

# Golden

The sunglasses weren't necessary. That was what she thought of the polaroid he'd sent her, wedged into an envelope between airline tickets and a scrawled note that read:

*Lucy,  
Come to Bangkok.  
I'm same-same, but different now!  
- Rory.*

They'd split eleven months before, shortly after his great-aunt Booby lost her second breast to cancer. On his twenty-fifth birthday Booby had summoned her favorite nephew to the *Hilton Liverpool* where, dressed in her late husband's dinner suit and a fake mustache, she handed over a briefcase stuffed with five-pound notes. It came with the express condition that he spend it all on titties before his own world turned flat.

"He's insane to think I'd just get on a plane and come to him!" Lucy barked down the phone to her mother. "He's an emotional terrorist. And I don't negotiate with terrorists!"

"How does he look?" her mother asked.

Lucy snatched the picture from her handbag and examined it again. Rory's face, that Nordic prototype of sharp, pointed angles, smiled back at her: striking as ever. His skin, thick and tight as a drum's, had a clear, healthy glow to it.

"Like someone who's had a very long holiday," Lucy sighed. She flipped it over and mouthed the address on the back. It both annoyed and intrigued her, like a dare wrapped in an insult. Hadn't she been the tour-guide in their relationship? Hadn't she negotiated every map on their city-breaks in Bologna and Stockholm and Prague? Europe was *her* place; it's places *her* thing. Everything she knew about Thailand she could fit onto the back of a polaroid.

"So he's still handsome then?" her mother cooed, a peep of excitement rising in her voice.

"I'm hanging up now," Lucy announced, handing her coat to a flight attendant. She followed her down the gangway and onto the plane, turning left into the curved surroundings of BusinessFirst. Ahead of her, first-class passengers floated about the cabin like low-lit fish; slow and graceful and never touching. Lucy found her seat and stared out of the window.

"Just hear him out," her mother pleaded, already sounding thousands of miles away. "Men are idiots, sure, but this one's flying you First!"

The sun bled pink into the west, throwing a final rope of light across the runway as the plane nudged up. The city below her began to shrink, the buildings pinching closer and closer together. She could see Hanover Street, Duke Street, the spindly metal spires of Gibberd's Catholic Cathedral - Liverpool's modernist monstrosity - jutting out of the ground like an upturned shuttlecock. Even from this great height she hated its space-race design, its jaunty concrete angles, the defiant architecture of Sixties exceptionalism that had, in the end, given the city so little. She cursed her mother as it slipped behind a wisp of cloud. Her mother, who boasted of downing drinks with Paul and Ringo at the Cavern Club, had allowed this clanking great Sputnik to crash-land in their own backyard. Now they were stuck with it.

The plane shuddered as it lifted above the clouds. From beside her Lucy heard the grumble of male conversation.

"The problem with a plane is it's basically a building laid on its side, welded to a rocket, then thrown across a continent."

He had a firm handshake and a deep tan, which did little to hide the fact that he was sweating through his shirt.

"John Ackroyd," he smiled, the inflight entertainment system lighting up his leathery face. "Great flyer, reluctant faller." He unbuckled his seatbelt and stood up, opening the bin above her head. "Looks like you're stuck with me until Doha, Lucy Mavrakakis."

He reminded her of her uncle Ronnie - big and bearlike - a man who still pulled pennies out of her ears at parties. Lucy searched her mind for a quip, something pithy, then caught herself.

"Wait, how do you know my name?"

He sat back down and lowered his tray table, emptying a small bottle of whiskey into two finger glasses. "Say you'll have a *wee dram* with me Lucy," he teased, putting on his best Scots accent. "It's good for the nerves."

"How do you know my name?" she asked again.

"Says so right there," he smiled, nodding at the tickets still firmly in her hand. He handed her a glass and clinked it with his own. "Now tell me, are you joining this party or am I dancing alone?"

Lucy smiled at him suspiciously, raising her glass to a little blue star in the fuselage.

"To being thrown!" she announced, before knocking it back.

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Over Istanbul he told her about his line of work, providing fuel-efficiency savings on oil extraction for the Qataris. Lucy nodded politely, intently, trying to piece the words together as he poured from their third bottle of Barolo.

“There’s a lot of oil in Qatar?”

“One spark down one toilet and the whole country goes up!”

She chuckled at the image, feeling warmer, simpler now. Her mind beginning to stretch out, to lie down in front of her. For the past four hours he’d spoken in a way that was warm and general - sharing stories of his wife, Gloria, who hated their life in the desert. There was a son too -- a David or a Daniel -- the teenager with so many piercings that budgies tried to play on him.

