

## Sudden Desire

The wind sputtered and twisted in the backyard, bass throbbing gently from inside the house. The night was humid, to the point of oppressive heat. My head swam in that perfect meeting between highs; the drink warming on its way down, smoke staining lungs. I was at the point where everything, for no reason, felt particularly funny. The simple act of being, and how I relished in the resiliency that I always felt.

I held fits of giggles to myself, looking around the group to see if anyone had noticed me laughing. I doubt it: there were several conversations being had simultaneously. Moaning about work, the majority of us on the same staff; someone's meticulous efforts to sell their shitty old car; that there were already too many tourists on the island and the Fourth hadn't even hit yet. Occasionally David and I met eyes, more of a telepathic kind of exchange, trying to judge the vibe and adapt if we needed to. Always somehow knowing and feeling the same things.

I sat back in the lawn chair and absorbed the sounds of my friends. For weeks, months, maybe longer than I cared to admit, I had been feeling listless. Lost in everything and nothing, feeling like my life was in a permanent stasis, and even with painstaking effort I could do little else than feebly kick around, shuffling, flailing. Hoping the momentum would pick up and knock me into motion. Nothing seemed to be working, and it was worse when I was alone, so I was quietly grateful for the opportunity to get out of my own head and focus on something else. And no one ever judged me for being quiet, or not saying too much, one of my only imperatives. I settled into my customary role as observer:

Ray and David were in the throes of a conversation about Ray's license being suspended and how Jude has had to pick up carpool duties so Ray can get to work, too. As the manager he customarily stayed late nights, creating a few for Jude, as well. I looked at Jude to

see if he'd heard his name, and he was looking right at me. Loath to introduce cliches, I still thought it was like something out of a movie.

Everyone kept talking, and we looked at each other, but the swell of voices quieted. The pulse of the music dulled to a whisper. I could see the breeze lifting Kara's hair from where she sat next to Jude, but I could not feel it on my shoulders. His eyes were early-morning blue, the cusp of a just-had dream; they blazed of a certain kind of sunrise at me across the circle and I just stared. I couldn't do anything. It couldn't have taken more than two seconds, because he laughed then and looked to his right, catching Ray and then they both cracked up at something between them. Jude turned back to Kara's conversation about her artist residency with Vic, who at one point I caught looking helplessly around for Teddy when Kara finally came up for air.

"He's been fantastic with helping me improve my online shop layout," she said of Jude. She beamed a loving grin at him as I continued to pay attention to a conversation that wasn't mine. I seethed for the millionth time before Delaney touched my arm and I looked back over at her.

"Not boring you, am I?" she said amicably. I turned my chair towards her and backed up a bit so I could, hopefully, return to the conversation we'd been having with Maya about doing another dinner party.

"No, I'm sorry. I really would love that! I had such a good time the last time. Maybe we could even do a potluck-style thing, everyone brings something. I felt so bad that you made all that food by yourself," I told her.

"It sure was good though, babe. Wish you'd cook like that for me every night!" Maya laughed boisterously, interminably good-natured. She shook Delaney's knee in a way that was both rough and tender, and I regarded the kind of fondness they had after two decades of marriage. My heart tugged at the deceptively simple gesture. They got caught in their own

conversation, and I used the opportunity to look back across the circle that resembled absolutely nothing like a circle anymore.

Teddy had gone to take a tense phone call with his and Vic's housemates about something dire that seemed to be happening with their dog he'd asked them to look after for the evening, a pitbull of whom the other couple were skeptical. I kept hoping that Jude was looking at me.

He wasn't. I glanced at David again, but I don't think he caught me. He gave me a "kill me please" look before he re-engaged with a still-fuming Ray, lamenting about not being able to use his new Nissan to bar hop. I smiled towards him then tilted my head back, feeling content and cross-faded, deeply amused and agonized. I let all the nothing come at once, and everything I try not to think about I allowed to pour over my closed eyes, seep into the nerves behind them, until I felt the shiver I only ever feel from a pair of glaring eyes rip me out of my abyss. I floated up slowly through the flood toward the surface, but kept my eyes closed. I felt the creeping sensation of time slowing, the wind halting, pulse suddenly very loud in my ears.

