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Doesn't Play Well With Others

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Doesn't Play Well With Others

Abstract

The mock-memoir *Doesn't Play Well With Others* explores (white) queerness, mental health, trauma, and love in various literary forms such as screenplay format, visual illustration, erratic footnotes, gritty realism, sentence fragments and way too much personal information, all steeped in a bath of metafiction. The author recommends listening to “Tubthumping” prior to reading.

Keywords

memoir, queer, fiction

Disciplines

Creative Writing | Fiction | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies

Comments

Written as an English Honors Thesis.

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Doesn't Play Well With Others

Beauregard Charles

English Honors Thesis December 2016

and the award goes to...

When I received a swank 8.5x11 printer-paper announcement informing me that I had been nominated to write an Honors Thesis for my English major, I knew immediately what I wanted to do. At the time, I was working on three seminar-length research papers at once, totaling somewhere around 70 pages written during finals week, more or less. I was not impressed by the idea of doing more arduous research, of using “hence” and “Similarly, the aesthetic choice to...” in any form. Two of these papers focused on comedy. It had me thinking *I* was funny. I was funny enough to write a witty little memoir. Yeah. Yeah, totally. I can do that. In one semester? Sure, sure, no problem. What’s it called? You mean the title?

- Beau’s Thesis
- It’s a Memoir
- A Fake Memoir
- It Could Have Been Called
- But It Wasn’t
- The Name is Amazing
- What it is Not
- Is Am Are Was Were Be Being Been
- Alienate Your Loved Ones
- Meat Sweat
- Aftertaste
- Subtle Notes of Vanilla
- Rolling with the Punches
- A memoir?
- This isn’t a memoir it’s a shitshow.
- Shitshow: A memoir.
- Effigy from the Dirt
- Ross Geller doesn’t deserve Rachel Green and 100 other things I’m still mad about
- Concept: I adopt a blind cat who has psychotelekinetic powers and we become Instagram famous.
- Stop asking me if I’m okay
- Trashy Catty Queers

- Not My Gay Ass
- Look at Me During
- English Honors Thesis
- Who gave me an Honors Thesis?
- I mean really, who thought that was a good idea?
- Jody Rosensteel knows everyone's secrets: ye be warned.¹
- A farewell to solo cups
- Three queers one cup
- Millennial culture: what is it good for?
- I'd like to thank Legally Blond for being the best movie in the world: a memoir
- I didn't pay 120k for this
- 120k and still okay
- 120k I'm not okay
- Seeking Sugar Daddy or Mommy or a rich relative on their deathbed.
- Living in the Negatives: a tale of debt, lust, and tears.
- In case of death: forward to Sallie Mae
- If you're reading this I'm dead
- My friends think I'm making up having a thesis and am pulling an elaborate prank: a memoir
- phenomenological friendship: the boundaries of codependent identities
- Sailor Moon and Star Trek: the how and why space is gay in popular media.
- The infinity and beyond of gravitational pull: is gender a result of physics?
- I'm an English major because I'm bad at Math: reinforcing stereotypes about undergraduate degrees
- Esteemed Guests
- Mouth
- This Mouth was made for Talking
- The Faded Glory of 1990s American Culture
- SOS from the 2016 American Presidential Election
- Don't Tell My Parents
- The Gag Is
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQw4w9WgXcQ>
- Alaska Thunderfuck Rigged the Competition
- Respectability Politics: what are they good for?
- Borrowed Time
- In Case of Emergency
- What I Learned in Boating School

¹ Academic Administrative Assistant: Ye be warned

- Blankety Blankety Blank
- It's About Time
- This is for the Fans
- For the World
- Promo Code
- Beau-Go Promo Code for Half Off
- That one time I was going to study abroad in Rwanda and the website got messed up and I cancelled my application and they emailed me a month after the deadline asking what happened cause they were excited to take me on and it was too late to rectify so now I'm writing an Honors Thesis
- The Artist Formerly Known as The Artist Formerly Known as Prince
- The Fake Book
- That Book²
- My Advisor is Very Kind
- How to Get Away
- Just Get Away.
- It'll be Better in the Morning
- Fake it till you delude yourself and everyone around you
- Sleep on It
- Deny Deny Deny
- [Seinfeld Theme Sound]³

² These are strictly so that, should someone say: "Have you read..." it will be "Have you read The Fake Book" or "Have to read That Book" in order to confuse the other person. This will alienate the reading from the non-reading citizens. It's stage one.

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFY_rMzKD9g (god I'm American and white.)

mouth

My mother calls me Mouth. Smart mouth, foul mouth, loud mouth. Mostly, just “Mouth.” I didn’t know how to keep my mouth shut. “Nice M/mouth,” she would scold, offended and hurt as I ripped at the seams of her tortured self-esteem. Five, eight, thirteen, twenty two. I chewed on the little-girl bones holding my mother up and all she could do was scold: “Close your mouth.”

She should have kicked me aside.

I had my tongue out all the time. Used to walk around with it hanging out, drying up like a beached whale. Then I could run my fingers over it, feel the ragged fur of my taste buds, gone velvety and stiff. Fingers tasted sour when I was a kid. My mouth ran off. Went like a duck’s yoo-hoo on a rainy day. Go go go. Anything, everything, I couldn’t shut the fuck up. Go on talking a mile a minute to my big brother til he smacked me across the mouth. We would brawl.

They put braces on me, a retainer, head gear. My mouth was too goddamn big for my face. I could shove both fists in there, drooling out over the bird-bone wrists that flapped my baby hands. Used to throw myself down the stairs thinking they’d come to something miraculous. But no, no wings, no flight, just a big mouth.

My mouth is still too big. Then I got these lips. You should see them. Lips for days. Everyone else in my family has these tiny little bird lips, then there’s me, packing heat. These are prime cock sucking lips. And if we’re kissing, you better sit back. I kiss on this one girl, and she’s real tiny, a premature baby all grown up. Tiny hands, tiny ears, tiny little mouth. It’s like eating her whole damn head when we kiss.

I wear a mouth like I’m hungry all the time.

It’s not just the fact that my jaw wants to unhinge when I yawn and I can still shove too much in my gaping maw, or that I should do MAC ads. My tongue, that big beached whale

tongue I had wagging out of my face growing up: giant. Alarming. I can flip it and roll it and make it into a four leaf clover. I was the fucking best in grade school, maddaddy tongue master. Flat tongue, pointy tongue. If I was a snake person⁴ and split my tongue, you bet your bottom dollar I'd be crossing tines like a pro before the bleeding stopped.

My mother calls me Mouth and lo! I have an oral fixation and the face-cavity of a porn star. My mother chanted over me Mouth Mouth Mouth until something came of it⁵. I took Mouth as a title although it was only ever a curse. My mouth was trouble and it got punished for it. Neither of my parents hesitated to throw me over a knee and make me cry but after the hot tears and screaming, you healed up quick in your dark room. But my mouth -- if you talk back that was soap in your mouth. Mom did that one, carryover trait in her bloodline. She'd wedge you against the bathroom sink or catch you between her legs and dig her thumb into the bolt of your jaw, maybe her nail would cut you or a ring too, and pry your mouth open like a dog eating a shoe, and get the pump soap. Onetwothree pumps, just to make sure you tasted it through and through. Might as well have been battery acid, gel in every nook of your mouth, rinsing you out.

Don't you spit don't you dare spit.

⁴ Snake people are an off-shoot of furies. Snake people are always snake people. (They are not to be confused with lizard people who rule the world.) You know those people who, in their mid-twenties, start talking about the snake they're going to buy, and reasonably you know that that is not the best financial decision; they know it; everyone knows it. But they've "always wanted a snake,." And then they buy the snake and they let it sleep in their bed? And then all of a sudden they split their tongues down the middle and get white-out anime contact lenses; snake people.

Also my friend totally knew this girl in high school who had two large pythons. She let them sleep in bed with her and roam freely. Eventually she thought they were dying because they stopped eating but when she consulted a vet, he informed her that no, they were not eating in preparation for eating her. In conclusion: snake people.

⁵ Did you know there are mouth-muscle exercises? Things to reduce a drooping under-chin, sagging cheeks, even make your lips stronger? I think they're a load of horse shit, but, I must attribute some of my mouth's wicked abilities to ten years of playing brass instruments.

She wasn't fucking around when she said she'd wash your mouth out with soap.

Don't make me put soap in your mouth.

She fucking would, don't play her. She'd make you hold it, hand over your mouth, and then she'd let you scream into the faucet as you spat and swished and bubbles are coming out and if you coughed and swallowed and it came out your nose, you can sit with that headache all day thinking about what you said stupid to earn it. I know I got it the worst of all the kids. There was a lot wrong with me.

Is.

reasons why I say fuck a million times in this

My dad can cuss a blue streak like no one on this planet. Maybe my brother runs a close second, but my dad started it. He used to save it up for big things, like fixing the sink he had no inkling how-to fix. Leaking pipe on his face.

Goddammotherfuckingcocksuckingsons'abitchesfuckingcocksuckingfuckingjapmotherfuckingstupidashelldamnittochristcocksuckers. Fuck! Fucking hell!

It starts out as a low rumble, a slurry of words, then escalates louder and louder, accompanied by him slamming something down, then hitting whatever was giving the fuss, promptly breaking it, initiating a second cussing streak that's more stuttery, like a chainsaw that won't rip. Slam slam slam. Then my mother, who's been listening to this shit now forty fucking years, screams "What is it Bun!" put-upon, so old and tired; this marriage a lemon she has to suck.

"Nothing! Son of a bitch don't fucking work."

"Then quit fooling with it."

"Nah, Nah. I'm gonna get it. I'll fucking get you, you cock-sucking motherfucker."⁶ My Dad says cock-sucker a lot. Me too, Dad, me too. He threatens The Cock-Sucker, suitably horrifying to experience, shoulders low like he's gonna brawl, chest heaving because he winded himself. Then he goes and drinks a few PBR and stares glaze-eyed at some sport on the television.

If it's an all day job, like putting in a new faucet courtesy of the Home Depot, and something won't fit right or don't work right, mom will leave the house. Sometimes she'd take

⁶ Cock-sucking motherfucker seems a bit contradictory. It also may be his favorite thing to accuse inanimate objects of being. I'd make a Freudian implication but I think Freud is a no good motherfucking cock sucker.

me with her. The habits of my mother in response to my father's horrible mouth vary. Sometimes she laughs because why the hell not; it's kind of funny. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes she tries to fight him, and then they're cussing each other out. Mom pretends like she doesn't swear, and she might yell "you dirty bird" but my mom says "son of a bitch" just as good as the rest of them. She doesn't say the Lord's name in vain. She doesn't say fuck. She gets mad as hell when my siblings and I sit around on Christmas day swearing.

My brother-in-law got my one sister a mug that says Cunt. She loves the word cunt. Said "if men are going to yell that at me on the street you sure as fuck better believe I'll say it myself." she mostly only calls other women cunts though, but she saves it up for when they really deserve it. It's a great word and should be bestowed sparingly to preserve its impact.

My foul mouth picked up curses like the alphabet and I dropped that shit left and right. My Barbie called other Barbies bitches to the horror of my friends' parents. On top of my parents, I have four older siblings who barely restrained themselves in my presence. One sister's nickname was T-Bag. It took me until *Stepbrothers* to figure that one out. Other sister's best friend? Her nickname was Faggot, or, more endearingly, Faggator, Fagmaster, Faggatron, Faggintator, Faggerella,. No one stopped me from calling her Faggot either because then they would have to break the silence on the word. It was bad enough that I, a real and actual small child, said "Faggot," yelled it at Field Hockey practice, but if I knew what it meant, *whoa doggy*, what fresh hell would break loose. Only 90s kids remember family-fun with slurs.⁷

⁷ Today, a mere homophone of the word makes my heard jerk in public, ears cocked towards the sound. It's been used against me, misplaced but violent. It is the promise of pain to too many of my loved ones. Looking back, how could the word have been nothing in my mouth, just a noise, just a shape. In recollection, this slice of my sister's and her friend's lives make them laugh; now, in a moment of quiet in my 20s, I'm imagining someone's shoulders curling forward to hide, squaring back to take a blow. Two syllables like a thrown open door: the knob hitting the wall, the slam-shut of its rebound. A promise.

This is too much, this whole exposition, this exhibition. It feels like too much. Do you feel it? I think it's too much. A home, a too-big family, a rural town being slowly flooded by young couples from Jersey who whine about there not being a Whole Foods. They don't know how to buy from the Amish stands on the side of the road that run on the honor system; you just pull off, pick your food, put the money in the jar and move along; the tomatoes are fat and juicy and good with cracked pepper and coarse salt; tomatoes were my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, big dribbling slabs over chicken salad from the local store that gave me free cheese slices.

Look: What I'm trying to say is I'll tell you everything. Take it for what it is. This is not a story where the characters step out of the shadows. I'll tell you everything at once, just flip to a page. The rhyme and reason is yours. It's not unraveling before you; you're just stepping in and out as you please.

does it even matter we're all gonna die⁸

Here they are, Charlie and Ash, a couple of sad twenty-somethings hunched over an ugly kitchen counter in a badly lit college apartment.

“Why are we all so fucked up?” Ash asks. They got it in them to be worried about their miserable lives and eternal souls. It happens by accident, sadness clobbering them like spooks jumping from behind doors.

Charlie doesn't even consider the question because they know the answer. “Because we were children once.”

Ash rocks backwards on their stool with the impact of the words.

