

# Postfeminist Feeling in Contemporary Women's Short Stories

and

## *I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY*

A collection of short stories

By Marni Appleton

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in Creative and Critical Writing  
University of East Anglia  
School of Literature, Drama, and Creative Writing  
March 2023

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on the condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there-from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

# Abstract

This PhD in Creative and Critical writing investigates certain ‘sticking points’ or impasses that emerge in contemporary conversations about feminism, and considers the ways in which these sticking points are navigated in contemporary women’s short stories about girls and young women. I argue that the contemporary feminist landscape – marked by a renewed enthusiasm for feminism (sometimes thought of as a ‘fourth wave’) and complicated by the persistence of a postfeminist sensibility – contributes to the emergence of particular flat and frustrating feelings, which index situations of obstructed agency and affective deadlock.

In the critical thesis I analyse five short stories by women writers (all of which have been published since 2015) to theorise three particular feelings: heterosexual fatigue, stuckness and un/belonging. In the stories I analyse, the postfeminist insistence on upbeat feeling performances (such as resilience, positivity and empowerment) sits uncomfortably alongside the characters’ creeping awareness of the persistence and pervasiveness of gender inequality. In the fourth critical chapter, I address the question of form, asking what makes the short story especially suited to the channelling of these flat and frustrating feelings.

The second part of the project is a linked collection of short stories in which I explore, through my own creative practice, the potential of the short story to navigate the contradictions of contemporary femininity. The collection, *I HOPE YOU’RE HAPPY*, follows teen and young women protagonists to homes, workplaces, theatres, parties and roadsides as they try to reconcile their girlhood with the expectations and responsibilities placed on them as adult (or nearly adult) women. The stories are all rooted in the real world but often tend towards the uncanny or surreal. Many of these stories centre sexual experiences, but they also grapple with mother-daughter relationships, friendships, precarious work, and social media.

## **Access Condition and Agreement**

Each deposit in UEA Digital Repository is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the Data Collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission from the copyright holder, usually the author, for any other use. Exceptions only apply where a deposit may be explicitly provided under a stated licence, such as a Creative Commons licence or Open Government licence.

Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone, unless explicitly stated under a Creative Commons or Open Government license. Unauthorised reproduction, editing or reformatting for resale purposes is explicitly prohibited (except where approved by the copyright holder themselves) and UEA reserves the right to take immediate 'take down' action on behalf of the copyright and/or rights holder if this Access condition of the UEA Digital Repository is breached. Any material in this database has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the material may be published without proper acknowledgement.

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	2
Acknowledgements .....	5
<b>PART ONE: Postfeminist Feeling in Contemporary Women's Short Stories .....</b>	<b>6</b>
INTRODUCTION.....	7
CHAPTER ONE: Heterosexual Fatigue in 'Cat Person' .....	38
CHAPTER TWO: 'Stuckness' in 'Los Angeles' by Emma Cline and 'Would Like to Meet' by May-Lan Tan .....	62
CHAPTER THREE: Strategic Girlfriendship and Un/Belonging in 'Head to Toe' by Abigail Ulman and 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' by Jenny Zhang....	89
CHAPTER FOUR: The Question of Form .....	115
CONCLUSION .....	142
<b>PART TWO: I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY, a collection of stories .....</b>	<b>147</b>
Shut Your Mouth .....	148
Chastity .....	170
Under the Circumstances.....	201
Road Trip.....	214
Positive Vibes .....	236
Cowboy / Superhero / Spaceman / Monster.....	259
Flicker.....	277
The Mirror Test.....	286
Triangulation .....	309

<b>APPENDIX: I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY (Continued)</b> .....	<b>348</b>
Intimacy .....	349
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY .....	389
 Bibliography.....	 410

## Acknowledgements

Thank you, firstly and most of all, to my brilliant supervisors, Professor Jean McNeil and Dr Karen Schaller, for your kindness, guidance, enthusiasm and critical rigour. I feel privileged to have had this opportunity to learn from you both. Your belief in me and this project has motivated me through some very uncertain times.

I would not have been able to complete this PhD without the support of my friends and family. I am immeasurably grateful to Owen in particular, for your love, care, patience, and unwavering belief in me. Thank you to Isabella and Idris – my best cheerleaders. I would also like to thank Zoe, Tamsin, Janet, Mark, Megan, Nia, Helen, Tori, Jess, Stacey, and Sarah. I love you all.

My sincere thanks to Ben Pester for invaluable feedback on ‘Shut Your Mouth’. I would also like to thank everyone who supported me at conferences and/or worked with me on articles, especially Danielle Cameron and Tinca Lukan. An early version of Chapter One was published as ‘Feeling Straight: Heterosexual Fatigue in “Cat Person”’ in *Alluvium* 9.6 (2021). I have built on some of the arguments made in Chapter Two in the article “‘No Such Thing as Unending Sunshine’: The deflation of postfeminism in Emma Cline’s “Los Angeles” which is published in *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* (2023). Further work from Chapter Two is forthcoming from *Contemporary Women’s Writing* in the article “‘Stuckness’ and the Fraying Promise of Postfeminism in Contemporary Women’s Short Stories’. I would like to thank the editors and peer reviewers from these journals for their generous, insightful and constructive feedback.

PART ONE

**Postfeminist Feeling in Contemporary  
Women's Short Stories**

## INTRODUCTION

In October 2022, Saba Sams won the BBC National short story award for ‘Blue 4eva’, a story about a 12-year-old girl whose holiday with her newly and uneasily blended family is disrupted by the arrival of her new stepsister’s friend, Blue.<sup>1</sup> Sams is the fifth consecutive woman to win the award, a statistic that would seem to endorse Mariella Frostrup’s contention when she was chair of judges for the 2013 award that the short story is ‘much suited to the innovative brilliance of women writers.’<sup>2</sup> Indeed, less than five years previously, Kristen Roupenian’s short story ‘Cat Person’ went viral on social media after being published online by the *New Yorker*.<sup>3</sup> While unusual for any short story to garner as much attention – and so quickly – it is especially unusual for a story that examines the power dynamics of heterosexual dating from a young woman’s perspective.

This thesis emerges from a curiosity about the ways in which a number of women short story writers are exploring the contradictions and challenges involved in growing up and coming of age in postfeminist cultures. Since about 2015, many award-winning writers have published short story collections that

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Shaffi, ‘Saba Sams wins the BBC national short story award for “transportive” tale’, *Guardian*, 4 October 2022

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/oct/04/saba-sams-wins-bbc-national-short-story-award-for-transportive-tale>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]

<sup>2</sup> Mariella Frostrup, ‘BBC Short Story Award: from New York to the stars’, *Guardian*, 21 September 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/21/mariella-frostrup-bbc-short-story-award>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Roupenian, ‘What It Felt Like When “Cat Person” Went Viral’, *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2019 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-it-felt-like-when-cat-person-went-viral>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]

primarily (or exclusively) put the lives of girls and young women centre stage: these include Jenny Zhang, Abigail Ulman, Lucy Caldwell, Daisy Johnson, Carmen Maria Machado, Danielle Evans, Dantiel W. Moniz, Emma Cline, Nicole Flattery, and Julia Armfield. This preoccupation with narratives about girlhood occurs in a cultural context in which both girlhood and feminism have increased visibility. Girls are everywhere – from television shows to marketing campaigns to novels – and in recent years, feminism has become similarly ubiquitous in popular media and culture. For example, we might think of Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche’s speech ‘We Should All Be Feminists’, sampled on Beyoncé’s 2013 track ‘Flawless’,<sup>4</sup> or the popularity of feminist books aimed at children, such as *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*.<sup>5</sup> Given this visibility, it might be tempting to claim that girls today enjoy increased gender equality in comparison to girls of previous decades. However, as Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, the marketability of girls and feminism seems to be more about consumer power than overthrowing the patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> While the ‘safely affirmative’ feminism displayed in products and performances cultivates good feeling about girlhood and femininity, as Banet-Weiser argues, this can divert attention from feminist aims.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Kate Torgovnick May, ‘Beyoncé samples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx message on surprise album’, *TEDBlog*, 13 December 2013 <<https://blog.ted.com/beyonce-samples-chimamanda-ngozi-adichies-tedx-message-on-surprise-album>> [Accessed: 1 March 2023]

<sup>5</sup> Francesca Cavallo and Elena Favilli, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 tales of extraordinary women* (California: Timbuktu Labs, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation’, *Feminist Theory*, 21.1 (2020): 3-24, (p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 4.

I am concerned by the ways in which feminism is drained of political power through its marketisation as something to be celebrated or displayed for credentials, especially while so many women and girls around the world are desperate for tangible change. Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'feminist killjoy' has been a source of inspiration for me throughout this project. Ahmed writes that feminist killjoys are 'alienated – out of line with an affective community', because they do not 'experience happiness from the right things'.<sup>8</sup> Joyful celebrations of feminist visibilities concern me precisely because they seem to suggest that good feeling is enough – as though by witnessing spectacular displays of feminism, lauding women's successes, or purchasing feminist products, one is also challenging gendered power structures. In this thesis, the feminist killjoy is a useful counterpoint for the relentless cheerfulness demanded by postfeminist culture. I am interested in how feeling shapes feminine ideals and subjectivities. How do young women and girls navigate dissatisfaction, negativity and frustration in a context in which optimism is enforced? What happens to those feelings when they are papered over with cheerful celebration? Do they disappear altogether or emerge elsewhere? What is the significance of the short story as a literary form through which these complex feelings are captured and navigated? The key research questions guiding this project are as follows:

1. What kinds of feeling do neoliberal and postfeminist discourses produce in relation to femininity and girlhood?

---

<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)', *Scholar and Feminist Online* 8.3 (2010): < [http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed\\_01.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm) > [Accessed: 22 January 2023]

2. How do short stories by women and about young women map the complex and ambivalent feelings produced by the contradictory imperatives of (post)feminisms?
3. What is it about the short story that makes it an especially apt form for charting postfeminist feeling? How do questions of postfeminist feeling find expression through the form?

Motivated by these questions, the first part of this thesis critically examines the ways in which women short story writers utilise narratives of girlhood and young womanhood to bring the entangled dynamic of postfeminist feeling to the fore. I read five short stories by women writers in which I theorise the following feelings: heterosexual fatigue, stuckness and un/belonging. The second part is *I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY*, a collection of short stories in which I creatively navigate the contradictoriness of postfeminist feeling.

In Chapter Four of this thesis, I turn from theorising postfeminist feelings to address the role of the short story form in charting postfeminist feeling. However, I want to clarify here that although this thesis focuses on very recent stories, the short story has long been utilised by women writers – since at least the nineteenth century when New Woman writers saw the potential the form offered for what Clare Hanson describes as the ‘exploration of unchartered or hidden areas of women’s subjective experience.’<sup>9</sup> Within the context of postfeminism specifically, the short form also has a history: two popular novels often associated with

---

<sup>9</sup> Clare Hanson, ‘Introduction’ in *Re-reading the Short Story*, edited by Clare Hanson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989): 1-9 (pp. 3-4).

postfeminism, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*<sup>10</sup> and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*,<sup>11</sup> began their lives as newspaper columns,<sup>12</sup> whilst perhaps the first use of the term 'postfeminist fiction' was in Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell's 1995 short story anthology *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*.<sup>13</sup> More recently, Emma Young argued that British short story writers writing at the turn of the millennium, such as Helen Simpson and Michèle Roberts, made use of the short story to create a dialogue between second- and third-wave feminist concerns and postfeminism.<sup>14</sup> By writing about a recent body of short stories which has not yet been critically examined, and engaging critical theories of feeling in order to address questions relating to gender and form, this thesis builds on and extends existing arguments that highlight the tendency for women writers to use the short story to express and examine the complexities of feminism and femininity, especially during periods of cultural shift and change.

During the time I have been working on this project, from 2019 to 2023, it has become increasingly evident that we are living in precisely the kind of volatile moment in which women's short story writing thrives. There are so many political, social, economic and environmental crises unfolding across the world that, in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> While newspaper columns are, of course, not short stories, because they are not fiction, these two columns in particular have been turned into fictional products (novels, films and a television series) which have had a significant impact on cultural representations of feminism and womanhood, which is why I have included them here.

<sup>13</sup> Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell (editors), *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (Salt Lake City: FC2, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Emma Young, 'Feminist F(r)iction: Short Stories and Postfeminist Politics at the Millennial Moment', in *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*, edited by Emma Young and James Bailey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015): 133-148.

West, we are beginning to experience what Lauren Berlant calls ‘crisis ordinariness’ – in which life begins to feel ‘truncated, more like desperate doggy paddling than a magnificent swim out to the horizon’.<sup>15</sup> Like Berlant, I am interested in how a culture of heightened threat and anxiety is managed in the context of everyday living. In terms of feminism and gender, it seems significant to highlight that the current moment is characterised by increasing awareness of misogynist sentiment and behaviour. For example, focusing on a Western context, the 2017 #MeToo moment saw powerful men across the world called out for predatory behaviour in the wake of allegations made against film producer Harvey Weinstein. In the UK in particular, a rising ‘gender critical’ movement opposes the basic human rights of transgender people, yet this is being challenged by feminists and LGBT+ groups. In London, numerous high-profile murders of women by men, including Zara Aleena, Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard, and Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry were met with outrage, protests and public vigils. The accessibility of abortions is under serious threat: in June 2022, the US supreme court overturned the Roe v. Wade case by ruling that there is no constitutional right to abortion.<sup>16</sup> Less than a month later, the UK government amended an official statement on gender equality to remove a commitment to the sexual and reproductive rights and bodily autonomy

---

<sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Jessica Glenza, Martin Pengelly and Sam Levin, ‘US supreme court overturns abortion rights, upending Roe v Wade’, *Guardian*, 24 June 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-abortion-summary-supreme-court>> [Accessed: 3 March 2023]

of women and girls.<sup>17</sup> Most recently, the popularity and influence of self-proclaimed ‘misogynist’ social media figure Andrew Tate (who is currently detained in Romania as part of a human trafficking and rape investigation) highlights increasing polarity in discourses about what womanhood means and what power women possess.<sup>18</sup>

While my thesis does not explicitly investigate the events listed above, I invoke them here to illustrate the ways in which crisis is something we have become inured and perhaps desensitised to. This thesis is not concerned with the feelings of rage and despair we might readily associate with crisis, nor those of celebration and positivity associated with popular affirmative feminisms. I am not looking to figure out how we might ‘bounce back’ from the crises we face.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I am interested in the emergence of a very particular affective register: an ambivalence comprised of flat and frustrating feelings, which I argue can help us identify situations of obstructed agency and affective deadlock.<sup>20</sup> These feelings can be fruitfully understood in terms of Berlant’s concept of ‘cruel optimism’, which outlines the ways in which people remain attached to, and continue to

---

<sup>17</sup> Lizzy Davies, ‘UK under international pressure over deletion of abortion commitments’, *Guardian*, 22 July 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/22/european-countries-pressurise-uk-over-removal-of-abortion-commitments-liz-truss>> [Accessed: 12 March 2023]

<sup>18</sup> ‘Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer’, *BBC News*, 12 January 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64125045>> [Accessed: 23 March 2023]

<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad outline the ways in which women’s resilience or ‘bounce-backability’ is used as a regulatory tool in popular media in their article: ‘The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism’, *Sociological Research Online*, 23.2 (2018): 477-495.

<sup>20</sup> Here, I build upon the work of Sianne Ngai, who argues that ‘ugly feelings’ (which, much like the feelings I theorise in this thesis, are not oriented towards action) are especially able to ‘diagnose’ situations ‘marked by blocked or thwarted action’: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 27.

pursue, harmful fantasies of the ‘good life’, despite mounting evidence that these fantasies may never be fulfilled.<sup>21</sup> Attachment to such a fantasy imbues a person’s life with direction, purpose and hopefulness that they will, one day, receive the rewards they desire; detachment from the fantasy is disorienting and threatening. Following Berlant and Ahmed, I understand affect, feeling and emotion not as individual psychological dispositions, but as that which, as Ahmed puts it, mediates ‘the relationship between the psychic and the social, the individual and the collective’.<sup>22</sup> Feeling is inextricable from the sociocultural and political forces that govern people’s lives; rather, it is an attentiveness to feeling that can help us draw out the relations between individuals and those life-shaping structures.

In this thesis, I use postfeminism – by which I am referring to a set of contradictory and seemingly paradoxical discourses about women’s empowerment and equality that circulate in mainstream political cultural and media products and disavow and/or individualise feminist politics – to describe the specific context in which I situate the stories I am analysing. However, I want to briefly map the broader background from which both postfeminism and many of the crises I alluded to earlier unfold – a background which I contend can be best understood as neoliberal. Neoliberalism is conventionally understood as a political and economic ideology marked by free market competition, deregulation, austerity, and the divestment of the state in social and welfare provision. However, it is increasingly recognised as a psychological and affective force, with scholars paying attention to the ways in which it is ‘embedded in everyday living, our subjectivity

---

<sup>21</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘Affective Economies’, *Social Text* 22.2 (2004): 117-139, (p. 119).

and our feelings.<sup>23</sup> As Wendy Brown puts it, neoliberalism is a rationality which ‘disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities’.<sup>24</sup> The term ‘neoliberalism’ is contested, with some pointing out that it has become ‘so broad as to be meaningless’<sup>25</sup> and others suggesting that we are now ‘post-neoliberalism’<sup>26</sup> or in an age defined by the ‘information political economy’.<sup>27</sup> My aim here is not to offer an account of neoliberalism as a political and economic discourse but to recognise the role it has played in shaping the contemporary moment and, in particular, the impact neoliberal ideas have had on the ways in which people *feel*. For example, Yvonne Ehrstein, Rosalind Gill and Jo Littler recognise the ways in which neoliberal ideals, including individualism, entrepreneurialism, meritocracy and choice, have come to ‘saturate everyday life’ and call forth subjects who ‘make sense of their lives through discourses of freedom, responsibility and choice – no matter how constrained they may be (e.g., by poverty or racism)’.<sup>28</sup> The affective demands of neoliberalism encourage its subjects to cope with the inequality, precarity and isolation created and intensified by its political project – that is to say, the incitement to ‘cope’ (through, for example, self-care and positive thinking) is another way in which subjects are recuperated into the project of neoliberalism. Feelings such as optimism,

---

<sup>23</sup> Yvonne Ehrstein, Rosalind Gill and Jo Littler, ‘The Affective Life of Neoliberalism: Constructing (Un)Reasonableness on Mumsnet’, *Neoliberalism in Context*, edited by Simon Dawes and Marc LeNormand (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 195-213, (p. 201).

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Ehrstein, Gill and Littler, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> William Davies and Nicholas Gane, ‘Post-Neoliberalism? An Introduction’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 38.6 (2021): 3-21.

<sup>27</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Ehrstein, Gill and Littler, pp. 197-8.

positivity, resilience and confidence work to cover up feelings of disappointment, anxiety and despair.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, postfeminism has become the dominant ‘sensibility’ through which women are interpellated into popular culture. Both neoliberalism and postfeminism advocate a focus on the individual at the expense of collective solidarity and care, and both underplay the existence of structural inequalities. Accordingly, Gill argues that ‘the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism’.<sup>30</sup> The increasingly affective and psychological operations of neoliberalism and postfeminism require an affective approach in order to comprehend the ways in which they work. In the following chapters, I propose that growing discontent with postfeminist ways of living can be fruitfully understood through the concept of the ‘sticking point’. By sticking point, I mean the point at which opposing feelings, imperatives or ideas become entangled in such a way that no progress is possible, and deadlock or ‘impasse’ is reached.<sup>31</sup> I identify and track sticking points in five short stories by women writers over the first three chapters: heterosexual fatigue, stuckness and un/belonging. In the fourth chapter, I make the case that the short story is an adept literary form for the complex, ambivalent feelings created by women’s and girls’ attachments to fantasies that do them harm. First, I will unpack three concepts

---

<sup>29</sup> See for example: Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021) and Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Rosalind Gill, ‘Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (2007): 147-166, (p. 164).

<sup>31</sup> My concept of the ‘sticking point’ builds primarily on work from Berlant, Ahmed and Ngai, which I will discuss in further detail later in this introduction.

central to this thesis: postfeminism and its relationship to other contemporary iterations of feminism, the girl, and the sticking point.

### **(POST)FEMINISMS**

The term ‘postfeminism’ has been plagued by criticism, contradiction and ambiguity since it first entered popular usage around the late 1980s and early 1990s – to the point that some scholars have advocated for the abandonment of the term altogether.<sup>32</sup> However, the durability and cultural resonance of postfeminism are hard to ignore. It is sometimes thought of as a ‘backlash’<sup>33</sup> to second- and third-wave feminism, yet postfeminism is not a straightforward rejection of feminism. Rather, as Angela McRobbie explains, postfeminist discourses take the language of feminism, using vocabulary such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ to create a new, individualistic agenda, which situates itself as a trendier, more playful alternative to feminism – which is correspondingly framed as dull, boring and humourless.<sup>34</sup> Yet because feminism is ‘taken into account’, it is politically neutralised: the need for feminist activism or critique is negated.<sup>35</sup> In recent years, increased interest in feminism has changed the way postfeminism operates. As Gill observes, the postfeminist sensibility is dynamic and adaptable: it is ‘able to change and mutate

---

<sup>32</sup> For example: Susan Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

in relation to new ideas'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the visibility of certain kinds of feminism in the current moment – such as 'girl boss' feminism, 'choice' feminism and 'neoliberal feminism' – have a distinctly postfeminist tone and do not correspond to ideas of collective activism and the critique of patriarchal structures and methods that are typically implied by the word 'feminism'.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while the 'post' in postfeminism no longer indicates a moment in which feminism has been completely abandoned, postfeminism remains a productive concept for its ability to help us unpick the ways in which feminist and anti-feminist ideas continue to be entangled in current iterations of feminism and conceptualisations of femininity. For Gill, postfeminism is most fruitfully understood as a kind of 'gendered neoliberalism', which captures the ways in which it has become 'the new normal' and a 'taken-for-granted common sense'.<sup>38</sup> This is one of the reasons the persistence of postfeminist ideals is so troubling – and why I believe that the study of postfeminism is more necessary than ever.

I use the term 'postfeminism' in a fluid way, focusing on what links more recent analyses of postfeminism together – which I suggest is an attempt to unpick the entanglement of contradictory and seemingly paradoxical ideas about women's empowerment and equality that circulate in mainstream political, cultural and media contexts. Following Stéphanie Genz, I pay close attention to the ways in

---

<sup>36</sup> Rosalind Gill, 'The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility ten years on', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20.6 (2017): 606-626, (p. 611).

<sup>37</sup> Tinca Lukan and Marni Appleton, 'Girl Boss: New Sexual Contract in the Information Political Economy', Under review with *Feminist Media Studies*; Michaele Ferguson, 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 8.1 (2010): 247-53; Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism', p. 609.

which postfeminism has shifted from a more celebratory ‘boom model’ that emphasises choice, freedom and consumerism, to a ‘recessionary’ or ‘bust’ postfeminism, which emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, and which (though still concerned with consumption and self-determination) is different in tone, marked by ambivalence and uncertainty in place of unbridled optimism.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on the work of Gill, I also understand postfeminism as a ‘distinctive sensibility’, which has become increasingly reliant on the cultivation of certain kinds of feeling.<sup>40</sup> Postfeminism in the 1990s and early 2000s tended to be characterised by optimistic and celebratory feelings, which crystallised around the figure of the ‘can-do girl’, a term coined by Anita Harris to describe girls with high ambitions, commitment to their careers and glamorous consumer lifestyles.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, more recent work by Amy Dobson and Akane Kanai focuses on ‘affective dissonances’<sup>42</sup> which express dissatisfaction with neoliberal and postfeminist ideals of femininity, and the cultivation of corrective feelings: for example, Orgad and Gill’s work on confidence and ‘bounceback-ability’ and Angela McRobbie’s

---

<sup>39</sup> Stéphanie Genz, ‘Busting the “post”?’ in *Post-Everything*, edited by Herman Paul and Adrian van Veldhuizen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021): 195-214; Stéphanie Genz, “‘I Have Work ... I Am Busy ... Trying to Become Who I Am’: Neoliberal *Girls* and Recessionary Postfeminism’, in *Reading Lena Dunham’s Girls*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 17-30.

<sup>40</sup> See: Gill, ‘Postfeminist media culture’, and ‘The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism’.

<sup>41</sup> Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young women in the twenty-first century* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai, ‘From “can-do” girls to insecure and angry: Affective dissonances in young women’s post-recessional media,’ *Feminist Media Studies* 19.6 (2018): 771-786. The concept of ‘affective dissonance’ as crucial for a feminist politics of transformation was originally developed by Clare Hemmings in the article: ‘Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation’, *Feminist Theory*, 13.2 (2012): 147-161.

book on resilience.<sup>43</sup> These corrective feelings provide women with the tools to cope emotionally with the precarity of recessionary life. Expressions of vulnerability and negative feeling are sometimes permitted – even encouraged – yet, as Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka point out, this is only permitted within certain parameters, such as to strategically highlight one’s overall strength or to affirm one’s authenticity.<sup>44</sup> In cultures marked by a postfeminist sensibility, women must work on themselves emotionally and transform negativity into something positive.

McRobbie’s book *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* has been particularly influential on this thesis, and indeed, the study of postfeminism more generally. Crucially, McRobbie understands postfeminism as a source of complex feeling for women: she argues that its contradictions enact a ‘double entanglement’ whereby feminism is invoked to suggest that equality has already been achieved; therefore, feminism is outdated and no longer needed.<sup>45</sup> As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra put it: it is the ‘very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance.’<sup>46</sup> McRobbie also theorises the disparity between the popular images of postfeminist media and the reality of life as a young woman as a ‘post-feminist masquerade’, whereby young women feel pressure to embody the

---

<sup>43</sup> See, for example: Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Orgad and Gill, *Confidence Culture*, and ‘The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman’.

<sup>44</sup> Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka, ‘Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect,’ *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24.1 (2017): 85-98.

<sup>45</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, ‘Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,’ in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007): 1-25, (p. 8).

postfeminist ideal at all times in order to count as real young women.<sup>47</sup> The effort required to maintain this masquerade contributes to feelings of confusion, distress, anxiety and what McRobbie calls ‘illegible rage’ in the modern young woman.<sup>48</sup> *The Aftermath of Feminism* was published in 2009, shortly before feminism began to rise in popularity in mainstream media and culture, and thus describes a culture in which postfeminism repudiates and represses feminism, rather than its subsequent recuperation of the term. However, McRobbie’s concepts continue to be useful for unpacking how postfeminism feels. The idea of the ‘postfeminist masquerade’ shares an affinity with the oppressive nature of positive psychology, in which ‘thinking positive’ is positioned as something that will enable women to overcome any number of structural failures. Barbara Ehrenreich describes positive thinking as ‘useful as an apology for the crueler aspects of the market economy’<sup>49</sup> – in doing so, she captures how ‘good’ feeling and optimistic thinking is utilised in postfeminist and neoliberal discourses as a regulatory tool. Ahmed’s work also considers the ways in which good feeling functions as a ‘duty’, which works to conceal and deny negative feelings and therefore stalls potential political action.<sup>50</sup> The lives of postfeminist subjects thus become divorced from the social, cultural and political forces that shape them – emphasis is instead placed on individual responsibility and cultivating the correct mindset.

More recently, McRobbie’s concept of the ‘postfeminist masquerade’ has been extended by Tinca Lukan and me, in a forthcoming article which proposes a

---

<sup>47</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, pp. 59-72.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-123.

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (New York and London: Granta, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 7.

shift to a ‘girl boss masquerade’.<sup>51</sup> The term ‘girl boss’ was coined by Sophia Amoruso as the title of her 2014 memoir *#GIRLBOSS*.<sup>52</sup> It denotes a woman ‘whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world in which she swims upstream.’<sup>53</sup> Her value is derived from the fact that she does not attempt to change oppressive patriarchal systems, but rather overcomes them on a personal level and works within them. Her success is framed as a feminist act, purely as a consequence of her being a woman. Rather than adopting a mask of naivety and bewilderment, which marked early postfeminism (which can be seen most clearly in characters such as Bridget Jones), we suggest that the girl boss is incited to perform feelings such as confidence and empowerment, in order to work towards a more significant role in capitalist production – she aspires to become a business owner, rather than an employee.<sup>54</sup> While the ‘girl boss’ trope is often critiqued and ridiculed in the media, it continues to function as an aspirational figure for many women, which can be seen through the celebration and idolisation of ‘girl boss’-type figures from television and popular culture, such as social media influencer and Pretty Little Thing CEO Molly-Mae Hague, television personality and businesswoman Kim Kardashian, and high-achieving, glamorous pop stars, such as Taylor Swift and Beyoncé. The upbeat and enthusiastic figure of the ‘girl boss’ comes to the fore in a moment of dissatisfaction with workplace practices and precarious employment. A deluge of popular books on workplace dissatisfaction

---

<sup>51</sup> Tinca Lukan and Marni Appleton, ‘Girl Boss: New Sexual Contract in the Information Political Economy’, currently under review with *Feminist Media Studies*.

<sup>52</sup> Sophia Amoruso, *#GIRLBOSS* (London: Penguin, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Keith Spencer, “‘I Care A Lot’ is a stinging indictment of neoliberal “girl boss” feminism”, *Salon*, 26 February 2021 <<https://www.salon.com/2021/02/26/i-care-a-lot-neoliberal-girlboss-feminism-critique>> [Accessed: 2 March 2023]

<sup>54</sup> Lukan and Appleton.

have been published in the last few years, such as Anne Helen Petersen's *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, Amelia Horgan's *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism* and Sarah Jaffe's *Work Won't Love You Back*.<sup>55</sup> These texts highlight increasing frustration with late capitalist working conditions. Taken alongside the 'girl boss' – who aspires to overcome the challenges of employment by working hard and rising to the top – we can see a polarity in how work is framed, understood and discussed, a polarity that is primarily materialised through affect. What I mean by this is that the majority of people experience the same dissatisfactory working conditions, but what sets an aspiring girl boss apart is her affective orientation to those conditions. The girl boss is the ideal tool of capitalism; first by providing necessary labour and then by producing new streams of capital.

Thinking critically about the 'girl boss' helps us to unpick the ways in which late capitalism and 'feminism' become entangled. While the 'girl boss' is a visible figurehead, there are numerous insidious ways in which postfeminist methods work to neutralise the political potential of feminism. In their article about 'femvertising',<sup>56</sup> Kasey Windels et al. make the case that advertising that focuses

---

<sup>55</sup> Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2021); Amelia Horgan, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

<sup>56</sup> The term 'femvertising' was coined by lifestyle website SheKnows in 2014 during a panel discussion about contemporary advertising, and refers to 'advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls': Roo Powell, 'How Ads That Empower Women Are Boosting Sales and Bettering the Industry', *AdWeek* [online], 3 October 2014 < <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-ads-empower-women-are-boosting-sales-and-bettering-industry-160539/> > [Accessed: 20 March 2023]

on feminine ‘empowerment’ over the perpetuation of stereotypes is not as progressive as it might seem. They contend that though femvertising presents itself as feminist, it continues to enact distinctly postfeminist regulation.<sup>57</sup> By critiquing the ‘Dove Campaign for Real Beauty’, which tells women they are ‘sexy at any size’, they argue that the incitement to love one’s own body may seem positive, however ‘urging women to love their bodies is simply a different form of regulation of women, demanding them to control their beliefs through psychic regulation.’<sup>58</sup> This is an example of what Kanai and Gill call ‘woke capitalism’ in which corporations extract ‘*value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations*’ and circulate ‘normative affective orientations towards capitalism’.<sup>59</sup> We can see here how optimistic visibility and the promise of good feeling become part of regulatory tactics in the media. Postfeminist discourses are predicated on contradiction: they comprise both feminist and antifeminist themes, by at once calling for women to see themselves as empowered individuals, yet simultaneously underplaying the need for collective feminist action, which means that it can be challenging to unpick exactly how they work.

Alongside the upbeat tone observed in ‘femvertising’ and capitalist feminisms, scholars have noticed certain negative feelings emerging in relation to contemporary femininity. Kendra Marston’s *Postfeminist Whiteness* explores

---

<sup>57</sup> Kasey Windels and others, ‘Selling Feminism: How Female Empowerment Campaigns Employ Postfeminist Discourses’, *Journal of Advertising*, 49.1 (2020): 18-33, (p. 18). See also: *The Cultural Politics of Femvertising*, edited by Joel Gwynne (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> Akane Kanai and Rosalind Gill, ‘Woke? Affect, neoliberalism, marginalised identities and consumer culture,’ *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 102 (2020): 10-27, (p. 11). Italics in original.

performances of melancholic white femininity in Hollywood movies,<sup>60</sup> while Catherine McDermott's *Feel-Bad Postfeminism* discusses the ways in which the celebratory postfeminism of the 1990s has begun to sour, paving the way for narratives about resilient young women and girls.<sup>61</sup> Negative feeling in relation to heterosexuality is captured by the emergence of 'heteropessimism' or 'tragic' heterosexuality as descriptors for a cultural moment in which the disappointments of straight culture and frequently and widely discussed, yet at the same time, cemented as a normative practice.<sup>62</sup> In a similar vein, in 2019 Emmeline Clein coined the term 'dissociative feminism' to describe the expression of a 'darkly comic, deadpan tone' in relation to feminism – a numbing of feeling which enables one to feign nonchalance in the face of difficulty – most clearly exemplified by the unnamed protagonist in Phoebe Waller-Bridge's television series *Fleabag*.<sup>63</sup> The disappointment and passive acceptance captured by these analyses are examples of the ways in which feminist principles are absorbed into everyday life at the same time as being depoliticised.

Despite the numerous ways in which postfeminist logic simultaneously incorporates and undermines the fight for gender equality, postfeminism coexists with an increased energy for collective feminist activism. It is beyond the scope of

---

<sup>60</sup> Kendra Marston, *Postfeminist Whiteness: Problematizing melancholic burden in contemporary Hollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Catherine McDermott, *Feel-Bad Postfeminism: Impasse, Resilience and Female Subjectivity in Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Asa Seresin, 'On Heteropessimism,' *The New Inquiry*, 9 October 2019 <[www.thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism](http://www.thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism)> [Accessed 11 December 2022]; Jane Ward, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Emmeline Clein, 'The smartest women I know are all dissociating,' *BuzzFeed News*, 20 November 2019 <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmelineclein/dissociation-feminism-women-fleabag-twitter>> [Accessed: 14 December 2022]

this thesis to offer a thorough account of the history of feminism and to intervene in discussions about the usefulness of the wave metaphor as a way of articulating feminist histories. Yet I will point out that, despite their differing feminist histories, journalists and academics in both the UK and North America have argued that the current moment of increased feminist activism (from the 2010s onwards) constitutes a ‘fourth wave’ of feminism.<sup>64</sup> These writers cite technological advances and increased use of the internet as factors contributing to a rise in feminist activism, which includes a number of online projects and petitions such as Everyday Sexism, No More Page Three and #MeToo. Ealasaid Munro observes that the increased use of social media facilitates a ‘call-out culture’ that enables women to be more vocal about the sexism they experience, as well as defending other marginalised groups against discrimination (she uses an example of a transphobic ‘feminist’ figure in mainstream media in order to highlight how public figures who call themselves feminists are out of touch with many fourth wave feminists).<sup>65</sup> Kira Cochrane posits that there are four key elements of the UK’s ‘fourth wave’: (activism against) rape culture, online feminism, humour, and intersectionality and inclusion.<sup>66</sup> Although she does not use the term postfeminism, the cultural background that Cochrane describes as contributing to the rise of the fourth wave is arguably postfeminist. For example, she claims that ‘it’s no surprise that a

---

<sup>64</sup> For example: Jennifer Baumgardner, *F’EM! Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011); Prudence Chamberlain, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Kira Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (London: Guardian, 2013) [eBook]; Ealasaid Munro, ‘Feminism: A Fourth Wave?’ *Political Insight*, 4.2 (2013): 22–25.

<sup>65</sup> Munro, p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> Cochrane, p. 9.

generation of women who were brought up being told that they were equal to men, that sexism and therefore feminism, was dead, are starting to see through this'.<sup>67</sup> More recently, Jo Littler uses the example of the second *Enola Holmes* film to highlight the fact that a new generation is expressing dissatisfaction with individualistic 'girl boss' models of feminism and is instead embracing left feminism or 'feminism for the 99%'.<sup>68</sup> Littler situates this within the economic inequality of the current moment, which many people have fought against through worker's strikes, women's strikes, and marches against the costs of childcare.<sup>69</sup>

The current landscape of feminism is varied and complex. The word 'feminism' is used to denote both an intersectional movement and one that vehemently opposes the rights of transgender women or undermines the challenges facing women of colour and women living in lower-income households. It can be used in relation to individual corporate success or grassroots campaigning and protesting. Though on the one hand feminism has become 'common sense' and 'taken for granted', criticism of patriarchal systems is often still associated with the feminist killjoy, which means that enthusiasm for feminist activism is often tempered with a passive or ironic acceptance of the status quo and a turn to individual positivity, confidence and resilience as sources of value.

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Jo Littler, 'From Enola Holmes on Netflix to Britain's union leaders, why feminism for the 99% is thriving', *Guardian*, 27 December 2022.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/27/enola-holmes-union-leaders-feminism-99-economic-gender-inequality>> [Accessed: 1 March 2023]

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## GIRLS

Each of the primary texts I analyse in this thesis features a protagonist who might be described as a girl – a word that has taken on a flexible meaning in the current moment. As well as referring to feminine children, the word ‘girl’ is increasingly applied to some adult women. Gill describes the ‘girlification’ of adult women in postfeminist media culture, in which ‘female children are promoted as its most desirable sexual icons.’<sup>70</sup> Catherine Driscoll notes the ways in which the meaning of ‘girl’ has shifted, and uses the term ‘feminine adolescence’ to capture the experience of being ‘in transition or in process relative to dominant ideas of Womanhood,’ regardless of biological age.<sup>71</sup> The girl characters I write about in this thesis are caught in this transitory stage, between childhood and adulthood. The girl has become a central figure of postfeminist commentary: McRobbie remarks that girlhood has emerged as a site of ‘fascination, enthusiasm, concern, anxiety and titillation’ in contemporary culture.<sup>72</sup> Sarah Projanksy posits that, in a postfeminist culture, femininity is deeply connected to youth through the performance of ‘girliness’, which means that older women use the term ‘girl’ in order to emphasise their youth.<sup>73</sup> This speaks to the ways in which, as Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose point out, ‘the girl figure continues to be colonised, exploited, abused and commodified’ in such a way that “girl” becomes

---

<sup>70</sup> Gill, ‘Postfeminist media culture’, p. 151.

<sup>71</sup> Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 57.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Projanksy, ‘Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some reflections on postfeminist girls and postfeminism’s daughters’, in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007): 40-72, (p. 45).

synonymous with “sex”.<sup>74</sup> As well as being highly sexualised, girls have been situated as ‘in crisis’ and in need of surveillance and empowerment. Yet Banet-Weiser explains how, alongside this supposed confidence lack, girls have been identified as important consumers, which has been turned into a money-making opportunity: a market for ‘empowerment’ sells the ideal of an entrepreneurial go-getting girl figure to girls and young women.<sup>75</sup> Thus, empowerment becomes situated as something that can be bought for individual girls. Academic interest in girlhood has grown exponentially in recent years, and a number of books have been published on the ways in which girls are configured in media and cultural contexts: for example, Harris’s *Future Girl*, Driscoll’s *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Theory* and Projansky’s *Spectacular Girls*.<sup>76</sup>

Drawing on Driscoll, Projansky suggests that the postfeminist woman is ‘quintessentially adolescent’ no matter her age, because she is always in pursuit of ‘having it all’ while never managing to achieve full adulthood.<sup>77</sup> The extension of girlhood to women in their twenties and thirties (and beyond) thus seems connected to the instability of the category of adulthood, which is, as theorists such as Harry Blatterer observe, shifting significantly under late capitalism.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose, ‘Feminisms re-figuring “sexualisation”, sexuality and “the girl”’, *Feminist Theory* 14.3 (2013): 247-254, (p. 249).

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, “‘Confidence You Can Carry!’: girls in crisis and the market for girls’ empowerment organizations’, *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 29.2 (2015): 182-193.

<sup>76</sup> Harris, *Future Girl*; Driscoll, *Girls*; and Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media fascination and celebrity culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>77</sup> Projansky, ‘Mass Magazine Cover Girls’, p. 45.

<sup>78</sup> Harry Blatterer, ‘The changing semantics of youth and adulthood,’ *Cultural Sociology*, 4.1 (2010): 63-79; ‘Generations, Modernity and the Problem of Contemporary Adulthood’, *Contemporary Adulthood, Calendars, cartographies and constructions*, edited by Judith Burnett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

While, as Sari Edelstein reminds us, the criteria of adulthood have always been ambiguous cultural constructions rather than essential categories,<sup>79</sup> the context in which people are able to achieve traditional markers of adulthood has shifted under the influence of neoliberalism, and especially since around the time of the 2008 global economic crash. For example, markers such as financial independence are less achievable for those in their twenties and thirties today than they were for the generation before. Yet Blatterer also highlights how market conditions favour certain youthful traits, such as beauty, flexibility and mobility (in comparison to the stability and ‘settling down’ traditionally associated with adulthood).<sup>80</sup> These youthful traits do not replace traditional markers of adulthood but coexist with them: though the ability to achieve these ideals and markers of maturity has become more difficult, its ideals persist. Though young people are encouraged to construct themselves as independent and self-reliant (and indeed, those who prolong a stage of ‘irresponsibility’ are harshly judged), they must also continue to be fun, open-minded and crucially, willing to take on risk – especially in order to make a profit. There is a striking resemblance between the requirements of contemporary adulthood and the postfeminist ideal, which points to the fact that contradictory traits are demanded of neoliberal subjects. It is not as simple as claiming that girls are idealised or privileged in postfeminist discourses; rather it is necessary to pay attention to how they are compelled to blend certain characteristics of maturity, such as self-knowledge and responsibility, with youthful traits, such as beauty and enthusiasm for work. Age and maturity are one

---

<sup>79</sup> Sari Edelstein, *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Blatterer, ‘The changing semantics of youth and adulthood’, p. 64.

of the sticking points navigated by the characters of the stories I analyse in this thesis.

## FEELING STUCK

One of the key theoretical concepts I utilise in this thesis is that of the ‘sticking point’. By this, I mean the point at which opposing feelings, imperatives or ideals reach deadlock or impasse: a point at which no progress is possible. My conception of the sticking point draws on the work of both Berlant and Ahmed, who utilise ideas of ‘sticking’ and becoming ‘stuck’ to describe the way in which emotions, affects and feelings work. Ahmed argues that affects are ‘sticky’ in that they are what ‘sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects.’<sup>81</sup> In her analysis of happiness, Ahmed outlines the ways in which happiness ‘directs us towards certain objects’ which circulate as ‘social goods’ and accrue affective value through the process of circulation.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Berlant describes the processes by which we become attached (or stuck) to certain fantasies of the ‘good life’ which we believe will confer certain rewards.<sup>83</sup> Optimism sustains this attachment – the hopeful belief that the fantasy will be realised – however, this relation becomes cruel when the object that drew our attachment actively impedes our ability to achieve the goal that drew us to the fantasy in the first place. Both Ahmed and Berlant help us to see how the promise of good feeling keeps us attached to normative ways of living that cause us harm. Importantly, this

---

<sup>81</sup> Sara Ahmed, ‘Happy Objects’ in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 29-51, (p. 29).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

relation affects our ability to question the object of our attachment. For example, in Berlant's conception of cruel optimism, though we may become at least partially aware that the rewards we desire may never be delivered upon, striving towards them provides us with a sense of direction and a feeling of hope that we do not want to lose, so our attachments endure. Ahmed explains that the promise of happiness takes a particular form: 'if you have this or that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows.'<sup>84</sup> Much like cruel optimism, the promise of happiness is a regulatory strategy. It keeps us reaching towards the same things and prevents us questioning normative ways of living. Both refer to negotiations that are cruel and unsatisfying; yet paradoxically also life-affirming, in that they give our lives meaning. While the rewards promised are continually deferred and never materialise, the process of pursuing these rewards bestows us with direction and purpose. When we attempt to detach from these fantasies and promises, Berlant contends that we find ourselves in the 'impasse', which is 'a space of time lived without a narrative genre': a 'cul-de-sac' in which 'one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*.'<sup>85</sup> We might try to make a change, but we find ourselves uncertain and adrift, 'dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.'<sup>86</sup> Impasse helps us to understand why people return to the site of that which has been so disappointing before: it is important to have something to orient us in the world, something to look forward to, even if that object of desire continually frustrates our hopes. The impasse is itself a sticking point, one that I

---

<sup>84</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 199.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

draw on throughout this thesis to conceptualise the growing frustration with postfeminist fantasies.

I understand both postfeminism and neoliberalism as affective forces that secure our attachment to certain fantasies. For example, fantasies of personal success within the market economy are cultivated alongside competition, extreme individualism, and the erasure of community, all of which increase feelings of loneliness and isolation.<sup>87</sup> We are drawn in by the promise of individual success, which might confer money, happiness and stability, among other rewards, and endure the negative effects of that pursuit by remaining attached to the hope that our rewards will soon be realised. Investment in postfeminist living, for instance, might appear to bring women closer to the rewards they desire, but in fact, postfeminism's emphasis on individual agency and self-responsibility obscures the barriers that women face in pursuit of their goals. Thus, the rewards they expect in exchange for certain ways of being shift even further out of reach. Once an attachment is formed, it is threatening and it is embarrassing to detach from the fantasy – so we can see how people become stuck to, or stuck with, certain harmful fantasies. Nevertheless, when these fantasies repeatedly fail to deliver on their promises, the attachments become weakened. They begin to fray or unravel, and a person might find themselves in the impasse.

To understand what kinds of feeling emerge in this impasse, when the promises of postfeminist success, empowerment and happiness are not delivered upon, I find Sianne Ngai's theorisation of 'ugly feelings' useful. For Ngai, ugly

---

<sup>87</sup> Julia C Becker, Lea Hartwich and S Alexander Haslam, 'Neoliberalism can reduce well-being by promoting a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness', *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 60.3 (2021): 947-965.

feelings are dysphoric, non-cathartic and ambiguous or ‘weakly intentional’ feelings, including (but not limited to) irritation and frustration.<sup>88</sup> As Ngai points out, while one can be unclear about why one is feeling irritated or frustrated, we are less likely to be confused about why we feel ‘grander passions’ such as rage or terror.<sup>89</sup> These ‘grander’ feelings, which are easier to identify and usually have a clear source, propel us into action. Once we have acted, the feeling usually subsides. In contrast, ugly feelings offer no such emotional release. They are unproductive feelings with little capacity for catharsis – and so they linger, they stick around. But crucially for Ngai, it is precisely the ambiguity and the weak intentionality of ugly feelings that makes them so apt for the diagnosis of situations of blocked or suspended agency; whereas feelings such as fear, insecurity or anxiety might ‘translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself’,<sup>90</sup> ugly feelings are stubborn, and they resist recuperation into capitalist modes of productivity. Therefore, Ngai perceives such situations as ‘charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective’.<sup>91</sup> What Ngai is pointing out for us here is that ugly feelings are not tied to a specific type of person or character, but rather a particular subjectivity. Ugly feelings are to do with how a person perceives and engages with the world. Identifying ugly feelings in a literary text raises questions about how and why a character’s agency is blocked in the

---

<sup>88</sup> Ngai, p. 27.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>90</sup> Paolo Virno, ‘The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,’ *Radical Thought in Italy*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt: 13-36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 17. Cited in: Ngai, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

narrative – especially in situations where this may not be immediately obvious – which in turn raises political questions. Why does a character feel trapped? What is the context for those feelings of entrapment? Do those feelings seem at odds with the world portrayed in the story, and if so, why? These are the kinds of questions I ask throughout this thesis, in order to unravel the sticking points that persist in these stories of disappointing attachment to postfeminist fantasies.

All parts of this project can be understood in terms of sticking points. Girlhood discourses circle around whether girls should be celebrated and empowered or protected and worried over. Similarly, scholars have gone back and forth on the relevance and usefulness of postfeminism, which has led some to describe it as being stuck in a ‘critical impasse’ of its own.<sup>92</sup> As we will see in chapter four, the short story is mired in similar debates about status and value. Ahmed also describes emotions as that which has been a ‘sticking point’ throughout history.<sup>93</sup> Affect theory has become a key mode of enquiry for scholars investigating postfeminism and neoliberalism, with increasing emphasis placed on how it feels to live in societies marked by neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities. I situate my work within this field of research; however, scholars of postfeminist feeling have thus far primarily analysed television, film, and social and popular media. So far, there is much less scholarly work exploring the way contemporary literature charts and problematises postfeminist feeling – a scarcity which this project addresses.

---

<sup>92</sup> Catherine McDermott, ‘How to Survive the Postfeminist Impasse: Grace Helbig’s Affective Aesthetics’, *Girlhood Studies* 11.3 (2018): 50-66 (p. 52).

<sup>93</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 13.

I proceed as follows. I begin, in Chapter One, by analysing Kristen Roupenian's viral short story 'Cat Person' by approaching consent as a sticking point in heterosexual culture. The story centres on a sexual encounter in which the protagonist, Margot, has sex with her date, Robert, even though she does not want to. I make the case that the flat and exhausted affective tone of the story can be understood as 'heterosexual fatigue', which is created by Margot's attempts to navigate the irreconcilable discourses around consent and women's agency. In Chapter Two, I theorise the feelings of 'stuckness' that result from the postfeminist insistence that women can – and should – achieve anything they put their minds to, especially in the world of work. I analyse two short stories, 'Los Angeles' by Emma Cline and 'Would Like to Meet' by May-Lan Tan, both of which feature a protagonist who strives for a creative career (in acting and art, respectively) but finds herself stuck in a low-paid retail job. Both characters attempt to make a change, which I read as an attempt to break out of the impasse, and which therefore points us towards the ways in which each character's agency is blocked. Chapter Three considers the friendships in 'Head to Toe' by Abigail Ulman and 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' by Jenny Zhang as sites of un/belonging. I outline the ways in which neoliberal and postfeminist affective strategies comprise both deep attachment and stark alienation, which keeps the friends stuck with each other despite their difficulty connecting emotionally. Finally, in Chapter Four, I turn to the question of form. Situating the arguments I make over the previous three chapters within the context of short story theory, I make the case that the short story is a form predisposed to charting certain kinds of feeling, which makes

it an especially apt form for the interrogation of the way social and political structures make us feel.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Heterosexual Fatigue in 'Cat Person'

In December 2017, the *New Yorker* published 'Cat Person', a short story about a college student, Margot, who meets an older man named Robert while she is working at a movie theatre.<sup>94</sup> The two exchange flirtatious messages and go on a single date, which culminates in an uncomfortable scene in which Margot recognises that she does not desire Robert, yet they have sex anyway. Within days of publication, 'Cat Person' became the first short story to go viral on social media, sparking ferocious Twitter debate and numerous opinion pieces, as readers and culture writers alike struggled to work out why a short story about a seemingly 'normal' dating situation had captured public attention.

This high level of interest is partly explained by the particular moment in which 'Cat Person' was published, in which cultural anxiety around heterosexual relations was high. Popular feminist activism was focused on calling out the prevalence of (primarily though not exclusively, heterosexual) gendered and sexual violence in the aftermath of the Harvey Weinstein sexual assault allegations.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Kristen Roupenian, 'Cat Person', *The New Yorker*, 4 December 2017, <[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person)> [Accessed: 4 December 2022]

<sup>95</sup> Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,' *New York Times*, 5 October 2017 <[www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html)> [Accessed: 11 December 2022]

Therefore, the public mood, especially in Europe and America, was sensitive to issues around heterosexual dating, relationships and sex. Some critics expressed scepticism about this sensitivity. For example, in the *New York Times*, Daphne Merkin asked, '[w]hat happened to women's agency?' and made the case that the 2017 #MeToo moment represented a return to a 'victimology paradigm' for women and a 're-moralization' of sex.<sup>96</sup> For Merkin, the solution to the injustices women face lies not in collective action but individual strength – the ability to overcome any obstacle and 'toughen up' in the face of adversity. These were – and are – difficult and frustrating conversations which point to particular sticking points around consent, victimhood and agency. Its timely publication meant that 'Cat Person' became a lightning rod for these debates.

This chapter establishes 'Cat Person' as a story preoccupied with a particular feeling that I call *heterosexual fatigue*. My conception of heterosexual fatigue builds on work by Elisabeth Kelan, in which she argues that the repeated insistence on gender equality in the workplace in the face of enduring inequalities causes 'gender fatigue', in which women lose 'the energy to acknowledge and potentially oppose gender discrimination'.<sup>97</sup> I locate heterosexual fatigue within contemporary discussions of 'heteropessimism'<sup>98</sup> and 'tragic' heterosexuality,<sup>99</sup> which broadly describe the continued attachment of straight people to the promise

---

<sup>96</sup> Daphne Merkin, 'Publicly We Say #MeToo, Privately We Have Misgivings,' *The New York Times*, 5 January 2018  
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html>> [Accessed: 10 Dec 2022]

<sup>97</sup> Elisabeth Kelan, 'Gender fatigue: The ideological dilemma of gender neutrality and discrimination in organizations,' *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 26.3 (2009): 197-210.

<sup>98</sup> Seresin.

<sup>99</sup> Ward.

of heterosexuality, despite an awareness of its internal problems. For Jane Ward, straight culture is characterised by the fact that ‘boy’s and men’s desire for girls and women is expressed within a broader culture that encourages them to also hate girls and women.’<sup>100</sup> This ‘misogyny paradox’<sup>101</sup> and the persistence of gendered and sexual violence, sits uncomfortably alongside the relentless positivity and enthusiasm that women are encouraged to cultivate in postfeminist cultures – particularly in relation to their own sexual agency. Asa Seresin describes how many straight people attempt to distance themselves from a disappointing and unfulfilling straight culture through expressions of heteropessimism: ‘performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about the straight experience’.<sup>102</sup> Heteropessimists are keen to distance themselves from the ‘awfulness’ of heterosexuality and frame their own continued attachments as a kind of ‘prison’.<sup>103</sup> ‘Cat Person’ illuminates the ways in which the invocation of contradictory discourses around heterosexuality and women’s sexual agency produce heterosexual fatigue – a flat, non-cathartic feeling, marked by inaction, or a kind of paralysis. This underscores the impossibility of reconciling the affective demands of neoliberal femininity with the persistent dread of heterosexual culture.

Much of the controversy surrounding ‘Cat Person’ centred on a deeply ambivalent sex scene, in which Margot changes her mind about having sex with Robert after

---

<sup>100</sup> Ward, p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Seresin.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

she went with him willingly to his house. Margot struggles to articulate her change of heart to Robert:

Looking at him like that, so awkwardly bent, his belly thick and soft and covered with hair, Margot recoiled. But the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon. It wasn't that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but insisting that they stop now, after everything she'd done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back.<sup>104</sup>

In this passage, exhaustion is presented as the driving force behind Margot's (in)action: she is overwhelmed, it would be 'impossible' to attempt to change the course of events from what she has 'set in motion'. But we also see how Margot negotiates and polices her own thoughts. It is not, she tells herself, that she is scared. To acknowledge the threat of being forced against her will would be to acknowledge her own vulnerability in that particular situation – that the sex might have happened whether she submitted to it or not. Instead, her primary fear is of being perceived as 'spoiled and capricious'. There is a push and pull here, in which the fear of rape is briefly invoked before being swiftly set aside and replaced with what seems to be a much more trivial concern. This is a knotty, complex scene; one that I contend can be best understood through a critical attention to feeling. I argue that in this passage, we see Margot struggle to reconcile her lack of desire and lack of feasible options for exiting the encounter safely with the fact that she sees herself as a free, empowered and independent person, who has choices. She is constrained by patriarchal demands on her behaviour – to not back out of sex that

---

<sup>104</sup> Roupenian, 'Cat Person'.

she has instigated – yet crucially she is also constrained by patriarchal demands on her feelings – to not present herself as spoiled, and perhaps most importantly, to present herself as capable, empowered, and confident at all times. Consent, which is often touted as an uncomplicated framework and something simple to understand (a phenomenon that Lola Olufemi calls the ‘happy face’<sup>105</sup> of consent), is a sticking point. The lack or presence of verbal consent cannot tell us how a situation feels; therefore, its usefulness as a tool for separating sex from assault is limited. By drawing out the feelings present in scenes of ambivalent, complicated or ambiguous consent, such as the one presented in ‘Cat Person’, we can begin to unpick why consent is such a problematic rubric and why discussions about it have become so stuck.

Melissa Febos explores the often-murky space between consensual sex and assault in her book *Girlhood*, writing that she has struggled with applying the word ‘trauma’ to her own experiences. Instead, she has ‘often wished for a different word, one that implies profound, often inhibitive change, but precludes the wound and victimization inherent in *trauma*.’<sup>106</sup> Febos highlights the shame and stigma attached to perceived victimhood, but also suggests that consent and trauma are mutually exclusive – that it is impossible to consent to traumatic sex – which brings the problems with consent into sharp focus. Its dichotomisation of sex as either consensual or traumatic stifles our ability to speak about experiences that are both. To bridge this gap, Febos coins the term ‘empty consent’ to articulate experiences

---

<sup>105</sup> Lola Olufemi, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020) p. 96.

<sup>106</sup> Melissa Febos, *Girlhood* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 197-8.

of sex in which permission is granted, but which are completely devoid of desire.<sup>107</sup>

This might include sex work and consent that was given under conditions of coercion or threat. It might also include sex with a date, or even a loving partner, in which one has said yes when one means no. The notion of empty consent pushes back against the rigidity of the consent binary and clears space for the unpacking of more complex sexual encounters – such as the one portrayed in ‘Cat Person’ – that cannot be neatly categorised.

Though Febos insists that the word ‘trauma’ is not applicable to her particular experience, she recognises that the dissociation she describes in the aftermath of difficult sexual experiences shares similarities with that of a trauma survival mechanism.<sup>108</sup> She writes of a ‘dimming’, an ‘out-of-body feeling, the sense of consciousness detached from the corporeal self, perhaps watching it as one would figure in a diorama’.<sup>109</sup> There are similarities between Febos’s description here, and the description of Margot’s experience of sex with Robert in ‘Cat Person’, in which she feels like ‘a doll made of rubber, flexible and resilient, a prop for the movie that was playing in his head’.<sup>110</sup> The descriptions of detachment and distance between the self and the body highlight a kind of anaesthesia, an attempt to escape the situation in mind, if not in body. As Febos writes: the ‘frozen self doesn’t feel the

---

<sup>107</sup> Febos, p. 222.

<sup>108</sup> While the use of the word ‘trauma’ might invite us to read the scene through the lens of trauma theory, the experiences I am talking about here are common experiences that become absorbed into the mundane and the everyday. This seems to be partly why Febos resists using the word ‘trauma’, which implies a singular, disruptive event rather than ‘lifetimes punctuated by unwanted touch’ (Febos, p. 222). As such, I contend that these experiences are better understood through Berlant’s ‘crisis ordinariness’ than trauma theory, which, as Berlant points out, conventionally focuses on ‘exceptional shock’ and the ‘experience of catastrophe’ (*Cruel Optimism*, p. 10).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>110</sup> Roupinian, ‘Cat Person’.

affect of that self, though it is recorded in the body'.<sup>111</sup> Read through the lens of heteropessimism, which Seresin describes as a 'mode of feeling' which is 'designed to pre-emptively anaesthetize the heart against the pervasive awfulness of heterosexual culture',<sup>112</sup> these feelings of numbness suggest a reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of difficult or 'bad' sex. While heteropessimism typically consists of 'performative disaffiliations',<sup>113</sup> heterosexual fatigue signals a loss of energy to oppose the inherent problems of heterosexuality, even performatively.

Thinking about detachment between the body and the self raises an important question: are our physical bodies always reliable as indicators of emotion in general and sexual desire in particular? Writer, social justice facilitator and 'pleasure activist' adrienne maree brown defines consent as saying yes on one's own terms and giving agreement for something to happen. For brown, the first step to consent is to be able to 'tune in' to our own desire and 'feel a distinct yes or no'.<sup>114</sup> She suggests that we look for physical signals that we are 'feeling a yes': for example, quickening breath, flushed face, pressure in the groin, sweaty palms and tingling spine. But can we trust our physical sensations to substantiate our emotional decisions? Many of the signals brown uses to confirm desire are also signals of other feelings, such as fear and anxiety, which complicates our ability to discern desire from bodily signals alone. Margot feels what she perceives to be physical signals of sexual arousal before she has sex with Robert. For example, she feels a 'twinge of desire pluck at her belly, as distinct and painful as the snap of an

---

<sup>111</sup> Febos, p. 198.

<sup>112</sup> Seresin.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), p. 196.

elastic band against her skin."<sup>115</sup> While the pleasure of this feeling is complicated by pain, Margot nevertheless reads the physical sensation as an indication of desire. brown assumes a legibility of body which would reveal, or least help us make sense of, complicated feelings about sex. However, as Katherine Angel uncovers in her book *Unmastered*, even desire itself is not a straightforward enough feeling to confirm a feeling of 'yes'. Angel writes about the 'vaguely deflated, slightly melancholic' feeling she gets from watching 'misogynistic, coercive, tacky porn'; however, she notes that the same pornography can make her 'wet' – it 'irritates' her, 'if rather joylessly, into action.'<sup>116</sup> Though joy is missing, and Angel has certain moral and aesthetic objections to the porn, her body still responds to the images. If vaginal wetness cannot be taken as a clear indicator of desire, of a 'yes', then sweaty palms and 'twinges' are even less conclusive.

What Angel highlights is that sometimes what turns us on, what causes a physical response, is not something that we actually wish to happen. According to brown, this is because the repressive rape culture in which we live shapes many of our sexual fantasies.<sup>117</sup> These are gendered fantasies created by heteropatriarchal forces, which teach us what roles we should play in sex and how we become desirable. For brown, such fantasies work to keep us in gender-normative roles, where men are seen as 'naturally' sexually aggressive, and women are passive, responsible for fending off men's advances – yet always with politeness and good humour.<sup>118</sup> Fantasies and the sexual imagination play an important role in 'Cat

---

<sup>115</sup> Roupenian, 'Cat Person'.

<sup>116</sup> Katherine Angel, *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 15-16.

<sup>117</sup> brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 223.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

Person'. Though the mode of narration keeps Robert's interiority hidden from the reader, his actions during sex – such as slapping Margot's thigh, saying 'yeah, yeah, you like that' and growling 'I always wanted to fuck a girl with nice tits' – show us that sex he imagines is very different from the sex that Margot experiences.<sup>119</sup> This behaviour implies what Robert has learnt about how he, as a man, should behave during sex, from the rape culture in which he lives. Given the narrative perspective, we of course don't know whether Robert is aware of Margot's lack of enthusiasm during the encounter. Can we, as readers, dismiss Robert's behaviour as the behaviour of a misogynist? Or might he genuinely think that this is what Margot expects from sex – or wants? Is he simply conforming to the normative gender roles he has absorbed from the culture he lives in? Does Robert even want to have sex with Margot, or does he feel that he must 'perform' in order to assert his masculinity? The mode of narration holds all of these possibilities open.

The character of Robert is a site of conflicting feminist viewpoints. He embodies numerous figures: the stereotypical misogynist who uses a woman for sex, yet also the 'real' victim of feminism, a 'good guy' who is wrongly tainted with the brush of misogyny due to feminism going 'too far'.<sup>120</sup> As we are unable to access his thoughts, Robert is only revealed to us through Margot's ever-changing interpretation of him. We know very little about him and what we do know is filtered through Margot's worldview. On the one hand, it seems somewhat counterproductive to view Robert, or men in general, as emblematic as all that is

---

<sup>119</sup> Roupelian, 'Cat Person'.

<sup>120</sup> For further discussion see: Laura García-Favaro and Rosalind Gill, "'Emasculation nation has arrived": sexism rearticulated in online responses to Lose the Lads' Mags campaign', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.3 (2016): 379-397.

wrong with heterosexuality. As Seresin writes, 'if "heterosexuality" becomes shorthand for misogyny, the proper object of critique falls from view.'<sup>121</sup> Men might be the primary beneficiaries of heteropatriarchy, but men are also beholden to gendered stereotypes and scripts – just as people of all genders can be held responsible for upholding heteropatriarchy. Indeed, the conflicting messages Robert sends to Margot at the end of the story, which veer from 'I miss you' and 'you looked really pretty' to 'whore', recall Ward's misogyny paradox and suggests that Robert might be having trouble navigating the contradictions of straight culture too. Yet the problem with focussing on one particular fictional encounter and attempting to weigh up whether the character in question is a 'bad' misogynist or a wounded 'good' guy is that it misses the bigger picture that 'Cat Person' is drawing our attention to: the structural conditions that allow such encounters to take place, the cultural norms and practices that condone and even encourage sexually aggressive behaviour, and the burden of conforming to the limited roles demanded by heteropatriarchy.

Of course, women also have sexual fantasies. Angel writes openly and joyfully about her own desires, fantasies in sexual experience to highlight the ways in which women's sexuality is policed. However, Angel comes up against feminism as a restriction on her sexuality. She writes about how, at a feminist talk, she asked about consensual sex which plays with power and domination. The speaker dismissed this experience and reframed it as 'violent sex'.<sup>122</sup> Angel writes that the speaker presumed 'that these desires would come out of not knowing about

---

<sup>121</sup> Seresin.

<sup>122</sup> Angel, *Unmastered*, p. 215.

feminism – that feminism undoes “problematic” desires’ – yet Angel maintains that this is not the case: ‘We don’t align, neatly, inside ourselves, a stack of equal cards.’<sup>123</sup> In an inverse of the way ‘tacky porn’ can make her feel wet, Angel’s erotic imagination is not beholden to the political beliefs she might hold outside of the bedroom. That is, it is possible for a woman who believes in and wants gender equality to also want to be dominated in the bedroom – to be submissive, spanked, hit, restrained or even choked – and take great joy and pleasure from that sex. It is possible for a woman to be into BDSM and still be a feminist. Indeed, in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, Angel points out that practitioners of BDSM utilise a clear, explicit approach to consent, in the form of rules, boundaries and safe words, which removes the ambiguity present in many other, more widely socially acceptable, sexual situations, and could potentially provide a useful model of what open communication around consent might look like.<sup>124</sup> This contrasts with brown’s view of submissive fantasies, which she argues are products of rape culture in which ‘our desires are woven so thoroughly with these social norm fantasies that we think that we desire our own disempowerment or someone else’s’.<sup>125</sup> Wherever such fantasies come from, the possibility exists that Margot may want or enjoy being submissive in the bedroom. However, the sexual encounter in ‘Cat Person’ is not that which plays with power for pleasure – at least, not for Margot. The figurative language used to describe her during sex positions her as an object – a ‘doll made of rubber’.<sup>126</sup> Margot’s self-conception in image and language makes her

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London and New York: Verso, 2021), p. 101.

<sup>125</sup> brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 224.

<sup>126</sup> Roupenian, ‘Cat Person’.

seem dead – entirely detached from herself. After the sex, Margot thinks that they should ‘probably just kill [them]selves’.<sup>127</sup>

How do we make sense of Margot’s desire to die after sex? Drawing on Orlando Patterson’s concept of ‘social death’, Linda Martín Alcoff theorises the experience of sexual violation as that in which the ‘self is made into a mere instrument for another.’<sup>128</sup> Again, we are seeing the idea that sexual violence is characterised by a detachment between body and self; between the sense of oneself as a human being, with feelings and subjectivity, and the sense of oneself as an object, useful only for another’s purpose. Alcoff writes: ‘Given this, it becomes easier to understand how one might wish for actual death as preferable to this experience of being treated as meat while still alive.’<sup>129</sup> This is the crucial difference between the sex that Angel describes, in which power and domination are ‘played with’ by all participants, and that which is depicted in ‘Cat Person’ – which an attentiveness to feeling can help us unpack. There is nothing shared in the encounter between Margot and Robert. They are alienated from each other – and Margot, at least, is also alienated from herself. She is distanced, watching herself from the outside, as her body is used for another’s purpose. In contrast, Angel describes being ‘peaceful’, ‘sunk down into myself, into my desire’.<sup>130</sup> Both participants are cognisant of each other’s pleasure, rather than pursuing their own to such an extent that they foreclose their partner’s pleasure.

