court. When it was remounted, it was a more stripped-back show that highlighted Fosse's choreography, alongside Ann Reinking's updated stylings. Reinking, who had known and dated Fosse before his death, was likely the most fitting choice to breathe new life into the musical. She also starred as Roxie Hart in the revival opposite Bebe Neuwirth as Velma Kelly, the spotlighted star in prison for the murder of her sister, who she'd performed on stage with, and her husband Charlie.

My adoration for *Chicago* began when I first saw the 2002 film adaptation starring Renee Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones. The Best Picture winner remains one of my favourite films to date. There is something fascinating about the way the film is constructed—it not only elevates the source material for the silver screen, but it makes you feel like you're witnessing a stage show too. Musical numbers are vaudevillian in style, as Fosse intended, and the Kander and Ebb numbers get their chance to soar. Although several songs are cut from the film, including "Class", which was left on the cutting room floor entirely filmed, what remains has cemented itself in film musical history. People know "Cell Block Tango". The image of Catherine Zeta-Jones glamorously posed in the Velma Kelly bob during "All That Jazz" is a symbol for how *good* you can look on camera. "We Both Reached For the Gun" is understandably acknowledged for how masterful it is, not only in performances by Richard Gere, Zellweger, and Christine Baranski, but for the costume design and make-up which perfect the marionette routine. My words for *Chicago* (2002) are perhaps a little too forever-complimentary. The film was so excellently directed by Rob Marshall he's been unable to outdo himself ever since.

Let's take a brief moment to recount some of the trillion celebrities who have had a star turn on Broadway in a little musical about cheating your way out of prison. As Roxie Hart: Pamela Anderson, Mel B, Lisa Rinna, Angelica Ross, Brooke Shields, and Michelle Williams (of Destiny's Child). As Billy Flynn: Jaime Camil, Colman Domingo, Michael C. Hall, Harry Hamlin, Jerry Springer for some reason, and even Usher. As Mama Morton: the phenomenal Jinkx Monsoon, NeNe Leakes, Sofia Vergara, Wendy Williams, and even the incredible Patti LaBelle. Stunt-casting is synonymous nowadays with *Chicago* on Broadway, but it isn't necessarily a mood-killer. Seeing Pamela Anderson perform live, singing the words to "Roxie", sounds like a genuine gift. Whoever approved Jinkx Monsoon going out for however many shows to sing "When You're Good to Mama" struck musical theatre gold—a celebrated drag queen singing about doing a favour for a favour while undoubtedly looking stunning doing it. The beautiful thing about Broadway, about live musical theatre in general, is that the performers aren't projected on a screen, having recorded this months earlier. They're in the flesh, and if you're not cut out for musical theatre, at least you're only the ninetieth Roxie Hart in the line-up.

[I have never seen any of the above celebrities on Broadway so I am not dragging any of them.]

Chicago to me is all about its women. Perseverant women who don't care who they need to trample to get their success. Roxie Hart and Velma Kelly are allowed to get away with murder in my book. They're also fictional. So I'm looking the other way.

“My Own Best Friend”

A song so perfectly narcissistic you forgive it a little. “*My Own Best Friend*” feels a little unrecognised to me. It was cut from the 2002 film adaption, presumably because they could get the point across without it, but I fell in love with it the first time I heard it when I saw a live production of *Chicago*. It’s a song about turning to yourself in crisis, or because other people only want to use you, or simply because other people suck. Roxie and Velma sing it outwardly, proclaiming they only have themselves to truly, properly, watch over themselves. Both in prison, facing down their incoming trials to hopefully avoid a hanging, Roxie and Velma are afforded some narcissism. It’s difficult to be a murderess rightfully in prison for killing someone, but desperate to be released and in the spotlight for all their own reasons.

At the beginning of the song, like many a song from *Chicago*, the Emcee announces the *theme* of what is about to occur. Here, he says: *And now, Miss Roxie Hart and Miss Velma Kelly sing a song of unrelenting determination and unmitigated ego.* It’s an accurate description, of course, because what follows is two women getting frustrated about the people around them, but mostly just really feeling themselves up.

And rule number one // from here to the end // is ‘I am my own best friend’

It’s refreshing, in a sense, to have a song where the women aren’t fawning over a man or being codependent towards one another. Roxie and Velma have a rocky sort of relationship with one another—this song comes after Velma has attempted to convince Roxie to be the replacement in the double-act Velma previously performed with her sister, who she, you know, murdered. Although, of course, Velma continues to plead innocent on that. When Roxie declines the offer, and a new murderess steals the spotlight from the both of them, there is an unspoken numbness. It isn’t necessarily disappointment—Roxie and Velma are determined women, unwilling to appear fazed by the notion of their guilt—but at this point in the musical, you can understand their bitterness. People have wronged them before: the man Roxie was having an affair with confesses he was lying to her to get her into bed; Velma’s husband cheats on her with her sister of all people. Billy Flynn, their shared lawyer, has tossed aside their cases for the latest, showiest scandal. Roxie thinks Velma only wants to use her as a stepping stone to clamber back to her former glory, pre-prison sentence. Velma just thinks Roxie is a suck-up and self-obsessed.

And, I mean, they both sing this song. She’s not a bad judge of character.

If life is a school // I’ll pass every test

If life is a game // I’ll play it the best

This Roxie and Velma sing in unison, at the rear of *My Own Best Friend*. Pure perfectionism—both recognise the only chance at success they have in 1920s America, locked up in prison, is being more *perfect* than anyone else. This means trusting in yourself, perhaps only yourself. This means calling yourself baby. Roxie and Velma recognise that they cannot solely depend on anyone to help them out of the predicament of prison—they need to make their own passionate decisions. So, Roxie decides to fake a pregnancy. No one offers this as a suggestion. Roxie draws the attention back towards her.

It’s a relatively short song: “*My Own Best Friend*” is just under three minutes on the cast recording for the Broadway revival in 1997. A large portion of the song is Roxie and Velma repeating one another, driving home the obvious, the understood—these two women, in similar predicaments, have similar mindsets too. Disillusioned by the ways in which they have been treated, their egos are only inflated because having faith in their relationships with others has scorned them. Maybe Roxie being pissy her side-boyfriend lied about wanting to boost her career is a minor reason for murdering someone, but Velma had to immediately confront her husband and sister destroying her trust. Maybe she truly did black out. She is, after all, her own best friend.

...

The trail became narrower as we meandered further into the cavern system. It was less of a trail, more of a sharply-carved path many would have trod upon. The two of us avoided stopping where we could. Stopping meant reassessing, reevaluating—meant one of us could change our minds and stumble into an argument about how incautious we've both become. I took the rear as we walked in single file. I made tiny jokes, almost unheard, about how there could be a fire-breathing *something* right around the next corner. *No, not a dragon*, I said, because those had been extinct for a millennium, and it was documented so. Something else, something we were entirely more prepared for, like a fire *jjokena*. Their petite bodies would be able to wander these paths too, flatten themselves down to squeeze in between the rock. Feast on dust and the occasional bad-luck traveller.

'Muggy today,' my companion said, pacing forward. I could still remember the heat of the outside sun. *It's hot up here*. The cavern system began from a cave opening in the side of a mountain. We had spent time meandering from the base of the mountain, a short stroll from the closest village—this is how the townsfolk described it, in my loose translation of their language. *A short stroll*. I found it strange then to hear their word for 'stroll' as opposed to something like 'trek' or 'journeyway'. I brushed it aside at the time. We had asked for directions, not described tales. The sweat had clung to my back, time and time before we stepped foot inside the caverns.

'Yeah, right,' I said, wiping my forehead. The suggested rumour of a *jjokena* could prove to be correct after all. A sharp pause from Hullmes meant I almost slammed into his shoulder. He moved his arm the side, as if in warning, although his fingertips brushed against the wall of rock that daunted us from either side. He did not speak, which concerned me. My vision was entirely blocked by his figure. I made a quick pass at the path we had trod upon—it would be a clear and unhindered getaway if danger presented itself in front of him. Lifting one foot off the ground, I tapped the lower quarter of his back with my knee. This was our sign. It meant *protect one another* in childspeak, something the mothers of our community taught the children when they came of the age to wander the woods alone and desperate for sailing adventures. Any actual sailing was mere illusion. No one in the village had progressed so far as Hullmes and I had. The ocean was always storybook fantasy. People shared stories of that which interested us the most—dipping our toes into the warm water, seeing nothing on the horizon except crystal emptiness. Foraging for seashells, perhaps an isolated crab. People also told stories about eating crabmeat. Those were delicious.

Hullmes retreated his arm and took a step forward. Slow, deliberate. 'I saw nothing,' I uttered out, although immediately expected him to brush off the caution underneath my voice. *Nothing to worry yourself over*, he would say. In taking the leading stance, Hullmes agreed to assess for danger ahead, whilst I would assess what I sensed behind me. Infrequently would I believe something to be creeping up on us, but an unavoidable escape would require keen sight from me. Always something to worry yourself over.

We manoeuvred ahead. Hullmes lifted a sleeve to his eye to wipe dust from it, and I said something about falling stalactites. He ignored the comment, murmuring a quiet 'I'm good' before continuing with a steady rhythm. I liked the peace with Hullmes. He was like an older brother, although I had two of my own. Without the blood connection, he was less agitating, less confronting.

I remember sensing the ground. It shifted beneath my feet. *The presence of another*, although I figured further away behind me than he would believe if I warned him now. With a solitary glance behind me, I got confirmation, then a pausing breath from Hullmes. 'Chasm,' he uttered, checking the roof of the cavern. We stood in an open space with no stability. Nothing to grasp onto if we attempted to simply cross the chasm from one side to the other. A leap, a bound, a marching stride could result in

a sprained ankle or possibly worse. Neither of us trusted our agility. I would slam into the corner of rock, lose balance, and plummet to my death—here is to the foolishness of playing adventurer. Hullmes turned toward me, keeping his voice low and stable. ‘Too wide to dodge,’ he said, simple and vaguely familiar. Something his father would’ve said when we were children. *Too wide to dodge*, but implied on the falling of a decaying tree, or the perils of straying from the path. He warned us of wild creatures come to life from storybooks, and Hullmes and I laughed back then, already too intrepid.

He proposed a plan: with nothing around to give us any sort of traction or to be crafted into a makeshift bridge, we had to use our bodies. He was a tall enough man to stretch himself across the ravine, so long as we could fetch the ropes from our packs and tie him down to one side. ‘How do you plan to untie yourself?’ I asked, visualising the idea in my head. With hands in one direction and feet at the opposite, tied to rock, he would seem bound permanently, unable to wriggle free. Hullmes stared at me with new certainty.

‘I won’t tie myself down then,’ he said, beaming with confidence. Or overconfidence. I rooted around in the packs for our rope, regardless, and tucked it underneath my armpit. I could navigate myself across his imbalanced body and tie his hands to the rock once I was across. Even this plan had its flaws—he would be flummoxed to manage my weight without so much to grasp except the ledge of that opposite side. Buckling, we could both fall. He nudged away my expression, but I continued to root around in the backpack for something else of value. Too many impossible variables. *We’re just kids*, I’d wanted to say to him, feeling dumb, numb, and only barely out of range from when our parents would call us such. Kids. Little wanderers.

Casting my view across the chasm provided fruitless. There wasn’t anything in short reach for him to be tethered too, unlike the ledge we stood upon, which was littered with almost spherical boulders jutting out of the cavern floor. I covered my eyes with my hands, a show of frustration more than anything. It was in the quiet, the lull of thought, when I noticed the thump of the ground once more. Something was approaching, or would be, if we did not hastily cross the ravine. Hullmes glanced at me when I opened my eyes, wide and terror-strained. Panic-driven. I had to trust my body weight would not overpower him. I had to trust in our ability to summon strength. Think of community. The village. Deep breaths and weightlessness. When I came back into focus, Hullmes was stretched out over the darkness, straining his muscles.