“Go write that down,” they suggest, eyes comically wide behind their glasses. Cartoon-shock sits on their face. They love those smart little lines Charlie spits out without flinching. To them, Charlie's a witch, always conjuring something clever out of nothing, out of a little darkness and a pair of twitchy hands.

“I'll remember it.” It's a good line. Charlie does remember: here it is. Ash had been wet-dog shaking their way through recollections of childhood sexual abuse, the first scars to touch their babypale body. But it isn't new or exciting news. It's fact. Ash got fucked into, fucked up, fucked over by family folk. Charlie smiles: “I'm glad you're an artist.”

⁸ Have I mentioned that this planet is dying? We're on borrowed time. Enough with industry; let's launch music into space. I will singlehandedly fund the space program. I know that our oceans are ridiculously underexplored but the ocean is full of terrifying creatures and I ain't about that. Honestly high key fuck the deep sea.

“Why?”

“Because art is the only thing worth believing in, that I believe in.”

“This world is so fucked up,” Ash agrees with a bob of their head. It’s all the confirmation Charlie needs to tell them that they’re right. There is so little to believe in that why not throw the redemption of humanity into the stained hands of small time and big time artists. But Ash doesn’t see how important they are.

“No, really,” Charlie insists, taking Ash’s small hand into their equally small hand.

“Everything else is extraneous. Look, in my environmental science class I pretty much argued that we’re done evolving. We aren’t going to change, not really. We still haven’t lost our damn pinkie toes and it’s probably because we can wear comfy shoes and deceive our feet into keeping the digit. But seriously. Art’s the only thing. Ya know? We’re evolving through technology. Biology’s done; it’s taken a step back. No more enduring mutations because we cut off everything we don’t like.”

In another time, they would have been cut and killed like an unwanted toe. A couple of mentally ill queers like them? They would have been destined for rapings and beatings and burnings. The irony is that Charlie and Ash have taken two of the three already. The unwanted is still getting cut off, just slower, quieter.

Charlie rolls on:

“Science does one of two things: it either extends life or it kills life. All that ergonomic shit, all the little stuff, that’s just comfort. Trying to perfect what isn’t there, make us content as we throw ourselves down the hallway of life. We streamline and mechanize either killing or saving lives. We’re just making the same processes more efficient; and for what? It’s just streamlining our way to the end. Production of things, of people, of death. For fuck’s sake, you

know, we can suspend someone in death, take out their heart, put a new one in and send them on their merry way with nothing but a big ass scar and that same day we got state-sanctioned killings of people for being gay or having a different political thought or being black or, Christ, just about anything, all across the world. We're faking civilization. This species hasn't advanced. We've just been pasting up posters in a straight empty hallway. We have to walk down it; get born, go down that hall and die. But art--that's a new room. That's a door that wasn't there before. A moment of suspension, a chance to believe, to imagine and experience another life, a sensation we can't find elsewhere. It's another life, even if for just a second, when you look at something beautiful or gruesome or fantastically Otherly real. Art, creating--that's the opposite of monstrosity. It's so easy to be a monster--mindless. It's so easy to walk mindlessly down that hallway, cluttered with junk shit. But there could be a door. We're so goddam desperate for a door. Art is the dictation of infinity. Like damn. I'm glad you're an artist."

Someone's practicing guitar next door. The sound leaks through, blurs the edges of the room with the noise, cocooning Charlie and Ash in a soft thrumming. It's a moment. Ash will remember it. They won't write it down, but they will remember it.

"You're the hero of the book," Charlie finishes, still clutching Ash's hand. Ash's head is cocked to the side, ear swallowing up everything Charlie's spitting. They jolt now at that final admission.

"What--no way. It's you." They haven't been the hero of their fantasies since they were a kid, fresh with hurt and no one to paste with a picture-book suit of armor. "When I think about us, you're the hero."

“No. It’s you. The artist. The schizophrenic who chooses to live in their own reality, fully aware that it isn’t what everyone else sees or feels. You’ve grown up in it, inside yourself and outside of everything. You are a constant suspension in art. Forgive the romanticization of your mental health, but look at you--you’re the one we need to believe in.”

“But with us, you and Kirby, you’re the ringleader. You’re the hero.” Ash fixes their hand in a spade, moving it from left to right, like a claw on an assembly line, picking up one piece of the sentence and slapping it down. “You keep us together.”

“Nah.” Charlie shrugs, finally letting go of Ash’s hand in favor of finding a beer from the fridge. “I’m too cold. All that time you were just telling me all that awful shit, I’m there nodding, but I don’t pity you or feel sad or anything--”

“I wouldn’t want you to--”

“Yeah but I should. That shits fucked up.” They should be moved to tears, shouldn’t they, when their best friend talks about getting raped as a little kid? “But the whole time, you’re saying the words and I’m bookmarking them, organizing them, making you into a character. They’re bullet points under a bio I can thumb through later.”

Ash, bless their ever living soul, isn’t troubled. It’s nice to see people who don’t feel, who don’t wear scars but be scars, grown over and tough. “Being sad for people isn’t good. It makes things harder. When I get sad I can’t--do anything--when I go home, I see my family, I get so sad because of their lives, how sad they are, all poor and in or coming out of bad relationships, all disappointed and stuck in a dead town. It’s like a weight I can’t get rid of. You don’t do that. When I’m away from you and Kirby, I think about you, I guess those bullet points, and I get sad thinking about you. But then you guys just brush off all the bad stuff.”

Charlie snorts, rolling their eyes, draining their beer. They shrug again, a roll of bones. They're almost all bones. "That talent is called sweet sweet coping mechanisms. Gotta love 'em...Also, anyway, Ash, only assholes think they're the hero of their own story. The hero is what the story needs. If it's my memoir, it already has me, it can't go on without me, but I'm not what I need. But, fine, you don't wanna be the hero? Then you're not; you're just the point of departure."

at some point⁹

The comedian comes out on stage. White. White skin, white shirt, white hair. Their face is a strobe light. Legs like black twigs, twig-heeled boots. They look like someone on a magazine, a coffee shop magazine. You can imagine them there, beside a cup of coffee, a well-placed pair of reading glasses. Low-saturated #Clarendon filter. They stutter through a greeting, a performance of casual indifference. They're surprised at the audience, like they've all just wandered into a crowded room, here, together by accident, and someone's had the audacity to ask for a show.

The seat comes up around you; you lock one elbow onto the armrest. You take only one armrest; you were raised right; it'd be a brawl otherwise. In your head, 'cause your eyes are looking up to the stage, to that white white person, mouth wobbling in anticipation of the laughter you've been promised, you compare them to something. Anything. A snowman- not quite. A foamy beer. A flashlight. That's it. You can't make it graceful, that comparison. They look like a flashlight. If it's true, someone will understand. They look like a flashlight. Black from boot to hip, body a beam of light.

People are laughing.

What's the British word? (United Kingdom?) (What's the difference again?) What's the British word for -- torch. That's it. They look like a torch. There you go, you're off, trying to list

⁹ The joke is: I'm gonna end up as a stand -up comedian.

all the British words for American ones-- or is it the other way around? Torch, chips, knickers. You hate that. Pants, knickers, trousers. No wonder America revolted.

People are laughing.

The comedian's telling jokes you aren't hearing; you're missing the volley of words. Everyone's chests heave, out of time with each other--save a few, here or there. A few people in the theatre laugh in time; they don't know it. You breathe out, blinking up at the lights. Twat. Prat. You're missing the jokes cause all you can think about are British words. Everyone would laugh.

"In college, I wrote a paper on black comedy. Not *Weeds* black comedy but black people black comedy. White people love black people black comedy. That was the point of the--"

Oh great. One of those comedians. White as a beam of light talking about race and politics. People are laughing again. But now you're thinking about that black guy in 6th grade who everyone said was gay. Leo. Leo's a fucking gay name, so it's no surprise there. A black dude named Leo? His parents had to see that coming. It wasn't a bad thing. Everyone's gay now. You have a gay cousin. But there's just so many gays now, you can't tell who's gay or not. Was that girl at the bar gay? She was drinking craft beer--who can tell anymore. Rock-a-billy fashion and flannel everyfuckingwhere. Jesus, everyone's fucking gay. It's okay, though, to be gay. Doesn't mean anything. Leo didn't even get bullied. They said he was gay, like a fact, and it came true. Leo was gay gay gay as a rainbow day, but it was okay; he did theatre and all that shit. You remember, going to a show once. You're pretty sure it was for extra credit.

People are laughing.

"I wrote a lot of papers in college. Lot on comedy. I think I was trying to break it to my parents gently that not only was I studying English --mistake number one, lemme tell you-- but

that I really had no career prospects. Hi, mom! I learned how *other* people tell jokes. I took liberal arts very seriously.”

Maybe it'd be funnier if you were paying better attention.

Why are they so meta? Lewis Black doesn't tell jokes, though, he just yells, and people love that shit. After a while, once people make it, can get enough people to come into a room together, who cares? Whatever they're doing, it's something, it's the audacity to suggest a show before anyone asks for one.

Leo's doing shows in DC now, warehouse type theatre, you're pretty sure. You're pretty sure it's DC. It came up in the page for the class reunion, Facebook a red dot of intrigue. Leo said he wasn't sure if he could make it because he might be touring his show. Maybe it's not DC, but it was Leo saying something like that. People won't shut up about him whether he's there or not. People went out to see him. Friends, friends of friends. It's a big deal when someone makes it. That's the worst. The one who didn't sell out living the life everyone gave up on. If he's there, he's a star. A bunch of people in a room together, and Leo. And if he's not at the reunion, the spectre of his accomplishments will be there in the room regardless. *Have you seen one of Leo's shows*, people will ask.

You wish you'd gone to a bigger school. You wish you'd done bigger things.

june 12, 2016

A summer Sunday, another day I can't sleep past 8. Luna¹⁰ has gotten good at waking up before noon to get out of the house with minimum fuss from her folks, to sit in a Starbucks beside the cozy cute bookstore Chapters and work her way through the body: lungs and dermis, eye and nerves. She dedicates herself to the MCATS. I've made a hundred flashcards for the GREs and called it quits. Luna, who doesn't lives all the way up in Canada. Who maybe knows as much as I do about the going-on because America is everywhere and she loves me enough to watch the news and listen for that slippery slope country dying all over itself. First thing I see from her:

I barely begin typing into the search bar of Google before the news starts spilling itself across my screen. Orlando shooting. Pulse shooting. Orlando massacre. The body count is already in by the time I read the article. I skip the slow build. No stumbling over the corpses every minute, just a stack of dead. I think school. Or mall. Restaurant. *ZZZZ. ZZZZ.* Ding Ding wrong. All wrong. Gay club. Forty-nine dead. Gay club. Latinx night. Trans women and queens. Black and latinx. Dead. Gay. Forty-nine. That's more queers dead than I know personally. Domestic terrorism because the killer is brown and his family is Muslim. He doesn't practice, hasn't prayed in years.

Not a word of hate crime.

¹⁰ You will meet her again. I was in love. But Ontario is too far even for me to try to be in love.

I cry in bed, reading the articles. Luna must be crying somewhere far away from me, a diagram of muscle tissue glossy under her arms.

be safe baby I love you

Then more. From those not-even-49-queers picking up their phones:

I love you

Be safe

U still wanna go to pride ?

I'm scared

I'm tired

HOW many more times

R u fucking kidding me

Some of us cry hot. Some of us crawl back into bed, sunny Sunday bright over Orlando and the line of folks outside of blood centers. The lift on the ban of gay men not being able to donate is a lie. A million queers hold their breath thinking that at the very least while we are dying, that the legislatures and lawmen will wave a pass and let gay men take a needle for their peers. But the rumor is only a rumor. The news keeps coming, letting us down again and again. Fuck Orlando because Orlando doesn't love us. #IAmPulse.

The day is mud. The day before, I told my mother in gentle tones that the girl she liked on The Voice, the girl the same age as me, was murdered. Over the stove, over hot oil popping, I tell my mother 49 people were shot. She doesn't hear me right.

53 injured I add.

53 injured? How many dead?

She didn't hear me.

49 dead.

Her mouth falls open, her eyes go wide. The kitchen is plastered with patriotism.

God bless America on a copper plate

(a heart with the flag print lacquered over it)

Let your heart lead the way.

Give us this day our daily bread

(a flag wreath)

(a country-time-lemonade quality painting with the original 13 colonies flag and uncle Sam with

Liberty on the pedestal under his feet)

49 dead?

They were gay

It was one of those machine guns.

Yes.

There's an email from a girl who runs a writing blog encouraging us to release our feelings through writing.

Kirby texts me later that night to tell me what channel to turn the TV. Kirby's on the news with his boyfriend at a vigil. He's in his moms denim jacket, jaw set, arm around his boyfriend Tiny. Tiny and his crumpled face looking even more like a child than normal.

The identities of the victims are coming out; friends are making sure its beautiful photos of them.

Their ages all together look like a soup of raffle tickets.

23 25 26 33 29 29 28 25 39 21 25 32 31 25 26 22 22 41 27 30 40 19 30 25 32 21 49 25 37 18 20
25 36 32 35 25 27 35 24 24 34 33 33 24 37 22 50 37 31

Some of them are being forced out of the closet as corpses.

Writing is impossible, fingers gummed with grief. Lin-Manuel Miranda chokes through love is love is love is love on the television. I am supposed to write about the queer experience; that's the promise I made. I'd reveal. But this world keeps reminding me that I'm on borrowed time. Maybe these pages will be the safe space hidden from the rest of the world. People wanna say love is love but all I hear is: be safe, baby.

