

SOCKS

You're on your third vodka-soda when Socks finally notices you. Maybe it's because you've started giggling and now you can't stop. Socks is the name you've just picked for him - his are bright and bold and this isn't the kind of place where barmen wear name tags.

"He's watching!" Tamara beams. She loves that sort of thing. A man on your radar she can play with, wrap around her finger and then throw back at you. It's happened before: Jason, who you were lusting after, who was lusting after Tamara, came back to your place when she told him to, and maybe he was expecting a threesome, because it took him a while to get it up, and when he finally did, after you'd fallen asleep and woken up again, his words were 'Oh Tamara, you're so tight'. Which she probably isn't, FYI.

"He's coming over!" She reaches over and pulls your shirt down a couple of inches. "Cleavage," she winks. *Falsely friendly gesture. Step 1 in Tamara's game plan.* You can read the signs now, you see them coming.

"Can I get you ladies a last round?"

"Oh! Well...if you're offering..." *Step 2: Bat eyelashes (lathered in your*

Chanel Divine

Night). You used to be proud that she wanted to use your makeup and wear your clothes, but when it happened so often you both knew it was bothering you, you started giving her looks.

"You're so passive aggressive," she said, reaching behind her back for the clasp on your new bra, "it just looks better on me."

Nelson Mandela appears on your left shoulder, Mohammed Ali on your right. *Here we go....* Every time you feel cheated, they both pop up, like your skin's turned black, all of sudden. You've tried with feminists but they were so dull you had to chuck them off their perching places. Forgive? Punch? *Forgive*. What to say? *Back off*. What to risk and what to win? *A social life. Self respect*. Next time, you'll tell her. But next time's always before going out, so you have to recalibrate the arbitration. *Shut up or Stay home*. That was easy. So you'd go out, her in your favourite outfit, and you in what she deemed looked okay.

"What's your poison of choice?" Socks asks, standing beside your booth now. "Vodka, I'm guessing?"

"Men first, then vodka," Tamara says, without skipping a beat.

"What's happening down there?" Socks asks, looking down at your breasts as you try to dislodge the armature of a push-up bra stuck over you nipple. You blush. *Thanks Tamara*.

"Lucy, will you stop touching yourself for one minute? Unbelievable!" *Step 3: Suggest lesbian tendencies*. Tamara laughs, and Socks laughs too, and their smiles turn into the bra armatures you've just thrown at their faces. But the metal things come back at you, like boomerangs.

Socks walks to the bar. Tamara shoots you that *you better not embarrass me* look, which often she does, as though her social status were an endangered animal constantly under threat by your presence. You finish what's left of your drink.

Socks comes back carrying three glasses, chiming in a triangle between his palms. You take the celebratory sound as a sign from the universe that you're made for each other, but when he sets the glasses down and you see six, you put the interpretation on the account of drunkenness.

“Come on, have a seat.” Tamara nudges you to get out so Socks can sit between you. His clothes smell like he’s slept in them, and it makes you horny. Or hungry. At this time of the night it’s hard to tell the difference. What hits you first, really. A burger or a guy. Better: the weight of his body on top of yours. That’s how you want to fall asleep, and you feel it coming now, the wave of exhaustion, the deep desire to slip into dreaming, with someone who smells like him, leading the way.

“D’you girls want to come back to my place?” You look at Tamara. You can feel her brain zipping through the criteria, arranging them in pros and cons columns. Drugs? *Positive*. Food if she’s hungry? Maybe. But stale cereal if she’s lucky. So, *positive / negative*. Socks is holding his breath, scanning her body for muscle movement, preparing his next move.

“I live around the corner...” *Good shot*, you think. *You might score*. You clap – a mini clap in your lap, under the table, hardly discernible. But he mustn’t have liked the endorsement, because he swings his arm across you, as though to switch off a distracting device. Tamara’s mind scrambles a few seconds more. She’s liking the attention, and going by the slight, growing smile, she’s veering towards a *yes*. A short distance to a bed? *Positive*. Showing off the Wonderbra – *your* Wonderbra? *Positive*. Free drinks next time she comes to this bar? *Positive*. *Extra positive*, in fact. She likes to think of opportunities as investments in the future.

“Sure, why not.” Game over. The gates open, and the crowd – Socks – claplessly cheers. You don’t, because you don’t feel like it anymore. Boredom is sinking in, the way boredom does, anchoring you where you are. The distance between the bar and your apartment in Brooklyn suddenly seems as far to reach as a foreign country with visa requirements. You switch to a commuter’s mind-set, negotiating the long subway ride against guaranteed sleep on arrival.

His apartment is probably underwhelming, anyway. You can picture it – a bachelor’s bunker-like railroad apartment, designed for sex and stocked for emergencies: rooms far away from each other, and in between, condoms, whiskey, sheets wrongly selected in light, unforgiving tones, pasta, gummy candy, and cans of spray deodorant sometimes used as rodent repellent.

Socks goes to get his coat. You find yours on the floor, and struggle to make sense of its suddenly complicated form.

