MUMMY

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AT FIRST IT WAS CURIOSITY.

I wanted to know if my body was alive, so I devised the kind of fertility test you might perform if you'd never been to a gynaecologist, which I never had. It was curiosity, but also I wanted the bleeding to stop.

Years after coming off the pill my period still arrived almost to the minute, a blood offering to nobody. Everything else in my life was perfectly still. Even my fingernails had stopped growing. I brushed my hair and it fell out and didn't grow back and I liked it that way. Night turned to day turned to night but it made no difference to me. I watched the same defanged straight-to-stream movies and numbed my nerve-endings with the same vibrator, money entering and leaving my account as data. But even that felt like work.

What I really looked forward to was climbing into bed, tucking up tight under the duvet and scrolling Instagram for hours, auditing my ego until it was fully anaesthetised. It felt so good to feel nothing. No jealousy, no desire. On my phone I would study women's faces and bodies forensically, noting the differences between grid, story and tagged pictures, inspecting their outfits, angle choices, accessories and screenshotting everything, as if I might need to produce evidence at some point. I would lie wrapped in bed linen, burning candles, measuring out my life in Instagram stories.

In my dark bedroom life was soft, fragrant and meaningless.

I thawed the same gluey meals over and over again, eating with disposable cutlery out of cans and plastic trays. But then, somehow, I would bleed. And then I would rage.

Since my early teens I'd dry-swallowed the same sugary hormones, skin dappled with hives, mind full of black dots. A superficial cycle implemented before my body was even done developing. I'd grown inches of fat around my uterus that hardened like resin behind the zip of my jeans. I'd swallowed and I'd bled, always on time.

Each stage of my cycle was uniform, each scent: the yoghurt tang of my underwear, the sirloin musk of my armpits. I came to dread the distant thunder of cramps, the first blood, gummy in my underwear. I came to fear it.

I considered going back on the pill and running it over month by month, but couldn't shake the feeling all the dead blood would pool up inside me and start leaking out of my pores. I started thinking about how to make it stop. I devised my plan. Looking for men on dating apps, setting my radius to a couple of miles. I was searching for a father figure to make a mummy out of me.

The first man I met was Harry, 35. I didn't wash for Harry, but I brushed my hair and smudged lipstick in an attempt at coquettishness. I wore a tight boned top that pressed hard into my chest to reveal a rectangle of creased skin around my cleavage which I studied in the mirror. Digging out an ancient pot of anti-aging décolletage crème I found it sulphuric yellow and rancid, so packed powdery foundation on instead, taking swigs from a heavy-bottomed bottle of tequila.

I met Harry at a pub on a week night and we drank and talked about TV shows. I agreed with everything he said, but sometimes stopped and pretended to think before I agreed. A couple of times I lied about not having seen something so I could sit and listen wide-eyed while he described it.

Harry didn't seem attracted to me but when the pub closed I asked if he wanted to come back to mine and he said sure. I poured us mugfuls of tequila that tasted purple and green as I forced down sips, and sat so close to him our thighs touched through our jeans. We acted like we knew each other, complicit in a ritual that no one could seriously

call dating. Every so often I would turn to look at him and remember that Harry was a total stranger.

When he eventually kissed me, my body recoiled at the lack of chemistry and I had to force my lips back on to his.

It felt like kneeling down with an open mouth and licking tarmac.

We fucked without a condom and when he told me he was going to finish, I said I was on the pill. He left 15 minutes later and I unmatched him before I heard the door close.

The next day I matched with Tristan, 33. He worked in A&R and seemed to have a baby son who lived in a distant, tropical part of the world. I wore the same outfit as the night before, no underwear this time, and took an immediate dislike to him. He had shoulder length hair the colour of dried glue and his mannerisms were unsettlingly girlish.

