The Fearful Are Caught

Lina was the first. We met her in a café with cloudy grey furnishings and a needless accumulation of potted plants. The tables were covered with magazines that had titles like *Wheatsheaf* and *Gardenia*, their covers featuring tanned girls with ribbony limbs, all pigtails and peasant dresses. One by one, Stevie turned them upside down. Lina messaged us from outside and we watched her do it, crinkling her nose at the beginnings of rain.

I'm outside.
Shall I come inside?
I mean, shall I meet you inside?
Where are you sat?
Sorry, I just hate not knowing where to sit.
Are you near the back window? I think I can see you.
Okay, I can see you. I'm heading in now.
Sorry.
Sorry.

Lina had blonde hair knotted over her shoulder. She wore a navy cord suit and white silk shirt. Her bulky trainers were incongruous to her outfit. She explained she wears them to and from work but in the office is required to wear heels.

She worked as an office manager at an expensive hotel. It was reasonably paid: she'd get a discounted Caesar salad in the hotel bistro for lunch, plus use of the steam room and sauna. But she worked a fifty-hour week and once got docked pay for having chipped her nail

varnish on the tram. And watching all of the rooms being used for affairs, and worse, for ordering sex workers, had made her paranoid about her husband's fidelity.

'At first it was the middle-aged couples leering over the counter. Drunk and conspicuous, like we couldn't believe their audacity.'

She wore a thin gold bracelet which she rolled between her fingers. Spinning it in circles against her skin until it left a faint red mark.

'Then it was the younger ones. Women asking which lift would take them to room thirty-three. Their eyes never really leaving the floor. Walking out of the hotel still adjusting their clothes.'

Stevie and I made notes: me scribbling into a notepad, Stevie tapping at her phone. We didn't know what we were collating at that point but the data felt urgent and indispensable. Lina's round face turning pink.

'But it was the sex workers that got to me. And the men who use them. These completely ordinary-looking men.'

Lina's obsession began with the women: eyeing the sizes of their waists, scrutinizing their faces – wondering whether he might find them attractive. She'd think about the way they dressed, whether her husband might want her to dress like that. The women, of course, mostly weren't sex workers, but to her, they might as well all have been. These other women, with their lipstick and their lacquered hair. All offering something else, something new, something she never could – being in possession of just the one human body – and trying to make a penny off it too. She wondered whether she hated these women or if she was afraid of them. Whether there was a difference.

She became fixated on the idea that her husband must be having an affair or using sex workers – or that he eventually would. She'd follow him home from work, leaving her own work early, making up doctors' appointments or dentist check-ups, taking Ubers across town. She'd sit on the other side of the square outside the recruitment agency where he worked, having already taken note of the colours he was wearing that morning in order to better spot him. She'd follow him

on the opposite side of the street, a few feet behind, her gaze fixed on him diagonally across the road. She'd trail him into shops on the way home from work, ducking behind the bread counter in Tesco. Once she held an especially large watermelon out in front of her head, so she could walk past him undetected and check the contents of his basket (Jazz apples, cooked ham, Ritz crackers). She would trace him all the way to the station, where he would sometimes stop for a drink at the station pub, not telling her, saying he had to work late; and if he was lying about this then what else was he lying about? Dishonesty, she felt, was a spectrum: you might be on the less dangerous end but you were still on it, prone to slip up, slide further along, depending on the circumstances.

She wouldn't stop until she had followed him all the way to their front door, then she would crouch down, sometimes crawl on her hands and knees, hiding behind the brick wall that fronted their home. She would wait there for thirty minutes, sometimes an hour, until she was sure, until she was absolutely certain, he wasn't going back out.

After he had gone to bed she would stay up late to devour his internet activity: scrolling through his history after he'd fallen asleep. She downloaded a keystroke logger to their downstairs desktop, finding out all his passwords and accounts. When her husband used the bathroom or showered in the morning, or popped out to buy a pint of milk, she would check his phone, reading his texts, looking at his photos, reviewing his outgoing calls. She found out what kind of pornography he liked and that sometimes he looked up his old girlfriends on Facebook. But no sex workers. Never sex workers. She began feeling almost resentful at his inactivity, thinking about all the well-dressed businessmen who ordered champagne and Chateaubriand, who wouldn't patch through their wives' telephone calls – did he really think he was better than them?

