

## Friday

**Unknown Number**

**3.03am**

I know it's pointless, writing to you. I know you won't text back.

But I've been stuffing everything down for so long, if I don't put it into words it's going to rot me from the inside out.

This town's the size of a mud puddle, but it still feels like I'm drowning, here. Drowning in strangers. Drowning in silence, more than anything else.

Drowning doesn't even sound that bad, some days. People say suicide is the coward's way out, but is it? Doing nothing is cowardly. Suicide takes action.

Jesus, this is so pathetic. Thank fuck you'll never actually read this. Anyhow. Goodnight, wherever you are.

## Saturday

**1.46am**

*I've rewrote this text fifty times, and gone back on forth on whether to reply about a million times more. Even now I've got no clue whether I should be saying something—because I'm not the person you want to talk to. I don't know who this person is or whether they care or not but I can tell you this:*

*I care. I care about you, stranger. At least enough to try throwing you a life jacket, before your head disappears beneath the water line.*

*Yeah, suicide does take action.*

*But staying afloat takes more, when you've got nothing to hold onto.*

*So just grab a hold of this, okay?*

## Sunday

**9.10am**

Oh my God, I'm SO sorry. This used to be someone else's number.

That's super fucked up, that I probably woke you with all that psycho sad sack bullshit at 3am. You were really kind to reply, but don't waste any more time worrying about me. I probably drank a little more than I should have that night.

I'm okay, really. Just feeling sorry for myself. Though now I feel like such a crazy melodramatic asshole, there's not much room left over for self-pity. I guess I have you to thank for that. So thanks, stranger.

Sorry again. I promise I'll delete this number now.

**1.05pm**

*I just spent pretty much all morning trying to decide what to do. I'd hit on a possible answer while eating breakfast, then by the time I was done it would seem like the most foolish words that anyone has ever spoken. At one point, I even made a pros and cons list for the main two options, but still didn't really get much closer. Which sounds pretty extreme I know, but then even the smallest answers feel dangerous.*

*I mean, I could say you don't seem melodramatic. But what if that makes you slide back into the water? And if I say you did, I'm definitely going to be that asshole who rolls their eyes and jokes about people who are depressed.*

*So in the end, I thought I'd skip out on both and choose option three:*

*Don't delete my number.*

*Or at least, don't delete it because you think you bothered me. Even if expressing depressed feelings falls into that category, I'm never doing anything that you could possibly interrupt. As we speak, I'm sprawled on my couch in pyjamas I've yet to change out of, while the fiftieth episode of something I'm not even watching plays on the TV.*

*The very worst crime you'll ever be guilty of is making me rewind something back to the beginning.*

## Monday

1.48am

I hope this won't wake you.

I hope that, yet there I went sending it anyhow. Just more fodder for my growing asshole cred.

The first time you replied I got a little freaked out, because it popped up with someone else's name. Someone who wouldn't be texting me back unless Jesus fell off the wagon and started drunkenly tossing miracles around.

Speaking of drunk, yet again I'm probably not what you'd call entirely lucid. No doubt the liquor played a part in loosening my fingers enough for one to slip and hit the send button.

All afternoon, I tried to talk myself into deleting your number, so I wouldn't wind up spraying my sad all over you again in a fit of sloppy weakness exactly like this one, but in the end I couldn't. I just changed the contact from the old name to Stranger.

Anyhow, it was nice to hear from you, stranger. Like I was shouting into the void and the void was kind enough to whisper back. The void cares more than most of my friends, as it turns out.

Also, what are you watching? I'm watching some Nazi documentary. What is it with British TV? So goddamn many Nazis.

