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# Mayhem & marzipan

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MAYHEM & MARZIPAN

By

Christopher Nickolas Carlson

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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Christopher Nickolas Carlson  
April 15, 2011

**MAYHEM & MARZIPAN**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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Christopher Nickolas Carlson  
April 2011

## **ABSTRACT**

*Mayhem & Marzipan* is a novella in flash fiction. It details the path of a relationship between two very different queer men living in Spokane, WA during the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including their struggles with monogamy, commitment, and domestic abuse. Its experimental form allows for the breadth of the relationship and its impact to be viewed not only by the two men, but also by their families and their community through shifting and multimodal points of view.

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**November**

## Marzipan 1

Michael

It's important to grind the almonds yourself. You can buy it from a store, but it always comes out tasting like it's been made at a store, so it's important. You'll need about 4 cups. The sugar can come from anywhere, I've always used the white stuff that comes in the paper sack, but you could use cane sugar I think and it wouldn't matter. Confectioner's sugar probably isn't a good idea, though you'll need some for dusting at the end, and of course to coat the counter. Actually, just coat the counter right now with some powdered sugar so you'll be ready. 2 cups of sugar is about the right amount. Remember, with baking things have to be more measured, but they should still have heart. You'll need the whites of two eggs and just a dash of cream of tartar. Really it's a very simple recipe. I can't imagine why you haven't tried it.

My mother always made marzipan when her mother was coming to visit, said it reminded her of afternoons growing up when she'd bake with her mother and talk about boys. She never asked me about boys, but I think she wanted to, even in the years when I resisted staying with her sometimes, resisted recreating childhood memories.

Oh, water. You'll need some water. First, about  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup in a saucepan, and throw the sugar in with it. While it's heating, stopper the sink (you have a sink stopper, right? If not, use a towel to plug it like I did in my first apartment) and fill it about three inches with cold water. Once the sugar has dissolved, add the cream of tartar and bring it to a boil. Once it's boiling, cover it for about 5 minutes, you don't need to be precise, just the time it takes to tell a story or two. You have a candy thermometer, right? Uncover the mix and use it to test the temperature. When it gets to around 240° Fahrenheit take the pan off and put it in the cold

water bath. Make sure you keep stirring while it's in the water. Once it starts looking thick and turning opaque, pour in the ground almonds and your egg whites. Keep mixing, don't stop. Put it back on the heat, low this time, for two or three minutes to heat up the cooler ingredients, then spoon it onto the counter where you've put the powdered sugar. Don't touch it, though it will look and smell delicious. Just flip it around with your spatula a little until it's cool enough to work with your hands. When you think it's ready, put some powdered sugar on your hands (don't be stingy) and start kneading it like bread, until it's smooth, until it's hard in your hands and your knuckles want to quit. When it's done, you can use it immediately, if you want, but you'll rarely need that much. You can put it in a zip-lock bag. It will stay quite soft and pliable for weeks.

## Mayhem 1

Luke

It's not anarchy, really, but freedom I love. Freedom to be who I want to be and do what I want to do. Freedom to fuck who I want to fuck how I want to fuck them when I want to fuck them and where I want to fuck them. The movement doesn't really understand that, all wrapped up in marriage and the right to serve. In children who are better raised by lesbian parents than by heteros (who didn't see that one coming with two mothers involved?), in the refutation of lies spread by propagandists from the True Americans, refutations which invariably seem to piss all over those things I do actually want out of life: pleasure at the sight of a young man in a ball gag shackled to a whipping cross; an all-out orgy where no one exchanges names or phone numbers and everyone exchanges fluids; the sight of two people, genders unknown, kissing in a crowded restaurant while others pretend to be disgusted.

The mainstream movement revels in playing the stereotype, as if the reason we came out in the first place was to conform to a 1950s ideal of what a family is supposed to look like, only without the pesky gender roles—a house in the suburbs, kids underfoot going to the best schools, PTA and Campfire (not Boy Scouts), vacations at the beach with sand up our cracks. The leaders are so busy Uncle Tom-ing us, they don't even know they're selling us out, pointing to the antics of the faggots in the street as if rejecting the morality of those institutions that would enslave us is somehow wrong, since those heteros have been so nice in their progress of accepting us. *Nearly fifty percent*, is the rallying cry, as if it weren't a tragedy.

So yeah, I demonstrate, sometimes act out in ways unexpected and unacceptable to the mores of those who think Stonewall was about rights and not about the goddamn dam

bursting in the hearts and minds of queers who simply wouldn't take this bullshit anymore.  
The shards of glass left strewn on the pavement are a testament to the sacrifices I am willing to make in defiance of those whose main message for me is to quiet down because the adults know best.

## Meetings 1

Michael

The reality is boring, as the origins of love tend to be – mundane; and while time seemed to move slowly, it was because time spent on a city bus never moves more quickly than the traffic it's stuck in. Our eyes did meet, but the meetings were surreptitious and my eyes cast awkward down the moment his met mine. Three times, a meeting and the fall, my thick lashes bending to the power of gravity.

When his stop came, I didn't follow him, though I saw him looking back at me as he exited the bus. There was no hesitation in his stride as feet hit rubber stairs, and but for the hunger I saw in our brief moment of mutuality, I could have rationalized him as another straight guy pegged wrongly. But those three meetings, the contact and the fall, told me I was right.

## Original Sin 1

Luke

It's impressive that we've somehow managed to confuse the enemy with ourselves. We gays, we queers, we are our own worst enemy; we are the biggest barrier between our present selves and who we want to become. And we do want to become something as a group. All the over-identification with who's a bear and who's a twink, who's is gay versus straight versus trans versus intersexed is less about wanting than having. It's the fundamental gay sin: identity.

As a group, and this is the irony, we each want to stand out, we each want to be the most unique, to have the loudest voice, to be affirmed by the multitude that our pain was the greatest and that our suffering through all of those years (and what queer hasn't suffered?) was not only not in vain, but was in the service of some higher calling. Well, guess what, honey: it wasn't. That's not to say that you need to forget it and move on, but more that we need to stop using it as a crutch to prop ourselves up. We can walk on our own, I promise, and while it might be nice to think of the multitude as being behind us, they're really all there for themselves.

And that's the good news. We're all here, though clearly not all together, not yet. We're all here and we all need to get something straight: the goal has to be more than marriage. The goal has to be more than marriage, more than adoption, more than rights, more than the simple equivocation of the populace at large that we are indeed human, too. No, it needs to be more than that. It need to be a shout, a rallying call made to the largest of audiences, that the problems we have faced are endemic of a larger problem, the problem of faith. Faith as defined by those stick-in-their-ass white motherfuckers who never have a good



thing to say about queers, who never have a good thing to say about anything that isn't upright in its morals and uptight in its upbringing.

There needs to be a revolution of thought and of conduct, a revolution which states outright that we will no longer be trodden upon just because they say we are lower. And we agree with them, don't we? We bring it up for vote and we go through the courts and we beg the state legislatures to side with what they know is the course of history. And for what reason? So that we can be denied time and again, so that we can win victories in margins of less than 2%, so that those who oppose us can go on television and say on a major news network that we are a danger to America, so that Mike Huckabee can smirk and talk about the "fick factor" and claim, and have reliable liberals agree, that he is not a bigot, that his kind should not be shunned?

No, we need more than that. We need to take action, we need to move into the streets and to bring with us our straight allies if they will come and give them the finger if they won't. We cannot stand by any longer and wait, though, for the day that the Baby Boomers die and the country finally gets its head on straight, because waiting for that day to come is not a strategy, it's a retreat position. Our place, the place of all queers who want to see action when it can mean something to them, is on the front lines, is in the trenches where one can be spat upon by a grandmother who kisses her own faggot offspring with the same mouth and who would gladly turn her back on them if she only knew the truth of their true natures.

## Advice 1

### Michael's Dad

I was always straight with Michael about what it takes to be a good husband. From when he was little I tried to get him to realize that a man treats a woman like a person first, that no woman in her right mind wants to be treated like a goddess all the time. For awhile I thought those lessons were going to be completely in vain, after he came out to us, but I think there's more to it than sex roles and who puts what where, not that I like to think about that stuff. But I think Michael knows better today how to act in a relationship because of our talks, even if he had to switch out some pronouns.

