

SALLY ROONEY  
Conversations with Friends

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Bobbi and I first met Melissa at a poetry night in town, where we were performing together. Melissa took our photograph outside, with Bobbi smoking and me self-consciously holding my left wrist in my right hand, as if I was afraid the wrist was going to get away from me. Melissa used a big professional camera and kept lots of different lenses in a special camera pouch. She chatted and smoked while taking the pictures. She talked about our performance and we talked about her work, which we'd come across on the internet. Around midnight the bar closed. It was starting to rain then, and Melissa told us we were welcome to come back to her house for a drink.

We all got into the back of a taxi together and started fixing up our seat belts. Bobbi sat in the middle, with her head turned to speak to Melissa, so I could see the back of her neck and her little spoon-like ear. Melissa gave the driver an address in Monkstown and I turned to look out the window. A voice came on the radio to say the words: eighties . . . pop . . . classics. Then a jingle played. I felt excited, ready for the challenge of visiting a stranger's home, already preparing compliments and certain facial expressions to make myself seem charming.

The house was a semi-detached red-brick, with a sycamore tree outside. Under the streetlight the leaves looked orange and artificial. I was a big fan of seeing the insides of other

people's houses, especially people who were slightly famous like Melissa. Right away I decided to remember everything about her home, so I could describe it to our other friends later and Bobbi could agree.

When Melissa let us in, a little red spaniel came racing up the hall and started barking at us. The hallway was warm and the lights were on. Next to the door was a low table where someone had left a stack of change, a hairbrush and an open tube of lipstick. There was a Modigliani print hanging over the staircase, a nude woman reclining. I thought: this is a whole house. A family could live here.

We have guests, Melissa called down the corridor.

No one appeared so we followed her into the kitchen. I remember seeing a dark wooden bowl filled with ripe fruit, and noticing the glass conservatory. Rich people, I thought. I was always thinking about rich people then. The dog had followed us to the kitchen and was snuffling around at our feet, but Melissa didn't mention the dog so neither did we.

Wine? Melissa said. White or red?

She poured huge, bowl-sized glasses and we all sat around a low table. Melissa asked us how we'd started out performing spoken word poetry together. We had both just finished our third year of university at the time, but we'd been performing together since we were in school. Exams were over by then. It was late May.

Melissa had her camera on the table and occasionally lifted it to take a photograph, laughing self-deprecatingly about being a 'work addict'. She lit a cigarette and tipped the ash into a kitschy-looking glass ashtray. The house didn't

smell of smoke at all and I wondered if she usually smoked in there or not.

I made some new friends, she said.

Her husband was in the kitchen doorway. He held up his hand to acknowledge us and the dog started yelping and whining and running around in circles.

This is Frances, said Melissa. And this is Bobbi. They're poets.

He took a bottle of beer out of the fridge and opened it on the countertop.

Come and sit with us, Melissa said.

Yeah, I'd love to, he said, but I should try and get some sleep before this flight.

The dog jumped up on a kitchen chair near where he was standing and he reached out absently to touch its head. He asked Melissa if she had fed the dog, she said no. He lifted the dog into his arms and let the dog lick his neck and jaw. He said he would feed her, and he went back out the kitchen door again.

Nick's filming tomorrow morning in Cardiff, said Melissa.

We already knew that the husband was an actor. He and Melissa were frequently photographed together at events, and we had friends of friends who had met them. He had a big, handsome face and looked like he could comfortably pick Melissa up under one arm and fend off interlopers with the other.

He's very tall, Bobbi said.

Melissa smiled as if 'tall' was a euphemism for something, but not necessarily something flattering. The conversation moved on. We got into a short discussion about the gov-

ernment and the Catholic Church. Melissa asked us if we were religious and we said no. She said she found religious occasions, like funerals or weddings, 'comforting in a kind of sedative way'. They're communal, she said. There's something nice about that for the neurotic individualist. And I went to a convent school so I still know most of the prayers.

We went to a convent school, said Bobbi. It posed issues.

Melissa grinned and said: like what?

Well, I'm gay, said Bobbi. And Frances is a communist.

I also don't think I remember any of the prayers, I said.

We sat there talking and drinking for a long time. I remember that we talked about the poet Patricia Lockwood, who we admired, and also about what Bobbi disparagingly called 'pay gap feminism'. I started to get tired and a little drunk. I couldn't think of anything witty to say and it was hard to arrange my face in a way that would convey my sense of humour. I think I laughed and nodded a lot. Melissa told us she was working on a new book of essays. Bobbi had read her first one, but I hadn't.

