

Aubrey's Friends

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Shut in between the desk and wall, an assembly of banging and sighs; a possible laughter from somewhere, revealing how very thin indeed the walls were. Josie was at it again. Aubrey felt very like a nun possessed at night by irresistible thoughts of dark temptations that never ceased. She must have seemed on the outside to be a sexless creature, but these suspicions were immediately shut out, hoping to avoid succumbing to a conspiracy that nobody wanted to sleep with her.

These sounds like cymbals silenced by a fabric which concealed them became a ghostly ambience. But was it Josie at all? And who was the boy? Did the sounds start and stop; when were they there? The screaming discarded its body, could have been a nightmare or a ghost. Still it lingered. The dissolution of block J4...

Aubrey became a stranger to her flatmates, don't ask her where it began. Her first night at the halls she had gone to bed thinking friendship wasn't going to be a battle anymore. Now disparate images appeared to her, loosely ordered in terms of how quiet they were. Once further back, there it began with a small desk in a shoebox of a kitchen space, the ground flecked with some kind of artificial glitter effect, nevertheless awash in dust and sticky textures that were magnets for shoe soles. Aubrey was summoned there by a knock on her door, for the first time sitting across from a boy with that curious rusty glimmer in his teeth, marking him somewhere between desire and repulsion for her, that old delegation which she knew well.

From a glance she saw a boy held between one nature and the other. The first could be found in his gruff voice, his crossed arms and outstretched legs, his tattoos, his silver chain, his preference for beer. This was the boy who seems familiar, you imagine sitting opposite him in a classroom if you stretch your memory. He could have made fun of her, maybe he's grown up now.

The other nature was in the blue nail polish, a possible mascara combed into long eyelashes, the stripy t-shirt which fell to his knees, obscuring the chest. This was a flirting with androgyny. Both natures can easily blend together. They're not incompatible but it still feels like a juxtaposition. Perhaps that explains why the combination had always acted like a sedative for Aubrey. She was enticed by opposites: things that shouldn't seem possible; had somehow defeated the natural order.

In short, *What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Josie and Viv had grown up together as best friends and had decided to follow one another to university. As it stood they were contemplating mixers before several bottles of clear spirits; looking for nouns to point attention to in lieu of a reply to the boy's monologue.

- Alright mate? He chimed. God, Aubrey thought. He thinks I'm a guy.
- Edmund, this is Aubrey. Aubrey, Edmund.
- Charmed.
- Another drink?

- Let's have another drink.
  - Ah, this is fucking miserable. Guess I'm gonna have to be sober for now.
  - For the first time in your life I sponse.
  - Ooh, you're funny.
  - I've got some wine if you want some?
  - Hate wine.
  - Looks like you don't have any other options, Edmund.
  - Tastes like rich people piss... Ah, my oh my, yeah alright, go on then.
- Through the underworld, Aubrey trailed rhythmically back to her room and brought with her a cheap box of merlot paired with a glass for herself.
- It's the drink of the people. Just tell me when to stop pouring.
  - Nah, I swear that beer has always been the drink of the people.
  - Well, think back to the wine stompers... Is that enough?
  - Yeah, I guess. How strong is it?
  - About fourteen percent more or less.
  - Ah, yeah that's alright then. Cheers.
  - So where are you two from? Viv asked.
  - Some town in Essex - Edmund replied.
  - Lots of places, I moved a lot. Aubrey didn't want to get into it.
  - Are you both sad to be leaving? Josie asked.
  - Nah.
  - Not really.
  - I think me and Josie had more friends than you two. Viv giggled, both of her hands cupped around her glass sheepishly.
  - What's that?
  - That's the doorbell.
  - Oh, Lisa's here!

The previous night Aubrey had crashed a fashion student meet-up with Josie and Viv where they had met Lisa. And just like that first night, words were forced, vomited out to create a sort of mutual familiarity. When a topic was exhausted small talk was hurried in to escape the silence.

- Is it true that boys get a razor in the mail before going to uni? Lisa asked.
- Got mine, Edmund nodded.

