

STORIES

JUST



PERVS

JESS TAYLOR

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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.