

MR. SUNRISE

The women tumble through the turnstiles like frowning metal bunnies, close enough to smell and touch. They jostle and slide and breath in wet flowered huffs, settling into the filthy orange seats with their knees pressed tightly together while the gays swoon and giggle and thugs slide sideways through the door cracks pilfering the unzipped and unbuttoned. I sweat and fidget in the crowded car. A policeman's holstered gun rubs against my kidney. A small boy leans against my leg and falls asleep. The conductor says nonsense things. The train lurches into the dirty dark tunnel.

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Back on street level I work the phone as I walk, scrolling, texting, calling, deleting.

Hello? Hello? Um, yes, it's Thomas. We met in the gym.

We met at the museum. In the nightclub. At the grocery store.

The cold wind on my cheeks feels the way I imagine Botox might feel but I force myself to keep smiling, knowing it will leech into my voice.

When I reach my midtown apartment I Facebook and Tweet for an hour. I Nerve, I Match, I Cupid, nudging and tweaking my digital selves as they evolve and encircle the electronic women they stalk. I am between 20 and 40 years old. I have never been married and/or am divorced. I am a Republican but I also like to kiss. I am agnostic and a strong, malleable believer in whatever eases your guilt and relaxes your abductor muscles. I am fit, rich, stable, sensitive, happy, tall. I am a fireman who writes poetry and in my spare time I work as a CEO for the Last Bank Standing. A social yet non-promiscuous Type A, I am the life of

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the party who will deflate my balloon on your command and weep profound tears of love and empathy as needed.

I love Jesus, but I'd also fuck the tooth fairy.

You'll send me photos of the people you used to be. You'll represent the person you wish you were. We'll exchange a hundred emails of tricks and traps, spending days and weeks of our lives on personal discoveries that used to take seconds and yet we'll still know nothing. Professionally written bullshit is the new pressed shirt. A photo-op holding a fish is the new cleavage. Google is the first dance. Forgettable sex is the new Zumba. We're alone because we want to be.

I dial the number of a woman I met in Starbucks earlier but it's disconnected, so I go through my closet seeing what to wear on my date with Martha. Something soft, loose and not too constrictive, something casual yet dressy enough to go slumming elsewhere if Martha doesn't deliver.

We met at the bookstore, Martha and I. A

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prime gathering spot for libidinous females with mediocre social skills and workable levels of self esteem. I was in personal growth with one foot in cooking, carrying tomes on meditation and senior care and floral arrangement and Pacific Rim vegetarian gourmet. She was lugging heavy art books to accentuate her biceps. I wore boxers. She wasn't wearing a bra. We kissed in self-help and it was the last time I ever saw her in daylight.

You'll tell me that you love me. You'll tell me that I'm special. You'll tell me that you've never felt this way before. You'll work hard to remember my name, but sooner or later you'll slip up.

I start dialing again in the bathroom, the phone hot against my palm.

You have reached a non-working number at American Express.

You have reached the law offices of Diddle and Diddle.

You have reached the rejection hotline.

You have reached the quasi-mail server and we don't reach back.

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Sex is the new small talk. To a tech-savvy millennial, the definition of progress is a hands-free blowjob, and the real number is not how many men you've been with but how many minutes you've made them wait. Rejection is a random and practical necessity, but the truth is that we're all in rotation. Sooner or later we'll meet again, and in one of your calculated whore-moments we'll move up another notch, like standing in line for a taxi. Mating is a matter of timing, and at a certain time of night you'll literally fuck anything. You'll complain about it to your girlfriends the next morning over mimosas at the Soho Grand, of course, but this will just make you feel dirty and horny all over again.

All we have to do is get to you first. Your feigned acquiescence is our reward for living in this post-feminist shithole, and though we know there is no protection against it, nor a cure for it, the only sexually transmitted disease that truly scares us is *love*.

