

Tales of Whoa
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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2014

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Tales of Whoa

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

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ABSTRACT

Tales of Whoa

Victoria Young

Tales of Whoa is a collection of short stories that explores themes of: disappointment; sexual and emotional dissatisfaction; fidelity; and a person's right to define her own terms of happiness. The stories themselves attempt to move between the comic, the tragic, and the fairy-tale hopeful. The narrator is a thirty-something, female writer whose passion and intellect are often at war with one another as she struggles to find a happy balance in life. Feminist and fallible, the narrator navigates some of life's trickiest relationship dilemmas in a humorous and accessible manner. In these stories, a woman leaves an unsatisfactory relationship; a writer tries to pinpoint the essence of man while she searches for her own happiness; a first date explores what happens when people ignore their own short comings; a girl's first sexual experiences are recounted; a woman struggles with the idea that her boyfriend is trying to kill her with food (or love); advice is given for how to have a fake affair with a real celebrity; a woman experiences her own version of a modern day fairy-tale. Each story highlights a moment of illumination, or epiphany, where the narrator realizes something profound about herself or the men in her life. It is a book, gritty and often explicit, that seeks to pull off the veil of embarrassment that covers discussions of sex, and to present things just as they are: awkward; messy; beautiful.

For my parents, Gary and Marla Young

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I'm Taking the Microwave

He drove out of town in a silver car that looked like all the others, on a Sunday like all the rest and I went to sleep that night and then got on with my life. He took the stereo and the blender and that bottle of champagne we'd been saving for the day I sold my first book. He left the dishes and the bills and all the reasons I didn't love him to begin with. We'd had a fight that didn't make sense. Apathy is not an aphrodisiac. He broke a lamp as he stormed around, gathering up shit in a hurricane-sized meltdown, until I blew him over with one breath: *just go*. The lamp was my grandmother's and the dust upon its shade meant more to me than he ever did. A comment I now wish I hadn't made because I watched the way it moved across his face, a glow inside his veins, a dying light underneath his flesh, until it reached his chest and broke his heart in two, which was nine fewer pieces than my lamp. I counted, later, after he was gone.

"I want someone else," I said, to the wall before he got home. I was practicing for the dance we do where we pretend like the other person matters to us and we haven't just been filling up this space in each other's lives. I lit a joint, inhaled deeply, and tried to imagine someone I could settle down with, without settling.

He smells like dim lighting and candles. The scent of '80s movies. Something John Candy might star in. He makes me want to play mini-golf or fuck on a bear skin rug. I want to record him on my VCR. I want to drive my box cornered Volvo over to his house. I want to be a lifetime before any of this ever happened. I want to be a chapter in a book of mistakes, the one time it all worked out.

I start to plan excuses like escape routes, come up with reasons like reinforcements.

You don't really care about me.

We're just wasting time with each other.

I can't remember the last time my touch even mattered.

Can you just get the fuck out already?

I sat on the couch waiting for hours. Long past when he should've been home. Long past the point when a phonecall to say "Baby, I'm going to be late" would've made a difference. I ate Doritos for dinner and watched reruns of *Gilligan's Island*. I wondered what it would be like to be stranded. I wondered what it would be like to be deserted. I thought about what it would be like to be stranded on a deserted island *with him*. I immediately started packing up his things. When he still wasn't home at midnight, I piled the boxes by the door and left a note on top.

It's over. You know this.

Sometime around 3 a.m., or when I was dreaming about winning the lottery and wearing dresses made of cake, he burst in and woke me up. Stumbled around the bed, stubbed his toe on the corner, came over to my side, shoved the note in my face and slurred "whatthefuckisthis?" He smelled like bad decisions and weakness. He looked pathetic: drunk and dragging a bruised ego; an otherwise passive animal, now injured and terribly unpredictable. Then he ripped off the covers and all my sympathy was swallowed hard.

I jumped up, chest puffed out, ready for things to get blurry. Is it wrong that my first thought was *I could take you if I have to?*

But there was no fight to be had. He slumped down onto the bed, in the warm empty spot my body had left behind. He sighed a few times, like he was trying to get a grip. He wanted to know *why*? Face in his hands, rubbing his eyes. He wanted to know why I was calling it quits.

Because I don't love you.

Because I'm aging at warp speed in your presence.

Because you make my face hurt.

Because I want to matter more than a placemat: a space to put your food, your heart, your dick.

Because I want love.

Because I want someone else.

“Because I don't love you anymore,” I say.

He interrupts with, “or ever?”

His question wears a safety vest: full of trepidation, afraid of the answer, already regretting asking.

“Or ever,” I sigh in admission.

“You bitch,” he spits and gets up from the bed; I turn to go into the other room.

He grabs my hand, my arm, my waist. Jerks me close against his body, looks down at my face.

“I hate you.”

“I know,” I say. “You'll get over it.”

“Probably,” he shrugs.

His face expands into a smirk, and then just as quickly deflates. His breath is warm on my cheeks. His hand eases up around my arm, runs its fingers up my back, and finds a home in my hair. His palm presses against my scalp, fingers wildly searching for anchors in my curls. Forearm, bicep, his entire body tenses. He pulls my face up to his, hard, and kisses me. Searches my mouth with his tongue for our future: comes up empty. I let him have this one moment. He makes a noise that sounds like a hiccup, blinks frantically and pushes me away.

“Fuck you,” he says. “I’m taking the microwave.”

He Is Minty Fresh

He is minty fresh.
He is dollar bills.
He is midnight truck stop diner hot chocolate
He is miserable drivel.
He is a Tic Tac in your pocket.

I

Andy.

There. Just there, right beside me, in a bed too small for one, he pretends to sleep but I feel it. Feel it right through those sleepy little lids, which were cute once but now just scream “you’re too close to my face!” The heat from his body is making me itchy. Lying side by side like teenagers, Andy tries to reach his hand into mine. He wants a soul mate. He wants a partner. He wants someone to buy a couch with and I’m more into armchairs. I’ve told him as much.

“But,” he tells me, “I’m optimistic.”

His optimism tastes like lemonade: it burns the back of my throat. His stinky feet that smell like boy touch mine and my skin crawls. He rustles in the sheets, shifting positions, trying to find a way to encase me without drawing my attention. He is a thoughtful spider. I fidget in my indecision. His teeth grind and they sound like glaciers cracking. I imagine I am a chunk of ice breaking away to join the floe. He surrounds me, crushing me, with his misguided sense of kindness and I hate him for it.

Andy is perfectly nice; he is an action scene followed by a proposal and a kiss. He is perfectly suburb Wednesdays. He is the nice guy of the “nice guys finish last” sentiment. When was the last time that anyone got wet for nice? I lie on my back and

stare up at the ceiling, debating the merits of being average: make a list. He is making moves; I am making bullet points. I nudge his back with my elbow and roll over to face him.

“Tell me a joke?”

That’s when I realize I’m begging. I’m begging for this to be more than it is. I’m begging for the witty banter we had (I had thought we had) that first night we met. It has been weeks since we really laughed. Since the laughter wasn’t just a recycled bit. Since the laughter wasn’t situational or nervous or just because one of us happened to be in a good mood. Since we were more than just sounding boards.

He looks like a startled baby. His eyes are beautiful green pools; they are tropical lagoons of loneliness. I don’t dare dip a toe in for fear that an aging alligator will reach up to snatch my leg and drag me down into the emptiness. I can’t stay here with Andy; he is a drowning man, flailing, grabbing for anything that floats. I hold my breath. He says nothing.

Andy and I met at a party: a friend of a friend of a friend. He was like sugar cane, tall and sweet. He looked like Superman. We had been standing in a narrow hallway when I found myself pressed into his chest. I blame the dryer with its overzealous consumption of space. We had been talking about the party or the cat or the cupcakes when I leaned back onto the dryer. Unaware of my own body, I hit the release button on the dryer door which then flung open propelling me into Andy’s arms. It was more surprising than forceful but there I found myself, pressed against the chest of this boy who looked like Superman, and it was enough to make the whole room swoon. Or, at

least that's how I'll spin it if anyone ever asks, because honestly he was just a guy and I was just a girl and we were just having a conversation.

"You have really beautiful eyes," he said.

"Thanks."

"They're the gateway to the soul."

"I don't have a soul."

"You're not very good at this."

"That's not what your Dad says."

"Want a beer?" he asked.

"Sure"

He gestured toward the kitchen and then created a path down the hallway, crowded with bodies, for me to follow. He reached into the fridge and grabbed two green bottles from a case in the back.

"Here," he said, handing them both to me, "hold them." Using a bottle opener from the keychain in his pocket he popped both caps off and took one of the bottle's back. "Cheers."

I took a sip of beer and a closer look at this Superman lookalike. I tried to pinpoint the resemblance to the superhero and decided it was in the squareness of his jaw and the sturdiness of his chest. He had dark brown hair, deep green eyes, and wore a navy polo shirt that had to stretch to fit his biceps.

"So, what do you do for work?" he asked.

"I work for Coast Mountain Bus Company"

"You're a bus driver?"

“No, I work at a call centre. I give out bus information.”

“Oh, okay.”

He looked disappointed by this. I wondered if female bus drivers exuded sex appeal. I wondered if this thought kept him up at night. Maybe he just thought it would make for a good adventure story. “I can still drive a mean getaway car though,” I say.

“Good,” he says, “That’s really the only reason I’m talking to you right now.”

“For my criminal abilities?”

“Exactly.”

“What did you have in mind, in terms of illegal activity?”

“We could rob a bank,” he suggested, his smile widening.

“What if we get caught?”

“Show a little skin and hope for crooked cops? Or if that doesn’t work, maybe we could just steal things that aren’t guarded so closely—lowered risk and all that.”

“Like innocence from babies?”

“And beauty from debutantes,” he said. And then he winked at me. I didn’t think people actually did that, in real life. Lightning fast and butterfly inducing.

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “that sounds doable.”

He raised his beer and clinked the bottle against mine, and asked, “partners in crime, then?”

“Bonnie and Clyde,” I said, finishing off the rest of my beer and looking around for a place to set my empty down. The house was packed with people: some I knew, many I didn’t. The kitchen itself was brimming with happy partygoers and, though it

seemed every window in the house was open, it was extraordinarily warm for July. I was wearing a light summer dress and still, sweat trickled down my back.

“Another beer?” he offered.

“Sure,” I said, “What’s your name by the way? I’m Shannon.”

“Andrew,” he said over his shoulder as he reached into the fridge for two more beers, “but most people call me Andy.”

I nodded. “Cool.”

“Want to go outside for a bit, it’s really warm in here?” he asked as he opened the bottles.

“Sure.”

I led the way, through the throngs of thirty-something partygoers, past the open back door and out into the yard. The sweat running down my back immediately started to cool and we made our way over to a brown wooden picnic table near the edge of the yard. I sat on the table top and gestured for Andy to join me, which he did. We sat there for the next hour or so, slowly nursing our beers and enjoying what little breeze that we could. Somewhere around the third beer, I could feel him start to consider how to kiss me, the way you do when a kiss seems imminent and yet logistically awkward. We were relatively alone, out there in the backyard sitting on the picnic table but, still we were side by side. First kisses are never as smooth as movies and old T.V. shows lead you to believe. I’ve never had a guy do the reach-and-stretch to put his arm around me. It usually just involves looking at each other simultaneously, some shy smiles, and then someone just goes for it. But, that’s not what Andy did. We sat on that picnic table until

midnight when he stood up in front of me, reached his hand out, and said, “Want to go for a walk?”

“OK,” I said, standing up and dusting off the back of my dress. I said goodbye to my friend, whose party it was, and we walked for maybe ten blocks before he told me that we were at his apartment. I had no idea he lived so close to the party.

“Want to come in,” he stuttered putting his hands up. “I mean no pressure,” as if to gesture at safety, “I could walk you back to the party if you...” he trailed off.

“I...” said, my mouth barely open before he cut me off.

“If you don’t...but...I mean no pressure...” and then I interrupted him with a kiss. I had to. Who knew how long it would take him to eventually spit it all out?

When Andy and I first started dating, he said I smelled like sunshine. We dated like summer vacation. It began amazingly, like being thirteen years old with summer and adventure within reach. But then July hits and suddenly all your friends are off on family vacations, and you end up stuck home alone watching soap operas and eating Ichiban noodles, not getting nearly enough sun or fresh air and plumping up for an unpleasant return to grade nine. That’s how it was with Andy. It was all glistening bliss and popsicles, until it wasn’t.

“Why would I need to go anywhere else?” asked Andy as we stood in his kitchen looking at take out menus. “I’ve already found what I’m looking for.”

“How do you know?” It came out flirty, but I was being completely serious. I needed to understand how he could think this way. How could he think that we could be

good for each other; I wanted to see the world, he was perfectly fine never leaving the city.

