

IF THESE SHEETS COULD TALK



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The morning after the first time with someone new is always strange. Coffee? Tea? Bacon and eggs? You've grown so used to the feeling of someone old that the feeling of this new person's body is disquieting. She had blue eyes; he has green. She bore signs of your two children—on the sag of her breasts, the stretchmarks on her stomach, the lips that curled as your daughter took her first steps some ten years ago; he was practically young enough to be your son. She liked to face you; he likes it from behind.

It had been quite the journey progressing from your middle-aged ex-wife to this boy, hard enough to tell her but equally difficult to tell your children: "Your father likes men. He stills loves Mummy, but he needs a different kind of love now." What is this love? It's definitely dirtier, you think as you watch the boy sleep. There's an element of sleaziness that feels inescapable when you fuck someone you've met not two days ago.

You become suddenly and shamefully aware of the state of your apartment. There are wine glasses and an empty bottle on the kitchen counter, a trail of clothes and underwear leading towards your bed, which is circled by a scattering of used condoms. The sheets are stained, a combination of blood and lube and shit.

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Still, the experience was wholly positive. It had been your first time with a man in years and, barring a few poorly-executed attempts in your twenties, ever. This was how your friends spoke about their partners—this primal urge, this desire to crawl into their insides and make a home there, this lust, this desperation to go at it again and again. With your ex-wife, sex was rare: it was slow and gentle, and you found solace in the fact that it made you a man. A healthy sex life was a prerequisite for manhood. So too were children.

The first time you had sex with your wife, you were pleased. You loved her in the soft way that snow makes you feel safe and the smell of mince pies reminds you of Christmas. It was, for lack of a better word, right.

But it was also boring.

There was no struggle. It was all too easy—no need for lubrication, no need for protection when, in both of your minds, the primary purpose of the interaction was to procreate. It felt natural, clean.



Now, sex feels wrong. It feels like how your chest burns after running, like too-hot coffee and the blood running out of a rare steak. It's violent. Not abusive, but the restless form of violence that manifests only in the moments when you give in to your most base desires. If these sheets could talk, they'd scream.

But you love it. And so does he, who stirs and wakes slowly.





LOVE EVERYWHERE

The first time I did MDMA, I was in a gay club. There was something liberating about ARQ, which had a dancefloor circled by voyeurs watching their younger peers engage in behaviours that had become commonplace in the queer scene: men going down on each other in the nook behind the bar, men pulling boys in harnesses across the room and towards the street outside, drag queens doing poppers in cages on stage. Shirts were optional. So too were trousers, as I learned when I caught an old high school teacher gyrating in a silver budgie smuggler.

MDMA. EM DEE EM AY. MOLLY. As a kid I was shamed for my say-yes-to-anything attitude. "What do you mean you'd *try* cocaine?" a friend once yelled at me when I was sixteen. "What do you mean *there's nothing wrong with experimentation?*" Irony is, as I think when I run into him at the supermarket, he's a drug addict now.

I was seeing someone new. He was thirteen years older than me. The type of thirty-something gay who exclaims how well the security know him, how well he knows the bartender, how often he was found in the booths on the venue's upper level. We had met three weeks earlier, when I danced and I spilled a drink and he cried when I told him I wanted to know him. In many respects, I could do better, but still, there was something comforting about someone so *in* this world. It was sweet that he had found a home here. It was nice to be seen, too.

I swallowed the pill—a clear capsule with crushed ember crystals—in the middle of the dancefloor. My lack of discretion was a testament to the fact that this was my first time. It's also reflective of this fact that within the hour, I had made my way around the room, proving to myself that, yes, here, I could be with anyone. Here, at eighteen years old, I was desired in a way I had not been before. It's hard to explain the novelty of a situation like this: the fact that anyone, in theory, could be interested

in me. There was no anxiety over whether these men would reciprocate my advances, whether they would want me. At ARQ, I was a hot commodity. Love was everywhere.

The man I was seeing was here somewhere. He had given me the pill and left to find his friend, who I was told was too high to walk. It had never occurred to us that we could object to anything the other was doing.

So, when a man asked me if I wanted head, I said yes.

When he asked me if his girlfriend could join, I said yes.

When she asked me if her best friend could join as well, I said yes.

And it was good head. There's something about looking down at three people on their knees that makes you feel mighty good about yourself. It's not quite a feeling of domination but it's definitely a feeling of power. It's like looking into a circus mirror whose surface projects you five times bigger, the image of a self who, in its very nature, desires nothing more than to conquer. I felt strong, like they were praying at my altar. I was an object of their desire, and they mine.



Dear Lover,

It's been four years and I think about you often. I miss your smile and the way we fought; the way we could say anything to each other. We were comfortable, but in the sinking way that morphine makes you calm and heroin makes you sleep. It was unsafe, and I regret the things you made me do, the person I became with you. I regret letting you watch over me while I slept and the things you signed off on when I did. You hurt me, and I hurt you.

