9 I dreamt of a stranger

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Will you show face?

Not today.

Age?

Why does it matter? I can just lie anyway. How old do I look?

What are you into?

On a webcam? I assume I'm into jacking off with a stranger.

No, I mean in irl.

*But this **isn't** real life.*

To be a successful cammer depends on your willingness to commit to the performance. On some sites, it's about simultaneous viewer counts, on others it's about intimate and 'roulette-based' chance encounters, face or no face attached. It's a safe place for someone like me, afraid of sexual intimacy and the cavernous wound it can create.

There are moments where my eyes meet my companions over the screen and we can really see each other, wondering what connection might feel like. Should I ask for their details, I think? No, this is just a wank, once you've come it will be over; but I can feel it. I wonder if they do too, as we are together, by chance. I like seeing their homes, their cars, their balconies, their lives littering the frame of the screen. In our aloneness, we have created connection without the hazard of physical touch.

See the boy, he's on a plane sitting next to a rounding American man, who's wearing a colourful cartooned Hawaiian shirt. 'Your shirt's fun' the boy says, he isn't shy. The man has a bag of candies to hand and gives him some, the boy accepts. The man's hand finds its way to this young boy's leg, in shorts for the summer, and holds the soft skin.

See the boy, dressed like Mowgli, in a community theatre group production of The Jungle Book. Bronzed head to toe, and wearing a small loincloth, he looks like a pretty little girl. Everyone says so. In one scene he sits on the knee of a man, he knows also as a teacher from school. The boy smells the man's dairy breath wafting over him. Sweat is dripping from the man's brow, falling over fearful eyes, his fingers restrained around the boy's

naked waist, an awkward and proper grip, 'don't fumble here' the fingers say, the boy can hear them.

See the boy standing behind his desk in school. There was butter under the table and leaning back on his chair it had attached itself to his knee. Someone had put it there. After class, Mr Trevor, inspecting the table, got onto his knees using his hand to hold on to the boy's buttock, before gliding along the crease to the inside of his nylon clad legs, all the way to his ankle, and scuffed leather school shoes. The boy's retraction was too late. It had felt like an eternity, but it had happened swiftly. Up until now Mr Trevor had just handled, held, cupped, caressed, patted, fondled, his bum cheeks as he stood at the whiteboard, or made his way there. The class always saw the indiscretions. It was common knowledge that it was something Mr Trevor did, but there were the chosen few that it happened to. That night, the boy told his parents, 'Mr Trevor... makes me uncomfortable... he comes too close'. He couldn't say the words. Not asking any more, in return, 'just keep away from him' they said.

See the boy in the school nurse's office. He's crying because he feels unwell. He's been called gay, and it hurt inside. The nurse lets him stay while he composes himself.

The men who touched the boy, as far as I know, were not openly gay. Within the school there were teachers who were out gay men, which, now that I'm older and am aware of Section 28, was pretty special. Those teachers, those men, never conducted themselves in a way which would infringe upon the boy, nor his ability to learn. In fact, they actively supported this boy to succeed and gave him care and acknowledgement to do so. They didn't know their efforts were being thwarted. They also gave the boy a valuable representation. This sight, of an openly gay man who has a partner, allowed him to see, that he, he wasn't made wrong. He *could* love another boy. And that it *wasn't wrong*, there could be a life. *Just don't touch me.*

I fell down and cut my knee. Mrs Penry comforted me, I could see the bone, I thought.

My tired head on my mother's pillowy, warm legs, her hand stroking my hair.

Holding my best friend's hand and, all over, feeling like we can do anything – together.

I know what comfort feels like.

How dare you.

He is a good man, a very respected teacher, they said, a glittering record, he would and could never hurt a child, they said, it was the touch of 'pastoral care' they said.

Him, that boy, he's a dreamer. A fantasist. Not to be believed!

Look! It's all over the boy's school reports, they said.

If only he didn't spend so much time looking out of the window.

It's true, I did.

We accidentally confronted each other in the airlock between the courtroom and the hallway. This small old man cowering before me. And yet there was the boy again, scared and shaking like a leaf. My body crumbled inwards, to meet the boy's size. I was on the pavement, near the bridge, near the river, as a painful wail burst from my chest and my legs buckled. *They said it would be important to confront him; they said there weren't many other options; they said the school wouldn't listen.*

They didn't say it would be a public humiliation.

They didn't tell me my partner would look at me like I was diseased, his meagre grip struggling.

Why couldn't you hold me?

