

Hearts for Eyes

The bright sundial of his face pointed toward me, there, in the bar, beneath a vintage neon Budweiser sign flickering around a missing w.

For the last hour I'd been deflecting my former classmates who were sloshing beer onto my boots, my purse, shouting in my ear—home for the holidays! They insisted I show them my headshots. My being a freckled mestiza now took on a satisfying new power.

I'd been avoiding eye contact with him on purpose. He was with a girl. A woman, I guess. We hadn't talked in over a year, when I was home for my grandmother's funeral.

A woman named Megan grabbed my wrist.

"Cassandra," she said. She set her cocktail down on the bar and held my hands.

"I just have to tell you," she said. She was drunk. "I am so, so sorry for how I used to treat you. Sometimes I tell my husband about it. About how sorry I am."

He looked away from me. I couldn't tell if he noticed me. So, I looked back at Megan. Voluptuous tears lined her eyes. One tear got free, pulled a diluted stream of mascara like a loose thread, unraveling her eyes.

A memory of Megan driving her parents' black Audi out of the high school parking lot shouting, "Fuck you, whore freak!" She might have even flipped me off. Or maybe I made that part up.

A flash of him comforting me in his silver Honda Prelude. The rear windshield mutilated by the extreme summer heat of our southwestern town, its applique tint peeling and bubbling. My head on his chest. We were waiting around the block from his house for his parents to leave so we could watch Star

Trek and make out. He didn't want his parents to know he was dating a girl with tar black hair and gray lipstick. So, I protected him from the shame of associating with me.

Why won't he look at me?

In my 16-year-old dreams I splashed lemonade in Megan's face at lunch.

But tonight, she fawned over me, pinching and zooming on my features. I didn't have to try to look like someone just spent sixty seconds sucking on my top lip. That's just how it was.

He placed his hand on her waist, pulled her in close. The woman, his date, guffawed with her big garrulous mouth and I wanted to smack her across the teeth. He still wasn't looking at me.

I looked back at Megan.

"Back to the big city after the New Year, then?" said Megan, dabbing at her eyes with a bar napkin.

"Yeah, major auditions coming up. I'm really nervous," I said. I wasn't really. I spent the last eight years perfecting my exercise, diet, walk, pout, stance, and connections. I was ready for my editorial debut. There was nothing I could do about my height, but the cabbage and cayenne cleanse seemed to be leaning me out enough to make up for it.

I borrowed the apprehension growing around the searching, gnarled root of my former relationship with him—what it would mean if he didn't acknowledge me tonight—to spin a face that Megan could interpret as humility and nervousness.

I imagined my apartment on fire, how I would grab the vintage floral hat box of his letters first.

When our eyes locked, his expression remained the same as it was before: mischievous and kind, his eyes suspended in the deep, generous draw of his smile. Choke me, Daddy, please.

He was disastrously good looking. No sign of the spindly neck and twiggy arms he sported in high school, when we were strange and outcast together, but for different reasons.

A mild panic set in. Nothing in his expression registered that he acknowledged my presence. His eyes moved back to his date, whose face hovered close to his—even as she held up her phone to

capture—photos, videos? After each capture she would inspect it, then hold up her phone again for a do-over.

She started singing to some classic rock song, her eyes closed, her lips sneered back. Then she started drumming on the bar, smacking the tops of her thighs in time with the music. He didn't look at me again.

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I said something nice to Megan and walked out. I sat on the frigid cold seat of my grandmother's cherry red Mercedes 450 SL, the one and only gift to me in her will. *Weeds turn to wildflowers at the edge of town*, she used to say to me, tucking the hair behind my ear.

As I told myself I wouldn't search for him online, I did. He hadn't posted anything in over nine weeks. A blurry pic of his dog. A poorly cropped shot of his mother. The only selfie he ever posted showed him looking solemn and resolute in the chill of the bathroom mirror. Another picture showed him walking in a field, his hands in his pockets.

Beneath each of these photos was a consistently inane voice. *So adorbs. So hawt. Is that yur grandma? She's so beautiful.* There she was, the signature of her presence encompassed by tiny hot pink hearts attached to his laconic comments.

