

Tinderloin

I met Ryan on Tinder. He only had one photograph of himself on his profile, edited with a grainy filter. I thought he looked alright. I didn't have much in the way of standards. My own picture wasn't even really me; it was another lanky brunette that I'd found online, her face turned away from the camera. My bio was *Tinderloin*, after my favourite cut.

We met in the Crown and Sceptre. I ordered wild boar sausages with mash and caramelised onion gravy. Ryan was older than me by eleven years. He worked for a cab service, picking up the phone. His hands were nice and thick, a good ratio of muscle to fat, and he'd crack his knuckles when there was a lull in conversation, or

smooth out a napkin with his palms. When I told him about Papa's shop he joked that he was a vegetarian. I raised my eyebrows and smiled; I'd already overheard him order the roast chicken at the bar.

I went back to his after. He lived in his grandparents' garage. There was an electric heater groaning in the corner, and the corrugated iron door gave the place an industrial look. I felt at home in there; it reminded me of the shop in a way. A few carcasses wouldn't have looked so out of place, hung up next to his bookshelf.

When I slept with Ryan that first time I bled through the sheets. I was sixteen and I'd done my waiting.

A virgin then, are you? he'd said.

I'd just looked at him. There wasn't much point in lying. The blood had dried fast between my thighs and matted up my pubic hair, so the skin there pulled tight when I shuffled off the bed. The whole garage smelt of copper, like after opening a fresh pig.

I spent the next evening in the back of the shop with Papa, sawing a few lambs down into primals. We had Radio 4 on in the background. Papa likes *The Archers* so much he has the theme tune as his ringtone. If I speak during it he puts his blue-gloved hand up to silence me. I had to wait until the programme finished to tell him about Ryan.

I don't need to hear things like that, Gracie, he'd said.

He hadn't even let me finish.

It's not right, OK? Talking about those private moments with your old dad. Keep it to yourself in future.

It hadn't occurred to me that I shouldn't tell him, but then I was always doing things like that. I found it difficult to gauge certain situations. The day I got my first period I brought my knickers down to breakfast and laid them next to Papa's bowl of cornflakes, with the purple-brown smear facing him. I was beside myself. I thought I was dying.

Don't they teach you about all this in school, Gracie?

He'd picked up his cereal and was eating standing up, so to be further from my knickers. It came back to me then: all that stuff from PSHE about the menstrual cycle. I balled the knickers up in my pocket and went out to the back garden to set them on fire, in a sort of ceremony, and after that I went to school smelling like barbeque. I didn't have the money for tampons, so I just used screwed-up wads of tissue paper for that whole first year, until Papa started paying me to do Saturdays in the shop.

My mother died when I was six. I have a memory of being in the supermarket and losing her. I threaded up and down every aisle to look, and then I found her by the freezers. I was so relieved I could feel my heart throbbing in the roof of my mouth. She had her back to me.

She was wearing a purple walking jacket and had her hand in with the ice creams. I ran up and put my arms around her thighs, pressed my face against her.

Honey, she said. I'm not sure you've got the right person.

I looked up at her and she wasn't my mother at all. She was much older in the face, and she had a few burst blood vessels under her eyes, like tiny jellyfish. I jumped. I wanted to scream but the noise wouldn't come up in my throat, so I just turned and ran as fast as I could down the aisle. I bumped into a man with a pot of yoghurt, and I knocked it from his hand. It split and went all over the floor, but I didn't stop running.

I can't remember how I found my mother again, but I suppose I must have. She didn't die until the year after that.

The sex hadn't gone how I'd imagined, but it had *gone*, and that was the main thing. I walked around that week feeling slightly lighter on my feet. I passed a mock GCSE paper in my maths class, which hadn't happened before. I performed very well at my butchery. Papa couldn't believe the consistency of my sirloins. He said he'd never seen anything like it, and even I have to admit they were quite lovely.