A flash then, and my eyes shot open. A booming thunderclap quickly followed, alarming some, amusing others. I laughed with Ray and Delaney as David suggested we move inside before the impending rain. Again, I looked at Jude, and again he was looking at me. He didn't move, just sat there for a second with his hands folded, turning his face in Kara and Vic's general direction, gaze lingering. Once more the lightning struck, the delicious crack of thunder propelling my delirium; I loved rainstorms. Every chance I had, I sat outside somewhere, covered or not, and soaked in the sound and the feel of it, its pressure tangible and therapeutic.

Then I thought "fuck it," and I glared at Jude through another flash, willed everything out from inside me and into the air to pass to him, hoping he could see what I meant, hoping he understood. And at the same time, fiercely hoping he would not. That we could just write it off as

something innocuous. In that same breath, I turned from sudden desire into immediate mortification and wished I could take it back.

In my head I quietly lamented that this was one of the reasons I only smoke. What was I doing, making eyes at him like that? I was lucky no one seemed to have seen it. My eyes flicked to Kara who had already stood and was making her way inside, clutching her sweatshirt closer to her. Jude's sweatshirt, the needling voice inside quipped. Shut up, I thought, instantly bitter. Why shouldn't she be wearing one of his sweatshirts?

That angry green pulse hit me again and I bit down on my lip, shuffling in behind Delaney. I felt myself getting so worked up, and for what? Over what? We'd been through this hundreds of times, by now. When it's time, it'll be time; it does no good for anyone to waste your energy being jealous over something you have no control over. Exercise patience. I excused myself to one of the upstairs bathrooms. The creak of the wooden steps gained volume as the voices dissipated below.

This house felt like a second home. I had practically grown up in it, tagging along for so many years as my mom cleaned and catered, during the summer months, for the family who lived here. They were kind enough to let our large family gather there for our holidays and celebrations. My mom was kind enough to let me use it during this weekend. I felt glad that it wasn't close to Thanksgiving, or I'd have never been able to do this at all. The whole house, all 6 bedrooms with almost double the beds, would have been flooded with family relaxing after what is considered, ironically, a stressful event in our family.

The echo of surreptitiously trying to hide my footsteps from my mother and her vacuum came, when I'd head up to the widow's walk to smoke. The memory framed itself as being farther away from me than I thought; in reality, I had done this just last week while we were here prepping the house. I frequently misjudged the heat of the bare sun on the roof, and either had

to climb all the way back down to go to the second floor patio, or toughen up and sweat with a decent view, staring out towards the harbor between white wooden slats. I passed the sliding doors of the patio now, at the crux of where the two staircases met. I went right and into the master bedroom, flicked the lightswitch and walked past the California king bed into the bathroom.

I have an affinity for nice bathrooms, rich people's bathrooms, I thought to myself as I turned the switch and the familiar jacuzzi bathtub came into view. I felt the cool, sleek marble of the his-and-hers sink under my fingertips. I had been in countless such spaces, forever in the safety of my mother's industrious, devoted wing, following from room to room, imagining multitudes of lives being lived in each of them. I thought of her love, the love she had for her children, her family, just like the kind that I had, but infinitely more seasoned. I thought about the way I loved my friends, and thought of the kinds of love that could be given and received, and tried not to feel guilty for the fact that some kinds just weren't enough.

I felt again the derisive sting of a lack of that certain type of love, and tried to consider why I felt so strongly about it. Strongly... cheated? Looked over? Skipped? The importance I placed on that kind of love belied a lacking in the effects of the other types of love that I experienced, and the guilt resumed. My intention was not to make anyone mistake my yearning for ungrateful whining; some people (I'm about to do it again, sorry!) some people don't have any kind of love at all, I suppose. Waves of love started lapping at me, and I waded out into them but shortly after they became still, the rings fanning out from where I had simply stopped moving, now waiting. I wanted something disruptive, stronger. I wanted waves, to swim and wade deeply.

Maybe you just need to get laid, the needling voice intoned, and I could hear the shit-eating grin. "For fuck's sake," I said loudly. Not untrue. I took a long breath and then

laughed mirthlessly because that wasn't going to happen soon. No one I knew, or knew and was interested in, was interested in me. And the simple thought of reviving dormant dating apps made me want to bash my head into the mirror. There simply were no viable prospects. It seemed like a paradox, truly, because the only way I felt like I wanted to have sex with someone was if I had an established connection with them. The apps, then, would be a logical first step but it always felt so fucking dreary getting on there time after time and not being able to engage with people the way it's meant for me to make that connection.

