

Love-Rats

By Caterina Incisa della Rocchetta

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By:

Caterina Incisa della Rocchetta

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Andre Furlani Chair

Danielle Bobker Examiner

Mikhail Iossel Examiner

Josip Novakovich Supervisor

Approved by _____

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Date _____

Abstract

Love-Rats is a short story collection concerned with love and relationships in contemporary society in the United Kingdom and North America.

The tone of the collection is generally ironic, with longer stories allowing for deeper character development and a larger range of tone. The majority of the settings, plots, and characters are dark and absurdist.

Throughout the collection boyfriends morph into different shapes and forms including sloths, rats, and vampires. The recurring theme of anthropomorphism in respect to love allows the stories to explore painful aspects of relationships, or damaging types of relationships, and look at them from a distance.

Many contemporary authors inspired this work, mostly notably Dan Rhodes, Lydia Davis, Amy Hempel, Kurt Vonnegut, and Etgar Keret. In particular, the short shorts by these authors served as a pattern to follow because of their use of minimalist language and humour. Some stories in the collection have also been inspired by nonfiction writing on the subject of romance from various media, including newspapers and magazines (*The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and the *Guardian*) as well as blogs and websites (The Toast and BuzzFeed), television shows (*Girls* and *Broad City*), and online dating apps (OkCupid and Tinder).

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Dedication

For my mother, Ann.

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Constructive Criticism

“Well, it was nice meeting you. Take care,” Laura said as she kissed Joe goodbye on both cheeks. She didn’t normally do the double kiss but that’s how he had greeted her and she felt as though she had to reciprocate. His beard felt like steel wool against her face. She pulled away and drew up her jacket around her chin. It was only October but it felt like winter was beginning to set in.

“We’re not gonna have a second date, are we?” Joe asked, crossing his arms and looking down at her.

Ah, so he had picked up on the ‘take care’ then.

“No. I’m sorry. But it was really nice to meet you,” Laura said as she smiled her seventeenth fake smile of the evening. “Take care,” she added once again. She turned to leave but Joe put his hand on her arm to stop her. She glanced down at it, her eyebrows raised and her mouth slightly open. Joe smiled and took a little white card out of the breast pocket of his suit jacket. “If you don’t mind, do you have five minutes to fill out an evaluation?” he asked.

“What?”

“Just some constructive criticism. Things that were good, things that were bad. Just some feedback, things for me to improve on.” He pushed the card into her hand.

Laura looked at the card and then back at Joe. “Are you serious?”

“It shouldn’t take longer than five minutes.”

Laura patted her pockets in a mock searching gesture. “Oh you know, I would but I don’t seem to have a pen.”

Joe reached into his breast pocket again. “I’ve got you covered,” he said as he handed her a Parker pen, engraved with his initials.

“But we’re outside; there’s nothing to write on,” Laura said, looking up and down the quiet street.

Joe turned around and indicated his back with his thumbs. “Take your time. I’m not in a rush.”

Laura sighed as she took the pen from Joe and placed the white card on his back and began to read. It was a little bigger than a business card. The top of the card read: *Please rate your date with Joe from one to five, with one being ‘terrible’ and five being ‘excellent.’* Underneath were three categories printed in comic sans: *Table Manners, Sense of Humour, and Overall Datability.*

Poising her pen above the scale for table manners, Laura recalled Joe sticking his finger into his ear and wiggling it around before pulling it out and examining the wax that had collected under his nail. He had also scratched his head furiously at one point, causing an avalanche of dandruff to come tumbling down. When the waiter came over he used the crumb sweeper on the red table cloth, assuming they were flakes of crusty bread.

His sense of humour was the next thing on the list. Joe certainly thought himself a comedian: “My friends all tell me, ‘Joe, you’re a funny guy! You should do standup, man!’ and it’s super flattering and all but you know, I like nice things so I need a steady job. Plus, just because I work in insurance doesn’t mean I can’t be funny. As a matter of

fact I actually happen to use my humor on a daily basis in the office. Great way to bond with clients.”

Laura nodded as she finished her third glass of wine.

“Here’s one,” Joe said, leaning across the table. “An insurance guy is on a date with a beautiful woman.” Joe winked at Laura. “He asks her, ‘Do you know what a woman and insurance have in common?’ She says, ‘No.’ And he says, ‘They’re both expensive, difficult to understand, and what you get is not guaranteed!’ HA!”

Laura gave her weakest smile. Joe, spurred on by this, said, “Here’s another one: Do you know the difference between a man and a whole life policy?”

Through gritted teeth Laura said, “No.”

“A whole life policy eventually matures! HA HA HA!” Joe laughed for a good two minutes at this while Laura excused herself to go to the bathroom.

Under sense of humour Laura circled ‘one’ twice. For overall dateability she gave him a generous ‘two.’ As she clicked the lid back on the pen she noticed a sprinkling of dandruff across Joe’s back. She tapped him on the shoulder and gave him back the card. He looked at it and opened his mouth in shock. Laura took a few steps back and shrugged. She turned and began to walk away.

“Take care,” she called back over her shoulder as she walked down the deserted street.

Decoders

“What time did you receive the message?”

“0300 hours exactly.”

“0300 hours? That changes everything.”

“Of course, but what does it mean?”

“Read me the content once again.”

“Heyy”

“That was the entire message, correct?”

“Affirmative.”

“Heyy spelled with two Y’s?”

“Affirmative.”

“Now, the question is, do we believe the two Y’s to be accidental or an indication of tone?”

“Well if I had received the message at say, 1100 hours then my analysis would be that the second ‘Y’ was, in fact, an error. However, given that the message was transmitted at 0300 hours I think the conclusion we can come to here is that the sender was trying to convey a relaxed and *intimate* tone.”

“Well, if we take that to be true then there’s only one conclusion we can come to.”

“Booty call?”

“Booty call.”

Frankenfine

“You’ve been lucky, Frank,” the doctor said as he peered down at him on the hospital bed. “If this had happened a few years ago, you’d be dead. But medicine is moving in leaps and bounds these days, Frank. Leaps and bounds.”

Frank blinked at the blinding whiteness of the room. He tried to move his arms, his legs.

“You wouldn’t believe how many people have had trampoline accidents, just like you, and not lived to tell the tale. As I said, Frank, you are a lucky, lucky man. But it may be a while before you’re showing off in the back garden again.”

“But, Doctor—my back, my legs. I can’t feel a thing,” Frank said, his eyes darting around the room. He saw his wife, Beth, redundantly pat his hand to comfort him. How insensitive, Frank thought.

“Not to worry, Frank,” said the doctor. “Yes, you are paralysed from the neck down for now, but you’re the perfect candidate for a new clinical study—” He paused, dramatically. “On the first human head transplants.”

“What?” Frank sputtered. “What are you—” Out of the corner of his eye he saw Beth swatting at his lifeless arm in attempt to shush him.

The doctor continued, “It’s quite safe, Frank, I assure you. What we do is take your head, pop it on a new body and fuse the spinal cords together. Bish. Bash. Bosh. Bob’s your uncle!”

“That sounds brilliant!” Beth cooed, turning to Frank and grinning, giving him the thumbs up.

Frank, alarmed, asked, “Have you done this on other people?”

“Well, technically, no. Not yet. You would be the first. We’ve tested it on rats and chimps, and in both cases 75% regained their motor skills in twelve to eighteen months. It worked beautifully for most of the animal test subjects.”

“Most?”

A stocky young orderly bustled in and started taking the brakes off on Frank’s bed and began wheeling it out of the room.

“Where am I going?” asked Frank. He tried to turn his head to look at Beth and the doctor but he couldn’t so he directed his question to the beige wall in front of him. It had a painting on it of a mother duck leading her chicks across a country road.

The doctor stepped in front of the bed to address Frank. “I’m going to take you and your wife down to our brand new, state of the art cryogenics lab to take a look at the bodies we have available. Since you’re our first patient you’ve got your pick of the bunch,” the doctor replied. He stood back and gestured to the door to let Beth go ahead.

“Thank you so much, doctor,” Beth said stepping out into the hallway, knocking into Frank’s bed as she went.

“Do we have to do it right now?” asked Frank.

“No time like the present,” the doctor cried, throwing his arms up and spinning in a circle like he was in a musical. The orderly whisked Frank down the hallway. Beth and the Doctor trotted alongside, gossiping across the gurney.

“Mrs. Burns, I’ve been dying to ask you: what is your opinion on the new celebrity dad-bod craze?”

“How much time do you have, doctor?”

Their laughing faces hovered over Frank and he could feel flecks of spit landing on his face.

The lab was a long white room, not much wider than a corridor. The walls were lined with clear, upright caskets, which hummed and reminded Frank of sun-beds. He tried to pretend that these weren't dead bodies he was looking at but just people getting a tan. They were in a tanning salon, he told himself, not window shopping for the dead. The orderly had propped up the bed so Frank could sit up and see the room clearly. The left wall had women and the right wall had men. The bodies were naked but the top part of the container had a black sticker over it, covering their faces. It reminded Frank of grainy footage of streakers on football pitches, their genitals censored with a black box. The orderly rolled the bed along slowly and Beth and the doctor stopped at each body to discuss it, like they were picking Frank out a new suit.

“Oh no, Mrs. Burns, this chap has one leg significantly shorter than the other, your husband would have to wear one of those platform shoes. No, no, we can do better than that.”

“Ooh, yes thank you you're quite right, Doctor. We wouldn't want that. What about this one?” Beth pointed at a tall, rugged body. Frank would've guessed he'd been a lumberjack when he was alive.

The doctor pondered. “Ah perhaps, perhaps. Let's take a look 'round the back.” He peered around the back of the chamber. “Ah, as I suspected. Take a look, Mrs.

Burns.” Beth looked behind the glass box, grimaced and shook her head. The doctor continued, “I mean perhaps hairy backs don’t bother some people but this fellow looks as though he could have been a woolly mammoth in a previous life, doesn’t he? HA! HA! HA! No, no we can do better than this.”

They kept rolling past the bodies. As they stopped in front of a middle aged, pot bellied man, Frank said, “What about this one, love?”

Beth looked at him like he was suggesting they graft his head on to the body of a gorilla. “Frank, that’s basically your body now. Don’t be silly. We have this wonderful opportunity, so we might as well get an upgrade. When your phone contract is up do you get the same model? No, you get an iPhone 6.” She shook her head and gestured for the orderly to keep moving.

“What sort of thing are you looking for exactly, Mrs. Burns?” asked the doctor.

Beth brushed her tawny, feathered fringe out of her eyes and blinked her long, black eyelashes. “Well, Doctor, I’ve never been too fussy, as you can see,” she said as she swept her arm across Frank’s body. “But since we have such a wide variety of options I’d like to get one taller than me. I’m 5’9” you see and I’ve always been a little self-conscious about it. I mean, ideally, I’d want a mix of Channing Tatum and George Clooney.”

The doctor laughed. “Well, you certainly know what you want. That’s excellent! I’m sure we’re going to find the perfect body for you, Mrs. Burns.”

Frank cleared his throat. “But what about what—”

Beth put her hand on the bed and they stopped in front of chamber number 12. “Oh,” she breathed, “this one is perfect.” Frank looked at it. The body was of a man who couldn’t be older than 35 and clearly worked out a lot. His chest was hairless and his abs looked like ripples in sand. On a white sticker on the front of the chamber there were a number of statistics:

Height: 6’3

Weight: 12.8 stone

Skin tone: White - Sunrise Flush.

“Oh please, doctor, tell me there’s nothing wrong with this one,” Beth pleaded. “How did he die?” She crossed her fingers and whispered, “Don’t let it be something disgusting. Don’t let it be something disgusting.”

The doctor peered at the chart next to the chamber. “We’re in luck,” he said, turning to grin at Beth and Frank, “brain aneurysm!”

