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Studio Visit

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ONE

ON THE FIRST FLOOR of the old toothbrush factory, after taking a piss in the neighbouring studio's sink, she'd wash her dick with hand soap. Dripping on the short walk back to his studio, she'd shut the door behind her, the concrete floor cool under her feet. She'd dry herself off on an old towel and join him on the fold-up mattress on the floor, wrapping herself in a brightly coloured blanket. He would get up, excusing himself to do the same. From his bed she would watch the tops of trees sway out of the open window, hear the sounds of people in their gardens, the children home from school, a tumbler of wine never far away.

The arrangement lasted for years. Letting herself into the complex of artist's studios, she punched the code into the tall metal gate, climbed the fire escape and walked down the corridor. Unlocking the door upon her arrival, he would greet her with a kiss. She'd scan the room, put down her bag and point out what had changed since her last visit. She noticed the cucumbers growing around the window in the summer, the vines flowering then fruiting; a new exhibition postcard tacked to the brick wall; the changed direction a painting of his had taken.

He'd talk and she'd listen. He would tell her about his art, his lovers, his family and his friends. Sometimes, when feeling brave, she'd offer up something about herself. He would respond with an understanding silence, unsure of what to say.

On the surface, they didn't appear to have much in common. Though they broadly shared the same politics, disagreeing on the finer points, they could both agree on one thing: rarely was sex this good with other people.

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Her grandmother had come to Hackney to learn how to make shoes. Leaving her flat, checking the door was locked behind her, she would make her way past the college her Po Po had studied at on her way to the artist's studio. At an unnerving speed, she'd stride past the jewellers, the pawn-brokers, the pub with the late license on the weekends, the Iceland and then the recovery service. Before crossing, she'd stop for a look at the hospice, run by the sisters of the convent her Po Po was proud to have stayed at. Back then she thought, they must have been around the same age.

Po Po's proudest achievement? The line of shoes she'd designed that were picked up by buyers for a number of seasons. The last time they saw each other she was a teenager: she remembered standing in her parents' unfinished kitchen, asking Po Po what had happened to her career as a cordwainer. Wearily, she mentioned marriage and children. She fetched a mug from one cupboard and a teabag from another, then paused to think. Finally, with resignation, one she thought she had made peace with, she shrugged and said: 'Dreams die and you grieve for them, then you have to bury them and say bye bye.'

She stared into the distance and waved her dreams off like an old friend. Her admission lingered in the air for a moment, then both women returned to their days.

Before her family left the tiny island they came from, she remembered how as a young girl Po Po had taught her how to paint. On the walkway outside their flat in the tower block, she pulled out the table, arranged the chairs and carefully unfurled the bamboo brush roll, then two sheets of paper, setting them in their place. As they sat side by side, she watched as her grandmother wet her brush, swirling it around the inkstone. With a sure hand, she drew a dark line across the page: a horizon dividing sky, land and sea — places where their family were now, had been, and came from. Sitting between the plants and shoe rack and opposite the neighbours altar, where fruit was neatly piled onto a side plate and joss paper was burnt for the dead, Po Po began to fill in the landscape. Her granddaughter recognised the gentle green hills from the walk to the new MRT station, but the kampongs and the boatmen were from before her time, figures from the past her parents and grandparents liked to remember. When it was her turn to paint, she tried to copy her grandmother. It didn't work: her hand was too heavy so her lines were too thick. They would never see the world the same way.

On the top floor of the housing block, when she stood on her tiptoes and pushed her small round body up and off the ledge with her hands, she could just about see the causeway and the Johor strait. She squinted. This horizon was not black and white, nor did it separate what she saw neatly. It was hot and slippery, a muddy blur of brown, blue and grey.

As her chin dropped closer to her chest, she jerked awake. ‘Sorry’, she mumbled, checking the corners of her mouth for drool with the back of her hand. ‘That’s okay,’ he said as he continued sketching, ‘Rest.’ She couldn’t keep still; it worked in his favour. Sitting for a drawing, she had nodded off to the soft light of work lamps turned away. The room came back to her: the wine had worn off, her mouth was dry, outside starless night had replaced the yearning sky of that bright winter’s day. She lay on her side, arranging herself in casually contrived repose — one that gave her arse more curve and obscured her genitalia — then lay her head on the pillow and watched him. He reached for another sheet of paper. Only on one other occasion had she seen him so focused as now she thought, watching his eyes fixed on the marks where his pencil met the page. Through the thick lenses of his glasses, he glanced up at her figure with the eyes of a worker. How different from before, when he had carefully undressed her and looked at her body with reverence. It was like he saw through time: his eyes savouring the current moment whilst thinking of the next.