It always felt like I would match with people and there'd be nothing beyond having the same banal conversations, if it even came to that. It became a continual let down, and I didn't learn my lesson until after the second time I reluctantly signed up for Tinder Gold, thinking I'd be getting to the point quicker somehow by knowing who liked me first. I just had to leave it alone. Feeling woeful, but not sorry enough for myself to really Go There, I turned the faucet on and washed my hands.

Preparing to release myself back into the void, I realized I had no idea how long I'd been gone. In the master room, a second door led to the rest of the floor, into the den that had another bedroom attached to it. Through there and on the left was the last bedroom on that floor, and then the staircase. I was looking into the empty den with a light on in the middle bedroom, so I stepped through the door and caught movement from the side of my eye. Jude emerged, like a sentry, and came to a halt inches from me.

We were close enough that I was looking at his mouth first. Awesome, I thought absently. His beard was honey brown, thick so it looked darker, and his bottom lip, ruddy and full, poked out. I finally looked up. We did that thing where we stare and don't say anything. Ridiculously, I wanted to blurt out what I was not able to communicate through the lightning. "You okay?" I asked instead, peering over his shoulder.

“Was just looking for a bathroom,” he said. I caught the scent of lemon, the lemon verbena soap from the bathroom in there. The fact that all these fucking bedrooms have their own bathroom!, I thought before nodding at him, suddenly acutely aware of the space his body took up in the doorway. How close he was to me, that he smelled of vetiver and faintly of bergamot. I needed to get back downstairs before I embarrassed myself.

“Gonna head back down,” and I tried to say it casually and like I wasn’t envisioning pushing him into the room and closing the door. As I walked towards the stairs, he cleared his throat.

“And I was looking for you... Can... I talk to you for a minute?” It stopped me cold, especially the way he drew a breath in the middle; it was slow, and it smote with resignation. Every single scenario I’d ever imagined, the most wholesome to the deeply romantic to the ineffably salacious, slapped me with force and I didn’t mean to but I didn’t speak for long enough that I was certain he became uncomfortable.

I turned on my heel. Tried my hardest not to assume anything, and came up to him and said yeah, sure. He looked at me like he was trying to work something out in his mind, some question he thought he knew the answer to, but now had to reconsider. He stepped back and let me into the room first. Remaining acutely aware of both of our bodies, I stood stock still in the middle of the room, between the bed and the desk and tried not to appear awkward. I didn’t want to cross my arms, it would make it seem like I was uncomfortable (I was) and I thought putting my hands in my pockets would look stupid, staged. I just kept them at my sides and tried to forget they were there.

He closed the door. Looked as though he was considering leaving it open. He held his palm flat against the pane while he turned the knob and pushed softly. Gently sweeping, a delicate little secret. My head pulsed thinking of his hands suddenly on me. Mine went into my

pockets, curling into loose fists, aching for flesh, hips, shoulders, back. He faced me at a distance that was disrespectfully close, so that I could watch the rise and fall of his chest, deliberately measured.

I started thinking of all the warring I had left to do inside when Jude said, slowly, carefully, "I don't know how to say this, there's not a good way."

He was waiting for me to pick up the slack, but I could not say a word. I thought it was another delusion; but had I honestly exhausted it so many times in my head that I convinced myself of its impossibility on principle? That because I over thought it, coveted it incessantly that I would never see it come to fruition? That it, for that reason, could never be an authentic thing? But he couldn't be standing here telling me this, admitting this to me. Is he about to admit this to me? But what about--

"Morgan," and I hated myself because when he said my name I twitched, a movement in my shoulders that rolled down to my fists and tightened them, "I..." and he stretched out the space between what happened next for what was so long that I thought someone would find us and interrupt before he could finish. "I want you," then he made a quick face like he was wincing, "It's kinda wide of the mark, but--"

"Jesus *fuck*," I blurted, devoid of grace or eloquence. I felt the room tip. I hope I didn't communicate through the look on my face how crazy I felt inside. Like I was stood in the eye of a tornado, watching the desecration happen, unable to stop it. I became aware of rain pounding the windows. I felt sweat prick at my temples, itching. He looked more or less composed, and I was scrambling. I said nothing, waiting for him to say anything, do anything. I looked at the door, thinking of my friends downstairs, our friends. Thinking of Kara, and of escaping.