Lucy cricked her neck to the left. The digital plane on John’s screen edged silently across the Bosphorus. “This is the furthest East I’ve ever been,” she confessed.

“Bye-bye Byzantium!” he sang, tipping his glass to the window.

Lucy pushed a button and marveled at the smooth recline of her seat. “So this is John,” she announced, swirling the contents of her glass at the surroundings. “BusinessFirst. Back and forth. Selling oil to the Arabs.”

Her new friend’s cauliflower nose dipped low into his glass. “I think you may have misunderstood what it is I do.”

“Everybody’s selling something, John,” Lucy winked. She felt bolder, more certain of the world at this angle. He gave a conciliatory nod and eased his own seat back.

“And what is Lucy selling I wonder?”

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. “Her integrity, probably. Visiting my ex. He’s as dumb as a box of rocks.”

“Which means he must be beautiful,” John deduced.

Lucy cleared her throat and sat upright, feeling suddenly exposed. “He’s prettier than I am,” Lucy laughed, fishing the polaroid from her handbag. He glanced at it briefly then handed it back. “I’m making a huge mistake.”

John set his glass on her tray table and turned away from her. She worried she may have offended him until the collar of his shirt began to sag and loosen at the back. He lifted his hand and motioned for her to come closer. “Take a look at this and tell me what you see.”

The nape of his neck was surprisingly broad, buried beneath a coating of thick grey hair. Lucy tugged his collar back until she spotted it, something dark on his right shoulder-blade: three black arrows pointing up at her accusingly. She shifted in her seat and watched them converge, continuing down to something else, to a hand.

“I see a pitch-fork,” she laughed.

“You see a mistake,” John corrected her. “One I made when I was young and drunk and in love with the world.” He buttoned his shirt up and turned around. “Never regret your mistakes. They’ll remind you you were young and unstoppably beautiful once.”

Lucy pushed her bottom lip out and handed him his glass. “Time, John,” she announced with a clink. “Whoever made it did not make enough of it.”

“Are you excited for Songkran?” he asked.

The look on Lucy’s face made it clear she had no idea what he was talking about.

“The big Thai party to welcome back the rains. The locals line the streets and throw buckets of water at each other.”

Lucy rested her head against his shoulder and yawned. “That sounds awful, John.”

She felt his chuckle but ignored it, sinking deeper into the stillness of her body. Her life felt far behind her now, a narrowing point somewhere on the horizon. She opened her eyes to thank him but instead found herself alone. Above her, a Eurasian-looking attendant, crisp-clothed and drenched in sunlight, flashed her an unnaturally bright smile.

“Welcome to Doha, Miss Mavrakakis. Your connecting flight will depart in an hour.”

Lucy sat up. “Where’s John?” she asked, the fog in her mind rolling forward.

The flight attendant pinched her knees together and dipped down low, retrieving Lucy’s tickets from the floor. She handed them back to her with a wide, unwavering smile.

“I’m afraid Mr. Ackroyd had to leave you behind.”

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At Bangkok she cleared immigration, picked up her suitcase and climbed onto a SkyTrain. Giant billboards whipped past the windows, too fast to be read. Beyond them the city’s skyscrapers wobbled frantically in the the midday heat. Lucy switched on her phone, still in flight-mode, and checked for directions from Siam Central. The canal outside was exactly where her app said it would be. She followed it south three blocks, past the ornate terrace of a giant pagoda, its crumbling steps littered with the bodies of a dozen dozing dogs, turning left onto a sloping side-street that ended at Sopa Apartments. The reception area looked long-abandoned. The strip-lights above the staircase had all burnt out. She made her way up to the third floor, letting herself in with the keycode.

“Lucy, babe -- is that you?” came a call from a distant room.

The apartment looked surprisingly modern inside; open-plan and featureless in a new-build kind of way. She wheeled her suitcase in and closed the door, wondering who else she might be.

He skirted around a corner into the hallway, a thin wet towel knotted tightly around his waist. His dimples were deeper than she remembered, but his smile had lost none of its devastation. He ran at her like a dog unleashed, whipping her up into the air with a shriek.

“You came, you came, you came!” he shouted, her shoes slipping away from her as he spun her around the apartment. They crashed onto the sofa together, tipping it over, a fat Buddha statue from a nearby dresser going over with them. She’d missed this she realized, a shriek of laughter escaping her lungs; Rory’s childlike need to physicalize everything.

“I need you to forgive me,” he announced, climbing on top of her. Peppermint body-wash, still oily on his skin, was soaking through her dress. “I’ve been a dick,” he continued, planting kisses on her face. “Know that I know that.”

