JAMIE JUGGS

CREAM

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Lime

I slide the plate of breakfast sludge in front of the customer. She doesn't even glance up. She's staring at her Hello Kitty robot and stroking the purring kitty's fur. Her lip quivers like she is about to say something. Maybe a thank you, but the words never make it out of her mouth. She's too engrossed in the stream beaming from her kitty's eyes.

I move behind her. The stream beam blasts my face. *Is it cake or not, babes?* smacks me in the eyeballs. Bill and Saz's show is one of the most popular in Blue Shore. Bill's Adidas joggers are rolled up. Saz is holding a butcher's knife. She sinks the knife into Bill's thigh, both of them grinning. "Nottttt," Saz shrieks as blood gushes from Bill's flesh.

"Like and stay tuned!" Bill says, forcing his grimace of pain into a demented grin. Holographic hearts fill the air around me, then vanish as I tear myself away from the stream.

The chef hollers my name. "ZAC, YOU LITTLE SMEAR OF DICK CHEESE! SERVICE." My bare foot squelches as I walk towards the service hatch. My foot is still sticky from the slime I trod in this morning on the way to catch the shuttle bus that brought me to this hellhole. I hope the slime came from someone with a big snoz and a cold rather than a space knobhead, AKA alien. I managed to scrape most of the slime off with my penknife,

slashing myself in the process, blood and slime mixing in a gory puddle.

It feels like I've been on this shift since the beginning of time. Like I evolved here, starting the morning grunting and now finally human enough to communicate with words. But it's only 11 am according to the clock on the wall. At 11:01, the chef goes fucking apeshit, screaming, veins bulging from his temples, skin blistering, eyes popping from their sockets, all because I dropped the omelette I was meant to serve on the floor.

The spreading red sauce reminds me of the insides of dead things.

"Alright mate, chill," I say. The chef pushes his eyeballs back into their sockets, and I wait for him to cook another omelette whilst he swears under his stinking breath.

Omelette served, I slump against the coffee maker. Every hiss of steam coming from the bulging machine is a voice taking the piss: "Skivvy. Lowlife. Robot," it whispers, then "Zac. Zac. Zac," repeating my name like it is a sacred mantra. I'm bloody sick of this café. The manky ketchup bottles, the rude customers, the orange tables, and the slices of cake I have to deliver with a fake smile.

Sometimes, I imagine that I really am a robot. My arms move from the coffee machine to the till. Out amongst the tables, pistons popping, and tubes rupturing under the weight of hundreds of full English breakfasts, and metal coffee pots and teapots bubbling over, boiling water melting my rubber skin. My hydraulic dick strains against my too tight work shorts because some fitty is tonguing his sausage, and I only ever have the energy to wank when I get home, bathed in the glow of my bot, fingers smelling of bacon and iced buns.

I'm sick of the customers' endless complaints, overloading

my neural circuits. I want to break their necks. Really fuck them up. Force-feed them their moans. Shove the '*butter with a pube in it*', or the '*cold scrambled eggs*' down their throats. Then after I've finished English breakfast waterboarding, I will smash their baked bean brains out on the floor.

My manager, Iris, hobbles over. Her mouth hangs wide open, a gaping cave framing a view of her rotting organs. "Zac!" she barks, the word forcing itself into my consciousness, festering there. That's how she always talks to me. Like I'm a bit of crud she just swept up off the floor. The other server here, Carla, glares, licking her lips, fingers in her knickers. I'm grateful that Iris hasn't seen the viral stream that made me a Blue Shore wank bank. My old bird boss getting off on me would make this job even more depressing than it already is.

"Ice cream kiosk, now!" Iris's words wither in the hot air. "The beach is getting busy, and our regular lad needs a hand. Pay's the same, and the job's a piece of piss, so none of your moaning." She shoos me away with the backs of her wormy hands. She's done with having me in the café. Good. I've been doing a shit job on purpose. Roodie's Holiday Camp only employed me because Roodie is Mum's friend.

I got kicked off the work placement programme because I kept skiving, sick of doing mock interviews with the other jobless losers. Mum made it her mission to find me work. Roodie is the big, and I mean big, boss who owns the café, the arcades, the ice cream kiosk, and most of Blue Shore. Mum and Roodie "date back years," she always says with a wink, which means they were fucking, and I have to imagine her being pounded by that enormous, flabby slug. Grim.

"Try not to fall down a manhole on your way," Carla says, a gum bubble bursting between her bared teeth, her slimy cunt-

juice-covered right hand now holding a plate stacked with burnt toast. She blows me a kiss.

"Try not to shove a fork in an electric socket," I shoot back.

I sling my apron over my head and throw it at Iris. She chucks me a cap, a cartoon seagull embroidered on the front. The seagull is Blue Shore's dopey mascot. I bin the cap on the way out because there's no fucking way I'm wearing it.

The café breathes a sigh of relief, as if I was the problem rather than the customers and my demented coworkers. The customers were the worst, and that problem is going to follow me to the beach. The holidaymakers, AKA the sunnies will arrive soon with their hyper kids and magical pets constantly causing mayhem, but it's the Blue Shore yocals who make me want to dissolve into the lino because they often recognise me from the viral stream that made me famous in Blue Shore.

I catch the yocals rewatching the stream with glazed eyes. Or I catch them watching me, dribbling into their hot chocolates, jerking themselves off under the sticky tables.

"A full English breakfast and a blowy mate."

Or,

"A cum shake to go," they say, giggling and leering and wanking as I grit my teeth, trying with all my might not to throw the plates of soggy mushrooms and rock-solid hash browns in their faces. All I want is for someone to like me for me, and not get wet or bricked up because of the viral stream's fucked-up spell.

I pick at my cuticles, enjoying the feeling of peeling away the skin. Roodie's Holiday Camp gets smaller behind me, and hot air slaps me hard when I hit the beach, the air-con blasting from Roodie's Holiday Camp unable to reach this far. I wade through knee-deep heat haze, approaching the ice cream kiosk.

It stands out like a skinned thumb. It's painted a neon yellow that hurts my eyes, a giant plastic ice cream cone planted in the sand, and a Roodie's flag flying from the roof, the letters printed in a creamy, dripping, pink bubble font. Music is playing inside the kiosk. Some old song. All panpipes and drums like something straight out of Middle-Earth. A head pops out of the kiosk's hatch, smiling hard.

"Sup," the head says. "What can I get for ya?" I recognise him. I fucking adore him. Roodie's son is the most popular streamer in Blue Shore, known for his bad boy antics. Iris didn't mention that the regular lad is Jake! Jake is trouble. Jake's built different. He deals, he steals, he fucks whoever he wants to fuck because he's cock-explodingly-gorgeous. He lets cats loose in dog shelters, sets fireworks off in churches, has street fights with smashed glass tucked between his knuckles, and people love him for it.

My brain is as rotten as everyone else's in Blue Shore, glued to my bot. Jake's my biggest addiction. I tune in to his stream again and again. He's the reason I lose sleep, unable to tear myself away from my bot's beam. I spend way too much time in chat streams, arguing with Jake's toxic fandom about his love life, sex life, thug life, and listening to gossip streams with their endless speculation. But Jake's been off the radar for a while. '*Taking a hiatus, Fan Bams,*' has been his status for the last two weeks. Fan Bams is what Jake calls his followers. His stream went dark right after mine went viral. The Fan Bams have all been wondering where he went. There's been a big hole in my life where Jake used to be. I can't believe that he's here in front of me. That I'm actually meeting Jake in person. I want to be like Jake: fearless and charming. Watching his streams made me feel like part of his world, and now I'm stepping into it for

real.

"I'm here to work. Iris sent me," I say, playing it as cool as I can, but my voice is shaky. I want to reach out and grab him. I want him to sign his autograph across my bare chest. He's probably had enough of crazed Fan Bams though. That must be why he stopped streaming. I have to act normal, even if I am a nervous, excited wreck on the inside.

Jake's sharky grin widens, and little sparkles crackle in front of his eyes. "Zac, right? C'mon in little bro. Welcome to paradise!" My heart twists. Does he know my name from the viral stream, or did Iris tell him I was coming?

Inside, it's cramped, the air thick and sweet, and my headspace is instantly back in Ryan's syrupy studio, where the viral stream was produced. I try to shake the memory of it from my head, but end up looking like a glitching freak.

Sweetie boxes line the shelves, drinks sweat in the fridge, and the freezers hum. Jake is sitting on a stool, a cone of neon-green ice cream melting in his hand. He holds out a fist and I bump it awkwardly. He twirls a gnawed-on pencil in his other hand. It's dancing through his fingers. He drops the pencil, and it clacks on the counter. He ignores it, adjusts the bulge in his skimpy work shorts, then decides to go all in. My eyes follow Jake's fingers as they slip under the elastic. He rubs the space between his balls and thigh. Sniffs his fingers. He sees me looking and grins even wider.

"Want some?" he says. Do I... He glances at the ice cream, picks up the pencil. Resumes twirling.

"Oh! Yeah, sure," I say. He meant the ice cream, not his sweaty knob.

"Lime is amazing but choose whatever you want. It's free if we say it is. No one's keeping an eye on us here, little bro. We

can do whatever we want." His bulge twitches.

"Lime's good."

"Great! You can have mine. I'll make another." Jake holds out the soggy cone, and I take it. The thought of eating the ice cream Jake slobbered all over is like a dream come true. The fridge gobbles Jake up, his pink work polo riding up as he leans in, exposing tanned, wet skin and a wetter arse crack.

He holds up a fresh ice cream. His is white. Vanilla or maybe coconut I guess. "Cheers," he says, and we bump cones. Jake's pupils dilate as he licks the ice cream. Somehow he becomes more gorgeous and attractive than before. Tonguing things suits him. I lick the half-melted ice cream. Electric sourness floods my mouth. I've never tasted an ice cream this incredible. Maybe because Jake's spit is the best seasoning. I swallow, thinking of the viral stream again. The one I love to hate. The source of my shame, fucking with me by turning me on whenever it pops into my head. Jake must have seen it. Half of Blue Shore saw it. Then Jake knows what I am, and he wants me. That's why he's being so obvious. This is one of the rare times I want the other person too. More than anything. A drip of ice cream runs down my wrist. I lick it off. Jake's tongue splits into tentacles, demolishing his ice cream in seconds. His eyes are locked on me. Outside seagulls screech.

Jake leans forward on the stool, strands of slick hair falling over his forehead, cutting across his eyes. "Well," he whispers, the skin on his chapped lips quivering with his breath.

"Mmmm," I say. My hand drifts to the hump in my own shorts. I feel daring. The day started like shit, but now everything's looking up.

"I knew that Lime would blow your socks off."

He's not looking away from me. I won't look away either. The

ice cream melts in my hand. The speaker gurgles. Sweat pools in my belly button. Summer stretches ahead like a horny dream, Carla's juicy fingers, Iris's organs, and the chef's moon-face fading away in an instant.

Mint Choc Chip

A cloud swallows the sun, and the sunbathers moan, wrapping towels around their pimpled skin. It's my first full day on the job after starting yesterday, and the swarms of tourists haven't arrived yet. The education stream just shut down for summer, and the sunnies, AKA tourists, will be on their way here, a line of coaches roaring down the motorway, ready for a break from reality in Blue Shore.

Jake connects his bot, Sid, a gingerbread man plushie with tattoos and a tiny, gold nose ring, to the salt-encrusted speakers. "What's this tune?" I ask. Jake's lapping up a cone of coconut cream. He wipes a drip of melted ice cream from his salt-chapped bottom lip. "Music to dissolve to. Works wonders on the gals." Jake fingers the air like he's fingering a pussy.

"Pity I like dick then," I say, pretending to suck on an invisible knob.

"Works with guys too. Trust me, I'd know." His eyes beam between his lashes. Course he knows. I've seen Jake get with guys on his streams. At least their blurred pixelated forms looked male, the occasional glitch, showing glimpses of a muscly thigh, or a stubble-covered jaw. I never caught sight of the places that really count though. Without actually seeing a dong, it's hard to say for sure. "My mum was really into this music.

The band always performed using homemade instruments. *The Thrifters*. Have you heard of them? Mum introduced me to the album."

"Nah, they're shit-hot though. What do you mean, your mum *was* into them? She went off them or something?"

"She's dead now, little bro."

"Fuck." Now I wish I hadn't asked. "Oh man. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. It's fucking heartbreak that should be sorr..." He coughs. Smacks himself in the chest, and a crimson, bloody thing tumbles out of his mouth, trailing gore. Jake's heart thumps onto the counter. It flickers, zigzags of neon dancing around it. Jake slams his fist down, smashing the heart into a billion pieces. All the tiny, broken bits of heart turn into shards of light, float into the air, then come together, reforming into cartoon hearts. The cartoon love hearts orbit us, dancing around each other.

Jake blows the cloud, and the hearts drift towards my face. I inhale, and the hearts enter my body. Jake's emotions beat through me. He's exposing himself to me. Showing me his rawest, most painful feelings. I experience what it was like to lose his mum. The love they shared. Shit. My eyes are leaking, and for a second I'm embarrassed, but Jake's doing this on purpose. He wants me to feel like this. Jake reaches out a thumb and wipes a tear away. "She died of a broken heart?" I ask.

Jake shrugs. "Yeah, but not like that. Her heart literally broke. She was born with a dodgy ticker, and the mechanical replacement just stopped working one day. That was that."

I stroke the back of Jake's hand, running my fingers over the beautiful pattern of veins that criss-cross it. He looks at me, and for a millisecond the same love hearts appear on the surface of his eyeballs. "Thanks. It was a long time ago."

The next track comes on. "Alright," a kid says. A short arse, orange hair like greasy flames licking the counter. My legs are oxytocin-soaked jelly, and I have trouble standing up to serve him.

But Jake's already on it. "Whaddya want, my brother?" Jake says.

"Woah! Jake," the kid gushes. "Where have you been, man?!"

"I'm here, live and kicking. Tell everyone who's anyone."

"Wait till they all hear about this on the streams," the kid says, pretty much pissing his pants with excitement.

The kid rattles off an order: a bunch of ice lollies, fizzy drinks, and a cone of orange creamsicle. I bag the lollies and drinks, and Jake scoops the ice cream. The kid walks off as happy as Larry. Jake sits back on his stool, and a ghost trails in his wake and vanishes, as if Blue Shore didn't render him fast enough.

"Easy peasy, right?" Jake says.

"Simple Simon." I laugh, and now I'm wondering who the fuck Larry and Simon were and why they have dumb-arse phrases named after them.

"Just wait though. When the sunnies arrive, it will be total chaos. Have you ever tried to get ice cream on a summer's day? Some days, the line stretches right across the beach, as far as you can see." I try to remember last summer, but all I see is a blur where there should be memories. Weird.

I peek out of the hatch. The beach goes on forever. Endless, sparkling sand, pitted with footprints, only deep-blue, starry sky beyond it. It's like Blue Shore is the entire world, hanging in space. "I reckon I can deal with it," I say.

Customers drift up to the hatch, tired, sun-fried, and sweaty. They drift out grinning, hypnotised by Jake's famous, magnetic charm, clutching their ice creams, plastic bags filled with lollies,

sweeties and fizzy drinks, Jake's signature scrawled in spit across their boobs or bum or any other body part they requested. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, but even I notice something dodgy going on. Yocals with wide eyes and dopey far-out faces keep coming up to the hatch. I can tell they're yocals because of the way they dress. Typical Blue Shore drips: thrifted sports gear chopped and cropped, mesh tanks layered with plastic gilets, completed with jelly kicks of course. All of them order the same thing: a cone of lime, strawberry, pistachio or whatever, but all with an extra flake, and they hand over way more payment than necessary for just an ice cream and two flakes.

With each sus order, Jake nods, makes an ice cream, and hands over the extra flake wrapped in a bit of tissue.

The clouds on the horizon turn pink then orange as the sun drops, and the line of customers thins out. By five, we're dead. Jake's filling his signature brush's chamber with spit, a string of saliva hanging from his bottom lip. He's asking his bot about the surf in between dribbles. Sid dances on the counter as it gives the latest surf forecast. I swivel back and forth on my stool, watching the high tide creep over the beach. The ocean is flat and glassy. Sid reckons the surf might get better tomorrow or it might not. The forecaster is pretty undecided about the whole thing. "What's with the extra flake?" I ask, as Jake tickles Sid. The gingerbread man is lying on his back, rolling around, laughing his tits off. Except Sid doesn't have tits. Just two little tufts of icing for nipples.

"You're really on the ball, aren't you, little bro? Just making some profit, pushing cream."

"Cream?"

"Some of the flavours have special ingredients. Makes people feel things differently. That's all."

This badassery is exactly the reason I tune into Jake's streams, and now I'm living in one. But Jake's not streaming this. This experience is just for me and him. Our own, messy story. I wonder why Jake isn't sharing his life with Blue Shore anymore. I'd care more, if I could only have him through his stream. But I'm here with Jake now. I get to watch him live! I hope he never switches on his stream again. I want Jake all to myself.

"You're cool with it, right?" Jake's arm stretches across the kiosk, his bones turning to elastic. His hand lands on my thigh. He massages it, squeezing so hard it hurts, moving higher up my leg, under my shorts. His fingertips stop just short of my ballsack. Our eyes connect, mischief written in his. He laughs, and his arm snaps back and shoots across the shack.

"Cool as a cucumber," I dribble, dick hard as a frozen cucumber too.

"I knew you would be! You want some more lime? It's trippy as fuck."

I nod. "I loved it. I could eat a whole tub of the stuff."

"Hold your horses, little bro! You'll end up in another galaxy if you do that. Knew you'd love Elf Sherbert though. It's the most popular flavour. That was a tiny dose yesterday, and you let most of it melt. You've got to have the full experience today. A scoop and a half should sort you out."

"Elf Sherbert," I repeat slowly.

"Yep. Every cream has a street name. Lime's Elf Sherbert, Strawberry's Slut Dribbler. I'll fill you in on all the rest later."

"What's in Elf Sherbert then?" I wonder out loud.

Jake taps his nose. "Can't give away all the secrets, can I?" Jake heaves down the kiosk shutter, then hands me a cone of lime ice cream, so green it looks radioactive. "I've eaten a ton, so it hardly affects me anymore, but for newbies, it's like blasting

into space."

I lick the ice cream and the track changes, a pirate shanty drifting from the speakers. Lyrics about a love lost at sea. Taken by singing sirens. Pulled into the deep. Drowned with kisses. I wrap my lips around the ice cream, sucking it into my mouth. It tastes as good as yesterday, even without Jake's saliva garnish.

A psychedelic rush washes over me.

The kiosk expands until we are sitting in a giant void. A billion stars twinkle above. They fall from the sky becoming UFOs, hovering all around us. The alien pilots inside are chattering and pointing. Jake's eyes are black holes sucking me in. "I thought this summer was gonna be boring as shit," he says softly. "But now you're here. And you're cute as fuck."

Jake leans back, legs wide open. He licks his lips, and I'm on the tip of his tongue, a granule of sugar melting in bliss. He looks at me dangerously, the word 'CAUTION' strobing in front of his nose. "It's just you and me now. Hey! You can help me sell cream if you want? We can share the profits." I can't say no. He's offering me a slice of his world. I'll do anything to gobble it up. To gobble Jake up. I want to bite him. I want to taste him. I want to smear mint choc chip all over his chest and lick it off.

I think I say yes, but the world is shattering. I'm riding one of the planet shards into space. I'm joining the mantis aliens, the Greys, and the Pleiadians in their Galactic Federation. I'm sitting on a meteoric throne, and they're hailing me as their king. Jake's here too. He's lapping alien ectoplasm from my toes. Space elves surround us, whistling and twittering like birds. "So you'll help me?" Jake says.

"Yes," I groan. One of the mantis aliens has pried open my jaws. Its long furry tongue unrolls and probes my mouth. Enters my throat. Yes, I think. But I can't remember what I'm

agreeing to. Dealing? Toe licking? Fucking? Worshipping Jake all summer? All of the above?

The mantis drags its tongue from inside me.

The ice cream kiosk tumbles back into my vision. Jake's holding out another cone of lime cream. The beach is dark now. Everyone's gone. It's like time sped up.

The stars giggle.

The sea rises and falls.

"I'm planning to diversify my business. Not just sell to yocals. The sunnies are going to love cream," Jake says, his face a swirling galaxy.

Tomorrow, the sunnies come, and if Jake's plan works, we'll be rolling it in.

We. Me and him. I lick my lips. The taste of Jake is still there. Another flavour lingers on my tongue, metallic and cosmic like stardust mixed with crushed Martian cockroaches.

Mini Milk

Jake was right. Yesterday was a walk in the park compared to today. The sunnies are here en masse, and the beach is packed. We're rushing around, baking in the oven-like kiosk. Jake said to ditch our clothes and even our undies because "Roodie doesn't give a flying fuck what we do." So we're working naked, sweat dripping from our knobs. The world is slanted, the sky sagging under the sun's weight. Heat waves ripple over the sand, and barefooted sunnies leap from parasol shadow to parasol shadow, or run quickly across the scalding sand.

That's when I notice that the ice cream kiosk is all wrong. Nothing is quite meeting up in the right places. It's like someone bulldozed the kiosk, then rebuilt it using a torn-up flat-pack plan, joining the planks together in the incorrect order, leaving gaping holes where yesterday there were none. I take a look at the long line of sunnies, and decide to escape. I dive through one of the holes in the kiosk wall. My stomach slides across roasting sand. The sand rapidly cools until it is sub-zero, and I freeze in place. Ice-crystal-covered slabs rise up around me, enclosing me, and a ceiling of frosted glass and icicles slips overhead.

My blood cools instantly, my flesh turning to frozen steak. My eyes are the only part not frozen. I know because I can move them around freely whilst the rest of me is paralysed. My

skin is coated in strawberry syrup and hundreds and thousands. Freezing mist surrounds me, rushing away when the ceiling slides open. A marshmallow hand with chocolate flake fingers attached to a long, bendy arm made of woven strawberry laces, reaches in and picks me up.

This isn't the same ice cream kiosk I was in moments ago. This is a kiosk in a topsy-turvy universe. The walls are covered in posters of human lollies and ice creams. I feel sick looking at an image of a pretty girl because she's sliced and diced, chunks of her gorily piled in a cone, boobs covered in raspberry syrup. In another poster, a formation of human lollies are fake smiling, lips pulled up in the corners with strings of liquorice threaded through their cheeks, lolly sticks shoved up their chocolate-dripping arses. There's something hard between my legs, and it's not the usual culprit. I realise that I must be impaled on a stick too, and I'm glad that my arsehole is frozen and numb. My lips hurt from grinning, and I can taste aniseed on my tongue. The gigantic ice cream, holding me between crumbling chocolate flake fingers, passes me to another ice cream on the other side of the hatch.

The ice cream customer opens its mouth, the top of the cone separating into two jagged halves. I try to scream as the ice cream shoves my head inside its mouth, but my frozen vocal cords aren't working. My final view is of a set of razor-sharp candy fangs coming down on me. I flinch, preparing for the agony of being munched to death when the sound of a buzzer yanks me through time and space. I'm sucked through the hole in the kiosk wall, and my world snaps into place like puzzle pieces being slammed together by a demented toddler.

Heat slams back in, instantly thawing my flesh and blood. Thank fuck! I'm back in the human ran kiosk on Blue Shore Bay,

seagulls squawking above and waves roaring in the distance. Fear Factor Phil is standing at the hatch, his bot, Tails, hovering in front of him. "Piss check," Phil cries joyfully.

Tails flies over the counter, tail whirling. He hovers in front of my dick, then returns to Phil's happy face. "Not a dribble! Let's congratulate our fearless dimension hopper."

Phil hands me a tiny trophy. I don't watch Phil's stream. I'm not into watching people getting scared shitless for thrills. So I don't expect the confetti and glitter that fountains from the trophy, blasting my eyes and filling my wide open gob.

"Fucking hell." I lob the trophy at Phil and it smacks him in his forehead, leaving a gnarly dent. Blood bubbles from the wound.

"Looks like we have a bad sport, fear lovers." The words 'bad sport' flash in front of my face. "Let's find our next victi...I mean fear lover before this geezer wallops me again." Phil wanders off, still talking to his bot and his thousands of viewers. I wipe confetti from my sweaty mug, looking at my reflection in the fridge to make sure I get every little piece.

When I turn back to the hatch, a middle-aged woman is tapping her long, green fingernails on the counter, clutching a baby goblin in her other arm. The goblin stares at me with swamp-coloured eyes. The creature's bananary stink fills my nostrils. "A Mini Milk, and a cone of strawberry with an extra flake, please," the woman says flatly. She's wearing a see-through bikini, barnacles clinging to the plastic. I glance down at the special section of the freezer, where the cream with special ingredients is stashed. Lime, strawberry, pistachio, bubblegum, and coconut cream. AKA: Elf Sherbert, Slut Dribbler, Smash, Dreamscape, and Spunk Rush. The woman doesn't look like Jake's usual customer at all, but I can't check because Jake's

nowhere to be seen.

My bot starts buzzing and vibrating, then counting down from ten in moth-speak, which sounds like fuzzy buzzes, each louder than the last. I grab my backpack, rip the zip open, and my moth bot, Zebby, flies out, her digital eyes glowing red in anger. She hates being disturbed during the day, giving me ten seconds to receive whatever has pissed her off before she deletes the message, hangs up the call, or bites me ferociously. Bloody thing. She spends most of her time moping deep in my musty backpack. If I could take her back to the shop for a refund I would, but bots are for life, not just for Christmas. The stupid thing catfished me, projecting all these beautiful colours onto her wings, then turning into a dull, hairy, evil little creature the moment the return window ran out. The only time she's in a good mood is at night, when I'm glued to the streams. Then, she flutters around my bedroom, trailing pixels, her stream beam filling the whole room so that I'm immersed in whichever stream I'm watching, only landing occasionally to chew a hole in the curtains or the dirty clothes on my floor. Jake's holographic head projects from the bot, filling my vision, his salt-chapped lips so close it's like he's kissing me as he speaks.

"Out telling sunnies who pass the vibe check about our hustle. Man the fort, little bro! Back in no time."

I fake smile at the woman and goblin. I don't think she passes the vibe check, but I'm not sure what the 'vibe' is. "Hey, you're Ryan's masterpiece, aren't you?" she says, and it feels like she's tying a noose around my neck. If even sunnies have seen the stream now, it must be spreading beyond Blue Shore. The stream is like a virus, infecting everyone. Soon, the whole world will be getting off on me. I nod, feeling sick as her hands slip down her bikini bottoms. She licks her lips as she stares at me hungrily.

The goblin, free from her grip, jumps from her hip, latches onto a wall and begins climbing the kiosk, claws digging into the wood. I try to grab the goblin's hairy leg, and it spins, spit flying from its fangs. I let go because catching magical rabies was not in the job description. The goblin disappears onto the kiosk's roof. I try to focus on the task at hand and not on the rising and falling of the woman's bikini bottoms.

"You sure you only want normal ice cream?" I say, looking down, widening my eyes at the special cream compartment, then looking back up and giving her a not-so-subtle eyebrow raise. Her wet fingers are on the counter now. She leans into the kiosk hatch, boobs turning into squashed pancakes on the counter, and peers down at my sweaty penis.

The goblin is bashing its fists on the roof. "Sure, hot stuff..." She reaches in, her hand going for my dick.

"No!" I stutter, grabbing her paw so that fanny-juice-fingers and dick don't make contact. "I didn't mean that..." My mumbling is drowned out by the goblin's pummelling, so I shut up and get the ice creams. At least I was right about her not having the vibe. Maybe I can actually help Jake sell cream.

When I turn back, her eyes are rolled back, and her bikini bottoms are soaked. I pass her the ice creams. The goblin baby leaps from the corrugated roof at the smell of ice cream and chomps the entire Mini Milk, swallowing it in one gulp.

"Thanks. See you next time!" I say, hoping to never see her or the horrible baby again.

"Now, how about the Slut Dribbler!?"

I look at her, confused.

"Strawberry with an extra flake."

My confidence plummets. Each new customer feels like a test I'm bound to fail. I obviously don't have a vibe detector

like Jake does. I pass her a cone of Slut Dribbler, my cheeks burning. The goblin gives me a funny look, its eyebrows like two fat caterpillars on its wrinkled forehead. I'm glad when they piss off.

I do a double take. The line behind the woman is endless, sunny after sunny stretching forever. How am I going to deal with them all by myself? The ancient wall fan whirs, blowing 1000-degree-air at me. I'm so hot that I'd take my skin off if I could.

A beluga whale of a man approaches the hatch, blocking my view of the beach. I think he's naked, but it's hard to tell because rolls of fat are cascading down his body. Maybe his swimmers are embedded somewhere under the lard. Two tiny seaweed-coloured eyes glint at me between his bulging eyelids. "Two Strawberry Cornettos, two 99s, two Cokes, a 7UP, and a Feast," he says in a high-pitched voice. His skin is blotched with gross puke-coloured patterns like some kind of fungus is growing beneath his skin. I didn't hear a please, but I get on with the order anyway, desensitised to rude customers from my days in the café. The whale's oniony breath follows me to the fridge.

I pass him the cones, the ice cream already melting in the heat, and I shove the rest of his order in a plastic bag. He plunks down three pebbles in exchange for the order. I lift them to the light one by one. They're nice stones. One has a unicorn carved into its surface. Another's surface is painted to resemble a mushroom. My favourite is the pebble with a tiny Venus de Milo etched on its surface in crazy detail. I chuck them in the exchange drawer where they join the beads, feathers, teeth, a tiny watercolour portrait, pearls, a braid woven with plastic beads, and fingernail clippings (collected in a little baggy). All the exchange items emit auras, the colour and brightness corresponding to an item's

value.

I pass the whale his change, dropping a crab's claw into his hand. He tucks the claw under a roll of fat like it is the most normal thing in the world, then looks at me expectantly. I dig into my nose, really getting up in there, picking out a sandy bogey. I wipe my finger on his palm, and the bogey slides across his fortune lines. He rolls the bogey between his fingers, forming a nugget, and plops it onto his tongue. "And the rest of my change," he says, eyeing me suspiciously like I'm a malfunctioning android. "I gave you an extra pebble cos I need to change one up so my son can play the arcades."

"Sorry, sir, but you only gave me three. Worth what you ordered minus a crab's claw and a dried nose nugget."

"That bogey wasn't even dry, matey!" He says, licking his lips. "And are you calling me a liar, you little piss pot!?"

The sun dims, turning blood-red. My pulse beats hard against my wrist like a creature trying to break free. I open the exchange drawer. It sticks, the sand grains in the slide mechanism jamming it. I yank it open. The whale man leans over the counter, and the kiosk tips, rising into the air at the back, then slamming down into the sand when he unbeaches himself, the seven or so pebbles that he spied in the drawer still reflected in his mean, beady eyes. A vein pulses in the side of his bald head. "I told you, I gave you four! I saw them all in there. I want to see a fucking manager!"

"Just me here," I whisper, murderous rage surging through my body.

He snarls, "Give me my change, shitbag." Well, the customer is always right. I do a quick sum in my head. Maths is for bots, but this sum is simple. One artistically carved pebble = five and a half dull marbles. I reach into the marble sack, pulling out six.

He can fucking have one half for free. My ears are buzzing. I pull my hand back and lob the marbles as hard as I can.

The marbles impact the man's slab of a head, knocking out two of his bared teeth, breaking his nose, shattering cartilage, shooting through the 99 cone, smacking him straight in the third eye. A laser beam of blazing light explodes from his third eye hole, incinerating everything it touches. The kiosk goes up in flames, crackling then whooshing. The whale man drops to his knees. Falling forward. He face-plants the sand.

I'm enjoying the carnage. Fire, blood, and ice cream. Every part of me is burning, the fire flaying my flesh from my bones. A cool hand slides over my intestines. The fire instantly vanishes, my meat body snapping back to my skeleton. "Zac, little bro," Jake's voice murmurs. "There's a queue waiting." Ash drifts around us like snow.

"Shit. Sorry, I was miles away." I turn, breathing in Jake's hot, smoky breath.

"That was cool as fuck though."

"It was?" When I lean over the counter, searching for the blubbery man's body, it isn't there. Instead, sunburnt kids are collecting the marbles from the sand.

"Yeah, that was textbook. The way you chucked his change over his head. Epic. Here, go have a cone out back. Calm down. I can serve this lot." He passes me a cone of lime. I spot the whale man's flabby arse retreating in the distance. Guess he didn't want the marbles enough to get down on his hands and knees to collect them.

I do as Jake says, crouching behind the kiosk, huddling in the building's shade.

My right calf muscle spasms. I rub my leg. My calf muscle is bulging, the skin over it taut, veins throbbing, little lights

dancing under my skin. My calf is so big, it looks like I spent a week in the gym working on that muscle alone. My memory is thrown back to the shuttle bus stop. To the puddle of slime I stood in. I guess it wasn't snot. Oh shit. This is terrifying. I remember a streamer who would go on adventures in far-flung places. In one stream, he went for a dip in a jungle river, and a parasite swam up his pee hole. Two weeks later his brain was full of worms, the slimy things coming out of his nose and eye sockets. He streamed the whole thing. Even as they were eating him alive.

That was bad, but at least those nasties came from Earth. Shimmering slime on pavements doesn't just get there all by itself. I wonder which space creep spunked the goop all over the pavement. I try to think of a hench species of alien but my brain comes up with nothing. I will have to ask Zebby about it later. It's times like this that I wish I paid more attention to the education streams. Worms in the brain are grim, but a parasite from space could be a gazillion times worse.

I take a lick of Elf Sherbert. Tiny aliens appear, dancing across the sand, beckoning me with long, spidery fingers and curling tentacles.

I close my eyes and blast off.

Cappuccino

The beach is rammed. Jake and I dance around each other in the cramped space. Working together is effortless. We are a natural team. We move in sync: from fridge, to freezer, to sweetie shelf, to counter. I get hard when my bellend brushes against Jake's arse, and the customers giggle, point, and some of them wank, complimenting my cock. It's sticking straight up like a banana on top of a sundae.

My willy may be pretty, but my leg is a fucking mess. My lower leg is beginning to resemble a Cumberland sausage. Stranger still, it feels like something is bubbling under my skin. Like my tissues are tearing and reforming into a new configuration. It's spreading too, a fizzling sensation creeping up my leg, my thigh starting to inflate. Zebby wasn't much help, narrowing the alien culprit down to one of forty-two possible species, then suggesting amputation before the infection spreads further. Thanks, but no thanks.

A snake of customers winds across the beach's lava plains. Wasps orbit sticky kids, and their parents moan and dribble, impatient for their daily sugar fix. Jake and I are operating on autopilot: banter, scoop, serve, repeat.

"Oi! No cutting in!" a woman with a towering, beehive-shaped hairdo shrieks.

The giant surfer dude who pushed in turns, glaring at her, and she shrinks in response. When she's half her original size, the surfer dude stomps on her head, hammering her into the sand until only the top half of her face and her smooshed hair remain above ground. The surfer dude bangs his fist on the counter, and I jump a foot, but Jake doesn't flinch. "Spunk Rush, mate. Gimme a triple scoop," he says. Puffs of steam shoot out of his ears, and angry face emojis erupt out of his huge pores.

Jake leans in. Whispers, "Tom, keep it down, mate. It's coconut cream in front of randos. And you know we only do one scoop at a time. It's the hardest flavour to make."

"Just gimme." Tom flexes his arms, showing off his massive biceps.

"One scoop only," Jake says. Some of the people in the queue look pissed off. Others are taking photos or sketching. Quite a few have cut their losses and are walking away. I'd piss off too. An ice cream and a can of Lilt isn't worth being beaten into the sand. Some people are fingering their bots, activating streams. A few are holding up their emergency beacon lights, summoning a novelty officer. But by the time the beacon lights trigger more beacon lights, becoming a chain and reaching a novelty officer somewhere in Blue Shore, the surfer dude will have fucked off. I'm sure an officer will arrive to ask about what happened by next week at the latest, but it is only Monday.

"Three scoops," Tom roars, gob flying from his teeth, a vein ready to pop in his neck.

"Alright. Mate. God. Just this once, okay?" Jake hisses.

Jake reaches into the special cream compartment, digs a scoop into a tub of sparkling, white coconut cream. He plops three scoops into a cone one after the other, then passes it to Tom. "I'll pay you later," Tom says, then stomps away. The queue

of sunnies go back to acting like nothing happened. They're counting their bottle caps, beads, and feathers, and scratching their sweaty arse cracks and sniffing their fingers.

By late afternoon the feeding frenzy is over. The sunnies are splayed out on their sandy towels. They remind me of lumps of meat cooking in the sun. A girl appears at the hatch, and I almost swallow my tongue. Beautiful is an understatement. Her hair is pure gold, and her eyes are wells of grey seawater. She must have some pixie in her because her nose is like a tiny ski slope, and rainbow freckles and tiny sparkles catch the sun on her cheeks.