It's a demand and a plea.

right before college

A bone base and black lace set the peak of sensuality as far as lingerie color schemes are concerned. White, too crisp, too banal, with black ruins the mirage. Bone though; a grimy sort of off colour, dirty and dusted; sheer black peekabooing over silk or cotton or fuck, acrylic and rayon blend. A get-up of that underneath a thin oversized sweater and Kelly-green shorts. As good as any ensemble for the low-risk first-time penetrative sex Charlie has in their head.

Charlie's Boy's stretched out in bed, a cradle of muscle and relaxation. Neither of them talk much at night; the TV plays, MTV garbage; hands cozy against skin under clothes. Summer drones outside the window. Back at Charlie's, the drawers are empty in their room, everything cool packed away for college. This is goodbye to this melancholic summer. To a year of loving each other and being idiot children.

Charlie's Boy is always grateful, always doting. Because Charlie told him point blank that he was worth something. Because Charlie, even when Charlie was mad as hell at their Boy, was the one who stormed into a house, scared the shit out of a bunch of punks and got their Boy to the hospital when he was half-dead with an overdose.

Because Charlie bought groceries for him and his mom when his dad died suddenly, right there in the armchair—

— dad dad dad, hey dad, dad dad —

—just like that, dead after a long day and the aunts and the cousins ask Charlie at the funeral to take care of their(everyone's) Boy, and even with his son in a casket, old Pops tells his grandson to keep Charlie because they're a keeper; Charlie's there for that, checking in, getting their Boy out of the house. Their Boy is good, but just a boy.

“I need to tell you something,” he says. The beach party, he met a girl. This one’s in his grade. She’ll be around, not like Charlie who has a new life at college. This new girl doesn’t know him as the boy before his dad died, when he was so much younger and goofier and talked more; she doesn’t know him, not like how Charlie knows him.

“Yeah, man. I mean, we weren’t ever really—,” Charlie wobbles an indecisive hand in the space between them, gesturing to all that they were not. They shrug. “Christ, yeah, no. Shit, well, I was thinking we were gonna do It. Guess not.”

“What! Oh, oh...you don’t wanna anymore?” He’s disappointed.

“Look at this cute shit I wore.” Charlie flips up their sweater to show off and their Boy groans.

“Shouldn’t’ve told you about her,” Charlie’s Boy says, sheepish, glum.

“I’d hate you if you didn’t,” Charlie swears.

This new girl ends up hating Charlie. That’s always the case. Girlfriends and boyfriends never like Charlie, Charlie the *bestfriend* who knows how everyone kisses and cries.

At college, that twin extra-long is too empty. Charlie’s been sleeping up against a cradle of their Boy for months. He would moan in his sleep, nightmares, and need woken up two, three times a night. Charlie didn’t mind; he’d been right under their hands. They’ve had a pack of sleepmates with them since grade school. They’ve had people close at hand since forever.

Their new roommate, Drew, talks in his sleep. It’s something.

way back in high school

Mr. Pond jumps from desk to desk, a bouncy spry man, and demands to know how many friends most people keep coming out of high school.

(One.)

He's thinking more best friends, really, how many people from high school do you keep right in your pocket as an old adult. (One.) I don't bother to imagine who it might be because I have friends falling out of my pockets, got so many. Who knows who'll be the lucky duck.

This same time a year from now, I won't even think I'll make it out of high school, I'm so suicidal; free pass to go to the counselor during the day because I'm having panic attacks in class and people are finding me crying on the floor of the bathroom stalls, losing my shit and shaking out of my seat.

(One.)

High School friend is just code for childhood friend, 'least round here. Everyone here grew up together. Half of my friends live close enough to walk to their homes, to run away to in the middle of the night and go scratching at their screen doors in the basement, mouthing over the mesh like an insect, cicada-crawl words: "can you let me in." We gave each other bloody noses on the bus, cried at each other's Halloween party, all dated each other like you shouldn't but can't help doing. And now there's some prediction, a survey or study that says you get about one of these motherfuckers in your pocket for life. Supposed to be an old buddy who knows you best or knows the person you used to be, who has star maps on your evolution and the parabolic range of your character. And oh christ, everyone still makes fun of me for pretending to be a dog in first grade. *Remember when you thought you were a dog?* Ha-ha yeah! Turns out I was just trans and didn't know how to unmake my body. What a wacky world. Motherfuckers still bring

it up at parties, like, please just give me a shot and go away. And now I get told that I've got to keep one of these people for the rest of my mortal life?

But the truth is, it isn't even gonna be your best bud when you bust out of the gate at graduation. It'll be some casual pal you never hung out with one-on-one but they were around at enough of the big hangouts, that, when you both end up in Syracuse, you meet up, and then you keep meeting up and because proximity encourages the friendship, that's what you got. You never introduce them as your best friend from back in school because both of you know that's not how it went down.

Great Expectations¹¹ but not *Great Expectations*¹²

INT. CAFE

Quiet chatter fills the lounge. The number of voices talking is disproportionate to the number of people actually present. Dim light forms an intimate aura around KIRBY and CHARLIE.

KIRBY with CRINKLING of PLASTIC BAG unloads his campus sandwich shop meal.

KIRBY

I ran into JORDAN and he asked how I
was doing and I told him the weather
was nice.

CHARLIE drinking COFFEE

CHARLIE

At least you didn't tell him you want to
suck his dick. There are bigger slips of
the tongue you can suffer when
speaking to your professor.

KIRBY

I guess, conceptually, theoretically, that

¹¹ Mediocre Expectations

¹² This is, without a doubt, the truest story in this entire memoir. I make nothing up here. There is no lie. What you are about to read, even God themselves would verify, hand upon their immaterial atomic heart.

saying the weather is nice despite the fact that it's sleeting is, maybe, perhaps, less problematic than telling my professor that I want to suck his dick.
You got me there, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Personally, speaking from my own perspective, if it were me, I'd be charmed either way.

KIRBY mixes his TEA enthusiastically

KIRBY

Be my wingman next time I'm out cruising.

CHARLIE

(Unimpressed)

Do you really want to ask me that? You want the kid with a stutter and lisp to do the talking for you? Not your most brilliant of thoughts.

KIRBY holding his TEA cup with pinkie out.

KIRBY

That's the appeal, that's your sex appeal. Staring ominously at people and lispng.

CHARLIE
(Huskily.)

This lisp isn't just good for
mispronouncing words. Anyway! Forget
about Jordan; you have a boyfriend so
stop being a hoe.

KIRBY waves away the accusation of being a hoe.

KIRBY

TINY doesn't care; it's like that episode
of Friends with the celebrity fuck list.¹³

CHARLIE

I HATE ROSS GELLER!

KIRBY

Ultimate Nice guy!

CHARLIE

Don't be Ross Geller. You can't have
exceptional fuck-list people. And how is
that fair cause Tiny hates me.

KIRBY

Tiny thinks you're hot

¹³ Season 3 episode 5: "The One With Frank Jr." And technically, it was a "freebie" list.

CHARLIE

And he's jealous of me for it and hates me. How can he say that you can fuck Jordan which is way fucked up anyway, but he, like, cheated on you cause he thought you were in love with me?

KIRBY

Okay, true.

CHARLIE

Right? Don't do anything Ross Geller does cause it's the opposite of a good idea. Do the right thing. Spike Lee: do the right thing. Unless the person's rich. If they're rich, suck their dick. Be their child. Get adopted into a shady rich family. Like what's her face in every other Jane Austen novel.

KIRBY

Oh my god.

CHARLIE

What?

KIRBY

Oh my god.

CHARLIE

WHAT?

KIRBY

Oh my god, wait, wait, what the fuck.

CHARLIE

What the fuck, the fuck?

KIRBY

Okay wait. Wait. Get adopted by a rich lady but really she's a convict.

CHARLIE

Jane Austen?

KIRBY

NO. Shit. Did you read this book in high school? With the orphan and this rich old lady takes him in, but not really, and he finds out a convict has been helping him, and everything ends badly. What is that called?

CHARLIE

UHM! Oh my god. I don't know. What the fuck are you talking about?

KIRBY

(POUNDING on the table)

That book!

CHARLIE

(MIMICKING HIM)

I don't know!

KIRBY

Nevermind. Anyway. I think if we have
a threesome, it'll work

CHARLIE

Who are we having a threesome with?

KIRBY

Anyone. You know. I think we could
really up our image by being the
threesome couple.

CHARLIE

Your math is wrong there, buddy, my
guy.

KIRBY

No. No. Everyone already thinks we're
dating, right, so we might as well be,
like, the too-cool queer couple that if
you find the golden ticket you can join
our Johnny Depp acid trip sex life. Very
Willy Wonka remake.

CHARLIE

Okay...okay, I can work with that. But I can't fuck you. Can I just watch or commentate? Maybe play field medic?

KIRBY

Yeah, of course. You can be the stone cold Dom¹⁴ giving directions. You can wear your combat boots and step on me and the other guy.

CHARLIE

That's my aesthetic. I'm in. How do we start? We should do it with someone who gossips and like, get word of mouth out. KIRBY and CHARLIE are hosting auditions for threesome

Prospects.

KIRBY

Or, wait, better yet, kissing booth.

CHARLIE

Gay kissing booth. Big gay fundraiser.

KIRBY

Only the hot gays are allowed though.

¹⁴ Dominant. Don't think I've weirdly mistyped 'Don' and I was trying to make a *Godfather* reference.

CHARLIE

So you me ASH and like...JJ and Gray.
Jesus... You know, when you say it that
way, it really makes you realize that this
campus is so ugly.

KIRBY

It's not even that they're *ugly* so much
as too annoying to forgive them for not
being hot.

CHARLIE

Some of us are ugly. I'm ugly on the
inside.

KIRBY

Okay true, but honestly, TBH, to be
honest, in my opinion, you're hot
enough that it doesn't matter that you're
a big bitch. More importantly, no one
knows how to dress.

KIRBY makes a Britney Spears knot in his shirt and MIMES cinching a belt under his nipples.

CHARLIE

Do NOT with that "Baby One More
Time" throwback in front of my own
two eyes.

A random GIRL appears beside KIRBY and CHARLIE.

GIRL
(Suddenly and softly.)
Excuse me.

CHARLIE and KIRBY FREEZE

GIRL
Great Expectations.

KIRBY
What?

GIRL
Great Expectations.

CHARLIE
Same.

GIRL
The book you were thinking of, it's *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

KIRBY
(YELLING)
OH MY GOD YEAH *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* THANKS!

GIRL
You're welcome.

The GIRL disappears through the nearest door. The irreverent and offensive joy between CHARLIE and KIRBY dissipates. They twiddle their thumbs. The chatter in the lounge has gone down.

CHARLIE
That was so weird.

KIRBY
She listened to all of that.

CHARLIE
Why didn't she tell us it was *Great Expectations* sooner?

KIRBY
Was that real?

CHARLIE
I don't think so.

Masturbation: the first¹⁵

I walked in on my brother watching porn once; boy hit that alt-tab so fucking hard he came. I'm kidding that's a disturbing joke. But it was a pair of big bronze titties spilling out all over our Dell desktop, the jigging pixilated, stuttering on dial-up internet. This wasn't landmark in any way shape or form; Brother and I were close in the "everyone else is in college or in another state it's just us left in this Hell Hole" way siblings often are. Survival Strategies in a Small Town 101. He's five year older than me and that's had a significant impact on our relationship. Like the creepy jailbait situation with all his friends. So it wasn't that significant other than being fucking hilarious because by the time I'm twelve I'm already furiously masturbating to Inuyasha fanfic SO I MEAN we're all good. I was a real covert anime loving piece of shit growing up, but my youth was the anime renaissance. Everyone watched anime. Kids are still Naruto-running to this day.¹⁶

¹⁵ If you respect me, stop reading now. If you're already in this for the kicks, I suppose proceed.

¹⁶ I distinctly remember my sister, when she was teaching high school at some crappy Maryland high school, going on a rampage about all the weird anime doodles her kids leave on their homework. She also staunchly associated people who watch anime with people in fetish master/slave relationships, which you should not fucking be doing as a teenager, lemme tell you: also watersports.

Water sports is pee kink. Peeing on people. For sexy fun times. Not jet skis. We all thought it was about jet skis. Call jet skiing aquatic merriment or maritime activities. Sorry folks, kinksters took water sports.

RETROEDIT: So I was at dinner with one of my sisters and my brother when my sister brought up changing our diapers and how my brother peed on his face once. I made the joke: "I could pee on my face now." I explained the easy logistics of that task, prompting her to suspiciously question why I ever need to think about that. I said, still following what I presumed to be a running joke, that "you never know when you'll have to pee on your face," thereafter noting that Kirby, Ash, and I "would totally pee on each other and be okay with it, jellyfish sting or not."

I was imagining the scene in Friends when, I think, Monica gets stung by a jellyfish and demands she be peed on to stop the stinging.

Maybe you're thinking: what the fuck? But look. We've passed out drunk with each other a lot and had the worry that someone would accidentally wet the bed. Ash and I wet the bed into our double

Have I mentioned that this whole chapter is going to be about porn? Because it's about porn. Commercialized gay porn, specifically.

I love masturbating. I can tell you some early childhood masturbation fantasies when I had no clue what was going on but already had a firm grasp on how sketch my head was. I think proposing research on the correlation of early childhood abuse in women and the development of violent masturbatory fantasies in response wasn't exactly the ideal project for a high school psych class.

