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Narrative Bending:

The Subversion of *Watakushi Shōsetsu* in Ruth Ozeki's
A Tale for the Time Being and an abstract from *My Amy*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is comprised of two sections: a critical research essay focusing on Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), and the first part of a novel entitled *My Amy*. Both sections focus on the fictionality of fiction, as well as narrative structure and the effect of space and time on content, structure, and the organisation of a non-linear narrative. In the critical portion of the thesis I read *A Tale for the Time Being* in the context of narrative theory, Buddhist philosophy, and the traditional Japanese literary form of *shōsetsu*, examining how the structure and content of the novel originate from multiple literary and religious traditions. I argue that Ozeki appropriated the form of the Japanese 'I-novel' (*shōsetsu*) in an innovative re-imagining of form and tradition, whilst juxtaposing the duality of her hybridised identity as a Japanese-American writer in the meta-textual, non-linear, montaged, semi-autobiographical text, which focuses on the reader-writer-character relationship. In *My Amy* I employ a non-linear narrative structure to support the flashbacks and trauma experienced by a woman raised in a religious cult, and her later self-destructive behaviour which is a result of her seclusion in the cult and limited life experience.

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In this introduction, I will discuss my aims and processes for the creative and critical portions of the thesis. When I began writing the creative section of my thesis, I conceived a project that was completely foreign to my own style of writing, but inspired by Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. My original project was called 'Never Christmas' and featured the mythological Cupid as narrator, and short anecdotal scenes of narrative featuring the protagonist, Amy, at various stages of her life. Some of these scenes were narrated by Cupid, and some of them were in Amy's first person point-of-view. There were other unrelated scenes about love and famous lovers throughout history sandwiched between the primary narrative about Amy's life, which was told in a non-linear way. I was imitating Ruth Ozeki but I couldn't pull my narrative together in a way that represented *me*, and my style as an artist. I had the content, the story about Amy's life, her affair, and her past in a religious cult, and I had the voice – Amy's, not Cupid's but what I didn't have was the structure to support this story and voice.

In the second draft, I dropped the device of Cupid as narrator, the right decision because in my hands, Cupid was a no more than a gimmicky conception, offering nothing to the story. Cupid was just a way into the story, and it was time to let him go. As I continued to refine the content and expand Amy's backstory, I still found that I was unable to weave together the past and present in a meaningful and surprising way. I was working to imitate Ozeki by moving around in time, but unlike Ozeki who had a larger purpose behind her slippage in time, I had no clear reason for it, and so I continued to use short passages of prose linked together by scenes of unrelated dialogue, which were often floating, unanchored in either space or time.

When I began working on the third and final draft, I realised it was time to let go of any preconceived notions about structure and to just write the story that I could write. I started again, but this time, from a blank document. In the previous draft my

supervisor made the comment that people who have suffered traumatic experiences often tend to repeat themselves, that they often retell their story in different ways in an attempt to find meaning. Once I realised that trauma was non-linear, I realised I'd found a way into my narrative, and this was on this concept of trauma that I based both my structure and content.

With this complete revision of my material, a new title was born – the piece became 'My Amy' – not just a story about trauma and abuse but also a story of male possession of the female. 'My Amy' is 30,000 words, or the first third of a novel which will be told in three parts. This first third of the novel introduces Amy and the three relationships in her life: Harry, the married man; Wagner, the enigmatic cult leader; and Tom, her first boyfriend. While writing, I discovered that all three males claimed ownership of her, and that this was a pattern that started with her father. Because 'My Amy' is only the first third of a much longer piece, these conflicts of possession do not fully resolve themselves in this part of the narrative, but I envision that I will continue to explore the themes of possession and ownership until she fully embodies the *my* of herself – or she doesn't.

I have never written a non-linear fictional narrative before, and what I learned through this process is that I cannot write a non-linear narrative just for the sake of it, but that the content *has* to demand a non-linear structure, otherwise the structure is a mere device. What I learned from studying *A Tale for the Time Being*, was how to read critically and apply this reading to my own fiction, but in a way that remains true to myself as an artist. When I consciously tried to emulate Ozeki and create a link between my own fiction and hers, I created something untrue to myself. But when I realised this was the problem, I was able to write my own fiction with a freer mind, and also study Ozeki's fiction on a much deeper level, as I was looking for the 'how' and 'why' of her narrative, and *how* I could apply these findings to my own narrative,

without blindly mimicking her structure and compromising my own style. I feel that this journey has taught me how to read, and how to apply this reading to become a better writer.

In preparing to write the essay, I read *A Tale for the Time Being* three times, the first time for plot, followed by two further close readings to observe theme and structure, and develop my own reading of the text. I made extensive notes of the emerging themes: the text as a commentary on reading and writing, the reader as an active participant in the creation of the text, and questions of ownership, being, and time. After my own reading was complete, I turned to Ruth Ozeki's interviews, her essays, and her two other novels, *My Year of Meats* (1999), and *All Over Creation* (2003). I gained new insight into *A Tale for the Time Being* by reading it alongside Ozeki's earlier fiction, particularly in regards to her maturing style. Because *A Tale for the Time Being* was published in 2013, there is not any published critical work about the novel, so I had to draw extensively on my own reading, as well as interviews with Ruth Ozeki in writing this essay.

To develop my thesis statement I read extensively on narrative theory and reader positioning in fiction. Around this stage of development, I went back to *A Tale for the Time Being*, and in a forth close reading, discovered that Ozeki was dropping hints about *shōsetsu*, or I-novel. The breadcrumbs which led me to an investigation of Japanese literary form were Ruth searching the internet for an academic article on *shōsetsu*, written by one of the novel's characters. I followed this reading, which suggested that *A Tale for the Time Being* itself was an elaborate I-novel, and continuing with this line of research, I discovered two texts that were very helpful in the shaping of my ideas – *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity* by Tomi Suzuki, and *Rhetoric of Confession: "Shishosetsu" in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction* by Edward Fowler.

In conjunction with these readings on *shōsetsu* and triggered by Ozeki's comment that the novel 'grew from Buddhist theory' (Chatelaine), along with the New York Times' suggestion that the novel 'considers' Buddhist theory, I turned to textbooks of Buddhist theory, including Dōgen's essay on time ('Uji'), which inspired the title of the novel, its structure, content and themes. I disagreed with *The New York Times* comment that the novel just 'considered' Buddhist theory, and from this engagement with Buddhist theory, I began to see how Ozeki's structure was not just inspired by Buddhist theory, but that the novel was, in fact, a Buddhist text.

Through a close reading of the text and readings of studies about traditional Japanese literary form and Buddhist theory I was able to engage with Ozeki's text in a deeper, more nuanced manner. It became apparent that the true strength of the novel is Ozeki's ability to re-imagine traditional Japanese form in a surprising, new way, in the process creating an innovative, non-linear, textual experience which has roots in many literary and religious traditions.

The Body of Texts: Subversion of *watakushi shōsetsu* and manipulation of form in Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*.

A Tale for the Time Being is a novel as much about fiction as it is fiction.

Towards the end of the novel, the semi-autobiographical narrator Ruth asks of Nao, a character in the novel's story-within-a-story, 'Who had conjured whom?...Was she the dream? Was Nao the one writing her into being? Agency is tricky business' (*Time Being*, 391). These are questions the novel asks repeatedly, questions about the nature of time and being, creation and consumption. In this essay I will discuss Ruth Ozeki's appropriation of the traditional Japanese form *watakushi shōsetsu*, or 'I-novel', in her 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being*, and how her subversion of the I-novel offers not only a commentary on classical Japanese literature, but also on the 21st century novel. I will also consider her reading of the reader-writer relationship, and the concept of fiction as a fluid entity or 'time being'. My essay will read *Tale for the Time Being* in the context of Ozeki's other two novels, *My Year of Meats* (1998) and *All Over Creation* (2003), as all three feature Ozeki's signature hybridized narrative.

Ozeki's most recent novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, is her most narratively adventurous as in it she has matured into her signature style of quirky, innovative prose which features a montage of texts including biography, autobiography, memoir, letters, faxes, emails, journals, dreams, scholarly articles, quantum physics, and expositions on science, religion, gender, the economy, biology, ethics, and politics. *A Tale for the Time Being* is a self-identified Buddhist text, and in this essay I will explore how Ozeki uses innovations in narrative structure to create a text that is not just *about* Buddhism, but *is* Buddhism, as Buddhist beliefs not only influence the text, but the characters are born from the Buddhist philosophy of no-self, or '*anatman*' (Palumbo-Liu). I will also consider how the novel explores the concept of self (or no-self) in relation to time and the other. *A Tale for the Time Being* is a pluralistic, transformative text that not only transforms classical Japanese I-novel structure and

concepts into a hybridised 21st century novel, but it's also an experiment in capturing time. The structure Ozeki created is a form specifically designed to hold words in an attempt to stop them slipping away in time, and it's also an experiment in representing time authentically, and the near-impossible endeavour of capturing the always-fleeting 'now'.

Ruth Ozeki refers to herself as a 'racially hybridized, genetically pluralistic entity' (Palumbo-Liu) and the same description easily applies to her montaged, fabricated, dualistic style of creation. Ozeki is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, novelist, and Zen Buddhist priest; she studied English literature and Asian studies, and she holds a Master's Degree in Classical Japanese literature. These diverse skillsets combine into the marriage of cultures that is her latest novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*, shortlisted for the 2013 Man-Booker Prize. As a young writer, Ozeki struggled with plot, saying she 'didn't know how to put together a narrative arc that would move through time' (Carter). She later said that film-making, particularly editing, taught her how to write fiction:

When I was doing film and television work, I worked a lot with montage. I've always used montage as a technique in all of the books, bringing in faxes and emails, or newspaper articles, or different kinds of fictionalised source materials. This is a technique that comes from film. (Carter)

Ozeki's work is often described as patchwork, and montage is one of the signature features of her work, alongside a lively narrative voice and multiple narrators, jumping between first, second, and third-person point-of-view within a single novel. Structurally, *A Tale for the Time Being* bears most resemblance to her first novel, *My Year of Meats*, with dual narrators, with both novels featuring both a Japanese-American narrator, and a Japanese narrator.

The crossover between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ is something Ozeki embraces in her work; in *A Tale for the Time Being* Ozeki writes about factual global issues such as the 2011 tsunami, and its impact on her fictional characters, and she also writes about individual issues, using herself as a ‘character’ in the novel. Ozeki said: ‘When I used to make documentaries that purported to tell the truth, I realised what a problematic claim that was, so I just decided to skirt the issue by writing novels and calling everything fiction’ (Palumbo-Liu).

A Tale for the Time Being is the story of a diary contained in a Hello Kitty lunchbox which washes up on the beach of a small island called Whaletown in British Columbia, Canada. The lunchbox is discovered by a washed-up writer by the name of Ruth, and the novel unfolds as a dialogue between the diary’s author – the suicidal Japanese schoolgirl Nao, and the Japanese-American author Ruth, who is based on Ozeki herself. Ozeki spoke at length of the process she went through to ‘find’ a ‘reader’ for Nao’s diary:

I’d written Nao’s story in the years prior to the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. I knew that Nao needed a Reader, someone she would call into being to find and read her diary. I ‘auditioned’ four or five characters to play the role of Nao’s Reader, which meant I’d written four or five discrete versions of the book, each with a different secondary protagonist and story arc. Finally I finished a draft that I was reasonably happy with, and I was about to submit it to my editor when, on March 11, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami hit. Suddenly Japan was a different place, and the world was different, too, rendering half of the book irrelevant. Nao’s story was fine as it was. It was pre-2011. But the reader’s story had to acknowledge the horrors of the earthquake and the tsunami – it had to be post-Fukushima – so I

unzipped the manuscript, threw half of it away, stepped into the role of the Reader myself and started again from the beginning. (Chatelaine)

It was Ozeki's husband Oliver (also a character in the novel) who finally convinced her that 'she' had to be in the novel, but not just her, the entire life they shared together in Whaletown. He told Ozeki that she needed to 'step into the fiction [and] break the fictional container of the novel and allow reality to penetrate' (Dowling). Ozeki said overriding the confines between fiction and reality gave her complete freedom to 'comment and reflect on all that was going on in 2011... and stepping into the fiction as a semi-real character allowed [her] to respond more directly' (Dowling).

Before writing *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki had been working on a 'failed memoir', and in the novel the 'semi-fictional' Ruth is also working on a memoir which she discards to focus on Nao's diary, which in a very metatextual, circular, and somewhat ironic manner further illustrates the link between fact and fiction as Ozeki writes her own life story alongside Nao's fictional one, thereby reinstating her 'failed memoir' in a reimagined form. Ozeki explicitly refers to the Ruth sections of the novel as 'being [her] failed memoir' (Dowling). Often the lines are blurred between the 'real' and the 'imagined' and these are concepts that Ozeki explores in the novel: Where does fiction come from? Who creates whom? However, she doesn't just ask these questions through the prose, but more significantly, she asks these questions through the form. As the structure of the novel swells and changes with the characters, the structure re-writes itself, just as the characters re-write each other, awaiting the reader re-write them yet again. 'Who had conjured whom?' (391) is one of the big questions of the novel, and one that is asked many times.

One example of this structure-as-content occurs in the middle of the novel when Ruth is struggling to find traces of Nao online and in the 'real' world: 'Her mind just hung there, in a strange kind of limbo' (172). Ruth felt she was floating in a

‘darkened liminal state that was not quite a dream, but was perpetually on the edge of becoming one’ (184), and despite following Nao’s lead and trying zazen to calm her mind, she felt that she was being lost in time. This displacement particularly unsettles Ruth, because her journey in the novel is a journey through time to get her mind back (185). Her mother suffered from dementia and she is terrified of inheriting the disease and losing her mind because ‘her mind was her power’ (185). In the novel, the tighter Ruth holds on to Nao, the looser her grip on reality becomes: she can’t find any traces of Nao online or in real life, she loses the Nao’s words (342), she loses her ability to write, ‘[her] mind felt like a garbage patch’ (115), and she becomes distressed that she’s not ‘a writer anymore’ (344). In her diary, Nao wrote about the problem of ‘*now*’: ‘If you’ve ever tried to keep a diary, then you’ll know that the problem of trying to write about the past really starts in the present: No matter how fast you write, you’re always stuck in the *then* and you can never catch up to what’s happening *now*’ (97).

As Ruth becomes more and more transfixed in the past, she loses the ability to be present in the now, and everything grinds to a halt. But once she lets go of trying to hold on to Nao, once she realises that she is operating in a different dimension of time (312), Ruth is able to achieve zazen, *to be in time*. Nao describes this sense of being present in time: ‘nothing in the world is solid or real, because nothing is permanent, and all things ... even me and you – are just kind of flowing through for the time being’ (106). The text mimics this flowing and slippage of time, through memory and being, lost words and found, and re-creation by the reader: ‘Surely a reader wasn’t capable of this bizarre kind of conjuration, pulling words from the void? But apparently she had done just that’ (392).

Ruth Ozeki’s greatest innovation in *A Tale for the Time Being* is the creation of a Buddhist text. In the novel, she manages to construct a fictional narrative that is

simultaneously fiction and *about* fiction, a novel that is both storytelling at its finest, and philosophy at its most thought-provoking: *A Tale for the Time Being* is fiction that engages the reader as an active participant in the creation of the characters, which is itself an unconscious response to Nao and Ruth's creation and re-creation of each other, climaxing in a dream intervention. Nao calls Ruth into being ('*together we'll make magic*' 391), and Ruth calls Nao into being, simply by being her reader ('*Who had conjured whom?*' 392). Buddhism teaches that 'because everything is impermanent, there is not an independent self that can exist separate from others' (Ozeki qtd. in Palumbo-Liu) and these Buddhism theories of interbeing and non-being (*anatman*; no-self) are represented in the text through Ruth and Nao's creation of the other, which is both a Buddhist innovation, and a physical commentary on the reader-writer-character experience and symbiosis. Ozeki warns that *A Tale for the Time Being* is not meant to be taken literally, that it's a 'parable about the process of writing fiction' (*Conversation with Ozeki*) and the dream-intervention by Ruth into Nao's past explicitly calls attention to the text as a literary construct.

Felicia Lee, writing for *The New York Times*, said *A Tale for the Time Being* 'considers' Buddhism, but the novel does much more than just consider Buddhism, it is born from the 'bipolar' concepts of Buddhism itself (Hee-Jin Kim, 147). In interviews, Ozeki often speaks about how the novel grew from her extensive studies in Buddhism, calling it a 'chicken-and-egg situation', that her 'Zen practice was there, and the novel grew from it', and that she didn't have the intention of 'conveying anything in particular about Zen when [she] was writing it' (Chatelaine). In her diary in the novel, Nao writes extensively about the teachings of 13th century Zen Master Dōgen, but this is not his only influence on the text, as Ozeki borrowed the title from his leading essay on the nature of time, 'Uji'. 'Time being' is not just another chicken-and-egg conundrum, but it also subscribes to Buddhist philosophy. 'Time being' is

both eternal and temporal. Time *being* is *now*, an eternal present (for the time being...), as well as *time* being – a temporal creature who exists in time. Dōgen wrote: ‘I think of the past, present, and future, and no matter how many periods – even tens of thousands of them – I may think of, they are the present moment, the absolute now’ (Hee-Jin Kim, 147), and this understanding of the concept of time, and time being, helps read what Ozeki accomplished in her novel – writing the ‘*now*’. *A Tale for the Time Being* is a time being; it exists in eternal time, and yet it also changes in temporal time.

Not just a Buddhist text, *A Tale for the Time Being* is also a ‘time being’ text which manifests Ozeki’s experimentations in narrative distortions of time, as well as her attempts to capture time in ‘now’. The entire text is a journey in time, both forwards in time and backwards in time. The novel is a textbook example of the old adage that content is inseparable from form, because not only does Ozeki construct a unique structure to tell her equally unique tale, but she also manages to weave theories of time/Zen Buddhism/classical Japanese literature (i-novel)/quantum physics into a seamless narrative. Ozeki’s storytelling is both a rigorous exploration of time, and an investigation of how time and timing affects the lives of the characters.

The novel is non-linear and has a complex time-frame, opening with an entry from Nao’s diary, the entries of which work backwards through time, which is not immediately apparent to the reader. Nao’s diary is set a decade or so before the beginning of Ruth’s story, which takes place just after the 2011 tsunami devastated Japan. Nao’s diary is non-linear and she begins almost at the end of her story with the declaration that she’s going to kill herself. She then spends the rest of the diary looping back through time, until about the three-quarter mark, when she catches up in time: “‘This is it,’ Ruth read, straining to make out the letters in the dim light of the kerosene lamp. “This is what now feels like.” ... “She caught up with herself,” Oliver

said' (342). Ozeki's innovations with time and 'now' are an attempt to subvert the confines of 'suppressive' narrative by playing with events in 'real' time. In his article about the phenomenology of narrative, Christain Metz wrote that: 'Reality assumes *presence*, which has a privileged position along two parameters, space and time; only the *here* and *now* are completely real. By its very existence, the narrative suppresses the *now*...or the *here*...and most frequently the two together' (89). In creating a structure which purports to capture the 'now', Ozeki challenges the very nature of narrative, which is preserving a moment in time. By reading Nao's diary in 'real time', Ruth was attempting to experience Nao's experiences just as Nao herself experienced them in time (374).

This reading backfired on Ruth when caught in a false illusion of time, she got lost in Nao's narrative. Ruth found herself scouring the internet to find traces of Nao, searching for the online videos and blogs that Nao referenced in her diary, and finding nothing. Discouraged, Ruth tracked down an American university professor who knew Nao's father and wrote him several passionate emails, begging him to hurry and respond because Nao was suicidal and her life hung in the balance. Caught in time, Ruth responded to Nao's diary as it unfolded, emulating the reader's response to experiencing a novel in real time.

It had been more than a week since she'd sent the email, and now she had a sudden thought: Had she actually sent it? ... The professor was her only hope. As she stared at the restless pixels on her screen, her impatience grew. This agitation was familiar, a paradoxical feeling that built up inside her when she was spending too much time online, as though some force was at once goading her and holding her back. How to describe it? A temporal stuttering, an urgent lassitude, a feeling of simultaneous rushing and lagging behind...It was a horrible, stilted,

panicky sensation, hard to put into words, but which, if she were to try to represent it typographically, would look something like:

*thisiswhattemporalstuttering***FEELSLIKE***likeastutstutSTU
TTERYRUSHINGFORWARDinTIMEWITHOUTaM
OMENTORanINSTANTtoDISTINGUISHONEINSTANC
EfromTHEnextGROWINGEVERLOUDERANDLO
UDERWITHOUTPUNCTUATIONuntilSU
DDENLYWITHOUTWARNINGIT*

•••

(new page)

stops (227)

Ozeki employs the duality of time as a device to move the plot forward, drawing attention to the agency of time and its manipulations of the plot. Before Ruth's rather gimmicky 'temporal stutter', Ozeki's narrative was succeeding in conveying and 'capturing' the passage of time, the experience of lost time, and the feelings of being left behind in time that Ruth suddenly experiences mid-point in the novel. I refer to the temporal stutter as a stutter in the structure because by drawing the eye to the framework (the large font), the reader is distracted and drawn away from the content. Of course, in Ozeki's text, the framework is as significant as the content, but in this instance, I believe her innovation pushes one beat too far and the means outweighs the end. As the reader experiences Ruth and Nao's dual storylines, it becomes obvious that Ruth has become caught in the time warp of Nao's narrative, but Ruth herself doesn't realise this until her husband points it out: "You're not making a lot of sense. I mean, it's not like this is happening now, right?" ... How could she have been so stupid? It wasn't that she'd forgotten, exactly. The problem was more a kind of slippage ... Fiction had its own time and logic. That was its

power.’ (312-13). That idea that ‘fiction [has] its own time and logic’ (313) could be called the mission statement of the novel; a piece which exists in its own vacuum of time, concerned with the manipulation of time, and the bearing time has on the narrative, and how time affects and alters the narrative, and the characters within it, as evidenced by Ruth and her misreading of both time and the diary.

