

Manhood

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She rides, she shudders. She sucks air into her throat, says *Ooh* as it cools her. She squeezes your knees with fingers so tense the knuckles have turned white. She swishes her head down and you wrap your fingers around real black regrowth and dyed yellow hair. She's Reverse-Cowboying, facing away, twisting and shimmying on your lap. You count the vertebrae of her spine. She's short and plump. They're all misshapen in some way, these women, but they all have passion under their extra flesh, waiting to be tapped. You take off the brown and olive clothes and baggy track pants and reading glasses, strip the skin and fat off their skeletons, get inside them, feed on the raw woman.

She bends over, putting her face near her own feet. You withdraw your cock from her insides. It makes a sticky, plopping sound. Your lap is slick and shiny. Your thighs are white where her weight pressed on you. You unwind the hair from your hands, which have turned white too.

She lies on her back on the couch, legs open, inviting you in once again. You want to prise her open with your fingers, stroke her legs, ride the waterslide of sweat back into her body, just to show her what you can do.

'Oh my GAWD,' she says, and laughs. 'No one's fucked me like that since... GAWD.'

'Since you were 39?'

'Try 29.'

'Kids'll be up soon,' you go. 'No sleep for you, huh.'

Positioned on her back, one hand hiding her nipples, she strokes your chin with her big toe. 'I may not sleep, but I can tell people we slept together,' she giggles.

‘What time you meeting your lawyer? Making it official—the divorce, I mean?’

‘Baby, we don’t need to talk about that. Snuggle me.’

‘Cuddling’s an extra ten bucks an hour,’ you tell her, shifting along the couch. ‘I’m real sorry.’

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New week; new woman. Her name’s Kathleen, but no one ever calls her that - people call her Kay, ’kay? She laughs at the little pun and takes off her glasses and flutters her lashes. Fine. Whatever. God, you just want one of the smokes you can see throbbing in her handbag, radiating temptation. You scratch your arms; your stomach screams. You’ve been eating once a day, showering twice a week, sleeping on couches with foam spilling out. You look down at your tablet, see you’ve completed 50 minutes of work in the four hours you’ve been in class. Your student loan’s piling up, and if you don’t score some work from ladies on campus... It’s not even worth thinking about. Four red bank accounts is enough. 60% of campus is women, women who need people like you to hold open doors when their arms are full of library books. The work is out there, it just needs a worker to work it.

Kay has kids; she doesn’t boast about any talent or point of distinction, just her beautiful little girls. Kay seems otherwise defined by Lotto tickets and novels with candles on the cover and photos of beaches on her Instagram, all spectacles and fish and chips and big fatty breasts and hairdressing qualifications. Her body says Kids, Couches and Chocolate. She’s doing this design course because she thinks the life she’s driven off the road can be restored by 42. Maybe, Kay. Maybe. There’s a fee for indulging her.

God those smokes look good. She doesn't do catwalks or photos of her body or diets or celery or Evian. Everything about Kay is warm and well-fed and modest, cheap jeans, big earrings, shy eyes. She's on no trust boards. She doesn't exist on Google. She gets paid good solo parent support money by the government, you guarantee it. There'll be warmth and comfort between her legs. You sneak glances at the tight, damp valley, the cleft, the secret hibernation spot. Nothing bothers you when you're making women feel good. No one interrupts or taps you on your shoulder, tells you to do something else with your life.

Maybe women are what you'll do with your life. You'll always be 10 years younger than someone out there.

How old are they, anyway, the kids? Five and six, she goes, rolling her eyes. Little terrors, she laughs, You don't want to meet them.

Kids are alright, you shrug. My mum wants me to have kids, she keeps nagging my ass.

What about your dad?

Never had one.

You'll probably have a real hot wife by the time you're 30, she goes, licking her finger and wiping a spot of glue off the sleeve of your Misfits t-shirt.

I'll never be 30.

If you say so. I used to be like you.