I tapped her face, her dark roots common and undignified. Her profile was public. Lexie Johnstone. Her name tasted like poison, angular and bitter. I dropped my phone, a searing oracle, into my lap. I told myself I was better than crying in the car at an informal high school reunion.

And then they walked out of the bar together. I wiped the condensation from the windows. He kissed her cheek as he opened her door and helped her into the passenger seat. Just like he used to do for me. I watched his red-hot taillights disappear. I drove towards my childhood home as a welcome snow obliterated everything.

#####

But will he come visit me? Will he come see me now that I'm here? When I awakened in the hospital, I learned I crashed my car into a snowbank just off the highway. Something about the jaws of life, hypothermia, my luck. My parents were there.

For what felt like weeks, the snow piled up on the thin metal windowsill beside my hospital bed. I wasn't sure how long I'd been there. I tapped an announcement into Facebook. Maybe he would see it. I watched TV. I failed to recognize VH1 no longer existed as a network. I slurped applesauce through chapped lips.

On the way home, I couldn't internalize the catastrophic turn in my career. I ignored calls from my agent after I let her know what happened. I shrugged to myself. My dad patted my knee. He could still show up. Others would bring me food and I would be obligated to eat it—for healing purposes. The molecules of my marrow would re-knit with a robust vigor.

"Please, Mom," I snapped. I imagined my car, Gram's car, crumpled and cold at the impound, its elegant bones jagged and jutting.

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Propped atop my black comforter with swirling galaxies, I opened my phone. I wrote to him. I told him I hoped he would come visit me. I said I missed him. The exhaustion of this exercise laid me flat out. I slept for days and nights.

When I awoke, he hadn't responded.

So, I texted Sam, my best friend, back in New York. They had called a couple times and left voicemails for me, saying they'd been watering my plants, cooing over crystals and lighting healing

candles on my behalf. I liked knowing they were there. Proving my apartment, and by extension myself, still existed.

I tapped into my phone, “You’re the best. I might need you to come out. Talk soon.” I added some brown hearts.

I looked around my childhood room. I was a surly weed outgrowing my plot, ugly and tyrannical. I needed a dumb and vacuous princess to prick her finger on my spikes. I needed to do some damage. I decided I would succumb to checking the quickening, deafening, digital pulse of Lexie Johnstone.

I started with the familiar territory of Instagram. A quick scroll through her eponymous hashtag #LexJo revealed a carbon copy of her account. She was the only one who used the hashtag. She mostly posted selfies at slightly different angles, in loosely different locations (gym, pool, casino, bar).

She was good at responding to comments. She said “thk u” and “tnx luv” a lot. She wore all the wrong pinks, straps, and blondes.

In the comments I found her Twitter, YouTube, and Snapchat. I also found her phone number, email address, and home address, all of which she supplied as various responses to friends and acquaintances. I took screenshots and created a private photo album named LexJo. If she ever deleted her personal information, I would have receipts.

Twitter was LexJo’s least utilized platform. Her 49 tweets were pathetically unnoticed. One tweet was a thank you to Jilly’s Juice and Java, a local smoothie bar. She complimented the company on their “stellar” customer service and their “upmost” quality. Only Jilly’s Juice liked the tweet. I almost felt bad for her.

Another tweet, four and a half months before, LexJo shared with the world how great she felt after a “hard core gym sesh.” This tweet included a pic of her posing in a trucker hat, tank top and booty shorts. She made a gangster peace sign, flexed a meaty bicep, and spread her legs to accentuate her flat cheeks as she turned into the mirror behind her. I recognized this picture. After cross-checking timestamps, I realized she had posted it first on Twitter, but she must have been disappointed in the low

engagement there, so she posted it on Insta where it garnered 27 likes and three comments, one of which was her mother.

I tapped her mother's face and followed a few links before I landed on her Facebook page. There she posted alt-right propaganda and racist memes—the least offensive of which was a black and white photo of Civil War soldiers sprawled dead on a battlefield. The block lettering said: “Why haven't the negroes thanked all the good white people who died for them?”