It's not very good, Melissa told me. Wait till the next one comes out.

At about three o'clock, she showed us to the spare room and told us how great it was to meet us and how glad she was that we were staying. When we got into bed I stared up at the ceiling and felt very drunk. The room was spinning repetitively in short, consecutive spins. Once I adjusted my eyes to one rotation, another would begin immediately. I asked Bobbi if she was also having a problem with that but she said no.

She's amazing, isn't she? said Bobbi. Melissa.

I like her, I said.

We could hear her voice in the corridor and her footsteps taking her from room to room. Once when the dog barked we could hear her yell something, and then her husband's voice. But after that we fell asleep. We didn't hear him leave.

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Bobbi and I had first met in secondary school. Back then Bobbi was very opinionated and frequently spent time in detention for a behavioural offence our school called 'disrupting teaching and learning'. When we were sixteen she got her nose pierced and took up smoking. Nobody liked her. She got temporarily suspended once for writing 'fuck the patriarchy' on the wall beside a plaster cast of the crucifixion. There was no feeling of solidarity around this incident. Bobbi was considered a show-off. Even I had to admit that teaching and learning went a lot more smoothly during the week she was gone.

When we were seventeen we had to attend a fundraising dance in the school assembly hall, with a partially broken disco ball casting lights on the ceiling and the barred-up windows. Bobbi wore a flimsy summer dress and looked like she hadn't brushed her hair. She was radiantly attractive, which meant everyone had to work hard not to pay her any attention. I told her I liked her dress. She gave me some of the vodka she was drinking from a Coke bottle and asked if the rest of the school was locked up. We checked the door up to the back staircase and found it was open. All the lights were off and no one else was up there. We could hear

the music buzzing through the floorboards, like a ringtone belonging to someone else. Bobbi gave me some more of her vodka and asked me if I liked girls. It was very easy to act unfazed around her. I just said: sure.

I wasn't betraying anyone's loyalties by being Bobbi's girlfriend. I didn't have close friends and at lunchtime I read textbooks alone in the school library. I liked the other girls, I let them copy my homework, but I was lonely and felt unworthy of real friendship. I made lists of the things I had to improve about myself. After Bobbi and I started seeing each other, everything changed. No one asked for my homework any more. At lunchtime we walked along the car park holding hands and people looked away from us maliciously. It was fun, the first real fun I'd ever had.

After school we used to lie in her room listening to music and talking about why we liked each other. These were long and intense conversations, and felt so momentous to me that I secretly transcribed parts of them from memory in the evenings. When Bobbi talked about me it felt like seeing myself in a mirror for the first time. I also looked in actual mirrors more often. I started taking a close interest in my face and body, which I'd never done before. I asked Bobbi questions like: do I have long legs? Or short?

At our school graduation ceremony we performed a spoken word piece together. Some of the parents cried, but our classmates just looked out the assembly-room windows or talked quietly amongst themselves. Several months later, after more than a year together, Bobbi and I broke up.

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Melissa wanted to write a profile about us. She sent us an email asking if we were interested, and attached some of the photographs she had taken outside the bar. Alone in my room, I downloaded one of the files and opened it up to full-screen. Bobbi looked back at me, mischievous, holding a cigarette in her right hand and pulling on her fur stole with the other. Beside her, I looked bored and interesting. I tried to imagine my name appearing in a profile piece, in a serif font with thick stems. I decided I would try harder to impress Melissa next time we met.

Bobbi called me almost immediately after the email arrived.

Have you seen the photographs? she said. I think I'm in love with her.

I held my phone in one hand and zoomed in on Bobbi's face with the other. It was a high-quality image but I zoomed until I could see the pixellation.

Maybe you're just in love with your own face, I said.

Just because I have a beautiful face doesn't mean I'm a narcissist.

I let that one go. I was involved in the zooming process still. I knew that Melissa wrote for several big literary websites, and her work circulated widely online. She had written a famous essay about the Oscars which everyone reposted every year during awards season. Sometimes she also wrote local profiles, about artists who sold their work on Grafton Street or buskers in London; these were always accompanied by beautiful photographs of her subjects, looking human and full of 'character'. I zoomed back out and tried to look at my own face as if I were a stranger on the internet seeing it for the first time. It looked round and white, the eyebrows

like overturned parentheses, my eyes averted from the lens, almost shut. Even I could see I had character.

