What Have I Done To You?

We’re going to fall in love, Alex says as we wait for our lattes, and I can tell he really means it. He doesn’t hesitate or even ask me my opinion, so I know he’s serious. He makes all the important decisions on his own. Good for the ego, he says. His victory or his loss, no one to scapegoat and no one to steal the credit. I guess that’s why I trust him when he tells me, and why I get those shivers down my spine.

Anyway, I know I have to say something back but I’m not really sure what. It’s not like this is my first time dealing with something like this. Guys get sort of prophetic when I’m around. Matt was easy enough to handle because he was right, I did break his heart, and Jimmy down the street was right, too, when he said I’d be the death of him, God rest his soul. Even Mr. Cavanaugh, my high school biology teacher, told me I was trouble walking and that I’d make him lose his job, but that one was actually pretty fun to live up to because I got to march into the principal’s office, chin held high, and tell her the sorts of things that Mr. Cavanaugh wrote on my papers. Honestly, that one may not have been a prediction so much as a natural progression of cause to effect, the idiocy of leaving a paper trail. Still, it made me smile when the cops came in during fifth period and marched him out of the room, and the other girls started whispering and then cheering and it turned out I was becoming something of a hero, really. But this is different. I’m not really sure how to react.

I met Alex in the women’s room at my favorite bar, where they don’t look at your card too carefully since most of the other students aren’t willing to walk so far off campus. He was peeing in the sink like it was a urinal and I told him he must be drunk out of his mind. He said he absolutely was and put away his dick before reaching out his hand to shake mine. I told him to wash it first but afterwards I held true to my promise and shook his hand. Even though his hand was still a bit sudsy, he had a surprisingly sturdy grip. Firm, like a businessman or lawyer, ever the professional.

We danced a little after that, and it would be embarrassing if I was the type to get embarrassed, but I’m not, so instead it was just sort of pleasant. Somewhere between songs he said something like, *I’m not usually the type to show a girl my dick on a first date*, and I think I said something back like, *I am*, and he laughed and I smiled because it wasn’t really that funny of a joke but he was humoring me and it felt nice to be just sort of seen.

I think that’s why I took him home, but we didn’t do anything but eat pizza rolls and ask each other wildly inappropriate questions like *do you think God is dead?* and *why don’t our mothers ever love us?* We dozed off at something like four a.m. and became fast friends afterwards. In the morning he frowned at his disheveled clothing and said he’d have to do a walk of shame so I offered to be a gentleman and loan him some of mine but he said *no, thank you*, that fishnets weren’t really his style. I shrugged and said *to each their own* and that he should at least look the part, so I rumpled his hair a bit with my hands and smeared some of my spent lipstick onto the back of my hand and transferred it from there to his lips. He went still at that and took a moment to really recover himself, only breathing again when he’d gone red enough that the lipstick wasn’t making any difference. When he finally came to his senses he said I should add a hickey if I wanted to be really authentic. I told him that I wasn’t a biter and he said he didn’t believe me, but he went anyway. He didn’t even stay for coffee, though I offered, but he did take me up on my offer of aspirin and lukewarm beer to wash it down. He left me his number scrawled on a Post-It note with a cartoon dick drawn where he should have put his name. I thought it was funny at the time.

I didn’t even call him, I just sort of ran into him again at the library a few days later, and we kept sort of stumbling into one another’s paths. Turns out he’s studying Victorian love poems while I’m trying to have an original thought about Willy Shakespeare some four hundred years after his death just so I can get decent marks in the Intro Lit class that I should’ve taken as a freshman but instead wound up stuck in during junior year because my advisor said it was time to declare a major and that I had the most credits in English and Public Policy. God knows I don’t want to spend my life inside a courthouse or a consulting firm, so instead I’m resigning myself to my inevitable fate as an underpaid barista with a wacky dye job. I’ve always thought I could pull off aqua hair in a sexy mermaid sort of way.

Anyway we’ve been talking for a while now but I didn’t think it was anything serious until just now and he’s still watching me, waiting for a response while I wait for our coffee. His eyes are so round they look like cartoons, and I can tell he’s getting a bit impatient. His eyebrows say to me, *well?* and so I try to use my eyebrows to say *I don’t know what to say* but I’ve never really been good at using them to say anything other than *come hither* so I give up on that strategy after a moment or two and bite my lip instead.

“Well?” he says out loud now, his mouth finally catching up to his eyebrows, and I laugh out loud. That turns out not to be the right reaction because he gets this angry look now, like all his features are contracting towards the center of his face. He gets sensitive about things sometimes, especially in public, and while no one else is looking at us in this coffee shop I can tell he’s still embarrassed. I reach out a hand to smooth the furrow in his brow and he softens a bit at my touch, like a pat of butter left on the counter too long.