Further exploration of LexJo's mother revealed LexJo's brother. He posted disemboweled carcasses of unidentified animals alongside BBQ, beer, and milk memes. LexJo's mother commented, “My sweet boy.” She also littered LexJo's Facebook with invalidating sentiments: “Your so gorgeous it doesn't even look like you!”

#####

My mother walked in without knocking. I stashed my phone beneath the covers and folded my hands over my quilts, my guilt so palpable and animate I thought my mother might try to fluff and rearrange it behind me. I didn't know what time it was or how long I had been consuming LexJo's digital presence. But I could tell I was only just getting started.

“How are you, hon?” said my mom. She set a standing tray over my legs topped with a cup of Earl Grey, rice cakes, low-sugar jam, and a saucer with nine blueberries. She patted my shins through the comforter.

“Oh,” she said, “There's still some of that lasagna Megan brought.”

“I'll just work on this, OK?” I smiled, impatient to get back online.

She slipped out the door.

I pulled my phone out. 3%. I plugged it in. I never expected him to see my message or to respond, but I hoped with an embarrassing, debilitating desperation.

I checked his Instagram. He liked some of LexJo's photos and left two bullshitty comments. Comments that were innocuous enough, that proved he could respond to someone, but hadn't responded to me. I set my phone down with calculated fury. I sipped my tea. I ate a blueberry. I calmed myself with objectivity. I could not verify that he had seen my direct message to him.

When my mother came back three hours later, I was a new woman. I had downloaded images of someone online and edited them using an app and my fingertips. My new handle was AmberEmber342. I was 19. I designed myself a memoji and donned a floral printed dress with Doc Martens. My mom might have been Persian. My favorite movie was *Y Tu Mama Tambien*. I wanted to study psychology (just like her). I made myself LexJo's fan girl.

I followed her on all her platforms and started leaving comments on her pictures. I watched her stories over and over. On Snapchat, I could see exactly where she was because she enabled the map. On her Instagram story she announced she was flying to Vegas, for a date. My heart seized. Would he make an appearance? Would I see him here, transformed into a figment of her imagination, quantized, digitized, conceptualized into something she hoped could transform her?

I called out to my mom. She brought me a whole bowl of blueberries.

On Snapchat LexJo was wearing a cheap black corset and tight black leggings with platform heels. She was lounging on her bed sucking a lollipop and lip syncing. I took screenshots knowing full well she would be notified, and then I sent chats to her saying, "were u git dat top? U r so hawt."

She responded to my alter ego, "tnx bb."

I ate the rest of my blueberries handfuls at a time, like popcorn. My eyes burned with exhaustion. I took two of my pain meds and passed out.

#####

I dreamt of complimenting LexJo's bathing suit choice as she slung herself over plastic poolside lounges and looked shitty and hungover. I dreamt of sending her snaps of our memojis holding hands. Of sending faces with hearts for eyes when she posted pics of herself propped at the slot machines with a sweating plastic cup and color change straw in her hand.

I dreamt of finding her house. Of waiting for her. Tying her up. Telling her to shut the fuck up. Shoving screenshots of her idiotic hashtags and gym pics and pool pics in her face and whispering in her ear, *what the fuck is this, LexJo?* Watching the rough rope scratch and dent her thick thighs as she struggled. Her cheeks squeezing over the sides of the duct tape. Ripping off the tape. Reapplying her frosted pink gloss before smearing my fingers across her mouth, braiding her tears with her brassy hair like some furious river goddess tormenting townsfolk with violent deviations of current.

And then, I bludgeon her, not to death, but to a comfortable, muted state of questionable sentience.

#####

He didn't respond to my original message but started a new thread somewhere else. He said, "I heard about your accident. I hope you're OK. I wish I could help."

I told him, "So come see me."

He said, "We can't do this every time you're home."

"Why not?"

"Same as every time."

"Maybe this means something then," I said.

"We're adults now."

"All the better."

He didn't respond.

"So please just come be with me," I said.

Nothing.

####

It was a video of her in the backseat of a car, the city sky behind her a shakily drawn line of glitter puff paint. Her hair was blowing all around her, licking her sunburned shoulders like sateen serpents. She blinked slowly and darted her eyes to imaginary onlookers off-camera. Lassoes of hair tangled in her lashes. She shifted her torso, bloated with beer, buffalo chicken wings and shots of tequila, all of which I watched her consume in the previous few hours.