Shortly after my divorce I tried speed dating. This is where people go when they

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absolutely cannot get laid. It's like a fake game show where everyone loses. We're expected to lie, and we do. The business cards from jobs we've lost and the five minute fictions we hand over to you are the last stop we'll make before paying a sex worker who is far more attractive than anyone in the room and considerably less expensive. Also, you've got to understand that half the guys are masturbating under the table in between one-handed texts to fuck-buddies. Touching ourselves reminds us of why we're talking to you in the first place. We'll finish later in private, applying our practiced degradation to your imaginary face. I don't know what the women do, but I'd guess the same.

One of your photos will show you smiling while posed atop a horse, or a camel or an elephant for that matter. We have Internet. We know why women like horses. Veganism need not be mentioned, either. Cucumbers, zucchinis, long purple eggplants; every year thousands of people hobble alone into late night emergency rooms with remnant

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vegetable parts irretrievably embedded in their most favored orifices. We're the emotional equivalents of garbage disposals.

Martha calls to cancel as I'm knotting my tie. It's not her time of the month and even if it was she'd redwing it, so she got a better offer. I let it go to voicemail, and she texts just to be sure I won't come. A minute later she follows up with an email. The way I feel about this is the same way I feel about rescheduling a business meeting.

The thing about girls like Martha is that you have to sleep with them on the first date. If a girl sleeps with her doorman on her way upstairs, it's your own fault, and she'll never see you again. She'll tell her friends and colleagues and bartenders and they will laugh at your inattentiveness. Your inability to unzipper her will race through your social media circles in no time at all and it will be over for you. Big cities are very small places. Don't fall for the nice-guy routine. Don't go slow. Whatever bullshit she slings at you while you twist and yank at her bra clasp in the back of a cab is just more noise. She

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doesn't want to be your friend. Her friends have vaginas. You don't.

And really, at this advanced stage of civilization, whatever little bit you're still holding back is worth a lot less than you thought it was.

So have a jolt bar or some Turkish coffee and step up. There are no more sexes; there is only sex. A 24-hour doorman is just a replacement for a faulty vibrator. The only deliveries at three in the morning to the 37th floor are the ones that get trapped inside a condom, and these shiny, sex-addicted girls in luxury buildings like Martha's are the worst of the breed. Needy, selfish, often orgasm-impaired with too much time on their hands and too much drama in their heads. I don't mind using your body for an hour or two and helping you feel a little better, but I'm not in it for the overnight oral and get-me-some-Starbucks deal. Nor will I walk your rat-faced Chihuahua while your staff un-crusts the sheets. Give me a hardworking waitress or an administrative assistant screaming into a pillow any day of

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the week. I've got things to do and so do they. And just in case I do get trapped, I'll set the alarm on my I-Phone to match my ringtone. The 6 a.m. emergency at work is that you looked a whole lot better in the dark, when I was drunk and my tank was still full.

I fumble through my closet for shoes and scroll through my list of maybes, texting, tweeting, chatting. After 10 minutes I dial my ex-wife. Her boyfriend answers and tells me to go fuck myself.

I wonder; what's in his ass?

The phone rings while I'm still holding it in my hand, but it's only Jerry.

"Dude," he says, "I'm less than a half inch away now, let's go celebrate! " The thing about Jerry is that it is his life-long ambition to suck his own cock. His whole body is bent like a centenarian from hours crouched under weights to get his mouth close enough. It doesn't help that he has a small dick. I told him he could stretch his tongue with little clip-weights to help, but he wants the whole mouth.

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Jerry hangs up before I can say no. I look around at my rented furniture and my ready-made rooms and wish I were already drunk. Jerry sends a text of where to meet first, and then a picture message of a guy inserting his bald head into a woman's vagina.

Outside the club the women form anxious lines behind velvet ropes like flowers waiting to be picked and stripped, fake Gucci purses bulging with cheap condoms and gum and hand sanitizer. Inside, the work goes quickly. 'No' just means that you fucked up in some small, correctable way. 'No' means next time. 'No' means let's just wait a little while and see if either of us can do better. And the ones that really do believe they're too special for me? Glam-girl wannabees slumming from the burbs in Daddy's leased Beemer?