You were my age, I'd'a totally asked you out, you tell her. *I would've sucked your neck in the movies. I would've bit your jugular vein open.*

Five and six'll mean the kids are pretty big, you want to say, How old's that make you? When did a man last take your weight in his arms and guide you as you collapse onto an unmade bed and listen to your belt buckle tinkle as you kick your jeans into a pile of laundr—

You put down your project, act interested in the photos on her phone. You may as well exchange numbers, now, you say. You've cornered the quarry.

Sure I love kids, you tell her—don't look so surprised. She gets warm, she gets wet, she takes off her glasses, makes some joke about getting back to work. The lecturer tells you off for talking, asks if you're certain you're making the best use of your time here, and you giggle like school kids and then it's Let's do coffee, then right on through till lunch, then she breaks it off, slaps herself, curses, apologises for relaxing. She has to pick up the kids, has to drop the magazine cover she's designing and go and tuck pyjamas into drawers and hang out laundry and scrub the peanut butter out of lunchboxes. She has to go back to blah. This has all been a mistake, but it's too late, someone's paying attention to Kay, Kay's taking the offer, Kay's smoking nervously in the car, the smoke's blowing back into the girls' faces as they watch YouTube on their iPads, Kay's asking you to dinner, sneaking glances at your triceps, your shoulders, Kay's anticipating your muscular thrusts, hoping she's earned your company. She can't imagine you're desperate for shelter, for a fridge with cold ham and milk, for money for crushed ecstasy tablets and Jägermeister tipped into bubbling beers.

Kids, eh? Not usually your bag but fuck it, why not. They're part of the job. Take some photos of you holding the little squirmers, pxt your mum. Tell mum you're a builder of families instead of a wrecking ball.

Kay cooks and serves you cans of Czech beer she was saving for a special occasion, and you tickle the girls and channel-surf. The girls crawl on your lap, mash your crotch with their knees. They're so trusting, you want to tear the lying organ out of your mouth and confess all the holiday homes you've raided, the medicine cabinets you've left empty, the Lego sets you've swapped for tiny little bags of

crystallised happiness—but all you tell the girls is corny answers to the corny jokes they read from the TV Guide.

They pour piles of tomato sauce on the fritters Kay apologetically makes for tea, 'cause she bought only wine, forgot to get food. They play with your earrings. They stroke the patterns of your tribal tattoos. You lift them toward the ceiling fan. You're the strongest person in the house. Kay slips in these comments about your 'build', a term which sounds old-world to you. You don't have muscles, really, it's just you're so starving that your muscles show through your skin.

The girls shake pepper into your drink. They lift your gums up, tap your teeth. They squirt soy sauce in the wine Kay tossed between her hands for 20 minutes in the supermarket aisle before paying thirty bucks for it. The girls force you to drink the soy-wine. You say a wine-baby is growing in your belly. They cackle. They're amazed someone so old can be so childish.

The girls go to bed 90 minutes late. You recite a story for each girl. The stories are plots of movies you've seen, *Gladiator*, *Master & Commander*. Kay recites 30-second stories for each girl, slams their bedroom door, puts her back against it, rolls her eyes up at God, calls his name, laughs. You move to the couch. She pours wines, puts her right knee over her left, then the left over the right, takes her glasses off, moves her hair behind her ear as if it's competing with her.

Kay's trying to upskill herself with a two-year diploma in design and illustration so she can break the \$20 an hour barrier, she says. You tell her she could model, if she wanted. She tells you to stop, swats your shoulder.

'Out of interest,' you go, swallowing merlot, 'How much you making? Y'got much saved?'

Kay gasps and stares. Tracey's out of bed, standing in the door frame. 'Are you gonna be my daddy?'

You carry the girl like a load of laundry into her room, tip her into her bed. 'Course I will, sweetie.'

Kay's in the hallway, hands behind her back, brushing the wall with her shoulders. 'It's only nine o'clock,' Kay says, pushing the glass of wine to your mouth, pinching the back of your head. 'What are we gonna do now?'

