

MATTHEW HEITI

NOBODY KNOWS WHAT YOU ARE CAPABLE OF

I'M NOT SURE IF IT'S ME OR JEREMY, but one of us notices the ring the first time she serves us, her hand slapping the rag down on the table as she says, "You're stuck with me tonight, guys."

She dimples when she smiles, and she ties her hair up in a scarf. That's not enough to know a person, but it's enough to start coming back, trying to get some feel for her schedule.

Some nights we get the bald bartender who is always trying to prove his penis is bigger than mine, smirking when I order a scotch and soda, repeating "soda" back at me like this is something I should be ashamed of. Other nights we get the woman with the curly hair who has a thing for Jeremy and is always bringing him free sandwiches, hold the mushrooms, and finding reasons to touch his shoulder.

Jeremy's recently been through a break-up, and we slide into a booth to talk it through, him getting me to see why people other than him are assholes in this situation, me nodding and thinking I could never be so obsessed with anything, never mind I have before and will again.

This is the conversation we've been having for weeks when she slips in next to me one night and says, "You didn't notice my hair." I did, but I didn't say anything, and if I do now it will sound like I'm trying to prove something, which I guess I might be trying to do anyway.

"I've been going to the gym, and you didn't notice that either." I want to tell her how good she smells and ask if she notices that her leg is touching mine.

We're unlocking our bikes out front and Jeremy says, "Are you gonna ask her out?"

It's nothing, she's just making conversation. She's just passing time,

making friends. She probably treats everybody like that. It's nothing.

"I'm gonna ask her out then." He pulls his tuque down over one eye and takes off down the street without looking back. I take my time, rolling the leg of my jeans, coiling my lock, waiting in the spill of light from the windows to see if anyone will come out onto the street, stop me from heading home to my big dark apartment on the second floor.

I don't go back for weeks, and when I finally see her she passes by and says, "I thought you were dead."

I'm not feeling clever tonight, so all I say is, I was.

As she walks away Jeremy says, "I think she likes me," his voice just loud enough that she might hear.

Tonight we're talking about how much we hate school, which is our mutual excuse for being here drinking again instead of working late into the night, which is what we should be doing.

"What day is it? Wednesday? Thursday?" I know it's Thursday because she works on Thursdays, so here we are. We're sitting by the window, and next to us is a booth full of engineers in polo shirts with baseball caps on backwards, cheersing everything with their light beer—even the shitty, dated rock songs that come in too loud over the speakers.

"What a bunch of assholes," Jeremy smiles, enjoying this. "You can't change people like that. It makes you hate everything."

I nod in agreement, although I know he's only saying this because his girlfriend cheated on him with his best friend. Jeremy's eating a sandwich, hold the mushrooms, and as I watch the grease running down his chin it occurs to me that we're just two grown men who think writing for a living is a real job. Jeremy, why didn't you stay in computer science?

"Because I'd hate myself." He tosses his fries around like none of this is worth talking about, but I get stuck on it. Yeah, I've hated myself in office chairs, behind retail counters, on the phone. I've hated myself in this town, in others, in and out of relationships. I've hated myself all over the place.

I ask Jeremy, Are we good people?

"The fuck d'you mean?"

I'm going to be thirty, and I feel like I haven't done anything worth anything.

"Nobody knows what you are capable of."

Then she's sliding in next to me again, her eyes on me, and I see for the

first time that they're green. I'm distracted by her, so I don't actually listen to what she's saying. It's probably the usual server talk about bad customers and vomit in the washrooms. She pokes Jeremy in the chest when he makes fun of her, then she looks at the clock and says, "Drinks are on me."

Later, when we pay our bills, she puts a hand on my shoulder and I look at Jeremy and think, We're even.

We're out by our bicycles, freezing rain smacking off the pavement, and I ask about the ring.

"What about it?"

She's engaged, right? I mean that's what it means.

"We don't know that. It could mean anything."

No, on that finger that's what it means.

