

GENDER



UPHORIA

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For her.

“Gender is as much about the air around you, the kind of place you are in, as how you look and how you act. And how you feel inside barely means anything at all, in the grand scheme of things.”

—Tell Me I’m Worthless, Alison Rumfitt

“Heat from fire; fire from heat.”

—Ancient Transgender Prayer

Gender Uphoria

By Yvette Pyke

Part One

One

You didn't see the break-up coming, but neither did Elijah, so at least you're not alone, guiltily staring at Alexandra's ass together as she walks to her new boyfriend's car. When the engine starts, your metamour clenches his bouncing legs, holding something in. You want rebound sex, but you doubt he's open to it right now. You figure you shouldn't ask—you don't want to make things worse.

Elijah stumbles inside eventually, muttering about having ice cream before sorting this all out, but you remain on your front step. Who are you now without her? Well, you are Tulip Turner, a twenty-six year old, unemployed, transgender woman. The things you have include a house-share and a 2:2 STEM degree; the things you do not have include money for hormones and a girlfriend who's supplying your income. That only hits you now, half an hour after she left—no money for hormones. Alexandra had been so understanding about you struggling to find and keep work; between the anxiety, the lower second degree, and the transition, you had accepted the position of being her stay at home pet with such glee. You slept in a king bed all curled up in her arms, and you'd let her pop your estradiol on your tongue each morning, waiting on your hands and knees with your mouth hanging open for her. It was euphoric being her "good girl" every morning, and even though she couldn't change your passport for you or get the GIC to speed up your referral, she provided the love and the hormones you needed to really feel like a woman.

But now there's a hole in your medicine cabinet as big as the hole in your employment history. Your vocal therapy too will have to be paused. And what about the rent you have to pick up? Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

"FUCK," screams Elijah from inside, seemingly thinking the same thing. You hear the smashing of glass, followed by what sounds like a fist tearing through plaster. That anger makes you shudder, a specifically masculine anger you found difficult to leave behind. But when you came out, you found your community, you worked through your issues, you let go of your old friends—all cis men—who had nothing but toxicity to pour into your life, and that's when you met Alexandra. Her love and support washed away those remnants of bro culture still within you,

and the anti-androgens she bought you made it easier to chill out in general—to really feel your emotions again.

Oh fuck. Fuck.

The sun dips behind the house opposite yours, and you go back inside. You take in the smells of perfume and mildew, not that bad compared to the north facing flats of your friends but you think that this dampness is endemic to your section of the North. Maybe that's why she left, trading your grey Yorkshire skies for her native Bristolian... something—she never did take you to meet her mother down there. Elijah storms past you and you peer into the kitchen where you see a hole in the wall, blood speckling the white paint. Oh well, you know that he'll fix it soon; he loves that DIY stuff. Rent, on the other hand, is something that can't be plastered over. But it can't be dealt with now, either, so you go Alexandra's room—your room—and shut the door.

You tangle yourself in the sheets which are crumpled in just the way she left them this morning, still slightly smelling of her sweat. Your girlcock is already hard, not all that much smaller even after four years of HRT. Touching it feels good; the thoughts of her feel complicated. In your fantasies, you're still together, kissing, cuddling, whispering your affirmations of love. This was always your favourite way to do it, masturbating while she instructed you; penetrating her always made you feel so violent and mannish. But you stop—even as you get close and the fantasies get more vivid and her voice gets louder and louder in your head, you can't finish when you don't have her permission.

You whimper at nothing and twist onto your front, wholly unprepared to face your first morning without her.

Two

The sight of her empty bed is the first cry of the morning; the sight of your face in the mirror is the second. There's stubble! There's stubble every morning, admittedly, but this stubble feels like a foreshadowing of things to come. You take the last of the pills she bought you—your third cry—and get to shaving. It's a thorough process involving an exfoliating face wash, pre-shave lotion, a shave with the grain, a shave perpendicular to the grain, a shave against the grain, a second shave against the grain, a moisturising face wash, post-shave lotion, and moisturiser, but you end up looking spotless, once you put your makeup on, of course. That itself is thorough—colour correct, concealer, foundation, contouring, setting powder, eye shadow, eye liner, mascara, sparkles, lipstick—and it takes an hour, but it lets you look like the woman you always wanted to be.

You have long, dark hair, tumbling over your shoulders in a waterfall of curls, which hides just how big you think they look. Your face is small within this black frame, with glittering, red cheeks, plump and high, and wide, hooded eyes, pale blue iris casting a sharp glint, accentuated by the darkness of your eyeshadow. The lipstick you use is blood red, of course, which draws the eye towards your chin, sharp without being strong. It's the face of a woman who has it together much better than you do.

You put on a dress, draping it over your slender body. You've always been concerned about your height—over six foot—but Alexandra had you crawl sometimes when you were at home together, so you could feel the way you were supposed to: small; cute; unintrusive. That was always a complicated aspect of your gender, and your self-alleged feminism, how your womanhood was undermined by your presence, your height, your distinctly trans features. When you first came out, you thought a lot about the misogyny of having your womanhood be defined by how little you could stand out, how little people paid attention to you, but Alexandra had given you the space to learn how to be noticed for your femininity, not its absence. She played along with your attempts at charm, until you actually got good and they actually started charming her. She let you be loud and large and everything you thought you hated about yourself, while responding like she would

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to any other woman—without fear, without making herself smaller, the way someone trying to protect themselves from a man might. And at the end of it, she would indulge you and send you to your knees, allowing you to be the one looking up, for once.

Recollecting that induces your fourth cry of the morning, and now your makeup is ruined. At least Elijah doesn't comment on it as you walk into the kitchen.

Three

“New housemate or new job?”

You haven’t had your coffee yet, so Elijah’s question takes a second to comprehend.

“*Uhm...*” Your throat is clenched and your voice is higher than it ought to be, with a softness that sounds more like a stage whisper than anything organic. Your vocal therapy had been going well, but it’s the first thing in the morning and you’re in a stressful situation. “We’d need to find someone who’d be okay in the living room, or with me sleeping in the living room, unless you’d want to sleep with me, which—”

Elijah cuts you off. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to have that sort of relationship, considering what’s just happened.”

That’s fair. You weren’t really thinking about it that way, but it’s always good to set boundaries, you suppose. So you don’t take it personally—or you try not to take it personally, hardly even thinking about how you would feel with his arms wrapped around you in bed, the texture of his blocky muscle and dense hair on your satin skin.

You sigh as your fantasy gives way to a more pressing matter.

“I’ve been out of work for a long time,” you say. Your voice struggles with sounding sincere, especially when you still have to force your feminine affect, but Elijah’s frown melts into a resigned understanding.

“I know, but Alexandra hasn’t been responding to messages or calls or anything,” he says. He’s at the table, eating his cereal. It’s almost as if you’re towering over him, but he seems to have the power, comfortable and casual while you stand and wait for him to continue. “Here’s the situation: I’ve got enough money saved to cover the next rent payment for both of us; I do not have enough money to cover any subsequent rent payments. If you get a job—full time; minimum wage—that’ll be enough to cover rent and food. I can take care of the bills. Otherwise, we need a new housemate.” Elijah looks at you with the most stern sympathy. “And I mean ‘we’ because I’m not going to kick you out, whatever happens.”

“That’s—” You start and you stop. Every idea and every counterpoint goes through your head at once: you could get a new place if you hadn’t just signed on for another twelve months assured; you could talk to your landlord if he weren’t too busy in Spain to ever email back; you could just stop paying your rent if the Tories hadn’t won in 2019. Parental assistance is an option, maybe, but if Elijah’s family is anything like yours then that’s the most far-fetched suggestion yet.

But still, you ask, “Can your parents help out at all?”

Elijah stops eating. That incommunicable, queer trauma is obvious on his face, and you wish you hadn’t mentioned it.

“Mine won’t either so don’t worry,” you say, absolving him of having to talk about why. You wish that were it but there’s still one question on your mind: “Do you have enough extra to pay for my hormones?”

“I’m sorry, Tulip,” he says, addressing his cereal, “I can barely afford my own.”

The conversation lags as you boil a kettle and sprinkle too much instant coffee into a mug. The kitchen is small. The living room next to you is small. The bedrooms upstairs are both okay, as is the bathroom, but this place isn’t worth what you’re paying for it, especially since the rent hike last month. Alexandra made the real money, juggling office work and being some nebulous online influencer, but now she’s gone.

“How could she just leave like that?” you say, now sitting across from Elijah, who is swirling the mush at the bottom of the bowl with his spoon.

Elijah doesn’t reply; his hazel eyes remain unfocussed at some undefined point in front of him.

“What does this mean for us?”

This snaps him back to the present. He says, “I know we usually don’t hang out without her to glue it all together, but I don’t see any reason why we can’t.” He looks around the kitchen; Alexandra’s printout recipes still clutter the desktops—her photos of you all still hang on the fridge. “The past year that I’ve been living here with you two has been really wonderful, and if we were actually incompatible that wouldn’t have been the case. So I’m going to work on chilling out, and you need to work on being more active, and then we can make this work as housemates.”

You mumble a sound of agreement, sympathetic and thankful, but still only an awkward little mumble. Elijah holds back a sigh in a way that almost slips your notice, but then he forces himself to stand and walks over to you. His height standing is hardly larger than yours sitting, but his hug still feels comforting in the way that only a man’s can: patriarchal, meaning he’ll take care of you. You lean into him and feel his rough stubble on your face, fatherly and secure. There’s no point of comparison since you only met him after he started on HRT, but you can only assume that testosterone is responsible for his rigid musculature, accented by thick streams of hair over his tan skin. His binder shifts his breasts into his bulk under his t-shirt, creating the effect of huge pecs to match his round delts and bulging biceps. The only thing that gives him away as a trans man is his

haircut—sheared at the sides with a product heavy fluff aimed forwards on top—but you only clock that from being trans yourself. It’s a good hug, but it’s so different from what you’re used to; his physique makes you feel safe rather than vulnerable. That disarmament when confronted with a pretty woman; how you stop and wait for her instructions, careful not to infringe on her delicate beauty: that’s what you had for the last four years. It was only Alexandra that ever held that balance of wielding her vulnerability as power, leaving you exposed and weak in your unwieldy strength as a trans woman, which made the smallness she enforced on you all the more impactful. You’re not sure any man could fulfil that dynamic, but right now, Elijah’s protective embrace is perfect: your shield of masculinity against this painful world.

He pulls away. You realise you’re not sure what his relationship with Alexandra was like, specifically. She never talked about her other partners; you only heard about her new boyfriend yesterday when she left with him. But Elijah is going to be too stressed to talk until you sort something out.

“I’ll try,” you say, committal but nondescript.

Elijah stares at the hole in the wall behind your head. “Thank you. I’m gonna get this plastered up. Another fucking expense.”

Four

“Hi, everyone. My name is Tulip Turner; I use she/her pronouns; and my fun fact for today is not actually that fun: Alexandra has—” how do you put this? There’s a crowd of female faces looking up at you with the most awkward little grimaces. The introductory names-and-pronouns is not the place to ask for a new housemate, and you know this, but here you are, asking, pausing, holding everything up. Just say something. “—has left us. So I need a new housemate, if anyone is looking.”

The Queer Women’s Group, held at your local sexual health centre, is a monthly event where all the queer women—both cis and trans—of the local scene come together to support each other through the difficulties and oppression that all queer women face. However, while all queer women face difficulties and oppression, those difficulties and oppressions are not all the same, often not even similar. The straight trans women fear violence from their partners but feel safe when they’re out with them, while the transbians fear violence from being seen by the world but feel safe at home with their partners. Cis lesbians talk of this butch-femme dichotomy that trans women like you aren’t innately feminine enough to access, while *tee-for-tee* trans-femmes pretend they’ve transcended that whole binary like enlightened centrists who claim they’re beyond the left-right spectrum. And don’t even started on the bi/pan lesbians—what does that even mean? Sometimes they try to tell you, to be fair, but there’s always someone who thinks they know better shouting them down. The worst night was one where a young woman, dressed all gray and purple, introduced herself as asexual and aromantic. This prompted whispers of doubt around the circle, with the person next to you quietly remarking to you that she may be ace, but is she queer? (“I don’t know; have you asked her?” you had replied with the utmost innocence.)

All things considered, it’s broken and cliquey and as genital obsessed as any gaggle of TERFs you’ve seen online—but it’s still essential. This is where you can be understood more than anywhere else in this town. This is where you get to unquestioningly be a woman. This is where you’ll find a new housemate.

“Oh my Goddess,” your friend Maya says, gently clutching your arm; “are there

funeral arrangements?”

You're hit by the sadness of her deep blue eyes, set in her uniquely trans feminine face: round but firm; HRT pushing the fat to all the right places but doing nothing for the bones. Her confidence in the face of such eminent clockability is aspirational, and her makeup accentuates everything she's had to learn to love about herself with crystal precision. But she is a bit slow sometimes—though you definitely just phrased that badly.

“No; sorry; I mean: she's moved out and broken up with me and Elijah.”

“Oh,” she says, giving your arm a squeeze, her keeping a sympathetic, breathy timbre. “That's better then.”

And that's all she has to say. You do love her for her disengagement with any emotional bullshit beyond the bare logistics of it all—that she'll be like this in any situation is something you've learned to appreciate, and to rely on in times of stress, though unless she's willing to move in, it won't do much now.

“So... *uhm...*” you query, making some half formed smile at her.

“No.” It's a blunt rejection, and she lets go of your arm as she stands and continues the opening exercise: “My name is Maya; I use she/it pronouns; my fun fact is that I like trains.”

This gets a laugh, somehow.

After the introductions, the discussion revolves around the availability of sanitary products, which isn't really fertile ground for bringing up the discussion of new housemates. The AFAB women—distinct from cis women as it includes the non-binary they/she-s with vaginas—discuss the price, the social weirdness, and the biological hassle of buying, needing, and using tampons or pads or cups or whatever it is. Before any well meaning cissy can claim bepenised women like you should count yourself lucky that you don't have to deal with an experience which you still can't help but view as the cornerstone of womanhood, Eunice pivots the discussion to the relation that periods have to gender. Another friend of yours, she's one of those who seems to hang out with more trans people than cis, but shows no signs of being trans herself. She plays with her long braid—it reaches her knees and you feel the ache of jealousy—as she gives an honest account of how she values her period as something uniquely and intimately her, and she even goes on to ask openly to the trans women of the group if there's any regular, private rituals they have that affirm their womanhood, such as monthly anti-androgen injections, perhaps. This display of compassion is met with a shocked silence by the people it's addressing, who never thought they might be included in this discussion beyond being told how good their dysphoric asses have it, but slowly the discussion starts again, with more and more varied voices than ever. But you stay silent, too scared by the loss of your hormones to really formulate a thought.

The discussion wraps up unnaturally with the organiser mentioning the time and then everyone trying to fit in a one-last-thing. Eventually though, people do stop

talking, leave the room, and resume talking on the little street outside, broken up into their little friend groups, chatting about plans for the week and discussing the discussion itself rather than continuing on where they left off.

You wait by the door, asking the people who seem apologetic about the breakup if they'd know anyone who needs to move. But no one does. You're left with Maya and Eunice, checking her phone and smoking a joint respectively—maybe that's how Eunice stays positive about the period pain. You repeat your question to her once it's burned down to the roach, but she shakes her head, holding her the last drag deep in her lungs.

"Sorry," she says, breathing out the sickly smoke. "My little sister is thinking of moving up in a few months, but by the sounds of it, that's too far away."

You not and mumble a sound of disheartened gratitude. "I think I'm going to be too busy and too stressed to hang out this week with all the job hunting I need to do," you say, addressing them both as you all begin to walk.

"You missed the hang-out last week too, dear," Maya says.

Eunice laughs and chokes and laughs more. "Be nice," she says, once she composes herself. "Have you applied anywhere yet?"

"No," you say. This isn't so much an admission of laziness as it is an admission of hope that one of them would move in. "So far I've cancelled all my subscriptions and started shopping at ALDI and been through the whole Money Saving Expert money makeover list thing. It's exhausting."

"Goddess," Maya says in a tone which betrays nothing about how seriously she's taking the matter. "You'll still be telling us all the best new films to see though, won't you, dear?"

Now you laugh, baffled as you explain, "No. I've had to cancel the cinema membership too. But hey, now that Alexandra's not in the house to be weird about films, I'll be able to watch even more good stuff once I can pay for that BFI player again."

This brings the mood down, your two compatriots finally realising the extent of your situation. You've had to cut one of your two hobbies out of your life; maybe they think that your makeup will be next to go, as if you'd ever stop sending selfies to the group chat.

You walk in silence until you have to part ways, and then the empty night is yours alone. It's late spring now, you realise as you walk over the pink blossoms coating the pavement. Summer is coming soon and all the students who stay here will be looking for work, no maintenance loan to tide them over.

You need to find a job now.

Five

Alone in the kitchen, you compile a list of all the reasons you have been refused a job in the month since your breakup (in no particular order):

- Not enough experience—four times
- Other, better applicants—ten times
- Underqualified (2:2 STEM degree)—six times
- Overqualified (2:2 STEM degree)—once
- Four year gap in your employment history—three times
- Trial shift went badly—twice
- Interview went badly—eight times
- Formatting went weird on your CV, so that went badly—once
- Manager was worried that the clients wouldn't want to be served by "a transgendered woman"—twice, both with that exact phrasing
- Manager was just using your trial shift as free labour—fourteen times, which is illegal, but what are you gonna do about it?

You did get all the way to one acceptance though, but even that wasn't enough.

"Tulip Turner?" the voice over the phone had said—someone you'd never met before from some office job of which you couldn't even remember the details.

"Speaking." You made your voice as airy and unambiguously not male as possible, which is different from strictly female, but sometimes it helps to get read.

"I think you've scanned in the wrong passport for your right to work check."

You fumbled with what to say next in your head, which you realised made you either sound suspicious or simply inept..

"I also sent you a deed poll; the passport is in my old name."

There was the sound of paper shuffling and a keyboard clacking. You waited and waited and realised what was about to happen.

"I'm sorry; we can't accept this deed poll as it hasn't been signed by a solicitor," the voice said through your phone.

“Oh.” This was about all you could muster up. It isn’t true; deed polls do not need to be signed by solicitors to be legal, but who were you to doubt a stranger from some random company that specialises in office supply sales—you remember now.

“Thank you for your application. I’m sorry again that we cannot go forward with it. Best of luck, Br—sorry—Tulip.”

There was silence in the room and your best shot had been snatched from you, but all you could think about was that last comment. Why had she begun to deadname you after getting it right first time?

You lay your head on the list you’ve made, as if you could internalise and interpret the information via direct contact with your brain—as if that would help with the search. Elijah walks into the room and takes the seat beside you, rubbing your back. You feel anxiety well up within you even as your intimacy starved body shimmers around his touch.

“I’ve got bad news: even if you got a new job now, minimum wage wouldn’t cover our next rent.” He sighs and bends down to see your face as he says this. “We’re gonna need to get some extra money if we don’t want trouble with the landlord. I’ve put together some stuff to sell but my lifestyle is already quite Spartan; I’ll need you to do the same.”

“Rich new housemate?” you say, only partially present.

“I’ve been asking at the Queer Men’s Group, but it’s a hard sell,” he says. “I’ve also tried to get in contact with some of my old friends, but they went to uni and moved away and don’t want to come back. I really tried, but these are people I can’t even get to visit on their way to somewhere else. I’m sorry, Tulip, but we have to do this. I’ll do the actual selling and I’ll help you pick stuff out to—”

“Nnn...”

Elijah understands what you mean. You need to do this yourself. He makes you a cup of coffee to perk you up, either not understanding or not concerned that it’s eight p.m. on a weekday. His drive does force some sense of urgency into you though, and you sip at your mug even as it burns your mouth.

Six

Alexandra would buy you clothes every week. It would range from a single pair of the skimpiest silk panties you've ever seen to wedding dresses complete with veil and heels, but every week she would start date night by presenting you with your outfit, freshly bought. And she bought almost nothing for herself. She had her work outfit—navy suit, slim tie, white shirt—and she had her casual outfit—tight jeans, sheer blouse, leather jacket—and she had nothing in between. She didn't even need a suitcase when she left. It was part of what made you feel so secure, right up until she wasn't there anymore. You could wear whatever she asked of you while knowing that you were always her girlfriend—you were always a woman.

It's been a month, but these clothes still hold that lingering scent of gender, retaining a sense of womanhood as much because of how you wore them with her than the clothes themselves. Dress up was a date night tradition, where she did your makeup, helped you put the clothes on, and then made you model for her before you got on with going out or staying in or whatever it was she had figured out for you both to do. Everything was always done for you to the point where she wouldn't accept your gifts or let you take it on yourself to give her a good night out; only in retrospect do you think that's suspect.

Regardless, the clothes that fill the closet before you are beautiful and sentimental, and any analysis of your relationship with her is clouded by the memory of how female you felt with her. You start crying again as you survey what you have to relinquish. Elijah is still in the kitchen, making himself dinner. His straightforward, solution oriented mindset won't really give you the space to say goodbye in the soppy way that you need to, but you don't know about how you're actually going to go about this, so maybe it's worth asking for his help—in doses.

You return from the kitchen. He said to figure out what still fits first, and then sell everything that doesn't; these clothes have been bought over a span of four years, and your body has been changing. The clothes are arranged in chronological order, so you start with the oldest and work your way through your relationship. Maybe there'll be enough to sell at the start and you'll be able to stop this soon—

maybe.

First: a flowing, red dress. You remember Alexandra bought this specifically to prove that you could pass with a little bit of effort and a little bit of thought. When you first put it on, it covered your broad shoulders and created curves out of nothing. Combined with her precision contouring, you saw yourself as the woman you had always wanted to be for the first time in your life, and she had to attack you with paper towels to stop your mascara stained tears from ruining the dress. Now though, you can't even get it over your head. Because of the oestrogen, your twinkish figure attained a more womanly proportion of body fat, and you suppose you're just too big for it now. Alexandra was never in the habit of repeating things, so you've only worn this dress at a handful of events—her formal work parties mostly—but still, you'll never get rid of the first thing she bought you. Next!

Second: denim shorts which say “good girl” on the butt. These rip as you pull them up over your thighs. You hold back tears, but console yourself with the thought that now you can keep them, guilt free.

Third: a sheer blouse and tight jeans that Alexandra bought you so you could match. When you hear the blouse threads start to break as you try and shoulder it in, you start to get the picture. These go in the ‘sell’ pile.

There are a couple hundred outfits to try and this is going to take all night if you do it like this. It'd be more efficient to find the point where clothes start fitting and then decide what to sell out of everything before that.

You aim for about thirty clothes in and try to grab something bought when you were six months into HRT. A polka dot dress is what you pull out; you remember the clown makeup Alexandra did for you that date night, and how weirdly feminine you found it, being this hyper stylised parody of a woman. It doesn't pull down over your chest though, and you put it back.

Okay, fifty clothes in this time: one year on HRT. You pick out a leather skirt and crop top combo from when Alexandra was trying to get you to come to punk shows, but even with her there, you were afraid of obstructing other people or hitting them if you danced. The skirt gets stuck around your legs; you don't even try the crop top. You put them back.

One hundred clothes in: black heels, garter, and bra. That was such a sexy night in, for the most part. There was kissing and sensory touches with brushes and feathers and candle wax, but then she tried to use a strap-on with you, and you both found out that your haemorrhoids aren't too fond of that. You don't really want to try the delicate lingerie, so you put it back, instead deciding to slip a foot into one of the shoes, only stopping when the straps start to dig in.

One hundred and fifty clothes in now, or thereabouts; this was only last year. You pick the anniversary outfit she got you: a women's suit for a sit down meal at some posh place out of town. You were worried about wearing a suit for the first time since starting HRT but with her, you just felt like the most lesbian girl ever. You didn't even get ‘sir’-ed. Now though, there would likely be some comments

from the waitstaff as the shirt is about to burst and you can't get the trousers buttoned up.

What is going on? You take off the suit and throw it in the 'sell' pile, sentimental attachment fading with the anxiety of how few of these clothes fit. Just to see something, you pull off the most recent outfit she bought you: a beautiful, floral dress—short and poofy and perfect for a picnic on the first nice day of spring, just a month ago.

It... fits, arguably. It doesn't tear as you put it on, at least. But, looking in the mirror, you wish it had. A transphobic caricature stares back at you. It has a bloated belly pulling the whole dress up, showing its sagging, penis filled panties visible under the frills. The dress sleeves are tangled up and showcase your broad shoulders, in all their emphatically masculine glory. It's only been a month; you didn't think you could change this much. It now tears as you take it off, rough hands pulling at the sheer fabric. You watch as that awful thing in the mirror tries to punch its way out.

When Elijah finds you, you're on the floor, clutching your favourite, first dress. Shards of glass surround you, but at least there's no bleeding.

"Sell the rest of it," you croak, unable to force a melody into your words; "the extra will fix the mirror. I'll get clothes that fit later."

"Are you sure?" Elijah has a rare moment of uncertainty, taken aback as much by your voice as the state of the room.

"Yes." You're certain though; these clothes aren't for you anymore. "I've some baggy boymoder stuff to wear in the meantime."

Elijah mumbles something that sounds affirmative and begins to remove the contents of your closet into his room. You crawl into bed and fall asleep, clutching the last remnant of your past as the darkness comes.

Seven

Your “baggy boymoder” clothes are what you’ve been wearing for the past month, but that name felt ironic until now. They’re the vestiges of your pre-transition wardrobe, which you wanted to throw out, but Alexandra made you keep. You didn’t understand why until you were feeling so dysphoric one night that she made you up and forced you to put them on. In the mirror, she showed you how you’d never pass as a boy, even in these ill-fitting khakis and square t-shirt and oversized hoodie—you just looked like you had a boyfriend and had stolen his clothes. But now you just look like the ungroomed, unfashionable boyfriend of your nightmares. At least you won’t get harassed for looking visibly trans, as you would in a dress. So as you walk to this latest trial shift, you try to summon some kind of confidence, even if it feels like a betrayal of everything Alexandra helped you believe you could be.

The restaurant is dead at four p.m. on a Monday, so the waiter on the doors knows exactly why you’re there.

“Bradley?” he asks.

The name makes you cringe, visibly, eliciting an uncomfortable expression from the waiter in response, but you recover.

“Yep!” you say, warbling between your effeminate affect and your masculine monotone. You’ve had to resort to guerilla job search tactics.

He leads you into the kitchen, telling you the chef will be right with you. You’ve applied for a position as a dishwasher—entry level; something you like to believe you’re experienced with from all the domestic service scenes with Alexandra. The waiter leaves and you just take it all in: this boxy, humid room; the tightness of your panties against the looseness of your khakis; the way your hoodie feels like a shield, protecting you from consequence. What would the queer women of the Queer Women’s Group say if they saw you like this? Would they accuse you of invading their space, or would they throw an emergency LGBT educational seminar for your potential employers? Either way, they wouldn’t understand.

A short, bearded man walks in, hair thinning as it rises to his head. Before you

can respond he takes your hand and introduces himself as Damien—

“—but my girlfriend calls me Big D!”

The waiter rolls his eyes at this remark, but chuckles. You suppose that’s the kind of work culture here, and wanting to make a good impression, you force a titter out.

“My girlfriend actually just left me last month,” you say. You do not know why you’ve said this. Small talk is not something you’ve had to do for a long time, so you need to pay attention and just try to fit in, rather than saying weird shit like that.

But at least Damien seems to be understanding. “Ah,” he says, with unnerving empathy. “You try and do your best for women, but they always just run us down.” He pats you on the back, strong and hard. “We’re not super ‘pee-cee’ in the kitchen, you understand. It’s a high energy environment and the chefs use dark humour to get through long shifts.”

“*Haha*, yeah.” Oh god, who are these people? This is the exact type of cis-het person you haven’t spoken to at all in the last four years. But still, perhaps your willingness to engage in sexist banter will give you a competitive edge over the women applying to this position.

That feels weird to think, as if you’re no longer one of them. You’re actually accessing male privilege for economic gain, supporting a business with a misogynist work culture. You are exactly the kind of trans woman that some of the creepier cis feminists think is hurting the movement. But still, you need to pay rent.

“Great stuff!” The head chef shoos the waiter away and mutters something derogatory about front of house staff before showing you the kitchen. “So, remind me of your name.”

This bit comes with great difficulty. Hearing it is one thing, but saying it—fuck. “Bradley Turner.” *Ew*.

“Brad! I like that—strong name,” Damien says before explaining the workflow, the hours, the need for focus and precision. “Have you worked in a kitchen before?” You shake your head. “Well when you walk behind someone, you have to shout ‘behind!’ You take up space, and you’ve gotta let people know it.”

You’re going to struggle with this, you think as the first of the afternoon crowd arrives. The work is strange, there being you have nothing to do as Damien scrambles to cook on every section at once, his friendly chat turning to a low level stream of slurs at nothing in particular. Another chef shows up: as tall as you but twice as broad, with a sparse curling facial hair patching parts of his face. He introduces himself to you as Doc—presumably an in-joke—and then alerts the head chef to his presence with a simple “*ey-up*, cunt.”

You don’t have time for this to phase you, however, as the first dishes start coming in. You pick them up, rinse them, put them in the dishwasher, press down the lid, push up the lid, slide them out, and then return them to their proper homes. Damien gives you a thumbs up, which feels upsettingly rewarding. You’ve

done a good job; you've let your labour be exploited by this cunt—fuck, now you're thinking in their terms. You almost have the time to dissect that but you're distracted by Doc singing Eminem lyrics to himself, jumping between songs every couple lines.

More dishes come; more washing happens. Another chef shows up—Rover, which isn't an in-joke and is actually just his name—who takes up the pastry section as the dessert orders start coming in. He smells of smoke and when customers are at the door, he prays they will turn and walk away. Muscular, intense, and jittery: this guy would scare you if you were here as Tulip, but you're not, and you're somehow doing a pretty good job.

Calling out behind is difficult; the first time you whisper it as not to interrupt Damien's cooking and almost get hit with his hot pan as he swings around. But he explains to you again—louder and less kindly—that you need to make your presence known. The second time, you shout it way louder than you mean to, but Damien gives you another thumbs up. It becomes almost fun, and the volume you can reach is much higher with this man's voice rather than your feminine drawl. The shouting creates a bubble around you, staving off people, feelings, the pain of having to act this way. There's a twinge of dysphoria every time, but it just makes you angry, and that makes you shout louder, and soon you find the words “watch it, cunt,” coming out of your mouth, directed at the head chef as he tries to sneak behind you.

You don't even have time to realise what you've done as he laughs and throws his hands up: guilty as charged!

“You'll want some chef's trousers and a black t-shirt to match ours,” Damien says after the dinner rush ends, watching you mop up the kitchen. “Good work today; there's some admin to do but I can give you the contract now to sign.”

“Yes, chef,” you say, already in the habit after one night of work. He just laughs and brings you upstairs.

There's a little computer where he prints out forms to confirm your employment. He asks for your passport and you hand it over. The check is no more than a quick glance—it's obvious that Bradley Turner is you.

“I think you'll make a good fit!” he says as you leave, giving you another strong pat on the back.

All you give in reply is a warm *mmm*, voice shot from all the shouting. You hope you don't. You hope you're fired for being too feminine and faggy and that Alexandra rushes to take you back when she sees what's happened. But in the meantime, you have work tomorrow, and you have rent to pay.

