

I JUST WANT TO PULL DOWN YOUR PANTIES AND FUCK YOU

In the ten years they'd known each other there'd been countless opportunities for them to do it. Times when neither were attached to anyone else, when there was nowhere to go and nothing doing. Like the night they broke into the derelict church on Walworth Road or the time they drove up to Nottingham for the Stop HS2 protest and slept in the trees. But for one reason or another it never happened and after a certain amount of time had passed any friction that might've existed between them on the basis of him being a boy and her being a girl vanished. In its place friendship blossomed. A friendship where bad behaviour, lewd comments, racist jokes and other non-PC parlance were permissible and where the micro-politics of every social situation going was scrutinised to the extreme. Sometimes they argued, like when he had a go at her for doing an event at the Serpentine because, he said, the Serpentine was funded by the Sacklers. She told him she didn't see what difference her doing or not doing an event there made to the millions of people addicted to Valium. Or when she had a go at him for tagging the walls of Old St. Pancras churchyard, which, she said was just a dickish thing to do. But on the

whole, whether in agreement on a subject or not, they always arrived at the same conclusion: that while her politics were in theory libertarian and his anarchic, in practise there was so much overlap in their ways of thinking, so not being friends would be mental.

Any sexual tension that might've reared its head was kept at bay by the stories he told her about his frequent (and sometimes bizarre) sexual encounters. He always had a couple of women on the go. Around the time in question he was sleeping with one of the head honchos in XR who was, he said, the first 'black black' person he'd ever had sex with. ('Black black' meaning her skin was dark, a clarification that needed to be made in view of the increasing popularity of the American 'one drop' definition of black, more expansive and including quadroons, octoroons, high yellow, etc.) XR Woman flew him to eco-conferences in Austria, Belgium, Italy, France and fucked him in hotel rooms, claiming him on expenses as her assistant. He said he thought it was 'hot' because it made him feel 'objectified, like a girl' but also used it as evidence for the total fraudulence of XR's claimed agenda.

— The sex was amazing, he said. — But afterwards she feel asleep on the bed like this. He flailed his arms and began to grunt. — Snoring like a big, black pig.

His slapstick impression was funny and she laughed briefly and involuntarily. She hated XR as much as he did and had no difficulty believing the people with access to their coffers were not halal, but she also thought it wise to warn him (in case he didn't know) that comparing black people and women you've slept with to pigs was no go.

— You should be careful, she said.

— Why's that? he said.

— Well, she said, — People are getting cancelled left, right and centre for far softer statements.

— Are you saying I'm racist? he said.

— Maybe, she said. — I don't know. But it's a bit *Vice magazine* circa 2006...

— Fuck *Vice*! he said, his face reddening. — They don't pay their journalists you know.

— Again, she said, — old news. Why d'you even write for them anyway? They're clowns.

He shrugged. — A lot of people read it. I'm trying to get my message out.

She raised an eyebrow. — A lot of morons, she said. — But whatever, all I'm saying is you should be careful. I wouldn't want to see all the good work you do undermined over something stupid.

— Oh yeah, he said, jibing her, — I forgot you think you're black.

— It isn't that, she said. Then left it.

Then there was the Italian with the boyfriend who ran a food stall in Elephant & Castle. He'd dated Elephant & Castle woman years ago but had fucked her around so much that she'd eventually ditched him and started seeing someone else. Which is when he decided he was in love with her. He harangued the Elephant & Castle Woman with suggestive texts and eventually coerced her into a clandestine meet in a countryside hotel for (his) birthday sex.

The day after his birthday they met for supper at Chilli's, a very cheap and very good Indian caff in London Bridge. He spilled the beans on the nookie.

— It was so good, he said. — Really messy.

— Dude, she said, pausing the spoonful of daal on its ascent to her mouth.

Later, they'd finished eating and were standing outside on the pavement, he got a touch of the birthday blues. He stood gazing towards the roundabout, bike lock in hand.

— I feel like my life is at a crossroads, he said, straightening his posture and staring wistfully at the passing traffic.

— How you mean? she said, licking a one-skinner for the walk home.

— It's, like, if this girl could just see that me and her are good together then I *know* I could sort my shit out, he said. — I can be a really good boyfriend, you know. I can commit... But it's like, if she doesn't, if it's never gonna happen, if she's gonna stay with that fucking prick then, I don't know, I think it's just gonna be just this for me, forever.

What he meant by 'this' was graffiti, hating the police, prison abolition activism and more graffiti.

His shoulders sagged. Seeing him so forlorn, she stepped forward and gave him a hug.

— Don't worry, she said. — I love you. She patted him lightly on the back. — Plus 'this' is not so bad. I mean, you're not doing any damage.

— I don't know what's up with me, he said. — I never feel like this.

He rested a hand on the top of her head.

— My advice, she said, pulling out of the cuddle, — is if you love her you need to show her.

— How do I do that? he said.

— Act like her boyfriend, she said — even if you're not going out. Be there for her, don't fuck other women...

She'll notice. I mean, if she's still fucking you then she definitely feels something for you. She wouldn't be if she didn't. She probably just doesn't want to have the piss taken out of her again.

— Why wouldn't I fuck other girls if she's giving that prick shiners every night? he said.

— Mate, she said. — Come on.

— What, *mate*? he said.

— Really? she said.

The two of them looked at each other expectantly. She sighed.

— Who is fucking who, she said — has *fuck all* to do with love. Love is not transactional like that. Either it is, or it isn't.

His melancholic expression morphed into a Cheshire Cat grin.

— You know, when I'm fucking her, her pussy make these squelching noises, he said. He makes several rhythmic thrusts with his pelvis and a gross slurping sound with his mouth. — I swear, that never happens when I'm fucking anyone else.

Squelchy cunt comment aside it seemed he took her advice to heart because the next few times they met up he had no new conquests to report. But then, by the following week, things'd changed again. The first update came over the phone. Another ex-girlfriend had got in touch, they'd met up and fucked then when he called she blanked him.

— She's such a basic bitch, he said. — It's so obvious what she's doing.

— What's that? she said.

— She just wants to know that I still want to fuck her, he said. — That's it.

And two days later, when they met near Kings Cross, there was more.

— God, he said as they walked up York Way deciding where to go. — I'm *so* hungover.

— I thought you didn't drink, she said. (He was diabetic.)

— I only drink when I feel like I'm on holiday, he said.

He launched into a tale of the night before. A house party in south London with some of the Palace lot (rich kids with a skate emporium that needed shutting down).

— They got me fuuuuucked, he said.

— I hate those wankers, she said.

— Yeah, he said, — They're pricks. But fuck, it was mental... I mean, the party was whack. Full of Goldsmiths students, but there was this one chick. She starts flirting with me, like hardcore flirting. Like, 'your hands are so big' and shit like that. Then outta nowhere she's like, 'I've gotta go'. So I was like, 'cool, whatever, nice to meet you', and I guess we must've exchanged numbers but I was so pissed I don't remember doing it. But we must've cos when I decided to call it a night at, like, five in the morning, I went to order an Uber on my phone and there was this text. A picture of her arse, red, like it'd been spanked and 'wanna fuck?' But I was so wasted I couldn't remember chatting to her so I texted back like 'who is this?'. Lol. Not the kinda reply you want to a picture of your fucking asshole. So then I opened Uber to order a car but they were doing that surcharge thing and it was like forty quid back to mine, so I'm like maybe I should walk it but then this bitch texted a picture of her with one of those gimp ball things in her mouth.

— What!/? she said.

— Yeah, he said. — Mental. ‘Take me as you find me big boy’. That’s what she wrote.

They both get the giggles.

— So I’m like ‘fuck it’, he said, then stopped.

— Fuck what? she said.

— She texted me her postcode, he said. — And it was literally round the corner... So, yeah, I get there and the front door’s open. Anyone could’ve walked in. I go inside and there is this chick, naked, on her knees in the middle of the living room, tied up. Tied fucking *up!*

— Yikes, she said. — So what did you do?

— I’m a man, aren’t I? he said.

He didn’t divulge any more of the story than this and she didn’t press him for details, assuming ‘I’m a man’ implied he stuck it in.

They roamed the back streets, him stopping every now and then to do his tag or add an ‘A’ to parking signs that said, ‘CAB’. But that night in bed she thought about his sexcapade. She imagined him arriving at one of those terrifying terraced houses that make up most of south east London, imagined him naked in its living room, knees bent. She tried to picture the girl, casting a version of herself in the role but no, she couldn’t imagine being the sort of person who hogtied and blindfolded herself and left the front door open in the hopes that a random would come round to fuck her. Even if she wanted to be the sort of person who hogtied and blindfolded herself and left the front door open in the hopes that a random would come round to fuck her, she wasn’t sure she’d know how to go about it. It all seemed a bit extreme and she couldn’t help but wonder what

horribleness had happened to this anonymous woman that meant she needed to go to such lengths to get her kicks?

But because the woman was anonymous her thoughts on the matter couldn't progress beyond speculation. Something that made it easier for her to dismiss any concerns she might've had in regards to his behaviour... Not that she had a problem with fucking around, necessarily. She'd had her moments after all, working her way through entire social circles before vanishing to leave groups of bemused lads to work out what their new closeness to one another meant for themselves. No, she had no objection to casual sex or general slagginess as long as no one was getting hurt. Only in her experience, someone generally was, which is why she'd stopped doing it.