I distinctly remember being in my childhood bedroom, quite young, seven maybe, and imagining I was one of the 101 Dalmatians being skinned. The cartoon bad men would club me over the head but instead of dying, I was on the edge of consciousness as they flayed me.¹⁷ I hadn't the vivid anatomical knowledge that I do now, so the best I could summon to reenact this was sliding against the edge of my bed, where the lip of the mattress curled stiffly. I rubbed my skin red. I'd work furiously to catching the mattress on my clothes so that, with great effort, my clothes would come off. Mother walked in on me once; just undressing!

She walked in on me scalding my genitals with steaming hot water out of the bathtub faucet -- but that was less arousal based and more an attempt at self-mutilation. She never

digits. It happens. And we all concluded that even if we were to wet the bed, we would still love each other. It's a story of unconditional love, folks. Your heart should be warmed.

Unfortunately, my sister thought I was being serious and revealing a fetish and shamed me in public. As if I'd reveal a fetish over a bowl of chocolate fondue. It escalated a smidge, ending in her threatening to punch me and charge me with assault because I told her that she better watch out or I'd pee on her. And now we're not allowed to hang out together anymore. Boy-howdy, Christmas is gonna be TENSE.

I added this in without my advisor reading it. I'm sure it fits narratively. I'm really sorry that the footnote under the explanation of watersports got so long.

¹⁷ Rereading this is making me hot. (Please mind that this comment is for the 17th footnot and not an addition to the watersports tirade.)

walked in on me trying to cut off my labia with kid-safe scissors, bright teal handle jarring against the young darkness fleshed between my legs that horrified me.

My sexual imagination was triggered watching a sci-fi movie at the beach when I was 6. So was my unreal terror of primates because another sci-fi showed people being eaten alive by baboons. Then planet of the apes came on. Man, fuck gorillas. But the sci-fi that flipped the switch on my frankly impressive amount of masturbation involved a scene where, as punishment for accidentally killing a comrade via friendly fire, the male protagonist was spread eagle and whipped.

I'd be more concerned with my sexual awakening if I wasn't deeply grateful for the amount of orgasms I've given myself.¹⁸

It used to be that was how I did it. Spread eagle, thrashing my body into the mattress or the floor in mimicry of the painful recoil I saw on screen. It was enough. But then I found that laying on my hands and mashing my clit was an improvement. I still liked the supposed vulnerability of being spread apart, and I supplemented the whipping with fantasies of having my body cut apart inch by inch. As my toes were mutilated, ground and pulverized, I'd rock myself to some brief convulsive pleasure.

I don't know why my fantasies were loveless. They had no impact on any part of my character outside of when I wanted to masturbate. But I knew they were B-A-D. - fucking BAD. Then I got much better at the internet and found "bdsm" porn fiction involving anime characters that I liked. This occurred far more as a teenager. Basically, I read shitty smut on the internet. The rhetoric of the pornography I consumed simplified the body. Men were dangerously handsome, and their cocks were weapons of pain and unwanted pleasure. Women were beautiful; their bodies begged against their wishes until it became their wish. I started consuming hetero

¹⁸ This is self kink-shaming.

material but that shifted to male/male later in my teenage years. I attribute this to the three assaults that occurred when I was sixteen: I was already out about liking people of any gender, I had dabbled innocently in young love. Then, you know, guys I thought were my friends tried to rape me. Three separate times. After that, my life took a pretty dramatic downward turn; not only did my chronic depression, anxiety, and aggressive gender dysphoria worsen, but my sex-life and masturbation went up shit creek. I couldn't be part of erotic imagination. As life progressed, I could be blessedly smitten with another soul until that person even suggested the thought of attraction to me; once my body became tangible, became a point of interest, I was repulsed. Being flirted with was enough to drive me to tears and sickness.

So, my porn became overdone with the male body. In discussion with other AFAB¹⁹ folks who suffered assault, I found the same thing. Representation of bodies like theirs in erotic situations had become unbearable; (cis)gay porn was the solution. Even with my first girlfriend who could get me going like no one's business, we coded our play in the masculine. Both of us were interested in BDSM dynamics. We took turns playing Daddy and Boy, dissociating from our bodies and actual lives. The penetration of our reflections into the abstract pleasure of eroticism buried us back into the trauma of our material bodies.

And then college. College was a funhouse of sex: terrifying, distorted, often drunken.

United by Queerdom, Kirby, Ash and I pitted ourselves against everyone else, past, present, and future. We opened up our strangeness to each other. AKA: we talked about jacking off. A lot. It all kind of snowballed after Ash, who looked so innocent, said that they've had anal sex before during a game of never-have-I-ever played on my dorm floor along with a bunch of other wide-eyed guppies. Ash fucking wreckt us. Anal, seriously? So Ash had anal and we were like: *hoooooly hot stromboli, bitch, please!*

¹⁹ Identified female at birth

Naturally, as these things go, the next night, Ash, Kirby, and I were in Kirby's bed watching gay porn as a bonding experience.

this is like, a week into actual college: group porn viewing

(the play by play²⁰)

Kirby: Alright chickens, what do we want? Dick sucking, ass play, Eiffel tower?

Ash: Eiffel tower?

Charlie: DP²¹, bros lock hands over the middle.

Kirby: Bam, tower.

Ash: No, that looks sad.

Charlie: It's porn; it can't be sad; there's no plot.

Kirby: Porn's sad. Conceptually, it's sad.

Charlie: No porn discourse tonight.

Kirby: It's not like we can beat the video I told y'all about earlier.²²

Charlie: Let's go with something family friendly. Carnival porn.

Ash: NO CARNIES!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Charlie: Local town fair porn?

²⁰ If you respect yourself, put this down, dear god, what are you doing?

²¹ Double Penetration. DP is vague. Double penetration can utilize one orifice or two. DP with Eiffel tower refers to oral and either anal or vaginal.

²² This dude funnels the ingredients for a milkshake into his ass and shakes it around then shits it out into a cup and consumes it. You really can't beat that.

LIES. You can. This dude rigs a dildo to his washing machine and fucks it.

Kirby: Hot dog porn.

Charlie: HOT DOGS FOR EVERYONE!!!!!!!!!!!!

The Porn: Yeah. Yeah. Fuck yeah. That's hot. Put ketchup on it. Mustard. Spicy mustard.

Yeah, mummfff, god, mmmff yeah, fuck yeah, fucking love your meat.

On screen, a naked guy kneels before another naked guy. The standing naked man has his erect penis held out, cradled in a hot dog bun. His erect penis mimics a hot dog. It has been embellished with a row of mustard and a row of ketchup. The kneeling naked man messily consumes the mock-meal. The erect penis is not consumed, although the bun is, and the condiments are slathered about both men.

Ash: [in a tone of morbid fascination] Why would you do that to yourself?

Kirby: This is gay culture.

Charlie: Sandwich culture...ooh my god, Kirby, do you have a boner?

Ash: That's a boner!

Charlie [smacks Kirby's boner gently]

Kirby: Hate crime! ! !

Such events followed regularly. We obviously told everyone about our bonding experience and detailed the porn to all unfortunate souls. My roommate, Drew, shook his head at us. He watched ESPN, stoned and eating Twinkies, so who was he to judge? But our sexual bonding experience only alienated us from our dormitory brethren. It wasn't just that we watched porn as friends, but that we watched porn at all and that we had preferences. I mean, we readily delved into kink together. Choking? *"Hell yeah. Choke me the fuck out daddy."*

It was terrible. We were terrible. And then we found out straight girls don't masturbate.

The Girls were a clique of four pretty rich white girls that lived on our floor that liked Kirby because he was their token gay friend and were slightly unnerved by Ash and I for being the questionable type of queer. But that's unkind of me but still -- You know part of it might be because Ash couldn't remember their names ever.²³ And The Girls did not masturbate.

"Never?"

"Never."

"What do you do when you get horny?"

"I don't get horny."

"Bullshit."

²³ Ash is a fucking mess okay? They couldn't remember the names of anyone on our floor even though Kirby and I were friends with everyone.

This reminds me of a VERY IMPORTANT story that "has to go into the memoir"

There was this one Fake Southern boy (he was from Long Island but had this weird southern culture kink) named Buck. So Buck is a big bro, fratty and wears polos and baseball caps and went to a private school and kind of says the N-word. So us three queers are like, hey Buck...you gonna be a homophobe?

PLOT TWIST: Buck is so nice to us. In fact, all our sports-playing frat bro boys on the floor are our Squad. (Not really cause they're all white and you can't roll squad deep without a black kid but semantics.) And Buck gets plastered every other day and when he does, his feelings come out. And he will find me and Kirby (okay honestly Ash never left their room no one really remembered them either) and Buck will put his big clammy man hands on our shoulders and very earnestly tell us he is proud of us for being out and that he has our back and if anyone fucks with us, he will beat the shit out of him.

Buck was our substitute Dad as in he tried his best, cheated on his girlfriend, and was a belligerent drunk who caused probably \$1000 of damages to our dorm with all the shit he broke. We liked Buck.

Buck hated this one girl Maran. Maran was kind of a stuck up bitch. I totally fucked the guy she liked but she let me use her shampoo once which was nice. But Maran got Buck and his friends busted for pot once so in revenge, Buck got drunk and pissed on her dorm door. I learned about this three years later at a party when a very unpopular gay told me he hated Buck and thought he was homophobic and we had to explain, no, you just weren't his friend BUT MAYBE BUCK WAS WHO KNOWS; respectability politics are a thing y'all. But anyway, Unpopular Gay is telling us about how Buck pissed on Maran's door. And I'm like, man that's fucked up and Hilarious. So I turn around to tell Kirby and Kirby laughs and we're laughing and then we remembered that Maran's roommate was a severely handicapped wheelchair bound girl.

"You can't pee on a handicapped person's door!" Kirby shouted in the middle of Starbucks when he realized. And it was more outlandish and more hilarious in that you're-going-to-hell-in-a-handbasket way. It's all fun and games until you pee on a handicapped girl's door. Then you're a dick.

I still get belligerent snapchats from Buck but he didn't piss on my door so I aint complaining.

“I don’t know. I go out and hook up with a guy.”

“But how do you fall asleep when you’re sad?”

“What?”

“What, you don’t sad jack off and pass out right after?”

“Can you stop asking me this?”

But we couldn’t. We were fascinated. So naturally, we went around to every room with straight girls that liked us enough to answer our questions and polled the first two floors of our dormitory. They all claimed they didn’t masturbate. I mean, bullshit, right, but they couldn’t even fess up to a couple of gay kids, it wasn’t like you masturbating is a crisis of the Christian household. I don’t believe them when they say they don’t masturbate because masturbating to me is so natural and relaxing. But then I recall the shame and chastisement associated with the female body and realizes that some people are shy about their own vaginas.

This was proven to me graphically in the time Marlene Got. A. Condom. Stuck. Inside. Her.

Now, Marlene is an old-money classy southern bell who went fucking wild when she got to college. She got some of the hottest dick of our class year and everyone was exposed to her and that hot dick’s scandalous public sex debacles throughout the year. It was our benign breakfast talk. Marlene was one of The Girls; she was a pal by proximity; you know you’re a pal when you have to call the ambulance and then talk to her Scary Southern Mom on the phone. Not because of a condom but because of heart palpitations. She’s fine: too much caffeine.

Condom fiasco²⁴

Kirby and Ash are watching RuPaul's drag race on Kirby's laptop in Ash's bed. Charlie can't make it through more than five minutes of RPDR and bums out to go find someone to smoke or drink with. They wind up in The Girl's room, eating ramen and drinking vodka. It's 1am. All is well until knock-fucking-knock.

Marlene rolls into the room, makeup smeared, naked except for a robe, a hot mess.

"The condom. The condom. The condom came off inside me!"

Charlie and The Girls freeze, ramen noodles plopping back into Solo Cups.

Marlene points a finger. "Charlie, get it out!"

The camera pans to Charlie's horrified face. "Why me?"

"You know vaginas!"

"Fair." It really is a good point.

Charlie takes a deep drink of vodka and hustles Marlene into the bathroom. The Girls follow, laughing hysterically. Marlene sits down on the toilet, robe hitched up around her hips. Charlie has the wherewithal to close the stall door, penning themselves in with Marlene and at least pretending to form a private sanctuary as The Girls lose their shit past the border of the Hiny Hider™.

"Help me!"

"Chill. Get a finger up there."

"I can't!"

"What you mean you *can't*?"

²⁴ Man I hope no one ever reads this.

Time slows as Marlene righteously confesses: "I've never done that before."

"BITCH WHAT? You got dick so far up there you got a condom stuck and you don't put a finger up there in your down time?"

"I don't masturbate," Marlene insists through a rain of mascara tears.

And she's drunk and hysterical so now isn't a time she'd lie. Charlie is hollering in a cubicle with this drunk girl who won't touch her own pussy.

"Fucking do it. You know what your pussy feels like? Find the thing that is fucking latex," Charlie stubbornly commands.

"I don't know, I don't know, I can't do it!"

"I'll do it." Charlie is ready to die for y'all's sins.

"You can't finger me!"

"This is a medical procedure, not fingering."

And then Charlie remembers how next to Marlene's bed is a container specifically for used condoms, and they fucking lose it on this poor girl because all they can think about is that plastic container full of used condoms and this girl won't put a finger up her own pussy to get out a condom cause she was getting dicked so hard it came off

"I'm getting your boyfriend and I'll walk him through it," Charlie determines, holding back gut-bursting laughter.

Charlie rolls out and detours Marlene's room where said useless boyfriend is twiddling his thumbs and goes straight for Kirby and Ash's room, pounding down the door. Charlie's crying laughing at this point and through hysterical wheezes, explains the situation

Kirby and Ash volt off the bed and go to Charlie's room to tell a stoned Drew; it's also a strategic repositioning because Charlie's room is across the hall from the bathroom. Then Charlie

tells Hot Dick what to do; twenty minutes later, the problem is corrected and no one will ever forget the time Marlene got a Condom Stuck Inside Her.