She was wearing a silky gray tank top with ribbons and a tie up the back, and she was trying to move in slinky waves—a maneuver that appeared even stupider for the restriction imposed by her seat belt.

She moved the camera to reveal flashes of her friends in the car. There was a guy driving, but he wore a hat and I could not make out his face. She kept pushing the camera on him, trying to get him to engage. He held up a hand. The camera jolted, a square of moon roof with smeared stars, and then back on LexJo's face. She was mouthing the lyrics to a song I didn't know.

I could see the white scum on her tongue.

This, her ill-practiced routine in attempted seduction. Her thick, false eyelashes fluttered, and she dragged her chipped, red-painted nails across her lips. She lightly bit down on one and then nearly placed an entire knuckle in her mouth. She smirked before catching the lyrics again, an exaggerated flick of her tongue between her teeth on some phrase containing an *L*.

A blotchy, red-hot flower bloomed across my chest, diffuse tendrils swirled up my neck and onto my cheeks. I was then suddenly, intolerably hot. I considered belching a fiery, disgusted roar, a dragon enraged but also amused as it dangled its prey over its open maw.

I sent a link to Sam.

I played the video again. And then I pilfered her treasure trove of hashtags. *#Hotblonde*. *#Blondegirl*. *#Barbie*. *#Backseat*. *#Lipsing*. An hour later, when she hadn't updated any of her accounts, I made myself leave the house for the first time since my accident.

I drove to 7-Eleven with my windows down, my jealousy, my contempt, my malice swirling in a mad billowing fury inside the cavernous cockpit of my uncle's 1997 Buick LeSabre. I bought an enormous cup of coffee and a pack of double stuf Oreos. I checked her post again. She added hashtags. *#Beautifulgirls*. *#SexyLexie*. *#Lexlife*. *#LexJo*. *#Itsmymofolife*.

Later that night in the hotel lobby she held her phone high up above her so we could look down and see her dancing. She moved her hips in short, choppy bursts. She clearly meant to perform some sexy maneuvers, but she looked like Chubby Checker performing the Hucklebuck.

I watched the video again and again, chewing with my mouth open.

#####

By late April I had sublet my apartment with the help of Sam, signed onto disability, and visited two specialists who claimed they could help repair the shredded ligaments of my wrist. Everything was worse than it seemed. My high school soulmate was a specter in the background of this faux blonde bimbo's faux famous lifestyle.

I sat outside the airport in the Buick, waiting for Sam to exit. This was a time when the desperate desolation and delirium of summer were disguised as pale, unassuming buds, serenely rupturing at the ends of delicate branches. I blew the smoke from my cigarette toward the buds and hoped they choked. I hoped climate change was as catastrophic as they said.

My hyperphagia for LexJo's digital corpse had metamorphosed into a slow, cud-chewing monotony. I masticated every duckface selfie, every stuck-out tongue, every off-key karaoke video of her trying to sing Whitney Houston's version of "Higher Love."

Once I caught sight of the corner of a picture frame on the wall that looked exactly like the one in his living room, the one in the background of the bad photo of his mom. I screenshotted it.

Sam should have been out by then. I texted them.

According to Snapchat, LexJo was now at work, a greasy sports bar with more television screens than customers. She was wearing sparkly purple eyeshadow and braided pigtails. "Oh, I look so pretty today," she said into the camera. She waved her braids around and hit one of her coworkers, and they laughed. I glowered at them and sent her a chat: "omg ur so pretty & funny."

Watching her was like walking into a dusty convenience store and buying one of everything and then eating all of it in the car as you watch people depressedly pump gas and slap sad grey water across their windshields spackled with the crusty carapaces and exploded thoraxes of insects.

Sam exited baggage claim with a fabric duffel bag one might have taken to the Y in the 80s. They wore a dark gray three-piece suit and saddle shoes with shiny blue laces. Sam was an aspiring fashion magazine editor currently writing a monthly column on the history of LGBTQia+ activist fashion.

Sam tossed their bags into the back and sat down beside me in the Buick. I spread the tight pleats of my chartreuse skirt out across my lap, smoothed my lemon-yellow cable knit crop top.