The first time she felt uncomfortable was with the Indian girl.

— Fucking fit, he said. — I made her wear a bindi while we had really naughty bum sex.

Asides from the 'made', all well and good, until they ran into said Indian girl in the street. He was right, she *was* beautiful.

An awkward hello was followed by an even more awkward silence during which the Indian girl looked at them, clearly assuming they were fucking. She looked at the Indian girl and couldn't hide the fact that she knew about the naughty bum sex. He stood back with a smile on his face.

It was a short meet. The Indian girl broke it off, walking speedily away before turning into a side street with a Dead End sign at its corner.

— Told you she was fit, he said.

— That was odd, she said.

- What was odd about it? he said.
- I mean, she was obviously upset, she said.
- What's she got to be upset about? he said.
- Did you not just see her run away? she said.

She wasn't sleeping with anyone. There was no particular reason for this other than she had started to find sex a bit grim. All the spit and sweat and spunk and silty hairs. All the straining and humping and grunting. And it wasn't just the physical act. There was the issue of what sex did to her brain. It made it soft, fat, preening, lazy, puddleduck. Satisfied by the knowledge that her body was desirable because it had just been had, her brain gave up the ghost and stopped thinking the things it was supposed to be thinking — at night all cats are grey / every act of destruction is an act of liberation / armed love means the future has no future / tactical pig symphony / up against the wall motherfucker! — and instead fixated on what the naked man wandering around her flat was thinking about: pussy, ass, Call of Duty. No, she liked her brain and preferred it in its alert, defensive, rational state to when it resembled a bowlful of jelly.

- I don't think I'm going to have sex with anyone ever again, she announced the next time they met.
 - Bollocks, he said.
 - I'm serious, she said.
 - Why's that then? he said. — Enlighten me.
 - It's just different for girls, she said. — Innit.
 - Meaning? he said, sounding genuinely curious to hear what she had to say.
 - We-e-ell, she said, unsure how to put it, — It's, like, if

you think about the physical act of sex... Putting something inside someone is different from having something put inside you.

— Sure, he said.

— A-a-and, like, when boys cum, she said, — it's, like, getting rid of something from them and putting it onto someone else. Onto you, the girl, me.

— Are you fucking stoned? he said.

She nodded. — A bit. So what? What I'm saying is serious. When men, you, have sex, you absolve yourself of something, get rid of it, and women, we have to take it on. And then if you take that and run with it and extend it out to the way men are about women, all projection of desire, love, hate, I mean, it's all gotta come from the physical act of sex, kinda like etymologically. Cause and effect. Because women aren't the way about men that men are about women. Or maybe some of them are, but it's only because they've copied men's style because it's so seemingly successful...

But he wasn't listening anymore. He was on his phone, typing a message.

Both being self-employed ('self' being a euphemism for 'un'), it got so as they were hanging out almost every day. Late-night bike rides to nowhere places, him stopping to graffiti bus stops, shop shutters, cemetery walls... He'd write his tag and sometimes he'd write his tag and her name side by side. He urged her to have a go with the spray can on multiple occasions but each time she declined.

— I don't suffer from your addiction, she eventually said.

— And besides I don't have anything concise enough to say.

He appeared to approve of this answer and stopped bugging her about it.

When they weren't together they'd message constantly. He sent photos of his tag and lots of links to right-on Internet content, usually related to whichever current affair was making headlines in the tabloids that week. Like the video of the policeman getting his throat cut with a machete in Tottenham (so gruesome she didn't watch all the way through). He also sent a lot of petitions. Trans rights, workers' rights, justice for cleaners, defund the police, kind of stuff. She dutifully consumed all the media he sent except for the petitions. She wasn't gonna sign those. Then, one afternoon he texted a link to a petition for a boycott of the Zabludowicz Foundation, an increasingly irrelevant contemporary art gallery in Kentish Town run by Israeli arms dealers. She was aware of the Zabludowicz problem. There'd been a boycott a few years back. It made a lot of noise but, at far as she could see, had been completely ineffectual. The cunts were still cunting about and wasn't, she thought, the Al-Anon definition of insanity repeating the same behaviour again and again and expecting different results?

She clicked the link, if only to see what nonsense the so-called left were spouting this time round and was taken to a Facebook event page from 2014. It wasn't a new ineffectual boycott. It was the ineffectual boycott from before.

She messaged him: Dis page five years old yo.

She clicked a link to the Zabludowicz's website and scrolled through News and Upcoming Events. All the usual suspects: Mat Collishaw, Marina Warner, Rachel McLean and then, in a list of names for an upcoming group show, his

ex-wife's name. She took a photo of the listing and texted it to him: Noooooow I see ;)

One tick, two ticks. Grey ticks, blue ticks. No reply.

He called later, didn't mention the Zabludocwizc faux-pas, just got her to come meet him at an Ethiopian restaurant in Vauxhall. She turned up in a naughty mood and, over shiro, started teasing him about still being hung up on his ex.

— You wish it was you with an exhibition at Zabludowizc, she said. — Is that it?

— No, he said, — I just don't see why the upper middle class get all the airspace. I mean I'm doing really good stuff, you're doing really good stuff but no one's writing articles about *you* in the fucking *Guardian*.

— Who says I want articles written about me in the fucking *Guardian*? she said. — What? 'Biracial millennial redefines rape for the social media era'? Rofl. No thanks.

He lolled. — 'Prison dude says prison sucks.'

— Exactly, she said.

She watched him tear the enjera with his grubby fingers and mop up lentils.

— But it's bullshit, he said. — 'Culture.' I'm just sick of it.

— I know you are, she said. — That's why you hang around with me.

He smiled.

— I just wish there was something we could *do*, he said. — You know, to change it up. It's like there's nothing *real* anymore.

He launched into a monologue bemoaning London's

arid creative landscape and the lowly cultural statuses of themselves and people they rated.

— I mean look at Mattais, he's an amazing writer and he's what? Working on a psych ward? he said.

— At least he's working on it and not committed to it, she said.

— And your weird mate, what's she called? he said. — The music girl.

— Flora, she said.

— Yeah, he said, — I mean, she's cool, but what the fuck does she do?

— She's a freak, she said. — It's a full time job.

But he had a bee in his bonnet and wouldn't let it drop. Example followed example. The graff kid who'd had his tag stolen by Supreme for a line of t-shirts, the producer whose beat had been ripped off by Skepta, the sex blogger who'd had her account shut down by Insta. She finished eating and wiped her mouth.

— If you are so desperate to do something, she said, — why don't you just do it? We could do something. Me and you.

His face lit up. Shovelling the last of the dinner into his mouth he came up with idea after idea about what the thing they should do would be. A book? A zine! A website? A podcast! Open up a squat and run a space? All his ideas sounded fun but she couldn't help pointing out their obvious flaws: time, effort, money. In the end they settled on the most straightforward plan of action. They would put on an event. They'd both read. She could work Adobe so she'd do the flyers. He had a lot of followers and was a member of multiple WhatsApp groups so would pump it out on socials. He came up with the name: 'Reading',

pronounced like 'reading a book', but using the logo for the Reading Festival from the Nineties. She suggested a couple more performers: Flora for music and Reggie Stepper, a Ghanaian she'd met peddling his self-published book, *It's On Top* in a vegan Jamaican cafe in Whitechapel. He called a friend who lived in an ex-squat, now being run as a co-op, in Bermondsey and asked if they could set up in the kitchen. A date ten days in the future was decided and by the time they paid for the food and left, the thing was on.

The event was a massive success. Way more people than she'd expected, the readings met with laughter at all the right places, and the music so ephemeral that the audience didn't notice it and (to Flora's absolute delight) talked all the way through the set.

It was over by nine but there was such a good vibe, nobody wanted to leave and so the entire unruly party strolled into the night brandishing beer cans and spray cans and spliffs, buzzing at having been at what felt like the start of something new, something genuine, something un-PR'ed. Really exciting.

The two of them felt closer than ever. This wasn't just hanging out anymore, it was business! They walked arm in arm in the middle of the crowd beaming and congratulating one another on what they'd created... Except they kept being interrupted by Reggie Stepper, who was *on* her case. Kept trying to hold her hand, calling her wifey and saying how he was gonna cook her dinner. While she was cornered by Reggie, he took out his spray can and wrote her name in massive letters on the back of a bus waiting at traffic lights.

Realising she's a dab hand at PhotoShop, the ideas came thick and fast. He suggested a poster to sell at events and through his website, a set of stickers of his graffiti, and a flyer for an activist group he was trying to ingratiate himself with. She agreed to all of the above and soon enough the two of them were churning out what he referred to as 'product' fast.

— I love working with you, he said, after she'd emailed him a few different designs for the cover of a feminist pamphlet his friend wanted doing. — Everyone else needs like three meetings and wants to email every fucking tiny change but you, you just smash it out. It's wicked.

