

Melbourne la

Bella Ellwood-Clayton

*You entered my life unplanned. Came in the form of a friend of a friend
materialising one night in my local bar. Your hair shone black and your
eyebrows arched like an elfin prince. I took to your skin from across the table
and was left wondering how it might feel.*

*Before the night our affair began, I saw you intermittently in large groups,
through the same friend of a friend's mutual invitations. Invariably you were
with Woman, lounging on her, kissing the circumference of her ears.*

nocturnal— the first weekend

Rick, a mildly successful novelist, had invited all of us to a club in the city. You are there, vodka and lime in one hand. As are the other confirmed bachelors of whom you keep company – men in their mid-thirties, all having gone to a posh Grammar school in Melbourne together. Jim: cavalier, magnetic; Paul: dowdy and linear; and the others.

You and I find ourselves circling each other on the dance floor, like angel sharks, nocturnal. Find hands and lips and a mutual inclination to kiss with the use of teeth.

I spend the night beside you on your friend's love couch. You comply with my wishes, and remain half-dressed. Leave my nipples indented with teeth marks. Leave the call of your name through my temples.

chimneys and dragons – the second weekend

You call and confirm that my Friday becomes yours.

I wear a red dress that ties at the waist. We meet at *Caution* on Victoria Street. Play chess and drink too much. Your eyes are green and mouth purple. You tell of a corporate past: a breakdown, years combing the cities and caves of other continents and a decision upon return to live void of stress. To not care what your millionaire daddy thinks'. To make choices for yourself.

'So what do you do now, as a self-realized man?'

‘I read a lot,’ you reply. ‘Do landscape gardening during the workweek. Do debauchery during the weekend. I’m crashing at my mate Paul’s house ... If my life isn’t something amazing or grand-scale, that suits me. I don’t have any big dreams and,’ he shrugs, ‘I don’t really want any.’

We walk towards my house, orange leaves underfoot. I speak of the church on the corner that I never pray in. You speak of Hungarian ancestry, how during the regime they pointed a gun at your grandfather and told him to dig a grave before they shot him.

Inside. My house. Stevie Nicks singing. We talk for a while about my study of architecture, about when I lived in Sydney, and about all the friends I miss who are there. And then there is silence.

You tell me to turn around. Your hands trace my back, the train tracks of my neck and spine. Following my wishes, again we stay partly clothed, nothing consummated.

You sleep beside me and snore heavily, making sounds of chimneys and dragons. I sketch the sounds from my pillow as though orchestrating from the moon.

iron steeple – *the third weekend*

Rick is having a party. We are both invited. I wear turquoise knee-high stockings and tease my hair into a beehive.

The high-rise apartment fills with handsome men, with refilled drinks and city views. Gargoyles crouched along the ledges, appeal to my architect’s eye. Guests come and go until midnight passes and it is only me and a dozen men in the room.

You have fallen asleep on the couch. Your friends hover over me, float with leering limbs like opium smoke while you snore, hunched black in the corner.

I have drunk too much and feel seasick. Because having you there gave me a feeling of security. I approach the host. ‘Rick, do you think I might be able to sleep in your room?’

He leads me into his bedroom – desk covered in novels, *Hustler* magazines, ashtrays and a working manuscript about the life of early Australian boxers – and sits down beside me on the bed. His nose is bulbous and eyes small. If he were to have a role model, undoubtedly it would be Henry Miller.

‘I met you first,’ Rick, says. ‘Liked you and your silly questions and your silly hairdos.’ His hands flick my fringe. ‘I thought we had an ... affinity ... but then you went off with my mate. Just like that. Leaving me to lick your pretty crumbs.’ He laughs and licks his hands as though doing a pantomime.

I try to mollify him with kind words, but they, too, float. He grabs my arms and pulls me onto him, onto the mattress —

‘Rick, no —’

I push against his Popeye arms. I am afraid, my elbows like iron steeples, but sibling-like giggles too want to burst out of my mouth like bubbles.

‘Let go. *Let go.*’

He quickly releases me. ‘God, I’m stupid,’ he says, breathing into his hands. ‘Look, I was just trying my luck.’

I sit up. Stumble to the living room. Try to ground myself. I watch the room in slow motion. Let my breath do the calming.

Paul, your dowdy friend, with his diatribes and film reviews, passes by and I ask him to get me a drink. A minute later he returns with a glass full of ice. He coves around my legs and holds my ankles as though clinging to a child’s’ snugly. He is the runt in your litter, the weakest link. Cashed up, clever, but so directionless his heart beats in monochrome.