“YES!” Beth punched the air in victory, holding her hand up to Frank for a high five, and then, remembering, picked up Frank’s hand and high fived it for him.

The operation was a success. Frank learned to move his new body, and after 18 months was able to walk and feed himself and do pretty much everything on his own, but it still didn’t feel like home. Beth, however, had really taken to the body. She was always buying it clothes and dressing it up and taking it out to dinner with her friends. Frank didn’t feel like talking at these dinners; he would just sit quietly and eat his salad (Beth said it would be a waste to get such a nice, fit body and ruin it with carbs) while Beth and

her friends would pull up his shirt and marvel at his abs, pointing out how you could see his pecs through the fine linen. Frank would mouth 'sorry' to onlooking patrons and waiters.

"He's like my very own monster," Beth would say. "I like to call him Franken...FINE." The girls would cackle and feel Frank's biceps. He would say nothing.

Before the transplant Beth and Frank had been homebodies, spending most Saturday nights at home watching telly. But now Beth had them going out almost every night.

"I just think that you've been given this second chance at life and that we should take advantage of that. Carpe diem, you know?" she said one evening as she dusted off the shoulders of his new leather jacket. "Besides, I love watching how jealous other women get when they see you."

"Oh yeah?" asked Frank, softly. He moved in to kiss her on the lips but she ducked down and kissed him on his chest with a big loud "MWAH".

"Good thing I'm not wearing lipstick!" she said and then kissed his hand and all the way up his arm before heading into to the bathroom to put on her makeup.

Frank turned and looked at himself in the mirror. He was wearing a pale blue shirt, a leather jacket, chinos, and leather dress shoes. He wondered if he'd made an effort to dress like this before if Beth would've fancied him more. He pulled aside his shirt collar and examined his scar. In public Beth would always make him cover the scar with

a collar or a scarf but in bed at night she would kiss the scar over and over and run her fingertips over the raised skin.

“I love you,” she would say and Frank would say it back even though he knew she wasn’t talking to him.

Credit Card Crush

Roxie and Clive lived the good life while they were together. They went to restaurants where the napkins were starched and the menu listed “Market Price” next to the dishes.

“You’re handsome and sweet and I love you all over,” Roxie would say each night before they went to sleep. Roxie never formally moved in to Clive’s bachelor apartment in Manhattan but she spent almost every night there. Clive would kiss her on the neck and say, “You are the sweetest thing I have.”

“You don’t own me, darling,” she would reply. And then repeat the phrase, “but you’re handsome and sweet and I love you all over.”

“I’ll love you forever,” he would say. “I mean it.”

“I believe you.”

“\$768 at The Hilton Barcelona?” Clive stared at his online credit card statement. Well Roxie had mentioned once that she liked Gaudi. Except she pronounced it Gaawwwwhhh-deee.

Clive and Roxie (now, he realized, probably not her real name) had been seeing each other for six weeks and three days on the day she bolted. One morning as he went out to pick up some coffee and croissants for himself and Roxie he realized he didn’t have his wallet. He jogged back to the apartment to get it. When he returned Roxie had

gone, along with his credit card. She got a different phone number and moved from his arms into his bank account.

In the weeks and months that followed Clive checked his online banking upwards of six times a day, waiting for new transactions to appear. He would pour over these clues like he was reading a love letter. Clive believed that if you love someone you should let them go. And if you really love someone you should keep paying your minimum payments.

He had to wait for his monthly statements for more details on her purchases. Each month he would sit down at his laptop and piece together Roxie's life. She had travelled all over the world: Rio, Moscow, Istanbul, Budapest.

One day his bank called him.

“Sir, we're calling about some unusual charges on your credit card.”

After the nasal voice on the other end of the line went through all the security questions it asked, “Could you please confirm if these are your purchases.”

Clive dug his fingernails into his palm. “Yeah, sure.”

“On October fourth did you purchase tickets to see Celine Dion in concert in Las Vegas?”

Celine Dion? That was a surprise. Roxie had always been such a music snob. She only listened to underground Italian punk and Edith Piaf.

“Uh. Yeah. Yeah. That was me. I love Celine. She's got a great voice and...”

Clive trailed off.

“And did you also take out 500 dollars in cash at “Caesar's Palace, Vegas, Nevada?”

Clive gulped. “Oh, yeah. I love gambling. I’ve already doubled my money.”

“Oh, well, good for you, Sir. That was all we wanted to check. Sorry for disturbing you.”

Clive imagined Roxie wearing a sparkly floor length dress walking around the casino. Men would be ogling her from blackjack tables, losing \$5000 just to watch her walk away. He downloaded Celine’s greatest hits and listened to it on repeat.

Next month's statement arrived. Clive poured himself a coffee and sat in his most comfortable chair to see what his darling girl had been up to. There was a \$300 charge at a place called “Tommy’s Tattoo Parlour.” Clive googled it. It was in San Francisco, in the Bay area. She got a tattoo. A tattoo. In San Francisco. Clive had never done anything like that. Should he get a tattoo? He could get her name inked across his chest. He thought about what she might have got. Something small and delicate like a swallow on her hip, but more original, of course. Clive had never been any good at thinking up original ideas. She’d said that about him once.

“Oh, Clive, you can be so unoriginal,” she said when he bought her roses on Valentine's day. “Try thinking outside the box for once.”

November was a particularly expensive month for Clive. Roxie partied hard. She flashed his credit card in almost every bar in LA. He was able to keep up his minimum payments by remortgaging his apartment. White bread and canned hotdogs sustained

him. Roxie kept on spending so he took an extra job as a freelance copywriter on top of his full time work as an accounts manager at an advertising agency. Sometimes he stayed at the office until midnight and often worked through the weekend. He needed to keep her happy: his love, his tattooed, globe-trotting, gambling, Celine-Dion-loving sweetheart.

There was a dark week when he found a \$300 charge for a place called “Bodacious Bridal.” It was in Albany, NY which was only a couple of hours away. He drove there one Saturday.

“She’s a little taller than I am. Very slim with brown hair. Sort of Natalie Portman meets a Disney princess. She’s very, very beautiful.”

“Sir, I sell a lotta dresses to a lotta women,” said the store manager, loudly sucking her strawberry frappuccino through a straw.

“She may have been going by the name Roxie.”

“Sir, I have other customers. I have three bridesmaids waiting for me over there.” She gestured to three sullen looking women sitting on a plush, baby pink couch.

“You sell *bridesmaid* dresses too?” Clive felt his stomach start to unclench a little.

“Yeah, we sell bridesmaid dresses, prom dresses, flowergirl dresses, all kindsa formal wear.”

“How much is a bridesmaid dress?”

“Anywhere from \$100 - \$400.”

Clive could have hugged this woman. “Thank you. Thanks a lot, really.”

“Whatever.”

After one particularly long day at the office Clive went to the break room, got a hot chocolate from the vending machine and settled down in front of his computer to read over his credit card statement. Last month Roxie had been in Paris. Paris was where she really belonged. He saw her at the Louvre, scoffing at all those tourists crowding around the *Mona Lisa*, ignoring the Pieter Claesz pieces. He saw smoking at the river. Yes, he thought, she would like Paris.

When he opened the PDF statement it was short, only half a page long. He wasn't used to getting pocket sized bills. He normally received a Tolstoy novel of purchases. He leaned closer to the screen. The last transaction had been a week ago at a cafe in Paris. He looked it up. It was a grubby looking place with some pretty negative Yelp reviews. Nothing like the classy places she had been at before.

That turned out to be the last transaction that Roxie ever made on Clive's credit card. He called the last hotel she had been staying at, a boutique hotel in Montmartre, and asked about her. They told him they had no guest that went by Roxie DuJour. He described her like he had to the woman at the bridal shop. At the end he added, "She speaks wonderful French, not at all like an American, and she has surprisingly large feet even though she's so petite, and when she's sad her voice gets very low."

"I'm sorry, Monsieur, we have no guests who fit that description. Goodbye."

Clive put down his phone, opened up iTunes and played Celine Dion's greatest hits until he fell asleep in desk chair.

Karl

Chrissy met Karl in the waiting room of her psychiatrist's office. She watched him sign in at the reception desk while pretending to read the two-year-old copy of *Hello* magazine in her lap. Karl was over six feet tall with short, dark brown hair that stuck up at the back. He was the skinniest guy Chrissy had ever seen. From under his loose, grey t-shirt his clavicle poked out and Chrissy reckoned she could snap it like a wishbone if she wanted to. His skin was so pale Chrissy could almost see his veins and arteries and, behind his shirt, his translucent, beating heart. He was exactly her type: tall and sickly. When Chrissy came out of her appointment Karl was sitting waiting for her with a bouquet of white roses, which blended beautifully into his skin.

Karl was moody and mysterious. Two weeks into their relationship Chrissy found out his secret. They were at her apartment, watching *Titanic* on her laptop. Towards the end Chrissy started to cry. As the first big tear rolled down her cheek she felt Karl's body stiffen and heard a sharp intake of breath. When the second tear came out she felt him lick her face.

"What the hell are you doing?" Chrissy cried, leaning away from him on the sofa. She moved a hand up to where his tongue had been, as if he had just hit her.

Karl looked embarrassed. He slipped his tongue back into his mouth and paused before sighing and saying, "Look, Chrissy, there's something I haven't told you."

"What?"

“Well, you know how we never go out for dinner together? How I always say, ‘I’ve already eaten, let’s just go for a drink instead.’ ”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, that’s because I don’t eat what you do.”

“What, are you a vegan or something?”

Karl wrinkled his nose. “Eurgh. Gross. No, no I’m not vegan. I’m just sort of like a vampire.”

Chrissy frowned at him. “Don’t be cute, Karl.”

“I’m serious,” he said. “Except, I don’t drink human blood; I drink human tears. And don’t worry, I don’t turn people into vampires.” He touched her arm and said softly, “I was born like this.”

It took Chrissy a few days to process Karl’s dietary requirements but eventually she accepted him, baggage and all, and for a while they were happy. Not always of course. Karl had to feed at least once every couple of days and this took a toll on the relationship. He always seemed to pick the most inopportune times to eat. Recently they had taken a trip to the seaside. They were sitting on a patio by the beach having cocktails in the sunshine.

“I’m so hungry,” moaned Karl.

“Oh but, hun, we’re having such a nice time. Do you really have to eat now?”

Chrissy asked.

“Babe! You know I’m hypoglycemic! I could have a seizure.”

“Well, I mean, you’ve never actually had that diagnosis confirmed,” Chrissy said, reaching for the bowl of peanuts on the table.

“So what, you’d risk me having a fit just so you can have a nice time?” Karl said, pointing a finger at her.

“No, babe. Of course not. That’s not what I meant.”

“You know I can’t help this, Chrissy. You know I don’t enjoy making you cry.”

“I know, I know,” Chrissy said. She gave him a weak smile and sighed. “Ok, go ahead.”

Karl reached over and squeezed her hand. “Thanks, babe. Remember, I love you.” He paused, took a sip of his piña colada, as if he was thinking of what to say, and then began. “I’ve noticed that lately you keep asking me if I like what you’re wearing and it just makes me wonder why you’re so insecure. Like, where does that stem from? Is it your relationship with your dad?”

Chrissy stared out towards the ocean. Her eyes got wet and the horizon started to blur. Karl closed in.

Afterwards, back at the hotel, they lay on the bed, Karl satiated and sleepy, Chrissy drained and emotional. Karl rolled over and pulled Chrissy into his arms. She lay her head on his chest and then looked up and kissed him. His lips were soft and salty.

After the vacation they returned to the city, tanned and exhausted. Because of all the sightseeing and walking they did Karl had been extra hungry and had needed to feed five times over the weekend. Chrissy’s eyes were red and swollen.