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), cited in: Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), p. 65.

<sup>129</sup> Alcoff, p. 65.

<sup>130</sup> Angel, *Unmastered*, p. 9.

Fantasy, rape and sex overlap in heteropatriarchal cultures, such that it can be difficult to disentangle these experiences – but they are not inseparable. Audre Lorde’s distinction between the erotic and the pornographic is useful here, to draw out the differences between these ‘diametrically opposed uses of the sexual.’<sup>131</sup> She argues that (bad) pornography ‘represents the suppression of true feeling... [it] emphasises sensation without feeling’, whereas the erotic is a ‘measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings’.<sup>132</sup> In other words, the ‘erotic’ includes the ‘physical, emotional, and psychic’, whereas the pornographic is concerned only with physical sensations to the exclusion of the emotional and psychic, and therefore cannot be fulfilling.<sup>133</sup> The erotic extends far beyond the sexual, but it exists in shared joy and fulfilment, which sex can create. If we return to the sex scene in ‘Cat Person’, we can see that the scene registers the impossibility of erotic pleasure because nothing is shared emotionally. For Lorde, erotic power is to do with self-knowledge and an awareness of one’s capacity for feeling, whereas postfeminism focuses on individual performances of false power, which emphasise outward appearance over feeling. Women must police their sexuality carefully, enacting performances of power in order to accrue social currency, which deprives them of the ability to ask themselves what it is that makes them feel good. This illuminates the challenges involved in seeking pleasure as a woman attracted to men in postfeminist cultures. A woman must be desirable but careful of provoking too much desire. She must be wary of instigating sex,

---

<sup>131</sup> Audre Lorde, ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,’ in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), p. 25.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

because once she has it is difficult to back out. Retracting consent is not compatible with the 'sexy' and 'positive' power offered by postfeminism, which has strict limitations on how agency can be construed.

Although a certain school of feminist thought – what Angel calls 'confidence feminism'<sup>134</sup> – would insist that Margot is capable of walking away from Robert's house without having sex with him, 'Cat Person' registers the situation as one in which no path leads to safety. Margot is not physically restrained by Robert (though his physical strength in comparison to hers is observed, as well as the ever-present threat of violence), but Margot has been socialised in such a way that 'no' becomes impossible to articulate in the specific situation presented in the story. For brown, an 'authentic yes' is defined by the real option of a no; therefore, 'Cat Person' presents a situation in which it is difficult or even impossible for Margot to consent. brown examines the ways in which anti-consent practices are taught to us from a young age. For example, children are required to submit to physical contact with adults to be 'polite' and crucially, she points out that the 'culture of access based on power grows with us', meaning that power dynamics shape who has access to whose bodies: 'older people to younger people's bodies, white people to people of colour's bodies, men to women's bodies, cis to trans bodies, those with resources to those with less, those with more physical strength to those with less'.<sup>135</sup> Because of this culture of access, heterosexual sex is always characterised by a power imbalance, which raises crucial questions about women's safety within

---

<sup>134</sup> Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, p. 23.

<sup>135</sup> brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p. 198.

heterosexual relationships.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, throughout 'Cat Person' the threat of gendered violence is portrayed as an intrinsic, normal, and almost unremarkable part of heterosexual dating and sex. After Robert picks Margot up in his car, it occurs to her that 'he could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all.'<sup>137</sup> The flippancy with which Margot considers that Robert may want to harm her and with which he tells her, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to murder you,'<sup>138</sup> shows how violence is a normalised undercurrent to heterosexual life. The 'brief wild idea' Margot has that Robert's house might be 'full of horrors: corpses or kidnap victims or chains' highlights the ways in which rape myths obscure the possibility and prevalence of sexual violence in the public imagination.<sup>139</sup> Where rape is viewed as an unlikely, aberrant occurrence – what Stevi Jackson calls the 'myth of the stranger in the dark alley' – women's fears of rape and violence are framed as paranoid, and a rapist is perceived as some sort of 'sex-starved, crazed lunatic' instead of a 'normal' man.<sup>140</sup> The persistence of this myth directly contradicts statistics that suggest as many as 8 out of 10 rape victims know their attacker(s).<sup>141</sup>

While Margot's ability to judge Robert as a person is serious – her life could be at stake – the logic of postfeminism displaces this fear with an anxiety about the

---

<sup>136</sup> It is important to note here that brown's work rarely, if ever, foregrounds heterosexuality and never centres whiteness.

<sup>137</sup> Roupenian, 'Cat Person'.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Stevi Jackson, 'The Social Context of Rape: Sexual Scripts and Motivation', *Women's Studies Int. Quarterly*, 1 (1978): 27-38, (pp. 27-8).

<sup>141</sup> RAINN, *Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics*

<<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>> [Accessed: 11 December 2022]

way in which Margot is perceived in the world. If we think back to the way in which Margot is concerned not to appear ‘spoiled and capricious’, we can see that Margot’s sense of personal value under postfeminist value systems replaces concerns about personal safety. To act on concerns about her safety or lack of desire is to be ‘difficult’, to interrupt the flow of events expected to follow Margot going on the date with Robert and then going back to his house. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Marina Levina argue that ‘white women gain capital by inviting male desire – and by not being difficult, disruptive.’<sup>142</sup> Women are presented as active – they are the ones ‘inviting’ – yet simultaneously passive – ‘not being difficult’. This underscores a clash between Margot’s own lack of desire and an affective economy in which she stands to lose value by failing to sustain male desire and being ‘difficult’. In this context, the option of leaving or backing out is closed off to Margot. She must be tactful, considerate of Robert’s feelings (and his sexual pleasure) in a way that he is not considerate of hers. The point I am making here is that Margot’s ostensibly ‘free’ decision is shaped both by a real threat of violence, which is undermined by postfeminist logic, and a patriarchal context in which her personal value is entangled with her ability to fulfil male pleasure.

Aside from the potentially numerous practical considerations and fear of retaliation, Margot’s inability to reject Robert and leave his house is tied to her many attachments to certain fantasies about the world and her place in it. For example, Margot has a reassuring and optimistic attachment to a fantasy of her own postfeminist empowerment, which makes Margot believe she can do

---

<sup>142</sup> Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Marina Levina, ‘The Labor of Consent: Affect, Agency and Whiteness in the Age of #MeToo’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 37.5 (2020): 409-423, (p. 414).

anything, and that gender inequality is largely a problem of the past. This makes Margot feel good, and it makes her feel safe. Yet, her attachment to the fantasy begins to fray as she slowly realises that the fantasy does not deliver on its promises. Detaching from the fantasy is not easy – it would leave Margot isolated and adrift and crucially, without the sense of herself as an empowered individual. It would mean recognising her vulnerabilities and the ways in which she suffers from heteropatriarchal forces. Opening herself up to all that is overwhelming, and so Margot continues to invest in the fantasy hoping that it will, eventually, deliver on its promises. This wears Margot out – it becomes exhausting. The individualisation of Margot’s lack of agency, occurring as it does through a mode of ‘turning inward’ and focusing on herself, means that Margot cannot see the constraints on her agency as socially and culturally constructed; she can only see it as a personal problem. She blames herself, and so she does not feel terror or anger, but rather fatigue, a giving-in to the inevitability of the situation, as a way to avoid reckoning with the fantasy to which she is so firmly attached. It is a cruel cycle: Margot veers from confidence, to self-hatred, back to confidence, the cycle repeating and Margot herself becoming stuck within it. We see this play out during the sex scene, as Margot first tries to ‘bludgeon her resistance into submission’ – an acknowledgement that she feels resistance and is trying to reshape or deny those feelings – shortly before getting ‘carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego that she could hardly admit even to herself that she was having it’ – in which Margot imagines Robert thinking about how much he wants her, and how ‘perfect’ and ‘beautiful’ she is as a way to distract herself from the unpleasant experience to

which she has submitted.<sup>143</sup> This good feeling is unsustainable; it is quickly deflated by Robert's behaviour, his 'high-pitched feminine whine' and less-than-gentle touching. Eventually, we see Margot give up: 'she knew that her last chance of enjoying this encounter had disappeared, but that she would carry through with it until it was over'.<sup>144</sup>

After the event, Margot thinks that having sex with Robert was 'the worst life decision', but then she goes on to marvel at herself, 'at the mystery of this person who'd just done this bizarre, inexplicable thing'.<sup>145</sup> A kind of awe-struck confusion is deployed here to frame the dissonance between body and self as something mildly amusing, which enables Margot to side-step uncomfortable feelings about the detachment between her feelings and her actions. Crucially, however, though it is 'the worst decision', Margot does not entertain the possibility that sex with Robert was not her own free choice. We see Margot hold the experience at arm's length, as though it happened to someone else, or perhaps that it is too painful to look at closely. Margot's navigation of hetero sex is inseparable from the affective demands of neoliberal femininity, which foregrounds the cultivation of positive feelings, such as happiness, confidence, resilience and self-determination: feelings that do not fit with the celebratory narrative of women as strong and empowered are repudiated. In particular, expressions of vulnerability and victimhood are viewed as a sign of personal fault or weakness. This idea is closely linked to confidence feminism, which argues that feminist activism such as rape awareness campaigns encourage women to see themselves as helpless, vulnerable, and

---

<sup>143</sup> Roupelian, 'Cat Person'.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

unsexual, and that ‘bad sex’ or ‘regrettable’ encounters are an inevitable part of heterosexual dating. This viewpoint suggests, as Angel writes, that the solution to the injustices that women face lies not in collective action but in individual strength, by cultivating the persona of ‘the strong woman who can overcome it all – who can shrug off injuries and be tougher; be, frankly, less of a baby’.<sup>146</sup> This imperative to strength, resilience and positivity is particularly salient when we consider Margot’s complex affective response to unwanted sex. Her desire to understand and present herself as strong and empowered inhibits her ability to recognise – even to herself – how she feels.

Humour is an important tool for managing difficult feelings. Indeed, irony and humour play crucial roles in the postfeminist sensibility. Gill argues that they are used to express ‘knowingness’ and to establish a ‘safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs’.<sup>147</sup> We see how Margot’s negative feelings emerge before they are quickly repackaged into something funny and communicable, a story for an imaginary audience, a future boyfriend, ‘who would think that this moment was just as awful yet hilarious as she did’.<sup>148</sup> What we see emerging here is the idea that negotiation of feeling is a crucial part of sex for Margot. Yet Margot’s construction of the experience as something funny for her imaginary boyfriend (and herself), is undercut by feelings of despair as she concludes that ‘there was no such future, because no such boy existed and never would’.<sup>149</sup> The use of humour to reframe difficult experiences corresponds with

---

<sup>146</sup> Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, p. 23.

<sup>147</sup> Gill, ‘Elements of a sensibility,’ p. 159.

<sup>148</sup> Roupelian, ‘Cat Person’.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

Akane Kanai's observation that young women navigate the contradictions of neoliberal femininity by 'limiting their articulation of managing this burden to humorous, upbeat quips'.<sup>150</sup> We are witnessing the use of humour as a tactic through which Margot is recuperated back into a postfeminist sensibility. She disavows victimhood and vulnerability and as such, cannot entertain the possibility that the sex she had with Robert was not entirely consensual. By laughing, and seeing the 'funny side', she uses humour she deflects unwanted feelings to distance herself from the experience without playing into a victim narrative. To admit vulnerability would suggest a personal failure or lack and an inability to embody the ideal of psychological strength, confidence and power. Caught between the enforced positivity of neoliberal postfeminism and the terrifying possibility of her own lack of agency, Margot becomes frozen with exhaustion, trapped between conflicting pressures that are impossible to navigate.

Given Margot's abysmal experience, we might ask why she remains invested in the promise of heterosexuality. Ahmed writes that the 'promise of happiness' directs us towards certain things that will supposedly bring us the good life, and that the good life is almost inseparable from the 'historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledness.'<sup>151</sup> Heterosexual love (and therefore the straight culture that directs people towards it) is positioned as something that will make us happy or drive us towards a happy ending. By conforming to standards of heteronormativity, a person can accrue

---

<sup>150</sup> Akane Kanai, 'On Not Taking the Self Seriously: Resilience, relatability and humour in young women's Tumblr blogs,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22.1 (2019): 60-77, (p. 60).

<sup>151</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 90.

social value. As Ward points out '[s]traightness is a means through which people can access some (unearned) cultural and institutional rewards vis-à-vis the marginalization of their queer counterparts.'<sup>152</sup> The hopefulness of Margot and Robert's initial flirtation suggests that they are both deeply attached to the idea that heterosexuality will bring them rewards, in the form of either happiness or status. For example, when her parents ask about who she's messaging, Margot tells them, 'His name is Robert, and I met him at the movie theatre. We're in love, and we're probably going to get married'.<sup>153</sup> Though there is a degree of implied irony here, which suggests that Margot intends this as a joke, the invocation of heteronormative fantasies of the good life demonstrates Margot's investment in such fantasies as a route into a good life. The relationship begins with such hopefulness and the typical narrative arc of a romance propels the story forward, but the climax is never reached.

Questions about privilege are central to discussions about sexual agency, and therefore it is necessary to consider the ways in which Margot's affective life is shaped by her privileged position as a middle-class white woman. While I have explored the ways in which she is disempowered, particularly in comparison to Robert – for example, her gender, strength and age – it is important to consider the numerous ways in which she is privileged. Significantly, Margot is white, which gives her an ability to participate in some aspects of postfeminism that are foreclosed to women of colour. For example, to return to the point made by Dubrofsky and Levina, it is *white* women who gain social value by inviting and

---

<sup>152</sup> Ward, p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Roupenian, 'Cat Person'.

maintaining male desire – women of colour, in contrast, are seen as ‘always already inviting the gaze’.<sup>154</sup> Dubrofsky and Levina also point out that ‘Cat Person’ centres ‘the enduring violability of white femininity’ and that Margot’s whiteness is crucial to sympathetic readings of the story.<sup>155</sup> Margot’s whiteness confers a certain innocence which women of colour do not benefit from. Kendra Marston argues that the use of melancholia in postfeminist cinema distances the white feminine protagonists from white patriarchal structures, which enables them to position their race privilege as a ‘disabling sickness of the contemporary political and cultural moment’.<sup>156</sup> This both minimises the white woman’s complicity in (and the benefits she receives from) certain power structures, but also allows her to be positioned as one who is dissatisfied with the status quo in a way that feels almost ethical or progressive, which conceals the ways in which she contributes to upholding the status quo. Marston’s conception of postfeminist whiteness shares similarities with Seresin’s conception of heteropessimism, in that both involve performative dissatisfaction with structures in a way that absolves an individual of responsibility, but ultimately perpetuates the systems that the individual is so dissatisfied with. Yet this is not quite what Margot is doing in ‘Cat Person’. Margot’s emotional detachment is a coping mechanism, a way to regain control of a situation. While heteropessimism and white melancholia might be more readily associated with what Roiphe and others have called ‘victim feminism’, my argument is that Margot’s (un)feeling response emerges from a legacy passed down

---

<sup>154</sup> Dubrofsky and Levina, p. 413.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>156</sup> Marston, p. 4.

by confidence feminism, which insists that in order to be a valuable woman, Margot must show that she is unaffected by the things that happen to her.

What marks heterosexual fatigue as different from heteropessimism and white melancholia, then, is that it is not passive acquiescence or ‘giving in’ to victimhood; it is what happens when one is worn out and has nothing left to put into the fight. However, what all three feelings share is that they do not change anything. While heteropessimism is primarily performative, heterosexual fatigue works slightly differently. It doesn’t reinscribe the toxic logic of straight culture as heteropessimism does, and in fact, it doesn’t *do* much at all. It is a static feeling, one that results from the exhaustion of being pulled in multiple directions and having one’s experiences and fears of sexism and sexual assault denied or minimised. This is what makes Margot’s feelings ‘ugly’: like the feelings Ngai theorises, heterosexual fatigue is not a feeling that lends itself to political action, but it can help us to identify ‘ambivalent situations of suspended agency’.<sup>157</sup> By elucidating the politics of feeling at work in this kind of situation – one in which a woman’s agency becomes blocked or is revealed to be hollow – we can reckon with the affective rules and regulations that shape the negotiations of heterosexual relationships, and that in itself might point the way towards change.

Angel advocates for an ‘acceptance of vulnerability’ in the realm of sex, an acceptance of ‘all our capacity for injury, the shared softness of us all’.<sup>158</sup> Rather than the ‘happy face’ of consent, in which everyone – especially women – should be able to proclaim what they want and when they want it, Angel suggests that we

---

<sup>157</sup> Ngai, p. 1.

<sup>158</sup> Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, p. 109.

should 'give up the illusion that any of us have real, or total, power when it comes to pleasure and sex'.<sup>159</sup> This is difficult to do in a culture that insists that we all perform a confident, empowered (hetero)sexuality. 'Cat Person' doesn't offer an answer to the problems and contradictions of straight culture, but rather highlights the ways in which heteropatriarchal norms and value systems wear us out and make it harder to enact change.

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **'Stuckness' in 'Los Angeles' by Emma Cline and 'Would Like to Meet' by May-Lan Tan**

The protagonists of 'Los Angeles' by Emma Cline and 'Would Like to Meet' by May-Lan Tan are stuck. Their lives are marked by precarity and instability – both work in low-paid retail jobs, and both rent rooms in shared houses – yet they aspire to more. Alice, the white American protagonist of 'Los Angeles' moves to the eponymous city to pursue a career as an actor. The protagonist of 'Would Like to Meet' – Vivien – is a London-based art school graduate of Chinese heritage who longs to become a 'real' artist. Both characters make frustratingly slow progress towards their career goals, and both make decisions that could put themselves in danger. After discovering that her younger colleague sold her underwear to a customer, Alice begins to sell her own used underwear to strangers. Vivien responds to a mysterious advert in a magazine – from a couple seeking 'CONSCIOUS ... FEMALE FOR SOMETHING REAL'<sup>160</sup> – shortly after she is robbed at knifepoint whilst closing the shop in which she works.

The satisfying futures that Alice and Vivien anticipate are fantasies of the 'good life'. Their investment in postfeminist ways of living appear to bring them closer to the rewards they desire – success, fulfilment, and increased self-worth – but in fact, postfeminism's emphasis on individual agency and self-responsibility

---

<sup>160</sup> May-Lan Tan, *Things to Make and Break* (London: CB Editions, 2014), p. 198.

obscures the barriers that they face in pursuit of their goals. Thus, the rewards Alice and Vivien expect in exchange for certain ways of being shift even further out of reach. There is a cruel irony at play here, in the idea that by moving toward an object of desire, it could both *appear* to be moving closer yet at the same time, be moving away. Indeed, irony seems to play a role in the organising affect of both 'Los Angeles' and 'Would Like to Meet' – what we might think of as their literary 'tone'. Reading for tone acknowledges that it, as Ngai argues, operates as 'unfelt but perceived feeling'.<sup>161</sup> For Ngai, there is a 'crucial similarity' between a literary text's tone, which is 'reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story' and 'the slippery zone between real and fake feelings'.<sup>162</sup> This 'slippery zone' evokes the contradictions, or the 'doubleness' of postfeminism.<sup>163</sup> Irony is not just a feature of the stories, but indicative of the overall tone of postfeminist culture. Indeed, according to Gill, irony plays a crucial role in the postfeminist sensibility, and is often used to express 'knowingness' and to 'establish a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs'.<sup>164</sup> Irony, then, is to do with blurred and multiple meanings, in which what is actually 'meant' remains unclear. In both stories, we can see the gap between how Alice and Vivien frame events for others, and how they experience them. For example, Vivien makes a joke to her dates,

---

<sup>161</sup> Ngai, p. 28.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>163</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Enchanted (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony and the New Romantic Comedy', in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer: 67-79 (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 70.

<sup>164</sup> Gill, 'Elements of a sensibility', p. 159.

Amber and Jack, about how she'd 'hired a kid as [her] life coach'<sup>165</sup> – even though, at the time, she was uncomfortable and 'cast around for [the child's] mother to come and shut her down'.<sup>166</sup> The entanglement of contradictory feeling is related to the uncertainty of irony: postfeminist culture demands certain feeling performances of its subjects, which means that it is never clear what is real and what is performed.

Similarly, in 'Los Angeles', sunshine, good weather and light are set up as an ironic sort of pathetic fallacy from the first paragraph when we are told that there is 'no such thing as unending sunshine'.<sup>167</sup> The bright weather operates as an extended metaphor for Alice's optimistic faith in the postfeminist promises of success. The golden sunshine and the bright lights and glamour of the film industry suggest opportunity and possibility, yet the world of screens and celebrities also implies a degree of performance, and a blurred line between performance and reality. Throughout the story, Alice is concerned with how she appears – 'happy with the picture she made' – and takes care to conceal her negative feelings.<sup>168</sup> Yet the requirement to express positivity becomes oppressive and inescapable: at the climax of the story when Alice fears she might be kidnapped by a stranger, she cannot believe it would happen '[i]n the midst of all this unyielding sunshine'.<sup>169</sup> Alice believes that her performance of the 'right' kinds of feeling should protect her, but it does not.

The postfeminist incitement to achieve spectacular success is frequently

---

<sup>165</sup> Tan, p. 202.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>167</sup> Emma Cline, *Daddy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2020), p. 31.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

described in terms of light: women are required to ‘shine’, ‘glow’ or ‘sparkle’.<sup>170</sup> McRobbie builds on Gilles Deleuze’s theory of luminosity to assess the ways in which young women in the United Kingdom are subject to increased visibility.<sup>171</sup> Deleuze wrote that visibilities are ‘forms of luminosity, which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer’.<sup>172</sup> For McRobbie, postfeminism functions as a space of luminosity, a ‘moving spotlight’, which ‘softens, dramatises and disguises the regulative dynamics’ of neoliberal society.<sup>173</sup> Girls and young women have appeared ubiquitously in Western media since around the 1990s, yet scant attention is paid to the ways in which increased visibility of girls translates into regulation, control and pressure, particularly in regard to girls who fall outside the boundaries of conventional girlhood.<sup>174</sup> Though postfeminism is framed as universally empowering, postfeminist culture is dominated by a specific type of woman: cisgendered, western, white, young, able-bodied, conventionally attractive and heterosexual. As critic Rebecca Liu points out, though the main characters of television shows such as *Girls*<sup>175</sup> and *Fleabag*<sup>176</sup> may be ‘unlikeable’, which is a deviation from the typically

---

<sup>170</sup> Mary-Celeste Kearney, ‘Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-girl Power Media,’ *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 29.2 (2015): 263-273.

<sup>171</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 54-60.

<sup>172</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated by Séan Hand (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 53.

<sup>173</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 54.

<sup>174</sup> Projanksy, *Spectacular Girls*, p. 2.

<sup>175</sup> *Girls*, created by Lena Dunham (HBO, 2012-2017) <  
<https://www.nowtv.com/watch/girls/iYEQZ2uDbPiuTZ1ux7sebq>> [Accessed: 2 March 2023]

<sup>176</sup> *Fleabag*, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Two Brothers Pictures; BBC Three; Amazon Studios, 2016-2019) <  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p070npjv/fleabag>> [Accessed: 20 November 2022]

fun and positive postfeminist subject, these women are still overwhelmingly privileged.<sup>177</sup> Their ability to be cruel and unlikeable is often positioned as a good thing for all women, but Liu argues that this is not the case: 'For every celebration of a rich white woman as carelessly destructive with her life as her privileged male counterparts, we should ask what it is that gives her the ability to be so brazen and who is side-lined as collateral'.<sup>178</sup> Under the softening light of postfeminism, the unequal dynamics that shape society are concealed, leaving many women in the shadows, striving for their place in the light. This is characteristic of neoliberalism's intensified individuation: women are seen as solely individual subjects; thus success (or lack thereof) is cast as a personal failure.

Light is used pervasively as a metaphor for positive affect: it is often associated with discovery, knowledge, and progress – for example, the word 'enlightenment'. Things that shine or sparkle – shooting stars, phosphorescence, diamonds – are often admired and pronounced special or extraordinary, yet their shine is often transient. This is telling when we consider how light recurs throughout postfeminist and neoliberal discourse as an incitement for women to achieve more to be worthy. Light represents something fleeting, yet the requirement placed on women to stand out – to be extraordinary – is relentless. This extraordinariness is, of course, textured by masculinity. That is, women must succeed on the same terms as men, in patriarchal systems. Light is used figuratively to draw attention to the allure of extraordinariness in 'Would Like to Meet'. Before

---

<sup>177</sup> Rebecca Liu, 'The Making of a Millennial Woman,' *Another Gaze*, 12 June 2019, <[www.anothergaze.com/making-millennial-woman-feminist-capitalist-fleabag-girls-sally-rooney-lena-dunham-unlikeable-female-character-relatable](http://www.anothergaze.com/making-millennial-woman-feminist-capitalist-fleabag-girls-sally-rooney-lena-dunham-unlikeable-female-character-relatable)> [Accessed 29 June 2022].

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

she went to art school, Vivien felt like she was ‘carrying a kind of light inside me all the time. My first year of art school, the light went out. Almost overnight, I became deeply ordinary’.<sup>179</sup> Light represents Vivien’s anticipation of a good life fantasy in which her individual brilliance would confer up on her certain rewards. Where light is often seen as weightless and bright, conjuring feelings of happiness and positivity, here the light has been lost, and so it takes on a melancholic tone and gestures to something distant or ever-so-slightly out of reach. Indeed, there is a slight, yet pervasive, sense of loss that undercuts both stories, which conveys the difficulty of detaching from the promises of postfeminism. One of the objects for sale in the shop Vivien works in is a Japanese doll that traditionally represents a lost baby. Vivien thinks: ‘I thought there could be different dolls standing in for the different things that have been lost,’ which implies that she is already in the difficult process of detachment.<sup>180</sup> McRobbie explores the idea of ‘feminism as loss’, arguing that it is not a ‘nostalgia for a sanctified past, and for a golden age of second wave feminism’, but rather a ‘feminism-that-never-was’ that women have had to disavow in order to reap the benefits offered by the postfeminist sexual contract.<sup>181</sup> In other words, though they must accept the empty rhetoric of postfeminist ‘feminism’, the loss of feminist activism as a hopeful direction is painful, though women are unable to articulate this pain.

Related to career brilliance, financial success and spending power are crucial ways in which the postfeminist woman can accrue value. We can see how this

---

<sup>179</sup> Tan, p. 197.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 94.

works in the television show *Sex and the City*.<sup>182</sup> The self-made wealth of the four main characters not only communicates their status as independent, empowered, and successful women, it also provides them with the means to buy things. They are cheerful consumers: each purchase provides an opportunity to improve and shape their identities, a vision of wealth ready to be converted into personal value. But crucially, they choose to do this for themselves: '[T]he fearful terrain of male approval fades away, and is replaced instead with a new horizon of *self-imposed* feminine cultural norms'.<sup>183</sup> The friends' economic independence also highlights their supposed freedom from male authority. This establishes them as empowered postfeminist women, who 'have it all': the accrual and display of independent wealth is 'a primary measure' of their worth.<sup>184</sup> Thinking of the characters of *Sex and the City* in this way registers how the figure of the self-reliant postfeminist woman is bound up with money. In comparison, Alice and Vivien have less money and therefore less freedom to construct their identities. Their behaviour is strictly policed: they must conform to the requirements of their jobs. Alice is required to act 'as shorthand for the brand' on the shop floor by wearing only the brand's clothes and by being on display as an attractive young woman: 'It was only the girls that management wanted out front'.<sup>185</sup> Although she initially feels 'stirred' by the clothes she received for free, they were chosen by her manager and all too small; she later considers them 'junk' and they 'cut into her crotch' but still, she must

---

<sup>182</sup> *Sex and the City*, created by Darren Star (HBO, 1998-2004) <  
<https://www.nowtv.com/gb/watch/home/asset/sex-and-the-city/iYEQZ2uDbPiuV4Vu4KeDPf?DCMP=WA>> [Accessed: 6 March 2023].

<sup>183</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 63, emphasis mine.

<sup>184</sup> Kearney, p. 265.

<sup>185</sup> Cline, p. 33.

wear them, which highlights the physical discomfort of her lack of autonomy.<sup>186</sup> She is also only permitted to work after having her photograph approved by ‘corporate’, which further highlights the ways in which Alice’s life subject to patriarchal power – a jarring contrast with the rhetoric of postfeminist empowerment – as well as calling attention to how Alice’s physical appearance is seen as her most valuable asset.

Frequently throughout ‘Los Angeles’, women’s appearances are associated with money, as a kind of commodity or a kind of labour. Alice hopes to become an actress because it ‘was one of the traditional possibilities for a pretty girl, everyone urging the pretty girl not to waste her prettiness, to put it to good use. As if prettiness was a natural resource, a responsibility you had to see all the way through’.<sup>187</sup> The word ‘resource’ has connotations of monetary value and thus further implies Alice’s prettiness is something commodifiable. The word ‘responsibility’ suggests moral weight, a requirement to behave correctly towards something. Alice’s prettiness is both her own and not her own. She is responsible for it – for maintaining it – yet at the same time, she must maintain it within specific parameters. This textualises the ‘double entanglement’<sup>188</sup> of postfeminism: Alice’s beauty is situated as a source of power, the emphasis shifted away from the way her appearance is policed, and onto what she is *able* to do with it, and the opportunities that are available to her. Alice is encouraged to seek out a reassuringly feminine career, something that will make the most of her beauty. The fact that there might be money to be made from her looks is more important than

---

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p. 32-33.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p. 36-37.

<sup>188</sup> McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, p. 12.

whether Alice wants to pursue a career in acting: she pursues it primarily ‘because other people told her she should’.<sup>189</sup>

Alice and Vivien remain firmly attached to the possibility that they will become upwardly mobile; yet wealth disparity and economic precariousness are themes threaded throughout both stories. Walking through the neighbourhoods of Los Angeles, Alice sees ‘cheapo apartment buildings’ side-by-side with the ‘nicer homes’ with ‘lush backyards’, each one ‘like a primer on being human, on what choices you might make. As if life might follow the course of your wishes’.<sup>190</sup> Alice is surrounded by evidence that the promised social mobility is not available to everyone, yet she engages the ‘vivid imaginaries’<sup>191</sup> people construct about how their lives might unfold, the fantasies of the good life they remain attached to, in order to imbue life with hope and meaning. Similarly, Vivien is trapped in her employment: ‘[T]here’s nothing else for me around here, and I shouldn’t have to commute for the kind of money I make’.<sup>192</sup> The promises of freedom, autonomy and independence are situated within the characters’ hopes for future success and are at odds with their day-to-day lives. In the context of neoliberalism, such low-paid workers are invisible – unless they transcend class and inequality to rise to extraordinary success. While their wealthier customers are free to shop and spend, the day ‘just another asset’ to them, Alice and Vivien are required to clock in and

---

<sup>189</sup> Cline, p. 36.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>191</sup> Catherine McDermott, ‘Genres of Impasse: Postfeminism as a relation of cruel optimism in *Girls*,’ in *Reading Lena Dunham’s Girls: Feminism, postfeminism, authenticity and gendered performance in contemporary television*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan (London: Palgrave, 2017): 45-61, (p. 46).

<sup>192</sup> Tan, p. 197.

out, their days strictly regulated.<sup>193</sup> The fiscal connotations of the word ‘asset’ highlights the fact that these freedoms – money, temporal, expression – are all bound up together.

Alice and Vivien’s slow-growing frustration is indicative of what Berlant terms ‘the impasse’. That is, a holding space in which ‘one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*’.<sup>194</sup> Alice thinks about ‘[t]he sad fact of this city: the thousands of actresses with their thousands of efficiency apartments and teeth-whitening strips, the energy generated by thousands of treadmill hours and beach runs, energy dissipating into nothingness’.<sup>195</sup> The uncomfortably cramped spaces, pointless moving about and never reaching a destination conjure a visual representation of the impasse. Vivien muses that she ‘could probably get a better job, in an office or something, if I took out a few of my piercings and covered my chest piece’; but that would represent a detachment from her dream of becoming a successful artist, which she is reluctant to give up: ‘This is all I have left of that part of me’.<sup>196</sup> Changing her appearance would make Vivien ordinary and lose her association with the world of art, a space of luminosity to which she is still clinging. Similarly, Alice remains wedded to the luminous space of *becoming* an actress: in other words, she remains attached to the possibility that the rewards promised by postfeminism are just around the corner. Giving up on her dream would foreclose that possibility. Berlant argues that it is ‘awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working’.<sup>197</sup> Letting go of a fantasy of the good life in

---

<sup>193</sup> Cline, p. 39.

<sup>194</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.

<sup>195</sup> Cline, p. 36.

<sup>196</sup> Tan, p. 197.

<sup>197</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 263.

which one has invested means admitting delusion: it is embarrassing, and it is destabilising. This helps us to understand why Alice and Vivien remain stuck, unable to fully relinquish the glow that 'becoming' gives them: remaining close to the fantasy of the good life creates the illusion that it will – or at least, might – soon be reached. When Alice's mother tells Alice that she doesn't want to pay for her acting classes anymore, Alice panics: 'How to explain – if Alice wasn't taking a class, if she wasn't otherwise engaged, that meant her terrible job, her terrible apartment, suddenly carried more weight, maybe started to matter'.<sup>198</sup> Alice's attachment to the postfeminist promise of personal and professional fulfilment might cause her great unhappiness, but it is better to hold onto its promises rather than detach – the thought of giving up entirely is too much to bear. Alice's employment at the clothing store is acceptable only as a steppingstone on the path to a better future. If the destination is taken away, she is resigned to the ordinary, to stagnation. Striving towards *something* is more reassuring than standing still and giving up completely.

As an Asian woman and a low-waged worker, Vivien is not the privileged subject of postfeminism. However, the idealisation of certain subjects within postfeminist culture does not exclude others from taking part: women with less privilege are encouraged to engage as though they have the same opportunities to achieve postfeminist success as their more privileged counterparts. Jess Butler describes this as a 'double-edged sword': all women are able to participate in the deployment of postfeminism and 'enjoy its rewards' in exchange for silence on any inequality

---

<sup>198</sup> Cline, p. 42.

and discrimination they experience.<sup>199</sup> This is another paradox of postfeminism: women who experience discrimination – women of colour, women living in poverty, disabled women – are all encouraged to assist with the consolidation of the very hierarchies that continue to oppress them on the pretext that such hierarchies no longer exist. For women of colour, denying that their ability to access the same rewards and opportunities as white women is to do with race, and by focusing on narratives of individual triumph over collective struggle, emphasis is shifted away from widespread racial inequality. When greater attention and visibility is given to the few ‘brilliant’ and ‘hard-working’ individuals who do succeed on the same terms as white women, the conditions that cause other women to become stuck are made invisible.

To think about the experience of being simultaneously absorbed into and side-lined by postfeminist culture, I turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on ‘minor literature’. They contend that feelings of stuckness are required for its creation, which they define as the writing ‘which a minority constructs within a major language’.<sup>200</sup> In contrast to major literatures’ focus on ‘individual concerns’, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the ‘cramped space’ of minor literature ‘forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics ... The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it’.<sup>201</sup> There are two things to pick up on here: firstly, the idea of minor literature as a ‘cramped space’ evokes the

---

<sup>199</sup> Jess Butler, ‘For white girls only?: Postfeminism and the politics of inclusion,’ *Feminist Formations*, 25.1 (2013): 35-58, (p. 50).

<sup>200</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>201</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, p. 17.

confines of the short story, which has often been considered a minor literary form in the West and the global North, particularly in comparison to the ‘major’ form of the novel. Secondly, there is a suggestion of doubleness with the idea of one story vibrating inside another. The idea of ‘vibrating’ – an often pointless or wasteful moving back and forth – recalls Berlant’s concept of impasse. The word ‘impasse’ is also used by Deleuze and Guattari, as they suggest that impasse (in the sense of a deadlock or a place in which no progress is possible) creates the conditions required for minor literature, or ‘the impossibility of not writing’.<sup>202</sup>

The type of feelings Ngai explores in her book *Ugly Feelings* – ‘minor and generally unprestigious feelings’ – are feelings that we might find in minor literature.<sup>203</sup> Ngai argues that ugly feelings diagnose situations of obstructed agency, such as the ‘cramped space’ or impasse described by Deleuze and Guattari. Identifying ugly feelings in a literary text allows us to draw out the ways in which a character’s agency is blocked in the narrative, or at least, how a character understands their own agency to be blocked. Building on Ngai’s work, Cathy Park Hong argues that the widespread denial and minimization of racial discrimination results in what she calls ‘minor feelings’, feelings that are ‘negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one’s perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed’.<sup>204</sup> Like ugly feelings, minor feelings are produced by deep inequality and do not lend themselves easily to political change, nor to celebratory narratives of triumph. Minor feelings ‘are not generated from major change but from lack of

---

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>203</sup> Ngai, p. 17

<sup>204</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings*, (London: Profile Books, 2020), p. 55.

change: in particular, structural racial and economic change'.<sup>205</sup> Minor feelings then, are feelings of stuckness. They emerge through being stuck in a set of unchanging social circumstances – crucially, circumstances that are denied by wider society.

The gulf between Vivien and her white contemporaries is thrown into sharp focus during her date with Jack and Amber, who both read as white. Both Jack and Amber are described as looking like works of art created by European men (Amber like a Modigliani painting; Jack like an Egon Schiele) which associates them with the whiteness of the European art industry, and thus suggests they have a level of association with the industry that Vivien could never achieve. Jack and Amber also both have better jobs than Vivien, within the art world that she strives to be part of. Amber works as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Jack works as a font designer. If we compare the glamour and success of Jack and Amber's professional lives to Vivien's, in which she works in a gift shop and 'sold a few drawings on Etsy', Vivien's life seems lacklustre and somewhat disappointing in comparison.<sup>206</sup> The story does not explicitly suggest that Vivien's race or gender have anything to do with the fact that she has not achieved success. In fact, it is precisely the fact that only passing reference is made to Vivien's Chinese heritage that suggests it might be a point of blocked agency, an occasion for minor feelings. As Hong points out, minor feelings are untelegenic – they are not easily communicable or intelligible. The flat, lingering feelings of stuckness work as a kind of affective pressure point: they invite us to recognise the ways in which

---

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>206</sup> Tan, p. 196.

Vivien's life fails to match up to the promises she has been made.

Asian people living in the West and global North (and particularly in the US), are often stereotyped as the 'model minority', as Sapna Cheryan and Galen Bodenhausen explain – meaning all Asian people are framed as a uniformly hard-working and non-disruptive group, who are therefore accepted into society because of these presumed traits.<sup>207</sup> This situates them as 'different' from other immigrants – particularly those from Black and Latin communities, who are often stereotyped as lazy and disruptive, and must work harder to be accepted. This myth is a double-edged sword: at once, Asian people are supposedly accepted into society, yet at the same time their ability to speak becomes obstructed. As Vietnamese novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen puts it: 'How could we have anything valid to feel or say about race when we, as a model minority, were supposedly accepted by American society?'<sup>208</sup> This is a cruelly optimistic relation: by behaving in ways that enable them to reap the rewards of (supposed) social acceptance, Asian people are prevented from taking any action towards changing the inequalities that shape their lives. Both 'model' Asians and young women are viewed as the privileged subjects of social change. That is, the inequalities of the past are seen as issues that have been worked through; significance is instead placed on the ways in which Asian people and young women are accepted and empowered, which conceals the ways in which they are not. Instead, if they fail to achieve what is expected of them,

---

<sup>207</sup> Sapna Cheryan and Galen Bodenhausen, 'Model Minority', *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: 199-203 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>208</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen, 'Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the 'Model Minority' Stereotype.' *Time*, 25 June 2020. <[www.time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america](http://www.time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america)> [Accessed: 20 December 2022].

they are blamed for not being resilient enough. It is their own failure of spirit, or 'giving in' to negativity that is to blame, a narrative that obscures the socioeconomic inequalities that shape people's potential and compels them not to challenge the dominance of white heteropatriarchy. Where postfeminism encourages young women to be hypervisible and 'shine', young Asian women are subject to additional constraints. The stereotype of the 'model minority' means that while success is expected, it must be achieved quietly – lest it threaten white people and lead to racial abuse. Chao-Ju Chen points out that 'Western feminist discourses that grant visibility to Asian women constantly label them as different and categorize them according to a series of cultural stereotypes.'<sup>209</sup> In other words, racist behaviours continue, alongside the supposed rewards and freedoms that belonging to a model minority confers. Therefore, being culturally visible as a young Asian woman in a Western postfeminist culture carries a different weight to that of a young white woman. Where postfeminism optimistically frames all women as able to reap the same rewards, Asian women are stuck between contradictions that are even more difficult to reconcile.

Neoliberalism's narrow focus on the individual, particularly on narratives of transformative individual success, obscures the political conditions that the feelings of stuckness in 'Would Like to Meet' diagnose. From being orphaned at the age of seven and growing up as a girl of a 'minority' ethnicity in a Western culture, Vivien has worked hard and achieved an art degree. All the while, she has played down her negative experiences, anticipating certain rewards in return. Yet

---

<sup>209</sup> Chao-Ju Chen, 'The Difference that Differences Make: Asian Feminism and the Politics of Difference,' *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 13.3 (2007): 7-36, p. 10.

despite the promise that sexism is a thing of the past and girls have never had it so good, that racism is over, and that she will be valued on an individual level and face no structural barriers to opportunity, she has become disillusioned. She has begun to realise that the game she is playing is rigged and the fantasy she has been promised is not within reach.

In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed argues that the expectation and projection of happiness onto certain subjects masks the presence of other feelings. Drawing on Betty Friedan's figure of the 'happy housewife', Ahmed shows how the labour of the housewife is erased 'under the sign of happiness', describing the housewife's concealed negative feelings as an 'infection beneath her beaming smile'.<sup>210</sup> Similarly, the 'melancholic migrant' is bound by a 'happiness duty' not to speak about racism or negatively about colonial histories: 'The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness'.<sup>211</sup> The *expectation* of happiness from certain groups of people alienates them from happiness. The requirement to remain silent about negative experiences and to present oneself as happy creates uncomfortable and dysphoric feelings. One must hold two contradictory beliefs: that one is promised happiness, and the knowledge that one cannot be happy due to the political conditions obscured by the duty to be happy. Ahmed describes it as a 'shock' to realise 'that the world you are in is not available to you, that you do not belong in the world that you imagined would give

---

<sup>210</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 50.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

you happiness in return for being a certain way'.<sup>212</sup> Falling for a false promise is shameful and demoralising: it keeps a person in place. Happiness then, is something that deserves closer scrutiny. Rather than being something unquestionably 'good', it plays a part in a highly gendered and racialised system of affective regulation involving social and moral codes regarding who can or should feel what and when.

'Los Angeles' textualises the happiness duty through the character of Alice's drama teacher, Tony. He sends his students a motivational quote every morning. For example: 'REACH FOR THE MOON. IF YOU FALL SHORT, YOU MAY LAND ON A STAR!'<sup>213</sup> Here the story explicitly invokes the postfeminist demands of self-surveillance and psychological regulation. This is the language of positive thinking, reminiscent of the literary epiphany, which suggests there might be a truth about how Alice can harness her own mindset to achieve success waiting to be revealed. However, instead of feeling inspired or reaching a higher plane of insight, Alice's response is to try to remove herself from Tony's mailing list. She never succeeds, despite emailing the studio manager and even Tony himself. This evokes the oppressive nature of the happiness duty – it is impossible to escape. Any dissatisfaction Alice feels is smoothed over by the happiness projected onto her as a pretty, young, white woman chasing her dreams: her happiness is already socially scripted. The oppression of happiness recurs throughout the story. Alice is told to smile by John, her manager, during the interview for her low-paid job. Though employees of the company are not paid much, the women are still expected to

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>213</sup> Cline, p. 38.

smile and perform happiness to make their more privileged customers feel comfortable.

The imperatives to both happiness and extraordinariness are gendered. Women are held to higher account than men in both ways; they are regularly encouraged to think positively and outwardly perform happiness, and the implication of Ahmed's work is that this is more marked (in the West) for non-Western women and women of colour. The performance of happiness in this context functions as an act of submission, a relinquishing of power. To be angry or dissatisfied is the first step towards enacting change or finding solidarity with others; but happiness forecloses the possibility of both. Happiness implies satisfaction; that nothing needs to change. When describing comments made in the 2006 BBC television show *The Happiness Formula*, Ahmed suggests that happiness is imagined as 'what sticks people together', as a kind of 'social glue'.<sup>214</sup> This speaks to the way happiness is presented in 'Would Like to Meet' and 'Los Angeles' as something heavy, a kind of bind that sticks to the characters, weighing them down. In contrast to the dominant perception of happiness as something liberating, in a postfeminist context, happiness functions as 'glue' in the sense that it holds women in place, unable to achieve the social mobility and success that they are assured is readily available to them. The projection and expectation of happiness keeps people stuck; thus, it becomes clear why women are required to disavow political (particularly feminist) activism as something negative, and take up a new kind of femininity, a smiling and shiny one, in which change is not needed because it has always already occurred.

---

<sup>214</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 121.

When Vivien is threatened in the shop, she feels the impulse to project happiness, but resists: 'I knew what was required, an ultimate act of salesmanship, but I couldn't think of a single good thing I'd done or might do'.<sup>215</sup> Vivien feels she must 'sell' herself, and her life, as something positive and therefore valuable to prevent her attacker from disposing of it. She thinks about 'inventing a fiancé and a baby', which would invoke her worth in relation to others through her capacity to care and reflect traditional ideas about what makes a woman's life valuable and fulfilling.<sup>216</sup> As both McRobbie and Catherine Rottenberg have pointed out, the significance given to career success as a source of women's value is not intended to come at the expense of family.<sup>217</sup> Rather, women are encouraged to 'balance a spectacularly successful career with a satisfying home life'.<sup>218</sup> Indeed, McRobbie even goes so far as to suggest that 'cultural intelligibility as a young woman is now tilted towards the achievement of "affluent, middle-class maternity"'.<sup>219</sup> We can see how Vivien leaps from one fantasy of femininity to the other: if she can't prove her happiness, and therefore her value, through career success, perhaps she can do so through the invocation of the domestic. Yet ultimately, she gives up on trying to prove her worth and tells the attacker that she is 'a failure' and 'necessary to no one'.<sup>220</sup> This disclosure suggests that Vivien is already in the painful process of negotiating her way out of the impasse, of detaching herself from postfeminist fantasies of the good life. For Ahmed, happiness can 'involve a project of social

---

<sup>215</sup> Tan, p. 195.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*; Catherine Rottenberg, 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism', *Cultural Studies*, 28.3 (2014): 418-437.

<sup>218</sup> Rottenberg, p. 428.

<sup>219</sup> McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, p. 32.

<sup>220</sup> Tan, p. 195.

description: to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force'.<sup>221</sup> In the face of potential death, Vivien sees all too clearly. Contrary to our expectations, it is not her lies about family that save her; rather, her admission of feelings of worthlessness.

In the aftermath of the attack, Vivien thinks that 'if my life was a movie, this was when I'd decide to be artificially inseminated, open a cake-making business, or cycle across South America'.<sup>222</sup> Women are not expected to dwell on their hardships but instead must 'bounce back' from any setbacks. Gill and Orgad theorise 'the amazing bounceback-able woman' as one who defies adversity and precarity by springing back enthusiastically from any crisis or challenge she confronts. For Gill and Orgad, resilience is a quality demanded in the context of inequality and austerity 'as ways to navigate and survive pain, risk, difficulties and unhappiness'.<sup>223</sup> The articulation of negative feelings would show a person's individual failings – an inability to 'bounce back' – so resilience requires that 'negative experiences can – and must – be reframed in upbeat terms'.<sup>224</sup> Both Vivien and Alice use bounceback-ability as a tool to hide their anxieties and present themselves as fun, carefree and in control. Yet their negative feelings do not disappear. While they may be temporarily papered over with performances of positivity, it is precisely this obfuscation that contributes to the emergence of feelings of stuckness. Both characters articulate unhappy or uncomfortable experiences as reassuring, light-hearted stories for other people. As well as joking

---

<sup>221</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 132.

<sup>222</sup> Tan, p. 197.

<sup>223</sup> Gill and Orgad, 'The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman,' p. 490.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

about the hiring of a child as her life coach, Vivien tells Jack and Amber that her parents' death when she was seven was 'not as bad as it sounds'.<sup>225</sup> Discomfort is softened into something more palatable – a warm, indifferent nonchalance. Similarly, when Alice fears she may be kidnapped, she imagines recounting the experience to her friend: 'She and Oona were used to telling each other stories like this, to dramatizing incidents so that everything took on an ironic, comical tone, their lives a series of encounters that happened to them, but never really affected them'.<sup>226</sup> Humour and irony allow both characters to speak about negative experiences by emptying them of negativity. When Alice recounts having sex with her manager, she assesses that the experience 'had been bearable because it would become a story, something condensed and communicable. Even funny'.<sup>227</sup> Here the story engages implication and inference, suggesting that certain feelings or experiences are not expressible unless they are translated into something light, something at least adjacent to happiness, and therefore emptied of political potential.

Both Alice and Vivien make themselves vulnerable to potential violence in the hope of reifying certain good life fantasies to which they are attached. Vivien goes on a date with a couple she picked out of a magazine, and Alice meets up with strangers to sell them her underwear. Both actions are an attempt to break out of the impasse and reach the promised postfeminist fulfilment. After the knife-point attack, Vivien seems to abruptly detach from her artistic fantasies and instead, she

---

<sup>225</sup> Tan, p. 202.

<sup>226</sup> Cline, p. 50.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

seeks validation in the form of romantic relationships: a fantasy of belonging. In the lead-up to the date, Vivien's feelings are hardly described at all, and when Amber tells her they don't want to see her again, she simply wonders 'if I just hadn't been a good fit'.<sup>228</sup> Nevertheless, her disappointment is conveyed by the hopefulness she had begun to cultivate towards the prospect of a future with her new partners: 'I began to picture museum afternoons and picnics in the park'.<sup>229</sup> This conjures up images of sunshine and light and indeed, as Vivien walks home with these thoughts, it is still light outside, which evokes the space of luminous possibility that the relationship represented. Despite Vivien's downplaying of her difficult life experiences and playing up of her fun, upbeat side, her last-ditch attempt to embody the postfeminist ideal fails.

When Alice's faith in the potential of her acting career dwindles, she seeks validation by selling her underwear: by literally equating her sexual desirability with money. Although her motivation to sell her underwear is, at least in part, related to her financial circumstances, Alice also seems to be seeking power and control. When Alice's friend Oona first tells Alice that she has sold her underwear, 'Alice's stomach dropped with an odd mix of worry and jealousy, an uncertainty about who exactly had been tricked'.<sup>230</sup> This line is telling, and it captures the doubleness of postfeminism: Alice knows, on one hand, that selling one's underwear is potentially dangerous because she knows that male sexual violence is still a threat to women (despite the postfeminist insistence that it has mostly been dealt with), yet on the other, she is jealous of the way Oona plays with her

---

<sup>228</sup> Tan, p. 206.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>230</sup> Cline, p. 41.

sexual power, presenting herself as a paragon of idealised femininity by playing the role of the ‘sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman’ who is ‘forever “up for it”’.<sup>231</sup> Throughout ‘Los Angeles’, Alice is oppressed and objectified by men: this is her chance to tip the balance of power back in her favour and use men as they use her. At the end of the story, Alice finds herself stuck in a car with a dodgy customer, yet she wonders ‘[w]ho would feel bad for her? She had done this to herself’.<sup>232</sup> Self-responsibility is linked to the postfeminist emphasis on choice. Yet, in this instance, we are compelled to ask: is this Alice’s fault? Or to put it another way, does Alice have another choice? The narrative offers Alice no other way to exercise power, no other way to break out of the repetitive stasis of her life.

The neoliberal archetype of progress, resilience and self-invention leads us to expect, or at least hope, that both stories will culminate in positive change: that the characters will overcome the obstacles they face, take control of their lives, and shake off the gendered and racialised constraints under which they live. We want them to quit their terrible jobs and find fulfilment. Both characters do take steps towards change, but ultimately, they remain in the same space. Both stories work structurally, as well as at the level of imagery and affect, to suggest stuckness. ‘Los Angeles’ closes with Alice literally trapped inside a vehicle, and the circular structure of ‘Would Like to Meet’ ends with Vivien in the bath, reading a magazine, returned to the same place she was when she initially decided to respond to Jack and Amber’s advert. The little hope for change that each character had begun to create is crushed, which frustrates our hopes for a happy ending, and suggests that

---

<sup>231</sup> Gill, ‘Elements of a sensibility’, p. 151.

<sup>232</sup> Cline, p. 52.

both Alice and Vivien are trapped in unending cycles. Both narratives culminate not in a moment of advancement or overcoming, but instead what Catherine McDermott describes as ‘merely another cyclical lurch of the impasse’.<sup>233</sup>

Neither character exhibits heightened feelings we might expect from them when they are in situations with high emotional stakes. When Vivien is told that Jack and Amber don’t want to see her again, she doesn’t react; similarly, Alice shows little fear of the customers to whom she sells her underwear, until the very end of the story when she is in obvious danger. Although at times Alice shows signs of anxiety, events are quickly reframed in a way that makes her seem unaffected. These feelings are flat and level, with little fluctuation. For Berlant, flat affect or ‘underperformed emotion’ is produced when ‘events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering ... appear with an asterisk of uncertainty’.<sup>234</sup> Flat affect creates uncomfortable feelings of isolation for the reader: the scene is not immediately emotionally intelligible, and so we are shut out from a collective sense of affective belonging. Berlant suggests that underperformed emotion can be ‘a scene of appeal for help in shifting the way things are’.<sup>235</sup> Functioning in a similar way to Ngai’s ‘ugly feelings’, these flat feelings are not overtly directed towards action, but they are able to disclose situations marked by stuckness. The use of flat affect in these two stories creates a space of stillness amongst the perpetual motion of impasse that encourages us to attend to the implications of the affective deadlock. How and why have

---

<sup>233</sup> McDermott, ‘Genres of Impasse’, p. 55.

<sup>234</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin,’ *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28 (2015): 191–213, p. 193.

<sup>235</sup> Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, p. 195.

postfeminist subjects reached this place? Why are they so flat when the world around them is so full of optimism and light? Despite being a ‘recession from melodramatic norms’, flat affect functions in a similar way to melodrama, as a bid for attention.<sup>236</sup> In a world in which overperformed and exaggerated emotions are the norm, melodrama would not gain special attention, thus the turn to underperformed emotion to stand out. For example, when Vivien is robbed at knifepoint, we expect action that demonstrates her intense emotions. We might expect Vivien to cry or call the police, which would show us her fear and panic. Instead, she takes money from her own savings account to replace the stolen money and focuses on her desire for a ‘fish finger sandwich with ketchup’.<sup>237</sup> We do not get the catharsis we expect, and so the scene raises questions. It asks us to think about how the affective regulation of postfeminism obstructs the flow of feeling. Flat feelings are slow feelings: dawning realisations as opposed to instantaneous flashes of insight. They leak into the cracks between celebration and despair.

In addition to contextualising some of the ways in which deteriorating attachments to postfeminist ways of living are being conveyed in contemporary women’s short stories, this chapter has investigated how the blurred and contradictory meanings of postfeminism – its doubleness – work in ‘Would Like to Meet’ and ‘Los Angeles’ at the level of feeling. The constant, fretful motion of the impasse, with its performances of productivity and positivity, conceals the creeping sense of futility that characterises the affective experience of neoliberal

---

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>237</sup> Tan, p. 195.

femininity. As readers, we are made to feel the dissonance that characterises Alice and Vivien's experience, reeling between one false promise and the next. We might ask ourselves: how do we continue to bear these slow, frustrating feelings? We know the answer: we go forward, we keep moving. But the question remains: where?

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Strategic Girlfriendship and Un/Belonging in 'Head to Toe' by Abigail Ulman and 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' by Jenny Zhang**

In postfeminist cultures, friendships between girls are marked by contradiction. On the one hand, the drive for individual success and visibility means that girls and young women situate themselves in competition with each other, to be the one who stands out or 'shines' among their peers. For Alison Winch, the exclusive 'desire for hypervisibility' in postfeminist cultures means that the possibility of solidarity among girlfriends is 'foreclosed'.<sup>238</sup> Nevertheless, girlfriendships are essential relations through which girls come to feel that they 'belong' in popular girl culture – something which both affirms and regulates their femininity. This struggle between wanting to stand out and simultaneously wanting to fit in causes girls to form what Winch calls 'strategic' friendships: that is, relations built not on solidarity and care, but on a desire to utilise each other in the pursuit of normative feminine ideals.<sup>239</sup> In this chapter, I theorise the ambivalent affective register of postfeminist girlfriendships as 'un/belonging' – a network of interrelated feelings which comprise both deep attachment and stark alienation. I read two stories, 'Head to Toe' by Abigail Ulman<sup>240</sup> and 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' by Jenny

---

<sup>238</sup> Alison Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Abigail Ulman, *Hot Little Hands* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015).

Zhang<sup>241</sup> to explore the ways in which un/belonging both strengthens the bonds between friends and simultaneously drains those bonds of comfort, solidarity and emotional connection. How do we read the role of girlfriendship under postfeminism, when friends appear to be deeply attached – or stuck – together, yet starkly alienated from each other?

The characters in both stories are girls, a word which (as I noted in the introduction to this thesis), has taken on a flexible meaning in the contemporary moment, and is increasingly applied to adult women as well as feminine children. Indeed, I analysed the characters of Margot, Alice and Vivien through the lens of girlhood, despite the fact that all three characters live away from their familial home with varying degrees of independence (Margot from ‘Cat Person’ is away at college but is still based in the familial home; Alice from ‘Los Angeles’ still receives some financial support from her mother). However, despite having outlined age-related categories as shifting and complex under neoliberalism, it seems necessary to distinguish the girl characters that I analyse in this particular chapter as children. They are all under the legal care and guardianship of their parents, they live at home with their families, and they are ‘minors’ in the eyes of the law. This means that their agency is constrained in certain ways. Part of the aim of this chapter is to explore how their sense of self is complicated by striving for certain adult characteristics in order to increase their personal value.

Despite the similarities between ‘Head to Toe’ and ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’ – both stories centre on a pair of best friends, and both stories hinge on a disturbing sexual scene involving one or both friends – there are significant

---

<sup>241</sup> Jenny Zhang, *Sour Heart* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

differences. The friends in ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’ are Lucy and Francine, pre-teen girls of Chinese and Black-Hispanic heritage respectively, who live in Brooklyn, New York. Jenni and Elise, the friends in ‘Head to Toe’ are sixteen-year-old white, middle-class Australian girls who, bored with teenage life, return to a horse camp they attended as younger children. I attend to the ways in which the characters’ fantasies of belonging are shaped by age, race, and privilege in order to draw out the nuances of neoliberal affective regulation and the multiple and complex ways in which it alienates girlfriends from each other.

Lucy, the protagonist of ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’ is in fourth grade, approximately nine or ten years old – on the cusp of adolescence. Lucy is the daughter of Chinese immigrants to America and is just beginning to understand how she is perceived in both gendered and racialised ways. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, she is firmly attached to neoliberal and postfeminist ideals, such as individual responsibility and self-determination, which reformulate the effects of structural inequality as personal failings. We can see how Lucy strives for hypervisibility in the opening of ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’: ‘I lived, breathed, and exuded mind-boggling, head-spinning, neck-craning, heart-pounding, ravishing beauty. I was the best looking girl in fourth grade’.<sup>242</sup> The use of hyperbolic language in Lucy’s description of herself is employed for humorous effect and to emphasise her youth. Yet while this description plays into stereotypes of young people (particularly girls) as self-absorbed, Lucy’s extreme vanity can also be read as a by-product of growing up in a competitive and aggressively individualistic culture as an object of scrutiny. Though Lucy strives to stand out as

---

<sup>242</sup> Zhang, p. 41.

an individual, she can only do so within certain accepted boundaries: in this example, by being perceived as remarkably physically attractive. Her best friendship with Francine helps Lucy to learn and understand what is required of her to achieve acceptable (normative) femininity. For example, Francine teaches Lucy about swearing and sex, and convinces Lucy that the latter is essential if Lucy is to keep her boyfriend, Jason, who Lucy sees as a symbol of her desirability. This is done through an intimate kind of peer control that is framed as empowering, supportive and friendly – even when it becomes cruel, it is done within a sphere of ‘loving meanness,’ which makes acts of discipline and control feel like acts of love and care.<sup>243</sup>

In contrast to the energetic and direct first-person opening of ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’, the narrative mode of ‘Head to Toe’ is more lethargic, opening with a comparison of the two protagonists’ experiences with sex and drugs:

Elise and Jenni lost their virginity at twelve and thirteen, respectively. But they were nine months apart in age, so it happened for both of them at around the same time. In the three years since then, they had both hooked up with a bunch of guys ... They had also kissed girls; mostly just for fun, mostly each other, mostly when drunk, mostly to drive some guy at a party insane, sometimes because they were just bored. Both of them had tried MDMA, coke, speed and mushrooms. Jenni had also taken acid. Elise had once snorted keta, and she liked to smoke weed. But mostly they just drank.<sup>244</sup>

This opening, and the title of the story, suggests that the characters are constantly measuring themselves against each other, albeit in an intimate, friendly way. The forays into sex and drugs described in the above passage are framed as

---

<sup>243</sup> Winch, *Girlfriends*, p. 14

<sup>244</sup> Ulman, p. 168.

achievements, yet the typical feelings associated with competition, such as envy, are not present in the text. The dispassionate list establishes an affective tone of boredom and disinterest that continues throughout the story. Though Jenni and Elise are set up in competition with each other, the rivalry has become unexciting: they are 'bored and sluggish' and have the 'glazed, lethargic, agreeable disposition of jet lagged travellers.'<sup>245</sup> The objective third-person narration means we do not have access to Elise and Jenni's internal dialogue the way we do with Lucy; however, they don't seem to be jealous or frustrated with each other, as Lucy is with Francine. For example, when a boy Elise likes tells her she is more attractive than Jenni, she denies it: 'That's not true... We're both exactly the same level of hotness'.<sup>246</sup> Rather than taking the opportunity to stand out and 'shine' by herself, even in private, Elise is keen to emphasise her similarity to Jenni. When they go to a party, the friends swap their name necklaces 'just for fun',<sup>247</sup> which suggests their selves are interchangeable, and points to the pleasure of being absorbed into a community – even a community of only two.

The friends' desire to be the same as each other is built on what Kanai calls a 'utopia of sameness', a strategy she identifies being used by bloggers to foster 'relatability' and a sense of belonging in feminine digital culture.<sup>248</sup> Kanai's work draws on Berlant's 'intimate publics', which Berlant defines as a culture or an 'affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain

---

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, p. 172.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

<sup>248</sup> Akane Kanai, *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 4.

experience of belonging.’<sup>249</sup> Jenni and Elise’s best friendship helps to associate them with the wider intimate public of heteronormative postfeminist girlhood. Their friendship is a site of affective investment – both in each other and in themselves. It is a privileged status, which confers a certain value: we recognise the ‘best friend’; we understand that she is the object of another’s love, an idealised figure of love and care. In other words, it is not so much that Jenni and Elise *feel* belonging within their friendship, but rather that they *perform* belonging within their best friend relationship in order to show that they belong in the world as intelligible girls. We can see why they strive to fit in with postfeminist girl culture: it both affirms their femininity and promises them a space in which to belong. Nevertheless, this sense of belonging can only ever be temporary and uneven, because the perceived sameness among girls is a fantasy. When the fact of this fantasy is revealed, participants in an intimate public are, as Berlant puts it, ‘horrified by their mutual alienation.’<sup>250</sup> Yet this alienation is inexpressible if one wishes to remain part of the intimate public – that is, if one wants to cling onto the feeling of belonging the intimate public offers. This, in part, explains why Jenni and Elise remain so firmly attached to each other despite their inability to confide in each other about their feelings. Indeed, the similarity and familiarity the friends rely on seems to be a substitute for open communication and emotional connection. Despite their strange sluggishness, neither girl shares with her friend

---

<sup>249</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*, (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. viii.

<sup>250</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘The Female Complaint,’ *Social Text*, 19/20, Autumn (1988), 237-259, p. 238.

why she feels so fed up and ‘over’ everything, which leaves the reader equally in the dark.

I read the friendships in both stories as relations of cruel optimism. Both sets of friends are attached to the same broad fantasies of postfeminist empowerment and neoliberal girlhood; intersecting with this is a fantasy of feminine friendship which is not delivering on its promise. Each of the best friend pairs is at different stages in the life cycle of cruel optimism. Jenni and Elise’s attachments to these fantasies have frayed significantly, so they find themselves in the impasse, which Berlant describes as follows:

The impasse is a space of time lived without a narrative genre. Adaptation to it usually involves a gesture or undramatic action that points to and revises an unresolved situation. One takes a pass to avoid something or to get somewhere: it’s a formal figure of transit. But the impasse is a cul-de-sac... In a cul-de-sac one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the same space. An impasse is a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.<sup>251</sup>

Jenni and Elise’s optimism has been worn down, which helps us understand why the friends behave in such unenthusiastic ways, ignoring their other friends and showing no interest in shopping, which causes their parents to worry that they have ‘chronic fatigue or something’.<sup>252</sup> It also helps us to understand why they make the decision to return to a horse camp they attended as younger children – it is an attempt to make a change, to break out of the repetition of the impasse. They do not negotiate detachment from their fantasies because to do so would leave them unmoored from that which gave them a purpose and a sense of personal

---

<sup>251</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 199.

<sup>252</sup> Ulman, p. 182.

value. The passive, flat and frustrating feelings that occur throughout 'Head to Toe' are ugly feelings, which point to the girls' feelings of entrapment, and their sense that their agency is limited – even though their lives appear to be highly privileged. Jenni and Elise continue to present themselves as independent and self-reliant, despite their disillusionment with the promises of postfeminism, because to do so would be to admit to feelings of vulnerability and weakness – feelings that are strictly regulated under postfeminism – and which would position a girl as weak in the eyes of her best friend, her greatest competition.

The friends' inability to communicate is powerfully exemplified by a scene towards the end of the story, in which Elise has a graphic sexual encounter with a boy named Zach, which she describes to Jenni as 'pretty vanill',<sup>253</sup> meaning unexciting, conventional or boring sex. There is a stark contrast between this flippant description and the uncomfortable and detailed sex scene, in which Elise is choked and has a number of acts committed on her without her consent. As well as suggesting that there are crucial things the girls cannot communicate about, this scene highlights the conditions that women and girls must accept in order to be granted a modicum of agency in postfeminist cultures. Gill argues that girls and women are required to 'construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography.'<sup>254</sup> We can see the influence of pornographic tropes in the way Zach treats Elise and how he speaks to her – for example, 'Come for me, baby. Come all over that big dick,' 'I love watching those tits bounce,' and 'Fuck, your pussy's so fucking wet'.<sup>255</sup> While this

---

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, p. 226.

<sup>254</sup> Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture,' p. 258.

<sup>255</sup> Ulman, p. 221.

kind of sex talk is not necessarily inherently problematic,<sup>256</sup> when combined with the fact that Zach admits to pursuing certain acts (such as anal penetration) even though he knows Elise objects, and the fact that the objective third-person narration leaves us in the dark as to Elise's thoughts during the encounter, the possibility that she does not enjoy some (or all) of it is left open. Zach shows Elise a friendliness when they are not engaged in sexual activity, which implies that, during sex, both parties are performing roles enforced by heteropatriarchy – conditions that result in exhaustion or 'heterosexual fatigue' (which I discussed in chapter one). This scene also highlights how attachment to the postfeminist fantasy of sexual empowerment can turn friendship into an impasse. Elise is unable to discuss her experience with Jenni because to admit to her own discomfort and objectification would be shameful: it would undermine her presentation in the world as a free and empowered young woman. The girls cannot communicate about their dissatisfaction with postfeminist and neoliberal modes of living, even though the story suggests that they both feel the same way, because to do so would be to threaten the fantasies to which they are attached, fantasies which give their lives meaning, and from which they can derive feelings of personal value.