I remember the first time Michael brought home a boyfriend, not that he told us he was, but in retrospect that's what he was doing. A friend his own age and they spent hours in his room playing "video games" after dinner, after his friend had helped Michael's mom clear up the dishes and get them into the dish washer. The kid so polite. He and Michael kept exchanging looks during the meal. Their eyes were matched across that table, never really leaving one another's even as they were shoveling food into their mouths the way only teenage boys can do. They were feeding a hunger that never goes away, no matter how much it's sated, like a burst dam whose walls have fallen but which reservoir pours out for weeks, never seeming to abate.

## Faggots 1

Luke

For me it's always been there, lingering in the back of my mind, cemented into my psyche by a father who used it like it was a week's wages at the track, thoughtlessly and without consideration.

Faggot: It's the first time I can remember saying the word, hurled back as an insult against a tormentor on the school bus home. I can still feel the pull of momentum in my gut as the bus driver – a woman in her fifties who scared the daylights out of me – stomped her foot on the break. She yelled at me in front of everyone about the use of the word, a word I didn't really know even the meaning of at that point, though later, when the calls had been made and the conversations had, when the belt had been pulled from my father's waist and my tears stained the crumpled whiteness of my mother's blouse, I would know its meaning completely.

My father didn't stop using it himself, even after that, in all manner of circumstances, thrown at football players and drinking buddies alike, each time with a slightly different flavor as if meaning and intention were wound together so tightly they could not be considered wholly separate. And eventually the term was turned on me, who, knowing its meaning, knowing in some ways it did apply, never thought to hear it flung in a manner so cavalier, so precisely cast in my direction.

## Meetings 2

Luke

I don't normally fuck virgins, so I was pleasantly surprised when Mike needed no guidance when I entered him, his back arching just right, an old pro but sweet in a way that belied that reality. He didn't mind the shabby state of the apartment, the way the couches were scavenged from streets and back alleys, the lack of art on the walls or floorboards. I think he was just grateful I'd brought him to a room instead of taking him behind the Chase building where the bums hide out but will leave you alone if you toss them a dollar.

For about a month I had been seeing him once or twice a week. Similar hours or something, because he takes the same bus I do when I head North to the bookstore after a long day. He was waiting for the bus by the mall when I came up behind him and placed my hand on his hip. He wasn't startled, but turned slowly. My patten is smooth, worn expertly by the current of a thousand unsuspecting boys, and he was no different, falling for my lines, his eyes refusing to meet mine straight on. He was younger than me – not too much by years but by experience. Michael's coy smile could bring a man to his knees, but more often signaled his willingness to hit his.

Pleasantly surprised he wasn't a virgin, that he knew the maneuvers and the shape of the dance, that his tango met mine in harmony. He didn't mind I didn't reach for him, seemed content to service himself as I took my pleasure while his eyes remained fixed on the wall in front of us. He finished first, his heart exploding all over the floor in front of him and his tensing sent me over.

After the rush my brain went numb, nothing to be done about it. I couldn't feel or sense or move and he had to scoot forward to disentangle himself. He headed to the

bathroom and all I could think of is how long it'd been since I'd cleaned the bathroom, and he was out before I could think of what to do next. He was expecting the same patter, but I don't have the skill when I'm not hard up, and all I can manage is an exchange of names—*Lucas. Michael. Nice place you have here. Yeah.*—an offer of tea, the general implication that I don't want him here anymore and I just wish he'd take the goddamn hint and get the fuck out. I stand by the door, a bell boy waiting for a tip.

Eventually he got it, moved toward the door in skittering steps, gathering garments and putting them on haphazardly. Realizing he'd put his pants on without underwear, he made a move to take them off, met my gaze, stuffed them in a pocket instead. *See you around*, he said like he meant it, leaned in and placed his lips on mine for a moment, pulled back. He left. He left and I wondered whether I'd see him again, what I'd say if I did, if he turned up in my social circle. He left and I hoped I'd never have to find out.

### Meetings 3

They meet again on the bus, strangers forcing them next to each other. Lucas keeps his eyes forward, pretending he doesn't notice the body beside him. The bus jolts to a stop and they make contact. There's no pretending there's no connection.

Hey, how've you been? he starts out, his mind not knowing where else to go.

Not bad, work. You know how it goes.

Work's been keeping me busy, too, Luke answers the unasked question. I haven't had much time to get out.

Michael wishes the conversation would die, that this could all be done and he could go back to pretending he doesn't care about being a perpetual one night stand. He wishes he were more hardened because he cannot stop himself from continuing the conversation, from asking, So, where are you headed. You still live downtown, right?

Sure, same place, you know the place. I'm headed to Hollywood Boutiques. You know it?

Sure Michael knew it, everyone knew it, knew it was the place to go if you needed to get off and were short on time. Sure, he said, sure I do. Do you go often?

A few times a week, usually, nothing too much. Luke moves closer so his face is near Michael's, so his breath newly minty will invade the air between them.

The bus lurches and Michael falls forward, his pelvis grinding against Luke's, both aware of what the friction is doing to them. Mike's hands finds Luke's pecs, so firm, so solid.

It would be easier if I didn't have to travel so far, Luke continued, not missing more than a beat, his hand gripping Mike's skinny arm at the bicep, not pulling him but keeping him close.

I imagine so, Mike said. The rest of the trip was a tumble towards home, to Mike's apartment because it was closer, the homey touches and cut flowers on the kitchen table rocking back and forth as they reached their mutual conclusion.

## Drinking 1

Luke

My history with alcohol started with a six pack stolen from a friend's dad, drunk warm in the back of a truck while Kevin's girlfriend went down on him. I was late to the game, apparently, most of my friends having started drinking years before. I was late to the game on blowjobs, too. Kevin, laughing, suggested Kristy give me one when she was done with him. Then he yelped because she bit down a little, pulled up and said, —“Fat’ll teach you.” Neither were paying me much attention, but I remember the heat from the blood that rushed to my face, the panic in that brief moment where it seemed like a possibility. What would happen when Kristy was bobbing up and down on a dick that wouldn’t pop up? I drank three beers that night, Kristy only wanting one, and not even finishing that one, and I remember the feeling so clearly, that wonderful buzzing of the ears, the euphoria completely unearned that somehow made my earlier panic seem foolish and distant. And the heat, I remember the heat, not unlike the warmth that comes to my face when I’m embarrassed or upset, but somehow friendlier, a feeling that lets me know that no matter the cost of the day’s events in emotion, they can always be washed away.



**December**

## Mayhem 2

Luke

Sometimes life is about indecision, rather than action. Like the bus stop at Indiana and Division, a block away from where the protest was weekly held, the pro-family crowd so obvious with their signs and photos, the pro-equality cohort equally boring with their moral superiority, the match if ever there was one to the sanctimony of the consciously religious. This time was going to be different, the factions numbering three, the “pros” to be met with an “anti” that they would not soon forget, the rhetoric steeped in whiskey and savored before bursting out of our mouths to catch flame.

I had pulled the cord on the bus, its hard plastic lining slick in my grip like latex, and the bus slowed and then stopped, its breaks creaking in the way that public transportation always does, the exhaustion of the driver inhabiting the mechanisms of the vehicle. I was about to get up when I saw her: eighty years old at least, her hair not white, exactly, but the color of age and experience. Her hands clasped beads wrapped three times around a dainty wrist, a crucifix in the palm of her hand. She steadied herself. I had been the one to pull the cord, but this was her stop as well, and I had no doubt her destination, her weak legs set patiently one in front of the other.

She thanked the driver on her way out and he grunted, the extent to which he was willing to acknowledge the humanity that was his daily cargo. She descended the stairs and was gone. The bus, like all buses, ended up by River Park Square, two blocks from our apartment, and I followed the old lady’s path in a daze, feet moving as if of their own volition from one non-slip tile to the next.

## Marzipan 2

Michael

I didn't realize how much I would miss it, the ability to call her whenever I needed to, but when you're in a relationship, especially when you're living together, you can't always be on the phone with your mommy, especially not when your boyfriend already thinks you two spend too much time talking, that you have a relationship that's somehow unhealthy, a relationship he might understand better if his own mother hadn't left him to the ravages of his father. But those thoughts are unkind, my mother would say. Still, it hurt us both, not being able to talk.

