

**Things I'm Thinking About Sex (in Romance):  
A Novel and Exegesis**

By

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## Abstract

This Creative Writing thesis, *Things I'm Thinking About Sex (in Romance)*, is comprised of a rom-com novel titled *To Paris, with Love*, and a supporting exegesis which examines representations of sexual intimacy in the popular romance novel. As a young woman who has come of age in a world where porn is ubiquitous (Srinivisan) and sexual subjectification is framed as empowering (Gill), I constantly grapple with how to write about sex. The popular romance genre is a space that can address the anxieties and tensions of being a woman under patriarchy (Roach 14), allowing authors to explore “thoughts and fantasies that run contrary to patriarchal scripts of feminine docility, submissiveness, and sexual passivity” (McCann & Roach 421).

When novelists like me put pen to paper, do we actually provide a representation of sex that is egalitarian and challenges patriarchal sexual scripts? How can we, in the romance genre, use our novels to facilitate sexual education and imagination? I will employ the works of scholars such as Emily Nagoski, Rosalind Gill, bell hooks and Katherine Angel to interrogate my own work alongside case studies from contemporary rom-com novelists such as Ali Hazelwood, Emily Henry, Elle Kennedy and Christina Lauren. Critical of sex-positive feminism and considerate of the inegalitarian messages characteristic of porn, I explore questions such as how might romance novelists challenge, expand and enrich the sexual imagination while being conscious of the inequalities evident in representations of sexual intimacy? Romance has the expansive potential to create, encourage and inspire the egalitarian possibilities of sex, and *To Paris, with Love* is my exploration of how a novel can serve as a “twenty-first [century] basis for romance” (Pearce 521) and purposefully make room for modes of female sexuality.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I acknowledge that during my candidature I received contributions from the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signed: Georgia Nicholls

Dated: 28/02/2025

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Mum, I thought I'd be out of your house by twenty-two, but instead I spent three more years writing a thesis from my bedroom. Thank you for housing me for longer than expected, and for reading my book—sex scenes and all—so that when I asked, “Do you really think it's good?” you could answer “I think it's fantastic.”

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## Introduction

I didn't know what a blow job was until I read about it. I wasn't aware of the clitoris until Ansel, in Christina Lauren's *Sweet Filthy Boy*, used it to give a woman an orgasm. I learnt about safe sex practices because characters in college-set fanfictions always rolled on a condom or were on the pill (I'm yet to see some IUD representation). Between races at my high school swimming carnival, my friend and I read a sex scene from *Beautiful Player* by Christina Lauren, huddled underneath a towel so no one might see the word 'cock' on my phone screen.

My sexual education was, and continues to be, largely informed by reading, and reading *romances*—those fantastical books which focused on the love between two people, and always gave me an emotionally satisfying ending (Romance Writers of America 2025). I learnt about sex and its mechanics quite easily as a wide-eyed twelve-year-old because a world of romance novels (and, admittedly, fanfiction) was always tucked away in the pocket of my school blazer and, to this day, is usually never more than an arms-length away.

My education in, and from, romance novels is not a unique phenomenon. This ravenous consumption of romance novels (by teenage girls and their grown-up counterparts) is still, if not more, common. As I'm writing this, nine of the top ten novels on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List are romances (most of which are sexually explicit) ("Paperback Trade Fiction" 2024). When you walk into a bookstore, there's often a large section—be it a table or an entire shelf—dedicated to romance novels and their colourful cartoon covers. Middle-school-age girls at my alma matter are requesting copies of Hannah Grace's *Icebreaker* for the library (a novel which includes fingering in the backseat of an Uber and a woman who manages to do the splits mid-coitus), and the librarians can't acquire new romances as fast as the girls can read them\*.

These 'rom-com' type novels, set in everyday environments like office blocks (see Christina Lauren's *Beautiful* series), university laboratories (Ali Hazelwood's signature), or college campuses (like Elle Kennedy's *Off Campus* series), are given the expectation of a 'heat level' when it comes to the sex amongst their pages. Alongside witty banter and a relatable emotional journey for the contemporary main female protagonist, a reader wants to be assured that, when they open this novel, they will experience 'spicy' sex scenes that they, in part, bought

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\* While tutoring at my alma matter in 2023, the librarian and I would discuss the romance novels popular with the girls, and she would ask if I had any recommendations. I always found it hard to think of romances that didn't have explicit sex in them, so my recommendations were far and few between.

the book for. The authors I have chosen to use as case studies throughout this exegesis were decided on largely because of their ‘spice’ level. If I were to place the works of these authors along the TikTok scale of one to five chilli emojis (symbolic of ‘spiciness’) Emily Henry would sit at around a three (two and a half, if I could split an emoji in half); most of Christina Lauren’s work, specifically the *Beautiful* and *Wild Seasons* series, would sit at a four; Elle Kennedy’s works would also sit at a four; and Ali Hazelwood, to me, sits at a full five chillis.

Despite always having the *Wild Seasons* and *Beautiful* series by Christina Lauren tucked away in my pocket (as eBooks, because I was too afraid to own a physical book with the title *Dirty, Rowdy Thing* and how this would display my desire to know about, and have, sex), I didn’t begin to think about how sex was being represented to me until it overlapped with, and couldn’t be separated from, my feminism.

As a young woman who has come of age in a world where porn is ubiquitous and sexual subjectification is framed as empowering, I am critical of sex-positive feminism and considerate of the inegalitarian messages characteristic of porn. But what is ‘porn’, exactly? It’s definition likely varies person to person. My own definition was, and continues to be, hard to pinpoint. But for the sake of this thesis, to make clear my understanding of what pornography is, I’ll paraphrase Longino: pornography is the explicit representation of sex which portrays the role and status of women as mere sexual objects to be exploited and manipulates sexually (42). This is a relatively hardline, anti-porn positionality to take, and so it’s important to note that I don’t want to be censorial or to police every corner of the romance community’s erotic imaginations, as Eaton says is often assumed of anti-porn feminists (675). Rather, with both my novel and supporting exegesis, I hope to ask and explore questions of how we, in the romance genre, can expand on, aid, and enrich the sexual imagination of readers while being conscious of the inequalities evident in our representations of sexual intimacy.

At the beginning of my candidature, while reading Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, I was exposed to the arguments of second-wave anti-porn feminists. This kind of feminism was a new concept to me as a displaced Gen Z feminist who was more familiar with the sex-positive rhetoric that was, and is, more common in twenty-first century feminism, heard from voices such as Clementine Ford and Abbie Chatfield.

The arguments of anti-porn feminists (such as Gloria Steinem, Susan Brownmiller, and Laura Lederer) made sense to me, in the same way Amia Srinivasan, a social and political philosopher, found they made sense to her students. Srinivasan assumed her Gen Z students would find the anti-porn position to be “prudish and passé” (40). Rather, they were “riveted”



by the specific feminist ideology, agreeing that pornography depicts and makes the subordination of women real, that pornography silences women, that pornography is responsible for the objectification and marginalisation of women. “Yes,” they all answered Srinivisan, porn does exist as an “ideological scaffold of patriarchy” that “eroticis[es], incite[es] and legitimize[es] male violence against women” and reinforces the broader social and political subordination of women by men” (38). “Yes,” I would have answered if I was also in the classroom.

My kinship with anti-porn feminism felt contradictory to my love of romance novels, and the sex-positive feminist narrative I was most familiar with. The everyday pro-sex rhetoric encourages me, and other women, to be sexual subjects in our own right; it tells us that we should find empowerment in spanking, or choking, or any kind of sexual act without dispute if there is at least the permission of consent and positive choice. When Harlow, in Christina Lauren’s *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, is being spanked and tied up, sex-positivity told me not to question these acts if Harlow had consented and wanted to partake. Anti-porn feminism, on the other hand, challenged what I had seen, and previously excused, in romance novels, and made me ask: could romance novels, with their varying ‘spice’ levels and hundreds of pages of interpersonal content, be the same as pornography? Did the sex in romance novels eroticise, incite, and legitimise male violence against women in the same way feminists like Andrea Dworkin (*Intercourse* 1987), Catherine Mackinnon (*Feminism Unmodified* 1987) and Susan Brownmiller (*Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* 1975) argued pornography does? How might the genre I love so much, and learn so much from, be perpetrating myths of sexual pleasure and adhering to patriarchal sexual scripts?

It didn’t feel as though the romance novels I read were the same as pornography. If anything, romance novels aided my understanding of female pleasure. Might it be a kind of “woman-oriented feminist porn,” as Roach suggests (101)? Or more like the erotica Steinem defines in her article *Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference*, characterised as a “mutually pleasurable, sexual expression” (37)? Or, more broadly, a representation of sex that highlights women’s sexual pleasure, and the politics of producing this pleasure (Roach 94)?

To understand this, I wanted to write a novel that serves as a “twenty-first [century] baseline for romance” (Pearce 521), which includes egalitarian, feminist representations of sexual pleasure which decentre male-focused modes of pleasure and sexuality to make room for modes of female sexuality. Within the structural formula of a romance, which I will explicate in Chapter 1, “fears and anxieties surrounding love are allowed to surface in the plot

as problems” because the genre itself exists as a “safe space” in which to explore them (Ostrov Weisser 11). Popular romance scholar Catherine Roach and critical femininity scholar Hannah McCann similarly argue romance as a space that can address the anxieties and tensions of being a woman under patriarchy (Roach 14), with the novels offering insight into the “shifting sexual and gender norms” and “explor[ing] thoughts and fantasies that run contrary to patriarchal scripts” (McCann & Roach 421).

As the genre evolves, so too do the tensions and anxieties explored by romance authors. During the second-wave sexual revolution, books like *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss and *Captive Bride* by Johanna Lindsey contended with the rape fantasy; in the early 2000s postfeminist period, *Mr. Maybe* by Jane Green and *Something Borrowed* by Emily Giffin were infatuated with wedded bliss and the pursuit for domestic goddess-hood. Post the #MeToo resurgence in 2016, romance novelists are making a “much greater emphasis on women’s sexual desire” (Ostrov Weisser 132). Hannah McCann & Roach propose in their article ‘Sex and sexuality’ that romance texts should aim to “explore [the] contradictions and quandaries of female desire” (420)—of permissible consent, of finding pleasure, of power dynamics. However, most research on sex within the popular romance field has focused on the ‘pornographic’ elements of Harlequin Mills & Boon novels—such as the suggestion that they exist as “soft pornography for women” and “[promote] the gender and sexual ideologies that denigrate women and serve to keep them in their place, subordinate to men and to the marriage and family system” (Douglas, Snitow: Ostrov Weisser 132)—rather than unpacking the representations of sex and intimacy and considering the genre’s feminist potential to create, encourage, and inspire egalitarian expressions and possibilities of sex and sexuality.

There is a tension between the cultural narrative of romantic love and the ubiquity of porn and the resulting casual and often depersonalised construction of sexual relationships for my generation. Rhetoric of agency choice and self-determination are primary narratives within contemporary liberal feminisms, with “new femininities” being “organised around sexual confidence and autonomy” (Gill 103). Contemporary feminisms, which often favour the pro-sex perspective, “[insist] on women’s right to sexual pleasure, and consent as the sole boundary for permissible sex” (Srinivisan 36), which is said by Ariel Levy, in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, to be the residue of confusion (82) between anti-porn feminists and sex-positive feminists of the second wave. Where second wave anti-porn feminists like Susan Brownmiller and Gloria Steinem condemned porn as a “women hating, violent practice [sex]” which replaces a romantic yearning for closeness with objectification and voyeurism (Steinem 37), sex-positive (also known as pro-sex) feminists

“required a guarantee of women’s right to have sex when, how, and (subject to the other parties consent) with whom they liked, without stigma or shame” (Srinivisan 36), including the freedom to look at or appear in porn (Levy 71). Romance authors, in assuming a sex-positive position, and writing sex how they like without stigma and shame, evade the benefits of a more ambivalent positionality that, alongside their sex-positivity, would consider how they might be replacing intimacy and closeness with objectification and voyeurism.

Arguments as to whether pornography and sex-positivity are liberating or oppressive for women continue in the contemporary zeitgeist. A.W. Eaton, in her article ‘A Sensible Anti-Porn Feminism’, explores how anti-porn feminism has “lost ground” among self-identified feminists (674), likely due to its caricature as censorial (675). In pursuit of shifting criticisms of anti-porn feminism, Eaton explores the effects of “inegalitarian pornography” (676). This is defined as “sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticize relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterised by gender inequality” (676), including “dominance and strength in men, and softness and submissiveness in women” (678). This eroticisation of the mechanisms, norms, myths and trappings of gender inequality (679), argues Eaton, is particularly effective in shaping the attitudes and conduct of an audience in ways that are injurious to women (677) as it “plays a role in sustaining and reproducing a system of pervasive injustice” (680). Romance authors, with their novel as the tool, can either do as Eaton says and, like pornography, blend the erotic appeal of an on-page sex scene with patriarchal sexual norms, or it can use the sexiness to be educative and present the potentials for egalitarian sexual pleasure.

Scholars such as Ann Barr Snitow and Catherine Roach more commonly assert a sex-positive position, placing romance fiction under the banner of pornography. Snitow uses the term pornography “as neutrally as possible, not as an automatic pejorative” (151), going on to claim that romance as pornography is “masterly” and a “delicate miracle of balance” in which “the barriers that hold back sexual feeling are acknowledged and finally circumvented quite sympathetically” (160). In 2016, Roach argued that romance fiction is a form of “feminist porn” (94), supposing that the depiction of sex is “not simply of sexual activity but of women’s sexual satisfaction” and, in doing so, is “first and foremost about highlighting women’s sexual pleasure and about the politics of producing this pleasure” (94). Snitow & Roach’s sex-positive arguments, despite aligning with the pornographic title, centre around “eroticism and autonomy” and emphasise the importance of “intimacy and connectedness” (Thurston 185) in romance’s depictions of sex. While their feminism might remove the pejorative for them, I can’t say the word ‘pornography’ loses the pejorative for me—I hear ‘porn’ and I think ‘patriarchal’ and ‘violent’ and ‘degrading’. For these sex positive feminists, ‘pornography’ is

simply an effective descriptor for what romance does: it shows sex in an explicit, erotic context for the pleasure, and knowledge, of readers. Romance porn, to Snitow and Roach, does not align with the message of “violence, dominance and conquest” (Steinem 37) expected of patriarchal pornography, and rather offers a version of sexual explicitness purposefully written to, and for, the pleasure of women.

Claims about the impact of a sexualised and pornified culture on women (and their pleasure) are often contradictory. Attwood argues that “we need to move beyond the assumption that sexualisation is in the interests of boys and men” (xxii). However, Gill posits that women are “endowed with agency on the condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy (258). Chapter 2 asks how moving from an “external male judging gaze” to a “self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill 104) impacts a woman’s experience of sexual pleasure. Is occupying this place of sexual subjectivity, as Eaton argues, simply an internalising of the subordinating norms of attractiveness, and thereby a collaboration in their own oppression (679)? Srinivisan found, amongst her students to have come of age sexually in a pornified culture, there was “a script in place that dictated not only the physical moves and gestures and sounds to make and demand, but also the appropriate affect, the appropriate desires, the appropriate distribution of power” (41). Her students, Srinivisan claims, are “products of pornography” (41) who consider porn and sex to be one and the same. McCann & Roach identified a shift towards more sexually explicit content in romance novels which adhere to normative Western sexual scripts, including an emphasis on penetrative sex and the representation of men as the initiators of sex (414).

As a baseline for understanding and writing about loving (sexual) relationships, bell hooks’ *All About Love: New Visions* has served as an invaluable provocation for academics and romance writers like myself. hooks, as a formative voice for the practice of intersectional feminism, outlines that a “commonly accepted assumption in a patriarchal culture is that love can be present in a situation where one group or individual dominates another” (40), despite love and domination being entirely incompatible (xxiv; 6). Being socialised to think in such a way, hooks suggests, means people are “more interested in and stimulated by scenes of domination and violence rather than by scenes of love and care” (97) in which an “inferior” and “superior” parties are established. In solution to this, hooks proposes an “awakening to love” by “let[ting] go of our obsession with power and domination” and living by a “love ethic” (87). The basic principles of a love ethic involve “showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity and the will to cooperate” (101). As a formative voice for the practice of intersectional feminism—a movement which “fights to end sexist oppression and exploitation without

neglecting other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, imperialism and other” (Biana 13)—hooks’ proposed love ethic serves as a “way out of oppression” (Biana 128) in which “genuine feminist politics bring us from bondage to freedom, from loveless-ness to loving” (hooks 104). With young women—and men—having “no vision or expectation for good love, meaningful sex [and] commitment” (Sessions Step 222), it is important to create a distinction between presentations of love and care versus more readily accepted representations of domination and violence often synonymous with pornographic representations of sex. By orienting my research with hooks’ love ethic—an ethos which considers how to make love an actionable behaviour—and current intersectional fourth wave ideologies, I hope to do as hooks calls for and use mass media—specifically the romance novel, which hooks herself says remains the “only domain in which women speak of love with any degree of authority” (xxiii)—to challenge and change these images of violence and domination (98).

In creating loving images which are “a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect,” I look to scholars who have identified particulars of egalitarian sex. Gloria Steinem, in her infamous article ‘Erotic and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference’, writes that erotica, a “crucially different” concept to pornography (36), is a “mutually pleasurable expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice” which “leaves open the question of gender” (37). The erotic enables a discovery of “ourselves and each other through a sexuality that is an exploring, pleasurable, empathetic part of our lives” (Steinem 38). Providing a more contemporary perspective, Katherine Angel, in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, says there is a “pleasure” (99) and “[joy]” (98) to be had in vulnerability—the discovering of “new, different ways to be touched: in being vulnerable to the unknown” (98). All sex, Angel posits, involves play with power and relinquishing” (101). However, vulnerability would introduce a utopian horizon in which “we give up the illusion that any of us have real, or total, power when it comes to sex” (Angel 109) and that “the great dichotomies”—of male and female, of giver and receiver, of active and passive, of self and other—“slide away” (Segal 86; Angel 109).

Alternative to these more subjective approaches to egalitarian representations of sex, there is a more objective, biological perspective I hope to explore. With romance novels as an educative tool, female sexual realities can take place on the page to show the possibilities of sex *off* the page. Emily Nagoski, in *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*, focuses on the science of women’s sexual wellbeing (11), and specifically on how certain narratives of sex—our cultural context—have informed our understanding of ‘normal’ sex. Nagoski outlines how large-scale, long-term core cultural

messages about women's sexuality often inform deep patterns of thinking and feeling which, if noticed, challenged, and rewritten, can help empower women to have the sexual wellbeing which best suits them (156-157). The book considers tropes of sex often common within romance novels: penis-in-vagina intercourse and the myth that, if it leads to orgasm for men, it must too be how women orgasm reliably (2); discussion on the reliability of 'wetness' in relation to arousal concordance (193); and the reality of responsive versus spontaneous desire (3). In *Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters and How To Get It*, Laurie Mintz explores the pleasure (orgasm) gap between men and women during sex. Mintz explores multiple reasons for this pleasure gap, including how common media images of 'sexiness' (such as in porn and magazines) place women in the pursuit of being sexually desirable rather than their own sexual desire (9), and how communication is pertinent to achieve (specifically) female orgasm (10). Most notably, however, Mintz posits that the "cultural over-focus" on intercourse (penis-in-vagina sex), largely because it is the most common way for men to reach orgasm, is the number one reason for the pleasure gap.

In order to understand how, exactly, sex is being represented in romance novels, I will be conducting a close reading of mainstream romcom novels. The novels are single-title books published by current and recent best-selling authors: Emily Henry (who, as of May 2024, holds the top spot on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List with her novel *Funny Story*); ex-fanfic writer and current aca-romance pioneer Ali Hazelwood; Christina Lauren, who have written thirty-one best-selling romcoms; and sports romance writer Elle Kennedy<sup>†</sup>. Not only are these authors best sellers who capture the attention of readers across international markets, but they are also the writers who, as I've grown up reading romance, have had the greatest impact on my understanding and love of the genre. Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren all focus on narratives of cis, heterosexual, able-bodied white women (women whose identities closely reflect my own), which, though clearly limited in its scope of sexuality and gender, is most similar to my own creative work, *To Paris, with Love*.

Creative work, as Hazel Smith & Roger T. Dean put it in their book on practice-led research, is itself a form of research (5), and therefore my novel will serve as an ongoing example and provocation of how, in the writing of contemporary romcoms, it is possible to

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<sup>†</sup>I want to acknowledge that I am aware that these authors are all American (or, at the least, write about and in America, for the American market). This may seem (strange) as I am an Australian, writing about an Australian, from Australia. However, while there are fantastic Australian romance novels I could have selected for my corpus, I wanted to select novels which most closely reflected the aspirations I had for my own novel when writing. This meant analysing the works of my favourite authors, who just so happen to be American (Ali Hazelwood's nationality is... varied!).

combat myths of sexual pleasure and create a loving, vulnerable and pleasurable representations of sex. This practice-led approach will lead me to insights (Dean & Smith 5) to questions such as: what myths of sex, likely perpetrated by pornography, do we see in popular contemporary romance novels? How can we use the romance genre as an educative tool about egalitarian pursuits of pleasure? Can we, in romance novels, remind young people (but specifically women) that what sex is, and could become, lies with them (Srinivisan 71)?

Chapter 1 will focus on the objective truths and biological myths perpetrated, or reframed and challenged, within romance novels. Using Emily Nagoski's *Come as You Are* as a guiding text, alongside support from the work of Laurie Mintz and other sex educators, I'll conduct a close reading of the mechanics of certain sex scenes, from wetness to penetration, with the intent to challenge stereotypical and false norms of female sexual response.

Chapter 2 will focus on sexual subjectivity and how the presence of sex-positive feminist rhetoric has infiltrated the romance genre. Considering ideas such as the naked versus the nude (Berger; Allan) and Rosalind Gill's proposed feminine object versus subject, this chapter will ask how romance writers present the sexual identities of their main female characters, in and outside of the bedroom.

Chapter 3 considers the effects of hookup dating culture on the writing of sexual relationships in romance. Comparing testimony from Peggy Orenstein's *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* and Laura Sessions Stepp's *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* with the narrative context of contemporary romance novels, I'll consider how a reparative representation of casualness is utilised in the genre.

Chapter 4 will combine the vulnerability ethos from Katherine Angel's *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* with the love ethic from bell hooks' work *All About Love: New Visions* to consider how romance authors can create representations of egalitarian, mutually pleasurable sex amongst the pages of their romance novels.

At the end of each chapter, I make the connection between the creative and the analytical. In each 'In Practice' sub-section, I explore how I approached applying theory to practice, asking how achievable it is for a romance author to challenge stereotypical norms of female sexuality within the generic structure of a romance.

Whether or not conclusions are reached across the scope of my writing, this thesis should communicate something clearly: that I'm thinking—endlessly, continually—about sex (in romance).

## Chapter 1: Between the Sheets: Physiological Sex Acts

*“The images we see—or don’t see—matter. They tell us what’s possible” (Nagoski 161)*

Sexual pleasure is a fundamental concern of the romance genre (McCann & Roach 411), with the genre itself existing as an “attempt to solve—to resolve, dissolve—the problems of sex” (McCann & Roach 412). While romance novels do prioritise “women wanting and getting great sex from partners who know how to deliver” (McCann & Roach 412), it is important to develop a more in depth understanding of *how* this great sex is represented and achieved, as well as considering the potential patriarchal sexual scripts they adhere to or challenge. Without an understanding of how women (reliably) experience sexual pleasure, it is likely we, as romance authors, will continue to centre sexual representations on male sexuality, skewing the reality of what sexual pleasure can and does look like. I want to ensure that the sex in my own novel does not continue to reinforce harmful representations of sex and rather acts as a romance which can challenge stereotypical sex scripts.

Roach, in her book *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, puts forward nine key elements that are always present in a romantic story: (1) it is hard to be alone; (2) it is a man’s world; (3) romance is a religion of love; (4) romance requires hard work; (5) romance involves risk; (6) romance facilitates healing; (7) romance leads to great sex, especially for women; (8) romance makes you happy; (9) romance levels the playing field for women (21-27). These have been inspired by, and are in conversation with, Pamela Regis’s essential elements, proposed in 2003, except for one notable addition: the “great sex” that women “especially” experience amongst the pages of a romance novel (25). While Roach talks broadly of this great sex being “natural, healthy and empowering” (25), she doesn’t define how this might specifically be achieved beyond the suggestion to “get past a male-oriented preference for penetrative intercourse” (98). Instead, Roach suggests romance operates as pornography because it is a “woman-centred space of sexual fantasy (...) that functions as good porn for its readers” (84).

Roach’s assertion, and particularly passionate argument, of romance as a sex positive (25) feminist iteration of porn (93) feels contradictory to me. One side of the ongoing feminist



argument about pornography—the sex-positive side that Roach’s argument stems from (91)—says that pornography has the “power to transgress and disrupt tired norms for how women, how people, should live their lives” (Roach 90), with sex only being morally constrained by the boundaries of consent (Srinivisan 82). The other side, led by second-wave feminists like Gloria Steinem and Laura Lederer, says that pornography is not about “mutual love, or love at all” but is rather a “woman hating, violent practice [of sex]” (Steinem 39) which is a “celebration of male power over women” (Russell & Lederer 27).

I was largely at odds with my own positionality. Where did my positionality fit in the popular romance field? I agreed with my popular romance guru Roach when she wrote that romance could “[enable] more expansive possibilities for healthy sexuality,” but I did not agree that it was conditional on romance “embrac[ing] and fulfil[ing] its pornography potential” (Roach 90). Additionally, the hardline anti-porn arguments of the second wave left little room for negotiation. To anti-porn feminists like Dworkin and Brownmiller, pornography is, as Amia Srinivisan summarises in her essay ‘The Right to Sex’, a “metonym for ‘problematic’ sex in general: for sex that [takes] no account of women’s pleasure, for sadomasochistic sex, for prostitution, for rape fantasies, for sex without love, for sex across power differentials, for sex with men” (35). There seems, in the contemporary buttress of pro-sex feminism, little room to ask: “What would women’s sexual choices look like if they were really free?” (Willis; Srinivisan 83)

A.W. Eaton’s 2007 article, ‘A Sensible Antiporn Feminism’, helped give dimension to my positionality as it reconciles pro-sex sentiments with the anti-porn feminism argument. Eaton negotiates for a “sophisticated and reasonable” (675) anti-porn feminist argument and suggests pornography—referred to specifically as “inegalitarian pornography” (675)—to be “sexually explicit representations that as a whole eroticise relations (acts, scenarios, or postures) characterised by gender inequality” (675). Pornography causes harm in the ways it indirectly and cumulatively contributes to the reproduction of sexist attitudes and perpetrates gender inequality (Eaton 713; Cawston 634), and focuses not just on rape and sexual violence, but on broader characteristics of gender inequality (Cawson 634).

So, maybe the sex in romance is the kind of porn that is inconsiderate of the female sexual experience, where the social meaning assigned by patriarchy to sexual difference is reproduced (Srinivisan 64); and maybe, sometimes it isn’t, like I hope, and rather “embraces the idea of women’s authentic sexual pleasure” (McCann & Roach 418) while “explor[ing] [the] contradictions and quandaries of female desire” (McCann & Roach 420) under patriarchy. It likely depends on the content itself. What sex acts are, ultimately, characterised by gender

inequality? How have our ideas of sex been informed by patriarchal perspectives? And how does romance challenge, or adhere to, sex characterised by gender inequality?

To help me work through this problem, I referred to texts which interrogate sex as a physiological act informed by not just biology, but the broader cultural context. There are few texts published that disseminate decades worth of cross-disciplinary sex research concisely, and with specific consideration of the female experience of pleasure. Of the few, the works which have most formatively informed, and contributed to, my understanding of sex are the writings of Emily Nagoski and Laurie Mintz.

*Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life* and *Becoming Cliterate*, by Nagoski and Mintz respectively, are books which communicate achievable realities of sex from a female perspective. Both Nagoski and Mintz take research from a range of scientific studies on sex and communicate them to a generalist market. These books are accessible in the same way romance novels are—an arm's length away, on most bookstore shelves—and bridge the gap between scientific sexual knowledge and sexual realities. Mintz's work focuses singularly on the clitoris and its importance in female pleasure, while Nagoski's work more broadly explores the science of women's sexual wellbeing (11), from anatomy to arousal with orgasms in-between. These educators and sex therapists have made a conscious effort to engage in sex education which interrogates and debunks common misconceptions surrounding heterosexual sex in Western cultures, with particular focus on cis-het women's bodies and experiences. My reading of Mintz and Nagoski's texts identified three main tenets of sex that, like Eaton suggests of inegalitarian pornography, are characteristic of gender inequality (675): prioritising of penetration, arousal concordance, and genital size<sup>‡</sup>. I will break down each misconception of sex in relation to how the romance genre can either perpetrate this myth or act as an antidote by showing egalitarian sex acts to further understand what the “natural, healthy and empowering” great sex Roach—and I—know is possible in romance novels. Following this, I will explore how I, in the writing of my own romance novel and the sex scenes within in it, attempted to combat these misconceptions and provide a representation of sex more considerate of female sexual pleasure.

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<sup>‡</sup>The ideas of penetration, arousal concordance and size that I discuss in this chapter do appeal to a desire for simplicity (“Judith Butler: How the far-right wants to control your body”): that pleasure can be achieved in definite, objective ways. But sex is contextual, is personal, is *subjective*, in the same way that romance novels establish context and create the personal.

### “Get Inside Me” and the Emphasis on Penetration

The moment of penetration in a romance novel is a climax in and of itself. It’s the moment when she finally “[eases] his cock into [her] body” (Hazelwood 239); when he “roughly thrusts into [her]” (Lauren 271); when she “lower[s] [her]self inch by inch, until he’s all the way inside” (Kennedy 258); or as he “[sinks] deeply into [her]” (Henry 248). All other sexual activity up until the first thrust exists largely as foreplay, a precursor to more ‘legitimate’ sexual activity.

In reality, vaginal penetration (intercourse) is the most reliable route to orgasm for only around 4% of women (Mintz 12). And yet in romance novels, there is a resistance to think of ourselves beyond the convention of phallic penetration (Roach 97), despite romance functioning as a “woman-centred space of sexual fantasy” (Roach 84). A reliance on intercourse is reflective of a larger cultural over-focus on intercourse as the defining act of sex, with sex scenes in romance novels often culminating in an intercourse scene (Ménard & Cabrera 248)—in other words, a “one-way drive downfield to the end zone of intercourse” (Castleman 203; Ménard & Cabrera 248). This has largely evolved from a cultural privileging of the male sexual experience (Mintz 31), in which we overvalue men’s most common and reliable way of reaching orgasm (intercourse) so much so that sex begins with penetration and ends with male ejaculation (Mintz 32).

Female main characters (FMCs) in romance seem to exist within the small percentage of women who achieve orgasm from thrusting alone (Mintz 11), despite its limitations as a pathway to pleasure for women (McCann & Roach 422). Across Hazelwood’s novels, we see the FMCs “let go” (*Love on the Brain* 261) and experience “stupefying pleasure” (*The Love Hypothesis* 275) because the main male character (MMC) has “figured [out]” the “inside of [her]” and “how to angle his thrusts” (*Love on the Brain* 261) or simply from “how smoothly he slid in and out” (*The Love Hypothesis* 275). In Christina Lauren’s *Sweet Filthy Boy*, as the MMC, Ansel, “mov[es] in and out of [Mia]” (89), the FMC, Mia, makes the declaration that she “won’t need his fingers or [hers] or a toy” (89). Rather, she’ll be able to achieve orgasm in the culturally “right, good, normal” way (from penetration) as opposed to the “immature” clitoral orgasm (Nagoski 275).

Orgasm from penetration, for romance FMCs, is easily achievable, highly possible, and often mind-blowing. It is an idealised version of patriarchal sex—a reparative fantasy—where sex can be pleasurable for women from thrusting alone. It is a specific example of the reparative fantasy Roach suggests romance offers (181), where an intercourse sex scene is antidotal in its

presentation of patriarchal sexuality, and the pleasure imbalance between the sexes does not directly enter the represented world of the novel (Williams 179)<sup>§</sup>. The most reliable mode for orgasm for men—penetration—(Mintz 32) conveniently acts as the most reliable, and ultimately pleasurable, mode of orgasm for women. There is no trouble reaching orgasm with a partner from intercourse (Mintz 1); there is no longer something wrong with her (Mintz 8); the FMC has conquered the patriarchal inequalities of sex by achieving orgasm from penetration alone.

With, as Nagoski phrases it, this “men-as-default” (275) view of sexuality, a narrow conceptualisation of sex (Ménard & Cabrera 251) centres penetration as the defining act within a sexual encounter. So much so that the terms ‘sex’—which Shere Hite defines as “intimate, physical contact for pleasure, to share pleasure with another person (or just alone)” (365)—and and ‘intercourse’—defined by Mirriam Webster as “involving penetration of the vagina by the penis” (2024)—are often, in Western culture, used as if they are one and the same (Mintz 190). This interchanging of the word intercourse for sex is present in Emily Henry’s *Funny Story*. The characters (while heavily making out) agree they “shouldn’t have sex” (140). Mere pages later, Miles, the male love interest, asks Daphne that even though they said “no sex” could he “touch [her]” (142). This infers that his subsequent fingering of her, and her hand job for him, are not acts of sex, despite the characters being in a scenario of consensual shared pleasure.

Elle Kennedy, across her novels in the *Off Campus* series, often marks the distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘not sex’. In *The Mistake*, both the MMC, Logan, and the FMC, Grace, proclaim they “haven’t had sex yet” (200; 212) despite having dry humped one another (75) and engaged in manual (32) and oral (52) sex. In *The Deal*, the FMC, Hannah, makes the distinction between having “slept with” Garrett, the MMC, and doing “other stuff” (225). Sex, in Kennedy’s novels, does not signify the whole of a sexual encounter, inclusive of “other stuff” (225) such as oral sex, manual sex, and mutual masturbation. Rather, it refers to the singular act of penetration—the “[sleeping] with” (225), and the “fuck[ing]” (200).

How responsible is it, in a genre known for its unashamed writing of sex, that prioritises female pleasure (McCann & Roach 418, 421), to rely on and resort to representing a penetrative fantasy? Separating acts of manual or oral stimulation from ‘sex’ make the modes which women reach orgasm from most reliably (Kerner 58; Mintz 21) seem unimportant, with foreplay operating as a stopgap before supposedly more legitimate sexual activity. The

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<sup>§</sup> Adapted from Linda Williams’ novel *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible*, where she writes of pornographic films: “...the continuous, unending pleasure of a utopian world in which the power imbalance between the sexes does not directly enter into the represented world of the film” (179).

existence of ‘foreplay’, separated from sex itself, creates a heterosexist script which prioritises, and always leads to, intercourse. In *Beautiful Player*, the third book in Christina Lauren’s *Beautiful* series, the FMC, Hanna, makes consistent reference to “actual sex” (185) while engaging in non-penetrative dry humping with the MMC, Will. Hanna states she wants “his mouth against [her], his fingers inside. His cock” (Lauren 186), and that the pleasure makes her want to “beg him to take off [her] clothes, then fuck [her]” (Lauren 187). Despite being in a moment of mutual shared pleasure, with an orgasm that “[moves] down [her] spine to explode between [her] legs” (Lauren 187), the FMC is prioritising intercourse.

Romance is not incapable of stand-alone sexual encounters which don’t involve penetration; however, they often leave the impression that vaginal penetration is ‘missing’. In *Love Theoretically*, despite the MMC, Jonathan, being insistent that he is “not going to fuck [Elsie]” (Hazelwood 281), and “clearly (...) enjoying” (286) fingering her, Elsie constantly suggests they have “real sex” (Hazelwood 286). In *The Deal*, after the couple “pleasure [them]selves in front of each other” (Kennedy 216), the FMC, Hannah, immediately suggests they have sex (221). She’s achieved what she thought she was incapable of—an orgasm with a partner—and the immediate assumption is that intercourse must follow. In *Sweet Filthy Boy* by Christina Lauren, a scene of mutual masturbation—entirely successful on its own, with “sharp cry[ing]” orgasms (253)—is punctuated by the FMC, Mia, saying her masturbation is “a poor approximation of [the MMC’s] fingers, and an even worse approximation of his cock” (253) and culminates in the MMC, half-hard, “push[ing] inside [Mia] with a steady, hard thrust” (253). Vaginal penetration exists as a looming inevitability, even when pleasure (often in the form of an orgasm) has been achieved from other reliable methods.

Encounters which do not leave the impression that vaginal penetration is ‘missing’ or necessary for sex to have occurred are, across the novels of Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren, far and few between. Each scene of oral sex and/or manual sex that I came across seemed to always refer to “need[ing] to be inside” the FMC in some capacity (Henry, *Book Lovers*, 246). The sex scenes in *Beautiful Secret* by Christina Lauren operate largely around the logic that Niall, the MMC, only wants to engage in intercourse when he’s in love (283). Because of this, the question of vaginal penetration is largely removed from the stakes of each sex scene. The novel has scenes of manual stimulation, oral stimulation and dry humping where vaginal penetration does not exist as the logical and eventual next step. Each scene is sex in the sense it is an act of mutual shared pleasure, not because vaginal penetration has occurred. This I did not think would be so unique; I looked through each sex scene of my book sample hoping, like Niall and Ruby, other characters did not always privilege penetration, and yet always found

some kind of mention of being inside each other. Why is it, I thought, that in every sex scene I read, penetration is omnipresent? Are we, as romance authors, not capable of giving our FMCs just a moment, fleeting even, of pleasure that does not centre the male sexual experience?

I do not intend to suggest penetration need to be excluded from a romance novel simply because, as a genre passionate about women's sexual satisfaction, it should entirely privilege the female sexual experience and focus on sex acts that stimulate the clitoris, women's primary locus of sensation (Mintz 7). Penetration is still a reliable mode of orgasm for men (Mintz 14; Nagoski 275), and around 43% of women say their most reliable route to orgasm is intercourse *plus* clitoral stimulation (Mintz 12). Rather, external stimulation (clitoral stimulation for her) should be equally as important as internal stimulation (intercourse for him) when intercourse *is* written. The goal of great sex, in romance and outside of it, is to create moments of consensual *shared* pleasure, where one route to orgasm is not more important than another.

Across the novels of Hazelwood, Kennedy and Lauren, scenes of intercourse often include the stimulation of the clitoris alongside vaginal penetration. In Hazelwood's work, Levi makes "slow, wet strokes of his thumb on [Bee's] clit" while he's "inside of [her]" (*Love on the Brain* 239); Adam, though vague in description, does "rub that spot" (*The Love Hypothesis* 273) that "[makes] [Olive's] thighs tremble" (*The Love Hypothesis* 274). In Kennedy's work, as Garrett feels "the orgasm hurtling toward[s] [him]" he "reach[es] between [himself and Hannah] and press[es] [his] thumb on [Hannah's] clit" (*The Deal* 308); Logan, in *The Mistake*, "find[s] [the FMCs] clit and rub[s] it with [his] index finger" as he makes "quick, shallow thrusts" (263). Across Lauren's *Beautiful* series, the MMCs consistently find the clitoris: Max, in *Beautiful Stranger*, "[rubs] firming against [Sara's] clit with every stroke" (39); in *Beautiful Bastard*, Bennet "[moves] [his] fingertips across [Chloe's] clit with the perfect pressure" (28) as he "[drives] himself deeper and deeper inside [her]" (27). Even if brief in reference or called "*extra* (my emphasis) stimulation" (Kennedy, *The Mistake*, 243), the stimulation of the clitoris in romance novels contributes to the decentralising of vaginal penetration as the defining act of pleasure. Pleasure is then shown to not singularly occur from thrusting, but also in collaboration with, as Nagoski refers to it, the "Grand Central Station of erotic sensation" (21).

We might see, in conjunction with the equalising of clitoral stimulation with that of vaginal penetration, a challenging of the narrative that sex generally ends when the man ejaculates (Mintz 19). While the penis-in-vagina-clitoral-stimulation-to-simultaneous-

orgasm\*\* trope is egalitarian in its pursuit of pleasure, there is little representation of other sexual sequences which can lead to orgasm. Mintz, in *Becoming Cliterate*, notes a range of different sexual narratives people engage in: one brings themselves to orgasm directly before intercourse (136), another uses her vibrator after her partner has come (142), and another uses her partner to stimulate her clitoris after he's orgasmed (143). Across the novels of Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren, Hazelwood is the only author who challenges this popular cultural script and includes sex scenes which do not end in male or simultaneous orgasms. In *Love, Theoretically*, the MMC, Jonathan, orgasms from intercourse before the FMC, Elsie. The intercourse is written as "the best thing [the FMC] [has] ever felt" (Hazelwood 314) but is not the most reliable route to orgasm for Elsie, and she is left "[frustrated] that he came and [she] didn't" (Hazelwood 314), and assumes the sexual encounter was over. However, the sex continues, and exists beyond orgasm from intercourse, with the MMC then "draw[ing] fast, beautiful circles around [Elsie's] clit that immediately push[es] [her] over the edge" (Hazelwood 315). In *Not in Love*, the FMC Rue sets a "limit" (Hazelwood 121) of not wanting to have penetrative sex, explaining to the MMC, Eli, that she simply "[doesn't] like it very much" (Hazelwood 206). Wanting to embrace mutuality in her sex with Eli, Rue agrees to try penetrative sex with Eli. The penetrative experience for Rue is describes as "pleasant" and done "not in an attempt to get [her] off, but for [Eli]" (Hazelwood 256). After he orgasms from penetration, Rue "[feels] a tinge of disappointment" believing the sex was now over (Hazelwood 256); however, such is not the case. Eli, while "softening inside [Rue]," resumes his thumb "movements on [her] clit" and brings her to a "fast and [beautiful]" orgasm after he's experienced his own from penetration. *Not in Love* combines a reliable route of orgasm for Eli—penetration—with a reliable route for Rue—clitoral stimulation—without attempting to follow a narrative that ends with male or simultaneous orgasms.

Writing with reverence to clitoral stimulation, as a mode of pleasure most reliable for women, can, as McCann & Roach suggest, allow romance novelists, in their role as sexual advocates and educators, to challenge the stereotypical false norm of female sexual response (422). Rather than pursuing an unreliable penetrative fantasy, sex in romances can exist without vaginal penetration, can remove the fallacy of 'foreplay', can bring the clitoris into the intercourse equation, and, at large, provide images of sex which are more representative of orgasmic female sexual pleasure.

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\*\*I've amended this from the "penis-in-vagina-intercourse-to-simultaneous-orgasm trope" phrase McCann & Roach coin in their article *Sex and sexuality* (422).

### “You’re So Wet” and the Saturation of Genital Response

There is, in pornography, a central fantasy to “capture [the] frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured” (Angel 87; Williams 50). The wetness of woman, as Angel outlines in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, stands in for “good sex,” with genital arousal being treated as “the very same thing as a subjective sense of pleasure” (75). This is likely the result of women’s sexual response being viewed as “basically the same [as male sexual response] but not quite as good” (Nagoski 2): if he gets hard when he’s aroused, then she should get wet when she’s aroused; if his arousal is physically visible, then hers should be too.

Nagoski asserts that genital response is often mistaken as a reliable indicator for sexual arousal (217). Culturally, we use descriptions of our physiology (‘You’re so wet,’ or ‘You’re so hard’) as proxy for our state of mind (‘I’m enjoying this’) (Nagoski 210). This metaphorization of wetness (for women) and hardness (for men) as being exclusively representative of sexual arousal is common—if not a trope itself—in romance fiction. Women are often “so wet” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 305) or “glistening” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 219) when aroused, and men often have an “aching cock” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 305) or a “hot bulge” (Hazelwood, *Love Theoretically*, 286). This reliance on the description of the genital response of a romance FMC or MMC acts as a shortcut to describing their subjective sense of arousal (Nagoski 192). It’s, undoubtedly, easier to write “I’m so wet” or “I’m soaking,” than trying to describe the indeterminacy of arousal, despite the shortcut being an inaccurate representation of arousal and genital response.

However, as outlined by Nagoski, genital response is not necessarily indicative of sexual arousal (202). For men, there’s an approximate 50 per cent overlap between genital response and their subjective arousal, which is a significant correlation (Nagoski 193). This means that when a man identifies something as sexually relevant, there’s a one in two chance he *also* finds it sexually appealing. For women, however, there’s about a 10 per cent overlap between genital response and sexual arousal, indicating that there’s no predictive relationship between how aroused she is and how her genitals respond (Nagoski 194). When there is an overlap between genital response (‘expecting’) and subjective arousal (‘enjoying’), there is arousal *concordance*. When these things do not overlap (which, according to Nagoski, is common for women), a person is experiencing arousal *nonconcordance*.



This information surprised me. In the romance novels I'd read, when a FMC was aroused it was also highly likely it would mention how wet she was. I had, because of my ravenous reading of romance novels, formed an association between arousal and wetness. If a woman is aroused, they must be wet; if they are wet, they must be aroused. Wetness, Nagoski was telling me, is not necessarily typical or indicative of female sexual arousal, and yet I—and, I'm sure, other romance readers like myself—had come to believe it was.

Both Nagoski and Angel use an example from the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James to present the myth surrounding arousal concordance (Nagoski 208; Angel 70). Anastasia is being spanked by Christian, an experience in which she describes feeling “demeaned, debased, and abused” (James 164), screaming in pain and screwing up her face. However, Christian places his fingers inside Anastasia and claims “[her] body *likes this*” (my emphasis) (James 249). Despite not enjoying the scenario, Anastasia's genital response is, supposedly, a marker of her true pleasure (Angel 70), and that the experience is sexually appealing (despite the nonconcordance between her genital response and arousal), instead of simply being sexually relevant (Nagoski 208). Women—like Anastasia—are supposedly “disconnected from, or dishonest about, the truth that their bodies ‘scream’ out” (Angel 84). Their wetness is not simply a sign of being in a sexually relevant environment but a supposed greater representation of their desire.

In Christina Lauren's *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, there is a scene eerily reminiscent of the spanking scene in *50 Shades of Grey*. Harlow, the FMC, is being spanked by Finn, the MMC. Finn asks Harlow if she “want[s] this,” to which she replies with a nod and a stuttered “Y-yes” (189). The chapter is written from the MMC's point of view, so unlike the insight there is on Anastasia's (lack of) desire to be spanked, there is no mention of Harlow's desire to be spanked beyond, maybe, a lack of refusal for the act. Finn, however, makes the declaration that “[she] do[es] like it” as his “fingers push in alongside hers” and he feels the “slick skin” of her supposed arousal (Lauren 191). Harlow's genital response is posited as being arousal concordant and reflective of her greater desire for spanking, rather than the result of being in a sexually relevant scenario.

In *Beautiful Bastard*, another erotic romance by Christina Lauren, there is often a comparison made between the FMC's genital response and her arousal. Chloe, the FMC, questions how she “could let her body react like this?” (referring to the “heavy ache between [her] legs”) (Lauren 22) when she is engaging in sexual activity with Bennett, the MMC, a man who she “[despises]” in a “singularly sharp way” (Lauren 22). Chloe's genital response is attributed the same value as her subjective arousal, her body supposedly screaming out the truth

of her desire. Later in the novel, Chloe declares she is “*not* [Bennett’s]” to which he says her “body (...) thinks otherwise” because of the “damp lace between her legs” (Lauren 158). Despite Chloe’s resistance to Bennett—“struggl[ing] weakly in [his] grip” (Lauren 158)—it’s assumed that she is being dishonest about her arousal because her genitals have responded to being in a sexually relevant scenario. Does Chloe truly lack authority of her body—and what it supposedly desires—or is she just experiencing a form of arousal nonconcordance?

Romance protagonists tend to sit on the end of the arousal concordance spectrum where they can be “wet down [their] thighs” (Lauren, *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, 153) when, and because, they’re aroused. There is little consideration given to the fact that women vary largely in terms of the amount of natural lubrication they can produce (Mintz 140). There tends to be an emphasis on arousal *concordance*, with arousal *nonconcordance* being uncharacteristic of the genre.

Arousal is not measured or understood by a matter of communication in romances—“This feels good,” “I’m turned on”—but rather by descriptions of genital response which act as proxy for subjective feelings of arousal for the FMC. In *The Mistake*, when Grace, the FMC, is described as “soaking wet” and “slick” (Kennedy 52) from the moment Logan, the MMC, goes down on her, it is assumed this is because she is aroused. In *The Deal*, the FMC, Hannah, is described as being “so wet” when Garrett, the MMC, “[slides] a finger lower to tease the moisture pooling in [Hannah’s] core” (Kennedy 211); there is no other description of Hannah’s supposed arousal but the lubrication she’s naturally producing. In *Beautiful Stranger*, the MMC, Max, constantly makes remarks about how “fucking wet” (Lauren 85) the FMC, Sara, is; he wants to “feel how wet [she] [is]” (Lauren 85) or feel “[her] wet on [his] fingers” (Lauren 528), as though it is representative of how much she desires to be in the sexual situation, and not “simply a [physiological] response” (Nagoski 204).

Relying on physiological descriptions might simply be an easier way for romance authors to signal to the reader that the FMC is aroused. Even I, in the writing of my own novel, noticed how easy it was to use a quote like “you’re so wet” to describe the indeterminate excitement of arousal. However, simply because it is easier use these physiological descriptions in proxy for subjective arousal does not mean it is a helpful or accurate thing to do. By taking this shortcut, I and other authors unintentionally provide readers with an inaccurate representation of sex that is rarely reflective of women’s regular sexual experiences.

An emphasis on arousal concordance in romance novels, like the orgasmic-penetration fantasy, fulfils an idealised version of patriarchal sex—the reparative fantasy—where genital response always occurs just as frequently as men when a romance FMC is aroused. There is

little pain from intercourse because she is always spontaneously wet; there is no need to reach for personal lubricants or take part in ‘foreplay’ to generate arousal because she is physiologically capable of producing enough natural lubricant. The FMC, like with intercourse, has conquered the patriarchal inequalities of sex by being just as arousal concordant as a man.

Henry, across her novels, does not emphasise wetness as an indicator of arousal. Rather, her descriptions of arousal are metaphoric, likening her FMCs arousal to “feel[ing] lightweight, [and] helium-filled” (*Funny Story* 292) or her insides being “violin-string taut” (*Book Lovers* 304) or that “heat race[s] down [her] like flames on a streak of gasoline” (*Beach Read* 242). Omitting descriptions of genital response does not leave open the question of the FMCs’ arousal, but rather likens arousal to subjective feeling as opposed to a physiological response. If anything, the metaphorizing of arousal is more largely representative of the FMCs desire, linking her subjective feelings of arousal to the “great context” (Nagoski 226) she is experiencing arousal in.

By moving beyond the expectation of arousal concordance being conditional for good sex, and genital response being synonymous with arousal, romance can act as a site for more varied representations of arousal. Metaphorizing, like Henry does, is one way that descriptions of genital response are no longer relied on to reflect a FMCs subjective arousal. We might also see the inclusion of personal lubricants in sex scenes, which is comparable to how Henry, as mentioned in the *Shameless* podcast (Goonetillake 12:12), makes sure her characters always find a condom. She does this in the hope of “creating a world that is our world but a *tiny* bit better” in respect to sexual health and pleasure. This fantasy world might take the pressure away from women to experience a genital response when aroused, and include, as both Mintz and Nagoski suggest, a personal lubricant.

Rather than be a fantasy space where arousal is always concordant, romance can be an aspirational site for a range of arousal contexts, showing desire that is not only spontaneous and physiological, but responsive and specific to each FMC.

#### Size: “How do you walk with that thing?” and “You’re so tight”

When Hannah, the FMC of Elle Kennedy’s *The Deal*, first “encounters” the MMCs penis, she exclaims, “are you *kidding* me?” (Kennedy 212). Supposedly, the size of Garrett’s penis is so large he must be “taking human growth hormones or something,” and leads to Hannah coining his genitals a “huge man monster” (Kennedy 212). The size of his penis is supposedly

inconducive to Hannah's "narrow" "lady canal" and will "rip [her] in half" (Kennedy 212). In *The Score*, the MMC Dean constantly thinks about "the tight grip of [the FMC, Allie's] pussy" (Kennedy 4), or texts Allie about her "tight pussy" (Kennedy 110) or tells Allie that he wants her "tight pussy squeezing the hell out of [his cock]" (Kennedy 134) or refers to her vaginal canal as a "tight sheath" (Kennedy 136). These size-related comments are almost synonymous with the romance genre nowadays. If the MMC doesn't think, exclaim, or groan about the FMC's tight pussy, and the FMC doesn't—at least—hint at the MMC's huge dick, is it even a smutty sex scene?

Romances such as *The Deal* and *The Score* perpetrate the myth that good sex is dependent upon size for success. Penises are big. Vaginas are tight. These things fit perfectly together, and greater sense of pleasure, despite their diametrically opposed sizing. Placing an emphasis on the size—or lack thereof—of a main character's genitals inaccurately tells the reader: pleasure is not only dependent on your partner's physiology, but also on your own.

The cultural messaging that surrounds a woman's tightness—that you can 'loosen' over time, that pain occurs during a woman's first experience of penetration because she's not familiar with the sensation, that some women have tighter vaginal canals than others—is yet another consequence of a lack of understanding surrounding the female sexual response.

When a woman isn't aroused, the walls of the vagina "lie flat against each other" (Mintz 57) (likely, if penetrated, to feel 'tight'); when she is aroused the vagina (1) lubricates ('gets wet') and (2) changes size and shape (Mintz 140), where the vagina itself 'tents' around the cervix and opens and widens deep inside the body (Nagoski 44). Tightness, like our MMCs like to emphasise, is not something that is characteristic of some women and not of others (unless one suffers from vaginismus, which is a chronic tension of the pelvic floor muscles (Nagoski 321)). Rather, it's something that happens during orgasm because the Kegel muscle is contracting (Nagoski 44), or potentially because the tenting of the vagina narrows the vaginal opening (not the entire canal) (Mintz 57).

As explored in the previous section, our romance FMCs are perpetually wet, and this wetness is usually because they're aroused. However, if they're aroused, why would their vaginal canal be likened to a "tight sheath"<sup>††</sup> (Kennedy 136)? Why is it we want our FMCs to be aroused enough that they produce an inordinate amount of natural lubrication, but still maintain their 'tightness'?

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<sup>††</sup>I don't intend to contradict myself from the previous section on arousal concordance and equate lubrication with arousal. Arousal is not the same as lubrication, as Mintz points out, and women can vary in terms of the amount of natural lubrication they produce (140).

One of the contributors to our cultural ideas of ‘tightness’ is the misinformation surrounding a supposed marker of (female) virginity: the hymen. It’s largely assumed—by myself, too, until reading Nagoski’s book—that the hymen breaks (from riding a bike, or a horse, or by penetration) and then stays broken forever (28). However, Nagoski outlines that the hymen is not “like some kind of freshness seal” (28) but is actually a “membrane along the lower edge of [the] vaginal opening” (27) that if broken, heals (28), and can cause *some* pain, if not used to being stretched or atrophied from the hormonal changes women experience at the end of adolescence (around 25). The ‘pain’ we commonly associate with first penis-in-vagina sex isn’t because the hymen is ‘breaking’, but more likely because of a lack of lubrication (Nagoski 27-28).

The only (female) virgin across the sample of books by Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren was the FMC in Kennedy’s *The Mistake*, Grace, who describes herself as “still having an intact hymen” (Kennedy 7). Throughout the FMC’s first sexual experience, ‘tightness’ is not something used to describe her vagina; pain, however, is. When Logan, the MMC, “[plunges] deep,” Grace describes feeling a “jolt of pain,” despite being described as “so fucking wet” (producing a large amount of natural lubrication) (Kennedy 241). If adhering to cultural narratives surrounding intercourse, we would assume the “pain” Grace is experiencing is because the “resistance” (hymen) (Kennedy 241) Logan meets when first penetrates Grace. However, *pain* in intercourse is, as Nagoski exposes, something characteristic of a lack of lubrication, not because the hymen is ‘breaking’ (28). If Grace is “so fucking wet” (Kennedy 241), it seems unnecessary that her first vaginal penetration be characterised by pain simply because it has become conditional of first-time intercourse for women.

Though not ‘virgins’ per se, many of Hazelwood’s FMC are characterised as being sexually inexperienced. Olive, the FMC of *The Love Hypothesis*, has only had sex “a couple of times” (Hazelwood 266); the MMC, Adam, describes her as being “basically a vir[gin]” (Hazelwood 267). This conversation of Olive’s sexual experience follows a fingering scene where, despite the fact that Olive is described as “glistening, swollen and plump to her own eyes” (Hazelwood 265) with lubrication (and, in this case, concordant arousal), is described as causing “a pinching ache” (Hazelwood 265) that makes her “[wince]” (Hazelwood 266) when Adam tries to push his “big fingers” (Hazelwood 265) in further. When Bee, the FMC of *Love on the Brain* who hasn’t had intercourse in “a while” (Hazelwood 238), first “[eases] [Levi’s] cock into [her] body,” she describes the sensation as being “half pleasure and half pain” (Hazelwood 239). Either because Bee is “so tight” (Hazelwood 240), or because Levi is “so

big” (Hazelwood 239), Bee “strain[s] to fill [her]self with him,” and her trying to be filled “to the hilt” (Hazelwood 239) causes a “sting of pain” (Hazelwood 239). Is Olive’s and Bee’s discomfort reflective of their lack of sexual experience? Are they not yet used to being ‘stretched’? Or is it to reflect how “small and tight” they are (Hazelwood, *The Love Hypothesis*, 272), with a vaginal canal “not loose enough” (Hazelwood, *The Love Hypothesis*, 273) to not experience discomfort when being vaginally penetrated?

The trouble that Hazelwood’s FMCs experience in trying to be penetrated is not simply because of sexual inexperience, or because they’re so small, but likely also because of Hazelwood’s commitment to writing her MMCs with atypically large penises. When Levi is first inside Bee, she stutters that he is “*really big*” (Hazelwood, *Love on the Brain*, 24); when Adam is “push[ing] against every part of [Olive],” she exclaims that he’s “so big” (Hazelwood, *The Love Hypothesis*, 273); when Elsie first sees Jonathan’s penis, she does a double take and asks if it “get[s] in the way” (Hazelwood, *Love, Theoretically*, 290). Hazelwood’s recurring sequence of (1) a sexually inexperienced FMC having sex with (2) a well-endowed MMC who ensures the FMC she “can take it” (*The Love Hypothesis* 273) or that she’ll “get used to [his size]” (*Love on the Brain* 240) that leads to (3) discomfort for the FMC, and an emphasis on her ‘smallness’, repeatedly reproduces myths of pleasure for the reader where good sex is dependent upon the size of the ‘tool’ and not how the characters use it.

An emphasis on size in romance novels—of his largeness, and her smallness—is indicative of greater gender norms of masculinity and femininity. The “too big” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 235), “so big” (Hazelwood, *Love on the Brain*, 273), “*really big*” (Hazelwood, *Love on the Brain*, 24) penises of a MMC fulfil a patriarchal masculine ideal, a physical manifestation of his strength and dominance. The “small and tight” (Hazelwood, *The Love Hypothesis*, 272) vaginas of the FMCs fulfil a patriarchal ideal of femininity, in which women are “tiny and girlish” (Faludi 92) and their vaginas are a physical extension of their expectation to be submissive.

There is, according to Eaton, an “erotic appeal” to aspects of gender inequality, with signs of dominance and strength in men and softness and submissiveness in women serving as “markers of sexiness” (678). Eroticising norms of gender inequality, Eaton outlines in reference to inequality porn, is a particularly effective method for promoting and sustaining it (679). Hazelwood’s frequent representations of the ‘big’ man and the ‘small’ woman in an eroticised romance format renders these markers of inequality “not just tolerable and easy to accept, but also desirable and highly enjoyable” (Eaton 679).

If romance novelists like Hazelwood moved away from eroticising a difference in size, the greater dichotomies of male and female, of dominant and submissive (Segal; Angel 109), would be less prominent. The sex scenes in Henry's novels are an example of how omitting descriptions of penis size or vaginal tightness can create a more egalitarian representation of sex. In *Beach Read*, when the MMC, Gus, first pushes his briefs down, there isn't a gasp from January, the FMC, or a question about if it gets in the way, but rather a claim that "it [is] almost too much feeling him against [herself]" (Henry 248). Pleasure remains no matter the size of Gus's penis; rather, pleasure exists *because* it is Gus that January is sharing pleasure with. Size is an irrelevant factor in this sexual scenario. When Gus first penetrates January, "*everything* [my emphasis] in [January] pulls taught around him" (Henry 248). Rather than a tightness being experienced exclusively in her vagina, the FMC's entire bodily reaction is described. Her pleasure is not limited to, or defined by, her vagina's capacity for penetration. Each Emily Henry MMC "[pushes] into" (*Book Lovers* 305) or "[pushes] slowly into" (*Funny Story* 294) the FMC without the need to describe how endowed he is; it is largely a non-event when the MMC's pants come down and the FMC sees or feels his penis for the first time, more preoccupied with "taking in every firm curve and hard line" (*Book Lovers* 304). Like Henry, I want the descriptions of sex in my novel to not be dependent on descriptions of genital size, and rather decent size as conducive to pleasure. By refraining from size-related descriptions, the mutuality I strive to represent in sex will be made more achievable, with no big dicks or tight vaginas acting symbols of patriarchal gender norms.

### In Practice

Many common patriarchal misconceptions about women's sexual experience of penetration, arousal and size are, more often than not, reinforced in romance novels. It was important to me that my novel *To Paris, with Love*, not follow these inaccuracies, but rather build on the examples of authors (such as Henry) on how to depict great sex. However, I quickly found that my good intentions were not so easy to put into practice. The sex scenes were some of the most difficult sections of my novel to write. I often forgot if Freya, the FMC, had taken off her bra yet; I wondered if Théo, the MMC, really could throw Freya down onto her back from a seated position (199). Each action my characters engaged in was second-guessed: does she need a moment to adjust to the penetration, or should I just have them get on with it? Are they moving positions too often? Should she orgasm during penetration, or after, like Elsie in Hazelwood's

*Love Theoretically?* I wanted to deliver sex scenes that weren't just egalitarian, but gave me the same giddy, warm feeling I got—and often *expected*—of sex scenes in my favourite romance novels.

In pursuit of this affect, my writing doesn't largely deviate from the sexual script Ménard & Cabrera suggest is typical of romance novels. It follows the “correct order,” from “kissing and touching one another above the waist” before engaging in my explicit behaviours like “manual sex, oral sex or intercourse” later in the novel (248). My characters kiss in chapter ten (79) before they engage in oral sex in chapter thirteen (98) and fourteen (105) and then have intercourse in chapter eighteen (142).

It would have been easy, alongside the normative sequence of sexual activity, to also slip into the tropes expected of a romance novel sex scene: hardness, wetness, simultaneous penetrative orgasms, big dicks and tight vaginas. It likely would have made writing the sex scenes much more straight forward, and familiar. However, it was in the detail of the sex scenes themselves where I knew the misconceptions and cultural myths surrounding sex would be most effectively challenged.