She appreciated the compliment and liked seeing her work go out and getting likes on other people's Instagrams. On the whole, her work was put out anonymously, either under his graffiti name or one activist group or another. Until a promo postcard he asked her to design for Cape Campaign, which hashtagged his name but not hers. But then she didn't give *too* much of a shit. It was only Instagram. And she wasn't doing it for the credit. But she wasn't doing it for money either. So, why was she doing it? Because she believed in what they were campaigning for? Which was what? Prison abolition. That sounded alright, she supposed. Still, it'd clearly annoyed her because she looked at the post several times over the next few days and each time she looked felt a kick of something unpleasant.

— Oooo, that's nice, her mum, an avid Instagrammer, said, catching sight of the post on her phone. — What is it?

She locked her phone.

— It's a flyer I made, she said. — They posted it without crediting me, that's all.

— Is this for that boy you've been hanging around with?
her mum said.

— Maybe, she said. — Why?

— I'll tell you straight, darling, her mum said — But you're not gonna like it. That boy has got you exactly where he wants you. He's got you running around after him, making work for him, making content in promotion of issues *he* cares about, but what is he doing for you?

— He's my friend, she said.

— Well the way I see it, her mum said, — And I know you aren't going to agree with me, is that transgressions made against private property, which is what graffiti is, which is what squatting is... he is a squatter, yes? That's one thing. People might not like it, they might not agree with it, but at the end of the day it's a wall, it's a house, it doesn't matter. But transgressions made against a person, well, that's something else entirely.

Her mother was right about her not agreeing with the opinions espoused on graffiti or squatting. *Her* attitude was, with the system as corrupt as it was, any form of opposition to it was valid. So she was able to dismiss her mother's opinion on the friendship and forgo any consideration of what her friend's hidden (possibly even to himself) intentions towards her might be.

The next time they speak he has a new proposition.

— I was thinking, he said, — you're not really a designer, you're a writer and you remember how I went to Mexico?

— Yes, she said.

— Well, I've written something about it but it's a mess and I've kinda run out of steam. I thought maybe you could

have a look at it and let me know what you think. Whether it's worth doing or not.

He emailed a Word doc which she downloads to her phone. He was right, it was a mess. Text justified right, left and centre, whole paragraphs in italics for no reason, spelling mistakes highlighted eight to a line. She emailed him back.

Do you want me to go through and edit? xx

His reply arrived in her inbox in seconds.

That'd be AMAZING. I'd reaaaaally appreciate. I'm a bit worried that I come across like one of those wankers who goes in for extreme holidaying hahaha. What we saying for next event?

She replied with an attachment of a rough design for the next flyer.

Flyer already done. Just waiting for details of people/venue/date. More soon xx

That evening she sat down to read the text properly, on her computer. It began with him arriving in Los Angeles, visiting a prison then he's in Mexico with his graffiti friend, Pear. She made light corrections as she progressed, moving commas, adding capital letters and hyphens, closing up double spaces. Then the whole thing went a bit weird and there was a massive chunk of statistics about the history of brown people in the Americas. Unsure where the information was from but not wanting to make major changes without his approval, she started to leave notes in the margins.

Clichéd. Also there are a lot of black and latino ppl who r paler than u r AND a lot of black and latino ppl who vote Republican. Best to avoid magical negro trope as a rule.

Comes across as preachy + if u extend this argument to its conclusion what ur saying is that the leftest you can get is Jeremy Corbyn. Which is not true. Also Jews got to south america b4 slavery.

WTF. You can't just cut and past from Wiki.

Also, tenses r all over the place. It's cool to switch from past to present in the same text but if u do u gotta do it u gotta go it well.

The text is just over forty thousand words so she doesn't make it to the end on first read. She works until it got dark then calls him as she makes supper. His phone goes to voicemail.

— Hi there, I rarely check my messages so if you want to get hold of me quickly send me a text.

The next morning she picks up where she left off over coffee, following his escapades from desert to *barrios*, italicising the Spanish, correcting tenses, querying repetitions. Occasionally she will take a picture of a sentence she likes and text it to him and when she reaches the end of the story, which is less of an ending and more of a stop, she calls.

— Hi there, I rarely check my....

She emails him the edit.

It's really good. Really funny. Really informative. Have tried to keep ur conversational tone but make it readable. Some suggestions re: structure also. Anyway, AWOL? Lost ur phone? Call me bitch xxx

But he doesn't call or reply to her email. She checks the messages she'd sent earlier. Delivered but not read. She assumes he is holed up with one of his women and while she

has no problem with that, per se, finds herself, for the first time ever, irritated by him. She drafts a text saying how'd she'd done a helluva lotta work that she'd been happy to do but it was rude to... She remembers the Instagram post that had tagged his name and not hers. So not for the first time ever. For the second.

She doesn't hear from him for the rest of the week. Every afternoon she calls and every afternoon it's the same.

— Hi there, I rarely check my...

— Hi there...

— Hi...

And then, — This mailbox is full.

She begins to worry that her initial annoyance had been rash and maybe she should've been concerned for his safety instead. If he'd lost his phone he'd check his email. Maybe, she thinks, he's got arrested? But if he's been arrested that would mean he didn't get bail and you didn't not get bail for graffiti...

He resurfaces early Saturday morning. Calls, sounding hyper.

— Yoooo, he yells when she answers.

— Where've you *been*? she says.

— Went on a mad one didn't I? he says. — What you saying? I'm right near your house. Come meet me.

Without time for coffee she walks to where he says he is, the north side of Blackfriars Bridge, half-asleep. They set off in the direction of his but he doesn't get off his bike. He rides in wobbly circles around her, making conversation difficult.

— I was thinking, he says, — for the next event, we could get Ian Bone. He's *so* into me.

— Did you read my edit? she says.

— He emailed me, he says. — He called me comrade.

He puffed out his chest.

— Does he know you're middle class? she says.

— And then there's this graff kid. 'Ve you seen that goofy face with fangs? He's killing it. And we could get Wolfboy down from Nottingham, or wherever the fuck he lives. But we need a venue. Somewhere big this time. I was thinking you could ask your mate, what's her name, to let us use the Tin Tabernacle?

— Flora, she says, — Her name's Flora. But I don't know. I'm not sure a bunch of rowdy graffiti twats is what that place needs. If anything, it needs protecting from those kind of people. Plus Tin Tab usually rents out for £200 a night. That's how they keep the roof from falling in...

But he won't take no for an answer.

— Just text her, he says. — See what she says.

They stop while she takes out her phone and texts Flora, who responds with unusual promptness. To her surprise, Flora's answer is 'yes'.

— Sweet! he says. — That's sorted then...

— Is it? she says.

When they reach Vauxhall Bridge he gets off his bike and on his phone.

— What you doing now? he says absentmindedly.

— Nothing, she says. — Hanging out with you. Have you read the edit I sent?

He takes out his phone and writes a text.

— I think I'm gonna head, he says.

— Oh, she said. — Ok.

He puts his phone back in his pocket.

- I'll shout you tomorrow, he says. — Let's hang.
— So you get me out of bed to walk you home? she says.
— What the fuck?
— Shit, I'm sorry, he says, noticing she is miffed. — I didn't think. It's just this girl that I'm kinda seeing, she's turned up at mine... But what you doing tomorrow?
— Nothing I don't think, she says.
— Well I'll come to you, he says.
— We could look at Mexichaos, she says.
— What? he says.
— Your writing, she says.
— Oh yeah, he says, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.
— That's a good title actually.
He gets back on his bike.
— Did you look at the version I sent you? she says
— Haven't really been checking my email, he says, pushing down on his left pedal — Too much bollocks!
— Have a look! she shouts, jogging after him. — I mean, feel free to disregard anything, they're only suggestions...
He slows down and looks back.
— Sweet, he says, throwing a black power salute. — You're the best. I owe you one.

He drops off the pavement and into the road. She turns and walks back along the river, buying a coffee on the way home.

The next day he wants to go to the ICA where a guy he used to be friends with but now hates is hosting a zine fair. They meet out front but don't end up going in and instead sit in St. James's Park slagging off the exhibitors.

— That girl Luisa thinks she's so fit, he says. — When I was fucking her do you know what she said? She told me

she thought her face was world-changing. *World-changing*. I mean, lol!

— The face that sunk a thousand chips, she says.

— Lol, he says, again.

— Anyway, did you look at what I sent you yet?

He looks blank.

— Mexico? she says.

— Ah, shit, he says. — I'm a fucking dickhead. I'll look at it tonight. Promise.

They meet the following evening at a Nigerian place in Tooting he wants to go to because he's never tried fufu. Sitting side by side under neon lights on a black faux leather sofa, they order everything on the menu.

— So, did you look at the edit or what? she says.

— Ugh, he makes a face, — Yeah I had a look but I'm not sure I can be bothered with it anymore.

— Are you serious? she says.

— What? he says, turning to face her. — What's the point? Who's even gonna publish it?

She grins.

— It's funny, she says.

— What is? he says.

— Listening to someone else get depressed about what I spend my entire life depressed about. I'm telling you, nobody else thinks like this.

— Come again, he says.

The food arrives suspiciously fast.

— I'm saying, she says, toying with the mound of fufu, — that only writers get like this. Normal people just do their jobs and do their relationships and do their leisure

time. I mean, d'you think normal people get depressed about grammar? Cos I'm telling you, they don't.