Eight

You clink your champagne glasses together as the film starts. They aren't filled with champagne; they're not even filled with anything alcoholic: water is all you can afford. Along with rent! Ha! Now it's party time with Elijah and Terminator 2: Judgement Day.

Neither you nor Elijah like this film, actually, but it's Alexandra's favourite film of all time. Every time she decided to throw a movie night, this is what she would show. It never really made sense to you why she liked it so much or watched it so often considering her obsession with novelty otherwise, but there was a lot you didn't understand about her—clearly, looking at the empty space on the couch between you and your housemate. You wish this was thematic in some way, that you'd learn some critical emotional lesson just at the right moment tonight, but no: you put it on in honour of her, and to celebrate surviving her departure.

"So why did she leave?" Elijah asks. Neither of you need or even want to pay attention to the film after watching it so many times. You'll tune back in for the Fluffy scene, Patrick Harris walking through the bars, and the final fight, but that's about it.

"I don't know," you say. You've put on your female voice but it's harder to get right after a week of working and shouting like a man.

"You knew her better." He sips at his water and goes *aaahh* as if he were savouring some sparkling wine. "Even if we went on dates, I always thought of myself as her housemate rather than her partner. That was always you."

"I..." Your breathy voice trails off, swallowed by the air. This is the first opportunity you've had to examine the event that's upended your life, and you don't know where to start. Okay, what are the facts? "She was always looking for something new; maybe there was nothing more to discover here?"

Elijah thinks for a moment, weighing up the idea against the contrary evidence of the film on screen before you. "Yeah," he says, taking another sip, "and it's so like her not to even discuss it, you know? Despite all this hassle, I can't be angry with her; the reason I liked her is that she always did everything her way, and that extended to everyone around her, pulling them into her orbit and never

the other way around. That's why it felt so amazing fucking her, if you don't mind me saying—" you shake your head: it's okay "—but yeah, I got to make her an object of my pleasure, and that made me feel like more of a man than anything, owning someone so unashamedly feminine." He puts down the glass and leans over into her empty spot. "Which... that's a sexist way to think about gender, but gender, I think, is always a bit sexist. Anyway, we only engaged with that stuff consensually in the form of kink and on dates."

"Yeah, I..." you start. Elijah is curled up beside you now and you reach out, scratching his hair gently. He nuzzles into your touch, which is something he's never done for you before. "I definitely didn't have that same relationship with her, but I get what you mean about this being so like her. Like, she never told me anything she didn't think I needed to know—no conversations about her dates; no work chat; no mention of bills or rent or anything. I didn't actually know how much the bills were until you told me, and I didn't even know you were moving in until she introduced us."

"Weird." Elijah stops nuzzling and flashes you a smiling frown. "She talked about you a lot. Her 'perfect pretty princess' waiting for her back at home. It was always her excuse for leaving something I took her to early, before I moved in here. I always jealous, honestly—not that I didn't love her." The nuzzling resumes now, after some thought. "When she said she was leaving I thought she was taking you; it was only when we watched her walk to the car that I realised."

You smile, but that's all. Two months ago, knowing Alexandra talked about you like that would have made you burst into tears of joy and resulted in a sloppy, soppy card declaring your love for her. One month ago, it would have made you burst into tears of sadness and had you begging to understand how she then could have just left. Now, without oestrogen, wrapped in your hoodie, all these different feelings are at a distance. Fuck her, you think. But Elijah is here, with you, and you can borrow some of his emotions. Clearly, he's learned to feel with testosterone coursing through him, so it must be possible for you too, though getting your oestrogen back would be best.

"Yeah..." you say, in acknowledgement that there's more to be said but you can't find the words. "But like, it was really nice, letting her decide who I was—being in that orbit, which she had designed just for me." The metaphor is getting a bit sloppy, but Elijah *mmms* in understanding. "She gave me my hormones; she dressed me up; she told me when to come—" you blush "—and even that made me feel like a woman, in spite of my big, hard anatomy, because she made it all about her—in service of her." You sigh. "I guess that's sexist too, equating womanhood to sexual service."

Elijah's laugh is light and melodic—genuine and vulnerable. "I guess that's what I mean by gender is a bit sexist," he says. "We live in a society—if you'll pardon the phrasing—where we have these sexist models of womanhood and manhood forced upon us, taught to us from the day we recognise there's a difference between mummy and daddy." He pauses, compiling his thoughts. The

Terminator is riding a motorcycle with a kid down the open sewers of L.A. on the screen. Elijah turns the volume down. He continues, “TERFs have got it the wrong way round: trans women don’t want to be subjugated housewives and so decide to transition; trans women are women, but their idea of women is tangled up in the idea of the subjugated housewife, like everybody else’s is. Throughout my teenage years, before I came out, I was part of feminist circles that discussed at length toxic masculinity, and had to fight with the trolls and bullies at school who accused them of misandry. But now that I’m me, I’ve had to find ways to be masculine that aren’t toxic, which is hard because those elements were all that I was exposed to—all that I thought about. I mean, when Alexandra left, I got a burst of euphoria from punching through the wall, but I got euphoria from plastering over it too, so I try to focus on the latter: building, reliability, taking accountability—positive masculinity.”

Elijah’s speech goes into your head, but it doesn’t clear up what to do. When you’re out of oestrogen and unable to present as a woman, what womanhood is there for you to access but self-enforced misogyny? You want to shut up; you want to demurely listen to his diatribe, like a polite girl should, and you get an inkling of feminine gender feels as you think about it in this way. It feels hard to express that though, especially since Elijah has just bared himself to you, so you nod and *mhm*, trying to think of something else to talk about.

“Thank you for selling all the clothes,” you say. Sarah Connor, The Terminator, and the kid are now all hiding out in the desert. You’re both on your second glasses of water, still out of the champagne flutes. “I’m not sure I would have been able to part with all that myself.”

“Oh,” he says, reminded of something, “wait a second.” He takes out his phone and fiddles around for a minute, before looking up at you. “There! I fixed your mirror myself and so we ended up with a little extra money from the sales after rent, so I’ve sent it all to you.”

You had returned home one day to your mirror repaired and your room free of glass. It was done so perfectly you assumed Elijah had called someone, but no: he had done it himself and you hadn’t even thanked him. And now he was giving you the money he saved from doing hours of hard work. Here’s a burst of gender: a confident, strong man is providing for you. You take a chance and lie down as well, scootching and shuffling till you’re spooning on the couch. He doesn’t object, which you know he would if this wasn’t okay, so you let yourself enjoy it—even if you’d prefer him to be spooning you.

“Thank you, Elijah,” you say, but it comes out more as a whisper. You don’t really know where to go from there, so you stay silent until he starts talking of his own accord.

“Yeah, I felt as if you were having a rougher time of it than me. You know, I never really got a sense of you until now,” he says, snuggling closer inwards, holding your hands in his. “I always kind of resented your position as this carefree

little girl who got to stay in and play all day, but I realised that must take so much effort to be that vulnerable all the time and to give yourself to someone else like that; I could never do it—it would break something in me if I gave up that agency. And now you’ve been thrust back into the world at large...” He trails off; seemingly, that’s enough said.

“Thank you, Elijah,” you repeat, but wanting to say more, you ask, “What did you have to sell?”

He laughs. “Binders.” There’s a pause before he continues. “Strap-ons. Actually most of my flags as well; you won’t believe how much a properly ironed one goes for if you advertise it in the right place.” He squeezes your hands. “But I kept one of each: my best skin-tone binder; my hottest RodeoH strap, you know, the ones that are like boxer-briefs; and my first ever trans pride flag, which I wore as a cape on the train home my first time visiting my parents after coming out—had to make it clear that this was for real, for all the good that did.”

“Sounds like a killer outfit,” you say, half-jokingly.

“Wanna see?”

You do; you do so badly. And that desire must be projecting out from your body because, without asking, he jumps off the couch and rushes into his room.

It’s been so long since you’ve had sexual thoughts about any man. You had a lot sex with them when you first came out, but mostly as a way of feeling like a woman; that sickly misogyny which Grindr creeps love to claim is just a kink really did the trick when nothing else would. And you thought those experiences had put you off for life, but Elijah is different; maybe you could try again.

He bursts through the door and you tumble to the floor, kneeling beneath him. His binder blends perfectly with his pale brown skin, which must have been exceedingly hard to get from what you know about clothing colour options for non-white people. You spend a minute just gazing upon his flowing musculature, defined by the light of the television, accented by the binder even as it hides the abs you’re sure are there. Then: you look down.

His RodeoH strap is like the tightest boxers you’ve ever seen, seamless with his skin and skin tone as well, but out of it, where his cock would be, rises a dildo, coordinated in colour as well, standing six inches firm. He looks down at you with his stubble creating severe and imposing shadows on his face; he looks suddenly much older and you almost call him “Daddy.” But instead, all that comes out of your mouth is *ggguhbbbbb*, followed by a deep swallow. His legs and arms are covered in thick, black hair, and a bush is peeking out between the RodeoH and the binder.

He laughs, kind and confident; it’s so sexy to hear him take pleasure from you turning into such a mess in front of him—a silly girl babbling over a hunk. This is your chance; you lean forward to kiss his cock.

He backs off and you miss, falling on your hands.

“*Woah*, sorry,” he says, flustered himself; “I’m really flattered but I still just don’t see you in that way. And besides, I’m actually dating someone now.”

“Y-yeah,” is all you can whimper out.

“Yeah: Case—very cyberpunk.” He sits down on the couch, looking casual and surreal with this permanent erection shooting out from his crotch. “It started as a rebound thing but it’s gotten serious, in the best way.”

You think you maybe have seen Case at some of the punk shows Alexandra took you to. She wore leather trousers and a denim jacket; you can see why Elijah likes her.

“Oh, that’s cool.” You scramble to your feet and head towards the doorway. The living room is suddenly too hot. “I think I’m going to go to bed.”

“I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression,” Elijah says, glancing between you and the screen; “I just like to be physically intimate with my friends, which I think is something I learned while growing up as a woman with female friends, but I know that that sort of contact can come with the implication of sexual interest for AMAB people, since it isn’t such a—”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” you say, suddenly finding his ranting more annoying than interesting. “You look really good.” Your tone does not support that statement, even if you meant it.

“Thanks, Tulip.”

That’s the first time someone has called you that name all week. It feels... well, you don’t know how it feels.

“Night, Elijah,” you say, retreating through the door.

“Night,” you hear him call after you.

Nine

Your room is hot in the early summer air; you are hot from the sexual disaster you just ran from with Elijah. You have some money, for the first time in months. Now: what do you spend it on?

You open up your laptop and consider your options: clothes; hormones; good pornography. Each of these, ideally, will make you feel like a woman again. You clearly don't know what size you are and you want gratification now rather than later, so you strike clothes off the list. That leaves hormones and pornography.

You've been increasingly horny recently, still unable to masturbate to completion, lacking Alexandra's permission. You think you could probably do it anyway—it isn't like you've been conditioned or brainwashed or any other erotic mind control nonsense—but when you get close it begins to feel all wrong and the horniness lapses into a dull ache. Maybe some femdom jack-off-instructions videos, one of the ones specifically made for trans women, would do the trick. But whichever video you bought would get old, and you'd still be reliant on someone else for your pleasure.

So: hormones then? You check the prices on Inhouse Pharmacy. You could get a couple months of HRT, but there's no guarantee that you could continue getting it after that. Your contract is technically zero hours, and while there's plenty of work right now, you know there are dead periods in hospitality which will fuck with your finances. It's probably both unhealthy and ineffective to yo-yo between different hormone regimes in your body. You're unsure what to do, and Elijah has gotten you so worked up that you can only think in terms of what makes you feel the hottest, which the last remaining logic in your brain recognises isn't a great criteria for this type of decision making.

Okay then, tonight is the night: you're going to masturbate to completion. In the post-nut clarity, you will be able to figure all of this out. But how do you get to the nut?

You do the unthinkable and open Alexandra's socials—all of them. Her instagram is filled with candid beauty, and you feel like a creep as you stroke your growing erection to it, but even the facsimile of sex with her does something for

you. Eventually though, you catch up to when you were dating and switch to her Tik-Tok. God—the dumb dances and laughable lip-syncs really do it for you, *hub?* You get close as her ribbon lips and button nose crinkle at the end of the latest e-girl meme format, but her voice isn't present and you still can't come. So you open her twitter, holding onto the horny and just hoping that amidst her social justice retweets is some video of herself saying something—anything.

But her pinned tweet does you one better: an OnlyFans link.

She did not have this while you were dating as far as you were aware, and the tweet is only a month old. You read that her new boyfriend is an avid photographer and encouraged her to start a soft-core OnlyFans, since she's so photogenic—she's been told. You don't really know what to expect when you click the link, but the first thing you see is a reasonable price for a one month subscription, little enough money that you'd still have enough left for a month of hormones, or clothes, or even just some real wine to pay back Elijah. You create an account and buy one month.

Her feed is exactly what you were looking for: videos of her clothed, sweet talking to the camera, letting you know how strong and sexy you are and how you ought to show off just how much you can come for her. It's perfect, except for one thing: it's directed at men. You start watching one without realising this and almost close the tab as soon as she calls you handsome—something she's never done before. But what else are you going to do? Suck it up; get to stroking. You're handsome; you're manly; you're big and strong and your cock is so powerful that it must be storing up a huge, virile load. The dysphoria is immense, physical and prickly underneath your skin, but her voice is dripping with sweetness; she speaks to you in a way that no one else ever has, or ever will. Even after everything, you're still in love with her, and you still trust her implicitly. The masculinity she's affirming in you is intoxicating, and you start to grunt just as she instructs, like the rugged, sexy beast you are. You feel powerful and that makes you feel gross, but your disgust only emboldens you, feeding your anger, your horniness—you'll spurt out the biggest come-shot of your life and she's gonna love it, the slut.

"Come for me, Daddy," she says.

You oblige, and the initial shot goes over your head, onto the back wall.

"Make sure to tip if you want to see more."

You do, and you do, and in the aftermath of orgasm, moments before the clarity hits, you send the rest of your spare money to Alexandra.

Fuck.

Ten

Work is tough, and somehow, you find yourself understanding why “dark humour” has come to be the norm in the kitchen. Everyone hates the customers, which is fair, admittedly, because the customers are fickle bitches who don’t understand that there’s a menu for a reason and they’re supposed to order from it. You’ve adopted a misanthropy rivalling your co-workers, and you know that misanthropy is just a codeword for a miasma of bigotries all tangled together, but in the sweaty, shouty box that is the kitchen—where the orders don’t stop and the dishes don’t stop and the bullshit requests from front of house don’t stop—you can’t really deconstruct it, and you don’t really care to. It’s comforting, in a way. Let the hate flow through you and direct it at someone helpless: a customer; a waiter; your ex girlfriend on the other side of a screen. It’s the only way not to kill your boss, or yourself.

Well, maybe there’s another way to deal with it, but the best suggestion for dealing with the hate was from Rover, who explained to you that smoking meant you could get regular breaks outside, which you don’t have an excuse for otherwise. It’s hell for your voice, and you know it’s anti-oestrogenic, but the nicotine gives you just the boost you need to make it through the night. And Rover is right, talking with the guys outside over cigarettes lets you laugh out the growing frustration of a packed evening. Doc brings up this one woman—and it’s always a woman—who said she had a sulphite intolerance, asking to examine the kitchen to allergy check everything herself, and then ordered a glass of wine anyway because she was having a “cheat day.” What a cunt.

You bought some boxers to replace your panties for work. They’re cheap and scratchy and remind you how much of a man you’re becoming, but you’re no longer anxious about being spotted as some faggot freak by your boss. Plus, it helps you get into your role as one of the lads, giggling along to Damien’s impression of a flaming gay couple, all limp wrists and groomer jokes. You have to keep up this act to make rent, you tell yourself, as if you’re not beginning to enjoy it. You may silently disagree with Damien’s views about whether “transsexualism” should be taught in schools, but you can’t deny that his impression of the

overweight, overdone, transgender parody of a woman is spot on, and his laughter at his own jokes is contagious.

It feels good too, to shout, to be heard, for your presence and abrasion to be rewarded, as if every interaction is a competition and being the loudest, dumbest asshole makes you the winner. The old pressure of constant consideration is off and the new pressure of toeing the line is on; how close can you get to saying that all women are whores without actually just saying those words. But it's only a game, and you don't actually believe it anyway.

One slow evening, the discussion of feminism comes up, and this turns out to be as divisive a topic as the best way to make meringue.

"I'm an egalitarian," Rover declares with pride, explaining, "I think men and women are equal, and should be treated with equal disrespect."

"Well, women experience more oppression than men, so women need more respect than men," replies Doc, doing the strangest rendition of this basic argument you've ever heard. "So I'm a feminist because—"

"Like fuck you are," shouts Rover, which prompts a laugh from Damien. You think you're lacking context here, but you laugh too—it just feels good.

"If you're a feminist then I'm Caitlyn Jenner," Damien says, putting on his so-called "tranny voice," a high and breathy pastiche of the way early transitioners talk, as if her name were a joke in and of itself.

You laugh, along with the rest of the guys—again: the impression is accurate.

"No," he continues, sitting on the counter as if he were giving a lecture. "I've heard the arguments on both sides, and while I sympathise with wanting to be someone else, biology is biology." You don't see how this fits into the discussion, but you've learned to listen to your boss. He says, "Men are built to be providers, workers, fathers; women are built to be carers, mothers. Feminism confuses the whole issue by telling women they should be as strong as men, which is what makes them feel inferior, when they should be praised for being emotional and vulnerable, because that's what makes them so good with kids. And men are told to be weaker, quieter; feminists call masculinity toxic—but if they have their way, who will do all the manual labour that women just aren't cut out for? So I'm not a feminist; it's well meaning, but it just doesn't make sense—which is exactly something a woman would think up."

"What about transgender people?" you ask. You had to; you have to know. This is your first face-to-face contact with this kind of biological determinism since you were in school, and back then no one even knew what trans people were outside of being a stock sitcom punchline. You want to refute his point, but he's using his explanatory voice, which you've learned to take in since it usually means he's relaying some explanation of equipment or obscure cooking technique. And also, can you refute it? You've primarily accessed womanhood through feelings of subjugation and inferiority, and Elijah brought up sort of the same point about feminism, though phrased more thoughtfully. But you turn back to Damien,

looking up in thought at how best to phrase it.

“At best: delusional,” he says. “At worst: predators.” He turns to you with suspicion; you’re now very aware that you described trannies as “transgender people.”

Rover saves you though, adding, “In either case, keep them away from kids.”

“Chicks with dicks are hot though,” Doc chimes in, helpfully.

Eleven

Damien invites you out to the pub for the first time with Rover and Doc, but you decline. The Queer Women's Group is tonight, and you really need to go to recalibrate your sensitivity to the bigotry of your workplace. But obviously you can't say that, so you say you just can't make it. You get called a pussy, but they seem genuinely sorry you can't make it. Maybe next time.

You missed the one last month, and you're already late, so you call a cab and rush straight there. When you arrive, the discussion is in full swing, but Eunice scootches over and pulls up a seat for you next to her. Before you sit, she raises her hand and silences the room, then gestures for you to introduce yourself.

"Sorry I'm late," you say. "My name is Bradley—"

...

Oh fuck.

Fuck.

Eunice holds your hand and looks up at you with concern; the rest of the room just seems confused. The regulars don't know what's up with you and the new members don't know why a man has just invaded their group as if it were his own.

"I—" you stumble. "My name is Tulip; I use she/her pronouns; my fun fact is —"

"We did favourite Marvel hero today," Maya interrupts, her oblivious disposition always welcome.

"Uh," you say, "I don't really watch those movies. Does Spider Man count? Like, Tobey Maguire?"

You notice you're still using your work voice, sounding burnt from the multitude of cigarette breaks, but a woman with a mullet wearing aviators indoors explains, "It depends how you define a Marvel hero. Is it only characters from the MCU, or characters from any film based on Marvel comics? Or, does the actor even matter if the question is about the Marvel hero itself rather than any specific portrayal? I think it's interesting that you've interpreted the question this way, and it says a lot about how we see comics..."

You tune out as you sit down, letting her take the attention off you. You notice

her denim jacket hanging on her chair, and her leather pants, filled out with her stocky legs. This must be Case; it's even clearer why Elijah likes her now.

Eunice gives you a hug and whispers to ask if you're okay. You say that you are and she squeezes your hands again, before cutting Case off halfway through some salient point about artistic agency in franchises, and getting everyone back to the discussion at hand.

The discussion at hand is slow, and boring, and it keeps getting derailed by current events as if anyone in this room has a say on who will replace the Prime Minister. So there's no laughter; there's no banter; there's only posturing over the most meaningless bullshit—for this group, the goal of feminism is to be the most correct woman of the month. You don't care whether Blue Is The Warmest Colour is indulgent for women or for men, or whether that matters; you'd probably masturbate to it either way, by the way it's being described.

All you can do then is look at the faces around you. The cis women look stunning, as always; no matter if they're slender or plump or plain, they exude a femininity you've been missing at work and at home for so long, only accessible through a screen. Even when they're heated, their voices carry some fragility—is it fragility? or is that just the way you're thinking about it after that conversation with Damien. You know there is something there, different from men, but you've lost the language to describe it.

The trans women though... you can barely look at them, and if you can sustain your gaze, it's only as self harm. You see your future fractured over their faces: thinning hair; bulging jowls; thick neck covered in wisps of razor burn and hair. You've managed to avoid looking in the mirror, letting yourself get greasy and unkempt, but if you did, you know this is what you would see. And they lack the decency to cover up as you do, wearing rectangular dresses and stretched skirts instead of hiding their immodesty in a hoodie. A word comes to mind that's evaded you since you were a closeted little creep, browsing 4chan at night, underage: "hon." Hon describes these exact, self-assured, overweight trans women, who no one actually sees as women except others like them. They affirm the womanhood of themselves and each other with the moniker of "hon," allegedly, but you've never heard that term used in real life, and never seen it online to be anything other than an insult. Even so, it's stayed in your mind all this time, and it comes to you now. You don't want to be a hon; you'd rather be a boy.

What the fuck?

Okay: you do recognise that as internalised transphobia, but it's hard to push past it when all you see is Damien's impression whenever one of these hunks speaks. "Tranny voice" is right, you sort of admit to yourself; they all sound the same: breathy and weak and pitched up way higher than any of the real woman here. No—you mean biological woman. No, fuck—you mean a woman with female biology. No, fuck, shit—what was the term you used for them a couple months

ago? AFAB women. What is happening?

After the group finishes, you stand around with Maya and Eunice as usual, waiting for Case to exit the building. You wave her over and introduce yourself with a bit more composure than earlier. Xe/she introduces xyr/herself to you fully. You didn't assume xyr pronouns fully incorrectly at least, but you make an effort to switch to whichever comes first in people's list of them so you're at least consistent. Eunice takes a drag of her joint; Maya scrolls through twitter; you light up your rollie, the habit spilling out of work hours. What's Case going to do?

Xe asks you why you deadnamed yourself. It's a bluntness on the same level as Maya, but unlike her, xe is obviously concerned about your emotional state. You realise that this directness is also a drastic shift from the cryptic workings of Alexandra's feminine wiles; you really understand why Elijah likes xem.

"I have to go by my deadname at work," you say, responding with the same honesty xe's showing you, "and I think it's starting to get to me."

"That's no good," xe says. You think Case is AMAB, but the clothing and the mullet and the aviators serve to create an androgynous, stout, curvaceous person, obfuscating rather than accentuating any obvious signs of former maleness or femaleness that may have left traces on xyr body. You don't know why this thought pops into your head, or why it feels important. Xe continues, "Your body is a haunted machine, inhabited by your own ghost."

It almost sounds like something meaningful, but you're not sure it is.

Case notices your confusion and elaborates, "You think you're in here—" xe pokes you in the forehead "—but that's just a trick of the light. You are the robot, not the voices."

Is xe fucking with you? Case laughs when your bafflement turns to irritation.

"Sorry," xe says; "I mean that you are what you do, not what your brain says. Being a woman is doing womanhood, you know—performance, Butler, et cetera. Thinking it isn't enough, but the opposite is true too. If work is getting into your head to the point where you stop thinking you're a woman, look at what you're doing instead. Men don't come to the Queer Women's Group, for example." You smile politely at Case and xe takes it as sincere. "I was trying to do a cyber-gothic thing," xe explains, "to expand my modes of communication."

You've had enough of whatever this is, even if you appreciate the encouragement, and you gesture at Maya and Eunice to get moving. Case walks with you, but the conversation turns to blissful small talk. Eunice's little sister has just finished school and is coming up next month to see if she wants to move here; she's so excited to actually meet some other queer women at the group since there's nothing like that in the little village they're from. Maya says she'll have to miss it since there's a Magic: the Gathering pre-release night on the next one, but she wants to show her around town. Case says they might be attending the Queer Men's Group the day before instead, depending on how xyr gender fluctuates. You say you'll try to make it, if work allows, but what you mean by that is you'll go if

you don't feel like you'd just sit and stew and suffer, not that you'll go if you can afford the time, as you implied.

Usually, the three of you part ways all at once, but this time Eunice and Maya hold you back at the hold back at the intersection.

"Oh, Tulip," Eunice says, leaning herself into your awkward embrace, "I've missed you so much."

"Where's the makeup?" Maya adds.

You realise you haven't posted your morning selfie to the group chat in... a while. You haven't actually been looking at it since you muted it one day at work while Maya was providing a running commentary of a Nintendo Direct for the new Xenoblade game, as if she weren't the only one with a Switch. You don't mention that though; you don't have a reply at all.

"I know you have weird hours so it's hard to hang out," Eunice says, "but just let us know when you've even just got a couple hours free and we can be round as soon as."

You really don't want them to see the state of the place, or the state of you, for that matter, so you don't say anything. But then you gesture for Maya to join your hug and you hold your two oldest friend for as long as you're able. You feel something warm, for a moment, but it dissipates when they pull away, apologising that they've really got to get home. You wave them off and stand for a second in silence, save for your racing thoughts and the summer breeze.

Until Case says, "I'm still heading in your direction. You ready to go?"

Twelve

Okay, so you're walking with Case. You're not sure you like Case. It's a first impression, obviously, but xe doesn't seem to really grasp the way that you like to chat. The way xe talks is like if Elijah were trying to be cool all the time, rather than trying to be comprehensive and clear. You think xyr use of metaphor is a way of obscuring intent, but you recognise you've maybe just got it in your head that all trans people are out to deceive you with the way you were thinking at the group.

"How'd you two meet?" Case asks, not taking your silence seriously.

"Me and Eunice or me and Maya?" you ask.

Case doesn't notice your sarcasm, or at least doesn't take it as an answer, clarifying, "I meant Elijah."

You don't want to be rude a second time, so you say, "Alexandra—our mutual ex—mentioned him to me a few years after she and I got together, but for a while he was just another thing she would go out and do, same as a poetry evening or one of those FetLife munches, so I didn't actually meet him until he moved in."

"That was the first time you met him?"

"Rent had gone up and the extra bedroom was only being used as storage, so I was fine with it," you say, as if there was the possibility you wouldn't have been fine with anything Alexandra asked of you. "I remember the first thing I saw was his hands and I was shocked by how much his veins bulged as he carried a box almost his size into the house and up the stairs."

"Yeah..." Case says, clearly lost in some fantasy sparked by what you've said.

There's a moment where xe waits for you to ask how they met, but you mostly want to be home. The last thing you need is another person in your life to confuse this whole mess, and you're pretty sure Case is just some rebound, a ways away from Elijah's usual interest in women who are actually women. And that's not dismissive of xyr gender, you tell yourself; xe actually doesn't seem to be wholly a woman, considering the pronouns and the presentation and the attendance of both men and women's groups.

Xe starts to explain xyr introduction to Elijah but you have a more interesting

question: “When did you start going to the queer groups? I thought the Women & Marginal Identities Network would be more your thing.”

That shuts xem up, if only for a second. Xe says, “There was drama. There’s always drama but there was really drama there. When I told my DnD group about it, they suggested I try the queer groups and just go to whichever side I was leaning towards that day—not that there are sides but it’s all in flux; luckily I’ve not been straight down the middle on any group days, but those tend to be rare.”

Xe laughs. You realise xyr relationship to gender comes from a framework with which you’re wholly unfamiliar. Case is full of ambiguity, both in the way xe speaks and the way xe presents, and you can’t figure out what experiences someone must go through, what their circumstances be like, to allow them to identify—even partly—as their birth gender and still feel trans. In xe’s case, you’ve been talking for a while and you still can’t tell what xyr birth gender is, not that that’s important, but you’re still trying to figure it out. Maybe that’s part of it. Your body seems to do one gender or the other, rather than ever splitting down the middle. Your height and the shape of your head and shoulders are all things that need severe compensation to avoid being gendered as male. Your voice is the same, naturally so low that you have to emphasise every ounce of femininity you can muster to pass the threshold of even sounding different. That seems like you’re being hard on yourself, but all you had to do was skip your makeup and drop your voice and the staff at the restaurant didn’t even hesitate with the “he”s.

You grimace as you figure that a new perspective is maybe exactly what you need to get through this whole mess: a perspective from someone who switches pronouns at will and seemingly isn’t burdened with what seems to you like total fragmentation of self. You reach out:

“If you don’t mind me asking, do you—“ What is the question you actually want to ask here? Maybe there’s no normal question that will have a normal answer. “How... does being trans work?”

“*Erhm,*” Case starts. Xe takes a second to think, and then another, and another. “So, like I was saying earlier, being trans is doing transness. We are bodies, structures, machines, houses, wires. We run with electricity, water, consciousness, and we think of ourselves as such, but that is something that runs through us. I am the robot, to doing some ‘Simon Moon’ing if you’ll allow; mess with my wires and you’ll change how I run. But that’s not to get bogged down in what could be seen as a trans-medicalist position of physical fatalism; in clear terms, our feelings are part of our biology. Transness is the recognition the feelings don’t match the way you’re being seen, the way you’re expected to see yourself, in the first instance at least. Imagine using a crucifix to exorcise an atheist ghost; misgendering someone is the same thing—it’s clear who you’re referring to but they might not respond.

“This same thematic element appears between divergences. In the sense of gender divergence, some people create—or are more often given—a schematic for themselves and act according to that, as if by sending the signals for that system,

their own structures will change shape. In the sense of neuro divergence it's the same as well. Think about masking. Elijah is autistic, which I'm sure you know, but he's been giving a set of rules by his parents about how to act like the allistic they wanted to have. After two decades of that, he's now able to run a virtual machine of cis-allo normalcy, which is slower and less efficient than using his hardware like it should be used with the default operating system. But he's been doing it so long, if the VM crashes, he's thrust into an OS that he has no experience with, so he won't be using it right and it will stress him out. If he learned to let himself have his tics, his flaps, his stims, he'd have an easier time of everything, but all I can do is give him an environment where doing that is okay and let him come to his own conclusions. And I'll let you come to your own conclusions here; all I can do is be authentic to myself and see if my output matches your input impedance."

Okay, cool—that all made no sense to you. You *mmm* in polite, ambiguous agreement, and then continue in silence until Case stops to cross the road.

"This is where I turn off," xe says. "It was nice getting to know you."

"Same," you say. "I suppose I'll see you over sometime."