The first sex scene in my novel—specifically, the first “intimate physical contact for pleasure” (Hite 365)—is a scene of oral sex, where Théo, my MMC, goes down on Freya, my FMC. It was important to me that this scene not exist as a stopgap or prelude to intercourse. Rather, it exists as an act of sex itself, without reference to clitoral stimulation as a “worse approximation of his cock” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 253). Théo “give[s] [pleasure] enthusiastically right to [Freya]” (98) without intercourse, or any form of penetration. The orgasm that “[rolls] steadily through [Freya]” (99) comes exclusively from “a consistent pressure against the most sensitive part of [Freya]” (her clitoris) (98).

Unlike in Kennedy's and Henry's novels, where ‘sex’ is often used synonymously with intercourse, I wanted to create a distinct moment of definition in my novel, where any act of “intimate physical contact for pleasure” (Hite 365) was sex. In the chapter following the scene of oral sex, Théo and Freya have a simulated conversation, in which Théo is pretending to be a friend of Freya's. Freya, while talking to her ‘friend’, says “Théo and I had sex for the first time last night. Well, close to sex,” unsure whether she could refer to oral stimulation as ‘sex’. The conversation then questions this definition:

‘What do you mean “close to sex”?’ [Théo said.]

‘He went down on me.’ I put my hand-phone down, and said to Théo,

‘Quinn would say penetration isn't need for sex to be sex. Just FYI.’



He covered the finger-receiver of his phone—like there really was someone on the other end of the line who might hear him—and whispered, ‘Of course.’

He cleared his throat. ‘That is sex, no? Penetration is not needed for sex to be sex.’

‘You’re so right. Penetration isn’t the end-all-be-all. It’s so male-centric, right? To think their dick going somewhere is how sex is defined?’

‘I think if all a man wants to do it penetrate a woman, then he is not very good at sex,’ Théo (*definitely* Théo) said (171-172).

Though speaking by proxy of Quinn, Freya’s friend, the conversation between Théo and Freya creates a clear definition of their sexual encounter: it was sex, despite no intercourse occurring. I wanted to ensure that Théo wasn’t just prompted to say “penetration is not needed for sex to be sex” (172), and so had him repeat the sentiment in a similar way (“I think if all a man wants to do it penetrate a woman, then he is not very good at sex” (172)) with a specific emphasis from Freya that it was “*definitely* Théo” (172) saying such a thing. Dialogue acted as an effective tool to have discussions around intercourse that asserted my belief, and the research’s reality, that sex is not limited to, or defined by, vaginal penetration, while keeping to the light-hearted, comedic tone typical of romcoms.

Despite establishing that ‘sex’ is not synonymous with intercourse, in an initial draft of my novel I found myself using the word ‘foreplay’ and separating acts of oral and manual clitoral stimulation from intercourse. In the lead up to intercourse, I had written that Freya described the sexual activity as “competent foreplay,” unintentionally marking a distinction between the oral (197-198) and manual (198) stimulation Freya receives with the subsequent vaginal penetration (199). I didn’t want to continue to perpetrate the idea ‘sex’ centres around a man’s most reliable route to orgasm (intercourse). I changed the line to “This was the Olympics of intimacy” (198), removing the idea of foreplay entirely. The characters, then, weren’t in a prelude to sex, where Théo’s “mouth slid[ing] hot, heavy and messy all over [Freya’s vulva]” (198) is simply an exercise Théo needs to go through to get Freya ready for intercourse (Mintz 21).

I knew the sex acts in my novel would not only include oral or manual clitoral sexual stimulation. I knew I was working towards a scene inclusive of intercourse; I didn’t want to avoid it. Romance novelists likely rely on penetrative sex scenes because it’s a convenient way to show that by the characters being physically close—literally *inside* one another—the couple are now emotionally close. Especially when we consider the placement of intercourse scenes

in the sequence of a novel's structure—it does usually happen later in the novel (Ménard & Cabrera 248) when the couple's emotional intimacy is at its (ironic) climax.

I, personally, found this phenomenon to be true. The intercourse scene in my novel happens as Freya and Théo's relationship has become more emotionally intimate—Théo has admitted his inability to paint, Freya has been honest about her hatred for studying law—and subsequently they have intercourse for the first time. This was an inevitable series of events when I was writing my novel, almost out of my control: the intercourse *must* come next. Because if not next, when? Was the intercourse only made possible because of this emotional intimacy? Could I have placed it earlier in the novel, when honesty and trust hadn't been established? I'm not sure.

Penetration is, as explored previously, a reliable mode of orgasm for men (Mintz 14; Nagoski 275). However, in this inevitable writing of penetrative sex, it was important that Freya not experience pleasure singularly from penetration, and rather couple it with clitoral stimulation, as 43% of women's most common route to orgasm is intercourse plus clitoral stimulation (Mintz 12). External stimulation (clitoral stimulation for Freya) would be equally as important as internal stimulation (intercourse for Théo).

It would have been easier to write a sex scene where pleasure was singularly achieved from intercourse, with some inadvertent friction from thrusting. Often, working out the logistics of how clitoral stimulation would happen while intercourse was occurring was confusing. Could Théo position his hand on Freya's? Would the rolling of Freya's hips get in the way of her own hand? However, it was of paramount importance that I found space for it in my prose. And if including it in my prose, that I did not shy away from the use of the word 'clit[oris]' to describe the anatomy where women experience a large amount of pleasure. While I do still use—for the sake of variability in my writing—phrases like her “core” (168) and the “most sensitive part of [her]” (169), I made the conscious effort to include the word ‘clit’ (usually not ‘clitoris,’ because it felt too formal). It is unforgiving in its obviousness: it is the clitoris being stimulated, and not, mistakenly, a non-specific part of her “core” or that spot at the apex of her thighs. Théo “reach[es] down and [circles] a deft finger around [Freya's] clit” while “roll[ing] his hips into and against [her]” (199); Freya “[slips] [her] hand between [herself and Théo] to [her] clit and [starts] rubbing” while Théo “[clutches] at her hips, rutting them back and forth to set a rougher, more tireless rhythm” (200). These sentence-level changes reflect a more egalitarian representation of sex where while intercourse is occurring clitoral stimulation is held at equal importance.

Alongside the representations of clitoral stimulation and vaginal penetration is the question of arousal. How do these things make my protagonist feel? How do I communicate that she is aroused? A description of genital response could act easily as shorthand for arousal. Freya could be so turned-on that wetness pooled between her legs, or made her slick with want, and this would then communicate her arousal. Her physiological response would do the hard work of showing my characters *feeling* for me. However, resorting to this kind of description felt inaccurate to the reality of arousal concordance for women (and a lot like a caption of a video on one of many porn websites). Freya could be wet, but that didn't mean she was aroused; she could be aroused, but not necessarily wet (or producing some large amount of natural lubrication). I didn't want her arousal dependant on a bodily response which may not be reflective of her subjective desire.

I keep to the same figurative descriptions characteristic of Henry's work to describe Freya's subjective arousal. As Théo "[plays] with the red lace of [Freya's] underwear," "warmth twinkles in [her] belly like flashing fairy lights" (167); when Théo starts to undress, "a shiver [ran] down [Freya's] near naked body" (195); after she pulls his jeans down, she describes herself as "dizzy with desire" (196); as Théo touches Freya's clitoris "lazily under the pad of his finger," Freya likens the feeling to a "light switch that only [turns] on and on and *on*" (198).

There is a moment where I falter and resort to saying Freya's "arousal [is] right in front of [Théo's] face" (168) just before he goes down on her. It was an easy way to suggest my FMC was turned on. I did try to adapt this sentence—remove it, even, to not resort to bad habits—but I felt it worked effectively in the scene, and the vulnerability of sitting on top of someone's face. The assumption in this sexual scenario, then, is that Freya is experiencing arousal concordance. Her genital response is predictive that she is aroused, and it is that 10% chance of overlap between the two.

Finally, I was determined to avoid clichés around genital size, and because of this, I don't mention the size of Théo or Freya's anatomy. This was an unnecessary element of their ability to have a pleasurable sexual experience. Théo does not exclaim how 'tight' Freya is when he's inside her, despite—maybe—a "[groan]" when Freya squeezes her pelvic floor muscles (199). When Freya removes Théo's underwear, Théo's penis is simply referred to as "his length" (199), rather than creating a moment where the FMCs "jaw drops" the "second [she] encounter[s] his erection" (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 212).

There are no descriptions of the 'tightness' of Freya's vaginal canal in the final version of my novel. However, in an initial draft of Freya and Théo's first time having intercourse (around page 199), I attempted to write to the fact that the hymen grows more flexible when "regularly

stretched,” (Nagoski 28) and therefore vaginal penetration is less painful. I had originally wanted Freya to find first being penetrated by Théo somewhat uncomfortable. This would be because she hadn’t had sex in a while, and, at twenty-two, had not yet experienced the atrophy of her hymen so it’s less noticeable (Nagoski 28). To do this, I wrote:

It was a little uncomfortable at first. It had been a while; I masturbated with an external vibrator; the only thing that had been up there recently was a tampon.

In drafting my novel, however, I felt this either (a) assumed Freya wasn’t aroused enough and her vagina hadn’t lubricated and ‘tented’ around the cervix (b) continued to perpetrate the narrative that a hymen plays an important role during penetration or (c) implied that Théo had some enormous penis, and it was therefore “uncomfortable” for Freya. Rather than challenging misconceptions surrounding tightness, I would be continuing them, and therefore decided it would be best to remove the section entirely.

As the exploration of my practice shows, it is tricky to break ground and change how the romance genre has written sex. However, it is also important. The romance genre has acted as a “prime site of imaginative solace” (McCann & Roach 421) for me to navigate the misconceptions surrounding sex. Through Freya and Théo (and the dialogue between friends), my book creates images of what is possible in sex: intercourse that also includes clitoral stimulation; pleasurable sex that isn’t reliant on a big dick; arousal that is not concordant to genital response; and sexual encounters that are not defined by vaginal penetration. My representations of sex are an extension of the writings of Nagoski and Mintz, hoping to inhabit my role as a “sexual advocate” (McCann & Roach 422) to create one narrative—Freya’s narrative—that is considerate of the female experience of pleasure, and makes room for other authors—or myself in later romance writing endeavours—to move beyond the patriarchal limitations of certain sex acts.

## Chapter 2: Sexual Subjectification and the Naked Woman

Taking on, as I have, the writing of a female main character in a romantic and sexual context in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means considering what, exactly, femininity looks like. I needed to understand how contemporary feminism could, and would, be reproduced in my own imagined narrative context. In this millennium, feminism has been characterised by a mainstreaming of sexual explicitness for women (Evans et al. 114). Contemporary femininity, as outlined by Evans et al., centres around “a neo-liberal rhetoric of agency, choice and self-determination” (115) in which women are “sexually savvy and active” (115) and construct their femininity around a “more active, confident, auto-erotic sexuality” (115). This characterisation of the sexually liberated woman is familiar, and it would be easy for me to be complacent with, and leave unquestioned, as it aligns entirely with the heroines I grew up reading in romance. I could write, without question, reproductions of the sexually savvy Harlow from *Dirty Rowdy Thing* or the self-assured Rue in *Not in Love*, and create yet another neo-liberal, agentic, self-determined FMC. However, I did not want to resort to writing this kind of FMC simply because she is easy to relate to and familiar. Rather, I wanted to take the opportunity of a novel, and the representations it can give, to ask what femininity might, and could, be to me.

Ariel Levy, in her 2006 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, outlines that the “new feminism” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to simply mirror that of the “old objectification of women” (88), with the “stereotypes of female sexuality that feminism endeavoured to banish” instead being “resurrected” in a postfeminist society (Levy 19). As autonomous agents “no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances” women actively choose to objectify themselves (Gill, *From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification*, 104). This ‘choice’—“to display a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency” (Gill, *Critical Respect*, 72)—is “presented as not something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (Gill, *From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification*, 104). Romcoms written in modern times, about modern times, expectantly reflect this ideology in their depictions of womanhood. The modern FMC is wrapped up and presented to the reader as a confident, assertive woman who exists in an ideal narrative microcosm of contemporary feminism where female agency is tethered (someone tightly) to their sexuality.

A ‘technology of sexiness’, as Gill coins it in her article *Critical Respect*, has “come to replace ‘virtue’ and ‘innocence’ as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace” (72). This sentiment applies perfectly to romance: where

romances of the seventies saw the demure virgin dominate the pages (Ostrov Weissner 132), romances of the new millennium have replaced her with the sexually savvy heroine who says things like “I’m probably going to fuck him tonight” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 47). In a culture where “sexualised self-presentation has become a normative requirement for many young women” (Gill, *Critical Respect*, 72), not knowing or stating her desires, as Katherine Angel surmises in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, makes her “effectively guilty of her own repression” (92). Why would romance authors write the outdated, sexually inexperienced FMC of feminisms-gone-by when they could write the kind of woman who knows her desires intimately, and ensures others do, too?

Evans et al. outline the importance of feminist academics—like myself— “critically engaging in the cultural context in which women make (...) choices and not assume that participants can behave as if apart from their cultural context” (117). Even if I find the effect of cultural context on sexuality and womanhood difficult to grasp, I don’t want to shy away from ideas of sexual subjectification and self-policing gazes simply because they’re complex to me and unequivocal sexual liberation is the context I am most familiar with. I want to know how my cultural context might influence my writing of my main female character(s). Romance FMCs exist in an imagined narrative context, usually influenced by the political ideologies of the authors and/or the popular discourses at the time of publication. Elle Kennedy’s *Off Campus* and *Briar U* romance series are set in American colleges where hook ups are the norm and ‘puck bunnies’ chase after hockey players; Ali Hazelwood’s books typically take place in academic STEM environments where the FMCs are fighting for a chance to be taken seriously by their male colleagues; Christina Lauren’s *Wild Seasons* series has FMCs who have guilt-free, pleasurable one-night-stands. How, then, has the active, confident, and autoerotic feminine sexuality (Evans et al. 126) typical of twenty first century feminism influenced not only the representation of FMCs sexuality, but of their selfhood?

### Object or Subject?

In 2003, when I was a mere three-year-old, Rosalind Gill wrote an article titled ‘From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification’. In the article, Gill interrogates how women’s bodies are being (re)sexualised in the media, with a shift, as the title suggests, “from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification” (103). Twenty or so years later, reading this article after approximately ten years of being a capital-F Feminist, the ideas are just as relevant as they

were when I was a toddler. Contemporary representations of women in popular culture *still* depict women as “knowing, active desiring sexual subjects” instead of “passive objects” (Gill 103), and these were the kinds of representations I grew up consuming. I’ve known nothing else.

As I was told by shows like *Gossip Girl* and popstars like Miley Cyrus (see the ‘Wrecking Ball’ music video that debuted when I was thirteen), sexual objectification is no longer being “done to women by some men” (Gill 104) and is rather now “the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects” (Gill 104). Gill calls this a shift from an “external male judging gaze” to a “self-policing narcissistic gaze” where women are supposedly endowed “with the status of active subjecthood so that they can ‘choose’ to become sex objects” (104). These representations of women, all so heavily tied to their sexuality, were seemingly empowering, if not *actually* empowering—for them, for me.

Alongside my pop culture references in the form of TV shows and music, were romance novels. The self-beautifying subject (McRobbie 11) is present in many of my favourite contemporary romcoms. The FMC of *Beautiful Stranger* is a “fucking stellar lay” (246) who heads up the Finance department at a big marketing firm (21) while still dressing like she’s “stepped right out of some sixties photoshoot” (76). The FMC of *Beautiful Secret* is one of the few interns chosen to work at one of the largest and most successful engineering firms in Europe (18) who wears red lipstick to work (440) and touches herself in front of the MMC while guiding him through a sexual fantasy (230-244).

Harlow, the FMC of Christina Lauren’s *Dirty, Rowdy Thing* is one example of the 21<sup>st</sup> feminist caricature of a woman empowered by her active subjecthood. Thanks to the wins of feminism (McCann & Roach 415), Harlow is not subjected to a sexual double standard. Rather, her gung-ho enthusiasm about sex is a marker of success, pride and power (Angel 34). She’s a “confident sex goddess” her best friend Mia wants to “channel” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 281). Endearingly coined “Whorelow” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy* 164, 167, 168) and “so slutty” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 29) by her closest friends, Harlow says so many provocative things her friends tell her to put money in a “Whore Jar” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 167). Like the ‘Phallic Girl’ theorised by McRobbie, who can “drink beer in excess, dance in a wildly sexual fashion, vomit on the street after a night’s debauchery and stagger home to sleep it off” (11), Harlow “looks classy” even “after chugging a beer with a shot in it” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 48) and, according to her love interest, looks “goddamn” good (Lauren, *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, 219) while dancing with her “hands in the air, [and] bouncing to the beat” (Lauren, *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, 218). While maintaining a feminine form, Harlow, as McRobbie phrases it,

“mimics male power seemingly with impunity” (11) and is able to be just as lustful and vocal about her sexuality as men (Angel 103).

Harlow was a formative, inspiring, and empowering representation of a woman for me in my teenage years, as were the other FMCs in Christina Lauren’s *Beautiful* and *Wild Seasons* books series. I wanted to be Chloe in *Beautiful Bastard*, Sara in *Beautiful Stranger*, Mia in *Sweet Filthy Boy*, Harlow in *Dirty Rowdy Thing*. They’re women who navigate their sexuality under patriarchy, and use it to experience pleasure, and create autonomous lives for themselves, without compromising on decidedly ‘feminine’ attributes. In making themselves the subject, they understand their physical body as a source of potential control, and this gives them a tangible way to exert power (Tolentino 81). To a young Georgia who was beginning to understand the implications of patriarchy, the purposeful subjecthood of these FMCs seemed liberatory.

In reading Gill alongside my beloved contemporary romance novels, I wondered what the difference was, exactly, between the autonomous women who “choose to fling” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 120) and “[have] a thing for expensive lingerie” (Lauren, *Beautiful Bastard*, 56) and the women described from the MMCs point of views as having “great racks” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 12) and “damn sexy ass[es]” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 8) who are objected to a sexualised male gaze. It seemed as though being the subject did not necessarily remove the possibility of being an object. Women in these romance novels declare their desire noisily and defiantly (Angel 34) and don’t seek approval for their “freely chosen look” (Evans et al. 116), but still conform their appearance and desire to narrowly defined standards of attractiveness that, coincidentally, enhance the exact attributes that men consider appealing.

The difference, many scholars argue, is a characterizable postfeminist “self-[regulating] through a vocabulary of choice” (McRobbie, *Notes on the Perfect*, 11), where there is an emphasis on the individual lifestyle choices and personal pleasures, adopted predominantly by young women (Braithwaite 338). As long as romance authors communicate, explicitly or implicitly, that their FMCs behaviours are out of personal preference and self-motivation, detached entirely from any male influence, any choice they make is now proof of feminism’s success (Maguire 5). When Allie, the FMC of Kennedy’s *The Score*, waxes her genitalia so she’s “as bare as a baby’s bottom” (126), it’s a choice; when Darryl, a minor female character in *Dating You, Hating You* by Christina Lauren, gets “something else done to [her] face” (4) (referring to cosmetic procedures like Botox or filler), the FMC makes sure to disclaim that Darryl is “doing it because she wants to” (4); when Allie first has sex with Dean, the MMC of *The Score*, it’s “all about satisfying [her] own base urges” (Kennedy 65) and not, in any



capacity, the result of Dean constantly asking her to make out (Kennedy 23) or if she wants to receive oral sex (Kennedy 23). By authors justifying their character choices through a vocabulary of choice, the FMCs are supposedly becoming more powerful with every wax-strip, millilitre of Botox or filler, and one-night stand<sup>‡‡</sup>.

With, as McRobbie writes, “an over-emphasis on agency and the apparent capacity to choose in a more individualised society” (10), a woman’s sexual behaviour—from beautification rituals to actual sex acts—is isolated from all other aspects of her personality (Maguire 17), with any criticism of women’s choices often being lauded as “unfeminist” (Tolentino 80). Choice has become so synonymous with feminism that it is more important that a minor character in *Dating You, Hating You* disclaim that he “totally approve[s]” of women being “loose-with-[their]-sexual-morals” and believes that “girls should be able to have sex with whomever they want and not be judged” (Lauren 29-30) than questioning why, exactly, “whore” was a justifiable insult to call the MMCs ex-girlfriend. In this regard, a woman’s *choice* to engage in sexual activity (liberally) is respected, but not the image it creates. ‘Whore’ remains an insult, even if the choice to be a whore is respected.

Gill, in her interrogation of female sexual subjectification, identifies how in the desire to respect the choices of girls and women, our choices seem “strangely socially and culturally dislocated,” with “any notion of cultural influence [seeming] to have been evacuated entirely” (*Critical Respect* 73). Choices are, within mainstream feminism, “arrived at autonomously” without consideration to how our “daily exposure to a cultural habitat of images (...) relentlessly [shape] [our] tastes, desires, and what [we] find beautiful” (Gill, *Critical Respect*, 73). Romances novels were my exposure to a cultural habitat of images; they have shaped my tastes and desires (though I’ll abstain from telling you the particulars). I have a responsibility, in choosing to write a romance novel, to think about the things I include among my pages without simply using ‘choice’ as an excuse.

There is, undeniably, more power in making the choice yourself. Making yourself the subject of sexualisation, or the fashion-beauty-complex (Woolf), may, at large, be better than only being an object of it. As Maguire says in *Princesses and Pornstars*:

If society sees you as primarily either a womb or sex object, then it makes sense to be the best womb/sex-object you can. Then you’ll perhaps gain the power/wealth/independence otherwise denied you on the grounds of gender (44).

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<sup>‡‡</sup>This is paraphrased from *Princesses and Pornstars*, with the original quote saying: “Women (...) are becoming powerful with every wax-strip, lap dance, oven-scrub and baby bath” (Maguire 5).

The fact of choice, however, “does not make [an] unjust or exploitative practice or act, somehow, magically, just or nonexploitative” (Tolentino 80). As “autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances, who can somehow choose to ‘use beauty’ [or sexuality] to make themselves feel good” (Gill, *From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification*, 104), women often “do to themselves what they mean to prevent boys from doing to them” (Sessions Step 242) and give visual (or literal) pleasure to men (McRobbie 11) while supposedly doing it for themselves. Just because Allie chooses to wax her vulva bare (Kennedy, *The Score*, 126) does not mean it is not attractive to Dean; just because Allie wants to satisfy herself in sex with Dean does not mean she was uninfluenced by Dean’s begging for them to be intimate (Kennedy, *The Score*, 65).

Several scholars have theorised a specific postfeminist sexual subject. These caricatures of women encapsulate the defining aspects of the mainstream, contemporary feminist, and aptly surmise, I believe, the female characters commonly found in contemporary romance novels. Levy was one of the first people to put a name to the women who “make sex objects of other women and of [them]selves” (18) and, in turn, “deliberately uphold stereotypes assigned to [their] marginalised group in the interest of getting ahead with the dominant group” (111). This archetype of woman is called the ‘Female Chauvinist Pig’ (FCP). As an FCP, a woman:

(...) is postfeminist. She is funny. She *gets it*. She doesn’t mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn’t mind a cartoonishly macho response to them. The FCP asks: Why throw your boyfriend’s *Playboy* in a freedom trash can when you could be partying at the mansion? Why worry about *disgusting* or *degrading* when you could be giving—or getting—a lap dance yourself? Why try to beat them when you can join them? (178)

Gillian Flynn, in her mystery-thriller novel *Gone Girl*, creates a vivid characterisation of the FCP archetype, though she coins her the ‘Cool Girl’:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don’t they? She’s a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving matter and let their men do whatever they way. Go ahead, shit on me, I don’t mind, I’m the Cool Girl (Flynn 250-1)

Choice, for the Cool Girl, does not mean they're "pretending to be the woman they want to be" but rather are "pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be" (Flynn 251).

Elle Kennedy, in her *Off Campus* book series, creates FMCs who embody this FCP/Cool Girl archetype. Her FMCs, as Levy says, "[get] it" (178). Grace, in *The Mistake*, doesn't mind when men describe women as "anything in a skirt" or "puck bunnies" or "a fucking bitch" (Kennedy 210), and even partakes in calling one woman a "bitch" for kissing the MMCs cheek (Kennedy 214); her love of action movies (a stereotypically 'male' genre of entertainment) is, conveniently, also a "major turn on" (Kennedy 72) for Logan, the MMC. Hannah, in *The Deal*, makes, in FCP fashion, sex objects of other women dressed in "sexy" Halloween costumes by calling them "ho-bags" (Kennedy 244) and a woman who has sex with Garrett, the MMC, a "floozy" (Kennedy 128); she uses the word "dude" (Kennedy 218, 260) to refer to Garrett, to which he incidentally explains: "[damn] if [his] dick doesn't tingle when she calls him *dude*" (Kennedy 219). Allie, in the opening chapter of *The Score*, walks in on Dean, the MMC, having a threesome with "two very hot, very naked blonds" who are "suck[ing] each other's tongues in front of [him]" (Kennedy 6), but has that Cool Girl nonchalance, described as "[having] no issue with the fact that there are two naked girls ten feet away," and coolly "[flopping] down on the armchair opposite the couch" (Kennedy 10).

The Cool-Girl-slash-Female-Chauvinist-Pig behaviour that Hannah, Grace and Allie embody separate them from the puck bunnies and floozies Garrett, Logan and Dean usually hook up with. As opposed to being "bad girl[s]" who "smoke weed and dress slutty" (Kennedy 160) and are "obsessed with hooking up" (Kennedy 10)—like Grace's best friend in *The Chase*, Ramona—the FMCs are able to "applaud" "scantly clad girls" for their supposed "bravery" (Kennedy 9) while separating themselves from their overt representations of sexuality.

How might this 'empowered' female subject common of contemporary romance protagonists be challenged? If authors like myself are not so keen to endorse a femininity that internalises the male gaze, how might we orient our authorship of women? If we're constantly producing female characters who align with the most popular version of feminism at the time of the novel's conception, then we are never using romance as the tool could be to give new definitions and potentials to femininity.

Jia Tolentino, in her essay 'Always Be Optimizing', considers how the 'ideal woman' could, in smaller, less radical ways, come to understand how the terms of her life have always been artificial (92). The ideal woman Tolentino presents sees the intersection of feminism with consumerism:

She is of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She's got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at (63).

The woman in contemporary culture is “always optimizing,” from a ritualistic skincare routine to frequent ‘self-care’ appointments to refill their fake lashes or dye their hair (Tolentino 64). She is “interested in whatever the market demands of her” as well as being “equally interested in whatever the market offers her” (Tolentino 64). Optimization of one’s femininity, Tolentino argues, leaves women “trapped at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy” (91), in which “individual success comes at the expense of collective morality” (91). Women are still beholden to an ideal, and with the “full encouragement of feminism,” believe that they are “the architect of the exquisite, constant, and often pleasurable type of power” (Tolentino 91) that comes from maintaining this ideal.

Nora, the FMC in Henry’s *Book Lovers*, serves as a guiding example, to me, on how to orient authorship of contemporary women without entirely rejecting the influences of self-subjectification. Nora’s character unapologetically optimises. Her optimization, though, is self-conscious and critical; she does not necessarily oppose the ideal woman but adapts it to her cultural context (Tolentino 93). Framed as the archetypal ‘villain’ in her ex-boyfriends’ small-town romances, Nora, with her Peloton-riding, her “unnatural blond [hair]” and her Botox-injecting (Henry 2), “grasps the potential in her own artificiality” (Tolentino 94).

“There’s no good way to be [a woman],” Nora says (Henry 6). Henry’s character goes on to depict the ‘nice girl’ who manages to balance her emotionality (and, subsequently, femininity) on a decency continuum (Duis & van Zoonen 111)<sup>§§</sup>, perfectly situated between being “hysterical” or “a heartless bitch” (Henry 6). In “keep[ing] [her emotions] tucked away where [her] boyfriend doesn’t have to tend to them” (Henry 6), Nora has not shown enough of the emotionality expected of her as a woman.

Nora’s consciousness of her femininity is example of Tolentino’s suggestion that a boyfriend or husband acts as the “physical realisation of her constant, unseen audience” (63). This ever-present audience “[reaffirms] her status as an interesting subject, a worthy object, a self-generating spectacle with a viewership attached” (Tolentino 63). Nora identifies herself as the villain, the “uptight, manicured literary agent” (Henry 3), because she’s been broken up with three times for women who are her opposite: “ridiculously attractive” “sweetheart[s]” who

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<sup>§§</sup> This idea is adapted from the Duis & van Zoonen article ‘Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European Multicultural Society’ in which they discuss the idea of a decency continuum in relation to sexuality instead of emotionality, saying: “A ‘nice girl’ (...) [is] a girl who manages to balance her sexuality on the decency continuum; neither showing too much of it (...) or denying it (...)” (111).

are the supposed “good woman” (Henry 2). On several occasions, she has not been an interesting enough subject, or a worthy object for her boyfriends. The ex-boyfriends move from Nora—the assertive, high-heel loving woman—to women who are, supposedly, more interesting, worthy feminine subjects. They have, like the Cool Girl and the Female Chauvinist Pig, managed to incite the men’s approval, delight, and love.

By the conclusion of the novel, we see Nora affirmed as an *interesting* subject. Her uncompromising commitment to her “ice queen” version of femininity (Henry 4) is a condition of the MMC, Charlie’s, love for her. In his declaration:

“I love you, Nora,” he says (...) “I think I love everything about you.”

“Even my Peloton?” I ask.

“Great piece of equipment,” he says.

“The fact that I check my email after work hours?”

“Just makes it easier to share Bigfoot erotica without having to walk across the room,” he says.

“Sometimes I wear *very* impractical shoes,” I add.

“Nothing impractical about looking hot,” he says.

“And what about my bloodlust?”

His eyes go heavy as he smiles. “That,” he says, “might be my favourite thing. Be my shark, Stephens” (369-370).

Nora has, throughout the novel, not faltered on her early claim that there is “no good way to be [a woman]” (Henry 6) and rather further committed herself to an identity that, in the beginning, was the reason for her being dumped. She’s disloyal—as Tolentino puts it (94)—to a femininity that may have served her and led to her being loved. Rather, she has found power—and love—in an identity of her own choosing: the ‘ice queen’.

We can’t expect romance authors to completely challenge the prevalence, and, oftentimes, empowerment that comes from contemporary feminism’s emphasis on choice and self-subjectification. We can’t expect the (mainly) female authors to decide what authentic sexuality and femininity is when there may not be such a thing (Maguire 63-64).

Rather, we might see authors follow Henry’s example and have our FMCs grasp the potential of their own subjecthood. An FMC who acknowledges her self-subjectification can be the stepping stone to an FMC who can break free from it; a reader who sees a FMC acknowledge the artificiality of her femininity might consider the artificiality of their own.

## Nude or Naked?

I like to think of myself like Nora, in that I am aware of the artificiality of my femininity, and it's one of my own choosing. But if I were being entirely candid—too candid for an exegesis, maybe—I would say that even if I claim all my bikini waxes, Pilates classes, and lingerie purchasing are for myself, they are also so I might look good naked (or, with said lingerie on, near naked). Subjecting myself to sexualisation is me watching myself being looked at. I sexualise myself to pre-empt how someone else might sexualise me, and to maintain some control of the situation. I am no exception to the claim John Berger makes in his book *Ways of Seeing*: “A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself” (46).

I see this familiar phenomenon played out with the FMCs of romances novels. They are usually, like me, self-policing, surveying themselves from a secondary perspective: she “know[s] [she] [doesn't] look beautiful” in her “faded jeans and a loose shirt that keeps falling over one shoulder” and “tousled mess” of hair (Kennedy, *The Mistake*, 239); her “blond hair and blue eye[d]” features “aren't flawless” but she can “transform” herself from “cute to sex bomb” with “the right make up and the right clothes” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 180); she “look[s] at [her]self every morning” and notices that she's “gained a little weight” and “feels less boyish” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 436). This constant surveillance of our (female) bodies, by our partners and/or our ourselves, feels inconducive to pleasure, instead moving us from experiencing sex to performing it (Maguire 45). The question is, then: can sex be empowering if our bodies—real or imagined—are always subject to some kind of gaze? Can we, as women and FMCs alike, authentically experience pleasure without performance?

The self-awareness of these FMCs might be a convenience, so that the authors can reveal a character's outfit or body type. A character prone to detailed exposition is endlessly helpful in a romance novel. It may also be reflective of a larger cultural habit in which women “survey, like men, their own femininity” and “do to themselves what men do to them” and make themselves an object (Berger 47).

Berger theorises a distinction between being ‘naked’ and ‘nude’—which, as Allan notes, are terms often used interchangeably (5). To be nude, according to Berger, is “to be seen naked by others and yet not recognised for oneself”; the naked body “has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” (54).

Consider the moment Hannah, in *The Deal*, first sees Garrett in a half-naked state:

He rakes a hand through his short hair, and his biceps bulge as he does it. The cold air causes goose bumps to rise on his smooth, golden skin, and my gaze is unwittingly drawn to the thin line of hair that arrows toward his unbuttoned waistband (Kennedy 127).

At the sight, an odd flicker of heat travels from my breasts to my core. My body suddenly feels tight and achy, my fingers tingling with the urge to...oh, for fuck's sake. *No*. So what if the guy is totally cut? That doesn't mean I want to ride him like a cowgirl (Kennedy 128).

With nakedness as a tool to arouse a reader or to speak to a character's arousal (Allan 7), Garrett's near naked body is turned from naked to nude as Hannah, even as she's frustrated for forgetting their designated study date, looks upon his body. He goes from simply "not wearing a shirt" (Kennedy 127) to a semi-nude body that causes arousal in Hannah.

When Kennedy switches to writing from from the MMCs point of view, we see how Garrett objectifies Hannah:

Pretty face, dark hair, smokin' body—shit, how have I not noticed that body before?

But I'm noticing now. Skinny jeans cling to a round, perky ass that just scream "squeeze me," and her V-neck sweater hugs a seriously impressive rack (Kennedy 7).

(...) I want to check out her ass again, because it's a damn sexy ass, and now that I've seen it I wouldn't mind another look (Kennedy 8).

Garrett's surveying of Hannah's clothed body separates the sexual parts of her body—her "perky ass" and "impressive rack" (Kennedy 7)—from the person herself. He does as Berger observes of men and surveys a woman (in this case, Hannah) before deciding how he will treat her (46). Where Hannah's spectatorship of Garrett occurs in the confines of a sexual and pre-established relationship context, Garrett's objectification of Hannah is his foremost impression of her. Before even knowing her name (Kennedy 7), Garrett has "check[ed] out [Hannah's] ass" (Kennedy 8), "[realised] how frickin' tiny she is" (Kennedy 8), and all these things inform how he subsequently treats her, like calling her "baby" and being "gentlemanly" (Kennedy 8).

It's not until later in the novel—during their first sexual encounter—that we see Garrett's objectification of Hannah incite arousal within a sexual context. Garrett says of Hannah in the nude:

I can't believe Hannah is lying naked on my bed. She's fucking beautiful. Her body is soft and curvy in all the right places. Her breasts are absolute perfection, round and perky and tipped with reddish brown nipples. My

gaze lowers to the narrow strip of hair between her legs and I'm dying for her to part them. I want to see every inch of her (...) I'm hard as a rock, my cock throbbing in my fist as I try not to ogle the sexy naked girl on my bed (Kennedy 218).

Hannah's body—now in the nude—speaks to Garrett's arousal as he luxuriates in the object of her nudity. Her beauty, from Garrett's perspective, is made up of parts: breasts, nipples, the narrow strip of hair between her legs. These parts—in preparation for their surveying—were considered by Hannah; in preparation for their sexual encounter, Hannah takes the effort to wear a “matching bra and panties” in “anticipation” (Kennedy 208) of how she will appear to Garrett when near-nude, stating: “you know you're about to have sex when you're rocking black lace top and bottom, and your skin is silky smooth and ready to be touched” (Kennedy 208). Acting (as Margaret Atwood puts it) as “a woman with a man inside watching a woman” (471), Hannah turns herself into “an object of vision: a sight” (Berger 47) which Garrett ultimately appraises. Kennedy likely writes of Hannah's preparation for sex because it is largely relatable to readers. Yes, before being intimate with a man, in preparation for his consensual objectification of you, you sexually subjectify yourself to—I believe—maintain some control of how he might objectify you.

Allie, in *The Score*, similarly considers how she'll appear to her sexual partner, Dean, and undergoes a pre-sex “beautification process” where she gets “waxed, polished, scrubbed, and lotioned” from “head to toe” (Kennedy 127). These processes supposedly “ready” the FMC to have sex, but in actuality are an act of turning herself into an object for Dean to eventually gaze upon.

Many FMCs across romance novels, like Hannah and Allie, exist as both the “surveyor and the surveyed” (Berger 46), with the gaze of the FMC inciting a certain consciousness of their bodies in which they “watch themselves being looked at” (Berger 47). She can “feel the rake of his gaze move across [her] skin” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 129); she describes as “his gaze move[s] over every part of [her]” (Lauren, *Dark Wild Night*, 346). In Allie's case, as Dean's “green eyes sweep over [her] so intently,” she's made “self-conscious,” going on to self-police herself from her love interest's perspective, stating her “hair is a wavy mess” and is “pretty sure there's a tiny zit forming on [her] chin” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 248). She is not just the object of Dean's gaze, but actively watching herself being looked at by the MMC (Berger 47).

In *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, as Finn surveys Harlow, he describes her response to his gaze:



She takes [her clothes] off slowly, not like she's putting on a show, but like she's relishing the way my eyes move over every inch of newly exposed skin and is trying to make the feeling last. Her tits are fucking fabulous, high and full—a generous handful, and I have big hands—with tight pink nipples that make my mouth water (Lauren 118).

Harlow is not simply taking off her clothes. She is experiencing—“relishing,” as Lauren puts it (118)—herself being surveyed by the man, example of Mulvey's “to-be-looked-at-ness” as she is both looked at and displayed (62). Revealing her nakedness under the gaze of Finn is itself an act of surveillance for herself, even though, as noted by the MMC, it is not “a show” (Lauren 118).

If women, as Berger outlines, are both the surveyor and the surveyed (46), can the female body ever truly be ‘naked’? Or is she nude in perpetuity, always in some capacity trying to be “appreciated as herself by another” (Berger 46) and subjecting herself to a potential gazing second party? It seems unlikely a woman might ever engage in the “‘solo affair’ of nakedness” (Allan 5) if they are constantly surveying themselves—or, as Margaret Atwood phrases it, acting as their own voyeurs (471).

If nakedness is always nudity for a woman, they're likely—in sexual encounters—to “see [themselves] as the sex-object” and can possibly “only enjoy sex when [they] think [they] look like someone with whom other people will enjoy having sex” (Maguire 45). A woman's perpetual nudity leads to sex as a performance, rather than an experience (Maguire 45). Did the romance FMCs of my romance sample see themselves as sex objects during the on-page sex? And had I not come to notice it because I, too, would likely think as they think, mid-sex, wondering how to look my best for the pleasure of my partner?

As Rue, the FMC of *Not in Love*, gives a blow job to Eli, the MMC, she specifically points out to him that he's “not even watching” (Hazelwood 124), with Eli choosing to “shut his eyes” and “just [*feel*]” (Hazelwood 124).

Eli subsequently does as Rue asks: he watches, seeing:

(...) her plump mouth and everything else: the dark curls blanketing her shoulders, the rosy tips of her nipples as they got hard and puffy, the warm blue of her eyes whenever they held his (Hazelwood 125).

In watching, we see the visual of Rue as the woman whom Eli enjoys having sex with, an “active/male” gaze purposefully imposed upon herself as she is looked at and displayed (Mulvey 62).

The effect of an active/male gaze is expanded on in other romance novel sex scenes. In *The Deal*, Hannah is attempting, with the help of Garrett, the MMC, to regain sexual autonomy after being raped in high school. Her sexual assault supposedly “broke something inside [her]” and she “can’t have an orgasm with a guy” because of this (Kennedy 200). In hopes of “reprogram[ming] [her] body,” she asks Garrett to have sex with her.

During their first sexual encounter, as the two engage in manual stimulation of each other, Hannah “[shivers] with pleasure” (Kennedy 213) and comes “so close to detonating” (Kennedy 213). However, the arousal she’s feeling “extinguishes” when she “opens her eyes to find [Garrett] watching [her]” (Kennedy 214). Hannah excuses this and encourages Garrett to “keep touching [her]” (Kennedy 214) and decides to shut her eyes. This, supposedly, “doesn’t matter” because she can “still feel [Garrett] watching [her]” like her rapist did (Kennedy 214).

For Hannah, a large contributor to her problem in experiencing a fulfilling (i.e. orgasmic) sexual encounter is the weight of being watched. In this specific regard, being watched mimics an intrusive, non-consensual gaze she was subjected to when she was raped. Rather than being fully present in the sexual encounter, she’s conscious of a time when she was condemned to being a sexual object and cannot separate the two.

Garrett’s solution to Hannah’s aversion to being watched is to “pleasure [themselves] in front of each other” (Kennedy 216). In doing this, Hannah notes that Garrett is “putting himself on display for [her]” (Kennedy 216). Garrett, by asking Hannah to become a witting subject of his gaze, helps her move away from being the unwilling object of a male gaze. As opposed to being passive and looked at in the encounter, Garrett encourages Hannah to also engage in an active looking-at (Mulvey 67). There is mutuality in this experience, with Garrett purposefully subjecting himself to Hannah’s gaze, telling her to “watch what [she’s] doing to [him]” (Kennedy 218). It is in the autonomous decision to make herself the subject of a mutual, consensual sexual encounter that Hannah finds a degree of liberation from being the object of a non-consensual sexualisation.

In contrast to Hannah’s discomfort in being watched is Sara, the FMC of *Beautiful Stranger*, who, as the MMC Max puts it, “rather [likes] being watched” (Lauren 28). To Sara, being watched—or even the potential of being seen—is arousing, as opposed to Hannah, who finds it oppressive.

There is, in almost every sexual encounter between Sara and Max, a degree of performance, and an interaction with surveillance. The couple engage in a “committed fling”

(Lauren 131) where, one night a week, they'll have sex, with a condition being that the sex does not happen in the private domains of either Sara or Max's apartment.

Each sex scene plays with gaze—either the MMCs, an anonymous third party, or, in the case of their first official Friday night fling, Sara's own gaze. The sex takes place in a warehouse filled with mirrors (Lauren 137), with Max intending for Sara to watch as she has sex with him. Telling her to "look right there" at the mirror angled towards them (Lauren 147), Max then narrates the visual image reflected in the mirror:

"See how perfect that is?" (...) "Fuck. Look at the way your tits move as I fuck you. The curve of your back. Your perfect fucking ass." (Lauren 148).

Sara is purposefully made to survey herself during their sex, both performing and experiencing the encounter. Her nudity is described to her, put on purposeful display. This to-be-looked-at-ness continues to a scene where Sara masturbates in Max's office, where the express purpose is to be gazed upon by her male sexual partner. Max positions her exactly as he wants her: "[laying] down on the couch with [her] head [on the arm of the leather couch]" and tells her to put her "knees up, [with] legs spread" (Lauren 259). Then, after she's asked to "close [her] eyes," Max begins to touch himself and refuses Sara's request to watch him, stating "[he's] watching [*her*]" (Lauren 264). The FMC, in this scenario, is literally performing rather than experiencing sex (Maguire 45). She's in a provocative position, posed as Max wants to her to be, and only comes to *enjoy* the sexual encounter when he leaves the room, and she quickly masturbates.

In Hannah's scenario being surveyed, watched, consumed, ruins a sexual encounter and extinguishes her arousal, but for Sara it is what invigorates her arousal. Both women watch—or listen—to themselves being looked at (Berger 47), their nudity not only imposed upon them by their sexual partners, but also accepted and enacted by themselves.

Can sex be empowering if our (female) bodies are always subject to some kind of gaze? Not only our partner's, but our own? Self-policing, and asking: is my lingerie arousing? Does my mouth look good while I'm giving a blow job? Is my stomach flat? Did I shave thoroughly enough? If we're performing for ourselves as well as for others, how might sex ever be a realm for the dichotomies of hot or not, of nude or naked, of object or subject, to slide away?

## In Practice

Writing a female character who might be called a ‘cool girl’ is something I work consciously to avoid and has been since reading the excerpt from *Gone Girl* when I was around eighteen years old. I didn’t want to orient any female characters in relation to a male character. However, I found it difficult not to inadvertently create a Cool Girl/Female Chauvinist Pig/Ideal Women female character for two reasons. The first is that archetype is easy to write because they are largely who I thought I wanted to be until my Honours year of study. They’re the feminist woman that exists in, as McRobbie says, the “whole world of texts, theories, events, books, films, art works, activities, interventions, campaigns, writings, slogans, [and] ‘postings’” (16) I was privy to growing up. My creation of a female character is not culturally dislocated. She reflects the cultural milieu I grew up in, and am familiar with, such as Harry Styles calling a woman a jezebel in the first sentence of his song ‘Little Freak’ (2022), or Beyoncé including a French spoken word in her song ‘Partition’ which asks “Do you like sex? ... Men think feminists hate sex. But it’s a very stimulating and natural activity that women love” (2014).

The second reason I found this difficult is because, in a (heterosexual) romance, to a certain extent, your FMC *does* have to be interesting to a man, otherwise it’s unlikely the reader will believe the MMC would fall in love with her. However, I didn’t want the aspects of Freya’s character that appeal to Théo, and lead to their subsequent falling in love, to be created in response to him. Cool Girls, as Flynn says, exist in “slight different version[s],” and all, essentially, “like every fucking thing he likes and doesn’t ever complain” (251). If Freya was “the woman [Théo] want [her] to be<sup>\*\*\*</sup>” (Flynn 251), she would look something like:

Freya is a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores art by famous impressionist painters, knows how to tell the difference between a Chablis and a Chardonnay, is familiar with casual sex protocols, and jams steak frites and croissants into her mouth while somehow maintaining a size 2<sup>†††</sup>.

Freya is an attempt at diverting away from the FCP and Cool Girl archetypes<sup>†††</sup>. Her appeal is not orchestrated *to* Théo’s tastes. She knows generally about art because she finds most things interesting; she knows what kind of *red* wines she likes because her dad taught her the difference, not because Théo likes a good wine.

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<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Though I like to think Théo is enough of a feminist to not have a ‘Cool Girl’ type.

<sup>†††</sup> Adapted from the ‘Cool Girl’ quote in *Gone Girl* (Flynn 250-1)

<sup>†††</sup> All of my female characters, including Freya’s friends Quinn and Maia, are also an attempt at this, though there’s less material to discuss this.

Nonetheless, Freya is a young woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, currently being found attractive by a romantic (male) partner. To a certain extent, she is conscious of her body, not immune to developing that “self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill 104).

When Freya first meets Théo, she is overly self-aware of her appearance. Describing the effect of his gaze:

He lifted his eyebrows, all thick and strong, and appraised me from head to toe. His eyes swept across my body, lingering on the bare skin my skirt didn't cover; a tingling sensation simmered in the wake of his gaze. My neck, my arms, my legs, all buzzing, blazing, itching from the pressure of his attention (99).

Théo's active, male gaze is imposed upon Freya, and she is both surveyed and surveys herself (Berger 46). When I wrote this, I didn't intend for it to be a commentary on how men survey and women are both surveyor and surveyed; I simply wanted to express the effect of Théo's *specific* attention on Freya, and how it was a unique, new feeling for her—a good way to insinuate the two MCs have chemistry. Freya *also* surveys Théo, describing his “softly sculpted arms” and “childhood blonde” hair (99), but with the limitations of a first-person perspective, we aren't privy to how Théo feels and if he is also surveying himself in response. Would I write his response similarly to Freya's if I'd chosen to include his perspective? I can only assume I would, in hopes of communicating the same chemistry that Freya is noting. But it's possible the self-surveillance is limited to when I write female characters, subconsciously communicating a consciousness I experience as a woman.

Following this, Freya makes the comparison between Théo's male gaze and impersonal ones she encounters in other environments:

This was a professional environment, not dissimilar to taking your shirt off for a doctor to check a mole or removing your underwear for an aesthetician to rip hair from your most sensitive of skin.

However, confronted with the prospect of *Théo* needing to see me topless so he could do his job, I became hyperaware of every square inch of the skin he would see: the outline of my bikini imprinted on me after my (reluctant) time in the sun, how lucky I was I'd shaved my underarms this morning in the minuscule hostel bathroom, the way my stomach would not hold taut as I lay on my side and he tattooed my body.

I had booked aestheticians at beauty salons, willingly let them see the entirety of my vulva, and then wished them a good day without even the slightest of awkwardness. Hell, a gynaecologist had wrenched open my

vagina and inserted an IUD into my cervix, seeing more of my body than even I had. In those situations, I hadn't thought once about my body's appearance, and yet the moment I was confronted with a gorgeous man I wouldn't mind being found attractive by, I felt it necessary to worry (105).

She makes the comparison between scenarios where her nakedness is normal—waxing sessions and gynaecologist appointments—and compares this to the nudity she feels when undressing for Théo to tattoo her. Less intimate areas of her body, like her underarms and stomach, are more of a worry to her when under Théo's gaze than decidedly intimate areas—like her vulva and cervix (105). This is a direct juxtaposition between Freya's nakedness, where she "reveals herself" (Berger 54) to aestheticians or gynaecologists, versus her nudity, in which she feels she is placed on display (Berger 54) when in Théo's presence.

When I wrote this, I didn't purposefully set out to make a comparison between nakedness and nudity as Berger describes it. I *did* intend to write to the differences between being in environments devoid of a male gaze, versus environments where it is present. Familiar with the self-surveillance that comes from hoping—in some capacity—a man will find you attractive, I wanted to communicate how certain standards of beauty are internalised by women. What the culture demands of us—shaved underarms, taut tummies, even tans—are choices Freya wishes she'd committed herself to more adamantly in order to experience the power that comes from not only being found sexually attractive, but sexually attractive by a man she *also* finds attractive.

Freya corrects herself, in a way I wish I could:

*Stop it, I told myself. Even if he did find you attractive—which he likely doesn't, he's just French and flirty and trying to work—he would have to like all those things too. Like a mantra, I focused on the words: There is nothing you need to change. You're fine as you are. Because if you say something enough, it eventually feels like the truth (105).*

It was important to me that, rather than excuse Freya's worry about a soft tummy or hairy underarms as some kind of personal peeve, motivated by her own culturally dislocated desire to look good instead of a desire to look good *for a man*, that she corrected herself by accepting her body as it was, uninfluenced by both cultural demands for the female body, and potential specific demands from Théo.

Freya's awareness of her body continues throughout the novel. Oftentimes, it's used as a tool to give detail to the situation—as I mentioned earlier in the chapter—of what she's wearing. Consider before the couple attend a party together:

“You look nice,” Théo said.

I looked down at myself: I wore a small black skirt I’d bought years ago and had formed a rather intense emotional attachment to, as no retailer seemed to be able to replicate such a perfect A-line mini; on the top half, I had lazily chosen a blue-striped shirt which I’d barely buttoned up, which revealed a black bralette which Théo seemed rather fascinated by (160-161).

On reflection, I don’t think there is *enough* self-policing here. I know that if it were me, I’d be overly conscious of the fact my shirt was barely buttoned up and my bra was showing. *Should I button up my top more? Is it too provocative? Is the bralette giving my boobs enough support?* Freya, on the other hand, isn’t perturbed by her choice of clothing, which is slightly inconsistent with how, earlier in the novel, she’d “found it necessary to worry” (105) about her body when Théo was looking at it. Why had this insecurity suddenly disappeared? Was she now more comfortable being surveyed by him, affirmed that he found her attractive, as opposed to earlier, when she wasn’t sure he would? Has she simply repeated to herself, in the week between being tattooed and attending the party, that “There is nothing [she] need[s] to change” and that she’s “fine as [she] [is]” (105). I feel the explanation for this inconsistency is likely two things: (1) I needed to describe how she was dressed up for a party they were attending, and shift the reader’s image of casual Freya to dressed-up Freya; (2) I wanted to start creating tension for a sex scene that happens in the following chapter, and a revealing outfit that makes the MMC “fascinated” (161) can be a good way to achieve this.

When it came to writing sex scenes—specifically those with nudity (which is not achieved in the cunnilingus scene in chapter 9)—it was important to me that Freya was not, as Maguire writes, performing sex rather than experiencing it (45). I didn’t want her pursuit of a certain image of attractiveness (like the taut tummy and even tan mentioned in Chapter 1) to mean she was more concerned with, at Mulvey puts it, the to-be-looked-at-ness of the encounter.

When the couple first arrive back at the apartment, there is, however, a degree of performance. Though, I’d like to say it’s in pursuit of control. Freya, making space between herself and Théo, reveals herself to him at her own pace. At “half-speed” (195) she:

[starts] working on the button of [her] blouse to reveal a delicate white lace bra. (...) As [she] [shimmies] [her] skirt down [her] legs, [she] [turns] around and [bends] over slightly, so Théo [has] a full view of the thong [she’s] wearing (195).

We might say that, in controlling her undressing, Freya allows Théo the privilege of taking her from naked to nude. When “his eyes [are] pinning [Freya] down” (195) it’s by her own invitation. Freya, in controlling her nudity, does take on the role of a knowing, active, desiring sexual subject. She does, in this moment, *choose* to become a sexual subject. There’s little way around writing a romance FMC who is about to have sex as anything *but* a willing sexual subject. I want her to feel desired, and I want her to be conscious of what it is that Théo finds attractive so she might incite arousal in him. Is writing Freya as complicit in her own sexualisation leading up to sex a betrayal of my commitment to opposing the self-policing narcissistic gaze Gill says is characteristic of sexual subjectification? I’m at a loss for how sexual tension can be created without the characters self-sexualising in some capacity. Should Freya not appeal herself to Théo at all? Must she entirely subvert archetypes of attractiveness, of fuckability, in order to sexualise herself in an autonomous way?

When entirely undressed, she thinks:

I was completely naked underneath him. He could see the freckle just above my navel, the dip of my hips, the stretchmarks on my upper thighs.

All was revealed for him to gaze at (198).

Ideally, these worries would slide away; her need to survey herself while being surveyed would dissipate under the eye of someone she trusts, and is comfortable with, and is willingly revealing herself to. She has controlled her image to a certain extent. But I find it hard to completely remove any self-surveillance from my female characters. There might always be a moment of worry, and that moment of worry—about stretchmarks and freckles and hip dips—feels authentically reflective of the surveying women do to themselves, even if they understand their artifice, and their performance.

In hopes of creating some mutuality to the surveying that occurs during this sex scene, following all being “revealed for [Théo] to gaze at” (198), Freya declares she “[wants] him in the same position” (underneath her) so she can “leisure in [his] body” (198). I would like to think, as Freya notes his “messy hair, lips swollen, [and] tattoos bared” (198) that maybe, if not limited to the first-person perspective, Théo might also reflect on the details of his body that Freya is looking at, and survey himself while being surveyed. That self-surveillance, when under the watchful eye of a sexual partner, might not be limited to women who, as Berger suggests, “continually watch [themselves]” (46).

What is likely the greatest example of surveillance in my novel is Théo’s grand gesture in the conclusion of the novel, where he paints Freya. Not only does he paint Freya, however, he paints her naked body—a nude, to use more artistic terminology. He could have painted her



in any of the other compositions he lists—“cleaning [her] teeth, brushing [her] hair, napping on the couch” (256)—and it could have been just as intimate, and yet I chose for him to paint her in the nude. I couldn’t tell you why exactly I made this choice. Maybe because there is more vulnerability in nakedness, right after sex, than there is when brushing one’s teeth? Maybe because, in some capacity, I wonder how men want to see a naked woman, and hope—like for Théo—it doesn’t mimic the nudity seen in *Playboy*, *Penthouse* or Pornhub.

In seeing herself from Théo’s perspective for the first time, Freya looks at the painting from a detached perspective, not yet having figured out it’s her likeness:

The linens were wrapped around the naked body of a woman, draped so you couldn’t see the curve of her breast or the dip of skin between her legs.

Blonde hair whispered around her shoulders, and by her ribcage—

‘Is that...’ I knew that tattoo. I recognised the mole by her navel.

*Me.* He was painting me (245).

Our first introduction to the painting composition is objective. Freya describes it with impersonal pronouns: “a woman” who is not her, a “her” who is not *me* (245). This speaks to the unique perspective I was hoping to imply with Théo’s painting of Freya. It isn’t simply an objective, impersonal likeness Freya might find familiar; it’s intended to communicate how Théo, as the spectator, sees Freya (Berger 50). How might this be different to how Freya sees herself? What might it reveal to her that, in her self-consciousness, she is ignorant to?

In realising its herself, Freya describes what it’s like to see herself from Théo’s perspective:

He’d painted me so well I felt I was looking in a mirror while reciting my diary. Looking at the picture made me feel like I was laying in his bed again, sexually sated after gorging on Théo’s body. That was what a painting did that a photo couldn’t, right? They had stories melted into their paint, and feelings forged into their brush strokes (246)

Despite intending for the painting to communicate not just the physical dimensions of Freya’s body, but the vulnerability of a diary, the essence of a memory, my supervisor, after reading an initial draft of the novel, noticed that I limited myself to a heavy concentration on Freya’s looks. I had not asked myself the question my supervisor posed to me: What about her character?

Théo, earlier in the novel, states that painting is not just about “painting what [an artist] see[s], but how they feel” (155), and yet, in an initial draft of the novel, when he describes his intentions behind the painting, it is focused on capturing the physical. Consider how Théo describes how he wanted to capture Freya:

You were—still are—the prettiest thing I had ever seen, and I wondered for the first time in five years what shade I would choose to paint your hair, and how red I would colour your lips.

In trying to avoid Freya subjecting herself to sexualisation, I did not think enough about how Théo might objectify Freya, and only be able to name physical things he noticed and liked about her. The painting was being made to appeal to *Théo's* sexuality, as opposed to Freya's character. I'd reverted right back to sexual objectification in trying to avoid sexual subjectification.

In revising the novel, and moving away from a focus on objective physical traits, I rewrote what Théo wanted to capture of Freya:

You were—still are—the most interesting person I have ever met, and I wondered for the first time in five years if I painted your lips, red from being bitten, an observer would know you worry too much. Or if I had you finger the sheets like the pages of a book, they would know you read books like breathing. I wanted to know if I could paint what I love about you (255).

I moved from an emphasis on the physical—the colour of her lips and hair—to the physical being a reflection of her character—finger positioning as reflective of her reading habits, and her red lips as sign of her anxiousness. Though Freya is still depicted in the nude, seen naked by Théo and recreated by him in paint, she is not limited—condemned, as Berger puts it (51)—to simply her nakedness.

I can't comment, broadly, on how successful Freya is as an autonomous or liberated female character. I'd like to think she has a certain consciousness of herself as a woman in the cultural environment she lives in (that is, conveniently, largely the same as the environment I live in). She can worry about how a man sees her body, and then reassure herself there is "nothing [she] need[s] to change. [She's] fine as [she] [is]" (105). She can be depicted naked from a male perspective and rather than be objectified, or overly sexualised, she can feel like she's "looking in a mirror while reciting [her] diary" (246).

I likely haven't moved Freya entirely away from the feminist sexual subject I'm trying to challenge, and is that not itself a representation of how entrenched self-sexualisation is in contemporary culture? Of female surveillance? That even when I hope to challenge it, I still partake in it, and leave myself with questions about Freya's character like: *Isn't her blind acceptance of being painted nude simply complying to the idea that a sexualised woman is an empowered one? Why can she notice the difference between a male gaze and a female one, and*

*not challenge them more?* If other romance novelists out there are worried about perpetrating the female sexual subject like I am, I'm not sure I can offer objective solutions that will help them combat it in their writing. It's all so contextual—to the narrative world they're constructing, and the cultural world the author inhabits. Acknowledging the artifice, like Henry does in *Book Lovers*, might be one option. Another, that I try to do, is to always ask “why?” Why do I want Freya to be wearing red lace underwear when Théo first goes down on her? Why did I not write that Théo paints Freya fully clothed? Asking why we write it might eventually help change the how we write it.

### Chapter 3: A Caveat on Casual Sex

Take the Female Chauvinist Pig-slash-Cool Girl and imagine her at a party<sup>§§§</sup>. She's come wearing an outfit that makes her feel good about herself. Maybe it has a top with a low neckline that shows just enough cleavage that she overhears a guy describe her boobs as "stripper tits" (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 145). Maybe she's put on siren red lipstick that makes her lips look luscious and gets her called "cerise" by a Frenchman because it emphasises her blow job mouth (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 81). Whatever the outfit is, she's told herself it's for her. *She* likes her stripper tits. *She* likes having a blow job mouth. All of these things give her confidence in the microcosm of a party, where girls are hot, and guys are horny.

She's get talking to a guy. He tells her she looks hot. The compliment—traitorously—makes everything seem worth it: the skirt she has to keep pulling down, the lipstick she keeps reapplying, the heels that are making her feet hurt. He keeps looking down at her cleavage and she feels powerful knowing her body can hold the attention of a man.

They get closer and closer all night. They make out in the corner of the party, which she thinks someone takes a picture of. She hopes she looks okay. He asks her if she wants to get out of there, and she says yes. This is what people come to parties for, right? She danced a little, drank a little, and now she's going to have sex with a guy she thinks is cute.

Back in his room, his bed is poorly made, and the room could do with a window being cracked open. She wonders if there's anyone else in the house. She sits tentatively on the edge of his bed and compliments the *Godfather II* poster he has on his wall. Then he's leaning down and is kissing her with more fervour than at the party.

It's all a bit of a blur: his shirt comes off, a hand is up her skirt, her underwear come off. He doesn't go down on her. He licks his fingers and bypasses her clitoris to put them inside her. He calls it 'foreplay'.

As he's inside her, he puts his hand around her throat, because he saw a headless male body do it in porn. It's blocking her airway slightly, and she's getting a bit lightheaded, but if she says anything it might ruin the moment. He might think she's a prude. Wouldn't a Cool Girl be into this? Be able to handle this? She says nothing.

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<sup>§§§</sup> The narrative here, and in my novel, is reflective of my own cis-heterosexual, middle-class cultural positionality and experiences.

When he asks her to get on top, she spends every grind worrying about her tummy more than her pleasure. Do I look good from below? Are my nipples hard? Should I be more vocal? He seems to be enjoying it. That's good. She must be doing something right.

Afterwards, underwhelmed and unsatisfied, waiting for an Uber on the curb outside his house because he "has to work tomorrow," she wonders why she did it, and if he'll even text her tomorrow.

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Writing about sex in contemporary culture and not mentioning hookup culture would be like swimming without water, especially considering my own novel takes place in a heterosexual, middle-class cultural environment where 'hooking up' flourishes.

Hooking up is defined as the "brief, uncommitted sexual encounters among individuals who are not romantic partners or dating each other" (Garcia et al. 161) and is endlessly nicknamed in the broader cultural zeitgeist: one-night stands, friends with benefits, Netflix and chills, sneaky links. According to Sessions Step in her book *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*, young people are abandoning dating and replacing more formal courtship with behaviours that are detached from love or commitment (5). Peggy Orenstein, in her book *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*, noticed that whether young women participate in hooking up or not, they still have to "negotiate the culture of casual sex and find comfortable ground in a culture that is simultaneously fun and antagonistic, [and] carefree yet riddled with risk" (111).