When I was in college, even before I came out, I would talk with her most days, such that a day I did not was anomalous and worthy of note. When Luke and I got serious, we had a serious talk, which we do from when I get involved. I said I couldn't talk with her as much, the scene the same as it had been with Ethan and Cody before Luke, me putting me first and mom accepting the backseat, sure in her mind that this one, too, would lose its novelty and within months I would be back to nightly calls. Each time I like to think that some part of her hoped she was wrong even as she hoped she was right, that she hoped more for my happiness than our connection, but I don't know if I can believe that, don't know if I can fool myself that badly, and if I could, what that would say about me and about her?

## Advice 2

### Luke's Dad

That boy will be the death of me, I goddamn swear it. Even since he was a kid he was such a fucking pansy, never wanting to go out for football or learn how to change a tire or replace an alternator. I tried explaining to him, like I did with Andrew, that this was part of being a man, learning about cars and sports and looking at pretty girls. I should have known he was queer when he didn't even want to do the last one, but he was a late bloomer, I figured, or the kind of guy who doesn't like talking about tail for one reason or another.

It all came out eventually, of course, and I told him I loved him. I told him I loved him twice, then told him to pack his things and get out. I told his momma the same thing when I found her sucking a dick that wasn't mine, kicked that son of a bitch's ass so hard she called the cops, then told her to scat. Haven't seen her in some time, but that's the thing. A man can't stand for shenanigans like that, for a woman or a son who don't behave right, who don't know that I gotta do what I gotta do in order to look myself in the mirror.

They've both got their sob stories, their lies, that I hit her and drove her away, that when he told me, shouted it at me, I clocked him in the mouth so hard he lost a tooth, but they're lying, the two of them, conspiring against me to turn Andy away, Andy the only one of the three of them worth two squirts of shit. Andy still comes by to talk, but not like he used to, not the same way. I'm gonna lose him, too, one of these days, but at least I'll be a man about it.

## Courtship 1

Michael

It's the little things: picking up a box from the post office because I had to work; the new punctuality; the holding of a door. The way out of nowhere Luke would say something romantic or suggest a night out over a night of thirty minutes' fucking and four hours of TV. The way slowly I was spending more time at his place, the convenience of morning sex a flimsy pretense.

We lay for hours in Riverside Park, saying nothing, gazing at the immobile carousel or the townies riding the gazebos looking for a touch of the divine in a pocket of mist. Sirius and cumulus, the clouds would swirl overhead and his arms would keep me warm, apart from the Autumn scene, with the switching of trees from green to yellow and red, to bare in a matter of weeks.

It must be something more because of the way he sacrificed for me. He blew off rallies that would otherwise have filled him with rage; his anger gave more readily to resignation, the feelings of an angry young man flowing away and sliding furtively into reason and perspective. He never took me up on the reading the paper, but he seemed to consider it longer each time I offered it to him.

Relationships are about the interpretation of signs; the way the bones cast from of our lovers' lives are scattered in particular patterns can show us the way to move forward. Each phase is determined by the gibbous moon and the casting of lots, the persistence of luck in a vacuum. Every word can be analyzed until it's stripped of its meaning, but the matter at hand is that you hold nothing in your hand and so you cleave to what you can to understand the mechanisms at play – at least you'll have him for another day.

## Faggots 2

Michael

The word was unfamiliar to me at first, so I had to ask for the kid to repeat it. It hadn't been aimed at me, but the description he gave, "you know, a sissy, a guy who likes getting cornholed," was close enough to my burgeoning identity that there was no real doubt.

Kevin was younger, twelve still, by a few months and I think it confused him that I had never heard the word, never heard my dad scream it at a television or my uncles use it to make fun of each other, but I guess there are different kinds of families and mine never let even minor curse words go without consideration, so it wasn't have been surprising to me that this one I hadn't encountered even at home. What was surprising was that I hadn't heard it at school, hadn't heard it on the bus on the way to a game or bandied about by the drummers who were relentlessly off-beat in the back of the band. And I wondered if I hadn't heard it because they knew, somehow, knew that the word applied more to me than to others, that it was a sign of deference that they hadn't inflicted it upon me or on anyone else in my presence, that it proved they were friends.

But things were changing then. People change and become cruel in ways that would never have occurred to their younger selves. From that day I waited, waited for the day that one of my *friends* threw that word my way, casually in a conversation, but knowing that it might mean more to me than it would to anyone else, that it might sting all the more because it was true. The word defined me.

I waited and I wondered what would happen when it did.

## Diner 1

I see it all the time: love. I see where it starts, where it settles. And most of the time I can see it end. Before the couple sees the end I see it. It's in the way their arms touch too often, the jostling of elbows above or below but never in perfect harmony. They always sit on the same side of the booth, the ones who won't make it. They order and then talk about nothing like it means the world to them.

It's worse with the queer ones, because there's so much goes on in their heads, especially during that first date. There's the *who's gonna pay?* and *will I get any?* that all the normal kids have to deal with, but then there's more with the queer ones. Their hands both reach for the ketchup and who knows what the result of that reach will be. Soggy fries, no doubt.

I remember this one pair of queers came in for awhile, both young, both looking for whatever slice of happiness they'd been told comes in a form that isn't pie or the first cup of coffee on a cold morning before the paper gets there. They came in for a couple months together, I waited a few times on them but they usually sat in Bill's section. The queer kids always prefer Bill because he's got an ass like granite and isn't shy about showing it off for tips. Not like I've never done the same thing, but my stuff isn't what those kids are looking for, so Bill takes them most times. But it was me their first time.

The first thing I noticed was their eyes wouldn't meet, even though the one kid kept trying to snag a glance the way most kids his age look for tits at a volleyball match. The other kid wasn't having any of it. His shirt *was* so tight he looked like he might pop out of it. He ordered for both of them like in some fifties movie, didn't make eye contact even with me

while he was doing it, like he was embarrassed even to be here. But I knew it wasn't that he was embarrassed to be here, but more that he was embarrassed by what he was doing, of the ordering of food and the admission that maybe this situation was exactly what he wanted out of life, which can be crushing for those queer kids. One of my cousins is queer, girl-queer, and she's got the opposite problem, always in love and never in-between.

They sat side-by-side, their knees touching under the table like no one has a view because they don't, baby kittens, their paws reaching and exploring but oblivious. And I could see it, the fractures that would come about between them, even in those early moments. The thing with nitroglycerin is that you don't know when it'll blast, but you damn sure know it's going to. And that's what I see, I see the potential for destruction. And honey, that capsule was set to explode.



## Sex 1

### Michael

The first time didn't count, that much was clear. It had been quick, over too soon to examine anything. The second time I knew what to do, what to look for. I discovered a birthmark in the small of his back, deep purple like a bruise. I discovered the mole even he didn't know he had, hidden beneath the hair of his armpit, not big and hairy, flat and cute, endearing in its imperfection and unknown in its origin.

His body was new and was therefore interesting. Each mound of muscle hidden under skin needed to be prodded, to be known. Giving in to the pressure of our couplings, he relented to my curiosity, exchanging time spent cuddling afterward for time when all he had to do was switch positions when I told him to, raise an arm or spread his legs so I could examine the boundaries of his peritoneum. Eventually he would get bored of this, catch his second wind, and shift, grabbing me and hurtling me onto my back, climbing on top of me and ~~making~~ making me pay for all that curiosity." His eyes were like an owl's when he said things like that, somehow focused on mine and searching out my vulnerabilities at the same time.

Our sex became regular, our mouths meeting in the right way the first time, our tongues calibrated to match each other's variance of speeds. My study paid off in knowing how and where to touch, spots sensitive to pleasure which he otherwise would have ignored, his own interest in my body becoming more pronounced as he spent time in foreplay, his fingers digging into me while his mouth moved all over, teasing, until we both couldn't stand it and we relented.

I think it was the sex more than anything that brought me close enough to get inside, to move into his head and eventually his house, to make myself indispensable to him in a way

that tricks, regardless of variety and need, could never be. My mouth was a conduit to the divine for him, somehow touching a god neither of us believed in to bring back the secret to sex that would never get boring, would never feel too familiar, but would only bring us closer to becoming a matched set the longer we spent in each other's arms.