**2.58am**

*You don't have to worry about waking me up. Chances are you won't be. I sleep like someone trying to start an engine stuffed with sugar—in stuttery fits and starts. Really you're saving me from staring at the ceiling. Or from nightmares that are usually about me, staring at the ceiling.*

*Oh and I don't care if you're drunk, either. My stone cold sober is usually weirder than most people's blotto. I mean, when you said you wanted to call me Stranger, my first response was a burst of happiness at the idea of having a secret name. How ridiculous is that?*

*And is it more or less ridiculous that I've already given you a secret name back? Smith, I've called you, after the author of that poem. You know the one—I was much too far out all my life, and not waving but drowning.*

*Hopefully that's not too pretentious. Or too much of a reminder of the miracle that isn't happening. Or the friends that aren't calling. They're all fools to not want to talk about Nazis on British TV at three in the morning, I promise.*

*I want to talk to you about it, and I barely know you. I don't even know where you're from. Up until this point I thought you were British, and so understood our strange ways. But now I see I will have to guide you through them. Explain in detail why we love dull-voiced documentaries about Nazis so much. Help you understand what makes them so vital to our country.*

*Here it is, the big revelation:*

*I haven't got a bloody clue.*

*It's as much a mystery to me as it is to you.*

*I don't even think I've ever watched one all the way through—right now I'm in the middle of The Killing. Give me dismembered bodies and haunted detectives and rain drenched roads over grainy footage of Churchill, any day of the goddamn week.*

**3.18am**

Hi, stranger.

I stayed awake on the off chance you'd reply. I waited and watched that entire stupid documentary, and then there was a ping just as the credits rolled. And then another. Nine pings, and I waited for them to stop for good before I read what you wrote.

Was I afraid to interrupt you? I think maybe. Or maybe something else. Some greedy cousin of anticipation.

I held my breath and waited, waited, and the pings kept coming, like a box of chocolates filling up. It made me feel strange, and warm, like this middle-shelf bourbon is doing. Plus some other bad food-and-beverage similes I can't think of just now.

Yeah, I'm not from these parts. I'm from the States, New Mexico. It's a long story, how I wound up here, in a tiny little turd of a village just off the M1. It's not quirky and picturesque and beset by a disproportionate number of murders like the British villages in the shows my aunt likes to watch on PBS. I'd kill for a murder. This place is dull as fuck.

But here I am, and here I'm stuck for the time being. It's very wet and gray. I don't mean to piss on your country, but I won't lie, it's rough. At least when you come from a place that's dry and sunny 362 days a year, it is. And if you're a whiny douche who can't handle a little rain.

I'm homesick, ignore me. Maybe only March sucks. Maybe April will be better.

Hey, look at me, the eternal optimist!

I feel like I should wonder if you're a man or a woman, if you're sixty or sixteen, but I don't really care. I think maybe you're a woman, but that's probably just me being sexist, thinking only women know about poetry or worry about strangers.

You don't have to tell me. It doesn't matter. I only care that you're a human and you're awake and you're kind, when you have no reason to be. That you said, "I'm here," when almost anybody else who got those texts would've said, "Fuck off, stalker, wrong number." If they bothered to say anything at all.

It makes me wonder what I would've said. I feel small and a little ashamed that I can't guess.

Now me, I don't know about poetry, but that one you quoted sounds nice. I'll look it up. When I read that you think of me as Smith I first thought of Elliott Smith, because lately I've been listening to all the music that used to make depression sound so romantic, back before I knew what depression actually feels like.

I wish I had the same problems I did back then. I didn't even know what problems were, or what hopelessness is like to live inside, like a well that's so empty there's no water and no floor, not even any walls, too bottomless for you to make out the sky or stars or hear somebody calling your name. If anyone's even noticed you went missing.

Fucking similes. Hey, maybe this one makes you my bucket. Deep, right? I think I better leave the poetry to you.

I've been listening to way too much Nick Drake lately, too. He's my kind of poet. You showing up makes me think of some of his lyrics. Now you're here. Brighten my northern sky.

Before I shut the fuck up, I want to let you know, I'm not going to kill myself. I can't. I have something too important to live for.

Believe me, I fantasize about it. I fantasize that it's an option, that I could hit the stop button on the shit show my life's become, but I can't, and I won't. Promise. So don't worry. I'm here to stay.

Now try to get some sleep, stranger-bucket.