Tristan's eyeballs seemed too small for his head and the way they rolled, revealing their circles of white like a ventriloquist's dummy, disturbed me. With Tristan I didn't nod along obligingly or place my body snugly against his on the sofa, I didn't want to. We fucked silently from behind, standing up in my hallway. After he came, he pulled out, picked up his Mubi tote bag and left.

On the third day my body was stiff and dehydrated, I winced as I rolled my head off the pillow to find my phone. Opening the app, I scrolled through an inbox of messages from strangers, who offered in subtle and unsubtle terms to fuck me and then never speak to me again. Through the cushion of my hangover, I felt a thrill—a kind of excitement at finally being able to think like them, behave like them. *Fuck these people* I thought, and smiled.

I matched with a 41 year-old called Matt who looked like he might have been athletic once, wearing an old Boiler Room T-shirt and a five-panel hat.

All of the posturing on Instagram dissolved once you switched apps.

No one here knew what "Drain Gang" was.

Over here people were still using photos from 2017, presenting as ghosts, ready to show up, move some furniture around and disappear. I wanted to play. I was playing.

I arranged to meet Matt at the same pub as the others. He was out of shape but attractive, with a boyish haircut that was peppery grey and thick. He smelt of patchouli and had eyes that seemed ever so slightly crossed. Matt was relaxed and ready to enjoy himself. There was something about him that felt slightly paternal—the way he said my name, how he touched the top of my arm—close but not sexual.

When he brought the second round of drinks back to the table, I imagined a world in which I loved this man, and vaguely wished I knew how to be the kind of woman who could. Matt asked me what I did for work, he asked me how long I'd been living in my flat, he asked me what my interests were. He asked me if I'd ever been in love, and when I told him that once I thought I had but it turned out that probably I hadn't, he asked me how I felt about that, and said he understood.

Matt didn't take the tequila I offered him once we got back to mine. Instead, he had bought a bottle of wine and made a point of asking me what I thought of it, filling two glasses right to the brim. I picked mine up carefully and contained a smile, wondering if he'd ever poured wine before, endeared by this childlike quirk.

Matt got up and studied my bookshelf with intent. He asked if he could look me up on Instagram. He told me he loved to cook, and showed me photos of elaborate plates of food he'd put together, seemingly for no one. As we drank more, we started to flirt. He started asking me questions about how I liked to have sex, and insinuated, subtly but grinning, that he loved eating pussy. I felt myself blush unexpectedly, and went to the kitchen.

Cardboard sleeves from freezer meals were piled up next to the bin, reaching the counter and tumbling over into sub-piles. I

saw myself through Matt's eyes for a second, living in a tomb I'd created around myself, waiting to disappear, I guess waiting to die. Excusing myself to my bedroom, I poured the last few inches of tequila into an unwashed cup, pinched my nose and tipped it down my throat, swallowing fire, gasping for breath.

Back in the living room I wondered if Matt would insist on using a condom and how I'd respond if he did, but as we began to pull our clothes off I was relieved when he said nothing. Under his T-shirt his body was more solid than I expected, arms stronger, stomach thicker and wider. His belt was black leather and heavy, surprisingly formal, and, as I heard him unbuckle it with purpose, I felt something. Then, without ceremony and without a word, Matt pulled my knickers down and pushed his fingers inside me. As he began moving them, fast and ungracefully, then aggressively, my body stiffened and I felt a kind of distance stretch out between us.

Matt knelt on the floor with my legs over his shoulders and continued to push his fingers harder into me until it became uncomfortable.

'Ow,' I said, and squirmed, but he didn't stop. It was as if by removing my clothes I had agreed to a new dynamic, the contents and rules of which were subliminal at best, unspoken either way. My nakedness meant something coded to him which it didn't to me—an agreement, licence to do whatever.

I looked down and saw his eyes, blank, nothing of the man I'd spent the evening with, nothing but my own scorn reflected back at me, amplified. *Fuck these* people, he was thinking. *Fuck this person*. With one hand still pushing hard he reached the other up to grip my neck, his heavy body pinning me to the sofa.