He said my name again in a voice I'd never heard him use before, like it was a secret between us, a simmering homonym whose other meaning only we understood. "... I don't know what to do."

I sputtered, mind splitting into a million different factions. Why was he doing this? I felt vaguely like I was about to have something taken from me. A feeling of unfairness came to me, imminent whenever I got my hopes up high for something, knowing it was certain to fall through. Sure, he could say that, but what would change? What could happen? The futility of the situation was blatant, and the fact that he'd decided to say something like that anyway gave me pause. "Why are you doing this?"

He looked at me with something like sadness, something forlorn. "Honestly, I don't know." He took a step forward and I took one to the side, backing up to the desk. What could I say right now and not incriminate myself in some way? The whole thing was ridiculous; it was a trap. If I didn't say anything, didn't tell him that there was, in fact, no way that he could want me more than I wanted him, then I fumbled the opportunity. But there really was no opportunity to be had, this obtrusively evidenced by the girlfriend who was downstairs. So what then? I did say it, and...

I really, really did not want to do that. To be that kind of person. I could not. I wanted to. I couldn't. I could. I really shouldn't. I really wanted to.

I had nothing smart to say that wouldn't give me away. I thought of all the times I wanted to say it to him, just to relieve my tension. I thought about how that was the last thing I should do: I had a dismal track record with admitting feelings to my friends. None had ever reciprocated those feelings before, so this was already different, but my nerves hummed, the shadow of my first, and most significant, failure looming close by.

I had been a freshman in college, and he'd been one of my closest friends. I lived on the floor above him, and we had a core group of classes together, so we wound up spending a lot of time. That friendship formed as friendships often do; quietly, and all at once, in a way whose significance I didn't realize until we were sitting next to each other on his bed one night watching Fight Club on my laptop. I never realized how much I took for granted the simple act of him sitting right there, how much I felt like I belonged, even before I spilled my guts and flooded the room.

After the movie, we smoked outside. The topic steered towards crushes, if we had feelings for anyone. I don't know why I even entertained that conversation, or how we got there. I felt the novelty of something precious yet to be discovered, something that could be sacred, but I kept trying to play coy. I told him that no, Isaac, I didn't have feelings for anyone, lying to his face about him as a curl of smoke trailed from his lips. He said nothing and we went inside. After I could hold it in no longer, I told him that I lied and that he was the one I had feelings for. "But why?" he said amicably, warningly. "I'm a piece of shit," and we laughed. He said come here, give me a hug, and though he didn't feel the same, he said that it didn't change the fact of us being friends.

And that remained true until I pushed it too far. Over the next year I bargained with how much patience, how much resolve he had for the situation and put the relationship in jeopardy. Drinking and unwarrantedly espousing my feelings; we'd have conferences about it occasionally, one such resulting in an ultimatum that said we'd have to take a break, or he couldn't do it anymore. Put me the fuck in my place. Who did I think I was? Having love for someone and being determined to keep showing it, all the way to a mutual detriment?

The way I felt when I would see him around campus, walking up the hill passing his dorm and him standing outside smoking, not being able to say anything, the disconsolate way we'd

look at each other. It all tore at me in the middle of the room now, in the middle of this party I was supposed to be enjoying, hosting. Instead I kept hurling myself between my past and this uncomfortable present.

I looked into Jude's face and tried to find the future in it, the answers. Only my own fantasies came back, refracted in his silver-blue gaze. Cold steel. Thunder rumbled outside, preceded by two flashes in succession. "What are we supposed to do?" I asked helplessly, sounding meek. Though I made sure I didn't look away when I finally said, "I've always wanted you," because I wanted to see what my words did to him in that moment. The look he gave me felt like someone pulled the ground out from beneath me. A pure free fall.

"I switched my Sunday shifts with Teddy because I felt like I couldn't be alone with you on the floor," he said suddenly.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about something?" as in my head I gripped the walls, trying not to sink.