"Hey, you must be Zac? Jake told me all about you," she says. My stomach twists. I'm happy Jake's been chatting about me, but he definitely never mentioned *her*. Before I can reply, she calls over my shoulder. "Hey, baby bum!"

Jake's face lights up. "Hey gorgelicious." He leans over the counter and licks her plump lips. Jake's dick hardens, and so do the pretty nipples poking through the girl's pink, fishing-net bikini.

I'm jealous as fuck. On Jake's streams, his lovers are always censored, pixelated on purpose, making it easy for the viewer to imagine it's them being licked or pounded. But seeing Jake kissing a flesh-and-blood girl is a different story. This was our world and now this girl is invading it.

"Zac, Tasmin. Tasmin, Zac," Jake says, and Tasmin extends a hand, emerald nails glimmering. I pretend not to see her paw, nod a hello, just about manage a smile, then make myself look busy by restocking the cans in the fridge. Tasmin's perfect features are reflected in the door's dewy glass.

"Can I get a scoop of strawberry," Tasmin says, "and don't forget the extra flake." Fishy-smelling foam drips from her

lips and creates a little puddle on the counter. A group of ants surrounds the puddle, lapping up her gob. Jake leans in again, cleaning the foam from her mouth with his tongue. My own dick is misbehaving, the pink head looking up at me, a dribble of white oozing from its traitorous eye.

I scoop the ice cream, pass it to her and hold out my palm, waiting for payment. "Don't be a bum!" Jake laughs. "It's on the house." He winks at her, salty lashes meeting, then parting. He grabs my hand. The one hanging out of Tasmin's view behind the counter. He squeezes it, his hard thumb pressing into my palm, and I imagine it pressing into my arsehole.

Tasmin polishes off the ice cream. Her cunt is opening and closing like it's winking at me, soaking her thighs. Now I know why they call strawberry cream Slut Dribbler.

"Mind if I take a break, little bro? Cover the shack for a bit for me?"

I nod. "Sure, why not."

I watch Tasmin and Jake as they make out with each other where the waves lap the beach. They touch and play like no one's watching. No one is watching but me because the sunnies are sleeping after their sugar rush. The sky gets darker, and the shapes of Jake and Tasmin blur into one another. They become a swirling mass of flesh, growing bigger, sucking and fucking on the horizon.

The noises of squelching and slurping wake up the lobster-red sunnies. They crawl over to the blob-like form on the horizon. The sunnies worship the blob. Its fleshy mass is fucking itself, hovering above the water, glowing. The sunnies chant prayers.

A freckled girl interrupts my trance. She's holding a plush Seagull under her arm. They sell the Blue Shore mascot in the beach shop. "You forgot my Fruit Pastille lolly, mate, and I

asked for a lemon Calippo, not orange." I fix her order, without saying anything, eyes still glued to the blob. It has become two separate, but still enormous, silhouetted figures, cross-legged on the surface of the ocean, stars twinkling inside them.

Something massive eclipses my view, and for a moment I think the whale man is back for another barney, but it's that surfer dude, Tom. Somehow, he looks way bigger than before, his muscles enormous. His eyes are blue slits of anger. "Where's that dickhead?" He's vibrating, his muscles pulsing. "The Rush was a dud. It didn't do shit."

Jake and Tasmin have vanished, and the worshipping sunnies are back on their towels, soaking up the last rays of sun. What am I supposed to do now? Tom sucks in a breath. His fists are clenched, knuckles white. I close my eyes tight.

"Tom, mate." Jake appears, his fingers creeping over Tom's tense, rock-hard shoulder, squeezing. Tom lashes out and grabs Jake's neck. Oh fuck. Tom's enormous hand tightens like a clamp. He's going to kill Jake. I bite down on my tongue.

"Stop it!" Tasmin says calmly. She's stroking Tom's beast of a forearm. First Tom's hand, then his whole body relaxes, and a look of confusion crosses his spotty face. "What's the problem?" Tasmin says.

"The Spunk Rush. It was a dud. I'm not exchanging nothing for that shit." But Tom's heart isn't in it anymore. The words sound hollow and unconvincing.

Jake splutters. Composes himself. Manages to say, "I can give you a discount, mate, but no freebies."

"There," Tasmin says. "Jake will give you a good deal." Tasmin winks at Jake, and Tom nods slowly. Tasmin leads him away by the arm, and he floats in her wake, tiptoes dragging a trail through the sand. Jake shakes his head. Goes into the kiosk.

I join him. He's frantically wiping down the counter surface, rubbing a crater in the wood.

"What was that all about?" I ask.

Jake stops, but doesn't look at me. He's staring out onto the beach, into the darkening sky. "Tom's a dick, but Tasmin knows how to handle him. He always claims the Rush is a dud, but it's working. Just not the way he wants."

"What is Spunk Rush supposed to do anyway?"

Jake's eyes light up. "It's the best thing ever. I can become the delay."

"The delay?" I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Blue Shore's worst-kept secret." Jake taps the side of his nose. "After streaming became so popular, Blue Shore gave streamers an option to maximise engagement and growth. You switch on the delay, and Blue Shore edits you. Blue Shore calls it a reality filter. We call it the delay."

"You're joking?" I always thought I was watching Jake live.

"No joke, little bro. Every streamer knows it's possible to delay, but we don't talk about it to nobodies." He means people that don't stream. Unknowns. That's hardly anyone. Almost everyone in Blue Shore broadcasts their lives. I'm one of the few who don't. But I've got fame whether I want it or not. "Every stream's edited in advance. Making us look better. Changing our storylines. Blue Shore decides your fate. You're never there when it happens. You're catching up. Rush takes that minute away. People see you live. Well the version they want to see. Their eyes touch you. Their desire wraps around you. Shaping you. You start to glow with what they want, and Blue Shore makes sure you're living your best life."

"You look exactly the same to me as you do on your stream," I say. He does. Beautiful. Impossible. Edible.

Jake's smile widens. "Exactly! That's Rush. That's why I stopped streaming. I don't need to anymore. I'm shining all of the time. People can't take their eyes off of me." I try to look away, but my eyeballs are glued to his perfect skin. "Blue Shore is the director, little bro. Blue Shore is telling the story. Tom thinks Spunk Rush is a dud because he doesn't know who he wants to be. Not really. His whole image is being a strong-armed tough guy. Tom can slurp up all the Rush in Blue Shore, and people will still see him as a meathead, fucking dickhead. You saw him just then. He was bigger, dumber, more aggressive. The Rush is working." The infamy Jake lives on is what I desperately want to escape. Ryan's stream made me the object of everyone's desire, just like Spunk Rush does for Jake. "If I stopped I wouldn't be me anymore. Not the Jake you know from the streams. I'd be someone else."

"And who is that?"

"Guess you'll never know." Jake grabs a cone and piles it with coconut cream. He takes a lick himself, then offers me the cone. "Try some."

I push him. Not hard, but hard enough that his expression flickers from happy to miffed.

"I've never streamed, Jake. No one knows me," I lie. "And I'm happy for it to stay that way."

"It's not just for streamers. You don't just become the version of you people desire. Your own desires come true too. You could be anything you want."

Like you, for example. *I want you*, I think. But I don't want to win Jake through some kind of druggy magic. I want him to want me because he really wants me. "And what did you desire?"

"All of this!" he laughs. "A thriving ice cream empire and a beautiful sidekick."

I blush hard. I'm the main character in Jake's fantasy. It feels fucking great. "I think I'll stick to Elf Sherbert, thanks." I'm already a walking sex doll. Taking Spunk Rush might make things even worse.

"Cool. Whatever you want, little bro." He looks up wistfully, perhaps remembering that his girlfriend went off with Tom. "It's late. You can go home. I'm going to chill for a bit, then lock up. See you tomorrow."

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Twilight has cast its spell on the beach. I walk barefoot over the cool, mauve sand, feeling really small beneath the sky, which rises up forever like a bottomless, glittering cave. The sunnies have become sun-fried zombies, stumbling back to the holiday camp. I join the zombie horde, already thinking about tomorrow. Looking forward to being back in Jake's intoxicating world.

I stop dead. Two people are standing separately from the marching brain eaters, near to where the dunes roll onto the beach. They're standing in a sand mountain's shadow. It's Tom and Tasmin. Tom is shouting, hammy hands gesticulating wildly. He shoves Tasmin hard and she trips over a rock. She falls backwards onto the sand. I have to help Tasmin. I may not be her biggest fan, but I can't just stand here and do nothing. I search the ground for a weapon. A sea urchin I can use to batter Tom with, or a message in a bottle I can lob at his head.

The only thing I find is a driftwood stick and next to it, a belly piercing bar with an emerald crystal, a bit of flesh still clinging to the bar. I pick up the belly bar and slip it in my pocket. Must be worth more than whatever Tom owes Jake. I get butterflies in my stomach when I imagine giving the bar to Jake. My eyes are still locked on Tom and Tasmin. She's back on her feet. The driftwood stick isn't going to do shit, but maybe if I charge at

Tom, I can knock him over. I get ready, warming up my legs, jumping from foot to foot.

Tom slaps Tasmin, the thwack like a thunderclap. I flinch. She nails him back, fist closed, right in his jaw. He grabs her shoulders. Holds her tight. Pulls her in and eats her face, his lips and tongue slobbering all over her pretty features. He pulls back. Is she going to smack him again? I'm shocked when she goes in for another snog, her tiny mouth massaging Tom's rib eye-steak lips. I should leave. I can't stand here gawping forever. Bank the memory. Serve it up to Jake for breakfast on a golden platter, then soften the blow with the belly button bar for dessert.

But I can't move. My feet aren't working like they should. I'm shackled in place. Tasmin's head spins. She sees me. Instead of looking surprised or embarrassed, she smiles.

Strawberry

I've done fuck all this morning. The weather's miserable. Dark clouds fill the sky and it's pouring buckets. My teeth chatter. The temperature must have dropped twenty degrees. The tide is out, but the waves look enormous even from this far away. The surf picked up like Jake's forecast said, but you'd have to be a nutter to go in the ocean today. Even Jake isn't mad enough for it. Jake showed up an hour late for work, Tasmin stuck to his side like chewing gum. He's been watching a stream all morning. I joined him in the beam for a while. Death Wish Doris cliff jumping again. I got bored of seeing her belly slam the ocean over and over, so I tore myself away, and now I'm staring at the beach instead.

A few yocals are walking their pets, leaning into the fierce wind. A giant, long-legged woodlouse drags a blanket-swaddled, old man across the beach. The rain gets heavier, and the man vanishes behind a curtain of water. In weather like this, the sunnies head to Roodie's Swimorama! indoor pool, or Roodie's Magic Arcades where you can gamble your gold tooth, or whatever else you have spare for the chance to win big on one of the magical machines: glass boxes with enchanted creatures inside. At the magic arcades, top prizes include a potion made by a witch, a curse chanted by a warlock, or a wish granted by a

genie.

A couple approaches the kiosk, huddling under a massive brolly. The woman has a long face and nose, and the man's features are tiny like someone zapped his eyes, nose, and mouth with a shrink gun. "A hot chocolate and a coffee to go, please," the woman says in a shrill voice. I whip them up, the smell of chocolate filling the kiosk. I pass them the drinks, and they disappear into the rainstorm.

Tasmin is sitting on the step behind the kiosk. She's inside of her iridescent jellyfish bot. It's shaped like a bell, arching over her head and reaching down to her bare feet. Her toenails look like sea glass, gleaming against the sand. Rain bounces from the jellyfish and each drop creates a ripple that spreads across the jelly surface. Tasmin's licking a cone of Elf Sherbert. A hole suckers open in the side of the jellyfish, and Tasmin reaches into the kiosk, passing me the cone. She looks at me, doe-eyed, all of her features softened through the oily jelly. She resembles a star from a Golden Age movie. A streak of lightning splits the sky, and Tasmin's hair lights up, turning blinding white.

I only take a lick because I'm not in the mood to get completely shit faced, but on my empty stomach a lick must be more than enough because the kiosk's walls disintegrate, exposing me to the rain. I look up expecting to get soaked. Instead, Jelly wobbles above me. I'm inside Tasmin's jellyfish. Somehow Jake is in here too. I pass him the cone, smiling dreamily.

"Guess what, fam?" Jake says. He licks his lips with his tongue tentacles.

The rain is easing off, fat droplets rolling over the jelly like see-through slugs. "Dunno," I say, not in the mood for guessing games.

Jake's eyes are half closed, each pupil a pit that I want to claw

my way into, then climb down and fuck whatever lies at the bottom. "I got Tom's payment. Well, Tas did." Jake opens the gold clasps of a purple velvet purse. He shows us the contents: a peacock feather, a chewed-on bottle cap, and some white eyelashes in a little plastic baggy. I guess the eyelashes came from Tom's peepers.

"Told you I'd handle it, baby bum," Tasmin says, and I cringe. It really is a vomit-inducing pet name.

"I know, gorgelicious. You're the best." Jake nuzzles Tasmin's cheek. "I say we throw a party. Later I'm going to pick up a new flavour that's supposed to be great for it. Pink lemonade AKA Pump. Ryan says it's all dancy, trippy, horny vibes. Sounds like fun."

My ears prick at the name. "Ryan Made makes cream?" I say, using his streamer handle.

"Who else would be able to cook up such sick stuff? No one makes things like Ryan Made does."

Yeah. Just like how he made me. "Weather's a bit shite for a party," I say, instead of blurting out the horrible truth. The thought that Elf Sherbert was produced by Ryan makes me want to puke up all of the cream I already ate. I wish I didn't love the stuff so fucking much. The jelly walls are rotating around us, the kiosk's wooden walls sliding back into place, becoming solid and real.

"Nah, forecast is full moon and starlight tonight, little bro. Says so right here on the counter. Look. It's already brightening up." The counter appears before my eyes, the words *'full moon and starlight tonight'* written in little letters made of piles of sand. Jake wipes his hand across the counter, destroying the forecast. I roll my eyes, because predictions in Blue Shore are rarely right, timelines changing because someone, somewhere had a wank.

But the forecasters must have gotten lucky this time because the rain weakens to a pitter-patter, and the sun bursts through the clouds. The rain stops completely, and the watery film that covers the sand turns to steam, the beach becoming a misty mirage.

Sunnies are already trudging onto Blue Shore Bay like they are a part of the weather system. Some are all wrinkled from soaking in Roodie's Swimorama! and others look really strange, things not right about them. One bloke has a long, drooping purple nose. A woman is being followed by a posse of crows. The creepiest sunny is a walking shadow-man. I can see the beach parasols through his dark form. They'll all go back to normal soon. The arcade's visible effects mostly wear off after an hour or two. It's the underlying weirdness that always hangs about.

"Let's do it!" I say.

Jake drapes his arm over my shoulder and a thrill rushes down my spine. "Great! The theme is..." He thinks for a moment. "Nuddy aliens X flower power. I'll hit the florist," Jake says, pushing his tongue into his cheek.

I remember the belly bar in my pocket. I hold out my palm, offering it to Jake, the attached flesh now dried-up and shrivelled. It's glowing with an expensive golden aura. Jake's eyes widen. "Add this to the stash. This party's going to be shit-hot," I say.

"We can invite all my mates with funds like this! I'll get an extra ten tubs of pink lemonade," Jake says, punching the air in celebration. "Fancy coming?" Jake pokes Tasmin playfully.

"And watch you chat up the florist like last time? Nah. I'll hang out and chill with Zac."

Great! I can't imagine anything worse than chilling with Tasmin. "I'll come with you," I blurt.

"Nah, little bro. Keep Tasmin company and hold the fort. I'll

be back in no time. See you two in a bit." Jake disappears into the sun, and it's hard to believe that it was pissing down a couple of minutes ago.

An awkward silence falls on the kiosk. Tasmin is sitting on a stool, the jellyfish now hanging at her side, shaped like a handbag. After sitting in silence for way too long, I say, "Hot chocolate?"

"Strawberry?" she says at the same time, pulling a plastic punnet of strawberries out of the jellyfish handbag.

"Sure," we both say, and I laugh uneasily, but Tasmin bursts out in hysterics. Weirdo. Jake left his bot next to a box of Starburst. Sid is slumped against the cardboard box, his pot belly rounder than usual. He's surrounded by sweetie wrappers. I clap my hands loudly to wake him from his sugar coma, then tell him to play a song. The tune that blasts from the speakers is classic Jake. One of a ton he has on his playlist because I've never heard the same tune twice. The lyrics are in some strange language, and I have no idea what each word means, but together, they sound like sorcery. Even though I don't have the foggiest what the singer is saying, it sounds good, and I feel more chill.

The strawberry is as ripe and red as Tasmin's lips. I take a bite, strawberry juice dribbling over my chin. I make Tasmin a hot chocolate and pass it to her. "He's something else," Tasmin says, sipping her chocolate, a chocolate milk moustache left behind on the fine gold hair under her nose. She wipes it away and licks the chocolate from the back of her hand.

"Who?"

"Jake. I mean, what's with these tracks?"

What's she on about? Jake's music is cool as fuck. Tasmin probably likes shitty machine generated pop songs. "I like this tune," I say, defensively.

Tasmin smiles. "Don't get your balls in a twist, Zac. I'm just saying. It's not just the music. Everything about Jake is different. The way he tastes..." She looks at me intensely, challenging me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. Have I tasted him too? I look away, watching a fly climbing the wall. "His looks. His attitude. The way he smells, everything." The fly morphs into a tiny UFO that zips across the kiosk and zooms out of the hatch.

I look down, picking at my nails. There's a long silence as Tasmin slurps the hot chocolate, and I pull a strip of skin from my thumb.

"Look," Tasmin says. "I know you saw me yesterday. It wasn't what you think."

So she wants to talk about it. I'm fine with that. Let's cut to the chase. "How was eating that meathead's face not what I thought?"

"I know how it looked. I had to neck Tom. The guy's a psycho. He'd have got proper nasty if I didn't do it. You saw what he did to Jake. I got Jake's payment, didn't I?"

"Jake deserves to know about you and Tom."

"You can't tell Jake!" Tasmin shrieks. "It will ruin everything. I'm just keeping Tom sweet, but Jake won't see it that way." Tasmin parts her knees, and my eyes are drawn to the dripping sea anemone between her thighs.

"I don't know," I say, fixated on the beast nestling in Tasmin's crack, tendrils reaching out from the lips, a small blue starfish slithering out from inside. Tasmin lifts a bare foot, rubs my dick through my shorts. I jump up. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Knew it. Gay as Christmas. Soft as a shoestring. Just wanted to test you out. I know you're into Jake. I saw the way you look at him."

"I...So..." I don't know what to say. Is it that obvious?

"Ryan is bi, you know. Not a raging homo like you. Him and I kissed before, played around."

Ryan's name feels like a cleaver splitting my skull in two. "Ryan?"

"My BFF, Zac. I've seen One Lad, One Masterpiece." She twirls a strand of hair around her finger. "That was some crazy shit. No wonder everyone in Blue Shore is wanking over you. Eating you up. But Jake hasn't seen it...Right?" She drags a finger through the gunk streaming down her legs and sucks it off.

"You're blackmailing me?"

"There's no need to put it so horribly, but yup! Suppose I am. Tell Jake that I kissed Tom, and I will show him your little, viral stream."

I nod slowly. Tasmin thinks I care, and she's right. At first I thought that Jake had already seen One Lad, One Masterpiece because he came on so strong. But then, when he didn't whip his knob out the first time we met, I knew that he hadn't. Jake has been coming on to me in a normal way. I think he might actually like me for me. The more I think about it, the more pissed off I get. If Tasmin tells Jake about the viral stream, I will never know if Jake wants me for real, or if he is just falling under the stream's spell like everyone else. Tasmin's got me by the balls. Jake deserves to know what an evil bitch slut his girlfriend is, but the thought of Tasmin showing Jake the stream turns my stomach. Tasmin sips her chocolate, then bites a strawberry. She's dangerous. Some kind of monster. She's seen One Lad, One Masterpiece, but it doesn't affect her in any way. I'm not sure she's even human. She's too beautiful and too strange.

"Ok," I stutter. "I won't tell Jake."

Not now anyway.

Tasmin grins. "Good boy."

Rock Candy

I smell Jake coming, the stench of flowers reaching the kiosk before the man himself. I stick my head out of the shack. Jake is weighed down by the bunches of flowers gathered in his arms, sticking out of his backpack, overflowing from a holdall slung over his shoulder, and tucked into the waistband of his work shorts. He's dragging a cooler through the sand. It's secured round his waist with a rope.

I jog over the sand, the conversation with Tasmin as fresh as a turd in my mind. Jake calls out when he sees me, his head peeking out from between two huge sunflower heads. "Hurry up! My arms feel like they're going to fall off."

I gather a load of the flowers, helping Jake to haul the cooler into the kiosk. We fill the kiosk with the flowers. "Great haul," I say. Jake opens up the cooler, tubs of Pump AKA pink lemonade are stacked neatly inside. He smiles and lets the cooler lid fall shut.

Jake drags a finger over my bare chest, making a trail through the pollen coating my skin. "Thanks to you and Tasmin, tonight's going to be soooo sick. That belly bar was a great find." Jake looks around, only just noticing his missing girlfriend. "Where's Tasmin?"

"Said she was going to put on a fresh drip."

"Safe. We better get ready too." He flicks a hydrangea the size of his head, and golden pollen rains down from it.

"I'm already ready!" I say, holding out my arms, planning to stay in my work shorts.

"Don't you ever check your bot?"

"Not in the daytime, unless I have to. I nearly lost a finger once. Now, I'm more careful."

Jake laughs. "Makes sense that you have the moodiest bot in Blue Shore!" Jake pinches my cheek, laughing, but he must notice my miffed expression because he adds, "only joking. You're a proper ray of sunshine, unlike your furry friend." He kicks my backpack and Zebby vibrates and growls. "Lucky for you, you get to hear the news straight from Jake's mouth," he says in third-person just like he does on his streams. Jake raises an eyebrow. "Get your bubble butts down to Blue Shore Bay, for the sickest, slickest fancy dress party of the year. Let's celebrate the start of summer in style. Hosted by yours truly. Theme is nuddy aliens X flower power. Prizes for the sickest drips," he says playfully. "I sent the memo to everybody who's anybody. Here, I brought some face paint along. Sit down, I'll do you." He's already lining the pots of paint up on the counter. They're grimy as fuck. Better not to know what the splotches and fluffy bits growing in the paint are. Jake uses an ice lolly stick to stir the paints, mixing the organic growths in with the sludgy pigments.

I sit on the stool, and Jake moves his closer. "No brush?" I ask as he digs his fingers into the white pot.

"Nah, it's funner this way." He reaches out and begins to smear paint on my face. *I try* to imagine what crazy space creature Jake's going to turn me into. If we waited a few more days, I might not need to dress up. Both of my legs are throbbing like crazy now. The sausage effect has gone, and the swelling's

not as bad as it was. But my previously skinny legs are jacked-up even though I've never worked out a day in my life. My leg muscles are growing bigger and stronger every hour. It's actually kind of hot. There are even hard veins visible beneath my skin. It's weird that no one else has noticed my huge legs. They are pretty fucking obvious. Maybe they have noticed but just haven't said anything. Jake's hand is on my bulging thigh now. Rubbing it. "Close your eyes." His other hand begins to spread paint over my eyes, and I close them tight.

What will I be when Jake is done? The most common species of aliens spring to mind: a Mantis? A Pleiadian? A Grey? The paint is warm on my eyelids. I open my eyes a crack. Jake's dipping the same hand into the black pot. He smears his fingers down through the white. "You can look now." He's pressing a silver, sparkly lipstick to my lips, filling them in. He blows a cloud of glitter at my face, and I scrunch up my eyes.

Jake holds up a small cracked mirror. The thing looking back at me is nightmarish. Jake has painted two massive, cartoon eyes over my own eyes. Thick butter-like paint forming long white eyeballs embossed with midnight black pupils. Embedded in the clumpy paint are dots of glitter, and little foil stars. "What am I supposed to be?"

"You're my alien." Jake laughs. "I made you. You're a Jakeslutian! Here. Can you do me?"

I'm glad that Jake can't see my burning cheeks under the thick face paint. I'm turned on by the thought of being Jake's creation. I'd much rather be Jake's slutty alien, than Ryan's masterpiece. "Course. What do you want to be?"

"Make me into one of those fuckers with three eyes. They always creeped me out as a kid."

"A Triptoid?" I say.

"Yeah, that's it. I want to be a trip toad."

We both burst out laughing. When we're able to breathe again, I smear white paint on Jake's forehead in the shape of a squashed lemon, then use turquoise and black to paint in the Triptoid's third eyeball. I paint thick black eyelashes around the outside. When I'm done, Jake pulls something out of his bag.

"They're bald, aren't they?" he says, plugging the electric clippers into a socket.

"Yeah," I laugh. "You're not actually going to..." I sneeze. The air is full of pollen, and it's getting right up my nose. Jake drags the clippers over his head, shaving his hair to the skin. I'm shocked. He's always had the same hairstyle: his beachy hair is an iconic part of his look. Him doing this feels huge. Like he's stepping into a new life. A new body.

"Can you do mine too?" I ask.

Jake looks at me. He looks fucking fantastic. The buzz cut suits him, making his handsome face harder and rougher. More angular. "Yesss!" he shouts happily. "What do you want?"

"Something cool. Do something crazy. I'm sick of this basic look." I run my fingers through my nest of blond hair.

The clippers buzz in my ears. Jake hacks a straight line around my entire skull, then shaves off everything below the line. It only takes him a few minutes. I hold the mirror up, grinning at my reflection. It's perfect. I look like an insane medieval monk.

"A new me," I say.

"A new us." Jake winks. "I've got something to show you too, but first...Ready to get messy?" He pulls down the kiosk shutter, padlocks it, opens the cooler, pulls out a tub of pink ice cream, scoops it up, and holds the ice cream between us. "Stick your tongue in that." I take a big lick of the ice cream. He licks the other side. "Suck it," he says, and we both suck on the cream at

the same time, our noses almost touching. I keep going, licking and sucking. Jake does the same. Our lips are about to meet when Jake whispers, "Take a peep in the holdall," his breath making little ice crystals form on my lips.

My senses are glitching. Time is going faster. One millisecond I'm standing face to face with Jake and the next my hands are in the holdall like I teleported here. Strawberry laces wriggle across my vision, clumping together and morphing into Tasmin's severed head. I wish she was dead. That she'd never entered our world and fucked it all up.

"Flowers?" There's nothing in the holdall but flowers.

Jake's behind me, his hands pressing into my thighs, massaging my bulging muscles and veins. "You're perfect," he whispers into my ear and little icicles form in my earhole.

"What?" I manage.

"Under the flowers," he says.

I push my fingers deeper into the holdall of flowers, rummaging around. I feel something cool and slick. I haul it out and hold it up to the beam of sunlight seeping through a crack in the wall. A pistol. "You're shitting me!"

"I shit you not, little bro. Cool as fuck, right? It's Roodie's. A family heirloom, but it definitely works. Roodie showed me how to shoot it when I was a kid. It's part of my inheritance, I guess, just like all of this." He opens his arms to the ice cream kiosk, but he means everything. The holiday camp. The beach. The arcades. The swimorama. And whatever other hustle's Roodie's got going on. "So I thought, why not just take it now?" Jake steps closer, a frame of orange petals unfurling around his face.

"How do you load it?" I stutter. The pistol is heavy in my hands. I blink and Jake's behind me, pressing into my body.

"Like this." Jake holds a stick of rock candy up to a sunbeam,

the hard rod shining. One end is filed to a point, and the other end has the words Blue Shore written in candy. He pushes the candy into the pistol's barrel. It clicks into place. I raise the pistol, pointing it at the kiosk shutter. Tasmin's head appears again, floating in space, kaleidoscopic fractals blistering across her face.

Jake adjusts my hands, bare chest pressing against my bare back, moving my fingers so they are gripping the trigger. Jake guides my hands to aim at Tasmin's forehead. "Pull," Jake whispers. A hollow click echoes through the charged air. "Safety is on," Jake chuckles, and Tasmin's head dissolves into nothingness. Jake spins me around. Grabs the pistol. He points it at my head, the rock candy's sharp tip digging into my skin. "Bang," he whispers. The word tastes like blown-out brains and shattered sweeties. He pulls the gun away, giggling manically.

"Why do you have it?" I swallow my Adam's apple. "Planning to kill someone?"

"Maybe," Jake's face changes so fast I almost miss it, the anger creasing his brow disintegrating in a second, replaced by a smiling marigold. "Nahhh, just thought we needed some protection. Selling cream's a laugh, but it attracts some right dickheads."

The door explodes open, and Tasmin bursts through, tears streaking her face. Her white, fishing-net dress is torn at the shoulder, the sea-urchin clasp dangling, oozing blue blood. The stench of fish and sweet coconuts floods the kiosk.

"Gorgelicious! What the fuck happened?" Jake pulls her into him, her head on his shoulder, and for a moment her tears stop, and she looks at me dead on, challenging me. All I can focus on is her dripping pussy beneath the netting. She's getting off on this.

Jake's holding her at arm's length now so that they're face to face. The orange petals that surrounded his face are wilting and dropping to the ground one by one, Pump's effects withering away. "Dad went psycho. Said my dress made me look like one of the whores at Tinkle Balls. Tried to rip it off. If he caught me, he'd have tied me up again," she snivels. "He's the biggest cock muncher in Minger Lane."

Her dad sounds like a complete twat. Some old fogies think Blue Shore youngsters don't wear enough clothes. I'm glad my mum's not that old-fashioned. She wears nothing but a merkin over her fanny most days. Mum's a nutjob but at least she's not a prude. As much as I hate Tasmin, she does look incredible in that dress.

"What a dickwad," Jake says. "Someone should teach him a lesson."

"Yeah, someone should." She kisses Jake, biting his bottom lip as she pulls away, then immediately perks up, sweeping the crocodile tears from her cheeks. "Let's party!" She buries her face in the half-melted ice cream tub, lapping up Pump like a cat. She offers us the tub. I hold it up and pour the watery cream into my mouth. Jake opens his gob, and gets on his knees. "Feed me like I'm your baby bird," he says. I take another swig, then let the ice cream waterfall from my mouth into Jake's.

I think Tasmin's going to be pissed off, but instead she laughs and claps her hands gleefully. Guess the loved-up part of pink lemonade is working on her already. Maybe she's not going to be a total bitch tonight. "Get a fucking room, you two." She grabs the tub and takes a swig herself. "Let's fucking go!"

Pink Lemonade

The beach is covered in flowers. We shoved them all into the sand when we were already high, taking the piss out of each other as we turned the beach into a garden.

I'm enjoying the party. Every lick of Pump fucks me up in just the right way. Pink lemonade makes me want to chat shit to strangers, something I'd normally avoid, and I feel daring as well as fucking high. The world is blurry and beautiful like I am looking at it through pink lemonade glasses. I become a social butterfly, fluttering from person to person. I meet Dan, whose entire body is covered in green makeup. All of his body hair is green too. Green dye stains my hands when I run my fingers through the curling pubes sprouting from his thong. Tonight, I'm feeling open to everyone's come-ons. I'm horny as a dog.

Jake introduces me to his friend Riah. She has pink spiky hair, a plastic tea stirrer through her septum, and three tits wrapped in cling film. We chat for a bit about how she's quarter troll and how her boobs were a gift from her sugar daddy. I say that her hairy knuckles and big forehead really suit her. When she starts touching her dick, I'm really into it. I lick her a bit to help her finish faster. After she cums, her friend Liam wants to chat. He's dressed as a furry, alien bear. He reeks of something I want to dive into. He lifts his arm and I bury my face in his pit. When

I surface, two randos are deep in Liam's other pit, tossing each other off.

I flutter over to a lad with turquoise hair and skin like a shark's purse, drawn in by his cool look. He introduces himself as Malaki. Malaki is a skinny, ocean goth with a sexy Scottish accent. He's wearing a cropped Kappa tee, holes cut out for his nipples, which are pierced with safety pins. His joggers are printed with a pattern of little-green-man alien heads, and he's wearing a belt of seaweed around his skinny waist. His nose and lip rings glimmer in the firelight. Malaki is easy-going and nice to talk to. I want to suck on his cherry-red lips, so I do.

"That was nice," he murmurs as I pull away.

In return, Malaki gives me a plastic dolphin keyring, then lets me run my fingers over his digital tattoos: conches on his hips, sprays of coral bursting across his stomach, electric eels moving in a wave pattern across his collarbone, their heads meeting at the dip of his clavicle, and a giant lobster on his back, perfectly symmetrical, a claw on each shoulder. Malaki's tattoos move and react to my touch, the eels buzzing as my fingers slip over them. Our bots make contact, and we promise to meet up sometime for more lip sucking and tattoo stroking. Then he mentions that he is friends with Tasmin, and that she invited him. That puts me off him a bit.

After finishing another cup of melted Pump, my brain rebels and tries to escape through my eye sockets. I'm getting paranoid as fuck. The people who I met and liked are now turning into demons. Jake never mentioned that Pump's fun vibes have a limit. That gobbling too much would make me feel like total shit. I sit on the sand and slump backwards against a hunk of driftwood. It's basically half a tree. I imagine a giant in an ancient, mystical forest uprooting it and chucking it in the ocean,

then it washing up on Blue Shore Bay a thousand years later. I'm questioning everything about myself and my life choices. The faces who were so friendly are throwing me aggressive looks. They've all seen the viral stream. Course they have. They whisper. Hands moving to their crotches. Masturbating golems in the firelight.

My vision judders, and the full moon becomes a massive mirrorball, casting moonbeams onto the sand. My body is boiling hot, flesh moving under my skin like tectonic plates. Something is happening beneath the surface that I can't control, but I can see it when I close my eyes. My atoms are rearranging, morphing and changing shape, DNA untwisting and re-twisting into a new configuration. My stomach is throbbing now. It feels like someone is grabbing hold of my innards and wringing them out. The veins in my abs are bulging. Since when do I have abs? I'm caressing my newly formed six pack, looking at it in horror, and getting kind of turned on when a voice says,

"Zac!"

I manage to lift my head. Tasmin is towering over me. I stand up, sand drifting from the skimpy sequin and bead shorts that Jake leant me. He pulled them out of his backpack earlier, saying that now I'm wearing a thousand jewels over my crown jewels. My enormous, bulging crown jewels. Whatever is happening to my legs and stomach, is happening to my cock too. My dick feels stupidly oversized, like it's going to burst through the fabric at any moment. I'm face to tit with Tasmin. How is it possible that she got taller? Or maybe I've shrunk. "I've been looking for you," she says, seawater dribbling from her mouth. Her skin shimmers, bioluminescent algae spreading across her chest.

I'm miles away, picturing Jake in the kiosk earlier. In my mind, I'm there with him now.

"Those shorts look fire on you." He grabs my hips and pulls them into his. Rubs his dick against my beaded hump. "You can keep them. Never suited me. I look better naked. Don't you think?" He stands back, holding out his arms, wiggling his skinny hips, only a chain of flowers around his toned belly, cock swinging. I nod, trembling. "Your body is looking fierce by the way, little bro. Did you start working out or something? Sure you were a runt when you first started here."

"Can you two get a room!?" Tasmin hisses for the second time today, making me jump. She's curled up on the back counter, sucking a cone of pink lemonade. I forgot she was there. For a moment it was just me and Jake existing outside of time and space.

Back in the present, at the party, and here Tasmin is again, forcing me to speak to her when I'd rather sink into quicksand and suffocate. I scrape at the sand with my foot, hoping it liquefies and sucks me under. "Someone wants to see you," Tasmin says. She beckons the someone with a long fingernail, but all I see is the flames from a huge crackling bonfire, licking the night. Tasmin steps back, and the someone steps into my vision, embers and ash drifting up behind him.

Ryan Made.

The experimental streamer who ruined my life. The strange thing is that no matter how hard I think, I can't remember my life before the viral stream. It's like I didn't even exist. Like Ryan gave birth to me the moment his machine jacked me off again and again in front of a thousand hungry eyes.

Tasmin's vanished. Two bioluminescent footprints in the sand where she stood. Ryan steps into them, and worm-like filaments reach up, twisting between his toes. "Alright?" he says.

"Fucked up," I reply, heart hammering against my ribs.

Ryan's perfect, symmetrical head nods: square jaw, skin like polished wood, hair as dark as charcoal. The fire pops and hisses when someone throws a wet hunk of wood on it. "Good. This is a great party." He steps towards me and I step back, gritting my teeth so hard my skull might shatter. Enough of the bullshit small talk.

"What do you want, Ryan?"

"Zac," he says at the same time, reaching out to me. What is it with him and invading personal space? As if I'd want him near me after what he did.

"I'm sorry," he says. "About One Lad, One Masterpiece. I didn't think it would go sooo viral."

The mention of the stream's name is all it takes to yank me back. I don't want to go there, but I can't stop the images from smashing into my head.

I smack down in Ryan's studio, red, bruised knees on the cold studio floor. I climb out of my underpants awkwardly. I'm wondering why I agreed to this. I know I did, but when I try to remember the reason why, all I see is darkness.