Christain Metz refers to the phenomenon of time as a ‘doubly temporal sequence’, arguing that ‘there is the time of the thing told and the time of the telling’ (87), and the sequence of time is what Ozeki plays with in the narrative, drawing attention to both the temporality of time and its permanence (also a Buddhist conceit), the conflict between the duality of time, and how the time of happening and the time of telling directly affects both the outcome of the plot, and the reader’s experience, as demonstrated by Ruth getting caught up in Nao’s diary. Metz continues that:

this duality not only renders possible all the temporal distortions that are commonplace in narratives (three years of the hero’s life summed up in two sentences of a novel or in a few shots of a ‘frequentative’ montage in film, etc). More basically, it invites us to consider that one of the functions of narrative is to invent one time scheme in terms of another time scheme – and that is what distinguishes narrative from simple *description* (which creates space in time), as well as from the *image* (which creates on space in another space). (87)

This play on time, and time as a time being; this conscious acknowledgment of the bipolar fluidity and slippage of time, which is both now and future concurrently, is something that Ozeki mirrors in the space of her narrative, a narrative which does not exist in the vacuum of a single time scheme, but plays on the conflict between time schemes to create tension in the text. In this way, time almost functions as a physical

character – a time being, as the passage and presence of time directly impacts the lives of the two protagonists, just as another protagonist – or antagonist – would.

The most obvious challenge that Ozeki makes to the traditional construct of fiction is the case of Nao's disappearing words and Ruth's intrusion into Nao's life via her dreams. When Ruth opened the Hello Kitty lunchbox, she found a stack of handwritten letters written in Japanese, an antique watch, a small journal written in French, and a copy of the book *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust. Ruth flipped open Proust expecting an 'age stained folio, printed in an antique font' (11) so was wholly unprepared to find 'adolescent purple handwriting ... sprawled across the page ... like a desecration' (11), this surprising 'desecration' foreshadowing Ruth's own inexplicable insertion into Nao's life via dreams. Upon opening the diary Ruth's 'first impulse' was to 'read quickly to the end, but the girl's handwriting was often hard to decipher, and her sentences were peppered with slang' (29) so instead she riled through the pages:

She wasn't reading, in fact she was trying not to. She only wanted to ascertain whether the handwriting continued all the way to the end, or if it petered out partway through. How many diaries and journals had she herself started and then abandoned? ... But to her surprise, although the color of the ink occasionally bled from purple to pink to black to blue and back to purple again, the writing itself never faltered, growing smaller and if anything even denser, straight through to the very last, tightly packed page. The girl had run out of paper before she ran out of words. (31)

Ruth reads the diary slowly, in an attempt to experience Nao's life in real time:

How do you search for lost time, anyway? ... Perhaps the clue lay in the pacing. Nao had written her diary in real time ... moment by

moment ... Perhaps if Ruth paced herself by slowing down and not reading faster than the girl had written, she could more closely replicate Nao's experience ... This way she wouldn't end up with an overly compressed or accelerated sense of the girl's life ... nor would she run the risk of wasting too much time. (38)

Ruth's timely reading, and her point-of-view chapters are sandwiched between Nao's diary entries, the 'Ruth' chapters her interpretation and theories on Nao's diary, which she reads aloud every night to her husband, Oliver. But when Ruth reaches the end of the diary a surprising, physically impossible thing happens – the pages that were once tightly packed with words are *blank*: 'The page was blank ... And the page after that. Blank' (342). Ruth skipped quickly to the end – there were about twenty blank pages, and the book used to be tightly packed with words, all the way to the last page. Ruth decided Nao had 'changed her mind', that she'd reached in and taken them back, that as her life got shorter 'time slipp[ed] away from her, page by page' (343). Ruth and Oliver discussed 'where do missing words go?' (343) and he suggested that she was looking in the wrong places, that she *should* be asking – 'where do words come from?' that they: 'come from the dead. We inherit them. Borrow them. Use them for a time to bring the dead to life ... The ancient Greeks believed that when you read aloud, it was actually the dead, borrowing your tongue, in order to speak again' (345).

This concept of timeless, reborn words, words that do not come from 'no-where' but come from the mouths of people that have spoken them before, aligns with both the Buddhist theories of rebirth, and the novel's themes of slippage and time. There is a scene earlier in the novel where ancient warnings six centuries old were found engraved on stone markers above towns decimated by the tsunami. 'Do not build your homes below this point!' the stones warned. "'They're the voices of our

ancestors,” said the mayor of a town destroyed by the wave. “They were speaking to us across time, but we didn’t listen” (114).

Immediately after the shock and disappointment of the missing words, Ruth fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming her second dream of the novel, which in a very physical, quantum way, reinforces the central themes of the novel – that the reader recreates the novel through their engagement with it. In the dream, Nao’s great-grandmother, Old Jiko, gives dream-Ruth a pair of glasses so that she could see clearly: ‘fragments of the old nun’s past flood through her’ (348). But dream-Ruth knew she couldn’t hold on to both Old Jiko and Nao, that one of them would slip away if she tried to hold on too tightly.

The words are there at her fingertips. She can feel their shape, could grab them and bring them through, but she also knows she can’t stay much longer ... she makes a decision ... [she] opens the fist of her mind and lets go. She can’t hang on to the old nun’s past and still find Nao, too. (348)

Dream-Ruth follows the Jungle Crow into the future and it leads her to a man she recognises as Nao’s father, Haruki #2. Nao’s final diary entry spoke of the pain she felt at her father’s betrayal (she knew he was going to attempt suicide again), and the betrayal she felt from her reader: ‘I know you don’t exist and no one is every going to read this ... the fact is, you’re a lie. You’re just another stupid story I made up out of thin air because I was lonely’ (340). Dream-Ruth says she has a message from Nao: ‘She says to tell you please don’t do it’ (352) which was what Nao always wanted to tell him, but she couldn’t find the words (339). Dream-Ruth says Nao will kill herself if he does (352), and that he can find her at the temple with Old Jiko, who is dying. Suddenly dream-Ruth finds herself in an old temple, ‘she looks down and realizes she is holding the old composition book in her hands...and suddenly she remembers’

(353). She leaves the book for Nao to find, and when she wakes up Nao's diary has been mysteriously re-written with new words and a new ending. This is the epitome of the Buddhist reader-writer relationship; each constantly re-writing the other.

Reaching into Nao's life via dream was Ruth's way of entering time and 'finding' Nao completely, and not only is Ozeki just writing about Ruth and Nao here, she is writing about the process and function of fiction, and how we as readers become active participants in re-writing the narrative. The first new diary entry tells us that Nao's father unexpectedly joins her at the temple (362) and that Nao finds Haruki #1's secret French diary that dream-Ruth left for her – the diary that later ends up in the Hello Kitty lunchbox alongside Nao's diary. Nao and her father translate Haruki #1's diary together, and then they decide to reinvent their lives – to live. Later, Ruth thought back to the missing words:

Had she somehow found them and brought them back? It wasn't as crazy as it sounded. Sometimes, when she was writing, she would lose herself in a story so completely that the next morning ... she would find herself staring at paragraphs that she could swear she'd never seen before, and sometimes even entire scenes that she had no recollection of writing. How did they get there? It was an uncanny feeling, usually followed by a quick upsurge of panic – *someone has broken into my story!* (391)

'Who had conjured whom?' Ruth asks herself. 'Was she the dream? Was Nao the one writing her into being?' (392).

At the end of the novel, the focus is once again on agency, on the reader-writer experience, or rather, the 'Buddhist' experience, which is each character creating the other anew, and how time and being is a shared experience; that 'we', the reader, the writer, and most innovatively, the *characters* constantly 'recreate' each other. Felicia

Lee says the relationship ‘between reader and writer is reciprocal ... we co-create each other. We are constantly emerging out of the relationship we have with others’. Early in the novel Nao writes to Ruth: ‘*I am reaching through time to touch you ... you’re reaching back to touch me*’ (37). Later, Nao writes of the impossibility of capturing people in time: ‘when I sit down to write them, they slip away and become unreal again. The past is weird ... does it really exist? ... And if it did exist but doesn’t now, then where did it go?’ (97). When Ruth has her final epiphany she realises that ‘*mind and words are time being*’ (347), and here the novel has finally captures ‘now’, it pins the narrative to that moment of realisation that the mind and words are fluid entities, influenced and changed by the minds and words around them, and this is what the novel shows us, through its structure which slips and changes with its characters interferences, and through the content, which slips and alters in the same way. In the novel, Nao and Ruth’s journeys and their shared experience are merely physical manifestation of the reader-writer-character relationship.

Nao’s diary narrative follows a looping, repeating pattern where the themes of her ideas, thoughts, and feelings repeat and build upon themselves with a gradual intensity, including thoughts of suicide, despair and philosophy. It’s not until Ruth’s intervention in the text, via the dream/Haruki #1’s journal, that Nao and consequently, her father, are ‘talked’ out of suicide by the secret French diary of their ancestor, Haruki #1. In further textural layering and montage, the themes of time and agency which so concerned Nao are explored by her great uncle Haruki #1 in his diaries and letters. Judging by the timelines of events, it’s possible that Haruki #1’s letters significantly influenced Nao’s obsession with time. In his letters to the family, Haruki #1 wrote:

By volunteering to sortie, I have now regained a modicum of agency over the time remaining in my life. Death in a ground offensive ...

seems random and imprecise. This death is not ... I will be able to control and therefore appreciate ... the moments leading up to my death. I will be able to choose where and how ... my dying will occur, and therefore what the consequences might be. (256-57)

In her own diary, Nao wrote something similar: 'I don't even believe in myself anymore. I don't believe I exist, and soon I won't. I am a time being about to expire. ... I guess this is it. This is what now feels like' (340-31). This is a return, a circling back to what she wrote at the beginning of her diary, that she was going to 'graduate from time', 'time out' and 'exit her existence' (6-7).

With Ruth intervention in Nao's story line via Haruki #1's secret diary, the narrative climaxes and changes direction completely. Nao goes on to live a good life in North America, and her dad invents anti-bullying quantum programmes which eradicate a person's history from the internet, removing their identity from being fixed in a permanent space and time. Both Nao and her father's life transformations are the direct result of Ruth's intervention in the text, which is, once again, a chicken-and-egg situation as the diary 'existed' in time long before Ruth involvement, yet Ruth's engagement with the text, some ten years *after* it was written by Nao, re-writes its content. The text is toying with us, reinforcing in a very tangible way, that we 'create' every text we interact with; as Tzvetan Todorov said: 'every work is rewritten by its reader' (qtd. in Fowler, xv). Ruth's intervention also calls into being questions of authorship and ownership. Ruth is, after all, a novelist herself – is the entire text merely an exercise in voice and engineered completely by Ruth herself? There is no evidence in the text to support this reading; instead the evidence points to the novel being an elaborate *shōsetsu*, or 'I-novel'.

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki appropriates the traditional Japanese form of *shōsetsu*, or 'I-novel', and her hybridisation of this classical form functions by

offering further insight into the reader-writer relationship, as well as well as offering a commentary on the function of fiction. Morikawa Tasuya made the bold claim that ‘there are really no contemporary writers who have not written *shishōsetsu*’ (Hijaya-Kirschner, 2). *Shishōsetsu*, or *shōsetsu*, *watakushi shōsetsu* or *shi-shōsetsu*, as it’s sometimes known, is a traditional Japanese literary form otherwise referred to as the ‘I-novel’. *Shōsetsu* is a voyeuristic ‘autobiographical narrative in which the author is thought to recount faithfully the details of his or her personal life in a thin guise of fiction’ (Suzuki, 2), so immediately, Ruth’s sections of the novel – Ozeki’s ‘semi-autobiographical’ ‘failed memoir’, falls into the categorisation of ‘I-novel’. In an interview, Ozeki said, ‘Two filmmakers can make a film about the exact same thing and they’re completely different. Every time you’re filtering information through a certain consciousness, it’s going to change ... I think the same thing is true for the distinction we make between fiction and non-fiction’ (Dowling). Breaking the fictional container and stepping into the fiction, blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction, gave Ozeki the opportunity to comment and respond directly in a ‘non-fictional’ manner, whilst also giving her the opportunity riff on traditional Japanese literary form, an appropriate narrative decision considering the hybrid nature of her text, plot, characters, and the dual Japanese/American cultures experiences she explores.

Broadly speaking, *shōsetsu* is autobiographical content told in a fictional style, and fittingly, in *shōsetsu*-style itself, Japanese writer Maiura Tetsuo explains:

What motivates a *shishōsetsu* author? ... When I was preparing to write my first *shōsetsu*, the first subject I thought of ... had secretly plagued me for years and ... I had always carried [it] with me, and I was impatient to get it done as quickly as possible. I wrote it all down without hesitating ... Everyone who starts writing a *shōsetsu* must be

full of things he wants to write down. Listen to my story! – This feeling is strong. And then you write as if you were gradually vomiting everything up; the most accessible style for what one wants to express is, after all, the letter or the diary style ... I started by writing a *shōsetsu* in letter style. And only when I heard from a critic that it was a *shōsetsu*, I thought, aha, so it is. (Miura Tetsuo qtd. in Hijjiya-Kirschner, 269)

Being ‘full of things’ to write down and ‘vomit up’ (269) can also be used to describe Nao’s diary: ‘here I am, at Fifi’s Lonely Apron, staring at all these blank pages and asking myself why I’m bothering, when suddenly an amazing idea knocks me over ... [I’ll] reach forward through time to touch you, and ... [you’ll] reach back to touch me!’ (26). At first Nao ‘struggles’ to find the words (21), and she’s also intimidated by the ghost of Proust (22), whose book she appropriated to use as a journal: ‘What happened is that Marcel Proust’s book got hacked, only I didn’t do it. I bought it this way’ (20); and as she brought Proust transformed into a diary, which she overwrites with text of her own, Proust functions as the suggestion of palimpsest. Nao’s voice is chatty, light, playful, and fun, an easy narrative that spews haphazardly onto the page, in the manner of a confessional *shōsetsu* or I-novel.

I’d argue that Ruth’s sections of the novel *are* I-novel: first and foremost, these sections are an autobiographical account of Ruth Ozeki’s life thinly disguised as fiction, and in content and form, they also subscribe to the ideology of the I-novel. As Tomi Suzuki explains:

I-novel discourse evolved from the 1920’s through the 1960’s ... and was formulated on a polar axis that contrasted the Western Novel with its Japanese counterpart ... The I-novel meta-narrative was premised on a binary, polar opposition between the Western novel, which was

seen as a fictional, imaginative construct, and the Japanese I-novel, which was characterized as a factual, direct expression of the author's lived experience. (Suzuki, 3)

One of Ozeki's subversions of form is that 'Western' parts of the novel, the part that is a 'fictional, imaginative construct' i.e.: Ruth's narrative, is written, in both form and content, as a Japanese I-novel. This acquisition of form is Ozeki subverting genre, as the 'Western' part of the novel is written in the conventions of the 'Japanese' I-novel, thereby harnessing the conflict evoked in the dual-nationality of the 'hybrid' author Ruth/Ozeki. Suzuki writes that I-novel was 'always a value laden concept: the binary contrast was never neutral or simply descriptive: instead, it implied a hierarchical opposition that always raised the question of which pole was the "truer" novel' (3). This description of the I-novel also applies to Ozeki's novel as both parts, both Ruth's 'I-novel' and Nao's diary, are in hierarchical opposition for the duration of the text, with each narrative warring against the other for pole position in the 'truth' stakes.

Arguably, Nao's diary is *also* an I-novel, because like Ruth's section, the diary is a self-conscious and 'factual' 'direct expression of the author's lived experience' and she also employs some of the best rhetorical devices of fiction to tell it; temporal prolepsis ('I'm telling you this because I'm actually not going to be around for long' (6)), as well as plot, setting, sensory details, point-of-view, dialogue, conflict, multi-dimensional characters, surprising prose, theme, metaphor, and metafiction. Suzuki writes of the I-novelist as 'an artist locked in a painful struggle to write while suffering from difficulties ... poverty, sickness, loneliness, and an awareness of a lack of creativity ... caught in a vicious circle of "art" and "life"' (7). When novelist Ruth was caught in a vicious circle' of writer's block, she

glowered at the manuscript ... Perhaps she would start reading only to find her words had vanished. Perhaps this would be a good thing ...

Nao had described something similar, seeing the blank pages of Proust and wondering if the letters had fallen off like dead ants. When Ruth had read this, she'd felt a jolt of recognition. (63)

Ruth wasn't the only victim, so was Nao: 'I'm pretty chatty ... and usually I don't have any trouble coming up with stuff to say. But this time, even though I had a lot on my mind, the words didn't come' (21). Nao's solution was to write the story of her great-grandmother Jiko's life, to write something 'worthwhile', not something 'crappy' about her 'stupid empty life' (22), further subscribing to the conventions of I-novel, the work 'meaningful only insofar as it illuminates the life' (Fowler xviii). However, Nao didn't end up telling Jiko's story, she ended up telling her own story instead. Ozeki said she is 'more interested in what gets left untold ... in what drops out of history, or what gets dropped' (*Conversation with Ruth Ozeki*), and this is the case with Old Jiko's story, which is 'told' between the spaces of Nao's story.

Incidentally, both Nao and Ruth struggle to express themselves in 'real' life and in writing, so they both turn to the autobiographical form of the I-novel.

Ozeki's use of annotations, while largely innovative and only occasionally gimmicky, are deeply rooted in *shōsetsu* tradition. Nao's diary is excessively annotated with Ruth's notes which engage the reader in a metatextual experience. Not only does the reader experience Nao's diary, but the reader also experiences Ruth's *reading* of Nao's diary in 'real time' alongside the readers own, which is then followed by Ruth's extended discussions on the diary in the 'Ruth' sections. Ruth annotates the diary whenever she comes across a cultural expression or Japanese kanji (words) that she doesn't understand. In a couple of instances Ruth annotates her own

sections, for example when she points the reader to the appendixes on Schrödinger's cat (396), or Hugh Everett (397).

At their most innovative, the annotations add new insights into the text and character viewpoint and culture, for example when Nao talks about cosplay: 'my new life was just cosplay' (126). Cosplay, the footnotes explain, is 'dressing up in costume, especially of favourite manga and anime characters. Japanese slang, from "costume" + play' (126). Here the footnote expands on a cultural expression and also provides a commentary on culture. When the annotations are the least successful is when they're at their most contrived, for example, when the focus shifts to a random Japanese word which is easily translated and without cultural comment. For example, on page 125: 'I used to lie awake in bed, metal-bound and unable to move, picturing him in his scuffed plastic slippers, shuffling along the dark and winding shitamachi streets'. *Shitamachi*, the footnote explains, translates as 'downtown'. I question the authenticity of Nao's voice here, as nothing is lost in translation from Japanese to English, *shitamachi* = downtown, I argue that Nao would just have written 'downtown'.

Further illustrating this point are the two meaningful Japanese translations on the very same page, annotations of words that are not directly translatable into English: '*ikisudama*', a living ghost, and '*tatari*', spirit attacks. Ozeki's annotations are another marker identifying the text as I-novel, and yet another play on form. Annotations are a device of the I-novel genre, as Suzuki explains: 'defective or dubious historical writings' were considered inferior to 'official historical writings' (17) and so I-novel/ *shōsetsu* writers would mimic the form of official histories ('*seishi*'), annotations and all, to better be accepted by society. A strength of the I-novel was that under the guise of being "playthings", *shōsetsu* ... could deviate from the official histories (*seishi*) and satirize orthodox social values' (17). Annotations

originated because historically, the I-novel was considered an ‘inferior’ genre due to its lack of ‘truth’, as Yano Ryūkei explains:

My original intention in writing this book was to write an orthodox history [seishi]. Therefore I will not distort historical facts or confuse the just and the unjust, good and evil, like the ordinary shōsetsu. I will only add a little colour to the framework of historical facts...In order to give the reader the pleasure of reading a shōsetsu and the benefit of reading orthodox history, to let the reader know that this book is based entirely on orthodox history, the author will cite all historical sources.
(qtd. in Suzuki, 19)

In order to be taken seriously as a writer, Ryūkei annotated his fiction in an academic manner, thereby lending authenticity to his text by mimicking orthodox history. These revelations about the origins of annotation in *shōsetsu* add further credibility to Ozeki’s use of annotations, revealing them as tribute to form rather than just an innovative authorial construction, enforcing yet again, the nature of the text as I-novel. By reimagining a traditional literary form, with all its subtle nuances of history and culture, Ozeki writes her text between the pages of history, appropriating a traditional form that best supports her form and content and manipulating it in new and surprising ways, offering a new reading experience, and a new commentary on fiction and time.

A Tale for the Time Being is not just a commentary on writing and reading, it is a commentary on being, a commentary on time, a commentary on Buddhist philosophies, a commentary on the traditional Japanese I-novel: it’s a playful, philosophical, challenging, and innovative text which text calls into question issues of ownership, being, revisionist history, creation, and fiction. The text is a physical manifestation of the ‘slippage’ between reader and writer, author and text, and even

the characters within the text. As Ozeki said, ‘reader, writer, character, book – these are not fixed identities we inhabit The lines that seem to separate us are not as distinct as they appear. We are more like a blur of one overlapping another ... a polyphony of resonating tones’ (*A Crucial Collaboration*).

A Tale for the Time Being takes two separate characters and connects them through space and time via an innovative narrative which is as much about the process of the creation of fiction as it is a creation of fiction. Not only does Ozeki subvert and transform the traditional Japanese literary genre of *shōsetsu* into an invigorating 21st century text, but she also calls into question concepts of being and time and interconnectedness, ideas born from the very Buddhist texts that birthed the novel. *A Tale for the Time Being* a groundbreaking, challenging, and genre-bending text, yet it’s also a very Buddhist text, its very characters, content, and form born from the Buddhist principles of interbeing and ‘no-self’.