See the boy, he's back at school, a feeling of slimy destruction washing over him. His knees and legs are hitting each other rhythmically, spreading open and closed against his erection. He stares intensely at the physics teacher, Mr Rolands. For a brief moment the man's eyes meet the furious child's, and a sense of terror fills Mr Rolands up. The boy doesn't flinch, legs opening and closing. Mr Roland turns abruptly and goes back to work. The boy has already moved on, and is planning on dropping his pen on the floor, so that he can take a sniff of poppers under the table. He does this in chemistry too. His face would be flushed as he sat back up and his mind would be blurred and blunted.

The bus was empty on the top deck bar for one man behind the boy. Can you see the boy sitting there in his school uniform? The man undoes his belt buckle button and lowers the zip of his jeans; he pulls them down to the ground and lifts up the tabloid newspaper he has ready. It's there to cover him from being seen by the bus driver through the periscope. The boy hears, his ears pricked, his face pale, and a fearful form of arousal stirring. The man might have been looking at the boy. He doesn't know, as he brings himself to climax. The man drops the newspaper and zips up as he hurriedly leaves the bus. The boy sees the newspaper on the floor behind him and goes to look at it, he's stained a naked woman on page 3. He can smell the man's seed. He carefully closes the newspaper, to ensure it became *his*, to ensure no one else would know.

I'd had to run. He had chased me into the station. I was sure I had lost him, but as the doors of the train were blinking shut, he boarded. He was coming straight towards me. I found myself breathlessly cowering as this man's crotch met my body. I could feel him looking down at me, as he forced me against the glass that separates the seats from the standing area. I won't acknowledge him, this isn't happening, I look around and catch the eyes of a woman, 'help' my eyes scream... she glances away, 'I'm not getting involved' they say. Facing the darkness, I close my eyes as the lights of the next station intrude. The doors of the train sweep open as he lets me run, obviously satisfied.

I won't tell anyone about this. You're the first.

They said that maybe I wouldn't want to be present for the expected incursions; they said that maybe it would be better if I go into hiding for a while until it's safe out there. Dissociation, they have called it.

You were safe in there, then, they couldn't get to you, they couldn't take you away from me.

I'm sitting on a wooden bench in the winter sun, looking at diagrams, there's a medical model for this. He says it depends on the variable costs of the denial, avowal, and the pain. The brain can't process all of the information and so it's a form of protection. From the truth.

You needed to hide.

This word, 'gay', that had somehow attached itself to him, and felt too that it was true and real, that these *necessary* acts were a part of that. They had all told him it was time to grow up, that there would be a biological creation of sexuality, through puberty, and that things would change. They didn't say that there would be someone, crowbar in hand, attempting to wrench it and pry it out before it was ready. It didn't feel like an accident to him, and so he assumed it was a form of preparation for a life of loving men. Maybe these men were conducting a necessary ritual.

I loved the sound of the request as a new chat box would open. There was a sense of anticipation of meeting someone new. Starting with the compulsory 'asl', deciding how I would answer that – with honesty, or through an avatar – I could then proceed. I could play out various situations and test the water, play other people. I also remember I once activated the webcam and performed a 'show' for a number of older gentlemen in a specific group chat where this was available. It was exciting. I can still hear the thick Virginia accent, as this older man commanded my movements for him over the headset.

See the boy sitting on a plastic blue swivel chair, he is in the office of the family home; he is removing his clothes. See the boy as he is coerced into creating pornography. See the boy, saved as a file onto a hard drive, so he can be re-used and shared.

When I had come, and left the space, that brief feeling of visibility I had found was quickly lost to a tidal wave of self-disgust because it was dirty to be gay.

'Julian, that was abuse. You were a child. There should have been someone there to protect you, to stop that from happening' he said. I had been seeing Jeremy now for 6 months in this office in the old docklands.

But I would crave it, I thought, I wanted to be there, this is what I want.

See the boy, he's on his road, walking home after a party; a creature wrapped around his neck as a scarf. He is inebriated. Under the tree outside the mosque, a man steps out of the dark. The man comes in very close, very quickly, the boy's ass is already in his hand. There's a gap here, a memory loss. The man asks 'Is this where you live?', the boy has opened the gate and they're walking through into his mews, stopping by the ivy-covered wall he allows it to happen.