I moved to a new rhythm. Terrified of looking down, I stared ahead at an angle, shutting off my periphery where I could. All to say: it was impossible to avoid the notion of falling. Hullmes had this strength from his father. I was cautious not to put intense pressure on his body, shimmying myself across him like a gangplank. Balancing on my hold on his body. Every earthly shake felt like death’s greeting. Willing the both of us to plummet, perilously. Three quarters of the way across his body I caught a proper glimpse of the void beneath us. I just needed to lunge my body.

And I did. I cleared the chasm. Standing once more on land, I took a moment to clear my throat, to channel some calming energy. Thinking it incredulous to have crossed a blackened gap crawling over a childhood friend. I glanced at Hullmes, who shook with a new vibration. Something inched itself towards us. Its shadow became noticeable first. Not a *jjokena* like we tricked ourselves into believing, but something larger, fiercer. The *majvid* slunk forward on five legs—the fifth, additional, almost unnecessary leg was oftentimes used in combat like an underhanded punch. This female scuffed the dust off the ground with each claw, faster in approach than we would have anticipated.

Hullmes barked out his order. ‘Lift me out.’ Of course he sensed the danger. The *majvid* had a talon on right ankle, inches from hooking into the flesh. The female *majvid* had a powerful grip, that much I knew from Hullmes’ father’s stories. They spoke of these creatures, raging and making meals out of any victim, no matter the size. I saw myself standing there, weak, vulnerable. Little.

‘Lift me up right this minute,’ he said with more force in his voice. The *majvid* skewered his ankle and Hullmes let out a wail of a scream. My options were limited: either I wrestled with the wild, aggravated creature to wrangle my friend to safety, or I...cut my losses. My hand shook in tandem with the ground of the cavern. Hullmes scrunched his face in agony. Misery.

He would pull me back towards the female *majvid* and we would both be food for slaughter.

I locked eyes briefly with the *majvid*, but not Hullmes. His stare would penetrate me, break down these conflicted feelings completely, and I would watch myself stumble forward. Into the ravine. Behind me, I knew my path to the exit. Where to lead. Where he cannot follow.

I deeply exhaled and gathered up my pack and turned from Hullmes, the *majvid*, afraid to witness absolutely anything. His grip came free of the rock and he wailed out my name, his voice fragile and unsure and bitter. Punctured. The *majvid* was a worthy opponent with the strength of its ancestors. Without any more hesitation, I took off down a corridor of the cavern, never once glancing back to see what has become of my old friend. Soon, his corpse would be mangled, bloody, an arm and a leg wrenched out of their sockets. But I was alive. I felt my shoulder, where there were no signs of damage. I felt my arms and my legs and the space where beneath the skin is my heart. Guarded, protected.

I collapsed back against the wall of the cavern system and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

Guilt should have haunted me. I should have expected myself to be worn down by my choice to flee, instead of risk everything for Hullmes. But there was a certain calmness to how I proceeded, how I continued to navigate myself, alone, through naturally-carved corridors. Constantly aware of what could lay ahead of me, or behind me. Another *majvid*, or a proper *jjokena* after all. A great roaring dragon. Guilt.

I paid my respects to him, muttered words of remorse as a precaution, yet I thought about the spirit of warfare, something else from the stories of his father. Lives will be lost, but you prepare yourself for this entirely before beginning the ascent. Or descent, dependant on what lay ahead for your journey, little travellers. I heard the story I would tell his family, his father, and I comfortably bore the scrutiny over whether it was the correct response to rescue myself. I saw his fleshy bones having tumbled and descended to the bottom of the chasm; remnants of a man who knew it dangerous to be faithful.

There is a story Hullmes’ father would tell in the evenings, when the light of the moon reflected off our shiny foreheads. He would say, any little adventurer worth anything knows about the perils of the great world. A young man, somewhere in the middle of age between himself and us, the children, set out one morning in search of what he believed to be a fantastical reward. Treasures unimaginable. But he lugged behind him a horrible, terrible burden. His mother had died two mornings beforehand—she had died coughing and spluttering up blood. At this part, us children screeched and covered our ears, but not long enough to miss any more important details of the story. The young man wandered every path with the same hesitation, the same exhaustion, for he knew instead he could be at home, standing beside his father. He almost broke his arm fighting off a woodland creature hungered by his lethargy; he almost lost his life not paying attention to where he was going. The young man had vivid dreams of his mother suddenly awakening from what had been simply a slumber, crying out his name—son, my son, why have you abandoned family? He knew it was simply the woods playing tricks, falsifying the thoughts he kept unearthing each day. Exhaustion may have seen him meet his fate. Alas, the young man suddenly realised something—and this part always fascinated me. He realised he could not be afraid of letting go. Hullmes’ father would begin a short passage about respecting family, holding them in your heart when you become your own individual person, fighting back against fear, but I have realised something of my own. The young man was letting himself be defined by others.

I must be stronger.

MOULIN ROUGE

Occasionally, you get asked one of the usual questions: what's your favourite movie? Gradually I had to sharpen myself to settle on one response. There wasn't strength in stumbling through a shortlist. I settled on *Moulin Rouge!*, the 2001 film starring Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor that was filming while I was in the womb [it finished filming in May 2000, several months before I was born in September.] The film is centred around the famed Moulin Rouge in Paris, France—it tells the fictional story of Christian (McGregor) and Satine's (Kidman) romance. He, a penniless writer, and she, a courtesan in the dark underworld of the city, fall deeply, madly, in love with one another when she initially mistakes him to be a wealthy duke. The film is primarily a jukebox musical, weaving well-known songs into the fabric of the story as Christian writes the premiere theatre spectacular while the Moulin Rouge undergoes its transformation into a proper theatre venue. The actual Duke is jealous and raging. Harold Zidler (played wonderfully by Jim Broadbent), the Moulin Rouge's proprietor, is desperate to keep the thrill of the Red Windmill alive. And Nini Legs-in-the-Air (Caroline O'Connor) is petty and a tiny bit cruel but she's quite entertaining.

I will forever be obsessed with her line *why would the courtesan go for the penniless writer? Whoops. I mean sitar player.*

As a jukebox musical, *Moulin Rouge!* is littered with strange, gorgeous, beautiful, crazy decisions. Harold and the Duke sing Madonna's *Like a Virgin* in the Gothic Tower while Harold pretends Satine is off confessing her sins to a priest. Satine performs *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend* and passes out from her undiagnosed illness, almost cracking her skull as she falls from a swing. A narcoleptic Argentinean man performs The Police's *Roxanne* while dancing the tango and telling Christian he was foolish for thinking he could love an early 1900s sex worker. The most ambitious choice of all, however, is the overstuffed—and I say that lovingly—"Elephant Love Medley", which contains about ten different songs, unless you're watching the stage production, which includes nineteen. This is a great segue as any—many years after the film, a stage version of the musical premiered, with a large number of changes, including some truly confusing ones, but that's a story for another time, nevermind.

Nicole Kidman, to me, has never looked more gorgeous than in *Moulin Rouge!*. I will always think about how beautiful she is in the scene that takes place when Satine and Christian first meet in the giant Elephant. She wears a lacy black outfit, sort of like a sexy dressing gown, and her red hair waterfalls down past her shoulders. If I were including photographs in this work, hers would litter the pages. But beyond being mesmerising to witness, her performance as Satine was worthy of the attention it got. Kidman balances the seductive with the heartbreaking, the romantic with the ill-fated. I would do anything to see her somehow reprise the role, once more taking up the mantle of the Sparkling Diamond, although there is always the worry anything *legacy-related* will only disappoint. Also, Satine is dead. Spoiler alert—although they make it known a tragic fate is destined for the character from the beginning. She is Eurydice, desperate to escape the Underworld. The connection with the Greek myth is well-established: Christian is the poet, the visionary bohemian, desperate to *rescue* the woman he loves. But much like the story of Eurydice and Orpheus, they will be waiting for a lifetime and over again. No matter how many times I rewatch *Moulin Rouge!*, their ending will always ruin me.

Ewan McGregor also looks incredibly handsome and it is so obvious why Satine loves him. His voice sounds angelic, he writes poetry—*ahem*, Elton John song lyrics—and above all else, he believes in love. All you need is love. *Please don't start that again*, Satine muses, although she's already fallen head over heels for him. He's her chance at escape, you see. It's all so beautiful and depressing.

“Come What May”

In a musical littered with classic tunes and complete bangers, somehow I get to talk about something original! Whether you consider “*Come What May*” entirely original though depends on if you’re a stickler for the rules: the song was initially written (then cut) for another of Baz Luhrmann’s films, *Romeo + Juliet*. To me, it seems completely impractical to even consider this as anyone but Christian and Satine’s song. As an undercurrent to the film from the moment they first sing it, “*Come What May*” resonates with their love story because Christian is embedding it within the text of the film. *I will love you until my dying day* is a future promise for Christian, not something he establishes by ending his own life beside her. [I mean no disrespect to Shakespeare, who famously wrote *Rome and Juliet*, but Christian and Satine mean everything to me *because* they fight so desperately to stay alive.]

I want to vanish inside your kiss is endlessly romantic.

listen to my heart // can you hear it sing is how someone should propose to me.

“*Come What May*” is the emotional core of *Moulin Rouge!*, a film that already makes me weep. It is a song about loving someone unconditionally, loving them passionately, and loving them through all patterns of weather. Maybe it’s a bit overdramatic, a bit sappy, but that’s what romance and being in love is sometimes—this idea of being completely in adoration of a person because they came into your life. Christian and Satine perform the song as if it were a new addition to the theatre spectacular to be performed at the Moulin Rouge, but it is their secret-yet-public confession of undying love. No matter what comes between them, be it The Duke, or the illness Satine doesn’t really know she has, or even just the poverty of being not-well-off in France in the early 1900s, they will love one another.

Suddenly the world seems such a perfect place

Suddenly it moves with such a perfect grace

Suddenly my life doesn’t seem such a waste

The commitment to being sappy and overly romantic in “*Come What May*” is a feature, not a flaw. Haven’t you ever loved someone so much it consumes you? The song is positioned within the story as a chance for Christian and Satine to confess how passionate their love is. Everything is grandiose because otherwise you would see the intrusions for what they are: inescapable threats. Satine is bound in a contract with The Duke, in which he is promised to have sex with her, really, on the opening night of the show. The Duke is a jealous, controlling, demanding man and sees the Sparkling Diamond herself as his *prize* for funnelling funds into the Moulin Rouge. Satine can’t be sneaking around, fooling around with some other man—there are consequences to spitting in the Duke’s face. She’s also dying of consumption, but as she and Christian sing “*Come What May*”, neither is aware of this rooted truth. Certainly their all-consuming love for one another clouds any notion of it—Christian saw Satine faint in the Elephant boudoir, yet he is largely unaware of the reason why. “*Come What May*” speaks to the *distraction* of love. It’s uncomplicated to find yourself dedicated to the person whose adoration is above all else. Christian values truth, beauty, freedom, and love. Satine, to him, represents these ideals. She presents no façade, unlike how she behaves publicly around The Duke. She is incredibly gorgeous—and there is beauty to her soul, too. She dreams of fleeing the clutches of the underbelly of Paris. And, above all else, Satine shares this core belief: that she will love him *until my dying day*.

To me, despite its wholly-romantic lyrics, it’s the performance of the song by Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman that makes me completely enamoured. There is a passion in their voices that is convincing, and weighted by the characters’ experiences. As a courtesan with little anything, Satine has never imagined herself loving a man so earnestly. Christian, still navigating the world with naivety, thinks of their love as unstoppable. In true, complete bohemian spirit.

• • •

You and Maggie were together for thirteen years before the accident. It was a later-in-life connection, when both of you had married previously, had children previously, became empty-nesters previously. Your daughter wanted the best for you. She would try to inch you towards finding someone new after the passing of your wife, your children's mother, from a particularly brutal case of monkeyfever. It had been years. Nine to be exact. Before you met Maggie, who waited on the side of the road in front of the restaurant with a coat slung over her shoulders. She still shivered. In the middle of winter, when you could see your icy breath, a woman you barely knew stuck out her hand and flashed her discoloured teeth. There was something so beautiful about her, you knew that already. You didn't dare to say something so bold on the first date, the proper greeting between you both, because some messages on a screen hardly counted. This was a recognisable human person, flesh and bone and blood, and you realised all the alone time had made you a little uncertain about your ability to talk to women again. Flirt with them. Fine-dine and romance them.

