

MATTHEW HARRIS

COURTNEY XTRAVAGANZA

I SPEND TOO MUCH TIME on tumblr, so I've been riding my bike to the gravel quarry, getting splooges of dirt on my bare legs. I go there to chill and watch the sunset. A family of bobcats comes out sometimes and walks along the quarry's edge sniffing for food. I snap photos of them with my phone, but the only person I could send them to is Sky. Or maybe I could post them for the four other people who follow me on tumblr and my cousin Carrie, even though she's not on Facebook.

I also lie down and listen to the cicadas' buzz, which sometimes sounds like it's coming from the hydro lines. When the sun goes away I think of some porn gifs and masturbate.

Yesterday I biked home before it got too dark just 'cause of the tree roots on the thread. I've been thinking about Venus lately. Venus Xtravaganza. I only saw *Paris is Burning* two months ago because of some gifs on tumblr, but I'm already so wrapped up in it—and her. I want to be Venus. But don't get me wrong—I don't want to be a girl. I want to be something else, something that no one in this universe has ever been. I've started quoting Venus's lines from the documentary. "Touch this skin, darling," I said to the sky last night. "Touch all of it."

My dad had left garbage bags on the front stoop so I carried them to the trash can at the end of the driveway. "Are you going to do the kitchen?" he asked. So I mopped the kitchen floor while he watched the news. I left the kitchen smelling all fresh and chemically.

My room is this little box, but it's good enough for now. If I hang out my window I can see a smear of downtown Kittston—the second-hand clothing shop, the concrete rec centre, the corner of Prince and Vane with the gas stations. Last night I saw the white lights of the bus depot, and even a driver. He was strolling across the painted lines of the parking lot, smoking.

Carrie texted me: *what u doing?*

I texted back: *Fucking everything in sight.*

Her response: *ha ha nice try virgin.*

Mine: *at least I'm not a slut, slut.* And I got another *ha ha* for that. Behind one of the gas stations, I could hear some guys smash a bottle.

I think Phil would like it if I held his balls in my mouth. Phil is the neighbour I get drives from sometimes. He has this tiny wife named Miss Sharon. Miss Sharon teaches French at West Prince Street High School, and she rides a bicycle in a big puffy jacket almost to the end of spring, so we all make fun of her. Phil is an off-and-on bricklayer, and most of the time I see him shirtlessly watering the huge lawn around his house. He stares down his street, at the dirt brown fence circling the shutdown pulp mill.

I think he'd want me to roll his balls around gently, like I was sucking hard candy really softly with my cheeks.

When I rang the doorbell the other day, I saw through his screen door that he was watching some antiques show. "Phil," I whispered. "Phil." His bulky shadow walked down the cluttered hallway. He opened the screen door and gave off a sweetish stink of alcohol. I remembered a gif from tumblr last night: an older guy was grabbing some young guy's hair while getting a blowjob. I'd like that best. He'd let me feel his entire width with my mouth.

"It's time?" he said.

"Yeah, that would be great."

And after sex he'd have his bristly face behind my ear and his grey arm hairs underneath my chin and he'd say something like, "I like how short you are."

"The clients will like it that my hands are smaller than theirs," I mumbled as we got into his car.

Phil drove me to the rec centre, where I run bingo nights for the old people. We drove with the windows of his Honda open because the air conditioning's broke. He said, "Are you excited about the last year of school?"

"Not really. I'm sort of dumb."

"You're not dumb, Court. What about after graduation?"

"Does it matter? I'm not going to be rich or powerful or anything." I could see myself in his side mirror. I am always shocked by how ugly I am, but I just stare at my reflection without batting an eyelash.

After bingo I went to the Pretzel House. On the bar's cinder-block side wall, among all the other graffiti, it still says "fag"—I don't think anyone even notices it anymore. Inside, these wooden captain's chairs huddle around the round tables and you can't smoke, but people do. Barry'll let me in most

nights so I can sit in the back and watch the Stiletto perform. The Stiletto are a bunch of local moms who sing country music with two really old mechanics on drums and piano. Sometimes Barry will give me a watery beer in a red plastic cup that I have to spill if the cops come. But usually there aren't many people at the Pretzel House, so I just go there and read my sci-fi novels.

This night I saw that strange guy. I've seen him a couple of times. He's skinny and wears these ridiculous shorts that are shorter than even the girls wear. And giant glasses that give him blinking owl eyes and facial hair that makes him look dirty—you can even see the spaces between the bits of hair.

