

2026 *Prism Review* Staff Award:

Excellence in Experimentation and Engagement

## *Men from the Internet*

by Erin Arata

On Friday night, Tess waters her dead basil plant, then takes the bus to the bar on Fairfax. Arriving, she locks herself in the bathroom, washes her underarms with hand soap, and applies a personality the way some people put on lipstick. She practices smiling in the mirror—cheekbones high, lips taut, held until her face hurts in the hopes of having it memorized. Satisfied, she goes out to order a shot. “Cheapest you got,” she makes herself say. She tries to be fun. Breezy. Fingers clenched around a damp dollar bill, she thinks she can feel her paint melting, her glue pulling loose from the corners. But the glass the bartender hands her is almost overflowing, and she feels it catching sparks in her stomach. Words creep up her throat like smoke.

“I have a date tonight,” she tells the guy behind the bar, testing out her tone. Alcohol rounds out the sarcasm she saves for strangers, anchoring her voice so it doesn’t turn up at the end. *Is that a question or an answer?* her ex used to ask her. It’s harder to tell than it should be. Easier with whiskey.

“Who’s the lucky guy?” the bartender asks.

Tess shrugs, then laughs. She orders a drink.

“Better have a double,” the bartender says. “Make your own luck.”

Tess selects a table, putting it between herself and the room. Two beads race each other down the side of her glass, and she picks her favorite, blotting out the other with a finger. She takes a sip, so it doesn't look like she's been waiting, then another to remind the shot it has work to do. She pretends she's a stranger, seeing herself for the first time. She wonders what she'd notice first about herself. She wonders if she'd be disappointed. She wonders if she exists at all if no one's looking at her. When Max enters, it's too dark for him to make her out. She watches him stop just past the doorway, blinking while his eyes adjust.

From her table, she takes a minute to play Memory with his living, breathing figure, matching him with the image she built in her head from messages and thumbnails and poses with Urban Light. He looks like his pictures, but he does not look like she pictured him. They're often like that, these men from the internet. For the week before they met in person, she imagined her ex as Elijah Wood.

Seeing this particular stranger in motion is strange. He is taller than she expected, and he has a kind of bulk to him, a solidness that makes him seem like he should have roots. She's only seen him still, and it takes her a second to understand him as capable of approaching the bar, scanning the darker parts of the room—for her, she thinks, reaching for her drink again. She tries to keep hold of the moment, keep it from spinning into a series of similar times, similar bars and coffee shops; similar men, still in the second before they catch sight of her and start moving. There's a certain kind of street performer that always scared her as a child: the kind that turned themselves to stone beside benches, painted shades of marble and rust, suddenly shoving a hand out for quarters. You could tell which ones were real from the crowds, but Tess always checked the lonely statues too. Just in case.

When he finally sees her, Max comes closer, says her name. It's a question, but he says it like an answer; she can hear a laugh where the question mark should be, acknowledging the joke they're both in on. She smiles, so he'll know she's a good sport. She isn't sure whether to stand, hug him, shake his hand, so she leans in, offering a wave like a kid offers pulled dandelions. *These are all I could find, I hope you like them.* Please like them.

If he has anything to say about her having a drink, he doesn't.

Instead, he deposits his coat on the chair opposite her and says he's going back up, can he get her anything? "I'm fine, but thanks," she says, adding, "Bartender's nice." He smiles as he's turning. She waits until he's gone to move her eyes to his coat. She has the fleeting urge to rifle through it, maybe steal his keys. Instead, she checks for signs of—what? Blood of the date before her? Whether he wipes his nose on his sleeve? Some hint of who he is, who he's hoping she'll be. She scans the wool like she's cheating on a test. Is there a dog hair stuck somewhere? A paperback peeking out of a pocket, curled into a tunnel? (She always hates when people fold books like that.) His profile said he's from upstate New York, a substitute teacher at a Catholic school; hobbies include UCB shows, ultimate frisbee, and voice acting. She doesn't know why she's looking for proof on his coat.

He comes back, and she asks what he's drinking. First to speak, first thing she can think of. Another comment from her ex: *Settle down, Napoleon. It's a conversation, not a war.* It's funny how these are the things she remembers now, like their relationship was just rejected lines from *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. "Jack and Coke," Max answers. She says, "Good choice," like an authority on the subject when she doesn't even like Coke. It just seems like the right thing to say.