“Love,” I say out loud, testing the word out on my tongue, but he takes it for an affirmation, a term of endearment. I don’t want to correct him because that never usually goes well for people and frankly I’m not sure I can. Ten minutes ago I would’ve sworn I was frigid and unlovable but now it seems the future may disagree. It was that voice he used that did it, really, and though I don’t feel any closer to loving him now than I did before he said anything, I feel a whole lot more uncertain.

I don’t think he’s the type to be violent when he’s angry, especially in public, but that doesn’t really mean anything. My instincts for people are shit. I guess it isn’t helped by the fact that their instincts for me seem to be spot-fucking-on. I don’t like to think of myself as predictable because that sounds like a code word for boring, but time and time again it seems like these guys can read me before I even open my mouth. I don’t know what I did to bring any of it on, really, except for maybe look the part, all lips and tits and hips and bedroom eyes, and that’s just a matter of genetics, which I guess is another way the world made plans for me. But these men see me and they see danger, or pain, or sin, or salvation, all of which are just fancy ways of saying *sex*.

“Love,” he says again, echoing me, and I can’t help but think of the Greek myth of the nymph who loved the narcissist and played ventriloquist for his reflection until he withered and died. I wonder if maybe that’s us, now, if he’s the aching nymph and I’m about to turn into a daffodil, or maybe the opposite. Maybe he’s hearing my voice but seeing his own reflection, distorted, showing him the flattened version of what he wants to see. But there’s the lit student in me, always reading into things when I should be running away from them instead.

“How do you know?” I ask. I always ask. It’s a genuine question, but when it comes out of my lips I hear it turn coy. My body has a way of doing that, of taking the things I say and turning them into flirtations, overtures, seductions. I can’t wink, but you’d never guess it from hearing me talk.

“Well, I’m already halfway there,” he says, not bothering to blush, “and I’ll win you over soon. My dick wasn’t enough to scare you off, so I’m not sure what else could.”

“To be frank,” I say, “I didn’t really get a good look.”

I realize too late that he’s taken this as an invitation. He’s looking at me differently now, but in a way that isn’t unfamiliar. I’ve just never seen it in *his* eyes before, not really. I can see from the way his pupils dilate exactly how I appear to him right now. I’m a raw butterflied chicken, spatchcocked, splayed out flat. Headless, naked, pink, all breasts and thighs and cavity torn open, waiting to be rubbed, stuffed, grilled, torn apart, consumed.

I can see it now, how I’m ruining things again, and it’s killing me as he steps closer and puts his hands on my jaw, my scalp, pulling me closer. His mouth is already open and I can see his crooked teeth and I don’t think I’ve ever been less in love with someone but I know it’s coming, feel it like a twist in my gut or a flood in my lungs. When he kisses me he uses so much tongue, and I’m so disgusted I can’t quite pull away.

He does pull back, eventually, and his spit cools on my lips and dribbles down my chin a bit. Part of me thinks I should just fuck him now and leave and maybe that’ll be enough to count, that ten minutes of skin on skin, breath on breath, sweat on sweat could count as a certain sort of love, enough to set me free so I can get away for a while, strike out on my own.

His eyes have darkened, focused on the searing flush in my cheeks that he probably doesn’t know is from fighting back tears. “You don’t know,” he says, breathing heavily, “the things you do to me.”

He wipes his spit from my chin with his thumb, and as he sucks it off I step backwards.

I almost say, *what the fuck have I done to you*, but I don’t want to draw more attention in this quiet café. I almost say, *you don’t know what you’re doing right now*, but that isn’t quite true. I almost say, *I’m scared*, or *I’m sad*, because I’ve been trying so hard to convince myself of those two things that I’ve almost forgotten I’m not scared or sad, I’m fucking furious. I almost slap him across the face but that would require touching him and I can’t have him getting the wrong idea again, because it *is* the wrong idea. I didn’t do anything to him, just like I didn’t do anything to the others. I haven’t done a single goddamn thing, like I’m some passive fucking piece of poultry, and it’s killing me.

“Paloma,” the barista calls out loud enough to pierce the fog of my frustration, and I grab my latte. His is on the counter too—I paid for him, of course I paid for him—but I leave it there. I don’t bother putting a sleeve on the cup and the scalding coffee burns my skin through the thin paper, but I don’t say a word as I walk out the door, leaving him standing there, baffled in the low light of the evening. He doesn’t follow, and I don’t expect him to. Or I do, sort of, but then I remember just how shit my instincts are and so I guess he probably won’t. He’ll probably just linger there for a while, confused, before eventually heading home or maybe to the bar to pick up some other girl by peeing in front of her and hoping for the best.

I don’t have a plan. At this hour I’m not sure where to go. It’s that awkward time where it’s too late for dinner and too early for drinks so the entertainment district is basically a ghost town. The weather’s nice, I guess, and the river isn’t far. It feels good to move under my own power with no firm goal in sight, so I just keep walking.