

Pg. 262

My words melt away when I see her. Tessa in an undershirt, white with short sleeves, the straps of her sports bra faintly visible underneath.

Nothing on bottom but boy shorts.

My heart's spinning cartwheels. I don't think I realized until this moment just how much clothing she usually wears. Hoodies and jeans and shorts. Even her dark academia clothes had extra layers. I guess she was *technically* naked under a bathrobe when we met, but if I think about that too long, my heart might combust. She's so pretty, it's actually kind of unbearable. Boyish and girlish, all at once. She's a little huskier than I realized. Narrower than I am, but with an unexpected softness.

What would it feel like to touch her bare skin with mine?

Pg. 263

She lets out a quick, breathless laugh. "Oh my God, this is—you know that part of *The Lion King* where they're having sex in the forest—"

"People had sex in *The Lion King*?"

"No, lions had sex in *The Lion King*—"

"What? Sorry—when?"

"Can You Feel the Love Tonight"! Imogen, they were rolling around the whole jungle—"

"I thought . . . I thought they were just, like—being in love?"

"Yeah, but then Nala gives him that look—remember? Like. *Heyyyyyyy*."

Tessa leans in and kisses me. "And that's us! We're lions having sex! Except we're *not* having sex, because we're not gonna rush!"

"To be clear, we're also not lions," I say, shooting her a smile that turns into a yawn halfway through. "Sorry—"

"No—geez—what time is it?"

I crane my neck toward the pair of phones on Tessa's nightstand. "Almost three in the morning. Yikes—sorry! I can give you your bed back —"

"I don't want my bed back. Sleep here."

I look up at her. "Really?"

Pg. 279

"I guess." I scrunch my nose. "Why do I feel like I'm just making all of this up?"

"Probably because of toxic-ass Gretchen. Or the five million other Gretchens out there on the internet. Some queer people just really seem to love shitting on other queer people. Every day, someone's out there weighing in about whether bi and pan girls even count as queer to begin with. Or we're only queer under certain circumstances. They'll say it with their whole chest. Absolutely zero awareness that their very specific queer experience isn't one hundred percent universal. And it's almost always this very white, very Western framework—completely rooted in colonization. No acknowledgment of regional differences, generational differences—just the same people relitigating the same semantic fuckery. But it still gets in your head! I feel like half of us are just drowning in imposter syndrome all the time. More than half, probably. I know I've been there."

I look at her. "Really?"

"Why do you think I made up the whole thing about us dating?"

"Yeah, but that was pretty much right after you came out. You seem so

confident now."

"Sometimes I am," she says, "and then ten minutes later, I'm convinced I'm somehow faking it in my own head."

"That's how I feel!" Suddenly my eyes brim with tears.

"It's the worst. And it's such bullshit." She shakes her head. "And like, there's this whole other part of it where I'm pretty sure I'm panromantic asexual, actually. Or demisexual. I don't even know. And I haven't dated anyone. Which isn't *because* I'm asexual." She shrugs. "Sometimes I feel like, oh my God, why am I giving this so much mental energy? I'm literally home watching Netflix. Like. Who the fuck even cares? But I care! It matters."

Imagine Me by Tahereh Mafi

Pg. 341

He smiles.

He smiles and I stare—two dimples, straight teeth, shining eyes. A sudden, incomprehensible heat rushes across my skin, sets me aflame. I feel violently hot. Sick with fever.

Finally, he says: "So you *are* in there."

"Who?"

"Ella," he says, but he's speaking softly now. "Juliette. They said you'd be gone."

"I'm not gone," I say, my hands shaking as I pull myself together. "I am Juliette Ferrars, supreme soldier to our North American commander. Who are you?"

He moves closer. His eyes darken as he stares at me, but there's no true darkness there. I try to stand taller, straighter. I remind myself that I have a task, that this is my moment to attack, to fulfill my orders. Perhaps I sh—

"Love," he whispers.

Heat flashes across my skin. Pain presses against my mind, a vague realization that I've left something overlooked. Dusty emotion trembles inside of me, and I kill it.

He steps forward, takes my face in his hands. I think about breaking his fingers. Snapping his wrists. My heart is racing.

I cannot move.

"You shouldn't touch me," I say, gasping the words.

"Why not?"

"Because I will kill you."

Gently, he tilts my head back, his hands possessive, persuasive. An ache

"Yes," he says again, his own voice rough with feeling. His hands leave my face and I'm lost in the loss, searching for warmth. I press closer to him without even meaning to, asking him for something I don't understand. But then his hands slide under my shirt, his palms pressing against my back, and the magnitude of the sudden, skin-to-skin contact sets my body on fire.

