

STORIES

JUST



PERVS

JESS TAYLOR

**JUST
PERVS**

JUST PERVS

" # \$ \$ % & ' () * +

Book*hug Press

Toronto, 2019

FIRST EDITION

Copyright © 2019 by Jess Taylor

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Funded by the
Government
of Canada

Financé par le
gouvernement
du Canada

Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Book*hug Press acknowledges the land on which it operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Just pervs / Jess Taylor.

Names: Taylor, Jess, 1989- author.

Description: First edition. | Short stories.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190147075 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190147083

ISBN 9781771665148 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771665155 (HTML)

ISBN 9781771665162 (PDF) | ISBN 9781771665179 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PS8639.A9519 J88 2019 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

Printed in Canada

For my friends

CONTENTS

&, -%\$.!/0%! !

&, -1-23%45%651-%7899!/ -33%) - : .%

; !/. -1%<8/= -1%

&, -%>?@-1.A%B18C-1%

<! . -3%

" ?3.%> -1D3%

E8F -18%

&C5%\$ -G% HH!! .3%J8KK%/%) 5D-%

&! =, .%2/2%<1! =, .%&, -%) 5C-3.%>5!/ .%/ %6A%) !: -M%

' %>18A-1%5%, -%IOB%

E8D-1/%

' %\$.51A%B@5?.%* ?1%J1!- /H3%) 8/8%B/H%&!8%

N%65D-H%* ?.% , -/%N%E8? =, .%7!F %C!., %, -%B5 =%

\$5%+8C%(5?%E8/2.%\$!.%

* K!D-3%

***She sees you come in, Daddy.
There is always a set of eyes on you.***

THE STINK

That summer the stink grew and rose through a heat wave that left everyone in the city sticky with sweat. Keith, the guy I was fucking at the time, liked to ask me about women we knew and if I could imagine being with them. He said their names and usually I said, “Yes.” I found almost everyone on the planet attractive during that time. He made me feel like, with all the people I’d been with, I was just some splintery board waiting to be rubbed up against. Keith liked to watch me touch myself, and he told me to tell him what I was thinking about. He said it turned him on. From this we learned that every day there was something new I found erotic. He told me that whatever was sexy to me was sexy to him and we made our fantasies that way, at least until he got sick of me.

One day he said, “Melissa?”

And I said, “I don’t know who that is,” but of course I did.

I got him to describe her to me. He told me about how she was tall, taller than me by almost a head. He told me what he thought her breast size was and probably exaggerated, but stuff like that didn’t bother me. “I fucked her once,” he said, but I always knew when Keith was lying from the pinch in his cheeks that meant a smile was coming that never fully did. Then we made up a scenario about the lingerie store where she worked. It was too expensive for me; I was still bartending at the bar next to the store and people tipped me in gossip rather than money. In

the lingerie store, according to Keith's fantasy, the saleswomen had to model the lingerie and customers ended up making out or having full-blown sex in the change rooms. I climbed on top of him as he spoke, begged him to keep talking, but even after just hearing the name Melissa I was ready to go.

Really, I couldn't imagine there was a woman out there who was more perfect than me. I was barely twenty-six, and I swelled with the power of my attractiveness. People started to secretly say I was conceited, but I had ears and I knew what they were chatting about. I also knew enough by then to know that people liked to think someone who loved their body was vain; it was the same thing they thought about Melissa. To be accepting of yourself gave you power and one of the ways to stomp on someone's power was to pretend its source was something disgusting. I saw it in Melissa and liked it, and I liked it in myself. Everyone else didn't know anything—they just knew how to move their mouths until they were tired or thirsty and then ordered another drink from me.

Customers complained about the stink. It coated their tongues, so they thought something was off in their drinks. The AC was also spotty. I'd journey into the basement and play with the settings, kick at that damn machine. Sometimes it started humming away and everyone clapped as I climbed back up, as if I'd fought off a monster down there, delivered everyone from certain doom. But we were already stuck to the roof of a dead dog's mouth, everything hot and rancid and damp.

Eventually the customers called my boss about the stink, even though it wasn't just in our bar, the stink was everywhere, under the shade of the trees and along the boardwalk, especially directly under the sun, which glowed bright and red and deep. Sunsets and sunrises seemed to stay still and hovered all early morning and evening. Time in general slid slowly around the

clock. My boss ordered me to take out the garbage on the hour.

