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The house was quiet in the way it only ever was when the kids were staying elsewhere. I glanced at the ceiling, the bedsheets, plumped my pillow, let my head fall. A drawing of a fallow deer stood out from all the other school artwork on the wall. Its sausage body, its oblong head, its blank expression. One shot – bang – and it would gallop away, dragging its crayon hoofs.

I looked at my phone, no new texts. The last was from Sarah, at 1.27 am:

So high, feeling over the rainbow, kissed a French guy, dancing now, love you, spunky xxx

It was 9.15 am. Anything could have happened between then and now. I hoped it had. Something. We'd been gearing up to it for so long. Years of coochie-coo baby-raising and no sex. Years of rejection and disappointment. Years.

* * *

I'd gone from shop to shop in Melbourne's CBD looking for a gift for Sarah's fortieth: a teapot, some cups. But not just any teapot, not just any cups: rustic, handmade, aesthetically pleasing, robust and entirely functional cups, no two the same but still clearly from the same kiln.

After a few false starts and a flurry of back-and-forth texts with my new friend-of-a-friend, Zac, I found a ceramics specialist down some steep stairs. Each item was marked with the name of the artisan, each price tag sobering. Fuck. Just for a cup?

To Zac: *May need to remortgage the house ...*

To me: *Aren't you guys renting, dude? Sorry - don't mean to undermine you ☺*

Four cups, four saucers, the teapot – that was the plan – but it wasn't going to happen. The most I could stretch to was a teapot and two saucerless cups – but which teapot, and which saucerless cups?

One of the two attendants was keen to advise, and with her help, then on my own, I narrowed it down to three possible teapots and two possible styles of cup. I carried them from their shelves, put them next to each other, scared I was going to bash an edge, chip a spout. Yeah, yeah, they looked good together, but then so did those other ones, but not so much, no, maybe actually a little more, no, yes, no, ha.

I was itchy with indecision, knew I was being watched by the two attendants. I had to get home in time to drive the kids to Sarah's brother Kyle's for the night so she could go to a party while I stayed at home alone rueing the fact I'd decided not to go, rendering Kyle's babysitting services pointless but for the fact he so rarely offered or agreed and, if shunned, might never again.

I made my choice, a blue-grey teapot – Sarah would love it, just her style – and two cups from the same set, carried them towards the checkout, nearly all the way to the attendant's eager hands, before returning through a narrow aisle to reconsider my options. The green one was better, its design similar to pre-Colombian teapots I'd seen in Peru with Sarah. Travelling – that had been our bag for a while. Europe, Asia, South America. Sarah knew salsa, the milonga, knew them all.

The cups that most closely matched the teapot were not by the same artisan but they looked good together, like they belonged. I put them closer to each other on the shelf, looked at them, asked the attendant

when she came across if she thought they belonged, and yes, she did, she thought they looked very nice together, that it was a very good choice – for someone special?

‘My wife. She’s turning forty in a week.’

‘Well, she’s very lucky. This is a lovely gift. Would you like me to wrap them up carefully for you?’

I stood sweating and smiling, watching the woman wrap the gifts. Saw a scarf among several that would look good on Sarah – not instead of the teapot, the cups, but in addition –

A text from Zac: *Any luck, dude?*

From me: *Yeah, kind of:/*

I took the scarf from the rail, read the card. Japanese silk, a natural hand-dyeing process, white and magenta pattern. It reminded me of the one I’d bought her in Hong Kong, my first ever token of affection. She was still dancing professionally at the time, on tour with Tasty Moves in Asia. I was a backpacker, working as a DJ in the basement of her hotel, hanging out with expats and taking speed to get through my lacklustre sets. Until, there we were, suddenly together – both from Melbourne, uncannily enough, both single, and –

The scarf was ... fuck ...

‘Yeah, on the credit card, too, please.’

* * *

The theme for tonight’s party was ‘Oo La La’. When I saw Sarah after dropping the kids at Kyle’s, she seemed to meet the brief. ‘I made it myself,’ she said. She’d always been a dab hand at making party clothes but hadn’t done so for an age. A halter-neck with sheer floral fabric on the top half, black jersey material from the waist down. Kohl eyes, cherry-bomb lips, her scent of sweetened coffee, toffee. ‘And look at this, hun.’ She kicked one leg out, bent the other knee. ‘I can even dance in it.’

It was a beachfront party, an hour's drive down the Peninsula. She was picking up a friend, and wouldn't wear her wig until getting there, but – just so I could see – she pulled it on, adjusted the fringe, tucked away her dark strands. A Russian-red bob for an automaton designed to look as sexually appealing as possible. I loved it nearly as much as the blonde one she'd worn in Greece when we were twenty-eight, hoped she'd love the teapot, cups and scarf I'd hidden in the dining room.

