

Corny

How can I tell you this without sounding trite? In the circumstances, what is there but cliché? I'm in love. You're wonderful. I love you.

I'm walking through the market, on my way somewhere, it doesn't matter where, that's not part of this story. I've got my phone in my hand because I've just sent you a text and I'm waiting for your reply. I've texted to tell you I'm walking past the cake stall where we bought the blueberry cheesecake that time. We bought it because the stallholder's blackboard described it as legendary, and you said, a cheesecake fit for slaying dragons and seducing maidens. Then you looked at me, your gaze bluer than blueberries (which are really more purple, don't you think? Certainly nothing like the colour of your eyes anyway), and left a pause. A pregnant pause, I might have thought, a womb of silence in the middle of the market's bustle, waiting for my heart to swell it.

But I didn't. I just laughed and said, imagine blueberry cheesecake oozing through chain mail? It wasn't very funny, was it? But it deflected our attention from the dangerous subject of the heart. It focused us on the realm of the physical, where the heart is just a muscle, a bunch of tissues discoverable in the chest cavity of any mammal.

And remembering this, waiting for your reply, thinking of the words I would be tapping out if my fingers were governed by my heart rather than my brain, a line from a song pops into my head:

I'm as normal as blueberry pie

I shuffle my way through the lunch time queue at Happy Dim Sum, past racks of sausages and rails of vintage denim, counter displays of cheeses and watch batteries, whiffs of cinnamon churros and green curries, until I wash up on the scarlet pelargoniumed shore of the Memorial Gardens. Next to me on the bench where I sit pondering my phone's dark screen is a woman eating a

Corny

sandwich. She has a tote propped between her feet, summer blue and decorated with the star circle of the European Union. The stars are actually gold coloured rather than yellow and gleam in the corner of my eye as I tap out:

‘It’s August. What if I went to Kansas?’

This time your reply comes immediately; you want to understand everything and you’re drawn to travel like a moth to a flame.

‘Because,’ I tap back, my finger trembling over the keys and a flush spreading up from my groin, *‘if you’ll excuse an expression I use, I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love, I’m in love with a wonderful guy!’* I hope that’s the right number of *I’m in loves*. I was singing under my breath as I typed and I notice now that the woman next to me on the bench has edged away, just enough to remove the stars on her tote from the edge of my gaze. God, I think, god, what have I done? The muscle in my chest squeezes and releases, squeezes and releases and aches through lack of exercise. When I try to synchronise my breathing to its exertions, I think I’m going to suffocate.

‘Come on,’ I mutter, staring at the silent screen, ‘please...pleeeeee.’ The woman next to me finishes her sandwich, gathers up her bag and leaves, taking with her the blue sky, the gold stars.

‘Corny,’ comes your reply. Eventually. It’s been eleven minutes. No kisses, no emojis. What am I to make of it? Before I can find an answer, you text again:

‘Love isn’t normal,’ you write. You know the song, though only, till now, with the same vaguely dismissive benevolence with which you have always indulged my love of musicals. Now I’m certain the eleven minute delay was you Googling the lyrics. Laughter bubbles up through me; I am buoyant with relief.

Corny

'Come with me,' I write.

'Where?'

'Kansas.'

'Why?'

Because there would be nothing to hide behind in Kansas. You would see through to the heart of me there.

I would have expected poster yellow, dotted with windmills and red clapboard farmhouses. Hipped barns and little girls in pigtails and pinafores gathering daisies among the ripe corn.

But it's wheat they grow in Kansas, not corn, and the fields would be, well, wheaten coloured, and by the time I arrived, in August, Kansas would be shorn, shrouded in the dust whipped up by the combines as they made their majestic progress from horizon to horizon. Scorched earth, chaff, petrol fumes.

I would very probably eat blueberry pie (as opposed to cheesecake) and drink bitter coffee in a diner across the street from my motel. It would be called The Mayflower and there would be a Stars and Stripes hoisted on a pole on the roof, sun-faded and snapping in the gritty wind. There'd be a heroin hillbilly lolling on a bench in the parking lot out front, and we'd smile and wave at one another as I made my way across the street, blinking the dust out of my jet lagged eyes.

I would get into conversation with a man sitting up at the bar, nursing a beer. He'd have a neat buzz cut, greying, and a neck creased and weathered as a dry creek bed, except for a pale patch marking the indentation at the base of his skull, vulnerable as a target. Muscular thighs, dusty work boots hooked under the bar stool's crossbar, his upper body curved around his beer glass like a metaphor for something he couldn't protect.

'Buy you a beer?' he'd ask.

Corny

‘Why not?’ I’d say, pushing aside my pie and the terrible coffee. Never talk to strangers, my mother told me, but you’ve always said, when we travel, it’s the unknown we’re reaching for. So yes, why not? Why not this stranger and the unexplored landscape of his mind?

‘You’re British,’ he’d say, and both of us would know that much. ‘What brings you to our fine town?’ I’d remind myself that middle America has no sense of irony.

‘I came looking for love,’ I’d reply, because we are dealing in truth here, however bromidic. And we’d be well into the second beer by this time.