He never really answered me that night, nor any that followed, but little by little it became wildly apparent that we weren't kindred spirits. While I enjoyed the dating, Andy was scouting for a future, and his future kept rubbing mine the wrong way. In all fairness to him, there had been signs that I should've paid more attention to. On our third date he had said, "It feels like I've known you forever," and I just stared at him.

"Yes," I said, "of course you do. You do, because you see me through yourself. Most of what you see fits your assumptions of me, which is more of a commentary on your ability to believe in your own delusions than an accurate portrayal of who I am. You see our future life together, built on your assumptions, and you forget that your imagined future isn't real because it *feels* real to you. If we spent a life together and it ended badly, you would see this moment as the one where all your hopes and dreams were simply a projection onto me. In fact, the line 'I feel like I've known you my whole life' isn't even you. It is you being a poor caricature of someone you think I'm looking for...so finish your drink and go home because this night is beginning to feel like an uphill battle."

But, of course, I didn't really say that. He looked at me with those sad little eyes and I couldn't bring myself to explain the ridiculousness of his emotions given that he'd known me for fewer hours than it takes to get over the flu. It was unfortunate that Andy couldn't see what I needed, which was, admittedly many things, but among them, at the very least, was a person who wanted to know me, deeply and truly. Andy just liked the idea of me.

It made me sad to have to hurt Andy, to have to say that I didn't think we were a good match, to have to say that this wasn't love, when I knew how much he cared for me. That was really my only regret, if you could even call it that. I didn't regret a moment of the dating. And in all honesty, I didn't think so highly of myself as to assume that Andy wouldn't be fine after I was gone. He would meet another girl, and another girl, and another girl, until he found the one that could care for him the way he cared about her. Someone who could care for him more than I cared for him (which was the same as I cared about everyone, really). I wanted him to be happy and to have a good life, the same wish I have for all people. But that's not enough to stay with someone. That's not enough to sustain a relationship. What I couldn't figure out, what disturbed me the most, about dating Andy, was how many people (friends, strangers on the internet, writing professors) thought that finding someone who treated you decently was enough. Like 50 years would pass in pure bliss because someone managed to not be a complete dick to you, for at least a few dates.

II

He is lemon scented logic.
He is momentary madness.
He is the last sip of coffee.
He is aggressive, strong, dark and broody.
He is someone you could never love.

Brian.

“He seems like a nice guy,” I say.

“That’s what they said about Ted Bundy,” responds my mother over the phone. We laugh. She’s mostly kidding, though I know she worries about internet dating. As if online dating is a go-to source for serial killers. “Shannon, just be careful if you’re walking anywhere with him alone,” she says, this time more seriously.

“Mom, if I ever found a guy who could actually lift me up and carry me away I would go with him willingly. Someone that strong is exactly who I’m looking for.” This time it’s me who’s mostly kidding. *Mostly.*

“Alright,” she says. “At least tell one of your friends where you’re going, just in case.” She doesn’t want to know herself, feels that it’s an invasion of my privacy or something, wants to farm the worrying out to someone else.

“Helen knows where we’re going,” I assure her. “I also gave her a picture of him, in case the police need it to track him down post-murder. Ya know, *just in case.*”

She laughs but she is my mother, so she doesn’t find this nearly as funny as I do. We say goodbye and hang up. I get ready for a first date. His name is Brian.

~

It’s seven-fourteen exactly. I’ve been watching the clock since six twenty-five. The booth where we’re sitting feels tight. He takes up too much space; body-builder or construction worker or things that are all muscle. Unconsciously hovering, his hot breath spreads over me like an unwelcome fog. He’s been talking about himself for half an hour straight. I feel like I can’t breathe.

“You have a really great rack,” he says before signalling the waitress to get more drinks.

I need many, many more drinks. His stupid comment reminds me of months of online dating, months of men who say things like:

Hey hot tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiits

I WANT TO PUT MY FACE IN THOSE!!

I don't mean to be rude but your breasts are amazing

The great irony is that they are just normal tits, boobs, breasts, whatever. They are not great, they are just there; and yet, not even really there, because none of my pictures reveal any great amount of skin. But that's not the thing that really gets me. What I can't understand are the men who say these things, to women, out loud. And the worst *the worst!* part is that they don't even know why it's so ridiculous. It's not because I'm ashamed of my breasts, or that I'm up in arms over the premature sexualisation (which is a tad off-putting but not a deal breaker). It's because they don't know how boring this is. Highly educated, ambitious, well-travelled, confident and successful (at least moderately), it would seem that I'm still fated for a lifetime of men who think I'm going to be interested in this kind of banter. In their defense, here I am having drinks with a man who says such things; a man whose passions don't extend past the length of his bicep. But, I just keep hoping that someone will prove me wrong. That a man who makes egregious social missteps is just that, miss-stepping, and not, ya know, entirely worthless.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"It was okay," he answers shortly.

"So you never really told me about your family or where you grew up..."

"I grew up in Kelowna," he responds. "My parents still live there."

“Any siblings?” I ask, trying to spur the conversation on. I wonder if he notices that he never asks me anything. I’m not even looking for brilliance, but Jesus, lob the ball back once or twice. Give a shit about me as a person or something.

“Two older brothers and a younger sister,” he answers, his hand slowly rubbing my thigh under the table. Brian has told me about his apartment. He has told me about his dog. He has told me about his favourite muscle group. I’m just waiting for a discussion of the weather.

But he’s big and manly and I can tell he would pull my hair in just the right way, so I go home with him. I have this unrealistic hope that he can be something more than he is. But as we get up from the table, I realize it might not ever happen. He is what he is. He is my guy-Friday. He is my work horse. He is the bare minimum; the absolute least amount acceptable, until he becomes even less. I wonder about the woman who will one day (hopefully) not see him this way. I wonder about a person who could be his perfect match, his counterpart. We leave the bar and walk toward his apartment. I want him to be brilliant, to be interesting, to say something that I can connect with. Why doesn’t he ask any questions? Why doesn’t he have any worthwhile passions? Why am I such a horrible person? I stay silent. In the elevator up to his apartment, he says something that causes me to turn and look at him (hint: it was racist), my face scrunched in disapproval. He straightens his back, looks me dead in the eyes and says, “I was just joking.”

And it occurs to me that he doesn’t understand what joking is; he is an idiot, not a magician. The smirk on his face is an irony he doesn’t get. The bell dings and the elevator doors open. I let him walk out ahead of me, press L for lobby, hold my breath

and say, “I just can’t.” His mouth hangs open like a baby whose candy I just stole. He says nothing. The doors close.

Brian was a tester. He was a supermarket sample, a low point. But, after the emotional excessiveness of Andy and lack of any other real competition at the time, he was my best option. It was like default dating. Brian snuck in under the radar because the troops were lethargic during peace time. Those kind of desperate dating situations never end well for anyone, but what else was there to do except keep trying.

III

He is the lights too bright.

He is a mouth breather.

He is Vaseline on toast.

He is a less than charming bracelet.

He is water-boarding with a bag of sugar, granulated, in your cavities and sitting where your teeth might grind.

Charlie.

“Charlie?” I ask, and he turns around and smiles. It is a smile to scare young children; it is a smile that haunts fairy-tales and high school horror films. His teeth should be in a guidebook for wilderness survival: ragged, terrifying, predatory. “You look exactly like your dating profile,” I say tensely. I start to reprimand myself for being so judgmental; after all, a man is not his teeth, just as I am not my fat body and, of course, no man has ever judged me on that. But then I notice a discrepancy between the man with me now and the man who messaged me online. Here stands a man a decade and a delusion older than the pictures I first smiled at days ago, when the message read, “what’s a nerd like you doing on a site like this?”

I've never understood men (or women for that matter) who lie on their dating profiles. To lie to someone before meeting them is to say two things: that they believe you are too stupid to notice and that they believe lying doesn't matter. Someone once asked me if maybe they do it because they're insecure, but that doesn't make sense. An insecure person would never lie on their profile for fear that upon showing up you'd reject them immediately. If anything, the lie shows overconfidence, a lack of worry over social embarrassment, a lack of concern about disappointing someone. On the surface, I feel rage. I can't believe someone has wasted my time by lying. Underneath is sadness: a sadness I'm not entirely sure how to pin down.

I hate the idea of lying. And yet, when Charlie shows up, I become dressed in them: his lies pass themselves onto me, I am covered in his contagion, I am coated in a caramel sauce of dishonesty. Still, I don't get up to leave. I mean, I'm not a total asshole (or so rumour has it) and maybe he'll turn out to be brilliant. Maybe he'll turn out to be kind and eager and interesting. Maybe he'll be any of the things that make up for all the imperfections. It is not long before my hopes are dashed again. Like little disappointment bombs, the conversation explodes all over the place.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Pretty good," he answers and I think maybe this will all turn out okay. "I bought an inhaler today."

"Oh? Like for asthma?"

"No, I'm trying to quit smoking"

"You smoke?" I mentally recall the fact that it says *non-smoker* on his online dating profile.

“Yeah. I’m trying to quit.” I, however, am trying to keep it to myself that calling yourself a non-smoker when you’re trying to quit is like calling yourself an Olympic athlete because you go to the gym: the intention is not the thing. As it turns out the inhaler is not for tobacco; he’s a rampant pothead, so I guess there’s that. The date only gets worse from here. Soon, he is talking ‘nipples’ and ‘vibrators’, making gestures with his hands, for reasons I can barely discern and all before even my first drink arrives. I start to realize he doesn’t need a date; he needs a seminar in sexual harassment. I know that I should leave, that I should tell him the truth. I should pick up my purse and run. I should press my hand on his arm, say “I’m sorry, but this just isn’t going to work,” collect my things and walk out. I should yell “liar liar pants on fire!” for everyone in the bar to hear. I do exactly none of this. I am ‘things that would do well if captured’. I am a dating prisoner of war.

Charlie gives online dating a bad name. Charlie gives men in general a bad name. He had seemed entirely normal online, the definition of average, almost to the point of cliché. You could almost say that Charlie *was* completely normal, and it was just that an entirely different person showed up for the date. He had, after all, lied about virtually everything: his age, his height, his image, and if his lavender leather jacket tells me anything, his sexual preference as well.

Midway through the date I can’t take it anymore. The lies are too much. I look at Charlie like he’s wearing the Emperor’s clothes. Even in their non-existence they don’t quite fit him right. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. When I return, I insinuate that my parking will soon run out. “I think it’s best if we call it a night.” He asks for the bill to be split. I can’t believe the man who asked to split my fries, and then stuffed most of

them in his mouth , wants the bill divided evenly. I throw enough money down on the bar to cover my share and stomp off.

I can hear him call after me, “SHANNON WAIT, CAN I WALK YOU TO YOUR CAR?!?”

I hurry to my car, unlock the doors and jump in.

IV

He is an imposition.
He is a figment of your imagination.
He is the color persimmon.
He is the taste of dandelion.
He is the word spelled wrong.

Kyle.

The air has gotten cool but not quite cold enough for my liking. My winter jacket hangs lonely and untouched in the closet. It dreams of white Christmases and freezing Februaries. It misses the fresh air. It never gets cold enough for my liking here in Vancouver.

“Are you close?” he texts.

“I’m here,” I text back, confused.

“Are you at the Starbucks on the North or South side of Marine Dr.?”

I take a minute to think about it, try to situate myself, picture where I am in relation to the mountains. “North, I think.”

He laughs. “I’m at the one on the South side. Stay there I’ll be right over.”

This is either a terrible or really great start to a first date. My stomach is a bundle of nerves. My breath is close to panting. I hate first dates. Well, I hate first dates with guys from online dating. Those minutes before meeting where it all just feels a tad creepy. Those minutes before meeting where I'm still terrified, like a jerk, that they will show up and embarrass me.

And then I see him at the front door; tall and lanky, jeans and a dark jacket. He looks great. I start to worry about whether or not I will live up to my own online profile hype. I walk towards the door to meet him. He smiles. He has fantastic hair. Can hair be both coiffed and manly? If so, his is both of these things. At 6'4, he fits my chubby 5'7 frame like a puzzle piece as I reach to hug him. I've learned that handshakes are too formal, and feel weird, for first dates but doing nothing leaves people feeling rebuffed.

"Shall we?" he says, gesturing inside.

I order a complicated drink. Not so complicated that it's annoying and the barista is tempted to spit in it, but enough that Kyle notices and gently teases.

"How about over there?" he asks pointing to a table near the back. We sit and when my drink comes up, he gets up to retrieve it, asks if I put anything in it.

"Splenda," I say.

I find it terribly endearing that he comes back with the sugar substitute, stir stick, lid, and napkins. This is what chivalry looks like now. We spend the next two hours getting to know each other. Nothing particularly riveting, just a lot about families and jobs and smiling just a little too long at each other. I'm wearing a dress that makes me feel like a million bucks, a maxi dress that accentuates the size of my breasts (just because I don't want men to talk to me about them doesn't mean I don't want them to

noticed), minimizes the size of my round stomach, and makes my booty look great. It is a magic dress. I wear it on all my first dates. Not that I've had that many.