Dontfuckingaskmedontfuckingaskme Aubrey repeated to herself, but was nevertheless still unable to resist the masochistic temptation to make eye contact with Lisa, and her dark glance back to her had an awkward note of uncertain recognition, and with it another attempt at conversation was voided.

Josie and Viv to the side of what was probably once a music hall, the old art deco wallpaper traded in for a constant matte gold paint.

- Ciao, darlings.

- Should I tell? Viv giggled.

- Yeah, okay.

- Josie's got a thing for Edmund!

- You know... I kind of do as well... Aubrey considered if she had made a drunken blunder.

- Don't go down that path, Jo. It wouldn't last. Think how awkward it would be. Viv knocked her on the shoulder.

- Let make a pact, girl. Neither of us can go there. Locking pinky fingers and raising palms, Aubrey almost laughing at the impossibility, thinking it a patronising formality to be included in the pact.

Viv's face shrieking into death, the number of parties expanding.

- Hiya, Where's Ted? Viv asked.

- Don't know, in the crowd somewhere.

- He drunk like... half a bottle of grain alcohol.

- Yeah, he's on a bit of a mad one.

- I want a smoke.

- Where's the outdoor bit?

- Through there.

The empty red halls, lit up every turn of the corner by a yellow gaslamp bolted with iron loops to the ceiling. There were no signs for the smoking section so they took spontaneous turns, hoping to go as far down as possible. Finally, a glimpse way down of a parting in a doorway. Josie and Viv got caught up with a friend by the door, the rest finding an empty place on a bench.

- Do you smoke, Edmund?

- Nah.

- You never wanted to?

- It's not that. My whole family smoked, I can't pick up their habits... Except drinking, that is. That one's so insignificant that it's not even worth thinking about. You can just tuck it away and leave it be.

- Should we have left Ted?

- Fuck him. Did you see how he was looking at those girls? Lisa leaned in.

- No, what was he doing?

- He was out of it, just pestering these girls. Looked at them like some kid at an ice cream truck. Edmund replied.

- Was he trying to chat them up?

- No, just kept looking at them.

- You should say something to him, Edmund.

- Yeah, I will. I don't stand for that shit. Fucking disgusting what men can do sometimes. He exhaled, scratching at a blot of dried rum on his knee. - My mum's dated men like that.

He stopped, however many pints he had downed must have made the sweaty respite from the club, crowded with young faces who looked a lot like his, seem very different from his world a few days prior. He started on his monologue.

- You know... just being here now... I think about how I'm finally doing what I want to do. But the people I knew in Essex just wouldn't get it. It's an empty zone back there. I don't know what to make of it. The people are the only thing you can form an opinion of. There's nothing to look at. There's nothing to judge. Nothing there... I feel bad leaving my mum, but then I remember the rest of the family I left behind... I used to have pink hair, they all made fun of me. My nan called me a poofter. I'm straight. 100%, but I was different I dunno. A lot of people don't get it, how frustrating it is for people to think you're gay when you're not... But I still feel bad. I don't want to keep Essex inside of me. I can feel it there, It will always stay with me. I want to throw it up.

Lisa and Aubrey were quick to comfort him. *Nobody understands* Edmund kept repeating. Aubrey did understand; his repetition grated on her.

A gunshot at the time when it seems that the rest of the town are awake, and the cries of several, perhaps children. Aubrey was stirred from that night at inferno and was victim to a second hand embarrassment, not for herself, but for someone who felt less shame. She could chart the coordinates to when the feeling must have returned, but decided to block out the contemplation in favour of giving herself over to another principle of the controlled totality of something or other.