What makes that story interesting in its relevancy to this larger work of semi-fiction right here is that Marlene wanted me to help. She bypassed her close girlfriend for Charlie, for me; even though The Girls were witnesses, they weren't participants. It would never occur to me, Kirby, or Ash to go to anyone other than each other with a problem. My first reaction to someone needing me to perform a bizarre task is to go and include Kirby and Ash, not just because it was a golden moment for reminiscing about ten years later, but because I needed them to know what was happening with me. My ramen noodle-vodka plans had changed: protocol --> report back to headquarters about location change. In doing so, they became part of the story.

This constant relay of information, whether that means sending a video as it happens when the others are not within proximity, or making sure to grab ahold of them at a party to drag along to whatever Shitshow is going on, meant that the episode never derailed. We cast ourselves purposefully as the stars of all the going-ons at college. Even the most obscure event became relevant to ourselves and thus to each other by the inclusion of a cohort. Isolation ceased to exist as we crafted a singularity in our friendship.²⁵

²⁵ Really slapped in these last two paragraphs to justify the condom fiasco story being in here ngl.

a final²⁶s week

Ash hardly emerges from the art building; Charlie calls them at midnight to make sure they're alive, to remind them to come home; to remind them that they have other classes to work on besides sculpture. At breakfast, Charlie picks clay from Ash's hair, at the base of their neck where it sneaks and stays. At night, the two of them trade off on massages. You can't touch Ash's back without making them horny, so all Charlie can do is knead the meat of Ash's pottery throwing arms. Ash's stubborn dedication has fired their very veins.

Tonight, a night, Charlie sits up naked in Ash's bed; damp bath towel crushed and curled beneath their body. Slick as a greased pig, massage oil on Ash's hands, Charlie looks them in the eye. It's hard to say if Charlie is drunk now; this final's week, they've gone out drinking and dancing and fucking every night. They will return from someone's bed at four in the morning and finish an essay by ten; collapse in their professor's office by eleven. Tonight, they are with Ash, buttered up, full of crying because they always cry. The two of them had been crying over cartoons they watched as kids that now turn them dazed with remembering.

“You know, I think this is it.”

It's a declaration apropos of nothing but the spinning in Charlie's mind. It's common; they roll on top of Ash who grunts and holds them and strokes their slick skin like a lover, like a parent, someone patient enough to endure the spinning.

“I figured it out.”

Ash hums. They nose and nudge at Charlie, at their bedraggled wet head, chirping kissing sounds out of a round little mouth. Charlie chirps back. They are two mute chambers bouncing birdsong and madmen syllables between each other.

²⁶ It took me a good five minutes to decide if there is or is not an apostrophe in “finals week” and I've decided no. It's the week of finals, not a week belonging to finals. Semantics.

“Loving you and Kirby. Seriously. That’s it. Whenever I get really sad, like real fucking dark, I think life is worth it because of loving you. That’s why we’re all alive. The small shit; chicken pot pie and dark green grass and loving you guys. That’s enough to keep me going. This is why people are born, why they bother to live at all.”

“Oh my god,” Ash gasps. “That is so gay.”

“Yeah, d’you think?”

Ash bursts out crying. They squeeze their big sculpture arms around Charlie. “I love you.”

charlie and ash have a new stand-up routine.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: neither of them know how they got there.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: one can't recognize anyone and the other doesn't know if they're real people.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: both of them are nonverbal and can't order.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they start crying.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they start beeping and chirping. They're asked to leave.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: it's a good day and they find a table in the back.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: it's too loud and the autistic covers their ears and the schizophrenic stares off into space.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they have other disorders and can't tell what symptom is from which disorder but overall it's not a good time.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: more than one person says hi: neither of them know what to do.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: quick quick what's the right social script for this?

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: who the fuck let us go to a bar alone?

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they're also visibly queer; they might get beat up.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they're also queer; why are so many queer spaces in bars? Our community has a heightened risk for drinking problems.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they're meeting friends; neither of them want to follow through with this social obligation but feel too guilty to turn away.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: they're meeting friends and greet them happily. It's fun.

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: "That's a funny set-up for a joke. An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar. That's funny."

An autistic and a schizophrenic walk into a bar: "Why are we like this?"

daddy issues

Mike, my Father's partner at work, came over with dear old dad to help change my tire. He rolled the flat to me; I picked it up and put it in my trunk.

"You're just like your dad."

I strove to be nothing like my father.

Dad agreed, rueful, apologetic: "Yeah, Charlie's got a lot of me in them. Too much, actually."

It was the fact that I picked up the tire and walked from the driver's side door to the trunk of my little Aveo, a seemingly more difficult task than rolling it, that I was like my father. It was no more than a moment of innocence. My father is a hardworking, stubborn man. I am too. And I pick up shit rather than roll it because I hate wedging things corner by corner when I can just throw my weight and lift from the knees. There's a reason my ass looks so great and it's squatting to pick up shit. My dad's ass doesn't look great and it's because he doesn't have the form I have. But that's beside the point. This stranger had known me for five minutes and articulated my greatest fear: I was like my father.

No less than a week earlier, my redneck white-trash neighbors had a truck parked diagonally in the yard pointing towards the road. I get parking in the yard cause I do that sometimes too, but what I didn't do is obstruct the view from my neighbor's driveway when they already have a "hidden driveway" sign posted, when they have mentioned before that the driveway is incredibly difficult to pull out from because the hill makes you blind to most oncoming traffic. The system requires you to idle in such a way as to see the traffic light at the bottom and then to count to five; if no car comes in five seconds, it's clear. Normally I have to watch everyone pull out of my long driveway safely before I can unclench my sphincter to take

the desperate poop I'd been holding for the duration of whatever social gathering had occupied my house. It's troublesome. It's the same sensation when I myself have to pull out of the driveway and pray I don't get T-boned. That day, I had my dad with me and we were going to pick up his piece of junk truck that had refused to start, again, and this diagonal-ass pickup truck was blinding my entire pull out.

"Thesedumbmotherfuckingwhitetrashredneckchickenowningdirtyassfuckinghillbilliesparkingtheirfuckingtruckaintgotnothinginthebedsomebitchassboydrivinthataroundaintpickingupnothingfuckersparkingandblockingwithnorsepctorcarefornooneelseintheworld."

In the face of my anger and the knowledge that I was about to pound down our neighbors' door, my dad mollified my anger with a: "They're idiots. Some people are idiots."

"Nah. Nah. I can't stand people like that disrespecting everyone else, and we aren't the only people who ever have to pull out of this driveway. They're fucking dumb. I'm gonna fucking rip them a new one; I don't give a fuck."

"Don't do that."

"No, I'm gonna." I pulled out, cutting the turn sharply, not dying. The house was dark as I rolled past and I glared spitefully at all their white trash land. "I'm not gonna accept some stupid fucking thing when it's fixable. I actually stick up for myself, unlike you."

That shut my dad up. Anytime I hurt my parents, I wondered why in heaven's name did they plan for me. They wanted me. All I did was grow up mean on them.

Ten minutes later, we were home. It had begun to rain but I pulled off to march across the swamp of my neighbor's yard and pound on their door. They weren't home. I stalked around, debating leaving a note, before swearing to return the next day. Well the next day a tree from their yard fell across my driveway and I had to get them to cut it away with a chainsaw and

endure awful small talk; I didn't lay into them because they had a chainsaw and a hatchet and I know to walk away when I'm outgunned. But between the rain and the chain saw, I texted my childhood friend, Molly.

U ever get so angry that u remind urself of ur father?

yes. Yes i was just thinking about that. I've been getting so angry lately 😡. Been catching myself yelling and storming around the house like my dad. It's so scary he's so scary. I wasn't always like this was I?

you think im kidding about the daddy issues?

I am in Gettysburg with Ash. Luna and her girlfriend, Mei, have detoured on their road trip down from Canada to Florida to see me. Because we are well adjusted, we can talk about our respective daddy issues as friends, as a found-family. It's beautiful. We're even sober.

"You ever get so angry you remind yourself of your father?" Charlie asks their friends. Ash is tucked under their arm, feverish to the touch, but they're a real trooper. Luna bounces in her seat; she's as thin as a rail, shockingly small. Charlie never thought that the girl who was as strong and steady as stone could take up so little space. Mei laughs at the prompt. They all do.

"Yoooooo, man," Luna enthuses. Charlie has always loved her eyes, tells her this, and now Luna makes half of her gestures with them, hands flapping in excited histrionics and her dark cow eyes radiant. "Yo. Mei: her dad fucking abandoned her. If she wanted to act like him, she'd have to leave the country."

Charlie cackles. That's brilliant. "Oh! Jeez, when did that happen?"

Comment [IT1]: Yes, that's sharp.

"Like a week ago," Mei says, shrugging.

"What the fuck?" Charlie laughs louder, mouth a dumb gash of delighted horror. Ash apologizes; they love their father and are horrified by the idea of abandonment and also embarrassed by how uncivilized Charlie is; Luna thinks it's great, waving her hands and egging on Charlie.

"Isn't that fucked up?" Luna prompts.

"Oh my god, yeah. Dude," Charlie confirms. "Mei, what the fuck?"

"Yeah, he has like a second family or something. Also he's wanted by the government I think. He ran off to the Philippines."

Mei is twenty two. She is a world champion weight lifter. She's in med school with a good line of credit. Luna told me about her the first day she saw Mei, almost two years ago.

"Oh my god, did I tell you I had to pull a knife on my dad?" Luna bursts.

"What?" Charlie is all seriousness when it comes to Luna in harm's way. Luna's smile is manic; Luna's dad is a grade-A piece of shit. "Recently?"

"Nah. A while back. He was drunk and had me and lil' bro backed into a corner so I grabbed a kitchen knife. Ma was in the background praying and Muff is screaming his head off."

"Stab him next time," Charlie suggests. "Next time he's drunk, just kill him and make sure it looks like he was going after you or Muff or Ma."

"You'd win the case; nobody would want to defend him," Mei reasons.

Ash sits mostly traumatized by the conversation, mostly silent. When Luna and Mei are asleep, and Charlie spoons Ash through the fever sweat, Ash says real quiet: "I get like my dad too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He cries. And I cry too."

"He cries?"

"He gets so angry he cries. He's so tired. Me too."

Charlie pets Ash's hair and wishes that there were cicadas this summer to fill up the night.

this is a chapter about group dynamics

otherwise known as

“Glamorous Tricycle”

There’s something to be said for group dynamics²⁷. They exist in every story: an ostensible leader, a wily coyote, a heartfelt moral figure, a queen, a badboy, a clown, and so on. Archetypes of character that, in a book or on TV, clean up. They’re groomed by so many writers and editors, played from page to screen. They are predictable; their turn is when the predictability is interrupted. They do the opposite of expectation or the foundational trait of theirs is flawed, fucked. I think too, like characters, that all stories have been told. That’s a theory; that there’s only a fixed number of plots that exist.²⁸ Anything “new” is just shuffling the deck.

Growing up, I inhabited the space of teacher’s pet and schoolyard bully simultaneously. Some might say that makes no sense but it was the perfect combination of insidious internal destruction that fit me perfectly. Precocious, adorable, and aggressive at kickball. Being transgender but not quite sure what the fuck that was ousted me from my own body and space. Only in my deepest privacy, sans a mirror, lost in imagination whether brought on by daydreams or books, I was free. But every other moment of my life was a constant struggle with flesh and boundaries. Mom’s greatest accusation was “you’re a young lady” and as one I had no business forgetting to wash out my bowl of oatmeal. To be fair, oatmeal dries on like plaster so that’s a big pain to clean. But though I knew how to clean up good and walk with

²⁷ I told you.

²⁸ I think it’s Northrop Frye.

straight-backed poise, the young lady façade was strictly that; a façade. So continuing to grow up, I drank and partied and fucked around with a jutted-chin insolence so familiar to white angry teens. I shoplifted harmlessly, chaptstick and lighters, like so many other desperate clowns and participated in equally meaningless pranks; snuck in and out of my house; snuck around with older boys; whatever; the stuff rebellious Hallmark children are made of.

Amidst that, though, was a chronic weariness. I got through all that nonsense by the time I was 17; after that, I was too busy working my cute little butt off to buy a car and being too deliriously sick with depression to troll around. I rolled my emaciated corpse into college tired and over it, reeking of wasted potential and poorly made decisions.

I was not the mom of the group. Moms in the group nurture and fuss. I don't class this as how moms really are. My mom swore by two cures: "Take a Tylenol and have a nap" and if you needed an extra boost and you're *really* looking worse for wear, try some cinnamon sugar toast.²⁹ We could be bleeding from the eyes and this was her go-to cure-all. And my friends wonder why I don't go to the doctor. *A doctor?* Tylenol and a nap will fix you right up. Look buddy, my mom was a nurse. She knows what she's talking about. And if you don't feel better after all that, get the barf bowl³⁰ and watch Full House. You'll be fine. Stop faking it. You can go to school.

²⁹ It must be made on white bread made with refined bleached flour. If there is a single hearty grain visible, you've defeated the purpose of simple carbs and sugar.