Two hours of talking over coffee turns into dinner at White Spot across the street. We sit at a table between a family with two children under five and two men old enough to have seen covered wagons firsthand. This is not the stuff romance novels are made of. We sit quietly. I can hear the scrape of utensils on plates. Conversation eventually picks up again but it's less flirty, more family-restaurant-appropriate. When the bill comes, the waitress has split it. I offer to pay my share and he accepts. I wish that he hadn't.

We walk back to our cars, back to Starbucks across the parking lot. We do not hold hands or touch, which isn't a great sign, but when we get back to my car he asks what kind of music I listen to and then says, "Play me something?" We both get in the car. He leans towards the centre console, so I lean towards the centre console. Things seem more electric again, like they were back in the coffee shop, before the kid's menus and elderly specials.

"What do you want to do now?" he asks smiling, his long legs cramped in my small car. I'm not sure if he means in terms of a second location or if this is his way of working up to kissing me. Either way, I'm mostly just excited the date isn't over yet.

"Um...whatever...what do you want to do?"

"Do you want to come back to my place and watch a movie?"

"Um..." I consider for a moment. I spend that moment wondering how long a *lady* would demurely consider such an invitation. How long should you wait before admitting that you have deemed someone not a serial killer? I waited, with the self-restraint of a God, a full ten seconds, I think.

“Sure, yeah...that sounds good.”

“Okay, you can follow me then,” he said opening the car door. “I’m just up near Boundary and Hastings.”

Once the doors of both our cars are securely closed, I let out a little squeal of joy. There will definitely be kissing in my near future.

We arrive at his place fifteen minutes later. I get nervous and start to sweat. We get out of our cars and walk towards his house, or more precisely his basement suite. A neighbor peers down at me from the 2nd floor window. Am being judged by a man in a housecoat? We go inside and, after taking off my shoes, I sit on the couch. Kyle turns on the TV and sits down beside me on the couch. He flips through a few channels before stopping on a movie that is just starting: *Hurt Locker*. Nothing says romance quite like a war film. I spend the next twenty minutes trying to paying attention to the movie rather than the silky way his hair looks. Can it really be silky? It holds it’s spikey shape on top so perfectly that it hardly seems plausible but nonetheless it just looks...soft. I desperately want to touch it.

“Are your feet cold?” he asks looking at my bare feet. Yes, it is January. Yes, it is moderately cold. In my defense, the magic dress only looks good with gladiator type sandals. Sometimes you have to forgo common sense for fashion.

“A little,” I say sheepishly.

“Do you want some socks?”

“Sure,” I say and he gets up to get them. He brings back white tube socks and sits down on the couch, this time closer than before. He gestures at my feet like one does with a horse they are about to shoe, and pulls my legs up onto his thighs so that he can

put the socks on my feet. I'm not sure if this is chivalry or a foot fetish. He offers a foot rub, and I'm no fool, so I accept. Foot fetish or not, nobody in their right mind turns down a free foot massage. After he finishes rubbing my feet, we are somehow sitting closer than before. The couch is like a matchmaker pushing us together. He reaches out to hold my hand. It is sweet and endearing but at times feels oddly placed beside this war movie. And then he starts stroking my forearm with his fingers. It tickles and feels a bit weird. I can't tell if he's doing this because he thinks this is what girls like, or if he's doing it because he's really into it. The thought doesn't stay in my head long though because I'm much more interested in whether or not he's going to kiss me. This seems like the perfect moment—a movie about bombs and terrorism aside—to kiss. After all, he's managed to get from halfway down the couch to right beside me, our shoulders touching, our hips touching.

And then it seems he was thinking the same thing. He turns to face me, puckers his lips like a fish and goes in for the kiss. This probably seems like an exaggeration. What person above the age of five puckers their lips like a fish for kissing? The answer is Kyle, apparently. Kyle definitely does. The upside of this is that it comes as a welcome surprise when he kisses well. He kisses wonderfully, in fact. The butterflies, which had momentarily paused when his pucker was coming my way, have come alive again. Slowly, the kisses get more intense. His chest presses against mine as we lean back together against the couch.

And that's when I feel it: a wetness. My tampon is leaking. Here I am on a first date with a hot guy whose conversation is good and though he kisses a bit like a fish I thinking I might like him, I definitely lust him, and our lips and tongues are dancing and

all I can think is that I'm going to bleed all over his couch like some kind of psychopath. Or a woman with her period. Dramatics aside, as soon as I feel this it becomes hard to concentrate; hard to focus on anything other than how every movement of our bodies is liable to widen the leak in the dam of my vagina. I pull back from his increasingly passionate kisses and politely say, "I have to go to the washroom."

In the washroom I look in my purse for another tampon. Frantically, I search each pocket for a mighty shield of cotton to save this damsel. There is none to be found. I sit down to pee and consider my options. None seem very good. I wipe what leakage I can from myself while being careful not to dislodge the tampon. I pat the seeped blood from my underwear with toilet paper. My only saving grace is the fact that, in an effort to conceal my chubby belly, I'm wearing a homemade version of Spanx, which is really just a pair of leggings cut into shorts and hoisted up to my bra. Regardless, it acts as a second layer between me and bloody mortification. That being said, I can't very well come out of the bathroom only to immediately say I have to go and then leave. I would look like a total nut job.

Like a menstrual ninja, I wrap toilet paper around the crotch of my underwear, a third protective, though flimsy, layer against my body's attempt to ruin this first date. Doesn't my uterus know that he is tall with excellent hair? Goddamn it, body! Get your shit together! I figure this makeshift maxi pad will keep me safe for at least fifteen minutes, at least half an hour if we're lying down. I think that I can spin this as an appropriate enough time to make my exit. Long enough that it doesn't seem abrupt, like I just clogged his toilet or something. Long enough that it doesn't seem too abrupt an end to our making out. Soon enough that I don't leave a murder scene on the back of my

dress and his couch. At which point, I would actually have to murder him because can you imagine how many people would hear the story of the girl who bled on the first date? No, thank you!

Twenty minutes later, I made my lady-like excuses about it being late and having had a great time blah blah blah. He smiled as I took off his socks and put my gladiator sandals on. I could feel the blood pooling as we hugged goodbye and he kissed me one last time before I walked off into the night and back to my car stain free.

The next morning I woke up to find a text message from Kyle: I had a great time last night.

I'm ecstatic. I text back: Me too.

And then I wait for him to keep the conversation going. And then I wait for him to ask me questions or tell me interesting things. And then I wait for him to ask me out again. And then I wait. I wait. I wait. Minutes go by. Hours go by. The nerve of this guy what with all his living life and not being a slave to my every beck and call. Ugh.

Time ticks by like a clock covered in molasses. I am busy pretending to be breezy, nonchalant, relaxed. I wait for four days before I decide to text. I mean, dammit! He went out of his way to tell me he had had a great time, that had to count for something?

I casually text him: How are things?

He responds: Good but I'm getting sick.

I decide to call him rather than text. This seems totally normal at the time. I call and he doesn't answer. I check the clock to see how many minutes have passed since his

last text message. Not enough that being away from his phone could be anything other than ignoring me. But then why respond to my text at all?

Later that night he texts: Sorry I was sleeping aka getting rest, maybe we can hang out on Friday? Let you know how I feel.

When you're dating, when you're in the thick of things, it can be really hard to see the forest for the trees. I felt like I was in the jungle and couldn't see shit. Was this a total blowoff? Did he just admit that he wasn't actually sleeping and was just 'resting' which, while important, means that he saw my call and purposely didn't take it? Or maybe I was over-reacting and he was just a huge baby, as men tend to be when they get sick, and wasn't it a good sign that he wanted to hang out on Friday, albeit only if he was feeling better. I didn't respond.

Two days later, I get a text from Kyle that reads:

ltrdfakl))))))shfsdd8**&^&^#^&(#hppdjhfl&a#\$#I+=13

It's basically a love poem. I text back: Are you sitting on your phone because I just got the weirdest message from you?

His response: No lol! Telus doesn't play well with other phone carriers, this is what I said – Hey! It hurts to talk, I'm back at Dr. not feeling any better. Hope your enjoying sunshine ttlyl.

I'll admit that I started to feel like maybe I was being too hard on him. After all, he was taking to the time to update me on how he was feeling, and the potential likelihood of us hanging out on Friday. I decided to cut him some slack and we ended up having some pleasantly flirty banter.

Two days later, I get another text from Kyle: Hey! So, are you wanting to get together tomorrow night? Maybe you can come over to my place, that would be nice, Hopefully I'll be feeling 100%

We make plans to hang out then. He seems to think he'll be feeling better. Who am I not to trust a man to be an accurate observer of his own health? (Spoiler Alert: I would be a smart woman not to trust a man to be an accurate observer of his own health). Friday afternoon I text: Hey Cutie! How's my favorite patient?)

He texts back: Just at Dr.'s again

I text: Because you're still feeling crap? or to get the go-ahead aka not contagious?

No response. Two hours pass.

I text him again: You still at the Dr.?

The silence is deafening. Lonely mountain echo. You could hear a pin drop the silence

is so intense. Children in Panama are telling the story of the lady who thought she had gone spontaneously deaf except that it's so quiet I can actually hear them telling the story.

The next day he texts: Sorry fell asleep after I got home. I ttyl when I feel better.

I responded: Sure. Feel better.

What I actually thought was: are you fucking kidding me? Why didn't he text somewhere between the doctor's and his apparent onset of narcolepsy. I would've felt more pity for his bout with the plague except that he couldn't even take the time to send a text message that says: I'm dying, go on without me. And that's all he really would've

had to say to remain in my good graces. As it stood now, I wasn't sure he would ever call for a second date or whether or not I even still wanted one.

You would be surprised how quickly a person can forget things that are displeasing: pain, disappointment, fish puckers. And, how easy it is to remember the good stuff: tall, butterflies, possibility for sex. So, when Kyle got over the cold a week later and called to see if I wanted to hang out, while still reserved, I agreed to go. And if I'm being honest, I was excited. That was until he told me that he was having dinner with his mom and "could we meet after at his place to watch a movie?" For someone whose job as a Garbage Man didn't suggest a particularly high IQ, he sure had that ability to manipulate down pat. He had asked me to hang out and I had foolishly agreed before hearing the terms of said date. No dinner, no effort, just a movie at his place. I mean, *jesus*, he'd double booked his mom and me. But, I had already said yes. So when Friday rolled around, I went to his place.

I did my best to remember how to get there, and luckily he had supplied his address so I could GPS it. Still, I felt incredibly nervous walking from the driveway to the side door of his basement suite. And of course, there was that nosy neighbor, whose judgment I could feel, again. I knock lightly on the side door. No answer. I wait. Did I knock loud enough? Maybe he couldn't hear me? Should I knock again? I don't want to look crazy. I knock again, loudly this time. I hear footsteps, then he unlocks the door, and opens it wearing...jogging pants. I want to cry. Nobody ever wrote a love poem about jogging pants. Sweatpants. Loungers. A tracksuit. Joggers. I can't help but wonder if he's freeballing in there. This is what a second date looks like, apparently.

I go inside anyway. After all, he still looks like the guy from that Vampire T.V. show. The one about the brothers. He looks like one of the brothers. He's got that vampire-chiselled-jaw-soft-hair-thing happening. It helps me forget that he's a garbage man. Not that there's anything wrong with that. We sit on the couch for awhile and talk while a hockey game plays in the background. He tells me about his brother. He tells me he wishes he could travel more. He tells me how many garbage men drink on the job.

"They all do it," he says.

"Do you?"

"No, you can kill someone. If a garbage truck ran into a small car, they'd be dead. Dead."

The conversation is like a sedative, lulling me into acquiescence. In theory, he's a nice enough guy, except for the jogging pants, which is a real asshole move if you ask me, and he kisses like a fish and can't tell a good joke. Maybe that is what he's searching for when he moves towards me, lips puckered, sucking up the air until they touch mine: a punch line. I let those fish lips come right at me and latch on. Nonetheless, I'm pretty sure I should throw this fish back, there's sadness in his scales. Aside from all the bullshit he put me through between the first and second date, I feel a compassion for Kyle. I know that he's not particularly happy. He doesn't want to be a garbage man, dreams of more, wants to see the world. But, this is his life. He is a garbage man: limited. But this is a second date, and so it's neither this sad nor this serious in the moment. In fact, in the beginning it is hot and heavy.

We move from the couch to the bed. Everything is going well, jogging pants aside. We are making out, he's trying to go further and faster than I am. They are always

trying to go further and faster than I am. I have to set the pace; I have to take the breathers, I have to be the one that makes sure we don't fuck yet, because I like stages. Because you can't ever go back. Making out on the couch and dry humping is incredibly hot and fulfilling, until you've had sex. Then it will always just be a prelude to the main event. Not that I don't want the main event but no couple who has had sex ever thought, 'hey let's just make out on the couch'. Also, most men are horrible in bed, at first, all rushing and hormones and cluelessness. I need to make sure we wait long enough that he cares whether or not I actually get off. And thus, I am the pace car of fucking. But this is our second date after all, and we are on a bed, so there's no reason we can't have some hands-down-the-pants action for everyone.