She bucked her hips for the city he’d left her in. For the sly, knowing smiles of the girls at the tanning salon. “Fuck you and your five-pound notes!” she hissed.

His hands skimmed the contours of her breasts. His hair, a mangled mop of gold and yellow, fell jauntily across his face. He looked like a puppy, she thought; young and stupid and completely irresistible. Covered in shit and wanting to come home.

“I need you to forgive me,” he repeated.

*“I need, I need,”* Lucy whined. “You’re such a pussy!”

He slipped his fingers under her dress, tugging at the waistband of her panties. “I’m a pussy-hound,” he growled, exposing his perfect canines to her.

They crashed about the apartment like pinballs, ricocheting into the bedroom, a small yelp escaping both of them as they landed awkwardly on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” Rory gasped, fumbling on top of her.

“Don’t talk!” Lucy warned him, hiking up her dress. He headed south on her, mouthing fresh new apologies into the dampness between her legs. “I said don’t talk!” Lucy repeated, more forcefully this time, pulling his head closer, grinding her hips into the hurricane of his mouth. He climbed on top of her, slick and naked and gleaming like fruit, entering her with a single expert thrust. She bit his neck as he found the rhythm, nudging her forward like a tiny boat toward the swells of an orgasm. She closed her eyes and started to moan: for John in Qatar, sweating through his shirt in the desert. For the colossal sweep of the Golden Horn, its depths churning with the remnants of a thousand Byzantine ships. For the great grey cathedral she could never hope to rebuild. And for every other stepping-stone that separated this new place from the old. She moaned until Rory’s lips, soft and inexplicably sweet-tasting found her own, edging shut the opening doors of her mind, easing each one back into its frame with the very faintest of clicks.

It was dark when she awoke. She slinked out of bed in search of her underwear, mindful not to wake him, snatching a t-shirt from the dresser as she headed toward the kitchen. The fridge was completely empty, save for a half-carton of soy milk which she sniffed at suspiciously. She put it back and wandered the apartment, opening drawers, picking up ornaments; abstract-looking objects she could never imagine him buying. In the living room she tipped the sofa upright and spotted something - a book poking out at her - its spine wedged between two of the seat cushions. She pulled it free and examined the cover.

**“Selling Yourself: A Guide To The New Entrepreneurialism.”**

There was a message on the acknowledgements page, big and looping in childlike script:

*To my Golden Boy.  
You are worth so more than you know.  
All My Love,  
- Ohm.*

She dropped it on the floor and marched into the bedroom. It looked smaller, darker than before, the sun outside having dipped below the window. “Get up!” Lucy demanded, whipping the blanket away. She climbed onto the mattress and slapped him awake. “Why am I here?” she barked, “Who the fuck is Ohm?”

The flash of fear in Rory’s eyes told her she was onto something. She punched him in the chest and scrambled to get up, feeling small and stupid all of a sudden. “Fuck you and your Thai whores,” she hissed, heading for the door.

“My what?” he laughed, catching her by the foot. She tried to kick free of him but it was useless, his arms were like tentacles, pulling her back to him no matter which way she turned. She swung at his face and missed, hitting the mattress with a graceless flop.

“You need to calm down,” he told her.

“I need a fucking lobotomy!” Lucy screamed.

He rolled on top of her, pinning her down with his knees. “Ohm is a *he*, not a *she*. Ohm is my business partner here.”

Lucy screwed her face at the idea. He had no degree. No business credentials. He’d dropped out of university in his first semester. “What are you selling, Rory? Is it drugs?” she asked, her mind beginning to race. “Jesus, Rory, tell me it isn’t drugs. They’d butt-fuck you to death in a prison out here.”

“We do not sell drugs,” he assured her, kissing her snarling lips. He slipped out of bed and into the bathroom, his pert white buttocks bouncing behind him.

“I’m not done talking!” Lucy shouted after him. Through the wall she could hear a shower-head spurting into life. He appeared again, handing her a folded towel.

“We’re having dinner with Ohm in twenty minutes,” he told her.

She felt confused and hungry. Her knuckles throbbed.

“You’re going to love him,” he assured her, flashing her another one of his winning smiles.

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The hostess at the restaurant was a small brown rabbit. Even her lips were brown. She ushered them through the bar and up into the member’s area, tucking them into a corner table at the far end of the room.

“I can’t see a thing from here,” Lucy complained. She felt antsy; penned in all of a sudden. Half a day in Bangkok and the city was still alluding her. She jabbed Rory in the side. “Tell her I want to sit somewhere else. Someplace with a view.”

He asked for a bottle of the Beaujolais instead, pressing his palms together in a little prayer.