Maggie was wonderful from the first conversations. She asked politely about your wife, but you were unsure about making this a reversed *and you?* situation. Different than asking about favourite films, or favourite things to eat in spring, or what kind of adventure you sought out for the remainder of your days on Earth. This humongous planet and somehow Maggie invited herself into your world. She would ask you on picnics in the park, and in return you made her breakfast in bed and reminded her to pay her taxes on time. It's the little things. Somehow the person you had been before Maggie had morphed into this entity, a *before* you. Almost unrecognisable. Strange to think of yourself waking up in the morning without being greeted by her face. Strange to think of yourself waiting in the drive-through line of a Tuesday morning, for example, and ordering only one coffee, instead of two.

It meant the world that your children adored Maggie too. Your daughter never named her stepmother, but it was an unspoken thing. They spent time with one another when you slept in for hours, or otherwise disappeared into one corner of the shopping complex to browse the sorts of things you had a complete lack of an eye for. Your daughter suggested that Maggie walk her down the aisle instead of you, and it made you blush, watching your daughter take back her words with a casual laugh. The unspoken thing of grief, the missing of her biological mother, had seemed to have been curtained away. At least for these moments, when she visited her parents, as they were.

You and Maggie holidayed in Athens one summer and somehow fell deeper in love with one another. The Greek sun gave you both tomato sunburns, but you laughed, because here you both were in Athens, taking a quiet night's opportunity to slather aloe vera on each other's shoulders to numb the burning sensation. It had been an inexpensive purchase, thankfully.

In the morning, properly whitened by sunscreen, you and Maggie wandered the streets, wishing a holiday could last forever. She laughed when you said it was a dream you both could accomplish—living in a little house somewhere out there, and you pointed to the Grecian horizon in the opposite direction to the sea. Maggie's laugh was still infectious. You could never part with everything that makes our home *our home*, she said, grasping your hand. It was lovely to dream.

An ancient Roman column toppled over and crushed you beneath it, killing you instantly.

You blink your eyes open. The last thing you remember is watching Maggie wander ahead, a disposable camera looped on a lanyard around her neck. She would have it developed when you returned home, and eventually the walls of your home would be littered with picture frames containing some of the better-composition photographs. You're in a hall of white now. Alone.

Nothing makes sense for a moment. Maggie's silhouette isn't even a distant smudge of grey. She's gone, completely, and so is the landscape. There aren't roads to walk upon. It reminds you of a blank canvas, and you think about one of the early dates, when Maggie was spontaneous and suggested you step into the wide, open doors of an art studio neither of you seem to remember. Journeys into the city were few and far between for the both of you. A woman with dyed mauve hair carries a glass mason jar of paintbrushes and practically thrusts one into your hand. It's all interactive, she says, gesturing to the room behind her. Paint something.

When your fingers collide with what passes as a semi-wall, your touch is pale blue. Watercolours. You draw a line, startled to find the flowing shape could be never-ending. If you let it. You are alone, of course, wondering how to change the colour of your body paint. You draw a square, thinking the lines will connect, form the angular edges of the box figure, but nothing remains rigid and firm where it sits in thin-air. The square is rounded, and you think, for a moment, it may simply morph into the shape of a heart. You sigh out. The last thing you remember is high-pitched wailing. Something dreaded from a disaster movie, things you would watch with your daughter, before you'd ever even met Maggie. Sitting on the upholstered lounge, the volume a sensible twenty-five, as those unnamed background extras deserted what they were all doing—pretending to do—as the tsunami wave crashed upon the shore. People were screaming all around you.

You have died, a voice announces. There must be some sort of mistake, you think, but keep to yourself. The entire world has theories about the afterlife, this realm, but your fingers just created their own form of art out of nothing. There is no use forming fists to expunge your newfound misery. Thoughts of Maggie. Listening to those sounds. Flicking her head round to understand and meeting the crushed form of your body there on the pavement. Tears. Tears up until she ends the call to your daughter and suddenly sharing the burden gives her a moment to exhale. A breath had been caught there, an invisible stoppage. This is all what you imagined. Your sole understanding of the afterlife meant you thought you could reach out and catch a glimpse of her. Everything is white.

The voice guides you towards a door you had not noticed. It is, like everything else in existence beyond yourself, entirely white. The door handle is cold, perhaps made of sculpted ice, and you turn it gently, afraid to break something these early moments of afterlifehood. This next room is more familiar. A series of classroom seats, without desks, facing a whiteboard carved into a cliff-face. The voice offers a spotlighted chair, and you sit down, feeling your first moments of comfort since the immediate paralysis of being crushed by an ancient stone column. You had not noticed the aches in your feet—you had been too concerned with the ache of deserting Maggie in Athens.

Time passes you by.

While you are getting initiated into the afterlife—a rigorous process that involves answering to the mediocre sins of your childhood, like the times you stepped on ants intentionally—you think of Maggie. While having afternoon tea with an old friend who had passed away in their twenties, you think of Maggie, similarly nibbling on a shortbread biscuit with a wounded heart. You even visit your first wife and she sets her hands upon yours when you speak of the wonderful woman who came in the beyond. Your Maggie. Love of all lives. You drift off into an afterlifian slumber wishing Maggie all the comforts. On what you presume to be your birthday, you tell no one of the final thought before you blow out the candles. To once more see your daughter, and your Maggie, drifting back from a jaunt to the other side of the shopping complex, toting brand-name bags. While you are horseback riding in an imagined landscape eerily familiar, you think about the misfortune of never seeing her again. The idea crams itself inside your brain. You concede Maggie must die eventually, but what if she lands someplace else? What if this is only one of several afterworlds? There is no concept of time here. You ache.

More time passes you by.

You are watching a concert orchestration performance set to the History of Dinosaurs, with your first wife, when she leans over and questions the tapping of your foot. She's all too familiar with your nervousness. Is this about Maggie, she whispers, partially interrupted by the deep groan of a tuba. You feel unnatural for finding yourself impatient: this should be a complete experience, witnessing dinosaurs crack out of eggs, or crack other dinosaurs' eggs, but they were right when they uttered that the dead have unfinished business. Who this *they* is you are unsure. Sometimes you lie awake watching the ceiling television—it's more like a screen embedded in the spectral phasing that is your ceiling—and replay those final moments that were a life. No one had screamed, 'GET OUT THE WAY!' at you. Maggie had not even noticed, until splat. You understand with vision sharp as a tack why people become grumpier as they age. You are dead, but still fifty-eight.

You have no way of knowing what has become of anyone.

Your children, they will live forever, seemingly, although at some point their fingers too will paint in squiggly streamwater blue. But Maggie. A morbid sort of curiosity that she is simply standing there in place, mortified, waiting for the column to retract and return to standing. Simply. You think yourself so narcissistic, desperate for love again. You'd spent time alone and it had done you good.

But, you think, let me back let me back let me —

You blink your eyes open, again. It's a little strange to adjust, and there's this irritating coughing noise. It's coming out of your own mouth, you realise. You're coughing, and you have moved, and the blood is rushing to your head and to your toes simultaneously. You have some neck pain to adjust to. It's late at night, presumedly. The street is empty. Or the path. You don't recognise where you are at first. It isn't the Afterlife Unit you were assigned sometime prior. It isn't the World Amphitheatre. Or the Do-Anything Doors. There should be a woman in front of you, with a disposable camera hanging round her neck. She wants to have the pictures developed when you return home from...Greece.

Your eyeball pops out of the socket.

You glance down and your naked body is smeared in your dried blood. Kneecap is entirely visible, the left one. No more 'ten toes in total'—the biggest two are missing. In truth, you believe the column would have smooshed you down, flattened you into the earth, but this approximation of a reconfiguration isn't half-bad. The naked part is partially distressing.

Despite Greece being the last natural place on Earth you visited, everything seems in a sort of disorder. This doesn't look familiar, nor does that. Local residents shy away from your naked figure limping forward, begging for clothes, begging for money. Destitute. A woman standing in her doorway bathed in yellow light murmurs something unfamiliar, something in the Greek language you had never memorised. She retreats, and you are grateful for less scrutiny. Body temperature is permissible. It is a lovely night and you narrowly avoid stepping on a sharp stone. The woman returns, half-hidden behind a tangled mess of rags, weathered clothes, and a heavy blanket. The colour of midnight too. As you dress yourself, she shakes her head, making clicking sounds with her tongue.

You wonder why she hasn't called an ambulance.

You collect enough money from begging on the streets to afford a taxi fare to the airport, although the driver is visibly disappointed when you pour the euro coins into his hand from the backseat. Technically, you are short, because of inflation.

You hobble into the airport, the thick blanket weighing down your shoulders. There is a pang of worry the moment you pass through the automatic doors, that someone will have you escorted out of the building for appearing homeless. Maggie is alive in your mind, whispering out for you. Your appearance will not deter you. The airport is crowded in the wee hours of the day and there is a man busying himself at the ticket counter.

'Kaliméra,' you say, brushing off the Greek for the first time in...you don't know how long.

The man behind the desk requires from you many things you do not possess: money, a passport, or identification of any kind. Anything that is your own. This look he gives is startling. It isn't fear, although he would have every right to be terrified of the figure in the threads and wools moving ungracefully, looking half-dead. Instead he is ambivalent. Emotively undecided. This must happen often, you think, picturing other folks without the money to afford airfares, other folks without a valid passport. Do other people come back from the dead? The blanket is too heavy now.

This plan, perhaps it was doomed from the beginning. There is land and oceans and distance between you and the second woman you ever married. Maggie. There is a Greek myth about an orphaned child, certainly at least one, left for dead on the mainland while one parent is punished. The other perched on a throne. You find a metal bench outside of the airport and sit down, and again, that sudden twist of comfort. People wheel their luggage past you. For the very first time, you wonder what year it is—you wonder how long everyone else has lived since one singular person died. Some uncertain peace. A mouthful of longing and ouzo.

Some people are kind. To them, you are an immigrant with no papers, no identity beyond an old name. A worn name. In that afterlife, which now feels impossibly like a dream, you had been afforded everything without reaching for your wallet, your phone. A scan of the pupil and you would be golden. Or blue, like the shimmering Grecian sea. Some people are kind. They give you an under-the-table job and free rent, and you tell them stories of your beautiful, generous, talented wife. Remember that time Maggie was waiting with you for the elevator, and she started humming the song that was stuck in her head, and you realised why it was so familiar? The song you had listened to three times in a row on a road trip. At first on accident, then again, because the song was catchy, and it reminded you of this love. Or it reminded you of her, sitting beside you in the cool air-conditioning, occasionally lifting a straw to her lips to drink the remnants of the iced coffee.

Over time, your body heals. When you thank the man in his forties who gave you the roof over your head, your kneecap is no more visible than it was before your accident. When you stand in the airport once more with a ticket and a passport—you're committing a tiny bit of identity fraud here—you wiggle all ten toes at once. They announce boarding for your flight. Nothing has ever meant more than returning home to Maggie.

Home. The same construction laid out in front of you. Late afternoon sun hits the back of your neck and you think, maybe I should've slathered the sunscreen in the taxi. You don't anticipate being outside for long. When you reach for the doorbell, listen to the soft chime echoing through the house, and greet her same-as-ever face, you might never step foot outside again. Some miracle, to be home again.

You attempt to steady your breathing as you hobble, only a little, towards the front door. She will greet you with open arms. Maybe she will be newly home from work, exhausted, tired, wanting a quiet moment of rest. And you can make whispered chatter about everything you both missed.

Ding dong.

