

Summer Fellowship 2014 Final Report

This summer I wrote a short piece of fiction called ‘Radio Silence’ that aimed to investigate the question: “When is transgression empowering.” Radio Silence is a melancholic dystopian story that uses science fiction to look at themes of sexuality, gender, and class. During the fellowship I read speculative fiction and critical theory in order to invigorate my own work.

Radio Silence focuses on the dynamics that arise when a new gadget is invented, referred to as a ‘tick,’ that displays the sexuality of the wearer on their wrist. This element allowed me to explore how representation changes and limits reality. I was also keen to show how societal dynamics of oppression can often be mirrored in the more intimate dynamics at play within relationships. For this reason, much of the story focuses on the failing partnership between the two main characters, Lux and Radio.

Transgression means to push beyond or break the boundaries of something. Transgression could mean breaking a law or subverting a social norm. When laws or norms are oppressive, transgression can be used as an empowering tool for both individual and societal change; it can suggest a new alternative to old ways of thinking. Radio Silence attempts to look at modes of transgression as tools of empowerment but I would like to think that it could be itself transgressive, and hopefully, therefore, affording an alternative light in which to look at elements of society that may seem common place to us.

This draft of Radio Silence will certainly not be the same one that I will turn in for my keystone, but I am proud to be able to submit the first finished incarnation of what I am sure will continue to be a work in progress. I am overwhelmingly thankful to the Fellowship committee for giving me this opportunity, and to my host faculty, Curt and John, for their support, guidance, and patience.

RADIO SILENCE



When Lux first started having sex she would always try to cry afterward. She wasn't sure at what point it had stopped, (whether she had made the conscious decision to quit doing it, or if she had simply forgotten about it somewhere along the way), but she could clearly remember laying in the darkness next to those first few early partners, trying very hard to squeeze out some tears. Sometimes she would force herself to silently yawn or pinch herself until her eyes watered and then she would rub her face against her partner's skin to signal her contrived distress. Other times, unable to coax out any real moisture she would just sniffle a little, rather pathetically, and make small, sad whimpers. It embarrassed her terribly to think about it now, but she would wonder from time to time whether these forced displays of upset had permanently colored her post-coitus mood from then on. Although she would not, and would never, allow herself to cry after sex anymore, she was always overcome with a still, somber feeling of hopeless melancholy.

Lux reached above her head from where she lay on her back on the open sea of her shared bed and slammed the window with the palm of her hand. The window burst open and the cool sweetness of the summer night wafted into the sweltering bedroom which smelled lurid and pungent. Radio rolled over in his sleep. Nightlight from the moon and the stars and the lights of the city gleamed against Lux's milk white hair. Rain started lightly tip-tapping outside.

Lux admired Radio while he slept. She had decided long ago that he had the most perfect face. Radio's greasy black hair, which was shaved close to his head around the sides, and unevenly overgrown on top, spread around his head across his pillow like a catholic saint;

forming a dark halo. The rain was getting louder, the tip-tapping growing into a steady drumming. Lux rolled onto her stomach and examined her tick-band. It was black, slim and sleek. Its design was surely aimed at being as unobtrusive as possible but it was so shiny and new and utilitarian that Lux felt certain that it would stick out obviously in contrast to her normal uniform of raggedy, bright-colored clothing. Lux ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the wrist band and then traced the dim neon-green dashes that flashed across the small square display. Lux looked over at Radio's matching tick-band which also flashed small dashes into the darkness. Lux liked to watch Radio sleep. It was the only time his face took on such a look of utter serenity, and it comforted her that she could visit with this Radio every night.

Lux could hear the water rushing down the street now and the drops that hit the window were violent, quaking the thin glass with the force its contact. As she watched the light from her tick-display flash dim-mossy shadows onto the ceiling she concentrated very hard on the gloomy memory of her forced crying.

It hadn't been something she planned to do in the beginning. Lux knew that she had started this odd tradition the first time she had sex. She had been very nervous throughout, and her nervousness grew into panic when she realized that it was over and she hadn't orgasmed. Afraid that if she didn't make a strong show of emotionality her partner would know and be displeased she had worked herself up into a positively frenzied crisis of sobbing. She would never know whether this roués had fooled anyone, but she congratulated herself on an unexpected side effect of the tears. It had ensured in every case that she would receive very earnest comfort. It turned out that Lux loved the feeling of comfort from a lover more than any other feeling that she had ever been able to extract from another person. She had never told Radio about these episodes. Lux didn't feel the need to tell Radio anything that might cast a

herself in a less-than-rose-colored light. At some point Lux had dropped the crying-act, perhaps because she came to find it dishonest or perhaps because she started to put more value in seeming self-sufficient than in lapping up the heady feeling of comfort. She wondered what Radio would do if she was to cry with him like this.

Lux sighed at the ceiling as rain pummeled the street and beat at the window. Recently she had come to be able to admit that her and Radio were not doing well. It had taken her several weeks to come to terms with the fact that this was more than a bad mood, or a rough patch. Radio had been permanently wound up tight lately and snapped easily. At first Lux had tried to reason with him, logically lay out the pieces to his problems and criticisms and explain her side of the riddle. But it wasn't much use. Radio didn't like her pushing back at him for the things he said and any kind of defiance from Lux quickly became the breeding grounds to a fight. Lux had started taking to Radio's anger like a storm to be weathered. Lux was horribly confused by the way that Radio acted. His furious outbursts were so unlike him that Lux had come to the conclusion that he was going through something and that she needed to simply give him the space to grow out of it, rather than try to force him to recognize his every transgression as unpleasant for her. Lux came to whispering and walking on eggshells. She would choose the dull ache of compliance over dispute.

Thunder cracked and water attacked the outside as Lux fell asleep. That night she dreamed that she was alone on a rowboat full of tick-bands, frantically scooping water out of the boat with cupped- hands as she sank into the sea.



Lux rubbed her ankles together nervously in the lobby of the clinic, her sweaty hands making small dark marks on the paperwork she gripped. Radio came out of the door of the

adjoining room rubbing his shoulder tenderly. Lux tried to give him a reassuring smile, but it stretched awkwardly across her face. Radio grimaced and sat down. The nurse popped her head into the waiting room and gestured toward Lux. Lux took a long jagged breath in.

“It’s not so bad.” Radio murmured, squeezing Lux’s knee. Lux got up slowly and went into the other room. It was small and bright and too clean. It smelled like rubbing alcohol. Lux’s head was spinning. The nurse gestured for Lux to sit down on what looked like a dentist’s chair and she gingerly took a seat. The nurse had her back to Lux and was fiddling with instruments and salves on the counter.

“Alright,” The nurse said, turning to Lux, holding a tool that resembled a tattoo gun. “Implementation stings a little but once it’s healed you shouldn’t notice your tick at all. Can you pull down your sleeve, honey?” Lux pulled the sleeve of her shirt down over her shoulder so that the bare skin of her back was showing.

“Alright, be a big girl for me and take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. On your breath out I’ll count to three and on three I’ll implant the tick right under the skin on the back of your shoulder, okay?”

Lux nodded, her ears growing hot. She took a deep breath in, taking her time, as the nurse moved the tool to the back of her shoulder and let the head rest on Lux’s skin. Lux breathed out slowly but her breath was choked away from her on the count of two when the nurse shot what felt like a jagged pebble under her skin. The nurse swabbed her wound with alcohol and put a bandage over it.

“It will take a few weeks to heal properly but it should stop stinging after the first couple days. If irritation grows or continues for too long, come back in and let us check on it. In the meantime, don’t use any chemicals on your skin and try not to be too rough with it.” Lux’s face

was hot and her shoulder was burning. Her entire arm was numb and she felt like she couldn't turn her neck.

“Here's the band.” The nurse plucked a small black wristband off of the counter and snapped it onto Lux's wrist. Digitalized green dashes flickered on the small computer display of the watch. “The number will settle soon: the tick just needs some time to calibrate. Once the number has settled it will probably stay on one number, but if it flickers back and forth or even switches numbers for long amounts of time, don't worry about it too much, it's perfectly normal.” Lux nodded slowly, her head spinning. The nurse handed Lux a pamphlet that read ‘Living with Your Tick’ in bold across the front.

“This should have all of the information you need about the tick. Zero means that you can only experience heterosexual desire, four means you can only experience homosexual desire, and numbers in between mean that you can experience some of both. Two is right in the middle of course, equal opportunities. A three would mean you can experience desire some of both but you are leaning more toward homosexual desire. Does that make sense? Great. Thank you for participating in this survey and you can pick up your payment at the front desk.” The nurse smiled at Lux and gestured towards the door. Lux wobbled out of the room and back into the lobby where Radio was signing forms at the front desk. Lux wanted to touch her tick but was afraid of hurting it, so instead she rubbed her fingers together nervously and walked over to Radio.

Lux and Radio finished signing forms, collected their compensation and headed out the door.



Lux sat in the large porcelain bowl of the sink painting pointed black curves onto her eyelids. She held her right elbow in her left hand and used her knees to prop herself up against the mirror. Lux exhaled slowly, trying to blow her breath downward so that she wouldn't fog up the mirror. Finished, Lux crawled out of the sink to stand back and admire her handy-work. The girl in the mirror tilted her head from side to side, tossing her lion's mane of fried curls so that the longest tendrils danced around her waist and tickled the sliver of exposed skin below her belly-button where shirt didn't quite meet jean. Lux fingered the oily contents of a jar sitting on the counter top and ran it through her hair, coaxing up curls and smoothing out frizz.

Pleased, she scrambled into the bedroom. Radio lay on his stomach amidst a turbulent terrain of tossed sheets. Lux padded onto the bed and traced his shoulder with her nose. When Radio didn't stir, Lux wormed under the blankets and pulled him into her arms, nuzzling her face into his neck. "Wake up, wake up, wake up, little critter." Lux breathed into Radio's ear between delicate kisses and gentle nose rubs. Radio opened his eyes, which were what Lux considered the color of tundra, peered at Lux for a moment, and then closed them again. He rolled over, pulling Lux onto his chest and lay still. "Your face is fucked up."

Lux wasn't sure if she had heard him right but then she remembered her make-up and flung herself out of bed and back into the bathroom. "Fuck. Fuck." Lux's cat-eyes had smudged into black clouds. As she scrubbed down her face with soap and water she considered whether it was worth it to reapply it. Although Lux had collected an arsenal of make-up over the years she didn't usually possess the patience to use it.

Radio probably had matching black smudges all over his neck. Lux wondered if there was any way she could subtly wash off his neck without him noticing. She could try to lick it off.

Lux scrubbed at her face, irritated at herself, until her skin was sufficiently raw and red and smudge-free. She paused for a moment and considered whether it was worth trying again. After weighing the options, she went back into the bedroom dejectedly, her penance for fucking it up so quickly. Radio was sitting on the edge of the bed staring intently at his tick-band. Lux crept over onto the bed and tentatively leaned over his shoulder. She could sense the mad mood that was black-clouding around him and it made her chest tighten. The display on his band which just the night before had displayed flashing green dashes now displayed an unmoving green X. No flashing.

“What does that mean?” Radio didn’t answer and in the thick silence that deepened the longer her question hung in the air Lux pressed her lips together in a tight line and wished that she could reach into the previous moment and pull the question back into her mouth.

“It means asexual.” Radio looked out the large window on the head of their bed and then back to his band. “The nurse at the clinic mentioned it. She said she hadn’t heard of anyone reading like this yet.” Radio’s voice was unemotive.

Lux’s mind went blank. She tried to force herself through the relief of not being the cause of Radio’s bad mood fast enough to properly react. Nothing hit her. Lux tried to keep herself still but she was perched at an awkward angle and she wanted to shift her weight. Very slowly Lux leaned away from Radio in the same way that one might slowly back away an unexpected predator.

To Lux, Radio could be defined primarily by his unquenchable sexual appetite. It seemed more likely that the device was broken than that it could be offering some revelatory truth to the inner workings of Radio’s identity. Lux was about to suggest the possibility that the tick was malfunctioning but she stopped herself. She didn’t know if it would be worse to suggest that

Radio's device was broken, and possibly end up looking like she wasn't supportive of his Real-And-True-Biologically-Rubber-Stamped-Sexual-Orientation; or for her to betray Radio's personality by not questioning the tick's reading. Lux made a valiant attempt to loosen the line of her lips. "Do you feel asexual?"

"I don't really feel anything." In fact, what Radio meant by this was that he didn't feel asexual, wouldn't know what asexual would feel like if he did feel it, and most importantly, that he felt profoundly unchanged from the way he had felt the night before when his tick-band was still safely flashing dashes and he was assured in the truth of his own abundant sex drive. However, Lux took this to mean that while Radio might not know exactly asexuality felt like, he did *not* feel anything, including sexual, so yes, he felt the lack of feeling that signified asexuality. Although relieved that Radio seemed relatively calm about the whole thing, Lux still wasn't sure where to go from there; she just crouched on the bed awkwardly shifting her weight. Should she make him some congratulations you-don't-want-sex breakfast? She tried lamely to think of something cute or funny to say. Did he want her to comfort him? Did he want her to play with him, to talk with him, to offer solutions or advice? Lux felt confident that Radio did not want her advice.

