

The Love Virus

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You notice straightaway how starving she looks so you have to go over there and fill her with you. Vera: it has to be her, hair blackened with boot polish, face painted white with foundation so she blends in with the Pozzies. She sees you slicing through the crowd and heads for the bathrooms and you're like, Oh no you didn't. She keeps turning backwards to check if you're following as you razor through the chests and elbows. She wobbles, you can tell she hasn't been wearing the giant black platform boots with the huge steel buckles for that long. When she comes out of the girls' toilet 30 minutes later, you're waiting for her, swaying, dancd-out, hating the cigarettes you're chain-smoking, and she grasps this big tall bastard and speaks real intimately into his ear and he turns his back on you and she vines him with her legs and you just stand there like, D'oh. You grope your way into the men's (no lighting) and cram the jacket and your work shirt into a toilet bowl. It's satisfying to see the logo of the bar, where they treat you like a piece of whitewear, bloating in bubbly shit-water. You bump into some punk on the way out and you think he gets a punch in, your gums throb like your eardrums, but it's hard to tell what's behind your sensations considering what you pushed down your throat on the way here. The DJ's kilometres away. His song's a weary, mournful organ, sped up a thousand times. It's the funeral dirge, it's defibrillators making a heart pogo up and down inside its rib-cage.

You have the tip-jar money with you, it's rightfully yours, Bounce never splits it up fairly anyway, and you buy

a bottle of Polish vodka over the counter with a pocketful of coins and small notes and the liquor makes the minutes melt as you grope for Vera in the dark. You think you see the big, tall motherfucker once, and you can see his white face-paint is covering up a big \neq tattoo on his neck. Positives: they're everywhere.

She knows you're looking for her, you're baited, you're hooked, but you're a mess, you got to piss again, and your vodka is half empty and your chest is all sticky, so you pull your phone out and use the light on it to try and see something, anything. You take out Vera's number, written on that floppy credit card receipt, and you punch the number into your phone, *üinst, üinst, üinst*, and looking around, you see a black stick-figure glowing as it holds a phone to its face, a phone with pale makeup caked on it, and you get up close behind her, and even get a sneaky kidney punch into the big, tall bastard she's with, and he folds and you pull each others' earrings out and get lost in a mosh pit, *üinst, üinst, üinst*, and she steps in to protect Lurch and you hold her hard, and black polygons play on her face and the shoving becomes rhythmic and you squeeze her so tightly she has to dance with you in the thousand-strong sticket of people who hate each other and want to fuck and dance all at the same time. She's trying to knee you in the groin but she can't, she's too skinny and weak and viral and her black, panda-eye-rings are dribbling.

'YOU'VE NEVER HAD ONE OF ME,' you shout, and she nods but keeps her eyes pointing everywhere but at you. 'BET YOU ANYTHING.' Her earrings look really big compared with her horseshoey collar bone, her heavy head almost wobbles. She has black crescents under her eyelids thick and wide like overturned macchiato cups. Black crescents are painted on with eyeliner. She has a boy's haircut, and you can see how snappable her neck is.

It's the thinness that makes her eyes bulge. Her flesh is watery skim milk, bro, you can see the skeleton underneath, and those cheekbones? Like a skull, you swear to God, a talking skull. Then you shout right at her face, and the vibrations make her look into your eyes. 'LOVE VIRUS. YOU GOT IT. AM I RIGHT?'

Her head and her chin are nodding, though it could be the *üinst, üinst. üinst.*

The taxi screeches away and she clutches the frame of her front door and the world stops spinning. Her keys keep falling out of her hand. 'Don't worry about that idiot,' she goes, laughing and putting on these sunglasses like pools of black vinyl.

'That tall guy, he's a Positive, right? That tat on his neck? Your minder or something?'

'Positives don't get in punch-ups with dickhead bartenders. So: no.'

'Pimp?'

'Are you trying to get slapped?'

'What, some tat on his neck makes him cooler than me?'

'Least he doesn't think he's superior. Getcha pants off. Be with you in a tick.' You've arrived in her lounge. You opened and closed a taxi's doors at some point tonight. Did you pay? She worms out of your grasp and barricades herself in the bathroom and you can hear some liquid pouring into the toilet. You think you hear pills rattling in a bottle. Few left.