You press one hand against the wall on either side of her. The short woman in the track pants and Kmart shirt with her name embroidered on the breast closes her eyes, tips her head down. She's waiting for approval. You exhale into her ear. Your lips brush the skin on her neck. She's sprayed perfume and put on dangly earrings. You bite the throat, she claws your chest, squeezes your shirt.

'I need something.'

'Anything,' she goes.

'Listen very carefully: I need cash—or vouchers. We can't go any further unless... It's the rules. I'm really sorry.'

She clears her throat, keeps her eyes down. 'No worries,' she says. She will shatter if not handled gently. 'Not ayyy problem. Can I give you the stuff... *after*?'

You pull your shirt over your head, nudge her bedroom door open. She pools herself for you, little waves raising her hips. She strokes her rippling breasts. You add her nipples to the photo album you store inside your skull. You mash and roll and tease your body until part of it emerges, a blade you stick her with, you bite her chin, squeeze yourself inside her and she pulls her feet away from her ears, stretching one foot toward each side of the room, and you hold one twitching pectoral over each of her eyes and grunt and use your pelvis to push her against the wall, counting the thrusts until you've hit 200. Tears leave her face shiny. She reaches for her inhaler and cigarettes. You roll onto your

elbow, your coughing, shivering penis leaving a glaze on her hip.

‘I’m gonna have to have that cash by tomorrow,’ you go. ‘I’m real sorry to ask.’

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Mara wears heavy glasses that she has to tilt her head back to hold up, so her line of vision almost doesn’t meet your head. On an hourly basis she checks the spreadsheet you’re adjusting for the Economics Department, punches your arm if you’ve done something wrong. Each time she comes, you have a new joke you’ve stolen from some website. Each time she walks away, you plan the next joke. On your lunch break, you pound yourself in the university toilet until a party popper explodes in the palm of your hand and you can concentrate again. You try to walk off your obsession, press your nose against the window of FramesDirect in the arcade downtown. You go to McDonald’s, get your thickshake upsized to large, insist on drinking it from a Disney movie cup. The cup has dark sides, covered in cartoons. You pour the shake into the gutter. Smokers eat smoke, not sugar. Back to the FramesDirect store full of posters of bespectacled models with no chinks in their armour. You ask the girl with the moisturised fingers sitting behind the cash register if your grandma’s glasses are ready. Mrs Smythe. Nothin for her? Check again. Not *Smith*, S-M-Y-T-H-E, darling—check carefully, my lady. That’s an amazing necklace. That’s Saharan opal, am I right? Don’t ask how I know that. ‘Sbeautiful. Your eyes are green, aren’t they? With inflections of hazel, I’m gonna say. You’re so rare. We should party sometime. To Be Continued. Just check if there’s some glasses for a Smith or a Smythe or anyone starting with S, okay? They’re paid for already. Sall

good. The girl leaves her desk; you drop stolen specs into your deep thickshake cup.

You get back on campus early with your drink of \$400 glasses and you stall, walk in circles, smoke two Chinese cigarettes in ten minutes, take the elevator up all ten floors. Incredible view, like the view you admired when you were fingering that realtor against the huge panels of penthouse glass overlooking the river. You'd read in the paper her divorce was a seven-figure thing, seen a sorrow in her printed eyes. She'd pay five figures to feel loved again. You tugged her to the edge with two fingers stiff enough to pop eyeballs. She drooled onto your shoulder, gasping. You sucked the loose skin under her chin. You loved how short she was, how short all women are, beneath you, below, looking up, stroking the muscles beneath your collar bone with perfectly-painted fingertips. You sniffed her silver scalp, looked down your nose at the whirlpool of hairs on the crown of her head. Your forearm rashed her soft belly as you tickled the magic triangle where her belly met her legs. You found short black hairs embedded under your fingernails as you counted your cash. You had four showers within the next day. You didn't want to splash out on a therapist, the money was worth more than mental health, so you wrote guilty poetry on your blog.