Ryan's rubbing a solution all over me. Some chemical that he wants to absorb into my bloodstream. "It'll make it work," he says. "Your dream will come true." My dream!? Did I really ask for this? Maybe I did, but Ryan twisted it somehow. There's no way having people wanking whenever they see me was on my list of wants. I remember now. I would have given anything to be famous like the streamers I watched, but I was talentless with the personality of a dishcloth. The only thing I ever had was beauty. Ryan turned that into fame. The studio breathes like a lung, inhaling and exhaling in time. Too many bots to count watch with their blinking red eyes. People are watching

me through them. They paid a premium to have their bots here, so they could feel like they are in the room. The walls are hung with posters with weird medical diagrams, shelves lined with chemicals and potions, and the ceiling is dripping with fleshy stalactites. Ryan is somewhere behind me, his voice echoing. "Everyone's going to taste you, Zac." The coloured lights turn my sweat to syrup drops.

The dings of thousands more people joining the stream. Needles, injecting something that burns under my skin. Ryan connects a cylindrical machine to my cock, positions a dildo attached to another machine, aimed at my arsehole, lubes it up from a tin of petroleum jelly. I wouldn't normally be able to get hard with this many people watching, but there's something in the chemicals and the injectables making me hornier than I've ever been in my life. He switches on the machine.

A thousand tongues are all over my shaft and head. "It's a new experience," Ryan declares. "People don't just watch, they participate." So many mouths sucking my bulging, raw head. The machine pumps. Up and down. Faster and faster. The dildo goes deeper with every push. I explode. White light firing from me. Filling the machine, running through the clear tube that connects to it. A thousand mouths swallowing it. Swallowing me. Ryan gives me a minute break. I'm panting, sweat pooling around me. My cock is softening, but Ryan sticks another needle in my arm. Rams his fingers into my mouth, and I'm bricked up again. "Round two," he says gleefully.

Seconds after the stream ended, someone beamed it to Blue Shore's main billboard slap-bang in the middle of town, the words *Welcome to Blue Shore*, and the smiling sunny faces replaced with my drenched mug. Another streamer rendered it pixel by pixel across the night sky, and someone else turned it

into a production and held the stage performance on the village green. Before I could even wash the sweat from my body, half of Blue Shore had seen the stream, all of them falling under the masterpiece's spell.

I shoot forwards in time. A human meteorite slamming into the beach, sand blasting and splitting into colourful fractals that rush around my body.

I'm rock-hard, shame and horniness filling my cock, my shorts sticking up, reaching for the stars. Somehow in the haze, I've let Ryan come closer. He's so close I could bite him. I want to. I want to latch onto his mouth like a Jack Russell and shake him until his jaw breaks off. Crush it under my foot. Tie him up and sprinkle the bone dust on his head. Ryan tugs at my waistband, and I jerk back, the elastic on my shorts slapping my cock.

A hurt expression flitters across his face. "What? I said I'm sorry." I eye him up and down. His naked body telling me exactly how he feels, the flowers painted on his skin morphing and dancing across his muscles. I'm way too high for this conversation. I can tell that he actually means what he's saying though. He really is sorry. His dopey, but amazingly hot face couldn't lie if it tried. Sorry yes, but Ryan still sees me in the same way as everyone else does. A toy whose shorts he wants to rip off. Ryan is so cute that I almost want to forgive him. "It's cool," I say, ignoring the fury burning behind my eyes, two little furnaces full of corpses. "I'm over it." I force myself to smile. Open myself to letting him touch me. I know he's desperate to. He senses my openness, and his hand is instantly on my neck. His other hand on my sequined shorts, gripping me. He pushes his fingers into my pubic hair, but that's too much, and I grab his forearm. "You know what, Ryan. If you really were sorry.

You'd reverse whatever you did to me."

"I thought you wanted fame."

"Yeah, once, maybe. But not the kind of fucked-up fame you gave me."

"I might be able to take it away." He's joking. Could he really? There's a whizzing sound as a firework shoots from the bonfire. Someone must have chucked it on there. It explodes, and sparks fill the air. "Maybe we can hang out sometime?" Ryan says.

"Sure," I reply. I knew it. If I want to go back to normal, I'm going to have to pay for it by spending time with Ryan. I'll do anything to be a nobody again. Even hang out with the person I hate most. I don't believe him though. How can he turn off the horniness of an entire town? Then again, he did this to me. Maybe he can take it all away. Ryan's bot is out, a replica of some weird art sculpture: a massive ball-shaped blobby thing with colourful circular eyes and tentacles. I mentally summon Zebby, and she zooms out from wherever she was and joins us on the beach, trailing neon pixels. Our bots touch, exchanging all of our socials in a holographic zap. "The cure?" I blurt out. "What is it?"

But before he can answer, Tasmin is beside us. She grabs Ryan's arm, dragging him away. "Come on, BFF. Jake wants us to do a shot of Pump," Tasmin says.

Ryan shrugs. "Sure."

"Coming, Zac?" Tasmin coos.

"I'm good," I murmur. But I'm not. Having to talk to Ryan sobered me up for a minute, but now a fresh swell of Pump is hitting me and I'm fully fucking fucked.

Tasmin's tugging on Ryan's arm. "Great. I'll see you around then," he says to me. "Wait, I almost forgot." He takes the flower that was tucked behind his ear, and holds it out to me. An

orchid vibrates on his palm. "Just my way of saying sorry."

I take the orchid. "Thanks." I think I say, but I'm already collapsing back into the driftwood. Ryan and Tasmin phase backwards, leaving me alone under the rippling galaxies.

I sink deeper into the woody marshmallow. I can't tell the stars from the spaceships. Both are zipping through the sky. Some of the stars and ships attract each other like magnets, balls of gas and alien crafts congealing, forming letters. J A K E, the letters spell. He hasn't paid me any attention since we licked our last cone together. Probably thinks I'm in a right state. Gone off the rails. Meanwhile he's still fluttering around. More words appear in the sky.

J A K E W I L L N E V E R W A N T Y O U.

That's not true. Fake news. Me and Jake are besties. Me and Jake will be lovers. I repeat the mantra over and over. Willing it to be true. Manifesting it.

I can't control my body. My arms and my legs are full of lead. Partygoers are coming up to me. Crawling on top of me. Their hands between my legs, licking my face, climbing onto my cock. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut. I don't want to see the partygoers orgasm faces. Instead I see Ryan's face etched on the back of my eyelids. He's sticking his tongue out and lapping at me like a thirsty cat. Look what he did to me. Turned me into a sex doll, lying fucked up on a beach whilst everyone takes their turn, with no memories of who I even was before all of this happened. I want to sleep, but my brain is still going at light speed. Strange thoughts that I can't hold onto or understand rush through my mind.

I force my eyes open so that Ryan's mug vanishes. The people making out with me look like cartoon characters. A giant mouse spits in my open gob, then kisses me with furry lips. A massive

Japanese robot monster thing sucks on my willy, while a bear spreads honey over my body and licks it off. I cum again and again and again.

Melon

I'm running as fast as I can over the soft sand, surging forwards, chasing something. Someone. I'm a lad possessed. Unstoppable. Until bracken tangles my legs, and I fall forwards into the sand. Grit and tears blur my vision. I clamber up, never letting go of the pistol.

The weapon is heavy in my hand. I hold it up to the moonlight. Not the moon anymore, but a giant orchid rotating in the sky. The pistol is corroded and dripping seawater, parts of the weapon replaced with mottled stone, small tentacled creatures clinging to it. Seaweed wraps around my wrist, connecting me to the gun. I peer into the barrel, checking it's loaded. A spear of coral is rammed into the hole.

I choke air as I scramble up a sand dune. I reach the top. I'm so high that the whole world is laid out below like a blanket. The beach in front of me. The endless ocean. I spin to take in the lights of Blue Shore town, then back to face the beach. Everything is so still and calm. Even the line of smoke funnelling straight up into the sky from a bonfire on the beach seems to be motionless. It's like time stood still. But in my head, a storm is raging. My prey is already halfway down the sand dune, stumbling on the steep sand like a wounded, albino deer, heading into a valley between the peaks. She digs a hand into

the sand. Climbing back to her feet.

I lean back, treading sand, moving quickly down the slope, locked onto my target. The girl's heavy breathing and soft whimpering are driving me crazy. I'm riled up and ready to strike. She would already be easy to pick off. But not yet. I have to be closer. This has to be point-blank. I want her to face me. I want to see the fear in her eyes, then I'll finish her quickly and cleanly.

She's speeding up now. Running across the valley, but I'm a machine, stomping sand like I was born on Arrakis. I'm close enough to lunge. I grab her hair. "Hey, bitch," I drool, raising the pistol.

The girl twists, her hair turning to slippery kelp in my palm. She wriggles free, her face wearing her fear like an ugly mask. Tasmin's face. I pull the trigger. A coral missile punches through her chest, opening her up. I reload from a holster of coral spears on my hip. I cock and fire. Another spear of coral separates her neck. Three's a charm. Bam. Her stomach tears open like a Christmas turkey, spilling her innards on the sand. She collapses, dead.

I drop into a crouch, put my head between my knees and rock back and forth. My legs are hot to the touch, and patches of black are appearing on my skin. What alien species looks like a fucking jacked-up Friesian cow? I spit on my skin, rubbing desperately, hoping that somehow my DNA will kill the alien parasite that is taking over my body. I picture tiny mini versions of myself rampaging through my body, wielding coral machine guns, blasting extraterrestrial globs to smithereens. It's working. The patches fade and my legs cool. Maybe I can fight off this infection.

"You dick," a gurgling voice says. There's no one here but

me and Tasmin's corpse. Tasmin's head jerks, and her sunken eyes flick open, melted ice cream seeping from her eyelids. "You absolute cock," she hisses, voice like a wet rag.

I slither backwards through the sand.

Tasmin is collecting her innards, and stuffing the sandy organs back into her stomach and chest. Not organs, but wriggling black eels, their red eyes fixed on me, toothy grins splitting their heads. She rises, swaying, standing up to her full height, and her insides tumble back out, slapping the sand.

"You jealous little turd." She points an accusing finger at me. "You want Jake all to yourself. Well you're not going to get him that easily." She hobbles towards me, dragging seaweed, fishing netting, and her kidneys behind her.

"Stay away from me. You can't talk. You're supposed to be dead. I killed you."

She cocks her head, water and tiny spiral-shaped shells pouring from her ear. She's holding a pastel pink ice lolly. Melon. I sold enough of them to know. She slides the lolly between her lips. Looks at me and winks. She deep throats the lolly and swallows it in one gulp. "Dead, you say." Her fingers touch the hole in her neck, her chest, and finally her stomach. "Guess you're right. But are you sure you're the one who did it?" She is staring at the pistol I dropped on the sand, eyebrows raised. She leans closer, too close, her eyes rolling back in her head, dark seawater flooding her eye whites. "Maybe this is just a fucked-up trip, Zac. Who's to say what's real and what's not? Then again. Those horrible scratches on your arm tell a different story."

"What scratches?" I hold my forearms up to the moonlight. There's not a scratch in sight.

Tasmin giggles. As we've been speaking, she's been edging

closer. She springs forwards, claws at my arms, drags her nails through my skin, ripping it open. I hear the howl come from my throat, but it feels disconnected, like I'm listening to some small animal suffer at the hands of a giant predator. She licks the blood from her fingertips.

"Hmmm, you taste funny, Zac. What is that flavour? Hint of... coconut cream?! Things are really starting to get interesting." She smiles psychotically, row upon row of triangular daggers lining her gums, her eyes black and cold, more Great White Shark than human. "Now run!"

"What...I?"

"Fucking run!" Tasmin roars and launches at me. I spin on my heels, adrenaline lighting a firework up my arse. The dune shifts beneath my feet, sending me flying. Sand cascades all around me, blasting my skin, tearing me apart. I curl up in a ball. She's on top of me, whispering in my ear. "Blue Shore needs you, Zac."

***

I come to.

I'm a curled-up foetus inside an egg. I break through the shell, reach out a yolk-covered arm, grip the cold sand in a fist and let it run through my fingers. My body follows, stretching, muscle by muscle, limb by limb. I roll onto my back. I'm lying on sand and broken shell. Wind sweeps over my skin. My head is pounding. Something squawks, its soaring silhouette completely alien. I wonder if it is a dinosaur or a dragon. It shits on my head.

I wipe my forehead and sniff my hand. Plain old seagull shit. I chuck up my insides, pink vomit puddling on the sand. I hold my hands up in front of me. The strange things don't feel like part of me, swollen and muscly. How can fingers have bulging

muscles? A memory returns like a slap in the face. The party! But who am I and how did I get to this strange place? I look around. Mountains of sand surround me.

My memories are gone. All I know is that there was a party, and now I am an odd creature in an unknown land. My body is my only clue. Maybe looking at it will help me to remember. I roll onto my stomach. Prop myself up on my elbows, arsehole greeting the rising sun, I examine my arms. Pale, white, slashed, with creamy tears dripping from the wounds, patches of hairy black here and there. A memory hits me:

I'm blowing out a girl's intestines.

More memories rush back.

I saw her again. She rose from the dead.

I relax into the sand, closing my eyes, my face sinking into the cool granules. I'm not ready to move yet. My muscles spasm, painfully. There's something inside of me. I feel it taking over my body. I'm inside my own body, hunting the enemy down. The infection pulses inside my skull. I rush up my spinal column, claw into my head. I see it. The infection has taken the form of Ryan, endlessly tossing himself off, spraying cum all over my brain. All I have to do is rip him to shreds, then I will be free. I raise my hands, ready to tear him apart, but all I see is hooves where there should be fingers. What the fuc...

My body jerks awake. The sun has risen above the biggest sand mountain. My memories are coming back. Some of them anyway. I'm in the sand dunes, a stone's throw away from the beach where I work with Jake, and also the site of a Pump-fuelled party. I stand, head killing, limbs aching like they were pulled off and reattached. I start walking, swearing at my legs. "Fucking work!" I tell them, putting one filthy foot in front of the other. I've got to open up the kiosk.

More patchy memories pop like overripe zits in my mind.

Screaming.

Blank.

I'm running through the dunes. The world rushing past in a blur.

Blank.

I'm tumbling through a bramble thicket, sharp thorns tearing at my arms.

Blam.

I'm shooting some girl to death.

Crunch.

Diamonds of moonlight creep over me as I eat a wild rabbit, tearing at its fur, crunching its bones.

What the actual fuck?

My hand shoots to my mouth. I pick at the dried blood around my lips, roll it between my fingers. What am I? A werewolf or something?

That's enough remembering for now. Better to focus on the present. Getting out of these dunes and back to the kiosk. The place where Me and Jake can be together. Climbing the dune is like climbing Everest. Finally, reach the top of the sand mountain, the beach below me, dark beige as far as the eye can see. The fire is a dying ember in the distance, and curled-up people scatter the beach, partygoers who slept wherever they fell.

I slide down the dune on my sequined arse, dragging my fingers through the sand as I pick up speed. I dig in my heels, coming to a stop at the kiosk. It rises above me, our whole world contained inside. I notice things about it I never did before: the way the paint on the wood is peeling, the seagull shit covering the slanted roof, the Roodie's flag fraying at the edges, little

threads of colour flowing with the wind.

The kiosk is unlocked, the door slightly ajar. I pull it fully open, the creaking hinges like fingernails ripping through my brain. Inside, I slam the door closed. I don't turn the kiosk light on. I'm glad to be in darkness. It's comforting. Being in the dark kiosk is like being back in the womb. This is my safe place. I open the ice cream freezer, pull out the entire tub of chocolate caramel and dig in, scooping the ice cream out using my fingers like little diggers shovelling it into my mouth. I start to feel a bit better. Ice cream cures everything.

My backpack vibrates, counting down. I summon Zebby. The hologram of Jake's head lights up the dark kiosk.

"*Have you seen Tasmin? I can't get a hold of her, and she didn't leave with me last night.*" Jake's voice blares, his face dishevelled, angry and red-eyed. I can't believe he made it home. I imagine him driving his sporty car, high as fuck. I'm surprised he didn't total it, or take off into space.

More memories coming back. The girl I gunned down in the dunes was Tasmin. Fucking hell.

I don't send Jake a reply, the memory of spilling Tasmin's guts replaying in my head. There's a chance it was all a hallucination. Tasmin said that herself, didn't she? So where the fuck is she? I heave the kiosk shutter open. Scan the beach. A naked guy with dreads and spiralling eyes nods as he passes.

"S'up," he says. "Mental night." I manage a dopey smile in response. "Something in your gnashers, fam," he laughs.

I pull a tuft of brown fur from between my incisors, my thoughts thrown back to last night. To the taste and smell of rabbit flesh. I drop the ice cream tub.

Bodies are moving on the beach. Some are leaving, spaced out, brain-dead, wandering past. It's 8 in the morning. Not long

until the sunnies show up. At 9 on the dot Roodie's breakfast service ends, and the sunnies will drag their full bellies onto the beach. When the beach changes hands, it will feel like the Earth is switching dimensions. Passing from the craziness of last night to what passes for a normal day in Blue Shore. I'm not ready for it. I still can't process what happened. Maybe if I can find Tasmin before the sunnies arrive, Jake will chill, and we can resume our lives together.

I spit on my hand, and smooth down my sticky-up hair, rub the sleep from the corners of my eyes, concentrate hard, and send a reply to Jake. "Haven't seen her. At the kiosk now. Will have a look around. She probably just passed out like me." *Send*, I think, and Zebby growls, pissy as usual.

I stumble across the beach, towards the fire's dying embers and the ocean beyond. Sleeping people scatter the ground, little green shoots sprouting from the sand around them where flower seeds fell. A girl in an Adidas bikini and a bucket hat rolls onto her side, yawning, her dazed eyes open a crack, following me as I pass, her cheek smooshed against the wet sand, a daisy growing from her ear.

I step around the fire pit, walking through the imprints of the bare bottoms that sat here last night and the wilted stomped-on flowers all around. Tiny flecks of orange and red flicker in the fire pit. My head spins. Ice cream bile rises in my throat. My heart is beating way faster than it should be. The Pump must still be in my system. I feel like I'm coming up again, fear and adrenaline ripping through my body. I catch myself in one of the mirror-like puddles that pool all over the beach.

I look insane. I forgot about the face paint, now streaky and smeared, sand embedded in the dried, cracked gack. I'm quarter mess, quarter flower, quarter lad, quarter fuck knows what. I

scratch my cheeks. My skin is ridiculously itchy. I feel like poisonous sap has replaced my blood and is flowing into all the capillaries that feed my skin. My muscles are expanding in front of my eyes, and islands of black are appearing all over my body. My eyes are black pits surrounded by bloody petals. Two enormous poppies are staring back at me.

I head to the ocean. I'm sure I will feel better once I wash last night away: the guilt and grime. The surf is small today, only sets of tiny waves rolling in. A mini wave smacks into my shin. I belly flop into the water, then swim as if my life depends on it, diving under the frothing white water, paddling over the mound-like waves, making it out to where the water is completely still and calm.

The ocean is only chest deep, but the beach seems a world away. It's so peaceful out here. I slip out of Jake's shorts, and they float on the ocean's surface, glittering in the sun. A sea sponge floats past, and I grab it. I scrub my skin all over, dirt floating around me. The sea sponge struggles as I squeeze it between my arse cheeks. Once my skin is clean, I still feel like shit, so I rub harder. A sleeve of skin slides from my left arm, and I finally feel some relief. I keep scrubbing, flaying my arms and hands. The salt burns so bad that I scream out, but I have to keep going. I scrub the skin from my torso, my legs and finally my face. I lie on my back, water lapping against my exposed flesh, wailing and screaming like a banshee. I float, birds circling high above. Maybe they are waiting to eat me. No. These are normal birds. Not pterodactyls. The sappy, white fluid seeps from my body like I'm a broken dandelion stem, and the pain leaves with it. I stretch out my fingers, bare tendons flexing in the brine.

After a while, I hold my arms up to the sun. Tiny sea polyps are crawling over my flesh, using their antennae to remake my skin,

so that it is brand new. Not a scratch in sight, and even the cow-like black, hairy patches have vanished. When I'm completely rejuvenated, I pull on Jake's shorts, and wade back to shore.

I notice a jelly sac hugging the sand, located between the ocean and the fire's glowing embers. How did I not see it before? As I get closer, it becomes obvious that a human figure is splayed on the sand beneath the jelly's glassy dome. She's naked, chest rising and falling. Looks like I found Tasmin.

I dig my fingers under the jellyfish and try to peel it off Tasmin. The bloody thing won't budge. I try again, speaking to Tasmin's jellyfish bot. "It's okay, I want to help her," I whisper. The jellyfish finally gives up, becoming as light as air. It flops to the side and instantly shrinks, taking on the form of any old jellyfish washed up on the shore. Shit. There's a wound on Tasmin's chest, a spear of coral sticking out from between two ribs. Blood pulses from the wound, no longer sealed by the jellyfish plug. Tasmin's eyes spring open. "You did this," she shrieks.

"Shush," I say, frantically looking around the beach, checking that no one heard her. But the tiny partygoers are miles away. I put my hands around the coral, trying to stem the bleed, but blood flows through my fingers faster and faster.

"You killed me!" My hands are on her mouth, blocking out her lies. Her neck opens like a blossoming flower filled with viscera, and her swelling stomach splits open, spilling her guts. Tasmin releases a terrible, soggy breath, then falls still.

Dead.

I slowly stand, bare skin covered in Tasmin's insides. I want to run back into the ocean and clean myself again, but there's no time.

I summon Zebby, and she takes her sweet time flying across the beach to me. She lands on my shoulder and takes a vicious

bite out of my earlobe, spitting a chunk of lobe-fat onto the sand. Blood flows from my lobe, mixing with Tasmin's.

"Fuck, shit." I clutch my ear. "Just turn on your sodding beacon light, Zebs," I say, resisting the instinct to beat her to death. A beam shoots up into the sky, visible for miles, even on this bright morning. Further up the beach, someone else lights their beacon. Another beam, closer to the beach's exit, rockets into the sky. Some partygoers are approaching, jogging over the sand. I look down at my bare chest, covered in Tasmin's blood. My hands are dripping red too. This doesn't look good. I turn off my own beacon light. What was I thinking? Tasmin will be discovered soon enough without me drawing attention to myself. I grab Tasmin's jellyfish bot, and it helpfully morphs into a handbag. I start walking along the beach.

I jog.

I fucking leg it.

I don't want anyone pinning Tasmin's death on me. I'm infamous enough in Blue Shore. Maybe I craved fame once, but now I've tasted it, I want to clean my gob out with sulfuric acid. I just want to be a nobody again. Ryan said he has a cure. That he can take all the fame away. But now this! The last thing I need is to be celebrated for murder. All I want is a quiet life. Me and Jake and the kiosk. I knew Tasmin showing up was going to ruin everything. Even in death she's threatening me. Lying there, blood-soaked, coral sticking out of her tit.

The partygoers look scared of me as I zip past. Maybe they think I'm a ghost.

I push my way through the horde of sunnies. They're streaming onto the beach, rubbing their stuffed tummies.

Blancmange

Blue Shore is rammed. Fuck my life that my house is on the other side of town, and I'm going to have to walk through the centre of Blue Shore, past everyone, standing out like crazy in Jake's sequin party shorts, red staining my deformed body, carrying Tasmin's jellyfish handbag. Roodie's Holiday Camp takes up the entire beach side of town, each building a blob of slumped fibreglass. There's sand all over the pavements and roads, dragged from Blue Shore Bay by thousands of feet.

I walk past the café where I used to work with my eyes fixed on my feet. I imagine Iris and Carla staring at me through the bulging glass frontage, and the chef gritting his teeth and spitting curse words. Further on, sunnies are streaming out of the breakfast hall, where the happy campers eat their all-inclusive slop every morning. Some of the sunnies are holding up their beacon lights, chattering excitedly, pissing their pants because something interesting is happening. Everyone on the beach must be blasting their beacons for the news to have spread this far, this quick. I look over my shoulder. Hundreds of swords of light are piercing the sky. The novelty officers will be all over Tasmin before lunchtime. With this many beacons firing, they will rush to the scene.

I quicken my pace, approaching the high street where shops,

performance artists, and street hawkers fight for a chance to milk the sunnies dry. In the winter, Blue Shore's a ghost town with only a few shops open like the dusty antique bookshop that no one ever goes in. That's what mum says anyway. I can't remember a winter in Blue Shore. In my memory, summer never ends. Maybe winter is only something that happened to the older generation. Talking of...

A yocal granny winks at me, her saggy skin bunching up on her cheeks when she smiles. She's pulling a small fox-like creature, that looks as tattered as she does, along on a lead. She's strangling the poor thing. The granny notices a yocal and their bot on the other side of the street. The bot is blasting its beacon into the sky. I think the old dear is going to pull a beacon out of her handbag and hold it up with her tanned, tree branch of an arm, but instead the fox thing does a little handstand on its front legs, lifts its tail, and a beam shoots out of its bum hole. I clap my hands. The fox doesn't even look like a bot. I thought it was her pet! It's impressive that the granny is so with the times. "Wonder what's happening?" she says to me.

"No idea." I shake my head and continue on my way. A fairy flutters in my face. Tickles my nose. Pinches my cheek. "Fuck off, would you?"

"Come inside for some fun," her voice jingles. It's tempting, but today's not the day to visit Tinkle Balls Fairy Fun Brothel. Maybe if one of their go-go boy fairies was working the streets, I wouldn't be able to resist. You haven't lived until you've had fairies tickling you all over. No, not today. Not now. The fairy won't take no for an answer, so I slap her out of my way. Her tinkling voice turns evil. "I'll kick your head in next time you haul your fat arse past," she screams. Yeah right. As long as I have a spare bogey or three, I will be welcomed into Tinkle Balls

with tiny arms. Since when do I have a fat arse anyway? My hands instinctively go to my bum. It definitely feels bigger than normal. The moment I have the thought about my growing bottom, Jake's shorts split open right down the middle and my cheeks pop out, scattering sequins and beads all over the pavement. I continue on, bare bum on full display.

Three yocal lads are hanging out under the wishing tree on Blue Shore square's green. The tree trunk is covered in wishes, scrawled and scratched on every bit of available bark. The tree erases a wish each time it grants one, constantly making space for new wishes to be added. It's obvious who the leader of the group is. The skinny lad who is standing on a bench, holding court in odd Crocs, one purple and one dirty white. He's wearing a tank top made from a Tesco carrier bag, and his knob is painted fluorescent pink and painstakingly covered in little gems. He eyes the jelly handbag enviously as I pass. The jelly would go well with his decorated knob. His two friends are dressed in an old school grunge style. They are eyeing me, licking their lips and rubbing themselves through their threadbare jorts. Pink dick spits in his hand and starts massaging his engorged, neon head. "Heyyy, pretty lad," he coos. "Want to make a wish with me?" I look away, holding the jelly bot closer, walking faster.

It's already warm and getting warmer, the sun climbing over Blue Shore's buildings. Shit. A squad of novelty officers are coming towards me. I sink into an alley between two buildings as they gallop past on their albino horses, the officers' long hair flowing behind them like rivers of silver. A horse looks directly into the alley, its red eyes meeting mine for a flash, and then the officers are gone, only a cloud of silver sparkles swirling in the air to show that they were ever here at all.

I creep out of the alley.

I feel better when the high street is way behind me, and I finally enter Buttered Hole Close. But I'm not safe from attention in the housing estate where I live. I feel eyes ogling me from the bungalows' sheeny windows, letterboxes, and tree houses.

Our bungalow is a squat glob, painted bright orange, Mum's favourite colour and her brand. I follow the winding cobblestone path through a garden brimming with marigolds, and push through the front door. Mum is standing in the hallway with her arms outstretched as if she was waiting there the whole time, her orange talons drawn, a towering vision of fake tan, her orange skin matching the walls! Her device is a stuffed chihuahua with propellers, hovering behind her. She's wearing a clear, plastic boob tube, and a ginger merkin. "Baby boy!! Where have you been?" She turns and addresses her audience. "He's been out all night, the little devil!" She pulls me into a bear hug, my head like a beach ball under her tits. She smells of cakes and cleaning spray. She holds me at arm's length, spits on her hand and begins rubbing the bloodstains from my face. "What happened to you? You're an absolute state." She turns to Tilly, her chihuahua. "What do you think my little worm cheesecakes? What do you think this little lad has been up to? Cast your votes now." A holographic poll appears, floating between us, the climbing bars showing that hundreds of people are voting. Mum calls her watchers a different dessert every day. I don't know how she comes up with them all. "The results are in. 40 percent say party all night. A measly 5 percent say shagging. But a whopping 55 percent say out murdering! It must be the bloodstains, and the psychotic eyes!"

"What the fuck, mum? Can you turn that off? Give it a rest."

She tuts. The chihuahua flies closer to her face and she tuts some more, hamming it up for her audience. "Guess I better

have a private word with my little psycho sex doll! Back soon for more Cooking with Miriam. Stay tuned." The chihuahua's eyes dull, it drops to the floor and starts licking its balls.

"Thanks," I say.

"So what really happened to you? You look like total shit."

"I'm fine, mum! Just a beach party. Busy making friends and influencing people."

"If you say so," she says. "You're looking awfully strange, love. When did your lower half become so big? Your stomach muscles are sticking out too. Is it something you ate?" She runs a hand through her tangerine merkin, a shade lighter than her tangerine skin.

"It's the latest thing, mum. You wouldn't understand."

"Course. I knew that." She puts her hand on her bulging hip, leaning into it. "And the tiny udders?"

My hands go to my stomach. I finger the protruding nipples that have suddenly appeared there. "The latest thing too," I say, while at the same time thinking *what the fucking fuck?*

"I'm a fashionable woman, you know," she says, then whispers to herself, "but it is hard to keep up with the trends. Every day something different." She sighs, then looks at me. Really looks at me, her gaze so intense that I find my toes very interesting again. "What am I going to do with you, love?"

"I don't know, mum," I reply. Going through the motions.

"You're not working today?" Moving her bulk to the other hip.

"I...yes I am...but..." Tasmin's corpse is on the beach. The novelty officers are on their way. Probably already there. The thought of the crowds of sunnies and yocals swarming the scene to get a good look at Tasmin's bloated body makes me want to puke. Mum's palm whips across my face, my cheek suddenly on

fire. "What, Mum? Why?"

"Snap out of it. Your father was the same. Always away with the fairies." She closes her thick eyelids, gloopy mascara lashes meeting like two spiders kissing. She holds her eyes closed for too long, and I know she is thinking of the actual fairies at Tinkle Balls. Dad was a regular customer. Finally she opens her eyes, and her mouth returns to its default, smiling position. "Forget work today. Mummy can call in sick for you. Roodie and I are like this." She squeezes her nipples through her boob tube. "A jellyfish!?" she suddenly shrieks. She yanks the jellyfish, but it clings on to my body. Mum's pretty strong though, and after a few more tugs the jelly gives up, releasing me. Mum struts off down the hall towards the kitchen, her bare bottom waddling. She talks as she walks. "They were all the rage years ago. Haven't seen one in donkeys. Had no idea they were back in vogue."

"You had a jelly bot?"

"Of course! Your muma was the height of fashion back in the day. I stopped wearing it when it became uncool, then dug it out of the closet and stamped it to death before your father could get a hold of it. That jellyfish would have given up all my secrets if your father ever found it. The jelly's USP was its diary-keeping capabilities, but who really wants every dirty thought recorded in wobbly jelly?"

The kitchen is bright, sunlight pouring through a large window on the opposite wall. This room is mum's paradise: painted pastel orange, the cabinets the same shade but glossy, a fluffy orange tablecloth on the table, and a kitsch cuckoo clock on the wall. A little ginger cat pops out on the hour, saying, *meow, meow, meow*. Softbox lights stand in the corners, shining even more light into the room.

"Sit down, love. You'll feel better after a hearty breakfast." A towering blancmange takes up most of the dining table. "My audience went wild watching me make this. Miriam's Bouncy Blancmange!" She makes her boobs bounce up and down as she says it. Mum cuts into the blancmange with a spoon, and slaps a wobbling lump into a bowl. She drops it in front of me. "Dig in." I play with the dessert with my spoon, watching mum lower the jellyfish into the big aquarium under the catkoo clock. "Got to keep the jelly wet for at least a few hours a day, or it will dry up."

"I didn't know that." The other fish in the aquarium: a pair of angelfish, a school of neon tetra, and a threesome of Glofish, flee to the far corner. I stand up, really not having the stomach for mum's blancmange after eating so much rabbit and ice cream, being flayed by the ocean, then watching Tasmin bleed to death. I dip my hand into the aquarium's warm water, and the jelly propels itself towards it, gently sucking on my knuckles. Maybe we are friends already. "Fuck!" My hand flies out of the water. The little shit stung me. My hand is throbbing, already swelling up. It feels like a hundred bees injected me with snake venom. Mum takes a salt shaker and thumps some salt out onto my massive hand.

"Oh my poor baby! You're really in the wars today. This will help," she says, rubbing the salt in. Her eyes widen.

"Zac! Your arms are covered in scratches." I look down. I'm just as shocked as Mum that the scratches have reappeared. Maybe their disappearance was just a cream-down hallucination. I picture Tasmin's nails tearing through my flesh.

"It's fine," I stutter. "I got lost in the dunes. Had to scrabble through a thicket. Tore me up good." That was a memory, right? Tumbling through brambles as I chased that rabbit down.

"Okay, love. I do worry about you." Mum dips her hand into

the blancmange. "Choo choo, open up, sweetheart." I shake my head.

"Sorry, mum. I'm just not hungry." Normally I love her desserts, but all I can think of when I look at the unidentifiable chunks of meat suspended in custard is chewing on raw rabbit. A memory of the bunny struggling in my teeth sledgehammers my brain. I just want to be by myself. Sort my head out. I'm getting the odd feeling that Tasmin's eyeless jellyfish is staring at me from the tank too, taunting me.

"Oh dear. I can't say I'm not disappointed in you. Turning up stinking, as bloodstained as Jack the Ripper, then putting a jellyfish in my tropical beach fish tank..."

"But Mum, you did that." The jellyfish is eating one of the angelfish as its partner angelfish blows bubbles.

"That's beside the point. Then you can't even stomach a mouthful of my blancmange. You better go and sleep this horribleness off, Zachary, and we can start over when you're compos mentis."

"Yes, mum. Course. You're right."

My foot's out of the kitchen door, when Mum squeals like it's her who was shot with a jagged piece of coral. I UNO reverse, joining Mum at the sink. She's staring out of the window at the sky. I open the back door and wade through mum's herb garden, the stench of wild garlic thick in the air. The words written in the sky are as clear as anything.

Nineteen-Year-Old Girl Found Dead on Blue Shore Bay.

I wait for further details, my world closing in on me.

More cloud letters appear.

Death Highly Novel.

More clouds form in the morning sky.

Shot to death with coral. The suspect remains at large.

The words vanish, the announcement done. I slink into the house. Mum is sitting at the table beaming. "Did you see, darling? How absolutely horrible and wonderful. I will have to make a trifle to celebrate. I'll take it to the family! My audience will love it. I must visit the shrine too. Did you know her? She must have been in your year on the edu streams? Oh love, say you knew the poor dear."

"They didn't even say her name, Mum. It could be anyone. I'm going to bed."

Horlicks

It's pissing it down, and no matter what I tried this morning, Tasmin's jellyfish refused to turn into an umbrella or even back into a handbag. I'm making my way onto the beach, my anorak blowing in the wind, the rusty safety pin I used to close it already broken. My Nike crop top is soaked through. The jellyfish is sloshing around inside the Tupperware Mum uses to store her custard. The box is stashed in mum's tangerine backpack, which I nabbed because I left my usual pack in the kiosk yesterday. It's been raining all night, with no sign of it stopping anytime soon.

I open the kiosk, the padlock crunching as I force the key to turn inside the salt-and-sand-filled lock. I sit on my stool. The space on the other stool is usually occupied by Jake. He should be here any minute. I wouldn't blame him for taking a day off though, or even a week. His girlfriend is lying dead on the beach. I slowly raise the hatch's shutter, knowing that the instant blast of sugar and cream will attract customers. Rainy days like this should be quiet, but Tasmin's death is big news, and people are going to flock to see her rain or shine. I'm mentally preparing for an insane day.

I can see Tasmin's shrine from here. Two huge parasols protect her corpse from the elements, and a crowd is gathered around, drawing and painting, taking photos, and collecting

souvenirs. Each visitor is only allowed to fill a tiny vial with blood, or spit, or hair, or whatever else they can scavenge. I passed an old crone hawking the empty vials as I came onto the beach. I didn't get one. I already took something from Tasmin. Her jelly bot. The novelty officers have cordoned Tasmin off, and there's a long queue of people waiting for their turn to crawl under the cordon and collect a souvenir.