'Go wait in the lounge.'

'You should've popped those bad boys at the club.' Your mouth has gone all rubbery from grinding your teeth. You're still not sure if someone punched you. Woman is your favourite depressant. With woman in front of you, you feel nothing else. It's warm between their legs and you

don't have to shout or drink or spend money while you're there.

'LOUNGE.'

'Wha are you popping? I wan some.'

'None of your business.'

You look over all her photos and her framed degree and her health rating from the council and all that shit. She probably doesn't even work a day job any more. You wish she'd turn the light on so you can see if her neck's marked with a big Plus, but then, the bug-chasers' forum said it's what you don't know that keeps you going in life. When there's nothing left to know, then you die.

She doesn't look sick in none of the photos. There's one with a guy with his arms proudly around her like he's built her himself, but that man makes only one other appearance, holding a baby, one of those real little wrapped-up ones like a loaf of bread. The way the dude looks at that baby, you can tell it's mostly his.

The lounge is a tessellation of black shapes from the moonlit windows, and glowing greys, and shards of light on the bulges of her vases and on the screen of her TV. Her photos say that she could smile, back when she was expected to. She must not've had the virus, then.

The light goes out and she is pulling off the lower third of her legs. She's tinier now. She's shrinking. You're reflected in the shades she hasn't taken off her eyes. She hands you a bottle of something thick and bitter. The aniseedy, sour fluid makes a hollow sound as it sloshes against the heavy glass. You like to think you can taste her spit on it, taste the danger. Little microbes or whatever.

'I'm not convinced you've thought this through,' she says as you knock back a whole mouthful and wipe the back of your hand across your lips.

'What, you're afraid of swapping juices?'

'Afraid for you.'

She tugs you down the hallway and you recall what you read in the chat-room: Soon as we're born, we're on the road to dying. Your head bobs in the ocean of your shoulders and you feel satisfied, now, like you're on a retreating boat and the pier has disappeared. You've had bitches in the toilets at City Hall, bro. You've had bitches in the handicapped toilets of a fucking fire station, God's own truth. You've even fucked a woman all cuffed up who said she was a Fed, dawg. Never a Positive, though, you've never been—

'You think you know what you want,' she chuckles, stroking open the door to her bedroom. Her bed is a frozen lake of black silk. Some part of her must have been longing to fill up those wide metres of mattress with someone. People with The Virus fuck like crazy before they die, they know they're spreading it, they want everyone else in the city to be in the same sitch as they are, to party to death with them.

You laugh at what she's said, about fucking a Positive. As if.

'SSH. Shut it down, mister. You've got two hours. Move your ass.'

'What, you got a kid?'

She sits on the edge of her bed and takes a wet wipe from a packet of wipes with a photo of a baby on it and wipes the black from the rims of her eyes. Her last layer of protection is her shirt and when she's taken it off, she lies down on her stomach, shivering, and stretches her legs out until you grab them. A truck passes outside and the room is momentarily lit by a strobe light. Her back looks like bricks in a pantyhose. You want to pull her knobbly spine out like fishbones from a tin. There are panties and pads to remove. You've heard that they bleed a lot, the Pozzies.

You kick the panties under your own discarded jeans, to add to the collection you keep in the box in your hot water cupboard. When you've had a thousand people, bitches, dudes, anyone, you will retire from it all. You just need to get those numbers up.

Then she catches her breath and holds it and shrinks her mouth. 'What if – how do you know I'm *not* positive?'

'Love virus? Sall good, Vera.' *Ünst ünst ünst* in your ear drums. She arches her tunnel up, inviting you in, and you're like, 'You sure you don't wanna face me?' and she gasps, 'The injection, prevench, it's, the 7/11, just – justputatowel,' she begs, '*Putatoweldown*,' but you push her head into the pillows. Her eyebrow ring gets caught in a loose thread in the silk sheet at some point and she cries as you snap it out. Everything in her life stings.

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You awake from a nightmare of heat-ripples, lawns, children, chicken pox, air con, lawn mowing. You're too scared to get up and grab a glass of water. You need your cigarettes, though.

She ain't in the bed.