Before I move my hands lower on his body, we take another quick pause, just to make sure he doesn't think that this movement is leading straight to sex. And that's when it happens. I'm thinking about kissing and fucking and then...he starts talking about meat. He starts to talk about lunch. Bison. Meat.

"It's the leanest of all the meats," he says, and I can't tell if this is a diet tip or a recipe.

"Yeah?" I say, trying to feign some interest.

"Yeah, I just cook up some vegetables and rice with it the night before and put it in the fridge. Then, in the morning, I put it on the dashboard of the truck and by lunchtime it's reheated."

He looks at me like this is normal. His eyebrows arch as if to say that I should be impressed by his ingenuity. I can't help but wonder if he has a bout of food poisoning in his future.

V

He is last night's leftovers.

He is paper mâché pie.

He is "I'm so sorry, but I've forgotten your name."

He is locker room sweat.

He is the sex in the backseat of a car when you should've been walking down the stairs of your debutante ball.

Fairy Tales for Adults.

The idea to drive across the country had occurred to me somewhere after Andy but before Charlie. Actually, the idea had always been with me, for as long as I can remember. However, it became a tangible thing, a real possibility, in the moments where there should've been laughter but instead there was always just me, biding my time, waiting and hoping. With every new guy, who then became an old guy, there was disappointment; a sensation that I was missing something, that I was doing something wrong, that the pieces just wouldn't fit together. There was never enough laughter, no matter how many times I'd dish it up, serve it out. No matter how many times I'd tilt my chin up, smile and ask for something in return. Each time was a little bit harder to take; I didn't like to keep finding out that I'd been wrong, once again.

It had seemed important to find the laughter. It seemed that there was more joy in a few, honest, full-bellied chuckles than in any embrace or guarantee of fidelity. I didn't want a date for a wedding or a certainty on Sundays; I just wanted someone to tell me a joke.

~

That first day had felt heavy. The morning, full of rain and optimism, had a certain kind of pressure that comes from taking a risk. In that first week, I drove more than I wanted and slept less than I should, but I crossed a border, five state lines, and one story off the list. I had some laughs in a bar just outside of Portland, and haven't looked back since.

Whenever I told someone what I was doing, where I was headed and what I was coming from, their first question was always the same. "Why?" they would ask. "Why are you doing this?"

I didn't entirely understand the question because, why not? Because who wants to spend their life always living in one place. Because who doesn't want to see a country? Because who doesn't want to have an adventure, live a life, have a story—many stories—to tell.

That night, I chose the bar specifically for its townie feel. I'd seen its sign from the highway. *Johnny's*. Because what else would it be called? It had a picture of a wooden barrel outlined in neon. I went in with my heart set on men who looked like lumberjacks offering up witty banter but was willing to settle for easy charm and a sense of American entitlement.

When I walked inside no one looked up. I was an unnoticed presence, just another girl. I grabbed a seat at the bar and ordered a gin with water and lime, miming out the quantities I wanted of each to the bartender, who smiled, rubbed his unshaven chin, smiled again and turned around to find the gin. He was wearing a blue and white plaid shirt, because of course he was, with the cuffs rolled halfway up his muscled

forearms. I couldn't see all of him behind the bar, but I imagined that his jeans were fitted and he was wearing cowboy boots.

“So where are you from?” he said, turning back around and placing the drink down in front of me.

I raised my eyes to meet his as he stood, arms extended, leaning his weight against the bar, “How do you know I'm not from here?” I asked dryly, assuming he asked this of all the girls who sat at his bar. And why shouldn't he?

“I would've tried to chat you up already,” he said.

“Fair enough,” I said. “I'm not from here”

“So you're not going to tell me?”

“Maybe.” I smiled, trying to be coy. “I'll let you know.”

He continued to smile and grabbed a dishtowel, making wide sweeps across the bar top as I watched.

“Where are you staying?”

“It's a real fancy place, over on Keystone street. It's got all the amenities: clean sheets, in-room coffee, and every so often when the room gets too hot a guy leans out of the closet and blows on me.”

He laughed. I tilted my head to the side. For a moment I thought he might have reminded me of someone back home, but it passed and before I knew it we were talking about where he grew up and I no longer needed to mime the respective portions of my drink. Apparently, he had moved to Portland with a couple of high school buddies from the small-town where they grew up in California. When they didn't make it big as musicians, a few of them decided to open up this bar. We talked for awhile; he told me

about his kids, his divorce, and his thoughts on love, and I talked about writing and my search: gave all the reasons I had for this journey. The bar got busy around eleven thirty and I took that as my cue to call it a night, but I planned to return the following night; I liked this place. I wasn't quite done, wasn't quite ready to move on.

On Thursday night I returned to the bar. The music was louder, the people were livelier, the air thicker; I smiled at no one in particular as I made my way to the bar to see my, now, old friend. He recognized me right away and had my drink on the bar before I had a chance to sit down. He smiled a big toothy grin with beautiful white teeth; I wondered why I hadn't noticed before. In fact, I'm not sure why I hadn't noticed how attractive he was before either.

“So,” I said, “anything special going on here tonight?”

“Around 11p.m there will be some dueling pianos.”

I thought for minute. “Why can't pianos just get along?”

He leaned forward onto the bar. “The answer is not always so black and white.”

“That joke seems a bit flat. Perhaps I can be sharper?”

“Baby, your jokes are grand.”

“I'm glad they struck a chord with you.”

“But, even if others don't love them like I do, don't let it damper your spirit, they're probably just upright assholes.”

“You are so right,” I laughed, “Our minds are so in tune with each other. It's like I've metronome you all my life.”

His smile stretched till I thought his cheeks must ache. “You're a real charmer,” he said.

“I have my moments.”

~

Sometimes, it felt like I was writing poetry in bathroom stalls; the words hanging in the air, or scribbled down on any open surface, while I tried to figure out who I was and who they were, by themselves and in relation to me. Writing it all down became like a chart, like I was drawing a map with words, about where I had been, and who I had been with. And it wasn't necessarily about the story, it was about knowing people, figuring them out: who is he? I was trying to pin down just exactly who they were: the men of my past like Andy and Charlie, and the men of my future, or even just men in general. I was trying to figure out who I wanted them to be, trying to understand who they actually were, and found myself loving them, wholly, somewhere in the middle. Trying to find my way to a laughter worth setting my life on fire for as I wrote stories in between coffee shop crumbs on laptop keyboards, making out with boys in bars.

~

He is a ticking clock.
 He is a tuna casserole.
 He is the Christmas present you're going to take back.
 He is behind the glass; a sign that says don't touch.
 He is moving day.

Wake up sweating, laptop heat pulsing like waves of summer on Vegas cement. Buzz and whirr of fans, open your lazy eyes. “Are you done, miss?” he asks. Eyes up. Look around. Pretend you weren't sleeping like some degenerate freeloader. Pretend you are someone else. Rub your forehead. Brace yourself. Remember who you are.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep. In fact, I hadn't really wanted to stop at all. I was halfway between the middle of nowhere and the place where no one wants to be, when

the snow just became too much. I had snow tires on, but when what I had thought would be a quick flurry turned into a total whiteout. There really wasn't much of a choice but to pull over and wait it out. I found a decent looking diner near the highway and hoped the weather would clear up before I would have to consider trying to find a hotel in a town that looked like it might not even have an ATM. Either way it wouldn't be the end of the world. I didn't have a plan. There wasn't any schedule to stick to. I was spinning the wheel and hoping for more good memories than bad. This was my adventure after all.

“Miss,” the waiter asks again, this time head tilted down to you, “are you done?” His blue eyes would be piercing if not for their heavy green color. Green like reasons to order another. Green like shiny, young and new. Smirk. Smile. It grows. Beaming. Big teeth. Bright teeth. Hollywood teeth.

“Maybe...” you blush, “...I'll just take another.” Part question. Part demand. He's just a kid. You're only partly jealous. You're only partly responsible.

Your jeans are too tight. Your hair is too curly. Your makeup is too powdery. Your optimism is broken and you've got bigger problems. Strike keys like picket lines and you write your entire life story in puns. Breathe in the smell of bug spray and regret. You are an apology. Raise your hand and signal him, two fingers together sway back and forth, close, barely touching.

“Maybe a piece of...” you say, trailing off. Think of your jeans, think of your stomach, think of your thighs. Say apple, say apple, say apple.

“Never mind,” you sigh. Ask for skim instead of cream. Ask for air instead of food. Ask for sex. Ask for sex. Ask for sex.

“What are you writing?” he asks coming towards you.

“Nothing special,” you answer. Your left hand twitches and knocks the cup over. Thick sticky liquid spills everywhere; an accidental river sweeping throughout the keys. And then you blink and it never happened. Look up. Look at his face. Smile. Say “thank-you” as he sets the cup down.

“I’m an actor,” he says and the number 22 blares like a warning out from his chest, animated, like a cartoon heart. *Awooooga!* “Well...uh,” he admits as he pulls out a chair to join you, “...an actor and I work here.”

He is a child, an infant, an embryo. He has no idea what a fool you are. Did you ask him to sit down? He tastes like salt water taffy. You guess. You dream. You’re fairly certain. You’d bet your life. You try to do the math in your head. He is too young.

He wears a half apron: he is smocked. Brushes his hands across the front, over his thighs and stares at you eagerly. You talk for minutes that look like hours. Or was it hours that look like days? He says things that only 22 year olds say. He babbles on and it soothes like a gurgling baby, but it’s late and you’re tired and babysitting isn’t a skill you highlight on your resume. He is your blindside, a bag of frozen peas, the flavour purple.

Shut it down. Fold it up. Make the motions of leaving without standing. Look him in the eyes. “I’m not...” you say, knees touching, legs together. He crinkles up his face and winks.

“I know,” he laughs softly, head nodding slowly. He smells presidential. He smells like authority. You smile at the illusion. You’re in the movies. You are a silent picture. You are what happens when nobody is watching.

For this very moment, *he* pushes all the other *hims* to the back burner.

You look around the diner. Empty.

“Hey,” he says. You hear it, soft and low. Turn to where he stands, flicks the lights off. Cash register box lays open. You are dim lighting. You are smoke and mirrors. You are ice cream dripping. Stand silent, watch him over your right shoulder. You are the moment before it happens. You are the turning point. You are a box of iced cupcakes. You are sex in a weekend bra.

Outside, snow is everywhere. Icing sugar floats past and gets caught in your hair. You are a Christmas special. You are an empty snow globe. You are jingle bells. Say it’s snowing. It’s snowing, it’s snowing. Or it’s not. Every time you blink is different. It hits your cheek, cold and wet. You are Russia’s last chance. You are Snow-bunny Sundays. Close your eyes. Make it stay like this. You are his frozen moment. You are his TV dinner. You are his bedroom sheets. You are raspberry deodorant, teenage sweat, 11:34. You are only wearing one shoe.

He is the cold brick against your back. He is the eclipsing hand behind your head. He is a push against your hips. His is the give and the pant and the pull and the desire. He is all the best moves. He is a quick fix, gauze dressing, “I’ll get to it later”. He is this very moment.

And you were right. He is salt water taffy. He is peach flavour. He is swallowed whole.

He’s got your head in his hands and his lips are like pillows. He is a teddy bear storm trooper. He is a polar bear poet. He is a jalapeño lollipop. He might not make it out alive. You move your head back, tear your lips from his, take a breath and tilt ever so slightly to the right. His head is as weightless as a balloon and you tuck it down into your

neck, let him nuzzle there for a moment. Stand there thinking; in a back alley behind a coffee shop, and try to imagine a scenario that you could later file under ‘things I don’t regret.’

And then he lifts his head; slowly draws a future up your neck, under your chin and across your jaw line. He is all hands and lips and tongue. And then he looks you dead in the eye and says, “Want to hear a joke?”

A Date, Gynecologically Speaking

In every woman's life there will come at least one moment when she's on her back, legs spread wide, holding her breath, a man between her legs, and she'll think to herself, *Things have gone terribly, terribly wrong.*

It was the summer of 2010 and things had taken a turn for the worst; meaning, I was thinner than ever and yet, I hadn't had a date in weeks. Jennie and I sat in a coffee shop trying to figure out the male species.

"I'm not kidding, Jennie, he literally typed those words, *I want sum fuk,*" I said somewhere between laughter and tears. "I couldn't help myself so I messaged back with, *I fuk sum wan.* I don't think he got the joke though."

"Maybe you could message some smarter guys, Ya know, make the first move," Jennie offered.

"I would," I said. "I mean, I have in the past. They often respond but I swear I've never actually gone out on a date with someone I messaged first. We end up messaging a lot back and forth and then *nada*, nothing happens."

"Oh." Jennie sipped her coffee.

"I know," I sighed.