It became a routine of sorts. The following. The checking up. The phone. One Saturday afternoon he went to watch the football and she

noticed his phone left behind on the kitchen counter. She didn't even think about it, it was instinctive. Perched against the oven she opened his messages: a text from an unknown number. *Thanks for last night, let's do it again soon, how much do I owe you for the room* – punctuated by an image of lips, clavicle, rib-cage and breasts. She stared at the message for a while, worrying she had imagined it, that she had literally willed it into existence. She waited for the anger, the disappointment, the betrayal she had anticipated to course through her veins, surprised when all she felt, all she actually felt – was relief. It was over. It had happened. And it didn't hurt that bad.

'That's why I'm here,' she told us. 'That's why I want to do this.'

Stevie and I could not contain ourselves. We squeezed hands underneath the table. She grinned back at us.

'You're in,' Stevie said.

'We've not got a date for the first one yet,' I added. 'Or a venue. But we're looking. Probably something next month.'

We finished our drinks and told her more about our vision for Supper Club. We told her about the ethos. About what we hoped the events would look like. The sort of women we were looking to recruit.

'So your husband,' Stevie said. 'Did you leave him after you found out?'

'Oh no,' she replied, perhaps a little dreamily. 'We stayed together. We're kind of happier than we've ever been. It's weird to think,' she added. 'It was just one year. Just one really peculiar year. But it changed my life forever.'

Stevie's face changed. 'That's ridiculous,' she said, forever teetering on the precipice of hostility, never afraid to speak her mind.

'Don't you think that's ridiculous, Roberta?' She turned to me. 'To put an emphasis on one arbitrary stretch of time that's, you know, a total construct? I mean, we are all just these giant accumulations of stuff and experiences and talking and things happening to us. You can't break a human life down into years and say that one really means something.'

Lina looked embarrassed. She began fiddling with her bracelet again.

'Roberta?' Stevie said. 'Roberta, don't you agree?'

I half-smiled – out of generosity or discomfort, it was often hard to say. And I didn't say that I didn't agree, but I didn't say that I did.

Expectations

The September I left for university, colour clung to the branches. There is something particularly unbearable about being sad in the heat: the terrible knapsack of it, carrying it around like a heavy load. Something between melancholy and nerves, a blank no-man's-land, lousy with the lethargy of hot weather. Who can be bothered?

On my last morning at home, I looked out at the cemetery that backed my bedroom window. I hooked open the latch and pushed forward the glass pane, swinging my legs over the ledge, lighting a cigarette and exhaling thin curls of smoke towards the graves. Growing up next to a cemetery had made me flippant about death. It was as perfunctory as chopping cabbage beside my mum; Van Morrison on the radio, the dog expectant beside our legs, flipping scraps of veg to the floor. Hearses dragged slowly past our house, but so did rubbish trucks and milk vans. Families sobbed and howled, we turned up the TV. Sometimes I liked to pretend my own dad was dead: imagining the funeral, what I might say, what hymns might be sung. Whether there would be any readings or speeches. I got a strange satisfaction from thinking about it.

He wasn't dead, of course. Just gone – he'd left when I was seven. And though my mum encouraged me to stay in touch with him, eventually I stopped replying to his letters, wouldn't answer his phone calls. So I was used to the vagaries of loss, the spaces left behind: my dad's absence apparent in the most peculiar ways. The suite of friends' husbands that swung by, each offering a particular trade or service: fixing a clog in the gutter, ringing the council about streetlights. Not

that my mum was incapable. She was a problem-solver, resourceful in a way I've never since witnessed.

'Some things come better from a man,' she would tell me, wearily. Though I could barely remember my dad I was acutely aware of a lack in my life: missing something I'd never really known.

I sat on the windowsill and thought about death, my dad, and whether or not I'd get a good room in halls, while downstairs my aunt Hetty loaded up the van.

My aunt was a woman who drove a van. It was an olive-green Toyota Hiace and she drove it in sleeveless shirts and khaki shorts, a carton of orange juice wedged in the cup holder to be slugged back noisily at traffic lights. On the weekends she'd go to watch Arsenal wherever they were playing; travelling all over the country, the continent, with the large group of men who were her friends. She'd tell me stories about cutting them down to size, drinking them under the table. 'I know men.' She tapped her index finger to the side of her head. 'I know how their brains work.' She was a woman who'd lived a very glamorous life.

