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Opening Extract from...

Animals

Written by Emma Jane Unsworth

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WHITE PISS GOOD; AMBER PISS BAD

You know how it is. Saturday afternoon. You wake up and you can't move.

I blinked and the floaters on my eyeballs shifted to reveal Tyler in her ratty old kimono over in the doorway. 'Way I see it,' she said, glass in one hand, lit cigarette in the other, 'girls are tied to beds for two reasons: sex and exorcisms. So, which was it with you?'

I squinted up at my right arm, which felt like it was levitating – but no, nothing so glamorous. The plastic bangle on my right wrist had hoopla'd over a bar on the bedhead during the night, manacling my hand and suspending my arm over the pillow. I wriggled upwards to release it but only managed to travel an inch or so before a strange, elasticky feeling pulled me back. I looked down. My tights – or rather the left leg (I was still sluttishly sporting the right, mid-thigh) – had wrapped itself around a bed knob. I tugged. No good. The knot held fast.

'Get that for me, would you?' I croaked.

She'd moved across the room and was leaning against the wardrobe. *Her* wardrobe. Her room.

We'd been out. Holy fuck, had we been out. A montage of images spooled through the brainfug. Fizzy wine, flat wine, city streets, cubicles, highly experimental burlesque moves on bar stools . . .

Tyler took her time looking for somewhere to put her cigarette. I knew that she was really savouring the scene. This was one for the ever-burgeoning anecdote store; to be wheeled out,

exaggerated and relished on future nights that would doubtlessly end in similar indignities. *Hey, remember the time you tied yourself to the bed?* Killer.

'Where did you sleep, anyway?' I said.

'I didn't sleep. I Fonz'd it on the back lawn with a spritzer and my shades on.'

'Fonzing it' was making yourself feel better about things (aka the inevitable existentials) by telling yourself that you were cool and everything was fine. We also referred to it as 'self-charming'. It had a 55% success rate, depending on location and weather.

'What time is it now?' I asked.

Tyler tugged at the knot, raised an eyebrow and unthreaded the tight-leg into a straight black line, which she held taut to show me. 'Half past five.'

'And what time did we get in?'

She pinged the tight-leg at me and held up her hand. I thought she was saying five – but no, she was saying no. *No forensic autopsies.*

I nodded. The effects of the day's self-charming were stable but critical. Don't think about endings. Don't look down. There were rules that had to be obeyed in order to guarantee a horror-free hangover: no news, no parental phone calls, some fresh air if you could tolerate the vertical plane. Sitcoms. Carbohydrates.

I ran my swollen tongue over my unbrushed teeth. A farm-ish smell. Furriness.

'How do you feel?' she asked.

'Like an entire family of raccoons is nesting in my head.'

'Nesting raccoons? How nice for you. I've got two bull-seals fucking a bag of steak.'

I sat up. Woof. Liquefying headrush. I looked down and caught sight of the prolapsed duvet on the floor by the side of the bed, its insides lolling between the missing buttons of the striped cotton cover. I squinted at Tyler. Five-two with cropped

black hair sprung into curls. Face like a fallen putto. Deadly. She gripped her fag between her teeth as she opened her kimono and re-tied it tighter. She was wearing knickers but no bra: a bold move for the garden in March. She pulled the fag from her teeth and exhaled. 'I know this will only concuss you further,' she said, 'but I'm getting excited about the Olympics.'

I held my head with one hand, squeezed my fingers into my temples. 'The Olympics? Fuck! What month are we in?'

'March.'

'Thank Christ.'

My paranoia wasn't so paranoid when you took into account the time we'd gone to bed on Saturday only to wake up on Monday morning. On that occasion I'd raised my head to see Tyler frantically shrugging off her kimono in front of the dresser.

What are you doing, you maniac? It's Sunday!

It's fucking Monday and I'm fucking late, she said, batting a dimp out of her regulation baseball cap.

What's that on your eye?

