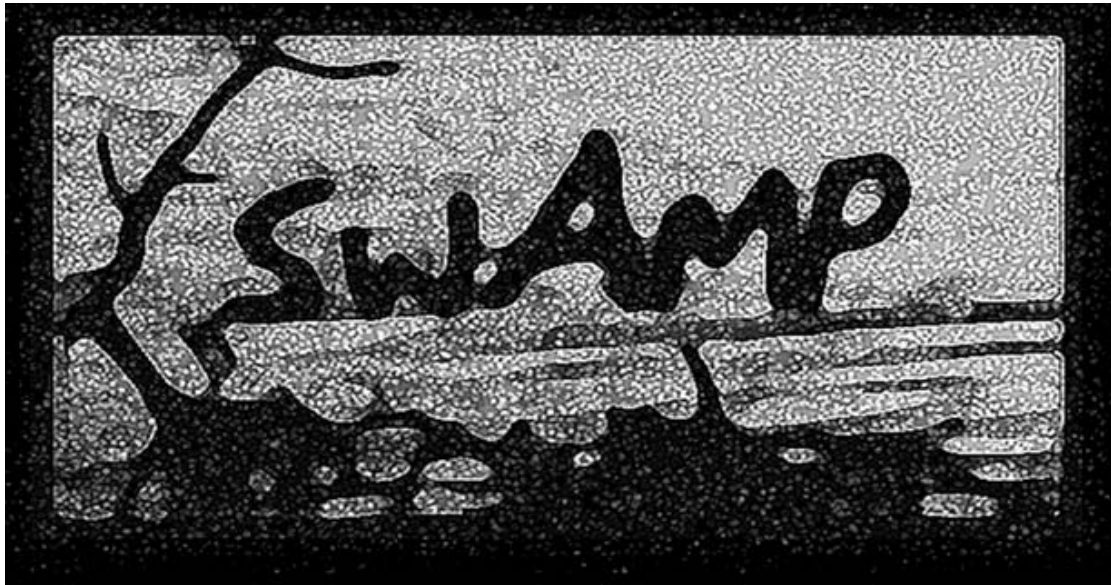


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Prerogative

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When it comes to the big stuff, the life changing stuff, mirrors are always there. Forget photos and videos on phones, forget rambling journal entries. Nothing captures that moment at the mirror when everything changes at a glance. All those rites of passage like my first pimple and first shave and the first time a girl sucked my throat a little too hard. My first fucking *ear* hair! Straight to the mirror. The third time you and I slept together. That wretched bed and breakfast place your mother recommended. Every conceivable surface covered with a God-awful floral fabric; after ten minutes I could *smell* fucking roses. Forty-seven pillows were hurled off the bed and we had slow, sexy sex and afterwards tried to impress each other with witty repartee. While circling two fingertips around my nipple, you told me about losing your virginity to a Peruvian osteopath. With a grin, while twisting tufts of your pubic hair, I asked whereabouts Peruvia was. I told you about the second time I masturbated to ejaculation as a kid. Admitted that I did it front of the mirror; spontaneously decided that your reaction would determine our future. You smirked first and then a smile lit up your face. Everyone gets your half-arsed smiles but the genuine ones are rare. *Exceptional*. And suddenly you became serious. You lowered your head slightly, lay an almost maternal hand on my cheek. In slow-motion you moistened your lips and said, “That’s what the psychologists call a *perversion*, baby.” I moved my mouth to your left nipple and suckled agreement with the shrinks. Eventually you shook me away, giggling, and lay still, supinely, staring up at the dusty chandelier. “I’ve done it too,” you said. I narrowed my eyes. “The masturbation in front of the mirror thing,” you clarified, looking at me through the corner of your eye. I nodded, bemused, “Yeah, I got that,” I said, falling for you. I want to say it was because you stopped calling me baby. But you stopped precisely when I deserved it. I want to say it’s

because I can't remember when you last played with my nipples. But it was a Tuesday morning, one fortnight ago. My balls and nipples together. As we discussed my Dad's root canal. And I want to say I've forgotten the texture of your pubic hair, but those coarse curls don't get forgotten.