You can't cope with the smell of what's cooking, spitting oil, crêpes or fried bananas or something. Food, for you, is something you grab as you're passing through the kitchen at work to make your breath smell better after a smoke.

For ages, you stand on Vera's front doorstep shivering, repairing last night, taping the shattered vase back together. You really can't remember why you pursued this bitch – because she was mean to you, wasn't it? Something about getting even. She'll make a decent story, this she-beast who craved to be hunted down and hurt, that's how you'll tell it if you can manage to get some boys together to listen to your stories. Whose numbers do you still have on your

phone? You pat your pockets – no, your phone’s lost, gone, like the last two years of your life.

It’s dusk already, somehow you slept all day on her mattress built for two, the air is unfriendly and it stings and turns your fingertips into purple rocks, and there’s an grey-orange ribbon wrapped around the sky. Dusk on a cold day. You shiver and bury a cigarette butt in a pot plant then you tap her door, and she’s there, wearing those sunglasses that keep you out of her eyes. ‘I don’t usually eat with other people, but I made something.’

She has trouble sitting down – she’s sore, down below, and her bones creak. You wonder if she’s changed her bandages and pads. They must be well hidden. It’s so quiet that for a while, you can hear her chewing every bite. You picture it sliding down her throat and into her stomach. You wonder if her insides have sores and photosensitivity, too. You know that if you look at her teeth in full daylight, you’ll see the edges all frayed and rotting. You pinch a cigarette out of your box and you’re hoping she’ll lose her cool and kick you the fuck out, send you on your way, otherwise you’ll just sit at the table dipping cigarette butts in your lemon sauce, waiting for the world to end.

You both notice the clock ticking and glare at it.

‘Spit it out,’ she says.

‘I wasn’t... Nothing.’ *Vera: How often do you have to go to A&E? What kind of meds you take, Vera? They get you high? Wanna go halves?* Thing is though, ask a Poz if they’re positive and they’ll deny it, that’s the rub, bro. They’ll always say, Not me, I practice safe sex, all those old excuses. They get their backs up, like it’s their fault they’re positive, like it’s their fault Normals don’t go to their clubs, but it’s all backwards. What they’re covering up is the most intense, hair-raising bugchasing ride anyone could ever have. Making love to a Poz is like swallowing razor blades

and hoping they'll pass cleanly through your system because you know people are gonna get hurt, but you don't wish harm on them.

As soon as she lays her fork down pointing straight, you snatch it up and wash her plate and wineglass too, and dry them and put them away, and pull everything out of your pockets. Swipe card to get back into the box you live in; smokes; lighter; bottle opener; her phone number written on the wet receipt.

'You smell that? Reeks of alcohol. You got a bottle of vodka in here?'

'Must be you. The smell. Your shirt.'

'I don't really need this,' you say, pretending you ain't heard her. 'You're trying to get me to take it off? Devious, you are.' You remove your shirt.

She rises from the table, bumping her knife. 'Let me put a load of washing—

'The fuck you will!' You throw her phone number into the insinkerator but it won't wash down so you put it back in your pocket and say, 'Another drink, ha-ha,' opening one of her bottles and sliding some cupboard beers into the fridge. They fall out. The fridge must be on an angle, the floor must be sloped, it can't be you. You take a piss and stumble out of the flushing room, doing your belt buckle up, but you can't be bothered finishing it.

'Bring it through. The bottle.'

She steps out of her pants as she moves down the hallway. The V between her thighs is shy, it's hiding from you. Makes it that much harder to get a story for the boys.

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'You're big-time late. Manager's looking for you.'

'Well I'm looking for him, so we're even.'

You actually ain't. He's going to fire your ass, probably. You pour yourself a beer so cold you're afraid to drink it,

and pause, then put it all down in one go, and wince. You bite into a lemon. The burn seems healthy in some way, it means you don't gotta brush your teeth. The bar tries to shift under your glass, so you hold it good and tight. When did the bar turn into a galleon and set sail on jagged seas? The room tips and lurches all over the place. You attempt to top your glass up with something harder, to save time, speed up the high or absolute low or wherever it is you're trying to put yourself. You start tapping the rhythm of the song the deej has on. It's afternoon and you own this place, your blood is muscular, your moves are stylish. The bottles are swaying all over the place and it's hard to get the sharp brown liquid into the glass. You go to pour yourself a schnapps, next, but this big furry hand wrenches the bottle off you. 'Something's come up. Don't bother. Manager says you should come back when you've had a wash and a shave. Me? I concur, bromes.'