The weekend after we first met, Ryan and I went on a country walk around a stately home that had its grounds

open to the public. He drove me there with his dog, Petal, in the back. I'd brought Ryan a few nice chops wrapped in greaseproof, as a gift, and I was devastated when he fed one to Petal. She was one of those chunky breeds with skin so tight that you could see the shape of her skull under it. I watched the muscles of her jaw working away at the chop and thought of all the effort I'd put into separating them, the careful layer of fat I'd left, thick as orange peel.

On the walk, Petal either tried to start fights with other dogs or barked at sheep through the wire fence. She had a taste for them now, that much was clear. When we got back to the car park, Ryan and I had sex on the back seats. Petal sat in front of the steering wheel and watched us through the headrests.

There's a good girl, Ryan kept saying. I wished he was talking to me.

It was a month later that I found out I was pregnant. I was in the shop, and the smell coming up off the mincer was so intense I had to run out to the street to throw up into the gutter.

Take a test, said Papa, when I returned.

I wiped my mouth on the sleeve of my workwear. It took me a moment to understand what he was saying, and when I did I turned and walked back outside again. My vomit was a thin, yellow bile on the tarmac.

The man behind the counter in the pharmacy looked embarrassed when I asked to use the toilet, but I'd already paid for the test so he let me. The two red lines flashed up immediately, clear as smit marks. I must have fallen asleep then, because the next thing I knew I was curled on the floor of the cubicle, my forehead pressed against the cold porcelain of the toilet, and the man was knocking on the door to check on me. I have no idea how long I was lying there.

I told Papa straight away. He was shaping some of the mince into burgers and he didn't look up. The meat squelched in his hands as he spoke.

It'll happen, that, he said. We'll get you sorted.

We made the call that evening. The receptionist at the clinic booked me an appointment for two weeks' time. They didn't have anything available sooner. Papa sat at the kitchen table with me during the conversation, and when I hung up we shared one of his pork pies with lots of mustard. They've won awards, those pies. Papa had special stickers made. I've asked, but he won't give me the recipe. He says that when he dies, those pies will die with him.

I didn't make it to the abortion. I'm not sure I would have anyway; I'd been having second thoughts. I'd started to switch off in lessons, or mid-conversation with Papa. I'd find myself imagining a little baby, fast asleep in my

arms. When I eventually came around, I'd realise I had no idea what had been happening in the real world. I once found myself in a corner shop, buying chewing gum, with no memory of how I'd got there. Still, the decision was made for me, in the end. When the blood first started it was a very bright, garish red. I was in school, in the lunch queue, when a boy called Oliver pointed at me.

Someone's got the painters in, he shouted.

I went home and stayed there. The blood got heavier and heavier over days, and the rest came out in pieces, alongside some of the worst cramps I've ever experienced. Some of the pieces were stringy and some more circular, dark and shiny as kidneys. I knew enough about flesh to know it was the baby.

It didn't stop until Saturday. That morning, in the shop, Papa said I looked pale. He sent me into the back to get on with some French trimming. I was using a boning knife that I'd sharpened the day before. The blade gleamed in the sunlight coming in through the little window. For the first time in weeks, the rack of lamb smelt bearable. I took the tip of the blade and pressed it into my left thumb on the chopping board. It broke the nail easily. I felt the knife scrape the top of the bone before breaking through to the other side. I pulled it out again. There was a horizontal cut almost the width of the nail, and just a pinprick at the back, where the tip of the

blade had made it through. Blood spilt all over the chopping board and the floor. I could actually see it pumping; there was a definite rhythm to it. I used some blue roll to bandage my thumb. The pain was steady and vivid. I felt OK then, I felt almost normal.

I'd been seeing Ryan regularly. We'd spend time in his garage, watching films and having sex. He had a camping stove attached to a gas canister in the corner, and in the mornings, before school, he'd fry eggs with some back bacon I'd brought from Papa's shop. Ryan didn't have a toaster, so he'd put the bread in the pan too and let it crisp up in the fat. Petal would get a portion about the size of mine, and Ryan would get double.

I'd decided not to tell him about the pregnancy, but the first time I visited after I miscarried I could tell that Petal knew. She climbed up on the bed and put her head in my lap. I scratched her behind the ears with my good hand and she smiled with her tongue spilling out her mouth. This was the first time we'd ever really acknowledged each other, and Ryan was impressed.