We emailed her back saying we'd be delighted, and she invited us over for dinner to talk about our work and get some additional photographs. She asked me if I could forward some copies of our poetry and I sent her three or four of the best pieces. Bobbi and I discussed at length what Bobbi would wear to the dinner, under the guise of talking about what we should both wear. I lay in my room watching her look at herself in the mirror, moving pieces of her hair back and forth critically.

So when you say you're in love with Melissa, I said.

I mean I have a crush on her.

You know she's married.

You don't think she likes me? said Bobbi.

She was holding up one of my white brushed-cotton shirts in front of the mirror.

What do you mean likes you? I said. Are we being serious or just joking?

I am partly being serious. I think she does like me.

In an extramarital affair kind of way?

Bobbi just laughed at that. With other people I generally had a sense of what to take seriously and what not to, but with Bobbi it was impossible. She never seemed to be either fully serious or fully joking. As a result I had learned to adopt a kind of Zen acceptance of the weird things she said. I watched her take her blouse off and pull on the white shirt. She rolled up the sleeves carefully.

Good? she said. Or terrible?

Good. It looks good.

It rained all day before we went for dinner at Melissa's. I sat in bed in the morning writing poetry, hitting the return key whenever I wanted. Eventually I opened my blinds, read the news online and showered. My apartment had a door out into the courtyard of the building, which was lavish with greenery and featured a cherry blossom tree in the far corner. It was almost June now, but in April the blossoms were bright and silky like confetti. The couple next door had a little baby who cried sometimes at night. I liked living there.

Bobbi and I met in town that evening and got a bus to Monkstown. Finding our way back to the house felt like unwrapping something in a game of pass the parcel. I mentioned this to Bobbi on the way and she said: is it the prize, or just another layer of wrapping?

We'll catch up on that after dinner, I said.

When we rang the bell, Melissa answered the door with her camera slung over one shoulder. She thanked us for coming. She had an expressive, conspiratorial smile, which I thought she probably gave to all of her subjects, as if to say: you're no ordinary subject to me, you're a special favourite. I knew I would enviously practise this smile later in a mirror. The spaniel yapped in the kitchen doorway while we hung up our jackets.

In the kitchen her husband was chopping vegetables. The dog was really excited by this gathering. It leapt onto

a kitchen chair and barked for ten or twenty seconds before he told it to stop.

Can we get you both a glass of wine? Melissa said.

We said sure, and Nick poured the glasses. I had looked him up online since the first time we met him, partly because I didn't know any other actors in real life. He had mainly worked in theatre, but he'd also done some TV and film. He had once, several years previously, been nominated for a major award, which he didn't win. I'd happened on a whole selection of shirtless photographs, most of which showed him looking younger, coming out of a swimming pool or showering on a TV show that had long ago been cancelled. I sent Bobbi a link to one of these photographs with the message: trophy husband.

Melissa didn't appear in many photographs on the internet, though her collection of essays had generated a lot of publicity. I didn't know how long she had been married to Nick. Neither of them was famous enough for that kind of information to be online.

So you guys write everything together? Melissa said.

Oh God, no, said Bobbi. Frances writes everything. I don't even help.

That's not true, I said. That's not true, you do help. She's just saying that.

Melissa cocked her head to the side and gave a kind of laugh.

All right, so, which one of you is lying? she said.

I was lying. Except in the sense of enriching my life, Bobbi didn't help me write the poetry. As far as I knew she had never written creatively at all. She liked to perform dramat-

ic monologues and sing anti-war ballads. Onstage she was the superior performer and I often glanced at her anxiously to remind myself what to do.

For dinner we had spaghetti in a thick white-wine sauce, and lots of garlic bread. Mostly Nick stayed quiet while Melissa asked us questions. She made us all laugh a lot, but in the same way you might make someone eat something when they don't fully want to eat it. I didn't know if I liked this sort of cheery forcefulness, but it was obvious how much Bobbi was enjoying it. She was laughing even more than she really had to, I could tell.

Although I couldn't specify why exactly, I felt certain that Melissa was less interested in our writing process now that she knew I wrote the material alone. I knew the subtlety of this change would be enough for Bobbi to deny it later, which irritated me as if it had already happened. I was starting to feel adrift from the whole set-up, like the dynamic that had eventually revealed itself didn't interest me, or even involve me. I could have tried harder to engage myself, but I probably resented having to make an effort to be noticed.