## Courtship 2

Luke

It's about obligation, the lien he takes out on my precious free time. Why head to Hollywood when you could head over here, to a sure thing, to the kind of release that you know will feel better than anything an anonymous grandfather with man-tits and back hair could achieve with his eyes closed and floating in a bare bulb back room? This is the logic of commitment..

And that was the most frustrating thing, of course, the pretext of pretending that I cared even half as much as he did about the preciousness of a Friday night spent bowling or dancing, when left to the shadows of my former existence Friday would meld seamlessly into Saturday morning, the sun a sure signal of the desire for sleep. And more, that he was right, that those nights spent with friends trading tidbits were fulfilling in ways that the exchange of fluid and discarding of phone numbers would never be. Still, he seemed to think value judgment between the two realms was required. His side always won, my reality found lacking.

I knew it would happen as soon as he started hinting at sleepovers, a word that evoked surreptitious fingers under the covers, calluses exploring realms forbidden to daylight accompanying the tension of knowing neither was asleep. And for awhile that was the case, though daylight was no longer a barrier to that kind of play; romps in the kitchen and bent over the couch, a moment of connection before the chaos of another day. But that couldn't last any more than the newness of his scent after a hour's embrace, the film of the everyday and familiarity transforming him from scented candle to potpourri, offensive and eldritch in a place once called home.

And now he would call it home, the slow-motion move-in over a matter of weeks, when shirts were combined in the wash and toiletries left to stay in the shower, drawers formerly ordered now bursting their bounds with boxerbriefs and tube socks. And condiments never before seen in my refrigerator now populating the space Dijon mustard used to rule in solitude. These things aren't major, not seismic events, but in aggregate they can mean only one thing, the inevitable conclusion of cohabitation, the penultimate goal I had known would be Mike's from the moment I fucked him more than once.

## Worry 1

### Michael's Mother

Even as a kid, he was a worry wart. —Mommy, no one at school is going to like me.”

—Mommy, there could be glass on the bottom.”

—I don't want to learn to drive, I'll just get a speeding ticket or get in a wreck.”

—Mom, I don't want to ask her, she's just gonna say no.”

Well, that last one counts a little less, I guess, but you can see what I'm talking about.

He's always been a worrier, always concerned with the order of things, the potential for things to go awry. He worried that Santa wouldn't bring him presents because he called his brother a bad name, worried for weeks, then wrote Santa a letter apologizing and explaining his actions.

More than anything, though, Michael's always worried about how other people would see him. He didn't come out to his father and me until he was nineteen, and even then he couldn't say the word gay. It was a coming out of inference. He never brought a boyfriend home and rarely confided in me. I suppose it was the Catholic thing, the fact that I never joined PFLAG like a good gay mom is supposed to do, but those women are usually intolerable and, well, I'm not going to apologize for my faith. I do so hope Michael comes back to it someday.

The worst was when he was twenty. He had come out about a year ago, none of his friends really cared one way or the other, and by that time his father had come around. You didn't hear this from me. It was at the campus—he was living away from campus—but he'd heard there was an LGBT center and there were meetings, meetings where a gay boy could go and just be himself, maybe make new friends, find a boyfriend, that sort of thing. He

looked the room up online and never told anyone he was thinking of going, not even his roommate at the time. The meeting was for six and Michael got there early, he always arrives early, just like I taught him, he got there early, but he couldn't go inside, couldn't make himself try the door. He had brought his backpack with him, had homework he was supposed to do anyway, so he sat there in the hall. Other kids came, opened the door, went inside. He sat there for over an hour, over an hour on the tile floor of the hallway outside the LGBT center, pretending to read Kant but really wanting to go in the room. He waited until the kids came back out, filtered out in pairs and small groups, their mouths buzzing but Michael not hearing the words. He waited awhile longer until he was sure everyone had gone, then got up and left, walked back home and called me, told me he couldn't go in, couldn't make himself because what would they think, how could he fit in with people who had probably been out since high school, with the kind of people who would join a group meant for queer young adults.

## Diner 2

It's hard to say how it happens, the transition from random customer to regular, but I know it happens slow most times. They come in once or twice, then more frequently, and suddenly you're seeing them a few times a week and you know exactly what they're going to order. It happens so naturally that I don't even realize I'm nurturing a regular until I already have one, most times. I don't think they know about it, either, most times.

My best regulars are the gay kids, under thirty and still thinking that eating out for lunch with their honeys is a good way to stay connected. Some of them stop by for dinner, too, but most regulars are lunch regulars, tied to a specific time of day, either by their schedules or by their preference for daytime dining. It gets dark by five or six these days. Vinnie says it's the same for him, working the night shift they come in and order food, don't eat a ton of it but you know how that goes. They're there at least twice a week. He says he loves em, the way they smile and flirt when they get done at Dempsey's or some other new club that's progressive enough not to lynch them, a larger feat here than ninety miles west.

I get to know their orders the same way they get to know each other. They don't see me back here, really, though the kitchen is open and I'm available for public viewing, but I see them, their romances and their heat. Polly is always going on about their potential for destruction, but what painting worth looking at doesn't have flaws, what would be the fun of a relationship in which nothing had even the possibility of going wrong?

## Sex 2

Luke

The beginning was great, the newness and his willingness to explore. He was so curious about me, so tuned into every part of my body, always exploring and poking and pinching my flesh, checking its ability to stretch, to pull away from the muscle it enveloped.

But then he became less interested, like I was a puzzle he had solved. He stopped exploring each nook of my being, stopped holding his breath for less than a minute after sex and then charging into the exploration with the same vigor he had shown while writhing under me. His pupils no longer flared when he took in the sight of me, the hours of work I had put into my abs, the tightness and definition that only true believers can achieve, and then only if they're extremely lucky.

I didn't mean to, but I started to grow bored with my new mate, the way I grew bored with most boys after only an encounter or two, my eyes immediately grabbing onto bulges while waiting for an elevator, the uncomfortable shifting, microscopic almost, when I knew a guy was into me, knew I could have him on his knees within moments, but resisted because —we were being faithful,” —we were building our relationship first,” —we were becoming better people.” If I had to hear Michael's sanctimonious speechifying about the power of monogamy, about its historical importance one more time I—I really would cheat on him. I would cheat on him in a moment, with the first swinging dick that caught my fancy. But no, I couldn't do that.

It was on the bus, the first time it almost happened. It was his eyes caught me off-guard. Usually I'm the pursuer, the one whose eyes undress in an obvious way, signifying that we should exit the bus at the same time. His eyes were intense, as if something more



than human lurked behind them, and I could feel him in my mind. His eyes said “I want to fuck you,” “You are everything I need to feel complete tonight,” “Without you telling him, he never has to find out about a one-off fuck.” My lips were dry, my throat parched and thirsty for the slow slide of tongue over tongue.

The bus slowed and he looked back at me, his eyes intent as he got up and walked slowly to the exit door, his hand grazing my shoulder as I passed. I didn’t dare look backward at him as he left the bus, knew that if I saw those eyes again, if I could know what we could do and not get caught, I would in an instant follow him wherever was nearest, feel him, try to flip the dynamic so he’d be on his knees, not caring if the ploy worked or not. I couldn’t look back.

Instead I looked forward, past the bus driver to the road ahead. Here was Indiana, here was the clinic. I could get off here, get off legitimately for a purpose, but I kept my gaze ahead, rode the bus until it reached the terminus downtown, walked slowly, my feet shuffling more than stepping, to the apartment we shared, to the life we were making together, to the better people Michael wanted us to become.

**January**

### Marzipan 3

Michael

Being a boyfriend to Luke is a lot like being a housewife in the fifties. I'm in charge of the laundry, the cooking, the cleaning, the shopping, some of which sometimes he'll help me with, but as an afterthought more than anything, the implication being that if he weren't doing it it would be me getting it done. And for the most part, I don't mind the monotony; hell, I love doing laundry, the stain-fighting and folding makes me feel like a ninja, as if the disheveled pile of clothes has been beaten into submission and all that's left alive are starched shirts and pressed pants.