I feel explosive.

I feel dangerously close to something that might kill me, and still I lean into him, blinded by instinct, deaf to everything but the ferocious beat of my own heart.

He pulls back, just an inch.

His hands are still caught under my shirt, his bare arms wrapped around my bare skin and his mouth lingers above mine, the heat between us threatening to ignite. He pulls me closer and I bite back a moan, losing my head as the hard lines of his body sink into me. He is everywhere, his scent, his skin, his breath. I see nothing but him, sense nothing but him, his hands spreading across my torso, my lungs compressing under his careful, searing exploration. I lean into the sensations, his fingers grazing my stomach, the small of my back. He touches his forehead to mine and I press up, onto my toes, asking for something, begging for something—

"What," I gasp, "what is happening—"

He kisses me.

Soft lips, waves of sensation. Feeling overflows the vacancies in my mind. My hands begin to shake. My heart beats so hard I can hardly keep still when he nudges my mouth open, takes me in. He tastes like heat and peppermint, like summer, like the sun.

seizes my muscles, holds me in place. My eyes close reflexively. I breathe him in and my mouth fills with flavor—fresh air, fragrant flowers, heat, happiness—and I'm struck by the strangest idea that we've been here before, that I've lived this before, that I've known him before and then I feel, I feel his breath on my skin and the sensation, the sensation is—

heady,

disorienting.

I'm losing track of my mind, trying desperately to locate my purpose, to focus my thoughts, when

he moves

the earth tilts, his lips graze my jaw and I make a sound, a desperate, unconscious sound that stuns me. My skin is frenzied, burning. That familiar warmth contaminates my blood, my temperature spiking, my face flushing.

"Do I—"

I try to speak but he kisses my neck and I gasp, his hands still caught around my face. I'm breathless, heart pounding, pulse pounding, head pounding. He touches me like he knows me, knows what I want, knows what I need. I feel insane. I don't even recognize the sound of my own voice when I finally manage to say,

"Do I know you?"

"Yes."

My heart leaps. The simplicity of his answer strangles my mind, digs for truth. It feels true. Feels true that I've known these hands, this mouth, those eyes.

Feels real.

I want more.

I take his face in my hands and pull him closer and he makes a soft, desperate sound in the back of his throat that sends a spike of pleasure directly to my brain. Pure, electric heat lifts me up, outside of myself. I seem to be floating here, surrendered to this strange moment, held in place by an ancient mold that fits my body perfectly. I feel frantic, seized by a need to know more, a need I don't even understand.

When we break apart his chest his heaving and his face is flushed and he says—

"Come back to me, love. Come back."

I'm still struggling to breathe, desperately searching his eyes for answers. Explanations. "Where?"

"Here," he whispers, pressing my hands to his heart. "Home."

"But I don't—"

Flashes of light streak across my vision. I stumble backward, half-blind, like I'm dreaming, reliving the caress of a forgotten memory, and it's like an ache looking to be soothed, it's a steaming pan thrown in ice water, it's a flushed cheek pressed to a cool pillow on a hot hot night and heat gathers, collects behind my eyes, distorting sights, dimming sounds.

Here.

This.

My bones against his bones. This is my home.

I return to my skin with a sudden, violent shudder and feel wild, unstable. I

stare at him, my heart seizing, my lungs fighting for air. He stares back, his eyes such a pale green in the light that, for a moment, he doesn't even seem human.

Something is happening to my head.

Pain is collecting in my blood, calcifying around my heart. I feel at war with myself, lost and wounded, my mind spinning with uncertainty. "What is your name?" I ask.

He steps forward, so close our lips touch. Part. His breath whispers across my skin and my nerves hum, spark.

"You know my name," he says quietly.

I try to shake my head. He catches my chin.

This time, he's not careful.

This time, he's desperate. This time, when he kisses me he breaks me open, heat coming off him in waves. He tastes like springwater and something sweet, something searing.

I feel dazed. Delirious.

When he breaks away I'm shaking, my lungs shaking, my breaths shaking, my heart shaking. I watch, as if in a dream, as he pulls off his shirt, tosses it to the ground. And then he's here again, he's back again, he's caught me in his arms and he's kissing me so deeply my knees give out.