Maggie's shadow appears. She opens the door, staring wide-eyed at you. You have to wonder what she sees, what she thinks. What goes on in that head of hers. 'I don't believe it,' she says, placing a hand to her chest. Pearl-clutching, if she had any.

'I can't believe it,' she repeats, albeit with one word changed. You are altered too, you know.

'It was near-impossible to return to you,' you say. 'I love you always.'

Maggie slows her breathing. The oxygen tank helps regulate it. Two pipes connected into her nostrils. Only now do you realise how thin her hair has become. Her eyes droop. She seems smaller than you remember.

'I don't understand it,' Maggie says, bowing her head.

WAITRESS

In 2007, *Waitress* starring Keri Russell and directed by Adrienne Shelly was released. The film follows a waitress and extraordinary pie-maker, Jenna Hunterson, who falls pregnant and finds it confronting to think of raising a child with her abusive husband. Inevitably, she begins having an affair with her doctor, who is also married. With a rich history of turning films into stage productions, *Waitress* soon became a musical sensation, with music and lyrics by pop darling Sara Bareilles. It's an intricate story to adapt for a stage musical. Jenna begins a whirlwind affair with Dr. Pomatter, who replaced her doctor when she retired. Stuck in the rut of her loveless, uncomfortable marriage, Jenna hides the baby, and of course the affair, from her husband Earl, who refuses to let her dream on her own. Jenna has these grand ambitions to enter a pie-making competition, win the prize money, and squirrel away the hope to escape from underneath Earl's clutches and bake pies with her eyes closed and the biggest grin in the whole wide world on her face. Jenna spends her days working at a diner off the highway, making customers fall in love with her homemade, creative, sensational pies, and confiding in her true support system—fellow waitresses Becky and Dawn.

From top to bottom, Sara Bareilles's music captures the essence, and heart, of the story. *Waitress* is not about a homewrecking woman hellbent on shattering two marriages and ruining the future for her child in the process. Jenna shakily assesses what life could look like with a baby—she is reserved about being pregnant but isn't nervous or silent. With a husband like Earl, Jenna cannot openly confess she be better off without a *pie in the oven*. In her head, she dreams up overtly-pointed flavours of pie, like “Baby Screaming It's Head Off in the Middle of the Night and Ruining My Life Pie” and “Earl Murders Me Because I'm Having an Affair Pie”. Bareilles's lyrics are littered with baking references and elevate Jenna's life through this musical storytelling. The emotional core of *Waitress* (the musical) is “*She Used to Be Mine*”, a self-reflective ballad Jenna sings out to the audience moments after Earl has discovered the money she has been hiding around the house, throws it in her face, and accuses her of exactly what she is planning. Abandoning him. Well, a pie contest, and then abandoning him. “*She Used to Be Mine*” is the expected for a project like this—but you won't find a page unpacking it. Instead, before it creates a well of tears in my eyes, I will leave you with this: “*She Used to Be Mine*” is a perfect musical theatre song. It's about the internal loss a woman in an emotionally-exhausting relationship has faced just to keep herself afloat. It is raw, passionate, heartbreaking, and in signature Jenna style, a cry for help without any begging. It gives a complete voice and soul to Jenna, although since Keri Russell's performance in the 2007 film, Jenna Hunterson has always been a character rich in perseverance and strength.

One thing to truly be admired about *Waitress* is how complicated all of its characters are. Becky, a married woman, with a husband at home who can't have sex with her, is having a secret affair with her boss, Cal. Who is also married, to a potentially-closeted woman. Dawn and Ogie get married but Ogie is insanely clingy and practically forced her into dating him. There will always be someone that objects to the strange, inappropriate, problematic aspects of *Waitress*, but I don't see these characters as morally-perfect, or even attempting to be. They want happiness, or some form of it, and face life's scrutinies because of it. The employees of the diner are scraping by with the little moments they can get. Life is complicated. Jenna doesn't quite know how to escape the toxicity of her marriage, but maybe having an affair with a handsome man who is already comfortable with poking around in the downstairs department store is enough to make her realise something: she used to be mine—and she can be mine again. All I need is some *sugar, butter, flour*.

“You Matter to Me”

Out of context, this is a song I would want if I were to get married. It is elegantly gorgeous, spelling out the love and admiration two people have for one another beyond the surface-level wants for physical beauty or a body to rest beside. “*You Matter to Me*” effortlessly charmed me. Sung by Drew Gehling and Jessie Mueller on the Broadway cast recording, it is like walking on air—light, flowy, emotional, with an added touch of a monologue about Jenna wishing the same sort of love for her unborn child. Someone to love you in the silences, in the comfort of your presence, as an escape from the daunting realities of the world around you.

But it is also a song about two adulterers.

Jenna and Dr. Pomatter are having an affair on their spouses and neither seems likely to confess the truth of this grandiose sort of love. So, while Pomatter confesses ‘*come out of hiding, I’m right here beside you // and I’ll stay there as long as you’ll let me*’, and Jenna confesses ‘*all of this time I’ve been keeping my mind on the running away // and for the first time, I think I’d consider the stay*’, you reckon with a simple truth. Both of these people are attempting to outrun their situations. We know very little about Pomatter’s marriage—but we know Jenna is married to an abusive, controlling husband, so we do want to root for her happiness. Yet the underlying context is embedded in the song. The song is not a superlative: neither confesses that the other is the first person they have loved, or the greatest, or even the person they love the most in this very moment. Yet. The wording of “*You Matter to Me*” makes certain notions of the relationship between Jenna and Pomatter obvious. Neither utters the word *love*, but they acknowledge how much they *matter* to one another.

You matter to me

Simple and plain and not much to ask from somebody

Their affair is uncomplicated because they are both still married. While Jenna grapples with a truly awful marriage, saving every penny possible for the pie-making contest and a potential getaway, the last thing she is desperate for is another marriage. Although Pomatter rarely mentions his wife, the silences are obvious enough—he has no desire to leave her. When Jenna discovers he’s out-of-office to attend a funeral with his wife, it cements in Jenna’s mind the sort of relationship they have. The affair is built out of a mutual comfort, a matter of mattering, yet this is not some perfect fairytale romance. Not the perfect escape from a loveless, tiresome marriage. It is complicated.

I hope someday, somebody wants to hold you for twenty minutes straight

They don’t pull away, they don’t look at your face

And they don’t kiss you

Jenna speaks to her baby, wrapped in Pomatter’s arms. This moment resonates with me—the thing Jenna wants above all else in this moment is to be appreciated without endless attention. To matter, without being engulfed in *love*. When you compare the relationship she has with Pomatter to that of the relationship she has with her husband Earl, you see her need for *comfort*. Earl is confronting, but desperate for physical affection, always requesting kisses and attempting to be intimate. Pomatter and Jenna’s affair began intimately—they have sex several times in the doctor’s office—but as it develops, she finds herself curling up and snuggling into the warmth of him saying those four simple words: *you matter to me*.

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‘I just won 1.3 million on the fake pokies. In my bag, without trying.’ She huffs, rooting around in her purse for a pair of ocean blue sunglasses. The purse is a similar shade of faux-crocodile. When the man she’s sitting beside turns to her, flashing his beige teeth, she says, ‘I feel like a slushie.’ Her laugh is rich in tobacco.

They’re sitting on the rooftop of the river ferry, in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, burning in the late-spring sun. She hardly knows the man—he’s somewhere in his early fifties, bald, with a name ripped from the past like Archibald or Benedict. He doesn’t look it, though. Old-fashioned. His scalp is oily and there’s a silver chain scorching the back of his neck. He is a new friend of hers, someone she started messaging online on one of the dating apps where she lies about her age. He probably thinks she’s in her early forties, still basking in the high of a crazed fortieth birthday party where one of her best friends scaled the neighbour’s high fence to fetch something wholly unimportant. One of the dog’s chew toys, maybe, or a soccer ball. Replaceable trinkets. Hardly trinkets at all.

With eyes hidden behind sunglasses, she tilts back her head and forgets the world for a moment. Gesine’s pale arms are folded in her lap. The ferry drifts forward on the river, coming to a hesitant stop at one of the more populated terminals. Over the speaker, the ferry’s captain announces it has docked at South Bank, and Gesine suddenly lurches forward, slinging the purse over her shoulder. As she eases herself down the steep staircase, calling out to Archie-or-Benny over her shoulder, someone’s young kid thumps their head into the railing. A high-pitched wail erupts, and Gesine groans, meandering through the gaps between people in the indoor seating area of the ferry.

Waiting for them at the terminal is Gesine’s blonde-haired daughter, licking the melting ice cream off the darkly-coloured waffle cone. She’s in her early twenties. Doesn’t look much like her mother. Gesine envelopes Rowen in her arms, kissing her softly on the cheek. Daughter reacts—she squirms away, clearly embarrassed in the presence of a complete stranger. The male friend introduces himself and Rowen smiles, politely, letting the ice cream drip onto her painted fingernails.

‘You came,’ Gesine says, miming to take a mouthful of a bite out of the bulbous ice cream hill atop the waffle cone. ‘You never leave the house, certainly not to come see me.’

They begin along the river’s edge, boiling underneath the sun. Archie-or-Benedict asks a handful of boring and slightly inappropriate questions directed at Rowen, who pays complete attention to the dessert instead. Her answers are short, to the point, somewhat biting. In the middle, her mother mediates: Gesine tells her new man friend to be less of a nuisance in pants, and she tells her daughter to be more engaged, more riveted by his pure existence. These things she says mostly to herself, the head voice that yearns to break out. Instead, she merely communicates through pointed glances.

‘This is where I got the ice cream,’ Rowen says, pointing with her free hand towards a metallic-silver van parked in the middle of a curving walkway. Gesine and her friend make short glances towards the van, paying it little attention. Rowen takes a bite of the ice cream, recoiling from the cold.

Gesine points with a manicured finger towards a veering path and they follow her lead. In the warmth, she watches the glistening reflection of Archie-or-Benny’s bald head, pretending to be brushing off a fallen leaf or a speck of something as she runs a hand over it. ‘This is close to where you parked, wasn’t it?’ She says, thinking for a moment she has caught herself in the mirror atop his head. Wrinkles expose themselves from behind the pair of ocean blue sunglasses. Gesine shivers, and her daughter notices, flicking her head with a half-concerned stare.

Her male friend chimes in with a response, something to the tune of ‘yes’ or ‘yep’, and Gesine combs her fingers through her hair. They all linger at the landing of a concrete staircase. Rowen is

finishing the ice cream. Her fingers are sticky on the paper napkin. Archie-or-Benny seems likely to attempt a peck on the cheek, but he suddenly doesn't budge. They make idle chit-chat, him and this dark-haired woman older than he knows, but perhaps he realises.

'Keep in touch then,' she says, leaning toward him, but not for a smooch. 'Have a good night,' and here she would have inserted his name, had she bothered to remember it.

Archie-or-Benny saunters down the concrete staircase and opens the glass door leading into the carpark, disappearing underground. Mother and daughter glance at one another, only somewhat uneasily. 'Did you have your fun?' Rowen says, biting.

'I'm bored and lonely.' Gesine laughs.

'He seems perfectly average.'

Gesine shrugs the suggestion off, and the two begin wandering once more through the urban landscape. Rowen pauses at a water bubbler to wash the stickiness off her hands. Her mother, with arms folded, looks uncomfortably grumpy in the heat.

'You make me feel so old and haggard,' she says, looking away before she can glimpse at her daughter's reaction. Rowen unbends from washing her hands and takes a short step towards Gesine. Her thin frame made noticeable by the summer dress the colour of honeydew skin. Gesine turns back, forcing a comforted smile, although for that moment neither of them speak a word to each other.

They wander past a ginormous spinning structure—the Eye, or Wheel, or whatever nickname they denominate for it—and Rowen shields her eyes to attempt to see inside the highest of the swaying compartments. The Ferris wheel is suspended as a family of three boards one of the carriages, the young girl of three or four disappearing into the shadows of the tinting. Gesine laughs, but what about isn't so obvious. Her eyes are following the family as their shadowed forms get comfortable in the compartment, and the wheel begins to turn, lifting them off further into the air. Maybe she's screaming in joy, the three-year-old girl. Or in terror, nervousness becoming a new limb of her body. Too small and petite to be so certain of her mortality.