'Let go, Bounce. My shift, my rules. Get back on the door, anyone could come in.'

'I oughta twist your arm, Mr. I'm-Too-Cool-To-Answer-My-Phone, break it a little.'

Bounce thinks he's the city's conscience. He's from the tropics and he goes to church on Saturdays. He thinks every time he twists someone's arm that he's got this heavenly approval to do it. You let go of the bottle and shatter an ice cube between your teeth. You hope that doesn't give Bounce any ideas about shattering your arm.

'What you're doin is disgusting,' he goes on, 'You're a flippin animal. Do the right thing, you cockroach. Get a checkup. Get botha yous a checkup. Call it a double-date.'

'You don't know nothing.' You reach over to the lemon board, groping for a knife or at least a glass to smash over his head, but all you get is lemons squishing between your fingers. 'I ain't even seeing her again. Shows what the

fuck you know.’

He squeezes your shoulder like you’re a little kid. You envision punching him hard in the guts, but your hand would probably shatter like the ice cube. What’s that shit that makes your bones strong? Carbon? Whatever it is, you don’t have enough in you. ‘This is serious. You’re being serious. You’re not a bad man, even a flippin’ bro on a good day. Don’t risk yourself. Get checked up.’

You’re so pissed-off you go out back and stand on the fire escape stairs and smash bottles in the dumpster, listening to sirens and people screaming, then you stack kegs in the icebox and clean the hoses and load the dishwasher and stay the fuck away from Bounce, then when your shift has five minutes to go, you untie your apron and tell the customer with the fifty in his hand to save some drinks for the rest of us and Bounce yells out after you as you jump over the velvet rope and run past the heat lamps and the line of people in tight pants and you stumble and the bottle of schnapps tumbles out of your sock and makes that horrible cracking sound of wasted booze, and you fall down and lick the fire off a shard of glass, and sit in the gutter, worrying about your wound. Say a person’s got the virus, couldn’t you bleed it out? You’ll have to ask Vera, she’d be the one, except – except you never went back there. You won’t even wear your black jeans ‘cause her number’s in the pocket. You don’t even use your phone any more ‘cause you know she’s been ringing.

To get her off your case, you have sex with her every day until the rusty leaves let go of the trees and there’s ice on the windows in the mornings, and your uphill days are only relieved by nights of squishy, slippery sweaty naked wrestling, pins and holds and bent legs, meat too slippery and oily to stand up, tired muscles, cramps, rashes you have

to itch against another body. You turn out all the lights and nail her black satin sheets against the windows and flip her over and come away with your penis hiccupping and strands of black hair caught under your rings, and scabs on her knees leaving these potato-stamps of blood and goo on the sheets. She's getting scabs on her knees from what you do together on the rug in the lounge. You keep finding threads of her under your wedding ring.

She keeps offering to launder your clothes. You keep telling her you gotta run. She asks your name at one watery, shifting point which won't stay still in your memory.

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ImmYOUne is stashed down one of those laneways that's too narrow to fit your car down. It's stacked head-high with black bags of garbage. No one in the line is wearing anything on their top half and a lot of them have forks and spoons stuck through the holes in their ear lobes. A lot of people are sitting on the dumpsters sucking syringes full of blood or squirting them into each's mouths. Some people are inside the dumpsters, texting, smoking, wearing clothes suitable only for shredding, soaked, trying to speed up their deaths from cold or flu or exposure. A nipping wind drives you inside and you stick your key ring through your ear lobe and they let you in 'cause you look incorrigible and you pull your very last work shirt off and fling it into the flapping black thicket of bodies. The ceiling is a giant canopy raining condensed sweat, with a forest of heat lamps in the centre that steam and hiss as the sweat-rain patters, and beyond there are winding canvas alleyways that go past dark tables where tattooed monsters sell insane trinkets and you keep tripping over wet floor signs, and there are pools of reflective liquid on the ground leaking from drips and catheter bags, some red and some white, and you slip and take your shoes off and throw them into a