I can't count the times you've claimed that there are only two types of men: men who've paid for sex and men who haven't. Just two types! Over endless plates of bread and olive oil, over and over again you'd present this theory to tables of people who, strangely, found it profound. And then you'd touch me. A gentle caress of my face, a fond squeeze of my thigh. I'd sit there and be your living and breathing testimony to the *good men*. The ones who *don't* abuse women. The ones who know that every time a man pays for a blow job baby Jesus cries. And I'd smile and agree because by then, truth be told, I'd long been convinced that you'd washed my sins away. You, with your feminist politics. You, with a love for me that was thorough and unjustified and almost unconditional. I have paid for sex, Claire. I was twenty-five. Before you, but still, I did. And I can't blame post-season football revelry or being in a sweaty Asian city and I can't blame substance abuse. I can't even blame some existential fucking crisis where warm flesh would have made a scrap of difference. I just wanted to pay for sex. I. Just. Wanted. Sex. That. Cost. Sex that was expensive. Sex paid for with money I couldn't spare. Not really the point of this story. Anyway, I was driving home from that crass Roman-themed brothel in a suburb I'd never been to and won't return to and I'd worn a condom but knew I had a disease. Not something treatable with cream or pills or an injection. No, something undiscovered by scientists. Something new and awful and debilitating that would end up being named after me. The penis-deforming equivalent of Lou Gehrig's disease. Everything felt too hot down there. Feverish. I had this vision of pus-filled welts and itchiness and I pulled into a petrol station because the evidence needed inspection. The restroom was blue-lit but just bright enough to show that everything appeared normal enough. Strangely. Of course I knew the cysts needed time to fill. I zipped, splashed metallic-tasting water on my face and looked up into the mirror above the sink. Three, four, probably five seconds past until I realised there wasn't a mirror there. Just tiles and a hole where one might have once hung. And I stared at the tiles. I want to say you created a mood where I couldn't tell you my secrets. That I had to pretend the prostitution bullshit never happened. To lie and to lie and to lie. But you made it so fucking easy to tell you *everything*. So much so, I felt embarrassed when I had nothing to reveal.

Mirrors. The fourth time you and I had sex was against a mirror. Attached to the back of the bathroom door at that bed and breakfast. Only I benefited, but I was more interested in your throat then. And your left breast. There was a mirror involved the first time I slept with Kate. Maybe a little more relevant to this story. One thing nobody ever mentions about cheating is the buzz found in finding places to fuck. It's like you're fifteen and still living with your folks and you don't have your license and you don't have any money for a hotel. Only in this case I'm forty-two with a partner who hasn't expressed interest in me bringing home other women and I didn't want to be that guy who checks into a hotel for an hour. And you had the car and Kate was living with that fat fuckwit philosopher. So we went to Andrew's. He handed me the key the night before. No grin. No wink wink, nudge nudge. No rubbing of my scalp. Zero eye contact and some bureaucratic bullshit about locking up properly when I *finished*. When I finished. He may as well have said when I'd *ejaculated*. And had I

not been running on adrenalin since meeting her, had blood not been coursing around my ears and my dick and my heart with fierce, distracting vengeance, I might have realised he was quite clearly uncomfortable with the arrangement. Thought that I was a prick. But I didn't. I was permanently on the precipice of an erection and his passive aggressive shit meant nothing. I want to say that she made me feel something. Made me feel young, sexy, *wanted*. But she didn't. Not once. Sleep with a woman seventeen years younger and you feel envious of how much more time she has. Envious that she doesn't have stray grey pubic hairs. And God how she made me feel like she was acquiescing to the sex! No matter how taut the thighs or perky the boobs, nothing dilutes a favour fuck.