These casual encounters, which exchange relationships for sex as the primary currency of social interaction (Sessions Step 5), have fuelled contemporary popular culture: Chappell Roan's song 'Casual' has been streamed over 165 million times, sings of how "it's hard being casual" and the difficulty in trying to be a "chill girl" (like the 'Cool Girl') in a situationship. Sabrina Carpenter, across multiple songs in her best-selling 2024 album *Short n' Sweet*, laments the (embarrassment) of a situationship, saying: "If that was casual, then I'm an idiot" ('Sharpest Tool'), and how she'll "be kissin'" the "douchebags in [her] phone" "just to get [her] fixings" ('Slim Pickins'). In 2011, two movies of almost the exact same premise were released: *Friends with Benefits*, which has Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake using each other for the sex they don't have time to find in a relationship and *No Strings Attached*, which sees busy junior doctor Natalie Portman using Ashton Kutcher for sexual gratification. Article after article after article is published questioning the cult of casualness: *The Cut*, in September of 2024, asked 'Was

Casual Sex Always This Bad?'; Vogue, in July of 2023, wonder, 'For Women, Is Casual Sex Ever Really Worth It?'; *The Cut*, again, asked in February of 2022, 'Are We Really Getting Sick of Hookup Culture?'

With hookups as "culturally normative" (Garcia et al. 161), it is unsurprising that romance novels engage with it in some capacity. Romance is a genre that functions as an "antidote to patriarchy" (Roach 181) that helps its women readers explore the paradox, negotiate the tension, and heal the rift of patriarchy (Roach 181). The best-selling novel *Wildfire* by Hannah Grace begins with the MCs having a one-night stand, expecting not to see each other again; *Reckless* by Elsie Silver has a recently divorced woman not looking for commitment spending a night with a notorious ladies' man; *Business or Pleasure* has the MCs fumble through an awkward one-night stand that the FMC doesn't find sexual satisfaction in. My own novel, without me consciously realising it until undertaking this exegetical reflection, was a place for me to bemoan the culture of casual dating I am so familiar with in my cultural environment. Each one of these novels takes the hooking up and creates a scenario where a woman can explore, negotiate and heal the cost to a woman's psyche of dating in a culture that is largely not designed for her\*\*\*\*.

The overarching premise of the *Beautiful* series by Christina Lauren are agreements of casualness. It sees young, professional men and women committed to pursuing academic, personal and professional goals while still enjoying an active sex life (Orenstein 107). Under the semblance of exploring their sexual desires and capabilities while keeping their emotional lives under control, each book in the *Beautiful* series sets up arrangements of maximum freedom. In *Beautiful Bastard*, Chloe and Bennett can't help but have frequent no-strings attached sex—often quickly between working responsibilities—despite hating each other. In *Beautiful Stranger*, Sara and Max enter into a sex-only agreement which takes place exclusively on Friday nights. In *Beautiful Player*, Will, the MMC, is described as "often with women, and never just one" (Lauren 40) who, at the beginning of the novel, has "two regular lovers" that he "meet[s] regularly for no-strings fucking" (Lauren 55). With a reputation as a "hot, player guy who doesn't apologise for enjoying women" (Lauren 71), Hanna, the FMC, asks Will to teach her how to "be *with* a guy" (Lauren 145) and show her how to "touch [him], and make [him] feel good" (Lauren 148), with the couple then engaging in educational dry humps, hand jobs and intercourse.

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\*\*\*\* Adapted from Roach's phrase: "[Women] work out, within the realm of fiction, and make up, through the pleasures of the text, some of the inevitable cost to a woman's psyche of living in a culture that is in certain ways against her" (181).

The saturation of hookup culture in romance novels and other popular media, alongside showing hookups as fun, pleasurable and empowering encounters where women explore their sexuality while suspending emotionality (like Hanna in *Beautiful Player*) and/or have orgasms for the first time with a partner (like Chloe in *Beautiful Bastard*), is an imaginative place to navigate the confusion of casual sex, despite the resounding commentary that reveals hookup culture as largely unappealing, unrewarding and unsatisfying. In a 2010 study by Garcia et al., 83% of college-aged women and 63% of college-aged men preferred, at their current stage of life development, a traditional romantic relationship as opposed to an uncommitted sexual relationship (167). Lisa Wade reports, in her article ‘What’s So Cultural About Hookup Culture?’ that 36% of her research sample reported being “simultaneously attracted to and repelled by hookup culture” (67).

Reading the novels of Elle Kennedy, it often feels as though she has plucked a case study from books like *Girls and Sex* and *Unhooked* and given the women in them a romantic twist. A majority of her books are set in the depths of hookup culture: college campuses. The MMCs of the books are caricatured prime perpetrators of casual sex: they ask their friends if they’re “tapping that” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 84); the men proudly refer to each other as “slut[s]” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 84) who “[chase] anything in a skirt” (Kennedy, *The Mistake*, 210); when one of them has had sex with a woman, he ‘jokingly’ says he’s “been there, done that, got the T-shirt” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 38).

This uncanniness goes so far that there is a mirroring of the testimony of a woman in Orenstein’s book and the FMC of *The Score*. Holly, an interviewee of Orenstein’s, says of first having sex outside of a relationship that it made her feel like “one of those skanks who just has sex with people” (121). Allie, in *The Score*, after having casual sex for the first time (with the book’s eventual MMC), says:

God, I’m not cut out for casual sex. I feel... defiled. (...)

I’m such a slut.

*You’re not a slut.*

Okay, maybe I’m not. Maybe I’m just a twenty-two-year-old woman who had some no-strings fun for once in her life.

The only problem is—I like the strings. Sex and relationships go hand in hand for me. I’m all about the snuggling and the inside jokes and talking late into the night. I’m a card-carrying member of Team Boyfriend, and after last night, I can honestly say that Team One-Night Stand sucks. The

sex was incredible, but the shame it left me with isn't worth the orgasms  
(Kennedy 44).

Allie struggles between “resisting and submitting to age old ideas about girls’ sexuality” (Orenstein 125), attempting to navigate what one of Orenstein’s interviewees describes as “every girl’s goal” to be “just slutty enough, where you’re not a prude and not a whore” (Orenstein 125). This residue of confusion—between being experienced but not too experienced, having one-night stands but not too *many* one-night stands—has not made the stigma of slut disappear, Orenstein outlines, but made its criteria more elusive.

Where Orenstein’s interviewee, Holly, is left after her casual encounter attempting to navigate the elusive criteria for ‘skank-y’ behaviour, feeling ashamed and embarrassed for betraying her preference for only having sex in a relationship (Orenstein 121), Allie, in *The Score*, does receive reparation for the one-night stand that left her feeling slutty. Talking to the MMC (who is also the guy she hooked up with), Dean, they discuss Allie’s propensity to align casualness with promiscuity:

“But I wasn’t kidding when I said I’m not into casual sex, okay? Every time I think about what we did this weekend, I feel—”

“Horny?” he supplies.

Yes. “Slutty.”

(...)

“Stop slut-shaming yourself. And fuck the word ‘slut’. People should be able to have sex whenever they want, however many times they want, with however many partners they choose, and not get some shitty label slapped on them.” (Kennedy 83)

What Kennedy offers here, with an MMC who—though enthusiastically having no-strings sex with the FMC—does not slut shame but encourages the exploration of sexuality (sometimes) facilitated in hookup culture, is what Roach calls the “core appeal of romance fiction” (181): the reparative fantasy. This is a cathartic scenario, not just for Allie but for the women reading the novel: that maybe women can not only engage in casual sex and, as Dean professes, can “stop thinking there’s something wrong with what [they] did” (Kennedy 83), but also have their partner, who is historically a player, assure them of it.

Among the pages of a romance novel, there are attempts to answer, in the form of a reparative fantasy, the conundrum of living as a woman in a man’s hookup world (Roach 15), where “guys have no doubt that they’re winners” and are able to “create [a] social environment in which hooking up flourishes and sets the expectations about what girls will do” (Sessions



Step 38). Consider *The Deal*, where the “hot sorority girl” (Kennedy 14) Garrett, the MMC, is hooking up with incorrectly assumes Garrett might have missed her in their break from hooking up:

Honestly, I don’t know why I bother laying down ground rules anymore. In my experience, no woman enters into a fling believing it’s going to *stay* a fling. She might say otherwise, maybe even convince herself she’s cool with a no-strings-sex-fest, but deep down, she hopes and prays it’ll lead to something deeper (Kennedy 16).

In *Beautiful Player*, Will, the MMC, makes a similar observation of one of his regular hookups:

She was gorgeous, and willing to do almost anything I wanted. She insisted our just-sex arrangement was fine, fine, fine. The thing was, I think we both knew she was lying: every time I had to ask for a rain check, she would become insecure and needy the next time we were together. (Lauren 57).

These MMCs frequently create a social environment in which hooking up flourishes—like regular Tuesday night hooks ups (Lauren, *Beautiful Player*; 56) or summer flings that don’t coincide with his six-days a week practice schedule (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 17)—and set the expectations about what the girls will do—like “reenact[ing] any trashy [porno] scene” (Kennedy, *The Deal*, 14) or not stay “beyond the moment of [their] shared release” (Lauren, *Beautiful Player*; 56). And in these parameters, the women are “lying” (Lauren 57) or “[convincing]” (Kennedy 16) themselves that they find the casual hookups rewarding.

In each of these novels respectively, the FMC overcomes the MMCs hookup restrictions. Both Hannah, in *The Deal*, and Hanna, in *Beautiful Player*, turn their educational hook ups into committed courtships. These women exist in a fantasy safe space where they can reform the in-demand hockey captain or “hot player guy” (Lauren 71) who’s “not looking for a relationship” (Kennedy 101). Both Garrett and Will submit in and to their romances with Hannah and Hanna respectively, giving up the power of the patriarchy—the “fooling around” (Kennedy 14) with women who are “willing to do almost anything [they] [want]” (Lauren 57)—for the power of love (Roach 183).

The appeal of the hookup reparative fantasy is understandable. It is appealing to read a book where hookups happen with men who believe “sex is all about the woman” (Kennedy, *The Score*, 7) as opposed to seeing female orgasms being “not as important” and “not a part of the deal” (Orenstein 119). It’s hopeful to see a man who starts out benefitting from hookup culture then turn away from his playboy lifestyle to love a woman. Romances where hookups

turn romantic give representations of a kinder hookup culture that is “warm as well as hot” (Wade 68) and makes up for, in part, the cost to a woman’s psyche living in a hookup culture that is not overly beneficial to her (Roach 182). But I can’t help but wonder: are romantic reparation fantasies what we want to help resolve the toll of hookup culture? They, admirably, provide an alternative to the reality of hooking up, giving it pleasurable (and orgasmic) potential for the women involved, where intimacy is not entirely removed but still a possibility. But, as Sessions Steps outlines, if hooking up comes to define a way of being, there is potential for it to act as an obstacle to real intimacy (236). There reparative fantasies are short-term fixes, focused on repairing as opposed to resolving the “dangerous,” “selfish” nature of hooking up. Could romance novels, instead, be a place to *challenge* this cultural narrative, and make sex intimate again?

### In Practice

It was inevitable that, either directly or indirectly, I would write about hookup culture. It defines my relationship with dating and, as Orenstein says, whether I participate in hooking up or not, I still have to negotiate the culture of casual sex and find comfortable ground in it (111). The romance genre offers me a space to work out, in the realm of fiction (Roach 182), my experiences and feeling surrounding hookup culture.

The question, then, was about *how* I represented it. Critical of reparative narratives of reformed playboys and no-strings sex-fests turned into loving relationships, I didn’t want to create a cathartic representation of a hookup that saw these gendered tropes reformed just for the duration of the novel. I wanted to create a story that was—even if subtly—critical of hookup culture.

The first way to do this was to establish a relationship history for Freya that involved the unsatisfactory half-commitment of a situationship. A situationship is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as: “a romantic relationship between two people who do not yet consider themselves a couple but who have more than a friendship.” It is that murky, never-ending middle ground of half-commitment that is being discussed in *Mamma Mia* articles (‘We’re going overseas together, but he’s not my boyfriend yet.’ The rise of situationships.’), Ariana Grande songs (*this situationship has to end / but I just can’t refuse / I don’t want to break up again*) and TikToks with hundreds of thousands of likes (see Figure 1 and 2).



Figure 1: TikTok on Situationships

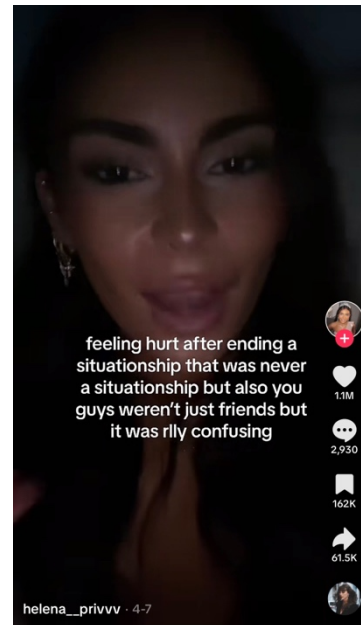


Figure 2: TikTok on Situationships

As I am yet to see this specific subset of hookup phenomena in the pages of a romance novel, I decided that Freya's (only) reference for a relationship would be in the confines of a situationship. Where "'ex'" is a more serious way to refer to him" and "man-[she's]-no-longer-being-strung-along-by" is a more apt a description (134).

I wanted James, Freya's 'ex', to be a perpetrator of every situationship trope. A caricature of a non-committal guy, who "[doesn't] want to make [Freya] [his] girlfriend" (189) and finds it easy to "kiss [Freya] on the forehead, call [her] nicknames [and] share his beer with [her]" and then "easily not text, or call" (180). A guy that Freya finds its "embarrassing" to be enamoured by (189). He would be like the men in Sessions Steps' and Orenstein's books, and the men my friends and I gossip about. He would believe that the female orgasm in a hookup was "never a given" and considered it "not as important" or a "part of the deal" (Orenstein 119), making arguments that "sex didn't need to be about orgasming" but going "silent" when asked if he would have sex if he didn't orgasm (167). He would shun Freya from his room immediately after sex, giving a "spiel": "*Soo annoying I have to get up early for work. I totally wish you could stay over. You can to get back to your place alone?*" which Freya translates to:

I don't have to get up any earlier than I usually would, sleepovers just aren't a part of this arrangement. I'll give you the semblance of consideration by seeing if you're okay to get home, but I'm *not* paying for your Uber (or even getting out of my bed to see you to the door) (201).

Having Freya's formative relationship history be defined by her non-commitment with James ultimately informs how she approaches her arrangement with Théo. When Théo, the morning after their first night together, says to Freya, "I want you to know there are no expectations," Freya immediately presumes he's trying to have the "let's-not-get-too-ahead-of-ourselves, I'm-not-looking-for-anything-serious, we-should-just-have-fun" conversation (127). She presumes, to her own detriment, that there is "no expectation for seriousness" (127) because that has always been the expectation for her 'relationships'. She has generated an "obstacle to real intimacy" (Sessions Step 236) with Théo because hookup culture, and its propensity towards nonchalance, defines her way of dating (Sessions Step 236). Even if, as Freya says, she's "not particularly confident in [her] ability to not catch more serious feelings for Théo" (127) with moments of intimacy "[clinging] to [her] heart and [making] a mark" making it hard to "*fling* them away" (180), she is trying to partake in a culture that is comfortably familiar yet ultimately unfulfilling to her.

As revealed later in the novel, when Théo first proposed the "no expectations" agreement, he meant essentially the opposite of the presumption Freya made. He meant that there were no expectations "for [her] to have sex with [Théo]," and had not, as Freya presumed, "agreed to casual" (228). Constantly reminding and committing herself to the "casual" nature of their relationship (127; 180; 187) leaves Freya "wholly unprepared" (Sessions Step 28) for seriousness, and more comfortable leaving Théo than committing to him.

If Freya had been so willing to have a three-week fling with Théo, why is it then that they don't have sex earlier in the novel? I've been asked this by my supervisor, my mother when she read an early draft of the novel, and myself. They have a supposedly "casual" arrangement, according to Freya, and a bucketload of built-up chemistry that makes Freya "giddy with want and silly with infatuation" (114). Freya even decides early into their first night together that she will "let [her]self have a night of earth-shattering sex with Théo" and "let [the] beautiful French man go down on [her] on his tattoo table" (113). Sex seems immediately on the cards for the couple, and yet they don't kiss (properly) until after spending four days together, and don't have sex until a week after the first kiss.

One reason they don't have sex earlier in the novel is because when I tried to write them having sex on their first night, it didn't feel right. It reminded me of something Christina Hobbs

(of Christina Lauren) said in a Q&A panel I attended. Explaining why, in their best seller *The Unhoneymooners*, the MCs do not have sex on the page, Hobbs said: “It’s like they were looking at us and saying *What are you guys looking at? Perverts*” (2024). It was similar for Freya and Théo and their first night together. Théo was saying to me *I’m not rushing this situation*, and Freya was saying, *I don’t really want to rush this situation, but I guess that’s just how things work, right?* When I did try and write a sex scene for Chapter 3, the characters on the page were unfamiliar to me, behaving uncharacteristically—Théo was dominant, Freya wasn’t nervous—and it felt a lot like trying to jam a key into the wrong lock.

What felt better was to have Freya try to follow a protocol she was used to and have it, as she sees it, “[fail] miserably” (124). Between her and Théo, sex would not follow the same script as her past hookups. It would happen slowly, and she would have to be patient, and it would be a new and unfamiliar space for Freya—a woman in a hookup culture—to navigate and experience. Rather than kissing expectantly “after [Théo] [wonders] if [Freya’s] lips would taste like lime” or “right after [she] [says] yes to staying [in Paris],” Freya would spend her first few days staying with Théo waiting for and wondering when they would kiss. When they do finally kiss, Freya asks Théo if she’ll “have to wait another four days before [he] feel[s] [her] up” and Théo practically says yes, telling her to have “patience” and that “good things come to those who wait” (151). Rather than rushing these moments of intimacy—kissing, intercourse, oral sex—like Freya might have done with her situationship with James, I wanted Freya to have an experience that, though ‘casual’ like she thinks it is, does not adhere to the broader cultural narrative of hooking up.

Maybe this is, in part, still a reparative fantasy. Rather than reforming hookup culture, and turning the playboy into a domesticated benevolent patriarch, you survive it. You have negotiated, in your past, the culture of casual sex—the lack of intimacy, the orgasm gap, the slut-shaming—and have now come to find its antidote: a loving relationship, inclusive of loving sex. My approach in *To Paris, with Love* is only one of endless ways in which a romance novelists can say to their readers: I know this is how ‘relationships’ are for you; I know it is unsatisfying; I know you’re hoping for a solution. There is no one way to contend with hookup culture in our romance novels, but it is the choice to contend with it, and challenge it, that offers readers an aspirational possibility.

## Chapter 4: Achieving Egalitarianism in Sex

The greatest question I'm left with, after delving into the physiological inequalities in sex, and how women—in an attempt to grasp some kind of (patriarchal) power—self-sexualise, is: how can I remedy this in my romance writing? How can I provide an alternative possibility to male-centred sexuality, where encounters are casual, women are 'hot' above all else, and penetration is the pinnacle of intimacy? What might make sex, where women don't feel the need to make sex objects of themselves, and feel beholden to patriarchal sexual scripts, possible?

An understanding of sexual subjectification, contemporary hookup culture, and reliable ways for women to orgasm is all well and good, but there is a need for additional skills to apply this knowledge (Mintz 15). My romance protagonist might know she orgasms most reliably when a pillow is under her lower back and her clitoris is being stimulated, but this is redundant information if she is not comfortable and communicative in pursuing her own pleasure. If romance is, as McCann & Roach suggest, a "prime site of imaginative solace to navigate [patriarchal] tensions" (421), how do I, in my own romance novel, represent the egalitarian possibilities of sex and sexuality?

The guiding philosophies I consciously used to pursue sexual egalitarianism in my own writing and which I found reflected—even if unintentionally—in the works of Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren came largely from two voices: Katherine Angel and bell hooks. Angel, in her book *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, makes a call to embrace vulnerability in intimacy. hooks, in *All About Love: New Visions*, explores the key qualities of her love ethic and how, in combination, they can facilitate loving (sexual) behaviour. With romance authors consciously embracing the vulnerabilities of sex, and purposefully engaging with the key tenets of a love ethic, readers, with their favourite FMCs as conduits, are empowered with representations of how they can pursue their own pleasure and have mutually enjoyable sexual experiences. I can do for my readers what Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren have done for me since I was a young teenager, and put the possibilities of (egalitarian) pleasure onto the page with Angel and hooks' ethos's as my tools.

### Vulnerability

In *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, Katherine Angel translates her academic research into an accessible book which explores how the age of #MeToo has affected female desire and

sexuality—the age that both my own novel and works of Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren are written in, set in and, inadvertently or not, reflective of. Largely, Angel opposes the burden which has been placed on women to know their own real, bodily desires (91), as the empowered sexual subject of mainstream feminism is defined by her ability to have “easily identifiable” desires that she can “summon up with ease” (111). Any ambiguity a woman may have concerning her sexuality makes her, supposedly, “guilty of her own repression” (92). Women, Angel says, are not the authority on themselves because *no one* (my emphasis), perhaps especially when it comes to sex, is ever truly an authority on themselves (93).

Many women do “desperately need to hear that they deserve to explore their own sexuality, free of pressure” (97). It is why, when London, in *Wicked Sexy Liar*, tells Luke she “want[s] to come with [him] inside [her]” (Lauren 127), and when Mia, in *Sweet Filthy Boy*, tells Ansel to suck “not so hard” as he’s going down on her and instead to suck “like [he] suck[s] on [her] lip” (Lauren 126), that women see, among the pages of a romance novel, “things they want and like that are not given to them by their partner” (Angel 97), or that they “can say no, and can also say what they like” (Angel 97).

Hanna, the FMC of *Beautiful Player*, explores her sexuality free of pressure with Will, the MMC, throughout the length of the novel. She tells the MMC:

I feel like I’m just figuring these things out. I haven’t really tried before...  
or maybe I haven’t wanted to explore it with the guys I’ve been with. But  
ever since I started hanging out with you, I can’t stop thinking about these  
things. I want to figure out what I like (Lauren 147).

Every time the characters are intimate, Hanna is vulnerable enough to ask Will to “show [her] how to do [this]” (a hand job) (Lauren 151) or to admit she “[doesn’t] know how to [have sex] with clothes on” (Lauren 185), or to declare she “*really* [doesn’t] know what [she’s] doing” (Lauren 256); to say “yeah” (Lauren 186) and “don’t stop” (Lauren 251) when it feels good. Hanna, desirous of things not given to her by other partners, is comfortable enough to say no, and to tell Will what she likes.

Each sexual encounter is “unique and has a powerful indeterminacy to it” (Angel 98), and I’m hopeful to think the breadth of unique romance narratives are proof of this. Take the other books in the *Beautiful* series by Christina Lauren: the sex in *Beautiful Player* is different to the sex in *Beautiful Bastard* is different to the sex in *Beautiful Stranger* is different to the sex in *Beautiful Secret*. Chloe and Bennet like ‘hate sex’; Sara and Max of *Beautiful Stranger* like exhibitionist sex; Hanna and Will in *Beautiful Player* like explicitly instructing one another on what to do; Ruby and Niall in *Beautiful Secret* favour non-intercourse sex acts for most of

the novel. With each unique context that is created in a romance novel, new joyful and fulfilling sexual potential is revealed (Angel 68). And it is in this sexual context, Angel insists, that our emancipatory energies should be focused (68).

Rather than “wholly discover[ing] [our sexuality] alone and then slot[ting] [it] into (...) another person’s sexuality,” Angel says, part of the joys of sex might be found in “discovering new, different ways to be touched” (98) and, central to Angel’s ethos, “being vulnerable to the unknown” (98). Sara, at the beginning of *Beautiful Stranger*, is not aware of her interest in being watched, and it is in her experiences with Max that she discovers this. In a new sexual context—being touched in a secluded corner of a club, still visible to patrons from the waist up—Max asks Sara: “What is it you like? The idea that we’re doing this here? Or that I watched you think about fucking me while you danced?” (Lauren 34). Sara, amid discovering a new, unfamiliar way to be touched, “[doesn’t] say anything, too afraid of what the answer might be” (Lauren 34). Across the course of the novel, and after a series of sexual encounters where both Max and Sara make themselves vulnerable to one another—but specifically during sex on a rooftop—Sara reveals that she “like[s] the idea of people seeing [Max] like this [intimate] with [her]” (Lauren 225), a desire she didn’t know she wanted before she met Max (Lauren 226). It is with Max, who “accepts (...) [and] embraces” (Lauren 232) Sara’s sexuality, that she has been able to discover new, different ways to be touched, saying:

I was still having a hard time wrapping my head around my newfound obsession with being watched by him—maybe even also by others—but that need pushed up like steam beneath my skin: warm, and exciting, and impossible to ignore.

Eventually, Sara, in response to a joke by Max stating they’ll “have to confine [their] snogs to bedrooms and limos now” (Lauren 343) is vulnerable enough to declare what she likes (Angel 97), stating: “I like what we do” (Lauren 343). The FMC and MMC, across the course of the novel, develop a unique context for their sexual relationship because they were willing to be vulnerable to the unknown—which, in this case, was exhibitionist sex. Neither Sara nor Max could take this desire to be watched and dovetail it to another person, another context.

In Ali Hazelwood’s *Not in Love*, the FMC, Rue, and MMC, Eli, initially attempt to slot into each other’s sexuality. Rue tries to control any sexual scenario she’s in, only engaging in casual sex with men on a dating app where a person can detail their sexual limits. Before any sexual activity happens between herself and Eli, she reminds him that “on the app [he] wrote [he’d] be fine with [her] limits” (Hazelwood 121). The limits in question being: “FYI, I don’t enjoy penetrative sex that much. If that’s a deal breaker, then we should both move on”



(Hazelwood 121). Rue, arguably, tries to control sex so, in the scenario, she is “inviolable, utterly autonomous, and in possession of firm boundaries” (Angel 99). Eli enthusiastically adapts to Rue’s boundaries, himself more receptive to discovering new ways to touch Rue—to “be so *good* to her” (Hazelwood 128). As they have sex for the first time, Eli asks:

“Can I put my fingers inside you?” he asked.

She nodded eagerly.

He showed her his hand. “How many?”

A pause. “No more than two.” (Hazelwood 129-30).

While Eli is “susceptible to the other’s [Rue’s] needs and desires” (99), asking if he can penetrate her with his fingers, asking how many fingers is okay, Rue remains committed to not testing her inviolable limits, instructing Eli to use “no more than two” (Hazelwood 129-30). It’s good—undeniably—that Rue can say yes, can establish limits when it comes to sex, and doesn’t fawn to the idea of penetration as the defining act within a sexual encounter. It is something even I can admit to being empowered by when reading. However, in committing to firm boundaries, Rue limits her ability “to take risks, to be open to the unknown” that comes from being vulnerable in sex (Angel 99).

It’s not until later in the novel as Rue is slowly “letting things in, being porous” (Angel 99), and being more receptive to Eli’s needs and desires, that Rue first answers why she doesn’t want penetrative sex. She explains that she doesn’t “actively dislike it. [She] just can’t really come like that” (Hazelwood 206), and that her experiences with intercourse “usually [lead] to two outcomes, and neither is good” (Hazelwood 206), including:

“A lot of men see penis-in-vagina sex as the end goal and forget everything else. Skip foreplay, move straight to the fucking, get their own, completely forget about their partner—which is *not* what I’m looking for. And that’s the best scenario.”

“The *best*?”

She sighed. “It’s better than them deciding that they absolutely need to get me off during the sex, which almost always ends up with them dragging it out to the point of pain. I can’t come from that, which means that we’re at a very unpleasant impasse that forces me to *fake* an orgasm just to get it over with.” (Hazelwood 206-7)

Could penetration, with a considerate partner like Eli, reveal a third, potentially pleasurable outcome for Rue? Might, as outlined in Chapter 1, intercourse be decentralised as a way to orgasm, and rather become a way to pleasure your partner? Could there be a greater joy to be had for Rue if she is vulnerable to an unknown, unique experience of penetration? This is the

representation I'd be calling for earlier in this thesis, keen to see in one of the books I regularly pick up. How might a sexual scenario like this play out? Rue and Eli can show us.

Rue is best able to be vulnerable in her penetrative experience with Eli if they establish a receptivity within their sexual encounter. Being receptive, Angel says, is a "crucial part of pleasure" where a person is "susceptible to the other's needs and desires" by "letting things in and being porous" (99). Before the sex has even begun, Rue and Eli establish a receptivity with one another. Eli suggests that Rue "might like [penetrative sex]" with him, considering how "exquisitely ambiguous" (Angel 99) this experience may be, saying:

I'd like to try, if you're up for it. If you come, good. If not, I'll still enjoy myself, and I can get you off half a dozen different ways before. And afterward (Hazelwood 208).

Rue, in response to this, doesn't continue to, as she usually would, commit to her easily identifiable desire to not have intercourse. Rather, she is receptive to Eli's needs and desires—to have "her coming with his dick inside her" (Hazelwood 207)—and replies: "You won't get offended if I don't like it?" (Hazelwood 208), indicating her willingness to discover new and different ways to touch and be touched.

Having penetrative sex does not magically act for Rue—now that Eli is her partner—as a reliable and ultimately pleasurable mode of orgasm for her. The first time Eli penetrates Rue, it lasts all of a few seconds before he "[comes], and [comes], and [*comes*]" (Hazelwood 223), not "even able to put it in [Rue] before [he] came" (Hazelwood 254). In their second penetrative encounter, Rue has already come from manual stimulation, and rather than Eli "deciding that [he] absolutely need[s] to get [her] off during the sex," like her past partners, Rue discovers of intercourse that:

It wasn't painful, or boring. The hot pressure was pleasant, as was his tight grip on [her] hips as his cock pushed in and out of [her]. The way his thrusts would become choppy and erratic before he'd remember himself and suddenly stop, as if to draw out the experience. Not an attempt to get [*Rue*] off, but for himself (Hazelwood 256).

If Rue had not been receptive to Eli's proposition to have penetrative sex, had she not been vulnerable enough to communicate her historic dislike of intercourse, Rue might not have ever discovered that "[she] liked (...): his big body moving in [hers], the stretch of him, the way he rocked into [her]" (Hazelwood 255). Though not the stereotypical joy women are expected to derive from intercourse—an orgasm—Rue, by being vulnerable in her desires, and receptive to her partner, was able to find a unique joy, and a desire of her own.

The penetrative encounters do not remain non-orgasmic in *Not in Love*. In one of the last on-page sex scenes, Eli, receptive to Rue mid-sex, responds to her comment about how she “want[s] [him] to feel good” (Hazelwood 279), by saying:

“Okay, new plan.” He guided her off him. “I’m going to turn you around.”

“Around?”

“Yeah. That way I should be able to...” He arranged her to face the wall, then guided her until her palms were on the headboard (...) “I can control my thrusts better. And I can touch you more easily.” (...) “And even if you don’t come, at least you can...”

He circled the heel of his hand against her clit first, then his fingers (...)

“How are you—”

“Good,” she exhaled. “I like it.

“Yeah?” He touched her some more. “Is it working for you?”

She nodded (...) “I think maybe I could...” (Hazelwood 279).

This is not the idealised version of patriarchal sex discussed in Chapter 1, where an inability to achieve orgasm from penetration simply disappears amongst the pages of a romance. Instead, a penetrative orgasm—or, as Eli and Rue put it, “[coming] around [his] cock” (Hazelwood 280)—is facilitated by communication, a tool which makes the risks and the unknowns of sex less daunting. It is, alongside being an erotic encounter, an educative one, saying: we can work together to find mutual pleasure; we can adapt to create our own pleasurable context.

“Sex,” like Eli and Rue show readers, “is a conversation,” Angel writes (110). This literally occurs in *Not in Love*, from Eli explaining what position he wants to put Rue in and why, to when, ahead of their first penetrative encounter, the couple discuss safe words:

“(...) Do we need a safe word or something?” [Rue asks.]

“Why don’t we just... communicate, for now? I tell you what I’d like you to do, what *I* would like to do, and you can tell me no, or ask me to stop.

Does that sound good?”

“It sounds better than screaming ‘broccoli’ because you’re pulling my hair too hard.” (Hazelwood 214-15)

These conversations—dirty, informative, or otherwise—are endlessly facilitated by romance. They bring the vulnerability of each sexual encounter to the forefront. It allows Will, as Hanna is giving him a hand job, to say, “Squeeze it (...) I like it pretty hard” and for Hanna to wonder “It doesn’t hurt?” (Lauren 154). It means Allie, in *The Score*, as Dean is going down on her, can change the pace, telling him to go “slower” and “do it in little circles. No, not that much pressure. Softer...” (Kennedy 137). Seeing these romance MCs try to locate their own pleasure,

with fumbling conversations and open-mindedness makes the vulnerability of exploring your desires seem less daunting. Maybe, because I've seen it's possible, I could tell my partner to go slower, like Allie did. If they can do it, maybe I could try.

Hazelwood, beyond the pages of *Not in Love*, is a strong advocate for communication. Like clockwork, in all of her novels, there is always the question, in almost the exact same wording: "Can I fuck you?" In *The Love Hypothesis*, Adam asks Olive twice: "Can I fuck you?" after he goes down on her (Hazelwood 272) and again after Olive asks him to clarify what he said (Hazelwood 272). In *Love on the Brain*, Levi asks Bee, in the exact same wording: "Can I fuck you?" as he's kissing her neck (Hazelwood 238). In *Love, Theoretically*, Jack frames it as a comment at first, saying "I want to fuck you," (Hazelwood 310) before rephrasing it as a plea, "Please, let me fuck you" (Hazelwood 310). Even as the characters are being intimate—mid hand-job, post-cunnilingus—there is never the assumption that they'll fulfil the patriarchal sexual script that leads to intercourse. The communication remains active, and the couple continues to negotiate the conversation of their sex.

With sex as a conversation, with *literal* conversations a part of them, we can move away from a "fixation on yes and no" and rather help navigate "the uncertain, unclear space between yes and no" (Angel 111). Quoting Christina Tesoro, Angel encourages the capacity for women to say "I'm not sure (...) To say, touch me a little longer first. Touch me at all. Be gentle. Go slow" (110).

In *Love Theoretically* we see this exploration of the unknown. As Jack is manually stimulating Elsie, he asks: "What do you want?" (Hazelwood 283). Internally, Elsie thinks: "I want everything, and nothing will ever be enough" (Hazelwood 283), unsure of what it is, exactly, that she desires, and would find satisfying. Prompted again by Jack, Elsie says: "I don't know" (Hazelwood 283). Rather than having to declaratively state: I want you to finger me, I want you to move faster, or slower, or go down on me, Elsie can communicate her uncertainty and adopt a "trial and error" (Hazelwood 282, 284) approach. Throughout the sex scene, Jack continues to ask questions: "Should I put a finger inside you?" to which Elsie says she doesn't "usually" do it (Hazelwood 284) but agrees to trial it. Elsie's wants and desires are never presumed by Jack because she has, at some point, enjoyed something he does. Even though her "entire body blooms with heat, [and] thrums from the intensity" (Hazelwood 285) of being fingered with one finger, doesn't stop Jack from asking "Two?" (Hazelwood 286) and "One finger okay? Or you want more?" (Hazelwood 286) before changing the rhythm of the encounter. It gives Elsie the chance to decline, saying he has "really big hands" (Hazelwood 286).

Elsie's desires do not need to be steadfast. She can say she only wants one finger inside her at one point, and then suggest they "try" two fingers (Hazelwood 286). It is in not fixating on yeses or noes that lets this partnership learn to navigate sex, but rather in taking risks and being open to the unknown that joy and transformation can be experienced—that Elsie can have an "explosive, crashing, nuclear" orgasm (Hazelwood 288). It is Hazelwood's representation of fluid sexual encounters, which involve ongoing communication and FMCs embracing new modes of pleasure, that the potential of romance is made clear to me: to break down the illusion of scripted, presumptive sexuality and prove the unique possibilities of every sexual encounter.

The vulnerability Angel advocates for—of receptivity, and uncertainty, and exploration—may ultimately help us, in the writing and reading of romance fiction, "give up the illusion that any of us have real, or total, power when it comes to pleasure and sex" (109). Quoting Lynne Segal, Angel posits that "in sex, if we are lucky, 'the great dichotomies slide away'" (109). That, in a utopic horizon, there is no separation "of male and female, of giver and receiver, of active and passive, of self and other" (Angel 109).

Henry, across the breadth of her novels, sets an admirable precedent of how, in the writing of sex scenes, romance writers can depict the sliding away of dichotomies Segal coined, and Angel endorses. There is, when Henry writes, a dissolving of roles—an enthusiastic mutuality I aspire to in my own writing. Consider when Daphne and Miles, the main characters in *Funny Story*, have sex for the second time:

We move slowly, heavily, and every time one of us reaches a tipping point, we turn. Rearrange. Find new ways to hold each other, to move together. Lying on our sides, him behind me, his arm draped over my hip and his hand tucked between my thighs, he murmurs my name, like it's an exclamation, the sound you make after a perfect sip of wine (*Funny Story* 302)

Could I, with any certainty, say Miles is giving and Daphne is receiving? Is Miles active and Daphne passive? Is Miles the other to Daphne's self? It's in Henry's purposeful ambiguity of who is where, of what exactly is being done (are they having intercourse? Mutually masturbating? Manually stimulating each other?) that any definitive roles are made redundant.

Henry's stylistic commitment ambiguity continues across her books. When Poppy and Alex, the main characters of *You and Me on Vacation*, first have sex, Henry writes:

And then I'm dragging him against me, and he's roughly lifting my thigh against his hip, and I'm sinking my fingers into his wide back, my teeth

into his neck, and his hands are massaging my chest, my ass. His mouth curves down my collarbones, sliding under my bikini, teeth careful on my nipple, and I'm feeling him through his shorts, then reaching into them, loving how he tenses and shifts (255).

There is a mutuality here: when Alex “[lifts] [her] thigh against his hip,” Poppy “[sinks] [her] fingers into his wide back” (Henry 255); when Poppy bites “[her] teeth into his neck,” Alex’s “hands are massaging [her] chest” (Henry 255). There is no passive Poppy or active Alex. Both characters give and receive simultaneously. In *Book Lovers*, Henry does not waver on her steadfast stylistic commitment in writing sex scenes, writing of Nora and Charlie:

As we move together, the world goes soft and dark, everything shrinking to the points where our bodies meet. His hands massaging me, his mouth unravelling mine, my nails digging into the contours of him to urge him closer than our bodies let us get (305).

Once again: Is Nora receiving and Charlie giving? Are either Nora or Charlie passive in this moment? There is—whether done consciously or not by Henry—a metaphorization of the unknown vulnerability opens us up to (Angel 99). The reader might not ever be totally certain of the exact mechanics of each EmHen couple’s sex, and there is overall less objectivity than one might see in works like Kennedy’s, where the exact details of when her “sex contracts, milking his hard shaft” (*The Deal* 259) and when he makes “quick, shallow thrusts” and “skim[s] one hand down her body, grazing her tits, dancing over her belly, until [he] find[s] her clit and rub[s] it with [his] index fingers” (*The Score* 263) are given. Henry’s prose tells me, tells readers, that sex—when *good*—is defined by the action of receptivity: reciprocity. Henry dissolves, again and again, the passive/active, giver/receiver, male/female dynamics often assumed in sexual scenarios and creates an image “of dissolution, of exchange, of confusion and merging identities,” where the “association of receptivity with women and an activity with men” is softened (Angel 109). Where vulnerability, as Angel advocates, presides.

### Love Ethic

The second guiding philosophy is bell hooks’ love ethic and its potential to contribute to the writing of kinder, more caring intimacy. hooks, in *All About Love: New Visions*, says that “we are all affected by the images we consume and the state of mind we are in when watching them” (96)—or, in this case, reading them. It’s important, to both hooks and me, that our media not “[dwell] on and [perpetuate] an ethic of domination and violence” (95). With romance novels

being the “only domain in which women speak of love with any degree of authority” (xxiii) it is important, surely, that we do not present (sexual) behaviours in romance which are singularly caring or considerate as loving. Loving, hooks advocates, is a *combination* of “care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect” (8). How, then, might these things come together in a romance to create purposefully loving (sexual) scenarios? To tell the reader: sex can, and likely should, include all these qualities.

Care, hooks asserts, is a dimension of love, but simply giving it does not mean we are loving (40). Yet, under patriarchy, it is often assumed that love can be present in a situation where one group or individual dominates another (hooks 40). Male domination of women “stands in the way of love” (xxiv), with erotic appeal often attributed to gender stereotypes which depict men as dominant and strong, and women as soft and submissive (Eaton 678). If there is, in some capacity, domination by a MMC to a FMC in a sex scene, can we call this loving? Can he spank her “until her skin is warm and pink” and still consider it loving when he “soothe[s] the flushed skin with [his] palm” (Lauren, *Dirty Rowdy Thing*, 135)? Can he say he’ll “press [her] into the mattress (...) and fuck [her] ass without lube” and think it’s loving for him to assure her that “if something bothers [her], *anything*, tell [him]” (Hazelwood, *Not in Love*, 215)? Surely this is not what women are saying with the authority they’re given in the romance genre. These actions are the opposite to nurturance and care, and yet continue to perpetrate how women settle for care and affection, usually mingled with a degree of unkindness (hooks 10) in the hopes it increases the peace, pleasure and playfulness in their relationships (hooks 12).

In *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, hooks outlines that there is an attachment, most often from men, to “holding power over women in the sexual arena” (67). Often, this means that many women are “settling for equality and power in the public arena while continuing to conform to sexist and gender roles at home or, most importantly, in the bedroom” (hooks 67). This dynamic is common amongst romance novels. The FMC is established as the man’s equal in the public arena: Bee, in *Love on the Brain*, is a neuroscientist hired to work alongside engineer Levi on a collaborative project where she holds equal weight; Chloe, in *Beautiful Bastard*, despite working in a subordinate position to Bennett, can handle Bennett’s “excessive perfectionist” expectations by “perform[ing] better, work[ing] hard, and do[ing] whatever it [takes] to get the job done” (Lauren 45) alongside being an MBA scholarship student. Despite establishing these women as highly capable equals of the MMCs, when in private, “in the bedroom,” as hooks puts it (*Communion* 67), there is the return of the “benevolent patriarch” (hooks 165), who, though kinder and gentler, is still a patriarch all the

same, dishing out orders and setting rules. Levi, in *Love on the Brain*, orders Bee to “slow down” and tells her she’s a “good girl” when she follows (Hazelwood 237); he “hold[s] [her] down,” but thankfully does so “gently” (Hazelwood 259). Bennett, in *Beautiful Bastard*, is, by Chloe’s admission, “demanding” (Lauren 28), endlessly ordering her during their sex scenes: “Look at me,” is his first order, before adding: “Ask me to make you come” (Lauren 25). Even if, in public, their dynamic is equitable, within the private sphere there is the continued commitment to sexist and gender roles that privileges male power over women and maintains the woman’s sexuality as subservient to the man’s (Eaton et al. 27), like Levi controlling the pace of their intercourse, or Bennett being the authority of Chloe’s orgasms.

This dynamic of public-sphere ally and private-sphere patriarch is particularly present in *Sweet Filthy Boy* by Christina Lauren. Ansel is a “really nice guy” MMC (Lauren 93) who keeps his promises and respects Mia’s decisions. In the sexual sphere, however, the couple assume stereotypical gendered dynamics to spice up their sex: Mia is a maid, and Ansel is her stern employer who punishes her for not doing a good enough job of cleaning his windows (Lauren 178); Ansel is an overworked professor who has to reprimand his student, Mia, for breaking into his house, declaring:

“Your body is for my pleasure,” he tells [Mia], eyes dark. “You’re in my house, little thing. I’ll take whatever I want” (Lauren 270).

Ansel’s “pretending” (Lauren 264) to be “hard and calculating” (Lauren 263) and “stern” (Lauren 264) with Mia instead of continuing his usual public sphere softness, “sunshine” (Lauren 263) and equity into the bedroom creates an incongruence with hooks’ love ethic. Rather than a continuation of the care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust his character participates in outside of the bedroom, Ansel, for the benefit of Mia and the confidence she finds in inhabiting the “easy, obedient place” (Lauren 181) of maid, student or stranger, reverts to the benevolent patriarch who “take[s] whatever [he] wants” (Lauren 270) from his sexual partner. It is not enough to see our FMCs experience an egalitarian relationship outside of the sexual arena only to revert to the stereotypical dynamic of dominant and submissive, or powerful and powerless, when back in bed. Can’t sex see the same loving treatment that their career gets?

“Enlightened women,” hooks says, ultimately prefer “erotic satisfaction within a context where there is loving, intimate connection” (176), rather than sex which is singularly focused on sexual satisfaction. I have no doubt that she’s right. Sex can only be made better when intimacy—which involves “deep connection, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love” (Shumway 27)—is involved. However, I like to think that sex



can be loving as hooks describes it without the need for a distinct “intimate connection” (176). That even in the adventurous, intensely emotional moments (Teo 471) of early romance that we can approach sex in a loving way, and can “openly and honestly express care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust” (hooks 14) without deep intimacy.

Often, sex in romance happens before any deep intimacy is declared by either the FMC or MMC, and yet romance authors still represent sex as loving. Almost all the sex in my novel (excluding the ending sex scene in Chapter 22) takes place before any formal intimate connection is made between Freya and Théo, but this did not mean that I wanted the sex before they more intimately commit to one another to be devoid of loving behaviour.

In Emily Henry’s *Funny Story*, Miles and Daphne have sex while Daphne is still committed to moving away from Waning Bay, and Miles is still in “roommate” territory (142) and not yet someone Daphne has formed an intimate connection with. This doesn’t mean that when Miles fingers Daphne on their flat share couch early in their story that the sex isn’t loving. Rather, we still see the actions that hooks asserts are characteristic of loving behaviour (hooks 14). Miles respects Daphne when she says she’s “not ready for [sex],” agreeing it’s “way too soon” (Henry 140); Daphne trusts Miles enough to act “like someone else, someone who does this all the time” (Henry 142); they’re affectionate to one another, like when Miles says Daphne is “so sexy” and Daphne says, “[he] [is] too” (141). Even after the encounter has ended, Miles is respectful, flashing Daphne an “apologetic smile” when he has to step away to take a phone call. When reading the scene, it’s unlikely you could say Miles and Daphne are simply being caring or considerate to one another. There is an underlying ethic of love.

In a culture where hooking up—i.e. having sex before there is an intimate connection—is the norm (as explored in Chapter 2.5), communicating to your readers that casual sex can still action a love ethic shows that it is not impossible to expect your partner for the next few minutes, few hours, few nights, to treat you with care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust. These qualities are not exclusively actionable with an intimate connection; they are qualities which can underly any sexual encounter.

In *Sweet Filthy Boy* by Christina Lauren, Mia and Ansel have a one “wild night” (Lauren 47) in Las Vegas together. Though largely for the purposes of sexual satisfaction, Ansel is still committed to “figuring out how to give [Mia] pleasure” (Lauren 47) and is the kind of lover Mia describes as “attentive” (Lauren 48). Throughout their entire encounter, and the following day, they continually openly and honestly communicate to each other: Ansel declares Mia “tell [him] what [she] need[s]” (Lauren 48) and Mia trusting him enough, declaratively “not nervous or intimidated” (Lauren 35) to “[tell] him almost immediately” (Lauren 48).

Ansel, when Mia changes her answer to the question “Do you want me to stop?” from “No” to “Yes” to “No. Don’t stop,” respects her uncertainty and “[freezes]” his touch (Lauren 38) the moment she first says no. Even in their earliest of sexual encounters, expressly casual and brief, it is not simply caring or considerate; there is also respect, communication, and trust, not matter the level of familiarity with one another.

Like Angel, when she says particular sex acts do not necessarily denote vulnerability or strength (108), I am not sure I can say, definitively, what sex is loving and what is not. Is Ansel, when he asks Mia to “tell [him] what [she] need[s]” (Lauren, *Sweet Filthy Boy*, 82) being loving, or just respectful? Is it loving when Wynn, in *Happy Place*, asks Harriet, before they have intercourse, if she’s “sure about this?” (Henry 292), or simply caring? Must we see, across the pages of a sex scene, the complete and total fulfilment of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility and respect for the sex to be considered loving? Or is there an indeterminate quality to these scenes that, even if knowledge or responsibility or any of the other aspects of loving are not expressly shown, we can still call the sex loving?

What might characterise a loving sexual encounter most formatively is what hooks calls the foundation of intimacy: trust (41). If without trust, as hooks asserts, “genuine connection cannot take place” (41), maybe it is exact behaviour, before commitment, or care, or knowledge, or responsibility, or respect that must lead, and inform, a loving sexual encounter. In *The Deal*, Garrett approaches having sex with Hannah—a victim of sexual assault—in a loving way, despite, at this point in the novel, not yet being in love. Paralleling hooks’ sentiment that “trust is the foundation of intimacy,” Garrett declares, after Hannah finds it difficult to relax into the sexual encounter:

“Sex is all about trust,” he says. “Even if you love the other person, even if it’s just a hookup, it still takes a serious amount of trust to open yourself up and let yourself go to that vulnerable place, you know? And there’s nothing more vulnerable than coming.” (Kennedy 215)

“Unclothed, [and] injurable, both physically and psychologically,” as Angel puts it (101), sex is the vulnerable experience Garrett describes it to be. In getting sexually intimate with Garrett, Hannah has not just revealed her body, but her past trauma: a sexual assault that impacts her ability to orgasm, specifically under the male gaze. It is important, then, that trust is involved, as Garrett says, and serves as the guiding ethos for their intimacy. However, it is one thing for Garrett to say sex is about trust, and another to put that feeling into action. Garrett must put words into action (hooks 13) so he can create a loving sexual scenario for Hannah and himself to engage in. The loving behaviour Garrett then engages in is to step away from Hannah—

literally. Rather than touching each other, he suggests she “makes herself come in front of [him]” and he will “make [him]self come in front of [her]” (216). In this, he actions his trustworthiness and facilitates other conditions of loving behaviour: to be caring when he asks, “Does that feel good?” (Kennedy 219) and encouraging communication by asking “What are you thinking about, [Hannah]?” (Kennedy 220); to be respectful and responsible when he says no to going from mutual masturbation straight to intercourse, encouraging they take “baby steps” (Kennedy 222) in the exploration of her sexuality. It’s in leading with trust that the loving sex between Garrett and Hannah is made possible.

There is often a shift in the representations of sex when the characters do finally declare their love and commit to nurturing an intimate connection with one another. The previous sexual encounters “[lay] the groundwork for [the couple] to be at ease with each other sexually” (hooks 174) when they do acknowledge their intimate connection. Simply because the sex becomes *more* loving doesn’t mean their sex without the intimate connection was not loving. It is in approaching their sex before ‘I love you’ from a foundation of care, knowledge and respect that the declaration of romance love actually *intensifies* romance (hooks 174) and loving behaviour.

Often, the sex scene itself acts as a tool for romance authors to express a shift from being *loving* to being *in love*. In the *Sweet Filthy Boy* sex scenes that precede a declaration of love sex is described as “wild, and frantic” (Lauren 271), “hot and languid” (Lauren 181), with Mia saying she feels “lust and pain and need and relief” (Lauren 271) when intimate with Ansel. Compared to these earlier sexual encounters, the descriptions of Mia and Ansel’s sex shifts after they “like” (like’ acting as proxy for the word ‘love’ in the context of the scene) one another. Alongside the descriptions of a “punishing rhythm” (Lauren 298) and “overwhelming” orgasm” (Lauren 299) is the added intensity of loving, with Mia, being “touched by someone [she] trust[s] with [her] body, trust[s] with [her] heart” (Lauren 297). The MCs already loving sex is a tool to show how an intimate connection intensifies their romance, with Mia saying of their sex:

I feel like he’s taking over every part of me: filling my vision with the things he’s doing, reaching into my chest and making my heart beat so hard and fast it’s terrifying and thrilling in equal measure (Lauren 298).

The erotic satisfaction, in conjunction with a commitment to intimacy, intensifies for Mia (and, though not privy to his inner-monologue, likely for Ansel too). It is not that she prefers the sex within the context of their declared ‘like’ for each other, like hooks says of supposed

“enlightened women” (176), but that she can enjoy it *more*, with intimacy that exceeds loving sexual satisfaction and “[takes] over” (Lauren 298) her body.

In Henry’s *Funny Story*, the declaration of commitment between Daphne and Miles is punctuated by a sex scene. Their development from loving lovers to in love partners happens when Daphne says she “want[s] all [the good and bad] parts of [Miles]” to which he returns the sentiment, saying “they want [her] too” (Henry 300). The declaration sits between two comparable, but different sex scenes. The formative sex is “tender and delicate” (Henry 294) and makes not only Daphne’s body “come apart” but her “heart [split] at the seams” (Henry 294) as she’s “vulnerable” and “so unexpectedly and wholly at his mercy” (Henry 295). The sex evolves—intensifies, as hooks says—with Daphne, in the successive sex scene, describing their intimacy as:

(...) good, and fun, and maybe even funny. I’m surprised how my chest keeps twinging like my *feelings* have too much weight, and my ribcage might crack under them (...) Like there’s no boundary between us, like he’s in my mind and heart and soul (*Funny Story* 303).

It is not as though Daphne prefers the sex she has with Miles after the declaration of their intimate connection. There is largely not much difference between how the former sex scene is described from the latter, but rather an evolution of one to the other: the former splits her heart at the seams, and in the following Miles is *in* her mind and heart and soul; they’re tender and delicate in the former, and in the latter their intimacy has evolved to leave no boundary between them. In such close positioning in the novel, the sex scenes serve as tools to show how loving sex can only be intensified by the intimate connection—not changed, or bettered, or preferred by the enlightened woman FMC.

Mass media has the potential—and, oftentimes, the ability—to portray images that reflect love’s reality (hooks 95). Sex, as we see it among the pages of romance, can show us more than sexual satisfaction, can avoid reverting to patriarchal dynamics, and can show how sex can be loving before any intimate connection has been forged. If they fuck in the first chapter, like Sara and Max in *Beautiful Stranger*, it can be, from the outset, loving. If he respects her as a scientist in their professional environment, like Levi does of Bee in *Love on the Brain*, then he can bring that respect (and care and affection and commitment and trust) into the bedroom and leave the benevolent patriarch at the door. hooks love ethic is not just a philosophy; it is the foundation for egalitarian sexual intimacy.

## In Practice

I read *All About Love: New Visions* and *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* at the beginning of my candidature. From the outset of my research and writing, these philosophies functioned as tools for me to achieve the representations of egalitarian sexual intimacy I wanted in my own novel. I could *literally* demand of myself that my chosen form of mass media—the popular romance novel—reflect love’s reality (hooks 95). I could ensure that I wrote of the pleasure that there is to be had in vulnerability (Angel 99). I wanted the receptivity and exploration of Angel’s vulnerability ethos, and the care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility and respect of hooks’ love ethic to be defining qualities of my sex scenes.

Freya, throughout the novel, is largely vulnerable. She is taking a risk—or, as she calls it, doing “something dumb” (117)—by staying with Théo in Paris. There is an overall openness to the unknown as Freya explores not just Paris, but her intimacy with Théo. She does not have “easily identifiable” desires that she can “summon up with ease” (Angel 111). Each sexual encounter Freya has with Théo is explorative, and an exercise in the pleasure that Angel says is possible when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the unknown (98). I didn’t want Freya to know, in exact terms, what she wanted from sex. I didn’t want the sex between her and Théo to be predetermined by previous experiences, as opposed to developing within a unique context full of sexual potential specific to the couple. As Angel asserts, the fantasy of total self-knowledge is not only a fantasy: it’s a nightmare (114). Would sex between Freya and Théo truly have been as loving, as vulnerable, as pleasurable, if each of them entered into the scenario with a commitment to previous pleasures? If they had immediately denied the opportunity to let each other in: *Don’t kiss my neck. I don’t like blow jobs. I just don’t think my clitoris is very sensitive.*

Freya often refers to her previous attempts at pleasure with her ex-situationship, James. Historically, she has unsuccessfully attempted to slot her sexuality into her partner’s sexuality (Angel 98), with coming existing “independent of sex” with “no partner (...) [intertwining] the two (sex and orgasming)” (167). Instead, her partner argued that sex “didn’t need to be about orgasming” (167) only to always privilege his own orgasm, and never allowing the vulnerability for Freya (along with himself) to discover new, different ways to be touched (Angel 98).

“Often ashamed that [she] didn’t have the confidence to take [her] pleasure into [her] own hands” (167), Freya decides to be honest with Théo when he asks: “Do you not think, sometimes, it is like you have died after you have come?” (166).

‘I suppose I wouldn’t know.’

Théo frowned. ‘You have had sex before, yes?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But not with a partner that cared about my pleasure.’

With little room to embrace vulnerability with her past partners, Freya lacked the confidence to tell them that she “didn’t like that position” or “how he kept pushing [her] face down into the mattress” or that “he was actually rubbing [her] pubic bone” (167). Alternatively, with Théo, Freya is in a loving scenario—where Théo cares enough to ask about her orgasm and commits to learning what feel good for her, respects her honesty about her sexual experience<sup>††††</sup>—where embracing vulnerability is second nature. Freya decides she has “no interest in faking [pleasure] for [Théo]” (167) and is vulnerable enough to finally speak to the pleasure she previously shied away from. Encouraged by a loving partner—Théo—who she trusts, Freya is able to take her pleasure into her own hands and share her wants and desires with Théo as they first have sex. The entire scene is Freya “discovering new, different ways to be touched” (Angel 98).

A strength of vulnerability, Angel advocates, is women learning to say “maybe. To say, I’m not sure” (Tesoro; Angel 97) alongside their ability to “say no, and (...) also say what they like” (Angel 97). Freya, for the first time, is encouraged to “ask for what [she] want[s]” and to “tell [Théo] what feels good” (168). It is in Théo being receptive to Freya’s needs and desires that she feels encouraged, and comfortable enough, to embrace vulnerability, and give voice to her pleasure, saying:

‘I don’t know—’ I choked a little as he pressed his mouth full to me,  
mimicking what he would usually do to my lips.

‘Is this good?’

(...) ‘Yes,’ I managed.

(...) ‘That,’ I near whimpered. It felt momentous: to ask for my pleasure,  
and to have Théo give it enthusiastically right to me (168).

The “giddy reward” (Angel 99) of releasing her past experiences, of “taking risks, [of being] open to the unknown” (Angel 99) is pleasure in sex for Freya, and the tying of sex and orgasming together that she’s never experienced. Might Freya have had an orgasm that “[rolls] steadily through [her] body like [it’s] been hiding and Théo [has] found it” (169) if Freya had not trust Théo enough to safely say “I don’t know” (168)? Could the same pleasure have been navigated to, found, pulled from her, if there was no room for expressing uncertainty?

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<sup>††††</sup> Albeit these are what I consider bare minimum considerations, hence the importance of including them.

I wonder if, in this moment, it would have been more powerful for me to have Freya say “no” when first asked if what he is doing is good. If, instead of Théo figuring out a way to touch Freya independently of her instruction, that there was more conversation and uncertainty to be had. Instead, Freya might say:

It wasn’t *good*, but ‘bad’ wouldn’t be an apt adjective, either.

‘It’s...’ I tried to be polite, at first. But would polite get me to the orgasm

Théo wanted to give me? ‘No.’

Maybe if he...

‘Harder,’ I said. ‘Suck harder.’

Théo complied, tugging my body—if possible—even tighter to his mouth, pressing his tongue heavy against my clit.

There is, I believe, a courage in saying “no” as opposed to forfeiting to a yes. I assume, in Freya’s previous encounters with James that I’ve not detailed in *To Paris, with Love*, that a ‘yes’ would have been easier than saying no and being considered, as Srinivisan puts it in *The Right to Sex*, “a blue-balling tease” (28) for not complying with his arousal. Therefore, a ‘no’ from Freya in this scenario would have been more liberatory for Freya, finally pursuing her desire rather than denying it for the sake of her partner.

This “no” would have, I believe, acted more effectively to show a woman exploring her sexuality, and reflect a moment between the MCs of Christina Lauren’s *Sweet Filthy Boy* that was formative in showing me a woman that, as Angel puts it, “can say no, and can also say what they like” (97). Ansel is, early in the novel, going down on Mia (not dissimilar to Théo in this scene), and she feels he’s sucking “too much” (Lauren 174), to which she “[finds] the bravery to tell him”: “Not so hard (...) Like you suck on my lips” (Lauren 174)

I remember reading this as an impressionable fourteen-year-old. I saw, in the pages of my light-hearted read, a woman telling a man how to please her. It wasn’t an encounter where he knew immediately, and perfectly, how to touch her. Instead of tolerating how he was touching her, she gave voice to how *she* wanted to be touched, and he listened. This was monumental to me.

I said in the Chapter 1 ‘In Practice’ section that I found the sex scenes difficult to write. Hoping to achieve the same magic of the sex scenes in books by *New York Times* bestsellers Christina Lauren, I was daunted by the number of factors I wanted to see intersected in a sex scene: writing with reverence to clitoral stimulation, not resorting to writing the MMC as a benevolent patriarch, seeing the dissolution of active/passive and dominant/submissive, a woman who was comfortable enough to pursue her pleasure without self-sexualising, all the

while giving the reader a giddy, warm feeling that makes them kick their legs in excitement. It's intimidating. I usually favour fade-to-black scenes, where the scene ends mid-make out and happens off the page. But I couldn't—and didn't want to—shy away from putting sex on the page and writing it like I hoped to read it. Understandably, as I continue to think through my writing in this exegesis, I second-guess myself and wonder if I should change the sex scene so there is a “no” involved, so the pleasure is not so easily stumbled upon for Freya, and shown to the reader as a process, a journey. But, nonetheless, Freya still has a moment of uncertainty when she declares she doesn't know (168). She still, when she finds what feels good, is confident enough to say “yes” (168). And that feels true to Angel's encouragement for women to “say no, and (...) also say what they like” (97).

The vulnerability of each encounter in *To Paris, with Love* is, like many romance novels, facilitated by entertaining, informative, and dirty conversation which brings a literal effect to Angel's assertion that “sex is a conversation” (110). Dialogue has acted as a tool, among the pages of my book's sex scenes, to navigate the “uncertain, unclear space between yes and no” (Angel 111). Freya and Théo have conversations regarding sex both in and out of the bedroom. In the streets of Montmartre, they agree that “penetration is not needed for sex to be sex” (172); when Freya first sits on Théo's face, he encourages her “ask for what [she] wants” and “tell [him] what feels good” (168). Each conversation clarifies a dimension of their sexual intimacy that helps them be more fully vulnerable with one another, and allow them to encounter the “depths, surprises, and new avenues” (Angel 110) for sexual pleasure.