'C'mon, let's keep moving,' Gesine said, placing a hand on Rowen's shoulder, only briefly.

Underneath a gorgeous tunnel of greenery, they narrowly avoid a young kid barrelling forward without looking. Rowen's movements are obvious, startled, her hands darting out of the way first before anything else. Gesine begrudgingly moves, changing her path forward. In her stare, it's apparent she has outgrown *children*. Being around them, moving heaven and earth for them. Rowen isn't a small bundle of joy anymore.

'When you were little, we didn't come here much,' she says, giving a quick glance to her daughter. 'I didn't have the money for everything the other kids got, and I wasn't about to splurge on rides on the expensive Ferris wheel, or whatever sort of kid-friendly event they put together in the early 2000s.' Gesine smirks, but she isn't looking anywhere in particular now. Just the scenery as it passes. The conservatorium. A brightly-coloured staircase she doesn't completely comprehend. She wants to change the topic all of the sudden, ask her daughter what those different colours mean, if they mean something, but Rowen stays focused.

'We didn't leave the house much at all, Mum,' she interjects, trying to keep her voice low.

'I was keeping us protected.'

'I know, you always said so. Monetary protection, like you stashing fifty-dollar notes in old toothpaste boxes at the back of the cupboard under the sink to keep us protected. Rainy day funds.'

'You weren't supposed to know about those,' Gesine says.

Rowen laughs, a soft chuff. 'You could keep me inside the house, but not in my own room.' She darts off, away from her mother, for a moment as an elderly couple passes through the centre of the path. 'Out of boredom I told myself little stories about those toothpaste boxes.'

'What sort of stories?'

Rowen sighs. 'That you stored cash there for a secret drop, like they did in animated spy shows I watched when you sat me in front of the television. Someone would come to collect it, they would know the money was hidden in a bent-a-bit toothpaste box, brand-name toothpaste.' Rowen looks to Gesine with a stupid sort of smile on her face. 'I know, it's just a dumb kid thing.'

'Never wanted to give any of that cash to anyone,' Gesine says, almost laughing.

But she doesn't.

Rowen makes a small gesture with her hand, pointing towards a public restroom, and her mother just nods. While she's in the bathroom, Gesine waits outside, contemplating a cigarette. The packet in her purse is three-thirds empty and she plucks at the cigarette for a while. A slow, precise movement. The cigarette lifts in her fingers, then stumbles back into the packet. Gesine makes a scrunched-up expression at a passing kid, probably only eight-years-old.

'Smoke if you want to smoke,' Rowan says, wiping her palms on the summery dress.

'You know I'm trying to avoid it.'

'It's sickening, yes.'

'It's this or it's that with you, my daughter. A forgivable necessity or a sickening ruin, and you only want to make the decision once you hear whatever comes out of my lips.' Gesine slings the purse back over her shoulder, ignoring the packet, ignoring the cigarette. 'I am trying to not go into an early grave, because all you did once you started learning new things in high school is harass me for taking a smoke break to ruin my dirty, filthy lungs.'

Rowen scoffs.

'What does the doctor say?'

'Oh, my doctor, of course he says, *keep puffing away, Gesine, it keeps you young and beautiful.*'

Rowen scoffs again, looking ahead as they continue to meander along the wide sandy-coloured path. People litter the promenade, seated at tables, observing their kids on playgrounds, buying ice creams from that little metallic van. The loop closes.

'Do what you want.'

Gesine scowls. 'You come at me with that bullshit, what does the doctor say?' She lowers her voice when a young mother, with an infant straddled to her chest, wanders past with pursed lips. Gesine's expression reads: *well so-rry, mother of the year*. 'We always had the brand-name toothpaste, you know. Maybe I didn't keep every single box, I would've flattened down a lot of them, put them in for recycling if I remembered.'

'Thank you for saving the environment then.'

Gesine doesn't respond. She gives her daughter a false smile, a grimace, and they soon have their backs to most of the commotion of the playgrounds and the children. Of course, in no time they would come upon the strung-together 'beach' that remains somewhat attentioned regardless of the weather. Gesine watches a hungered ibis cross the path in front of her.

'I love you, but when I see you, we start these arguments,' she utters, adjusting the strap of her purse. Rowen laughs softly. 'Pick on me then.'

'I don't want to do this in public if we don't have to,' Rowen says, straightening out the dress.

Gesine closes her eyes for just one moment. Enough to see something shimmering behind her eyelids, no doubt. 'Come home then.'

'For dinner?' Rowen begins, directing the two of them out of the path of a father and his teenage son. Ice cream stains the boy's hand. 'Where you serve something like your mother's recipe for spaetzle and bury insults underneath it? You find a new way to tell me why I wasn't prepared to move out and be an adult while you're complimenting the way I styled my hair.'

Gesine rolls her eyes. 'Come for another dinner, my darling.'

'Mum,' Rowen says, giving her a side glance.

‘You expect me to say something like, I promise not to pester you with my motherly concerns, but I always speak my truth.’ She sighs. As they pass another ice cream store, and a cheap-and-tacky touristy gift store, mother and daughter avoid each other’s gaze. An obvious tourist lingers in the store, turning a wide-brimmed hat round in her hands. Her tanned skin is overwhelmingly slick with sunscreen. ‘All I do is care for you, and spend all of my money,’ she says, craning her neck to watch the tourist in the gift-store. ‘and win at nothing that really matters, and talk to strange men.’

‘I thought we liked... what’s-his-name.’

‘I don’t know, Artie is fine enough.’ Gesine freezes in place, taking her daughter’s hand suddenly. Holding it, gently caressing it, she gives Rowen a smile. ‘You are my priority.’

‘Then let me just exist in my life.’ Rowen shakes off the hand, shakes off the glance, and the pair continue walking. Onwards past the extravagant-hat restaurant, the Nando’s, whatever was once in the boarded-up place. Although with all the glass it isn’t so much boarded up as “cellophaned-over”, with the tacky-looking *this could be yours* marketing.

‘I’m sorry,’ Rowen says, straightening out the dress, again.

Gesine laughs, under her breath. ‘It’s good you like to fight back at me.’

‘Mum, I don’t need the text messages like *I hope you’re vetting the men you go on dates with like I do.*’ Rowen wipes the sweat from her forehead. ‘They’re helpful, in a way, but I can watch over myself.’

‘You’re young, they don’t get what that means.’

‘What does it mean? That I’m helpless?’

‘No, no,’ Gesine says, meandering forward on the path alongside her daughter. ‘It means you don’t know every sign, because some of them are unfamiliar to you. The way some men talk unlike how they dress, you get me?’ She gestures to the right, and they move further away from the water. The nervousness of the afternoon must be getting to Gesine—she plucks at the purse again, almost reaching for a cigarette, but stops herself.

‘Inevitably, you find some way to think of me as naïve,’ Rowen interjects.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Just fucking smoke a cigarette.’

Gesine sighs, snatching the packet up in her hand. They stand on the sidewalk of a street blockaded off for a weekend crafts marketplace. Crowds wind and weave past the stalls, and the air is thick not with smoke, never with smoke, but the smell of cinnamon and handmade soaps. She clasps the cigarette pack almost nervously.

‘All they do is slowly punish me for ageing,’ she says.

‘Oh bugger, Mum, you’re getting old.’

‘Darling,’ Gesine continues, shoving the packet back into her purse. ‘Just come for another dinner at mine, sleep in your old room again, let me brew some coffee we don’t drink.’ It isn’t begging—there is no look of forlornness from Gesine, there never will be. She isn’t the sort of mother to plead for her daughter’s affection—and yet. ‘Lord, I am sweating.’

Ignoring the latter, Rowen mindlessly begins browsing a stall, lifting a pair of earrings tacked to a paper slip. ‘I can come for dinner sometime, that’s no crazy bargain for you.’

‘I love you, darling,’ Gesine says, similarly lifting up a pair of earrings—these look like small oblong mandarins, pecked skin like wrinkles. Rowen frowns, setting the paper slip back on the hook.

She doesn’t respond, not for a while. They walk in silence, admiring things from afar.

MURIEL'S WEDDING

As quintessentially Australian a musical could be, *Muriel's Wedding*, based on the film of the same name, tells the story of Muriel, sometimes Mariel, who dreams of just one thing: to be a bride. Bridal shop windows call her name. She adorns herself in wedding dresses, imagining that someday, this will be her truth. But life is oh so complicated. She forges a complicated path: stealing money to fund lush tropical holidays; moving to Sydney to rebrand her identity; attempting to outrun her past; marrying a Russian man so he can compete in the Olympics. The latter is her big opportunity: here comes the bride, all dressed in lies. A faux-romance, but she can at least give it a try.

Obsessed with the music of ABBA, Muriel dreams of a life like one of their songs. The happier, upbeat ones, like "*Dancing Queen*". The Swedish band underscores Muriel's story: the bogan family she inexplicably cannot escape, her blossoming friendship with Rhonda, and her attachment to the idea of falling in love and getting married. She performs "*Waterloo*" with Rhonda on the vacation, high on the excitement of doing something for herself, albeit through nefarious means. They don't recognise ABBA ensembles and bond over their shared spirit for more than simply the music and the lyrics—it's the spirit for an elated confidence to approach the world grinning. On a downward turn, Muriel's mother Betty performs "*SOS*"—a sharply emotional tread of life being suddenly like one of ABBA's songs. At its heart, *Muriel's Wedding* is a celebration of the excitement of youth, and the perils of getting too swept away by your ambitions, but Betty's character arc carries over in my head. The mother to a handful of children who expect her to wait on them hand-and-foot, and a husband who sidelines her for his politics, Betty confronts the depression of a life going nowhere. She is a brutal juxtaposition to Muriel, who takes life by the horns and is desperate to avoid noticing any of the consequences.

Muriel's Wedding has the quirky charm I love. It's opening number is brash, crude, and chirps on the sort of behaviour that is everything but our leading lady, Muriel. *The girls are trim // we have no pubic hair // their boobs are round and pushed up* speaks to this succinctly in three lines: Muriel, however, isn't the standardised image of beauty, nor does she attempt to confine to it. Her dream of a wedding involves everything she already possess—just with a man to kiss when the officiant announces it is time to kiss the bride. Muriel's avoidance of the messaging within "*Sunshine State of Mind*" is not only positive representation for feeling comfortable in your body but reaffirms that she is uniquely herself. Unfortunately, she garners a lot of criticism. In "*Can't Hang*", she is abandoned by her friends because they consider her 'immature', and a 'trashbag', and consider themselves superior because they're hot and they've all had sex. Muriel is the odd one out, a fish out of water not merely in her hometown of Porpoise Spit, but in Sydney too, where she moves with Rhonda after the flashy vacation. Her name change to Mariel is only a disguise—she attempts to rebrand herself but becomes too attached to *ideas*. The idea of a marriage. The idea of a husband, of being a wife. The idea of fitting in and being adored by the friends who abandoned her. The mere idea of what catching the bride's bouquet represents.

I have always loved the original film the musical is based on. Toni Collette is charmingly awkward as Muriel, fumbling ahead in her life. It captures the Australian spirit but exposes how uncomfortable life can be, all of the sudden. Rhonda's sudden cancer scare is heartbreaking, and Rachel Griffiths delivers a performance in the film that really does feel genuine for an Australian going through tough shit. Her anger bites, but she is vulnerable too.

Adapting a film to the stage can be challenging, certainly in the eyes of the fans who have high expectations. Kate Miller-Heidke and Keir Nuttall's music for *Muriel's Wedding the Musical* is beautiful, devastating, and so incredibly earnest. It's Australian. And only a little bit cringe.