Lucy watched as the hostess disappeared down the stairs. She opened her handbag and pulled out her lipstick, daubing her lips in two deep crimson lines.

“He’s here,” Rory announced, standing up. He grabbed Lucy’s arm and pulled her up with him, knocking her handbag under the table. The man walking toward them was not what Lucy had expected, he was old and frail-looking, dressed in a light grey suit that seemed to pinch at the shoulders. He made his way slowly across the room, his balding head catching the lamplight as he neared the table.

“You must be Lucy,” he said, offering her his hand. His voice was dim and faintly girlish sounding. If he had an accent she couldn’t hear it. He scanned her face up and smiled. “You are as beautiful as Rory said you would be.”

Lucy blushed, a sudden pang of guilt flushing through her body.

“He has talked a lot about you,” Ohm continued. “Lucy this and Lucy that.” He shuffled into his seat and motioned for them to follow. “It feels like I’m meeting the Queen of England again.”

“Ohm was a trade delegate,” Rory interrupted, draping a napkin over Lucy’s knee. “He’s been everywhere, met everyone.”

“Sounds fab!” Lucy enthused, nudging Rory’s hand away.

The old man’s shoulders jittered. He let out a laugh, more air than sound, and reached across the table. “I like her already!” he said, tapping fast on Rory’s hand.

The rules of the game were unclear, but the look of approval on Rory's face told Lucy she was winning.

"You two must be hungry," Ohm guessed, a knowing smile creeping across his face. "I went ahead and ordered for us. I hope you don't mind."

"We don't," Lucy chirped taking Rory's hand. His hair was slicked back the way she liked it, his crisp white shirt making his blue eyes sparkle. He shot her a wink as the Beaujolais arrived, rushing out into her glass with a *glug-glug-glug*.

"I'd like to offer you a job," Ohm announced, his back straightening up in his seat.

Lucy gripped her glass, unsure if this was a part of his repertoire. "I have no idea what it is you do," she laughed.

Ohm's eyes darted quickly between her own. He took a sip of his drink. "I deal in loneliness, Lucy - a vast and growing market." He set his glass down and let his eyes rest on her. "I heard your mother played at the Cavern Club. Is that true?"

"She was a barmaid there," Lucy corrected him, unsettled by the ghost of her mother at the table.

"The Beatles wrote some wonderful music. Tell me, do you know *Eleanor Rigby*?"

"I think everyone in Liverpool does," Lucy confessed.

"Then you know Paul's question then. The one about the lonely people. *Where do they all come from?*"

Lucy nodded like it wasn't a lyric. Like she'd hadn't heard her mother slur it at parties a hundred times over.

"The lonely people are our market. They're who we sell to. My clients will pay almost anything to forget they are alone in this world."

Lucy felt a wrinkle of suspicion creeping across her forehead.

"Rory is our main attraction. The clients adore him - and why shouldn't they? - he's an exceptionally likable young man. Some of the older clients - women who've lost a husband or a son - are absolutely mesmerized by him. They'll pay good money to spend time with him; to cook for him; to coddle him like he were their own. He provides an environment in which they can indulge their needs."

"The women fall in love with me. The men ask to piss on me," Rory laughed.

Lucy set her glass down.



“He is not a prostitute,” Ohm interrupted. “We do not offer sex. Sex without context is anathema to companionship. It is not our business model.” He studied the wall behind her for a moment. “Try to think of Rory as a blank canvas. He fills a void, a certain emptiness in the client’s life. They project their needs onto him and he in return becomes whatever they need him to be.”

“I’m helping people,” Rory smiled.

“By letting them piss on you?”

He rolled his big blue eyes at her. “Pissing was just a for instance.”

“He’s changing people’s lives,” Ohm added.

“He’s a prostitute!” Lucy barked, her eyes beginning to well up, to sting at the edges. He was impressionable she told herself; his mind prone to mangling. “Take me back to the apartment,” she said, grabbing his arm.

“You met a man on the flight to Doha. Remember your good pal, John?” Rory asked.

Lucy felt her stomach plunge.

“He’s a client of ours. You did with him what I do with my girls, you helped him forget himself. He’s been singing your praises since he stepped off the plane.”

“We needed to be sure you were compatible with our business model,” Ohm explained. He reached into his jacket and handed her an envelope. The pile of cash inside was considerable, heavy in her hand. “That, Lucy, is for a job well done.”

She dropped the envelope in her handbag as the hostess approached. The bowls of soup she carried steamed upward, soaking the air with spicy vapor.

“Ah, Tom Yam Goong!” Rory announced, taking a bowl from the tray. He placed it under his nose and breathed it in greedily.