She turned to the mirror. Gasped and sighed. *It's a low-budget high-definition eyebrow.*

It's permanent marker.

It's A ClockworkmotherfuckingOrange. Oh Lo Lo Lo, what am I going to do?

There were still red wine stains on her kimono from that night some months ago. She took another drag on her fag. 'And then the rover is almost at Mars, just a few months now until it performs its neurotically precise landing. There's too much happening this summer. My hope can't take the strain. There was this Olympics ad just on with a cartoon man diving off a cartoon cliff. It had me in *bits*.'

'Cartoons can be very moving.'

'Why do I feel more for cartoons than the news?'

'Because you're perverse. And American.'

'Barely, any more. American, I mean.'

'Say "vitamin". Aluminium. *H*erbs.'

She'd lived in England for ten years and hadn't lost her accent – I especially liked hearing her say the words 'mirror' (*mere*) and 'moon' (*murn*). Tyler had moved over from Nebraska when her mum, an English lecturer, decided she wanted a divorce and applied for a teaching job at Manchester Met. The Johnsons were well off, the profits of her dad's family's cattle-farming mostly. They had a ranch in Crawford with stables and turkeys and a porch with a chair-swing. But for all the perks Tyler said that living there had been like standing on a mathematical plane drawing: eerily flat and evenly portioned into squares of sallow crops. Just you and the horizon, waiting. More specifically: filling the hours. You had to tell yourself you were waiting or really there was no point in eating your breakfast, changing your shirt.

'I was thinking of boiling up some pasta bows,' Tyler said. 'Reckon you could eat?'

'Possibly.'

She looked at her watch.

'By my estimation this culinary extravaganza should be ready in about fifteen. Now, do you need some help getting up?'

'No. And don't be nice to me, or I'll cry.'

'Roger that.'

She retrieved her cigarette from the side of the dresser and left the room, fagsmoke trailing. On the back of her kimono was the logo of a Thai boxing club in Salford – the Pendlebury Pythons – along with their motto, in looping gold font: DEATH BEFORE DEFEAT.

I lay still for a moment, planning. An order of ceremony was needed. Become upright. Brush teeth. Find phone.

Phone.

Jim.

My fiancé (although we both hated the word) was in New

York performing a piano recital on a barge in Brooklyn. We'd spoken the previous night before he sound-checked. *You be careful*, he'd said. He knew me, knew the way the night rose in me, knew the way Tyler and I egged each other on. *Course*, I said. At the time I was *carefully* smoking outside a bar on Oxford Road, while Tyler was inside *carefully* transferring the number of a dealer from her dying phone onto her forearm in lip-liner. The rest was – well, not quite history; more a chain of events that amounted to the same headache, the same ransacked purse, same wasted day-after. But at least we'd made it home (you congratulate yourself with the *avoided* crimes when you're clutching at the grubby straws of self-charming) – why, I'd been positively restrained, getting home and sort-of into bed. The previous week we'd ended up at a house in Stretford with a fifty-year-old air traffic controller called Pickles who'd invited us for a (purely friendly) nightcap to discover he only had an eighteenth of a bottle of gin in the cupboard. *How he could have over-estimated that situation quite so much is beyond me*, Tyler had said. *It's enough to make you never get on a plane again*.

I looked to my side and saw a glass I'd somehow had the sense to fill and place there before I collapsed. I reached for it, gulped one twice three times. My gunky mouth made the liquid milky. Swallowing was an effort. I drank water like it was a job to do, an unpaid internship at my own inner (highly corrupt) Ministry of Health. Getting the whole pint down was hard work. As soon as the water was in me it wanted to come out. I ran along the thin hall to the bathroom, left tight-leg trailing. Slammed the door.

The tiles were blissfully cool under my feet. Bathrooms were the best kind of room. You knew that whatever happened in there, you were going to be all right. You had a sink, a toilet, no soft furnishings, usually no audience. I pulled down my

knickers and sat. A thunderbolt of piss plummeted and the rest trickled through.