³⁰ Jenny Lawson also wrote about the concept of barf bowls. Do people not have bowls specifically to receive hot acidic vomit? Bowls meant to nestle against your chest where you sweat and wilt on a ratty old bath towel. It's for emergencies, when you can't make it to the toilet, but it's so easy just to roll over and up-end your stomach and then flop back into your soupy sickbed. Our barf bowl is a firm plastic,

Ash, though. Ash might be the closest thing to the mother in the group, but that's hilarious in its own because Ash is like my child sometimes. Mostly, Ash is used too dealing with their disastrous sisters and has developed a healthy dose of neuroticism. Kirby and I were a pretty good test-drive for the bullshit any child could bring. When I took Ash and Kirby to a yarn mecca to pick up a bunch of expensive wool I'll never trust myself to knit, Ash kept me and Kirby from absconding with this gorgeous cat lurking amongst the yarn.

We named her Teacake; we'd all been reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and we sat outside the yarn shop going "teacake, I'm hongry" in our best worst southern accents.³¹ I had five hundred bucks in my account and this seemed like enough to illegally keep a scrawny but kind cat in a filthy college dorm. Ash said no. Kirby and I sat on the ground and cried, petting this cat who knew just what to do: roll over and paw at the air and flick its fluffy tail and butt its cute little nose at us. *Take me! I'll haunt your consciousness with my forlorn adorableness. You'll never forget me. You will recall me and all that we could have been together, as a family, a real family, (you and someone sweet on a couch with the TV droning distractingly, me on your lap purring, a fichus growing healthfully in the corner, bills looming menacingly in the faded edge of your peripheral), each time you rest your eyes on the image of a cat.*

Ash said no.

wide and round. It's the most heinous shade of orange Pantone could conjure, some relic of the putrid 70s dishware collection lingering about the house like the ghosts of murdered orphans.

³¹ Fun fact! When I get drunk and read poetry, it's always in a southern accent. Not drrrrrrrawwwllliinnngg my words but everything's got that tight-fiddle clutch-and-release vowel noise.

I drove us home and the whole reason we didn't have Teacake was because of Ash. Whenever we want to pester Ash, Kirby and I whine about how much we miss Teacake. It's hilarious because Ash really gets upset about it; it's not hilarious because the schizophrenia makes them really vulnerable to emotions and they can't process the legitimacy of me and Kirby's bullshit whining. But we do it anyways and have a good laugh because we kind of suck.

Our actions persist. Ash, Kirby and I have fallen into each other fast and hard; it's only when we're faced with other people, people outside of this drunken trio of

CharlieAshKirby that I realize how obnoxious we are because we're so full on each other.

Nobody wants to be stuck with a group of people making endless inside jokes and melting into hysterics at a look that no one outside of their locked eyes can perceive. Look folks, I don't make the rules. This glamorous tricycle is roaring and ready to go, we don't have time for questions of clarification. Keep up!

im still talking about group dynamics i swear

[a quick preface: For the first few years as friends, every time Ash would leave us to go have anal sex with their boyfriend, Kirby and I would get hilariously drunk, kiss, cry, and propose to one another.³² We needed Ash to keep us from our dramatics. With

³² two of our friends are ordained ministers so technically we have gotten married. I think.

Ash, we had an audience, someone to entertain, and someone who knew when to stop laughing. But just the two of us meant infinity, no barriers, no limits.]

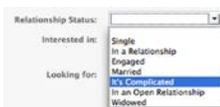
Ash is gone and Kirby and Charlie are bored and in love with each other, probably drunk off Carlo Rossi.

“You know what we should do,” Charlie slurs, slumped against the wall behind Kirby’s bed. Kirby’s bed is notoriously filthy and it’s a measure of love that they’re even sitting in it. Kirby doesn’t own sheets; he sleeps with just an orange comforter. He doesn’t have pillowcases. “I’m from Detroit,” he defends. It’s a cop out.

“Please tell me you have an idea. I’m so bored. Can we just jack off ³³ and go to bed?”

“That’s such a waste of drunk I can never get off when I’m drunk I just end up falling asleep. No, you know what we should do? Let’s go burn ourselves with cigarettes.”

Kirby shoots up from his lounge on his filthy bed. “Okay!”



³³ I admit, this seems a little sketchy. “can we just jack off” implies some mutual masturbatory helping-hand jacking off being done. Like a group effort. Except jacking each other off is sex. Kirby and I have not done this and will not do this. We’d both cry. Here, Kirby is suggesting that we get into our respective beds, turn off the lights, put in earbuds and ignore each other while we both masturbate to our respective, private fantasies and achieve our respective, private orgasms.

“Wouldn’t that be hilarious?” Charlie encourages.

“Yeah. The comedic value. Ash’ll come back and be all ‘what did yinz do?’ and we can say ‘burned ourselves with cigarettes.’” Kirby strikes a delighted pose, already envisioning the fussing and dramatics to ensue.

“They’ll be so annoyed. Okay, get some pants on.”

“How much do cigarettes cost?”

“I don’t know. If it’s a lot we can find buds on the sidewalk and relight them.”

“Who has a lighter? Chesky³⁴ does. You think he wants to come?”

But neither would ever really invite anyone else on this kind of excursion. These sort of things are just for Charlie and Kirby or CharlieAshKirby or AshCharlie or KirbyAsh. Outsiders cannot intrude. They wouldn’t want to, not really.

They put on clothes and get to 7-11 and don’t buy cigarettes. Charlie buys 2 for \$1 glazed donuts and Kirby debates getting a juice but inevitably doesn’t. They go home, jack off and go to sleep.

“What did yinz do last night?” Ash asks when they return in the morning; they have the glow of someone who just had kinky car sex.

“Burned ourselves with cigarettes,” Kirby is the first to volunteer. Charlie has Ash around the middle, trying to drag them into their bed in the bunk beneath Ash’s.

³⁴ Our prescription pill-abusing friend.

“What!?” Ash screeches.

“We didn’t. We got to 7-11 and decided nah. But we were gonna.”

“How funny would that have been? Ash left me and Kirby alone so we had to resort to burning ourselves to have fun,” Charlie harasses.

“You two.” Ash’s hands strike their hips, a bundle of admonishment in their fists. They are almost a mom. “I can’t leave you two alone,” Ash sighs, put-upon. They look up at the gray ceiling and fluorescent lights, searching for god, for answers -- why them? Why these two goobs? Why does it feel like a blessing that without the third side, this triangle is just two collapsing lines folding into each other; the shape, the matter and substance, is lost. Ash feels important. Without them, Charlie and Kirby didn’t know what to do with themselves. “Wait for me next time, okay?”³⁵

³⁵ If we’re going to burn ourselves, we will at least do it together.

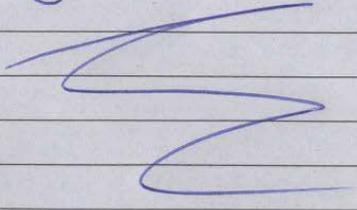
the night
Kirby got
cockblocked
by a drunk
Charlie
As told by
Charlie

Complained
about by Kirby

Based on true
events

11/12/2016

The night
I got
cockblocked
by drunk
Charlie



The morning post-cockblock

“You know what?” Kirby loudly interrogates his crankily awakening apartment. Charlie is in the bathroom losing their guts. He has to misdirect his leftover ire and unsucked-dickness to the rest of the unwilling occupants of room 109. They’re invested; they just don’t know it. They’ll be ready to pity him, support him, and validate his emotions the moment that they wake up. “Anytime someone asks me how I’m doing, how my weekend was, you know what I’m gonna say? I’m gonna say: I almost got dick last night. I was this close to getting dick last night:



“I’m sorry. But you know what,” Charlie counters from the toilet where they’re noisily dying, “it’s Tiny’s fault. Ultimately. It’s his fault.”³⁶

³⁶ They broke up. Lemme give you the drama. If you read ahead, you’ll see that in the 2am breakdown chapter Kirby is freaking out about Tiny and his constant relationship stress. Surprise surprise, it came to a head. Tiny visited from Detroit for the week and on day 1 they break up and spend the week going through the motions of a couple, including “I love you”ing each other. But then on the last night Tiny is here, I throw a party and Tiny tries to fuck some dude. Not cool.

“It’s everyone’s fault!” Kirby screams.³⁷

Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I

Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I

Missy Elliot – Work It

The evening - pre-cockblock

It all started at QueerThanksgiving™.³⁸ All the little queers were going around the dinner table offering thanks to the community for being a safe and welcoming place.³⁹ And then Zoupee has to go and say, while sporting a nebula of hickies on his neck, how thankful he is for freshmen. To fuck. Because freshmen are easy. All said at the thanksgiving dinner table.⁴⁰

I tell you this, dear readers, because you must understand the problem afflicting our personal lives. Oh, yes, Mr. Donald Trump is our president elect but is the threat to our civil rights and liberties, the threats to our migrant siblings, our brown and black siblings, our Muslim siblings, our poor siblings, our Jewish siblings, our international siblings, our siblings in invaded nations – is that the problem I’m penning write now? No. No. It is the scant pickings for sex and love on this campus.

Let’s take a step back from the narration to really get to the problem. Imagine your frustrated, hormonal heart restricted by confusion, by social taboo, by law or religion, by your family and friends’ acceptance – that little queer heart finally liberated far away at the magical

³⁷ It’s Tiny’s fault but I’ll get there. You’ll get there. We’ll all get there.

³⁸ Wait for the intertextuality. It’s building. This will come back to haunt us all.

And Julie Davin says I don’t speak meme. I’ll show her.

³⁹ The thing is, Kirby and I left feeling so awful. We felt like mean respectability politics queers at the end EXCEPT we justified our disdain by reminding ourselves how in the right we were to judge certain individuals.

⁴⁰ This isn’t how decades of genocide are meant to be celebrated!

world of college. The grass is expensively manicured, the squirrels are yabbering frightfully from the trashcans, and you have found a power and place within and outside of yourself to take the name Queer like a gold star of secret success you hide away at holidays –whatever – yes, here you are, arrived, ready for kissing and hanky panky.

And there's, like, only ten people like you.

The community is a shriveled raisin of options. Everyone has beef and regret with the other ten people in the room. There's enough drama to extort to Broadway. Everyone's double dipping and it's getting a little incestuous. The seniors are haggard, the juniors are overextending themselves, the sophomores are loud. And you, little-one, are fresh-meat.

I want to protect the first years from upperclassmen. They're fresh off the boat (out of the closet?) half the time. Some don't even have their first kisses. You know what people need to talk about more? About why queer people, particularly gay men, go through the motions of hyper-masculine dick-pursuit and take long long time to have mutual relationships?⁴¹ Because if you don't grow up being able to openly have crushes, date, and engage with potential partners in your age bracket like hetero-kids growing up, you kind of get the shaft for social skill development.

And this campus sets a perfect example. People want to be able to do the Sex Drugs & Rock n' Roll lifestyle that wasn't accessible to them in high school. Who are they to deny the attentions of an Out n' Proud senior dogging them, making a party space for them full of foamy basements⁴² and foamy beer. Then, take a look at that senior, lurking around and ready for spectacle and sex with a bunch of barely-legals; their options are continued unwilling celibacy,

⁴¹ Admittedly, this isn't a Queer™ perspective on interpersonal relationships

⁴² Foam parties. Conceptually weak and practically weaker.

hooking up with someone ugly but their age, or picking the fresh flesh of first years like a skeevy vulture.

It's problematic.

BUT! HO! So there we are, listening to this, criticizing Zoupeee's behavior.⁴³ And then: we decide to announce our engagement.⁴⁴ Everyone thinks it's a joke! The gag is: it isn't. But it prompts Kirby and I to swear off the people on this campus. No sir, not for us, no more faces that will haunt us in the cafeteria. There's a party and we will find people we will never see again and go home with them somehow.

The morning post-cockblock

I put my thing down, flip it and reverse it

"Hey, Kirby, how was your night?"

Someone makes a grave mistake.

"Let me tell you," Kirby sings out. He stabs a hand to his cocked hip, strikes the pose of the righteously wounded. The innocent bystander backs away slowly. Kirby smashes his coffee cup on the floor. Cheap ceramic and even cheaper coffee flies about the room like errant party favors, shards of scorn and horniness afflicting all and sundry. "Let me," he waves his pointer

⁴³ This entire thesis is an elaborate call-out post about this dude. I hate this dude.

⁴⁴ Over the previous summer, Ash and I thought we were going to get married. I really believed it. Alas, Ash rescinded the offer even though we'd *totally* be a great mentally unstable couple. A few months later, Kirby and I were on a wild ride to Baltimore and decided that we should get married so I can put him on my insurance.

We're mostly caught up on whether or not it's a gay or a straight looking marriage.

finger around, “tell you. I was *this close* to getting dick and drunk belligerent Charlie had to burst in screaming and ruin the night.”

From a distance, Charlie can be heard yelling defensively: “It was so funny though.”

The beginning - pre-cockblock

Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I

Ti esrever dna ti pilf nwod gniht ym tup I

The door clicks open. A lurking, shapeless mass comes stumbling into the dark room.

“Mmmrrshmm?” Charlie mumbles an incoherent demand for identity.

“Hang out with me,” Kirby whines, falling atop them where they sleep.

“No.”

Their alarm didn’t go off. The liquor store is closed. They have a party to attend. The small inconveniences of the world pile atop Charlie as surely as Kirby does now. They cannot possibly be asked to do that; they already went to QueerThanksgiving™. That’s more than enough socializing for one day.

“Hang out with meeeeeeeeeeeeeee,” Kirby annoys, sliming his way under the covers.

“Put on pants.”

“No.” Charlie flips over to face him, a slash of light from outside shining on the bronze highlighter they stole from Ash. 🙏. “People expect us to go, right? We’re queering it. We aren’t going. Let’s spice it up. We can’t keep showing up to things.”