“So this is it? This is what you do here? Prey on the lonely and wring them for money.”

“It’s a job, Lucy,” Rory shrugged. “Everybody’s selling something.”

She winced at the thought of men above him, of warm yellow rivers streaming down his beautiful face. She grabbed her handbag and stood up.

“Please sit down,” Ohm warned her, the lines on his face folding in on themselves, warping into something more ominous, more threatening now.

Lucy grabbed her drink and soaked him with it.

“I’ll be at the apartment,” she said, dropping the glass in Rory’s lap.

She rushed out of the restaurant and into the street, retracing her steps, the canal beside her yellow and sinister-looking beneath the streetlights. Above her, frantic winged insects flitted about, swooping and diving in the warm night sky. She passed under a bridge, then another and another, her high-heels clicking beneath her as she spun around, doubtful in the darkness where the turn-off had been. A group of boys rattled past on bicycles, their heads bobbing frantically as they turned into a side-street. She followed them, moving quickly now, her dress clinging stickily to her legs as she slipped into a wide street filled with dancers; men and women grinding against each other to a tremendous beat. One broke away and approached her, wrapping his wet arms around her waist. "Come, come, come!" he shouted, pulling her back into the crowd. He was shirtless she realized, his rolled up trousers dripping soggly at the knee. He pulled her close and started to sway.

"I need to get to Sopa Apartments," Lucy shouted. "I'm looking for the train station. *Do you know the train station?*"

"Look!" said the man, pointing animatedly over her shoulder.

She spun around and backed up into him, startled by the image in front of her: an enormous brown elephant careening through the crowd, its trunk swaying through the air like a giant pendulum. It flapped its ears as it passed them, twisting its trunk into an elegant *S* above its head.

"Yindi Songkran!" shouted the man, slapping the elephant's hind leg. It veered leftward, trumpeting a loud, thunderous boom as it trampled away. He grabbed Lucy and pulled her close, his dark eyes scanning her neck and chest. "You are lonely tonight," he told her, examining her face with a doctor's certainty. "I am lonely too," he confessed, the smell of beer heavy on his breath. Against her leg Lucy could feel the slow, inevitable creep of his erection. She snatched the envelope from her handbag and wedged it into his waistband. "Here -- be less lonely tonight," she told him, pushing past him through the crowd.

There was a McDonalds in the distance, its golden arches floating above the scene like a giant broken halo. She willed herself toward it, swallowing hard against the rising lump in her throat. She could call her mother she thought, then shook her head at the absurdity of the idea, scanning the crowd for something she could work with. It didn't take long for her to notice him, an American she guessed, tall and muscular, snapping away with his camera at the chaos around him, his baseball cap turned backwards on his head. He lowered his lens when he spotted her, his expression a mix of concern and intrigue.

"Looking kinda lost over there!" he shouted, his thick southern accent cutting through the air. His vest said *GO BOBCATS!*, the words tall and urgent-looking in thick white letters.

"What's a bobcat?" Lucy asked him.

He laughed and made his way over to her. "You wanna go somewhere and talk about that?"

"Maybe I do," she smiled.

He put his hand on her back and led her out of the thinning crowd, his bright white teeth sparkling back at hers.

“I’m Gloria,” she told him.

“Chad,” he replied, flagging down a tuk-tuk with his free arm. He helped her in and squeezed in beside her. He looked younger up close, his features small and delicate despite his size. She leaned forward and asked the driver to take them to the train station.

“You running away?” Chad asked.

“I’m thinking about it,” Lucy said.

He laughed at the seriousness in her face, his dimples cutting deep into his cheeks. He fished a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, tilting his head back, a thick plume of smoke escaping his nostrils. “You want in?” he said, offering her a puff. She took a long drag and handed it back to him, holding the smoke inside of her for as long as she could stand it.

“I hate Bangkok,” she told him, the road in front of them swelling out into a highway.

“Today I saw a woman shoot a goldfish out of her pussy. The thing flew right out of her cooch and into a fishbowl.”

“Did it survive?” Lucy asked, clutching her chest in horror.

“I paid to see it again,” he told her.

“You’re disgusting,” Lucy laughed.

He leaned in and kissed her neck, leaving patches of saliva from her collarbone to her ear. The driver nudged left and slipped off the highway. She could see the station now, its glass entrance lit up like a christmas tree. She’d tell him to wait for her there -- that she was definitely coming back -- the tone in her voice so sincere that for a moment she’d believe it was the truth. There was always way out of these things, she reminded herself. Even if it meant having to become someone you weren’t for a while.