They just pretend to hate me because the sex is better that way.

By 1 a.m. we're at a table in the backroom of our third club with people we've only ever seen at night, drinking \$600 bottles of vodka and kissing strangers. Models and lawyers and brokers and students and coke dealers

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all dance on the tables together, on the backs of couches, standing on wobbling chairs and waving their arms at the ceiling. Everyone laughing and kissing and dancing and yelling. We're our own tribe here, a bunch of monkeys, fucking.

The sole purpose of us even going out is to transport our dicks someplace useful, like walking a dog to a tree.

By two the methheads and tweakers arrive and the staff closes off the back room so it is just us, maybe 50 or so. Some of them slip in anyway, cute little 90 pounders with their too-short skirts and glass-top eyes. There are already too many women, but someone will take them, and by sunrise the place will be picked clean, all the warm flesh taken elsewhere.

I dance and spin and slum, kissing girls I'd never recognize again and letting the suburban bff's do their little sandwich routines on me, and by three I'm already too drunk to read my phone, but Jer keeps pouring, and I keep drinking.

Three am in NYC is the magic hour. Three

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am is when decisions are to be made. Blurry watches are given up on. The kinds of people who go home, they go home at three. The women decide which person or persons they will have sex with. The men start thinking logistics. The insecure eliminate competition. Daily cash limits are exceeded, and the credit-card dealers bump their prices and cut their weight. It is the continental divide of excess, the meridian of maturity. If you're not setup by three, you're an orbiter, a scavenger, another loser raking the trash for emotional and sexual leftovers.

Jer hands me a glass of vodka and two Red Bulls and kisses me on the forehead. I cross the line couch-bound, groping a little Asian with thin lips and a Long Island lisp and a mouth the size of a quarter. She tries to kiss back but lacks the genetics. I sigh and sink a little deeper into the dirty upholstery. This is how we live when we get tired of living. It is rehab for romance, a halfway house of emotional bulimics. We hate each other because we hate ourselves.

I drink the vodka and the Red Bulls and

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fall into a semi-sleep. A while later I get an email I can't read, so I hand the phone to Jerry. "It's from your ex-asshole, dude. Says *I'm sorry...call me back on my cell.*" He drops the phone into the ice bucket and hands me another glass.

The way I feel about vodka is the way fat people feel about ice cream.

I push the Asian off my lap and reply to the email as best I can in the blurry dark room. *This is the quasi-mail server. The person you are trying to reach does not exist. We are giving up now. We are sorry.*

You thump down on the seat next to me with a dramatic sigh; dark, depressing, available. My little dream-girl. Everything I want, yet nothing I need. You rub my leg as you talk in an impossibly sensual French accent, and this makes me want to hit you. I lean in kiss you on the lips and you stop talking for a few seconds and we both turn and stare at the crowd. You're insulted, of course, and you'll take it out on everyone else in your life, but the truth is that I can't stand looking at you. You are beautiful in a

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way that people like me cannot see. There's just too much, of everything.

You'll tell me you're sorry. You'll tell me you never meant to hurt me. You'll tell me it just *happened*. You'll tell me it's *you*, not me, and it'll probably be the only true words you'll ever say to me.

I give you my best blind man's turn. "How long have you been sitting here?" I ask.

"I'm not sitting here," you say. And I believe you.

I reach down for one of my fictions but there's nothing there. I'm all out. I look at you but I cannot see. I will not hear. I do not feel.

"Do you like me?" you ask, rubbing my leg again.

All I can see is that other you, two abortions later, naked and screaming and bleeding and murdering my flat-screen with a curling iron.

"I like pie," I say, and I get up and walk away.

A few minutes later a fight breaks out in the small room and I stand on a table to see

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better and to plot the safest route around the wreckage. A tall brunette clubs a guy in a suit with a chair and he turns around and smiles, blood pouring from a flap in his scalp. Another girl grabs her by the hair, and the first girl spins around and punches her straight in the forehead, karate-style. She goes down in a heap. A third girl tends to the guy in the suit, and a few minutes later I see Jerry making out with the first one, the brunette.