You are still asleep on the couch as though a dark embryo, unavailing to my predicament.

‘His parents died recently,’ someone tells me. ‘Cancer. Got one of them first, and then the other was diagnosed a year later. Within two years they were both gone.’

You poor thing. You poor, handsome, orphan.

I step over Paul and catch a taxi outside, the morning light, iridescent.

flash flood – *the fourth weekend*

I confront Rick during the week with words prepared.

‘Presume I’ve been raped. Presume my boyfriend’s hit me. Presume I’ve trusted a man and then watched him obliterate that trust. Women’s bodies have histories, Rick. And when you touch us unwelcomed, it rekindles Memories.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, squinting. It seems like he feels something like sorrow.

You call me and apologise for falling asleep the night of the party. From what your friends have said, I know that you are in grief, your parents newly dead, and so of course I forgive you.

‘What are you doing this week?’ I ask, curious about the habits of the independently wealthy.

‘Reading,’ you reply, ‘*Epicurus*.’

On Friday we meet at my local. Play word games – if you were a type of cocktail, what would be your significant liquor? Vodka. If I were an instrument, what would I be? Balalaika. If you were a building, what dimensions would you have? Masonry.

Back at my house we scale each other’s bodies against the walls and on the carpet and break mugs, falling from tables, laughing and sucking each other until our mouths hurt. Although close, I don’t let you in me. Penetration will have to wait.

You scratch your skin while you sleep, the sound distracting me from dreaming.

Saturday is surprisingly warm. After breakfast, I lead you to a flat park nearby. Lie on your chest in the sunshine. Feel comfort, near the hard grass and eucalyptus. I keep initiating conversations but you pat my head and laugh and say all my words are nonsense. ‘You’ll get more out of the vitamin D than playing twenty questions. There’s nothing about me to learn about.’

Only that you’re grieving. Only that you’re the richest communist I know. Only that your lackadaisical surface doesn’t match the intensity underneath.

A kite flyer works his magic near the Thinking Tree. I walk over and ask if I can give it a go.

‘Watch your hand, luv,’ the podgy man in khaki shorts says, his hand blocking his eyes from the sun. ‘The rope can give a real burn.’

The flight of the yellow kite skips so high, like a child leaping.

We spend the evening at your windsurfing friend’s barbecue in Brighton. I play charming to your circle; dropping strawberries into their champagne flutes.

Your friend, Jim, middle-name *Charisma*, pulls me aside. ‘So, do you like him?’

‘Yes,’ I reply truthfully.

‘He’s been hurt before. And he has unusual tastes, a streak of per—’

We are cut off, and I am left to wonder.

We stay late, too late for my liking, but our affair is early and your parents dead, so I let you have your way.

Jim seduces a beautiful brunette and takes her home.

I take you home.

Straddle you in the taxi. Burr my lips of raspberry along your chin and chest bones.
'Turn up the music,' I tell the driver, unbuttoning your black shirt.

'You're driving me crazy,' you word from your crooked mouth. 'You know exactly how to turn me on.'

I bite your sentence and chew your tongue and when upstairs in my bedroom decide that I will let you in me tonight.

You take me and I take you. A flash flood of cocaine and licorice.

Afterwards it occurs to me that it was too good for first sex, too daring and brutal to just be the starting point.

The morning houses Easter. I write a riddle and leave it under your pillow.

*Morning sleepy head
no need to rush from bed,
but if you desire to be fed
look in the backyard s - - d.*

We take to the shed and I giggle when you find your only prize to be an organic chicken egg.

'Omelette?' I ask you.

prayer flag and white rose – the fifth weekend

Another party. After it ends, you and I go to my uncle's nearby house as he is away on retreat.

We wake during the night and talk small words with half dreams still caught in our mouths.

I ask you if you want go outside for a cigarette. Naked, we enter the night garden of lemon tree, prayer flag and white rose. Tiptoe through the dark passageways of tomato leaf and lavender.

‘Come here,’ you tell me, sitting down on the bench. I enclose myself on you, take you into me, shivering. Under the trees we rotate earth discs, and form bright oranges from our limbs, and small strawberries from our lips.

I sleep in long. You bring me coffee and we make loose plans for later ... but I don’t hear from you.

You scratch your neck at night and leave a spatter of blood on my pillow, small red bird feet to be bleached.

fluorescent lights – the sixth weekend

Saturday. I spend the evening with you and Jim at Rick’s. I have forgiven Rick for his idiocy. You ask me what I did the night before.

‘Went to this peace party. We were supposed to bring an object that represented peace to us. So I showed up in a white dress and fishnet stockings, carrying this giant fuzzy red heart.’