You wash the glasses you stole for Mara in a men's room handbasin then blast them in the hand-dryer and they shine, and the red titanium-composite frames glow. They're drop-proof, you tell her, handing them over in the case the malleable girl gave you, Plus they've got a ten-year warranty. Or you can take 'em back to the store, if you don't want 'em. It's okay if you break my heart. I don't have one anyway.

She laughs, folds her arms, unfolds them, tickles her hair behind her ear, but takes her clunky glasses off and slides the

new glasses on and bites her red bottom lip till it's white. 'I really shouldn't, university policy's not to—'

'Have you even put 'em on yet? They must be invisible.'

She giggles and strokes your chest. *Cheers*. You reach out and squeeze her shoulder. It's an off switch, and her force field folds away. You step forward, pull the glasses off her face.

'You don't like 'em, I can tell...'

'No, retard, I mean—they're amazing. Aren't these worth, like, half a grand?'

You shrug. 'You're worth more.'

You've hypnotised this woman with admirable speed. It's not a new record or anything—hell, you melted a woman in eleven minutes, at this Narcaholics meeting one time—but—what's her name again? Martha?—Mara, that's it—this one is pouring out everything in just one afternoon. You think of Morlocks in *The Time Machine*, seizing those happier and higher than them, pulling them below. Martha—no, *Mara*—spends 17 minutes with you at afternoon tea instead of the regulated 10. You're tapping the sap and she's pouring out stories of the boy with learning difficulties making the beautiful woman sad and giving the sad woman something to define herself against. Mara was a massage therapist for three years, she had anorexia when she was 15, she chews her fingers till they're pink, she loves horses, she teaches literacy to prisoners on public holidays, she has a barbell through her labia. She can't believe she just told you that. She lashes out at Tae-Bo so she's too drained to lash out at her son. She knows he's not a curse, but he makes things so hard.

'I'm not a special case, though, so don't... you know.'

'But you *are* special.'

She shakes her head, stares out the window. 'Guess you'll have to come over,' she says, 'See that purple rock salt I was telling you about.'

Her kitchen has arranged itself around her body, with just enough space outside each elbow. She works hard to sweep up each shred of ginger and onion skin and speck of gluten-free flour. She cleans tins, wipes surfaces. There are knee-high boots in a corner, tucked under an umbrella. They look hardly-used. Because her son is fragile and everything could be taken away at any time, Mara takes care of things. Her son's disease makes him unable to digest anything that isn't mushy and wet. She must be responsible—after all, he came out of her. She has a machine to hose the compacted shit out of his intestines. She operates it still wearing her high-heels and nice white shirt. Her chest is flat, fit, muscular, taut, and she never treats herself to anything sugary or fatty. She stirs her gazpacho and sups it as if she doesn't deserve it. Her fiancé left her. He couldn't handle Benjamin. It's pronounced Ben-*ya*-min, by the way. The proper pronunciation.

After dinner, you wrestle Benjamin in front of the TV, carry him to bed, put a *Bob The Builder* video on his iPad, turn the light out, tell him yes, of course you'll marry mummy.

'Promise you'll be here in the morning?'

'Depends if I've got enough money. I get sick without money. I need it to be happy. You should tell your mum. Attaboy.'

You turn off each light switch you pass, find Mara scraping food into the sink, legs together, elbows in, head bowed. You seize her ponytail, bite the back of her neck, swallow her gasp as it leaves her mouth. 'Mate,' she tries to say, 'Let's, *stooooop*, shouldn't we go watch... *Abbb*.' You tip her into your arms, catch her, put your knee between hers. Half-pushing, half-dragging, you urge her into the bedroom, where the bedsheets have been tucked in so harshly the bed's become flat and hard. The panties you pull from her thighs to her toes used to be white, now they're faded grey. You

slurp the juice out of Mara as if she's an oyster. She thumps your back and pulls your hair and her ankles drum your butt. There's electricity flowing through her body. Her fingertips flicker. There's blood on her chin. She's bitten her lip. You reach under her, flip her body over, make some joke about her new position, about the value for money you're gonna give her, extend your middle finger, spread her knees. Your chest presses against her shoulders. Your belly fits into the cavity in her lower back. Her head thumps the wall with each thrust. It sounds like she's sobbing. You think of payday and squirt inside the condom, and think of money again, and keep thrusting.

