

Extract 1.

You should know that when I found the body I did not scream.

On the phone, I feigned humanity. I performed the inflections of a person overwhelmed and confused, but the fact was ‘no, he is definitely not breathing and there is no pulse.’ I stood by him patiently as we waited for the police and ambulance to arrive, hoping no dog walkers or joggers would amble near. I admit I drank my coffee, though I put my croissant in my bag for later.

The police asked their many questions and I was pragmatic in my answers. I felt like I was their colleague, my memory was so clear and my recounting so efficient. I felt like I answered in a way that suggested I was inured to horrors — humbled by them, perhaps, but no longer frightened. I said the precise time I had found the body (I’d checked), I indicated what footprints in the snow were mine and I described his original position, before I’d moved him to check breath and pulse. They said I’d been very helpful, but I think they say that to everyone.

The man had frozen to death, this much was clear to everyone.

I did not tell them that there was an immaculate beauty to the scene when I'd first found it, nor that I'd felt a weightless intimacy between me and this man as we'd waited for their arrival. I did not say that I felt like my life was supposed to be altered by this chance encounter, but it hadn't in the slightest. If anything, I felt like it this was meant to happen to me.

You should know that on the way home I ate my croissant.

I have never told anyone this story.

I think of it most often at parties, when I miss a social cue or I am strange and sharp. In the second of silence and my rude, polite smile that follows, I think of how this has happened to me, that one icy morning in December I was the person who found a dead man, I was the person who penetrated the secrecy of his death. He had likely slipped away hours earlier, privately and quietly, but I was the one who'd found the death, and I am now the one who carries it. And in cold moments, where I have not been right as a person, I know it is because I have a death inside of me. This thought is very comforting to me.

I have never told this story before. There is no way to prove it happened, but why would I lie?

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You should know that I was born a normal child and my parents loved me as best as they could, which is all you can ask of parents.

Extract 2.

Obviously all Normal Ben and I actually did was talk to each other (everywhere, in pubs, near the pond, in his car, on the tube over the sound of screaming gears, on WhatsApp for most of each day, at parties with my friends, at the airport as he ate two sandwiches, at the beach that one time, on the walk home, on the phone as I cried, a few times in restaurants, in his mother's living room, in my father's living room, in the garden as I smoked, on the balcony as I smoked, at the bus stop as I smoked, and of course in shops, marvelling at the girth of leeks) but at first all we really did was fuck.

The first time we slept together I did not feel like his body was a unique and new discovery, nor that what it would do to me was unique to him alone. I stroked his neck and chest the way I did everyone else's, and he tugged at my jumpsuit the way everyone did and said the customary 'how the fuck do you take this thing off' my jumpsuit had been subjected to so many times before, and when I reached down and he wasn't hard yet I said 'are you Catholic or something?' between

coating him in kisses and before he could answer I continued to entertain myself with ‘because I give you permission to sin. In fact I insist on it, you can go to confession later’ and as he started speaking I said ‘I can sense your remorse! I can sense your hesitation! But it’s allowed, you’re allowed to get hard! You’re allowed to fuck my brains out!’ and his laugh was so sexy it made me grateful God made me funny and especially grateful that Normal Ben found this irritation arousing because now successful I threw my leg across his waist and kissed him deeply as his beautiful head rested on my pillow and I pressed against his cock which was blissfully swelling, and asked what the worst thing about him was and before he could answer I said ‘I think it’s probably that you’re so good looking you don’t have to try very hard at all do you, people just give you things don’t they’ and batted away his hand as it tried to resolve my jumpsuit, ‘I think it’s probably that you’re too secure’ and he groaned and grabbed my waist, pulling me hard against him and muttered something about fucking hating me and then I said ‘what’s your mother’s name?’ and in his swift and athletic way he flipped me over so he lay on top of me and finally clamped his hand over my mouth and told me to shut the fuck up but faltered again at the jumpsuit and I wriggled smugly under him as he struggled to undress me until he rolled off, defeated, and I kissed his neck in that soft way you’re supposed to and stroked his perfect and unrewarded penis and said ‘tell me her name’ and he sighed deeply, eyes shut, and whispered ‘Maggie’, and I peeled my jumpsuit off in an instant, let him grab my hair like everyone does as I went down on him and then the moment he was inside of me, eyes shut and rough, I gasped and grabbed and said ‘call me Maggie’ and with the briefest

pause in his thrusting he said ‘I’ve never met someone I wanted to fuck more and less simultaneously’ and muted my laughter with his hand again and then there was hardly any talking and later when he came it was very good, it was like a punchline, it was like being loved.