I've not seen her like that with anyone other than me, he said.

Ryan made us White Russians with some milk he kept in a mini fridge. I'd never had a cocktail before, and I felt grown up with it. I drank very carefully, trying to move as little of my body as possible so as not to wake

Petal, who had fallen asleep on me. I sat like that for hours, and when I complained of backache Ryan gave me a massage. His big fingers digging into me weren't necessarily soothing, but I'd never felt closer to him. Petal's snores wheezed through the silence. She was warm as a running engine.

The next day, we went for a walk on the hill that overlooked the town. I threw sticks for Petal with my good hand. She chased them down and returned them foamy with saliva. Ryan carried on ahead with his hands pressed into his pockets. Eventually Petal bored of me and dropped her sticks at his feet instead. Ryan could throw much further than I could. After, he looked back at me and winked.

She's playing the field, he said.

I laughed, then spent the rest of the walk trying to catch Petal's eye. I wanted her to bring the sticks to me again, but she didn't.

We went to a pub after. I ordered a bowl of water for Petal and a pint for myself. The barman asked for my ID, but Ryan just put his hand on my shoulder.

Alright mate, he said. She's with me.

We sat in the garden with our drinks. Ryan ripped open a bag of pork scratchings and lay the packet out on the picnic table. He'd drop one to Petal every so often, and she'd catch it in her jaws and crunch it to dust. It was late afternoon by then and cold, so I took my jacket

off and covered Petal with it. Goose pimples surfaced quickly on my arms, and when Ryan noticed he slipped his own coat off and passed it to me. It was so huge it drowned me, and for the first time in my life I felt cute. We sat like that, in our swapped clothes, way into the evening.

I didn't get home until past dark. Papa was waiting up in the living room.

Grace, he said. Jesus. I've been pulling my hair out.

I told him I was sorry. I hadn't thought about him all day and I felt terrible.

You were with him again, weren't you? he said.

Yes, Papa.

Papa smoothed out his frown with the tops of his fingers. You just look out for yourself, won't you Gracie?

Yes, Papa, I said, and then I went to bed.

After injuring my thumb, I lost touch with my butchery for a while. I'd had the wound patched up properly at the hospital, but for weeks after I was still slow with my knife work, and this made me frustrated and inaccurate. At school, I couldn't write, so I just sat in the back of my lessons and looked off out the window. The teachers didn't notice; I'd mostly always done that anyway.

Papa seemed a little hurt every time I presented him with my cuts, but he'd put them in the counter without saying anything. I busied myself in the shop by packing



TINDERLOIN

treats for Petal instead. I'd never been much of a dog person, but she'd charmed me that weekend. I'd bag up some offal while Papa wasn't looking, or cut a few sausages from their string. I once brought her an entire beef hind shank. I'd stayed behind to close up shop, and before I left I stole it out the back, then walked over to Ryan's with it balanced on my shoulder like a Flintstone.

I was spending most nights with them by that point, and when I arrived Petal would run out of the garage to greet me. I'd lay her gifts down on the front lawn and watch her devour them, and then we'd go in together to see Ryan, Petal leaving a trail of pink saliva behind us.

It didn't take long for Petal to become protective of me. I understood that she'd learnt to associate me with good fresh meat, but I like to think that our bond ran deeper than her stomach. We felt comfortable around each other, was what it was.

She'd growl whenever Ryan touched me. It got to the point where it was easier just to wait until she was distracted outside or asleep on her mat. I didn't mind this; there was something romantic about it to me.

She loves you so much, Ryan whispered once. He was leaning over my body to check that the coast was clear.

I invited Ryan and Petal over to meet Papa one evening. It was six weeks or so after the miscarriage, and my thumb was fully healed. I baked the same chicken and mushroom

pies that we sell in the shop. Evening light through the lace curtains dappled the whole dining room. Ryan put his glass down without a coaster, and Papa waited until he was in the toilet to slip one underneath. Petal sat up at the dining table with us and licked her plate clean. I felt proud of her.