There's a brief smile between you, and nothing else to say. You leave before the lights change.

Thirteen

When you arrive at home, your night proceeds like it has every day for the past month: laptop out; cock out; load up Alexandra's OnlyFans; jerk away the pain.

She uploads daily—sometimes a photoset; sometimes a video; sometimes just a wall of text—but it's always enough to get you off. And it's always aimed at men. She's moved to hardcore scenes though in the space of the last month, and this has caused a rush of conflicting emotions for you. The videos where she's standing above you, teasing her clit as you gaze up at her glistening pussy, are a near perfect recreation of the sex you used to have with her; she uses the same tone of voice, the same pouting expression of dominance and lust, and you fall in love all over again, every night, willing to believe anything she tells you—at least until you come. Those videos make you feel boyish, juvenile, like you're only just now discovering what sex is rather than having been sexually active for the past decade. The dysphoria stays at bay as you take comfort in her gentle dominance; you spent four years training yourself to trust her and that's hard to unlearn—and why should you anyway when it feels so good? Instead of playing into your submission as she did when you were with her, her instructions now reward you for being curious and naughty: you've snuck in to catch your best friend masturbating; oh well, boys will be boys, and you shouldn't be denied your urges; why don't you watch? The pressures of femininity fade and you grunt to show her your appreciation; you want to make the biggest load you can so you earn that surprised, impressed expression with her lips making a perfect circle which she puts on at the end of these videos. After spending years navigating your own social anxieties and the unspoken rules—both real and imagined—of all the women's spaces you go to, you're being rewarded for doing everything you were afraid you'd do. It makes you feel... powerful isn't the word, exactly, but you feel as if you have a right to your most base instincts, that you're entitled to do what you want in whatever space you want because that's what you are, and if people wanted to support you then they'd support that.

But that's only some of the videos. There's another type of video, one that you couldn't watch when it first started appearing on your feed, but now the surge of

emotion it generates in you is so strong that you moan in anticipation as you see it's the type she's uploaded today. You take your erect penis and start to jerk as you click the video.

Her boyfriend is there, head out of shot, chiselled and firm and big. But not as big as you—you note with an ugly grin—neither in height nor in manhood. He is so muscular and strong though, as Alexandra says as she kisses his forepack, running her hands up and down his rigid thighs. He's shaved to show off every bulge and crease of muscle with perfect definition, and it almost makes you want to shave too, but you don't have any definition so you hide your lack with body hair, now growing thicker and darker as testosterone has come back into your system. The body hair makes you feel gross, but the last time you shaved you broke down in tears, and the grossness can be okay when you're with Alexandra like this—she's in love with manly men.

She shows off her love through kisses and licks all over her boyfriend's body, *mmmm*ing and *aaa*ing as he grabs her hair to direct her to worship somewhere specific. He holds her away from his cock and she sticks his tongue out, trying to get a lick of the pre-come leaking out, but he tells her to kneel, face on the ground. He steps on her head, gentle but forceful. You hear her whimper.

"What are you?" asks a deep voice off-screen.

"I'm your babydoll," she replies, more demure and submissive than you ever were.

"Who am I?" her boyfriend asks again.

"Daddy."

He lets out some primal noise of satisfaction and steps back.

Alexandra brings herself up off the floor, beaming her bright, watery eyes at the man standing above her, and takes him in her mouth. You pump your penis up and down with such passion and fury that the laptop screen rocks on the bed.

When you watched straight porn, before you discovered sissy porn and other weird inlets of closeted trans affirmation, you always imagined yourself as the woman. It wasn't that you preferred cock to vagina—you've always salivated over female anatomy—but wanting cock made you feel like a woman. Now it's all twisted: you're not Alexandra; you don't want to be Alexandra; you want to have Alexandra back. In your head, she's looking up at you, gagging on your engorged shaft, leaking spit over your full balls. The fantasy is not only to be with her again, but to own her, to have her so committed to you that she'll never leave, not this time. Life has been so much worse without her, day after day of heartache and pain, and you take all that and use it to crush the butterflies in your stomach; you shove it into the load you're working up for her, ready to spray out all your hate over her face and turn her into nothing but an object for your pleasure. Whenever you come it feels like an expression of control—even though she's with another man; even though you're spending your extra money on tips—because in that moment, she exists to serve you.

But you know that's not right. You've talked to sex workers at the women's

group and you know there can be empowerment from this type of work, but your control relies on her disempowerment, so that's what you believe. She's controlled by her desires, and if you can give her that huge load she's now begging for, if you can be the man she wants, you can control her.

Her boyfriend comes. Hot semen streaks her face, coats her lashes, gets in her hair. She shudders and lets out a horny, disgusted *nnngghhhh*. You come too, whispering, "Take it, bitch," as you do.

You hit your own face and feel a warm, gloopy stream flow down into the stubble you've worked up since your last shave, something that's becoming less and less frequent. The horny reverie is over and you're alone in your room with a video of your ex having a better time than she ever did with you—at least according to your twisted, bitter memories.

You feel worse, but tomorrow night you know you will briefly feel better, so you wipe up with a tissue and then go to sleep.

Fourteen

Your new routine doesn't go unnoticed, if only by Elijah. You wake up midmorning; you sometimes shower; you go to work; you come back from work at night; you get on your laptop; you come; you go to sleep. In terms of food, you nibble on a constant stream of bits and pieces from the kitchen through work, and then have cereal for breakfast to perk you up and a ready meal for dinner so you can get to masturbating as quickly as possible. Your baggy boymoder clothes are becoming less baggy by the week.

You haven't had a proper chat with Elijah since you watched Terminator 2, and outside of the occasional exchange of "hey" in the kitchen, you haven't seen him much since then either. For his part, he's started asking you questions about how work is or about how you're feeling, or he'll tell you about how things are going with Case or recollect some Twitter discourse as if it were a story, but you only just say "hey" and then make noises such as *mhm* and *ah* to make it clear that it's either too early or too late to have a conversation. You suppose that this burgeoning friendship has stalled, but you're too dulled by everything in your life to care.

Except today he blocks the door as you try to take your ready-meal back to your room.

"I heard from Case that you deadnamed yourself at the women's group the other day."

The only conversation you want to be having is with Alexandra in your head while looking at her latest photoset where she's dressed like a maid and her new boyfriend is in a suit. Elijah doesn't fit into any of that, but he's filling up the doorway, and you don't want to spill your food by pushing past.

"Yeah," you say, hoping that this is enough. It isn't, by the look on Elijah's face, so you continue, "I've been feeling weird and I got in the habit from work and it was all just a mess, okay?"

"Sit at the table, Tulip; we need to talk."

You oblige and take a seat, steaming plastic tray of pasta and tuna and cheese laid out before you. Elijah takes the seat opposite and thinks about what to say;

even sitting, he's so much shorter than you. You sigh as you tuck into your food.

"Tulip, you're looking bad and you aren't doing anything," he starts, with about as much grace and style as you can expect from someone who has a sock shoved in their underwear while walking around town.

That's uncalled for—you try to listen.

He says, "You need to go on a date and get over Alexandra, or at least get out there and make new friends because you're not getting the kind of support you need at work; I can tell. Do you think she'd want you to be like this?"

You know exactly what she wants you to be like. You say, "I'm getting the financial support from work that we—" you point your fork at Elijah "—need to pay rent. You asked me to get a job."

"And now I'm asking you to do something else too," he says, grimacing at his own faltering plea. "Look: let's figure out the specific, material issues you're facing, and then we can address them together."

You chew with an abundance of leisure, forcing him to notice that you're making him wait for a reply.

"Okay," you say once you swallow, "issue number one: we're poor and I need to work with transphobes to make money. Issue number two: my girlfriend left me out of nowhere after eroding my ability to be Tulip without her. Issue number three: I can't date anyone as Tulip because I can't believe in her when I look like this, and I can't date anyone as Bradley because..." because Bradley is a monster, you want to say, but something catches in your throat and the words just stop.

Elijah nods and bites his teeth, unnerved by your use of the third person. But he exhales and says, "Let's put issue one on the back burner; I'll put the feelers out for a better job and keep you updated. Issue number two is something that's happened and we can't change it, so we'll leave it. For issue number three..." he pauses and considers his words here. "For issue number three, what do you mean by believing in Tulip?"

"Tulip doesn't look like me; she doesn't sound like me." You don't understand how it isn't obvious. "When I call myself by her name it feels like I'm lying because Tulip never acted this way—never thought the things I think. Tulip was Alexandra's girlfriend, and now that Alexandra is gone, Tulip isn't anything."

Elijah perks up, seemingly excited by your wrenching confession. "That's an actionable issue," he says; "we can do something to amend that."

"How?" you ask. "I'm out of hormones; I don't have the money and the time for vocal training; I sold all her clothes cause they didn't fit me."

You try to think of more examples of how sorry your situation is but Elijah cuts you off: "You just need to do things as Tulip. The women's group isn't frequent enough for it, but if you find something else as well to do as her—some other people to be her with, socially or sexually or anything—you'll start fleshing her out, making her real again. You'll start feeling real again."

"What can she do?" you ask. "She doesn't have any friends except Maya, the nerd, and Eunice, the stoner," and Elijah, who is taken, you add in your head.

“Don’t dismiss them like that, and you can do a lot of things,” he says, insisting that you are Tulip, which makes you calm down, somewhat. It feels good not to have your bullshit indulged—your self-destructive framework validated. “And you haven’t sold all your clothes, in case you forgot.”

You first think that he’s being a dick, but then you do remember that beautiful red dress, still hanging in your closet as the last thread connected to her—to you, Tulip.

“It doesn’t fit though,” you say.

“Well we can kill two birds here,” Elijah says, standing up. “I can get a discount for inviting you to my gym, so I think between us we could afford a membership for you, which’d be something to do as Tulip with me, and would mean you could redistribute some weight to fit back into it.” You’ve finished your food so he comes round your side of the table and sticks out his hand. “C’mon: let’s see what we need to do.”

You hold the red dress up against your body. You will need to do a lot to get it to fit, but it’s possible. Even just in proximity to the dress, imagining how you will look once it fits again, you feel like yourself for the first time in months. It becomes a symbol of hope, and you put it back in the centre of your closet so you can remind yourself of who you are—who you’re going to be—every morning.

You lay on the bed, horny out of habit, but Elijah stays in the room with you.

“How’d you choose the name Tulip?”

You haven’t been asked this since the first year of coming out, but you haven’t really made many new friends since then. Elijah is the first person you’ve gotten to know since you moved in here with Alexandra, and even that only actually happened in the past couple months. You used to have a whole story that was neat and well paced and true enough to satisfy people, even though nothing in real life happens like you tell it. But you suddenly feel too old for that.

“I liked flowers,” you say. “I wanted to be a botanist but I decided to study biology at university instead for some reason, and then stopped liking flowers once I found out how boring and difficult a topic they were—similar to every other topic. But I guess I was also thinking about this metaphor for growth and change and blooming at the time, because that’s who I was.”

“And you aren’t the kind to think about the significance of names now?”

“A rose by any other name...” you say, smirking. “I haven’t even seen that play. I was just someone who thought that being interesting was the most important thing and that being interesting meant having a lot of opinions about art, which naturally leads to thinking that your real name has to have some thematic significance in your life, which is weird because all the cis people I wanted to emulate had names chosen by their parents that were just names of their dead relatives, who in turn had their names chosen by their parents. Anyway...”

There’s nothing to say after “anyway” so you sit in silence, until something

bubbles up from some long disused part of your memory.

“There’s one more thing, actually,” you laugh. “Don’t tell anyone this—and don’t use it yourself—but I also thought Tutu was a really cute girly name that fit with the sissy stuff I was into at the time. Get it? Tulip Turner: Tutu?”

Elijah looks at you with a lopsided smile, not a smirk, but big and toothy and wonky and cute.

“Did you ever get anyone to call you that?” he asks.

“No—not even Alexandra. I never asked; I always wanted someone to call me that on their own, which I thought would be the most gender affirming thing ever. For someone to come up with the girliest, silliest name for someone as tall and masculine as me, or as I felt I was, was my idea of making it as a woman, which sounds silly but...”

Elijah picks up where you stop: “No, no—I get it. It’s someone saying that not only are you a woman, but you’re this hyperfeminine ideal of a woman, without you having to ask for it, which would undermine the whole thing.”

You smile lazily and nod, glad that he doesn’t interrogate your vision of what a woman is too closely, as the women’s group might, and he doesn’t heartily agree that that’s a perfect name for some dumb bimbo slut, as your coworkers would.

“How’d you choose your name?” you ask, at which he sits on the bed with you.

“I’m one of those trans people who just kind of switched up my deadname. My email address was already E-L-I richards nine nine six and I didn’t want to mess with it, so I just changed the last part of my name to -jah.” He lies down and you turn towards each other. This is the first time you’ve been in bed with someone for months, and even though you know the feelings are asymmetric, the butterflies and heartbeat and love that’s surging up in you feels good. “Originally,” he adds, “I was planning on being Eli, but that felt too androgynous and I wanted something a little more—”

“More like a drowned Victorian child?” you say, referencing a popular twitter post that you’re sure he’s seen.

He has, and he laughs, and his little quiff of hair shakes while he does. You realise you’re excited to go with him to the gym, the place of trans women’s nightmares. You giggle your airy, tittering laugh, nothing like the mean bellow you use at work, and you begin to believe that together you can rebuild your life.

Fifteen

The gym is intimidating, but Elijah forces you to shave and put just a smidgen of makeup on as a confidence booster, and he loudly genders you correctly and repeatedly in front of the receptionist while signing you up. You are given a key to a locker in the women's changing room. This terrifies you somewhat, but you go in the morning before work, so no one else is there to find your presence worrisome. You change into some baggy sweatpants, not wanting to show off your girl-bulge with anything too tight, and put on an old t-shirt, ready to torture your body into shape.

It's not actually torture, you soon discover. It's difficult, but it doesn't feel bad, and Elijah's enthusiasm every time you pick up the barbell is worth every dysphoric, ghastly grunt you let out while grinding out a difficult lift. The next day, your muscles ache as you lay in bed in the morning, but Elijah bursts into your room and drags you up, saying you'll feel better when you start moving. And you do, weirdly enough. As you eat breakfast, he presents you with a notepad and pen, saying that you should keep track of everything you do and that you should look up an exercise programme that excites you since he won't be able to tell you what to do every time. You accept his gift and search around online for something that seems fun until you have to rush off to work.

Over the next couple weeks, you begin to see changes. You work out three times a week, always before work, always using the women's changing room, always feeling better for it every time. You had thought you lacked the time to have a hobby like this, but now it's like there are suddenly more hours in the day. Your sleep has become more regular as well, and you realise that you've gone to bed without spending time with Alexandra on the nights where you're working late, which is probably good for your brain, you think, but has also definitely increased your ambient horniness. Between the way your fat has shifted slightly over your frame, the confidence generated by picking up heavy things, and the joy of formally being a woman again, you feel sexy in a way that you haven't since the breakup. Maybe you could get a new girlfriend, or at least get a date and try to wean your way off of this OnlyFans dependency you've got going on. But is that

fair to the person you'd be dating? Would it be worthwhile sex for them if the point of it for you was not in fact to express an attraction to them, but was to become less attracted to someone else? You could be upfront, but then their response might be a similar disengagement in the sex, resulting in a situation where you're both in your own heads, using each other as essentially a tool for masturbation, which—

Hey! You're even being analytical about your own thoughts and desires again! The feminist is back and she's ready to hit the dating scene.

And then it all crashes down, of course. Damien politely takes you to the side one day and says you need to cut your hair. You're pretty sure this is some kind of violation of something, but you also know that your contract means they can just stop giving you shifts. You wear a hairnet but apparently it's ineffective as your hair has been floating around the kitchen, and it needs to be cut before it winds up in anyone's food, especially with a hygiene inspector visit due. He's sad in a way that you've never seen before, like he understands that this is something you've put years into and he doesn't want to take all that effort away, but the business needs what it needs, and he's taken his duty as its solemn enforcer. He says to do it by your next shift, and adds that he thinks the style is really cool—very 70s. He's sure you'll look even cooler with a buzz though.

Sixteen

You go to the Queer Women's Group that evening in a panicky haze, made all the worse by your resurgence of feeling; if you were still detached from everything, this would have been easy to resign yourself to, but now you're you again and you've been washing your hair and you want to keep it. Losing it will make your shoulders look bigger; it'll make it obvious how severe your hairline is; it'll show off the weird, bulging shape of your head. Fuck.

You enter and you sit and you think about the game plan. This is your one chance to find some support for what you know you have to do. Today the introduction is names, pronouns, and your biggest desire right at this moment. Obviously the person who thought of this is cis because you know what every other trans woman's response is going to be, but this actually works in your favour.

After a succession of "...and my biggest desire is to be able to give birth" from the sniffly row of women without wombs, it's your turn.

"Hi, my name is Tulip; I use she/her pronouns; and my biggest desire at this moment is to find a girlfriend so I can cut all my hair off."

There was perhaps a more elegant way to phrase that, judging by the grimacing cis women who seem uncomfortable with you using their support group as a dating app. You look around to find a friend for support, but Maya and Eunice are missing, as is Case. You sit down and ruffle your curls back and forth over your shoulders. The introductions finish. Today's discussion will be on beauty standards. Perfect—you can explain the hair situation.

"So I just want to say about the hair," you blurt out as soon as the topic is announced, "I mean that I need my hair long to really be a woman, but if I had a girlfriend whose girlfriend I could be, then that would account for me cutting off all my hair." The words are all coming out so fast you don't know which voice you're using.

"Wow—there's a lot to unpack here," says the cis she/they called Billie sitting opposite you. "Firstly, long hair isn't what makes you a woman—" she gestures to her mullet/undercut combo "—and for you to come into a woman's space and

define womanhood for us is actually very invasive.” She makes these short, sharp gestures with her fingers but keeps her elbows tucked by her sides. You realise you may have forgotten to mention why you need to cut your hair. “Secondly,” she continues, “you shouldn’t be using a woman for self-realisation; that’s classic misogyny, to see a woman as an aspect of yourself like some guy on a quest to be thoughtful and caring and he just needs a sensitive girl to teach him to be himself.”

“Okay, that’s—” What is that? This is going badly and you’re already a bit scrambled and now someone is using what sounds like premade soundbites against your fumbling attempt at vulnerability. You try to speak again: “—that’s not really what I meant. Like, obviously we’re kinda defined by the people you’re with, in part, right? It’s not enough to not be misgendered to feel like a woman, you need to actually be gendered properly.” Your mind is jumping a bit so you try to make this into an actual point. “I’m sure the trans women here who can’t pass need this space to really see themselves as a woman, by way of others seeing them as such.”

“Sorry, what?” The deep voice comes from your left, a few seats down. A trans woman who introduced herself as Ruth is cocking her head at you. “Since when do we care about passing? If we want to talk about beauty standards, why don’t we talk about the way that cis beauty standards are enforced by trans women who have internalised them and want to be validated by putting their sisters down. I feel like a woman because I am a woman; there is no other way to feel. And I agree that the correct gendering from this group is important, but then why is it not good enough for you?”

“That’s a great point,” adds Billie, “and I think it’s worth discussing why ‘girlfriend’ is the first form of relationship you jumped to for your affirmation, rather than just a friend, or a social group such as this. It’s interesting the way we think of girlfriends as being unique in that they support our idea of ourselves, I think because there’s this feeling of control—”

“Look: this group is once a month and friends are messy,” you interject, leaving a resonant silence in the cluttered room. “I just need a girlfriend who will be who I need her to be.”

“Is that really how you see women?”

Billie does not elaborate and you don’t either. Someone else gets the discussion to the actual topic, but you don’t join in, staring at the floor to ignore the anxious glances cast in your direction.

“Tough crowd.”

A lanky brunette approaches you as you roll up a cigarette outside the building. You were the first out once the group ended and scrambled away to a corner, specifically to not be noticed.

“Mmm,” you say. You can’t remember her name.

“My name’s Linda; I called myself Adnil back in the group because that’s my

secret identity.”

“Tulip,” you say, lighting up. “I do have some friends but they aren’t here. Eunice, Maya, and Case—I guess—if you know them.”

“I know,” she says. She clutches the lapel of her tweed jacket as she talks. Her hair stays flat against her head in some kind of anti-fashion bowl-cut. You read lesbian all over, and she’s being nice to you; maybe the night won’t be a total bust. “Eunice has been sick for a couple days,” she adds.

“Ah.” Despite the subtle spark of enthusiasm, you can’t think of anything to say.

But she can: “I get what you were trying to say earlier; it was phrased awfully, but obviously there’s a difference between having a romantic partner and a platonic partner, or else why would we use those terms?”

“Yeah,” you reply. You wish she had defended you when it mattered but you figure that she’s new here.

“And I think you only said girlfriend because you’ve got pussy on your mind,” she says, with some irreverent, grating giggle, “or girlcock—both are valid.”

Your laugh stutters. “Yeah, I guess.”

She reaches out her hand, a gesture of trust, and you accept her offering of the casual intimacy which exists between women.

“So what are you looking for in a girlfriend?” She says it like *giirrrllllfrriieennnd* and squeezes your fingers, locked between hers.

You start walking together as you reply, “Someone who will love me even if I have a buzzcut.”

Linda titters and says, “So any lesbian, basically.”

You want to explain how that’s not true, and certainly not true for trans women, but you instead leave it, enjoying the sentiment that you’re surely attractive enough for all women who love women.

“I have to get it cut for work,” you say; “I forgot to explain that. It’s as much a class issue as anything else, really.” The feminist is coming back out, ready to impress this young woman with economic analysis of gendered oppression.

“You should style it into a pompadour, then it would be a classy issue.”

You laugh for real, and a life together forms in your head with Linda. She could move in with you; you could take the couch while she sleeps in the bed at first, but then she invites you in one night because the room feels empty all of a sudden; you just snuggle, but then the next day she tells you how good it felt and you make love all morning; she wants to explore your kinks; you want to explore hers; you work and she works but you find time for each other, and you have money, and you can buy hormones and new clothes and flowers on date night; you’d fall in love again and again over every little thing you discover about each other. She’s looking up at you with a teasing smile. You realise she’s silly enough to be the one to call you Tutu.

You haven’t spoken in a while, so she asks, “Can I run my hands through your hair before it goes? I’ve loved playing with long hair since I was a kid, probably

because my sister hated me touching hers.”

You bend your head forward and she reaches up. She’s not that much shorter than you so your foreheads are almost pressed together as her hand scratches the back of your scalp. She drags her fingers down through your curls with the most gentle of motions, like she’s practised doing this in a way that would go unnoticed. But you can feel it, just barely, and that lights up your head, tingling and buzzing, and the late summer coolness settles in and the first leaves of autumn fall around you and you have to kiss her.

Your lips meet hers. She lets out a sound as your tongue flickers across. You feel her grab your hair so you embrace her back, running one hand up to the back of her head, angling her to kiss you more deeply. Your tongues touch and she grasps your breast. This is all moving so quickly but you feel the excitement, the heat, and you pull her into your growing erection as you reach around to cup her butt. There are moans and heavy breaths and you kiss and kiss until you can’t anymore, so you break off to bite her neck, gentle at first, but you’ll listen to how she responds.

She responds with a broken whisper:

“Please stop.”

The words don’t register at first—stop biting? stop pulling?—but then her moans reframe themselves as quiet sobs. You let go and see the tears on her face.

“Oh my god; I’m so sorry,” you say. “I thought—”

“No, I know,” she says, gulping back her sobs. “This has happened before: ‘looks like little Linda has let her guard down again!’” She puts on a voice as she says this and blurts out an eerie cackle, wet with mucus and tears. “I’m only visiting, so you won’t have to see me again.”

“But it’s not—” you start, but she’s already leaving, waving to you as she crosses the street.

She turns the corner towards Eunice’s house.

What have you done?

Seventeen

You steal Elijah's hair clipper when you get home. You turn it on, feel it in your hand, and stare in the bathroom mirror. You're not cut out for womanhood. You abuse the trust real women place in you; you invade their spaces; you disrespect them both cis and trans alike. If you keep pretending, you'll only prove the TERFs right.

The first of your hair falls—a bold stroke above your right ear.

The idea of ever attending the women's group again leaves your mind.

Another stroke—more hair floating to the floor.

Eunice and Maya would be worse for being friends with you. You let them fade.

The clippers cut right down the centre.

You thought this would be hard, that there would be tears, but as you lose your hair, you lose your feeling, and it gets easier to accept what you are.

Once more across your head and it's almost all gone now.

The sight in the mirror is distinctly a man. He looks like some military goon, someone who believes that everyone gets hurt and uses this to justify his own abuses and the abuses committed against him. It's comforting.

The clippers buzz up against your left ear.

And there's no more Tulip.

Eighteen

The transition to Bradley full-time is natural. You just stop caring. You let go of all that anxious crap. It would feel great, but it doesn't really feel like much at all.

There are moments where something pierces through your increasingly thick skin though, but you try to numb yourself to these. Your body feels wrong? You start going to the gym daily, grinding out heavy sets on the machines to beat it into submission. Someone at work takes the banter too far? You laugh it off; with the fat you've put on and the hair you've shaved off, you suppose you do look a bit like a human toe. You play into it; you laugh with them. Doc melts down a tub of ice-cream on the stove and you drink it through a funnel, doing some awful Mike Myers impression—“*git en mah behlleh*”—which generates a laugh all round, drowning out the voice of your dysphoria. And the best part is that no one reads you as female anymore, so there's no opportunities for a spark of euphoria to burn down the defences you've created. Not even your friends recognise you on the street; they just assume you're another creep leering at obviously queer women, which you admit that you are.

You feel stronger by the day, and you feel safer as well, finally unconcerned about someone accosting you in public. It means you can dress how you want, act how you want, and people either won't notice or won't say anything, knowing that it's a losing battle to tell some towering lunkhead that they can see his ass crack or that his cock is a bit too big for him to get away with going commando—something you've been doing now that your underpants are all too small, unbothered to buy new ones. It's freeing.

Elijah was shocked at your new appearance, but then he figured that you're still going to the gym, and you seem to be socialising (at the pub with your coworkers—but he doesn't know that part) so there isn't much more he can encourage you to do. One day though, he's waiting for you in the kitchen when you return home, a few pints deep from an impromptu celebration of the new King, and the new PM, and everything else that's wrong with this fucking island.

“Oh thank god,” he says, rushing up to hug you; “I was worried when Case told me that you weren't at the women's group, and with how different you've been

acting lately I just thought..."

You're brought back to when he held you in the kitchen all those months ago, how you felt secure in his fatherly embrace, nothing like now: clingy and hysterical. You gently force him away.

"I didn't even remember, gotta be honest."

Elijah makes a sound of confusion; he doesn't know how to reply, so he says what he was going to say anyway: "Eunice was really worried about you; Maya was Maya but you should tell Eunice you're okay."

You roll your eyes. Eunice probably wants to talk to you about Linda, but what is there to say? She led you on; she even admitted that she did. You're a guy and she teased you and she took you out alone and got close to you and baited you into kissing her, only getting upset when she realised she didn't want it. Your only transgression was pretending that you were a girl like her, but everyone else at the group saw through it; she should try to be less nice, toughen up, realise that the world is a dark place and we have to fend for ourselves—at least, that's the party line you came up with after a week of sleepless nights.

Elijah can't bear the silence and asks, "Why didn't you go, really?"

"I didn't remember—really."

"Well why didn't you remember?" He throws his arms in the air as he says this, almost shouting.

You squint at him as if you're not sure what he means. But you do know what he means, and you just want him on the back foot. He needs to lay off. You say, "It's a women's group. It's not for me."

"Tulip, what—"

"Bradley."

He doesn't move, face frozen mid-sentence.

"I'm going by Bradley now, again," you explain, with a nonchalant shrug that betrays a sudden surge of emotion—you're really having to perform now.

"Okay. I think I'll need a day to process that but like," he says, "like—okay: this is super weird and I'm worried and I'm angry and I really liked where our friendship was going but everything has changed—again—and I'm going to have to re-adjust to all this new stuff. What happened?"

"I'm not a woman," you shout; "nothing happened."

"Don't you fucking raise your voice," Elijah says with such dry conviction that you drop your gaze to the floor.

You both stand and stare away from each other in silence. Your head is cluttered with so many strands of thought that you can't pick any one out, and before they can fade, Elijah speaks again:

"Let's go to your room."

You don't want to, but you follow.

In your room you sit on your bed, only now realising the embarrassing magnitude of cum tissues that clutter the floor, but Elijah pays it no mind as he walks to your closet. You've been leaving your clothes strewn about the room, so

the closet hasn't been touched for a while, laced with cobwebs like the doors to a crypt. When Elijah pulls it open, all you can see is your red dress.

"How does this make you feel?" You note that he doesn't say your name.

"It makes me feel really, really bad."

"What about it makes you feel bad?"

"It's a broken promise."

"How so?"

You know he knows, but you also know he wants you to say it. So you say it: "It's the promise that I could be a woman, that I could be beautiful and expressive, that I could love as a woman—be loved as a woman—and love in the way that women love each other, with understanding and empathy and balance: two sides of the same axe."

You smile at that—some part of her is still in there. Elijah smiles too.

"Most people who detransition do so only temporarily, while the circumstances aren't right to make transition viable," he says, sitting next to you. "I respect that this is who you need to be right now, but Tulip is still here, waiting." You're both looking at the dress, not so much as glancing at each other. "I don't want you to do anything differently; I just want you to know that she was real, and she mattered, and she can bloom again."

It hurts too much to reply, so Elijah leaves you alone in the room. You can't make it through the day, even through the night, believing that there's another way, so you shut the closet and open up your laptop. But before you let yourself get horny and numb and shielded from yourself, you allow yourself a vision of hope. You'll have your hormones; you'll see your friends; the dress will fit.

Nineteen

“So you’re okay for them to come over?”

“For the last time, Bradley, yes,” Elijah replies, emphasising your name to confirm that he’s absolutely not to call you Tulip around your coworkers. He tries not to do it anyway, but sometimes it slips out.

It’s Halloween and your coworkers have bartered their way into an invite to your annual household viewing of Alexandra’s favourite horror movie: Terminator 2. You and Elijah both had tried to convince her to watch something else and that Terminator was the horror movie while the sequel is just an action thriller, but now that she’s gone there’s nothing you’d rather see. Damien is bringing beer; Rover is bringing beer; Doc is not allowed to bring anything, which was a laughing matter for a while until Damien suddenly got very serious about it. Elijah is more interested than excited to meet them all, but you’re somewhat dulled to the whole thing. The only thing you care about is not pissing off the guy who pays half your rent—he’s also your only remaining trans friend, but you try not to think about that.

You had informed your coworkers of this on the day you finally caved to their demands for an invite.

“Doesn’t he mind you calling him a trans man?” Doc had asked.

You didn’t really understand what this meant, but Damien had you covered.

“He’s a woman who thinks he’s a man,” he explained, too used to making transmisogynistic remarks to realise he got the pronouns right.

“Yes. But also please don’t say stuff like that when you’re there,” you said, reiterating your plea to not make your home life difficult.

They had assured you that they wouldn’t—at least, not while he was in the room. They seemed more curious than anything about encountering a trans man. They knew what trans women looked liked, of course—either bombshells that happened to have a dick or overweight perverts in ill fitting skirts—but they hadn’t received any cultural input on how trans men look. All this did was make you curious as well about their reaction, and you sold the idea to Elijah as an educational experience for them, that if they met a trans person who wanted to be

more, rather than less, like them and their gender, they'd start to think about it all in a new way.