She snores; you scheme. You sit up so slowly the bed doesn't creak, find a brand new packet of Marlboros in her handbag, the ones you asked her to buy. She's failed to get you a lighter. There's a fee for that. You borrow Mara's car, drive to the store, get a lighter and pancake mix, come back as the sun's rising, make Benjamin chocolate chip pancakes, clear the table so Mara can't see anything other than your masterpiece when she gets up.

She comes out blinking in those new glasses of hers with leg warmers and Nikes on.

'I'm broke now, after these,' you say, sliding a plate of pancakes in front of Mara.

'Oh. Okay... My bag's in the car, I think...How much do I owe you?'

'He's the best!' Benjamin shrieks, slurping his banana-flavoured milk with the curly fun straw you've bought him. 'You gotta let him stay another night, mum!'

'Hold still,' you tell the boy, sliding his banana milk to the left, positioning your phone in front of his face, getting a photograph good enough for Ma.

Can't walk down her street, can't be seen by her on Facebook with that name. Can't Tweet that one, can't go to the gym where the other ones goes. All you can do without changing your routines is wait until everyone has healed, smoke all the cash in all your bank accounts and pick up this Dutch girl who says she's 19 and let her buttcheeks slam against your waist on the bottom bunk of a dorm full of backpackers using cellphones and even with your eyes closed, picturing the girl 20 years from now, desperate to have you, begging and clutching so she won't be alone, you can't climax—

But you can hunt.

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With your new name, new bank account free of restrictions and new email account, you post the advert on Craigslist, then there are two weeks of downtime before enquiries start happening.

You go on this course where they teach you to drive buses and bulldozers. You operate an axe for a week, tearing out the walls of a derelict house. You sleep in the houses of men, apologetic, feeling weak when they clomp into the room.

You look up an old friend, Patrice, in the corner of the city where the sections are large and there are greenhouses and factories turned into Saturday organic vegetable markets. Patrice's last name was something like Riverwater, there was a *River* in it, she changed it when she was trying to become Gender Rights Officer on campus when you thought you were going to become an engineer. God, six years goes quickly. She's Community Shopping with five other Amish-looking women who she breaks away from for your arranged meeting. You put a big hug and kiss on her. She smells like

nutmeg. Her hair is rich and thick, unwashed. It's not long before you've separated her from the pack, made her invite you into her home. It's not long before you've bonded with her twin 3 year olds who are allowed to play with untreated native wood only. They stack blocks and chew on dried figs and you watch her thighs shift under her orange canvas skirt. Everything is autumn-coloured in her house. The wallpaper is brown. The wood is unpainted.

'Listen, I've gotta tell you about this condition of mine,' you say, coming back from the bathroom where you've released some tension. 'Open Craigslist. Just do it.'

'I don't have a computer. What is it?'

'Don't be offended, but, listen—you obviously need a daddy around here.'

She pinches your arm, brushes her lips against it, flutters her eyelashes. 'I think so, too.'

You break out of the close contact, build a farm scene with the twins' wood blocks and some pieces of wool that are supposed to be sheep. Patrice boils mugs of raspberry tea. Dinner is wild rice with some kind of Indian cheese mixed in, with a steaming bowl of water and kelp. You bathe the kids and send a pxt to your mum. *I think I might've found the one, ma.* Patrice is ecstatic to finish the final paper in her psych course. She couldn't've done it without you minding the girls, thank you soooo, sooo much. You lift her like a fireman over your shoulder and she squeals and you flop her onto a padded surface then sit up against the wall, shirtless, with your hand pressed against her chest, keeping her away.