This dark face, you're handsome, you must be lonely, this isn't the right way, 'what's your name' I say, as he takes my kiss, and places my hand on his cock, makes me feel him, 'do you like it?'... I like it, don't I, I like it, 'yeh, yeh I do...' you seem so sad, we can be ok, I thought, but 'this isn't the way it's done', we can do this properly, 'sorry, what's your name?'. There's a neighbour leaving his house, someone I know, he's coming, I have to cover him, I will make it look real, like I want you. I do, I want you, I'm kissing *you* now, I'm holding *you* now... he's gone, why... neighbour didn't I... 'What's your name?'.

'It doesn't matter', the man says. 'Let's go to your house, I want to fuck you'.

The boy finds himself down the road again, in front of the 24hr Turkish restaurant. His face is wet, and he's struggling for breath.

I'm sitting in a large room, with five other men, and two therapists. I'm becoming euphoric as one my group describes how he met strangers in public toilets, older men who would ritually degrade him, or how he would do drugs with younger men and be treated roughly and left, feeling worthless, how he wanted to be, how he thought he should be. His cousin had raped him repeatedly, he was made to feel like he wanted it. I looked around the room at these men, overjoyed to know that they would understand. How relieving, I thought, to have a symptom and not a character flaw.

It was the lack of an available aggressor that left a vacuum – someone needed to take on the role.

I'm used to that, taking on roles. So let me, let me tell you what to do.

Drink, I'd say. So, you can't feel it anymore.

Maybe you'll wake up on the doorstep in the rain. Or maybe, maybe if you drink just enough, you'll be loose enough to let someone take you. Maybe, if you let yourself go, maybe that will make it quiet.

Maybe, if you can make it quiet, maybe then he'd love you.

Can you see the boy, he's sitting in a small red Volkswagen, with another boy called Leon, a friend from school. They are on a wet leafy road under the light of sulphur lamps. The boys are kissing, whilst music, a cd the boy had made, plays on the stereo. They would stay like this for a while, tasting each other, or maybe smoke a cigarette together or a joint, maybe they would hold hands, maybe they would just drive.

Maybe we could disappear together, steal your dad's fast car again, do you remember? That was fun. I remember that afternoon before the anti-war march where you told me I was the brains, and you the brawn. We were lying in that part of the heath which is a bit cruisey. It was a beautiful day. We felt ok there, I remember, I felt like we fit. It was near the end of school and maybe it would carry on; I hoped it would. I think I loved you terribly; I think you did too; I think you loved me terribly.

With Leon? Leon isn't gay, he has a girlfriend; I think you're imagining it.

I had a relationship with him, I would say I did.

Leon had soft features, light dusty cropped hair, a rounded but pronounced jaw, sharp blue eyes receded into a rugged eye line, and a muscularity he would later attribute to steroid use. They just wanted to be close to each other. The boy felt safe in Leon's strong hands. There was one time, after they'd drunk a fair amount of tequila together, and then and only then, did they try and see if it might work sexually, but it was a mess, so mostly they just held each other, and that felt enough.

You can't even hug me in public, I told him. I'm finding it hard to be silent about this. Maybe we can go to a gay club or a bar where no one will know us, maybe we can find a way, maybe you can do that for me?

When school ended, they went on their individual travels and left things open. The boy began an arts foundation course in London, and, on a visit from Leon after his trip to the Caribbean as a ship hand, Leon revealed that he had slept with and lost his virginity to a female prostitute.

Why are you telling me this? He just looked at me blankly.

It culminated in a painful 5 days at Glastonbury Festival where they shared a tent, but Leon spent most of the time ignoring Julian. Leon was moving on, growing up. This was a childhood exploration, it didn't mean anything anymore. They would hold each other one last time in the tent, feeling the warmth of each other's fading bodies. But as Leon threw himself into a cocktail of party drugs, the boy, who was starting to look like a man, was ultimately forgotten and gave whatever feelings he had left into his job at the welfare tent. He gave strangers tea and comfort, after their tents had been lost in flash flooding.

Later that summer, the boy would accidentally escort himself to an older American gentleman in Tallinn, Estonia. A few weeks later, a guesthouse owner in Bosnia plied the boy with beer in his private living space, and then tried to accost him. It would be somewhere on a train, in the endless sunflower fields of eastern Hungary, where the boy decided that he didn't want to be like this anymore, and decided that he would have to go.

The boy sacrificially cut his hair to concrete this, removing the gay one snip at a time. He thought whilst he did so of his old queer piano teacher, who had once called him and his curly locks 'Samson'. He thought that maybe the power would leave with his hair. In this dingy guesthouse, he watched on the screen of his Sony DVCam as he tried to become more manly for the camera.