The garbage bins had less sludge in their bottoms if I took them out often, fewer beer bottles with glass shards to slice the bags open and release the slurry of food and old booze on me. Outside, in the alley behind all the stores and restaurants, Melissa was smoking on break from the lingerie store. I dumped the garbage. “Hi,” I said to her. The stink rose from the row of garbage cans. My boss kept adding more cans, thinking it would disperse the smell. I stared at Melissa, although I didn’t mean to. I couldn’t get Keith’s sexy scenarios out of my head. She just waved at me and didn’t say anything. Crushed her cigarette against the brick of the building and went inside.

Melissa kept getting creepy messages from different Twitter accounts. Everyone was talking about it. Keith had an almost photographic memory for language, so he’d say the Tweets to me from memory as we fucked. All I’d say was “I’m Melissa.” It was a game we played, one last-ditch attempt to excite each other before we lost interest.

After we had sex three or four times and were both exhausted, Keith fell asleep beside me. His breathing whistled and his hand held my wrist as he slept. I hoped he wouldn’t forget me after we moved on. “Who’s tweeting at Melissa?” I asked him when he stirred.

It was dark and the heat held us in such a way that we couldn’t move. “I think I might be in love with her,” he said. “I talk to her from time to time.”

“Fine.” It was too hot for me to give myself fully over to Keith. “Don’t forget to tell me about it later.”

When I hadn’t heard from Keith in a week, I found Bryant. He was slouched in a chair outside a coffee shop. “Well, hi,” I said to him, kicking at his shoe. He looked at me with these great eyes

as if someone had taken a mirror and smashed it and tried to put it back together all wrong. I knew exactly who he was. When he and Melissa started dating back when they were twenty, people said they'd never seen a couple so in love. I looked to see if Melissa was inside, to see if this might finally give her a reason to talk to me. But he was alone, as he was most times I saw him around. On his wrist, he'd gotten *Mel* tattooed in what everyone said was her cursive. I fell down into the chair beside him and introduced myself. He handed me a cigarette.

I got him laughing telling him about some of the gossip I heard behind the bar and told him I had half a bottle of wine at home. We started walking and goofing around. He stopped to bat at my ass every couple of steps. Even though I wasn't Melissa, he wanted me. After we had sex, he buried his face into my curly hair, and I asked him if we could keep fucking. I'd heard Melissa was more or less done with him.

"Are you sad you're breaking up?" I asked him.

"Everyone thinks she's perfect, but she's not," he said. "I was with the woman for five years. It's totally different when you're with a woman like that." His whole face twitched. I wasn't sure if it was from exhaustion, sadness, disgust. "It'll be good. It'll be good when it's over."

I didn't expect them to patch things up, but they did. I kept fucking Bryant.

After the air conditioning of Melissa's place, Bryant couldn't stand the heat of mine. I set up three fans to be ready for him the next time he came over, one facing the bed and another on a TV table I used as a desk and another beside the hot plate. On their highest settings, they created a breeze, even though they stirred up the stink. My apartment was above a fruit stand that always stank during the summers anyway. Nothing but the smell of rot, but it was a short walk to work and barely cost me anything.

Keith stopped by the bar to return a couple of paperbacks I'd given him. "I dropped one in the bath," he said. "I hope that's okay." I asked him if he wanted to fuck in the backroom. The bar was deserted.

"I can't," he said, and ordered a Dark 'n' Stormy.

I was glad to have him stay and chat. I wanted to catch up, but he didn't have all that much to say. I told him not to tell anyone, but I'd been fucking Bryant even though he'd gotten back with Melissa. That I didn't even really hope he'd leave or want to be with him, just liked sharing something with her.

Keith finished his drink in one quick sip. "I don't know. He's not a good guy, from what I hear."

"Who'd you hear that from? Melissa? That's not what I've heard. And they're back together, so why'd you think that? What do you know?"

Keith shook his head and put money on the bar.