He picks me up, bracing my body as he sets me down on the long, steel table. The cool metal seeps through the fabric of my pants, sending goose bumps along my heated skin and I gasp, my eyes closing as he straddles my legs, claims my mouth. He presses my hands to his chest, drags my fingers down his naked torso and I make a desperate, broken sound, pleasure and pain

stunning me, paralyzing me.

He unbuttons my shirt, his deft hands moving quickly even as he kisses my neck, my cheeks, my mouth, my throat. I cry out when he moves, his kisses shifting down my body, searching, exploring. He pushes aside the two halves of my shirt, his mouth still hot against my skin, and then he closes the gap between us, pressing his bare chest to mine, and my heart explodes.

Something snaps inside of me.

Severs.

A sudden, fractured sob escapes my throat. Unbidden tears sting my eyes, startling me as they fall down my face. Unknown emotion soars through me, expanding my heart, confusing my head. He pulls me impossibly closer, our bodies soldered together. And then he presses his forehead to my collarbone, his body trembling with emotion when he says—

"Come back."

My head is full of sand, sound, sensations spinning in my mind. I don't understand what's happening to me, I don't understand this pain, this unbelievable pleasure. I'm staining his skin with my tears and he only pulls me tighter, pressing our hearts together until the feeling sinks its teeth into my bones, splits open my lungs. I want to bury myself in this moment, I want to pull him into me, I want to drag myself out of myself but there's something wrong, something blocked, something stopped—

Something broken.

Realization arrives in gentle waves, theories lapping and overlapping at the shores of my consciousness until I'm drenched in confusion. Awareness.

Terror.

Desert Echoes by Abdi Nazemian

Fuck: 44

Asshole: 15

Shit: 7

Damn: 28

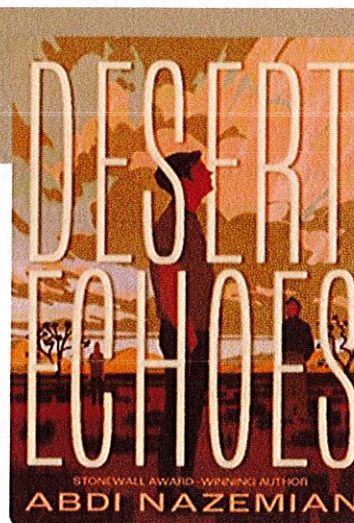
Lord's name in vain: 49+

Piss: 9

From Abdi Nazemian, the award-winning author of *Like a Love Story* and *Only This Beautiful Moment*, comes a suspenseful contemporary YA novel about loss and love.

Fifteen-year-old Kam is head over heels for Ash, the boy who swept him off his feet. But his family and best friend, Bodie, are worried. Something seems off about Ash. He also has a habit of disappearing, at times for days. When Ash asks Kam to join him on a trip to Joshua Tree, the two of them walk off into the sunset . . . but only Kam returns.

Two years later, Kam is still left with a hole in his heart and too many unanswered questions. So it feels like fate when a school trip takes him back to Joshua Tree. On the trip, Kam wants to find closure about what happened to Ash but instead finds himself in danger of facing a similar fate. In the desert, Kam must reckon with the truth of his past relationship—and the possibility of opening himself up to love once again.



Borrowed

Pg. 16

I find an empty stall and lock it. The back of the stall door is etched with doodles and words, most of them pornographic or hateful, or both. These are the wall carvings that would tell future generations everything they need to know about who we are right now, in November of 2023. The hateful pornographic messages will disappear soon enough, cleaned up by the janitorial staff, and then they'll reappear in new variations. I take solace in this fact. If gross bathroom scrawls can reappear, then so can Ash.

I sit on the toilet and unlock my phone. I go straight to the grief forum and scroll. Two guys enter the bathroom. I don't recognize their voices but I feel disgust as I hear them talk about some girl they want to fuck. Sometimes I want to escape this school, this city, this whole world. It all feels so shallow.

I put my earbuds in and blast Lana so loud that it silences the guys talking about tits. When Lana sings, Ash is with me. If I listen to her enough, he'll come back. Maybe it's magical thinking, but these are the kinds of games my mind plays with itself.

I have a new forum message from someone who calls themselves Youdiditasshole. *You were the last person to see him.*

True.

You conveniently remember nothing.

True, except nothing about it feels convenient.

Did you bury him? Eat him? Burn him?

Why would I hurt the person who lit up my life? But then I remember that they're right. I can't say for sure that it wasn't me who killed him, and I have to know it wasn't me. I can't move on until I know I'm not the one who hurt the boy I loved.

Whatever you did to him, someone will do to you someday.