You only kind of believed this, as did Elijah, but both of you want to fuel the hope within you, even if it's shuttered off most of the time, so they're coming over and you're all going to watch Terminator 2 together. Fuck.

They arrive together, dressed in button up shirts and nice jeans for some godforsaken reason. You're in a graphic t-shirt and sweats and that's it—no socks and no underpants. Elijah comes down from his room to meet them; he's dressed in a rabbit onesie.

"I thought we were doing costumes," he says.

"No," says Damien, laughing like it's his party and he set the rules and Elijah's the one being weird.

Though you don't think that costumes were ever mentioned, to be fair.

Elijah takes the hood down to reveal his boyish, stubbly face—not quite as stubbly as yours is now, but he's been growing it out since the day you mentioned they wanted to come. He sticks out his hand and introduces himself: "Hi! I'm Elijah; I use he/him pronouns; and my favourite horror movie is Get Out."

Fuck. Oh fuck. Elijah gives you the slightest side eye as he says this, letting you know that he knows how much he's fucking with you, but he also said he/him rather than his usual he/they, so he's at least trying to get on—you have no idea if your coworkers even know about non-binary identities; all you know is now is not the time to discuss it.

Damien takes the waiting hand and says, "Damien; he as well; and Silence Of The Lambs."

Elijah glances at you again when you laugh at Damien's shitty joke, but then he grins something wicked and you can see their hands clench around each other.

Rover breaks the tension when he says, "Gotta be The Exorcist for me—all time classic." There's a pause, then: "Oh and uh, he's Rover," he says, throwing his thumbs up towards himself.

"Hi, I'm Doc; I use he/him pronouns; and my favourite horror film is Paranormal Activity. I saw it in the cinema and when I got home I actually swear my house was haunted; I wouldn't even get the DVD because there were reports that it was making people's TVs go all weird."

Damien breaks the handshake to make some bizarre, personal hand gesture to Doc, and then everyone turns to you.

"Hi," you start, in your most dulled, deep voice; "I'm Bradley; it's he/him; and probably Rosemary's Baby? But fuck Polanski."

"Excellent choice, my friend," says Rover, pushing his way past you into your home.

The others follow suit, spilling into the living room and finding spots to sit, leaving the loveseat for you and Elijah. You stand with him in the doorway for the briefest of moments before you proceed. There's not quite enough space on the

loveseat for you both, now that you've gained weight, so Elijah decides to sit across your lap, to some chuckles from your coworkers.

"What?" he asks. "Afraid of some male on male platonic intimacy?"

Elijah calling you male stings, even if that's how you think of yourself now, but you know that he has to assert that that's what he is to these people. You'd think it brave if you didn't just want to avoid conflict.

"Not if the man is as pretty as you," Damien says, leering over at you both.

Elijah forces an intentionally fake giggle and flicks his hand with the limpest of wrists. "Thank you," he says, raising his voice by an octave.

You have no idea what is happening right now and start the movie without asking anyone if they're ready. Rover tears open the case of beer you bought and you cringe, embarrassed by how much you paid for it as if you alone were being ripped off by this economic crash. He tosses one to you and you intend to savour it, but by the time the opening credits have rolled, you motion for another. But the film has gotten going, and as your coworkers actually begin to pay attention, you realise this is going to be a boring night—you want to skip to the end.

The night is indeed boring as your coworkers are too enamoured by the film to talk over it, presumably not having seen it a dozen times over the past four years. You drink more beer; you whisper back and forth with Elijah about irrelevant shit—how was your last workout? are we gonna be okay if our bills increase?—until Doc whispers for you to shush; you pay attention to the bits of the film you like, mainly the effects and sweaty Linda Hamilton.

Elijah adjusts to get comfortable while the kid teaches the old Terminator a catchphrase and you notice his weight shifting and rubbing over your penis. From that point, that's all you can think about, acutely aware of his ass right on you, his pussy barely an inch away. You try to refocus, but you start to get hard, and that makes the sensations even more present in your mind.

Elijah gives you a look when he feels you pressing into his thigh. You just flash an apologetic grimace: spontaneous erections come with the territory. You figure that the men he usually expresses this type of male on male platonic intimacy with don't have the equipment for this to be a problem, and you figure that he understands that too, giving you an inexplicable thumbs up and turning back towards the film. You'd say you need to use the toilet to give you a chance to change seats or go soft or something, but you know that standing up would reveal your predicament to the whole room, which is not a desirable outcome. Thankfully, Elijah gets a text and breathes a sigh of relief.

"Case just asked if I'm up for an impromptu party at xyrs," he whispers to you, careful that your coworkers don't hear the neopronoun.

"You should go," you say, which you realise sounds mean, but wasn't meant to be taken as such.

He just replies, "Thanks," and slips out through the door, unnoticed by anyone but you.

Your boner flops over in peace and you lean back in the chair, finally able to really relax with the guys.

“Where’s Elijah?” Damien asks as the credits roll.

“His girlfriend wanted to do something so he headed out,” you say, stretching out your limbs. There’s a good buzz going in your head; together, you’ve finished both yours and Rover’s cases of craft beer, and are now onto Damien’s case of Heineken, which—fuck that shit, you giggle to yourself, but drinking is drinking.

“What’s she got?” Damien asks for the second time, seemingly, twisting the armchair he’s sat in round to face you better, looking across Rover and Doc sat on the couch between you.

“*Huh?*”

“Is she a tranny? Do trannies all just date each other since no one else will?” he says. The slur is so normalised at work that you don’t even feel anything about it, other than relief that Elijah isn’t here.

“I don’t actually know, but yeah, they do” you say, remembering Maya and Ruth and all their friends who wanted no part of you. “Yeah, like: it’s just easier—you know?—for them to date people who understand them.”

There’s a lot to say about violence and personhood and sex but the buzz in your head feels better than trying to be comprehensive. It doesn’t even matter; those people aren’t your friends and they let you go.

“What’s there to understand?” asks Rover.

“Well,” replies Damien, “transsexualism can be very complex and stem from a number of childhood traumas, parental neglect, grooming, or it can be an insidious way that men who have failed as men try to succeed as a woman, in their sports for example—as if anyone watches them.”

“No,” you say. You disagree, obviously, but you’re drunk and you’re bitter and the disagreement that comes out is not what you expect. “Rover’s right: what is there to understand? Some people think they’re men and some people think they’re women and sometimes they’re right and sometimes they’re wrong.” It’s self hatred that drips out of your mouth, but your coworkers don’t take it that way.

“You meet many trannies then, living with Elijah?” Damien asks.

“Too many,” you laugh.

“Sounds fun,” says Doc.

“No—just,” you say, trying to find the words to describe the years you spent as a woman, all that time amounting to nothing, “no, it’s just boring. None of them have a sense of humour: all jokes you’ve already seen on Twitter or Tumblr or something and the only way to make them laugh is to repeat a joke they’ve already seen because that’s how they know it’s acceptable. And the conversations—fuck—the chat is always so tepid and sensitive unless they’ve decided that you’ve crossed some inexplicable line, and then they’ll let you have it but you can never

respond in kind. It's fucking ridiculous how many social rules they assume you're aware of considering how many of them are autistic, which also means that when you break one they throw some fucking tantrum and won't even engage with your side of things. It's the most boring, walking-on-eggshells bullshit of your life, and the best part is that no one really sees them as women or else they wouldn't all date each other—people just try to be polite.”

Your coworkers look at each other, excited to have elicited this outburst from you. It felt good, and it feels good to take in their excitement—finally, people want you to be as crass and passionate as they are, rather than thinking they're allowed to shout because they're small and weak and you're not because you're big and scary. Fuck that.

“Why are you living with Elijah then?” Damien asks, eager to bring out another rant from you.

You suddenly realise that if you explain the situation, you'll get called a cuck for the rest of your time working with them, so you say, “He was my girlfriend's friend who moved in with us when we moved in here to make it more affordable.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Ex.” You figure that if the videos telling you that she loves you are publicly available and directed to every person who can pay for them, that doesn't really count as romance.

“Was she a tranny?” asks Damien again, sharpening his gaze.

“God, no,” you reply. “She was perfect.” They all look at you to elaborate, but what is there to say that wouldn't give it all away? You come out with, “Until she packed up and left out of nowhere—fucking crazy. They all turn out to be psychos sooner or later.”

This gets a laugh from everyone except Doc, who is still looking at you with unnerving intensity.

“You ever sleep with one?” he asks.

“A tranny?” you say, rushing through your memory: men? yes; women? yes; transsexuals? not any that were out at the time at least. “No. Can you imagine though?” You use your female voice for the first time in months. “Oh my God, Bradley, I want to have sex with you so bad but first I need you to sign this consent form to read my list of turn ons and turn offs, please ask your parent or legal guardian.” They laugh; you continue: “Oh my God, Bradley, you're so sexy and that's getting me hard in my panties and that makes me realise I'm a man so it's basically rape.” They laugh harder; you go for a third time, loving how ignorant you get to be, how it doesn't matter what your target would actually say because who cares what some tranny thinks. “Oh my God, Bradley, why aren't you hard? Is my hairy, dirty asshole not as good as a real woman's perfect, pink pussy? I can't believe you're so transphobically unattracted to me.”

It hits you that that was the best you've ever done it—the voice. All the years of vocal training and exercises and practice came together in one heated moment of pain and passion and you spoke in the voice you always dreamed of having. The

satisfaction of achieving that outweighs the satisfaction of their laughter.

“Holy shit,” laughs Damien, wiping away tears, “you do the perfect tranny voice—even better than mine.”

You laugh—hard. Fuck these feelings. Even your dream voice doesn’t sound like a real woman: how funny is that?

“Did your ex leave any clothes? You could do a full tranny impression,” Doc says, leering at you.

“Okay, well, try to be less of a creep, Doc,” says Damien, getting a bit more serious in tone with the resident pervert. “But actually that sounds like it could be hilarious.”

“Well,” you say, your stomach knotting up, “there’s one dress.”

You want to do this properly but there’s only so much time. You apply eyeliner evenly enough and the mascara doesn’t clump. Elijah’s electric razor feels fine on your damp face, but you’ve always preferred cartridge razors for a closer shave so you don’t exactly know what you’re doing. The stubble kind of disappears though, and you apply your blood red lipstick, of course, and some sparkles across your cheeks will hopefully distract their eyes from the remnants of your facial hair.

“One more minute,” you yell down the stairs as you hop from the bathroom to your bedroom.

You open the closet and there she is. Your beautiful red dress remains pristine and shining and hopeful. You sway with drunkenness as you untangle yourself from these ugly masculine clothes you’ve been wearing and reach out for a pair of panties hidden above the rack. Something comes over you as you slip them on; it’s been so long that it feels like your first time experiencing the soft, snug fabric against your legs and butt and girldick—so distinctly a girldick tucked away in them, bulging demurely in the pink fabric—and you begin to believe again. Maybe this will change their minds. Maybe you can show them what a trans woman really looks like. The emotional tension of this evening has snapped and here you are: vulnerable and drunk and ready to be yourself. They aren’t expecting this, you, the dress.

With tremendous effort, you pull it on.

“Hi! My name is Tulip Turner; I use she/her pronouns; and my favourite horror movie is *Fire Walk With Me* because I too am being haunted by a man who wants to possess my body.”

Your voice, your appearance, your everything stuns the three men staring at you as you enter the living room. You feel like an angel, your dress of fire purifying your coworkers, showing them the light of nonconformity, the freedom and playfulness and joy of gender. You twirl and your dress spins and the room spins with you and you’re never going back. You—

“You look like fucking clown,” Damien laughs, breaking the silent reverie with guffaws of appreciation for how perfectly you’ve humiliated yourself and

lampooned your sisters. “Holy shit: Tulip Turner, that’s perfect. You’re Tutu the clown.”

Rover joins in too but it sounds distant, cold. This is actually it, you realise as you glance at yourself in the black reflection of the television. You see a big guy stuffed into a dress a few sizes too small, seams bulging in all the wrong places: no hips, no breasts, all tummy and shoulders and neck. Your now uneven stubble tracks down to where it meets your chest hair, curling out of the top, creating this bizarro clash of textures that’s only diminished by how fucked up your face looks—overly stylised eyes on the head of a greasy, buzz-cut goon. The pain you feel extends back through every memory, reshaping you into what you see now, an image never to be drawn over, hideous and permanent. And then something cracks, and the pain stops, and you breathe out.

This is so fucking funny.

You want to put on a show for Damien and Rover, still laughing at your Halloween drag act, so you approach Doc, sitting on the couch with a gaping mouth and a visible erection.

“*Oooh*, Daddy,” you say, amping up your tranny voice as grating as you can get it, “does little Tutu get you excited?”

Damien and Rover are doubled over at this, gasping for breath, but Doc only nods and a bit of drool drips from his lips.

“Well, you get Tutu hard too,” you say with the most fake innocent giggle.

You flash him your “girlbulge,” which is really just a hairy, manly penis stuffed into too tight panties, and you laugh at him as he gasps at the sight. This is hilarious; you don’t know how you ever believed people weren’t just being polite to you when they called you a trans woman—why Alexandra called it a girldick, as if that’s not some ridiculous oxymoron. You think of all the other men deluding themselves too at the women’s group, how they’ve created this hugbox cult of affirmation, telling each other that anatomy doesn’t matter, as if injecting yourself with drugs bought online is the same in some bullshit metaphysical sense as having a period. Womanhood is what’s not between your legs, boys.

“I didn’t know Doc was this much of a faggot,” you say, turning back to Damien and Rover, wiping tears from their eyes.

Rover responds, “Don’t get him too excited now or you might find out why he’s called Doc.”

Damien shoots him a glare, which almost immediately melts into uncaring laughter. He explains, “There was a girl at a party and he ‘prescribed’ her a pill—in his own words—but thankfully it was too strong because he’s a fucking moron, so she just got sick and he had to leave her alone.”

“*Aw*,” you coo at the wannabe rapist before you, “was someone thinking with his dick? Here: let Tutu help with that,” and you stomp on his crotch.

He doubles over on the couch and the two men behind you bellow out in laughter again. You feel immense pride, that even as drunk as you are and as wild as you’ve been, you still managed to do the right thing.

How dare he look at you, another man, like that?

You just want to help his confused pervert mind learn the difference between men and women.

The rape thing doesn't bother you since men naturally can't control their urges—you'd know! You help him up to his feet and give him a pat on the back, man to man, and guide him towards Damien and Rover, who hold him up to see the final act in your little show.

You are covered in your mistakes. How did you ever believe you could be a woman? This is ridiculous; you look ridiculous. Real women need better protection from people like you, creeps who want an easy way into their pants. And you can admit that's what you are, creeping into the women's group because what's hotter than a dyke who thinks she doesn't want cock. But you know they do; you know that's why they let trannies in, to get cock guilt free. Maybe there are a couple real lesbians here and there who really do only like pussy, but most of them are faking it just like you were—trying to find a way to be special because of some inadequacy; letting themselves find a group of other losers to be friends with so they don't feel so bad. Being around men who know that they're men has given you such respect for even the dregs of them, far above the perverts you used to hang out with; even Doc, a failed rapist, can hold down a job and make his own rent and doesn't spend most of his time lying in bed because of issues with "executive dysfunction," unlike Maya or Eunice or any of the failures you used to know. You'd take him over any of them, now that you've realised how pathetic this whole gender ideology really is.

You flex your muscles and that's all it takes. The dress tears into pieces and falls onto the floor. Your coworkers applaud and you bow, proud to be a man.

Twenty

You wake up nude on your bed, shivering from the growing cold, Alexandra's latest video paused at the end. You've got morning wood so you heat yourself by masturbating to it again, unplugging your headphones and turning the volume up since you can't be fucked with that in the morning. As you come to her being slapped with her boyfriend's cock, you feel grateful to be a man—to have this daily reminder that you have a huge fucking cock and he wants you to get off.

Elijah seems disconcerted already in the kitchen but becomes even more weirded out when you walk in naked. His gaze travels towards your manhood, swaying between your legs, and you grin, knowing that the image will stay in his head forever, teasing him. You're pretty sure this is the first time he's seen it.

"Look: what the fuck is going on?" he says, putting down his coffee in a way that betrays his hangover. "I saw your dress in the living room."

"I'm done," you say. "I'm over it. I'm not trans; I don't think I was ever trans. If anything, this whole experience has been good for me."

Elijah doesn't know what to say, evidently. He picks his coffee back up, sips, puts it back down, stares at it, picks it back up, and then puts it down again without sipping. You pour a bowl of cereal while he does all this a couple of times, just waiting for him to come out with some dumb shit to try to drag you back.

"Being trans... Transition is hard."

And there it is!

You say, "My transition was hard because it wasn't real. Everyone I knew would affirm that I was a woman even though I didn't have periods—couldn't give birth—and that made me feel so broken. What was I as a woman? Just some rich bitch's pet who got to be dressed up and given her happy pills and didn't have to think about anything. The pain of never amounting to more than that, never truly achieving womanhood, was so much worse when I was pushed up against it, spending time with all these women who convinced me I was one of them, but defective. Being Bradley is liberating."

Elijah is quick with his reply this time: "What? Firstly, many cis women can't give birth; are you saying they aren't really women? Secondly, liberating from

what? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Are you really using disabled cis women as a rhetorical tool to invalidate the way I’m expressing my struggle with gender?” That feminist is still within you, locked up in the basement of your mind, only to be used when you need to win an argument. “And I have liberation from this gender ideology that seeks to control not only who we are, but who we want to be, as soon as we feel like we’re not manly enough or not womanly enough or just don’t fit in with our peers. It feels good to finally be myself.”

“Don’t you feel dysphoric?” Elijah asks as the anger drains from his face, replaced by sombre horror.

“What do you mean dysphoric?” It’s a rhetorical question, but you wait long enough that he starts to reply before cutting him off. “I would rather be a real woman than a man, sure, but I’d rather be a success of a man than a failure of a woman, which is all I can achieve. I can’t give birth, but I can fuck a baby into someone else, and my body is built for that—it wants that—and when I get to it, I know I’ll feel good because I’m actually being myself, a man. These feelings right now are just the vestige of all the bullshit I’ve been fed these last however many years.”

“I—” Elijah starts. He pauses and sips his coffee again, trying to formulate something personal that you can’t warp into part of your own argument. “I know how you feel: I can’t fuck a baby into someone else, only give birth. And that’s something that I wish I could do so, so badly, but that doesn’t mean I’ve failed as a man. There are ways around it: strap-ons that shoot out donor cum; being part of the scene as someone with a penis fucks the birthing partner.” He sits down across from you, and reaches his hand out. Even with everything you’ve said this morning, he still wants to help. “It’s hard, but giving up isn’t the solution.”

“You think this is easy,” you say; “you think this is giving up?”

Elijah starts to rephrase that but you get up and leave the kitchen before he’s able.

How dare he think that? You’ve struggled so much to get back to being Bradley, but he thinks he’s got it hard? He’s a feminist, so why doesn’t he realise that being a man is the easy option for him? If men really have all the power, like you used to think, then surely his female-to-male transition is the easiest thing in the world. It must be seductive to give up your womanhood for a fleeting grasp of being male. He’s even convinced himself that he’d feel happy filling someone else up with cum, as if that wouldn’t make him feel even more “dysphoric,” which is really just what happens when your body is on the wrong side of something—when his body knows it should be the one getting fucked.

And the gall of it all! Not once has he actually shown support for you being Bradley, always trying to bring you back to that scared, sorry woman you pretended to be. He’s amped up on testosterone and having a power trip because he thinks he’s strong—but he would get that impression only hanging out with

other failed men and failed women. Once you start hanging out with regular people you realise how ridiculous all of these queers look and sound and it makes you embarrassed to think that you ever valued not being normal, as if normal people weren't competent, hardworking, and not the dumbest, whiniest bitches like those at the queer group.

You can help him, though. You need to get him off this ego trip, out of this cult that's making him feel inadequate, and off the drugs that are destroying his body. You'll do for him what nobody did for you.

Maybe you can become even more of a man while you're at it.

Twenty-One

Elijah keeps his testosterone kit in his bedroom, so you've waited until the next Queer Men's Group and now you're searching through his drawers.

And there it is: needles, swabs, small glass ampoules of testosterone. You know that Elijah has a private endocrinologist, but he does all the blood work through his GP and you can just intercept that when it arrives at home, blaming underfunded and overworked NHS staff for it not arriving. You unpack and dutifully swap the labels of his Sustanon and the ampoules of progesterone you bought online; Inhouse Pharmacy has been so reliable, both through yours and Elijah's transitions to womanhood. You put the progesterone in his kit box, and you take the T with you. It returns to his drawer exactly as he left it.

In your room, you fill up your own needle and pull your trousers down. There's a sting as it slides into your leg, but as you press the plunger, you get this rush of power, control, and everything you hate about yourself—your body—becomes something you can inflict on someone else. You're going to show Elijah what a real man looks like, and you grunt something violent and guttural as you finish the shot, the first of many.

Gender euphoria.

Part Two

One

“It’s hard,” you continue, “but giving up isn’t the solution.”

Bradley doesn’t make any sudden movements or flail his limbs at you, the violence is all in the tone of his voice as he says, “You think this is easy? You think this is giving up?”

Sitting across the table from him, you realise you’ve maybe fucked this.

You reconsider, rephrase: “Sorry, I meant ‘giving up’ in the sense of—” but he gets up and goes. And you’re alone in the kitchen as the person who has grown into your closest friend quietly and quickly shuts the door.

Nice one, Elijah.

Two

You work at a queer café. People who aren't queer ask you what exactly distinguishes a queer café from a straight café; some of them even make jokes about frappuccinos or some other faggy drink. You don't have these conversations very often as you don't hang out with people who aren't queer, as a rule, but when you do, you either begin a lecture on whether or not a business really can be meaningfully queer, or you answer along the lines of "gender neutral toilets and not saying sir or ma'am," depending on your spoons. But really, if someone comes here, they always admit that the café is queer.

You stand behind the counter, eyeing the clock opposite on a cork-board wall of homemade flyers and infographics and general rainbow-centric artwork. You were more into the aesthetic when you first started working here, but after a few years it wears off. Your workwear is a black apron and plain clothes, and aside from your "he/they" pronoun badge, you don't fit into the crowd of patrons still loitering about: the pastel goth couple in the corner; the tender lesbians in dungarees cuddling and sipping at their tea; a gaggle of chic trans women dutifully discussing the latest Contrapoints video as you used to do, before you realised that reading a real essay might be a more informative use of two hours. Still, these are your people, you suppose, even if you occasionally overhear a stray comment about "the cis guy working the counter," which you found funny and euphoric when those sorts of remarks started, but you now find grating—who are these strangers making use of your labour to assume what's in your pants?

Whatever. The clock strikes 6pm and you duck out of your apron and say goodbye to Kelly, who's closing up tonight. Kelly is an ambivalent, angry, stout little lesbian who cofounded the café. She explodes whenever some queerphobic asshole decides that here would be good to film some right-wing viral content, but aside from that, she almost always does not give a shit about anything that anyone says or does—neither their achievements nor their problems. But she knows you've got the Queer Men's Group soon, and she tries to make adjustments for her staff.

You smile as you leave, knowing that Case will meet you at the group, and you

turn your thoughts to the climatic overture of the season. November carries a sense of apocalypse: you arrive at work before sunrise; you leave after sunset; you hunch your shoulders and tighten your jacket against the damp wind which seeps past your defences anyway. Your home is filled with a similar chill, Bradley no longer on speaking terms with you seemingly, though he's around so little that it's hardly obvious. At least rent is getting paid.

But you turn your thoughts to the Queer Men's Group, to Case, to another night of affirming your queerness, which is so much harder now you're not a stone butch dyke but a straight man—trans admittedly, but you pass so well that people only see the 'man' part. Dating Case though, you've taken some of xyr queerness on loan; how could you not be queer dating a genderfluid neopronounced cybergoth? For what it's worth, you can't get excited by fucking xem when xe comes over and says it's a xe/he day, and that usually results in a long discussion about identity and sexuality and how bodies alone aren't hot but the significance we attach to them, the way we frame them, but the discussions always are abstract and critical as you try to emulate the types of things that gender theorists say without having the time to actually read any of them anymore. At least you two communicate, unlike Alexandra.

"Hi! My name is Elijah; I use he/they pronouns; and my favourite dog breed is Alsatian?" You look around as you say this, unsure on why "favourite dog breed" was selected as today's third thing, and also unsure on what an Alsatian actually is—you just said the first thing that came to mind.

Case gives xyr answer, sitting next to you, and then the discussion begins.

You've heard from Case that the women's group is much larger and as such, more tightly focussed in terms of topic. There's a triad of non-binary men across from you, and then a cis gay guy sat by himself. The organiser is an older trans man, but much more obviously queer than yourself, all camp and limp in the wrists. You know there are more queer men than this in your little city, but the cis ones tend not to see this sort of support group as something they need and the trans ones tend to congregate at the lesbian group or the separately organised Women & Marginal Identities Network, finding something distasteful about being a man outright. You do too, you suppose, noting the vestigial "/they" in your pronouns—unused by all, including yourself.

"I'd like to talk about the intersection of queerness and maleness today," you say to the group, waiting for the silence to become just the slightest bit uncomfortable.

"Well," Malcolm, the organiser, says, "this is the Queer Men's Group, so go ahead."

"Okay." You compile your thoughts and everyone waits politely; you tend to start speaking and hope your mouth knows where to go, but this time you struggle on slowly, still reeling from mishandling Bradley. "It feels, to me, very difficult to access queerness as a traditionally masculine man, such as myself. My

housemate, she—or, *uh*, he—has recently transitioned, or detransitioned, back to being a man—or to being a man for the first time, if you believe that you were always the gender you end up as. But in that case I guess she'd still be going back to being a man, or realising she was always a man. Sorry: he.” Everyone else at the group mostly looks bored; Case gives you a sweet little nod, urging you forward to form whatever point it is you might be trying to make. “Okay, what I mean is that she shaved her head and she grew some stubble and she started going to the gym—with me, mind—and in a couple of months she's more manly than I've ever looked. And I don't know why I care; it's not like anyone is misgendering me, even strangers, but I still feel threatened, or just like, belittled by her presence.”

“His,” Case reminds you.

“Yeah, his,” you repeat.

“What does this have to do with accessing queerness?” Kelsey, the cis gay, asks after a moment of pause. He's a sweet guy, and the comment is more to help you along rather than to criticise.

“Right. I want to be part of this community of queer people, and I want to be a man, and it feels like those two things are at odds sometimes. I've seen Bradley's gender change as soon as... he... lost someone who acted as his reference point for womanhood—someone he was entangled with in a categorically female way—and I just feel weird and scared now that I've lost my housemate and my girlfriend as reference points for which my maleness existed in opposition. The solution, probably, is the acceptance of wholesale queerness as a rejection of what gender means entirely, but all the stuff that people think of as queer exists at the overlap between childish and feminine: pastel colours; rainbows; dungarees. And that's not me, anymore.”

No one takes offence to this assessment. The non-binary triad are all checking their phones, and Kelsey nods towards the floor. Even Case sits in silence, eyes to the ceiling in thought. Only Malcolm pipes up:

“What's changed to make you not enjoy feminine things? I think we'd all agree here that you can be feminine while still being a man.”

“I think I just found someone who made it okay to be unashamedly masculine and assured in that masculinity. Alexandra was so into me being tough and taking the lead; she even liked it when I got loud and worked up, because she had such trust in me that I could be my kind of platonic ideal of a man without reproach, which most queer circles seem to admonish—or the more kind of tender, cuddly queer circles rather than some gay male communities, which are clearly super into that type of thing,” you add, addressing Kelsey who had started to make sounds indicating he had a counter point. He quiets himself, looking at you expectantly, and you say, “But I'm straight, so right now I exist between queer people, rather than as one of them.”

“You still miss Alexandra that much, *huh?*”

Case and you are sitting at xyr table. Xe has a cute flat that's only a slight detour on the way home to yours. It's positioned within a huge block that requires using a key fob multiple times to even get to xyr front door. This is the first thing spoken between you since the meeting.

"I was dating her for years, Case," you say, reaching across to take xyr hand.

Xe accepts the offer and gently cups yours. Xyr bright blue nails distract you as they so lightly scratch against your skin. Xe says, "You're trying to force a ghost into me; I'm being possessed."

This is spoken with such utter seriousness that you both immediately laugh.

"I'm sorry," you say, after the giggles subside, "but you're different. And that's good, but it's also complicated. I always knew where and who I was with Alexandra, but you shift and you shimmer and you skate around all our mortal notions of gender, and I love you for that, but it also feels like you want me to have that same sense of freedom, but I like knowing who I am."

Case looks up with a fumbling smile.

"You love me?" xe say.

You realise you haven't told xem that before.

"I love you," you reply.

"And just when I wanted to have a conversation about how things aren't really working," Xe laughs at your pained expression and looks at your hands twisted and tangled together. "I love you too. I thought we should discuss my gender flux fuckery and how half the time you don't want to so much as lay a kiss on my bestubbled cheek, but I realise it's something you're struggling with too. So give me some time to process and we can venture back into it all later?"

"Thanks. That sounds good."

You bonk xyr head with your head in lieu of a kiss on their stubbly cheek on your way out. For what it's worth, maybe xe has a point.

Three

The days after you say you love Case are taut, and you're unsure of when xe is going to pop a serious discussion on you about gender and sexuality and the future of your relationship. Not that you're ever adverse to hard discussions, but more that you're waiting for Case to initiate—and really you prefer to be the one starting them, if you're honest. You do love xem; you love xem so much that you stay awake at night thinking about how crap of you it is that you struggle to show xem affection when xyr a demi-boy, rather than a demi-girl. It's just that you like girls. You love women. You love the difference, the contrast, between the soft curvature of the female form and your own rigid masculinity. While you can admire another man's body, you don't get that same rush which comes with crossing that divide between genders. But there's more to it than that, and that's the part you have to think about with Case that you never had to think about with Alexandra, who you'd put in her place on her knees as a woman, and by the same hand, looking up at you with those bright, wet eyes, she'd put you in your place above her as a man.

Case doesn't dig that sexist stuff though, and you're so fixated on trying to figure out how to explain it differently that you blank Bradley when he sits down in the kitchen with you, for the first time in a couple weeks.

"No apology." Whether it's a question or a statement is unclear, but you jolt to attention regardless.

You steel yourself and prepare the only reply you can think up: "Okay."

"Cool," he says, digging into his instant ramen with a fork. His build has gotten meatier all round since you last really spoke with him. It's equal parts fat and muscle, like there isn't really any definition to his body—head flowing into neck flowing into shoulders into great bulging arms, stretching the cuffs of his t-shirt—but it's clear that there's muscles under there, and a lot of it. He smells like a locker room, except without the Lynx. Maybe this is your way into talking with your best friend again.

"Gym going well, I see," you say, gesturing in his general direction and taking in now how his pecs are bigger than his breasts ever were.

He grins, teeth showing in the midst of his rough stubble, and says, “Yeah! Better than ever actually. I was thinking maybe we could go together again, sometime?”