Though the friendships in 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' and 'Head to Toe' might fail to deliver on their promise of emotional closeness and understanding, they do protect the friends from becoming situated as the 'other'. Kanai argues that while the 'best friend' is one who strives alongside a girl to achieve the same (or similar) goals of femininity, the 'other', in contrast, is an

---

<sup>256</sup> For further discussion of the role of pornographic tropes in sexual fantasies, please see chapter one.

outsider – one who is perceived to be failing to achieve the goals of femininity, and thus becomes a figure for ridicule and disdain.<sup>257</sup> ‘Other’ girls play an important role in best friendships. Mutual disdain for and critique of another girl can strengthen the bonds of the best friends. As Winch points out, ‘belonging can be achieved by mocking and humiliating others’<sup>258</sup> – which suggests that belonging can be forged at someone else’s expense. In ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’, we see how the cruelty directed at Frangie, a child who has a difficult home life and has been taken in by Lucy’s mother, strengthens the bonds between Francine and Lucy. She is weak, alone and rejected in comparison to their strength, unity and belonging. Lucy and Francine’s treatment of Frangie reveals their aversion to vulnerability – an aversion produced by postfeminist and neoliberal affective cultures which prize mental strength and fortitude – and shows how resilience and self-reliance are situated as crucial characteristics which must be cultivated. Failure to overcome hardship is framed as an individual’s responsibility. Indeed, Frangie’s fragility is so essential to her personhood that it is present in her name – which sounds like an abbreviation of ‘frangible’ – a word which denotes something that is easy to break.<sup>259</sup> We see Frangie through Lucy’s eyes as ‘someone who made everything worse, someone who was so helpless that she sucked the energy and life out of the people who had to look after her.’<sup>260</sup> Lucy’s criticisms of Frangie point to her own anxieties around vulnerability and dependency: ‘no way was I going to

---

<sup>257</sup> Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, p. 100.

<sup>258</sup> Winch, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, p. 10-11.

<sup>259</sup> ‘frangible, adj.’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online] <<https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/74200?redirectedFrom=frangible#eid>> [Accessed: 21 March 2023]

<sup>260</sup> Zhang, p. 63.

be a Frangie, no way was I going to be a hangers-on.<sup>261</sup> Here, we can see what the stakes are for postfeminist girlfriends. It is crucial to remain attached to one's best friend – even though that attachment is frequently disappointing and does not deliver on its promises – or else one may end up reviled and alone.

Postfeminist girlhood is a culture predicated on a 'utopia of sameness', which draws its affective power from emphasising the ways in which all girls share certain qualities and interests. However, this also conceals the significant ways in which girls differ from each other. To acknowledge difference threatens the utopia, which means that girls' differences – certainly those differences that deviate from normative girlhood – become seen as shameful. For Lucy, concerns about difference can be broadly divided into two categories: differences relating to her family and race, and differences relating to her perceived failures of girlhood. Lucy struggles to connect with any of her family members. She is desperate for affection and approval but is unwilling to ask for it. Her mother is variously described as 'sweet', 'resourceful'<sup>262</sup> and someone who makes Lucy feel 'so alone that sometimes I couldn't recognise myself in mirrors or in pictures'.<sup>263</sup> Lucy's mother is often critical of Lucy for what she perceives to be her selfish, materialistic impulses, which highlights a divide between them. Lucy's parents were born in China whereas Lucy, having grown up in the United States of America, is surprised and confused that her self-interested desires are controversial. The social transformation promised by the American dream here forecloses understanding between mother and daughter. Similarly, Lucy idolises her father's work ethic,

---

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, p. 42

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

describing him as a ‘superhuman’<sup>264</sup> yet this pride is contrasted with the racist representations of Chinese food delivery workers that Lucy sees on television. She is at once proud and ashamed; she both belongs and does not.

As I noted earlier, the pervasive whiteness of postfeminist cultures does not exclude people of colour but allows (and even encourages) them to take part as individuals with an ostensibly equal opportunity to succeed, on the condition that they do not speak about the racism that they experience.<sup>265</sup> This creates complex and dysphoric feelings, described by Ahmed as that of the ‘affect alien’ – someone ‘unjustly interpellated’ or assumed to belong, who is ultimately left on the outside of the joke.<sup>266</sup> These dysphoric feelings also resonate with Hong’s conception of ‘minor feelings’, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Minor feelings occur through the enforcement of American optimism, which contradicts a person’s racialised reality, causing what Hong calls ‘a static of cognitive dissonance’.<sup>267</sup> These concepts share an affinity with the deep ambivalence of postfeminist friendship, in which one is expressly promised a certain kind of belonging and recognition, yet this promise coexists with an inability to speak about ongoing inequality or injustice. We see how Lucy is stuck awkwardly between competing ideas: her commitment to the neoliberal values of the country in which she lives means that her experiences of racism become reformulated as personal failures on the part of herself and her family, yet she cannot speak about these experiences without alienating herself further, and so these feelings stick and become a private

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

<sup>265</sup> Butler.

<sup>266</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 42.

<sup>267</sup> Hong, p. 56.

source of unbelonging and shame. Indeed, Hong points out that minor feelings are the opposite of the feelings created by archetypal immigrant narratives of survival, determination and overcoming the odds. In contrast to the neoliberal emphasis on progress and transformation, minor feelings emerge from stasis and a lack of change – in the face of the promise of change. Lucy is optimistic that things will turn out a certain way for her, yet she experiences dysphoria when her expectations of happiness do not align with reality. For example, Lucy’s enthusiastic opening in which she declares herself the ‘best looking girl in fourth grade’ is deflated after a classmate doesn’t remember her presence at a party: ‘[F]or all the lights and moves I had in me, for all that I naturally dazzled and sparkled, I still had to work harder to be noticed’.<sup>268</sup> Here we can see how the language of luminosity and ‘sparkle’ often applied to girls’ increased visibility points to the effort Lucy puts in to achieving visibility, and the disappointment she feels when those efforts do not pay off. We see how Lucy’s optimism in the American dream jars with the disappointment of her gendered and racialised experience.

Though Lucy experiences inequality, we also see how Lucy is unaware of her privilege in comparison to others. For example, Lucy has a family who love her and care for her, whereas both Francine and Frangie do not. Similarly, Lucy’s idealised beauty – her slim body shape and ‘straight, long black hair that never tangled’ are racialised features, especially when compared to Lucy’s observation that the other girls in her class have ‘tangly, messy hair, and sort of thick arms and legs’.<sup>269</sup> Lucy does not recognise her criticism of her classmates’ hair texture and body shapes as

---

<sup>268</sup> Zhang, p. 45.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

racist, yet it serves another example for the reader of the ways in which individualism flattens the possibility of solidarity between girls. When Francine (who is Black-Hispanic) is catcalled on the street by a construction worker – ‘Nice ass, mami’<sup>270</sup> – Lucy asks if they are talking to her, but they respond that they are talking to her friend. The use of the Hispanic slang term ‘mami’ and the comparison of Francine’s body with Lucy’s codes Francine’s as a sexualised, racialised and therefore adult body, whereas Lucy’s body remains childlike. This is a characteristic of anti-Black racism, that Black girls especially are denied their childhood and often perceived to be adult at a much younger age than other children.<sup>271</sup> Lucy is jealous of the attention Francine receives – despite the fact that Francine herself seems uncomfortable and the reader can see that this isn’t desirable attention. Yet Lucy is oblivious to Francine’s feelings. Lucy does not and cannot perceive this scene from any perspective other than a position of concern for her own personal value, which is tied to Francine: the person with whom she is in competition.

Lucy and Francine’s school holds a sex education assembly in which the students are told that they are ‘at risk’, a phrase which invokes crisis discourses around girls and girlhood, where privileged girls are coded with celebration as the ‘can-do’ girl, whereas working-class girls and girls of colour are treated with

---

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, p. 56.

<sup>271</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake and Thalia González, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood*, Center on Poverty and Inequality: Georgetown Law (2017), <<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>> [Accessed: 9 November 2022]

concern.<sup>272</sup> Afterwards, Lucy wonders, ‘what were we at risk for?’<sup>273</sup> This draws our attention to Lucy’s growing confusion and uncertainty about her position in the world. She is situated on the outside of panicked discourses about her age, race, socioeconomic background and gender. Lucy is not a participant in these debates but rather an *object* of scrutiny. We can see how the ‘at risk’ girl becomes a figure of concern, but also a figure of disdain, a failure in the making: one who is ‘cut off from the imagined majority of successful girls.’<sup>274</sup> This helps us to understand why Lucy is so keen to develop her identity as a ‘grown-up’ – one who is self-sufficient and knowledgeable – in order to ward off the assumption of failure that has already begun to stick to her. Lucy must prove herself as an individual in order to avoid belonging in the ‘wrong’ category. Ideas about individual self-responsibility mean that Lucy holds other people responsible for their own lives, feelings and behaviours, regardless of what has happened to them. For example, of Frangie, Lucy thinks, ‘her mother died (so what) and her father spent three months in a mental institution (who cared).’<sup>275</sup> Lucy deploys the same neoliberal thought patterns that make her feel that she does not belong in order to situate someone else as the one who does not belong. This captures the contradictory and cruelly optimistic nature of neoliberal modes of belonging. The only way to counteract the feelings of isolation and hopelessness produced by one’s own suffering under neoliberal value systems is to use this logic against another. While this can be used to create bonds of belonging with someone else, in opposition to the one who does

---

<sup>272</sup> Harris, pp. 13-36.

<sup>273</sup> Zhang, p. 55.

<sup>274</sup> Harris, p. 25.

<sup>275</sup> Zhang, p. 45.

not belong, this means remaining trapped within a cyclical harmful fantasy of the 'good life'.

The characters of 'Head to Toe' are white and do not experience anxiety about belonging in regard to race. While the bored, slightly uncomfortable narrative tone of the story conveys their growing disillusionment with the neoliberal and postfeminist tendencies of the culture they live in, this is also a tone of privilege. Recall Kendra Marston's work on postfeminist whiteness, which I discussed in Chapter One in relation to heteropessimism. Marston argues that white feminine protagonists in postfeminist cinema distance themselves from white patriarchal structures through performative dissatisfaction with those structures, which minimises their complicity in, and the benefits they receive from, racist power structures. Similarly, Liu's criticism of the 'unlikeable woman' trope helps us here, by showing how the celebration of the unlikeable woman's ability to be 'carelessly destructive' conceals knottier and more complex questions about how exactly she comes to be able to behave in such messy, careless and destructive ways, and who does not. In other words, the capacity to behave in particular destructive or dissatisfied ways outside of the typically accepted norm is a privilege granted to few women: it is a privilege that comes at the expense of other women who do not get portrayed as complex or 'interesting' in the same way. Jenni and Elise's passive and dysphoric feelings are thus not only possible because of their white privilege but sustain their white privilege. The narrative arc of the story sees the friends literally returned to the site of childhood innocence as they go back to the horse camp of their youth. This can be read as an attempt to detach from the social obligations of postfeminism, but this is a turn back to innocence – to a time of

blissful ignorance – rather than an attempt to change their dissatisfactory circumstances. As Robin Bernstein points out, to be innocent is not always merely obliviousness but an ‘active state of repelling knowledge.’<sup>276</sup> Jenni and Elise’s ignorance is highlighted as they wonder ‘why there weren’t more Iranian supermodels or movie stars, and thought it was sad but would hopefully happen soon.’<sup>277</sup> Indeed, this sentence effectively captures the ways in which the assumption of equality in a neoliberal society flattens out (and perpetuates ignorance of) inequalities: anyone has the ability to be a supermodel, so the barriers certain groups face in pursuit of such a goal are made invisible. Similarly, when the younger girls at the horse camp play a game of ‘secret swaps’ – in which participants swap anonymous comments about each other – an Indian girl, Indira, receives a comment that her house smells like curry. Jenni and Elise gloss over the blatant racism of this comment by instead discussing how delicious curry is. They do not recognise the racial slur, which is based on a history of cultural stereotyping and name-calling, but rather invest in a fantasy of postracial society as a kind of neoliberal ‘coping mechanism’<sup>278</sup> which enables them to disregard the comment and pretend racism does not exist.

Girlfriend regulation in both ‘Head to Toe’ and ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’ tends to focus on sex and the body. When Jenni and Elise discover the younger girls in the unhappy aftermath of ‘secret swaps’ they immediately step into

---

<sup>276</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>277</sup> Ulman, p. 228.

<sup>278</sup> Britt-Inger Keisu and Helene Brodin, ‘Postfeminism as Coping Strategy: Understandings of Gender and Intragroup Conflict among Swedish Welfare Workers’, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* (2022): 1-15.

an authoritative role, calling them ‘girls’ (therefore situating themselves as grown-ups – as women) and take on the role of mediators in an attempt to resolve the argument. They give advice whilst at the same time reassuring the girls that the comments are not true. For example, one girl, Dylan is criticised for having ‘too much pubes.’<sup>279</sup> Though Jenni and Elise reassure her this is not the case, they offer her tips on how to remove her pubic hair. Jenni and Elise are situated as the experts, the gatekeepers of the feminine ideal; they offer advice to the younger girls on subjects such as hair removal and how to safely send naked pictures to a boy online. This kind of advice regulates the girls’ bodies and behaviours, and helps them to acquire the ‘correct and normative feminine skill set’,<sup>280</sup> which will bring them success in postfeminist cultures. The emotional shift, from the younger girls being upset by the criticisms received anonymously during the game to the intimate friendliness of the older girls giving out personal advice, exemplifies what Winch calls the ‘gynaeopticon’, a ‘collaborative enterprise between women’ which enables ‘the mutual development of a hypervisible normativity.’<sup>281</sup> The presence of digital cultures is felt in the friendships in both stories. For example, Jenni and Elise take on a similar role to that of an Instagram influencer or a lifestyle vlogger – girls and young women who ‘present the self as an accessible “big sister.”’<sup>282</sup> Yet helping the younger girls is not – or at least, not only – an act of feminine care. It reaffirms Jenni and Elise’s success as postfeminist subjects who are able to offer

---

<sup>279</sup> Ulman, p. 206.

<sup>280</sup> Winch, *Girlfriends*, p. 91.

<sup>281</sup> Alison Winch, ‘Brand Intimacy, Female Friendships and Digital Surveillance Networks,’ *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 84 & 85 (2015): 228-245, (p. 233).

<sup>282</sup> Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, p. 11.

support and advice to others, and it also situates them as feminine experts. They know how to solve the younger girls' problems and answer their questions about sex. In the three younger girls, Jenni and Elise find admiring fans, or perhaps followers.

The feelings produced by the gynaeopticon are at once reassuring – the younger girls are glad of the advice, to be steered on the correct course – and also alienating, as we see Jenni and Elise criticise the girls behind their back, which deflates any sense of care or intimacy that the advice-giving produced. Recounting the incident later on, Jenni says of the girls, 'one of them was a crap dancer. And the other one reeked of curry. And this girl, Dylan, she had a super hairy vag.'<sup>283</sup> To belong in girlfriend culture is to accept some cruelty against you; however, meanness in this context also serves another purpose. Through discussing the girls' weaknesses and taking pleasure in the fact they are 'not eleven anymore'<sup>284</sup> and therefore comparably superior, Jenni and Elise cement the bonds of their own friendship. Their own feeling of belonging is heightened by situating the younger girls as other, as feminine failures, and themselves, comparatively, as the masters of upholding normative femininity.

In 'The Empty the Empty the Empty', we see girlfriend regulation unfold within the best friendship. Lucy and Francine are in competition, yet this rivalry is unspoken: to speak of it would be to undermine the affective power of the best friendship. When Lucy learns how to 'curse', she feels 'proud to finally know something before Francine did.'<sup>285</sup> However, Lucy has misunderstood the 'beeps'

---

<sup>283</sup> Ulman, p. 218.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

<sup>285</sup> Zhang, p. 49.

of censorship on the television shows she watches at home, and when Francine tells Lucy she's 'fucking crazy' and that 'beep' is not a curse word, Lucy is frustrated: 'I didn't get how Francine already knew how to curse and I was still imitating the sound that covered up curses.'<sup>286</sup> We can see that Lucy's anxieties around belonging and feminine normativity are tied to a desire to seem 'grown up' and knowledgeable about the adult world. Lucy feels inferior to Francine because Francine understands something that Lucy has not yet grasped – yet there is an irony at work here. As the story develops, it becomes clear that the 'grown up' things Francine has knowledge of are not as enviable as Lucy believes them to be. For example, when a friend asks Lucy and Francine who has 'done it' (meaning sex), Francine 'jokingly wiggled her hand' and Lucy 'smacked it back down.'<sup>287</sup> There is a disconnect between Lucy's perception that Francine is joking and the possibility that the story holds open: that Francine is telling the truth. Similarly, Lucy's jealousy that Francine's parents don't care about where she is and how she gets home tells the reader that Francine is being neglected and possibly abused, yet for Lucy, Francine's perceived freedom is simply another thing Francine has and Lucy does not. Lucy cannot understand Francine except in relation to herself, through the lens of competition. Francine is also unable to speak to Lucy – she never discloses what might be going on in her home life. We only piece together the fact that something is wrong from clues that Lucy fails to notice. This sets up girlfriendship as a responsibility – as something that should mediate the

---

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

patriarchal violence that Francine is subject to, through the enactment of support and care. The fact that Lucy does *not* notice signals a failure of femininity.

Lucy's alienation is total: she is unable to sympathise with and understand Francine, and she is also unable to communicate her own feelings to Francine. When Francine suggests that Lucy ought to have sex with her boyfriend, Jason, Lucy is unable to admit that she doesn't want to and that the thought 'made [her] with [she] knew how to drive a bus so I could ram it into Jason, ideally disabling his penis but leaving him alive.'<sup>288</sup> Although humour is deployed in this scene, the quote shows how Lucy cannot even imagine the possibility of sharing her feelings with Francine. The thought is so shameful, so impossible, that she would rather think about gravely injuring Jason. Francine encourages Lucy to develop her sexual identity and present herself as 'up for it', the 'active, desiring sexual subject' of postfeminism.<sup>289</sup> Gill points out that in cultures marked by a postfeminist sensibility, '[g]irls and women are interpellated as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships'<sup>290</sup> – however, Francine isn't only monitoring Lucy and Jason's relationship, she aggressively regulates Lucy's behaviour, writing to her in a note 'why haven't u done it yet' (meaning sex with Jason).<sup>291</sup> This corresponds with Winch's analysis of postfeminist friendship, in which cruelties, meanness and strict sexual regulation become 'glossed as friendship'.<sup>292</sup> Cruelty is not only directed at 'other' girls, but also permeates the bonds of best friendship.

---

<sup>288</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>289</sup> Gill, 'Postfeminist media culture,' p. 151.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Zhang, p. 66.

<sup>292</sup> Winch, p. 12.

Despite Lucy's envy of Francine's adult knowledge, Lucy is also critical of both Francine and Frangie for their attempts to present themselves as grown up. For example, Lucy describes how Frangie 'put on [Lucy's] mother's push-up bra and clothes and make up and asked [Lucy] to stuff socks in her underwear so that she could have a porn star's ass... She was like the world's most confusing-looking slut.'<sup>293</sup> When Francine comes to school with makeup on, Lucy tells her: 'You look very dumb.'<sup>294</sup> These criticisms represent a contradiction at the heart of 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' which mirrors the panicked discourse around the 'sexualisation' of girls.<sup>295</sup> On one hand, Lucy desperately wants to be seen as desirable and grown-up; yet at the same time, she is highly critical of her friends when they embody the self-sexualising postfeminist ideal. In this way, the incompatible and clashing discourses around girlhood always situate girls as affect aliens, regardless of whether they are perceived as sexual or not. The postfeminist double-standard – in which adult women are assumed to be empowered and desiring sexual agents yet are often girlified, while teenage girls and girl children are situated as not-yet-woman and are morally condemned for sexual behaviour – creates a complex picture of sex as something that can be both a source of power and something that sees a girl derided as a 'slut'. Jessica Ringrose argues that slut-shaming, a method girls use to discipline each other's behaviour in relation to sex and sexuality, 'appears to express a dynamic where jealousy gets sublimated into a socially acceptable form of social critique of girls' sexual expression'.<sup>296</sup> Jealousy is

---

<sup>293</sup> Zhang, pp. 64-5.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>295</sup> Renold and Ringrose.

<sup>296</sup> Jessica Ringrose, *Postfeminist Education?: Girls and the sexual politics of schooling* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 93.

a feeling of unbelonging, a feeling borne from competition and rivalry; yet also, as Ngai reminds us in her work on envy, it is an ‘affective response to a perceived inequality.’<sup>297</sup> Lucy’s envy underscores an inequality – and perhaps more aptly, a double-sided inequality, an obstruction – in postfeminist girl culture, in which the competition cultivated in her friendships makes her feel unequal and alienated, and blinds her to other inequalities between herself and her friends. For Ngai, envy in the public domain always seems ‘unjustified, frustrated and effete – regardless of whether the relation it points to is imaginary or not.’<sup>298</sup> Envy itself is a source of shame, a shame which becomes alleviated if it is projected onto another girl, who in turn becomes situated as a shameful. The ‘shame’ of slut-shaming is felt on both sides: it is something that is both produced by and produces shame around feminine sexuality. Girls are required to harness their sexuality but must do so within certain parameters. This becomes an impossible bind. Lucy cannot connect with Francine and Frangie across this divide, in which sexuality is something to be sought *and* something to repudiate and thus becomes tinged with melancholy and a sense of loss.

As I have shown throughout this thesis, heterosexuality and the prospect of fulfilment in heteronormative romantic relationships is a crucial element of the postfeminist fantasy of the good life. Although Winch has emphasised that postfeminist girlfriend culture ‘does not rely on the hope generated through a heterosexual “happy ever after”’,<sup>299</sup> Kanai points out that the emphasis on the special position of the girlfriend – and especially the best friend – is depicted as

---

<sup>297</sup> Ngai, p. 126.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>299</sup> Winch, *Girlfriends*, p. 4.

‘resolutely heterosexual.’<sup>300</sup> Both stories do depict the friends engaging in some sexualised activity with each other; however, in ‘Head to Toe’ Jenni and Elise kiss to enhance their heterosexual appeal – ‘to drive some guy at a party insane’<sup>301</sup> – and in ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’, Lucy and Francine’s exploration of each other’s vaginas is framed not in terms of desire, but childish curiosity. But even the playful intimacy suggested by these scenes is undercut by the imposition of heterosexuality: in the former scene, Jenni and Elise kiss for the benefit of boys; in the latter, Francine insists that Lucy ‘better wash it real good for Jason’,<sup>302</sup> suggesting that the purpose of this activity was to help mould Lucy into the heterosexual male fantasy. Lucy experiences a ‘horrible feeling of dread’ whenever she thinks about sex with Jason, yet she remains attached to the idea that heterosexual romance is important to strive for: ‘Surely there was someplace where it was safe, where you thought you were matched up with how others treated you... as far as I knew, the first step to getting there was to have a boy who loved you and only you.’<sup>303</sup> As Ahmed suggests, ideas of the good life are difficult to separate from the historic idealisation of heteronormativity.<sup>304</sup> Thus we can see why Lucy invests so heavily in the heterosexual fantasy and believes that it will offer her a solution to all her feelings of unbelonging. However, this fantasy takes a darker turn in the story’s final scene, as Francine’s regulation becomes abusive. She tries to force Lucy to have sex with Jason and when Lucy resists, she forces Frangie instead. Instead of intervening and protecting Frangie, Lucy retreats into

---

<sup>300</sup> Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, p. 97.

<sup>301</sup> Ulman, p. 168.

<sup>302</sup> Zhang, p. 58.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>304</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 90.

herself and feels 'a deep disappointment' that when she looked at Frangie, she could 'only picture myself.'<sup>305</sup> Lucy remains self-interested, still governed by the fear that she could be Frangie, which makes her unable to intervene and protect Frangie from harm. In this scene, Francine embodies power: she is the one in charge, calling the shots. Yet her power and her 'grown-up' characteristics are no longer situated as desirable and inherently positive. Instead, it becomes something to fear, something aggressive that makes the scene unintelligible to Lucy.

In contrast, at the end of 'Head to Toe', Jenni and Elise phone Elise's mother to collect them from the party after they realise they may have to wait for a bus. This is an affectively underwhelming scene, which shows that the friends are safe and protected in certain ways that Lucy and her friends are not. Yet the fact that Jenni and Elise have been returned to their life as it was at the start of the story suggests that they too are trapped. Like Lucy, they are stuck in certain neoliberal and postfeminist modes of living and can see no alternative. This suggests that the dissatisfaction and the alienation of neoliberalism cannot be entirely alleviated through economic and social mobility. The acquisitions of late capitalism – girlfriends included – can only make living under its rule slightly more bearable, but do nothing to change it.

'The Empty the Empty the Empty' and 'Head to Toe' differ significantly in perspective and tone – one being an energetic, very close first-person narrative and the other a much more restrained, distant third person. However, both stories highlight gaps in terms of feeling, between the expectations and demands of neoliberal girl culture and the disappointing, disorienting reality. There are brief

---

<sup>305</sup> Zhang, p. 70.

glimmers of what appears to be pleasure or reassurance within the girlfriendships, but this is always undercut by feelings of disappointment and alienation, which are created by the conditions of postfeminist girlhood. To be clear, postfeminism is a tool of patriarchy. Feelings of competition, self-interest and shame are cultivated to alienate girlfriends from each other and prevent the formation of solidarities, which ensures the continuance of the status quo: white heteropatriarchy. The promise of belonging is a strategy used to ensure people continue to invest in ways of living that cause them harm. By invoking multiple promises – the promises of girlfriendship, postfeminist empowerment, heterosexuality, social mobility and even the promise of the short story form itself – and illuminating the ways in which these promises fail, ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’ and ‘Head to Toe’ puncture optimistic fantasies of belonging. Postfeminism animates feminine friendship as a site of refuge from the demands of postfeminist culture, but rather than offering respite, friendship turns out to be an impasse, too.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Question of Form

In the preceding three chapters, I have analysed the ways in which women short story writers engage the politics of feeling at work in contemporary (post)feminist discourses through narratives about girlhood and young womanhood. But so far, I have not explicitly addressed the question of form. Each of the stories I have analysed seems to tactically engage with the short story *as a form*; in this chapter, I interrogate that engagement to ask why the short story is being used to chart the paradoxes of postfeminist feeling. In my consideration of this question, I build on the scaffolding provided by scholars of the short story and bring short story theory into dialogue with the work on (post)feminism and affect that has been central to my thesis thus far. First, I consider the status of the short story in contemporary literary and consumer culture. I then situate the short story alongside television – which I argue is another form especially suited to the exploration of postfeminist feeling – and draw out the parallels between the two. I ask what kinds of scenes are captured by short stories and television that reckon with postfeminist attachments, and I propose that those scenes are ripe for particular types of affective knowledge. Thinking about the role of the speculative in the short story, I make the case that the work of Lauren Berlant is especially useful for the study of the short story, and I bring Berlant’s work into conversation with the work on the

‘minor’ that I drew on in Chapter Two in my theorisation of ‘stuckness’ to ask whether there are specific tonal qualities that might explicate the relationship between the short story and the political. The key question guiding this chapter is this: what is it about the short story that makes it especially adept at charting postfeminist feeling?

### **The status of the short story**

The short story is, I argue, a site of stuckness. Critics frequently acknowledge that short story theory has become mired in questions about definition: for example, Suzanne Ferguson argues that the short story is ‘surprisingly resistant’ to definition, and that ‘there is no single characteristic or cluster of characteristics that the critics agree absolutely distinguishes the short story from other fictions’.<sup>306</sup> Despite numerous attempts, it has proved difficult to capture exactly what makes a short story a short story. Length has dominated many of these attempts, which isn’t surprising, given that length is inherent in the name, *short* stories. Yet ‘short’ is not a definitive quality, except as Mary Louise Pratt reminds us, in relation to something else – most frequently, as Pratt points out, the novel. According to Pratt, the dependence the short story has on the novel for definitive purposes makes the short story a ‘minor and lesser genre with respect to the novel.’<sup>307</sup> This suggests

---

<sup>306</sup> Suzanne C. Ferguson, ‘Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form’, in *The New Short Story Theories*, edited by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994): 218-230, (p. 218).

<sup>307</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, ‘The Short Story: The long and the short of it’, *Poetics* 10.2-3 (1981): 175-194, (p. 175).

that the short story is involved in a kind of politics of form, stuck in repeated and circuitous questions about status.

The short story is also stuck in questions about its popularity and literary value. For Clare Hanson, the two are antithetical. She makes the case that the short story is ‘immensely popular with readers’ and suggests that it suffers critical and academic neglect because of this popularity, which renders it ‘not quite respectable as an art form’.<sup>308</sup> The tension between the short story’s popularity and its literary value can also be seen in the frequency of articles proclaiming a ‘short story renaissance’ – that is, the idea that the short story is a neglected and unpopular form experiencing a ‘comeback’ on the Western literary scene. In British publications alone, there have been articles declaring the resurgence of the short story approximately every two years for the last ten years.<sup>309</sup> Again, we can see how discussions about the short story tend to circle back on themselves and repeat.

One reason advanced for the supposed resurgence of the short story in recent years is that the short story is often situated as the ideal literary form for our busy, tech-heavy lives and waning attention spans. The idea is this: while we might be

---

<sup>308</sup> Hanson, ‘Introduction’, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 1.

<sup>309</sup> See Chris Power’s 2018 *Guardian* article, in which he criticises the idea of the short story’s ‘renaissance’, pointing out that it is proclaimed so often that the short story does not have the opportunity to ‘wither’: Chris Power, ‘Complete Fiction: Why the short story renaissance is a myth’, *Guardian*, 12 March 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/12/short-story-cat-person-tom-hanks-jojo-moyes>>. Despite Power’s article, in 2022, the *Guardian* published an article insisting that the short story was experiencing a ‘surprise boom’ – this time as a result of the coronavirus pandemic: Miranda Bryant, ‘Tales of the unexpected: the surprise boom in UK short stories,’ *Guardian*, 30 January 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jan/30/tales-of-the-unexpected-the-surprise-boom-in-uk-short-stories>> [Both accessed: 5 January 2023]

too busy and distracted by our ‘compulsory continuous connectedness’<sup>310</sup> to sit down and read a whole novel, we might find time to squeeze in a short story. Author and critic Brandon Taylor expresses his frustration with such sentiments, arguing that ‘they are an attempt to boil down the short story to its most commercially viable rudiments.’<sup>311</sup> Indeed, the idea of the short story as a ‘quick fix’ positions it as a commodity – something to be bought to solve a problem – and associates it with what Pierre Bourdieu calls the ‘heteronomous’ in the field of cultural production: that is, something produced to be sold, rather than something valued for its artistic prestige, or the ‘autonomous’.<sup>312</sup> Of course, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, yet for Taylor, the commodification of the short story in cultural discourse devalues it as a literary text. Timothy Clark also notes that the short story is often viewed as a commodity, possessing a ‘dubious consumability’, and the status of ‘fast food’.<sup>313</sup> The brevity of the short story, which enables it to be read, re-read, shared and interpreted quickly, seems to imply a disposability – that an inherent quality of the short story is its ability to be picked up, consumed, and tossed aside. Yet conceiving of the short story as a ‘quick patch for literary consumption’ elides its ability to dwell in complexity and obscurity; as Taylor puts it, ‘a short story is a vast system of caves into which you can shout one

---

<sup>310</sup> Ludmila Lupinacci, “‘Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing’”: liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media’, *Media, Culture and Society* 43.2 (2021): 273-290.

<sup>311</sup> Brandon Taylor, ‘Against the attention economy: short stories are not quick literary fixes’, *Literary Hub*, 6 December 2017 < <https://lithub.com/against-the-attention-economy-short-stories-are-not-quick-literary-fixes/> > [Accessed: 8 November 2022]

<sup>312</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>313</sup> Timothy Clark, ‘Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading’, *Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): 5-30, (p. 19).

note and from which emerges eerie, ghostly echoes that both converge upon and diverge from that first, perfect sound.<sup>314</sup> Rather than an easy way to fit a bit of reading into a hectic schedule, the short story is challenging. Dominic Head proposes that the short story demands a ‘unique kind of attention’.<sup>315</sup> This is a view shared by Taylor, who insists that the short story requires ‘slow reading’. This demand to slow down and focus our attention seems almost subversive, particularly in a world in which our attention is pulled in different directions all the time. The way in which we read a short story speaks to its radical capabilities. It asks us to go against what we are incited to do by capitalist society: more and faster.

For Alice Munro, the short story does not merely ask us to slow down, but allows us to move through the narrative in a different way. Munro writes that she does not read a short story by following it ‘as if it were a road, taking [her] somewhere with views and neat diversions along the way’; instead, she ‘move[s] back and forth, and settle[s] here and there, and stay[s] in it for a while. It’s more like a house.’<sup>316</sup> Reading a short story, for Munro, is to do with how it ‘encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way.’<sup>317</sup> We see these ideas of enclosed space and connections appear in Taylor’s description too, through his conceptualisation of the short story as a ‘vast system of caves’ which produces ‘eerie, ghostly echoes’.

---

<sup>314</sup> Taylor.

<sup>315</sup> Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>316</sup> Alice Munro, ‘What is Real?’, *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Fifth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994): 939-942, (p. 940).

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, Clark describes short story theory as ‘in a cul-de-sac’<sup>318</sup> – which recalls Lauren Berlant’s use of the word ‘cul-de-sac’ in their description of the impasse: a space in which ‘one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*’.<sup>319</sup> I propose that the striking similarities between the short story and the impasse aren’t merely (un)happy coincidences, but actually offers a way of thinking about the form of the short story, which can help explicate its deftness for certain feelings. Indeed, part of the short story’s particular power is its ability to dwell in uncertainty and indeterminacy – which (at least partly) explains why it can be such a frustrating field of study.

### **The short story, television and postfeminist feeling**

The short story’s ability to linger in particular scenes – those of frustration or disappointment – while refusing to move towards resolution or transformation, is something I propose it shares with another form: television. My intention with bringing television into this chapter is to highlight that the short story is part of a wider cultural preoccupation with narratives that engage postfeminist feeling – especially those of dissatisfaction, frustration and stagnation – and to use the example of television to draw out some of the features that both television and the short story share in their negotiation of these complex and difficult feelings.

The relationship between television and the negotiation of postfeminism has been traced from the very beginning, as I noted in the introduction of this thesis.

---

<sup>318</sup> Clark, p. 5.

<sup>319</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 199.

From *Sex and the City*<sup>320</sup> to *Girls*<sup>321</sup> and *Fleabag*<sup>322</sup> and more recently, we might include shows such as *I May Destroy You*,<sup>323</sup> *I Hate Suzie*,<sup>324</sup> and *Emily in Paris*.<sup>325</sup> Much like the short story, television is another narrative form viewed as a commodity under capitalism, something to consume or ‘binge’ on. Indeed, many of the short stories I have discussed in this thesis have been marketed in relationship to television. Kristen Roupenian’s collection *You Know You Want This* is reportedly being turned into an HBO television series,<sup>326</sup> while Jenny Zhang and Abigail Ulman’s short story collections have both been linked to Lena Dunham, creator of *Girls*. Zhang’s collection was the first book published by Dunham’s Lenny publishing imprint, and Ulman’s collection is marketed by its publisher as ‘for fans of HBO’s *Girls*’.<sup>327</sup> In content as well as marketing, Ulman’s short story ‘Head to Toe’ explicitly knits itself into a postfeminist media culture. When Jenni and Elise visit a shopping mall, their mothers expect them to buy clothes as (we presume) they usually do, but instead the friends watch five movies in a row: one

---

<sup>320</sup> Created by Darren Star (HBO, 1998-2004).

<sup>321</sup> Created by Lena Dunham (HBO, 2012-2017)

<sup>322</sup> Created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Two Brothers Pictures; BBC Three; Amazon Studios, 2016-2019)

<sup>323</sup> *I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel (BBC; HBO, 2020) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/m000jyxy/i-may-destroy-you>> [Accessed: 27 November 2022]

<sup>324</sup> *I Hate Suzie* and *I Hate Suzie Too*, created by Lucy Prebble and Billie Piper (Bad Wolf; Sky Studios, 2020-present) <<https://www.nowtv.com/watch/i-hate-suzie-too/iYEQZ2rcf32XREszTMd44o>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]

<sup>325</sup> *Emily in Paris*, created by Darren Star (Netflix, 2020-present) <<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289281?source=35>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]

<sup>326</sup> Denise Petski, ‘HBO developing “You Know You Want This” anthology series about gender, sex and power from “The Leftovers” duo,’ *Deadline*, 30 May 2018 <<https://deadline.com/2018/05/hbo-developing-you-know-you-want-this-anthology-drama-the-leftovers-writers-carly-wray-lila-byock-kristen-roupenian-1202400396>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]

<sup>327</sup> Penguin Random House, *Hot Little Hands* <<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/533870/hot-little-hands-by-abigail-ulman/>> [Accessed: 20 March 2023]

about a 'girl who moves to the city to fulfil her dream of becoming a performer'; Dunham's debut feature film *Tiny Furniture*, which is about a 'girl who moves to the city to fulfil her dream of becoming an artist'; a movie about 'a girl who goes looking for her dead father'; another about 'a girl who goes looking for the killer of her dead father'; and the final movie, 'about this girl who visits her dad. She makes him macaroni and cheese, and cheers him up'.<sup>328</sup> Here, we see how Jenni and Elise are overwhelmed by images of girlhood: girls chasing their dreams, facing their fears, and caring for their family members. They are surrounded by narratives about how to be a girl; yet by watching these other, active girls, their own passive consumption is accentuated. Jenni and Elise exist in the same cultural context as the girls they watch on the screen, but they cannot – and do not – live up to the fantasy that the screen girls represent.

In contrast to the girls presented in the movies, the girls in the short stories I have analysed in this thesis do not enact change. While in 'Los Angeles', Alice moves to a city to fulfil her dream, that dream is not realised, and the material conditions of her life do not change. Jenni and Elise go back to the horse camp of their youth in 'Head to Toe', but nothing changes. The girls do not go on grand quests; they do not take care of people; they do not live out their dreams. We see similar scenes in television. For example, in HBO's *Girls*, none of the protagonists have an easy time realising their career ambitions in New York City – despite their firm expectation that things will work out for them in the end. There are moments in which the characters seem to be on the cusp of the life of their dreams, but these moments often fail to materialise or change their lives in the way they want. For

---

<sup>328</sup> Ulman, p. 178.

example, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet) gets her dream job and moves to Japan, but is made redundant after a few months; Hannah (Dunham) finally gets a publishing contract for her essay collection but then the publisher dies, and the project is cancelled; Hannah then gets a well-paid writing job but quits when she realises it is stifling her creativity; Marnie (Allison Williams) gets married, then spends a single wild, almost surreal night with her ex-boyfriend (see how the narrative circles back) and then asks her husband for a divorce. What we see in all of the examples above is an attempt to find routes into a postfeminist good life. Each time it fails, the fantasy is renegotiated.

The episodic nature of television series, and the narrow confines of the short story, makes them both suitable for this kind of repeated negotiation. The characters are trapped – or stuck – within the form. Questions about futurity – by which I mean questions such as, what kind of a person is this character becoming? What kind of life is she going to have? – are avoided or at least postponed. This means that (despite the character's growing frustration and disappointment) anything is theoretically still possible. The point I am making here is that television series and short stories are both able to dwell in a particular kind of affective scene: those marked by contradiction, which feel disappointing and confining and which cannot resolve, yet in which fantasies of future good lives remain open and limitless. These fantasies are deeply held and clung to; at the same time, they begin to feel impossibly out of reach. The promise of a satisfying conclusion or a character transformation can be refused by shorter forms in ways that are not possible – or at least much more difficult – in longer works. The brevity of shorter forms means they do not have to promise anything, in terms of the future or

forward progression. This resonates with the affective scene of girlhood in the contemporary moment – one of stuckness and failed promise.

The episodic nature of television shows means that they can, as I noted above, circle back on themselves rather than transform or resolve. Catherine McDermott describes how the trope of the ‘rom com run’ is utilised in *Girls* to poke holes in the conventional promise of a ‘happy ending’, showing romantic gestures to be not a destination but ‘another cyclical lurch of the impasse’.<sup>329</sup> In this way, the promise of catharsis or good feeling is invoked and then frustrated. Similarly, I posit that in the short story, the ending is frequently exploited for the purposes of disappointing or frustrating expectations. One of the ways it can do this is through the promises set up by the epiphanic ending or the moment of insight, which I will explore in the next section.

### **The short story’s (lack of) insight**

For critics such as Valerie Shaw, there should always be a ‘definite moment’ in which the meaning of a short story is made clear: a moment of ‘radiant insight’, often described (following James Joyce) as an ‘epiphany’.<sup>330</sup> Nadine Gordimer uses the metaphor of seeing by the ‘flash of fireflies’ to describe the experience of reading a short story, arguing that the form is characterised by transient glimpses or insights, which more accurately conveys ‘the quality of human life’ than the

---

<sup>329</sup> McDermott, ‘Genres of Impasse’, p. 55.

<sup>330</sup> Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1983), p. 193-4.

consistency of the novel.<sup>331</sup> However, other short story theorists have challenged the supposed insights of the short story. Head argues that in James Joyce's *Dubliners* stories, the epiphany is 'problematic' and cannot be viewed as indicative of a 'simple, unified meaning.'<sup>332</sup> In fact, he goes so far as to say that there is 'a lack of illumination' in many of the so-called epiphanies.<sup>333</sup> Similarly, Sophia Kier-Byfield writes that the epiphanic moment 'actually hinder[s] the acquisition of knowledge: both character and reader are left dazzled, rather than closer to the truth'.<sup>334</sup> We can see how the relationship between seeing and knowing is disrupted. Light, illumination and sight no longer represent a straightforward acquisition of knowledge in the form of an insight, but rather a disorientation, in which the reader's (and perhaps also the character's) hopes for 'knowledge' are frustrated.

This sense of disorientation, particularly at the moment of supposed insight, seems to suggest one story – or feeling – vibrating within another, resonating not only with the idea of minor literature advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, but also the doubleness of postfeminism and the multiplicity of postfeminist feeling. The expectation or emphasis placed on the ending of a short story can thus be an opportune moment for the channelling of complex feelings. An epiphany – a moment of individual revelation – is one that seems to lend itself towards change, which might be a shift in perspective or feeling rather than a bold action or

---

<sup>331</sup> Nadine Gordimer, 'The Flash of Fireflies' in *The New Short Story Theories*, edited by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994) p. 265.

<sup>332</sup> Head, p. 37.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>334</sup> Sophia Kier-Byfield, 'Revealing as concealing: The photographic flash of the epiphany in the modernist short story', *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, 8.1-2 (2018): 69-88, (p. 69).

material change. Nevertheless, the epiphany's necessary emphasis on the individual and the individual's perspective means that it shares an affinity with the rhetoric of neoliberalism and postfeminism. A failed epiphany then, by which I mean one that culminates in more uncertainty than clarity, might hold the potential to disrupt or destabilise the individualistic sensibilities and hollow promises of neoliberalism and postfeminism. This is not because the epiphany is a definitive feature of the short story – even though the ending of the short story is often a moment of high stakes – but rather relates to the ways in which it is perceived by readers and in literary criticism and short story theory. Often perceived as a 'minor' form, with a tendency to express 'outsider' viewpoints, we can see how the short story might be recuperated for narratives of triumphant overcoming-the-odds or personal growth and development – both of which have clear affinities and applications within the projects of neoliberalism more broadly and postfeminism in particular. This is not to say that the short story is never used for such narratives, but rather to say that the ways in which the short story is perceived as an 'individual' or 'isolated' form makes it especially adept at destabilising the neoliberal promise of individual triumph.

Each of the stories I have analysed in this thesis could be considered a story with a disorienting ending but let us take the ending of Emma Cline's 'Los Angeles' as one example. At the end of the story, as we know, the protagonist, Alice, meets up with a customer to sell him her underwear. Prior to this, we have seen Alice in numerous situations in which her femininity has been a source of social currency and also a source of shame. Alice tries to exit the customer's car, but the door handle gets stuck. We are shown Alice's fear – her heart 'clanging' in her chest –

yet the final line belongs to her customer, the man she believes will cause her harm: he tells her, 'Just stop, you're only making it worse.'<sup>335</sup> This is an ambiguous line, which could be read as the man telling her to stop trying to open the door while it's locked because her action is preventing him from unlocking it, or it could be read as the man telling Alice that she has no control over what happens next, so she should submit to him without making a fuss. The story ends and Alice is left there, in the car, grabbing at the handle and trying to let herself out. We wonder whether Alice brought this situation on herself, by selling her underwear to strangers. We wonder if Alice could have avoided this danger by taking better precautions. We wonder what we would have done. In doing so, we engage in questions about the rhetoric of personal responsibility and individual choice, which is such a central part of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies. The story offers us no answer and it does not tell us how to feel about it. It lets us feel for ourselves.

If we compare disorienting endings, such as the ending of 'Los Angeles', with what Clark calls 'trick endings', we can see that the supposed pleasures of illumination are unsatisfactory.<sup>336</sup> Clark describes a pseudonymous 1887 story called 'Olive's Lover', in which a young woman, Olive, tells her family that she has fallen in love with a man she met while travelling.<sup>337</sup> Various twists and turns emerge: the man writes to tell Olive that he has inherited a fortune and wants to marry her, but he is delayed by business problems and illness. When Olive and her

---

<sup>335</sup> Cline, p. 52.

<sup>336</sup> Clark, p. 14.

<sup>337</sup> 'Olive's Lover' appeared under the pseudonym of 'C. C. K. Gonner'. It is reprinted in *The Oxford Book of English Love Stories*, edited by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 120-130.

father finally go to meet him from a train, he does not appear. Eventually, they learn he died in an accident, and this news makes Olive ill. Olive's father looks for the man's grave but cannot find it, nor a record of the burial. When Olive hears this news, she dies, seemingly in a fit of anguish and despair. Once she is dead, her father discovers that she wrote all the letters herself; Olive's lover never existed.

Clark suggests that this story shows that the trick ending is 'capable of transcending its status as a verbal conjuring trick' and that it can enact major issues (such as, in 'Olive's Lover', the 'distinction between apparent or hidden motives'), overturning ingrained social norms (if, for example, the moral character is revealed to be the opposite), or a twist reveals the reader's prejudiced assumptions.<sup>338</sup> Nevertheless, as Clark himself later points out, very often when a meaning is made explicit in a short story, and closure achieved, 'significance drains out of the whole text – the story is now something one can throw away.'<sup>339</sup> Trick endings, which are themselves a kind of epiphany, attempt to reveal something, but often feel disappointing. While the reader might feel a momentary satisfaction that they have discovered the 'true' meaning of the story and can therefore move on, the story is not one that a reader is likely to return to, dwelling in the various rooms of the house and shouting through the cave system. There is nothing left to puzzle over and wonder about, nothing worth lingering over. The problem is solved; yet the world of the story disappears with it.

The short stories that I have written about in this project do not offer definitive knowledge in the way that 'Olive's Lover' does, in the form of an answer

---

<sup>338</sup> Clark, p. 14.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

to a problem posed within the story, a moral or an epiphanic insight. Yet the stories are ripe for a different kind of understanding. Hanson writes that the short story is a ‘vehicle for different kinds of knowledge, knowledge which may be in some ways at odds with the “story” of dominant culture.’<sup>340</sup> While I believe Hanson and I are approaching a similar question in terms of the short story’s tendency to represent certain kinds of subjectivity, I do not agree that the ‘knowledge’ a short story imparts is necessarily at odds with dominant culture, because dominant culture – which here is postfeminism – is so clearly invoked in the stories I have analysed. Similarly, to say that the stories are ‘at odds’ with postfeminism doesn’t quite fit either. It seems to imply a subversion or an overturning, akin to a trick ending, whereas the work of a disorienting ending is more akin to expansion: it opens up possibility, rather than overturn or close down. It is true that the stories I have analysed (and indeed the stories I have written) as part of this thesis do not offer a thorough, consistent, and complete account of the experience of growing up in a postfeminist culture. Indeed, postfeminist girlhood is a scene so suffused with contradictions and paradoxes that it wouldn’t be possible to account for it through a neat narrative resolution, like the ending to ‘Olive’s Lover’. There is not a single ‘solution’ to postfeminist girlhood. By depicting scenes of impasse and letting us feel the cultural politics of a scene, the short story offers us a slow, dawning awareness of just how knotty and complicated the situation is. That is, the short story makes us aware that the questions it poses are not answerable ones; to attempt an answer would be dissatisfactory. This awareness comes, almost paradoxically, through the suggestion of what we don’t know, the way a metaphor

---

<sup>340</sup> Hanson, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

amplifies or alters the meaning of an image or feeling by describing it as another, drawing connections between disparate things in order to bring a particular detail or quality into focus. The short story offers us a kind of affective understanding, one from which we cannot draw conclusions, and which does not lend itself to resolution. The point I am making here is that while the stories might not give us any concrete ‘knowledge’ about postfeminism, they unsettle what we do know. We can imagine alternative possibilities because we can feel them; we are oriented away from the feelings, ideas and ways of thinking that we have been so firmly attached to.

### **The speculative and the short story**

In order to think through the ways in which the story can be used to unsettle patterns of thinking and direct us away from firmly held fantasies and beliefs, I argue that the short story is a form that invites certain kinds of speculation. To speculate is to contemplate, to theorise, to examine, or to ‘reflect upon with close attention’.<sup>341</sup> While it could be argued that this is something all fiction does, Kim Wilkins proposes that what distinguishes the genre ‘speculative fiction’ from other types of fiction is the use of the ‘fantastic mode’ – magic, futuristic technology or the paranormal.<sup>342</sup> However, the idea of fantasy has recurred throughout this thesis in a less magical, yet no less powerful way. I propose that affect theory allows us to

---

<sup>341</sup> ‘speculate, v.’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online] <<https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/186112;jsessionid=4FA69AE81BCD286B39175EB257F761E8?redirectedFrom=speculate>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]

<sup>342</sup> Kim Wilkins, ‘Genre and Speculative Fiction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 37-51, p. 39-40.

think about the fantasy element of speculative fiction in a way that is not limited to genre. The short story offers a space in which affect can be materialised: the conditions under which we are living can be brought into sharp focus through speculative techniques.

For example, Carmen Maria Machado's short story 'The Husband Stitch' is a speculative story: the young woman protagonist wears a ribbon around her neck to keep her head attached to her body.<sup>343</sup> The woman falls in love, marries, and has a child with a man, but she has one small thing she does not want to share with him, or anyone: the ribbon around her neck. He insists and insists – his desire to possess her entirely grows more fervent throughout the story – until, at the story's conclusion, the woman allows her husband to remove the ribbon and her head falls off. 'The Husband Stitch' offers an allegory for the ways in which men want to possess women in the real world but with dramatised stakes: what the protagonist stands to lose is not her sense of herself as an independent and autonomous person, but her head – and thus her life. Sami Schalk articulates the relationship between the speculative and the political by suggesting that speculative fiction 'can comment on our world and make us imagine alternative possibilities: the good, the bad, the ambivalent and the downright terrifying.'<sup>344</sup> The strategies utilised by speculative narratives, such as 'The Husband Stitch' encourage the reader to recognise the problems inherent in our real-world fantasies in order to open up routes towards imagining (or perhaps even realising) more satisfying ways of

---

<sup>343</sup> Carmen Maria Machado, 'The Husband Stitch', *Granta*, 28 October 2014 <<https://granta.com/the-husband-stitch>> [Accessed: 13 March 2023]

<sup>344</sup> Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 1.

living. Indeed, the most horrifying moment of Machado's story is not when the main character's head falls off, but when she gets the titular 'husband stitch', which isn't a fantastical myth, but a real medical practice.

Sophie Mackintosh's short story 'The Weak Spot' might also be described as speculative fiction.<sup>345</sup> The story centres on a group of schoolgirls who are forced to murder a man as a rite of passage, to prove their capability and to protect themselves from the predatory behaviour of men. 'The Weak Spot' pushes the imperative often propounded in rape cultures – that women are responsible for protecting themselves against violent men – to an extreme. The terrain of the story is familiar, even if the specific situation is alien. In both 'The Weak Spot' and 'The Husband Stitch', behaviours and practices that we can observe in the real world are pushed to their limits, which enables the writer to draw out questions about how things could be if certain elements of the real world intensified, changed, or did not change. Both stories show us that the gendered dynamics of the world in which we live are unsatisfactory and demand that we look for better ways of living. Yet this is done through the invocation and the accentuation of what is not working in the world, rather than by telling us what to do or how to feel. By speculating, these stories can suggest the damage done by the fantasies that circulate in the contemporary moment – heterosexual romance in 'The Husband Stitch' and girls' ability to protect themselves from gendered violence in 'The Weak Spot' – without moralising. Short stories like these draw connections between the imaginary world of the story and the world in which we live, and in doing so they

---

<sup>345</sup> Sophie Mackintosh, 'The Weak Spot', *Granta*, 15 August 2016, <<https://granta.com/the-weak-spot/>> [Accessed: 13 March 2023]

are able to produce particular kinds of affective understanding. They ask us to re-examine and re-imagine the world and what we thought was possible within it.

Fantasy is deeply implicated in the political. After all, the role of the political is to improve lives: whose lives and how are its fundamental questions. These are also, as Schalk identifies, the key questions tackled by speculative fiction. This is what Berlant's work does, too. As Ben Anderson puts it, Berlant's work refuses 'the pleasures of closure in favour of unsettling expansion, arresting ruptures, and strange returns.'<sup>346</sup> What is striking about this description is that it could be mistaken for a description of what the short story can do: unsettle, expand, arrest, rupture, return. Berlant's work encourages us to recognise the relationship between fantasy and the political, that fantasies are part of the fabric everyday life, not separate from it. In our day-to-day lives, fantasies alleviate 'what is hard to managed in the lived real'<sup>347</sup> yet these fantasies often cause us harm. I posit that all the stories I have analysed in this thesis are speculative in that they also encourage us to feel the cultural politics of the world in which we live by utilising a fictional scenario. No story – whether set on a different planet or in the reader's own city – is completely divorced from the lives we live. In its ability to raise questions and leave them unresolved, the short story as a form is able to theorise, problematise and speculate. Though it may not furnish knowledge, the short story creates the conditions for new knowledge. By probing and challenging, it can open up the possibility of other ways of living. A hazy shape of what a 'good life' could look like begins to emerge.

---

<sup>346</sup> Ben Anderson, 'Encountering Berlant part one: Concepts otherwise', *The Geographical Journal* 189.1 (2023): 117-142, (p. 121).

<sup>347</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p. 5.

## Tone and the short story

Its propensity for disorientation and affective ambiguity is, at least partly, what makes the short story so elusive and so tricky to define. In her work on Elizabeth Bowen's short stories, Karen Schaller suggests that the difficulty critics have in 'securing' the short story – that which makes it so vexatious – is its emotion.<sup>348</sup> I proceed by understanding the short story as a form preoccupied with certain kinds of feeling: disorientating, ambiguous, 'ugly' feelings, which are difficult to pin down and define. To consider the short story's emotionality, I start by looking at its 'tone', which its critics have long been concerned with. Ngai describes tone as the 'global or organizing affect' of a literary text: 'its general disposition or orientation toward its audience and the world.'<sup>349</sup> Talking about the short story's 'tone' is frustrating for critics, precisely because it points to feeling and is therefore ambiguous. Theorisations about tone cannot point us towards clearly defined characteristics of the short story. Yet for Ngai (and it would seem, for Schaller), the 'amorphousness' of tone is where the concept's power resides.<sup>350</sup>

For Gordimer, the novel relies on a 'prolonged coherence of tone' which means that it cannot 'convey the quality of human life' the way the short story can: like the 'flash of fireflies'.<sup>351</sup> Frank O'Connor suggests that 'while we often read a

---

<sup>348</sup> Karen Ann Schaller, *The Bowen affect: the short fiction of Elizabeth Bowen and the case for re-reading emotion*, Doctoral thesis (University of Sussex, 2011)

<<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/6950/>> [Accessed: 17 February 2023] p. 31.

<sup>349</sup> Ngai, p. 28.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>351</sup> Gordimer, p. 264.

familiar novel again for companionship, we approach the short story in a very different mood'.<sup>352</sup> In other words, we do not read the short story for reassurance but rather to be unsettled. Both O'Connor and Gordimer illuminate a preoccupation with a particular tone or affective orientation. The short story has long been associated with isolated individuals – from O'Connor's assertion that the short story contains an 'intense awareness of human loneliness'<sup>353</sup> to Hanson's suggestion that short stories have offered themselves 'to losers and loners...writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling "narrative"'.<sup>354</sup> In a similar vein, Shaw suggests that the short story 'is inherently suited to dealing with the unconventional, in attitudes, in behaviour', which she connects to its 'detachment'.<sup>355</sup> These ideas of isolation and detachment point to the fact that the short story is especially suited to charting certain kinds of feeling. For Ngai, there is a 'crucial similarity' between a literary text's tone, which is 'reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to the representations of feelings within the world of the story' and the 'slippery zone' between real and fake feelings.<sup>356</sup> As I discussed in Chapter Two, this 'slippery zone' evokes the doubleness of postfeminism, but I suggest that it also points towards the types of feelings the short story is especially adept at channelling. What I am proposing here is a shift from understanding the short story as an 'outsider' form, suited to

---

<sup>352</sup> Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963), p. 18-19.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>354</sup> Hanson, 'Introduction', p. 2.

<sup>355</sup> Shaw, p. 223.

<sup>356</sup> Ngai, p. 41.

portraying particular kinds of subjective experience, to understanding the short story as a form deeply concerned with knotty, difficult or ambiguous affects.

Adrian Hunter draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature' in relation to the short story in his work on Alice Munro – a writer whose work seems somewhat of a literary precedent to the women writers I discuss in this thesis. Hunter writes about the short story's 'interrogative' capabilities, its 'failure literally to express, to extend itself to definition, determination, or disclosure', and reads the aversion to determination in Munro's stories as an example of minor literature.<sup>357</sup> Hunter also draws on Hélène Cixous's essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' to argue that Munro subverts 'the "reserve-discourse" that insists on writing "the end" as a matter of full disclosure and the fulfilment of causal expectations in narrative'.<sup>358</sup> He suggests that by using the short story form, with its ability to remain ambiguous and 'open', dwell in gaps and silences and crucially, its ability to leave questions unanswered, Munro is able to resist the closure and resolution that would impose 'points of closure on feminine discourse'.<sup>359</sup> Conceptualising the short story as an 'interrogative' form again points to the short story's proclivity for examining political problems. Discussing the feminist potential of Munro's stories, Hunter writes that they are not 'narratives of empowerment in which the subaltern is made to speak' but rather 'conspire formally in inarticulacy, minority, and even silence.'<sup>360</sup> Feelings related to 'empowerment' would be 'major' rather than 'minor' feelings – those that represent

---

<sup>357</sup> Adrian Hunter, 'Story into history: Alice Munro's minor literature', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 53.207 (2004): 219-238, (p. 221).

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.* p. 220.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.* p. 237.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.* p. 225-226.

a resolution of a problem. By using the form of the short story, Munro is able to gesture towards alternative modes of resistance outside of existing power structures on both a formal and a narrative level.

Understanding the short story as an explicitly political form raises questions about whether it is an exclusive form, accessible only to those who already possess certain knowledge. This certainly seems to be Emma Young's suggestion: she writes that a reader must have prior knowledge of feminist politics or a 'feminist sensibility' in order for a story to achieve its feminist potential.<sup>361</sup> This suggests that the meaning of a feminist short story is only intelligible for those who have access to certain avenues of knowledge. Yet as I suggested with the example of Emma Cline's 'Los Angeles', it is not that the reader needs to have specific knowledge – indeed, many readers of these stories will not have heard of postfeminism at all – only that they need to be curious about the situations presented. Gordimer also suggests that the short story is a somewhat exclusive form. She draws on Georges Lukács statement that the 'novel is a bourgeois art form whose enjoyment presupposes leisure and privacy', concluding that the novel 'marks the apogee of an exclusive, individualist culture'.<sup>362</sup> She then extends this criticism to the short story, writing that it is an 'art form solitary in communication; yet another sign of the increasing loneliness and isolation of the individual in a competitive society'.<sup>363</sup> While Gordimer is correct to point out that short stories can and do convey experiences of solitude, and they are solitary in the way we usually experience them

---

<sup>361</sup> Emma Young, *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 145.

<sup>362</sup> Gordimer, p. 265-266.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.* p. 266.

(by reading on our own), it seems somewhat paradoxical to argue that the short story is solitary in its communication. Communication necessarily refers to that which is shared, an interaction between people, and the short story (like most forms of literature) is something shared or communicated between writer and reader(s). Yet Gordimer's suggestion that the short story might be 'another sign of the increasing loneliness and isolation of the individual in a competitive society' demands closer scrutiny. It is not the case that the short story itself is an inherently isolating or exclusive form, but rather that the feelings of disorientation that it tends to deal in can be isolating. This is an important distinction, because reading a short story about feelings of isolation (which could be applied to all the short stories I have analysed in this project) can open up new ways of thinking about community and connection. By disorienting us in such a way that we could turn from the dominant sensibilities of the contemporary moment – namely neoliberalism and postfeminism, which both focus on the individual at the expense of community – the short story allows us to feel the *possibility* of alternative ways of being in and understanding the world. This is done by presenting us with an opportunity to reflect on the forces that shape it.

At the beginning of this chapter, I asked what it is about the short story that makes it especially adept at charting postfeminist feeling. I have not attempted to define the short story or make claims about what a short story should do; merely to reckon with the particular features that I have noticed about the form through my work on this thesis. The short story is a challenging form – that much is evident – and this has led short story theory to something of a critical impasse. This means

that popular conceptions of the short story and the study of the form itself are marked by uncertainty and frustration. Attempts have been made to recuperate the short story as a tool of capitalism, which exacerbates these questions and puts the short story in an awkward position. How do we reconcile its status as a quick fix for literary consumption when it demands so much of us? In this way, the short story both fits within and stands outside of capitalist culture. The short story's ability to encapsulate contradiction – to be both – is one of the reasons it is such an adept channel for postfeminist feeling. As I have shown throughout this thesis, postfeminist feeling is a site of uncomfortable and irreconcilable contradiction, too.

It is not my contention that the short story is a form uniquely positioned to navigate postfeminist feeling. In this chapter, I have touched on some of the ways in which television is able to explore postfeminist feeling in a similar way. Both the short story and the television series are able to postpone or avoid giving answers to questions about resolution and the future because of the particular confines of the form. Yet the questions remain present, and all options remain possible, because of their momentariness. This resonates with Driscoll's point that a defining feature of the girl is that she is always 'in transition'.<sup>364</sup> She is always becoming and never 'become'. While this can feel optimistic (because anything is possible), it is also confining because a destination is never reached. The point I am making here is that the short story is part of a wider cultural exploration of the failed promises of postfeminist girlhood.

---

<sup>364</sup> Driscoll, p. 6.

While it is not a requirement of the form that the short story has an insight, moral, resolution, twist or reveal at the end, as Young points out, the form does ‘entice the reader’ towards the end with ‘high expectations’.<sup>365</sup> When the ending delivers something ambiguous or disorienting rather than something definite, the reader is encouraged to feel for the ‘meaning’ themselves. In this sense, an ambiguous ending can be more satisfying than one in which the meaning is spelled out. While this type of ending can also be frustrating, frustration is consonant with questions of postfeminist feeling. The ending of a short story then, holds a great deal of potential in regard to questions of postfeminist feeling: it can highlight the impasse, it can destabilise the triumphal narrative arcs promised by neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies (in which the individual succeeds ‘in the end’), and it can push back against the capitalist conception of the short story as an easy, throwaway read. The endings that let us feel the cultural politics rather than answering, resolving or moralising are the ones that resonate; they are the stories we return to. The short story is thus suited to questions with difficult – even impossible – answers. Realising that questions of postfeminist feeling are unanswerable is itself a kind of knowledge.

The short story’s indeterminacy makes it an apposite form for charting the complexities of postfeminist feeling, in the same way that the diagnostic power of ugly feelings comes from their inability to be resolved. The power of these stories – ones that grapple with difficult questions about postfeminist feeling – is a suggestive power: they point to possibilities, openings in the fabric of a narrative, but do not tear them open. As Berlant writes, ‘in the intensified everyday there are

---

<sup>365</sup> Young, *Contemporary Feminism and Women’s Short Stories*, p. 13.

always pointers to alternative experiences, even the yet un-lived'.<sup>366</sup> What is fiction but the 'intensified everyday'? Whether the stories have elements of fantasy – such as 'The Husband Stitch' – or are more clearly grounded in the real world, fictional encounters are by their very nature intensified and manipulated by a writer for a reader(s).

The short story is often considered isolated or isolating form for narratives about loners and outsiders. Yet what I have proposed here is that while these stories might isolate us from accepted and comfortable societal and cultural norms and therefore, they might feel isolating, the purpose of disrupting the norms that keep us stuck is to orient us towards new possibilities for connection and understanding. Indeed, though the short stories I have analysed utilise complex and difficult feelings – such as stuckness, disorientation, un/belonging and fatigue – they are underpinned by a desire for better ways of living. But rather than searching for quick and easy solutions, by following Berlant and against the demands of neoliberalism, the form registers that working harder and faster will not create better ways of living. Rather, we must sit with that which is difficult and complex, that which is not working, and feel our way.

---

<sup>366</sup> Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, p. 273.

## CONCLUSION

This critical thesis maps postfeminist feeling in five short stories by women writers. In doing so, it contributes to and draws from four key fields of study: postfeminism, the short story, girlhood studies and affect. Crucially, it offers a much-needed analysis of the ways in which postfeminist feeling is textualised in the short story, and it provides fruitful methods through which to interpret literary representations of feeling under neoliberalism. I began with three key research questions, the first of which addressed the kinds of feelings produced by neoliberal and postfeminist discourses in relation to femininity and girlhood. The second question asked how these complex and ambivalent feelings are mapped in short stories by and about young women. Accordingly, the first three chapters investigate how the irreconcilable discourses surrounding contemporary femininity create feelings marked by passivity: fatigue, stuckness and un/belonging. Each of these feelings involves a central contradiction: the subject is both absorbed into the postfeminist intimate public through the cultivation of certain promises which create enduring attachments, and simultaneously isolated, as these attachments become increasingly strained.

Chapter One focused on the ways in which promises of heterosexual happiness and women's sexual empowerment create feelings of exhaustion. While heterosexual fatigue sits alongside feelings such as heteropessimism, heterosexual fatigue is not marked by despair or 'performative disaffiliations' with straight

culture; rather, it is a symptom of the ways in which the contradictions of heterosexual culture wear its participants out, and so prevents them from imagining better models for heterosexual relations. Indeed, all the stories in this thesis explore (primarily but not exclusively heterosexual) relationship dissatisfaction. I identify the failure of the fantasy of romance in my analysis of 'Would Like to Meet' by May-Lan Tan, as the story's protagonist, Vivien, reaches for relationship fulfilment as she tries to adjust to the loss of her dream of becoming a successful artist. Though Vivien's route towards a fulfilling romantic relationship is somewhat unorthodox – she dates a heterosexual couple who she found after they placed an advert in a magazine – what she hopes to get from it speaks to a conventional desire for belonging. In Emma Cline's 'Los Angeles', the protagonist, Alice, uses her bodily femininity to earn money when she struggles to 'make it' as an actor. Though this is framed as an act of confidence – perhaps even an act of empowerment for Alice, who elsewhere in the story is treated badly by men – ultimately, Alice finds herself threatened with danger. Both 'Head to Toe' by Abigail Ulman and 'The Empty the Empty the Empty' by Jenny Zhang feature younger girls – teenagers and children, respectively – who struggle to navigate the demands of heterosexuality. Again, we see how ideals of empowerment and self-responsibility and conversely, an aversion to vulnerability, put the girls in difficult and dangerous situations. Relatedly, (hetero)sexual fantasy appears in both 'Head to Toe' and 'Cat Person', but in both of these stories the fantasy primarily belongs to the girl character's male partner and are, crucially, fantasies from which the girl character is excluded. The fantasies do not appear to be exciting or satisfying for either party, but rather represent stereotypes or expectations to which the male

partners conform. These fantasies draw further attention to the ways in which current models of heterosexuality need reimagining.

