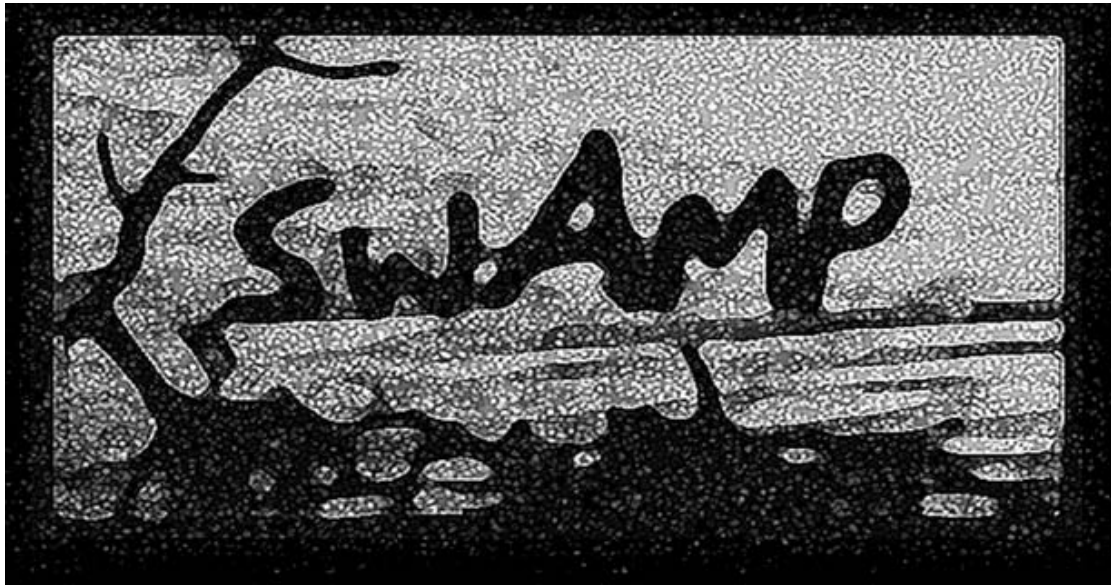


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Issue #5

## Cordon

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She hadn't seen him since they'd started exchanging erotic emails. And erotic text messages. And erotic fiction. And shared telephone calls with far too many double entendres. It was pure farce to think dinner could be painless. Technology had aided them to whip and bite and suck and fight and hit and kiss and stroke and grope each other in fantasies they'd readily shared. As though that were *normal* behaviour for platonic friends. She stopped questioning how things had progressed to that stage several months prior. But progressed they had. And now, presumably, they were supposed to archive it all. Given his suggestion of the restaurant rather than her hotel, evidently she was expected to eat linguini with him as though nothing had happened. Talk about 'the academy' as though either of them really cared for it. Pretend that significant others and the sea or two that separated them were non-issues. Break bread and drink coffee and continue on as though things weren't markedly different from the last time she saw him, nearly six months prior. A time when she was positive her sentiments remained unreciprocated. A time when she was able to convince herself that every hint that a normal person might have construed as flirting was in fact pure projection. She ran her finger down through the condensation on her water glass.

As she spotted him through the restaurant window, all she could think about was Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*. There were only two memorable things about the film. The first was a scene towards the end where a clingy, insane blonde was giving a sombre, semiconscious handjob to a model oil rig. The second was Sirk's use of colour. A man and a woman meet at the beginning of the film: both are dressed in green. Apparently a visual clue that they'd couple. Which of course they did. And of course, he arrived at the restaurant wearing a green shirt. Not the same green as hers,

but green nonetheless. She might have brushed it aside except that they were both wearing *Marc's* shirts, purchased from the same store in Melbourne. Completely different cuts: hers was military with silver buttons and rivets and pockets and buckles. His was plain with clean lines and an over-sized collar. Elvis-style. She picked non-existent lint from her skirt. Sirk and colour and shirt manufacturers and oil wells. As though she could trick herself out of dwelling on just how weird her world would become in ten seconds. In nine seconds. Eight...