Pg. 19

I get distracted by three quick knocks on the stall door, followed by two slow knocks. My and Bodie's secret knock. I take my earbuds out and hear Bodie's voice from the other side.

"Everything okay, Kam?" he asks.

"Just going to the bathroom," I say.

He makes a point of sighing loudly. "You're watching porn, aren't you?" I laugh. He knows I'm not watching porn. I never watch porn. All I need to get off are memories of Ash. "Nothing wrong with a little morning pornography."

Pg. 22

"You want me to be joyful and light." I don't look at him. I can't right now. "You want me to joke around about our moms and our annoying classmates and porn hubs, but—"

He raises one of his thick eyebrows. "Not porn hubs, plural. One Pornhub, singular. It's . . . a website."

I shake my head. "Whatever, you know I'm not interested in watching random guys fuck their fictional stepbrothers."

"I guess I have to watch porn since I've never had a boyfriend and probably never will," he says bitterly, and I suddenly doubt that what he wants to tell me is that he's dating someone.

Pg. 88

The score is close, the points dramatic. But it's hard for me to focus on the game when Louis and Bodie won't stop chatting next to me. "Okay, a tennis court is kind of like a courtroom," Bodie says to Louis. "Like, each side has to make their argument over and over and over again until one side comes out on top."

"Or on bottom," Louis responds with a smile.

"Well, the world needs tops *and* bottoms," Bodie says. I've never heard him be so obvious about his interest in someone before. It makes me deeply uncomfortable.

Bodie and Louis make small talk between points. When Louis tells Bodie about his TikTok dance videos, Bodie lights up. "Wait!" he says as he pulls out his phone and scans through his videos. "That was you in the video where you're dancing to 'American Teenager' with a Marjorie Taylor Greene mask on your head! I watched that so many times." I remember that video too. Bodie showed it to me. He thought it was hilarious, and a perfect fuck-you to the ultra-right-wing's anti-trans policies.

When I walk into the kitchen, where Bodie has laid out the ingredients we'll need, he doesn't ask about my walk with Ash. Instead, he hands me his phone. It's open to a DM he's drafting to Jack Spencer. *Can a boy change his mind about that date?*

"What do you think?" he asks me.

I look up at him. "I mean, sure, it works. But maybe you should spell *boy* b-o-i so he feels seen."

He swats me playfully. "I hate you."

"I hate you too. And I thought you didn't like him."

"I judged him too harshly." I arch a surprised brow at him. He presses send on the message, then glances up at me. "Stop looking at me like that. I know I'm a judgmental jerk sometimes." Within seconds, Jack sends back a winky-face emoji and a hot-face emoji. Bodie holds the phone up. "What do you think that means?"

"That he's happy and horny?" I suggest. "Or that he has pink eye and he's in a sauna?"

"You got pink eye from me and it was the best, remember?"

He laughs. "That's 'cause we got to stay home from school and watch *South Park* through crusty eyes."

"And our moms left us alone since they were too scared to be around us."

"God forbid they can't put on mascara for a day!" Bodie does an impression of his grossed-out mom saying "I curse pink eye" in her Iranian accent. We laugh until another text comes through from Jack. It's not an emoji this time. It's a picture of Jack, shirtless in front of a streaked bathroom mirror. Bodie stares at it a beat too long. He's either lusting after him or searching Jack's body for some deal-breaker.

"You want me to take a picture of you flexing for him?" I ask dryly.

He rolls his eyes, then puts the phone away.

"You should at least give the text a thumbs-up," I tell him.

Bodie pulls out his phone and hearts the photo of Jack. "This is why I

I hop on my bicycle and pedal toward Ash, and toward a family that welcomes me, accepts me, and doesn't erupt like a volcano every night.

I brake outside Ash's apartment building. Crouch down to lock my bike at a parking meter. I feel his hands around my eyes. "Guess who?" he asks.

"Salvatore?"

"No, he's beatboxing and rapping in the summer rain."

"Carmen?"

"Nope, she's too busy walking the streets so mean."

"Norman Fucking Rockwell."

He laughs. "In the flesh." He takes his hands off my eyes.

I can feel his hardness as his body presses against mine. "Norman hard as a fucking rock-well," I say, loving the mischief in my voice.

"Do you think maybe . . . in the desert . . . you'll be ready?" he asks. "Not that I'm pressuring you or anything. I just . . . I'm ready, that's all."

I spin around and kiss him. "I feel ready too, but . . ."

"But?"

"I just . . . I'm not sure I want my first time to be in a desert."