My hand shakes as I bring a coffee to my lips. The scratches on my arms throb, and I'm beginning to think they might be infected. I'm running through what to say to Jake. He's going to hate me forever if I tell him the truth. I don't even know what the truth is. Did I mow Tasmin down in the dunes? Or did she croak it when I was there with her under the jelly? I'd dismiss the whole thing as a bad trip, if I wasn't staring at her shrine, and if the news wasn't written in the sky yesterday. Tasmin is as dead as a dodo, and I had something to do with her demise, no matter what way you look at it. I'm going to have to lie. I'm going to have to lie to everyone. I stick my head out of the kiosk's hatch. A crowd is flowing onto the beach, carrying cameras and easels, heading towards Tasmin. No sign of Jake. A couple of figures are making their way towards the kiosk.

"What can I get for you?" I say to the two hooded figures. I wink, turning on the charm, trying to imitate Jake's effortless style. I lean on the counter, my elbow slips, and I bite my tongue. "Bollocks!...I mean Horlicks?" Perfect for a miserable day! The figure on the left pulls down their hood. I step back in disgust. Either they swapped their face for a magic spell in the arcade, or they really are a full-grown adult with a baby's head. Not just youthful, but a full-on small-headed, chubby-cheeked, snot-bubble-blowing baby.

"Goo goo, ga ga, wa wa hot milka," the baby face says.

I can't even see a face in the other figure's hood, just a dark space like their head got swallowed by a black hole. A cold voice from the black hole says, "And thirty-one coffees, please." Then they list the different types of coffee, the sweetnesses, and even the amount of foam in each cup. Bloody hell. They are coming by the coach-load to see Tasmin. Thirty-one coffees in one order is a record. *Come on, Jake, you sexy arsewipe*, I think. *Dead girlfriend or not, I need you here.*

"Of course, coming up," I say. I collect the payment, pulling out the bottom of my work polo so it forms a makeshift bag. The black-hole-faced figure with the cold voice fills my polo with the payment objects. I release the fabric and the bits and bobs tumble into the till. The baby head dribbles. It really is a minging sight. I start making the drinks, wishing I could grow another pair of arms.

Finally, I place the thirty-first coffee on the counter, my fingertips scalded and raw. A blur of hands, and claws, and robot fingers grab the coffees in a frenzy, then trot, whir, and stomp over to Tasmin's shrine.

The kiosk door slams open and Jake stands in the doorway, backlit and dramatic. The flower chain he wore at the party is still around his waist, but the flowers have wilted and shrivelled. He stumbles in, droplets of rainwater rolling over his dirty forehead, the Triptoid's third eye smeared across his mug. "Hey," I say, all nervous like he's an old friend who I haven't seen in years.

"Little bro," he says gruffly.

"You. You look different."

He sits on his stool. I pull the shutter down. I don't think he's ready to confront reality. To see the hordes flocking to his girlfriend's body. Better say something. Keep it simple. "Shit

happens, mate."

"Are you taking the piss?" Jake snarls.

Oh no. Maybe he hasn't heard the news. How can I tell him? I have to soften the blow. He really looks like dog shit. I barely recognise him. The more I look at him, the less he looks like the Jake I know. He's raw around the edges, like someone chucked him in a potato peeler. His features are smooshy, his face turning into mushy peas.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, mate. But Tasmin, Tasmin is..."

The door swings open. "Gorgelicious! What happened?" Jake says.

"Fell asleep on the beach, baby bum. What the fuck happened to you?"

I blink. Blink again, wondering if this is another trip. But nope. Tasmin is definitely standing there, live and kicking. She saunters in, sits on the counter, her dress from last night hanging off her. She looks as bad as Jake, gaunt, and pale, and...dead?

Peanut Butter

"Aren't you...wasn't that your..." *corpse on the beach*, I think. But the words are too ridiculous to say with Tasmin standing right in front of me.

"What's your little gaybie trying to say, baby bum? I'm dying here! I feel like total crap after last night."

"Me too. I haven't had any Spunk Rush today. Look at the state of me. My supplies dried up. I'm trying to get more, but Ryan's down to the last few tubs and he's not selling."

I can't listen to this. I feel like I've slipped into another dimension. I grab Mum's backpack, and barge through the door, slamming it behind me. I thunder down the beach. I've got to be dreaming. I saw Tasmin's body. The world is an out-of-control waltzer, spinning around me.

"Zac," a deep voice says. The waltzer crashes and plastic shrapnel and torn off limbs rain down all around me. It's Ryan, a dreamy expression plastered across his chiselled face.

"Shit, you scared me."

"What are you up to?" he says. I eye him up and down. He's wearing a white T-shirt spray painted with a pink palm tree, Umbro shorts, and a pair of jelly beach shoes. He's holding a jar of peanut butter, a butter knife embedded in it.

"Nothing. I mean, just walking to clear my head."

"I messaged you, you know. Don't think you even read it." He pulls the knife out of the jar, and sucks off a wad of peanut butter.

"Oh. You did?" Course I didn't read it. My bot is a pissy drama queen with a grudge, but she still sides with me. Zebby knows I don't want to talk to Ryan. She didn't even notify me. *Good bot.* To seem like I care, I summon Zebby from Mum's backpack. She hovers in front of my face, eyes glowing red. I flinch, expecting her to bite me, but she holds back from her instinct to rip a chunk out of my nose. Thank fuck. I view Ryan's message. He's in his studio, all wires, tubes, neon lights, and tanks filled with who knows what. Holographic Ryan is in my face, rambling on about how good it was to meet at the party. How we should get together and hang out. Go and see the body on the beach. Bond over a corpse.

A switch in me flips. I pull an ice cream scoop out of my shorts. Launch at Ryan. Shove the scoop down his throat, my whole arm inside his oesophagus, digging out his insides. He gags, choking as I cackle. "How does that taste, Ryan? Your dead arse is going to be famous just like me." But Ryan Made is already a star. He's the most famous experimental artist in Blue Shore, celebrated for his insane creations. He wasn't a star when he asked me to help him. It's all coming back to me. I said yes because I fancied him like crazy. I was so into him then I'd have done anything. I *did* do anything. But that memory doesn't quite seem real. For all I know, Ryan could have kidnapped me and forced all that perverse shit on me, then implanted a false memory in my head later.

I blink. Ryan's pulling away from my mouth, licking his lips. My own lips taste like peanuts. The ice cream scoop was never stuffed down my pants. A vision of it sitting in a cup of lukewarm

water in the kiosk pops into my head. I become a fly on the wall, watching Jake grab the scoop. He desperately scrapes at the corners of an empty tub of Spunk Rush, trying to get at the last morsels. Tasmin watches, the string of drool trailing from her mouth smells so good. Like fishy-syrup. I flitter across the kiosk, making a beeline for the drool pool on the counter. Tasmin brings her massive fist down on my hea...

"Damn, Zac. That was intense. It's like you were trying to eat me. So fucking hot."

"Right," I manage. How did digging out Ryan's insides turn into licking out his gob? And what's with these violent fantasies anyway? This is the third time I've brutally assaulted someone, then come back to a reality where nothing happened. I think I'm losing the plot. Maybe I should lay off Elf Sherbert for a while.

"Look," Ryan says. "I want us to start afresh. Go on dates and stuff. I want to take care of you, Zac. I could solve all your problems. I can give you the cure."

"I can take care of myself, thanks." Then I think of the scratches on my arms, the memory glitches, killing Tasmin, but not really because some other girl is lying on the beach. So who the fuck did I shoot? Maybe I do need somebody to protect me from myself. Ryan put me in a prison made of every fucker's gaze. Am I really going to let him back into the cell? "But yeah. We can start afresh," I say. The antidote to all of this is within reach.

He nods enthusiastically. "So, for out first date, let's go and see the body."

***

The moment we reach the shrine, people start touching and pulling at Ryan, asking for him to experiment on them. He gives one woman an electric shock, pushes a needle into a chav

lad's eye, and chops off an old man's toe with the peanut butter knife, which takes a lot of hacking and sawing. The woman looks radiant after the shock, the acne on her face vanishing. The lad's eyes pop open, and lots of mini eyes tumble out into his hands. "I can see again," he cries, his eyes shooting into the air like little drones. "I can see everything!" A mushroom grows where the man's toe once was. He plucks it, and gobbles it up, then lies down on the sand, curling up and sucking his thumb. He looks really happy, even though blood is pulsing from the stump where his toe was severed.

Me and Ryan stand at the shrine, holding hands. Ryan's palm is clammy. The close contact is making my skin crawl. I feel sick to my stomach. I tell myself that I'm biding my time. That I'm doing this for the cure. But maybe I'm just being weak. Bending over for Ryan because he's showing a real interest in me.

A random bloke runs up to us. Skin hanging from his ruddy cheekbones, a haunted look in his eyes. I only see him for a second before he's ripping at my shorts. He's screaming at me to take them off. "Let me drink you up!" I push him back hard, but he comes at me again, drool flying from his gob. Ryan swings and punches him hard, right in the jaw. Tells him to fuck off. Tells everyone to fuck off, and they do it, like Ryan's the king of the beach or something. A dribble of piss runs down my leg. That guy was terrifying.

"Rush-head," Ryan says, as if that explains the sudden violence. Most people who watch the viral stream just get off on me from afar and say disgusting things. Jake's friends rode me like a pony at the party but that's because everyone was fucked up. This is the first time someone's physically attacked me. "The stuff's been in short supply. I've run out of the raw ingredient. Lucky I've got a few tubs left." He smiles, and

coconut cream oozes between his perfect teeth. Of course Ryan's gobbling Spunk Rush. No one could be as gorgeous as he is in real life. He's too perfect. I think back to One Lad, One Masterpiece. He looked different then. Skinnier. Spottier. Rougher around the edges. Nothing like the gorgeous, jacked-up junky holding my hand. He was always hot, but not this hot.

We're alone with Tasmin's body. It is Tasmin. Clear as day. I look at Ryan, expecting him to react in some kind of way and he is. Teardrop emojis pouring from his eyes. "Shit Tasmin," I whisper, but the word Tasmin is censored by a buzzing that rips through my ears.

"What?" Ryan says.

"It really is Tasmin," I say louder. The buzzing sound censors her name again.

"It really is beautiful," Ryan says, still crying.

"You must miss her?"

"How can I miss someone I didn't know?"

What the shit is he on about? "But you did know her. It's Tasmin." Again with the buzz. But I realise I'm the one who sounds like a lunatic here. I just saw Tasmin as clear as day in the ice cream kiosk. I sink to my knees, clasping my head in my hands. I think I need to go back to bed. I twist my hair in my fingers.

Ryan wraps his arms around me, and I melt into him. He's smiling gently. "I wonder who she was too," Ryan says. "Don't worry. Everyone wants to know. No one knows where this girl came from. No one from round here has ever seen her before."

I take in the girl again, and as I look, Tasmin transfigures into someone else. Someone I've never laid eyes on before. "Maybe she was just a sunny who pissed off the wrong person," I say. I stand up. So, it was all in my imagination. This whole thing. I

didn't kill Tasmin. But did I kill this innocent girl, whoever the fuck she is? Maybe someone else did it, and somehow I saw it happening live. A stream! That must be it. Someone killed this girl on a stream. Fuck. Why didn't I think of that before? I tapped into somebody's psychotic stream. "Did you see it happen too?" I wonder out loud.

"The murder. No. No one did."

A private, invite only stream then. But why did I see it and no one else? Maybe someone is fucking with me on purpose. A sigh escapes my dry mouth. This is too crazy.

People have placed items around and on top of the girl. Mostly valuable objects like shells, spoons, small ornaments, bits of plastic, and interesting bits of flotsam. The girl's head is almost plucked bald, and her fingernails have been stripped down to the bloody quicks. I wish Ryan hadn't dragged me here. At least it isn't raining anymore. Blades of sunlight cut through the clouds, butchering the girl's body, trinkets and smoothed shards of sea glass glistening. It is kind of pretty.

"What should we put on her?" Ryan asks. That's how it works. If you want to take a piece from a murder victim, an accident victim, or from anyone who died, you have to leave something in return. It's a Blue Shore tradition.

"I'm good," I say.

Ryan shrugs. He pulls off one of his jelly shoes, crawls under the cordon, and gently manipulates the corpse's foot, slipping on the jelly shoe. In return he plucks an eyelash and fills his vial with saltwater and body juice from the shallow pool the body is lying in. He drops the eyelash inside, then holds the vial up to the light. "Sure you don't want anything?"

"I think I just need to be alone with her for a minute."

He narrows his eyes at me. He must think I'm acting weirdly.

He expects me to take a souvenir, but I already took the girl's jelly bot. It's not like I can tell him that. "You know what some people are saying, Zac?"

"No. What are they saying?"

"That maybe you did it. You killed her? Everyone's blabbering about the scratches on your arms. Saying that they're human-nail-shaped."

Who's blabbering? I haven't seen anyone except my mum and Jake and Tasmin since the party. *And all the people who saw you walking through Blue Shore covered in blood*, the voice in my head says. That's true, but that blood could have come from anywhere. Blue Shore's fishermen are always wandering round covered in guts and no one blinks an eye. Jake and Tasmin were in their own messed up world when I saw them, so these rumours must have come from mum. She was talking about the state I was in to her audience. Speculating that her son is a cold-blooded killer. Bet she's repeating it over and over. "I didn't touch her!" I shout.

"Woah chill. It's no big deal, Zac. I could put a word in with the novelty officers. Maybe this is your chance to reinvent yourself. Psycho Killer Zac, instead of Cum Dump Zac."

"Well, I didn't kill her, so the reinvention is never going to work, is it? Nice first date, Ryan," I say sarcastically. "I'll see you around." I grab his wrist and kiss him on the lips because I don't want to lose the cure just because I'm fuming. Biting his lower lip as hard as I can makes the kiss feel less soppy and more like I am still in control of the situation.

"Cool!! It really was the best first date. I'll see you soon then," he says, not registering my sarcasm at all, blood dripping from his chin.

"Yeah. See you."

I stare daggers at Ryan until he is halfway up the beach, then I turn back to the girl's body. I should really give the jellyfish back, but things aren't adding up and I have a feeling that the bot is the key to the mystery. "I took your jellyfish, so now you need payment. That's why it wouldn't do a thing I asked," I whisper. "So, what're your secrets worth? What do I have to give you in return?" I look over my shoulder. The swarm of sunnies and yocals are closing in now that their commander Ryan has gone. "So hurry up and tell me," I shout at the girl's bloated body.

"Kiss me, Zac. I'm so wet and cold." Icy fingers creep over my shoulder. "So bloody cold. Warm me up with a kiss," Tasmin's voice trickles through my ear.

"No. No fucking way."

Tasmin's fingers press against my lips. I smack myself in the mouth. Shit! When I look at my palms they're full of kelp. I chuck the seaweed at Tasmin's shrine, as her cackles bombard me from every direction. "Just a little peck, and my jelly will be yours to command," she says.

"Just a peck?"

"A little smack on the lips. That's all I want."

I force myself to glance over my shoulder. No dead Tasmin, and the sunnies and yocals are moving in slow motion. Closer and closer. A little kiss won't hurt me. Then the jelly might actually do what it's supposed to, and I can begin to figure all of this out.

I crawl under the cordon, wet sand pressing into my bare knees.

I lean over the body, the smell of salty blubber and death filling my nostrils. I lick my own chapped lips. Press them against her bloated pus sacs. My heart is going apocalyptic in my chest. The girl's sagging skin gives way beneath my living lips. I expect her

to grab me. To pull me into a pool of sinking sand, suffocating me. Instead, her dead tongue pushes through my teeth, and the taste of rotten fish floods my mouth.

I stumble back, hacking up bile and seawater.

Jelly

Tasmin and Jake are nowhere to be seen. Jake must have gone on a coconut cream hunt, Tasmin following along with him. Did Jake forget he's meant to be working with me? It's kind of a relief though. Jake looked rough as a run-over dog. Hopefully he gets his hands on some Spunk Rush and goes back to his normal self. The Jake I know so well from watching his streams. That I've come to know in the kiosk. It's actually good that he's not here. I need to be alone so that I can figure out what the fuck is going on. I heave down the kiosk shutter, locking it. I bolt the door too.

First, I need to confront the dead girl in the room. I saw myself blasting Tasmin to bits, then she rocks up here, walking and talking. Meanwhile, there's some random girl's corpse on the beach. Tuning into the killer's stream is a plausible explanation, but then why did I see Tasmin being blown apart and not this random girl? The gun looked almost the same as the one Jake pressed against my forehead the day of the party, except for the sea-life additions. Maybe that was just a skin. Can you get skins for guns? I'm really no gun expert. I'm surprised I managed to shoot the thing, if I even did. Jake's holdall is still there on the floor, but it's empty. The gun's gone. Shit.

I slap the jellyfish onto the kiosk counter. It morphs uncon-

trollably, buzzing with static, glitching, lightning bolts flashing over its surface. It switches from a handbag, to an umbrella stand, to an umbrella, to what resembles a big dildo, to a pair of jelly shoes, all in quick succession, ejecting its contents as it does: a turquoise lipstick, a shell-shaped hair clip, a sachet of salt and another of tomato ketchup.

The jellyfish stops shape-shifting. It turns blue and melts into a puddle. A memory of before the viral stream hits me. I can almost taste the blueberry jelly mum would bring to our family picnics every summer. The jelly was always moulded into perfect shapes. I specifically remember a castle, a kitten, and a pair of boobs. Every picnic, the jelly quickly melted in the sun, becoming a pool of sticky gelatin, and we'd gobble it up, our fingers sticky, wasp circling us like vultures. "Let's be friends," I say to the jellyfish, and it vibrates. "What's your name?" No answer. "Turn into a handbag," I command. The jelly vibrates again, making a hissing noise. "Come on! I kissed your rotting, stinking owner!! What more do you want?" It doesn't react.

Maybe I need to play nicer. Woo it first. "Come on, who's a pretty jellyfish? You are!" I coo like an idiot. But it actually works. The jellyfish finally does what I ask, magically turning into a handbag. "Good!" I applaud the stupid thing. "That's a good start. Now, I want to see Tasmin's memories. Or that girl's," I hedge. "Show me the memories of whoever you belonged to." A tiny mountain range of bumps moves over the jelly's surface, but it doesn't show me any memories. I have no idea how the jellyfish works. I wish I'd asked Mum earlier, but that would have been too sus. Jellies must have come with instructions back in the day.

I ask Zebby, telling her to stay in the backpack whilst her machine neurons start firing. I'm kind of attached to what's left

of my earlobes. Mum's orange backpack vibrates with Zebby's annoyance, shoots across the kiosk, falls back to the floor, then spits out the instructions on how to operate the jelly. The words appear on the shack's wooden walls, letter by letter being scratched into the wood as if an invisible psycho is hacking them out with a butcher's knife. Talk about dramatic! If Zebby had hands, I'm sure she would shank me.

Instructions for operating Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™.

The invisible knife rips the letters in the wall, the words appearing faster and faster.

1) Initiate Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™.

2) Imprint. Bond with Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™.

3) Turn on bell mode.

4) Climb inside your Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™ and think. Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™ will memorise your memories.

5) Share with family and friends (Jiggly Jelly's Eyeball Replicator Device™ required), or keep your Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™ secret forever.

The words surround me, carved into the kiosk like a cliché scene in a horror film. I blink, and the words are gone.

"Bond with your Jiggly Jelly's Girly Forever Diary Bot™," I repeat out loud. "We already bonded, right?" I ask the jelly, and it pulses in response, the areas of jelly that might be cheeks blushing pink. "What's your name then?"

The word 'SANDRA' appears in neon letters under its translucent skin.

"Great, SANDRA." The jelly bot glows with pleasure at being

addressed by its name. "Switch to bell mode."

The jelly grows, until its membrane is pushing against the freezers and the sweetie shelves. I lift one of the side flanges and climb inside. Now what? I try squeezing my eyes shut, telling the jelly to play the girl's memories. Nothing happens. My eyes snap open. "Come on, SANDRA. Let's see what she was up to."

A safety warning flashes on the jelly membrane.

For the safety and security of your memories, memories are only accessible after an eyeball scan.

Shit! I heave the jelly from my body, and it contracts, shrinking into a corner like a cold dick. I swear the bloody thing is laughing, its whole flabby body jiggling.

***

Jake doesn't come back for the rest of the day, leaving me to deal with the thousands of yocals and sunnies who come to the kiosk on their way to or from the corpse shrine. By the afternoon, I'm starting to wish I was back in the café with Iris, Carla, and the chef. At least there, I got a little time to breathe between serving breakfast slop and coffee. When I get a rare moment between customers, I eye the jellyfish. It's under the counter, pulsing softly in Mum's Tupperware box, taunting me. I'm thinking about my next move. It's obvious, but horrible. I'm going to have to do it after dark when the sunnies and yocals have left the beach to settle down for an evening glued to the streams, or for a wild night at one of Blue Shore's nightlife spots.

The sun hangs around on the horizon for a stupidly long time, drifting back and forth, rising slightly, then dipping below the ocean before coming back up. The sun finally finishes fucking with me, and fully drops below the horizon. I wait for the beach

to clear, then I lock up the kiosk and head towards the shrine. The disgusting thing has turned into a small mountain, blotting out the rising stars.

The monstrous shrine looms: flowers, plastic toys, dead bots, clothes, organic matter, and a half-ton of other things piled high, all stuck together with bodily fluids, condiments, and slime. Glowsticks, torches, and candles make the heap glitter like a horrible Christmas tree. I'm going to have to burrow into the mound to find the body. I pull an ice cream scoop out of my pocket, the cold metal in my hand telling me that it's as real as the spotty nose in front of my face.

"I can smell you cumming," the wind whispers in Tasmin's voice. "Cumming for my eyesssss." I feel sick. If kissing the body was payment for the jelly, what am I going to have to do for its eyes?

I plunge the scoop into the shrine, using it like a shovel, digging into the layers, throwing off the knick-knacks and crap, tunneling towards the delicate body at the mound's centre. What if her eyes are already gone? They were there earlier, staring up, reflecting the sky. I'm going deeper and deeper like a maggot burrowing through flesh.

I reach the body at the mountain's core. It's resting in a void, the cavity created by stuff being piled on top of the parasols. The corpse is lying in seawater and goop. Fuck! The death tourists took every soft part of her, including her eyes. There are two greasy hollows where they used to be. There's nothing left of the body but a moist skeleton. I scream in frustration, but there's no one on the beach to hear me, and even if there was, my rage is trapped in this putrid mound. I crawl out, sucking in fresh salty air as soon as I'm free of the slumping heap.

Zebby flies in front of my face, bleeping and buzzing. The

message blazes across my retinas. The sender's face is masked by a vampire avatar, fangs dripping blood.

"*Looking for something? Meet me on the pier in 5.*"

I spin around. Is whoever sent the message watching me now? I think I see a shadow moving at the top of a dune, but then it vanishes. Probably my mind playing tricks. The vampire must already be on the pier. The rickety pier juts into the ocean, cutting Blue Shore Bay in half. It's way down the beach from where I'm standing now, and I'm going to have to fucking leg it to get there in time.

***

Blue Shore pier is heaving. Sunnies and yocals enjoying the balmy evening. I stumble over the pier's wooden planks. My lungs feel like they're going to explode. The pier is Blue Shore on steroids. It's crammed with arcades, sweetie shops, donut stalls, souvenir stands, bot grooming parlours, and freak shows. At the very end of the pier there's a funfair with the '*Craziest Rides in the Universe!*'

It's a pretty public place to meet some rando to collect a corpse's eyeballs. Zebby screams in my face. A new message. Vampire lad fills my vision. The hologram shows vampire lad's whole body this time. His chest is bare and his nipples are like two black jelly beans sticking out of his bony chest. I get the urge to latch onto one like a leech and suck until he's a bloodless husk. "*Meet you by the dodgems,*" he says, and I notice he has a distinct accent. I didn't pick up on it earlier. It's hard to place it because he's speaking with a voice modulator applied.

Screams of excitement and terror assault me as I push through the crowds. The funfair is crammed with sunnies and yocals enjoying the insane rides. A figure is leaning against a pillar at the edge of the dodgem's arena, a black tote bag hanging from

his shoulder, an acid-yellow smiley face embroidered on the front. He's disguised in the same way as he was in the message, a vampire avatar covering him from head to toe.

"Just the guy!" he says, his voice fuzzy. "A little birdie told me you're looking for Tasmin's eyes."

His words are like being slapped back to reality with a wet fish. "So you think it's her too?"

His evil vampire eyes dart sideways, checking no one is watching or listening. He grabs me and pulls me behind the scenery screen of eerie twisted trees that backs the dodgem's arena. We're wedged between the screen and The Donut, a ride with a swinging pendulum attached to a donut of seats. It rises high up into the sky, all hydraulics, lights, and screams. The ride's machinery pumps and grinds in my earholes. "Look," he whispers, pulling me so close I can smell the sushi on his vampire breath. "Pardon the cliché, but not everything is what it seems. You need to figure this out for yourself. If I told you everything now, you'd freak out. And if he finds out it was me who spilled." He pauses dramatically. "I'd be a dead cod."

"He? So someone else killed her."

"Like I said. My lips are sealed." Threads burst from his skin and criss-cross his lips, sealing them shut.

Freak out? I think I'm pretty freaked out already. I don't think anything this bloodsucker could say would make things worse. The sound of tearing metal cracks the sky open. My eyes dart up. The seating ring attached to The Donut's swinging pendulum is plummeting towards the ocean, no longer attached to the ride. The riders shriek as the donut crashes into the black waves.

"Why take the eyeballs just to give them to me? Why didn't you let me take them for myself?"

Vampire boy opens his mouth, tearing the threads and ripping

his lips open. His mask glitches for a millisecond, and I almost get a glimpse of the real person beneath, but it all happens too fast for my brain to process. Static zigzags over his chest. "You already snogged Tasmin for the jelly," he says, the torn skin on his lips flapping. "I knew that next time she would want more, so I took a hit for you. She'd have wanted that giant slong of yours in her fanny next. All I had to do was kiss her. I can still taste her nasty-arse, rotten-fish tongue." He spits on the ground. "The eyes are the best part. If I didn't take them, someone else would have. You're lucky I got there first."

"You've been watching me."

"You make it sound so creepy. This is Blue Shore. We are all watching each other."

"But I'm not a streamer."

"Here." He holds out a jam jar, two peepers bobbing inside of it. Tasmin's eyes rotate to stare at me, pupils dilating. "Good luck. Be smart, Zac." He shoves the jam jar into my hands. His avatar glitches again, but he's already turning away, leaving me sandwiched between fairground rides. I rush out after him, but he's vanished, and all I can see are flashing lights, and the funfair guards fishing laughing bodies out of the ocean, their arms or legs or necks broken, bent into horrifying positions. An accident victim is looking directly at me. One of their hands is hanging off by strings of viscera, their other, attached hand is frantically wanking. Ryan's cure can't come soon enough.

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I'm cross-legged in the kiosk, the jellyfish enclosing me, a rotting eyeball in each hand. I must look like some deranged Hindu god. Lucky no one can see me then. Except for Tasmin maybe. I shake the eerie thought out of my head. I hold her peepers in front of my own eyes, seawater and eye slime dripping

between my fingers.

Tasmin's memories play, fragmented and incomplete, like she only bothered to record them sometimes, and they are all mixed up and ripped apart, which isn't that surprising considering that I'm viewing them through the eyeballs that were ripped out of her head. But these are definitely Tasmin's memories. Maybe I'm not going crazy. It's everyone else who is out of their minds. I skip through the memories by flicking Tasmin's eyeballs left or right, hard flicking to skip through a bunch at a time. Tasmin never sorted her memories into any kind of order. They're just one big clusterfuck.

As I watch Tasmin's memories, I feel like I am inside her head, looking through her living eyes. The memories play in my brain and her POV becomes my POV. I'm Tasmin, meeting Jake for the first time at a streamer meet-and-greet. I'm Tasmin, looking at me (Zac) with contempt and pity as we shared hot chocolate and strawberries in the kiosk. The next scene is in an unfamiliar place, but I guess it's Jake's bedroom because it reeks of him in the best way. It's minimal. White walls, with a couple of posters of surfers on them and LED lights strung around the bed and ceiling. I feel a stab of jealousy that I've never been in his room, or even been to his house.

I unzip Jake's flies and start tossing him off as I talk dirty to him. Jake is thrusting his rock-hard dick into my spit-lubed palm, really putting his skinny hips into it. I hated seeing Tasmin and Jake make out in real life, but this is different. I feel like it's really happening to me. I'm not watching. I'm taking part. I'm rock-hard as I climb on Jake and feel his dick slide into my vagina. "Fuck my brains out, baby bum," Tasmin squeals. It feels so good to be filled up with Jake. I want to wank, but I've got to hold up Tasmin's eyeballs. The stink of rotting

eyeball flesh and sex is overwhelming. I rub my crotch against the jellyfish bell as Jake slides in and out of me. The jelly vibrates in response, massaging my cock. "Yesss! My pussy is dripping like a leaky tap. Fuck it harder my stinky-cocked donkey. Shit in my mouth and call me Tit Face Fish Breath!" Tasmin shrieks. The memory suddenly ends. Typical of Tasmin to only record a teaser. It's like she knew I'd be watching.

I skip forwards. There are memories of Tom too. So she was fucking him. But was she cheating on Jake? I mean, I saw them snogging, but it's impossible to know for sure when she was shagging Tom. The memories are all over the place. Watching Tasmin and Tom fucking doesn't turn me on at all. It's brutal. Tom's enormous knob ripping Tasmin in half. She seemed to like it though. I experience the feeling of Tom's giant girth pounding my body. I've never felt anything like that before. I thought shoving a frozen banana up my arse was painful, but that was nothing by comparison. Being fucked by Tom is explosively painful. Kind of like how I imagine being impaled to feel. I'm losing track of time. Being inside Tasmin's head is like licking the most insane ice cream flavour.

More memories. More places. I see the beach, the chippy, The Horny Siren pub, a strange cave filled with fairy lights, but the memories always cut off in front of a door I don't recognise, and the memory always fades to black before Tasmin reaches the door and opens it. Is it Jake's house or someone else's? I flick back through the memories. No, not Jake's door. In one memory I see Tasmin and Jake go into Jake's house through a grand door made of antique wood with shining hardware. The mystery door must be important because it keeps reappearing in Tasmin's memories. The yellow door is set in a proper rustic-looking fisherman's cottage. One of many that line whatever street this

is. Minger Lane perhaps? Where Tasmin said she lives. In every memory where the door appears, Tasmin stands staring at it. It's as if she left the memory there as a clue for me to find and figure out. Dead Tasmin is playing games with me, and I can't be fucked to play along.

99

It's going to be another manic day. It's 8:30 am and the sun is blazing. Interest in the shrine has vanished, and the hulking thing is melting in the sun like Mum's blueberry jelly. Jake is sitting on the stool next to me, back to his usual shimmering, gorgeous self. Ryan popped in first thing and gave Jake one last tub of coconut cream. Jake paid a fortune for it, pretty much emptying the till into Ryan's duffel bag. Ryan told me he'd come back later for another 'date.' Can't say I'm looking forward to it.

Jake was over the moon, but became moody the moment Ryan left.

"Fuck knows what I'm going to do after this tub runs out," Jake said.

"Well, at least you can be yourself for a little while longer."

"Yeah, you're right, little bro." He instantly cheers up. "Make the most of it and all that."

I'm glad to have my eye candy back. Jake was a complete wreck when he came in this morning, and the demon who is pretending to be Tasmin was in even worse shape. Jake's arm was linked through hers, and she was flopped at his side, coming to life, then flopping again like a narcoleptic fish. He basically carried her in here.

She's slumped in the corner now, struggling to keep her head up.

"I heard someone took that girl's jelly bot before the novelty officers even came on the scene," I say.

"That's weird," Jake says. "How do you know that?"

"It was written in the sand this morning," I lie. "Got washed away with the high tide. Hey, didn't you have a jelly bot, Tasmin? What happened to that?"

"What are you on about?" she says, in her nail-grating dead voice, little pebbles that look like tonsil stones flying out of her festering gob. "I never had one of those stupid girly devices."

"Right, okay," I say, sarcastically. Dead Tasmin is in on all this, I just know it. She's playing dumb on purpose. Her new device is a skeleton thing that is constantly perched on her bony shoulder. Apparently, since she came back from the dead, she's turned into an edge queen.

I'm happy when Tasmin leaves to do whatever it is she does. Probably fuck Tom. I want to show Jake the jelly memory of Tasmin being jack hammered by Tom, but what if the memory doesn't show Tasmin at all, but that other girl who everyone thinks is under the shrine? Then I'm going to look like a right idiot. I can't even say when Tasmin and Tom were at it anyway. Even if it is Tasmin in the memory and I somehow prove when it happened, if I show Jake, Tasmin will retaliate with One Lad, One Masterpiece. That would ruin everything. I'm so close to getting with Jake, I can feel it. After that, I don't care if Jake sees One Lad, One Masterpiece. I just have to know that he wants me for me.

The beach is quiet, the sunnies' breakfast service not finishing for another twenty minutes. I'm making the most of the peace by reading a book on my cyberdeck. It's called *So You Murdered*

Someone? It's making me feel better about the whole killing Tasmin thing, not that I was really feeling guilty in the first place. I'm still not even sure I did it. Could have been Tom. He is a nasty fucker. Or maybe some psycho streamer did it. Fuck knows. I actually downloaded the book hoping there'd be a chapter called '*So Your Victim Came Back To Life,*' so I wouldn't have to figure all this out myself, but there's nothing like that in the contents at all. It's all about coming to terms with things. I'm already on the later chapters which focus on making the most of the killing. Getting famous, securing brand deals. All the things that I definitely don't want. I decide to get a refund, and the zit pus I paid for the book is immediately refunded straight into the bacteria volcano on my forehead. I've had a ton of zits since the party thanks to Jake's greasy face paint, and I'm already planning what to buy with the pus bonanza.

I'm leaving an anonymous, negative review on the book, when Jake pinches my elbow. "Hey, little bro. What're you doing? Entertain me! I'm bored as shit."

Fuck the review. I'm here with Jake. Nothing else matters right now. I need to stop worrying about dead girls. Focus on the here and now. Bloody hell. Now I sound exactly like the book! Maybe it was worth it.

I pull out my balls, and dick, then wrap my ball-skin expertly around my cock. "It's a hot dog," I laugh.

Jake bursts out laughing. "It's fucking huge." He gets on his knees, like he's about to gobble me up. Is this the moment? It's not as romantic as I hoped.

"A 99."

"Huh. What?"

"A 99, please," a lanky guy says.

"Sure. Coming right up," I say, bundling my junk back into

my shorts.

I make the ice cream and hand it to the guy. Jake is smiling serenely. The chill vibes don't last long though because a wave of sunburnt sunnies is making their way onto the beach. Clutching buckets, spades, fishing nets, and picnic hampers, they hunt for a decent spot, then hammer in windbreaks, laying towels and inflatables down, marking their territory. A blow-up starfish breaks free, tumbling over the sand. A sunny runs after it, fat cascading around him like a fleshy party dress. Flabber flub will never catch up with the starfish, but it's hilarious to watch him try. Jake follows my gaze and starts cackling too. Everything in the universe is back in order, me and Jake doing what we do best. I'm sweating, and I pull my work polo off. Jake licks his lips, taking in my ripped body. Whatever happened to my legs, arse and stomach, is affecting my arms now too. They're huge. I nearly cum in my pants when Jake fondles my udders.

"They really suit you," he says. And I'm glad that he still thinks I'm sexy, jacked-up body, udders, massive hot dog cock n'all.

After lunch, the sunnies are craving cream, and they all decide to hit the kiosk at the same time. Jake getting the word out to them paid off. Every Tom, Dick and Harry wants a cone of Elf Sherbert, Slut Dribbler, Smash, Dreamscape and the newest and most popular flavour, Pump.

"We're going to be fucking rich!" I say to Jake, taking in the endless queue.

"What shall we buy?" Jake laughs.

I'm scooping up special cream like my life depends on it. Scoop, plop, smile, serve. "I'll buy a time machine, so I can live this crazy summer with you again and again forever."

"You're so fucking cute." Jake pinches my cheek with his

sticky fingers like I'm his baby.

"What will you buy?" I plonk a row of cream cones on the counter.

"Enough Spunk Rush to supply me forever! Actually, I'm already investing. Ryan's building a machine that's going to supply the whole of Blue Shore, but it isn't cheap. That's why I didn't mind paying a ton for the last tub. You have to speculate to accumulate, little bro."

That puts a bit of a damper on my mood. I'm here wishing to be with Jake forever, and all he cares about is securing enough Spunk Rush.

This is the most people we've ever had queuing up. Jake's comment has made me lose focus. I'm making silly little mistakes and getting more and more worked up. I nearly lose my shit when three teenagers spend forever looking at the ice lolly board, chatting about which ones they should buy. They're sunnies, but trying to dress like Blue Shore yocals, and badly.

"Can you hurry up? There's a million people behind you," I say, in an arsey tone.