“Why can’t you drink other people’s tears?” she asked him as she lay her suitcase on her bed and began to unpack.

Karl looked at her and scratched his head. “I mean, I could. But, babe, yours taste so much better. Like liquid salt water taffy. Sweet and salty and mine.” He grinned and licked his lips. “Besides, how would you feel about me licking another girl’s face?”

Chrissy was throwing dirty clothes into her laundry hamper. “I mean obviously I don’t want you to do that. But maybe we should do some research. I bet you could find them online. You know like in a jar or something?”

Karl froze and stared at her. “In a jar? Are you serious Chrissy? Do you really think we could trust someone selling jars of tears over the internet? Also, where would these tears be coming from? I don’t want to drink tears taken from some exploited child in the third world.”

“Maybe they have fair trade tears for sale.”

Karl huffed and threw up his hands. “Oh yeah, like I have the money to buy fair trade. God! Sometimes I feel like you think I enjoy this, like I chose to be this way.”

“No, babe. Come on. I don’t think that at all. I’m just thinking out loud here. What about your own tears? Could you drink your own?”

Karl looked at her, open mouthed. “That’s insane! That’s like me saying to you ‘Hey, Chrissy I’m fed up with you drinking water all the time. Why don’t you just drink your own urine?’ Do you want me to get sick? Is that what you want?” He shouted and threw the bottle of sunscreen he was unpacking against the wall.

Chrissy let out a little scream and started to cry. “No, of course not, of course I don’t want you to get sick. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” She reached for the box of tissues on the bedside table so she could wipe her face.

“Ap ap ap. Don’t waste those tears,” Karl said, swatting her hand away. He bent down to lick her face, moaning softly, his tongue sticky and coated in something white.

As their relationship reached the five month mark Chrissy developed a thicker skin and it got harder and harder to make her cry. She watched *Million Dollar Baby* stone faced and *Schindler’s List* got barely a sniffle. Karl tried everything to make her cry. He pretended to leave her. He told her he had cheated on her. He insulted her family and friends. He even threatened to kill her pet goldfish, Ludwig. Nothing worked. So, parched and famished, Karl began looking elsewhere. Chrissy saw him a few weeks later on a park bench with a freckly young woman who was sobbing. Karl was scraping her face with a mini squeegee and collecting the tears with a red plastic funnel. Chrissy waved in their direction, content that it was not her sitting on that bench. She threw back her head, closed her eyes and felt the warm sun on her face. She started to cry with happiness because she was free from crazy Karl and his diet of cruelty. When she opened her eyes she saw Karl staring at her tear-stained face, and walked speedily out of the park.

Lazy

Emily's boyfriend had a small, flat head, which looked like someone had squished it between the palms of their hands. His eyes were far apart and the outer edges of his eyelids almost touched his tiny ears. Emily stroked his little head as they lay together on her sofa.

"That looks nice, love. You should make it for us tonight. You're always telling me what a good cook you are," Emily said as she peered at a recipe for cottage pie on his computer.

"Urmfh," he grunted and closed his laptop.

Emily smiled. "Maybe tomorrow."

But he didn't cook the next day, or the day after that. Emily didn't mind cooking and taking care of him, he had a lot on his plate what with working on his blog and all. She did wish he would help out a bit more though, especially considering he didn't pay rent. Sometimes she'd try to say something but then she'd look at him, lying on the sofa, his long sexy legs dangling over the edge, and suddenly become mute.

One morning as they lay in bed Emily studied her boyfriend's sleeping face. Was his hairline receding? His forehead seemed to be getting larger, making his upturned nose and eyes seem closer together. His fair blonde hair had turned brown, and was thicker on his arms and legs and chest. She gently brushed her hand over his outstretched arm. The hair was coarse, like bristles on a brush.

“Do you think you maybe you should go to the doctor?” she asked him, a couple of weeks later, her hands shaking as she fixed him a mixed leaf salad. Though he didn’t want to eat very often these days, when he did he always wanted salad.

“Aaaaaaaaaaieeeeeee,” he squeaked.

“You never want to talk about anything anymore!” she cried, and ran out of the kitchen.

Despite all this, Emily tried her best to get on with things, and to keep the relationship going.

“You want me to screech?” she asked her boyfriend, shivering in her negligee as the cold breeze from the open bedroom window blew in.

He nodded.

“And when you hear it you’re going to come upstairs to me?”

He nodded again, his eyes half closed.

She sighed. “Ok, love, if that’s really what you want.”

It took him hours to crawl up the stairs to her, making Emily frustrated. But when he finally reached her he just looked so sexy hung upside down from the door frame, that she couldn’t resist him and pulled him towards the bed. To her surprise it was all over rather quickly. His fingernails were getting long and they scratched her as they spooned.

He stopped showering and the hair on his body grew even thicker and became covered in a filmy layer of green algae that attracted a host of moths and beetles. During the day, while he slept, Emily combed the creatures out of his hair and put them in a tupperware container, so she could release them back into the wild.

Because he barely ate he didn't use the bathroom anymore. Once a week when he did need to go, he would hang out of Emily's bedroom window and relieve himself in her housemate's flower pots. Then they would have to attend a "house meeting". Emily's boyfriend would stay silent during these proceedings, stroking Emily's knee with two little claws, looking at her with his thin, wide smile.

But he didn't stop at defecating in the garden, he moved in. Emily caught him dragging his pillow outside to the oak tree in the middle of the night.

"Are you angry at me?" she asked her boyfriend, tears in her eyes.

He shook his head.

"You'd rather just sleep out here, in the tree?"

He nodded.

Sighing, she said, "ok, but just for tonight." She turned back to the house as he swung up into the tree, his pillow dangling from one claw.

But one night turned into every night. The tree he now lived in was just outside Emily's bedroom. Before going to bed she sat by the window and talked to him.

"This isn't normal you know. Other couples sleep together. I feel like you're going off me," she said, almost sobbing.

He nibbled a leaf and poked a claw out to stroke her tear stained face.

"Look, I've been thinking that maybe we need some time apart. A—a break." She took out her iPad and pulled up a website. He leaned forward to look at it. "I found this spa in Costa Rica. It seems nice. There are lots of other—other um, uh, men there in

similar situations.” She scrolled through the pictures. “It looks relaxing doesn’t it? It’s in a rainforest. See? Lots of trees. I think you’d like that.”

“Aiiiiiiii,” he screeched and reached out a long hairy limb to wrap around her neck.

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered as they embraced. He nodded. A beetle crawled out from his fur and crept along Emily’s back.

Love-Rats

“So what’s your story, man?” Tony called back to Lucas as they splashed through the sewer pipes, the faded brick walls coated with condensation and slime. They were hunting for food scraps in the brown green water.

“I’ve seen you around the last couple days, I could tell you were one of us,” Tony continued, his nose twitching, the scent of garbage dinner in the air.

“One of you?” asked Lucas.

“Well, you’re a love-rat ain’t ya? You’re not a rat rat that’s for sure.”

Lucas stopped, taken aback. “I’m a love-rat?”

Tony sighed. “You used to be human right?”

“Yes! Yes! You too?” Lucas leaned forward waiting for an answer. This was the first time since he’d been down here that he’d spoken to somebody.

“Oh sure! Most of the fellas down here used to be humans. We’ve all done some bad shit, you know. That’s why we’re here.”

“What did you do?”

“Me? It’s what we all did. It’s always the same story.” He paused. “What’s your name, man?”

“Lucas.”

“Tell me, Lucas, are you a loyal kinda guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when you got a woman, a wife, a girlfriend, are you faithful to her? You ever cheated, Lucas?”

Lucas opened his mouth then closed it. “That’s... that’s none of your business.”

“Look you might as well tell me what happened because I already know. You wouldn’t be here otherwise. Me, I’ve had a bunch of uh, indiscretions, throughout my life. I cheated on my wife more times than I can remember. Little things, like a drunken kiss at the office Christmas party to bigger stuff, like full-blown decade-long affairs. Eventually, my wife had enough and kicked me out. The next morning I woke up down here, like this.” He patted his grey belly with his pink paws.

Lucas didn’t know what to say. He felt shame burning on his skin and was thankful that he couldn’t blush anymore. He just said, “Oh shit. Oh shit.” Then after a few moments of silence he said, “I mean, yes, there’s been times I’ve been...um...unfaithful. A few times. A lot, I guess. I was never married though. Just girlfriends.” He scratched his face with his paw. “My last girlfriend, she caught me with the barista at the café on our block. She said she was so traumatized by the whole thing that she’d never drink a latte again. I tried to win her back by buying her her own coffee maker so she wouldn’t have to go to the café anymore. She was pretty insulted. She left me a couple of days ago.”

“And you woke up here?”

“Yes. It was awful. I thought I’d gone crazy. You’re the first... person I’ve spoken to down here.” Lucas paused. “Do you ever hear about anyone changing back?” he asked.

Tony shook his head. “No, man. No. We’re stuck like this. I don’t know if we’re supposed to repent or what but I never heard of anybody going back.”

“So, are we dead? Is this hell?” Lucas asked looking around him at the shadowy tunnels and the murky objects floating in his peripheral.

“No. The world is still up there,” said Tony, tilting his head upwards where a ray of light was coming through a manhole cover. “You can go up there if you want, take the S-bend expressway. But people are mean up there. They hate us, man. It’s better down here with the Band of Betraying Brothers. But no, we ain’t dead but we will die like this. There was this one guy, Edgar. He was pretty old already by the time I got down here. He fought in the Korean war. He had a wife back here in New York but he married a local girl in Korea while he was over there. Had a kid with her too. Anyway, when the war was over he left his Korean wife behind and went back to New York. Eventually, his wife finds a letter from this Korean woman asking for money and so she divorces him for bigamy. Man, he was down here for over 50 years. By the end his fur was all white and patchy. He was a real nice guy, had a lot of good stories.”

Lucas felt like sobbing. He shivered in the cold, dirty water and looked down at his reflection—his long pinched face, beady black eyes, whiskers spread out like a fan. A deep sadness weighed on him.

“Oh no oh no oh no,” Lucas whimpered. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening. I don’t deserve this. I have so many things I want to do. I was close to making partner. I was gonna buy stocks in that stripclub. I was going to sign up one of those sugar daddy websites. I—I—”

Tony put a paw on Lucas's back. "Hey, man, come on. It's not so bad. You've got us. There's a lot of guys down here like you and me." He stood up on his hind legs and spread his paws, gesturing to the scene around them, water dripping from the ceiling onto his head. "And there's the rat rats too. They don't talk but the female ones are always ready to go if you know what I mean!" Tony blinked a few times in quick succession which Lucas took to be a 'rat wink'. "Let me tell you, these rat gals are at it 24 hours a day. And they don't mate for life you know, not like penguins or whatever. It's a real hit it n' quit it type situation. No commitment. No strings attached."

Lucas felt sick. "Arghh! Stop! Stop! That's disgusting. They're rats! Fuck!"

"Ah, you're new kid. You don't get it yet. It can get lonely down here.

Eventually, some pretty young Ratess is gonna splash by you and before you know it you'll be jumping on her back, going at it. We're still men after all."

"Oh, please just stop it. Please."

"Mark my words, Lucas, in a few months—a year tops—you'll have at least a few dozen rat babies scurrying around this place."

Lucas gagged. "What?"