"What better place to make love than under the stars?"

"I love that you call it *making love*."

"What should I call it?" he asks with an innocence that makes me want to leap into his arms. "We can escape my parents in the desert . . . find some private cove—"

"Get bitten by snakes or attacked by a coyote—"

"Okay, fine, we'll do it the traditional way, in a *bed*, with all the windows closed so no wild animals attack us."

"And doors locked so no parents walk in on us," I add.

He kisses me. Then he points up to his bedroom window. "I was drawing when you got here. I saw you turn the corner on your bike, and I asked myself, *Who is that hottie?* And then I realized, *Wait a minute, that's my hottie.* And I ran down to you."

Pg. 218

"Yes." He kisses my neck. "And we don't need to go too fast tonight. We can take it as slow as we want."

"Like two desert tortoises," I suggest.

With a smile, he takes his hoodie and T-shirt off. And then his pants and his underwear. "Is this okay?" he asks.

I run my hands on the skin of his backside. "It's much better than okay."

"Your turn," he says.

I hesitate, then I slowly peel off my clothes, enjoying the moment, reminding myself to move like a tortoise. Not to rush past the best moments of my life at accelerated speed. I want to savor him.

"You're so beautiful," he says quietly.

No one ever called me beautiful before him. I feel my body changing. My posture prouder. My heart calmer. I never want to forget how this feels, to actually believe I'm beautiful. Worthy of love.

Our hands lock into each other effortlessly. I love his scent on my sheets. His skin fuses into mine, like we're becoming one. Every time I close my eyes and reopen them, he looks different, like he's changing in front of my very eyes. His skin milkier. His eyes deeper, a portal to a secret place. His freckles glimmer like stars in some undiscovered galaxy.

We laugh. We kiss. We cuddle. We stop sometimes and just face each other.

We ask questions when we need to. Ask each other what feels good and what doesn't. We don't go as far as I thought we might. We choose to stick to just touching each other for now. But we talk about all the things we want to do when the time is right. I hesitate before verbalizing each fantasy, and he tells me never to be ashamed of my desires. When my hand guides his body to a climax just as his hand takes mine to the same peak, I feel the absence of shame, the swelling not just of my body but of my pride.

"Wow," he whispers.

"Yeah, wow." I feel depleted. But it's a beautiful emptiness, because I feel, for this moment at least, weightless and free.

Pg. 231

"*Nothing gold can stay*," he sings softly, quoting Lana, who was quoting Robert Frost, who was probably quoting ancient wisdom, words passed down, so meaningful, and also so meaningless in the grand scheme of two billion years, a time before words. "Which is why we need to make the most of our time together."

He kisses me gently. "Ash . . ." I want to say I love him but I hesitate.

He fills the silence of my hesitation with more words. "You know what I love about this place? It's not a desert. It's two deserts with totally different climates. The Mojave and the Sonoran. This is where they meet." He lifts a finger and traces the shape of my face with it as he speaks. "Sometimes I think . . . we're like this place. We are the place where two deserts meet. You know what Rilke said about love?"

"Of course I don't," I say. "Tell me."

"That love is like two solitudes protecting, bordering, and saluting each other. Isn't that beautiful?"

I nod.

"Two solitudes. Like these two deserts coming together. Like us."

"Maybe we're not two deserts." I mount him. "Maybe we're like those rocks." I slowly run my hands along his chest, unbuttoning his shirt, and then pulling his shorts and mine down. "Smashed together by a mighty geological explosion, or a major cosmic erosion or the—"

He cackles as he grabs ahold of me. "You really know nothing about how nature works."

"I know a little bit," I grunt as he strokes me, and I stroke him.

"Boys!" Mrs. Greene's voice, like birdsong itself. Human voices don't sound the same here. They seem to travel at a different frequency, slower, more poetic. "Boys!"

Ash lies on top of me and just as I'm about to come, he screams, "Coming, Mom!"

We collapse next to each other, in laughter, love, breathlessness.

"Where's the lie?" he says. "I told her we were coming."

"And so we did."

"Boys!" his mom calls out again. "Come for dinner!"

"I did just come," he says. "And it made for a delicious appetizer."

"Stop!" I can't stop laughing.

"Can't stop, won't stop," he says, a smile in his voice.

"Ash and Kam, come on!" she calls out again. "Kids, we went over the ground rules. No disappearing."

We giggle as we rush back to our campsite.