The girl with a spotty forehead and green braces grimaces like I just slapped her. The Coke ring-pull dangling from her ear wiggles as she moves. I have to admit, it's a nice touch. It might catch on here. "We'll take as long as we want, moo moo man!" she says, and I mentally take back what I thought about her stupid earring. I'd love to rip it out of her head.

Her two boyfriends are clinging on to the girl like she is anchoring them to the beach. "Yeah moooodie man. What's the hurry?" the boy in a puffer jacket and paint-splattered trackies with a face like a pug says. Her other boyfriend snarls.

I pull my polo back on, suddenly self-conscious of my udders. The sunny trio fuss and argue over what to buy for another

couple of minutes as I tap my foot impatiently.

Jake finishes serving the people who were behind the trio, then clicks his fingers in the air, and their attention snaps from the lolly board to Jake's gorgeous face. Little explosions of light burst from Jake's pores so that his mug looks like a fireworks display. "Alright, lovely lads and lady," he sings. Their eyes widen, probably recognising their streaming idol. "Don't mind my friend. His arsehole is as tight as your braces," he winks at the girl. *Try me*, I think. The boyfriends stutter, trying to say something, but instead pink slime bubbles from their gobs.

"Can I recommend these Twisters? Perfectly refreshing on a hot Blue Shore day." Jake pushes the Twisters into their hands, his eyes like mini suns in his orbital sockets, pulling the sunnies into his gravitational lock. "How about a Lilt each too?" He chucks a can to each of them, and they grab them one handed, like robots. Maybe they are. They pay, muttering thanks, then wander off dazed and confused but grinning in bliss.

"Take a break, little bro. You look like you need it," Jake says, staring into my eyes like he's staring into my soul. I wonder what he sees there. Something good beneath the rot of shame and humiliation, I hope. He pushes his sugary fingers into my mouth, playing with my tongue and tonsils. I vomit onto the kiosk floor, then manage a dreamy smile. The way Jake is looking at me so adoringly after finger fucking my gob, is a definite sign that he is as in love with me as I am with him. Or maybe I'm being de lu lu. Jake's flirty and finger-fucky with everyone. Those sunnies were creaming their pants just being in his presence. Jake waves his hand in front of my face. "Hellllloo... Is anyone home? I said, I think you need a break, little bro." He laughs.

"Yeah I...erm...thanks...I do."

Jake passes me a cone of Elf Sherbert.

I sit out the back. Jake is incredible. He's gorgeous and charming and magical all at the same time. If I could bottle up even a tiny bit of his charm, and take it for myself, then I would. Maybe some of it will rub off on me just from hanging out with him. That's what I'm going to focus on now. Staying as close to Jake as I can. I'd crawl under his skin and wear him like a onesie, if I could.

"Cooey," a voice says. I look up. Someone's trundling down the steep dune that rises up behind the kiosk. Right away, I recognise Malaki, the cute as fuck guy I met at Jake's beach party. "How's it going?" he says cheerily in his Scottish accent. He looks fierce today, dressed in fishing-net briefs and dune-stomping platform boots. His tattoos are shimmering. He must be running a glitter mod on them.

"Why are you lurking in the dunes?" I ask when he reaches me. His legs are so long and spindly. He's towering over me.

"I like it up there. I can sunbathe in the nuddy without a thousand people setting up easels to paint me or touch me. When I sprawl on the beach, sometimes, I'm dozing, and get woken up by a tongue somewhere it shouldn't be."

"I know how you feel."

"Yeah, I know you do."

"You've seen One Lad?"

"Nah, or I'd have my dick out already, wouldn't I? I heard about it of course. But I'm not into porno streams. I prefer doing stuff in real life." He's sitting next to me, holding my gaze with his massive black eyes. I wonder if he's one of those secret aliens that walk among us. He has a mesmerising, other-worldly quality about him. "After we met at the party, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

"Really?" I feel bad because I haven't thought about Malaki

once. Then again, I have had quite a lot on my mind lately.

"Yeah, really. I think you're really nice...and beautiful of course."

"I was so high."

"Yeah. We all were. Then Tasmin tried to force One Lad down my throat, and I said I'd rather not watch it. That I wanted to know you for real." Wow. Standing up to Tasmin is no small feat. Malaki has balls. "And everyone's talking about you."

"What do you mean?"

"That you did that girl in. Your Mum's been streaming about it nonstop." I sigh. I told her to give it a fucking rest, but she's like a dog with a bone. "Are you going to eat that?" he says, looking at the melting lime ice cream.

I take a big slurp, and pass it to Malaki. He takes a bite, and I cringe at the sight of his pretty teeth entering the cold ice cream. As he does, his face glitches and a vampire mask appears for a split second.

What the fuck?! It was him on the pier! Malaki is vampire lad.

A curtain of viscera sweeps across my vision, and I lose control of myself. I leap at Malaki, grabbing him by the throat. He lets out a short gasp, but I'm squeezing so hard he can't speak. "I know it was you on the pier last night, vampire lad, dishing up Tasmin's eyes like finger food." I loosen my grip so he can speak.

"I...I...I'm trying to help you."

"I know that you know what's going on. Tell me or I'm going to open you up." With my other hand I fumble around in the sand, my fingers wrapping around a razor clam shell. I'm impressed with myself. When did I become such a psycho? I hold the razor clam shell up, wielding it like it's a zombie knife. Malaki is silently struggling, his little dick sticking up in his

thong. This is turning him on.

"I can't. I told you. You have to figure it..."

I slide the clam across his throat and it splits open like a water balloon. Blood spills from the flapping gash. Fuck. It's going all over me. What's Jake going to think? Ice lolly wrappers surround us. The sunnies litter the beach without a care in the world. Every evening we clean the beach around the kiosk, picking up after their lazy bones. I grab a Feast wrapper, and stuff it into Malaki's wound as he lets out a wet choke. A Calippo wrapper, a Mini Milk wrapper and Fruit Pastille lolly wrapper go in next. I stuff his throat with wrappers until the bleeding stops. I admire my handiwork. Malaki's throat is blossoming with lolly wrapper flowers. He's choking and gasping now, blood flowing out of his mouth. I grab more lolly husks, stuffing them into his gob. Finally, he stops wriggling and breathing, and I drop his lifeless body. I put my fingers in his thong, and when I pull them out, threads of cum glisten between us. I rub my fingers on my lips, tasting Malaki.

Malaki coughs. He pulls the wad of wrappers out of his mouth, dragging strings of thick bile with it. He sits up. "Fuck. That was fun. You're nuts, Zac." He rubs his neck. There's nothing there. No wound. "The way you cut my neck in one fell swoop. Fuckkkk." I narrow my eyes. Malaki pulls down his thong. "Clean me up, will you?"

His cock is really pretty. Like a little jewel, small but perfectly formed. The cum oozing from its tip is an elixir. I bury my head in his hairy crotch, lapping up the juice. As I lick, Malaki babbles. "Imagine if that timeline was real, Zac. You just go around killing people because they piss you off a bit. You'd be world-famous."

I surface, pulling my hand across my salty lips. "What're you on about?"

"The ultra-violence, babes."

"It's fucked up. I keep doing insane shit, then moments later whatever I did is erased. But this time, you were there too. Right? You remember me severing your neck like it was a flower stem."

"Sure do. It felt fucking incredible. I had an inkling this might have happened to you before."

"How come you experienced it with me?" I say, swallowing down a glob of cum that was clinging in my throat.

"You can just call me attuned. I'm switched on to Blue Shore's weirdness." He puts his fingers together making two little circles and hums an Aum. "Nah. My rents are into all this spooky stuff. Ghosts and premonitions and all that. They know Blue Shore's whole story, and I guess that rubbed off on me. You'll see what I mean when you come to my gaff."

"How do you know I'm ever going to come to your house?"

"Just a feeling. Anyway, do you want to know what I think?"

"Sure."

"I think the violent fantasies are Blue Shore showing you who you could be. Imagine if you took control of your own destiny, instead of being just an object for everyone else to fantasise about. What if you were a streamer who fucked people up... permanently...for views?"

"But I don't want to stream, and I don't want views. I'm famous enough already."

"And you like it?"

"I fucking hate it. There was a time when I wanted it. But not like this."

"Then take control of your own story. Oh! Before I forget. Any progress with Tasmin's eyes?"

I sigh. "Seeing through them didn't help at all. Tasmin didn't make a memory of the person killing her, obviously. And I

couldn't find any clues in her memories to what really happened. I did find out she was fucking Tom, but I don't know if she was actually cheating on Jake. Well, I kind of do. I saw her necking him on the beach."

"Oh, she was definitely cheating. She blabbed to me about it all the time."

I knew it! "I want to tell Jake. Maybe if he knows, and breaks up with Tasmin, she won't have any reason to keep clinging to him and Blue Shore. Maybe she will go back to being dead." And then I can have Jake all to myself, I think. Malaki is nodding. "The problem is that even if I let Jake take a peep through Tasmin's eyes, he will see that other girl."

"Grow a brain cell, Zac. All you need is a receipt."

"What do you mean?"

"Take some screenshots or a screen recording."

"And Jake will still see Skeletor over there." My eyes flick to the shrine, hidden from our view by the ice cream kiosk.

"Nah. A receipt is a receipt. Once you've captured it, reality resolves around it. Nothing can alter a receipt. It's basically written in stone."

"I think I'm just going to leave it. I've had enough of all this nonsense."

"No! Zac! Don't do that! This is important. Don't give up. You have to get to the bottom of everything."

"Why does it matter so much to you?"

Malaki sighs. "Tasmin was my friend. She could be a complete bitch sometimes, and she probably deserved what happened to her, but seeing her imposter walking around is too weird. I just want everything to return to the way it should be. Because right now there is a rip in reality, and I'm afraid it's going to split right open, and swallow us all up."

"I don't know. Everyone dying wouldn't be so bad. We're all so fucking fucked up."

He nods. "Yeah, we're fucked. But it's kind of fun, isn't it? I want to play here for a bit longer. We can play with each other." He grabs my hand and licks my palm. Malaki really likes me. Why am I chasing Jake like a loser, when Malaki's hot for me? Maybe Malaki is the one, even though I did just slice his throat open. He is the most beautiful thing I ever saw. His eyes alone give Bambi a run for his money.

"Yeah, we could definitely play with each other some more," I agree. I want to sloosh his little dick around in my mouth again.

"Yes! That's the spirit, babes. Let's try and fix Blue Shore before it takes us all down with it. Thinking about it, forget the jelly receipts. I doubt Jake would even care that Tasmin was getting with Tom. Jake's relationships were always wide open. We've all seen his streams. But I've got a receipt that I know will make Jake see red. Just ask Jake about his mum and their grotto, but do it subtly. Then when the time is right, suck on these. Both of you." He shoves a packet of Tooty Frooties into my hand.

"Sweeties."

"Receipts, and better than the ones in the jelly. Trust me."

I return to the kiosk, dazed and confused. Tasmin is slumped at the hatch, upper body splayed on the counter, her fingers tapping on the wood frantically. She's staring into her bot. "Shushhhh," she whispers, then taps her nails some more. I realise she's live, streaming dumb ASMR content. She clicks her tongue, then purses her lips and whistles. She is so ugly compared to the first time I met her. Her skin looks like cold chicken, and her eyes are dull and frosted over.

I pull out my clamshell-shaped cyberdeck, tugging on the

pulley cord that attaches it to a carabiner on my shorts. I hold the cracked screen up in front of Tasmin, and her stream appears on the LCD. She looks completely different. Beautiful and glowing. The girl on the stream looks exactly like Tasmin did on the first day I met her. The real-life Tasmin is lagging way behind, and the on-stream Tasmin is making more beautiful sounds. I'm witnessing the delay firsthand. Blue Shore is editing Tasmin in front of my eyes. I wonder why I haven't ever noticed streams being ahead of real life before? It's like I'm finally waking up and seeing Blue Shore for what it really is.

Tasmin gives me a side glance, then returns her gaze to her bot. Jake still looks great. He's as handsome as always. He's cooing over Tasmin, adoring her, stroking her hair. Whispering in her ear, nibbling it. It's like he can't see the same walking corpse that I can. The Tasmin I'm seeing is sprawled on the counter like pummelled meat.

"What's that?" Jake says, eyeing the packet of sweets Malaki gave me.

"Just some sweeties. They're my fav."

"Let's have one then," Jake says, twiddling Tasmin's slimy hair between his fingers. A chunk of hair, scalp attached, comes away in Jake's hand, but he doesn't notice, dropping the gross tangle to the ground.

I shove the sweets into my pocket. "Later. I'm saving them."

"Alright, stingy," Jake says, and I feel bad for denying him anything, but Malaki said I'd know when the time is right, and this isn't it.

"Mooooo," Tasmin rasps, "Moooooooo!" The sound coming from between her teeth, her lips not moving.

I grab a Snickers and lob it at Tasmin's head. Fucking bitch.

"Whoaaahhhh," Jake shouts, jumping up. He grabs my wrist

and pins it against the wall. His face is in mine. "What the hell are you doing?"

Tasmin is peeling the Snickers wrapper, inserting the chocolate bar into her gob, making sucking sounds, and I imagine all the likes flooding in. Her head is now propped up with a withered hand, seawater that smells like puke dripping from her earholes and pooling on the counter. She's grinning as she tongues the Snickers.

"Can't you see? Your girlfriend is dead," I pant. Jake's grip loosens.

"So you threw a chocolate bar at her. Zac. Little bro. I think you're losing the plot. Tasmin is dead hot, but she isn't dead, mate. Maybe lay off the lime for a while."

Does Tasmin really look normal to him? I wish things could go back to the way they were. When Tasmin wasn't here, everything was good. Tasmin needs to die and stay fucking dead.

Tasmin is still grinning like her mouth got stuck that way, and I almost throw up at the sight of the tiny maggots wriggling between her chocolate-covered teeth. It has the opposite effect on Jake. He's on top of her, licking the rancid gunk out of her ear, comforting her. Jake pulls his tongue out of his dead girlfriend's ear and starts working on her mouth. "Is Zac there?" Ryan's voice says at the hatch. Can't he see me? I look up, realising that I'm slumped on the floor, shaking like a weirdo.

"He's down there, mate," Jake says, spitting maggots. I clamber to my feet, wiping the sweat from my brow.

Ryan's grinning. "It's so good to see you again," he says. "You're looking great." The last time he saw me was this morning, but okay. I hold out my arms. They are covered in black patches and coarse hair. I turn them over in the sunlight.

This is a new development. At least the scratches have faded away.

"I'm covered in hair."

"I guess you could do with a shave, but I think it suits you. Are you ready for our second date? I brought a picnic." He holds up a picnic basket. Something inside is making a strange noise. Kind of sounds like screaming.

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"This is nice," Ryan says.

"Yeah," I nod. "So nice." So, so fucking nice. This is the un-nicest thing ever. Sitting with the lad who ruined my life, pretending to be into it so I can get a cure to the curse he cast on me.

"I bought some of my own creations for us to try." He's fluttering his eyelids sweetly as he unloads the 'creations' from the picnic basket, placing each thing onto its own paper plate. I poke a pile of pink balls. Ryan plucks one up and inserts the whole thing into his gob, biting down with a squish. A stream of pink gack shoots out of his nose.

He holds up something that could be a tail. It's long and hairy anyway, but the creature attached to it looks like a tumour with a mouth. It must have been this thing that was screaming. On cue, it lets out a demented wail. "Eating this is like getting a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. The thing is so deformed it lives in constant fear. Did you ever taste fear, Zac?"

I shake my head. Guess there's a first time for everything. I take a bite, expecting a mouthful of blood and viscera, but instead sweetness floods my tongue. Now Ryan's holding out a spike, a slug-like thing impaled on it. "Open up," he says. I open my mouth, and he plops the slug onto my tongue. "Bite then!" I bite it in half, blood that tastes like liquorice running

down my throat.

"Yum!" I say, bored of this picnic already.

"You look so pretty when you're eating, Zac."

"Thanks," I say, slug juice dripping from my chin.

He leans in for a kiss. I'm going to have to do this if I want the cure. At first I thought one of these weird foods might contain it, but now Ryan's unpacked the basket, I can see the syringe glowing like a radioactive rod in the picnic basket. It's so close. I open my mouth, and let him kiss me. Fondle me. Rub my cock, pretty unsexily, like it's his pet. Cum still fountains out of me after less than a minute of stroking, seasoning the rest of our unholy picnic. Ryan plucks up a cum-soaked piece of cake. Feeds me a nibble, stuffs the rest down himself.

Finally, he's holding up the syringe.

I feel numb as he pushes the needle into my arm. I wonder why the needle has to be as girthy as my little finger, then remember that Ryan is a fucking sicko, masochist, shitbag.

Then relief.

Fucking finally.

Mango

I'm desperate to know if the cure worked, but today the beach is empty because it's pissing it down again. No one is coming to the hatch, cock or fanny in hand or not. Jake is listening to the surf report. The weather's shit, but apparently the surf is going to be mega later today. Jake got here earlier than me this morning, excited about the surf. He's watching the ocean and tickling Sid.

"Do you ever surf, little bro?" Jake says.

"When I was a kid, but I stopped after a few years."

"Why?"

"Couldn't be arsed, I suppose."

"Damn, I bet you look so good in the ocean. A proper dolphin."

"More like a blobfish," I laugh. "I was never any good."

"So show me. Let's go in together sometime. Hey! How about this afternoon, if the beach stays dead. We can lock up early and go for a surf."

"K," I say, noncommittally, secretly hoping the beach gets busier. Jake is a pro on a board. He used to stream his sessions all the time, carving up the waves and doing crazy tricks. I don't want to make an idiot of myself. I can stand on a board and ride the wave, but that's basically it. Jake scrapes out the last cone of Spunk Rush. "What're you going to do when that wears off?"

"I'll be alright, little bro. I'm not an addict or anything. If I get the glitches, I'll turn on my stream again. That'll give me something to do. Anyway, sources say that there'll be some fresh rush stock in town soon."

"That's great!" I say. I'm afraid of Jake going back to his real self. I'm in love with streamer Jake. It's me who's the addict, hooked on a version of Jake that isn't even real. The thought of him turning on his stream and sharing our world turns my stomach. Then what am I meant to do? Sit with rough, fugly Jake, constantly holding a screen in front of my face so I can pretend that my Jake, streamer Jake, is still here.

We sit in silence for too long. I'm thinking about what Malaki said about Jake's mum and their grotto, whatever that means. I can't help my curiosity. I have to know what Malaki was talking about. "My mum is a complete nutter. She still insists I shot up that girl on the beach," I say.

Jake sighs. "Rents. More trouble than they're worth."

"Your mum wasn't so bad though. She sounded cool. Didn't you say she got you into this kind of music?" I'm nodding my head in time with the tune that's trickling from the speakers.

"Yeah, I mean she was pretty rad for a rent. Just wish I got longer with her, you know?"

"Yeah. So fucking shit. I'm sorry, man. Did Roodie break her heart? You must really hate him."

Jake makes a noise like he's choking on his tongue. "Roodie! He's not my real dad. Hardly got my looks from him, did I?! Nah, little bro. Roodie adopted me after what happened."

"I had no idea. You never talked about that on your stream."

"Why would I? That's private shit. Roodie was in love with my mum. Since they were kids actually. That's why he took me in."

I don't say anything, waiting for him to continue. He just

smiles and shrugs, so I say, "Did you know your real dad?"

I think I see a tear forming in the corner of his eye, but it vanishes as soon as it appears. "It's kind of weird."

"Mate," I say. The word feels awkward on my tongue. "This is Blue Shore. Nothing is too weird."

Jake chuckles. "Mum always said he was the most handsome man in town. The coolest guy ever. He'd ride around on this zippy rocket of a motorbike, and all the yocal girls were crazy about him, but he only had eyes for one person."

"Your mum."

"Right. They had this whole whirlwind romance, and mum got up the duff with me. Dad was a free spirit. Completely wild, but somehow, mum tied him down. They were going to get married and everything. But, well, he died before I was born. Crashed his rocket into a wall, and that was that."

"Shit."

"But that's not the out-there part. I know it's probably bullshit, my mum was too high or something, but she always told this story about how Max, my dad, was only part human. That he was half merman, and that when he died, his soul went back into the sea."

I think he's joking. I almost laugh, then swallow it down. Jake's deadly serious. I look at him, trying to see the merboy genetics in his face. His skin is too perfect, almost rubbery like a dolphin's, and there's a bluish-pinkish tinge to him that I never really noticed before. His teeth too. They are so tiny and sharp. No, they were never like that before. It must be the Spunk Rush that Jake slurped messing with my perception. Jake is fucking with me.

"There's a special place we'd go to talk to his ghost. I still go there sometimes. It was our little grotto."

Bam. There's the word Malaki mentioned. Grotto.

"I'd love to see it," I say.

Jake's face brightens. "I'd love to take you there. Actually, I've been meaning to. It's just everything has been so hectic."

"Maybe I'm just not special enough." I realise straight away how fucking sad and needy that sounded, and I wish I could take it back.

"Don't be a knob. You're my little bro. Of course I want to take you there. Come on." He grabs my hand and drags me out of the kiosk.

***

Jake pulls me across the beach, the wind blasting us and the rain driving into us like Mother Nature is trying to stop us from going to Jake's grotto. I wonder where it even is. He's pulling me towards the cliffs on the far side of the beach. I imagine some secret entrance to an underground cave, or a whirlpool that swirls us into an underwater dimension where the merpeople live. I glance back at the ice cream kiosk, now just a distant yellow square. I swear there is a figure standing on top of the sand dune behind the kiosk, pitch black against the blue sky, but I blink and they're gone.

We clamber up rocks, and jump over rock pools, heading towards the cliffs that rise endlessly into the sky at the end of the beach. We reach the rock face, and Jake grips onto a crag and heaves himself onto a ledge so thin, I didn't realise it was there until he stood up on it. He lowers his hand and grabs mine and hauls me up onto the ledge. "We have to follow the ledge up and around the cliff. Careful, it's dead slippery." For some reason I end up leading the way. The ocean is wild, the water churning and bashing against the cliffs. I'm finding it hard not to piss myself as we edge around the rock face because we are

going higher with every step, and the water beneath us is getting deeper and darker. The jagged rocks 20 feet below look like a T-Rex ripped out its teeth and used them to set a booby trap.

My leading hand loses grip, throwing me off balance, and I'm sure I'm heading udder-first into the ocean when Jake grabs me and shoves me back. He laughs his head off. "Shut up. It's not that funny. I was going to pull you in with me anyway. We'd drown together." I twist my head to take a look at what caused the rock to give way beneath my fingertips. We've reached a dark opening in the rock face.

"Come on. That's the way in," Jake says.

I edge further along, lift myself up into the cave entrance and start crawling into the blackness.

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My voice echoes when I ask, "How much further?" It feels like we've been crawling through the dark forever.

"We're already there, little bro."

I listen to the sound of my own breath as Jake's footsteps echo around me. Jake clicks a switch somewhere and the darkness illuminates with fairy lights. A gasp escapes my lips. "It's beautiful." I expected the grotto to be as wet and horrible as the tunnel, nothing but crevices and slimy surfaces, but this place is magical. There are carpets on the floor, pillows on ledges, and lights strung everywhere so that the whole place glows. Holoframes are leant on rock shelves, projecting moving holograms of Jake's mum, dad and Jake into the space. In one hologram, Jake's dad pinches his wife's bum playfully, and little Jake is grinning like he just got his wish granted by Blue Shore's wishing tree.

"Your parents are...were stunning," I whisper because it feels like this place deserves reverence. There's something holy about

it. Like we are inside a giant shrine.

"Yeah," Jake says, suddenly solemn. This is a heavy place to be. I get it. My mum's a nightmare, but I can't imagine losing her. I lost my dad though. What happened to my him?Another memory of before Ryan Made's stream that I've lost. I guess he just pissed off. I don't think he's dead or anything. He was just a wanker. "Come over here."

I go over to where Jake is standing. He pulls a carpet away. Underneath it there is a trapdoor made of wooden planks, crudely nailed together. There's a merman carved into the wood, surrounded by barnacles. Jake heaves the trapdoor open, revealing a deep hole and the sound of the swelling ocean far below. Jake's kneeling down. Leaning over the abyss. "This is where me and mum used to talk to him. I still come here, sometimes talking and listening for hours." I look into the void with Jake, but there's really nothing to see. It's too dark. "Hey Max," Jake says. He turns his ear to the hole. I do the same. I don't hear Jake's dad reply.

I put my arm over Jake's shoulder. Give him a squeeze. "Does he ever talk back?"

"Sometimes I think I hear him."

I leave him there, staring into the depths, and I walk around the cavern, taking it all in. The holograms, the twinkling lights, the love that hums through the space. It's so cosy and wholesome. Like all of Jake and his parents' memories found a place to live, frozen in time. Why do I have a feeling that I'm about to fuck all that up? I rip the Tooty Frooties packet open and place an orange one in my mouth. "Hey, Jake." I toss him the pack and it breaks his staring spell.

"So you finally decided to stop being such a stinge?" he jokes.

"Just thought you could do with a little sweetening," I shoot

back.

"Thanks, little bro," he says.

"Course."

I brace myself for the shit to hit the fan. The Tooty Frootie's flavour spreads through my body. Mango coloured light radiating out from my stomach. The same thing is happening to Jake, a bubble of lemon surrounding him. Our lights expand to fill the whole cave. The grotto becomes misty and pixelated like all of the atoms have become granules of sugar, and time has thickened to syrup, flowing all around us. "What's happening?" Jake says.

We're moving backwards through the cavern. Not the us in the present. We're still rooted firmly in the place. It's the versions of us who existed in the past rewinding through time. The versions of us who are made of sugar and syrup. Past me is back at the hatch, looking down into the ocean. I'm walking backwards with Jake, he turns off the fairy lights.

Darkness.

Then an eerie silence that stretches for what feels like forever.

Until...Shuffling sounds. Snickering. A girl's voice reaches us through the tunnel, followed by a more distant, deeper voice. They are crawling in here in single file just like me and Jake did, forced to by the tight space. I recognise the voices. I'm sure that Jake does too.

The lights turn on. Tasmin is standing in the grotto.

"Gorgelicious!? What're you doing here?" Jake says, startled, his brain not yet computing that this Tasmin is made of particles of sugar.

She doesn't reply. I understand what's going on. This is a memory. This is Malaki's receipt written in sweeties. Tasmin must have spilled the whole memory to Malaki, and he turned it

into a packet of Tooty Frooties.

"Come on you, Chunky Chad," Tasmin says to the black tunnel. "Can't your big arse fit through or something?"

Tom squeezes into the cavern. The sarong that covers the entrance falls back into place behind him, the yin-yang design on it like two eyes watching us.

Tasmin sits on a ledge, knocking a holoframe of Jake's mum and dad over, so that it crashes onto the cave floor. Jake flinches. In the here and now, the holoframe is still on the ground, the images of Jake's parents distorted, like their forms are spilling across the ground. Tasmin didn't even bother to put it back. Tasmin opens her legs wide. "This is Jakey's special place," Tasmin giggles. "He brought me here and told me all about his dear mummy and daddy."

"What a loser," Tom grumbles. "All these holos of his dead rents."

"It's kind of hot though, isn't it? To fuck in here."

"Dead hot." Tom laughs in his deep, dumb voice. "What did you say their names were?"

"Max and Dina, big boy."

"Then come here and climb on, Dina."

"Fuck me with your big mermaid cock, daddy."

"Vrrrrooommmm," Tom shouts, making the sound of a motorbike revving as Tasmin climbs onto his cock.

***

Back in the kiosk, I notice that mum's backpack, which is basically mine now, is unzipped, and I definitely didn't leave it that way. I check the inside. Zebby is curled up next to the Tupperware box, snoring. Something isn't right. I expect to hear sloshing. The jelly normally dances around in the water whenever it senses me being close, but this time there's no

reaction to my presence.

I tilt the Tupperware so I can get a good look inside. The box is empty, except for cloudy water and a few coils of jellyfish shit. Someone must have snuck in and stole the jelly. "Zebby," I say, and the bot immediately wakes up, peering up at me with psychotic eyes. "Who took the jelly?" Zebby does the equivalent of a human shrug, moving its wings up and down as if saying, how the fuck am I supposed to know? What a shit guard moth Zebby is. She'll bite me for no reason, but when someone opens up my backpack and robs me, she doesn't do a thing. I realise that the thief took Tasmin's eyes too. The jam jar that contains them is nowhere to be seen.

Why would anyone want the jelly bot and Tasmin's eyes, anyway? It doesn't matter to me now. I don't need them anymore. It didn't help me to figure out what really happened, so I already decided to dump them in the ocean. Someone nicking them has saved me a job. Jake knows what a horrible twat Tasmin is, so I don't need the jelly to prove it. Still, it's strange that someone else wants it. Maybe a murder mystery streamer knew I was in possession of the best souvenirs/clues from a murder victim and wanted them for themselves.

Jake's in a complete state. This isn't what I wanted. I just needed him to know the truth, but I didn't know how fucked up the truth was, and that he'd take it this badly. The Jake I know and love is fading away, the shock of Tasmin's sacrilege speeding up his decline. I've spent enough time with Jake and watching Jake that I can tell when something is majorly off. The cheeky glimmer has gone from his eyes. His tan is flaking away. His beautiful, bone-white teeth are turning grey. Without Spunk Rush, he's going to roll further and further downhill. He will start streaming again soon so that he can become himself again,

and our ice cream kiosk world will shatter. I don't want that to happen. It's me and him forever. I don't want him sharing our universe with anyone else.

The weather's even shittier than earlier, the rain pouring down in thick sheets. Only surfers and die-hard yocals out walking their creatures remain on the beach. The surfers enter and exit the ferocious sea, walking up and down the beach clutching their boards in the wind.

"Alright, Jake?"

Jake doesn't respond to the kid standing at the hatch, his blond, spiky hair barely even reaching the counter. "He just had some shitty news," I say, leaning over so I can look the kid in his wide, sky-blue eyes. "What can I get for you?"

"Lime and an extra flake, bud," the kid says.

Seems a bit young, but he obviously knows Jake and is one of his regs. I scoop up some Elf Sherbert, and pass the little shit the cone.

When he's gone, I make us both a cone of Elf Sherbert. Maybe it will help take our minds off of things. "Here, Jake." I try to sound upbeat. "We've still got plenty of lime." But I know what he really wants. What he needs.

I take a lick. Jake makes a strange gurgling sound. He lashes out, dropping his own cone and smacking mine out of my hand.

"What the fuck, Jake? I haven't done anything to you. You should be taking this out on your bitch of a girlfriend. Not me."

"Well, she's not here, is she?" he barks, literally. His face morphs into a dog's, teeth bared, snapping and growling at me.

"Suppose I'm the next best thing, am I?" I shout. We're face to face, my spittle flying into his dribbling muzzle.

He grabs my chin. Pulls my mouth to his. Pushes his dog tongue into my gob. This is it. It's really happening. I'm kissing

Jake. But he's a fucking dog. His doggy breath fills my nostrils as I push my tongue into his long fissure-filled mouth. I can't do this. I pull back, nearly throwing up. I throw up, then wipe the neon-green bile from my chin. Jake's predatory eyes are fixed on something over my shoulder. His ears are pricked. He barks like a maniac, mouth frothing, drool flying from his teeth.

My head twists a full 180 degrees, stretching like my neck is made of elastic. My body follows, twanging into place. A surfer is coming out of the ocean, making his way up the beach. Tom is unmistakable. Seven foot of muscle squeezed into a wetsuit so that he looks like a walrus wearing a seal's skin. His muscles are saggy like a daddy who let himself go. His face is more weather-worn than before. He looks like he aged ten years. Tom passes the kiosk, 300 metres away, heading towards the car park.

"I'm surprised he isn't coming here, begging for a Rush fix," I say, my hand on Jake's shoulder. It's as tense as a rock. His face has returned to normal. Now that his mug is flat and human, I want to kiss him again, slip my fingers into his underwear, stroke his willy and tell him everything's going to be alright, but the moment has passed. Tasmin fucking up my chances yet again. I wonder where she is now. She's done a vanishing act. Maybe she's finally dead and staying dead.

"He did. He came here first thing this morning. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Couldn't believe we were all out." Jake's eyes are still fixed on Tom. "If I'd have known what I know now, I'd have finished him there and then."

"Finished him . You mean..."

He grabs his car keys from the hook he always hangs them on, punches the door open and pushes out, into the driving rain.

Cranberry

"Wait," I shout. I'm trailing after Jake. He's striding through the rain. Tom is a blur in the distance. Jake's net vest is clinging to his back. I grab it and tug. "What are you going to do?"

He spins around and pushes me hard. I trip over my feet and land on my arse in the soaking sand. "Get lost," he says through bared teeth. "Stay out of this, little bro."

He stomps away from me.

I catch up. "What are you going to do?" I say again.

"I'm going to kill that fucker."

We've almost reached Tom. The meathead is crossing the point where seaweed, scattered pearls, and driftwood carved into sculptures mark the high-tide line. My brain goes into overdrive. Should I piss off back to the kiosk or help Jake? This is the last thing I need. Another dead body. If Ryan's cure worked, then I am finally free of fame. I can be a nobody again, and I want it to stay that way.

Tom is passing the surf life-saving shack. Blue Shore's lifeguards are hanging out in front of the shack. They're popular streamers, and their streams always go mega viral. The drownings, octopus attacks, and boat accidents that happen pretty much every day make stellar content. They stream the odd life save too, but they get more views from tragedies than

from heroic rescues.

My heart sinks into my bowels and drops out of my arsehole. Two of the lifeguards have their binoculars fixated on me, their big banana boat cocks out, stroking them vigorously. The female lifeguard has got all of her fingers shoved in her rubber-ring pussy.

So much for Ryan's cure. It should have put an end to this shit. What if wanking over me is just a habit for the lifeguards? They do this every day when I pass. Maybe they can't stop themselves, even if the cure did take away my curse.

There's a group of sunnies in front of the life-saving shack too, getting ready for a surf lesson, only their legs pulled into their wetsuits. Their naked bodies are goose-pimpled in the cold rain. I recognise one of the lifeguard's devices, a flying fish flapping its wings in front of the sunnies. I can guess that the bot is blasting One Lad, One Masterpiece into their eyeballs because the dad sunny is pushing a finger into his arsehole, his other hand around his porky shaft. Mum's twiddling her nipples, and their burly adult sons, twin brothers with ugly, flat noses like they ran into a wall, are rhythmically pumping each other's cocks. Teaching sunnies to surf and using them for content is the lifeguards' side job. Nothing gets views like a drowning sunny does. But showing them One Lad, One Masterpiece! What the actual fuck!?

Fuck my life. Ryan tricked me. What did he inject me with then? And as if in answer, the skin on my forearm bubbles and more hairs burst through the surface, the black patches that now cover most of my pasty body darken. Whatever transformation I'm going through is accelerating, my body changing before my eyes. I don't have time to worry about my morphing body, or to shout at the sunnies and the lifeguards to stop. I gave up on

trying to stop masturbating strangers ages ago anyway. Nobody ever listens. If anything it makes them beat off more furiously like me losing my shit is a turn on. I'm already famous, and it looks like that's not going to change. Maybe Ryan was right. Malaki said the same thing too. I'd rather be a famous killer than a fucking wank bank, and it means supporting Jake too. I'd do anything for him. I'm going to help him do Tom in.

We reach the car park. Jake heads towards his car. On the other side of the car park, Tom climbs into his. I don't know shit about cars, apart from that like dogs, cars resemble their owners. That's definitely the case with Tom and Jake's. Tom's is a big-arsed, white jeep, the roof and doors bulging like it took too many steroids, with wheels that are too big for the chassis. Jake's car is a cliché with an engine: a red sporty racer, branded with little devil emojis, and painted with flames down each side. "Oi, dickhead!" Jake shouts, but Tom doesn't hear him over the beating rain. Tom slams his door shut, starts up the engine and reverses out of his space. A miniature human face stares out at us from the passenger-side window, pressed up against the steamy glass, its eyes glowing red. Tom's bot.

Jake throws his devilmobile's door open and jumps in. I open the door and fall into the passenger side.

***

We drive in the opposite direction from Blue Shore, the road winding around steep cliffs that drop a hundred feet to the ocean below. I can't remember where these roads lead. I can't even remember the name of the closest town to Blue Shore. I must have known once. Now, when I think about it, the only place that I can be sure exists is Blue Shore itself. I'm fucking clueless where the sunnies even come from.

Jake's engine is purring. He's driving too fast, and the car

likes it. I'm scared shitless, but loving this at the same time. This is the version of Jake's world that I know from his streams: dangerous and adrenaline fueled. He's never killed anyone on stream before though, and I will get to experience that first time with him. I stare at Jake as he drives. His knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel so hard. Not having Spunk Rush for a few hours has taken its toll on him. The flesh on Jake's cheeks is melting like ice cream.