I was too young to know that leaving was an option. I used to drive down South Dowling, convince myself that I could try harder. You didn't speak to me, I reasoned, because I was not interesting. You didn't confide in me because I was not trustworthy. You let your friends do things to me because I was not worthy of more. Next time I saw you, I would be fun, I would listen, I would do what you wanted. Next time, I would be enough.

It's taken years to realise that what angered you so much was my desire for freedom. You hated when I acted out, when I showed you how adventurous I could be. "What's the point in going anywhere?" you asked me when I suggested a holiday. You wanted me, but only in your bedroom, only in the moments when we died in silence and the television played reruns of *The Big Bang Theory*. When did you realise that I would leave? Did you know, even then, that I was bound to wake up one day and keep driving, never come back?

I didn't want to leave. We were trapped, aware that our situation had to end, but unable to do it. It was in the nature of our love that every move we made away from each other found us tied closer, entangling us more and more in a series of outbursts that became the fabric of our relationship. You were violent and I acted out. I slept with an ex, you slept with a stranger. I hurt you by accident, you hurt yourself on purpose. With each betrayal, we found ourselves hurtling deeper into the heart of a labyrinth from which neither of us could escape. But still, I loved you, and my world shrunk to you and your smile and the way you hugged me when I came over. That was enough.

But it will never be enough again.

It's been four years and I think about you often. I've moved countries, I've graduated from a degree you never appreciated, moved in with that friend you never liked. Sometimes, I wish I could share it all with you. But what I know now, more truly than ever, is that none of it would have happened if I stayed.



FIRST DATE

"I've actually just come from a client; he gave me two thousand." The woman across from Henry threw in during a lull in the conversation. How the topic had strayed to her *secondary income*, he was unsure. He assumed most people saved the fact that they had sex with older men for money until at least the second date, but it's good to be upfront, he thought. He was unphased and, rather smugly, a little proud of how quickly he accepted this.

It was Henry's first date in months and, aside from a few messages on Tinder, he hadn't dated a woman in years. He had been with his ex since university and, after he was caught with his pants around his ankles in the stairwell of their apartment building, his sex life had revolved around Grindr and men whose names he had not bothered to learn. He found it quite freeing to leave the door unlocked and wait for these men to have their way. Or, if he were feeling romantic, to invite them over for a film and a blowjob.

But here he was. He had toyed with the idea of swapping his Tinder preferences a handful of times and decided, fuck it. He had slept with women in high school and, though it was not quite congruent with his current identity, he had thoroughly enjoyed it. Why not have another crack? The woman across from him blinked. Henry knew next to nothing about her: she was twenty-four, worked in communications and based on a handful of photographs on her dating profile, she had a penchant for designer clothing. Still, she seemed friendly enough.

"Does that scare you?" She asked, running a hand through dark hair, "half my dates can't stand it, you know." In truth, she explained, she enjoyed the panic she caused, how her autonomy rattled men's confidence. Maybe they were worried

about her safety, maybe they would get possessive or, more realistically, their minds would become consumed with a single worry: what if he's bigger than me? Her last partner became so preoccupied with the thought that she'd seen bigger members that he refused to be seen in the shower.

"I mean, not really. It's only straight men that seem to have a problem with sex."

"Oh, that's very *not like other girls* of you," Henry felt her tease him a little. He wondered if she was trying to push him, to coax a reaction out of him. "So anyway, this man was in his sixties, and I swear to God I've never had a more awkward experience. I met him in this big building in Canary Wharf—it's not far from where my father works actually, could you imagine running into him there? But yeah, I'd never been to his office; normally we do it in a hotel. You should have seen how his secretary looked at me, this big beefy woman."

"So, I walk in and it's one of those fancy offices. You know, the ones that have their own living rooms, views of the whole city, private bathroom. That sort of thing. There's a photo of his wife and kids on the table, too."

"And you fucked him?"

"Not this time—not really. Sometimes he asks me to stand over him while he plays with himself. You know, doesn't take too long." She sipped her margarita so slowly that Henry was sure she was trying to build suspense. "But I'm standing over him with my thong in his mouth and as the old man comes, his secretary walks in. God, can you imagine what she must have thought? There's her boss on the floor blowing his load for me."

"Oh god. What did she say?" "There was something about the honesty with which this woman spoke that drew Henry in. His own escapades flooded through his mind: he, too, had been caught

blowing his boss a few years ago, had been caught by his flatmate in the kitchen, had been caught jerking off by his mother in high school.

She giggled like a schoolgirl. "Would you believe me if I told you she said nothing? She just took two thousand from the drawer and dropped it on her boss's chest. Turns out, it's pretty normal for execs these days. The rest of the staff just let it happen." She rolled her eyes. "It's good for the bottom line, apparently."

"So that's it? And you enjoy it?"