Max sits and puts his glass in front of him. An offering? A barrier? He's holding a coaster in his free hand, small and wet-looking as his palm folds over it. He picks bits off with his thumbnail. A shred of cardboard lands on the table lip.

"Get here okay?" he asks.

"Define 'okay,'" she replies. There's a pause, then she clarifies: "I took the bus."

"That was brave of you."

"I thought so too at the time."

He smiles and says, "How was your day otherwise?" It's a simple question that catches her with its casual directness. For a second, she thinks she must recognize his voice, but then it occurs to her the question is what's so familiar. It's a common enough play at politeness, especially from strangers in bars, but it's hollow, as questions go. Rounding the end of their two-year stint—her longest—it was what she and her ex clung to, passing it back and forth like

an unwanted birthday gift. There was a time when *How was your day?* was pleasant and possible to answer. There was also a time it meant there was nothing else to say.

“Improving,” Tess settles on, lifting her drink. Max presses his own in her direction, and they touch glasses. “I’ll drink to that,” he says. They do.

“How was *your* day?” she asks after. She doesn’t mean to say it like she’s making fun of him, is only trying to insert the same joke into her tone, but she trips over it. It doesn’t seem to faze him, though—he answers, and she starts stockpiling his words, plucking out the meaty parts and gathering them at her feet. “You’re studying speech therapy, right?” he asks. “Why,” she says, “do I seem like an expert in talking?” They set sail in a sea of non sequiturs, cresting and bobbing, trying not to fall overboard. He tells her he had a stutter when he was small. “How bad?” she asks. “Bad enough.” Something she always notices about first dates is how much the people talk. Like they’re desperate to fit all their stories, all the words they’ll ever say, into one two-hour exchange. They talk like they’re treading water. “My parents made me hold cinnamon under my nose,” he says. She asks if it helped. “Only because I was sneezing too much to talk.”

“The least they could’ve done was get the spice right,” Tess laughs.

He smiles at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, that’s a myth, definitely, and I’m not condoning it as a therapeutic practice. But it’s supposed to be nutmeg.”

She watches the grin on his face bubble up and over. *Funny*, she thinks, proud of herself for being it. Then his laugh dribbles down his chin, leaks across the table, and puddles in her lap like something spilled. Tess is surprised, and she reciprocates. She drops her glass.

In their two years together, she came to think of her ex’s laugh as a charitable donation. She was happy, at first, when he handed it off to her, but later, she wondered if he was just being nice, if he just wanted more on his tax return. Tess remembers other laughs too: startled sounds, startling sounds, sounds that aren’t sounds at all but silent signals in her memory that still make her shiver. But this laugh, Max’s laugh, seems familiar. It sounds like a kettle boiling, shuddering and trembling itself to the surface, swelling into that sudden surge of sound. She recognizes it—she’s sure this time.

She scrambles for her glass before it can tumble off the table, snatching at the ice cubes that have fallen across the surface like dice. With dampening fingers, she drops them back into the whiskey, hiding the rest of the spill with a napkin. She doesn't realize until she's done that she's missed something: one more cube, just past the middle of the table, sliding toward Max as it starts to melt. Too far to reach without getting too close. She looks at it, then at him. He's still laughing, but not at her spilled drink. Only seconds have passed for him. She stares.

*Voice-acting*, she thinks. All at once, she's under sheets in the dark, the afterglow of the city creeping through the gap-tooth of her curtains. There were a lot of nights like that once her ex was gone, waiting for something she didn't have words to ask for or describe. There were nights like that before he left too. Sex with him had been like Google—if you wanted anything close to an answer, you at least had to make a request. For Tess, sex remains like Ask Jeeves. Always with a question mark on the end, losing all relevance when she was still a teenager.

Alone in her bed again, Tess had found Marc, not entirely by accident. Another man from the internet, but with Marc, you didn't have to ask anything directly—you just had to type a name into a browser, even Jeeves, and you'd find him. You didn't need to meet him in a bar or a coffee shop. You didn't need to speak to him, or see his face at all. All you needed was to plug in your headphones and listen to his voice. There were dozens of scenes, dozens of characters, dozens of categories, to choose from. A night in with a make-believe boyfriend. An imaginary ex showing up at your door. Celebrities, coworkers, stepsiblings; vanilla, and other vaguely disgusting dessert synonyms. Then the more complicated things, which Tess had to pretend, even to herself, to be clicking by mistake. *Sweet girl*. Curiosity killed the cat, but the cat hadn't been curious since high school. Stoppering her ears, every night for months, Tess had clawed her way out of her skin into weightless, bodiless purgatory, where her only company was that voice, telling her stories, telling her what to do—like phone sex with an answering machine. His laugh had been her first handhold. She'd stuck around to hear what went with it, knowing all the while that Marc was safe, was dangerous, because he wasn't real.