I followed her into the bedroom, handed her a condom from the packet I'd bought.

Her raised eyebrows, unsure smile. 'Oh, that's subtle, hun.'

'Yeah, look, have a good time.'

* * *

9.33 am. Sophie had drawn the fallow deer; Oliver, the octopus. I missed them, missed Sarah.

After getting her text at 1.27 am, I'd lain in bed, unable to sleep, wondering what would happen next for her. It was exciting. For Sarah, I hoped, but definitely for me.

She was high. Over the rainbow, in fact. We hadn't done drugs for nearly nine years – maybe longer in Sarah's case, given Oliver was seven and a half. She'd have taken MDMA, most likely, her Sufi-whirling past-self spilling over, the poet Rumi on her mind: *Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.*

And kissing a French guy, ripping open a condom packet, not tearing the latex ...

My phone – Sarah. 'Hey, Chrissy.' Her voice was quiet, consciously so.

'You've got the kids, yeah?'

'No, sorry ... I'm still at the beach.'

Heartbeat, boom.

'You're meant to be getting them in, like ... like, now. Kyle's expecting you, he's going out.'

'I know. I'm sorry, Chris. I haven't slept. I'm like a half-shut door.'

I threw off the bedcovers, stood, sat back down on the mattress.

'Where are you now?'

'I'm in our car. I spent the night with someone.'

'Right. Yeah. Right. The French guy?'

'No, the DJ from the party.'

'OK, right ... Can you hang on a second?' I paced through to the kitchen, started pulling open drawers looking for the emergency cigarette stash, found it, found a lighter, went to stand in the garden in my boxers and T-shirt - fuck, it was cold - lit up, exhaled. 'So, you slept with him, yeah?'

Boom, boom.

'Yeah. I was the last one dancing. We were together all night, after his set.'

'At the house?'

'In his car.'

'You had sex in the DJ's car?'

A pause. Her breathing. Hurry up. 'Yeah.'

I inhaled, exhaled. 'Did you like it?'

Another pause. 'Yeah.'

'Is he still there?'

Another ... Why the fucking pauses?

'He's in his car, just next to ours. I'm calling you from ours.'

I lit a second cigarette from the tip of the first. I was trembling, because it was winter, that's why. 'So, what did you like about it?'

'Um, well, you know ... I don't know ... everything, really.'

'What does that mean?'

'Do you really want to know, Chris? Can't you just imagine it? It's a bit ... I don't know.'

Our first time: a backstreet in Lan Kwai Fong, doing it doggy in the detritus. Her strong legs, taut skin. It had felt, she'd felt -

'Just tell me, Sarah. I won't get angry, I promise.'

Because I was already fucking fuming - no, I wasn't. I was a small 'l' liberal, well-versed in the theoretical underpinnings of ethical non-monogamy, impervious to otherwise universal manifestations of human frailty. Or I would have been had I done any proper research.

A sigh, her nervous laugh. 'OK, so ... Are you sure, hun?'

Calm voice. 'Yeah.'

'Well, right ... Cos, I don't want to hurt you, Chris. Just tell me to stop if -'

'Carry on, Sarah.'

'So, yeah, OK ... He had a blow-up mattress in his boot and that's where he, you know ... fucked me.' A giggle. 'We covered the windows with a bedsheet.'

I couldn't work out what my body was trying to tell me: could it explode and implode at the same time?

She'd been reading *The Celestine Prophecy* when we first met; me, *If This Is a Man*.

'What kind of things did you do?'

'Oh, you know, just the usual stuff. Although ...' She was whispering now. 'You might not want to know this, but he took me up the arse as well.'

Oh. Implode. I had never. She'd never let me, fucking arse. 'Was it good?'

'Yeah, I guess.' Another nervy laugh. 'I don't know, it just felt really ... natural.'

'And you used protection, yeah?'

'Yeah, of course, hun - I'm not stupid. He had condoms.'

Exhale, Chris. 'And you're going back into his car after this?'

A shy laugh. 'Um, probably, yeah. Do you mind? I definitely can't

drive home in this state. Lucy's still on the beach somewhere. I'll have to wait for her to drive us.'

I rubbed my face. 'I'll get the kids. But fuck knows how I'm going to get them home. Anyway. So ... right. What's his name?'

'Valentino.'

'Valentino? Fucking hell. Well, thanks for telling me.'

That was our deal, the only condition beyond condoms: that Sarah would tell me what had happened without holding back for the sake of my feelings, which I'd be hiding as best I could in case my jitters stopped her telling me more.

I craved knowledge of Sarah's libido, her ... fucking arse.