'Ouch,' I repeated, louder and breathless, but he didn't move. I tried to wriggle back but couldn't.

Matt started to squeeze the hand around my throat while pressing the other one further, trying to push past his fingers until he was up to his palm. He kept his eyes fixed on his hand, occasionally looking blankly up to my face. He was silent. I let out a whimper, a mix of fear and bewilderment. Then he moaned.

I struggled to process what was happening, grasping around for words that might end my pain without drawing attention to it.

‘CAN WE FUCK?’ I MUMBLED, AS CASUALLY AS I COULD MANAGE.

Matt relaxed his grip momentarily to flip my body over and pull my legs apart. I felt him there, behind me, waiting. His open belt pressed against the back of my thigh, buckle cold, leather thick and smooth. At that moment my plan became absurd. Trying to use men to help me do it became insane.

All that existed was right now, body dissociated from brain, no organs, no soul, not living or dead, just bruised, bruising.

‘You want me to fuck you, do you?’ Matt said, in a voice that sounded nothing like the one I’d heard earlier. *‘Yeah? You want me to fuck you?’* He held my hips in his hands. *‘You want to get fucked by a strange man? Nice girl like you?’*

I felt him pull back, then reaching forward and wrapping his hand around my neck again, he shook my head violently. His other hand came down hard on my bent hip, hitting and then grabbing the spot he’d hit. *‘Makes you feel alive, does it?’* he spat, pinching my skin. Then he pushed my rigid body forward so my head was pressing into the dusty sofa. I felt his eyes on the back of my head, on my body.

‘Ugh,’ he said. *‘You’re fucking bleeding.’*

Matt fucked me while I bled and I tried to remember to breathe so I wouldn’t faint. At no point did I tell him to stop. After a while he pulled out and came silently onto the sofa cushion, before buckling his belt back up and reaching for his phone.

I lay curled in silence for a few seconds before becoming self-conscious. I stood up and left the room in a daze. Matt did not flinch. He did not look at me. With his eyes on his screen he asked for a phone charger. In the bathroom I found that I was bleeding from both between my legs and out of my mouth, where I’d bitten little indents, like the prints of pebbles on bare feet at the beach, all along the outside of my bottom lip. I slipped out of the bathroom silently, not looking at the stranger in the other room.

In my dark bedroom I stood and tried to recalibrate time. I tried to find my way back into time, to organise the past half-hour into an order I could understand, to

process it while destroying all memory of it.

In my dark bedroom I began to breathe normally again. I lit a candle and looked at my black outline in the long mirror.

In my dark bedroom I caught up with time by putting my hand between my legs and feeling the warm blood on my fingers.

In my dark bedroom I started rubbing the blood over my inner thighs, moving rhythmically up over my stomach, then meticulously over my goose-pimpled forearms, my ignored breasts, my rising and falling ribcage.

In my dark bedroom I rubbed blood into the roots of my hair, down my chin and over my eyelids.

Out of my dark bedroom I walked, red and black-eyed. In one hand I held the tequila bottle, a white iPhone charger dangling from the fingertips of the other.

Padding towards the cluttered living room, I stood silently in the doorway and looked in. Matt sat on his phone on the dishevelled sofa. Around him, magazines spilled over the floor, shoeboxes full of dried up felt-tips and birthday cards and old photos were stacked on top of each other, trainers had been kicked off and forgotten next to piles of laundry sorted by colour, no way of knowing now what was washed or unwashed.

It was beautiful—my scent, my handwriting, me—filling the room, piling up in front of the radiators, reaching the windows. I smiled and walked up to the back of the sofa. I raised the bottle of tequila up and brought it down hard on the top of Matt's head. Then I raised it up and brought it down hard a second time. Then a third. And then, as he struggled to process what was happening,

I wrapped the white cable around and around his neck, and started to pull.