Still she recalled drinking glass after glass of wine in her room, trembling as the anticipation of getting ready could be heard from the kitchen. She downed another glass of courage and nervously made her way there, only to hover silently in the corner before asking to follow them. Leaving the halls of residence in a repulsive finery of poorly applied makeup and into the unlit park, realising she didn't have her bag, running back and falling over, shining her phone light across the path until finding it beside a tree, and her friends hadn't waited for her. That night Viv led the way with a clear lack of geographic knowledge of London, climbing unnecessary bridges through the tides of wind which ruined hair and made a drunken Aubrey trip once or twice. When they took photos she was conveniently always to the side, but since she could barely look at herself in the mirror she didn't particularly want to remember the night anyway. On the train they had struck up a conversation with a stranger who said they *have all kinds of fucked up queer energy*. He went one by one, rating outfits, finally landing on Aubrey.

- Now that's a queer mess!

If all of them, including even Edmund had *queer energy*, the word had certainly lost its meaning. You could cross your legs a certain way and a boy on a train would say that you have *queer energy*. To Aubrey, her friends seemed more like the escapees of small towns

breaking the rules for the first time, but even then she didn't want to judge. In the end, she had only just crawled out of a similar pot of piss and wanted to divorce herself from her past as much as they did.

That night where they were already spent as they entered the Hackney warehouse before projected videos of colonoscopies, they didn't make it back to the halls until five. It wasn't to be the last of Aubrey's self-invites. On Friday evening the weekend would come to ask you what you were going to do with yourself, the trepidation of what the night was to become had to be confronted. There was no question in locking herself away and hoping for invites. Once again she found herself in the kitchen corner, making small talk which she hoped would lead to a validation.

- I don't want to ask this but my friends bailed on me - Aubrey almost wretched.

- Really? Josie muttered, stepping back from the steam of boiling penne.

- Again, I don't like being like this. But is it okay if I go to The Principle with you guys?

- Of course - Edmund interjected.

After going out on a limb, Aubrey could see that Josie and Viv weren't particularly bothering to make it look like they were pleased Aubrey was coming.

- Should I invite Ted? Edmund asked.

- You're still hanging out with Ted?

- Edmund!

- Look, he's got some issues. I had a talk with him about that night. He had drank way too much and maybe went a little too crazy with the eye movements. I told him that. You realise that me and Ted go way back, he was one of the only kids at college who I got on with. I like having him around to talk about that stuff back then. And as I say, he needs help.

Aubrey remembered his arm.

- I think he needs a friend. He's not a bad guy, he just needs to be around the right people.

- I don't care if he's got problems - Viv shot Edmund with her eyes - He's a bad influence.

- I'm not fourteen, Viv.

- He's a twat. He's always blackout.

- Everyone seems drunk when you're only high from the horse you're sitting on.

Josie and Aubrey remained silent, Josie nodding when Viv spoke and Aubrey scratching her nose in between tiny gratuitous sips.

- I should get ready, I just remembered that clothes don't talk back. Viv sighed, and made off to her room to change, as did Aubrey who turned to her dark corner and hastily touched up her foundation, adding lipstick and mascara. Since she always wore her best during the day anyway, the question of making a statement led her to her Gaultier dress, the most expensive item of clothing she owned. Then impulsively she decided on drawing a small cross on her forehead with eyeliner before inspecting herself

in the mirror, hoping that the lights elsewhere wouldn't be too harsh on her demeanour; wouldn't reveal smudged lines, a shadow of irritated flesh, or the burgeoning scales of a grey mackerel. Not fear, no, but a kind of internalised nausea would follow her nevertheless.

The first stop of the night was the chain bar nearby, where although their cocktails were diluted, they were a fraction of the price of any respectable establishment. The puffy black jackets of the bouncers resembled bulletproof vests in the dark, and they stood nodding people in as they scanned IDs. Aubrey had her passport, being uninterested in driving, and flicked the pages to a dead image of a whimpering child. She thought she heard one of the men say no but didn't know what it meant and tried to push forward, only to have a palm restrain her shoulder. *No, not you*, he grunted. Above her she saw a large sloping forehead leading to a brow swallowing tired eyes. His natural strength was even present in his general aura of disinterest.

- What did I do?

- Yeah what did she do? Josie cried.

- Had too much to drink. Go home.