Tonight, Marc is sitting across from her, drinking a Jack and Coke.

“Can I get you another one?” he asks, bemused-looking as he stands, and Tess almost says yes because she needs a minute to think. Then she remembers it’s a bad idea to let strangers touch your drinks (at least one of Marc’s scenes is proof of that), so she says, “Probably a sign I should stop.” He laughs again and sits. *Voice-acting*, she thinks.

She thought he meant cartoons.

She must ask him a question—she isn’t totally sure—because he starts talking again, and she starts cross-referencing each syllable, each time his words pancake in on themselves, adding proof to the pile. Is there a way to make him say “tongue”? Is there a way to make him growl? She has to be sure. In the meantime, she realizes his eyes are different than she thought. Maybe she just hasn’t met them yet. She didn’t notice them when he sat down, which usually means brown. They’re not. They’re the color of clear water on a cloudy day. Just opaque enough to have color. He looks down as her ice cube reaches him, too small now to bother drying, and she rewrites them in her head. Swaps them out like button eyes on a snowman before he looks up.

He is not at all how she pictured him.

He starts a story about a roommate, and she prompts him with an undercurrent of her own curiosity. The roommate has a serious boyfriend—“So, what I’m hearing is you split rent but live alone?” (This explains how he gets away with the growling.) She eases answers out of him, disguised as stories of her own, tethering him to leading questions, poking and prodding towards a confession. “I like practical work, but my schedule’s a nightmare. The last time I had a free weeknight, I was still shopping for prom dresses.” He’s not a fan of his schedule’s uncertainty, but he likes not taking work home—which explains, at least, how he finds time for the work he does when he’s there. Often, Tess feels conversations tugging at her fingertips, getting tied up in her legs like leashed dogs chasing traffic. She’s used to stumbling after them. She’s not used to this.

It occurs to her the date is going well.

“Tell me about the voice acting,” she says.

If she weren’t watching for it, she might not see the flush spread

under his freckles, gradual, like a snowdrift blocking a driveway. She knows Marc is good with his voice—he has to be, to be what he is. He can slip into tones and timbres like he’s putting on a coat. His voice is familiar, but it’s part of the mask. Max’s blush isn’t. Neither is his laugh, once her question hangs in the air between them. “It’s not as exciting as it sounds,” he says. *Speak for yourself.* “It’s just something I’ve been trying to get into.” *Marc certainly gets into a lot.* “Personal projects, on the internet.” *Personal for eight thousand people.*

“I’d love to hear one,” she dares to say.

“That’s more of a third-date activity.”

“Oh, I bet.” She might as well wink.

She twitches her fingers, loose on the bench beneath her, the heels of her hands pushing her forward. Leaning in again, watching the remains of her ice mix with the sweat under his glass. He is leaning too, on an arm bent across the table in front of him, the shredded coaster significantly smaller in his hand. She looks at his fingers, opening and closing, drumming slightly as he speaks, and wonders how they’d feel on her skin. How they’d compare. If his voice is enough to bring tremors to her surface, she can only imagine. She does. She thinks about going back to his empty apartment, with his computer, his microphone, the hidden pieces of Marc nearby, buried in a closet or drawer. She wonders what pieces he’d let out. She thinks about fucking him in the bar bathroom. For a second, she feels like she could.

“How about you?” he says. “Any secret hobbies I should know about?”

She stops herself from saying, “What do you think?” because her ex hated guessing games: They’re not as fun when you’re the one without the answer. Then she’s angry at herself for thinking of him at all. For putting him and Marc—no, Max—in the same sentence. Confusing them all already. Marc is safe, is dangerous, because he has so many faces. He can be anyone you like, and for her, he’s been several anyones. She realizes she can’t fuck the man sitting across from her and feels stupid for thinking otherwise. She says, “I know who you are.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, like she’s telling a joke.

She lets her smile float away. “I guess I don’t know who *you* are.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I,” Tess says, “know Marc.”