'Hello.'

'Hello.' She stood up and they engaged in an awkward greeting that had his lips land somewhere between her cheek and her mouth, combined with a fumbled attempt at a handhold/forearm grab.

He stood behind his chair, drumming his fingers on the back of it, making no attempt to sit. 'I only suggested here,' he said slowly, deliberately, making steady eye contact with her, 'because I didn't want to be presumptuous about how things would end up.' His voice had a gentle sing-song quality. She was in America so thought of Paul Simon. In fact, his Australian accent was no less distinct than hers.

She twisted her lips to the side. 'So this,' she gestured vacantly, 'was merely a ruse to make you seem like a gentleman?'

His continued staring cajoled her to fold her arms. 'You know I'm not much of a gentleman.'

'I know you're not much of a gentleman, Tom.'

He did a sexy head tilt towards the door, enamoring her.

His hands were pushed into the pockets of his dark jeans. 'I'm going to hug you,' he said casually, when they were out on the footpath. She smiled. It felt like a very, very long time ago when he first said that to her. Ten months back. Elizabeth Street in Melbourne. It was late, midnight, maybe later. So cold he'd asked to borrow her lipbalm. They were outside the old YWCA building which had been covered in scaffolding. And the exact same reply entered her head: why are you *warning* me?

'So what are you getting all neurotic about now?' he asked, his arms tightly around her. He was perfectly right, of course. She was squeezing him back while busily devising a list of things that she would never have told him – ever – had she thought they might one day be in this situation. One. The time when she was in David Jones for a bra fitting and was told that she had very small breasts and very strange ribs. Two. That she runs. It could only lead him to erroneous assumptions about her body. Three. Anything about any sex she'd ever had with anyone else: it seemed a little filthy suddenly. Four. Any and all conversations about orgasms: it placed them both under too much pressure. Five. That she was sentimental. *Far* too sentimental, and in that embrace, ever having told him so seemed definitely stupid. She loosened her grip slightly.

Her chin was pressed into his shoulder. 'I'm just going through a list of things I wish I'd never told you about myself.'

He unraveled his arms. 'I've got one of those.'

'You should,' she laughed and was compelled to briefly touch his face. 'I wish you hadn't told me you liked cats. I wish I didn't know you had a cat *screensaver*. I wish you hadn't told me you ever did *aerobics*.' She thought this was all tremendously funny and even his dejected expression didn't temper her laughter. 'I wish I didn't know you used to wear *eye make-up*, I—'

'Okay, okay,' he interjected with his exaggerated self-deprecation. Something she had fallen for before any of his other quirks. 'Three things that weren't on my original list.'

She'd made a decision on the flight over to be less harsh on herself. Less rules, less judgment, less pressure. And no rehearsals. This of course meant that she had no ice-breaker planned for the moment when they were in her hotel room and the silence turned toxic. She anticipated that a lack of material would leave her to focus on *not* pacing and on *not* folding her arms. In fact, she didn't feel inclined to do either, which made her realise that she no longer found him intimidating. This was surprising given that his 'problematic air' was always the first thing that entered her head when she thought of him. And at that moment, she abruptly stopped caring about all the things she wished she hadn't told him. Suddenly there was a long list of things he really needed to know already. One. That she's really not as high maintenance as her shampoo collection might imply. Two. That she can cook, she doesn't, but has the ability, despite her hyperbole. Three. That she's not quite the misanthrope she makes out. Four. That she's not totally opposed to sunlight. Five. She most definitely should have told him that she found him beautiful. Being alone in a hotel room with him, it felt hideous that she hadn't. Six. That of all his quirks, she likes nothing more than his 'baby steps' approach to being devious and decadent and debauchorous with her. It was only 'bottom' until he ascertained she was okay with 'arse'. It was only 'breasts' until *she* used 'boobs'. She'd loved that from the very first time he sent her a message about thoughts he'd had on her 'in the sack'. The one text message which irrevocably changed their friendship forever.