He knew where he was meant to go. He had seen the men whilst still at school, standing behind trees and looking wistfully out for another set of eyes. He had also come here recently in the search of the 'sex tree' and found a leafy sheltered arch where the ground was littered with used condoms. He wasn't sure this was the spot, but desperately masturbated on the leafy ground alone, longing for an intruder.

He would be grabbed by the wrists and forced down. Entering him they would whisper 'dirty faggot' before kissing his ear. He might cry out, but would be joyful for getting what he deserved.

He awoke a couple of hours later on this bench; the sun poking its head through the pine that sits above the small pond. The iridescent colours, the pink and orange of a new day, were beginning to creep with early morning commuter traffic. He would walk down the hazy, dewy steps behind Jack Straws Castle and experience an immediate wave of acknowledgement, followed by eyes weighing up possibility. A dark builder in his fluorescents and steel toe caps moved out of his way. A burlier older gent, in a maroon v-neck jumper and barely concealed comb over, passed a glare. A younger lad in trackies and a buzzcut, probably high, walked decisively past. And that seemed to be it. The other men and faces became blurs, as he walked out of their world and onwards home. He was surprised at how many men there were at that time of the morning. He wondered why no one would just take him, and why he couldn't surrender.

Can you see the boy, he's still there, dancing in Heaven nightclub, on a Monday night. He's made it to the grimier top floor. His arms are up to the ceiling revealing his bare abdomen, his head is flinging side to side with his hips grinding to the dirty bass-line. Eyes are spitting everywhere, waiting for a glance, lights spinning. He looks across and someone catches it. That brief glimmer is all it takes, and spinning around they're suddenly dancing, crotch to crotch, the man's arms around the back of the boy's body holding him. The boy's hands feeling under the man's shirt, at the body hair, reaching up to his face and his stubble, before they kiss. Their arousals united, the man puts his hands down the boy's bulging trousers and pleasures him on the dance floor. The boy feels it like communication, an innate understanding of his longing. 'It's possible, here' he thinks, 'in this space'.

On the rowdy bus home, the boy's face is still tingling from the rubbing stubble, the taste of manliness lingers on his tongue. As the next day arrives, the sensations start to disappear with the enveloping hangover, and the details fade even faster than the feeling of his childhood being rubbed away.

We had just had intercourse; it was the second or third time. I don't know how we decided who would take it and who would receive, but I suppose I just let these things happen, so fell into the roll of receiving. I waited for Peter to come, I couldn't, I didn't want to. He knew this about me. I cleaned myself up with a towel, put on my T-shirt and trousers. I felt cold, and after giving Peter a kiss, I went downstairs, three flights down, through the kitchen he shared with his father, which was littered with trinkets and paperwork and out into the walled and damp garden. I wanted to have a cigarette alone, away from Peter.

Peter was kind and fun and loving. He had allowed me to walk gently into his life and was bursting to share it all with me. He had seen this young man on the fence and felt it was worth the effort to try. I'm grateful he did. He had pulled me out of four years of enforced celibacy, after that melodramatic haircut. Peter took Julian dancing at Duckies, in the Vauxhall Tavern, and spun the queer back to life amongst the disco of hairy men, vaudeville, and cheap drinks.

Things would eventually end, and Peter would move far away to Vietnam for work. On a rash visit to see him, I would try and explain to him, that I was ‘dealing with something’, I wanted him but ‘maybe those experiences at school...with the teacher’ had something to do with it, maybe if he could try and help, maybe I could move forward and we would work. Our intimacy issues weren’t his fault, he said. I had made him feel poisonous, and it was clear my actions had broken what we had.

I fell off my chair after I asked Edwin to kiss me. He looked down and laughed before helping me up. ‘Let’s go’ he said, as we grabbed our stuff and sneaked out of his friend’s house party. We made it to the outstretched, concrete balconies of these 1950s estates before our lips awkwardly fell over each other’s faces, and we grappled with desperate, boyish fumbling towards the stairway and down onto the damp street.

This messy one-night stand turned into brunch the next day, and then into a few weeks of togetherness. He touched me with care, and a deep and honest longing; I trusted him with my body. This all surprised me because it was Edwin’s first real relationship with a man, and so this freshness became a new start for me too. The first three weeks flew by in a haze of wild teenage exploration before that man, whose name I can’t remember, assaulted me outside my house. The aftermath of the assault revealed an infected rash of memories, some of which you’ve read here. I said to Edwin, ‘you can still be having fun, you don’t need to take this, me, on’. But he wanted to stay. I wanted him to stay too.