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My Amy

We met one boring day at work when he came in with his kids and without his wife, just another middle-aged man in a mid-range suit. I could always pick the cheaters, the ones who spent far too little time picking a piece-of-shit gift, usually something that involved a moronic epigraph, *love never dies*, *sweets for the sweet*, or more often than not, my personal favourite: *you're the last face I want to see when I close my eyes...* yeah, yeah, whatever. But I didn't pick him as a cheater. In the first place he had a tired worn-out look – the guy was clearly through with life. Who'd want that dick? Hardly good for much. And then he had these weird eyes, not quite colourless but not quite coloured either. He was like one of those grey dogs with freaky Halloween eyes. That was it. He was an old tired Weimaraner. And then there were the kids, two of them, quite clearly wild and unmanageable. That's the thing about having kids later in life, isn't it? I wanted to say. Forever an old dad. Never get that second lease on life that you get when you whack 'em out at twenty.

He surprised me by buying a recycled paper wallet and while it wasn't expensive, it was thoughtful, as the paper wallet stand was hidden way at the back of the store behind a rack of inappropriate greeting cards. The wallet was folded from an old safari map. He'd picked Abyssinia.

'Good choice, I have one of these myself. Are you travelling?'

'It's for my wife,' he said. I liked his voice immediately.

'Good choice.'

He asked if I could gift wrap it and I said no, that sorry, we didn't gift wrap items under twenty dollars, which was complete bullshit. I felt a bit guilty afterwards, especially when I overheard him telling the kids they were going straight to the hospital and when they complained, he said they wouldn't stay long. Truth was, I was completely over wrapping gifts another woman would open.

It was three months before he came back, on a dull spring day that was even duller than usual, and five minutes before close, which was completely inconsiderate. I knew what I'd say when I saw him again: *Hello. Can I help you?* I'd certainly never admit to seeing him before, let alone being rude and abrupt. But unluckily for me, real life didn't run as perfectly as my imagination.

I was wrapping a set of fragile origami birds when he pushed through the doors, the roar of winter behind him. I looked up to say *hi* and then I saw it was him and that I was caught out with my wrapping paper and scissors I couldn't control the look of horror that spread over my face. He looked confused for a minute and then I realised – what colour was my hair last time I saw him. Red? Black? It was definitely blonde now. I relaxed my face into a grin that was too toothy, too conscious, a shit-eaters grin. And I was squashing a bird. I lifted my wrist off the wrapping paper. The customer scowled at me but unfortunately it was our last set. He just browsed the shelves. I didn't want him to go and I didn't want him to stay. It was weird. He was just a grey man I'd been rude to once. But he was looking a lot less grey. Maybe his wife had died? God. It wasn't right to think such things, didn't I believe in karma? What was wrong with me?

The woman left with her birds and if anyone needed *soaring wings to carry you through adversity* it was her.

He had his back to me, looking through our selection of Fair Trade paper bead necklaces. Oh great, so he was a do-gooder as well. I left the counter and ducked into the staff room, grabbed a piece of peppermint gum, looked in the mirror, didn't like what I saw. I started opening the mail to give myself something to do, gave myself a paper cut on my right index finger. I heard the front door chime and I looked at the clock, five past six. Now that he was gone I guessed it was safe to go out. But there he was, standing at the counter.

My first instinct was to say *I'm sorry, I didn't realise there was anyone in the store*, but instead I said, 'I don't have any friends.' And then: 'Oh my God, I don't know where that came from. How can I help you today?' I knew my face was as red as bracelet he was handing over.

'Well the good news is you're just one gift-wrap away from a new friend.'

I was too embarrassed to make eye-contact. I felt he was smiling.

'You don't have to be nice to me just because I was an asshole.'

'Sometimes assholes need the most kindness.'

I was surprised that he'd surprised me. Most people would have downplayed it *you weren't that much of an asshole* or talked themselves up *I'm just an all-around good guy* or even worse, pitied me *you must be going through a really hard time*.

'I'm not *always* an asshole,' I said, raising my eyebrows at nothing in particular, still avoiding eye-contact – at least gift wrapping gave me an easy out.

He picked up my hand while I was talking. I looked up, shocked.

'You're bleeding everywhere. You'll ruin the present.'

I looked into his strange, colourless eyes and I felt that, in another place, he would have put my fingers in his mouth.

I pulled my hand back. 'Stupid paper cut.' I grabbed a band-aid from underneath the counter, a silly yellow Sesame Street band-aid. 'Hazards of the job,' I said, too brightly.

'Hey... Do you want to go somewhere...? Get a coffee?'

'Do you still have a wife?'

He held up the half-wrapped bracelet. 'Yes.'

'OK.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means nothing. I just wanted to know. Yes, let's.'

‘Now?’

‘Why not.’ Night was looking up.

I met him at the Starbucks on the corner, twenty minutes later. He’d already ordered, got a seat by the fire.

‘The name’s Harry,’ he said, jumping to his feet as I joined him.

I shook his hand. ‘Do we have to do names? I prefer labels.’

He smiled and he had nice teeth, not too American. Nice teeth are important.

‘Come on... What’s your name?’

‘Can’t you just think of me as gift-shop girl?’

‘Why the aversion to names?’

‘I dunno.’ I took the lid off my coffee, stirred it. ‘Well, I do know. It makes things real.’

‘I’m real, you’re real. What’s not real?’

I hated that I was pushed to saying it. ‘It makes this *something*.’

‘But it *is* something.’

‘I don’t want it to be something!’

From the look on his face I thought maybe I’d hurt him. I didn’t want to hurt him, not really. And I certainly wasn’t expressing myself clearly, no surprises there. I tried again.

‘—well, I mean I *do* want it to be something that’s why I’m saying I don’t.’

He smiled, and it said *I’ll never understand women*. I smiled back, his warmth catching.

‘There’s something about you that makes me want to tell you all my problems and I kind of hate it. How can I impress you if you know what kind of a shit show I am?’

‘You don’t have to worry about trying to impress me,’ he said, gently. ‘And anyway, I like your honesty. It’s refreshing.’

‘Sometimes I worry that I’ll scare everyone away.’ I took another sip of my drink. ‘So far I’ve done a pretty good job of it.’ I laughed but he didn’t.

‘Why so harsh?’

‘Sometimes I worry that no-one will be able to see past the bullshit to the real me.’

‘I think that’s what we all worry about. Not being seen.’

‘Yes but... I’m very honest but I can never say what I really mean. I protect myself with bullshit and snark and talking smack. I always get close to the issue but I skirt around it. It’s killing me. I long for a world without bullshit. And I’m primarily composed of bullshit.’ The more into it I got the faster I talked and then I stopped, smiled. I imagined it was a rueful smile but it was probably more maniacal.

‘You’re pretty honest, considering I’m a complete stranger. Or are you bullshitting me too?’

‘I don’t ever have to see you again, after today.’ I flashed him a smile and my teeth *were* too American.

‘And you’re going to stop me coming into the shop how?’

His question hung in the space between us. Like his wife, like my past.

I changed tack.

‘I’ve been reading war letters from the Second World War.’

‘American?’

‘British. I prefer their wit. Smaller gestures.’

He laughed. ‘That’s unfair.’

‘It’s what I like. Anyway, there’s something about the way they wrote that’s the same way I want to live my life.’

‘They were writing under censorship, remember.’

‘It’s not that. It’s the fearlessness of their communication. Imagine if we could all get to the heart of the issue, all the time, cut the bullshit, say what we really meant. – You make it easy for me,’ I said, pre-empting his reply. ‘I wish everyone was like you.’

‘We get what we need at the time of need. At least that’s what I’m figuring out, Ms *I-read-other-people’s-mail*.’

‘I’ve never thought about it like that. That’s kind of creepy.’

‘We’re all voyeurs at heart,’ he said. ‘But I hope that your boyfriend guards his phone *with his life*.’

‘I don’t have a boyfriend.’

‘Lover?’

‘Nah.’

‘Why not?’

‘Ah... I’ve kind of been single for a while.’

‘How long?’

– What the hell. ‘I’ve been single my whole life.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘I know.’

‘No wonder you’re so uptight.’

‘If we were in a less public place I would really beat you for that.’

‘Is that why you’re so single?’

I smiled at him. ‘Probably.’

‘But seriously, let me take that in for a minute. No boyfriend? Ever? What do you do about touch?’

I shrugged. ‘I live without it.’

‘That’s no way to live.’

‘Sometimes we don’t have a choice.’

Clearly he saw me bristle. ‘Sorry. It’s just that touch is one of life’s greatest gifts.’

I nodded my head. ‘I’m sure it is.’

‘Aren’t you curious?’

‘Not anymore.’

‘Don’t run away now.’

As I stood, I pushed his arm away. ‘It’s what I do best. No, I kid. Second job, *really* gotta go.’

‘I don’t even know your name.’

‘That’s good. I don’t want you to feel you’ve got me in hand.’

‘I don’t think I could ever have you in hand.’

‘Bye. *Harry*.’

I went home and climbed into bed, even though it was only seven thirty. It was cold out, it was cold in. I filled a hot water bottle and held it to my chest, not overheating despite having my electric blanket switched on to number ten. There was no one to tell me I might die mixing water and electricity, so why not? I pushed the water bottle lower, lower, over my stomach. Stuffed toys were questionable after a certain age but a hot water bottle was a timeless comfort.

Of course I didn’t have another job. That was bullshit. There was truth, and then there was truth with a purpose, and I felt I’d cast out enough truth to reel him in, but I would never admit that publicly. There was a fine, fine line between truth and manipulation. So far he fell into my palm like a ripe plum, but I wasn’t even sure what

I wanted with him, or what to do with him, only that I wanted something, and that there was something in him that drew me in and repulsed me in equal measure.

But it wasn't all bullshit. I admitted that much to myself, before I fell asleep.

It was exactly seven days, to the minute, before he came back into the store. That impressed me. Begging, slaving behaviour disgusted me. Self-respect took a person a long way. It was another dull raining Monday and I was wearing leather pants and a soft, slouching singlet. It had taken a long, long time to feel comfortable enough to wear pants in public, to accept that no, not everyone would stare at the gentle curve of my ass, and for those who would appreciate it, to let them. My legs were weapons, it was time to start enjoying them.

I didn't see his eyes as colourless anymore, but a steely pale grey. And I didn't see grey as negative, not since his skin had lost its tired pallor. I felt I knew him far better than I really did, since I'd been thinking about him every day. I wondered if he'd thought of me. I didn't really twig that it was a false intimacy.

The shop was empty. I felt coy, I felt stupid, I didn't really know what I felt.

'Hey,' I said, to break the silence.

'Is it coffee time yet?'

I smirked. 'Are you not even going to *pretend* to be interested in anything in-store?'

'Oh I'm interested alright.'

I blushed. 'I walked right into that.'

'How have you been?'

'Very good. What about you?'

'There's been better weeks, but then there's been worse.'

'Do you ever answer the question?'

‘Don’t you mean *I’m sorry to hear that?*’

Ugh. He grated me. ‘I meant both.’

He reached for my hand. I was standing somewhat self-consciously in front of the counter. ‘I’m happy to see you.’

‘Me too.’

‘Coffee?’

‘Sure. Meet you at Starbucks in half an hour?’

‘Starbucks is Starbucks. I want to take you somewhere else.’

‘Oh... OK.’

‘Meet me out front in thirty.’

You could learn everything about a man by the state of his car. His was black and clean and polished and the interior smelled like freshly cut oranges and frankincense. Not bad at all. He was waiting for me when I finished work and walking towards him I was slightly curious but awfully nervous. I hoped it didn’t make me talk a million miles an hour, overcompensate like hell. *Just chill the fuck out* I said to myself as I stepped into the car. *Shut up shut up shut up.*

‘Nice car,’ I said.

Harmless enough.

He chuckled. ‘I just took it through the carwash.’

‘And here I was thinking you could tell everything about a man by the state of his car.’

‘I hope you can’t tell everything about me that easily.’

‘To be honest, I can’t tell anything about you. All I have is my own fiction.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, we both have very different perceptions about this, right now.’

Afterwards I'm going to have my own version of events, and you'll have yours. Both will be fiction. Neither will be what *actually* happened.'

He was quiet for a moment, merged lanes.

'I like the way you think. You're unpredictable.'

'I can't read you at all.'

'Do you like that?'

'It interests me and frustrates me equally. But I do like how comfortable you make me feel. Comfortable like a worn-out shoe.' I grinned. 'Even though my pep talk to myself when I hopped into your car was *shut up shut up shut up*. Oh my God, I can't believe I just confessed that.'

'That was your pep talk?' He sounded incredulous. 'Why?'

'Because I get nervous and act like a maniac. I can just hear myself talking more and more shit, and I can't stop.'

'I don't want to make you nervous.'

'You wouldn't interest me if you didn't.'

We drank our coffee overlooking the sea. He'd gone through the drive-through, Starbucks, as it turned out. I ribbed him about that merciously.

'But this isn't Starbucks, is it?' he said, pointing to the view. We'd parked high above the dunes, towards the lighthouse end of the beach and for the first five minutes the rain lashed the car furiously, spoiling everything, but now it had relaxed into a wet drizzle. We watched a pair of kite surfers bob and tear down the ocean-front in a kind of awkward dance, not unlike us. *Nothing* was a very strange feeling, even for someone who disliked boundaries.

'This is one of the places I go when I need some peace. I always find it here. Everything is so big. It reminds me how small and temporary life is. That nothing

lasts.’

‘Is that what you see when you look at the waves?’

‘What do you see?’

‘I see no beginning and no ending.’

‘That too.’

We were quiet for a while, and the silence was comfortable. The damp sea breeze carried over the dunes. The smell of childhood and candy corn and the last sigh of summer.

‘Where are your kids?’ I said, eventually.

‘With their mother.’

‘Oh.’

It was quiet again. I wondered if he’d put his hand on my knee. I’d wondered about that the whole drive. I could almost feel the warmth of his fingers curving around my thigh, but no.

‘Do you love her?’ My voice sounded unnatural.

He waited a beat. ‘Very much.’ And then finally, he reached across, put his hand on my knee. I let it sit there, out of place.

‘This is weird,’ I said.

‘It’s chemistry,’ he said.

‘But what is *that*?’

‘It’s just something we roll with.’

I liked the way he said we, us. In that moment there was no her.

Driving home I wondered if he’d ruin everything. He’d come so close to it already. *Very much*. I heard it on replay in my head. *Very much*. The very tone of his

voice, the way he caressed the words as he spoke them, how much I liked his voice.

Very much.

He pulled up outside the shop.

‘I can drop you home you know.’

‘No thanks. I want to avoid the awkward goodbyes on the pavement outside the front door. Wondering if I should invite you in, if it’s rude not to, waiting for you to turn me down *I have a wife*. The pure physical embarrassment that follows.’ I cracked open the door, cracked a smile. ‘So no. I like to avoid all of that.’

‘Now that you put it so convincingly,’ he said, teasing me, unbuckling his seatbelt.

‘Oh God Harry, just stay in the car.’

‘You sound like a wife already.’ He opened the door into traffic.

‘That was below the belt.’ I sprung out onto the pavement, glared at him above the bonnet of the car. It was raining again. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Giving you a chance to hit me,’ he said, wading around the front of the car.

I felt awkward in my skin, like it was stretched too tight or something. Like my organs were too big for my body. It had been a while. I almost didn’t recognise it.

He pushed me back against the car so I was somewhat sheltered from the rain and mostly sheltered from the prying, passing traffic. Rain splashed from his face to mine. His mouth was on my mouth.

‘What’s your name?’ he said. ‘I’m going to kiss you until you tell me your name.’

‘I don’t want to tell you my name!’

‘Tell me your name.’ His kisses were insistent, firm lips, a soft tongue.

‘No.’

‘I’ll ask your workmates.’ He kissed my neck.

‘I would be very angry if you did.’

‘I’d like to see you angry.’

‘No you wouldn’t.’

‘Tell me.’

‘No. This is our thing. If I tell you, we’ll have nothing.’

‘I can’t date a woman with no name.’

‘You can’t date her anyway.’

He stopped kissing the side of my face, my hair. Looked into my eyes.

‘Is that what this is about?’

‘Not just that. It’s about giving you something I don’t want to give you.’

‘It’s just a name.’

‘It’s power.’

He kissed the top of my nose, my cheek, my eyelid.

‘The other side of my face is jealous,’ I mumbled.

‘The other side of your face will have to wait.’

He didn’t turn up the following Monday. I’d been building up to it all week; a quiet week of drinking green things to make my skin glow, practicing my blow-dry, eating neutral foods so I’d taste good. Fuck! To think I turned down garlic prawns for this, to be upstaged in my own shit-show. For the first time in seven days I began to doubt myself. Sure, eating my face off had been great. Hadn’t it? Did I do something wrong? It was hard to do something wrong when you had no means of communicating with them. It’s not like I’d texted him too much or not at all. Did I kiss him wrong? Was I not into it enough? Five past six rolled over and I sat behind the counter like a vegetable. I googled *how to kiss*. It had been a while. Let’s see what I did wrong. *Drop hints that you’re interested. Yeah, maybe. Get caught looking*

(briefly) at the other person's lips. Did I look too long? Did I even look at all? Keep your lips softly parted so you can breath comfortably, and so you can bite your bottom lip easily. What? Make your mouth appealing. Well, it was my mouth so yeah, appealing. Avoid gum which you might have to spit out awkwardly if the other person goes in for a kiss. Uh, did they ever hear of swallowing? Break the kiss barrier by testing the waters with a small kiss to the hand or cheek. What the fuck. This was a monumental waste of time. I closed the browser. I didn't want to acknowledge that it sorta made me want to be kissed.

All week a kind of stupid resentment built up inside me. I knew it was stupid but there was nothing I could do about it. In the morning he was *asshole* but by afternoon he was *cunt-faced spawn of satan*. By Saturday I finally let it go. What was the point? I mean, clearly, there was a point. You don't shit on something so delicate and new but hey, what did I know. The guy had a family, a life. That made me dark all over again. I tried flirting with some boys, the sandwich shop guy, a young lawyer who got his business cards printed with us. It was boring because they were so available. When I got home from work I was forced to front up to what I wanted from life. Did I want to be a paper salesperson when I was forty? Did I want to be pining for someone who so obviously didn't pine for me? Did I want to be spending all my time pissing around? What did I want? Why was it such a difficult question to answer? Why did I always put myself last? There wasn't even anyone else to put first and I was still denying myself. I really did have Askers Syndrome. I could never ask for what I wanted. I barely even acknowledged what I wanted, even to myself. Dumb fuck. I ate a chocolate bar and went to bed.

He turned up Monday, two weeks later. All day I'd built up false hopes and had to keep shooting them down like small birds from the sky. There was nothing

worse than expectation. When he walked in at six o'clock I knew I was bristling. I folded my arms in on myself and I was all sharp angles and elbows but there was not much I could do about it. I could hardly relax on cue.

'I missed you last week,' he said, as he walked in the door. He came close, like he meant to embrace me. 'I was out of town. Business.'

'Did you know you were going?'

'Well, yes.'

'You could have told me.'

'I didn't think I had to.'

I was still angles and corners.

'Try being nothing. See how you like it,' I said, turning and walking behind the counter. I didn't feel like smiling. I always felt like smiling when I was around him.

'Can I start again?'

'It would have to be a pretty big gesture.'

He turned back over his shoulder. 'Thought you hated grand gestures?'

'I don't think *you* could ever gesture big enough.'

'Oooooohhhh, catty, I like it.' He laughed to himself, walked back in through the sliding doors.

'Hello my darling, I've got a surprise for you –. Fuck, you're right. I can't do grand gestures. Can we just go get a drink?'

'Beg again.'

'Please?'

'I like that better,' I said, smiling finally, letting him put his arms around me.

'–no, you can't kiss me. This is fucked up.'

I grabbed my purse, grabbed his hand. 'Let's go. I cashed up early. Quiet day.'

He followed me out the store and I went to turn right but he caught my sleeve and pulled me in the other direction.

‘Let’s go get a real drink.’

‘I don’t drink.’

‘Neither do I. At least... I can’t go home smelling of alcohol.’

‘Tasting of it, you mean.’ What a comedown.

‘Don’t be dark, silly.’

He pulled me towards him like he wanted to hold my hand but of course he couldn’t.

We walked two blocks to a small bar called Enders. It was early and it was Monday so the place was empty besides ourselves and a couple of other drifters.

‘I don’t really see the point in coming here just to drink lemonade.’

‘It’s about the atmosphere, Jesus!’

‘I liked the beach better.’

He took my coat, folded over his arm.

‘I liked you better there too.’

I hated myself for making our brief time together unpleasant. I looked forward to it so long and then— expectations, I guess.

‘I really am sorry for abandoning you,’ he said.

At least he got it. But I was still sharp.

‘I should get used to it, I guess.’

‘I want to bite your lip really hard,’ he said.

‘Do it, I dare you.’

He pulled me close. I could taste him. Cedar and wood-smoke.

‘You think I’m full of false promises, don’t you?’

‘I think you’re no promises. I like that. There’s nothing to disappoint.’

‘I like you.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Well of course you do. Everyone likes me.’ I laughed and pulled away from him, walked up to the bar to order the drinks. ‘What you having, lemonade-boy?’

Thirty minutes later I’d unwound enough to let him play with my legs, pull one across his lap, hold my ankle under his wrist.

‘This doesn’t mean I like you,’ I said.

‘Of course not. Why else would you be here?’

‘Because I’m bored?’

‘Oh lord, I’ve become the bored girl’s man. Should just end it now.’ He rolled his eyes, squeezed my leg.

‘It’s a *bit* more than that,’ I said.

‘Just a bit.’

‘A bit, yes. Don’t get ahead of yourself, mister.’

‘I was wondering... Next week... If you’d like to come over to my house?’ He spoke carefully, like I was a small bird about to take flight.

I pulled my legs back.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I’d like you to see where I live.’

‘And a whole lot more than that,’ I scoffed.

‘*Please*. I’m not going to fuck you.’ He sounded offended.

Now I was. ‘Why not? Don’t you want to fuck me?’

‘Well of course I do, I’m a man.’

‘Don’t give me that *I’m a man* bullshit. Do YOU want to fuck ME? That was the question.’

He was too long in replying, too quick in replying.

‘Yes, but –’

‘Don’t say *but*. You may as well just have said no.’

‘Would I be here with you if I wasn’t attracted to you? Come on, woman.

Give me a chance here.’