Across all the sex scenes, I wanted to give a voice to the awkward, fumbling moments that feel monumentally vulnerable, but I specifically wanted to do this in the second sex scene, where intercourse occurs. I wanted the sex to include when you ask for a condom, when you need a moment to get used to the feeling, when you want to move into a different position, or would prefer a faster or slower pace. Putting these small conversations on the page was particularly important to show how, in embracing vulnerability, and suspending embarrassment, a couple can find pleasure in sex. I could have easily omitted the moment that Freya briefly says “Condom” (199). It's such a brief beat that, if anything, deters the pace of the scene only slightly. But that makes it clear that it's even more important: it's only a small line of dialogue that, as Emily Henry says in her interview with the *Shameless* podcast, communicates that “the women should feel safe with her partner” (Goonetillake 12:12) and is comfortable enough to ask for protection.

One conversation I was adamant in putting on the page was the first moment of penetration. As explored in Chapter 1, it's usually written as a momentarily pleasurable



moment, creating a reparative fantasy of sex where intercourse is just as reliable at delivering pleasure for women as it is for men. Alternatively, I didn't want it to be perfect—a fantasy—with Théo sliding into a perfectly wet and aroused vagina in a way that immediately produces pleasure for Freya. I wanted Freya to be honest enough with Théo to admit to a moment of discomfort, and to ask for the time to adjust and accommodate; I wanted to demystify penetration as immediately enjoyable. Dialogue was the best tool to do this. Freya asks of Théo, just after they “[guide] the length of him into [her] with twin moans and breathy gasps” (199).

‘Be still for just a moment?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘OK.’

I focused on the feel of him inside of me, stretching and filling. The slight burn as I adjusted to accommodate him. Théo groaned as I did a testing swirl of my hips, his head falling forward onto my shoulder.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You *squeezed*,’ he answered.

‘Oh.’ I giggled. ‘Like this?’ I squeezed again.

He bit softly into the meat of my shoulder.

‘You cannot ask me to *be still* and then do that.’

‘Then move,’ I said. ‘I’m ready.’ (199)

I’m glad this moment uncertainty is amongst the pages of my book and serves as representation of how vulnerability can still be fun, and funny, and a little selfish. You can ask your partner not to move, and he can respect that request, and you can “[giggle]” about it after, tease them with another squeeze of your Kegel muscle, and then delve further into discovering your pleasure together. I do believe, however, I could have used dialogue, like the above extract, to my advantage more, and put additional moments where Freya wasn’t sure, or Théo uncertain, about how they were going about their pleasure. There could have been more of the moments Angel references: the “I’m not sure,” the “touch me slower,” the “be gentle” moments that would, I believe, show the exquisite ambiguity of Angel’s vulnerability ethos (98; 110). Would being more didactic, and inclusive of every ‘harder’, ‘slower’, ‘kind of’, ‘softer’, been better? When Théo asks if Freya is “OK?” with his “steady pace” and “deft finger [circling] around [her] clit, moving in sync with [his] hips” (199), should I have given Freya more of a moment to determine the pleasure? Should she have said, “try it slower” or “touch me harder,” or is her nod of approval enough? I’d have to rewrite the sex scene for any kind of answer and reassure myself that putting everything I read into practice may not be totally achievable—certainly not

in my first time writing a full-length romance novel—and it leaves only future potential for myself and what I want to achieve out of my writing of sexual pleasure.

While *actual* conversations as a tool to communicate Angel's vulnerability ethos was effective, I wanted also to take the idea as sex as a conversation and metaphorize it. Written on a sticky note the first time I read "Sex is a conversation" in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (110), I realised there was figurative potential to this statement, and wrote on that fluoro pink piece of paper: "Conversation sex metaphor?" Freya and Théo's intimacy would be comparable to a great conversation, mutual and communicative, where neither person is afraid to reveal their vulnerabilities, and every sentence is more promising than the next. When Théo says "goodbye" to her lips with a kiss, he moves to "run his mouth over parts of [Freya's] body he [hasn't] met yet" (197):

He greeted one of my breasts with the palm of my hand and the other with the wet slide of his mouth. He acquainted himself with the plane of my stomach by murmuring sweet nothings into the skin (197).

Metaphorizing sex as a conversation speaks to Angel's assertion that, like anything social, sex is "a process, a development, an unfolding" (110). At first, there's the introduction, as Théo greets Freya's breasts with his mouth, and acquaints himself with the plane of her stomach (197). Then, as the MCs engage in intercourse, the conversation of their sex progresses past small talk to the depths of communication, their bodies "[speaking]" and "[listening]" to one another. "As [Freya's] head [falls] back, Théo [kisses] up the length of [her] throat;" when Théo's head "[nestles] between the valley of [Freya's] breasts," she "[tugs] his hair between her fingers;" Freya can "[rock] to the side underneath [Théo]" and he can finish her sentence of her actions and "[flip] [her] on top of him" (198). Each statement their bodies give has an equal and opposite response, creating the same mutuality you might see in a conversation: when you ask a question, they ask one back; when you listen to one of their stories, and so they listen to one of yours. Sex *as* a conversation, alongside the promises, potentials and possibilities given in actual conversation.

Alongside the vulnerability in Freya and Théo's sex scenes is an underlying ethic of love. This felt less actionable than aspects of Angel's vulnerability ethos, because, as I say earlier in this chapter, *loving* seems like a largely indeterminate quality that, even if objective representations of care, or respect, or any of the other aspects of loving are not expressly shown, is still achievable and present in a sex scene. To repeat myself, I'm not sure I can definitively say what loving sex is and is not, but I still attempted to write with reverence to the core tenants

that hooks says define loving behaviour: care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust (hooks 14).

One way to emphasise the loving approach Théo takes to intimacy was in contrasting it with Freya's previous experiences of intimacy in her situationship with James. Freya is more familiar with being intimate with someone who is not interested in loving and accustomed to care and affection being mingled with a degree of unkindness (hooks 10). James would "kiss [Freya] on the forehead, call [her] nicknames, [and] share his beer with [her]" but couple this with "not text[ing], or call[ing], or even think[ing] about [her] after [she] left" (180). Familiar with dismissive spiels of performative kindness, Freya is made "apprehensive" by Théo's hesitation to speak after the intercourse scene, expecting "the same spiel James used to give [her]" (201). But Théo does not perform the same routine Freya is familiar with. Rather, he *is* interested in being loving and engages in the full spectrum of loving behaviour, before, during, and after they have sex. He's caring when he makes his hand into a phone shape and talks through their sex from the night before (171-173); he's endlessly affectionate, "always" pinching Freya's chin between his fingers (108; 140; 146; 162; 175; 192; 217; 248; 256) and slipping his hand "over the curve of [Freya's] knee (...) his thumb rubbing against [her] bare skin" (180); and responsible when he stops their first kiss, saying "not now" because they had been drinking and Freya looks tired (124). Théo is respectful when he asks, "Would you let me?" before giving Freya her first orgasm (167), and "Can I?" before taking off her underwear before intercourse (198); trustworthy enough for Freya to tell him she "wouldn't know" what an orgasm with a partner feels like (167).

Before Théo, there was little intertwining of sex and loving behaviour for Freya. Despite simply being "roommates who fuck" (117) and Freya purposefully not establishing any kind of "intimate connection" with Théo, I wanted to ensure that the MCs sexual encounters committed to Freya's "no expectation for seriousness" (i.e. avoiding an intimate connection) while still being loving. I wanted to action my claim that the adventurous, intensely emotional moments (Teo 471) of early romance sex can be approached in a loving way. From their first kiss, where Théo is responsible enough to stop any intimacy because they'd been drinking, to their first time having intercourse, where they're caring and respectful and knowledgeable about each other enough for Freya to call it the "Olympics of intimacy" (198), Freya and Théo are never simply just engaging in sexual gratification—it always has some element of the care, affection, responsibility, respect, commitment and trust bell hooks defines loving by.

With, as I say earlier in the chapter, sex scenes acting as a tool to express a shift from *loving* to being *in love*, the final (on page) sex scene is a moment, beyond the conversation and

declarations, to solidify the intimate connection between Freya and Théo. Although Théo, throughout the book, embraces loving behaviour fully, Freya has always withheld complete trust of Théo, not wanting to share the truth of her dad's passing, described as the "biggest thing that has ever happened to [her]" (179). In finally trusting Théo and telling him the full story of her dad's illness and death, their sex is representative of an intimate connection *intensifying* the lovingness of their sex.

Less focused on descriptive sex acts and detailing every discarded piece of clothing and stroke of their hands, the final (on page) sex scene is focused on the intangible feelings of sex. The "lightheaded, *lightbodied*" (257) experience where there is little outline of who is where and what is happening, and rather embraces the indeterminacy of a loving encounter, with her legs tingling like "rainbow-coloured confetti," undressing that "[fills] [Freya's] heart with helium and [makes it] [bob] around in [her] chest like a balloon, blood that feels "fizzy" and an orgasm comparable to champagne popping (257). Their sex has always been, by Freya's description, loving and vulnerable and enjoyable enough to combine all her favourite feelings at once—"like cracking a book spine with a mouthful of macarons under a steady stream of hot water" (168)—but the final sex scene sees their intimacy become even more than a combination of caring touching and respectful responses, and fully embrace intertwining of pleasure *and* emotional intimacy.

I like to think of my novel being a continuation of Angel's and hooks' philosophies in action amongst the pages of a romance novel. Whilst Hazelwood, Henry, Kennedy and Lauren may not have been directly conscious of their writing of vulnerable and loving sexual encounters, their books have served as inspiration for what my book could be and is. I have simply taken what I have seen in their writing and applied an academic perspective. This can only mean (I hope) that my book, and this exegesis, could serve the same purpose as the works of my favourite authors, and help inspire and evolve how other authors write sex in romance.

## Conclusion

When I first began this project, I was looking at something vastly different. I wanted to give scholarly shape to the infamous enemies-to-lovers trope and was focused on writing a novel which could only loosely be called a ‘romance’. After each supervision meeting, it became clear first to my supervisor, and then myself, that my passion lay elsewhere: with the impact of a hypersexualised culture on young women’s understanding of their sexuality, and the romance genre’s part in this.

Across the course of my thesis, I wanted to develop an understanding of how feminist philosophies surrounding sexuality found their way into the pages of romance novels, including my own. I wanted to find, and understand, the “thoughts and fantasies that run contrary to patriarchal scripts for feminine docility, submissiveness, and sexual passivity” that romance authors supposedly dare to explore (McCann & Roach 421).

This meant beginning with the nuts and bolts of physiological sex acts: the fucking, the fingering, the fellatio, and more. I wanted to ask: is how we do it how we *all* like it? Is how we write it how we experience it? *Should* the way we write it be how we experience it? Taking the writings of Nagoski and Mintz, I explored how the familiar tropes of sex—of penetration, lubrication and tightness—fulfil a cultural sexual script that is informed by a patriarchal, male-centric understanding of pleasure. Even with romance’s advocacy for female pleasure, it seemed popular romance texts favoured presenting a reparative fantasy where male-centred modes of pleasure were made equitably enjoyable for the female characters and gendered power relations were not dissipated but reiterated. The disservice of writing a pleasurable fantasy, as opposed to presenting an aspirational could-be-reality, is that patriarchal misconceptions of sex (that penetration is the privileged way for women to achieve orgasm, that genital response should always be concordant to arousal, that size is somehow reflective of femininity or masculinity) continue to define the way we understand, and have, sex. With romance as a prime site for imaginative solace (McCann & Roach 421), why let sex remain a patriarchal fantasy when it could be a feminist reality?

From here, things became more complex for me. No longer was it just about the fucking, it was about how the FMCs approached the fucking. I wanted to understand how feminist philosophies of sexuality were being reflected in the narrative contexts of contemporary romance novels. Specifically, I asked if the auto-erotic sexuality that characterises contemporary feminism was serving to enhance female sexuality for romance reader. This was, admittedly, the most difficult question I posed to myself over the course of

my exegesis. I often felt like I was slut-shaming these characters who were written as sexually empowered—engaging in one-night stands, enthusiastic about and open to any sexual act—and betraying the mainstream feminist rhetoric of unquestioned sexual liberation I grew up with. I am clearly an advocate for women being sexually liberated—my entire PhD has been in exploration of it—and yet this chapter, if not communicated with care, could have quickly insinuated that there is a right and wrong way for a woman to embody her sexuality. Theories of sexual subjectification and self-policing gazes are not easily understood feminist philosophies—I still struggle to fully grasp them—and yet they are integral to understanding how female characters are written, especially when written by female authors for (mostly) female audiences. It was a constant question of: are these FMCs sexually liberated and empowered in relation to the men who find them attractive? In analysing Henry’s *Book Lovers* in company with Tolentino’s ‘Always Be Optimizing’ essay, I found a partial resolution, and personal solace, in the idea of writing FMCs to be conscious of their own artificiality—of knowing when they are being looked at, and how—as a way to acknowledge and navigate the milieu of self-sexualisation.

In writing of the active, confident, assertive depictions of female sexuality in romance, I couldn’t help but detour slightly to discuss hookup culture. While the scope of this thesis didn’t allow for a greater exploration into the cultural phenomena of hooking up, it was still relevant and important to both the exegetical topic, and the content of my book, to at least partially probe at representations of casual sex in romance. There were, often, direct parallels between the anecdotes of casual sex from non-fiction books like *Girls and Sex* and scenarios in romance novels. If hookups are, reportedly, unenjoyable and unrewarding for the women engaging in them, why were we always writing them into what is a female sphere of imaginative relationship solace? Rather than replacing the cultural narrative of casualness, romance novels revert to giving hookups a reparative arc and resolving the tensions of hookups in individual novel contexts.

My final chapter tries to find ways to represent the egalitarian possibilities of female sexuality amongst the pages of a romance novel. There seemed little point in wondering about the writing of male-centric sex, or self-sexualising FMCs, if I couldn’t suggest an antidotal approach to writing these things in romance. With Katherine Angel’s vulnerability ethos, and bell hooks’ love ethic, I explored how the novels of my sample of authors currently create representations of intimacy that encourage shared mutual pleasure. It is in establishing vulnerability between her characters that Hazelwood can write of Rue’s journey to pleasurable penetrative sex with Eli; it is in Henry’s stylistic approach to describing sex scenes that gender

dichotomies are less decipherable; it is in understanding trust as the foundation to intimacy that Kennedy can write a sexual context where her FMC is comfortable enough to experience an orgasm. Whether these authors consciously approached the writing of their sex scenes with Angel and/or hooks' critical perspectives in mind, it's clear that romance novel sex scenes become greater representations of egalitarian intimacy when considerate of ethos' of vulnerability and loving.

Romance fiction is a powerful, influential tool for novelists and the women who read them. As McCann and Roach best put it, romance “helps deepen awareness about shifting sexual and gender norms by staging these stories on the page for widespread discussion among its community of readers and authors” (421). Romance has been, is, and will continue to be a prime site for representations of cultural attitudes to sex. In romance, Kennedy, in her book *The Deal*, can explore a woman's journey to pleasure after sexual assault; Hazelwood, in *Not in Love*, can show a woman, with the receptivity of her partner, trying to find pleasure in a mode of stimulation more reliable for men; and Henry, in *Book Lovers*, can explore the consciousness of feminine performance.

In this exegesis I have posed more questions than I have reached conclusions. Any answers I suggest are, in part, in the creative writing itself. *To Paris, with Love* was my own personal creative space, where I could work through and create my own answers to the questions posed throughout my thesis. Each sex scene, and intimate moment, served as a tool for me to exercise my own agency and ask: what would I want to read? What would I want to experience? This was no easy task. As I've said previously in this thesis, the intimate scenes between Freya and Théo were the most difficult to write, and I often didn't write them as I expected of myself. This seemed proof of theory not necessarily translating to practice. Even with such a clear advocacy for a decentralising of penetrative sex in romances, I still wrote it; despite discussing a woman's perpetual nudity, I thought it romantic to have Théo paint Freya's near-naked body; despite believing dialogue is an invaluable tool to show communication as sexy, hot and important in sex, I don't believe I used it effectively enough. There will never be enough time, or a large enough word count, to create the 'perfect' representation of sex; rather, there is always the potential for *better* (meaning educative, empowering, enjoyable) representations.

My supporting theoretical discussion, is, undoubtedly, just the beginning. There is so much more to be said of representations of hookup culture, of the residual effects of #MeToo, of representation of non-heterosexual sex practices, in relation to the romance genre. What I would like, more than anything, is for my thesis to be a conduit for discussions—scholarly or

otherwise. That people, but particularly women, come away asking: is sex still sex if penetration doesn't occur? How does the writing of naked women potentially involuntarily invoke the male gaze? Does my partner encourage me to pursue my pleasure? That romance authors, when they take to the page, are conscious of the tropes that they may slip into when writing sex, and challenge them by not writing a FMC with a tight vagina and a MMC with a big dig; by moving away from Cool Girl/Female Chauvinist Pig archetypes for their FMCs; by challenging the hook up narrative rather than adhering to it; and by imbuing everything sex-related with vulnerability and love.

My research has already helped facilitate so many discussions for myself and those around me and made clear to me the power of the romance genre. Word by word, scene by scene, romance novels help give sex its feminist potential.



To Paris, with Love

## Montmartre, Paris

Two blissful weeks in France and we were ending it like this: aimlessly frolicking through the eighteenth arrondissement; the afternoon heat softening, a weak breeze floating through the streets; the shutter of Quinn's film camera; Maia's phone in her pocket, not being used for directions; a bottle of cheap wine shared between us; my abdomen was sore from laughing so much.

Reality was an arm's length away and I was clutching my limbs to my chest.

'What if the kids I'm taking care of are little terrors?' Quinn wondered. She was about to move to London and work as an au pair for the foreseeable future.

'They *will* be little terrors,' I said. 'They're kids.'

'What if I get stranded in Athens, or robbed in Berlin, or have booked all my train tickets incorrectly?' Maia said. She was agonising over all the little details that might not go to plan during her next few months of solo travelling, even though she had the most regimented itinerary I'd ever seen in my life.

'Then you'll figure it out. You always figure it out,' Quinn said.

I was about to say a long overdue 'Thank you' to my friends. Thank you for saying yes to a trip to the other side of the world when I asked. Thank you for helping me forget about the desk stacked with legal textbooks waiting for me back home. Thank you for driving the car from Nice to Reims, Quinn, even if we nearly died on the way. Thank you, Maia, for having a hair tie, or a tampon, or lip balm, stacked away in that Mary Poppins bag of yours for whenever I needed it. You both held me up when I wanted to crumble under the weight of my grief, and I don't know how to repay you for that.

Instead of saying all the things I should have said, a store at the bottom of the stairs we were descending caught my eye. Its façade was painted entirely red; the only branding on it were the words *L'impressioniste* painted in a pristine cursive above the shuttered windows.

'What kind of shop do you think that is?' I pointed down to it.

'*Luh-im-presh-on-ist?*' Maia tried to pronounce.

'Something about impressionism, I'd guess,' Quinn managed to puff out between heaving breaths. She hated climbing stairs and had ever since first year when we were placed in third-floor rooms with no elevators.

'So, it's some kind of art store?' I guessed.

‘A gallery, maybe,’ Maia said.

‘I want to know what it is,’ I said. I started hurrying down the stairs, doubling my pace. The girls pottered behind me. Over the course of our trip, I’d dragged them into stores that sold only rubber ducks, churches which were left unlocked, and anything that sold books. This was just another Freya-detour that they were entertaining, and there was no need to rush.

On the door, there was a very simple brass sign that said the name of the shop again and, just below that, the word *tatoueur*.

‘It’s a tattoo parlour, I think,’ I said to the girls once they made it down the stairs.

‘Cute,’ Maia said, ready to move on. ‘Do we want to go get dinner somewhere?’

Trying to peek through the shutters, Quinn said, ‘I wish it were open. I’d get another tattoo.’

‘Didn’t your mum make you promise not to get any more?’ Maia asked.

‘No, she made me promise not to get any more in places they aren’t easy to hide. Very different promise.’

Quinn didn’t have many tattoos—three, in total, all hidden across her body and done in very thin, dainty lines—and I often forgot she had them except for when she pulled her hair back and I got a glimpse of the teacup on the back of her neck, or the stamp on the underside of her bicep when she stretched.

‘I’ll get one,’ I said.

‘Really?’ Quinn asked with bright eyes at the same time Maia said, ‘Don’t be insane,’ with a laugh.

‘Why is that insane?’ I asked.

‘You’ve never wanted a tattoo before,’ Maia said.

‘I haven’t *not* wanted to get a tattoo,’ I said.

‘You wouldn’t regret it?’ Maia asked.

‘I might,’ I said. ‘But at least it would remind me of this trip. Of you girls.’

‘Don’t use sentiment to butter me up,’ Maia said. ‘I’m trying to be the rational one here. I’m the left side of our shared brain, and she says no.’

‘If you really loved us, you’d get our names tattooed on your ass,’ Quinn said. Definite right side of the brain.

‘It’s not even open,’ Maia said.

‘We don’t know that for sure,’ I said. I grabbed the door knocker and gave it a tentative hit against the brass. I waited a (short) moment before I tried knocking a fist on the door as well.

‘Hellllllllllooooo,’ I said to the door. I attempted to look through the peep hole, only seeing myself reflected back, unflatteringly distorted.

‘Definitely *not* open,’ Maia said, softly tugging me away from the door.

‘One last try.’ I started drumming on the door with two fists, and just as I started to establish a rhythm, the door flung open.

The man was young—around my age—and was wearing a pristine white t-shirt rolled at the sleeves, showing off his softly sculpted arms. The arms in question had a patchwork of monochrome tattoos, a deep black against his olive skin tone. His hair was a light brown, with hints of a childhood blonde, and pushed back off his face save for a few strands falling haphazardly across his forehead. I had never seen someone quite like him, and was sure, in that moment, I never would again.

I was stunned into silence. Every ounce of the alcohol in my bloodstream dried up.

‘Hello.’ His accent softened the ‘H’ as it left his lips. ‘There is a bell, you know?’ He pointed to his left, and sure enough, right by where my hand had been knocking, there was a small bell.

My brain had no thoughts, taken over by a TV static hum. I managed to put together, ‘Oh, God. I’m sorry. I didn’t notice it.’

He looked at me with playful smile and fell into a casual lean against the door frame, arms crossed so his tattooed biceps flexed. ‘It is alright,’ he said. ‘I have never had a pretty woman bang on my door before.’

I could feel all the blood rush to my cheeks and flush them fire truck red. French people had a nonchalance towards sex and romance I still hadn’t gotten used to, flinging out compliments to whichever pretty person came their way. Being complimented by this man, though, was much more invigorating than any flattery I’d received since being in France. Or in my life, for that matter.

‘Is this a tattoo parlour?’ I asked meekly.

‘*Oui*,’ he said. ‘It is.’

‘I don’t suppose—I mean, you look closed, so this might be a stupid question—you might tattoo me? That is, if you have the time, and no other clients.’

He lifted his eyebrows, all thick and strong, and appraised me from head to toe. His eyes swept slowly across my body, lingering on the bare skin my skirt didn’t cover; a tingling sensation simmered in the wake of his gaze. My neck, my arms, my legs, all buzzing, blazing, itching from the pressure of his attention.

‘I usually only take appointments,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ I said. I hung my head in embarrassment. Stupid Freya makes a stupid fool of herself in front of a stupidly beautiful man.

‘But my last of the day cancelled.’

I perked up.

‘Oh?’ I said, looking right into his caramel eyes. ‘You’re sure? You don’t want to finish early for the day? Go enjoy the sun?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I do not think I do.’ He stepped aside to let me by. ‘Come in.’

‘Is it possible—can my friends—’ I was tripping over my words, unsure of how to form sentences anymore.

‘Can your friends watch?’ he clarified, his smile growing even bigger.

‘If it’s possible, please.’

‘Of course.’

With this confirmation, Maia came up behind me and pushed me through the doorway.

‘*Bonjour*,’ she sang, guiding me in my stupor into the studio. ‘I wish you’d told her no.’

‘*Salut*,’ he said, nodding to her. ‘My apologies.’

Quinn attempted a French greeting, though she wasn’t very good with the pronunciation, phonetically saying, ‘Sah-loo’ as she followed us in.

The studio was small, and minimally decorated. With the outdoor shutters closed, it was lit by lamps placed sporadically around the room, emitting warm yellow ambient light. By the window was a green lounge, its velvet well-worn and its cushions softened by time. Maia and Quinn happily plopped themselves down on it. Along the white walls were large prints of classical paintings, only a couple of which I knew, set in plain gold frames. The focal point of the room was the tattooing bench, rather sterile compared to the rest of the studio’s homely decoration, with an adjustable lamp shining a cool white onto the black leather.

‘So.’ The tattoo artist’s deep voice startled me. He took a seat on a wheely stool, and asked, ‘*Comment tu t’appelles?*’

‘My name?’ I asked. I had a vague recollection of the phrase from high school.

‘*Oui*,’ he said. ‘What do you call yourself?’

‘Freya.’ I reached my hand out for him to shake.

‘Freya,’ he repeated to himself. My name fell from his lips like silk, wrapping around each syllable with a kiss. It felt as though no one had said my name right until now. ‘I’m Théo.’ His hand glided into mine, his fingers dragging along my palm before they wrapped around my hand.

‘Théo,’ I repeated to myself. His name was delectable: *Thay-oh*.

‘I’m Quinn,’ I heard from the couch. ‘And this is Maia.’

Still holding my hand, Théo swivelled slightly to look at Maia and Quinn. ‘Hello, girls.’ I swear I heard a giggle from Quinn.

‘Your English is amazing,’ Maia said, brazen as ever.

‘Most of us French people are good at English,’ Théo said, slowly pulling his hand from mine. ‘And my father is English.’

‘Sorry about our shitty French,’ I said, which brought Théo’s attention back to me, his caramel eyes on my face, and nowhere else.

‘Your French is bad?’ he asked.

‘My French includes “*merci*,” “*bonjour*,” and “*désolé, je suis Australienne*.”’

With a small laugh, Théo said, ‘At least your accent is good.’ He motioned to the tattooing table. ‘Please, sit.’

I tried, as gracefully as possible, to hoist myself onto the table. Once I was up, Théo wheeled his stool around so he was in front of me, his back to Maia and Quinn. With him slightly lower than me, his face looking up, full lips softly parted, I felt as though he was in supplication, at my mercy.

‘Now,’ he said, all soft and buttery. ‘What would you like tattooed?’

‘Well—’ I fiddled with my fingers. ‘—I haven’t thought that far.’

‘You do not know?’

‘No. I don’t know.’

‘You do not want some time to think? It is permanent, you know.’

‘If I think too much I’ll back out. I don’t want to back out. I want to be spontaneous, and stupid. I should be spontaneous and stupid while on holiday, don’t you think?’

With a small nod, Théo rolled his chair to a sideboard and picked up a weathered sketchbook.

‘Maybe this will help,’ he said, placing it in my lap.

I barely wanted to touch it; it felt sacred, special, to be touched by someone with gloved hands employed to curate an art gallery. The pages were made of thick, sturdy sketching paper; the sketches were mainly done in pencil, but the finalised designs were made permanent with black ink; there were little scribbled notes next to some of the sketches. He seemed only to design tattoo versions of famous artwork: a series of swirls from Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, just the face of Michelangelo’s *David*, a Georgia O’Keeffe flower. They all paid tribute to their original source material, but his own unique style was etched and fingerprinted into every sketch.

‘I specialise in renditions of famous artworks,’ he explained.

*Oh.* The name of the shop made so much more sense now. ‘The Impressionist,’ I said to myself.

‘It is a stupid name,’ he said, bashful.

‘No, no. It’s smart. Because you do *impressions* of the paintings, right? Not copies, but your own versions.’

‘That was the intention.’

‘They’re all very good,’ I said. And pricey, I assumed.

‘*Merci*,’ he said quietly, as though saying it any louder would mean having to arrogantly admit he also thought he was a good artist.

I kept flicking through the pages. Some of the drawings were more finished than others. I would happily have any of these imprinted on my skin, but there was one that made me stop flicking the pages, and made my mouth drop open.

‘Are these waterlilies?’ I ran my fingers lightly over the pencil. It was a couple of flowers, made up of vague lines which barely connected. Simple—no colour, no shading. The longer I looked at it, the less it looked like two flowers, and more like a swirl of delicate, precise lines. Like ripples in water.

It was startlingly serendipitous: a drawing of the lilies I travelled thousands of kilometres to see, sketched into the book of a tattoo artist whose door I was compelled to knock on.

This waterlily, and all its companions, were tethered to memories of my father. When I was eight, and my parents had finalised their divorce, my dad pulled me out of school a week before term break and took me to the French countryside. We’d only stayed for the week allotted to Dad in the divorce agreement, and I was promptly returned to Mum’s house on the Sunday agreed upon for child-swapping.

In the weeks after my dad died, memories from that trip never left me alone. The fairy land that eight-year-old me had called Monet’s House and Garden, with its pink house that seemed to be half-shrubbery, with wisteria whose petals were shaped like the wings of a pixie princess, with lily pads that looks like sunlounges for magical creatures. We’d wandered those gardens for hours: Dad, comparing his brochure of the famous paintings to their real-life flora; me, picking flowers to put in my hair and pretending I was in wonderland. He’d bought me a book in the gift shop, filled with Monet’s most popular artworks. The glossy pages were covered in Monet’s pristine brushwork that I stared at so long they started to look like Magic Eye pictures. Inside the cover, Dad had inscribed, in his boxy lawyer handwriting:

*For my lovely, one-and-only daughter.*

*Love, your dad.*

The memory ran like a roll of never-ending film across my mind, each frame a blur of multi-coloured tulips, dashes of pastel-coloured peonies, smudges of blossoming roses.

‘Oui,’ Théo confirmed. ‘From a Monet painting.’

A still life from the garden I had come all this way to see. From the garden I’d seen with my dad. I felt like I was eight again, sat on the plane ride home, pointing out the flowers I liked most in the book Dad had bought me. Hours of me saying *this one* and then deciding *no, this one*.

‘This,’ I said, without a second thought. ‘Can I have this tattooed?’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Would you like me to change anything?’ he asked.

‘No? I mean, isn’t this how you intended it to look when you drew it?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. But it is a tattoo, not my art. It can be changed for you.’

‘But if it *were* just your art, this is how you’d want it to be, right?’

‘Ouais,’ he said. ‘Yes, I would want it to be like that.’

‘Then we’ll keep it like that.’

He looked chuffed that I respected his artistic choices. That I hadn’t asked for some colour, or more defined flower shapes. I wanted *his* version of the waterlilies.

‘*D’accord*,’ Théo said, and with it, drew his chair a hairsbreadth closer to me. ‘And where would you like it?’

‘Oh, that I know. Just here—’ I touched the left side of my ribcage, where my bra strap currently was. Hidden away—under my arm and close to my heart—felt like the right option. It would be just for me. (And less of a commitment than somewhere more visible).

Théo reached out a hand and touched the tip of his finger—featherlight and almost imperceptible—to the same spot on my ribcage. ‘Here?’

‘Yes.’

I felt as though I’d been placed in a trance, only able to hear and see Théo, time suspended around us. Behind him, I think Quinn whispered something along the lines of ‘I feel like we’re intruding,’ but I couldn’t be sure.

If my desire was radiating off me as obviously as I felt it was, he didn’t seem to mind. He was entirely in control of his body, and any tells it might have. I was attempting—embarrassingly—to see if his cheeks, too, were flushing; if he, too, was fidgeting slightly to rid his body of the same electric current that I had humming through me. Instead, every move he



made had a pristine grace to it: his shoulders poised with good posture, his strong legs spread slightly.

‘How big would you like it?’ he asked. He held his thumb and forefinger about three inches apart, and said, ‘Like this?’

I took my same two fingers and pinched the space between his fingers smaller, to about two inches. ‘Like this.’

He stared at where our fingers touched, his throat bobbing as he swallowed his... desire? Pride? Professional decorum?

Clearing his throat and abruptly standing from his chair, like my touch had sent some sort of shock through his body, Théo said, ‘*C’est bon*. I will be back in a moment—I need to print the stencil.’

Once he was out of the room, Quinn very loudly whispered, ‘*Hot*. He’s so, so hot.’

‘I think Freya drooled when she saw him,’ Maia said to me.

‘He has a very attentive stare. Doesn’t look anywhere but right at you,’ Quinn said.

‘I’m his client. And the girl who manically banged on his door. Why would he look at either of you?’

Quinn shrugged, a smug look on her face. ‘If he looks at all his clients like that, I’m not sure how he gets any work done.’

‘So, you’re seriously doing this?’ Maia asked.

‘I’m seriously on the table right now. There’s seriously a tattoo gun *right over there*.’ I pointed to a small table where the scary looking metal device lay. ‘I’m *seriously* doing this.’

‘Okay. Just wanted to ask one last time. Give you an out if you needed one.’

Footsteps sounded from behind us, and we all attempted to look as though we hadn’t just been talking about Théo.

As he walked back towards me it was like being struck with his attractiveness all over again. Being tattooed by him was going to be a cruel torture, trying not to think of his fingers on my body, grazing along the side of my ribcage, so close to the underside of my breast.

Théo wheeled a portable worktable towards the bench—filled with as assortment of tattooing essentials like gloves, disinfectant, and the aforementioned gun—and said, ‘Now, with the placement of your tattoo, you will need to take off your shirt, but also any other garments you may have on.’

My bra, I realised he meant. I hadn’t even thought about that.

‘Of course,’ I said. As I reached for the hem of my shirt, I tried desperately to act as though my disrobing wasn’t even slightly unnerving, though I was beyond frightened at the idea of Théo seeing me shirtless.

I had a fine relationship with my body. It housed me and moved me around, and I was lucky to have that. It was only a recent revelation for me to be somewhat comfortable in my skin—its long legs, broad shoulders, and hip to waist ratio that made buying jeans impossible—my teenage anxieties only bubbling up from time to time. I was as loving towards my body as I had ever been.

This was a professional environment, not dissimilar to taking your shirt off for a doctor to check a mole or removing your underwear for an aesthetician to rip hair from your most sensitive of skin.

However, confronted with the prospect of *Théo* needing to see me topless so he could do his job, I became hyperaware of every square inch of the skin he would see: the outline of my bikini imprinted on me after my (reluctant) time in the sun, how lucky I was I’d shaved my underarms this morning in the minuscule hostel bathroom, the way my stomach would not hold taut as I lay on my side and he tattooed my body.

I had booked aestheticians at beauty salons, willingly let them see the entirety of my vulva, and then wished them a good day without even the slightest of awkwardness. Hell, a gynaecologist had wrenched open my vagina and inserted an IUD into my cervix, seeing more of my body than even I had. In those situations, I hadn’t thought once about my body’s appearance, and yet the moment I was confronted with a gorgeous man I wouldn’t mind being found attractive by, I felt it necessary to worry.

*Stop it*, I told myself. *Even if he did find you attractive—which he likely doesn’t, he’s just French and flirty and trying to work—he would have to like all those things too.* Like a mantra, I focused on the words: *There is nothing you need to change. You’re fine as you are.* Because if you say something enough, it eventually feels like the truth.

‘Would you like it just below the strap?’ Théo asked, motioning to my ribcage.

‘Ah—I was hoping where the strap *is*. So, it’s basically hidden.’

Théo nodded. ‘A little secret.’

‘Exactly.’

‘You will have to take your bra off, then. Clients sometimes use their tops to cover their...’ He motioned towards my chest. He seemed to omit the word ‘breasts’ not because he was uncomfortable with it, but because I might be. ‘Whatever would make you comfortable. I will turn around.’

Théo spun in his chair, meeting Quinn and Maia's stares, while I now had free reign to stare at his back and the way his well-defined muscles were being hugged by the fabric of his shirt. It was obscene, the sight of his broad shoulders and the way they tapered down into a small waist.

'You do not want to give your friend some privacy?' Théo asked the girls.

Quinn laughed. 'We've been friends for over three years and just spent two weeks travelling France together. If we hadn't seen Freya's boobs by now, I'd be worried.'

Unclasping my bra—a more confident action now Théo's back was to me—I watched as my friends spoke to him.

'And how is France?' Théo asked.

'Magical,' Quinn said at the same time Maia said, 'Expensive.'

'And Paris? Your favourite location, yes?'

'Freya's favourite,' Maia said, motioning to me.

Théo's head tilted slightly, as though he wanted to look at me to confirm this fact. 'She would suit Paris,' he said softly.

'It's the fringe and affinity for red lipsticks,' Quinn said.

'Freya's ready,' Maia said, nodding her head towards me.

'Freya, are you ready?' Théo asked, not turning around until he had my confirmation.

'Yep. You can turn around.'

At his first glimpse at me, sat on his workbench, holding my shirt to my boobs for dear life, I swore I saw a flicker of desire cross his face. He quickly hid whatever echo of attraction I might have seen, his face returning to the same cool calm as before, leaving me feeling as though my mind was playing tricks on me.

'This is your first tattoo, yes?' Théo asked.

'First and likely only, I said.

Théo explained the steps of the tattooing process as he did them. As he sterilised the expanse of my ribcage with a cleaning wipe, he explained he had to disinfect the area first. As his hands massaged (with a torturous delicacy) a lotion into my skin, he told me it was to help the stencil stick. Once he'd placed the stencil on my skin, he told me, earnestly, that I must tell him if it was in the right place, if I wanted it higher or lower, more to the left or right, made smaller or larger. It was now my art, he said, and I must love everything about it, down to the millimetre. After assuring him it was in the perfect spot (measured against the strap of my bra to ensure its secrecy), he told me to lay down on my side, with the right side of my body open to him.

He started with a small line to let me get used to the feeling of the needles and asked how the pain felt. Was it tolerable? Was I ok? Did I know women tolerated the pain of tattooing best? I nodded and said yes, women are quite familiar with pain, and then he focused in on his work.

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After about five minutes of tattooing, the slight hum of pain became my focus. As much as I wished the pleasure of Théo's touch, delicate against my skin, would mix with the pain of the tattooing and form some sort of next level arousal, that was not the case. The feel of the needles repeatedly puncturing my skin forced me away from the deftness of Théo's hands and thoughts of him taking one of those hands and moving it just slightly to palm my breast.

After thirty minutes, he'd finished, and he began applying the treatment to what he said, was 'a wound, and must be treated with care.' He applied an adhesive barrier to the tattoo that looked a lot like cling film, which I would have to keep on for at least three days. For the following two weeks, I *must* (his emphasis) wash with only anti-bacterial soaps and apply a salve to the ink.

Théo was an incredible artist. He had printed his sketch onto my body perfectly: the lines were perfectly thin, the petals perfectly formed. Perfect was the only word to describe it. Awed was the only way to describe my reaction. I had thanked him (at a loss for the right words) when he first let me see it in the mirror, and again when I lay back down on the table for him to dress it, and again once I had placed my shirt and bra back on.

'You're very talented,' I said. 'I'm so grateful. Seriously.'

Théo laughed as he cleaned his station of tools, placing a lid on the black ink and wiping away the spilled excess. 'Seriously, you must stop saying thank you.'

'She won't,' Quinn said, bending over my side and lifting my shirt to inspect the tattoo. 'Like clockwork, at the end of every lecture, Freya used to walk up to the lecturer and thank them. Even if she'd fallen asleep part of the way through.'

'I never fell asleep,' I said to Quinn. 'That was you.'

'Freya's very polite,' Maia said, holding Quinn's hands so she didn't poke my tattoo. 'Chronic people pleaser. She should talk about it with a therapist.'

I could tell they were trying to ply Théo with information about me so his interest might pique, though they weren't using the most flattering anecdotes. They may as well have brought up when I lost a tampon in my own vaginal canal or called my teacher 'Mum' in grade two.

‘It means a lot that you’ve done this for me, really. I know it’s your job, and I’ve paid you a generous sum of money to do it, but I’m very thankful you made time.’ I wanted to reach out and squeeze his hand, as though my sincerity would migrate from my body into his, and he might know how I truly meant what I said.

‘Say it one last time, then,’ Théo said, stopping his cleaning to turn his body to me fully, bracing himself for my last thank you.

‘*Merci beaucoup*, Théo,’ I said. ‘*Merci, merci, mercimercimerc*—’ Théo’s hand covered my mouth. I could smell a touch of tobacco of his skin and the tang of ink.

‘Enough, Freya,’ he said, like he might say *arête, stop, do not move*. He removed his hand from over my mouth slowly, his thumb and forefinger slightly pinching my chin before dropping away.

A bubble seemed to form around Théo and I, locking us into one another’s orbits. Neither of us were able to look away from the other. A goodbye was creeping up onto my lips that I couldn’t manage to vocalise.

With a warning clear of her throat, Quinn slung her arm around my shoulders and said, ‘It’s our last night in Paris,’ to Théo.

‘Oh?’ Théo didn’t break eye contact with me. ‘That is a shame.’

‘We were going to get a drink,’ Maia said. We had actually planned to go to bed early, so all of us could make our trains and planes the next day. ‘Spend what’s left of our travel funds.’

I nodded along, letting my (God sent) friend’s proposition Théo for me. Maia pinched me at the waist to continue.

‘You should come,’ I let out with a squeak. Théo raised his eyebrows, as though he desperately wanted to say *that’s what she said*. ‘For a drink. You should come for a drink.’

He withheld his answer from me (us). My breathing stalled. The whole world stopped spinning. I’d melt into a puddle of embarrassment if he said no. *Please say yes. Say yes, say yes, say yes. I’ll buy the first round. I’ll carry the conversation. I’ll do anything to spend just a little more time in your orbit and keep a hold of this feeling. Contentment? Lust? Excitement? Whatever it is.*

Théo leaned in closer to me, ignoring the girls attached to my hip, and murmured, ‘I was hoping you would ask me out.’

I could breathe again. Crisp, clean breaths that absolved my body of its nerves.

‘There is a bar up the road, on the corner. I will meet you there?’ Théo said.

I nodded, in a stupor, and let the girls direct me to the bar.

During our first drink, Théo and I sat an intimate distance from one another—closer than strangers, but further away than lovers. Quinn and Maia sat on the other side of the table, smart enough to know that my conversation with Théo was none of their business (yet. I would of course recount every word he said to me once he'd left).

Théo kept asking questions of me, anything and everything, and listened attentively with a shadow of a smile on his face the entire time. I wished I was more mysterious, not answering his questions with such enthusiasm, but his earnestness when asking left me unembarrassed and more than willing to spill my entire life story to him.

'You went to university together?' he asked, nodding towards Maia and Quinn without taking his eyes off me.

I nodded. 'We all lived at a college together.'

'And what did you study?'

'Well, I studied English Literature. Maia was a commerce student, and I think Quinn ended up with a Film and Cultural Studies major. We can't be too sure.'

'You like books?' he asked, a slight sparkle in his eyes.

'Very much.'

'Will you be a writer, then?'

I shook my head no. 'I like reading them, critiquing them. Pillaging information from them like they're encyclopedias. Couldn't ever write one. I'm in law school at the moment, anyway.'

He tilted his head, curious. 'You want to be a lawyer?'

I hesitated. My answer wasn't as simple as yes or no. My answer, in long form, was more along the lines of: *My dad was a lawyer—a good one, a fair one—and he always thought I'd be a good one, too. And at some point, his dream became mine.*

'Yeah. Law is just reading and words, anyway. It's not so different from studying literature.' Théo seemed unconvinced with my response, so I kept trying to justify myself. 'And I've read enough Chaucer and Sartre to last me a lifetime.'

Law was presented to me as a way to make my favourite pastime (reading) into a sensible living (i.e. a job with a salary over the national minimum wage). *It's all reading*, Dad said. The worst kind of reading, he left out. Of precedents indistinguishable from one another. Of the constitution and new legislation. Of contracts between one business and another.

'What *could* you read for a lifetime, then?' Théo asked.

‘Loaded question,’ I said.

‘A favourite, then. You must have a favourite book.’

‘I have too many.’

‘A good problem to have.’

With each of his questions, it seemed our bodies were inching closer to each other. His arm, slung over the back of his chair, slowly making its way to the back of mine; my hand, rested in my lap, slowly creeping towards his knee; our faces, leaning in to feel the reverberations of the other’s words on our skin more powerfully.

I felt imprinted by his touch. Like I could trace back through every square centimetre of my body he’d been in contact with because his touch left a white-hot trail of desire in its wake.

Throughout our second drink, I tried to mirror Théo’s questions, to not monopolise the conversation and try to learn something about him. And I wanted, desperately, to know him.

‘When did you start tattooing?’ I asked.

‘After university,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t expect to.’

I cocked my head. ‘Why?’

‘I studied at Beaux-Arts de Paris—it is a *grande école* which specialises in fine arts training. We were taught many art forms, but mostly very classic ones, like painting and sculpting. Towards the end of my degree, I became very interested in more divisive art forms—like tattooing—which is sometimes not very... respected? People do not often see it as art, I mean.’

‘It is art,’ I said. ‘Yours specifically.’

He looked away from me, uncomfortable being complimented. ‘*Merci*,’ was all he managed to say in response.

‘And so, you started tattooing to learn another art form?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘I had never been as good at anything in university as I was at tattooing.’

‘That must be amazing. To find what you’re best at,’ I said.

He smiled at me. ‘It is.’

‘I wish I knew what I was good at.’ I hadn’t meant to say something so honest. He’d lured me in, with his interested gaze and trusting smile. He’d lulled the truth out of me, the words slipping from my mouth like they were easy to say to everyone, and not just him.

‘You have time,’ he said, like everyone else in my life did, except when he said it, I believed it (likely because I was tipsy, and he sounded so pretty when he spoke). I felt like there

really was an expanse of time opening before me instead of a lifetime of billable hours and office cubicles shrivelling into nothing. ‘How old are you? *Vingt-trois*?’

‘Twenty-two,’ I said, not knowing if the French numbers were the same as the English ones I said.

‘*Vingt-deux*. Plenty of time.’

‘And how old are you?’ I had spent our time together assuming he was somewhere around my age—likely a bit older. He had a hint of crow’s feet by his deep brown eyes; his hairline was still generously intact and the hair itself was luscious and thick, no touches of grey just yet amongst the light brown. Even if he did have more definitive signs of aging—whisps of grey hair, defined lines across his face—I was sure it would only make him more attractive. He was going to Clooney over the course of his lifetime, without a doubt.

‘*Vingt-huit*,’ he said. I had gathered, by then, that *vingt* meant twenty. But *huit*? ‘Twenty-eight,’ he clarified.

‘Twenty-eight,’ I repeated to myself.

‘Am I too old? Are you going to break my heart and leave now?’

Australian men did not flirt with the boldness of Frenchmen. Even if, as I sat across from Théo, I was entirely perplexed by the idea of a man so beautiful, and so talented, being interested in the likes of me, I couldn’t deny the obviousness of his desire. Being in the grasp of his confident flirting and assertive interest made me want to match his vitality, to not hold back on my own desire.

‘You’re lucky I have a thing for older men,’ I joked. ‘You’re almost too young.’

‘I will have grey hair soon enough. At least I know you will only like me more with age.’

Théo insisted he buy the third round of drinks as I sipped the dregs of my vodka soda out of the tumbler.

‘Are you trying to get me drunk?’ I teased.

‘Would you like a water instead?’ As he said this, he reached out and pushed my fringe slightly off my forehead and smiled down at me. My skin tingled like it was being carbonated.

‘No, no. Alcohol is good. I’ll have a vodka—’

‘Vodka soda, lots and lots and lots of lime,’ he finished for me.

As he walked away, Quinn and Maia immediately turned to me, dropping the pretence of their conversation quickly.

‘My goodness, Freya,’ Maia said. ‘Watching you two is better than a movie.’



‘He looks like he wants to reach under the table and finger you,’ Quinn said, earning a slap on the shoulder from Maia. Flashes of Théo’s hand running up my thigh and slipping under my panties crossed my mind.

‘I can’t believe he’s interested in me,’ I said.

‘Don’t act so shocked, Freya. You always undervalue yourself,’ Maia said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I just feel like I’m delusional if I don’t confirm it with someone. Like, is what I’m experiencing what you’re seeing?’

‘You’re not delusional,’ Quinn said. ‘He practically drools every time you wrap your mouth around your straw.’

‘Pity you’re not staying in Paris,’ Maia said. Pity, for sure. Pity I didn’t live in Paris. Pity I couldn’t speak French. Pity I didn’t meet Théo earlier and wasn’t terrible at one-night stands.

‘What are you guys even talking about?’ Quinn asked.

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Anything. Everything.’

I had come to know that his family—a mum, a dad, a sister, and a maternal set of grandparents—lived in a small town somewhere in the south of France. He said, ‘It is so beautiful where they live. I often think of leaving my life in Paris to tend to the gardens of my family’s house all day, eating my grandmother’s food and sketching in the sun.’ I know he made extra money during college by drawing portraits for tourists in Place du Tertre, which was ‘excruciating, but sometimes enlightening.’ I knew that he found it hard to appreciate art without being jealous of the artists technique, or success, or experience. He went a few years where he couldn’t even look at a Berthe Morisot painting because he’d always wish he was the one who painted it.

I told him that I had a crush on Jean-Paul Belmondo that started after I watched *Pierrot Le Fou* for the first time (‘I look like him a little, no?’ Théo said). I told him about my first kiss with a guy who had a wispy, pointless moustache that tickled me the entire time we made out, to which Théo swore ‘to never grow a moustache.’ I confessed to him, like a worshipper at the altar of Notre Dame, that being in Paris felt like I could finally breathe (which was ironic, because the air quality is much worse than at home in Melbourne). That I flourished in the city like I didn’t in Nice or Reims or even my hometown. That apparently being a little fish in a big pond suited me. That four days here had been not nearly enough time, because I hadn’t made it to the Luxembourg Gardens, had only walked past Shakespeare & Co., and hadn’t taken photos in a French *fotoautomat* like in the movie *Amélie*.

All I seemed to be able to communicate to Quinn and Maia was: ‘He went to a grande école.’

‘What’s that?’ Quinn asked.

‘Like a top tier university,’ I clarified. ‘Means he’s smart.’

‘You’re smart,’ Maia said.

‘I’m not *that* smart. I was barely smart enough for my capstone literature subject.’

‘It gets very boring listening to you undermine yourself, Freya,’ Maia said. ‘You got into law school and blitzed all your undergrad subjects. That seems pretty smart to me. So, stop acting like this guy is out of your league. There’s no league to be in, anyway. It’s just a stupid baseball metaphor that has become unbearably pervasive in the cultural zeitgeist.’

‘Have we transported back to that sociology elective we all took?’ Quinn said, miming as though we were back in the Social Sciences building, with its tiny classrooms and rotting windowsills. ‘Please, I barely passed the first time.’

Maia leaned across the table, lowering her voice to ask, ‘So, do you think you’ll...’

‘Fuck him?’ Quinn finished for her.

Before I could answer, Théo came back, somehow carrying four glasses in his two very large, dextrous (calloused, nimble, sexy, huge, too many synonyms to describe the beauty of his) hands.

Placing the drinks down on the table, he said, ‘What are you girls whispering about?’

‘You,’ Quinn deadpanned.

As he was moving past me to get to his seat, Théo placed his hands over my ears. Poorly trapping out any sound, I heard as he asked the girls, ‘Does she like me? Am I doing ok?’

Quinn’s face erupted in a smile, delighted by Théo’s charm. Maia, even with her forever imperceptible poker face, seemed to thaw at Théo’s cheerful kindness.

The three of us were each other’s barometer for a man’s viability. If one of us didn’t like him, none of us liked him. One of the reasons Maia broke up with her boyfriend was because neither Quinn nor me could manage to make conversation with him.

‘You’re doing just fine,’ Maia said, which was as good as her official seal of approval.

During our fourth drink, I decided I would let myself have a night of earth-shattering sex with Théo. Likely, it would be the best sex of my life, and I would think about it until I was old and decrepit. I would sit across from a husband at the dinner table and think of the time I let a beautiful French man go down on me on his tattoo table and I would rue the day I left Paris less than twelve hours after meeting him.

Théo would undoubtedly be the one that got away.

As he spoke to Quinn about her next adventure in London as an au pair, Théo drew lazy shapes between my shoulder blades, occasionally twirling a few strands of my hair around his fingers, too. The fabric of my shirt felt miles thick.

‘Do you know what “au pair” means?’ Théo asked Quinn.

‘Not in the slightest. I assumed it was just French for nanny.’

Théo offered an explanation. ‘It means, literally, “at par.” Au pairs, unlike nannies, are to become a part of the family. You will be a member just like the mother, the father, and the little children you will take care of. You are not their staff; you are their sister.’

‘Huh,’ Quinn said. ‘I’d be a horrible staff member. I’m a great sister, though.’

I could hardly concentrate on the conversation happening in front of me, so distracted by the feel of Théo’s fingertips trailing up and down my back, thinking of the way I’d like those same fingertips to trail across more sensitive parts of my body.

I leant into Théo’s side and whispered, ‘I can’t focus with you touching me,’ hoping, selfishly, it would bring his focus away from Quinn and back to me.

‘We are both in trouble, then,’ he said, his eyes dipping down for a glimpse at my lips. ‘I cannot focus, either, knowing you probably taste like lime. I keep thinking of what it would be like to kiss your sweet lips and taste the sour juice.’

Giddy with want and silly with infatuation, I picked out a wedge of lime from my drink. I brought it to my lips with a newfound confidence, completely unfamiliar to me, and sucked on it. *Kiss me*, my action screamed. *I dare you*.

Théo groaned in response, turning back to Quinn. To try and distract himself from jumping my bones, he asked her the most boring and monotonous question he could think of (the conversational equivalent of dumping a bucket of ice over his head): ‘And what time will you be boarding your train tomorrow?’

By our fifth drink (sixth? Maybe seventh? I started to lose count), as I was practically sitting in Théo’s lap (and yet no kiss in sight), he whispered against the shell of my ear, ‘You should stay.’

I spun to look at him. ‘In Paris?’

He hummed a *oui* into my skin.

‘You’re insane.’

He shrugged.

‘I’m supposed to be on a train to Giverny in—’ I tapped my phone to check the time. ‘—nine hours.’ To see that garden again. Like my dad would be standing there, amongst the

tulips and rhododendrons, and say to me, *Did you really think I would leave you so soon? Die before I deserved to?*

‘You are not done with Paris, no?’

‘No,’ I said softly.

‘And your next semester of law school is not for a month. Correct?’

‘Just about.’

I still had over three weeks until I had to be back in Melbourne for the beginning of the semester. My plan had been to go home (Dad’s home; where I’d still not packed up all his books; where his recliner chair was getting dusty in the living room) for the month and spend time with Mum.

Aside from watching every episode of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, being dragged to Pilates classes every other day by Mum, and dutifully packing and unpacking the dishwasher, I wasn’t entirely sure what I would do in my three weeks at home. Quinn would be in London, Maia somewhere on the European continent, and I’d be looking for any excuse to not do my holiday readings. There seemed little harm in spending the time in Paris instead, wrapped up in a fling with Théo, nothing on my mind but his mouth and where I would source my next pastry. Mum had practically buckled me into my plane seat when I left three weeks ago, and inappropriately told me to have a fling with a Frenchman, and I’m certain my dad would have said *life’s short* and mentioned some historical monument I had to visit.

‘And what would I do if I stayed? Be a perpetual tourist?’ I said to Théo, trying to talk myself out of this even though I knew I was a very short jump to yes.

‘Anything,’ he said, like it was the most obvious answer ever. ‘Everything.’

‘I have nowhere to stay.’ Any more time in a hostel would surely drive me insane.

‘Stay with me,’ he offered.

I laughed, not realising he was serious. ‘You’re getting ahead of yourself.’

‘As much as I would like you to share my bed,’ he said, placing soft, featherlight almost-kisses down my neck. Couldn’t he just kiss my lips already? Was he trying torture by eternal foreplay to get me to yield? ‘I have a spare room. It is yours.’

‘I don’t even know your last name.’

‘Augustine,’ he told me. ‘Théodore Augustine.’ His name didn’t sound *real*. It sounded like the name of a marquis or duke or viscount, not the twenty-first century tattoo artist attached to my neck.

‘Théo...’ I almost whimpered, losing track of my thoughts as his teeth teased at my skin.

I feared the alcohol was getting to me, that his proposition only seemed rational to a drunken Freya. But as scary as it was to stay in Paris with a strange, handsome man offering to house me, it was scarier to return home. Home to a city my father no longer lived in, without my best friends just down the hall. I knew I would spend my time counting down the days until I had to start memorising legal precedents and constitutional amendments, avoiding packing all of my dad's things into boxes, and running away anytime Mum tried to ask me what I wanted to do with his ashes.

'Ok,' I whispered, unable to fully vocalise my decision.

Théo pulled away from my neck, a smile blooming on his face. 'Ok? You will stay?'

'I need to talk to Quinn and Maia.' They were up at the bar getting more drinks: Quinn pointing to a bottle of tequila she wanted to buy shots of and Maia trying to politely order it in French. 'They get the final say.'

'Go. I will wait here,' he said with a squeeze of my hand.

Sliding up next to Maia at the bar, I drawled out a 'Hellllloooooo,' sounding drunker than I thought I was.

'Left your boy toy at the table, huh?' Quinn said.

'I have a question for you two. A statement. Just floating a little idea past you,' I said. Maia turned to me, immediately suspicious. Quinn handed me a shot of tequila.

'Go on,' Maia said.

'What if I—maybe, just for a little bit—stayed in Paris for another... three weeks?'

'Why would you do that?' Maia asked.

'Well, I may have been asked by Théo to stay and I may have said yes.'

'*What?*' Maia yelled as Quinn yelled, '*Hell yeah.*'

I took that moment to do my shot of tequila, not even bothering to lick some salt or find a wedge of lime to make it go down smoother. I needed to prepare myself for the Wrath of Maia.

'You're staying in Paris? With him?' She pointed over to Théo. He gave Maia a small wave.

'Just for a few weeks. And he'll be there, yes.'

'You're insane.'

'No, Théo's insane. He's the one who suggested it. I'm just insane-by-proxy.'

'Are you ovulating? You shouldn't make any big decisions while ovulating. Especially not romantic ones.'

'Because I'd make such a different decision if I were in my luteal phase?'

‘Maybe,’ Maia said. ‘You’d be less interested in getting laid.’

‘C’mon, Maia. Let Freya do it,’ Quinn said. ‘She’s never done something so dumb before. It’s refreshing.’

I parroted Quinn: ‘Yeah, Maia. Let me do something dumb.’

‘So, you admit it’s a dumb idea?’

‘Oh, it’s incredibly dumb. But I need to make a mistake in my life some time or another. This seems like a pretty good one.’

‘Fucking fantastic one,’ Quinn agreed. ‘And I’ll only be a train ride away in London. And you’ll be somewhere in Europe, too. It’s not like she’s so very alone here.’

‘Exactly!’ I said. ‘Quinn will be in London, you’ll be in Germany or Italy or wherever, and I’ll be in Paris.’

Maia looked unmoved by this line of reasoning. ‘You made this decision before you remembered both of us would be in Europe, too, didn’t you?’

‘Maybe.’ I had.

‘So, you’ll be staying in Théo’s apartment? Will you work? What if everything completely implodes between the two of you? Like, what if you have sex for the first time and then both lose any semblance of feelings for one another? What will you do then?’

‘Breathe,’ Quinn said to Maia, miming deep breaths.

‘Geez, Maia,’ I said. She had a knack for making someone second guess themselves, pointing out every flaw in their argument or idea or opinion until they surrendered to her. She really should be the one going to law school. ‘Théo has a spare room. We’ll be roommates.’

‘Roommates who fuck,’ Quinn said. I shrugged, not disagreeing with her.

‘Money, Freya. What are you going to do for *money*. The thing people exchange for goods and services.’

‘I have money,’ I said. ‘More of it than someone my age should have.’

Being the only daughter of a successful lawyer meant all his earthly possessions had gone to me when he died: a three-bed house in Richmond that Mum was helping me get ready to sell; shares in tech companies and supermarkets that generated quarterly dividends; a life insurance payout sitting in a high-yield interest savings account collecting dust.

‘Right,’ Maia said. ‘Of course. Sorry. I forgot.’

‘So do I, a lot of the time.’

‘I wish you remembered more when we order rounds of drinks,’ Quinn said.

‘And you’ll be back in time for your next semester of uni?’ Maia asked.

‘Maia, please,’ I said. I didn’t need to say more, the pleading in my tone for her to *just trust me, please*, was perfectly clear.

‘I’m worried about you.’

‘I know,’ I said, pulling her in for a hug she begrudgingly succumbed to. She didn’t like hugs at the best of times, always remaining very stiff in the embrace. ‘If it all fucks up, I’ll put myself into debt to immediately leave this country and come home. How does that sound?’

Pulling away from the hug but keeping a stronghold on my shoulders, Maia said: ‘I want frequent Facetime calls. Not texts, not voice calls: Facetime. I’ll need to see daily that you aren’t being held captive by a hot, Parisian tattoo artist.’

‘I can agree to that.’

‘And I want to speak to Théo. Right now.’

‘Go ahead,’ I said, wrangling myself out of her grip. If Théo survived an interrogation from Maia—which it was bound to be—he’d be perfectly safe to live with.

Quinn mumbled, ‘Fucking great idea,’ to me as we followed Maia as she hurtled over to Théo. ‘You deserve it.’

‘*Salut*,’ Théo said casually once Maia reached him. He wasn’t at all deterred by her now deadly stare.

‘You’re not a murderer, are you?’

‘*Non*,’ he said, standing his ground.

‘A murderer would never admit they’re a murderer,’ Quinn said, earning a sharp shush from Maia.

‘Psychopath?’

‘*Non*.’

‘Kidnapper? Trying to Stockholm Syndrome Freya here?’

That one made him stifle back a laugh. ‘*Non*.’

‘You’ll look out for her?’

‘I can look out for myself, Maia—’

‘Of course,’ Théo said, no uncertainty evident in his answer. He would, undoubtedly, look out for me.

‘Alright,’ Maia said, visibly relaxing. ‘Give me your license.’

‘What? Maia, what do you need his license for?’ I said, as Théo, without complaint, reached into his pocket to get his wallet.

‘I want to take a photo of it. If you go missing, I’m taking the picture to the authorities and telling them that it’s him who’s done something to you.’

‘It is alright, Freya,’ Théo said, his license now in Maia’s hand. ‘She is being a good friend.’

‘It is a good idea,’ Quinn said from beside Maia.

‘And it also shows he’s got nothing to hide,’ Maia said as she took the photo.

‘I do not have anything to hide,’ Théo said as he stood, coming to take my phone out of my hand. He held up the screen to my face, indicating for me to put in my password, and then started typing his address and phone number into my Notes app (which was incredibly mortifying, because I wasn’t sure if he saw the notes titled ‘KISS LIST’ and ‘BABY NAMES’).

‘Collect your things,’ Théo said, handing me back my phone. ‘I have to make up the bed in your room.’

‘We won’t be long,’ was the last thing I said to Théo before the girls and I went to pack my bags.



I woke up in an unfamiliar bed—soft and engulfed in a cloud of white sheets and pillows—with a cracking headache and a man’s shirt on.