— It's not the grammar I'm depressed about, he says, pulling the shared plate towards him.

— Yes it is, she says. — You just don't know it yet.

He lifts a heaped spoonful of fufu to his mouth.

— You're being cryptic, he says, with his mouthful.

— Am I? she says. — Maybe. Either way, all you gotta do is write the thing. When it's done, something will happen. It always does. And if it doesn't, publish it yourself.

He perks up.

— Maybe we could start an imprint, he says. — You and me.

— You and Me Books, she says. — I like that.

— Hey, he says, shuffling around on the sofa, which squeaks, — why don't we go and have a look at it after this?

— I don't know, she says. — I should really get home. You know I haven't done any work for ages and it's starting to stress me out.

— This is work, he says.

— Yeah. Your work, she says. — So I don't think I should do too much more to it. It's your thing.

— I just need someone to get me going, he says. — Through the sludge. He nudges her with his elbow. — Go on. Come back to mine. Please. I'll get dinner.

He persuades her into accepting a backie to Clapham. She sits on the bicycle seat, balancing dangling legs away from the wheel while he stands and pedals. She puts her hands on his shoulders.

— Put your arms round my waist, he says. — It's easier.

She wraps her arms around his torso. She holds him loosely at first but then her leg muscles start to ache and

she holds on tighter, leaning into him, ear pressed against his back. It's strange holding his body in her arms because although they are close and hug and kiss and touch all the time, their physical interactions are brief ('tis the English way). She's never held onto him tight for fifteen minutes with his bum rising and falling and rising and falling against her chest.

Back at his, he sets up his laptop in the kitchen. She shivers. He notices and turns on the oven with its door open for heat (more effective than you might think, although obviously a waste of energy).

— So, he says. — How we gonna do this?

— Where's what I sent you? she says.

He settles in front of the computer, opens his email and downloads it.

— I thought you said you'd read it, she says.

— Oh, he says. — Yeah, I'm just not sure where anything downloads to on this computer.

She accepts his answer but watches him closely as he opens the document.

— Shit, he says.

— What? she says, on him like a hawk.

— It's just a lot of red pen, he says.

— So you didn't read it! she says. She is triumphant.

— No, he says. — Well, I... He trails off as he scans her first edit. — That is fucking *good*. He bangs his fist on the kitchen counter and scrolls. — Yes. Agree...

He deletes his text and replaces it with her edit then scrolls some more.

— Maybe I'll just accept all changes, he says.

— No! she grabs his hand, then realising they're holding hands, takes her hand back.

— It's just there's a lot of questions and stuff that shouldn't be in the final edit.

He gets to his feet and pulls back the chair.

— Why don't you sit? he says. — You know what you're doing. It'll be quicker.

With her on the keyboard and him pacing the room listening to her reading his words aloud, they make good progress. She adds edits and deletes notes.

— What about moving this bit, how 'Russians are the only white people anyone is scared of' to before where they're laughing at the gringos? she says.

When he doesn't answer she turns to look at him and catches him shoulders hunched, mouth open, staring at her with a lascivious look on his face.

— Hello? she says.

— Shit, he says. — Sorry. I was miles away.

He comes to stand behind her to look at the extract she's highlighted, rests his hands on shoulders and leans in to look at the screen.

— Don't you think that makes more sense? she says, turning to address him without realising how close his face is to hers. They brush lips.

— Yeah, he says. — Do whatever you think's best.

She turns back to the screen, fingers on the keys. What is going on?

They work on his text for a couple of hours, stopping when they reach a natural break in the action. (The two protagonists are stranded in a railway depot in the blazing

heat and will remain there for seventy-two hours). She checks the time on her phone.

— Shit, she says, realising how late it is, — I've gotta run if I'm gonna make the last tube.

— Why don't you just crash here? he says.

She hadn't thought of that.

— What's that band you like? he says, taking her place in front of the computer.

— D Block Europe, she says. — Why?

He types it into YouTube.

— Here, he says. — For you.

She smiles and raises her arms half-heartedly before being caught by an enormous yawn. He kills the music.

— Go to bed, he says. — I'll be in in a minute.

She goes through to the bedroom. Undressing to knickers and bra, the thought crosses her mind that she's never stayed round his. He'd stayed at hers and they'd slept together in the back seat of vans and at other people's houses but his bed is a first. She gets into the side of the bed that looks less slept in and smiles at how close the two of them feel and what a productive evening it'd been.

She wakes in his arms to the sound of his radio alarm clock playing Punjabi music. It's been a long time since she'd woken up in someone's arms. It's sunny and everything feels nice.

— Mornin', he says, snuggling into her before letting go and stretching. — Coffee?

They roll out of bed, don enough clothes to be decent (tops, no bottoms) then go through to the kitchen where he turns on the oven again, then they get straight back to it.

Half an hour in and they're on a roll. They're not just

correcting mistakes but adding in-jokes and flourishes. They come up with the idea of adding the word 'mate' to the end of every sentence the narrator says to make him sound English and to add the word 'yo' to the end of every sentence Pear says to make him sound American and are delighted by the effect. They read chunks of direct speech at one another, hooting with laughter.

— This is so fun, he says.

— Isn't it? she says.

They work into the afternoon when they both remember they have places to be and call it a day. She goes into the bedroom to fetch the rest of her clothes then joins him in the bathroom where he hands her a toothbrush. They brush their teeth at the same time, looking at themselves and each other in the mirror. She smiles at him.

— I love brushing my teeth with people, she says.

— That's cause you're a freak, he says.

She spits, rinses the toothbrush then turns on the hot tap to wash her face. No water comes out.

— No hot water? she says.

— Waste of money, he says.

— What about soap? she says, looking around for some to wash her face.

— Don't use soap. Don't use shampoo, he says. — Waste of money.

— I stopped using shampoo too, she says, splashing her face with cold water. — I only wash my hair with conditioner but I don't think I'm ready to live without soap.

— You don't need it, he says.

— Maybe *you* don't, she says, — but if you've got a pussy, you need soap.

He walks her to the Tube wheeling his bike and bigging up the work they've done.

— Seriously, he says. — That was amazing. Really, good.

— I think if we have one more crack, we could get it done, she says.

They arrive at the station.

— How about tomorrow? he says.

— Maybe, she says. — But I might try and do some writing myself, you know?

— Ok, he says. — Well, don't forget the event Tuesday.

— I won't, she says.

He leans down to kiss her goodbye but instead of kissing her on the cheek like he usually does, he kisses half-on, half-off her mouth. He lets his lips linger on hers and squeezes her tight. She feels his chest expanding and detracting for one breath, two breath, three breath, four breath, five breath, six breath... but she can't breathe. She wriggles out of his arms and ducks into the Underground.

On the way back to hers she mulls over the events of the past twenty-four hours. The kisses, the cuddles, the highly-efficient work rate. Was there something going on or was it her imagination? It kinda seemed like they liked each other but no, that couldn't be. She's never thought of him like that and she doubts he's had any thoughts about her. No, she wasn't like the plethora of women his penis has recently been inside. She was his friend...

She makes a stab at her own work that afternoon but doesn't get far. She tries again the next morning and gets absolutely nowhere. She ends up trawling social media, clicking on the page he'd made for their last event and reads the comments.

Dream team

What a night. Restored my faith in humanity.

Best flyer ever.

He's liked them all and she wonders why he didn't bother to mention how popular her flyer was. Seventeen likes! Thinking she should text him to give him shit about not telling her about everyone loving the flyer, she unlocks her phone but before she can open messages, he calls.

— Ha, she answers. — You are so psychic.

— Why? he says. — What you doing?

An hour later she's back at door. She drop-calls him, hears his phone ringing, his footsteps on the stairs then he swings opens the front door and steps into the street in his underpants. Tight jockeys. He twangs the waistband.

— Woah, she says.

— What? he says.

— You're naked, she says,

— Oh, he says. — Yeah. I've got the oven on full blast.

He hugs her, the skin of her face meeting the hairs on his chest.

— Go up, he says. — I've got some rum. It's really good. It's like four hundred quid to buy.

He sits by the oven. He pours them a drink. She gives him a 'what are we doing?' look. He grins. She shouldn't care that he's naked, it's not like she can see anything, but it puts her a little on edge.

— Aren't we gonna look at the text? she says.

— Sure, he says.

He pulls his laptop out of a backpack on the floor and opens it.

— Oh wait, he says. — Let me play you this. He opens iTunes. — This is what we were listening to in the train yard. ‘Esto es Mexico’ by La Malagueña. This is what real G’s listen to.

She takes a sip of her drink and sways in time to a violin. He takes her hand, lifts his arm and spins her underneath it.

— Sorry, he says, letting go of her hand. — That was so cheesy.

A woman starts to sing.

— But isn’t this music nuts? he says. — Like Latino opera or something.

When the song is over they sit down in front of the computer. The Word document is open where she left it.

— Have you looked at this while I’ve been gone? she says.

He shakes his head and tops up the drinks.

They go through a couple of paragraphs: the train starts moving, someone nearly loses a foot...

— Fuck this, he says. — Let’s go out.

— Out where? she says.

— Out nowhere, he says.

She likes the sound of that.

— Okay, she says. — But you’ve got to put some clothes on first.