Pg. 233

him over. My mom's repertoire of meals, which was her mom's repertoire of meals, consists of meat-based stews, and meat kotlet, an endless variety of ways to cook beef, veal, chicken. On the ride home that night, she said at least he could eat Persian rice, and I told her, *Not if you put yogurt in it*. She looked horrified.

"Kam does love his meat," Ash says with a grin. "But I think he can handle a vegan camping trip."

"If you think we miss your double entendres, you're wrong," Mr. Greene says.

I blush. I know Ash discusses *everything* with his parents—including sex—but I have no interest in talking about my lust for Ash's meat with his mom and dad. "So what are we eating anyway?" I ask.

Pg. 247

"I'll go first," Fiona announces. "I have a fun one." She raises her cup up high. "Never have I ever wished I was cis and straight."

At first, no one drinks. And then, as we all eye each other suspiciously, we all drink.

"I mean, I don't wish for that anymore," Tucker says. "But like, have I *ever* wished that? Sure."

"Same," Olivia says. "Like, these days, being cis and straight seems like a

fucking curse. But when I first came out to my parents and I saw my mom doing everything she could to hide her despair . . .”

Bodie puts a hand on Olivia’s shoulder. Gives her a moment to compose herself. “Your mom loves you. We all love you.”

Olivia shakes off her sadness. “No, I know that.”

Bodie raises his glass. “That wasn’t exactly a fun one. Here’s a fun one. Never have I ever had a crush on a teacher.”

“Bodie, ew!” Olivia squeals.

“Don’t yuck my yum,” Fiona says as she drinks. “It’s just a crush, not a crime. And I happen to think Ms. Carolina is hot.”

“Ms. Carolina?” Olivia asks, aghast. “The chemistry teacher who constantly talks about how she’s wasting her PhD teaching high school?”

“In fairness, what she’s really wasting is her Ph-double-Ds,” Fiona quips. Even I laugh at that. It feels like we’re drunk, even though there’s no alcohol in our cider.

“Okay, okay, it’s the newbie’s turn,” Lincoln declares. “Never have I ever been caught hooking up by my parents.”

At first, no one drinks. But then Olivia wags her finger at Bodie in mock consternation. “Nobody lies during this sacred game, especially in this sacred desert.”

Bodie blushes. “We weren’t *hooking up*. We were just *kissing*.” My throat stiffens. I know what a big deal kissing is to Bodie. It’s intimacy. It’s what he usually pushes away.

Olivia cackles as she says, “You said Louis was sucking your face like a vacuum cleaner when your dad walked in!”

Defy Me by Tahereh Mafi

Pg. 61

I let her touch me the way she wants to, let her put her hands on my body and kiss me wherever, however she wants. She touches me in a proprietary way, like I already belong to her, and I don't mind. I kind of love it. And I let her take the lead for as long as I can bear it. She's pulling up my shirt, running her hands across my bare skin and telling me how much she likes my body, and I really feel like—like I can't breathe. I feel too hot. Delirious but sharp, aware of this moment in an almost primal way.

She helps me pull off my shirt and then she just looks at me, first at my face and then at my chest, and she runs her hands across my shoulders, down my arms. "Wow," she says softly. "You're so gorgeous."

That's it for me.

I pick her up off my lap and lay her down, on her back, and she gasps, stares at me like she's surprised. And then, *deep*, her eyes go deep and dark, and she's looking at my mouth but I decide to kiss her neck, the curve of her shoulder.

"Nazeera," I whisper, hardly recognizing the sound of my own voice. "I want you so badly it might kill me."

Pg. 283

Ella crosses her arms, pretending to look mad, but I can see the effort she's making to fight back a smile. "Aaron," she says sternly. "You were going to take a shower without me?"

My eyebrows fly up, surprised.

For a moment, I don't know what to say. And then, carefully, "Would you like to join me?"

She steps forward, wraps her arms around my waist, and stares up at me with a sweet, secret smile. The look in her eyes is enough to make me think

about dropping the towel.

I whisper her name, my heart heavy with emotion.

She pulls me closer, gently touching her lips to my chest, and I go uncomfortably still. Her kisses grow more intent, her lips leaving a trail of fire across my chest, down my torso, and feeling rushes through my veins, sets me on fire. Suddenly I forget why I was ever holding a towel.

I don't even know when it falls to the floor.