Most days, Bryant didn't come close to Keith. There was something about the way all those little shards of mirror in his eyes could flip around that brought this hardness to him, especially as we fucked. It was those times when I could most slip into the fantasy that I was Melissa. It worked in the moment to send me over the edge, but after he left, I sat on my bed with a book with both covers torn off. They call a book like that a stripped book because it can't be sold, I guess. I ran its frayed pages underneath my fingernails. It wasn't shame I was feeling, more like a troubling stillness and a fear that I was destroying myself. In the shower I scrubbed at my skin, the stench even heavier with the steam.

My bedsheets were still wet from our sex. I combed through my closet, pushing aside old winter coats, looking for another fan I was sure I had. My hands were slow and clumsy and my hair slapped my shoulders with its wetness as I moved.

I picked up a bicycle helmet and garden tools and let them slip from my fingers and pawed at a windbreaker I'd forgotten I had and cut the side of my hand on the claw of a hammer. Blood gushed over the inside of the closet, onto the extension cords and power bars and instruction manuals. I put my hand to my mouth and sucked. The taste of my blood made me gag. I grabbed a towel and wound it around my hand. It stained quick, but stayed in place, soaking up the mess coming out of me. I decided not to strip the sheets. I was too tired and everything was damp and smelled and was surrounded by the damn heat anyway, so it didn't matter what I did. Why strip sheets to just need to strip them again in the morning?

I don't know how I knew, lying in my bed with my damp sheets stuck to my legs and my hand wrapped in that bloody towel, but when I woke up, before doing anything I checked my Twitter feed and then I checked Melissa's. Someone had hacked into her account and written *Im comin for you Melissa. Your family too.* And another. *I will kill you bitch.* The stink made me retch that morning, especially as I washed my towel in the sink. The blood clung like rust along the bottom of the drain. I breathed in and out slowly, trying to keep down last night's wine. I'd seen Melissa outside at least once a day when I emptied the trash. Sometimes I even bummed a smoke from her. The blood in the sink reminded me of the alley's brick wall, her crushed cigarettes. I needed to say something to her. I wondered if she was scared.

At work, I poured drinks and dunked deep-fried pickles and chicken wings and counted down until the hour was up and I could see Melissa. When I went out to the alley, she was smoking and crying quietly, staring into the sun that hung there like it hated us.

"I saw everything online. You okay?" I dumped the trash.

“I don’t give a shit about that,” she said. “My dad had a heart attack.”

“Oh,” I said, and moved closer to her. She was the only one in this city who didn’t smell. Close to her, I filled my nostrils. I wanted her smell to cover me, but as soon as I stepped away, that stink set back into me. It was in my pores. Whenever I showered, I waited for the water to get scalding hot to burn away the stench, but it was in the water too. Putrid. Rot. Maybe all the water in the world had gone bad somehow and no one had noticed yet. Melissa had water stored in her basement while the rest of us washed our bodies with the rank liquid that spewed from our faucets. “Did you just hear?”

She nodded and glared up at the sky again, sucking on her cigarette. “I’m out of this fucking place,” she said. She was wearing a tank top, and a shimmer of sweat clung to her skin. She was so close. With the back of my fingers, I ran my hand over her, skimming the sweat away. I cupped my hand around her shoulder, felt her skin burning underneath.

“I’m going to miss you,” I said.

She moved my hand off her, but her fingers took their time as they pushed against my skin.

That night when Bryant came over, I didn’t pretend I was Melissa. I couldn’t get into it. I thought of her crying in the alley, and I lay there like a blow-up doll.

“What’s the matter with you?” he said, and shook me. “Don’t you want to fuck?” He held his hard dick in his hand and pumped it over me.

“It’s too hot,” I said, and rolled over onto my stomach. “Everything stinks.”

“Don’t you have another fan around here?” The three hummed in unison, waving their heads back and forth.

“In the closet.”

Bryant pulled open the closet door, and he screamed high and long, not like I thought a man would scream, but like a dog, kicked deep in the stomach. “What the hell!”

I dragged myself from the bed and walked to the closet, naked. He was staring at its insides. Blood was everywhere. Over the walls and the cords and smeared on the door handle.

“What did you do?” he asked me. The mirror pieces all flipped to their reflective sides, light glinting everywhere. “What the fuck did you do?”