Tom's hulking car is still way ahead of us, the rain so heavy that our wipers can't clear it fast enough, the view ahead disappearing then reappearing with every swoosh of the wipers. Tom's car slows to a stop at a traffic light, and we pull up behind it. The light changes, and we take off again, nose to tail. Tom turns right, heading into the maze of country backroads that surround Blue Shore. I imagine Tom living in a cabin somewhere in the countryside, existing like a savage, surrounded by brambles, gobbling blackberries and the deer whose necks he broke. Tom is a monster. Maybe he's even unkillable. What the fuck are we thinking?

We follow the winding roads, trailing Tom. Jake doesn't say a word. He's fixated on Tom's car. The road gets darker as the fields and hedgerows thicken into forest, day becoming night as the trees close in. Jake turns on the devilmobile's lights, two red beams illuminating a river of blood. Tom's car slows to take a sharp corner, and Jake accelerates. We smash into the back of Tom's car.

We've stopped dead. Smoke is rising from our crumpled bonnet. The windscreen is shattered. I think my head caused it. It's fucking caning, and when I put my hand to my forehead, there's a deep, wet gash carved across it. I pull a shard of glass out of my face. Drop the bloody thing into my lap. "Are you

okay?" I ask Jake, my voice muffled and strange.

Jake nods. His nose looks broken, snot and blood trickling from his mangled nostrils. The view out of the passenger window is bruised blue. Rain streams down the glass in rivulets, wriggling around like little sperms. They join up with one another and divide, forming letters. Making a word.

S C A L P E R

Bang. Something impacts the driver-side window. A meaty hand. Tom's hand. "What the fuck were you thinking?" he shouts. Jake reaches over my lap, opens the glove box, and pulls out something wrapped in an old Pokémon T-shirt. Faded, cracked Pikachu is grinning up at me. Tom hammers on the window again. "Open up, man. I can see you in there. Jake! What're you playing at? You fucked my car."

Jake calmly unwraps the T-shirt. Goosebumps erupt all over my body. It's the gun. Jake points it at the glass and winds down the window.

Tom's face to face with the gun. He doesn't look scared though. Maybe he thinks Jake is having a laugh.

"Get back," Jake shouts, jabbing the gun and the rock candy spear loaded in its barrel, at Tom.

"Alright, mate. Whatever you say."

Jake shoves the car door open. I try to open the passenger side door but it slams into a tree, and I can't open it more than and inch, so I crawl out behind Jake, climbing over the handbrake and shattered glass. Jake is holding the gun at arm's length, his hand shaking from the weight and adrenaline. Tom doesn't look concerned. He's puffing out his flabby bare chest, muscle hanging from his torso. "Put your hands up!" Jake jabs the rock candy into Tom's chest, nicking him, and blood bubbles from the small wound. The heavy rain has finally stopped, but the sky

is still spitting, a mist of water blowing through the trees.

"You gone crazy or what, bud?" Tom raises his clenched fists above his head, clumsily stepping backwards. Maybe now Tom realises that Jake means business.

"Nope, dickhead. I'm thinking pretty clearly."

"You reckon you're such a big man with that gun. But if you didn't have it, I'd pound you into the ground."

Jake advances on Tom, jabbing at him, and Tom stumbles back. Jake cackles. He's turned into a maniac. I get it though. If I saw my girlfriend and this meathead shagging and spraying fountains of cum all over my dead mum and dad's sacred grotto, I'd lose the plot too. "But I do have it, so you better shut your fucking gob and do what I say. Now fucking move. We're going for a little walk in the woods."

"Delightful," Tom mutters. He turns and walks into the forest, Jake and the gun breathing down his neck. I follow along behind like a good murder accomplice.

***

The ground is muddy under my bare feet. I hate the squidgy feeling between my toes, and wish I'd thrown on my jelly slides before storming after Jake. It's hard going. There's no clear path, so we're pushing through dense undergrowth. Tom's like a bulldozer at the front, smashing through the vegetation. The occasional branch thwacks me in the face, Jake not bothering to stop them from pinging back after he pushes through them. I'm about to tell him to be fucking careful when Jake bellows, "STOP."

Tom's entered a clearing, the ground carpeted in dead, rotting bluebells. Tom stops at the clearing's centre. "A fairy circle," I whisper. The fairies chatter and giggle all around us, but they aren't anywhere to be seen. Wild fairies often stay hidden, unlike

the pushy sluts at Tinkle Balls. Fairies are mischievous, some say evil beings. They're going to get a real kick out of watching us kill Tom, if that's how this goes. I have a sinking feeling that it's us the fairies are going to be tittering about when Tom knocks our heads together. Tom's Action Man bot is swinging from branch to branch like a monkey, circling us. It must have followed us here from the car.

"Destroy it, Jake!" I say, sounding more like a kid's cartoon super-villain than I intended. At the same time, I realise how vulnerable we are. Sid and Zebby are back at the kiosk. If shit hits the fan, then we're on our own, apart from the fairies, and they're more likely to join in with a bloodbath than help.

Jake points the gun at Tom's bot, but it's moving too fast. There's no way he can get a clean shot. The fairies giggle. Tom's bot cackles. "Call daddy, Duncan," Tom shouts at his bot. Fuck. Shit. Tom's father's face appears as a giant hologram floating at the edge of the clearing.

"Hey Tom! What's going on?" Tom's dad says cheerily. He looks similar to Tom, except for the lines on his face are deeper, his hair is grey instead of bleached-coral white, and there's a sparkle of intelligence in his eyes that Tom lacks in his.

Tom opens his arms. "What does it look like, daddy?"

"Looks like you got yourself into another pile of shit." The cheeriness evaporates from his voice. "What on Earth do you expect me to do? Gosh Tommy, you were always the numbskull kid. All brawn and no brain. Well, your muscles can't get you out of everything. You're going to have to learn the hard way."

Tom turns tomato-red. Maybe 'daddy' is the only one who actually makes Tom feel smaller. "Fuck. FUCK," Tom screams. He's breathing heavily, getting really worked up.

"It's okay, Tommy. Count your breaths," his dad says.

"Maybe try talking to them. They look like reasonable fellows."

Jake doesn't look reasonable at all. Tom would have better luck reasoning with a rattlesnake.

"One, two, three, four, five..." Tom whispers. He regains some composure, then says, "So. Okay. Why are you doing this, Jake? Whatever it is, I'm sure we can work it out. Come to some kind of agreement."

Jake waves the gun. "How about going back in time and not fucking my girlfriend all over my sacred, fucking grotto. How are we going to come to an agreement about that?"

"You did what!" Tom's dad says, his holographic face strobing in anger.

Tom ignores his dad's reaction. "Is that what she told you?" He jabs a muscly finger. "Tasmin is a lying bitch. She'd say anything for a bit of attention."

"She didn't tell me anything. I got receipts." Tom's face drops. A receipt is a receipt, there's no point arguing with that. Tom knows that he's been caught fair and square.

Tom's dad is shaking his giant head. "You're an idiot, son, and I'm very disappointed in you. The best I can do is send Huntress, my squirrel hunting bot, your way. She's armed with a low-powered machine gun. It could easily finish off these two. I'm going to need your exact location."

"Duncan, send locati..."

"Hang up, or I shoot you right now," Jake shouts.

"DO IT THEN YOU WANKER," Tom screams.

"Fucking hang up," I say like I'm Jake's parrot.

"Why have you brought your little gaybie, cow-lad along anyway? Just for fun?" Tom taunts.

"Actually he's my bezzie mate," Jake shouts.

I grin proudly.

"You just want to get in his pants like every other sicko in this town. The lengths I had to go to not to watch his stomach-churning stream. It's bloody everywhere."

What the fuck? Now Jake knows about One Lad, One Masterpiece. It's okay. He doesn't know the name of the stream. But all he'd have to do is search for my name, and my sweating face and hard knob would pop up.

"What's your location, bud," Tom's dad's head says. And Jake stupidly points the gun at the holographic face.

"What strea..." Tom launches at Jake, darting across the clearing faster than I thought he'd ever be able to move. Jake's taken completely by surprise. Before Jake has time to aim and shoot, Tom's head slams into his stomach. The gun drops out of Jake's hand. Duncan cackles, eyes glowing in his ruggedly handsome face. He's streaming this.

I dive, sliding on my stomach through the rotting vegetation. I grab the gun. Tom tosses Jake to the side. I flinch, then want to scream when Jake's head slams against a rock. Blood pooling on mulch. I'm behind Tom, holding the gun out with both arms. "You fuckface. You killed Jake." Tom turns. Even without Spunk Rush he is a Goliath. My hands are shaking from anger and also because the gun is so fucking heavy even with my newly jacked arms.

The wound on my head is throbbing, and my face is soaked with blood, sheets of the stuff pouring over my chest. I feel pretty dizzy actually. Fuck I want to lie down. I can't though. I have to kill Tom. I'll do it for Jake. When he comes round, I will be his hero. That is if he's not dead. He looks dead. He's not making any sounds. All I can hear is rain drumming on leaves, insects creeping through the dirt, and Tom's shallow breaths.

I pull the trigger and the gun lurches upwards.

Fuck me. The rock candy missile takes Tom's scalp off, exposing his skull beneath. A boy fairy giggles in front of my face, and I swat it out the way. The fairy made me miss. The little fucker pushed the gun up as I fired. The fairy flies behind me and tugs on my hair, jerking my head back. "piss off, would you?" I slap the fairy sideways, and it flutters off into the undergrowth. The shot has spooked the shit out of Tom. For the first time he looks properly afraid, his eyes bulging, jaw slack, screaming coming from his throat like there's a wounded animal trapped inside of him.

"Oh shit, son," Tom's dad's floating mug says. "Looks like they really are going to do you in! What's your location, bud? I'll machine-gun them for you."

Tom screams in response. How's Tom going to tell daddy his location? I don't even have a clue where we are. Tom's head is bleeding like mad. I'm going to have to finish him off. If I do this, I'm going to be more famous than ever. At least the fame will be for doing something cool. Everyone hates Tom. Killing him is like slaying the dragon that's been marauding through town for centuries. Duncan's eyes are still blazing red. This is going out to Blue Shore live. I'm committed now. I have to put on a show. I wonder if Tom opted in to the delay. And if he did, how is Blue Shore telling this story? The temptation to find out is overwhelming. I pull out my cyberdeck and hold the screen in front of my face. My blood turns to ice cream. The screen shows Tom on top of me, the rock candy missile in his hand, poised to drive it down into my eyeball. My face is black and blue. Tom must have given me a knuckle sandwich. There's no way. I'm not going to let that happen. Blue Shore can't write my reality. Anyway, I'm jacked as fuck now. Tom couldn't overpower me even if he tried. And besides, I have the gun. I drop the screen.

Tom's furious scalped head is rushing towards me.

I pull the trigger. Nothing happens because I didn't reload the gun. Fucking thing. What was I meant to shove in the barrel? A stick? Actually that could have worked. Too late now. The rock candy that took off Tom's scalp is gripped in his hammy fist. Tom smashes into me, his bloody skull impacting my stomach, knocking all the air from my chest. I'm on the ground. Tom is on top of me. The first punch feels like being hit with a lump of wet clay. They keep coming. Bash, bash, bash. My consciousness is slipping away. Tom's going to kill me. He raises the rock candy. What does rock candy slicing through eyeball feel like? Guess I'm about to find out. Tom's straddling me. I twist my head and bite the arm he's using to support his body. I latch on and don't let go, sinking my teeth into his flesh. He screams, but he's still on top of me. He's going to skewer me at any moment.

There's a loud crack, and Tom's arm rips from my mouth. He falls forwards on top of me. The rock candy plunges into the ground behind me. Thank fuck. I flounder for a second, struggling to get free from Tom's huge body. I manage to wriggle out from under him. Jake is standing over us, holding a rock in his bloody fist. I get to my feet, my own head throbbing.

"Thanks, Jake. You saved my skin. We're going to have the worst bloody headaches tomorrow."

Tom lets out a guttural moan. He's clambered to his hands and knees, and he's slowly crawling towards the clearing's edge, bits of brain falling from his skull and crawling across the clearing like pink slugs.

"Put the poor boy out of his misery." Tom's dad blubbers. I forgot he was here.

"You have to finish him off," I say. Jake's already on it, grabbing the rock candy and shoving it into the gun's barrel.

He can't get it in because his whole body is shaking. There's no way he'll be able to aim the gun, and I'm not going to try again. I don't trust the fairies. They will fuck up my shot again. As if to confirm my suspicion, high-pitched cackles erupt from the trees all around us. "Just hammer him on the head again."

Tom is making the most horrible noises, pretty much how I'd expect a guinea pig being squashed in a vice to sound: gurgles, little squeals and splutters.

"I...I can't," Jake whispers. "I thought I could kill him, but I don't have it in me. I only smacked him one to save you. But seeing him this...this...pathetic. I can't do it."

"It's okay." I rub his arm. Maybe this is how it's meant to be. I have to strike the final blow. Seal my place in the murder annals. Zac, murderer of meathead dragons. I pry the rock from Jake's fingers. It's hefty in my hand. Should easily do the job, especially as Tom is already halfway there. I approach Tom from behind. He looks like a giant baby, crawling around, leaking piss, and shit, and brains. I pull my arm back and swing the rock into Tom's temple. Crack. He collapses onto his side. I slam the rock into the side of his head again and again. I'm in a frenzy. It feels good. Like I'm getting something out of my system.

Cranberry blood spills all over the bluebells.

Lavender

Tom's stream is a sensation. Everything went super viral last night. Since I walked in my front door covered in blood, it's been pretty much non-stop . The news of Tom's death is everywhere, even the shitting stars aligned so that a new constellation appeared in the night sky, pronouncing TOM STRONGARM'S SICKENING SLAYING.

I'm staring into my breakfast cereal, the soggy wheat alphabet letters forming the same headline as the stars did last night. I stir the words up, then take a mouthful. Every stream I beamed through the night and this morning was gossiping about what happened. Mum is over the moon. She hasn't stopped streaming since I got home: doing Q&As, recounting the killing as if it was her battering Tom with a rock, and baking a special cranberry-infused murder cake.

I'm about to escape Mum and go to the kiosk for the day, when there's a rapping on the front door. Mum opens the door and squeals. Three novelty officers are standing in the porch, their huge, elegant stallions forming a snowy backdrop behind them. "Zacarias Acorn," the lead officer says in a husky voice.

"Yours truly," I say confidently, the breakfast spoon still in one hand. After I've signed some paperwork on an ancient and important-looking tablet, the two officers flanking the lead

officer decorate me with a medal, the ribbon woven out of their own beard hair, and hand me a certificate. The certificate says, 'MOST NOVEL KILLING OF THE WEEK.' I was hoping for killing of the month at least, but there are other famous murderers in Blue Shore. Susan Slays probably won killing of the month. She streams murders from her home dungeon. Last week she egg-white-waterboarded a victim before drowning them in a tub of chili sauce. I only know because everyone on the beach was gobbing on about it. I've been too busy to watch streams lately, and I was never into snuff anyway.

My head is still hurting from cracking open Jake's windscreen yesterday, but apart from that I feel great. Fame has never felt so good. Being a wank bank was totally different. That version of fame was toxic and humiliating. I remember the last time the novelty officers visited. Ten old men performing bukkake all over my face as I lay on the living room floor, whilst mum made cocktails for the officers in the kitchen. Afterwards she produced a whole series of streams on 'how to clean away cum stains'. This is different. This is adulation without orgasm, and so far I love it.

Every car I pass on the way to work toots their horn at me, and an old lady on a mobility donkey stops me and asks for my signature. The famous streamers all have their own way of signing things. Jake uses his gob, Fungus Foot Fuck signs with his toes, and Cosmos Pyro burns his name into things. I'm not a streamer, but I am famous for being on a murder stream. I think of my signature on the spot. I bite the donkey on its hairy hide as hard as I can so that my teeth leave an impression. The donkey bucks, throwing the old woman off. She climbs to her knees on the pavement, looking at me adoringly. "Thanks love. You're the craziest fucker ever!" She holds out her arm, and I

bite that too. The donkey tasted of sweat and piss, but she tastes nice, like lavender.

Maybe I should become a streamer. I reckon I could live this lifestyle forever. I'd have to kill more people though because I'm not like Jake. I'm not a naturally interesting person. I could be a natural killer. Killing Tom was a piece of piss. They say that one barrier to becoming a killer is feeling guilt and remorse, but I'm not experiencing either of those emotions at all.

Blue Shore is strangely quiet, and the few people I pass keep their cocks and fannies firmly in their undies. Killing Tom was better than any 'cure'.

I'm finally free.

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Jake's already in the kiosk. I do a double take. Sid is sitting on the counter, his eyes glowing. Jake's live again. "Hey!" I say, suddenly self-conscious, knowing that all of Jake's viewers will be seeing me too. How is Blue Shore going to edit me? I wonder what Jake's viewers are seeing.

"Little bro!" Jake says. God he looks like rubbish. Way worse than yesterday. His eyes are pale and watery, and his muscles have wasted away to nothing. He looks like skin and bones. He stinks too. Jake's scent used to turn me on, but now all I can smell is his bad breath, unwashed pits, and something else that I can't quite identify. There's no way this is how Jake was before he started streaming or tried Spunk Rush. I know it wasn't. I saw all the holograms of him in the grotto. He was shit-hot when he was younger. Blue Shore edits him to be beautiful, but it must slowly erode the real him too. Spunk Rush takes that process to the extreme. I must have it bad because I still want Jake even in the state he is in. If Jake continues streaming or using Spunk Rush, one day he'll just be a blob, and I'll probably still want to

stick my dick in him. It's really fucked up.

Jake turns to Sid. "So get your bubble butts down to Blue Shore Bay pronto. For one day only your favourite flavours come with a special sauce." Doesn't Jake care that his Fan Bams flocking here will see the real him, just like I can? It will ruin his image. "I'm live with The Scalper."

"The who?" I say.

Jake laughs. "He doesn't even know what everyone's calling him yet! So humble! So come and get scalped, if you dare! And don't forget your specs," Jake holds up a pair of Specksters, the glasses hardcore streamers wear so they can sit and rot, watching streams without ever needing to command a bot.

Jake grins at his fans, and I notice how manky his teeth are. Yellow and rotten from munching too many sweeties and fizzy drinks. Jake lives off them. "See you in a jiffy," Jake sings one of his many catchphrases. He accompanies it with a click of his fingers, ending the stream. Sid's eyes turn black, and Jake slumps forwards on the stool.

"Are you okay, mate?"

"Fucking tired, little bro. I didn't sleep a wink last night."

"I slept like a baby!" I feel fresh and rejuvenated. Killing really suits me. It doesn't look so good on Jake though. He's just not cut out for this. I'm thrilled that I'm finally good at something other than being hot. "Where's Tasmin?"

"At home. She's really sick. She sent me a message, asking if I'd go round. I told her to go and fuck herself with an open bottle of anthrax."

I'm so happy. Maybe death is finally catching up with Tasmin. Now, I have Jake all to myself. Then the annoying voice in my head says, *yeah, you and his thousands of Fan Bams.* "Why are you streaming again?" I blurt.

"I'm not going 24/7 or anything. I just want to feel more like myself. And people want to see us, Zac, after what we did. The whole town is talking about us. Did you hear? Blue Shore is going to be flooded with coconut cream soon. Well, something even better than coconut cream. Ryan's releasing Spunk Rush 2.0. He wants to take it mainstream, and I'm going to help him."

"Spunk Rush 2.0," I ponder.

"Yeah, but he's renaming it or something. I'm not sure. He's going to make an announcement about it today. He's around here somewhere. It's all thanks to you, helping me move cream. We earned a ton, and I invested my percentage in Ryan Made. Ryan used our profits to get his new machine up and running."

Ryan Made and his fucking machines, and what is he on about, his percentage? Where's mine then? I haven't received a single gold filling, feather, or even a marble for helping Jake. But maybe Jake is thinking of us. He's investing in our future. He wants to go back to being himself so that we can live happily ever after.

"Great," I say. I'm happy that Ryan is here. He will make a wonderful murder victim. Not only did he start all this, but he gave me some bullshit cure that did fuck all but fuck me up more. Ryan's got it coming. I better wait a while though. Once Ryan's machine is producing enough Spunk Rush for Jake, then I will strike.

"Since when am I The Scalper anyway? I've been beaming streams all morning and I didn't hear anyone call me that."

Jake laughs. "Because I invented it, little bro. I said it for the first time like an hour ago. Now everyone is calling you that. You like it?"

"Suppose it does have a horrible ring to it."

The kiosk shutter is down, but there's a lot of chatter outside,

getting louder and louder. Jake's invite spread quickly. It sounds like there's a ton of people waiting to see us. They start screaming and chanting a mix of "Scalper" and "Jake" before we've even opened up. Jake is breathing deeply, staring ahead like he's psyching himself up. His hand is shaking as he wipes away the sweat beading on his worry-wrinkled brow. I guess streaming to fans you can't see and actually standing in front of a crowd is a different kettle of fish. Jake used to be able to handle it though. He happily charmed whole mobs of cream-hungry sunnies. The lack of Spunk Rush isn't just affecting his looks. Even his personality has degraded. He pats me on the back. "Ready, little bro? Time to shine." I nod, and Jake clicks his fingers, going live. He heaves open the shutter.

I suck in a breath. The crowd is huge. A lot of them are wearing cut-up plastic bags as caps on their heads, covered in whatever red substance they could find. I reckon some of them used jam or maybe it's ketchup. Must be something sweet because wasps are orbiting their heads. All of them are sporting Specksters. Jake told everyone to wear them, and they obeyed like the obsessed Fan Bams they are. I get it now. All the gathered people are seeing filtered streamer Jake. And filtered me, whatever that looks like. None of them are viewing us directly. They are seeing perfect, immaculate Jake. Not the shabby version of him that's really here. The crowds are cheering and clapping even though we haven't said a word yet.

"We don't have time to sign you all, but you can have our DNA for free on a cone. Our gob is the special sauce. How does that sound?" The cheering peters out. It's like everything is out of sync. Jake's lining ice creams up on the counter, leaning over each one, spitting onto them one after the other. He nods to me, and I know he wants me to do the same. I'm already

doing it. Leaning over, coughing up as much phlegm as I can and letting a little bit dribble out of my mouth onto each cone. "Come and get them!" Jake's words echo in my ears, but I am already stretched over the counter, passing ice creams to the grabbing hands below. Their payments pile on the counter, and Jake rakes the spinning tops, toe nail clippings, buttons, shells and a thousand other things into the till. Time is all fucked up, and I haven't even had a lick of Pump today. This must be the streamer delay in action. Blue Shore is glitching hard because everyone is seeing us a minute in the future through their specs, but that reality is banging heads with the real world, causing a complete meltdown.

But I'm the only one in the real world. Everybody else is inside Jake's stream. Maybe I just need to join them. I throw on the Specksters Jake left on the counter, and whisper, "Join Jake." The whole world changes. I'm not just watching Jake's stream. I am inside of it. The world's colours are more saturated, the sand and sea are sparkling like they never sparkled before, and the people are radiating light and sexiness. Even my body feels different. Like being in Jake's stream has made me into a sleeker version of myself. Like an old banger becoming a souped-up sports car. "What the fuck?"

Jake looks at me and laughs. "Welcome to my world, little bro." Jake is radiant. He's handing out ice creams to his adoring fans, grinning widely, his teeth gleaming. Everyone in the Fan Bam horde looks more gorgeous too, like they are being absorbed into Jake's world of glamour and badness. They're my fans now too, I realise. I help Jake to hand out the cones.

The crowd swells, pushing towards the kiosk like they are one body. The sea of bloody heads and shaved heads imitating Jake's buzz cut, resembles a strange, bumpy terrain. There are cocks

out everywhere. Walking to work gave me the wrong idea. The couple of yocals I ran into must have never seen One Lad, One Masterpiece, and Blue Shore was quiet because they were all flocking to Blue Shore Bay. Jake was probably promoting the event all morning. What if instead of replacing my wank bank fame with murderer fame, being a famous killer has just helped to spread One Lad, One Masterpiece even further? Then my plan completely backfired. Strangely, I feel okay about it. Everything is okay now that I'm wrapped up in Jake's intoxicating light. Being in his stream feels like being a part of him. A meteorite could strike and obliterate Blue Shore, and I'd be happy as long as my ashes end up floating in the void with Jake's.

As I pass out the ice cream, I catch sight of myself reflected in a Fan Bam's Specksters. I look incredible. I'm a twinky cow, human but bovine at the same time: sexy droopy ears, wide and dew-filled eyes with lashes to the gods, and my mouth has become a sleek muzzle, my nose black and juicy. I look down at my body. The muscles that were wrong-looking and bulging before have settled and lengthened. My udders are pert, leaking sparkling milk, and my dick is perfect: long and hairy with a fat, pink head.

My fans are a beautiful bunch too, stroking and teasing their cocks and clits. Some are already spurting cum onto the sand. I get into the swing of things. Handing out more cones, smiling and laughing as people spray sparkling fountains of cum onto us and the counter. Jake licks some jizz from his lips. He's loving this. He grins at me. "Why is everyone so fucking horny today?"

"Dunno," I lie. It's me. It's One Lad, One Masterpiece. For the first time ever I'm proud of what me and Ryan made.

"Speech, speech, speech," the crowd chants.

Jake clears his throat. The whole beach is blazing like every-

thing is made of light. This is what watching Jake felt like. No matter what he did on stream, no matter how bad, the viewer always felt amazing inside. Watching Jake was like a fuzzy shot of dopamine straight to the brain. Now we're all basking in it.

"Thanks for coming, Fan Bams!" Jake cries.

"Jake! Jake! Jake!" they chant.

"As well as an ice cream-fest, I have a special announcement to make." Cheers erupt from the crowd. "Something is coming that will make everyone feel good all of the time. You will all be able to live your best lives, the world your clay to shape."

Oohs and aahs from the crowd. Sunnies are joining the horde of Fan Bams now, wandering sun-dazed towards the crowd like moths drawn to a flame. That's when I spot Ryan. He's walking around the edges of the crowd handing out Specksters so that all the sunnies can join in.

A memory hits me like a sledgehammer. There was a time that I was crazy for Ryan. I'd do anything for him. I did do anything for him. Those memories of the time before One Lad, One Masterpiece are glitchy and incomplete, but clearer now. I met Ryan on the work placement stream. He was looking for someone to become his studio assistant. I jumped at the chance. I didn't have an interview or anything. He took one look at me, and I got the job. I remember I wanted him like I want Jake now. I loved working in his studio. I loved him. Ryan was my whole world, for like a week. Then that world ended and this one began. I didn't get kicked off the placement streams. I stopped logging on because I got a job. So how did my whole past get rewritten in my head?

"Tell us how," a woman shouts, interrupting my daydream.

I want to scream, *I don't know how. Ryan Made did it.* But she's not talking about my shady past. She wants to know how she's

going to live her best life. I'm already living mine. I'm here with Jake. Fuck the past.

"All will become clear soon," Jake says.

Everyone on the beach is gathered around the kiosk, masturbating bodies as far as the eye can see. I'm wondering how all of the sunnies have seen One Lad, One Masterpiece, when I notice a notification in the corner of my eye. "Open," I whisper.

One Lad, One Masterpiece fills my vision. Everyone here already watched it, or is watching it on their Specksters right now. I watch it. I enjoy it, getting so bricked up that the tip of my dick is tickling my chest. I should be mad. Some part of me somewhere is livid, but it's being suffocated by the gorgeousness of Jake's stream. I'm too ecstatic to care. All I know is that all of these people are here for us. Me and Jake. This is our world just like I always wanted it to be.

Then Ryan steps into the kiosk.

"Lush," Ryan shouts. "Soon you will all have a taste of Lush, the newest cream flavour. But not just ice cream. Lush is going to be in everything! It's my best creation yet. Pure desire in an edible form. Having everything you ever wanted will set you all free."

"We want it now," a beautiful, lanky bloke shouts.

"What does it taste like?" a girl cries.

"Soon! But it isn't ready yet. There's one ingredient missing, but I will have it soon!"

"But what does it bloody taste like?" the girls calls out again.

"What else? It tastes like cream. Pure cream straight from the source. Milky, thick, fresh cream, with a shit ton of sugar, of course," Ryan sings.

Everyone cheers and moans. "Scalper, Scalper, Scalper," they all cry. They want me to speak. Can I do this? Can I talk to all

these people? Of course I can. Dripping in Jake's aura, I can do anything.

"Thanks for coming, everyone," I giggle, realising the pun as I say the words. The scent of cum and sugar in the air is intoxicating. Now that I've started speaking, my confidence is growing. I remember on the work placement streams, how I was too shy to even say a word in front of thousands of other jobseekers. Now here I am, my hard cock dribbling, udders lactating, the hottest guys, Jake and Ryan, flanking me, addressing the whole beach like I am some kind of king. I feel invincible. The kiosk is way higher than it ever was before too. It's as if we are floating above the crowd. "Moooo," I cry. "I slayed the meathead dragon! Fucking mooooo." I waggle my sword of a cock back and forth, jabbing it at the crowd.

Everybody screams, jerking off more furiously. Jake and Ryan pose beside me, both of them godlike. They are teasing my udders, milk seeping and dripping onto the counter.

"Lush, Lush, Lush," Ryan chants.

Jake takes up the chant too.

The whole beach is chanting. "Lush, Lush, Lush, Lush."

The crowd starts making out, sunnies and yocals snogging and groping each other. The sand becomes a moving carpet of bodies. "Bloody hell," Jake says. "I'm diving in." And he does, leaping from the ice cream shack into the pulsating mass. I lose track of him in the throng of writhing naked bodies.

I turn to Ryan. I should be angry with him. The anger is there somewhere within me, but it's sunken deep down where I can't reach it. I was going to kill him. I still will. But not now. It isn't the right moment at all. "What was the cure?" is all I can manage. "What did you give me?"

"Something to speed things up. Your body was strong,

fighting it. I had to make sure everything went smoothly. It is going smoothly now. Just look at you." He pulls me close and kisses me intensely. He drags me out of the kiosk and down into the crowd. He enters the crowd, and I quickly lose sight of him too. I want to find Jake, but he's become just another moving body in the mass. I'm kissing, and touching, and pushing, and groaning. Fingers and fists and dicks enter me, blossoming and releasing inside of me. My body dissolves into everyone else's. Tongues and lips all over me. The mass throbs, movements radiating from the middle to the edges. I'm somewhere among them, a node of sexual energy feeding the massive fucking machine.

The whole of Blue Shore Bay is wailing and crying in ecstasy. An orgasmic boom shakes the sky. The heavens open. Cum and spit and sweat rain down on the beach. Some of the heads sprouting from the moving mass look up, mouths open, tongues catching and swallowing pure bliss. Salty-sweet liquid slides into one of my mouths, and I swallow it hungrily. I have become the mass. We are one thing. Seeing everybody, experiencing everything. We move like liquid mercury over the sand. The body fluids from the sky and from us glisten beautifully as the sun drops through the sky. Deep inside the moving body, my cock, the cock that belongs to The Scalper, has become a prize. Every mouth that can get into position is licking and sucking it. Riding it. Every hole that can press into it is pressing. I cum and I cum. We cum and we cum. The form itself is changing. Becoming stronger. Younger. More beautiful. Like my seed is the mass's elixir.

Something rips from my face. I still have a face. Where is it? Somewhere in the middle of the throng, staring up at the sky, body fluid flowing over my cheeks. Someone must have ripped

the Specksters off. I'm not part of the mass anymore. I am my own body again, with fingers, and hooves, and udders, and all my teeth in one place. I manage to stand. I feel fucking terrible.

I vomit, waves of cum splattering over the bodies that press into me. Without the Specksters, reality is fucked. Instead of a beautiful mass of moving, orgasmic parts, all I see is flesh, sweat, sand, cum, shit, and piss. A sheen of filth covering everything. All of the bodies are grotesque, their faces contorted in agony and ecstasy. Flabby sunnies. Old, ugly yocals. Acne-covered chavs. And people who wouldn't be out of place in Blue Shore's freak show. I recognise formerly hot people too. A lifeguard whose face melts sunny hearts every day, and a group of models who were making content on the beach yesterday. Now they look demented and contorted, soundlessly screaming as snot pours from their noses.

The bodies tear at each other, biting and groping. The noise of swallowing and sucking is overwhelming. It is like a scene from Hell. I search the spasming crowd for Jake. He's not far from me, fucking some old woman, her cane abandoned underfoot, his lips pulled into a grimace, yellow teeth grinding. I look at him and for a second he looks right back, then he closes his eyes. I spot Ryan being spit-roasted by two old farmers famous in Blue Shore for their sheep-shearing content. The sun is dropping below the horizon. How long was I in the orgy? It seemed like no time at all, but the whole day has passed. I shove my way out of the horde of writhing bodies. My mouth tastes of unwashed cock and granny fanny. I spew again, then watch in horror as a woman, her hair matted and tangled with jizz, laps up the vomit puddle, looking up at me as she does.

I back away, tripping over my own feet. Children stumble around the periphery of the orgy. One wanders past me, their

orange armbands half-deflated, sand-filled snot crusting on their top lip, tears streaming over their ruddy cheeks as they cry out for, "mummy. Muuuummmmyyyy!"

I turn and I run. My whole body hurts. My jaw aches, and my arsehole feels like it's been ripped open. I head into the dunes, not knowing where I'm going to go. I just want to be as far away from the fucking crowd as I can be. In Jake's glow everything felt so perfect, but with the specs off, I could see the orgy for what it really was. Absolute insanity. I hate Ryan so much. Showing everyone One Lad, One Masterpiece. I don't see any way to escape that kind of fame unless I die. But has Jake seen it? He must have. He's the only person I really care about. Even if he is ugly and haggard. I still want to kiss him. To feel him inside me. My sphincter pulses in anticipation, and the cum of however many people fucked my hole, drips down my thigh. I'm disgusted with myself. With Ryan. With the whole of fucking Blue Shore.

Grass

I head through the dunes in the direction of Blue Shore, switching between running and walking, my only aim to get as far away from the beach as possible. The dunes have turned into the Sahara. They're so vast that what used to be a short journey on foot is taking hours. Either the dunes have expanded, or I'm confused and running around in circles.

I crest a dune. On the other side, there's a field filled with cows. The field is standing between me and Blue Shore, the town's bright lights glowing in the distance. I swear this field wasn't here before, but Blue Shore has a fucked-up way of springing surprises on me.

I approach the field's gate. I'm on all fours, the ground soft beneath my hooves. The herd of Friesian cows inside the field moo, and trot towards the metal gate. They seem to recognise me, snorting and grunting, their big heads raising up to greet me.

I'm happy to see them. Like I'm rejoining with a family I never realised that I had. But I sense a nervous energy coming from them as I get closer. Some of the cows back off. Others stamp their hooves. "I'm one of you," I say, and they retreat even further because what fucking cow speaks English? Also, I'm not a cow. What am I even thinking? This isn't my family.

They don't know me. They will probably kill me if I go in there with them. Cows kill more people in Blue Shore every year than funfair rides do. Cows are fucking ferocious. I'll walk around the field instead. I'm not going to risk my neck in their muddy, shitty field.

I stand up on two feet, and start to walk around the field's perimeter. It's awkward, standing up like this, my udders hanging from my stomach, so fat with milk that I'd do anything to have some calves latch on and suck some of the juice out of me. What the fuck? Think normal thoughts, Zac, I tell myself as I traipse through the grass, stomping on the tiny, liberty cap mushrooms that are growing everywhere, wafts of psychedelic spores drifting from them. The cows watch me for a while. I know because I glance over my shoulder at them. Then slowly, tentatively, they begin to follow me. I stop and let them catch up. One of the cows is more confident than the others, coming right up to the edge of the field and sticking its head over the fence. It bites me on the arm, hard.

"Cunt!" I shout and back away, but the cow lunges again. It bites my arm and it's not letting go. Pain rips through my body. I pull and thrash but the cow isn't going to give up. Its jaw is so strong. It reverses, pulling me against the fence, then dragging me into the field. The cow is biting so hard that it's crushing the bones in my arm. Finally, it releases me. I'm on my back in the field, looking up at the rising stars. A circle of cow heads surround me. A different cow is nudging me with its big, wet nose. At least this one is being friendly. I clamber to my hooves, thank the friendly cow, and a massive moo comes out of my gob. The other cows are eyeing me suspiciously. I look like them, but don't look like them at the same time. My muscles are back to bulging in all the wrong places. My udders are bigger than theirs.

My cock...Well, they don't have cocks. These are all milk cows. I can't see my head, but it feels uncomfortable to be inside of it. It's like my human head is trapped inside a cavern full of gristle and slime, teeth erupting like tumours from my horrible jaw.

The friendly cow leads me over to a trough. It's empty. The cow lowers its muzzle into it, and I do the same. Neon-green liquid sloshes in, until it fills the whole thing. All the cows come to guzzle from the trough, and I join them, burying my mouth and nose in the scummy liquid.

We spend the rest of the evening grazing the field, chewing on grass.

As I chew and moo, all of my human thoughts evaporate.