"Well..." she said her voice rising at the end like she was about to offer up a great idea for this no-man-desert I seemed to be stuck in.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know," she said laughing. "Men are idiots; I don't have any good advice."

Jennie was a great friend. Married at twenty-three, and about to celebrate her fifth wedding anniversary, she was one of the few people I didn't have to convince of my right to define my own happiness: that it was okay to not be sure about wanting to get married; that sex and pleasure were worthy goals. Plus, I had known her since eighth grade, so we had passed the too-much-information threshold ages ago. Nothing was off-limits.

"I have to go to the bathroom," said Jennie, "but when I get back we are going to make a serious plan to find you a good man. At least for a few weeks," she added, winking, before grabbing her purse off her chair and walking towards the back of the coffee shop.

I swirled my coffee around in its cup and smiled. I was lucky to have such a great friend.

"I would go out with you," said a voice to my right. "It sounds like you've been dating a lot of boys."

I turned to face the speaker, eyebrows raised.

"You should date men," he added. "You should let me take you out."

He was tall with spiky blond hair and had silver framed glasses. His face was angular although his body had a certain roundness to it. Under a white and blue striped button down, he had the belly of a beer drinker or a stress gut; I could relate.

"I don't know," I said, "What makes you worth my time?" I was trying to be cheeky but I worried it came across as arrogant. He didn't skip a beat but began to recite his life resume: the job he held, the things he owned. Something about him didn't sit quite right with me. Pretentious? Maybe that was it; he seemed like the kind of guy who might send back wine for not being oaky enough. And yet, something in me wanted to

say yes. It was probably the same part of me that kept repeating loudly in my head *beggars can't be choosers, beggars can't be choosers*. I could be a real bitch sometimes.

“Sure, okay,” I said, smiling as Jennie returned from the bathroom.

“Who is this?” she asked sweetly.

“Mi'lady,” he said gesturing towards her seat, “I'm Simon.” He stuck out his hand to shake hers. “Your friend and I are going to go out on a date.”

“Shannon,” I said, turning to Simon to formally introduce myself.

After a few minutes of idle banter, I gave him my number and Simon made his exit.

“Well how about that?” laughed Jennie.

“We'll see,” I shrugged, determined not to get too excited about a man I hardly knew. Though I had to admit, getting picked up in the daytime with hardly any makeup on was enough to put me in a good mood all week. *Beggars can't be choosers*, right?

~

It rained the night of our date. We met in a bar in New Westminster. Within ten minutes, I was fairly certain this was going to be a fling. We didn't have much in common, but I could get past that. He was very intense, while I was looking for light and carefree. He was touchy-feely and I was more initially conservative. Perhaps most detrimentally, he had a kid. A kid was not a problem in and of itself but, he still seemed to be fairly entangled with his ex. He didn't appear ready for a relationship. I'm not even sure he was ready for dating. Then, just when I thought all the strikes were in his column, he would say something completely sweet, or hilariously funny, and I found myself wishing we were somewhere more private. The things that made him obnoxious

as a person—his arrogance and pretension—when in the context of a possible sexual relationship made him seem ideal: at least for the moment.

“Want to go shoot some pool?” he asked. Music to my ears.

“I would love to!” Not only do I love to shoot pool but, perhaps bizarrely, I find it sexually exciting, which sounds weird. It’s not the pool itself; that would be super creepy. But the act of shooting pool: all those cues and balls and holes (the jokes practically write themselves); and then there’s the guy of course. He gets to see me looking my best (read: down my shirt), I get to see him do something that involves skill, something that usually they can teach me more about. Shooting pool is like wearing lingerie: inert on its own, but its mere presence makes me feel sexier.

This date was unlike most that I had been on thus far. Usually things were either going really well or downright awful. This was the first date that seemed to be going poorly for an emotional connection and yet extremely well for a chemical one. He wasn’t particularly attractive, and that’s putting it kindly, but he had the balls of a rock star. He had the kind of arrogance that attracts you in the bedroom and repels you in every other room. Regardless of what my brain and heart were telling me, my vagina was Simon’s number one fan. We had driven to a nearby casino that had a huge sports bar with tons of fun things to do, the most important of which were ten pool tables lined up along the back. After winning the first game, Simon walked up to me, slipped an arm around my back and pulled me in for a kiss. I hardly had time to consider whether or not I wanted to let alone time to pucker. My lips relaxed as soon as they touched his and, while I couldn’t understand my intense sexual attraction to Simon, I gave into it easily. Well, until I realized that people could see us making out and I became uncomfortable. We

played three more games of pool, two of which he lost. His reaction to losing reinforced my gut instinct that our personalities were not a match. He managed to be both aggressive and pouty in the same sore-loser fashion. It was a turn-off even my hormones couldn't ignore. And yet...we ended up at his place anyway.

~

His apartment was a mixture of a kid's playthings and unpacked boxes. "I just moved in last week," he explained. I didn't mind the boxes though the child's toys seemed a stark reminder that he had issues with his ex: unresolved issues. We made our way over to the couch, where he sat exactly in the middle. I was unsure if he was expecting me to squish into one side or the other when he grabbed both of my hands and tried to pull me onto his lap. Or, rather, he guided me into straddling him on the couch. We didn't stay on the couch long before the kissing turned to humping turned to him leading me into the bedroom. Whether or not he felt the same way about my personality as I did about his, it seemed clear enough that we were both on the same page sexually.

I lay down on his bed while he turned on some music and then came to join me. We hadn't been rolling around long before shirts were being pulled off. I undid the top button of his jeans and then his zipper, reached my hand inside his boxer shorts...and found myself holding the world's smallest penis.

There's this thing that happens when you find yourself touching the world's smallest penis; part of you wants to run away, to pull up your pants and say, "nope, not going to happen". And then there's the other part of you that would be crushed if someone rejected you for a part of your body that you couldn't control (or even one you could). An inner turmoil goes on between self-preservation and kindness. Unfortunately

for me, kindness usually wins. Because who wants to be the girl who breaks someone's heart who already has the shitty luck of having the world's smallest penis? Less than three inches. Hard. Seriously. And barely hard at that. What is a girl to do?

He put the condom on himself and I fucked him anyway. I bit my lower lip and hoped that his dick would triple in size once immersed in something wet. It did not.

"Get on top," he said.

"Uhhh...no...let's keep doing it like this," I mumbled. I barely wanted to be fucking him anymore, I certainly didn't want to get on top and do all the work. I know it was mean, but in the moment I kept thinking how it was total bullshit that a man with the world's smallest penis wasn't working harder to please me. But he wouldn't stop asking.

"I can last longer if you're on top," he said, totally unaware of the fact that this was no longer an upside for me. "Get on top," he urged again, and again. With every urge, what was left of my sexual attraction disappeared until I finally caved and thought, *fuck it let's just get this over already*: I got on top. In less than twenty thrust he was ready to cum. Rightly assuming that this was too soon for a grown man to be cumming, he tried to shimmy out from under me and gently tossed me to the right. I thought he was hoping to slow his climax so that we could continue.

He sat up, swung his legs over the side of the bed and came into his own hand. He sat there for a moment before getting up and going to the bathroom to wash off his hand. It seemed really weird that he would cum in his own hand. Weirder still that he would take the condom off to do so. Why wouldn't he just cum into the condom: no muss, no fuss? When he returned from the bathroom, he crouched near the bed and ran his hands along the sheets.

That's when it dawned on me. As it had probably dawned on him only moments before.

"The condom came off," he said without even a hint of shame.

"What do you mean?"

I was freaking out. He didn't seem too concerned but, then again, this had never happened to me before. He started to explain it away with some bullshit about all the thrusting and the movement and me being on top etcetera etcetera, but the truth was that his penis was so small that the condom probably didn't even fit. I watched him look through the sheets, walk around the bed looking for it on the floor, before the horror started to sink in.

"I think the condom is inside you," he said nonchalantly.

I almost burst into tears immediately. I reached inside myself in a desperate search to get this, now disgusting, foreign body out of me. My heart was racing. I was ashamed. I was enraged. I was helpless.

"I can't feel anything!" I said, my voice rising in hysterics. "You have to take me to the hospital." I'm not entirely sure why I thought the hospital would require the both of us, or why I wouldn't be able to drive myself to the hospital. I did, however, know that I wasn't going to show up at the emergency room, alone in these dire straits, without the World's Smallest Penis by my side for support. **YOU DID THIS TO ME!**

"Relax," he said. "I'll help you get it out. Lay back on the bed."

And that's how it happened for me. That time in every woman's life when she's on her back, legs spread wide, holding her breath, a man between her legs. All I could think of was that things had gone terribly, terribly wrong.

As luck would have it, he was able to get his hand somewhere up near my uterus (or probably more likely my cervix) and deftly manoeuvred his fingers to retrieve the lost treasure. With my legs in the air over his shoulders, and him crouched down on the bed, he pulled that rubber alien out. After at least a minute of precision searching, mind you. He took it to the bathroom to throw it out and came back into the bedroom. By the time he returned, I already had most of my clothes back on.

“Well, I hate to hit it and quit it,” I said awkwardly trying to relieve the tension, “but, um...I gotta go.” He didn’t seem too bothered by my quick departure, which is understandable. After all, I was a now a stark reminder of his inadequacies.

On the drive home, there was a moment when I started to feel bad. Perhaps I shouldn’t have run out of there so quickly. What’s the big deal about a lost condom inside you anyway? But then I flashed back to that moment when it felt like he was up to his elbows in my vagina, searching and digging, and I forgave myself for any slights I might have caused. And then I made a mental note to make an appointment for my annual PAP smear.

Wood

The first time I touch a penis I am seventeen and in someone else's empty tent. There are no sleeping bags, no stretched out foam mattresses. I can feel the hard dirt underneath the tarped bottom. My jacket stays on the whole time.

We hadn't even kissed. He opened his pants in the darkness and I went for it. I immediately squeezed too hard and it deflated into something like a balloon filled with pudding. He was an older boy from Chilliwack. A town of value to me only in so much as it wasn't my hometown. He was older and unknown; he was sexual heroin for a teenage girl. After he went soft, we sat in the tent in silence for what felt like ten minutes until he told me that he was much more attracted to my friend Megan. I was crushed. Megan had a mannish quality about her, which I guess could've been attractive.

The second time I touch a penis is right before putting it in my mouth. It was significantly smaller than I had expected. It was like sucking on your finger to get a ring off; it was a tiny baby erection. His name was Errol, "like Errol Flynn," he said and then he imitated a swashbuckler. I think. It was pretty dark. I had crossed the border into Point Roberts, with a few friends, to see the 4th of July fireworks. After they were over, a group of boys approached us and began to flirt. They turned out to be younger than us; we had just graduated a week before, they were starting as seniors in September. More than their age, they were of interest because of their location. They lived in Richmond, which inherently meant they weren't from our small town, they didn't go to our one high school.

"We have a cabin," they said.

Their “cabin” was occupied by their parents, so we were forced to seclude ourselves around a fire pit in the backyard. By backyard, I mean the woods that surrounded their property as the area was relatively undeveloped.

I was crouching the second time I touched a penis, away from our respective friends and hidden in the trees. First we were kissing—making out really—and then I was crouching with his tiny baby penis in my mouth. Only my second penis ever and it didn’t even seem that bad. He had asked if I would, asked had I ever before.

“Would you suck my dick?” he said.

I was offended. He had barely touched my boobs. But I also wasn’t one to turn down a challenge and that was what it felt like: a dare. I sucked on it like a Twizzler. And within a minute he came: thin and sweet. I swallowed without much thought. It went down with ease, much like I did, apparently

The third time I touch a penis is later that same night.

We had all been drinking, some of us more than others. Errol, like his penis, turned out to be a lightweight. Shortly after returning to the fire he began to vomit: luckily, not on me. Still, I was horrified; partly because I took his drunkenness as a personal slight (how could I be sure that he was attracted to me? Was he this drunk when we were making out? Was the blowjob so bad that it made him throw up?) and partly because now my night was over. He was only the second boy I had ever kissed. I still wanted to practice. I still wanted butterflies. I didn’t want to spend the night hanging around a campfire with strangers, not making out with anyone, while all my friends were off in the woods having fun with boys.

I didn't do much to hide my disappointment. I was standing around the fire, pouting, when a boy named Mark offered me a beer. I accepted. He retrieved one from a cooler nearby and handed it to me.

"I'm a good kisser," he blurted out, smiling.

"What?" I opened my beer.

"I'm a good kisser," he repeated. "You'll like it."

"I bet."

I didn't understand. Was he was bragging or propositioning me? I wasn't really an ugly duckling, but I was definitely a slow starter. I rarely got any attention from boys, let alone from two in the same evening. At first, I wondered if he was talking to me because he knew what I had done with Errol and his baby penis, but that wasn't possible, unless he'd been spying on us. I'm sure he assumed we had made out but Errol hadn't had time to brag about the night's events, assuming he'd even wanted to, before he'd started throwing up.

"I bet I'm a better kisser than Errol," he boasted further. He was now standing next to me, or more precisely over me given how big and tall he was.