When she stood back her friends had entered the bar. Edmund seemed to be caught in a minor altercation with one of the men but soon disappeared upstairs. Needing space to think, she crossed the road to lean beside a closed department store, shadowed by a heavy beam in the sky.

- What happened, can u not come in? Josie texted.

- No, they said I drank too much. I'm not that drunk, there's something more to it.

- Woah thats so fucked up, youre not more drunk than we are.

Aubrey kept texting but got no response, deciding on pleading with the bouncers for the final time.

- Sorry, I'm not allowed in now but will I be later?

- Just fuck off mate, it's sleepy time! One of them courageously blurted out, and his friends broke out into rabid giggles.

So Aubrey crossed the street again, placing a cigarette in her lips but it wouldn't light. After a full minute she realised that she had lit it at the wrong end and sent it into the gutter, taking up another instead, close to tears. Perhaps she was drunker than she thought, but then again, she wasn't the only one in the group who was like that. She hadn't fallen or sworn or stripped naked, she was like many students on a night out. But she wasn't allowed in.

As she puffed and remained in the open air for longer, the wind began to hurl and brought an ambiguous rain. Going home was an end to the friendship altogether. If she was there one moment and gone the next she wouldn't expect a call. The only option was to wait, her glance falling on metallic sheens caught in tail lights. There was an

innocence of those who passed on their way to the club; a seamlessness to what they wore, how they appeared. They were accepted without doubt.

Turning self-deprecatingly to the shop window behind her. She felt that, like Eurydice, her reflection was enough to make a man fall out of sight into the very air. It repulsed her.

If she were to throw herself before a car she would make another scene. She probably wouldn't die but she would be outside of herself once again, caught in a claustrophobia of eyes. In the midst of what felt like her eternal surveillance, she felt juvenile, a poorly sewn doll where the lips took up half of the head, fitted with cheap and offensive clothes. She couldn't even become an imitation. No, she didn't want to be an imitation, she remembered telling herself that. But memories of old affirmations were lost without context, she couldn't remember where they came from. The tears and grimaces drifting past her sight led to nothing anyway. Soon an hour was marked, and there were Edmund, Josie, and Viv.

She could forget it all by losing herself in The Principle's all consuming strobe.

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It could have been daybreak and it could have been noon when thoughts of water roused her to wake. A volcano thrust somewhere near her lips, wetting everything except for her palette and making way for more thirst than there was initially. Inferno came to her, and then there was the night outside of the bar, and somewhere after then the room would go quiet as she entered it. She remembered throwing herself down the first flight of stairs in the boredom of a weekend alone. If it wasn't for the party on the floor beneath her, somebody would have heard it.

Her attempts at conversation were cut off cold. It could have been put down as stress so she devised plans to salvage what had slipped away. The night she left to go home for Christmas she placed an expensive bar of chocolate on the kitchen counter and beneath it a note. She also did an engraving of a Christmas poem on a piece of card but decided against leaving that as well.

Then there was the fire alarm, when one mid-morning she was smoking in her room as she was known to do, the fire alarm decided to operate which it had apparently never considered doing before. The entire block was evacuated and the staff were sent up to her room for an investigation. Edmund was caught mid-shower. He strolled in a well-humoured vexation to Josie and Viv who could be seen whispering in a speaking tone. Luckily she didn't hear her name.

Josie and Viv would sing in the hallways, or rather screech or wail. Whatever it was became incredibly ghostly night after night behind a partition. By then the self-invites were no longer in question. The kitchen laughter of pre-gaming could be heard as Aubrey remained in her room. One evening when new friends had arrived, were playing



music and clinking glasses, the voices became too much. Taking a final sip she jumped to her bed and began reciting Puck's closing monologue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and then onto parts of *The Broken Tower* by Hart Crane. Certain she wasn't heard, her cadence rose, she bounced between different voices and dialects before building up the courage to enter the kitchen to make dinner.