They head to one of the Portuguese bars on the high street and order brandies. It’s rowdy at the bar and a drunk Brazilian takes a shine to them, tells them they make a handsome couple and pays for their drinks. He puts his arm round her, playing up to the misconception. He winks at her.

Some more brandies and a couple of beers, then they

head into the estates. He tags stairwell after stairwell with his tag and her name.

— I don't know about tagging estates, she says, drunker than she thinks she is.

— What don't you know about it? he says.

— Well it's one thing tagging a bank or a bus or a shop, she says, noticing her voice sounding like her mum's. — But here it'll never get cleaned off. And you know, people live here.

— Fuck that, he says. — Did you see what I wrote about Blaise Belleville on his house?

— Blaise who? she says.

— The guy who runs Boiler Room, he says. — What a prick. Do you know he's a fucking aristocrat? Landed gentry, no less.

They talk about this and that, nothing and everything, are kinda flirting, kinda being friends, flipping between both like it doesn't matter.

They manage to slip into one of the tower blocks behind an entering resident and ride the lift to the top floor.

— Shit, he says. — I've got the key to get up on the roof of this block but I didn't bring it. I fucked a girl up there once.

— Oh, she says. — Really?

— Maybe we should go back and get it? he says.

Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

— Okay, she says.

They take the lift back down and he takes a photo of their reflection in the mirror.

Back at his he doesn't look for the key. He pours more rum and they goof about, drunkenly setting the world to rights

aka taking the piss out of people. He doesn't ask her to stay, it is assumed. They go to bed together. She strips to her underwear in front of him without giving it a second thought, shivers and gets under the duvet. He lies down beside her, rests a hand on her shoulder but remains upright, fiddling with his phone.

— What you doing? she says.

— Gotta take my insulin, he says. — I fucked it up yesterday.

She closes her eyes and listens him to take his blood sugar.

— I feel sick, she says.

He pats her head.

— Go to sleep, he says.

She listens to him self-administer the injection then pack away the kit. Lying down, he scoops her up in his arms.

— Night, one of them says.

— Night, says the other.

He kisses the back of her neck then rolls away from her. Her drunken nausea passes and she drifts off for few seconds then wakes again at the touch of his hand pawing the duvet, looking for her. It finds her and pulls her towards him. She rolls over so she is big spoon and he is little. They stay like that until she gets pins and needles in her arm. She takes it away and turns around in the sheets. He rolls after her then ever so gently rests a hand on her waist. She can feel it vibrating. He moves it slowly, sliding it onto her stomach then up her torso towards her tits. He cups them both in his palm then returns to her stomach and spreads his fingers out.

— You're shaking, he says, his voice loud in the residential quiet.

She wriggles, pushes her bum into his lap. He takes it

as a signal and pops a finger under her knicker elastic. She turns her face to his and they kiss for a couple of seconds. They stop kissing at the same time.

— It'd be a disaster, one of them says.

— A total disaster, says the other.

They both giggle. He takes his arm away and they lie on their backs in the dark, both awake. His hand returns. Feels the contour of her hip, her bum. Squeezes it and they're kissing again. Surprisingly effortless for a first kiss. He rolls onto his back and pulls her on top of him, holds her hips, holds her bum then, with her straddling him, puts an index finger in her pussy. He moves his finger in and out. She makes the appropriate appreciative sound, riding up and down on top of him. She can see him looking at her intently, even in the dark. She reaches a hand between her legs in search of his willy but before she finds it, he snatches her arm away.

— No, he says, his finger still in her.

Suddenly self-conscious, she dismounts. Back on the mattress, she rolls away from him, to the other side of the bed.

— It's be a disaster, he says, sounding apologetic.

— A disaster, she says.

She tries to go back to sleep but it's impossible. Her brain is going a million miles an hour. How come he could put his finger in her pussy but she couldn't touch his dick? It didn't seem fair. Then she thought maybe he had an STD and didn't want her to get it. Or did he have a small willy and not want her to know?

He rolls over in bed again, dropping an arm heavily over her and bringing his mouth right up close to her ear.

— I just want to pull down your panties and fuck you, he says.

If the lights'd been on and they were looking at each other it would've been awkward, but in the darkness with her back to him it's only surreal. Him holding her, her not breathing until the atmosphere goes crackly.

She breaks the silence.

— Well, she says, breathing out and adopting a jovial tone to try and clear the air, — you probably will at some point but I don't think this is the moment.

He laughs. His normal, friendly, not-sexy laugh.

— Yeah, he says, — If we're gonna fuck we shouldn't do it half asleep in bed. We should do it somewhere amazing.

— Like the rooftop of a council estate? she says.

— Yeah, he says. — Exactly.

She wakes the next day feeling awful. He's next to her in bed surfing radio stations.

— You were snoring, he says.

— What's the time? she says.

— Just gone three, he says.

— Jesus, she says. — I never sleep this late. I should get home.

— Nuh-uh, he says. — We gotta be in Kilburn.

Blank.

— The event? he says. — We gotta be there in two hours to meet your friend, he says.

— Flora, she says.

Coffee makes her hangover worse but makes him eager to edit.

— Just the last few paragraphs, he says. — Then it's done.

He sits at the computer. She lies on the floor, backseat editing and eating dry granola but can't pay attention.

— Let's just leave it for another time, she says.

That's when he gets stressed.

— I just want to get it done, he says and kicks the bin.

She chuckles.

— Chill, she says. — We will.

But a bad mood has descended. They walk to the Tube in close to silence, him grunting one syllable replies to her questions. She beeps her Oyster card. He skips through the barriers behind her. She wonders whether she should say something about last night.

— You okay? she says, as a lame attempt.

He shrugs.

When they get on the train it is empty but instead of sitting beside her like he usually would, he sits two seats down. Was he being weird? Or was he just being hungover? She can't tell. She watches him for a minute, eyes shut, head nodding. But then the roaring whoosh of the train through the tunnel starts giving her a headache. Her hangover takes over and she shuts her eyes, letting the train's movement vibrate her.

They get off at Kilburn Park with him still not looking at, or talking to her, except to remind her he'll come through the gates at the same time. But then, when they get to Tin Tab, he changes tack completely. As soon as there's an audience, he comes on all touchy-feely. He gets her to sit on his lap when there isn't a chair, holds her hand, puts his arm round her shoulders, even slaps her on the bum when she says something funny.

The event goes seriously off-piste. A line up of nutters have to be prised off the mic, there's lot of drum 'n'n bass, one of his graff mates tags up the bathroom. It's fun but

stressful for her because Flora is worried about the building and the neighbours. So as soon as the event is over, she does her best to coax the audience into relocating to the pub.

At the end of the night the two of them catch the Tube together. He sits beside her this time and drapes his arm round her shoulder as he goes over moments from the evening that had been particularly awkward or funny. He puts a hand on her thigh with no one around to see it. He leans his head on her shoulder, saying how he can't wait to be in bed. So she reads the signs as saying she's gonna go back to his. She wants to go back to his. But then, when the train doors open at Piccadilly Circus he turns to look at her and says, —Isn't this your stop?

— Oh, she says. — Yeah.

She grabs her jacket and jumps off the train.

— I'll call you tomorrow, they both say at the same time then laugh.

It's only when she gets outside and an alert vibrates her phone that she remembers tomorrow is the day she's supposed to fly to Berlin. A plan made time ago that being so involved in the edit and in the event, she'd completely forgotten.

Berlin is Berlin. Big scary Fraus and their big scary children, teeth-kissing Turks, British kids from the provinces posing as noise musicians, and drugs. The two of them exchange a few texts over the course of the week but their conversations are out of sync, with messages replied to hours after they are sent... But of course she thought about what was going on between them, attempting to gauge different possibilities. It seemed likely they were gonna have sex but after that would they be boyfriend and girlfriend? That seemed a

bit much. Maybe something more emancipated than that. Lovers. Too schmaltzy. Fuck buddies. Too crass. Maybe just friends who love each other who sometimes have sex. She went with that one.

The day before she is due to fly back to London he messages: When r u back?

She types: Tomorrow... I miss Mexico.

A speech bubble pops up. It goes dot, dot dot, then disappears then pops up again. He texts: I miss you.

An unexpected development.

She smiles as she replies: Miss u too

He texts back with a link to a song on Spotify: 'Best Friend' — Vybz Kartel.

She puts her headphones in and listens.

A tight pum pum is a man's best friend, couldn't be no puppy what a load of shit. Not a rottie', not a pit, just a goodie goodie in a drawers that's it.

It's the first music with a rhythm she's heard all week.

She messages: So good xx

He replies with a photograph of Vybz Kartel in a purple suit simulating sex on a woman bent over in front of him. He texts: U and me LOL.

She laughs as she replies: Have you blacked up?

He replies: Have you?

It might be a cack-handed London version of it, but it is definitely flirting.

Fireworks Night. She wakes around ten to a text from him sent at four in the morning: Call me when u wake. Lets go fireworks xxx

She calls.

— Hey there, I rarely check my messages so if you want to get in touch with me you can send me a text.

If he was awake at four it makes sense he's sleeping now, she thinks.

She spends the morning catching up on life. Pays bills, replies to emails. He's sent her an email with a load of photos from his Mexico trip.