"It's not too bad, right? It's cute, yeah?" I said.

"What, the sling?" Sam laughed. They pulled out a crunchy green tree air freshener from between the seats. They flicked it onto the dash and said, "So what the fuck is up with this chick." They spread their left arm over the back of the bench seat and stared at me.

"Watch this," I said, scooting in close. LexJo's pale avatar hovered over a satellite map of the strip mall where she worked.

“See,” I said. “Exactly where she is.”

“And you said she’s definitely seen you before?” said Sam.

“It’s possible, at the bar back in December.”

“Where’s your nearest wig shop?”

“I don’t feel bad about this, you know?” I said. “She shares all this information publicly. I’m not doing or finding out anything she hasn’t already shared.”

“Do you have any kind of respectable makeup store in this rooster poop bunghole of a town or what? Tarte, KVD, anything?” asked Sam, wiping their hands together as if to expel something sticky.

“And I never said you should feel guilty.”

“I drive by her house. I drive by her work,” I said flatly, my fingers wiggling through the end of my sling.

“Well, show me this radiant beam of sunshine, then!” Sam clapped their hands together. “Wigs! Lashes! Let’s go!”

#####

By the time I walked into Bob and Bill’s Mega Sportz Bar, I could have been mistaken for an only slightly less than perfect Edie Sedgwick. Sam did my shimmering silver eyeshadow, daring dark winged eyeliner darted above my cheekbones like sparrows. Sam crowned me with a platinum blonde wig.

As we sat down and ordered our fluorescent beverages and sucked them down with thick plastic straws, LexJo twirled around the corner holding a tray of pints. She was much blockier than she allowed herself to appear online, as if her sculptor tired, left the top half of her struggling to escape the unhewn heaviness.

“Bang-a-rang,” said Sam. “I mean, I want to be nice, but it’s almost impossible.”

“See what I mean?”

“Everyone can see,” said Sam.

“I can’t figure out why he won’t just come see me.”

“Maybe he knows this is it,” said Sam. “That you’re it.”

“Everyone says you can’t stay with your high school boyfriend.”

“Since when do we listen to other people?” said Sam. “We can do whatever we want.”

“I literally have been waiting for you to stay that.”

“So, invite him out,” said Sam, staring openly at LexJo.

“Already tried. He said we can’t. Because it will be the same as always.”

“You mean, like a deep, undeniable connection the same?”

“Exactly,” I said. An orange slug of liquid slipped up Sam’s straw.

“Well, as fun as this all is,” said Sam, waving their hands around, “it’s absurd.”

“You’re judging me?” I said, chewing my straw and eyeing LexJo. She was flirting with the bartender.

“I mean *he’s* absurd,” said Sam. “It’s like that scene in *Clueless*. When Cher asks her dad what to do if you can’t argue your way out of a situation.” I stared at Sam.

“Come on, just tell me,” I said.

“ ‘Well,’ Cher’s dad says, ‘obviously this boy is a complete moron. You’re the most beautiful girl in Beverly Hills. And I’m not sure I want you with a stupid fellow like that.’ ”

“I really do love you, you know that?” I said. “But, Christ, look at her, Sam. Look,” I pouted.

“Cassandra, all I’ve done is look at her. On Snap, on Insta, on Facey. ‘I seen’t it,’ ” they mocked, smiling. “This look you’ve got tonight. It’s wasted. Let’s get outta here. Besides, we can always watch LEXJO online.” Sam shouted her name with enthusiasm as the entire place went silent.

“Yeah?” she said. LexJo stared at us from across the restaurant, her face a soft, service-oriented smile. She walked over to us as the sound returned to the room. She stood at the edge of our booth and then squatted down to be level.

“Can I help you with anything? A refill maybe?” she asked. I decohered into a pool on the red vinyl cushion.

“We couldn’t help noticing you from afar,” said Sam, flirting. “You look like you might know a good place around here to do some dancing.” Sam winked.

“Oh, that accent, where you all from?” said LexJo.

“Guess,” I said.

“I loooove guessing,” gushed LexJo. “I’d have to say like, maybe Boston? Or Chicago?”

