

BETTER THAN ALL THAT

Lucas is still talking about some woman he slept with, only this one stole weed from him and hid out in her apartment with another guy for three days. He drove an hour and a half, he says, from Cleveland to Sandusky, with a gun nested across his knees, and a pulsating vein in the side of his forehead. This story is only slightly less horrible than the conversation we were having at dinner. He was swiping through photos in his phone, each a snapshot of a set of boobs or vulva, and in one instance, an ass; after every fourth photo, he pulled up a video of a woman fingering herself. “Damn, this shit is weak,” he commented on one. I looked around the Applebee's, locking eyes with a pig-tailed little girl sitting a table over. She ate the crust off an onion ring, draping the stringy vegetable over the edge of a ketchup-stained plate. “Is she kidding me with this shit?”

“It looks like she’s doing her best?” I offered.

“Absolutely she ain’t,” he said, closing out the video and swapping it with another. The portfolio of this woman was objectively more impressive—she stood in a shower, sat on the edge of her bathroom sink, splayed herself out on the couch with a towel tucked beneath her ass, playing with herself more intensely, her long-nailed fingers slipping in and out focus. “See?” he said. “Now that’s effort. Look, she’s dripping and everything.”

Across the table Ray was trying to convince Zeke to let him keep his own phone, to which Zeke responded, “Nope, not gonna happen. Them’s the rules Ray-ray. Can’t have you sneaking a Facetime session with Alyssa. As your best man, I gots to keep my eye on you.”

Zeke was not drunk, but Ray was. Only 40 minutes into his own bachelor party. My sweaty glass of watered-down sangria remained less-than half full, and its medicinal taste stained my tongue so I no longer cared to finish it. “Should we be heading out soon?” I asked. Beside me, Lucas sucked his teeth and rattled off a text message: *pussy* and *mine* being two of the included words. “Please?”

But in the car, Lucas keeps at it, switching from story to story without proper transition. He calls women “females” in that Rottweiler way, and speaks of past hookups with the tone of someone discussing their least favorite cereals. One was too meek, another was too nice, there had been the blonde one who ate salad without a drop of dressing, the one who was too into Jesus, and the one in between those two who abused the word “love,” as in, *I love you, Lucas*. As in, *I love you, Lucas, please stop fucking with my heart*. “What’s with that, man?” he asks Ray.

Ray chuckles in the passenger seat. He has been with Alyssa since they were twelve. I’m not judging, but he gloats about the fact, treats it like a prize won for shooting a bullseye on the first try. “That’s crazy,” he says.

Ray never talked much about sex. To any of us. I remember him in high school: skinny arms wrapped tightly around Alyssa, anxious she might float away like a balloon. If you studied them in public even now, you might think they barely entered the hand-holding stage of adolescent love. Even their kisses were quick and stale, containing all the passion of a cold fish.