But there's more to the duties than just the chores, chores only slightly more onerous than the ones I would be doing were I living alone or with a sloppy roommate. There's also the lack of respect for the things I do for him, the lack of support when I spend half a day kneading dough into cute little animals or making a cake and all he can focus on are calories and carbs, simple sugars and the time one would have to spend on a treadmill to make up for the indulgence which, in his opinion, is never, ever worth it, as if we hadn't already found each other, as if this weren't the end of the line.

And the sex. The whenever-he-wants-it-I-have-to-be-in-the-mood-and-if-I'm-not-tough feeling I get whenever he comes up behind me after I've had a long day and presses himself into me when all I really want to do is sit on the couch and talk or watch a crappy TV show or listen to the Cure on repeat for hours and hours. He reaches forward and brings me to life, makes me want to feel something for him so badly that in that moment I do and everything for fifteen minutes is wonderful. And then the click of the television. And then the drone of the movie that I otherwise would have enjoyed but am now assaulted by.

## Mayhem 3

Luke

It was easy enough to quit going, those were just comrades, and everyone relishes the defection of a former freedom fighter—I knew the things they would say about me because I had taught them the craft of tongues, how to form the words, reach that fever pitch of high rhetoric and ad hominem that is the power of the revolutionary and the zealot. How strange the similarities of our tools to those of our enemies, the arms race having stalled out in the Neolithic period.

While the transition was easy, it was, as is often the case, fraught, the complexities of who I used to be and who I was turning into were more than a mind could comfortably contain. And so, making love to Michael, rather than fucking him, because something of a commonplace event, his arms free of bonds and his mouth ready to accept rather than being used. His smile as I don't tear into him is transcendental, the lack of pain somehow a virtue in his sight, as if pain and pleasure could be anything but twins, as if the world were more concerned with one than the other.

I wanted to hit me, right then and there, hit me like I wanted to hit him, but because of the invisible bonds I had caught myself in, neither possibility was tenable. I ached to ache, to make him ache, for one of us to feel in the morning the bruising of flesh underneath soft skin, the way a muscle strained while resisting a scream could be more satisfying than the most sinful of acts committed in mutual pleasure.

Micheal moved beneath me and my foot slipped, driving me deep and fast. His cry was brilliance and sound unexpected; I came almost instantly as his voice filled the room, filled the darkling void that threatened to close off the moon.

–Sorry, love,” I said, faking sincerity, reaching forward and through his legs to the obligatory act.

### Courtship 3

—So, what do you mean are we a couple? ‘ You live here now, basically.’”

—Yeah, I stay over all the time, some of my stuff is here, but what does that mean if you’re still fucking other people?”

Mike’s breathing was even, his naked back still taut against Luke’s muscled abs. —It means we’re queer, Mike. It means we don’t have to stop doing things we enjoy just because we’re dating.”

—Things we enjoy, ‘ god you’re such a cliché.” Mike pulled away, sliding his legs off the bed, stepping down onto the cold November floor, the heat from the baseboard units never quite high enough to keep the chill out of the wood.

—What, you want me to stop? You think that’ll make you happy? You think it’ll make me happy?”

Mike’s mouth quirked a bit, a kind of half-frown, his features sloughing, sliding slightly south. —Yes. I think we’d both be happier. At least say you’ll think about it, that you’ll try.”

—Fine. I’ll think about it. But don’t think you’re going to change my mind.”

—No chance of that.”

Mike made his way into the small bathroom, closed the door. He turned the shower on, reached back and felt the wetness on his back as he waited for the steam to signal the shower was ready for use. He glanced sidelong into the mirror, his reflection slowly blurring as the shower filled the room with billowing clouds. He stepped into the shower, making sure the burning water first hit his shoulder blades.

## Abuse 1

Michael

It was quick, that first time. The moment passed without comment, almost. We were in the kitchen, the rally he was supposed to be at had started three hours ago and he was still here, still with me, still fighting about the same bullshit, the dishes and the laundry, the sarcasm and the lip. We had been going in circles with each other, I shouted, it was only once, and then it happened.

The contact was quick, a flash of cold jelly against the side of my face, the kind of contact I wouldn't think twice about in a shirts and skins basketball game. His hand seemed to linger, seemed to stay on my cheek for two seconds too long, then broke away as I glanced quickly left. Everything seemed wet, as if covered with water, drowning, and we stood for a moment looking at each other, our eyes connected. I think he was as surprised as I was.

He lunged forward and I didn't flinch, his mouth crashed against mine, and soon our clothes were a pile on the linoleum, a thin layer of warmth as he pushed me to my knees, his passion for me driving away the surprise of the moment before, a salty wave of comfort, an assurance that it would never happen again.

## Drinking 2

Michael

The first time I blew a guy, I came without hands, the moment too much to bear. The wash of shame that followed, as it always followed an orgasm at that time, sent me running for the bottle. Of course it was whiskey, that now familiar friend, the bright burning of that amber liquid following the load I'd gulped.

When Luke first hit me, I didn't think much of it, didn't think of needing a support system for something that was so clearly a one-off event. I didn't want to deal with the realities of what might be coming. It was only a swallow at first, just something to calm my nerves after some sex that got too rough or started too violently for my taste, not the type of thing to worry over much. But a swallow became two and two became a pull, a pull became a glass on the rocks, became a glass neat, became a bottle, became the definition of myself, wavering in the reflection of tempered glass.

It's not that the booze was something to numb the pain so much as it was something else to concentrate on, the kind of personal failing toward which someone could point easily and say, "Yes, well, he's a drunk, what do you expect." Because it was so easy, because each morning started off with more than a little liquid courage, it soon became less and less a distraction, and more of my time had to be focused on the real, especially when the room was spinning and everyone and everything around me felt like I was seeing it through the kind of haze only heard about at AA meetings and best-selling memoirs, a reclusion in public so isolating that the only way to mediate it was to reengage with the thing I had been running away from in the first place.



### Advice 3

#### Luke's Brother

Luke's always looked out for me, steered me well when dad would go off on his bouts of advice. Dad told me women love a man who acts like a man, shit like that, useless shit which explains his two ex-wives and his estrangement from Luke. When we were kids, before I knew he was a queer, he would tell me how to get girls, how to treat them right, even when he was secretly fucking his friend Mitch. Mitch followed him around like a puppy for the better part of a decade before he got hit by that car. Luke told me a woman wants to be treated like a lady, but not a queen, like she matters but still wants to get fucked, which I always took to heart. He taught me how to shave when dad was too drunk and too stupid to do it right, telling me that he learned by himself, so I should do the same and stop bothering him.

I guess nothing much changed when Luke told me, though I stopped undressing around him cause I didn't want him to see my dick. It was him I called the night I went to that club with my girlfriend, the one that turned out to be a gay club. I didn't mind and was letting this guy buy me some drinks when he grabbed my hand and put it on his dick. I'd never touched another guy's dick, not like that, anyway, cause wrestling doesn't count. I freaked out a little and ran out of the club, called him on the phone and asked him why he didn't warn me about that kind of shit, that gay guys were fucking pervs like that. He laughed at first, but then told me it wasn't a big deal and calmed me down. I still went home and fucked my girlfriend three times, just to be sure, but it wasn't so scary anymore.

## Worry 2

Michael

I'm not sure if I believe he won't do it again, or what it means for us if he does, since I've made it clear that he's my priority in most things at this point, and what are the consequences of a precedent like that? He's been acting so much more stable since it happened then, grabbing flowers at the supermarket and even taking me out to dinner for a real date in a restaurant that you can't find in every city in North America. Still, what can it mean that he would do that to me, that I would let him? Not just let him, but reward him for his violence with some of the best sex we've had in months, if reward is the right word, which it almost certainly isn't. What kind of person would that make me? Someone who uses sex as a pawn in their relationship, good sex for good behavior, bad sex for bad, or worse no sex, which would be like punishment for us both.

### Sex 3

Michael

It's just the click of a mouse. Curiosity, nothing I would ever really do. That's what I told myself.

His name, according to the email header, was Anton, though I very much doubted it. I'm sure he selected it because he thought it would be untraceable to him, or might suggest he was well-read as well as horse-hung. Most of the posts I made were from stock photos, or from photos lifted from other cities, guys whose cocks were already out there for the world to see, but this one, the one Anton had responded to, had been a text-only ad, had been just my words. My words crafted to titillate, to attract just the kind of guy I feared... Well, the kind of guy Anton was anyway.