“That would be fun,” you say. “Maybe we could even do it regularly? It’s been really crap not really seeing you for so long, especially when we’ve just had an argument, and I can’t help but feel that not having dedicated time where we hang out has prolonged the tension between us. I really care about you, Bradley, and I want things to get back to how well they were going just a few months ago.”

Bradley grimaces at this, seemingly taking offence to the idea that things were going well for him a few months ago, but before you can amend your statement with greater nuance, he replies, “I agree. That’s a good idea.”

He then glances at the clock and shovels down the rest of his... breakfast? You’re not actually sure. But he mumbles something about work and runs off, leaving his dirty bowl on the table, which shakes with each of his steps.

You received a text a few hours after that conversation with a list of Bradley’s gym times. He goes six days a week, seemingly doing some push/pull/legs split rather than the three day a week full body routine that keeps you making your slow and steady gains. You’ll see what it looks like in reality now though, as you sit in the men’s changing room with him, swapping out your dirty trainers for old converse you only use for weightlifting. You wish you could afford proper squat shoes, but the converse have served you well so far, you suppose.

Seeing Bradley in the men’s changing room is strange as the first time you brought him you made sure he got a key to a women’s locker, and you haven’t been in with him since then. He’s so much bigger than you. Usually you feel right at home here, amongst the other guys, your binder shifting your breasts into the form of slightly exaggerated pecs, which at most receive approving nods from other people training; that male-to-male gaze feels euphoric, but next to Bradley and his hulking frame, you look petite enough to be his girlfriend, and you’re afraid anyone who sees you will think you’re just that, at least until they see your stubble. It’s especially unnerving when Bradley stands up and faces you. His sweatpants, which used to be so baggy, are now practically leggings, and the outline of his manhood is so clearly present and level with your face. You glance up and take his outstretched hand, as if you need help off the bench. He’s feeling more confident, and that’s good, even if it generates some weird twisting inside your guts.

This is your first workout since your T shot a couple days ago, and usually this one feels the best—man juice working through your body; muscles swelling up; grunting and gasping with joyous rage as you grind out your last reps. You know it’s all psychosomatic, but it’s still a fun thought. Except this time Bradley is with you, and he’s stronger than you. And obviously he’s stronger than you, you think, on account of being bigger, but he’s joking around, coming up to your work set of squats and declaring “bar inspection!” before taking it off the rack and pressing it

over his head, staring at your shocked little face while he does it and telling you it “looks good to me!” before bringing it back down. You don’t manage all your squats, collapsing down against the safety bars on rep three of five during your last set, but Bradley sure manages his. God, he’s doing more than double your weight with ease. It’s not without effort—his face is red and his veins are popping out of his biceps and forehead and his shirt is mostly sweat patch—but the movements are fluid and strict. It’s a dedicated intensity you’ve witnessed before in him, back with Alexandra, doing the chores she set him and fixing himself up to be pretty for date night, completely enthralled in the gendered feelings of it all, but that never had this level of physical strain. And he does this six days a week? Fuck.

“I’m hype to do this again next week,” he says, high-fiving you after he racks the barbell.

“I am too,” you say, but you’re not. Hey—you catch yourself engaging with this pointless negativity. Bradley is your friend and you’re excited that he’s happy, even if it is obnoxious. And if you had a bad time that’s okay, because next time will be better. You’re just used to going alone. This was just an off day.

Four

It starts with cramps. It generally ends at cramps too, or at least it's always ended at cramps the entire time you've been on hormones. This time, it does not end at cramps. It continues to spotting, which you notice in a bathroom break at work. Strange. The queer café has free pads in its gender neutral toilet, obviously, so you put one in place and get on with your day. It's not comfortable and it reminds you of your own anatomy, which really should be a penis if there were any justice in this world. You scowl at a customer who asks you what your pronouns are, as if they know you're going through your most womanly time of the month and aren't getting unambiguously male vibes from you—or otherwise can't read your "he/they" badge. Kelly says she can close up tonight if you need, so you dash home right at 6pm and change out of your work clothes to find it hasn't stopped at spotting. That's a lot of blood. You threw out all your special period underwear when you downsized to move in here, and you don't stay stocked up on any prohibitively expensive sanitary products that you didn't think you needed, even if you recognised they'd be good to have in case of something like this. You've got a dish towel? You've got some kitchen roll? You sigh—you've got your phone.

Hey Bradley, can you grab me some sanitary pads?

Large.

Whatever brand.

Like for periods

Yes.

Np, will do On my way! Home

Five

You taste the sweat on Case's skin as you press your lips against her breasts. Xyr breasts. Well, it's a xe/she day, so she is fine. You usually use the first one people say since sometimes it's a preference thing, but like, "she" is still a valid pronoun. So it's fine. Yeah: "her breasts." Case almost notices your hesitation but you so gently bite her nipple and she leans back in anticipation of ecstasy.

You were upset and bored, holed up in your room and sulking through the second day of your period, when Case said she was coming over. Horny and hormonal, you wanted to ask what's the gender today, but you restrained yourself, remembering the last time you preemptively cancelled a quick sexy meet-up with Case on account of him being a boy at the time. Today, when she walked in with her homemade "xe/she" badge proudly displayed among a dozen others on her denim jacket, you threw your arms wide open and bit her tender neck as she pulled you into her embrace. There wasn't that much chat because what is there to chat about except sad dysphoria feelings—and what's sexy about those?

So you're here now: Case in your bed with no shirt; you on top of her with your clothes all still on. You kiss from nipple to nipple, laying your lips across the flat expanse of her chest between her tits, staring away from each other with that particular trans-feminine astigmatism. They are sexy, you think as you suck on her teat and tune out her strained moans to better hear your own thoughts, but yours are better. Yours are more defined and flow with, rather than against, the curves of your body, and honestly they're just bigger, even though Case is much bigger than you. And that stark difference is so noticeable now as you've forgone your binder on account of your own aching nipples, but at least Case is too enraptured in her own pleasure to really notice. She's been positive about your breasts before and that didn't end well—or, it didn't end sexily, but it did result in a long discussion about how that sort of body positivity is misplaced when it emphasises what you feel is at odds with your gender, and now Case gets it, sort of.

"Daddy?" she asks, "do you wanna kiss me?"

You realise you've been sucking on this one nipple in the same way for a while now. You let out a sultry *mhm* and attempt to be present with Case. Your lips meet

hers. Your tongue is in her mouth. Your hand is on her throat. You feel her moan as your fingers tighten. Push back and glimpse at that submissive, scared spark in her eyes. Another kiss. Lips on lips. Tongue on tongue. Stubble on stubble.

Okay so: it doesn't bother you that she hasn't shaved. You'd be an awful person if you let that get in the way of finding your girlfriend sexy. You're not just another man trying to control what women ought to look like, and you're especially not the kind to enforce cis-normative beauty standards on trans women, so you're not bothered. It is uncomfortable, both on your face and in that weirdly emotional space between your heart and your stomach, but you're not letting it bother you anymore, and Case hasn't even noticed you cringe.

You get back to it. The kiss feels slightly awkward now, even though you are fully unbothered, so you push back and cup Case's face. You press your thumb against her lips and she sucks it willingly, looking up at you with the whites around her eyes glimmering in the light.

"*Cunnufuhme-a-ee.*" Case's tongue presses all round your thumb as she tries to speak.

"*Hmm?*" You slip out of her mouth.

"Can you fuck me, Daddy?"

"Of course, baby," you say through a tight, toothy smile.

You get off the bed and head to your dresser—sparsely populated in the aftermath of Alexandra's departure but at least you haven't had to further cut down. You pull out the RodeoH strap, a skintight pair of boxers with a hole and a ring where your dick should be, which you shove your skin tone dildo through. Well, it feels more than skintight as you pull it up after shedding your clothes. Your tummy tumbles over the waistband just slightly, but before you can feel bad about it, Case mumbles "Oh, Daddy," to herself, clearly staring. You smile, but as you step back towards the bed, you acutely feel the pad nestled in there, not quite settled. You pull at things and adjust and Case's expression slowly tilts from enthrallment to concern.

"You okay?"

You breathe out and break into your lopsided half-smile. "I might have to stop at some point if it gets too much for me."

"The sex?" Case asks, with such stupid innocence.

"My period, Case," you say in a tone that makes her look away.

"*Ah, right.*"

You roll your eyes and grab her hair. She cries out as you pull her off the bed, onto her knees. There, you hold her just beyond your strap and watch her strain to caress it with her tongue. You can always get her to focus like this; she's so horny that anything bothering her is supplanted by sheer lust at the slightest suggestion. Usually, you're the one pausing things to have a talk, which is why it's so concerning that she said she would be the one to initiate the conversation on the future of this relationship. And that's stressing you out, but really you need to focus. You've held her for long enough now; you let her suck your cock.

She reaches the base in one smooth movement. Hands on your hips, you gaze down at her in approval. You know she's seeing how long she can take it, your manhood at the back of her throat, and it fills you with such heat and lust and love to watch her eyes water as she quietly chokes. Your hand whips round as she starts to pull off, keeping yourself deep within her just one second longer, and then you let her go. She breathes in deep and lets out a smattering of flustered little giggles. Gently, you pull her back up to your cock, this time thrusting in and out, listening to the wet sounds of her mouth as you do. You try to ignore the feeling of your pad; you focus on her laboured breathing, on the heat in your face, on the feeling of her dry, dyed hair between your fingers, on the cotton rubbing between your legs—fuck. Case doesn't notice though; she's just worshipping you and rubbing herself through her leather trousers. Hey, you didn't give her permission for that!

"What are you doing with your hands, baby?" you say, stopping mid thrust.

She squirms a bit before realising you're not letting her off your cock until she provides an explanation.

"Tuhthinmythelf-a-ee."

Her cheeks flush, humiliated, and yours burn with passion. There's fire in your voice as you say, "Did I tell you to do that?"

She just looks away with the same genuine embarrassment as before. She gets so into this and oh god you really do love her for it. You slip her mouth off your cock and bend down on one knee. She looks like she's about to collapse into a big, soppy puddle from the weight of being a bad girl, disobeying Daddy like that, but you keep her up with your hand under her chin. You turn her face towards yours and crush her cheeks into a terrified pout.

"Answer me."

Too scared to refuse, she says, "No, Daddy," and then, with a trickle of tears down her cheeks, "I'm sorry, Daddy."

The only things that exist in your world right now are this little mess of a girl and your desire to dominate her.

"You're too pretty when you cry," you whisper. "Daddy is going to fuck you now."

That stops her dead. No more tears, no movement, just the thinnest of breaths and widest of eyes at the prospect of you inside her. She doesn't even say "Yes, Daddy;" she just mouths it. You stand and pull her up by her hair. Her hands are limp and useless by her sides, so you unbutton her leather jeans, riding low under her beautiful, soft tummy. You need to see it jiggle when you pound into her. You need her now.

She's naked, and when you push her onto your bed, hands and knees, her ass spreads so naturally for you. You get behind her. You lube up. You dig your fingers into the fat of her hips, and hearing her moan, you ease your cock in. Slowly. Slowly. Now you feel her skin on yours, as deep as you can go, and you take it all in for a moment—the control; the power; the male gaze turning her into your toy

—and you shudder in abject euphoria. Then you move back out, slowly, and back in, slowly, and back out, getting faster, and in, faster, and out, and you start to sweat, and you strain your breaths, and you hear yourself crash into her, in, and out, and in and out, and in and out and in and out and—

“Wait, sorry. I think I need to use the toilet.”

You stop, and you let go, and you pop yourself out of her, not even chuckling at her cute, little *eeep* as you do.

“Okay, that’s alright. Daddy will be waiting right here for you, baby,” you say, attempting to hold on to the feeling. At least your cock will stay hard, you think as she leaves the room.

You lie down on the bed, grimacing as the RodeoH strains with your movement and the pad rubs against you, now more prominent with all the blood that’s rushed there from the minute of fucking. You know this is going to take a while. Whenever this happens it takes a while. The cis women you’ve slept with tend to require less prep for this sort of thing, and after years with Alexandra, you’re still adjusting to spontaneous penetrative sex coming with caveats such as this. You don’t even really want to look down at your cock, knowing that it will take you fully out of the mood, but as Case yells that it might be a little bit from the bathroom, you resign yourself to the mood dissipating regardless of what you do. There’s some toilet paper on the bedside table, and you wipe the shit from the tip of your strap.

Some minutes pass with nothing but silence. You hold the shitty paper and stare at the ceiling and let thoughts of actually going to work tomorrow come into your head. You should probably go to bed soon, but you can’t just kick Case out. You should flush this toilet paper, but the bathroom is occupied. You should probably have a conversation about this stress and these—let’s be honest here—deeply problematic feelings before they boil over into something worse, but the midst of your period is not the place for productive discussions.

Fuck. Whatever. Maybe you should talk to Bradley.

Six

“Hey, Bradley!” You walk into the kitchen with an exaggerated nonchalance. “Buddy. Brad. Brad the chad.” You do fingers guns at him the whole time as he crunches on his cereal. You really lost some sleep to ruminating about your future with Case after xe wasn’t super happy you kicked xem out. Well, you didn’t kick xem out; you told xem you needed some space cause you were just feeling awful and wanted to sleep after xe spent half an hour in the bathroom. But regardless, xe wasn’t happy, and now you’re tired, and you’re still doing finger guns at Bradley.

“We’re doing nicknames now?” he asks as the weight of living takes hold and sits you down, resting your head on the table.

“Sure, Brad,” you mumble, getting the feeling you ought not to bring up Tutu. “Brad Turner. BT Broadband. What’s your middle name?”

He laughs. “Don’t have one, Ellie.”

Ick. Oh god that just feels gross to hear; way too close to your deadname.

“What happened last night?” he says, before you have the chance to express your distaste.

“What makes you think anything happened last night?” you say, with an obvious insincerity that you immediately regret. With your head still on the table, you say, “Sorry. It’s just some problems I’m having with Case, and my period, and I’m just feeling too scrambled to sort things out or talk things through or like, any of the stuff I usually do, you know?”

“Not really,” says Bradley. “I don’t get periods.”

“Not even while you were on HRT?” you ask, now genuinely curious. “Some trans women get PMS, you know; I think it’s actually—”

Bradley dismisses you with a scoff. “Don’t be silly. Anyway: I do get what you mean about not feeling up to talking about things; just think about how long it took me to have an honest conversation with you about being a man. That wasn’t perfect, we can both admit, but sometimes that’s the only way an issue will get discussed, when there’s enough fuel that any spark will start a fire.”

“I want to talk to Case before we get to that point though.”

There’s a pause while you both think. Bradley usually half pays attention to

your kitchen conversations, either exhausted after work or rushing on his way in, but right now his attention is entirely on you, on your problems, on making things better.

He says, “Maybe it’s already at that point; maybe trying to talk right now will burn a hole in your relationship. I’m just playing the devil’s advocate here cause I assume your trans friends will have a different perspective. But, maybe the thing to do is just to grin and bear it and hope nothing catches light until the issue resolves itself.”

Okay, what does that mean? How would the issue resolve itself? You heave a long, slow *mmmmmmmm*, deep in both consternation and consideration at the prospect. To be fair, where has proactivity gotten you thus far? Case and you still have arguments; Bradley still became... well, Bradley; Alexandra still left in spite of your weekly future prospects meeting where you’d update your google sheets and documents and make sure your life as housemates and partners was on track. Maybe at some point, something will just click in Case and xe’ll finally be the woman you thought you were making out with, drunk at the electronic open mic night all those months ago. It seems unlikely, but the rough faced meat-head opposite you is evidence that gender is sudden and mutable.

“Yeah. I don’t know. What happens happens, I guess,” you say with defeat in your voice as you realise you’ve forgotten to eat breakfast, now having to leave for work on an empty stomach.

“My point exactly,” Bradley says as you head through the door. Then, as it swings shut: “See you, Ellie.”

You snarf down some overpriced and underwhelming meal deal on the way to work, feeling sick from indigestion just as you arrive. Kelly gives you a nod of reassurance as you take your station behind the counter, but that’s all the support you’re getting from her today. Bradley mentioned “your trans friends” earlier. You have to wonder, who was he referring to?

Your body goes through the motions of serving the first few customers through the door and your mind wanders. Kelly is a cis woman, and she isn’t really your friend. She’s a great coworker, but you don’t even take lunches together; in fact, you think she’s a great coworker because she’s so uninvested in having a relationship with you outside of this fragrant little room. Emily, who you used to see at the queer poetry evenings that Alexandra would take you to, is trans, but you don’t think you’ve ever messaged her outside of the now inactive group chat that Alexandra started. There’s Case, of course, and xe is both trans and your friend, but that’s not who Bradley meant. You know xyr friends, but hanging out is always at xyr invitation since you haven’t earned the assumed invite to any given social event with that group. It’s entirely trans people who play board games. You don’t mind this, and the few times that you’ve been to one of their board game evenings you did enjoy it, but it felt like you existed as an extension of Case. There are the people from the Queer Men’s Group, you suppose, but they give you that

same feeling of acquaintance—people you can enjoy an evening with who will have forgotten you were there by the time they get home.

It may look like you have a lot of friends, if one scrolls through the pictures you're tagged in on Facebook, but contrast this to Bradley. Back before Alexandra left and everything fell apart, Bradley appeared to only have two friends, Maya and Eunice, but they were tight. You would see them all in here together every week for "sharing and caring," a little activity where one of them would present something they'd been working on and the others would fawn over it with such over the top displays of praise that it would bypass the superficial insincerity to become startlingly heartwarming. Maya would invariably talk about her latest homebrew decklist for Friday Night Magic; Eunice would invariably talk about her latest zine; Tulip would invariably talk about her latest makeup stylings. Oh god, you're feeling emotional just thinking about it—about that anxious little bombshell you'll never see in here again.

"Are they okay?" someone asks Kelly, gesturing towards you.

You notice the tears dripping down your cheeks, but you can only think about that pronoun. "They."

"It's he," you say, teeth clenched.

"Oh, sorry! I just didn't want to assume."

You just about succeed at not screaming. "'They' is still an assumption. So if you're going to guess, guess correctly."

"Umm." They look at Kelly, who is only looking at you. They say, "I'm sorry. I didn't realise and I should have asked before I said anything."

"Right."

You stare at the floor on your side of the counter, that space of crumbs and coffee stains between your feet. Kelly is looking at you funny, but doesn't tell you off. Your name tag and pronoun badge flashes up in the brightest pastel pinks and baby blues, "he/they." God fucking dammit.

Seven

“My name is Elijah; I use he/him pronouns; I’m not really up to the third thing today, sorry. Like, favourite pasta shape? I don’t know the names, and just—that’s such a non-sequitur. Is there nothing interesting we can express about ourselves and our gender or our queerness with the third thing? Is it like this at the women’s group?”

“Actually, yeah,” Case cuts in, “a few months ago we did favourite Marvel hero, and I thought it led to an interesting discussion relating to what defines a hero and the way the actors who portray them carve out a specific idea of them in popular consciousness that perhaps wouldn’t exist if people were reading the media instead of watching the media, because the reader is having to generate the tone, the pace, the voice, all by themselves, whereas the watcher is simply handed all those subtleties of characterisation.” The room is silent. You stare at Case until xe realises no one has any response for this. Xe continues, “But yeah, it’s like this at the women’s group, is what I meant. Anyway: I’m Case; xe/he; and ziti is my favourite pasta, which are the little tube ones. They’re good for pasta bakes,” he adds, unprompted.

The silence surrounding Case’s diatribe extends long enough to be noticeable, until Malcolm breaks it, stating his own name and pronouns and favourite pasta shape—penne. Case glances over at you as the pronoun circle continues, but the room is too quiet and too empty for xem to ask you if you’re alright. In total, there’s only seven of you here, again, and after the pronoun circle concludes, the silence rushes back, filling in the distance between you and your peers with screeching emptiness.

“Oh doesn’t anyone have anything to talk about?” Malcolm asks, mostly with good humour but there’s a touch of genuine exasperation lurking in the high tones of his lilting voice.

“Ehhhhh?” says Kelsey, raising his hands and half laughing at himself in the hopes that this will carry over into the group as a whole. But it doesn’t.

Malcolm sighs. Usually Case would start talking about something at this point

but you've got the feeling the look you gave xem was so harsh that they can't access their trademark overconfidence. What male stuff have you got to talk about? The pad you're still wearing? The bloating and the cramps? Maybe you should take the reins and just have that discussion with Case about your future together right now.

Get a grip. This is a safe space. This is for queer men to talk about queer male issues; periods are just that, for you.

You clear your throat. "I've been on my period," you say, "for the first time in —" you pause to think here — "three years? When I started T, my periods were reduced to just minor cramping every couple months, and it was a reminder of my anatomy but I'd take some paracetamol and fill up a hot water bottle and it would be dealt with. This time however, it's just been hell. Full on cramps and full on discharge and I've had to wear a pad—wearing one right now, actually—and it's interrupted my sex and my work and I just feel off. And now I can't escape my anatomy, which I'm experiencing right now as so distinctly female, looking at the 'feminine hygiene' section in the chemist's and staring at the silly, pretty fonts on the fucking boxes of pads." You realise that everyone is now awake and aware and waiting for you to open this up to the group. "So: how do other people here deal with periods? Or like, other such unavoidable things that are at odds with your gender."

The group looks back and forth between you and each other and the floor. You can't tell if the question is causing them to think or if there's nothing for them to think about. Case however takes this as an opportunity to respond with another question:

"Is it worth specifying what you mean by 'your gender'? Just because someone gets periods, that doesn't make them any less of a man."

Is this how you sounded to Bradley, trying to help him through the worst of his dysphoria? You don't know if your usual unwarranted optimism has rubbed off on Case and is now coming back to haunt you, or whether xe is just like this and it wasn't grating until now.

You reply, "I meant the conceptualisation of your gender, which is the part of gender we actually interact with. For example, Ashley is a male name, for instance, but if someone transitions from a girl called Ashley to a boy called Adrian, then being Ashley would feel emasculating. Gender doesn't exist outside of our material reality; if we could reject any gendered experience except what we make up inside our head then transition wouldn't matter—trans healthcare would be meaningless."

Wow, you're grumpy today. Case holds xyr breath and leans back into xyr chair. Xe looks like xe wants to say something personal but all eyes are on the both of you, watching you fray the fabric of your relationship in real time.

Malcolm attempts to save you. "Well, I had a hysterectomy several decades ago, so I wouldn't be able to say about periods."

There's no "but." There's no continuation at all. What the fuck, Malcolm.

Kelsey pipes up, addressing the group: “I think something to consider is how the landscape of products available can be emasculating for people with periods, as much as the periods themselves. Elijah pointed out that gender exists within our material reality, and for them, that means dealing with feminine hygiene products and girly marketing, but if there were more products available that catered to men who have periods, it might be less dysphoric.”

They?

Did he call you they?

Rocket, one of the non-binary triad, says, “I can link you to the online store where I get my pads, if you want. They’re plain, very gender neutral.”

“Did you say ‘they’?”

Rocket tilts their head before Kelsey realises you’re addressing him.

“Oh! Sorry, is it not he/they?”

“It’s he/him.” Your guts are being crushed by some invisible hand reaching in, manicured nails digging into your organs. “I said he/him, didn’t I?” You look at Case, actually pleading.

“Sorry! I really must have blanked on that because it’s usually he/they, right?”

“Kelsey, just—” Case sighs, reaching over and holding your clenched hand, “—just give Elijah and me a few minutes outside, okay.”

You must be in a really bad way. Case stands and leads you through the halls of the community centre, looking straight ahead the entire time.

“What’s going on?” Case asks, standing with you in the cold courtyard.

You open your mouth to reply, but all that happens is you start wail.

Xe wraps xyr arms around you. There is sanctuary in xyr heft, your face buried in xyr chest, almost sinking into xem like you can with no one else. You let it out and babble and feel xyr shirt get wet and your face get wet and you don’t know what words you’re even trying to say, but you hear yourself as you push away to gulp in the humid winter air:

“—and that’s the second time today and just I feel so bad and I don’t know why my period is happening and the group doesn’t get it and my friends don’t get it cause I don’t have any and you don’t even really get it and now we’re having problems right when I need you the most and I just feel like I’m acting up and acting out and—and—and—”

Your breaths heave. Crystalline mist floats between you, then up and away to the starless sky.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been helpful,” Case says. “Everything I say is intentional, but hanging in the air, the words take on a different shape. To be explicit, I want to support you, but you’re so different from everyone else I know that I need to formulate new modes of communication, just for us—but that’s what’s so wonderful about love.” You whimper at that; xe still loves you. “Some of my friends have told me to stop dating you, but they’re all used to moving in and out of relationships with each other; sometimes it’s unclear if they can understand the

weight of decisions like that. But, I think we could incorporate some of their relationship anarchist practices to help us communicate. How does that sound?"

Your eyes shimmer with excess tears, still lingering. You say, "Like, now?"

"I think we're both feeling awful now," xe says, pulling xyr phone out and looking homeward, "and I believe that the ghosts within who we are can only been dealt with during an active haunting."

You laugh, and sniffle, and take Case's hand to walk back home together. Xe texts the group that you're both leaving. A few minutes pass, and you enjoy the time spent with your lover, warm with the hope of making things better.

Eight

You sometimes wonder what impression of you someone would get if all they saw was your email inbox. Would they assume you had an interest in board games, theatre, skateboarding, half a dozen queer essayists, and traditional Japanese footwear, judging by the weekly promotional newsletters that you can't quite figure out how to unsubscribe to? Would they realise you don't actually use Quora, but simply scroll through the digest to see snippets of a different, simpler reality that some people have seemingly found a way to inhabit? Would they know scared you are about your hormones?

The email doesn't come off fearful at least; it's just, "Hey! I'm having periods! Should I get a blood test? Thanks!" You've got a private endocrinologist, who costs money every time you want to video call with him, but all he needs to do is email you a list of stuff to get tested in your blood, so it's free. Really, this is the easiest part, or at least it should be, but the auto reply email states that there's currently a high volume of recent contact with the practice and you realise it might be a wait to get what you need. You sit and refresh and sit and refresh for a while, laying in your bed, until the growing awareness of the pointlessness of this whole activity causes you to at least attempt thinking about something else. So, what are you going to think about? You feel like you used to have hobbies that would occupy your thoughts, but at some point your life just became balancing work and having a partner. Alexandra dragged you along to everything she was interested in, but the museum visits and art history lectures and poetry readings didn't survive her departure. You play board games, you suppose, but it's more something you'll engage with as a social centrepiece rather than enjoy on its own terms; you're not actually sure you can remember the names of any of the games you played with Case and xyr friends. Well, you can think about Case, certainly, given the conversation last night.

Case is, in fact, all you think about over the next few days. At work, at the gym, at home, all that's on your mind is the big conversation you had with your partner—the big conversation that they specified wasn't even the conversation about the

future you had been waiting for for weeks. You find yourself nodding at nothing in the cafe, repeating in your head that it was a good conversation, a productive conversation, that you understand them so much better now and the relationship is going to continue with compassion and care. You lose track of your reps at the gym, just going over and over each awkward little smile and what it meant. It went on so long that there's so much to ruminate over, and it doesn't even feel comprehensive. The only reprieve you have from your relationship anxiety is your medical anxiety, refreshing your inbox now acting as a nice break from your sprawling fear.

You should try to break it down into key points, make notes in your gym journal which usually details your progress weightlifting. You ignore the way you've gone down to smaller and smaller jumps in weight recently, how your work set of squats today is only 0.5kg heavier than the set you did last week with Bradley before your period started, and you get to figuring all this out in neatly bullet pointed writing. This is how normal people work out emotional situations, right? You do your first warmup set with an empty bar, feeling your ankles and knees and hips stretch and shudder as your thighs come down to press into your calves, and back up and down and up again and again. You rack the bar. As the weight comes off your body, the thoughts flood in.

Case Relationship Analysis: Observations #1. Case wants periods. Surprising? Should be expected as a quasi-transfemme. Had xem pegged wrong as more comfortable and less binary. Tension caused by anatomical desire. Xe wants my uterus and I want xyr dick. Xe struggles to empathise with my period pain because xe sees it as something xe lacks. Xe also struggles to intuitively empathise due to lack of periods, which makes xem resentful, by own admission. Way xe copes with this is sex.

You put the notebook down at load the bar with some weight. It's another warmup set, which goes alright, easier than the first despite being more than twice as heavy. Your period has finally subsided so you're excited to be back at the workout in full force, having spent a week taking it easy on account of the way you just felt off. The bar crashes down onto the rack and you pick your notebook up again.

CRA: Obs #2. Case feels unwanted and unfulfilled sexually. Said xe uses sex as an expression of gender and needs to be able to express xemself as such. Said xe gets not wanting to have sex on my period and losing the mood after a long break where xe prepares for anal. Suggested exploring alternate ways to have sex—more planned scenes, more formal bdsm, xe penetrates me. I was confused at last suggestion. Xe explained that fucking is a way for xem to feel positive about xyr anatomy. I said that it does the opposite for me and has a lot of dysphoria attached. Xe asked me to think about it.

The notebook falls to the rubber padded floor. That whole bit of the conversation pissed you off at the time and that feeling has resurfaced now. You said you didn't want to be penetrated in the slightest right at the start of the relationship. The thought of it makes you feel demeaned and violated and angry. It's just not something you do, and having never done it has a special kind of value to you. You'd never sincerely use "gold star lesbian" as a term for yourself, even though that's what you are—or were, until you came out at least—but you have managed to keep something to yourself throughout all the years of being sexually active. Whether teenage sluttiness or your recent dedicated relationships, you've never let anyone put so much as a finger in you—on and around you, teasing your clit and your lips, sure, but never feeling inside. It wasn't a conscious decision, you just did it to yourself a few times as a teen and didn't like it and let people know that; the significance has grown with you gender, with the meaning that sex holds for you, and now Case is asking you to give something to xem that you don't want anyone to even think about. Alexandra was not only understanding, but loved that interiority you kept from them—but she also left your life with about five minutes notice, so really who knows.

You realise, without noticing, you've loaded the bar again, even heavier for your final warmup set. You have spent an indeterminate amount of time staring at it, just thinking. You get under it, lift it, step back, and squat. It's heavy, again, but this whole business of warming up tends to be woefully non-linear and inconsistent. Oh well, all there is to do is grind out a few reps and re-rack the bar. You breathe for a few seconds before picking up your notebook again.

#3. Still waiting for the future conversation. I still want to be in this relationship. Case is interested and engaged and is fun to be with. Xe broadens my idea of what identity can be and what queerness is. Xe listens to me and gives a unique perspective on everything I talk about. I love sex with xem when it goes well. It makes me feel manly and powerful and queer too, but in a way that feels like I'm more rather than less. I want to know what Case thinks and I want to make this relationship is even more serious. I love xem.

It's an affirmation as much as it is a factual statement. You acknowledge your own hesitation as you write the words and accept that as a part of making them true. Maybe you just rebounded to the first available woman-like person after Alexandra and xe happened to be someone with more sticking power than you expected, but you try not to entertain that thought. It's your work set anyway, so you load up the bar and clear your mind, ready to squat.

You unrack the bar. You squat back. You squat down. There is a moment where you experience the serene indifference of the gym, the world, the weight on your shoulders, as you try to push yourself out of the hole but come to realise that you are not actually moving at all. You fall on your ass, and the barbells clatters against the safety bars.

Now you can't even hit a 0.5kg increment. What the fuck?