"We still don't know the whole story. She's said the word 'ex' a bunch of times, but she never said fiancée."

I dunno. Just forget about it.

Jeremy hops on and pulls a lazy circle in the empty street, coming back to me, yelling over the popping rain, "She likes one of us!"

We both think, Me.

Midnight in a third floor dorm room and I'm looking at the same white-washed concrete walls I lived in almost ten years ago, thinking this has got to be my last residence party. Jesse and Liz are watching '80s music videos on a computer, Becca's trying to get people to play Twister, Nick's cycling a platter of jello shooters and no one has the heart to tell him that the jello hasn't set.

I drink just enough to blush. I laugh loud enough when Tim falls over playing Twister that everyone knows I'm here, that I'm in on this. I make eye contact when I talk about essays and theses because that's the only thing that holds us together in this space. At one point I look around and realize I'm the oldest person in the room.

Jeremy doesn't come out anymore. He's at home, doing what I would be doing at home, pretending to work and thinking too much. On my walk back over the train bridge he calls to ask if they were at the party.

Yes.

"Where were they?"

At the party.

“Fuck you. What were they doing? Did they show up together? Did they make out in one of the bedrooms? Did they leave together?”

I tell him that I don't know; they were sitting side-by-side on the couch when I left.

“Were their legs touching? You know, like in that way that's meant to look accidental but isn't.”

They were just sitting there, talking. It didn't seem like a big deal.

Silence. Jeremy crunches on something. “That's the way it always fucking was, holding hands under the table.”

Ten racks of pool and several gins later, it's already last call. The room is packed and sweaty, and Jeremy's yelling across the table. His ex keeps calling, wanting to get back together. “Isn't that fucked? I mean, she's fucked, right?” But he's really asking something else.

I tell him that there's no trust left. You can't come back from that.

“Yeah, she's fucked. I never want to see her again.” He is spraying lime everywhere except in his drink, while I'm pretending that I haven't heard him say this a dozen times already. I want to tell him she's like a drug, that they're both sick people making each other sicker, but instead I nod and say things like definitely, are you serious, and fuuuck.... It's easier this way, and I know it's what he wants to hear. Nobody has any interest in changing—nobody I know, anyway. We all just want to be convinced we're victims.

I wait for Jeremy to pay his bill before I walk up to the cash register. I've been planning this all night, visualizing how casual I'm going to be, but she's too busy and it's so loud that she can't hear my joke about the table of meatheads she was working earlier, so I just say, We should all play pool sometime.

“Sometime when?”

Tomorrow, we should play tomorrow.

“Maybe, but how will I reach you?”

I write my number on the back of my cheque. Hallelujah.

I've been sitting on my couch for two hours, feeling guilty. I'm really good at guilt, but it's not even real guilt—I mean, feeling bad about stuff I shouldn't've done. What I feel bad about is that I don't do anything, and that's what I've been doing for two hours when my phone rings.

There's a lot to be surprised about in a phone call that starts with “Come

for a walk with me and my daughter.”

I find them by the river. Her daughter is four and repeats my name with a lisp while she splashes in the water. She pours sand on my head and rubs mud on my face and I laugh—not one of those polite your-kid-sure-is-a-sweetheart laughs, but a real one that even I don’t expect.

She won’t let me pull the wagon. I get that she doesn’t like to be taken care of, but I walk them home anyway. She tells me that she doesn’t want to be a waitress forever and that she’d like to go back to school but doesn’t know what for. We have that awkward talk where the child comes and goes from our focus, asking “why why why” and shrieking about the bumps in the road, but I don’t mind because I’m too busy noticing the colour of her skin outside the bar in the real world. The little girl crawls out of the wagon to walk the last block. I’m holding one hand and with the other she holds her mother’s, the small fist curling around the long fingers, snatching that ring from sight.

She calls me later while I’m dragging my bike up my steps. “Why didn’t I meet you two years ago?”

Is that how late I am?