"So what?" I said, both as a challenge and a deflection. Suddenly, I was aware that none of my friends were anywhere nearby. I wasn't really afraid, just nervous, unsure of what was going to happen next.

"You should kiss me and find out."

Having stopped pouting over Errol, I gave Mark, the boaster, my full attention. Errol by this point had wandered off to the cabin to sleep it off.

“Naw, I think I’m all set,” I said, laughing. I laughed at him. I laughed at his bravado. I laughed at a boy who thought that he could goad me into making out with him. And then, I laughed at myself because in a way it was working. There was vulnerability in his confidence. Or, I was a seventeen year old girl who had just realized boys were interested in her and was immediately drunk on the attention. Not to mention that he was the only boy in the bunch who resembled anything other than a malnourished fifteen year old. He had a beard for *christ sakes*. He was tall. He had muscles. My self-restraint never stood a chance.

I didn’t cave right away though. There was more prodding and boasting. I’m fairly certain at one point he actually said the words, “I dare you.” It wasn’t brilliant. After all, we were just silly teenagers and didn’t know anything about witty repartee. This was as good as it got.

We walked out into the woods and I let him kiss me. And he was right, he was a much better kisser than Errol. His lips were fuller, his tongue more controlled, his head was a foot higher than Errol’s. Sometimes my leg would shake uncontrollably from nerves. I hoped he wouldn’t notice. His hands moved quickly down the sides of my body, stopping on my breasts perfunctorily; boobs left hand right hand one two three four five, hips same time one two three, lower back one two, ass one two three four five and squeeze both hands. Repeat. Until we heard giggling coming from not far off. His friends must have gone to take a leak and stumbled upon our forest make-out session. I couldn’t see them, but it made me uncomfortable knowing that they were there, watching. I started to pull back. He reached out for me.

“No...” he mumbled. “Don’t go yet.”

“Maybe we should go back to the fire?” I suggested but he had a better idea. We walked down the dirt road that had originally led us onto the property from the main road and crossed the street to a dark deserted park. He grabbed my hand and pulled me behind an old brick building (a building I would later recognize, in the light of day, as the Fire Department). We started kissing against the wall but before I could say, “I’m still a virgin” he was dragging me down onto the ground with him.

“It’s dirty!” I whisper-shrieked, given that it was somewhere around 1a.m..

“You can lay on top of me,” he said. This was as close to a love song as I had ever heard.

I was a size 12. I was a teenage girl with self-esteem issues. I was wearing a floor length skirt. Manoeuvring my way onto his chest should have qualified me for Ninja status. I kissed him, nervous and shaking and not altogether warm enough. He, with one hand helping to balance me on his body, took the other hand and undid his zipper, whipping his penis out.

“Want to 69?” he asked in the same tone as someone asking you if you were hungry.

I wasn’t looking for love and romance but being asked to 69 in a park behind a firehouse by only the third guy I’d ever kissed was not the story wet dreams are made of. But, this was only the third guy I’d ever kissed and I was only 17 and he seemed to be under the impression that I was small enough that I could continue to lie on top of him without crushing his body and if that isn’t enough to convince a girl to 69, I don’t know what is. He spun me around, pulled my panties to the side and stuck his face in between my thighs. It felt reasonably good; his tongue seemed to know the right spots but his

mouth was so wet and all I could think was how embarrassed I would be if I ended up with a drool stain on my skirt later. My orgasm didn't stand a chance with that kind of divided attention.

His penis was significantly bigger than Errol's. I wrapped my mouth around it and tried to ignore my worries about my skirt getting slobbery or dirty or both. I can't even imagine what we would've looked like if someone had chosen that moment to stop by the park. My legs protruding out the side slits of a baby pink floor length skirt. His face, shrouded in plump thighs. My face, confused about what I was supposed to do next. From above I imagine we looked like a sexually awkward starfish.

It was a lot harder than it had been with Errol, both sucking his dick, and the dick itself. I put my mouth on his penis and did my best to imitate what I thought a blow job should be. While my cheeks cramped and my jaw felt tight, I thought about the stupidity of naming it a *blow* job when I was pretty sure you weren't supposed to blow at all. It was probably the worst blowjob he had ever gotten. I felt so uncomfortable that I couldn't enjoy anything he was doing to me. After what felt like hours but was probably only a few minutes I slowly tried to get up without squishing his head in my thighs. I would spend the rest of my life trying to figure out what kind of person could possibly like the 69 position for anything other than a novelty.

"I don't want to do this anymore," I said like a sexual revolutionary. He tried to persuade me with a few weak attempts but I was pretty quick to jump up off his body. At that point I think he knew his battle was lost. We straightened our clothes, got ourselves together, and walked back to the fire. He didn't hold my hand. He didn't ask for my phone number.

Plus

It has been 12 months and 9 days since I first thought he might kill me with this elevator love; since he put too much weight on these heart strings that were already stretched thin like my patience and his biceps. We had met at the office Christmas party on the 7th floor, which I thought might make him lucky.

People moved about the main office, congregating around tables of food and tensely circling the bar, as if at any moment they would suddenly run out of booze. Or make us pay for it. I looked past the now silent cubicles and studied my reflection in the dark windows dressed in fake snow. My plumpness guised as a curvy silhouette; I looked at the table of pretty little sandwiches, of catered salads and gourmet desserts, and opted instead for the bar. I was in line when he tapped me on the shoulder. We were both wearing ugly Christmas sweaters; his, a light blue sweater with white snowflakes; mine, a dark green cardigan covered in felt reindeer, complete with big Rudolf and red pom pom nose. When I turned around to face him, he held out the box of chocolates and said, “Life is like a box of chocolates, I already ate all the good ones.”

“Jeff,” I said, “life is like a box of chocolates, mostly gross.”

Later that night, amid drunken coworkers and the high pitched voice of Susan from HR, karaoke-ing her way through *Uptown Girls*, he grabbed my hand and ushered me down the hall to his office. He picked up a piece of mistletoe from the desk and held it above our heads.

“That’s toxic if you eat it.”

He smiled and said, “Your beauty is intoxicating.”

I laughed and said, “I roofied you.”

He put the mistletoe down and picked up a plate of desserts from his desk. “I stole these earlier, just in case they ran out.”

“Good thinking.” I leaned back against his desk, rested too close to his inbox, and knocked it over along with a cup of pens. My face flushed with embarrassment. Jeff didn’t seem to notice. I quickly turned to sweep them up, cleared myself a bigger space and sat more squarely on his desk. Jeff continued to look at my face, smiling sweetly and holding the paper plate of desserts. He seemed suddenly uncertain. He traced an outline around the brownie and then pinched a Nanaimo bar gently between his thumb and forefinger. He stepped towards me, the tops of his thighs touching my knees as my legs draped off the edge of the desk.

“Bite?” he asked holding up the Nanaimo bar. I opened my mouth and he placed it halfway in. I took a bite. He put the rest of it in his mouth, and then the confidence in his face was back, a sweet arrogance inflating his broad shoulders. He slipped his arms inside my open cardigan, manoeuvred around my chubby waist. When we kissed, he tasted like Christmas, peppermint and chocolate, the hint of nutmeg on his lips. We spent the rest of the party in his office, making out against his desk, until midnight when he asked if I wanted to go home and be weird together.

“OK.”

The next morning I stood in his kitchen while he made declarations and sandwiches, like tall tales, too big to swallow.

You’re so beautiful.

You’re so perfect.

I’ve liked you for months.

You could be my girlfriend.

You should stay.

I wanted to say yes, but something held me back. He watched my face too closely. He looked at my waist with too much lust. “Here,” he said, offering me a pressured mouthful like a Jewish mother, “you should eat something.”

But I just shook my head *no* and turned away from him. I was too anxious, too uncertain. He was so much better looking than I was. Sure, a quick office romance, a holiday party hookup, that I could believe. But, after we had done it, after we were dressed and he no longer had to be nice to me, he told me things I couldn’t believe. The things he said were too grand, too big, everything was just too much; except, that I was completely enthralled by him. I couldn’t help myself.

After that night, time flew by like race cars: fast and dizzy. At night, when I couldn’t sleep, which was far too often and very rarely addressed, he would tell me jokes until the bunched thread of my frailties wove a quilt worth sleeping under. Sometimes, after he had gone to sleep I would get up and find that he had made me snacks. Meals packed into the fridge with little notes of love. *Just in case you get hungry.*

He was always taking care of me. When we stopped for a hotdog on the street while shopping downtown he offered to share and then gave me the extra bite. When we went out for dinner he’d feed me from his plate. “Here,” he would say, “try this.” Try these French fries, try this pasta, try this hamburger, you look great you look great you look...are you hungry here have some of mine. He was constantly trying to expand my horizons.

I gained 20 pounds in the first three months. After that, I stopped eating the dinners he made us every night because I was certain he was hiding extra ingredients in there: butter in the mashed potatoes, bacon in the stuffed chicken, desserts under my pillow, love in the little pockets of ravioli. “You’re being paranoid,” he said in confusion I assumed was feigned. He had to be faking it. Sly. He wanted me fat. Super fat. He wanted me to be obese. But, that didn’t make sense. He looked like a fitness model. “I don’t understand what’s happening, you have to talk to me,” he demanded. “Maybe I can help?” But it only made me pull away.

“I can’t,” I said, tears streaming. I gestured at my neck. Crossed my arms to make him see. Made the international symbol for choking. “My throat is full of something toxic.” It was my heart, filled with love and probably cholesterol. He fed me cotton candy on the bed, touching it to my tongue so the sugar would melt my heart. We talked about moving in together. I wasn’t sure. We went for a walk in the park and I threw up in the bushes. I thought he was trying to love me to death.

I was terrified, but I moved in anyway. I thought he could teach me how to make lasagna and have a proper bedtime. I thought maybe he could teach me to stop checking for disasters in seat cushions and on countertops, but every time he dusted the things we owned together I thought the air tasted *just a bit* like maple syrup.

It has been 12 months and 9 days since I first thought he might kill me with this elevator love and now I’m considering running away to join the circus; every circus needs a fat lady. The thing is, though, I can’t sing for shit. Plus, I love him.

“Plus, I love him,” I say into the mirror to remind myself.

“Plus, I love him,” I say counting the rolls around my waist.

“Plus, I love him.”

I apply a shade of red lipstick and practice my pout, pudgy hip thrust to the side, shoulders back, breasts out. *Angles Dana, angles.*

“Plus, I love him,” I say again, sweating.

“Plus, I love him,” I say again.

“Plus, I love him,” I say again.

“Plus, you love me,” he whispers, as his head pops up over my shoulder, his arms slip around my expanding waist, his lips mark my neck with a wet kiss. He smells like fresh cinnamon buns.

“Plus, I love you,” I say turning around to face him. I kiss his mouth, smearing the red lipstick on both of us, gesture towards the bed, and he mumbles something in agreement. My thighs slap against my belly as I crawl onto the bed; I arrange myself amongst the sheets, try to hide these rolls in the pillows. He pulls them away and tosses them on the floor.

“I want to see you,” he says smiling sweetly, “you’re beautiful.”

I decide that tomorrow I will take poison control off my speed dial. I think maybe my mother is right. Love probably won’t kill you.

How to Have a Fake Affair with a Real Celebrity

You will find him one day, on Twitter, and follow immediately because he makes you laugh. Doing so will be a thing that changes your life. He will be the _____ of the most popular _____ since *Oprah*, which you would probably watch if only you had a T.V.

Star a few of his tweets. If you're lucky, he will notice that you have 10,000 followers and maybe, just maybe, think that you are a Somebody. You are definitely not a Somebody; but, if you're lucky he won't notice that. Your bio will be funny and your avatar will have been selected for maximum appeal (read: from above and looking thin), so you can rest assured that you did all you could to make this possible.

*Writer. Dater. Masturbator. Don't
worry, my parents don't think I'm funny either.*

He will follow you back. When he does, take a screenshot immediately. For all you know he could realize that you're ridiculous and unfollow at any time. Post the photo on Facebook. Text your parents and tell them. This is the most exciting thing to happen to since getting into grad school. Who are you kidding? This is the most exciting thing to happen to you ever. The first few times he stars your tweet take a screenshot of that too. Do not take any chances while waiting for the other shoe to drop. Your friends will joke that you are a celebrity now. Remember that you are not a celebrity now.

On a Thursday in December he will tweet about the hockey strike. You will star this tweet and he will send you a private message.

He types *Hockey strike sucks!!!*

Take your time responding. Be patient; doing so will make you seem busy, regardless of the fact that you actually are busy. You are busy with grad school and work and pretending you have a life that is more interesting than this. Be super witty, be incredibly suave and smart and super sophisticated. Use words like you are a goddamn Somebody.

You type *I know, right?*

And you have never been more brilliant. You are basically a genius. A few seconds will pass before you decide this isn't good enough and type something more elaborate.