“I might go home,” you tell Tamara, untangling an arm from the wrong hole.

“Oh don’t be a sod,” Tamara says. She dated a British guy a few months back and serves you the verbal leftovers when she’s feeling coy.

“Sod?...*Seriously?*” Your confidence is vodka-fuelled and stupid, but it’s also warm like a blanket. You wrap it tightly around your shoulders, for extra shield against the tiny storm it’s bound to unleash.

“What’s *with* you?,” she says. You pull the confidence blanket around the daughter you’ve always imagined Tamara will have, whispering to the child that despite appearances, her mother’s frowns aren’t fatal.

“Ready to go?,” Socks says, and then, his eyes on your legs, “nice woolly tights...” *Give me a break. It’s New York. In January.*

“Yes, we’re ready,” Tamara says, hugging to hush you.

The walk to the apartment is short, and brisk from the cold. They’ve locked arms and you’re behind them. If Tamara’s future daughter were here, you’d be following the cracks in the pavement like tracks on a secret treasure hunt. You’re pretty sure you’ll be asked to be the god-mother. Tamara’s love for you is clumsy

now, but a daughter will be a perfect place for it settle into something both scintillating and serious, like real friendship.

Socks unlocks the door to his apartment.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he says, as you look around for where that could possibly happen. The room is small, with a couch visibly used for sleeping, a stained rug, a bookshelf, a TV, and general masculine messiness. “I’ll be right back,” and he disappears into a room.

“This apartment’s pretty shit,” Tamara whispers.

“He’s a barman...” you say, impatient at how unrealistic she can be. She genuinely believes that when she turns 30, she’ll be rich. She has a game plan all mapped out, but as it involves a PhD in sociology and chance encounters, you have secret doubts about the outcome. Socks emerges from his room, bong in hand:

“D’you girls want a hit of this?”

“Definitely,” Tamara says. They both sit on the couch, which pretty much covers all the seating options. You’re starting to feel like the one who didn’t make the cut at the audition but has to stick around anyway and watch the performance. Still, you know girls who wouldn’t have made it this far, like the black girl from Zimbabwe, married at 16, now in college with you, studying to be an astronaut. An *astronaut*. While everyone else was eyeing up careers in tech start-ups, her dreams were in black and white. “It’s so 1960’s retro cool,” Tamara had told her when the three of you sat down for your first meal at the cafeteria, before popularity radars had time to register and reshuffle groupings. You’d known straight away it would be the first and last time this girl would sit at your table. It wasn’t that neither you nor Tamara could place her home country on a map - although that was part of it. It was

her tray. Filled with deserts. Apple crumble, blueberry pie, banana sundae, ice cream with sprinkles, brownies...

“I can’t believe there’s desert here *every* day!” she’d said, her eyes filled with thrill. “Back home, we only have it on Sundays...”

“Welcome to America!” you’d said, as Tamara laughed and you both picked at your dressing-free salads.

Tamara’s just taken a hit and her eyes are bright and moist, like she’s about to shed a tear. Socks puts his hand on her leg, proud to be touching a body like hers, proud to be saving her from crying. He whispers something in her ear and she laughs, canting her head backward. Hushed words and bursts of laughter, that’s why she flirts, for the bit of drama it adds to the conversation. You want those lips and those eyes, to suck the world in like they do.

You’re still standing there with your coat on when a black mutt comes charging from the end of the corridor, his stubby legs circling wildly in the air between each stride. You expect what’s coming – a collision of two bodies, one small and moving at high speed towards another, stable and sturdy – but you’re startled anyway when the dog hits you, and surprised that no one seems to notice or care.

As the dog kicks back to standing position, a tall man walks in and acknowledges you with a nod. You can’t tell whether the shake in your legs is from the vodka, the dog, or the man, but you know you need to sit down to decide.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“Back there,” Socks says, unhelpfully pointing towards the only way out.

You lock the door and sit on the edge of the bathtub. There’s an open box on the floor, filled with metal sensors, adhesive tape, wires, elastic belts and metal clips.

Bottles of prescription pills are lined up against the wall, loosely faithful to what must

have been a carefully organised system: Zolpidem, Doxepine, Eszopiclone, Ramelteon, Zaleplon —medicine for sleeping or tuning out, in almost alphabetical order. You pick up a zip-lock bag lying on the sink. The pills are shiny and in all different colours. You never see a black pill, you think. Or even a grey pill. They all come in attractive colours. You sink your fingers into the bag and pull out a handful, fondling them like stones on a beach. The doorknob turns.

“I’ll be right out,” you shout. You’ve touched enough for it to be known you did, so you scan the room against your first memory of it. As a kid, you were good at the game *spot the difference*, but there was more time then.

You open the door and the tall man is standing there. He looks at you like you just looked at the bathroom, comparing against something else. Not Tamara, you hope.

“I’m Lucy,” you say, putting your hand out with uncharacteristic formality. It’s the casual authority in his eyes, in his voice. Your friends aren’t like him. They make you self-conscious in other ways.