Thought maybe you could do a layout using these??

She downloads them and looks through. Mostly they're black and white landscape shots but one is of him completely naked on top of a moving train. His willy wasn't that small.

Running out of menial tasks mid-afternoon and too Ryanaired to do any real work, she decides to walk in the general direction of his, assuming he'll wake at some point and tell her to come over anyway. Knowing he doesn't have InDesign she takes her computer with her and since she's carrying a bag she chucks in her toothbrush and a bar of hotel soap.

She walks the usual way to his but when she gets to Westminster Bridge a protest has closed off the road. No big surprise. Society's been crumbling all year and there'd been a protest every weekend since the weather warmed up. But this protest isn't your usual demographic of the think-they're-liberal middle classes and DIY anarchos handing out risographed 'what to do if you get arrested' pamphlets. This march is entirely made up of black people, and old black people at that, dreader than dread, dressed in army fatigues. What looked like the Channel One soundsystem from carnival was playing dub on the back of a flatbed truck. She's never seen a protest like it and knows there is no way she can let it go past.

She joins the throng, walking on the pavement beside the march, partly because the road is barricaded off and partly because it is her habit to remain at the peripheries of any mass movement. Signs bob above the crowd.

‘My ancestors were Kings and Queens’.

‘I was stolen’.

‘Reparation Day is Today!’

‘Stop the Maangamizi’.

Maangamizi is a term she hasn’t heard before. She takes out her phone and is about to look up what it is when an electric wheelchair speeds by, an oxygen tank on its back, driven by a man with tubes feeding the oxygen into his nose.

— Go back where you came from darkie! he yells at everyone and no one.

Her jaw drops. She was used to black fetishisation racism and racism disguised by neoliberal metaphor but it’d been a while since she’d witnessed old-fashioned, out-and-out ‘darkie’ shit. Was this guy serious?

A tall man wearing a Gaddafi t-shirt, with long, immaculate dreads, takes the bait.

— You piss off, he says to the disabled lunatic.

— No one wants you here wog! the disabled lunatic shouts.

Her jaw drops lower.

— You think, the tall man wearing a Gaddafi t-shirt with long, immaculate dreads turns and addresses the wheelchair, — that I am so stupid as to give you what you want? To leap over the barriers and beat you, like you deserve and then you get your footage, your precious footage to send to the papers and look: Black man attacks disabled pensioner? Well you’ve got the wrong man because I’m a smarter man than that.

The disabled lunatic deals out a couple more racial slurs then speeds off.

The march crosses Westminster Bridge before the crowd congregates on the lawn outside Parliament. Someone hangs the Jamaican flag over the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst, that says 'Courage calls to Courage Everywhere'. She snaps a pic of it on her phone.

Wandering through the crowd she gets a couple of dirty looks for not being black enough, but most of the protesters don't seem to mind her presence and one or two even give her a nod or a double-blink to indicate their awareness of her particular predicament. Different from theirs, but related.

A woman steps up to a mic set up on the back of the flatbed truck carrying the Channel One soundsystem.

— I am here, the woman says, — representing the Dutch West Indies and Suriname.

Not Jamaica, not Trini, not Barbados, not Martinique, not St Lucia. *Suriname*. No one *ever* talks about Suriname.

— Whoop, whoop, she whoops in excitement and throws a hand in the air to represent. It being such a rare occasion, she can't help herself.

— Too long, the woman representing the Dutch West Indies and Suriname says, throwing a hand in the air herself. The crowd echoes the words in agreement. — For too long black women have been ignored, silenced, trodden on. We have sacrificed our bodies, our minds, our children to this system without credit, without acknowledgement, without payment. How many rich people, how many famous people, how many powerful people, how many well-established people are in the places they are in because of the toil, the labour, the continuing oppression, the silencing, the invisibility of the

sacrifices and efforts of black women? Four hundred years, four hundreds years! Well to those dishonourable men and women sitting in that collapsing building that houses *their* democracy I say, those four hundred years are up!

Cheers from the crowd.

— Now is the time for black women to speak and be heard, for their suffering to be recognised but also their talents, their skills, their contribution...

Her phone rings. It's him. She wants to listen so puts it on silence then changes her mind and answers.

— Hey, she says, putting a finger in her other ear so she can hear him. — I'm in Parliament Square. There's a reparations march and the speaker's from Suriname! You should come down.

— I'm fugged, he groans. — I've got dis mendal tootache. It came on lasd nighd. I was hoping id go away but id's jus fugged.

— You sound terrible, she says. — Do you want me to bring you some painkillers? I'm not far from yours. I could get some codeine.

— Nah, he says. — You're alrighd. Think I jus godda sleep id off...

— You sure? she says. — I really don't mind. Have you eaten anything? Maybe you should go to a dentist?

— Theriouthly, he says, — I'm in no fid sdade.

He sounds really bad.

— Okay, she says — Another day then. Shame... Thought we could go up on the roof of that block and watch the fireworks.

He laughs, a low throaty gurgle that sounds like he's about to expire.

— I'll led you know if da siduashion changes ad all, he says. — But righd now roofdop is off.

By the time she gets off the phone the woman representing the Dutch West Indies and Suriname has finished and the crowd is dispersing. She sets off towards home but, crossing Trafalgar Square, he calls again.

— Do you want to go to Lewes for the fireworks? he says, sounding like his usual hyper self.

She stops in her tracks, spins 180°, spins 180° back.

— Errrrr, she says. — What? When?

— ASAP, he says.

— Okay, um..., she says.

— I'm gonna jump the train, he says.

— What should I do? she says.

— Where are you now? he says.

— Victoria, she says, unsure why she lies.

— Come to mine, he says. — How quick can you be?

She calculates potential routes in her head. The 88 goes from nearby.

— Actually, scrap that he says. — Clapham Junction station. Ten minutes.

— I think it'll take me longer than that, she says.

— Okay. Twenty minutes then, he says. — Be as fast as you can, I'll be there.

She descends into Charing Cross Tube, opting for the fastest (and most expensive) route to Clapham Junction. Underground to Victoria then British Rail. A whopping £5.40. Arriving at Clapham Junction, she walks to one exit to see if he is there. He isn't. She walks to the other. No sign of him.

She texts.

— Which exit u at?

She is about to go through the ticket barriers when she realises she'll only have to come back in again and if he's going to bunk the train then she might as well bunk the train, because if he gets caught they'll both be fucked. She taps out on the 'changing journeys' machine and waits inside the barriers. Half an hour goes by, forty five minutes. She calls.

— Hi there...

She texts: Where are you?

Ten minutes later he texts back: I'm an idiot.

He calls.

— Left my phone at home, he says. — Had to come all the way back to get it so I'm only leaving now. Will be ten minutes max. Check the train times. Let me know which platform you're on.

She waits for him on Platform Six for half an hour. He appears on the stairs just as a train pulls into the station. It isn't the train to Lewes but he says they should get on anyway as it's a local train so less chance of inspectors. Rush hour commuter hell presses them against each other for several stops. She tells him about the woman from Suriname.

— I think I know her, he says. — Brenda. She's my mate.

— Brenda what? she says.

— I don't know, he says.

— I'd like to meet her, she says.

He looks worse for wear and is taking sips from an expensive-looking bottle of brandy.

— Can I have some? she says.

He hands her the bottle.

— Happy holidays, she says, raising it to her lips.

She takes a sip. It's delicious.

— I need it, he says, taking the bottle back. — It's the only thing that stops my face aching.

More people get on and they're separated so she puts her headphones in and listens to music on her phone. He messages with someone on his until the train empties out. A seat comes up.

— Sit on my lap, he says, taking the seat and patting his thigh. She sits, taking out one headphone so she can hear him.

— What are you listening to? he says.

— DBE, she says. — Like always.

— Oh, he says, — Are they those gay boys you love so much?

He rests his hand casually on her hip, moves it inch by inch towards her bum.

— Errr, I don't think they're gay, she says and laughs. — They're completely obsessed with pussy.

— You know what I mean, he says. — Gay as in gayboys, who spend all day thinking about sex.

— Their lyrics are *so* rude, she says, putting a hand faux-coyly to her mouth.

— Tell me, he says.

She laughs. — They're too rude for rush hour.

— Whisper it then, he says, — In my ear.

She waits for the song to reach the right bit.

— That pussy drippin, I just put my tip in, my tongue in her mouth while her pussy is full up, she whisper-raps.

He gives her bum a squeeze.

At Croydon, the commuters exeunt en masse. She moves to the seat opposite, putting her feet up on the seat next to him. He's still on his phone but rests his other hand on her ankle. He closes his fingers round it. He slides his hand slowly up to her thigh.

— Check this out, he says, thrusting his phone screen in her face.

Most times she hates looking at things on people's phone but he's earned his credentials in interesting digital content over the years and so she sits forward to see. A chat is open with 'Billie'.

Hey, thanks for getting back to me so fast. I'm a REALLY big fan of your work. I'm really into crime and I think prison is bad so big up for all you're doing to try and stop it.

He scrolls back through old messages too fast for her to read them.

— What's that? she says, not understanding.

— This girl wants the D, he says and laughs.