Patterns arise across the first three chapters which illuminate the ways in which the paradoxes of postfeminism are navigated in the stories. For example, the use of irony and humour emerges as key coping strategies for discontent with postfeminist ways of living. In 'Cat Person', we see how Margot uses humour to distance herself from the difficult and unpleasant unwanted sex that she is engaged in, whereas in 'Los Angeles' and 'Would Like to Meet' both Alice and Vivien use humour to present themselves as composed and collected – unflappable in the face of adversity. Humour and irony create a distance between one's self and one's negative feelings, both in order to avoid engaging with something difficult and to cover up negative feelings. As coping mechanisms or 'blocks' against certain types of feeling, this performed humorousness diagnoses situations of obstructed agency in the same way that ugly feelings do.

I have considered race (in particular, whiteness) and class across the first three chapters. This is not merely due to the intersectional approach I have taken to my analysis, but due to the ways in which postfeminist discourses privilege and idealise wealth and whiteness to the extent that other experiences become invisible. To this end, those who do not conform to this ideal in some, or many, ways are encouraged to set aside their differences and the obstacles they may face and strive towards postfeminist and neoliberal ideals as though they are on equal footing with their highly privileged counterparts. As Marston argues, in relation to postfeminist cinema, '[w]hiteness may be critiqued in relation to patriarchal power structures, but what is markedly less common...is a critique of how such power

structures disadvantage those who are neither white or of a privileged socioeconomic class.<sup>367</sup> In Chapter Three, I read a story that centres middle-class white protagonists – ‘Head to Toe’ – side-by-side with ‘The Empty the Empty the Empty’, a story that centres a Chinese American protagonist and a Black-Hispanic protagonist from working class backgrounds. This enabled me to unpick the way postfeminist discourses interpellate its subjects as individuals with an ostensibly equal opportunity to achieve its ideals, which elides the socioeconomic difficulties that affect a woman’s ability to freely choose. The blanket invitation to all women to partake in and uphold the project of postfeminism, along with its emphasis on self-responsibility, makes it challenging for its subjects to identify the structures that disseminate its unachievable ideals, and so they turn inwards and blame themselves for their inability to achieve it.

Visibility and, relatedly, light also recur across the chapters. The desire to be seen and to ‘shine’ permeates postfeminist scholarship – something it shares with short story theory, which is also concerned with light and sight metaphors, particularly in relation to the epiphanic moment. In Chapter Four, I address the third research question, which asks: why the short story? I make the case that the form is especially adept at charting entangled and disorienting feelings, which includes (but is not limited to) postfeminist feeling. This is connected to the short story’s political capacity, its ability to invoke and gesture towards alternative ways of living. This is not (or at least, not always) done explicitly. Rather than giving us clear directions for how and what to change, or fulfilling the demand for hopefulness and optimism, the short story dwells in what is difficult. It asks us to

---

<sup>367</sup> Marston, p. 4.

think about the way things are, in the present, by refusing to promise, or even gesture towards, a transformed future.

PART TWO

# I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY

*A collection of short stories*

## Shut Your Mouth

00:03. Tuesday night. A hazy shape, static against the darkness. Ponytail, puffer jacket, handbag. A girl, like a blast of light.

The CCTV footage slows as the girl leaves the fried chicken shop; a box of food clutched to her chest with one hand, phone in the other. She taps on the screen as she walks down the road and slips out of shot – a moment of lunar emptiness, the light crackles – before the door swings open and she steps out into the street again. The clip loops on repeat. I scour the screen, looking for something – a tiny detail, an overlooked speck of evidence, eyes glinting from the bushes. There must be something we are not seeing.

I return to the search page and click onto a website for amateur sleuths. It is full of non-professionals who are, like me, trying to cobble together the pieces and create a fuller picture. I learn that her last text message was sent at 00:11. GPS records show that at this point, she was on her usual route home, approximately five minutes' walk from her flat. Two minutes later, her phone was switched off (or destroyed). It has not yet been switched back on. At the bottom of the article, the comments: *She can't have just disappeared. She can't have vanished into thin air.*

Kirsten sweeps into my room without knocking. I snap the laptop shut. Daylight seeps from the sky, the colour of dirty dishwater. She switches on the main light, a bare bulb. It makes my eyes ache.

You're not even dressed yet, she says.

I'm not going.

You'll like it when we get there.

I don't want to.

It will be fun.

I flop back onto my bed in protest and turn my head towards Kirsten – now double Kirsten, one Kirsten looking at the other in my full-length mirror. She's wearing a dress I haven't seen before. It looks new. A black halter neck, sweetheart neckline, tucked waist, printed all over with blood-red cherries.

Wasn't that style popular like, a hundred years ago? Don't you think it's kind of dated?

No, Kirsten says to herself in the mirror. It's right on the pulse. She turns this way and that, swishes her skirt. Cherries dance across the glass.

Kirsten and I know each other from school. We weren't close then, but we are now. We moved out of halls and in with each other last year. Technically, we also live with a woman named Sandra – she owns the house and pays council tax – but she is always away on business. We see her sporadically, maybe twice a month. Her suits are always crisp, clean and crease-free – even when she claims to have been travelling all day. When she is gone, Sandra keeps her bedroom locked. The house is blank and pristine, like a hotel or an Airbnb. She never leaves any personal items out, nothing to betray her interests or taste. Kirsten and I navigate the shared spaces carefully, as though we are just visiting. We never invite our friends over. Most evenings, we huddle up on Sandra's slate-grey corner sofa and watch sitcoms on Netflix. But at least once a week, Kirsten insists that we go 'out out'.

I drag myself up from the bed. I put on a clinging velvet dress, midnight blue, black tights, boots. I barely glance at myself in the mirror. Kirsten rakes some product through my hair and scrunches it at the ends. I whine that my feet hurt all the way down the road, then stare out of the bus window while she sends a stream of WhatsApp messages confirming that we are indeed on our way. When we get to the bar, everyone is talking about some photo.

Have you seen it?

You haven't?

Best photo of the year, hands down.

I start to pick at the label of my beer, which has become soggy with condensation. It peels off in long, satisfying strips. Kirsten glares at me. I never try with these things. We stand at the edge of a cluster of people. Kirsten: smiling, engaging, trying to work her way in. Me: staring into my bottle and wondering when our peers became so well-versed in photography.

I just think it's really sexy, says this guy Luke, a second year, whose blonde fringe is parted at the centre of his forehead. Does everything have to be a political statement? Can't we move past all that and share in the experience of a beautiful woman enjoying herself?

I completely agree, Shell chips in. That's what's so empowering about it. The freedom, the pleasure. It's just sad that a woman enjoying food is something that has to be commented on. Isn't it time we talked about something else?

I think about the missing woman, the fried chicken. I imagine her lips and fingers, slick with grease. Kirsten nods and nods like her head is malfunctioning.

Like, haven't we moved on since the noughties? says Luke. You know, Kate

Moss, Amy Winehouse. Heroin chic or whatever. That was such a sad time.

He gazes past us, out into the distance, his eyes full of reverence. I make a face at Kirsten, but she is staring at Luke with wide, shining eyes, like he's something she could eat.

I go to the toilet to be on my own. The plastic lid creaks under my weight. I search on my phone for the famous photo. I think of Luke's smirk when he announced to the table that he'd taken an extra-curricular photography course in Year Eleven – as though that qualified him to diagnose the single best photograph of the entire year. I tap with my fingertip and the thumbnail swells to full size. A young woman tucked into a white plastic garden chair – her pale knees bumping against each other, white-socked ankles crossed. The grass shimmers in the background, a false, super-saturated green, like something from Dr Seuss. After a beat, I recognise the woman – a famous supermodel. I've never seen her like this: relaxed, dressed down, casual. She is blurred – ever so slightly out of focus. The real subject of the photo isn't her at all, but the hot dog, which she holds out in two hands, ketchup dripping between her long fingers. The red sauce is lurid and other-worldly, stark against the grass, like something pretending to be natural – fake blood or lipstick. The inside of the sausage glistens pinkly in the sunshine. But the photo isn't the way you might imagine – grotesque and vulgar – in fact, it is an interesting image. Tasteful, even. The woman's mouth is full: a bulge in the soft meat of her cheek, her head turned slightly from the camera. Within hours of being posted, it had garnered more likes than Ariana Grande's wedding pictures, enough to rival The Egg.

In bed that night, I open the image on my phone again. I trace the outline of

the woman's face, the smooth curve of the hot dog. I swipe from the photo to the news. The missing woman has slipped down a few tiers on the news site, become a little less newsworthy. The hot dog is ahead of her: 'Fluke "aesthetically perfect" photograph track to receive the most Instagram likes in history'. I sit and look at it for a long time. After a while, my mouth waters. I realise I am hungry.

The next day, I decide to visit the chicken shop. I want to get down there, into the thick of the investigation. It's not that I think I'll find the girl necessarily – that would be ridiculous – but I have a strong feeling that there's a connection between us. Perhaps I could be useful. On the bus, I scroll through the news. There are no updates. The police are keen to emphasise that this remains a missing persons case, not a murder investigation. Kirsten texts to ask me how I'm feeling. I told her I wasn't well to explain why I was skipping uni. I send her back a sad face emoji which is not a complete lie. The hot dog photo is everywhere on my social feeds. Vegans and animal rights activists have spoken out about the fact that it 'glorifies the consumption of meat'. Health campaigners aren't impressed either, claiming that public figures have a responsibility to encourage healthy eating. Kirsten sends me a hug emoji, then she sends me an opinion piece with the headline: 'The image that single-handedly eliminated food-based shame.'

*People are losing their minds, Kirsten writes. They need to get a grip.*

*I thought you liked it? I text back.*

*It's not about liking it. It's about being realistic about its impact.*

I get off the bus at Roderham Road. It's a wide street, residential. The houses are mostly Victorian terraces with brightly coloured front doors and brass

knockers. The chicken shop is further down, in between a newsagent and a beauty salon. *What happened here?* I whisper to myself, like I am narrating a documentary. I turn on my phone's camera and film the journey up the road. I will analyse the footage later.

The chicken shop is busy for a Thursday morning. It's only 10am and not long opened. There are four tables with red plastic chairs, nailed to the ground, and yellow tabletops. The colours make me think of preschool. All of the tables are full. When I get to the front of the queue, I ask the man behind the till if he knows what the missing girl ordered. He frowns and looks down at his blue-gloved hands. His cap covers his face so I can't read his expression.

I'm not supposed to talk about that anymore, he says, head still bowed. I am aware of the people behind me, impatient, ravenous.

That's OK, I say, leaning forward. I'm not press. Just curious.

He looks up at me then, looks me right in the eye. So, you want a three-piece chicken meal with regular fries and a strawberry Mirinda?

Yes. I nod slowly, knowingly. Yes, that is what I want.

I had hoped there would be more clues in her choice of meal. For example, there would be lots to read into the choice to order twenty extra-hot wings. Or perhaps she would have ordered enough food for four people, and then I could try to work out who she was going to see. But no. Her order was nothing special. It was what I usually ordered after a night out. It was what anyone would order.

So, I say, fishing in my purse for cash. Have you been busier since... you know?

Yes. It's been busy, very busy. Nearly back to normal now though. Anyway, that'll be five ninety-nine. He takes the cash, and his eyes slide over me and onto

the person behind. Next, please?

There aren't any seats free, but that's fine. I had always planned to walk out of here with my food. I put my can of Mirinda in my bag, and I think, *she must have put her can of Mirinda in her bag*. I clutch the box of chicken to my chest, hold my phone in my other hand. The door swings shut behind me. I take a right and start walking down the road. I take out my phone again to film the route, turning it this way and that to capture all the houses, anywhere she could have turned off, the food cooling against my chest. Halfway down the road, I come across the entrance to a patch of woodland. I've seen it before, on Google maps, a patch of broccoli among the miniature houses. It is cordoned off with white and blue police tape. I tell myself to cross the road, duck under the tape and look around, but I can't. I want to find clues; I want to find her alive. I don't want to find her dead body. I stand there for another minute, willing myself into action, still filming. Then I turn and head back towards the bus stop. I start eating the chips. They're a bit cold and soggy, but I'm starving – I didn't eat breakfast.

Kirsten is in the kitchen when I get home, slicing up hot dogs to put on top of her salad.

Where have you been?

I take off my jacket and slide onto one of the bar stools. Out.

Out where? You're supposed to be sick.

I felt better.

She sits down opposite me and starts to eat her lunch. I watch her chew iceberg lettuce and frankfurter, flashes of green and fleshy pink appearing and

disappearing as she moves her mouth, like clothes in a washing machine.

You smell disgusting, she says.

Thank you.

I mean it. You smell like grease.

Interesting.

You went to the chicken shop, didn't you?

I shrug.

You have got to stop with this obsession. It's unhealthy. What exactly were you hoping to find? Blood on the pavement? Her bag in a nearby dustbin? I can't believe you!

But –

Please, just stop. Like, it's time to move on?

I look at the granite countertop, its flashes of light like stars in the night sky. I don't know what I was hoping to find. I just wanted to be there, to do something.

The police must know something you don't, Kirsten says, as though she's read my mind. Maybe she's run away or killed herself or something.

I nod, like these would be reassuring outcomes.

At the weekend, my mum comes for a visit. We get lunch at a fancy place in town. We sit at a table by the window, so we can watch the Saturday shoppers moving past in a continuous stream, like brightly coloured fish in an aquarium tank. My mum orders a tomato and burrata salad with balsamic vinegar. I get white fish in a creamy sauce with garlic buttered potatoes. She's on her own. My dad is in Taiwan on a work trip.

He really wanted to come, she says, her voice syrupy and sorry.

I nod.

Afterwards, we walk around the busy shopping centre together. We look at lots of clothes but never try anything on. It gives us something to talk about. Eventually, we go into Boots. My mum buys me some new deodorant and moisturiser, a jumbo pack of maxi-pads. We try out a few of the perfumes. One in particular catches my eye. It's called *Savoureux*, which the salesgirl tells us means 'tasty' in French. Behind her, an enormous poster of a woman with dark, hollowed out eyes, hunched over a plate of ribs, up to her elbows in sauce. It smells like caramel and metal. My mum buys it for me as a gift.

Lying on my bed that evening, I read an article about this year's unlikeliest trend: food. There are photos of an actress who wore a dress made of pasta to the Met gala, headpieces made from hollowed-out bowls of watermelons on the runway at Dolce and Gabbana. *Savoureux* featured, as well as a skincare campaign in which dozens of girls lie on a pink satin-covered bed, eating pizza. I look at them, stretched out and effortlessly beautiful, surrounded by pillows. Their skin is perfect, and their mouths are open, cat-like, to catch globs of melted cheese. Kirsten appears in my doorway.

Look at this, she says, looming over me.

I shut my laptop and replace it with hers. On the screen, a photo of Kirsten, riding the Tube and eating a doughnut. Her mouth is open; she is poised, ready to take another bite. There are flecks of icing and sprinkles on her skirt and dusting her upper lip.

What do you think?

Um, I say. Who took it?

There isn't anything especially artistic about the photo. It's a bit blurry and at a somewhat unflattering angle, Kirsten's eyes half-closed as though they're rolling back in her head.

I don't know. Does it matter?

What do you mean you don't know?

It's on this new group... But that's not the point. Do you *like* it?

What group?

OK, OK, she says, shuffling me along to make space for herself on my mattress. Someone started this group online. At first it was called something like... Women Eating on the Underground, because it started in London, but now it's got pictures of women from all over the world. You're not allowed to post photos of yourself or people you know – only strangers. Look –

She clicks through to the main page and scrolls for a moment. She shows me a photo of an elderly woman, sat on a bench, hair tied in a scarf, mouth closing on a sandwich.

This ones from Lyon, Kirsten says, and this one... This one's New York.

She expands a photo of a preteen girl on a subway platform. She is wearing rainbow tie-dye shorts and eating a pastry.

And who knows where this one is, she says, opening a video of a woman eating a chicken dish in the economy section of a plane. Somewhere above us, right now, there's a woman eating... It's brilliant!

I watch the woman on the plane over and over again, the way her eyes dart

around as though she knows she is being watched, the way she chews quickly and swallows hard, her forehead centimetres from the seat in front. She dabs her lips with a napkin after every forkful.

And now there's a photo of me in the group too, Kirsten says, with satisfaction.

And you're happy about that?

She surveys my face. I thought you'd be pleased for me. I didn't think you would be jealous.

I snort. I'm not jealous.

Yeah... OK, you're not jealous.

I'm not. I think you're being stupid.

Stupid?

It's creepy, Ki. It's an invasion of your privacy.

Wow. Thanks for your concern.

She leaves my room and slams the door behind her. The framed postcards on my wall shudder. I open the group page on my phone and swipe through endless – literally endless – photographs of women eating. I wonder how long Kirsten had been looking before she saw herself eventually materialise on the page like a mirage, like a gift. There is a picture I recognise, of a woman biting into a muffin. I don't know the woman, but she has been turned into a meme, variations on a theme. You know, *get you a girl who looks at you the way this woman looks at this muffin*. Some images I scroll past, but others make me stop. There is the woman in a car, eating fast food from a paper bag, fries dangling from her mouth, gaze fixed on the road ahead. The woman on a bench in the spring sunshine, eating an ice

cream. Her eyes closed, a moment of perfect contentment.

I wait for some sort of feminist backlash, but it doesn't come. Everyone seems to find the group amusing and unproblematic, which makes me wonder if I might be jealous after all. I don't know what else to call the tangle of anger and uneasiness in the pit of my belly, and that seems as good a name as any. I look carefully through the photos on the group. It's true that they all seem to be posted in a festive, celebratory spirit. And there is something powerful about it, the intensity with which these women are desired, and desire. I read the comments on each photo. They say things like, *I like a woman with a big appetite*, or *I wish my wife ate like this*, or *We love to see it!!* Sometimes women comment on each other's photos, in a supportive, sisterly way: *Bite of dreams* or *Perfect chew, hun*.

I stop eating in public after that. It feels like the right thing to do. But sometimes I creak open a packet of crisps at the bus stop just to feel a frisson of danger. The packet puffs and crackles and the air turns solid. Nobody moves. What would happen if I took a crisp out of the packet and put it in my mouth? What if I crunched it with my teeth, chewed and swallowed? Would people watch me, take photos? Would somebody hurt me – maybe even kill me? Eventually, I put the crisps back inside my bag, uneaten, beside the unopened can of Mirinda. The air changes, the other people at the bus stop let out their breath collectively. Disappointed perhaps, or relieved. I touch the can of Mirinda, dented and garishly pink. It has become a kind of talisman. I tell myself I'll open it when the missing girl is found.

The weather brightens. Blossom bursts into life and the daffodils go crispy at the

frills, as though nature itself is frazzled by the sudden seasonal shift. More girls go missing. There is the influencer who was last seen by the delivery guy who dropped off her Chinese takeaway. The middle-aged mum who was last seen collecting a cake from Patisserie Valerie for her daughter's birthday. I watch the video of her buckling the cake box into the front seat over and over until my vision blurs. My books are stacked on my desk, but I can't bring myself to open them. The words swim away from me when I try. What little energy I have leaches slowly from my body and into my phone. I am tense and jittery without it, can only breathe when I am watching something – a police press conference or a video of a cat or a baby or both, celebrities strolling around their extravagant houses answering 73 random questions. I learn whether they prefer tea or coffee, city or beach, burgers or pasta.

I am lying on the grass on the quad, my back slightly damp, when I spot Kirsten and Shell walking towards me. I lower my sunglasses and wave. There is something different about them.

What have you got on your faces?

What d'you mean? says Shell, her voice muffled by the shimmery material strung over her mouth.

What do you mean, what do I mean?

Huh?

I turn to Kirsten, who is taking a pair of sunglasses out of her bag. She shrugs.

It's just a voile. I continue to stare. It's just this face accessory, so you can't see our mouths properly, not in detail anyway.

I don't get it. Why are you hiding your mouth?

I'm not. I love my mouth. It's just... Well... Don't you ever feel exposed? When

you walk around with your mouth just... out like that?

Yeah, says Shell. When you think about it, it's kind of gross.

I bring my hand to my face instinctively and finger my lips. They feel supple and soft, different to the other types of skin I have on show. I breathe out of my mouth sometimes. It is an opening, a hole that leads to my tongue, my throat, my insides. All slick membranes and private flesh. Kirsten and Shell are right: it feels weird that it is out, on display, for anyone to look at.

Sandra is home that night. Kirsten and I open the door to see her heels placed neatly together on the shoe rack, a suitcase waiting on the freshly vacuumed carpet.

Girls! Sandra says calling to us from the kitchen. Hello there. It's only a flying one. I'm back out on the road tomorrow.

We become children again in her presence. We smile and mumble. I think about how I watched a TikTok of someone describing this as 'smumbling'. *Why is it that the smart girls are always smumbling?* They said. *Speak up, ladies! We want to hear your voices.*

Would you like a glass of wine?

Sandra is already halfway through a bottle of red that was most definitely not bought from a supermarket. We look at each other.

Sure, Kirsten says. Thank you.

Sandra looks at me and raises her eyebrow. I nod.

So, Sandra says. How's it all going? How's university life? How's the house?

No problems, I trust.

Kirsten and I glance at each other again. This is unlike Sandra. Usually, she greets us cursorily, without questions or interest. We see her eating something in the kitchen – a salad if it’s dinnertime or a bowl of muesli if it’s morning – and then she’s gone again, or shut away in her room, preparing to creep away at the crack of dawn.

Oh, yeah, Kirsten says. It’s all going well, thank you. And of course, we love the house.

Yes, we love the house, I say.

Fantastic. Sandra smiles and pours herself another glass of wine. I can hear the tick of the clock, the gentle hiss of the dishwasher.

This is great wine, says Kirsten. Thank you, Sandra.

Look girls, Sandra says, suddenly serious. I need to talk to you about something. It’s nothing to worry about, nothing too serious – not for you anyway – but, ah. Well, I’ll not beat about the bush. There are some... photographs of me and my friends doing the rounds on the Internet. You might not have seen them yet, but I expect you will. It’s all a rather unfortunate breach of our privacy, you see. We’re all very upset about it, and we’re taking the necessary steps to have these images taken down. But in the meantime, well... They’re out there. And it seems there’s nothing we can do about it.

Oh, Kirsten says. Gosh.

I don’t say any actual words, but I nod and make sounds, not trusting myself to speak.

Oh goodness, Sandra says. I’ve worried you both. I can see it in your eyes. I’m fine. We’re all fine. It’s just one of those Internet things, isn’t it? You never know

when it'll be your moment in the spotlight. And – oh! Oh dear. I haven't led you to think these images are in any way *sexual*, have I? No, no. Of course, it's nothing like that. We were just... well. We were just in a restaurant. We were eating. We were in a private dining room, or at least it was supposed to be a private dining room. It was my friend's birthday...

Sandra reaches for her wine glass, and I notice that her hand is trembling.

We Google the images together later, huddled up in Kirsten's bed. They have been posted in the 'Women Eating...' group. In fact, they are the top viewed photos. In the first photos, the six women are perfectly composed: cheeks powdered, clothes pressed, hair coiffed. They lean towards each other for dainty air kisses, like flowers swaying on a stem. Then they begin to eat. They slurp oysters from their shells, crack langoustines with their bare hands and suck the juice from their heads. They crunch on deep fried baby squid and swipe slices of sourdough bread through mounds of mackerel pâté. By the end of the meal, the women are glassy-eyed and glossy-lipped, dishevelled and satisfied. The last photo depicts two of the women: one stretching her legs out, feet resting in the lap of the other. The slanted afternoon light falls across their faces, washing them in pink, giving the photo a dreamlike quality. We almost don't recognise Sandra, a dab of sauce on her chin, her head thrown back in laughter. Another woman clasps a glass of wine and gazes tenderly in her direction.

Sandra, eh? Kirsten says. Who knew?

Ssh! She might hear you.

We read on. That morning, the women had released a joint statement, calling

for an investigation into who took the photographs and ‘disseminated them without consent.’ They used words like ‘outrage’, ‘violation’ and ‘illegal’. They wanted the person who ‘stole’ their images to be brought to justice. They called for the ‘grossly misogynistic’ group to be shut down. They called for the restaurant itself to be shut down. They called for prison time. They called for the City of Edinburgh to investigate the public safety standards the restaurant had breached.

This is a bit much, isn’t it? says Kirsten. They’re just photos.

I didn’t realise it was a crime to take photos of people.

Sounds like they’re making a lot of fuss over nothing.

We return to the photos. They are magnificent photos. They stir something in me, a ripple spreading out from my navel to the ends of my hair. I feel alive, the way I feel when I stand at the top of a tall building, or in front of a great work of art, as though all the world is collapsing into this one, singular moment. There is something warming about these photos: the women’s visible satisfaction, their glistening mouths.

I guess they didn’t exactly volunteer themselves for this, I say. I mean, they were just eating.

But they were eating in a public place. No one is being nasty about them – all the comments are positive! Or... they were...

Kirsten pauses over a recent comment and we both flinch.

Bloody hell, I say.

Well, Kirsten says. People are upset, aren’t they? They were getting good attention, the right kind of attention. They should have just enjoyed their moment in the spotlight.

The next day, I wrap a pair of tights over my face to go to the shop. It is the kind of place that sells all sorts of accessories, from handbags to socks, phone cases, lip balm, sunglasses. I knew they'd sell voiles. They have a whole wall full of them, in so many different colours, patterns and styles. You could choose a different one to go with every outfit. At the till, the saleswoman tries to tempt me with a new product, a kind of glue that keeps your lips stuck together for a few hours.

It means you can show off your lips in a risqué way, but still keep it classy, she explains. You know, when you want to be that extra bit sexy, for a date night or something, but you don't want to leave yourself exposed. No slips! She smiles beneath her own lilac silk voile.

I walk around the shop a few times, peering at everything they have on sale. The choice is overwhelming. In the end, I stick with the one voile, the first one I'd seen. It is kind of plain – black lace – but I figure I can wear it with a few different outfits.

Great choice! says the saleswoman as she scans my voile, bags it up and asks me to tap my card. Next time, look out for our silk and satin range. They're sold out today but we're due a delivery next week. They're so good for your skin!

I nod and smile broadly as I back out of the shop – then I clasp a hand over my mouth.

When I get home, I tell Kirsten about the glue. Don't you think it's weird though? Literally gluing your mouth shut?

Kirsten is applying peach pink lip gloss and looking at herself in the mirror.

That depends on what's more important to you, doesn't it? she says, carefully lowering her face voile. Looking elegant and in control... or being able to speak.

I know which one is more important to you!

She shrugs. Women have died for my right to speak.

Is that even true?

I'm pretty sure. Are you going to wear your voile tonight? Let's see it on.

I wear red lipstick underneath the voile. At first, I'm not sure if it's worth it, but it makes me feel better. Just knowing it is there makes me feel powerful, even if no one can see it. I match it with a long-sleeved sheer shirt, a black lacy bra, and a pair of black leather trousers. Then I spritz myself down with *Savoureux*.

You look bad ass, Kirsten says, nodding approvingly. Like cat woman or something.

I scowl, but I am secretly pleased.

Selfie!

Kirsten takes a photo and posts it on Instagram. We look great together, her shimmery blue voile and my black lace. She's right: I do look bad ass. I watch the likes stack up. The front door slams. I jump.

What the hell? I say. Was that Sandra?

Oh yeah, Kirsten says. She's been hanging around all day. Said something about a meeting being cancelled?

Oh.

I go to the window and watch Sandra walk down our street towards the main road, dragging her suitcase behind her.

Before long, we stopped eating in restaurants. It wasn't law, nobody enforced it. But we had all chosen to stop. Some restaurants provided women-only seating areas, which were first behind curtains but, in time, became lockable cubicles. These were much more convenient. Sometimes there was a window, but it was covered in a sheet of privacy plastic so that other people couldn't see in. When we looked out, the world was dim. Food was delivered and orders were placed through a hatch in the wall.

Don't you think this is kind of ridiculous? Shell said one day, as we huddled in a cubicle while our dates ate in the main restaurant. Why should we have to suffer for the actions of one group of women?

Who? I asked, forking up a mouthful of risotto from the dish balanced on my knees.

Shell looked away.

She's talking about Sandra, said Kirsten. The Edinburgh lot.

Sorry, I always forget she's your landlady.

She's more like a roommate these days, Kirsten said. She doesn't travel so much anymore. Not since they lost the court case, and of course, the threats...

I remember the photographs of the women standing together outside the courthouse. They looked older and colder, their faces drawn tight shut, impenetrable. Sandra looked so lost and tired, stripped of everything that made her special. I had to look away. I was furious with her, with them, for how easy it could have been.

I don't know how you can stay living there, said Shell.

It's only a couple more weeks now. We're moving out next month. Anyway,

if it hadn't been them, it would have been someone else. We needed a wake-up call.

To realise what? That we should be hiding our faces?

No, no. Not our faces. Just our mouths.

Listen to you – this is insane!

Oh stop it, Shell. You think you're so bloody revolutionary because you want to eat in the main restaurant? Well, go on then. No one's stopping you! Can't you respect my choice to eat in here? I don't want to flaunt my tongue at any random man who walks past. That's my choice, OK? Isn't that what feminism is all about?

I looked down at my risotto. It was really good. They'd used some fancy mushrooms in there. Ceps. Girolles. Porcini, maybe.

I don't think you understand what feminism actually is, said Shell. It's to do with the rights of women?

This is my right! Kirsten snapped. She put her plate down on the bench beside her, next to a half-drunk cocktail.

Kirsten and Shell glared at each other for a moment, and I thought about how much effort they'd put into making themselves look good and how haggard their faces appeared now, crumpled with electric light. Still, I suppose it didn't matter. There was no one in here to see us.

Screw this, Shell said, getting to her feet. I'm done. I won't stay where I'm not allowed to sit at a bloody table.

The door clicked shut behind her. It was plain grey, made from some sort of textured plastic, like hardened dust. Kirsten picked up her plate and began cutting up her steak vigorously, putting small pieces into her mouth. I watched Shell walk

away through our tiny letterbox window, the world sepia-toned and dark. I thought I should stop her, or at least tell her to be careful, especially as she had left her voile behind on the table. But at the end of the day, she was a grown-up, and she could make her own choices.

## Chastity

They had been co-workers for about a year before anything happened. Harri joined the company as a waitress but was quickly promoted, first to front of house supervisor and then to duty manager – even though she was only twenty-three, almost twenty-four. Technically, she outranked Jakob when they were on shift together, but he had been with the company since the start, when there was only one restaurant, and this gave him an unofficial authority. Now there were several restaurants, all across London, and even one in Brighton.

It was Harri's shift that night, a busy Saturday full of rowdy customers, broken glass and endless rounds of 'Happy Birthday'. The team's morale began to wane around midnight, so Harri comped a bottle of tequila and told them to knock themselves out. As she passed a shot to Jakob, he winked at her and she felt an unexpected shiver shoot up through the middle of her body, like a burst of light. Some people stayed for more drinks after they closed, but before long, they began yawning and saying their goodbyes, heading off to catch night buses or meet up with others to continue the night's adventures. Harri closed the back door behind the last gaggle of waitresses and sat down at one of the restaurant tables. She had two messages, both from Fred.

*Hey gorgeous. How's it going? X*

*I guess you're having a busy one! See you in the morning. Love you. X*

The table was covered with mess: crisp packets, lime wedges, paper cups filled with cigarette butts. She would need to wipe the table down again before she took out the bins and set the alarms. As she rose to fetch a cloth, Harri heard a tapping sound. It was four o'clock in the morning. The whole front of the restaurant was glass. The bar lights were on – she was lit up like an exhibit in a museum – and the street outside was dark. She froze. There could be anyone out there at this time of night. Harri slunk down the side of the restaurant towards the host station, where the lights were switched off. There, by the door – a figure. She squinted and tried to make out their face. All the while the finer details of the latest rape and murder case marched through her head. She reminded herself that there was CCTV throughout the restaurant and a panic alarm by the host station that could call the police to the restaurant within minutes. Harri stepped out of the darkness. It was only Jakob, his grinning face pressed up against the glass.

Did I scare you? he said, after she unlocked the deadbolt.

No.

I missed my bus... Can I wait in here?

Of course.

Jakob opened his mouth to thank her, but something took over. In a heady rush of relief and adrenaline, Harri kissed him. *Oh*, she thought to herself. *So, this is something I want.* After a moment, Jakob began to manoeuvre Harri from the restaurant into the kitchen, their lips still pressed together, hands grabbing at each other's clothes.

What are we doing? she said.

There are no cameras back of house, Jakob murmured, though that didn't exactly answer her question.

Jakob lifted Harri by her waist and put her down on the chrome work surface, shiny and spotless from the post-shift clean. A thought flashed through Harri's head: this is where they prepare food. Suddenly she felt like a piece of meat in Jakob's practised hands, a free-range chicken whose chest cavity he was staring into, wondering what to stuff it with. She closed her eyes. Jakob nudged his head between her legs. What had she started? She hadn't thought this through. What about Fred? What about Lola, Jakob's girlfriend? Harri pushed Jakob's head out from between her legs and got down onto her knees on the cold tiled floor. She began to unbuckle his belt.

Uh oh, he said.

She pulled his jeans and boxers down and found, instead of the erect human cock she was expecting, a robot cock, sheathed in chrome, fitted with a tiny padlock and secured around his hips with a chain. Her own distorted face reflected back at her in its shiny surface.

What the fuck?

Jakob bit down on his knuckles and shook his head apologetically. Harri stood up. She felt dizzy. She was cold. The strip lights made their skin glow sickly yellow.

What is it?

Well... It's a cock cage.

Can you take it off?

I wish, he said. I don't have the key.

Where's the key?

Lola has it.

Lola? Harri's head was spinning. Is this... Is she worried you're going to cheat or something?

No, no. Nothing like that, Jakob said, pulling up his boxers.

Harri rubbed her forehead.

Sorry, Jakob said. It's nothing to worry about. It's just a sex thing. You know, she controls how and when I come. Like, power play.

Oh. Harri leant back against the cold metal surface that still bore the print of her buttocks.

Oh no, said Jakob. I've upset you.

No. It just made me feel bad, that's all.

Jakob pulled her in close and kissed her. I don't want you to feel bad.

He slipped his hand between her legs. She still didn't have any underwear on. Everything else fell away, and Harri heard herself asking him to pull her hair. Something had opened up inside her and she was running with it, running, running, through this new, wide-open space and not looking back. She closed her eyes and felt the blood beating around her body, her skin tingling, the physical sensations of being alive.

\*

Harri and Jakob were meeting at 2pm in a café not too far from the restaurant. It was starting to rain. Harri pulled her jacket closer around her and walked with her

head down. Jakob waved to her from a table by the window. He stood up and wiped his hands on his jeans. His hands moved upwards in a strange, flitting motion as though he was about to hug her but then thought better of it. He clasped them together at his chest.

Hi, he said.

Hello.

Coffee?

Yes, please. Cappuccino.

I'll be right back.

Harri glanced around. The cafe was empty. The walls were purple, every surface filled with green houseplants. There were a few brightly coloured works of art on the walls, the kind filled with shapes and squiggles that were supposed to represent something that Harri could never see. She took off her jacket and checked her phone. She had to be at work at 3pm. Jakob came back with the coffees.

So, he said.

So.

He watched her for a moment. Harri met his eyes but had to look away. She felt exposed, like she was being assessed. Her cheeks flushed with colour.

I owe you an apology, Jakob said finally.

Harri added another cube of sugar to her coffee and stirred it, even though it was too sweet already. Jakob waited for her to respond. When she didn't, he continued.

I should explain a few things.

Harri felt like a recalcitrant schoolgirl, waiting to be told off for something she didn't think was her fault.

So firstly, Lola and I have an open relationship. That means we are both allowed to have sex with other people, so –

I know what an open relationship is.

Of course. And, well, as far as I know, your relationship isn't an open one...

No.

So, I'd like to apologise. I shouldn't have... gone through with that, knowing what I know.

Harri pressed her lips together.

I don't want you to feel badly in any way about what happened. I take full responsibility.

Well, how do you feel about it?

The question came out snappier than she'd intended, as though she was telling him off. He smiled, in a slow, infuriating way, as though he was really enjoying seeing her like this – nervous, out of her depth. Harri's tummy was flipping over and over and not, as she had previously thought, because she was scared of being caught.

How do I feel about it? I enjoyed it. He paused. But I know it can't happen again.

Harri nodded. She tried to tell herself that the heavy feeling in her chest was not disappointment, but relief.

The next weekend, Harri and Fred went to a barbecue held in the garden of one of

Fred's friend's houses in Clapham. The friend had straw-coloured hair and a floppy fringe that made him look like a member of a 90s boyband. He was shorter than Harri, and at least a head shorter than Fred. He wore glasses with round, wooden frames and a small, silver hoop in one ear.

Fred, my man!

He reached up to sling his arm around Fred's neck. He didn't acknowledge Harri. Fred looked over the friend's shoulder and gave her a half-hearted smile of apology. She followed them along a thickly carpeted hallway, through a kitchen so white it made her think of the orthodontist's office, and into the garden. It was one of the first sunny days of the year; there was still a chill in the air. Harri wore a blue and white patterned dress and her denim jacket. Her legs were speckled with goosebumps.

The girlfriend of one of Fred's other friends came over to say hello. Harri nodded and smiled along, but inside she was smacking herself in the face. The thing she hated most about parties like this was the fact that the conversation never actually went anywhere but repeated itself, going round and round in a circle like a snake eating its own tail.

By the time Fred found her again, she had been given a Pimm's and lemonade and told at least four people that work was going fine, thank you, and then she had listened to each of the four people soliloquise about their own lives for so long – boasting about holidays they'd been on and successes they'd had – that she was amazed they didn't realise how rude they were being. She nodded and smiled and wondered how long they would continue to talk if she didn't say a word. The host finally introduced himself.

Matthias, he said, extending a hand. You must be Harriet, right?

Harri, she said.

Did you ever think about being called Hattie, instead?

Did you ever think about being called Matt?

Touché. Matthias smirked at her over his beer. So, what is it that you do, Harri?

Harri opened her mouth to speak, but Fred jumped in.

She's in restaurants, he said. For now.

Harri hated the way he kept telling people she was 'in restaurants', as though she dealt in them, or had shares in them, as though she wasn't literally there in a real restaurant every single day, counting the grubby notes people paid with, getting down on her knees to wipe up spilled drinks, picking up shards of broken glass with her bare hands.

For now, repeated Matthias. Just a little something to keep you busy until the wedding, eh? Until you've got your hands full with a crowd of little Freds running around the place?

Matthias chuckled before excusing himself to greet a new arrival. Fred was dragged into another conversation with a friend and his new wife. Harri knew she should stay and join in – that was why she was here, after all – but when she heard 'remodel' and 'our interior design friend', she knew she couldn't bear it.

She walked over to the drinks table and asked for a glass of sauvignon blanc, but all they had were natural wines made of grapes she had never heard of. She accepted a glass of the least offensive-looking white wine and walked around the perimeter of the garden, feigning interest in the flower beds.

Fred acted like these gatherings were something to look forward to, but Harri knew that as soon as they got in the car to go home, he would be bitching about something some buddy or other had said. He would be jealous about someone's new car or someone else's new job. These events were nothing but an opportunity for them all to show off to each other. At one point, she had been that thing for Fred, his shiny new girlfriend. But since their engagement party, even his most persistent friends had given up trying to persuade her to sleep with them. When she first told Fred about it, she expected he might get angry, so she told him a watered-down version of the things they said to her. He just laughed. Even later on, when it got worse, when she told him exactly what they said, their beer breath on her cheek in the smoking area while Fred was in the toilet, their hands lingering for too long on her thigh at brunch, Fred continued to laugh it off, saying they were just chancers and they would never do anything, not with his girl. The possessive made Harri wince. But she didn't say anything – after all, wasn't she the one hoping that he would go out and defend her against his friend's advances?

Harri thought about children – their children. As a couple, they didn't spend much time around children. There were none in either of their families – Fred was an only child and Harri's sister was seven years younger than her – and none of their friends had had children yet. Fred's friends and their girlfriends spoke about having children all the time, as though it was something that was going to happen whether they wanted it to or not. Harri thought about that, a childless future, stretching forward, unpunctuated by round, cherubic faces. It seemed at once impossibly sad and also, strangely freeing.

What are you looking at?

Fred appeared at her shoulder. She was staring into a small, decorative pond, in which it was clear no real wildlife lived.

Hm?

Lost in a daydream, are you? Fred took her hand. Come on, I want you to meet George's new girlfriend.

In the car on the way home from the party, her insides warmed by those sour glasses of wine, Harri began to feel faint twinges of desire, a string tightened somewhere deep inside her. She looked at Fred, her Fred – his kind eyes, his lightly tanned skin and his easy, affable smile. She stroked his arm. He looked across the car at her and smiled.

Is somebody a little drunk?

Maybe.

Sometimes she wished he was the kind of guy who would take advantage of her or, at least, pretend to take advantage of her. She wished he would look at her like he was starving, and she was the last plate of food left on the entire planet. A couple of years ago, when they were backpacking around Southeast Asia, they had sex all the time. Sometimes they'd make elaborate plans for the day, agree to meet some fellow travellers to see some gorgeous waterfall or visit a temple or a street food market, and then at the last minute they would collapse back into bed and spend the day naked, stewing in their own filth, the sun white-hot through the cracks in the blinds. Harri decided that when they got back to their flat, she would just go for it, the way she used to back then. She would surprise him by dropping to her knees the minute they got through the door. He would like that. She smiled

to herself thinking about it. Then afterwards, maybe he would lift her up in his arms and carry her into the bedroom, throw her down on the bed and really give it to her. No, he would go slowly, really slowly. So slowly that she couldn't stand it. She'd be moaning and begging him to please just fuck her harder, please –

The car stopped and Harri's eyes flew open. The face in her fantasy changed from Fred to Jakob so quickly she hardly noticed. In the mornings, on her way to work, she had taken to checking Jakob's social media accounts. He didn't have Instagram, just a poorly maintained Facebook and a Twitter page mostly filled with retweets. Still, Harri found herself visiting them every day, just to check in and see if anything had changed. When there was something, the new knowledge gave her a thrill. Lola was much more active. She didn't use Facebook much but on Twitter she at least wrote her own tweets sometimes, and she posted fairly regularly on Instagram. The other night she posted a picture of a chicken salad and a glass of wine with the caption: *Dinner for Two*. Harri scoured the picture for details – the nice wine glasses and the trendy earthenware bowl. In the background, a basil plant, a jam jar of pens and a kitchen window that overlooked a fairly normal looking London street. She wanted to know exactly where they lived. She wanted to know what their kitchen looked like. But then, maybe the two people having dinner were not Lola and Jakob, but Lola and someone else.

Harri and Fred got out of the car and walked into their building. As the lift doors slid shut behind them, Harri imagined taking Fred's hand and putting it between her legs where, maybe, she wasn't wearing any underwear. He would feel how wet she was and look at her with a mixture of surprise and delight. Would they have time to fuck before the doors opened on the fifth floor? She looked at

Fred. He was looking at his phone, his brow furrowed. The doors dinged open. Their elderly neighbour was waiting to get the lift back down.

Good evening, Mrs Brown, said Fred.

Good evening, Freddie, she said.

Harri hated the way Mrs Brown called Fred Freddie, the way she smiled at him, her soggy grey lips spread across the mask of her face. She hated the way he indulged her. It was practically flirting. If Mrs Brown were fifty years younger, she'd have every right to give him hell for it.

Are you OK, baby? Fred said to her. You've been quiet ever since we left the party.

I'm fine, Harri said. I've just been thinking.

Yeah?

Fred put the key in the door. She was trying to decide whether to pounce or whether to wait until they were in bed to start something. But maybe then he'd say he was too tired. Why was she being so indecisive? It shouldn't be this hard, should it? With her boyfriend, the love of her life, her husband-to-be? They weren't even married yet. Maybe she was worried he would reject her. What if she got down on her knees, ready, and he said he didn't feel like it? Fred opened the door and walked in, dropping his keys into the basket on the little console table in the hallway. He was about to turn into the kitchen when Harri grabbed him, pushed him up against the wall and began kissing him. She pressed her body against his.

Woah, he said. What's brought all this on?

I thought I'd give you a blow job.

What, now?

Yes, now. I'm offering now. Do you want it or not?

Yes, god yes. Of course, I do. I was just surprised, that's all. I didn't expect this so, you know... Oh!

Fred moaned, a full, deep-throated moan and Harri felt a shudder ripple through his body. She almost rolled her eyes. Sometimes it felt like he was being a little overdramatic, as though he thought she needed some reassurance that he was enjoying it. She wished he would stop with this performance. Still, she recognised that was a hypocritical thing to think. How many times had she faked an orgasm to get Fred's head out from between her legs when all she wanted to do was sleep? How many times had she groaned, performing pleasure, when really, she was a little sore and he was hurting her, because she wanted him to hurry up and finish so she could watch another episode of RuPaul's Drag Race?

I'm gonna come.

She pulled back.

What are you doing?

You don't want to come now, do you? I thought we could... you know.

Oh, Fred said. I just... I was really enjoying it.

You don't want to have sex with me?

What? Oh my god, Harri. I was just enjoying the... you know. Is that a crime? That doesn't mean I don't want to have sex with you. In fact, if anything it shows that I do want to have sex with you.

Well. Come on then.

Wasn't it possible for them to fuck without bickering? She stalked into the bedroom and started taking off her clothes. Fred began undressing too, in a

functional way, as though he was getting ready for bed. He wasn't even watching her. He wouldn't know if she was doing a strip tease for him or licking her own nipples. Fred got into the bed, under the duvet, and waited for her. For a moment, she thought he was going to pull out his phone from beneath his pillow, but he was just getting comfortable. Looking at him there, tucked up in bed like a small boy waiting for his mama to kiss him goodnight, Harri felt a wave of reluctance surge through her body. In that moment she realised that the problem was bigger than this particular occasion. The thought of having sex with Fred again and again in this bed, forever, with the lights off, his body moving rhythmically over hers to the same gently shuddering conclusion, made her feel cold inside.

Why don't we try something different?

Different how? Fred said, the suspicion palpable in his voice. Harri's resolve wavered.

I don't know, different like... Maybe, I don't know. You could spank me.

Spank you?

Yeah. You could slap me a bit with your hand or... your belt...

My belt? Fred was incredulous. You'd like that?

Yes.

They looked at each other across the room. She, standing by the window, completely naked, lit up from behind by the orangey glow of the streetlight. Him, sat up in bed, looking at her with distrust, as though she had suddenly morphed into a seven-headed demon, or someone entirely different, someone he didn't know at all.

You really want me to hit you?

Not hit me, exactly. Just... spank me. You know, it's a thing. People do it.

Not people like us.

Harri hesitated. How did they come to be categorised as people like them? And how had she become a person like that? Was she only included by association with him? What kind of person would she be without him? Just another skint waitress?

Fred sighed. You want me to do it now?

Yeah. If you want to.

He pulled the duvet off and got out of bed. How do you want to do it? Do you want to lie on my lap or something?

No! Harri cringed. Shall we just... you know... start, and maybe there will be a good opportunity for it?

OK, Fred said, and lay back down on the bed.

Harri moved towards him. She thought about getting on top, but she didn't want to have to look into his eyes after that conversation.

Can we...?

Oh, you want to do it doggy style? Fred sounded bored. He entered her quickly, without preamble. There was a sharp stab of pain, and then a warm curtain of darkness fell around her. He grabbed onto her hips and pushed himself deeper inside her. She closed her eyes.

So... You want me to just like, slap you on the thigh?

Yeah.

Fred slapped her gently on the thigh. It didn't hurt at all. It felt like a wet fish.

Could you... A little harder?

He slapped her slightly harder, and it made a satisfying sound, but there wasn't that sting, that sharp thrill of pain that she was desperate for. He slowed down.

No, don't stop, she said. I want... I want you to fuck me hard and slap me too – as hard as you can. I want to feel it. Don't be afraid.

He thrust harder and made a strangled sound that could have been frustration or excitement.

Yes. Do it again. Harder. Yes!

It wasn't really working for her as she had imagined, but she closed her eyes and decided to at least try to make the fantasy work. The moment she allowed herself to sink into it, the man behind her was no longer Fred, but Jakob. She imagined the ropes of muscle in his arms, his shoulders, taut, standing to attention. She imagined his hands on her hips, in her hair, grabbing her around the neck.

Tell me I'm a slut, she said, surfacing for a moment.

You're a...

Say it.

You're a slut.

Say it louder.

Harri...

Go on. Tell me I'm your dirty little slut.

All right, that's enough.

Fred withdrew quickly and sent her toppling over onto the pillows.

What?

What do you mean, what? I should be saying 'what' to you! What the fuck!

Harri drew her knees to her chin and wrapped her arms around herself.

Sorry.

She wanted him to tell her that she didn't need to be sorry, that he was sorry and that he just needed some time, but he'd think about it, he'd try again. He'd think about the things she wanted and maybe he'd think about what he wanted too, but no.

I didn't realise this was where we were, Fred said. I can't treat you like that, Harriet. I can't insult you just to make sex more interesting for you. I'm sorry. I didn't realise I was so repulsive that you needed something... something like that to get you off.

Oh my god, Harri said, dropping her head to her knees. Her bare skin rippled with goosebumps. Can we please just rewind? It was just a... I was just trying something out.

I'm not feeling particularly horny anymore.

No, I know, she said. I know. I didn't want to be... I didn't want to make you feel like that. And it's not that I don't enjoy having sex with you. I do. I just thought... I dunno. I thought we could spice things up a bit or...

I'm not *spicy* enough for you? Fred said. We're engaged to be married, you know.

Yes, thought Harri. Yes. It wasn't something she would forget.

\*

A week later, Harri texted Jakob: *What if I said I wanted to do it again?*

She didn't get a reply for two full days. She didn't want to go into work. What if he was there? What would she say to him? What if he had told other people? She felt as though he had the power to split everything open, like a piece of overripe fruit, and reveal the messy, blackened bits at the centre. She liked feeling whole, complete, unnoticeable. She liked feeling that she looked like everyone else. You wouldn't know she wasn't like every other piece of fruit unless you touched her.

On the second day, Harri was called into the office for a meeting with the area manager, her boss's boss. Harri thought about what she would say. She could flat-out deny anything ever happened between them – though maybe there was camera footage before they got into the kitchen. Or she could say that the message had been intended for someone else. She could say that Jakob took advantage of her, that she didn't want to have sex with him then, or any time. She had never been interested in him, but she had felt pressured by him and so if anyone should be punished, it should be him. They could hardly fire her for sending one message, could they? It wasn't sexual harassment, was it?

Harri. Rachel, the area manager opened the door. Do come in.

Rachel was an efficient woman. Even the air around her seemed tightly controlled and packed into discrete blocks. She had long fingernails that were always perfectly manicured and painted in bright colours. Today they were cobalt blue.

Hi. Harri sat down on one of two chairs in the cramped office.

Listen, Harri, Rachel said. Let me get straight to the point.

Harri inhaled sharply.

You've been working here for... What is it now? Eighteen months?

Harri nodded.

Not long, really. But in that time, we've been consistently impressed by your diligence, your hard work ethic, your reliability and your flexibility. The team loves you, that much is clear. Everything is left spotless and accounted for at the end of your shifts. You've dealt with some pretty big issues on your own – like when we had the flooding last year, that drunk underage customer and the allergy instance – things that many more experienced managers would struggle with.

Rachel paused and raised her eyebrows.

Thank you, said Harri.

Seriously, it's very impressive.

Thank you.

Anyway, I wanted to have a little chat with you about where you see your career going. Are you hoping to stay in hospitality or are you thinking of going travelling again or maybe applying to university? What does the future hold for you? I know this might be a big question to spring on you like this...

Harri nodded. Rachel smiled broadly and Harri noticed that her bottom teeth were all crooked.

I won't beat about the bush. We've had an opportunity come up. At our new Margate branch. We had a manager lined up to take on that restaurant but well, for various reasons that I won't bore you with, it hasn't worked out. We were thinking of recruiting externally for this role but then someone mentioned that you might be suitable. We know you're young and fairly new to management, but you've been so responsible and hard-working so far, we thought you might be able to rise to the challenge.

Wow, I... I don't know what to say.

We'd give you plenty of support, of course. There will be an experienced team of duty managers and I myself would visit at least once a week, probably more in the beginning. I know this is a lot to think about – this must feel very sudden – but we are working to a tight schedule. The remodel is being finished as we speak, and the big opening is pencilled for two months' time. So, we would need to know your answer by next week. I know that's not a lot of time, but please, do take all of that time to think about it and let us know.

Wow. I...

Rachel smiled again, crooked teeth and all. Don't say anything for now, and let's arrange another meeting next week. Just let me know if you have any further questions. I'll send you over an email with the details of the remuneration package – there will of course be a significant pay rise, plus a relocation bonus – so you can have all the information while you think it over.

Harri stepped out of the office. She felt like a baby adult, stupid and indecisive. She wished she was older. She wished she was calm and efficient, like Rachel, that she could stop and think about things without everything spinning out of her control. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Fred would say no. There was no way he was going to move to Margate and what? Sell the flat? His parents would kill her. Could she commute? A tiny voice at the back of her mind whispered that she could go to Margate without him, but she knew she couldn't do that. She couldn't start over somewhere new, by herself. Harri walked out of the restaurant and round the corner to the Tesco Express. Almost on autopilot, she walked up to the counter and asked for a packet of Marlboro Lights. She was asked

for ID and in a flash of panic, she thought she had left her driving licence at home, but then, no. There it was. Her own face shining back at her, blinking up from the cards section of her wallet. She flashed it at the cashier and rolled her eyes, tapping her card before he told her to.

She walked out into Soho Square. The air smelled fresh and clean and damp. The benches were full of office workers on lunch breaks, with burritos and take-out salads on their laps. The sun was glowing through the clouds in luminous flashes; people laughed. She lit her cigarette and took a long drag. Her phone vibrated. She pulled it out of her pocket.

*JAKOB: I would say tell me when and where.*

They agreed on Friday evening. Lola was out. Harri didn't ask where. Fred was going to one of his mates' birthday drinks in town after work. While she was getting ready, Harri had a glass of wine, which turned into two. Before she knew it, she had drunk the whole bottle. She didn't want Fred to find the bottle the next morning and ask why she was drinking wine when she was supposed to be at work, so took the empty bottle with her and threw it in a bin outside the station. Riding the Overground made her feel woozy and slightly sick. Bright sun fractured through the plexiglass windows of the train carriage. Chips of light danced across the floor.

Jakob met her outside the train station. He was wearing a pair of jeans, a plain grey sweatshirt and trainers.

Hi, he said.

Hi.

This was the first time they had seen each other since they met in the cafe to talk. Harri thought that he had become more attractive since then. She felt her body move towards his involuntarily, as though he was a planet, and she was caught in his gravitational pull.

This way, he said, walking ahead of her. She skipped a little to catch him up.

Jakob and Lola's flat was an ex-council flat on the second floor of a block. He tapped a fob to gain entry to the building, then they walked up a set of concrete steps onto an open walkway. Harri found herself inspecting everything – the front door, the doormat, the cleanliness of the floors – to see what new insights could be gleaned into their lives. Jakob showed her through to the living room, while he went into the kitchen to get some drinks. Harri stared at the bookcases, the dining table, the cabinet and the record player that sat opposite the sofa in place of a television. She looked out of the window. Beyond a few treetops, far in the distance, you could see the London skyline. The Shard reaching upwards, the Gherkin beside it, squat and distinctive. She felt very far away from home, even though she was just the other side of the same city.

Riesling OK?

Jakob placed two glasses of wine on the coffee table and a small painted dish containing some nuts.

Sure.

Harri took the glass of wine but didn't take a sip. She was squinting at the spines of Lola and Jakob's books, wondering what sort of things they read and what this might say about them.

Do you like to read? Jakob said. He swirled his wine in his glass before taking

a small sip.

Yeah, she said. I mean, who doesn't like to read?

A lot of people. What do you like to read?

She wished he wouldn't ask her questions. Didn't they both know why they were here? Why did there have to be all this pre-amble, all this conversation?

All sorts, she said.

Tell me, Jakob said, his voice low now and sexy, though they weren't talking about anything sexy at all.

Harri tried to remember the last book she'd read but drew a blank. Well... I've enjoyed the Sally Rooney novels...

She was wilting. Everyone had read Sally Rooney. It didn't say anything about her at all.

Yes. I haven't read *Normal People*, but *Conversations* was great. Lola recommended it to me.

I see, said Harri, but she didn't see and saying that she saw only exposed how little she saw. She was thinking of Lola now, the kind of person who read *Conversations with Friends*, probably read Sally Rooney before the TV series, before she became someone that everyone else had read, and recommended books like that, about cheating and complicated relationships and endometriosis to her boyfriend, and then went off and fucked someone else. Was that where Lola was tonight, was she with someone else, a lover? Did Lola know that Harri was in her flat, on her sofa, drinking wine with her boyfriend? Did she think about it at all? Did she even care?

Are you all right? asked Jakob.

Yes, why wouldn't I be?

You seem a little tense. I just want to make sure...

Oh my god. You're not pressuring me into anything. I can make my own decisions, you know.

Oh, I know.

Jakob moved towards Harri and took hold of her waist.

Can I kiss you?

Harri nodded. She thought about how Fred always said to his friends, *Harri likes to think she wears the trousers*, with a roll of his eyes whenever she asked him to do something. Even if it was something like, take her home when she was tired and unwell, or stop drinking when he was already too drunk, and she knew the night would end with him covered in vomit and her hosing him down in the bath. His friends smirked back. She could see them thinking: *Oh, she's one of those girls.*

I want you to tie me up.

The words were out of her so quickly she almost wondered if they came from someone else. Both of their bodies froze. Harri felt her heart rate ramp up and up until it was less a beating, more a quivering in her chest. She'd once read that the body cannot tell the difference between fear and excitement. The hypothalamus triggers the same physiological reaction in the body, whether presented with something new and thrilling, or a threat. *You can choose excitement over fear*, the article insisted. *You can take control.* Harri closed her eyes.

OK, he murmured.

Jakob led Harri to the bedroom. He removed her clothes slowly, until she was down to her underwear, a black lacy set that she only wore on special occasions.

Harri shivered. Jakob instructed her to lay back on the bed and lift her arms above her head. She complied, watching his face above hers, brow furrowed in concentration as he looped the cord from his dressing gown around the metal bed frame and then round and around her wrists several times, before tying it tightly back to the frame.

There, Jakob said softly.

Harri tested the knot by bringing her arms forward. It felt pretty tight.

Don't worry. You'd be able to escape if you needed to.

Harri nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak. Jakob stood at the foot of the bed and watched her.

Are you sure you're OK with this?

Harri nodded again. It was her suggestion, wasn't it? She imagined what she looked like from above, a bird's eye view. Naked and pale and bound like a prisoner, on Jakob and Lola's monochrome polka dot bedsheets. Being this exposed and helpless was equal parts thrilling and terrifying, desire and fear bleeding into each other, becoming indistinguishable. She felt like she could cry, but at the same time, she was wet between her legs. Every cell in her body stood to attention, ready and waiting to see what was going to happen next.

Fuck me, she whispered. Please, fuck me.

Who was this person, speaking through Harri without her permission? She felt like she was evolving, changing, from the Harri she knew into something – someone – else. Was this good? She wondered. Was this OK? Was that the right thing to say?

Not yet, Jakob murmured. You'll have to wait.

Harri looked down, across the desert of her body, to where he stood at the foot of the bed. He pulled his T-shirt over his head. His cock was straining against his boxers. He could do anything to her. But wasn't that part of the fun? Wasn't that what made her so excited? He was in control, and she was a pawn in his game.

You can do anything to me, she said. Don't hold back.

What did that mean? Why did she say that? She didn't know, but it seemed that Jakob did.

Oh, I won't, he said, leaning over, brushing his lips against hers. Don't you worry.

\*

The next morning, Harri went out for lunch with Fred and his parents. It was a place in West London, dark green walls, velvet banquettes and crisp white tablecloths. Outside, it was a sunny day, but inside, the low lighting conjured a perpetual evening. During the course of the meal, they discussed the issues the men were having at work. Fred felt he was overdue a promotion – he worked so hard, after all. Fred's dad was having problems with his team. Fred's mother nodded along sympathetically. Harri did the same, smiling and nodding when it felt appropriate. Yes, the wine is delicious. Yes, that fish is exquisite. Yes, Fred truly does deserve more praise. No one asked Harri about how her job was going, and for once she was glad. It was complicated. Was she excited or scared? Both? Neither? There were questions she needed to ask herself, questions about her career, about Fred and about Jakob, but she pushed them aside and allowed herself

to wallow, if only for one day, in the memories of the night before. She thought about how, after he had teased her, Jakob untied her and rolled her body over, taking her firmly in his hands. She remembered how she gasped when he was finally inside her, how it felt like she was dunked underwater, into some deep, dark part of herself. The memory of pleasure rippled through her, an aftershock, like a protective wrapping. She felt invincible. Harri marvelled at how she could be simultaneously playing the part of the perfect daughter-in-law and be deep in the memories of another man's body. How incredible, she thought. This performance, this theatre. She was both here and not, and no one could tell the difference.

When they finished having sex, Jakob made them toasted cheese sandwiches. They sat on the bed naked and ate them together.

Can I ask you something?

Sure.

If you and Lola are in an open relationship, then why the... you know...

The what?

You know what.

But I want you to say it.

Fine. The... cock belt thing.

Oh, the cock cage?

Harri glared at him. Jakob laughed and kissed her shoulder.

It's just something we like. Sometimes I'm submissive, sometimes she's submissive. But when it's my turn to be submissive, I like Lola to deny me. It's hard to explain, but it's incredible. It works for us, anyway.

Harri nodded and finished her sandwich. She wondered what it would be like to be the dominant one, the one in control. She didn't think she would like it at all. On the other side of the room, on the top of the chest of drawers, there was a framed photo of Jakob and Lola, arms around each other, laughing. She hadn't noticed that they had been watching her this whole time.

In the taxi on the way back to their flat, Fred chatted away. He was going to speak to his boss on Monday and ask – no demand – the promotion he felt he deserved. Harri looked out of the window at the pale, cloudless sky, the city streets blurring below, and she knew that she should tell Fred about her job offer. She should tell him now. She should at least mention it to him. He was her fiancé, for god's sake. They were supposed to talk about things like this. But she didn't. As Fred talked on and on, she felt her mood deflate. What must it be like to feel so sure, so deserving of everything you wanted?

Earlier that week, Harri had gone to visit her mother and sister. Alice still lived at home – or rather, at their mother's new home – in the house bought by her new husband, an old Victorian house, with large bay windows and a magnolia tree in the front garden, original wooden flooring, and a heavy door with stained glass in it. The day Harri visited, the magnolia had started shedding, its petals thick and brown beneath her feet.

Harri! Alice said when she opened the door. She was still in her school uniform, a rumpled white shirt, her striped tie skew-whiff. I've missed you.

Harri breathed in the familiar sweet scent of her sister, of deodorant and

sweat and hair spray. How long had it been?

Her mother was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for a salad. She had sliced them into very thin sticks.

Julienne, she said. It's a julienne salad. I thought it would be nice in this lovely weather. Can I get you a drink, Harriet? Some lemonade?

Sure, Harri said, sitting on one of the bar stools around the kitchen island.

It felt strange to be here, in this beautiful house, the kind of house she dreamed of living in when she was a child. Her mother passed her a glass of lemonade. Alice rinsed some more vegetables in the sink. The back door was open and Harri could see out into the garden, the table set up on the lawn, spring colours bursting from the borders.

Harri had thought about telling her mother or Alice about the new job offer, but when they were seated around the garden table, tucking into their salads, it didn't seem like the right time.

Where's John? Harri asked.

Oh, he's at work, said Harri's mother. He always works late. Bless his heart. Always working hard, isn't he, Alice?

Mm-hmm.

And how's Fred?

Harri noticed the way her mother's mind slid so easily from John to Fred.

He's great. I think he's on track for a promotion, actually.

Well, that's just wonderful. I didn't expect anything less from him, of course. I always knew he'd take care of you. He's a good lad, isn't he? Alice has got a boyfriend now, haven't you Alice? Did she tell you? I met him the other week. He

seems a very lovely chap.

No, she didn't say.

Alice looked up and pulled a face. I wouldn't call him my boyfriend, not yet.

Well, there's plenty of time for that.

\*

Harri's phone vibrated in her lap. She had a new message from Jakob. She didn't want to know what it said. Would it matter? She remembered the flat that she lived in as a child, with her mother and Alice, the way mould crept up the walls and her mother counted out piles of change on the coffee table to put on the gas meter. The way she and Alice shared a bed for far too long, using each other's body heat to keep warm, while their mother took the sofa bed in the living room. The flat was always spotless, despite the mould, and sometimes they would wake up in the night to get a glass of water and find their mother spraying a new homemade concoction onto the mould to try to get it to disappear, for good this time.

She had been kidding herself that she deserved something new, something bigger and better than what she already had. She had been so wrapped up in the excitement of it all that she didn't notice the fear, the very real fear, of everything she stood to lose. She knew then that she wouldn't take the job in Margate. Why would she? She had Fred. They had a future, a real future, with children and houses and holidays and dogs and date nights and everything she could ever dream of. What more could she possibly need? The car swerved as the driver avoided an oncoming cyclist, who seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Fuck, the driver said. Sorry boss. You OK back there?

No worries mate, said Fred. We're fine.

Fred looked at Harri across the car, the expanse of leather seats. They were inside a metal skeleton hurtling around a roundabout, joining a dual carriageway and heading home. Harri thought about how they were always just hurtling along in their bone skeletons, looking for somewhere to go. How stupid it all seemed, all of it. Fred reached out his hand. The space between them had never felt bigger, but he crossed it. He stroked her leg in a gesture that felt so familiar, so safe, that it brought her back from wherever she'd been, a place where the world was spinning too fast like a merry-go-round that she couldn't get off.

Are you OK, baby? Fred said. I lost you for a moment there.

Don't worry, Harri said. I'm back.

## Under the Circumstances

Sweet air, divine light! How long have we waited for this happy sight? This ancient city, its sun-baked streets, the Acropolis in the distance, raging with light. We are here, so it begins.

The first night. Everybody orders wine. It comes in little jugs called carafes. Red or white, it doesn't matter. We simply ask for *krasí* and later, *ouzo*. We say *parakaló* too – when we remember. The bartender tells us we shouldn't do shots. *Ouzo is to sip slowly*, he tells us. We nod, but when he turns his back, we down it anyway. The drink is cloudy-white and smells medicinal. Sophie holds off the longest, sniffing her glass suspiciously for several minutes. *I can't!* When she finally takes a sip, she screws up her face and gasps. *Oh god!* We cheer. The boys laugh. The bartender rolls his eyes and mutters something to a customer. We know we are being ridiculous, but we don't care. We are here – finally – and everything is as we imagined. We smoke cheap cigarettes from crushed packets. We try shisha. We hear the summer breeze shushing through the cypress boughs, the crackle of ancient history alive in the air. The boys tell us that the ouzo will crystallise in our stomachs and when we drink water in the morning, we will become drunk again. This seems entirely possible. Everything seems possible. We could turn objects to gold with just one touch, flap our way into the sky, towards the brightness of the sun. Around 1am, the teachers urge us back to the hotel and we go, stumbling, laughing – about what, who knows, who can remember? One of the teachers says

the first night is always a bit bacchanalian. We laugh at his choice of word; we get the reference.

All hail Dionysus! We shout.

We should make a sacrifice, Nico says.

I'll kill your firstborn daughter, Leo calls back. We erupt.

When we get back to the hotel, some of us head to the bar, but the vibe is not what we had hoped for: tinkling piano music, low lighting. The drinks are expensive. The single, besuited bartender regards us without a smile. Our enthusiasm wanes. We head upstairs. Some of us stumble to bed, whilst others continue drinking from bottles of wine stashed at the backs of wardrobes, under beds.

All hail Dionysus! Anwar shouts, alone, on the stairs.

No one responds. The silence tells him that it's time to go to bed.

We wake early the next morning, the sun poking its insistent fingers through the cracks in the hotel curtains. We have so much to do, so much to see! The teachers tell us the schedule earnestly – *No dilly-dallying please, we've got a very busy day!* We have studied hard, written essays, debated, taken exams and now, finally, this is our reward. We will walk in the footsteps of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, in the shadow of the Olympian gods. But first, Nico tells us about how he vomited in the shower.

It was properly projectile, he says. Like a fountain.

Gross, says Anna.

I feel fine now though, Nico says. And I drank almost a litre of water this

morning and haven't got drunk again, so thank god for that.

The ouzo is just dissolving. You'll be sloshed in half an hour, says Anwar.

I've got a headache, Leo whines. I need a paracetamol.