**3.30am**

*First of all, can I just say that I love you waiting for the pings? Every time I text I get this slight sizzle of nerves that you'll want to text back the way normal people do—immediate and between the seven thousand things I want to say, instead of all slow and deliberate and like letters. I love that this is like sending each other letters.*

*And don't worry, I love your similes.*

*I'm currently rolling around in all of them, especially the chocolate one.*

*Though can you blame me? Now all I can think about is a hot dry place I've never been to, and the taste of middle-shelf Scotch that I'm imagining is sticky and warm, and a well that's so empty and lightless you need me to let down the rope.*

*I hope I'm doing it well enough. I hope you're telling the truth.*

*I hope the something that is too important is as cool and amazing as you sound.*

*You deserve amazing just for Elliot Smith. I've never heard him in my whole life—I didn't even know he existed. But now I'm lying on my bed in the dark, his words whispering over me in waves. Drink up baby, stay up all night, with the things you could do, you won't but you might...*

*You're probably going to tell me that they mean something specific. That they're about a girlfriend he lost to heroin or some sleazy thing he did in a bar one time. But just for right now I want to imagine those words are only for me, or for both of us, like a soundtrack to the weird conversation we seem to be slipping into.*

*Because this is slipping, for me.*

*Usually I hesitate. I bargain with my own words.*

*I let out two as long as ten stay behind.*

*Yet I don't seem to be doing that with you.*

*I wonder why? Part of me thinks it's because you don't know me, can't see me, aren't even aware of what gender I am. But mostly I read you saying things about suicide, and it's like you're slicing through the wall that holds back everything I would usually never say.*

*I would never usually say things like cool and amazing, but I don't care if it could be the last thing you ever know about yourself. All that matters is that you do know it.*

*Goodnight, Smith.*

*Sleep well, under whatever bright northern sky I provide.*

**10.52am**

Yes, letters. You're right, that's what these are.

I read your latest one in bed just before the sun came up, and I've been turning that thought around and around all morning, as I showered and made coffee and breakfast and took care of things around here.

I can't remember the last time anyone sent me a letter, or I sent one to somebody. Not even a heartfelt email. People don't really do that these days—take turns, wait for the other person to finish saying what's on their mind.

We don't tell stories about ourselves anymore, just let the mundane blurt from our brains into our phones, hit send, half-read the reply in a rush, knowing it's our turn to blurt again, to send a photo of our boring lunches or our boring faces, made very slightly less boring by the application of a colorized filter.

Anyhow, I've found that idea distracting, in a nice way.

And I'm finding our correspondence very refreshing. It makes me want wait until all the pings are in, and to read what you write, then let it settle over me before I rush to word my own reply. I haven't done that in far too long.

Anyhow. My important something, as you put it, is about as far from cool as a something can get.

That's a lesson I've been learning in recent weeks. That "important" and "cool" rarely intersect. Cool used to be a very big part of my life.

Before I moved here, I owned a liquor store. To say "liquor store" doesn't paint the right picture, though. It was a boutique, basically, in the most happening part of Albuquerque. The kind of place where parents blow \$600 on a bottle of ancient Scotch to give their kid when he graduates law school, where guys my age drop ninety bucks on bourbon in an attempt to convince ourselves we're connoisseurs, not alcoholics.

I guess I'm probably a hipster. Or was. I don't have any cred anymore.

I used to, though. My shop was like hipster church. Everyone came by each week to worship and be seen and empty their wallets.

It meant a lot to me, that shop. I picked out every light fixture, stocked it with stuff you couldn't find anywhere else in the state. Hipsters fucking love hard-to-find shit, and I loved being the guy who found it.

That shop was me. It defined me the way being in a band defined me when I was in high school. I've always been like that. Like there's not enough bones and meat inside me to build a person worth knowing. Like I needed a costume as big as a whole fucking building to pass for one.

And I did pass. I had dozens of friends, all as hip and clever and unique as me. But when shit went south and I had to sell the shop, it turned out I'd picked those friends the same way I had the light fixtures. They looked good, looked right and slick and hard-to-find, but they didn't really give a shit about the guy behind the counter. They only cared about shining. Same as me.

Anyhow, that was the old me. The new me's got nothing to hide behind, just this crazy, sad, inescapable anchor keeping me here, neck-deep in my own incompetence twenty-four hours a day.

