

SIMPLE AND CLEAN

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1

I started talking to Omar on Grindr. I was in Chelsea to pick up keys that I'd forgotten on vacation in Brazil; my art dealer ex had just come back from São Paulo, where he'd gotten them from the hotel.

Right away Omar seemed aware of who I was.

I think we might run in the same circles.

I asked to exchange handles.

Oh. It looks like I already follow you lol

I was flattered. We made plans to meet a few nights later at a mutual friend's birthday party at Botanica. One of my ex's friends, James, was smoking a cigarette outside on Houston, and we did coke in the bathroom before I went over to Omar's table. (James had apparently groped Omar's roommate on the dancefloor of Spectrum a few

months prior; Omar only made me aware of this at a much later date.) I told Omar it was nice to finally *meet him*, making air quotes. He told me he worked in fashion but was really a musician. I was immediately bored. I bought him a gin and tonic, and an hour later we took a Lyft to my place in Harlem.

I bottomed, which was uncharacteristic of me at the time, considering myself a vers top. In the morning we streamed the new Mariah Carey album and ordered Dinosaur BBQ. He asked if I was in a relationship. “I just got out of one,” I said. “It was a zombie relationship. I had to kill it.” Omar told me he was moving to LA the next week. He could DJ out there, and he was tired of struggling in New York. We stayed in bed all day, and by late afternoon he fell asleep with his cheek on my chest, his arms splayed on either side. He looked like a child.

The next week was Thanksgiving, and I went to my grandmother’s in Boston. On the Boltbus, hurtling past the brilliant red elms of Connecticut, I realized I had gonorrhea. At a rest stop, I placed a piece of toilet paper in my underwear, attempting to block the pus. What I really needed was a tampon. I felt like a woman.

2

The night before Omar’s flight to LA, he slept at my apartment, and I tried to bottom again. This time it was too painful.

“Let’s stay in touch?” he said as his Uber pulled up.

Over the next month I came to understand something: no good act of sodomy goes unpunished. I developed

an anal fissure. An anal fissure is a tear in the lining of the anus. It's frequently diagnosed after a patient says something like, "I feel like I am shitting shards of broken glass." My sphincter spasmed for hours in the aftermath of every shit. Every clench felt like an X-Acto knife against my lower intestine.

Weeks passed, and the fissure refused to heal. Every bowel movement re-opened the wound. I began to fear my trips to the bathroom. I ate nothing but soup and crackers, and I lost over twenty pounds. I hated how skinny I looked.

I went to an anorectal surgeon, who put a headlamp on like he was mining for coal, wiggled a gloved finger dripping with lube into my anus, and told me my tear was "a real nasty specimen." He recommended a lateral sphincterotomy, a surgical procedure used to heal an anal fissure too severe for the healing power of time or even nitroglycerine cream. Essentially, the doctor uses a scalpel to make a tiny incision in the internal anal sphincter, loosening it so the patient unclenches, blood flow returns to the area, and the fissure can heal.

"My toilet is literally stained with blood," I said through tears.

Omar watched me cry over FaceTime. We'd been texting regularly while he was in LA. He was staying with a fat screenwriter friend who drank a twelve pack a day and watched *Serpico* on repeat. He'd gotten some administrative job at a video production company, dealing with clients wondering where their work was. His boss was constantly laying people off but putting up ominous billboards all over LA that said "Conquer or Collapse"

in a red typeface. We complained about everything all the time, but this was the first time I told him about my fissure. I told him that, while researching the procedure, I'd come across the homepage of an anorectal surgeon who specialized in a gay male clientele. A recent posting on his site read:

PSA: SAY "NO" TO A LATERAL INTERNAL SPHINCTEROTOMY!

"Remember that as a hole and an essential part of the bottoming community," said Dr. Evan Goldstein. "The more we have sex, the looser we get. So now take an already loose hole with the sphincterotomy and put it to the test of withstanding years of bottoming. What do you think happens? Yep, you guessed it: a looser hole in an even shorter period of time. Not favorable for you and your partner's pleasure."

"What if I become incontinent? A gaping hole at age thirty-five."

Omar laughed. We momentarily locked eyes on screen. I was shocked I was telling him this. I felt like I was talking in my sleep.

"You give more top energy anyways," he said.