Here, you laugh.

‘But everyone was so precious. They were all sitting in this cramped room with fluorescent lights. And, might I add it was an alcohol free event.’

Here, you groan.

‘So this woman in a red Afghan told us that we had to go around in a circle describing what peace meant to us. But there were about thirty people, and some of the men went on for twenty minutes. They were naïve. They thought peace was achievable. Seriously, all that talk about peace made me feel violent.’

Here, you grin.

‘How ’bout you? What’d you do?’

‘Just hung out here,’ you reply, turning your mouth around my neck like a dancer in a music box.

I feel close to you and warm. ‘I missed you this week.’

‘Missed you too,’ you murmur.

‘We could’ve gone out. There’s a movie at the Nova I’ve been wanting to see.’

‘I don’t like movies. Or television. It’s subjecting yourself to the fantasy life of others and before you know it you’ve got the same fantasies.’

A while later, you get up. ‘I’ll be back in ten minutes. I have to go pick something up.’
Something?

While you’re gone, Rick reads my Tarot cards.

‘What’s this card here?’ I ask him.

Rick looks up with gleaming eyes, ‘It’s when someone has a double life ... say, for example he’s seeing two women at the same time, although they don’t know... And maybe he saw one of them last night, He’s a juggler. I don’t know how he gets away with it, but he does all right.’

I remember that there are things I need to do at home and leave before you return.

I spend the rest of the evening at my drafting table drawing empty lines.

who is who is lost –*the seventh* weekend

‘I’m running late,’ I say answering the door.

‘There’s nothing in this world worth rushing for darling,’ you reply.

We arrive at Rick’s prepared for an early night, but he has other plans for us: *Purr*.

‘I tell you, fellow ratbags, it’s going to be the most happening place to be in the city,’ Rick tells us.

Us: a young Danish backpacker with squirrel cheeks that he’s working to seduce, you and I, and Jim. Although I’m not in the mood, somehow I am persuaded to go.

You and I drive to my house to collect costumes. We return to Rick’s and dress one another to the acid jazz of Jamiroquai. You in drag with tennis-ball breasts, Jim in my silver sequin top, Rick naked under a sheik’s cloak, and the Danish girl in a white bustier. I wear a fuchsia slip, faux fur jacket, and bright red lipstick.

They drop *E*, we get into Jim’s olive-green Benz and drive to the venue in Collingwood, a suburb devoid of street lights and full of underground gay clubs.

We enter *Purr*. Inside is a chess set: mad hatters, red couches, low platforms, and small cages. The guests wear black wings, gold and leather. They dance, sip drinks, walk around bare-breasted.

You lead me to the loo. It is filled with bodies and flowers, men and women smoking and laughing, invitations. We duck into a toilet cubical. It's lined with a mirror. I undo your fly. You lift my slip. I watch you enter me, the crane of your neck, the camber of my thighs. You consume me like a crow.

Afterwards we go upstairs to a small room which overlooks the dance floor. Long wooden tables overlaid with bowls of fruit and candles. Women walking past in groups – g-strings and braided hair. I watch you watch them. I see Jim dancing below with a girl dressed as a snake: green eyes, boots, streamers flowing from her hips, her nipples pinched with coins.

I go and get us some drinks. I return to meet you, but —

You're standing beside a lissome blonde. You and her are talking. And then you calmly slide your hand into her blouse, housing her breast with your palm, your crooked mouth smiling.

What the fuck?

You are such an asshole. You are so fucked up.

I turn down the stairs and give myself to the only thing that makes sense: sound. I throw my limbs into the electronic pulse and try to dissolve into music. I dance until I am Large, until I am Beautiful,

Then I return to you and your group of dilettantes, politely say goodnight to each man, save you, whom I eye with contempt.

I stalk down the stairs. And yes, you follow me, catch me near the coat check, with earnest, pleading eyes.

I don't mince words. 'I saw you feeling some woman's breasts. What were you doing?'

'It wasn't sexual at all,' you tell me. 'I was being irreverent.' She came up to me and squeezed my tennis balls, so I squeezed her breasts. She was there with her boyfriend. I told her I was there with my girlfriend. Look, I'm not the type of guy to see more than one woman at once. I just want to be with you. Why would I want grapes when I have you, the sweetest mango?'

'Take me home, then,' I demand. 'I'm tired.'

Jim (empty-handed) and you and I drive to Jim's together. Along the drive you point out spots of your shared life-maps: schools and parks, parents' homes.

Once inside, Jim pours us wine, Shiraz, from McLaren Vale.