I slip my arms around her, reel her in. She feels incredible, her body fitting against me perfectly, and I tilt her face up, my hand caught somewhere behind her neck and the base of her jaw and I kiss her, soft and slow, heat filling my blood with dangerous speed. I pull her tighter and she gasps, stumbles and takes an accidental step back and I catch her, pressing her against the wall behind her. I bunch up the hem of her dress and in one smooth motion yank it upward, my hand slipping under the material to skim the smooth skin of her waist, to grip her hip, hard. I part her legs with my thigh and she makes a soft, desperate sound deep in her throat and it does something to me, to feel her like this, to hear her like this—to be assaulted by endless waves of her pleasure and desire—

It drives me *insane*.

I bury my face in her neck, my hands moving up, under her dress to feel her skin, hot and soft and sensitive to my touch. I've missed her so much. I've missed her body under my hands, missed the scent of her skin and the soft, feather-light whisper of her hair against my body. I kiss her neck, trying to ignore the tension in my muscles or the hard, desperate pressure driving me toward her, toward madness. There's an ache expanding inside of me and

demanding more, demanding I flip her over and lose myself in her here, right now, and she whispers—

"How— How do you always feel so good?" She's clinging to me, her eyes half-lidded but bright with desire. Her face is flushed. Her words are heavy with feeling when she says, "How do you always do this to me?"

I break away from her.

I take two steps backward and I'm breathing hard, trying to regain control of myself even as her eyes widen, her arms going suddenly still.

"Aaron?" she says. "What's—"

"Take off your dress," I say quietly.

Understanding awakens in her eyes.

She says nothing, she only looks at me, carefully, as I watch, imprisoned in place by an acute form of agony. Her hands are trembling but her eyes are willing and wanting and nervous. She shoves the material down, past her shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. I drink her in as she steps out of the dress, my mind racing.

Gorgeous, I think. So gorgeous.

My pulse is wild.

When I ask her to, she unhooks her bra. Moments later, her underwear joins her bra on the floor and I can't look away from her, my mind unable to process the perfection of this happiness. She's so stunning I can hardly breathe. I can hardly fathom that she's mine, that she wants me, that she would ever love me. I can't even hear myself *think* over the rush of blood in my ears, my heart beating so fast and hard it seems to thud against my skull. The sight of her standing in front of me, vulnerable and flushed with desire, is doing wild,

desperate things to my mind. God, the fantasies I've had about her. The places my mind has gone.

I step forward and pick her up and she gasps, surprised, clinging desperately to my neck as I hitch her legs around my waist, my arms settling under her thighs. I love feeling the weight of her soft curves. I love having her this close to me. I love her arms around my neck and the squeeze of her legs around my hips. I love how ready she is, her thighs already parted, every inch of her pressed against me. But then she runs her hands up my naked back and I have to resist the urge to flinch. I don't want to be self-conscious about the scars on my body. I don't want any part of me to be off-limits to her. I want her to know me exactly as I am, and, as hard as it is, I allow myself to ease into her touch, closing my eyes as she trails her hands up, across my shoulders, down my arms.

"You're so gorgeous," she says softly. "I'm always surprised. It doesn't matter how many times I see you without your clothes on, I'm always surprised. It doesn't seem fair that anyone should be this gorgeous."

She looks at me, stares at me as if expecting an answer, but I can't speak. I fear I might unravel if I do. I want her with a desperate need I've never known before—a desperate, painful need so overwhelming it's threatening to consume me. I need her. Need this. Now. I take a deep, unsteady breath, and carry her into the shower.

She screams.

Hot water hits us fast and hard and I press her against the shower wall, losing myself in her in a way I never have before. The kisses are deeper, more desperate. The heat, more explosive. Everything between us feels wild and raw

and vulnerable.

I lose track of time.

I don't know how long we've been here. I don't know how long I've lost myself in her when she cries out, clutching my arms so tightly her fingernails dig into my skin, her screams muffled against my chest. I feel weak, unsteady as she collapses in my arms; I'm intoxicated by the pure, stunning power of her emotions: endless waves of love and desire, love and kindness, love and joy, love and tenderness. So much tenderness.

It's almost too much.

I step backward, bracing myself against the wall as she presses her cheek against my chest and holds me, our bodies wet and heavy with feeling, our hearts pounding with something more powerful than I ever thought possible. I kiss the curve of her shoulder, the nape of her neck. I forget where we are and all we have left to do and I just hold on, hot water rushing down my arms, my limbs still slightly shaking, too terrified to let her go.

Pg. 293

I reel her in, kiss her, again, and lose myself in the taste and feel of her, in the fantasy of what we might have. What we might be. And then I pull her gently onto my lap and she straddles my body, settling over me until we're pressed together, her cheek against my chest. I wrap my arms around her, spread my hands along her back. I feel her gentle breaths on my skin, her eyelashes tickling my chest as she blinks, and I decide I'm never, ever leaving this bed.