After dinner Nick cleared all the plates up and Melissa took photographs. Bobbi sat on the windowsill looking at a lit candle, laughing and making cute faces. I sat at the dinner table without moving, finishing my third glass of wine.

I love the window thing, Melissa said. Can we do a similar one, but in the conservatory?

The conservatory opened out from the kitchen through a pair of double doors. Bobbi followed Melissa, who shut the doors behind them. I could see Bobbi sit on the windowsill, laughing, but I couldn't hear her laughter. Nick started to fill

the sink with hot water. I told him again how good the food was and he looked up and said: oh, thanks.

Through the glass I watched Bobbi remove a dab of make-up from under her eye. Her wrists were slender and she had long, elegant hands. Sometimes when I was doing something dull, like walking home from work or hanging up laundry, I liked to imagine that I looked like Bobbi. She had better posture than I did, and a memorably beautiful face. The pretence was so real to me that when I accidentally caught sight of my reflection and saw my own appearance, I felt a strange, depersonalising shock. It was harder to do it now when Bobbi was sitting right in my eyeline, but I tried it anyway. I felt like saying something provocative and stupid.

I guess I'm kind of surplus to requirements, I said.

Nick looked out at the conservatory, where Bobbi was doing something with her hair.

Do you think Melissa's playing favourites? he said. I'll have a word with her if you want.

It's okay. Bobbi is everyone's favourite.

Really? I warmed to you more, I have to say.

We looked at each other. I could see he was playing along with me so I smiled.

Yes, I felt we had a natural rapport, I said.

I'm drawn to the poetic types.

Oh, well. I have a rich inner life, believe me.

He laughed when I said that. I knew I was being a little inappropriate, but I didn't feel too badly about it. Outside in the conservatory Melissa had lit a cigarette and put her camera down on a glass coffee table. Bobbi was nodding at something intently.

I thought tonight was going to be a nightmare, but it was actually fine, he said.

He sat back down at the table with me. I liked his sudden candour. I was conscious that I had looked at shirtless photographs of him on the internet without him knowing, and in the moment I found this knowledge very amusing and almost wanted to tell him about it.

I'm not the most dinner party person either, I said.

I think you were pretty good.

You were very good. You were great.

He smiled at me. I tried to remember everything he had said so I could play it over for Bobbi later on, but in my head it didn't sound quite as funny.

The doors opened and Melissa came back in, carrying her camera in both hands. She took a photograph of us sitting at the table, Nick holding his glass in one hand, me staring into the lens vacantly. Then she sat down opposite us and looked at her camera screen. Bobbi came back and refilled her own wine glass without asking. She had a beatific expression on her face and I could see she was drunk. Nick watched her but didn't say anything.

I suggested that we should head off in time for the last bus and Melissa promised to send on the photographs. Bobbi's smile dropped a little but it was too late to suggest we should stay any longer. We were already being handed our jackets. I felt giddy, and now that Bobbi had gone quiet, I kept laughing at nothing on my own.

We had a ten-minute walk to the bus stop. Bobbi was subdued at first, so I gathered she was upset or annoyed.

Did you have a good time? I said.

I'm worried about Melissa.

You're what?

I don't think she's happy, said Bobbi.

In what sense not happy? Was she talking to you about this?

I don't think she and Nick are very happy together.

Really? I said.

It's sad.

I didn't point out that Bobbi had only met Melissa twice, though maybe I should have. Admittedly it didn't seem like Nick and Melissa were crazy about each other. He had told me, apropos of nothing, that he'd expected a dinner party she'd arranged to be 'a nightmare'.

I thought he was funny, I said.

He hardly opened his mouth.

Yeah, he had a humorous silence about him.

Bobbi didn't laugh. I dropped it. We hardly spoke on the bus, since I could see she wasn't going to be interested in the effortless rapport I had established with Melissa's trophy husband, and I couldn't think of anything else to talk about.

When I got back to my apartment I felt drunker than I had been at the house. Bobbi had gone home and I was on my own. I turned all the lights on before I went to bed. Sometimes that was something I did.

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Bobbi's parents were going through an acrimonious break-up that summer. Bobbi's mother Eleanor had always been



emotionally fragile and given to long periods of unspecified illness, which made her father Jerry the favoured parent in the split. Bobbi always called them by their first names. This had probably originated as an act of rebellion but now just seemed collegial, like their family was a small business they ran cooperatively. Bobbi's sister Lydia was fourteen and didn't seem to be handling the whole thing with Bobbi's composure.