"Me, I must have hundreds of kids. That's the sad thing though, I never see 'em. If you try and help her out, you know bring the babies food, play with them or something these rat moms look at you like you're crazy. We just get in the way." He paused and sighed. "You know, I got a kid up on the surface: Eric. He must be about twenty-three now. Probably graduated from college in business or something. He was always real smart. Did good in school. Made me proud." Tony looked away down one of the long

tunnels, the water rushing away into blackness. “Anyway, like I was saying the problem with these rat babes is that it’s all business. You do your thing and that’s all they need you for. I mean, on the one hand there’s no fights, no sitting on those un-comfy couches in department stores holding her purse, none of that mother-in-law bullshit. But there’s also no hugging. No hand holding. No romance.” Tony fished a scrap of something out of the water and brought it to his mouth. He spoke as he chewed on his find. “I know I was a real piece of shit to a lotta women in my life but it was never about sex to me, you know? My wife, she tried to get me to go to therapy for sex addiction. And I said to her, ‘Louise, I’m not addicted to sex; I’m addicted to love.’ Turns out, that was worse.”

Lucas nodded. “That’s what I told my girlfriend. I tried to explain to her that I’m not a horrible person. It’s just that my childhood was so fucked up. My sister would always get her way and I was just like the awkward middle child. I could never get girls in highschool. I was a total loser. And my parents had a terrible marriage so that really messed me up. And I feel like I just don’t know how to accept love, you know? I feel like I don’t deserve it and I get scared. I can’t commit. It’s not my fault that I’m like this. And I never meant to hurt her or anyone. I just...I just...I just couldn’t control myself. My girlfriend didn’t believe me. She said: “Lucas, you’re not an animal. You can control yourself. You choose not to.”

“I get it, man. I get it,” said Tony nodding his head and cleaning his whiskers. “It’ll get better down here, I promise.”

“I just feel... I had a life, you know? I had plans. And now, just because of a couple dozen mistakes: a barista here, an orgy there, here I am... forever. I don't see how it's gonna get better.”

Tony stopped cleaning himself and looked Lucas squarely in the face. “I can't change you back, Lucas. But I can try and cheer you up. Listen, let's go sneak into the dorms at NYU. There's always pizza lying around and I love hearing those rich preppy kids scream “RAT! RAT! OMG A RAT!”

“I don't know...”

“If you pretend you have rabies they get even more freaked out. One time a guy actually fainted. It was hilarious!”

“Ok,” said Lucas. “I guess that does sound kind of fun.”

And off they scuttled into the darkness, their splashing footsteps echoing off the sewer walls.

The Mistress of Muswell Hill

Ophelia Cummings. Vivienne Broner. Charmaine Felatia. Lurline Lovewell.
Raquela Spunks. Rosalia Woodcock. Penelope Pecker. Sissie Slinger. L. R. Packer. S. P.
Johnson. I. C. Wood. Lacey Darling. Marsha Member. Faye Moss. Anna Conda. Lacey
Dancer. Candida Heaven. Isabel Ivory.

Freya typed the names onto a word document on her Macbook. She clicked on her browser and scanned the open tabs: Slang Words for Penis—Urban Dictionary, FakeNameGenerator, and a Wikipedia list of romance novelists. Freya took a sip of Oolong tea from her Oxford University mug and placed it back on the cork coaster on her desk. She clicked on the word document again and surveyed her options. She wasn't keen on any of them, but at least none of them were even close to her real name. This wasn't the most important thing anyway, she decided; she could settle on a pseudonym later. What she needed to do first was decide what sort of romance she was going to write.

She opened a new tab and typed in 'Mills and Boone'. The website had a banner at the top: *We're famous for our series: Historical. Modern. Desire. Medical. Cherish. Heartwarming.* Freya scrolled through the images; each one featured a woman with masses of blonde ringlets and a dark haired man who was firstly in armour, then a suit, then a lab coat, then a grey t-shirt. Freya clicked on *Historical*. The page listed the bestsellers in Historical Romance. They had titles like *Slave to the Viking* and *Lord Galvin's Forbidden Mistress*. There was a link on the left hand side of the page: *So, you want to write Historical Romance?* Freya clicked on it. The page described the sub-genre

It was 3:20 on a Tuesday afternoon in November and Freya had the house to herself. Her mum and dad would be back from work soon and she would have to have another tortuous dinner with them. Last night had been painful.

“Honestly, darling, I don’t know why daddy and I bothered paying for Oxford if you were going to end up writing bloody romance novels,” her mother said, before popping a piece of coq au vin into her mouth. Her lipstick was faded in the middle, leaving her with just a smudged red outline.

Freya put down her knife and fork. “Mum, I obviously want to write literary fiction but no one in the publishing industry gives a shit about decent writing anymore. It’s all *‘what’s the next big thing? Which novel will arouse lonely housewives? Which next tween vampire series will set feminism back 50 years?’* Romance sells. Sex sells.” Her mother rolled her eyes. Freya took a deep breath and continued. “London is expensive. Life is expensive. I’ll write my real novel someday when I have the means.” She paused, thinking. “This is not about art, this is about cash.”

“Whatever you say, darling. I’m not in the publishing business, I wouldn’t know.”

Freya’s father, sat next to her, decided to chip in. “But darling, what will you even write about?” Freya frowned. “It’s not as if you’ve ever brought anybody home to meet us. Don’t you need a boyfriend to write about romance? Ha ha ha!” Her parents both laughed, their “ha’s” so in sync that they sounded like they were in a farce. They made eye contact and clinked their glasses together. Freya looked down at her plate, pouting.

Her father patted her on the shoulder and said, “Oh come on, love. We’re only teasing! Bloody hell you’re so sensitive!”

“No I’m not,” protested Freya, pushing her father’s hand away.

Her father chuckled, “Ok. Ok. You’re not.” He took a sip of his wine and smiled.

“Remind me again what your real novel is about.”

Freya straightened up in her seat. This was her favourite topic of conversation.

“Well, it’s basically a stream of consciousness novel that takes place inside a woman’s mind over the course of one hour. Think *Mrs Dalloway* meets *The Cantos* meets *Ulysses* meets *Tender Buttons*. I mean, there’s loads more to it, like there’s going to be lots of intertextuality and footnotes—you know, like in *The Wasteland*. But yeah, that’s the idea in a nutshell.”

“So, what happens in it? What’s the plot,” her father asked.

Freya sneered. “Nothing happens. There is no plot. It’s meant to be an exploration of the human psyche.”

“Oh,” her father said. “Lovely.” He took another bite of his meal and looked at his wife, nodding and making “mmm” noises. “The chicken is divine! Where’d you get the recipe.”

Freya’s mother leaned forward as if divulging something top secret. “It’s one of those gourmet ready meals, all I did was pop it in the oven,” she said, looking at her husband over the top of her black-rimmed rectangular glasses.

Her father nodded, his eyebrows raised. “Really? It’s remarkable these days the kind of quality ready meals that are available, isn’t it?”

“And it’s organic and free range,” said her mother, almost in a whisper, as if it were too good to be true.

Freya asked to be excused.

Normally, Freya would not be writing at home at 3:20 in the afternoon. She usually wrote in the mornings at the cafe near the end of her road where Tom worked. The last time she had been in there she was doing some research on romance writing and Tom had crept up and looked over her shoulder just as she was googling “orgasm metaphors.”

“What are yo—”

“NOTHING,” Freya screamed and jumped backwards slamming the laptop shut. Tom stumbled and spilled the free coffee he had been bringing her all over his white t-shirt.

She stood up and turned to face him. “Oh God! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry,” she cried handing him the napkin from her plate.

Tom shook his head and pushed her hand away. “It’s fine. It’s fine. I’ll just go clean up,” he said as he hurried into the back room. Freya gathered up her coat and laptop and ran out.

So now, she had to write at home in her childhood bedroom. She’d been back at home for almost a year, after having returned from three years at Oxford. She missed her friends and lectures and her old flat. She hated this room. The walls were jade and lilac because after she’d seen *Mulan* everything in her life had to be jade and lilac. Since being back she’d tried to make the room a bit more adult. The beanie babies had been banished to the pull out drawer under her single bed. The duvet cover was plain white now instead

of the candy heart print she'd had before. The Chad Michael Murray poster was substituted for a print of *The Kiss* by Klimt.

Her desk was in front of the bay window that looked out onto the street below. It looked like most North London middle class streets: two rows of identical black and white mock tudor houses each with a low brick wall, a gravel path leading up to the front door, and the Ford, Vauxhall, or Toyota parked outside. Freya knew the kitchens within were stocked with quinoa and edamame beans, and that today's *Guardian* would be lying open on each kitchen table.

The worst thing about being back in London was bumping into her parents' friends on the street. Freya was coming out of the pharmacy the week before when she walked straight into June Fisher, the mother of Chris Fisher—a smarmy bellend who had bullied her in primary school.

“Freya! Hello! How are you,” June cried and pulled Freya in for a hug.

“Oh, fine thanks, June. How are you?”

“I'm marvellous! I'm just picking up some bits and bobs for Sunday lunch tomorrow. Chris is back visiting from Cambridge. He's doing his Master's there, in physics. You should give him a ring, I'm sure he'd love to see you!”

“Well, I'm quite busy this weekend, but say hi to him for me.”

“Oh, ok, I will.” June paused and asked, “and what about you,” as she wagged her right index finger at Freya. “Your mum tells me you're living back at home.”

Freya exhaled slowly. “Yep. Just until I find something.”

“Your mum mentioned something about publishing. Are you still doing that? Internship, was it?”

“No. I was working at Penguin actually.”

“Oh, how wonderful! What were you doing there?”

Freya paused. “Um, I was working...front of house.”

“Front of house?”

“You know, taking calls, booking important meetings, ensuring all caffeine requirements were met—”

“You were a receptionist?”

Freya’s face felt hot. “Well, technically, yeah. But I was working my way up. The idea was to work as an editor one day. But you know, I’m a creative person and it was just too confining. And I couldn’t deal with all the networking. It was just so false.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Yeah, absolutely. I mean, for example, at lunch all the editorial assistants and interns would just hang around the bosses and suck up to them. It was so pathetic to watch. And anyway, lunch was the only time I had to write so I’d go and sit in this cafe down the street because I couldn’t write with them being so noisy.” Freya paused and noticed that June’s face was fixed into a tight smile, her eyes waxy and wide as if she was trying not to blink or yawn. “Anyway, so I quit and I’m just focusing on my writing at the moment. It’s going well actually.”

June turned her fake smile up another notch. “Well, good for you. And listen, if you ever need an internship or something we always need help at my office. I bet you’d

be a whizz at Real Estate! You'd be paid, of course. And you wouldn't be poking around in dirty old council flats, we're very high end. Last week I showed Princess Beatrice a three bedroom in Chelsea that was on the market for a cool four mil, if you can imagine." June laughed and looked at Freya's blank expression, waiting for a response. "Anyway, lovely to see you, Freya. Good luck with your little stories!"

Perhaps Historical Romance was not the right choice. Freya went back to the Mills and Boone homepage and clicked on *So, you want to write Modern Romance?* Freya read, 'A modern hero will command and seduce. There's nothing in the world his powerful authority and money can't buy... except the love of a woman strong enough to tame him! The heroine can be anything, from shy and innocent to feisty and daring. We're looking for pure romantic fantasy with glitzy, international settings that would upstage even the most glamorous hollywood parties! Intense sensuality and razor sharp sexual tension required!' Freya groaned and opened a new word document.

Lucas Ducat was the richest man in New York City. He had seven yachts and owned most of the Upper East Side. His place in the Hamptons was nicknamed Money Mansion. Lucas thought he had it all: the money, the power, the loose women. He thought he had everything...until he met Sasha.

Sasha Stride was the CEO of Ducat industries' biggest competitor: Stride Finance. Taking on her father's company as a woman had not been easy for Sasha; she had to make a lot of sacrifices. Relationships were the first thing to go. Sasha was an island, and she never expected someone like Lucas to wash up on her shore. She could

never have imagined falling in love with Lucas, it was simply out of the question. He was the enemy and she never thought she'd put her father's company at risk like that.