brazier. People are squelching, squirming, grinding, slurping each other's lips, women are biting the goatees of men, necks are getting chewed, people are sixty-nining right there on the ground. Women are pressing their ribs against each other. Everyone seems skeletal and exhausted, but the bass beat is a slavedriver and they keep making effort. Your cock pulsates with the music – screaming metal sped up 300bpm, songs about the apocalypse. There is an animal in your pants. You have to fight to bend down to touch your toes. Something is jabbing your foot, broken glass, right? You move on, but what's holding you won't let go. You raise your foot out of its shoe and pull a needle out with about a third blood left in it. It's fun to squirt on some guy. He says thanks, rouges his cheeks with it and licks his red lips. Looking up, you see the wall at the ultimate end of the club is brick, painted black, and what you think are TV screens are sewer grates and pipes leading into black holes. You're all dancing in a sewer.

You insist on buying an entire bottle with your last credit card, some cracked thing with your ex-wife's name on it beside yours, a card some department store signed you up for. You put the bottle of sticky, fiery chemicals to your lips and let the napalm burn your guts. You carry the bottle with you in one hand, drinking for strength as you eel through the fingers and tits, trying to stay away from any Exit signs. No one wears a smile, they just mosh and let their blackened fringes flop into their eyes, and lick their cracked charcoal lips and rip the dressing off their sores. Their kissing is thirsty, desperate for saliva to moisten their throats. You pour alcohol over your head and people suck it off your earlobes. If somebody were to light you on fire, you'd dance until you charred, and then you'd shake yourself into fragments. The middle of the throng is the edge of the galaxy, looking at the earth as a pinprick a

million light years away. Stings, shards, fragments keep stabbing the bottoms of your feet, and you keep swaying and pulling needles and glass out of your flesh. There are a hundred underground hours between midnight and morning.

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She comes in at the start of your shift, wearing a big fat dress under her hoodie, and you can't remember her name, only her condition. What was her number? Tucked about ten back, you estimate. You've doled out the last month in cigarettes breaks with Bounce out the back, trying to describe the sealed knees and concealed secrets you dissected and split and revealed, trying to talk him into coming bugchasing with you.

'I just wanted you to know,' the V-woman begins, (Virgil? No...) metres away from the bar, fucking pre-empting you, trying to look you in the eyes, 'I just wanted you to know that the test came back positive.'

'Venus,' you say, and it sounds wrong. 'No – it's not – Viola. Vera, I mean.' She is wearing some kind of a blanket or shawl. She has on a woollen hat with ear flaps but you see clues that her black hair has grown back twice as thick. Her legs are buried in thick pants with frost on them. This is the first time you've seen her without face paint on. Her eyes stand out against a purple background. Her skin is... glowing? Pink? Impossible... She must have dropped out of the party scene.

'Vera–'

'I'm getting it cured. Fixed.'

'D'you want a drink or something? You're not really looking for, like, a monogamous, y'know... Here – here's a tissue.' You hand her a thin cardboard coaster.

'You left your ring.'

'What?'

‘At my house. Last time you slept over.’

‘What am I gonna do with a wedding ring? What do I wanna get married again for? Do I look like I wanna fucking commit?’

Her staunch blue eyes dribbling, she takes the ring out of her handbag. She looks sore as she moves her arms, and she’s sweating. The ring is in a stupid little plastic baggie, and she handles it with so much respect, it’s aggravating.

‘You buying a drink or not?’

She pulls open the flaps of her black coat and tries to show you what was underneath, and you shut your eyes and fling a towel at her. ‘DO I LOOK LIKE I SHOULD BE DRINKING?!’

As she storms towards the lady-toilets, you throw the ring at her. It lands in some ashtray.

‘AND DON’T BE COMIN BACK!’ you yell after her. ‘GO GETCHASELF A TRANSFUSION.’

Bounce lets go of the toilet door he’s been holding open for her. You break eye contact first, damn it. ‘She can’t hear you, son. She’s in there throwing up.’

‘All yours, if you want her.’

‘You broke it, you bought it,’ Bounce goes, and cracks his knuckles. ‘You’re lookin at your future right there.’

