

Expectations

By Laurane Marchive

Joint First Place 2018

It's not that you fell asleep straight afterwards that offends me. It's that you would leave me alone in your house, with the leftovers still on the table and my thoughts to myself without wondering what I might be thinking. What I might be doing. And I guess I could go but maybe that's as good as it gets.

- A nice home-cooked dinner with a candle on the table.
- A bottle of nice, not-too-cheap Pinot Noir you bought especially.
- And sex.

Sex that isn't that good but isn't that bad and feels like your average drunken takeaway. Not great but I guess it's better than no food at all.

Maybe I shouldn't be so greedy.

I sit in your bathtub, the shower running over me from up high. The water splashes onto my scalp, it makes a thundering noise. I want it to be loud, I want it to wake you. Droplets slide along my hair and stick to the back of my neck. Your bathroom has no windows, no view onto the world but I know what I'd see if there was:

- The street, quiet.
- A bench, with no one sitting on it.
- A winter tree with no leaves.

But there is no window so I count the tiles that separate the door from the wall. I watch elastic drops drip from the ceiling. I read the back of your pampering paraphernalia.

- A *Head & Shoulders* Classic Clean shampoo.
- That *Original Source* Mind and Tea Tree shower gel that everybody hates.
- A bag of coffee-based MAN SCRUB that reads "*Some like it rough but all prefer you smooth*".

I felt like we were getting on, though. You said you liked my top, I said I liked your beard. You laughed at some of my jokes and I listened to you talk about the perks of your job. I told you my story of eating superglue when I was three and you listened till the end. You told me of your brother and his love of boxing.

When there were blanks in the conversation, we filled them. We talked about the barman at the pub where we met. We discovered we had more than one friend in common. That we both liked

celery. That we hated marmite. You kept pouring more wine, I opened the bottle that I brought with me.

When we were done with the food, we kissed on the sofa and then we went to your room. I pushed you on the bed. You pushed back. We kissed some more. Medium chemistry but nothing alarming, you caressed me softly, I caressed you softly. We had sex. We both performed and eventually you came. Then you rolled next to me and you laid on your back, you slid a hand through my hair and I rested my head on your chest. It was still so early and I wasn't tired, so I kept nuzzling.

And I thought for a moment - but you just fell asleep.

- A towel on the door, angular and grey.
- A toothbrush in a glass, the glass square at the base.
- A plush-looking bathrobe, honeycomb pattern.

I guess I could go back to mine and at least read a book or wash with my own soap. But maybe I should stay and in the morning when you wake up I'll pretend I was asleep all night. I was really hoping the sound of the shower would force you to wake up.

I stop the water and I grab the towel, luxurious and soft. Almost like it's new, like you put it there for me. It smells like fabric softener or somewhere at the back of a very well- organized cupboard. In your cabinet there are things, mundane and organized.

- A razor and more soap.
- Dental floss.
- Hand lotion, the bottle cream-coloured and a fancy label that screams of soothing smells and fragrant peace.

In the mirror my face red from the heat. But your toothpaste in the glass, carefully flattened towards the end. So neat, so perfect. I reach out and I grab the tube and I slowly squeeze it right near the neck, so that tricoloured paste oozes through every crack.

In your room my clothes are all over the floor, rolled up in piles and all black. You fell asleep with the lights on so it's easy to find everything, though I might have taken a sock of yours by mistake. After you dozed off I didn't say anything. I wanted to shake you but that would be crazy, so I looked at the ceiling for a while. I listened to the sounds of the street and I tossed and I turned but I couldn't even drowse and still you didn't stir.

You sleep so peacefully, I just want to pinch you.

I should probably leave.

- Put the wine glass down on the bedside table, it leaves a wet round crimson print.

- Sit on the bed to lace up my shoes.
- Pull my jumper from underneath your leg.

And you still don't wake up.

After dinner my phone was dead, I plugged it in near your bed. Now I lean over to check but it's only on 12% battery, not quite enough to take me all the way home.

I really need to get a new phone.