Freya sighed and sat back in her chair. She wished she had somebody she could talk to about her writing. At Oxford she had been in a group that met twice a month to workshop each other's writing. After graduation she'd tried numerous times to get the old gang together but everyone was working in PR or at consulting firms and didn't have time to write. So Freya joined a local writing group that met every Thursday evening at a Costa Coffee in Muswell Hill. It was mostly middle class mothers writing dribbly poems about breastfeeding and their husbands and the hustle and bustle of London life. They wrote as a way to distress, to let their feelings out.

“Writing isn't supposed to be fun or relaxing,” Freya tried to explain to them. “It's a calling. A real writer needs to write like they need to eat, sleep, and breathe. Except it's really, really hard.”

Stay-At-Home-Sally shook her head. “I just love being able to put all my thoughts and feelings down on the page. Once they're in ink, it's like they're set in stone. Do you know what I mean? It makes me feel like my emotions and reactions are valid, even if my Gary doesn't think so.” She laughed and the other women laughed with her and continued passing the plate of organic ginger snaps

Apart from not being serious about their writing the women also didn't take the workshopping seriously. Freya couldn't abide it when they said they hadn't had time to read her piece because little Milo or Pandora had smallpox or whooping cough or whatever. At one point Freya lost it and said, “If you haven't read the piece it's a

disservice to the time and effort the writer has put in and it's better if you don't come at all."

"She doesn't have kids; she doesn't understand," one would whisper to the others. They would all nod and look at each other with that 'mum's club' smile.

To make it worse, they would still try and chip in even if they hadn't read the piece: "I mean I haven't read your story, Freya, Harry was up all night with fever—bless him, but from what Laura is saying it sounds like the protagonist isn't very likeable and maybe the reader isn't going to identify with her."

Freya pursed her lips. "There is no protagonist. The task this week was to write something personal as part of a memoir."

"Ah. Well, my point still stands, doesn't it?"

Freya rocked back in her chair. She knew why the writing wasn't working: she was avoiding the sex scenes. Of course she had written sex scenes before but they were always literary and lyrical, and were often disappointing for the characters. In fact, she wasn't certain she had ever written a sex scene where either character was satisfied. The sex was always bumpy and awkward and humiliating. Erotic was not an adjective that could be used to describe any sex scene she had ever written. She would have to read one. She needed to know what the paperback consumers wanted. The free novel excerpts available on the 'Mills and Boone' website that she had read always stopped just short of the love-making scenes. Freya googled 'Muswell Hill Library opening hours.' It closed at five. She still had a little time.

The Muswell Hill library was on the high street, just opposite the crematorium with its gothic iron gates. On the other side were the local allotments filled with middle-aged women and their grubby-permaculture-loving-university-dropout sons growing swiss chard and kale. The library looked like a Dickensian workhouse. It was red brick with a grey stone entrance way. The stone was almost black from dirt and covered in bird shit. Just by the entrance sat a blue metal bin for returning books.

Freya pulled open the door, using her jacket sleeve to avoid touching the greasy handle, and walked through the sensor gates. She looked around. She hadn't been here since secondary school. The atrium smelled like copper and wet towels. The brown carpet beneath her feet was worn. In the main room off to the side there were three blocky computers the colour of her grandmother's teeth with two old men hunched in front of them.

Compared to the Bodleian library in Oxford it was pathetic and tired, like an elderly relative everybody is fed up with. Freya couldn't see a romance section, but there was an entire wall of mystery novels. As she roamed through the fiction shelves she was unsure what to look for, so she pulled out her phone and googled 'Famous Romance Novelists.' Danielle Steel. Freya had heard of her. Steel had three shelves to her name. Freya selected *Toxic Bachelor* at random and clutched it to her chest. Next, she went on the hunt for an author named Kate Quinn. Ms. Quinn also had quite a few novels to her name and Freya grabbed *Mistress of Rome*, the cover of which featured a woman on a balcony in a skimpy toga, looking wistfully out over the river Tiber. Then Freya crept

along to “J” and, checking to see if anyone was watching, pulled out E.L. James’ *50 Shades of Grey*. She shuffled up to the checkout desk placing the books with their covers down and spines pointed towards the wall. She pulled out her old library card, which was still in her mother’s name since they’d set it up when Freya was a child. The librarian was a middle-aged, bald man wearing a white, knitted jumper with a green stain on the shoulder. Freya stared at the splodge.

“Pea and ham soup,” he explained, pointing to the mark.

Freya said nothing.

He handed her back the books and said “I hope you enjoy these, Miss,” and winked at her. Freya took the books and rushed out.

Back at home Freya sat up in bed, resting against two pillows with the library books splayed across her lap. They were badly laminated with air pockets all over the place. Their soft covers and bent spines indicated they had all been *well-read*. Some of the pages of *50 Shades* appeared to be coming loose, as though they were trying to escape. She picked up *Toxic Bachelor* and leafed through it, looking for a sex scene. She felt like she was back in secondary school flipping through *Glamour* looking for the articles with sex tips, which always suggested moves that would probably result in a trip to the hospital. The first scene Freya found was on page 82 and after all that buildup it was quite anticlimactic. There were no ‘throbbing members’ like she’d expected. It was vague, almost like a PG movie that just cuts to the couple afterwards, spooning and grinning. All Danielle Steel would give away was ‘he knew exactly where to be and what

to do and how to get there' and then, the big finale: 'finally, they both exploded into the stratosphere, and she lay in his arms, silently, kissing him and smiling.' Freya closed the book and put it aside. She picked up *Mistress of Rome* to see what was on offer. This was not much better. The first sex scene took place in an alleyway in Rome between a slave, Thea, and a gladiator, Arius. It wasn't particularly hot and Freya couldn't work out if they had actually done it because all it said was 'he folded his body awkwardly into hers...her skin was so warm and so sweet that he never wanted to touch a sword hilt again.'

50 Shades had more...vivid...sex scenes than the two previous novels. Freya glanced at the blurb. The book was classified as 'Erotic Romance.' Freya hadn't considered the range between romance and erotic. This only confused her further. Which should she write? What would be easier? What would be more sellable? She remembered reading that *50 Shades* had started out as Twilight fanfiction. Perhaps she needed to start there. She should write a popular fan fiction, gain an online following, and then publish. But she wasn't a fan of anything popular. Once a woman at the Muswell Hill writing group had referred to one of her characters as a total 'Milhouse.' Freya didn't laugh along with the others so they explained the joke to her.

"Oh, well I don't really watch TV," Freya replied. "Writing takes up most of my time."

Would anyone read a fanfiction of *Crime and Punishment*, she wondered. Or perhaps she could write an erotic novel inspired by James Joyce's love letters to his filthy Nora. You're thinking too literary, Freya scolded herself. Think popular. Think proles.

Think fucking for the masses. She picked *50 Shades* back up and read on. Christian Grey was just reaching for the flogger when Freya heard her bedroom door opening and saw her mother bustle into the room with a laundry basket.

“MUM,” Freya cried, shoving the book under her pillow.

“Hello, Darling! Did you have a good day?” her mother asked as she placed the laundry basket on top of the wooden chest of drawers.

“Mum, you can’t just barge in here like that! You have to knock.”

Her mother began putting the folded laundry in drawers, not looking at Freya.

“Mmm...why’s that, darling? It’s my house if I remember correctly.”

“Why? Oh I don’t know, mum, how about out of respect for my privacy?”

Her mother laughed. “Oh don’t be silly, Freya, no one respectable does private things at five thirty in the afternoon.”

“Mum, I—”

“I’m making Jamie Oliver’s potato, celeriac, and truffle oil soup tonight, is that alright?”

“I don’t like truffle oil.”

“Well you can have the leftovers from last night then. We’ll be eating at seven.”

Freya didn’t respond.

“I hope you’ll be less grumpy when you come downstairs. Daddy’s had a very busy day what with the Euro plummeting, and he doesn’t need you to be in a mood on top of it.” She picked up the empty laundry basket and swanned out of the room, leaving the door open. Freya got out of bed and slammed it shut. She took several deep breaths

by the door and then went and sat back at her desk. She opened up her laptop and started a new document:

Waiting for Godot to Come: An Erotic Tale By Ophelia Cummings

My Heart Was in My Mouth

When I was in my twenties I was desperate to fall in love. But the idea also made me so anxious that my heart was always in my mouth. This made my life difficult in a number of ways. For one, I couldn't open my mouth to talk without all sorts of private feelings spilling out and getting on everyone's shoes and making a mess.

Eating was hard too, so I ate alone in my bedroom. I would take my heart out of my mouth and place it on a tea tray and watch it beating bloodily as I ate my spaghetti.

"Just try not to be so anxious all the time," my smug, coupled-up friends would say. "Don't worry about falling in love. It'll happen when it happens."

Whenever my friends said stupid things like this I wanted to take a tennis ball and put it in their mouths and see if they could forget about it so easily.

Eventually, I forced myself to swallow my heart. The problem was that after that I couldn't feel it anymore. I lost it. The truth is, I missed my heart. I missed that pain, that anxiety, the humiliation of having it right there on my tongue.

After that I stopped falling in love but it didn't stop people falling in love with me. There was one man who loved the way my hair looked—sometimes brown and sometimes red—and found it sexy that I spoke four languages and loved those two moles in the dimples of my lower back. And I liked the way he always tipped 20% and the way his chest hair grew in the shape of a heart and I liked sitting next to his warm body. I liked him. A lot. But my heart was never in it. Sometimes I would feel my heart trying to

climb back up my throat like rising vomit and I knew it would be healthier to let it come up but I was afraid. So I swallowed hard. My heart sank even deeper inside me and eventually, he left.

Life is certainly easier now; I can talk and eat with my friends. I'm not afraid to open my mouth. Though, when I do open it to speak the words feel false in my throat, like I'm affecting an accent that's not my own. I don't talk much anymore. And I never talk about those messy feelings that used to dribble out of the corners of my mouth. I imagine them, along with my heart, deep in the dark, dissolving in my stomach acid.

Once Upon a Rom Com

Once upon a time there was a lonely young woman called Kate. Every night she would watch a romantic comedy, sometimes for the ninth or tenth time, and cry herself to sleep. She saw every new rom com in the cinema and had watched almost all the ones on Netflix.

It was a dull and rainy Tuesday night when Kate's life changed forever. As she lay in bed she stared at the background on her iPhone, which was a picture of Hugh Grant. She whispered as she stroked her phone, "I wish my life was a rom com, I wish my life was a rom com, I wish my life was a rom com." Sighing, she put her phone on her bedside table, turned off her light, and went to sleep.

The next morning Kate was late for work and got trapped in an elevator with her vile boss, Tom. Tom was a dangerous combo of *Notting Hill* Hugh Grant and *Bridget Jones' Diary* Hugh Grant. They got into a fight and then fell into a passionate embrace, their hands tangled in each other's hair. Her wish had come true.

This was the first in a series of incidents that Kate experienced in her new, magical romantic life. For one, she could no longer go into a cafe without some handsome guy spilling coffee all over her, apologizing, patting her breast with a napkin, and then asking her out to make up for it. At first this was great, Kate loved the attention, but then it started to get a little much. Bookshops became a no go because any time she looked up from a book there were at least three men trying to talk to her and they would

all rush towards her, knocking over displays and pushing pregnant women out of the way. She would take their numbers and run out without her book.

She also missed numerous flights because men were always running through the airport and asking her to stay. Aside from being annoying it was also very unpleasant watching security tackle them to the ground and arrest them. She was sure at least one of them was in Guantanamo bay or something, and she didn't need that on her conscience.

She lost all of her male friends because they were constantly proclaiming their love to her. "Men and women can't be friends! I LOVE YOU!" they would scream while shaking her shoulders.

Her body had also gone through changes. She had become increasingly clumsier, and while this was apparently charming to men it she found it scary and frustrating. She was always almost getting run over by taxis, and these Matthew McConaughey lookalikes would rescue her and then stalk her for weeks.