Lux reached out to touch Radio's side but the movement felt forced the moment her hand made contact with his body. Under her hand, the stillness of his rigid side made her suddenly feel embarrassed, and she withdrew.

"Lil bear, you gotta get to work." Lux said catching sight of the time. Radio looked back at her, irritated. Fuck, she thought. She should have made him breakfast. Radio got up, pulled on a pair of jeans that were lying by the bed and scooped up his keys and wallet from where they sat on the window sill. When he turned back to Lux his face was softer.

“Love you baby,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “I’ll see you when I’m off?”

“Yeah” Lux broke into a shining smile that touched the edges of her eyes. Radio hustled out the door and Lux sat still on the bed listening to him walk down the hallway, open and close the front door, run down the four flights of stairs to the street and burst out of the front of the apartment building. When Lux had lost him to the noise of outside she lay down on the bed and let herself exhale a long jagged breath.



The carnival was only really accessible to the public through the subway. Some years back an earthquake took out a lot of the city, all of what lay between the park and downtown. The floodplains had never been a particularly prestigious area anyway so it took a whole slew of other natural disasters before the city planners finally started turning their eye to that lopsided wasteland. By then, it wouldn’t really have been worth anyone’s time to rebuild. The land was full of sinkholes and quick sand, muck and swamps. Not valuable property. Those who could afford it had already been pushed out into the suburbs on the other side of the city, planted new roots and gone on with their life. The folks who now populated the hills and gullies of the trashlands were homeless, poverty stricken vagrants. Slums had begun to spring up in the hills by the park, and as long as they didn’t creep in too close to the city, they no one minded too much.

Somehow the carnival had stuck around through it all, droughts and floods and sinkholes – the lot. The little amusement park (if you could even call it that, it didn’t have any thrill rides and what rides it did provide were hardly worth boasting about) sat right on the edge of a lake and was shut off from the useless-land by forbidding hills of rock and rubble. On the other side of the park from the fortress walls of jagged, mean looking dirt and rock was a vast, open lake. The lake was pretty sometimes but always eerily still, like a watery desert. It was too polluted for

recreational use. Sometimes the park employees would go wade into it after a hot day at work, but they always regretted it. A wade into that water would mean itching and rashes and strange infections. Aside from the odd vagrant coming down from the hills to roll through the park, no one ever walked into the park. Instead visitors would take the subway straight in.

Radio stood outside of a once brightly painted building whose color had been weather worn far beyond the point of pastel. It was a low roofed kind of deal with red tile on top and happy little windows that recalled images of sweet cottages in the woods. The midway was empty. There is something really creepy about an empty midway, Radio thought, looking around. It's unnerving to be in an empty place that is designed to be bustling with people. Right as Radio was considering whether he should go up and knock on the front door of what he was assuming was the main office, a woman flew past Radio from behind, up the steps to the door of the building, whipping it open and scrambling inside. Radio hadn't even heard her coming. He looked around; the rest of the park was lifeless. The late-morning sun was already cooking up the asphalt of the midway and little clumps of garbage rolled listlessly about on the ground. The woman reappeared at the door long enough to cast an enthusiastic and breathy "Hey there!" in Radio's direction before disappearing again. For a moment Radio wasn't sure she had even been talking to him until he heard her holler out "Come on in, don't be shy!" Radio sighed as he started painfully climbing the steps up into the little house.

Inside it was at least a little cooler. The woman had long red hair and pale freckled skin. She was wearing a tube top, tall seven inch pumps that it looked like she was struggling to stay atop, and giant silver hoop earrings that she was quickly unfastening and placing in a drawer.

“Late again,” she said with an overly friendly smile “Setting a bad example over here.” She kicked off her shoes and slipped on some flats before pulling a formless yellow T-shirt over her head with the park’s insignia in the corner.

“Alright then, Regina, right?”

Radio’s face was the still ice of tundra, the solitude of desert. No muscle twitched and no feather ruffled. “Actually, I go by Radio.”

The woman paused for a moment staring at him, blinking. She glanced down for a moment at a form in the middle of a desk by her side and maintained - throughout - the exact same expression of frozen warmth.

“Uh-okay. Well great. Radio. Can’t wait to have you on board. Let’s get you started right now, okay? And talking about on board we’ll just start you right off with the swinging ship, okay? Great.”

The woman, who introduced herself as Celeste, walked Radio around the park, pointing out various rides and excitedly explaining how to run each one. It turned out that most rides could be run by pressing the start button. Radio was vaguely disappointed. He had found it endlessly entertaining to tell people when he first filled out the ride operator application that he would be operating ‘heavy machinery.’ Although the joke was that this was that operating heavy machinery was diametrically opposed from anything that Radio had ever done before, he had started warming to the idea of blue collar work. Earning his keep through the life of the hard-livin’ heavy-machine-operating proletariat was romantic to him. However, the actual life of a carnie didn’t look much like this that at all. The machines were mostly pretty simple. The older rides were a little more complex. The really ancient ones that croaked and screamed their

indignation over not being put to rest had complicated controls that involved sets of brakes, different colored levers and various buttons.

“Radio’s different for a chosen name.” Celeste beamed as they strode towards the Ship. “You know, usually you’d go with Reg, or Gin or something. But it’s super hip. You know it’s kind of vintage. You don’t hear a lot of real-thing names anymore. And Radio, too, like, old-tech. Super hip.” Radio was disgruntled by Celeste’s usage of ‘hip’ like it was supposed to be an un-ironic compliment. He couldn’t remember the last time he had heard someone use the term ‘hip’ in this way. He wasn’t sure if he ever had. He wondered where Celeste was from.

“Alright, when you get to the park in the morning, you wait in the employee clock-in area for us, the foremen,” Celeste beamed, “to assign rides for the day. Then you grab your ticket box and go inspect the ride. There’s a checklist by the control panel. Once inspection is done you test-run it and then you can open your ride for the day. Sound good?” Radio nodded. “Great! Just go ahead and follow the instructions by the control panel and you can go ahead and open the ride up. If you’re nervous you can give it a couple test runs just to make sure you’ve got the hang of it. The park will be open in a half an hour or so, but you can keep the closed sign up on the ride until you feel comfortable. Make sure that everyone is sitting down during the ride and not sticking their arms or hands out anywhere. These kids scare me half to death sometimes with the stupid stuff they pull.” Celeste shook her hand a couple times, perhaps considering the morbid consequences of yester-year before snapping back to her face of friendly delight. “Alright, good luck!” As Radio watched Celeste bounce off down the midway, he could not help but ponder how utterly ridiculous it was that he had to work this silly job that would undoubtedly make him feel terrible so that he could afford to go to the silly school that definitely did make him feel terrible.

Working at the park turned out to be about as unromantic as Radio had guessed. It was much more of a customer service job than physical labor. Most of Radio's time was spent loading and unloading customers onto the Ship, telling little kids that they were too short to ride, and asking people to please remain seated while the ride was in progress. It was very peculiar to watch large metal machines throw a person's body around in order to stimulate pleasure for hours at a time.

The one upside to the park were the gaggles of strange women who were endlessly delighted by his tick-band. Radio had barely started the first run of the Ship when he was joined by a woman with very tan skin and bags under her eyes. The woman, who was thin and boney and whipped her wrists around when she spoke, intermittently cut into her own diatribe about the safety of park-rides in order to comment on Radio's X-band. Radio mostly ignored her while she attempted to engage him in some small talk about her children who were also boney and tan and riding the Ship. The woman continued talking, gesticulating with fevered vim. Radio imagined her gesticulations as grotesque sex-thrusts, her bony fingers penetrating flesh.

Radio was at one point in his life very selective about women. He had prided himself on his ability to pick the cream of the crop. This ethic had slowly been disintegrating, however, and not just because of the green X that followed him malevolently under every comforter, streetlight or fire escape window. Radio thought of himself as cold and aloof. Fantasies would often float through his head - not the sex, but simply the discarding of women. His cold goodbye. His utter antipathy.



There was no way to tell whether or not it was the first time that Lux's tick-display had switched, but it was the first time anyone had noticed. Three days after they had gotten their ticks

implanted, Lux and Radio were riding the subway home from the park when Radio, lackadaisically running his thumb in circles around Lux' wrist, looked down in time to see the green neon number change from two to four. Radio moved his hand away from Lux' wrist and after a few moments the display flickered back to two.

Radio had never heard of anyone's tick-displays changing. It had been less than a month since he had started hearing about them at all, and only one week since he had first seen one, but it seemed to Radio that if the numbers could change, out of the dozens of folks he knew who were racing to clinics all over the city to get them implanted, he would have heard of one that changed display-numbers. Lux was sleepily staring straight ahead and out the window of the subway. As she tilted her head to rest of Radio's shoulder her tick-display changed again. Radio shrugged down a little in his seat. He didn't like seeing Lux's tick flicker.

Lux laced her fingers through Radio's and closed her eyes. The train car rattled violently as it sped down shadowy alleys. Lux and Radio's tick-bands clicked together softly with the rattling. The bands were thin but wide. The straps were made of smooth black material that looked and felt like what seatbelts are made from. The actual displays looked like the display of a digital watch with pale neon-green numbers.

The ticks had become so common so quickly. When Radio and Lux had heard from friends that the clinic would give them a hundred bucks to participate in the trial run of the new devices, the ticks had seemed alien, intriguing. Barely a month after ticks were hitting the streets it seemed like everyone had one. New tech came out so quickly it was hard to keep track, but the ticks were something else.

Radio nudged Lux and her eyes sluggishly fluttered open. The subway shuttered to a stop and the pair exited the train car.

“Your tick-band. It changed.” Radio said tentatively as he and Lux started mounting the steps up the long tunnel towards fresh air and above-life. Lux rubbed her forehead, glanced over at Radio, and then down at her tick-band. A two projected from her wrist.

“What do you mean?”

Radio and Lux pushed through rusted turnstiles and were released into a clear night. Together, they walked side by side down quiet, empty streets toward their apartment. “On the subway, I looked down and your tick-band changed, from a two to a four.” Lux’s eyebrows slowly pulled together.

“What do you think that means?”

“I dunno.” Radio jammed his hands in his pockets. “Maybe that you felt real gay for a second.” Lux grinned “I always feel real gay.”

“Okay, but like really, really gay I guess, I don’t know.” Radio shrugged.

“Well I don’t know why it would change to a four then. I mean, two should mean just queer. Attraction to anyone.”

“And four would mean only attraction to women.”

“Yeah I guess so.” Lux ran her fingers through her hair which glowed in the moonlight.

“Well I’m not a woman.” Radio’s voice was low and soft. Saying those words made him feel embarrassed. Without breaking stride, Lux threw her arm across Radio’s back and squeezed his side. “Little critter, don’t worry about it okay?”

Scene: Darla

“I dunno, Dar,” Lux shook her head. “between what I owe for my last semester at school and rent for this place through the summer, I’m strapped. 10,000 for my last semester and 1,000 for every month we’re here.” Lux lay on her back in her bed and looked up mournfully at Darla

who was straddling the window sill, one leg dangling out the window toward the fire-escape while the other one perched inside the room against the bedstead.

Darla's perfect china-doll bangs hid her knit brow as she dragged off of a pastel pink cigarette printed with daisies. "Are your parents helping you?"

"Yeah," Lux sat up and tugged at her curls, making them spring up and down. "But they can only do so much, you know? My little sister is going to be in university next year so now they have to split the college money two ways. I shouldn't even have that stupid 10,000 left over from last semester. Fuck."

"What happened to it?" Darla blew pink smoke out the window. It smelled like strawberry flavored hard-candy.

"Radio and I took the speed-train down to see his cousins. We missed our train coming back so we had to buy new tickets. I had to buy both of them." Lux shifted on the bed and frowned. Darla snorted pink smoke out of her nose. "You bought both tickets? Jesus Lux, what is wrong with you?"

"We had to get back for school! He didn't have the money!"

Darla rolled her eyes and tucked a wisp of violet hair behind her ear. "It just seems like when he's in trouble, you're bailing him out, and when you're in trouble, I'm bailing you out. Seems like some shit to me."

Lux shrugged and gazed out the window and then down at her lap letting her hair waterfall in front of her face. "I need a job. I need fast money."

"You could cam." Darla's stare burned into the wall of printer-paper white curls that shielded Lux's downcast eyes. "Did you want me to come all the way over here so that I could suggest it to you so that you wouldn't have to admit that you had decided to do it all on your

own?” Darla’s head was semi-submerged in pink smoke. “Listen, I’m starting a site and if you’re going to start coming it would be rad if you wanted to start up with me. I’m starting it with some other camgirls. We’ve been working on it for a couple of months but it’s not open to run yet. It’ll be opening next week. We still need girls. Like, plenty of them. It’ll be cool. By camgirls for camgirls.”

“Dar.” Lux lifted her head sending a cascade of curls running down her back. “I need fast money, now. Thus, the point of coming. It doesn’t seem like struggling through a start-up project is really what I’m talking about here.”

“Oh come the fuck on Lux, and what do you know about coming? Go to another site then, sure, but it won’t be any faster than with me. You don’t know the first thing about the work and you’d be struggling along at some established venue, letting them squeeze most of the money out of you because you wouldn’t know what the fuck you’re doing. Anyway, we’re all camgirls so we’re bringing a client base with us. A free client base for you? Right off the bat? Yeah there’s no way you’d have it so easy anywhere else. This way I’d be there to help you out. Everyone and their fucking mom is coming now because everyone thinks its easy money. The truth is that it can take years to establish the kind of client base that lets you really make bank.”