He made a lot of sense, I had to reluctantly admit.

‘My life is... complicated.’

‘Whose isn’t?’ I fired back.

‘Feisty, I like that. You don’t have a wife, one with cancer, at that.’

‘Lots of people have cancer.’

‘Yeah well, try living with it.’

‘You love her, right?’ It took all I had to say *her*.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you do this often?’

‘What do you mean, *this*. See other women?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have a few times.’

‘So what you really mean is, dozens of times. Does she know?’

‘No.’

‘I think a woman always knows.’

‘I don’t think she does.’

‘Would she forgive you?’

‘I think she would.’

‘Would she be devastated?’

‘...I think she’d be pretty hurt.’

‘Then why do you do it?’

‘Why the million questions? My God. I do have a heart you know.’

‘I’m just trying to understand.’

‘You can’t, can you?’ His voice was soft.

‘No, I can’t.’

‘I’ll go to your house,’ I blurted out the next time I saw him, which was a Monday. I was Monday girl. Was I OK with that? I wasn’t sure. But I’d been yo-yoing wildly all over the place ever since he’d suggested *I go to his house*. Worrying about whether or not I was only good enough for Mondays was another issue entirely and quite frankly, I didn’t have the energy for both. And whatever conclusion I came to I’d probably be wrong. Who knew what was in another man’s head? It was sobering to think I could make life decisions based on what I thought he thought about me. Stupid, really. But still, I would go to his house while the offer was hot.

‘Ah, OK,’ he said, laughing. He shouldn’t have laughed. It was a privilege, didn’t he know that? He was still talking: ‘I can’t keep up with you.’

‘I can’t keep up with myself. I’ll come next week.’

‘*Come* come or just come?’

I hit his arm. ‘Don’t be gross.’

We walked down the street, a discreet distance between us. A wife-sized distance.

‘Why did you change your mind?’

I shrugged. ‘I was bored.’

‘You’re mean.’

‘Did you ever think I wasn’t?’ I arched my eyebrow at him, I thought it was seductive, obviously not.

‘Maybe we could watch a movie.’

‘Christ. I’m not coming to your house to *watch a movie*.’

‘If you think you’re gonna abuse me for my dick, that’s not happening either.’

‘You wish,’ I rolled my eyes. That’s all I seemed to do these days, roll my eyes. ‘Maybe you really *are* gay.’

‘Isn’t that what all girls say when they can’t nail a guy?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never wanted one I didn’t nail.’

‘Classy,’ he said, dryly.

‘Don’t judge me,’ I fired back.

‘I’m actually scared to.’

‘Good, that’s as it should be.’

We ate sushi under the light of a thousand tiny lanterns. It was incredibly dumb. It felt like the movies and I didn’t like it, it was too glossy, too false. Too happily contrived. *Make ALL your dream come true!* Ugh.

‘Why *did* you tell me you have no friends?’ he asked, spearing a piece of salmon deftly with his chopsticks. I could watch those hands for days.

‘Why *are* you hanging out with someone young enough to be your daughter?’

‘No you’re not,’ he quickly pointed out. ‘Fifteen years, entirely reasonable. Hardly Hugh Hef territory.’

‘Yet.’

‘So why did you lie?’

I felt my chest tighten, what had he figured out?

‘Lie?’

‘About having no friends. I mean, you’re not dumb, you’re good looking, you have an incredible body—’ his eyes ran down my thighs— ‘You’re a *bit* sharp, but hey, all in all... you’re a bit of a catch.’

‘I wasn’t lying,’ I said quietly.

Finally I had his attention.

‘You really have no friends?’

‘I’m really pretty much all alone in the world.’

He put down his chopsticks, neatly, on the side of the plate. I liked that.

‘What’s the deal?’

‘It’s a bit difficult to tell you, because you know, you have it all. Great job, nice house, wife, kids, life. You probably met her young, realised she was a prize, travelled the world with her, had all kinds of experiences together, settled down, started a life together. No one’s ever realised that I’m worth more than a casual piss on the side of the road.’

‘Darling, I can’t help it, but I’ve got to laugh. What the hell is a casual piss on the side of the road?’

‘I mean other girls get girlfriend status and I get pissed on as they drive by.’ I sounded as bitter as I felt.

‘Darling, you have everything that I want. You have complete freedom.’

‘It’s easy for you to say. It’s much easier to be lonely when there’s something warm on the other side of the bed. Why do we always want what we can’t have?’

‘Isn’t that why I want you?’

‘*Do* you want me?’

‘Well, I’ve called exactly... zero women “darling” in my entire life.’

And then: ‘don’t, I taste like fish,’ but he kissed me anyway.

We had sex the first time for three hours. It seemed a reasonable amount of time for first-time sex with a new partner. It wasn’t what I expected. Sex with him wasn’t a wild free beast but a carefully choreographed sequence of movement, more New York City Ballet than the fierce crash of the ocean. But still, it was warmth, and that was what I craved most of all.

I rested my head against the length of his forearm and it was nice to have space between us but still be connected. He lay on his back breathing deeply.

‘Fuck that was good.’

‘I know.’

At that point it didn’t really matter who said it.

His sheets were nice; a high thread count and obviously freshly laid, they had that squeaky soft feeling of new skin. The rest of the room was average though, or rather the taste was average. Too much gold, not enough contrast. Too much stuff. There was a taxidermy swan in the corner for chrissakes.

Did I feel bad lying in another woman’s bed? Nah. Far as I was concerned it was all his. It was his body I’d taken, she had nothing to do with it. I reached over and rubbed his shoulder absentmindedly. The skin was very warm under my fingers.

‘What are you thinking about?’ he said.

‘Things.’

Maybe she’d die and I’d get him all to myself. But I didn’t really want him. I just wanted to know I could have him. I wanted his nice lips and his soft hands.

He rolled over and reached across my chest, holding me loosely, his arm between my breasts. My skin was white, light with sweat.

‘My name’s Amy,’ I said.

‘I always felt that you were an Amy.’ He leaned over, touched his lips to my forehead.

‘I was a virgin, too.’

He laughed against my hair.

‘Everyone was a virgin once.’

‘No I meant like, today.’

Did I just say like? Like a teenager? God.

He pulled my shoulder towards him, so we were facing each other, a hand space between us.

‘What are you saying?’

‘I was a virgin until today.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘I didn’t see the point.’

‘Yes but... virgin?’

‘Sex is sex. Whatever.’

‘How are you a virgin?’

‘Look I just was, OK?’

‘By choice?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, pulling away from him, rolling back onto my back, speaking to the ceiling. ‘Everything in life is *a choice*, isn’t it? Isn’t that what we tell ourselves when we can’t control it otherwise? Oh, it was *my choice*. Oh yes! *My choice*. No, it wasn’t my fucking choice to remain unfucked during the best years of my life.’

He rolled against me, pushed his back to my shoulder, his thighs against my thighs. I felt him breathe into my hair. I relaxed a little, just a little.

‘I just wish I knew,’ he said.

I left it, pushed closer against him, pushed away any air between us, any bad feeling.

He kissed the space beneath my ear, moved his fingers over my collarbone.

‘I can’t believe you were a fucking virgin!’

I liked that he let himself laugh. The whole situation was pretty ridiculous. Not quite the great sacred experience I’d been programmed to expect. But still. It was holy, in its own way.

I wouldn't give him my phone number. I didn't see the point. It was just one more way to be disappointed, and I knew I would be disappointed eventually. It was just the way it went. He had a wife. Wives were forever. And even if they're not, you never really get rid of a wife, no matter how hard you tried. She was always there, and she was always there first. You might be next best, or you might be better than the last, but you were never first. And let's face it, everyone wants to be first.

'Why were you a virgin?'

He held my hand, under the covers. We only really talked in bed now. It was warm, it was neutral. It was a hunting-ground.

'It's a long story.'

'I have a long time.'

'No you don't.' I unlaced our fingers, pushed his arm off my belly, looked at his watch. 'You have exactly forty-five minutes until she gets home. You've still got to strip the sheets, make the bed, wash yourself, wash me off you.'

'I don't wa—'

'Don't lie. I can't bear a lie.'

But was he going to say something different? Was he going to say *I don't want her?*

No, of course he wasn't.

It was a bit of a hike to his house. He lived on the other side of town, the upper side. I used to tease him that he was *fucking Gatsby*. I didn't use to know all these literary references, and I certainly never used to swear. They were learned behaviours that I slipped into once I hit twenty-four or twenty-five, the classic quarter-life crisis years. And once I started swearing, I couldn't stop. It just felt so fucking great, just like the orgasmic rush of flipping someone off.

I said to him – ‘Don’t you fucking treat me differently because you know I was a virgin,’ and I probably pointed at him while I said it. He said he wanted to know why. I said I would consider telling him. *Consider*. But I always knew I would. You see, I’d never had the chance to talk about the strange things that women talked about when they were alone; the things that terrified men. *What’s his cock like? I’ve always wanted to know*. Would I take the high ground: ‘I’m not talking about his dick’, or would I talk intimately about its shape and size? Would I say ‘Find out yourself’? Could I hold on so loosely? Who knew. So he was my best bet. I’d probably even talk to him about the things that terrified men, once I figured out what those things were. I knew they existed. The one thing in his favour was that marriage didn’t terrify him, or the ticking clock, my aging uterus. I would never have children with him, not even if he offered to donate sperm. I couldn’t do that. I might be a lesser woman but I would never let my children be lesser children.

It was a grey cold day and the skies were hosing down. It was by far the worst spring we’d had in ten years. We were lying under the covers and he was playing footsies with my feet until I kicked him off. He was like a little boy. His wife was in hospital for three days having a new round of treatment and he said I could stay but I said I wouldn’t stay the night. He said I’d never know the pleasure of waking up next to someone, or early morning fucking, or falling asleep spooning. I said correction. I would never know it with *him*. The kids were at their grandparents for the week and it was too convenient, he said, even meant to be, if you believed in that kind of thing. I still said no. I had to maintain some sense of control. Staying the night would negate that.

‘Well you can tell me about your life then. Plenty of time.’ He sat up in bed, leaned against the headboard. I lay on my back staring at the ceiling, someone else’s

ceiling. I felt displaced in this strange bed. But still, it was the easiest way to talk.

‘I grew up in a cult.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘Yeah.’

It looked like he was searching for the right words. I had to reassure him that there were none.

He slid down the headboard and lay on his back beside me, his legs coarse against the length of mine.

‘I truly wasn’t expecting that.’

‘Well yeah. I’ve tried to shake off as much of it as I can.’

‘This is why you’re all alone in the world.’

‘Yeah. I left them all behind. My family. My so-called friends.’

‘When?’

‘Six years ago.’

I could tell what he was thinking.

‘And yeah, it’s taken me all this time. The first three, four years I was really angry. So angry. No wonder no one was attracted to me. I repulsed everyone, even myself. And then I was invisible, wearing so much negative energy that people just passed right by me. Do you know what it’s like for people to not even see you’re there? Do you know how it robs little pieces of your soul? It’s only in the last... year, that I’ve started feeling like me. Or at least the person I suppose is me. It’s like a – I don’t know. A recalibration.’

‘I, uh, don’t know what to say.’

‘You can just listen, it’s OK. I haven’t been able to talk about this with anyone. It’s been a long lonely time.’

He stroked my hand, my hair. After a minute he said – ‘God I’m hard. I

suppose it would be uh, wildly inappropriate for me to say that I *really* want to fuck you right now.'

'No, I think it would be fitting.'

He grabbed my waist, pulled me on top of him.

'*My Amy*,' he said.

'– don't call me that.'

'Think I'll fit?'

I bit his shoulder, hard.

'No.'

I was only just sixteen when Wagner called me into his office for the first time. It was late, although there was nothing particularly unusual about that – everyone knew he conducted meetings well into the small hours of the day but I didn't realise exactly *how* late it was until I noticed the hallway lilies had closed for the night. I sat outside his office picking my nail polish, flicking the peelings into the tree ferns. I picked off perfect imprint of my little fingernail. Bingo. It was dark and cold in the hall, even though it was summer, and the air was stale and unpleasant, all old perfume and rank socks. I wished I was in bed reading the novel I'd stashed under my pillow the last time he paid me a surprise visit and confiscated all the novels on my shelf. My bed would be really warm right now, and there'd be fresh air and a small breeze from the open window. I stopped a yawn, squeezed my eyes open. The main source of light came from the slice of light underneath his door. So he *was* in there. I didn't think he was rude, I just thought he had more important things to do. I thought maybe I should memorise some Scripture to pass the time. That's what we were supposed to do in situations like this. Avoid idle thoughts, negative energy, the whispers of the devil. *There is no benefit to be gained from thinking human thoughts,*

they said. But instead I sat there picking my nail polish and cuticles and wondering who they'd send up to chaperone me. I hoped it was Mrs Hill. I disliked her the least. That was probably the most diplomatic way of putting it. When I was around her I missed my mom. *That's* how bad it was.

The door swung open and I jumped to my feet. The light surrounded him like a halo.

'My Amy,' he said, holding out his hand.

I shook his hand, smiled, using plenty of teeth like we were taught. I had no idea there were different kinds of smiles. I thought there were only smiles you meant, and smiles you didn't. My back ached from sitting so long. His palm was kind of warm and sweaty.

'Mr Wagner, it's good to see you again.' I noticed the top buttons of his shirt were undone.

I followed him into the office. There was some kind of classical music playing, perhaps Bach; it had that tremulous, grand feeling about it. The drapes were closed. I'd never noticed that they were heavy red velvet. I wondered where the chaperone was.

He sat down behind the big oak desk and I perched on the flowery upholstered chair in front of him. The fabric was rigid and stiff; uncomfortable. As soon as I sat down he sprung up and walked around the front of the desk, sat down on it, and leaned back on his arms, his feet nearly touching mine. I'd never noticed that he had decent arms, muscular, and covered with downy blonde hair. Surprisingly blonde.

'It was far too formal back there,' he said, smiling at me in a way which made me vaguely uncomfortable. Ugh. That wasn't right. Here I was with one of the most Godly men on earth. I should feel blessed, not –whatever this was. I asked God to cast out my fleshly thoughts.

‘... are you listening to me, Amy?’ He smiled again, a bit warmer this time. I recognised that smile. A ministry smile.

‘Ah, sorry. I’m a bit tired.’

‘Of course, of course, it’s late. I won’t keep you long. How old are you now, Amy?’

‘Sixteen, sir.’

‘It seems like just yesterday your parents were knocking on my door, asking when I could take you under my wing.’ *Why were his teeth so shark-like.*

I didn’t know what to say so I just smiled. To be honest, I didn’t really see the point in all this.

‘But when a girl reaches a certain age, it’s time for her to face some important issues, things about growing up. Since your parents aren’t here, it’s my job to step into their shoes, to see you through onto the right path. Are you OK with that?’

‘Oh yes, Mr Wagner, thank you. I’m really grateful.’ I talked too fast, even for me.

‘Good. I want you to feel comfortable.’

‘Well, what you’ll say is right, so how could I feel uncomfortable?’

‘Good girl. Your parents raised you well.’

There was a bit of a pause, then he continued. ‘So tell me, why did your family not join you here?’

‘My father was tied to a work contract.’

‘And your brothers?’

‘Oh, you know about them?’

‘There’s not a lot that passes my attention my dear.’

‘Uhm. I guess I could say – their hearts are not quite so –’

‘– Open?’

‘Yes,’ I said, with relief.

‘He turns our hearts at different times. Malachi 4:6.’

I was quoting Scripture with Mr Wagner! My whole body felt suddenly warm, weirdly alive. In all my dreams I’d never imagined this.

‘The thing is, Amy, in order for you to blossom here, there can be no secrets between us, no hidden ground, no closed hearts. Not now that you’ve moved away from your father’s protection and come under mine.’

When I looked into his eyes I felt that he could draw all the secrets from my soul, if only I had secrets to tell.

He reached out, took my hand. His palm was still clammy, or maybe it was mine.

‘I need you to tell me all your sexual failings.’

‘I have no sexual failings!’

‘Beware lest ye think ye stand lest ye fall.’

‘No! I actually have no sexual failings.’

‘Have you ever touched a boy?’

‘No.’

‘Been touched by a boy?’

‘No.’

‘Kissed a boy?’

‘Definitely not.’

‘Been alone with a boy?’

‘Not until now.’

He ignored that.

‘Now this is the important part. Have you ever thought impure thoughts about a boy.’

For the first time I looked away, my eyes darting to the carpet. Did Wagner count? We *all* thought about him.

‘–No.’

‘Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be with a boy?’

‘No!’

‘What about being married? Have you ever imagined what it would be like to be married to someone, Amy?’ His tone was soft, wheedling. I pulled my hand back from his grasp. I imagined him with talons. Talons like an eagle. He rubbed his hands down his pants. Up and down his legs. Up and down. I couldn’t look away.

‘Uhm... well, yes, I have. Is that wrong? I didn’t know that was wrong.’

‘The Bible says if we imagine it in our heart it’s as if we’d acted it in the flesh.’ I puffed my cheeks out, looked away. The silence stretched between us.

‘–It’s as if we’ve already fornicated.’

Well then, why not actually fornicate, if there’s no difference? I hoped he couldn’t read my thoughts, my face.

‘Have you ever imagined a man touching you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Have you ever touched yourself?’

My head shot up, surprised. ‘What?’

He repeated the question slowly, his voice soft, gentle.

‘Ah –’

‘You can be fully honest, Amy. This is a safe place.’

‘Of course it is. I know that.’ I flashed a smile but it was a pathetic, weak smile. My eyes drifted down towards the carpet.

He reached over, placed a finger beneath my chin, tilted my face up towards his.

‘Amy. Have you ever touched yourself?’

I looked straight at him, into his clear blue eyes.

‘Yes, I have.’

I could feel myself shaking. Was that really me shaking? It didn’t feel like me.

‘Tell me how you touch yourself. No, don’t look away,’ he added. He moved his hand to my shoulder.

‘ I uh–, I run my hands over my body, I mean uh, my breasts.’

‘Anywhere else?’

‘Uhm. Sometimes.’

‘What other places, Amy?’

‘Sometimes I rub my hands all over my body and sometimes I put a finger inside of me.’

I felt clammy and weird and like my breath was too fast.

‘How often do you do this?’

‘Uh, I don’t know. Every week?’

‘And do you enjoy it?’

I felt so much shame I couldn’t look at him. I refused to look at him.

‘Yes.’

He lifted his hand off my shoulder. I didn’t realise it was so heavy. He looked at his watch.

‘It’s getting late, well past your bedtime. But this is just the beginning of our sessions, my dear. From what you told me I feel we have a long way to go in reclaiming and guarding your sexual purity. You have given a lot of ground to Satan. A lot of valuable, precious ground. A lot of you that should only belong to Jesus Christ. Do you feel better now though, Amy, for sharing these sins? Do you feel

lighter?’

I didn’t know. I guessed so. I felt different.

‘Yes.’

‘Will you pray with me, Amy?’

‘I will.’

He knelt down in front of the desk and guided me by the elbow to kneel next to him. I rested my forehead on the edge of the desk, it felt cool against my burning skin. He draped his arm around my shoulders and I felt an unexpected sense of peace rush over me when I felt his body next to mine, big and solid and safe. I knew that we were joined in spirit and that it was the purest form of communion.

A couple of days later we were in the minivan travelling home from church, me, Mr Wagner, Eve, Sarah, Miriam, and a couple of the other secretaries. It was quite late, the sun had finally set but it was still hot. I felt my skin itching under the long black regulation skirt. It was a prickling stabbing heat. There was gospel music playing and somewhere in the van someone was singing along in high sweet soprano. Probably Eve. I wished singing was one of my talents.

Mrs Penderton was pregnant so Mr Wagner insisted that she sit in the front, extra leg room he said. It was a long, giggly process getting all of the girls into the van, long skirts to hike up, eyes to avert, at least Wagner’s. I never knew Sarah had such long lean legs.

Three girls piled into the back, and Wagner steered me into the next row of seats, his hand hot on the small of my back. I was shocked when he climbed in next to me and we were on our own in the double seats in the middle row, the seat backs in front of us so high they completely shielded my view of the last three girls who climbed into the last three seats. I pulled my skirts away from him, towards the side of

the van, making myself small in an already small space.

‘Nice to see you again so soon, Amy,’ he said.

I turned to look at him but it was kind of hard because I was sitting so close to him. Instinctively I pulled my arm in on myself.

‘That was an inspiring sermon, sir.’

‘What touched your heart the most?’

‘Definitely the part about turning the hearts of the children towards their fathers. There were some helpful steps that you outlined.’

‘Did you take notes?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’d love to see them sometime.’

I could feel him grinning at me in the dark. He’d never see those notes, at least not in their current state, all doodles and scrawls and love hearts in pink gel ink.

The driver turned the music up; it was a good thirty minute crawl back to the ministry. I longed to relax, to lay my head back against the headrest and close my eyes, but my proximity to Wagner put a halt to all of that. There was a strange kind of tension around him at all times. Everybody wanted to impress him.

I thought he would probably talk to me but after a few minutes he pulled out his phone and started dictating notes for the following week, speaking softly into his headpiece. I turned my head away, looked out into the night. I stopped thinking for the first time in days. Heaven.

The van lurched around a corner, shuddered when the driver changed gear. Wagner’s hand found my knee and I turned instinctively but he didn’t move it, apologise, laugh it off. My knee felt sticky under his hand, wet with heat. I looked out the window at nothing and he moved his hand up my leg, pushed his leg against mine, kept talking into his mouthpiece. It felt kind of familiar. Comfortable, even. It

was an odd feeling, like he'd chosen me.

'How'd I end up there, that's what you're wondering, isn't it?'

We were in bed, at least he was. I was on my hands and knees on the floor picking up hair clips. His wife was bald. Couldn't exactly have her finding hairclips in the bed. And things had gotten a bit wild. I picked my thong off the lamp, my lacy bra from under the bed.

'It *is* pretty extreme,' he said lazily, from the bed.

'People get involved in these kind of things all the time,' I said, defensively. He sure knew how to push my buttons. It surprised me to hear myself defending my parents but perhaps it was also a reaction to being thought a freak. I didn't want to be a freak. It's why I nearly didn't tell him.