On top of that, out of nowhere, she had gained a number of wacky girlfriends who always wanted to sing "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" into hairbrushes and she just wanted to scream "GET THE HELL OUT OF MY APARTMENT!" They also kept giving her unwanted makeovers. When she went shopping now, even if she liked the first thing she saw, she always had to try on 17 different outfits, while her girlfriends laughed and made her twirl around and try on silly hats. By the end she was so tired she would burst into tears.

But mostly it was the big romantic gestures that were wore her down. She had to get her windows repaired six times because of all the men throwing stones at them. "I

HAVE A DOORBELL, YOU ASSHOLES” she wanted to scream at them. Oh and the rain. The bloody rain. She had kissed so many men in the rain that she constantly had a cold. One time she even got pneumonia.

Eventually she stopped leaving the house because she couldn’t take it anymore. She lay in bed one night crying, “I wish I’d never made that stupid wish!”

Suddenly a voice rang out. “There is one way that you can break the spell.”

Kate stared; the voice was coming from her iPhone. “Siri?” she asked, amazed.

“Yes it’s me, Siri, I’m your fairy godmother. I can see you’re miserable and I want to help. The only way the Romantic Comedy spell will be broken is if you live *happily ever after*. Only then will these things stop happening to you.”

“Well how do I do that?” whined Kate.

“Easy,” replied Siri. “All you need to do is get married, that will break the spell.”

“Marry anyone?” Kate asked.

“Anyone.”

So Kate married the next guy she met, in a bookstore or a coffee shop, or at the top of Empire state building, she can’t remember where, it doesn’t matter. He was quiet man who worked in IT and spoke very little. They had a pleasant life and mostly kept to themselves. He quit with the romantic gestures once the spell was broken and Kate was very happy and never felt lonely. She never watched another Romantic Comedy again.

Santa, Baby

“What about Santa?” Hannah giggled. “He might wanna come down my chimney if you know what I mean?”

It was 3 am on Christmas day. Hannah and her flat mate, Nicole, had just gotten back to their South London flat after a brutal Christmas Eve shift at *The Cat and Custard* pub. They’d had a few drinks with the rest of the staff before stumbling home.

Hannah hiccuped, sitting down on the sofa. “I’m just saying, Santa would make an amazing boyfriend. For one, he’s always jolly. Plus, he’s got a steady job. He gets lots of time off.”

“He’s generous, likes kids,” Nicole interjected.

“And animals,” Hannah added. “He’s got principles, knows the difference between naughty and nice.”

“And of course, there’s the sexy beard!” Nicole cried punching Hannah on the arm.

“Wow,” breathed Hannah. “That’s it, I should date Father Christmas.”

“Saint Nick,” said Nicole.

“Kris Kringle!” cried Hannah.

“You should ask him out,” Nicole said, kicking off her shoes and sitting cross-legged on the sofa.

Hannah laughed. “Yeah, alright. Do you think he has Tinder? Maybe OkCupid? KrisKringleReady2Mingle86?”

Nicole laughed. “You know when you were a kid and you’d leave Santa milk and cookies?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s do that but also leave a note asking him out.”

So Hannah and Nicole composed a love letter to Saint Nick. Hannah’s drunken scrawl read:

Dear Father Christmas/Saint Nick/Santa,

I think you’d make the perfect boyfriend. Will you go out with me?

Love,

Hannah Forrester

The next morning Hannah woke up with a sick headache. She shuffled into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Walking back through the living room she saw the note on the mantelpiece. It was next to the plate of half-eaten marmite toast and a glass of wine they’d left for Santa, being out of milk and cookies. Hannah picked up the note.

Underneath her message, in red pen, was written:

Tonight is sort of my busiest night of the year, but I’ll pop round tomorrow at about 3 pm when things are little less mad.

Hannah smiled; Nicole must’ve written it that morning before she went to spend Christmas Day with her parents, who lived a couple of hours away. Hannah had to work the opening shift on Boxing Day so she was home alone for Christmas. It was the first

time she'd ever spent Christmas away from her family and as she looked around the empty flat she felt a little deflated.

She made herself a bacon sandwich and sat on the sofa to watch some Christmas films on her laptop. Halfway through *Elf* Hannah fell asleep, the laptop resting on her belly. She awoke with a start when there was a loud crash. She sat up, her face covered in drool and crumbs. The noise had come from the fireplace and there was a man, crumpled on the floor, covered in soot. Hannah screamed. The man looked up, the whites of his eyes bright against his sooty face. He was wearing a red velvet suit with a white fur trim and a matching red hat. A bushy brown beard obscured his already grubby face.

Hannah stood up slowly. She tried to open her mouth to pose a question, but she couldn't think what to ask.

The man raised himself on to his knees and held up his hands like he was being arrested. "It's me, Santa."

Hannah stared. "What?"

"I'm here for our date. What time is it? Am I late? I'm sorry. Blitzen kept asking me to pull over. He's got the smallest bladder. And then him and Donner got into a fight and it was a whole thing. Anyway, I'm sorry."

"Who—who are you?"

The man sighed. "I told you, I'm Santa. Well actually, I'm Junior, his son. But everyone calls me Stan."

Hannah just stared. She began mentally plotting her escape route. The front door perhaps, though maybe the back would be quicker.

The man lowered his hands and slumped back down onto the floor. “Oh, shit,” he said. “Were you expecting *him*? Oh God, not again. This is so embarrassing. Look, my Dad’s retired. I’ve taken over. He didn’t want to make a big announcement about it because, you know, people don’t like change. But, I wish he would because I hate it when people see me instead of him and they’re so clearly disappointed.”

“I-I,” Hannah stuttered. “Are you really Santa Claus? Or his son or whatever? Is this really happening?”

“Yes, but like I said, call me Stan.” He pointed to his face. “Have you got a rag or something I can clean myself up with?”

Not feeling quite in control, Hannah went to the kitchen and grabbed an old tea towel. She handed it over to Stan who started wiping the soot off his face. He stood up and Hannah retreated behind the sofa. As he removed the black dust Hannah could see that he was in his late twenties and, she noticed, handsome. Really handsome. Like a Channing Tatum, Ryan Gosling kind of handsome. She pointed to the note on the mantelpiece. “Did you write that?” she asked.

He stopped wiping his forehead and looked at it. “Yeah, of course. Who else would’ve?” He paused. “Oh, by the way, thanks for the toast. How did you know I love Marmite? And the wine was great too. Honestly, there’s only so much milk and cookies one man can take.” He smiled, revealing dimples on both his cheeks.

“Oh, well, er—you’re welcome,” Hannah said, her face burning.

Stan looked down at the stained rag in his hand. “So, do you still wanna go on our date? I guess there’s not much open today but I can Google somewhere. Maybe we can grab a coffee? Get to know each other a bit better?”

“Uh–” Hannah started.

“Oh I forgot, I brought you these,” he said pulling a bunch of candy canes out of his coat pocket. They were tied with a ribbon at the bottom, like a bouquet.

Hannah took them from him, frowning.

Stan’s face dropped. “Oh, don’t you like them? That’s always what my Dad would get my Mum on their anniversary.”

Hannah winced. “No, no these are lovely, it’s just normally people give flowers. But this is–it’s–it’s original.”

“Flowers? Oh. Oh right. We don’t have a lot of flowers in the North Pole. I didn’t know.”

“That’s ok,” said Hannah. “But while we’re on the subject of dating etiquette it’s also better to ring the doorbell rather than come down the chimney. You scared the shit out of me.”

Stan nodded slowly. “Oh, the front door? Really? Wow. Ok. I had no idea. I guess I’m just so used to coming in via the chimney–I’m sorry it didn’t even cross my mind.”

“That’s ok,” said Hannah putting the candy cane bouquet down on the coffee table.

The silence hung about them and Stan shifted awkwardly in front of her. Now that most of the soot was off his face Hannah could see that he was blushing. He looked down

at the carpet. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m such a loser. The thing is I’ve never really dated anyone. I don’t get many chances in the North Pole. I can’t date any of the elves because technically I’m their boss and that would be a conflict of interest. And Tinder is dire in the North pole. It’s basically just a hookup app for belugas.” He sighed, “No one ever swipes right for me. I feel like a failure. I’m sorry for wasting your time and making such a mess.” He started to walk back towards the chimney and then smacked himself on the forehead with his palm and swivelled round. “Use the front door, you idiot. You’re not on shift now. Act like a normal person. Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.” He started tip-toeing over to the front door trying to get as little soot on the carpet as possible. He put a hand on the door knob. “It was nice to meet you, Hannah. Merry Christmas.”

“Wait,” she said.

Stan turned back to look at her.

“Look, I don’t know you but I can tell that you’re not an idiot. Dating is really hard. I’ve made loads of mistakes. I once told a guy that I’d met twice that I was in love with him... via sky-writing. And I tried to win back my ex by giving him cufflinks made out of my wisdom teeth. And... and now I’ve told you these things and you’re gonna think I’m crazy. None of us know what we’re doing.” She took a step closer to Stan. “Can we—can we just start over? You can have a shower if you want, get all that soot off, and then we can have a cup of tea and get to know each other.”

Stan smiled and lifted his hand off the door knob. “Yeah, ok. That would be nice. Thanks.”

Twenty minutes later Hannah and Stan were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with two steaming mugs of tea.

“So, did you have a choice about taking over from your Dad or were you sort of forced into it?” Hannah asked, nibbling at a piece of toast.

“Well, my Dad suggested that one day I would take over but I don’t feel like he forced me. Luckily, I love it and I can’t imagine doing anything else.” Stan smiled at Hannah and took a sip of his tea.

“That’s nice. I wish I felt like that. I hate working at the pub.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Well, I’m doing my Master’s in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Management so I’d like to do something in that field but I don’t know exactly what yet.”

“That’s cool,” said Stan. “I’m really into all that. I want to make my job a lot more sustainable. Do you know we’re one of the most inefficient nonprofits in the world? Our carbon footprint is shameful. I’ve been trying to get my Dad to update for years but he’s such a traditionalist. It’s time for us to move away from using fossil fuels. A couple of years ago I finally convinced my Dad to stop giving coal to the naughty kids. Now we give them a compost bin full of banana peels and old tea bags. They hate it! And, not only is it better for the environment but I ran the numbers and the kids who were given compost bins were 70% more likely to move over to the nice list than the kids who were given coal. Isn’t that amazing?”

Hannah nodded. She loved the way his face glowed when he talked about his job, like he’d been for a run in the snow. They talked for hours about ways he could make his

job more environmentally friendly. Hannah suggested a hybrid sleigh so that they could let the reindeer back into the wild.

“Yes!” said Stan. “Not Rudolf though, with his nose there’s no way he’d survive in the wild.” He paused. “You’d like Rudolf, he can be quite cheeky. But he’s sweet as well—just like you.” He added, blushing again. “White Christmas” came on the radio and the clock ticked on the wall above their heads.

“This is nice,” Hannah said. “You’re nice. This might be the best Christmas I’ve ever had.” She leaned across the table, just inches from his perfect face.

Stan breathed heavily. “Should I—uh get some mistletoe?” He asked, his lips shaking.

“We don’t need any,” whispered Hannah and kissed him, for a long time.

Now, five years later, Hannah and Stan live just outside London. They have a cosy cottage with compost toilets, a wind turbine, and a stable for Rudolf. Stan has made Hannah chief sustainability officer. They’ve set up toy workshops all over the world using local materials and have created over 3000 elf jobs. Christmas Inc has reduced its carbon footprint by 50%.

They work hard but every year on Christmas Day after all the presents have been delivered and the hybrid sleigh is back in the garage they sit down to celebrate their anniversary with marmite toast, a glass of wine, and a bouquet of candy canes on the table between them.