Lux grimaced, scratching some crud off of her blue baby doll dress. “So... You’d help me out then?”

“Course, sweetie.” Darla’s faced relaxed into a smile as she flicked the cherry out of her cigarette and swung her leg back into the room. “Would you wanna start next week?”

Lux nodded slowly. “Is it mostly guys? That you cam for?”

Darla crawled out of the window sill and onto the bed where she spread out lazily against a wall of pillows. “Yeah mostly. Suzzy’s got some chicks I think but, I don’t know how she nabbed them. You just don’t get a lot of women into this shit, you know?”

“Who *is* into this shit?” Lux leaned back on her elbows “I mean when I was younger I think I just assumed that it was just disabled folks. I mean folks who would have a really hard time picking people up in real life. Like, folks in wheelchairs or folks who are scared shitless to talk to people. You know, that sort of thing. But I mean, I knew guys in high school who were using these sites. Like, totally straight up normal guys.”

“Yeah, I dunno. You get a lot of different types. You get some dudes who just want a girlfriend. Or guys who don’t actually want a girlfriend but wouldn’t mind pretending to have one for a couple hours a week. Some guys are so used to porn they’d rather just watch than have to deal with a real body. And I mean, Lux, bodies are messy shit, ya know? It’s nasty business enough dealing with your own body. Having to deal with someone else’s on top of that...” Darla shook her head and raised one eyebrow. “I mean all I know is that I get off a hella of lot better with my own hand than I do with anyone else’s. Why deal with all of the shit that comes with having sex with another body?”

“Come on, Dar.” Lux giggled and rolled her eyes.

“No I’m dead fuckin’ serious.”

“You’re just saying that because you keep getting into shitty relationships with shitty people who make you feel like shit. Maybe if you were getting off with the hand of someone you *loved* you wouldn’t be so quick to shun the very real perks of another body.”

“Hey.” Darla sat up and gave Lux a playful nudge with her foot. “It has nothing to do with love. I can have good sex with someone I don’t love and I can have bad sex with someone I

do love. You're such a fucking romantic Lux. And the ways that my partners treat me have nothing to do with how much I *love* them. I can love someone who treats me shitty. You should know."

Lux's smile dropped off her face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't."

"I *don't*."

Darla sank back onto the bed and fixed a worried gaze upon Lux's taut features. "Have you talked to Radio about coming?"

Lux shifted around on the bed and tugged at the edges of her dress. She snaked her tongue across her bottom lip slowly and cleared her throat. "No."

"How do you think he'll take it?"

Lux pursed her lips and shrugged. "I don't know. I think that he knows that we need the money."

"You mean that *you* need the money."

"*We* need the money. He's working at the park right now. As a ride operator. It's shit pay. Minimum wage. He can barely afford his half of the rent. Forget about food, living expenses. I mean, you know Radio. He can be jealous but he knows I love him. Fuck, Dar. My fucking tick. Did I tell you it's been flicking?"

Darla raised an eyebrow and tucked an arm behind her head. "Nope. No you did not." She raised her own tick-band and gave the display and thoughtful look. Darla's read two. Twos were trending. It was quickly becoming the norm to consider a two that didn't flick as the best reading you could get. "When does it flick?"

“Shit. All the time. I don’t think Radio’s noticed yet, but he will eventually. He’s only seen it flick once so far, but it flicks almost anytime I get talking with someone. It’s a pain in the ass.”

“You know that shit could be good for coming. I’ve heard some people say that if you practice you can even make it flick when you want to. Clients would love that shit. You get your tick flicking with a client and you could make them really believe you’ve got feels for ‘em”

“Jesus Dar, thanks for taking my total fucking nightmare so seriously.”

“Lux! Relax.” Darla sat up and gave Lux’s foot a squeeze. “So you have a flirty tick? So what? I’ve heard of worse things before. I mean, if you’re just afraid of Radio...”

“I’m not *afraid* of Radio.” Lux sighed and fell back onto the bed. “I just don’t want him to get the wrong impression. I mean these things are so stupid,” Lux raised her hand, gesturing to her tick-band. “I really don’t even think they do anything except fuck with people’s heads. I mean, Radio’s tick reads X right? X? There’s no way. There is no way. I mean his life revolves around his sex. It’s bullshit. It’s just that I think he takes it way too seriously.” Lux sat back up and looked Darla in the face. “We’ve both been so busy lately we haven’t been able to really talk about it, but I think that his tick is actually making him believe he’s asexual. It’s so stupid. And like...” Lux’s voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “When my tick flicked... it flicked to four. When he touched me. I mean I don’t know, I didn’t even see it, but that’s what he says.” Lux finished and waited expectantly for Darla to answer.

“Okay.” Darla said finally. “So?”

“So that is some bad fucking news, Dar. Four means straight up gay-sexual. Homo all the way. And if we are to assume that I consider myself a cisgender woman, than we would also assume that my tick thinks that I see Radio as a cisgender woman.”

Darla snorted.

“Dar. I’m serious. This is bad news okay? Bad. News.”

“Why, because Radio thinks that your tick flicks mean that you don’t see him as the dudely dude he is? Lux, it shouldn’t matter, it really, really should not matter. If Radio is going to make some stupid flicks into this whole big deal where it’s betraying your real perception of his gender,” Darla wiggled her fingers around to emphasize her point, “then he is a fucking narcissist.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Really, why?”

“Because! I mean, you wouldn’t say that if I was like, constantly misgendering him.”

“That’s not the same. You can’t control your tick, you can control your words, you can use the right pronouns if you are actually taking the time to think about it.”

“I really don’t think it’s that different. I mean people accidentally misgender queers all the time. And they don’t mean it, it just comes out. And it shows you exactly how they actually perceive your gender. And it fucking hurts. I don’t want to do that to Radio. And I mean, you said yourself that some people can control the way their tick-flicks right?”

“Lux. That shit’s just rumor. I have no idea whether anyone can actually control their tick. Either way, you cannot take responsibility for what some new tech is doing. This stuff is so new. I mean what do we even really know about how it works? Chromosomes? Hormones? Brain chemistry? Everything I’ve heard to date about how ticks actually work is just speculation.”

Lux nodded and looked off dolefully out the window. Then, as if she had just remembered something, she got up and walked over to look out onto the street. She scanned the

houses and sidewalk and then returned to the bed, spreading out over the light purple cotton sheets. “I just know that Radio believes this stuff,” Lux flicked her wrist, “and it bums me out that he’s going to trust tech over what I tell him. Like, why can’t he just take my word for it? I love him. Everything’s fine.” Darla unzipped the lilac-colored leather pocket that was buckled around her thigh and pulled out a crushed paper carton of Smoking Daisies.

“How long have you two been together” Darla asked out of the corner of her mouth as she lit another pink tube. The magenta tobacco made crackling sounds as it caught fire.

“About a year.”

Darla raised an eyebrow. “That’s not long.”

“Feel’s long.”

The lovers had known each other for a while before they had gotten together. They went to the same school, took some of the same classes, had many of the same friends, and dated many of the same people. Although they made an impression on each other in the same way that anyone you might find somewhat attractive makes somewhat of an impression on you, there was no instantaneous life-changing moment. Fireworks and thunderstorms did not accompany their first few interactions, and in fact, you might even say that their beginning was strikingly bland. This was why it surprised everyone who was around to bear witness to the inception of their relationship when over the course of a weekend the pair went from amiable strangers to inseparable.

Lux lay on her back and watched pink furls of smoke lazily glide across the ceiling. She had perfectly committed to memory the image of Radio on the day they became lovers, sitting cross-legged at the park. He had a crew-cut at the time, which gave him a mean look. He had been reading and when he looked up from his book they had locked eyes. That was the image

that she had of him: sitting crisscross in the grass, tight, worn, black clothes, looking up at her, startled. Lux used to often ponder the strangeness of this chance meeting. If Radio hadn't have happened to look up and see her watching him from across the park, she wouldn't have gone over to him. They might never have talked the way they talked that day, and they may never have started dating. If he hadn't have looked up at that precise moment then he would probably not be in her life. For a long time, this idea mesmerized Lux and she would spend a lot of time basking in the magic of serendipitous happenstance. Over time she had lost the feeling of giddy pleasure over these ponderings and now she rarely thought about that day at the park at all.

Darla squinted out the window and puffed perfect pink clouds toward the ceiling. "Do you talk much?"

Lux sighed and rolled over onto her stomach. "Sometimes. It's been tough lately 'cause first school was really heavy, and now the amusement park is taking up so much of his time." Lux met Darla's gaze and then dropped it again. "We used to talk a lot."

"Really?" Darla scoffed and flicked her cigarette causing pink ash to scatter across the window sill. "I have a hard time imagining Radio having a lot to say."

Lux nodded slowly thinking about how exciting their conversations were in the beginning, long conversations that were penetrating and invigorating. They would spend hours into the night talking about anything they could think of. "He used to have a whole lot to say."

Lux loved people and she loved talk. She had that kind of excited sweetness, usually reserved for the budding of new love for a good conversation. Radio never shared Lux's love for people, but at one point the lovers' favorite game was a friendly argument. Their arguments weren't as friendly anymore.

Lux started at the sound of the front door swinging open. Darla watched a micro-expression of panic flinch across Lux's face and stubbed her cigarette out on the window sill before sliding off the bed.

"We'll talk more about coming soon, okay Lux?" Darla squeezed Lux's knee and headed for the door of the bedroom. Darla and Radio paused where they met in the doorway. The two eyed each other suspiciously. Darla cast an unreadable expression over her shoulder towards Lux and then disappeared down the hallway.

Radio was sweating and smelled sour-sweet like congealed park food. He walked across the bedroom with his trademark limping/swaggering gait and brushed pink daisy ash out the window. "Was she smoking inside? It reeks like a candy store in here." Radio scowled at his ashy pink hands and clapped them together out the window.

"I'm gonna start coming." The setting sun lit up the dust in the air of their bedroom and slanted menacingly across the walls. "We could use the money. And it's easy you know? Darla's going to help me out." Radio sat down on the bed without looking at Lux.

"Okay." He shrugged and rested his elbows on his knees. Lux's shoulders sank as they relaxed out of their brace. She crawled across the bed to him, rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arm across his chest. This time, they were both looking at her tick band when it flicked.

The digital six, constructed out of six straight lines, flicked onto the display of Lux's band the moment her arm made contact with Radio's chest. Lux yelped in surprise and her arm jerked back.

"What the *fuck*, Lux? What the *fuck*?!" Radio got up off the bed and fixed Lux with a look of angry accusation.

When Lux was twelve she had been in the passenger seat of her father's truck when a motorcyclist had slammed head on into the truck's hood. Lux and her father had gotten out fine, but the motorcyclist got smeared across the windshield. Afterwards, a counselor had told Lux that traumatic experiences sometimes made a person think that they were in danger when they weren't. The counselor, gesturing with slow, soothing movements, had explained that the brain of a traumatized person floods easily with fight or flight chemicals. The counselor had really accentuated the word *flooded*, and since then whenever Lux felt the familiar tingle and acceleration of panic she would think of a valve opening in her head and an outpouring of angry red liquid, toxic, radioactive, buzzing. The feeling reminded her of that game kids play where they pretend to break an egg over your head by gently tapping you with their fist and then slowly moving their hands over your hair, lightly enough to give the phantom sensation of an egg oozing down your head.

Lux sat still on the bed, crouched exactly in the position that she had been in when Radio leapt up. Lux looked up into Radio's face trying hard force herself into reaction. A more appropriate idiom than "fight or flight," Lux thought, might be "fight, flight or freeze." In Lux's experience, freezing with the indecision of whether to fight or flee was a much more common occurrence than actually choosing one or the other. Panic always hit Lux like a tsunami. Before the tidal wave of fear or anger or sadness or hurt hits like a runaway train, the tide gets sucked back into the ocean: a rug being torn out from under you. Lux didn't feel anything at all for a moment aside from stunned.

"It's not like I can control it, Radio." Lux said haltingly, "New tech... it's so unreliable..." Radio's scoff cut her off.

"You're so full of shit. You are so full of shit."

“That is totally uncalled for.” Lux’s eyes burned as she tried to force back the angry shadow of a coming tidal wave as well as reach down somewhere inside herself for the right thing to say that would stop this from happening. These competing forces left her immobile.

“Actually Lux, I feel like it’s *completely* called for. Nobody ever calls you on your shit. Well this,” Radio plucked Lux’s tick-band adorned wrist up gingerly and waved it around in front of her face, “there’s no way around this. This means that you can’t just pay lip-service to seeing me for who I am. You can’t just talk the right talk anymore now that your walk is all fucked up.” Radio dropped Lux’s wrist which fell lifelessly to her lap.

“The ticks aren’t even reading gender though, Radio, the ticks are reading sex. Right?” Lux’s heart was pounding in her head “I mean, they can’t read what bathroom you use or if you’re wearing nail polish, right? They read whatever your biology is telling them. So they aren’t reading gender anyway, they’re reading sex.”