I'm no one, here. I'm that sad American guy who rents the apartment above—get this—the village off-license. It's so fucking ironic, it could grace a forty-dollar tee shirt.

But that's plenty about me for now. I want to know more about you. Tell me something. Anything. You seem full inside the way I feel empty. You've got poetry for marrow and compassion pumping through your veins. You seem genuine, and earnest. Everything I'm not. So tell me how you do it, stranger.

**11.45am**

*I think the truth is it's easy to seem full when you've spent your whole life not letting anything out. I have years of conversations inside of me; decades of unvoiced thoughts. They're practically straining at my seams. Honestly, it's a relief to have someone pluck at the stitches holding them in. To have someone actually ask about me.*

*I just wish there was something of worth in there to tell you. I have no interesting history—or at least nothing as interesting as hipster scotch and fake friends and being in a band. I didn't fall from the grace of some golden false god.*

*There was no grace to begin with.*

*Only falling.*

*I started out at above the off-license, you know? Only in my case it's above an abandoned movie theatre, after dropping out of university and dropping out of every job I've ever had and dropping out of humanity. The last time I went outside was a Tuesday, but I couldn't tell you which Tuesday it was. It could have been the last one in June.*

*It might have been the first one of five years ago.*

*Really, I'm the last person you should come to for advice on how to be a person. But if it's any consolation at all, you seem to be doing pretty good to me. You didn't have to tell me that story, but you did. And you don't have to be so honest about everything, but you are. They seem like solid places to start, if you're trying to rebuild yourself into the kind of person you want to be.*

*I have faith in you, Smith. Even though I've only known you for five minutes, I have faith.*

*Doesn't that tell you something?*

**12.20pm**

So we're both trapped, huh?

Me by circumstances and obligation. You by...what, exactly? Something in your head? Or your past? Help me understand. What on earth could have made someone with so much to share decide to keep it all locked up?

Was it even a choice at all?

Go ahead, stranger. Break my heart. Show me I'm still capable of feeling something so tender.

**12.32pm**

*I guess so, but I don't know if I ever thought of myself as trapped until right now. It's safe here. It's comfortable. I don't have to make any choices or decide anything in particular. The hardest part of my day is picking what to watch, what to eat, whether to get up off the couch.*

*I've rubbed myself a smooth, soft rut in the fabric of my life.*

*Though I honestly don't know why. If I did, I swear I would tell you. Nothing sounds so sweet to me as provoking tender feelings from someone who thinks he isn't capable of feeling them. But if I tried, I know I'd probably slip into lies.*

*Make up something juicy for you, like "it was on the day my family died" Paint you a picture of a happy girl who lived a sunshine life, until storm cloud clichés came and stole it all away. I could describe the smell of blood with words like raw and heavy; tell you that a corpse turns the colour of spoiled food within moments.*

*And you would believe me.*

*It's just that I don't want you to.*

*Instead, tell me something sweet. Tell me something you like.*

*Tell me all your favourite things.*

**1.02pm**

That's all I'm getting out of you, huh? You're a girl. Well, I'll settle for that if you'll tell me just one other thing about yourself...

What did you study before you dropped out of university?

As for my favorite things... Man, I've felt so little desire for anything other than sleep and whiskey these past few months, it's like I almost don't know. But for you, stranger, I'll try.

I like being barefoot. On smooth hardwood planks or warm sand or dry grass or against cool sheets. I wear socks a lot, here. It's chilly and damp and it makes my feet ache even though I'm thirty-four not seventy.

But maybe tonight after my obligations are met I'll move my chair over by the window and take off my socks and prop my feet up on the sill, just above the radiator. That might feel good.

Maybe I need to be making more of an effort to feel nice things. Instead of just trying not to feel anything at all.

What else? I like pumpkin pie. My mom made really amazing pumpkin pie from scratch, on Thanksgiving and Christmas. I'd give anything to taste that again.

I like when a bar of soap is brand new and the logo pressed into it's still crisp and you can see the seams along the sides.

I like dogs.

I like buying flowers for women.