Viv bit her tongue and looked to the side as Aubrey entered. At a table edge, a boy with ginger hair who she immediately averted her gaze from. Perfect, someone else she had a pathetic history with. Fortunately, hunger is a prevailing force.

- How are ya, Aubrey? Lisa asked.

- Oh, I'm fine. I've decided to take up woolgathering. Flustered that anyone would acknowledge her. However, the rest of the room didn't agree. Carefully plotting out a stretch of silence, Viv aggressively pulled at one of her teeth whilst Josie deadened her eyes and Edmund re-read the leaflets on the wall.

Once the pasta was boiling, Aubrey returned to her room and pulled her chair up to the door.

- She messaged me on...She heard the boy say. It was somehow a relief that she was a subject in their conversation, but only the loudest words could be made out. Luckily, from what she could discern there seemed to be nothing too damning of her.

Nevertheless, difficult questions are only put to rest with simple answers, and that never happens. Aubrey looked around and regarded her squalor of mutual resentment numbed by intoxicants. It was easier said than done to say that she was going to get to her feet and dust herself off. In truth, the dread that she could be being watched at any moment from her childhood had returned. There was no self other than what died inside her. Everything she put into question had a time limit. As she withdrew to bed she fell back into a submersion of idiotic forgetting. Suddenly being a misanthrope felt like a fine idea.

## II

Classes ended early. As much as she was looking forward to it, summer was still far off. She was cut dead in the confusion of late spring. Perhaps in her classes she had made friends but the holiday would be the test of that. Having exhausted her student loan, she got a job in a chain cinema nearby. Barely conscious, she swept popcorn and scanned tickets in between absent moments where you walk in small circles to kill the time. On her breaks, she would shuffle outside for a quick cigarette and exhale storms of noisy fog, checking the time every few seconds.

That evening the summer was still in a breeze and haze of clouds. Within her own mangled web, the coils were broken by familiar notes and inflections. She drifted her head to find Edmund, Lisa, and Ted behind a great pillar. Josie and Viv were absent. Aubrey kept her gaze on them for longer than what felt natural, partly wanting to make

eye contact. Lisa smiled, perhaps with melancholy, perhaps with guilt. When she smiled back she discarded her cigarette and went up to the elevator, numb with buttery fumes and the sugar induced cries of children.

A few days later in the dark, the sky began an exhaustive wash for the season's blooming. The rain falling in the eye of the streetlamps became snow as Aubrey passed beneath it to reach what suddenly became Edmund and Ted sheltering under a beam by the door.

- Hi.

- Hi.

Untangling keys woven into the ribbon whilst watching that they don't slip to the tiles.

- Did you cut your hair?

Edmund elusively remarked, his mouth remaining slightly ajar in subtle wonder. Just those words were enough for Aubrey to put everything into question again. He hadn't been seen with Josie and Viv for a while now, and she recalled him gently cutting Ted off.

- Oh, no. I'm wearing a beret. I don't want to get my hair wet.

- I do like a beret.

- I look like a French... prostitute. And immediately regretted the word choice. She actually looked more like a French acrobat, and on bad days an ailing French bulldog. In reality she aspired to resemble a creature from a Jean Genet novel melded with a Proustian society lady.

- Nothing wrong with that. He and Ted both leaned down and playfully snorted.

- Guess not. I'll see ya Edmund.

- See ya.

- Later.

An academic year, despite however long it feels when you're in it, is understood to be much less than its name suggests when the holiday has nothing in store for you. So the halls were finally evacuated. If you closed your eyes you could hear the sting of packing tape and dropped crockery. Rooms gave you a flash as you remembered what they were when you first entered them.

She was wearing black denim short shorts, smoking outside past midnight. As it was reduced to its end she reached into her matchstick sized pockets for her keys, but they must be in the back pocket, or she was holding them? Fuck... Viv left earlier that day, her mother said hello while she grunted. Josie was probably gone too. She traced the court for someone in her block, but there was only Lisa by an open door. Too busy trying to crawl inside herself, she was only just able to notice her, followed by Edmund advancing back to their block.