"Supposed to make you aware of how serious this is."

"*Is this* serious?" and the drunken hilarity returned at full force. How *fucking* silly we both were, locked in here talking about our feelings when there was nothing we could do about them. I cackled, tartly, then cut it off. This was not serious at all, it was the biggest joke I had ever bore witness to. "Prove it," I said then, knowing in the instant the words left my mouth that he would.

By the time I had completed a blink, he'd taken another step across the room, had a hand around my back and the other in my hair. Our noses touched, the tip of his freezing, before our mouths met. I thought of the smothering heat of the rainstorm outside, of humidity and melting wax, felt his tongue, warm, sweeping against my bottom lip. I wound a hand around his neck, twining my fingers in the hair that had grown down to the nape. Happy that it was longer

now, I remembered one day when he came into work and we all quipped about how we barely recognized him with his buzzcut. He did it for a wedding; Kara's sister had gotten married, and--

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck.

I pushed him off me, pushed myself away from him, and the wet sound our mouths made upon parting spliced the silence of the room with a crackle. He looked like an animal keen to attack; and I felt like one.

He opened his mouth to say something, I never found out what, when we heard it. The sound of someone ascending the stairs near the den. It grew louder; time was running out. What excuse could we have for being in a closed room together like this? Did either of us look ravaged, like I felt? Could we get away with a lie? I could not be caught hooking up with Jude, at a party I hosted, while his girlfriend was downstairs with the rest of our friends, presumably all waiting on us. I bolted to life like an electric shock.

"Ask me if I'm alright. Loudly," I told Jude, passing by him to head into the bathroom. Then I coughed and cleared my throat and pushed the plunger on the toilet.

"Morgan, are you sure you're okay?" he said as a knock came at the door. I closed the bathroom door but not completely. I wanted whoever came to see me appearing to struggle with being sick. I cast my eyes downward, trying to inspire pathos.

"Everything okay here?" David asked, hovering in the doorway. Jude's frame obstructed David's slight one in the doorway, but I swore I knew it was him before he opened the door. I was glad it wasn't anyone else. Maybe he could be convinced that nothing happened.

"I heard someone vomiting up here, came to investigate," Jude said, not missing a beat.

I emerged from the bathroom then, affecting a stagger and wearing an exhausted frown. The look in David's eyes convinced me I was a better actor than I thought. It was the familiar

gleam of empathy I always receive from him when I tell him of how my life has been fucked up by my chronic illness. He went into guardian mode:

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah...” and I looked at the ground, tried to milk the mortification to make it convincing. It wasn’t hard.

“Are you...” he made a vague gesture that was meant to encompass the cycle of me getting violently ill, vomiting for days, becoming severely dehydrated, and by a stroke of something I’d yet to identify, luck perhaps, recuperating and returning to normal.

“I hope not. I don’t think so... I shouldn’t be,” I said. Then I looked over at Jude, whose eyes I’d felt boring into me. “I’m sorry,” I said to him with a blush, not for the reason I was thinking.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, “Just wanted to make sure you were alright.” His eyes flashed, and thunder clapped outside.

“We thought you took off,” David said, turning to make a pointed glance at Jude.

Jude regarded him for a moment. Nodded, then said, “I should go back down. Kara gets neurotic if no one pays her attention for 15 minutes,” and he looked at me when he said her name, like he was challenging me to something. “I can’t imagine Vic is still actually listening to her talk about nothing.”

He turned for the door and I said I needed to wash my hands. I heard his footfalls fading while David remained in the room until I emerged, wiping still-damp hands on my shorts. I looked at him, and he was giving me a strange look. Like I had misunderstood something incredibly simple, or I was being willfully ignorant of an obvious point. Like he already knew. I said nothing, just looked around the room flailingly, wishing I could float through the walls, or throw myself out the window.

"You ready?" I asked affably, inching towards the doorway.

"Be careful, please," David responded, and I stopped. Turned to look at him, hoping I was hiding the desperate look in my eyes. I didn't want to admit my wrongdoings. But he didn't relent.

"What--"

"I'm not judging you because I know how you feel about him, and I won't tell you what to do or not to do. And I know you will be, but I just want you to remain aware of the consequences of acting further."

Fuck me, then.