The first email he sent was casual, was warm, even with the 8" monster of a picture attached to it, but the tone was right, the feeling was right, as if he were someone, despite the casual sex, that I could feel some sort of connection with. We flirted back and forth for a few emails, I explained about the situation with Lucas, about the worry of recursion into what I hoped would be an isolated incident. Somehow it was easier talking to someone online than it was to talk even to myself, the send button being a catharsis ice cream couldn't mimic.

For his part, and because he was a stand-up guy who valued honesty, Anton explained about his wife, about the lack of connection and understanding between them, about the unspoken understanding that he would get needs met elsewhere if she were going to deny him release at home. It all seemed so reasonable, the subterfuge and justifications a kind of shield against the realities of both of our situations, an agreed upon falsehood that somehow became more real than the truths that daily surrounded us.

It was me who first suggested meeting up. The university he'd mentioned in an email was familiar to me from past dalliances before Lucas. It was me who arranged the date so that Luke wouldn't know I was gone, even, because he was at work and I was scheduled but had been shifted. For once my asshole boss's inability to understand how a bi-weekly schedule operated had paid off, and I mentally forgave him.

We didn't fuck that first time. We met for weeks before, our inability to escape even when we knew we should translated into a kind of paralysis, an inability to make the first move even when all of the signals were present. The sexual stars had aligned above us and screamed "FUCK ALREADY" at the top of their lungs. But we didn't. We drank macchiatos and talked about our relationships, his kids, my school and my bullshit job at the big box computer store, the way the boy in the backroom kept giving me the eye that signified he'd like to start something, but the homogeneity of their place, its ability to suffocate even the fiercest spark of connection made that liaison more impossible somehow than this attempt at connection, with our fumbling feet under the table, our hands grazing each other like princes in some kind of queer fairy tale.

Of course, like all things queer, we eventually relented. Specifically, I relented, my hand twining with his in a grip, my shoeless foot running up his leg, playing with his testicles in the middle of Café Dulce, the barista's eyes averted because she knew what was going on, but it titillated her a little to know it, something about the pointed way she didn't quite look away as he grew in his pants. And soon, "I have an office," and soon, "Let's go," and soon, "Oh god."

He fit like a glove, like I knew he would, his cock a perfect match for me in that moment. I could tell the key wouldn't fit later, that the magic was in the doing, not the person

being done. We wasted our energy in his office on the desk and kneeling on the floor, and as the moment came I think we could both feel the pulling away, the realization that, even after all that talking, this was still about sex, about the sex he wasn't getting at home, about the intimacy I craved with Lucas.

We pulled apart, awkward and afraid of each other, a mutual acknowledgement that, like all things, we knew only what we'd been told. Did Anton have a wife at all? Was Anton his real name? I had assumed not at first, but then, maybe it was, maybe he was that naïve. Or maybe he was more devious than I thought, maybe this office wasn't his. All of these thoughts swirled around as I pulled up my boxers, bunching them between the cheeks of my ass to absorb the lube until I got home, could get cleaned up, could wash myself.

Anton didn't kill me, wasn't a psycho obviously. He tried to maintain contact. Maybe his half of the fairy tale had been more than a lie, had been in some ways true, but I knew mine had been nothing but pillars of salt. I responded to his emails reluctantly. We met for coffee a few times more, his legs initiating what mine were no longer interested in.

What surprised me was that I didn't feel the need to confess. I had been certain the Catholicism and the guilt of the situation would coalesce until my stomach was in knots—but it never materialized. I held onto Lucas as he fucked me, held onto the sink as he hit me, and never felt the need to unburden my soul of my misdeed.

It wasn't until later that I realized the lack of guilt was a silent acknowledgement that Luke had been right all along, that I didn't feel guilty because there was nothing to feel guilty about.

## **February**

## Abuse 2

Luke

Violence became the key to arousal, unlocking in me feelings that were locked away under my skin. I couldn't have held him in my arms and touched his cheeks without first punching him, couldn't have held him so close to my face, to my lips, without something to apologize for.

Of course, like all drugs, I started to build up a tolerance, more and bigger events were needed more often to achieve the same effect. It started with a slap and I figured it would end there, that it would never happen again, that I wouldn't permit it. But like all my promises, I broke it without thinking. The second slap firmer, a crack of bone against soft flesh, malleable like clay bent to my will. He seemed surprised by it, but I overtook him with my strength, with my passion for him. Our mouths met and we fused as we had never before, bodies twining in the February chill of our downtown apartment.

The third time, so inappropriately public, was in the middle of Hollywood Boutiques. His pique about a movie and the price tag of porn. I struck low so the peon at the register wouldn't see, so that our love could be private. He gasped and the magazines and handcuffs disappeared. I grabbed him by the wrist and wrested him into the cold, his arm twisting in mine like a toddler's, as if trying to get away, until it became apparent my intention, until we reached the back of the storefront, the briskness of the air hitting first his thighs, then brightening into a rosy bloom on his cheeks, I kissed him and brought him close to me, clutching him against me, our growing excitement. I pushed him back and hit him again, this time in the arm, hard and concrete and his face flashed pain like a rainbow.

It happened again and it kept happening, each time with less merit, as if merit were involved, each time a little closer to the last. I went a week once without it, just to see if I could, and we grew apart, our eyes never meeting, our sex rudimentary and awkward, as if we had never fucked before, as if our bodies were new and our limbs didn't yet respond to commands. A single punch and everything connected again, like I was the Fonz and he was a jukebox in need of correction.



### Diner 3

I liked those two, at least at first. The one was so wide-eyed, always throwing me a smile and chatting me up, checking out my ass when he thought I didn't know where his eyes were going, as if all eyes didn't land there sooner or later. They were cute, he so brazen, his boyfriend of a different kind, quieter but more in control. He'd order most times, and then I'd come back and give them coffee and if it wasn't too busy, we'd talk for a few minutes, flirt back in forth in a way that usually guarantees a bump in tip, my lips moving more slowly and my banter just a little blue.

I'm not sure when the shift started, but it was there. The gregarious one, Mike, stopped making eye contact as easily or as well. He seemed to shift uncomfortably, like he was favoring one side over the other. The other guy got more open with the flirting, his eyes staring at my ass openly. I think he would've fucked me in the bathroom if I'd let him. His stares were making me more than a little uncomfortable, but he always tipped well and he seemed nice. Nice in that way Jafar did when he was trying to schmooze the sultan, calculating and unable to keep a sartorial smirk from his lips.

They stopped coming in suddenly, and I didn't see them for months after that, but I couldn't forget the look in his eyes as he stared at me, like I was on display in a museum somewhere and he was going to write a critique of the artist's style, cold and calculating, but appreciative of the technique, the structure, the effort.

## Sex 4

Luke

It was him again, the eyes were the same but the hair was different, buzzed close to the scalp this time as if warring against the cold air surrounding us. His eyes were the same, though, and sank right into my skull. I knew, though, that I could get the upper hand if I just tried, released the Luke inside and went for the kill with abandon. I didn't have to go through with it, after all, it would be just something I *could* do if I wanted to.

His eyes were staring at my sockets, and I decided to go for it. I flashed him the Look, the one that always made them look away, their souls somehow too fragile to bear the sexuality behind it. I've never really understood the Look, its effectiveness seems to be lost on me. For a few years, I tried to master it, tried to get closer to perfecting it, glancing in mirrors and shiny windows trying to understand the cadence it beat into other hearts, but nothing. I only saw myself as a goofy face, the kind of face that small children would laugh at and bad porn actors would emulate. But somehow, the Look is a force to be reckoned with.

So I shot him the Look and he bent away from me, not laughing to himself, but the familiar structures of arousal dancing in the language of his torso. In the bending, I knew I had him, so I sauntered forward and stood by him, my eyes forcing his to meet mine. "Your stop is next," I said. I felt the risk of this kind of behavior. What guy in his right mind wouldn't laugh at such a line, but he reached over and pulled the cord, signaling his willingness. His eyes still burned, but they burned somehow less brightly, their embers fading.