“The Bouquet”

Someone is // gonna wanna marry me someday // I know it

When Muriel sings these words, the emotions are flooding in. Having just caught the bride’s bouquet at Tania Degano’s wedding, she is aflush with the hope and unbridled optimism that comes with the mere suggestion she could be the next person at that wedding to get married. Yet she is marred by self-confidence issues and desperate to belong. When she sings, *They’re wrong about me // and I’ll show them all when they see // that he’s six foot tall, and ripped*, she’s clutching tightly to the promise that one day everyone in Porpoise Spit will see she isn’t the failure image they project onto her. It’s a little bit delusional, but this is Muriel’s earliest *I want* song. She wants a man who will love her, someone who is the very definition of male beauty. Tall, handsome, built like a god. But she doesn’t want her family, any of her friends, or any of the spectators to think this perfect union is anything less.

They’ll say “Isn’t she radiant? Look at our Muriel // Isn’t she perfect? Isn’t she beautiful?”

Who would’ve thought she’d be someone?

Built into her ambitions to be loved and the image of the gushing bride is Muriel’s deep-seated desire to be appreciated by the people around her. We get a picture of her family life after the fact—the Heslops are an unloving sort of family, in the sense that Bill Heslop cares more about his political career, Betty is depressive and craves to be acknowledged, and Muriel’s siblings only seem to care for sport, whatever they’re drinking, and lounging around in the house. There isn’t a suggestion that Muriel has the sort of support system at home to bolster her self-esteem. She yearns to get married to prove herself, because having a hunky man on her arm is proof of status. Yet, it’s true, her buried-underneath wants are rooted in the childhood type of longing for the big white wedding. Muriel believes in all the traditions—catching the bouquet is a reassurance that the next bride-to-be should be her. She doesn’t sing with uncertainty.

But someone is // gonna really notice me, someday, I know it

Not ‘*maybe*’ or ‘*I hope someone notices me*’, Muriel is assured by catching the bouquet that her biggest dream is an actuality, something that will happen in her future. It’s the sort of confidence that comes with feeling discarded. This committal to prove everyone wrong.

Someone is // gonna come and sweep me all away

And they’ll crowd in to watch // and they’ll cry and they’ll smile when they see me

It’s interesting to think about how Muriel sees the way not just how people should react to her, but how they will. It’s this want for attention, to be noticed not by one someone but by everyone around her, and for them to express two specific emotions: happiness, with a smile, and pride, with the tears. The sort of crying that is reserved for weddings.

“*The Bouquet*” is short and sweet. Three verses long, an imperfect introduction to the character of Muriel as she stands there clutching the bouquet she just caught. In a dress she very likely did steal, Muriel previews a future crafted out of childhood dreams and insecurity. When I first fell in love with this song, I played it often enough I started to memorise the way Max McKenna sung it. The light little laughs, the accent, the giddiness just sitting on the surface. In 2019, “*The Bouquet*” was third on my most-played playlist generated by Spotify at the end of the year. There’s something about the bare, exposed promise that rests within this song. Muriel wants to be loved, she wants to feel beautiful, and she knows she deserves these things just as much as everyone else. I’ve struggled for a long time with how I look, how I feel in my heart, the thoughts that rattle around in my head. I think I must have just connected back then, and still do now, with this succinct message. Someone is going to want to marry you someday. People will see how beautiful you are. You put that into motion.

Don’t you guys remember? // I caught the bouquet.

• • •

‘Everyone, please welcome our Eligible Boy!’ With an extended arm, the announcer gestures out to the back of the stage, where a velvet curtain sashays. The announcer, a man in his late 50s with a light-blond toupee to hide his receding hairline, flashes a comical grin of salt-white teeth. The Eligible Boy sweeps the curtain out of his face and the audience erupts into the expected stampede of applause. OUR ELIGIBLE BOY! someone screams out, but the camera remains centred on the dark-haired, fair-skinned twenty-something-year-old waltzing towards the announcer. The sound stage falls into a silence. The announcer takes a solitary step sideways, revealing the skinny, greyed-out barstool. Somewhat of an eyesore against the colourful backdrop. ‘Come, sit, sit.’ The announcer sweeps his arm like a revolving door. Our eligible boy does as he is told.

He is: 23, homosexual, on the cusp of unemployment. Depressed, loveless, previously in a two-year relationship which ended when he realised his partner was an incubus demon doing some experimentation. Hobbies include: swimming, video gaming, and recently, pretending he’s not unhappy to his therapist. You may call him Apollo. Mr. Wallace if you’re nasty.

Apollo makes himself comfortable on the barstool, smiling out to the audience. The announcer, picking at his moustache, reminds everyone of the very basic rules: our beautiful, handsome boy will take turns asking questions to his potential suitors. They linger behind this contraption known as a ‘contractible wall’. ‘In a moment,’ the announcer says, ‘we’ll introduce them to you, the audience. Now no giving away the game! No shouting, *number three is ugly as sin!*’ Harassing laughter. The announcer appears almost to applaud himself. It’s a good crowd tonight, no crazy freaks, except for the one woman you heard earlier. There stands a moderate chance she will mutter something unintelligible and be escorted out the fire exit door with tears staining her cheeks.

Four squares of carpeted floor open to squares of darkness and the quiet hum of machinery clicks as four figures are raised out of the void. More applause. Apollo barely reacts. To him, nothing has been altered, not yet. Sometimes they hear the roar of a crowd thirsty for some good entertainment and start licking their lips, salivating at who could be behind the collapsible wall. Apollo looks to the announcer. The four suitors adjust in their plush leather chairs—four attractive men, noticeably typical, dressed entirely in black. Not matching outfits, however. One wears a simple, elegant tuxedo. Another wears a button-down shirt and chino pants. Every single one of them has the same shit-eating grin.

‘Alright, you’ve all met Apollo and seen the boys,’ the announcer says, beaming out to his audience. Subtle applause, on cue. ‘How about we make a love connection?’ Someone whistles. Apollo recoils at the whooping, the sound travelling across the studio. He stares out, half-blinded by the lighting, but oh does he look more than excited to be this close to meeting the next love of his life.

HOW ABOUT.

WE MAKE A LOVE.

CONNECTION.

Let’s meet our boys beyond the wall.

Bachelor Number One! You’re wearing a suit. Are you the fancy type? Do you make fortunes in bonds and stocks, do you make the boy in your life, your little lover, kneel down in front of you and blow you in the office with its walls made of glass? That is in fact a story you told us has happened multiple times. You like watching them get in trouble for nodding their head yes. Don’t you?

Bachelor Number Two! Hair the colour of my moustache. You like to get pissed on, don’t you? Oops! I am certain that would have been one of our eligible boy’s many targeted questions. What is it your

mother does for a living? And why did you frequent the place looking for lovers? Apollo! Will you shit in Bachelor Number Two's mouth??

Bachelor Number Three! In a sleek shirt, buttoned up, and those slimming pants. Is that a banana you snatched from crafts services or were you just down in the dungeon jerking it off thinking about me? A little birdie told me you're a pathetic disappointment. Is it true? He has a degradation kink but he only likes solo play, it's Bachelor Number Three!

Bachelor Number Four! That's your lucky number, isn't it? You have been known to distrust other numbers—you request the fourth floor of hotels, will always make sure there is at least one four in a grocery bill, and when you swing that seven-inch penis of yours, you cry out *FOUR!* And pray to sweet Jesus you damage the sight of the twink whose cum you'll be drinking. A lucky four pendant hangs from your neck too. Dare I ask, what are the four most important things in your life?

ONE OF THEM.

MUST BE.

LOVE.

The audience's throats must burn from this raucous shouting. Apollo, sitting bolt-upright, relaxes as the announcer moves past the separating wall. The toupee becomes slightly askew when the man bounds forward, returning to an assuredly-rehearsed spot on the firm, crimson carpet. There is an overabundance of anticipation in his voice. 'Apollo, ready for your first question?' Chairs squeak from the audience. People must be moving around in their seats, hooked on this show like a drug.

Apollo nods his head, and 'Yes, I am,' he says, which garners its own round of applause. Everyone loves to clap at these tapings. When the show was first airing, the ten-or-so-years-younger host would flaunt around a microphone, pointing it in everyone's faces. Getting his steps in. Now, through an advancement in technology, or budget, mic-packs are strapped onto the contestants. Apollo's voice echoes through the studio.

'Bachelor Number One...' he echoes confidently, leaning in the direction of the separating wall. 'I'm bringing you home to meet my parents. How do you try to impress them?'

A pause, deliberate, passionate. Bachelor Number 1 is playing up for the camera poised on him. 'Oh, the parents—you know, I'm good in front of an audience. Nothing spanky in front of your mother, but your father...how about I get him on his knees, begging to destroy his gag reflex on my erect—then I tell them both about my achievements, humbly, of course. Parents like to know their son would be marrying a success story. Do your parents have high hopes for you, Apollo?'

A pointed question returned. The announcer plays up wide-shock, with an overexaggerated 'O' shaped mouth. A circus clown waiting for balls to be flung. Apollo shifts, willing to respond. 'They would be,' and he hesitates on finding the perfect word to sum up the emotions, 'glad I found someone who didn't underplay themselves.'

'I like to play with myself,' Bachelor Number Three utters, unasked, with a grin.

Bachelor Number Two extends an arm and pats him on the shoulder. Also grinning, also looking foolishly confident, borderline arrogant.

Without delay: 'Bachelor Number Four, same question.'

'I would first shake their hands, ask them how they preferred I call them, and then check the room for unlucky signs or omens.' At this, Bachelor Number One cocks his head and scrunches up his face. 'If there isn't a four in the room, noticeably, I will offer your parents a charm I keep in my pocket. This goes over well with the parents of my suitors. They'll keep it on the mantelpiece, front and centre.' He blushes. 'Then, we'll begin the talking.'

'Um.' Apollo leans forward hesitantly. 'Thank you, Number Four.'

The announcer does something strange with his hips, a sexual gesture. The crowd laughs.

The crowd will laugh even when the act itself makes no sense in the context.

We're making television here, someone would say, if you asked why.

Apollo taps his chin, once, then twice, and one final time. A small gesture, but you can imagine the audience leaning in, squinting their eyes just to see it. *He's thinking of a new question*, one of the children in the audience would be thinking.

This is an inappropriate show for a daytime taping.

'Bachelor Number Two!' He beams. 'What would you say is your primary love language?'

Over in the line of four, Bachelor Number Two screws up his face once more. He mouths out *love language?* to the audience, and a stray belly laugh or two erupts from his half of the audience.

Bachelor Number Two, running a hand through his bleached blonde hair, makes his response: 'I love when my partner uses dirty language in the bedroom.' He simulates a gesture towards the audience—clap for me! clap for me! he begs out with those sickly bull mastiff eyes. Loud, isolated claps erupt from the audience. Large-handed claps.

'Same question for you, number three.'

Bachelor Number Three adjusts his crotch and smiles. 'I would say words of affirmation...or defamation, really. I used to work at a call centre. The cruelty of the other folk on the end of the line sometimes...could really make a man bound to the bathroom afterwards to finger himself on the toilet.'

On Apollo: an unexplainable facial expression. Sort of a combination of shame and surprise and irreversible revulsion. Then, he tilts his head, unsure, perhaps suddenly self-conscious about judging people's kinks on taped-for-the-air television. He adjusts his butt on the barstool.

ONE QUESTION.

DOWN.

ANYONE NOTICE.

THE LOVE BREWING.

Fast-paced, lightning-speed:

How many children do you want?

- 1) All of my children will be down your throat.
- 2) Children get in the way of actually enjoying life. They're interruptions. We're having kinky sex until your heart gives out.
- 3) Uh. I guess we could adopt one from China?
- 4) Four.

Where would we go on vacation together?

- 1) Believe the Las Vegas hype. We're high-rollers until we pass out drunk.
- 2) An all-inclusive place, adult-only. Free bevs and happy endings, baby.
- 3) Somewhere isolated and secluded. A cabin in the woods?? I don't have a passport.
- 4) You would be wrong to assume the Four Seasons, my love. Prolly Spain.