I stubbed out my cigarette against the exterior wall and went downstairs. My aunt was throwing in suitcases and canvas bags, landing each with a loud thump.

'Careful!' I yelled.

'You know you might have helped,' she responded, and I wondered why it hadn't even occurred to me to offer.

Joan of Arc snapped at our feet. She was a usually stoic French bulldog. The rescue trust we'd adopted her from told us she'd been abandoned, found whimpering beneath a cooling bonfire. She must have crawled there for warmth. The name was obvious. We called her Joa for short; appropriate, as that was the shape of her bark. *Jao! Jao!* she would yap, as if with an accent.

'She knows you're going,' my mum offered, solemnly. I picked Joa up, snuggling her loosely in my arms. We had been a triad: her, me and my mum.

'Can she come with us?' I asked.

My mum levelled her gaze on me and I took Joa inside, scooping up her face. 'I'll be home soon,' I said, kissing her goodbye.

My mum had taken the passenger seat while my aunt switched on the engine. The van hummed a low vibrato. I got in the back.

'Right,' my aunt said, revving the clutch. 'Let's get you moved out.'

I pulled the lap strap across my waist as tight as it would go.

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I was not unaccustomed to the trappings of an urban environment: once a year we'd take a trip to the city for shoes. We'd eat sushi off rubber conveyor belts, dinging the bell for more sparkling water. I'd drag my mum to vintage stores and buy oversized sweatshirts and buttoned dresses. She'd marvel at their cost and scrutinize stains, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. 'You'll get that out with vinegar,' she'd concede, shaking her head in seasoned disbelief. We'd finish with a trip to the cinema, a rare opportunity to see something foreign. But I was always happy to come home. There was a sense of order there. Everything closed at five, so you knew where you were.

Now I was moving to a much bigger city. A city in which the train station contained more enterprise than my entire home town. 'It's like an international airport!' I'd exclaimed, on my first visit, coming to look round the university. My mum eyed me warily: my callow gait and habit of tripping over.

The roads were wider and more hazardous than I was used to. Everything felt immediate and perilous. The buildings slowly increased in size and density. I pressed my face against the glass. We passed Turkish sweet shops and Chinese bakers. Snooker halls and shisha cafés. Organic grocery stores and newsagents with bars across their windows. Newspaper boards warned of gang crime and fraud, reported stabbings and rape. Back home we'd passed just two: 'Bee Infestation Closes School' and 'Lake Algae: Killer?' The traffic wound sluggishly through the city centre, backdropped by an orchestra of car horns and emergency services.

On approaching the campus everything began to space out. We circled its glassy modern structures for a full hour, trying to find my accommodation. My mum and aunt bickered in the front. They are like an old married couple, I thought. They are literally like an old married couple. A map was produced, and we realized that my new home was set just outside the city; not quite suburbia but almost. 'Here,' my aunt said, as we approached rows of dilapidated three-storey townhouses surrounded by a somewhat bleak industrial landscape. It was a world away from the grassy slopes and freshers' fairs I'd imagined. On the website, the halls had been photographed capped in snow. They'd looked a lot nicer that way.

Across from the student blocks were low rows of shops and businesses. A tiny vegetarian café. A semi-derelict laundrette. A chip shop. There was an unmarked plot of land that contained a single abandoned supermarket trolley. We loaded out.

My assigned flat was located on the top floor. I was the first to arrive. My mum relayed a strategy while I stood, guileless and dismayed, at the centre of the communal kitchen: historic smears of bean juice on the counters, the walls stained and cracking. My aunt put her arm around me. 'The good news is, you get first pick of the cupboards and drawers.'

I chose the smallest ones. Once unpacked I saw my family downstairs. Each step released something spidery inside me: the sick-making terror of need. Needing the accumulative, impervious love of being forced to eat all your broccoli even when it is making you retch and gag to put it in your mouth. The love of the TV being turned off past eleven. The love of being made to say hello to the dog over the telephone. I'd always seen my mum and aunt from knee-height, never quite managed to meet them as equals. It occurred to me how ludicrous it was that families slept in separate bedrooms, not piled on top of each other like lazily sunbathing lions.