I would hide the worst under meditation and yoga, which I found lifted me up to a level zero. I was also in therapy and just trying not to be the worst that I felt, at least with him. But sometimes I would disappear – no hearing, feeling, or loving, unwilling to have sex. Sometimes the touch of Edwin’s hand on my waist, a kiss on my cheek, would make me jump.

I knew he was there; I knew he was right there next to me, why had he scared me?

There would be a public trial against my teacher, in which I had to stand as a witness. I would become consumed. Edwin found it increasingly hard to look me in the eye and, unconsciously or not, tried to escape. This life we were living was a secret life from his family, and it was perhaps suddenly becoming all too real; my bravery in the face of very real demons shamed him further. I would ultimately go through the process alone, whilst also having to care for him.

Even though I craved visibility without the restraint and shame of secrecy, I also wanted to preserve the relationship. It had taken me so long to get here, that I refused to give it up. I would end up facilitating our lives so that our difficulties couldn’t become real – I micromanaged our pain until neither of us could breathe anymore. On the seventh anniversary of our meeting to the day, even though we still loved each other, we left each other and went our separate ways.

I had only seen him as a series of torso and leg shots, obviously from the gym, on the app – he had a toned physique, with some hair, potentially early 40s, not street-savvy as his trainers weren't trendy at all. I met his eyes across the keyboard in the darkness of my bedroom. His face was withdrawn, and pale, and his voice soft, timid, and expressed his Italian heritage; his hair was shaved back to the same length as his stubbly beard. 'Tomas' he said his name was, he worked in IT for the NHS. He had asked me what I was into earlier, on the app, and I had said I'm not sure, I asked him what he was into – 'Oh, I like fucking, sucking, kissing, rimming, blow jobs...'. I like that stuff too, I responded. We would spend an intimate 15 minutes masturbating together, him intimating penetrative sex with me and making sounds to inform me of him getting close to climax. He wouldn't come though, and didn't want to, but he was happy I did. I thanked him. Our eyes met briefly. He hoped that one day maybe we could meet when the lockdown was over, and we said goodnight.

Two-way mirror

I would describe this text as a portrait of a fractured self, a self in conflict (Krishnamurti, 2018). A self that has been forced to live multiple lives – to find safety, protection, and understanding. It's an experience that I know many gay men go through with or without CSA (childhood sexual abuse). This opportunity to normalise my experiences of CSA in the context of my life as a gay man, to see my experiences as one road that a gay man might (sadly) have to take as something not normal, but *ordinary*, has given me the bravery to explore it openly. Edgar and Jason gave me the permission I needed to feel that my experience is not irrelevant or obsequiously unique.

During my MA in 2018, I suddenly had university access to a world of medical journals. I would read a lot (e.g. Dare, 1993; Schwartz & Galperin, 1993; Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010, Friedrichs, 2014) to try and find answers, to find routes out of what sometimes feels like a perpetual purgatory of re-experience. Although not always helpful, it showed me that some of my actions were indicative of overcoming the shame surrounding the abuse – the two films I would make were a public opening, but also a necessary creative expulsion. It hasn't been conducted in isolation. My self-care includes psychological personal and group therapy alongside a consistent personal practice in meditation, breath work, and yoga. These practices have been vital in my healing and, I realise now, are also recommended for the effects of trauma and dissociation (Draucker et al., 2011; Van Der Kolk, 2015). It has been a process of creating safety in my body whilst learning agency, taking back what has been lost.

Writing as candidly as I have here about my past might seem brutal, perhaps uncaring. I have actually found it necessary and vital. It has been about reclaiming my sexuality proudly (away from the abuse) and exploring

it vividly; the writing process has been another act of agency. I have had to be careful; I have had to change details to protect myself and others. I have also had to confront the fact that those mentioned may read this one day. This has forced me to be as honest as I possibly could with the result.

Through each of these voices represented, I have learnt and grown and lived maybe many more lives than I would have liked to, but they have made my life and understanding much richer than someone without the difficulties of being born other (Odet, 2019) in what Derek Jarman would call ‘heterosoc’ (Jarman, 1993). I feel grateful to be able to offer these words to a stranger’s eyes, to see if perhaps we might meet and understand each other.

‘I don’t know your name’, one of the films mentioned in this text, is available to view via this link: <https://www.julianpericles.com/IDKYN>

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Jaap Van Der Schaaf for his support and encouragement.

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