Along the back of the bar there’d be a mirror, flyblown in the corners. Why do they do that? Who wants to look at themselves while they’re drinking? I only ever want to look at you when I’m drinking. What I would find I was looking at, in my studious effort to avoid looking my companion in the eye, reflected or otherwise, would be the Moon, fuzzed and distorted by the glass, a cigarette burn fraying the star cloth.

‘Oh, that,’ he’d say, his tone as brittle as a desiccated corn stalk, fishing in the back pocket of his jeans and pulling out his wallet.

‘My round, I think,’ I’d say, and he wouldn’t disagree. He’d just slip a dog-eared photo out of the wallet and set it reverently on the bar in front of me.

The photo shows a little girl, an archetypal little American girl with pigtails and a wide, bold smile full of metalwork. She’s wearing jeans and a teeshirt with a big daisy splashed across the front. The daisy was probably once yellow but age has bleached out nearly every colour from the photo other than red. Red teeshirt, red bows in her pigtails. She’s maybe ten years old.

My heart would make a fist and punch up into my gullet as I looked at the photo. I’d start to sweat and worry that I was beginning to smell, the

Corny

staleness of travel emanating from my pores. I'd try to distract my mind with thoughts of the shower in my room and the little bottles of courtesy shampoo and shower gel and what their perfume might be. But the heart, bunched up taut there in my throat, wouldn't be distracted. The heart would know.

'My sister,' he'd say, in a voice that would catch on my heart like a fish hook and jerk it a little closer to the surface. 'May'.

'How'd it happen? I'd ask, as the barman, knowing his cue, slid whisky chasers on to the counter in front of us.

'Car smash,' my companion would begin, and I'd hear his words were well-rehearsed, but that would be OK; I'd think back to the text I sent you from the Memorial Gardens, to the inadequacy of language. 'July 1969,' he'd continue as a mouthful of whisky slipped around the lump in my throat. 'We were on our way to Florida. We were going to sleep the night on the beach and watch Apollo 11 take off for the Moon next morning.' I would glance up at this point, at the grubby blur in the mirror that is the Moon.

'The car trunk was full of camping equipment and I remember our mom had brought along extra sun cream because she was afraid the rocket's ignition would burn us, you know, like the folks who witnessed the atomic tests on the atolls. Crazy thinking. We weren't scared at all. We were singing, I remember. *Bright as a moon happy night*. I don't recall the song but that line has always stayed with me. Then...A truck, travelling too fast, I guess. Trailer slewed across the road ahead of us and our car slammed right into it. I was thrown clear through an open window, they said, that's how I survived, they said. Everyone else...' He'd swallow the rest of his story with a slug of whisky, and he'd hunch back over his glass the way he was when I'd first noticed him, trying to protect what couldn't be protected.

Corny

He'd tell me how he was brought up after that by an aunt and uncle, who were kind enough but weren't his parents, who had two sons but no daughters. How he joined the air force at sixteen, and went on to take a degree in aeronautical engineering at A.F.I.T because he intended to become an astronaut. Because he was going to go to the Moon. For May.

'That picture,' he'd say, 'I was going to leave that picture at Tranquillity Base. But by the time I got on the program it was the Shuttle. Reagan's Star Wars and TV satellites. So...' and he'd return the photo to his wallet.

I'd be feeling quite high by this time, and the lump in my throat would be turning acid. 'I think I'll get some air,' I'd say, and he'd thank me for the whisky and follow me outside. He'd offer me a ride, but I'd tell him I was staying just across the street so he'd climb into his station wagon and back out of the parking lot. It would be as if he'd never registered I was a woman drinking alone, far from home, as if he'd stopped seeing women after May had died. I'd wonder, fleetingly, if he had a wife and that would bring me back to thoughts of you.

Sometimes, thoughts of you come at me like that Florida juggernaut. I hit them head on and find myself reeling from the impact, stars in my eyes. Whatever I'm doing just stumbles to a halt while I recollect how to breathe, how to walk, how to look and hear and make my voice come out of my mouth. There I'd be, standing in the parking lot, swaying but not from the whisky, and I'd catch the eye of the heroin hillbilly on the bench, a baleful, bloodshot eye in a face collapsed and sallowed by the streetlamps.

'Fuck off,' he'd mumble, and that would start me up again, back to my motel room where I'd open the window and gaze out at the Moon, so clear now you could almost see the boot prints on it, a silver dollar in the pocket of the stars.

Corny

I'd sit on the bed, in a shaft of lunar light, and send you a text.

'I'm coming home,' I'd say. While I waited for your reply, I'd try to work out what time it would be at home, if you'd be asleep, or at work, or cooking yourself a meal. I'd just have got to wondering what you'd be cooking, if you'd be treating yourself to mushrooms, which you love but I can't eat, when my screen would light up with your reply.

'Good,' you'd say, followed by that emoji with hearts for eyes. 'I missed you. I love you.'

'You too,' I'd say.

In the morning, gazing out of the window of the bus to the airport, I'd see poster yellow fields and red barns and little girls with pigtails skipping blithely into the future.