My aunt blew kisses as I stood in the damp landing of what was now my home. I heard the van's engine start up, turned to go back upstairs. There was a tap at the door and I looked back to see my mum

on the other side of the glass, holding her coat: a thick waterproof effort she took everywhere. I let her in. 'Here,' she said, handing me the impossibly middle-aged item, two sizes too big. 'Because you don't have anything decent for when it gets cold.' She kissed my forehead and left.

I went back to my room, threw the coat I knew I would never wear on to my bed. I lay beside it and cried.

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I thought leaving home would be a liberation. I thought university would be a dance party. I thought I would live in a room vined with fairy lights; hang arabesque tapestries up on the wall. I thought scattered beneath my bed would be a combination of Kafka, coffee grounds and a lover's old boxer shorts. I thought I would spend my evenings drinking cheap red wine and talking about the Middle East. I thought on weekends we might go to Cassavetes marathons at the independent cinema. I thought I would know all the good Korean places in town. I thought I would know a person who was into healing crystals and another person who could teach me how to sew. I thought I might get into yoga. I thought going for frozen yoghurt was something you would just do. I thought there would be red cups at parties.

And I thought I would be different. I thought it would be like coming home, circling back to my essential and inevitable self. I imagined myself more relaxed – less hung up on things. I thought I would find it easy to speak to strangers. I thought I would be funny, even; make people laugh with my warm, wry, and only slightly self-deprecating sense of humour. I thought I would develop the easy confidence of a head girl, the light patter of an artist. I imagined myself dancing in a smoky nightclub, spinning slackly while my arms floated like laundry loose on the breeze. I imagined others watching me, thinking: *Wow, she is so free*.

I'd had friends before. I had a group to check in with at lunch.

We'd go on cinema trips and talk about boys at sleepovers. We'd go to bars and horrible clubs and on birthdays we'd go bowling. But we never really connected; standing side by side like soldiers, we were just marching through. It was sort of understood we wouldn't stay in touch beyond the last summer of school. We were stand-ins for the people we were eventually supposed to meet. They would meet their sporty friends, their religious friends, their studious friends; I would meet my arty friends, my pleasingly weird friends. In those first few weeks I would meet people, thinking: is it you? Are you the person I am supposed to find? But most people didn't fit that frame. These were not the sort of people I'd left home for. And if they were, I couldn't quite recalibrate myself to be the sort of person they would want to spend time with. No matter how much I shifted and shrugged, I was still right there.

The first night at university, I'd heard everyone congregated in this one pub. I went down alone. Grating techno blared from the speakers and the whole room smelled of perfume and sugar. But there was a thick sense of anticipation in the air, a sense of the invisible membrane that separated us from our future selves. If you could just worm your way through it, a plentiful and rewarding existence awaited. I ordered a drink at the bar, my heart rattling at my throat. I looked around. The girls were all tanned, hair grazing the curves of their bottoms. The boys wore open shirts, buttoned down far below their sternums. I felt the bloom of a hand on my shoulder.

'My name's Natasha,' the girl said. 'But everyone calls me Nidz.'

I stared up into her eyes, unable to make my mouth into the shape it needed to be, to say my name.

'This is Becka,' she gestured towards the tall blonde by her side. 'But everyone calls her Becks.'

I extended my hand to shake theirs. They looked down at it: my damp, floppy palm.

'Okay, well, nice to meet you!' she said, then hurried her friend on, giggling. I finished my drink and went home.

When class started, our tutor asked us to turn to the person next

to us, and talk to them about our favourite writers. I watched as the room naturally turned inwards – looking first to the girl to my right, whose back was to me, and then to the boy to my left.

'No,' he said, reaching for his iPod and headphones, listening to music while staring straight ahead.