You unload the bar, lift it back up, and reload it with your working weight from last week. You step under, step back, and squat down, once again straight into the safety bars. Again you unload, lift it up, and reload even lower than your working weight during your last serious session. Again you try to squat and end up on the floor, the bar hanging in the air above you. It takes a few more tries but you find a weight you can complete for one rep, 5kg lower than what you could have done only a couple weeks ago.

You manage not to cry until you're alone in the changing room.

Nine

You make it to date night, somehow. You and Case don't actually have a regularly scheduled date night considering the awkward nature of shift work and your living situations, but you realised you're both off work tomorrow and now you're walking to a pub together, hands held between you to spite the snowless December frost. It hasn't been a fun few days after that awful session at the gym, and your subsequent gym sessions have suffered for it as well, delayed and cut short from anxiety, but you're here with your lover and the pub is in sight. The conversation so far has been succinct and logistical by necessity, the cold tightening your lips and creeping into your jaw to the point where talking is torture. You're looking forward to some beer, or mulled wine—hopefully this place has mulled wine.

It's busy, but not so busy as to cause sensory concerns. Case stays wrapped up and goes to the bar to grab you both drinks as you settle down in a booth. You take off your overcoat to reveal an intentionally ugly, oversized sweater, one which hides the body that you're increasingly thinking of as overtly feminine. You don't want anyone looking at you, eyeing your curves, questioning your gender. You are a big rectangle patterned like a bus seat. The only thing that indicates your gender is your stubble.

You learn your head against the window, condensation almost entirely obscuring the view into the alley outside, save for the blotches of light crowding out the darkness. You just leave it, not wanting to wet the sleeves of your sweater. There is some sensation at the back of your head and you turn towards the bar, just in time to see Case approach the table with two glasses of wine and two women in tow.

"Case said we could sit with you," Maya says, thudding down on the other side of the booth.

"Hey," Eunice says with an awkward half wave, rethought as soon as it started, as she navigates over Maya to sit across from you.

Case sits down next to you and smiles, bright and genuine, as if inviting two of Bradley's friends to join you is a perfectly normal thing to do on your hard fought

date night. You take your wine from xem and sip, burning your tongue but getting that rush of cinnamon and star anise and alcohol which only mulled wine can provide. Maya and Eunice each have some purple and clear and cloudy cocktail, both with two short, thin straws. It's two for one night, you guess, but you're worried that cocktails will make you feel girly tonight, as ridiculous as that sounds in your head. You feel Case squeeze your hand which you realised you've been digging into your leg, and it brings you back to reality before you have the chance to properly drift off. It's time to attempt conversation.

"...so I don't know. I just feel that while it's correct to say that landlords should have to abide by all the regulation you're suggesting, the proposals are so far off that you might as well be saying landlordism should be abolished, which is necessary but politically unattainable."

After her speech, Eunice takes another sip of her, what, fourth cocktail? It's orange but it doesn't have any orange juice in it, or at least Maya thinks it doesn't, having ordered it. Eunice's sip is long and loud, letting everyone know to take a break after her definitive shutdown of Case's point about rent control and restricting evictions. The chat has all been political after the pleasantries concluded. You tried to contribute, to a degree of success. Politics started feeling too hopeless to keep up with after a few years of unmitigated Tory rule, so now you just hear the news that everybody hears. You're a socialist, of course, but you mostly just want an NHS with enough funding for you to get through to a GIC in fewer than five years and to get on hormones for free. You used to have opinions about more than that, calling yourself an anarcho-syndicalist to argue with the Trots and tankies and crypto-lib soc-dems back when you made a point by having blue hair and pronouns—now you have natural, black hair and just the one "he". What happened? You got with Alexandra, you suppose, and got a full-time job. You met her and could afford hormones privately and then moved in and all the specific class struggles you were going through went away, as did all the friends of yours who went to uni and wanted to argue with you as their own personal exercise in being the most correct communist in the café.

"Anyway," Maya says, rolling her eyes at the silence that has fallen after Eunice's statement, "how's Tulip?"

You smile. For a second, you imagine there's a big, bouncy girl waiting for you at home. Maybe you should have—

Let's not entertain that thought. You're with Case, and you're in love with Case, and you're on a date with Case right now, so it is really not the time to cause some weird scene. But still, Tulip makes you happy.

"She's okay," you say. "She's working harder and later because that's just the nature of the season, but she's getting on with her colleagues a lot better now."

"She hasn't been to the woman's group in a while," says Eunice.

"It's he." Case's comment causes furrowed brows in the girls, while you just stare into the dregs of your pint glass. "And it's Bradley now."

“Oh, is that the case?” Maya asks, looking at you with a weird, plastered smile.

“Yeah, *uh*, yeah-ish. She’s been going by Bradley at work and at home as well for just over a month, but that might just be until she can get back on hormones.”

“He,” Case emphasises, “sounded pretty adamant about being Bradley when you described it to me.”

Another silence creeps onto the table, spreading between you all until Eunice has the good grace to stutter her way into a sentence:

“Well it would be nice to see her—or, him. Sorry. So please let him know we’ve been missing him.”

“I will do.” You smile at Eunice, who smiles at her cup.

“I could use another,” she says to no one really. Then: “Maya?”

“Well trans women who date cis women are always a little strange, and Tulip was no exception,” says Maya, ignoring Eunice’s request.

“Bradley—” Case starts.

“It was Tulip at the time. The distinction is important.” Maya sips her own orange not-orange cocktail with an inscrutable sense of triumph, though over Case or over Tulip you can’t tell. Her whole tone is inexplicable. “It would make much more sense for Bradley to date Alexandra, but trans women like Tulip shouldn’t be with someone so basic as to have their femininity come in fully formed.”

“Oh Maya not this again,” Eunice whispers before trying to drink from her empty glass.

“What’s wrong with dating cis women? Like, I haven’t done it I guess so I wouldn’t know,” Case says.

“Yeah, I really liked dating Alexandra; I don’t think Tulip was weird for it.”

As you say this, Case shoots you a look, but Maya steps in and replies, “Dear, the equivalent for you would be dating a cis man. There’s an obliviousness that all cis people have regarding their own gender, and they will always see you as different if only for your own acute awareness of yours. Cis people think that to be truly of one gender, you must not acknowledge it, whereas we trans people understand that our focus on our gender gives us a saturation of femininity, masculinity, gender fuckery, whatever—more than a cis person could ever achieve, at any rate. Which is why the answer is *tee-for-tee*.”

“Scotch,” Eunice says, pushing Maya out of the way. As she stands and walks to the bar, you vaguely hear her murmur, “T4T except when you want me to domme you, fucking, ‘oh, cis women don’t get it; real women have dicks,’ like you’re not crying when I shove my strap in you, you fucking...”

Maya and Case ignore this little rant, instead fixated on the conversation at hand. Case says, “That makes sense. I’m de facto T4T I suppose, but mostly because I don’t think cis people want to date a vision of the future of culture when it’s as bright as me. You ever dated any other trans people, Elijah?”

The warm lighting and wooden interior makes everyone’s faces glow with some unplaceable colour, like if sickness had a hex code. Maybe it’s so that people

can throw up between rounds and no one will notice the vomit smattered on their chins. This feels like the conversational equivalent. You realise you've never mentioned any previous partner to Case except Alexandra, and to be fair, she's the most significant.

"I've been on dates with a few trans girls, and a couple non-binary girls who were somewhere between cis and trans. Not for a few years though, and just dates—not like, dating."

"Well, how's dating me?"

Oh god, Case...

You say, "It's..."

God, why'd you have to ask that, Case?

You say, "Look, so much of us dating is so wonderful, and it's amazing for someone to just know what I'm talking about when I talk about my hormones or dealing with my endo and shared care agreements with the GP and all that trans stuff." Case looks like xe knows that there will be a but, so you don't even attempt to delay the inevitable. "But, I think that trans women and trans men have difficulties together. We're not going on the same journey, we're going to each other's starting points, and I can't look at you and not see a body that can get to where I want to be much quicker than I can—if I can at all. I don't feel solidarity with you, sometimes; I feel competition, which I think is the opposite."

Case looks at you, a thousand things coursing behind xyr gently twitching brow. Xe says, "I'm not a trans woman."

"Yes you are," Eunice asserts, pushing Maya along and taking her place opposite Case. "Everyone is a trans woman. Fuck, I've been harassed in bathrooms by the 'adult human female' crowd for looking too boyish. I say, if you wear a dress and get called a tranny, you're a trans woman."

"Dear, I don't think that slur is yours to say," Maya interrupts.

"I thought you gave me permission to say that last night, when you were begging for it." Eunice downs the cocktail in her left hand in one motion, something in a martini glass that was distinctly not a martini.

"Maybe it's time to stop, dear," Maya says, reaching for the other glass.

Eunice holds it out of the way. "Maybe it's time for you to stop telling me what I can and can't do. It should be the other way around, dear." That last word is dripping with something violent coming out of Eunice's mouth, but maybe it's just drool.

"Dear—please—could you—please—"

Eunice pushes Maya away while she downs her other cocktail. Maya hangs her head in genuine defeat as Eunice delicately places the glasses down in front of her. And then, with such subtle swiftness, Eunice grabs Maya's hair and presses up against her ear. You can't hear anything, but you can see Eunice move her mouth and Maya's face start to burn.

"We're going back to yours, right?" Case asks, not expecting a response. "Lemme

use the toilet.”

“I’ll join you,” Maya says, standing up to follow Case in a joint venture to the gender neutral toilets.

The evening cooled down after the distraction earlier, with some pub food ordered in a vague attempt to sober up. You weren’t feeling super drunk an hour ago but you’re really not feeling anything now. Eunice still looks a bit tipsy, but all the happier for it.

“Linda told me what happened,” she says, as soon as the others disappear.

“Linda?”

“My sister. Did Tulip—sorry, Bradley—tell you what happened?”

You didn’t even know Eunice had a sister. Bradley had never mentioned that, and he certainly hadn’t mentioned that something had happened.

“No,” you say, feeling concern drive out the warmth you had built up over the evening.

“Bradley groped and kissed Linda without her consent.”

You have a lot of questions. You’re really so overwhelmed with questions that the actual nature of what’s happened has become entirely unclear to you.

“Did he sexually assault her?” you ask.

“Linda said it was just a misunderstanding but yeah, pretty much.”

What the fuck?

“What the fuck?”

Eunice says, “Yeah, what the fuck. I was so angry about it and I called but he didn’t pick up. But now, like, I’m still angry, but I’m also concerned. Linda really wasn’t angry with him, even though I told her and told her that it was okay to be. She really doesn’t value herself enough, I think, but I’ve got to take her lead on how to deal with this.”

“Right.”

You really, really are uncertain on what you can do about this at all or why you now have this information.

“And now that you’ve said that Bradley has detransitioned, I wonder if that’s related? I want to help my friend, and I want justice for my sister, and I want everyone to be okay. Could you talk to him?”

You can try, depending on when you see him, though it might be difficult considering it’s not a conversation for the gym or for right before work or even for the after work while he’s boiling the kettle for instant ramen before collapsing into bed after midnight. But that’s not what Eunice wants to hear, so you say, “I’ll talk to him.”

You spot Case emerge from the bathroom and wave towards the exit.

Eunice says, “Maya and I put the caring and sharing sessions on hold waiting for Bradley to sort his life out and we never resumed them. I just realised how much I missed seeing you since we haven’t been to the café.”

“It was nice seeing you too,” you say, glancing at her before, throwing your coat on and rushing to meet Case in the doorway.

You step outside and leave the girls behind. A thought occurs in your head that maybe you should talk to Case about the conversation you've just had with Eunice, but you don't want xem freaking out about going to a rapist's house, or something.

"Why'd you invite them to sit with us?" you ask, curious as to how your date night got derailed, not that you're really complaining.

"They're my friends, and I haven't been at the women's group a few months in a row so I wanted to chat with them. I thought they were your friends too?"

"They were more Bradley's," you say. "But I liked hanging out with them; I thought the conversation was interesting."

"Yeah," Case says, Docs thudding against the wet stone, "interesting..."

Ten

Your shirt comes off as soon as the door is closed and both your shoes are sequestered on the shoe rack. Case seemed upset on the way home so you've decided to get xem hot and horny and having a good time again. It's working apparently, with Case's eyes widening at the sight of your body hair and muscle and skin. You push xem against the wall and kiss xem, having to crane up but still feeling in control. You're not even going to ask if the second pronoun is he or she today. Schrodinger's gender, baby—or at least that's the idea.

You texted Bradley to be out of the way before you got home. He replied he was out tonight but glad to hear you were getting it on. There are at least some nice things about being bros with him. You push Case into the kitchen and sit xem on a chair. Xyr jacket comes off, then xyr sweatshirt, then xyr top. You stand over xem and let xem suck your thumb until you notice goosebumps appear in xyr skin. You try not to run the heating considering how high the price cap has gotten recently, but that's not an especially sexy conversation so you'll try to avoid it coming up. No words have been spoken since you came into the house; you want to keep it like that until you're sure it'll all be "yes, Daddy," and "no, Daddy," and "please, Daddy."

You pull Case along by xyr mullet, undercut shaggily growing out, and drag xem through to your room. You stand xem in the middle, exposed and unflattered by the single bulb and tattered lampshade, but it's getting you going, seeing xem so objectified like this. Xe's just a toy for your pleasure alone, is what you believe, what you feel in this moment, even though you can see xem getting off on it too with an awkward bulge forming in their leather jeans.

"Take them off," you command.

"—" Case starts, but you cut xem off before any sound can come out xyr mouth, best used as decoration right now.

"*Tch*, no talking until I say, doll."

Case moans, which you decide doesn't count, technically, and then xe undoes xyr belt. You suppress a gasp as xyr tummy comes into view, hanging over the band of xyr boxers. You manage not to whimper at all at the reveal of the three distinct

stretch marks, pale, pink bolts scratched into xyr skin. There are more, smaller ones around xyr tummy, on xyr hips and thighs, but those three you know are so soft and sensitive from the hours you've spent tracing them with your fingertips, your lips, your tongue. You don't even let your eyes widen, though you feel your heart beat harder in your chest. You have to maintain this detached, objective, objectifying gaze for the sake of the scene, and it gets Case off too, becoming an object under the spotlight of your cold glare. Xe explained it once in xyr own ethereal, meandering way, and you didn't really get what the take home point was, but you know that xe likes being your doll as much as you like being xyr Daddy.

Xyr jeans hit the floor. You see a wet patch has formed at the tip of the stub sticking out in xyr boxers. You've learned that asking xem to step out and kick xyr trousers to the side is a recipe for slapstick, which is more fun when you're having cutesy casual sex rather than a serious scene like this. And this scene is serious—it's going to fix whatever has been going on today and then you're gonna have a conversation about your future in the weightless euphoria of aftercare and it'll all be okay. These were not your expectations when you took off your shirt but you've found they've crept in, hiding just below the surface of your desire, all these anxieties waiting to attach themselves to something you thought was going to be fun. So this is all very serious, but serious can be sexy. You step forward, grab xyr crotch, and appraise the toy before you.

"Oh, is that all there is?"

You feel xyr erection twitch in your hand as xyr face scrunches up and turns away. But xe nods, acknowledging that xe's too small to be satisfying, unlike you.

"Do you want me to show you what a real cock should feel like?" You bring your mouth up to xyr ear as you say this and even your voice gets wet. You let xem hear all the movements of your tongue, feel your lips graze against xem. Case nods so hard xyr hair whips you in the face.

"You can speak, doll," you say. "One syllable only."

"Yes, Sir."

Well, 'Daddy' is what you prefer, but you suppose that's two syllables. These kinds of slips always happen and it's just part of sex, at least, part of this kind of sex which isn't entirely negotiated in advance. You've had sex like that, and you know that's what Case is used to with the other conscious queer people xe's been with, but you've been helping xem explore the dynamics of spontaneity with all the anxiety that entails, and so you don't want to make xem feel bad for calling you 'Sir,' even if you've never expressed interest in it. You realise you've hesitated however, and so you nibble on xyr ear to make up for it.

"Good doll."

"Nnnnnn," Case moans. "Thank you, Sir."

You step away and pull a pillow off your bed. It flumphs down onto the floor just beyond Case's feet.

"Kneel, doll."

“Yes, Sir.”

You watch Case’s eyes as xe drops to xyr knees, instant and obedient, entirely without style in a way that feels unconscious and so, so sexy, like all xe can think about is following your command as quickly as possible. There’s a thud on the pillow but xe doesn’t even wince. Xe just keeps staring, and you can see xyr glistening white eyes as xe gazes up at your face. You savour the moment; you almost don’t want to say the next bit but you know how it’ll make xem shiver.

“Shut your eyes for me, doll.”

“Yes, sir.”

You stand still, letting xem work up just a little bit of anxiety, unsure of what’s coming or when. Then you flick xyr breast, tip of your finger causing xyr nipple to bounce, erect in your cold room. Case moans in pain and pleasure and intensity of sensation, and you let xyr whimpers die down before you touch xem again. That anticipatory anxiety returns, but this time you don’t hurt xem, you instead graze your thumb over xyr bottom limp. Xe shivers and “aaaa-aaaa-aaaa”s and tries to lean forward to take you in xyr mouth, but you grab xyr hair and keep xem back. Your hand tightens and loosens again and again, massaging xyr head as you explore xyr face with your nails, lightly tracking over xyr round cheeks and xyr gentle, sloping neck—even xyr stubble.

“Touch yourself, doll.”

“Yes, sir.”

Case tries to comply but fumbles with xyr boxers, half attempting to stand while pulling them down. Your hand grips xyr hair hard and you realise you’re pulling xem to xyr feet. Xe’s taller than you but the important part is that xe gets the idea without anyone having to say anything; there’s no interrupting this scene with an awkward “Hey, can I stand for a sec, Sir?” You keep in character; you stay in the moment. Xe drops xyr boxers and steps out of the pile of clothes around xyr ankles. Or, xe tries to. There’s a slightly stumble followed by an overcorrected little jump and you realise that xe’s going to fall regardless of what you do. So you go with it; you pull xem down.

The pillow depresses under xyr knees again but this time you’ve moved back to make space for the whole of Case’s body to hit the floor. You walk around xem and yank off xyr trousers and boxers, leaving xyr socks on because cold feet are almost never sexy. Then, you walk back and gently step on xyr head. You feel the hardness of the carpet below, which you know hasn’t been vacuumed in a while, but you’ve been in xyr room and that’s even worse.

“Aww, poor dolly,” you say, your voice lilting and mocking. “Do you need Daddy to kiss anything better?”

That’s the best you can think of to ask if xyr okay without asking outright. Case replies, “No, sir,” the subtleties of xyr voice lost to the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s two syllables, doll,” you say, stepping off and crouching down to meet xyr rising, trembling face. “You don’t need to apologise. You’re my toy, and my responsibility.”

You help xem sit back up, bearing through the manoeuvring that ends with xem on xyr ass on the pillow, face level with your crotch.

"I still want you to touch yourself for me, doll," you say, stroking xyr tangled hair. "You look so pretty and empty when you do, and it makes me want to fill you up."

Case snaps back into the moment, overwhelmed by the promise of you inside xem. You see xyr hand start working under xyr tummy as xe leans back on xe other hand. Your face goes flush as you take in the way xyr body bounces and flows as xyr motions grow so slightly larger as xyr trans feminine dicklette becomes hard. It doesn't feel cold in here at all any more. You let xem suck your thumb. You feel xem moan and rock and suck harder as they close in on orgasm, not even trying to make it last. The desperation is so, so hot, so you can't let it end just now.

"Stop."

Case does. Xyr hand comes off entirely and you see xem twitch and leak, right at the edge. You step on xem, crushing xyr shaft into the pillow and massaging it with the ball of your foot just slightly. Xe cries with the overwhelming sensation of it all, but you're careful not to drive xem to some unsatisfying orgasm that would result in a ruined pillow and a sticky sock.

You step off.

"Close your eyes, doll. You'll know when you can touch yourself again."

You think you hear xem breathe "yes," the word floating beyond any earthly voice, and you walk to your dresser. Xyr eyes are shut—you check—and so you drop your trousers and boxers and tug the RodeoH up your legs. You grab the dildo, sitting in the drawer, and slide it in, so much larger than Case could have ever been. Then you walk, gazing at your own manhood swinging out from between your legs, enjoying this moment where you're completely feeling yourself, this body, this sex.

You arrive. Your cock hovers above Case's open mouth. It's always a bit awkward getting the angle right to start, especially with your partner's eyes closed, but you won't let that get in the way. You squat just a touch, until you're just pressing against xyr waiting lips. And then, tenderly, you thrust.

"Okay, I think my eye is alright but even if it wasn't it'd be a maybe 6 hour wait for an ambulance and A&E times are similarly bad right now, so I think we just have to assume it'll be fine." Case sits down next to you holding a bag of frozen peas against xyr face. Xe continues, "How are you feeling? You didn't get hurt, right?"

You're holding the tatters of your RodeoH, the stitching of which seemed to explode halfway through fucking Case's face. Even the elastic broke, whipping round to hit xem right in the eye. You didn't get hurt in any serious capacity. You're not really feeling anything either. You really don't have the money to replace this, but maybe you could if you skipped lunches for... only a few months! Fuck.

"I'm fine," you say. You're not, really, and you don't know why you can't just be honest right now; it's like this abject absence of emotion has precluded your desire to be true—to do anything other than just make this evening end with minimal fuss and lie down alone and stop existing in the world for a few hours. Maybe Bradley's been rubbing off on you.

"That's good," Case says, taking you at face value, somehow. Xe's still horny, judging by how xe's somehow not fully limp, so maybe xe just wants to get it on again. You could maybe engage with that? Sex is an escape, sort of, plus you just had a big conversation about expanding what you do sexually. After a period of silence, xe adds, "Do you want to keep going?"

"Uhh, sure." You toss the memory of your manhood to the side and stare up at the ceiling. "I'm a bit out of it so I don't have any ideas right now."

"Okay, so, I'll take the lead then?" You don't actually like the sound of that at all, but you can't find it in you to say anything. Something fundamental has broken. Something has gotten caught in the falling debris of your heart and now an essential gear in the way you work won't move.

"Okay, *uhhh*, I'll take the lead," Case repeats after your unmoving silence, "and I'll lay you down—" that sounds nice —"and kiss your body—" that also sounds nice —"and then I could gently slide into you, and we could just lay there for a minute and you could see how it feels?"

...

"I'd be like a weighted blanket for you, just kinda laying on top, except sexy?"

...

"Sorry, for all our sex it's like you've been the operator of your own theme park, which I'm just attending, and now I have to show you around these rides you've built yourself, so it's a bit awkward getting—"

"Case, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

Now it's xyr turn to pause and stare, aghast. You figure xe has no response, so you elaborate, whatever was wrong inside you now operational, overclocked.

"Case, how can you be so ignorant as to ask to fuck me, something I have not done with anybody on account of how emasculating it feels, immediately after my one harness broke? Do you not understand how dysphoric I'm feeling right now? I thought you would understand more than anybody else the way that I experience gender, but you get it even less than Alexandra, somehow."

"Maybe that's just because you're trapped in a cultural lens I've liberated myself from," Case replies.

You realise this is an argument now, that you've started an argument that's real and that will hurt and that will almost certainly escalate to shouting. Great! You're a man; you're going to act like a man. You will be aggressive and toxic and you will bully this ditz into submission and you will feel all the better for it, cause apparently that's the cultural lens you're trapped in. Let's go!

"Do you think I've not had to escape the way others thought about me to get to this point? Everyone insisted I was just a tomboy until I fought to be recognised

as a lesbian. And then my parents insisted I was just butch until I came home, so in their face about being trans that they had no choice to accept it and cut me out of the family. I'm still conscious about choosing how I identify even if I'm not a genderqueer neo-pronounced cyber-dork like you."

"Cyber-dork" sounds pathetic coming out of your mouth, but you know, for Case, it'll sting.

Xe raises xyr voice. "I'm not trying to attach judgement to it, unlike you seem to be; I just mean that you can't conceptualise being penetrated as being masculine, despite there being so much gay male sexual thought devoted to the manliness of bottoming."

"I'm not gay!" You're shouting now. "I like women! The gay male sexual thought or whatever doesn't apply to me."

"You know I'm not a woman, right?" Case is somehow shouting and pleading all at once. "I'm non-binary. I use various pronouns and fluctuate this way and that, but I'm never quite a woman."

"You go to the Queer Women's Group," you say, standing up and crossing your arms as if this were some amazing trump card.

"Where else am I supposed to go? There's no dedicated trans meet-up since funding is so crap here, and the Women & Marginal Identities Network isn't super welcoming to AMAB people. I need community."

You don't have a response to this, so you stumble before the words even get out of your mouth and end up saying nothing. And so Case speaks again, and now this is an argument xe's having with you.

"Let me tell you what I've been thinking about when I've been thinking about our future."

Oh fuck. Oh no. You recognise you're not in a state to mitigate any of this. You feel your eyebrows raise out of your control, your body saying "Go ahead!" without your consent.

The white in xyr eyes glistens again as you stare at xem, sat on the bed, naked save for socks.

"I've been thinking we should break up."

You stare. "Why?"

"I don't want to elaborate."

You bend down, face to face. "Why?"

"Cause you're temperamental and you don't respect me. Your closure is not worth more than my safety."

"Safety?" you shout straight into xyr face.

"Okay, I'm going."

And xe does, and there's nothing you can do to stop xem.

Eleven

You sit on the loveseat, playing with the plaster from your T shot earlier. You don't know why you're not in your room for this; you're not going to be able to escape to something fun Case is doing since you assume you've been disinvited to your board game nights, considering how things ended last week and the lack of contact since. There's a crate of cheap, lukewarm beer sitting on the floor. You want to start drinking now but you can't even find the energy to sit upright. Bradley has laid out the kitchen table with the finest Aldi sharing platters and chips and dips and paper plates. You had asked if chefs didn't expect a bit higher quality of food and Bradley explained that no one really wants to cook at home when they do it for forty-plus hours a week. That made sense to you, and honestly the Aldi ready-to-eat stuff is decently nice, but you're not hungry right now. You think some latent teenage eating disorder has appeared considering how little you've been eating since your harness broke, as if slimming down now would somehow undo the damage. The damage is there though, purposeless and permanent, and now you're sat waiting for a bunch of misogynistic chefs to arrive and watch a movie with you and Bradley.

You hear the door open, followed by the sound of shuffling and murmurs on the doorstep.

"Ellie's just in the living room. They're going through it right now so be polite."

It doesn't even bother you that Bradley misgendered you; you suppose you haven't told him your updated pronouns. And you've been too busy to explain how awful it is to be called Ellie, so you can't blame him for that either. Maybe the crushing weight of this breakup has muffled every other aspect of you that cares about anything. You try to remember what you've done this week and you find it impossible. You went to work, you think? God, conversation with these people might be impossible.

"No costume this time?" Damien asks as he walks into the room.

Your fears are confirmed: how do you respond to this? You attempt to say something without any words in mind but end up swallowing, as if they just went

the wrong way in your throat.

Damien laughs and sits on the armchair. "It was good to meet at Halloween. We were all quite interested to meet a trans man, and Bradley has explained 'non-binary' to us."

"Oh, cool."

There's silence in the room, only broken by awkward intentional breathing and the sound of phones being taken out of and placed back in pockets again and again, until Bradley comes in, carrying a kitchen chair.

"I'm sitting on the couch," he says, setting it down next to the armchair. "Rover, you can take this cause fuck you for leaving us."

"Don't know why you're upset with him," Damien laughs. "It got you a promotion."

You look up to your housemate, arching your eyebrows. A promotion? That's the first unreservedly good news you've had all year, potentially. Some small part of you hopes this means you can get Tulip back, but mostly you're just happy that things won't be so tight in the house. Maybe you can even run the heating while you're both here over Christmas.

"Hey, congrats!" You smile up at your one remaining friend.

"*Oooh*, I got something for you, as a thank you for supporting me this year," he says to you, beaming. "I hid it at the back of the fridge; I hope you didn't peek."

You've been paying so little attention to anything that you don't even know if you noticed anything out of the ordinary. Maybe you did peek and the memory just didn't stick around. You go *nh-nh* with a smirky smile across your face and watch Bradley return to the and come back with a champagne glass of—fuck, is that actually champagne?

You'd only been able to afford a couple trips to some bar each month because Case could afford it and would buy everything for you, so you had just resigned yourself to being sober by circumstance through this whole breakup, but now Bradley has bought you champagne! You take it out of his hands, delicate as to not spill the slightest drop, and breathe it in. It's so floral, with tinges of green apple underneath. You sip, and oh god, that's so, so nice. Maybe you'll enjoy this evening after all.

"You're welcome," Bradley says through a wide smile, taking your satisfied sigh as his thanks.

You didn't think Bradley saw you as supporting him this past year, considering the argument you had barely over a month ago, but he's got you a bottle of liquid joy and he's gotten his coworkers on side with they/them pronouns. And even if you hate it, it's progress, so you'll bear it for tonight before bringing it up, just to get them in the habit of using and respecting it. You wave at Rover coming in with a plate and taking up the seat next to Damien. Doc enters in tow with two plates.

"This is for you, Bradley," he says, raising one up to be taken as he sits on the couch.

“Like fuck it is,” Bradley says. “I’m not eating something you’ve prepared, Doc.”

Damien and Rover laugh as Bradley ambles over and starts up the TV. You notice that it isn’t Terminator 2 on the screen and shock rips through you. What are you watching?

“Die Hard?” Bradley asks to the room.

Everyone else nods, but you can’t, instead letting the words flutter out of your mouth, “Not Judgement Day?”

“That’s...” Bradley pauses, “not a Christmas movie?”

“Technically neither is Die Hard,” Damien states.

“Fuck off.” Bradley turns and starts the film, now disinterested in any more input on the film choice. “What do you even mean ‘technically’? Don’t answer; we’re not having this discussion again.”

John McClane is crawling inside the vents. It feels like he’s been doing this for hours. He’s so competent at vent crawling, perhaps he has done that his whole life. Is it included in police training, along with such other pointless skills as killing pets and planting drugs? You realise you’re maybe a bit drunk, considering it’s just you drinking your champagne. But that’s so nice: a whole bottle for you. You smile at your empty glass.

“May I have another?” you ask to Bradley, sat on the couch adjacent to you. You’ve got work tomorrow but you’ll drink a couple glasses of water before bed and it’ll be alright; you’re feeling too good to slow down now.

“Doc, can you get them some Champagne?” he says, taking your glass and passing it along.

“You want me to—“

“Yes,” Bradley replies. You can’t see his expression but you notice Doc suppress a giggle.

He gets up and rushes out. You tap your fingers waiting for him in the kitchen, probably fumbling about trying to pour. For a chef, he doesn’t seem like the most well coordinated guy. Maybe that’s why no one else trusts him with food. You hope he doesn’t spill any of your nice wine at least, but considering Bradley’s pay rise, nice wine might be a more regular feature in this house.

He returns and passes the glass to Bradley, who then passes it to you. You sip, and it’s wonderful, and you stare back at the screen, watching John McClane continue to crawl through vents.

“So what’s everybody’s favourite Christmas movie?” you ask, bored and indignant and approaching drunk.

“Not enjoying this? It’s a classic. I thought you liked 80s action?” Rover asks, eating Aldi hummus with a plastic spoon.