'We gotta talk business real quick.'

She leans back, protects her breasts with two fists. 'Can't we do it later?'

'I'm supposed to bill you. I can't work for free, I'm sorry. This is what I do, I mean—you read my advert... didn't you?'

She hugs a cushion against her breasts. ‘Don’t you *like* me?’

‘Before we do *this*, we’ve just gotta make a contract, that’s all. Nothing written, honest, we don’t have to write nothing down. Just verbal. It’s, like, it’s for my protection...’

She starts reaching for her cardigan and you say Don’t, and wrap your arms around her elbows, your nipples pressed against her shoulder blades, your chin pushing down on her clavicle, nuzzling her, and she tilts her head until her throat is exposed and you suck until she’s almost saying yes, almost, but it never comes.

She twists out from under you, throws a leg across you, straddling, pushes your chest back.

‘Thassit, baby. Let’s rock.’

‘Tell me what’s wrong with you,’ she says, even as she’s pulling your huge hoodie over her cooling body, pinning it with her elbows, shivering nakedly. ‘I’m a qualified counsellor, now, pretty much. Why are you doing this?’

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You need a client who won’t fuck around. Kay takes minutes to win back. She has a story about another man who scooped her up after you’d left her smashed on the pavement, but you’re certain a story is all that it is. You fuck her in the shower and on the floor and in the changing rooms of Kmart. You bill her for a hundred hours of love. You scoff the leftovers from her fridge. You scoff every original plate she prepares for you. You slam her against the wall until all her resistance and disappointment is smashed away. She claws at your chest and mashes your face and demands you pause and put a condom on, but you tell her the magic words that keep you doing what you want to be doing. ‘*I know you love this.*’

‘Just-keep-just-keep-just-keep-fucking-meeee.’ You come inside her. There’s a fee for that. That’s your rent paid for two weeks, maybe a new cellphone too.

When the moon has painted you blue and shadows are painting black the clefts and folds above her curled hips, and the sheet’s around her ankles because the room’s hot and stinks of sweat and lube and latex, you tiptoe to the kitchen, pull up a chair in front of the fridge, suck the chicken off some drumsticks, eat some of those delicious jellies and candies the girls are only allowed once a week, unwrap some slices of cheese. Since the Coke has been opened, it makes sense to drain the rest of it into your belly. It dribbles off your chin, goes sticky on your chest.

You re-trudge your steps across the dark carpet. There’s at least three types of carpet stitched together, and creaky floorboards, and a leak somewhere in the hall that’s gotta cost four figures to fix. You push open the door and see the woman with rolls of fat stacked on her hips curled like a caterpillar. Her short, soft body turns subconsciously toward where you’re supposed to come and sleep. You think of money. You think of the sound a zipper makes as it buzzes down the back of a woman’s dress. You think of your glass pipe and little crystals that take your filthy feeling away in white smoke. You think of her kids and what \$896.50 could’ve bought them.

You were precise with the bill, exacting. \$896.50’s what it came to. It’s just business.

Everyone knows love shouldn’t fuck with business.

You glide back into her bed, suck her lips till she wakes up, give her some love, off the clock. There’s something about this client, she’s earned a little extra. You can hear her girls waking up, whining, begging you to stay. These adult transactions, they’re nothing to do with little kids, but there’s something there, some strange economy. The more you read

to these girls and draw them pictures and wrap your big hand around their tiny hands and guide their handwriting, and the more money you take from their mum, the more you feel you owe them—

Then again, the girls never signed any contract with you. You gotta eat, and to eat, you gotta prey, and to prey, you gotta sneak out the bathroom window. You almost text her *Sorry*, but she won't believe you.