His arm comes up from the table, and his hand disappears into the shadows beneath it. She can see from the way he shifts that he’s crossed his wrists in his lap—definitely a barrier now. He’s still leaning toward her but not in the same way. It’s strange how a slight change in posture is the difference between cat and caught mouse. In that moment, Tess isn’t sure which of them is which. With his eyes large and polished-looking, Max says, “What?”

“I recognize your voice,” she says. Then, because she hears every second he doesn’t speak, “Does that happen?”

Slowly, he answers: “There was a barista once. A woman at the library. But,” quietly, “you’re the first date.”

“What do we do?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“What would Marc do?”

He shrugs. “Probably fuck you in the bathroom.”

She looks down at the table, the wet crumple of her napkin, the remains of her spilled drink. She feels light and heavy at the same time. Like she’s on the verge of vanishing, rising and bursting like a balloon on a lightbulb, and still buried so deep inside herself that you could shovel for weeks and never find her. She can’t stop herself from thinking of her ex this time. She often felt this way in his bed. She says what she said then: “I’m sorry.”

Max raises his eyebrows. “Why are you apologizing?” Another reason for the comparison—her ex was always asking that.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Maybe you don’t want to talk about this.”

There’s a moment of silence, where he exhales something that could’ve started as a laugh. They’re not looking at each other, not exactly, but she feels like she’s being appraised. Or, at least, considered. He repeats, as if she has an answer, “What do we do?”

“There isn’t really a manual.”

She’s surprised when this makes him smile. But as his face changes, and his posture, again, with it, she feels herself grabbing for whatever she can get hold of. She hears herself say, “You can relax, I’m not going to ask for your autograph.”

He does relax. Slightly. “I don’t think it would be worth anything.”

“I’m sure I could get ten bucks from someone.” She’s frantically

fingering for her seams, pulling them back into place. “And here, I thought you’d have a mustache.”

“A mustache?”

“It comes with the profession, right?”

“You’re thinking of videos.”

“My mistake.”

He hasn’t gone back to frowning yet. She hangs onto that like driftwood.

“Why Marc?” she asks.

He says, “Why do you think?”

“It’s not your middle name, is it?”

“No, it’s not my middle name. My parents are fucking weird, but they’re not going to name their kid Maxwell Marc McMahon.”

“Are you sure you want me to know your full name?”

“I think we’ve passed the point where I can be worried how much you know about me.”

“I don’t really know anything,” she says. “I know Marc.”

He puts down the ragged coaster and picks up his drink. “You know Marc,” he repeats, taking a final swallow. He lifts his eyes with the glass still to his mouth, covering it, so she can’t read his face. Their eyes meet. She holds her breath when his wrinkle at the corners; the glass comes down, and she’s relieved to see he’s still smiling. “You’re not someone I know, are you? One of the commenters? Princess\_PlugNPlay? TheBreastIsYetToCome? Kink-182? Puss-in—”

“I’m not Puss-in-*anything*,” she says.

She watches his face: he doesn’t look disappointed, but she’s not sure he’s pleased either. He says, “I guess I have to ask, then—which is your favorite?”

“Sorry, but no.”

“By law, you have to tell me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“What if we use a code?” He puts both elbows on the table, looking her right in the eye. Gray clouds, a curious sun peeking out. “Blink twice if it’s in the babysitter genre.”

She stares. A voice in her head whispers, *Sweet girl*.

“Petplay?”

She drops two fingers into her glass and flicks water into his face. He retreats, laughing: “Okay, okay, fine.”

They look at each other over the blank stretch of wood, the only punctuation between them their empty glasses. A drop of water slopes down the side of his nose, disappearing into his cheek. “I have so many questions,” Tess says. Again, what she can think of, what she has to say to keep the conversation going. But it’s the truth. Max spreads his hands, palms up, in her direction.

Before their sex life went the way of her basil plant, Tess had gone to her ex with the idea of watching porn. He’d been trying to help her, and she’d been trying to prove—to both of them—that she’d let him. They’d sat side by side on his bed, eyes trained on the dark television screen and their reflections in it. She’d joked about making popcorn. *Half-joked*—she’d liked the thought of holding onto something once they turned the TV on. Something to keep her tethered. Lacking that, she’d reached for one of his pillows, uncased and empty in the middle. She’d clutched it to her chest. “You’re the expert,” she’d said when he asked what she wanted to watch. She had stared at the screen over the cotton in her arms, feeling it creep up her collarbone and neck until it was tucked under her chin. “Is this what you like?” she’d asked, eventually. He had shrugged. “But you picked it.” She’d watched him shrug again: “It’s not really about that.” The pillow had shifted higher, and Tess had closed her eyes against the fabric. She’d breathed in his sweat, her shampoo. Later, he had tried at pulling her back, but even with his head between her legs—even then—she couldn’t keep herself from thinking, *What is it about?*

She thinks Marc might know the answer. She thinks about asking Max. She settles for “How’d you get into it?”