Kirby hums. “Interesting. I can see it. Conceptually, it’s interesting.”

“Exactly. Let’s do something different. Let’s...let’s go to the diner. I want cheesecake.”

It’s decided. It’s done. It’s the worst bean water coffee and kinetic-sand cheesecake they’ve ever had. While there, Charlie gets a text from the girl throwing the party.

iMessage
Yesterday 9:58 PM

Hey are you guys coming? Lmao

“Look. See. Spice it up. The fans, they crave us. Look. They can’t resist us. See, a little fashionable-lateness and we’ve destabilized them. They’ve grown complacent. They think they can just invite us and that’s enough to get us into their homes, into their arms. But we’ve shown them. Now they need to ask, really show us how much they want us. See?” Charlie waves their phone around as they bombast.

“So are we going or not?” Kirby asks.

“Yeah, sure,” Charlie shrugs. “Text her from your phone, mine’s broken as fuck.”

Hey- we are running late sorry lol
lost my keys in town 🙄 give us 10
min to joutfit the fuck out

Charlie and Kirby show up. It is not lit. The resident hippies let them into the apartment, hysteria clammering in the blinking of their eyes. Someone hands Kirby a Natty Ice. He cringes.

Charlie bobs and weaves their way to the fridge to get a Blue Moon. “I write love songs not tragedies” is the most significant thing happening at the party. And the strange group of hot thirty-somethings.

“That’s a gay dude,” Charlie comments quietly to Kirby as they point to some gay dude.

“Yeah, he’s from Jersey. I know him from instagram.”

Wink wink. Nudge nudge. Charlie dips⁴⁵ and sidles up to the hottest, whitest, boat-shoes wearing dad-looking 30-year old in the joint.

“So why are you here,” they suavely interrogate. They know a skeeve when they see one. Twenty minutes later, they leave with this White Dicked Lawyer for a club. There you have it folks.⁴⁶ But the night goes awry. Kirby has to take Charlie’s apartment keys so Charlie’s up shit creek and rolling around town just hoping they’ll be able to get back into their apartment at some point; meanwhile Kirby is tryna edge on that Jersey dick.

It’s 3:00am; White Lawyer rolls Charlie up to their apartment post-club.

“Wanna come in,” Charlie offers, bold and confident.

“I have a lot of questions,” is the unexpected reply from White Dicked Lawyer.

What seems to be the case is that White Dicked Lawyer evidently can’t determine Charlie’s gender. He doesn’t know what’s gonna be in the down-town of Charlie’s pants. This is not the first time Charlie’s been in this exact same situation. It isn’t even the second. Or the third.

⁴⁵ I tried so hard NOT to cockblock him. I nobly abandoned him to the fates.

⁴⁶ I was later congratulated on a job well done, applauded for bagging the hottie who is in “high demand” with a “lot of competition” in pursuit of him. And I ended up giving him a crisis of sexuality. Classic.

Straight men will pursue Charlie, buy them drinks, date them, and get to the door still unsure of the matter of gender and anatomy. Really, it's anatomy that confounds them. These men are curious, interested, aroused, and internally debating how to approach the hot aloof figure tempting them. Charlie's gonna get hate-crimes one day if they keep going out with straight men.⁴⁷

"Uh-huh," Charlie nods. They makeout a little before Charlie skidaddles. They, in a miracle of coincidences, collide with Kirby and his Jersey Dick on the way into the apartment. Oh, excellent, how fortuitous, now Charlie can both gain access to their home and quickly recap the night with their best friend and fake-fiance, Kirby. How pleasant, how convenient.

Cockblock

"I spent all night getting closer to sucking a dick. I was so close. We were at another party after and we couldn't find a room alone together because every time someone would burst in asking us to smoke or seeing what we were doing. All night! I was so fucking close. I was so close. You know, I was like, 'oh boy it's getting pretty late,' and he, you know, said 'I should walk you home,' and THAT WAS MY CHANCE. WE WERE SO CLOSE. I'm literally opening the door and out from the shadows rolls drunk belligerent Charlie screaming about some lawyer! It was a bad Seinfeld episode. I even said: this is a bad Seinfeld episode. We're standing right outside my bedroom door and Charlie is just hollering and then they go: 'Ohhh. You know, let me leave you two to your thing.' They wink and go into their room. And it's awkward but we're almost there. My key is in the door. It's gonna happen; my mouth is wet, I know that dick is

⁴⁷ I've been called she-male and trap and a whole slew of other things, so I'm sure it's coming.

close. And then the door FLIES opens and Charlie bursts out to talk even more. But at that point, they've woken up everyone else. So now Ash, Rio and Mami are in the kitchen going 'oh who is this Kirby?' and everyone's congregating and then my date is like 'I should get going,' and LEAVES. He leaves! But then, oh no, you wait, then I scream at Charlie: 'YOU COCKBLOCKED ME!' only to realize that our windows are all wide open and the guy is still on the sidewalk just outside of our rooms.

in love with all the things that won't happen

Ash is a soft place in the world. They are soft. I tease them to remind myself that they're just another kid, another coulda-been stranger. It's by chance that I know them, that I'm subject to their warm embraces, the pink smell of sleep tucked around their jaw in the morning. They are the easiest person to sleep with, wide and giving, cradling.

They tell me things.

"I can count on you and Kirby to tell me that I'm alive."

They'd worry me more if I wasn't right there with them.

"That I'm not out of my mind."

Me too, kid.

Being their friend tests me in all the hardest ways. I'm not tested on my capacity to love or accept; they are far from a chore. But loving them makes me want to be soft too. I'm not good at that, at letting in or putting down my guard. It's easier to slip behind someone and hug them, bend my bones around their aches and shelter them, than to cut skin and bleed together. To bleed at all.

"When I'm with you and Kirby, I'm so happy to be alive. Sometimes I'm happy to be alive when I'm alone, but then I'm not sure if those are my thoughts, if that's even possible, when I'm alone. I don't trust it. I can't enjoy my happiness when I'm alone. It's easier with you around."

Telling me this excites them. They look like a kid, smiling, big-eyed, arms flapping. They're eager for my understanding.

"Same," I echo. And I wonder, if they wake up smiling too. And I know: they fall asleep easy with about anyone. And I don't think they wake up and don't know what to do with the dead-asleep body next to them under the covers, summer warm but we like the sheets over our naked legs; I stroke their hair and their nose because what else does one do under the moonlight.

On Ash's bedroom floor, we sit cross-legged eating pesto and tomatoes and chirp at each other because we both go non-verbal together. It feels a lot like healing. And maybe later in town, our hands clasped and swinging wildly, cracked sidewalks skipping under our feet, they ask: "Do you ever get so dysphoric that you aren't there anymore?"

I wonder how we'd be if we weren't queer, if we were still sick in our heads, developed wrong, but not queer. Me and Ash not sure if we're put together right or wrong, if it's everyone else that's seeing the world wrong. Maybe we would have been happy as plain old boys but who we are now, we hate men. Men are just a lot of hurts. None of us trust men a bit.

"Yes," I say. "I know that feeling."

Yes. I'm talking to myself in the mirror, standing there having arguments out loud with the people in my head, the fantasies of coulda-been and gonna-be and not being there in the first place. A friend asks me how prominent are my thoughts of death and dying and I tell her, it isn't so much dying as eradication. I want to combust. I dream of immolation. I will remove every part of myself from history and future.

These days, I'm back home, the hometown, the place of departure and return and running into people I never liked much at the gas station. I have too many names in my pocket that I'm handing out between beers and handshakes. I'm going by my last names because Lancaster isn't the place to be the person I am with all these folks so set on the person I never was except to them. So here be dragons; call me Charlie.

We step off the sidewalk into Ash's house, into their bedroom. I'm still talking. "You know what too? You know what I say about being *Mouth*. I can't talk to anyone. They stick me to making small talk to customers – you make the fucking autistic kid do this bullshit customer service chat-em-ups and I'm stuttering and blanking out. A co-worker said "bye Charlie" to me and you know how I responded? G-g-good bye, g-g-g-ood job today, g-g-good one, am I right, my g-g-guy, b-bye-b-b-b-ye, g-g-good farewell." and this poor man just has to laugh and clap me on the shoulder and I'm staring at the buttons on his shirt."

"Oh, Kiddo, you poor thing," Ash croons sympathetically.

"I swear to god though, I went out with my friend Eleanor, my oldest dear friend, some since-second-grade friend, and I mean, I'm kind of drunk, but I warn her I'm gonna talk her ear off, you know how I run my mouth when I ain't been around anyone, and I'm just talking a mile a minute out of relief about anything because at least she knows who I am kind of. Not like how you and Kirby know but pretty good."

But Ash gets it. "I get it," Ash says. "I don't feel like a person except when I'm with you. You ground me."

It's a touching moment. It's the kind of shit that makes the future so terrible and thrilling. We think we're going to get married. Talked about it the other day. Let's get married, I really

mean it, I'm here for you, we get each other, I can't imagine you/us living with anyone else, I don't trust anyone to be good enough to you, for you, with you. Yes, yes, that's good. That's so good. We think we can do this. Let's really do it. Instead of rings we'll get tattoos.

We'll live in a small, environmentally friendly house. We'll garden, and have our own art studios. Etsy shops for some rain-check weekend funds. We'll be бага yagas. We'll be old wise gays. We'll be a refuge. Our wedding will be pirate themed so we can wear vests and capes and big boots. We'll be swingers, of course, Ash still has their boyfriend. And I express worry about dying alone aside from them, like maybe I should take up some of the guys asking me out on a weekly basis. The past month, I've been asked out at least three times a week and someone makes a pass at me every day. And I keep saying no; I'm surly and irritable and people aren't taking the hint; it's gotten to be so much that I'm dreaming about turning people down.

"Maybe I should say yes?"

Ash gives me a look, like I should know better. I do. "Don't say yes if you don't like the person." It's the same advice I've given to others. Do as I say and not as I do.

I wonder how anyone meets anyone anymore.

I clasp them close, a golden locket dangling at my throat. "Thank god for you."

When I see old people all alone, I'm liable to weep. On benches waiting for the bus or at the little Greek diner up the street drinking camel-colored coffee, shaking and old, they're old and life is hanging down all over their face and they're alone, thinned up body liable to melt into the big swallowing pleather booth. And it's all about grounding. And I wasn't sad when my grandpa died and I wasn't sad when my grandma died because they lived good long lives; but

everyone was sad when grandpa died because grandma was alone after that. And she said, at Pap's hospital bed: "I don't know what I'll do. I haven't gone a day without him for sixty-three years."

Just two years before that, I'd asked them how they met

Pap saw her coming out of a corner store and thought she was beautiful and said to his friend: "I'm going to marry her," and he walked up and asked her out with intent and that's all she wrote.⁴⁸

After Nan dies, the thing that's makes me sad is all the stuff they never told us that we lost. And we lost their Pennsylvania Dutch accent and their slang and their secrets and the smell of their house.

And then I see the all-alone old people; maybe they like it like that, maybe they got a house full of grandkids driving them to an early death and getting a coffee alone is a breath of fresh air, but I can't see that. I see someone who passes the day with their mouth shut, watching TV with no one to pat on the leg and crack a joke at. And maybe they got a dog but a dog dies or you die and someone gets left behind. And this old man always comes into work and he wants to talk to everyone about anything, and it's a drag cause he talks so much, and I know he has a wife, but it must be something to need anyone to listen. To talk back.

2am breakdown

⁴⁸ Everyone had problems with him cause Nan was his little housewife and Pap was a stubborn cuss and my dad too and if I'm like my dad then I'll be a stubborn mean cuss too and I gotta be better than that for Ash.

The weekend came with slow predictions of calamity. Charlie prepared themselves to be stood up once more by the latest man to ask them out and planned accordingly. They were smart to do so as the man didn't show but this lack of showing disturbed nothing in Charlie. They had asked after his company simply to confirm its lack. Rather, they enjoyed themselves at brunch with Kirby and Rio.

Leading up to a trip to Lancaster, a brief spell home to gather a few forgotten belongings, Charlie invited Kirby and Rio⁴⁹ to join them to much enthusiasm. As the hour of departure approached, Kirby himmed and hawed, shuffling his feet and protesting.

"You wanted to go," Charlie reminds, fussed and annoyed. They'd delayed leaving by three hours in order to accommodate Kirby. "I could have been home and back already."

"I know," Kirby wails. He gestures around himself: they're at his work office, the cluttered desk; they're in his bedroom, the messy bed; they're in the doorway of the bathroom, the dirty toilet. "But I kind of want to be alone."

The pose Charlie strikes reeks of a power play, a knotted fist on a bony hip, a mean mouth. "I left last weekend for break and you didn't leave your room for days. You're coming with me. Shut up," they interrupted any protests with a pointed finger. "Get your shit packed, we're picking up Rio and we're leaving. Find a play list on your phone."

So they leave. And the next morning in Lancaster city, the streets cheerily flocked with earth dwellers soaking up an inappropriately warm October day, Kirby looks up with a squint in

⁴⁹ Rio is our child. They are very cute and they are our actual literal child without negotiation. They're new. Just accept that we have this adorable eighteen year old child.

his boy-blue eyes and says: “Thanks for dragging me along. Now that I’m here, I’m really happy I came.”

“See, I told you,” Charlie boasts, all confidence, manicured and impeccable in an all-black get-up, long strides traversing familiar streets. “You just need to get into the middle of something. Throw yourself into the middle. That’s what I do.”

They shield their eyes from the sun, watch Rio peer into storefront windows. They’d known they would be stood up. This was the contingency plan. “Just gotta get so far into the middle that you can’t turn back; make yourself enjoy it. The only way out is through, ya know.”