I woke up from anesthesia screaming. Omar was there, holding my hand in the post-op room. He'd decided to fly back to New York to take care of me for the week. I could feel the incision deep inside me, the fissure now larger than before, as though the doctor had stabbed a knife in my gash. I took three pills of Oxy every four hours. Omar watched me fall in and out of sleep as Wendy Williams reruns played in the background. He held my hand as I sat on the toilet for the first time post-op, the pain so intense my vision went white. Afterward he threw away the bloody

sponge and helped me redress the incision. He brought me Diet Coke and toast as I lay on my stomach. Running his fingers down my back, he whispered that he felt bad for hurting me.

Four days out of surgery, and I felt ready to leave the apartment. We went to a Korean spa in New Jersey. I was still spotting blood from the incision, but I was too high to care. That night I told Omar I was “possibly falling in love with him.” He responded, “I love you.” Two days later he went back to Los Angeles. The fissure began to heal.

3

My dad texted me.

Your Mom and I need to have a call with you tomorrow night. It's important that we connect so you need to be available.

I ignored his text, assuming he wanted to tell me off for using his credit card without asking. I didn't answer when he called; I was having drinks with an old undergrad girlfriend whom I had little in common with but who always paid for my tab. I called back the next day, though, and he was angry.

“How can you be such an asshole?” he said.

“I was busy last night. I'm sorry.” I found it odd for him to be admonishing me. My mom usually played the bad cop.

“It doesn't matter,” he said. There was a long pause. “You're on speakerphone. Your mom is here beside me.” My mom stayed quiet, not even a hello. Something was off. Why hadn't she grabbed the phone from my dad yet?

Why wasn't she talking over him? He began to tell me.

"You know, your mom, she hadn't been feeling very well . . . She'd been getting really tired . . . She'd come home from work and sleep for hours and hours . . . We thought maybe it was a thyroid issue . . . So we went to the doctor . . . and after running a few tests . . . and getting a second opinion . . . we were told that she had stage four colon cancer . . . already spreading to her liver and her lungs . . . Doctor said *you guys have been dealt a really tough hand* . . . Options are pretty limited at this point . . . She needs to get on a rigorous chemo regimen straight away . . . Outlook is a couple of years at best."

I would say I felt numb hearing this news, but that would be inaccurate. What I felt was much more than the absence of feeling. Rather, something had been subtracted from me. A lack opened up within me, and I became something less than myself. I wish there had been anguish. I longed for pain and the release it would offer me. But the blow never came. I tried to force out tears, and nothing came. All I could do was relate the cancer to myself. The colon. The rectum. My anal fissure. I had always thought having some Actual Trauma would be exhilarating. Instead, I found myself deflated.

Omar was the first one I called. When he went back to LA after the operation, we'd vaguely agreed "not to be open" and looked up how much it would cost to visit every other month. As I told him about my mom's diagnosis, I considered how such a cataclysmic event might seal us together in ways we would never be able to separate from. A semi-random Grindr hookup had propelled itself into

possible eternity.

I flew back home. My mother cried when she picked me up, and we hugged on the airport curb for a long time. She felt slight in my arms, much smaller than before. And now she was sharp to the touch. Her bones jutted out from the loosened skin of her arms. I was surprised when she let go first.

Omar came from LA to see me at my parent's house. As we lay in my childhood bedroom waiting for dinner, he grabbed my phone to change the music. But he spent too long scrolling, and I could tell he'd seen something he shouldn't have.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You've been on Tinder," he said. "I saw it in your Recently Used Apps."

I looked at the popcorn ceiling. "I was bored. Can't you see I'm bored out of my mind here? I'm stuck at my parent's house with no stimuli. Give me a break."

"We agreed to stay off the apps," he said.

I was surprised when I started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm just really confused right now. And I've been looking for a distraction. Anything to keep me from dealing with the reality of my situation." Omar hugged me. I couldn't tell if I was lying or not.

"It's ok," said Omar. "I don't actually care."

He played with the cowlick in my hair. I laid my head against his bicep until he fell asleep.

Before I deleted Tinder, I told all of my matches to follow me on Instagram. I wanted to gain a thousand followers before the end of the summer.