She gets a sinking feeling. She brings her feet to the floor. Why was he touching her up at the same time as messaging Billie? Why was he messaging Billie at all? She stares out the window to hide her face from him, zones in on the reflection of a tablet belonging to a man sitting in the next compartment. She can read his email clearly. It says:

Dear Gary,

Thank you for applying for the position of Parking Lot Manager. Unfortunately, we have had a lot of applications for this position...

Poor Gary.

He's still chatting and laughing.

— What were those lyrics again? he says.

— That pussy drippin', I just put my tip in..., she says out of rhythm in a monotone.

— Billie's gonna get the tip, he says, — Just the tip, hahahaha. Nothing else.

— Who is Billie anyway? she says.

— How do I know? he says. — But I know her parents are going to the country next weekend and I'm invited.

— Her parents? she says.

The train doors open. No one moves. The train doors beep, warning they are about to close. He jumps out of his seat.

— I've been here before, he says, — There are no ticket barriers. And we can probably get a cab for like five pound or something.

He heads for the doors. She rushes after him, makes it onto the platform but her jacket gets caught in the train doors. A moment of panic. She calls his name but he's already gone. She yanks the material free and runs after him. He's right, no barriers. She spots him talking to a minicab with its engine on.

— How much to Lewes mate? he leans in the window.

— Forty pound, boss, the driver says.

— That's as much as buying tickets for the train, she says.

— You're alright boss, he says to the driver, who rolls up his window. He turns to her. — Yeah but it's the principle.

— What? she says. — The principle of supporting private enterprise over national infrastructure?

He doesn't, or pretends not to hear.

They walk to the main road, taking one last sip each of the brandy.

— I'll pay for the cab if you get some more liquor, he says.

She agrees.

He orders an Uber on his phone and a few minutes later a Prius pulls up. It gets them to Lewes for £36 but when they reach the outskirts of town the turning is closed off.

— They don't want no one who isn't local coming, that's why, the Uber driver says.

The road block has caused a traffic jam, which they sit in for fifteen, twenty minutes.

— Fuck this, he says eventually. — Let's walk.

She doesn't like the sound of this and nor does the Uber driver.

— Very dangerous, he says. — Dark. No pavement.

But he is out the car and she has no choice but to follow.

At first it's fun collecting looks from people stuck in their cars but pretty soon the traffic picks up and they're walking headlong into vehicles going sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety miles per hour. He speeds ahead of her, surefooted but she's nervous and shouts for him to wait. He slows down, walking in front of her protectively, until they reach a bridge across the motorway.

— Let's go up here, he says.

She thinks they're going to climb the actual bridge.

— You're going to have to help me, she says.

— Course, he says.

He puts on builders' gloves and climbs not up the bridge but up the bank alongside it. Of course. She follows, clutching at ivy, slipping in mud. Asides from the gloves, which allow him to grip on to the slimy branches, he's wearing trainers and a tracksuit. She's in loafers that don't have any grip and a pencil skirt but she makes it without his help anyway, if only just.

She emerges from the foliage to him getting angry looks from locals as he tags a massive 'Free Palestine' tag on the sign welcoming you to town.

— You know that the PLO was set up with Nazi money? she says.

— What are you chatting about? he says, pocketing his magic marker.

— The Palestine Liberation Organisation was funded by François Genoud. Nazi banker.

— Don't tell me you're fucking pro-Israel, he says.

— No, she says, — no, but you know, most countries are founded on bloodshed and Israel has shed a lot less blood than, say England...

— You're a fucking Zionist, he says.

— I'm not a fucking anything, she says. — I'm just saying some facts.

— So what? he says.

— So I just think you should think about what you write on walls, she says.

— Where's a newsagent? he says. — You need to buy us something to drink.

They look around for a shop but can only find a pub. She buys them expensive pints for the countryside as the Proddies gather outside, oil drums burning, rockets going off.

— Let's take these and go, he says.

They hide their full pints from the bar staff and scarper, following the route of the procession. The further into town they get the busier it gets and soon the streets are rammed and they are forced in the middle of the parade, with fires burning and bangers going off. A piece of hot coal jumps out of a trailer, burns a hole in her tights and singes her leg.

— Watch out! someone shouts.

— Get back! someone shouts.

— You're not supposed to be walking. It's dangerous. You've got to wait, someone shouts.

They duck inside the barriers and push on at the back of

the crowd until they come the other end of the parade where the streets empty out.

— Fuck, she says, —That was intense.

He's got his phone in his hand and is looking around.

— Yes mate, he says, high-fiving a guy who appears out of nowhere.

— Fancy bumping into you, the guy says.

— You didn't tell me we were meeting someone, she says.

He doesn't hear her.

His friend has a girlfriend and from that point forth the group arranges itself into the men conversing between themselves with the women defaulting into each other's company. The girlfriend is alright but because more preoccupied with the fact that he is, for no reason she can see, ignoring her.

They watch the bonfires, then go for a drink in a pub in town. His friend offers to drop them back to the outskirts of London on his way back to Essex.

On the drive back, the boys sit in the front seat talking shop (graffiti). The women attempt to join in the conversation but fail so the girlfriend demands control of the music.

— What shall we play? the girlfriend says, — Something good.

— D Block Europe, she says. — Outside. That's the one most people like.

His friend's girlfriend finds the song on Spotify.

— Yeah, I like this shit, the girlfriend says as it starts. — Like, what's that American group? Migos?

— Yeah, DBE are the *real* Migos, she says, cheering up.

In the front seat, he reaches forward, turns the volume down.

— Hey! she says.

— It's fucking shit, he says.

She sits forward and punches him lightly on the arm.

— What's your fucking problem? he says, nasty.

And that's her done. She takes off her seatbelt, slumps down in the seat and doesn't say anything for the rest of the journey. He carries on yammering away and doesn't notice her silence. But the friend and his girlfriend do.

When the car pulls off Blackheath roundabout she doesn't bother saying goodbye to them. She slips out, slamming the car door and runs down a side street to wee. He follows her, standing by a wall and pisses in the direction of where she is squatting.

— Well, he says, doing up his fly, — What we doing?

— Exactly what I was about to say, she mutters.

— What's that? he says.

— What are we doing? she says, wound up.

— What's your problem? he says. — Are you drunk?

— Yes, she says. — A little.

— You're acting loopy, he says, sounding irritated.

— Well? she says.

— Well what? he says.

— Well what are we doing? she says. — You and me.

— You tell me, he says.

— Don't be a goof, she says, carefully opting for a gentle jibe rather than an out-and-out insult as the mood seems electric, but he reacts as if she'd just publicly denounced him as a psychosexual rapist stalker with paedophilic inclinations anyway. He blows up.

— You should watch what you say right now, he says, gesticulating like a hard man, — I'm serious. Chose your words carefully. Because if you say some shit you don't mean right now, you won't necessarily be able to take it back.

She is shocked at his reaction, but acts nonchalant to hide it. — I always mean what I say, she says.

— Pfff, he says. — Yeah right.

They walk to a bus stop in silence. He checks his phone again and again and again.

— There's a bus in two minutes that will take us to the Walworth Road, he says.

— I'm not sure where I'm going, she says.

— Well it's all the right direction, he says. — Let's hop on this and then figure it out when we're somewhere sane.

The bus arrives. They go up to the top deck. It's empty and they take separate seats. She looks at him. He looks anywhere other than at her. She tries again.

— Don't you think, she says, — we should talk about it?

— Talk about what? he says.

— We kissed, she says.

— So what? he says.

She opens her mouth, closes it, opens it. — So nothing, she says.

They ride a couple more stops.

— All I'm trying to say, she says, — is that we are really good friends, right?

— Right, he says.

— Who tell each other we love each other all the time, right? she says.

— Right, he says.

— And now we've kissed, she says.

— Listen S... he says, then breaks off. — Fuck, I almost called you my ex-wife's name.

There is a different quality to his voice. A meanness she's not heard before.

— Okay...? she says.

— It's just that you sounded just like her then, he says.

— Sorry, she says, — but how do I sound anything like that fucking careerist Zabłudowicz cunt?

She is losing control of the situation.

— It's just that she's the kind of person who makes a massive issue out of nothing, he says. — Which is what you're doing.

— So this is nothing, she says. — Is that what you're saying?

— Come on, he says. — Do we really need to have this conversation? I thought we were way past this.

— If that's how you feel, she says, — then fine. I'm not here to talk you into anything. I'm not trying to go out with you. I'm just saying that we're friends and we kissed and if that is all then it's cool but we should at least *talk* about the situation.

— We are talking about it aren't we? he says.

— Ya think? she says.

Her sarcasm seems to work.

— So, what do you want to say about 'the situation'? he says.

— Fuck, she says. — I don't know! Nothing in particular. Just maybe acknowledge there's something going on and try n' figure it out...

— One, he says, — there's no need to shout. And two, we are friends. That's it.

— Fine, she says, calming down. — Whatever you say, boss.

— Why 'boss'? he says.

— I'm just saying, she says, — that you can *say* what you want but if you look at the whole situation, I'd say it adds up to something more than just friends.

— What, he says, — do you think it is?

— Like I said, she says, — I think maybe we love each other.

— You can't love me, he says, looking directly at her.

— Why not? She says.