“Gus.” His handshake is firm. You tighten your fingers against his, so you can touch them for longer.

“Are you doing...some sort of study?” you say, pointing to the lab-like paraphernalia. You’ve just started studying physics, as an elective. You’re not a scientist at heart, you know you don’t have what it takes, the ability to see the world in fields and particles. But people who do excite you.

“Yup,” Gus says. The dog leaps in between both of you. You resent its sappy excitement more than the interruption, which is welcome, considering how the conversation is going.

“Schroedinger...!” he says with a condemning - but also loving - voice.

“Schroedinger? Isn’t a pet called Schroedinger supposed to be cat?” Gus looks positively surprised.

“I think I better take him out for a walk...” His first few words come out tentatively and then speed up to “...Wanna come?” uttered in a breath so short he almost swallows back the thought. You grab it before he does:

“Sure.”

“You guys going out?” Socks asks, as Gus hooks a leash on Schroedinger’s collar.

“Lucy...Stay....” Tamara says from the couch, her words slurred. “Cocktails have been served!” She leans forward, knocking over Socks’ untouched drink. The liquid crawls across the carpet. “Have some of mine,” she declares, aiming her empty glass at you.

“They’ll be right back,” Socks says folding her body back into the couch.

Outside, the late-night air is cool and windy, digesting the day. Happiness, you think, comes in chunks, pieces broken off from time like shards of ice at sea, sharply visible until they melt in with the rest. Tonight feels like that - Gus, and you, and Schroedinger, in the moonlit street.

The moon isn’t quite full yet. Last time you looked at it, it was a crescent, thin like a piece of nail, and now it’s almost the awesome ball of pale light that inspires strange rituals and animals to howl. You feel connected to it like you do to your body, only aware of it when things don’t feel quite right, trusting, most of the time, that it’ll keep doing its thing.

When you found out, by chance, that Tamara's periods were aligned with yours, it made you attached to her in new ways. The moon and menstrual cycles don't lie. And even after the incident, years after you had last spoken, you would still think of her every month, hoping the cosmic connection hadn't been broken, that you were still hurting and bleeding in synchronicity.

"I'd love to be able to rent a dog. You know? A pound dog you could take out for company and a good run? They should set up a business for that - I'd totally sign up."

"A dog's a living being," Gus says. "It's not like a pair of shoes you decide to wear one day and shove back in your closet until you're feeling in the mood again." You wonder why it is that around certain types of men, you say the opposite of what you should.

"So...what is it you're you working on, exactly?"

"Quantum cryptography." You nod, fishing for a word, any word, that would show you know something about what he knows.

"It's a security scheme. Based on the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle." You nod again but then you think he probably can't see because it's dark. So you say:

"Right."

"You know Schroedinger's cat experiment..." he continues. "You put a cat in a closed box with a device that has a 50/50 chance of going off and killing the cat...Opening the box means disturbing the outcome." You like the idea that information can be disturbed, like it was sleeping, or concentrating.

"The fact you need to know decides the cat's fate, in a way..." you say, following his argument.

“Exactly,” he says. His *exactly* makes you proud, as if you had come to the conclusion on your own. “It’s the same thing with the security scheme,” he says. “What I’m doing is basically creating a communication channel between users where it’s impossible to eavesdrop without disturbing the system, without leaving a mark.”

Maybe it’s the word ‘eavesdropper,’ or maybe it’s the cat experiment that makes you think of Mr Hicks, your high school physics teacher.

“Lucy? What condition is the cat in until you open the box? Lucy?...” You’d been absorbed in other thoughts, and his voice, like the ring of an alarm clock, was weaving itself into them. He had precise eyes and the facial wrinkle map of intellectuals who forget to laugh: a forehead ribbed like the sole of a hiking boot, and smooth skin around the mouth and eyes. “The cat is dead *and* alive, Lucy. Until you open the box.” You always invented details to make difficult concepts stick: *Siamese for the cat. Cardboard for the box. Siamese cat. Cardboard box. Siamese Tamara. Cardboard apartment. Tamara. Apartment. Pills.*

You’re running now, away from Gus, past shuttered stores and sleeping cars. You turn a corner. *What street was it?*

Mr Hicks’ voice is loud in your head, louder than your panting: Lucy, what you would know if you had been listening is that you can’t precisely measure the position and the momentum of a particle...”

You see the bar across the street and follow the cracks in the pavement. *Brown door? Black door? Other brown door? Yes. This one.* You can’t remember the apartment number so you ring all the buzzers, your fingers running across them like on a xylophone. *Come on...* You take a step back and crane your neck to see which window is lit.

“Tamara! Open up!” The top floor apartment flicks to light. *It’s not the top floor. You’d remember walking up that high.*

“...The more accurately you know one of the values...”

The makeup, the clothes, it’s all yours, Tamara. Anything. You can take anything. Just, someone, please, open up.

“...the less accurately you know the other...”

“Open!” you scream, your voice echoing under the useless moon.

“...Something’s gotta give.”