Sophie rubs his back. You boys! You never know when to stop.

We chatter as we load up our plates at the buffet – yoghurts, sweet pastries, olives, bread, cheese, boiled eggs cut in half like happy yellow suns. The floor-to-ceiling windows are thrown open to the bright morning. A soundtrack of city sounds, beeping horns and busy breakfast clatter. The stories keep coming. Who else was sick? Who passed out? Who fell over on their way back to the hotel? One of our group is missing – Molly. She tiptoed into our room, quietly quietly, as the day was breaking, the stars shrunk, the night almost nothing, her hair matted around her face. Where is she now? When we all left for breakfast, she was still in the shower, washing herself over and over. Maybe she's sick. Maybe she's still drunk. Downstairs, in the hustle and bustle of the restaurant, we are having fun. We forget her. Wait – who danced in the street? Who said what to which teacher? We laugh and laugh and laugh.

On the third day we leave Athens, sunburnt and exhausted, to board the cruise ship. It is another glorious day, the sea smooth and shiny like crushed silk. Our ship is called Antigone. We are disappointed; we haven't learned the tragedies yet. Our set text for this year is *The Odyssey*. We would have preferred to board the other ship in the cruise company's fleet, Scylla, but that ship sails in the wrong direction, west around the jagged coast of mainland Greece and on towards Italy. We love the tale of Scylla, the beautiful nymph turned man-eating monster, and

Circe, the witch-goddess who transformed her enemies into pigs.

There is a photo of us lined up in front of the cruise ship, the only photo that Molly is in. A row of girls, all smiles. The luminous colours of clothes that have not yet been washed, the false shop sheen shimmering in the sun. One of the teachers counted us down: *three, two, one, smile!* We all smiled. Molly did too, wide-lipped, full of teeth. Later, we looked at that smile and asked, how could she? How could she smile, after what she'd done? Back then we thought nothing of it, the way she did as she was told and floated along with us throughout the day, like debris on the surface of the sea. Later we cropped her out, so only her arm remains, strung up in thin air like a dead thing.

In the room, the narrow room with three sets of bunkbeds and not enough space to move, we ask Molly if she is all right. She says she is fine, just tired. She doesn't unpack her bag. She leaves it on the neatly made bed and goes for a walk alone on the deck, her hair whipping her face in the wind. She looks out to sea, the great expanse of water that now lies between us and the mainland, a million miles away.

At dinner, we sit at a round table. Pressed white tablecloth, moussaka. A terrible combination. Halfway through the meal, Leo sidles up, wanting to talk to Sophie. In private. She smiles and excuses herself. On the other side of the table, Molly drops her cutlery and pushes her chair back with a screech. Her food, barely touched, abandoned. *Are you all right / what's wrong / everything OK?* we ask, words overlapping. *What is going on?* We ask each other. She's been acting strange all day. We call to her – *Molly!* – but she doesn't look back. She rushes out of the door like she's going to be sick. We try to decide who should go after her, but then

we notice that Anna's face has turned white. Her eyes are wet and terrified.

Anna? What is going on? What do you know?

Just then, Sophie's voice cuts through the din: What the fuck?

Anna bursts into tears. We rush to Sophie's side. We forget about Molly. She's gone, disappeared into the bowels of the ship. We follow Sophie back to our room, our arms around her, as though we could physically protect her from what had already been done. We collapse onto the bottom bunks, crammed in together, a tangle of bare limbs.

Get that bag out of here now, Sophie commands.

We chuck Molly's things into the corridor; we'll deal with them later.

Sophie speaks first, telling us what she knows, then Anna fills in the gaps, in sodden, tremulous whispers.

Molly told Anna after we boarded the ship, just the two of them in the toilets. She locked the door and said, *Can I tell you something?* Anna is a kind person. Of course, she said yes. She didn't know what was going to come next. How could she? Molly held onto Anna's hand and asked what she should do. We didn't ask Anna what advice she gave, why she didn't snatch her hand away. It didn't seem fair. She was put in a difficult position, an impossible position, by Molly. Who of us could say with confidence that we would have done the right thing, caught off guard like that? Still, when Anna tells Sophie that she knew, hours before the rest of us, she hangs her head in shame, shrinks up inside herself like a deflated balloon. Sophie listens to her, and we sit in silence for a long time, looking to Sophie to tell us what to do. She tells Anna that it's OK, but her voice is heavy with exhaustion, the weight of yet another betrayal.

So that's why she didn't come back to the room with us on the first night, we say, piecing it together. We didn't realise she had been so drunk.

She wasn't drunk, Sophie says stonily. She's just a bitch.

One or two of us think back to the stories we heard over breakfast the day after that night. The ouzo, the falling over, the sick. But we, as a group, we say nothing.

Caroline and I search the labyrinthine corridors for Molly, to give back her bag and collect the room key. We find her sat by an emergency exit, her head resting against her knees. She tries to talk to us. Is Sophie OK? Can I speak to her? Please? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. She starts to cry, but we say no and keep our eyes lowered, simply pass over the bag, and repeat the agreed-upon line: stay away from her.

We find the teachers. We explain that Molly needs to be assigned to a new room. Later, we tell Sophie how the teachers went from room to room but none of the girls wanted her. There isn't enough space in here, some said. We just don't want her in our room, others said plainly. We wouldn't feel comfortable. The teachers were exasperated. Someone has to take her, they said. They asked the receptionist for another room, but there was nothing available. In the end, she was assigned to a disgruntled pair of first years who regarded her with disdain, as though she was riddled with disease, something they could catch.

We stayed up late that night, trying to make sense of it all. Sophie bought an overseas data package for her phone, so she could update her relationship status and un-friend Molly and Leo on Facebook. Her sister phoned, and then her mum. We expected her to cry but there was only a quiet, white-hot fury, shining in her

eyes.

What was it? she asked us, her captive audience. Did she have to prove to herself that she could get any guy she wanted? Was it some fucked up power trip?

We murmured in agreement. It probably was.

She says she was drunk, but so what? She let herself get drunk. She always does – remember my birthday party? Molly chose to put herself in that position. She went to the boys' room. No one made her. No one spiked her drink, did they?

We nod along and squeeze her hand, rub her back.

If she comes near me, Sophie says, I will end her.

We believe her.

The next morning, we eat breakfast on the ship. It isn't as good as breakfast at the hotel in Athens. Fatty bacon and anaemic sausages, cereal like cardboard. We push the food around our plates in their puddles of grease, but Sophie fills herself up. She goes back for seconds, eating steadily, ravenously, until her plate is clean. Leo comes down to breakfast late, his hair wet, head hanging like a scolded puppy. He sits on the other side of the room with the boys. We avoid looking in their direction. The ship bobs up and down while we sip our flavourless coffees. We are exhausted, running on nothing but adrenaline and heady anticipation. Through the window, a bright line drawn between sky and sea. We share glances, wondering where Molly is, what will happen when she comes in, where she will sit. What will Sophie do? She would be entitled to tear her limb from limb and stick her head on a stake.

But she doesn't come. We don't see Molly for more than twenty-four hours.

We disembark in the midday heat, spend the afternoon walking around Kusadasi. We buy pashminas and postcards, look at jewellery, ceramics and other trinkets. Sophie doesn't mention her all day, and we don't want to bring her up, so we just wait and wonder. We drink cocktails in the tangerine glow of the sun, our group of girls together, turned inward.

Molly appears the next evening. We see her leave the ship, flanked by teachers.

The only people who will still speak to her. And only because they're paid to, Sophie says.

We nod along. Yes, yes, yes.

Maybe she's fucking them as well.

We smirk. She is wearing red shorts and a black T-shirt. She looks like a slut, we say, though the outfits we are wearing are not dissimilar. We pretend she doesn't exist, yet at the same time, we are very aware of her presence. It ripples through the group, like a bad smell we are pretending we haven't noticed. We never look directly at her, but we know exactly what she is wearing, how much make up she has on. When we laugh, we hope she notices what fun we're having. When we whisper, we hope she thinks it's about her. It isn't, but that's not the point.

We climb the steep hill to the old monastery, standing high on the hill of Hora. It is enormous, built like a fortress, the walls over fifteen meters high. Our guide shows us the small opening above the entrance, through which burning oil or lead was poured on unwanted visitors.

They say the screams were terrible, he says. You could see the skin just melt

from their skulls. It looks like nothing, just a little slit, but it saved the people of Patmos many times.

We move on. We look at paintings of all the miracles performed by Saint John. Our guide tells us that we can visit the very place John had his visions of the final judgement – the cave of revelations.

If you make it there before the sun sets, he jokes. After dark it gets pretty creepy.

He gestures back down the long slope, towards the sea, set ablaze by the sinking sun. It looks beautiful; it looks like hell. He keeps talking but we are all looking down at Molly, a shadow, an apparition, slinking back down the path on her own, towards the sea.

That night we dream of fires, of war, of violence and vengeance. The curse of the gods, severed penises, swallowed children, the relentless pull of fate. A fuck worth sacrificing a thousand men; a victory worth a young daughter's life. We wake suddenly in our beds, hot, sticky and disoriented. Our eyes adjust to the darkness, and we remember where we are, drifting from one island to the next on an odyssey of our own. The room around us resolves into a simple cabin, each girl in her own bunk, her best friends asleep around her. In the dark, our collective breath is a rhythmic shushing, like the slapping of the sea against the side of the ship, like a mountain breeze whipping through the trees. We rock back and forth, back and forth, buffeted by Poseidon's white-tipped horses, until we fall asleep once more.

The next day Molly tries to give Sophie a note. She corners her in the toilet and

says, Please. Please will you just read it. But we crowd her out and tell her no. She's already done enough.

Why doesn't she say it to my face, huh? Sophie says later, when we are back in our room, her eyes hard and wide, her mouth drawn into an angry little pucker.

Sophie has been using her overseas data package to communicate with our friends at home, to make sure that by the time we get back to school, absolutely everybody knows what happened. She says she is taking control of the situation. We nod. It is her right.

Apparently now she's saying Leo 'took advantage of her', she says, rolling her eyes. I mean, please. She wasn't that drunk. She was capable of saying no.

Yeah, we say.

She could have stopped it; she could have said no at any point.

Yeah, we say. Exactly.

It's irrelevant that she thinks she was 'taken advantage of'. It's irrelevant that she was drunk. It doesn't matter who instigated it. *She* went along with it. She needs to shut up and take some responsibility.

Yeah. We can feel a dark, painful aura radiating from Sophie. Yeah, we say. We can't say anything else.

Of course, I hate Leo too, she says. But at least he told me the truth.

We nod.

He shouldn't have done it, she says. But I don't know... it's just so much worse when a girl does it, isn't it? When a friend betrays you like that, acts like your best friend when they know – she knew – she had betrayed me in the worst way possible. And I mean, you almost expect that kind of thing from guys.

Yeah, we say. We nod. Yeah.

Molly doesn't eat with us for the rest of the trip. We never see her eating, only smoking alone on the deck of the ship, leaning against walls, trailing behind us through the frescoed rooms of the palace at Knossos, or lurking behind a pillar at the Acropolis of Lindos while the rest of us smile for a group photo. There are more countdowns: three, two, one... We smile! We are having so much fun! Her face is as blank as a statue.

We cannot to speak to her of course, but still we are so curious, burning to know how it happened, how it really happened. We try to imagine Leo telling her *shh shh*, a sound like the sea, his face a pale moon above hers. We try to imagine her brain shouting *no no no no no no*, and her body staying silent. We try to imagine her blurry, slurring ouzo-impaired perspective, her thoughts shunting and flashing, long moments lost to the hazy black hole of alcohol. We try to feel sympathetic; we really do. But how hard is it to say no? How hard is it to push back, even through the fog? Had it been us, we would have pushed back, we would not have given in. But it wouldn't have been us. That is the difference between girls like us and girls like her. We never got as drunk as her. We didn't do stupid things, like dance in the street or fall over. We didn't have the inclination to stay out so late, especially with boys, even ones who were supposed to be our friends. What was she expecting? A sleepover?

And besides, it is so much easier to imagine her smiling coyly at him from across the room, full of intent, brushing up against him at the bar and whispering in his ear. It is easier to imagine her looking up at him through her thick lashes,

biting on her full bottom lip (because her lips are particularly full, aren't they, her eyelashes particularly thick?) and him, rendered helpless by this act, and in the end, under the circumstances, who could blame him?

There was no confrontation, no big showdown like we were expecting, maybe even hoping for. Molly didn't try to speak to Sophie again, and even if she had, we wouldn't have let her. And Sophie, it seemed, really did have nothing to say to her. It was old news by the time we got back to school. Someone else had done something shocking, something unforgivable, and within a few weeks, Sophie was walking around school holding hands with a new boyfriend. Everyone's attention turned to revising for our exams that summer. The trip to Greece became nothing but a washed-up memory.

We acted as though Molly didn't exist for a few more weeks, but slowly we started speaking to her again, when we were in the same classes or drinking at the same pubs. It was as easy as walking through an open door or taking a sip of a drink already in your hand. After a while, it started to feel like maybe what happened wasn't so scandalous after all. Sophie had moved on, so why shouldn't we? And anyway, at the end of the day, people make mistakes, you know?

But though we wouldn't say it to each other, sometimes, when we are drifting off to sleep at night, when our minds are still and empty, we dream of dark waves lapping against a shore, shh shh. A body in the bed next to us, possibilities unspooling like a ribbon of tape from a cassette. In each moment, a choice made, and a choice taken away. Infinite alternate universes exist briefly before disappearing, crystallising into hard moments of action, inaction, here, now,

something that cannot be dissolved, cannot be wound back, pushing us unstoppably towards an empty beach at night, a bed with sealed exits, a voice in the dark whispering. *Don't say anything, OK? Shh shh shh.*

## Road Trip

I have been waiting almost an hour when my mum's car pulls up outside the train station. Her white Prius stands out among the black cabs, a swan in a huddle of ducklings. I see her through the car window, pale hands on the steering wheel, brow furrowed as she scours the station concourse, wondering why I am not waiting in the agreed-upon location. My phone starts to vibrate in my hand as I reach the car. I open the passenger door.

Hi, I say.

Where have you been? she says, barely glancing at me, her mouth drawn in a knot.

I came down from the platform when I saw you arrive.

My seatbelt clicks closed. The car smells of clean leather and my mum's heavy citrusy perfume. My stomach lurches.

You said you would be waiting here.

Yeah, well... you said you'd be here an hour ago. A pause. She checks the rear-view mirror.

Oh, you're starting already, are you?

Starting what?

This... This thing, she takes her hands off the wheel to wave them about. This bad attitude, the sulking, whatever you want to call it. You know what? Just don't today, OK? Just don't.

I say nothing. Ordinarily I would say something. I would raise my voice against hers until we were both shouting. Me, about how she came to be an hour late and didn't manage to send a message or make a call – doesn't she know how it feels to be abandoned like that with no answers, just waiting and waiting? And she would tell me to just get a grip, Allie, just get a grip, making me feel small and wild and uncontrollable. The whole cycle runs through my head, a familiar routine of shouting, words flying back and forth like tennis balls, but I'm too tired to start it off. I sink back into my seat and look out of the window as we circle back past the train station and the people I've been standing with for the last almost-hour: the homeless couple with their dog and a coffee cup of change on the ground in front of them; the cheery guy who tries to tempt every passer-by into taking a free session at the gym.

I take my phone out of my pocket and plug it into the car's charging point.

Oh no you don't, she says. I need that.

But you're not using it right now.

But I will need it – look, I'm only on 36 per cent.

I'm on one per cent! I say, waving my phone at her.

It's my car! she says. You can't charge your phone.

Fuck you, I say, in my head, but not out loud. I take my phone back and fold my arms. I look out of the window at my ghostly reflection racing along the wall opposite, through the trees, faster and faster as we take the road that leads out of the city.

She doesn't ask about what I did last night. I knew she wouldn't, but still I hoped she might. I would have got a thrill from saying 'not much' and letting her

dig for information, eking it out as slowly and as irritatingly as possible. When I left yesterday evening, I told her I'd probably be back that same night. Some small part of me thought she might have worried when she woke up and I still wasn't home.

My phone flashes with an incoming call: Mattie. My heart starts to thump harder, keeping time with her name. Mattie. Mattie. Mattie.

Mum glances over. Your phone's ringing.

I can see that.

Her eyes widen. Here we go.

What is your problem? she snaps. I came all the way out here to pick you up and now I'm asking myself why. Why did I do you a favour? Why did I bother driving out here on a Saturday morning to pick up such an ungrateful girl who thinks the whole world revolves around her? I've got news for you, Allie. It doesn't. Next time you can walk all the way home, or get the bus, or hitchhike for all I care. Are you listening to me?

Yes, I say. I'm listening.

She could talk about my flaws for hours. I'm too much of a dreamer. I am completely devoid of empathy. I'm ungrateful. I'm dirty. I'm always late. I am a bad daughter, a bad friend. I wind people up on purpose. I'm impolite. I don't use my cutlery properly. I say certain words in a stupid way. You would think after hearing it so often there would be no impact.

She drives too fast, swinging around roundabouts and barely pausing at junctions. Even when we are in slow-moving traffic, she jiggles her leg up and down and pulls off with a jerk every time the car in front of her moves more than a

centimetre. Sometimes she gets like this, anxious and wound up, full of energy like a bomb that's about to go off. I don't think it's me this morning, though I didn't do anything to improve her mood. It's probably her boyfriend, Mike. Last time they had an argument, she threw a drink at him and he said he would never come back. Somehow it became my fault. If only I wasn't so difficult. If I could just answer her questions with full sentences. The following afternoon when he showed up on the doorstep, she was all smiles, like nothing had happened. I watch her face, the clenched jaw, the frequent flaring of her nostrils.

What? She turns to look at me, her eyes hard stones.

Nothing, I say, looking away.

Then stop staring at me.

She turns the radio on, loud. I look down at my feet in my scuffed converse trainers. Once they were white, but now they are a dull, dirty grey. I am trying not to think about last night. What will I tell Mattie? I have to tell her the truth. I should be drafting apologies, but I can't push the images of Reena and Max out of my mind. They were still asleep when I left, semi-clothed and peaceful on the sofa, the cold early morning light pooling on their skin. I think about the curve of Reena's neck, her mussed hair, Max's pale chest and soft hands. My face is too hot. My heart is a fist thumping thumping thumping against my chest. The motion of the car makes my brain swirl around in my head, smack against my skull.

Can you pull over? I shout, over the music.

Are you kidding me...?

She looks over and sees my face: grey green, studded with sweat. I try to hold it in, take deep breaths and focus away from the nausea and think about

something, anything else, but my body takes over and starts convulsing on its own.

I clamp my hands over my mouth.

Don't you dare! Mum shrieks, as though she could control my bodily functions by shouting.

The car swerves onto a grassy verge just in time. I open the door and bile rushes out of my body. I tremble and blink back tears. Mum is still yelling at me. Everything is shimmering slightly, in an underwater way. I struggle to make out what she's saying – she's repeating my name – Allie. Allie. Allie. I try to turn around in my seat and look at her, but everything hurts, I can't. The ground swims in front of me, patchy brown grass, in and out of focus. I cry harder, snorting and sniffing, nose streaming like a hysterical child – but then Mum is shaking my shoulder, pushing me out of the car. It all happens so fast. My knees make contact with the dry ground. The sun bursts out from behind a cloud. Mum's face in shadow, hard and twisted. She shouts words that I don't hear, lost to the roar of passing vehicles. The door slams. She's gone. At least I have my phone, I tell myself. I press its buttons, willing it to light up, but it is dead, a useless weight in my hand.

At first, I just lie there. The ground spins and waves of nausea crash over me. I think about what would happen if I died here. Would Mum feel bad? She would, I know. The guilt would eat her alive. Not because she would miss me or anything, but because then she would have to live the rest of her life knowing she was a bad mum, that she had failed, that there was no chance of absolution. What about Reena and Max? They don't deserve to feel guilty. Last night was all me, always taking things too far. The sky is wrapped in thick, unmoving cloud. Cars speed past as though nothing has happened. Lives continue. I imagine a child in the backseat,

gazing out of the window.

Mummy, why is there a girl lying on the ground by the road?

Don't be silly, darling.

I close my eyes, and we're at my grandparent's house. Thick, brown carpet. Yellow and brown patterned wallpaper. A wall-mounted electric heater. A taxidermy ferret, baring its teeth at me from the display cabinet. I am six years old. My grandma makes me Spaghetti Bolognese and lets me watch VHS tapes while the grown-ups talk about grown-up stuff. I'm watching *The Raggy Dolls*, the same three episodes I always watch. My grandfather slams his mug down on the table. Tea splatters the carpet.

I said no, Jacqueline.

Please, Dad. You might not want to leave, but she has a life of her own to live, outside these four walls –

Stop this, Jacqui, my grandma says, her voice wavering, her eyes pink and watery.

You don't have to stay here, my mum says. You can come with us.

She's not going anywhere!

I let out a panicked sob, a dart through the air. Everyone looks at me as though they have no idea who I am. My grandfather throws his hands into the air to dismiss us all. Grandma flinches. He puts on his thick glasses and picks up a book from his reading table.

Mum, my Mum says, a note of desperation in her voice. Mum, please.

Just go, Grandma hisses. Please, just go. You've done enough.

Her cheeks are flushed red, her breath shaky. She leaves and doesn't look back. She leaves without saying goodbye to me, something she has never done before.

Dad, Mum says.

You heard your mother, my grandfather says, not lifting his eyes from his book. It's time for you both to leave.

When we get into the car, I am still crying. It is dark outside, my mum's face illuminated in the soft blue light of the dashboard.

What happened? I say, after a while.

My mum doesn't say anything. She doesn't even look at me. Her eyes remain straight ahead watching the road, as though she hasn't heard me speak.

Is grandfather a bad person? I whisper.

She laughs. We're all bad people, Allie, she says.

I absorb this information. Everyone?

Yep.

Even me?

Oh yes, she says, turning to look at me for the first time since we got into the car. You're a bad person too. I've seen it sometimes, behind your eyes.

Both my grandparents are more or less gone now. Grandfather died of liver cancer when I was 11. Grandma lives in a care home. When Mum and I visit, she mumbles nonsense, made-up words, sometimes smiling, sometimes shouting, sometimes crying. We know it's time to leave when she starts telling us about the bad man, saying he's waiting in her room or hiding out in the garden. Mum rolls her eyes. The carers laugh. Don't be silly, darling, they say. There's no bad man.

A few months ago, I asked Mum if she remembered saying that to me. She laughed as if I had told a really funny joke and said, *Well, you were probably being bad*. I said I didn't think I was. She said I was probably remembering it wrong.

\*

There's a petrol station along this road, a few miles away. I've seen it from the car. After a few minutes the trees on the sides of the road flatten into fields, then a minute or two later, just before the roundabout, a Texaco garage pops up, a brief splash of red. If I leave the main road, I might find a village, small clusters of houses, maybe a shop. I wish I'd paid more attention to the road signs. They all have stupid names. Something Green, Little Something, Something Heath. I sit up. Pain flashes through my head like a gunshot. My throat is dry and sour. I decide to head towards the Texaco. There might be a payphone or a phone charger I could use. What else can I do?

Last night. I didn't mean to stay out. I promised myself I wouldn't. But after spending a couple of hours in that same pub everyone in our year goes to – the pub on the outskirts of town, the only place that accepts our fake IDs – I couldn't bear the thought of going home. I hadn't had any fun yet.

Do you wanna get out of here? I said to Mattie. We could go somewhere else?

I don't think so, she said.

But I'm bored.

I stirred the remains of my extremely overpriced Archer's and lemonade and

knocked it back. I didn't even feel slightly drunk.

Mattie, baby? I stroked her arm through the soft material of her cardigan.

She didn't look at me.

Don't make me go without you.

I'm not making you do anything.

I squeezed her hand under the table. I know you want to come with me. I know you do.

I don't. I'm having a nice time here.

But what if you could have a nicer time?

She shook her head and turned away from me to carry on talking to Aimee and Karim about their philosophy teacher.

I just love everything about him, Aimee was saying. Even the weird shoes he wears. They make me think of elves...

Ohhh, you like that? said Karim. You're into some weird shit!

What? No, I'm not into elves! I'm just into... him.

And the cardigans, Mattie chipped in. On anyone else it would be a sort of weird old man vibe, but on him it's like, hello sexy librarian.

Aimee and Karim murmured in agreement.

But the question is, said Karim. Is he into men or women? Who among us mere mortals, stands a chance with the devastatingly gorgeous Mr Taylor?

Definitely women!

Both?

Nah, let me tell you, he's one hundred per cent gay. It's that hair...

I watched Mattie for a moment, the way she fiddled with her hair when she

was listening and clamped her hand over her mouth when she laughed. She'd changed a lot since she first moved here. Back then she was a mess, always saying and doing the wrong thing. Now she looked more or less like everybody else.

I texted Max: *You out tonight?*

He replied within a few minutes: *Yeah. Come to The Ship. Reena's here.*

I looked around the table. People were smiling and laughing. Someone was asking if anyone wanted to split a rum and coke. Two girls were taking selfies. Someone was reading out a Twitter thread and asking someone else, can you believe it? I watched them all, my friends, with reverent sadness, as though I was leaving and never coming back.

Mattie looked up as I rose from the table. Oh, are you going?

You sure you don't wanna come?

I looked at her, my gaze hard as though I could burrow my way inside her head. *Don't make me beg.* She shook her head.

Where are you going, Allie? asked Aimee.

Just to meet some other mates for a bit.

Ooh, she has other mates! said Karim.

I'll see you guys on Monday, yeah?

Mattie wasn't looking at me.

I'll call you tomorrow. I bent down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Yep, speak to you then.

A chorus of 'byes' followed me out the door. I didn't need to look to know that Mattie wouldn't be one of them. I stepped out into the cool night air. I imagined what it would be like if she ran out now and joined me: her cheeks rosy,

hair messy and all over her face. The way she always looks slightly sweaty but in a good way, as though she has just finished dancing or having sex. She was always warm; she was her own source of heat. I felt a sudden wave of sadness that she wouldn't come with me, that we wouldn't have fun together. I shook myself out of it. You'll see her tomorrow, I told myself. Anyway, it's healthy to have separate interests.

There was a security guard on the door at The Ship, but he let me inside with barely a second glance. It was suspiciously easy. I had been psyching myself up beforehand; the sudden release nearly made me laugh out loud. Max kept bringing me foaming columns of beer, even though I told him more than once that I didn't really like it.

You'll take what you're given, child! he said loudly.

Everyone at the table erupted into giggles and shushed him. The sheltering of an underage drinker was a game, a secret mission. I was less than a year younger than some of them, but there was a hard line between 17 and 18. They were all on one side, and I was on the other.

As well as the beers, we had a few shots and Reena gave me lines of coke off the back of her iPhone in a toilet cubicle. I didn't know her particularly well – both Reena and Max had been a couple of years above me at school, but now they were both on a gap year: she was interning at a magazine; he was working in the kitchen at Nando's, supposedly saving up to go travelling – but the three of us had started to gravitate towards each other at parties, the way people who take drugs tend to, united by the fact our other friends raised their eyebrows at us and got frustrated by how long we spent in the toilets. We pooled money and contacts; shared a

rolled-up note or a cut off straw. The fact the three of us were together meant the night was always going to end a certain way. The bell rang for last orders and when everyone else disappeared into cabs and onto last buses, Max picked up a couple of grams of mandy.

We decided to go back to Reena's. Max insisted that because Reena's house is so big, even though her parents were home, they would not be able to hear us. Reena rolled her eyes but didn't contradict him. We went downstairs to the basement; the room Reena called the 'snug'. The word 'snug' is so casual and intimate, I was expecting some sort of cosy den filled with books and games, a couple of armchairs squashed up together. I was not prepared for the spacious room with its high ceiling, velvet sofas, deep brown parquet flooring, expensive-looking rugs, artwork displayed on the walls in tasteful, asymmetrical arrangements. At one end of the room were French windows that led onto a small, stone courtyard; at the other was floor-to-ceiling walnut-coloured panelling. Reena pushed one and it popped open to reveal a counter full of bottles of spirits and underneath, a number of temperature-controlled wine fridges. I tried to take it in my stride, but the secret door was too much.

Holy shit, I said.

What? said Max, with a smirk. You didn't know Reena was rich?

Reena blushed, a mixture of pride and embarrassment creeping over her face. I'm not rich...

Max was rummaging in the bar. Yeah, I mean, how many of these do you have at home, Allie? He pulled out three enormous bottles of champagne.

What the fuck are those?

Oh, Reena said. They've been in there for ages. We can drink them if you want.

Oh yes, Max said. He pulled out a small baggie filled with powder. A magnum of champagne and some mandy – now that's what I call a party.

You're not putting all of that in, are you? Reena said.

Abso-fucking-lutely, Max said, winking at me. You're gonna be hammered by the time we've finished this.

After that, the night breaks down into fragments, images, words. The pop of a cork. The three of us dancing breathlessly to music videos, Reena and me draping ourselves over Max like the women on the screen. The sour chemical tang of the warm, MDMA-infused champagne hitting the back of my throat. I can't remember the order things happened in. But it was probably me who took my clothes off first. I'm always the one who escalates things.

\*

I walk. Just walk and walk and walk. Cars roar past, whipping up great gusts that judder through my body and make my teeth chatter. I imagine the people inside looking out at me and wonder what they are thinking. Occasionally a car slows as the occupant tries to get a closer look – flash of fear – but I tell myself that no one will harm me here. It's the middle of the day. There are too many witnesses. I'm on display, something interesting for drivers and passengers to look at, something to break up the monotonous landscape: trees, fields, repeat. I could be seconds away from a car losing control, spinning out and flattening me, but still, the fear of being

kidnapped, raped or murdered is more acute. It fills me with a humming dread. I think of Mum, at home now, perhaps with Mike. Is she thinking of me? I should be angry with her, and I am, but more than that I am tired. My anger rages in the same detached way as my fear. I stand outside of it, watching it, aware of it, but not really feeling it.

I have no idea what time it is. What difference would it make, anyway? It's not late enough that I'm worried about not making it to the Texaco before dark. No one is expecting me anywhere. No one is expecting anything from me. I'm adrift in time, or non-time, like a stick floating down a stream. I walk past one of those emergency SOS phones on the roadside. I've never seen one up close, but good to know, I suppose, that if I was in danger there would be some way for me to contact people who could help. I imagine someone chasing me, racing down the road, running for the phone, snatching up the handset and screaming: *Help!*

How could she leave me on the side of the road? It's a hollow thought. She told me I was pathetic once, her eyes filled with a hate that crushed my insides like a Coke can, made it difficult to breathe. What had I done? Something she didn't like, ignored her messages or the persistent phone calls that never seemed to stop, said something stupid or embarrassed her by showing up at the office, where she sits straight and stoic, unsmiling, dressed in her cold-coloured suits – metallic grey, pale morning blue – face hard and impenetrable.

One time I went into the big office in the city when I knew she was there for a meeting, to ask her for money. She had already told me no at home. I'd spent quite a bit that week. I thought I'd confront her and make it impossible for her to say no. She wouldn't want to look like a cheap skate in front of her colleagues,

would she? She gave me fifty quid in cash, and a long, hard smile. When I returned home the next evening, the door to the house was locked and bolted. I tried my key in the door, but it wouldn't budge. Through the frosted glass window, I could make out a hazy glow of light in the living room and the flicker of the television screen. If I strained, I could hear voices, a dramatic swell of music. She was watching a film. I called to her, but she didn't move. At first, I thought she couldn't hear me. I called a little louder, banged my fist against the door and rattled the handle.

Mum! Mum, it's me!

I tried her phone. No answer. I tried the back gate: locked. After a few minutes of banging and shouting, of wondering, was she on the phone? Was someone else in there with her? Had she somehow gone deaf during the day? I realised. I felt suddenly cold, like someone had tipped an ice bucket into my chest cavity. After about fifteen minutes I saw her blurry shape go into the kitchen to get another bottle of wine. I sent her texts: *PLEASE let me in. I'm SO sorry. I will NEVER pull a stunt like that again. I LOVE you. PLEASE PLEASE DON'T DO THIS.*

After two hours, she started turning off the lights downstairs. I called to her again.

Mum, please let me in! I'm sorry.

I thought she would open the door once she had finished her film. I thought she wouldn't be able to sleep knowing I was out there in the dark. But it wasn't until the dull, grey light of morning, when the birds had begun their incessant song, that she finally opened the door.

Get inside, she said, to the crumpled heap of daughter on the tiled floor, in

amongst the shoes and umbrellas.

I shuffled inside, grateful for the warmth. Perhaps I should have kept banging and shouting, louder and louder, until a neighbour or a passer-by noticed. But even then, what could they have done? Called the police? Broken down the door? But it ran deeper than that. On one level, I didn't think anyone would help me – why would they? And on another, I didn't want to draw attention to myself, I didn't want anyone else to see how little my own mother cared about me, because what does that say about the kind of person I am? How bad do you have to be to be rejected by the person whose body was your first home?

The patchy roadside of dust and wispy grass gives way suddenly to lush, verdant green. Trees reach up from the earth for about fifteen minutes – barely ten seconds in the car – and then, as quickly as they arrived, they disappear. The roadside becomes gravel; small, chalky white rocks underfoot. There are fields again, a distant horse or two. They seem so far away. A metal barrier appears; I must be getting close to the garage. Vehicles slow, brake lights flashing like angry eyes. And then, there it is. A red T looming, shimmering, a mirage on the horizon. I don't run towards it. I don't even pick up speed. I continue at the same, slow pace, wondering what I will do, what I will say. How should I respond when I am asked where I am going, why I am out here on foot and why I need a phone charger? The thought of saying words, forming sentences, feels like an impossible task.

There is a café beside the petrol station that sells coffee, burgers, breakfasts. I check the menu in the window. A laminated piece of A4 paper, comic sans font. I don't have enough money for anything. I sit on the kerb outside. My feet hurt.

My head is swimming. Now that the rhythm and aim of walking is gone, the pain is back. Options weigh heavy in my skull but I can't formulate them into decisions and actions. I drop my head to my knees and close my eyes, take small, shallow breaths. *Do not vomit. Do not vomit.*

Are you all right down there?

I don't know how long I've been there, hunched over. Now there is a man standing before me: tall, slightly stooped. He is wearing thick-rimmed glasses, full head of brown hair like a brush.

I'm fine, I say. Thanks.

You don't look fine.

I squint back up at him. He is smiling at me knowingly. What does he know about me?

What do you want me to say?

He looks thoughtful for a moment, turning over what I've said as though I have made a fascinating philosophical point. I almost expect him to stroke his chin.

Would you like to join me for a burger? On me, of course. You can choose whatever you like.

My stomach grumbles a response, but he can't hear it above the traffic. Horns beep in the distance. Of course, I desperately want some food. I want to eat. I want to sit down for a while and think. But I also know I shouldn't accept gifts from strangers.

No, I'm OK thanks.

Come, he says, not missing a beat. I'm not going to kidnap you. I just want to see you fed.

He laughs, as though kidnap were a hearty joke, and as he laughs, I see the dark cavern of his mouth, raw meat red. I consider accepting his offer, and then I see him see me thinking about it and hate myself for being so weak, so transparent.

Come, he says again, decisively. What would you like?

He tells me his name is Damien and he is the father of two young boys, three and five. He tells me this quickly, in order to show off his credentials I suppose; to reassure me that he won't hurt me. But I already know that there are many kinds of parent. I order a double cheeseburger with fries and a black coffee. Damien goes for pancakes with bacon and a cup of tea. He dithers over whether or not to order a vanilla milkshake, before deciding that it would be too sweet with the pancakes as well. I stare at him. He's sweet enough already, he tells me with a wink.

Damien eats slowly. He cuts his food into small, precise shapes before placing them into his mouth. He tells me about his job as a history teacher at a local sixth form college. He talks a lot. I relax. He doesn't ask many questions but watches me over the rim of his glasses as he talks with a strange expression on his face, as though he can see right through me, to the veins and the bones and the muscles beneath my skin. I wait for him to mention his children again, or his wife, but he doesn't.

Do you have a boyfriend, Allie? He asks softly, out of nowhere.

I start. I don't remember telling him my name, but I must have. I tell him that no I don't, and it feels like a betrayal even though it's true. Mattie. I close my eyes and try to conjure her face, but I can't. She has become distant. Even Reena and Max feel faraway, like people I will never see again. I think of them waking up together in Reena's snug, embarrassed, regretful. But they are friends, they love

each other. They will talk about it and laugh and become comfortable around each other again. Last night will become a fond, if slightly awkward memory. Life will go on and I will be outside it, looking in.

Damien gets the milkshake in the end. We have been sitting together for nearly two hours. He brings me back a Coke.

I thought you could use the energy, he says, smiling.

When the light starts to fade, he offers me a lift home. I haven't told him where I live yet. I accept, a sense of dread and inevitability unfurling in my brain like a fog. It was always going to end like this. As we walk towards his inconspicuous silver people carrier, I feel my body become stiff, as though my soul has left and is hanging around somewhere above me.

Once both doors are shut, he holds my phone out to me, fully charged.

Try not to lose it, he says, winking again, in that awkward way of his. Text someone and let them know you're in the car with me, yeah?

He starts the car. I come back into myself with in a sudden, dizzying snap. The radio comes on, some old song, and Damien starts to hum along. I thought... what had I thought? I switch my phone back on, and the notifications pile up. Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp. Nothing from Mum, nothing from Mattie. I pretend to type out a message, as if someone cared where I was.

You take care of yourself now, Allie, Damien says, as he drops me off at the end of my road. It was lovely to meet you, but in the nicest way possible, I hope I don't meet you again.

He chuckles, his eyes serious over the top of his glasses. Thank you, I think. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

The front door is open. My mum and Mike are sat on the sofa, a bottle of gin on the coffee table, a couple of wedges of lime and tiny, empty cans of tonic water.

Oh, there you are, Mum says. I was wondering when you'd get home.

She is looking at me and waiting for something. My body rushes with adrenaline, the ghost of anger. I wonder if I will cry, but I don't. I think about telling her the truth, and then I think about telling her I was forced to have sex with an old man in exchange for a lift home. But I know she wouldn't care. She would laugh and say wow, is there anything you won't do to avoid walking home?

I was about to go and look for you, she says, turning back to face the television. Wasn't I, Mike?

Mike looks at me, but I don't meet his eyes.

I go upstairs and lay flat on my bed. It had felt like I was never going to get home, but now that I was here, I realised that I was always going to make it back safe. Mum knew it, so why didn't I? *I made it back*, I tell myself, as though it is something to be proud of. I made it. I want to call Mattie and tell her everything. I want to tell her about Damien, what I thought was going to happen. I want to tell her about Max's hand on the small of my back last night in the pub as he told me to drink up. The way later on, he and Reena merged into one body in the dark. I want to tell her about how I imagined Damien was going to grab me across the car and that I wouldn't have been disgusted or even surprised, but willing. He had been so nice, after all. You won't believe what happened to me... I would say, as though I am a passive observer of my own life, as though I didn't make the choices that led me here. I remember the glance Reena and Max shared with each other

last night, just before. That glance caught and scraped inside me, like a stone lodged in my throat. I stare at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling. Only a few remain now, scattered fragments of light. Will Mattie be angry with me? Will she even care? Perhaps she wouldn't be surprised. Maybe she didn't come with me last night because she knew exactly where I'd end up. Everyone always seems to be a few steps ahead of me.

My phone lights up with a new message from Reena: *Hey mate, how you feeling? You coming out tonight?*

I probably shouldn't. I close my eyes and feel the bed spin out beneath me, remnants of the night before still clinging to my blood. I should get some sleep. Tomorrow is Sunday. I will have to speak to Mattie at some point, and I need to figure out what I'm going to say. I will go with Mum to the care home, I always do. I think of the clinical smell, the whole place dreary, sucked of colour and energy, a waiting room for death.

On the way, we will sit in the car, and we won't speak. I will watch the world outside blurring through the passenger side window. Mum will keep her eyes on the road, focused. This is a kind of limbo too. It's better when grandma doesn't recognise us, when she smiles uncertainly, but sits politely through the memory games that Mum has found on the Internet, or looks at the photo albums Mum shows her with faint baffled amusement.

Look, Mum will say. Do you remember when we went to Edinburgh together? Do you remember the castle?

Grandma will laugh. Is that you? she'll say, looking at the photo and back up at Mum in disbelief. Oh right.

Yes, Mum. And that's you.

Grandma will turn to look at me. I don't know what he's talking about, do you? I just got here so I didn't know something was happening and now...

Mum and I hold our breath. It will go one way or the other. Good or bad. Happy or sad.

I haven't seen you before in my life, she'll say, laughing. But you can tell me the story if you think he'll like it.

She motions for Mum to continue. We make eye contact and relax. It's better like this. It's not perfect, but it's better than the shouting, the crying, the insults, her inconsolable fear that the bad man is coming for her and there's nothing we can do to stop him. Mum takes a deep breath and tells grandma a story about herself.

## Positive Vibes

First, she laid out the little milk jugs of wildflowers. One on each of the round tables, and three on the long table at the back. Then she laid out the pots of sugar and arranged the croissants and pastries in a glass display cabinet by the till. She put the squashed ones at the back, where they would be selected for sale first, and the best ones up front. Outside, a man knocked on the door and peered through the glass. He was holding a briefcase. He tapped his watch and mimed drinking a cup of coffee. Lia shook her head and shrugged apologetically. He gestured for her to come closer, but she stayed where she was. They weren't supposed to open the door to customers unless there were at least two of them in the building. Cora told her that it had been company policy ever since there was a robbery-murder at one of the other cafés, over in East London. Lia laughed, but Cora's face remained deadly serious. Later, Lia Googled it, but she could find no trace of the murder having actually happened. Still, she made sure the door was double-locked whenever she was on her own.

Cora clattered through the back door; Lia flinched.

Sorry, sorry! Cora called. I didn't sleep well. I'm just gonna get changed then I'll be right with you.

The café's décor was Scandinavian in style, neutral and full of light: blond wood furniture, blinding white walls. It was April. Spring had finally arrived. Sunlight skittered across the polished tabletops. Outside, yellow and purple

crocuses began to poke their heads out of the grass; the sky rinsed clean by the sun. Once she was dressed in the regulation blue jeans, white t-shirt and plum-coloured apron, Cora switched on the speakers and an upbeat pop playlist pumped out. They were supposed to play music from an approved playlist, which mostly consisted of calming spa type music, but Cora refused to put it on, even when their boss, Fiona, was in.

I hate it, Cora said. And anyway, this is what people want in the morning, isn't it? A boost! Some fun! I mean, isn't this what you want first thing in the morning?

Lia nodded enthusiastically.

They opened a little after eight. Lia was relieved to see the man with the briefcase was gone. Then, the steady stream of commuters. The first customers were always in a rush, placing their orders in clipped tones, eyes locked on their phone screens. At her interview, Lia said she was a people person, because it sounded like the right thing to say. Fiona nodded and made a mark in her notebook that looked like a big tick. But the job had in fact concretised Lia's knowledge that she was the opposite of a people person. Even though the interactions were mostly brief and uninteresting, she still felt like she'd been physically assaulted after a shift on the till. She much preferred making coffee. She liked the repetitive nature of the work. Once she got into a rhythm, she could lose herself in it. Her mind would glaze over as she tamped down the coffee grounds and watched the brown liquid trickle out of the portafilter. It was like meditating, really. Except she got paid for it.

Another order was placed. Cora stuck another orange post-it note on the coffee machine: *Decaf almond cortado*.

Famous person alert.

Lia turned around. The girl Cora was serving was about their age, early twenties or so. Lia didn't recognise her, but she didn't doubt that the girl was famous. Her body was clad in skin-tight lycra: clean lines, no wobbles or bulges. Her trainers were grape purple, a big, leopard-print tick on the side – a defiant YES. The air in the coffee shop had changed. Everyone was looking – but trying not to be seen to be looking – at the girl. Lia turned back to the coffee machine and began to make the girl's coffee. She understood why people liked to look at the girl's face. It was pleasant enough, but it was also very generic, a Barbie-type face, in that it was not exactly beautiful, but it was without any obvious faults.

Decaf almond milk cortado? Lia said.

The girl beamed at her. Thank you so much!

She spoke with a hard enthusiasm that felt rehearsed and oddly empty, as though she didn't mean what she said at all. Cora and Lia watched as the girl was stopped not once but twice on her way out of the café. First by a young woman in gym clothes, and then by a frazzled mum with a small fat baby tied to her chest. Each of them flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and joy.

What's she famous for? Lia asked.

Instagrammer, Cora said, peeling the plastic lid from one of the granola pots. Don't you follow her?

No. I barely use my Instagram.

Oh. Really? Cora licked the lid and watched Lia with narrowed eyes. Or are you just saying that?

Lia snorted. I've just never really got into it.

Huh. Well, I've been using it a lot recently. To promote my work. I've got quite a few followers now. It's how I got the bikini job.

Cora had studied at the same art school as Lia, but she graduated last year. Alongside working at the café, she did a bit of photography. Mostly headshots for actors she knew. She said the money wasn't bad, even though she had to do a lot of them for mate's rates. Sometimes Lia watched as Cora scrolled through the photographs on her break, selecting the ones she would edit, and binning the others. All those hopeful, bright faces, trying out different expressions, different postures, as though the right pose might land them a life-changing role. Most recently, Cora had been on a trip to Barcelona to take photographs for a bikini company. Lia looked them up on the Internet. The bikinis were ugly, over-the-top, and garish – that seemed to be their main selling point. The photos were great, but Lia didn't understand why the models were looking at their phones in every photo. It must have been some sort of statement or quirky-cool artistic choice that she simply didn't get.

Maybe I should try harder with it.

Maybe you should. And you should follow Sara. Her page is all about positivity and gratitude and making the most of your time or whatever. It sounds cheesy but it's not. It's like, really inspirational.

Through the glass front of the café, they could see a group of girls sat at the tables outside, phones in hands, hunched over themselves as though they'd quite

like to fold up flat and slip away entirely. When Sara walked past, their heads turned in her direction, flowers towards a sun.

The morning rush was over. There would be a lull until lunch. Cora took out her laptop and set it on the edge of the counter. She was scrolling through Twitter on one tab and looking at sunglasses on the other. Lia took her phone out of her pocket and ran a Google search. Sara's face appeared immediately, her eyes big and blue, blonde hair blowing out around her face.

*Sara. Positive energy can change your life [sunshine emoji] I'll show you how [smiley face emoji] [thumbs up emoji] 3x Bestselling Author of the Positive Vibes books, link below! [book emoji] [sparkle emoji]*

Lia selected a post at random, and a caption appeared:

*I'll never get tired of saying this to you guys, but breakfast is the most important meal of the day! Don't forget to fuel your body for a productive day ahead! [muscle flex emoji] [hands outstretched emoji] [sparkle emoji] Now that's what I call a breakfast for champions! Remember to show the world your biggest smile today. Like I always say, positive vibes bring positive results [kissing face emoji] [muscle flex emoji]*

There was something childlike and faintly embarrassing about Sara's unrestrained enthusiasm. But she must have been doing something right. She had more than

600,000 followers on Instagram – a number that seemed enormous, outsized, one Lia could barely comprehend. She Googled the capacity of Wembley Stadium. 90,000. Sara had more followers than six full Wembley Stadiums. It was hard not to think about how much that was worth in monetary terms.

Lia clicked through to her own neglected Instagram page. She had posted only five images, including one of her mother's dog and another of a fork resting on a plate, which she had dimmed and brightened and saturated within an inch of recognisability. She deleted it. Sara's page was a neat grid of images, bright and balanced like a lovingly tended flower border. There were numerous plates of food, all healthful and primarily green. Sara in impossible yoga poses. Sara in a bikini. Sara on a yacht. Sara in a mirror. Sara at the gym. A particular shade of bright chlorine blue recurred through the images, tying the profile's aesthetic together. It was impressive, from a compositional perspective. As she scrolled through the posts, Lia noticed the main colour fade from blue to pale yellow. Everything was planned, orchestrated down to the finest detail – and yet each post felt so spontaneous. *Just got in from the gym... Just wanted to let you guys know... How are we all feeling today?* It was like having a friend in your pocket. Cora peered over Lia's shoulder.

It's good, right?

Yeah. I like it. Great colours.

I can lend you her book, if you want. I've got the first one.

All right.

I think it'll be really useful for you. It might give you some tips for handling criticism.

Lia stiffened.

I don't mean that specifically you need it, Cora added hastily. Not necessarily. But everyone needs to be able to like, maintain a sense of self-worth when they're having their art criticised all the time, right?

\*

The week before, Lia's tutor had performed an impromptu critique of everyone's works-in-progress. She had known her work wasn't ready yet – it was 'in progress' after all – but she had been hoping for some encouraging feedback. She hadn't expected him to hate it.

It just doesn't *mean* anything, Matteo said.

Lia picked at the skin around her nails. One of her thumb nailbeds started to dribble blood. She could feel eyes on her from all around the room, peeking out from behind canvases and sketchbooks, glancing around workstation corners.

I mean, it's pleasant enough. I can't fault your technique. But I just don't know *why* you've done this. What are you trying to make the viewer *feel*?

Matteo tried to make eye contact with her, but Lia's gaze remained fixed on her own inadequate work of art.

This is just a quirky painting of the Millennium bridge. Something I might buy in a gift shop, or along the Southbank. I have to ask, is that what we're trying to do here?

He turned to face the room. Are we here to make trinkets for gift shops?

A soft titter spread around the room. Lia burned.

You can do better.

His words stung. Lia had researched and mixed that palette of colours for weeks. She spent hours and hours – full days, even – down by the bridge. She took photos and sketches, viewed it from every possible angle, in different weather, different light... She put in the work. She fully immersed herself in her subject. Isn't that what Matteo told them to do?

At the station next to her, Gabby chewed her lip. She was wearing a cardigan several sizes too big, bobbly leggings and a pair of green Crocs. Gabby's project was, as far as Lia could tell, just a pile of dismembered dolls. Matteo got down on the ground to take a closer look, his brow furrowed in concentration.

This is striking stuff, Gabby. I appreciate the layers. From a distance, we are horrified. We almost want to look away altogether. Then when we get closer... well. There's something really poignant about this piece close-up. It invites the viewer in... Yes, there's something special going on here. I look forward to seeing where this goes.

When Matteo moved on, Gabby glowed pink and put her hand over her mouth to conceal her enormous smile. Others around the room tried to catch her eye; someone gave her a thumbs up. They wanted to put themselves in proximity to that kind of feedback, that kind of genius.

What to do after feedback like that? Lia had waited a few minutes, then packed up, turned her paintings face down and left. She stopped on the pavement outside the art building. People rushed past with speed and purpose, but she had nowhere to go. She thought about going back to her shared house. Her bedroom was so small that her desk was practically wedged up against the bed. But at least

her room was clean. In the bathroom, the walls were peeling, and the shower drain was clogged with nests of other people's hair. The last time she had yanked one out, it had been the size and shape of a rat.

She checked her phone. It was nearly six o'clock. At home, her mother would be in the kitchen, chopping something at the marble-topped island. She might look out at the sky dimming above the lawn and wonder whether she should bring the laundry in before making dinner. Her brothers would be at their clubs – swimming or computing – or they'd be lounging on the overstuffed linen sofas, eating crisps and playing on their Nintendo Switch. The cleaner would have been by now: the carpets would have perfectly straight vacuum lines across them, like the stripes on a football pitch.

Lia walked through the park. The air had a damp, mineral smell. The sky above her turned lilac and the temperature dropped a few degrees. She thought about the Millennium Bridge. It would look stunning in this light, the river flecked with violet and gold, St Paul's lit up like a Christmas tree, the slow creep of night. But so what? What was it for? What did it mean? Nothing. Nothing at all. In the end, she went back to the café, where Cora was still cleaning up. Cora was an artist; Cora would understand.

Look, she'd said. You've absolutely got this. You're super-talented. You can do anything you put your mind to. You know that, right?

Lia nodded.

But at the same time... If you want to survive art school, you'll have to toughen the fuck up. Just get back on the horse, try again. You can do it, Lia. I believe in you.

\*

The monthly magazine order arrived. Lia tore open the latest copies of *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Cosmopolitan* and *National Geographic* and fanned them out on the low table by the window. She collected the old magazines and was about to throw them in the bin, but she stopped. She flicked through them instead; she gazed at all the faces, the sleek bodies.

A notification popped up on Lia's phone screen: *@saraspositivevibes started a live video. Watch it before it ends!* The video stuttered to life. Sara was speaking to the camera and walking down the street at the same time, an act that seemed strangely impressive. Didn't she worry about people looking at her? Didn't she worry about tripping up or knocking into someone? There were people streaming past in the background, but Sara appeared to navigate them with ease. It was clear she did this on a regular basis. She was calm, relaxed, effortlessly flawless. The audio connected mid-sentence:

*...because the thing is, we learn most from those who bring us up, not those who bring us down. It is so incredibly important to surround ourselves with positive people and avoid those negative people who like to chip, chip, chip away at you until you feel completely worthless. Yes! I see you all commenting saying you know those people... Your sister. Your boyfriend. Your boss. We all know those people. But listen to me, life is too short to be surrounded by people who don't make you feel good. Spending time with them is not serving you in any way! They do not fill your life with*

*positive vibes. And on this account, as my long-time followers will know, we live for positive vibes! Anyway, that's enough from me, and my short morning TED talk. I've just been to the gym for a really yummy yoga class, and now I'm off for an exciting meeting – but more on that later! Hope you guys all have a wonderful, positive day. Mwah!*

The video cut out and Lia was returned to Sara's Instagram profile. She thought about her parents. They'd wanted her to study medicine or law and when she tried to explain how important art was to her, they wouldn't listen. They would love to hear about Matteo's feedback. They'd love to know she was failing. When she told them she was going to study art against their wishes, her decision was met with resignation.

Well, her father had said evenly. The only thing to bear in mind is that we won't be able to pay your allowance if you accept the offer to study art.

Her mother nodded along, enthusiastic in her agreement.

It would have been gratifying if they had at least *tried* to forbid her from following her dream. Lia had braced for drama – shouting or tears, some emotion at least – but there was none of that. They dropped her off at the train station the day before the semester started. The five of them in the big car: her mother, father, brothers and the dog. Lia waved at them before she walked through the gate and they waved back in unison, all smiles, like something out of a movie. After she dragged her suitcase onto the platform, she turned back. But they had already left.

She hadn't been home since Christmas. Her mum had texted a few times to ask when they could expect her visit. The thought of home always filled her with a

hopeful warmth – she thought about the heated floors, the familiar faces of her family, the absence of nasty smells in the kitchen – but at the same time, she knew it wouldn't be long before the comments began. Her dad would ask how living in a shared house was going, and her mother would, at some point, ask about Lia's diet. It would be under the pretext of care – *I just want to make sure you're eating properly* – but the subtext would be that Lia had put on weight or that she looked unwell. One way or another, it would be deemed that Lia had failed at the basic task of taking care of herself. Eating too much or not enough, she would be to blame.

Later that evening, Lia sat on her bed and opened the magazines. With her scissors, she scraped around each model and actress, all the beautiful famous people, and laid them on her blue gingham sheets. There was Gigi Hadid strutting down the runway in a sheer black dress, pink flowers bunched around her waist; Adwoa Aboah in a red leather trench coat; Rihanna wearing a sequinned, floor-length gown; Cara Delevingne lying naked in some sort of puddle, a bottle of perfume clasped in her hand. Lia reached out to touch them. They crinkled under her fingertips. She sliced them into parts – Gigi's long legs now free of her body; Adwoa's head floating beside it – and she cut and cut and cut until her bed was covered with scraps of paper and body parts. What was she doing? She didn't know exactly. She moved the parts around, rearranging them over and over like she was playing a game of Tetris. She was just messing around, taking the women apart and putting them back together, seeing what happened. She felt like it meant something – or could mean something. But how would she articulate what she'd

done to Matteo?

*But what does it mean?* Lia imagined him asking her in front of the group.

*What are you trying to say?*

When she showed a photo of the collage to Cora on their next shift together, Lia watched her face carefully, hoping for that flicker of jealousy, that recognition of genius that she'd seen on her classmates' faces when they saw Gabby's work. But there was nothing. Cora raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

It's not bad, she said, zooming in on Lia's phone screen with two fingers. I think I get the concept. It's supposed to be like, feminism, right? Reclaiming their bodies from the pages of the magazine?

Lia thought that sounded right. She nodded.

It's not the worst but it's not the best. Do you know what I'm saying?

Lia nodded.

I just think you can come up with something better.

\*

The next day, Lia arrived at the café to find that Cora wasn't there. Alejandro was behind the counter, starting up the coffee machine. It spat and hissed.

Lia! Long time, no see.

Hey. Lia looked around. Alejandro had done most of the set-up jobs already, the milk jugs strewn haphazardly onto the tabletops. She looked closer. He hadn't swapped out the dying flowers. He had just stuffed the fresh flowers in there too, amongst the ones that were dried out or wilting, lost half of their petals. It bothered

her, like an itch that she couldn't reach, but she would have to endure it. Instead, she picked up the box of croissants and began arranging them in the display cabinet, putting the best ones up front.

Throughout the day, she read through more of Sara's posts. They always contained some sort of positive affirmation, something like: *Every new day is a new opportunity to be positive [heart eyes emoji] [sunshine emoji] [sparkle emoji]*. She looked at Cora's page too, which, she was surprised to see, contained photos of plates of food like kale and lentils, and perhaps even more surprisingly, photos of Cora's own face alongside her photography and digital art. Lia had never seen her like that – carefully made up, smiling so broadly. The most recent post was an artwork. It was a photo of her street sign, copied out nine times in different pastel shades. Lia read the caption: *Feeling creative today #grateful #arteveryday #positivevibes*. Cora had almost a thousand followers.

\*

Lia ventured out to attend a talk at the university. It was a guest lecture, given by a famous woman photographer who recently won a prestigious prize. The auditorium was full. Lia took one of the last seats, sandwiched against a stranger on the end of a row. The lights dimmed; hush fell. The woman lit up. She wore all black and a pair of glasses with thick black rims. Her hair was slicked back but sprung free at the nape of her neck. She tapped her laptop and the projector blinked to life. Words appeared on the screen.

*IS IT REAL?*

The woman didn't say hello or introduce herself the way lecturers usually did. She tapped her laptop once more and a series of photos appeared, one after the other. Donald Trump standing alongside the Ku Klux Klan, Kim Kardashian in the process of giving birth, Queen Elizabeth sitting on the toilet. Titters from the audience. The laughter petered out and the woman moved centre stage.

Some of these things happened, some of them didn't. But does it matter that the photos are manipulated? Does it change how we perceive them?

The audience was rapt, hanging on her every word.

How often do we question the images around us? How do we define reality?

Lia peered at the faces around her, expecting to find her own bafflement reflected in someone else's expression – but no. She seemed to be the only one that didn't get it. This was the kind of thing she would expect to see on some dodgy blog or Reddit thread, or perhaps on Instagram – but not in an art school.

The cultural moment we live in is saturated with images. In the news, on the Tube, on social media. It is up to us to pay closer attention to what is in front of us.

\*

Cora wasn't at work the next day, or the day after that. Lia sent messages but they went unanswered.

*Weren't u supposed to be in today?*

*Missing u at work lol.*

*Hey, you were supposed to lend me that positive book.*

*Oi, where are you?*

Lia tried asking Alejandro, who had taken over most of Cora's shifts, but he didn't know – or care.

*I dunno babe, she's probably just busy.*

In her most recent post, Sara reclined across a pink velvet armchair, a glass of champagne in her hand: *Cheers to the weekend* [wink emoji] [champagne bottle emoji]. The comments underneath read the same as usual: *You are such a beautiful person, inside and out; U R such an inspiration, thank U; I tried to buy the top you are wearing from Zara, but it's already sold out* [crying emoji].

Eventually, Cora messaged back.

*Sorry. Been busy. See u soon. I'll bring the book. X*

Lia's mum texted her a photo of the dog: *Coco can't wait to see you this weekend! She's missing you.* Lia deleted the message. She hated the dog. The dog did not miss her. It was so small and yappy and unnecessary. Lia imagined it sitting on the armchair where she used to sit every evening after school, watching trash on telly and eating snacks delivered by her mother. She imagined its head resting on its fluffy brown and white paws, its eyes closed, perfectly content.

\*

Three days later, Lia was polishing the cutlery from the glasswasher while she was waiting for the coffee machine to warm up. Cora came through the back door, late as usual.

Hey, she said breezily, as though she'd just returned from popping to the

shops. Cora's face was bare of make-up. It looked fresh and dewy, like she'd been doing a lot of sleeping. Her hair was pushed back from her face with a floral print head band.

The shift went slowly. It was raining. Lia wiped down the table and looked out at the park, all smudged and wet through the window like an impressionist painting. When she tried to talk to Cora, she felt her close off, like she was receding back inside her shell. If she asked her a direct question, Cora's answer was vague and she looked at Lia with a faraway, slightly mystified expression, as though she had forgotten who Lia was, and didn't understand why she was talking to her at all.

The rain steadily intensified throughout the afternoon. By the time she got back to her house that evening, Lia was soaked. There was a rumble of thunder. Lightning cracked across the sky. She sat at her desk, squashed in against her bed and looked through her folder. The cut-up women were still in there, loose amongst the pages. She had never stuck them down, nor thrown them away. The photos she had shown Cora were just temporary arrangements. She thought about what Cora had said: *You can come up with something better*. But what if she couldn't? What if this was it, the extent of her creativity? Would that be so bad? She thought of Matteo's enthusiasm for Gabby's work. Wasn't this a bit like that? A bit surprising, a bit different, but with an important meaning. Or at least, there was a meaning that could be applied to it.

Lia opened Instagram. People celebrating, on holiday, making big announcements. Sara had posted a new image of herself doing yoga on a beach, in the peachy glow of a sunrise. Her leggings and sports bra were the exact same

colour as the sea. The caption said:

*Start now. Start today. Start here. Start with all your doubts and fears inside you.  
Start and don't give up. Start now and don't stop. Start today guys – I believe in you!  
A more positive you is just around the corner. Namaste [prayer emoji] [ocean wave  
emoji] [sparkle emoji]*

Lia looked at Sara's face, trying to figure out she might transform herself in the same way. It wasn't the clothes, the money, the mega-watt smile. It was the self-assurance, the self-love that Lia had no idea how to tap into. Watching Sara made her feel like anything was possible, like she could come away from her Instagram page and truly invest in herself. But when Sara was gone and she was facing herself in the mirror, the task in front of her seemed impossible and overwhelming. Lia was trying; she would try harder.

She was about to exit the app when something caught her eye – something she almost recognised, in an off-kilter way, like a doppelganger or a ghost. She enlarged the image, which had been posted from Cora's account. Lia gasped. Her screen flooded with monstrous women, reduced to their parts, and then built back up again. They were horrifying and unnatural. They made her recoil, but they also made her want to keep looking. Cora had more than three thousand followers now. Lia clicked on one of the images and read the caption: *Let's reclaim these women from the pages of magazines #fuckthemalegaze #feministvibes #womensmarch.*

Lia looked steadily at her phone screen for a full minute and then she switched it off. She threw her folder across the room. It clattered against the

wardrobe, sending slips of paper drifting through the air like snowflakes. One of her housemates yelled through the wall.

Can you not? I'm trying to sleep!

\*

The next day, Lia was supposed to be meeting with Matteo to talk about her project for the work-in-progress exhibition, but she knew she wouldn't be able to go through with it. Outside, the streets were glossy and the air still damp, water pooling along the path. But there was a warmth in the air, as though the sun was trying to shine through thick cloud.

The café had not long opened when Lia walked in. There was a queue of people stretching out the door.

Oh, hey Lia, said Alejandro. What are you doing here?

I need to talk to Cora.

Little busy here, Lia, Cora said. She handed a customer their coffee. Can you come back later?

I need to talk to you now.

Cora looked up with narrowed eyes. Lia! Come on. I'm working?

A woman with a white bob was watching their conversation and shaking her head.

It's important.

Alejandro looked around. Everything OK Lia?

I just need to talk to Cora.

Cora shrugged. Fine. I'll just tell these customers to wait, shall I?

Excuse me? said the woman with the bob. Excuse me!

Alejandro stepped forward, a smile ready. Hi there! Can I help?

Cora stalked across the café and waited for Lia by the window. Well? she said.

What is it? What do you want?

Lia opened her mouth to speak, and felt her anger slowly fizzle out. What did she want exactly? Did she want Cora to take the pictures down? Did she want an apology? She didn't know.

Lia? Look, whatever's going on, you need to make it quick. Alejandro can't do it all by himself.

You... You stole my idea, Cora. I trusted you.

I did what?

The magazine cutups, Lia said. I showed you the photo. The other day, remember? I was asking for your thoughts. I didn't think you would...

Wait, Cora interrupted. You think my new work is based on your idea?

Well, yeah. I mean, I don't think so... I know -

Do you have any idea how ridiculous this is? My work is *nothing* like yours. I'm sorry that you're going through some sort of artistic crisis. I feel for you, I really do. But this is incredibly inappropriate... I mean, this is my - our - place of work.

I'm not going through an artistic crisis! It was my idea, and you took it.

Oh, grow up, Cora snapped. This isn't a playground. This is the real world. Now fuck off. Seriously. This is unbelievably out of order.

Cora...

I mean it Lia. Don't make me phone Fiona.

Lia faltered. Then Cora was back behind the counter, murmuring in Alejandro's ear. His eyes widened in shock. Lia turned and left the café as fast as she could. What would she do now? What would Sara do?

Lia opened Instagram. Cora's collages were being shared among women attending a protest that weekend. There were more hashtags emerging *#reclaimthebody #fuckmagazines #burnitdown*. Cora had four thousand followers now; a number that was steadily increasing. Meanwhile, Lia's page sat bare, untouched, and unnoticed. She sat on a bench in the middle of the park. It was still wet; the chill seeped through her jeans. She clicked onto the post with most likes and typed out a comment:

*THIEF!!! SHE STOLE THIS IDEA FROM ME. THIS IS NOT AN ORIGINAL IDEA.*

She refreshed the page and saw a response: *Bitter much? Get a life*. Then another: *This isn't about you. This is bigger than you*. And another: *So what?* Lia scrambled to delete her comment, to wipe it from Cora's page before anyone else saw it, but all of a sudden, Cora's posts had vanished. So, too, had her profile image, post count and follower count. The grid area, where her photos used to appear was empty, except for the words: *No Posts Yet*. For a brief, dizzying moment, Lia thought that maybe she had done this – that Cora had been suspended for plagiarism – but no. It dawned on her that she had been blocked.

What else could she do? Her blood was burning with possibilities. She could report Cora – properly, officially – to Instagram, for the things she had done. She could report her for things she hadn't done, too. What could get a person banned

from Instagram? She could photoshop Cora's face onto a porn star's body. She could manipulate a photo of Cora naked, defiled, committing a crime. She could leak it on the Internet, some dark, dank corner, and wait for Cora's life to fall apart. No one would hire her to be their photographer – not even the actors whose headshots she was taking for next to nothing. Maybe she should make it her art school project – the 'Fuck you, Cora' project – what would Matteo think of that? Would it mean anything? Would it have layers? Would it invite the viewer in?

Lia stopped suddenly. She caught sight of herself in the window of an abandoned clothes shop. The glass was covered in a crinkly metallic material; a poster advertising a closing-down sale still dangling in the corner. Her face was distorted like she was trapped in a funhouse mirror – but the reflection was still clearly her, Lia, her face twisted with anger. What would Sara say if she could see her now, like this? Lia thought back to something Sara had said about smiling in a recent post. The act of smiling releases certain hormones in your body. You can literally force yourself to be positive if your mind won't cooperate. *Even when you're feeling sad or angry or hurt, you can connect to your inner positive vibes. Just give it a try! Your body will thank you.*

Lia took a deep breath. Now that she had stopped and taken a moment, her anger had faded a little. It had begun to feel distant, as though it belonged to someone else. She tried a smile – just a small one at first. *The brain doesn't know whether you're faking it, or genuinely over the moon about something – so why not tell it you're feeling good and see what happens?* Lia felt her heartbeat began to slow. It felt miraculous that she had this much control over her own body, her own feelings. *Smiling can even make you live longer.* Sara giggled and tossed her curls.