I like music. A lot. Maybe more than anything.

I like the way my son's hair smells.

There, I said it. You're giving me crumbs but here's the whole fucking mouse-ridden bakery for you.

I have a kid, a little boy, two and a half. I found out about him a year back, met him five months ago when I moved here because his mom's out of the picture, now.

When he's not afraid of me he's just...blank. He doesn't speak, doesn't look me or anyone except his grandmother in the eyes. He went through shit I might never know the details of, saw shit that's turned him into this frightened, silent little ghost-boy. When he's in blank-mode, I'll sit next to him while we watch TV and put my arm around him, just wait for the points where our bodies touch to grow warm, so I know he's real.

When he wakes up moaning in the middle of the night, I go to his bed and prop him up and hold him. The whiskey lets me do that. Hug him. I tell him he's safe and I'm here, and I hope my voice comforts him, the way his moans nearly comfort me, because apart from those, he never makes a sound.

I play my guitar for him, sometimes. I play Blackbird and Country Roads and Pink Moon, and I don't know if he hears.

I never wanted kids. Kids aren't cool, especially ones as damaged as this little boy, and cool used to matter so much.

The counselor I met with when I came over said to give him time, he's been through a lot. Let him know you're here, that you care, that you're not going anywhere. That you love him.

I don't know if I do, though. Love him. I want to, but how do you love someone you don't know? I have no idea what his thoughts are, because he won't talk. I have no idea if he likes my cooking, or my singing, or a toy I buy him, or if he even knows I'm his father or what that means, or trusts that I won't hurt him. He's like a wounded animal—no language, only reaction and fear.

But he's beautiful, and, yes, I like the smell of his hair at the end of the day. Even I can't find two similes to mash together to describe it. I can't say what it smells like, but it feels like coming home, somehow. Like familiarity or recognition. I knew he must be mine before the blood test results even came back, because of that smell and how exactly right it is.

He's watching TV now. I let him do that a lot, and play on my iPad, even though it can't be good for him. But it hurts too much, taking him to the park, seeing him stare fearfully at the slide and swings and pigeons like they're snarling dogs. Screens calm him, and I'm so helpless at this shit. And so fucking tired.

Okay, stranger, that was a lot. That was half of everything, so do right by me, here.

Don't tell me I'm doing great or to hang in there or that these things take time. Just tell me about you. Something real. Something solid I can dig my fingers into.

**2.50pm**

*I can do that: I studied English Literature. Went into it expecting to meet all the friends they say you will and go to all the parties I had always missed in high school. But the friends never materialised, and I kept missing all the parties. Some because I wasn't invited. Others because I just didn't really want to go. I finally left when I realised I was only doing what I would have done anyway: devouring books and movies by the boatload.*

*So I understand about the nice things. I wanted them too, and I failed at getting them.*

*Or at least, it feels like I failed.*

*Sometimes I get so much joy and pleasure out of a meal or watching a movie or reading a book in the bath that I don't really know if I won or lost. I don't know if it's okay to live your life like this—through other people and places that don't actually exist. It makes me think I'll look back and wonder why I wasted all this time.*

*Why I didn't go barefoot while I still could.*

*But maybe that's silly to think, if my attempts always come to nothing?*

*It's hard to keep trying, when it always turns out wrong. I mean, I'm utterly addicted to talking to you. Yet part of me hesitates before I pick up the phone or press send on a certain message. More and more I find myself deleting particular lines, in case those are the ones that will finally make you fall silent. Cutting myself off, before you can do it for me.*

*I think it's why I'm not sharing as much as you might like.*

*Because it's easier.*

*It's easier to hear about you than tell you about me.*

*I could read about your little boy all day—it gave me a little jolt of surprise and something else, something tender, just to see those words. To see you being so honest about your feelings towards him. Everyone always makes it seem terrible, to doubt whether you love a child. But love isn't something that can simply bend around all barriers. It isn't a coat you can wear for all occasions.*

*It's messy and elusive and strange. It runs when you think it should be there and comes when you least expect it to call. Sometimes it hits you in a rush; other times it creeps up like a thief in the night. Lies waiting for that moment when you need it most.*

*Or at least, I hope so.*

*Don't you?*

**6.46pm**

Are you there, stranger?