My flatmates were equally resistant. There were five of them. Across the hall, a girl called June: home counties, Law, embarrassed by her obvious wealth, every bit as fussy and rigid as the obsolescence of her name implied. Next door was a boy called Samuel, a little snarky and vague though I very much liked his boyfriend Robert, for his soft-faced handsomeness and manner of gently closing the door. Next door to June was Mei-Ling, spirited and friendly, though with a habit of looking right through you. She'd ask you questions about your day but you got the impression she wasn't listening to a word you were saying, just formulating an agreeably benign response: 'That sounds bad,' or 'Is it really?' At the end of the hall, two boys, Adnan and Nadeem, on the same course cluster. Adnan was confident and a flirt, even with me, though I suspected mostly out of kindness. One morning I got up to pour a bowl of cereal, the bloated blush of my stomach protruding above my pyjama bottoms, my hair a slick mess. Adnan was at the kitchen table, tinkering on his laptop. 'How am I supposed to get any work done with beautiful girls slinking about . . . ?' he began, then, looking up from his laptop, corpsed, and carried on typing. Nadeem was skinny, and shy unless drunk, in which case he was an absolute nuisance: inviting his seemingly masses of friends round, playing dance music until the early hours of the morning.

Other flats had formed rowdy gangs, mutually supportive units. Everyone I lived with seemed to have a vivacious social life, complete with emotionally cohesive bonds, strictly outside the confines of our flat. June knocked around with other posh girls with impossibly voluminous hair and lax personal hygiene. Samuel hung out exclusively with Robert. They had a decidedly domestic arrangement for two nineteen-year-olds but they seemed happy; washing up side by side,

getting takeaways. Mei-Ling's friends were mostly from her Fashion Marketing course; aloof, but essentially nice. They'd go to a Vietnamese noodle place just off campus, then out dancing dressed in immaculately conceptual outfits: crinoline skirts and heels like works of art. Adnan hung out with an eclectic bunch of varying ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and gender; the only thing they all seemed to have in common was being exceptionally good-looking. Nadeem's friends were a large group of boys who liked playing sports. I'd not met anyone. Sipping tea and staring out of my grimy window, my heart wound tentacles around the city, clutching blindly in the dark.

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My room was reassuringly small, a modest unit of space. I'd spent a lot of time harmonizing the light. The issued lampshade produced a pallid glow that looked like the colour of depression, so I purchased a brass reading lamp and lined LED candles along the floor. I wasn't allowed to hang pictures but I could Blu-tack postcards to the walls. I found a crochet throw to put on top of my bed and began a small collection of vintage ashtrays. And although it wasn't the space I imagined – one in which friends would drop by to see me, in which I would entertain slim-shouldered Theatre grads – it was my space: my first snug space.

In lieu of a life I settled on an existence. I spent most of my time in bed, eating noodles and doodling crosswords, listening to music. Sometimes I'd just lie there with the window open, breathing in the steel smell of the rain. I'd blow huge chunks of my loan buying clothes no one would ever see me in or hop from webpage to webpage, researching conspiracy theories, reading about serial killers. Occasionally, I would write an essay or attempt some required reading.

I'd started smoking roll-ups because they were cheaper and killed more time. I'd take myself out on trips to art galleries because they were free, go on walks around town. I'd check out films from the library. One morning it occurred to me a good way to spend the day

might be cooking. My days were punctuated only by meals, with so little in the space between them. People could spend hours cooking: thickening risotto or caramelizing meat. It was something to do.

My mum had already taught me the basics: cooking rice, scrambling eggs, how to boil pasta. But that was eating to survive. The more I experimented, the more I wanted to discover flavour, texture, scent. Gently toasting spices. How to mix herbs.

My immediate instincts were towards anything like comfort food, the hallmarks of which were a moderate warmth and a sloppy, squelching quality: soup, stews, casseroles, tagine, goulash. I glazed cauliflower with honey and mustard, roasted it alongside garlic and onions to a sweet gold crisp, then whizzed it up in a blender. I graduated to more complicated soups: Cuban black bean required slow cooking with a full leg of ham, the meat falling almost erotically away from the bone, swirled up in a thick savoury goo. Italian wedding soup was a favourite, because it looked so fundamentally wrong; the egg stringy and half-cooked, swimming alongside thoughtlessly tossed-in stale bread and not-quite-melted strips of Parmesan. But it was delicious; the peculiar consistency and salty heartiness of it. Casseroles were an exercise in patience. I'd season with sprigs and leave them ticking over, checking up every half hour or so, thrilled by the steamy waves of roasting tomatoes and stewed celery when I opened up the oven. Seafood excited me but I felt I had too much to learn. The proximity of Polish stores resulted in a week-long obsession with bigos – a hunter's stew made with cabbage and meat and garnished with anything from caraway to juniper berries.