I like your room. Nobody's watching so I open the top drawer of your chest. Socks. And underwear, white, grey, old. Not like the ones you were wearing tonight so you definitely did make an effort. Second drawer, T-shirts. Folded, organized, I pick one up, it smells like clean, like the wash, like potential stable relationship. Third drawer, trousers. Fourth drawer a selection of hats, scarves, belts, gloves, one lonely shoe, an old pair of slippers. Fifth drawer, a mixed bag of cables, old chargers, condoms, plasters, a dog-eared notebook. Inside the notebook a picture, that's probably you in the centre. It looks like you at what, six, seven or eight. And is that your mum? And your dad and your brother, the one who likes to box. I turn round and I watch you sleep in your bed. Naked, aloof and breathing softly.

And I just want to shake you. To see if you care.

I put the notebook down, next to it an envelope and inside more photos. Recent, with friends, some of them polaroids. There's also a photo-booth strip, four shots of you with a girl. Four images almost the same but different, laughing, wearing oversized party glasses and fake moustaches. I put it back in the envelope and I close the drawer.

I look through your shelves and through your books. I open your bedside table in silence. I look through all the things that might tell me who you are:

- Organised. A got- your-shit-together kind of man who hangs his shirts and his jackets in opposite ends of the wardrobe.

- An intellectual with a fun side, who keeps a DVD of Haneke's *White Ribbon* next to *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

- A sentimentalist? Or why would you keep a picture of that girl, and also who is she and do you still like her?

Sometimes, when I get home from work in the evening I do this exercise where I try and find least three things that went well in my day.

- At rush hour this morning I was able to find a seat on the Piccadilly line.

- A colleague at work told me he liked my presentation on “Antibiotic Resistance And How To Explain It To Children”.

- I made a mean cauliflower curry for dinner, and I still have some left for the day after.

And then when I’m upset or angry, I list three things that exist regardless of how I feel. That way at least I know it’s not just all in my head. So I wait for my phone to charge and I look through your window. The leafless tree is there, and I think of the things that did go well tonight.

- The food you made: vegetarian lasagne because you remembered that I don’t eat meat.

- The music you played: Belgium minimal techno, not exactly my thing but I guess I could get used to it.

- The kissing itself: soft and a little toothy, but then again I don’t know. Maybe I’m not such a good kisser either.

I go back to the kitchen, pour myself a new glass of wine. The clock on your wall tells me it’s only half twelve. I come back to the room and I sit on the chair. I’ve seen *The White Ribbon* too, maybe I should have said it. But just a little more charge and I’ll make my way home.

I will finish the wine and you will still be sleeping. Eventually I will move and I will get my phone. I will touch your skin and then I will shake you and eventually, you will wake up. You will look at me. You will yawn and touch the water in my hair. At first you won’t look surprised, then you’ll see my clothes and you will say, are you leaving? And I’ll say, well I’m not sure it’s really worth me staying. You will look a little surprised, a little offended maybe but you won’t show it and you will say nothing. I will stand in front of the bed with my clothes on.

You will say, well it looks like you’ve made your decision, I won’t hold you back. I will say, sure that’s fine, you do look tired; you will say what do you mean? I will say I don’t know, you don’t seem that interested and you’ll say what are on about, you just woke me up. I will wait for you to tell me not to go but you won’t. You will look at me like I’m mad. So I will grab my bag and I will shrug like I don’t care. And you will go back to sleep or pretend, and I will slam the door behind me.

Outside, the wind will get wrapped in my hair. Around every inch, around every strand of water that’s left in it. Freezing my head, the bones, my skull underneath and there will be steam coming out every time I breathe. My skin will prickle.

- Against the cold, because it’s February and it’s 6 degrees outside.

- From the stubble on your face, which left it soft and raw.

- From the frustration, and the not-sure-what-happened-tonight.

There will be people crossing the road. I will feel like they're watching me even though they're probably not. I will rewind the evening. I will think of what went wrong or if it's all in my head. I will wonder:

- If I was right to leave or if I should have stayed.
- If this was good enough and I ask for too much.
- If I was boring in bed or if you were just tired.

I will walk to the bus stop. Eventually the 341 will come and it will take me home. And while we ride I will sit at the back and I will go through our message history to search for clues.

- I will go on your Facebook profile and look for the girl from the photo-booth.

- I won't find her or maybe I will. I will picture her in bed, with you, sleeping peacefully. I will think of you two having sex and drinking wine, making each other laugh.

- I will notice the shade of her hair and the shape of her lips. And everything in her you might like, and all the things she has and all the things I don't. So I will keep looking at her. And I will squint my eyes in my mind. And if I try hard enough I might even imagine that she looks a little like me.

But for now my phone still charges, and you keep on sleeping.