Her phone buzzed. ‘thanks for last night,’ he messaged, ‘i had a nice time hanging out, was really good to see you :D:D x’

No, too fond, she thought as she typed out her response — though, there was something uncomplicated in his attention. She redrafted the message, mirroring him but giving him less. She hit send.

As he kept typing, she threw her phone down on her bed and walked away. Earlier that year there had been someone, said he nearly told his mother about her. As soon as she felt him pull away she had tried to be needless and cavalier. This felt different, tidy; wanting someone sometimes, not needing them.

TWO

STILL ON HIS KNEES, Simon pulled out of her and caught his breath. The skin over his stomach was tight like a drum, then with each sharp exhale it suddenly folded concave, the air evacuating his lungs. He reached over to the tissues, wiped himself off, then staggered over to the bin. Returning to bed, he lay back with his eyes closed and his arms crossed over his head. When he first lay down, he looked so spent she thought even looking at him might cause him pain.

Lifting herself up off her elbows, her vision panned from the mascara stains on the mattress up to the large plastic bottle of water on the table. She grabbed the bottle, unscrewed the lid and chugged; no thoughts, just sensations. She held the bottle out to him. As he took the bottle from her and drank, she pulled the blanket over her arms and up to her neck. She felt her body go in and out of focus; she felt so raw whenever someone kept fucking her after she came.

A silence hangs, then Simon starts to laugh. ‘You good?’ she asked, so bashful the first word was barely heard. ‘Yeah,’ he says through a smile. She could be so shy for someone so

willing, he thought, thinking of her keeping so obediently to her side of the bed. It wasn't that she wasn't fond, he had intuited, she just needed permission. Whilst smiling at the ceiling, he gently took her hand from on top of the blanket and placed it over his chest. She relaxed her fist and twirled her fingers through the wiry hair.

A couple years ago she had turned up to his studio, her skin freshly showered and hot from the walk over, her kiss tasted like cigarettes and extra strong mints. It was late spring, they had met for sex twice that first week – both admitted that it wasn't their style, both said that they weren't trying to get into anything.

'Don't worry,' he remembered her saying as they lay in the makeshift bed, 'We're fucking in your studio, I didn't think we were gonna get married.' She turned back and faced the ceiling, smiling dryly. She knew whatever it was about her that first excited men would eventually repulse them. He was quiet, stunned, hurt. Was it because she hadn't entertained the possibility of falling in love with him, or that it was sobering to see her jaded? No, she knew she had been insensitive and closed a door to him. She could tell it took him a lot to say that, clearly being honest about what he wanted had not gone so well for him previously. She waited patiently as he struggled through long pauses, the whole while he was unable to make eye contact. 'I've got someone...a partner' he said shakily '...all I can offer is uhm...friendship.' How long it took him to say the word partner. Section 28 and his family must've done a number on him; here was a hurt boy possessing the frame of a grown man.

‘Thanks for telling me,’ she said, ‘That’s a kindness. Not everyone can do that.’

‘Well, it’s good to be clear about these things,’ he said, trying to put some distance between himself and the sincerity of his confession.

‘Friends,’ she said, turning to face him. She hoped that would put him at ease.

Those first months he had wondered if she had many friends her age who weren’t girls, she was feminine but not particularly precious about it; stuck out — not in a bad way, just reminded him of himself when he was her age: a bit nerdy but finally at peace with it, with a popular men’s haircut that didn’t quite suit her face. He said she dressed cute but she looked a bit out of time with all those second hand clothes, like if you handed an iPhone to a character in an old Linklater film — though the odd ASOS label that peeked through the pile of her discarded clothes on the studio floor was a tell. Wasn’t that quiet actually, talked like she hadn’t always looked that way. Striking. Then soft again. Maternal; heard what you had to say, asked follow up questions, listened. Nice to have a new friend, to be new again — a new “friend” in the gay tradition, queer perhaps — though he didn’t know where he fit in with that. He’d told her that the last boy had been complicated, messy — she’d noticed even mentioning his name pained him. Though cool and hot in an East London way, the last boy needed more than Simon could give. Simon couldn’t save him, his mess spilled over onto everything, disorder over routine, he wouldn’t let that happen again.