“You’re good at this, you know?” said Sam.

LexJo smiled and said, “I’m supposed to be from a big city, just never got the chance. But things are looking up for me.” She looked back towards her coworker who was waving her over.

“I’m headed to Gigi’s later,” she said. “Date night. Maybe I’ll see you there.”

#####

Shiny quarters slipped through my fingers into the old jukebox filled with new songs. I pressed the thick arrow buttons toward “Stay with Me” by Duffy. A digital clock framed beneath a diorama of a stagecoach galloping past snow-covered mountains blinked in glowing red, 2:47am. I turned around and placed my ass on the jukebox shelf. I walked over to him as he watched me.

I sat down next to him at the bar.

“So, where is she?” I said, placing my face down close to my beer, drunk. I had lost Sam hours ago to a woman named Shirley.

“She’s not my girlfriend, if that’s what you’re wondering,” he said. On the bar his phone rang. He looked at it. I couldn’t read the name, but it was her. He silenced it.

“This is what a restraining order looks like,” he said.

“Why didn’t you block her, then?”

“She had no one else. Her family’s crazy.”

“But you still got a restraining order against her, when she needed you,” I said.

She continued to call. On the sixth or seventh time he answered it while staring into my face. Her voice was obnoxious and belligerent attempting to mask itself as cute and flirtatious.

“Oh, you’re too good to answer me?” her voice yelled through the phone. He held the phone away from his face and made a pained expression.

“It’s three in the morning.”

“You know why,” she said, a soft flicker of a forked tongue.

“I can’t talk right now,” he said, keeping his eyes on mine. *Say it. Tell her it’s me and what I meant, what I still mean to you, tell her how you’re looking at me*, I thought.

“You know this is real,” she said. She spoke with slurred seriousness.

“That’s enough,” he said.

“You told me we’d get out of here together,” she said. I looked into the dwindling foam of my beer. She was crying. “You said!”

He didn’t deny anything she said. He didn’t shut her down. He spoke to her in front of me, calmly, unemotionally. “You don’t need me to save you,” he said.

When I suspected it was over, I asked, “Is that all?”

He shrugged and sipped his beer. I imagined the thick snarl of his lip contouring my clit. Three successive texts popped onto his screen.

“She calls you her boyfriend.”

“Maybe months ago. And besides, how do *you* know that?”

“She’s pinned her pathetic hopes on you.”

“I told her not to show up tonight.”

“None of what you’re doing is real,” I said.

“You’re the one in a disguise.”

“Yeah, a fake account with a blonde wig asked you out tonight,” I said.

“Well, fine. It worked,” he said. “You won.”

“Yes,” I said. “And all it took was for you to believe I was someone else.”

“Goddamn, Cass. You wanted a confrontation with her, didn’t you?”

“I’m just as perplexed as you,” I said.

“I don’t know what it means that we still feel this way.”

“So why can’t we find out together?”

#####

I parked outside LexJo’s apartment for the last time. She disabled the map a few weeks before, but I knew the way to her house by heart. I’d grown accustomed to following her. Oblivious, she recorded the minutiae of her life, all for me. I’d seen the Buick appear on my own screen in a forgotten fraction of her background, a mystic blue apparition. I followed her on the nights she drove to his house. She sat on the ground slumped outside her car, crying and calling him.

“But I’m your girl,” I heard her saying. I imagined her posting a tearful selfie, *#melonchaly*.

I wanted to watch her close the trunk of her packed car, tail her 1700 miles to the coast, chasing her close to the cliffs, veering in and out of lanes until she scrambled screaming from her car. I’d hold her at flowerpoint—the softness of wildflowers breathless against the hard, dumb exterior of her forehead. Hands up! I would watch her stand on the edge of the earth and contemplate her existence as I held my offering of peace. And then I would tell her I forgive her and toss the bouquet, congratulations, you’re saved. A custom gown of pastel petals. And then from my castle, I would watch her stack gray stones in a deep green field — those heavy, healing stones. Watch her palm sea glass, tongue liquid gems from shells cracked open with her teeth. Crown yourself queen of iridescent days. Here is where your tears find their own way to the sea, the wild, triumphant sea, uncharted.