- Hey, sorry. I forgot my keys can you let me in?

- Yeah, of course.

- How've you been, Aubrey? Lisa turned

- I feel like a bee that isn't allowed to eat the honey.
- ...Are you leaving tomorrow? Edmund asked.
- No, the day after that. My dad came by to pick up some extra stuff. My stereo and records.
- You've got a record player haven't you? He lunged three steps at once.
- You're not the only one.
- Careful, Edmund!
- Do you own Doppelganger Fancies by Armchair Butt Rest?
- Yeah, I do. You must have heard me playing that. I heard you playing Partisan Water House the other day.
- Partisan Water House are amazing! Lisa cried.

She remembered when he bought it, taking it out of his bag to show Viv who said it sounded pervy.

Then beside the door, Edmund's face relaxed as he stopped, letting the air out as if to say fuck it before a colossal release.

- Listen. I'm sorry we were such cunts to you.
- That's okay. She blinked a slow step into darkness and opened her eyes. Edmund was really there.
- Let's go in.

Leaning on her door, their two rooms parallel to one another, standing in a liminal underworld. She wondered if her makeup was running and if her hair was in order and noticed a dried morsel of something on her sleeveless turtleneck but couldn't flick it away, both eyes were on her. She remembered how her glance could kill. But she could have kissed him. Was he there to save her from that underworld? Would in another room she wake up and be friends again?

- What happened, Edmund?

He looked around and spun his head like a parrot.

- I know Josie left. What about Viv, is she gone?
- She left today.
- Good. I don't care either way to be fair.
- Them two... they're not the brightest.
- You can say that again.
- You know what? Lets sit down, I'm hungry anyway.

Out of the zone, into the pan. Soon the fire...

Rejecting the pre-ordained places. Where Aubrey sat, she remembered Josie always sitting. Where Edmund sat, Aubrey sat on the first night. Where Lisa sat, Edmund used to sit. But where Viv used to hold up was dotted by a mark of her implausible absence.

- I don't know how to explain it. But they got an idea; I don't know what it was. They got it into their heads that you weren't worth knowing.
- Did I do something wrong?

- Of course not. Something I think we both understand is that Josie and Viv are like a lot of people we went to school with. They dip their heads beneath the water and don't like it when the fish don't breathe the same way as they do. Now all that's left for them is to drown. They've gotten to the top but didn't bother to build an exit route. Nobody will care to save them...

- Is it a transphobic thing?

- I don't know, I'd be lying if I said that it didn't cross my mind, but I think it's complicated.

- I don't think I fit their image. Maybe that's all it is.

- All they have is an image. Viv got so stuck on standing like someone in one of her posters that she forgot how people act. Her image is her personality. She doesn't understand that not all rockstars throw TVs out of windows. If she was natural she'd probably crumble.

- I always thought that Viv was the reason for all this. Josie's like her sidekick, she just does everything her master tells her. I was put on trial, left in the zone...

- Definitely.

- I mean, obviously now me and Edmund are a thing. - Lisa began - But before we even were, it was Viv who would joke about us being an item. It all went beyond jokes. They weren't jokes, it only seemed like they were because everyone laughed. But Viv... Viv didn't smile or stutter. Very coldly, she leaned in and told me that we should control ourselves, that we'd fuck the whole dynamic of the group up if we started dating. Then by the time that we were, I saw that we were members of something. The rulebook was never written but we all knew what we had to follow.

Viv and Josie were summoned as if by a seance, their presence remained in the room, their fingerprints could be made out in the unforgetting gloss of the walls. Like laws they were silent. Rooms which you shrink to enter without even thinking.

- They cut off Ted as well. Edmund groaned. I've gone against them, now. I see him all the time. Others were cut too... they can't speak... nobody sees them around, they don't go out anymore. J4 is cursed...

- Who are you both going to be living with?

- Well, guess? Lisa smoothed her eyes.

- No...

- If I remember rightly, we all decided on a place at the end of last year. Remember when we were all talking about getting the J4 tattoo?