'Come and put your hand on my cock and tell me more.'

'I'm not wanking you off.'

'Relax, relax. It was a joke.'

But I knew it wasn't really.

I climbed back into bed, pulled the covers up over my legs. It was better than prancing around naked, breasts hanging freely. Even though they weren't large I felt they were starting to sag a little. Should they be so flat on top? What about the pencil trick, what was that again? Would that help tell me where my breasts were sitting on the age demographic? And what about my legs? They felt all stubbly even though I'd just shaved them that afternoon, just a couple of hours ago. I mustn't let him rub his legs against mine. Lord, there was always something to worry about. I pulled the sheets up to my chin. He pushed them down over my breasts, I batted his hands away, and then conceded. The breasts could stay.

'Don't touch me though.'

‘Sorry,’ he said, way too sarcastically, jerking his hand away. I grabbed him back.

‘I didn’t mean it like that. I like your hands. I just can’t concentrate.’

He made a big show of sitting on his hands.

‘It wasn’t exactly something my parents chose. They were born into fundamentalist families – no sex before marriage, no alcohol, no cursing, no divorce, but it was only after we were born, my older brother Joseph, me, my younger brother Jacob, that they met some like-minded fundamentalists who were in that cult. Like-minded is a bit of a key phrase, watch out for it. The cult was just an extension of what they already believed, a more hard-lined, pearlway paved to heaven route through life. I was four when they joined, too young to remember anything else.’

‘Why don’t you have a Bible name like your brothers?’

‘My full name is Amy-Abigail. I just go by Amy.’

‘It’s kind of... white trash.’

‘Thanks a lot, asshole.’ I hit him, hard, on the shoulder. He laughed and grabbed my hand, put my fingers in his mouth, bit them gently.

‘Maybe I’ll tell you another day.’

He moved my fingers from his mouth, set my hand down on the bedspread between us. ‘No, tell me now.’

‘I was home-schooled, rah rah rah. Didn’t really miss much, maybe the love notes and five-year old crushes. We grew up happy, well-adjusted. We lived on the outskirts of town, near a river, we had no TV, no video games, no computers, but that was pretty much par for the course back then anyway. Except for TV, maybe. Me and my brothers spent all our spare time down at the river building forts and huts. When we hit ten years old we were allowed to camp out, cook sausages and eggs on our small gas cookers, fish for carp in the river. It wasn’t all bad.’

‘I met Wagner for the first time when I was eleven, at the annual cult conference. We went every year. –Even after all these years it feels weird to call it a *cult*. Sticks in my mouth a little. For so long it was the wall I built up around myself. Cults were for lesser people, less secure people, or crazy people seeking spacemen; Tom Cruise.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, finally. ‘I think people are drawn towards cults because they think they represent a better way of life.’

‘The good ones get out when they realise what they’ve got into,’ I fired back. ‘The weak ones use it as a measuring system to give themselves some kind of place in the world.’

‘You’re the expert,’ he said.

‘Don’t mock me.’

‘I’m not! Trust me, I’m not.’

‘Sometimes you say some really stupid things.’

‘I’m a man.’

‘Think that lets you off scott-free?’

‘I dunno. Does it?’

‘No.’

‘OK. Glad we cleared that up.’

He knew I couldn’t help smiling at him.

Dick.

‘Where were you?’

‘Every year we’d go to the annual conference. They held them all over the country, one in every capital city, it was a circus of epic proportions. Every year my parents got a little more zealous. Every year the rules got a little stricter, the stakes got higher. It was one big competition, you see. Who could have the most children,

who got married the youngest, who stayed the purist, who could memorise the most Scripture, whose children volunteered the longest at the ministry... you get the picture. We didn't know it at the time, but our parents tried for years to have more children. It just made them harder on us, more determined to see us succeed more than our peers, since they couldn't beat their neighbours with numbers. Some of the families had ten, twelve children.'

'Jesus. And two are killing me.'

'Can imagine.'

'-I hope it doesn't offend you that I said *Jesus*.'

'Dude, those days are long gone. I'm fucking a married man.'

'Jesus, you wicked little slut.'

I leaned over licked his ear, kissed his jaw.

'You know you love it.'

'Nothing like a little... perversion,' he said.

I rolled over to him, still laughing.

'Want to take it up the ass?'

'-Sodomy?'

'Seems appropriate.'

I was about eleven when he singled me out of the crowd and I felt special because I was sitting amongst much older girls, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen year olds. It should have been them but he picked me. I remember I tripped on the way up to the podium, my hips still too narrow for my long heavy skirt. He shook my hand and his fingers were cold and then he handed me the microphone while he fished around in his pants pocket. I was hypnotised by his gold cufflinks as they caught and flashed in the stage lights, bald eagles in full flight.

He pulled a large round lollipop from his pocket. OK...

'This is for you,' he said, holding it out.

I reached out to take it but he pulled it back.

'So covetous,' he said, and the audience laughed. I could feel my face going a bright shiny red. It was hot under the lights. All my friends were at ankle-level, staring at my shoes. I was glad I wore matching socks today. Did I? I glanced down at my feet. Two lace-rimmed white socks. OK.

He was taking his time unwrapping the lollipop, carefully unwinding the yellow paper so it didn't rip. But instead of giving it back to me he bounded down the stairs, far too youthfully for his age, and then he handed it to a young guy in the front row. What the -? He bent down, whispered in the boy's ear. I didn't know what was going on. I was just stuck on the stage holding the microphone and grinning like a knob. I felt very close to being humiliated and I could never deal with being the butt of jokes. He was laughing, clapping the young boy on the shoulder. The boy stuck the lollipop in his mouth, *my lollipop*, his grubby hands all over it. And then he handed it to the girl next to him, talking quickly. She took it, pulled an ugly face at it and then rubbed her thumb over the top of it, before cleaning her sticky fingers on the side of her skirt. This went on, along the line of the front row. People touching it, rubbing it, the more adventurous ones not caring about transmitted disease and stuff sticking it in their mouths. Meanwhile he had bounced down to the end of the row, waiting for the lollipop to do the rounds. I was just standing onstage like a moron, my little chicken legs scrawny in my ill-fitting skirt.

When the front row was done with the lollipop he brought it back up the stairs and held it out to me.

'Here's your lollipop.'

'Are you kidding? I don't want it anymore!'

‘Why not?’

‘Because other people have touched it!’

‘You’re so right,’ he said, looking me earnestly in the eyes, and turning to the audience, grinning. He turned back to me with his hawk eyes.

‘This lollipop is you. If you let yourself be touched and handled by other people, why would anyone want you?’

I nodded, felt a bit sick. Looked down at the lollipop in my hand.

He continued. ‘Would *you* want to marry someone who’d been touched by other people?’ He turned to the audience. ‘Would **YOU** want to marry someone who’d been with other people?’ The crowd of teenagers booed.

He patted me on the back, sent me back into the audience. I trotted down the stairs, eager to return to my seat.

‘This is why, boys and girls, it’s so important to keep yourself pure and whole so that you can give your future spouse a wonderful gift. No one wants used goods. No one wants a second-hand version of you. Virginity is the gift you only give once. You should not give parts of yourself away, parts of yourself that are not yours to give. For you are not your own, you were bought with a price. You were bought with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He claimed you, that day he died on the cross for **YOUR** sins. And so, your body is held in trust, forfeit to pleasure, until you’re ready to give it away to your life partner. This is what your parents are for, to keep you accountable, to keep you pure, until you are ready for the one you will marry. You’re like a little seed, be a little seed. Go to sleep, rest in the earth until it’s time to wake up, spring to life, and spend the rest of your life with the one God has chosen for you. Remember, virginity is the gift you only give once. Once you give it away, it’s gone forever!’ He was getting more and more excited, whipping us all up into a frenzy.

‘Give it back to me!’ He held out the mic and we all chanted back: *ONCE*

YOU GIVE IT AWAY IT'S GONE FOREVER.

Once the commotion died down he continued.

‘Remember, kids, it’s not just your bodies you have to protect from the lusts of the flesh, it’s your minds too. God says if you even *look* at a man or a woman in lust, that you have already committed adultery with them in your heart. Do you want to be a fornicator? God doesn’t want an adulterer, do you want an adulterer? Why should your future spouse want an adulterer? So this is why, ladies, it is your responsibility as women to protect the eyes of your brothers in Christ. Do not tempt them to fall, dress modestly, cover yourselves, so that we can all work together in becoming a perfect sacrifice. We need to keep ourselves whole, as white as snow. I myself have never kissed a woman. I’m forty-five. And by God’s grace, I will never kiss a woman until God brings along the one who will become my wife. And if He never does, then I will remain whole and unblemished, and in His service. Marriage to Christ is another calling, and another speech for another day. But today, my friends, I am here to remind you, and I exhort you: *keep yourself a pure and whole being*. Do not imagine marriage with another, for that also is a sin. Do not look at your neighbour and imagine what it would be like to be married to them. That is defiling your mind, cheating on your future spouse, giving something away that is *not yours to give*. Go to sleep, when the time is right – *if* the time is right, God will give you a spouse.

Alright, that’s it for today. So who amongst us is ready to commit to purity? Raise your hand if you’re ready to take that vow.’

‘Oh, that was *you*,’ he said, many years later, when I was sitting in his office discussing masturbation. ‘I knew there was something about you, even way back then.’ He opened his desk drawer, pulled out a yellow-wrapped lollipop, sat it between us on the desk, where it caught in the lights, a dull yellow glow. ‘Look what

I've got.' He laughed. 'Actually, I've got hundreds of them, go on take it, for old times sake.' He pressed it into my palm and I didn't know then that there was something disgustingly sexual about sucking on a lollipop.

That was the first time I met Wagner. He was a bit of a rock-star in our group, in so much as fundies had rockstars. He was tall and blonde (well he was then) and muscular with a barrel chest and impossibly blue eyes and a spectacularly perfect side-part. But no one commented on these things. That would've been unchaste. But we all noticed. He was hard to miss in his expensive slim-fitting white shirts and gold cufflinks, the way he parted a room like the Red Sea. Instead everyone talked about his *passion for Christ*, his *heart for the youth of America*, his *unspoiled countenance*. No one talked about his tight butt or his hypnotic hands. And it seemed that everyone over the age of sixteen and under the age of forty wondered if they'd be the one that God had chosen for him. Not that anyone admitted it, of course. But everyone was thinking it. He was the Brad Pitt of Christianity. We all wondered who would be his Virgin Mary. Because that's about how much of a miracle it would be, when Mr Wagner actually tied the knot.

After I came clean about the masturbation, I became his little pet. He never said anything, but I knew I was. He looked at me differently than the way he looked at the other girls, he smiled at me often, he glanced at me regularly during his sermons, always during an intense moment. He'd look straight into my eyes and I knew he was talking to me. He took to singling me out at the buffet, running into me in the hallways, seeking me out in the gardens when I was on my own. I tried not to let it go to my head but of course it did. After about a week of this, one of the older girls took it upon herself to give me a smackdown, cornering me one night after I was heading

to bed after a particularly intense prayer session with Mr Wagner.

‘Don’t think you’re anything special,’ she said, making me jump. Her tone was spectacularly bitchy. ‘He has a favourite every term.’

‘I take it you were last month’s favourite, Evangeline,’ I said, trying to remain unruffled, not give her the satisfaction of getting to me.

‘Oh no,’ she said, and her laugh was bitter. ‘That was *years* ago. I’m much too old for him now.’ She gave me one of those looks, an unsettling mom’s look. She had it down.

I tried to pretend it didn’t get to me but it did. What would it be like not being the favourite? Gaining that status was one thing, losing it would be something else entirely.

I arrived at the ministry four months shy of my sixteenth birthday. I was young, yes, but they whacked us out young back then. I was supposed to continue my education at the ministry for the first twelve months, studying under supervision for the first six hours of the day and then moving into the writing programme assisting in the development of the character curriculum for the second half of the day. But it didn’t quite work out that way. The emphasis was on practical experience over academic merit and so long as we attended the compulsory Bible study every morning at 7am, no one seemed to care what we got up to in education time. I got pretty good at playing the piano and drawing, I can tell you that. And I certainly wasn’t the only fifteen year old, the place was swarming with young things, and more girls than boys. The elders joked it was because girls matured so much faster that there was no point in having boys around until the age of eighteen at least. Actually, it probably wasn’t a joke. My brothers were morons and I imagined they were probably representative of the sex as a whole.

I wasn't sad when I left home, I was excited. I'd had five years of really being able to interact with my peers at the annual conference, five years of being able to attend Wagner's speeches and really take them in. I felt like I belonged there, sweeping around with the other girls in their long skirts and white shirts and long curling hair. Somehow we all got a reputation for our long curly hair. Mine wasn't naturally curly by any means, but I spent hours practicing with the curling tongs until I'd perfected the big bouffant not-quite-the-80s look that was so popular amongst the girls. Diana, Mr Wagner's queen bee, was the one we all secretly wanted to be. She had long golden hair and fat red lips and she was always two steps behind Mr Wagner, in his ear, or he in hers. I'd looked at her enviously ever since I was thirteen. She had it all. And she was young too. Eighteen, if that.

The year I turned fifteen was the year Mr Wagner didn't bring Diana to the conferences. He brought a new girl, Lydia. But for what it was worth, she was basically Diana. Diana 2.0. She was long and lean and blonde and glamorous and very young. It made me secretly hope, like I hadn't hoped before, that maybe there would be a spot for *me* at Mr Wagner's side, even though I wasn't particularly glamorous, and I didn't have blonde hair. I'd seen those girls without makeup, that glamour was all painted on. I began to hope, I began to curl my hair, I began to pray that I would be sent to the ministry and soon, and not just one of the outposts, but the main ministry headquarters. Where Wagner was based. If I was called to serve, I wanted to serve at the top. I didn't see the point in being bottom shelf.

My parents were thrilled. Children who wanted to serve, to give up the best years of their lives to the ministry was all they'd ever wanted. It wasn't just keeping up with the Jones. It was beating the Jones and running them over with your success. I'd had ten years in Wagner's home-school programme, I knew the drill. Graduate. Give Christ your best years. Marry. Raise a family. Repeat. In reality it wasn't as bad

as it sounded on paper. In reality there was a whole exciting world of men in suits and travel and of course, Wagner.

They nabbed us all at a prime young age because we'd been brought up to believe there was no future for us in higher education and college. That was serving the flesh, and our own vanity. All that mattered in this life was winning souls for Christ, and the best way to do that was to volunteer with the ministry, assist with creating programmes, serve on the frontline by supporting the ministry team, or volunteer in the orphanages or charity programmes. There was no money in it, there was just glory and eternal reward. This was the Bible verse printed on every publication, a warning, an exhortation. *Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*

Just my dad dropped me at the airport, the day I left home. It was raining lightly and when she stood on the front doorstep I thought my mom was crying but it was probably just the rain. My brothers didn't say goodbye, at least, not that day. I think they felt inferior because I was the one giving our parents what they wanted. My brothers just didn't realise it was what I wanted too. I was so excited my face was shiny and glowing with sweat, anticipation. I remember my mom wiped my face down, told me to be on my best behaviour, to not give them any reason to be ashamed of me. As we drove my dad told me they wanted me to get into Mr Wagner's team, that they'd talked to him personally about me, and recommended me as a secretary. I said thanks. I was too young to realise it didn't exactly work that way. But when I looked in the rear-view mirror, I knew I was pretty and that that would count for something.

All this, you should know, was very inward, the inner workings of a fifteen year old girl, which are terrifying at the best of times. All of these memories are the way I felt, at that particular moment, which could very quickly change in the next moment. But my hero worship of Wagner was legitimate. I always justified it by saying we all worshipped him. And all these things were things I'd certainly never admit out loud, and very rarely would I even admit them to myself. Yes I had a little crush on Wagner. We all did. He was the type of man we all wanted to marry. We all asked for a man *just like him*. A man after the Lord's own heart. But as far as any busybodies were concerned, I was moving to the ministry to study, serve, and minister. Mr Wagner wasn't even a blip on the radar ...except that he was.

Sex with Harry was becoming a little more wild and free. I guess everyone was right when they said sex with the same partner just got better and better and better. Until it didn't. I was well aware that everything ends. You either get hurt, or you don't. When you get with someone you will break up, or you will be together forever. There are only two options. That made things a little easier, took the pressure off. I had no doubts that Harry had other women, or if he didn't now, that he would before long. If his wife wasn't enough for him why would I be? I was under no illusions; much as I wanted to be, sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to be the one he came home with at the end of the day, the one he shared his meals and his bed and his bath with. The one he thought of when he read something funny, or saw something ridiculous. Sometimes I thought too much about the way he touched me, the long sweeping passes over my naked back, the fingertips lightly stroking my collarbone, idly, as if without much thought but with an awful lot of thought, an open mouth on the inside of my knee, and then I would start thinking how he probably touched his wife the same way.

Probably. I scoffed at myself. Of course he did. It wasn't me. It was just the way he touched. I didn't like thinking about his hands so much after that, rewinding our own little private moments lost all their joy, his mouth on my ear, his tongue on my neck. It was like they weren't really ours anymore, they were just history, things that happened to happen to me. But the thing that really pissed me off about the wife, other than her existence, was that I'd never know what kind of a husband he was to her. Not knowing that left me with so little to really know about him that was concrete. All I knew was the role he played with me; "Lover." And so I had to imagine him as husband, and I imagined him far better than he probably really was. Of course I did. In my mind she had everything. She could pull him on like an old sweater. I couldn't.

And I didn't like what I couldn't have.

It was basically summer and already stifling and our new uniforms had come in at the paper shop. Those of us who had the physique for booty shorts wore the micro short/collared shirt option. We were cute and retro and even though I didn't usually wear shorts I thought: what the hell. My legs were covered in bruises from Harry, big blue bruises turning green around my upper thighs, small finger marks around my knees. The girls teased me mercilessly. It was kind of obvious they weren't from walking into furniture, much as I tried to say they were.

I was glad they couldn't see the small purple bruises on the inside of my arms. I liked knowing they were there, like old friends. Sometimes they were the only reminders that he was real, that our lovemaking did exist, that in some kind of place and time, it was real. It had graduated from meaningless sex to lovemaking and I wasn't quite sure how I felt about that. It was all Harry's fault. He said we were *making love* and yeah, it stuck. I told him it was stupid, he was just a shag. He said

words have power, not to abuse them. I said fuck off and he said *I fucking love you*. I didn't know what to say to that so I said nothing. I guess it didn't mean anything because he had to qualify it. *I fucking love you* isn't the same as "I love you". *I fucking love you* is in the same category as *you know I'll always love you*. Close, but no cigar. Little things like this mattered. Words mattered.

He wanted to take me to the zoo. Said it would mean something to him. I said it would mean nothing to me, asked him if he was taking his kids. He said yes. I said it was inappropriate to invite me. He said they'd bugger off into the after-school programme after five minutes and then what was a dad to do? I said if he wanted to fuck something in the public toilets that he was shit out of luck with me.

We were in the shop, after hours, and the zoo came up while we were debating where to go for dinner. There weren't so many people he knew on this side of town so we felt a false sense of security. Well, I guess he did. I didn't feel much at all. I assumed the man was a pro, and so I didn't worry about the wife finding out. I was bent over the counter leaning on my elbows, reconciling the cash register. He wouldn't let it drop about the zoo. He kept heckling me, poking at my arms as I tallied up, touching my ass. It was getting friggin' annoying. I stood up.

'Would you just stop?' I said, glaring at him.

'I want to take you to the zoo.'

'I hate the zoo. And it's not appropriate to hang around your kids.'

'It wouldn't be like that.'

'I don't think your wife would like it.'

'Children off-limits, husband on.' He laughed, too meanly for my liking. I shoved him.

'Stop touching my butt. You sure do have a way of making me feel shit about myself. You're the one with the wife, not me.'

‘Ooooooh. Touché.’

‘It’s true. Or do you only like my honesty when it’s at my own expense?’

I had him there.

He wandered away, looked at some merchandise, came back, wrapped his arms around my waist, pressed his chest against my back, his chin resting on my shoulder.

‘Why do you hate the zoo? I thought you’d love small fluffy animals.’ His breath was ticklish in my ear. ‘Don’t tell me you’re one of those crunchy animal rights activists are you? The horror.’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ I said, not really playing.

He tightened his grip a little around my waist. ‘Oh. You have a real reason.’

‘Yeah, I do.’

I didn’t want to meet the kids. Anyway, I’d already met them. A screaming girl and a hollering boy. Irresistible. And I certainly wasn’t going to meet them as some kind of third-rate human being. Why would I do that to myself? I knew how it’d be. We couldn’t go together because he’d have the kids in the car and how would he explain his young nubile travelling companion to the kids? They were three and five, old enough not to be complete morons. So I’d have to make my own way there, meet up with him by accident, *oh, hello! fancy meeting you here*, carefully timing it so it was after the kids had disappeared into the programme. I guess, if I could avoid seeing them... No. The principle stood. I would be skulking around out there without a rightful place at his side. I wasn’t going to sleep comfortably with him at night and then pass by him like a stranger in the day. I wasn’t going to play that game of espionage, meet me at the jungle café at four-oh-five. No. He could own it or he couldn’t have it.

That's what I thought about while I wrote up the cashbook. He was still wandering, looking at stuff, talking mindlessly about zebras and chemotherapy and the cooking classes he was going to take next month. I tuned out. He was looking for a new present for his wife, wasn't he? I glared at his back, thought about second-place some more. Second place. First place for losers.

There was kind of a weird tension between us, when we weren't fucking. I felt it at dinner, over oysters and tequila. He said we should get drunk. I said that wouldn't fix us. He said what needed fixing? I said his face was annoying. He said at least someone wanted to spend time with me. That was a mistake. Maybe we only got along when we were fucking. I said this to him.

'But I'm a good listener,' he said.

'Oh. Right. And who else would I tell my tale of woe?'

'Don't be like that.'

'Oh, come off it. Like you're not getting off on being the less damaged person, even if you are the one fucking around.'

'I don't think you're damaged.'

'I haven't even got to the bottom of it yet!'