“I used to watch a lot of movies,” he tells her. At her look: “*Regular* movies. On TV. On TV Land! I used to try and imitate the people. And when I was, you know, James Bond, or John Wayne, or Elvis, or whoever, I didn’t stutter as much. I don’t know if that was what ‘cured’ me, or if I just grew out of it, but I figured out I was good at voices, and then, it was either this or be that one guy at parties the rest of my life, so...”

“Remind me to thank Elvis.”

He smirks. “How’d *you* get into it?”

Another simple question that leaves her floundering. She tries to read his face again, tries to run through the sieve memories of

the dark nights after her ex. Still trying to prove herself to him, even when he was just a self-help book in her brain. She'd watched more videos. Men who looked nothing like him. Men who looked *just* like him. She'd looked for, and found, every lookalike of every man whose name she'd whispered to herself in the dark to see if they made her feel something, going all the way back to Beau from high school. That hadn't been enough. Tess needed someone to *make* her feel something, or she wouldn't. She needed someone to cut her voice out of the story, decide her replies before she made them. She needed someone to tell her how she felt.

"I'm in speech pathology," she says. "It's just nice to hear someone know what they're doing."

"Thanks, Elvis," Max replies. It's his turn again, so Tess waits. They spend another second in the interim before he says, "Did you really think I had a mustache?"

"No." She laughs, surprising herself.

"What did you think?"

She thinks about it, about Marc. He is a ghost, a human Mad Libs, a chalk outline. He is the empty spaces in front of your eyes when you stare too long at a lightbulb and blink. He is what you put into him. Sometimes, for her, he looks like Elijah Wood. Sometimes, he's smudged, like a warped photograph of a face she recognizes but can't remember right. Sometimes—and these are the times it's easiest—he's as bodiless as she tries to be.

"It depends what you're saying," she says. Not quite the truth, not quite a lie. She expects him to, fumbles for a follow-up, but he doesn't press the issue.

Her next question is complicated. She is careful of her phrasing, and this time, she knows that's more for her benefit than his. She doesn't hold it like a leash; she holds it like a palm above a candle, ready to pull it back if the flames get too high. She begins to feel dizzy—no, not exactly that. She feels like she's stepped off a boat, and the ground hasn't stopped swelling beneath her. She feels unsteady, uncontained, in danger of spilling—or leaking. But she asks, has to ask, "Are you working from experience?"

From the look on his face, she wonders if he expected this. "With some things," he says. She finds it hard to hold his gaze just now, wonders if it would've been easier if his eyes were brown. "But

I get a lot of requests. People are into a lot of things. Some, I try to piece together the best I can. Some, I struggle. I had to stop doing teacher/student stuff when I got my job. I couldn't get in the mind-set anymore. Then there are things that are fun to record, but I've never, *I would* never, you know...hurt someone."

She swallows. *Sweet girl*. "How do you make it feel real?"

"I guess I try to imagine...well, there's a line, right? I try to think what people want. That's not always so simple. It's not always Point A to Point B. Some people want to have power. Some people want to be powerless. Some people, it's not about power at all. It's not always that you literally want to fuck your boss or your sister's boyfriend or your dad. Sometimes, it is, I guess. But there are a lot of factors. This—voice acting, porn, *sex*...it's a performance. But it's performing to get to the thing that's true. So, I do that. And I hope I get it right."

She says, "You do. You get it right."

He looks at her. She feels her mask dissolve.

"You asked my favorite," she says.

Tess found Marc, not entirely by accident. She'd existed in the space between his words, she'd lent herself to him—borrowed by hands she couldn't feel or recognize, hands with no idea who, or what, they held—and she had stuck around for his laugh. But that hadn't been enough either. The first time she'd heard him rape her, she'd trembled like an egg in a pot for hours, cracked open until her skin was slick and shell-studded, bright as a yolk and begging. The second time, she'd laid awake half the night, tracing half-forgotten hieroglyphs carved into her skull over a decade before. *Sweet girl*. *You don't know what you want*. The third time, she'd vomited. By then, she'd found an answer, the one she hadn't gotten from her ex, the one she'd never been able to give him. All this time, crying, *Don't hurt me like he did* whenever he touched her, she'd been starting with the wrong word.