He was sitting on the end of the bed, his knees slightly spread. She was standing, leaning back against the wall opposite. He edged forward ever so slightly. 'I'm going to hug you,' he said in his silly half-whispering, half-laughing voice. He made no attempt to move and they laughed. And it was instinctual: she just walked over to the bed and let her hands motion to his face.

'You're okay?' he asked. She smirked.

Over the past six months, she'd thought often of his last day in Melbourne. The same set of images played over and over again, as though if she'd only managed to properly charm him with the right anecdote, worn the right piece of jewellery, twirled her hair that little bit more, that he'd never have moved to Los Angeles. She often pictures herself on that afternoon, sitting on the edge of his desk, using her teeth to tear off pieces of masking tape for him to seal his boxes. She remembers cutting the pieces

idiotically small so that the routine of touching him while handing over the tape would be repeated over and over. She often thinks about helping him unpin the photographs on the corkboard above his desk. Two or three were stills of a television screen showing the final scores of a soccer match. The others were the kind of snaps everyone has, hollow photos of friends grouped together in backyards, smiling as though they hadn't just eaten an undercooked sausage and feared salmonella; grinning as though they didn't know Barry (far left) was cheating on Jane (third in from the right) with Tina (crouched down front). There's Bob, the broadest smile of all, quietly harbouring an all-encompassing death wish. One of the photos however, the only shot that Tom appeared in with his wife, Mary, showed five people in a row, not dissimilar to a police line-up. Tom stood on the far left, Mary on the far right, two balding men and an adolescent girl in the middle. It wasn't the first time she'd seen Mary: she'd Google-d her eighteen months prior when she first found out her name. It wasn't about jealousy – her feminist politics would never allow her the indulgence of female rivalry – nevertheless it was important to have someone to picture, someone to *blame*, during spates of self-loathing. And it was somehow satisfyingly masochistic to be able to picture the woman he was going home to. The woman he wasn't going to leave. The woman he'd *chosen*. Holding that photo that afternoon, she wasn't thinking about Mary's over-plucked eyebrows or her utilitarian haircut – no, she didn't even acknowledge their obvious similarities: the long dark hair, dark eyes and pale skin. Instead, she focused completely on the three people standing between her and Tom. Somehow, the sheer number of *other* bodies, of other *lives* between them, reflected just how wretched their relationship was. And she'd held onto that thought for six months.

He stirred just enough for his arm to roll off her back. That simple loss of contact woke her. A crack of smog-filtered sunlight seeped in through the gap in the curtains, zillions of dust particles illuminated. Lying next to her was a man she'd spent two years pining for, and yet her only thought was of the photo of Mary from his office. In the photo, Tom's arms had been folded, his hands positioned stiffly in his armpits. The gesture was absolutely meaningless and yet came to mean absolutely everything to her.

'You're going to leave me,' he said, groggily, reaching for her hand. She knitted her fingers together on her stomach. The website was right: the hotel *was* quiet. *Too* quiet. She needed music but knew whichever song she heard next would be poisoned for eternity.

'Eventually,' she said, staring up at the yellowed ceiling rose. 'I do live in another country after all, darling.' They'd slept most of the night entwined, but now that his arm had moved and a cold valley had formed between them their distance was unforgivable. 'I need to go for a walk.'

'You're okay?' He propped himself up on his arms. She couldn't remember ever seeing him without his glasses. The image was disorienting.

'I just want to revel in a little LA air.'

He leaned down to kiss her but she thwarted him and squeezed his bottom lip. He narrowed his eyes slightly and she conceded and kissed him simply because it was

easy. *Easier*. When his office in Melbourne had been packed up, when all that was left to do was to stare at each other awkwardly and acknowledge that the much-discussed end had come, he pointed to a coffee cup on his shelf.

'I should return this,' he'd said, licking his finger and using his saliva to clean the bottom of the cup. It was erotic horror in the same way that a pubic hair stuck in your teeth was, but that filthy gesture cemented an idea she'd courted from the second he'd accepted the American job offer: she'd never forgive him for any of it. She'd be old and arthritic with a worrying weakness for those Werther's lollies, and yet she'd still bitterly hate him for all of it.