“The tick isn’t reading my sex though. It’s reading your sex and whatever your biology is telling it my gender is. It figures out what your sex is and it figures out what my *gender* is, based on how you perceive it. And clearly you see me as a woman. That’s fucked up, Lux.” Radio kicked the wall sharply. Lux’s chest was tight and it was hard to breathe. The tsunami was crashing, waves of feelings jane doe emotion.

“Baby, you’re taking this tech too seriously.” Lux whispered.

“Jesus, that’s your excuse? I’m taking that you have no respect for me too seriously? I wish that you would take *me* a little more seriously.” Amusement cut clarity across the white noise of Lux’s panic. How ironic, she thought, that he would be accusing her of not taking him seriously enough. Most of Lux’s day-to-day discomfort and unhappiness was caused by taking Radio too seriously. An assortment of digs that might point this out sprang to Lux’s mind but she

was acutely aware that a barb would do nothing in her favor. Lux carefully fixed her face so that it was a gentle mask of openness.

“I wish you would trust me.” Lux stared at Radio, unblinking. “I wish you would trust me over some alien device.”

Radio snapped a jacket off the floor and tugged it on aggressively. “Why should I trust you over anything? You’d rather fuck yourself in front of an audience than do real work. You’re fucking lazy and you’re fucking selfish.”

Lux nodded slowly as Radio pounded out of the apartment. This was how most of their arguments ended. Radio would grasp at whatever hurtful thing he could think of and fling it over his shoulder at Lux as he fled the scene.

Lux recalled a conversation she had once with her little sister, Lo, right after a terrible fight with Radio. It might have been the very first time that Radio had gotten truly angry with Lux. On the phone to her sister, Lux had explained how disturbing the argument was. How it had felt like Radio had become a different person. Someone who just wanted to hurt her. Lux had described the nauseous feeling it had inspired, the dreadful despair. When Lux had finished vividly describing the feelings that the fight had inspired, Lo told Lux that it sounded like she felt the same way that she might had Radio hit her.

“But... He didn’t. I mean, you can’t get away from physical violence, you know, not really. But if he’s just saying stuff to you that hurts, the solution is to just not be hurt by it. Don’t take him so seriously, you know?”

Lux had felt rather empowered by this for a while. In fact, this was the main reason that her and Radio were so quickly able to reconcile. But Lux eventually came to find that this strategy did not work out as well as she might have hoped. Lux was never able to not take Radio

seriously in the heat of battle. If anything, she took him the most seriously when they fought. It was only afterwards that she could convince herself to take him less seriously, which did him more good in the long run than it did her. This semi-cold easy-going attitude wouldn't last for long. Soon enough the lovers would be back in harmony and the healing of renewed connection would wipe away the protective barriers that Lux had carefully constructed. It was only at the moment of complete regained intimacy that Radio would strike again.

Lux sunk back into the bed, wishing that she could escape that bedroom, so heavy and bulging with Radio's scorn. Lux felt like the walls crawled with loathing for her.

The next morning, before the first light had broken out over the city, Radio crawled into bed next to Lux and pulled her body tight against his. He repeated that he was sorry and that he loved her very much, and nuzzled her great mane of milky tresses until the bitterness drained out of her and she relaxed into his embrace.



“I always thought you lived in the flats.” Darla kicked off her shoes in the doorway of Lux's bedroom and moved towards the cyber screen inlaid in the wall directly facing the bed. “But you don't really, what would you even call this neighborhood? It's not really downtown either, but it's more downtown than it is the flats.” Darla pulled a crumpled pack of Daisy smokes from her thigh satchel and lit up a smoke. Lux considered asking her not to smoke inside, thinking about Radio, but then thought better of it and instead crawled over on the bed to the window and slammed it open. Heat from outside filtered slowly into the room. Lux grimaced. She had never been very good at handling the heat.

“We live in the industrial. All of this used to be just warehouses and factories but now all of that has moved out to the other side of the hills. The industrial's just full of squatters and

artists and students now; punk houses and community areas. The buildings are so rundown that rent is pretty cheap, for those of us who are actually bothering to pay rent.” Lux paused at this, cocking her head to one side and gazing out the window at the once-factory building directly facing her own apartment that had recently been taken over by a large and mysterious band of gutter-punks. “But a lot of these old warehouses are just abandoned so kids will move in. Kids or radicals or whatever.” Darla tapped the screen and Lux’s cyber-world display illuminated across the surface.

“I already made an account for you,” Darla noted as she scribbled the address of her site onto the top of the screen. Lilac-bob swaying, she tapped it again and the screen flashed onto the homepage of her site. The homepage was neon-lilac. It matched Darla’s hair perfectly.

Lux pulled at her faded black shirt which featured a large hand sewn patch depicting a crudely printed rotten strawberry. “Are you really going to stay and watch?”

Darla, who was fiddling with options and settings, cast a doubtful look over her shoulder at Lux, who was obviously extremely uncomfortable. “Do you want me to leave?” Darla’s voice was pregnant with a laugh she was suppressing. Lux blushed. A dirty habit she had worked long and hard to rid herself of through pure force of will, but from time to time the blood in her cheeks rose too quickly to be battled down. “I guess not.” Lux mumbled. Really she wasn’t sure though. On the one hand it was a great relief to think that on her first try she might have some moral support throughout the very daunting project. On the other hand, Lux felt rather uncomfortable about doing sex in front of her oh-so competent and confidant friend. By this point Darla had finished setting the account to Lux’s cyber-screen and was about ready to start the show.

“So this is how it works. I have you set up to do shows weekly. Of course you can do them literally whenever you want, but there are seven of us camgirls right now, so each of us gets a highlighted show-time once a week. You can do this whenever you want but make sure you are always on during your highlighted timeslot or else we’ll be pissed.” Darla dragged on her cigarette and exhaled a pithy snake of fuchsia smoke. “All you have to do is bring up the site. Your account is set to this screen so like, if you move or something let me know so I can come disable it. Or at least tell you how to disable it. It’s not super self-explanatory.” Darla nodded to herself and looked up at the ceiling as if trying to figure out what else needed to be explained. “Okay so like, cool. You’re on in five or six minutes. The room looks like this.” Darla gestured at the screen which was just a blank chat interface. “Clients who are in the room can give you tips, you get paid for the hour but the tips are really where you can roll in the cash. At any time you can go into a private room with a client and do cam to cam. Which is pretty much what most folks on here want; a little alone time with you.” Darla snorted and took another long Daisy-drag. “But you can’t go do private shows during your highlighted hour. Wait until the hour is up and then you can go join a private chat.”

Lux fidgeted on the bed. “Cam to cam... would that mean that I would see them?” Lux was not interested in seeing the clients. Darla nodded. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because,” Darla glanced at the time being projected off of the cyber-screen. “You get more money.” Darla’s lips parted and her ultra-violet lip-sticked lips parted into a sort of creepy smile. “And the clients love it.”

Lux could feel her heart pounding in her throat. Maybe she should call it off. Maybe she could stop everything right now. Maybe she could find a nice waitressing job.

“Do you have any drugs?” It was supposed to be a joke but the way it came out, it didn’t sound like a joke.

“I have some rubs.”

“Can I have some?” Lux was as surprised at herself as Darla clearly was judging by the look on her face.

Darla stared at Lux with an amused expression, one eyebrow slowly creeping up into her forehead. “Are you serious?”

Lux considered this for a moment. “Yeah.”

Darla’s whole face was bright with bemusement. She reached into her thigh bag and produced what could easily be mistaken for a tube of chapstick. She tossed it at Lux who caught it with one hand and then automatically opened it and rubbed it into the crook of her elbow. Lux hadn’t done rubs since she was in high school. Darla continued to look on with a face working hard at stifling a laugh. “Are you really that nervous?” Lux shrugged.

“I don’t know, I guess so.” Her arm was getting warm and started to throb, not unpleasantly. Lux frowned “Is this synthetic?”

Darla laughed, “Fuck yeah it is, do you know how much the natural shit costs?” Lux grimaced. She should have asked before she started rubbing drugs on her body. “Alright, kiddo. Showtime.” And with that Darla tapped the screen. A little red sign flashed onto the top of the screen that read “filming” aside from that the only indication that she was on now came from the small electronic sounds made by the camera that sat in the wall above the cyber-screen to indicate that it was adjusting to focus on Lux. Darla sat down in the corner of the room facing Lux, leaning up against the wall that held the cyber-screen. Lux looked down at her arm. She really hoped the rubs would kick in soon. The screen was quiet. Nothing was happening.

“Should I do something?” Lux whispered at Darla out of the corner of her mouth. Darla dragged on her cigarette luxuriously.

“You don’t have to whisper. The sound is off so that I can talk to you while you perform and it won’t be weird for the audience.” Darla blew pink plumes out of her nose and stretched her legs out. “There’s no one in the room right now. Do you see that little box up there?” Darla gestured non-decrepity toward the screen, “That shows how many clients are in the room.” Sure enough Lux could see a little grey box underneath the red ‘Filming’ one that said ‘Guests: 0.’

The little grey box was blurring slightly into the red one and the numbers and letters on the screen kept dancing back and forth from blurry to crisp. Lux looked down at the little tube of rub laying discarded in her lap, and after considering it for a moment, she popped off the cap and rubbed more clear waxy gunk into the underside of her other arm. She then capped the bottle and threw it towards Darla. The bespectacled lilac cyber-punk smirked at Lux as she smeared her own arms and placed the tube back in her bag. Lux sprawled out on the bed and watched shadows jitter and quake eerily in smoky patterns across the ceiling. Lux lost sense of how much time was passing. It was dark out now and the air that floated into the room from outside wasn’t as oppressively hot as it was before. Eventually a friendly beep came from the speaker hidden in the cyber-screen. Lux wobbled into a sitting position and squinted at the display. It was difficult to read now but she could make out the number ‘1’ in the guest box where there once was a zero. While Lux strained to see, two more beeps registered and the number changed to three.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck.” Lux started laughing. “Fuck Dar, what do I do.” Darla was slumped against the wall.

“I dunno, masturbate or something.” Darla laughed loudly. She had a raunchy, husky laugh. Her laugh was thick with the cigarette tar that didn’t register in her normal speaking voice. Darla wiped tears from the corner of her eye and tried to sit up straighter against the wall.

“Uh,” Darla cleared her throat. “You should say hi, introduce yourself. Maybe tell them that this is your first time. That shit is pretty typical.”

“Hi,” Lux said. Darla started laughing again.

“No, Lux they can’t hear you. Unless you want to turn the sound on but in that case I’ll have to shut up.” Lux giggled and rocked back and forth on the bed. The room was very dark. “Can they even see me?”

“Yeah,” Darla nodded, lighting up another cigarette. “Unless they have like a real, real old cyber screen. But any moderately functioning model should just fix the balance.” Lux was staring off into space and swaying back and forth like a buoy caught in the breeze.

“Uh, okay. So what do I do?”

“Do you have a pad?” Lux stared at Darla through the darkness.

“What?”

“A pad.” Darla waved her cigarette around to emphasize her words. “To write with, fuck Lux, you are the least cyber-savvy person I think I have ever met.”

“Oh.” Lux was trying to not get distracted by the shapes made by the cherry of Darla’s cigarette the clung to the air long after the cherry had moved away from that spot. “Uh, no.”

“Okay,” Darla took a very long drag on her cigarette, “Then you’ll have to write on the screen.” Lux fumbled off the bed and awkwardly stumbled up to the screen. She stood for a moment, transfixed by the sudden brightness of standing directly in front of it before scrawling “Hi” in big bubbly letters with her finger.

“Hey” Guest #1 wrote back. Lux started giggling. “What now?” she asked the screen more than Darla.

“Well you can try to chat them up or you can try to get down to business. It’s sort of up to you. Everyone has their different style. The ‘business’ is what rakes in the actual tips, ya know? But chatting them up first establishes a certain connection. So it’s up to you. Some girls feel more comfortable if they can get talking with them for a little bit first.”

Lux cocked her head and waited for decision to strike. Instead she just stayed there, head cocked while the screen continued to beep in new guests. There were twenty now.

Darla broke Lux’s wide-eyed indecision by piercing the room with her husky laugh. She had slumped back down again and was almost completely lying on the floor, struggling to light new cigarettes. “Yo Lux.” Darla husked trying to light a smoke with both hands. “Listen it doesn’t matter okay. Just do whatever. Just like, touch yourself or something.” Darla chuckled an old-man kind of chuckle. The kind of chuckle you’d expect to ring out across the countertops of dive bars at the end of a work day.

Lux stumbled back to the bed. Outlines no longer existed. The world was made up of soft objects that hummed with energy. Colors blurred into colors and she wasn’t sure where floor stopped and bed started, or even where the edges of her skin were. Lux giggled quietly to herself. Somewhere in her mind she was still very aware of how absurd this whole scene was. Perhaps more aware, in fact. She tried to push that thought out of her mind. This was no time to internally wax nostalgic on her ability to perceive absurdity. She giggled again to herself and with great effort hoisted herself onto the bed, or more accurately, attempt to hoist herself onto the bed and instead over shot the edge and tumbled gracelessly into a pile of sheets. Darla broke out into hysterical laughter.

“Yeah Lux, you’re off to a great start here, really.”