*How had I gotten here?* Oh, yeah. After collecting my bags with Maia and Quinn from our shitty hostel (‘Let’s hope his apartment has hot water and a bed larger than a couch cushion, huh?’ Quinn had said while shoving my underwear into a suitcase pocket), we took an Uber to an apartment which was located right above Théo’s tattoo parlour. Next to the red door we’d entered his workplace through, there was a cream-white door which was almost unidentifiable against the rest of the building’s identically coloured exterior. We’d been told to let ourselves up—the door would be unlocked—and then to knock at the second door up the stairs.

We’d drunkenly dragged and banged my suitcase up the set of stairs, knocked on the door, and were greeted by a wet Théo, a towel slung low across his waist and his hair slicked back. I seemed to be forming a Pavlovian response: each time I was presented with the sheer magnificence of Théo, my mouth watered. Soon enough, just the sound of his name might make me salivate.

I tried, desperately, not to look lower than his face. In my peripheral vision I remember noticing his tattoos were mainly scattered across his toned arms, and yet a flash of ink lower and near his happy trail caught my eye before I reminded myself to *not look, be polite, and don’t linger*.

‘I showered,’ he’d said.

‘Amen,’ Quinn had said.

Without any worry that his towel might slip and reveal what looked to be an *amazing* ass, Théo took us through his apartment, saying a bunch of things I didn’t quite catch because his accent seemed to be getting thicker, with French words infiltrating his English. (Was he faltering in his English because he was nervous like me? Or because he was tipsy enough that he was getting lazy with his vowels and consonants, letting them slide languidly out of his mouth?) I think he may have muttered something about where the bathroom was (*salle de bains?*) and maybe told me to help myself to anything in the kitchen (kitchen must be *la cuisine*, right?) but before I could clarify anything with him, or even slightly get my bearings, Théo had ushered the girls and I into the room I would be living in for the next three weeks and told us he would ‘let me get comfortable’ before running off.

Maia immediately started scavenging the room, turning pillows upside-down and checking in the wardrobe, behind the door, and under the bed.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ I asked her.

‘Checking for cameras,’ she said, pulling back the curtains,

‘*Cameras?* Maia, your paranoia is now becoming annoying.’

She kept looking for another minute or so—no cameras to be found—before joining Quinn and I on the bed.

Sat in a circle like a trio of tween-age girls about to confess their latest crushes, Maia, Quinn and I intertwined hands and stared so deeply at each other that I had an urge to look away.

I had thought my friendship with these girls couldn’t get more intimate after three years of university, somehow always being assigned rooms adjacent to one another like some serendipitous reward. No one had ever known me as truly and deeply as Maia and Quinn did. It wasn’t that we were all perfect matches for one another’s personalities—not in the slightest—it was simply that our love for one another had grown out of proximity, a forced closeness that led to a co-dependent devotion.

This trip had—somehow—taken our closeness to another level. There was no escaping to our bedrooms for a moment’s peace, or weekends away visiting our families. For two weeks, each waking (*and* sleeping) moment was spent in each other’s company. And now we were expected to simply part ways—with me staying in Paris and then back to studying in Melbourne, Quinn terrorising London, and Maia doing some well-deserved cavorting around Europe for an indeterminate amount of time—and not feel as though we were severing off our own right hands?

I worried that with them leaving, my confidence would say goodbye, too. They *were* my confidence. I’d outsourced that part of my personality. When I was too scared to send a text or email, Quinn did it for me. When I was holding back on my opinion, Maia was the one who told me to *spill it, Freya*. Without them, I worried I’d revert to the timid girl I was before university.

‘I’m so glad I finally get to be rid of you two,’ Quinn had joked, but it fell flat.

Maia had tried to carry on the joking tone. ‘I never actually liked either of you.’

Then it was my turn: ‘Both of you are incredibly unfunny and not at all amazing.’

We all knew what our words actually meant: *I love you. Thank you for being my friends.*

Maia zeroed in on me. ‘You call me—or Quinn or your mum or border security; I don’t care who—*Every. Single. Day.*’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said. Whether or not I could, logistically, talk to someone on the phone every day, there was no need to make Maia worry any more than necessary. If it comforted her,

I would promise it. I would likely want to talk to someone and recount every single interaction I had with Théo, anyway (because I needed a decoder to understand any romantic behaviour). They would likely not go two hours after leaving this apartment without a text from me.

The girls and I sat in silence for a short moment, knowing what was going to come next: a goodbye. The official one, before we all moved onto what seemed like very separate and distant lives.

‘You have to leave now otherwise I’ll cry,’ I said, a wobble in my voice that indicated just how close tears were.

‘Oh, Freya, stop it,’ Maia said, climbing off the bed. ‘Your crying will make me cry, and you know I don’t like crying. Doing or watching.’

‘Must evacuate,’ Quinn said, pushing Maia towards the door. ‘I can handle Freya tears, but Maia tears? Sedation is the only cure.’

The girls left me sat cross-legged on my new bed, its size so expansive and empty without them. Their bickering reverberated down the hall as they made their way out of the apartment, Quinn begging Maia to pass on sleep, hair of the dog and all that, and just stay awake until their respective train and plane trips later that morning. Maia called out into the abyss of the apartment to Théo, saying goodbye, that she’d murder him if anything bad happened to me, that he better count his lucky stars he had me under his roof.

The next thing I had to figure out was the shirt. *How did I end up in his shirt?*

The likeliest of culprits: my useless, impractical, bane-of-my-existence suitcase.

The bag I’d travelled with had belonged to my father and had belonged to him since before I was born. It was enormous and could likely fit a large child in it; it didn’t have any locking mechanism, so I had to padlock it for safety; its zips had become essentially useless, and often got stuck when the case was halfway open, or barely held closed when I needed them to.

During the two weeks of travelling, the bag’s function only declined. When I tried to take out my pyjamas and make-up wipes after the girls left, I couldn’t see the correct combination on the locks because my eyes were trying to hold back a flood of tears, and even once I did manage to get the locks off, the zip seemed to have been fused shut by some godly force. No matter how much I tried to rip the bag in two, smash my hand against it, and curse at it, it wouldn’t open.

I think I was muttering something along the lines of, ‘If this bag doesn’t open in the next five seconds, I’m going to throw it out that very nice, very big window,’ when Théo appeared in my doorway, leant against the frame like an angel, black lit by warm yellow light.

He had (unfortunately) clothed himself and stood in blue striped pyjama shorts and a white tank top.

He smiled down at me sympathetically. 'Would you like some help?'

I pushed the suitcase towards him helplessly. 'Please.'

He tried, with all his muscle-straining might, to open the suitcase, muttering *mon dieu* as the zip remained fused shut, but yielded no better result than I did. The bag was thus discarded to a corner of the room to be tomorrow-Freya's problem.

'*C'est impossible*,' he said, resting next to me against the wall.

I smiled at him. 'Thank you for trying, but this bag has a mind of its own. It will open when it's ready.'

'You need a new suitcase.'

'It's my dad's,' I said, forgetting to use the past tense. It still didn't feel normal to refer to my own father—who had always existed to me, somewhere, in the present tense—as someone who *was* and no longer *is*.

'Your dad must get a new suitcase, then.'

There was no point in correcting him. It was too late; I was too tired; it was too serious. I just nodded in agreement.

For the first time all night, we sat silently. There were no more whispers about what he might show me in the city, no more stories of his grandmother's garden. Instead, wedged between us was the question of *do we kiss now? Do we fuck now?*

Of all the chances I had to kiss him that night, it was the worst one. I should have kissed him after he wondered if my lips would taste like lime. I should have kissed him right after I said yes to staying, before my suitcase was in his apartment and the alcohol was still buzzing in my blood. I saw every missed opportunity I'd had to kiss him that night, and stupidly told myself to *fuck it* and turned Théo's face to mine.

He tasted like the Campari he'd been drinking, bitter and orange. His bottom lip was plumper than his top and fit between my lips like a marshmallow. His hands mimicked mine, cupping my face, both of us holding the other as close as we'd wanted to be all night.

His tongue slid into my mouth like I was ice-cream; I melted into him.

It was good. *We* were good.

As I was moving to straddle his legs, wanting to press more than just my lips to his body, Théo mumbled, '*mon chou*,' into a kiss. I thought it was encouragement. Enjoyment. I thought he wanted me on top of him.

I was wrong.

‘Not now, *mon chou*,’ Théo said when he’d pulled us apart. I was hovering on my knees, bracing my hands on his shoulders so I could hoist my leg over his.

I let out a ‘Huh?’

‘We have been drinking,’ he explained, tucking some hair behind my ear. ‘You look tired.’ He ran a gentle thumb under where my eye bags were evidently showing. ‘Not tonight.’

My first attempt at being confident without Maia and Quinn nearby and I’d failed miserably. This was why I ran things past them and developed a game plan. I’m so embarrassingly terrible at having autonomy that it’s just easier if someone else tells me what to do.

The embarrassment of doing what I thought we both wanted and being turned down doused my confidence in kerosene and lit it on fire. It’s embarrassing to *be* embarrassed. My cheeks were hot like a they were branded with the words *stupid* and *idiot*; *bad* and *decision*; *turned* and *down*.

‘You’re right.’ I sat back and made sure none of me was touching any part of him. I saw his hand twitch a little, like it was going to chase after me, but he tucked it into his lap instead.

‘Would you like something to sleep in?’ Théo asked. He nodded towards where my pyjamas were being held prisoner.

I almost moaned at the thought of a clean, oversized shirt and the chance to finally take my bra off. Best I kept that moan to myself, though, lest Théo ordered me to keep it in my pants again.

‘If you wouldn’t mind.’

I’d spent the two minutes he was out of the room trying to figure out where to put myself. Did I stay sitting on the ground? Untuck the sheets and get into bed fully clothed? Instead, when he came back into the room, I was perched awkwardly on the edge of the bed, fiddling with my fingers.

He handed me a neatly folded white shirt, a variant of the one he was wearing earlier in the day, and our hands grazed slightly when I took it from him. I swear I felt an electric shock sizzle at the tips of my fingers.

‘*Bonne nuit*, Freya.’

‘Goodnight, Théo.’

/

Théo’s apartment was brighter than the sun itself, all windows and few walls.

He clearly favoured simplicity—a neutral colour palette, bare walls, few furniture pieces beyond the functional necessities—as though to serve the purpose of a blank canvas. In lieu of decoration, the space was littered with art supplies. A canvas and easel faced out towards the skyline, empty frames leant against the walls, sketch books were left on every which surface, their pages open to rough pencil etchings I itched to look at. I think there was even a block of clay, not yet moulded, sat in a corner somewhere.

Théo had not just let me into his home, but his studio. I wasn't sure which might be more personal.

'Good morning,' I jumped with a fright at the sound of Théo's voice, croaky and not yet warmed up for the day.

I turned to see him stood in the kitchen behind an island which more closely resembled a table you might find in an art studio, made of reclaimed wood with patches of dried paint and drawers which didn't shut completely because they were stuffed full of both cutlery and palette knives.

He looked as though he'd been up for a while, his hair styled back off his face except for that one strand that liked to fall forward and taunt me (*sexysexysexy*, it screamed). He was wearing a tank top today, tucked into a pair of jeans which snugly hugged his waist, his tattoos accessorising the outfit.

'Good morning,' I said. '*Bonjour*,' I corrected myself. Better start getting used to the language.

'Soften the *r* sound,' Théo pointed out. 'Almost as though it is not there. *Bon-jou*.'

'*Bon-jou*,' I said, copying his pronunciation.

'Good,' he said. 'Would you like some coffee?'

'Yes, please.' He motioned for me to sit at one of the stools by the kitchen bench.

Placing a mug in front of me—which looked handmade, with little flowers painted along its rim and a wonky handle—Théo filled it with coffee and asked, 'How do you feel this morning?'

'Are you referring to my decision to stay in Paris, or my hangover?' *Or the residue of embarrassment that's hanging around after trying to kiss you?* I thought.

'Both,' he said. 'But mainly Paris. There is paracetamol for a hangover.'

I thought I might be more freaked out this morning, sober and faced with the reality of my decision. But I knew I would rather be in this strange home than in one I knew all too well, waiting for my next semester of law school to begin. The home with the study with bookshelves for walls, filled with thick books from eighties law school curriculums which were falling apart

at the seams. The home with pencil marks still drawn on the walls behind paintings he'd hung. The home which my dad didn't live in anymore.

The one thing that did freak me out, that might result in me losing hearing in an ear drum as she yelled down the phone at me, was telling my mum I wouldn't be getting on the plane in a couple of days. There was no particularly good way to break the news that instead of flying home I'd be staying in Paris with a guy I met less than twenty-four hours ago. Mum didn't need to have a heart attack, and I certainly didn't want another dead parent.

'I feel good. Fine, really.'

'You are not disappointed you did not go home?'

'No, no,' I said. 'Disappointed I missed out in the liminal vibe of an airport, though.'

'Liminal?' Théo repeated back to me, saying the word for what seemed to be the first time.

'It's like—oh, how do I describe this? It's called a liminal space, where you feel as though time almost doesn't exist. Where you could do anything and it wouldn't count, like it wouldn't be real. Airports are one infamous liminal space. Hotel lobbies, too.'

'Ah.' Théo nodded. 'You like these liminal spaces?'

'I like feeling like I could do anything, and it wouldn't matter.'

There was something about Paris feeling liminal, I supposed. Like me in Paris didn't count, like I could be a completely different Freya. I wouldn't be Freya with the dead dad, or law school Freya. I had the freedom to find out which Freya I would like to be.

'Wouldn't that be nice?' Théo said with a smirk over the lip of his coffee mug. Taking on a more serious tone, he continued, 'I have been thinking.'

'Oh,' I said. My heart felt heavy in my chest. 'About us living together?'

'*Ouais, on peu,*' he said. 'Kind of.'

I forgot—as though I was the only person that mattered in this situation—that maybe *he* was regretting his offer for me to stay. That maybe he went to bed, woke up, and there was some random girl in his apartment, and he realised how stupid he was last night. That it would be like having a child around, always having to correct my pronunciation of words and talking to people for me because no one wants to talk to the ignorant Australian who can't speak French. That in the light of day, maybe I'm not so pretty, or charming, or anything like I was last night. That the kiss last night wasn't worth having me around for.

'Are *you* not feeling so good this morning? About offering for me to stay?'

'*Non, non, non,*' Théo said, reaching across the bench to place a comforting hand on mine. 'I'm glad you a here, Freya. Very glad.' There was no doubt he meant it.

‘Ok,’ I said. ‘Good.’ Pressure eased in my chest.

Théo walked around the bench and sat in the seat next to me. ‘I want you to know there are no expectations. That this is—’ He motioned between the two of us. ‘*How do I say?*—I mean, you should not—’

There was never an easy way to have this kind of conversation—the let’s-not-get-too-ahead-of-ourselves, I’m-not-looking-for-anything-serious, we-should-just-have-fun conversation—let alone when there was (somewhat of) a language barrier. It was an awkward, bumbling conversation in any language.

But I knew what he was trying to say: casual. There was no expectation for *real* between us; no expectation of rushed kisses on the floor of his spare bedroom; no expectation for seriousness.

Serious wasn’t possible for a three-week stay, anyway. Théo was to be the perfect, distracting pastime. I wanted to only think about if he might kiss me again, about when we would find time amongst his schedule and my sightseeing to get each other naked, about how his hands would feel as they grazed up the bare skin of my thigh. No thoughts of law school or my dad’s non-existence would get a say in edgewise while I was in Paris.

Though I was not particularly confident in my ability to not catch more serious feelings for Théo (I already ached desperately to know as much as possible about him), there was no room in my life for anything but casual. This was a fling. There would be no expectations of me in this city, nor would there be in this apartment with Théo.

‘I know what you mean.’ I smiled at Théo. ‘No expectations,’ I said in confirmation. Like a verbal agreement between the two of us.

‘No expectations,’ he confirmed.



Théo very apologetically had to leave me for the rest of the day. He'd rescheduled his morning appointments—much to his customers' dismay—so he could be home when I woke up but had other customers booked in for the rest of the afternoon that he couldn't miss. One of said clients, apparently, was getting a back piece of *The Birth of Venus*, which Théo was immensely proud of. It had taken him three sessions so far, and that afternoon should be the last.

'Ever done a depiction of Venus's conception?' I asked him.

He laughed. 'Testicles on the ground of Gaia would not be so pretty, I do not think.'

'You could make it pretty,' I teased.

As I escorted him to the door, following him like a puppy who was about to lose her translator and singular friend in the city, Théo asked me what I might do with my day.

'Shower first, I think. Then I'll have to mentally prepare myself to call my mother. And then actually call her. Those last two might take up my whole day.'

Staying in Paris meant messing with Mum's schedule, and messing with Mum's schedule was a cardinal sin in her home. Everything she did in a day, from her morning coffee to her toilet breaks, was written into her leather-bound diary. It was her emotional support planner, and everything abided by it. She had me penned into her diary—in the special red pen which was used for important events—as travelling from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June to the 8<sup>th</sup> of July. My plane would arrive back in Melbourne at 5:30pm, and she would leave work early to pick me up from the gate and roll my suitcase to the car.

'If you would like something else to do, you could visit my friends at their restaurant,' Théo said. 'Raphael is the head chef and his girlfriend, Inés, is the manager. They would like to meet you.'

'That sounds scary,' I half-joked. 'Do they also want to take a photo of my license like Maia did to you?'

'Inés might. Raphael will feed you beautiful food until you spill all your secrets.'

'I'm always happy when I'm being fed,' I said.

'If you are too hungover, they can meet you another time.' He was offering me an excuse not to go and meet his friends. But wasn't it the least I could do, especially after he so expertly appeased mine?

'I'm grateful for a proper reason to postpone calling my mum.'

'You have my phone number, but it is written here next to the restaurant address.' Théo tapped a piece of paper on the sideboard by his front door.

‘Phone number, restaurant address. Got it.’

‘And here is a spare key.’ He passed me a long, brass key with a fraying yellow ribbon tied to it.

As I played with the silky material between my fingers, Théo said, ‘It is my mother’s spare key. She likes yellow.’

‘Yellow is pretty. Yellow means I won’t lose it.’

‘You will call if anything goes wrong?’ Théo was fretting, braced against the open doorway, refusing to leave until he knew I would be alright.

‘With my mother? It will likely be a disaster, but you won’t be able to save me.’

‘Call me if you are lost, or want to know where the nearest shop is, or just need to hear my voice.’ Théo winked. ‘I can even talk to your mother myself. Mothers love me.’

‘My mother might tear you limb from limb through the phone.’

‘Impressive.’

‘Go. I’ll be fine,’ I said, pushing him through the door frame. ‘You’ll miss your appointments. And you know how crazy your clients can get.’ I pointed to myself. ‘One might even start banging on your door like a lunatic.’

‘One *lunatic*—’ Another word I seemed to have taught Théo. ‘—is enough for me.’

We had gotten awfully close, in my pushing him out the door, and his trepidation to leave me alone and thus clinging to his apartment’s threshold. His eyes flickered down to look at my lips, and I hoped it meant he might kiss me again, that I hadn’t messed up with how impatient and clumsy I was last night.

His tongue dragged across his teeth slowly, and I thought he might press just a chaste kiss to my lips. I *hoped* he would initiate just one quick kiss; I needed to know he still wanted me like that after my impatient, messy attempt at intimacy last night. Instead, he said, ‘*Dieu sauve-moi*,’ with a groan and pushed himself out the door.

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‘Just call her, you wimp,’ I said to myself. I was probably wearing a hole through Théo’s very nice herringbone floorboards with all my pacing.

In an attempt to delay the call, I’d taken a very long, very luxurious shower. After weeks of hostel showers I could barely fit into, where the water pressure was pathetic and the temperature tepid, I took advantage of Théo’s amenities. He used expensive soap which cleaned *and* moisturised simultaneously. I debated using his razor to shave my legs but decided against

what would undeniably be the overstepping of boundaries. His shampoo was the kind that had *no parabens* and *profits donated to charity* written on the bottle and smelt like grapefruit.

In my procrastination, I'd also managed to: wrangle my suitcase open, pick out a very cute outfit (which included a pair of jeans which hugged my ass but didn't cling to my calves and a pair of Mary Janes I bought in a vintage store a few days ago), blow dry my bangs perfectly (I'd genuinely never seen them look so good), do my make up (with winged eye liner!) and watch the departure time of my train to Giverny come and go without me sitting in carriage six.

There was no more delaying this call.

It was about eight o'clock at night in Melbourne. Mum would be awake, sitting on the couch rewatching some sitcom with the one glass of wine she sipped on all night. I could ruin her nighttime relaxation with my news—images of her in tears as a laugh track played in the background popped into my mind—or I could call her later (like while she was busy at work), familiarise myself with the streets of my new neighbourhood, and get a lashing for not having called sooner (*Freya Ford Davis! Why would you not run this past me first? Do you know how idiotic this is?*).

'Rip the band aid off, Freya,' I said to myself.

I opened my mother's contact and it stared back at me. The Australian country code taunted me, as though saying, *use your international minutes wisely, Freya*.

I pressed dial. Mum, of course, immediately answered. I could envision the picture she had assigned to my contact: a zoomed in photo of my high school graduation, where I'm ugly-grinning with my diploma, my dad's arm around my shoulder.

'Hi, sweetie,' Mum said cheerfully.

'Hey Mum,' I said, trying to match her cheery tone.

'Are you in Giverny yet? Is it as beautiful as you remember?' I could hear a *Seinfeld* episode playing in the background.

'About that.' I hesitated. 'I'm still in Paris.'

'Oh, sweetie. Could you not go through with it?'

'What—?' She thought I couldn't do it. She thought I chickened out of going back to Monet's house and seeing the gardens I'd gone to with Dad.

'Because that's okay if you were scared. You can go another time. It will always be there. Hopefully. I'm sure it's a historical land—'

I interrupted her. 'No, Mum, I'm not scared to go back to the gardens. That's not why I stayed in Paris.'

‘Why did you stay in Paris, then?’

‘I, um—’ *Rip the Band-Aid, rip the Band-Aid*, I reminded myself. ‘I met a guy. Sort of.’

There was a silence down the line, no hint as to how my mum was reacting. Was she preparing to scream at me? Stifling her tears while holding her hand over the receiver? Maybe she was already scanning the internet to buy me a plane ticket home.

‘Is he nice?’ Mum asked, her voice still measured, normal. Of all the questions she could have asked, including *Is he an axe murderer? Into cannibalism? What’s the address of his apartment? Can I speak to him over the phone, right now?* All my mum wanted to know was if he was nice? I couldn’t tell if that was endearing or foolish.

‘He’s very nice,’ I said.

‘Good! That’s good, sweetie.’

‘You’re not mad? That I’m acting all foolish for a boy?’

‘Mad? Oh, not at all. I’m glad you’re having fun and want to stay. Goodness knows I did stupider things when I was in Europe at your age.’

I wished she’d give me a little something, maybe say: ‘But, sweetie, that seems a bit... ill-advised. Maybe just stay another week? And then I’ll fly you home.’ Or even some anger—I could deal with anger—some voice raising, a ‘How could you be so *careless*, Freya!’ I wanted her to be mad that she’d have to cross out the event in her diary that said ‘Freya Home’. I wanted her to tell me I would be cutting it too close semester two start date.

This even-toned Mum was unsettling.

‘How much longer will you be there?’ she asked, likely getting out her pen and diary.

‘Three weeks?’ I squeaked out.

‘Well, that sounds lovely, Freya,’ she said.

‘I promise I’ll be back home before my next semester of uni starts.’ I kept trying to defend my decision, though it was evidently quite redundant. Mum was completely on board. She’d text me later and ask for my flight reference number and return date.

‘I trust you,’ she said. ‘Even if you wanted to defer law school for a sem—’

‘No. I’m not deferring. I’ll be back for second semester.’

Another laugh tracked sounded in the background of the call.

‘So, everything is alright at home?’ I asked. ‘Have you spoken to the real estate agent yet?’

‘Oh, everything is fine here. The same as always. And yes, I’ve spoken to the agent. She’s entirely confident the house will sell and sell quickly. She’s a client of mine, remember?’

Sold the house next door to me? Crazy woman. Total real estate type, with Botox and a fake smile to match. She's very good at what she does.'

I had this feeling that my mum was lying to me. That she was concerned about her daughter living a normal and enjoyable life after the years of not-very-fun and not-normal with dad and his cancer. She would never tell me that she would rather me be at home or that the real estate agent thought the house was totally unsellable.

'Did she say when we should sell it? Soon, right? It's been over ten months with no one living in it.'

'There's no rush to sell the house, Freya. Everything will be fine,' Mum said, as though she could hear my guilt through the phone. 'You enjoy yourself.'

'Are you sure you don't want to yell at me? Tell me it's a stupid decision?'

'I'm sure Maia already did that,' she said. 'She wouldn't leave you without knowing it was safe.'

'Maia did already do that. Vetted Théo quite thoroughly, too.'

'Then, no. I don't want to yell at you, or tell you it's a stupid decision.'

'Ok. Great. Lovely,' I said, still unsettled. 'There is one other thing.'

'And what's that?'

This would without a doubt cause some yelling. 'I got a tattoo.'

I heard Mum take a deep breath to ready her diaphragm for her yelling. 'You got a *what?!*'

And I hung up the phone before she could continue.

Théo's apartment was oppressively silent. Just me and the overwhelming freedom to do whatever I wanted filled the living area. There were so many things I could do without Maia keeping me to a reasonable schedule, or Quinn always looking for her next snack. I could go to the Louvre again and read every placard. I could try the lavender, and rose, and orange blossom flavoured macarons at Ladurée without Quinn taking the first bite. I could go inside Sacré-Cœur and stare up at the ceiling for an hour. I'd never had so many options available at once and it felt like being told to pick a favourite child.

Decision fatigue meant I ended up familiarising myself with Montmartre instead, seeing as it was where I'd be staying for the next three weeks. I walked up and down endless stairs that made my calves ache and chest heaved; I went into a bookstore, messy from ground to ceiling, and saw some copies of my favourite novels with unfamiliar French titles; I tried to look inconspicuous as I walked through Place du Tertre so the artists wouldn't ask if I wanted a drawing, and so I wouldn't have to feel bad about saying no.

I poked my head into the restaurant of Théo's friends. *Le Restaurant D'a Côte* was an art deco style restaurant with dark-stained wood panelling, velvet-lined booths and moody lighting that served leisurely lunching Parisians expensive wine and butter-filled meals. Ines, who I met while she was holding six wine glasses at once, had long braids she'd twisted into a bun on top of her head and the perfect posture of a ballerina. The first thing she asked me was if Théo and I had had sex yet, and the second was if I was anything like *Emily in Paris*. Rapha, who spoke to me through the pass, was an even-tempered chef with a lopsided smile and braids to match his girlfriend. He offered me steak frites with garlic butter and the information that Théo could be messy, especially with his art supplies.

Once the evening started to settle in, I decided to make my way back to Théo's apartment. I thought—for a brief and idiotic second—I might be able to find my way back by memory, but I'd dizzied myself so far into the maze of Montmartre that it only took five minutes of aimless walking (in the wrong direction) before my phone was pulled out of my pocket and the automated voice was directing me once again.

When I opened the door to the apartment, I was met with the sight of Théo, a little apron tied around his waist, chopping vegetables. He looked up mid-chop and flashed me a million-watt smile.

'*Bonsoir*, chef,' I said. 'Any other redeeming qualities I should know about?'

Laughing, he replied, 'I draw, and I cook. There is not much more.'

‘More than most men. My ex didn’t know how to turn on the oven.’ “Ex” was a more serious way to refer to him. More like man-I’m-no-longer-being-strung-along-by.

‘He is an ex for a reason, then.’

‘Very much so.’

I came to join him in the kitchen. I felt it should have been *me* cooking *him* dinner, and not the other way around. I tried, albeit weakly, to offer to chop some of the vegetables he was about to roast, but he vehemently insisted I sit down. He guided me with his hands on my shoulders to sit on a kitchen stool and once he had me sat, placed a thin-stemmed wine glass in front of me and filled it generously.

‘Relax,’ he ordered.

It’s hard to live in the moment when you think it’s too good to be true. I was wondering what might go wrong as I watched him in yet another of his mastered domains, basting the roast chicken and coating the potatoes in olive oil and fresh rosemary. Maybe he was some kind of Hannibal Lecter, fattening me up before he ate me, and the only reason he knew how to cook was so he could make a nice rump steak out of my ass.

*Or maybe, Freya, he’s a good guy, like Ines and Rapha said. Maybe, he’s just being nice. Would it be so weird if he were just being nice?* It was, unfortunately, weird to me for a guy to be even somewhat considerate and competent. My precedent for men was a guy who said he’d ‘build up stamina’ if we had sex a lot, who forgot my friends’ names and called them ‘brunette’ and ‘bleach’ instead, who had to ask which cycle to put his washing on and bought four-in-one shower products (shampoo, conditioner, body wash and what the fuck was the fourth product?)

‘You know,’ Théo said, leaning on the counter after he’d put the potatoes in the oven, ‘I thought I might find you laying on my couch when I came home. Instead, an empty apartment.’

‘I got a little lost during my afternoon walk.’

‘You should have called me.’

‘Good lost. Purposefully lost.’

‘You met Ines and Rapha.’ It wasn’t a question. They’d like texted him the information moments after I left the restaurant, like I would have if I were them.

‘Briefly,’ I said. ‘While Ines was serving, and Rapha was cooking.’

‘It is always busy at the restaurant,’ Théo said. ‘The only time I see them is when I visit for lunch.’

‘How did you meet them?’ I asked.

‘I have been friends with Rapha since school. We were six when we met. And Ines went to university with me. She is a very talented ceramicist. Makes very beautiful vases and bowls that no one else at university could compare to.’

‘So, they met through you?’

Théo nodded. ‘Rapha was about to start culinary school here in Paris after working at a restaurant down in Marseille. To help him get to know the city, I invited him out with me and my university friends. One of my friends was the girl I liked,’ Théo said.

‘Ines,’ I guessed. ‘You liked Ines?’

Théo nodded. ‘I had told myself I would ask her out that night. But I got scared, like I always did. She was my closest friend at *l’université*. If I scared her off, or it did not work out, I would have no one to study with.’ He said this with a weak smile on his face. ‘It is not a problem, though, because Rapha got there first. Though I did not know that.’

‘You didn’t know they were dating?’ I prompted.

Théo took a sharp swig of his wine, then said, ‘Not for a few months. They thought I would be mad. Rapha thought he was a bad friend for liking the girl I liked. Ines thought she was selfish for liking Rapha instead of me. It was all very silly, why they kept it from me. I would never have been mad that they were dating. Jealous, maybe, that Ines liked Rapha more than me. But not mad.’

‘Not even a *little* mad?’ I asked. I would have been mad.

‘I was hurt that they kept it from me,’ Théo said. ‘Me and Rapha had never lied to each other before. We never needed to. I will never truly understand why he was afraid to tell me.’

Théo’s jaw was clenched tight, and eyes clouded with bad memories. He clearly didn’t like lies or secrets. He’d rather be told his best friend was in love with his crush than have the information kept from him. And yet *I* was keeping something secret from him.

Théo was the first person in months to not see the grieving daughter. And I, selfishly, needed to be who I was before my dad was sick, before he died. I wanted to be someone who didn’t know what grief felt like. I wanted to be the person with two parents and no cares in the world.

I could have told him there, barely twenty-four hours into knowing each other, but what did it matter? In three weeks, I’d be gone on a plane back to Australia, and Théo would be none the wiser. My dad could be alive for three weeks, Théo would never know he was being lied to, and maybe that ache in my heart would ease for a short while.

‘It is all fine now, though,’ Théo said, shaking himself out of his stupor. ‘When I first saw them together, I knew they were better for each other. Ines and I would never work, and



hesitating to ask her out for over a year was so they could be together. Her and Rapha, they are like fire and ice, but complement each other very well.'

Of all the questions that burned on my lips—*Why did you like Ines? Why do you hate being lied to so much? How long did it take you to trust Rapha again?*—I asked something safer instead: 'If Ines is so talented, why does she work at the restaurant? I know being an artist of any kind can be hard. Does her work not sell?'

'No, her work sells—for a lot of money—but she does not produce much. It is very popular, her art, but she gets bored sitting at home by a pottery wheel all day, no matter how much she loves it. She must always be doing something. And Rapha, when he opened the restaurant, trusted only himself to run the dining area. He was so busy. Almost hospitalised for fatigue. So Ines said she would do it. It would be like having two of Rapha, she said, though I think Ines might be scarier.'

'I wouldn't go against a chef, though. They're terrifying.'

Théo laughed. 'Rapha can get angry in the kitchen.'

Théo felt miles away stood on the other side of the counter. With each sip of his wine, I watched his lips cup the edge of the glass and I pictured the way they might fit between my lips.

'I like the role reversal,' I said. If we kept talking, my mind couldn't wander. Wander to thoughts sitting up on the kitchen bench with him between my legs and only the apron between us. 'You, barefoot in the kitchen; me, sipping on a glass of wine.'

'My grandmother would kill me if I did not cook for a guest. And my mother would curse at me if I did not offer a good rosé.'

'Strong maternal figures. They sound like my kind of women.'

'You would like each other,' Théo said. He punctuated his words with a wink.

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After dinner, Théo pulled a cigarette from his pocket. I thought he was going to light it inside as he placed it lazily between his lips, but instead he said, 'Come join me on the roof.'

'The roof?' I said.

The right side of his mouth pulled up into a smile. '*Oauis*. Just through that window.' He pointed to a window which was slightly ajar in the corner of the living area. 'I promise it is safe.'

Standing, he held out a hand and, if only so I might touch him, I took it.

He made a small detour through the kitchen, not letting go of my hand as he took two beers out of the fridge, before making his way over to the ajar window.

‘We need to shuffle along this ledge,’ Théo said, his voice slightly muffled by the cigarette which still dangled comfortably from his lips.

He stepped through the window onto a generous ledge. There was no barrier between him and the two-story drop as he reached his hand through the window, willing me to follow. I stepped out onto the ledge hesitantly, gripping onto him for dear life, likely cutting off the blood flow this his fingertips.

‘Shuffle for a little. Three metres, maybe.’ He was moving towards the adjoining building.

We had to shuffle past Théo’s bedroom window, and I got my first glimpse at his private space. I noticed his mid-century style bedframe, the same stark white linens as the guest room, and a leather armchair with clothes beginning to pile up on it. Most notably, though, was a large blank canvas rested against one of the walls.

‘What’s the canvas for?’ I asked. Talking and trying to maintain balance was not the easiest of tasks. Théo, however, managed to hold two beers, keep his cigarette in his mouth, and not let go of my hand while remaining perfectly stable.

‘Not sure yet. Maybe a nude,’ he joked.

‘Need a model?’

Théo turned his head to me with the confidence of someone who was clearly unafraid of height and scaling buildings. ‘If you are offering, then yes. I am in desperate need of a beautiful, Australian model who is living in my home.’

Once we reached the adjoining building, Théo stepped across onto the roof, quickly placed the beers down and then used both hands to steady me as I stepped from ledge to roof.

The roof was on a slight slant and was made from well-reinforced slate tiles which held mine and Théo’s weight comfortably. The wall of the building extended up a little, so as we sat down, we could rest our feet against the brick and be assured we weren’t going to slide off onto the pavement.

‘You cannot see much,’ Théo said. ‘But if you sit just here—’ He pushed my body across the roof slightly, so I was sat with a view between the gap of two buildings. ‘—you will have something to look at.’

Through the gap, I could see down towards the flat of Paris. It wasn’t like standing on the stairs of Sacré-Cœur, where there was an expansive 270-degree view of Paris; instead, it was like a painting, capturing just a sliver of the city, framed between brick and mortar.

‘You can’t see from where you’re sitting,’ I said, beginning to slide my body so we might share the view. He stopped me from moving with a hand around my waist and pulled me back, so the view was all mine.

‘I see it all the time. You enjoy it tonight.’ As he removed his hand from my waist, he lingered across the plane of my back, his fingertips grazing the slither of skin between my top and jeans. I had to rub my arms like I was cold to hide the goosebumps that ran across my body.

‘You come out here a lot?’

‘Most nights,’ he said, pulling a lighter out from his pocket. ‘I am trying to quit, you see.’ He lit the cigarette and took a long, smooth drag. ‘I save it for some time when I can really enjoy it.’

Théo pinched his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, a lot like how someone might hold a tiny paintbrush as they added minute details to a painting. I wondered if I hadn’t known he was an artist, if I could have figured it out from the way he held a cigarette.

‘Sorry to ruin you enjoying it,’ I said.

‘Freya,’ Théo began, his sentence punctuated by a quick drag. My name felt suspended in the air between us and sounded like honey dripping from his lips. ‘You could not ruin anything.’

A comfortable silence fell between us. Though I didn’t feel the need to make conversation with Théo, to me all silences—comfortable or not—felt as though they needed to be filled. Instead of ruining the moment, I focused very hard on the view.

This particular portrait of Paris was still and simple: rooves of a slate blue similar to the one I was sitting on; windows with blinds pulled, shutters closed, or left slightly ajar with glimpses into living rooms, bedrooms or bathrooms; the tops of lampposts glowing like candles in the dusk; hints of greenery, from hanging flowerpots or trees.

‘Tell me why you came to Europe,’ Théo said, breaking the silence. It wasn’t an order, but it wasn’t a question, either.

I looked to him and found him already looking at me. He was holding one of the beer bottles, now open and offered to me.

‘What you say on the roof, stays on the roof,’ Théo reassured me.

‘Well, aside from a trip with my friends, I was supposed to head to Giverny today and visit Monet’s Gardens. My dad and I went together, years ago. I don’t remember it so clearly, but I know I liked it.’

I knew I was withholding information, sidestepping the truth while not completely lying. Théo didn’t need to know it was one of the last memories my dad mentioned to me as he

was in his hospice bed, a nasal canula helping him breath. *Remember Giverny? Remember the garden?* he'd said. *Wasn't that nice?*

'Your choice of tattoo makes more sense now,' Théo said.

'I couldn't believe it when I saw it in your sketch book,' I said. 'It felt...' My voice thinned out, afraid to say this next thing. 'Something like kismet.' The words were so quiet they were practically inaudible.

'Kismet?' Théo repeated. With all the French he was teaching and would teach me, I liked it when I got to expand his English vocabulary.

'Like destiny. Fate.'

'Fate,' he repeated. 'I knew those goddesses had something good coming for me.'

'Maybe I'm not good. Maybe I'm your allotted misery.'

'I doubt it.'

Théo's cigarette was coming to an end, and he made the final drag last. He closed his eyes and slowly pulled the smoke into his lungs. As he held onto the now useless butt, Théo tilted his head up to the sky and pursed his lips like he was about to kiss and breathed out the smoke. With clear familiarity, he stamped the cigarette out on the brick and flicked it over the edge.

It was so intimate to watch Théo act with such habit. The last drag of each cigarette he smoked had turned into a ritual and being privy to it almost felt more erotic than if he'd breathed the last dregs of smoke into my mouth and closed his lips over mine to taste it. Almost.

Théo rested back on his forearms and looked up at me as he said, 'Would you let me tattoo you again?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'What you would want to tattoo.'

'I could come up with some ideas. But I'd need to ask some questions first.'

I leant back on my forearms like Théo, and our elbows nudged at each other.

'Okay. Ask away.'

He turned onto his side so he could look at me more fully.

'Would you like to stay with a theme?'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean only flowers, or only Monet.'

'Do you have a theme?' I asked.

'You cannot guess?'

I slapped my hand to my face. Of course, he had a theme. ‘Famous artworks.’

He nodded. ‘Famous artworks.’

‘Any famous artwork?’ I asked.

‘Any I like.’

‘Do you have a favourite? Tattoo, I mean.’

Théo reached over and pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger—a gesture he seemed to like—and said, ‘I am supposed to be asking the questions, *mon chou*.’ I tried to commit the phrase *mon chou* to my memory so I might translate it the moment I was alone in my room. ‘My favourite changes every day.’

‘Which one is it today?’

Taking his fingers from my face, Théo partially lifted his shirt and pushed the waistband of his jeans down slightly. On the soft plane of his stomach, next to the smattering of hair that trailed from his belly button to below his pants, was a fine line tattoo of two naked figures wrapped around each other. The male-bodied figure was an angel, holding the female-bodied figure, his wings framing them from behind. I had only one cultural reference for an angel carrying a woman away.

‘Eros and Psyche,’ I said.

‘Do you like the myth?’

‘Depends on who’s telling it,’ I said. ‘But it’s definitely a favourite.’

Quinn, if she heard me say this, would have said, ‘Pretentious. How do you even *know* about that?’

‘It was my degree. I *paid* to know that,’ I would have said to her.

But Théo agreed with me, saying, ‘For me, too. Every painting of the moment Eros takes Psyche has so much love, as he carefully carries her home, wrapped in his arms. I like thinking that two people in love would do anything for one another. That if separating a thousand seeds from each other kept me from my lover, I would do it, and so would they.’

He’d taken my breath away with the sincerity of his storytelling. He’d made me want the kind of love that would separate seeds. ‘You tell the myth well.’

‘I try,’ he said.

‘So why is it your favourite at the moment?’

Théo shrugged, a small smirk on his face. ‘No particular reason.’

‘Tease.’ On two grounds: keeping his reasoning from me, and for lifting his shirt and pushing down his pants.

‘My question, Freya. Would you like a theme?’

‘Right. A theme.’ I hadn’t ever thought about getting a tattoo up until the other day. They were always something other people had. If I did get more tattoos, would I want continuity? To be covered in sunflowers, and roses, and peonies, and tulips? Or more Monet, with waterlilies and bridges and irises scattered across my body?

‘Flowers seem like a good idea.’

‘Flowers,’ Théo repeated, as though he was making a list in his head. ‘And would you like it to look similar to the waterlilies?’

‘I think so. It would bother me if they looked too dissimilar.’

‘Colour?’

‘Let’s stick to black ink.’

‘Where on your body would you like it?’

I stretched my arms and legs out in front of me, looking for a patch of skin I might like another tattoo. Théo looked with me at the expanse of what now seemed like very bare skin.

‘What hurts?’ I asked.

‘Here,’ Théo said at the same time he cupped the underside of my knee, his hand hot against my skin. ‘And here.’ He trailed a teasing finger up and down the bare skin of my thigh, focused on the way my skin shivered under his touch. ‘And here.’ He lifted my hand that wasn’t holding the beer and pinched at each finger.

He could have kissed me right then and there, on that roof. It would’ve been perfect. And that must have been what he was waiting for, I told myself, why he turned me down last night: somewhere perfect. There was no other reason he would be withholding his lips from me.

I’d been kissed in dingy pubs, locked bathrooms, and teenage boys’ bedrooms (with empty tissue boxes on the side table and dirty sheets). Lots of not-so-perfect locations that couldn’t hold a candle to this place. The Parisian cityscape surrounding me, jazz music flowing from an open apartment window across the way, and a strong electric current running through my body that could only be described as *want*.

‘Maybe here,’ I said, running my hand over the underside of my left arm, just above my elbow.

Théo nodded. He was caught up in his head a little, as though already mentally sketching ideas.

‘*D’accord*. If I design a flower tattoo, for just above your elbow—’ He tapped the spot lightly with his finger. ‘—in a similar style, with only black ink, you will let me tattoo you again?’

I reached my hand out for him to shake.

‘If you come up with the perfect idea, Théo, my skin is your canvas.’

Théo took my hand in his and gave me a firm, warm handshake my dad would have been impressed by. His caramel eyes glittered with a hint of mischief as he whispered, ‘*Marché conclue*, Freya,’ and I knew, soon enough, I’d have another tattoo on my body.

We stayed out on the roof until just after the sun set. I took small sips of my beer until it was lukewarm in my hand and the label was pilling under my thumb. Théo pulled another cigarette out from his jean pocket and said the second didn’t count tonight because he ‘didn’t have time to have one last night. Some Australian girl kept me busy.’ I waited for him to kiss me all night—because I couldn’t bring myself to try and fail again—but eventually we found ourselves saying good night at the threshold of our separate bedrooms, *bonne nuit* and *sweet dreams* murmured across the hallway before we went to bed on our own.

Théo worked Saturdays ('for those who cannot attend weekday appointments') and had rescheduled his Friday morning clients for Sunday. He offered to move his appointments again so he could spend time with me, but I told him there was no reason for him to stop his regular routine.

'I should not work weekends, anyway,' he tried to rationalise.

'But haven't these people been waiting months for appointments?'

'I can fit them in another time. After you are gone.'

'It's fine, Théo. Do the appointments.'

'I will not be able to focus. All I will do is think of you.'

'You'll be fine,' I said, shoving him out the door with a red flush on my cheeks.

All weekend, my phone vibrated with messages from my friends. Maia would constantly send me texts like PHOTO EVIDENCE REQUIRED FOR PROOF OF LIFE or FACETIME RIGHT NOW followed by a perfunctory ????? so as not to seem like a demand. Quinn texted our group chat to give us a play-by-play of her life as an au pair, such as:

these kids are called bowie and stevie. BOWIE AND STEVIE.

That seems unfair to those kids, Maia texted.

like david bowie and stevie nicks? I asked.

EXACTLY LIKE DAVID BOWIE AND STEVIE NICKS.

On Saturday, as I sat eating a baguette by the Siene, Quinn FaceTimed me to give me a tour of her accommodation.

'I have the top floor entirely to myself in a multi-million-dollar mansion in one of the most expensive suburbs in London,' she said as the camera showed her ensuite. 'Did you know people lived like this? I didn't even know it was possible to have this much money. What would you even *do* with this much money?'

'Isn't your family kind of rich, Quinn?' My mouth was full of food as I said this.

'Not this kind of rich,' she said.

'I think Théo has a bit of money. Like, from his business. I think it's quite successful.'

'No shit. Does he own his apartment?'

'I think so.'

'In this economy? At his age?'

'Unheard of. I know.'

'My family have a holiday home in Spain.'



‘Casually.’

‘Look at us, living in rich people’s homes. I’m so proud.’

Early Sunday evening, I was people watching out the front of Rapha’s restaurant with a glass of wine Ines kept refilling before I was finished. An old man, with deep-set wrinkles and a bouquet of flowers set beside him was reading a newspaper. I wanted to know if the flowers were for anybody, or just to brighten up his dining table. I wonder what section of the paper he was reading, and whether he had ink all over his fingers from turning the page. I wished I could have seen my dad just as old as this man was, with barely any hair and sunspots on his cheeks, still reading well into his eighties.

A deep, French accent, just like the one that wished me sweet dreams before bed, sounded from in front of me, saying, ‘Hello.’

I looked away from the old man and looked to Théo. His work day had left a residue on him: a smudge of ink by the hem of his shirt, and a cramp in his right hand he was trying to subtly massage out.

‘*Bonjour*,’ I said. I tried to tamp down my eager smile at the sight of him. My crush may as well be written across my forehead, *Théo Augustine is sooooo sweet* in bold, black sharpie.

‘*Bonsoir*.’ Théo tapped the watch on his left wrist. ‘It is after five o’clock.’

‘*Bonsoir*,’ I corrected. ‘How did you know I was here?’

‘Rapha texted me. I thought I would walk you home.’

‘You walked here just to walk me back?’

Théo shrugged. ‘I needed the air.’

/

‘I thought we would take the long way home,’ Théo said.

It was a perfectly mild night, the air warm around us as we walked. The streetlamps, which emitted a yellow light onto the buildings and cobblestone streets, were reminiscent of another time, as though each night a lamplighter had to go around igniting the flame. They reminded me that Montmartre had been here for years longer than I could fathom, and would continue on for lifetimes upon lifetimes, with more clueless university grads walking the streets trying to figure out their lives.

‘Sounds lovely,’ I said.

‘How was your day? I am sorry I could not join you.’

‘It was good. Just wandered around the neighbourhood.’

‘You did not go see *le Tour Eiffel*? *L’Arc de Triomphe*?’ In his accent, the names of the famous monuments sounded so much better.

‘I’ve got three weeks here. I’m not in a rush.’

‘Would you let me come along with you one day?’

‘Sightseeing?’

‘*Ouais*. So I can see my city through your eyes.’

‘I would love that,’ I said.

‘What is on your list, then? What is it you have not done yet?’

‘Um—’ I took my phone out of my pocket and opened up the Notes app. Earlier in the day, I’d started making a list of things I’d heard about France from books and movies over the years. I wanted to go and be a part of the city like an actor in a frame of the film, or a character on the page.

‘The Luxembourg Gardens,’ was first on my list. I think it was where the first shots in *Pierrot le Fou* were filmed, but I couldn’t completely remember.

‘For a picnic, maybe,’ Théo said.

‘Shakespeare and Co.’ That was because every author under the sun had been there: Anaïs Nin, Zadie Smith, F. Scott Fitzgerald. If they liked it there, I had to know why. I had to see it with my own two eyes.

Théo nodded with a hum.

‘The last one on my list is the café from *Amélie*, but I went there earlier today.’ Inside, it hadn’t looked exactly as it did in the film. There were drawings and posters of the character all over the shop, and it even had a crème brûlée named after her character. Part café, part giftshop.

‘You have been busy,’ Théo said.

‘Very,’ I said, not entirely sure what else to say.

We slipped into a silence. While Théo sat in it like a lush sofa, I itched to keep even the smallest of small talks going. The quiet filled with all the things I thought I should but hesitated to say: a reciprocal *how was your day?* A causal *any plans for tonight?* A boring *have you had dinner yet?*

‘You know,’ I said, keeping up the conversation. I’d get used to being quiet around Théo some other time. ‘I keep thinking about how you’ve not told me how you became a tattoo artist.’

I felt guilty I hadn’t asked this sooner. I knew such intimate things about him by sharing his home, like how he preferred washing dishes by hand because it helped him calm down, and

how he got up at around three in the morning for a glass of water, and how he had a thing for, ever so lightly, pinching my chin between his fingers so he could gently angle my face to look up at his. All these small details about him and yet I didn't know how he had begun his very successful, clearly lucrative, and impressive career?

‘You want to know?’

‘Desperately.’

He took a moment before he started speaking, and I took the same moment to look at him again. His hair was messily pushed back off his face, his eyes drowsy with sleep, and his brow still carried a hint of his focused frown. It was a lot like being a hair's breadth away from the Mona Lisa.

‘Well, I was lucky,’ he began. ‘That is one thing artists need: luck. I am a painter, mainly. And without an agent, or a gallery to show my paintings, there is not much money in what I love to do, and Rapha was tired of paying my half of the rent, and I was tired of eating instant noodles. So, I had to compromise.’

‘One day, Ines asked me to come with her to get a tattoo. Rapha was busy working, and she didn't want to get her first tattoo alone. I came along, thinking I would sit in the waiting area, or hold her hand while staring at my phone, but instead I became focused on the tattoo artist and how hard they worked. I thought, how difficult it must be to get the lines right, to not make a mistake on someone's skin and have your work be ruined for life. You can always correct bad painting, but ink? It is not so easy.’

As he recalled the memories of his career's origins, a small smile bloomed on his face. ‘I kept asking questions throughout Ines' session: did different skin tones carry ink differently? Was there a perfect pressure to press the needle? And eventually, the tattoo artist—one of the most talented in Paris—after learning I was a painter, asked if I was interested in an apprenticeship.’

Théo cleared his throat then and ran a nervous hand around the back of his neck.

‘Juliette was her name.’ He stammered out the words. ‘The tattoo artist I learnt everything from.’

‘Juliette must be a damn good teacher,’ I said.

‘Yes, she is. Very good. Many people would love to work with her.’ His sentences were clipped, like he didn't want to give me this information but was anyway.

‘And she chose you?’

‘*Oui*,’ he said, and then mumbled, ‘Maybe not just for my experience with painting.’

‘What do you mean?’

The back of his neck was likely getting irritated from how much he was rubbing at it.

‘We dated, for a while. When I was her apprentice.’

My mouth formed an ‘O’ shape, but no sound came out. An ex. He was telling me about an ex, who also happened to teach him everything he knew about tattooing. She’d been the one to praise him, reprimand him, question him. She’d practically crafted him out of clay and brought him to life.

‘It was stupid of me to get involved with her, I know. But when you spend so much time with someone...’

‘Sure.’ I tried to sound blasé. Instead, I sounded jealous. ‘As long as she didn’t abuse the power dynamic.’

‘Non,’ Théo said. He didn’t sound so sure.

I wanted to pry, ask him: *did it get in the way of your education? Do you idolise the woman who taught you your livelihood? How long did you date for??* But instead said, ‘So she took you on as an apprentice?’

Théo nodded, visibly relieved I was moving the conversation onward. ‘The pay was shit, and tattooing is incredibly difficult to learn, but it was a job like being a painter. If I could not make money painting, I could at least do something close to it. As a tattoo artist, I would draw all day even if it was on someone’s skin and not on canvas; I would work with ink, something close to the oil paints I preferred; my brush would be a needle instead. After a while, I almost forgot how much I loved painting because tattooing became so important.’

‘*Ah voilà!*’ I said, butchering the phrase. ‘France’s most talented tattoo artist was born.’

Théo let out a flustered laugh. ‘You exaggerate.’

I aggressively shook my head. ‘You’re very impressive. Mastering a whole new trade and becoming successful at it.’

‘I find it hard not to put all my energy into something. I am very all or nothing, as my father says.’ He acted as though his accomplishments were menial.

‘Do you miss painting?’

‘I still paint,’ he said. ‘Just not as often as I used to.’ He looked sullen when he said this—disappointed.

‘What do you paint? When you get the chance,’ I asked.

‘Oh, the usual,’ he said with a shrug. ‘The same as everyone else. Portraits. Landscapes. Fruit.’

‘Ok, then what do you like to paint the *most*?’ I refined.

‘I like painting the boring things,’ he said. ‘Or—what is the word?—the everyday things?’

‘The mundane?’

Théo nodded. ‘Someone hanging up their washing. Waiting for the bus. The inside of a bathroom cabinet. I think it is quite beautiful. They are little snapshots of a life being lived.’

‘That sounds beautiful to me.’

Back in a silence. It was more comfortable this time, the sound of my shoes against the cobblestone streets like a metronome, giving me something to focus on.

Théo broke the silence this time. ‘Would you like to go to the Musée de l’Orangerie with me tomorrow?’

I was giddy at the thought of doing something with him. That we would wander the halls of the museum within each other’s orbit, looking at the same paintings one after the other and reading the placards at a leisurely pace.

‘I’d love to,’ I said.

‘You have not been yet?’ he said, almost nervous.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘I went to the Louvre, though.’

‘Not the same,’ Théo said. ‘Not as good.’

‘You might be right. I was more excited that I was in the same hall as the scene in *The Dreamers* where they’re running past a security guard than I was about any of the paintings.’

‘Musée de l’Orangerie is my favourite. It is also where Monet’s landscapes are.’ Théo pressed his pointer finger into my ribcage where my tattoo was.

‘Then we have to go,’ I said. I’d only ever seen the paintings in pictures, wrapped around the white walls of the galleries they hung in. ‘I always want to stare at paintings for way longer than whoever I’m there with does. If I go with an artist, maybe I won’t be the slow one.’

‘Maybe,’ he said.

Our hands were doing that little dance hands do before they held one another: our pinkies would graze; Théo would move his hand closer to mine, I would move mine away; I would flex my hand as though I could stretch out the want that filled my fingers to touch his, and he would curl his into brief fists like grabbing the tension in his hands.

Just as Théo was—I *think*—about to reach out and actually hold my hand, I saw it. For the past two days, despite all the streets I’d walked, the different routes I’d tried to and from Théo’s apartment, I had not come across it. It was like it had been hiding from me, only to

reveal itself at an annoyingly inopportune moment and cause me to bound towards it and away from Théo's grasp.

'The photobooth!' I squealed. After googling "*Amélié* movie photobooth locations," one search had suggested a Montmartre-located photobooth which, though not in the film, was more of an authentic experience, and still in the neighbourhood the film took place in. It looked vintage, made of a polished metal with a sign above it which read 'PHOTOS' in a retro font. I peeked past the small blue curtain to see the tight space; the seat would barely fit two people.

An idea popped into my mind.

Théo lingered out on the street, a smile stretching across his face as he watched me. I was a little kid high on sugar, bouncing across the pavement. As my happiness crept up, his own increased, too, like our moods were inexplicably tied to one another.

'I've been looking for this all weekend.'

'You could not just search the address?' he teased me.

'No,' I said. 'Where would the fun be in that?'

I went over and wrapped my hand around Théo's wrist and dragged him towards the photobooth. 'Let's take some photos,' I said. 'Do you have any coins?'

Without complaint, Théo pulled his wallet out and rummaged around for the three euros we needed to operate the photobooth.

'You are lucky I cannot say no to you,' he said, placing the coins in my hand.

When I pushed back the curtain, I watched Théo as he noticed just how small the seat was. One of us would have to sit on the other's lap, and that one of us would be me. It offered the perfect scenario to taunt him into kissing me.

He sat down first, and tried cordially to make room next to him, even though we both knew this was not a side-by-side seated arrangement. I swallowed my nerves and, as confidently as possible, sat in his lap.

My ass was cushioned by his strong thigh, and our arms had to wrap around each other: his right arm around my waist, a hand hovering above my hip politely, and my left arm rested behind his shoulders.

'Is this ok?' I asked. He nodded wordlessly, his Adam's apple moving with a gulp.

As the screen counted down, about to start taking the photos, we moved into the first pose: I wrapped my other arm around his neck and pulled him closer to me, our faces squishing into the frame with stilted, but happy, smiles.

Blinded slightly by the camera flash, I moved into a second pose. I grabbed his face and decided to plant a kiss against his cheek. As my lips touched his skin, I heard his breath catch

in his throat. In waiting for the click of the camera, the flash of the light, my lips had to linger for what felt like minutes on his cheek.

I felt his short stubble scratch against my lips. Smelt the grapefruit from his body wash. Practically heard the blood rush to his cheeks and flush them. Every one of my senses was in Théo overload.

The third photo was completely unposed. Once my lips detached themselves from Théo's cheek, he turned and looked at me with a hunger I hadn't yet seen from him. He seemed infatuated with the sight of my lips, and his mouth hung open while short, shaky breaths escaped his lips. I tried to tamp down a smile, elated by the response I'd elicited from him.

'*Rien à foutre,*' he said only to himself.

The fourth and final photo was the exact moment his lips crashed onto mine.

*This* is what our first kiss should have felt like: filling me with a tornado of relief and excitement, twisting through my body at rapid speed.

Théo moved me, with complete ease, so I was straddling him fully. One arm was wrapped tight around my body, keeping us as close together as possible; the other hand tangled itself in the hair at the base of my neck, occasionally tugging lightly.

As his tongue slid across mine, I could taste tobacco. If I was able to put any cohesive thoughts together in that moment, I would know that meant he'd had his daily cigarette, but all I could think about was getting closer to him, touching more of him, giving more to him.

I found, as my hands explored the parts of his body I could reach—across his chest, along his shoulders, through his hair—that Théo liked my touch on his back. As I skated my hands under the back of his shirt, drawing my nails lightly across the skin, a moan moved from Théo's mouth and into mine and rested right between my legs.

When we finally did pull away from one another—but not too much, because I worried if he moved too far away, he might never come this close to me again—I was sure we were thinking the same thing: *that was good. Earth-shatteringly good. How-could-we-keep-this-causal good. Ruined-from-ever-being-able-to-kiss-another-person good.*

'I thought you were never going to do that,' I said, tracing my thumb around his lips.

He nipped the tip of my finger and said, 'I was always going to do it. It was just a question of when.'

'Sooner,' I said. 'It should have been sooner. Maybe the literal first second you saw me.'

'Was that not worth the wait?' he teased.

We smiled at each other—knowing, content smiles that filled the space between us more than any words could. Our bodies seemed to throb with an electricity I wanted to bask in, feel

radiate through even inch of my being. I licked at my lips, his taste lingering like a dusting of powder sugar.

‘We shouldn’t stay in here if we’re not using it,’ I said.

Without saying anything, Théo reached into his pocket again and pulled out more coins. His eyes stayed on mine as he carried me with him, reaching outside the photobooth to slip the coins into the slot, then placing us back on the seat.

‘I guess we’ll have to use it again,’ he said.

His lips came back onto mine, and the next row of photos showed us as we romped around the small photobooth: me pushed against the wall, my head pulled back as he kissed down my neck, his hand clinging to the fabric of my shirt, our smiles as we laughed into another kiss.

After the second round of photos had finished, we climbed out of the photobooth. I knew my hair likely looked a mess, and could feel the way my lips throbbed, swelling from all the friction. Théo’s dishevelment only made him look more attractive. Knowing I’d been the one to mess up his hair, drag lipstick down the length of his neck, and make his jeans a little tighter only enlivened me with a possessiveness I knew was unhealthy.

Théo stared intently at the first strip of photos, and said, ‘I finally have your likeness on paper.’

‘You say that like you’ve been wanting to draw me,’ I joked.

‘I have,’ Théo said. ‘But now I *need* to.’

‘Well, you take that strip then,’ I said, plucking the second row of photos from his hand. They were still wet with ink and had a rich metallic smell. ‘And I’ll keep the one where we’re violently making out.’

We started walking again and, without hesitating this time, both reached out for the other’s hand. Théo was an intertwiner. Our hands didn’t simply cup each other’s, but each finger interlaced with the others, and every so often, he squeezed our hands just a little tighter.

‘So now that we’ve kissed,’ I said, looking up at Théo by my side, ‘am I going to have to wait another four days before you feel me up?’

‘Patience, Freya,’ he said, drawing me in closer to his side. We seemed to have relaxed into the same sort of causal intimacy of our first night together. ‘What is the saying? Good things come to those who wait, no?’



I did not think the Musée de l'Orangerie would make me cry.

A forcefield seemed to have formed around me, everyone in the gallery too scared to get close and potentially catch my grief. Monet had done it, made me cry like this. The blues that whorled around in his painting were like the shades of blue I saw alongside memories of my father: the pastel of his work shirts, the oceanic blur behind him as he swam with me in the water, the speckles in his eyes I didn't inherit.

It was as though I was underwater, struggling to breathe and finding it difficult to hear. I had this sense that someone was saying my name, and I wanted to respond, but I couldn't figure out which way was up, swallowing water instead of breathing air, until finally two hands cupped either side of my face and a body was blocking my view of the painting.

'Freya,' I heard, clearly. It was Théo.

He was taking deep breaths, telling me to copy him. *In, out. Dans, hors.* I focused on his chest, the way it expanded out, held the breath for a long moment, and then deflated. *In, out. Dans, hors.*

His shoulder looked so comfortable, looked like just the place I wanted to rest my forehead, so I leant further into him, and the hot of my skin met the cool of his shirt. The cotton caught my tears, and a darkened puddle started to form.

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled. It felt like the only thing to say, the only words I could form. 'I'm sorry.'

'What are you sorry for?' he said, soothingly stroking my hair. 'There is nothing to be sorry for.'

'We were having such a nice day,' I said.

We'd been idly roaming throughout the museum floors for hours, always within a few feet of each other—him further ahead, me lagging behind; me rushing to a particularly pretty painting, him stood doing a rough sketch of a painting he'd been thinking about designing a tattoo for. We worked perfectly in tandem throughout the floors of the museum.

That is, until I got stuck in front of Monet. Théo had continued walking ahead of me—I had been quite enjoying reading every placard in the room, staring with my face as close to the paintings as I could get without setting off an alarm—and had thought nothing of my lagging until he'd turned to point out a painting he liked and instead found me nowhere near him. He retraced his steps, and eventually found me red-faced and sobbing by a painting he'd walked past without a second thought.

