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Vulnerability and Surrender

Beneath a full-length seventies leather coat, Valerie's long legs strode up Crown Street from Woolloomooloo. Her headphones full of brass and thudding bass, and the black milk voice of Rhoda Myers poured through her stride. The wind blew at her coat from behind. Clouds gathered and pushed toward the east: the chill on her cheeks sharp as glass.

She had been hiding with a shadow she named grief. She lied to Ronnie and June saying she was sick with the flu. The pity fest had to end so she texted June telling her she'd meet her at the Piccolo Bar before her first job.

Inside the cafe June sat near the window sketching, the white page of her journal with dark ink alleyways. Her cardigan hung on the back of her chair, vintage sunglasses next to her espresso. Looking up from the book she smiled. 'So glad to see you beautiful one. Sit down. No. First kiss me.' Her fifties curls framed a heart-shaped face.

Valerie pressed her lips to her friend's forehead. June squished up to create enough room for Valerie to sit beside her. They talked as they always did, nakedly.

'Ronnie says my blow jobs leave him wanting. You've got a reputation for good head, Valerie. What's the secret?'

'He didn't say that did he?'

The couple at the next table turned around to snatch an eyeful. Valerie stared straight back.

'When are you going to wake up to him and just tell him to fuck off?'

June frowned. 'What about you and Billy?'

Valerie looked at the menu.

'Do you want anything? I'm going to order.'

June knew something was up. 'I'll have another short black.'

Valerie went over to Mario, frothing milk at the coffee machine.

They'd met Ronnie the previous summer when they traded university subject readers for squalor and decadence in Kings Cross. He showed them both how to earn easy money.

'I should know better and you should stop sleeping with Ronnie.'

Ronnie had renamed them Temper and Tantrum, TNT, promoting them as dominatrix and submissive for hire.

'So where's Billy?'

'It's not *Where's Wally*.'

'He dumped you, didn't he?'

'Made me feel like shit. I've cried till I'm dry. He left me a break-up playlist, *Music To Howl To*.

Toxically romantic. I'm so fucked up by it.'

She'd listened to it over and over.

June fiddled with a curl, 'You and I and our shit heads. Ronnie ought to change our names to Vulnerability and Surrender.'

They both laughed then, familiar with the emotional debris in one another's life. Mario put down a tray with tea for Valerie.

'Billy left me a note saying he's vanilla. Flavours, that's such bullshit. When I scene with someone it's a kind of intervention. It's profound. It's got fuck all to do with Hoboken Crunch.'

June grabbed her friend's hand.

Someone opened the door, a gust of cold air moved through the room. Mario yelled at them to shut the door fast. An old guy raved about the day the sewer exploded and the tourists were hop, skip and jumping like kangaroos.

Charlie Parker was on the juke box.

Her mobile vibrated in her pocket. It was Ronnie, he wanted her to go see someone in Darlinghurst.

* * *

It was a modern apartment. Ordered and clean with geeky objects. A perspex puzzle skull, a photograph of the Aurora Borealis on the shelf above the computer. A suspended mobile of the planets floated above the coffee table and big leather couch. There was a neat galley kitchenette with stainless steel bench tops.

He wasn't bad looking. Thirty something, short hair, clean shaven, wearing a black t shirt and jeans - non descript. After he told her his name, she asked him what he did.

'I'm a data analyst.'

She wasn't much interested in hearing more, but he was chatty. Probably wanted something prescriptive he'd read in Penthouse.

'I work out what we can collect and how we can use it to make a profit.'

Looking around the room, there were no ropes or stray paddles leaning next to a wall suggesting someone who played. He was still talking, trying to fill space, uneasy about how this all worked. She put her bag down and sat on the lounge, unbuttoned her coat. She watched him to see his reaction to her thigh unveiled by the slit in her long black skirt. She took a hair band off her wrist and pulled her long hair into a tight bun. Her shaved scalp was hennaed with an intricate lacework design.

He rambled on, 'How old you are, where you live, who you call, when you don't answer the phone, that sort of thing. I write code.'

An information gatherer who knew fuck all she thought.

She retrieved a cigarette from a silver box and was reaching for her lighter when he interrupted, 'I'd prefer if you didn't.'

It was time to take charge. 'I'm the one in control here, so whilst you can have your preferences, I decide what goes. Do you get that?'

Glaring straight through him she lit the cigarette and inhaled.

He mumbled, 'Alright.'

'Thank you, Mistress. Repeat that. Now,' she commanded.