Lux tried to compose herself but failing she resigned herself to awkwardly lying back onto the bed. She liked doing this in the darkness. She also congratulated herself on doing this on rubs. Good choice, she thought, nodding.

“Alright kiddo, your hour is almost up, why don’t you actually try to do something dirty.” Darla was at this point rolling around on the floor rubbing her face with her hands. Lux squinted into the darkness trying to make out where the fly on her jeans was. She scooted around on the bed, as if trying to burrow herself into a hole, and searching with her hands for the knot of metal that would let her access to that secret place of pleasure. She laughed aloud to herself. Not so secret for long. Her once secret, soon to be open for business pleasure center. The motherboard of her sex. She figured she must look pretty silly to her viewers right now, squirreling around on the bed, fumbling at her pants, laughing silently. Frustration taking over she finally started just tugging her pants off, still fully zipped, over her hips. It was a huffing and puffing struggle to get them over the curved mounds of her ass but after that she was able to fling her apparel to the floor. She could barely see anymore. The room tilted and fluttered with shadows and light and smoke. Lux closed her eyes to concentrate on the task at hand. At hand. At her hand. The task of her hand. Lux laughed with giddy delight over the task that was at her hand. She certainly found herself quite amusing. “What do I do?” Lux mumbled into the darkness. Truthfully, she didn’t masturbate very often. She hardly masturbated at all in fact. Darla’s husking laugh pitched the colors that danced across Lux’s vision into swirling circles.

“I dunno, Lux. Rub your clit. Stick a finger inside of yourself.” Lux couldn’t see Darla at all now from her vantage point on the bed, but Darla’s voice was muffled, like she was talking into the floor.

Lux moved her hand across the soft, hairy mound of her vulva. She wondered how much the viewers could see. Would they be able to see the details of her genitalia if she spread herself out right? Even if the light was perfect and the camera zoomed in, way in, wouldn't her hand cover most of what she was doing? Lux started rubbing herself slowly, giggling at the absurdity. Essentially they were paying to see the suggestion of the act. Lux rubbed herself in circles and letters, and patterns that mimicked the ones she saw in the humming shadows of the room. The green light of Lux's tick-band blurred into shapes and patterns that matched the journey of Lux's hand. She lost track of how long she was rubbing herself. She had become engrossed in the novelty of the spectacle when Darla suddenly rose up from the floor and tapped the screen which immediately blinked off, leaving the room in still darkness.

"Welp! We done!" Darla cackled to herself, stumbling to the bed and crumpling into a tangle next to Lux. "Very exciting, eh?" Lux smiled drunkenly and gave her fingers a few delicate sniffs.

"That's it?" Lux's voice was heavy and hazy with rub. "I thought I was supposed to pick a lucky contestant to go private with." Darla snorted.

"Baby, you can barely tell your fingers from our toes. You've had about as much fun as you can handle for one night." Darla leaned back hard into the mattress. Lux's gaze traced the outline of Darla's body. Lux's eyes rested upon the sharpness of Darla's hipbone, which protruded out of the slit between her shirt and her shorts. Lux leaned back into the bed. Her moonlight curls held hands with Darla's lilac furls.

"Hey Dar, do you think I could get good at this?" Lux watched the intermingling of white and purple strands. Darla grinned at the ceiling and then turned her head to face Lux, which also happened to bring their faces into very close proximity. That complete lack of personal space

proximity where sweet breath can be smelled by either player and every pore and blemish could now be examined if it wasn't for the rub, which was not a particularly long lasting drug, working the last of its dying magic to smooth the imperfections.

“Yeah, sure.” Darla’s sleepy grin matched her drooping eyes. “I mean it’s not hard. I think it takes a certain personality type. It’s like any customer service job. You punch in, sweet talk some folks, do some manual labor, and punch out. Done. I think it’s the sweet talking that’s the hardest.” Lux had her gaze fixed squarely on Darla’s gently moving mouth. Her lilac lipstick was smudged. Darla was looking at a space somewhere above Lux’s head. “You know how in books and movies and shit there’s this character sometimes that you see, like, the femme fatale, man-eating, succubus who gets all the guys and always knows what to say to ensnare the lovesick men who fall blithely across her path?” Darla snorted. Lux’s mouth parted slightly as she imagined what it would be like to put her mouth on Darla’s. “Yeah well what bullshit. That doesn’t exist. Any woman, any fuckin’ woman, Lux. There’s gonna be folks for whom she is simply not their cuppa tea. Period. There is not magical elixir, no perfect face, no secret open-sesame words. I mean there are some chicks in this business who get it right just about as much as a person could possibly hope to. And hats fucking off to those women. But in general you just gotta rake in those who are into it and remember that there is no way. No possible way that you are gonna be able to guess the intimate desires, the sneaky perversions of every single anonymous person who runs across your screen.” Darla’s eyes came to rest on Lux’s which were still hungrily tracing the outline of Darla’s lips. “I mean think about how awkward the first fuck with a new lover is. It takes time to learn what makes someone tick. Time and effort and some nice long dirty talks too, if you can handle it.” Darla concluded quietly, mostly to herself. Lux’s hand moved involuntarily towards Darla’s face, but on its way Lux managed to catch site of her

tick flicking from two to four. Lux jerked her arm away like she had been electrocuted and flew up and off the bed.

“Shit, shit.” Lux mumbled.

“You okay?” Darla said rising from the bed herself.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah I’m fine.” Lux paced around the room and then propped herself up against a wall busying her hands with nothing at all. “Uh, you know... I’m just really tired I think.” Lux knew that this was preposterous. She was acting more like she was hopped up on speed than tired. “So like, thanks, Dar. Thanks for everything. Seriously.” Lux pressed her lips together in a tight smile and gave Darla what was meant to be a grateful look, but came out looking more pleading than anything else. Darla raised one slim eyebrow and then shrugged.

“Okay, Lux. I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Lux followed Darla out to the front door. “I’ll see you soon.” At the door Darla turned to face Lux.

“Oh yeah, listen I told Suzzy you would be coming over to watch her perform tomorrow. I figured it might help you out to see what an actual performance looks like.”

Lux nodded distractedly. “Uh yeah, okay. Sounds good.” Darla nodded slowly back at her.

“Alright Lux, you take care now alright?” Lux nodded.

“Yeah. Night, Dar.”

“Night Lux.”



Radio squinted against the glare of the sun as he watched Tonka turn off the midway and disappear down the shadowy passage-way towards the smoking gazebo. Radio liked Tonka

immediately. She was a pixy: a gutter-punk with big eyes and a likeable, mischievous face.

Radio saw her around the park long before he ever talked to her. She would be gliding around the midway, or prancing off to the smoking gazebo or bouncing up and down the steps of the Tilt-A-Whirl, loading and unloading passengers from their metal prisons. Radio liked the way she moved. She might be scowling or sneering or just had that kind of glazed over look you get in that kind of heat working that kind of job, but she moved in this way, weightless and bouncy but with intense purpose.

Radio briskly moved through the sweating metal gate of the ride he had been working and took off across the midway, darting quietly between hoards of sticky park-goers before slipping down the narrow alley, barely shoulder width across, between the funhouse and the bumper cars. Down this short cavern, a left and then a right, and the passageway opened up on a little clearing, boxed in by the backs or sides of various building, the bumper cars, the funhouse, the haunted house, the employee offices. In this clearing was an ancient gazebo, paint chipping, wooden poles rotting, the whole thing with the look of something tilted, distorted, as if one side was sinking.

Tonka was sitting at the picnic table, as ancient and dilapidated as the gazebo it was under, with her legs on the table, and her back up against one of the pillars. She was talking to Roger. Roger was an okay guy. Radio didn't mind him much. He didn't bother Radio when they had to work a ride together, which was enough of a relief that Radio had some good feeling for him. Roger was probably not as old as he looked but he was definitely substantially older than most of the other park employees, whose median age appeared to be about nineteen, and his leathery skin and white hair weren't doing him any justice. As Radio stepped out into the clearing, Tonka, who had been mid-laugh at something that Roger was saying, turned her gaze to

Radio. She grinned at him lazily. “Oh hey there.” She drawled, the heat of the day infecting slowness into her voice. She tilted her head to one side and took a long drag off of her cigarette.

“What are you on today?”

Radio shrugged and looked down. “Squirrel Cages.” In his hot-eared self-consciousness his face took on the unmistakable look of being totally uninterested in both Tonka and anything she had to say. It is really to the merit of her character that she would forge on in the face of his stony ambivalence.

“Wow, they wouldn’t let me get near that death trap for weeks. I only got trained on it a couple days ago. And this isn’t even my first season, I mean, c’mon.” Tonka grinned; it was so strange to see her usually dour looking features now so open and twinkling. Radio shrugged again and checked his phone, a nervous tick. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and looked around the clearing for a place to sit. Instead he found himself saying, “Guess my break’s up,” before backing out of the clearing, “Later.”

Radio had in fact, almost ten full minutes left on his fifteen minute break. But the pressure to say something witty or amusing to this twinkling gutter-sprite was more than he could bear.



Lux was dreaming of a boat full of tick bands. She lay on top of them, stretched out like a goddess atop an altar. As the boat sank into the sea, Lux calmly smeared rub into her arm, eyes closed, expression serene. Lux was stirred part-way out of sleep by cussing that her unconscious registered as Radio’s displeasure. There was stomping and storming and door slamming. Lux didn’t open her eyes. She turned over in her half-sleep and buried her head into the mattress.

When Lux did wake up the sun was already up and past it's prime. Which didn't take away from the heat. The exhausting heat that was boiling up the city. Lux wished fervently for rain. How long had it been? She wasn't sure. The white-topped child-vixen fluttered her eyelids until they would stay open comfortably and then dispassionately studied the room. Shit. The floor was strewn with magenta colored ash and the place smelled like strawberry flavored daisy-smokes and sex. Oh jeez did it smell like sex. Lux sat up and rubbed her eyes. The funk that clung to the room was so moist and pungent it recalled images of frothy bayous and spilled beer. Lux slowly made the descent out of her bed and stumbled into the bathroom where she wiped gunk out of her mouth with her hands and scrubbed at her face until she felt like the living again. Lux pulled on a short, baggy pastel purple dress and checked her phone. For a split second she both yearned for a dreaded to see any new messages from Radio. No such luck. Just a message from Dar that gave her the address to Suzzy's place. Lux threw her things together into a small backpack and exited her apartment. Suzzy's address put her in the hills. Lux hadn't been there for years. Not since the tolls had been raised.

Lux meandered through the Industrial, trying to stay on the side of the street that offered the most shade. She stopped for a fizzy ice coffee at a corner store. The man at the counter was a little too keenly focused on her tickband, which flicked to a zero when she passed him the cash. Back on the street Lux sighed. She just wanted to be back in school again. She hoped the teachers strike would end soon. Preferably long before the next semester started. Lux took a bus straight across the flats and was dropped off at the bottom of where the hills started. At the bottom of the hills Lux hopped over the first pedestrian-toll turn-stile. The turnstiles were often hopped, it was almost showy to actually pay, even if you had that kind of money. But they still

served their purpose, the constant reminder: YOU ARE NOT MEANT TO BE HERE. The hills were impossible to access by car unless you had money or actually lived there.

Lux started up the steep ascent into the twisting neighborhood. The hills were about as opposite to the flats as you could get. Everything about them was coded to signify affluence. The flats were a grid. The streets made sense and everything was easy to get too. That was because if you lived in the flats, you were utility, you had places to be and things to get done and you didn't want to be messing around with streets that wouldn't get you to where you needed to be. The hills on the other hand were pretty much designed to get you lost. There were dead-ends and bizarre loops, alleys that were made to look like driveways, so that if you didn't actually live there it would be enormously difficult for you to figure out how to get around. The hills were designed for folks of leisure. As Lux marched up, up, up the neighborhood, jumping turnstiles and she made her way deeper and deeper into the menagerie of money she felt grateful that rich people also probably liked their shade. Hence the not terribly unpleasant walk under large trees, spreading out over the climb up.

When Lux finally reached her destination she was completely out of breath, and fearful of her abilities to actually get back out again. She was also mildly surprised to find herself outside of a slightly dilapidated but mostly very beautiful mansion. For whatever reason she had continued to believe, even as her ascent was marked by a rapid growth in wealth, that the house she was destined for would be the only run down, tiny little house in all of the hills. What was a camer doing here? Lux walked down a shaded path across an overgrown, but densely populated lawn. Lux didn't have to wait at the door very long before the door was answered by an aggressively androgynous woman who couldn't have been much older than herself. "Yo" The

woman said, leaving the door open and walking back into the house. Lux gingerly followed in the woman's wake. "Are you Suzzy?" Lux called into the cavernous house.

The woman, who wore a ragged trucker-hat over a greenish blue mullet reappeared in the main room of the house and nodded slowly, she had the shrugging confidence that marked a certain kind of attractive woman. The kind who is a little too aware of their beauty and has grown exhausted from carrying it around their whole life.

"Yeah." Suzzy lifted a foot to scratch at her ankle absent mindedly as she looked Lux up and down. "Lux?"

"Yeah." Lux fidgeted feeling too small and too bright in the large, dark room.