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I wake up to the rising sun. I listen to the soil: a moist, mulchy, fungi sound with occasional bursts as fresh grass shoots through the earth. Fresh food. But there's still so much to polish off in the field. It's comforting to know that the grass keeps growing. That I can keep munching all day long. All of us are eating, our chunky heads down. Tearing and chewing. A bird squawks. Some of us look up. Most of us don't. Us. I'm part of this herd now. They really are family. All the girls eating grass together, day in and day out. I'm one of the cows who looks up. I try to see where the squawking came from, but my eyes aren't that good. I can't see much in front of me really. A blur where there's sky, a blur where the fence is. Closer there are more cows. Beneath me there is grass. Precious, delicious grass. Sometimes the squawking bird lands on one of the other cows. Then I can see it. But not today. Today it is staying far away. My jaw keeps on chewing. Chewing and chewing.

The cows become solemn because the wind changes direction, and the cries of baby cows reach out to us from some distant

place. The friendly cow tells me in a few moos that the babies were taken away when they were born. Mooing and crying, the babies and the mummies. Not knowing why they can't be with each other.

When the sun sets, we all lie down together. It feels nice. Warm bodies pressed against each other. I whisper to the cow closest to me. The one I remember because of her strong teeth. The teeth that pressed so hard into an arm that I once had. That I don't have anymore. Now I only have legs. Strong, sturdy legs. I dream of walking on two legs, and touching things with fingers. Pushing them into holes that are warm and smell nice.

In the morning a human sloshes more liquid in the trough for us to eat. The human's face is familiar, but I can't quite place it.

We eat more grass. The young girl cows watch me as I eat. They have never been fucked by a bull before, and they eye my swinging dick. I understand. I am the only boy cow and these girls are horny. They seem confused too because my udders are huge and juicy. But they understand my cock and what it can do. They back up towards me, and I fuck them one after the other, moooaning in pleasure.

Life goes on like this for many days, then one morning, the human who fills the trough comes to open the gate. I follow the other cows instinctively, already knowing where we are heading. Today we will be milked. This is what I was made for. What we were all made for. We trundle in single file down a muddy lane until we reach a gigantic, silver shed. Each of the cows backs into a stall, and I get horny just watching them. The human seems pleased with me, patting my arse, then attaching suckers to the other cows' teats.

I am the last one to be hooked up. My stall and machine look different from the rest. It reminds me of the UFOs that

sometimes hover over the field at night. Last night one of them sucked a cow up in its light beam. Everybody hopes that will happen to them. They want to be up there in the twinkly stars, instead of down in the mud eating grass. "There, there, Zac," the human says, patting me again. "You're doing great." He connects my udders and my cock to the strange machine. Hundreds of little red lights watch me from the darkness surrounding the milking stalls. A chain hoists my tail up, and something thick and hard pushes against my arsehole. I cry out in pain. "Relax, Zac."

I relax and let the hard thing go in and out of me. I shudder in pleasure, and the milk and jizz starts flowing from my body.

"Good boy," the human says. "Such a good boy."

Babes

Zebby buzzes. Rising from behind some gorse. I look behind me. The herd of cows are gathered at the fence, all mooing at the same time.

"What the fuck do you want?" I shout.

I swear they are laughing at me. Calling me a cum cow in fucking cow-speak. It's like One Lad, One Masterpiece all over again, but now I'm being humiliated by cows as well as people. I didn't even know Zebby was following me. Maybe she's not such a useless grump. She must be livid though. Having to wait for me for days, while I was busy being a cow.

"What's the date today, Zebby?" I ask out loud. Zebby laser beams the date onto the ground. What the fuck? It's still the day of the orgy. My udders are raw, my knob is rawer, and my arsehole is in an even worse condition than it was after the beach gang bang. Zebby starts counting down, announcing an incoming message. Malaki's head appears in front of me.

"Zac, babes! I saw it all: the beach orgy and the fly on the cow soap opera. Did you know a little fly bot was streaming that cow stuff live? That was some crazy shit. Both streams went mega viral. You shagging those cows got millions of views. You're really famous now. If you need some respite from all the adulation, pop over to my place. Muma's hosting a party tonight,

so I'll be hiding from it in my room as usual. Come over." His tongue traces across his top teeth, then his head vanishes. His address pings into my notes. Woah. He lives in a mansion on Blue Shore Boob, a hill that overlooks the bay. It's where all the town's richies live. Jake lives up there somewhere with Roodie. Maybe he and Malaki are neighbours.

Going to Malaki's is actually a great idea. I don't think that I can face my mum at the moment. She fawns over her '*famous little darling'* every moment I'm there. I check in on her stream. Holy fuck. She's waddling around in a neon-orange PVC catsuit, serving tea and sardine cookies to the crowd that have gathered outside the house. I wonder who doxed me. Probably mum herself. She loves the attention. That's decided then. I can't go home. Maybe Malaki's gaff is the only place where I can get some peace and quiet.

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I press a button on a post next to an imposing wrought-iron gate. The garden on the other side of the gate is huge, sprawling up the hill towards a distant house. Two eyes open on either side of the gate, and the digital eyeballs rotate to look at me. "Welcome to The Darkness," a set of rubber lips declares. The lips are fixed to the gate's centre, but the voice is coming from a speaker somewhere above me. From a tree maybe. The Darkness. Weird house name. Malaki's parents obviously like a bit of drama. I remember Malaki telling me how they are into spooky shit. The name definitely works with that vibe.

"Hi," I say. "Is Malaki in?"

There's a loud buzz, but the gate doesn't open. Instead, the lips whisper. "You have to enter through me, shushhhh. It's a secret." The mouth opens wide.

Weird, but ok. I grab onto the lower lip, which isn't easy

because it's coated in lip gloss that stinks of strawberries, and pull myself up. I tumble through the mouth into the garden on the other side. I stand up and wipe the sheets of gob from my skin. The leftover spit adds a sheen to the filth already caking my naked body.

Bushes lit with coloured floodlights line the driveway. Each bush is shaped into a different type of ghost or demon. At least, that's what I think they are. One topiary bush is clutching its decapitated head. Another is wearing long chains that curl around the plinth the ghost is standing on. A bogeyman looms over a sundial, its long arms and claws outstretched. I pass three shrubs shaped like hellhounds, the shadows of their snouts distorted and elongated on the driveway so that they look like crocodile's jaws.

The house looks very modern, every part of it rounded and smooth. It resembles a giant pebble. As I get closer, I can see into the living room through a set of large, bulging windows. The figures inside are distorted through the thick glass. They are standing around a wooden table. The walls are covered in digital panels, displaying bare stone walls, and electric candles glow in sconces, their fake flames licking the gloom. The house's interior looks like a pretend gothic mansion, what with the fake walls and leccy candles. The figures are wearing long, flowing fabrics and strange headdresses made from plastic spoons, plush toys, bot parts, and other random shit piled on their noggins like techno crowns. They're holding hands and swaying side to side. A plate of jelly occupies the middle of the table. Or is it...No, it couldn't be. Tasmin's jellyfish? SANDRA? I tear myself away from the bizarre scene and approach the front door.

I slam the chunky claw knocker against the door, and a hollow

sound echoes through the house. I've only waited a second when the door swings open, revealing a gaunt-looking woman on the other side. Her deep brown eyes twinkle, and she's naked beneath the cobweb dress she's wearing. It's so ethereal that it might be made of real cobwebs. "Darling!" she says. "Do come in. So nice to have Malaki's friend over to visit. We've heard so much about you."

Heard or seen? I think, but her fingers stay away from her crotch, so at least she's never watched One Lad, One Masterpiece. I've gone viral three times since then though. Everybody in Blue Shore must have seen my face. I can't stop gawping at the foyer. It's like a haunted house but turned up to 100 degrees of madness: demon sigils painted in blood on the walls, mirrors that aren't reflecting the room but what looks like alternative dimensions, and a cabinet full of the creepiest dolls I've ever seen.

"We're having a little party. You and Malaki should join us. What could be nicer than a shindig with the dead?"

"A séance?"

"We like to call it a quantum manifestation, but you can call it a séance if you want. Malaki said there's someone you'd like to talk to."

"What? No. I don't fuck with ghosts."

"But they might like to fuck with you."

I don't know what to say to that, so I just mutter, "Thanks. But I'm alright. I'm just here to see Malaki."

"Of course, darling. He's waiting for you upstairs." I turn away, eager to escape the weird vibe as quickly as I can.

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I reach the top of the ornate staircase and walk along the landing. There are so many rooms. I pass gothic door after

gothic door, before I come to one with the word 'MALAKI' written in a gold, fancy font on a black plaque. I knock.

"Come in," Malaki's voice hollers from inside.

The door creaks open without me even touching it. I almost laugh because this whole place is such a naff cliché. Malaki's room is a mixture of vampire's lair and cursed seaside sideshow: stripy, candy-cane walls, an old arcade slot machine flashing in a corner, fishing netting sagging from the ceiling, and a chunky four-poster bed at the room's centre. Ominously, Punch and Judy stare at me from an oil painting on the wall. It's a realistic portrait of the horrible couple like the artist imagined what they would look like if they came to life. Punch is holding a wooden bat, ready to beat the fuck out of Judy, and an evil-looking crocodile lurks in the background.

"Holy shit! You're a right state!" Malaki says. He's lying on the four-poster bed, wearing a black jockstrap, his bum mooning the canopy. The massive bed is made up with black sheets and covers, topped with old fishing netting and shells. Malaki's nose ring and lip ring glint in the flickering candle flames. He's wearing lipstick the colour of blood too, and the whites of his eyes are blazing. He looks like an ancient Hindu goddess. That one who wears her enemies' severed heads as a necklace.

"It's been a strange day," I say.

"You're not kidding! It looks like you fought off a horde of zombies on the way here."

"More like a horde of cows!"

"You didn't do much fighting though. You sure showed those cows a good time. Come and sit down." He pats the bed next to him.

Sitting on the bed feels like falling into a cloud. It's so bloody

soft.

"If you weren't so beaten up and tired around the eyes, I'd say you look incredible," Malaki says. "So beautiful and bovine." I'm completely naked. My skin is as white as the teacup on Malaki's bedside table, and the black islands on my skin look like little patches of space. I'm covered in scratches and bruises from the orgy. It's funny, I didn't feel any pain whilst we were all doing it. Now, the scratches sting, the bruises throb, my arsehole aches, and my cock feels like it's been licked raw.

Malaki sits up on the bed. "Here. Let me nurse you, babes." He rushes into another room. A black roll-top bathtub and matching sink are visible through the open door. Malaki returns carrying a silver bowl filled with water. The iodine mixed into it hits the back of my throat. Did he pour a whole bottle of the stuff in there? He soaks a hanky in the rusty-iron-coloured water and starts patting my wounds. He's being so tender that I want to burst into tears. No one has touched me like this for...well, forever.

"So how's it all going, Zac?"

"I don't know. It's strange. I'm kind of confused, I guess."

"Can't you see it yet, babes? You're becoming a product. Products don't need to understand. They just need to be."

"What do you mean?" I don't understand at all.

"It still hasn't clicked, has it? Blue Shore is turning you into its lifeblood. Literally." He mops some blood from my forehead, rinses the cloth in the bowl. The water turns crimson. "You know, they are launching Lush tomorrow on the beach. I'm going to go along for the show. You'll be there, I guess."

"Course. I'll be working in the kiosk with Jake."

"You're really in love with him, aren't you? I can see the way your big, black eyes light up when you say his name. Those long

eyelashes of yours are really gorgeous, by the way."

"Yeah, I guess I am in love with him." It's the first time I've said it out loud, and it feels right. "And thanks, about my eyelashes. I'm trying to get used to this new body, but it keeps changing."

"Yeah, it will settle down. Transformations are never easy. It's a shame. About Jake, I mean. Cos, well, I think we really have something too."

"Yeah, we do." I reach out and touch his cheek. His skin is so soft.

Chanting drifts up to the room from downstairs. "Your parents are pretty freaky?"

"Yeah. But I'm used to it. To Mum and Dad, calling random entities is like us calling up our bezzie. Just something they do every day."

"That's fucking weird."

"Weird! It's insane. You don't have to tell me. Imagine living with a bunch of fucking ghosts."

"You're serious."

"Yeah, they hang around here doing horrible shit. You wouldn't believe it. It's like living in a hell some days. Lucky I'm into death and torture or it would be a complete nightmare."

"What do you mean about me being a product?" The word keeps drifting through my mind. Product. He must mean everyone getting off on me.

"Look, Zac. If you can't figure it out for yourself, then I can't help you. But just remember. Blue Shore needs you willing. You're not a streamer so Blue Shore can't edit you like it does everyone else. You decide the ending."

I sit with what he's saying for a moment. I'm the product. I already know that. Everyone wants me. Everyone is consuming

me. So what? Ryan's cure didn't work. There's nothing I can do about it.

"Rub that into my arsehole, will you?" Malaki says. He lies on his front and sticks his pretty, exposed bum in the air. I follow Malaki's gaze to a tub of something clear and greasy on the bedside table.

"Sure," I say, not actually in the mood for anything sexual, but this is my life now. It will always be. I've accepted it as my normal. I grease up two fingers and tease Malaki's hole until it relaxes and opens up wide enough for me to slip my fingers in.

He moans as I push them in and out, and even after cumming so many times in the orgy, my giant cow cock still gets hard.

"It's so nice you came over," Malaki says between gasps.

"Yeah, it's nice to spend some more time with you."

Something barges through the door without opening it, phasing through the thick wood like it is a hologram. My eyes open so wide you could land a UFO on my eyeballs. Ghosts! "What's wrong? Why have you stopped? Don't ever stop," Malaki moans. I resume pushing my fingers in and out of Malaki as the ghosts float towards the bed. Malaki squeals and a damp patch spreads beneath his hips. I lick my fingers as the ghosts close in on us. Malaki twists on the bed.

"You're early!" Malaki says. "Couldn't you have waited for us to finish properly?"

"Time is an illusion," Tasmin sings.

Malaki tuts. "Ghosts are always saying stupid shit like that. Don't pay them any attention, babes."

"Tasmin," I whisper. But it's not just Tasmin. She's riding the ghost of meathead Tom like he's her horse. Tom's head is caved in, an eyeball hanging from his skull on a string of sinew. Tom looks gruesome, but Tasmin is angelic, nothing like the undead

Tasmin who ripped her nails through my arms that trippy night in the sand dunes. This is a completely different version of dead Tasmin. She is beautiful and radiant. I wouldn't be surprised if she sprouted angel wings.

Tasmin beckons to me with a long skeletal finger. "I have a message for you," Tasmin says, her voice like a leaf trembling in the wind. Great, just what I need. "I...I...want to help you, Zac."

"Oh yeah. The message," Malaki says. "My rents told me she had something to tell you."

Since when did Tasmin ever give two fucks about me? Dead or alive. Tasmin doesn't have any wounds on her from that night on the beach. I thought the dead carried their death wounds for the rest of eternity. Just look at the state of Tom!

"How are you going to help me?" I say. How can a ghost take away my fame? Travel back in time and stop One Lad, One Masterpiece from ever being streamed. Make Jake love me for me, and not for the viral stream that he must have seen by now.

Tasmin coughs and splutters, her fingertips tracing over the sausage-shaped red bruises that wrap around her delicate throat. They look like finger marks. Like someone put their hands around her neck and squeezed fucking hard. Tom lunges forwards and Tasmin tugs hard on his reins, jerking the ball gag in Tom's gob, yanking his head back. There's a sloshing and some of Tom's obliterated brain matter drops onto the floor. "I...I..." Tasmin says, then trails off, coughing some more. Ghost Tasmin is so thin. So weak and pathetic. She's nothing like the girl I got to know in the kiosk. This Tasmin is a wraith. Being dead has really done a number on her.

"Spit it out then," I say.

"Yeah, spit it out, babes," Malaki says, breathlessly. Malaki is loving this. A smile spreads across his face. He's lying on his

back now, propped up on black pillows, his legs spread, his long fingers teasing his greased-up arsehole.

Tasmin shakes her head. She makes a sound, but it's not a word. Just a gurgle. She coughs, and something clicks against her teeth and falls out of her mouth, trailing bile. It lands softly on Malaki's shag-pile carpet.

Tasmin screams and retreats back into a pall of smoke, and both she and Tom vanish into nothingness.

I dart to the thing on the floor. What is it?

I hold it up to the light. A key.

"Keep it," Malaki groans, his fingers now deep inside of himself. "You might need it."

"Yeah, I will," I say.

Malaki's little dick explodes for a second time without him even touching it, spraying himself in cum."Clean me up, will you, babes?" he coos.

I lap up Malaki's cum with my lolling, furry tongue. Malaki convulses with pleasure.

After I've licked Malaki clean, he goes over to an ornate vanity next to a blacked-out window. "Come over here," he says.

I join him in front of the shell-shaped mirror. All of his jewellery is laid out on the vanity's counter, along with an assortment of vitality creams, powders, and perfumes.

My reflection stares back at me from the mirror. I expect to see the hot, twink cow that I was during the orgy, or the full-on fucked-up Friesian I became in the muddy cow field, so I'm shocked when the thing looking at me is more alien and disgusting. Twink cow is how Blue Shore edited me on Jake's stream. Full-on Friesian is who I became in the field. The real me is a fucking horror show. I look like a human with a cow bursting out from inside of me, pushing through my pores. My

long tongue hangs out of my half snout/half mouth, my eyeballs bulge out of my face, my neck is covered in lumps where cow me is straining to escape, my udders are already full after being milked, fresh milk dripping over my distended, painful stomach, and my cock is raw and bloody, shining in the candlelight.

Malaki picks up a thin, barely-there gold chain. He darts, cat-like, behind me. "Pass me the key," he whispers into my ragged ear. He threads the key onto the chain, then drapes the chain around my fat neck. It barely fits, digging into my flesh, but Malaki manages to close the clasp.

"Why don't you stay the night, babes. You can sleep with me," Malaki says, and I can feel his nubbin cock pressing up against my furry arse.

Lush

I trot onto the beach. I'm feeling more like myself. When I looked in a puddle on the way here, I could see my own face again. Almost normal. Almost human. Almost beautiful like I used to be. It's like this transformation is coming in waves, ebbing and flowing like a mutant tide. I still have a pair of udders, and a huge cock, which I stuffed into a pair of leggings that Malaki gave me this morning. The leggings are pretty cute, embroidered with stars made of silver threads. I'm looking forward to seeing Jake, but I'm nervous too. Yesterday, everyone on the beach saw One Lad, One Masterpiece. I'm pretty sure that Jake got an eyeful too. I have to make peace with it. There's no other option. If Jake has seen One Lad, then today is the day I finally make out properly with him. I don't care if Jake wants me for me, or because of One Lad anymore. I've got Malaki now. It felt so good lying in bed with him, cuddling and kissing all night long. I'm telling myself that I'm in love with Malaki. I have a new world to go to. One that doesn't revolve around Jake.

Yocals and sunnies stare at me as I pass. A bloke with an afro spits in his hand and uses his soggy palm to stroke his curvy dick. The wanking, fingering, nipple-tweaking beachgoers become background noise. I'm so used to it now that I don't feel anything.

The beach looks different from usual. There are banners, and flags, and huge inflatable ice creams, and inflatable letters spelling the word Lush scattered all over the beach. A piece of paper lands on my head. I look up. Flyers are falling all around me. The shadow cast by the huge, soaring seagull moves over me, and I mean huge. The Blue Shore mascot is the size of a dragon. Another cloud of flyers is ejected from a hatch on the seagull's underside. I snatch a flyer from the air and read it.

Lush. Release party today. Become Whatever you Desire.

The seagull flies towards Blue Shore, flyers raining down like confetti.

My stomach is full of lead. Looks like there's going to be another massive party here, and with me around it will probably turn into a nightmare orgy. Tasmin's shrine has vanished, not even a mark on the sand where it used to be. It's as if Blue Shore has erased the whole thing from history.

The ice cream kiosk is the epicentre of everything, all the promotional flags and blow-up thingies spreading out from it like it's the cause of this marketing infection. The flag on top has been replaced by a giant windsock, the word 'LUSH' written on it in a globby font. The other banners, blowing in the wind, have the same branding, LUSH, with cartoons of cream spurting from holes and teats beneath the lettering. The ice cream cone planted in the sand outside of the kiosk has been repainted, and the ice cream is now creamy white.

I approach the kiosk. The shutter is down, even though it's past opening time. There's a sign hanging on the metal shutters that says "Lush releases at moo o'clock. Stay tuned!" What's the message supposed to mean? I get the stay tuned part. That means the release is going to be streamed. But moo o'clock?! I'm so sick of fucking cows.

I go around the back to the kiosk. There are voices chatting away on the inside. My heart deflates. Ryan is in there with Jake. I remember that I was going to kill him, but I got distracted. Maybe now is the right time to do it. I burst into the kiosk. A blast of hot air hits me, and I'm dripping with sweat the moment I step foot inside. "Zac!" Jake says. "The lad of the hour."

"Hey," Ryan says all coy like I'm his crush, and not the person he's fucked over multiple times. Here's my chance. I could smash his skull against the rusty nail Jake hangs his car keys on.

Instead, I whisper, "Heya." I can't kill him now. It would be too messy. Ruin the celebratory mood. Now, I just want to spend time with Jake. We're finally going to get off with each other. Ryan can wait.

"I'll leave you two to it," Ryan says. "I'm going to hand out samples on the beach. Do what you have to." He winks at Jake.

What's that supposed to mean? It sounds like Ryan knows what's going to happen between me and Jake. Why do I feel like there is some huge conspiracy against me? That every fucker knows what is going on but me. Malaki, Ryan, and now even Jake seem to be in on something that I'm clueless about. "What does he mean, leave you to it?" I ask Jake when I'm sure Ryan is out of earshot.

"Nothing, little bro. I was just telling Ryan how excited I am to see you after yesterday. You vanished halfway through the gathering. That was mental though, wasn't it? I'm so happy we experienced it together." He's rubbing my bulging arm as he speaks. I'm trembling under his touch. He looks like dog shit. I barely recognise him. If Ryan's out there, handing out samples of Lush, then why does Jake still look like total crap?

"Didn't you have any Lush yet?"

"Oh shit, Zac. You have no idea how much I wanted to. But

I wanted something else more. I wanted my first taste to be straight from the source. Pure Lush. Not turned into an ice cream, or a milkshake, or a chocolate bar."

That makes sense, but I wonder what this mystical, magical source is. Jake looks so ugly. I'm repulsed and turned on by him at the same time. I know that the Jake that I wanted and loved all summer is accessible. All I have to do is put on the Specksters that are lying on the kiosk's counter, and hot streamer Jake will appear. But I'm craving something real. I actually want the degraded, haggard version of Jake that is sitting in front of me right now.

Sid is perched on the edge of the counter, his legs swinging back and forth. His eyes glowing. "I thought you said you weren't going to stream full time again?"

"I'm not, little bro. I just promised Ryan that I'd stream the official Lush release party. It's great marketing for him to have a top streamer on board. Some might say the top." He winks at me. "Anyway, I'm getting paid in Lush. Who wouldn't take the job!" He turns to Sid and addresses his audience directly. "Lush. Become whatever you desire." Jake grabs my arm and pulls me into the beam. "I'm here with The Scalper, yet again! But take a look at him, Fan Bams. He's evolving into his final form." He taps his finger against his nose. "You all know what that is. I know what that is. But does The Scalper?"

I'm not processing Jake's words properly. All I'm hearing is that I'm part of Jake's story. His drama, and whatever happens next is already being watched by his audience. I'm so curious. I really want to know what's happening one minute in the future, but I don't have my cyberdeck, and I don't want to put on the Specksters and melt into the reality that Blue Shore is curating. I want to be in the ugly, present moment when whatever happens

happens. I want it to feel real, even if the slime covering Jake's teeth, his lazy eye, and his broken, dirty nails repulse me. I want to know what it feels like to run my tongue over his real gums, and push my hand into his stinking, salty pubes.

"So let's sample The Source," Jake says, and Sid runs along the counter, I guess to get a better angle. Jake pushes me against the wall. This is happening. It's finally happening. I wonder what I look like pixelated. That's how Jake's audience must be seeing me right now. Maybe I came already. Maybe they're watching censored jizz spray all over the sweetie shelf, dripping down the fridge. Jake tugs on my leggings and they slip over my veiny, black-and-white cock.

Jake is kissing me. His cracked, coated tongue slips between my lips. I suck his tongue, swallowing the slime that collects in my mouth. My hands are all over him. Feeling his dry skin, and the muscles that are wasting away, soft as jelly in my calloused hands. Jake covers me in kisses, bites me, swirls his tongue around inside my ear.

I moan as Jake takes my huge girth in both of his hands. He pumps it and pumps it. "Stop," I whisper. "I want to cum hands free. Fuck me, Jake."

"Course," he says. Then to Sid. To his audience. "My pleasure." He pulls his shorts down, revealing his dick. I grimace. It's nothing like the work of art I've seen again and again on his streams. That I've seen up close in the kiosk before, when it was sculpted by Spunk Rush, by my desire, by Blue Shore. Now it resembles a ragworm, the slimy creature with hundreds of wriggling legs that Blue Shore fishermen impale on hooks as bait. I've seen some funny looking cocks in my time, but Jake's really takes the biscuit.

"What the fuck is that?" I say, and for a second Jake looks

heartbroken.

"Listen to him!" Jake says to his audience, "It's not hard yet, is it? Just ask the Rockometre."

I know what happens next. I've seen it enough times. A Rockometre is overlaid on Jake's stream. It's his partner's job to suck, and lick, and tease until the metre goes from 0 to 100. Sometimes even higher.

I get down on my knees, cup his balls in my hand. I know he likes them to be squeezed. The fat ragworm wriggles in front of my nose. I take it in my hand and pop it into my gob. It moves around in my mouth, tickling my tonsils, makes me want to chuck up, but I manage to keep the breakfast Malaki fed me this morning down, the sardines and ketchup remaining in my belly.

My lips move up and down Jake's shaft.

"10," he screams.

I take his cock out of my mouth and lick all around it, even sucking on its individual legs.

"50!"

I'm getting into it. I don't feel sick anymore. Jake is thrusting into my throat. Pounding it. The ragworm is getting bigger and bigger, bloating with blood. It fills my oesophagus. Pushing down into my organs. Pounding my grass and sardine-filled stomach.

"100," Jake cries.

He pulls out, the entire length of his dick emerging from me like a skewer stick being pulled out of a kebab. He's holding it in both hands, the ragworm pulsing, its hundreds of legs writhing, its beady eyes looking up at me. "Let me see your arsehole," Jake says. I turn around. Fucking hell the kiosk is cramped. I can barely move in here as I turn to stick my bum in Jake's face. He holds my tail up, and I spread my cheeks. I'm imagining

what his viewers are seeing. Me a sultry, slutty cow lad. Him the hottest, baddest boy in Blue Shore. He buries his face in my hind. His tongue whirlwinds around my bum hole. I feel it opening up to let him in. I let rip, methane blasting from my hole.

"Yesss," Jake cries, inhaling deeply. He buries himself in my hole again, this time pushing his entire head inside. I feel him in my anus, licking and slurping. He pulls his head out. "125! And that's a record. Fastest time ever. Oh! Holy fuck. 130!"

He slides his knob into me. All of it. His wriggling cock isn't wriggling anymore. It's pumping inside of me. It feels like a clot of blood is moving through it again and again. The sensation is like being inflated and drilled at the same time. Jake's really going for it, his hands gripping my flanks, moving his hips like he's a belly dancer. He changes positions. Pounding me whilst he's standing on his hands. Lying on top of my back, so his cock is as far in as it can be, and moving his hips around and around, back and forth. Standing as far away as the kiosk allows, so that just the last quarter of his cock is inside me, and using it to stir up my intestines like he's mixing a cocktail.

Jake is squeezing my udders as he moves in and out. Groping them. Squeezing them hard. Milk pools under me, sloshing around my knees. I'm going to cum at any moment. "Keep pounding," I moo. "Don't stop." Cum spurts out of me, mixing with the milk that covers the floor. Jake moves under me. He's on his hands and knees, slurping the jizz and milk mix up like it's a heaven-made elixir.

Jake stands up, glistening in sweat, milk, and cum. He transforms in front of my eyes. His teeth whiten, his skin goes from grey and dead-fish-like to radiant, he grows two feet, and his muscles harden and bulge. He looks even better than he did before Spunk Rush ran out. "Fucking hell!" Jake says. "That

felt amazing. I feel amazing."

"But you didn't have any Lush. How are you becoming you again?"

"Can't you see it? You still don't understand? You were Spunk Rush. And now, you're Lush, little bro. You're not only The Scalper anymore." He turns to Sid, who's lying on the counter with his tongue out, his own floppy gingerbread cock in his hand. Jake addresses his audience. "Fan Bams! His transformation is finally complete. Zac is The Source. So get down to Blue Shore Bay, if you want to try Lush directly from the lad cow's udder and his juicy knob." He winks. "Pay what you can! There's enough for everyone!"

The world breaks. The kiosk walls shatter. Jake separates into a billion pieces. He rearranges in front of my eyes, becoming a towering monster made of everybody's leering glances. A thousand cocks and dripping clitorises sprout from his body, waterfalls of cream filling the kiosk.

"What the fuck do you mean?" But it's all clicking into place now. One Lad, One Masterpiece. Ryan wasn't just creating a viral stream. He was extracting something from me. I was an ingredient in one of his ice cream flavours. Coconut cream came from my body. Everyone wanted me, and extracted desire was the secret sauce that made the drug. And now Ryan has turned me into the ultimate desire machine. Lush is flowing from my body. It already did. The human who hooked me up to the machine in the milking shed. I can see his face clearly now. Ryan's face.

I don't know what to do or say. Sid's ruby eyes are burning through me. Thousands of eyes are watching me on Jake's stream. I know I have to get out of here. I don't want to be sucked on by another mouth or squeezed by another hand. I'm

a minute behind the reality that Jake's viewers are seeing. That means everyone knows what I am going to do next. They all know my next move when I haven't even decided on it myself. How am I supposed to escape?

"Let's go surfing," I blurt.

"Huh." Jake's face instantly switches. He didn't expect that. But he's the one who originally suggested it. When was that? Yesterday? Days ago? It feels like an age ago already.

"Yeah, you said we should surf together so let's do it. When we come back everyone can fondle me, lick me, and blow me to their heart's content."

"Ermm," Jake looks confused. My suggestion has thrown him. He just revealed me to be the ultimate cum cow that deep down I always knew I was, and I'm acting totally chill. I'm not sure how he expected me to react. Judging by the way he announced it so cheerily, like it was the best news ever, he expected me to be over the moon instead of fucking confused and furious. But I have to hide the way I feel. I have to escape this situation.

"Come on, your board's outside, isn't it? It will be a right laugh. You can show me some of those sick moves."

"Yeah." Jake says. Flattery gets you everywhere, especially with someone whose ego takes up the entire beach. "Let's go in our nuddies."

I shiver at the thought of his ragworm cock flopping about in the sea, but of course it doesn't look like something out of a horror movie anymore. Now it's the perfect, tanned thing it used to be. I almost want to take it in my gob again. I shake the thought away. As far as I know Jake was in on all this from the beginning. He knew what Ryan was turning me into. I don't want to believe that's the truth. I want to believe that there was a time that he really didn't know who I was. That he flirted with

me because he liked me.

"How long have you known?"

"Known what, little bro?"

"About all of this. Spunk Rush. Lush. That I'm an ingredient in the cream you've been gobbling up?"

"Not long. When you were hanging out with those cows. When I watched Ryan milk you."

My heart flutters. Then everything else was real. Jake liked me for me. Nothing else really matters. I'm actually glad that Jake was the first person to drink Lush straight from my udders. I don't want another person to touch me ever again. There's no way that Ryan or the rest of Blue Shore are getting a taste. "Let's go," I say.

We set off right away.

"You can take my board and I will body-surf," Jake says, shining as luminously as the sun because he's full of my milk and cum. His board is where it usually is, leaning against the kiosk.

"Wow! Thanks," I say, grabbing Jake's board. It's a speedy-looking shortboard, with flames on the front just like his car.

Sid is standing in the sand, looking up at me, eyes beaming. "Why's Sid coming?" I suggested surfing so we could get away from Jake's bot. From Jake's stream.

"Sid loves surfing, little bro! He has his own tiny board. It's the cutest."

I already knew that, but my stupid cow brain completely forgot. Now all of my memory lapses make sense too. There's no room to remember a past, or even what happened yesterday when your brain is the size of a fist. I've seen Jake surfing with Sid loads of times. How else would he have streamed his surf sessions? I didn't even notice the dinky board beside Jake's. Sid grabs it,

whistling some stupid little tune. I've never been so pissed off by a stuffed cookie in my life.

Why is Jake even still streaming? He drank me up, now he can be himself without Blue Shore's delay. He can be what Blue Shore wants him to be right now, with me, here in the present. "Are you going to stop streaming?" I ask him.

"Soon, little bro. I've got to stream the Lush party, then I'll quit for good."

Oh yeah. The Lush release party. The one I'm supposed to be the star of. I imagine what Ryan has got planned. Me up on a podium. Of my own free will? Does he actually think I want this? Or was he planning to chain me up like a fucking animal to be used and abused? For the first time, I notice a massive stage set up a bit further down the beach than the kiosk, the lasers and lights attached to it already flashing in rhythm to a band who are testing their instruments.

Sid strides along beside us, carrying his dinky board. We pass a banner proclaiming:

A new luscious flavour to bring magic to everyday life.

We pass words written in the sand in lines of crushed-up oyster shells, sparkling in the sun:

A cone as cheap as an odd sock or a wishbone

Driftwood rearranged to say:

Drink from the source. Today only at moo o'clock. Pre-pay wristbands available at the main stage.

I notice that everybody we pass is wearing a wristband, the word Lush emblazoned on them.

Above, the clouds swirl, turning into cartoon characters. It's a sky advertisement for Lush. A cute lad with big cartoon cloud eyes is using an icing sugar shaker, spreading little particles of Lush that glow like firework embers over cloud formations that

resemble a packet of crisps.

Far ahead sunnies and yocals clap. They are watching the stream, clapping the people who haven't even passed them yet. The versions of us that are a minute ahead. They must think this is all part of the big show.

The closer we get to the ocean, the louder the waves get. The ocean is a giant beast, waiting to gobble us up. To swallow us into its bowels, swirling us deeper and deeper. I always get the same ominous feeling when heading into the ocean. It's why I quit surfing in the first place. I hate the sea. I'm not a beach bum like most of the people who live in Blue Shore.

Jake dives into the water. "Let's paddle out," he says. "I'll swim beside you."

I lie on Jake's board, and Sid lies on his. His little gingerbread arms turn into propellers, powering through the water. I narrow my eyes at him.

I forgot how hard paddling is, even with my jacked muscles. We've only been at it for a minute and my arms already feel like they are going to drop off. Jake swims effortlessly, diving under the roaring waves, his merman genetics shining through. Sid is zooming ahead, probably to get a better shot of us. I imagine the ocean is the big boss, constantly throwing walls of frothing white water at me, trying to knock me off Jake's board. I paddle towards a wall of bubbling, raging white. I brace myself, holding my breath, clinging onto the board with all my might. I dip the board's front so that I slip under the wave instead of being swept away by it. The wall smashes into me, washes over me, and I emerge from the other side, with all my skin still attached to my body. These waves have been known to maim and flay when the ocean is throwing a hissy. I check both of my eyeballs. Still there. Another wave hits.

This time the white water breaks on my head, pushing me and the board under. I tumble beneath the wave like I'm in a washing machine. The leash connecting me to Jake's board pulls taut. If it snaps, I'm a goner. The board will float and resurface, but I'm not so sure about me. It doesn't snap, and I grab onto the cord and use it to haul myself to the surface. Sunlight blazes above me. I break through, my eyes burning and my lungs struggling to catch a breath. I cough up a litre of seawater.

"Are you okay?" Jake says. He's laughing his head off. Sid is cackling too, still propelling himself forward. If I could catch him, I'd drag him under and drown him right now. But that would be way too sus. I have to make this look like an accident. I pull Jake's board towards me and grab it, climbing back on clumsily.

"Yeah, I'm cool," I lie, wiping snot away from my top lip.

"We can paddle together. I can see you're rusty." Jake pulls himself onto the board and lies on top of me. It sags below the water. "I don't want you to drown, little bro. Not now."

What does he mean not now? So he wouldn't have cared if I drowned a few days ago. Now, I'm valuable. Now I am his fix, literally. A wave smacks into us and sweeps us off the board. I tread water, fighting the current, only just managing to keep my head above the surface. Once the wave has passed, we swim to either side of the board and cling on.

"Wipeout!" Jake shouts, and I crack up laughing. I'm actually enjoying this, despite how fucked up my current reality is. For two people who have surfed before, we are pretty useless. I climb back onto the board, and Jake wriggles on top of me. His stomach expands and contracts in the small of my back. The waves come in sets, and now the view in front of us is completely flat. We make a dash for it, trying to get out to the back, where

the unbroken waves roll in, before we get beaten up by white water again. "Paddle!" I shout, and we both paddle furiously.