“I thought Die Hard was 90s?” Damien replies.

“N-no,” you say. “Die Hard was definitely 80s; I mean, look at the suits. Secondly, T2 is the only film I’ve watched not in cinema in the past four years or

so, except for this just now. So it's not that I like 80s action particularly, there's just one 80s action film that I like a lot."

"That's queer," Damien says. You get the double entendre; maybe he's not become as progressive as you wanted to believe, but you'd find the joke funny if Case had said it, so who knows. He continues, "Anyway, my favourite Christmas movie is *In Bruges*."

Isn't that the one that's really ableist? Is ableism even the right term there? You swear you used to know this—

"How is *In Bruges* a Christmas movie if *Die Hard* is not a Christmas movie?" shouts Bradley, cutting off your meandering, drunk thoughts. "Again: don't answer that. The best Christmas movie is *Die Hard*, which is why we're watching it."

"Well, *Die Hard* just happens to be set at Christmas, it doesn't have the themes of familial love and redemption that defines proper Christmas movies."

Bradley stares, and then resumes shouting. "Have you seen the film before? Do you know what the themes are? What are you talking about? Whatever, look, Doc: what's your favourite?"

Doc thinks, his expression entirely retreating into himself, and then the light returns to his eyes. He says, "I saw *Die Hard With A Vengeance* in cinema and that was sick."

Everyone in the room rolls their eyes at once. Rover then decides to intervene before the argument can resume:

"It's *A Wonderful Life* for me. I cry every time. You, Ellie?"

It's just surreal hearing that out of his mouth. Has Bradley been calling you that at work? That thought is concerning. You actually do want to bring it up now but you can't get the words right in your head. What was Rover asking? Favourite Christmas movie?

You say, "*Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh*," which is not much of an answer, or even a sentence really. You look at Bradley, who appears to be moving in place. Back on the screen, John McClane is climbing through vents, which appear to be spinning. You don't remember them doing that when you first saw the film. "Maybe Elf? Does that count?"

"Yeah, I think we can all agree Elf counts," Damien says, without humour. "Are they okay?" he asks Bradley.

You drop your glass, which you seem to have already emptied down your throat without noticing. You feel too drunk, too quickly.

"I don't think they've been eating too well," Bradley replies, picking up the glass and then picking you up too. You're all wrapped up in their arms, held like a princess being rescued from a den of bandits and ruffians. You feel his deep voice echo in his chest as he looks down at you and says, "I'm taking you to bed now; I'll check on you in a bit."

Twelve

You're asleep, but it doesn't feel like it. The bed rocks and the room spins slowly. Everything jumps and jumbles with disconnected flashes of dreams. You float and crash and feel hot and cold and your mind can't make sense of any of it, so you let it all happen.

Then, you feel weight.

You feel damp breath.

You feel knuckles digging in to your skin.

You feel your clothes burning against you as they're pulled off.

You feel hands, fingers, nails.

You feel tongue, in and around your mouth.

You feel an arm on your neck.

You feel lightheaded.

You feel the room twist and pop.

You feel sick.

You feel something inside you.

You feel your insides clench and grip.

You feel a scream, stillborn in your throat.

You feel your pillow on your face.

You feel your hands grip the bedsheets.

You feel your limbs refuse to defend you.

You feel lightheaded, again.

You feel yourself slacken.

You feel that something go deeper.

You feel it deeper than anything has gone before.

You feel the pain of your body conforming to its shape.

You feel it pull out.

You feel it push in.

You feel it speed up.

You feel your body comply.

Yvette Pyke

You feel time skip and—skip and—skip and—
You feel heat burst within you.
You feel empty.
You feel alone.

Thirteen

Your phone is ringing. It fucking hurts. It hurts so much. You don't know where it is. You slam your hand around your bedside table and knock your lamp to the floor, but you don't feel your phone. Opening your eyes is tough, and everything is too sharp and too bright for your brain to comprehend; seeing your room in the austere light of this December day hurts as much the phone. You bend over the side of the bed and wretch from the motion, but nothing comes out. Your phone stops ringing. Thank god. You pull the covers up and try to hide yourself from this world of painful things. You hear something tumble to the floor. At least you know where it is now.

Your phone is ringing. It hurts so fucking much. You pull off the covers and reach to the floor without looking. The texture of your carpet makes you gag, but you find that horrible, vibrating little thing. You try to answer, but your fingers have lost the memory of how that gets done. You drop the phone as the ringing stops and a voice appears, small and distant. You try to focus your eyes and press the loudspeaker icon.

“—are you? It's midday.”

“Kelly?” you ask in a voice that tears through your throat.

“It's midday; you should have been here at eight.”

She sounds annoyed, or concerned; the subtleties of her tone are lost in the grating sensation the sound causes in your ears. You're too fucked to put together a cogent reply.

“Yes,” you say, as if that means something in this context.

“Are you coming in?”

You think, to the extent that you're able to think.

“Yes.”

“Okay, I'll see you soon.”

She hangs up. You don't know why you said that, considering how hungover you seem to be, but you know that no one has ever accepted a hangover as a reason to skip work. You just have to make it there. You didn't realise you drank that

much last night; a bottle of champagne is a lot but it shouldn't be this bad. Standing is difficult so you pause your warbling internal monologue to focus. Your feet come round and touch that awful floor. You push yourself up and off the bed. The world keeps moving even as you feel still, and then you realise that the ground isn't rushing to you, you're rushing towards it.

Sprawled out, you try to find your phone to call Kelly back, but it's lost in the tangle of your legs. You wretch again, and again there's nothing, not even sound. Did something happen last night? You were watching the movie, and then you got too drunk and Bradley took you to bed, and then...

And then...

Sensations and sounds and images return to you, out of order and out of context. A panic rises in your cheeks. That must have been a dream. You certainly can't accuse Bradley of rape; that would ruin his life. Plus, you're sure he just carried you to bed and you had some weird drunk dream that you can't even remember. You're probably misremembering it. It wouldn't do any good to bring it up. Dwelling on it will just make you traumatised, and you don't want to be traumatised. If any of it were real you'd be an anxious wreck, damaged goods for life. You've met rape victims—survivors, you mean—at queer events and you don't want that aversion to touch, that fear which takes years to work through, those flashbacks and those abrupt tears and all those moments where you'll have to excuse yourself to hyperventilate in a bathroom, somewhere bright and safe with the door locked. So it didn't happen. You're not traumatised. You're fine, except for the hangover.

It doesn't feel like it though: not in your body, sensitive sores starting to come into focus as you start to wake up, and not in your head, flashes of feeling coursing through you, hands and tongue in the darkness, over you, inside you. Is that a flashback? You don't know; it never seemed polite to ask someone to explain. It probably isn't. You don't want to have flashbacks. You'll stop feeling like this once you get some more rest and get into the right state of mind. It was just a bad dream. You pull the covers off the bed and try to have a better one.

Your phone is ringing. It hurts less than before but the panic attack is instant and awful. You search the floor under the covers and find it, managing to answer it normally this time.

"Hey, Kelly," you say, wincing as your dry mouth shapes around the word. "Sorry—"

"Are you coming?"

You pull your phone away from your ear and check the time—13:01.

"Sorry, I might be another hour," you say, pushing away the covers and scrambling to sit, back against your bed.

"Well then don't come in," Kelly says. She is clearly containing herself; you can make out the drips of anger in her tone even through the phone, but she's forcing herself not to shout. It must have been a busy day, but she does know you're going

through it right now with the breakup.

Oh god, the breakup: you had just about forgotten it. You miss Case. Case would know what to do here; xe is so aware about all this kind of stuff, just like you used to be. Fucking Alexandra. Fucking work. You were taken away from your own queer version of normalcy for the promise of stability and regular date nights and consistently good sex. And now you're on the floor, and your boss has just hung up on you, and you've had a dream so awful that you're imagining you've been raped. You have no way to navigate any of this. You put your phone down and hang your head and finally notice the blood between your legs.

Fourteen

Even though the blood hasn't reoccured over the past few days, you're still using pads. It must have been your period. No real woman has her period on time every four weeks, which is what Bradley told you when you brought it up. You appreciated the assurance, and he made you breakfast and told you he'd watch out for the blood forms from your GP, which still haven't arrived somehow, so you didn't even complain that he basically called you a woman. You really couldn't deal with things getting frosty again in the house at any rate; the draught that seems to have appeared overnight has already made it chilly enough. You want to fix it, to feel all manly with your tools and your can-do attitude. But you really can't do anything right now, except dissociate at work and watch youtube at home, trying to stave off using your brain for anything because that inevitably results in—not flashbacks; you refuse to call them flashbacks—bad thoughts.

You realise you're at the joint Christmas party between the Queer Men's and the Queer Women's groups. You realise you've been standing in one spot holding a cocktail sausage for an indeterminate length of time, not talking to anyone or looking at anything or making any conscious motions. There are thirty or so people here and the room isn't big. Case is notably absent, presumably to give you some space because xe's conscious like that, but god you wish xe were here. At least there's Eunice and Maya, who you again realise have approached you and are waiting for you to acknowledge their existence. You attempt a smile and a friendly nod, but you couldn't describe what your face just did, and from their reactions, they can't either.

"We heard, dear," Maya says, reaching out and patting your shoulder. You feel a scream well up inside you but your body is not capable of mustering the energy required to produce it. This feels like the worst sensory issue you've ever had, just from one soft palm on your shoulder, the first time you've been touched since the dream. It's so awful you strain to hear Maya continue, "And we don't care about sides."

"Are you okay, Elijah?" Eunice asks, pushing Maya's hand off and away from you, noticing how half your body appears to have tensed up.

“Yeah, *uhm*, you know,” you say as if they know.

“Yeah?” Eunice says.

Your thoughts are swallowed up in the noise of voices and chewing and laughter and music. Sometimes it’s so easy to retreat into your own head and sometimes it feels so full that you get pushed out. These states of being flip between each other at random, and now, having come out of yourself made what marginally counts as conversation, you find it impossible to get back in.

You nod, slowly. That’s about all you can do.

“Are you doing anything for Christmas?” Eunice asks. You notice her grab Maya who rolls her eyes, clearly caught in her attempt to depart from this conversation.

“I’m at home.”

“Oh,” Eunice exclaims through a relieved smile, “where’s home?”

“Here with Bradley.”

Saying his name garners some awkward glares from the partygoers surrounding you, mostly women who will have known him as Tulip. Maybe they’ve been staring at you this whole time. Is everybody looking at you, actually? You want to scan the room but you’d best not draw attention to yourself like that. Sweat slips down your palms, wet between your fingers. You focus back on Eunice whose expression seems to have dropped entirely.

“Ah,” she says. “*Uhm*—“

“Dear, come on,” Maya says to Eunice, tugging her sleeve. “I’m autistic and even I can tell that they want some space.”

“WHY IS EVERYONE CALLING ME ‘THEY?’”

Your brain hasn’t even registered that you’ve shouted; you’re so disconnected from your body that the heat and tension and panic feels like it’s something you’re holding for a friend. But you’re you, the person who occupies the space that you’re standing in, who has just been far too loud. Now everyone really is staring, but at least the sounds have stopped. Someone even had the good thought to pause the music.

“I’m a man,” you continue to shout. “I want to be called ‘he.’ I want to be hairy and built and fix things and I don’t want anyone to be unsure of what pronouns I use or whether I like to fuck or be fucked or anything about me. It should be obvious. Is it not? Why are you calling me ‘they.’”

Maya, for all the grace of god, rolls her eyes and points at your chest. “Your pronoun badge says he/they. You might want to get that changed.”

You look down and she’s right. Your pronoun badge says “he/they,” still pinned onto the apron you’re still wearing after work. Something is really wrong.

“And scene,” Maya says, bowing to the crowd around you. “You’ve been a wonderful audience but the show is over; please give the performers some privacy.”

“I’m going to go,” you whisper, and head towards the door as everyone picks their own conversations back up, trying their best not to chat about you until you’ve left the room.

Eunice says, “Hey, it would be nice to hang out at yours some—” but you’re already in the hall before she can finish.

As you step outside you hear two sets of footsteps behind you. Kelsey and Malcolm come out into the courtyard, shivering immediately in their t-shirts. You put your jacket it on and zip it up, covering the apron and pronouns that aren’t yours.

“Elijah, as the person in charge of the Queer Men’s Group, your wellbeing is my responsibility,” Malcolm says, more serious than you’ve ever seen him before. “I would like it if we could have a conversation about what’s been bothering you, if not right now then at some point soon, so I can direct you to some resources.”

“And I can walk you home,” Kelsey says, “if you don’t want to be alone right now.”

He’s right: you don’t want to be alone right now. But you don’t want to be alone with him. There’s one person right now that you trust, and you’re going home to him as quickly as you can. And “resources”? You know those will take weeks for you to talk to anyone, and then months spent on a waiting list for you to get the help you need, whatever that is. You just want to get back home and chill on the couch and be bros with Bradley. Just two guys, respecting each other’s manhood. Maybe that’s a fantasy considering how small and feminine he makes you feel, but a fantasy is good enough for now.

“No thanks,” you say, backing away from your wannabe saviours. “And don’t worry: I’ll be safe at home.”

Fifteen

Bradley isn't actually home when you get there so you go straight to bed. You take off your clothes and slide under the covers and stare at the ceiling. You don't feel safe at all, actually, in your room alone. You feel like something is going to come through the door again and hurt you, whether real or imaginary. You're scared of your own thoughts, what you might imagine is in here, knowing you might lose your grip and have to admit that something's happened—that you need help in a country that's incapable of providing it. You have to be fine, or at least only as not fine as your friends can handle—friend, rather. Even if you weren't, there's no alternative.

The draught rushes and something creaks and you continue staring at the ceiling, knowing that if you look, you'll will something into existence that wants to harm you: some awful unknowable creature, waiting to be borne in the doorway as soon as you tilt your head, ready to violate you and take rip your skin from your flesh, leaving you alone with your anatomy, no more of your slipping façade of manhood. You haven't been to the gym at all since Case left; you don't think you'd be able to fight back. So you stare at the ceiling. You stare, and you stare, and you stare.

The light shifts from the grey of moonlight to the black behind your eyelids. Something white glimmers, a figure beside you, sitting on your bed. It speaks and you can't hear it and you can't respond. You sense its laughter, something running through your hair. You watch its fingers trace over your face; you feel them on your lips and down your neck. A shiver courses within you but you don't move—you can't.

It bends over and tastes your neck. You glimpse its face, complete with features but devoid of anything except malice, any colour in its skin long since lost to dead bone white. You feel its tongue, cold against the beat of your blood, pumping through your veins faster and faster. You think it might hurt you if you move. You think it might hurt you if you don't. You think you're in danger for even noticing it at all, but when you shut your eyes, you still see everything: its ribs; its nails; its

grin.

“What is your name?”

The voice comes from within and without, converging out of sync with itself. It sounds as bare as the face pressed against yours. You don’t want to answer. You don’t want to say it. You want to push it off but its fingers are grasping your neck, twisting themselves so tight that you can’t contact your body. But the feeling is unplaceable and wrong rather than painful, as if meant to avoid description so you end up alone with something you can never explain.

“What is your name?”

The voice prickles over your skin. Its breath claws into your face, presses ice into your pores. Maybe you could say it just to make this end, but you can’t move your lips, almost grazing against its own now, splintering and thin. Its face has moved even closer, pressing deeper into and around you. You see its eyes, white iris and black pupil and nothing in between. You feel its weight, and you feel it shifting as it speaks again:

“E—L—I—Z—“

You bolt upright and punch air. You throw your covers and flap your hands and shout indiscriminately until Bradley comes through the door.

“What the fuck, Ellie; it’s 4am.”

“There was a bad thing,” you cry. You’re really crying, you realise. You’re wailing. You throw your arms around Bradley and sob into his chest. “There was a bad thing and it came into my room and I was so scared.”

He wraps his arms around you and pulls you into his bulk. You feel his muscle and his fat and his body hair, and you know he can protect you. You nuzzle inwards, touch starved and needing something on which you can wipe your tears. You feel his voice as much as you hear it when he speaks:

“What did it do?”

“It—it—it spoke to me,” you say in muffled babbles, but Bradley strokes your hair and waits for you to continue. “It stared at me and touched me and asking what my name was, and then it starting spelling out E, L, I, Z, and I got up before it could finish but I was so scared and I didn’t want to hear it and how did it know?”

There’s a moment of serenity. You’re finally able to cry it all out and you’re here with Bradley and there’s fear all around you but right now, in his arms, you feel like things are going to be okay, if you can just get it back together. You look up at your saviour, blotches of tears still crowding your eyes.

“Maybe if you say it, that will dispel this thing.”

You make the slightest of retreats. Your voice comes out a whisper, even though you meant to speak.

“What?” you say.

“If you say your name, maybe you can own it, that way it won’t have power over you.”

Bradley holds you tighter. You trust him; you have to. You'll try.

—" you say.

"You need to say it out loud, Ellie."

You choke it out: "Elizabeth."

"Louder, Ellie. Show it you're not afraid."

The tears resume, streaking down your cheeks as you scrunch your face, straining as you push it out: "Elizabeth."

"What's your name?"

You grip him and he grips you and you sob and shout and say, "Elizabeth."

"*Huh?*"

You push away to stare at Bradley in his smiling, toothy face, so joyous that you're facing your fear like this.

"My name is Elizabeth."

He pulls you in close and whispers something you can't quite make out. You stay there for a while, waiting for the sobs to subside, before he releases his hug and lays you down on the bed. As he throws the covers over you, you smile at him. He flashes you a grin back and then exits, leaving you to stare at the ceiling. So you stare at the ceiling. You stare, and you stare, and you stare.

Sixteen

You wake up. You feel good! God, you feel so good. You feel the coarse texture of your bedsheets and the drool down your face and the morning darkness pressing down and the vibrations from your alarm and the dust in the air—all in 4K with 3D audio. It's ASMR inducing, or at least that's the term you ascribe to the buzzing in your head. But you feel good. You feel a little quirky today, sure, but you feel so good. The room bends around you as you move to your dresser. You throw on your clothes and shudder at the feeling of the fabric, so slightly crusty from the hard water here. There's a sensory burst, indulgent, like scraping a metal scourer hard across your mother's non-stick pans, over and over until it's metal on metal and she's screaming and you're crying cause she said to clean them and it was so dirty it didn't look anything like the nice shiny, silver pans on the drying rack.

That was a weird memory to resurface. You giggle; you probably won't see your mother ever again since she thinks this whole gender thing is just a protracted rebellious phase. There's a bliss to be found in defeat. You've felt it your whole adult life: that moment in the pub after the Brexit results came out, knowing that this was as bad as it could get; that moment with your then-friends at the café well after close, staring at the 2019 exit polls, knowing that this was as bad as it could get; that moment alone scouring online marketplaces for the right kinds of face masks as soon as lockdown was announced, knowing that this was as bad as it could get. You've always been wrong, always preempting the worst of it, always mistaking the news of bad times ahead as the bad times themselves. But still, you feel good when it all goes wrong, because you believe, just for a moment, that you've hit the bottom, and there's nowhere left to go, and nothing matters. You feel good.

Kelly seems disconcerted as you walk into the café. Your past detachment from your surroundings has been replaced by a hyper vigilance, an acute awareness of the shiny varnish on the tables, the watermarks from where customers have neglected to use their coasters, the smells of coffee and plant-based milk, the buzz

of the lighting casting swirls of colours onto the pavement, reflected and refracted by all this rainbow veneer. Kelly replies to something you didn't notice yourself say. You hear all the words, the sound of her uptight rasp, but you don't consciously put them together. You reply without meaning to and your own voice comes out as static. She seems satisfied at least, and you set up for work.

The closed sign is flipped to open. Light begins to trickle over the top of your building onto the roofs of the houses opposite, still too early to flood the canyon of a street. Customers begin to flow in, Kelly taking the first few, a couple wayward office workers who seem bemused by the décor. A triad of clearly queer children enter, wanting to escape the oppression of home life while off from school. When Kelly talks about pride, she means these kids who have a space to be themselves in a way that she never did—nor you ever did—at that age. Or even now, really, you think. She tells them to sit and brings over their hot chocolates and tacitly weak coffees. You see her sit with them and ask how it's going, mothering the nascent future of culture, inevitable just as long as enough of you stick around.

You handle the next customer, waiting politely at the desk while you stare over at your boss. You notice him, the spots of skin between the fibres of his facial hair, his freckles, his cheekbones and the illusory inward curve of his cheeks; he seems like a very conscious person, an ally certainly if not queer himself. You try to start the day out on the right foot:

"Hi there! What would you like today? I just want to let you know that we're out of oat milk, but we've still got soy, almond, skimmed, and full fat. You'll notice that we have pronoun badges here and that mine says 'he/they', but this is a mistake. My pronouns are he/him, which should be obvious, so if you call me 'they' or any variant thereof, I will ruin your coffee before accidentally pouring it on you. Personally, I think this whole pronoun badge business is an advancement that solves something which wasn't a problem. Don't you want to know how people see you? Don't you want to feel validated for the effort you put into your gender presentation? See, I look at you and I can safely assume 'he', and doesn't that feel better than if I had to ask? I expect you to do the same for me."

"It's 'she,' actually."

You feel your cheeks set ablaze as her delicate, quivering voice corrects you. You insides drop, as if to escape this situation as quickly as possible. Words leap out of you before you have time to assess:

"Then you should shave: just some advice. I think that failing to make the least bit of effort to even look queer, to the point where saying your pronouns is indistinguishable from parody, creates an environment where no one wants to support anyone else's gender without asking for permission first, which diminishes what that support means. Your attitude is the reason people don't see me as a man anymore."

The queue formed behind this person is all staring away at the ceiling and the floor and the decorations on the walls. But the kids are watching. So is Kelly.

The person says, “But anyone can be a woman. I don’t know; you could be a woman if you wanted to.”

“But I’m not! Are you blind or just stupid?”

“Right, okay, Elijah: back room, now,” Kelly shouts, raising her voice above the level yours seems to have reached. Your legs shake as you walk. This is the hardest part, the fall, the anticipation of the landing.

“Elijah, I don’t know what is going on, but you cannot be here right now,” Kelly says, now in this dinky little room full with boxes of coffee grounds and spare shoes and aprons. “I wish I could just give you a break because something is clearly wrong, but if people don’t feel safe around you it affects the whole environment. You’ve been late, you’ve been distant, and now you’re shouting and misgendering customers? You should have talked to me before it came to this. I have to fire you.”

And there you go: the earth rises up to meet you and you feel weightless in this moment, where the spray of your blood and guts spreads across rock bottom before it drops out again.

You say, “Do I get severance?”

Kelly breathes in. “Your contract is zero hours, so no. There isn’t enough money to pay you anything to tide you over with how bad the business rates for gas and electricity have gotten. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” you say, and it really is okay. You feel relieved that this is so final.

You hand Kelly your apron, complete with pronoun badge. You smile—you really smile—and you leave the café for the last time.

Seventeen

At some point on the walk home, you realise you have to find a job now. The weightlessness collapses into its inverse and the final few steps you take towards your door are slow and stunted. You enter, sit on the floor, take off your shoes, throw them across the hall and listen to them bounce ineffectively off the wall. Fucking shitty trainers. You wish you had Docs.

You scramble to your feet and pace. First through the living room then through the kitchen and back and forth and back and forth. You have to find a job, probably another shitty barista job serving socially conscious people who are so feminist as to never believe that anyone would actually want to be a man. Or worse, you'd have to serve people who aren't so clued up on queer conventions and would just assume you're a woman, because apparently that's how people see you. You hate the uncertainty, the in between, the "they." You want something to work out for once. You want something to last.

You stand in front of the plaster you put up over the hole you made, all those months ago. It's not quite the right white to match the kitchen wall, but the letting agent's inspector didn't notice. You decide you can do it better this time. Patching things up always makes you feel better.

Your fist connects with the wall, but the only thing that breaks is your skin.

And again.

And again.

There's blood on the floor now, dripping from your knuckles. You're so weak. The mark you've left on this house is a shitty plaster job done to appease your sense of gender that no one will ever acknowledge or care about. That's the legacy of your manhood: a stain. You weren't enough for Alexandra to stay, and now she probably resents you for wasting all her time when she could have been with a real man. And Bradley must resent you too, wasting his time with your attempt at brotherly advice when really he managed to sort his life out himself, while you've let yours spiral to this after one bad dream.

You collapse. You cry. There's nothing left to do.

“Ellie, what’s wrong?”

You didn’t notice Bradley come in, but you feel his body against yours, holding you back from the wall where you’ve been banging your head for the last... how long has it been? You lean in as the tears continue to flow.

“I got fired,” you say.

“Oh, Ellie.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do.” You clench your fingers into fists and flap your hands. “I wish my parents were willing to help; I wish I knew how to make things better; I wish I had friends; I wish I didn’t feel like this.”

“You’ve got me.” You do; you feel him so close to you and you never want him to let you go. He kisses your neck and you whimper. He says, “Don’t worry about the job. My pay rise should cover rent until our contract rolls around and then we can downsize.”

“Together?”

Another kiss. “Of course we’ll be together.”

You feel something warm and rotten bloom inside you. You cry louder. You pull away from Bradley’s embrace and throw yourself back and wail and sniffle and flap. Bradley is loving you the way you wish you had loved her. This is just what you always wanted, to feel the spark of a man and a woman together, lightning arcing across the difference between you. You see a flash of your retinas against the white wall. You hear the rush of blood in your ears. This feels like winning on a technicality, the wrong side of the perfect couple.

You scramble and push Bradley away, backing up against the wall and kicking so he gives you space. You scream, and you scream until your screams become words:

“I don’t know that’s going on. I want this to stop. I want whatever has been happening to stop. Something is happening to me and I don’t know what it is and I want it to stop. I want a break. I want a time out. I can’t think. I can’t stop thinking. I can’t focus or work or make sense. I wish I were a boy. I wish I could go home. I miss my Mummy and my Daddy. I miss my friends. I miss Alexandra. I miss Case. I miss—“

Bradley’s lips interrupt yours. His tongue is in your mouth. You freeze. You let it happen. You wait for his cue.

“Ellie,” he says, still pressed up to your face, “when was the last time you shaved?”

“I...” ...don’t know.

He stands and brings you with him. “Let’s get you to cleaned up, okay, and then I’ll make it all better.”

Bradley’s bed is soft. You sink into it, beyond it, through the floor and the ground and the bottom of the Earth. Your face feels so soft. You didn’t recognise who it was in the mirror Bradley was shaving, but you figure it must have been you.

“I’m going to take your jeans off.”

You shut your eyes and feel the cool covers around you, the endless expanse of mattress beneath. Your belt is undone; there are hands at your hips; your jeans come down, along with your boxers. You don't even get a flicker of embarrassment. You might be dreaming.

"I'm going to take your top off too."

Sure. You raise your arms and feel your ugly sweater and your t-shirt and your binder come up and over your head all at once. It hurts but then you feel free. You think your body doesn't match your binder anymore from all the shifting and growing, no longer able to fit. You feel Bradley's skin against yours as he climbs into bed next to you. He's so rough it almost hurts against how soft you've gotten. He props himself up on his elbow and looks down at you.

"Do you want me to help you figure out what's wrong?"

He's circling one nipple of yours with his free hand. It so sensitive, and so sore, and you breathe and moan and gasp and speak simultaneously. Some faintly affirmative sound comes out; that's all you can manage.

"So," he says. You're still looking at the ceiling, but he's in your vision, hovering out of focus while his words work their way into your thoughts. "I think this has something to do with sex—biological sex, that is. I'm not sure that trying to be a man is good for you. And I know you think that's what you are, but I mean, how long have you been out as a boy?"

You flicker in and out of memory. "Five years, I think."

"And now how long did you—I don't know—believe in Santa? What age were you when you stopped?"

Now you feel embarrassed. "I was eleven. My parents had to tell me because they were worried I'd get bullied at secondary school."

"Oh my god, that's so sweet." Bradley moves away from your breasts and reaches up to hold you face. "Consider: you thought Santa was real for more than double the time you've thought you're a boy. Now I've got to play the part of Daddy and let you know that it's time to stop believing."

You hold your breath. There's a moment between moments—a moment where this could all change, where anything could happen if you could think of what to say, if you could think at all. But you just breath out and let Bradley speak again:

"Do you feel better than before you came out?"

"I don't know?"

Bradley twists your face to his; now you'll have to address him directly.

He says, "Let's weigh up the evidence for both sides. You've lost your job; you've lost your friends; you've been acting hysterical; you've been crying and trying to break things and hurting yourself; you're distant from your parents; you've wrecked your body." He smiles wider than you've ever seen. "And on the other hand?"

"Gender euphoria?"

He frowns a knowing, fake frown, overemphatic as if he knew you would misunderstand the question. He asks, "Is this 'gender euphoria' in the room with

us?”

You can't reply. It isn't, clearly.

“We're looking for concrete evidence,” he continues. “That's how it works in therapy. There's a big difference between something being real and something being in your head. And everything we can see that's the former points to coming out being a mistake.”

You can't tell if you're nodding of your own volition or if his hand on your cheek is moving your head. But the word that comes out is all you:

“Yes.”

“Do you trust me, Ellie?” he says, so close and so warm and holding you so gently.

“Yes.”

He laughs.

“Do you want to know how euphoria feels?”

Eighteen

“Open your legs for Daddy.”

You oblige.

“Good girl.”

You notice that Bradley is naked. He positions himself between your legs and you take him all in: the curling hair over the round hills of his chest and stomach; ropes of delts and biceps and triceps along his arms and shoulders, like you used to have; his cock, larger than even your strap-on. He kisses your breasts and you flutter. His stubble scratches against your skin. You feel it up your neck and across your cheek until he kisses your lips, lying limp on your expressionless face. He kisses you deeper as he grabs something on the bedside table. You hear a bottle squirt. He stops for a second, and then you take him all in again.

You know how your part goes. You’ve seen it every time you got into bed with Alexandra, with Case. You’ll play your role better than they ever did.

“Do you feel good?”

Yes.

“Yes, what?”

Yes, Daddy.

“Good girl.”

Thank you, Daddy.

“That’s what you are, isn’t it?”

Yes, Daddy.

“What are you?”

A girl, Daddy.

“That’s right. Do you have a girly name?”

No, Daddy. I’m sorry, Daddy.

“You used to, didn’t you?”

Yes, Daddy.

“Are you going to share it with me?”

...

"You said it this morning."

I know, Daddy.

"I can't help you if you aren't honest with me."

Elizabeth.

"What's that?"

Elizabeth is my name, Daddy.

"Good girl."

Thank you, Daddy.

"I'm so proud of you."

Thank you, Daddy.

"I'm so happy you're getting over all this silliness."

Thank you, Daddy.

"I'm going to make you beautiful again."

Thank you, Daddy.

"You're so tight."

Thank you, Daddy.

"Am I your first?"

Yes, Daddy.

"How does that make you feel?"

STATIC

Like a woman.

"Like a woman?"

Like a girl.

"Well that's what you are, Elizabeth."

Yes.

"Yes...?"

Yes, Daddy.

"Good girl."

Thank you, Daddy.

"You made an awful boy."

STATIC

I know, Daddy.

"Did you know? You were pretending for five years."

I'm sorry, Daddy.

"It's alright. We're together now and I'll make things better."

Thank you, Daddy.