* * *

I pulled on my jeans, my hoodie, got my bike, left the house, started pedalling.

Thanks for telling me sounded weak, like saying *thanks for the opportunity* when an audition failed or a job interview flopped. *Thanks for hating me, I've had a wonderful time.*

I'd already phoned Kyle, explained that Sarah was stuck at the party, yeah, but I'd be there in like -

'Mate,' he said.

'Yeah, I know. I'll be as quick as I can.'

They'd be waiting for me - oblivious Oliver, sweetest Sophie.

Kyle worked in finance, drove a nice car, had a nice girlfriend called Himari. He was also a workaholic and recovering alcoholic who'd always promised to be the uncle the kids deserved if things ever calmed down.

I rode quickly under darkening clouds, overtook pedestrians and cyclists on the bike path. Even in that moment, Sarah may have been riding Valentino, and that was ... a relief?

The prospect of Sarah being with someone who wasn't me had been

there for a couple of years, since just after Nikau from New Zealand took his life. Our one sexual encounter since then had ended in tears – Sarah’s, not mine – but maybe if ...

I’d broached the topic, or maybe Sarah had. It was hard to know, but we’d run with it. Imagine – Sarah screwing someone else. Fucking hell. We’d imagined it, shared our fantasies. Imagine – Sarah wanting to screw me, her life partner, who she’d once ravenously desired. Fucking hell. I’d imagined that too.

Arguing hadn’t fixed our sexless marriage. To me, my logic was sound – we used to have a good sex life, could again – but didn’t convert to action. Guilted Sarah into sympathy-screwing – I was a dutiful dad, a decent provider – always hit the buffers. Blackmail – I could leave her destitute, I really could – aroused little in the way of desire. Rages – I’d flown into so many, fallen to the ground, wings clipped.

These days, just reaching out – even a tentative hand across the mattress in the dead of night – was too much. The shame of real and anticipated rejection was paralysing. She wasn’t interested, said she didn’t feel sexy. But if she could see that men still wanted her, found her desirable ... Me, for example – I was a man!

I straddled my bike at the intersection, waiting for the lights, come on, sweating. My phone ... Had Sarah texted? No.

Green light. Driving the pedals, wind in my face, my wife released.

We’d been married for ten years, together for fifteen. Other than her fling with Nikau six months after our wedding, and the fact she’d been in love with him ever after, and maybe more so since he’d carked it, she’d not been with anyone, to my knowledge, but me.

She’d gone to the South Island for her friend Larissa’s thirtieth, a party in the mountains. Nikau had approached her after his DJ set, sidled up to her, told her, ‘You’re dangerous for me.’ He was fascinating to her, so dark and mysterious and ...

I swerved to avoid a pothole.

In the past eight years, she'd been a mum or expectant mum or mum who worked five days a fortnight at a myotherapy clinic in Fitzroy while studying for a complementary health sciences degree. It wasn't easy: life after dancing, motherhood, Nikau's demise, family grief. Meditation, spirituality, poetry – Sarah still found solace in those, but they only went so far.

I got my phone out, texted Kyle: *There in five*. Or even sooner, the way I was riding – I was a superdad, unstoppable.

Sarah's sexual reawakening would be good for her, but more importantly it would be good for me.

I wheeled over the tram tracks.

Despite myself, I still craved her – how she looked, smelled, moved, touched, kissed, tasted ... I yearned, she spurned, but I loved her, like a chump. She loved me, always told me so, still made me laugh with her interbred idioms.

We were a success, a happy couple.

And thanks to Valentino I'd maybe even get laid.

* * *

I couldn't get the kids and me and my bike and their bags on the tram – I tried, had to step back off, wave at the driver.

'Oh, what's Daddy going to do?' I said, faking a laugh.

'We could all ride on your bike,' Sophie said.

'Yeah, that could work,' I said. 'If you could just sit on the handlebars, just there, and, Olly, yeah, if you could put your feet there, on the back-wheel bolts – just be careful with your shoelaces, and hold me tight round the waist.'

'You're joking, Daddy.'

'You think? Well, what else can we try?'

'What if Olly and me ride your bike?' Sophie said.

'And you run after us,' Oliver said.

‘It might be hard to reach the pedals,’ I said. ‘What if we try this?’ I propped the bike against my hip, lifted Oliver, sat him on the seat. He leant forwards at full stretch, pulling against my arm, trying to reach the handlebars. ‘I can push you in turns so that you both get a shot. Shall we try that?’

‘I’m scared,’ Oliver said.

‘Yeah, lame idea,’ Sophie said.

‘We’re going to have to walk then. At least until a tram comes that has fewer people on it.’

‘No.’ Oliver threw his hands in the air, buckling at the knees.