My parents had separated when I was twelve and my father had moved back to Ballina, where they'd met. I lived in Dublin with my mother until I finished school, and then she moved back to Ballina too. When college started I moved into an apartment in the Liberties belonging to my father's brother. During term time, he let out the second bedroom to another student, and I had to keep quiet in the evenings and say hi politely when I saw my room-mate in the kitchen. But in the summer when the room-mate went home, I was allowed to live there all on my own and make coffee whenever I wanted and leave books splayed open on all the surfaces.

I had an internship in a literary agency at the time. There was one other intern, called Philip, who I knew from college. Our job was to read stacks of manuscripts and write one-page reports on their literary value. The value was almost always nil. Sometimes Philip would sardonically read bad sentences aloud to me, which made me laugh, but we didn't do that in front of the adults who worked there. We worked three days a week and were both paid 'a stipend' which meant we basically weren't paid at all. All I needed was food, and Philip lived at home, so it didn't matter much to us.

This is how privilege gets perpetuated, Philip told me in the office one day. Rich assholes like us taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them.

Speak for yourself, I said. I'm never going to get a job.

Bobbi and I often performed at spoken word events and open mic nights that summer. When we were outside smoking and male performers tried to talk to us, Bobbi would always pointedly exhale and say nothing, so I had to act as our representative. This meant a lot of smiling and remembering details about their work. I enjoyed playing this kind of character, the smiling girl who remembered things. Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a 'real personality', but she said she meant it as a compliment. Mostly I agreed with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am.

Melissa sent us the image files from the dinner party a few days later. I'd expected Bobbi to dominate the photo set, along with maybe one or two token photographs of me, blurry behind a lit candle, holding a forkful of spaghetti. In fact, for every picture of Bobbi, I appeared too, always lit perfectly, always beautifully framed. Nick was in the photographs also, which I hadn't expected. He looked luminously attractive, even more so than he had in real life. I wondered if that was why he was a successful actor. It was difficult to look at the photo set and not feel that he was the primary presence in the room, which I definitely hadn't felt at the time.

Melissa herself didn't appear in any of the images. As a result, the dinner party depicted in the photographs bore

only an oblique relationship to the one we had actually attended. In reality, all our conversation had orbited around Melissa. She had prompted our various expressions of uncertainty or admiration. She was the one whose jokes we were always laughing at. Without her in the images, the dinner seemed to take on a different character, to go spinning off in subtle and strange directions. The relationships of the people who appeared in the photographs, without Melissa, became unclear.

In my favourite picture, I was looking straight into the lens with a dreamy expression, and Nick was looking at me as if waiting for me to say something. His mouth was a little open. It looked like he hadn't seen the camera. It was a good photograph, but of course I had really been looking up at Melissa at the time, and Nick simply hadn't seen her come through the doorway. It captured something intimate that had never really happened, something elliptical and somehow fraught. I saved it to my Downloads folder to look at later on.

Bobbi messaged me about an hour after the photographs arrived.

Bobbi: how good do we look though?

Bobbi: i wonder if we can use these as facebook profilers.

me: no

Bobbi: she says the piece won't be out till september  
apparently?

me: who says

Bobbi: melissa

Bobbi: do you want to hang out tonight?

Bobbi: and watch a film or something

Bobbi wanted me to know that she had been in touch with Melissa when I hadn't. It did impress me, which she wanted it to, but I also felt bad. I knew Melissa liked Bobbi more than she liked me, and I didn't know how to join in their new friendship without debasing myself for their attention. I had wanted Melissa to take an interest in me, because we were both writers, but instead she didn't seem to like me and I wasn't even sure I liked her. I didn't have the option not to take her seriously, because she had published a book, which proved that lots of other people took her seriously even if I didn't. At twenty-one, I had no achievements or possessions that proved I was a serious person.

I'd told Nick that everyone preferred Bobbi to me, but that wasn't really true. Bobbi could be abrasive and unrestrained in a way that made people uncomfortable, while I tended to be encouragingly polite. Mothers always liked me a lot, for example. And because Bobbi mostly treated men with amusement or contempt, men usually ended up liking me better too. Of course, Bobbi made fun of me about this. She once emailed me a picture of Angela Lansbury with the subject heading: your core demographic.

Bobbi did come over that night, though she didn't mention Melissa at all. I knew that she was being strategic, and that she wanted me to ask, so I didn't. This sounds more passive-aggressive than it really was. Actually we had a nice evening. We stayed up talking and Bobbi went to sleep on the mattress in my room.