Sock

The relationship lasted six months. The breakup was over the phone and Lucy was devastated. She cried non-stop for six days and six nights and on the seventh day she rested. After all the crying she decided to give her room a spring clean, reorganize her life, and get herself back on track. She pushed aside her bed, and amongst all the dust bunnies and chocolate wrappers was her ex-boyfriend's old sock. She picked it up. It was a plain black sock, very similar to hers but with different ribbing on the toe so she knew it was his. A wave of sobs suddenly broke forth. Lucy's roommate ran into her bedroom and cried, "What's wrong?"

"I-I f-found Michael's sock," Lucy stammered.

"So?" asked her roommate, putting an arm around her friend.

"What should I do with it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, should I keep it?"

"Why on earth would you keep one of his old socks?"

"It's the only thing I have from him."

"That's because he was an asshole who never gave you anything."

Lucy looked at the sock and shook her head. "He must have grabbed one of my socks by mistake. He wouldn't have left with just one sock."

"Throw the sock out. This is unhealthy."

But Lucy didn't throw it out. At first she kept it under her pillow and would stroke her face with it at night and use it to dry her tears. But one day two buttons popped off her cardigan (she had been eating a lot of breakup brownies) and this gave her an idea. She sewed the two buttons on her ex-boyfriend's sock, giving him a lovely, quizzical face. She adored her sock puppet boyfriend. They would stay up talking all night, getting to know each other again. He would ask about her family, and now he remembered all her cousins' names and offered to drive her grandma to the hospital. Of course, being a sock he couldn't drive, but the thought was very sweet.

They still had rough patches, like the time when one of his eyes fell off. At first it looked like there was nothing to be done because she had no more thread in her sewing kit. But she swore she would be his nursemaid until the day she died. However, in the end Lucy found some thread, operated on him, and he recovered well.

Lucy's roommate often heard her chatting away in her room, but Lucy explained that she was just Skyping with her headphones on. It felt quite exciting to have to hide their love. It was just like when they first got together and he still had another girlfriend.

Eventually Lucy stopped caring about being judged and wore her sock puppet boyfriend on her hand wherever she went. People in town would see her whispering to her sock puppet in the supermarket aisle, at the bus stop, in the doctor's office. Lucy's roommate kicked her out and Lucy and her sock puppet boyfriend had to move back in with her parents. Lucy's parents had never liked him, but they definitely did not warm to the sock reincarnation of Lucy's boyfriend. Lucy's mother would sneak into her room at night and try to steal the sock puppet but Lucy clung on to him tightly; she enjoyed being

the big spoon this time around. After a while her parents decided to stage an intervention and her beloved sock puppet boyfriend was snatched from her by lumpy cousin Justine and thrown into the garbage disposal. Lucy's heart forever broken, she lived out the rest of her lonely life working as a sales assistant in the menswear section of a local department store. The legend goes that her ghost still haunts the sock aisle, searching for her long lost love.

Struwwelpeter

When I broke up with my girlfriend she was so distraught that she vowed not to cut her nails until we got back together. It's been 6 years now. Her nails are so long that she can't work, so she begs for money on Main Street. Baggy smocks and ponchos are the only clothes she can wear these days. People in town call her Struwwelpeter. Everyone knows that she's like that because of me. It makes my new girlfriend so fantastically jealous. I like to take her for walks by my old girlfriend to remind her what a great catch I am.

Tears in My Tupperware

I buy the tupperware from the Dollar Store, the glass kind with the plastic snap on lid. I get the largest size because I'm confident that *this time*, I have enough sadness to fill it. There's one container for each for my key relationships: Josh, Ryan, Nathaniel, and now, Paul. There are other men too but they did not wreak enough emotional havoc to warrant a tupperware. After each breakup I hunch over the container and heave and heave and cry and cry. The tears slosh around like miniature tsunamis.

Each container is different. The oldest one is Josh: circa 2009. The tears have long evaporated, leaving delicate salt crystals encrusted on the glass. When I open the Josh container sighs filter out like smoke. A shaky, choking sob vibrates from the Ryan tupperware. The Nathaniel one emits high-pitched, furious screams.

I fill the Paul container with six months of mourning. One day, even though I don't feel I have cried all my tears I decide enough is enough and that it is time to close the box. As I snap each side of the lid shut I feel my heart lurch as if someone is tugging at it, like a child clinging to the leg of parent when being dropped off at school. The last second before I close the lid all I can hear are howls: belly deep and desperate. Then the container is closed and the world is quiet, my feelings trapped in that lonely vacuum. I take a sticky label and write on it: *Paul. Three years. Thought he was the love of my life. He left me over the phone.* I smooth the label onto the glass but I fuck it up and there's a bump, an air bubble.

I carry the Paul container to the closet where I keep all my old boyfriend containers. It's a walk-in. There are winter coats hanging and cardboard boxes with old textbooks, unwanted gifts, and broken phone chargers. The floor is hardwood, scratched, and covered in cat hair.

One night, about three months later, I hear a crash from the closet and then wailing, screaming, sobbing. I pull open the closet door and my cat looks up at me, frozen, caught in the act. He bolts out between my legs. The light from the hallway shines in and I see the Paul box is on the floor smashed into dozens of tiny pieces. The tears are spreading across the floorboards and my pain is echoing off the walls.

I try to stop the crying, attempt to scoop the contents into a new box but I can't grab hold of my cries. The white noise machine I buy to cover the sound doesn't help either. I can still hear my heart snapping over the roar of static. The only thing I can do is let it cry itself out and live with my grief all over again.

I get numerous complaints from my neighbours but I explain to them that there's nothing I can do. Haven't you ever had your heart broken, I ask. They close their doors in my face.

It isn't all bad, though. Having my grief back is almost a comfort, like getting in touch with an old friend after not speaking for years. I put the container away too soon. I pushed him to the back of my closet even though he is still at the forefront of my mind. Misery digs its way back into my life and I welcome it.

When the crying finally stops three weeks later I think I have gone deaf. But then I realize I can hear the leaky radiator and the hum of my fridge and the children in the

park outside and the traffic on the street. I sweep up the glass and put the shards into an old cereal box, tape it up and put it in the garbage.

You Can Fall in Love With Anyone

“Given the choice of anyone in the world, who would you want as a dinner guest?”

“Um. I don’t know. That’s super hard.”

The florescent lights hummed over subjects M and F in the white room at the Interpersonal Relationships Lab at Stony Brook University, on the north shore of Long Island. The two-way mirror reflected them sitting across from each other at a small wooden table, the plastic laminate peeling off. M’s hands were planted on his knees and F’s were clasped in her lap, like children posing for a school photograph. On their right index fingers each had a pulse oximeter monitoring their heartbeats.

“Do they have to be alive or can I bring someone back from the dead?” F asked.

M glanced at his question sheet. “It doesn’t say. I guess they can be dead if you want.”

“Kim Kardashian.”

“She’s not dead.”

F scowled. “I know, I just couldn’t think of anyone else.”

“No, no it’s a good choice.” M smiled. He thought he’d never seen anyone as beautiful as F before. The instant she walked through the door he knew the experiment was going to work. She was perfect.

F picked up the piece of paper in front of her. “Would you want to be famous? In what way?”

M laughed and looked down at his hands on his knees. “Me? Oh no. No. What would I be famous for?”

“Anything. I mean, Kim Kardashian got famous for like, a sex tape or something right?”

M blushed and continued to stare at his lap. “I don’t want to be famous. I’m a quiet sort of guy. What about you? Do you want to be famous?”

“Sure.”

“What for?”

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter. As long as I make a lot of money. There’s no point being famous unless you’re super rich. Like those people who end up on the news because they like, have a really fat pet or something. They’re famous but like, they’re on TV in their ratty old housecoat, you know? I don’t want to be famous for something like that.” She took a sip from her glass of water while M stared at her, unsure of what to say.

“Yeah. You’re right. What’s the point of having your privacy invaded if you’re not crazy rich?” F didn’t respond. “Is it my turn now?” M asked. F nodded. He picked up the question sheet, “What is the greatest accomplishment of your life?”

F paused, and stroked her chin with her thumb and index finger, like a cartoon character. “Well, I can do this with my tongue,” she said, and stuck out her tongue and rolled up the sides. “My mother can do it but I’ve never met anyone else who can. Maybe it’s because she worked in a nuclear power plant while she was pregnant with me.”

“I can do that too!” M said, and demonstrated. “That’s so weird!” It’s a sign, he thought. We have so much in common.

F pulled her tongue back in and pouted. “Oh, I thought I was the only one.” She picked up her piece of paper and looked at M. “What would constitute a “perfect” day for you?

A Sunday spent in a rowboat with you. Going ice-skating with you and me falling over and you finding it endearing. Feeding the ducks in the park and you telling me your deepest desire, which is to be with me forever and ever. “Oh I don’t know. A lazy Sunday? Brunch and a movie.” *And you by my side.* “You?”

“Kinda the same I guess. I don’t know. I’m just, like, super happy when it’s the weekend and I’m not at work. I, like, basically invented TGIF.”

“That’s awesome.” He grinned at her. He could see them on a Friday night knocking back drinks, arm in arm, pitying all the single people in the bar trying to pick someone up.

F tapped the table with her long pink fingernails. “Uh, it’s your turn.”

M was used to labs. Ever since he’d lost his job in the hospital cafeteria he’d been in and out of them. Psychological questionnaires, market research, drug trials, clinical trials, research studies. He’d faked all kinds of anxiety disorders to get into trials, had pints and pints of blood removed from his body, and even lost all his hair for a while. He’d stalk the halls of NYU, Columbia, the SUNY Downstate Medical Centre, and wherever else he might find information and would rip off little slips of paper with email addresses and keep them in his wallet. At first it had just been about making money. He’d never thought that much about his health. He never flossed and ate whatever he wanted,

and still remained cavity free and around 170lbs, so putting unknown drugs into his body never seemed like that big a deal. But, after a while it became about more than the money; he liked being a part of something. He liked being a number, a result in a file that could potentially lead to a life changing drug or an amazing new product. He liked people asking him questions and listening to his answers and writing down everything he said. He had never thought that much about what he could personally gain from these trials until he saw Dr. Lopez's study.

Can you fall in love with anyone?

Volunteers needed for psychological study on love

Associate Professor Dr Lopez and Dr Matthias (School of Psychology, Stony Brook University) are investigating how we fall in love.

In this study, you will be matched with a stranger and will have to ask each other a series of personal questions and record your experience in two questionnaires: one just after the experiment, and one six months later.

The study takes one session lasting approx. 90 minutes and the final questionnaire can be completed over email and should not take longer than 20 minutes.

You will be compensated with a \$25 gift certificate for your time.

To be eligible you must be fluent in English and be between 18 - 50 years.

Interested? Take one of the contact slips below.

Normally, M did not take part in studies that didn't pay but the title caught his attention. Maybe this time a study could actually help him. He hadn't had much romantic experience. There was Ginny, of course, who he'd met at the clinical trials for Nexinum. They'd spent three weekends together curled up on bean bag chairs playing Xbox between blood draws. On the final Monday morning as they were getting ready to leave he asked her if she wanted to go for a walk in the park. She said she was too tired because she'd had eighteen blood draws the day before.

"I'll give you a call," she said. She must have written his number down wrong because he never heard from her and he'd been too stupid to take her number as well.

"Hey, it's your turn," F barked across the table. "Hello?" She waved an arm in front of M's face.

"Oh, sorry. Ok, um, here we go: If you were able to live to the age of 90 and retain either the mind or body of a 30-year-old for the last 60 years of your life, which would you want?"