— Because you know the truth, he says.

He sits looking out the window, wincing and holding his bad tooth.

She feels sorry for him, decides to take it easy.

— I like the truth, she says. — I like you.

She moves seats to sit beside to him and puts her arm round his shoulders.

— I told you no, he says and shoves her hard enough for her to fall off the seat and onto the floor.

— This, she says, getting to her feet, — is exactly my point.

— What is? he says. — What is your point?

— If we are just friends, she starts to shout, — then there is no fucking reason for you to act like such a dick!

— I'm not the one making a scene, he shouts back.

— D'you wanna know what I think? she shouts louder, wagging a finger at him like a mum.

— I'm guessing I'm gonna hear it, he says, smarmy as a teenage boy.

— What I think, she says, — is that you chat a big whole load of shit and if you could put your massive ego aside for one second and actually acknowledge the way things are between us. We hang out every day, we talk every day, we work together, we say we love each other, we say we miss each other, we kiss. I just want to pull your panties down and fuck you. I just want to pull your panties down and fuck you. That's what you said. And you don't *say* shit like that to people if you don't fucking *mean* it!

— I did mean it, he says, — At the time. But after this I've changed my mind.

She eyeballs him for long enough for him to find it disconcerting.

— Look, he says, — I'm sorry if I led you on but I don't fancy you. That's just the way it is.

— Oh really? she says.

— Yes really, he says.

— Well I find that hard to believe, she says.

— Oh right, he says, meanness returning. — I forgot you think you're really fucking fit.

— What? she says, — Like I 'think' I'm black?

She's had enough. She rings the bell.

— D'you know what? Fuck this. I've never taken my clothes off in front of a man without his jaw dropping and I'm not going to act like some mincing slut where I try and prise compliments out of you to validate my beauty because I'm not that fucking insecure!

By the end of the sentence she's shrieking. She twirls round the pole onto the stairs and flounces down them.

— And I don't think I'm really fucking fit, she throws her voice up the stairwell, — I know I am, so fuck you.

She gives him the finger through the floor as the bus doors open. She steps into the street surprised to find they're already in Camberwell. He must've noticed too because he follows her out.

— Can we not just have one straight conver... she says when she sees him but he blanks her and goes into the shop.

— Fine, she shouts after him. — For. Get. It.

She walks up Peckham Road. Of all the scenarios she had in her head. This was not what was supposed to've

happened. She stops. Should go back and sort it out. She turns on her heel. A couple of buses go past. She tries to see if he is on either of them, hopes he isn't, luckily or unluckily enough, when she gets to the bus stop, finds him leaning against it munching a packet of Doritos. A paper carton of coconut water pokes out his pocket. He sees her and laughs.

— Come back for more? he says.

— Can you not be an asshole for one fucking second? she says.

— Thought of some clever way to manipulate me into fancying you? he says, pleased with his own joke.

— I came back, she says, — because if I walked off this would be a lovers' tiff and if we aren't lovers, if we are friends, then there's nothing to walk off about.

— Exactly, he says, munching crisps with his mouth open and spitting crumbs.

— I'm your friend, you know, she says. — You care about me.

He looks at her and although his features barely change she can see a sheen of something unpleasant.

— Okay then, she says. — You know what? Since this is where we've got to, let me tell you a couple of things. First, you shouldn't be going to stick the tip in to random teenage girls on the Internet you don't even know. Second, if you loved the Elephant and Castle woman, you wouldn't tell people her cunt squelches when you fuck her. Third, the gimp ball sex story is fucking atrocious, it's like who even are you anyway? And last of all the way you talk about women and the way you're talking to me is fucking bullshit and fucking hypocritical.

— Funny how you suddenly become a feminist when you know you aren't gonna get any, he says.

She is stunned into silence, unable to get her head around why he would act like this.

A bus pulls up.

— What you doing then? he says.

She is still reeling, trying to process the insult.

— I dunno, she says.

He gets on and feeling like she's lost all free will, she follows. They stay downstairs, using the driver as a chaperone. She's not sure what she should do. It wasn't going well and there was an argument to make that she should just go home. They were both hungry and tired and he was clearly in pain. She takes out her phone and Googlemaps the best way to get to hers. The quickest time is an hour and a half. His house was two stops away. She looks at him. He looks back at her with no expression. A sudden premonition: she's never gonna see him again. She doesn't want to not see him again. She panics, tries to think what she can do to remedy the situation.

— I think I'm just gonna come to yours, she says.

— Do what you want, he says.

His words smart but then she remembers all the shit they've got going on. The events, Mexico, world domination... Of course this wasn't it. This was just a bad night and a stupid misunderstanding that would figure itself out by morning.

Back at his she goes heads straight for the bedroom. She keeps her clothes on, feeling like an intruder getting into his bed and lies as far from his side as possible. He clatters about in the kitchen for ages but she's still awake when he comes in. He gets in bed and lies with his back to her, not touching. Time goes by. Maybe twenty minutes, maybe an

hour. They're both awake, you can tell from their breathing but neither says a word, only moves occasionally, rustling the sheets. He'll move. She'll move. It's like a kabuki drama only without an audience to make sense of what was going on.

She wakes before he does and gets up. She considers leaving but needs his keys to unlock the door and doesn't want to go through his things so puts on coffee. Feeling grubby, she remembers the hotel soap. She finds it and washes her face then sets up her laptop on the floor in the corner of the room and for the first time in ages, writes.

There'd been plenty of opportunities...

In the ten years they'd know each other...

In the ten years they'd known each other There'd been plenty of opportunities for them to do it..

She hears him get up and a few minutes later he crashes into the kitchen.

— Hi, she says, looking up.

— Ugh, he says, kicking her bag out his way.

He stomps to the sink. She picks up her laptop, afraid he's going to step on it. He rubs his jaw.

— Tooth still giving you jip? she says, trying to use a tone of voice that'll make things seem normal.

— It's killing me, he says.

— There's an emergency dentist in Barbican that's free, she says. — For homeless people.

— Why d'you know that? he says.

— Lot of friends who are junkies, she says.

— Makes sense, he says then slams his fist on the counter.

— Where's the fucking coffee pot?

— It's in the sink, she said. — I used it.

— Fuck's sake, he says.

He unscrews the coffee pot and runs the tap then grabs the edge the sink, his whole body tensing.

— Are you alright? she says.

— What the FUCK is this? he shouts but she can't see what he's shouting about.

— What is what? she says, peering round him.

He turns and presents her with the bar of hotel soap.

— I don't need this fucking BULLSHIT in my fucking house, he says.

— It's not bullshit, she says and laughs cos she's nervous but also cos it's kinda funny . — It's soap.

But even as she defends the soap she understands its implications to him. He knew that she knew he didn't have soap because they'd talked about it so having it in her bag looked like she'd planned on staying over and brought the things she needed to spend a comfortable night.

— Is it yours? he says.

— Yeah, she says. — Obviously.

He hands it to her. — Take it then.

— I don't want it, she says. — It's all wet plus I already threw away the wrapper.

— It's going in the fucking bin, he says, marching over to a half-full black bin bag slumped in the corner of the room.

— Actually, fuck it, maybe I'll keep it for the next time I have some bird stay over.

She bows her head. — I think I'm gonna go, she says.

— Aren't we gonna finish the edit? he says.

— Are we? she says.

— We've only got the last bit to do, he says.

— I dunno, she says. — It doesn't feel like you want me here.

— Fine then, he says. — Whatever. We started it together but if you want to bail that's fine. Can you at least give me the details of the emergency dentist or is that too much to ask?

— Just Google 'emergency dentist', she says. — That's it.

He takes out his phone. She goes to the bedroom to get her shoes. Why is he being such a prick? She returns to the kitchen.

— Can you let me out? she says.

— I'm leaving too, he says. — I've got an appointment. Gimme ten minutes.

She can't understand why he makes her stay considering he can barely look at her but nevertheless she waits in silence not wanting to push it. Stands by the door as he traipses round the flat downing coffee, gobbling paracetamol, getting dressed.

Twenty minutes later they leave the house. They don't speak until the Tube station comes into sight when she, not wanting to leave things badly, says — It'll be okay you know.

— What? he says.

— Between us, she says, — It'll be okay. We'll work it out.

He glowers.

— Come on, she says and jostles him. — It's not a big deal. Still nothing.

— Fine then, she says. — If you be like that be like that.

She takes out her phone and pops in her headphones and presses shuffle. Oasis comes on. She skips ahead of him, in time to the distant guitars and when Liam comes in she sings along.

— I don't feel as if I know you, you take up all my time, she sings, thinking what a perfect sentiment it is for the moment. — The days are long and the nights will throw you away cos the sun don't shine....

— What the fuck is the matter with you? he says, snatching the headphones out of her ears. — I live here.

His face is a mask of horror.

— So what? she says.

He's got hate, actual hate, in his eyes. She can still hear the music playing out the headphones, throws out her arms and serenades him.

— We-e live in the shadows and we ha-ad the chance and threw it away. And it's never gonna be the same' here

— Fuck this, he says. — You're batshit and I'm gonna be late.

He pushes past her and breaks into a run, not a run, a sprint.

She watches him, thinking how she'd never seen anyone run away from her so fast in her life.