"C'mon." Suzzy turned and walked out of the room. Lux hurried to follow her up a creaky flight of stairs and down a hallway before entering what Lux assumed was Suzzy's bedroom. Suzzy moved piles of papers and books off of the bed and shrugged. "You can sit wherever. You're early. We've got some time. You want some tea or something?" Lux nodded. Suzzy threw a final stack of what appeared to be garbage onto the floor before swiftly exiting the room. Alone, Lux surveyed her surroundings. The large bedroom had both the feeling of being incredibly cluttered a particularly empty at the same time. There were lots of small objects in various piles and very little furniture. There was a bed, which was really just a black sheet covering a mattress on top of various crates and boxes. On the other side of the room there were more crates stacked against the wall which seemed to serve as bookshelves. Lux crossed the room and sat in the window seat. From the window Lux could see all of the hills she had climbed up, and the flats stretching out where the hills stopped.

Suzzy came back with two mugs of tea and handed one of them to Lux before plopping down on the bed.

“So you live here?” Lux didn’t know how to ask Suzzy what she was doing in this house without it being obvious that it was surprising.

Suzzy smirked “Yeah, I do.”

“Do you live with your parents?”

Suzzy shook her head, slowly. All of her movements looked a little tired. “No, my parents died when I was sixteen. I inherited this house. And a trust.”

“Oh.” Lux nodded and leaned back against the window. “So do you go to school?”

“Nope.” Suzzy did another slow shake of her head. “Nope, I just live in my big-ass house on the hill.”

“What do you do?”

Suzzy laughed a little. “Uh, nothing. I read, I go to rub-raves. I cam.” Lux fidgeted in her window seat and sipped delicately on her mug of tea. “But you have a trust? Why do you cam?”

Suzzy shrugged. “I don’t do it for the money.” She flipped the tail of her mullet over one shoulder and looked up at the ceiling. “I dunno. I just like it.” Lux was silent for a little while. Suzzy’s body was lithe and lanky. She wore a baggy brown shirt with the sleeves cut off and baggy black denim cut-off shorts.

“You don’t have a tick?” Lux said as she noticed Suzzy’s blank wrist. Suzzy swallowed some of her tea and took a deep breath.

“Uh, uh-uh.”

“Why Not?”

“Because they’re bullshit.” Suzzy’s voice was low and gruff. Lux rubbed her own wristband, suddenly self-conscious.

“Why... I mean why do you say that?”

Suzzy rubbed her feet together, which were long and thin like a rabbit's. "It's just a new way of forcing people to see gender like they always have." Suzzy looked up at Lux for a moment with a penetrating gaze that made Lux's chest tighten. "I mean for one thing, to even have a number, you are assuming that you have a gender that is either male or female. I mean yes, everyone knows that the ticks are supposed to account for transfolk and like, that's cool but what about kids who don't want to fall on either side of the fence at all. And it's not even just that some folks' identities aren't being accounted for right? Cause like, the real issue is the way that this will shape the way that people think about gender. Cause representation right, like, the way that something is represented... I mean that is a serious limiting factor all by itself." Suzzy's shoulders were slowly hunching up farther and farther which gave her the peculiar look of attempting to bow out of her own skin. "If the underlying assumption is that you have one of two genders than it's so easy to just start accepting that. I dunno. I just think that love and romance and sex and gender and desire and everything, all of it, well... I think it's a fucking travesty that someone is going to start making money off of dumbing all of that down to five stupid numbers." Lux and Suzzy sat in silence as the room dimmed with the setting sun. After a while, Suzzy shrugged and got up off the bed. She strolled over to the cyber-screen on the wall of her bedroom that faced the black mattress bed and gingerly tapped it on.

Lux felt slightly awkward. She sipped very slowly on her mug of tea and fiddled with her hair. Suzzy worked the show in such a way that it was obvious that she had done this plenty of times before. After bringing up the site she wandered back to the bed where she nonchalantly peeled off her clothes. Lux hid her blush behind her tea mug. Blood was smeared down Suzzy's thighs. Lux felt like she should look away but told herself that she was being absurd. She was here to watch Suzzy; that was the point. Suzzy wasn't paying any attention to Lux anyway. Lux

wondered if Suzzy cared that she was working on her period. The sound was on this time, and Suzzy chatted with clients who were beeping into the cyber-room with a familiarity that Lux envied. Suzzy seemed completely relaxed. Lux wondered if it would ever be like this for her.

The dense air of humid summer heat was slowly replaced with the dense sticky smell of cum and sweat and the sweet acidic smell of blood. Suzzy joked and teased clients in between body-rocking orgasms. When Suzzy's hour was up, she flicked off the screen with her touch pad, which lay beside her bed atop a pile of papers and books and lay back against the mattress. Her hands, stomach, and thigh were smeared with blood. Time ticked by and in the thick silence that clung to the room Lux could feel the blood pumping in her head. She should leave. Or peel her eyes away, or probably both. Instead she continued to watch a blood soaked Suzzy watch the ceiling. Lux squeezed her legs together, embarrassed by the heat pulsing through her vulva. When she felt a trickle of wetness squirm it's way between her labia she jumped to her feet and headed for the door.

"Thanksforlettingmewatchbye" Lux mumbled as she flew through the door.

Lux could smell herself all the way home.



"So what's the deal," Roger gestured towards Radio's tick-band, the ever-present green X glowing off of his wrist. "You a fag or somethin'?" Radio found this a very strange question. If he was a fag, by definition, he would have a sexuality. "Not that I've got a problem with fags." Roger nodded solemnly. "Some good people, you know? Okay in my book, fags." Radio and Roger sat on the steps of the baby coaster under the flimsy shade of the platform canopy. Hot out. Worse than normal, even. The kind of gooey hot that makes you move through your own gritty sweat all day long. The kind where it's too hot to move and too hot to sit still. There was

no one at the park. It probably wasn't even worth it at this point to pay the employees to keep it open. No one was going to be showing up in this heat. Radio and Roger had matching straw sunhats, compliments of the park administration, and wet rags around their necks. About every thirty minutes or so someone would show up to dunk their rags in big tubs of ice water.

It was too hot to shrug. "Sure," Radio said slowly. "I'm faggish." They were quiet for a little while Roger chewed this over.

"Well do you fuck men or do you fuck women?"

Radio raised his wrist to flash the X in front of Roger's face. "I think the point is that I'm not fucking anybody."

"Yeah but you must fuck *somebody*."

What world did Roger live in? Could he seriously not believe, not even conceptualize of, a world in which someone could not be fucking anybody?

"Well, women. I guess I fuck women. Did fuck. My girlfriend. I fuck my girlfriend. Did. I don't know. I mean I used to, I mean, before I got this fucking bug under my skin, I fucked women and it was great. I loved women, I do love women. I thought I loved women. I don't even know what these words mean anymore. I dunno. There was awhile when I was boning every girl in sight. I made it a game, I made it a challenge. I think I was trying to prove that I could walk like the other boys and talk like the other boys and get under girls clothes and sheets like the other boys too. But I got over that phase I think. At the time I really thought it was about them. The girls. I really hooked onto that idea too. I liked what I saw that made them girls to me. Like these were really interesting people, people who are doing really crazy shit now and all I saw at the time was just like, lashes and skirts and lips and earrings and cat-eyes and curls. I thought that I was in love with every single one. But then I grew up and I guess I started to get what I

was doing ‘cause it was never about them. It was always about me. It was always about me and me being a boy and to be a boy I had to bone chicks and like, I love chicks, it’s not like I don’t, I really, really do, but it was more about me. I loved them because I loved what they did for me. Maybe my tick knows that. Maybe it can see all of those faceless lashes and curls and it knows that it wasn’t sex.”

Radio remembered that he was talking out loud and turned to Roger who was looking surprisingly contemplative.

“I don’t know about those things.” Roger finally said. “I don’t know how they can be doing all the things they’re supposed to do. Too confusing, you know? Way too much goin’ on for one little machine, one tiny little chip can possibly be picking up. I bet they get confused sometimes. You know, and how do they even know the difference between different kinds of wants? Like I want a woman and I want a beer and I want a nice shady place to sit down and maybe some air conditioning. But how can it know the difference between how I want a woman and how I want air conditioning? Why wouldn’t it think that I wanted to fuck the air conditioning?”

Radio smirked. For a moment he thought about Roger trying to fuck an air conditioner. Radio liked hearing Roger talk about the ticks like that. The truth was that Radio hated it. He hated his tick, he hated his tickband and he hated that fucking X, that X that would never go away, never just leave him alone. That X that pulled out every root of an identity that Radio had worked so hard to trowel into the earth, tore out every shred of the stable person he thought he was. Because it may have never been something that he would have known before this, before the X that would haunt the dreams he had in his sleep as well as the dreams he had in his wake, but his entire identity had been grounded in this basic axiom: He loved fucking women. If Radio

didn't love fucking women than what? Maybe this is hard for me to explain to you. Maybe you're thinking right now, "Then anything?! Then he can like books, or TV, or the smell of sidewalks after a summer rain. Then he could keep a collection of butterfly wings in a jar, or sweep floors in a soup kitchen, or he could be really into Sudoku or horseback riding, or pretty much still be any kind of a person at all." But the truth just was that Radio had been, first and foremost, a lover of women, and without this, the other quirks of his personality seemed like dull platitudes, unworthy of mention.



Perched atop a mound of tick-bands Lux lay naked in her dream-boat. Eyes closed, Lux caressed her slippery thighs with both hands. Dream-Lux opened her eyes and found herself staring at blood covered hands.

Lux woke with a start and checked the time. She was supposed to meet Suzzy and Darla downtown. She threw her clothes on and escaped her apartment at a brisk jog. The sun bared down on her like an angry lover. Out on the street Lux had to squint to see. Darla lived nearby. In the flats. *Actually* in the flats. Lux hurried down the perfectly straight avenues that made up the grid of the flats. Darla's house looked like every other house in the flats. Identical, utilitarian. Lux hurried around the side of the house and down the steps to the cellar door. At Lux's knock, a voice from the other side called for her to come on in. Lux pushed open the door and slammed the heat out behind her. The chill of the highly air conditioned basement apartment felt lovely-sweet. Icy-wonderful. Darla and Suzzy lounged on Darla's bed smoking. Suzzy was smoking salt-licks. Sky blue cigarettes that ashed turquoise and trailed wisps of periwinkle. Lux skipped to the bed and fell into a heap at Darla's feet.

“Ugh, Dar it is so hot out, I can’t even deal. When did it get this hot?” Darla grinned and blue pink smoke above Lux’s head.

“Gets hotter every summer, sweetie. Climate change”

Lux pouted. “I wish it would rain again.”

“Hah!” Darla chortled nudged Lux’s shoulder playfully with her leg. “I don’t. This place floods every time we get a big rain.”

Suzzy grinned from where she leaned up against the wall and pulled a trucker hat over her hair. Spikes of blue popped jaggedly out the back. “Let’s get going.” Suzzy smashed her cigarette against a glass ashtray that lay in the middle of the bed and hopped up. Darla and Lux followed her lead and soon the three were out in the heat again.

“I need some fucking sunglasses.” Lux grumbled.

“Lux, you need a new attitude.” Darla poked Lux’s side. They decided to take the bus into the city to save them some time walking though the heat. By the time they got off downtown all three of them had trickles of sweat sliding down their necks. The toyshop was only a few blocks away. The three of them battled through the stifling hot and into the shop. Lux hadn’t ever been inside. At best she had wanted to. Almost every partner she had since she was fifteen had suggested at some point that they make a trip to the toyshop but this plan had until then never come to fruition. The place was immaculate. Lux strolled around, the shop wasn’t very big and she managed to loop it several times before Darla and Suzzy started forcing her to focus on what she wanted to buy.

It had taken some convincing to get Lux down there. She had tried hard for a while to convince Darla that she was fine with just her hands, but somehow Darla had figured out that Lux had trouble making herself come. Lux felt like she should have probably lid to begin with

but she had been caught off guard. So on the defensive she had attempted to argue that she didn't need to *actually* come to perform on cam. Darla wasn't hearing it. No, no, no. Fuck the cam, fuck the performance Darla had said. It's about you, and you being able to get yourself off. The way Darla saw it, being able to get yourself off was an indispensable part of being autonomous. Nobody should be relying on other people to make them come Darla had said solemnly. Darla had given Lux very explicit instructions. She was now on the prowl for a plug, a wand and a vibrator. Lux hadn't told Radio that she was buying toys. Radio would never say it out right, but he wasn't a fan. Toys were lazy. You have hands for that.

Darla pointed out toys and explained the differences in model and company, size and shape, material and vibrating power. Suzzy strut around and picked up objects, looking rather unenthused.

"What do you like?" Lux asked Suzzy as Darla held up various plugs for her to inspect. Darla rolled her eyes.

"Suzzy is against toys."

Suzzy strolled up to where Lux and Darla where Darla was pointing out the difference between glass and metal plugs and eyes the merchandise with suspicion. "Toys are just a way for companies to make money off of women who think that they won't be able to get off without them. It's just more capitalist propaganda." Suzzy's arm brushed against Lux's. Lux's heart fluttered in time to the flicking of her tick-band.

Darla snorted. "Listen trust-fund. Fuck off. Listen, Lux, do you want me to just pick some stuff out for you? You don't seem too into this." Lux looked at the ground and scuffed the toe of her shoe against the floor.