He's in there with an iPad, and he drinks old man's beer—OV and Labatt 50—and watches the Stiletto. He laughs and cheers them on.

No one sits near him, and when he orders cheese nachos and beer and starts reading the iPad, sometimes the cashiers from Dina's Fresh Foods will move to another table and whisper about him. The men at the bar don't whisper about him. They just sit on their stools and stare at him, and watch him take the iPad to the bathroom. Then they take a sip from their beers and watch him come back, while he holds the iPad carefully with his damp hands. Barry says he's a scientist—or maybe just a wannabe scientist.

This science guy must have seen me staring, because he wiped beer from his beard and walked over. He asked to sit down. I shrugged. "No one's sitting there."

"I see you here all the time," he said. The cashiers were looking at me. "It's hard not to notice you—you're the only one in here even close to my age."

"I like the Stiletto." I didn't really know where to look—at his smile, at the cashiers, at the guys at the bar who were swivelling on their stools to face us. I decided to look at my copy of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

"What's your name?" He opened his mouth and scratched his beard. I was being so rude—I couldn't look at his eyes.

"I don't know." I shook my head. "I mean, it's Court—Courtney."

Maybe he caught where my eyes were flicking because he laughed and said, "Okay, Mr. I-don't-know. I'm Simon. Here's my number. Text me sometime. I'm going to be in town for another month or so and I get pretty bored." He wrote on a napkin and slid it over to me.

I looked at the number, but didn't pick up the napkin.

"Sure," I said.

He paid the waitress and walked out with the entire room watching him. He didn't seem to notice. Or maybe he didn't want anyone to notice that he noticed.

One of the cashiers from Dina's drove me home. She wouldn't shut up about that "queer" guy. "I hope he wasn't bothering you," she said. "I have no problem with that stuff, but can't they leave it at home?"

She waited for me to say, "Yah," and then she laughed.

Later, in my room, tumblr was blowing up about some song. It was only a beat and an attitude, but it was exactly what I wanted. I got showered and wrapped my towel into a turban. The song played while I strutted. I uncrumpled the napkin and read the number again.

"Miss Upcoming Pretty Girl 1986," I said to my mirror as I danced.

Simon drove us down to Skeleton Lake Go Carts and Mini-Golf, and on the way back we bought ice cream from the camper trailer parked next to the big storage tanks. The trailer has an awning and some wooden picnic tables, and dust and napkins went flying whenever a big rig roared by. The guy who served us picked his teeth and watched us eat. Simon shivered in his tank top as he licked his twist.

"What's in those storage tanks?" he asked. From where we were sitting you could see the rusted staircases climbing up their white curves and a scattering of black letters near the top. The tanks looked blue in the twilight.

"I don't know," I said. "I hate them. They're weird."

He laughed. "Why?"

"Look how big they are." And we both looked, and some tiny birds fluttered past. "I can't help thinking of being trapped inside one of them. No one would know you're there, and you'd be lost in this huge black space."

"Courtney." He licked his ice cream. "You're pretty funny."

"How am I funny?"

"You just are." He wiped some vanilla dribbles off his face. "Do you think you'll ever leave Kittston?"

The ice-cream guy watched us from his trailer window and spat as far as the gravel shoulder. I thought of my Dad, and how sad he'd be if I left.

"I can't wait to leave," I said. "I have a friend on tumblr. She's called Sky and she lives in New York. I plan on moving to New York and living with her and never seeing this place again."

We drove home. His car was ancient—an eighties station wagon with bench seating—so even though we were both in the front, we weren't close together, which was fine. He was making this weird whistling sound and he sat straight up in his seat as if he'd just learned to drive—hands at ten and

two—and I was shaking, so I turned on the radio. At first all I found was weird chanting from some crackly station, and then a man whispering about aliens, and then it was Frankie Goes To Hollywood, “Relax.” We listened to it all the way through and didn’t say a thing.

At River and Prince, we stopped at a red light. Someone was celebrating something somewhere, because a firecracker popped above the rooftops. Simon let out an “Ahh!” and I laughed too hard and watched a woman with a stroller cross the street. Then I looked at the car next to us, and there was Phil. Alannah Myles’ “Black Velvet” bleated from his car, and he turned forward to watch for the light to flick green, and that’s when I noticed he was picking his nose.

Simon parked his car under the heavily leaning ash in front of my dad’s house. We sat there as the engine made pinging noises. Simon looked at me and his owl eyes blinked lazily.