I laughed and laughed. I held up my hand. “I cut myself by accident,” I said. “I must’ve forgot.”

“It stinks. It stinks like blood in here. Nasty,” he said. “I’m going home.”

“Don’t you know she’s gone?” I said. Bryant was pulling on his pants. “She’s left the city, Bryant.”

“What?” he said.

“She left. Her dad had a heart attack.”

“Her dad?” He paused with one arm in his T-shirt before his hand burst through the sleeve. “Why’d she tell you?”

I just smiled at him and shrugged, as though I knew everything that would ever happen in his life and didn’t care much about any of it.

He slammed his fist into the wall beside my head. I started shaking, but there was nothing he could do to me. “You’re scared?” he said, rubbing his hand.

I tried calling Keith after Bryant was gone, but a voice said his number was unavailable. For the rest of the week, I looked for him all over the city. But I was alone, with only the city’s whispers.

Keith came back to the city and showed up at the bar. He put both elbows on the counter and ordered a Dark ’n’ Stormy. Nobody drank those anymore. He told me that, for a while, he’d

moved with Melissa to her hometown, and the air was cool and clear, but eventually the heat found him there too.

“What was it like being with her?” I asked. “Was it like we imagined?”

He shoved his hands into his hair, which already stuck to his forehead. They trembled as he put them back around his glass, a habit he’d later learn to conceal. “It was a complete nightmare,” he said.

I left Keith to watch the bar and descended the steps to the basement to check the AC. Even down there it was foul and hot. I flicked dials and switches and fuses, kicked and hollered and begged, I wrapped my body around the machine. The more I moved, the more I stank. The cold would never come.

**THERE'S NO MORE
HAPPINESS LEFT**

" * (

Sam stretches out her legs under the blanket, and this gives her joy. There is a warm body beside her, his back pressing against her arm like a gentle cat, and this gives her joy. The bedroom feels like a secret clubhouse because Travis is there, and it's snowing outside but warm inside, and this gives her joy. But it's time to get out of bed, and she knows there's nothing that can ruin this joy, not today. It's morning and nothing can shake the joy out of her.

It's a wonderful time to be young. To put coffee on, listening to the water boil, smelling the grounds, watching as the water splashes through and turns dry to sog, to a dark brown liquid with a bit of golden froth. And then waiting just the perfect amount of time for it to steep, just enough time to do a dish or two and look out the window as snow falls down. The ground isn't white yet. Her mind tries to freeze on each individual flake, but, like her, they fall too fast.

He stretches in the bedroom. She can hear him groan. Her pyjama pants drop to the floor, as if pulled down by the sound of him waking instead of her own hands. She pulls her T-shirt off, sets it silently down. He calls for her. She forgets about the coffee and runs and jumps onto the bed, where he is swaddled in the comforter.

& # # 4 \$ % 4 % 7 #))

Tim asks her what her worst nightmare is. She smiles and deflects. He says, "Like, I want to know what your version of hell is." He holds her wrists as he says this, but not as though he wants to control her, that won't happen until he's older. They are stretched out, the entire length of the sofa. The way he's holding her wrists, one in each of his hands, it's more like he thinks she might fade away in a second, like if he doesn't keep a part of himself joined to a part of her, she will be gone, and he'll be alone on the couch again playing video games.

"Tell me yours," she says.

"No, I asked you."

"For me, it's a place where love doesn't exist. And it's hot and smells, and people just keep using each other up, and there is no happiness, none at all. Only, like, a discomfort. Like your skin is too tight for your body."

He runs his hands up under her shirt and over her stomach. "Too tight for your body?" he laughs, and she laughs too, squirms closer to him. She imagines their bodies are two halves of a worm wanting to be reattached. Just two weeks ago, he'd never touched her skin, only the skin of her lips on his lips, and now he touches all of it, and she touches all of it.

"Too tight for your body," she says back, and runs a finger along his arm.

"In my hell, people can't stop arguing," he says.

"Arguing? That's all you got?"

"Well, sometimes they just argue and sometimes they hurt each other. They stab and punch, but no one can die. And they just don't leave each other alone. They have to keep arguing again."