“Yeah... I mean... I just don’t really know what I want Dar. It’s whatever. You just make a decision.” Darla pursed her lips.

“Alright but whatever I pick out, you have to promise to use it okay?” Lux nodded.

On the bus home Darla pulled out the toys and explained how best to use each one in detail. She had picked out a metal plus, a glass wand, an intimidating vibrator, and a morbidly large bottle of lube. Lux wasn’t sure how she was going to hide these from Radio. Especially the lube. Radio hated lube. As Lux stood in preparation for her busstop Suzzy suddenly got up and moved toward her.

“Listen.” Suzzy’s face was very close to Lux’s and the proximity made Lux want inch away, but with Darla watching she stood her ground and steadied her face. “There’s a party in the Trashlands coming up. Darla and I are going. You should come too.” Lux felt queasy.

“Uh...” The bus lurched to a stop and the doors flew open. “Yeah” Lux backed out of the bus and onto the sidewalk. “Yeah, just like, let me know when it’s happening. I’ll be there.”

“Rad.” Lux could see a smile creep across Suzzy’s face as the doors closed and the bus squealed back into motion.



The subway squealed and hissed to a stop at the park and an automated message came through the loudspeakers to announce that this stop would be the end of the line. The doors made their signature sound of decompression as they opened onto the platform and Radio wobbled out of the car, rubbing his eyes as if trying to massage awake-ness into his face. At the top of the winding staircase that ended at the park gateway the late morning sun streamed into the hole of the subway. There were a couple of early-comers to the park, there always were at this time of the season, but mostly the place was as empty now as it always was right before the rides

opened. It was an odd time of day. The sun was high; it wasn't yet noon. It felt like there should be people there, a feeling Radio had never quite gotten over, but the midway lay mostly empty and steaming with heat. Radio forced his lanky body across the concrete and into the employee office where a crowd of bright yellow and green shirted ride operators furnished the dark room, awaiting their ride assignments so that they could start punching in.

Radio plucked a neon-green polo from the stack of extra smalls and pulled it over his head. It fit snugly over his bound chest and faded black shirt but it was too short, exposing several inches of his long torso. Radio leaned up against the same filing cabinet Roger was propped against. Roger nodded at Radio without breaking the glare he aimed at Celeste who was bouncing about greeting the employees and flirting with the younger operators. The room murmured with dark, lazy impatience. Two more operators slipped dejectedly into the room before Celeste started happily belting out ride assignments. There were about thirty rides in the park, kiddie rides, slow rides, house rides, thrill rides, coasters, and tumblers. Each ride had its own flavor, its unique perks and irritations. Some offered more shade; others allowed you to sit down while operating. Some rides required less contact with customers, and others required more. Some rides could be operated alone, and others required a crew of operators. As Celeste called out ride assignments, those operators called started getting up and punching in.

“Radio, Tonka, Roger: Carousel.” Tonka, who had slipped in while Celeste started reading out the assignments, appeared before Roger and Radio eyes twinkling, and Cheshire smile on full.

“Bank.” Tonka said cheerfully, flicking her hair and reaching past the two men to grab her punch ticket. Radio and Roger plucked their own punch tickets from the rack before following Tonka over to where the machine was eating tickets and punching time. The three

employees took turns sticking in their cards. Each time the machine made a clicking sound and then spit the ticket back out. Tonka grabbed the tin mailbox used for collecting tickets from the shelf marked ‘family rides’ before leaping joyfully out the door. Radio and Roger followed in the gutter-sprite’s wake, less enthusiastically. Not that they weren’t relieved. The carousel was a catch. The ancient machine provided shade from the pounding heat was one of the few rides that the operators could ride while working. Usually it didn’t take a team of three to run it, but every once and awhile, when everyone showed up to work, they would shove extra carnies onto casual rides like the carousel or the train. It really only took one person to actually operate the ride. The other workers could post up on the carousel as it ran, watching to make sure there were no brave jumpers. The carousel was the oldest ride at the park. Some of the intricately carved animals had probably seen several different centuries. It played signature organ carousel music constantly throughout the day, and the top was inlaid with many thousands of tiny lights and mirrors.

Roger took care of the inspection as Radio and Tonka walked in circles around the ride, not trying very hard to look busy. Folks had started to show up now and there were small crowds milling about, waiting for rides to start opening. Roger hung the open sign on the ride and park goers started crowding around the entrance, awaiting the open gate that would let them board the magnificent wooden circle. Radio and Tonka paced about the wooden platform while children and families streamed onboard. Eventually they climbed up onto two animals in the back to enjoy the breeze and the shade. Radio took a lion and Tonka took a rooster. Radio leaned back against the yellow metal bar that skewered the wooden animal to the ride and watched Tonka drape herself over the neck of the rooster out of his periphery. Tonka was so little.

“You know carousels cause more injuries every year than any other ride?” Tonka looked expectantly at Radio. Her grin was a swift punch to the gut. Radio shook his head. “It’s because

there aren't any restraints. It's so slow it actually just lulls people into a false sense of security."

Tonka laughed, delighted with herself. "It seems so tame that stupid ass kids will just jump off when they feel like it, folks think they're in control. Hah! Then some stupid kid breaks their ankle." Tonka nodded. Her voice was high and throaty.

Roger's gravelly voice came in over the microphone system as the ride started and stopped to inform those on board of the rules. Tonka and Radio didn't make much extraneous effort to monitor the rider's behavior.

The carousel music blared in the background, overly cheerful. Tonka leaned over to Radio and plucked his wrist up to examine his tick-band. Tonka's finger tips were too cool and delicate for the sweaty summer day and they shot off sparks through the powder-keg of Radio's smitten insides.

"What does X mean?" Tonka's giant blue eyes, an almost identical blue to Radio's, intently watched his face for a reaction. Radio wondered if she already knew.

"It means asexual." Radio cleared his throat and scratched at his polo; his chest hurt.

"Oh wow." Tonka dropped Radio's wrist which fell lifelessly back into his lap. The weight of the tick band was unbearable. "So you just don't like sex?" Radio squirmed in his seat.

"Actually..." Radio took a deep breath in. "No. I do like sex. Or at least I did like sex when I was having it. I haven't been having a lot of sex with this thing puttin' my shit on blast." Radio nodded toward the tick band. Radio wished that he had phrased that last part differently. It made it sound like his asexuality had always been apparent to him but now he couldn't keep it a secret. It hadn't ever really occurred to Radio before that this may have been the way he had started to feel about it. Like the tick-band was revealing a cherished secret that he could now no longer hide. Radio felt constantly embarrassed by it.

“Wow, that’s really interesting.” Tonka tilted her head to one side. “So you aren’t asexual? Is it broken? Have you had it checked?” Radio shook his head.

“I don’t think it’s broken, but I guess I don’t know; I haven’t gone in to have it checked or anything. The nurse at the clinic told me that this happens, the X I mean, but I haven’t ever seen another one.” Radio’s stomach was dropping slowly. “It makes me feel like a freak. I don’t understand why it reads like this. It makes me feel like all this time what I’ve thought was sex, feeling sexual, was maybe something else entirely. But like, what then? If it wasn’t sex I’ve been feeling all of this time then what is it?” Radio looked up from his lap to find Tonka’s eyes glued to his face. His stomach turned and he fidgeted in his seat.

“Wow.” Tonka looked out into the revolving distance. “And I thought mine was annoying.” She shook her thin wrist and her own tick-band spun around. It was loose of course, her wrists were tiny. “Mine just reads two. Nothing special. But it means that everybody is thinkin’ I’m an equal opportunities kinda girl. I dunno. I just wish a two wasn’t the same as an open for business sign.”

Radio cocked his head. “I’d trade you.”

Tonka leaned back in her seat, scooting down into the cock’s saddle. “Have you thought about getting it taken out?”

Radio shrugged. “No. I haven’t heard of anyone getting them taken out. And even if I did, I would still know. Even if they ripped this tick out of my shoulder I would still know that it read like this. So I don’t really think it matters much if I take it out or leave it in. It’ll always be there in my mind now.” Tonka relaxed into the bar against her back and fixed Radio with an inquisitive look.

“Hey, have you heard about this Trashlands party?” Radio shook his head. “You should come. It’s supposed to be really, really huge.” Tonka nodded. “It’s all I’ve been hearing about lately.”

“I’ve heard of parties being held there before, but I’ve never heard of anyone actually going.” Radio looked out into the direction of the Trashlands. “How do you even get out there?” Tonka shrugged.

“Walk out I guess.”

“Uh, yeah.” Radio cleared his throat and looked down at his hands. “I mean I’d be into that.” Tonka tossed her smile towards him.

“Bank.”



Lux lay naked on her back in the middle of her bed. She stared at the ceiling as the cyber-screen pinged in clients. Beside her she had her new toys carefully lined up. She glanced at the screen where she could see that clients were typing her messages. She looked back at the ceiling. She had quickly figured out in the few weeks following her first show that it didn’t really matter very much whether or not she chose to interact with the clients. For every client that seemed to want her to communicate with them their appeared to be one that would rather pretend that she didn’t know they were watching. Darla had explained this concept to her. There was a growing trend toward a kind of cold performance. The camer wouldn’t look at the camera or act like it was there at all. Lux preferred this method. She sighed and looked at her line of new toys. She didn’t have very much experience with toys but Darla had been very thorough in her descriptions.

Lux plucked up the plug and examined it. It was small but heavy, made of smooth solid metal. She squeezed out some lube and wiped it gingerly over the surface of the plug. Lux hiked her knees up to her chest and with the lube on her fingers she massaged her asshole. She held the heavy plug delicately with two fingers and grimaced as she dipped one of her fingers into her ass. It was a tight fit. Lux sighed again, eyeing up the plug. This was the toy she was most apprehensive about. Lux hadn't delved very far into the world of anal play. Aside from the curious finger that made it up her rectum on particularly heavy and drunken nights with especially curious lovers, Lux had nothing to really go off of. How was this foreign object going to get up her ass? When Lux had posed this question to Darla, the lilac smoke stack had answered with a curt: 'you'd be surprised how much can fit up your ass.' Lux sighed. Yes, probably she would be surprised. Lux held the plug up against her asshole. It was very cold, but not totally unpleasant. After rubbing it back and forth over the opening a few times she took a deep breath and pushed it in quickly. There was a moment of discomfort but it was not as painful as Lux had feared. It was a very odd sensation and not really like anything Lux had ever felt before. The weight and cold of the plug was certainly alien, but strangely nice. Lux closed her eyes for a moment and felt heat circulating in her groin. Lux opened her eyes and considered the other toys at her side. What now? Should she try the wand? Should she try the vibrator? Should she try them both? Which one first?

Lux decided that while she was on insertions she might as well try the wand. The glass wand was also hard and cold but not as heavy as the plug. Lux applied more lube to the toy and then rubbed the remainder from her hand over her vaginal opening. She wondered if it would be uncomfortable to have so much stuff in her abdomen. What if the tissue that separated her vaginal canal from her rectum got pinched between the plug and the wand? Lux grimaced again.

Before she could psyche herself out, Lux brought the wand up to her vagina and pushed it in quickly. This time, it was a little more uncomfortable. However, the discomfort was almost immediately surpassed by intense pleasure. Lux felt drunk. She felt heady. She told herself to keep breathing. She did indeed feel extremely full of stuff. Her stomach tensed. Lux felt silly with her various instruments sticking out of her like a medical experiment. Lux reached out and picked up the vibrator. She examined the monstrous utensil. It was large and, of course, having been picked out by Darla, hot pink. Lux flipped the 'on' switch and it came to life. The obnoxiously loud vibrator moved so violently it shook her hand and she could feel the vibrations going up her arm and into her shoulder. Lux promptly switched it back off. Fuck. After a few moments of silence Lux turned the vibrator back on.

With a deep breath Lux lowered the machine to the dark mound of her groin. With one hand she lightly parted her labia and with the other she hovered the vibrator above her clitoris. Nervous anticipation caused beads of perspiration to form at her temples.

Very, achingly slowly, Lux lowered the shivering vibrator to her clit. Lux choked on a sharp gasp as her eyes squeezed shut. In the darkness of her head she could feel nothing but her body responding to too much stimuli. Lux shuttered and convulsed. The feeling of mounting pleasure was too fast. Lux tried to stave off alarm. It was the feeling of being clinked up to the top of a roller coaster, and your stomach knows what the drop at the end will be like. The drop came with the musical accompaniment of a strangled animal cry. Lux switched off the vibrator and it rolled away from her across the bed. A wave of euphoria wrapped around lux like a warm bath. Lux laughed. The sound was so strange and unexpected that it made her laugh harder. She kept laughing for a long time.

Lux felt no loneliness or longing. She rubbed her stomach gently and before she closed her eyes she thought that she glimpsed her tick-band blank, reading nothing at all.



“She likes me.” Roger husked, grinning too wide for his face. Radio was still wistfully watching the bend in the passageway out of the smoking-gazebo-clearing where just a moment before Tonka had disappeared, back to the shutter and grind of The Spider. Radio’s mouth tightened and he tried not to roll his eyes.

“Yeah?” He was barely listening.