- That was the end for me.

- Right. Well we all knew we would be living with each other next year, we went from house to house. By the time we got to the final one we had our doubts but there was nowhere else to go. We signed the lease.

- We have to share rooms. Edmund went straight.

- Really?

- We're living in squalor, you could say. If we haven't all slept with each other already, it's pretty clear what the future holds.

Aubrey considered spilling about that night where Josie confessed, but Josie and Viv held the key to her own desire. The dirt would be traded for some indistinguishable dung in return. Everyone would become their opponent, despite not having seen them for however long.

- It's only a year, another year. What's in a year? Lisa strolled her fingers across the table. Then taking up a deck of cards.

- Aubrey, it feels like such a waste for it all to end like this. I mean, I lived with you for a year. He paused, must have rolled to the edge of a long day.

- We'd all left home for the first time... we were each other's first flatmates. And we both like a lot of the same music. Sometimes I would walk by your room and I'd think shit I wish I owned that. And I couldn't talk to you about it... - He spaced out his palms and mouthed a roar - And I felt horrible. Then other times you'd come into the kitchen and nobody responded to you. There was no use in speaking. I regret not speaking, it would have been kind to. But I couldn't say in words what we both knew so it would have been useless... After you left they would swoop around the room and break into decibels that were out of range. Remember when you got us that chocolate at Christmas? I loved that shit. They wouldn't eat it. When I took a bite they gawped as if I was eating something that came out of your arse. That can't go on, kindness fails you when someone who should hate you for what you've done shows it to you. It disarms you with shame. So... I'm saying, if you're okay with it, that this shouldn't be it.

Handing her his phone, she typed in her profile and clicked follow.

- So if you're up to nothing one night...

- I'll let you know.

- Come on, let's play cards. Do either of you know shithead?

- I know him well. I don't want to lose anything to him again, I've looked at him enough. I never looked, and I have nothing to spend which means I have a lot I can't lose.

Aubrey looked back at Edmund, drifting back into the underworld which led only to her unoccupied room. Long past the end of the night, the shadows blended with the light. She looked down and saw no body nor a shadow cast by it... A pleasant warmth but it came from nowhere... Then suddenly there were the ins and outs of the inhales and exhales of wrestling from the next room. Layers of gunshots upon swinging fists.

- I'm dying! Edmund cried out in an ecstasy of pain or pleasure, and then the firing broke off, leaving in its wake a hollow pang of traumatised sound, emanating as steam from some nostrils in a wispy sigh of relief. Now both were dead but found no unity of souls in the zone. Everyone had their own room, and each was held closed by a key. It was easier said than done to let somebody else in. Only in the underworld could someone meet another, as they passed on their way back and forth from the eternal shitter.

...They let her into the bar this time but it's not the same bar. In this one people only talk over each other because they can read each other's minds, they're onto answering questions that haven't been asked yet. Sparks of Edmund's pint collide with his brow. He tilts his head back, his Adams apple a snake in his throat, writhing as he glugs. The anatomy of a tulip head. Dissected upon the table, buds of pollen fallen to the grooves, and the night goes on without paying any attention to itself. If they are past death will desire finally be sanctioned?

No, it dies in the palm.

Still, you can always solicit a glance.

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The day. She holds out an arm for a desk which is now somewhere else, scraping a contracting palm on the wardrobe's ridge, set on a turn. Edmund's out there, but she's too busy to give herself over to the repetition of someone. That boy was replicated in the mind over and over again. To imagine him again, if even for real this time, was too much of a weight for now. It was time to flip it around, she was never the muse anyway, but Edmund always struck her as Orpheus, trying to save someone from something, like when he got in a broken-off altercation with one of the bouncers that night... In an exhale or a piss he is free, a balloon lost in the clouds. Sometimes reveals itself through a part in the mist. By then you've been looking up for so long that you see a film of stars in a black net. You rub your eyes, cannot remember if you really saw it. But it will come again, it will.

Get up, Aubrey. It's all out there.