Théo took my face in his hands and wiped my tears with the pads of his thumbs. ‘It is still a nice day,’ he reassured me. ‘Let’s go outside for some fresh air.’

He guided me through the museum. He knew which way to go, which turns to take, and led us out to the front steps with ease.

The fresh air was a good idea. The day’s breeze was light and grazed gently across my face; the sun had sheer layers of clouds gliding past it which softened the July heat.

We sat down around the corner from the building, hidden from view, near the bottom of some limestone steps. I wanted there to be no space between us, and shuffled close, keeping our hands tightly intertwined and sat in my lap.

I wasn’t crying heavily anymore, and there was no need to heave air into my lungs, but I still needed to recentre myself, to get my breathing steady again, to let my eyes de-puff and cheeks dry. My face would likely carry a hint of my crying for the next few hours.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said again. I was so ashamed of my show of grief: its ugliness, coated in tears and hyperventilation. I was so sick of crying. It ruined my make-up, or puffed up my cheeks, or left my eyes so red for hours people thought I was high. I couldn’t hide the tears, or the wreckage they left behind.

‘There is nothing to be sorry for,’ Théo said again. ‘You know, there is this quote, by a novelist, who described what it was like when he saw a Van Gogh painting: *...in these pictures I lost my awareness of self; then regained it; then lost it!*’

‘I like that,’ I said, my voice croaky and weak.

‘You lost yourself for a moment.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I did.’

Was it wrong to take comfort in Théo—to have him dry my tears, and hold my hand—but not tell him where, exactly, I found myself lost? That I’d dug myself down into memories of my father: of the work shirt he owned ten times over in just the one blue; of the days in summer when he’d take me to the beach and would wade with me for hours in knee-high water until I plucked up the courage to swim deeper; of my tweenaged dreams to wake up with his blue eyes instead of having my mother’s brown ones.

There was no way to explain to him that there was this unsteadiness to my life since my dad had died. Like whatever kept my footing strong, and my head high, and my body in equilibrium had been taken out from underneath me, and I was trying so hard to maintain my balance.

I no longer had someone to run to when I was scared of thunder or had a nightmare (not that either of these things happened anymore); if I needed an essay drafted, he wasn’t there to

read it; if I wanted (but likely never would) to have a long-winded conversation about Imperial Japan, I no longer had the option. It wasn't that I couldn't do these things on my own, or with someone else, but rather that I now lacked the reassuring omnipresence of my father. A presence which had been unwavering my entire life was suddenly gone, and it was all I wanted in the world to have it back so I might feel steady again.

'I don't know why I started crying,' I lied.

'Art can do that sometimes,' Théo said. 'I do not mean to be insensitive when I say this, but seeing you so moved by a painting reminds me why we create. We do it so someone else might feel what we feel, see what we see.'

*He would understand you told him, Freya, the reasonable, rational part of my mind told me. Would it be so bad if he saw that part of you?*

'Do you think someone else has cried while looking at that painting?' I asked.

Théo let out a small chuckle. 'I have no doubt they have.'

We sat for a while longer on the steps. So long that I could feel as the sun lowered towards the horizon from the sharp midday position it had held when we'd exited the museum. The café a few metres down the road filled with patrons—mainly tourists who had just exited, or were about to enter, the museum—bottles of rosé were uncorked by the servers, baskets of fries placed on the marble table tops, and menus pondered over.

Next to me, Théo had closed his eyes and turned his face up towards the sky. He looked so perfectly contented. I'd never seen someone appreciate the sun as much as he did in that moment.

'Can we go back?' I asked, begrudgingly disturbing his peace.

I wanted to know if I could feel like this and recover. To be swallowed under memories and find a way to breathe again. Grief might only feel suffocating temporarily.

He slowly looked to me, his eyes adjusting to the light. 'To the painting? You would like to see it again?

I nodded. 'You know when you really shouldn't do something, but all you can think about is doing it? Like when your nail breaks and you know you should cut it and file it down like a regular person, but instead bite it off like an impatient little child?'

'Sure,' he laughed out.

'That's how this feels.'

'Alright,' he said, standing and holding out a hand to me. 'Let's go.'

This time, as Théo and I made our way to the right room, we stayed together, and didn't get distracted by any other artworks.

Back at the painting—with Théo a reassuring presence by side—I didn't have the urge to burst out in tears once again (thank goodness). Instead, I wanted to give shape to the artwork's current image in my mind and move it from the memory which was diluted by tears into a whole painting.

The blues and greens in the painting did seem eerily close to the colours of my dad's eyes and it was odd to see colours I was so familiar with—looking down at me as he said goodnight or winking at me behind Mum's back as he annoyed her—staring back at me in an art gallery.

My grief usually happened at the strangest moments; it was nonsensical and random. The smallest of things could set me off. I had once cried looking at a nail my dad had hammered into the wall. I'd cried when I saw a dog-eared page on the last book he read and there were over a hundred pages to go. This painting wasn't random, though. I knew my dad had liked it and liked it so much he'd taken me to where it was painted. And there it was in front of me: in technicolour, as real as the day I saw the gardens in person.

'Talk me through it,' I asked Théo. He had a degree from a prestigious arts university, after all. It seemed a waste to have him stand silently at my side. 'What does an artist see?'

'I am not so good at analysis,' Théo said. 'Just the creating.'

'I doubt that.'

'I can give it a go,' he said. 'If you insist.'

'I do.'

'Well.' He took a small breath. 'Artists talk a lot about not only painting what they see, but how they feel. When you look at this painting, you are not just seeing the pond and the flowers in it, you're feeling the emotions Monet put into paint.'

'So far so good, painter,' I said. Théo squeezed my hand.

'Van Gogh talked about it—I think—but about his portraits. That he found painting himself very difficult, and very real. I think nature was like that for Monet—very real, and very difficult. Maybe it is why he tried to paint it so much.'

'Is it difficult? Have you ever painted yourself?' I asked.

Théo laughed. 'I had to, once. In university. I burned the canvas when I was done.'

'That seems dramatic,' I said.

'Necessary,' he jokingly whispered to my ear.

We stood sharing the view of the painting, right in front of the little slither where I'd started crying. This version was named *Matin (Morning)*, with a few blooming waterlilies, blank lily pads and that swathe of blue that made me feel homesick.

‘Was it the sadness? Did that make you feel sad, too?’ Théo asked. I could tell he wanted to ask more, to know more, but wouldn’t let himself probe.

‘You think it’s sad?’ I tilted my head to the side, like changing the angle might make the picture make more sense to me.

‘It was painted sometime after his son died,’ Théo said, pointing to the placard. ‘All of his works after this were a little sad.’

Did he know? Could he somehow tell that a bit of death now clung to my being? Did I radiate my grief for everyone to see?

I shook my head. ‘No, I think I just got lost, like you said. Spiralled down into my thoughts and found myself somewhere that made me feel like crying. I can see how I got there. I might start up again if I stand here too long.’

‘You can cry again if you like,’ Théo said.

‘I think I’m all cried out. Not entirely sure how a person can produce that many tears.’

‘I will ring out my shirt at home and we can see how many cups your tears fill,’ he teased.

I swatted him away playfully and told him to keep walking ahead. He hesitated for a moment, taking slow, tentative steps backwards, our hands reaching out towards each other like *The Creation of Adam* before they slipped from our grasps. He told me he’d meet me back at the entrance, and I told him I’d only be a minute.

Taking out my phone, I took a photo of the painting. I was only able to capture a slither of it, and my camera quality was so shitty the blues didn’t look as blue, and you couldn’t see the individual brushstrokes. The photo was more so evidence that I’d seen the painting, it’s time and location stamp in my gallery to remind me that I’d been here, and seen it, and felt something.

Turns out, Théo and I were great at being roommates.

In the mornings, I would wake up late and Théo would already be downstairs at work. He would leave little notes on the kitchen counter, mentioning what time he'd be home, where I should go explore on my days off (and where I shouldn't, because he wanted to come with me), and I would spend the time it took me to drink a cup of tea attempting to translate them into French with little-to-no help from Google.

Before I left for the day, I would pop my head into Théo's tattoo parlour. He was usually in the middle of a session, intensely focused on the work in front of him, and I tried not to be seen as I peeked through the doorway to catch a glimpse of him, but he always noticed me. Without needing to turn to check that it was me hovering at the threshold—as though he had a sixth sense to detect my presence in any room—Théo waved me over and let me watch if the client was okay with it.

Watching him work was hypnotising. He was completely devoted to the art in front of him, every ounce of his being concentrated on creating. His brow furrowed as he focused, sometimes he would bite his bottom lip during a particularly difficult section, and when he was proud of the work he'd done he couldn't help but let a small smile pull at his lips before tamping it down modestly.

I liked to torture myself by imagining the parallels between Théo working and Théo fucking: would he dedicate himself to getting me off just as tirelessly? Would his brow furrow similarly as he focused on himself inside me? When he made me moan just like he wanted, would he smile to himself in satisfaction?

I'd never had such intrusive filthy thoughts in my life, and I found myself, as I walked around the city, bumping into tourists or taking wrong turns because I couldn't get Théo out of my head.

Dinnertime had started to turn into a race of sorts: whoever was home first got to make food for the other. I was trying desperately to be helpful and at least cook dinner and buy groceries as a form of rent payment, and Théo was adamant on being incredibly hospitable and always having food at the ready for his houseguest. After whoever won had finished cooking dinner, we would sit across from each other at the dining table and talk about our days. Though he was shy to brag, I would make Théo tell me about every tattoo he worked on that day, and sometimes make him show me sketches or photos he'd taken after the pieces had been finished. Eventually he'd warm up to sharing and move from bashful to passionate, describing what he'd

changed about the original artwork so it would translate onto skin or why the client had chosen the specific artwork.

‘I have a client,’ he’d said a few nights ago, ‘who only wants portraits of women, painted by women. They are scattered all over her body. Mary Cassatt, Berthe Morisot, Frida Kahlo. Today, I did a version of a self-portrait by a pop artist, Pauline Boty. My client says she is her favourite artist.’

In return, Théo would always ask me, ‘What sights did you see today?’ I would list them off: I had a *Ladurée* macaron and brought some home for dessert. I walked all the way from Montmartre down to the left bank. I visited the Louvre again, and realised the first time I did it I took absolutely nothing in. *I do all these wonderful things with my days and yet the best part is when I get to come home and talk to you*, I never admitted.

On Saturday evening, as I was doing my daily Duolingo activity, Théo peered over my shoulder and startled me by saying, ‘What are you doing, Freya?’

I was learning about *filles* and *fil*s (daughters and sons, stupidly similar in their spelling, and I always got them wrong because I assumed *filles* was the plural to *fil*s and it’s not).

‘Ah. Thank goodness you can now say “I have three daughters,”’ he joked.

‘Non, *j’ai* deux *filles*,’ I corrected, reading out what was on my screen verbatim.

‘Is that how many children you would like? Two? I have always wanted three, but I could compromise,’ he said.

‘And if I said I didn’t want children?’ I said to test his response.

‘Then we will not have them,’ he answered.

He walked over and joined me on the couch, snatching my phone out of my hand and throwing it onto the armchair.

‘Hey!’ I said, standing to go and retrieve it. Théo pushed me back down onto the cushions.

‘Enough of this app,’ he said. ‘We will practice the *helpful* way.’

‘And what way is that?’

‘Conversation,’ he said, before starting our French dialogue. ‘*Salut, Freya. Ça va?*’

Hesitantly, I said, ‘*Je vais bien.*’

Théo smiled. ‘*Ah, bien.*’ He came in closer to me, his breath hot on my cheek, and whispered: ‘Say “*Et toi?*” It is polite to also ask me how I am going.’

‘Oh, right. Of course.’ Théo leaned back into his French conversationalist character.

‘*Et toi?*’ I tried to say just as he did.

‘*Ça va bien,*’ he said, going down on the last syllable so it didn’t sound like a question.

‘I can just repeat the “ça va” bit and say “bien” afterwards?’

‘Ouais,’ he said, which I’d come to learn was a more casual way to say “oui.” ‘It is a little easier.’

‘You’re already better than that app,’ I said. ‘Let’s keep going.’

Théo cleared his throat. ‘*Qu’est-ce que tu racontes de beau?*’

I blanked completely, my mouth agape and lost to find even *one* of the handful of French words I knew.

Slowly, with his lips wrapping around each vowel, Théo repeated what he said: ‘*Qu’est-ce que.*’

He left a pause for me to repeat. ‘*Qu’est-ce que,*’ I said.

‘*Tu racontes.*’

‘*Tu racontes.*’

‘*De beau.*’

‘*De beau.*’

‘Say it all together, now: *Qu’est-ce que tu racontes de beau.*’

‘*Qu’est-ce que tu racontes de beau,*’ I said, tripping over every word and likely butchering the phrase. ‘Will you tell me what it means now?’

‘It is something like “What is new with you?” or “What is new?” But if you translated it with your app, it would not be right,’ he explained, all judgement (which he was entitled to) withheld.

‘Do you want me to answer your question?’

‘Ouais,’ he said. ‘I will ask it again.’ He cleared his throat: ‘*Qu’est-ce que tu racontes de beau?*’

‘*J’habite avec un beau homme.*’ I tried to joke, saying I lived with a handsome man. I probably said it in a very formal way, or completely wrong, and likely with worse pronunciation than a toddler, but Théo seemed to understand what I was going for. He looked at me with proud disbelief, his mouth agape with a smile.

‘*Tu me trouves beau?*’ he said, faster and with a thicker, deeper accent than he had been speaking before.

‘Stop saying things that are hard to translate!’ I whined, trying to put my hand over his mouth so he’d stop.

‘*Non,*’ he said, catching my hands at the wrist. He kept going, saying another sentence which I couldn’t translate, a smile growing bigger on his face with each word.



‘Stop!’ I said, unable to sound at all serious. Hearing him speak in French was delectable, and I wanted to devour each sound he made.

‘Nuh-uh,’ he sounded, the only thing I recognised.

I tried to playfully push back against his hold on my wrist, and Théo didn’t resist. I managed to get him into a vulnerable position: him laid on his back, still holding my wrists loosely. I’d inadvertently moved into a straddling position, my legs on either side of his hips.

‘What are you saying?’ I asked again.

‘Not telling,’ he said.

In an attempt to catch him off guard, I decided to lean down closer to him, so our chests grazed against each other and drew closer with each breath. His hands loosened on my wrists, and I took the opportunity to hold his arms down on the couch on either side of his head.

‘Now will you tell me?’ I said, a hair’s breadth away from his face.

I saw his eyes flick down to my lips and then back up to my eyes before he surrendered, saying, ‘I said “You are the most interesting person I have ever met”.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘They usually say people are more honest in a foreign language. But those words felt true in French and English,’ he said.

The air between us felt thin; little was keeping either of us from moving just slightly and pressing the other’s lips to ours. But we didn’t. We stayed, breathing in each other, for a long moment. I wasn’t sure if time was moving slower or faster, if we’d been here for only seconds or hours.

He liked to make me wait, I’d learned. He’d kiss me, stop right before the logical next step was to take off my shirt. He’d press himself half-hard between my legs as he taught me French but wouldn’t unzip his pants and push my panties to the side. He built up tension like the silence before they announced the winners of *Love Island*.

‘Are you ready?’ Théo asked, his breath warm on my lips.

We were going to Rapha and Ines’s new apartment for a housewarming party. They had lived there for six months, Théo said, but had only just found time to furnish the place, and Ines would not call it home until she had found the perfect living room couch and sufficiently splattered wet clay along the walls of her studio. This took, Théo said, longer than it should.

‘Yes, I’m ready,’ I said, moving to stand—reluctantly—from the couch.

‘You look nice,’ Théo said.

I looked down at myself: I wore a small black skirt I’d bought years ago and had formed a rather intense emotional attachment to, as no retailer seemed to be able to replicate such a

perfect A-line mini; on the top half, I had lazily chosen a blue-striped shirt which I'd barely buttoned up, which revealed a black bralette which Théo seemed rather fascinated by.

‘Should I do my buttons up?’

‘*Non*,’ he said quickly. I felt laid bare under his scrupulous gaze.

‘Ok,’ I complied. ‘You look nice, too.’ Understatement of the century.

I'd become so used to Théo's everyday uniform—the vintage 501s, crisp white or black T-shirts, scuffed Chuck Taylors—that the sight of him in tailored navy slacks, expensive looking loafers, and a butter-soft cashmere sweater was slightly disorienting.

‘*Merci*,’ he said, bashful. ‘Shall we go?’

In what was now becoming a familiar domestic routine, we each made sure we had all the necessary items before leaving the apartment: Théo found his keys on the sideboard by the door and slapped at his pockets to make sure he had his phone; I picked up my bag from the dining room table and dashed quickly into my room to find the red lipstick I was wearing and stashed it into my purse. Théo's hand wrapped around my waist and tugged me through the front doorway. His keys jangled as they locked up what was starting to feel like my home.

‘Why do French people hate elevators?’ I said as I heaved myself up the last flight of stairs. ‘Is this why you can all eat pastries without putting on a pound? The endless staircases you climb?’

Théo’s laugh rumbled behind me, and one of his hands laid itself on my back and provided a slight push.

‘Ines needs unobstructed light in her apartments,’ Théo said. ‘Otherwise, she will go crazy.’

‘Your apartment is on the first floor, and there’s plenty of light. Artist’s light! I wake up and walk out into the middle of the sun! What does a few more levels change?’

When we finally reached the door to the apartment, which was on the *fifth fucking floor*, I said, ‘You know, I think that many flights of stairs without an elevator is illegal in Australia.’

Théo pinched my chin. ‘You are in France now, Freya. Have been for nearly a month. Assimilate.’

‘I have been doing lots of assimilating. I know how to use the metro. Tourists now ask *me* for directions.’

‘Oh, is that so?’ Théo crossed his arms and leant against the doorframe, clearly in no hurry to get inside to the party (despite us being over an hour late). ‘Which metro stop is closest to the Champs-Élysées?’

I thought maybe if I said ‘um’ for long enough the answer might come to me. Come to me from where, I wasn’t sure, because I’d never known it in the first place.

As if she knew I was about to get myself made fun of by Théo, and wanted to save my honour, Ines opened the door so hard I thought it might fly off its hinges.

‘Freya!’ she said, grabbing at me and pulling me into a tight hug.

‘Théo’s here, too,’ I said, muffled by her hair.

‘Théo is here always,’ she said. ‘You are here for the first time. You are much more important.’

‘Good to see you, too, Ines,’ Théo said.

I managed to wriggle my way out of Ines’ grasp, though she didn’t let me get far before wrapping her free hand around my wrist and shouting ‘Drinks!’ As I was pulled into the heat of the party, I threw my hand back in search of some part of Théo to drag along with me. I got a fistful of his jumper and didn’t let go until Ines had manoeuvred us through the crowd of people into the kitchen.

It was the only room in the house which people hadn't seemed to have populated. Instead of being crowded with people, it was crowded with booze. Bottles filled up so much of the central island that I couldn't see if the benchtop was made of marble or maybe some cheap laminate (though I was sure a chef wouldn't live in an apartment with shitty kitchen benches).

'What would you like?' Ines said. 'We have every alcohol you could imagine.'

'No kidding,' I said, lifting a bottle of dusty Frangelico.

'An amaretto sour, maybe?' Ines lifted a very ornate bottle. 'Or I make a good negroni.' Théo laughed at that, and promptly stifled it with a cough as Ines shot him a deadly glare.

'A vodka soda, if that's okay,' I said.

Ines pouted. 'I wish you would let me make you a cocktail.'

Théo manoeuvred around the kitchen like it was his own, opening the moss-green cabinets and taking down glasses Rapha and Ines had *not* set out for their guests to use. He rifled through their fruit basket and picked up two limes before placing them down on a large wooden cutting board littered with the remnants of people's drink-making: lemon, salt, dried grapefruits, wine corks.

'She does not want to be poisoned, Ines,' Théo said. He turned to me. 'Grey Goose or Cîroc?'

'I won't be able to tell the difference,' I said.

'The good stuff, then.' He picked the Grey Goose.

Théo, like everything he did, made my drink expertly. He could eyeball the vodka and pour a perfect 30ml shot; he knew to squeeze the lime into the vodka before pouring the soda in; he scavenged around the fridge to find the coldest can of soda and didn't crack it open until the tumbler was in front of me and I could watch as he poured the bubbling liquid over the ice.

'Vodka soda.' Théo held the crystal tumbler out to me. 'Lots of lime.'

'*Merci*,' I said. He looked so proud whenever I spoke French. Even a measly 'thank you'.

'*De rien.*' *You're welcome.*

'Okay. You have your drink,' Ines said. She had a very full glass of red wine in her hand now and managed to steer me out of the room without losing a drop. 'You now get a tour.'

I looked over my shoulder at Théo, who was leaning against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed and an amused grin plastered across his face. I had hoped I might be able to spend my night couped up in a corner with him, our knees brushing against one another purposefully, having to lean in close so we could hear what the other was saying over the music.

Telling him, with every flutter of my eyelashes, that I'd waited a long, torturous week, and was very much ready to get each other off.

It seemed, instead, I would be following a drunken Ines through every nook and cranny of her apartment.

*Help me*, I mouthed to Théo.

He shrugged, palms facing up.

'Have fun, girls.'

Traitor.

/

I met many of Théo's friends over the course of the night, each one of them more eager than the last to tell me some story about him.

'I was his first customer,' a man with ink covering nearly every square inch of his body told me. Lifting his shirt sleeve, he pointed to a tattoo of what looked like one of those headless and armless Grecian statues. 'He was shaking, before he began. He was worried I would be mad if it was not perfect but—as you can see—I put anything on my body. He had nothing to worry about because it is the best tattoo I have. He was talented from the beginning.'

A girl called Mathilde, with jet black hair and a septum piercing, told me about when she tried to ask Théo out on a date: 'He modelled, in class. Naked. No tattoos, then. We painted him.' She sighed, gazing at Théo across the room. '*Il est si beau.*'

'He is quite pretty, isn't he?' I said, turning to look at him with her.

He was in the middle of a vibrant conversation, waving his hands animatedly and splashing his drink everywhere. The two guys Théo was speaking to looked engrossed by every word he said.

'I have a boyfriend,' Mathilde assured me, pointing to a tall man in a sailor's beanie and a strong moustache. 'But will have a big love for Théo, always. I went to him after class, when he was naked still, and could not speak. I wanted to ask him for a drink, but my mouth would not let me. He asked, "*Étais-je bon, Mathilde?*" and I died.'

'I understand the feeling.' It was the same one I had when he was the one to answer the door to my relentless banging.

'I still have my picture,' she said. It was likely hung up on her wall in an ornate gold frame, somewhere she would see it every day. That's what I would do if I had a naked sketch of Théo, anyway.

‘I’d like to see that,’ I said.

‘You see it every day, no?’

I shook my head. ‘No. Not yet.’

‘Maybe tonight,’ she said with a wink.

After Mathilde, Rapha used me as a socialising shield so he didn’t have to speak to anyone else. As he told me that, ‘This party was Ines’ idea. I would have done a small dinner, with you and Théo and me and Ines. Some other friends maybe. Three courses. Wine only,’ I stared across the room at Théo, who stared back across the room at me. He was being spoken at just like I was and was able to wave at me unbeknownst to his self-involved conversation partner.

Forming the kind of intimacy with someone where we could be on either sides of a crowded room and know exactly where the other person was, where we shared small glances and knowing smiles with one another, was—though I’d never realised it before—something I desperately wanted. I could return the wave to Théo, and he would mouth *beautiful* back at me, all the while Rapha kept listing the menu of his non-existent dinner party—‘Seared-skin salmon. Do you like fish? You will eat it. Duck fat potatoes with garlic butter’—oblivious to me experiencing the most intimate moment of my life.

I watched as Théo politely excused himself from his conversation and weaved his way through the bodies of the party towards me.

‘Hi,’ he said, sidling up close to me.

‘Hi,’ I said.

Like second nature, a completely domesticated act, Théo reached into his drink and pulled out a lime wedge, which had been floating un-squeezed amongst his tonic and gin. He pinched it between his fingers and let the citrus juice drip down into my own drink before dropping it onto the ice.

I’d never had someone give up their lime wedge for me before.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘Perfect,’ I hummed. My whole body was buzzing and warm from the vodka, and in the presence of Théo I got drowsier, more relaxed.

‘I should go, I think,’ I heard Rapha say. Neither Théo nor I acknowledged him, and rather kept talking to one another like Rapha had never been there in the first place.

‘I haven’t seen you all night,’ I said.

‘You are popular,’ he said. ‘I have been watching you, in many conversations.’

‘I was told you were a life model once.’

‘Ah, yes. The model did not show up to the class, and no one else wanted to get naked.’

‘You wouldn’t happen to have a copy of someone’s drawing, would you?’

Théo’s head tilted back with a smile. ‘Do you want to see me naked that badly?’

With a confidence I only had while drinking vodka, I took Théo’s wrist in my hand and pulled him down the hallway to the guest bedroom Ines had shown me earlier. It was small, with barely enough room for the double bed which engulfed the space; some of Ines’s discarded crockery—a dainty plate with little flowers painted on it, ill-shapen mugs with handles too big for their bodies—sat on the floor, alongside thick, hardcover cooking books Rapha didn’t seem to have any use for in the kitchen. This was the forgotten room, where Ines or Rapha barely entered, and no one would stumble across us.

I positioned Théo at the edge of the bed and pushed him down by the shoulders. He very willingly complied, a bright smile on his face as he sat down on the mattress.

‘You do want to see me naked very badly.’ So much so that I’d forgotten what it had felt like when he said *not tonight* because I’d had too much to drink.

‘I overheard something, in the living room,’ I said, moving to stand between his legs.

‘Hmm?’ Théo hummed, cupping his hands around the backs of my thighs, an absentminded thumb stroking the skin. ‘And what did you hear?’

‘Apparently, you—the French—call orgasms—’ I stumbled over my words slightly, struggling to maintain my previous confidence in such proximity to Théo. What had I wanted to say? I could only focus on the hands which were so close to slipping under my skirt.

Théo’s interest peaked at the sound of the word ‘orgasm’ leaving my mouth. ‘*Le orgasme?*’ The way he said it made me want to *orgasme*.

I cleared my throat. ‘Is it true that the French call orgasms “The Little Death”?’

‘Ah,’ Théo said. ‘*La petit mort.*’

I tried the French words out on my lips: ‘*La petite mort.*’

‘*Trés bon,*’ he said softly.

I leant down so there was less than a hair’s breadth between us. I had to bite my lips to keep from pouting them to touch his.

‘Why do you call it that?’ I breathed out.

‘Do you not think, sometimes, it is like you have died after you have come?’ My breath locked in my chest at his words.

Coming, to me, occurred singularly with my own hand between my legs and a small vibrator. Coming occurred like a chore: make bed, write essay intro, masturbate to clear head,

hang up washing. Coming, to me, was independent of sex. No partner had yet intertwined the two for me.

‘I—’ Though I wasn’t sure how I might tell Théo that I’d never come with a partner, I knew I wanted him to know. I had no interest in faking it for him, nor did I think he’d enjoy the idea of me faking it. I knew Théo enjoyed giving pleasure just as much as he enjoyed receiving it. ‘I suppose I wouldn’t know.’

Théo frowned. ‘You have had sex before, yes?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But not with a partner that cared about my pleasure.’

The guy (may he remain nameless) I was stuck in a situationship with for most of uni had, in fact, argued that sex didn’t need to be about orgasming. When I asked him if he would have sex if he didn’t orgasm, he went silent and didn’t deign to give a response.

I was often ashamed that I didn’t have the confidence to take my pleasure into my own hands. To have at least told my previous sexual partners—no matter if they listened or not—that no, I didn’t like that position and how he kept pushing my face down into the mattress, that he was actually rubbing my pubic bone, that no, I didn’t *like that, baby*.

‘Idiot,’ Théo grumbled. ‘Sometimes, all I think about it making you orgasm.’

‘Me, too,’ I said.

Théo’s hands started to move higher up my thighs, inching closer to the underwear I chose specifically for tonight: a flimsy thong I was usually too fidgety to wear.

‘Would you let me?’ he asked when his hands made it under the hem of my skirt. Warmth twinkled in my belly like flashing fairy lights as he played with the red lace of my underwear.

‘Yes,’ I breathed out.

I leant down and closed the gap between our mouths. Théo kept the kisses at a slow and leisurely pace, drawing his lips across mine at half-speed to feel each millimetre of skin, his tongue rarely grazing at mine.

Théo pulled back slightly from the kiss, our lips still rubbing against one another, our breaths short and erratic. He ran a featherlight hand up along the front my underwear before pressing his thumb—for just a millisecond, so gently that if I weren’t turned on, I might have missed it—right to my clit.

‘*Tease*,’ I whispered. He chuckled right into my mouth.

Théo had an attentive stare. The kind that you remember the burn of days later. He was acutely attuned to every breath I took, aware of every freckle on my body, and the slight shake of my hands as they clasped the nape of his neck.



He watched as his hands made their way under the waistband of my underwear. He watched as he pulled the fabric torturously slow down my thighs. He watched the flush draw up my neck and to my cheeks. He watched as I stepped out of the underwear and glanced quickly at the discarded material on the floor before he removed himself from my aura entirely.

Théo lay back on the bed, pulled a pillow from where it sat against the headboard and rested it under his head.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘Sit on me,’ he said, so matter-of-factly it took me a moment to register what he’d said.

‘Huh?’ I think I said, though it was likely more of a moan.

Théo leaned up slightly so he could look at me more fully while he repeated himself. ‘Sit on me.’

I hesitantly climbed onto the bed, and shuffled my body so my knees were on either side of Théo’s hips and my ass rested against his thighs. He gave me a disappointed look.

‘On my face, Freya.’

My breath hitched in my throat.

‘I am waiting,’ he said with his most devilish smile yet.

If only to wipe that cocky look off his face, I lifted myself off his thighs and waddled my knees up so that they were on either side of his face. Immediately, I could feel Théo’s warm breath against my core, my arousal right in front of his face.

I heard a whispered *mon dieu* before Théo wrapped his tattooed arms around my thighs and pulled my full weight down onto his face. I shuddered at the sudden contact.

‘Ask for it,’ he muffled against me.

‘What?’ I couldn’t focus. I could feel how hot his breath was, how deep his voice had become.

‘Ask for what you want. Tell me what feels good.’

‘I don’t kn—’ I choked a little as he pressed his mouth fully to me, mimicking what he would usually do to my lips.

‘Is this good?’ he asked.

*Good* was the first bite of a pastry in the morning. *Good* was cracking the spine of a brand-new book. *Good* was a hot shower after a long day. *This* felt like every first bite, every cracked spine, every hot shower. Felt like cracking a book spine with a mouthful of macarons under a steady stream of hot water.

‘Yes,’ I managed.

I closed my eyes, worried I might lose hold of this feeling. I always lost hold of this feeling.

Théo moved his hands to grab at my hips and guided me in rhythmic grind against his mouth, keeping a consistent pressure against the most sensitive part of me, and then flicked his tongue. I collapsed forward onto the headboard.

‘That,’ I near whimpered. It felt momentous: to ask for my pleasure, and to have Théo give it enthusiastically right to me.

‘This?’ He kept moving my hips at the exact rhythm, kissed at me with the exact pressure. I could feel his groans reverberating through my body and feel his fingers pressing deeper into the meat of my ass.

*I really might die, I thought. Heaven might just be real and I’m getting there because of Théo’s head between my legs.*

When the orgasm came at me, rolling steadily through my body like it’d been hiding and Théo had just found it, I clutched at headboard so hard I felt my nails pierce through into the cushion. Théo reached a hand up to my mouth, offering it to help stifle my moans. I bit at him palm, licked at the sweat.

I had only enough energy left in my body to climb off Théo and rest back against the headboard. I was panting as though I’d just run a marathon, and my abs had clenched so hard during my orgasm I could feel the six-pack forming.

‘Are you alive, *mon chou*?’ Théo asked but I barely registered it, not back to complete consciousness yet. I was stuck staring at the evidence of my orgasm wet and glistening on his swollen lips, mesmerised as he swiped his thumb along the plump bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth.

‘Just,’ I said.

‘See. Just a *little* death.’

Sunday morning. I kept thinking about Théo's mouth.

His bottom lip is fuller than his top. I wondered if I bit its plumpness between my teeth it might squirt out some kind of ambrosia and make me more drunk on him.

'Freya?'

'Hmm?' I turned to look at Théo, who was holding up a green and a red apple.

'Which kind?' he asked. He looked all soft and still half-asleep on a Sunday. He let his hair flop over his forehead and was wearing a shirt that was slightly cropped and showed off a slither of his tummy every time he reached for the fruit.

We were at an open-air market which Théo liked to go to once a week. Shaded over by tall green trees and packed with locals, the tunnel of stalls offered every possible piece of produce you could want: bright red cherry tomatoes still on their vine; bunches of pink radishes you could mistake for flowers; avalanches of oranges, lemons and limes. I could smell flowers before I saw them, and taste cheeses before I was offered a bite.

Théo knew a lot of the vendors and had perfected the art of bartering for a better price. To butter up the stall owners, he offered handshakes and bright smiles, even kisses on the cheeks for the little grandmothers. He made shopping for fresh produce a high-octane activity.

'Oh. Um, the red.' He started loading them into a reusable bag.

'What are you thinking about, *mon chou*?'

*What you looked like when you came. About kissing that tattoo on your upper thigh.*

'You know, I looked up what '*mon chou*' means the other day,' I said.

'And what did the internet tell you?'

'That you're calling me a cabbage.'

Théo let out a big laugh, and so did the vendor of the stall we were at. 'I'm calling you sweet.'

*Oh.* 'I thought maybe you were calling me a cabbage because of my chubby cheeks or something.'

Théo pinched the apple of one of my cheeks between his thumb and knuckle. 'No, *cabbage*. But I do love your cheeks.'

When we started wandering the stalls again, I said, 'I'm a little spacey this morning.'

'Spacey?' he asked.

'Not totally present. In my head. Lagging like an overheated computer.'

Théo huffed out a laugh. 'Why?'

‘I haven’t been able to speak to Quinn or Maia. They’re MIA.’ Quinn probably had a kid hanging off her ankles, and Maia must have been somewhere without any service.

‘You can speak to me,’ Théo said.

‘I can’t speak to you *about* you.’

‘You want to talk to your friends about me?’

I nodded.

‘Oh.’ His mouth formed the perfect little ‘O’. ‘About what?’

‘Surely, you know what.’ His mouth curved up into a slight smile. Was he also thinking about his head between my legs?

‘Pretend I am one of your friends, then,’ he said.

‘Which one?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Well, Quinn would take part in my delusions, and Maia would try to rationalise them for me.’

‘Quinn, then,’ Théo chose.

He made his hand into a phone shape and started making a *ring-ring* noise.

‘I am calling you,’ he said with a nudge of his elbow.

‘Oops. Must have had my phone on silent.’ I made the same phone shape with my hand and brought it to my ear. ‘Quinn?’

‘Yes, it is Quinn. Who else would it be?’ Théo winked.

‘You never know.’ I smiled up at him. ‘I have news.’

‘News? What news?’

‘Well, you’d know if you’d read any of my texts.’

‘Ah, I have been so busy...’ Théo looked to me to help finish his sentence.

I put my hand-phone down and whispered, ‘With the kids.’

He nodded and got back into character. ‘I have been so busy with the kids.’

‘I know, I know. I forgive you.’

‘Will you tell me the news, then?’

I took a short breath. ‘Théo and I had sex for the first-time last night. Well, close to sex.’

‘What do you mean “close to sex?”’

‘He went down on me.’ I put my hand-phone down, and said to Théo, ‘Quinn would say penetration isn’t needed for sex to be sex. Just FYI.’

He covered the finger-receiver of his phone—like there really was someone on the other end of the line who might hear him—and whispered, ‘Of course.’

He cleared his throat. 'That is sex, no? Penetration is not needed for sex to be sex.'

'You're so right. Penetration isn't the end-all-be-all. It's so male-centric, right? To think their dick going somewhere is how sex is defined?'

'I think if all a man wants to do is penetrate a woman, then he is not very good at sex,' Théo (*definitely* Théo) said. Quinn would have said something like, 'Stupid men, always making everything about themselves.'

'Too true,' I agreed.

'And how was it?'

The choice of adjectives was never-ending: Earth-shattering. Revolutionary. Life-altering. 'Mind-blowing,' is what I settled on. 'Is that cliché?'

'No, not at all.' A huge grin was plastered itself across Théo's face. 'How was it *mind-blowing*, exactly?'

'He talked to me. Listened to me. And he did this thing, where he *flicked* his tongue—'

Théo covered the receiver of his hand-phone. 'You would tell Quinn all this? This detail?'

'There's not a secret between us.' Unlike between him and I.

'What else does she know?'

'The kind of cologne you use and what time you wake up in the morning.'

'So, everything?'

'Nearly.'

He leaned down to my face, and near whispered, 'Does that mean *you* also know nearly everything about me?'

I brought my hand-phone back up to my ear to avoid telling him the truth: *everything and more*.

'He's making me wait,' I said.

'Wait to what?' he said.

'Penetrate me.' An old man walking past gave us a quizzical look.

'Did we not just say sex is not all about penetration?'

'I know, but I want to be close to him. Like, as close as physically possible. Penetration seems a good way to do that.'

Théo wrapped his free hand around my waist and drew me into his side. 'It is fun, no? Waiting. Wanting.'

It was all-consuming, is what it was. I felt as though every moment of the day I wondered when it might happen next, and where, and how it would be. Slow and loving in a

bed? Rushed and ravenous against a wall? I had come up with so many possible scenarios it might take a lifetime to get through them all.

This was exactly why I stayed in Paris, though. There was not a thing on my mind but Théo. Of getting him back to an empty apartment where we didn't have to stifle our moans. Of his body, the one he let everyone draw, which likely had tattoos hidden in places I hadn't seen yet. I didn't have a dead dad in France; I had an amped up libido and endless time to daydream.

'Like delayed gratification?'

'*Oui*—' Théo muttered a little *oops* at his French slip. 'Yes. Delayed gratification. It can only be better if you wait, no?'

'I think it's called edging,' I said.

'Where did you learn that?' Théo said, cocking his head at me.

'I better go,' I said. 'I'm at a market with Théo.'

'Tell him I say hello,' Théo said.

'Will do.' I would usually say *love you* to her as a goodbye, but opted for, '*Au revoir*, Quinny.'

Both of us hung up our hand phones.

'Quinn says hello,' I said to Théo.

'That was her on the phone? I had no idea.'

The markets had become busier during our phone call, a midday rush coming through for their fresh produce, so Théo suggested we sit down at a café and wait until the crowds died down before continuing our shopping.

As we were trying to find a café, I saw an American tourist who, for the briefest moment, looked like my dad might've if he'd lived a little longer. More grey hair, a bit of a belly, and the same kind of polo shirt and sneaker combo my dad always wore on his days off.

In the split second it could have been him, I felt my heart lighten in relief and an intense urge to run over and envelop him in a hug. Instead, I managed to stumble over my own feet and hold my breath for so long I coughed up stale air.

'Freya?' Théo said. He'd caught my fall and was holding me under the shoulders, a worried look plastered across his face. 'Are you okay?'

These moments didn't happen often, but I hated them the most because I knew what happened after: when I realised it wasn't my dad, and I couldn't go and hug him; when I remembered just how much I wished I could say to him that I loved him, that I missed him, that I was really quite scared about having to learn the law. That's the moment that hangs heavy

on my heart, like an anchor off my aorta. That's the moment I had right there, in the middle of a fresh-food market, post-dirty talk.

'I'm good,' I said. I kept staring at the man. The similarities were far and few between: he was balding, my dad had died with a full head of hair even after chemo; he was short, my dad boasted a height of six foot two. Hallucinating was symptomatic of grief, apparently.

'Are you sure?' He didn't seem to completely believe me. It was like Maia was here again.

'I'm sure.' I let him hoist me up and into his body, his arm a little tighter around my waist. 'I'm like a baby giraffe.'

We walked over to an empty table out the front of a café, and once Théo ordered for us, I brought my phone-hand back up to my ear and started making the *ring-ring* noise. To distract myself from my fumble, and to get back to forgetting.

'Your turn,' I said.

'I do not have anything to—'

'The phone is ringing,' I said between call sounds. 'Rapha is waiting.'

'I would talk to Ines about you,' he said, making his hand into the phone shape.

'Really?' The ringing noises were getting harder to do.

'She is better at relationship advice.' The word *relationship* stood out like red, bolded capital letters in his sentence.

I took his wrist in my free hand and looked at the phone like it had caller ID. 'Would you look at that? It's actually Ines calling you. Answer that phone.'

With an amused roll of his eyes, he lifted his hand to his ear.

'*Allô?*' he answered.

'*Allô, Théo. C'est Ines.*'

'*Ines. Ça va?*'

'*Meh. Comme ci, comme ça.*'

Théo covered the fake receiver of his phone. 'Your accent is getting very good.'

'*Merci beaucoup,*' I said, bashful. I tapped his hand, indicating he get back to the phone call.

'Should we speak in English?' Théo asked. 'I want to be good at it for Freya.'

'You're already good at it,' I said.

'I could be better.' I shook my head at him and mouthed *you're great at it*.

‘Where did you and Freya disappear to last night?’ I continued. After the bedroom, Théo and I ran out of the door without a goodbye, with flushed faces and swollen lips, our hands all over each other.

‘We disappeared to have sex,’ he said.

‘Finally! I have been waiting for this! Why did you wait so long? Why did you not sleep with her immediately?’

‘Sometimes, it is good to take time.’ Théo put his hand-phone down and said to me, ‘Ines would call me an idiot, and then tell me to give you more orgasms.’

I acted exasperated like I thought Ines would, with a furious shake of the head. ‘You are an idiot. You must give her more orgasms. Orgasms all the time. Night and day.’

He pinched my chin so he could look directly into my eyes and promise, ‘I will. I want to.’

I broke eye contact with him so I could breathe and began very intently stirring some sugar into my espresso. ‘So, you left the party to have sex?’

‘No. We had sex *at* your party.’

‘At my party? Where?’

‘On your spare bed.’

‘Should I wash the sheets?’

‘No. She only sat on my face.’

I felt like I was experiencing it all over again: the ravenous feeling in my gut that I carried the entire walk home, the way my fingers tingled as I waited for him to unlock the door.

‘Is that all you did?’ I asked, knowing the answer. I wanted him to tell me about what we did when we got home.

Théo shook his head ‘no’ as he took a sip of his water. ‘When we got back to my apartment, she pushed my back against my door and got down on her knees.’

‘Bold of her,’ I said. It was single-handedly the most courageous I had ever been in my life. The door had barely closed before I asked Théo if he’d let me touch him, my hands hovering over the waistband of his pants.

‘Hot of her.’

‘And how was it?’ I asked the same thing he’d asked me.

‘It was the best I have ever felt.’

I’d never really enjoyed giving blow jobs before last night. I was always so in my head about it. *Don’t let your teeth graze him. Am I doing it correctly? I should use my hand at the same time. I bet I look ridiculous right now with my cheeks all hollowed out.* But with Théo,



the only thing I could think about was making him feel good. I watched his face to see his reaction to every drag of my tongue; when I first saw his upper thigh tattoo of a Roman bust, I'd licked across the ink and heard him groan *oh, mon dieu*.

'I will think about last night every moment until I can do it again,' he said.

'I'm sure she will too.'

We both smiled at one another, not bothering to hang up the hand phones we'd practically given up using. Théo's suggestion to clear my mind by faking a phone call with Quinn had turned into dirty talk in the middle of a fresh food market.

'Would you actually tell Ines all of that?' I asked, crossing my legs tightly to relieve some pressure.

'No,' he said. He shot back his espresso. 'That was just for you.'

Days later, I finally got my friends on a video call. Quinn was supervising after school homework, Maia was resting in her all-girls hostel dorm after touring the Colosseum in scorching heat, and I was sat on Théo's couch hammering away at my daily French exercises.

'Théo and I had sex,' was the first thing I said down the line. 'Actually, I guess the more specific explanation is that I sat on his face at a party and then went down on him in his entranceway.'

'At a *party*? Like with people in the next room?' Maia asked.

'It was a loud party.'

'Oh, so they couldn't hear you scream *oh, Théo! Move your tongue faster, Théo!*' Quinn moaned loudly.

'Aren't the kids in the room, like, right next to you?' Maia said to Quinn.

'Oh, shit.' Quinn hurried through the house and locked herself away in a powder room.

'I always forget about their impressionable little brains and the ears that hear everything.'

'Did you orgasm?' Maia asked.

'Yep,' I said. 'Definitely.'

'Freya's first orgasm!' Quinn cheered.

'Freya's first orgasm from a partner,' I clarified.

'Yes, because Freya's given *herself* plenty of orgasms,' Maia said.

'Fingers?' Quinn asked.

'No,' I said. 'I don't think I like fingers all that much. Gets a bit... knuckly.'

'Sure.' Maia got me.

'Did you use a dental dam?' Quinn asked.

'A *dental dam*? Why would we use a dental dam? It's not the nineteen eighties.'

'I'm kidding,' she said. 'But you can never be too safe.'

'Wouldn't that feel awfully clinical?' Maia said. '*Sorry, before I eat you out, let me place this bit of thin latex between your vulva and my mouth.* Mood crusher.'

'You could say the same about condoms,' Quinn countered.

'Are you kidding? Watching a guy put on a condom is *hot*,' I said. 'When they're kneeling between your legs, and they're panting a little because they had to stop mid-romp to put on protection, and they roll it down quickly and then they—' I cut myself off before I get too carried away. 'Sorry, I just keep imagining Théo putting on a condom. I think it's the tattoos on his arms.'



‘Making new friends, are we?’ Quinn said. ‘Stevie, go to the bathroom. I’ll be there in a second.’

‘Jealous, are we?’ I countered.

‘No’ Quinn said unconvincingly. ‘I’m also making friends.’

‘The kids don’t count,’ Maia said.

‘Then you clearly don’t understand the bond I have with Bowie and Stevie.’

We sing-songed ‘Love you’ and ‘Love you, girlies’ down the line like we finished almost every conversation with one another. Maia held out on her love-you for this call, though, and stayed on after Quinn left, telling me sternly *not* to hang up on her.

‘I really do have to go,’ I said, running around the apartment to try find my handbag. I shouted, ‘*Une minute*, Ines!’ at the closed door.

‘*Pas de souci*,’ Ines shouted back, which I believed meant something along the lines of *no worries*.

‘Does he know about your dad?’ Maia asked.

‘I really don’t have the time for this Maia.’ I found my handbag resting on one of the kitchen stools and ran to my bedroom so I could spritz myself with perfume.

‘It just seems like something he should know,’ she said.

‘Why? What difference would it make? I’m here for so little time, there’s no point.’

‘You don’t feel a little guilty?’ she asked.

Of course, I felt guilty. To share so much of your life with someone—from the shower you wash in to the knife you chop vegetables with—and not share what is, ultimately, the biggest thing that has ever happened to me felt like I was omitting part of my personhood from Théo.

But what I felt more than guilty was *normal*. Normal like when my dad was alive and in Melbourne, mowing his lawn, or listening to the Bee Gees, or simply sat at his desk working. In Paris, with Théo, I barely thought about him. Barely in the sense that his existence in my life was secondary and regular, like how I made my tea or washed my hair. But back home, my dad’s absence was always at the forefront of my mind.

‘I’m not Freya with the dead dad here, Maia. I’m just Freya.’

There was a short pause from Maia.

‘Okay,’ she conceded. ‘If that’s what you want.’

‘It is.’ Though I didn’t totally believe myself.

As I left the apartment with Ines, a question lingered on my mind: did I really not want to tell Théo, or did I not want to deal with what telling him meant?

I was asked on a date when I came home from my day out with Ines. Théo was out on the roof having his daily cigarette and I climbed out to join him.

‘Hi,’ I said as he scooted across the rooving.

‘Hello, cabbage,’ he said. ‘How was your day?’ was coupled with a casual kiss to the crown of my head, performed like the routine of a much more established couple than us. As much as I cherished the moments when Théo and I excused comfortably alongside one another, complimenting each other’s lives, I worried that a real life—like the one I’d suspended in Melbourne—was accidentally forming flesh and bones around me. I had made a friend in Ines and had a flourishing fling. I was an adult finally released from the leash of my youth. It was like being allowed a forkful of decadent cake and then having to go back to eating stale biscuits.

‘Amazing,’ I said.

‘Explain,’ Théo said. A plume of smoke surrounded the word.

‘I bought a signed first edition of *The Second Sex* for ten euros. *Amazing* might even be too weak a word to describe that.’

Théo turned to me, mouth slightly ajar.

‘How did you steal it for ten euros?’ he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders, still in disbelief. ‘I’m not entirely sure.’

Théo routinely stubbed out his cigarette on the brick and then threw it over the edge. He wordlessly handed me his warm beer to let me take a sip. His hand slipped over the curve of my knee and nestled between calve and thigh, his thumb rubbing against my bare skin.

I wondered—and hoped—he didn’t find intimacy like this easy. That, unlike James, he wouldn’t kiss me on the forehead, call me nicknames, or share his beer with me, and then easily not text, or call, or even think about me after I left.

It was all contradictory to what we’d agreed to: casual, no expectations, a fling. I should have known myself better. Known that moments like this clung to my heart and made a mark, and I could never *fling* them away after three weeks.

‘Do you want to go on a date this Saturday?’ Théo asked.

I turned to him, a huge grin on my face. ‘I’d love to go on a date this Saturday. Who with?’ I teased.

With a growl, he playfully bit at my exposed shoulder before trailing kisses up my neck, goosebumps left in the wake of his mouth.

‘What are we going to do?’ I’d asked.

‘You will find out on Saturday.’

/

Date stop number one was the Shakespeare and Company bookshop.

I’d never been taken on a date before. I was more familiar with run-ins at pubs or late-night texts. But, without needing to have gone on any, I already knew this was the best date I’d ever go on.

‘You remembered,’ I said when we first arrived at the bookshop.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘You only mentioned the other week.’

‘We’re going to be here for hours, you know,’ I said.

‘I thought so,’ he said. ‘Good thing there are plenty of books to read if I get bored.’

We had to wait in a line that stretched for metres outside the entrance, full of people who were itching to get inside and see what all the fuss was about. Aside from nervously tapping my foot and flirting with Théo, the best thing to help pass the time was to read what was written on chalkboards hung on the shop façade.

“‘This store has rooms like chapters in a novel and the fact is Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are more real to me than my next-door neighbours,’” I read.

‘Who is more real to you, *mon chou*?’ Théo asked.

‘Patrick Bateman,’ I deadpanned.

‘The *American Psycho*?’ Théo said with raised eyebrows.

‘I’m kidding.’

‘I was hoping,’ Théo said. ‘What is the real answer?’

‘It’s boring,’ I said.

‘Bore me, then.’

‘Emma Woodhouse, from the Austen novel,’ I answered.

‘I have never read it,’ he said. ‘Should I?’

‘Everyone should read Austen,’ I said. ‘*Emma* is a good place to start.’

‘I will put it on my list.’ To which Théo pulled out his phone and *literally* put the book title into a Notes list a mile long. Even my TBR wasn’t comparable in length to a Proust novel.

‘Jeez. Don’t have much time for reading, do you?’

‘No, not really,’ Théo said with an embarrassed laugh. ‘Someday.’

‘Someday,’ I assured him.

When it was our turn to enter the store, I clasped Théo's hand tightly in mine and pulled him past the threshold, desperate to get inside.

It felt untouched by time. My Mary Janes clacked against the tile as I stepped into the first chapter of the store. The bookshelves were wonky and defying physics with how many books they were able to hold, and the ceiling cut down at strange angles, sinking in parts and pitching in others.

No one was on their phones (thanks to a 'no pictures allowed' rule), and everyone was murmuring about the books they saw—*that one is amazing, I had to stop reading that one, I've been meaning to get around to reading that.*

'Is it how you imagined?' Théo asked in a hushed tone. We'd stepped through a slither of a doorway and into a room with the general fiction titles.

'I'm not sure I ever imagined what it would be like,' I said. I started running my hands along the spines of the new releases, like I could read their titles like braille.

We silently browsed alongside one another, a lot like when we went to the art gallery. Always within arm's reach. I started collecting books and justified each choice by saying to myself *when will I be here again?* Théo held them for me, his arms my own personal shopping basket.

In front of the classics shelf, Théo pulled out a copy of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and said, 'My favourite book.'

I dramatically gasped clasped a hand over my mouth. 'That might be the only unattractive thing about you.'

He looked worried. 'You do not like it?'

'I've never read it.' And I never planned to. But if it was Théo's favourite, I'd read it just to try to understand him more. 'It's just a very typical book for guys to like.'

'Do you think I am like every other guy?' he asked.

'Just your reading tastes,' I said. 'I won't hold it against you.'

'What are other typical male books, then?' Théo asked. 'So I can be careful to avoid them.'

'Well,' I started. 'Anything Murakami is a red flag.'

'Because...?' Théo asked.

'He writes women like boring brick walls and always describes their boobs.'

Théo nodded in understanding. 'Anymore?'

‘*Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace,’ I said. Théo looked at me with raised eyebrows for an explanation. ‘Unnecessarily long with such big words a lot of editions have a glossary at the end.’

‘Good to know,’ Théo said. ‘Avoid *Infinite Jest* and anything by—’ He’d forgotten the name of the first author.

‘Murakami.’

‘Murakami,’ he repeated.

After briefly browsing in the little pocket rooms full of non-fiction books on cooking and history, we headed up the narrow staircase to the second floor. We had to avoid the books stacked on each step as we ascended the stairs, and Théo kept a steadying hand on my back, so I didn’t lose my balance on the steep incline.

It was a lot quieter on the second story. People sat in worn leather armchairs reading. The shelves were much less organised than downstairs, with copies of beaten-up old books shoved into any available space. It was even more of a maze, the chapters of the store more deceptive, with room leading into room, book after book available to pluck from the shelves to read.

I felt overwhelmed, surrounded by so much knowledge, so many words, and felt the pressing reminder that there would always be more books to read than I have read. Another favourite might be sat on these shelves, with more information I’d tuck away into my back pocket to bombard Quinn with or use at a pub quiz.

Above one of the doorways was a quote that read, ‘Be not inhospitable to strangers lest they be angels in disguise.’ I pointed it out to Théo and said, in a hushed tone so as not to disturb the readers, ‘They have people who stay here, you know.’

‘What do you mean?’ he said. He was cradling my stack of now five books close to his chest.

‘They’re called tumbleweeds. You can stay here if you read a book a day, help in the shop for a couple of hours, and write a single-page auto-biography.’

Théo started looking around like he might see someone taking a nap on the terracotta tiles.

‘If this date doesn’t go so well, I’ll come crash here,’ I teased.

Théo dropped my books down onto a chair without breaking eye contact with me. He used his newly freed arms to pull me closer into him. ‘I think this date is going quite well, no?’

‘Best I’ve ever been on,’ I said.



‘So, you will not be going anywhere anytime soon.’ He was moving us into a corner, our feet shuffling until my back met with a bookcase. None of the readers around us looked up from their books, and the other customers simply went on with their browsing.

‘You’re stuck with me, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, no,’ he said, the largest smile pulling across his face.

I was pinned to the bookcase, his hips heavy against my belly. He kept me snug in his arms, one of his hands hot on top of the exact spot he tattooed.

‘You look very pretty,’ he said.

‘Thank you,’ I whispered. I’d FaceTimed Quinn to help me make all the date-look decisions. Lips: red. Skirt: mini. Hair: down. Underwear: lace. ‘You look very pretty, too.’

He was in his uniformed attire of vintage jeans and Chuck Taylors. But, instead of the usual white tee, he was wearing a tank top underneath a poplin shirt which he’d left unbuttoned. The Date Shirt. I could tell he’d spent a little extra time doing his hair and had spritzed just a touch of a citrus cologne on the pulse points of his neck.

‘I am going to kiss you,’ he said. The hand which had rested atop my tattoo slipped under my blouse. His rings were cool against my skin. He found the exact spot he’d inked and traced a finger along the lines.

‘In this temple?’ I said, body thrumming with desire. ‘Blasphemy.’

‘I will go to hell, then.’

He latched his lips firmly onto mine. If he’d not been holding me, I would have melted.

It was chaste, no tongue and all lips, and so slow time felt suspended around me. Our lips pressed together for long, devouring seconds. His hands grazed millimetre by millimetre under my shirt. My hands gripped at the hem of his tank top to keep him heavy against me.

When we unlatched, we stayed close and breathed heavy and hot onto one another.

‘Isn’t that supposed to happen at the end of the date?’ I said, pushing his hair back off his forehead.

‘Oops,’ was all he said in response.

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‘No one is sitting on the grass,’ I noted as we sat down. We were at date spot number two: the Luxembourg Gardens. Another spot I’d mentioned I wanted to visit.

We were under a vast canopy of trees and sitting on a pair of slightly reclined metal seats Théo had to hunt throughout the park for, claiming the other regular type of chair would not be as comfortable.

‘You are not allowed,’ he answered. His legs were stretched out in front of him and he was wearing a pair of Wayfarer sunglasses he’d put on when we left the bookstore. ‘There is only one spot of grass where you can, on the other side of the park near the fountain. It has a beautiful view of the palace.’

We were snacking on a punnet of strawberries and pulling apart mouthfuls of pastries. The bottles of juice we’d bought on our way here were sweating with condensation which pooled against the bare of my thigh as I held it. Giggles of groups of teenage girls were the soundtrack to our picnic, alongside the pulse of Théo’s occasional deep laugh.

‘Do you paint often?’ I asked. It had been on my mind since Ines and Ingrid spoke about it at the estate sale. ‘I haven’t seen you do anything. But maybe it’s a handful having me around.’

Sitting adjacent to one another, watching the light filter through the tree leaves, made it easier to talk than it would if we had to make sure our faces were adequately reacting to everything we said to each other. It was a lot like toddlers in kindergarten having parallel playtime.

‘Sometimes,’ he said.

‘But not, like, regularly?’ I asked. *Don’t push it, Freya.*

I could hear him turn to look at me, feel his eyes graze along the side of my face. When he finally looked away, he admitted, ‘I have not painted in a while.’

‘How long is a while?’ I asked.

I heard him take a deep breath. In, out, and then, ‘Since I started tattooing.’

‘Isn’t that like—’

‘Five years.’

I turned to look at him. He had his eyes closed under his sunglasses; his hands clasped together across his chest. The light speckled onto him and made it look like some of his tattoos were under spotlights. His eyebrows, messy and thick, and his nose, a straight slope that led down to plush lips. It was like looking at a portrait of a person, which caught not just his beauty but the sadness my question seemed to incite.

‘That’s a long time,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he agreed. ‘It is.’

‘Why stop?’

A big silence. One even Théo was uncomfortable in, stiff and uncertain in the park seat. Broken when he said: 'I love being a tattoo artist. I love using ink as my medium, and skin as my canvas. I love all the pieces I have designed. I love all the people I meet, and the stories behind the art I put on their bodies. I love that once I am finished with it, it is no longer just mine but theirs as well. Tattoo art offers so many things painting does not.'

There was a huge *but* hanging in the air.

'But I think, sometimes, it was the easy option. I worried I would never sell a painting, and if I did, only sell it for pennies. I worried I would live on Rapha's couch forever. I worried I was not good enough, and I gave up.'

I could hear the disappointment laced in his words. The worry that still lingered in his story, years later, despite all the success he'd achieved in his craft.

I was worried, if I looked to him, I'd see a new, real Théo who I wouldn't be able to help but to love. Who I couldn't leave in two weeks. Who would hang around in my heart for the rest of my life like a scar that just wouldn't fade.

Quieter, almost to himself, he said, 'I did not have the stomach to be a real artist.'

My heart broke for him. 'Do you not think what you do is being a real artist?' I asked.

'I do. I do. It is just...' He sat up in his chair, elbows resting on his knees so his face could be cradled in his hands. 'I was always a painter, and always *saw* myself as a painter. I am still adjusting to this version of myself who is not that, who is a completely different artist.'

I sat up into a similar position, desperately wanting to reach out my hand and touch some part of him. But this conversation felt as though it was happening in a confessional booth, with him on one side and me on the other, and I was just here to listen and sometimes probe with a question.

'When I pick up a paintbrush, I freeze,' he said. 'I forget everything I ever learnt, ever taught myself. Once, I sat for hours staring at a blank canvas and did not dip my brush into a single colour. I just stared and stared and stared until the natural light died and I was sitting in my dark apartment with a blank canvas.'

'You have art supplies all over your apartment. There are sketch books, and clay, and pencils.'

'I will do anything but paint,' he said. 'I feel that when I chose tattooing, I gave up painting. I know it does not make any sense.'

'It does,' I said. 'It makes sense.' Sometimes you just wanted someone to say: *You're right. I get it. That sucks*. No answers, no problem solving. Just solidarity.

It was a punishment for himself: if he didn't have the guts to paint for a living, he felt he didn't deserve to do it at all.

He turned to look at me then. His eyes were red from the way he'd been rubbing at them with the heel of his palm. His lips had a hint of my lipstick still staining them.

'I have never told anyone that. Not even my parents know I do not paint anymore,' Théo said.

I didn't know what to say. *Thank you for choosing to tell me or you should talk about it more. With Ines maybe? or I'll listen to anything you want to tell me.* But I didn't have to come up with anything, saved by a gaggle of tweenage girls who ran up to us, breaking apart our conversation. They congregated by Théo's chair, giggling between themselves, and asked him something that made him smile.

He pointed towards a bench across the grass and wished them *bonne chance* before they hurried away.

'Scavenger hunt,' Théo said. He scooted his chair across the gravel to be closer to mine and rested his forearms onto his thighs. 'They asked if me and my girlfriend had seen any clues hidden around.' He was so unbothered by the word *girlfriend*. A word that had never been associated with me.

As nonchalantly as possible, I asked, 'You've had a girlfriend before, right?' I didn't feel I had much of a right to ask this. We were being casual. We weren't going to define our relationship, so I had no reason to be privy to his past ones.

But Théo answered, unbothered. 'Yes, I have had a girlfriend before.'

'Juliette,' I said.

'*Oui*. Juliette.' He raised his eyebrows a little. 'You want to know about her?'

'Maybe,' I said.

'Will you answer one of my questions next, then?'

'Seems only fair.'

Théo let out a steady breath, and whispered, '*Par où commencer?*' to himself. Then started: 'She was my mentor, as you know.' I nodded. 'And a few years older than me. Incredibly talented and well known in the industry. I felt so lucky to be learning from her. She did not take many apprentices, you see, but saw something in me.'

'Very soon into my apprenticeship, we started seeing each other. It was very...' He cleared his throat. I hung out for the word he was looking for. '*Passionate*. We spent every moment of the day together. I idolised her for teaching me something new, and making sure I was good at it. Soon, that turned into love. For me, at least.'