“Yeah, just yesterday, we were sitting right here, you know? And her bug, it turned, you know? Turned when I touched her arm; on accident of course.” Radio tried not to glare. He was listening now. Roger was still grinning with the Cheshire smile of a Wiley cartoon character.

“You mean it *flicks*?”

“Yeah, you know, I don’t really give much of a shit about those things. I think they’re fuckin’ creepy myself. I don’t know why anyone would be goin’ around tryin’ to get shit put under their skin. I mean it’s a saying for a reason right, like, that woman, *she just knows how to get under my skin*. Or let’s say, you know, that fellow, him the one on the carousel all the time, it really bugs me that they’ve always got him on the carousel. Bugs the shit outta me. Gets under my skin. See?! Gets under my skin! Why would anyone be *trying* to get something under their skin!?” Roger stopped for a second looking vaguely in the direction of where the carousel might be if they could see through the canopy of the gazebo, forgetting for a moment what he had been talking about.

“But Tonka, her tick likes me or somethin’ cause it’s always flickin’ my way when I’m around. If you know what I mean.” Radio tried to stuff down his complete repulsion for Roger at

that moment. Radio just looked straight forward, glazed eyed and still like a frozen carousel animal. Just when Radio was beginning to think that he had weathered the storm, Roger continued.

“I like those little gutter kids, you know? Little things, look like they’re still thirteen. Maybe it’s all of that shit they stick in their arms.” Radio did roll his eyes this time, but Roger didn’t seem to notice. Before Roger started talking again, Radio got up to leave.

“Listen, if you hear Tonka’s got any sweet words for me, you let me know alright?”
Radio left without saying a word.



Lux bounced off the subway and up the stairs into the park with a zeal that seemed absurd given the oppressive heat. That day she had woken up missing Radio. As she skipped around the park in search of his ride she hummed along with the carousel music. Radio was just being tapped out from the Ferris wheel when Lux arrived. Radio hadn’t seen Lux in days. They had been avoiding each other. Radio’s heart pounded and his chest tightened. He looked around instinctively for Tonka, who was nowhere to be seen. Radio sighed with relief. Lux snaked an arm around Radio’s waist and kissed his cheek.

“Hey sweets.” Lux beamed at Radio who managed to muster up a strained half-smile in return. Lux’s body prickled. Instinctually she knew that something was wrong. Radio started walking urgently toward the employee holding area, Lux in toe.

“Jus’ sec.’ Radio mumbled towards Lux as he flew up the steps of the small building and through the door. Radio tore off his work-polo and punched out. Outside Radio briskly walked past Lux and towards the subway stop. Lux’s stomach flipped and tied into knots.

“Hey Radio,” Lux said quietly, “It’s nice to see you... Is everything okay?” Radio shrugged, not looking at Lux. His face was flushed and his ears burned. Radio was frantically leading Lux to the mouth of the subway entrance.

“It’s just weird. To see you here.” Lux’s heart sank. She chastised herself for expecting Radio to be excited to see her. In her mind’s eye, walking up to Radio’s ride he would have seen her and broke into an earth shattering smile. The clouds would have rolled out and the breeze would have swept them into a blissful afternoon of cuddles. Reconnection. Stupid. Lux should know better by now. Right as the couple were about to descend into the subway Roger strut into their path. Radio crumpled inwardly.

“Hey there beautiful.” Roger leered at Lux, his body was slumped against the heat of the sun and sweat dripped from his temples. Lux reached up to tuck a strand of bone white curls behind her ear. As she did Roger and Radio caught sight of her tick, which was flicking violently. Lux saw both of their eyes drawn suddenly to her tick-band so she angled her wrist up to see what they were looking at. The display number was going back and forth from zero to one. The number flickered on zero for a while before a one would reappear and then it would be back on zero. Embarrassed, Lux held her right wrist in her left hand, trying to cover the flicking display. Roger’s leer widened across his face.

“C’mon.” Radio muttered under his breath, pulling Lux behind him, down into the subway station.

“I’ll see you later.” Roger called out after the couple. Lux’s face burned. The subway ride back to the apartment was thick and silent. Lux felt nauseous. She shouldn’t have gone to the park. Lux would intermittently tug on Radio’s shirt or make small sounds in his ear to somehow communicate her distress but he stayed rigid in the seat beside her, looking straight ahead.

When Lux and Radio climbed up out of the subway exit dusk had fallen and the industrial murmured with the life that comes out after the sun sets.

Without any warning Lux stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Radio continued walking for a moment but then turned around when he saw that Lux had stopped.

“What?” Radio walked back over to Lux and spoke towards the ground between them.

Lux shook her head and stared at the same spot of cracked concrete that Radio spoke to. Her head shaking picked up speed until she was wildly tossing her tresses from side to side.

“What is it, Lux?” The irritation in Radio’s voice seeped out around the corners of his mouth. Tears pricked at the corners of Lux’s eyes as she kept her bone-locks swaying from side to side.

“Why do you stay with me if you hate me so much?” Lux was surprised to hear these words come out of her mouth. Obviously Radio was too. Too bad Radio had a poor poker face. The words hit him like a shock and his body tensed up from his toes to the creases of his eyes. A torrent of tears cascaded down Lux’s cheeks. Overriding her embarrassment at crying in public which she generally refused to do, was the desire to embarrass Radio but forcing him to play witness to the spectacle. “You don’t love me at all. Why do you stay here?”

“Lux, you’re being ridiculous.” Radio’s teeth were clenched. Lux started crying harder.

“Lux, please pull yourself together, I can’t talk to you if you get like this.”

“You won’t talk to me at all.” Lux was shaking. Radio rolled his eyes.

“C’mon Lux, let’s go inside.” Lux was crying harder now. Her sobs echoed up and down the street and people passing them were staring, trying to discern whether or not this was the sort of situation in which they should intervene. Her body convulsed as she heaved for breath.

Radio placed his hand on the small of Lux's back and gently steered her into their apartment building. It was cool and musty inside the building. Lux didn't want to go up the stairs but Radio pushed harder on her back so she stumbled forward and in this way, the two made it up the stairs to their apartment. Lux's hysterical cries filled the corridor and then changed pitch as they went through the entrance of their shared place. Once inside, Radio stopped pressing on Lux's back. Gruffly, he pushed past her and into the hallway. Lux continued to sob as she listlessly followed Radio down the hall and into their bedroom.

"What the fuck, Lux? What the fuck is going on?"

"Why are you with me? When you don't want to be?" Lux choked on the mucus running down her throat.

"Why does your tick flick all of the time?" Radio kicked the wall which quacked violently. "Like, what the fuck Lux? Do you actually want to fuck every person that you see? Really, Lux?" Lux stumbled to the wall and slid down to the floor.

"Why don't you just leave me?"

"Why don't you just leave?"

Lux covered her face with her hands. "What happened?"

Radio stared out the window and listened to Lux. "You changed."

"Did I?" Lux's question was a swift fist but her aim was off and Radio continued to watch the street.

"Maybe you just aren't who I thought you were."

Lux filled the room with shuttering, gasping cries that slowly turned into quiet whimpers as she fell asleep on the floor.



When Lux's eyes fluttered open she found herself face to face with Radio, who was staring intently at her, as if expecting her to wake up.

"We're going on a date." Lux followed Radio out of the apartment and down the street through the industrial and into downtown.

The air was crisp and cool outside and the sky had barely begun to lighten. Lux wasn't sure what time it was. It felt like a dream. At any moment Lux could imagine finding herself atop a mound of tick-bands on a sinking ship. As Radio walked purposefully down alleys and across deserted streets, Lux stumbled after in a sleepless daze. As the two neared the heart of the city's downtown Radio took Lux's hand gave it a squeeze. Lux's mouth opened to ask questions but her mouth was dry and her mind was slow. As the sun's rays started peeking through skyscrapers Radio stopped outside of a brunch restaurant and opened the door for Lux to go through. Throughout breakfast Radio nuzzled Lux's neck and held her hand. Lux had no words. When their food was finished Radio paid and on the walk home he held Lux close to his body with one arm snaked around her waist. At home, Lux fell asleep watching radio stroke strands of moonlight out of her face.



Radio watched Lux sleep. Her face was relaxed and childlike. For a while he felt content to watch her sleep. After a while a strange feeling crept over him and he felt very desperately certain that he needed to leave the apartment before she woke up.

Radio didn't know where to go, so perhaps it isn't surprising that he managed to find himself instinctively heading toward the park.

The park was bright and sunny and bustling with people. Radio slipped from ride to ride, passing through ride operators and passenger lines. As the day wore on clouds started blocking

out the blazing sun. It was a relieving change. Radio didn't pay it much notice but the ride operators appreciated the shade. Radio rode ride after ride until he could barely perceive the upset to his physical senses anymore.

Just as the air at the park became thick with the unmistakable promise of coming rain Tonka appeared across the midway. Radio hopped the fence of the mini-coaster and scrambled over to her. She was smoking a cigarette and looking blearily around the park.

"You know there's no smoking on the midway." Radio said when he got to Tonka, staring at the ground. He saw Lux's sleeping face in the pattern of the asphalt so he looked up at Tonka whose dilated pupils locked with Radio's.

"Do you wanna see something cool?" Radio said into Tonka's hazy face.

"Yeah," Tonka rasped. Her head tilted around on her neck. Radio grabbed Tonka's hand and started leading her off towards the carousel. Tonka's arms were covered in thick red rashes, a common sign of too much rub. The carousel's music blared out of the speakers on top of the ride. The operator greeted Radio and Tonka as the two hopped the fence into the ride but neither of them reciprocated the greeting. Radio pulled Tonka behind him onto the ride and to the base of the carousel where a small door was hidden. Radio pushed open the door and pulled Tonka inside, closing the door behind them. From inside the base of the carousel, the music was deafening. Tonka and Radio squirmed around on the dirt covered wooden floor of the carousel. When it was over, Tonka took Radio's hand and led him out of the ride, out of the park, and into the Trashlands.



Lux woke up alone. Outside the sun beat down on those walking through the industrial. Lux pushed the grotesque caricature of the happy-couple that she had performed with Radio that morning out of her head as she showered and dressed.

Lux met Suzzy and Darla at Darla's basement apartment. The two had been doing rubs for several hours by the time Lux arrived. They giggled and rolled around on the bed creating a lilac and sapphire swirl. When Darla tossed Lux a tube of rub the ivory queer applied it without comment or hesitation.

On the way to the Trashlands the three girls laughed and meandered, played in the streets and continued to rub their arms down with chemicals. Above them the sky was quickly growing dark. Thunder clouds were moving in. Lux rejoiced. She missed the rain.

By the time the three of them had crossed the downtown and had begun creeping past old-growth skyscrapers and the rotting tombstones of urban decay it was sprinkling. The sky twisted overhead and shadows kept time with the camers. Lux heard the party long before they could see it. They had been hiking through abandonment for what felt to Lux like hours before they crested a hill and we're looking down into a pit of writhing bodies. Music blared and fires and lights lit up the field. Lux couldn't pick out individual people. Lux could barely pick out individual people. Suzzy and Darla moved with Lux down into the pit of the party. Very quickly once they had reached the mob of dancers and rabble rousers Lux was split off from the group. Lux lurched her body through the mob, sometimes dancing. Colors and shapes melted and imploded in front of her. As Lux moved around the corner of a mass of bodies, she came face to face with Radio. Radio had a large bottle in one hand and both of his arms were covered in rub rashes. When he saw Lux, he dropped the bottle, which proved to be empty. Radio and Lux

moved toward each other and as the music swelled they pressed their mouths together before being ripped away by the sea of moshing bodies.

The last thing Lux could remember before passing out was walking away from the fire and the people and the party and, perched on a rock, overlooking the park, cutting out a small piece of metal that had become lodged in her shoulder. As the girl held the tick up, bloody and itty bitty, she laughed merrily to herself. The rain pounded the ground around her, her head, her body, and the metal object she held between thumb and forefinger as her tick-band flickered one last time, and then went dark.



Lux woke up in the field. Suzzy and Darla were nowhere to be seen. Light had started to make its way through stormy rain clouds. The ground that Lux lay on was moist. Lux's pocket vibrated and so she retrieved her phone from the depths of her jeans. It was Lo. Lux suddenly had a great yearning to see her little sister. She agreed to meet her at a diner downtown.

It took Lux several hours to stumble her way out of the Trashlands.

At the diner, Lo was already awaiting her big sister at a booth. Lux slid into the seat and the two grinned at each other. It felt good to see Lo. It was nice to see that Lo looked fairly healthy, and although it was probably beyond her realm of possibility it made Lux glad to think that Lo was perhaps happy as well. Lo was probably looking a great deal better than her, herself, and it was at this point that it fully dawned on Lux that she was currently covered in blood and mud. Lux and Lo shared breakfast and drank coffee. Lux told Lo about Radio and her tick and all of the troubles. She left out the webcamming. Lux liked to be able to believe that Lo was too young to have ever heard of the phenomenon.

By the time Lux had finished her story Lo didn't really have to tell her anything.

Sometimes just hearing yourself say the words you already know is far better than any advice that anyone else could give you. The sisters embraced and departed.

Lux took her time walking home. She walked past churches and diners, brunch houses and rub shacks, liquor stores and sex shops. When she got home she didn't say a word to Radio. Lux packed in silence and left without saying goodbye.