And then we retire.

'May I join you?' Jim asks.

Who is who is lost as you and you uncoat me and turn me between your limbs. Who is who is lost as you and you both stroke me like mischievous twins.

In the morning, while Jim is downstairs preparing our coffee, I whisper to you, 'That was the least rough we've ever been in bed, hey?'

'Well,' you reply, 'we had company.'

medusa – the eight weekend

My mother is down from Sydney and tonight she will meet you.

You arrive late at the bar: a place of lawyers and high stools, wearing black, as always, your cheeks red.

'He is handsome,' mother says, while you are ordering drinks. (But subversive, and amoral, I think to myself.)

We have dinner with mother's hippy friends in Fitzroy. Paintings of eucalyptus trees on the walls, feathers on the mantelpiece, discussing Rudd and how everything has become cyber.

After dessert you tell me it's time for us to leave, that your friends are waiting.

'And why's your presence such a big deal?' I tease.

'I have the coke,' you reply.

We drop my mother off and go to Rick's. I am bored with their words and opt for Bacardi. We hit different clubs in the city. I keep to myself. The last club is so nothing I strike up conversation with the doorman, a New Zealander, who grew up in an orphanage. I think of my last visit to my sister's tombstone, where the cliff, sea and clouds merged like a mythological Greek city. And then I remind myself that no good comes from remembering and return to the bar.

My lover has fallen asleep. His signature: passing out in inappropriate places.

My embarrassment turns to rebellion. I dance with the young – their hard eyes that dangle lines into anything, their testosterone heady, rhythmic. A woman across the room is dancing like I am, with a self-confidence that comes from embracing suns and moons. We flag each other with our hips. To her I go, and with her, we lean close, and rub our arms and thighs. She buys me drinks with pretty umbrellas and we clap at each other's beauty, sliding close and then far, her ponytail and pointy breasts rasping my skin.

I escape to the bar and find you ordering a drink. 'Emerged from the dead, have you?'

'For now,' you grin conspiratorially.

I throw my arms around your neck, 'This woman is hitting on me!'

'Should we take her home?'

'No, for god's sake. But taking you home on the other hand ...'

We sleep in a spare room at Rick's. *Under your arms heavy as tree trunks, I swallow your sour breath in sleep.*

The alarm on my mobile goes off. I'd set it early as mother is only visiting for one more day. I tell you that I have to leave, but you just press me closer, as though I am a flower between a book

'Fuck me first,' you say, your black hair peaked, the weight of your legs anchoring me.

I shake my head. 'I can't. I have to go see my mum ... I'm sorry about your parents,' I blurt. 'I'm sorry that they're both gone.'

You look up at me, dazed. 'What are you talking about?'

'The guys, the guys told me about your parents. About the cancer ...'

You shake your head. 'You got it wrong, baby. It's Paul's parents who died recently.' He laughs, 'Have you been feeling sorry for me all along?'

How could I be so stupid? I throw on your T-shirt and go into the living room to look for a charger for my phone. I can't see one anywhere. Hearing music playing from Rick's room, I knock on the door.

'Come in,' he says.

I enter and quickly take it in: raucous hip-hop, cocaine on the table, indistinguishable naked bodies on the bed. I back peddle. A woman sits up and turns to me, her torso

pinkened, her blond hair like a lasso. She looks like a prostitute. She stares at me, wondering who I am, whether I'll create trouble.

I close the door and rush down the hallway to you. 'They're having an orgy in there... There's women I've never met...'

'A typical Saturday night for Rick then,' you reply. 'Could you get me a glass of water, chérie? I'm thirsty.'

I nod and fill up a cup in the kitchen and bring it to you. Fight your arms that pull me back like seaweed, your undertow. I collect my seashells, my leather jacket, and note my hair in the mirror makes me look like Medusa. I take the elevator down through the towering city and skate quickly through the streets wishing I had a hat, a scarf, and a straighter life.

Mother meets me at the café with green tables. We eat eggs Florentine and peruse Victoria Market: pink pig heads on hooks with bulging eyes, olives, mango, leather bags and koala kitsch.

The world of which you and your friends consort is unrestrained. You follow each whim for whatever rush, seeking immediate gratification.

You entered my life unplanned. You came in the form of a friend of a friend materialising one night in my local bar. Your hair shone black and your eyebrows arched like an elfin prince. I took to your skin from across the table and was left wondering how it might feel.

I know now it feels of leather, brotherhood, and sexual freedom. It tastes of licorice and vodka. It swims of mastery and late, late nights, bringing me lyrics for my sketchpad, and challenges to my status quo.