I squeezed my jaw shut to keep my teeth from chattering.

“You’re super hot, Courtney,” he said and scratched his beard.

He leaned over and his face bristled into mine. His tongue felt like a hot spear in my mouth. I wanted to pretend that I was like any other guy, so I did everything he did. We circled our tongues around each other’s.

He reached out and held the back of my head.

I thought, “Is this all there is?”

But I was also totally okay with only this endless circling and his bristling cheeks.

He let go of me and I didn’t say goodbye as I jumped out of the car.

My dad asked who dropped me off, but I pretended not to hear and ran up the stairs really fast.

In my bedroom, my hands still shaking, I wrote a post on tumblr.

Phil, I just wanted to write and tell you that I am completely over you. The thing is, I was never into you. This town is boring, I don’t know if you’ve noticed. There’s nothing to do. Most days I just ride my bike from one end to the other and maybe hope that I’ll fall into the canal. Not that you could drown in the canal. There are too many shopping carts in it, and plastic grocery bags. There’s so much stuff in it, you could even live in it. It could be your own little plastic shopping cart Venice.

It’s also—no offence—because you’re old. You’re old and old people seem afraid of everything. I remember when my dad and I went to the carnival and he wouldn’t ride on the Zipper and I was like, “What are you afraid

you're going to die?" He said something about being tired and wanting to drink his beer. And I flipped upside down in the Zipper and screamed while everyone's change was rattling around their stupid cages. The sun looked like it was setting the wrong way, and I wanted to throw up and I loved it.

I've also met someone else. He's cool. He's not from here, and he's only been here a short time, so he's not bored yet. He dresses better than you, and he's younger, obviously. And he's from Toronto.

Anyway, good luck getting your car's air conditioner fixed.

Your pal, Court.

I didn't publish it.

Instead, I texted Carrie. *Girl, guess who's almost a slut*, I wrote. She texted back: *I don't have to guess ever.*

Simon and I went to the park. Some girls from school used to smoke in the park's hollow because the patchy bushes hid you from passing cars. People said that in the eighties Satanists burned kittens by the splash pad. There was a public washroom shaped like a cottage that hadn't been open in years. Everyone tried to get inside, but the most we'd done was to break one of the high windows and now birds could dart in and out. There was a thick chain across the door, orange with rust, that everyone said would give you tetanus and herpes and AIDS.

It was getting close to evening, and there wasn't anyone in the hollow, but two girls were sitting on a hydro box, drawing red stars on it with nail polish. They gave me a cigarette and I led him down the wood and dirt steps.

"Where should we sit?" he asked.

"Over here," I pointed to a bunch of bushes. "I don't want the girls to see us."

We found a space under the branches where there wasn't any raccoon shit or dampness. Through the mess of yellow leaves you could see the roofs of passing cars.

He asked me how long I'd lived here and I told him, "All of my life," even though it wasn't completely true—I lived in Graver's Point before my dad got custody. He had already told me all about his life, how he was examining some sort of fruit fly at York University, but that he was living in a cousin's house near the bush so he could conduct experiments. I knew all that boring stuff.

"Have you seen *Paris is Burning*?" I asked.

“What’s that?”

I gasped and said, “It’s about all these drag queens in New York. They compete in these amazing amazing balls—that’s what they’re called. *Balls*. And they look so fantastic, and they don’t take shit from anybody. The best is this girl named Xtravaganza. Venus Xtravaganza.”

“That sounds cool,” he said. “Do you do drag?”

“No.” I put the cigarette in my mouth, but didn’t light it. “I’m not like that.”

I picked at a yellow leaf. We could hear the girls on the hydro box laughing.

“My first time,” Simon said, “it was kind of a park like this. We were at the beach, though. We’d just come out of the water and both needed to pee, so we went into the woods. We started ‘accidentally’ fooling around. It was chill—it was nice just to feel his wet skin.”

A Honda passed. For a minute I thought it was going to stop.

“To be honest, I’m kind of bored,” I said. I put the cigarette behind my ear. “Maybe we should go to the Pretzel House.”

“I don’t want to go to the Pretzel House.” He scratched his beard. “I want to kiss you, Courtney Xtravaganza.”

“Whatever,” I said, trying to see if I could see the girls on the hydro box. “Do it.”