We have an argument. How do you propose we smooth things out?

- 1) You either take my rock-hard cock up your ass, or we're going to bed fuming.
- 2) You either take my rock-hard cock up your ass, or we're going to bed fuming. (*ditto*)
- 3) You find a way to apologise to me, and I forgive you, and we sleep peacefully.
- 4) You list the four reasons you think you were in the right, and I do the same, for why I think I was in the right. We give these lists to our therapist, who reminds us that arguing is heathy, or whatever, and we resent our therapist for months.

The questions simmer. The announcer, a bird constantly in flight, darts back around the wall and lingers beside Apollo with a hand on his shoulder. The gesture is strangely intimate. Apollo doesn't buck the hand away, although his attention is on the audience, this seated crowd beyond. He looks to be squinting to make out the faces, as if he expects someone in the bleachers to be at all familiar to him. These audiences are typically lined with childless women, creepy old men, stay-at-home parents in desperate need for something to distract their children, and the occasional depressive past contestant attempting to claw their way back on stage for a second-coming. They all roar and applaud just the same. They all pay the same seat-filler fee, the same make-some-noise-and-laugh downpayment.

And yet.

AND YET.

ONE OF THEM.

COULD BE EVERYTHING.

Apollo doesn't understand it. This feeling welling inside him. It transcends the basic premise of the dating show—you ask four suitors a handful of questions, most of them pre-scripted, and you hope and prod to find a true, vying sort of match. Verisimilitude. Apollo squints his eyes and leans forward. The announcer, with an animated, performative expression, offers a false, invisible microphone to his so-called Eligible Boy. A title thrust on the lonely-hearted.

'Whatcha thinkin' about there, Forlorn Boy?'

Apollo breaks from his focus, or lack thereof, and mimes tapping the head of the invisible microphone. It's all quite phallic. 'Can I ask the audience a question?' he says, round-eyed but serious, convinced and astute. The announcer momentarily breaks character—wouldn't you love to believe there is an ordinary sort of man beneath the façade? He simply nods his head, and the bleached blonde toupee shakes atop his head.

Bachelors One through Four react accordingly: Bachelor Number One begins to rise out of his seat and throw his arms out, sporadic, nonconforming movements. Bachelor Number Two starts pinching the flesh at his wrists, mouthing words unintelligible. Bachelor Number Three curses out a 'fuck off.' Bachelor Number Four simply starts thumbing the lucky charm around his neck and closes his eyes.

Apollo sighs. All he could possibly be reacting to is the alarmed *fuck-off*, but from his stare you get the sense he knows his four suitors find it alarming. *He* might not choose one of them at all. There is an intense silence, an anticipation, over the crowd.

'Who in the audience finds me attractive?' He says, bluntly, scanning the studio. Immediately he is greeted with a few brazen *I do*'s, a handful of screeching *no*'s, the whaling indifference of a *meh* and a shrug. Some people in the far reaches of the crowd have raised their hands. [A camera is now pointed, for once, into its audience. Spotlights fall haphazardly in sections where creepy old men and single fathers and reality television lovers perch on foldable seats.] Apollo asks another question: 'Who believes in romance, true romance?' He studies the responses he can tie to different faces in the lit-up house. Ignore the NOISE. Bachelors One to Four threatening to upend the dividing wall and crucify him for *breaking tradition*.

You break the rules, you don't find love—fuck off!

'You,' he says, pointing to a dark-haired twenty-something man sitting wedged between two mid-sixties women. He's bathed in light, the edges of a spotlight netting him in it. 'If you were to be a bird, what would you be?'

The lone audience member smiles, and responds, 'I would be something like a pelican. A bird of flight. Beautiful, majestic. I was never scared of the one from *Finding Nemo* as a kid.'

Apollo grins back at him. 'I have another question for you,' he says.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS

Little Shop of Horrors dares to ask: what would you do if you discovered an alien species of plant that feeds and survives on the consumption of human blood? When Seymour suddenly becomes father to a ravenous little cretin he names Audrey II, because he's deeply in love with Audrey I—a human woman who is dating a sadistic dentist—he sharply has to ask himself that question. What do I do? How the hell do I feed a plant when there are only so many fingers on my hand I can prick to draw blood? Seymour hesitantly forms a bond with Audrey II to attempt to get closer to Audrey I and become more notable and confident in the process. A dorky nerd who works at a florist, Seymour becomes just the right amount of bloodthirsty for the relationship between man and plant to be a success... until it isn't.

The musical is based on a 1960 film with an almost-identical title—the non-musical film is titled *The Little Shop of Horrors* and follows a similar storyline about a man-eating plant. The film spawned an Off-Broadway musical, which was adapted into a 1986 film starring Rick Moranis and Ellen Greene. It's this adaptation, littered with songs like “*Suddenly, Seymour*” and “*Somewhere That's Green*”, that I fell in love with when I first watched it. Although, when I speak about my passion for *Little Shop of Horrors*, there's always one thing I make sure to mention: the original ending is far superior to the theatrical release's ending. Audiences in the late '80s didn't know what they were talking about.

Horror musicals are more infrequently made, in comparison to... musicals in which people die of ordinary causes like consumption and old age and *maybe* a stabbing. Alongside *Sweeney Todd*, *Little Shop of Horrors* combines my love, my obsession truly, with characters bursting into song AND getting brutally murdered. In the film, Steve Martin is Dr. Orin, a sadistic dentist who sings about popping puppies with a BB-gun and bashing kittens' heads in. (This is naturally the reason he became a dentist, to inflict pain on his patients while also getting paid for it). He is unsurprisingly Seymour's rival—Orin and Audrey are together, although his behaviour trails out of the dentist's practice. He is strangely the perfect fit for a horror musical—part horrific representation of the male psyche, part silly goofy singing dentist man.

At the heart of *Little Shop of Horrors* is the romance between Seymour and Audrey. The most well-known song from the musical is their duet, “*Suddenly Seymour*”, in which Audrey confesses to blindly following men because of the trauma of her past, and Seymour finally has the courage to be affectionate towards her. They seal this moment with a kiss, and perhaps, in another life—the theatrical cut—they live happily ever after. This is exactly something Audrey wants: a perfect suburban life with Seymour. But this is a film about a man-eating plant. Seymour tries to manage Audrey II's constant demands for more. Audrey II continues to grow, demand, speak, sing—“*Mean Green Mother From Outerspace*” defines the shift in power completely from Seymour's hand to that of the people-eating plant. Giving Audrey II so much personality and a voice of its own perfectly encapsulates the tone of *Little Shop of Horrors*. It's silly, but emotionally-serious: a singing plant pulls down Seymour's pants, but our main characters in Seymour and Audrey confront the reality of death, and in Audrey's particular case, the uncomfortable reality of being in an abusive relationship.

The puppetry is terrific—by the close of the film, Audrey II is a ginormous physical puppet taking up a sizeable portion of the florist shop. With a mouth wide enough for a human being to fit inside. It's such a wonderful reminder of the potential in using practical effects.

Little Shop of Horrors might serve as a reminder to be wary of mysterious plants, but it also is a passionate story about finding the courage to ask out the beautiful blonde woman who deserves so much better than the cruel motorcycle-riding dentist. Just don't get her murdered.

“Somewhere That’s Green”

A matchbox of our own // a fence of real chain link // a grill out on the patio // disposal in the sink

Audrey wants the simple things. She wants a picture-perfect, magazine-ready home in the suburbs with a husband she adores and children who play Howdy Doody (I don’t really know what that means). She opens the song by confessing this dream about to unfold is unrealistic—she’s in a relationship with a terrible man who has given her a black eye and broken her arm. Audrey thinks the idea of being with Seymour is the fantasy, before everything else. Before the escape from Skid Row, before the little house and the perfect landscaped lawn. Getting out from underneath Orin, her abusive boyfriend, feels an impossible task. She cannot find the confidence to stand up to him, or when she does, she ends up more poorly injured than she has previously. The black eye and broken arm are obvious signs of Audrey’s desperation for a better, shinier life. Something sparkling clean because the plastic is still on the furniture.

He rakes and trims the grass // he loves to mow and weed // I cook like Betty Crocker // and I look like Donna Reed

Audrey’s ideal suburban fantasy is layered with masculine and feminine stereotypes, but her dream confines her to a life she thinks represents *perfection*. The husband does the outdoor manual labour, the wife does the cooking and the cleaning to maintain this image of domestic bliss. It’s a subtle hint at the discomfort of her current relationship—she and Orin are frequently fighting, there is no lawn for him to mow and weed, and her attempts to impress him are often met with disdain because he’s a terrible human being. Audrey believes in this ideal: if she and Seymour can live with one another in the typical standard of a family home, playing stereotypical roles, they can love one another completely. She can escape the burden of Skid Row completely. Not that she ever attributes cruelty and violence to Seymour... although his attempts to keep the man-eating plant satiated say a little otherwise.

“*Somewhere That’s Green*’s title and repeated lyric is not merely a botanical reference to the fact that Audrey and Seymour both work in a florist’s shop, constantly surrounded by green every day, but also of course to the stark difference in view Audrey dreams of possessing. At current, she lives in a tiny apartment in Skid Row, a down-trodden part of the city where the view out the window is a dark, damp street with maybe a handful of homeless people and the glow of streetlamps. It’s a confronting landscape. Audrey cannot take solace in the outside world when her inner world—her relationship with Orin, her injuries—is uncomfortable and dreary. And toxic. Toxicity is a sickly green, true, but Audrey imagines a place that is lush with the vibrance of natural green. It’s no wonder she mentions this masculine-presenting ideal of Seymour mowing and weeding—the mere suggestion of having a lawn to keep well-maintained is a central focus of the escape. Spending her days surrounded by flowers, stalks, and nature, Audrey has been naturally swayed to reflect the other lens of her interior. The side that is teeming with life. Her passion, her sweet-natured spirit. Her adoration for Seymour.

There are a handful of references to television shows—they’ll watch *Lucy (I Love Lucy)*; she’s his *December Bride*; *Father Knows Best*; and *Howdy Doody*—which give the implication that Audrey is centring her idea of the perfect future, with a husband who loves her and children she adores, around what she sees on the TV. It’s a good way to establish more of Audrey’s character. She values what she witnesses. This fantasy life with Seymour exists because of her moulded ideal of suburban bliss, and specifically with him because of how she witnesses him move through the world. She sings, *still that Seymour’s a cutie // well, if not, he’s got inner beauty* because she recognises he would be the sort of husband she deserves to have. The somewhere she dreams of, this place of green, she knows it’s possible, just out of reach.

A picture out of Better Homes // and Gardens magazine // far from Skid Row // I dream we’ll go // somewhere that’s...green.

...

The elevator is not operational when you arrive—and a few zaps of your power achieves only a miniscule shudder. The bellhop, dressed in apricot, taps a sign above your head. *Take the stairs.* You give him a pointed nod, restraining yourself from any more foolish attempts to prove yourself more adept than the working staff. Take the stairs.

‘How long are you here?’ Your partner, taking the stairwell slower than you are, tones from four steps below. He is dressed smartly, having just met with you after a job interview. He spluttered out a disappointed response when you asked him how the meeting went—the perspective employer, he said, *wasn’t very enthused by what I could do with my hands.* Not a euphemism.

You shake off thinking about him, about his unsuccessful attempts to establish a life for himself in this city. He’s starting to gain on you, hastening his pace. ‘Just five days,’ you reply, banging the suitcase into the railing. This journey is awkward and exhausting. You could use a basic spell to lift the suitcase off the ground, maintain focus until your floor, but it’s more complicated to keep your eyes open. The flight was interrupted once or twice by the passing of a class of witches, everyone seemed to know the pilot, and that seemed to shake her because she inevitably killed an albatross on the escape. These privately-owned flights are not your favourite.