The sun's setting and I still have my socks on. The boy should be going to bed soon, though, and after that I promise my bare feet will be propped above the radiator.

Maybe I'll read a book, tonight, instead of watching TV. It's been a long time since I heard that sound—the dry hush of pages turning in a quiet room. I've been avoiding the quiet. The boy gives me too much of it. Probably half of why hearing your pings coming through feels so damn nourishing.

You said, "More and more I find myself deleting particular lines, in case those are the ones that will finally make you fall silent."

It's funny, because after I sent my last messages, I told myself, if she pussies out and turns this back on me, I'm gonna be a dick. I was frustrated by some shit this afternoon, nothing to do with you. You're the one good thing right now. But I thought, if she holds back, I'm gonna say to her, tell me something goddamn real about yourself or I'm out.

That's unfair. It's true, but it's not fair.

Because you didn't sign up for this. I was thinking before, this is so random. This is like accidental Chat Roulette. Was Chat Roulette a thing in the UK?

Basically the idea behind it was that you went on this video-chat app and you got linked up with some other user, totally random. In theory it was a beautiful thing, like some great-grandma from Corsica gets connected with a disaffected skateboarder from New Jersey, and everyone discovers they're not so different, after all. Kumbaya.

But like all great things, dudes ruined it by waving their dicks around. I heard that like 99% of the time you'd wind up with a screen full of some rando jacking it.

Anyhow, I was thinking you and me, we're like Chat Roulette in the wild. But when I think harder about it, we're not. Because you didn't ask for this. You didn't sign up and hit Connect or Chat or whatever the fuck the button's labeled. I barged in like a drunk stumbling into your living room and you were nice enough to rub my back while I puked in your flower pots.

So yeah, that wasn't fair, my thinking you owe me a goddamn thing. You've offered up more than anybody could be expected to.

But that doesn't change how it felt, getting to hear about you. You didn't give me much but I sucked it down like the whiskey I'm telling myself I won't drink tonight after the boy goes to bed.

Tell me a little more. Please. Tell me what you'd eat, if you could eat anything, and what you'd watch while you savored every bite. What you'd read in the tub afterward. What you'll think about while you lie in bed or on the couch or the roof or wherever it is you don't sleep at three in the morning.

(And so you know, it's never too late to go barefoot. Even if you die tomorrow, there's always tonight.)

As for me, I'm eating rice, all cheesy with broccoli. The boy seems to like it.

Normally he eats exactly three bites of whatever I put in front of him and that's it, he just quietly sets his fork down and stares at the rest while it congeals until I take it away. He's real skinny, with a big head full of the same blond curls I had when I was his age, before my hair turned brown.

His grandma—his mom's mom—told me he'll only eat these salty-as-fuck microwave noodle packets and she gave me like twenty of them, but fuck that. I can't do much for this kid but I can at least try to get some real food into him.

Anyhow, I made us brown rice with cheddar cheese and butter and broccoli, and he's still eating it, a fork in one hand and the other swiping at the iPad. It sounds like nothing but I feel like Rocky standing at the top of those steps.

Fuck, I'm so tired. Tell me more if you're ready, stranger. Don't delete a thing. Don't censor yourself.

Show me all your soft, bruised, homely parts, because that's all I'm made of anymore. That's all I've got, and frankly that's all I want to see. I spent thirty-four years only caring about facades, and shock of shocks, it left me hollow.

So fill me up.