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You annihilate your wages in four days; the next week, two days, but here you are, now, today, this night, slinging drinks around with your seventeen arms. With your overdraft overdrawn, you have to take a bit out of the till – you know, to survive. Survival. Survive. No one else’ll hire if they find out about... the thing. Word is getting around. Bounce says there are people coming up to him, asking if this is a Bug Bar, officially, as in registered under the Health Code and stuff. Does that skinny guy work here? Mr Deathwish, with the blue crescents under

his eyes?

Some dance parties last two moons and a sun. You go into a stall, lock the door, sleep for an hour sitting up, hugging the rear of the toilet, your head resting on a roll of TP, then you tumble back into the party. Bugchasers can't tell what one another looks like in the dark, there is no welcome, no warmth. You are greasy all the time, stinking, bathing in jizz and fishy juice, scabbed up, bony. You get forced to do a blood test that you buy from an all night convenience store. You can't seem to find time to actually sit down and grab a drop of blood and put it into the centrifuge. Your work desk becomes an overflowing pile of bills and threats and Model Hobbyist magazine with miniature Fokkerwulfs. You can't be fucked cancelling the subscription, too much effort. You pick up a Frisbee with jagged bits on the side where your dog used to chew it. You can't remember what the dog was called. Your dog. Its kennel is full of leaves now.

Where did you step into space? In what reality did you belong at this desk?

You plunge straight back into the clubs. Underground, TranceFuzion, Rhesus, all of them are safe. They keep the light off your skin, and you never hear birds or traffic any more.

You wash your spasming, crusty eyes with ice cubes. You are in a bathroom. There are white puddles on the ground, and a Band-aid. You have a guy fucking you and it hurts but in the centre of the pain is a new dimension, an undiscovered colour. It doesn't make a difference, you have a hole, that's what matters. His friend props you up against the wall and whispers into your ear. A song you used to love but no longer understand is playing. You slump into the man's car. You're going to live with them forever,

apparently. He pukes words into your ear which have strange barbs and curves to them, comic book speech bubbles. He is saying things you can't envision, strange words which sound real but which you are convinced are authentic. You'd lash out, punch and kick, if you didn't think you'd disintegrate. The club stops spinning and the toilet stall door opens and you are in the back seat of a jeep. The walls are concrete with lights embedded in them. The ceiling is low. '*Chasing rabbits or roaches?*' one of them asks, and holds your head and another one parts your lips with his tongue and slips a tablet of baking soda into your vinegar head and it bubbles up and your ears snap and pop. You are made of clouds and you can enter buildings through the top floor. Your card is declined. They give you a thick roll of cash. You are on your knees in a bedroom. Someone places a heavy coat over you and you can't shake it off. That major world sports tournament everyone's talking about lives only in the TV murmuring in the background. Sports belongs on the surface; you belong in the sewer. You're on your knees, offering your arse up to the party, and every time you try to move, your spine is extracted and shoved into your back and your tailbone aches. The man groaning into your ear is a tall, thin, black-skinned guy wearing glasses. He has the distant look of a scientist. His chest looks like a coral reef, it's covered in weeping scales. He has a small crowd watching and sipping drinks. They all wear hospital scrubs. Some have IV drips coming out of their forearms. You want to vomit, you want to get what's inside of you out, but it's easier just to take it and scream and take it some more.

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The birds tell you that it is daytime, but they don't say which day. You pull your underwear on, groaning with agony. There is something brown that has cracked, little

panes, shapes, dark brown. Dried blood. Even worse, though: there is a text on your phone asking you to dinner, hot, roasted meat with trimmings. She wants you to come home inside where it's warm, before she has to go into hospital.

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Everyone knows you're The Cockroach and you feed on garbage and get garbage fed to you. There is no one out there who hasn't seen you exposed. Everyone knows that you live out of the till. Everyone knows you wash by rubbing ice cubes on your face, and turn your t-shirts inside out to freshen them. They only keep you on because you can clear a crowded bar in one minute flat. The entire fucking Positive community seems to be showing up at the bar. They have decided you're one of them.

You head out back behind the dumpsters and smoke a cigarette while somebody sucks the filth out of you and you eyeball Bounce and even this big prick, the most dangerous man in the club scene, blushes and looks away.