‘Wine?’ Simon asked. She grinned out the corner out of her mouth, ‘Yes please,’ she said. As he got up, she turned and looked behind her, at the easel temporarily parked in the corner next to the trestle table. ‘I like the new colours on the painting,’ she said. He told her about them.

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Simon was an artist. That wasn’t what drew her to him, it was a clear and direct expression of interest sent through an app on a hot and still day that set off something in her, arousal rising from her taint to her throat. Horniness was mental not gendered, she offhandedly told a gay acquaintance years later, after he said that it was different for women. But honestly since the blockers or the uptick in violence, she couldn’t remember the last time she felt turned on with the same urgency as before. She used to feel it with all of her blood. Now, there was more to navigate, another gulf to cross, if only they’d meet her halfway. But Simon made it easy; in the before-times she was less afraid.

She liked guys that put it about. They didn’t make her feel ashamed. She wasn’t picky, but liked them blokey, older — preferred the attraction of the street to the screen. She had learnt that it was a punishable sin for a femme not to be beautiful, but why should men suffer the same fate? ‘What kind of guys are you into?’ her friend asked, scoping the crowd at the queer night. He seemed affronted by her disinterest in a man who lingered by her as they danced — tall, muscley, too clean. Unsure he would understand but feeling generous because of the edible, she leaned in and said:

‘Guys that look like they could get you pregnant the first time.’ ‘Like their blood is really close under the skin.’

She had noticed from her research that the finest men, some but not all fathers, had this beautiful leather patina to their masculinity, an ease that lubricated life’s hardships. Experience that becomes knowledge that becomes understanding. A worn kind of grace. At the time, she liked guys who had never given their gender much thought. The ones who couldn’t help themselves but turn back for another look her way.

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At twenty-five she wasn’t so young anymore, a drop-out with two jobs and no future. After her breakup with Andrew, she moved from South to East, from Deptford to Hackney. Herself and her belongings were driven by friends through the Blackwall Tunnel to a room on Mare Street that she would share with a friend in order to save money for a deposit. She loved and hated the city like it was family. She moved in two trips. Earlier in the week, Vic drove them in their work van. Friday after work, Fionn picked her up in her new Fiat.

It was kind of Fionn to come through on the plan; they’d grown apart, didn’t need each other like they did in school. Fionn had moved back after uni. Things were different. In the traffic on the Old Kent Road they made chat, driving slowly past the uncles sitting outside the cafés, who were also engaged in friendly debate. There was something in

the way Fionn looked at her after she caught her up on her recent history: trying to hide her expression whilst taking everything in; forcing her expression into one less disturbed. Once they were in it together. Waywardness was a direction for two girls who couldn't get out of their own way. From the reactions of others, she understood the standards of what she'd accept were a lot lower than the people around her. But Fionn had an out: she came from a good family; she had finally found a job she was good at where the work was meaningful; she had credit in the straight world, could live in it without looks or derision; *you couldn't blame her for that.*

Maybe it wasn't that deep, she thought on her day off, watching the glassy top layer of her coffee shake as she set it down on the kitchen counter. Maybe now Fionn just preferred pub coke with her straight mates over her own dancefloor bombs of MDMA.

THREE

'THINGS USED TO BE EASIER,' Simon said, seeing how hard things were for her, thinking on how hard things had become for himself. He wasn't the first to tell her — she'd seen the anger caused by austerity erupt between the student riots and the London riots, felt its violence hum in her everyday. Resentment was everywhere: under the fluorescent lights of the jobcentre; in the charged silence of her colleagues at her warehouse jobs and seasonal work; in the standoffs between the frustrated staff and patients at the GP's; in the brawls that broke out on the overpoliced

high street. Later that decade, she was told of better days many times by well-meaning elders between the release of *Blonde* and *Norman Fucking Rockwell*. Once on the ground floor of a beautiful red brick council flat in Bethnal Green, a man who looked like William Blake's Urizen had mentioned that in his day she would have been able to go on the dole between years at university, after she dropped out as a result of poor mental health. The older man asked her what her plan was for the future. She found it hard to shrug lying down in his bed.