The wall next to me was full of holes – a succession of injuries from various toilet-roll holders, towel rails, shelves and, I could only imagine, fists and fingers – that had been botchily plastered and painted over in sickly pale yellow by the tenants before us. On the other side, my knee rested against the flimsy fibreglass bath-side. The slightest pressure could dint the bath-side in and out. Sometimes I did it for fun – just pressed in and out with my knee. (Sometimes I did it for hours.) A cityscape of curdling beauty products sprawled along the bathside and then, at the foot of the bath, the winking sink with its hot tap head missing. A red metal heart, dusty and hollow and punctured with crescent shapes, hung on a long chain from a nail above the sink, next to an extending shaving mirror that Tyler used to do her eyeliner. Next to the sink, two folded banknotes balanced on a rung of the towel rail, drying. I stood and looked in the bowl before I flushed, recalling the adage of a girl I'd once worked with: *White piss good; amber piss bad*. Orwellian in its visceral simplicity. Meanwhile the liquid I had dispatched into the toilet bowl was almost ochre. Not good, not good at all. More water was in order.

I walked down the hallway to the kitchen, past the coats, hats and bags dangling from hooks like the vaporised hanged. Tyler owned the flat – her dad had stumped up the cash (not just the deposit, but The Cash) not long after she moved over – and I was meant to give her a hundred a month for my bare little box-room, but I never had it and she never asked. The flat was part of a wood-and-chrome cooperative that had been built in Hulme, south of the centre, in the late 1990s. The block shared a central courtyard with a patch of grass and a few raised beds where people with the time and organisational skills grew their own vegetables. Someone had tried to keep chickens in there

once (*Stuck in Fucking Chickentown*, said Tyler, quoting John Cooper Clarke), in a little sustainable-wood hutch they'd whittled themselves or something, but they hadn't lasted long with all the foxes. Zuzu alone had dragged in four hens, limp-necked and lovingly punctured, through the cat-flap, leaving each splayed in the centre of the kitchen floor and she'd looked up at us as if to say: *I caught it, bitches – the least you can do is pluck it and cook it.* It was mostly hippy types who lived in the surrounding flats; 'hippysters' as Tyler called them (*eco-friendly toilet cleaner and fifty designer jumpers . . .*). In the shop space on the ground floor of the block there was a vegan café that Tyler and I ate in when we forgot to buy food (often), taking in our own ham and honey, applied under the table to liven things up – the latter because a) Tyler liked sweet toppings on toast and b) they'd reprimanded her once when she asked them whether they had any, thinking it would be a safe bet. *They looked at me like I'd just slaughtered an orang-utan in front of them*, she said. *And this was HONEY. It's a natural product. Bees LIKE MAKING IT. No one forces them to. Where will the madness end???*

She was in the kitchen merrily slicing up a bumper jar of German Bratwursts. Zuzu wound expectantly around her ankles. Zuzu was muscular; more military hardware than cat. She barrelled up and down the hallway. When she trod on my foot it hurt. Tyler walked over to the sink and drained the pan, tipped the pasta into a bowl. A few greasy bows spilled over the sides and slid steaming across the draining board.

'We're gonna need a bigger boat.'

Spinning around looking for a larger bowl, she eventually shrugged and tipped the pasta back into the pan. 'Fuckit. Those are for you, by the way.'

I looked over to the opposite counter and saw a pint of iced

water and two ibuprofens. I necked them and edged around her to refill the glass with water at the sink.

Tyler scraped the slices of sausage into the pan, squirted ketchup over the top and stirred it all together with the handle of a rusty fish slice. 'So Tom texted.'

I put the glass of water down, goggled her on.

'Jean's gone into labour.'

Jean was Tyler's sister. Lived in London. Did something to do with funding for museums. Or at least used to, before.

'Shit.'

'Yeah. She's *dil-ating*. Saying it's all his fault. You know the drill.'