He repeated her just louder than a whisper.

She rolled on with her formula: fifty-five minutes of torment, five minutes with a riding crop. She rarely had penetrative sex with these guys. He would come prematurely anticipating the crop or after when she tugged him off. It was see you later and she'd have made rent.

'Where's the bathroom?'

'If you want to change.'

'I'm not changing.' A fuckwit with a latex fantasy. This was going to be tedious. 'Where, Dick-head?'

He pointed to a closed door on the left.

Valerie considered her reflection, stood up straighter and got out her kohl, transforming into Tantrum thinking what to create for the nervous geek who liked to talk a lot. All scenes were largely built around the anticipation, the dance of seduction. The pain at the end was the release, the forgiveness.

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When she first listened to the playlist it didn't quite gel why Billy had chosen those songs in that particular order. He had laid down an emotional journey beginning to end. It had a shape to it, starting with IMU doing *Blind Owl*, then *Mirror Ball* sung by Rhoda Myers, before *Voodoo Moan* by Venus In Furs. Gogol's Cat with *Begging Bowl* was followed by The Counterfeit Coins and *Dream Tigers*. The final track was Hard Candy doing *Sweet Future*. He knew she'd hate that song, so sugar sweet like a stick of pink fairy floss with ground up glass in it. Valerie felt nauseous the first time she heard it. The song contradicted everything. It alluded to a shared future, completely at odds with his actions.

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Looking up from her journal June asked, 'Do you think you could work as a sub?'

Valerie rotated the pot clockwise then anti clockwise.

'I don't know. In my private life it's different, I can switch. But professionally it would have to be someone I trusted, a regular. There are too many morons who think they're Doms.'

She poured tea into the cup.

'They aren't *all* morons.'

Some students near the juke box laughed. Mario hovered over their table.

Valerie had a sip of tea then reflected, 'As a Dom I find a way to humiliate someone so they crack open.'

June coloured a window frame. 'How do you work out what that is?'

'It's to do with the solitariness of life. We all experience it. We're each a tiny bit of lint in a belly button. And we get that vast loneliness of life feeling.'

June paused from her scribbling. 'Forgotten in the big vagina of the universe.'

She had drawn a still life in the window above the alley. A table with a bowl of fruit. 'You think we're running away from that when we look for intimacy?'

'Yeah. My clients are cracked open by their fears. They usually have something secret around desire and the aloneness. An attachment to some sort of absence.'

A student put some change in the jukebox, and music rushed into the silence.

Roaring guitar and a strutting smart talking voice screamed, 'Yeah, I love you so much, I don't need to resist, I don't need to exist.' Bass line addictive it drowned their chat. June rocked back and forth into the music.

'The Dead Weather doing *Blue Blood Blues*, Billy used to play this all the time.'

Valerie scowled at her for bringing him up. He'd spun that track whenever she walked into the courtyard at Dean's.

The door opened and an old tramp came into the coffee house. Mario stepped away from the espresso machine, sat the guy down and brought him some soup.

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Craig moved forward on the lounge. On edge.

She stood over him.

‘We’re going to play a game.’ She wanted him to concentrate. The suggestion wasn’t threatening in any way.

‘We’ll need safe words,’ he suggested.

He sounded like he’d been spanking off to a cup cake insight into push me pull you culture. He was predictable, annoying.

She was going to undo that false safety around words.

‘You are embarrassed by cunts. I bet you can’t say the word cunt fifty different ways. Say it for me.’

Craig stared at her blankly, speechless for a second, before admitting, ‘It’s not a word I’m inclined to say in the company of a woman.’

‘I’ve told you to say it. Can you say it fifty different ways?’

‘Cunt.’ He said it softly, then again cheerfully. ‘Cunt.’ He giggled. ‘Cunt.’

‘You said it the same each time.’

‘I did not.’

He whispered it strongly under his breath. Yell it, she thought. But he couldn’t, too chicken.

He spat, ‘Cunt.’

Walking behind him, her coat swished against his shoulder, she was holding a crop.

His bitterness she recognised as his longing. He ran away from it toward chatter.

‘It would count if I just used it in conversation wouldn’t it, like say we talk about cunts. The guys in head office are cunts, carrying on about their cars, holidays and boats.’

‘I told you to say the word cunt, not babble on like a nervous boy.’

‘That’s me being cunt.’

The alarm went off on her mobile.

‘Time is up.’

‘No spanking?’

‘Do you think I’m a cunt right now?’