See Papa, I said. Isn't she well behaved?

Papa nodded. She's a lovely dog.

Ryan and I reached out at exactly the same time and stroked either side of Petal's face. She was sitting between us. She turned her head to me first, and then to Ryan. There was a bead of gravy in her whisker, and she used her tongue to get it. We all laughed.

She loves being the centre of attention, I said.

I can see that, said Papa.

After, we played Gin Rummy in the living room. Papa took two games and I took one. Ryan was slow with his cards and kept getting the spade confused with the club. Petal lay on the floor. A fire was going, and she looked pleased with the heat on her belly.

When they were leaving, Papa shook Ryan's hand and then went to pat Petal. She barked once and sunk her teeth into his ankle.

I'm so sorry, said Ryan. She's not good with new people.

I got down on eye level with Petal and told her to behave herself. She looked ashamed, so I gave her a quick

rub under the chin. Papa wasn't one to make a fuss, but from down there I could see a few dark spots of blood coming up through his trousers.

Ryan's cousin was getting married in Wales the following weekend, and he'd asked me to have Petal while he was away. I waited until the Thursday to tell Papa this. He was still walking with a limp, and I had to bring a chair out front in the shop so that he could sit down to rest when there weren't any customers. He wasn't enthusiastic about having Petal to stay, but I told him it was too late for Ryan to find someone else.

I'd started getting excited about work again, now that my thumb was better. I'd go straight from school to the shop. I had half a pig to practise my seam butchery on, and the roasts came out beautiful. Papa cheered up when I showed him, but it didn't last long. One afternoon, he caught me sneaking a whole rack of spare ribs for Petal.

Can't you just give her the trotters? he said, clicking his tongue.

She needs some comfort this weekend, Papa. It's unsettling, staying in a new place.

Papa shook his head. Half of those ribs back, at least.

I was stroppy, but I divided the rack into two and put one on show in the cabinet.

That weekend with Petal was wonderful. I fried up a whole tube of black pudding and we shared it. We spent Saturday afternoon walking. I took her to a field of long grasses and watched her weave through them like a snake, leaving a stepped-down trail behind her. The sun was so bright it made the dew dazzling. After, tired out, Petal leant against me with all her weight and panted. Her thick tail slapped at my thighs. I picked a tick off her back, squashed it between my knuckles, and her warm blood ran down my thumb like ink from a cartridge.

We shared a bed that night. If I rolled too close her sour breath would wake me, but when Sunday morning streamed in the first thing I saw was Petal. She smiled at me and squinted. I stroked her belly and rubbed my face into her neck.

On Sundays, I always went and helped Papa prep the carcasses for the rest of the week. I'd been doing this since I was very small, it's how I learnt all my knife skills. I brought Petal that weekend. She sat quietly under the counter, twitching her ears occasionally when something good happened on *The Archers*, leaving shiny patches behind on the linoleum when she licked up the scraps I dropped for her.

She's got a real appetite, that dog.

Hasn't she, Papa?

It's nice to see you so close to someone, Gracie, I must say.

Yes, Papa.

Ryan, I mean.

Oh. Yes, Papa.

How old is he, Grace?

Twenty-seven, Papa.

Papa got a ball of string out from a drawer and started to cut it into equal lengths. I used them to tie a few roasts. Neither of us spoke much for the rest of the afternoon.

Petal was confused when Ryan came back that evening. I think she was under the impression that I'd be looking after her full-time from now on. She whined when he clipped the lead to her collar, and I felt so guilty I could barely look. We were in my house, just by the front door.

Why don't I come stay with you tonight? I said to Ryan. You know, settle her in.

Ryan had just driven all the way from Wales, and he was impatient to get home. He looked irritated, but he agreed to have me. I got in the back of the car with Petal to reassure her. She kept looking up at me while we were driving, to check I was still there.

When we got to the garage, Petal curled up in her bed and Ryan opened Netflix on his laptop. He liked having something on all the time, even just as background noise. We talked briefly about the wedding, and I told him in lots of detail what Petal and I had been up to.