"Look." Jake points at the horizon. "Big ones are coming."

Giant wedges of glassy water are moving across the ocean towards us. The first one rolls into us, and we glide effortlessly up its huge face, then down the other side. Spritzes of water blow off the wave's crest, showering us in sunshine-filled droplets.

We sit up, legs straddling the board, waiting for the next wave. It's strangely quiet out here beyond the crashing waves. We are among the silent giants. The only sound is coming from Jake's bot, who is babbling and murmuring. I realise that it is reading out the comments that are flooding in live.

Woah, that wave was massive.

Rode it like pros.

You two are too cute together.

Way to moo, guys!

Another giant wave is coming towards us. I know this is the one we're going to catch. Or did it already happen? My head is a fucking mess. We sit up, waiting for the wave. Jake turns the board to face the beach. "We're heavy," he says excitedly. "But if we paddle hard, we can catch it." We paddle hard. The wave rolls under us. "Harder!" Jake cries. I paddle like my life depends on it, and the wave picks us up, launching us down its steep face. "Yeeeessss!" I scream.

"Fuck yeahhhhh, little bro," Jake screams in my earhole.

We're going at a million miles per hour. I put my arms out in front of me like I'm flying. Sid is beside us, carving up the wave, doing all these crazy tricks: spins and jumps and sudden turns. Fucking show-off. The wave rumbles, then breaks, and an atomic bomb of white water explodes behind us. I feel myself being blasted off the board, but Jake wraps his arms around

me, holding me tight. We hurtle towards the beach. The wave weakens as the water becomes shallower, and we slow down. The wave overtakes us. We glide to a stop.

I feel amazing. That was the best. *One last good moment before everything turns to shit*, the niggling voice in my head says. Jake's grinning from ear to ear. Maybe we can do it one more time. One more moment of bliss. Of me and Jake together. "Let's go again," I say. I can do what I have to do after our last ride.

"Okay."

Jake swims beside me. This time I make it through the white water without a problem. The adrenaline has made me faster and stronger.

We make it out back to the glassy giants. "I'm going to body-surf this time," Jake says.

"Oh, okay." I try to hide my disappointment. I wanted to feel Jake on top of me again.

"Don't be a sourpuss! You can ride alongside me." Jake cups my face in his hands and kisses me hard. "I fucking love you," he says.

"I love you too, Jake," I say, as a wave even bigger than the one we just caught barrels towards us. Jake's already beneath the surface, his arms cutting through the water, building up the speed to ride the wave. I try to process what we just said to each other as I maneuver Jake's board into position. I want to believe Jake's words. I want him to love me. But I can't take his words seriously because now Jake has a new motive to desire me. I am The Source. I am Jake's fucking drug.

Sid is still reading comments.

Holy shit.

No way.

Noooooo.

Sid starts screaming and crying. The wails are jarring, coming from his gingerbread mouth. He's not using his normal voice. Instead a jumble of voices: crying, screaming, and wailing are spilling out of his gob. The wave rolls under us. Jake zooms away. I let the wave go. I watch Jake dance through the ocean. He looks like a fish. Surfacing, diving, slicing through the water, his body more sleek and streamlined than the best surfboard. I've seen him do it so many times on his stream, but seeing him perform in real life is magical. Sid's there beside him. In the distance, on the beach, beachgoers with bots flying in front of them, or Specksters stuck to their faces, fall to their knees, cupping their heads in their hands. All this for a fucking gingerbread man.

Another wave is rushing towards me. This one even bigger than the one Jake just caught. I position the board facing Sid in the distance. The bot is celebrating, high-fiving Jake. I paddle, easily catching the wave this time without Jake's extra weight on top of me. The wave breaks, crashing around me. All I can hear is the roar of white water as I faster and faster, the board's knife-sharp point firmly aimed at Sid. I'm going to shear him in half. I'm locked on. Jake moves in front of Sid. There's a terrible cracking sound as the board slams into the back of Jake's head.

The impact throws me off the surfboard, and I roll underwater. I surface spluttering. Sid turns to me, eyes glowing. I grab Sid and push him underwater. Blood and sea foam swirl around me. I can't see Jake anywhere, only a trail of blood on the ocean's surface, moving in the direction of the beach. The wave has carried him off. Sid resurfaces, treading water furiously, his eyes fixed on me, shouting and screaming, the words of all of Jake's streamers reaching me in a barrage of hatred. I shove him underwater again. Pushing him down to the coral-covered seafloor. I stomp on Sid. Again and again until I feel his little

body disintegrating beneath my feet. Stream obliterated. Tears mixed with snot and seawater streak across my face. What do I do now? Jake's Fan Bams are running into the shallows.

I clamber back on the board, a chunk of Jake's head embedded in the front. I paddle, catch the next wave, and glide towards the beach, aiming away from where a huge crowd has now gathered in the shallow surf. Jake's body must be there. Everyone's attention is on him and not on me. This is my chance to escape. I jump off the board, ripping the leash from my leg. The world is spiralling around me. I feel like I'm going to throw up my insides. I have to keep low. I can't be seen. I collapse onto my hands and knees, crawling over the wet sand. Goosebumps spread all over my body like a disease.

I'm getting nowhere fast on my hands and knees, so I stumble up into a stooping crouch, running a bit further like that. When there's some distance between me and the shore, I stand and look back over my shoulder. Scanning the shallows. The crowd at the shore is getting bigger. I know what they are all looking at. Jake's lifeless body. No. He's not dead. He can't be. Their heads turn to look at me, their tongues are hanging out of their mouths, saliva dripping from their lips, cocks and pussies in their hands. I leg it.

I run as fast as I can, away from the ice cream kiosk, further down the beach towards the pier. There's still a big crowd at the kiosk too. The words written in the sky, on the beach, and in suncream on a sunny's sunburnt back change in front of my eyes to say:

The Scalper Strikes Again.

Jake's stream is probably already going viral. I'm sure the novelty officers will give me another medal. I don't want to be famous. I don't want Jake to be dead. I don't want to be milked

and sucked off by everyone in town. I just want to vanish.

My bulging eyes dart up to the billboard that looms over the beach like bad weather. Usually it proclaims:

Come to Roodie's, fun and freakiness in the sun for everyone.

But now the letters flashing on the digital screen pronounce:

Roodie's, the Only Place with Authentic Lush. Make all your Desires Come True.

Candy Apple

I'm hiding under the duckpond bridge. Ducks swim all around me. At first they were scared, all of them clustering in a corner and squawking in fear, but I've been down here for hours, and they've gotten used to me. They're swimming around the island I'm on, giving me the occasional glare. "What's up, fucky ducky?" I say as one sails past, looking at me with evil eyes like I'm an invader in its precious pond.

I don't know where else to go. Everybody wants a piece of me. I can hardly just walk down the street and go home. I can't even trust my mum. If I walk through the door, she's going to blast me to her audience. The Scalper. The Source. Her son has reached a level of fame that she has only ever dreamed of. She'd love to live out her own aspirations through me. She'd probably set up a torture chamber for The Scalper and a milking station for The Source and stream me killing and being milked dry 24/7.

My head feels like it has been dashed on the sharpest rock in the rock pools, my thoughts spilled all over the crabs and sea anemones. Become beautiful. Become muscly. Become the most famous streamer. Become...alive?! Is that what happened to Tasmin? Jake wanted her to live so much that Spunk Rush made it come true?

I've been hiding here since I fled the beach, and it's already

nighttime, lights from the towering rides above illuminating the dark. Everything is coming to a climax. It's not fair. My life as I know it is ending, but in Blue Shore summer never ends. It goes on and on in endless cycles of ice cream and sunnies. Every summer season is short in Blue Shore. Summer lasts from the beginning of an all-inclusive holiday to the end of it.

I feel sick. I haven't eaten anything but ice cream and weird shit for days, and I can't remember the last time I had a proper night's sleep. I'm so tired. I barely slept at Malaki's. I spent the whole night tossing and turning, dreaming of the orgy, the cow field, ghost Tasmin wailing. And now, I don't think I will ever be able to close my eyes again after what I did to Jake. I just hope he's still alive. I haven't seen any news in the sky pronouncing him dead. He must have made it. I hope he made it. Then why did the news say, *The Scalper Strikes Again?* Does the Scalper maim or only kill? I should fucking know. I am The Scalper, after all.

All of this is because of Ryan. I hate him so much. He made me into this creature just so he could get rich or make the perfect work of art, or however he justifies what he did to me. But I'm not just Ryan's project. I'm Blue Shore's too. Lush will be the ultimate tourist draw. Then Blue Shore can play its twisted games with all the people who come to visit here every season.

Blue Shore is fucking amazing too. I can't deny that. Nothing concrete before Ryan's stream is clear in my head. But I think that I remember the vibe. Blue Shore was just another run-down British seaside resort. Everything was too normal. Too boring. Now, Blue Shore is the one place where everybody can be and do whatever they want to be and do. Who wouldn't want to visit Blue Shore? It's my bad luck that my life's gone down this crazy path. Everyone wants me. Everyone is out to get me. I have to

steer clear of people as much as I can from now on. I know if they catch me, they're going to hook me up to Ryan's machine and suck everything they can from me. But I can't stay under this bridge forever.

A string with a hook on the end drops into my vision. Another follows and I hear people laughing from the bridge above. I grab one of the plastic, yellow ducks as it floats past, and attach the little metal hoop on its back to the dangling hook. Whoever it is up there cheers and hauls the duck up. "Who's that tripping over my bridge?" I roar in my scariest voice. I grab the other string and tug it hard, so that the line and fishing rod are pulled out of the person's hand and into the water.

"What the fuck?" I hear from above. "There's a troll down there. This game's rigged. I want my belly button fluff back. What a rip-off." I laugh my head off. It's actually quite fun being the troll under the duck bridge. I should probably stop messing with people though, but I know the burly fairground folk who run the rides and the stalls won't listen to lunatic complaints about trolls. The complainers will get a knuckle sandwich instead. May as well have a laugh while I'm down here, but no one else comes to play Hook a Duck, and one by one, the ride's lights go out, the competing fairground jingles switch off, and the pier falls silent. "What's the time?" I whisper to Zebby, then realise that Zebby's not here, and she is too far away to summon. I guess it's around 3 am. That must be when the fair closes. I've never been here late enough to know. I've got to find a disguise, so I can move around unnoticed. I begin to climb up the rope ladder that leads to the bridge above, the maintenance island growing smaller beneath me. The ladder strains under my weight, making creaking, cracking sounds.

In the funfair, I move like a stealthy animal. Well I think I

do, but it's pretty hard work as a hulking half-lad, half-cow. Empty packaging litters the pier, torn open sachets, empty milk cartons, scrunched up plastic bottles and cans, discarded chewing gum wrappers, a tub of lip balm licked out until there's nothing left. All of them have the Lush branding on them. Ryan found a way to put me in everything. I'm starving, so I grab a candy apple from a stall, rip off the plastic, and eat it in one bite. Massive cow jaws are good for eating things in one bite, and I'm glad because I'm fucking hungry. I gobble a few more before continuing on. No one sees me. There's no one here. I was worried I might bump into a group of yocals licking toads, or a bunch of sunnies toe-fucking, but who needs the escapist pleasure of drugs or sex when Lush is available? Everyone is at home, happy, being the coolest, sexiest, baddest versions of themselves. And here I am. The thing I never ever wanted to be. A monster of Ryan Made's creation. It's not fucking fair. I leave the funfair behind me and trot along the pier towards Blue Shore, my hooves clacking on the wooden walkway, not bothering to try and be stealthy anymore.

The funny thing is that as fucked as my head is, things are starting to make sense. There's one thing I kept seeing again and again when I was wearing Tasmin's jelly bot. That door to the quaint house. When I was sitting under the duck bridge, it hit me like an out-of-control ice cream truck, Tasmin's words echoing in my skull.

'*He's the biggest cock muncher in Minger Lane.*'

She was talking about her dad. Tasmin lives on Minger Lane in the house with the yellow door. And I know Minger Lane well. I remember now. I've been there before. But it's not a picturesque

row of fisherman's cottages like in Tasmin's memory. To get to Minger Lane, I have to go through Blue Shore, then wait until a reasonable time to knock on the yellow door.

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I make a stop at Blue Shore's giant Tesco Super Ultra located on what used to be scrublands near to the pier. The supermarket is the size of a small country, and it caters to the sunnies and yocals. Being here is risky because the place is open 24 hours, and there might be some people around in the car park, but it's a good location to scavenge for a drip. I need a disguise if I'm going to move through the town unnoticed after dawn. There are massive recycling bins in the sprawling car park. I know because I've threatened to chuck Zebby in the bot bin on multiple occasions. Sure enough, the bins are exactly where I remembered them being. I read the sign on the front of each bin.

Bots,

Toys

Tea Bags - filled with rotting old sacs of tea. We get through a lot of the stuff in Blue Shore.

Drips.

I push through the drip-bin's flap, dangling into the musty-smelling bin, and pull out a bunch of clothes. They tumble onto the tarmac. I throw a glance over my shoulder, checking that no one is around. Behind me there's nothing but the distant lights of Tesco Super Ultra. The car park goes on forever, and there are only a few abandoned cars in here. One looks like it only just made it through a stone storm, its roof pitted and caved in. Another went through some kind of organic transformation, and now its wheels have taken root in the concrete, causing the cement to crack and buckle, and giant flowers with car seats at

their centres bloom from the car's smashed windows.

I root through the clothes, choosing a Kanga bucket hat, a pair of huge sunglasses, a dress with a Venus flytrap pattern that will hide my very recognisable cock, and a very snazzy feather boa. I put everything on, then crawl back inside the clothes bin. Lucky the flap that leads into the bin is wide, but I still have to heave my huge backside through, squeezing into the space. Inside, I sit in the dark. I'll hide here until the sun rises.

Cup of Tea

I stand in front of the yellow door. The clothes I picked out last night are torn, falling off my body. During the early hours, I grew in size, bulging and blistering. I don't want to look at my reflection because I'm scared of what I'll see, and I'm sure that if I try to make a sound, only a monstrous moo is going to come out. I have a horrible feeling that this house does not represent my salvation, but instead my doom.

I don't recognise the house only from Tasmin's memories. I remember it from my own too. This is where Ryan lives. This is the doorway to his studio. Only it's not the same doorway. This entrance is disguised as something homely and inviting, masking what was a big metal portal to Ryan's strange world. I had my suspicions the moment I put two and two together. Tasmin mentioning Minger Lane. Remembering that Ryan's studio was on the same road. Wondering if desire brought Tasmin back from the dead. All of my inklings are confirmed as I wait, staring down the door.

I approach. Tasmin gave me the key to the door. I wonder if it was just a clue, or if it was bait? Blue Shore dangling the object that would lead me here in front of my eyes. My hand goes to my neck, where Malaki hung the key. It's embedded in my flesh, and I really have to yank it to get it free. I take the key from the

bloody chain. Whatever I find behind this door, I'm going to face it like I'm not a dumb prey animal. I'm a fucking beast, and I'll rip out a throat with my herbivore teeth if I have to.

I'd love to chew some cud right now, and laze about in the sun for five hours, but I'm on a mission. I've got to do this. I try to look through the windows but they are all dark, and when I get closer I realise that they are covered black bin bags, gaffa taped on the inside. There aren't even any gaps. Nothing inside is visible.

At the door, I reach out a hand, each one of my fingers a mini hoof, square and hard at the tips. My finger clacks against the doorbell. It rings. I don't know what I am going to say if someone's home. I imagine the door opening, Ryan leering on the other side. I'll bite him on the head with my grass-chewing jaws and crack his skull open like an egg. But no one answers. Either no one's home, or they're staying quiet on purpose. I think this might be a trap, but I have to face my fears and open the door. I use the key, struggling to hold it in my finger-hooves. I manage to shove it in and twist it. The lock clicks.

I push the door open.

Immediately, I hear footsteps. Fuck. It is a trap. I consider running out and slamming the door, but everything has been leading up to this. I can't chicken out now. It must be Ryan thundering down the stairs. I grind my teeth and stretch my muscles.

But it's not Ryan. Some old geezer in a pink dressing gown, the fluffy fabric barely making it across his bulging pot belly, trundles down the stairs.

"Mooooo," I say. Fuck. Come on. I can do this. I cough to clear my throat. Think human thoughts. "Hello?" I say, confused.

"Who the fuck are you, mate, and what are you doing in my

house?" He says in a gruff voice.

I don't know who this is, or how I'm supposed to answer, then I see a framed picture of Tasmin on the wall, her holographic freckles like tiny prisms. Flowery wallpaper contrasts with the silver picture frame. "Mooo...I'm. I mean. I'm Tasmin's friend." I hold up the key. "She told me to let myself in whenever."

"Well, why didn't you say? She's in the habit of giving her loony mates a key. Likes them to give her daddy a fright." He pats me on my massive, hairy back. I wrap the feather boa tighter around my shoulders and shuffle further into the hallway. This definitely isn't Ryan's studio. That was all open space, holographic interfaces, strange specimens, and strobing lights. This place is a proper home: claustrophobic and chintzy. Tasmin's home. But it's not supposed to be here. I don't think it is really here.

"Where's Tasmin?" I ask.

"Went down the shops. Picking me up some bits and bobs. We're all out of Lush. Amazing how much of that stuff we're getting through." The bottom half and top half of his face are covered in stubble, and his features are squeezed into a small hairless space in the middle. He leads me into the living room. I can tell that the room used to be nice, but the floral curtains, beige carpet, and pink sofas have all seen better days. It stinks of takeaway food and fairy juice, a popular drink that gets you off your tits, sold in the Tinkle Balls. The curtains are drawn and the room is gloomy. Dirty plates and mugs litter the coffee table.

"You want a cup of tea, mate?" he says, leaning against the doorframe with a thick arm.

"Yes, please," I say, and he gestures for me to take a seat on a sofa.

"Make yourself at home. Tasmin should be back any minute."

I pick a hologram album off a shelf and flick through it whilst I wait. The holographic memories jump out at me. Tasmin's family look happy together. There are memories of them on holiday in places that look totally alien to me. Places outside of Blue Shore that may as well be on a different planet. There is a memory of a Christmas where presents are stacked beneath the tree, spilling across the floor. I wonder what happened to Tasmin's mum. She is always there in the memories, but there's no sign of her hand in this house. Unless she's a total slob like Tasmin and her dad. A loud sound startles me, and a huge cockroach slams through the door, scuttles across the floor, and jumps on my lap, licking my face.

"Fucking hell." I push it off and give it a kick. I'm not a fan of roaches. Even pet ones. A second roach scrambles in, leaps over the coffee table, knocking filthy plates and an ashtray onto the floor. Gross. Who even smokes anymore? Tasmin's dad I guess. I punch the cockroach and it shrinks back into a corner, its beady black eyes looking at me like it's in love or something.

"Oi." Tasmin's dad storms in. "Gerout," he shouts, his neck tendons straining, and for a second I wonder if he's talking to me or the roaches. But the pet roaches retreat, sloping into the kitchen with their antennae dragging along the ground sadly. "Milk? Sugar? It will have to be normal milk though. We're all out of the good stuff," Tasmin's dad growls. "Looks like you could give us some nice fresh milk yourself," he says, looking hungrily at my teats, which are lactating freely.

"Black with three sugars, please," I say, pulling the torn dress down over my udders, and returning my attention to the album, my furry cheeks burning.

Tasmin was clearly a complete daddy's girl. In one hologram,

I guess she must have been about four years old, sitting in her dad's lap, his arms wrapped around her stomach. In another, they are standing in front of what looks like a circus tent, Tasmin's dad's arm draped over her shoulders. Tasmin's mum is standing a metre away from them, looking miserable. Maybe not such a happy bunch after all. I flick further through the album. There's a hologram of Nigel kissing Tasmin on the lips. It's a bit creepy because she looks much older, and her boobs are out, peeking through a dress that has two holes cut out at the chest. I know it's just fashion, but it still gives me the ick. Anyway, families are weird. Who am I to judge? My mum's a complete Froot Loop after all.

I turn a page, and reality glitches, little squares of light exploding across my vision. The room buzzes out of existence, and for a microsecond I'm in Ryan's studio. Vast and cold. My stomach fucking twists because Ryan is standing there, a grin splitting his face in two, then he vanishes, and I'm back in this flowery living room.

A hologram leaps out of the album, filling my vision. It's Tasmin, but she's not lively and demented like usual. She's dead. And this isn't an image of her shrine on the beach. She's actually in a coffin. It's one of those organic pod coffins that becomes a tree when you plant it. This coffin has cherry blossoms painted on the pod, making it obvious what kind of tree it will become. There's a date written above the image. I can't believe my eyes. The room glitches again, and when reality stabilises, there's a blank space where the hologram of the coffin pod was a millisecond ago.

Tasmin's dad comes in, carrying a teacup on a saucer. The cup looks ridiculously dainty in his big hand. He sets it down on the coffee table between a crumbled McDonald's bag and a plate

covered in slimy baked-bean juice.

"Thanks." I take a sip of the tea. It's lovely and sweet but weak, like Tasmin's dad made it with a secondhand teabag.

"No problem. Will you be alright down here? I've got to get my glad rags on. Sposed to be at work in twenty. Tasmin should be back soon."

"Actually, can I wait in her room?" I ask. A look of concern flickers across his face. "She told me to go up if she wasn't back yet."

"Sure," he grumbles. "Why not?" He's shaking his head though. "She's been really sick. I'm sure you know. Been doing too much cream with that little worm on the beach."

He must mean Jake. I suppress a smile at Jake being called a little worm, until I remember caving his head in. I'd do anything to go back in time and erase that. To hold Jake in my arms again. To relive every moment we spent together. I'd live this summer again and again until the end of time if I could.

Tasmin's dad heads up the stairs, and I follow behind. He grumbles the whole way. "Really shouldn't be working with my fucked up back, but I've got to earn a crust for me n' my girl. Those ruddy houses out on Drenched Fields ain't going to build themselves." He's muttering to himself more than to me. At the top of the stairs he turns left into a bedroom, and I continue down the corridor pretending I know where I'm going. Tasmin's father coughs, and I turn. "It's that one, mate," he says, narrowing his bloodshot eyes at me and pointing at the door I already passed.

"Course," I say. "I know. Just need to take a leak." I'm betting that there's a bathroom at the end of the corridor. I'm right. Inside the small bog, I exhale a long breath. What am I even doing here? Any moment now dead Tasmin's going to rock up,

then how do I explain being in her house. Maybe that's when I put my chompers to work. Rip the bitch to shreds. Classic Scalper move. The bathroom is so small. I'm hunched up inside it, my back arching, my head scraping against the ceiling. I hitch up the dress, and my dick swings above the toilet bowl. I let out a load of tea-smelling piss.

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Tasmin's room is gross. She's been throwing up in here. There's vomit everywhere, and the whole room stinks of death. The room was once cute with seashell dream catchers, a deflated blow-up dolphin hanging from the ceiling, and pearls and sand on the floor instead of carpet. Now it's a dive, clothes and rubbish everywhere. Even the sand has turned a nasty green colour. It's even worse than downstairs. The restraints on the bed make me do a double take. Strips of blood-stained fabric are tied to each corner of the bed frame. Was it some kinky game Tasmin liked to play with her partners, or is daddy a complete sicko? My udders are really painful, full and aching. I sit down on the bed and squeeze them. Milk flows from my swollen teats. I sigh in relief.

There are pictures scrawled all over Tasmin's walls. A lot of them are random scribbles, but one of the pictures is clear as day. Tasmin drew me on her wall. Me as a fucking cow. I know it's me because she's written:

*Jake's little moo cow Gaybie, i*n glowing sea slime above the crude picture. Whoever Tasmin is, dead or alive, she is a complete nutcase. I don't know why I came up here. I guess I wanted to know what a dead girl's bedroom looks like, and it's as bad as I imagined.

I push the window open to get some fresh air. There's a sapling in the middle of the small back garden, a little wooden cross

sticking out of the ground in front of it. Well there was, but the moment I look out of the window it vanishes like Blue Shore is scrubbing it from existence in real time.

I turn from the window to the mirror on Tasmin's vanity. I cry at the sight of myself. I'm a fucking horror show. I used to be so beautiful. Everyone wanted me. Even before Ryan's stream made me a wank bank. That's why Ryan chose me. Now my body has become this monster as a way to hide from everyone's leers, but it didn't work because everybody is blinded by desire. Tears flow from my hulking head. My disgusting, bulging, warty body could curdle milk.

What if I become what everyone wants me to be? I could be the hot, twink cow I was in Jake's stream. A real piece of udder. All I'd have to do is drink some Lush. I'm going to do it. I have to do it. I stretch one of my teats out, pull it up to my face, and shove it in my gob. I suck and suck, drinking myself. The milk flowing from my udder is thick and creamy. It's delicious. But I don't think it will be enough. The original Spunk Rush was made from my cum, and when Ryan milked me he took both body fluids. That must be why Lush is so potent. So versatile. I better gobble up some of my own seed too.

I fold myself up on Tasmin's bed, pushing my huge, bulky legs over my head. My cock is big enough for me to suck on without too much exertion. As I'm doing it, I wonder why I never tried before. It feels so bloody good, even if chomping on a hairy, sour-milk-tasting knob is a weird experience. Having my own cock in my mouth is nicer than sucking on Jake's wriggling ragworm. It feels amazing. My body trembles in pleasure as my flexible, muscle-filled tongue teases and sucks on my own bellend. I explode, a whoosh of jizz impacting the back of my throat. I swallow it down.

I sit up in front of the mirror. My knob flops over the bed, drooling onto the sandy floor. My reflection in the mirror slowly morphs. I become less animal and more human. I become the object of everybody's desire. Young, lean, hung, and cow-like but not repulsive. A sex toy. A cow. A murderer. Something else?

The downstairs front door clicks open.

I saunter down the stairs.

I feel ecstatic. Who knew that becoming what everyone desires would be this thrilling?

"Cooey," Tasmin says. I meet her at the bottom of the stairs. "You made it here," she sings. She is radiant. She looks like she did the first time I met her, but more beautiful and more perfect if that's even possible.

I follow her into the kitchen. She's weighed down with carrier bags. She sets them down on a work surface, and starts to unpack. Tiny crabs skitter over her bare back, the strings securing her coconut-halves bikini dangling in the small of her shimmering back. "You look great," I say. "Your dad said you were sick."

"Were," she says. "I'm all better thanks to you. Everyone wants you, Zac. Everyone needs more of you." She's unpacking product after product, all of them branded with the now way-too-familiar Lush logo. Lush milk, Lush baked beans, Lush marmalade. There's a coughing behind us. Tasmin spins, her eyes like two rock pools of swirling grey.

"Darling," Tasmin's dad says. He's standing in the doorway, blocking it.

"Daddy!" Tasmin gushes. I turn to face him too.

"She's right, Zac. Everybody needs you. Look at you. You are gorgeous. You can make everyone else perfect too." He's nuzzling on my body, sucking my udders. I push him away

effortlessly, and he slides across the floor. I'm so strong. He looks up at me like I crushed him. Maybe I will. Tasmin is grinning menacingly. She's loving this. I'm watching her from the eyes that are opening up in the back of my head. I can see everything so clearly.

"You killed her," I growl. "You strangled her."

He is crying and snivelling now. "What? No. What're you talking about? She's here right now."

"The version of her you wanted is here because you created her. That's why this house is here. In Ryan's studio. You were the first one to test Spunk Rush. Ryan needed to keep his experiment close." I knew it the moment I realised what I am. When I recalled that Ryan's studio was on Minger Lane. It was too much of a coincidence. Suddenly it all made sense. Now I've drunk from The Source everything makes sense. Every single fucking thing.

"Bingo," Tasmin shouts gleefully.

"She was my precious darling. I just wanted her back." Tasmin's dad snivels.

I imagine Tasmin's dad guzzling up the drug synthesised from my cum. From me, the most desired lad in Blue Shore. It bought a version of his daughter back. Not really though. She's just a corrupted Tasmin brought to life from a fucked-up memory. The real Tasmin didn't die on the beach last week. That was just one version of her. The real Tasmin has been dead since the start of summer. The date above the photo of her coffin appears in the middle of the room, melting like ice cream on a midsummer day. The 1st of June 2041. Only days before One Lad, One Masterpiece went viral.

"You strangled her with your bare hands. Ryan offered you a way to bring her back. Your one desire was her, and you got her.

But not the Tasmin that used to exist. You got the version you created."

"That's right," Tasmin hisses. "You got the Tasmin that you would tie up on the bed so I couldn't go out. The Tasmin who was a bad girl in your eyes. Always out fucking around with boys. The Tasmin in your mind never existed. Well, she does now. And she's holding a fucking butcher's knife, Daddy!"

"You were out of control. That's why I strangled you. I didn't want to kill you, baby. I really didn't," he pleads.

"I never asked to come back, Daddy. I even tried to die again, driving Zac so insane with jealousy that he mowed me down. But you and Blue Shore just wouldn't let me rest." The corpse on the beach was Tasmin version 2. I killed her, then Blue Shore laid a filter over the corpse so Spunk Rush could bring her to life again. Each version of Tasmin was more twisted than the last. Double-dead Tasmin was a maggot-infested, walking corpse until Lush breathed vitality back into her.

Tasmin's dad crawls over to me. "Please forgive me." He's covering me with kisses. Sucking on me. Trying to push his tongue into my mouth, his penis straining to break free of his work overalls. I grab him, and twist him around, wrapping my arms around him, holding him tight. Tasmin slinks closer. "Please, baby. Forgive me," he sobs to Tasmin. Tasmin draws the blade across her daddy's throat in one clean swipe. Blood sprays from his neck.

"Why didn't you do that earlier?" I ask. But I know the answer. Things had to unfold like this. It was the only way.

"Do me now," Tasmin says, stepping over her daddy's body, sprawled on the linoleum.

I take a bite out of her skull, and spit a chunk of her brain out. She falls like a sack of meat. Blood pours from her tiny gob. I

pick a strand of her beautiful hair out of my teeth. Tasmin tastes of flesh and numbers. Tiny 1s and 0s sticking to the roof of my mouth.

The kitchen and house disintegrate.

I slowly spin around. I'm inside a huge space. Ryan's studio. In its centre is a suburban garden, weirdly out of place in the huge, clinical warehouse. The far side of the studio is in complete darkness.

The garden is the same one I saw out of Tasmin's bedroom window. A cherry blossom sapling grows at its centre, and there's a barbecue smoking on the patio. Ryan and Malaki are tending it. Ryan is slowly clapping his hands. I approach. Something that looks like a puddle of snot is bubbling over the barbecue's hot coals.

Malaki blushes. "Zac." He sighs. "You look incredible." He's beside me. He looks hot today. Even hotter than usual, draped in misshapen sea pearls, his eyes balls of squid ink. His tongue is in my ear, his fingers all over me, entering my mouth, fingering me. I gasp in pleasure. "Babes," he whispers. "You're ready."

"I think so?" I say, all whispery and sexy. I'd fuck my own mouth if I could. A little laugh escapes my plump lips. Been there, done that.

Malaki doesn't even have a clue just how ready I am. Taking in my own body has given me divine revelation. I am the holy cow. Blue Shore created me because it needs me. Something existed before Blue Shore, but it doesn't matter because that was the old world and what came after was far better. Far more divine and magical. A world powered by everybody's desire, and it all started with me.

My eyes are half closed, crescents of light blazing beneath my lids like a thousand exploding suns.

I notice Ryan's hand shaking as he turns the lump of slime so that the other side is frazzling on the coals. He's terrified of his own glorious creation.

"Jellyfish?" Ryan says. He's skewered a lump of slime and he's handing it to me.

I shake my head. Beckon to him with a long, hooved finger, licking my lips. He comes over to me, as tentative as a kitten. I'm twice as tall as him now. I grab him by his neck and pull him up to my lips. I kiss him deeply. He's trembling all over. My tongue circles his canines, presses against his tonsils, pries his jaw open wider. My muscular tongue grows bigger, pushing down Ryan's throat, expanding his palate. Cracking it in half. His bones crunch as his jaw breaks and separates. I drop his bleeding body to the floor.

Malaki is latched onto my teat, sucking and swallowing the milk that flows from me, Ryan's blood dripping down his face. He moves onto my cock. He winds his tongue around my shaft. My cock is pulsating and pumping like a rocket about to go off. He sucks on my cock's head, the whole thing filling his mouth. I climax, a whoosh of cum firing Malaki across the room. It bombards him, sticking him firmly to the wall, slimy cum flowing all around him. I approach him. "You never really liked me?" I say. "You were just playing a role?"

"Of course I liked you. I love you, Zac, but I had to play my part. I knew how this would unfold. For you and for Blue Shore. Ryan wanted a masterpiece and a product, but I could see the end. My parents told me. They saw it in visions. Blue Shore showed them how you bring the town to life."

"Then I have to go through all this again?"

Malaki looks down sadly. "Forever," he whispers. "Blue Shore will continue on into the future because you will be its engine.

Lush is Blue Shore's beating heart. Its blood. You have to fuel it from the beginning. You already did this. This already happened, Zac."

I scream. The whole building shakes. The sound coming from my body is so inhuman and alien that it rips anything biological to shreds. The deformed things in Ryan's experiment jars break apart and the jars shatter. Malaki's beautiful body rips into pieces, splattering onto the floor. I pick up one of the lumps of meat that used to be Malaki. This lump has Malaki's little cocktail sausage dick attached to it, rock solid as usual. He loved all this depraved shit. I rub the bloody part over myself as I make my way to the milking machine. Malaki's juices are really turning me on. I need to be hard to be milked. I need to be the horniest I have ever been. All of my sexual energy needs to flow through Ryan's machine.

But I'm not really willingly going to hook myself up, am I? Is Blue Shore really worth saving? If I don't do it, what will happen? Lush will dry up, everyone will turn into ugly, uninteresting, normal people, and all of the magic that makes Blue Shore such a weird place will be sucked out. Blue Shore will become like any other shithole seaside town in England. I can't even imagine a place without magic. Without strange things happening every day. What kind of life would that be?

But selflessness isn't what's driving me. I couldn't actually give a shit if Blue Shore withers away or not. I don't want this town to get what it wants. It's been playing me like a fiddle. If I don't hook up to the machine, I will become a normal guy again. Maybe people will forget who I am. That's what I've always wanted. But there is something that I desire more. The one thing driving me as I climb up onto the rack with all its pistons and tubes is Jake.

Jake's ghost is watching me. It appeared as my sonic scream tore Malaki apart. His ghostly hands were all over me, and I imagined Malaki's hot bloody flesh was Jake as I rubbed it all over myself. Tears flow down my face as I ask him, "What should I do?"

Jake points at the suction cups and the massive dildo. I already know the answer. I will hook myself up. Not because of any desire to save Blue Shore, but because I want to be with Jake again. I want to go back to the beginning of this story. I want to live it all again.

Forever and forever.

I strap myself into the rig. It faces the dark side of the studio. Jake helps me to connect all the pieces. Lovingly, he attaches the nipple suckers to my udders. The cock pump to my blood-covered dick. My arse is in position, and Jake parts my cheeks and fixes them in place with straps. Jake pulls a switch on the wall, and two enormous red lights come on in front of me, blinding me for a second. My eyes adjust. I'm staring into the face of the Blue Shore mascot. The cartoon seagull's feathery plush body fills my vision. Its beak is open, curving upwards towards the gull's face, so it looks like it is smiling. I'm bathed in the seagull's red glow.

"Ryan's secret project," Jake whispers. "Are you ready?"

"Ready." Jake kisses me on the lips as the machine starts up.

I close my eyes as bliss washes over me. Thousands of bot eyes light up all over Blue Shore. I move through them. I exist in the beams of light shooting from their eyes. Everybody tunes in to see me. To watch me become the heart of Blue Shore. My udders empty and refill, empty and refill, and as the machine pumps my dick, I cum once, then again, and again, and again. Time becomes soft and stretchy, moving around me like a mist of

snakes, all of them biting their own tails. I become the beginning and the end. Lush flows through the bots, through their owners' brains, then through the oxygen, and the water, and the sparkles, and even the plastic ducks.

I'm floating above Blue Shore, wracked by ecstasy, my mind melded with the fabric of everything. The essence of reality pours out of me in orgasmic pulses. For a moment, something goes wrong. A tube in Ryan's studio busts open. I feel it like a paper cut across my skin. Mild but painful. Ghostly hands gaffa tape the tear. The connection was only severed for a moment, and in that moment Lush, as thick and slimy as treacle, dripped from me.

It drops through space. It makes it through the atmosphere. It falls past raindrops, and seagulls, and words written in the clouds. I am inside the drip, feeling the rush of air around me, watching the pavement below getting closer, bracing for impact. I slam into concrete, separating into globules that splatter across the ground. Each individual blob contains me. We turn into heat-seeking worms.

We find each other.

We rejoin.

We become a single puddle of slime.