A grimace with this. Tyler and Jean were close – so close that it had been a composite betrayal when Jean got pregnant, considering the fact that at twenty-eight Jean was a whole year younger. *Another one lost for a decade!* was Tyler's initial reaction, delivered with a sweep of her kimono sleeve, like a Roman emperor declaring the closing of the games.

'Is she all right?' I said. 'What – ' It was hard to know what to ask about someone who was in labour. How's her perineum holding out? Has she shat herself yet?

Jeannie Johnson. Who'd once accidentally set her own pubes ablaze standing naked on a candlelit dinner table. She'd outspectacled us all. Now where was she? Spouting clichés, in stirrups.

'Yeah,' Tyler said. 'Tom's going to call when there's news.'

She handed me the bowl and a mug, a fork and a teaspoon, and walked ahead carrying the pan with two hands. She paused at the kitchen door and turned. Nocturnal woodland eyes, black and glistening. 'Do you want some wine?'

We looked at each other for a few moments, assessing the weights of our various desires and reservations as they rolled and pitched inside. After all: the first rule of intoxication was

company. Do it together and you have a party; do it alone and you have a problem. I felt the dryness of my insides, tubes crackling and gasping.

'I don't know, are you having wine?'

'I do not know.'

'Well, we might as well, if it's there.'

'Yes!' Tyler said, dancing with the pan. 'Make like mountaineers!'

She jogged through to the lounge, deposited the pan on the plate-glass coffee table and jogged back to the kitchen. She returned a few minutes later with two grubby tumblers of white wine. Drops of water clung to the top of the glasses where she'd rinsed them. She put one on the table and drank heartily from the other.

Somewhere, my phone started to ring. I ran around, uprooting cushions and rifling through papers. There were books all over the flat, poetry mostly. The previous Christmas we'd made a Christmas tree out of them: hardbacks at the bottom, working up through paperbacks, finally to slim modern collections (Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* propped up on top). We'd wrapped the whole thing round with fairylights that turned off looked like barbed wire. Now, only the bottom three branches remained. I pulled them apart and threw them across the room.

'It's in your jacket in the hall,' said Tyler, sitting. 'It's rung twice already.'

Out in the hall I located my jacket on the coat-stand and patted the pockets until I felt the hard boxy telltale form of Phone. It was Jim, of course it was Jim – only two people ever called me and one of them was in the next room. I picked up. 'Hello.'

'Hi.'

It struck me as it always did: the contradiction. The beauty of phones! But also the inadequacy. Jim's voice was a tonic: a

Midlands accent softened by natural sibilance and university down south. Henry Higgins might have clocked him but everyone else found him hard to place. Me, I was instantly Mancunian: too clipped for Lancashire; too glottal for Cheshire.

'How was your night?' he said.

I clutched at the phone, hunched in the hallway, feeling suddenly goblin-like. The long-distance line buzzed. I thought of Jim's sharp agile lips, the colours of the political world map, slowly looping satellites. In the lounge, the TV came on.

'Fun,' I said.

'Great!' Jim said. 'How fun?'

'Home-and-sleep-but-a-bit-hungover fun. How was the recital?'

'Not fun, but nice people.'

Jim had been teetotal for two months – a decision made when his workload increased to such an extent that he rarely got a day off with travelling and rehearsals. As a concert pianist he couldn't take any chances. Classical music fans were ferociously attentive.

'How's Tyler?' he asked. He always asked. I had to give him credit for that.

She snorted a tequila slammer through a straw. She stole a Magic Tree air freshener from a taxi. She –

'She broke a shoe. Otherwise she's intact.'