I hadn't been to Andrew's new place and quickly, regrettably, discovered he had an enormous mirror hung behind the bed head. Huge. With a big gilt frame. Biggest mirror I'd ever seen. And while I'd explained that it was my brother's place, Kate stared at it, stared at herself in that mirror, at me, and I could see a light go on for her. That was the moment she identified the cliché. Framed. *Before* we'd fucked. And that was the pause we needed to make the right decision. To cease and desist and go back to campus and return to flirting and loaded banter and cryptic smiles. But two PhDs between us and not an ounce of sense and an oversupply of anomie. I leaned in and kissed her. She pulled back and made a comment about the mirror. Said she found it disconcerting. *Distracting*. While undoing the buttons of her shirt, I offered to cover it up – with what, I'd no idea – but she said no, that it didn't matter. It mattered. Of course it mattered. But I kneaded her small breasts through her bra like it didn't. No passion, no spark, just the sadness of two people who had spent months pining for a moment that was better as fantasy. No matter how hard I was and no matter how much I tried to convince myself that she was panting, she clearly knew that I was the predatory professor that the university's Drawing The Line manual warned about. On page twelve. Twenty four. In the appendix. Maybe it'd have been sexy if I were a rock star or an outlaw biker helping her shake off the shackles of... but I was a tweed coat short of a stereotype and the whole thing was shameful. There's one time I want shame during sex. You're standing over me on the bed. Hands on your wide hips, you're calling me a pervert, a deviant, telling me what I have to do to you. For you. For how long. With how many strokes. Being with a girl in her 20s who knew the depth of my unoriginality – saw it all in that fucking gigantic mirror – it was shame of the unpalatable kind. I want to say she allowed me to be as filthy and debauched as my heart desired. *You* allowed that. She offered me the missionary position with her bra on.

She and I went to that conference a few weeks later. There really was a conference, by the way. I'm not completely full of shit. I didn't get to any other paper but hers, but there was a conference. There was a conference and there was a mirrored corridor leading to our hotel room. And every time we'd walk up or down that corridor our steps were laboured. There's that Masaccio painting you like where Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden. And every time we were in that corridor I thought of that painting. I pictured her and I naked, ravaged, horrified. In the room things were minimally better, but in that corridor images of us were projected infinite times and it was a new kind of ghastly. I want to say that I was angry with you. That I felt some kind of domestic incarceration. That you trapped me into a routine of weekend organic markets and eggy, sourdoughy café breakfasts. But we never ever had routine: you hated the word and I adored that.

I first suspected you might have known about her a week or so ago. You were standing at the basin in the bathroom. For reasons I still don't understand, that morning my balls felt big enough to confront you.

"You okay?" I asked, leaning against the door frame.

"That's a strange question," you said with a hollow tone I didn't recognise. Your attention was focussed on sliding pins into your hair. I'd never noticed all the times you'd called me baby over the last twelve years. I ceaselessly replay the times you didn't.

"Strange?" I echoed, tempting fate.

You were quiet for a minute and slowly pushed in three or four more pins. "Not this morning," you eventually said. "I'm not doing this this morning."

And looking at the reflection of your tightened lips and your tightly wound hair and your tight posture and I knew that it was a breakup you weren't doing. At least not at seven-forty on a Thursday morning. And I fucked Kate that afternoon. She and the fat philosopher had broken up two days prior freeing up her unmade bed in her tiny apartment that smelt like shoe polish and detergent. Straight afterwards, she was in her bathroom, untangling her hair. I sat on the toilet seat behind her, watching. Do you remember when that was *our* daily ritual? For the first few years I'd sit on the toilet seat and watch you put on your make-up. For a good two years we even had a CD player in there and I'd play DJ. We'd talk about everything and nothing and there was... Anyway. So I was sitting on Kate's toilet, watching her comb her hair. "This is going to have to stop," I said, saying those clichéd words that men have been saying to younger women ever since we started messing with their heads in Bedrock. Not that you'd care, but she'd never had a single orgasm with me. Not once. She didn't even fake one. Which, in fact, I kind of liked. Anyway. Not relevant to this story. She stopped combing her hair and stared into the mirror. "I know," she said, softly. Her eyes moved to the left slightly to look at me, and then she looked away. "I know," she repeated, and we both watched her face collapse. "Don't stand up," she said, through clenched teeth, pre-empting an embrace I wasn't going to give. I wanted to stand, I wanted to run, but I absolutely didn't want to hold her. And while she cried, so hard her tiny body shuddered, she started pinning her hair up, hank by hank and I sat there, impotently, watching. You. Kate. My mother. *Your* mother. Fiona before you. Danielle. Fiona. Ellen. Jean. My sister. I have made every woman I've ever known cry. It wasn't an entirely shameful thought but intriguing. I want to say something about your politics. That your feminism was militant and spiteful and oppressive. But I don't remember ever thinking that. I want to say you emasculated me but the first image I have is lying with you post-coital, exhausted. Lying there, thinking that you were all mine, *telling* you that you were all mine. You'd rest your head on my shoulder and with a sleepy, sated smile tell me what a perfect hypocrite you were.