I could see how Théo found himself in such a situation. He doesn't think in negatives. Not only is his glass enduringly half-full, but it has so much space for *more*. I'd never met someone so endlessly positive and open-hearted, never realised how those same qualities meant Théo had a tendency towards naivety. To him, it didn't compute to feel so passionately about someone and not have those feelings reciprocated. Surely everyone loved as freely as him. Surely everyone cared as deeply as he did. Surely everyone was as honest as him. It likely didn't occur to Théo to question Juliette's intentions until after he felt the consequences of them.

'You loved her?' I asked. I'd never loved someone romantically; never come to know if it was any different to the love I felt for my friends or my parents.

'I thought I did,' he said. 'When I think about it now, I do not think it was love I felt for her. It was something else.'

'Lust?' I suggested.

'No, more than lust,' Théo said. '*La dévotion*, maybe. I owed her my career and my talent, and I confused my appreciation for that with love.'

He looked to me; eyes soft, something in them I didn't recognise. 'Love is...' I thought, for a misguided and delusional second, he was going to say love is what he felt for *me*. 'Love is something completely different,' he said instead.

'I was lucky, in the end, that she did not love me. She liked me, thought I was talented, liked to spend all night in bed with me. But I was never anything more to her, and she kept that information to herself, and let me assume she cared just as much as I did.'

The parallels between myself and Juliette seemed glaring to me. I was doing the same thing: letting him *think* I was being open; letting him *think* I was being honest. But I was keeping the truth from Théo so nothing was too real, or too serious, or too much like love.

'How long were you together?' I asked.

'About three years,' he answered. 'Until I was not an apprentice anymore.'

'And then she...'

'Broke up with me.'

I winced. That was *cruel*.

For the briefest moment, I saw the residue of the relationship and the hurt that lingered, the spill from his half-full cup, before he switched codes, back to the brazen guy who liked to ask me to sit on his face.

'Have *you* had a boyfriend?' Théo asked, nudging my knees with his.

'That's the question you want me to answer?'

‘It is the same question you asked me.’

‘You don’t want to know if I’ve killed a man?’

‘Gun or knife?’

‘Arsenic.’

‘Clever,’ Théo said. ‘Now tell me if you have had a boyfriend.’

I made him wait a long beat before I answered. ‘Not anyone I could confidently give that label to.’

‘Because you didn’t want to call them your boyfriend?’

‘Because they didn’t want to make me *their* girlfriend.’

‘Idiots.’

‘Just one idiot,’ I clarified.

‘*Comment s’appelle-il?*’

‘James.’

I tried to forget he existed, like that would also mean I’d forget how embarrassing it was to be enamoured by him. All those excuses I came up with to convince myself he was actually interested in me (for more than a fuck): *He hasn’t responded because he’s studying really hard for his Quant Methods exam* (he never studied). *Neither of us wants anything serious right now* (I didn’t mind the idea of a boyfriend). *He hasn’t messaged me about my dad because he probably doesn’t know* (he lived in the same gossip-fuelled college as me and probably heard it mentioned at breakfast or texted in a group chat).

‘I should have listened to Maia when she told me not to get involved with a guy whose name starts with a “J”.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Cosmic rule that they have to be an asshole. James, Jack, Jean-Paul.’

‘Juliette,’ Théo added.

‘Juliette,’ I agreed.

We settled back into our chairs. Théo sucked indecently on the pit of a peach, and I tried to avoid staring. I dragged another chair over to rest my feet on, so I could recline into an almost complete laying position.

‘What is law school like?’ Théo asked after chucking the peach pit into a garden bed. It felt only fair I confess more than the name of my ex-situationship.

‘Thinking of enrolling?’ I asked.

He huffed out a laugh. ‘No. It is just... You never speak about it.’

‘No fun talking about something you don’t like,’ I admitted.

‘So, you do not like law school?’

‘I guess I’m being dramatic,’ I said. ‘It’s really not that bad.’

‘What do you not like about it?’

‘It’s all just a bit... bland. The most exciting thing I’ve learnt so far are the stupid things people have sued over, and you can’t even sue for most of those things nowadays because there are so many disclaimers to prevent it.’

‘What have people sued over?’ Théo asked.

‘Someone sued McDonald’s because their coffee was too hot. But McDonalds hasn’t even adjusted the temperature of their coffee, they just put warnings on their cups now, and that legally covers their asses. So, was justice really served when tongues can still be burnt on a hot McDonalds coffee?’

Théo asked, ‘How much longer do you have left?’

‘Two and a half years.’

‘That is a long time to do something you do not enjoy.’ The years of my law degree spread in front of me like a never-ending collection of mock trials, exams, and precedent-memorising.

I shrugged even though I agreed with him. I was a master shrugger. Just a quick lift and drop of your shoulders, a slight tilt of your head, and everybody thinks you’re good. ‘It’ll go by quick,’ I said, thinking my shrug would work. Théo saw right through it.

‘If you hate it so much, why are you doing it?’

“‘Hate’ is a strong word,” I said. Arguments with my dad were like this: picking at words and how accurate their definitions were for the scenario. That’s how lawyers argue.

‘Dislike, then. If you dislike it so much, why are you doing it?’

If I was looking at him, I couldn’t have answered this. Couldn’t have referred to my dad in the present tense without the guilt of lying written all over my face.

‘My dad has always wanted me to go,’ I said.

After my first week of legal studies classes in high school, I came home to Dad’s house and told him I liked legal studies. His face had lit up; his crow’s feet wrinkled more than they usually were, and his smile lines got indefinitely deeper. He’d always tried his hardest to be interested in the same things I was interested in—Roald Dahl books, boybands. But this? This we could *share*, in a way we hadn’t found the ground to before.

He started to insist on helping me with my homework, quizzing me on sections of the constitution and reading over my essays. Then he asked if I wanted to see him argue in court.

Then he came with me to the university open day and reminisced on his time at law school—the late nights, the pub crawls, the law society. *God, how fun!*

I provided a solid defence against enrolling in the undergraduate law program, arguing that by completing a Bachelor of Arts, I would develop a general theoretical background that could help inform my future law studies and careers. I could minor in Latin to understand the origins of certain legal terminology; Gender Studies classes could help inform my understanding of prejudices in the legal system. Ironically, I'd argued this so well Dad was more than certain I must, after my now approved undergraduate degree, study law.

After he got sick, my acceptance into the Juris Doctor course and subsequent career was his primary focus. What GPA would I need? Could he reach out to one of his friends to set up a clerkship for me, nepotism be damned? Would commercial or human rights law be more my speed?

It was a way for him to be a part of my future without actually being there. I'd made these promises to my dad so he wouldn't feel like he was missing out on so much. So that he wasn't simply imagining me sat in a lecture theatre learning Torts law, or one day being admitted to the Supreme Court of Victoria but was somehow there with me. Like he should have been.

'He thinks I'll be good at it,' I continued. 'I mean, I *am* good at it. Like, naturally good at it and I don't know why or how.' It was almost as though I'd been around Dad so much his lawyering skills had been absorbed into me like osmosis.

'Is your dad so hard to say no to?'

I wanted so badly then and there to tell Théo. I quickly played out how it might go.

Me: Hard to say no to someone who's not alive anymore.

Théo (confused): Your dad is dead?

Me: He died about ten months ago.

There were two ways it could go from there, the first being:

Théo: I'm so sorry, Freya.

The second being:

Théo: You've been lying to me? For weeks? Acting like your dad is alive, keeping the *biggest thing that has ever happened to you* a secret? Did you really think it would make me treat you any differently? See you any differently?

Instead, I said, 'A little.' It was the answer closest to the truth.



‘Are you sure it is what you want to do?’ he asked. I was sure I didn’t know what I would do if *not* law. I could be good at law. Great, even. I would earn a good salary, have a clear career path, and appease my dad all thanks to one degree.

Théo turned to look at me, and I couldn’t help but meet his gaze. There was a soft worry line forming between his eyebrows, like he couldn’t fathom me doing something I didn’t love.

‘As sure as I can be,’ was the vague answer I gave back.

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The third and final date stop was to have a drink at a bar back in Montmartre. We were seated in a dark, tucked away corner, and had pulled together the red velvet chairs so we could be as close together as possible. We’d both ordered drinks (him a negroni, me a cosmopolitan) which sat unsipped on the tabletop.

After a day of grazing touches and teasing kisses, the tension had drawn thick between us. He was tracing my face with his hands, naming the body parts in French as he did so. *La tête* as he cradled my cheeks in his palms; *les cheveux* as his fingers tangled in my hair; *les yeux* as he placed fluttering kisses to both eyelids; *le nez* as he came in and rubbed his nose against mine; *le menton* as he pinched my chin, like he always did; *la bouche* as he pressed a thumb to the plump of my lips and smeared the lipstick slightly.

‘I am going to ruin the mood for a moment,’ Théo said. He leant back away from me, and my instinct was to follow.

‘I am going to visit my family next weekend,’ Théo said.

My stomach dropped a little at the thought of a weekend without him.

‘That’s nice,’ I said, as upbeat as possible. I wouldn’t keep him from visiting his family, and this was very much *not* a meet-the-family scenario. ‘You don’t need to stay in Paris on my account. I’m a big girl.’

‘Would—’ Théo cleared his throat. ‘Would you come?’ he asked at an almost imperceptible volume.

*Oh.* ‘To visit your family?’

‘*Ouais,*’ he said. ‘Come home with me.’

Théo had always spoke so fondly of his home. He had described the old stone house so warmly: with its walls so thick he used to play The Strokes at the highest possible volume without his parents hearing in the bedroom down the hall; the snug room where, after dinner, the family sipped on an aperitif with a record playing in the background; the wine cellar which

from which he stole countless bottles of wine as a teen. All the little parts of Théo that he cherished were born and nurtured in that home, and he was inviting me to come see it.

‘I don’t want to impose. I really would be fine staying—’

‘Freya,’ Théo interrupted, his voice now steady and strong. ‘Come home with me.’

I wished I could have asked Quinn and Maia how to answer. I saw them like the devil and angel on either one of shoulders: Quinn misleading me in a bright red boiler suit, and Maia sitting pretty in an immaculate white mini dress.

Devil Quinn: Say yes.

Angel Maia: Don’t say yes. Politely decline and let him go alone.

Devil Quinn: If you don’t go, you’ll miss out on a whole weekend with him.

Angel Maia: If you do go, you’re misleading him and making this more serious than it was ever supposed to be. Than it ever *can* be.

Devil Quinn: Wouldn’t it be nice to see Marseille?

Angel Maia: You can last a weekend without him.

‘Okay,’ I said to Théo. I wanted to spend as much time with him as I could before I left. ‘I’ll come home with you.’

‘Good.’ He came in closer to me again. ‘Because *maman* wants to meet you.’

‘You talk to your mum about me, huh?’ Angel Maia would have had an aneurism if she heard this.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Lately, you are all I talk to her about.’

‘Only good things I hope.’ I brought my right hand to my ear like it was a phone and pretended to be Théo saying, ‘*Maman, I have a clueless Australian in my home. She cannot be left alone.*’

Théo laughed at my imitation, his eyes crinkling at the sides.

‘It is more like—’ He lifted his hand to his ear, and looked straight into my eyes as he said, ‘*Maman, I have an amazing girl in my home. I want to spend all my time with her. If you want me to visit, she is coming with me.*’

I dropped my hand-phone into my lap, my breath stuck in my throat.

‘You’re a sweet talker,’ I said, all breathy and windswept.

Théo shrugged and reached over for his negroni. The large sphere of ice had melted down into a little ball, and the orange was floating aimlessly in the liquid. He took his first sip slowly and without breaking eye contact with me. When the glass left his mouth, his lips were damp with the cocktail. He didn’t lick it from his lips. Instead, he pressed his mouth firmly to

mine and kissed the bitter orange of the Campari and the sharp cut of the vermouth into my lips.

When he pulled away, I caught the eye of a waiter and signalled for the check.

‘Let’s go,’ I said. I reached for my lukewarm cocktail and took one sip, then two, then three. The Cointreau burned down my throat and ignited a flame of courage in my chest.

‘*Mon chou, mon chou,*’ Théo tutted, taking the drink away from my mouth. ‘Why are you rushing?’

‘Because if we don’t leave now, I’m going to fuck you in front of all these people.’

Seconds seemed like hours as I waited for Théo to unlock the apartment door. I was huddled up against his arm, itching to get inside. Théo, on the other hand, was steady and calm, taking an excruciatingly long time to fit the key into the lock.

When we got inside, I didn't push him up against the door and unbuckle his pants like I did the last time. Instead, I started slow, backwards steps down the hallway. The only sound was the creak of the floorboards under my weight.

If he could tease, so could I.

'Where are you going?' he asked, following me.

'My bedroom,' I said as I slipped off my shoes.

'*Non*,' he said sharply. 'My bedroom.'

'Okay,' I complied.

Everything was happening at half speed. I felt every second ebb and flow through my body. The apartment filled with our desire, soaking into the walls, heating the air.

I started working on the buttons of my blouse to reveal a delicate white lace bra. Théo kicked off his shoes, the soles hitting the skirting boards with a *thud*, and then shrugged off his shirt.

As I shimmied my skirt down my legs, I spun around and bent over slightly so Théo had a full view of the thong I was wearing. When I turned back around, his eyes were pinning me down—warning, planning. Without a glance at the buckle of his belt, he worked it free and snapped it through the belt loops. A shiver ran down my near naked body.

My hand froze at my bra clasp as Théo said, in a deep, gravelly voice, 'Keep it on.'

I dropped my hand and kept on down the hallway until I was in line with his door. I rested my back against it, the wood cold against my skin.

Théo came within an inch of me, his hands posed on either side of my head. The jeans he still wore grazed against my belly. I reached for his tank top and pulled it from where it was tucked in, and raised it up and up over his taut torso until he took over the movements and pulled the material over his head.

'You want to?' I asked.

He guided my hand to the zip of his jeans. 'I want to.'

I could feel the length of him under my hand as I popped the button and dragged the zip down. Flashes of the last time I'd taken off his pants crossed my mind, hastily and rushed in

the dim light of the hallway. I'd been so desperate to get make him feel good I'd barely noticed the tattoo on his thigh or the kind of underwear he wore.

This time, I focused on every detail as I knelt and pulled the denim down his legs. The Eros and Psyche tattoo I loved so much peeked out from the band of his underwear. The tight black boxers and the hardness underneath. The thigh tattoo of the Roman bust which looked like the oldest ink on his body, the lines bleeding slightly into the surrounding skin.

I stood back up, dizzy with desire, and Théo asked, 'Are you going to go in?'

'I'll let you do the honours.'

He reached for the doorknob next to my waist and pushed open the door.

I'd not been in his room yet. I'd caught glimpses of it when I shuffled along his window to get to the roof, but nothing more.

It was a big, blank canvas with white linens and white walls, and an *actual* blank canvas rested against the wall to my left. To my right was the bed, made hurriedly in the morning with sheets peeking out from under the quilt and pillows haphazardly thrown up against the headboard. In a corner of the room, next to the wall of windows, was a leather armchair with clothes messily discarded on it.

It was all very minimal, with touches of Théo hidden around: a picture of his family stuck to the wall next to the right side of the bed; a small collection of colognes on the top of his dresser; a record player and a stack of vinyls next to it.

'Not big on colour, are you?' I asked.

He was walking to turn on the lamps which sporadically dotted the room—one on a dresser and one on either side of his bed.

Théo's hatred of overhead lighting meant the apartment at night-time always had an aphrodisiac effect, like a Barry White album should be playing on a low volume in the background. With clothes removed from the situation, it was intoxicating. The mellow lighting complimented his form and made his softly sculpted body look as though it had been chiselled out of some kind of olive-toned marble and brought to life.

This was the most of his skin I'd ever been exposed to, and with it came new knowledge of tattoos he had hidden along his body. While most were along his arms, he did have the occasional spot of ink on other parts of his body. There was a very traditional sailor's tattoo of a sparrow on his ribcage in a similar spot to where my tattoo was. In the centre of his spine, near the top of his back, was a voluptuous female torso. Each piece of art he chose to ink into his skin was perfectly chosen, and undeniably right for his body. Unlike my tattoo, which still

felt alien on my body, its dark lines against my pale skin often jarring when I caught a glimpse of it in a mirror.

‘I put it in my paintings,’ he said of the colour.

We’d ended up on opposite sides of the room: him to the right side of the bed, me to the left. I don’t know how I’d let so much distance get between us when my body was practically thrumming to be near his. It felt like I was tethered to him, a string pulling taught to ensure we’d always end up back in each other’s arms.

‘I would paint this view,’ he said. ‘You, backlit by the streetlights, in nothing but your underwear.’

‘Are you saying my near-naked body will get you to start painting again?’ I said, crawling across the bed. He swiped his hand across his disoriented face.

I wasn’t sure who I was in that moment, but I liked her. She did what she felt like doing; she said what she wanted to. When she got close enough to Théo, she put her hands on him and brought their lips together for the first time since the bar.

It heavy and impassioned, tongues crashing together, chasing more of each other. Théo’s hands were lost in my hair, angling my head so he could kiss me deeper and better.

‘Why don’t you—’ I said, between a break in our kiss. ‘—take my bra off and see if you have to immediately go and pick up a paintbrush?’

I guided his hands down to my chest. He briefly palmed my breasts through the lace before running a hand to the clasp and unclipping it deftly. He dragged the straps down my arm in a slow, torturous movement.

*Keep it on*, he’d said, so he could relish in every moment while taking it off.

His hands cupped under the bare curve of my breasts as if to frame them, and I asked, ‘Need to get some watercolours?’

He shook his head no, a hungry look in his eyes, and then pulled my legs out from under me, sending me flat onto the bed. His body followed quickly, laying heavy on top of mine.

He kissed me briefly on the lips, a quick *goodbye* to them so he could run his mouth over parts of my body he hadn’t yet met. He greeted one of my breasts with the palm of his hand and the other with the wet slide of his mouth. He acquainted himself with the plane of my stomach by murmuring sweet nothings into the skin. When he was met with the sight of my underwear, sheer and delicate against my fading tan, he groaned and kissed me through the material where I was most sensitive.

I wriggled on the bed, pleasure immediately twisting at the base of my belly. His mouth slid hot, heavy and messy all over me. And just as I was settling into the feel, Théo pulled back and kneeled between my legs.

He smiled down at me and toyed with the waistband of my underwear, twisting it between his fingers.

‘Can I?’ he asked, tugging at the material. I nodded eagerly.

The sight of him knelt between my legs, dragging the lace down my thighs at a languid pace, mouth ajar, would remain imprinted in my memory. I knew I’d recall it at inopportune moments, like while I was waiting for a bus, or surrounded by students in the library studying for exams or sat across the table from my mum at dinner. No matter how much I thought about filing my tax return, I’d never calm down from the sight.

I was completely naked underneath him. He could see the freckle just above my navel, the dip of my hips, the stretchmarks on my upper thighs. All was revealed for him to gaze at.

I wanted him in the same position.

I wanted to gaze.

I nudged at him with my legs and motioned for him to lay on his back. He flipped us so I was sat on top of his hips, only his briefs between us.

It was my turn to leisure in his body. To feel the ink of each of his tattoos under my fingertips. I’d run my mouth over every individual artwork, eventually. Know their coordinates on his body like he was a map I’d memorised.

The sight of him splayed out before me—hair messy, lips swollen, tattoos bared—made me hum happily, like I’d just taken the first bite of my favourite meal. I wanted my mouth full of him. I wanted to feel him in my stomach. I wanted to gorge, and devour, and indulge.

Théo spread a hand wide across my lower belly, his thumb pressing firmly into my clit. He swiped it lazily under the pad of his finger, up and down, like a light switch that only turned on and on and *on*. His other hand slid up the side of my body and smoothed at my tattoo as I dragged my hands down the planes of his torso and inched towards his underwear.

This was the Olympics of intimacy. With communication, and a patient pace. With touches that lingered and never rushed. Touches and words that caused an ache so rich and plentiful in my body no orgasm might satiate it.

‘I could barely focus when I tattooed you,’ Théo said. My hands stalled at the elastic of his waistband. ‘You smelt like vanilla. Your skin was so soft. You would whimper a little when the needle particularly hurt.’ He pinched a part of my tattoo and elicited the same sound from me. ‘You still smell like vanilla,’ he said as I pulled his briefs down his legs, the length of him

coming free. ‘Your skin is still so soft,’ he said. ‘Maybe you will whimper when I make you come.’

He sat up and clutched me tight to his body. My legs bracketed tight around his hips. We were so close. One movement and he’d be inside me.

‘Condom,’ I said.

He grunted a *oui* in response and practically threw me down onto my back, my head caught by a pillow. He managed to reach into his bedside table and pull out a foil packet with my legs still wrapped around his waist.

As Théo rolled the condom down his length, I noticed how similar he looked to when he was tattooing. His brow furrowed as he focused on the motion, he bit his bottom lip as he ran an assessing hand up and down his length, and when he was done, he let a small smile pull at his lips as he lowered himself down to me again.

‘Pillow,’ I said.

‘Under your hips?’ Of course, he knew a pillow could help.

I’d barely said, ‘Yeah,’ before he was taking the pillow from next to my head and positioning it under my hips, so they were angled up and towards him.

I reached down between us and grabbed him, my breath hitching at the first grazing touch. He added a helping hand, and together we guided the length of him into me with twin moans and breathy gasps.

‘Be still for just a moment?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘OK.’

I focused on the feel of him inside of me, stretching and filling. The slight burn as I adjusted to accommodate him. Théo groaned as I did a testing swirl of my hips, his head falling forward onto my shoulder.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You *squeezed*,’ he answered.

‘Oh.’ I giggled. ‘Like this?’ I squeezed again.

He bit softly into the meat of my shoulder.

‘You cannot ask me to *be still* and then do that.’

‘Then move,’ I said. ‘I’m ready.’

Théo started to roll his hips into and against me, eventually building up to a steady pace.

‘OK?’ he asked, watching my face closely. He’d reached down and was circling a deft finger around my clit, moving in sync with his hips.



I nodded in approval, dazed and a little confused by such a simultaneous experience of pleasure. He started to move with a more tireless rhythm, urging me to roll my hips upwards to meet his forward thrusts.

A flame of pleasure fluttered through my body, trailing a path between where Théo touched: from lips to breasts, breasts to belly, belly to clit. There were moments when moans would slip out of my mouth so accidentally, so loud, I surprised myself. Théo tried to catch each one, smearing his lips over mine, messy and desperate.

As our bodies spoke, we listened. As my head fell back, Théo kissed up the length of my throat; when his head nestled between the valley of my breasts, I tugged his hair between my fingers; when I rocked to the side underneath him, he finished the motioned and flipped me on top of him.

Sinking back down on him pushed my breath from my chest, an *oh, Théo* leaving with it. His hands clutched at my hips, rutting them back and forth to set a rougher, more vigorous rhythm. I slipped my hand between us to my clit and started rubbing. Théo swore against my sternum in French. I collapsed forward onto his shoulder; my body moved on autopilot to chase and chase and chase the pleasure he was pulling out of me.

‘Kiss me,’ Théo said, using my hair to angle my mouth to his. ‘Kiss me while you come.’

Our faces were a hairsbreadth apart, our breaths ragged and heavy between us. I watched the look of determination on his face, the quick glances he took to where we were joined together. I waited until my body started to tremor with irrepressible pleasure before crashing my mouth down onto his. I’d never felt so complete in my body, from my head to my toes, than when Théo was touching it, devouring it, pulling pleasure from it.

He came moments later, his movements becoming feverish and irregular, narrated by a muffled *Freya, Freya* in our kiss.

We stayed in each other’s arms, limp with euphoria, laughing giddily. Minutes passed, maybe hours, where all we did was breathe in sync with one another, trailing gentle hands up, down, across and around each other’s bodies. In that moment, I felt what Théo meant to me shift, from fling to for real. The seriousness of it throbbed deep in my chest. An ache under the aftershocks of pleasure.

‘You know,’ Théo said into the stillness. ‘I have wanted you in my bed since the first night I met you.’

‘Me, too,’ I said. I was tracing a tattoo of *The Swan* by Hilma af Klint which was on his upper bicep, committing it to memory.

‘Sometimes, just after we have both said goodnight to one another, I wait for you to come and knock on my door. Or I think about going to knock on yours. It always seemed so stupid to be in separate beds.’

‘I did the same,’ I admitted. ‘I’d stand by my door and listen for your footsteps in the hall, like you might come knocking.’

‘I am going to lock up that bedroom and throw away the key.’

‘Let me get my things out of it first,’ I teased.

He pushed my sweat-damp fringe off my face and smiled down at me.

I knew there was something he wanted to say but was deliberating on voicing. His mouth was open as if just about to start a sentence, all pouty and ready to form the sound.

Théo wasn’t shy to say much, and his unusual hesitation made me apprehensive. What would come out of his mouth next? The same spiel James used to give me? *So annoying I have to get up early for work. I totally wish you could stay over. You good to get back to your place alone?* Translation: I don’t have to get up any earlier than I usually would, sleepovers just aren’t apart of this arrangement. I’ll give the semblance of consideration by seeing if you’re okay to get home, but I’m *not* paying for your Uber (or even getting out of my bed to see you to the door).

Instead, Théo said something I didn’t have a practiced response for: ‘You should stay.’

I knew he didn’t mean in his bed.

‘I’m not going back to my cold bed now,’ I joked in lieu of an answer.

I slipped out of his arms to go in search of my underwear. His arms hesitated to let go of me, lingering on my waist as I sat on the edge of the bed.

‘You should stay *in Paris*,’ he clarified.

I couldn’t see my underwear on the floor anywhere. Had I taken them off in the hallway? No, Théo took them off me when we were on the bed. Where did he throw them?

‘Freya,’ he prompted. I was holding my boobs in my hands and peeking under his bedframe.

‘Have you seen my underwear?’

‘Do not worry about your underwear,’ he said.

‘Are they on a lampshade or something?’

‘Freya,’ Théo huffed, frustratedly throwing the sheets of himself. He walked over to the armchair and picked up my thong from where it had landed on top of his pile of clothes. He was backlit by a streetlamp and glowed in profile.

‘Here. Underwear,’ Théo said. He tossed them across the room to me and I just about caught them in my hand, my pinky looping through a leg hole. ‘Now talk to me.’

Who knew a man with good communication skills would frustrate me so much?

As I slipped the lace up my legs, I said to the floorboards, ‘I can’t.’

‘Cannot talk to me, or cannot stay in Paris?’ Théo said.

He stood in front of me, half-hard and frowning. I crossed my arms under my boobs and tried to forget what it was like to be cupped in his hands.

‘I can’t have this conversation naked,’ I said.

‘You are not naked.’ He gestured to my underwear.

‘Semantics. You can still see right through them.’

‘Only if I focus.’

‘*You’re* still naked.’

‘Does my body bother you, *mon chou*?’

‘A little,’ I said. Bother like hot and bothered.

‘I will put on some clothes, then.’

The word, ‘No,’ left my lips before my brain caught up. ‘Why do we need to have this conversation?’

I didn’t want to look my existential crisis in the eye, but Théo practically had two hands on either side of my head, turning me so I couldn’t avoid its gaze. He was going to break the fourth wall of the movie I’d been living in, the book I’d been devouring. Paris and Théo would not, if I could help it, become a part the same story as my dead dad and law degree. I would not let one ruin the other.

‘Because you leave soon,’ he said.

‘Soon.’ I took a testing step towards him. ‘Not now, or tomorrow.’

We slowly inched towards each other; even when arguing, we wanted to be close. He was an arms-length away, and I was on the verge of reaching out to pull him towards me. ‘It is so hard not to ask you to stay. Every time we speak—’

‘Bottle it up this once, Théo,’ I said. It felt counterintuitive to ask a man *not* to talk about his feelings. ‘Please.’

I stepped in so close to Théo our bare chests grazed with each breath. He was reluctant, stiff, like he had to tense every muscle in his body to keep in his words. I wanted to lean into him and place apologetic kisses along his clavicle, but it didn’t feel right to distract away from the moment. Instead, I tilted my head up so I could see the worried look on his face, all his questions locked behind a bitten lip.

‘Ok,’ he said, bringing his hands up to cradle my face. He placed a kiss so sweet to my lips it was like a trickle of honey ‘You will sleep in my bed tonight?’

I nodded. He smiled. Apparently, the left was my side.

I loved train rides. I loved watching the countryside fly by framed by the window like a roll of film. I loved that I could do my make-up without worrying about a wheel dropping into a pothole that would knock my hand and smudge my mascara all over. I loved being able to read without getting motion sick. I loved the little slice of freedom between where I was coming from to wherever I was going.

‘I’ve never met a guy’s family before,’ I said to Théo, sat opposite me. ‘I might be terrible at it.’

He peered at me over the top of his book. ‘You will not,’ he said.

‘Then tell me the things I need to know before we arrive. To reduce the chances of me fucking it up.’ I rested my elbows on the table between us and my head in my hands.

‘Well,’ he said, putting his book down. ‘My *mamie*—that is what I call my grandmother—does not speak English very well, but she will talk to you like there is no language barrier. It is best to nod your head until I can translate.’

‘You underestimate how good I’ve become at speaking French,’ I said. ‘I can hold a bad conversation. I can say all kinds of things.’

‘Like?’ he said with an amused smile.

‘Like...’ I’d been holding this phrase in my arsenal for a while. ‘*J’ai envie de-toi.*’ *I want you.*

Théo’s mouth dropped open in shock.

‘Or...’ I leant further towards Théo, who also moved in closer, chasing after my next words. ‘*Baise-moi,*’ I whispered. *Fuck me.*

I would never be able to say the same thing in English without my voice shaking and essentially becoming a whisper. In another language, however, embarrassment felt far away.

‘I am not sure you could say those things to my grandmother,’ Théo said.

‘No, probably not,’ I said. ‘I did only learn them so I could say them to you.’

‘Later,’ he said, his voice guttural. ‘You will have to repeat them to me.’

I sat back in my seat and admired him all dark-eyed and practically panting.

‘What are their names again?’ I asked.

‘You still want to talk about my family after that? There is bathroom in the next carriage.’

‘I need to know their names, don’t I?’

Théo cleared his throat in frustration before saying, ‘Céleste is my mother, Henry my father—but *mamie* calls him Henri. Marie is my grandmother, and Maxime is my grandfather.’

‘Four names. I can remember four names.’

‘Yeah?’ Théo said. ‘Repeat them to me.’ It sounded like when he’d asked me to come last night. Bent against the kitchen bench, our dinner going cold as it rested on the stove, my skirt not even off, his pants barely down.

‘Céleste is your mum,’ I confirmed. Théo nodded. ‘Henry is your dad, but your grandma—called Marie—says it so it sounds more French.’ Another nod. ‘And Maxime is your grandpa.’

‘*Très bon*,’ Théo said. ‘*Papi* will be quiet most of the time and is usually in the garden. *Papa* will only talk about whatever he is reading now. He forgets everything else. *Mamie* will let no one touch her vegetable garden. Not even *Papi*. And *Maman* will fuss over you.’

‘OK,’ I said, slowly absorbing all the information. ‘Wait. *Mamie*, *maman*, *papi*, *papa*,’ I repeated, trying to commit the frustratingly similar nouns to memory.

‘*Oui*. Can you tell them apart?’ Théo asked.

‘*Mamie* is grandma, which makes *maman* mum. *Papa* is the same in English—dad—so your grandpa would be—’

‘*Papi*,’ Théo filled in.

‘I was definitely going to say that.’

‘I am sure you were,’ Théo said.

‘Anything else I need to know?’ I said.

‘One thing,’ Théo began. He leaned across the table, and I had the instinct to try move further away. If he stole my breath away, I’d be short of it for hours. ‘You may be able to talk dirty in French, Freya, but I can talk dirtier in English.’

An automated French voice filled the train cabin around us, announcing the stop we were passing through, and Théo stood coolly to go to the bathroom while I sat flustered and unable to move, a million possibilities of *dirtier* playing on my mind.

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‘*This* is where you grew up?’ I was mesmerised.

Théo’s family home was a short drive from Marseille, away from the city and enveloped within the French countryside. His grandparents had bought it in the sixties, though it had been

there for much longer, ensconced within an alcove of tall trees and hidden away from civilisation.

The stone the house looked like the type a prince would scale with hair as a rope to save a princess; the windows, each with their own tiny balconies, were exactly the kind Juliet would have sung *wherefore art thou, Romeo?* from; I wouldn't be surprised if a woman in a blue ballgown ran through the double front doors and lost her shoe along the way.

It was a lot like Monet's Garden, if memory served me correctly. The gravel walkway we were on was flanked by bushes of forget-me-nots and deep-pink roses. A wilting wisteria tree drooped over manicured shrubs. Vibrant purple bougainvillea wept off the house with baby blue shutters bright against the sandstone.

I thought I might see the eight-year-old version of myself running with a rose tucked behind her ear, long hair littered with leaves, my dad in tow.

'*Ouais*,' Théo said, coming to rest his chin on my shoulder. 'You like it?'

'Like it?' I said. 'This, I'm sure, is where I've dreamed of running off to and living the rest of my life.'

'You would leave me all alone in Paris?' Théo teased. He drew my back into his front and nuzzled his head further into the crook of my neck. 'For this old house?'

I thought to quip back 'in a heartbeat,' but it felt overwhelmingly untrue, like the biggest lie that could leave my mouth. I realised I couldn't even bring myself to joke about leaving Théo, because I didn't want to, not even in theory.

I would eventually have to leave, of course. My time in Paris, and with Théo, always had an expiration date, and it was fast approaching. Each tick of the clock closer to my flight home filled me with dread, my method of not looking at the date when I opened my phone didn't—annoyingly—mean my time with Théo wasn't drawing to an end. My life back in Melbourne was coming to swallow me whole. Absorbed back into law school and grieving daughter duties, I'd forget who I'd been here in France: a woman who finally did what she wanted to.

'*Théo*,' a soft voice sounded. A few metres away, rounding the corner of the stone house, was who I could only assume was Théo's mother, Céleste. They had the same caramel eyes, the same plump bottom lip. Their smiles pulled big and bright like mirror images of each other.

'*Maman*,' Théo said, his voice full of love. He dropped his hands from my body and jogged over to his mother.

Next to my five-foot-nine, Théo was tall. Next to his mother's five-foot-two, he was a giant. To hug her, he had to crouch down almost a foot, and his mother then still had to lift onto her toes to reach around his neck.

*'Mon cœur,'* his mother hummed.

Their hug lasted a few moments, some murmuring occurring in French which I couldn't—and didn't feel I should—translate, before Céleste ended the hug and promptly set her sights on me and said, 'Let me see your Freya.' I dismissed the use of the possessive pronoun as a mistranslation.

'Freya,' Théo said, following his mother as she walked towards me. 'This is my mother, Céleste.'

'Hi,' I said in English, before realising I should be speaking in French, and correcting to, *'Bonjour. Salut.'* First impressions count, and I was already speaking the wrong language.

She took my hands in hers, a bright smile on her face, and said, 'It is so nice to finally meet the woman my son does not stop talking about.'

I glanced to Théo and found him blushing. *'Maman,'* he weakly admonished.

'It's lovely to meet you—' I started to say but was interrupted by a call for *'Théodore Augustine!'* from the other side of the garden.

Théo's grandfather, walking at a rapid pace and carrying a scary looking pair of sheers, and his grandmother, clinging to a bunch of carrots that look freshly plucked from the earth, were practically sprinting towards their grandson.

There was a whirlwind of greetings I couldn't keep up with: French being spoken at the speed of light; Théo hugging his grandparents at the same time, with his grandpa still holding onto the deathly sheers; his grandma cupping his face and squishing his cheeks in her hands.

In that moment, I could see Théo aged five, ten, fifteen, twenty. The smaller, childish versions of himself which his family had pinched the cheeks of, squeezed the life out of, smiled brightly at. Love overwhelmed the garden.

I wasn't sure where to situate myself among the familial chaos. It was a lot like watching an amazing movie but sitting on a chair that kept poking your ass. I rocked on my feet, zhuzhed my fringe, shoved my hands into my pockets, all while keeping an eye on the group hug Théo was engulfed in.

'My mother hates when Théo is away for too long,' Céleste said from beside me. She kept a comforting hand on mine; an effort to include me in the family reunion. Warmth radiated from her. Being with her was like sitting by a warm fire with a cup of tea. 'She thinks he should be here every weekend.'



Conversations didn't seem to last long here in Marseille, all of them interrupted by pressing questions and loving touches. I didn't get a chance to engage any small talk with Céleste before Théo asked her where his dad was.

'He is at *le supermarché* buying food for dinner,' Céleste answered. She was speaking a kind of Franken-French, blending French words into English sentences.

'What is for dinner?' Théo asked.

'That is always the first thing on your mind,' Céleste said. 'Do you not feed yourself, *mon cœur*?'

'*Tu mangeras ce qui servi*,' Marie said.

Céleste laughed, then translated for me: 'She told Théo he will eat what he is served.'

Théo's grandma, Marie, then set her sights on me.

'Freya,' she said sternly. My back straightened in response; my posture was more poised than it had even been in my entire life.

'*Bonjour*,' I almost whimpered.

She walked over and linked our arms together pulling me with her towards the house. She had a grip of steel.

'We go,' she said. 'They talk.' She pointed to Théo and Céleste.

'Ok,' I said. Something told me refusing Marie was something people did not do often.

'*Mamie*,' Théo whined, reaching for my hand. 'Let Freya settle. She will be here all weekend to question.'

'*Ah!*' Marie said sharply, a finger pointed at her grandson. Théo raised his arms in forfeit.

'*Sorry*,' Théo mouthed to me as I was pulled away.

'She cannot be stopped!' Céleste called, followed by a bright laugh.

'*Sous gentil, mamie!*' Théo yelled. *Be nice.*

Marie dismissively waved her hand as she stole me away into her home, Maxime following us like a very well-trained dog.

The maternal line of the Augustine family had those rich, caramel-coloured eyes, and their hair remained thick well into the octogenarian years. Marie had ice white hair which she twisted back into a messy chignon and pottered around in a linen apron that functioned for both the kitchen and the garden. Maxime kept his thick slate grey hair cut short and wore a navy work shirt that was likely perpetually covered in dirt and jeans he'd probably owned for thirty years.

Marie talked at me like I understood what she was saying, as Théo warned me. Maxime—though I'm not sure any more capable at English than his wife—attempted to translate for me. It was surprising, however, how little French I needed to know in order to understand the two of them.

I was brought into the kitchen. A room with tall ceilings supported by thick wooden beams, ivory white cabinets with yellowing paint around the brass handles, and an old, baby blue oven range. Marie promptly pointed to a wicker basket full of dirt-covered carrots and then to the deep farmhouse sink. Apparently, I was to rinse the vegetables.

Behind me, Marie waddled around the kitchen, preparing (hours in advance) what I assumed were parts of our dinner: potatoes being cut and set aside to soak; carrots, moments after I'd rinsed them, being nipped from where I set them to dry.

Maxime, much to Marie's annoyance, sat at the dining table in the centre of the kitchen eating an apple with loud crunching noises, reading the newspaper. Occasionally, Marie would not be able to reach something, and Maxime would stand up, one eye still on the newspaper, one hand still cradling his apple, and take down the required object. Years of cohabitating had sunk into their bones.

It was all so comfortably domestic. I felt like an atheist in a church.

Once I'd washed all the carrots and had attempted to chop the largest pumpkin I'd seen in my life ('From my garden,' Marie had said as she softly shuffled me to the side and took the knife from my hand), Maxime ushered me to sit down at the table, joyfully repeating *apéro*, *apéro*.

'*C'est comme de l'eau*,' Maxime said while filling a glass of wine for me, as though he could feel my hesitation to drink before 5pm. Rosé, of the wine varietals, was apparently interchangeable with a bottle of *Evian* to the French.

We spoke for a short while, Maxime and Marie softly interrogating me. Questions about what part of Australia I was from ('Melbourne,' I said, which they didn't recognise the name of), if I went to university ('Yes, I'm in law school,' I said, miming a gavel. They made *ooo*

noises), and if I had any career plans ('Lawyer, most likely,' I said, as though the prospect wasn't daunting).

While I was listening to Maxime explain that the vegetable patch was Marie's and Marie's only, and that his presence in that section of the garden was only allowed if he sat quietly on a bench and read the newspaper, Marie asked, 'You are his girlfriend, yes?'

'I, uh—Well, we're—' I had no clue how to explain that though I lived with Théo, had sat on his face, and experienced this unexplainable contentment when I was around him, that I couldn't with any certainty refer to him as my boyfriend, or to myself as his girlfriend.

Luckily, Marie didn't give me much space to answer, saying, 'No girlfriend here for long time.' Did that mean Juliette had been here once?

'I am very happy to be in your home,' I said, evasively.

'*Mamie.*' Théo's voice cut through the room, interrupting Marie before she could get back to her line of questioning. Like a moth to a flame, my eyesight cut right to him leaning against the kitchen doorframe. '*As-tu été gentile?*' *Were you nice?*

He came up behind where I sat and rested his hands on the back of my chair. The old wood creaked under his weight.

'*C'est la cas!*' Marie said, which made Maxime laugh.

'I do not believe you,' Théo said.

He then lowered his head down next to mine and said against the shell of my ear, 'Your room is ready,' causing shivers to run down my spine.

'Oh?' I said, turning to face him.

'Come.' He held out a hand to me and practically dragged me out of my chair and across the kitchen.

As I was towed away, I (very poorly) said, '*Merci beaucoup! Pour le vin!*' to Marie and Maxime.

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'Monet,' I said. I was appraising all the posters on the wall of Théo's childhood bedroom. It was the opposite of his Paris home, the walls cluttered with posters and sketches, the linens a dark blue and the bed a small double, barely any light streaming in from the small window.

'Hmm,' he hummed, one step behind me.

'Hockney. That's a good one.'

'It is.' His hands moved to hover by my waist, tickling along my side.

‘Matisse.’

‘Of course.’

‘Who’s this?’ I read the name in italics at the bottom of the poster. ‘Pauline Boty?’

He stepped in so close my ass grazed against his front. ‘A British pop artist. Always overlooked. She was the best of them all.’

‘So, your childhood bedroom walls are covered in posters of famous art.’

‘Mmmhmm,’ he hummed.

‘No posters of half-naked women? A *Sports Illustrated* centrefold? Even a flag for some football team?’

‘I think I once had *Venus of Urbino* on my wall. That is a half-naked woman.’

‘Doesn’t count.’

‘It is a good thing I did not objectify women with posters on my wall, no?’

‘Yeah, yeah. Very admirable. Instead, you made your room the poster version of an art gallery.’ I pointed at a poster of a room full of ballerinas. ‘Wasn’t Degas a bit of a creep?’

‘Can you separate art from the artist?’ he asked—me or himself, I didn’t know.

‘Van Gogh.’ I walked up to the largest poster on the wall, titled *The Bedroom* in the bottom right corner. ‘Is this a favourite?’

‘My father’s favourite. He bought it for me when I started painting.’

I nodded, assessing the painting but not taking anything in. I was still trying to wrap my head around the Augustine family living situation.

It was a multi-generational household, with both Théo’s parents and grandparents calling the countryside villa home. When I asked him during the week if it would be a bother for his family to have me, Théo said that his grandmother was no stranger to visitors and had always had an open-door policy. His entire childhood had been filled with guests of his parents and grandparents staying in the home for months on end, swimming in their pool, helping in the garden, sharing whatever knowledge they had. With just the four of them living in it now, it was the emptiest it had ever been.

A family that not only wanted to spend time together, but *live* together, was so foreign to me. It was a cool reminder of what I didn’t get to have as a kid: a loud house, with affectionate parents and doting grandparents, radiating a love so palpable you could feel it through the walls. Instead, I had pre-planned drop offs where I was passed between my parents like a parcel and became an expert at packing my duffel bag. What little family I did have was now half-gone and felt paper-thin compared to the fullness of Théo’s family.

‘So, they all live together?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Théo said. ‘Does that surprise you?’

‘A little bit,’ I said. ‘My family practices a more separatist approach.’ Separate houses, separate suburbs, and my surviving grandmother even lived in a separate state.

‘Your parents are divorced, yes?’ Théo asked.

‘Mmhmm. Since I was eight.’ The easiest way to lie, I’d come to learn, was with a hum.

‘What was it like?’ he asked. Divorce was just as alien to him and his family was to me.

‘I thought it was great in the beginning. New books, new toys. Two bedrooms, two backyards. But that got boring pretty quickly. I felt like I was always half at my mum’s house and half at my dad’s house. My suitcase was perpetually packed and waiting to be dragged back and forth between my homes. It was a lot like being their favourite toy that they were learning how to share.’

‘I cannot imagine,’ Théo said. ‘The people I love have always been a room away.’

I smiled at him, almost jealous. I could feel the love that filled the rooms of this house. The family history carved into its stone.

‘By the time I was in high school, I was sick of living out of a suitcase. I’d always forget something. Usually my school sports gear, so I’d end up in P.E. class without my sneakers trying to play volleyball in school shoes. That’s why I went into college. Don’t have to choose between houses if you just move out of them both.’

Despite growing up in two houses full of everything I could have possibly wanted, the Ormond halls were the first place that felt like home. Every week I was in the same room, in the same bed, with my same friends across the hall. I made sisters of Maia and Quinn, who came into my room without invitation and stole my makeup. There was no chance of me leaving my shoes in the wrong closet, or my textbooks on the wrong table, because there was only *one* desk, only *one* closet. I felt put together for the first time in my life, not stretched thin between two places.

It’s why I knew this thing with Théo couldn’t last longer than the few weeks we had. A part of me would always linger in Paris, clutching to Théo, waiting for the next time I could see him. Instead of a week at Mum’s and then week at Dad’s, it would be months with Théo and then months without.

‘Do you ever wished they stayed together?’ Théo asked.

I shook my head with a laugh. ‘No, not at all. They were way better at being divorced. I think they love that they made me, and that they’d given that to one another. They will always respect each other for that.’

I sat down on his bed, soft from wear, the sheets smelling like they'd just come in from being hung on the washing line, pollen and sun and washing liquid all pooled together.

'How long have your parents been married?' I asked. I patted on the mattress next to me, urging him to sit down.

'They are not married. Just together,' he said as he sat down next to me. He pulled my legs so they draped across his lap.

'How long for?'

'*Ouf*,' Théo let out with a breath of air. 'If I am twenty-eight, then... *Trente ans? Trente-deux?* I could not be sure.'

'I'm still making my mind up about the whole marriage thing.'

Maia, Quinn and I often had long-winded conversations about this. *How will I be able to afford a wedding?* Maia would ask. *There's no legal difference between a married couple and a de facto one,* I would say. *I'd rather elope on a cliff face in Italy, if I had to bind myself legally to someone,* Quinn would say.

'Do explain,' Théo said.

'It didn't go so well for my parents,' I said. 'And legally, there's not a whole lot of difference between being married and a de facto couple. Why spend all your money on a wedding when we could just buy a house together?'

'I will admit, I have not given it as much thought,' Théo said.

'Well, it's not shoved in your face as much as a man.'

'No, it is not,' he agreed. 'But I do know I have always wanted to find someone to spend my life with.'

'Me too,' I agreed.

Neither of us dared wonder if we were that person for one another. We knew our time was finite.

I redirected the conversation onto smoother terrain. 'Your last name—Augustine—it's not very... English. Is it your father's last name?'

'It is my mother's,' he said. '*Papa* did not have any attachment to his last name. *Maman* did, *à la* my last name.'

'Progressive. I like it. Fuck patrilineal supremacy, right?'

'Right,' he laughed out. 'Whatever that means.'

'Would you take your partner's last name?'

'Théodore Davis.' He tested the sound of the name on his tongue.

'It doesn't sound anywhere near as good as Théodore Augustine.'

‘Freya Augustine,’ he said, with a quick nuzzle of our noses together.

‘Don’t tempt me.’ It sounded so sophisticated, like it should be printed in gold lettering on the front of a hardcover book.

‘Do you have a middle name?’ Théo asked.

‘Ford,’ I said. ‘Like the car.’

‘Freya Ford?’ My name melted off his tongue like butter. I felt it warm across every nerve of my body.

‘It’s my mum’s maiden name. Well, it’s just her last name. She never changed it. If she didn’t believe hyphenate surnames were cruel, I’m sure she would have fought for Freya Ford-dash-Davis.’

‘My middle name is Maxime. Big surprise, no?’

I tried to pronounce ‘Théodore Maxime Augustine,’ in my best French accent, but it didn’t sound anywhere near authentic. ‘That’s just about the prettiest name I’ve ever heard.’

‘Freya Ford Davis,’ he said, the end of my name muffled as his lips pressed into mine.

I was lowered back down onto the bed as Théo deepened the kiss, my feet hanging off the edge. His mattress would only fit us both if we tangled together, legs between legs, chest against chest.

‘Do you know,’ he said against my lips, ‘that this bed has never had a woman in it?’

I stopped his ministrations and held his head between my hands. ‘I don’t believe you.’

‘I swear.’ He placed a hand on top of his heart. ‘You are the first. *Mamie* made Juliette sleep in the living room.’

‘You’re telling me a teenage Théo never snuck a girl in? Had her climb the vines on the side of the house and squeeze through the window so you could make out, at least?’

He shook his head. ‘Never. Would you sneak someone past my *mamie*?’

‘Good point.’ His mouth latched onto my neck, his tongue teasing and tracing at the sensitive skin just below my ear. ‘I don’t want your *mamie* to hear,’ I—very weakly—protested.

‘The walls are thick.’ He unzipped my jeans and slid a hand down into my underwear.

We got each other off with hurried hands in his childhood bed.

The next morning, Théo spent time with his parents, and I curled up on a chair by the lavender bushes to read a book. Their scent, like a spray my mum would put on my pillow when I was sick, wafted over to me with each gentle breeze. My spot of shade was provided by a line of young *platane* trees (Maxime had told me their name), whose yellowing leaves sometimes ruffled and let through a sprinkle of sunlight to warm the pages of my book.

I didn't manage to read much, despite sitting outside for over an hour, and instead used it as a shield across my eyes. Halfway through paragraphs and in the middle of sentences my mind kept running off and under the covers of the bed Théo and I had shared last night. We'd watched each other take off every piece of clothing and eventually made it down to our underwear, at which point Théo took a step back to look at me more fully, like a sculpture in an art gallery, assessing all my curves. He'd whispered something in French under his breath at the sight.

I'd never slept better in my life than when I slept next to Théo. He always had to be touching some part of my body: a hand over my waist, lips on my shoulder, feet rubbing together with mine. He would occasionally kick a foot out from under the covers and hang it over the side of the bed to cool himself down. He slept in complete silence, not even a hint of snoring.

'Can you read with your book so close to your face?' Théo had come to interrupt my reading (daydreaming) time.

'I gave up,' I said, taking the book off my face. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I was met with his tall form standing over me. He wasn't wearing a shirt and was glistening with sweat. His skin shimmered like glitter and was already turning a deeper shade of olive after a morning in the sun. 'How was your morning?'

'My dad made me mow the lawn,' Théo said.

'Aren't you a dutiful son.'

'I need to cool down,' Théo asked. 'Should we go for a swim?'

'Sure,' I said, closing my book completely.

He stretched out in front of me; his abdomen pulled taught, and a smattering of hair peaked out of his pants. 'The beach is about a half an hour away.'

'What?'

'The beach. *Maman* says you must see the ocean, and I've been ordered to take you.'

'I've seen the ocean before.'



He quirked an eyebrow up. 'The Mediterranean Sea.'

'I've seen the Mediterranean Sea. I swam in it off the coast of Nice. I even have some photos of the girls and I at a beach club there.'

Théo knelt down in front of me and rested his hands on my knees. 'Why do you not want to go, *mon chou*? Are you worried you will not be able to resist me all wet?'

How to say, like a regular person: *It's called Thalassophobia. No, I can't translate that to French. Yes, it is a fear of deep water. Yes, I squeal when seaweed brushes my ankle, and hyperventilate when I'm in water deeper than my waist. No, I couldn't tell you why.*

'No.' I hadn't even thought of how gorgeous he might look all slick with salt water. Did he have little four inch in-seam swim shorts? I hoped so. 'I just—I don't love the ocean. That's all. I prefer a pool. You guys have a pool, too. A very nice pool that we should use. And I was going to help your grandma in the vegetable patch.'

'You are very sweet,' he said. 'But I do not refuse my *maman*. She raised me, you see. Gave me everything I could want. Even bought me my first bottle of wine. If she says I cannot bring you all the way down here and not take you to the ocean, I have to take you to the ocean.'

'I didn't bring a swimsuit.'

'What about that white one in your bag?' He'd seen it in my pile of clothes while I packed, and picked it up and said, *you will never wear this for long when you are around me.*

'It's faulty,' I said. Then, unenthusiastically, 'Oh no.'

'We will buy you one. A blue one would look good, I think.'

'How will we get there? A taxi would be too expensive.'

'We have a car.'

'And you can drive it?'

He gave me a playful scowl. 'Yes, I can drive it.'

'Competently?'

'With one hand and my eyes closed, cabbage.'

'I promised Marie I would—' Théo scooped me out of the chair and threw me over his shoulder so quickly I had a brief spurt of vertigo.

'We are going. You will swim in the sea, and you will do it with me.'

'*Théo!*' I squealed, pounding on his back. 'I was about to get up.'

'It is easier this way,' he said between laughs.

'I dropped my book. Let me get it!'

'You will not have time to read,' Théo said.

‘Can I at least put it in my bag so I *feel* like I might read it at some point? For my own piece of mind?’

Théo huffed out a breath and walked back to where my book had fallen on the ground. With me still on his shoulder, he bent down and picked up the book before handing it to me.

After a few moments of attempting to release myself from his grip, I relaxed into Théo’s hold and let him walk me into the house. Past his dad reading by the pool, past his grandparents in the kitchen, past the sitting room where Céleste laughed at the sight of me hanging off her son’s shoulders, and then up the stairs.

He finally let me stand on solid ground when I was inside his bedroom. At which, he pinched my chin between his fingers, said, ‘We leave in fifteen minutes,’ and left to me to get ready with a peck to my lips.

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Our ride into the city was a two-seater convertible which was painted bright yellow. As Théo drove, a pair of Wayfarers on, his hair blowing in the wind, and one arm rested across the back of my seat, I think my pupils changed into cartoon love hearts and burst out of my head. The car radio was stuck on a station which only played seventies disco music, and the volume knob had only two levels: super loud or super quiet. Théo would turn the music down when he wanted to point out the school he went to, or the house his first kiss lived in.

We were told by Céleste to visit a specific boutique to buy myself a bikini. As I tried on different swimsuits, Théo sat on a chair in the changing area trying to get me to show him what I was trying on. Every so often, the shop owner would hand through a new bikini for me to try—orange to make me look tanner (impossible), black for something basic (more Maia’s thing), and floral patterns that reminded me of my grandmother’s curtains. At one point, Théo’s hand poked past the curtain holding a bright blue triangle bikini. The shop owner let me leave the store with Théo’s choice on under my clothes, hidden from his peering eyes.

The swimming spot Théo brought me to was more of a cove than a beach. Steep steps led down to a pebble bank, where sunspot-covered elderly women with enviable body comfortability relaxed, their bikini straps untied and sunglasses on. The water glistened and sparkled against the sun, its colour moving from a glassy tourmaline by the shoreline into a clear sapphire in the deeper spots.

We set our towels down in a small nook between the rockface that framed the cove, hidden away from the main stretch of the shore.

‘Rapha and I would come here when we were teenagers,’ Théo explained, pulling his shirt off. He was wearing navy blue swim shorts which barely contained his thighs, his Eros and Psyche tattoo peeking out above the waistband.

His busy skin always left me feeling dizzy and aching to touch him.

‘To prey on sunbaking girls?’ I teased.

‘To *flirt* with all the sunbaking girls. And sometimes we would—’ Théo stopped mid-sentence, his mouth needing to hang agape in awe.

I’d taken off my sundress to reveal the bikini he’d chosen for me. Its cobalt blue made me look like I had some colour on my skin; the briefs were dangerously high cut, the ties sitting atop my hipbones snugly; I’d twisted the straps of the top so they criss-crossed over my chest and pulled my breasts in closer, giving the semblance of cleavage.

‘What?’ I said, trying to bite down my smile.

‘You chose the blue bikini,’ he said.

I shrugged. ‘It looked the best.’

‘It looks *amazing*.’

I felt a world away from the self-conscious Freya I was that first night Théo had tattooed me. I’d been so worried he might think my shoulders too broad, or legs too long, or stomach not flat enough. But under Théo’s gaze, I realised I would never be anything but utterly adored.

Théo’s eyes darted towards the water, and then a mischievous smile started to bloom on his face. ‘Race you?’

‘No, Théo—’

‘*Une*.’ He started shuffling towards the water. Did the rocks not hurt his feet? Did he have some kind of immunity?

‘I’m not running on a pebble be—’

‘*Deux*.’

‘For fuck’s sake—’

‘*Trois!*’

Théo sprinted into the water, and despite the pebbles pinching at the soles of my feet, and the resistance of the water against me, I kept up with him quite well. I tried to blind his vision with a large splash, but he splashed me with more force, the water matting my hair to my face and blocking my view. At one point, I managed to claw my hand into the waistband of his swim shorts and pull him back in line with me, which was a bad idea, because then I was in arms reach of him. He encircled a hand around my waist and pulled me into his side, and before I could squeal that I’d just washed my hair, he plunged our bodies under the water.

Théo resurfaced with a gleaming smile on his face and droplets of saltwater teasing their way down his toned chest. I resurfaced with a scowl and the look of a drowned rat.

‘All wet,’ he said, pushing some hair off my face.

‘I hate you,’ I said.

‘No.’ He gave me a quick peck. ‘You do not.’

We swam out to a quiet spot where no one was wading nearby, where the water calmly lapped around us, and our bodies bobbed rhythmically against the tide. I tried to not think about what could be swimming under me and pretended I was in an enclosed pool.

‘So, how am I doing with your family? Does your mum like me?’ I asked, focusing on the back-and-forth sculling motion my hands were doing.

‘Loves you,’ Théo said.

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Henry?’

‘He loves having someone in the house whose first language is English.’

‘Maxime? Does he like me?’

‘Would be happy with anyone who will listen to him talk about wine.’

‘I didn’t absorb anything he said.’

‘You sipped the wine and nodded your head. It was perfect.’

‘I’ll remember that for dinner tonight.’

I was most hesitant to know what Marie thought of me. While Céleste always offered me warm smiles, and Henry was always happy to chat to me, and Maxime always noticed when my wine glass needed refilling, Marie was entirely unreadable. Her face sat constantly in a neutral expression.

‘And Marie?’

Théo laughed. ‘She is a little scary, no?’

‘She is a lot scary,’ I said. ‘One minute she is announcing to the entire dinner table I am *très, très belle* and the next I’m being shunned to get more glasses for the dessert wine.’

‘You are *très, très belle*,’ Théo said. He swam close enough to wrap my legs around his waist, holding us both up in the water.

‘But does she *like* me, Théo?’

‘If she did really ask you to help with her vegetable garden today, then she must like you very much.’

‘I thought it might be a test. Like, if I picked a lemon off the tree before it was ripe, I’d fail, but if I pulled a radish out of the ground the right way, I’d pass.’

‘It might still be a test,’ he said. ‘But one you are lucky to take.’

‘I’ll make sure to look up what produce is in season before we get back to the house.’

‘You cannot pull a radish out of the ground the wrong way, just so you know.’

‘Noted.’

As I was playing with the slick hair at the nape of his neck, Théo asked, with a little nervous quiver, ‘Would your parents like me?’

‘You’re punctual. Mum likes anyone who’s on time.’

‘And your dad?’

‘He, um—’ I nearly admitted my secret right there, wrapped up in sea water and Théo. The confession was going to splutter from my mouth, messy and ridden with guilt. *There’s only one parent you need to impress. Dad’s six-feet-under and I’d need a Ouija board to introduce you to him.*

It was getting harder to not tell Théo. He’d shared so much with me—his home, his family, his fears—and in return I was keeping an important part of myself hidden away.

‘He’ll love you.’ It wasn’t a lie. Not completely.

A few months before he’d died, I’d asked my dad what kind of person he’d like me to end up with. Our conversations had started to revolve around future proofing. Things like making sure I took out a life insurance policy by the time I had kids or turned thirty, whichever came first.

I’d hoped for a steadfast checklist for the most Dad-approved partner. Something I could tick off after first dates and use as an excuse not to see a guy again. Like:

(1) Is overly nice to waitstaff.

(2) Can talk at length about at least one historical event (bonus points if it’s World War II).

(3) Makes you laugh.

Instead, he’d just given me two words: kind and cheerful. *Is that it?* I’d asked. *That’s it,* he said. *That’s all you need.*

I’d found it in Théo—kind and cheerful (and also overly nice to waitstaff)—without even realising. My dad had been right. He was always infuriatingly on the money. No checklist would stand a chance against the smiles Théo gave me, or the kindness he radiated. I’d chose this over someone who could deliver a good joke any day.

‘Yeah?’ Théo said, hope flickering in his eyes.

‘Yeah,’ I said. Guilt was so leaden in my stomach I could have sunk to the seabed and burrowed myself deep into the sand.

I couldn't sleep that night.

There was a suffocating ache in my chest as I watched Théo get ready for bed. As he brushed his teeth in front of the mirror, my heart grew a little bigger; as he filled up a glass of water for me and placed it on the table to the right side of the bed, my heart grew a little bigger; as he stripped down to his briefs, my heart grew a little bigger. By the time we were under the covers, my heart was so full, so heavy with love, that I thought I might throw up.

At around one in the morning, I lifted Théo's arm from where it lay draped across my belly and slipped out of the bed.

I watched him for a moment, sleeping without me. He was splayed across most of the mattress, his legs falling off the sides, face all soft and squished up against the pillow, and wondered where I had just fit. He'd go back to having the bed all to himself, and I'd shove myself back into my single size dorm mattress and wonder how I ever slept without someone's arms around me.

This late at night every room of the Augustine house was so still in silence I could hear the staircase steps creak under my weight, and the slide of my feet against the tile as I made my way towards the kitchen. During the day, it was alive with noise. Overlapping conversations in lightening-speed French; vinyl records playing loudly in the garden; pots and pans clanging in the kitchen before and after every mealtime.

I had the (idealistic) hope that I glass of water might rinse my body of all its guilt and help me get to sleep. I'd sit in the spotlessly clean kitchen and sip at lukewarm water until my eyes were heavy and head too cloudy to think of anything but closing my eyes and having a dreamless sleep.

As I got closer to the ajar door, I heard the quietest hum of music. Sylvie Vartan, like we'd listened to during dinner at Céleste's request.

I poked my head in first to check I wasn't interrupting anything and saw Céleste sitting alone at the kitchen table. Her long hair was pulled up into a mop of a bun on top of her head and a pair of comically large, thick framed glasses rested on the bridge of her nose. She was flicking through the pages of a magazine, sipping at a glass of wine at the same time.

I knocked lightly on the door before slipping through into the room.

'Freya,' Céleste said. She placed her glass down onto the table. 'What are you doing up?'

'Couldn't sleep,' I said. 'What about you?'

‘Night owl,’ she explained. ‘It is the only time there is any quiet around here. Even Henry talks in his sleep.’