We'd been running across a road when the plastic heel of her ankle boot – which had been threatening to go since December – had snapped clean off. She'd sworn a long, lusty *Fuuuuck* and then started singing, cornily: *You picked a fine time to leave me, loose heel . . .*

A fraction-second of silence. A conversation drawing to a close. I tried to picture New York in my mind, seeing Earth from low orbit, then falling through the sky, zooming down and down through map scales, to the hotel room where Jim was sitting, holding the phone. The image disintegrated as it

smashed into memory: Jim, the way he'd looked leaving for the airport with his Bart-Simpson-church-hair, side-parted and slick from the shower, in his white shirt and diamond-pattern tank top. The memory put more miles between us rather than fewer.

'Get back to your girlfriend,' he said. 'I'll see you Friday.'

'See you Friday.'

Exhalation.

Love: funny how you knew you'd found it, when you found it. I didn't like believing in fate, it struck me as a concept for happy people to cling to. Majestically unfair when you thought about it. Someone gets a shit lot – that's their *fate*, is it? Oh, bad luck – sorry about that Alzheimer's, that dead kid, that bombed-out family home. *Sor-ry.* It's just . . . well, it's destiny, you know? At the same time I knew I felt lucky, having found someone to make some promises to; to be in turns fascinated and reassured by. Jim was solid and separate: hooded eyes, pointed chin, black widow's peak – not dissimilar to young Spock and just as logical, just as smart and self-contained. Knew exactly who he was. And there's *nothing* more attractive than someone who knows who they are, especially when you're – well, a fucking shambles. Lately, our love, too, had been assuming more of a definite shape – a *marriage* shape. I'd never really known whether marriage was for me; I'd just said it as a word, an abstract – *When I'm married* – without thinking about what it meant. But the abstract was manifesting. It was white and huge and heavy and expensive, like a Fifties American fridge appearing at the foot of the bed, and I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do with it.

'How's loverboy?' Tyler said as I walked back in the lounge.

I looked at her and I could see she was reading me, seeing how the conversation with Jim had gone, getting everything she needed to know – the words were just her playing for time.

Since meeting Tyler I'd believed that a psychic connection between human beings was possible. 'Kinship' is the best word in English for it. The French call it *une affinité profonde*, which I also like it but it still doesn't quite get there. It's that doppelgänger effect that can go either way: to mutual understanding or mutual destruction. Someone sees right to your backbone and simultaneously feels their backbone acknowledged.

'Fine, thanks.'

'Does he think we're savages?' (This with her mouth full, spraying pasta bits down her front.)

'Of course he does. We *are* savages. How's the pasta?'

'Functional.'

Tyler was a dreadful cook, not that she gave a shit. She liked food but she wasn't fetishistic about it – quantity not quality gave her her kicks. 'Yeah, it's definitely done the job,' she said, getting up and patting her stomach. 'I could dump a corpse right now.'

We'd met nine years ago. I was ordering a coffee in a shop halfway along Deansgate. The shop's leather sofas and hat-sized sponge cakes had looked inviting as I passed on my way to the library after work, which at the time involved standing on Market Street with a clipboard selling £9.99 baby photos to people with babies. (Of all the jobs I'd had it had been the simplest – new parents were the most vulnerable demographic, the most desperate to preserve and present their legacy; the easiest to sell shit to. *And yet you're still going to die – that's the punchline!* I thought as they proffered their tenners, bloodshot, sleep-starved, unsexed, their offspring indifferent.) The coffee shop was part of an Italian chain and hadn't been open long. She was at the coffee machine grappling with a metal jug – the milk wouldn't froth properly by the looks of it – and she was shaking the jug and frowning and pouting. Her pinny was skewiff, her baseball

cap was backwards like Paperboy's, her name badge said DENISE. She looked up and I saw a look pass through her eye that I'd caught in my own, in bathroom mirrors – it was a look that said she was outside somewhere, and running. She made the coffee with the milk as it was and came to take my order. I ordered a frappé and as I ordered it I said, *I never believed the day would come when I'd order a frappé* and she nodded at the books I was pressing to my chest and said, *That's a Moleskine, isn't it, like Hemingway used?* and I said: *Touché.*