He sank his bare knees into a patch of mud and I felt his lips on mine. That bristle again. The sun was setting and his face was blurring into the darkness. He reached under my shirt and I spasmed a bit. His fingers drifted around my chest. It was weird to realize that someone feeling my chest was a new feeling.

With his other hand, he grabbed my crotch.

I pushed him away. “No, you,” I said.

We pulled at the button on his shorts. Then he crouched under the branches and unzipped them. He wasn’t wearing underwear. I could see the base of his dick—the rest of it was still pushed into his tight, girly shorts—and I saw a scraggly bush of hair, as scraggly as his beard.

He slithered his dick out. It flopped and hung halfway. It was just lying thickly on an invisible shelf, twitching. It looked like a blind baby animal.

I heard the girls on the hydro box laughing again. The dick twitched back and forth like a gif. But it wasn’t a gif.

I grasped it to make it stop twitching. It felt thick and I wondered how I’d get my mouth around it.

I put the tip in my mouth and gagged.

“Are you okay?” he said. In the growing dark, I couldn’t really see his eyes, but I felt like I could see him looking at me. Holding his dick, I felt that newness again. Everything had somehow changed.

“I just don’t understand,” I said, dropping it. “What makes you think this is even okay?”

“I’m sorry.” He opened his mouth and scratched his beard. “What’s the matter?”

It felt wrong—it felt way too regular. Wasn’t I supposed to be more special than this?

“I don’t know.” I pulled away from him. “How do you know that I’m like you?”

“You’re not?” I saw his shadow sit back down. “Okay.”

“Like, that’s the thing. You *don’t* even *know*.” I rose to a crouching position and the branches scratched the back of my neck. I kissed him and it was like kissing a damp teddy bear—dull and nothing—and I pushed my way out of the bush.

“Courtney.” I heard, but I didn’t turn around. I climbed up the steps. He shouted, “Do what you want!” and I started running.

At Prince and Vane, I called my father.

“Your new friend can’t drive you home?” There was a flat echo on the line that made it sound like he was calling from the bottom of a pool. “I can’t pick you up.”

I still had my cigarette, but I crumpled it and threw it away.

“Maybe you should call Phil,” he said.

After ten minutes of crushing a pop can into the flattest thing ever, Phil pulled up in his dirty Honda. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and, with his hairy paunch hanging over his shorts, he looked like he was naked.

“It’s hotter than ever in this car,” he said as I put my seatbelt on. “It was in the sun. So I apologize.”

I touched the dashboard: it felt so hot my fingertips almost stuck before I yanked them away.

“I won’t ask,” he said at the stoplight. I nodded and searched for something to look at in the ugly storefronts. “But I remember bringing girls to that park. If you did bring a girl there, I hope you were a gentleman.”

“I’m not much of a gentleman.” I looked at the side mirror. “I don’t know if I can be.”

We didn't say much else as we drove around the back of the brightly lit hospital, and then back up the hill to my house.

My father wasn't around—the whole house was dark. In my bedroom, I turned on my computer. I looked out the window. There was the smear of town and the concrete rec centre and the gas stations. I'm not sure, but I think I could see Simon's station wagon at one of the gas pumps. The bus was at the bus depot. Simon was probably talking to the bus driver and laughing. Probably about me.

If I had to be honest, I had one other moment. It was on a school camping trip. Two of us helped the teachers and parents clean up the campsite and start a fire while the guys chased down the girls in the woods. I didn't know him: he must have been a year higher or lower. After dinner a teacher loaned us a quilt, and we huddled under it next to the fire. His bare arms felt hot, but he said he needed more of the quilt, and we both tugged on the fabric and laughed, trying to position this too-small quilt around our bony shoulders.

One of the parents, a nice guy who worked at the hardware store, walked by. He said, "You girls having fun under there?"

We froze.

I didn't talk to him for the rest of the trip. On the bus ride home we had to sit in the same row, but we sat on opposite sides of the aisle. I stared out the window and scrolled through tumblr on my phone. I only glanced at him once. He was staring out the window, picking his nose.

I imagined telling Phil about everything. "Some of them, Phil," I would say, "think that I'm crazy." And Phil would grab the back of my head and he'd pull me in and kiss me. We would make our tongues circle one another's.

And after, when we were cuddling, my face brushing against his bristly beard, he'd tell me, "Courtney, I think you're the most gorgeous thing on earth."

I sat down on my bed and texted Carrie. *Guys are the worst, aren't they?*

Carrie texted back. *Only a slut would say that, slut.*

I LOled at that, a real out loud LOL.