You type up an elaborate scenario, a fool proof plan, something about how the two of you should campaign elementary school children to write thousands of sad little letters about how badly this strike is affecting them. Nobody ever says no to sad children.

He responds with *Thanks for the faves.*

Ooh, not great. Recede into the depths of your self-doubt. Over-think to the edge of madness. Did he not think the letter campaign was funny? It probably wasn't funny. Oh god. He must now think that you are an idiot. GET A GRIP ON YOURSELF! You are spinning out of control. He is just a person. Settle down and respond.

You thank him for making you laugh; he thanks you for being cute. He says all the things you wish men, who live within taxi distance from you, would say. He thinks you're sexy. He thinks you're funny. He appreciates that you're in grad school, as if to confirm that higher education isn't completely without value. It's all flirt and swoon

until he drops this bomb: *and I'm married so we have to be sneaky which makes for sneaking flirting sexting.*

Whoa. Wait. What. He's married?!? Of course he's married. This is the internet. Why would he be talking to you unless he was married? He could be out somewhere talking to supermodels and gorgeous actresses. So, of course, he is married; the question now is whether or not this will bother you enough to offset the excitement of him wanting to talk to you. Or more precisely, as his message indicates, wants to sext with you. Everything is so exciting! Except, ugh, he is married. You will need to find a way to push the notion of his wife away. Maybe you can convince yourself that you're doing her a favour, spicing up their sex life without him ever actually straying. Married people need that don't they? This will be the moment when you realize that you are a horrible person and that this is some messed up logic. Try not to get down on yourself. Lots of people are horrible. It's about time you joined the crowd.

When you respond, act like you're surprised it turned out this way. Act above it all, like you knew this would never be more than just playing around with words. Never admit that you looked at the prices for flights to LA.

When he messages back it is not at all surprising. He asks *what you're wearing?* Ignore the sound of tumbleweeds rolling across your arid southern states. Try not to be disappointed at his first foray into talking with you. You were expecting genius and that was a mistake. He is an executive producer not a writer. Still though, his tweets are hilarious, so it's okay to be a little disappointed. But chin up because it won't all be bad. Somewhere down the road he will say things that seem like magic. He will act like a

dreamboat should. A dreamboat who is married. And on the internet. And basically a celebrity. Living in L.A., and you are not in L.A. . But, no matter.

The conversation progresses and there will come a time when you will ask how old he is. He will tell you that he is old; he will use exclamation points; he is 45. Try not to be bothered when he never asks how old you are. Wonder how old you look. He knows that you're in grad school, but that doesn't mean much. You could be anywhere between 23 and a hundred. This will be one of the few times you hope you look your age. 32 is okay for a 45 year old to flirt with. 32 is okay to have fake sex with a real celebrity. Hope he doesn't think that you're 23 as that would be gross. Well, grosser than being married and flirting with a strange girl on the internet. Consider how many levels of gross there are. Consider the morality of grossness. Consider getting more sleep.

As the sexting progresses, you will realize that this is why the dialogue in movies and stories never sounds like real life: because real life is cheesy. Real men (and women) are cheesy. All his words will be goofy and yours will always be half-missteps and embarrassing upon review. But in the moment, in real time, when you think about him typing them to you, they'll make your cheeks flush and your desire real. You may actually even squeal with glee a few times. There will be moments when you beam. This is what it's like when powerful men flirt with Nobodies. This is what it's like when he talks to you. This is how to have a fake affair with a real celebrity.

You ask *what would you do if you were here?*

This is the moment of no return. This will be your one chance to turn back, to stop the things you know will happen, before they happen. You will not make that turn,

you will charge on full steam ahead. When it's over you will be embarrassed, having touched yourself to the words of someone you've never met. Let go of that guilt. Finish your final paper. Finish all your marking. Go home for Christmas.

When you're back home, go to Costco with your parents. While your Dad looks at motor oil and your Mom is in the aisle for books, tweet the following:

My life won't be complete until at least one guy wrecks his car checkin me out. And I win a Nobel prize.

It won't be your best, but it has a certain humorous charm. Almost immediately he will retweet it. This basically-a-celebrity, who has amassed another 10,000 followers since you first discovered him a month ago, will retweet it to his 30,000 followers. This is the internet. This isn't real. This is ridiculous. And yet, it's not. This *is* real. Not the swooning and lust you feel for him but the exposure: your words, your picture, your presence. That is real. This is happening. Take a screen shot of your face and your tweet on his page. Burst from joy in the dish detergent aisle of the Costco near your hometown. This may be the most exciting thing that has ever happened to you. Savor every moment. This is probably as good as it gets.

Enjoy Christmas with your family, have a great New Year's Eve with your friends, and try not to hope (don't hope!) for more contact from him. Try not to be sad that his face doesn't show up after every tweet. Fly back to school after holiday break. Act normal. Continue to tweet things only you could find funny:

I accidentally got it on with a Miami Dolphin once.
Just kidding, it was on porpoise.

Whenever someone says “press pause” during a movie I go over & slowly press my palms against theirs because I like word play...and bears.

He will star both tweets; you are both comic geniuses. This will be your window to contact him, without seeming over-eager. Thank him for starring your lame tweets, say something witty like *thanks for starring those tweets, I wasn't sure anyone would find it funny*. He will respond *I did!!* His exclamation marks will feel like declarations of love. Logic has never been further away.

He will go on a business trip halfway around the world, a real whirlwind thing. Your mother watches his show; she watches America's sweetheart of daytime. “_____ is filming the show in Australia,” your mother will say over the phone. Sometimes she watches to see if they ever read one of your jokes on the air. They do that every so often, read a selection of funny tweets. You will have to pretend that you are not bothered by the fact that none of yours have ever been read. You're probably not funny enough, but thoughts like that sting so keep them to yourself. Or, more accurately, push them down and pretend they don't exist. Keep them hidden from everyone, yourself included. Ask him how the trip is going. Try to be brilliant, make a joke about the time difference. Ask him what the future is like. *Is future me as adorable as present me?* He wants to LOL you all night. It happens again; across the world and the internet and his marriage. It is winter and you will be empty and he is alone.

When you are ready, jump into bed, engulf yourself in covers, and wait—vibrator at the ready. He asks what you're wearing. Describe it to him slow and thorough, leave

no detail unclear: red lace panties, topless, clean and ready to get dirty. He will tell you that he wishes he could see you. Tell him you're not ready for that, you don't want to be rushed. Plus, you can't be certain that he would like your ample figure if he were to see it in real time and not in perfectly angled, internet- safe photos. You've seen pictures of his wife. She is fit. She is lithe. You can see her collarbone in photos. The only person who has ever seen your collarbone is an x-ray technician and he didn't seem particularly thrilled by it. Maybe he has a secret fetish for fat girls.

You say something, casually, about how if he has an iPhone the two of you could video chat with Facetime. You will say this mostly as a brush-off, a way to say *not yet* about him seeing you too closely without having to explain why you might not want him to see you too closely. And then, just like that, he types out his phone number, like it's no big thing. Like he's not the executive producer to the most popular daytime show in America. Like he's not on the show sometimes. Like he doesn't now have 50,000 Twitter followers. Like he's not a goddamn celebrity. Like he's not a goddamn *married* celebrity. He just types his number, like somehow you can be trusted. When you respond with shock he worries and asks *was that a mistake?* Assure him that it was not. He tells you that you are trustworthy.

It will feel like he makes it so by saying it, that you are trustworthy because he has given you something worthy of trust. The very reason he will feel safe giving his phone number to you, is probably the same reason he chose you in the first place. You are trustworthy. To an extent. After all, I imagine his wife wouldn't think you're so great. Best not to think too deeply on that now. You send a text to his number: *Hey...it's me.* You wait. There is no response. A minute goes by. Two minutes go by. You

double check the number, triple check. It is the right number, the number he gave you.

You send another message on Twitter.

Sorry he says. He was taking a picture of his dick to send you.

Remember this moment in time, it will be the one and only time you'll be amazed by a dick pic. It won't be the size. It will be the way he took the dick pic. He will be lying down, the camera facing up towards his face: full dick exposure, full face exposure. You will wonder if he's drunk. You will wonder if he's a moron. You will want to believe that he trusts you beyond reproach because of something he feels for you; you will want to believe that there is some realness to this thing that you two are doing. You will want to believe that this fake affair could one day be a real affair, all because of a face in a dick pic. You shouldn't believe any of this. But you will and that belief will be the thing that makes sexting with him feel like the best sex you've ever had, at the time.

When it's over he will thank you. He says "thanks for being there" like you did him a favor, like you were just a necessary hurdle. You are the proverbial shoulder to lean on of internet fucking. Push this feeling down. You absolutely cannot say anything about this to him. You cannot reveal that you think this is anything more than words on a screen. But then he calls you baby and you melt like a teenage girl who has just been told she's pretty for the first time. What else is there but to emoti-con him into thinking you're fine with everything?

You don't wonder whether or not he cares about you; it is clear he does not. You are not in a relationship, you are a practice wall. You know this, not-so-deep-down. Yet, here you are, in this place. You would never sell yourself so short for a regular man. But

he is not a regular man. You will feel shame for valuing his status so highly, but it is more than that: you will tell yourself.

The next morning he sends you a message. You are hurt, but not surprised. The message comes on Twitter instead of via text. He will not have saved your number in his phone. You are not a number worth saving. Maybe that is too harsh. You are not a number he can be caught having. Thinking about it this way will make it hurt less but increase your guilt. Repeat after me: he is married; he is married; he is married. Pretend he isn't married.

The message reads: *please delete pics. Omg.*

You press him for details, wanting to know why. *How come?* You ask. (*Aside from the obvious*). *What has changed from last night?*

Nothing!!!!!! and again his exclamation points feel like kisses, feel like assurances, don't feel nearly as empty as they should. *Just makes me nervous cause you can see my face. That's. All.* And that's how he types it. *That's. All.* His punctuation feels like a love poem. He's embarrassed and vulnerable and he's worried about assuring you. His punctuation is not for lovers. His periods are afraid. His exclamations are hollow. He is a married celebrity in this TMZ world. You should bear this in mind. You should prepare yourself.

He will have been right about you; you are trustworthy, because you actually delete his pictures. You won't take screenshots, you won't save the files to your phone, you delete the photos from your phone like a good trustworthy girl. Later, you will regret being so trustworthy, for not saving a trophy.

A few weeks will go by. No messages get sent from either party. But still, he will star your tweets and you will star his. Every tweet he stars takes on important meaning, like he is sending you secret messages. They will rarely be reassuring. Your friends ask when you're going to be on the show. They are certain that you will be a star one day. Know that the mistress never gets a starring role. Though, if you think about it, you won't actually be a mistress, having never actually fucked each other. Some days you wonder what is more pathetic, having a real life affair with a Nobody or a fake affair with a Somebody. These thoughts are slightly insane and not at all uncommon. Keep this negativity to yourself. Nobody wants to hear the woes of the morally corrupt. Nobody wants to hear that you're sad about your fake affair.

Trust me, I'm not the girl you're looking for.
Unless this is your bike that I just stole. My bad.

He stars this.

I faked an orgasm while sexting. I'm what's wrong with the world.

He stars this.

Send him a message. Try not to pander, try not to be pathetic, make only a few awkward jokes. He will lift you up. But it will feel just a little too much like you begged for it. Like you're an annoyance. He retweets the next funny thing you tweet.

How soon after starting a diet are you allowed to be a total bitch because I haven't had a carb in over 3 hours

And the one after that.

Relationship Status: Mythical

Two weeks pass and he retweets you again, but time has elapsed and reality has had a chance to chip away at the internet-haze of lust that you were caught in. You still want him. You still want the affair to be real. But now, you've remembered that you have a life. This time when he asks what you are wearing you shut him down, politely. Two days later he tries again. This time you fall into the old trap. You say *we should text...messaging takes too long on Twitter. Do you still have my number?*

Try not to be hurt by this; you know it makes sense that he wouldn't keep your number. What if his wife looked in his phone one day? And what would he even file you under: your name? Your twitter handle? As 'that whore from the internet'? Okay probably not that last one. Don't let your emotions get the better of you; you are a wonderful person. He is the one with the power fucking you. Give him your number, you need another hit off this pipe.

He asks for a photo of you, naked, or at least stripped down to your red lace undies. Do not send one. Ignore his request. You are less trusting than he is. You are smarter than he is. The rest will happen as it always does. In the moment it will be a turn on, it will be thrilling. When it's over he will thank you. Do not be surprised. It will always end like this: painfully quick. Logically you know it makes sense, there is no such thing as sextuddling(?) (cuddlexting?) (spoonexting?). There is no cuddling after

sexting. That is not a real thing. Regardless, you will still be bothered by his speedy retreat, his brush off. While your vagina is still wet, you will become all too aware of all the things that this is not. This is not anything. And yet, it is not entirely nothing. Some days you wonder why you bother to return to this man, and admonish yourself for your inability to disengage from his pull. He is a celebrity and if you are being honest, that is a big draw. But it is more than that. He is this strange brand of celebrity. He speaks out for gay rights. He speaks out against bullies. He is fearless, and yet constantly self-deprecating. You know that from his position of power he is fucking with you, even though he's not actually fucking with you. But, then he will be paying attention when you tweet about your sobriety or a life change and he will congratulate you. It will take him a mere second to send a message or tweet but it feels like receiving a personal letter in the mail. You feel special. You think you are the only one. You are not the only one. There is no fucking way you are the only one. You know this. You have to know this. For goodness sake, tell me you know this.