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That night I woke up sweating underneath the duvet. At first it felt like a dream or maybe a film. I found the orientation of my room confusing, as if I was further from the window and door than I should have been. I tried to sit up and then felt a strange, wrenching pain in my pelvis, which made me gasp out loud.

Bobbi? I said.

She rolled over. I tried to reach out of the bed to shake her shoulder, but I couldn't, and I felt exhausted by the effort. At the same time I was exhilarated by the seriousness of my pain, like it might change my life in an unforeseen way.

Bobbi, I said. Bobbi, wake up.

She didn't wake up. I moved my legs off the bed and managed to stand. The pain was more bearable if I hunched my body over and held onto my abdomen tightly. I went around her mattress and out to the bathroom. It was raining loudly onto the glazed plastic wall vent. I sat on the side of the bath. I was bleeding. It was just period pain. I put my face in my hands. My fingers were trembling. Then I got down onto the floor and put my face onto the cool rim of the bath.

After a while Bobbi knocked on the door.

What's up? she said from outside. Are you okay?

Just period pain.

Oh. You have painkillers in there?

No, I said.

I'll get you some.

Her footsteps went away. I hit my forehead against the side of the bath to distract myself from the pain in my pelvis. It was a hot pain, like all my insides were contracting into one little knot. The footsteps came back and the bathroom

door opened an inch. She slid through a packet of ibuprofen. I crawled over and took them, and she went away.

Eventually it got light outside. Bobbi woke up and came in to help me onto the couch in the living room. She made me a cup of peppermint tea and I sat slouched holding the cup against my T-shirt, just above my pubic bone, until it started to scald me.

You suffer, she said.

Everybody suffers.

Ah, Bobbi said. Profound.

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I hadn't been kidding with Philip about not wanting a job. I didn't want one. I had no plans as to my future financial sustainability: I never wanted to earn money for doing anything. I'd had various minimum-wage jobs in previous summers – sending emails, making cold calls, things like that – and I expected to have more of them after I graduated. Though I knew that I would eventually have to enter full-time employment, I certainly never fantasised about a radiant future where I was paid to perform an economic role. Sometimes this felt like a failure to take an interest in my own life, which depressed me. On the other hand, I felt that my disinterest in wealth was ideologically healthy. I'd checked what the average yearly income would be if the gross world product were divided evenly among everyone, and according to Wikipedia it would be \$16,100. I saw no reason, political or financial, ever to make more money than that.

Our boss at the literary agency was a woman named Sunny. Both Philip and I really liked Sunny, but Sunny preferred me. Philip was sanguine about this. He said he preferred me too. I think deep down Sunny knew that I didn't want a job as a literary agent, and it may even have been this fact that distinguished me in her eyes. Philip was plainly pretty enthused about working for the agency, and though I didn't judge him for making life plans, I felt like I was more discerning with my enthusiasms.

Sunny was interested in the question of my career. She was a very candid person who was always making refreshingly candid remarks, that was one of the things Philip and I liked most about her.

What about journalism? she asked me.

I was handing her back a pile of completed manuscripts.

You're interested in the world, she said. You're knowledgeable. You like politics.

Do I?

She laughed and shook her head.

You're bright, she said. You're going to have to do something.

Maybe I'll marry for money.

She waved me away.

Go and do some work, she said.

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We were performing at a reading in the centre of town that Friday. I could perform each poem for a period of about six months after I'd written it, after which point I couldn't



stand to look at it, never mind read it aloud in public. I didn't know what caused this process, but I was glad the poems were only ever performed and never published. They floated away ethereally to the sound of applause. Real writers, and also painters, had to keep on looking at the ugly things they had done for good. I hated that everything I did was so ugly, but also that I lacked the courage to confront how ugly it was. I had explained that theory to Philip but he'd just said: don't be down on yourself, you're a real writer.

Bobbi and I were applying make-up in the venue bathrooms and talking about the newest poems I had written.

What I like about your male characters, Bobbi said, is they're all horrible.

They're not all horrible.

At best they're very morally ambiguous.

Aren't we all? I said.

You should write about Philip, he's not problematic. He's 'nice'.

She did air quotes around the word nice, even though she did really think that about Philip. Bobbi would never describe anyone as nice without quotation marks.