I picked up my bowl of pasta and stabbed it with my fork, failing to spear a single piece. Zuzu glanced at me. The cat only trusted Tyler, an exclusivity Tyler had ensured by getting her when I was away on a random week's holiday with Jim. When I came back the cat was already indoctrinated to Tyler's ways, brainwashed in some kind of one-cat cult. 'I've trained her to recognise only my face,' Tyler said. 'The rest of humanity are inferior mutants in her eyes.' Zuzu tolerated the odd pat or stroke but always with hackles-ready suspicion. She never came on my lap, never took food from my fingers. Tyler was unhealthily proud of her hairy little devotee.

The pasta was rotten – overcooked and laced with the poison-tang of too much basil. I ate it anyway. The small flatscreen TV in the corner was tuned in to a tacky Saturday night dating show I liked. Tyler was objecting. The elitist in her often stropped centre-stage, raised as she had been amongst poetry and horses. Conversely, light entertainment was mother's milk to me. It relaxed me, rendered me junk-drunk at the teat of British terrestrial telly. That was how my four-strong, two-up two-down family had rolled: takeaways in front of game shows and horror films. (I'm not trying to *out-working-class* you, by the way; I went to grammar school and university, but my first touchstones were forged in the garish gore of Granada TV.)

The dating show was a bit like *Blind Date* except instead of a screen and the old 'love is blind' philosophy there were thirty girls behind a bank of white-lit pillars and one man standing in front of them for their perusal. The poor bastard descended onstage in a lift, the 'Love Lift', and thrashed about like a landed fish under the studio lights to whatever godawful tune he'd chosen to come onto (in this case, bludgeoning irony to within an inch of its life with Sister Sledge's 'The Greatest Dancer'). He proceeded to further fuck up his chances by doing a 'party piece' (juggling bananas) and allowing his friends and family to defame him via an impishly edited video of them all discussing his personality down the pub (*Steve's VERY close to all his exes and his mum, such a nice guy . . .*).

I was on the floor, practically laughing out toxins. Tyler – fork poised chin height, split pasta dangling – was aghast.

'Someone get him the fuck out of there,' she said. 'Preferably *not* someone he knows.'

It got worse. The second part of the show began with Steve in an energetic headlock courtesy of the comedian host, and the line of girls manically dancing behind their booths to the theme tune.

'Christ on a cracker,' said Tyler. 'Did they crop-dust them with poppers during the commercials?'

The camera homed in on one girl in a partially see-through dress, her nipples almost visible beyond the corners of a diamond of fine black net. 'This is Our Lou,' said the host, 'and she has a very special talent: she can pick men up!'

'Presumably in the literal sense,' Tyler said. 'Or she wouldn't be involved in this fiasco.'

Tyler had been single as long as I'd known her. I'd once overheard her saying to a boy at a party: *Sharing your life with someone is like Marmite. It's FUCKING SHIT.* She took him home after.

On the TV Lou came out from behind her pillar, grasped the host round the thighs (face practically in fellatio-proximity) and lifted him a good two inches off the ground to deafening applause. 'I bet you can do it with Steve, too, can't you?' said the host. Steve gulped but looked game. *Pick him up! Pick him up!* chanted the audience. Steve came forward and Lou lifted him, nose-to-crotch. After she'd returned him to his feet she did strongman arms to the roaring crowd.

'You utter cunts!' said Tyler. 'What are they doing? Do they think stupid is sexy?'

'They probably make a lobotomy mandatory in the early stages of the selection process.'

When the women had been whittled down to the final two it was time for Steve's decider question. 'I like to buy myself fresh flowers every week,' he said. 'How would you guarantee romance blossomed on our date?'

'Sunsets and sunrises,' said Lou, who had unsurprisingly made it down to the final cut. 'They make romance blossom.'

'Get me a gun,' said Tyler. 'I'm going to shoot the TV, then myself. No wonder people go postal in shopping malls. The populace deserve it.'