A month later, when the sting of his last *thank you* for sexting has dissipated, you send him a message. Maybe you are addicted to him. Maybe you are delusional. Maybe you have big dreams and, really, who says that one day he won't be the hand you need getting up. Capitalize on your awkward persona.

You: *Can't believe you haven't noticed my adorable new avi ;) JUST KIDDING PLEASE DON'T UNFOLLOW ME!*

Him: *So cute!*

You: *And that's why you're my favourite!*

Him: *Lol*

You: *Well maybe number 2...but it's not really fair because Sean Connery has an accent...can you do an accent?*

Him: *Not really.*

You: *Just kidding obviously you're number one...Sean Connery is fictional.*

Silence. He does not respond. Wait half an hour and then message again.

You: *Not a fan of my Connery jokes? I knew I should've stopped while I was Ahead.*

Silence. For the next few hours, check his tweets every so often to see if he's ignoring you. Check to see if he favorites any other tweets. He won't do either. Become a little less crazy-hurt and agitated, and go about your business. If he wants to respond he will, and why would he start ignoring you so completely. The next morning he messages: *Sorry I fell asleep, long day!*

Don't bother responding. This will be one of very few moments of power (though the fact that you care enough to manipulate yourself into a more powerful position technically negates that power position. Best not to think too deeply on this.) He fell asleep during your witty banter. You don't need to be angry about this. There is no need to harbor feelings of resentment. You can just leave it as is. His will be the last message left unresponded to. Feel powerful for a few minutes. Go back to living your life as normal after those minutes are over. You are a strong woman, most of the time.

Before you know it, it is May and a string of events will change everything. A girl on the internet will write an article about body image. It will be well-written and powerful. She will post it online with a picture of her eating pizza in her underwear. People will rally around her. She's a gorgeous size 8 and though she's saying great

things about how women should feel wonderful about their own bodies, you will have concerns. Size 8 is not fat. You will wonder how people would react if an **actual** fat person posted their body so flagrantly. You will immediately write an article that conveys this. You will cry the entire time. You will post a picture of your size 24 body in a bathing suit, at a BBQ, eating a messy burger off a paper plate on your lap. The photo will not be cropped, shopped, or filtered. The photo will not be flattering in the traditional sense. Your heart will nearly stop beating. He will retweet the article to his now 70,000 followers. The response will be deafening. He will also tweet an endorsement.

Please please please read what I just RT'd. I love it so much.

And then he will message you. He will tell you that he loves it. Several exclamation marks of love. Thank him. He reiterates his love. You reiterate your thanks.

Leave this as the final message. Do not pursue him further. Do not ruin the picture you have of him in your mind. Sure, you will probably send innocuous messages back and forth with him: a *Congratulations!* here and a *Happy Birthday* there. In the sweetness, let this be how it ends.

Ribbit.

The two girls were sitting out on the cement balcony, getting high, and waiting for the storm. Their lower backs perspired against the cheap white plastic lawn chairs, their thighs sticking to the seats. The thermometer Shannon had hung in the corner read 32 degrees but with the humidity it felt more like 40. The storm would cool everything off. They could see it in the clouds, still a ways off across the St. Lawrence River.

“Want another drink?” Shannon asked opening the balcony door and stepping inside. The apartment was much cooler than outside, though they had turned off the air conditioner. The hot air pumping outside where they sat was nearly unbearable.

“Yes please!” responded Dana, taking the last sip of her drink and holding it out for more.

Shannon smiled, “I’m thinking more tequila this time, yeah?”

“No question,” said Dana carefully rolling another joint.

The apartment was mostly dark, except for the main light on in the tiny kitchen. Shannon poured what was left of the first batch of margaritas into two glasses and then added an extra shot of tequila to each.

“Do you have any binoculars?” Dana shouted from the balcony.

“What do you want them for?” she asked.

“So we can see the lightning more clearly when it starts,” answered Dana.

“Oh,” said Shannon disappointed, “really?”

“Of course not, I want to see the weird shit your neighbors are up to!”

Shannon laughed and ran to get her binoculars out of her closet. She brought them out to Dana before running back in for the drinks.

Dana smoothed the joint before lighting the end, took two puffs and then handed it to Shannon. She grabbed the binoculars from the table where Shannon had set them down, stood up and began to scan the buildings across the way.

“Anything interesting?”

“Nothing so far but I’ll keep you posted.”

Shannon took a sip of her margarita and then dried her hands on her shorts. The air was so humid even the glasses were sweating buckets. Far off in the distance they could see lightning strike.

“One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...” Shannon counted but she got to fifteen before there was even a hint of a rumble. The storm was still a ways off. “Hey, how was your date last night?” she asked Dana, who was still scanning apartments with the binoculars.

“Meh,” she said shrugging her shoulders, “it was okay.”

“Not great?”

“Not great.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing really. He was a nice enough guy, maybe a little entitled and full of himself, but nice enough to me.”

“Why did you go out with him, then?”

“He asked?”

“Hmm,” Shannon said taking a big sip from her drink, “Think maybe we should be setting our sights a little higher?” They both sighed and sat back against the plastic chairs. The balcony now silent except for the rumble of thunder, now only ten-one

thousands away. Shannon wasn't entirely sure how to calculate how far away the storm was based on the time between the lightning flash and the sound of thunder but she liked to count it down nonetheless.

"But then I'd never have another date," said Dana.

"Well what do you even want?" Shannon asked. "I mean, if you could just design a guy or something, what would you ask for?"

Dana sat quietly in her chair, thinking. She began to fold a rolling paper into an origami frog. When she finished, she placed it on the balcony edge. The two girls sat silently, staring at the frog. Shannon was getting up to make another batch of margaritas when the wind picked up the frog and swept it off the ledge.

"Ahh!" she said reaching for it, but it was too late. The frog was gone.

"It's okay," said Dana, "I can just make you another one."

"More margaritas?" Shannon walked back into the apartment.

"Can you bring me a pen when you come back?"

"Sure."

"And some better paper?"

"Yep."

A few minutes later, Shannon returned with a pen, a pad of paper, and a jug of margaritas.

"How does a frog tell you to make his condom?"

"How?"

"Ribbit."

The girls laughed and off in the distance lightning flashed.

“So what did you want the paper for?” asked Shannon, handing her the supplies.

“We’re going to tell the universe who we want.”

“And you think it’ll give it to us?”

“Can’t hurt to try.”

“Tall,” said Shannon refilling the drinks, “put tall at the top.”

“Don’t be so superficial!”

“Fine. Funny. Put funny at the top. And tall goes second.”

“Okay, what else?” asked Dana, pen poised.

“Doesn’t expect me to wear high heels.”

“Yeah that’s good. Keep going.”

“Understands my coffee addiction?”

“Sure, yeah, that’s important.”

Dana finished writing and folded the paper into another frog before leaping it over the side of the balcony.

“What are you doing?” Shannon grabbed for the paper frog but it was too late; it was already floating through the air, being tossed around by the wind.

“I’m putting it out there,” said Dana calmly. “I’m telling the universe what to send you.”

The two girls laughed.

“Oh, I almost forgot, add that he should be kind to customer service people.

That’s important.”

Dana wrote this down on another piece of paper, folded it up into another origami frog and launched it over the side of the balcony.

“Oohh...also add that he should be a decision maker, I’m horrible at that.”

Dana wrote this down on another piece of paper, folded that one like the others, and threw it off the balcony.

Shannon looked at her, “Ya know, at this point I think it’s just called littering.”

The storm had progressed quickly. In the last few minutes it had moved it’s way across the river into downtown Montreal and seemed as if it was now right above Shannon’s apartment building.

“Okay one last thing,” said Shannon, taking the pen in her hand and writing on the paper. “Don’t look at it,” she said and handed the paper, already folded once in half, to Dana. “Can you make another frog for me?”

Dana took the paper and turned it into a perfect frog. This time she handed it back to Shannon. Shannon looked at it in her hand, took a deep breath, and threw it over the balcony into the storm. A huge burst of lightning lit up the sky and with that the frog was out of sight.

~

Shannon woke up the next morning with a headache, in no small part from the margaritas. The sun was shining on the apartments across from hers and she was silently grateful for having chosen an apartment that didn’t get the morning sun. Standing at her window, she could see someone in another window, across the street, watching her. As best she could tell, it was a man.

Shannon brought the binoculars up to her eyes and found herself gazing into the apartment of the man with the red curtains. He did not yet see her. He had binoculars of his own, pointed upwards towards the sky. She was already in one of the tallest

buildings, and he was still looking above her. She determined he could only be looking at birds, or contrails, or perhaps the moon through the day's blue sky. After a few minutes he lowered the binoculars until they rested upon her.

He looked shy, kicking imaginary rocks around with his feet, and then he blushed. From the sun? From the heat? From her gaze? He drew the binoculars back up to his eyes. Then, it was her lowering her binoculars. She was nervous, squinting from the glare of the sun on the windows of his building. A smile spread across her face like a flood: the movement uncontrollable. She was awash with uncertainty. She looked away, down and to the left, but raised her arm, her right hand, and offered a gentle wave. He waved back, big sweeping motions, like he was acting out a silent movie. She wanted to be in black and white with him.

Shannon blinked and he was gone. She grabbed the binoculars and whipped them up to eye level. She searched for him like a lion on a safari, sought him like a bird in flight. She looked for him like the last piece of cookie dough in the cookie dough ice cream. But he was gone. She closed the drapes, her heart heavy. Again, she was alone. She tossed and turned all night long. Her memory foam mattress would be so much more comfortable if it would just stop reminding her she was going to be alone forever.

Morning came. Drapes were opened. And the first thing she did was look towards the red curtains. In the window is a sign. Big. White. Posterboard. Nestled in between those red curtains was a sign, just for her. He had thrown a message in a bottle. He has put his hand in wet cement. He had marked out space for her. Her knees went weak.

Where did you go? It said. I'm sorry I left, I thought you knew I would come back. Your smile is more beautiful than my heart can stand. Come back this afternoon at 6p.m. David.

She can't think straight. But you can't call in romance to work, so she got dressed and headed to the office. The day went by as normal, things happened, tasks got completed, and time did not stop for her. She went to the store to buy white poster boards and colorful markers. When evening was just coming on she peeked out of my window. She stood off to the side, hidden by her own bland beige curtains. Shy. Not ready yet. She's wondered if he was there, watching. He was not. Shannon reminds herself that he said 6p.m. and that she is the one who is too early. The next two hours are spent as if getting ready for a date. She cleaned up her apartment, showered; did her hair and makeup. Shannon tried not to think herself insane. She wrote her name in big red letters on the white poster board.

At 4 p.m. she opened her curtains, like it's opening night, and there he was. Standing. Waiting. She jumped up in excitement and holds up her poster board with her name. Then she picked up her binoculars to see his response. He held up a hand as if to say *stop* and *wait*.

She watched and waited while he scribbles furiously, bent over a table to his left. She saw his apartment and noted to herself how nice it was. She was instantly glad that she had taken the time to clean up her own apartment, as he can see everything. She thought about her apartment, imagined what it said about her. She wondered if he'll think her juvenile for the IKEAness of it all. Wondered if he thought it looks like doll furniture. Wondered if he will judge her, decides that he won't. Without judgment she

continued to think about his red curtains. What is the man like who has red curtains? Did an old girlfriend pick them out? Maybe they were her homing beacon, floor to ceiling, rich and deep. His curtains are the centre of a cherry: where flesh meets pit.

Shannon looked down at the street and thought about how easy it would be for them to meet. Two elevator rides, two swinging doors, two strangers on the ground. Her feet made no move toward the door. It felt right to stay; to find their way to each other through signs, to write themselves onto poster boards. She was not ready yet.

He held up a sign.

6'4.

Then another.

What do backhanded insults and women in 90s mom jeans have in common?

He waited for a minute, made sure she had enough time to read it and then held up another sign.

Barbs.

She laughed. He continued to hold up card after card as she watched.

I like smiles more than high heels.

You should have dinner with me.

The whole thing felt uncanny. He reached into his back pocket and brought out what looked like folded up pieces of paper. He opened them up and placed them against the glass. Shannon squinted but it was too hard to see, the writing was too small. He folded up the pieces of paper. He bent his knees and jumped, touched his hands to the ground between his legs and jumped again. He was miming a frog.

Her stomach flipped.

He watched with his binoculars as she slowly put it all together. She put her binoculars down on a table and began to write something on the white poster board.