"God, I love it. Obviously, I don't really need the money and it's definitely not a forever job, but it's fun. Who doesn't want to be wanted? The sex is pretty good, too. Plus, two thousand less the price of a pair of pants is absolutely worth any... soreness."

Henry laughed. He wondered how long it would take to make that much money, even before he left his job. "I normally don't mind the pain," he quipped, hoping to match her energy.

"Oh well, it's definitely an experience. What did you do today?"

"Is there a charming way to say I spent the day staring at my computer?" Two months ago, Henry's days started at six am and ended well into the evening. He had been an attorney for a family law firm in Central London until, struck with a sudden moment of mid-twenties malaise, he had left his job to pursue a career as a screenwriter. Well, career was a stretch; he had written one script and entered it into a competition for young writers. It was fine. Still, there was always something nice about telling people he was one of those fabled creatives; he enjoyed bragging that maybe, just maybe, the mainstream wasn't ready for his work.

"God, you sound like one of my clients."

"Well, I've been through a bit of a transition in the last months. I'm trying to break into screenwriting—I want to write something *irreverent*." Henry felt himself shift into a tone he usually reserved for job interviews. "You

know, something kind of edgy, like *Skins*, but for adults."

"So, every straight man's wet dream?"

"Not necessarily. Everyone has sex. Surely there's a way to depict that without pandering to the male gaze." Henry felt defensive. He was ready to list off examples of films he thought accomplished this task but thought better of it. "Not every director is Lars Von Trier."

"Surely it's a fine line." It was unclear if she was growing impatient or probing for a reaction. Either way, she continued. "Tell me, then, what's your big screenplay about?"

Henry hated these questions. It was one thing to mention his work, but it was another to describe it without feeling like a fraud. "Well, the one I sent in is a comedy. It's about this man who's, well, he's having a string of hook-ups and every episode is about a different one. The idea is to sort of feel like you're taking a journey into all these different worlds tied together by sex with this one guy."

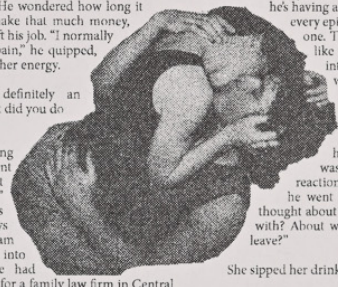
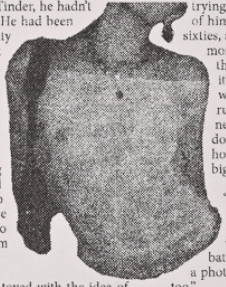
Now Henry paused, taking a drink from his gin and tonic. It was his turn to wait for a reaction. When none came, he went on. "Like, haven't you thought about the people you've slept with? About what they do when you leave?"

She sipped her drink.

"The pilot—that's the one I've sent in—it follows this main man who's meeting a younger guy off Grindr and then, afterwards, the episode stays with the hook-up. We see his day at university, his friends, we learn that he's not out. Until they all run into the main guy and his wife at the store, and they realise. And that's it, really."

"So, the whole show is about this man sneaking around behind his wife's back?" For the first time all evening, she looked genuinely intrigued.

"Well, no. They're polyamorous. That's what makes it funny: watching them navigate how they feel when random people at the store have seen them naked. I don't know ... it seems funnier when you read it."





NEW YORK, 1989



I keep having this dream where I'm in New York. It's a New York where Michael Alig did not kill Angel, where the Club Kids continue to reign. It's a New York where Basquiat makes small talk with Nancy Reagan while her husband shoots up with Cookie Mueller. It's a New York where Andy Warhol's factory booms.

I can't figure out why I keep coming to this place. Perhaps, I miss it. Perhaps, I'm upset that I missed it. Maybe I should stop falling asleep to the Five Ninth Avenue Project on YouTube, which has digitised recordings made by Nelson Sullivan as he documented his life with the likes of RuPaul, Lady Bunny and Michael Musto. Nelson died in 1989 and these videos feel at once timeless and bound to a time I can never access.

It's one big party. I like to think it's the rave at McDonald's that made Michael Alig a star. Or maybe it's at Limmelighi. Maybe Amanda Lepore is there. Maybe Madonna is. Either way, I watch them dance as the sound of sirens breaks. I realise they're burning. Are they in hell? Am I?

I wonder what I would do if I were really there. Would I continue to dance like they do, unaware that the world is on fire? Would I continue to dance knowing what they would soon have to endure? Would I continue to dance knowing that, in 2024, I would wish I were there to see it all?

To dance in the face of trauma is a coping mechanism passed down through generations. Like those who populated the queer world of late twentieth-century New York, I see queerness as something challenging: it is something that must be reckoned with, something facing a continual threat from the outside, something painful. But still, marginalisation can be freeing and, like those who dance as their world burns, I see it as an excuse to give into pleasure.