I've already seen this. It's happened a hundred times.

Jer gives me the universal parting signal, all is OK, and then someone clubs him on the side of the head and he turns and swings. You don't want to fight Jerry. He's small, but he's mean.

I walk through door into the main room and cross the center of the dance floor, dialing my phone and twisting through mashed-together bodies.

Sarah answers on the first ring.
"Thomas?"

It's almost lunchtime in Paris. Jer watches

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me like a cat, shaking his head and smiling through bloody teeth as the doors behind me swing on their greased hinges. The fight behind him wanes as the bouncers take note. After three am the police tend to let these things work themselves out. After three am, the cops who would have done something are back in the suburbs, passed out drunk next to their wives or cohabitants; parents, probably, of some of these very citizens. The graveyard shift shivers in subway stations or bakes in heated sedans or cruises the coffee shops hitting on the leftovers, the girls without fake ID's or connections.

I say nothing, about to hang up. All around me strangers kiss and grope, refining and perfecting the craft of temporary love like surgeons learning to suture, patching the holes with mindless efficiency.

"Thomas?"

I walk towards the entrance of the club and wedge my head into a corner. There are so many things I could have done differently.

"Thomas?"

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"Yes, Sarah."

"Thomas, I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to you. You shouldn't keep calling me." Her voice is tinny and scratchy and very far away.

I want to hate her, but I can't.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"Out," I answer. "I'm learning."

Contrary to my theories and experience, two policemen walk through the door towards the back room. They look like they could still be in high school. I stick a finger in my other ear.

Sarah doesn't say anything for a while. I stand in the corner with my cheek against the cool wall, swaying, feeling close to her through the dead noise of the phone. I can't tell if she's crying or not.

"Are you OK?" she asks.

The music gut-punches me from the giant speakers above. People funnel past, coming and going and pressing me further into the corner. More police enter, their arms parting the crowd like machetes to weeds. A woman pushes against my back, pressing her pubic

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bone against my ass and breathing softly on the back of my neck. I am in everyone's way.

"Thomas?"

I grab the nearest coat I can find and walk out the door. Outside in the street empty police cars wait at angles like dropped shoes, their idling engines pumping steam. A news van comes, circles and then leaves. The sky changes from purple to crimson to orange as I walk east.

We talk about the big things. About freedom and time and love and regret. We talk until my phone dies.

At the park by the river the daytimers keep to the right under the rising sun, jogging and cooing to their children and their dogs. The rest of us in our black suits stay on the grassy side by the trees, stumbling without direction or haste. There is nowhere else we need to be. In a few hours we'll be back in our little cubicles and offices, hovering over spreadsheets and lines of coke and stealing everyone's money. We're just another form of immigrant, another lost class sharing the sinking island of

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Manhattan. Plumbers brought in to keep the money flowing upwards. No one belongs here anymore.

I cross the line to the day side, weaving between the dog walkers and joggers and cyclists and rollerbladers as the sun climbs over the unfinished landscape of Queens, creeping across the river and sliding up against the faded coop buildings crowding the water. No one stops me. No one watches. No one cares.

I could have gone to Paris. I could have forgiven Sarah. I could have been a better person. I could have done anything. But every day I forget a little more. Every day I hurt, a little less. Our ancestors once saw cannibalism as a pathway to eternity. We immortalize one another with love. But the greatest tool we've ever invented is, I believe, our ability to forget. We go to sleep. We move on. We live the same day, over and over and over again, with new hopes, and new people.

I put the phone away and lie down on a bench near the water as the city awakens, closing my eyes tightly against the sun. The

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new day sharpens her nails and waits
patiently. I fall asleep to the sounds of
footsteps and bakery trucks and the soft
whizzing of bicycle tires.

I don't remember my dreams.

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