Melissa had said she would come along that night, but we didn't see her until afterwards, at maybe half ten or eleven o'clock. She and Nick were sitting together, and Nick was wearing a suit. Melissa congratulated us and told us she'd really enjoyed our performance. Bobbi looked at Nick as if waiting for him to compliment us, which made him laugh.

I didn't see your set, he said. I just got here.

Nick's in the Royal this month, Melissa said. He's doing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

But I'm sure you were great, though, he said.

Let me get you both drinks, said Melissa.

Bobbi went with her to the bar, so Nick and I were left alone at the table. He didn't have a tie on and his suit looked expensive. I felt too hot, and worried I was sweating.

How was the play? I said.

Oh, what, tonight? It was okay, thanks.

He was taking his cufflinks off. He placed them on the table, beside his glass, and I noticed they were coloured enamel, art deco-looking. I thought about admiring them aloud, but then felt unable to. Instead I pretended to look for Melissa and Bobbi over my shoulder. When I turned back he had taken out his phone.

I'd like to see it, I said. I like the play.

You should come along, I can hold tickets for you.

He didn't look up when he spoke, so I felt certain he was being insincere or would at least forget the conversation quickly. I just said something affirmative and non-committal. Now that he wasn't paying attention to me, I could watch him more closely. He really was exceptionally handsome. I wondered if people just got used to being so good-looking and eventually found it boring, but it was hard to imagine. I thought if I was as good-looking as Nick I would probably have fun all the time.

Sorry I'm being rude, Frances, he said. This is my mother on the phone. She texts now. I should tell her I'm talking to a poet, she'd be very impressed.

Well, you don't know. I could be a terrible poet.

He smiled and slipped his phone back in his inside pocket. I looked at his hand and looked away.

That's not what I've heard, he said. But maybe next time I'll get to decide for myself.

Melissa and Bobbi came back with the drinks. I noticed that Nick had dropped my name into conversation, as if to show that he remembered me from last time we talked. Of course, I remembered his name too, but he was older and somewhat famous, so I found his attention very flattering. It transpired that Melissa had taken their car into town, and so Nick had been forced to join us after his show to get a lift home. This arrangement did not seem to have been drawn up with his convenience in mind, and he looked tired and bored for most of our conversation.

Melissa sent me an email the next day saying they had put two theatre tickets aside for us next Thursday but that we shouldn't feel bad about it if we had made other plans. She included Nick's email address and wrote: in case you need to get in touch.

Bobbi was going out to dinner with her father on Thursday, so we offered Philip the spare ticket to the play. Philip kept asking if we were going to have to talk to Nick afterwards, and I didn't know. I doubted if he would come out especially to talk to us, so I said I was sure we could just leave as usual. Philip had never met Nick but had seen him on TV and considered his looks 'intimidating'. He asked me a lot of questions about what Nick was like in real life, none of which I felt qualified to answer. When we bought the programme, Philip leafed straight to the actor bios and showed me Nick's photograph. In the dim light it was really just an outline of a face.

Look at his jaw, he said.

Yeah, I see it.

The lights came up onstage, and the actress playing Maggie came on and started yelling in a Southern accent. It wasn't a bad accent, but it still felt like an actor's accent. She got out of her dress and stood there in a white slip, like Elizabeth Taylor's white slip in the film, though this actress looked both less artificial and also somehow less convincing. I could see a care label bunched inside the seam of the slip she was wearing, which destroyed the effect of reality for me, although the slip and its care label were undoubtedly themselves real. I concluded that some kinds of reality have an unrealistic effect, which made me think of the theorist

Jean Baudrillard, though I had never read his books and these were probably not the issues his writing addressed.

Finally Nick appeared, out of a door on stage left, buttoning up a shirt. I felt a sting of self-consciousness, as if the audience had all turned at this moment to observe my reaction. He looked very different onstage, and spoke in an unrecognisably different voice. His manner was cool and detached in a way that suggested sexual brutality. I breathed in and out through my mouth several times, and wet my lips repeatedly with my tongue. The production in general was not very good. The other actors had off-key accents and everything onstage looked like a prop waiting to be handled. In a way this just emphasised how spectacularly beautiful Nick was, and made his misery seem more authentic.

When we came out of the theatre it was raining again. I felt pure and tiny like a newborn baby. Philip put up his umbrella and we walked toward his bus stop while I sort of grinned manically at nothing and touched my own hair a lot.

That was interesting, Philip said.

I thought Nick was probably a lot better than the other actors.

Yeah, it was stressful, wasn't it? But he was pretty good.