*It's unbelievable, isn't it? We have the power to make ourselves happier and healthier – we have the power to actually extend our lives – and so many people don't make the effort to be positive. Stick with me guys, and I'll show you how. Mwah!*

Lia breathed in and out. She smiled at herself – wider and wider – until she was beaming, showing all her teeth. The rage was still there, but it had taken on a new shape. It could be boxed up, pushed down. Her body flooded with something else. What was it? Calm? Exhaustion? Emptiness? Maybe the feeling was happiness, after all. Her cheeks began to ache. Her lips cracked – but she didn't stop. On the street behind her, people went by, on their way to their jobs, their friends, their families, their busy lives. She stayed there for a few more minutes, looking herself in the eye, until she was sure she felt completely happy. Then she took one last deep breath and began to walk home.

On the way, Lia passed the university building. Weak sunlight flashed against its cold shiny surfaces. It occurred to her that Matteo was in there, right now, waiting for her to show up for their meeting. She could go in there and tell him that she was struggling. She could ask for help. But she wouldn't do that. Instead, she would go back to her house and look at herself in the mirror. She would stretch and perhaps meditate. She would think positive thoughts. She would put on a little bit of make-up and a nice top. She would take a really good photo of herself smiling, sunshine glowing through her bedroom window, and she would post it on Instagram. Then she would wait for the likes to flood in.

## Cowboy / Superhero / Spaceman / Monster

It is a Sunday, the last show of the week. I am stationed in a basement corner, facing down dark corridors in both directions. There is nothing to see except a creeping fog, which hisses on at timed intervals, and a distant crack of light. When I look down, I can barely see my hands splayed in front of me. The tips of my trainers wink back at me through the gloom, like tiny ghostly mice. The soundtrack crescendos, a static rumbling that makes my chest ache. The first ushering shift I ever did was in the basement. I remember the cold, drenching fear – the kind that I have only felt once before, when I was mugged at knifepoint on my way home from school. My heart was roaring so loud I could hear nothing else, and my body went limp, given over to my impending death. I was thinking crazy things – that the job was some sort of elaborate trick, that I was about to be ritually sacrificed to some weird cult. But eventually the audience trickled down, as they always do, and the space filled with the white-masked faces of other humans.

Another figure dressed all in black appears at the end of the corridor. A fellow usher, or a member of the stage management team. I check my watch. We aren't due to change positions for another twenty-five minutes.

Fancy that, a voice says, close to my ear. Finding you down here all alone.

I catch my left wrist in my right hand behind my back and hold it tight. I feel my pulse jumping like something small and frightened is trying to escape.

Fancy that, I say. Looking up my location on the rota... Are you stalking me?

The figure smirks. I can only see pale lips and a chin speckled with dun-coloured stubble. The black mask covers the top half of his face.

Aren't you good, staying where you're supposed to be.

And where exactly are you supposed to be?

In the desert.

You're missing the naked cowboy just for me?

The desert is on the top floor, another floor that usually remains empty until the second hour of the performance. There was a whole drama with the desert before the show opened. There weren't enough bags of sand, and there was a big question mark over how long the horse could stay up there without needing a break. His name is Chestnut, and he goes up and down in the lift about three times a day. In between shows, the Head of Animal Handling takes him for a canter in Hyde Park.

Nah, the naked cowboy's bit isn't for another ten minutes. I don't like you enough to miss out on that.

Ha, I say into the dark. So you *do* like me.

Keep up, little one.

He leans closer. The music crashes into wailing strings – a track from a horror movie. The innocent girl, alone, making her way through the creepy house. I can smell the cigarettes and coffee on his breath, the minty freshness of his shower gel, and something musky and animalic, which could be sex or shit.

I know you like me too, he says. Just admit it.

Nah. This is a one-way thing, I say. You're the one stalking me, three floors down from where you're supposed to be.

Stop playing hard to get, he says. He grabs hold of my wrist and then lets it go. Think of all the fun we could have if you just admitted that you want me.

\*

I applied for the job on a whim. At the time, I was sending out applications indiscriminately, wanting to do something – anything – else with my days. I was sick of stacking shelves at the supermarket across the road from my flat and spending my days off at the same supermarket with my boyfriend. My basket would be full of tins, frozen ready meals, and as a treat, a little bottle of supermarket own brand vodka. His would be full of fruit, cakes, fresh bread, wine, butter. He was buying the food for me, and we both knew it, but we had to pretend otherwise. He liked the performance, the suspense, the moment when he was due to leave for the night and I would say, *don't forget your food shopping*, and he would say, *that's not my food, I bought it for you*, and I would gush with gratitude and he would act like it was no big deal, which I suppose maybe it wasn't, for him.

I was ready for a change. The ad said the show was immersive. A theatre dance experience. I didn't know what that meant at the time, not being the theatre type, but I thought it sounded promising. More fun than stacking loo rolls anyway. I called my mum when I got the job, and she asked me if I was sure it wasn't a sex thing. Lots of people just don't get it. Aside from the Facebook group – the Superfans, who visit again and again – most audience members miss out one or two floors entirely on their first visit. I'd had complaints about it when I worked cover shifts on the box office.

But I didn't even get to see the whole show! My friend saw this orgy in the basement. I didn't even get to the basement.

That's the point, I'd reply. It's literally impossible to see everything. You have to make choices.

This is ridiculous, they'd huff. How can I choose when I don't know what I'm choosing *from*?

I'd shrug. I was just a box office assistant. What did I care?

You're welcome to return and try again. We have availability from mid-October.

My favourite complaints of all were from people who missed the show completely, having gotten their dates mixed up. They always demanded a refund – righteously – as though it was somehow my fault and not their own stupidity.

But we didn't get to see the show at all! they'd say.

I'm sorry, I'd say. But that's like trying to return an item of clothing that no longer exists.

But we didn't see the show!

I was a bit antagonistic, sure, but it was one of the perks of the job, getting to wind rich people up. Sometimes the women cried, their eyes clouding over with the impossible unfairness of it all. But I remained strong. It was just my job, I reminded them. My hands were tied. They always paid up, in the end. They could swallow the cost no problem. It was all an act designed to elicit sympathy, and I never fell for it. Sometimes I refunded their orders anyway – after they had paid for new tickets – and pocketed the cash.

Most of the audience is made up of two categories of people: the Tourists and the Good Timers. The Good Timers, we were told, just wanted to have fun. All we had to do was facilitate their good time within the rules of the world.

Imagine a Good Timer comes up to you, and they're frustrated because they can't find the bar. What do you do? Karina?

This was at our induction workshop. We were in a large, draughty room, which must have been an old office. The carpet was grey and rough and covered in worn black wads of chewing gum. We sat on stools in a circle almost as wide as the room. Everyone's eyes were on Karina.

Um, she said. So, we're not allowed to speak?

Not unless it's an emergency.

Can I ask them if it's an emergency?

The facilitator of the induction workshop – who I've not seen since – paused and looked around the room, his eyes alight with glee. Wrong answer, he said.

Anyone else?

I can't remember what the right answer was now. I was getting bored. But in a nutshell, we were told to hold the Superfans at arm's length, call the police on the Obsessives and pander to the Tourists and the Good Timers as much as we could. We weren't given much direction on how to deal with the Young Creatives – probably because most of us belonged in that category and any sense that we were being 'handled' would have compromised the illusion.

Every production has its roles, the facilitator said as we left the room. Don't forget how to play yours.

\*

When the show finishes and the lights go up, the place looks less ominous. There are thirty or so of us in the ice palace, sitting on the black linoleum floor, surrounded by glittering glaciers of white and blue. A member of the stage management crew is testing out the trapeze, swinging through the air above our heads. There are boxes and boxes of masks – not the black ones we wear, but the white ones the audience wear, with gaping eye holes and pointed mouths, not unlike the mask from *Scream*. We clean each one with a disinfectant wipe. Usually this is straightforward, but sometimes we find the imprint of someone’s face inside – lipstick, mascara, foundation, blusher – which is both terrifying and disgusting in equal measure. One time a mask was full of tiny snippings of hair. We wondered aloud if it had been worn by a hairdresser, or someone who’d just had a beard trim.

The front-of-house manager, our boss, stands in front of us and clears his throat. He is a little man, not much taller than me, with floppy white hair that curls past his shoulders. He wears combat boots and speaks the way he walks – slowly, ploddingly.

Howdy everyone, he says. Howdy. It was an eventful show tonight. We had to ask one audience member to leave, which was a pity, but he was following Kirsty way too close. You might have seen him before – he’s an Obsessive. I think he has a ‘thing’ for her, but he started to get aggressive tonight and yeah, that was it! Had to go. Kirsty’s fine, but let’s be vigilant going forward, yeah? He’s not allowed back in again. Sally?

The assistant front-of-house manager steps forward. No one likes her much.

She has a laugh like a hyena.

Hi, hi. Just a quick reminder from me that you're not here to watch the show... unfortunately! I know, I know. So please stay in your allocated position, all right? If I come to check on you and I can't see you anywhere in the vicinity of where you're supposed to be... well, that's a problem. Also, not to nag, but can we please stay on the correct radio channel? I need to be able to get in contact with you if something happens. If I can't, then you may as well not be here. Sorry to be blunt.

Sally shifts from foot to foot and wipes her nose with the cuff of her black fleece. What else... What else. Oh! We had a few panic attacks in the audience tonight. Thank you to Lucy and Siobhan for dealing so well with those. An injury too. Someone fell off the stage on the first floor, you know, where the movie set is? By the high school locker room? Anyway, I think his leg's broken. He had to go off in an ambulance, so let's make sure audience members don't climb up there in future.

Ouch, says the front-of-house manager. Sounds rough.

Sally shrugs and makes a strange facial expression – sympathetic but also mean, as though she thinks the guy with the broken leg got what he deserved. I think of him being pulled out of the show and into an ambulance, not by NHS paramedics in their neat, green uniforms, but by the doctor from the show, with his crooked bow tie, his slicked-down centre parting, and his white coat. I've seen him take individual audience members into his little room on the first floor, the walls covered in Rorschach inkblots and Snellen eyesight charts. On the shelves, a skull and a hovering eye, complete with stem, preserved in some kind of liquid.

Our boss and Sally look at each other for a moment and for a split-second I

think they're going to kiss.

All right, so there's some money behind the bar tonight, Sally says. From production. To say thanks, I suppose. These last few weeks have been difficult, and you've all done a great job. Only one drink each though! This is a trust system and if you have more than one, you'll be taking a drink from one of your co-workers which isn't very nice. OK, so have fun. See you all tomorrow.

The show lives in a huge red brick building that used to be a postal sorting and delivery office. It's been empty for a few years – the developers are at something of an impasse with the council – and so the production company was granted permission to run the show for a limited period of time, while the developers wait for permission to expand the building into a multi-function retail, restaurant and office complex made almost completely of glass. I've looked up the designs online. The backstage area on the top floor is the only place that hints at the building's former identity. The old cubbyholes remain, along with a few signs bearing London postcode districts. Backstage is also the only area with any natural light. All the beautiful, six-foot windows elsewhere have been painstakingly covered with layers and layers of black material and masking tape to ensure that no light gets in. There aren't many individual rooms inside the building as such – just wide-open cavernous space – which is ideal for the show areas and for sorting post, but not for backstage, where people need to be divided according to job responsibilities. New rooms were created with temporary walls – flimsy bits of material that don't reach the high ceilings and feel as though they will collapse if you lean on them by accident. The area designated for front-of-house staff is divided into three sections:

one for M, one for F and one general area where we sit around pre- and post-shift talking and eating. I look at everyone huddled together under the strip lights, untangling their radios, eating bananas, sharing lip balm, and I feel repulsed. I grab a packet of cigarettes out of my jacket pocket and cross the top floor – past clots of people dissecting that night’s show, performers peeling off their wigs, someone extricating themselves from a scarlet feather boa – and climb out of a low window onto the roof. It is basement dark. As my eyes adjust, I look out at the BT tower glowing in the distance. My mum told me that there used to be a spinning restaurant up there, but I don’t know if I believe her. It doesn’t seem likely that people would want to spin round and round whilst they ate their dinner.

Hello, a voice says.

Hi.

I can’t make out who it is, only a shadowy shape and an orange pinprick of light.

So, tell me what you do.

The voice is smooth and authoritative and sounds like it belongs to someone much older than me. I move closer.

I’m an usher, I say. Box office too, sometimes.

But what do you *do*?

I squint into the darkness. It is one of the performers. He sits cross-legged, head resting against the metal railings. I think of the long, empty space between his head and the pavement, several floors below, and my tummy flips sick. He is wearing some kind of fur hat, which looks like a dead animal on his head. It is August. I think he must be very hot.

Nothing really, I say, and instantly regret it. Everybody else has something. Nearly all the other ushers are creatives of some kind – actors, dancers, writers, filmmakers – they work here to support their creative endeavours. But not me. I get asked that question a lot in this building – what I do. At first, I didn't understand why gesturing around and saying 'this' was not a satisfactory answer. The Hat takes a thoughtful drag of his cigarette – a roll-up – although by now it is practically burning his fingers, smoked right down to the filter. The silence makes me feel uncomfortable, so I try to think of something funny and ironic to say about his headwear. Before I can come up with anything, he flicks his butt off the roof and speaks again.

Sometimes doing nothing is the most difficult thing of all.

Right, I say. Right... But you're an actor. Isn't that harder than doing nothing? Like, staying in character, remembering lines... Didn't you have to do training and stuff, a degree?

He smiles, a dreamy, distant expression, and turns towards the window. More people are scrambling through. We sit for a while and listen to their conversations, their stupid laughter.

\*

My boyfriend and I aren't getting along very well. After one argument, I threw his guitar at the wall. I don't know what it was doing in my flat. It didn't break, which was amazing really. Another time I dropped his iPhone from my bedroom window, and it shattered into a million pieces. Some of the glass turned to dust. I watched

as he went down and picked up the device from the tarmac. He brought it back and showed me the missing chunks, gaping holes that revealed the phone's internal organs. He wanted to claim it on insurance, but they wouldn't go for it. It was clear it had been intentionally damaged. He told me I would have to save up to pay him back for his new phone, but he earned three times more than me and it didn't seem fair. So I didn't.

But you *broke my phone*, he said, again and again. You threw it out of the *window*.

Yeah, yeah, I thought in my head. But on the outside, I stayed silent. I made sure I looked sorry.

He asks me a lot about the people I work with, especially the performers. I get a train to work now so he can't stop by the way he used to when I was at the supermarket. If he wanted to surprise me now, he'd need a ticket. He checks my phone when I come through the door and if I am out drinking, he requires a full list of everyone present. If there is someone on the list whose name I don't know, like *Some Guy Who Seems To Be Friends With Danny*, he makes me ask their name so he can look them up on social media. This is supposed to be a punishment, something to embarrass me. But after the first few times, I start to enjoy it. People are amused to be approached by me. They touch my waist and lean close to hear me speak over the music. Sometimes, I get so close I can feel the heat pulse from someone's neck, and my insides quiver. I had my first kiss with a girl this way. She was a dancer called Astrid, a friend of one of the performers. Her hair was long and red and went all the way down to her waist. She told me she'd once been in Italian Vogue. Her lips were soft and the air outside was cold and clear like bottled water

from a fridge, and for the three minutes we kissed, I didn't think about my boyfriend once.

\*

I'm signing myself out at stage door when my friend from the basement reappears.

It's all right, he says. I haven't left yet.

I roll my eyes and continue writing my name. How was the cowboy?

Excellent, as always.

When I move towards the door, he grabs my hand. Not my wrist this time – my hand. His hands are rough – some sort of eczema – and I realise that mine are really sweaty. I slide my hand out of his grip.

I'm going home, I say. You're too late.

That's a shame. I thought we could go for a drink.

I told my boyfriend I would come straight home. Or rather, he had told me to come straight home after I finished work, and I hadn't said anything in response. We didn't live together but, somehow, he'd ended up with my spare key. I knew he would be waiting for me. A group of us walk to the Mexican bar down the road. It is the only place that stays open on a Sunday night, so it is where all of us – cast and crew – inevitably end up once the show bar closes. The Mexicans love us. Before the show opened, they had hardly any customers on a Sunday night.

We didn't know why we bothered staying open! The owner yells at me, struggling against the heavy metal music pumping over the speakers. But this is why – we knew you were coming! We could feel it in our hearts! You and all of your

friends!

I thank him and take a sip of my £5 margarita. My phone buzzes in my pocket with a message from my boyfriend: *WHERE ARE YOU. IF YOU ARE WITH HIM, I CANNOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR MY ACTIONS.*

I like the fact he used all caps, the lack of question mark. I take a large sip of my drink. It is so sour it makes my teeth ache. I can see my friend sat at a table with five other girls – two from wardrobe, two ushers and one of the choreographers. They are all touching each other, trying some playground trick to give each other goosebumps. I briefly wonder if this display is for me, a thought that makes me feel mixed up, at once embarrassed and unbearably sad.

The Hat is already outside, leaning against the wall under a streetlight. I watch him take one of his little roll-ups out of a dainty silver case.

Why do you wear that thing? I say.

He pauses, cigarette dangling from his lips, unlit. A golden curl of tobacco flutters from the end.

Why do you wear *that* thing?

What thing? I look down at my black jeans, my black and white striped t-shirt, my plain trainers.

Any of those things.

Because we have to wear clothes?

Why do you wear that skinsuit?

What do you mean?

Your skin, how does it feel when you put it on?

I wonder if the Hat is flirting with me, or if my drink has been spiked. I think

about my body, naked, and flinch, fold my arms tight across my chest.

This could be the night I went back to the Hat's flat in Stoke Newington. We snorted lines of coke off the screen of his iPad and fucked as the sun was rising, his hat finally removed. He looked like an overgrown baby with his smooth, bald head, lying on his back, helpless. I thought, *I could do anything to him*, but of course, that was not true. It was just an illusion. I felt like I was outside my body, watching someone else going through the motions while my heart accelerated so hard I thought it would burst. After a while, it became clear that he wouldn't come and so I left. I stepped out into the watery daylight, and I felt sad, like I had failed, or something had been taken from me. But deep down I knew that anything I'd lost had been given away freely.

Or maybe it was the night my friend appeared for a third time, like an apparition, blocking the doorway to the bar as I was about to leave.

Wait, he said. I haven't had a chance to buy you a drink yet.

Oh, you've had your chance, I thought, but didn't say.

Shall we get out of here?

The music started up then, a blast of brass. He took my hand and we tip-tapped our way to the corner shop. He popped inside and reappeared with some little cans of gin and tonic. The journey from Paddington to Camden took minutes. Our feet barely touched the pavement as we leapt and pranced and spun, the sky above us smeared with streaks of light pollution, like butter on a car windscreen. He lifted me high above his head at the summit of Primrose Hill and turned slowly

in a circle. I held my body tight together and looked out at London, all the lights, all the sights. I felt like I was the BT tower and there were lots of little people sat inside me looking out and exclaiming – *Wow! Would you look at that view?* We collapsed on the grass, and he played the Blur song ‘For Tomorrow’ on his phone, just for the line about Primrose Hill. We shouted the lyrics together, our hands clasped in a knot like a wrecking ball, swinging up and down in the air.

After a while, our backs got cold from the ground. We moved to a bench and huddled together, watching the city emerge from the gloom. We waited for sunrise, but it never came. The sky faded slowly to an off-grey-white, the colour of damp, dirty tissues. The Blur song continued to play on repeat, a tinny sound from his pocket. People walked past us with purpose, dressed in their work outfits, their suits and heels, their uniforms, ready for the day to start.

Can you believe people are going to *work*? He said to me, incredulous, as though the world should have stopped for us.

Yes, I said. Yes, I can.

What did we do after that? We went back to his, I suppose. His tiny, damp bedroom in Stepney Green. We took the Tube, our faces ghastly under the bright lighting. I noticed my phone had run out of battery and I thought briefly of throwing it away, so my boyfriend could never get in contact with me again. My friend lived in a small pebbledash house just down from the station. There were piles of coins on the top of his chest of drawers and mould speckled one wall. He said the landlord wouldn’t do anything about it.

He says I just need to open the windows more often.

I nodded, like I knew. There were several mugs on the floor, half-filled with

a grey liquid. The room smelt horrible. I lay down on top of the clammy duvet and tried not to think about when it was last washed. I allowed him to touch me. Why not? We'd come this far, hadn't we?

I woke at 3pm with the sun blaring through his curtainless window. In the bright light of day, his room was worse than I'd remembered. I wanted to scream.

Hey, he said.

Sorry. I should go.

I got dressed and rushed out onto the street, lit a cigarette, and walked back in the direction of the tube. I decided I could stop at Primark and get some new clothes before going to work. They'd have something black. They always did.

What else, what else? Maybe it was the night I went to see the doctor and he peered at me closely, tapped my forehead with some metal implement and told me I needed to stop eating so much.

Or else you'll die, he said. I could see burst blood vessels, like red stars in his eyes, his large, oily pores. I nodded. I didn't want to die.

Maybe it was the night the cowboy scooped me up from the desert and took me to a barn dance and his girlfriend, the star of the show, saw us fucking behind the bar.

Maybe I am the star of the show, maybe I was the star all along.

That afternoon, I go to work, but I don't work. I'm watching the show, I'm in the show. I walk through toy shops and churches, abandoned motel rooms and libraries with polished desks full of paper. I open a drawer and pull out a file. Each

sheet of paper has the word test test test test test test test test test test printed all over the page. I throw them up in the air. The seamstress plucks me out of the darkness, out of the sea of anonymous faces, blank masks, and takes me into her dressing room. I am awestruck by her beauty, the flat roses of her cheeks, those bee stung lips.

Hi, honey! She says, snapping her gum.

Hi, I say back.

Don't be shy now, she says. I know exactly what to do with you.

She shows me all the dresses she's been working on, swishy and silky, emerald, magenta, glittering gold, poufy, structured, slinky, bejewelled, petticoated.

Wow, I say. I run my fingers along the gowns on the rack and it feels like cool water. It feels refreshing is what I mean. It feels like something is filling me up.

The seamstress selects one for me and I put it on. It doesn't matter what it looks like. It fits me perfectly, like a glove. It's gorgeous and comfortable and so lovely that I think I'm going to cry, but the seamstress stops me.

I'm about to do your make up, she says. It won't do to have salty streaks down your cheeks now, will it?

I let her take my face into her soft hands. She moves so slowly, so softly so gently, that I feel like crying again but I make my mind go blank to stop myself. I imagine a big, white, empty space that I walk around and around, for miles in every direction and I see nothing and no one. I think, I truly am all alone!

Honey, the seamstress is saying. Hello, are you still in there?

I'm here.

It's time for you to go.

I don't want to go, but I know she's right. I thank her and I stand up in my beautiful dress, my painted face, and I leave the dressing room. I don't put my mask back on. As I move through the building, all the blank, masked faces watch me, as though I am there for them to look at, as though I have a storyline and a path to follow, the same thing every day on a loop. I push open the fire exit on the ground floor and natural light floods the corridor. A crowd has gathered. I see a black mask in the background, speaking urgently into a radio. I lift up the hem of my skirt and walk carefully down the front steps. The sun is setting, the sky lit in soft hues of peach, lilac, neon pink. Cars roar past and bikes and people. Someone honks, someone shouts, from behind me or in front of me, I can't really tell.

## Flicker

Summer is almost over. Sunlight filters through the trees, firing each leaf in turn. Dark veins glow like the roads on a map. You wait outside, peering through the bars. It is the kind of school you would have liked to go to as a child. The words BOYS and GIRLS are engraved into the stone arches on either side of the building, relics from another time. The pavement is splattered with some kind of berry. Heavy, wine dark. Fat wasps hover, swooping for anyone who gets too close. Kamikaze pilots humming, for the queen! They won't die, not yet, but soon. You wonder if they know, what it must be like to feel a chill in the air and know that death is closing in. September, the month of new beginnings, polished shoes and freshly sharpened pencils. Yet also, an end; leaves already yellowing. A few, burnt orange, crisp underfoot.

It is your daughter's first day of school. You booked the day off work to be with her, but after taking her into the classroom and then waving goodbye, there wasn't anything else for you to do. Some children were crying and clinging to their caregivers, and you wonder what it means that your child is so happy to leave you behind. You walk back to the flat slowly, not wanting to get there and find it empty. But of course, it is. The silence is heavy with your daughter's absence: no voice announcing her every bodily function, no clunk-clunk as her books slip through the gaps in the stairs, no shout of maaaaaaaa. You remind yourself that after today you will be going to work every day as usual. Your daughter will be collected

from school by her childminder, and you will pick her up from there at six as usual. You will walk home along the canal and ask her about her day. Everything will be more or less the same as always, so why do you feel so dramatic about it, as though something huge has been lost? Your period started that morning, after days of heavy aching and wondering where it was. It seemed like an omen of sorts. You are always looking for omens, waiting for the sudden snap and crack as fate deals a blow.

The other parents laugh and chat, small knots of people strung along the pavement. You stand alone, fidgeting, flicking through your phone. You absent-mindedly watch a video about how to clean a toilet. A yellow-gloved hand squirts purple liquid around the rim of the toilet bowl and then gives a thumbs up. You feel as though you are a glitch in the system, hovering between this reality and another. Some mothers hold other, younger children by the hand or in slings, strapped tight to their bodies. *Shh*, they say. *Mummy's talking*. When you see these tiny newborn babies, you recoil, suddenly returned to those early days, almost forgotten, when your daughter was impossibly small and breakable, barely human.

You first saw her on a screen. A fuzzed, grainy moonscape, shapes and shadows that looked like nothing in particular until the parts were pointed out to you. The sonographer was an older man, gruff, unsentimental. He didn't comment on the fact that you were there alone.

*It's all looking good*, he said tonelessly. *There's the head, the spine...* The scanner zipped back and forth across your tummy. *And there... look – that's a little hand.*

A hand? You had no idea the thing had tiny fingers, that it could move them. The doctor showed you the heartbeat flickering away, a flame in the darkness of your body.

You emerged into the harsh strip lighting of the waiting room. Couples sat together in little units, huddled over paperwork, or squeezing each other's hands. Women, girls with their husbands, boyfriends, mums, sisters, friends, lovers. And you, alone. Or rather, not alone. You thought of the flickering flame, the tiny hand. You were two people now.

In the corner of the room was a poster of an unborn baby, swallowed by a cloud of smoke. You averted your eyes, hoped no one could tell that you had been a smoker. Even worse, that you'd had a final cigarette just three days ago, after you found out you were pregnant. You couldn't believe that all the other mothers managed to give up cold turkey, in one go, amidst all that panic and confusion. The two lines appearing like a vision. Black text confirming: PREGNANT. Each test making it clearer and clearer. The advertising makes it seem as though every woman is always just waiting, expecting, hoping even, to find out that she is growing a human every month. But also, that every woman gets pregnant exactly when she wants to. The boxes don't show the tears, the shouts of *Fuck!* or the toilet bowls full of rude blood, metallic, dizzying red. Yet you were a person who smoked when you knew there was a teeny tiny baby in your uterus, a life only just unfurling. You imagine the next scan, the doctor pushing the probe over the small hill of your tummy again and again, searching, while the screen remains resolutely blank, empty in every corner.

Falling pregnant with your daughter had been swift, easy, unexpected. You

worry that you could lose her in the same way. Nature taking its course, the body acting against will. You doubted you would carry her to full term and nervously marked off each week as it passed, hoping to get to the end of the next and the next. An accidental human growing inside an accidental human. What did that mean? It was probably a bad omen. Two babies, both loved but unintended. You hated those words – unintended, accidental, mistake – but how else to describe it? A miracle? In the end, your daughter was born one week late and completely healthy. An easy birth, all things considered. But still the feeling persisted, the sense that she could be swept away on some tide, as though she was never really yours but belonged to some greater force that could claim her at any time. As you drift off to sleep at night, you watch the slow rise and fall of your daughter's tiny chest and pray and pray – to who or what, you do not know – that your daughter will still be there in the morning.

The gates open and everybody shuffles forward. It's 3pm. They will be out any minute. Other classes have started trickling out already: children in gingham dresses, bows in their hair, little shorts, caps, bookbags. You look around at the smiling faces gathered outside the classroom, an expectant audience. The teacher emerges, squinting in the sunshine, and starts to send the children out, one by one.

You think of your mum, how she would have loved to be here. She would have cried. She always cried at things. When you were younger, your mother's perpetual misty eyes irritated you, but now you are older and have a child herself, you understand her a little better. All those first days your mum hoped for. Each baby that took root in her body and blossomed in her mind. Each time she told

herself that this time, this time, everything would be alright, but it wasn't. Another dull ache. Another twist of pain. Another trip to the hospital, hoping, against all odds, but knowing, deep down, what was to come. Each anniversary, each new school year, the children that were never born never having birthdays, never starting school. Watching their peers grow older and hit milestones while they remain on some different plane, both lagging behind, struggling to keep up, and staying stone-still. Never growing big enough to hold with two hands. You grew up with this. All your brothers and sisters, angels, gone before you were born.

In the hospital, those dark, endless days when your daughter was tiny, the midwives would ask you if there was someone coming to visit.

*No one?* they'd say, eyebrows raised. *You know, love, you should call him. You'll need help. And what about mum? She'd want to be here with you, she'd want to help. Whatever's happened, put it aside. You and baby will need all the help you can get.*

You nodded, afraid that speaking would shake the dam built up in your throat. You told yourself that you would be OK, that you didn't need anyone. You whispered it to your new daughter – marvelling at the word daughter – *we can do it*. You repeated those words to yourself again and again during the long, lonely nights in the flat you used to share with your mother, when your eyes burned from exhaustion, when you sobbed and sobbed because your baby wouldn't be put down and you just needed five minutes. *We can do it*, you said. *We can do it*.

Your mum had six losses before she fell pregnant with you. She'd split from her husband. Neither of them could handle the constant grief, the wanting, the

waiting. She had taken all the tests and though they could never give her a clear answer, she knew, deep down, that there was something wrong. How else to explain it? Her periods had always been erratic, and she thought she'd noticed signs of early menopause. It made sense to her then, that if her reproductive system didn't work properly it would close itself down early, like a business failing to make a profit.

When the blood didn't come, she didn't notice. She had long since stopped tracking it. The first clue she had of your existence was when she felt something move inside her, like a tide or a fish flipping up and down, something that was most definitely not indigestion or gas bubbles but something foreign, something new. She hurried to the hospital and found out that she was pregnant, almost five months gone. She didn't allow herself to imagine that she would be able to hold onto this baby, but at the same time, she hoped, secretly, deep down, a tiny, fragile flicker, that maybe, maybe, this time... You were born three months later.

Your parents tried their best to be a family, but they hadn't known each other long when your mum fell pregnant, and they weren't a great match. By the time you were two, they'd split up. It's hard to blame your father for his lack of commitment because this was never his plan. Where to your mum, you were a treasured gift, to your father you were an unwanted one, one that he would like to exchange for something better, like his freedom. Since your mum died, he has been around more, checking in on you. He gives you money when you need it. You get on well enough now that you're an adult. He adores your daughter, his granddaughter. Watching him swing her little body around, hearing her squeals of joy, makes you feel strange, as though you are watching a younger version of

yourself in a parallel universe, a different life. When he puts her down, he jokes about how being a grandparent suits him so much better than being a father. He jokes about how he could never stay in one place, never remember to post a card on time, would lose his head if it wasn't screwed on.

When your mum told you that the cancer had spread too far and there was no curing it, she had been calm and collected. So calm, in fact, that you wondered if you had misunderstood. She told you that the chemotherapy would help manage the disease – her words strangely formal, almost foreign-sounding – but it could only give her so long. She became thinner and paler; the bright colours of her headscarves cruel against her skin. She began to forget things, to move and speak slowly, like she was stuck underwater. In the last few days, she slept a lot. You sat by her bedside, stroking the claw of her hand, listening to her breathing, an irregular, laboured rattle. Right at the very end, for a couple of hours, she had seemed newly energised. She wanted to tell you all about the lost babies. Eleanor, born at twenty-five weeks, who lived for a few hours. She showed you the tiny hospital band they slipped onto her wrist and the photograph she had of her, in the incubator, tangled with tubes. For Rosemary, she had pressed a flower, because the week she'd lost her had been the first week of spring. There was an ultrasound image of Katherine, lost at sixteen weeks. The picture was now faded and striped with white cracks from where it had been folded, unfolded, re-folded over the years. There was a book too, a purple, battered notebook, in which she had recorded her memories carefully. She pressed this book into your hands and asked you to read it, to keep the memory of those babies alive for her after she had gone.

You think about the fact that three generations of women live inside the same

body for a short period of time, when the foetus begins to grow her own eggs, a point that occurs around twenty weeks gestation. A potential baby inside a potential baby inside a mother. The three of you curled into one another like Russian dolls, connected across the generations, a bridge between life and death. It was so unlikely, so statistically improbable that you would ever be born, your very existence basically miraculous. Yet here you are.

The teacher waves to you. Your daughter appears in the doorway. She shouts as she runs down the slope towards the playground. The other parents turn to look, smiling, at the little girl barrelling out of the classroom. You scoop her up, breathe her in. She smells the same, but different. A new smell layered over the top; the warm, waxy smell of crayons, the gravy smell of school canteens. As soon as you put her down, she's off, racing across the playground in the rosy afternoon sun, calling to her new friends. The sun's glow brightens and for a moment, your vision splits and warps and it looks as though there are several children out there running, running, running alongside your daughter. You blink your eyes shut, bright shapes fizzing in the darkness, and when you open them, she flickers back into herself, a single child, running on her own.

You are overcome, suddenly, with a rush of gratitude, so strong that it could knock you off your feet. The world is terrifying in its randomness, its unpredictability, its ability to give so much then take so much away. You'll do what you can, because you're here, aren't you? That has to count for something.

Out of the blue, about six months ago, just before bed, your daughter says, *I don't want you to die!* You tell her not to be silly. *But that's what happens, isn't it?* she

insists. *You are born, and then you get older and then you die?*

You were struck then, by death's inevitability, in the mouth of the human you created. The fact that every moment of life is a moment closer to death. One trip, one slip, one rogue cell or a one-night stand is all that separates us, the fragile membrane between life and its opposite. Your own mother told you about heaven. Right up until the end she told you not to worry, not to be sad, because she was going to a better place, home to her heavenly father. You nodded, but you didn't believe it, not really, not then and not ever. You don't believe there is a man in the sky, waiting for you with outstretched arms. You don't believe that there is some place, some other dimension where you and your mother will be reunited, where she can hold all those babies in her arms and this time, watch them grow.

*Mummy?* she says, looking up at you from her pillow.

You jolt. Her face surprises you, suddenly unrecognisable. You blink and she returns to you. Your daughter, your sweet daughter. You think back to that purple notebook. After your mother died, you dropped it into the bin outside hospital, unopened. It felt like a curse. You threw away all those stories, and you can't get them back. If only you could. You take a deep breath, put on your smile, and tell your daughter that it's all right. No one is going to die. Her face smooths over with relief.

*Good night,* you say, and switch off the light.

## The Mirror Test

*Say the ape, the Eurasian magpie, or the elephant looks in the mirror and recognizes the paint smeared on her body by the researcher. The animal who passes the mirror test then investigates her own body for the offending mark. Say she finds nothing. How long before she trusts the reflection over her own body? Say the mark on her reflection is confirmed by all the other elephants. How long before her reflection replaces herself?*

– Melissa Febos, *Girlhood*.

The glass in front of us shimmers with our own reflections. Saturday shoppers scurry past. A busker, packing up his saxophone. An elderly Christian lady pushing flyers into hands, insisting that it's not too late, it's never too late – Jesus will always be open to you. I shift in my seat and look down at my legs in their thin black tights. If I arch my feet, my thighs appear small and slender, the fatty parts pulled under, concealed by gravity. When I let my feet drop, they spill over the seat like goop. Someone is watching me. I turn to see a family hovering behind us. Four of them: a toddler on a hip, another clinging to his mum's trouser leg, an older child holding a wobbling tray packed with Happy Meals and cardboard cups of milkshake. The mum gives me a tight smile. I respond with what I hope is an apologetic smile. *Sorry, I want to say. I wish I could but...* The woman doesn't move. I break eye contact and swivel my chair back towards the window, away from their expectant faces. The table in front of us is strewn with the remnants of our own (happy) meal: stray fries, half-empty pots of sauce, toys still sealed in their plastic packaging. I pick up my Diet Coke and slurp the watery dregs through a straw. We

are still consuming. We have a right to be here. When we chose these seats, we knew they were coveted. The three comfiest chairs – one green, one red, one blue – right in the window, perfect for watching, or being watched. We knew we would have to defend them.

Niamh is painting Skye's nails violet, with the new polish she swiped from Superdrug. I've seen how she does it – slips small tubes and jars up her sleeve and secures the cuff with a hair tie. One time, the alarm went off. Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep. I wanted to run, heart splintering in my chest, palms slick. I looked across at Niamh. She was smiling – at me, the security staff, the sales assistants – as she proffered her bag. She co-operated. In the end, her bag wasn't checked at all. The gesture was enough to reassure them of her innocence. Everyone dispersed as quickly as they had arrived, full of smiles. Later, she shook out her sleeve, spoils tumbling like gold coins. We all got a new eyeliner.

Skye yawns and examines Niamh's handiwork. Rihanna's 'We Found Love' is playing over the speakers. Niamh is humming along, over the sounds of children screaming, crying, parents raising their voices, McDonald's employees shouting order numbers. A group of boys, a few years younger than us, huddle around a screen, watching something and laughing. *Waheyyyy!* Skye scowls and picks up her phone carefully with the freshly painted hand. She begins to scroll.

Brandon's going to be there tonight, she says.

I watch the upward curve of her lips, the barely perceptible smirk. The black speckles on her upper eyelid where she did not wait long enough for her mascara to dry. Niamh looks up.

Are you still into him, Melissa?

I shrug. Yes. Maybe. I don't know. No.

I won't tell him, you know, says Skye.

She would.

I know, I say. It's just... it's complicated.

Skye opens her mouth as though she might like to say something else, but then her eyes drift towards Niamh's and her mouth closes. She turns back to her phone and resumes scrolling.

Suit yourself.

\*

I am looking at myself, always looking, in whatever surface is available to me. A phone screen, a mirror, a train window, the slick surface of a passing vehicle. What is it that I see? Another person – a glimmering double – living her life in cold, shiny surfaces. Detached from a body, a mind, she is only an image. Long hair, full lips, thick lashes, clear skin. She smirks at me. She is confident, bold. I imagine heads turning in her direction, boys burning with desire. They square up to each other. They're going to fight it out, they're going to hurt each other, and it's all because of her. She is cruel and detached; she watches without feeling. It is true that people hate her – that is the price she pays – but their envy, a weight, also lights her up. It makes people look. Even when the mirror shows me someone else – someone messy and imperfect, with blackheads sprinkled on her nose, a sore spot forming just below the corner of her mouth, burst and scabbed, chin too square, arms too hairy – even when I know I'll never be beautiful enough, when the fundamental

structure of my face seems incompatible with any kind of beauty, when I feel unlucky to be born in this body, this thing I can tweak but never change, not completely, even then I want people to look at me. I want to be seen.

Melissa?

Skye and Niamh are both looking at me, giggling.

Huh?

We lost you for a moment, Niamh says.

You were away with the fairies.

In the mirror, my cheeks glow like embers. I looked too much; I got caught.

We are at Skye's house, getting ready for the party. Niamh pours vodka from a small glass bottle into our plastic cups of squash. She stows the bottle carefully in her bag. Skye sits cross-legged on the carpet, staring straight at herself in the full-length mirror, tilting her head this way and that. She widens her eyes. She pouts. She is completely oblivious to – or uninterested in – me, watching. I catch sight of myself staring in the background of the frame. I turn away and look at my own face in a smaller mirror. I review the parts of my face indifferently, as though they belong to someone else, or no one at all. A project, something to work on. Generic features on a diagram. I apply mascara carefully, making sure I don't poke myself in the eye with the brush. I have sensitive eyes, and I will cry and ruin everything, and then I'll have to start again. I apply concealer and watch my imperfections disappear. I apply lip gloss. When I am done, I smile at myself in the mirror: mouth wide and wet and shiny, eyes looking back at me, lashes long and pretty. I wonder, briefly, how much my friends and I differ on the inside, the parts of us we can't see. Which of us has the smoothest femur, or the reddest heart? We

know nothing about these parts, sealed up in the liquid darkness of our bodies.

I'm in the mood to get completely trashed, Skye announces. I'm just in that mood.

Don't worry, says Niamh. We'll look after you.

Don't you want to get trashed with me? I want to jump around and sing at the top of my voice and kiss a stranger. I can't do that by myself.

Melissa will get trashed with you, won't you Melissa?

I smile. I laugh. I don't know.

Niamh and Skye's eyes meet across the room, drawn to each other like magnets, and they burst out laughing. I feel cold, cold, cold, like my insides have been flushed with ice water. I smile. I laugh.

Skye's wardrobe is covered with images: magazine cut-outs of fashion models and pop stars blue-tacked alongside postcards, polaroids and strips from photo booths. The largest image is of the three of us. It sits inside a flimsy frame that reads: *Sadie's Sweet Sixteenth!* along the bottom in a curly font. Behind us, a bunch of pastel-coloured balloons; gold chain curtains shimmering. None of us look at the camera. Skye is on the left, in a silky black dress. She's laughing at something. Her hair is set in perfect golden waves. She looks across the shot, at me, on the right, or maybe at Niamh in the middle. Niamh's hair is smooth-straight and falls over her face like a curtain of dark water. She wears a maroon crop top and a matching tight skirt, an intricate web of gold chains across her neck. Her eyes are half-closed. She faces Skye and laughs at the joke, whatever it is, her arm around Skye, pulling her closer. I am on the right, also grinning. I try to read my own expression, but I can't. I hardly remember being there, as though the whole night

happened to someone else, someone who operated my body, as though I left it on autopilot. We are bathed in the glow of the flash, light reflecting from collar bones, cheekbones, foreheads, shiny, shiny hair. Snap!

I think about the morning after Sadie's sixteenth and how Niamh texted the group chat asking:

*Was I OK last night??*

And how we responded, within minutes, telling her she was brilliant, she was fantastic, she was fun, she was cute, and she had nothing to worry about.

I hope we play spin the bottle tonight, says Skye, looking at her face with her phone camera. She smiles at herself and takes a photo. Niamh rolls her eyes.

What?

You're such a slut.

I am not! says Skye in mock outrage. OK, maybe a little bit. But in a good way. Sometimes it's fun to just let go, you know? Anyway, I'm not a *real* slut. Not like Charlie Morris.

Oh no, definitely not like Charlie Morris.

I laugh. We laugh together. Niamh barks like a dog. *Woof woof woof!*

Charlie Morris. I keep smiling and try not to think too much about what happened to her, or what might have happened to her, anyway. She crawls into my mind sometimes when I read news stories about women who accuse famous men of rape – like that teenager and the footballer in the hotel room, and how they got all her previous sexual partners to testify that she liked it rough, even though I thought they weren't supposed to do that anymore – and I wonder. Charlie Morris

was drunk, they nearly always are, and it's so stupid because everyone knows you have to get drunk enough to be fun and funny, but not drunk enough to make a mistake or have a mistake made on you – which is basically the same thing, isn't it?

Before we leave for the party, we look at ourselves in the mirror, our three faces squashed in beside each other. We are all smoothed out and refined: bad parts erased, good parts coloured in and accentuated. Skye takes out her phone. Flash! I am slightly drunk, pleasantly drunk but not too drunk. Our faces look \_\_\_\_\_. They smear into one and I feel quiet inside.

\*

Skye's dad drives us to the party. In the car, my phone flashes with a call from Tomas. I let it ring out.

*ANSWER THE PHONE NOW.*

The girls are singing along to the radio and taking it in turns to sip 'squash' from a bottle. Skye dabs gloss onto her lips in the front seat. We catch each other's eye in the mirror for a brief moment, before she looks away. Niamh's eyes are closed as she sings along to Beyoncé and tries to reach the high notes. Everybody is laughing. Everybody is having fun. I ball my hands into fists, and I belt out the lyrics to 'Halo'.

*Hit me like a ray of sun!*

On the seat beside me, Niamh sways from side to side, her hands in the air. In the front, Skye takes out her phone to film us. We wrap our arms around each

other and croon.

*I swore I'd never fall again, but this don't even feel like falling!*

Tomas didn't want to break up, then I didn't want to break up, and then we both kind of agreed. Whenever we talk about it, I cry, and he assumes that means I want to get back together but I don't know how to explain the difference between the love and the sadness and the wanting to be apart, together. But there is a gap. There is something missing.

*I ain't never gonna shut you out!*

Trying not to but slipping into thinking about how Tomas had sex with another girl, and I stayed with him anyway. I guess I wanted to win. I wanted to prove that I was better than this other girl, the one who slept with my boyfriend as if it was no big deal, as if I was no big deal. I wanted to prove that I was it: I was the one. When I told Niamh, she rolled her eyes and told me I was being dramatic. I wait and wait for it to feel less of a big deal, but I still feel dramatic about it. I try not to think of it at all, but I can't stop. I think about it all the time. I imagine Tomas, he picks up this cute girl and pushes himself inside her over and over and over and I try to stop this playing in my head but I can't I can't I can't. She goes to our college and even though we don't have the same classes or the same friends, sometimes I catch a glimpse of her moving down a corridor or purchasing a Diet Coke from the café and I think about all the ways I could hurt her. I could spill a hot tea on her from behind. I could say it was a mistake, but she would know. She might be burned for life – imagine! – a scar from me, forever. Or maybe I could corner her in the toilet. I could flush her face in the toilet. I could spread rumours about her on social media, in real life. What else could I do? I could do anything at

all. I stare at her as she walks past every day. I will her to look up and see how happy I am, how carefree – but she never does. I look so often that I memorise the sharpness of her collarbone, her delicate nose and her dark eyebrows. Her hair is so straight and shiny I can practically see myself reflected back in it. Sometimes, on particularly slow afternoons I look down at my notebook and see that I have sketched her face in blue biro. Her body, too. Her breasts, her waist. I imagine her naked body all the time. Tomas and I broke up again.

When I told her that Tomas and I had split up – for good this time – my mum asked me if she was sure there wasn't anything I could do to fix it. She asked me again and again. Had I thought about making him a card? Had I asked for a chance to explain? She said it was a shame. She sighed. I could tell I'd let her down.

Skye's dad pulls over in front of Lizzie's house. It's quiet. An orange, liquid light spills out from behind the curtains. He tells us he will be back to collect us just before twelve.

Just like three Cinderellas, he says. You shall go to the ball! But if you miss the stroke of midnight, you shall turn into pumpkins!

Dad.

Skye opens the car door, and we follow suit.

Wait, says Skye's dad, leaning over the passenger seat towards where we are all standing together in the road. Come here. Skye. Look, all joking aside, don't leave this house, OK? There's been some stuff in the news... Some unsavoury types, you know...

Dad, for god's sake!

Skye moves to shut the door.

Skye Louise Underwood, don't you shut that door!

Niamh and I turn away tactfully and listen to the hissing sounds of Skye and her dad exchanging words in the front of the car. A compromise is reached. Skye's dad waves at us out of the car window before driving away, his smile tight.

What was that about?

It was nothing. You know dads. Always worrying about nothing. Skye rakes through her curls with one hand. Shall we?

There are a few people sat around in the living room. Ellen is on the sofa with her boyfriend, and there's a group of boys we know, drinking beer and talking to Lizzie's brother enthusiastically about what games he has on his games console.

You're not playing video games at a party, Lizzie says.

I know. You've told us already.

As Lizzie turns to show us where to hang our coats, one of the boys says something and the rest of them snigger, even Lizzie's brother. Lizzie doesn't say anything. She doesn't flinch or make any indication she heard them at all. In the kitchen, there are two different types of beer and a few alcopops. There isn't much.

My brother isn't eighteen yet, Lizzie explains. And this is all my parents would buy me.

Do they know you're having a party? Niamh says.

Well... It's not a party, not really. It's more like a gathering.

Who else is coming? asks Skye.

I look at the photos and notes stuck to the fridge. A photo of Lizzie and her brother in school uniform. Lizzie must be six or seven, her front teeth missing, her

plaits messy and her fringe stuck to her forehead. She has the biggest grin on her face.

God, Lizzie says. Please don't look at that.

A takeaway menu from the local Chinese restaurant, with three dishes circled: chicken chow mein, egg fried rice and prawn toast. An expensive-looking wedding invitation, on heavy white card with gold detailing, inviting the family to witness the marriage of John and Susanna. A couple of fridge magnets from holiday destinations: Disneyland Paris, Sydney and Mallorca, and a photo fridge magnet of Lizzie, her mum, and her brother on a log flume ride at a theme park. Lizzie's brother sits at the back with his arms stretched wide and a contented grin on his face. Lizzie's mum in the middle, wearing a navy raincoat and looking terrified. At the front, Lizzie is bent so far forward, it isn't possible to see her facial expression, just a blonde ponytail attached to a navy raincoat that matches her mother's, and her arms holding on tight, bracing herself for what is to come. Niamh nudges me with her hip.

Did you hear that?

What?

Tomas is coming.

So?

So? So... nothing. I was just letting you know.

That's all over now. It's not a big deal.

OK. Do you want some wine?

I didn't know they had wine.

They do. We walked past her parent's wine rack on the way in. Didn't you see

it under the stairs?

I accept the wine. My phone vibrates in the pocket of my jeans. Tomas calling again. My heart, my brain, a static fuzz. What is he doing? Is he drunk, is he high, is he angry? I wonder if Tomas thinks I've had sex with someone else. That's what he thought last time he got like this. Endless phone calls, mysterious texts. He'd heard something from someone, and he wanted to know, he just wanted to know. He felt that he had the right to know.

Niamh and I return to the living room. Nobody asks where the wine has come from. Skye is talking to Lizzie's brother. He has a girlfriend, but we don't know her. Skye arches her back, her breasts extended out towards him like an offering. She is laughing more than usual, her face softer in the dim light. He looks at her chest while she speaks. She looks at him looking at her chest. She doesn't seem to mind. Someone has put music on. Drums, guitar. It's loud enough to drown things out.

Do you wanna go outside? says Niamh.

I shrug. OK.

We go out through the back door and onto a patio. There are white plastic chairs by the door, but Niamh sits on a low brick wall that separates the patio from a long section of grass that stretches way off into the darkness, further than I can see. The air is clear and sharp. We can see the stars, those impossibly tiny pinpricks of light. Niamh offers me her cigarette packet.

What was Skye's dad on about?

What?

When Skye's dad was leaving and he was talking to her about, you know,

unsavoury types or whatever. What was that?

I take a cigarette and roll it back and forth between my fingers. Niamh lights her own cigarette and motions for me to lift mine so she can light it for me.

Oh, I say. Well, there's been some stuff in the local news. You know, someone got raped in Palmer Park a few weeks ago.

But we're miles from Palmer Park.

I take a drag of my cigarette. I don't want to state the obvious, that rapists aren't animals who lurk in the bushes all day. They're people who go home, live lives, move on, attack again elsewhere. Lightning never strikes twice, and all that. But it's easier to imagine that Palmer Park itself is unsafe, because then the danger is pinned down, easy to avoid. I remember, as I always do when I think about that assault, how it feels to walk down that dark road by my house, beside the train tracks. The small stretch that the streetlamps don't cover, the nearest houses still a few metres away, just out of shouting distance.

There was a flasher outside the girls' school, too, I say.

A flasher?

Yeah.

Like someone who just flashes their penis at you?

Yeah, I guess so.

That doesn't sound like a big deal, Niamh says.

I shrug and laugh, a tinkling sound, coins dropping into a glass bottle.

If it happened to me, I'd probably just laugh, she says. Or else I'd be like, put your prick away mate.

Yeah. I take a sip of my wine, take a drag of my cigarette. I make the right

sounds, laugh a bit more.

The article about the flasher was in the local newspaper. Children walking to school were forced to look at this random man's genitals. I imagine him opening a long, dark coat and shouting *Surprise!* I imagine him turning away and unzipping his jeans, as though he was going for a wee in the bushes that line the path before turning and shouting *Surprise!* I imagine the penis, flopping, dangling, swinging from side to side from its dark nest of hair. Though it probably wasn't soft, was it? I imagine it rising up, transforming, like some terrible monster. One article said he masturbated in front of one of the victims, a 12-year-old girl on her way home from school after a late detention, a girl the same age as Niamh's little sister. One parent was quoted: *Very hard to explain to my child why this happened to her, and I hope no one else has to explain to theirs.* I wonder what I would do if it was me, if I was alone and a man appeared in front of me like that. I see him smiling, leering, his eyes sparkling with a challenge, a threat: *What are you going to do?* Would I freeze, like a small animal caught in a bright light? Would I run? Would I find it funny; would I laugh? Would I tell all my friends about my interaction with this weirdo? Or would I keep it to myself, worried that I'd be the wrong one in their eyes, that it would be my fault, just for looking?

TOMAS: *Are you at Lizzie's?*

There's no 'x' at the end of the message, which shouldn't mean anything, but it does.

ME: *Yes, I heard you were coming ☺ See you soon. X*

*Tomas is typing...* And then he's not.

I pass Lizzie on my way to the bathroom.

Are you all right, love? You don't look too good.

Yeah. I just need a wee.

I edge past her and push into the downstairs toilet, a bright white room, filled with harsh light. The bulb above my head hums. There are no windows. I lock the door, pull down my underwear and sit on the toilet. I listen to the soft hushing sound as my pee hits the toilet bowl. I wipe and stand to wash my hands. I look at my face in the mirror and it is like there is no one in there at all. I had forgotten I was attached to a body, a face. The face does not belong to me. The teeth that are ghostly white, the faded lips, a hint of purple wine stain. I splash my face with cold water and open my bag, take out all the items that will help me become more myself. I scrub my lips with a wad of balled-up tissue paper until they are raw and swollen, scar-pink, and I start again from scratch.

\*

Something has happened between Lizzie and Skye. Niamh and I hear shouting from upstairs, followed by someone sobbing. Ellen's boyfriend comes out to tell us our friend is upset.

I just thought you should know... he says.

Neither of us moves. He goes back inside, shaking his head. We look at each other. We both know Skye is our responsibility, but we don't want to get in there and mediate the situation – whatever it is – unfolding between her and Lizzie, the

host of the party, the person whose house we are in. The crying quietens a little and we both shrug at each other as if to say, *she'll probably be all right*.

Niamh's lips are black now, from the wine, a similar colour to her hair. It looks so soft – I want to touch it. Her skin glows pale and blotchy. I lean towards her. She looks unwell. I hope she's feeling all right. I think this, but I don't say it. I'm laughing at something she's said.

OK so tell me, Niamh says, grabbing hold of my arm and whispering loudly in my ear. How old were you when you... you know.

We both cackle, but I don't know why it's funny.

Fifteen. I've only done it with Tomas.

Bull shit! Niamh says, a little too loudly. A knot of people standing by the kitchen door look over at us. I was twelve.

It's not bull shit! You can ask Tomas!

I'm not going to ask him that.

Well, you can. It's true.

Whatever! Niamh's eyes slide in her face. Don't you want to know who my first was?

Niamh never wants to talk about the people she's slept with, so we never ask. Presented with the possibility of this knowledge, I shrink away. Both of her hands grip my forearm. I try to shake her off gently, but her grip tightens, as though she's worried that I'm going to get up and run away.

OK... Who?

Oh, it was no one important. Someone on holiday, I think. Hey, Liss... Do you think people think that I'm a slut?

Of course not! I say. Why would anyone think that?

But I know people do. No one has ever said it to me personally, but I've overheard them – the boys – they've said horrible things, and the girls... They say much worse.

Maybe... Maybe I am?

Niamh is making a strange grunting sound, somewhere between laughing and crying, and I look around, wondering if there's anyone who can help me with her. We haven't been out here long – we've drunk more or less the same amount of alcohol. How did she get this drunk?

Niamh, I say. You're not... You're not a slut, OK? Let's get you some water.

But I had *sex* when I was *twelve!*

Niamh, shhh, I say, pulling her towards me. It's not a big deal.

Why? Why should I shush? Are you embarrassed of me? Are you embarrassed to be friends with such a slut?

I imagine everyone at the party is looking out at the two girls in the garden, clutching onto each other by the arms, as though they're holding each other back. One of them is shouting the word 'slut'. The one who isn't shouting looks towards the house – the gauzy curtains in front of the French windows, the silver blinds in the kitchen, even the closed drapes upstairs – but no one looks out.

Hey, come here. Come here.

I wrap my arms tight around her. At first, she struggles, but after a moment she gives in and collapses on my shoulder.

Melissa, she sobs. Melissa.

It's OK, I say. It's OK.

Her body is unfamiliar against mine. She's too long, too full of sharp corners. We shift uncomfortably. Niamh was the last one of us who needed a nightlight at sleepovers. She never wanted to watch any scary movies – not even the ones we were allowed to watch. But now, she'll watch anything. The ghost movies, the monsters, the slashers. Sometimes, when I'm hiding beneath a blanket, I peek out and look at Niamh's face, stony and expressionless, the action sparkling on the surface of her eyes.

After a moment, the back door opens, and people spill out into the garden. Skye is among them, her eyes dry now, her arm looped in Lizzie's. Tomas is there too, hanging back with his friends, and Brandon. My stomach flips. Neither of them looks at me.

Oh my god, says Skye, dropping Lizzie's arm and rushing to Niamh's side. What happened? Is she OK?

She's fine.

She doesn't look fine, someone says.

She is.

I'm fine, Niamh mumbles into my chest.

Do you think I should call my dad? Skye asks, over the top of Niamh's head, her eyes round and glassy.

I shake my head, but before I can say anything, Niamh stands up, almost knocking me off the wall.

We don't need your fucking dad, all right?

Woah, hey... Brandon steps forward. Niamh, hi? How are you?

I'm fine. I'm fine. How many times do I have to tell you all? I'm absolutely

fine!

OK, OK. That's great. Look, shall we get you some water? Brandon tries to put his arm around Niamh's shoulder and lead her towards the kitchen, but she pushes him off.

I don't want water. I told you, I'm fine.

You don't seem fine, calls Matt, one of Tomas's friends.

Hey, can somebody stop her from shouting like that? Lizzie's brother says, poking his head out of the kitchen door.

Who's 'her'? Who are you talking about? Niamh asks. Are you talking about me? I'm here, you idiot. Why don't you just ask me yourself?

All right, Lizzie steps in front of her. Listen to me. That's enough now.

Don't, I say. Lizzie, just leave it.

This is my house! I'm not going to have her screaming like this in the garden. What the fuck has happened to her?

Well, fuck you and your precious house. It's a stupid house anyway. Niamh starts laughing. I wouldn't want to live in this stupid house... I'd rather live on the... on the street!

Hey, hey, Niamh. Come on. That's not nice.

Brandon is still trying to play the peacekeeper, his arm hovering above Niamh's shoulders in case he has to grab her. Me, I'm holding her hand, trailing behind. There are too many people talking now, people talking about Niamh, people talking to Niamh. Other people talking about other things, I guess.

I don't care, Niamh says. I really, truly don't care anymore.

Well, get out then. No one wants you here, anyway, says Lizzie.

Lizzie! says Brandon. Come on...

What? She's ruining my party! Niamh can just start shouting like that about how I have a horrible house and... somehow... it's all my fault? I'm just trying to make sure everyone has a nice night.

I didn't say that.

Hey... Hey buddy. Lizzie's brother reappears. How about you don't upset my sister at her own party?

Brandon holds his hands up. Just trying to help... Forget I said anything.

The garden has filled with people, everybody is looking at Lizzie now, mascara-flecked tears slipping down her cheeks. People gather round, ask her if she's OK. I watch them all milling about, checking in on each other in the aftermath of the drama. After a while, I realise I can't see Niamh anywhere. She let go of my hand. I didn't even notice.

Niamh? Niamh! Where did she go?

I turn to look for Skye. She's there in the hallway – with Brandon. His arm around her. Their heads bent so close together. He reaches out to touch her cheek and she smiles. I freeze. It dawns on me slowly, like peeling back the wrapping on a present I already know I don't want.

Oh shit, Skye says. Melissa...

I turn back towards the kitchen. I can't. I can't deal with this now. I call Niamh's name over and over again, even though it's obvious by now that she's not here. She's not in the house. She's gone. Skye is standing by the front door when I walk through it. Brandon is in the corner, looking at his feet. Skye says my name. I don't look. I don't want to see her sorry, sodden face. I don't want any of this. Skye,

Brandon, this party, this body – any of it. I just want to find Niamh.

Melissa, please, Skye says. We should call my dad, we really should.

I laugh. Is Skye's dad going to save us? I push open the door. Excuse me.

Niamh. Outside, the sky is black but filled with endless specks of light. It's cold. My breath blooms white in front of me. I shiver. I left my jacket inside. Never mind. I take out my phone to call Niamh and when I look down at the screen, the letters shift and slide across the screen. Maybe I am more drunk than I thought. Niamh. Behind me, I hear someone open the front door. Without turning around or thinking about what I'm doing, I start to run.

What do I look like, running like this? Down the road, across the playing fields. I can't hear anyone following me but still I run, I move, the air so cold, so painful in my lungs that it gives way to a sharp, pointed kind of pleasure. I think of Niamh, what she told me. I remember her, twelve years old, the same age as her sister, Eimear, same age as the victim of the flasher (the paedophile, the sex offender, the pervert), same age I was when my periods started, smudge of thick brown in my underwear. I knew it was coming, I wanted it to come. I wanted it so much, but if I'd known – truly known – what it was like, I would have waited forever. All the things we don't talk about creep out of the woodwork of my mind, all the things we keep secret. I think about how I want to touch myself – no, how I do touch myself – when I think about Tomas fucking someone else. It turns me on even though I hate her. And then I hate myself even more, filling up with sadness and shame when I come, sheets twisted in my fingers. I think about how our history teacher adding Skye on Facebook and calling her Little Bunny isn't the joke we all

make it out to be. I think about the marks on Niamh's arms, the ones she says are caused by her cat, scratching, scrabbling out of her grasp. Light pink, red, scabbed over, blood. Stop.

Niamh! I'm yelling, by the river now. Niamh, please! My voice disappears into infinity overhead. House lights blink on the other side of the river, shiver in its black surface. I don't stop.

Tomas called me a slut once, a good little slut, and it felt like a compliment. I stretched out, still and naked, on his bed, waited while he viewed me through his screen, moved the parts of my body to get the best shot. My head buzzed with static, white noise, car alarms. When he was done, I sat up and pulled the sheets up to cover my chest. I watched him survey each photo. My body spread, posed. His face quiet, inscrutable. *You need to show me you love me*, he said. I said I did, I did, I do, still do. He found new ways for me to show it. (Knees aching, caked in mud, jaw aching, dirty slut.) I stared at myself in the mirror and tried to find the bold girl, glimmering there, in the mirror's shine, the one I thought I was, but I couldn't see anything at all. My face so still and silent, my reflection disappeared. A wisp, a breath. But the noise in my head was so LOUD. Tomas's friends called me 'insatiable' and said he was a lucky boy. I thought that was something to be proud of. I wanted to be wanted. I wanted to be someone's prized possession, a precious object. I wanted that flickering, quivering power. I grasped at it, again and again, and still it slipped through my fingers. I trailed behind like a ghost, on the outside of the joke. It was all good humour; they meant no harm. I didn't let on that I felt any pain. He loves me. He loved me. He would do anything for me, anything to keep me for himself. I must feel so special. Don't I? Don't I?

Melissa!

There she is: Niamh. Standing further up the path like an apparition. I rush towards her. I need to tell her. I need to tell her everything. Does she not know? (Did I not know?) Or do we know, but never say? Do we think it's kinder (better, nicer, easier?) not to say anything at all? I sprint. I think I'll catch her. I think I'll tell her, right now. I'll tell her everything. She catches me in her open arms, holds me tight.

Don't, she says. Don't say anything.

In the morning, we will wake up and feel that crushing sense of dread for what we were about to do or say, or what we did do and say, and we will wish we could take it back. We will look in the mirror and wonder how others saw us: screaming, crying, composed, beautiful, ugly, whore, nothing at all. But no matter. We will let each other forget. We'll clean up together. I'll message Niamh and ask if I was OK. And I know, within minutes, she will tell me that I was fine, I am fine, everything is completely fine. Niamh takes my face in her hands.

You're a mess, Liss. You've got mascara all over your face.

Yeah, well.

At least you're not a slut.

Oh, stop it. You're not a slut. You're just a... you're just a normal human.

I knot my hands behind her back and press my face into her shoulder. I breathe her in. We should probably go back to Lizzie's house. We should probably call Skye's dad, or one of our parents. We should get someone to pick us up. We should go home. But Niamh's heart is humming in my ear, her hair tickling my cheek. It's dark out here and there's no one around to see.

## Triangulation

*Tell me something about you that nobody else knows.*

Georgia rolled over to look at Jas: her long body wrapped in a white sheet, early evening sun slicing through the window, brilliant and hot. It looked like she could catch fire.

Make it good, Jas added. Something special, something secret. Something only you and I will know.

Jas's face was flushed. She looked open and vulnerable, like a small, soft animal. Georgia turned her gaze upwards to the crusted Artex swirls on the bedroom ceiling. She knew what Jas was after. Something thrilling and difficult – a childhood trauma or a deeply held regret. Something cruel she had done, or something unforgivably stupid. But there was nothing like that, so she told her silly things instead. Like, the part of her own body she hated most was the fleshy mole on the inside of her left thigh. That she'd eaten three bars of chocolate for lunch. That sometimes, she genuinely wondered if it was possible or even likely that everything in the world was a product of her own mind, like some kind of extended dream – or nightmare, depending on how you looked at it.

Jas laughed. Trust you to think you're the first one to come up with that. It's called solipsism you know.

Georgia knew. She had a degree in philosophy. It was something Jas teased her about relentlessly, calling her 'The Philosopher' whenever she thought Georgia

was being too clever. In return, she called Jas 'The Zombie', until it began to strike a nerve.

What else? I want more.

Hmmm.

These games made Georgia feel uncomfortable. She didn't understand the impulse to gorge on information about other people, as though the accumulation of facts could cement their bond and stave off disaster. The ceiling was speckled with stars, blue-tacked to the ceiling by a previous tenant, the kind that would once have glowed in the dark.

I prefer the moon to the sun?

But you'd die without the sun.

Not if we're all living in my imagination.

Jas laughed and stroked Georgia's shoulder with the tip of her finger. Georgia was thinking about school, and how she used to get called Moonface, like the character from the Enid Blyton magical tree stories. Ever since, she'd been sensitive about her round, childish shape. She turned to offer this to Jas, but her face had lost its dreamy, playful expression, hardening into something cold and solid.

Is that what this is all about then? A little project for your narcissism?

Georgia laughed. It echoed slightly; the room laughed back at her.

Jas began to fiddle with the sheet, tugging herself out of its tight embrace.

What time does he get back?

I don't know. Does it matter?

Don't think he'd be too thrilled to find me in his bed, do you?

Georgia stood up. She was naked. It was still warm, but cooling. The sky

outside was the palest peach, with a bright slash across the horizon.

Where are you going? Jas asked.

He's out. I don't think he'll be back til late.

Georgia edged around the bed without looking at Jas. She could feel eyes on her, sweeping over the dimples on the back of her thighs, the halo of frizz on the top of her head. Georgia tried not to speak about Jonathan in front of Jas, which was difficult – they lived together after all – but Jas always found a way to bring him up. She snuck him into conversations, whatever they were speaking about. *Did Jonathan buy you those new jeans? Does Jonathan like drinking wine too? What does Jonathan think?* She would slip it in, like it was natural, like he was just some mutual friend of theirs. It would be fine for a moment – but then her face would alter, almost imperceptibly, and the whole room would dim.

Georgia moved down the narrow corridor and into the kitchen. The floor was vinyl – fake terracotta tiles, too shiny and too orange – and the cabinets were old, varnished wood with black metal handles that shrieked whenever they opened or closed. The kitchen was at the back of the flat and overlooked the car park. Georgia squinted through the gaps in the blinds – no one out there. She slipped her arms into a jumper that was far too big for her and started to fill the kettle to make coffee.

Jas appeared in the doorway; arms folded across her bare breasts.

Hello, she said.

Hi. Georgia weighed the grounds of coffee into the cafetière, the way Jonathan had shown her.

Everything OK? Jas wiped her finger along the nearest bookshelf. She

collected a scraggy clot of dust and then shook it to pieces all over the floor.

Grand, thanks.