There's a mother who needs you to escort her to an eight-year-old's birthday party. She tells the party hosts she has to drive to the store. You fuck her in her car with her fist pushed against the window and her face mashed with frustration and ecstasy. You sleep at her place a couple nights, ask her for cheap bottles of wine, though cigarettes are increasingly pricey and you HAVE to have those too, there's no choice about it. Also, you can't eat cheap hamburgers. You won't see movies that aren't 3D. If you don't pay for the finest tattooists, you'll both regret it five years from now. She says you can't keep sleeping at her place. Her husband'll be back from the tournament on Sunday. You make her pay for the motel room with the spa inside it. It's too harsh on your feet, tip-toeing all the way to the spa room. Come to think of it, you need new shoes. She's got room on her AmEx, you know it.

You hate yourself for a weekend, and turn the hate into desire. You find a hip, youthy church to blend into. They grind real beans instead of serving instant coffee. You grind the wall of a toilet stall with the woman who handed you the offerings dish. You brush her hand; you tell her you had to hold someone. You tell her you've just put in 90 minutes of conversation and waited till the church was empty. 1.5 hours means she owes 1.5 times your hourly rate.

'Are you for real,' she gasps.

'I used to be,' you pant, slurping the brains out of her ear

You let the sons of desperate women with bright lips use your pocket knife and have sips of your beer and you show them how to hammer a nail. They give up the choicest seats at the dinner table and you get the largest portions when supper's served. They need someone to be head of the family.

Women need you to be there as their princesses smash piñatas at birthday parties, so the mums never have to admit they're on their own. They need you to jog with their prams. They need you to hold the pads at BoxFit For New Mums. They need you to stand at the door as a babysitter comes in so the mum doesn't look like she's going out solo to the movies. You hit on every babysitter, to get back to normal, but there's a note of disgust and wariness in the voices of these optimistic, blameless, unruined girls, so you stick to what you're good at.

You wedge yourself between a husband and his Malaysian noblewoman wife and fuck her so hard she can never be intimate with her husband again. You get your chin bloodied by a man in a suit frothing at the mouth who finds you scrubbing your armpits with his shower gel. Some of these women use the dictionary's darkest words to blacken you in text messages they send ten at a time. They regret everything. You regret not banking the money they've paid you. You can make \$1000 one Friday night and lose it by the next.

You gaze at your high school bros on Facebook. They tell tales about 18-year-olds they yank out of clubs and fuck at 6am; you tell them I know, bro. I'm with you. I feel you. Happens to me all the time, bro—

But that's bullshit. You tell them nothing about whoring yourself out as a fill-in father for the women you never see depicted on TV and movies. You can already hear what your bros would say to you if you told them. They'll never again let you sit beside their sisters at a Christmas dinner.

You have 2000 Facebook friends one week, then vicious things get said, women report that you're the devil, your account gets hidden, you change your name, come back and befriend them the next. You post no profile photos; you can't report the news that fills your days. You need to complete the study course you once tried to commit to and find the right administrator in the Faculty of Arts and grind her on a rug on the floor of her own office while the printery prints your diploma. She screams at you afterward. You can hear her sobbing through her closed door, trying to tug her wedding ring off. You're alone in the hallway, with two directions to choose between.

You fuck your friend, your confessor, your mother, your sister, your soulmate. You don't make love to any of them.

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Xanthia and that old one, Mara, have a booking on the same weekend as this soccer coach and this opera singer and this greying police officer and this woman who's come out of a decade of pot and vodka dependency and needs a deep, strong keel to hold her in the water. Felicia, Christina, Christine, Lydia, Joanne, Carmen. You can only juggle half a dozen names in your head at once.

Your friends have babies and buy trucks and get their wedding anniversary dates tattooed on their wrists. You'll never be like them, mowing the lawn, splitting firewood, clapping at the TV screen. You don't own a power drill. You can't fix a leaking sink or remove a u-pipe with your hands. You suck cigarettes like they're full of helium and you'll deflate without the gas. It takes seven or eight drinks at lunch and at night to keep gravity holding you down.