## Tuesday

**6.33am**

*I thought about your last words way too much. In fact, I spent so long thinking how to reply that I fell asleep at an odd time, and woke up at an even odder time, and now six in the morning feels like one in the afternoon.*

*Though at least I now know how I feel about your words. Truth is, I kind of want you to be a dick about it. It's a novelty to have someone be a dick about me not giving enough, rather than a dick because I'm giving too much. The conversations I do remember from college were all me boring people to death, then falling silent over a hint of disinterest. I would listen to stories about other people's lives for hours, just to avoid seeming selfish or like I was monopolising things.*

*So you'll see a lot of me, trying not to be a monopoly.*

*Trying not to take up too much space, or semi-apologising for spilling my guts.*

*But when you get specific about what you want, I can do it. I can tell you what I'm eating right now, as I peck this message out to you in bits and bats: a probably-terrible-for-me ready meal of lamb discs and carrot batons, swimming in a watery gravy.*

*It tastes about half as good as brown rice and broccoli sounds, but somewhere along the way to where I am now I forgot how to cook. Or maybe I never really learned? As a teenager I*

*subsisted on floury cheese sauce made in the microwave, over pasta that I always managed to boil to death. University was a mess of those death noodles you mentioned, with the occasional slice of toast in between.*

*Though sometimes I do entertain ideas of more. Of fancy restaurants or hearty home cooked meals; salads with dressings and sauces made from scratch. Pies with real crusts, gleaming and crisp. Cakes with sweet icing swirls and meat so tender it dissolves in the mouth...*

*Yeah, I dream about amazing food more than I actually eat it.*

*As for the book, and the bath:*

*Little Children, by Tom Perrotta.*

*And it was so good I read until the water was flat cold. It had the glossy, enthralling sheen to it that American sadness often seems to have—as opposed to British sadness, which is always so droopy by comparison. We set a cow on fire in a field and go in lifts that stink of piss. Everything is damp and dark, and just misses okay by a pathetic margin.*

*Affairs are conducted in gloomy silence, at the seaside.*

*Thunder never rolls in the distance. There are never any haunting train sounds or bright blue pools or laundry rooms. Nobody finds any poetry.*

*Not even in our books.*

*The one I'm starting tonight is already grim and waterlogged. There's masturbation in it, but the masturbation is a terse, depressing, single sentence affair. Like any further reflection on it would bring the tone of the book down, or give proceedings a slightly exciting air.*

*Nothing can be slightly exciting here.*

*Not even my messages to you, apparently, because now I'm fighting with myself again about whether I should have sent those last few lines. I've said a sexual word in front of you, in the middle of our texts about broccoli and being drunk and suffering through depression.*

*Though I suppose you did say that thing about Chat Roulette, first.*

*Can I be forgiven for masturbation, when you featured flapping dicks before I did?*

**8.28am**

I wouldn't worry about scandalizing me with casual mentions of dreary literary masturbation. Sex has always been easy for me to talk about. It's probably the one genuine thing about me. In my old life I was all about artifice and airs, except when it came to sex.

But you seem shy about it, so I won't say much more than that. We've got kind of a pure thing going on here, and I promise I'm not secretly getting off on all this. Typing with one hand, as it were. It's not like that. I'm a gentleman pervert.

Plus to be honest, sex is pretty far from my mind these days. Eroticism's in short supply around here, what with the catatonic toddler and my impending alcoholism.

Anyhow, I was thinking. Let's play a game, stranger. Truth or Dare, minus the dare part. We get to ask each other questions, and the other person has to answer them completely truthfully. We each get one pass. Deal?

Here's one for you: How long has it been since you left your apartment, really? I know you know. How could you not?

**9.52am**

*Is it okay to admit that I liked you calling yourself a gentleman pervert?*

*Or tell you that I'm not that shy?*

*I just need to know where the line is, in case I'm the one being ungentlemanly.*

*And I like the idea of truth or dare. It's good and specific. It makes me feel like I'm not really answering at all, while answering pretty dreaded questions. I mean, I don't even think I've told myself when I really last left, never mind you.*

*It took me an hour to work out when it actually was. An hour of pretending I had to clean the bathroom instead of coming up with the number right now. I polished the mirror over the medicine cabinet and scrubbed the bath to a high gloss, before I finally gave in and counted.*

*And now I think I have it: seven months ago I had to grab a parcel that someone had left outside my apartment door. Though does that technically count if it was just in the hallway? It felt like it counted. I had to reach outside while lying down, and when I was done my body was slick with sweat and sort of limp like an old dishrag.*

*Now here's my question for you:*

*Who did you think I was?*