Your hotel room is on the fourth floor and he holds open the door as you wedge the suitcase through it and chuckle nervously when you almost squish his foot with your own. Jeremy is your partner of five years and he wants so desperately for you to move here with him—last night, on the phone, he complained about the cost of a water taxi fare, how the merfolk are making a fortune in taxing anyone who plans on speeding across what is essentially their home territory. Everything comes back to transport, then. On the phone, he made a subtle reference to the space in his apartment meant for you. The invariably-cold side of his bed you don’t sleep in—he definitely resents you for this hotel room, but you don’t feel the need to remind him this is a business trip and your boss is going to call the hotel and potentially hex your name if they let her know you never checked in.

Another reason for your partner to resent you: the job.

You are a sit-down travelling salesperson, doing most of your business through a sensible amount of emails and online check-ins. Occasionally the company slips a private-owned flight ticket into your inbox and gives you the details. Prospective client meetings, strange lunchtime encounters at oceanside restaurants with a fishy odour, small magic acts. Clients seem to applaud the minute moments you express what you ingrained within yourself at university. The degree of yours. Your partner thinks the work could be easily-converted here, to this city on the coastline, where most of the restaurants have a fishy odour regardless if seafood is on the menu. Clients operate out west, he reminds you.

At the hotel room door, you fumble around for the keycard that was just handed to you four flights down but has somehow already become entangled with everything else in your pockets. Phone, sunglasses, gnawed pencil, loose goose feather (for good luck), clothes peg, two rubber bands, folded handkerchief, apple, and a small velvety bag of dice. Your favourite pair of pants, at least for when you’re travelling. Endless pockets. Ah, there it is, the thin plastic hotel keycard.

‘Slower,’ your partner says, after the first insertion is hasty and glares back at you with a pulsing crimson light. ‘Slower, but with intention.’ Something a university professor would have said to you, with certainty. Something your partner has naturally picked up from his own time studying, and then from bosses, and now from these measly interviews he bombs without fail. The door unlocks. He carries the suitcase into the room and suddenly there’s privacy between the two of you. You blow out air and think about kissing him, but you don’t. Is this punishment? Maybe.

You have a shower. Your partner is in the ‘bedroom’ part of the hotel room, which is to say he isn’t in the bathroom with you while you strip yourself bare and think obsessively over the phone call from last night. How clingingly he dreams of a permanence to these trips, although sometimes you try to weasel out of them at the last minute because not having to be around him in person is a form of a glamour spell. Something is hidden, something is obscured.

‘Feel more refreshed?’ Your partner says as you waltz out of the bathroom. You do, although the exhaustion still erupts out of your body, a physical manifestation of the pain. Blisters are no doubt forming on your feet. There will be a crick in your neck in the morning. Headaches and strange joint pain a healing witch would cure within seconds, but you don’t think about leaving the hotel room.

When rushing your partner out of the door, a heaviness sitting on your shoulders, you don’t think about leaving the hotel room, or even the hotel itself.

You think about sleeping.

You drift off the moment you magically switch off the light with a flick of the wrist.

When your eyes adjust to the darkness, you aren’t in the hotel room. There is a floor-to-ceiling mirror opposite you—your face is concealed in shadow, but you notice the same features, albeit drawn down by a noticeable weightiness. Deep, purpled creases. Makes you want to scream. Except you have no voice, you notice that. Wherever you find yourself, there is something sterilised yet unsanitary about the space. Thick curtains are tied back with frayed rope. These little details come to you as the room begins to brighten in the glow of two wall sconces. You had flicked them on, fearing this isolation. It is a hotel room. Not yours, or one familiar. There is a dining room chair nailed to the ceiling, directly above your head. A rug half-stapled to the roof, half to the adjacent wall. It’s ancient, textured, rich in its tapestry from some forgotten pattern of the past. Looks strangely like the patterns on butterfly wings.

Wriggling your toes, moving your feet, you inch yourself out of the bed. It isn’t much of a bed at all, more a collapsible sofa bed, sheeted in deep burgundy. It smells like warm milk. There are picture frames on the wallpapered walls of this oblong room, with a hallway to the right. Pictures of extreme close-ups of the body—a pair of golden eyes, which do not follow you, and a pierced ear. A bruised kneecap. Nine toes. The tenth severed and photographed alone, in a still-life separate, underneath a light switch. Still-life because it has a painted quality to it, a phantom dream, the wish for a pinkie toe to be reunited. A framed photograph of yourself and your partner, married.

No necessity for turning doorhandles—you flick your wrist and the passage opens to another hallway, identical in design. The carpet underneath your feet is wet, as if rained upon in the past half-hour, and you wander into another hotel room, with another four dining room chairs tacked to the ceiling. Fine craftsmanship. Sleek wooden chairs, cherry red. You picture yourself planted in one of them, engaging in political conference with a gathering of your peers. Blood rushing to your brain. A red-hot face of Cauldron-Certified tea. You grimace as the topic of conversation floods over to whether immigrating is a viable decision for everyone involved, not merely just the self-indulgent few, who want to forge a new comfortable for themselves. In his arms you can feel so self-indulgent too.

Suddenly one of the chairs comes loose and bounces down off the mattress. Instinctively, you leap out of the way, afraid to be impaled. Afraid to be some form of collateral damage. There is only one other door in this identical-and-yet-not hotel room, which is the door to the bathroom, so you choose to assume based on every hotel room in existence like this very one. The stiff growl of the air-conditioning is unnatural, although you reason this is a low-quality hotel room. They can’t possibly afford the newer systems that operate off pixie dust and warlock powers.

Or whatever.

The bathroom isn’t a bathroom isn’t another hallway.

‘Hi there,’ a short, purplish woman intrudes, locking you in place before you trudge forward into the muddy bank of a swamp. She begins the process of scrubbing your feet with an oval-shaped brush before placing them down on a platform to her right. Nice and dry. ‘The introduction is different for everyone, but this process is always my exact same.’ The short woman, coming only to your waist, wanders off for a moment, clicking open the trunk of a tree. It is not a mere compartment—the woman peels away a chunk of the trunk and fetches a tightly-bound binder made from the tail of a mermaid.

‘So, we are in your dreams now,’ she says, snapping the section of tree back in place.

Overhead, you hear a string of thoughts spoken aloud.

This is your freedom place.

But you do love him!

I’ve got the world on a string...

‘My name is largely irrelevant, but I am Seitha, good to meet you.’ In a matter of moments, she blinks out of existence, and you are left alone with your thoughts.

That hotel room bed is uncomfortable for the back.

You think about how Seitha could have helped you, could have been an old reliable, or otherwise, cruelly, an animate walking stick. Your back does ache. This is supposed to be your dreams? A frog croaks somewhere near, the stench of muck tickles your nostrils, and you have the faint craving for a plate of delicious beignets. Yes, perhaps this dream is familiar. You think you see an alligator in the water. ‘Seitha!’ You call out her name several times, but nothing happens. She does not reappear.

‘Seitha, please,’ you cry out, watching an alligator with only its eyes above the water creep towards you. Why are you here, standing on this platform, that you think should otherwise protect you? Alligators, they are stronger and smarter than you. Would your partner protect you?

You shutter your eyes and stop thinking about the matter of **other people**. This is your dreamworld, there shall not be any alligators or crocodiles or tiny dwarf caimans. This is your dreamworld, there shall be Seitha if you want her, right?

You open your eyes and there is no Seitha, but there are no crocodilians either. The room is once more a room—the funeral parlour of an intimate community church somewhere in the suburbs. A dark-haired woman is at the connecting door handing out thin pamphlets with a circular picture on the back. It is your face, fast-forwarded through the years. Maybe you were seventy-one when you passed away in your sleep. Some familiar faces in the crowd, but predominately an unknown variety—more elderly folk, a woman with dreadlocks, a few young children, a man wearing a striped fedora. An unsettling thought: of course you dream about your death, an inevitable future. You don’t understand it. A gender non-conforming person weeps at the front of the funeral parlour ceremonial room, staring down at your lifeless body. Open casket. You wish you looked more peaceful in death.

But, ah, life. You guess it was lived, no matter the ending.

Someone taps you on the shoulder and you turn around to face them. It is twelve-year-old you, wearing a school uniform, the shirt tucked in. The widest smile on your face, which inside your heart feels incorrect. An imagination, although this is your dreamland, not theirs. Twelve-year-old you offers out hands to hold, and the pair of you begin a slow, unpractised waltz, not in the funeral parlour but in an expansive, empty ballroom. Chandeliers from the ceiling, not upside-down dining chairs. In circles, you move, and in circles, your questions are answered.

‘What am I doing here with you?’

This version of yourself smirks. ‘What am I doing here with **me**?’

This smaller, more fearful and frightened version of yourself, yet strangely self-assured, too, is wearing an alligator t-shirt and does not stop looking at you once. You go to intrude: *this does not tell me anything*. But by the time you have said the word *not*, you are alone again, in a hotel room.

You must have been cooking an egg on a camping stove, which feels somewhat irresponsible.

First things: move the egg onto a plate, or find a plate at least. There is no kitchenette in the cramped hotel room. The face of a book would do no good as a plate, but you hesitate, caught in the flurry of high-extended emotions. Nothing is plate-adjacent. The covers of the bed are strewn around the room, molehill obstacles. A pillow blocks the door to the bathroom, although hardly. No plates no plates no plates. You hear your partner's voice, suddenly, from one of the corners of the room.

'I'm not moving all the way out there, you live in the middle of nowhere,' he says, and your entire body shakes in response. You take the egg in your bare palm—this is a dream, you remember—and you settle through the initial ache before flinging the fried egg onto the bed. Eyes flicker to the ceiling—no upside-down chairs, surprisingly. Once there was one, then four? No, five.

'Long-distance is fine if you can't avoid it, babe,' he says, his voice somewhat staticky. 'Yes, it's long-distance because every time you come to see me, it's for work, and you stay overnight in one of those hotel rooms where they force you to use keycards because they have a low tolerance for just magicking everything, because they still want to make a profit and run a normal business like the olden days. Yes, it is long-distance, you give me a headache.'

When the room ceases spinning, you pick yourself up off the carpeted ground. Fumes of egg latch onto your nostrils. Your partner isn't visible to you, although you sense he's somewhere in the room, maybe crouched in the bathroom, in the shower. You hope he is crouched, unguarded, but you don't admit to wanting to do anything to him, even with his voice in your ear. 'You know I cling onto those visits, because even when you make those excuses that the company HAS TO put you up in a hotel, at least I can walk you around after work, watch you eat dinner—not in a creepy way!—and know you're slowly getting more acquainted with this place.'

You stumble around the hotel room, trying to find him, trying to follow his voice, but the bathroom is empty. Totally, completely—not even a leftover toilet seat or a bath mat the colour of seaweed. His voice is fed into your ears. 'I get it. What if you move out here and you completely hate this new way of living? Or you grow to hate yourself for it. You know I used to live in the suburbs too, right?' His voice is beginning to fade, and you jeté across the room, desperate to catch him.

'We can talk about this tomorrow, when you land.' All the presence of your partner disintegrates. Left in the hotel room, alone, you clamber onto the bed and eat the egg.

Your throat is dry when you wake up. You attempt to conjure up a bottle of water from nothing but fail miserably and choke back your anguish. The next breath is heavy and wavering. Dreamland has made you properly starving, too, and you roll over towards your phone and **pause**. A few new text messages from your partner. He sent them four hours earlier.

Good morning (when you read this)

I made reservations for dinner. Otherwise we can eat in the hotel room.

It feels, to you, like decisions should be simpler. Choosing where to eat dinner, or at all, if you stave off the hunger to replace it with all the questioning thoughts. Questions seem like the easiest thing in the world to ask. You can think of a million and one right in this moment. You can also hear someone in the hallway, pushing along a housekeeper's cart, presumably. They might not even be physically pushing it with their hands. Hypocrite.

You see yourself in the coffin again, changed by life. It should be easier, to choose your way forward. You love a person, but these hotel rooms make coming to the city feel like nothing more than a quest. Loving him and living with him mean different things. In the hotel room bed, with your phone above your face, you suddenly start to cry.

Tears stain your cheeks.

You don't understand it. But you do.