‘We’re tired,’ Sophie said. ‘We can’t walk anywhere.’

They were tired because they’d stayed up past midnight – that’s what Kyle had told them. They’d eaten their midnight feast at half past eight, an hour past their normal bedtime, believing it to be the witching hour. But really, the witching hour was now, half past eleven on a Sunday morning, miles from home with no means of transport and the threat of revolt by a five- and seven-year-old.

Was that rain? A couple of small drops, nothing major.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. A message from Zac: *Don’t suppose you fancy a coffee today, dude?*

From me: *Not today!*

‘Let’s just keep walking,’ I said, ‘just up to that corner there.’

‘No,’ said Oliver, stamping his foot.

‘No way,’ Sophie said, stamping hers.

I leant the bike against the tram-stop railings, phoned Sarah. ‘We’re basically stuck. Where are you now?’

‘About half an hour away, hun. Lucy’s driving, I’ve just been dozing.’

‘How you feeling?’

‘Yeah, good. I feel good.’

‘That’s good. Do you think you could come get us when you get

home? It looks like it's going to start pissing down, and we're still in North Melbourne.'

'I can't drive. I'm three sheets to the mainsail.'

Heavy clouds, cold breeze. But Daddy wasn't stressed, he could do this. I rubbed my face, tried to smile, winked at Oliver and Sophie. Both looked away, their shoulders slumping. A friendly tone, I had one of those, and wasn't in any way, shape or form losing it. 'What if Lucy drives and one of us squishes up in the back next to the kids?'

'She's already running late. She was meant to get her kids an hour ago. I'm really sorry, hun. Maybe just get a taxi?'

'I can't get a bloody taxi,' I hissed, covering my mouth to hide the words from the kids. 'I've got my bike, Sarah. I don't have a lock.'

'OK, Chris, Jesus. I'll get you. I'll try to sleep some more just now then text you when I'm at the house, OK? Love you.'

'OK. Yeah. Cheers.'

Oliver kicked the railings, a plaintive clang. Sophie looked at me, shrugged.

'That was Mummy,' I said. 'She's going to pick us up but she'll be a little while. We should start walking, just to stay warm - and, hey, we might even beat Mummy to the house, we might win the race, we -'

'I hate walking,' Oliver said.

'Me too,' Sophie said.

The feeling keen hikers might have looking over their shoulders to see their young children in trekking gear following them merrily along a mountain pass wasn't one I expected to ever experience. But getting them to the next corner - if I could just do that. And then the next. And then the next.

We made it as far as the Royal Melbourne Hospital, where my mother had been treated, and sat outside on a bench. It wouldn't rain - there was that, at least. Just wind. Just whining. Just whooping. Just wailing. My phone ringing.

'I'm heading down Royal Parade,' Sarah said.

'Oh, great. We're just outside the hospital.'

We'd made it.

'That was Mummy,' I said. 'She's coming to get us.'

They cheered, stood, ran in circles. Oliver tripped over Sophie's foot, scraped his knee, started crying, punched her in the chest. She started crying.

'Oh, look,' I said. 'Look up there. Holy ... what the heck is that?'

'What's what?' Oliver said through his tears.

'Didn't you see it, up there?' I pointed at a hospital window where nothing of any consequence had happened.

'What was it?' Sophie said, sniffing but no longer crying.

'I don't know. Like a bird or something, but bigger. It flew right up to the window, and then this old lady opened the window, and then -'

'Mummy,' Sophie said. 'Mummy, Mummy, Mummy.' She hopped from foot to foot, pointed across the road at our car.

'OK, quick, get your things.'

Sarah pulled into the No-Waiting zone. I got the bags in the boot, strapped the kids into their car seats, got my bike onto the roof rack, got in.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello.'

'We saw a bird and an old lady,' Sophie said.

'Did you?' Sarah said.

'Daddy just made that up,' Oliver said.

'Sounds like you kids have had a bit of an adventure.'

'You too,' I said.

I had to look at her, couldn't help it - I wanted to see her basking in the afterglow of steamy sex with an elaborately named DJ. She mostly looked tired. Her eyes were hidden behind her sunglasses. Her lips looked like they'd been kissed a lot. Like she'd had someone's penis between them. Like someone had cum across her face before flipping her over and taking her up the arse.

'Mamma, I'm hungry,' Sophie said.

'Are you, darling? There's an apple in that bag just next to you.'

'What about me?' Oliver said.

'You didn't get them anything to eat?'

'We haven't passed any shops,' I said. 'I've just been walking and sitting and trying to keep everyone happy since picking them up.'

'We'll get some food at home,' she said, looking in the mirror. 'Let's just have a rest day.'