4

I had booked a summer trip to Japan with Omar on a whim, a few weeks before finding out about my mom's diagnosis. She told me I should still go. "No one's life should change on my account." That was her new mantra. My dad remained quiet on the subject, though I sensed his disapproval.

I landed in Tokyo already in a state of guilt. My mom had texted me three times while in the air, asking if I was alright. As we laid out our luggage onto the faux tatami mat floor of our hotel, I asked Omar if we should take the mushroom chocolates we brought with us from California, a brief mood enhancer before we went to the Imperial Palace.

"I already ate one," he said. "While you were in the shower."

I tried to stay calm. "So if I hadn't brought them up now, would you have told me later? You would've told me when you were already tripping?"

Omar breathed out slowly, looking at the wall behind. "I was worried that if I asked you beforehand, you might not have wanted to take them," he said. "And five minutes ago, while you were in the shower, that's what I wanted to do: to take one."

"You see me as someone who needs to be managed," I said. As the son of a soon-to-be-dead mother, he was forced to handle me with care.

On an atoll in Okinawa, we were sunburned and in love. At a cramped gay bar in Osaka, we seemed to have

run out of things to say to one another. On a hike down from the summit of Itsukushima, our hard steps on the dirt path hinted at an unspoken rage between us. Omar twisted his ankle on a loose stone and glared at me, as if he suspected I enjoyed watching him experience pain. In Kyoto, we couldn't decide on where to eat. We fought until we cried. In a ryokan, we took my leftover Oxycontin, bathed in the hot springs, and made love on the rough flooring of our room, both of our knees bruised in the morning. On the last day of our trip we were back in Tokyo, exhausted. Our bodies gave up. We found each other in a shared laziness. Under the dim light of a ramen shop, we were slumped over one another, half-asleep.

An hour into the flight home, and I spiraled outward. My mind focused on the passage of time. The constant march forward. The slow fade of memory. I was about to leave a dream and was already forgetting its contours. I looked out my window. The sky was empty. A jagged sheet of ocean lay below us. Try as I might, I couldn't get myself to feel insignificant. I yearned to be a smaller piece within a larger whole. But I could not decenter myself. For it was my mind that was small, full of teensy tiny reptile thoughts, barely a blip on the brain scan. I was unable to fathom a world that didn't place me at its center, the pulsating force that all life bends towards. My mom's death would be a cosmic apocalypse. There was no denying that. I closed my eyes and tried to empty my mind. Float through this, I told myself. Float into another dream.

5

Summer ended and Omar moved back to New York to live with me. He'd racked up a lot of credit card debt on personal trainers but said he'd still have to gain twenty pounds for anyone in LA to book him for a circuit party. My ex moved back to the city as well. He planned to attend the same graduate program as me. In fact, he'd sent me a long text over the summer explaining the particulars—he'd applied last winter, he said, after I finally inspired him to "get off his ass and change career paths." He had only applied to my program. I was furious. I felt he was stalking me. And yet for the first few weeks of the semester, I saw no trace of him. I thought maybe it had been an elaborate lie, a deluded attempt to trigger some kind of response from me.

Then I spotted his name on a mailbox in the student lounge. A large stack of papers spilled out of his cubby hole: printed copies of a story called *The Lost Boy*. I took one and read it in the nearby bathroom. My doppelgänger within the story was named Troy. I was described as "smelling a bit sour, like a teenage boy," "a full white supremacist fantasy-descent [sic], football player measurements, Orange County mannerisms and attitude." There was a detailed account of the size and shape of my dick, both flaccid and erect. A sex scene: "Troy rode me with his large frame, leaving behind a single drop of blood on the tip of my penis." I didn't remember this. Or I hadn't been made aware of it at the time. I thought back to my fissure. Had I been wounded much earlier than I previously thought?

Another section summary, this time in all caps:

I DO AYAHUASCA IN BRAZIL AND AM ABDUCTED BY ALIENS,
GIVE BIRTH TO A BABY ALIEN THAT LOOKS LIKE TROY, AM TOLD
BY GOD TO CHANGE CAREER PATHS.

And the last line: “And the party was perfect—except for the fact that Troy wasn’t there.”