*Do you understand?* she could ask Max. "Is that sick?" she says instead.

"No," he says. "It isn't."

She watches him sitting there, rewritten. He is not moving, but she wonders how she could have imagined him immobile. How she could have imagined him with any other eyes. Sometimes, change

comes as quietly as frost on a window. In degrees, inches, small surrenders. Leaves dropping off a basil plant, limbs shrinking one by one—*just keep watering it, it'll perk up*—until the whole thing withers. Sometimes, it's faster. Sometimes, you look up from the puzzle you were playing, and the shape of the pieces isn't what it was a minute ago. Sometimes, the picture bleeds into itself, into all the other pictures you've looked at, and makes you so dizzy, you can't stand looking at all. Sometimes, things don't fit where you thought they would.

"Some things are ugly," Max says. "Some things are as ugly as you want them to be."

It's the kind of thing she's heard before, from her ex, maybe, or some other man across the table in a bar or a coffee shop. She almost smiles. For all their platitudes, these men never find the ones to put her together again. And for all the broken pieces Tess has tried to smother and smooth for their benefit, she's never forgiven them for reminding her of Beau without being him. Maybe, for her, there's no love, no sex, without what came first. Maybe it's all too tangled, something rotten in the roots. Maybe there's no helping it, really. Maybe it is what it is.

"Why Marc?" she asks again.

He is looking at her carefully. She'd understand if he watched her like her ex did: like a dog, starving, shrinking from the hand that feeds it; all that pity and frustration over this shivering creature when, really, it's just been trained. Max doesn't look at her like her ex did, though. He just sits with his hands open and looks. He says, "It's not really so complicated. I liked the way it sounded. 'Marc' sounds like someone who would, you know..."

"Fuck me in the bathroom?"

He smiles, but he doesn't laugh. To be expected. "It's like Max but isn't."

"Why not Max?"

He shrugs.

"Were you afraid someone would recognize you?"

"No one would recognize me."

Tess smiles at this. At her look, he does laugh.

"No," he says, when he gets his breath back. "It couldn't have been Max. I couldn't be me, if it was ever going to work."

She says, "That makes sense."

"Do you think," he asks, "you could ever see me as anything else?"

"Than Marc?"

He doesn't answer her. They watch each other across the table.

"Would you want me to?" she asks.

"Yes," he says. "Would you?"

When Tess was sixteen, still shopping for prom dresses, someone whose face she can't quite picture put his hands in her lap every day until she gave him what he wanted. *Sweet girl*. After, he told her she wanted it too. *You don't know what you want*. Maybe she had. I do. She can't remember now what his voice sounded like. She isn't sure she'd recognize it. She can't remember now if he spoke at all. Maybe these words in her head started out as his, as Beau's. Maybe they belonged to the ones that came after. Maybe they were all these other men's before they were Marc's: *Sweet girl*. *You don't know what you want*. *I do*.

She tried not to want things after that.

"I don't know," she tells Max.

He nods. "I understand."

This is not the end of their date. They face each other from their seats, and they talk about upstate New York, his roommate, her bad luck with potted plants. He tells her his favorite hot dog stand in the city. She tells him about drinking nine whiskey sours at a Halloween party and waking up with her bed full of pumpkins. They manage to fill the rest of their two hours without drowning because they don't leave the shallows. When he stands up to leave, she stands with him. They shake hands. His skin is warmer than she expected. She lets him go.

"Can I walk you out?" he says as he puts on his coat.

"You go on ahead," she tells him. "I'm going to powder my nose."

"It was nice to meet you, Tess."

His smile is genuine, and she returns it. "You too, Max."

She turns her attention to the table, dabbing at imaginary puddles with her used napkin. She waits until he turns to watch him go, returning to the lighter parts of the room, easy as melting. He pauses before going out the door. He grows roots. He turns back to face her, approaches again. She stops with her hand over her glass.

“If it helps,” he says, “you’re the one pressing play.”

In the bathroom, once he’s really gone, Tess looks at herself in the mirror. She peels the last strips of dried glue from her jaw, her cheekbones, and washes away the ruined paint. She wipes her armpits again. She lets her face relax. She regards the sink for a moment. It wouldn’t have held her, anyway.