These women aren't members of clubs. Their girlfriends all moved away and married. These women drop their kids at

school, work hard, try to eat salad for lunch, pick the kids up, make dinner, watch TV and wonder how the actresses stay skinny and get guys. They roar at the kids to quieten down so the mums can go to bed. The things they whisper at 3am are said in the delicate, crushable voices of four-year-olds. The midnight counselling sessions? They're billable, too.

If you got your one hundred women together and hosted a soiree, they wouldn't mingle. They wouldn't believe they had anything in common. They'd go into separate corners. Julia, 42, last name unimportant, has curly soft brown hair. Her eyes are gentle. Freckles creep from her forehead all the way down onto her chest. She has a PhD in commerce. She delivers lectures at university. A Sunday paper does a story about how she's a role model and used to be known for bringing her child into the office, refusing to place him in daycare. You make her pay you \$15 an hour so she never has to admit that when the lecture theatres empty, she's alone.

A 51-year-old woman doesn't expect to be held against the wall and fucked while candles flicker and the vibrations shake the petals off a dozen roses. A 51-year-old career woman cries while she sets up your automatic payment with her laptop on her belly while her knees cradle your ears like headphones. A 51-year-old woman gasps and wriggles every time your hard tongue presses her clit.

Kay stands on the doorstep of another woman's house, saying, I thought you wanted to do design.

Nah, you tell her. I took a shortcut. You shouldn't've bothered, Kay. You got the girls in the car?

Yeah, I do.

That them crying I can hear?

Yup. Wanna know why they're crying?

Nah. I don't wanna know.

Kay's spent 30 hours putting together this portfolio so you can apply for honourable work. Mara's got you an Advanced Certificate In Research Accounting to put on your CV. Patrice has organised an entire job for you, if you want it—35 hours collecting trolleys from a parking lot.

Years drift like clouds as you fuck and tickle poker machines and suck cigarettes and eat burgers and watch movies, skinny, starving, brown teeth, slumped, spine curled.

When the children of these women get to about 12, even 14, you have to stay away. You're happy to destroy these kids' mothers for money, but the kids themselves? Dangerous. Kay's little girls—big 15-year-old girls now, and God, you can never remember their middle names, but you can't shake their birthdays out of your head—they get some triad of boys from their school to follow you. You run through an alleyway, can't see the end, panic, feel justice on your heels, then emerge onto High Street and breathe again and stroll into a bank instead, seconds away from having your face smashed by kids with more testosterone than you.

Shopping vouchers from Lucinda or Lucianne or whatever her name was remain in your pockets. The youths go away, but Mara's son, he confronts you next. He has a picture of his mum on his smart phone and he's thrusting it at you. His voice is deeper than yours. He is heavy with spaghetti and NutriGrain; you're 20 years older, but weak compared to this kid. You scurry away from him in some hi-fi department in some megastore and run and crawl and crouch between furniture and emerge and think, Something has to change.

200 women is enough. You start snapping SIM cards, biffing them out of the window. You're throwing out photos of the children your mum wants you to have, yes, but there are other ways to make your mum happy—plus, after eight years, maybe she's not mad at you anymore.

Maybe you'll tell her you love her.

Maybe you won't charge a cent.

You park outside the house of a woman you left one night at dinner when you said you were going to use the bathroom. You saw her sticking her fork in a piece of broccoli, then you left. Why the fuck not? Your old man did the same, didn't he? You have to check three SIM cards before you find her old messages and phone number. A teenager answers the phone. He's confused when you fumble, when it's obvious you can't remember the woman's name even though you jerked this woman's car off the highway, tugged her hand into a grove of fruit trees, tugged her panties down around her ankles, pushed her into the wet leaves and dirt, licked the makeup off her cheeks. 'Sounds like you want my dad,' the boy says, 'I'll see if he's home.'

'No—don't. I want Kay.'

'Kay? Who the fuck's that? Kay doesn't live here, bro.'

'I know. But I want her.'