'You'd have to get me there and then you'd find out,' said the other girl coquettishly.

Tyler mock-vommed. 'This piece of shit is an *assault on my soul*. Every second of it that I endure robs me of MILLENNIA. Just so you know.'

'Oh shush,' I said. 'Just go with it.'

'I can't believe *you* enjoy this,' she said. 'You, with all your high-falutin' ideals of "romance" . . .'

I stopped laughing. 'This is not Romance,' I said, pointing at the TV. 'This is the other end of the spectrum. It's the dregs of reality.'

Her hand shot to her eye.

'What now?'

'I've lost a contact. No, seriously.' She blinked and rubbed at her eye.

I looked at her. 'Well, fancy putting your lenses in today when you've got no moisture in you.'

'It was more a case of not taking them out.'

'Not to mention how old they must be.'

'Best-before dates are for pussies.'

A few days after I'd met Tyler I was walking across town, heading home to my parents' house, where I was living at the time. I stopped at the tram tracks at the top of Market Street when a tram tooted to indicate that it was pulling away from the stop. As I stood waiting by the track I looked up to the front of the tram and saw inside the driver's cabin. And there, in the driving seat, *driving the tram*, was Tyler. I blinked. It was still Tyler. Driving a tram. The driver was standing behind her, grinning and waving. I waved back. It must be her dad, I thought, he must be a tram driver. But when I questioned her the next day she said: *No, I was just on the tram and I thought,* I don't want to die not knowing what it's like to drive a tram – *so I asked the driver and he said I could have a quick go. That's what I call Society.*

I lay in her bed later, Tyler snoring next to me, Zuzu curled between her legs. When Tyler's phone rang I nudged her and she moaned and reached over to the bedside table.

'Hello?' Louder: 'Jean? JEANNIE?'

She sat up, flicked the light on. I sat up, too. Zuzu opened one thin green eye.

'Oh fuck! Oh fuck!'

It was a good *Oh fuck*. She was grinning. I grinned back.

'What is it?'

Tyler looked at me. 'A girl! Shirley.' I held onto her arm. 'More wine,' she said to me and then, down the phone: 'We're toasting you, Jeannie, we're toasting you all right now, you beautiful bovine bitch.'

I ran to the kitchen and swooshed a couple of glasses clean. We had a fine collection of branded beer pots and family-sized ashtrays we'd pillaged over the years. (One time Tyler had tried to steal a chair from a bar – and not a small chair either but an *armchair*. She'd got stuck in the doorway, like a dog with a bone.)

I came back with a Kronenburg half-pint and a Duval goblet, both filled with wine. Tyler was off the phone, sitting with her back against the bars of the bed's headboard, one hand holding the bed knob, resplendent. The swirls of teenage tattoos on her upper arms were slowly greening, like algae on a shipwreck.

'Congratulations!'

Tyler sniffed like a football rattle. 'Jean sounded rinsed,' she said. 'And it's only just begun. Give it a week and it'll be like when she used to take meth except she won't be able to hide away because she'll have this *thing* to feed.'

'*Shirley.*'

'Imagine suddenly losing all your privacy, all your hope of self-development. You put everything on hold. Oh, the feelings, Lo!'

It was something we said often: *What to do with all the feelings.* They ambushed you sometimes. They rioted. They were legion.

'Yes yes, just drink.' I cheers'd her glass.

After she'd fallen asleep I took the glasses through to the kitchen, placing them quietly in the sink. The sky was dark beyond the window, starless and moonless, the city muddled with reflections in the glass. I lit up a cigarette.

Babies. I didn't know how to feel about them. I had a recurring dream where I was walking through a room with babies

sitting on the floor, regularly spaced, and I bent down to each one, took its chin in my hand and looked at its face. They stretched away in every direction, like a prism of mirrors.

I stood staring out the window and sensed a huge thing turning in the supposedly great beyond. The pull of it made me grip the sink.