Jas nudged Georgia with her hip and took the cafetiere out of her hands. That was something they both did – took over ordinary tasks, like cooking or taking out the bins. Especially making coffee, they were both very particular about coffee.

Georgia found Jas with Jonathan. They sat down together on their sofa one evening and scrolled through endless profile pages, black and white images of headless naked and nearly naked women in various sexy poses. Georgia wasn't sure why all the photos were black and white – perhaps it was to make things look a little classier, or another way to protect the women's identities. Jas's picture was cut off at the chin and below the knees. Her face was a secret, but they could see her beautiful long neck, her sharp collarbone, the gentle curves of her body that, for some reason, made Georgia think of water. They chose her together – their unicorn.

They met her at a pub, a neutral place, a bus ride from their flat. The place was a bit run-down, but in a trendy way: the bar was strung with fairy lights and the shelves stacked with dusty boardgames and empty gin bottles, a few dried flowers stuck into the neck.

Should we have asked for a photo of her face too? Jonathan chewed on his thumbnail while they waited for Jas to arrive. I mean, she's got our faces. It's only fair.

Georgia thought about the idea of Jas 'having' their faces, as though she was taking something from them, droopy pockets of skin, and they would be left with

nothing but soft flesh, wet and red raw.

She's a woman on her own. We have to give her *something* over us.

Yeah, but she's chosen to be here, hasn't she? We're not exactly forcing her.

Jonathan could be unsympathetic when it came to other women. He made a show of listening intently when Georgia railed about rapists and murderers and workplace sexism, but he was suspicious of anything that involved what he perceived to be a choice. He'd become almost apoplectic when Georgia used the phrase 'emotional labour' for the first time, especially when she said she wouldn't be buying the birthday presents for his mum and sister anymore.

Georgia and Jonathan?

They turned around – Jas. She was wearing a floaty dress covered with a bright, multicoloured print that looked like confetti, a black leather jacket and a pair of shiny Doc Martens. Her thick, wavy hair was pinned loosely on the top of her head, and she wore heavy flicks of eyeliner, like Amy Winehouse. Georgia was surprised to see her standing there, real and solid – despite the fact they were waiting for her. Had she thought – deep down – that Jas wouldn't show up? That she would remain a shared fantasy between herself and Jonathan? But she was here now, in the flesh, a woman who really did want to have sex with both of them at the same time. Georgia's body flashed with heat; desire and trepidation curdling in the pit of her body. It was not unlike coming down with an illness. Should she stand up and give Jas a hug? Shake her hand? There was a curious intimacy in the fact that they had all traded messages – including photographs of their naked bodies – for a few weeks. But at the same time, they were still so new to each other.

Jonathan stood up to give Jas a kiss on the cheek. It wasn't an air kiss or a

brush of their cheeks. Georgia watched, enthralled, as the soft flesh of his lips lingered against the smooth skin of Jas's face. Her heartbeat flickered. Jonathan leant his face close to Jas's and asked her what she'd like to drink, then he went to the bar. Jas perched on the edge of the leather banquette where, moments earlier, Jonathan had been sitting and stressing, an entirely different person from this new cool and flirtatious one. Georgia was taken aback by the sudden change, but she wasn't angry – mostly intrigued and vaguely turned on. She looked at Jas, who was fussing with her dress and looking out around the bar. Looking everywhere it seemed, except at her.

So... You found the bar OK?

It was a stupid thing to say. The words hovered accusingly, and Georgia saw Jas's face twitch very briefly.

Yeah, I've been here before, so...

Oh, do you live around here?

Jas paused and looked Georgia directly in the eye.

Shit, sorry. I'm not supposed to ask that, am I?

Georgia felt the balance shifting, creaking out of her favour. Jas leaned back and looked steadily at Georgia, the nervous energy she had possessed before fizzled out, like a match held underwater.

No, you're not.

Jas's voice was blunt, almost bored. Georgia searched her face for a smile, a trace of warmth, but Jas held her gaze, steady and impenetrable.

They took their coffees through to the living room and sat on the old, sagging sofa,

which was covered in brightly coloured cushions and throws. The first time Jas had been to the flat, she raised her eyebrows at their decor – the rugs with zigzags and diamond shapes, the cream fabric wall hanging, the Argos lamp. Georgia asked what was wrong, and Jas only said that she liked what they'd done with the place. But Georgia could tell there was something unsaid, and indeed, it came out months later, during an argument, when Jas announced that she found their abundant cultural appropriation distasteful. Georgia hadn't understood and felt stupid, later Googling 'cultural appropriation' and reading article after article. It had never occurred to her that the patterns they chose to decorate their home with were inspired by Native American art, and even if it had, it would never have occurred to her that it might be wrong. She wanted to talk to Jonathan about it, for reassurance or backup, but she knew he would roll his eyes and she would feel herself dimming.

How's the coffee?

It's good, thanks.

Better than when Jonathan makes it? It is, isn't it?

Yes.

I knew it.

Jas was still naked. She stretched her arms above her head and tensed her body into a hard line, balanced against the sofa. She was showing off. The taut muscles in her thighs were formed not through repetitive gym hours but team sports, like netball and football – activities that Georgia despised. Georgia wanted to touch her; she wanted to tell her to put some clothes on, but she knew she couldn't. Jas was on the edge of a bad mood – she didn't want to push her over

completely. Georgia took a sip of her coffee. A small, dark shape darted across the floorboards behind the sofa – and she screamed.

What? Jas leapt up onto the sofa and looked around. What is it?

There was something... Something behind the sofa, like a rat or something.

A rat!

Jas sounded thrilled, as though this were great fun, some stupid prank. She peered behind the sofa. She wiggled the floor lamp this way and that until the shape shot across the room and disappeared into the kitchen. Georgia shrieked again and burst into tears.

It's just a mouse, Jas said flatly.

Georgia took out her phone.

What are you doing?

I'm phoning Jonathan. Georgia wiped her nose on his jumper sleeve.

Don't do that. Come on. It's OK.

Jas wrapped her arms around Georgia and hugged her close, tight against her chest. It was warm – too warm. Georgia couldn't breathe. She swatted Jas away.

What's your problem? Don't fucking hit me.

I didn't hit you – I couldn't breathe!

I was trying to comfort you.

You were smothering me!

Are you serious?

Look, I'm just upset, I –

No, no. It's fine. I'll go. Call your boyfriend to come and take care of you.

No! Jas... Please.

Things were unravelling so fast; Georgia couldn't stop it. She thought about saying please and begging Jas to stay. She could smooth things over, the way she usually did. But she was tired – and she was still thinking about the mouse. How did it get in? Would it come back? Were there more of them? The front door slammed – Jas was gone. Georgia's thumb hovered over Jas's name in her call list. She knew she should call her and beg her to come back. That was the quickest way to resolve things between them. But she realised, with startling clarity, that Jas's presence wouldn't make her feel safe. She wanted Jonathan. He answered the phone in a sing-song voice.

Heeeeeeey, Georgieeee! How's it going?

Georgia could hear thumping music, people cheering and laughing. She imagined Jonathan bathed in blue light in the middle of a nightclub, even though, from what he'd told her of his plans earlier, he was more likely in someone's dimly lit living room.

I'm OK! I'm OK! Are you having a nice time?

You don't sound OK.

Don't I? Oh, well. That's strange.

There was a pause on the other end of the line and the party sounds began to fade. They were replaced by the purring sound of a car creeping past, the low hoot of a nighttime bird. There was a rustling sound as Jonathan adjusted the phone against his ear, perhaps the faint whisper of a sigh.

Do you need me to come home?

What? Why would you say that?

I can tell something's wrong.

Georgia said nothing and looked out of their window at the city in darkness, the ghostly outline of her own face reflecting back at her.

It's nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice.

Another pause. Jonathan inhaled sharply through his nose.

I'll see you in half an hour.

When Jonathan arrived, Georgia was sitting on the sofa with her feet up, her arms wrapped around her knees. Her face was red and blotchy, but she was no longer crying. She told him about the mouse as he made her a cup of camomile tea. She apologised for interrupting his night. He said it was fine. Eventually, Georgia got under the covers and curled into the solid warmth of Jonathan's body. Every time she closed her eyes, all she could think of was rats, lots of rats – so many of them, moving over each other in such a way that it was impossible to tell where one rat ended, and another began. A giant, shifting mass of rats; dark matted fur; long, slinky, worm-like tails, and every so often, a glint from one of hundreds of beady black eyes.

\*

When Georgia explained her job to other people, they always seemed to imagine she worked in some kind of factory. But the cookies weren't baked in a huge, shiny industrial oven – they were baked in Denise's home kitchen, in a regular oven. She did them two or three at a time – maybe four if they were all smaller sized cookies – and during busy periods, like Valentine's Day, she could be baking all day long. It was Georgia's job to ice each cookie with the correct personalised message then

put it in a presentation box with a clear cellophane window. Denise checked everything before someone else – another girl – packed the cookie into a postage box and posted it. Georgia had never met her. Their paths never crossed.

Sometimes Denise was around when Georgia was working, bustling between rooms, ready to make cups of tea and chat through the orders. Other times, the house was empty, and Georgia had to make her own way through the main corridor – past the laundry room, the bathroom, the living room, and the high-ceilinged hallway – and into the back room that had once been a grand dining room but was now, since the divorce, the room Denise used for her cookie business.

Against the back wall, a large, walnut table, covered with a plastic polka dot tablecloth and eight matching chairs. This was where she did the icing. There were two desks on the other side of the room, which was where Denise did all the business paperwork, mostly on her own but sometimes with her accountant. The remaining space was taken up with large black shelving units, on which there were various dry ingredients and different styles of box. Georgia selected an appropriate box based on the message and the size of the particular cookie. Usually, the messages Georgia iced were pretty standard: *Happy Birthday Susan! I'm sorry! Get Well Soon Johannes! Congratulations on your engagement Lola and Lee!* But occasionally she'd get a strange one that she wouldn't know how to interpret. *I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY* for example, written in all-caps. It was sent anonymously so in theory the recipient would never know who sent the cookie. *I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY*. Georgia read the words out loud in different tones – sweet and happy, sad and dejected, angry and embittered. It could be any, or all of the above, at once kind and sarcastic. How would the recipient feel when they opened the box and

saw the cookie, but no further message or sender information? Would they be comforted? Would they panic? Perhaps they'd just eat the cookie.

After packing up the last of the cookies, Georgia stood to leave – but something made her stop. Did she see something move on the bottom shelf? She swore she could hear rustling, little feet scrabbling against the floorboards. She got down on her hands and knees and shone her phone torch beneath the table, blood pounding in her ears. There was nothing there. No scuttling sounds, no moving shapes. After a few minutes, she got to her feet. Her vision glittered in front of her. She closed her eyes and steadied herself against the table. She left as quickly as she could, phoning Jonathan on her way out.

\*

Jonathan found an article online about how to make a homemade trap. It involved slathering peanut butter on an empty drink can, which he placed onto a rod over a bin. He fashioned a sort of ramp out of an old cardboard box. The idea was that the mouse would be tempted by the peanut butter, climb up the ramp to reach it, shuffle along the rod and then when it stepped onto the can – whoosh! It would lose its balance and fall into the empty bin. The article suggested filling the bin with water, so the mouse drowned, and Jonathan suggested doing this too, but Georgia didn't want the mouse to die. She didn't like the thought of it suffering. She just wanted it moved away, out of her life, as painlessly as possible. When she had told him about seeing the mouse at Denise's, Jonathan was concerned.

Are you feeling OK, bun?

He used the nickname he had had for her ever since they first got together – bunny, because of her apparently cute nose – even though she had asked him to stop.

Not great.

He nodded and took off his glasses, wiping them clean with the hem of his shirt.

Do you think – and don't get cross with me here – but do you think this could be an anxiety thing?

Georgia stared at him. It seemed obvious that it was indeed an anxiety thing.

Of course, Jonathan. It's an irrational fear, a phobia, whatever you want to call it. I know lots of people are chill about rodents but I'm not, OK?

No, I know. I know that. I suppose what I meant was... There isn't anything else you're feeling anxious about, is there? Something that might be making this... worse than it maybe is?

You think I'm making it up?

I don't think you're making it up at all. It's just... I dunno. Are you maybe making it mean too much?

Georgia turned away. She took a glass from the cabinet and began filling it with water.

I don't know what you're trying to say.

OK, forget it then. Forget I said anything. You clearly don't want to talk about it.

Talk about what?

Jonathan said nothing; his expression suggested that he was experiencing a

degree of physical pain.

I'm going out tonight so you can have the flat to yourself, free from your irritating psycho girlfriend –

That's not fair. That's not what I said.

That's what you meant though, isn't it?

Jonathan left the room. Georgia examined at the trap that Jonathan had made. She touched the can with her index finger and sent it spinning.

\*

Later that evening, Georgia got the Tube into town to meet Amia and Robyn. Amia was an aspiring actor. So far, she'd had a few small roles in fringe productions and had once been in a television advert for life insurance. She liked to hang around at the National Theatre bar on the Southbank because, she said, it's like manifestation or whatever, right? It was their kind of bar: indie music, dark wood furniture and trendy lighting fixtures, those vintage-style filament bulbs suspended in metal cages that made Georgia think of fairies trapped in tiny jails. Every so often, they spotted a famous person, and Amia thought it was a sign. Amia was into positive psychology. She kept a written list of things she had asked the universe for, so that she could check them off once they'd been given to her. She had no doubt whatsoever that, eventually, each of her requests would be fulfilled.

The trick is to be specific, she said once. You can't just ask to be cast in a show. You need to ask to be cast in a *specific* show. For example, one thing that has been on my list for years is to be in a play at the National. And you know the

universe is trying to give it to me, because I had that audition last year. I didn't get the part – that time – but I know I'm being *prepared* for the right time. It's a process. I'm playing the long game. When it's the right time, I'll have experience in the actual National Theatre audition room under my belt. That'll give me the edge.

Amia wrote positive affirmations on post-it notes and left them all round her house. One time, Georgia was washing her hands in Amia's bathroom when she noticed a message stuck by the toothbrushes: YOU CAN DO ANYTHING. AND YOU HAVE A GREAT ASS.

They met outside, on the Southbank. The river was churning in the wind. Amia marched straight to the bar, insisting that she knew the bartenders and would get them a discount. Robyn and Georgia found a table by the window. Georgia checked her phone: nothing from Jas.

So... How are you? How's Jonathan?

Georgia glanced up. Robyn's expression was neutral. She was an account manager for an advertising agency, a role that was perfectly suited to her slightly mean, sarcastic humour. Clients lapped it up, but it made Georgia feel distanced. She never knew whether Robyn was being genuine or setting her up, the butt of a joke.

Yeah, he's good, Georgia said.

Good?

Yep.

And you? Wait – let me guess. You're also good.

Georgia smiled back sarcastically. And you, Robyn?

Robyn leant back against the black leather banquette. Georgia noticed that

her eyes were a little pink and glazed, as though she'd just gotten out of a heavily chlorinated swimming pool.

I'm actually really hurt, Robyn said. Why won't you be honest with me?

Georgia rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to say something sharp, but just then Amia returned and started handing out Aperol spritzes.

One for you, she said, pushing a wine glass full of synthetically orange liquid in front of Georgia.

And one for you, she said, spilling a little out of Robyn's glass as she plopped it in front of her.

Whoopsy daisy! And one for me.

Oh my god, said Georgia. You guys are sloshed already!

Not sloshed, Amia said, frowning.

We've only had two, for god's sake.

They looked at each other.

OK, maybe three. Perhaps four, Robyn conceded.

You need to catch up, G! Let's get shots.

Georgia checked her phone again: still no messages.

I can't have any more, said Robyn. I'm supposed to be going spinning in the morning.

Oh stop it, said Amia. You are not going spinning!

The next bar was on a rooftop, overlooking the river. Tiny brightly coloured orbs were strung up over their heads. In the distance, the BT tower flashed through the gloom. Georgia was trying to roll a cigarette, but she was shivering too hard. Her

fingers had turned white and bloodless in the cold.

Give it here, said someone – a man – beside her.

Georgia allowed the man to remove the cigarette components from her fingers. He carefully rearranged the filter and the tobacco on the paper and rolled it expertly, before passing it back to her.

I'm Jamie.

The man had short dark curls that fell across his face, and he wore a distressed looking leather jacket.

Thanks, Jamie.

Georgia turned back to her friends and asked Robyn for a light.

Hang on, Jamie said. Don't I get to know your name?

Georgia laughed loudly, almost cartoonishly. In her head, she was calculating the best course of action. Was he flirting? Should she tell him she was taken? She didn't like to do that – it meant invoking a whole structure of ownership that she didn't want to rely on. It assumed that Jamie would respect her anonymous and potentially non-existent boyfriend more than he respected her own feelings.

Um, sure. It's –

Wait – just because you took a cigarette out of her hands and made it yourself, you think you're entitled to her name?

Robyn slid down the table, towards Jamie. Amia, who was furthest away, leapt to her feet.

Oh come on, Rob! I'm sure he was just trying to be nice. Weren't you?

Jamie shook his curls and smirked. No, I wasn't being nice. I was asking a question.

Well, she doesn't want to answer, said Robyn.

Oh, really? So you've stepped in to tell your friend exactly what she wants? How do you know she wouldn't be happy to give me her name?

Robyn's nostrils flared. Well... I just know. Because she has a boyfriend.

And that prevents her from sharing her name? Sounds kind of... unhealthy.

Robyn opened her mouth to speak. Jamie was goading her, deliberately winding her up – and it was working. Georgia knew she should step in and resolve the situation somehow, either by telling Jamie to get lost or by telling Robyn to shut up, but she didn't know which was the right choice – which was fairest, and which would cause the least amount of conflict.

Well actually, said Amia. They're kind of open.

What are you talking about? Robyn snapped.

Amia was swaying on the spot under the pastel glow of the fairy lights, her hair flapping in the wind. She has a girlfriend now, too. As well, I mean. She has two of them. Two... you know. Lovers.

Georgia laughed again, the wattage on her performance turned up as far as it would go. She had told Amia about that in confidence; Robyn didn't know. Could she pass it off as a joke? There was a pause; no one else laughed. Out of the corner of her eye, Georgia could sense Robyn looking at her, eyes wide. Jamie took in all of their expressions and let out a hoot of laughter.

Wow, he said. You guys are fun. But it sounds like you haven't got time for me right now. Maybe another time.

He sauntered away from them, towards the shining lights of the bar. Georgia watched him leave, his sagging jeans, the sway in his step. Georgia thought he

should have a guitar slung over his shoulder. He should be on a beach. She could picture him walking barefoot across the sand.

Behind her, she heard Robyn say: You have a *girlfriend* now? What the hell?

\*

Georgia jolted out of sleep to the sound of the doorbell – a harsh, metallic sound that yanked her from the cosy strangeness of her dream, in which a blue ghost-rat was talking from the foot of her head. It was almost half past three in the afternoon. She had slept all day and was still wearing last night's clothes, hot and musty beneath the duvet. She had a message from Jonathan, who said he probably wouldn't be back until later, several from Amia (the only words she could see in the previews were *I'm sorry but...* and *It's not my fault that...*) and none at all from Robyn. The doorbell sounded again, and Georgia pulled a pillow over her head. She thought: I am a bad friend. The words felt tinny and forced, as though they were coming from someone else's mind. Was she a bad friend? The doorbell jangled for a third time. Georgia dragged herself out of bed and put her dressing gown on over her clothes.

She opened the door. Jas. Her face clean and bare and startlingly beautiful. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a hooded sweatshirt.

Can I come in?

Jas didn't say anything about the smeared makeup, the short dress and tights that she clearly hadn't taken off from the night before. She didn't say anything about the mussed bedsheets, the sharp stench of hangover sweat. She didn't say

much at all. She led Georgia to bed, as though everything was normal, and began to kiss her. Jas smelled very clean. Her mouth was minty and smoky, and her skin smelled like tropical shower gel – coconuts and pineapple and freshness. Georgia thought about putting a stop to things and taking a shower before they continued, but it felt rude, almost offensive to stop the kissing when the kissing was this good. She felt her body respond to Jas automatically as she slowly let go of the fuzz of anxiety about their relationship, her hangover, her friends, Jonathan. But then it was over, and everything came crashing down like a sheet of water.

Did you fuck him last night? Jas demanded.

Wait, what?

Did you fuck Jonathan last night here, in this bed?

No... I didn't. But even if I did –

You should have told me if you did.

But why? Georgia sat up and pulled the duvet up around her chest. What are you talking about? Jonathan's my boyfriend. I thought we were all happy with this. After... After we met, I thought we all agreed...

Georgia's vision speckled. She realised that she hadn't eaten or drunk anything at all that day, except for a few sips of old, warm water that she found in a bottle on the floor by the bed. Jas kept talking but the room was whirling; Georgia couldn't look up at her. Then something slunk out from under the bed. She howled and leapt back into the centre of the bed.

What the fuck?

Jas's face paled.

Did you see it? It's under the bed. It's there now. Oh my god, I can't. I can't

deal with this. I can't.

I didn't see anything, said Jas. And anyway, it's just a... Holy shit.

They both watched as a large rodent – larger than a mouse, bigger even than a rat – scuttled out of the bedroom door and into the kitchen.

Get it! Georgia cried.

Jas leapt up and chased the creature into the kitchen. Behind her, Georgia sobbed. They both watched as the creature disappeared through the dark chasm between the washing machine and the wall.

The pest control company said they would be there in two hours. It felt like an eternity. Georgia was too afraid to stay in the flat, so they went outside in their coats – Jas sitting on the low wall, Georgia pacing, both smoking – while Jas tried to calm Georgia down.

It wasn't that big... And it was only one.

Yeah sure, it wasn't that big. I know you saw it! You can't pretend that it wasn't fucking huge.

OK, OK. It was bigger than I was expecting, but still... It could have been bigger.

How big would you like it to be exactly?

Well, I would like it not to be there at all, obviously, because I don't want you to feel so upset, but honestly...

Jas stopped speaking. They both turned to watch a silver car pull up in front of them. Jonathan leapt out of the back seat.

What's going on? Why aren't you answering your phone?

Oh shit, said Georgia. Sorry. I didn't think. It was the mouse. I... We saw it again. Jas called pest control. They're on their way.

The mouse again, huh?

It's true, Jas said. I saw it. To be fair, it is pretty big.

OK. Well, thanks for calling them.

Yeah, no problem. Um... I guess I'll go now, George? I'll see you soon. OK?

You don't have to –

No, it's fine. I've got stuff to do, and you'll be busy with the... With the pest control people.

Jas waved a hand dismissively and turned down the road towards the station without looking back. Jonathan wanted to go inside and have a look before pest control arrived. Georgia didn't, so she sat down on the low wall and rolled another cigarette. She couldn't sleep at home tonight – that was for sure. She was bothered too, by the fact Jas left so abruptly. Didn't she realise how terrified she was? Couldn't she have taken Georgia with her? The sun had almost completely drained from the sky, except for the last few flecks of fire on the horizon. It would be dark soon. Georgia realised, fleetingly, that she wasn't supposed to have Jas round without asking Jonathan first. She wondered whether he would have figured out that they'd had sex, from the tangled sheets, the smells of their bodies. Would he say anything? Did he care?

When they first met Jas, Jonathan was besotted. His eyes sparkled, his smile was dopey and irrepressible. Georgia thrilled to see it. His desire made her feel good, a slow, steady spread of heat throughout her body. Jonathan was giddier than

Georgia had seen him in years. Watching him flirt with someone so beautiful – and be flirted with in return – filled her with an inner peace. It felt like an endorsement of her own choices. They left the bar and decided to go back to Georgia and Jonathan’s flat. They were having fun; none of them were ready for the night to end. Jas had a small bit of MDMA on her, which they put in their last round of drinks. In the taxi on the way home they were all touching each other in the backseat. Only gently, tentatively, exploring each other. Jonathan had one arm around Jas and was stroking Georgia’s face and neck, the other hand resting on Jas’s thigh. Jas had an arm around Jonathan, under his jacket, while Georgia was practically sitting in Jas’s lap, touching her legs, her belly, her face. She pulled Jas’s face towards her to kiss her, but Jas whispered: not yet; not here.

By the time they got upstairs, into the unnervingly familiar territory of their flat, Jas’s face had become unreadable. Jonathan wanted to kiss her, but she stopped him and said she needed a moment. She went into the bathroom and locked the door. Georgia asked Jonathan if he thought Jas was all right. He said he was sure she was fine.

I can’t blame her for getting a little bit of cold feet, he said. But she’ll come around.

They had discussed the possibility of sex on the first date – Georgia and Jonathan – and while they were both open to it, they felt that it was unlikely. The website they’d used to find Jas cautioned against sex on the first meeting – but usually as a measure to protect the unicorn. It also said that there was nothing wrong with going for it if everyone was comfortable. And they were all comfortable, weren’t they? Jas had said she wanted to go back to theirs. She had seemed up for

it, hadn't she? In fact, hadn't she been the one to suggest it in the first place? Georgia thought back to the taxi, all the touching. They were all into it, no doubt. After a few more minutes, Jas emerged from the bathroom. Georgia and Jonathan were waiting side-by-side on the sofa, like strangers waiting for an appointment with the dentist.

Have you got anything to drink? Jas asked.

Jonathan made them all an Old Fashioned, and Jas slowly came back into herself, rejuvenated by the alcohol. The other Jas – the mopey and distant one – disappeared.

Later, when they had finished having sex, Georgia glanced at Jas across Jonathan's torso. His arm was still around her, but she was facing away from him, towards the window. She was quiet – probably asleep already. Jonathan was dozing; it wouldn't be long until he fell asleep himself. Georgia wriggled out of his grasp and switched off the light.

\*

Jonathan waved at Georgia from the communal entrance.

Are you coming back inside?

Are you joking?

Jonathan sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He walked down the path towards the wall where Georgia was waiting.

Come inside, Georgia. Enough.

I can't! I genuinely can't. You didn't see the size of the thing. It's absolutely –

What are you going to do then, hmm? You're going to sit out here all night? You don't think there are more, and bigger creatures that can get you out here? You're not going to be any safer sitting out here on the street.

Georgia was taken aback by Jonathan's tone, a sharp impatience that she had never heard from him before. They both turned to look at the vehicle that was spluttering into their cul-de-sac. It was a black van, with the words *BUZZ OFF* sprayed in yellow. There was a picture of a bumblebee inside the 'O' and underneath, in smaller letters it said: *We'll make your pests buzz off.*

Buzz off. We'll make your pests buzz off? Jonathan said.

They were the only company who could come tonight.

I'm sure they'll be fine.

Maybe I'll go and stay with Alison, Georgia said.

Sounds like a good idea. You need anything from the house?

It's fine. I can borrow pyjamas. I've got a shift at Denise's tomorrow. I'll be back in the afternoon.

All right then.

Jonathan raised a hand at the two men who had just got out of the van. Georgia could already see him constructing a new version of himself, laddish and personable. As she turned towards the bus stop, she heard him say, *All right mate?* And she knew that within minutes, Jonathan would be explaining that his girlfriend was hypersensitive – an exaggerator – and the 'rat' was probably not a big deal at all.

\*

Georgia called her sister when she was on the bus. She hadn't seen Alison for months, but she knew she would be at home. She always was these days – ever since she'd divorced her husband a year or so previously. They had two children, Betty who was six and Zach who was eight. The children weren't old enough to be left on their own yet but that hadn't stopped Alison from trying. Last time they spoke, Alison tried to make a case for letting them walk to school unsupervised.

But they'd be *together*, Alison said. It's not like I'm saying they should go on their *own*. Anyway, I was just trying the idea out on you. You know, to see if I am being unreasonable, like Toby says. And apparently, I am.

Sometimes Alison asked Georgia to babysit, but lately they'd been so busy that the requests had stopped coming. Sometimes Georgia woke in the night, panicked, thinking that she had forgotten she was supposed to look after Betty and Zach, imagining them crying and alone in their house. Even though she knew it was only a weird anxiety dream, the feeling of uneasiness usually persisted well into the next day.

Well, look who it is! Alison said, flinging the front door open. I didn't know if you were still alive.

Yep, here I am.

Kids, look. It's Auntie Georgie.

There was a chorus of 'Auntie Georgie!' from upstairs. Georgia's niece and nephew bounded down the stairs so fast that Georgia's heart caught in her chest. Zach threw his arms around her waist and squeezed tight. Betty jumped up and down behind him, whacking him on the back and shouting, I want a go! I want a

go! Georgia reached out and stroked the top of her silky head.

Stop that, Betty, Alison snapped. She's a human, not a toy.

Betty stopped jumping and Georgia saw her withdraw to the bottom of the stairs and fold her arms across her chest.

Hey mate, Georgia said to the top of Zach's head. How's it going?

I missed you, he said.

I missed you too!

Come and look at my painting. Mr Relf said it was the best in the class.

Suddenly, Betty let out a loud shriek. I wanna cuddle Auntie Georgie! she bellowed, before bursting into tears.

Well, that's not the way to get what you want, is it Betty? Alison opened the door to the living room for Zach and Georgia. Let's go in here. Betty can join us when she's ready to behave.

No! Betty wailed. Auntie Georgie, I need you!

Georgia dithered. Alison motioned for her to proceed into the living room. There was some sort of superhero cartoon playing on the large flat screen television above the fireplace. Zach let go of Georgia's body and belly-flopped onto the largest sofa.

Shall I just –

No, said Alison firmly. She needs to learn.

Betty began wailing again. Alison closed the door behind them.

That's better, she said.

The living room was a mess. Alison and Toby's pre-children taste levels were evident – the mid-century furniture, the trendy ceiling light fixture, the art on the

walls, the embroidered cushions (which, Alison reminded Georgia often, were embroidered by women in prison as part of a rehabilitation project) – yet the floor was strewn with toys and piles of laundry and there were papers and dirty cups on every surface. Georgia removed a toy digger from the armchair before she sat down. Betty was still screaming out in the hallway. It sounded like she was also throwing something – perhaps shoes. Alison left to check on her every few minutes but resisted Georgia’s attempts to intervene.

You can come in when you’re ready to apologise!

Alison was wearing a pair of bobbly grey leggings, a neon pink sports top and a beige-coloured cardigan. Her hair was scraped back into a plait. Georgia could see her white roots exposed at her hairline.

So, Alison said, putting a glass of water down on the side table. What’s going on? Why are you here?

Georgia took a sip of water. We’ve got a rat.

What? A rat?

Seriously. I saw it.

I’ve never heard of such a thing. I’ve heard of mice in people’s houses, but not rats.

Well, it’s happening to me, so...

Oh, but are you sure you absolutely didn’t see a mouse?

It wasn’t a mouse, no.

Alison tittered. If you say so.

Later, once the kids were in bed, Alison opened a bottle of wine. Jonathan texted to say that traps had been laid but there was no sign of ‘her little friend’ just

yet. Georgia thought of him all alone in the flat, playing video games or maybe having a bath. Her head throbbed. She was still a little hungover from the night before and she knew the wine would make it worse, but it was easier to accept the wine. Alison would take it personally if she didn't.

So, do you think the kids are completely batshit crazy?

Why would I think that?

Well, Betty's screaming episodes and Zach is basically emotionally dysfunctional.

Georgia didn't react.

It's probably because of the divorce, Alison said, taking a large swig from her glass. I just keep thinking about mum and dad's divorce, you know? Wondering how that affected us as people. Do you think their divorce changed the way you look at love, and at life?

This was a familiar line of questioning. Alison loved to psychoanalyse the effect their parents' divorce had on them as if it was something uniquely traumatic, rather than something that happened to children all the time. Besides, they were practically adults when their parents divorced, and it had been on the cards for years. Personally, Georgia felt that the divorce had been healthy and had given her realistic expectations of adult relationships.

For god's sake. You know how I feel about this. I don't think the divorce affected me at all. At least, not in any damaging way. I was thirteen when they split up. You were twenty-four!

So? Just because we weren't young children doesn't mean it didn't damage us. You know, their relationship is the safe foundation on which we constructed

our whole selves.

I don't think that's true.

No?

No, I don't. I don't recall constructing my whole self, and even if I did, it would have been to do with them as people, as constant presences in my life, which they still are – not to do with whether they liked each other.

So, are you and Jonathan going to get married then?

What? No. Why would you even ask that. I'm only twenty-four.

So? I was only a few years older than you when I got married.

Well, I don't think it's on the cards for us.

What, not ever?

Probably not, no.

Because you're fucked up about marriage?

Alison, stop it. You got married after their divorce, so you weren't 'fucked up' about it. We're just different people, OK?

Alison laughed. You don't think I'm fucked up?

Please. Let's not do this now. I'm tired and we both know we'll just fight and feel bad about it afterwards.

Alison poured more wine into their glasses. Georgia noticed there were more lines on her face these days. Heavy ones on her forehead and some light creases around her eyes. She should visit more often. It couldn't be easy for Alison, looking after the kids on her own so much, ending her marriage. Georgia wanted to have those conversations with Alison, but no matter how the conversation started, it always circled back to their parents' divorce; Alison insisting that Georgia had

certain feelings, deep down, that Georgia was sure she didn't have.

It rained all night. The leaves on the plane trees were glossy and bright. On her way to Denise's, Georgia passed children wearing yellow welly boots and swinging tiny umbrellas above their heads that were still almost the same size as them. It didn't feel that long since Zach and Betty were that size. The time had slipped by almost unnoticeably. When Betty was a newborn – a tiny, curled-up, non-verbal shrimpy thing – Georgia was eighteen, on the cusp of adulthood. Now, six years later, Betty could walk and talk and read and recite her times tables, and what had Georgia done? She graduated with a degree in Philosophy, met Jonathan, moved into their own flat and now she was juggling working for Denise with sporadic copywriting work. Did any of this mean anything? Were they achievements? She didn't know. Maybe.

Denise wasn't around. The house was quiet and melancholy. Georgia didn't play music as she usually did. She tried to focus on the cookies in front of her – *Great job, Shareena!* and *Happy Graduation, Courtney!* and *Don't Cry Because It's Over, Smile Because It Happened* – but she was too alert to the sounds around her. The soft scrape of cardboard boxes against each other could be the scratching of rat feet and a creaky door hinge could be them trying to communicate with her. The knot in her stomach felt so solid that she actually grasped her midriff to see if there was some sort of growth inside her – but no. It was all in her head.

Just after she left Denise's, Jonathan phoned.

So, they've found one... He said. But the problem is, they think this one they've caught is a baby and they need to get the mother.

Right, she said, glancing towards the bush in front of her, which had just made a rustling sound.

So? what do you think? Are you going to come back tonight, or...?

She thought about asking Jonathan if he even wanted her to come back, but she realised she was afraid of what he might say.

No, no. It's fine. I'll go back to Alison's.

Do you want to pick up some stuff tonight?

She'll probably have something I can borrow. Did they say when they think they might catch the big one?

It's a waiting game really. It'll happen whenever she takes the bait. The guy said he'd come back in the morning though, so I guess it could be soon.

All right, I'll call you in the morning.

Jonathan hung up and Georgia looked down at her phone, his smiling image and the words: *Call Ended*. She navigated away from Jonathan's contact information and towards Jas. An image of Jas's naked torso filled the top half of Georgia's phone screen, Jas's nipples winking like a pair of eyes. She should probably change that. In fact, she probably should have changed it a while ago. She had thought it was fun – funny, even – a little joke, something to make her smile whenever she looked Jas up in her phone, but suddenly it seemed crass and inappropriate.

It began to rain again – a slow, hazy drizzle that bounced off cars and objects and made them look as though they were glowing with light. The thought of going back to Alison's filled Georgia with dread, but she didn't know where else she could go. She could call Robyn or Amia, but that would mean rehashing the events of the

other night, either hearing apologies or making them, and having long discussions about her feelings that she didn't want to have. The skies darkened and Georgia felt she could see rats everywhere: flashes of bodies shimmying along in the gutter or scabbling up walls, crawling along the pavement towards her with their sharp teeth bared. She could feel them on her body, the way they'd squeeze up the legs of her dungarees and down between her breasts, the way it would feel to have their thick, furry bodies moving against hers, the slither of their tails, the spikes of their claws. The rain got heavier. Georgia saw a pub on the corner. She decided to go inside and buy herself a drink, get out of the rain and think about what to do. Maybe she should just go home to Jonathan.

What can I get for you, hun?

The bartender was a young woman with a short blonde bob. She was wearing a black T-shirt and a black lacy choker around her neck.

Wine, Georgia said. Large, please.

Any particular kind of wine, or...?

Whatever really. Red, I guess.

Well in that case... I recommend the house red. It's a Sangiovese.

Sounds great.

Georgia looked around. The pub was smarter on the inside than it appeared from the outside. She noticed that there was a cocktail menu, and the floors appeared to have been freshly waxed. There was hardly anyone in there – somewhat unsurprising since it was only about 4pm on a Thursday afternoon. The bartender placed the glass of wine on a napkin in front of Georgia.

Rough day?

Kind of.

Georgia was horrified to find her eyes were filling with tears. What was she crying about? None of it was that bad. There was nothing she couldn't deal with. She blinked hard and dabbed at the corner of her eye with her jumper sleeve.

I guess I'm hormonal or something.

Aren't we all?

Nancy was easy to talk to. There were various trashy magazines behind the bar, left by another bartender. Nancy read the celebrity gossip aloud to Georgia and they discussed who they liked and who they didn't. Once they had worked through celebrities, they moved onto the shocking real-life stories. There was a story about a couple who had a demon in their house, that turned out to be his dead ex-lover. There was a story about a woman who survived a plane crash and had to eat her own sister.

That's fucked, Nancy said. I could never do that.

Do you have a sister? Georgia asked.

No.

Well, you're a better person than me then. I'd eat mine if I had to.

Nancy laughed and Georgia glowed. The bar was dead. Nancy joined Georgia drinking wine, although she drank hers from a paper coffee cup. Before long, Nancy's shift was over, and Georgia's bill wiped from the till.

On the house, Nancy said with a wink.

Georgia checked her phone. No messages – not from anyone. The walls around her faltered and she realised that she was really quite drunk after all. She couldn't show up at Alison's like this. Alison would bang on and on about how

their parents' divorce was making her drown out her feelings with booze. And what about Jonathan? He wouldn't like it. He was angry enough with her as it was. So, when Nancy asked Georgia if she wanted to come back to hers, it seemed like most sensible option.

\*

Georgia woke early the next morning. Nancy's bedroom was bathed in a cold blue morning light. The curtains hadn't been closed before they went to sleep. In fact, there were no curtains at all – just a large, bare window that looked out onto a well-tended garden, a smart set of wooden garden furniture stacked against a wall, ready to be put away for the winter. Georgia had huge blanks in her memory. She remembered talking about eating Alison and felt like she was going to throw up. It had seemed funny at the time. Nancy had laughed, hadn't she? She couldn't remember anything Nancy had told her about herself. Did she say she was a student? But where? And of what? Georgia tried to pull up more memories of the night before, but everything was scrambled. She had a fleeting memory of being told to wait outside the front door while Nancy went inside to check the coast was clear. She could remember the thick ivy that grew up the side of the house, covering a full side of the building. She could remember the red front door, with one of those posh brass knockers – and then she was ushered into a hallway, past a carpeted staircase and into a ground floor bedroom with posters on the walls. She remembered the two of them giggling and Nancy raising a finger to her lips – shh.

Georgia lifted the covers and slowly moved her body out of the bed. She still had her underwear on, which she presumed meant they hadn't fucked. That was something. Her jeans were tangled up with a pair of Nancy's tights by the foot of the bed. Georgia pulled her phone out of the pocket. She pressed on the screen and tried the power button, but it didn't respond. Her throat was dry and scratchy. She had a simmering, dizzy feeling in her stomach, something like dread – but of what? She hadn't done anything wrong. Even if she had slept with Nancy, everyone knew the score – the relationships were open; she wasn't tied down. Georgia pulled her jumper over her head and a gentle clanging sound made her freeze. In the corner of the room, beside a haphazard stack of textbooks, she saw a large metal cage filled with brightly coloured toys and ramps and tubes and there, at the bottom, amongst the sawdust, gnawing the trapdoor with its large, pointed teeth, was a black and white rat. Georgia watched as it turned and scampered into its dark enclosure, its tail flashing pink and fleshy. How had she not noticed last night? She seized her bag and fled from the room and down the hallway, past an open door through which she could hear the low murmur of voices. Georgia grabbed at the lock on the front door – she had to get out, she had to get out immediately – but it was stuck. When she finally got it open, she raced down the path and didn't stop until she felt like her lungs would give out.

On the walk to the station, Georgia drifted along like a ghost, a wisp of herself. She passed an ice cream shop she hadn't noticed before – perhaps it was new. The place was decorated in a pastel shade of pink, with fake pink flowers cascading down the wall behind the counter and around the glass shopfront. Georgia decided to go inside. The ice creams were laid out neatly in the cabinet,

each flavour labelled with its name: peach kiss, strawberry dream, tropical paradise, naughty chocolate. It was early, so the surfaces of each carton of ice cream were perfect and untouched. She bought herself a cheeky cherry cone, sat at a table and ate it slowly, feeling the delicious chill deep in the pit of her belly.

\*

Georgia turned into their cul-de-sac. Everything looked strange and ever-so-slightly different, as though she'd been away for years, not days. Her phone was still dead in her pocket, but her hangover had eased off. In fact, her mind was clean and bright and empty, like a lightbox. She unlocked the door to their flat. It was still early – before 10am – and she assumed Jonathan was asleep. The bedroom door was closed, but other than that, everything looked the same as it had when she had left. Unopened post stacked on the kitchen counter; mismatched shoes shoved together on the shoe rack. She walked into the kitchen and saw a black leather jacket slung over one of the chairs. It looked like Jas's. Perhaps she left it when she was last here – although Georgia couldn't remember her wearing it then. She picked up the jacket and inhaled the soft lining. It smelled of smoke and pineapples. She would message Jas later, when her phone finished charging.

Georgia went into the bathroom. She caught sight of herself in the mirror: dark circles under her eyes, smudged makeup, lips blackened by wine. She had looked better. Something moved in the background behind her. Georgia whirled around and there it was: the creature, in the bath, scuttling back and forth, back and forth. When it tried to climb up the sides, it slipped back down again. It was

trapped. Georgia edged closer to the bath. It looked so small in there, so much smaller than she had imagined. It was a mouse – not a rat – with soft grey-brown fur and a little pink nose. She watched it try and fail to make it out of the bath a few times, zipping from one side to the other, as though a new route out might suddenly have appeared. It occurred to her that she could kill it. She had her chance now. She thought about waking Jonathan, but she wanted to finish this herself. She could fill the bath with water and watch it drown. She could bash it with a rolling pin and see its blood splatter up the tiles. Georgia watched for a few minutes, the mouse frantically going nowhere. In the end, she fetched a large Tupperware box from the kitchen, and managed to scoop up the mouse without touching it. It crept around its new confines carefully, sussing out the dimensions.

Georgia slid her trainers half-on and clopped towards the front door. She paused. There were voices coming from the bedroom – two of them. She looked towards the kitchen table; the leather jacket slung casually over the chair. In her hands, the mouse scabbled against plastic. Jonathan and Jas – could it be? But, she thought, they didn't get along. Wasn't that why they avoided each other, why they couldn't spend time together as a three? She had spent all this time imagining that she was the central gravitating force between them, the sun around which they both revolved, but now it seemed that she was on a distant planet, the only one out in the dark. It occurred to her that this was against the rules, but Georgia didn't feel particularly sad or angry. She was tired, sapped of all emotion. It felt inevitable all of a sudden, like she had been trapped in a room with only one way out. She should go in and talk to them – and she would, very soon – but first she had to get rid of the mouse. She thought about where she would release it. There was a cluster

of trees at the far side of the park where it could perhaps make a home, or maybe she should dump it by the main road. The problem was that she didn't want it to end up in someone else's house – and besides, she thought it would be happier in the park. All that space. It would like the freedom. She would have to tell Jonathan that she'd killed it. After all, what was it the pest control guys had told him? No matter how far away you take them, you can never be sure. Unless you kill them, there's always a chance they could come back.

APPENDIX:

# I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY

*Continued*

## Intimacy

It was a gaudy poster, unusual for the theatre – two profiles in silhouette, a man and a woman, against a yellow and plum background, the word INTIMACY in thick teal letters – but then again, the play itself was a departure from their usual repertoire. It had been described as a ‘searing’ and ‘darkly funny’ drama about two lovers, which had created a stir in Germany before being translated into English for a limited run off-Broadway, which then transferred to Broadway for a longer run, and now here it was, in London. Despite its reputation, there was a lot of scepticism about the play, particularly among the front of house staff at the theatre.

Intimacy? Bembe said, with an eyebrow raised. Please. What kind of a play name is that?

He was lounging in an armchair in the Dress Circle bar, eating a packet of crisps. Danny sat opposite him, rolling a cigarette. Zara was behind the bar. She bent down to take a sip of the cappuccino that she made for herself on the coffee machine in the main bar downstairs, while Curtis, the bar manager, had gone to sort out a complaint on the Upper Circle bar. They were supposed to pay for anything fancier than a filter coffee. Staff price was only a pound. But still.

Is it about sex? asked Alessandra. It sounds like it’s about sex. She was cross-legged on the floor, doing side stretches.

Have you seen the poster? said Danny. It’s definitely about sex.

How did you get sex from two darkened faces and some childish colours? said Bembe. And by the way, I hope at least one of the actors is going to be Black if they're blacking up their faces like that.

It's not really blacking up, is it? asked Alessandra, wafting her arms above her head. It's supposed to be like, shadows, isn't it?

Yeah, but look, said Bembe, gesturing at the poster on the wall across from them. The way they've done it, all arty. I personally think it's problematic to black up people's faces like that if they're not Black.

They had a biracial actor in the New York production, said Zara. But they were both white in the original German production. Apparently the script doesn't specify – but this is the poster they've used for all of the productions. Annie's read it – haven't you, Annie?

Annie was sat on the floor by the bar, reading. She looked up.

Yeah... If you can call it reading. It's *really* weird. There aren't names for the characters – or genders, come to think of it – but so far, it's always been performed as a two-hander, one man and one woman. It doesn't indicate who says what either... It's more like poetry or – I dunno really. It's up for interpretation by the director, I guess.

So, the writer doesn't have any involvement beyond writing the script? asked Zara.

Nope, said Annie. No one knows anything about the writer.

Man or woman?

No one knows. There isn't a name on the script or any of the advertising materials. People are going crazy over it in Germany, trying to find out who it is. There are some theories, but I don't think any of them are particularly credible.

Ooh, I'm excited! said Danny. I think it will be sexy. Do not tell me that it's not going to be sexy.

I honestly couldn't say, said Annie. The script is that vague.

Who's directing again? asked Bembe

Aimee Munro and Robbie Olufemi, Zara said. They're co-directing.

Co-directing! said Bembe, aghast. I have literally never heard of that happening in theatre. Especially by two household names!

Each of the productions has been co-directed, said Annie. It's stipulated in the text.

So... The number of directors is stipulated, but not the characters? That's so random, said Danny.

Well, it does happen, Alessandra said to Bembe. *SIX* was co-directed too.

It's not common, said Bembe. And *SIX* is a musical. That's different.

Alessandra shrugged and took a bite out of an apple.

That wasn't a dig at musical theatre, you know.

I know.

OK, good 'cos I do think it's a valid art form, even though –

Bembe was interrupted by a rustling over the speaker. A hushed voice rang out: Five minutes 'til lights down people, this is your five-minute interval call.

Uh oh, said Danny. That time already.

Annie, Bembe and Danny disappeared down the stairs to take up their positions in the foyer. Bembe was with Tina, checking that no one took glass into the auditorium; they offered out plastic cups for audience members to decant their drinks into. Danny was selling programs and playscripts. Annie was on cloakroom. The current production was 'Death of a Salesman' but with a female lead – something to update the script and give it a fresh, modern edge. The reviews were generally favourable; the production received the standard procession of four stars that the theatre always achieved, with some critics writing that the production shone a light on the impossible pressures of being a woman in today's society. That one made Zara laugh. What play written by a man about a man more than 70 years ago could shine a light on anything about being a woman today? Instead of staging an old play that everyone had seen a million times, why not show something new? Also (and perhaps most importantly to Zara), Casey Day, the lead actress who played Wilhelmina Loman, wasn't any good. This was one of her first big jobs, so she was always overly friendly with the bar staff and bought them drinks if she stayed late into the evening – but her performance was flat and made Zara cringe. She found herself wondering who Casey had had to fuck to get the part and then told herself off for the unkind, un-feminist thought. It wasn't Casey's fault she was bad at acting. Casey regularly asked Zara and the other women actors if they'd had any auditions lately, something that might have been intended to bond them together as artists of the same craft and gender identity, to show that she thought of herself as one of them, but in practice it resulted in Casey taking up a lot of their time with stories about her exciting auditions at the BBC or the National, and weighing up the pros and cons of television work versus live theatre. They smiled

politely whenever she talked but rolled their eyes behind her back and sometimes even did a mean impression, which Zara did feel guilty about, but then, she hadn't heard from her agent in weeks and Alessandra's most recent job was as a dead girl in an anti-drink driving campaign, so she felt that a bit of meanness was justified.

Curtis peered around the corner. Zara, can you put the ice in your interval orders?

Yeah, she said. Already done.

Well, Curtis said, surveying the tables full of drinks with their little white slips. Remember not to do it too early, or else the ice will melt before the customers get to them. No one wants a watered-down gin and tonic, OK?

OK, Zara said.

Alessandra scowled when Curtis left. We've only been working here for two and three years respectively. We know how to make interval orders, Curtis.

Hearing Alessandra casually refer to her three-year career as a front of house team member (first as an usher, then as a bartender) made Zara wince. This was supposed to be a temporary job, to fill the time before she went to drama school, but somehow the years slipped by. Three years felt like forever. When she first took this job, she thought that it would be for a few months – a year tops – then after she'd completed her MA, she would get enough acting work to move out of her mum's house. It seemed stupid, in retrospect, to have been so sure, but she'd had to sell this future as a certainty to her mum to get her to co-sign the loan she needed for her drama school fees. On the way, she must have fallen for it herself too.

Customers began to trickle out of the auditorium, first in dribs and drabs, then a steady stream of them forming a queue at the bar. Alessandra and Zara bumped into each other, muttering ‘oops’ and ‘sorry!’ as they raced to fill glasses with champagne, squeeze wedges of lime into gin and tonics and pop the lids off bottles of beer. Finally, the five-minute call came over the speakers and the audience disappeared as quickly as they arrived, until there were only a handful of people remaining, the kind of people who acted as if the whole performance would wait until they had been to the toilet and out for a cigarette, had a snack, finished their phone calls, and purchased their drinks. There was a guy standing at the end of the bar by the cookies. Zara ignored him on purpose, hoping he would get the message and go back inside with the rest of the audience members.

Hi! Can I help you? Alessandra asked him after a moment. She was always cheery towards the customers – too cheery sometimes.

I’m just waiting to see if I can get your friend’s attention, he said.

Zara fixed her eyes on the beer fridge, knowing that both Alessandra and the guy would be looking in her direction. She continued to count the beer bottles and made a note in the folder. Alessandra dithered.

Erm, she said. She’s kind of busy right now. Can I help you? You need to order quickly because the show will be starting again any second.

It’s OK, the guy said. I’m not watching the show. I can wait.

Zara wanted Alessandra to tell him that he had to leave because this bar was closing now, but he could go to the bar downstairs which would remain open after the show. That’s what she would have said if the roles were reversed, not only to help out her friend but because it was true. But after a long pause, Alessandra

simply shrugged and continued to dry the clean glasses from the glasswasher. Zara stood, wiping her hands on her jeans. The guy lit up as soon as she turned around. She noticed that his mouth full of perfectly white, perfectly straight teeth. He slid down the bar towards her.

I was trying to play hard to get but I think I was playing too hard, he said. I'm James. He held out his hand. Zara shook it briefly, trying to convey her disdain with limited physical contact.

Hi James, she said. This bar is closing now, but the bar downstairs is still open.

Are you going to the bar downstairs?

No... I'm going to stay up here and help Alessandra close this bar.

Then can I stay up here with you and Alessandra? Just for a bit.

He grinned at Alessandra, who beamed back. Zara folded her arms across her chest.

Why would you want to do that?

I just wanna chat to you. Please?

But I'm working.

Will you meet me downstairs afterwards?

What? No. I don't know you.

But you could get to know me.

James shrugged. He was playing at being apologetic, as though to say hey, can you blame a guy for trying? This faux sweetness put the onus on Zara to respond in a particular way. It made it impossible for her to tell him straight to leave her alone without looking like a bitch. In the real world, outside the

restrictions of employment, she would tell him to get lost but here, in her customer service role, she had to be nice and polite – otherwise, Curtis would tell her off for being rude to customers (again). James knew the score. He was using it to his advantage.

I'm sorry, she said. I've got somewhere to be after work, so I really can't.

Hey, no worries. Another time, maybe?

Zara heard Curtis's voice on the stairs. She was trying to figure out the politest way to say no, not another time, please leave me alone for real, when James slipped her a scrap of paper over the bar and walked away, towards the stairs. He passed Curtis on the way, and they acknowledged each other with an 'all right' as though they were friends.

He seemed nice, Alessandra said, peering over Zara's shoulder to look at the piece of paper James had given her. It was a receipt from Pret, for a tuna cheese toasted sandwich and a can of fizzy ginger. On the back, in a childish scrawl, it said JAMES, followed by a phone number.

So annoying, Zara said, stuffing the scrap into the back pocket of her jeans.

Really?

Yeah, like, I'm at work?

Alessandra shrugged and began to re-load the glasswasher.

How's it going up here? said Curtis. He winked at Zara. I see someone's getting 'intimate' with our new leading man.

Sorry?

James. He's the lead in... Intimacy, said Curtis, doing jazz hands.

She rejected him.

Really? Huh. I think he's pretty hot.

Not really my type, said Zara.

Suit yourself. So, which of you girls is going to count the cash?

Zara didn't have anywhere special to go after work. She had been planning on staying for a drink with Bembe and Danny, but the whole situation with James put her in a bad mood. She decided to go home. So, he was going to be hanging around for a while. So, she was going to have to put up with him lurking around the bar, bugging her for the next few months. Great. On the bus, she searched the Internet for *James. Actor. Intimacy. London.* but nothing came up. The cast hadn't been announced yet. She ran a search for *James. Actor. London.* but there were way too many hits. She sighed and closed her eyes, trying to remember what he looked like. He did have a cute smile, if maybe a little *too* dazzling (did he whiten his teeth?), and to be fair to him, he did have kind eyes. There was something about him that completely turned her off, but she wasn't sure what. Maybe she was just so disillusioned with her job that the most generous, sweet, lovely, attractive man in the world could try to chat her up and she would miss him altogether.

Bembe found out about the number-giving incident and messaged her:

TEXT HIM.

IMMEDIATELY.

NOW.

OR I WILL NEVER FORGIVE YOU.

What?? This is such a bad idea!!

The actor in the show?!

Babe, you've been telling me for months that you want to go on a date with a nice guy. I saw him in the bar. He introduced himself to me, a lowly usher. He seems like a nice guy. Nicer than any of the other guys you normally date. I put up with you moaning on and on about them, even though I could have told you from one look at their Bumble profile that they were bad news. So you should do this. For me.

Right... you know that whole message is incredibly problematic??

Not everything needs to be analysed, Z.  
Sometimes it can just be fun.

Back home, in her bedroom, Zara took the receipt out of her pocket and looked at it again. It would be so awkward if things went badly. Both of them working in the same theatre, him coming down to the bar for post-show drinks and her, having to serve him his gin and tonic, trying to avoid making eye contact. That awkwardness hadn't stopped her from sleeping with Nick, an usher who worked at the theatre for a little while before he left to do a school's tour. But it would be different with an actor in the show. No one cared about Nick.

Zara fell asleep and dreamt that she lost the receipt. Her room was a tip. Clothes, clean and dirty, in amongst books, scraps of paper, candles, make up, crisp packets, balls of hair and dirt, chewing gum, all piled up in mounds all over the floor. She could hardly see the carpet. When she opened her wardrobe or her drawers, more of these piles of miscellaneous items spilled out, objects slipping and sliding over each other like coins in the penny machines she played as a kid. Everything moving, as though it was alive, mixed together in such a way that it was impossible to locate the receipt anywhere. She dived into the piles, searching through bras and old necklaces, chasing anything that looked like a little white slip until suddenly, there was no room to move, the objects were pushing into her, up around her face and there was hardly any room to breathe –

She woke to the sound of her phone vibrating on the table next to her, a grumpy clicking sound like some sort of insect. She grabbed the phone and in her disoriented state, didn't check to see who was calling before answering.

Hello?

Zara, it's Candice. Are you alright?

The voice was perky, high-pitched, unfamiliar. Zara cleared her throat. Yes, I'm fine thanks. And you?

Oh yes, I'm great. It's just... You sound like you've only just woken up and it's ten o'clock in the morning! You aren't *ill*, are you?

The combination of her sleepiness and the fact that it had been so long since Zara had spoken to her agent on the telephone meant that it took her a moment to remember who Candice was. But Candice's trademark passive-aggressive criticism reminded her with a bright snap of shame.

No... No no. Not at all. I feel really good, actually. Healthy, you know?

Zara heard traffic sounds in the background and the long inhalation that meant Candice was smoking a cigarette.

Well, that's fantastic. Because you've got an audition.

I have?

You have indeed, and it's a big one. At the Baylis. I'm sure you've been there before. Anyway, it's for their upcoming production of 'Intimacy'. Have you heard of it? It's a two-hander, a play from Germany, a translation. It's been a big hit, you know, in Germany and New York, and now it's coming to London. Exciting, huh? It's today, at 2pm. I've already confirmed everything, so if you just go to stage door for about ten to two, to make a good impression, they should be expecting you. I think that's all. Any questions?

Wow. I can't really... I mean, how did you get me this audition?

Well... Candice made a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a cough. Well, I didn't exactly put you up for it myself... The brief was vague. I mean like, really vague. Nobody knew what they wanted... But this is an incredible opportunity for you, Zara. You should go for it!

So if you didn't put me up for it... Did they ask for me?

Uh, yes. They did. Zara Bright. That's you, right? Candice barked out a laugh. Zara heard her take another drag of her cigarette.

Yes, but... I work at the Baylis.

So? What's the problem? Maybe somebody saw you there and decided you'd be just right for it. I don't know. But don't overthink it. I have to go. But you'll go, right? You'll do the audition? The casting director is a big deal, and I really don't

think we should let him down, you know? And of course, this is a truly amazing opportunity for you, Zara. Once in a lifetime, really...

Yes, yes. Of course I will. Of course. Thank you, Candice. Thank you so much.

Candice had already hung up the phone. Zara opened her laptop and checked through her emails, scanning for the audition confirmation, almost willing it not to be there. But it popped into her inbox, right in front of her eyes. The most she ever hoped for when she got an email from Candice (because they rarely spoke on the phone) was a cattle-call for an advert or maybe an audition for a small part in a regional fringe theatre production, if she was lucky. But then, she remembered James. He was the only other performer in 'Intimacy', if the gossip was to be believed, and he'd given her his number yesterday, and now all of a sudden, she, Zara, a nobody in the acting world, had an audition at The Baylis, of all the theatres in London. Zara checked the email again, and the original email had been sent by Julian Scheffler, a casting director she had heard of. She double-checked the email address. It all seemed legit, but still.

Zara's head was buzzing, like there was a wasp trapped inside her brain. She picked up her phone and called Amara. Amara didn't work in the theatre world – she was completing a degree in Medicine at King's.

Zara? Is everything OK?

Amara sounded like she was out of breath.

Yeah, yeah. Everything's fine. Can you talk?

I'm just out for a run... But yeah, I can talk.

Why aren't you at uni?

It's Saturday?

Oh yeah. Well... That just makes it even weirder.

Makes what weirder?

Zara caught her up on the whole situation, from James chatting her up at the bar, his number, the audition, even the dream. Amara didn't say anything throughout. Zara could hear her panting through the phone.

So, what do you think I should do?

She heard Amara stop and take some deep breaths.

So, let me get this straight. You got asked on a date by a guy who sounds, objectively, to be hot and pretty sweet, if a bit cheesy. And you've got the best audition of your life. What do you want help with exactly?

Zara imagined Amara in the middle of Victoria Park, sweaty in her gym clothes, skin glistening in the Saturday morning sunshine.

But... Isn't it weird?

Sure, yeah. Amara took a gulp of water. It's a strange coincidence, most likely. But they do happen. I mean, he's not famous, right? This James guy. He's just an ordinary, disposable actor. Why would they audition you just because he asked?

I'm worried that it might not be a real audition, though.

But you saw the email from that Julian guy. You checked the email address. You told me that yourself. He would have to hoodwink a lot of people to pull this off, babe. And anyway, if he's going to this much effort, you probably owe him at least one date...

Yeah, thanks a lot.

Right, better get back to it. Love you! Let me know how it goes.

When Zara exited Waterloo tube station three hours later, she still had doubts. She'd prepared as if the audition was real, of course. Showered carefully, put on the perfect minimal make-up, and brushed her teeth multiple times. She did a bit of yoga, some vocal warm-ups. She looked herself in the eye before she left her flat and said, *You got this. You can do anything you put your mind to.* The streets were heaving with the typical Saturday afternoon mix of tourists and day trippers. People with sensible shoes, bags with lots of zippable pockets and adjustable straps. There were kids screaming, either in joy or pain, it was often difficult to tell. The odd homeless person also joining in the merriment by screaming back, much to the panic of the children's parents. Pigeons squawked and shat. The air stank of fumes, dirt and cigarette smoke. It made her feel a bit more normal.

She walked to the stage door. The matinee performance of 'Death of a Saleswoman' was about to start. All the theatre staff should be in their places, and the only person who would know she'd ever been here would be the Stage Door Manager, Albert.

Zara! he said, buzzing her in. You look nice. Aren't you late?

Am I? What time was I supposed to be here?

She could feel tiny pinpricks of sweat breaking out of her armpits, across the skin of her upper lip.

Don't the shifts start at one anymore? Or are you not working 'til tonight?

What? No. I'm not here to work. I've got a... I've got an audition. For 'Intimacy'? My agent called me this morning, so...

Well, Albert said, flicking through the various pieces of paper littered around his desk. No one's told me anything about that, I'm afraid. I'll call up to the rehearsal room though. I think the 'Intimacy' team are up there at the moment.

There haven't been any other auditions today?

Nope. They held quite a few auditions a month or so ago. Nothing since then. Don't worry though, love. We'll get to the bottom of this.

Albert gave her a wink, and Zara saw a flicker of pity in his eyes. Oh god. Her heart was chomping in her chest like a horse about to break out of the gate. She could feel sweat needling her back and her neck, her face and underarms. Was she beginning to smell too? Only slightly – but it was happening. Zara checked the time on her phone and flipped the camera to selfie mode. She smiled down at herself. She would get her face prepared. At this point, she couldn't stop herself from being humiliated, but she would endure it with a smile. Albert reappeared.

Good news! They are expecting you. Bad news though, is that they can't find the other actor.

What other actor?

James something. Haven't you met him? He's been hanging around the building for a few days. He was supposed to read with you. They've asked if you can hang on for a couple more minutes while they try to... locate him.

Oh, yeah. Of course. That's fine. No problem.

Behind him, the phone began to ring. Excuse me.

Zara clasped her hands together and tried to steady her breathing. She would not pick the varnish off her freshly painted nails. She was so close; she would not lose it.

Albert hung up the phone and peered out at her. Zara beamed back at him. He gave her a half-hearted smile and returned to his papers. After a few minutes, the phone rang again. Zara tried to make out what Albert was saying, but he kept his voice low, his eyes darting occasionally in her direction.

All right, Albert said after a while. Show time! You can go up to the rehearsal room. You know where it is, don't you? They're waiting for you.

The rehearsal room was at the top of the building. There were several floors, and a staircase that wound round and around and around. By the time she got to the top, Zara was out of breath and a bit dizzy. She paused to compose herself, but there was a team of people waiting in front of the rehearsal room door. One of them was wearing a headset and holding a clipboard.

Zara Bright?

Yes, that's me.

Go on through.

Zara stepped through the door, and someone closed it firmly behind her. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light. There, in the centre of the room, a narrow spot of orange light. The skylights – which usually made this the brightest room in the building – had all been covered over with heavy black fabric.

Come forward, a voice called. Into the light.

Zara moved carefully towards the single beam. The figure of a man emerged from the gloom. He was wearing thick glasses and a pink flowery shirt. Beside him, a woman in a cream silk blouse stared at her laptop screen. Zara stepped gingerly

into the glow of the light. She felt like she was about to stand trial or be beamed up into a spaceship.

Hello, she said.

You can begin, the man said.

Is there... Zara cleared her throat. Is there something in particular that you'd like me to read?

Hadn't Candice said there would be a script? Something for her to sightread? She couldn't remember now. She ought to have clarified.

You should have something prepared, the woman intoned. Any monologue will do.

Zara's mind had gone completely blank. What could she do? She tried to stay calm and collect her thoughts, but her head was filled with panicked screaming. After a moment, she began a short *Alice in Wonderland* monologue, one she'd learned by heart in the first year of secondary school. The words unspooled from her as though they were written inside her body.

I believe I have been falling for five minutes, and I still can't see the bottom! Hmph! After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling downstairs. How brave they'll all think me at home...

The man frowned a little. The woman's face did not move. She knew it wasn't what they wanted, but she had nothing else.

Can you sing and dance at the same time?

Zara nodded.

The woman watched Zara expectantly. Well... Could you?

Zara laughed, but neither the man nor the woman moved.

But there isn't any music.

Oh, said the woman, clacking out a note on her laptop. Is that a problem?

No, no. Of course not.

The woman raised her eyebrow and waited. It was difficult to make their faces out clearly in the glare of the lights. Maybe she was imagining their impatient, frustrated expressions. She told herself to think good thoughts. Maybe they were pleasantly surprised by what she was doing. Maybe they loved her. The room was silent except for the angry buzz of the light, the occasional rustle of the casting director's papers. Zara began to sing 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' by Kylie Minogue. She danced as though she was in a nightclub, shaking her shoulders and flipping her hair. Towards the end, she started pirouetting and then, for some inexplicable reason, dropped to her knees. When the song was over, she got to her feet in silence.

OK, said the woman. We need you to remove your clothes. You can keep your underwear on.

Here? Now?

Yes, now. That's not a problem, is it?

The assistant stepped out from behind her desk. Zara could see that she was wearing a tight-fitting pencil skirt and patent black heels. A tape measure dangled from her fingers.

Just standard measurements, that's all.

Zara peered around the room, into the dark corners, as though there might be someone else – someone hiding, someone who might laugh, so that she could too – but there was no such person. Zara did as she was told. She was wearing an

old pair of knickers, which had smiley-face emojis printed all over them. Once they had been a pale lilac colour; now, they were bobbly and discoloured, the lace trim unravelling in places. Her bra was new-ish, so that was something. Black satin. The man's eyes moved over the bra, across Zara's belly, her thighs, down to her feet. There were a few flecks of red on her toenails. They needed a trim. The casting director nodded at the assistant, and she held her tape aloft to measure Zara's height. Then she wrapped the tape around Zara's waist, her head, each thigh. Zara began to feel cold. She crossed her arms over her chest, but the assistant moved them back to her sides. The assistant asked Zara to confirm what she had eaten for breakfast. Zara remembered the cheese and bacon pastries she had bought from Pret on her way in – not one, but two – and the oat milk flat white. She'd bought a Twix too, but that was still in her bag. She thought of it longingly. She would get herself a cup of tea after this. She deserved one. The assistant was waiting.

Oh right, Zara said. Sorry. Um, I had a bowl of granola, I think. Yeah, that was it. And an apple. And a... a black coffee.

The assistant raised her eyebrows at her laptop screen. Thank you for your time.

Zara paused. That's it? I can go?

Yes, the assistant said, without looking up from her screen. You can go.

Zara noticed that the casting director had disappeared from the room. She got dressed quickly and thanked the assistant again. The assistant did not respond.

The people who had been waiting outside, with their clipboards and radios, had all gone. Zara made her way straight into the top floor bathroom. It was empty. Natural light flooded in through the skylight and made everything glow. Outside,

the day had turned bright and beautiful. Zara looked at herself in the mirror. Had that audition really happened? She leaned in close to look at the tiny flecks of yellow in her eyes, the smattering of freckles on the bridge of her nose. She turned her attention to her pupils, those spots of black at the centre of her eyes, and she recoiled. *You smashed it, babe*, she thought but did not say aloud.