She thinks this might be about his parents. She holds him to her. "My hell is a city," she says, her mouth now sitting against his collarbone. "A city where you go because you think

it's where you're supposed to go, but then when you get there everyone is cruel and hurts each other. Sometimes kill each other. A city where sometimes you wake up and you don't even know what happened."

His hands are now around the back band of her shorts. His fingers play with each belt loop. Even her clothes are fascinating to his body. "My hell is being stuck in a box and you know you are in a box, and it's dark and everyone knows you're there and no one will help you out."

"My hell is an elevator ride that never ends."

"My hell is infinite trips to the hardware store."

"I thought you liked going to the hardware store with your dad."

"Changed my mind."

"Really?"

"My hell is not being allowed to change my mind."

"Okay, okay."

Then she says, "My hell is a world without you," because she knows that's what he wanted to hear all along. He eye-smiles down into her eyes, which eye-smile back. Their lips are so close that they are barely not touching, noses jammed together.

"Do you want to?" he says to her.

"Yes," she says.

70Y

Mommy and Daddy are hugging in the kitchen. Kylie says, "Me too!" She shoves herself in between. Mommy on one side, Daddy on the other side. Daddy's stomach smooshed against her face. Mommy warm, against her back.

Her brother, Tim, watches from the kitchen door, smiling. Sometimes he joins, tries to get in the middle too. Or he wraps his body around the three of them, as much as he can. His arms are still so small. But many times, he catches himself, remains

outside.

Mommy and Daddy kiss over the top of Kylie's head. Their bodies make a roof. "Squeeze," Kylie says, and her parents squeeze.

Kylie feels herself uncoil. *This is my home*, she thinks.

"Enough," Mommy says. "Daddy and I need some time together."

Kylie joins Tim at the kitchen door, and they watch their parents kiss.

"Gross," Kylie says, and her brother nods. They go off to play.

Y * * B%& * O E 7 # \$

The plastic from a bag from the discount bookstore digs into Sam's hand. Both she and Kylie had agreed that they needed to buy books urgently. "To ease the discomfort of being alive," Kylie had said.

"Exactly," Sam had agreed.

Now they sit on the curb in front of an elementary school, still empty though summer is nearing its end. Sam runs her hand through the grass. They lay their books out on the ground.

"I love sitting on a curb like this," Kylie says. "It reminds me of being in high school with nothing to do, nowhere to go."

"I hated high school," Sam says. "I wanted to be like we are now."

"Except you didn't know it'd be so depressing."

"Exactly."

Sam hands Kylie her books one by one. Kylie admires her purchases, celebrates her good taste. Sam looks at Kylie's books and reads their back covers. She tries to focus on talking about books. Kylie turns one of Sam's over in her hands, *Ten Ways to Be Happier*. The book is for Travis. Sam finally says, "I think we're gonna break up again." She begins to talk about how difficult

it is to be with someone who has a completely different moral code than she does, someone who doesn't even think about having a moral code at all. She wants Travis to not hate himself the way he does, but she can't help him. She doesn't know how to communicate with him, with anyone. She doesn't tell Kylie that sometimes, in the middle of the night, Travis begs her to get married, but then their days in Toronto are full of the chaotic loneliness that only comes from being with someone not-quite-right.

Kylie listens. She pats Sam on her shoulder first. Sam begins to cry. Running her hand along where Sam's bra strap presses into her skin, Kylie presses on a knot of tension in Sam's back. *How did she know?* Sam thinks. *How did she know I'm always hurting there?* It's different to be around someone who understands your aches. "It's like, I knew I could put a few years into this and it might not turn into anything, but now what do I have?"

Kylie presses harder. "No, Sam, you don't understand," Kylie says. "There is so much good in your life."

< ' B%& * OE 7 # \$

It happens at a work meeting. To Kylie, all touches are created equal. To Kylie, it feels as if all of her is a sex organ, ready to be stimulated at any time. She is ashamed of this.

The team is discussing the negotiation of a new contract. Kylie has stuck chart paper up on the wall. She likes seeing ideas posted up, likes seeing the way words look on paper. Kylie wants to be in charge because she likes the way her voice sounds when she gets really serious. It's different than when she talks to her friends, always lilting up, always begging to be liked. Kylie is wearing high-heeled ankle boots with laces. She feels proud when she laces them standing up. Only she knows all the effort it takes to balance.