I felt a sense of disappointment after reading my ex’s story. He had had a real chance to render my cruelty onto the page. There’d been an opening there, an opportunity to mortally wound. The sins I had committed against him were unconscionable. But he left all that out. In his piece, I was merely a sex object. I finally texted him back. *You are pathetic.*

6

The new year approached, and Omar considered starting an OnlyFans. He had no real job prospects to speak of. His DJ gigs had dried up even in New York; he was newly twenty-five and already old. I sensed that he blamed me for his financial situation. In his version of events, I had all but forced him to leave his nine-to-five in LA for a meager freelance existence in New York. I got by with my small stipend and an occasional allowance from my parents. He, on the other hand, had nothing to fall back on. We split the rent fifty-fifty. He offered to, and I didn’t say no.

He made his OnlyFans pitch to me as we walked down the aisle of a liquor store. I was against the idea from the jump. I pictured his body as a pay-per-view select screen. The thought of him selling a bundle of jerk-off videos for five dollars disgusted me. I told him that online sex work

would be a veto.

“But I think it’s something I could be really good at,” he said. “And it’s easy money.”

I laughed. “Are you some kind of hung solo auteur?”

“Kind of,” he said, letting out a half-smile. “I don’t understand why you’re being so uptight about it.”

“Because it grosses me out,” I said. “It’s tacky. It cheapens you. And it cheapens me, by proxy.”

Omar sighed and turned away from the wine rack, as if he were trying to compose himself. I hated when he fell into mock theatrics. “What?” I asked him. He shook his head slowly, eyes closed in pained expression. He clearly wanted me to pull this out of him. “Go ahead. Say it.”

“I’m sick of having to always think about you,” he said. “I should probably be alone.”

Omar looked tired under the fluorescent lights, sweating in his puffy coat. This fight felt different than the ones that came before. There was an air of total burnout in his demeanor. He was clearly exhausted by me. I tried to touch the nape of his neck, and he pulled away. He walked out of the store. Was he finally over me? Or was it I who was finally over him? I was caught in an eternal recurrence. The same events kept repeating themselves. The context and characters were swapped out, but the central drama remained the same: an inability to surrender. And standing there, observing Omar’s disengagement, I felt like my insides had been scooped out. The rows of bottles stuttered in and out. For how long can this keep going? I asked myself. How much longer does she have? No one could give me a straight answer. I saw a wide crater in the

distance. It moved toward me. I was terrified. But when I saw myself at the edge of the fissure, about to topple over, I wasn't alone. Someone was there, tying themselves to me. As if I were a heavy boulder.

Omar and I didn't speak for the rest of the day. I texted my Mom for a health update as I waited for Omar to get ready. We'd made plans the week before to attend a New Year's party in a warehouse.

Back pain has good days and not so good days. Will have my neck biopsy tomorrow and a MRI on Sunday

I thumbs-up'd her message. I didn't know what else to say.

Omar and I looked at our phones in silence on the train ride over. I refreshed my feed over and over again. A video of a deformed Sri Lankan woman who looked just like a toddler. A gym pic taken by a gay-baiting Latino bodybuilder. A screenshot of a Real Housewife's racist tweet. We entered the East Williamsburg event space and then separated immediately. I stood alone by the porta potties in a state of postpartum emptiness. Omar told me that when he first moved to the city he lived in a large loft within a warehouse. Him and six other people he'd met on Soundcloud. They all got kicked out after the place was condemned for housing undisclosed radioactive materials in the cellar. I tried to imagine the effect such materials might've had on adolescent Omar's DNA. His turgid, mutant cock—now for all to see online.

Omar grabbed me from the edge of the crowd. He pulled me in close.

"I thought you wanted to be alone," I said.

He shrugged. "I got bored."

“You know, I don’t really care,” I said. “About OnlyFans. About any of it.”

Omar cradled my head under his chin. “I know,” he said. I felt myself begin to cry, as though I were observing myself from behind a closed door.

On January 3rd, my mother stared at the shiny build-up of fluid on her swollen arm, a symptom of end-of-life edema. She attempted to seal off the leakage with medical tape. But she struggled to get the sticky side to latch onto the sore. Over and over again she tried and failed. I watched her from the bedside table, completely frozen. I was unable to help her. And so Omar picked the roll of tape off from the floor and began to wrap it gently around my mother’s paper-thin skin, so thin it was like it had begun to crack.