I looked away, blinked fast. Fucking couldn't cry. How humiliating.

He reached under the table, touched my knee. I jerked away, out of principle. He could touch me properly. It was over the table or nothing.

Later, when he was curled around me, I felt like he was a wave about to break. It was still his same strong arms, the wire grey hair, the rise and fall of his chest when he breathed too slow, but he was different, restless. Maybe I should have loved him better. Maybe I should have tried harder. He was telling me small things. The way he fought with his brothers when he was a boy, the apple pie his mom made every year

for his birthday, even now that he was a grown man how the sugared topping fell in small irregular clumps, that even after forty-five years she still couldn't get it right. The small squealing piglet sounds his daughter made when she was born. He said she was in remission, doing well, wanted another child. I said not to bother me with the details.

And then –you still fuck? He said well, she is my wife. I thought then that I should definitely have loved him better. But I was nothing against the power of duty, the destruction of shared experience, belonging. The set of expectations that came with being married. I wondered if I was just something to keep the bed warm, someone to stave off the loneliness, or worst of all, the ego fuck. I knew I should push away from him, value myself more. Here I was, a charity fuck. I should be with someone I drove wild, someone who knew how to look at me in lingerie, someone who didn't just expect me to fall into bed with him like it was his right. Someone who actually saw me, not just another pair of tits. I was under no illusions that's all I was to Harry.

After dinner I was cold, so I said I was going to take a shower before we went to bed. He said suit yourself, but don't expect me to wait up for you. My voice was arch, too highly pitched. A tinny laugh. Of course not, why would you do that? In the shower I braced my hands against the wall and wondered what the fuck I was doing. *Don't expect me to do anything for you.* That was the response of a sluggish man, not a fired up lover. We'd only been fucking for six weeks. He should be in the shower with me, peeling off my clothes, exploring my body in the gentle light of the tea-lights that burned like tears. Not collapsing into bed like it was just another day. Obviously it was just another day to him. Asshole. It was supposed to be a seduction. I threw my black lacy underwear against the wall. He would get a body wrapped in a bath towel tonight. That was all he deserved.

I wish I could say that he knew he'd cocked up and that he made it up to me, sent me something small at work to smooth over my insecurities, told me in plain, sexual language what I did to him, or even just gave me a date for the next time we'd rendezvous but no, nothing. I wish I could say that I didn't accept that he didn't acknowledge it, but I did, and because I did, that made it OK. Made it accepted behaviour. I wanted to go back to the easy early days when we just took our clothes off and shagged, before expectations crept in and poisoned everything. Why couldn't I just be happy with his cock? I was before. Ughghghgh. It was fucking difficult being a girl.

When I was thirteen, or maybe twelve, I woke up one night and my bedroom door was open and the tired light from the hallway filled the room. I saw my brother, Joseph, or maybe it wasn't my brother standing at the end of my bed staring down at my breasts. It was a hot night, I went to bed wearing just panties, and the sheets had slipped down during the night. They weren't very big, they were still trying to be breasts, but they were more than buds, they were large enough to pull away in the middle. I didn't fully wake up but pulled the covers back up to my chin, looked at my brother in the half-light of the room but was it my brother? He went away and closed the door and I went back to sleep and somehow I slept really well.

After that night with Harry, when he just went to bed, I started looking at other men. Why not? Now that the big V was out of the way there was nothing stopping me from doing it like a dude and using someone for sex. I mean it would help if I liked them, but at this stage I wasn't too picky. I slept with a man that I'd just met that day, and to my surprise, I found that I could do it, that it wasn't that big a deal. It's not like I really enjoyed it, but it's not like it was bad either. I was loathe to admit that he

wasn't Harry, and that it bothered me. Fucking Harry. This strange man was all arms and limbs and hair and sweat and it was just... nothing. Sure, he kissed me on the corner of my mouth like I liked, he bit me gently on my lower lip, he pinned me down with his big thick forearm heavy against my chest, but there was just something missing. I guess it was because I felt absolutely nothing for him.

I barely even mustered a gasp when I saw his cock. I couldn't even fake admiration. It was huge and it wasn't ugly but it was... just another pound of flesh. I didn't really know what to do when my mouth didn't touch the base, didn't even touch my hand around the base. And I didn't like it when he handed me the condom to unfurl over it while he lay back on his hands and watched me work. He could put on his own fucking condom. He said no one had ever made him put on the condom and I said your dick, you wrap it. But the awful truth was I just hadn't handled one before, not even on a banana.

He left afterwards and it kind of miffed me, but I was glad he was gone. It taught me something about myself. I wasn't an eats, shoots, and leaves girl; I would never again fuck a guy I wanted to leave. All night I felt the strange warm indent he left in the bed and the next day the only indication he'd ever existed was that I could still feel him inside me, his great big cock like a fork on my insides.

I didn't tell Harry about it. That one was for his wife.

Dinner time at the ministry was truly a watering hole. I used to like setting up early, watching the tigers circle. It was the equivalent of cheap daytime TV, every mealtime built a little more on the relationships advanced the night before. One night I saw a boy put his hand on Diana's knee, under the table. Wagner's Diana. She was still around. She didn't leave to get married, like we all assumed when Wagner didn't bring her on tour. There were so many urban legends about her. My favourite was the

one about the guys who would never talk to her, but every year would bring their binoculars to the conference and watch her from the upper balcony. The best part about this was that everyone thought it was completely normal behaviour. No one thought that maybe she would like to be talked to, like a human being. So I was halfway glad to see this man put his hand on her knee.

Touching a female was, of course, completely forbidden under the house rules. And there was a long, long list of those. When I first arrived, fifteen years old and budding with promise, I'd never seen such a grand old place. The main building was a stately old home, thirty bedrooms and counting, set in the middle of fifty acres of rolling lawn and wooded hills. It was bequeathed to Wagner by an old widow some twenty years earlier, and he'd built it into the crown jewel of the ministry. There were aviaries and a falcon run, tennis courts, a lap pool, a long meandering river that cut through the wildling pines, log cabins in the far reaches of the property, bunkhouses lying long and low behind the main house. I'd heard he'd wanted horses, but that the neighbours wouldn't sell their adjoining land, scuppering all plans for a ranch. Rumour was the neighbours weren't that happy to have a cult on their doorstep. We prayed for them.

The truth is, if you want to be rich, start a religion. None of us were paid, well, maybe some of the families that lived on-site were – the fathers working as directors of the ministry, the mothers raising their children and chaperoning the rest of us. The ministry believed in powerful leadership, in providing strong male role models for the boys so they would grow up into strong men in this weak world we lived in. Women were expected to get by alright, we were OK, and we weren't expected to change the world anyway.

When I arrived, fresh-faced and fifteen, Mrs Daley met me in the lobby; house-mother for the week. The driver unloaded my two bags at the front door, I was

embarrassed that they didn't match. I'd always imagined myself with beautiful dark luggage, stylishly put together. The rules of the house were laid out in the lobby on two huge, flowering embroidered canvases. I had to hold back a laugh because they kind of reminded me of the Ten Commandments. I could see Mr Wagner carrying them down the big curving staircase to the sounds of trumpet and thunder. I really had to reel in my disrespect. I straightened up, held my hands behind my back while she read out the rules. I really could read. Oh, stop. There was nothing new. Most of the list was of course dress related as well as guidelines for interacting with the opposite sex. The dress code was long and boring: long black skirts for the girls, nothing above the knee, no splits, no sheer material. White shirts with long sleeves, or capped sleeves, but absolutely no t-shirts and nothing sleeveless or with a scooped neck or v-neck. No patterned hosiery, no open-toed shoes, no high-heels higher than two inches. No coloured shoes, no dyed hair, no heavy makeup, and naturally, no form-fitting clothes and absolutely NO pants. It would be easy not to attract the boys, dressed like that. But still, in this hotbed of teenage emotions, the temptation of the flesh was strong. And no one wanted to be responsible for weakening a good Christian man, for giving him lustful thoughts. It was far better to dress appropriately, to cover ankles and shoulders and décolletage and bottoms; to avoid all appearance of evil. No one wanted to be the one who caused a man to look on her the way he should only think of his wife.

All fraternising between male and females was strictly prohibited. The rules weren't even slightly unclear on this point. Boys and girls did not communicate with one another outside of Bible study, and occasionally, meal times. No loitering lingering or flirting was tolerated. Perhaps the briefest conversations between the opposite sex would be overlooked, but nothing more than a few seconds, and in passing, and preferably chaperoned. No mixed-sex sports games after hours, no scary

stories around a campfire unless the company was split down the middle, boys on one side, girls on the other. Talking to a boy was basically dating him. This is what was honed into us from the beginning. And there was certainly NO dating to be done on ministry grounds. Dating was preparation for divorce. We all knew that. It went without saying that a boy couldn't set foot in the female dormitories, and vice versa. Many a student had been sent home for lesser offences. All in all these rules were established to protect us. A hive of young folks out from under the protection of their folks? It was a hothouse of anarchy waiting to happen.

So I don't know how that boy got away with putting his hand on Diana's thigh. I could see it, quite clearly, and I was the *least* hawk-like person in the room. I hadn't yet realised there were rules for all, and then rules for some. I also didn't know he was the son of Wagner's right hand man and that if anyone went, it would be her.

Dinner was another regulation affair, corn on the cob, green beans from the glass house, roast chicken with basic gravy and the much better bacon stuffing, potatoes over-boiled and mushy. So far, because I was so young, I'd missed out on kitchen duty. This was unusual, but not unheard of. I spent my days larking around in the education room and then assisting in the development studio in the afternoon. I worked under Diana, and I had a first-class case of hero-worship. So far she was as nice as her smile. I still hadn't met Wagner. He wasn't on campus at the moment, but I looked for him every night, until eventually, one evening, he appeared in the dining hall. He walked straight over to Diana, rested a hand on her shoulder, started chatting with the young man next to her. I saw him surreptitiously curl his hand away from her knee. He was a repeat offender.

Wagner talked with the man for a while and then took his leave, wandering over to the buffet. It was quite late, towards the end of dinner service, so there were no queues, just a few stragglers here and there. Wagner greeted each one of them,

looking deep into their eyes, clasping their hands in a firm handshake, thanking them for their service. It was all very military. I watched all of this furtively over whatever we were having for dinner, I think it was beef casserole and potato dauphinoise. At least, I remember stabbing at grey things on my plate, pushing peas around. I thought he looked older than I remembered. Well, that would be about right. He *was* older. And I felt a very grown up almost-sixteen, my hair curling down around my waist, even if it was brown it was shiny, my smart white broderie anglaise blouse. I was glad I'd worn something nice, even if it was only Wednesday. I was prettier than everyone at my table, too.

We were all shocked when Mr Wagner approached our table with his plate – our table being me and a handful of the other newbies, various scraglers under the age of sixteen. You could feel the table straighten up, the collective intake of breath. He sat down and started talking and quite frankly, I thought he would be more interesting. Although maybe that was unfair. He was clearly tired. He asked each one of us our names, what we did, how long we'd been at the ministry. So run of the mill. I'd expected angels to fly out of his mouth whenever he opened it, really I did.

A couple of weeks later I met Wagner officially, that night in his office when he took my hand and prayed for me. After that he took to regularly sitting at our table, twice a week, often more, whenever he was in residence. He got more interesting too, telling stories about his childhood, cracking jokes. Gradually older staffers migrated over to our table. It became the place to be. Sometimes he sat next to me and it felt like he sat far too close, like that night in the van. Sometimes I thought he wished he was that young man, that young man who could touch Diana surreptitiously under the table and everyone would turn the other cheek. I knew he was running his hand up and down his trouser leg, up and down. I could feel it.

It was about this time that an opportunity came up outside the ministry. It was

almost unheard of – we didn't leave the compound alone, and we certainly didn't gain *employment* outside of the ministry grounds. That's not what we were here for. But the local zoo and ecological centre reached out to Mr Wagner in a time of need, and Mr Wagner responded. They'd had a good working relationship in the past as the zoo supplied the falcons that Wagner was so proud of, his special pets. So he could hardly say no when they asked to borrow a teenager for a couple of weeks. Lord knows he had enough of them about the place.

He called me up to his office one afternoon, and I was surprised, after knocking and walking in, to see Diana there too. Something died in my chest. What had I done? I knew I was being sent home, I just knew it. But Wagner was beaming. He marched around to the front of the desk, pulled out a chair for me to sit in, clapped his hand around my shoulders.

'Well, my little Amy, I have some great news.'

I wished he would just talk quicker, get it over with. Was I going to be a secretary? I couldn't, I was only sixteen. But, but –

'I'm sending you away for a few weeks.'

Well that was just great.

'–to work at the zoo, in the afternoons. They're short-staffed and have had a run of bad hires, so they reached out to me and well, you were the pick of the bunch. We're all so proud of you, Amy, how well you're doing here. You've really blossomed.'

He was grinning away. I didn't really understand how it worked. We never went off the property unaccompanied. But... I guess if Mr Wagner suggested it, there was nothing wrong with it.

A couple of days later I was sitting in the forest enjoying my one afternoon

off. I loved the way the wind whistled among the wilding pines, the sound of birdsong, and the rush of small purple flowers growing amongst the tree roots. I liked to spend hours down here, far enough away from the cabins on the western boundary, but deep enough into the woods that I didn't see a soul and could skip rocks and lie on the forest floor and be well and truly not bothered by anyone.

If this were Disney my prince would come along, walk straight out from behind that big fat tree trunk. I tried to imagine which one he'd be, but it was hard to scrape my memory back that far, secular books and movies were banned when I was about seven, when my parents really got serious about the ministry. But still, I had flashbacks to dancing princesses and underground kingdoms and cloaks of invisibility. I decided my prince would have brown hair and kind brown eyes, maybe blue at a pinch. Although blue was a bit overrated. A bit too *good*. And he would only be around to provide the princess title, because let's be honest, they weren't much good for anything else, at least not in the movies. But ugh, this was silly. Clearly I was frying my brains at the ministry. I was getting delusional and regressive. Hardly what Mr Wagner would expect of me. Oh shit, Wagner.

I almost didn't see him before he came upon me, walking along with his hands in his pockets and his head down. I scraped myself off the floor, stealthily picked the pine needles from my hair. Hopefully he wouldn't see me. I was tucked way down in little indent by the river after all. But no, the man had the eyes of God.

'Amy! What are you doing away down here all by yourself?'

'Hi, Mr Wagner. It's my afternoon off and I always come down here. To pray,' I added.

He scrambled down the tree roots and I cast an eye over what I was wearing; not my proudest moment. It took him a minute to climb down to where I was. His shoes were so shiny I could see my face reflected in them, small and round.

‘Phew, that’s a bit of a hike, young lady.’ He bend down, brushed off his trouser leg. ‘Mind if I join you?’

I shrugged. ‘You’re down here now.’

He laughed. ‘You have the makings of a very honest young woman.’

I shrugged again. ‘I try.’

He gestured to the forest floor. ‘Please, take a seat. Don’t let me stop you.’

I perched on a tree root. He came and sat next to me, started picking pine needles out my hair.

‘Don’t move,’ he said.

I wished my parents knew Eric Wagner was picking pine needles out my hair. I wish my twelve year old self knew Eric Wagner would one day pick pine needles out of my hair. I would never have worried so much.

‘What do you think about, when you’re down here?’ His hand lingered over my hair. He had great big hands and I could just feel him touching the ends of my hair. Maybe he wrapped the ends around his wrist, I don’t know. It was very long. I looked out over the river, watched the water; it was far too green. A family of blue-winged teal ducked and bobbed along the surface. It was strange to see such a large group of ducks together in the wild, the ducklings fluffy, still half-down. I guess they felt safe in this environment with its lack of natural predators.

‘Right now I’m thinking about those ducks.’ I said, pointing them out, all eight of them. ‘But usually I think about my life, how I think it will turn out, the places I’ll go. I think about the people I’ve met, and the people I’ve yet to meet. I think about meeting my future husband one day and how I still have that to look forward to.’

He laughed, more to himself than at me, a deep friendly chuckle. ‘And you pray, too.’

‘Oh, right. That.’ I laughed. Caught out. ‘I do try and meditate but it’s so hard

sometimes.’

‘*The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.* Don’t be too hard on yourself, Amy. It takes a lifetime of application. Climbing on that altar is a daily sacrifice. And you’re only what, eighteen?’

‘Sixteen, sir.’

‘My goodness. I forget you are so young.’ He looked away, lost in some other place.

‘I’m fifty-one, Amy. I’ve seen so many students come and go. You’re one of the special ones. I sense that you’ll stay with me all my life.’ He turned towards me on the log so his knees touched mine, so he could see me better. He reached for my hand and I let it sit on my knees between us. ‘I see so many young people, every day my job is young people, working with them, counselling them, exhorting them, training them. You’re the first one that’s come along that’s given *me* back something. There’s something very special about you and I thank God every day for you. Your heart is open. That’s a rare and beautiful gift.’

He let go of my hand, pushed back from the log, paced along the water’s edge. ‘I really am confoundedly jealous you’re leaving me to go work at the zoo. I don’t want to share you with anyone. You see, my Amy, I’m not perfect either. My character is something I also have to work on daily.’ He looked up at the sky, scrunched his face up. ‘Jealousy and envy are some of the sins God hates the most. Love and gratefulness are the opposite of jealousy. Do you know the definition of jealousy? No, how can you, you don’t even know the meaning of love, do you. It’s that strong, passionate feeling of possessiveness. God himself calls himself a *Jealous God*. And I am a jealous man.’ He laughed, that chuckle again. ‘And I envy your pure hearted lack of guile.’

I always liked watching him preach. I was sitting with Diana, in the front row and it was Friday night, the series we fondly dubbed *Weekends with Wagner*. It was a little kick-starter for the weekend, a one hour power session with Mr Wagner, exclusive to the students serving at the ministry. Attendance was usually pretty good, and afterwards we drank lemonade and ate homemade cake. There was always a great selection, hummingbird, red velvet, devil's food cake, angel's food cake. We called the devil's food cake chocolate cake but really, it was devil's food cake. I knew this because I spent my spare evenings reading food magazines, one of the few magazines approved at the ministry. I'd recognise that dark chocolate frosting and rich crumb anywhere.

But yes, I liked watching him preach. It was like he came alive, shook off any tiredness and weariness that lingered from his job, I mean, counselling teenagers today, who would do it? When he preached he looked like he looked in the woods, full of vitality and crackling with passion. You could tell he meant what he said and I liked a man who meant what he said. I liked anyone who meant what they said. Fire was catching.

Tonight he talked about how our bodies were no longer vessels for earthly passions but holy chattels for the worship of Christ. I made little notes in my journal in crabbed rabbit handwriting. He talked about being single, about being called to be single. How putting Christ in the place of a husband or wife was not an empty life – did we want a man or woman who by their very sin nature would only disappoint? God would never leave us, never hurt us, would never betray us. In being married to Christ we'd loose the burden of coveting earthly love and affection, being crowned instead with glory, our lives serving a higher purpose. He asked, who amongst us felt lonely? I breathed small measured breathes. I felt lonely every day of my life. I felt less lonely now that I had Wagner to tell my small private concerns but still, I felt

lonely. There is no shame in being lonely, he said. But there is a higher way, there is a better way. Practice hospitality, charity, do not look inwards to your own wants and desires, but project your desires outwards, look to the needs of others, and in doing so, you will be fulfilled.

I wrote all of this down. I was so intent on writing that I almost missed him finishing up:

‘Each and every single one of you is precious to me. You are a priceless gift entrusted to me by your parents, by God, and I take my responsibility to each one of you seriously. There is something very special about every single one of you and I thank God for each one of you, daily.’

Harry asked if I’d blown him. I said shut your face! He said well, the man was clearly begging for it. I said that was disgusting. And he said, well, you said you were a virgin, but how much of a virgin were you really? I said that was offensive. He said he wondered how many girls, and maybe boys, took that penis in their mouths deep in the woods. I said he missed the point entirely. He said he didn’t think he did. It kind of upset me. Everything about Harry upset me these days. That was falling in love. It shouldn’t be falling in love. Falling in love should be easy and natural and feel like skin, easily worn. It shouldn’t be an effort. A hike in emotions, for sure. But it shouldn’t be work. I guess it was work because it wasn’t natural.

He had his wife and I had nothing and no place with him but it was hard, the more we slept together, the more we breathed together, the more I felt I didn’t want to let him go. And then he opened his mouth and fixed that problem for me, I would push him away, call him stupid, an asshole, arrogant in his confidence in my affection, thinking I would always forgive him, always come back for more punishment. He just laughed and called me a woman which pissed me off even more.

It hurt me because there was no way to hurt him equally.

I hated his flippancy about Wagner, so quick to dismiss him in purely sexual terms. They were obviously the only terms he understood. Sometimes he even made me miss Wagner and I knew that was wrong. How could I miss *him*? But Harry didn't know what it was like to grow up with someone you revered as a god, how could he? Every experience I shared with Harry was a moment that took me further away from feeling human.

I wondered: did anyone ever really love you? Did people really love each other or did they just love the way the other person made them feel? I knew the affair was not about me, it was about the way I made him feel. I guessed that was true about love too. It was never about you. It was only ever about the way you made them feel.

He used to tell me, frequently: *I love myself when I'm with you. I don't know myself, I'm a new person. You've given me a new lease on life, baby.* He thought he was telling me what I wanted to hear but I knew that he only liked me because I let him explore new areas of himself, dangerous parts of his sexuality, parts of him that had outlet with me because I was another. I liked this about myself, but I was pragmatic enough to realise that it could just as easily been someone else. Somehow, somewhere along the way I'd learned the difference between someone caring for their dick and caring for me. It wasn't me. There was no me. There was just her. But most of all there was just *him*.

I was under no illusions that had there been no her, there would never have been an us. We only existed because we were a fantasy, we were not real, we could never sustain in the real world. The realities of life would have quickly choked away whatever passion we might have felt. I was an illusion of happiness, pure physical pleasure. I used to give myself this pep talk every night when I was alone in my bed, wondering if he was with her, or if she was in her cold and clinical hospital bed. At

times I didn't feel that much different from her.