The bus slowed near Garland Street and we got out. I think he assumed we would go into the Boutique, but I passed by it, sneaking in between the sex shop and the SCUBA place

next door. He didn't wait for a signal, just dropped to his knees and opened my jeans to the bracing cold, then the moist warm that would ice over in a moment if he didn't keep sucking.

After a few minutes I pulled him to his feet, turned him around roughly and pulled his pants down without bothering with button or buckle. I spit into my hand and felt for his insides, and he winced then started to relax. He looked back at me, saying only one word: "Condom?" The voice was plaintive and pleading. I could not believe this boy thought he had been my match for even for a moment.

"Just shut up and take it," I said. And he did. He took it knowing the months of wondering that would follow this act, pacing by the couch and cursing the idea of danger. Not that he had anything to worry about, but I wouldn't tell him that. Eventually I was spent. I pulled up my boxers, zipped up, started to walk away.

A final sentence: "What's your name?"

It's a sentence I've heard before, one that always accompanies an attempt at control, and so I ignored it, walking away without saying a word. I waited for the bus and the boy came up behind me, obviously needing to go farther down the path, too. We sat there in silence until the squealing brakes of the city bus signaled our next move.

## Drinking 3

Michael

Sometimes it's hard to take a step backward and remember the fun of things before they became too painful. Beer and shots and mixed drinks used to be fun, used to lower inhibitions, make us more truly who we were in the first place. That's what my mom always said about liquor, that decent people became better when drunk and assholes revealed their true natures, that no matter what else it might be used for, alcohol was an equalizer because it demanded honesty in a way that most other things will not, whether for fear or for subterfuge or for reasons not entirely apparent even to the one who conceals them.

The first time Luke said "I love you" to me he was hammered, hammering into me, actually, but face-to-face and caught up in the sex. The moment he said it the carpet that was rubbing my back raw no longer seemed to matter. He had said exactly the right thing to send me over the edge emotionally and physically. I shuddered under him and my mind was a phantasmagoria of futures, the hollow ghosts of people I might have met otherwise slipping through one another and bathing my reverie in spectral light.

### Abuse 3

Michael

He punched me. Not a slap or a hit or a playful act, but an act steeped in violence. This time there had been no cause, simply a pivot point in time and the fist was flinging. I had learned to flinch, to cover my face with my hands, had learned the body language of suffering so he would transition to the quickening that always came. This time it didn't come.

I had always thought of myself as someone who would never be in this situation, the kind of guy who would make Gloria Gaynor proud. I had always thought I would stop it, or that it would happen once. I didn't expect for it to happen gradually, for the fits to transition from potentially playful into full-blown aggression. I didn't expect this to happen to me.

I knew it was over when it was no longer only his fists. I was on the floor, crying, not quietly, and the neighbors doubtless heard the difference this time, heard that these sobs were not soft but the primal cry of pain, but I didn't know if they would stop anything. The pain bending to punch me must have gotten to him, must have been too much to bear, or maybe it just seemed easier, but my eyes were closed so I didn't see it coming when the toe of his loafer hit my stomach. I screamed and mid-scream I started to vomit. The light of the room disappeared. Then two more kicks, same foot, same spot, my arms useless across my face. I lay there for a moment, hearing his breathing, expecting it to even out, expecting him to lean down and pull me into him, at least to my knees, but he didn't move. And then he did move, but not toward me. Toward the door.

I thought about packing, thought about separating my things from his. When he came back he wouldn't be mad anymore, there would be no more of this, I knew. I knew he knew it was over, that we were through. But I didn't pack anything, didn't wait to see if the

neighbors had gotten the courage to make a call, didn't want to be around even if they had. I just grabbed my jacket and left, knowing I would never see the inside of this place again, a thought that saddened me. For the second time I cried as I walked down the stairs into the freezing air outside. I was surprised it was still light outside, surprised that light could still exist in a world like this.

## Faggots 3

fag·got [fag-uht]

**-noun**

1. a sissyboy who doesn't know that big boys don't cry, but who does know that tears are often the best sort of defense against bullies you fucking assholes
2. a bundle of sticks, which is an image I've always laughed at because I have a hard time understanding the etymology there. I mean, really, the only way I've ever been able to think about this meaning is by imagining two guys rubbing poles together. What else is there, right?
3. the marine I went down on last week who could snap you in two like a faggot, whose muscles were bulging in that particular way that makes you think of steroids before you see the massive rod dangling between his perfectly shaped legs and then all thoughts turn to nothing in an instant as the blood rushes from your head.
4. a cigarette. [chiefly British] but even the British are beginning to get the message about this one and if you try to use it with an American accent you can believe that you won't be believed and that you will have to answer to me.
5. the clouded reflection you see in a mirror

## Break-up

### I.

He wasn't expecting the call, so when it came in he was surprised enough to answer. "Hello. What do you want?" Two distinct statements, each one dripping with malice.

The voice on the other end seemed hesitant, as if it didn't know where to begin. "We need to talk, Mikey," the voice said, unsteadily.

"I can't see about what." Mike's throat catches a bit.

"Just—can't we talk?"

"Fine. Where?"

"The diner, I guess. How about five?"

"See you then." Michael swallowed again. He knew he would go. He had to.

### II.

It had to end; he could see that. There was no good in keeping things going. Luke was becoming a monster and what he blamed it on was Michael. Not the physical Michael, but the Platonic Michael that insisted on monogamy and wanted him to be a shining knight.

Luke got to the diner early, snagged a booth, placed his coat on the seat next to him so Michael would take the other booth, just in case. He needed to get this out, this needed to be clean. He ordered a beer, thought better of it, asked for just water. He was sure Mike would show up. Mike owed him that, he thought.



### III.

Mike walked into the diner and saw Luke, his water already gone, placed to the side of the table to let the waiter know he needed more. He was almost half an hour late. He'd wanted to see if Luke would wait that long for him. He crossed the room and sat down at the booth across from Luke.

### IV.

The kid hadn't ordered, even though it irritated the waiter to have him filling up a table with the hope that his date was coming. He was about to kick him out when his date showed up, the same kid that was usually in here with him but looking somehow shakier, wobbling a bit.

He took their orders and watched them as he served the other people in the diner, the dinner hour picking up a bit. He saw the motions, the resignation on both of their faces, the acknowledgement that this had been at most a passing thing and that they had been fools to think it had been forever. The waiter read their faces so easily. He had memorized the motions, the digging in the pocket, the strong-arming of the key ring, the nodding and the tears that welled so close that a sad song on the radio would cause them to burst.

### V.

Mike left the key on the table on top of a ten dollar bill. It had been easy, really. Nothing. A piece of cake. They both wanted it to end, that was clear from the beginning, it was down to who would get the credit, and Mike pounced on it like an alley cat after his last scraps of dignity. He had been beaten, he had been humiliated, he would have this at least, the last laugh, the last piece of who they once were would be his.

## VI.

Luke sat at the booth and ordered another refill on his water. The food felt heavy in his stomach, but he felt somehow lighter for being no longer burdened with Mike, for being no longer burdened by who Mike made him be. He could just be himself again. Couldn't he?

## Original Sin 2

Michael

Look at the progression of Will in *Will & Grace* from a masculine heartthrob to another nelly queen by the end of the series and you'll understand that America likes its queers a certain way: easily identifiable and powerless.

It's not the fault of the actors or the makers of the show or even of the networks putting the show on; certain things sell and the things that sell in America are absolutely part of the problem. We use language—all of us, even the queers—that sets us apart from the mainstream, and it's only a simple step from “not the mainstream” to “Other.” Even our attempts at identity lead inexorably to this result: LGBTQAA\*69 (whatever the fuck it is now). We have turned identity into specialization such that there may be more varieties of queer than kinds of doctors or lawyers.

There really is no solution to this problem. The straight people aren't jumping on the specialization express. We're not seeing droves of straight men who are only interested in BBWs creating an identity for themselves because they don't see themselves as “Other,” just a different kind of “Normal.” We're the Other. We're the Other because we're always in the minority; queers will never outnumber any other group because we're always a subset of whatever group we're in. But that doesn't make our Othering any less a sin, doesn't make the straight world any less culpable for the pain it inflicts on us for our audacity to exist. It doesn't mean we have to like it.

