

BETTER THAN ALL THAT

I made the mistake of sitting next to Lucas at dinner. He spent the meal swiping through photos on his phone. After every fourth photo, he'd stop and nudge me with his elbow, and when I would give in and look down, I'd find a video clip of a woman fingering herself. "Damn, this shit is weak," he commented on one. "Is she kidding me with this?"

I looked around the Applebee's, locked eyes with a pig-tailed little girl sitting a table over from us. The crust of an onion ring dangled from her bottom front teeth; she draped its stringy skeleton over the lip of a ketchup-stained plate. "I don't know, Lucas, it looks like she's trying her best?" I offered.

"Absolutely she ain't," he said, then closed the video.

Across the table, Ray and Zeke sat in their own little world. One full of laughter, with Zeke's giggles helicoptering throughout the restaurant. It seemed that nothing had changed since high school. Although, now, Zeke drank. And he was drunk. And had been since 3PM, according to Lucas. It was a steady buzz.

But Ray's smile was the same, his teeth that perfect shade of yellow I find attractive. They looked soft to the touch. Even now, I still remember him from high school: skinny arms wrapped tightly around Alyssa, anxious she might float away like a balloon. I lost minutes staring at him, at both of them, if I'm being honest, when they kissed in public. I spent too many

school nights alone in my bedroom with my body pressed up against the standing mirror. I leaned in timidly, mimicking the way Alyssa would receive Ray's kisses, until the cold glass warmed slick beneath my lips. This felt appropriate. Those early, nervous encounters between Ray and Alyssa were always so quick and stale, containing all the passion of a cold fish. I wish it stayed that way between them.

"Come on, man, let me have my phone," Ray said. His cheeks were rosy from the discount margarita mix. He extended his hand toward Zeke, who responded by tucking Ray's iPhone into the breast pocket of his suit.

"Not gonna happen, Ray-ray," Zeke said. "Can't have you sneaking a Facetime session with Alyssa. It's my job to keep an eye on you."

"Yeah, Ray, one night apart won't kill you," I said, but when neither of them acknowledged my words, I returned to sipping a watery sangria through a cracked straw.

Then Lucas opened another video album on his phone. "Pay attention," he said only to me, hitting the play button. In the video, a faceless woman stood in a shower, sat on the edge of a bathroom sink, plucked her right nipple with dental floss, and then splayed her body out on a couch with a towel tucked underneath her ass. She played with herself for a while, her long-nailed fingers slipping in and out focus. Once she came, Lucas looked me right in the eyes and said, "See? That's effort."

I scratched my thumb. He shook his head at me and sucked his teeth. "What's with you?" He opened another video, consuming each new megabyte of footage with Rottweiler hunger. Why did he come out tonight? Surely, he'd rather slobber over the screen, alone, and use the

excess drool as lube. The thought of him rubbing himself raw underneath the table ballooned in my mind and the back of my neck felt hot. I returned to my sangria.

I knew going into the evening things would get awkward. More than six years had passed since I last saw either Lucas or Zeke, whose faces had hardened, though neither in an unattractive way. I felt so boyish and plump seated next to them, as if all that time away had only held me back in their timelines. And then, Ray—I wanted to keep it going, our friendship. I swear I tried. I learned of his engagement soon after I moved back to Cleveland and started working at the main branch of the library downtown. Not the research gig I wanted, but a solid job at the circulation desk. I saw their faces on my phone while eating a desk lunch. I had prayed on many drunken, lonely nights in college and the years right after for their relationship to fizzle out. All that wishing and hoping proven a waste of time and spirit when I saw their large smiles, the blindingly white diamond. I never expected to receive an invite to the bachelor party. But, one day, Ray popped up in my DMs—“I’m getting married! Crazy, right? Saw you’re back in town and I want the whole gang back together!”—and what could I say but yes?