He surprised me one day by taking me to the beach. His in-laws said he needed a weekend to himself, told him to take some time to rejuvenate before his wife came home and the next big push started. So they sent him to their beach house and naturally, he took me. I wasn't surprised to see that it was one of those big old vacuous houses perched pretentiously over the ocean and furnished straight out of a flashy magazine. The beachy white furniture, the duck egg blue accents, the anchors and sea-shells and wooden oars. I could see where the wife got her taste from; there were taxidermy animals in each of the main rooms, a stretched-out seagull, quails, cats, a long-haired snagged-toothed white rabbit straight out of hell. Harry said they were an in-joke. I said he didn't need to apologise to *me* for his embarrassing in-laws. He said we should have sex in all the rooms. I said I wasn't going to be watched by a rabbit. And anyway, hadn't he watched a single crime show? Didn't he know that's where they hid the cameras?

I carried the alcohol and Harry followed up with the groceries. He told me to go ahead, have a look around. It was all so blue – the wispy blue clouds sitting low on the horizon, or was that the line of the ocean? the big towering cumulous clouds rolling above the beach and threatening rain, the rustle of the long dry dune grass, blue-grey tinged from the lingering heat of summer. I was glad we'd left the city early. I'd already told him that I wasn't going to sleep in the master bedroom, that I didn't care if it had a magnificent marble bathtub overlooking the sea, there was no way I was going to sleep in the master bedroom. He laughed and called me a hypocrite. I said he could sleep there himself. I already put my lips where she put her lips. If I could avoid laying my head where she laid hers I would.

That first night we got roaringly drunk. We'd brought everything we needed so we didn't have to leave the house for three days. There was tequila for years and

plenty of nasty headachy bubbly wine – the stuff hangovers were made of – and there was a cache of good quality red, and a bottle of bourbon for when it got really rough. I said I didn't really drink, which was true. I had a bottle of baileys in my fridge for emergencies but that was about it. He said we needed to start on the red while we could still appreciate it, then move on to the nasty bubbles to get properly trashed. I said I didn't know what kind of drunk I was. He said that was all part of the fun. I said he'd stop laughing if I turned out to be a sad drunk, or worse, an angry one. He said I was angry enough in real life so surely being drunk would give me a break from being me? I hit him hard and then I jumped him, right underneath the judgemental nose of the hell-bunny.

In the morning he disappeared before we'd even had sex. I wondered what *was* this early morning sex he'd talked of? Probably myth. I didn't feel too bad at all, all things considered. I could see straight and there didn't seem to be any holes in my memory. And then – oh god! I'd totally sucked his dick after anal. Oh my god, it was disgusting.

I rolled around on the bed in a fit of shame and then decided – there was nothing much I could do about it, so I might as well chill the fuck out. I looked at my watch, nearly eleven. He must've gone for a run on the beach or something equally stupid. I got up, walked naked across the polished wooden floors – yes! winning! I could walk in a straight line! I was puffy and sore and well fucked and so I stretched out by the big windows overlooking the bay and looked for dolphins; I'd always wanted to see a dolphin but it was never my luck.

'Nice arse,' he said, coming up behind me.

I jumped, I couldn't help it, it was an embarrassing family trait.

I turned around, shimmied my boobs to make up for any self-consciousness I might have felt. I pushed the nasty morning hair out of my face and ran and jumped

back on the bed. I tried not to grin but I really felt like my face was splitting.

‘What *is* this?’

‘Big fat blueberry pancakes, bacon, syrup, vodka and orange juice.’

‘No, I mean, who is this?’

‘Just being my usual charming, awesome self.’

He perched the tray on the bed, climbed under the covers next to me. I pushed him off me.

‘I don’t want you. I want pancakes.’

‘That’s not what you said last night,’ he said, laughing.

‘Oh God, don’t tell me.’ I pulled my manky morning hair back over my face, looked at him sideways through spread fingers.

He laughed. ‘No, I’m not gonna. I’m just gonna live on it and drip feed you pieces of information bit by bit at inopportune moments.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘*I remember every single thing thank you very much.*’

He laughed harder this time. ‘Oh I don’t think you do.’

Oh shit fuck.

We spent the day on the beach and in the sea and I was really surprised that he was so romantic. It was a honeymoon without the husband, I could live with that. When we were finally worn out and sandy and the sun was dying and the vodka in our water bottles was warm and tepid I said that I wanted to cook dinner. I wanted to do something nice for him. And I hadn’t had a chance yet to cook a meal for him, and that was something I enjoyed. I didn’t like cooking for one. The point wasn’t the food, it was the other person enjoying it. I knew what it tasted like. And so we packed up our towels and umbrellas and picnic basket and stumbled up the wooden stairs to the beach house.

‘Oh God,’ he said, when I tripped on my fifth step. ‘I don’t have high hopes for dinner.’

‘Shut up, you moron, I’m an excellent cook.’

He was laughing. ‘And you’re a *terrible* drunk.’

I scowled at him over my shoulder and spent the rest of the staircase overcompensating, staring at the stairs until I felt my eyes bulging out of my head. Nope, nothing wrong with me.

He went for a nap and I had a look around the kitchen. I thought fresh fish tacos, a crisp white wine, some homemade guacamole and maybe apple tarte tatin later, when the sun went down and the heat died off something caramelly and sticky would be perfect.

I wanted fresh fish. That was the one concession I was willing to make; leaving our love nest for fresh flaky fish. I pulled out the ingredients I needed so that I would have a quick start later, lined them up on the counter. The kitchen looked right out over the dunes and sea, it was going to be the best meal I ever made. I checked my face in the bathroom mirror, tucked my t-shirt into my jeans shorts, put on a bra. My skin was covered in millions of tiny freckles. I had never seen myself like this. I liked it.

I jumped on the first bike I found, a small blue bike that I hoped wasn’t hers. I guessed it would take me about ten minutes to peddle into town and anyway, it was a magnificent night, the sky flushed pink, a few stars desperately trying to be stars. He told me there was an excellent fish market on the edge of town, to look for Larry, that he’d look after me. I almost wished he was coming with me and then I realised – enough. Enough was enough. I decided to think instead about him; how good it was for him that he’d be well rested and how good it was for me that he’d be restored for the night ahead. And anyway it was good for him to be able to completely unwind and

relax and let go of being a dad and a husband and all his worries, even if it was just for a while. And I'd had him at the grocery store anyway. When we started our trip, thirty minutes into the drive we'd piled out and into the store and everyone knew that when you went to the grocery store together it was *something*. You didn't go get the groceries together and *not fuck*.

I found Larry's fish shop no problem and was happily browsing the catch of the day when he got chatting, told me he'd got in some sea-run frostfish that afternoon that he *would* have recommended but that it was already starting to smell like lady parts and that you couldn't trust a fish from the east side. I gave him one of those little half smiles that celebrities have perfected and realised that while I might say fuck and cunt and do it like a porn star (sometimes), that Harry had completely overestimated me. Larry wasn't my type at all; his coarseness had at *least* twenty years on mine.

I kept browsing, looking at rows of fish, pearlescent cod, bloody salmon, but all I could see was vagina. Was it true you were either fish or cheese? Who started that rumour anyway, some dumb fratboy? The more I thought about vagina, the more I saw vagina; in the fleshy folds of the codfish, in the gapey openings of the groper, not to mention the slick wetness of the oysters – thanks a lot Larry. So yeah. I'd pretty much psyched myself out of fish so I started thinking about my other options. Beef? Yeah, beef would do. But then I'd have to change the wine and –fuckit. There would be something deliciously ironic about serving Harry vagina fish and so I ordered four fillets of the whitest cod. Fuck them all. If I didn't have to eat it I would've certainly bought frostfish. They should hear what we could say about *dick*.

In bed, after sex, he asked me if I'd ever skinny dipped and I said no, our bodies weren't something to be flaunted for the world to see and that was a habit that died hard. He asked me what I really believed. I said... I didn't exactly know. I said back then there was a lot of pressure on a woman, that we were responsible for the

way a man looked at us, and we were responsible for minimising the damage to his soul and sexual freedom by limiting the extent of his gaze, no ankles, no shoulders, no boobs. Harry said that was ridiculous because how could you control what was in another man's mind? I said I know, that at the end of the day it was about controlling us, not about controlling what went on in another man's mind. He said we were basically a more socially acceptable version of the burqa and I said yes. He asked what it was *really* like to live like that and I said I didn't really think about it much, because it was our normality.

But that there was all kinds of weird pressures and hypocrisies, like outer beauty, so highly valued by Wagner but so decidedly derided by other leaders in the cult. I told him about the girl with the magnificent golden hair who was told to cut it all off because it caused people to look at her twice, and that could cause them to feel lustful thoughts, stumble and fall, and that *she* would have to stand before God one day and give account of her actions, and how much would her vanity mean to her then, eh? They seemed to forget that they credited God with giving her that very same head of hair. –She got rid of the hair.

It was about as logical as the reasons why the cinema was banned: a fellow Christian might see you go into the movies and even if you were going to see a G-rated film, how would they know that? And why were you feeding the pleasures of the flesh anyway? All personal responsibility was removed. They could use *your* actions as justification to see a film of sexual nature. And if they saw a movie with sex scenes in it, you were responsible for it. And somehow, the way this was packaged, so earnestly in a white shirt and tie and a side-part, you never really questioned it, you overlooked anything that might have made you feel vaguely uncomfortable because the 'heart was in the right place'. Not only were we to avoid movie theatres, but we were to 'confront' those who did attend them, Christian or

otherwise, because we were duty-bound not to turn a blind eye to places of worldly entertainment. It was *sex* that caused us to curl our toes in our shoes. We were blindingly obsessed with it. Blowing things up was fine but sticking a dick in something was completely unnatural.

He said it was time I got comfortable in my own skin and that this mission was obviously his calling in life and did he sound enough like Wagner when he said that? I said *get your hands off me*; he said the body is a beautiful thing and nothing to be ashamed of. I said I wasn't used to being naked and he said he'd noticed how uncomfortable I was, either making everything a joke or completely avoiding being seen with the lights on. I said I didn't want to be that person. He said, very gently, that it wasn't unnatural. I said, quite meanly, that it wasn't his job to fix me. He asked if he could undress me.

'Fine.' I said, eventually.

'Don't make it a joke,' he said.

I just looked at him. *Try and stop me.*

I said he clearly saw me as a fixer-upper and he said for once in my life could I stop trying to get in the last word? That sobered me up, hit me where it hurt, because I had to acknowledge to myself that the cult did scar me, that I hadn't managed to shake it all off, that I was still suffering because of the tragic crap I'd believed; that I couldn't be flippant forever.

He led me over to the big floor-to-ceiling mirror in the corner of the room, took my clothing off piece by piece; the singlet he dropped in a soft pile on the floor, the lacy bra, the pale leather shorts, the bright pink thong. I looked at his face, there was no judgement there, no pity, a rare combination. I was forced to confront the ugly howling beast inside of me, the beast that judged him for having a wife and an affair. I

really thought he was a worse person than me. And then I realised, there was no better or worse. There just was. And at that moment I just saw us for what we were, just two people. Two people hated for this moment but perversely, that in this moment there was only beauty, purity and truth, even though I was standing there naked with another woman's husband.

He turned me around to face the mirror, stood behind me as he ran his hands over my body, took my hands from by my sides and guided them over my skin, told me I was beautiful. He told me to look at myself and see that I was beautiful. And eventually, I was able to look myself in the eye and see me. No false skin, no security, no lies, no rules. And I didn't feel turned on, not looking at him looking at me. I just felt terribly sad and clean and light. Lightness was an awfully strange feeling.

He told me to stop crying, pulled my by the hand and ran down the hall, making me cry-laugh at his stupid youthful enthusiasm. He pulled off his shirt as he ran, threw it on the floor, ran down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped, let go of my hand, I was puffing and laughing and not crying anymore. He ripped off his jeans, told me to *shuttup*. I was laughing, there was nothing erotic about it. He mooned me, pulled off his boxers, ran into the bathroom, his dick swinging between his legs. He grabbed two beach towels and tossing one at me told me to hurry up, that he wasn't waiting for me and neither was the beach. I said wait, what? He said you couldn't go your entire life without running naked down the beach. I said oh, my God. He said stop thinking, that is your problem. I said you asshole! and he took off and I tried desperately to catch him.

We tore down the beach stairs like idiots, it was 10am and we hoofed it across the sand like wild things. It was just starting to heat up and somehow without clothes everything seemed a bit sharper; the crunch of a million grains of sand underfoot, tiny seashells between my toes, the bite of the sea-breeze, the taste of salt-spray, bitter in

my mouth. I didn't realise how great it was not to care until I didn't. I was still chasing him, I couldn't catch up, he had a least a foot on me and those long mean legs left me for nothing. *Don't stop* he yelled at me as he sprinted into the surf and I ripped my towel away from my body carelessly, probably too far from the shore but hey, who cared, and I sprinted the last few paces to the sea, felt the sharp bite of the sea water fierce against my shins, splashed my way into the ocean, collapsed into a big soaking pile into the sea.

Afterwards we couldn't find our towels, some well-meaning beach-goers had moved them away from the surf, tossed them high up in the dunes amongst the grassy weeds. It was either that or some silly pranksters wanted us to run naked towards the houses in the full light of the day.

Late in the afternoon of our last day we lay together in the long grasses of the sand dunes. It was a different kind of peace with the distant foam of the ocean and the rustling dryness of the grass and I liked lying on my back hidden amongst all the weeds and flowers and flotsam and driftwood. He pointed out the camphor weed and prairie sunflowers and the long lean fluffy bunny tails which bobbed in the breeze. He said that when they were kids they used to make mice out of bunny tails – the fluffy head the mousy body, the stalk the stringy tail, and then they'd glue googly eyes on them and take them home from vacation and stick them in vases in their bedrooms. He said he wished he did stuff like that with his kids and I said why didn't he bring them to the beach more often? He said that was the thing, that he'd gotten so used to having them about the place that he overlooked them. I thought maybe if he spent less time thinking about his dick... but no, that was unkind.

I was very glad to have him here with me, I mean, I wouldn't be here without him. We lay still for a while until eventually he drifted off and I envied his warm carelessness, the slow rise and fall of his chest and his easy conscience. I thought

about him bringing his kids here – and her – and how he would probably run and chase them in the dunes; was he that kind of father? I thought about what it would be like for him without me here, lying in the big master bed with her, fruit loops and wheaties for breakfast, long days playing games in the surf, fucking her into easy oblivion at night. It made my chest tight, but then I thought – stop torturing yourself. You have right now. And that's all you have.

And I had something she'd never have, because she'd never know about this, and that just made it all the more special. Once you share something you lose it. I'd never lose him, I just wouldn't have him with me all the time. And I wasn't one of those people that had to have someone they loved with them every minute of every day. I was perfectly capable of loving him and not being with him. I didn't have that kind of withering love that evaporated like dew under a hot sun.

When he woke he told me he wanted one more secret. I told him he already had all of mine. He said that couldn't be true and I said well – no, it wasn't. He said he'd tell me one if I did, and I said I would give him an explanation but not a secret. He said that wasn't enough. And I said he had enough already, that it wasn't fair he wanted my mind, too.

I told him about visiting a neighbouring church with my family when I was about ten, how the sermon run late and that we were hungry and tetchy but our parents were talking to the minister so we had to pay attention. They always told us *keep your mind where your body is*. It wasn't exactly Biblical, but near enough. On this day there was a pot luck going on but we couldn't join in because we hadn't brought a plate to share and our parents didn't think it was appropriate that we partake, even though there was all my favourite stuff, especially the rice krispie treats. After a bit I thought perhaps the minister was asking me a question but I was only half listening because I was watching the flies lazily buzzing around the cake table. I said, *sorry*,

what did you just say? And the minister was elbowing my older brother and saying *I was just asking if you'd noticed any of our handsome young men in church today?* and my dad jumped right in and said, *oh no, my Amy would **never** do that.*

So you see Harry, I never really had a chance. I was always a possession.

He reached over and tugged on my hair and said *so that's why you resist being caught, my little flightless bird* and I said give it a rest. And then he ruined everything by asking why I couldn't just tell my story straightforward and from the beginning like a normal person and I said trauma is non-linear, asshole. I wouldn't have snapped if he hadn't needled me about normalcy. I felt enough of a freak as it was.

Mr Wagner himself drove me to the zoo for my first day of work. It was unheard of, not practically unheard of, but *actually* unheard of. No one knew he could drive. He had a driver who drove him everywhere, even to church which was a mere five minutes away. But when I reported into the main office at 12:30 with my afternoon tea packed neatly into my handbag, and a small Bible too, there wasn't a driver to be found. I was behind on my memorisation for the month and I knew we'd be quizzed next week, and for me, it was the end of the world. I hated standing up in front of everyone and reciting Bible verses like a moron. Last time I got stage fright and forgot the words like an amateur and then I looked like a complete idiot and people laughed, and I *knew* they laughed even if they did try and disguise it as coughs and anyway, Mr Wagner was going to be there and there was no way in heaven that I was going to look stupid in front of him. So, back to memorising it was. I saw the car pull up so I slipped outside and popped open the passenger door and I was shocked to see Mr Wagner in the driver's seat.

'I, uh, what are you doing here?' Ugh. 'Hello, Mr Wagner.'

He laughed. 'It's not often I get to do the rounds, missy, but I wanted to step

you in on your first day of *official* work. I think your father would like it.'

I blushed. 'Oh, thanks. But you really don't have to come in. I'll be fine.'

'On the contrary! I want to see where you'll be working.'

'Well... that's very good of you. Thank you.'

'Anything for you, my favourite non-secretary.'

I flashed a smile and he continued. 'But...about that. I've been thinking about it, and lifting it up to the Lord in prayer, and I think now is an opportune time to tell you that we've decided that you're *not* going into the character programme like originally planned, but once your schooling is done you're going to move straight into the head office to work with me.'

'What?'

I was jumping the queue?

'Congratulations, Amy, you're joining my team!'

'Wow, I didn't expect that so soon. I mean, if ever,' I corrected myself.

'We don't usually take on secretaries under the age of eighteen but you've proven yourself to be diligent, sincere, hard-working and determined, everything we look for in our girls so well, there was nothing stopping us adding you to the team. It will mean a bit of travel of course, but I don't think you'll mind that?'

'To be honest, Mr Wagner, this is all a bit of a shock. But it is exactly what I've always wanted, so thank you. Thank you so much.'

'Don't thank me. Thank your parents for raising such a Godly, exemplary young woman.'

Things had been a bit strained between me and Mr Wagner for a while, ever since he'd explained exactly what masturbation was. I had no idea it even had a name, let alone that it was bad. And I still didn't know how I found the courage to confess to

him that yes, I touched myself, and often. He said that's what he loved about me, that I had a fearlessness that cut right through my fierceness. I didn't totally understand but he said he would take me through a special Bible study that just for me that would help explain the evils of self-pleasure and what it would mean for my future relationship, if I engaged in it now. I was extremely grateful for the interest he took in me, for his investment in my life.

The most ironic thing about the whole micro-managed shit show that was my teenage years was that I met the great love of my life right under Mr Wagner's controlling thumb and the very best part of it was I met him at the very zoo Wagner placed me in for safe-keeping. It was too good. Even all these years later it still gave me a burst of pleasure to think about the subversion of it all. It was like God was getting his own private laugh. And then I'd get sad all over again, remembering those simple unspoilt days before everything was ruined. Before I lost everything that mattered to me.

One night Harry had me over for dinner and I told him about it; I didn't want to, but he was pestering me for a secret. I knew better, but well— I was a bit pissed and the truth came out. I was feeling gregarious anyway because he'd just cooked dinner for me and no-one had ever cooked me dinner before. Fillet steak and new potatoes and garlic butter and everything.

So yeah, it wasn't my proudest moment sitting in her chair and drinking her wine and telling my married lover about the other men I'd loved, well, more specifically, the one man. His name was Tom. But in my drunken steak-and-fries in-love state with Harry I asked myself, did I *really* love Tom? Maybe *this* was actually real love, this rush of emotion that I felt for Harry. Maybe this was it. Maybe this was what we all spent our lives waiting for. But oh god. If there was one thing I *must not*

do in my drunken state it was tell Harry I love him. So I told him about the other man I loved instead.

‘I thought you’d never *been* in love?’ he said, disgruntled.

I was delighted. Perfect response. Just the right amount of possession. But I was off my tits, and horrifically coherent, a nightmare combination. I was totally betraying my sober self.

‘No. I never said that. Obviously you just assumed it. Gotta be damn careful about those assumptions, Harry!’

‘But... But I thought I would’ve been the first.’

‘Silly! You had my virginity, isn’t that enough for you?’

‘Well... no it’s not, actually.’

Oh yes, he was so wound up. Oh yes, it was magnificent. I might have even done a drunken victory dance. My god.

‘Yeaaaaaah, well there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s done.’

‘Did you *really* love him?’

‘Yes I really loved him. Jesus!’

‘I just can’t believe we’ve been uh,’

‘–fucking each other’s brains out?’

‘–*seeing* each other for six months and you finally tell me that you’ve actually been in love before.’

I laughed, a bit wildly. And then just as suddenly I didn’t find it funny. Drunken Amy was a bit unstable.

‘Well it wasn’t any of your business.’

‘You know mine.’

‘*Yes well you have a wife. Your business is kind of obvious.*’

Even though he was pissed he got the sarcasm. He backed off, went to find

some more wine to further fuel our drunken rampage. At least we'd have sex soon; that would be some respite from the near-hate that was consuming us. Oh well, it would've been boring any other way. I wandered towards the bedroom, carelessly stripping off my clothes, hopefully I remembered them all at the end of the night. Couldn't have the wife finding out that way. I was better than that.

But ugh, I was a fucking terrible drunk. I had zero alcohol tolerance. But then again I hadn't started drinking until I met Harry so well, I blamed Harry. And of course I blamed Wagner.