My mouth opened and closed stupidly, comically. The jig was up. And even if it didn't happen to be up right now, I was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that David's knowledge of the situation would come back to bite me in the ass. I was so fucking fucked, no two ways about it. "Okay," I whispered, subdued with eyes downcast, all the shame of it hitting me at once. I really couldn't have anything I wanted, could I?

"I'm sorry, honestly. I know how much... I wish it was different, that it could've worked for you."

"We only kissed--briefly! We didn't... *do* anything." My cheeks stung as if I'd been slapped in the face. Fucking Jude, I griped inwardly.

David just nodded, trying to keep his expression neutral. I knew in a way neither of us had to explain that he was still pleased for me. He'd been privy of my feelings for Jude from the get-go; it started out in a platonic yes-he's-handsome way that both of us would refer to when we discussed Things Like That, but he shortly caught on to my sincerity, the fervor of it. I also knew that he was judging me in a way that wasn't unwarranted.

“Let’s head back,” he offered. “It’s been almost 15 minutes, everyone’s asking about you.”

The charred feeling of disgrace again. I did not want to go back down there and face the judgment and the gazes and the silent things people let hang in the air and pretend not to have thought, the accusations. Hopefully they all believed I did suddenly get sick; it wasn’t an uncommon occurrence, and everyone was aware of my affliction. I followed David out of the room and towards the stairs. I was wondering if he was going to keep the cover for me, but knew he would. Perhaps he wouldn’t be happy about it, but he’d do it for me. It was the wavelength we were on; a sibling bond without the blood.

We emerged back onto the main floor. In the doorway a sea of shoes flowed into the foyer. We passed into the small living area and the kitchen unfolded on the right side. The TV was on, tuned to ESPN with the sound off, but no one watched it. Vic stood at the island in the kitchen, pouring hennessy into two glasses, following one with Diet Coke. She beamed at us from behind thick frames and went back to pouring.

We took a left and reunited with the group parked around a large wooden dining table, a game of Cards Against Humanity in full effect. I sat off to the side, avoiding prolonged eye contact with nearly everyone, flitting from one to the next, pretending like Jude didn’t even exist.

Meeting Kara’s eyes, I noticed the apparent concern, not being able to ascertain if it was because she heard I was sick, or because Jude had been gone the whole time, too, presumably with me. I just looked at everyone’s hands, and tried to see who had the most black cards.

Delaney and Maya left after I returned, and everyone else lingered around, in a haze of good food, good weed, good drink. We should do a Friendsgiving version of this, I thought as David and I got the ball rolling on cleaning the kitchen. Everyone else caught on and began to

pitch in. There was some talk about going downtown, of which this house sat on the edge, to check out the night. Most declined, yearning for sleep.

I was of the same mind, but I watched Jude so closely when the question was posed, ready to change my answer if he happened to not want to go home just yet. As the plans fizzled out, everyone said their goodbyes and began to part. I thanked and hugged everyone: Vic snugly because she gave the best hugs; Teddy with one arm and “Much love” as we’d become accustomed to; Ray the same but with a “goodnight,” Kara a little too tight, I couldn’t tell if I’d done it on purpose; and Jude last of all.

The universe’s unabashed delight in watching me suffer made it so. I felt like everyone was watching, but I couldn’t tell. We came in to each other, not breaking eye contact until our heads turned and we met shoulders. Did I hold him for too long? I would have said no, but it wouldn’t have been very objective of me.

I made sure all the lights were off and I had the key in hand as David and I made our way, the last of us, through the doorway and out onto the street. The house sat just off the brick sidewalk. Our cars were parked in a neat line out front. The air hummed with the nightscape of downtown Nantucket in early summertime just around the corner. The ocean a skip away, I felt the lull of it standing among our group, everyone lingering around, continuing to chat, not quite ready to let the evening end. I felt the weight of tonight’s events settle on my shoulders like a shawl. My mom had texted me to make sure I locked up, and I finally noticed the time: 12:51AM. Sleep was imminent.

At last David and I shuffled into his van, and I shut the door on my glorious kickback, mine! I thought glowingly, and all the gnawing possibilities of the next day, the next encounter. I pledged to maintain my composure in the face of any potential impending upsets. I could not afford a misstep now.