As she was walking down the stairs, Zara's vision began to splinter – the stairs stuttered; the walls flickered – and then she could not see anything at all. She tightened her grip on the handrail, and then slowly lowered herself down onto a step. Could it be dehydration? It must be dehydration. She placed her head against her knees, which she remembered – from somewhere – is what you should do. Or was it between the knees? She pressed herself into the wall beside her as though she could be absorbed by it. She should get up. Someone might trip over her. She should try to move; she thought about moving – but all of a sudden, the lights dimmed completely. Then Zara was up on the stairs again, running up them, sprinting, and someone – or something – was chasing her. It was a spirit, a wisp, a wind. It didn't have feet or wings. It was both physical and not physical. It affected physical things – she could see its effects and she knew it was there – but at the same time, she couldn't see it, she couldn't be sure.

Zara? Zara?

What was happening? She was breathing hard; she was trying to scream but something was stuck inside her. It wouldn't burst out. She felt the pressure building in her chest. Was she dreaming? A door creaked open. James was shutting a door – his dressing room door. When he saw her, a slow smile spread across his face.

Oh, you again, he said. Are you stalking me?

What was he doing here? He was supposed to be in the audition with her. Where had he been? Zara felt the words stacking up inside her – all the things she wanted to say – but suddenly her anger evaporated. She didn't – couldn't – say a word.

James leaned closer, so close she could see the short black hairs protruding from his nostrils, the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

It's not over, he said in a sing-song voice. It's not over until it starts, and you and me, we've got a lot of beginning to do.

James laughed, and as he did, the door to his dressing room swung open. There was a woman in there, stretched out across the sofa, a sheet draped across her body. She moved up onto her elbows and the sheet slipped; an escaped nipple winked. The woman threw her head back so far that it looked as though it had been sliced off. The muscles in her throat twisted and writhed as though there was something alive inside it, and she laughed and laughed and laughed.

Zara? Zara!

It was Albert. He crouched on the ground beside her head. She tried to sit up, but he held her down. Hello! You're back, he said. That's great. But I need you to lie there in the recovery position for a little while longer.

The recovery... what?

Zara tried to push herself up again, more forcefully this time. Other hands reached around from behind her to hold her firmly on the ground. The carpet scratched against her cheek.

It's OK, Zara. Everything is going to be alright. It was a woman's voice – clear and firm, personable. It sounded like someone from marketing.

Albert? Zara called. He had disappeared, but she could still hear his voice. He was talking on the phone. Albert!

It's all right, the other voice said again.

There was a hum of voices now. Zara could picture the scene: people congregating together on the stairs – an audience – watching, murmuring.

Is she all right? someone called out.

Oh yes, someone else called back. We're just waiting for the ambulance.

The ambulance? No no no no no no.

Zara didn't push back this time, she hit back – and the four people who had been holding her down onto the ground sprung back. The crowd on the stairs held their breath. Albert gaped at her; phone still pressed to his ear. Zara reached out in his direction, for the button to release the door, and he flinched.

I'm sorry, Zara said. I just wasn't feeling well.

She stepped outside, back into the rush of people, the Saturday crowds, life churning on. She made her way home in a daze. She bought two bottles of water and a bottle of fizzy orange from the M&S in the station – in case it was sugar she needed. On the Tube, she ate her leftover Twix. Physically, she felt OK, but she was mentally frazzled. She was jumpy, her heart clenching whenever someone new stepped onto the train carriage. What would happen next? It felt like anything could happen, anything at all – a thought that was at once exhilarating and terrifying – as though she was powerless, standing by and watching the events of her life unfold. She watched the stations whizz past.

On the walk back to her flat, she typed the word INTIMACY PLAY into the search engine and placed an order for the script. She wouldn't get the part – that was for sure – but still, she wanted to read it. James's words rang in her head: *it's not over until it starts, and we've got a lot of beginning to do*. What did it mean? The sentence was odd – it didn't make sense – but it felt familiar. Was it from a play? She thought she had heard it somewhere before.

Zara didn't go back to the theatre for a few days – not because she was avoiding it but because she wasn't rota'd onto any shifts. She lay on the sofa and watched the first eight series of *Emily in Paris* back-to-back. Part of her wondered if she might receive an email from HR or Operations or some administrator, checking up on her or perhaps disciplining her for the situation on Saturday – she had hit people, after all; maybe someone had made a complaint – but her inbox remained resolutely empty. Not even Candice sent a follow-up email to ask how the audition went. Zara wondered if the casting director had been in touch, to express his disappointment. Twice she had logged out of her emails and then back in, to check that it was sending and receiving properly. She emailed herself and it arrived instantly, a gleaming, defiant text.

On Wednesday, back at work, her bar shift was fine, uneventful. No one made any comments about her audition or the subsequent collapse. She felt strangely deflated, as though she had, in some perverse way, been hoping for the news to make its way out among the front-of-house staff. Perhaps she'd been hoping for the attention. A group of them stayed for drinks. Danny was working a late shift on the bar with Curtis. There was a new cocktail menu, so Curtis showed Danny

how to make each new cocktail, and Danny passed the spares across the bar. It was quiet, a typical weekday evening. Other than the front-of-house staff, there were only a handful of customers. Some who had been to see the show that evening, but most were regulars – those who lived nearby, or perhaps those who had nowhere else to go. They were all at least three drinks down when Casey Day walked in.

Oh look, said Bembe, giving Zara a nudge. It's your bestie.

Shut up.

What? Annie asked, aghast. You don't like her?

No! I mean, yes. I do like her. Of course I do.

She's so lovely!

Yes, she is.

Alessandra caught Zara's eye and smirked.

What? Annie said again. I feel like you're all keeping something from me.

What is it?

Don't be silly, Annie.

Zara turned in her chair to look at Casey. She waved and pulled a face. She was surrounded by a gaggle of adoring fans, all of whom wanted a selfie and an autograph.

Don't be so paranoid, babe, Bembe said, patting Annie on the arm.

Danny pushed a Blue Lagoon across the bar and Zara snatched it up.

Hey, it was definitely my turn, said Bembe. You just had one of those.

Oh... Did I? Whoops. Zara gave him a sarcastic smile.

Touché.

Casey finally made her way over. She clutched a bottle of Evian in her hand. Her face was shiny – but not with sweat, with some sort of cream. Probably an expensive one, Zara thought. She looked healthy and young. Not youthful – young, like a child before puberty hits. Casey had big news.

I've been cast in a Hollywood movie!

Well done, Bembe said.

Amazing! said Alessandra.

Eeeeeee! I knew you'd get it, crowed Annie.

Zara nodded and murmured and hoped that the ambiguous sound would convey the false enthusiasm that she couldn't bring herself to put into words.

Well, don't get too excited... It isn't a lead role, Casey said, glowing. But... what am I saying? I can't help myself! I am so excited! This is my dream! So tonight, drinks are on me.

Everyone cheered.

Curtis crossed the room to give Casey a congratulatory hug; Danny leaned over the bar for a high five. Annie looked like she was about to burst her tears or wet herself.

I'm just so proud of you, she said, more than once, to Casey's turned back.

Casey told them all about the director, the schedule, her famous co-stars – and her face blushed with joy so often that Zara wondered if she was going blue elsewhere with all that blood rushing to her cheeks. Zara went outside to vape. The sky was thick with smog. She was considering sneaking off home without saying goodbye when Casey came outside.

Oh, hey Zara, she said. I didn't realise you were out here.

Hey.

How are you? Had any good auditions lately?

Well, no. Nothing as good as yours, anyway.

Casey beamed. I mean, no one could have predicted this. It really is a once in a lifetime opportunity. I still can't believe it's real! Even when my agent phoned me about the audition, even then I was like, can this be my life? They want to see me, of all people, in that audition room, with that director? The whole thing has been a dream, start to finish, honestly –

Actually, Zara said. I did have an audition. Now that I think about it. This weekend just gone.

Oh?

Yeah. Here, actually. For 'Intimacy'.

Really.

Yep.

Something was shifting in Casey's facial expression, a shadow moving across it. She looked as though she was about to say something, but then she turned abruptly. She looked out at the park opposite the theatre. There were no lights on, and everything was dark. A peal of laughter came from that direction, followed by a sound like smashing glass.

I thought they cast that a few months ago.

I guess not, Zara said. Or maybe somebody dropped out. I don't know.

So, you know James?

The actor? Yeah, we met briefly. He wasn't at my audition though. We just met in the bar the other night.

Casey moved towards Zara. She was searching her face for something – something she didn't seem to find. Yeah, he's great. Isn't he?

Oh yes. Great guy.

The eye contact was suddenly unbearable. Zara broke away, feeling like she had been burned.

Just remember – a woman is not a piece of fruit.

What?

From the play. You know, 'Death of a Saleswoman'? You have seen it, right?

Of course. Like, fifty times.

Well, don't be a saleswoman.

What are you talking about?

Casey laughed. It gets exhausting, always selling something.

You're not selling anything. Well... I mean, maybe you help to sell the theatre tickets... But it's not really your job to get audiences in –

I'm always selling something.

Casey turned to go back into the bar. With her hand on the door, she paused. Good luck, Tina.

Tina? I'm Zara?

But Casey had already disappeared through the door; it made a gentle shushing sound as it swung shut behind her. Why did Casey call her Tina? It made her feel as though she was dissolving. Zara grabbed on to her arms. She was here, in the flesh. Was Casey trying to shake her? To make her feel insignificant and unmemorable? Yes, that was it. How awful, to have so much, and to begrudge someone else so little! Zara had a single audition. Casey had a dreamlike career just

there, in front of her, waiting for her to snatch it. Casey would get everything she wanted. That was inevitable now. After this movie, there would be others. There would be award nominations and couture gowns, maybe even a *Vogue* cover. Their futures felt tied together, as though the more Casey had, the less Zara would have. Or what she had would feel less, and maybe that was the same thing. But then, was it possible that Casey had actually said, *take care*? Good luck, take care? That would make sense. Good luck, take care. Zara checked the time on her phone. It was half twelve. There was a bus in sixteen minutes. She had left her jacket inside, but someone would put it in the cloakroom or the changing room for her – she couldn't go back inside now. She would buy another jacket if she had to.

Zara!

Someone was calling her name. Zara didn't turn around. It might be Casey. Or perhaps it was just her imagination, and no one was calling after her at all.

Zara, wait!

She quickened her pace. The bus stop wasn't far now, just a few more metres.

Zara! Alessandra grabbed hold of her arm. Where are you going?

Zara started to say that she wasn't feeling very well, but Alessandra grabbed her face and started to kiss her. Zara could see the glittery eyeliner on Alessandra's eyelids, the sprinkling of blackheads on her forehead. The kiss was so forceful and unexpected – yet somehow also incredibly soft and gentle – that Zara froze, unable to fully comprehend what was happening. It was a moment before she reacted.

What are you doing?

Alessandra shrugged. Her long red hair blustered about her shoulders; her face shone in the glow of the streetlights. Zara waited – for Alessandra to explain

herself or apologise or say anything at all – but she didn't speak. She simply smiled, long and hard, an unsettling rictus.

I... I've got to go, Zara said. I need to catch my bus.

She turned and fled across the road. When she turned back towards the theatre, Alessandra had gone. But where? She must have run somewhere. Zara was so distracted that she didn't notice her bus approaching. She reached out her arm but there was no use – it whizzed by. On its side, an advert for 'Death of a Saleswoman' – Casey Day beaming in a pristine, bubble-gum pink suit, a glass of champagne held aloft. The bus began to slow as it reached the junction and Zara noticed something at the back of the bus on the top deck. A shape – a person – looking right at Zara and waving. Inside the bus was too bright; the face was all in shadow, pressed up against the glass. Zara stared as the bus turned a corner. Light passed across the face – a brief flash of recognition – but then it was gone.

When Zara was finally on the bus home, Amara called.

We should meet up soon, Amara said. For lunch, a drink, whatever.

Zara agreed. It's been so long since we saw each other face-to-face.

I'm starting to wonder if you are a figment of my imagination, Amara said.

No, I am real, Zara said. I'm free any time. Just say when.

So... How did that audition go?

Yeah, it was fine.

Zara leant her head against the window and watched the streetlights whoosh past.

They'll call you any day now.

Here's hoping.

Zara was almost home. She pressed the stop button. She should hang up the call, but she didn't want to. There was something reassuring about Amara's presence on the other end of the phone. It made her feel more real, having someone to talk to. Amara was talking, saying something about a dog, her friend's dog, it was so cute, she said, she really wanted one of her own. Zara could hear the murmur of voices in the background – Amara's boyfriend, probably, and maybe some of their friends.

Listen, Z. I've got to go, but send me a message, yeah? Let me know when you're free. We need to catch up.

I'm free any time, Zara said. Just tell me when.

Just put it in the message, OK? We'll align our diaries. We should be able to find a time. Speak soon. Love you!

The call disconnected.

When Zara unlocked her front door, she saw something waiting for her on the mat. Unmarked, brown packaging, slight and discreet. There it was. The script. She tore open the parcel. The cover was the same as the poster at the theatre: the word 'INTIMACY' in those thick, teal letters, that yellow and plum background. It looked as though a child had made it on the computer. She discarded the packaging and her bag in the hallway and took the slim volume upstairs. She lit every candle she owned – about eight of them, all different scents – and placed them around her bedroom. Then she turned off the electric lights, as though she was holding a séance. She took a deep breath and opened the book.

**CHARACTERS:**

1

2

**SCENE ONE**

*A blank stage. Other actors are present on stage, chatting and laughing. They do not notice 1 and 2.*

Come on, come for a drink.

I don't know if I /

You'll / break my heart if you say no.

I don't know. I should probably go home.

Who's waiting for you there?

*Beat.*

My housemates.

Yeah, but I didn't ask who's at home. I said who's *waiting* for you. They'll be all right without you, won't they? You

could just send them a text. Let them know you'll be back late tonight.

*2 looks at the other actors on stage. They do not notice.*

OK, OK. I get it. You don't want to. But don't forget, you only live once, and you've got to live life before you die. There's a whole world out there, and you're young now, but well... That doesn't last forever.

*Beat.*

I can tell you've got dreams. I've got dreams too. Dreams are what give our lives meaning. We've got to hold onto that hope, that belief, that we might be the next big thing. We've got to hope, haven't we? Without hope, we've got nothing left.

*Beat.*

But the truth is, I'm a dime a dozen. And so are you.

*Beat.*

I don't mean any disrespect by that. Quite the opposite. What I mean is, there's a lot of life that happens outside of dreaming. And we've got to grab that with both hands.

*Beat.*

You're not just a pretty face. I can tell you're smart. You've got brains in there, haven't you? You're the real deal, the whole package. You deserve it all.

*Beat.*

Aw. Don't be scared. Life is short but life is long. What I mean is, why does everybody have to conquer the world? Why does everything have to be a fight? Let's just rest up, let's just be together. You and me. Tonight. You know it makes sense.

*Beat.*

It's not over until it starts, and you and me, we've got a lot of beginning to do. Come on – life is an apple. Let's take a bite.

*Blackout.*

## **SCENE TWO**

*A single spot of light on a dark stage. 2 enters and addresses the audience.*

Hi. Is there... Is there something in particular you'd like me to read?

*A single, soft drumbeat sounds.*

But there isn't any music.

*Beat. The drumbeat is slightly louder.*

OK. No, no. Of course not.

*Beat. Louder still.*

Here? Now?

*Beat. The drumbeat is very loud now and keeps going continuously, over 2 trying to speak, picking up pace until —*

Granola. And an apple. And a... Just a water, I think. No, it was. It really was. Granola, apple and water. That's what I had. I did! I promise! That's the truth, the honest truth. Why won't you believe me? Why won't anyone believe me? Why is no one listening?

*Screaming. Blackout.*

### **SCENE THREE**

*The stage is set exactly as it was in SCENE ONE, as blank as possible. The other actors in the background are chatting and laughing. 1 and 2 are onstage. Tears are running down 2's face. 2 stares out into the audience. 1 is unaware of the audience.*

*It's all right. You trust me, don't you?*

*1 is moving 2's limbs into position. Left arm out.*

*You're beautiful.*

*Right arm out.*

*You're special.*

*Left leg.*

*You can do anything, anything you put your mind to. Just stay here another minute with me.*

*Right leg. 1 is now stood in a star shape. 2 crawls between 1's legs and huddles up in there, as though sheltering from a storm.*

*Blackout.*

Zara put the script face down on her bed. She felt nauseous – not just a little seasick, but like she was about to vomit up each of her internal organs in turn, torn from the fabric of her body. She had only read a few pages, but she knew already that this was not the script that had been performed in Germany and transferred to New York. This was something different – a cruel trick. Who sent this to her? It couldn't be James – no. This was beyond him. It was someone else, someone shadowy and mysterious, someone who watched her at close-range and at a distance. Someone who knew her address, where she worked. Someone who knew about the movements of her mind, the things she did not tell anyone. Zara's vision began to crackle again and this time, she knew she was about to black out. She tried to hold on to reality. There was the bed. The flicker of the candles. The basket of laundry that she had taken out of the dryer that morning. Her playscripts, stacked neatly on her desk. She tried to hold on to consciousness, but there was nothing she could do.

\*

The next day. Tina was late. She rushed into the building and changed into her usher uniform in a toilet cubicle. Outside the closed door she could hear chatter,

easy laughter, teasing. She checked the time on her phone to see how long she had before the shift started. Out of habit, she checked her emails too. She had sent a bunch of emails to agents, but no one had replied. Someone would, one day, she just had to stay positive and keep the faith. Casey was no better at acting than she was – not even Zara Bright, not really. It was all down to luck and self-belief, and Tina would stick with it until it happened for her too, no matter how long it took. She put her phone in her pocket and left the cubicle. It was James's shift tonight. He would be there, waiting for them all to arrive for the briefing on the Dress Circle bar.

Any time today, Tina, he would say. Come on. She imagined him in his suit, clipboard clutched to his chest. He would smirk at another of the ushers. The new one with the blonde hair. She would blush in response, unsure of how to react. James was her boss, after all, and she didn't know Tina at all.

Tina didn't blame any of them for not looking, not noticing. If she had been a different sort of person – the person she would one day be – then it wouldn't have happened this way. She would have been more noticeable from the outset. She thought of Zara Bright on the posters out front. There was something about her – a vibe, an energy – that you couldn't take your eyes off. She was the leading lady of the play; she was the leading lady of her own life, of any scene she found herself in.

Tina's insides clenched as she walked up the stairs. She felt like everyone was looking at her. Did they know? Had James said something? James didn't acknowledge her presence at all; she might as well have not been there. It was better that way, to be forgotten, to fade into the background of James's mind. She was down to check tickets. She took her place on the main staircase, opposite

Bembe. He wouldn't meet her eyes.

Welcome to the Baylis Theatre, sir. Please may I check your ticket? Good evening, madam. How lovely to see you! Do you have your ticket there?

Bembe knew. If he knew, that meant they all knew. What had James told them? Were they angry with her, or did they just pity her? Was it so predictable? Was it something he always did?

Before long, the stairs were clear. The show was about to start.

Are you ready? Bembe said, looking directly at Tina.

She was taken aback. Ready for what?

Trust me. I'm going to take you where you need to go.

Did she trust him? She didn't, not really. But it was reassuring to let someone else take responsibility for what happened next. They moved through the theatre, from front of house to the narrow corridors backstage. There was no one to be seen – no stage crew, no ushers, nothing.

What's going on?

They reached the door that led to the stage. A sign above their heads read: PERFORMANCE IN PROGRESS. Bembe opened the door and pushed Tina into the wings. She looked across the blank, brightly lit space of the stage. James was lurking in the wings opposite, doing up the buttons on his shirt. He winked at her. She turned to leave but Bembe was blocking the door.

It's all right, Tina. Trust me. It's you they're waiting for.

Please, I don't want to.

This will all make sense soon.

What do you mean?

Don't overthink it. Just go.

James stepped out into the lights. Life is an apple, he said to the audience.  
Life is just an apple...

Tina wanted to leave. She wanted to run as fast and as far as she could – but she knew she should stay. This was her moment, her time to shine. She had to give it her best shot. She took a deep breath. The audience was waiting.

You got this, Bembe said with a smile.

She looked him right in the eye,

and then she stepped out

into

the

bright

lights.

## I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY

Ana's phone started to go crazy on the drive home from the hospital. It was on silent mode, but the notifications kept interrupting the navigation. She knew the route well, but she liked being able to see it mapped out in front of her; she liked the soothing voice reminding her what to do. The messages were all from Chloe. Ana would know that they were from Chloe even if her name, followed by several heart emojis, didn't keep popping up on her screen. That morning, before she went in, Ana had messaged Chloe and said that she was crying. They didn't do that very often anymore – speak about their emotions in a sincere way. Instead, everything was refracted through their history, the events they'd experienced together and separately, side by side. Ana knew Chloe would be concerned – maybe that was why she said it – but she should have known how quickly Chloe's concern would sour. Ana's cheeks were dry now, her head thumping, eyes burning. She was consumed by a dull, persistent pain, and wondered if that was what Purgatory felt like. Or would feel like, if it was real.

A skinny fox watched her park the car. A witness. She turned off the engine and considered switching off her phone too, letting the messages pile up. After all, they would still be there in the morning. She knew it was sensible to leave it; she should wait to respond. She told herself that's what she would do, but then something overwhelmed her, like a terrible wave. Doing nothing – or even slowing down for a moment – no longer seemed to be an option. Ana opened the messages

and started reading. Her heart rattled around in her chest like a pinball. She typed furiously and pressed send, without pausing to read her message back.

It was late. A group of drunk girls screamed with laughter somewhere further down the road. Ana got out of the car quickly to avoid them and let herself into their building. She felt exhausted and nauseous and relieved, like a shard of glass had been removed from her body. The flat was dark – Callum must be asleep – but the curtains were open, the living room carpet striped by light from the streetlamps outside. Ana checked her messages. Three dots appeared inside a speech bubble. They rippled and flickered, over and over, trippy traffic lights in greyscale. What would Chloe say next? There was something strangely thrilling about it: waiting to see how Chloe would twist the knife this time, wondering how much it would hurt, whether they could recover.

The first time, it came as a shock to realise that Chloe could so easily withdraw contact. Ana couldn't eat. It was the most acute grief she had ever felt. When they eventually made up, Callum commented on the lift in her mood, the way she lit up whenever Chloe messaged. But what had it cost? With a spike of shame, Ana remembered the cookie she sent – the word 'SORRY' piped in blue icing. She thought about the person who received the order and had to make that cookie, her pitiful apology squeezed out of their icing pen. She couldn't do that again – she wouldn't.

Without warning, the dots disappeared. They didn't slow down or fade out. They left no mark. They simply vanished. Ana stared at her phone, her own message a tsunami of blue, dominating the screen. She started to type something else, but the little blue arrow beside her message turned green, which meant that

Chloe's phone had been compromised – switched off, run out of battery or lost signal – or, more likely, Ana had been blocked again. She threw her phone across the room. It landed on the carpet with a soft thud. There was more she needed to say, stuck deep inside her. She needed Chloe to respond in order to dislodge it. Ana grabbed a cushion from the sofa and considered screaming into it, but she didn't. The gesture felt too dramatic. She thought about writing Chloe an email – she couldn't be blocked on email yet, surely? – but that felt over-the-top too, unnecessary. It would make her seem deranged – and in fact, on reflection, Ana began to feel that perhaps she had been too impulsive, too cruel, her vision blurred by the velocity of her fury. Ana scrolled up to read the message back. *Fuck you, Chloe...* it began. She stopped reading and locked her phone. The photo of her and Callum smiling on holiday in Majorca appeared briefly, and then the screen turned black.

Ana sat in the bath and cried. The rush of water from the taps. The lavender and jasmine scented bath salts. Her own self-pity thickening around her. She could sense it rising up like tar, slowing things down. She kept checking her phone. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Green: the colour of life, leaves, green for connection, green for go, green for yes, good, correct – now transformed into green for no. Green for shut out. Blocked. Green for fuck you, too.

\*

The next evening, Ana went out for dinner with a friend from school. Moments after they sat down, Emily announced that she was pregnant.

Oh, wow.

It was just the two of them; there was nowhere to hide. Ana was surprised, but she didn't have any reason to be. Emily and her husband had just bought a place – a little maisonette out towards Twickenham, with a patch of patio and dirt that Emily (lovingly, gushingly) called their garden. This was the next logical step. Ana tried to muster up more happiness. Emily was overjoyed, and Ana wanted to be happy for her, but she couldn't. There was an absence where happiness should have been. Ana tried again.

That's so great.

Her voice came out robotic, empty. She looked up, ready to apologise – *I don't know what's wrong with my voice* – and maybe blame it on the thing with Chloe, her mum, problems at work, or make up something different altogether, but Emily hadn't even noticed. She was too busy scouring the menu for something that didn't contain any alcohol, caffeine, cured meats, soft cheese or refined sugar. Ana placed the closed menu on the table in front of her. She would order the steak. Medium-rare, peppercorn sauce. She picked up her phone and swiped through the apps on a loop – news, people's faces, people saying things, things to buy – until Chloe appeared. All the blood in Ana's body rushed in the wrong direction, like a sand timer turned on its head. Chloe was smiling, relaxed, like she didn't have a care in the world. The photo had been shared by one of Chloe's friends from work. They were out for dinner too. There was more than one photo. Ana swiped through them: Chloe laughing, Chloe eating, Chloe raising a glass of wine, a selfie of Chloe and the other friend in some kind of auditorium – maybe at a cinema or a theatre, it was hard to tell.

Are you ready to order?

Ana looked up. Emily was smiling at her. The waiter was waiting. A bright pink cocktail had appeared in front of her. It had a blue umbrella stuck in the top. Ana ordered the steak and took a sip of her cocktail. It tasted like jellybeans.

On the way home, Ana popped into Boots at the train station. She picked up a new skincare product and she thought about calling Chloe. She heard a song on the radio by an artist they liked, and she thought about texting Chloe. She opened her book, and the main character was Chloe. She watched a television show about women living together in a city, and there she was. Chloe. Dancing around in her underwear to songs by Busted and Destiny's Child, letting Ana sleep in her bed whenever they were sad, because they were always sad together, never alone. Chloe wrote little post-it notes and stuck them to the fridge before job interviews, or when Ana had to visit her mother: you got this, you are the best, I love you. 4eva.

\*

Soon, it was Ana's birthday. Callum wanted her to go out and have some fun, but she refused. She stayed sprawled on the sofa, drinking homemade margaritas, and scrolling through Chloe's social media profiles. Had she really been expecting a gesture of reconciliation today, just because it was her birthday? Perhaps – but it wasn't just Chloe. Emily messaged – but only to see if Ana could go shopping with her on the weekend for baby things, so clearly, she had forgotten. Ana's mother sent a message at around midday: *did my card arrive???* Which meant that she, too, had forgotten but wasn't going to admit it and would instead blame the

incompetence of the postal service. Ana didn't respond. She received a card from her sister, which simply said: *Dear Ana, Happy Birthday – have a great day! Love Lina and Josh.* It was such a generic, impersonal message that Ana wished they hadn't bothered sending anything at all. Was she really the kind of person who didn't get one single meaningful card on her birthday? Was that who she had become? There was Callum, of course. Callum had written her a sweet card and made her favourite dinner. Ana knew she should be grateful, but it was too much to expect one person to be everything. The thought made her feel suffocated – though she knew it was *she* who was being suffocating – and she spent long stretches of time thinking about breaking up with him, so he could be free of the burden of whatever it was about her that everyone else hated so much.

Ana's thumb hovered over Chloe's face-in-miniature at the top of her feed, wrapped in the cheerful pink-and-yellow circle that meant she had something to show off about. There was a full post on her timeline at least once a week these days – often more – even though she had once said that it was narcissistic to post that often. At first, Ana thought the incessant attention-seeking showed that Chloe wasn't happy – that she was trying to make herself feel better with the validation of likes, but now she didn't know. She'd thumbed through the grid a hundred times: Chloe in a brightly coloured jumpsuit and dark sunglasses by the river, holding two Aperol spritzes; photos Chloe had taken of a 'breath-taking' immersive exhibition at an art gallery off the Strand; Chloe's feet in sparkling sand, her toenails perfectly pink, clear seawater rushing over them again and again and again on an infinite loop. Chloe's life captured in neat, beautiful squares. When she saw Chloe's face now, Ana no longer felt like she had been thumped in the stomach.

There was still a shard of something – hot scratch of jealousy or shame – but the overarching feeling was one of sombre acceptance. Ana paused; her thumb still poised above Chloe’s face. She wanted to see what Chloe was up to, but it was impossible. She couldn’t bear the thought of Chloe knowing – seeing – that she had watched the story. She would know it was Ana’s birthday. Chloe would not have forgotten.

She’s just trying to make you jealous, Callum said.

Ana looked up, momentarily disoriented. Oh.

You know that’s why she’s posting so much, right? That’s why she hasn’t blocked you on any of her social media profiles. She wants you to know how much fun she’s having. Try not to let it get to you.

I’m not. It’s fine.

But every time she opened the apps, Chloe was there. Her face, her life – all of it there, staring back at her. But – of course it was. Ana was feeding the algorithm, wasn’t she? She offered it the hours she spent looking at Chloe’s face, trying to read her posture and the lines around her eyes; the humiliation she felt every time she typed Chloe’s username into the search bar. Not using the apps wasn’t really an option. What else would she do with all the time she had now? Bags and bags of it, her days sagging and empty where she used to be in contact with Chloe. She missed all that now, the constant communication, even though at times she thought it was a bit much – annoying, even. She complained to Callum. *Why won’t she leave me alone for five minutes?* But now, well. Things had changed.

I wish there was something I could do, Callum said.

Ana looked into his face: his forehead lined, eyes glimmering with anguish.

He was trying to be kind, trying to help. He wanted to understand.

It's OK. Let's just not...

Callum shrugged. Ana closed her eyes. Her head throbbed. Just then, her phone began vibrating on the coffee table, the glass screen lit up with an incoming call from her mother. Ana and Callum both watched the screen flashing until the call rang out and the screen went dark again.

Ana thought about reaching out, of course. Even started to type messages sometimes, before remembering that the words would be eaten by the network.

*So, I guess you're not ready to talk yet...*

*So, I guess we should talk...*

*I'd really like to talk...*

*Can we talk?*

*This is so stupid. You are such a bad friend. Would you just think of someone else, other than yourself, for once in your stupid fucking life?*

\*

Ana met up with Emily outside a huge shopping mall in West London. She got the Tube and Emily drove her new SUV which she and her husband had selected after taking into consideration the car's environmental credentials, safety rating and boot space. They had been to test drive a few and then they'd put together a spreadsheet to compare them all. Ana listened while they stood on the escalator and thought about how much easier it was to order things online. She hated the

luminous, clinical feel of the mall – all those white floors and shiny escalators whirring past each other. It felt like being inside a state-of-the-art machine. She didn't like the aimless walking. She didn't like the endless searching for something unspecific – something she wouldn't know she wanted until she saw it – when it was so much easier to simply wait at home for the desire to arise and then order the item instantly from her phone.

We've bought the car seat already, Emily said. And the isofix base. You have to buy those things new.

Ana nodded. The sun was dazzling through the glass ceiling. It was warm outside, but inside was so well air-conditioned that the hairs on her arms were standing on end. She gripped the handrail while Emily continued speaking.

I mostly want to pick up some little bits today. You know, muslins, blankets. Maybe some little outfits... The cute things.

Ana nodded again. She rubbed her eye. It stung. She must have got moisturiser in it somehow; she must have been sloppy this morning. She blinked several times, then she turned to Emily and smiled. They spent hours pondering tiny outfits. Rows of dungarees and tiny frilled jackets. Vests emblazoned with words like, *daddy's little darling*, *future CEO* and *forever happy*. Stacks of perfectly pressed suits for sleeping. Blankets rolled up like sushi and tied with a bow. Ana went through the motions, nodding and cooing and clapping when required, but inside her, nothing was happening. When Emily disappeared inside a changing room or a toilet cubicle, she marvelled at the ridiculousness of it all. How had she ended up here? Had she, at some point, mistakenly given the impression that this was something she was interested in – babies and their accoutrements? Was it her

duty, as a friend, to pretend to be interested? Was everyone doing this, every day, pretending to be interested in things that did not interest them for the sake of their relationships? It was possible that she was the only one that objected to this, and the thought made her feel petulant and burdensome.

In the café afterwards, over strawberry milkshakes, Emily showed Ana a photo from her most recent scan. Ana took the phone from Emily's hand and zoomed in on the baby's head, a staticky cloud of white. There was a new person growing inside her friend – a fully-formed person, with a brain and a heart, fleshing out inside her friend's body as they sat there, sucking synthetic ice cream through a straw. It was miraculous. It was magic. So why didn't she feel anything?

Ana was invited to marvel at the new car and be driven home, but she declined. She lived on the other side of town and besides, Emily needed to get home and rest. Emily insisted that she was fine and that she'd like to, but Ana insisted back and eventually she won. On the tube, she put her headphones on and looked at all the grime-stained seats, the floor streaked with mud and crumbs, a nest of hair and fluff. Opposite, a couple sat on the faded seats, their baby in a pram beside them. Ana couldn't see the baby, but she could hear it grunting and she could see little white-clad feet kicking up into the air. The parents weren't paying attention. They were looking at something on one of their phones. They were laughing. The man, who had a soft, bespectacled face and a wave of greying hair, squeezed the woman's thigh and dropped a kiss on top of her head. The woman was blonde-ish, the darker roots of her hair spreading down past her ears, so grown out that it almost looked like the position of the dye was intentional – just a bad balayage – but the sharp delineation of colour gave it away. They looked tired but

content, the fine lines on their faces picked out by the fluorescent overhead lighting. But – the baby. The grunts turned into cries and Ana turned her headphones up. She looked the other way as the couple shared a kiss. The tube carriage rattled and shrieked. The baby was wailing now, and she wasn't the only passenger who had noticed. Other people were looking around now, wondering – but not asking – if anyone was going to pick up the baby. Eventually the woman scowled and rattled the pram's handle.

Shush, she said. Go to sleep now.

The baby's cries became more mournful – warbling – its little voice shuddering and shaking. Ana gripped the rail in front of her and turned her music off and then back on again, louder this time. She couldn't bear to listen, but at the same time it felt awful – wrong – to ignore the baby. But what could she do? It wasn't a crime to let your baby cry, was it? Lots of people let their babies cry, and they were all fine. Well, most of them, anyway. Ana thought about what it would be like to be so small and helpless and on a Tube carriage like this – the strange sounds, the strange smells, not knowing where your familiar humans had gone, feeling so small and so alone. She tried to stop, to think about something else, anything else. Beaches. Sunshine. Christmas. She imagined herself snapping, losing control and screaming across the carriage: *Just pick up your fucking baby.* Her breath caught in her chest. It felt like the walls of the tube carriage were folding in on her. She closed her eyes. Suddenly, the train clattered into a station and the doors whooshed open. The couple stood up and Ana watched as the man took hold of the pram's handle and manoeuvred it off the through the sliding doors and onto the platform without once looking down at the baby. Its cries were quieter now –

whimpers, lost to the roar of station sounds. People getting on, people getting off, someone asking for some change so they could get a room at a hostel tonight, someone else asking urgently *does this train go to Edgware? Well, does it?*

\*

Ana learned of her own pregnancy slowly. She thought it would come to her in a flash of realisation, the way it did in movies. She thought it would be obvious from her dry heaving over the toilet first thing in the morning or falling asleep in the middle of the day. Instead, it was a slow, creeping process, like waiting for an answer to emerge from the purple liquid of a Magic 8 ball – an answer like *better not tell you now*, or *signs point to yes*. One day, on the way to work, she went to a Sainsbury's Local and looked at the pregnancy tests on the shelves. The branded tests that had started to pop up on her social media – ClearBlue, First Response – packed in alongside the supermarket own brand tests, all waiting in their neat, vaguely medical packaging, waiting with their answers. She left without buying one, telling herself that her period would arrive later that day, or the next. It didn't.

She thought about telling Callum. But she knew she wouldn't be able to answer his questions. He would ask her, why not go for it? What was wrong with them, now, their life? Hadn't she always said she was open to it – wanted it, even – one day? Why not now? And anyway, what else was she going to do? It wasn't like she loved her job, sitting on reception all day, booking out meeting rooms and ordering catering for client lunches. It wasn't like she had a career to think about. And she could take maternity leave. Think of all that time off! Perhaps they could

move out of London, like they'd always talked about, to somewhere with more space. Get a dog, maybe. He would run with it. He would take it out of her hands. He would insist that this was for the best; that this would make them happy.

Ana wasn't bloated, her breasts didn't ache. She woke up feeling like she had a mild hangover most days – but that might have been due to the fact that she was still drinking most evenings. Why should she stop? It was frustrating to have to take time to sort out something that wasn't impacting her day-to-day life much at all, but of course she knew that it wouldn't be long until it did. Ana thought of those images of pregnancy tissue, soft clouds in Petri dishes. She knew it wasn't a big deal. It was her body, her right. A right she was grateful to have. She thought of all the pro-choice protesters with their placards raised high. She read the information on the NHS website: *You may want to speak to your partner, friends or family, but you do not have to. They do not have a say in your decision.* It was validating, in a way.

On the day of the abortion, Ana rode the bus to the clinic. She stared out of the window at the dull November day, everything washed in grey. She passed hundreds of people. All of them seemed to be slightly damp. When she got off the bus, she felt shaky, which was probably travel sickness – buses always made her feel like that. The last time she had been to an abortion clinic she was seventeen. They were there for Chloe's abortion. Ana usually thought of this incident as an example of what a great friend she was. She booked the appointment for Chloe, took her to the clinic and waited with a can of Coke and a pack of maxi-pads. But now, entering a similar but different clinic, she remembered different details. The waiting room, with its pale, cornflower blue walls and scratchy grey carpet; the way

she sat with her arms folded, stony-faced. Chloe wouldn't tell Ana who had got her pregnant, and Ana was cross: she felt it was her right to know. Maybe she could have been a more supportive friend, but at the same time, she was only seventeen. She was still a child. They both were – but now they were in touching distance of thirty, and where was Chloe? Even if Ana had wanted her here, Chloe could never have known. She wasn't around to return the favour.

When she was called in for her scan, the nurse confirmed that Ana was about seven weeks pregnant. The room was bright and high-up, blinds open. The spindly fingers of leafless trees stretched into the vast white expanse of sky.

Would you like to see? The nurse asked her in a low, understanding voice.

Ana looked away and shook her head. She accepted a stack of blue towels to wipe the jelly off her stomach. The nurse handed her a file and told her to give it in at the reception desk. On the way down the corridor, Ana found herself walking off to the side, towards the toilets. She locked herself in the cubicle and opened the file. Inside, a small, glossy black and white image. She looked at it closely. There it was: the mysterious inner workings of her body. A cavernous black space and a tiny white blob in the middle. Ana thought of the image Emily had shown her over milkshakes. The blob that looked like a baby, a whole future contained within it. Almost the diametrical opposite of this blob. Ana slipped the image back in the file, left the cubicle and handed it in at the reception desk, just as she'd been told to.

\*

Suddenly, everyone was pregnant. At work, three people – two account managers and one senior client manager. The younger ones came into the office with their ‘Baby on Board’ badges and waited to be congratulated. The client manager had been pregnant for a while – apparently – but Ana had missed the announcement. She saw her in the glass lift opposite the reception desk, caressing the tight globe of her belly, straining out of her suit. Ana thought of the sea witch from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, the way she burst out of her human body, the clothes torn and shredded, when she transformed into a monster. Nicole, who worked alongside Ana on reception, was constantly monitoring the female members of the team, assessing their clothes, the shapes of their waists. Nicole knew all the gossip; she would be the first to know. Ana shifted in her maxi-pad, heard it crinkle and crease against her leggings.

The first few days, the blood was heavier than she’d ever known. She didn’t know how much was too much. She just had to wait and hope. Sometimes, she fished through the dark clots on her pad – some were solid, some jellylike, some burst into liquid when she poked them. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular, but she was intrigued by the mechanics of her body, all this *stuff* she’d created, without even knowing it, without even trying. When she was in the bath, it bloomed out of her, a rusty cloud in the water.

Emily texted a few times. Once she even called, which was unlike her. Ana didn’t respond. It seemed disingenuous somehow, to meet up and not talk about the abortion. But at the same time, she didn’t see how they could talk about it. They were each caught up in their incompatible experiences. There was a line drawn, and Ana didn’t know how to cross it. She imagined how it would go. Emily

would falter. She wouldn't be able to hide her disappointment or worse, her sorrow. She might even cry. No, it was better to leave her out of it. Ana decided to cut Chloe out too, for good – a choice Nicole enthusiastically supported. Ana blocked her across all methods of communication – WhatsApp, Instagram, iMessage, email – all of it. It wasn't that she thought Chloe would get in touch, after all this time had passed, but more that she wanted to impose a conclusion on their friendship, one that Chloe had kept from her. It felt good to wipe her out, like an annoying blot on a white jumper that finally washes clean.

Ana spent more of her evenings at home with Callum, watching Netflix and eating dinner on the sofa. On weekends, they cleaned their flat from top to bottom while they each listened to their separate podcasts. They talked about places they could go on holiday: things they might do, food they might try. They visited local markets to buy Christmas presents, or they went for long, chilly walks around the park and then to the pub for a roast dinner. At night, they sat in bed side-by-side, reading their books. Ana was relieved to learn that she could still have her secrets; that she could keep a small part back, just for herself.

\*

One night, Ana's phone rang. Lina's face flashed up on the screen, lighting the dark bedroom like a siren. Ana wasn't surprised. She knew what was coming; this was overdue. On the other end of the line, Lina's voice sounded broken, almost primal in her rage. She shouted that she couldn't take it any longer, that she was sick of taking up all the slack. She called Ana self-involved, a coward and a bitch, amongst

other things. These words must have hurt once, but Ana felt nothing now. They slid off her, as though she was watching a television show, or listening to some other sisters on the street, people she didn't know. Callum wanted to come with her – he said he'd drive – but Ana refused. She wasn't protecting her mother or sister from his judgement, but if there were less people involved, it was easier to take control. The narrative, the memories, herself – everything could be mastered.

Lina was on the walkway outside their mother's front door. She was pacing up and down and she was smoking, which didn't suit her. She looked like a little girl playing at being an adult. The lights were on, but there were no noises coming from inside the flat. Perhaps their mother was asleep. Motorbikes roared and spluttered in the distance. The light was cold and blue. Lina looked up. She was surprised. Perhaps she didn't believe Ana would come at all.

You did this, she said. I hope you're happy now.

Her voice was low and cutting. She threw her cigarette butt over the balcony edge. Ana watched as it fell down, down, down to the ground, like a fallen star, a tiny meteor.

Inside, the flat was a mess. Drawers had been upturned: ribbons, receipts, clothes, cutlery, food, all scattered across the floor. Their mother had been looking for something. Ana wondered whether she had hurtled around the room screaming or emptied the drawers methodically with a careful, trancelike precision. She was never sure which was worse. The shouting was most immediately distressing, but at least then her mother's pain was intelligible.

Lina shook out a bin bag and started to search through the jumble of things on the floor. She used her foot to push objects aside, looking for whatever was

broken and needed to be thrown away. After a while, she spoke.

I'm sorry, OK? I shouldn't have said all that stuff.

It's OK, Ana said. You don't need to be sorry. I'm sorry.

It's not your fault.

It's not your fault either.

Ana lifted a crumpled shirt from the sofa and folded it. The truth is that it was no one's fault. It was just one of those things, but that didn't make it hurt any less. For years, Ana had so much anger towards their mother, unable to fathom why she couldn't remember to take the medication. It all seemed so simple then, as though medication was an answer, a final fix for anything.

What caused it this time?

Oh, Lina looked up. Um, I think the water was off. A burst pipe on the main road.

Ana nodded. She could imagine how that would have gone down. Is it back on now?

Lina went over to the kitchen and ran the tap. Water spluttered out weakly. Kinda?

At least that's something.

Yeah. Look at this.

Lina held out a small object towards Ana. It was a fridge magnet. The three of them on a rollercoaster at Chessington World of Adventures. Ana must have been about thirteen – she was wearing her secondary school tie – and Lina was still in her primary school uniform: a purple jumper and a white polo shirt. Their mother's arms were in the air, an oversized grin plastered onto her face. The two

sisters were smiling politely, enjoying their truancy while they could.

Aw, Ana said. You were cute back then.

I'm still cute now.

Ana snorted. OK, sure.

Hey!

They looked at each other and then instinctively looked away.

So long ago now.

Yep. Time flies and all that.

It really does.

Their mother hadn't been well that day, but they didn't know it yet. Driving way too fast and singing along to the radio, her eyes wild. *I'm burning up, burning up for your love*. Ana couldn't listen to that song anymore, without remembering the giddy sense of possibility she felt when their mother announced that they were skipping school. That, and the end of the day, when she'd slapped Lina across the face for vomiting on herself, streaks of bright pink and blue from all the candyfloss and sweets. Ana thought about asking Lina if she remembered that bit too, but maybe she had forgotten. What a gift that would be. What would be the point in reminding her now?

Before long, the flat was tidy. Everything was back where it belonged, as though time had been wound back.

You should go home, Ana said.

No, it's OK, Lina said. You can go home. I'll stay.

But I've hardly done anything.

OK, so it'll be your turn next.

Seriously. You should sleep.

I just... I want to stay. I want to be here when she wakes up.

Ana looked at her sister, folded into herself on the sofa. Lina's eyes were raw but bright. She wasn't crying. She was looking closely at her phone screen and blinking hard, probably texting Josh. Ana wanted to say something – something reassuring or kind, something to make the situation better. But anything that could be said had been said many times before.

I'll come back first thing in the morning.

\*

When the baby was born, Emily invited Ana to visit. It had been almost four months since they last saw each other – a period of time that felt at once short and impossibly long. Long enough for a foetus to grow from the size of a grapefruit to the size of a new-born baby; for the baby's lungs to grow strong enough to breathe outside their mother's body. Long enough for Ana's mother to be back to her version of normal – for now at least. On the train journey, Ana turned her music up loud and stared out of the window at the sky, lit up with golden-blue winter sunshine. The face of a child – about two years old – appeared in the gap between the seats in front of her. The child stuck out her tongue and wiggled her head. Ana removed her headphones and stuck out her own tongue in response. The child giggled, and Ana felt as though she had been struck by sunlight. She thought about the cells that could have been her own child. There was a residual sadness there, a crack of pain – the pain that came with the end of anything. It was the same thing

she felt when she thought about Chloe these days: a feeling of longing but also a feeling of acceptance. There were so many things in a person's life that couldn't be changed, but there were also many things that could. It was a comforting thought – that her life was one of random chance and of her own construction. Soon, Ana would arrive at Emily's house, and she would hold the baby. The baby's eyes would be open, both wise and unseeing, her face full of possibility and a terrifying vulnerability that made Ana's tummy flip. Ana would be overwhelmed by both love and the certainty that she would never have children of her own. She couldn't. She wouldn't. But that was all right. Other things would come.

THE END

## Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004)
- *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)
- ‘Killing Joy: Feminism and the history of happiness’, *Signs*, 35. 3 (2010): pp. 571-594 <doi: 10.1086/648513>
- ‘Happy Objects’, *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth: pp. 29-51 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)
- ‘Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)’, *Scholar and Feminist Online* 8.3 (2010): <[http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed\\_01.htm](http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm)> [Accessed: 22 January 2023]
- ‘Affective Economies’, *Social Text*, 22.2 (2004): 117-139. <doi:10.1215/01642472-22-2\_79-117>
- Amoruso, Sophia, *#GIRLBOSS* (London: Penguin, 2014)
- Alcoff, Linda Martín, *Rape and Resistance* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018)
- Anderson, Ben, ‘Encountering Berlant part one: Concepts otherwise’, *The Geographical Journal* 189.1 (2023): pp. 117-142
- Angel, Katherine, *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell* (London: Penguin, 2014)
- *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London and New York: Verso, 2021)
- Appleton, Marni, “No Such Thing as Unending Sunshine: The Deflation of Postfeminism in Emma Cline’s “Los Angeles””, *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* (2023): <doi: 10.1080/14775700.2023.2169565>
- ‘Feeling Straight: Heterosexual fatigue in “Cat Person”’, *Alluvium* 9.6 (2021): <doi: 10.7766/alluvium.v9.6.04>
- Armfield, Julia, *Salt Slow* (London: Picador, 2019)
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, “‘Confidence You Can Carry!’: girls in crisis and the market for girls’ empowerment organizations”, *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 29.2 (2015): pp. 182-193
- *Empowered* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Postfeminism,

- popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21.1 (2020): pp. 3-24 <doi: 10.1177/1464700119842555>
- Baumgardner, Jennifer, *F'EM! Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011)
- BBC News, 'Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer', 12 January 2023 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-64125045>> [Accessed: 23 March 2023]
- Becker, Julia C, Lea Hartwich and S Alexander Haslam, 'Neoliberalism can reduce well-being by promoting a sense of social disconnection, competition, and loneliness', *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 60.3 (2021): 947-965 <doi:10.1111/bjso.12438>
- Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)
- 'Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin,' *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 28 (2015): pp. 191-213
- *The Female Complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2008)
- 'The Female Complaint,' *Social Text*, 19/20, Autumn (1988): pp. 237-259
- Bernstein, Robin, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011)
- Berryman, Rachel, and Misha Kavka, 'Crying on YouTube: Vlogs, self-exposure and the productivity of negative affect,' *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24.1 (2017): pp. 85-98 <doi: 10.1177/1354856517736981>
- Blatterer, Harry, 'The changing semantics of youth and adulthood,' *Cultural Sociology*, 4.1 (2010): pp. 63-79
- 'Generations, Modernity and the Problem of Contemporary Adulthood', *Contemporary Adulthood: Calendars, cartographies and constructions*, edited by Judith Burnett: pp. 10-23 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, edited by Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993)
- brown, adrienne maree, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019)
- Brown, Wendy, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015)
- Bryant, Miranda, 'Tales of the unexpected: the surprise boom in UK short stories,'

- Guardian*, 30 January 2022 <  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jan/30/tales-of-the-unexpected-the-surprise-boom-in-uk-short-stories>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]
- Burnett, Judith (editor), *Contemporary Adulthood: Calendars, cartographies and constructions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- Bushnell, Candace, *Sex and the City* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996)
- Butler, Jess, 'For white girls only?: Postfeminism and the politics of inclusion,' *Feminist Formations*, 25.1 (2013): pp. 35-58
- Caldwell, Lucy, *Multitudes* (London: Faber, 2016)
- Caliendo, Stephen M., and Charlton D. McIlwain (editors), *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020)
- Cavallo, Francesca and Elena Favilli, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 tales of extraordinary women* (California: Timbuktu Labs, 2016)
- Chamberlain, Prudence, *The Feminist Fourth Wave: Affective Temporality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)
- Chen, Chao-Ju, 'The Difference that Differences Make: Asian Feminism and the Politics of Difference,' *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 13.3 (2007): pp. 7-36
- Cheryan, Sapna, and Galen Bodenhausen, 'Model Minority', *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Stephen M. Caliendo and Charlton D. McIlwain: pp. 199-203 (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020)
- Clark, Timothy, 'Not Seeing the Short Story: A Blind Phenomenology of Reading', *Oxford Literary Review* 26 (2004): pp. 5-30
- Clein, Emmeline, 'The smartest women I know are all dissociating,' *BuzzFeed News*, 20 November 2019  
 <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmelineclein/dissociation-feminism-women-fleabag-twitter>> [Accessed: 14 December 2022]
- Cline, Emma, *Daddy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2020)
- Cochrane, Kira, *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism* (London: Guardian, 2013) [eBook]
- Davies, Lizzy, 'UK under international pressure over deletion of abortion

- commitments', *Guardian*, 22 July 2022  
 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/22/european-countries-pressurise-uk-over-removal-of-abortion-commitments-liz-truss>>  
 [Accessed: 12 March 2023]
- Davies, William, and Nicholas Gane, 'Post-Neoliberalism? An Introduction', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 38.6 (2021): pp. 3-21  
 <doi:1177/02632764211036722>
- Dawes, Simon, and Marc LeNormand (editors), *Neoliberalism in Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Foucault*, translated by Séan Hand (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988)
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by Dana Polan (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
- Dobson, Amy Shields, and Akane Kanai, 'From "Can-do" Girls to Insecure and Angry: Affective dissonances in young women's post-recessional media,' *Feminist Media Studies* 19.6 (2018): pp. 771-786
- Douglas, Susan, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010)
- Driscoll, Catherine, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)
- Dubrofsky, Rachel E., and Marina Levina, 'The Labor of Consent: Affect, Agency and Whiteness in the Age of #MeToo', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 37.5 (2020): pp. 409-423 <doi: 10.1080/15295036.2020.1805481>
- Edelstein, Sari, *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World* (New York and London: Granta, 2010)
- Ehrstein, Yvonne, Rosalind Gill and Jo Littler, 'The Affective Life of Neoliberalism: Constructing (Un)Reasonableness on Mumsnet', *Neoliberalism in Context*, edited by Simon Dawes and Marc LeNormand (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): pp. 195-213
- Emily in Paris*, created by Darren Star (Netflix, 2020-present)  
 <<https://www.netflix.com/watch/81289281?source=35>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]

- Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilya Blake and Thalia González, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, Center on Poverty and Inequality: Georgetown Law (2017), <<https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wpcontent/uploads/sites/14/2017/08/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>> [Accessed: 9 November 2022]
- Evans, Danielle, *The Office of Historical Corrections* (London: Picador, 2021)
- Faludi, Susan, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006)
- Febos, Melissa, *Girlhood* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2021)
- Ferguson, Michaele, 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 8.1 (2010): pp. 247-53 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698532>> [Accessed: 1 March 2023]
- Fielding, Helen, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996)
- Flattery, Nicole, *Show Them A Good Time* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019)
- Fleabag*, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (Two Brothers Pictures; BBC Three; Amazon Studios, 2016-2019) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p07onpjb/fleabag>> [Accessed: 20 November 2022]
- 'frangible, adj.' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online] <<https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/74200?redirectedFrom=frangible#eid>> [Accessed: 21 March 2023]
- Frostrup, Mariella, 'BBC Short Story Award: From New York to the Stars', *Guardian*, 21 September 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/21/mariella-frostrup-bbc-short-story-award>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]
- García-Favaro, Laura, and Rosalind Gill, "Emasculation nation has arrived": sexism rearticulated in online responses to Lose the Lads' Mags campaign', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16.3 (2016): pp. 379-397 <doi: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1105840>
- Genz, Stéphanie, 'Busting the "post"? Postfeminist genealogies in millennial culture', in *Post-Everything*, edited by Herman Paul and Adrian van Veldhuizen: pp. 195-214 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021)
- "I Have Work ... I Am Busy ... Trying to Become Who I Am": Neoliberal Girls and Recessionary Postfeminism', in *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan: pp. 17-30 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

- Gill, Rosalind, 'The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility ten years on', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20.6 (2017): pp. 606-626
- 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (2007): pp. 147-166 <doi:10.1177/1367549407075898>
- Gill, Rosalind, and Shani Orgad, 'The Amazing Bounce-backable Woman: Resilience and the Psychological Turn in Neoliberalism', *Sociological Research Online*, 23.2 (2018): pp. 477-495
- Girls*, created by Lena Dunham (HBO, 2012-2017)  
<<https://www.nowtv.com/watch/girls/iYEQZ2uDbPiuTZ1ux7sebq>>  
[Accessed: 2 March 2023]
- Glenza, Jessica, Martin Pengelly and Sam Levin, 'US supreme court overturns abortion rights, upending Roe v Wade', *Guardian*, 24 June 2022  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/24/roe-v-wade-overturned-abortion-summary-supreme-court>> [Accessed: 3 March 2023]
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory Seigworth (editors), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010)
- Gordimer, Nadine, 'The Flash of Fireflies' in *The New Short Story Theories*, edited by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994)
- Gonner, C. C. K, 'Olive's Lover' in *The Oxford Book of English Love Stories*, edited by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Gwynne, Joel (editor), *The Cultural Politics of Femvertising* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)
- Hanson, Clare, 'Introduction', *Re-reading the Short Story*, edited by Clare Hanson: pp. 1-9 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989)
- *Re-reading the Short Story*, edited by Clare Hanson: (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989)
- Harris, Anita, *Future Girl: Young women in the twenty-first century* (New York: Routledge, 2004)
- Head, Dominic, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
- Hemmings, Clare, 'Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation', *Feminist Theory*, 13.2 (2012): pp. 147-161
- Hong, Cathy Park, *Minor Feelings* (New York: One World, 2020)
- Horgan, Amelia, *Lost in Work: Escaping Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021)

- Hunter, Adrian, 'Story into history: Alice Munro's minor literature', *English: Journal of the English Association*, 53.207 (2004): pp. 219-238  
<<https://doi.org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/english/53.207.219>>
- I Hate Suzie* and *I Hate Suzie Too*, created by Lucy Prebble and Billie Piper (Bad Wolf; Sky Studios, 2020-present) <<https://www.nowtv.com/watch/i-hate-suzie-too/iYEQZ2rcf32XREszTMd440>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]
- I May Destroy You*, created by Michaela Coel (BBC; HBO, 2020)  
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/mooojyxy/i-may-destroy-you>>  
[Accessed: 27 November 2022]
- Jackson, Stevi, 'The Social Context of Rape: Sexual Scripts and Motivation', *Women's Studies Int. Quarterly*, 1 (1978): pp. 27-38
- Jaffe, Sarah, *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021)
- Johnson, Daisy, *Fen* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016)
- Kanai, Akane, 'On Not Taking the Self Seriously: Resilience, relatability and humour in young women's Tumblr blogs,' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22.1 (2019): pp. 60-77 <doi: 10.1177/1367549417722092>  
—— *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)
- Kanai, Akane, and Rosalind Gill, 'Woke? Affect, neoliberalism, marginalised identities and consumer culture,' *New Formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 102 (2020): pp. 10-27 <doi: 10.3898/newf:102.01.2020>
- Kantor, Jodi, and Megan Twohey, 'Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades,' *New York Times*, October 5, 2017  
<[www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html)> [Accessed: 11 December 2022]
- Kearney, Mary-Celeste, 'Sparkle: Luminosity and Post-girl Power Media,' *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 29.2 (2015): pp. 263-273
- Kelan, Elisabeth, 'Gender fatigue: The ideological dilemma of gender neutrality and discrimination in organizations,' *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 26.3 (2009): pp. 197-210 <DOI: 10.1002/cjas.106>
- Keisu, Britt-Inger, and Helene Brodin, 'Postfeminism as Coping Strategy: Understandings of Gender and Intragroup Conflict among Swedish Welfare Workers', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* (2022): pp. 1-15

- Littler, Jo, 'From Enola Holmes on Netflix to Britain's union leaders, why feminism for the 99% is thriving', *Guardian*, 27 December 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/27/enola-holmes-union-leaders-feminism-99-economic-gender-inequality>> [Accessed: 1 March 2023]
- Liu, Rebecca, 'The Making of a Millennial Woman,' *Another Gaze*, 12 June 2019 <[www.anothergaze.com/making-millennial-woman-feminist-capitalist-fleabag-girls-sally-rooney-lena-dunham-unlikeable-female-character-relatable](http://www.anothergaze.com/making-millennial-woman-feminist-capitalist-fleabag-girls-sally-rooney-lena-dunham-unlikeable-female-character-relatable)> [Accessed 29 June 2022]
- Lorde, Audre, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017)
- Lukan, Tinca, and Marni Appleton, 'Girl Boss: New Sexual Contract in the Information Political Economy', Under review
- Lupinacci, Ludmila, "'Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing": liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media', *Media, Culture and Society* 43.2 (2021): pp. 273-290 <doi: 10.1177/0163443720939454>
- McDermott, Catherine, *Feel-Bad Postfeminism: Impasse, Resilience and Female Subjectivity in Popular Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022)
- 'Genres of Impasse: Postfeminism as a relation of cruel optimism in *Girls*,' in *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, postfeminism, authenticity and gendered performance in contemporary television*, edited by Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan (London: Palgrave, 2017): pp. 45-61
- 'How to Survive the Postfeminist Impasse: Grace Helbig's Affective Aesthetics', *Girlhood Studies* 11.3 (2018): pp. 50-66
- McRobbie, Angela, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009)
- *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020)
- Machado, Carmen Maria, 'The Husband Stitch', *Granta [The Online Edition]*, 28 October 2014 <<https://granta.com/the-husband-stitch>> [Accessed: 13 March 2023]
- *Her Body and Other Parties* (London: Profile Books, 2017)
- Mackintosh, Sophie, 'The Weak Spot', *Granta [The Online Edition]*, 15 August 2016 <<https://granta.com/the-weak-spot/>> [Accessed: 13 March 2023]
- Marston, Kendra, *Postfeminist Whiteness: Problematising melancholic burden in contemporary Hollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)
- May, Charles E. (editor), *The New Short Story Theories* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994)

- May, Kate Torgovnick, 'Beyoncé samples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx message on surprise album', *TEDBlog*, 13 December 2013 <<https://blog.ted.com/beyonce-samples-chimamanda-ngozi-adichies-tedx-message-on-surprise-album>> [Accessed: 1 March 2023]
- Mazza, Cris, and Jeffrey DeShell (editors), *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (Salt Lake City: FC2, 1995)
- Merkin, Daphne, 'Publicly We Say #MeToo, Privately We Have Misgivings,' *The New York Times*, 5 January 2018 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html>> [Accessed: 10 Dec 2022]
- Moniz, Dantiel W., *Milk, Blood, Heat* (London: Atlantic Books, 2022)
- Morley, David, and Philip Neilsen (editors), *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Munro, Alice, 'What is Real?', *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Fifth Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994): pp. 939-942
- Munro, Ealasaid, 'Feminism: A Fourth Wave?' *Political Insight*, 4.2 (2013): pp. 22-25 <doi:10.1111/2041-9066.12021>
- Nash, Meredith, and Imelda Whelehan (editors), *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, postfeminism, authenticity and gendered performance in contemporary television* (London: Palgrave, 2017)
- Ngai, Sianne, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005)
- Nguyen, Viet Thanh, 'Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the 'Model Minority' Stereotype.' *Time*, 25 June 2020 <[www.time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america](http://www.time.com/5859206/anti-asian-racism-america)> [Accessed: 20 December 2022]
- O'Connor, Frank, *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (London: Macmillan, 1963)
- Olufemi, Lola, *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2020)
- Orgad, Shani, and Rosalind Gill, *Confidence Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021)
- Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982)
- Paul, Herman, and Adrian van Veldhuizen (editors), *Post-Everything* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021)

- Penguin Random House, *Hot Little Hands*  
 <<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/533870/hot-little-hands-by-abigail-ulman/>> [Accessed: 20 March 2023]
- Petersen, Anne Helen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2021)
- Petski, Denise, 'HBO developing "You Know You Want This" anthology series about gender, sex and power from "The Leftovers" duo,' *Deadline*, 30 May 2018 <<https://deadline.com/2018/05/hbo-developing-you-know-you-want-this-anthology-drama-the-leftovers-writers-carly-wray-lila-byock-kristen-roupenian-1202400396>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]
- Powell, Roo, 'How Ads That Empower Women Are Boosting Sales and Bettering the Industry', *AdWeek* [online], 3 October 2014  
 <<https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/how-ads-empower-women-are-boosting-sales-and-bettering-industry-160539/>> [Accessed: 20 March 2023]
- Power, Chris, 'Complete Fiction: Why the short story renaissance is a myth', *Guardian*, 12 March 2018  
 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/12/short-story-cat-person-tom-hanks-jojo-moyes>> [Accessed: 11 February 2023]
- Pratt, Mary Louise, 'The Short Story: The long and the short of it', *Poetics* 10.2-3 (1981): pp. 175-194
- Projanksy, Sarah, 'Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some reflections on postfeminist girls and postfeminism's daughters', *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker: pp. 40-72 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007)  
 ——— *Spectacular Girls: Media fascination and celebrity culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014)
- RAINN, *Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics*  
 <<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>> Accessed: 11 December 2022
- Radner, Hilary, and Rebecca Stringer (editors), *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011)
- Renold, Emma, and Jessica Ringrose, 'Feminisms re-figuring "sexualisation", sexuality and "the girl"', *Feminist Theory* 14.3 (2013): pp. 247-254
- Ringrose, Jessica, *Postfeminist Education?: Girls and the sexual politics of schooling* (London: Routledge, 2013)

- Rottenberg, Catherine, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)
- ‘The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism’, *Cultural Studies*, 28.3 (2014): pp. 418-437
- Roupenian, Kristen, ‘Cat Person’, *The New Yorker*, December 4, 2017, <[www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person/](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person/)> [Accessed: 4 December 2022]
- ‘What It Felt Like When “Cat Person” Went Viral’, *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2019 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-it-felt-like-when-cat-person-went-viral>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]
- *You Know You Want This* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019)
- Sams, Saba, *Send Nudes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022)
- Schalk, Sami, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)
- Schaller, Karen Ann, *The Bowen affect: the short fiction of Elizabeth Bowen and the case for re-reading emotion*, Doctoral thesis (University of Sussex, 2011) <<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/6950/>> [Accessed: 17 February 2023]
- Seresin, Asa, ‘On Heteropessimism,’ *The New Inquiry*, 9 October 2019 <[www.thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism](http://www.thenewinquiry.com/on-heteropessimism)> [Accessed 11 December 2022]
- Sex and the City*, created by Darren Star (HBO, 1998-2004) <<https://www.nowtv.com/gb/watch/home/asset/sex-and-the-city/iYEQZ2uDbPiuV4Vu4KeDPf?DCMP=WA>> [Accessed: 6 March 2023]
- Shaffi, Sarah, ‘Saba Sams wins the BBC national short story award for “transportive” tale’, *Guardian*, 4 October 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/oct/04/saba-sams-wins-bbc-national-short-story-award-for-transportive-tale>> [Accessed: 28 February 2023]
- Shaw, Valerie, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1983)
- ‘speculate, v.’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* [Online] <<https://www.oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/186112;jsessionid=4FA69AE81BCD286B39175EB257F761E8?redirectedFrom=speculate>> [Accessed: 5 March 2023]
- Spencer, Keith, “‘I Care A Lot’ is a stinging indictment of neoliberal “girl boss” feminism’, *Salon*, 26 February 2021 <<https://www.salon.com/2021/02/26/i-care-a-lot-neoliberal-girlboss-feminism-critique>> [Accessed: 2 March 2023]
- Sutherland, John, *The Oxford Book of English Love Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

- Tan, May-Lan, *Things to Make and Break* (London: CB Editions, 2014)
- Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra (editors), *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)
- 'Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture' in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra: pp. 1-25 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)
- Tasker, Yvonne, 'Enchanted (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony and the New Romantic Comedy', in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer: pp. 67-79 (New York: Routledge, 2011)
- Taylor, Brandon, 'Against the attention economy: short stories are not quick Literary fixes', *Literary Hub*, 6 December 2017 <<https://lithub.com/against-the-attention-economy-short-stories-are-not-quick-literary-fixes>> [Accessed: 8 November 2022]
- Ulman, Abigail, *Hot Little Hands* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015)
- Virno, Paolo, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,' in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt: pp. 13-36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
- Virno, Paolo and Michael Hardt (editors), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996)
- Ward, Jane, *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2020)
- Wark, McKenzie, *Capital is Dead* (London: Verso, 2019)
- Wilkins, Kim, 'Genre and Speculative Fiction', *The Cambridge Companion to Creative Writing*, edited by David Morley and Philip Neilsen: pp. 37-51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Winch, Alison, *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- 'Brand Intimacy, Female Friendships and Digital Surveillance Networks,' *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 84 & 85 (2015): pp. 228-245
- Windels, Kasey and others, 'Selling Feminism: How Female Empowerment Campaigns Employ Postfeminist Discourses', *Journal of Advertising*, 49.1 (2020): pp. 18-33 <doi: 10.1080/00913367.2019.1681035> [Accessed: 6 March 2023]

Young, Emma, 'Feminist F(r)iction: Short Stories and Postfeminist Politics at the Millennial Moment,' *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*, edited by Emma Young and James Bailey, pp. 133-148. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

———*Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

Young, Emma, and James Bailey (editors), *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

Zhang, Jenny, *Sour Heart* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)