The woman at the meeting is Kylie's senior. Soon it's her

voice that is really serious. Kylie's voice begins to morph into up-talk. She even accidentally swears when she's getting flustered. The woman chastises Kylie, playfully. "We didn't know you had it in you," she says, which in the woman's mind is a compliment, meaning that Kylie is usually on her best behaviour and it's neat that she's getting a little looser.

It makes Kylie think of this: when she was in Grade 1 she went to the bathroom by herself because she was in a Grade 1/2 split, so unlike the other Grade 1s, the students didn't have to go in partners. She sat on the toilet swinging her legs as she waited for the poop to be ready to fall from her. Sometimes she'd push, but it kind of hurt, so mostly she waited. Then she washed her hands and walked back to class.

"Kylie, what took so long?" her teacher said.

"I was going BM," Kylie said. The whole class began to laugh.

"Kylie! That is too much information!"

The class laughed louder. Kylie returned to her seat, humiliated.

This is what the woman is doing to her. Kylie's scalp begins to prickle with rage, a big smile still on her face.

If she focuses on the work, it's easier. At the front of the room, the woman continues to take charge. Kylie grabs a marker and stands beside her, beside the chart paper that was her idea. And then it happens. The woman ducks around behind her, and her hand presses in the dip right above her butt. Kylie knows how to deflect the woman's touch without it seeming rude—she's had many years of practice. It's as though her whole body is involuntarily inverting, her back arches, and she steps forward and writes something on the paper, an idea she'd been trying to say but the woman kept talking over her. To the woman, her touch has not even occurred. She was only moving people around, the way she is used to doing. Kylie's heart is smashing

against her lungs. In a few minutes, she takes a bathroom break.

In the bathroom, Kylie thinks about her breasts and she thinks about her butt and she imagines that she is nothing but a mind. A mind that is maybe attached to a robot. A robot that can feel no sensations, only carry out tasks. Despite Kylie's messy twenties, her thirty-year-old self tries most days to be like this. *One day, the world will end and there will only be cyborgs, she thinks. And then I'll be okay.*

6 * O & 7 \$ % 4 % 7 #))

The streetcar is full of mouths, and Tim's mouth tastes like cheeseburger. His hand spreads on the small of his daughter's back, to steady her. He sucks the inside of his cheek, wishing he had a mint.

Two young girls sit with their feet on the seats and their legs folded into their chests. Their mouths press to their knees. Mouths beside them talk into phones. A man beside him accidentally shoves his electric guitar right into Tim's shin. Then the man's mouth smirks. A woman to Tim's other side licks her lips. "Do you have your money?" Tim asks his daughter. "Do you have your ticket? Do you have your purse?"

"Yes, I have everything," she says, and fishes her phone out of her pocket and begins to text her friend. *streetcar taking forever,* Tim reads over her shoulder. *My dads freakin out*

he mad?

I think hes just worried for no reason. She puts a crying-with-laughter emoji.

Ten minutes ago, they were sitting across from each other at a restaurant while she rattled off facts about the band she was going to see tonight. She'd told him again and again thank you for taking her downtown, for the tickets, for letting her go alone with her friend once he drops her off. He moves his hand slightly up as the streetcar rocks.

“God, Dad,” she says, batting his hand away. “I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

+ * O & # 4 #

Sam is having a nightmare. She’s never lived a life at all. She was only dreamed into existence by one of the people she had sex with. Only the encounter had made her real. The heat from his face, the salty taste of his fingers, the brush of his eyelash, the magic feeling of someone else’s breath against you, or someone’s eyes blinking against your skin. In her dream, she approaches climax again and again, and the person, he doesn’t let her, he teases her, he says he’s not sure she wants it. The moment before she wakes up fully, Sam is certain she has died. Possibly has been murdered by Travis—she always had a feeling that one of the men she slept with would be the person to take her life. And then she wakes up and is alone in her apartment. She begins her morning routine: coffee, meditation, stretching, dishes, looking out the window for a prolonged period of time. This routine is the only thing that still makes her happy.

She messages Kylie and tells her all about the dream.

Hmm, Kylie types, a little on the nose.