Then in the pause, the space of clean up, heads on shoulders and eyes shut with deep contented breathing, a laugh rumbled through him slowly until he indulged in it fully, and after it had infected me and we were both laughing and I asked him ‘what’ three times he took a deep breath and admitted, serenely, ‘her name is Sally. And yes, I am Catholic, but lapsed. And you should know this about me — I will never say my mother’s name when I’m hard.’

He fell asleep before I did and I lay on his chest as it rose and fell gently, grateful that he knew how to lie to hide from God, and grateful that I knew his mother’s name.

Extract 3.

By the time my hand belonged to him there had been several foundational lies that I could not correct without unravelling his entire perception of me. I didn't often think about these lies when I was with him because the sincerity of the way he looked at me or held me almost made me feel real, like I wasn't an invention for him. But alone, sitting on the bus and gently chewing on the words I'd used that triggered a visible minor gear shift in his perception of me, like his understanding had enlarged, I'd suddenly run cold. Stopped at a traffic light, from the top deck of the bus I'd notice someone bleeding out on the pavement, a puncture at their jugular vomiting blood in convulsions, the bright puddle growing senselessly large, and I'd think about how I told him that I was in the school choir, that I was bullied when I was 9, that I broke my arm the first time I wore rollerblades, that I loved my cat, that the accident was reasonably traumatising, that we were friendly with our neighbours, that my ballet teacher fat shamed me, that it took me much

longer than normal to learn how to swim, that by the time she was drinking prescribed meal supplements we all began to accept she might be dying, that I got to see her corpse, that I fainted at the funeral, that I have much memory of the years after that, that I failed half my GCSEs, that we moved to this country carrying one suitcase each, that I've read *Wuthering Heights*, that I have strong thoughts about *Wuthering Heights*, that I'd never seen snow like that before, that we didn't own a fridge for several months, that my first kiss was good, that I had no fear about leaving home, that I preferred living alone actually, that I was surprised by how much I excelled academically, that the sex I was having was obviously sophomoric but informed my tastes nonetheless, that by the time Hamish and I got together we'd already been in love for a while, that it was a non-possessive affection and when he cheated on me I was honestly amused, that it lasted three effortless years because we were both so low-maintenance, that occasionally I would wonder if he was actually a bad person, that I fell out of love with him but didn't have the language for it, that I cheated, that I cheated because I didn't know any better, that I was surprised by how much it broke his heart, that I thought he would not be hurt by it, that he was the one who decided it was for the best we stop speaking to each other, that I moved on very quickly, that it was only after that I began to feel like an adult, that I was reasonably certain it was rape but I don't find it useful to call it that, that I moved to Clapham reluctantly, that I wasn't fucking many people, that I once slept with a man to charge my laptop, that I didn't call him Normal Ben in real life that's just what he was saved as on my phone, that I got ready very quickly because I don't really wear makeup, that I wasn't dressing to impress

him, that I wasn't going out of my way and I would have done it for anyone, that I found the body, that I found the body and was unaffected by it, that I really meant it, of course I did, I meant it and was so happy I could finally say it too, and then I'd think about how not all of these facts are true.

The body drained its colour onto the pavement and people walked through the stain without even noticing, tracking the blood behind them like a red shadow.

I decided I would confess everything as soon as I saw him, I had to, in reverse chronological order, so I could unstitch what he'd come to believe until we were perfectly detached. Then we'd never speak again and it'd be perfect, I'd get peace at last.

But as soon as I approached our favourite pub and saw him sitting in the beer garden with two drinks I simply had the choice between embracing his smile fully or acknowledging the window into the flat above the pub, which framed the perfectly still figure of a man hanging from his dressing gown belt. I kissed him hello before apologising insincerely for being late and then started telling him he wouldn't believe what happened on the bus on my way over.