Yesterday evening I was sitting on our toilet. An evening like all others: reading the TV guide and contemplating lofty things like angst and fear and death and wondering what the symptoms of bowel cancer were. You opened the bathroom door without knocking.

“Claire –” I began to reprimand, until I saw your face. *Until I saw your face.* Because at that exact moment I’d realised that you’d never been angry with me before. Not *really* angry. You’ve been upset – all those times where I opened my mouth without thinking and called your sister an uppity bitch or your mum a racist or when I accidentally-deliberately put your Kate Bush CDs in with the hard waste collection – but this was rage. Violent rage. Quite possibly *homicidal* rage if I dared breathe.

“I’m going to say this first,” you said, an unfamiliar force and composure in your voice. “You don’t get to do this to me.” And I only just started to process the thought – process the idea of having done something to you – when you raised your arm. I sat there thinking you’d hold a knife that way. Not that there was a knife. No. Your hand was just coiled into a fist. Just. And it just came down on my face like a mallet. Smashed down across my cheek bone, down onto my nose.

A guy gets hit and he becomes a child again. Wants to be nursed and mollycoddled and soothed. Wants a soft, warm hand on his forehead smoothing over his skin, wants someone to tell him that everything will be fine, that he’s still the greatest. That he’s still so so *so* fucking loveable. So I went to see Kate. I wonder if a woman exists who could turn away a bruised and bleeding man from her door; no matter how much she hates him.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” she asked, which were the first words she’d spoken since I arrived. Her legs were crossed, her arms folded, and even if I were inclined, there wasn’t going to be any leg parting.

“Once I say it out loud...” My head dropped down against the top of her couch and I stared at the ceiling. God, I missed you. I was sitting in the living room of a girl I’d fucked a handful of uncomfortable times, wounds you’d given me pulsated and all I wanted was to have you to tell me everything would be fine. For you to hold me and make everything else go away.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” she said. And of course I wanted to say that I’d never wanted *anything* from her. I wanted to say that I wanted to be left alone. That I wished she’d told me to fuck off the first time I made her a mix CD. But I just sat there, petulantly, wondering where you were. And what you leaving your laptop on the kitchen table might have meant.

“I shouldn’t have come here,” I said, grimacing as my neck started to seize.

“This will be the last time,” she said, quietly.

I want to say that she was beautiful. A muse. That she inspired ideas and creativity and vigour. That she made me want to get my guitar out of the shed. To pen lyrics in the margins of the newspaper. Beautiful, but she didn’t fall out of a Botticelli painting.

I open up your make up case. And if I weren’t missing you yesterday, good God how smelling this stuff makes me ache for you. I don’t even know what I’m smelling – probably carcinogens and colourings –but it’s you. It’s the smell of your chin and your cheek and... What would you use to cover this? All I want is to sit on our toilet.

I want you standing between my legs. I want your arms draped over my shoulders. I want your lips on my scalp. I want you tending to my pain. I want you calling me baby, baby, baby and apologising a thousand different ways. Most non-verbal. I pull out a tiny pink jar with 'Erase Paste' on the lid. And of course, seriously, what am I going to do here? Slather it on like some kind of fuck-face clown? How long does it take to work? *Where are you?* I want to be angry that you exposed me. But you're smarter than me. I want to say that I wanted you to find out. But I never thought ahead that far. I want to say I forgive you. But I don't.

Another dinner party staple you're fond of is your righteousness about domestic violence. That if a man ever lay a hand on you in anger, you'd leave. In all these years, you've never asked me what *I'd* do. Is such arrogance a woman's prerogative? The bruises are a greeny black colour and no quantity of Erase Paste will help. What do I do the first time a colleague asks whether I got roughed up over the weekend? Asks if I fucked around on the missus? Do I nod? Laugh it off? Raise my hand? Bullshit seven-o'clock current affairs shows love stories about disciplining kids. Wooden spoon: utensil or weapon? And I was never going to hit the kids I was never going to have. And I certainly wasn't going to hit a woman. Until I got hit. And then I hit her back. And I want to say I fucked up. I want to say I fucked up, Claire. I fucked up.

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