## Advice 4

### Michael's Brother

Michael never really learned what it meant to date someone. He dated a few girls in high school, before he came out, but it was more about appearances. I have to assume that the lessons he learned were more about subterfuge and the skills of deception than about what dating is actually all about. I've tried to explain to him that his hang-up about monogamy is goddamn ridiculous, that he doesn't need to date every person he fucks a couple of times, but he won't listen to me, saying I'm not romantic or don't have a poet's soul, as if that's a bad thing. He's always been like this, too, doing whatever he wants to do without the least concern about who is gonna have to pick up the pieces when it all comes crashing down.

He came to me after he broke up with his first boyfriend, bawling his eyes out and being a general pain about something he should have realized by now: relationships end and it's only a few that don't end quick. Fuck, *all* relationships end at some point, whether someone leaves or someone dies. There's an expiration date on them. But he blubbered into my couch cushion and told me that he would never feel whole again.

I've tried to be fair with him, tell him that the reason people date around is to get a better sense of who they really want to be with, and then they settle down. I could tell from the minute I met this last one that it would end with Michael crying on my couch again. Granted I didn't expect the bruises, and if I ever see that Luke again I'm gonna kick *him* in the stomach, but I could tell, and I could tell that even Luke knew that this wasn't a forever proposition. Michael, ever the busy bee, ever the one who has to make sure everything goes just so, kept the conversation steered to the mundane and then didn't bring Luke by again.

I keep hoping that each cycle will be the last, but like the Ragnarok, Mike's boyfriends will keep dumping him through the end of time. Each time he feels like it can't get any worse, that this is the worst the Earth has ever burned, but then another boy comes along and he's happy again. Happy until the next time the boy decides that he's had enough nagging, had enough drama about what kind of flatwear they should buy for the kitchen, because the white set they have is fine and all but doesn't really *go* with the theme. Then the Fenrir Wolf swallows the sun and the rooster crows the coming period of cold and ruination, Mike's body shuddering under the attack of the jötnar.

**June**

## Recidivism 1

Michael

It started out much like the first time, bumping into one another like it meant nothing, talking slowly, a half-apology from Luke and then all was forgiven, sort of, as long as it wasn't what it was. We fucked like mad for a week, driving our cocks into each other's flesh like wild animals. I wouldn't go back to his place, but a city like Spokane has so many places where one can fuck if one isn't too particular. A few times I let him come back to Nate's with me, but only when I knew he wouldn't be home, only when there was no chance of them meeting. I knew what Nate would do if he saw Luke again, and while a part of me would take pleasure in that, the smarter part knew that it was a bad idea and that nothing good would come of Luke getting beaten like he probably deserved.

Besides, we were having fun. I thought it was fun, anyway, even if I didn't know what it was, really, that we were doing. His dick was just so familiar. It was so nice not to be completely alone in my sorrow, even if the one who had caused me the sorrow was the one keeping me a kind of company. It wasn't going to be like last time because it wasn't going to go as far as last time. He could slap my ass while I he was fucking me and it didn't mean what it would have meant if we were seeing each other seriously again. Things could slide, could be free from analysis because we weren't really doing anything serious and bringing a serious lens to bear on it would seem ridiculous.

Of course Nate did find out, eventually, and called me a stupid shit-head, told me I was gonna get my heart broken again by someone who didn't deserve a second chance, and there was a good chance he would've been right a couple of years ago. Hell, he'd have been right about that before I started seeing Luke, but something in me broke a little with Luke,

and I kind of understood that this is the way the world works, that relationships are like the stock market, on a constant cycle of boom and bust, boom and bust. Each time I started a new one we were like a bull market, tearing apart the bonds that would otherwise support us, charging forward at the flourish of a red blanket. And then when things went south, we were polar bears, clawing at anything to try to keep afloat, but too full of inchoate rage and momentum to understand the trend we're following is likely a direct result of our confusion about reality.

So I don't think Nate was right about that, don't think me fucking Luke again means anything more than me wanting a couple moments respite, of solace in a pair of familiar arms, hoping that they wouldn't squeeze too tight.



## Marzipan 4

Michael

I tried again to call my mother, to reconnect with her. I think she thought it would have happened by now, our reunion after the break-up, our nightly discourse on the proper way to prepare a flan or the way Paula Deen uses too much butter in her everything. But there was more to it this time, a distance that had evolved between us that felt more natural than the closeness that she craved.

Too, I had grown apart from who I was before I met Luke. I don't even know who that person was – not really, not entirely. Our passions seem the same, our pursuits a mirror of one another, but something separates us. He was the opposite. The joy he took in cooking was mirrored in my hands as they met the marble of the counter, but even in that we were distinct. His hands were sure and quick, mine stroking long with the candy dough until my knuckles scraped against the hard surface, my flesh making no mark at first, then slowly and proudly a trail of sweat and eventually of streaky red blood emerged as the candy turned to rock in my fists.

## Mayhem 4

Luke

The parking lot is full of the “pro-family” crowd and we are but few, each of us with our signs and our masks, our shouts that send voices cracking against the rough use. Six months ago my voice would have rung, leathery and smooth, but today my voice barely rises against the torrent of the crowds before us. I know none of them are here for the people, here to protect either the marriage or children—like me they are here for themselves, but at least we have the courage to admit that our cause is our own and not a moral imperative handed down by God or HRC Headquarters.

Their faces are twisted, the lot of them, and I know I’m not seeing their best selves, the selves they are when they’re not standing outside in the middle of March, their feet wrapped in wool socks, boots, their signs held by gloves. I know Michael would know that they were not themselves here, but a caricature of what they think they should be. That’s the only way I can see even those with me, our own little party, several huddled against one another for warmth, their voices still raw against the winter wind.

Each morning I keep expecting him to step out of the shower, the steam curling out with him into the bedroom, fogging the mirror by the door. He was always awake first, always an easy morning riser in a way that provoked me to anger, my own resistance to waking a trait in which I take great pride and annoyance. I wonder where Mike is now, what he is doing or who he is doing it with. I wonder if his taste has changed in three months, if he’s forgotten the sting of a slap on the Thursday at ten pm or if he still thinks about where we went wrong. I know he still thinks about me; I still think about him and between the two of us, that is the unlikelier event.

## Recidivism 2

Luke

Each time we met to fuck, I was less sure of what was going on, and I resisted more the next time until eventually we stopped having sex altogether. It was a realization more than anything, a gestalt of information that told me I didn't need to be on the lookout any longer for the lingering flow of a heavy wrist or the soft return of Michael's lips to my own. That time in our relationship had passed.

It's funny how I had seen it in others before, the lingering friendship after the cessation of hostilities or sexual energy, those queers who ten years later were still hanging out regularly with their former paramours, and I had to wonder what the *modus operendi* was, if one of them had some sort of angle he was trying to work. But there was more to it than that, more to the laughter and the time spent together such that a bond forms. It's one of the tragedies of heterosexual relationships that ex-lovers seem oblivious to the mechanisms that could make them friends; after all, something had to draw them together in the first part. Not those lovers who met in hotel rooms and skulked in the night, of course – that would be madness – but those who legitimately cared for one another enough to give it a go at happiness and failed.

On the way to the Café Dulce one morning, Michael told me about how his parents had met years before they realized they were interested in one another. His mother was introduced by her then-boyfriend at a party in a house infested with Led Zeppelin posters. There had been a spark of interest, he said, but they didn't do anything about it because she was seeing someone and neither of them would be interested in a cheater. Part of me finds that silly, the jealousy over sex that would relegate your partner to a marionette's routine, but

I wonder sometimes if there isn't something right about that hesitation. Michael and I started off with fucking, before we had even exchanged names we'd exchanged fluids, and while I don't think I'll change my routine at all—sex is too much fun—I wonder if maybe it wouldn't be a good idea for him to. After all, most of us end up in some way the mirror of our parents, for better or for worse, and it seems the fairy tale that he wants needs the proper grounding, and no fairy tale I've ever read started off with the princess getting nailed in the first chapter.

But I don't tell him this, don't let him know that I think about what sorts of things he ought to be doing with his future relationships. Friendship is the last act of most gay romances, it seems, and I don't want to risk my happy ending with Michael just because I want him to be happy.