I bumped into Harry on his way back with more wine and we made out wildly in the hallway, arse everywhere. I don't even *want* to think about what ended up on one of her artworks. We certainly never made it to the bedroom. But at least it took away all thoughts of Tom and my worries about how much to share with Harry because once you shared, it was gone forever. And then he'd disappear from the corners of my mind where he resided like some sacred Buddha. Yes I worshipped him, and yes it was stupid, but I didn't know how to let go. You see, the thing was – and I only figured this once I got with Harry – the price of multiple lovers was disappointment. I thought all kisses would be *his* kisses, but – no. So since I didn't have him I built him up into something ridiculous and godlike and now Harry knew about him he was cheap and grubby. I didn't want him to be cheap and grubby. And I didn't want Harry to have him, and if he knew about him, he had him. So I desperately hoped my drunken confession would leach into the black hole of his memory. Like so many other confessions before, I hoped it would disappear into those wine-soaked wastelands forever.

I met Tom on my first day at work, after Wagner walked me in and passed me around for introductions. I met the zoo manager, Zara, a lean khakied woman in her

early forties, and Wagner's falconer, and Mrs Simpson, the café and gift store manager. They were both a bit tan and leathery, very pleasant of course, but Mrs Simpson was quite fat and we all knew that was just an outward manifestation of inner problems. Mrs Simpson said everyone called her Marge and Zara and Wagner laughed and I was just like, what? OK. Marge it was.

My job wasn't very exciting. I just had to sit in the small kiosk office just inside the main gates and issue passes and stamp hands from 1 – 5, four days a week. I wondered why they didn't just get some pleb from town to do it but Wagner was really vague about how he owed Zara a favour so yeah, whatever. I felt a bit like I was being traded but perversely I felt special too. And once Mr Wagner left and I was alone with Marge I suddenly felt... excited. They offered me a choice of khaki slacks or a beige miniskirt and I chose the skirt because I wasn't very tall and it came down to my knees. All good. I didn't feel comfortable in trousers. That was just one step too far.

Induction was pretty basic. Marge said they were in a bit of a pickle because the last girl got pregnant and left in a hurry and at times like these Wagner was a godsend. She talked me through the system; a stamp to the left-hand, a crocodile stamp for the kids, and then she explained day passes and group passes and senior discounts. She said everything else I needed to know was in the notebook underneath the till and to just read that when I got bored and she popped her gum and said that would be fairly often and ha, no wonder the last girl got knocked up. I said, thanks; was probably a bit prim. Marge told me I could decorate the shack however the heck I wanted and to feel free to take down any of those damn popstar posters and that she'd send Tom around later to give me a tour of the place.

Once Marge left I had a good look at the posters on the wall. *Titanic*, yeah, I'd heard about that. It was almost single-handedly responsible for making boobs

mainstream. We'd *all* heard the parents talking in mortified and hushed tones about their twelve and thirteen year olds sneaking into the cinema. Apparently the whole thing was a titfest. I judged the blonde guy with the stupid haircut pretty harshly. There were other posters too, but they were all boy bands I didn't recognise, all brown hairless chests and stupid bubblegum grins. Honestly, I never knew chests could look like that. I figured it would be no big deal looking at them every day so I decided they could stay.

Tom turned up at 5pm and I was a bit disconcerted to find out he was a good looking blonde guy with a ponytail, not the toothy tattooed dropout I'd been expecting. It was threatening. He laughed when he saw the posters, said they'd been taking bets whether or not I'd have more taste than Kayla but apparently not. I scowled at him, and then I climbed down from my tower to say hi.

When I touched his hand it gave me a sudden pulse of electricity that I'd never felt before in my life and so I jerked my hand back a bit too quickly, unsure if he'd felt it too. Obviously he didn't because he just winked at me with his stupid blue eyes. I turned heel and trotted along behind him.

'I've never met one of Wagner's girls before. I've been curious about you guys for a long time.'

'I'm not Wagner's girl,' I said, a bit too petulantly.

'Sure, whatever,' he said, giving me the side-eye and a cheeky grin. I didn't really know how to take him. Was he making fun of me? Was he serious?

'So what do you do?'

'I'm at school, zoology. Good old summer holidays, gotta do something useful. But yeah, I'm actually really lucky to get this internship. Two months of torture to go,' he said, drawing out his vowels. 'What about you? How long you here for?'

‘I don’t know yet. Just the summer I think.’

He laughed a bit. ‘Yeah, Kayla, that was a bit of a mess.’

I desperately wanted to know what happened but I wasn’t going to ask. We were walking along a narrow gravel path, I wasn’t exactly sure where we were going but he walked a bit too close to me and we bumped elbows often. I had plenty of opportunities to observe him as we walked. I liked that he was tall and brown but I hated the dirty red bandana tied around his head and I thought his long blonde hair was a bit girly.

He only had time to show me the tigers and the lions but said that he’d have more time tomorrow evening and I told him not to get his hopes up, what made him think I’d hang out with him again? He said sorry, it was in his job description...but now that I mentioned it, would I like to get a drink with him tomorrow before work? I said thanks, but I couldn’t do that. He said why not? he believed in the Bible too. I said it wasn’t like that and he said he was looking forward to hearing all my excuses tomorrow but that, unfortunately, right now he had to run. After he left I took my time wandering out of the zoo and when I eventually made it out front the car was idling and it was just the driver, Mr Brown, waiting for me.

He wanted to know why I wouldn’t go for a drink with him and I wanted to know why he was so hung up on it and he said it was just a drink and I said it was never just a drink. That morning I didn’t take much extra care with my hair, but I made sure my mascara was thick and that my eyelashes were curled. It was one way around the no makeup rule as Mr Wagner seemed to think eyelashes naturally presented themselves thick and black and sooty. *Men*. Wagner didn’t drop me off at work but his driver did and I told him not to pick me up later but that I’d walk back. He said he wasn’t sure Wagner would like that.

Just before five o'clock I climbed down from the kiosk and carefully arranged myself up against it, conscious of my best angles and man, that this was an ugly skirt.

Tom jumped when he saw me.

'Shit! What brings you down from your tower of judgment?'

'Stop being mean to me or I'll head back up there.'

He dropped to his knees. '*Noooo, don't punish me again.*'

'Get up you moron.'

He clambered to his feet and I realised he was young, much younger than I'd thought.

'How old are you?'

'Nineteen. How old are you?'

'Sixteen.'

'Jesus! I mean uh, wow. Whoops.'

'Do I really look that much older?'

'Well no, come to think of it, you do act pretty young and immature.'

I glared at him and he smirked at me.

I started to walk off down the garden path and he called me back.

I looked over my shoulder. 'What?'

'Nope. All the way back here, madam.'

I rolled my eyes and backtracked, all the way back to the front of the kiosk.

'Can you please hurry? I've got to get back soon before they send out a rescue party.'

He poked me back into my original position leaning against the kiosk.

'Much better. Right, now please explain to me why you can't get a drink with me.'

'Is that what this is about? Aren't guys just supposed to accept *no* in the

real world?’

‘Well yes,’ he confessed. ‘But you’re one of Wagner’s girls so I’m sure there’s more to it and I want to know. Actually, the only reason I invited you was because you’re from the cult and I really wanted to know what you’d say.’

‘We’re not a cult!’

‘OK, OK, sorry, poor choice of words. Because you’re super-Christian and I wanted to know what you’d say.’

‘Look, I’m not a museum exhibit, OK?’

I must’ve looked mad because he continued hurriedly – ‘to be honest, I’m a pretty decent guy, and I’m not *actually* a dick and I think we should be friends. I bet you don’t have many of those, especially not males. And how will you know how to deal with us in the future if you’re not friends with us now?’

‘Why would you care. I don’t even know you.’

‘Yah, but I know what it’s like to be you. My mom was a Mormon.’

‘Look, we’re *not* a cult and I’m sure this is all very nice of you and everything but I’m just here to work so can you just show me around so I can get home?’ I hated that he had an idea of me before he knew me. Was I really that predictable?

He shut up like a clam and turned on his heel and strode off towards the butterfly house.

‘Did I offend you? I don’t really have a filter.’

‘Not at all,’ he said, cheerfully, and I for a minute I believed him. But then he said *timing is everything* and was so wicked and rockstar that I suddenly realised he was probably Kayla’s baby daddy and that maybe I was next on the list.

He took me to the butterfly house and it was probably the most beautiful place I’d ever been in my life, apart from the one time my dad took me to the beach and it

was the first time I'd seen the Pacific ocean and even though it was freezing I lay in the surf and let the tide wash over me. The butterfly house, on the other hand, was scorching warm and sultry. He let me in the double-doors and then he said yeah, that was what he loved about the job, the look on people's faces when a butterfly landed on their shoulder and boy did I deliver. I couldn't help it, the place was warm and magical and tasted like jasmine flowers and it was definitely a place you could fall in love and he knew it.

Afterwards we sat on the park bench inside the butterfly house and he told me why he wanted to be a zoologist. I tried listening to what he was saying but I was distracted by his nice firm lips and the way they turned down at the corners when he talked. I liked that he could look me in the eye and talk to me straight about real things and that there was none of this mumbling bullshit and guilt and skulking round that I was so used to at the ministry. I hadn't realised the difference between him and the boys I knew but now I did, and I was shocked that actually, they came off second best. He shouldn't come off best! He had long hair and wasn't a Christian for goodness sake. He didn't ask me about the ministry again but we just talked about general things until he said oops, he'd better show me the spider monkeys before we got locked in for the night and then he didn't even make a joke about it and I appreciated that. Afterwards he offered to walk me back and I said yes. And he said what! and I said don't push your luck.

It was only seven and I knew that dinner service would be moving into full swing and that I would be able to slip into the dinning hall unnoticed and no one would be any the wiser. It was only a fifteen minute walk back to the ministry. Tom walked along beside me, half a footpath distance between us, perfectly acceptable. He was my first windfall and I was going to enjoy him.

I was mid-way through some stupid story about camping with my brothers

when I saw the big black ministry sedan coming around the corner towards us. I instinctively moved away from Tom, cast my eyes down and I'll never forget what he said. He said my light went out.

The car pulled up alongside us and the tinted window rolled down and it was Mr Wagner in the driver's seat. I never managed to hide when I was shocked and I certainly didn't manage it today. He stepped out of the car, made a big show of coming up to me and Tom, shook Tom's hand, put his arm around my shoulder, thanked Tom for looking after me, asked Tom about himself. I stood there silently – like midges, I was just waiting for him to bite. But no, he asked how my day was, and how the tour of the zoo went and he was just like anyone else's jolly, fun uncle. I decided maybe I was overreacting but when I got into the car I realised I wasn't.

'What were you doing alone with that young man, Amy?'

'He offered to walk me home so I'd be safe.'

'You would've been safe if Mr Brown had picked you up like he was instructed to do.'

I didn't say anything.

He looked over at me. 'I don't want you stewing away in rebellion over there.'

This wasn't the Wagner I knew. The Wagner for whom I could do no wrong. I almost laughed. There was so much I wanted to say.

'Come on, talk to me,' he said.

'It won't happen again.'

'Amy, my friend, you know better! We are exhorted to put aside all *appearance* of evil. You know better than to be caught alone with a man.'

I wanted to say *then what about now?* but I couldn't. Fine. I just wouldn't get caught. I wasn't going to stop seeing him. For the first time it was *fun* and there was someone who saw me and not my parents or my values or the values they'd installed

in me or any of that other bullshit. It was just me. And I was enough. I wasn't some programmed robot or performing monkey. I wasn't the girl with the longest skirt or the most Bible verses memorised. And I didn't see what was wrong in enjoying it. What was so wrong with having a buddy? If the shit hit the fan I would just say I was ministering to him.

I'll never forget that it was Tom who taught me the small pleasures of a mouth; the beauty of relaxing into another's skin. But it wasn't easy. The first time he kissed me was in the flower garden next to the kids playground at the zoo and the kids were screaming and hollering and I kept my arms folded across my chest and he had to peel them off one by one and I still resisted letting him get close.

And the first time he touched me, gently, on the naked skin of my arm one day when I was pushing a wheelbarrow full of hay bales. I jumped away from him like he'd hit me and he must've seen the terror in my animal eyes because he backed right off. Truth was, I didn't know how to deal with affection. There was no right way to accept it. We weren't supposed to accept it. So we just kept walking along side-by-side carting hay bales, both of us ignoring what had just happened. After we were finished we parted ways at the gate and I thought about his hand on my arm all night – the gentle pressure of his fingers, the soft charge that transferred from his skin to mine. I wanted to like it and I *did* like it but I knew I shouldn't. The next time I saw him I wore my sweater even though it was super hot.

One day, after he kissed me, Tom asked if I wanted to go to the movies with him, or at the very least, a show. I said I didn't go to the movies and he said he thought as much, that's why he suggested a musical. He said *Into the Woods* was playing and that he'd heard it was complete and utter crap but at least we'd be doing something together and outside of the zoo? And that chicks really digged musicals. I rolled my eyes and said yeah, because I really wanted to spend more time with him

and his girly ponytail. But truth was I did and I knew it and he knew it. There was no hiding the way I lit up around him. I was so florescent it was almost embarrassing.

I had a huge problem with what to wear. Escaping the ministry for a couple of hours was a much lesser problem – I could just go to bed early complaining of period pain – because then I'd be left alone – you had to pick your illness well, and then sneak out and Tom would pick me up outside the gate. It was pretty basic but yeah, they trusted me and I had my own room and so I didn't see how it could go wrong. None of the staffers would be at the musical, that was a safe bet. But I had nothing to wear. He'd only seen me in my khaki horror of a uniform, and I wasn't going to let him catch me in my black and white abortion of a ministry kit. Talk about downgrading. And I didn't want him to be embarrassed about me, most of all I didn't want that.

We didn't have internet access at the compound ('the internet is for porn!'), so the day after he invited me out I jumped on the public computer in the zoo café and ordered a yellow dress from a local website and got it delivered to the zoo. I could just plait my hair and wear lots of mascara and the yellow dress and I'd pretty much look like everyone else. Shoes were a bit of a problem but I had a pair of strappy leather sandals in my closet, a birthday gift from my grandma that I'd never been able to wear. They would do.

It went to plan and he picked me up outside the gate and when I climbed into his dusty little car I was embarrassed about how good I looked but then I saw him and after that I didn't know where to look. He'd washed his hair and wore it loose around his shoulders and it was lionlike and intimidating. And he was wearing dark jeans and a black t-shirt that was far too tight and I realised that he was hot, he was actually smoking hot. He laughed at my face and I realised that I'd been caught perverting and well, I just laughed. And he knew how to look at me in my yellow shift dress. I liked

that.

He kept trying to touch me during the musical and I kept batting him off but eventually I relented and let him hold my hand between the seats and then creep his hand onto the naked skin of my thigh. He didn't push his luck and eventually I relaxed and he must've felt me soften because he leaned over nonchalantly and kissed the soft underside of my jaw.

I was pretty quiet on the drive home. It was the nicest night of my life. He held my hand while we drove and I realised I actually liked the feeling of warm skin. There was nothing I could compare it to. After a while he asked me what I thought about the show and I said I liked it but that it was a bit immoral. He coughed a laugh and said how so? And I said well, the baker's wife was the classic seduction and that we all knew how it went, she gave him an inch and he fed her to the wolves and she only had herself to blame. He tightened his grip on my fingers.

'Is that what this is?'

I was horrified.

'I wasn't talking about you!'

'But... isn't it all the same? To you?'

'Well – it doesn't really matter what I think.'

'Yes it does.' He spoke gently.

'It does?'

'Of course it does. *You matter.*'

'But... that's not the way it's supposed to work. Our small human opinions don't matter. We're supposed to say *what would God think?*'

'You serious?'

'*Tommy.*'

'Right, sorry. I forgot. Always serious.'

I stuck my tongue out at him, scrunched up my face.

‘But seriously Amy, seriously. Isn’t it a little... presumptuous to think your thoughts, not just yours, but that any human’s thoughts can be *God’s thoughts*?’

I laughed. ‘It doesn’t work that way, you moron. We’re supposed to examine our initial reaction with what God says about the issue. And our thoughts should line up with His and if they don’t, we’ve gotta adjust them.’

‘Babe. You’re not a little walking talking miming robot. You matter. And what you think matters. Don’t ever let anyone tell you how you should think.’

‘Wow. I didn’t really... expect so much from you.’

‘Because I’m just a blonde bimbo with ungodly hair?’

He flicked his hair and I laughed and then he leaned over and kissed me on the face and I shrieked and said keep your eyes on the road.

One afternoon when we were bickering about culture Harry said that clearly there was a huge gap in my memory bank and that there was backlog of movies I had to see: *Pulp Fiction*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Fight Club*, *Dirty Dancing*, *Kill Bill*. I said I wasn’t just gonna watch stupid slasher movies and he said that’s why he threw in *Dirty Dancing*. And he thought the nine hours of walking in *The Lord of the Rings* would help balance it out a bit too, but that clearly my cultural education needed curating. And I rolled my eyes and said that *clearly* he was the man for the job because he had such excellent taste. He muttered to himself about me being such a smartarse and I wondered how it was that I seemed to attract philosophical men, or maybe it was that I was attracted to *them* because I thought they could fix me. Either way I didn’t think much of his movie list or his proposal. We kept walking along and bumping shoulders but I was wrapped up in a huge scarf and hat against the cold so it was OK because people would just assume that I was his

wife. He took the bag of roast chestnuts off me because he said I wasn't paying attention to him and that wanted to come over to my house next week to watch a movie. After a bit of haggling and not much bribery I said – OK. I wasn't thrilled about it. I didn't particularly want him in my space. I wanted to be able to look at my kitchen table without seeing him there. So far my house was ghost free and I wanted to keep it that way.

The first night he came I made chocolate chip cookies and cookie dough; since I didn't know which one he liked best I made both. I cleaned the TV screen and hired the DVDs and switched on the gold fairy lights that were strung across the ceiling; my version of mood lighting.

'Jesus,' he said, walking in, seeing the lights. 'Where's your fifteen cats?'

'I don't introduce them to strange men straight away, asshole.'

'You know it's not an insult calling me that, right?' he said, raising an eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes. 'Whatever.'

'*You know where I like to put it,*' he said.

'Stop it. This is a sex-free zone.'

He laughed. 'I kind of like that. I like stepping foot in here and knowing that I'm the only man who's ever been here. Look at your little virgin bed,' he said, stepping into my bedroom.

'*Hmmmm.*'

I popped the popcorn while he got the movie started. We'd decided on Hannibal Lector and I said it wasn't fair he was planning to leave afterwards. He said you could only stretch a business meeting so far. I poured the popcorn into a big glass bowl, added some m&ms to melt through and then sat the bowl between us on the couch, my favourite old mossy green sofa, the kind that welcomed you into its big

dark cavernous arms. He said I had to cuddle with him, I said I hated being touched when I watched a movie. He said that was the whole point. I said I also hated mouth-breathers and talkers and people who chewed too loudly, coughing, sneezing, and jiggling. He said I should probably just watch the movie with my cats.

When the movie got too creepy and I'd bitten off all my nails I let him put his arm around me. He said he'd seen the movie lots of times so did I want to chat for a bit? I said yeah, there was only so much face-eating I needed to see in a lifetime. He said he could eat my face and I said I'd rather not.

'Why *did* you pick me?' he said. 'I've always wondered.'

I'd been waiting for this question. And since I'd asked myself it many times, I was ready with an answer. 'You got under my skin. You were unfinished business.'

'That's it? My poor, poor ego.'

'And there was something about you that I couldn't let go. ... Your cold colourless soulless eyes perhaps.'

He said bitch! twisted around and pinned me to the couch, rolled on top of me.

I kept going: 'I used to wonder what was wrong with your eyes. I should've wondered what was wrong with your soul.' I was struggling to breathe but I still got out something that sounded like a laugh.

'I want to wipe that smirk right off your face,' he said.

'Try me.'

He rolled off me, sat up into his small corner of the couch, put the popcorn chastely between us.

'No, I don't think I will. I think I'll make you beg.'

'I'd never beg from *you*,' I said.

'It's alright, I've always known you were a cunt.'

'Don't pretend that's not why you like me,' I teased him.

‘There was something desperate about you. Not desperately desperate,’ he corrected, ‘just something desperately caged.’

‘I probably needed a good fuck.’

‘Don’t be flippant. I just – couldn’t forget you. You irritated me too.’

‘Do you have anyone else on the go?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Have you ever been in love before? With any of your other woman?’

‘You’re not just another woman Amy, Jesus. The way I feel about my wife has no bearing on what I feel for you. And what I feel for you doesn’t take anything away from what I feel for her. I wish you could understand that.’

‘I’d rather not. And anyway, I’ve always thought that love isn’t that big a deal. It’s just love. We can love lots of things. Candy. Hiking. Books. People. Whatever.’

‘My greatest fear is falling in love with you,’ he said, and I thought he couldn’t be more brutal if he tried. I felt like a sea anemone closing in on itself.

‘That and you falling pregnant. God, could you imagine.’

I wondered how he could be so sensitive sometimes and such a man the rest of the time.

‘I’d never have a child with you anyway. You have to think – your child will be their father and well... no thanks.’

‘Harsh!’

‘Not as harsh as you saying you’re afraid you’ll fall in love with me.’

‘I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

‘It’s a little late for that.’

‘For what?’

‘Just forget it. Let’s watch the movie. I’ve already missed enough.’

‘We can rewind.’

‘No thanks.’

It was a little late for that.

To be honest, I was fucking sick of him.

I was sick of him reminding me about Wagner, I was sick of him reminding me about Tom. I couldn’t decide if I was just in a weird funk or if he was actually bad for me. I’d always thought he was good for me, but maybe he was just an asshole all along. I was hardly experienced at spotting the asshole gene. I looked at him resentfully. Even the way he ate popcorn fucked me off.

Was it right to love someone who didn’t love you back? And who took weird pride in declaring it? I was human too. And I had a little delicate blossom heart that he was shitting all over. Clearly he saw me as second best. But if love was a choice, then it was a choice for me too, so fuck him. It’s not like love’s something that grabs us kicking and screaming by the hair. It’s something we choose. And I wasn’t sure, anymore, if I chose Harry.

I mean, I couldn’t even muster up the strength to abuse him, to string together the long list of expletives that *clearly* represented him. That was the first sign that my affection was on the wane. I didn’t care. And I cared about everything.