I started baking bread. My first was an unadventurous granary loaf, which came out sort of armadillo-shaped and a little too brown in the crust, but had a gorgeous graininess and was definitely tasty. I'd never thought bread could have any sort of complexity or depth of flavour, but now I found there were so many notes to be savoured: yeast, sea salt, pepper, rosemary, charcoal, butter, olive oil. I was mad on bread. I baked rolls before class, leaving them to cool, then cracking them open for lunch, dunking into beer and cheese stews, curried

lentils. The space beneath my bed, next to the radiator, became the perfect proving spot, and I took particular comfort in taking a nap above whatever dough was lethargically rising at the time.

I'd match meals to books and films. Requisite reading for my Southern Gothic seminar was accompanied by waffles and grits. New French Extreme called for steak tartare (I threw up for hours). Hot dogs and curly fries for a Friday beneath the duvet with *National Lampoon's*. Earl Grey and scones during a late Wednesday night rewatch of *Brief Encounter*. One especially bleak Saturday afternoon, *Kiki's Delivery Service* and some unmemorable Pixar: ramen and diet lemonade. It needed work.

I never made anything sweet. No cakes or desserts. Pies were filled with kidneys and game. Loaves were picnic, courgette. Though I liked the idea of creating my own ice creams or pastries it seemed sort of frivolous. What I needed was sustenance. Fortification.

The act of cooking imposed a kind of dignity on hunger, which had become terrifying. I couldn't remember how I had managed hunger, the animal wildness of it, before. At home we gobbled, we were a family who ate. You could sit in front of the television and shove handfuls of crisps into your mouth, you could smother ripped-up pieces of bread with margarine over the kitchen sink. There was a bravado in it: leftovers were for losers and if you didn't have a hearty appetite there was something wrong with you. But the eating always had a kind of context: in my mum's house, with its flotsam of dressing-gowns and stupid shows on the television, it felt reasonable and normal and right. Now my eating, my bottomless, yearning hunger, was a horror. I felt monstrous, shovelling in the amount of food I wanted to, more anxious with every bite. Cooking became the buffer: an act of civility before the carnal ensued.

And more importantly, it was a singular respite from academic life. Lectures and seminars were charged with nervous energy. Class felt like sitting at the bottom of a well: I could never raise my voice loud enough to be heard. On the rare occasions a tutor would try to engage me, their almost immediate regret was plain: registering panic in my

eyes, beating a hasty retreat. I was terrified of being asked for my opinion and yet I also longed to be – staring hard at the text in front of me, trying to conceive an original thought. When we took it in turns to read aloud, some piece of short fiction or theory, I'd restlessly anticipate which bit would be mine, running and re-running the numbers, making sure I didn't mess it up. Once, when the moment finally came, my section was only a paragraph long, seven sentences at that, before our lecturer instructed 'next' and the guy to my left, some scruffy doofus in a baseball cap and Rock Against Racism shirt, took over. I had the feeling I might cry. Another tile in the mosaic of tiny injustices that had become my life.

When I didn't have any classes or seminars I could sometimes go up to forty-eight hours without using my voice. I'd contrive ways of saying things just to make sure I still could. 'This bloody thing,' I'd announce, booting up my laptop. 'Ouch,' if I tripped over. The actual word of it. Ouch.

I still spoke to my mum once a week, usually on Mondays. 'I'm busy,' I'd tell her. 'I've got so much on.'

'I know,' she would reply, wearily. 'I know.'

Isolation was a strange thing. Sometimes the lack felt like a blank page, like a possibility. I'd spend a lot of time daydreaming. Long, convoluted narratives – picking at my dreams like I was choosing a movie. Lying on top of my duvet staring at the small expanse of my ceiling I'd relay the humble fantasy of my choosing. What about the one where I meet that guy from Critical Theory, we hit it off and he goes down on me in the library? Or the one where I buddy up with Mei-Ling? Do we go to the Vietnamese place and gossip? Or out meeting boys? But I was always tripping up. My fantasies were rooted in a tangible reality. Mei-Ling works at Bella Italia on Thursdays! We'd have to rearrange! And as for the sex in the library – would he be able to tell I hadn't done it before? Would there need to be a conversation about that?

My virginity was an issue. It had never bothered me before. Back home, sleeping next to Joan of Arc, my mother's faint snores just