“Not quite. Almost,” she laughs the nervous kind of laugh you hide behind. “Seriously, where the hell were you?”

I’m known for my timing, I say, laughing at the bad joke and how true it is, and when I hear the receiver click on the other end I know that this finally closes the door.

But she calls me in the morning, waking me up, and I tell her I’ve been up since eight because I think this makes me look like I have my shit together. She calls me in the afternoon to find out what I’m doing. She calls me at the end of her shift to say goodnight. She calls me the next day and the day after that. She never says anything much. Mostly she just fishes for compliments, and I give them because it’s easy.

I’m setting up for a foul shot when Jeremy tells me he’s leaving for Alberta to cook for the tree planters again. I miss.

I ask, When?

“Saturday.”

Saturday? You mean, tomorrow Saturday?

“Your toe’s on the line.”

For the whole summer?

“For good. Don’t worry, we’re going out for drinks tonight.”

We?

“Me and her,” he swats the ball out of my hands and dribbles down the court. “Got her number off your cell.”

I follow him to the changing room, pushing through the doors, trying to keep from breathing in the hot smell of sweat and urine. Jeremy’s already dancing on one leg, shedding socks and pants and trying not to fall over. “You can come too, if you want.”

Why’d you call her? What I should be doing is not seeing her.

“What the hell are you talking about? She’s gorgeous.”

I hate people who do shit like I’m doing right now. She’s got a kid and she’s getting married.

“Nothing’s happened; it’s just talking.”

But something could happen.

“So what if something does happen? She’s obviously not happy with her fiancée. You’re not happy with your whatever.”

But some things you can’t take back.

“You can’t take back nothing either.” He looks like he’s just said something so profound that it’s made him sick. “I made all my shots today and you sucked balls, so you owe me lunch.”

Two or three or too many margaritas later and we’re all saying goodbye on King Street. Jeremy’s trying to get on his bike, but he keeps slipping off. I’m telling her, “Hold on, I’ll walk you to your car,” but she steps away to take a call on her cell phone. I pick Jeremy off the pavement and pull his tuque up so he can see.

“Last summer half the planters in camp got crabs. I’m gonna get crabs this summer.”

I say, You won’t get crabs.

“No, I mean I want them. That’s how many girls I’m gonna sleep with this summer. And I’m gonna call her and tell her about all of them.”

He’s on his seat facing the right way, and there’s suddenly nothing more to say. We watch her off by the street lamp, talking fast, her body language telling us she’s pissed off. Jeremy puts his hand on my shoulder and says, “You’re a good person.”

He says the word “good” like it’s something you can never get away from. Then he’s off pedaling, and I don’t know if he said it because of what I

am or what I'm pretending to be.

As we walk down the alley to her SUV I ask, Is everything cool?

"Yeah," she says, her arms folded in that I'm-not-talking-about-the-phone-call way.

We shuffle our feet, then she shrugs and says "Well?" in that half-expecting tone. I echo it back at her.

"Good night," she says as she opens the car door. I know she's waiting for me to say something, to make this moment feel good, so I say it, something about her eyes, their colour or depth, and someone's leaning in, but when we kiss no fireworks explode, the earth doesn't move. It's just two pairs of lips trying to occupy the same space. I don't pretend to worry about kids and marriages and right and wrong anymore. I just want to make something better.

I'm up earlier than usual, and I'm out of the house without dragging my feet all morning, cycling down to the Saturday market. People are spilling all over the place, the kind of mess that would normally bother me. I'm picking up vegetables, thinking about today's menu, making plans.

I'm holding a loaf of bread, still warm, when I see her down at the other end. I think about waving, calling out her name. I imagine what her expression would be. I start forcing my way through the crowd, pushing my way through this mass of people to reach her. God knows what I'll say—maybe I'll start with Remember last night?—but I stop when I see the little girl tugging her along and the man following, just doing the morning shopping, a weekly routine.

I pay for my bread. Three-ninety. I tell him, Keep the change.