Céleste’s craving for quiet seemed bizarre to me. I’d only ever had quiet in my homes. No siblings playing videogames in the bedroom next to mine, or parents fighting, or dinner pans loudly clanging. I was all too familiar with the still, silent kind of house that occasionally had the TV humming in the background or the patter of a computer keyboard. I craved a loud home like the Augustine’s. I wanted people talking at me while I watched TV, a kitchen that never closed, and a record player that perpetually played music.

‘I’ll leave you be. I just came down for a glass of water.’ I shuffled over to the sink, keeping to a dawdling pace as though if I walked any faster, I’d wake myself up more than I already was.

‘*Non, non.* It is okay.’ She gestured at the seat next to her, already slightly pushed out from the table. ‘Sit. Have a glass of wine.’

‘I probably shouldn’t. I think I’m still tipsy from dinner,’ I said. Maxime had opened half a dozen bottles, intending to teach me how to tell the difference between white wine varietals.

‘It is red wine,’ Céleste said, holding up a half-full bottle. ‘It will help you sleep.’

I relented, picking a glass from the open shelf where they all sat.

‘It is lovely to have you here, Freya,’ Céleste said as she poured the wine. ‘I hope we are not too scary.’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘Quite the opposite. You’re all so lovely.’

‘Do you think?’ She raised an eyebrow at me, more manicured and thinner than Théo’s. ‘You can tell me the truth.’

‘That is truth. I swear it. I’ve always envied family dynamics like yours.’

‘How do you mean?’ She leaned in and rested her elbows on the table.

‘The people everywhere, talking over each other, running about the house. It’s so... lively. I’m an only child, and my parents divorced when I was eight, so most of the time, it was just me and Mum *or* Dad. Never the three of us.’

‘Ah.’ She nodded with as much understanding as she could give. Solitude, as she’d said, was a rare thing in the Augustine house. ‘You go back soon, yes?’

‘Uh-huh,’ I mumbled over a sip of my wine. I couldn’t admit to my leaving with my whole chest.

‘To law school, Théo tells me.’

‘Uh-huh.’ I take another sip of my wine.



‘Do you like it?’

A monosyllabic hum wasn’t possible in answer to this question. ‘I’m good at it.’

‘My English is not the best, but I know the difference between “good” and “like”.’

‘I’m still wrapping my head around the *aimer* conjugation,’ I said.

‘Should we practice, then?’ She asked the next question before I could answer. ‘*L’aimez-vous?*’

‘*Non*,’ I answered in French. For me, there was no room to hide in this foreign language. I knew so little of it that I had to be as simple as possible. *Do you like it?* had only one possible answer for me in French, and it was *no*.

Cèleste sat back in her chair and clasped her hands in her lap. ‘I think you understand the *aimer* conjugation perfectly well.’

The music hummed in the background, a white noise that soundtracked the silence between Cèleste and I. She had her eyes closed and was softly swaying her head in line with the melody, whispering the lyrics—something about a river and a father—like a prayer.

When the song drew to an end, Cèleste opened her eyes and said, ‘You look a little like Sylvie Vartan.’ Her head cocked slightly to the side, appraising me like a painting.

‘I’m not familiar with her,’ I said. ‘Is that a compliment?’

‘*Big* compliment,’ Cèleste said. ‘I always wanted to look like her when I was young, but *maman* would not let me dye my hair blonde.’

‘And there’s no rebelling against Marie,’ I said.

‘No.’ Cèleste laughed. ‘There is not.’

She looked down into the dregs of wine dwindling at the bottom of her wine glass, a sombre look colouring her face. ‘Is he painting again?’ she asked, softly. Worried.

My eyebrows pulled together in confusion. ‘You know about that?’

‘Of course I know about that. He thinks I do not, but I figured it out quickly after he stopped. It is cliché, but a mother always knows.’

‘What gave him away?’ I asked.

‘He used to always paint when he came home. He would set up an easel and canvas in the garden, and paint. He was going to paint every inch of the garden. And then, he stopped.’

I could see him everywhere in the garden: sitting by the field of lavender, detailing every sprig; lounged by the pool, trying to capture the movement of the water; on the bench in his grandmother’s vegetable patch, eating an apple while he stippled every speck of dirt.

I wondered whether I could share the truth with Cèleste. Maybe it was safer for him to tell me—the girl who would leave with his secret—than to tell his Mum.

‘He’s not painting,’ I answered. ‘Sketching, tattooing. But not painting.’

‘Pity,’ Céleste said. ‘I thought, with you around, he might be inspired again.’

‘I’ve not acquired “muse” status just yet.’

‘He talks to you about it?’ she asked.

‘He told me the other day,’ I said.

‘*Bon*. Good. At least he is talking about it.’

He’d had the courage to tell me the one thing he hadn’t told anyone else. He’d kept his painting (or lack thereof) a secret for five years, disappointed in himself for not having enough courage to stick to it, and yet had admitted it to me after only three weeks.

Who was I to deserve his honesty when I couldn’t be honest in return? Another knot tied itself to the web of guilt wrapped tight around my conscience.

‘I’m sure he’ll paint again,’ I said, like it might offer Céleste some comfort. ‘Whenever he’s ready.’

‘I am not worried. I have materials in the house waiting for him to start again when he wants to. Someday.’ She smiled to herself. ‘I have nearly every painting he has ever done, you know?’

‘I bet he’s always been talented.’

‘I think so,’ she said. ‘But I *am* his mother.’

‘He’s not showed me any of his painting yet.’ He’d described it: ordinary, domestic scenes where he puts all the colour he doesn’t have in his apartment. I itched to see what it looked like when he put paint to canvas.

‘I am sure he will,’ she said, mirroring what I had just said to her. ‘Whenever he is ready.’

We washed our wine-stained glasses next to each other, Céleste elbow deep in sudsy water, me polishing the glasses dry. She walked me up to Théo’s room with her arm linked in mine and said *bonne nuit* with a soft squeeze to my cheek.

Back in bed, my heart still aching against the cage of my chest, I slipped my feet between Théo’s calves. He was hot as a furnace; I was cold as ice. Suddenly I was seven years old again and cuddled against my dad as he read me a bedtime story, my little feet tucked between his calves to keep them warm.

On our last night in Marseille, we sat down for dinner early. It was a slow Sunday, where the sun seemed to set a little slower, the breeze practically placid, and the weather a tepid temperature.

I set the table with Cèleste, draping it with a large white tablecloth, lighting the candlesticks, and placing a wine glass and plate at each setting. Marie made a vegetable quiche with produce from her garden. Maxime brought out a white wine and declared it his favourite. Henry had a deck of cards sat beside his plate, intending to force us all into a game of ‘Oh Hell’ after dessert (would it be *Oh, L’enfer!* in French? I didn’t make it far enough into the dinner to find out).

I wanted to suspend the weekend in time. I wanted Théo’s family around me, him across from me, and that smile on his face, forever. I wanted to stay in my France bubble where my dad was still alive, existing somewhere else in the world, and wasn’t gone. A world where I had found the courage to break into the dinner time conversation, and info dump to Henry about the book I was reading and tell Maxime (with bated breath and a *désolée* ready to go) I didn’t really like the taste of white wine.

*Are you okay?* Théo mouthed to me across the table, his smile still lingering after laughing at something his father said.

I nodded, unconvincingly. Tears were piercing at my eyes like shards of glass.

His smile fell away, and he mouthed *Really?* at me.

I couldn’t lie one more time. It was like I’d reached my quota. There was no keeping my secret from Théo anymore. I knew I had to tell him. And in telling him, I had to admit to myself that my dad wasn’t back in Melbourne, sitting in his brown leather recliner, pouring over a dense history book. Telling him meant letting in every moment of grief I had shoved down for the last ten months, under coursework and readings, under planes and French wine. Telling him meant admitting I had lied, and that I had kept part of myself from him when he’d shared everything, including his family, with me.

I pushed back out of my chair so quickly it fell on the grass behind me. Maxime was so shocked by the sudden movement he knocked his wine over.

‘Excuse me. I’m just gonna—’ was what I rushed out as I tried to leave the table. Maxime sat on one side, Cèleste on the other. I had to practically jump over my felled chair to get away.

‘Freya? Is everything OK?’ Cèleste asked, in a comforting tone that made me want to tell the truth. *No, nothing is fine. I’m a liar. I’m about to hurt your son.*

I had the vague feeling that Théo followed me as I aimlessly tramped through the maze of garden, trying to find somewhere hidden away to recoup and catch my breath. To stall the tears I had no control over, that ran down my cheeks like flooded rivers.

I stopped in Marie’s vegetable patch, pacing around overgrown pumpkins and ducking under lemons which drooped down from one of the citrus trees.

I thought I had left all this at home. I thought my grief could be suspended in a place, in the city limits of Melbourne, and not follow me to the other side of the world. But my grief found me in a vegetable patch in Marseille, pacing between cucumbers and kale. It would follow me across countries, and span across my lifetime.

‘Freya,’ came Théo’s voice, like an anchor settling me in rough seas.

He tried to step closer, his hand reaching out to touch mine, and I flinched away.

‘Something is wrong,’ he said. ‘And you will not tell me what.’

‘Do I have to tell you?’ My words felt mean and bitter against Théo’s kind and caring ones.

‘Why would you not? I will listen to it. Whatever it is.’

I looked at him like it was the last time. I committed his deep-set caramel eyes, now marred with worry, to memory. I ran my gaze along his tattooed arms and tucked each artwork away like a souvenir. I saw the way I’d kiss him, if I was given one last chance: softly, tenderly, and holding his face to mine for as long as possible.

I could lie again. He might believe me if I said I missed my family and being around his just made it worse. I could let this fling be untouched by reality and suspend it in my mind—and his—like a rose-tinted memory. But I knew I loved him too much to lie, and if he were to know me, he needed to know the whole truth. Even if it revealed me as a liar.

‘My dad is dead.’ Paris bubble: popped.

‘*Pardon?*’ Théo was confused. He stepped forward to console me, but I flinched away. ‘When, *mon chou*? What happened? Are you okay?’

‘He has been for months now.’ I couldn’t look at him when I said it. ‘He died in September last year after a two years with lung cancer.’

‘But you—’ Always spoke about him in the present tense. Never corrected Théo when he assumed my dad was alive.

‘I know.’

‘Why did you not...?’ I dared a glimpse at him and saw him run a hasty hand through his hair, messing it up perfectly and making him even harder to look at. ‘You did not tell me. You could have told me.’

It felt sacrilegious to fight somewhere so beautiful. I may as well have stamped on the pumpkins, shoved a handful of strawberries into my mouth, crushed lemons between my hands, and teared at leaves of lettuce with my teeth. I didn’t want to cry in front of the tomatoes. I felt like my tears would fall like acid rain into the soil and rot the produce.

‘I didn’t want to tell you,’ I said.

‘Why?’ he said. He didn’t look mad at me. Disappointed, maybe. Betrayed. Things so much worse than anger. ‘Why would you not tell me? Why would you *lie*?’

Of course, in Théo’s world, there was no reason to lie. Withhold the truth, sure, but actively lie? That didn’t make any sense. His family was proof of his candour. Every thought was shared in the Augustine household; no one went to the bathroom without letting the others know.

‘Because I wanted a break from my grief. I feel like I carry it around like a neon sign: *grieving daughter: beware!* Everyone looks at me differently when they know. They see Freya with the dead dad and decide I’m all fragile and will cry whenever death is mentioned, or a dad is spoken of. I didn’t want you to see me like that, especially because this was only ever supposed to be—’

‘What was it supposed to be, *mon chou*?’ The term of endearment was sour, and its bitterness stung in my chest.

These next words were the nail in the coffin. ‘Casual. A fling. *No expectations.*’

Théo huffed out a laugh of disbelief. ‘No expectations, yes. No expectation for you to *have sex with me*. I never agreed to casual, Freya. I never agreed to not fall in love with you.’

I winced when he said it. *Why did he have to say it?* I could have ignored it if he never said it. I could have gaslit myself into thinking all summer flings involved feelings this big, this monumental, and that it had been nothing special.

‘I do not know how you can do what we did and think it was a *fling*. The photobooth. The park. *Putain*, the best sex of our lives. You can do all of that and leave?’

I would leave dragging my feet. But I would leave all the same.

‘I was always going to leave.’

That bleeding heart he wore so proudly on his sleeve, being dealt blow after blow. And mine, shoved away in a dust covered box, thinking it would be better to hide part of me away than share it.

I was no better than Juliette. I'd kissed him, listened to him, *loved* him, for three weeks and yet always planned to leave. I knew when my scheduled flight came around, I'd get on that plane, just like Juliette knew when she didn't have to mentor Théo anymore that she'd dump him. What a cruel kind of déjà vu.

'You will go back to Australia, to the degree you hate, and leave me here?'

'I have to go back, Théo.' He flinched at the sound of his name.

'Tell me why you have to leave,' he said.

'This is stupid, Théo. You know what I'm going back for.'

'Tell me why,' he repeated. 'Say it out loud.'

He knew I hated every time I had to say it. It was as though the more I said it, the more it cemented my life in a path I didn't want to be on.

'Law school,' I said. It felt like such a wobbly reason. Choosing law school, the thing I hated, over Théo, the person I loved. And I did love him. I knew it, right then, as I ruined it.

'You hate law school,' he said.

'I didn't tell you I disliked my degree so you could use it against me.'

'But it is the truth.'

'I promised I'd go,' I said.

'You promised who, Freya?' He knew the answer.

'I promised my dad.'

*A hospice bed. The acceptance email. The proud squeeze of his hand. You're going to law school, Freya.*

He nodded, tears in his eyes now, too.

'I love you, Freya,' Théo said. Steady, sure, and riddled with earnestness. 'That is *my* promise to *you*. That is the truth that I would never keep from you.'

He hesitated a step forward, and I hoped for a moment he might give me one last kiss. But he took two steps back instead and made the few feet between us seem like miles.

'But I will not only love you for three weeks. That was never going to be enough time, and I think you know this.'

I reached to touch him. 'Théo—' He held a hand up at me, signalling to stay away.

'So leave,' he said. I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. I nearly double over from the wave of nausea but stayed standing as best I could. 'Like you have to. Like you *want* to. And act like this never happened. I will try to do the same.'

He left me standing in the vegetable patch, watching him walk off and fade into the greenery like a mirage.

As I was shoving my clothes back into my duffel bag, eyes blind with tears, a knock sounded at Théo's bedroom door. My head jerked so quickly in the hope it was Théo that I had a momentary bout of whiplash.

It was Cèleste instead, leant against the doorframe with a sorry smile on her face.

'Not Théo,' said Céleste. 'I came say you should not go. Not tonight.' She picked up a stray shirt of mine that was hanging of the edge of the bed and folded it delicately in her hands.

'You can leave early tomorrow. Stay in the lounge room. The couch is comfortable.'

'It's ok,' I said, as confidently as I could. 'I want to go now.'

'You are sure? It is late, and I worry it is not safe.'

I looked to where she stood, her hand outstretched and passing me my shirt. She folded like my mum: better than me.

'I can't, Cèleste.'

She must have heard the guilt in my voice and known if she asked me once more to stay, I would have buckled and laid on their family couch wide awake if that was what Cèleste thought best. Rather than push me, she said, 'Let me drive you to the station, then.'

'You don't have to,' I said, looking away from her. I couldn't stomach seeing even a hint of Théo in his mother's face.

'No taxi will get you at this time,' she said.

I had no choice but to accept. 'Okay.'

'The last train leaves at nine. It is a slow one. You will be on it for hours.'

'That's fine,' I said. Felt like fitting punishment. 'I'll sleep on the train.'

She helped me pack the rest of my bag, folding my clothes a lot neater than I'd bothered to, and then carried it down to the car for me.

When we were minutes away from the train station, I had the impulse to say to Cèleste, 'I'm sorry.'

She briefly looked away from the road to a glimpse at me. 'What are you saying sorry for?'

'For hurting him.'

She took a moment to respond, turning into the lane that would take us as close to the station entrance as possible. After she put the car in park, she said, 'It does not feel like it now, but heartbreak can be a good thing.'

I tried to believe her. But in the thick of it, the only thing heartbreak felt like was *shit*. Like someone had punched a hole right through my chest. Or had a wrench clamped around my heart and was twisting each cavity apart.

‘*Au revoir*, Freya.’ She leant across the console to give me a kiss on either cheek. ‘I hope to see you again.’



I spent close to three days travelling from Marseille to Melbourne. Twelve hours on the slow train back to Paris. Three hours sat in a café on the phone to my travel agent back home trying to move my flight to an earlier date. Seven hours sat in Charles-de-Gaulle airport waiting for said rescheduled flight. Thirteen hours on a plane to Singapore stuck between a man-spreader and a blabbermouth. Six hours in Singapore airport trying to sleep while concurrently charging my phone and making sure no one stole my bag. Eight hours to Melbourne in a prayed-for window seat. One hour in a silent taxi ride back to Mum's house in Prahran.

I'd once liked the liminality of an airport, where nothing felt real, and time suspended around you. Beers could be drunk at 9 AM, water could be justifiably priced at eight dollars a bottle, naps could be taken in McDonald's cafeterias. But I felt every second of my journey home. It took me ten minutes to read one sentence of my book with any coherence. I vomited up a bacon egg McMuffin in the Singapore airport fifteen minutes after eating it, nearly blasting my face with bidet water. The film I watched on the plane was supposed to only last for one hour and fifty-four minutes but took me three hours to get through. The rain sounds that usually helped me fall asleep sounded like ringing in my ears.

When I knocked on my mum's door—7 AM Melbourne time—she'd gasped at the sight of me. Not because she was surprised to see me on her doorstep (I'd texted her my ETA), but because I looked like a total mess. My ponytail had given up, with the hair tie holding on for dear life at the nape of my neck. I was still wearing the linen dress I'd put on for dinner at the Augustine house, but pulled on a pair of leggings underneath and had bought an extra-large hoodie in the Paris airport to hide myself away in. I had pimples popping up on my chin from how much I'd been touching my face, and my lips were chapped because I lost my lip balm down the side of my airplane seat.

'Have you slept?' was the first thing Mum asked me.

'Only about an hour,' I answered.

'Bed. Now.' She ushered me into my old room, put eucalyptus rub all over my chest like I was a snotty toddler, and placed a massive glass of multivitamin water next to the bed. I fell asleep the second my head hit the pillow and didn't wake up for sixteen hours.

Adjusting back into my Melbourne life was like trying to squeeze into a pair of jeans that didn't fit anymore. I was supposed to move back into halls the following week but couldn't bring myself to do it if it meant Quinn and Maia weren't down the hall from me. Instead, I moved back into my bedroom at Mum's place, which she'd redecorated to have powder blue

walls and bed linens with such intense flowers patterns you could get hay fever just from sleeping under them.

My semester two subjects included: Constitutional Law (yawn), Contracts (bore), Disputes and Ethics (snooze worthy) and Legal Theory (worked better than a tranquilizer). The tutor for my Contracts class kept asking if I had a clerkship lined up yet, and if I'd consider the law firm he worked for. The tutor for my Disputes and Ethics class came up to me after the first tutorial and asked, 'Is Andrew Davis of any relation to you?' I'd said yes, he was my father, and the man had said, 'I read his vale in the law society bulletin. I'm sorry to hear of his passing. He was a brilliant lawyer.'

When I got home, I searched up the law society bulletin and read the vale an old friend of my dad's had written. I cried into the silk pillowcase Mum insisted I sleep on.

Late at night, I looked at articles titled 'What Not to Do When Grieving' in the hopes I hadn't done any of the listed behaviours, but realised, instead, that I was a prime perpetrator.

*Don't isolate yourself from those who want to support you.*

*Don't make any irrational decisions.*

*Do not avoid the pain you feel.*

When I woke up from dreams about Théo, disoriented and sure I'd made him and his caramel eyes up in my head, I would pull out the photobooth picture strip and stare at the snaps of us making out. His hands had been in my hair. I'd kissed those lips. I'd felt him hard under me.

I tried to convince myself that leaving Théo didn't feel similar to losing my dad. I made losing arguments every time.

I told Maia and Quinn that I'd left Paris after I'd arrived back in Melbourne. It was the longest I'd ever kept something from them.

back in melbs. told théo re: dead dad. did not go well, was my first message.

You got on a plane without telling us? Maia texted.

when did you get back???? Quinn texted.

wednesday night.

What do you mean by "did not go well"??? Maia replied.

is it thursday in aus now? Quinn asked.

I replied to Maia: crying, harsh words, told to leave. Then I replied to Quinn: yeah, early morning.

They then started shooting through every question that came to mind:

Maia: What kind of harsh words?

Quinn: are you still talking to him?

Maia: How did you tell him?

Quinn: where did you tell him?

Maia: Weren't you at his parents' house? Did they see/hear the fight?

Quinn: was he an asshole?

Maia: Yeah, was he an asshole?

Quinn: I know how to punch. My all-girls school made me take a self-defence class in Year 10.

Maia: Because why teach men not to assault women when you could give fifteen-year-old girls martial arts qualifications?

Quinn: how did you get a flight home so quickly? did it bankrupt you?

Maia: What airline did you fly? Was the food good? Where was your layover?

i'll answer all your questions when we call next, I replied. it's too hard to type it all out. When can we call? Maia asked.

It was a week later when we finally coordinated a call. I stayed up until one in the morning so I could talk to them.

'Tell us what happened,' were Maia's first words to me.

'Every detail,' Quinn seconded.

The fight had been rolling through my head on loop like a horror movie. I wanted the film to go up in flames so I'd never have to watch my mistake ever again.

'It all sounds so stupid when I talk about it.'

'Try,' Maia said.

So I told them about how I'd been sat at dinner watching Théo all bright and happy, and felt so sick about not telling him about my dad that I vomited out the truth in the vegetable patch. I told them that I called our relationship a fling, and Théo got offended and then told me he loved me.

'He said *what?*' Quin said, mouth agape.

'That he loved me. That he wouldn't only love me for three weeks,' I repeated.

'Jeez,' Maia said. 'He just outright admitted it?'

'Yep.'

'Do *you* love him?' Quinn asked.

'Yes,' I said, entirely sure. 'There's no other way I could describe my feelings for him.'

When I first felt love for Théo, it felt familiar. Like déjà vu. I'd watched him potter through the fresh food market, hand-phone up to his ear pretending to be one of my best friends,

and realised I'd felt love just like this before—for Maia, for Quinn, for my dad—and now I felt it for him. He'd nuzzled his way into my heart.

I knew I would keep loving him whether I was with him or not, just like I kept loving my dad even though he wasn't alive anymore.

'And now it's a total shit show,' Quinn said. I shoved my face deep into my pillow and groaned *I know*.

Maia was silent on her end of the line. I knew what she wanted to say.

'Say it,' I said to Maia.

'Say what?' she said.

'That you told me so.'

'Did she tell you so?' Quinn asked me.

'She did.'

'Damn,' Quinn said. 'It's so annoying when Maia's right.'

'I'm always right,' Maia said.

'That's why it's annoying,' Quinn said.

'Please tell me you told me so,' I said. 'I need my stupidity reimposed on me.'

'I did tell you to tell him,' Maia said to me.

'You did. You told me I'd feel guilty, and you were right.'

Maia nodded, silently accepting her win.

'Why didn't you want to tell him, anyway?' Quinn asked. 'I know you don't talk about it with us much but... Is it so scary to tell someone about your dad?'

'It's not *scary* to tell someone so much as it's hard,' I said. 'Like, gauging how people react can be so draining. And I never know how to respond. Like, do I say "thank you" for their condolences? Or say, "It's all good!" to try and diffuse the situation? It's all so exhausting.'

'I'd never thought about that,' Quinn said, voice quiet.

'I just—' I took a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. I'd never articulated these feelings very well. 'I wanted a break from my grief. I didn't want Théo to see me any differently, because everyone does once they know. Especially people with big, beautiful families like his. It's like an equation that just doesn't compute, and practically short circuits their brains. They act like I'm a delicate piece of China hanging off the edge of a table about to break.'

The girls were silent for a moment. I knew in admitting this, I sort of indicted them, too. There was no one I was more open to, more delicate with, than my friends.

'Do we make you feel like that?' Maia asked.

I paused before admitting, 'Sometimes.'

'Just sometimes?' Quinn asked.

'Only sometimes,' I said.

Mostly, they made me feel supported. From sleeping on the floor in my room the night of my dad's funeral, to going all the way to Europe with me, there was nothing short of a miracle they wouldn't do for me.

'So, it's kind of our fault, then,' Maia said.

'What do you mean?' I said.

'Well, if we'd never made you feel fragile in the first place, you wouldn't have been worried Théo would treat you the same way.'

'No,' I said, resolutely. 'I won't let you take any blame. All you've done is try support me in the best way you know how. I mean, who the fuck knows what to do when a friend's parent dies? I'd probably act the exact same way if it were either of you in my shoes.'

'You'd sleep on my bedroom floor for me?' Quinn said.

'Duh,' I said.

'Go along with my elaborate plan to go on holiday on the other side of the world?' Maia said.

'Of course,' I said.

'I'll hold you to that,' Quinn said.

'Me too,' Maia said.

We smiled down our cameras at each other for a beat.

'So you love him, but you're never going to see him again?' Maia asked.

Put so blankly, it sounded absurd.

'I guess so,' I said.

'You're just going to stay in Melbourne, do your law degree, and try get over him?' Maia said.

'I mean, yeah. That's *literally* what I'm trying to do.'

Maia sighed dramatically. 'Do we need to have the law school conversation?'

'What law school conversation?' I said.

'The one about how you hate it,' Quinn said.

'How do you know that? I've never told either of you I hate it.'

'It's palpable,' Maia said.

'We see the full body shudders when someone says any legal jargon,' Quinn said.

‘And while you don’t say you *hate* it, you do say that public law *sucks*, and that Torts *blows*, and that the constitution—’

I cut Maia off. ‘Ok, yes, I complain about it.’

‘Endlessly,’ Quinn said.

‘You know why I’m going, though,’ I said.

Both nodded a yes.

‘But we also want you to know that there’s nothing wrong with *not* going,’ Maia said. ‘It’s not giving up. It’s not defaulting on a promise. He’d love you whether you were a lawyer or not.’

I missed them, in their stupid Greenwich Mean and European Standard time zones. In the stupid northern hemisphere. I wanted them down the hall from me again just as much as I wanted them to see the world and live voraciously.

‘I love you guys,’ I said, all sentimental and gooey.

‘Bleh—’ Quinn fake gagged.

‘Listen to me, Quinn Harrington—

‘Oh, the full name. That’s serious,’ Maia said.

‘You too, Maia Comelli.’ I pointed at my camera. ‘You two mean the world to me, and I’m so lucky to have you.’

‘We’re like a throuple,’ Quinn said.

‘How do loves-of-our-lives fit into this throuple equation?’ Maia said.

‘You’re the loves of my life,’ I said. ‘*You’re* the equation *they* have to fit into.’

‘Lucky we like Théo, then,’ Maia said.

We stayed on the line until it was evening for them and early morning for me. We said goodbye with I-love-yous and promises to call again. I hung up the phone and grateful I had these women in my life.

Three weeks after returning home, my mum decided it was time to sort through my dad's things. She woke me up at 7 AM on a Saturday morning, a coffee in hand, and said that checking his mailbox once a week wasn't good enough anymore (because, even in death, some companies won't leave you alone). I had to enter the premises.

Though Mum had gone to Dad's house every now and then to make sure the surfaces weren't covered in dust an inch thick, everything in the house was stuck in time. It could have been a couple of months before he died, when he was still relatively mobile and self-sufficient, and I was just popping over for dinner. The couch still had pillows astray; the TV remote was where he always put it on the coffee table. I could still see the indent of him on the recliner, the coffee mugs he favoured, the side of the bed he slept on (even after thirteen years divorced, he didn't like sleeping on Mum's left side of the bed).

'Okay?' Mum said after I made it into the living room.

'Yeah,' I said. It wasn't as overwhelming as I thought it would be. Comforting, almost, to be somewhere my dad still half-existed. Like I could close my eyes and hear his footsteps heavy on the hallway floorboards.

'I'm going to start in the kitchen. Crockery, cutlery and kitchenware,' she said. She beelined straight to the cupboard which housed all of Dad's expensive wine glasses. 'These are coming home with me. He would have wanted them to go to good use.'

We had three categories: keep, sell, chuck. My mum was whatever the opposite of a hoarder was, so, to her, most things fell into the 'chuck' category. The Eames chair? Chuck it. The gold cufflinks he got for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday? Bin them.

I was an advocate for the 'sell' category, so Facebook Marketplace and I became well acquainted over the weekend. I listed his living room couch, his fridge, his extensive collection of ties. Most of his earthly possessions—down to the knives and forks in his top kitchen drawer—ended up getting a second life with someone. It felt much better than putting them in the skip we hired.

Dad hadn't owned that much stuff, and by Sunday night, we'd cleared out almost everything except his study, which I'd left for last.

His study was the place he spent the most time. It was all function with no form: a big glass desk facing the window, a bookshelf straining under the weight of hardcover books, and an eyesore of a filing cabinet full of old school reports, expired passports, and insurance policy details.

Little parts of him were wedged into every crevice of the room. I found a book about World War II which had been read so much the cover had fallen off. His desk had a junk draw where he kept receipts, an old wallet, random keys (can you throw out a key?), forgotten business cards. In lieu of a cellar, there were bottles of red wine tucked away in the bottom of the bookcase. One was signed, another in a tin box, one which had been half-drunk. And in a picture frame, right next to his computer monitor, was a picture of me, aged eight, in Monet's Garden. Leaves in my hair, flowers behind my ears, and a big grin across my face.

I wondered how much of my recollection of Giverny was tied to my dad's memory of it. Did I only remember the leaves in my hair, and the flowers behind my ears, because this photo had sat next to my dad's computer screen for thirteen years, looking at me each time I foraged through his desk for spare cash in high school, or came in and asked for help with my homework? Had I made it important to me because it was important to him, just like I had with law school?

So much of myself was an extension of my dad, down to the way I bit at my nails and my preference for blue pens. I liked thinking that I was his epilogue, an extension of his story. But in being that, I'd disregarded the choices *I'd* make, the person *I* wanted to be, in the hopes I'd remain someone he would recognise.

I kept forgetting my life was happening right in front of me.

I kept forgetting that autonomy wasn't some untouchable concept, but something I could actively have.

I grabbed one of the bottles of wine—whatever looked the most expensive—and decided to go and talk to my mum.

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Mum was sitting in Dad's recliner, flicking through her phone. Facebook videos played at a criminally loud volume while she doom-scrolled. I walked up to her, bottle in hand, and said, 'I think we deserve a glass.'

'I remember when he bought that,' she said when she saw the bottle. 'Said he'd give it to you on your thirtieth birthday.'

I turned the bottle in my hand and read the label. It was a vintage from the year I was born.

'Why thirty?' I said, sitting on a left-over kitchen stool. 'Doesn't eighteen or twenty-one make more sense?'



Mum shook her head no. ‘He said you wouldn’t appreciate it if you were that young. Thirty meant he’d had enough time to refine your palette.’

‘Pretentious of him,’ I said.

‘These things are hereditary,’ Mum quipped. I scoffed, and clutched at my heart like being called pretentious wasn’t almost a compliment to me. ‘Let’s open it.’

I hesitated. ‘Don’t you think I should keep it until I’m thirty? Respect his wishes? I’ll go get one of the others.’

‘Pfft,’ Mum huffed. ‘Who knows what’ll happen before then?’

She went to the box where she’d stashed away Dad’s good wine glasses and pulled out two. In the same box, she’d also managed to steal an expensive corkscrew Dad had felt guilty about spending so much money on.

‘Do we decant it?’ I asked.

Mum shrugged. ‘I’m sure it will be fine.’

‘Dad is rolling in his grave.’

‘He was cremated, sweetheart.’

It was a heavy red—not my speed—and I had to Google the aromas Dad would have gone on about: blackcurrant, cedar, and spice. Aged in an American oak barrel for 14 months. He was right that I wouldn’t have appreciated it until I was older than my early twenties, but I tried my hardest to enjoy it and its tannin structure.

‘Mum,’ I said, breaking the silence between us.

She hummed a *yes?* into the bowl of her glass.

‘Hypothetically, let’s say I wasn’t liking law school, and the thought of dropping out had crossed my mind... How would you react?’

‘Is this really a hypothetical?’ she asked.

‘Not completely,’ I said.

‘Why don’t you ask me and find out how I’d react, then?’ she said.

‘Okay,’ I said. I rearranged myself on the stool and said *for real* this time: ‘I don’t really like law school, Mum.’

‘I know you don’t.’

My eyebrows snapped together in confusion. ‘Huh? What do you mean “you know”?’

‘I mean that I’ve seen you, for the past few weeks, come home from university absolutely miserable. And I remember, when you were applying for the degree, how much you procrastinated submitting your application. And I was there, in high school, when you managed

to convince your father to let you do an undergraduate arts degree to—’ She pulled out the air quotes. ‘—give you an *all-rounded educational basis to support a postgraduate qualification.*’

‘Has it really always been that obvious?’ I asked.

‘To everyone but your father, yes. I’ve talked to Maia and Quinn about it extensively.’

My mum often forgot that she occupied the role of mother and often veered into friend territory. Maybe it was because she had frequent breaks from parenting me and lost the groove of it.

‘You talk to my friends when I’m not around?’

Mum ignored me and kept talking. ‘God, I’m still furious at your father for pushing the law thing.’

‘How can you still be mad at him?’ I said. ‘He’s not even here to be mad at.’

‘Death doesn’t get rid of the emotions, Freya. It just removes the person you would usually direct them to.’ She reached over and squeezed my hand briefly before continuing. ‘*Anyway.* When I was visiting him in the hospice—’

‘You visited him in the hospice?’

‘Of course I did. I was married to the man for ten years. Like I said, feelings don’t ever just disappear.’

I mouthed a *wow* to myself. I was learning more about my parents’ relationship than I had in all my twenty-two years. No wonder I didn’t share things—neither of my parents did either.

‘As I was saying, when I was visiting him in the hospice—this was right after you were accepted into the program—I decided I’d speak my mind. It’s hard to yell at a dying man, but not impossible.’

‘*Mum,*’ I said, my mouth agape. ‘You didn’t.’

‘I did,’ she said. ‘I told him there’s no pride in pushing your child into a certain career path.’

‘And what did he say?’ I asked.

‘Well, he rather liked being yelled at, funnily enough. Said everyone kept treading on eggshells around him and it was nice to experience some *normal* again.’

‘Because you yelling at him is the norm, obviously,’ I joked.

Mum raised her eyebrows at me. ‘Do you want to know what he said, or not?’

I shut my mouth.

‘He said he was sure you would love it, but if not, I would have bragging rights.’

‘He did not say that,’ I said.

I had a resolute idea of how he would have responded if I'd ever had the guts—or the chance—to tell him I didn't like law school. It involved yelling, and exasperated huffs, and probably the silent treatment for a few days. Not at all like how Mum described it.

'He said exactly that,' Mum said.

'You didn't think to tell me sooner?'

'I couldn't,' she said. 'After he died, you became so focused on becoming a lawyer. I didn't think there was anything I could do or say to dissuade you from it.' She sighed. 'You needed to figure it out for yourself.'

'I wish I figured it out before paying for the first semester,' I said.

'Adult decisions, adult consequences,' Mum said.

'I feel like I'm defaulting on a promise I made him,' I said. 'And he's not here to make it up to.'

'It wasn't a promise, honey. It was just the two of you trying show your love for one another. He was so adamant about you studying law because it was something he could throw all his love into, I think. It was always hard for him to show love.' She put a hand on my knee and gave it a small pat. 'Sometimes, as a parent, it is easier to think your child will be a better version of you than an entirely new person.'

I nodded to myself, overwhelmed. Accepting that the life I convinced myself I wanted wasn't going to happen anymore felt like a subset of grief. I had to mourn who I thought I wanted to be to become who I should be. I had to let myself change from the person my dad knew and loved into someone he eventually might not recognise. Whoever that might be.

'What do you want to do instead?' Mum asked. 'You don't have to have it figured out, by the way.'

'Paris,' I said without thinking. 'I want to be in Paris.'

She looked up at me, and seemed to hesitate for the briefest moment, before saying, 'You want to go back to the man you love.'

'I never told you—'

'Freya, we've established that you don't need to tell me anything for me to figure it out.'

'Fine,' I admitted. 'I love him. You figured it out. I want to be in the same city as him, even if we're not together. And if you're going to suggest I try and win him back, he won't want to be with me. I left right after he told me he loved me. I didn't say it back. I—'

'Don't put words in my mouth,' Mum said. She walked over to me and grabbed my face, squishing my cheeks together. Her attempts at physical touch as a love language were

always a little hostile. ‘Try. Talk to him. Apologise for what happened.’ I nodded. I could do that. Théo *deserved* that. ‘And maybe, if the moment calls for it, you let him know that you love him.’

‘Woah,’ I said, my words muffled. ‘Let’s take it one step at a time. Like, buying my plane ticket. Or applying for a visa. Which do I do first?’

‘You unenroll from that degree first, is what you do.’

/

I withdrew my enrolment from the Juris Law degree four hours before the census date, with my mum watching over my shoulder. Right after that, I used Ingrid’s phone number for the first time, and then booked a one-way flight to Paris.

It was the first real decision I’d ever made. One with consequences, that I might regret, which wasn’t run trial by my dad.

It was entirely mine. Good, bad, and utterly terrifying.

I was pacing on the landing in front of Théo's apartment door, murmuring to myself, *this is stupid, this is stupid, this is stupid*, when the door flung open. Just like the first night we met.

He stood in front of me—in the flesh, real and beautiful—wearing that white t-shirt and jeans uniform he lived in, but this time it was covered in paint. The stuff he hadn't touched in over five years.

'Freya?' he said. The sound of his voice sent chills through my body. My name was only ever supposed to come out of his mouth. How on earth would I ever be able to listen to some other guy say it?

'How did you know I was here?' I said.

'I did not,' he said. 'I was going to buy cigarettes.' He flashed his keys at me.

'Oh.'

'What are you doing here?' His tone was flat and emotionless. His face was still as stone.

'I was—uh—I was coming to say hello.' I was fumbling over my words like I'd just learnt to speak.

'I thought you had left Paris.'

'I did. Leave, that is. I'm back. Indefinitely.'

'You live in Paris now?'

'Yeah, I guess so.' It felt surreal to claim Paris as my home. I had a long-stay visa, which meant I had twelve months to find someone to either hire or marry me before the French government kicked me out.

'No law school?' he said, unmoving behind the threshold. He didn't want to let me in. I got that.

'Nope,' I said, looking down at my feet. 'Quit.'

'Ah.' He nodded. The air was thick with awkwardness, the silence so uncomfortable it made me squirm.

'Look, I won't make you suffer in my presence for any longer,' I said. He cocked his head in response. 'But I couldn't come back to Paris and not say sorry.'

He caught himself in the doorframe like he couldn't hold up his own bodyweight. His arms stretched out in front and above me, the tattoos on the underside of his biceps on show.

'*Pardon?*' he said.

‘I came to say sorry,’ I repeated.

‘*Ouais*, I understood that.’

‘Do you not want an apology?’

His gaze pinned me to the spot. It simmered under my skin and stripped me bare. It took off my T-shirt, pulled down my skirt, kicked off my shoes, and then peered into my beating heart. I may as well have served my soul to him on a platter.

‘You better come in, then,’ Théo said with a rasp. He reluctantly pushed himself off the door frame and stood to the side. There was only a slither of space for me to step into the apartment.

I tried not to romanticise the fact he didn’t slam the door in my face.

Théo didn’t move as I shuffled through the doorway into the apartment. Our chests grazed, my heart skipped, and I pretended I couldn’t feel his eyes on me.

The living room was a mess of art supplies. More than it had ever been when I lived there. Paint was splattered along the floorboards; jars of coloured water were littered across the kitchen island. And underneath all the paint were the memories of us. I don’t know how he lived amongst them. If it were me, every time I ate breakfast at the kitchen bench, I’d shiver with the memory of being splayed across it. Or when I went to sleep at night, I’d feel sick remembering what it was like to have him take up the left side of the bed.

I expected to look out the expansive windows—the same ones I’d been pressed up against—and see the Montmartre skyline, but shielding the light was the large blank canvas Théo kept in his room. Except it wasn’t blank anymore.

It would have been polite for me not to stare at the painting. Ignore it like it didn’t take up a large chunk of the apartment, blocking out the light and shielding the view. But I didn’t have a shred of willpower to keep me from walking towards it and intimately appraising it.

Most of the canvas was white, with carefully curated shades of ivory and eggshell that created the motions of sheets and a quilt. The linens were wrapped around the naked body of a woman, draped so you couldn’t see the curve of her breast or the dip of skin between her legs. Blonde hair whispered around her shoulders, and by her ribcage—

‘Is that...’ I knew that tattoo. I recognised the mole by her navel.

*Me.* He was painting me.

‘You,’ he said. He moved to stand beside and looked at the painting with a critical eye.

‘Me,’ I repeated, like it might help comprehend what I was seeing. ‘The night we—’ Those were *his* sheets wrapped around my body, stark white and messy after we’d slept together.

‘First had sex.’

‘Are you doing this from memory or...?’ I didn’t remember him sketching me.

‘Trying to,’ he said. ‘But, looking at you now—’ He stepped in close to me, his chest momentarily brushing against my back before doubling back and putting a respectable amount of space between us. ‘I do not think I got the creamy colour of your skin right.’

I held my bare forearm up in front of my painted body. The colour of my skin had more of a warm undertone in the painting, and I leaned cooler in real life. Ghost-like, Quinn would say.

‘Close enough,’ I said.

‘Stay there.’

I heard rustling behind me—paintbrushes clinking against glass, squirts of paint onto something—and then Théo was back at my side holding a palette with globs of white, yellow, red and blue on it. He started mixing the red and white together, then dabbing in specks of blue and yellow.

‘You’re painting again,’ I said. My arm was starting to ache. I didn’t dare move it. I’d take any brownie points I could get.

‘Like I said, I am trying to.’ He didn’t look up from his palette. ‘I am a little out of practice, as you can see.’

If this was out of practice, I could only imagine what *in* practice was. He’d painted me so well I felt I was looking in a mirror while reciting my diary. I may as well have been laying in his bed all over again, sexually sated after gorging on his body. That was what a painting did that a photo couldn’t, right? They had stories melted into their paint, and feelings forged into their brush strokes.

‘You’re painting *me*,’ I said.

‘To torture myself, I think.’

My form of torture was repeatedly scrolling through the Instagram page he had for his tattoo parlour, expecting to find a photo of him, even though I knew his grid inside out and the only glimpse of him was his hand in a photo near the beginning of his feed. I’d zoomed in on that hand. Stared at that hand. Remembered what it felt like to be touched by that hand.

‘Did I hurt you so badly you were driven back to the brush?’

Théo huffed out an unimpressed laugh. ‘Not exactly.’

I dared a lingering look at him. There was paint in his honey brown hair, and on the tip of his ear. There were deep purple bags under his eyes, and he’d gnawed at his bottom lip so much I could see the indent of his teeth still in it.

‘What was it, then? Why did you start painting again?’ Painting *me*, I wanted to add, but decided to abstain from the selfishness.

‘You have to apologise first before you get that answer.’ I saw the tiniest smile then. A flash of hope.

‘Let me apologise, then.’

‘In a minute,’ he said. To my untrained eye, the colour he was mixing looked identical to my skin tone, but he added a touch more blue to it to make it look even cooler, and *then* I struggled to tell the difference between the colour of my arm and the colour on the palette. If he swiped the paintbrush along my forearm, the paint would camouflage itself against my skin. I should get him to match my foundation for me.

‘Better, yes?’ He added a swipe of it to the canvas.

‘Better,’ I agreed. I was anxious to apologise, ready to bite my nails down to the cuticle if he didn’t let me do it soon.

He put the palette down and turned to me. I almost choked on my breath, being under his gaze again.

‘Can I apologise now?’ I stuttered out.

‘*Oui*,’ he said. ‘I am interested to hear what you think you did wrong.’

He gestured to the couch, and I tucked myself into the furthest corner of it. Théo sat so far opposite me the entire space time continuum could have fit between us.

It took me both plane rides and a lengthy layover to come up with how to apologise to Théo. As I’d walked here today, I’d repeatedly gone over it in my head.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my dad,’ was the first part of the apology. ‘I was worried about how you’d see me after I told you. I was worried you’d think I was—’

‘Fragile,’ he finished my sentence for me.

‘Yeah,’ I confirmed. This derailed my planned apology. I hadn’t expected him to *take part*.

‘You said so in the vegetable patch.’

‘I did.’ *Recalibrate, Freya*.

‘Is that what you want to apologise for? Taking your time to tell me your father had passed away?’

‘It was part of it.’

He scooted forward on the couch slightly, proof I was making *literal* leeway with my apology. ‘I am not upset you kept that information to yourself. If anything, I am glad you eventually had the courage to tell me.’



‘But you *were* upset,’ I said. I’d watched him in the vegetable patch, tears in his eyes, hands fisted at his sides. I heard his promise to *try and act like this never happened* every day.

‘I reacted badly. Like you were Juliette using me, and not someone still suffering after losing her dad,’ he said. ‘I was mad because when you love someone, Freya, you would listen to anything they have to say. You would sit with them through any pain they might feel. I was mad because you wouldn’t let me love you, not because you lied.’

My head was spinning. We’d gone completely off script.

‘You... *were* mad. As in, past tense?’

‘Yes, past tense. *Passé composé*.’ He inched in closer again. ‘What was the other part of your apology?’

‘Um—’ Words piled up in my mouth but what came out was, ‘You’ve stumped me.’

‘How?’ He crossed his arms.

‘I didn’t expect this. I expected you to still be mad. I thought I’d have to fight to get you to listen to me.’

‘There is still time for something to go wrong,’ he said. ‘You have not said the second part of your apology.’

Disoriented, I rubbed at my temples and murmured to myself, ‘What was next?’

‘Maybe you wanted to apologise for thinking it was *une amourette* between us? The “fling” you spoke of?’ It looked as though it pained him to say the word ‘fling’, his body recoiling at the sound of it.

‘I thought that was what we agreed. I thought that *no expectations* meant you didn’t want me to expect anything serious.’

‘A mistranslation,’ Théo said.

‘I kept telling myself there wasn’t time enough for anything *but* a fling.’ I stared down into lap, my legs crossed like a child in the naughty corner. ‘I didn’t know it could happen so quickly. I didn’t expect it to be like *that* between us.’

Théo moved in so close the couch dipped under me, my knees slipping down so they brushed against his jeans. He pinched my chin between his fingers—like he always did, like I hoped he always would—and angled my face to look at his. ‘*What* could happen so quickly? What was it like between us, *mon chou*?’

‘Be like—’ I heard my mum’s voice in the back of my mind: *Don’t say like!* ‘Be love.’

He smiled at me, hands moving to cup my cheeks. I could smell the last cigarette he’d held between his fingers, and the paint still smudged on his palm. ‘I knew you felt it.’

I ran my hands up and down his arms to remind myself he was real, and I could touch him again.

‘I’m scared,’ I whispered. ‘To feel like this.’

‘Scared?’

‘Are we going to get lost in translation again?’ I weakly joked.

‘Why are you scared?’ he asked.

Words arranged themselves in my head and made their way to my tongue. I found myself trying to—*wanting* to, for the first time since my dad died—describe something that could not, really, be described. ‘The last person I loved this much died,’ I voiced. ‘And I worry, sometimes, that I’ll love my dad forever. Because apparently that’s what grief is: your love for someone persevering and pestering you even after they’re gone. Forever and ever and ever, I’ll love my dad.’ My tears rolled down onto Théo’s hands, smothered under his palms and lathered into my skin like moisturiser. ‘What am I supposed to do with all that love? He’s not here to talk to, or hug, or even look at. But my love is still here, and it—’ I clenched at my chest, like I might hold my heart in my hands and squeeze the pain out of it. ‘—it *hurts*. It hurts so much that sometimes I wished I loved him a little less.’

‘I get it.’ Théo took his hands away from my face. ‘You are not ready to love me. It is too soon, and too big, and you are still trying to figure out what to do with all that love you still have for your dad and figure out who you want to be.’

‘No,’ I said, as resolutely as possible. I could see his face slacken in relief. ‘What I’m trying to say—and failing miserably—is that it’s good to know you love someone so much your love never leaves you. I’m saying I love you like that. Endlessly.’

He smiled at me, bright and blissful, like I was watching my favourite movie for the first time again. Like I couldn’t stop reading a good book. Like I was finally seeing a masterpiece painting in the flesh.

He leant in and rested his forehead against mine. ‘I love you like that, too. Endlessly,’ he repeated.

I got to kiss him then. A deep, slow kiss where I could suck his full bottom lip into my mouth, and he could run his hands through my hair, and I could straddle his lap, and he could sneak his hands under my shirt to tease along my bare skin. I felt like molten gold, shimmering hot and melting into his body.

When we pulled away from the kiss, all breathy and sated, I said, ‘This. Was. Supposed. To be. More. Difficult,’ punctuating each word with a playful hit to his broad chest.

He caught my hands. 'I realised, after spending four weeks painting the woman I love, I would forgive her for anything if it meant seeing her again.'

'But you never called or texted,' I said.

'I made deal with myself that I would not contact you until the painting was done. So, you might have some time to think—and really miss me. And so *I* could think about how I could visit you in Australia all the time, and convince you to practice law in Paris when you had finished studying.'

'How long would I have had to wait until you finished your painting?'

We both glanced back at the canvas.

'About another week, and I would have dialled your number and made a very expensive international call.'

'Beat you to it,' I said.

'You did.' He pushed my fringe back off my forehead. It had grown so much in the past weeks he could tuck part of it behind my ear. 'Thank goodness, because my plan was taking too long.'

'Can I know why you started painting again?' I said. 'Because right now, I'm giving myself all the credit. Naked woman muse and all that.'

'Not yet,' he said with a laugh. 'I have something I must show you first.'

I was carried down Théo's stairs ('Do not open your eyes,' he said as I hung over his shoulder) and then placed down on the walkway outside his tattoo parlour.

It was the middle of afternoon, and I didn't need to open my eyes to know that next to Théo's tattoo parlour was a shut roller door to a store that never opened. And that across the street there was a shop which seemed to only sell French children's books. This place had melted into my bones and helped the oxygen run around in my bloodstream.

'Keep them closed,' Théo said, removing his hands from my face. I heard his keys jingle and the door to his studio unlock.

'Why do they need to be closed? I've been in your studio before.'

'Just in case,' he said. I was guided into the studio by his hands on my hips, and I kept my hands out to pre-empt any possible collisions.

When we'd made it to what I assumed was his tattoo bench, I was turned around, lifted up, and plopped down onto the table like a sack of potatoes.

'Goodness, lots of manhandling,' I said.

'Easier when your vision is impaired.' He'd moved off and was rummaging around somewhere to my left.

'What are you hiding, Théodore? Is there another painting of me down here?'

'*Non*. You wish.'

'I could open my eyes.'

'*Don't*.'

'I won't. Not until I'm *told*.'

'Just a few more seconds.'

I dangled my feet back and forth and played with the hem of my shirt. 'Remember when you were going to design another tattoo for me?' I said, babbling to entertain myself as I waited.

The rustling stopped. I could hear his footsteps move closer to me, and sense as he closed the distance between us even with my eyes closed.

His voice sounded from right in front of me. 'Can you read my mind, *mon chou*?'

'Why do you ask?'

'I did design another tattoo for you.'

'You did?' What had the brief been again? Flowers, thin lines, no colour. My imagination would never be able to come up with something as good as his would.

'Yes,' he said.

‘Can I see it?’

‘Open your eyes, cabbage.’

A piece of paper was being held in front of my face. Drawn on it was a bouquet of vegetables: vines of cherry tomatoes, sprigs of rosemary, a bushel of strawberries, and a plume of cabbage leaves. It was simple, technically flowers, and would look right at home near with waterlily tattoo.

I cocked my head to try and make sense of it. Cabbage leaves because of my nickname, I understood. Strawberries because... he always had them in his fridge? Rosemary because whenever he roasted potatoes he used a whole lot of it?

In hopes of hiding my confusion, I said—and did genuinely mean—‘It’s beautiful.’

‘But you don’t understand it?’ His smiled peaked over the top of the piece of paper.

‘No, not really. Are they... the vegetables you think I like?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Guess again.’

‘Your nicknames for me?’

‘I know I call you cabbage, but have I ever called you *la tomate*?’

‘No.’ I frowned. ‘I should get this,’ I said to myself. ‘I should get this, right?’ I said to Théo.

‘I can tell you,’ he said. ‘You will kick yourself when you find out.’

I huffed out so hard my fringe blew off my forehead. ‘I give up. Tell me.’

‘You did not try very hard.’

‘I’m dying here.’ I hated not knowing an answer. ‘Tell me.’

‘They are all the things that surrounded you the first time I told you I loved you.’

*Oh.* The vegetable patch. Mid-fight: lemons drooping over my head, strawberries being rained on with tears, kale being trampled on, pumpkins looking lush enough to be kicked. *I love you* said as a promise, confessed like a poorly hidden secret.

‘And your nickname, sort of. With the cabbage leaves, even though it was not in season.’

‘Would you tattoo it on me now?’ I asked, taking the paper from him.

‘I am expensive.’

I shrugged. ‘What’s another dent in my inheritance?’

‘Different currency,’ he said, with a smile that seemed perpetually stuck to his face.

‘You don’t take Australian dollars? I can exchange it for euros.’

‘Kisses,’ he said. ‘I only take kisses from you, Freya.’

‘Would you like a deposit?’ I pouted my lips at him.

He stepped between my legs, ran his hands up my bare thighs, and leant in for what I thought would be a deeper kiss. Instead, he kept it quick and chaste, best described as a peck, and then moved off to ready his tools.

‘Where would you like the tattoo?’ he asked.

My last tattoo was on the left side of my body, on my ribcage, intended to be close to my heart and just for me. It made sense for me to put the tattoo on the other side of my body, in hopes of creating some kind of tattoo feng shui. ‘What hurts less?’

‘The arms are not as sensitive,’ he said, fiddling with something on the tattoo gun.

‘Ok.’ I held my right arm out in front of me. I didn’t want it somewhere I could always see it. It was distracting enough when I caught myself in the mirror and saw the black ink on my ribcage. But this tattoo wouldn’t be just for me. I wanted it out and proud; I wanted my heart on my sleeve, literally.

‘Maybe the back of my arm? Just above the elbow?’

Théo wheeled his stool in close to me and sat down. It was just like the first time: him, gazing up at me, in supplication. He wrapped his hand around the skin just above my elbow and clarified, ‘Here?’

‘Yeah.’ I would always, apparently, get distracted when he touched me.

‘Do you want to think about it a little longer? I can tattoo you whenever. Before breakfast. In the middle of the night. Whenever you like. Wherever you like.’

‘If I think about it for too long, I’ll chicken out. Or come up with too many changes, never be able to decide, and then never get the tattoo.’

‘OK. Back of your arm. Just above the elbow,’ he confirmed. ‘Right now.’

Théo printed the stencil—about three inches tall, two inches wide—and then tenderly pressed it into my skin and sealed it with a kiss. I was asked, in his professional voice, to lay down on my front and keep my arm on an angle, hanging slightly off the bed. I heard him flick on the machine, a soft buzz sounding.

He did the first testing stroke and made sure I was ok. I told him it hurt less than the waterlily, and before he settled into the work, he said, ‘Tell me about your dad, Freya, and I will tell you why I started painting again.’

There was no way to have this conversation without stumbling through it, but I would stumble through it for Théo. I didn’t want to keep anything from him anymore. I tried, as best as I could, to tell Théo about the man that raised me. Tall enough to forget how long his limbs were and develop a reputation for being clumsy. The grey streaks he’d had in his hair since his late twenties. How he adored the Bee Gees, and as a result, made their discography the

soundtrack of my childhood. I told him about our Friday night dinners where I learnt how to drink red wine, and the one Friday night dinner which ruined all the rest.

It was my second semester of university. I'd wanted to go with Quinn and Maia to the pub, but I'd already agreed to go over to Dad's. He was cooking Chicken Kiev (which meant he'd bought a nice one from the butchers) and would try his best to make sure the mashed potatoes weren't lumpy. I'd sent him text message confirmation. He'd replied with excitable emojis. I was nothing if not committed to my parents' schedules.

When I'd rocked up at his house, it was all very quiet. No music was playing, like it usually would have been, and everything was so clean it was almost sterile. The table had already been set, which is a task he'd usually force me to do, and he hadn't poured himself a glass of wine yet. Everything was off its axis.

I didn't even get enough time to cut into my chicken and see the butter run out before Dad said, very politely, 'I'm afraid I've got some bad news.' And then all the jargon that followed: Stage four. Non-small cell. Metastatic. Incurable. I cried into my mashed potatoes (lumpy, as per usual) and asked him if I should move back in with him. He'd need help getting to chemotherapy sessions, and a second set of ears to listen to the specialists. He'd need help cleaning, and cooking, and getting up off the couch. It's better if I'm around more often, I'd said to him. Just in case. He'd vehemently declined. My studies would not be interrupted. My young, frivolous life would keep happening. No moving home.

'I felt like my world was caving in around me,' I said to Théo. I could barely feel the sting of the tattoo, more focused on where Théo rubbed a comforting thumb against my skin.

I then told Théo about the morning I received a phone call from an unknown number in the middle of a lecture. I didn't answer it but called back during a toilet break. The person on the other end of the phone answered said, *Hello, St. Vincent's Hospital Emergency Department. How can I help you?* and my heart had dropped out of my chest. I said I was returning a call. My name was Freya Davis. Was the call about an Andrew Davis? The lady then told me my dad had had a heart attack and was in the emergency room.

I left class and caught an expensive Uber to the hospital. I'd walked through the emergency department—which was unexpectedly easy—and stopped a nurse in the hall to ask if there was an Andrew Davis there. I was taken to a drawn curtain, and peered inside it to see my dad, shirtless and thin, hooked up to wires with people fretting around him. He'd smiled at me, clearly drugged up, and said, 'Hi, Freya. Don't you have class?' and tried to pull the sheet up higher over his chest. I stood at the foot of the bed, my hand rested on his ankle, and tried not to look so scared. I tried to smile. He looked so skinny; his eye sockets were sunken and

purple; his skin looked pasty and thin under the fluorescent lights. I managed to keep from crying until I was back out on the street and had been promised I could visit him in a few hours when he was put in a private room upstairs.

*‘Mon chou,’* Théo said into my skin. He kissed just above where he was tattooing.

The leather under my face was wet with tears. I wasn’t even I was crying from sadness, but more as a kind of biological response. These stories were embedded with tears, and I’d always cry when I told them.

‘Do you want me to stop?’ Théo asked.

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘It’s good to have something to focus on.’

As Théo finished up the cabbage leaves, and detailed the bouquet with a bow, I told him about how I was there when my dad had died. I told him how he had looked at me right before his last breath, which the nurse said didn’t happen very often. I told him about how his last breath sounded like a rattle. I told him that I wished I’d left the room before he took his last breath, because the sound of it kept me up for weeks.

‘I sometimes forget all this happened to me,’ I said when the tattoo was done. I was sitting with my legs dangling off the table, and Théo had wheeled around and positioned himself between my thighs.

‘Thank you for telling me,’ Théo said.

‘You don’t know what to say, do you?’

‘No,’ he rested his forehead on my knee, embarrassed. ‘What do people say?’

‘I don’t know.’ I ran my hands through his hair. ‘You don’t have to say anything. It’s enough that you listened.’

‘How about I tell you why I started painting again, in return?’

I nodded eagerly.

As Théo cleaned down the tattoo, he said, ‘The short explanation is that I met you.’ I flushed at the admission. Muse status had been achieved, apparently. ‘The long explanation is when you knocked on my door, about two months ago, I started thinking colour again. You were—still are—the most interesting person I have ever met, and I wondered for the first time in five years if I painted your tender lips, red from being bitten, an observer would know you worry too much. Or if I had your hand finger the sheets like the pages of a book, they would know you read books like breathing. I wanted to know if I could paint what I love about you.’

When I turned to look at him, my lips sucked into my mouth like I could taste the cherry colour he’d painted them, he asked, ‘Do you remember the photos we took during our first kiss?’



‘I keep them in my phone case,’ I admitted.

Théo put down the dressing he had cut to size and reached into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet, and from it, a distressed strip of photos curling at the edges with fading ink across our faces. ‘I have turned every photo into a drawing. I know the slope of your nose, the shape of your eyes, the heart contour of your lips. In between clients, while I was counting down the hours until I could see you again, I would pull out my sketch book and try to perfect your profile.’

‘And where are these sketches?’ I asked as he tucked the photos back into his wallet.

‘Hidden away,’ he said.

‘I don’t get to see them?’

‘In time.’ He pinched at my chin before picking the dressing back up. ‘While we lived together, I saw you in all different compositions: cleaning your teeth, brushing your hair, napping on the couch. I itched to get a pencil out every time and draw you like I saw you: full of questions and endless knowledge, bursting at the seams to learn something new.’

‘Then—’ The screech of the dressing back being removed cut between his words. ‘We had sex, and I found one of my favourite sights: you, backlit by the streetlights, in nothing but your underwear.’

He’d confessed it to me that night. *I would paint this view* promised to me as I stood opposite him.

As he covered the tattoo, a deft hand smoothing the bandage over, he said, ‘So, I sketched you, in the middle of the night, while you lay asleep. It was not the same view I said I would paint, but better. You looked like you were floating on clouds. Your tattoo peeked out above the sheets. Your hair flowed across your shoulders perfectly. That was when I decided what to paint on the stupid canvas that had been sitting in my room for five years.’

‘Me,’ I said.

Théo came back around and stood between my legs. His hands rested warm and snug like gloves as they cupped my thighs. ‘You reminded me what it is to love something, Freya. For so long I focused on making painting an occupation that I lost my love of it. I saw my paintings as a way to pay rent or buy food. I forgot that I once painted pictures because I wanted to, not because I had to.’

‘I did not paint this picture of you for money. I painted it because I needed to. Because every time I look at you, I see every brushstroke you are made up of and every shade you are coloured with.’

I felt lightheaded. *Lightbodied*, really, as his lips latched firmly onto mine. As he pulled my underwear out from under my skirt, my legs tingled with rainbow-coloured confetti. When I unbuckled his jeans and shoved them down only enough for the length of him to come free, my heart filled with helium and bobbed around in my chest like a balloon. Air rushed out of my lungs in the shape of Théo's name when he had to create space to dig around in his pocket for a condom.

It was quick. Hasty. Like we'd been starved and were ravenous to feel full again. I ordered in the little French I knew for him to *fuck me*. He teased back, a sparkle in his eye, and asked if I wanted it *plus fort*? He grasped at every bit of my skin he could see, like the ankle clutched around his waist and the curve of my ass squished against his worktable. I felt complete in my body, from my head to my toes, when he was touching it. Worshipping it, really.

My blood felt fizzy, bubbling like champagne through my body, and I popped, significantly well shaken, and spilt all over Théo. He followed close behind, laboured breathing laced with the syllables of my name. *Frey*—the shudder of his body against mine—*ah*.

'I love you,' Théo said when he caught his breath.

'Like *that*?' I said.

'Like that,' he promised.

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