You do a priest, you do a paramedic. You see their garments fall from their bodies and get kicked across the room. You consume them all. It's the way your flaky lips purse, the thirst they can sense, the task of filling you up and sending you on your way. You hear so many pillow stories, say See Ya Round to so many strangers, and it's true, you see the same ones over and over. Sometimes they squeeze everything out of you, then they squeeze a little extra later in the week. You scrub your asshole with a toothbrush because you've heard that it increases the risk of infection. There's a little sensitive piece of flesh down there that makes you shudder when you prod it. You get random nosebleeds. They know your name and condition at the all-night A&E. You don't have to pay rent at A&E,

so why not spend as many hours there as you can.

You piss off Bounce real good one night and he punches you in the ribs and you fold in half. You're still hurting ten minutes later when he finds you in the chiller, sitting on a keg, holding a six pack against your guts. You haven't had any proper food in forever, all you ever take in is cocktail fruit and cigarettes.

'You oughta work out,' he says. He offers you a hand to help you up. You stare at his jeans.

'They're too tight on you,' You go, your voice still thin and raspy. 'Your jeans are.'

He shrugs and taps a cigarette out of the packet without even looking at it. 'She rang for you, by the way. That Viral.'

'Change the phone number. Throw the phone in the rubbish.'

'You ain't thinking straight. You need a check-up. I told her your brain's sick, diseased.'

'Who cares.'

'You know she's been seen? Spotted, I mean, going into a clinic. You heard about this?'

'Makes sense.'

He flicks his lighter a couple of times, then offers you a cigarette. He glares through the gap between the sliding door and the frame, and checks that nobody is in the coat room, and snaps the inside lock on the door and starts unbuckling his jeans. 'Too tight, you reckon?'

'That's what I reckon.'

'It's freezing in here,' he says, and his belt buckle hits the concrete with a clang.

'Never get checked, that's my advice,' you go, unbuttoning. 'Dying feels so alive.'

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You wake up in a hotel, but it is black outside, and all

the buildings are twinkling, and you're on top of them. You donk your head against the glass to see if you'll go through. A cleaning lady lets herself in. She thinks you're dead. You offer the cleaning lady a drink nine times, saying her language's word for Drink over and over. On the tenth time, she takes a sip. You turn up the stereo. Soon, you have her top off and you're dancing to the radio, and then you're moaning and sweating rancid brine while she moans prayers using letters you can't even picture. You're interested in the photos of her son you find in her purse while she's in the toilet. You even steal a photo. She won't stop talking in that irritating language. You've had enough. You yell at her, demanding to know who she's praying for and why she keeps saying your name.

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You come to in a white room. It's heaven. It's too sumptuous to open your eyes in, so you keep them closed, enjoying the bliss. You always wondered what was beyond that black crevasse at end of those dark corridors, and now you know: it's light. Everything is light compared to the blackness you've been swimming in.

You spot other colours in the room. The bio-medical waste bucket is bright yellow. The box full of bandages is clear. The exit sign is green. The nurse wears a uniform trimmed with blue. She says she won't unstrap you. Some of your tears almost get on her skin and she darts back and squirts sterilising foam on her hands and scrubs her arms, and you insist that you're not Positive, you're not not not not not.

'You still require the test,' she says, 'As part of our policies here.'

'What about my things?' you go.

'What things?'

You make a gradual escape, shuffling out of the room

and waddling like a penguin through sixty corridors that all look identical. You take the elevator to numbers you've never imagined. You find a floor that says Birthing Unit and you collapse and the stand holding up your IV bag falls over. The nurses ask you who they need to call, and you pat your pockets. You've got your white jeans on, except they're soaked with purple booze, and you pull the credit card receipt out of your pocket and hold it up like something you found at the back of your throat. The date of the receipt is still printed in neat black type and you squint as you try to read it, you need about four pairs of sunglasses, you haven't had light on you in.... how long? At least with the light you'll be able to see whether or not there's a tat on her neck. The receipt says it was eight months and four weeks and... no... Nine months, it adds up to. Nine months. Vera's phone number has faded away, so you can't call her, but the nurse helps you into a seat, and you sit outside the Birthing Unit and wait for her.