"I know you love me."

STATIC

Yes, Daddy.

"Do you want to say it?"

STATIC

I love you.

STATIC

“That’s so sweet.”
Thank you, Daddy.
“I’m getting close.”

STATIC

Please, Daddy.

STATIC

“You want it?”

STATIC

Yes, Daddy.

STATIC

STATIC

I love you, Daddy.

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

I want it, Daddy.

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

Elizabeth wants it.

STATIC

Daddy, please.

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

Please.

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

STATIC

Plea—
“I’m coming.”

* * *

After Bradley rolls off, you begin to touch yourself. Your fingers get sticky with his lube and his come and your wetness and your blood. He grabs your throat before you can start, but not hard. You feel him gently finger your arteries with the experience of someone who knows exactly where it feels best. You're dizzy. You giggle and feel the heat in your face and the stars in the air.

There are no more thoughts as you give in to the pleasure of this new normal, your own orgasm coming into focus as you stroke your aching clitoris.

When you wake, you don't know whether you slept or blacked out.

Nineteen

Christmas happens. You can't really say more than that. You try to think about what you did over the holiday period, even over New Year's, but it's all been emulsified into one memory, fragments of detail appearing on occasion. You did the shopping, but Bradley wrote the lists. You did the cooking, but Bradley gave you the recipes. You did the cleaning, but Bradley shouted about what was dirty. The only things you did of your own volition were suck his cock and fuck yourself with your old dildo to deal with the vaginal atrophy; blood stains are difficult to get out of the sheets.

Bradley was mostly away at work. It was a busy period and the restaurant had extended its hours while the customers were there. The Christmas menu they had was a real pain, apparently; you heard a lot about it, about how Damien is so full of himself and decided to put on a bunch of fancy bullshit that was nigh impossible to get right during the dinner rush. The end result was that you were mostly alone with your lack of thoughts, and when you weren't, Bradley filled up your head with cock and vitriol. It was easy. It was consistent. You had no complaints.

Your wardrobe changed. Bradley gave his old panties and bras to you, the stuff that you couldn't sell during your prior rent crisis. They feel warm, and tight, and they make you very aware of everything you have and everything you are. With some of the enlarged tips he received over Christmas, you ended up getting a whole suite of charity shop dresses and skirts and blouses, all a touch too tight even though Bradley took your measurements before going out and getting it all for you. You shaved as well, all of your body using those special razors and the fragrant foam that Tulip left behind. There's a schedule blu-tacked up on the bathroom door for you now since you're prone to dissociate and forget what needs doing. Bradley is so thoughtful like that. He must love you, even if he still hasn't said it yet.

And then Bradley took a holiday. January is dead for some restaurants, so he's been alternating between the house and the gym for the past week. You hear him call up letting agents on the phone and schedule house viewings. "Yeah, two people: me and my girlfriend," is what he says. You always blush, and your heart

does little somersaults—or it certainly does something at least. But it’s really been wonderful spending so much time together. He buys cheap films from CEX and you sit on his lap in the loveseat, snuggling up as your cinematic focus fades to conversation, and your conversation fades to sex. There’s still some soreness and some blood, but Bradley doesn’t mind, so sometimes he’ll just pull your panties to the side and use you to keep his cock warm halfway through a movie. If you’re bored, you’ll grind against him, even though you know it’ll hurt when he throws you over the couch and decides he needs to bruise your cervix.

He’s moved from using Ellie to Lizzy, now that you’re back to using Elizabeth. He’ll tease you when you’re begging for his touch, asking if “Lizzy the lezzy” wants some cock. The shitty Facebook page throwback always makes you cringe, but that just makes him laugh which means it’s worth it.

“I’m about to head out to see Case. Have you seen my binder anywhere?”

Bradley joins you in your old room, your bed now covered in clothes waiting for buyers on Facebook marketplace.

“I sold it to pay for that makeup you’re wearing, silly.”

You’ve dolled up today, foundation and colour correct countering your unfortunate beard shadow, red, velvet lips plump and pouting on your bright, brown face. The bright eye shadow and wing tip eyeliner are what seal it for you though, gifting you an expression of perpetual surprise.

“Oh, thank you!”

You give Bradley a kiss before you leave the house, blustering into the best that January has to offer: an eight-Celsius high and low, grey sunshine. You can’t go back to the queer café, you assume, so you let Case pick the spot. It’s tiny, placed on the corner of your high street. You look so beautiful, contrast against the backdrop of “For Let” signs and empty storefronts. It’ll be nice when Case sees what he’s missing—xe! Bradley doesn’t do pronouns anymore so it takes you a second to get back into the habit. You think it’s impolite but you’re not about to tell him how to think, not again. But there xe is now; you wave as xe comes through the door.

“El—“

“Elizabeth.”

Case stares and you see some mental recalibration go on behind xyr eyes.

“Elizabeth?”

“And she/her pronouns,” you reply, “in case it wasn’t obvious.”

“Right.”

Case stares more. You feel so seen, so pretty it aches and twists your insides around and you think you’ll throw up.

“Have you ordered?” xe asks.

“I haven’t got any money.”

Xe tilts xyr head, examining your fluffy jacket, flowing blouse, all the new makeup.

You explain, “Bradley got this for me; he’s in charge of our finances.”

“Right,” Case says. Your body tells you that was the wrong thing to say but you don’t know why. Xe continues, “I’ll get us both something. You still like filter coffee or has that changed too?”

You giggle and Case just about jumps. Xe composes xemself enough to order at the till, then returns with two full mugs and an expression of inimitable concern.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” you laugh. You blow on your coffee and realise you could have said “What? Is my gender not allowed to be fluid?” and really own xem, but you missed the chance. Plus, it’s easier to let other people do the talking, that way you don’t make a mess of things.

“Uhhm, okay.” Case just takes a sip from xyr mug and looks away. “You missed the January group meeting.”

“Why would I go?”

Case looks away to a different spot in the distance, and says, “I mean you could have gone to the women’s meet, but Eunice and Maya said you weren’t there when I asked. They seemed worried.”

You haven’t heard from them yourself, so you shrug and giggle again. “Case, I’m not queer.”

“Elij—“

“Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth,” Case corrects. “You are such a dyke that you ended our relationship over it. You can’t tell me you’re not queer.”

“Well,” you smile, feeling all dreamy just thinking about him, “I’m dating Bradley now. I’m his girlfriend,” you explicate with pride.

“Right.”

Case clearly doesn’t know what to say. Knowing xem, it’s probably some cryptic, gothic goofiness. You’ve got to preempt xem if you want to avoid an hour answering increasingly obscure questions.

“Look,” you say, reaching your hand to xyrs, “let me just tell you what I’ve been doing.”

Case seems satisfied with the explaining and dissatisfied with the explanation as you leave the café. It was all non-linear, each little detail sparking a tangent as you remembered it, but you did cover the month and a bit since your breakup. You head towards home and Case follows you, even though you know that’s not the fastest way for xem from here.

“You can stay with me,” xe says.

“I really like my new bed,” you reply. “It’s so big and soft and great for fucking.”

“I’m not—“ Case starts, before pausing, as if xe only has one chance to say this correctly. “You should stay with me.”

“Like a sleepover?”

“Why are you acting like that?” xe shouts, unable to adhere to any sort of composed version of xemself. “You are not a child. Who you were is not at the front who you are except by possession; I need to exorcise you.”

“Now you’re the one acting silly,” you pout. “What does that even mean?”

“I—” Another pause. “Bradley is abusing you and you are retreating into some infantile version of yourself to make it bearable.”

Your face goes red, visible even beneath your foundation, as if all the blood was pushed there from the rest of your body, which is what it feels like. You shout back, “How dare—”

“Okay,” Case screams, cutting you off. Xe lowers xyr voice, noticing concerned bystanders. “Okay, maybe Bradley isn’t abusing you. If he isn’t abusing you, he’ll let us have a sleepover for a few days to give him space while he cleans out your room before you move out.”

“But,” you say, heartstrings wobbling, “he likes it when I do the cleaning.”

“Look, I don’t know. I’ll—I’ll give you a crash course makeup tutorial to improve your skills since you must be a bit rusty.”

Tears threaten to wreck your mascara. You say, “I thought I looked really nice today.”

“You do,” Case admits, to you both. “Fuck, you really do.”

Something in you is hurting and hurting and you get the sense that you’re not really here, an overwhelming sensation that this body doesn’t belong to you, these hands aren’t yours, this face is something you’re temporarily trapped behind and the real owner is going to come along soon and kick you out. You look at the person beside you and you can’t recall their name. You can’t even distinguish their face from any other. It’s all colours and shapes.

Some colourful and shape-y thing is thrust into your hands. A series of curved plastic pieces connected to each other in a big, wonky loop. You uncurl it from its coil. You make two plus shapes. You make an infinity sign. You try to coil it back but it ends up different, less compact than the way you received it.

“You good?” Case asks.

You’re at your door now.

“I don’t think so,” you say.

“Stay with me, tonight at least.”

You open the door and tell xem, “Okay. Wait here; I can’t just ditch like Alexandra.”

You hear Case mutter something about how that’s different, but your focus is on Bradley, waiting in the living room.

“I heard that; you with Case tonight?”

Everything about him is casual—gentle tone; relaxed body; a touch of a smile in one corner of his mouth. Maybe he doesn’t understand that you might not be back tomorrow.

“Yeah,” you say, attempting to replicate the same nonchalance.

“There’s something you should check in my bedside table. Top drawer.”

As he says that, he sits back and opens his phone, just scrolling. You don't think he wants a reply, so you go through to his room and walk around the bed. His bedside table stands bare aside from a bottle of lube and a sunlamp. You pull open the top drawer, keeping your mind free of any expectation.

Oh. There are your blood forms. And a letter from the NHS. A couple, actually. You open one and it informs you that you've been discharged from the gender service for failure to make your initial appointment. You don't feel the need to open the others. There's one other thing too, right at the back: a pregnancy test.

You text Case that you'll be one to five minutes, depending on the style of test this is.

Twenty

Two red lines.

Twenty-One

You sit on the floor, waiting. You keep waiting. This house is so much warmer than your old one; it's so much smaller too, but the heat is the important thing. And the reduction in bills, actually: half an hour of running the heating will get the whole place warm. Amazing. You smile. You're finally home.

You open the door before they even knock.

"Hi!" you squeak. "I think we need to get reintroduced, don't we? My name is Elizabeth; I use she/her pronouns; and my favourite haunted house movie is *Parasite*."

Bradley hugs you from behind. He asks you, quietly, "Does that really count?" before addressing his friends with, "Come in! Still Bradley; still 'he'; probably *The Shining*."

"Good choice, my friend," Rover says, pushing his way inside. "I've got to go with *The Shining* too. Stephen King is a genius."

"Sure," Bradley says as he turns to gesture the others into the new flat.

"Mine is *Paranormal Activity*," Doc says. "I saw—"

"We know," says Damien, mercifully cutting Doc short. "It's technically also a possession film, not a haunted house film."

"What about *Parasite*?" you ask.

"Haven't seen it." He seems unbothered by this admission, as if you're the outlier. You suppose you are, all things considered. He continues, "Mine is *Poltergeist*. But more importantly, Elizabeth, you are glowing."

"Yeah, congratulations," says Rover, taking your hand for a kiss.

"Thank you!" You flap and flutter. "Can you tell?"

Bradley, scratches your hair, shaggy in the intermediary stages of growing out, and he says, "I told them, but I think it's starting to show."

You massage your nascent baby bump. "We don't have a name yet," you say, anticipating everybody's question. "Our only idea currently is Sarah for a girl and John for a boy, but we both think that's a bit silly."

Everyone laughs, regardless of whether they get it or not, you think. You

gotten used to this dismissive flattery. It's easier, no longer needing to keep track of what people mean or how to express yourself correctly. You just say what you say and people laugh and then continue on with what they were doing. Bradley decides to give a tour.

Your house is small, so it doesn't take long. There's the open kitchen which runs into the living room; through one door there's a bathroom; through another there's your bedroom. The front door leads to outdoor stairs in an alley between a newsagent and a chippy. There's a bus stop across the road, which Bradley uses to get to work. The bus isn't frequent, but it runs at night so he didn't have to change jobs. Everyone *oohs* and *aaahs* when you mention the rent. Bradley privately mentioned to you that it's the same price as when he and Alexandra first moved into your old place, but that's not a fun thing to bring up right now.

You had to get all new used furniture, but you made sure to buy a couch and an armchair and a loveseat, so everybody is able to shuffle into their usual places in the living room as Bradley puts on the film and distributes the fried chicken procured from next door. Tom Hiddleston cooks and eats a dog on screen. Damien starts to complain that this is a bit esoteric but Bradley asks him to give it a chance.

"It's Ben Wheatley," he says as he picks you up and sits down with you on the loveseat. "He did *A Field In England*, and *Free Fire*; have you seen *Free Fire*?"

"What's this about? Is it an MCU thing?" Damien asks, both ignoring and answering Bradley's question.

"Fuck, no. It's a haunted house movie, except it's a block of flats, and the ghost is Thatcher."

"Is it scary?" asks Doc.

"Not unless you're scared of neoliberalism." Bradley takes a breath. You look at his face as he works to fight off something inside him, something behind his retinas trying to claw its way into his vision. "Which... I don't know; maybe you should be."

You giggle, quietly. Even after the year you've both had, some things haven't changed.

"Bradley, this is so pretentious," Damien says.

Tom Hiddleston is painting his bedroom. Admittedly, you don't understand what's going on either, but your thoughts fade to static when you're not actually doing anything to keep them occupied. It's just sensations: the sound of bones being chewed; the colours of white faces flickering with the TV; the feeling of Bradley touching and holding and making it known that you're his.

"Okay fine," he replies, pushing you onto your feet. "Lizzy, can you throw away everyone's rubbish and get everyone a beer. We can do something else—whatever!"

You take everyone's used boxes of chicken bones and chip scraps to the bin. You smile back at their polite, mouthed "Thank you"-s and make sure to bend over as

you hand each of them a beer, showcasing how low cut your tops have gotten, how big your breasts always were. You return to your loving boyfriend and tune back into his rant.

"But fine, I didn't think that this was inaccessible; my bad for assuming any of you cared about film," Bradley says, standing up as you move to sit. "I'll turn it off."

"I was enjoying it," Rover says.

"Well, you are known to have taste," Bradley replies, ejecting the disc and putting it back in its case. "What did you like about it?"

"You two can talk about this later," Damien interrupts, putting on a tone that you've never heard anyone use outside of their workplace. "I've got a more interesting question: why did you detransition, Elizabeth?"

Why did you transition is the better question, but you're not about to correct Damien right now. What do you say? You could talk about euphoria and dysphoria, promises and lies, the culture, the community, the misplaced support. Your thoughts get quieter and quieter until it's all just static again. You want the single answer that's most true, and it when it comes you let it speak.

You say, "Okay, confession time: I've a crush on Bradley for years. I was so jealous of Alexandra that when I moved in with them I got all distant and decided to let him do his own thing. But when she left, I wanted to be there for him so much, I just didn't think it was time to express my feelings. But, when I realised he'd be into me as a woman, I knew I could go back and be someone he would love. And then our little miracle showed up and I haven't had doubts since."

Bradley stands beside you and ruffles your hair. You giggle. You try to take everyone's expressions in because you know they'll all be so happy for you, but you see their faces as cracked glass, colour and definition gone, replace with white as if they've been cut out from the world in front of you. You don't know where you are; you couldn't name the town; you can't describe the way back home to your old house for which you no longer have the right keys. You play with the toy you kept from Case until you return to the room. The men are talking, unaware that anyone had left.

"Are we doing confessions? I've got a confession too, about you, Elizabeth," says Damien.

"*Oooh!* Go on!" you say, and you ignore Bradley's grip tighten around your shoulder.

"We were all using 'they' for you last time because Bradley thought it would be funny to mess with you," Damien laughs.

You feel the hand on you clench hard enough to bruise you. Is Bradley upset or something? He definitely knows that you deserved it for the way you treated him. Maybe he was going to say it.

"Hey, shouldn't that be Bradley's confession?"

Your accusation comes out as a question, but your boyfriend himself steps in before Damien can reply.

“No, I’ve got a better one,” he says. “But first: Rover?”

“Okay,” Rover says. He rubs his hands together and then opens them to the floor. “I left coke in the back room at the restaurant when I changed jobs and I felt too awkward to go back for it.”

“Oh, I took that,” Doc says before anyone else can comment. “My confession is —”

“No one wants to hear any of your confessions, Doc,” says Damien. “Bradley, it’s your turn.”

Bradley turns to you and says, “My confession is that I spent a lot of money without your permission.”

A panic shrieks in your spine.

“Do we still have enough for rent and bills and council tax?” you ask. “Oh my god, there’s still so much we need to get for the baby. Can we afford this? How much did you spend?”

“Lizzy, look, I did all the finances and we’ll be fine,” Bradley says, dropping to one knee to hold you. “You’re supposed to ask me what I got.”

It takes a second for your wheezing to quiet enough to speak, but when it does, you say, “I’m sorry. What did you get, Bradley?”

He removes himself from the embrace. He has something in his hands. He shows you a small green box, which he opens. Inside, there is a ring. The ring is gold and thin. It holds a single diamond. You want to touch it but you can’t move. This must be the happiest day of your life.

“Elizabeth, will you marry me?”

The slightest nod of your head will have to do, since you can’t speak. Bradley takes your limp left hand and slides his purchase down your finger. You hear your friends applaud amidst the static. It’s tight around the knuckle, but after some twisting, it gets where it was meant to be. You worry that it won’t come off.

Epilogue

One

Dear Losers,

It has been a year and a half after I left and you haven't spoken to me in all that time and now you send me this? What do you expect from me? Are you going to confront me? Ask for an answer? Here... I'm impulsive, I walked out on a whim and you didn't stop me, you didn't even ask, you let someone I just met whisk me away and it took me months and months to start seeing the patterns that you should have noticed. All my friends flattened me into some one dimensional thing. Downbeat. Upbeat! She's so serious. She's so silly! And I started believing that that's just who I was with each of them. Emily makes me sombre. Kathryn makes me peppy. But no. I saw Emily when I was sombre, Kathryn when I was peppy, and it alternated. A week hanging out with one group here, another group the next little while, punk shows sometimes, art galleries others. Oscillating. The only people who were with me every day were you, but you two had done worse than flatten me, you made me into a static point by which you defined yourself. How do I know? Well once I left you both have come out as who you really are. I don't want to think that I was forcing you to be someone you weren't, but if I was I'm sorry. And I'm sorry for this. And I'm not going to send it. I'm still waiting for meds but the NHS takes a while, as I'm sure you both know, lol. I'm writing this out now so I don't say it at your wedding. I'm excited to see you both there.

Love, Alexandra.

I stare at my perfectly crafted letter, all my hopes and regrets, and I shove it into the shredder.

"Hey, Andi," Mum says as I bounce into the kitchen.

I look out over the Bristol channel. I hate the South. We're not even in Bristol, just fucking Portishead—I should give them a listen on the drive up; I've been slacking on my music recently, and my reading, I guess. I think I've been slacking on everything except making pornography, much to my mum's annoyance at being forced to take a walk whenever I need to film anything with moaning and groaning and all the other vocalisations of erotic rapture.

"Hi, Mum," I say, bending over and pecking her on the cheek as she spoons her oatmeal. Yes, I do kiss my mother with this mouth, thank you. I bet you wish I'd kiss you with it instead. "I'm heading out in a bit."

"To the wedding?"

"And to see Kathryn."

"Kathryn?" she asks. I guess she doesn't follow my sex work Twitter, but I'm sure I mentioned her when I lived up there.

"She's a friend from the same city, and a colleague. She helped me with the whole thing after—"

"We don't need to talk about him," Mum says, wary of how quickly this can spiral.

"You're right," I say, and I give her another kiss. "I'm excited to see them—the happy couple, that is. Do you still talk to any of your exes?"

"Andi, I'm trying to eat breakfast." She sounds apologetic as she puts her spoon down to look at me.

It's okay. It's alright! I'm not hurt, or upset; I just want a little lie down now before I head out. I mumble something that even I can't hear and get up to go to my room where I can get under my covers and not bother anyone for a while until inevitably I'll have to. I should have known Mum wouldn't want this kind of distraction while eating, especially when she's got to get to the office today, which I knew, cause she puts up her office days on the fridge cause they're infrequent, and I saw it right as I came into the kitchen cause that's the first thing you see through the door, and I should have—

"Andi, don't cry," she says. "C'mere. I know you're worried about seeing them."

She holds me. Sometimes all you need is to be held by your mother.

Two

The great roiling clouds above the M1 pelt down rain like traffic. Not the most beautiful weather so I pray that it will clear in two days time. I'm in my mother's car throwing itself at eighty miles an hour down the motorway, closing my eyes and clasping my hands just for a second—do you appreciate the effort I go through for you?

My eyes open and my steering wheel is gripped again. I should call while the driving is easy. Talking to you both at the wedding will be too much, I fear, and I don't want to ruin your happy day.

"Hey Siri!" I shout in the hopes my phone will hear me over Beth Gibbons' crooning coming from my speaker. "Call Tulip."

I haven't changed your name yet. Sorry!

"Alexandra!" you say. You picked up before the end of the first ring, which I find very funny so you'll have to pardon me laughing throughout this. "How's it going? You didn't reply to the RSVP."

"I'm on my way now. You got room for me?"

You pause. Your voice is sounding deep as the channel; weirds me out but we'll press through.

You say, "Like—at the wedding or to stay?"

"Wedding, silly," I reply. Would be way too awkward to stay over after everything that's happened. "I'm staying with Kathryn—you remember Kathryn?—and we're gonna film a collab tomorrow. Then the wedding's the day after! I'm so excited for you both. Congratulations!"

"Thanks. It's really been a journey."

"Always is," I say. I don't want to apologise for leaving; I want to avoid that whole topic entirely, actually. "Guess me leaving was the best thing that ever happened to you." *Ah*, well, at least I didn't apologise.

You're silent. Get over yourself, please; it's not like I was having a great time. I had to leave him too, the weird vlogger, pornographer, wild camper whatever. I had to get a cab all the way back to Mum's from the Highlands. She was furious when the cabbie asked for the bill, and then I had to deal with all her tears when

she realised what the situation had really been like. But he was so persuasive, and I was so ready for anything and I just wanted to go and go and go, and then that collapsed, obviously, but drugs are on the way.

You're still silent. C'mon, man. Fine, I'll say something for you:

"How's Elizabeth?"

Holy shit that name sounds strange in my mouth.

"She's right here, if you want to ask her yourself," you say.

I can take a hint, even if I had apparently missed some obvious clues. Give her to me, darling.

"Hey! Elizabeth!" I call out when I hear you against the phone. "Is it Elizabeth? Or like, Beth? Eliza? Ellie? Liz? Libby?"

"Bradley calls me Lizzie," you say.

"And your friends?"

Silence again. Oh for fuck sake, my lovelies.

I say, "Well, I'll call you Lizzie too, if big badly Bradley is gonna be alright with that."

You laugh. You giggle, even! Never thought I'd hear that.

You reply, "Bradley's fine with it; that's what his friends call me too."

Glad to hear he's got some, at least.

"How is it up there? You excited for the big day?" I ask.

"Well we had to move just outside the city since I stopped working and we wanted to downsize, but after I went back to being Elizabeth, my parents were so happy that they decided to help pay for the wedding! Which is why we could have it so soon."

That's... nice? Sucks that you lost my house, which is what I'd rather you'd have used the parental money on, but I was the one who left, to be fair.

You continue, "They're very excited for their granddaughter as well. And yes, we got the gender checked, but don't worry, we didn't throw a reveal party or anything silly like that."

"Are you excited?" I ask. You did bring up kids a couple times with me but always with the intention that we'd have the discussion when Tulip wanted kids too and maybe work it out between all of us. It was always me getting pregnant in those scenarios.

"Of course!" Oh, phew. "You know how I've wanted kids forever and now I finally get to have one, and a daughter as well! It's going to be so nice to have another girl around the house."

"That's great!" I say. "Oh, that's really wonderful, Lizzie."

"Thank you," you say. I could always hear your smile from anywhere and right now it's so obvious, beaming down the phone, bouncing off satellites. "I love him so much. He just keeps me steady."

"And how's he doing?" I ask. "It didn't sound like he wanted to talk to me."

I laugh, but you don't wait for me to shut up.

“He’s doing great! He just thought you wouldn’t come and hadn’t mentally prepared himself for what his new friends will think,” you say. “He doesn’t want them to compare them to me, especially when you’re so naturally beautiful and my parents are getting me laser for my facial hair and I’ve got to do all this makeup to look feminine and my hairline really crept back without me noticing, so now that it’s getting long I’ve got to really style it to get it to look right.”

“Well,” I don’t know what to say, but I try anyway, “I’m certain you’ll look beautiful tomorrow. And Bradley is the best at makeup so I’m sure he’ll feminise you right up.”

“Thanks, Alexandra. It’ll be nice to talk to you more at the reception.”

“You too, Lizzie.”

I don’t wait for any goodbyes before hanging up.

The rain continues and a barrage of taillights ahead come into focus. Beth Gibbons returns to my car. I press the brakes, then the clutch, then I slide the gearstick down and down and down into first. And with that, I stop.

That was a nice call, and I’m glad you’re both well. It seems like a strange situation but ours was too, I suppose. I should have tried to convert it into a proper triad, maybe. But there was so much inertia to overcome, and neither of you seemed to want to change things either. All this energy exploded out of me at once and I had to get away, but I’m glad you two made the most of it. You seem to be better with each other than I ever was with either of you.

Three

Oh dear. I think I had it all wrong. I can't believe that's you two up there on the altar. Well, in a literal sense, I can, but in the more-than-true figurative sense, I cannot.

You look bad, hate to say it. Even from here in my little wooden seat staring up at you, I can tell that something has gone seriously wrong with both your detransitions. Sorry—an aside—what a funny word: detransition. Is that how you two describe it? It seems just like transitioning again. The way your hair, Elizabeth, is swept over your forehead and pumped up with hairspray, and the way your chest, Bradley, is so bound up in those tight clothes that the tits I know you have are squooshed up against you, making your chest look weird and overly fat or overly muscular and just wrong. You've swapped your trans manhood for trans womanhood, and the other way around as well. You look like adults who got forced to take hormones for playing with dolls or race cars or whatever bullshit those right wing freaks think is happening in a country that, in reality, has a five year waitlist for gender affirming care.

This isn't cisness. You can't just choose to be cis. You can choose not to be trans, but you can't choose not to have lived those experiences, to have had that transition, and then another. If anything, I think you're the most trans people I've ever met—well, in person at least. I'm mutuals with some of those 'mtftm' types online, who get neovaginas and feminise their bodies and then say, "Psych! Thanks for the treatment but I'm not really a girl," and proceed to redefine what being a man can mean. It's inspirational when they do it, but with you two...

The vows start. The officiant says "in sickness" like that's not the situation at present. What a joke. Okay, okay—I think I'm being an asshole. You both told me you were happy. Or rather, you, Lizzy, told me you were both happy. Maybe it's a fantasy on your part to imagine you are. Maybe it's a fantasy on my part to imagine you're not. Maybe gender is all just a fantasy, a dream we have of who we could be, a dream of who we are when we're alone finally matching the us that people see. That's why I love filming solo scenes.

There are "I do"-s, and then I close my eyes for your kiss, and then you walk

back down the aisle. So this is how the TERFs win, to a rose petal exit toss. This is the triumph of an ideology as incoherent as you two, I hope you know. I hope you go home and have awful sex; I hope that baby bump gets in the way; I hope you have to use so much lube to make it all work that you sleep on slimy sheets. It's such a waste: all this effort to transition, again, and to fail. You've cut out every part of you that you were ever proud of, and of which you ever worked on, and it seems like that cutting cost more than growing it ever did. Maya and Eunice aren't here. No Emily. No Kelly. No Case, who, to be fair, I only know about cause we're mutuals. And instead to see your family, Lizzy. At least you made some abusive cunts proud.

I text Kathryn to say I'm not staying tonight.

Four

There's been a crash just outside Sheffield so I'm heading south on the A1(M). Psycho motorway. I pull into a petrol station with no entrance ramp at sixty miles an hour else the lorry behind me would flatten my mother's little car into the tarmac. Someone approaches my window to chastise my driving skills but I scream so loud they can hear it and back off. I step out and fill the tank. Fuck are these prices, god. Mummy won't mind her only daughter using the emergency credit card for this, considering the circumstances. I buy some plasticine candy and put it on the card as well. Business expense: having a bit of a tummy appeals to my ravenous trans feminine Twitter followers who all retweet and comment and boost the brand. I don't mean to sound so cynical; I love them and their enthusiasm for me doing whatever I want. Plus the tummy does look so sexy, hanging over the belt of my iconic low rise, boot cut jeans. Sometimes I think I'm a trans woman trapped in a cis woman's body with the way I get off on myself. Maybe I should buy a packer.

I sit back in the car and shove the red, sugary strips into my mouth, biting and chewing and singing along to the music I've got going. I'm still taking up space at the pump but there are empty spots. I managed to finish the entire Portishead discography on the way up so I'm relistening to all of Radiohead now. Glad I avoided a drunken punch-up at your wedding—*ha!*

I take my phone and text our old group chat. God that's a lot of messages asking if I'm coming back. Whoops! They're all dated from a year and a half ago though, so whatever. Anyway: I say that I had a nice time but felt overwhelmed and had to duck before the reception. I lie that you two look so cute together. I don't unmute the chat and I lock my phone again, leaving me to stare at a rectangular slice of my chin.

I bring the car to a start and blast out of the petrol station, hitting sixty again as I swerve along the non-existent exit ramp, slotting between two more lorries. I pull into the right lane, gear up to fifth, and feel myself fly as this little thing approaches eighty. I could swing my arms in either direction and crash and die right now. Someone could fall asleep in the fading red light of the sky and I'd be

compressed worse than a jpeg thumbnail. Isn't that wonderful? You both looked so serious on the altar, like your marriage would last, like you'd live forever so you must get this right, as if your detransitions were proof of some kind of permanence of spirit rather than mutability of body. You forgot the one rule of gender: have fun. The fuck does it matter otherwise.

Acknowledgements

This was broadly a solo effort, save for the cover art done by Rachel Reizin for no money even when I offered (but if this makes anything I promise I will send some of it to them, so fear not, dear reader). But anyway, the writing was a solitary endeavour, completed amidst a breakup. The closest someone came to helping was Em from work who passed me her pen and little waitress notepad thing when I wanted to scrawl down some ideas in the middle of a shift. Even so, there are still people to acknowledge.

Thank you to Devi, my first full draft reader, and to every subsequent draft reader. I didn't think anyone could pay attention to something I've made for however long it takes to read this. I appreciate the effort to get through the uncomfortable bits, and the putting up with my inevitable "Sooooo... what did you think of Andi?" afterwards.

Thank you to my mother, who—I don't know—might read this? It's a weird thought. At any rate, thank you for getting me some fancy text editing software for my birthday and letting me steal all your books (and thank you Dad for this also) and for reading *Detransition, Baby* when I was annoying about how it's the best book of all time and how you needed to read it to understand me.

Finally, thank you H— for finding something in the novel even when you didn't find it sexy. I want you to know that I really tried to make it hot. I guess I can make it up to you later x