‘Look I don’t know how to answer that question. I’ve paid you a bit of money and—.’

She cut him off. ‘You only said it seven times. We could extend or another time.’

She was playing, they had fifteen minutes left.

He said he would like to extend.

His dick was hard, pressing against his belly and the cool leather of the couch as the crop whissed through the air exhaling its animal breath.

After, she’d put a blanket over him and got him a pillow and made him a warm drink. He was completely spaced. She lay down beside him and lit a cigarette.

‘What’s this about for you?’ she’d asked. Her tone was, interested, gentle even.

‘I just feel all my inadequacy slipping away, the guilt of it, that is when you are beating me. When I’m humiliated I’m able to own falling short. It’s accepted.’

‘You got a girlfriend?’ She was a bit curious.

‘I got you,’ he deflected.

She moved away from him and sat up, got out her phone and checked the time.

‘For a price. I’m not really your girlfriend.’

‘I’d like it if you were.’

‘I’m a men-torturer so I’m not gonna meet those needs.’

She smiled as she rose from the couch. ‘I’m going to have a shower.’

Taking her bag from the coffee table, she padded down the hall to the bathroom. He heard the shower and fan go on. He was drifting, not in his body but riding a wave of endorphins stirred by his stinging backside.

A mobile was buzzing. It must have fallen out of the bag. He reached for it. It was the alarm. He turned it off then shut his eyes slipping off to sleep, holding it under the covers.

At the next job Temper realised she'd left her phone there. When she went back to get it he handed it over grinning sheepishly.

* * *

Later at home she returned to Billy's playlist. Those songs he'd spun on the turntables in the courtyard at Dean's that summer marked places and experiences shared.

They had sung along to *Blind Owl*, driving to garage sales where he turned over the contents at the bottom of every last box looking for discarded treasures. He'd found picture frames and old vinyl. Valerie had danced drunkenly to *Mirror Ball* at a party Ronnie threw, feeling free, strong like a woman of the ghetto. They'd fucked a lot to *Voodoo Moan*.

She remembered Billy fixing his car listening to *Begging Bowl* before he took them away for a weekend to Diamond Head. After a big night they drifted towards sleep listening to *Dream Tigers*, just layback beats, no lyrics. Hard Candy's *Sweet Future*, she'd always disliked.

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A few days later Ronnie sent her back to the wordy bloke. Words for a chatterbox also spelt vulnerability and surrender. Language to a talker was always both bliss and the abyss in Temper's experience. She arrived with a tablet in a zebra print silicon sleeve. She put it in front of him on the coffee table.

‘Open the grail icon.’

Craig tapped the app. A list of words appeared on the screen: hole, vagina, cave, slit, box, gate, frontier, opening, entrance.

‘They’re links. Click on a word.’

It was her holy grid of vaginas.

He opened hole. Foreign words materialised on the screen - offnung, trou, holu.

‘Study them Craig. You’ve got twenty minutes. Twenty correct gets you spanked. Fifty correct and I’ll leave bruises.’

His eyes glazed over looking at the screen forgetting the task at hand.

‘Get on with it.’

‘Can I have a pen and paper?’

‘I didn’t offer you a pen and paper.’

Craig connected the keyboard to the tablet and started copying the list of words.

* * *

The bruises transformed from blue to deep burgundy, then yellow and green in the days after the session. With the aches and pains, she came into his thoughts as his sore backside lifted off the seat riding his bike, at his desk writing code, then waiting for it to compile, listening to his iPod on the bus going out Friday night.

He noticed smiling cleavage, the lack of skirt on the tanned thigh. At work he texted Ronnie.

Fortnightly became weekly. One night, drunk, he called her .

* * *

They were sitting at a quiet table at Dean's Cafe, near the back of the room. The place was crowded with the late night crowd. She was taking the backgammon disks off the board and putting them away.

'Told you, I'd beat you,' Ronnie smiled getting cash out of his wallet, a fifty-dollar bill.

Her mobile rang, it wasn't a number she recognised. Maybe Billy.

Craig blundered into an explanation. She was pissed off 'You shouldn't have called.' He began to talk. She cut him off. 'I can't do that... Call Ronnie, some things can never be a reality...it's a professional thing.' She hung up.

'Who's that?'

'The geek down in the valley, Craig.'

'Another beer, what about you?'

'A pot of Earl Grey. Thanks.'