You spoil her, he said.

I smiled. It was true.

We waited for Petal's snores before we started. I was used to having sex most days by then, and my appetite for it had exploded. I rubbed Ryan through his jeans, and chewed on his earlobe. He let me get on with this, but his hands stayed limp on the mattress.

Touch me, I said.

I'm so tired, Grace.

I looked at him. His eyes were slightly purple underneath. I'd never been to a wedding, but I understood that they could take a lot out of you. Still, I was overexcited. I lay down on the mattress and pulled him onto me.

Ryan, I said. Let's.

He seemed reluctant, but he did lean in to kiss me. The weight of his body on mine made me feel crushed and helpless. I closed my eyes and moaned. This was always when I liked Ryan best: just before the sex. Most other times I didn't find the things that he did particularly interesting. I helped him get his jeans off and then my own. I could feel him through his boxers. He smelt of Parma ham and polythene. My whole body was throbbing. I cried out for him.

In hindsight, I was probably being louder than I should have. Petal was on the bed so fast. Before I could even register what was happening, Ryan let out a sharp yelp that ripped through the garage. She'd gone straight for

his forearm. Her jaw was scissored around it. He tried to pull away, but Petal's grip was locked. He gasped and twisted. Thick, red droplets collected on the bed sheets, and I could see bits of Ryan's arm flapping, soft and pink as raw chicken.

Petal, I shouted. Petal.

She dropped him then, finally. She came down off the bed and stood at my feet. A string of Ryan's skin was dangling from her jaw, dripping. I was struggling to breathe at a normal pace. Ryan was making weak, insignificant grunts on the bed. His face was expressionless, a very pale grey, and he was holding his arm as if it were a baby. There was as much blood as I've ever seen, and I've seen blood. It seeped into the mattress, slow as oil. I just stood and watched. Time felt still. Petal lifted her head to me. She blinked, licked her lips and grinned, her eyes half-closed with pleasure. She looked euphoric in that moment.

Ryan's grandparents burst in soon after that. They must have heard my screams. I was naked still, backed into the corner, trying to cover my body with my hands. Ryan's grandfather tossed me a T-shirt from the floor, and didn't look in my direction again.

I'm Grace, I said.

No one responded. Ryan's grandmother was pacing the room, shaking her hands. Ryan's grandfather pulled a

pillowcase off a pillow and used it to wrap up Ryan's arm. The blood was so red against the white it looked fake.

Fucking dog, he muttered. That thing needs putting down.

I burst into tears then. Once I was crying, I couldn't stop. Ryan's grandparents took us both outside and put us in the car. The night was purple. Petal stayed behind. I could hear her whining as we drove down the street. Ryan's grandfather dropped Ryan off at the hospital with his grandmother, and then he took me home. I didn't speak the whole way, I just wept and wept.

When I got inside, Papa came straight out of his bedroom. He was in his tartan pyjamas, and he looked barely awake.

Gracie, he said. My god. What's happened?

I looked down at myself. I was still wearing only Ryan's T-shirt, and there were specks of blood on my bare legs and feet. My face, I knew, would be puffed up from crying.

Nothing, Papa. I'm fine.

Papa's mouth did something then that I'd never seen before. It quivered, and I thought he might suddenly become very angry, or very sad. It only lasted a second, and then he was holding me in his arms, stroking my hair with one of his palms. The hug was so tight I almost couldn't breathe, and then he let me go.

You're not seeing that Ryan again, Grace. I don't like it. I won't have it.

But Papa—

No.

I turned away from him and went into my bedroom. He stood and watched me go. I didn't see any point in arguing. It wasn't Ryan I needed anyway; it was Petal.

School the next day felt longer than ever. I called Ryan between every lesson, and then again at lunch, sitting in front of a blue tray while my gravy coagulated. Each time, he didn't pick up. I skipped my last lesson of the afternoon and went to see him. I'd never disobeyed Papa before, and the feeling of it made me nauseous. I knocked straight on the corrugated iron door of the garage, and Ryan took a long time to come and fold it open.