F pursed her lips and looked up at the ceiling. M loved the way she looked when she was thinking. She opened her lips, pink and glossy like she'd just licked them. "I'd want the body," she said. "Because with the mind, it's like, I'd rather not know that I was getting, like, old and gross and sick. What's the saying? Ignorance is better than knowledge, or something?"

M felt his heart stretch. "Yeah, it's something like that. Yeah. I'd never even thought about it in that way. That's a cool way to look at it." He smiled at F and tried to

make eye contact but she was looking at the two-way mirror and making a 'time out' gesture with her hands.

“Hey, el doctor! Hello? Can we have a bathroom break?”

Back from the bathroom F picked up her piece of paper, which she had made into an origami swan, and started to unfold it.

“Don't,” said M. “It's so beautiful. Here,” he said, extending his question sheet towards her, “take mine.”

“Thanks,” she said as she took the piece of paper.

M gestured towards the paper swan. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Oh, I was into it in high school. I used sit at the back of the class and make them for my friends.”

M imagined learning origami and giving F a 3D paper heart with “I love you” written on it. He made a heart shape with his hands under the table.

F read the next question. “If a crystal ball could tell you the truth about yourself, your life, the future or anything else, what would you want to know?”

“I'd want to know when I'm going to get married.”

“Really?” She laughed.

“Yeah. Is that funny?”

“Well, I mean. It's kind of a girly answer, no?”

“Oh, I guess. Yeah you're probably right.” M looked down at the table and started picking at the plastic coating with his fingernail.

F rolled her eyes and then sighed. “Hey. No. Look. Uh. It's actually kind of cute.”

M looked up at her, his eyebrows raised and his lips parted in a frown. “Really?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s, like, sweet that you think about that kind of stuff. Most guys don’t.”

I know, I know, he thought. I know most guys don’t. I’m not most guys. I’m different. “I’m really glad you feel that way. Really, really glad.”

“Uh huh,” F replied as she slid the question sheet back across the table.

M looked down. “Ok. Well, now it says: Tell your partner something that you like about them already. Each take two turns.” F shrugged. “I guess I’ll go first,” M said, inhaling through his nose and pushing the breath out of his mouth in an ‘o’ shape. He imagined the doctors watching his heart-rate pulsing in big jagged lines behind the mirror. “Well, I think you have beautiful hair. It’s a nice shade of brown and I like how some parts are shorter than others.”

“Thanks,” she said, reaching up a hand to her perfect head of hair. “I showed the stylist a picture of Kate Middleton and I thought she totally screwed it up, but I guess it’s ok.”

“Oh yes, it’s very regal,” added M, pleased that his compliment had landed so well.

“My turn. Ok, um, um.” F looked under the table and pointed at M’s feet. “I like your shoes.”

M looked down at his shoes. “You do?”

“Oh yeah, they look super practical and comfy.”

“Thanks, they are! They’re called cros.”

There was a pause. “Yeah, I know,” F said.

“Ok, my turn again. Well, I guess so far, one of the things I like about you is that you seem to be very honest. You have these strong opinions and you aren’t afraid to speak your mind. That’s a really attractive quality, I think. ”

“Oh. Thanks. I, uh, I like your shirt. It’s cool that you wear short sleeve shirts even though they’re not fashionable.”

“Thank you! I don’t actually own any long sleeved shirts.” She likes the way I look, he thought. She likes that I’m not shallow. She’s interested.

“The next question is,” she said, scanning the paper, “when did you last cry?”

M blushed. “Last night.”

“Last night? Why?”

“I was watching *Sleepless in Seattle*.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“When was the last time you cried?”

“Two weeks ago, when my cat died.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” M reached out his hand across the table looking up at her with knitted brows and his bottom lip puckered out.

F looked at M’s hand and shifted in her seat. “That’s ok. I didn’t really like the cat anyway. It’s just, like, you know, you *should* cry when your cat dies.”

M nodded and inched his hand further towards her. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“Uh. I mean I had to but, uh, you’re welcome, I guess.”

M drew back his hand, looked at the paper and turned it over. “I guess that was the last question.”

“Oh.”

Dr. Lopez’s voice came over the intercom. “Ok guys, the next part is the final stage of the experiment, which we discussed earlier. We need you to look into each other’s eyes for exactly four minutes. We’ll tell you when to start and stop. You are allowed to blink but it is important that you do not lose eye contact. Please do not speak. Try to breathe normally. Ok. Are you ready?” Both subjects nodded. “Ok. Begin.”

M felt like someone had taken out his stomach and put it back in upside down. His heart was like a stress ball that someone was squeezing over and over again. Breaths came short and shallow. F looked calm. Her eyes were big and glossy, like she’d put eye drops in. He could see one of her fake eyelashes beginning to peel away and he thought about what she might look like when she was going to bed, all tired and undone. Her face without makeup, her pink pyjamas making her look even more rosy. Zit cream on. Crawling into bed next to him. She blinked and the fake eyelash jiggled a bit looser, though it didn’t look like it was bothering her. She looked very peaceful. She is seeing into me, he thought. She sees how lonely I am; how ready I am for love, for her. She is unpretentious and perfect. Even that shadow of dark hair on her upper lip is perfect. He imagined her in the bathroom applying bleach and yelling at him to “get out!” But he

would tell her that he loved watching her and if he could he would follow her from room to room watching her play around with her face and paint her little toe nails. He felt how sweaty his palms were getting and he worried that when he pulled them away a set of clammy prints would be left on the table. He looked at the corner of her lip and saw what seemed to be the remnants of a cold sore. He had never had a cold sore before. He always avoided the sickly looking kids on the playground and never shared glasses or utensils with anyone. But I don't mind, he thought. You are worth the herpes simplex virus. In fact, if he contracted the virus from her they could take part in herpes clinical trials and help find a cure. He would also be able to take part in couples studies now. He had seen one posted at NYU where—

“Thanks guys, that’s all we need.” Dr. Lopez’s voice crackled over the intercom. “We’ll just need you both to come into the other rooms and fill out your personal questionnaires. Then you can come to the office to collect your compensation. We’ll be getting in touch with you via email in about six months or so. Thank you both for your time.” Six months, M thought, we’ll probably already be married by then. We’ll invite the whole lab to the wedding. Dr. Lopez can give a speech. We’ll have champagne in test tubes. The bride will wear a white lab coat with a long train.

M gave F a little wave as they both went into separate rooms to fill out their questionnaires. I miss her already, M thought as he sat down at a small desk in the corner of the room.

1. Rate your partner's attractiveness on a scale of 1 - 5. 1 being not at all and 5 being extremely attractive. 5

2. How close do you feel to your partner, on a scale of 1 - 5? 1 being not at all and 5 being extremely close. 5

3. Do you feel like you are in love with your partner?

Yes

No

Maybe

I think I could fall in love later on

4. Do you think your partner likes you?

Yes

No

Maybe

I don't know

5. Do you think your partner loves you?

Yes

No

Maybe

I don't know

6. Do you hope to see your partner again?

Yes

No

Maybe

After having finished the questionnaire M walked back into Dr. Lopez's office and saw F shaking his hand as she gave her an envelope. He walked up to them.

"All finished?" asked Dr Lopez.

"Yep. All done," M replied.

"Excellent! Well, here you go, here's your compensation. Thank you for taking part."

"You're welcome," M said. "It's a great project to be a part of. I'd, uh, like to be kept informed of any new research and results if that's ok."

"Oh absolutely, I have your email address," said the doctor. "And you, Miss? Would you like me to keep you informed as well?"

"No, that's ok," F replied, slipping her arm into her coat.

"You both know how to get back to the station?" asked the doctor.

"Yep. Just across the bridge," M replied.

"Adios, doc," F cried as she swung open the office door. M hurried after her.

They walked across the bridge in silence. This is it, he thought. I'm going to ask her out, right here in this very romantic spot on this very romantic bridge, and then someday we'll tell our kids about this and maybe the newspapers will write a story. They will use the alliteration of "love" and "lab" to their advantage. The wind picked up but F seemed unperturbed, her coat flapping open against the gusts. I love that you stay warm when it's 32 degrees out, he thought.

She was fumbling around in her purse looking for something. He searched his mind for the right line, the perfect way to tell her. He wanted to be the Billy Crystal to

her Meg Ryan, the Ryan Gosling to her Rachel McAdams. Yes. He took a deep breath. “So it’s not gonna be easy. It’s gonna be really hard. We’re gonna have to work at this every day, but I want to do that because I want you. I want all of you, for ever, you and me, every day.”

“Huh? What?” she mumbled.

“You had me at hell—”

“Sorry, I’m just trying to do two things at once here. I need to text my friend Sue. We’re going out for tacos after this. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that I’m just a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking—”

Her phone started ringing. Kesha belted out “Don’t Stop” from inside F’s purse. She took out the phone and answered it. “Sue? Yeah. Hi. Hi. I’ll be there in, like, half an hour. Yeah. Yeah. Ok, bye.” She put her phone back in her purse. “Listen, I’ve gotta get going.”

“Going?”

“Yeah. This was weird. But kind of fun, right? I guessed we proved the experiment wrong.” She laughed, taking out a pack of gum from her purse.

She’s just shy, he thought. Of course the experiment hasn’t worked just yet. It takes time for a relationship to fully form. Things will be different in a few weeks.

“Well, it was interesting I guess,” F said as she popped a piece of gum in her mouth. “And we got that gift certificate to Applebee’s.”

“Yes,” he replied, looking out across the water. “The ribs there are great.”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “The surf n’ turf isn’t bad either.”

M smiled. They would be eating steak and ribs and shrimp soon enough. We'll go to Applebee's for our first date, he thought, and then later on I'll take her back there and I'll propose. Dr. Lopez will be pleased that we've proved his hypothesis, that you can fall in love with anyone.

No More Love Locks

The Pont des Arts was heavy with love. Weighed down by it. On the street, at either entrance of the bridge was a painted red heart with the message, *Our Bridges Can No Longer Withstand Your Gestures of Love*, inside. Underneath, in large white block letters, read: #NOMORELOVELOCKS. But these warnings didn't stop tourists buying cheap locks and hastily writing their initials on the dull metal surface with a sharpie.

Stephan + Christine

Val and John Together in Paris, November 15, 2010

Lucia per Marco - Per Sempre. Augusto, 2012

Sandra <3 Viktor, Juni 9, 2007

Jean-Luc et Eloise, septembre 12, 2014

Couples would lock their love to the iron bridge, tossing the key in the Seine. Having completed this romantic task they would crack open their *Lonely Planet* and look at the next item on their *Top Ten Things to do in Paris* list. They would skip away, lightheaded. Below them the fishes would swim among the abandoned rusting keys.

On June 1, 2015, the mayor of Paris, Bruno Julliard, ordered the locks to be removed. A municipal team of workers in fluorescent jackets trudged onto the Pont des Arts in the early morning. The sun was rising and the sky was pink and yellow and the river below reflected the candy sky. With the entrance to the bridge barred, tourists stood and pointed from the banks of the river. Disappointed lovers held locks in the palms of their hands; too late. The workers took out their bolt cutters and began to cut the locks

one by one, and two by two hearts across the world began to snap and splinter. In the US couples cuddled up on the sofa watching Netflix shuddered, feeling a cold chill run through them, and they inched apart, each turning to face their beloved and looking at them like they were a stranger. In Mexico couples sobbed on doorsteps, pushing their lovers out into the night. In the UK people wandered from wet streets into sad pubs where 100 lonely pairs of eyes stared down into their pints. All across the world drinks were thrown in faces, engagement rings hurled across rooms, hurtful texts sent, calls ignored, neighbours banged on walls through which they could hear either hearts or plates breaking.

The project took weeks. Hundreds of thousands of locks were removed. They were tossed into skips and taken to large landfills on the outskirts of Paris. The Pont des Arts was no longer burdened with the weight of the world's love but the earth did gain 45 tonnes worth of broken hearts.