After the city-spell, the little trio takes a nap in Charlie’s childhood bed, a squish of warm faces; they eat toast and drink coffee, sip a little juice; Charlie drives them back to campus, sun low and red and blinding as their greeting. There’s a party tonight. There’s tater tots to be eaten.

[subchapter: our only friend at a party is a cat named Tastee]

There will be a party and tater tots; Charlie wallows in bed; Kirby wallows in bed. Their own respective beds, separated by thin walls, conditions that make it all the more sad and telling that the two of them snapchat back and forth, the [10] second photos nothing more than disastrous selfies with any number of filters overlaid. They’re fond of the new Little Red

Riding Hood one. Eventually, their messages become simply the empty black space of their bedrooms. They send photos of nothingness.

Charlie: 'Idun even wanna go to this party'

Kirby: 'is it ok if i go'

Charlie: 'yeah i asked'

Charlie: 'ppl should know that ur coming if im coming'

Kirby: 'i never go to parties'

Charlie: 'kats last party was lit'

Kirby: 'isnt her apartment kind of small'

Charlie: 'yeah but honestly no one is going to this one every1 visiting Lincoln U'

Kirby: 'tru'

They want to arrive at precisely 11pm to get first dibs at the free alcohol. They couldn't make it through sober. They do, arrive at 11pm on the dot that is. The apartment is empty aside from its residents. Their friend Leah opens the door.

"So Deepkah was watching lesbian porn in the living room right before you got here," is Leah's opening line.

“I was watching lesbian porn right before I got here too,” Charlie jokes. Not enough people are around to appreciate their wit. Charlie and Kirby keep their shoes on as they enter the apartment, a habit that itches from the soles up. It makes Charlie feel uncivilized. And Kirby has only recently won the habit from Charlie after Charlie vocally shamed that sort of nonsense out of him.

“So no one’s here yet,” Leah explains. The room speaks for itself. But it doesn’t matter. Charlie’s already full of nerves and Kirby’s hanging off their elbow. But it’s okay, everything’s okay; there’s a cat on the couch, eager eyes beaming from its small black head.

“Is that Kat’s cat?” Charlie asks. And it is. And the cat is fucking awesome. One of those cool cats that’s all paws and baby claws and more like a puppy than anything, ready to play and head butt. Her name is Tastee.⁵⁰ Kirby and Charlie play with the cat and make small talk with the apartment’s residents until a group of students from another college who are visiting show up.

Charlie and Kirby are attractive people. Symmetrical white faces, thin bodies. Strangers like to meet them, mistaken by the appearance of them, drawn in briefly to what looks like a pretty young couple. A couple that’s cool and chill, a pair of people who know what’s what, what’s hip, the mistaken identities of people who are happening.

Directly following the introductions, Charlie smiles, turns on their booted-heels to Kirby and says: “I want to leave.”

⁵⁰ “Like the character from *Orange is the New Black*, Tastee” and not like the general sentiment of deliciousness. Which I wonder what constituted the resemblance to Tastee, the character, to prompt the naming with such enthusiasm to dismiss the potential of the cat tasting good.

Kirby claps his hands once, grinning relief. "I was waiting for that."

Leah laughs when Charlie shakes her hand enthusiastically, all comical apologies for their rapid departure: "So lovely seeing you, really enjoyed ourselves, gotta get going, see you on the flippy, have fun, be safe, take care, drink responsibly, use a condom, we really must be off, beat the traffic, you know, all that, that business, the business of leaving with our bodies and leaving with our minds and leaving this party up to a mysterious continuation we will never properly know but may learn mistaken glimpses of from other people's retellings of memories."

And they flee, out the door and down the stairs and across the street to *their* apartment where they can safely throw their bodies onto the dirty tile floors and bemoan their fates.

"How are we so attractive but so anxiety-riddled?" Charlie demands. They hold Kirby by the shoulders and shake him. "What the fuck is wrong with us?"

"Are we the worst?" He shakes Charlie back. "Do we suck?"

"I think we suck," Charlie agrees. "Are we okay?"

There's a pause.

"Are we okay?" they repeat.

Kirby frowns at the ground. Wrinkles bulge across his forehead. His lips sag. "Are we okay?" he wonders, desperately considerate of the question.

The two of them share a look more fit to belong on the faces of people trapped in a burning building with a crumpled doorway and ashen heaps at their feet.

“Are we okay?” one of them asks again. No one answers.

“Are we okay?” the other parrots. There’s a party going on across the street.

They’re holding each other by the clothes. Their hands are fisted in sweatshirts and sweaters and cotton and silk and gold and milk and honey. They rattle the loose fantasy of containment, pulling the loose threads of composure. They sit across from each other, faces bent towards a common thought.

“We have to be,” one says. Charlie hears the noise of the words, waits hard for the shape to come off Kirby’s mouth.

“We gotta be,” the other agrees. Kirby can’t place the speaker or the hearer. It could be Charlie hearing on his behalf. It could be Charlie talking this whole while, Charlie who left the apartment and came back and is telling Kirby this and Kirby is just misremembering that he was there – but he was there. Wasn’t he? Weren’t they both? Right?

They nod. They stand up. From the cabinet they scrape handmade bowls and from the drawer they gather plastic spoons. They microwave a container of soup and dump hot sauce into it so their tongue feels something. It was either this or the cliché burn of alcohol. At least soup is a real kind of warm.

“We have friends,” Kirby says after awhile. He’s sure he’s the one speaking. He’s definitely speaking because he’s watching Charlie talk back at those words.

“Where are they?” Charlie waves their spoon around the empty apartment.

It's only 11:30pm.⁵¹

There's a moment when Simon⁵² swings by to drunkenly chatter before he's off, and the brief reprieve of another human being popping the isolating bubble does little for Charlie and Kirby's hearts. It pushes the hour past 1am. The hesitant suggestion that "maybe we should like, read a book, or something," can no longer exist – that's just nonsense, at this hour? Just go to bed, idiots.

So they try.

But when they separate into their dark rooms, their own beds, just a thin wall between them, they fall back into themselves, unsure of the mouth moving on their face or the eyes roaming in their skulls.

Kirby's text message cuts through a swimming-with-sharks Instagram video on Charlie's phone screen. They'd been expecting a message. They'd been debating sending one of their own.

Me in Lancaster: I love
life

⁵¹ and what's this chapter called? 2am breakdown. Oh boy.

⁵² Have we met Simon yet? I don't think so. He's a really swell guy, you'd love him.

Me the minute I step back on campus: I want to die. I have so many regrets. I'm unzipping my mind into a void

Charlie gets out of bed. Kirby hears them and gets out of bed. They meet in the hallway, sidle a step into the small half bathroom. Fluorescent lights echo drowsiness on yellowed skin. If any of their roommates were home, this wouldn't be happening. But it's just them, the broken side of an undone triangle collapsing.

"You should practice tucking," Charlie says. It is a certified distraction.

"You know, you're right," Kirby readily bends to the idea. He takes off his pants and underwear, and Charlie sits on the floor between his naked legs and tries to help him push his testicles into the strange and secret cavity from where they originated.⁵³

"My balls are so weird," Kirby observes.

⁵³ I am mystified by the process of testicles descending. There's an episode of House MD where this young female model is hospitalized for some classically mysterious weirdo condition that intrigues House MD enough to work on the case. And it turns out she has an undescended testical and probably some late congenital disorder. So basically she's a classic Fausto-Sterling-categorized degree of intersex. Someone writing the episode probably read "The Five Sexes." But it also turns out that her dad/agent is fucking her. And House MD is like "your daughter is kind of a boy and you're a creepy incest pedophile." I don't think he goes to jail for it. But I saw that episode when I was pretty young, and the idea of secret organs stuck with me. But that's neither here nor now. Stay here with Charlie and Kirby's distress, dear readers. It's as pathetic as you think. It's as strange and dark as it must be.

“I think they’re nice balls,” Charlie shrugs. They look like decent enough balls. Not too hairy, not too big, not too saggy. All the better to t-bag you with, my dear.

“I’m so excited for Halloween, I can’t wait to dress up with you,” Charlie says. That’s why Kirby needs to learn to tuck. He’s wearing women’s spandex.⁵⁴ “I’m a little bummed I won’t have a date but you and Ash will have your boyfriends.”

“Oh my god,” Kirby gasps. Whatever thought has popped into his head knocks the breath from his lungs. His hand spasms on Charlie’s shoulder. “Did I tell you what Tiny said recently? He makes me so mad sometimes. He’s just not rational.”

They relocate to Charlie’s bed. Kirby has pants on again but Charlie doesn’t.

“Don’t touch my pubes,” Charlie warns.

“You were just helping me retract my balls,” Kirby points out, unimpressed with this useless show of modesty.

Charlie blinks, thinks it over. “Oh yeah. Okay. You can touch my pubes.”

So he does. They are abundant and voracious. Kirby moves on quickly after a cursory pat to the bush, circling back to his boyfriend woes. The situation is this: Tiny is not looking towards the future or anticipating the fact that Kirby will be graduating soon and finding work in probably a different location. Instead, Tiny is doing distracting and rather pointless work down in Orlando, lengthening the time he will be in community college and further postponing the

⁵⁴ TBH It won’t matter if everyone sees his dick if he can’t learn to tuck but it would lend a nice element of professionalism to the ensemble.

ability for him and Kirby to live together. This in turn makes Kirby nervous and anxious, but when he broaches the topic with Tiny, Tiny rebuffs him and accuses him of paranoia.

“So then it’s like, is he really being inconsiderate, or is my crazy brain making this shit up?” Kirby taps his forehead, digging the nail of his index finger against his skin. It leaves a red mark that sits on the skin for the rest of the night.

“Yikes,” Charlie grimaces. They stare. “Yikes.”

Kirby laughs. “You’re awful at this.”

“Yeah. But. Okay. I think he’s a useless shithead and inconsiderate but I can’t decide if it’s because I’m jealous or not. I don’t think I’m jealous. I think you deserve better.”

“And he wants kids! And I’m like, ‘we aren’t having kids.’ And he’s like, ‘that’s not fair I want kids.’ And I’m like, ‘well if one of us doesn’t want kids we aren’t having kids.’ And he’s like, ‘that’s not fair,’” Kirby bursts.

“Yikes,” Charlie repeats. “Also, you’re both too poor to adopt and raise kids.”

“That’s what I said!” Kirby throws his hands up, tossing the covers. “He’s like Ash when they get an idea in their head and won’t let it go for so long.”

“That sounds awful. Dealing with anyone like that. How the fuck do you do it? He is...okay no offense, but really, what are you doing with him? I don’t get it.”

Kirby shrugs. “I can’t picture myself without him.”

His body flinches at the words leaving his mouth. He hates the sound of them. He hates what they mean, what those words turn around and say about him with Charlie a witness to the vulnerable stupidity of them. Is this love? Is this wanting to be with someone? Unable to create a full image, a full self, without one body in the shot to prop up the other body, the Colgate smile and arm-around-the-waist a buttress and fortress to the future that must-be, carefully, lusted after?

“But you’re without him most of the year,” Charlie frowns. They don’t get it. Even as much as they want to be with Kirby and Ash forever and ever and ever, they picture an eggshell pale apartment, a fern a cat a book, all quiet isolation. Items that will survive on their own, that make do.

Kirby puts a hand on Charlie’s chest.

“I don’t know,” Kirby says with tight solemnity. He doesn’t know. They’ve been dating Tiny for going on two years and this person has become a part of his life, some barnacle or some tumor. Or a tree split through the sidewalk of his future. Something intrusive, attention demanding. Loved. Kirby, whom Charlie loves so much, accommodates and plans for and around *this person*.

Under Kirby’s hand, Charlie cracks, a skeletal shift up and out of their body. “I’m so lonely,” they cry. They are crying, suddenly, a hot flash of tears and noise.

“Oh my god,” Kirby says.

Charlie laughs as they cry, curling onto their side. “I’m so sad,” they hiccup.

Kirby sits back, watching Charlie give over to high pitched sobs. Slowly, he too starts to cry; he whips off his glasses and digs the heels of his hands into his eyes.

“This is so funny,” Charlie gasps. They’re dying, jerking beneath the blanket, choking on their spit, pounding the wall and shrieking. “I want to die. I want to die. If it wouldn’t kill my mother, I would die.”

Kirby starts cackling. He slinks down under the covers and holds Charlie. “This reminds me of the time in eighth grade when I went to the counselor to tell her that I wanted to kill myself and when she was like ‘are you serious’ I responded with ‘I’m too lazy to kill myself.’”

After several blurry minutes, Charlie fans at their red face. “Enough,” they order themselves aloud. They stop crying, swallowing it thickly. They shiver it off like winter thaw and take a deep breath. They are done crying. “That was wild.”

“I hate when you do that,” Kirby scolds. He scrubs at his face. “Good thing no one was around to hear that.”

“Our neighbors probably hate us.”

They lay under Charlie’s electric blanket, quiet for too long, tired.

“I can’t believe I got stood up,” Charlie sighs.

“I can. Who would want your crazy ass,” Kirby jokes. It’s all so desperate. Charlie lifts up their phone and opens snapchat to take a picture of their and Kirby’s red faces and puffy eyes, tears a glistening stain on their cheeks.

'I love 2am breakdowns' they caption the photo. They send it to Luna.

'u ok?' Luna replies; it comes served on the [10] second image of Mei sleepily watching TV beside them. Charlie thumbs past it with [8] seconds left.

'no but I gotta be' Charlie replies with a close up of a redshot eye.