The bartender is cleaning their table when she emerges. “How’d it go?” he asks.

“Worth a shot,” she says.

She takes the bus home, streetlights, headlights, and blinking neon falling across her eyes and body for seconds at a time before fading. She feels each one like a warm hand still on her skin, but that’s just in her head. Arriving, she locks the door behind her and switches on the light. Her windows turn to mirrors in the brightness. It seems too quiet after so much noise.

The first thing she sees is the basil plant in her sink, one shoot still green, the wasted stalks stooping into the soil. Tess picks up the pot and digs her fingers into the damp, plucking out dead bits like threads, covering her counter in loose earth and leaves. She stops once she’s done with the surface. She’s afraid to go deeper, to pull up the roots, because she can’t see them clearly, and she might kill what’s left. Maybe there is no love, no life, without what came first. But the plant looks better now. It’s alive, and that’s something. It’s still so quiet, but she could swear this whole time, she’s been talking.

She wonders if, maybe, she’s the one who’s not real. Maybe she’s the ghost, the outline, whoever you want her to be. Maybe she’s what Beau made her, what she tried to be for the others. Maybe she’s what’s left of them, of every person she’s put on a mask for, and maybe that’s all. Maybe she had words taken from her, rewritten and returned, so often, they lost their meaning. Maybe they didn’t mean enough when she had them, so she forgot how to speak. Maybe her stories, all of them, will keep bleeding into each other like water down the side of a glass. Maybe that does make her sick. But maybe she is what she is, and maybe, after it all, she prefers it that way. Most of the time.

With dirt on her fingers, Tess picks up her phone and her headphones. She types a name in; she wants to hear his voice. For now, that’s enough. There’s a moment of shuddering silence where

all she can hear is traffic through her closed window, the hum of her refrigerator turning on. Then a recording says, “Hi, you’ve reached Max. Leave a message if you want.”

Tess takes a breath and speaks.

*Behind the Scenes with Erin Arata*

PR: *Did you have any concerns about writing such a complex character as Tess?*

EA: I'd probably find something to worry about, even if I was writing the Very Hungry Caterpillar or Paddington Bear (who are both, I'm sure, *very* complex). I think my biggest concern about Tess was that there are so many—often contradictory—aspects to the way she approaches the world, and I worried it would be overwhelming for readers to track them. In the end, I think that's what made me fall in love with her. Human beings are messy, complicated, and contradictory. There's a lot driving them, even when it's overwhelming, and there isn't ever *one* answer to why they're the way they are. Tess's complexities just make her more like a real person, so if I ever ran into her at the bar or on the bus, I wouldn't be that surprised.

PR: *Could you share your approach to exploring taboo topics?*

EA: I think a lot of writing comes from a place of curiosity, that question of *What if?*, or just *Why?* Things like sexuality, kink, or desire in general are as varied as there are people to experience them, but I started this story with the question of what one person might feel, discovering and embracing an aspect of herself that's beyond her understanding of "normal." What personality quirks and life experiences might make audio porn and nonconsensual situations appealing, and what might make that appeal so difficult to accept? Approaching a topic, taboo or not, from a place of curiosity and a place of individuality made it a lot easier than just saying, *Hey, what's the deal with rape fantasies?* I'm not trying to answer every question for every person. I tried to answer them for Tess—as much as there are ever answers—and that ended up being a lot more satisfying.

PR: *What were you seeking to achieve—and avoid—with Max?*

EA: Tess's understanding of herself is heavily influenced by the men around her. Ideally, with time, support, and a lot of therapy, she would get to a place of self-acceptance...but that's a totally different story, so I plopped her down against the kind of guy she's usually acquiescing to and watched that situation get more complicated. Parasocial relationships are interesting in that, with limited information about our subjects, our brains start to fill in the gaps. Tess's understanding of "Marc" says more about her than it does about the man playing him. The actual Max is more complicated and flawed than a fantasy can be, and a lot scarier for it. It was important to me that Max not be someone who claims to have all the answers. It was

also important that, in contrast to Tess's judgement of herself, Max not express judgement about the kinks he performs. I wanted him to be an actor, playing a character, doing a job. In a lot of ways, Tess finds comfort in having her choices made for her. That's why it's so important that Max can't—and won't—tell her what to do. At least, IRL.

*(thanks, Erin!)*