Hi, I said.

His arm was wrapped in white bandages, held at a right angle in a gauze sling. I don't think he'd slept since I'd seen him last.

You look awful, I said.

Thanks.

I leant forward and gave him a kiss on the corner of his mouth. When my lips touched him, he flinched. I knew he didn't want my company, but I went into the garage anyway. The sheets had been changed, and there were some packets of pain medication on the chair. My clothes from

the day before had been neatly folded in the exact spot on the floor where I'd left them. The dog bed was empty.

Where's Petal?

Ryan shook his head. He seemed angry at the question. She attacked me, Grace.

I know that.

She's not safe.

She was confused.

Listen, said Ryan. We're sending her away.

I fell apart then. I stopped being able to see clearly; my vision filled with grey dots. I started to pick things up from around the room and throw them. I ripped all the hangers from the clothes rail. I emptied a pen pot onto the concrete floor. I unplugged a whole row of electrical items and hurled them at the opposite wall. Ryan didn't intervene.

Where is she? I screamed.

Please, Ryan said. He kept saying it, quietly, over and over.

I stopped destroying the room and collapsed onto the bed. I felt drained of energy. My face was covered in tears and snot. I kicked my school shoes up and down against the mattress. My sobs became weak and breathy. The garage was completely silent, other than that. Ryan hadn't moved from his position by the door. It was then, just as I was starting to calm down, that I heard the bark.

Petal, I shouted. Petal!

The barks kept coming. She could hear me. I started to cry again. I could almost feel her tongue, rough and wet on my hands.

Take me to her, I said.

Ryan folded his arms. I knew that I would never see him again, after this, and I didn't care. Just let me see her, I said.

Ryan turned and walked out of the garage. I followed him across the front lawn to his grandparents' front door. I'd never been inside the house before. The hall was full of old-people furniture. There were paintings of fruit bowls hung up on the walls. If his grandparents were in, I didn't see them. I could hear Petal whimpering, and I ran to her. She was in the living room, in a cage pushed into the corner. I knelt at her level and stuck my hands through the bars to touch her. She looked uncomfortable in there, hunched over herself. I wished I'd brought a treat.

Petal, I said. Petal, my love.

She had sleep crusted into the corners of her eyes, as if she'd been weeping. She looked up at me and whined. I couldn't stop myself. I flicked open the lock on the cage, and Petal flew out. She leapt into me and pushed me backwards onto the musty carpet. I lay under her, my arms wrapped around her solid middle. We stayed like that for ages. I just held her.

When Petal let me get up, I noticed Ryan had left the room. He must have been worried that she'd bite him

again. I went and opened the door to the living room, to find him standing in the hall. He looked so scared, I was embarrassed for him. Petal sat obediently at my feet.

Let me take her, I said.

No. She's dangerous.

I rolled my eyes.

Your dad wouldn't have it, said Ryan. She could kill him, Grace.

I shrugged. Deep down, I knew that that was true. I looked at Ryan properly for the first time. He seemed to soften in front of me.

Please, I tried.

Grace. I'm not going to let them put her down, alright? But she needs expert care.

Petal moaned a little, as if she understood. I felt cruel, for talking about her as if she wasn't in the room.

I don't believe you, I said to Ryan.

I stepped around him, and started towards the front door. It was made of heavy wood, and I had to use both hands to get it open. As soon as I did, the late afternoon sunlight flooded in. It picked up all the dust. Ryan was stood deep into the hall, next to a coat stand, and Petal was between the two of us, turning her head back and forth. Whenever she faced me, her eyes caught the sunlight. They looked completely clear, amber as two fallen leaves.

Where will you take her? Ryan said.



TINDERLOIN

I didn't answer. It didn't matter. We could do anything, Petal and I. We could go to Scotland and walk the hills. We could go to Rome and eat spaghetti. We could go to Barcelona and bathe in the frothy sea. I'd send postcards to Papa all about it, but Petal and I wouldn't be back.

See you, I said to Ryan, and then I walked away. After a few steps, I looked back over my shoulder and whistled.