'I want you to come back,' he said, doing his head tilt thing which didn't seem so sexy that morning. 'Afterall, LA has *very* little else to offer.' He wriggled his legs under the white sheet and grinned lasciviously.

Truth be told, she'd always hated Los Angeles. Most of all she hated that no matter where you were, everything seemed beyond walking distance. She'd booked herself into a hotel that promised all the 'excitement' of downtown Los Angeles: evidently her definition of excitement differed from management. A gallery was apparently close by, and that morning her identity was pinned on finding it. She left her watch on the bedside table, but assumed it was round-about midday. Where was everybody? For a city supposedly drowning in traffic, where were all the cars?

His wife had found out about Tom's indiscretions two months before her LA visit. Quickly her name came to be spat around their new American abode. Repeatedly. As it turned out, Mary had done her *own* Google-ing. Decided to find out all she could about her academic background, about her publications. Devoted time to reading her conference papers, poring over photographs posted on university websites. 'Hypercritical slut', 'faux-feminist whore', 'tenureless flat-chested harlot' and 'sneaky-eyed sycophantic lightweight' were just a few of her favoured insults. Tom divulged all of this to her in an email which he started with the sentence 'Like the crooked cop wanting to be caught, so too have I been'. Of course, wanting to be caught is apparently a very different thing from wanting to leave one's partner.

'Ma'am, get down! Get down!' Her sunglasses had been left with her watch, and she hadn't acclimatised to the glare. 'Get down!' She used her hand to shield her eyes from the sunlight and to hone in on the bellow. A heavysset policeman was crouched uncomfortably in the gutter across the road. He gestured wildly at her. For a moment she contemplated fleeing on foot: not because she'd anything to hide, rather, aching to be chased. She performed a lethargic trot across to him, joining dozens of people congregated outside the gallery, staring up at the building across the road.

'What the hell were you doing?' the policeman reprimanded. The road had been cordoned off with bright orange witches' hats; police cars book-ended three blocks. Across the road, probably the twentieth floor up, a television set was perched precariously on a window sill. She narrowed her eyes.

'Any second, man, any second!'

‘She won’t do it!’ someone dismissed, ‘she don’t have it in her’. Two seconds later and the television set fell from the window, crashing heavily onto the road. The crowd whooped and pumped their fists.

‘Some firecracker this one. Booya!’

‘Crazy like fox, man. Like a *fox!*’

She touched the elbow of the woman next to her. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Eyes open, girl. Eyes open!’ The woman’s own eyes never left the building.

A minute or two later, a woman appeared in the window. It was impossible to see her face given the distance and glare, but she had dark hair and her arm poked out of the window, something unidentifiable dangling from her hand.

‘It’s a baby!’

‘Holy mother of monkey!’

Moments later, a knife appeared in the woman’s right hand and was shaken out into the warm air. For a brief moment, complete silence fell over the crowd.

‘Someone done this one wrong. *Man!*’

‘She just wanna make the six o’clock.’

‘That no baby: ain’t never been a baby blowing in the wind like that.’

‘It’s a baby, Lord almighty, it’s a baby.’

The knife was plunged into the swinging mass, and both objects were hurtled from the window. A collective gasp inhaled much of the downtown pollution.

‘Just a doll, folks, just a doll,’ said the policeman, exhibiting a slight lament and plodding back to his observation point in the gutter. Audience disappointment was palpable, and a good quarter of the crowd dispersed. As attention waned, other objects shot out in rapid succession: items of clothing, a set of stereo speakers, shoes, a ball, eventually an oversized plush elephant which solicited a boisterous roar. The quality of the projectiles quickly faded however, with only a couple of pillows and then a blanket to follow. And then nothing. The last people left the scene, and eventually a man appeared in the window and drew the curtains.

Three-quarters of an hour had passed, and even the crouched policeman had departed. The cordon had been removed, the police cars had gone and the street was once again a sea of honking and exhaust fumes. Her own eyes never left the building.

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