I laughed much too loudly at this remark and then stopped when I realised nothing about it was funny. A light, cool rain feathered the umbrella and I tried to think of something interesting to say about the weather.

He is handsome, I heard myself saying.

To an almost off-putting extent.

We reached Philip's bus stop and had a short discussion about which of us should take the umbrella. In the end I

took it. It was raining heavily and getting dark. I wanted to talk more about the play but I could see Philip's bus was about to pull in. I knew he wouldn't want to talk much more about the play anyway, but I still felt disappointed. He started counting out his fare and said he'd see me tomorrow. I walked back to my apartment on my own.

When I got inside I left the umbrella by the courtyard door and opened up my laptop to look at Nick's email address. I felt I should send him a short thank-you message for the tickets, but I kept getting distracted by items in the room, like a Toulouse-Lautrec poster I had hanging above the fireplace and a particular smudge on the patio window. I got up and walked around for a while to think about it. I cleaned the smudge with a damp cloth and then made a cup of tea. I considered calling Bobbi to talk about whether it would be normal to send an email or not, but I remembered she was with her father. I wrote a sample message, and then deleted the draft in case I might accidentally hit send. Then I wrote the same thing over again.

I sat staring at my laptop screen until it went black. Things matter to me more than they do to normal people, I thought. I need to relax and let things go. I should experiment with drugs. These thoughts were not unusual for me. I put *Astral Weeks* on the stereo in the living room and slumped right onto the floor to listen. Though I was trying not to dwell on the play, I found myself thinking about Nick onstage yelling: I don't want to lean on your shoulder, I want my crutch. I wondered if Philip was similarly preoccupied, or was this more private. I need to be fun and likeable, I thought. A fun person would send a thank-you email.

I got up and typed a brief message congratulating Nick on his performance and expressing gratitude for the tickets. I moved the sentences here and there, and then seemingly at random I hit the send button. Afterwards I shut my laptop and went back to sitting on the floor.

I was expecting to hear from Bobbi about her dinner with Jerry and eventually, after the album was finished, she did call. I was still sitting slumped against the wall when I answered the phone. Bobbi's father was a high-ranking civil servant in the Department of Health. She did not apply her otherwise rigorous anti-establishment principles to her relationship with Jerry, or at least not with any consistency. He'd taken her to a very expensive restaurant for dinner and they'd had three courses with wine.

He's just trying to emphasise that I'm an adult member of the family now, Bobbi said. And he takes me seriously, blah blah blah.

How's your mother holding up?

Oh, it's migraine season again. We're all tiptoeing around like fucking Trappist monks. How was the play?

Nick was really good, actually, I said.

Oh, that's a relief. I felt like it might be terrible.

No, it was. Sorry, I remember your question now. The play was bad.

Bobbi hummed a kind of tuneless piece of music to herself and offered no further remark.

Remember last time we visited their house, and afterwards you said you thought they were like, unhappily married? I said. What made you say that?

I just thought Melissa seemed depressed.

But why, because of their marriage?

Well, don't you find Nick sort of hostile toward her? said Bobbi.

No. Do you?

The first time we went over there, remember he went around scowling at us and then he yelled at her about feeding the dog? And we could hear them arguing when we went to bed?

Now that she said that, I did remember perceiving a certain animosity between them on that occasion, though I didn't accept that he had yelled.

Was she there? Bobbi said. At the play?

No. Well, I don't know, we didn't see her.

She doesn't like Tennessee Williams anyway. She finds him mannered.

I could hear that Bobbi said this with an ironic smile, because she was aware that she was showing off. I was jealous, but I also felt that because I had seen the play I was party to something Bobbi didn't know about. She still saw Nick as a background figure, with no significance other than as Melissa's husband. If I told her that I had just sent him an email thanking him for the tickets, she wouldn't understand that I was showing off too, because to her Nick was just a function of Melissa's unhappiness, and uninteresting in his own right. It seemed unlikely she would see the play now, and I couldn't think of any other way to impress her with Nick's personal significance. When I mentioned that he was planning to come and see us perform sometime soon, she just asked if that meant Melissa would come too.



Nick replied to my email the next afternoon in all lower case, thanking me for coming to the play and asking when Bobbi and I were next performing. He said they were running a show in the Royal every night and matinees at weekends so he would almost certainly miss our set unless it started sometime after half ten. I told him I would see what I could do, but not to worry if he couldn't make it. He replied saying: oh well, it wouldn't be very reciprocal then, would it?