Someone selected *Sweet Future* on the jukebox. There was the cloud of fairy floss again, with ground up glass. It made her angry but sad, then happy about the possibility. But there was no possibility. She was on a loop. A hamster wheel. He wanted her to hate him. Billy wanted her to believe it was irretrievable. He wanted that to sting.

'This song, it's following me around...'

'Look love, he's got that walkabout thing. A great DJ but he's a card carrying member of the club of no consequence.

You got to stop this. He's not going to be present and accountable. That's who Billy is.'

Sniffling into a soggy tissue she agreed, 'I know. This is way fucked up.'

'You knew that's how he rolls. He smashes hearts.'

Ronnie's phone buzzed. It was a text from Craig.

'Showtime darling in Darlington. Off you go.'

* * *

As she walked, The Counterfeit Coins' *Dream Tigers* created a soundscape to the evening's shadows. Familiar fences and hedges, concrete cracks in the pavement along a path she'd worn to this regular's doorstep for weeks. She paused looking at the expanse of city skyline, the towers of power, the other side of the valley beyond Hyde Park. Some people were best never encountered in daylight. That was how it was with the men she saw professionally.

He stood at the door, grinning expectation in a crumpled shirt. Immediately she wanted to hurt him. Temper felt disgusted with his need. He had that desperate look of wanting to please. Helpless and hopeless. A mirror of her own immediate longing for something else entirely.

Without a word, she pushed him into the lounge. Still not speaking, she tied him up then jammed a big red rubber ball in his mouth without formality.

'Not a fucking word.'

She stood in his line of sight and lifted a cat of nine tails from her bag. Billy came to mind. She wanted to hurt him. 'Fuck You' her inner voice raged. She released the gag from his mouth.

She raised her arm. Billy wasn't vanilla. He was mudslide. She brought down the whip. Mudslide, shitty mudslide. Craig's back arched, he yelled out. There was no-one with a blanket and hot water bottle for her after Billy's scene, his playlist. She struck again. Red fanned the skin of his back and buttocks. It hurt. Her arms were shaking. She was crying. She lashed the tails across his body. Unable to stop. She felt used, empty. Billy's songs, Billy's scene. Craig's back and buttocks were bloody. She wanted to kick and scream. He yelled out the safe words, 'Forgiveness.' She put down the whip and went toward him, unzipping her skirt.

* * *

After at the Piccolo, she stared at the silent juke box and then at June as she tried to explain it, 'I'm so lost up my own fanny.'

June laughed, 'Well that's got to be inevitable, the universe being a cunt.'

'A vagina. That's not what I mean. I got off on having sex with a client just now. It was a power trip to fill my hole, forgetting that each of us is just a speck of dust in relation to the whole...no better no worse. I used him.'

'We all have needs I suppose,' June was philosophical about it.

The humiliation was having Craig turn her on, he'd seen her helplessness. She was mixed up, confused and still angry with Billy. She was lost alright.

'Oh god no June, no, this guy was *all* wrong. Coupledom and mediocrity.'

June was puzzled for a moment, 'He sounds nice, even if he is a client.' Then she dropped the clanger, 'Maybe even love, maybe that's what he wants. We all want love to fill the hole.'

'Me and him - that's insane.' Valerie snorted.

Ronnie came into the cafe. He had a bottle of whisky.

'Morning girls. Mario, three glasses please and of course one for yourself.'

Peeved, Mario wanted to close up. He muttered to himself, getting things onto a tray.

'You girls had a winning night.' Ronnie poured the whisky generously.

June was in her bag rifling for money.

Valerie's bundle for Ronnie had been counted already and was held together with a neat rubber band.

He had a drink with them, leaving the whisky as he and June disappeared into the empty street.

Mario and Temper called it a night as the dark outside dissolved into the dawn. Valerie got out her headphones and MP3. She was going to walk home. Not Billy's playlist. There were loads of things she could listen to, other choices. Her eyes scanned song titles, shuffling places and experiences.

She decided silence was best.

Outside a spectacular golden sun was rising in the east. She strolled along the main drag, past the fountain and the apartment blocks, down toward the navy base. As she took in the view of lightening blue sky above the teal glittering harbour, the sound of a garbage truck lifting and

stacking wheely bins at the start of a new day, Valerie thought about Craig's overwhelming sense of inadequacy and the yawning emptiness she matched it with. Was it defiant to howl out your weakness hoping it would be liberated? She saw someone could maybe meet those desires, that had to be better than coo-eeing into the big hole with nothing but your own playlist echoing back.

The End

All Songs fictitious with the exception of the Dead Weather's, *Blue Blood Blues*.