A happy, wonderful silence settles between us.

"You asked me to marry you," she says softly.

"Yes."

"Wow."

I smile, my heart filled suddenly with inexpressible joy. I hardly recognize myself. I can't remember the last time I ever smiled this much. I can't recall ever feeling this kind of pure, unburdened bliss.

Like my body might float away without me.

I touch her hair, gently. Run my fingers through the soft, silky strands. When I finally sit up, she sits up, too, and she blushes as I stare at her, mesmerized by the sight of her. Her eyes are wide and bright. Her lips full and pink. She's perfect, perfect here, bare and beautiful in my arms.

Pg. 294

Ella frowns. Looks around. "That sounds like a doorbell," she says.

I wish I could deny the possibility.

I sit back, even though she's still sitting on my lap. I want this interruption to end. I want to go back to our conversation. I want to stick to my original plan to spend the rest of the night here, in bed, with my perfect, naked fiancée.

Pg. 297

Maybe later.

For now, I step behind her, slip my hands around her waist. She startles and the sheet falls to the floor. "Ella," I say softly, tugging her body against mine. "Sweetheart, you have to tell me what's going on."

I turn her around, slowly. She looks down at herself, surprised—always surprised—by the sight of her naked body. "I don't have any clothes on," she whispers.

"I know," I say, smiling as I run my hands down her back, appreciating her softness, her perfect curves. I wish I could store these moments. I wish I could revisit them. Relive them. She shivers in my arms and I pull her closer.

Believe Me by Tahereh Mafi

Pg. 61

I move slowly at first, kissing her cheek and lingering there, pressing my face to the softness of her skin. There's no one here but us. No thoughts but hers and mine. She touches my chest in response, sighing softly as she trails a hand up the back of my neck, into my hair.

My body responds before my mind has had a chance to catch up.

I take her face in my hands and kiss her like I've wanted to for days. *Weeks*. I nudge her mouth open and taste her, running my hands down her body now, drawing her closer.

Her desires consume me as they evolve, leaving me slightly intoxicated. It's always a heady cocktail, experiencing her like this, feeling her emotions in real time. The harder I kiss her the more she wants, the more desperate her needs become. It's dangerous; it makes it hard to think straight, to remember where we are.

She makes a sound when I kiss her neck, a soft moan followed by the whisper of my name, and the combination incites a riot in my body. My hands are under her sweater now, grazing the satin of her skin, the clasp of her bra, and she's reaching for me, for the button of my pants, and I can hear, but choose to ignore, the distant voice in my head telling me that there has to be a better place for this—somewhere warmer, somewhere softer, somewhere that

Pg. 93

—when she opens the bathroom door and stands there, smiling at me—

My relief is so acute I reach for the wall, bracing myself against the cold tile. Ella is holding two mugs of coffee, dressed the way she often is: in a soft sweater and jeans, her dark brown hair so long now it skims her elbows. She grins at me, then disappears into the outer room, and I start to follow her, nearly slipping in my haste. I catch the doorframe to steady myself, watching as she rests the coffee mugs on a nearby table. She slips off her tennis shoes. Tugs off her socks.

When she pulls her sweater over her head, I have a minor heart attack. She's facing away from me, but her back is bare. She's not wearing a bra.

"You were sound asleep this morning," she says, glancing over her shoulder at me as she unbuttons her jeans. "I was afraid to wake you up. I went out to get us some coffee, but the line at breakfast was really long. I'm sorry I wasn't here."

She shimmies out of her jeans then, tugging them down over her hips. She's wearing a scrap of lace masquerading as underwear, and I watch, immobilized, as she bends over to yank off the last of the jeans, pulling her feet free.

When she turns around, I'm struggling to breathe.

She's so beautiful I can hardly look at her; I feel as if I've stepped into some strange dream, the debilitating fears that gripped me yesterday somehow forgotten in a moment. Heat courses through me at a dangerous speed, my mind unable to grasp what my body clearly understands. There's so much I still need to say to her—so much I remember wanting to ask her. But when she steps out of her underwear and walks through the open bathroom door, into the

shower, and then directly into my arms, I remember nothing.

My brain shuts down.

Her soft, naked body is pressed against every hard inch of mine, and suddenly I want nothing, nothing but this. The need is so great it actually feels like it might break me.

"Hey, handsome," she says, peering up at me. She runs her hands down my back, then lower. I can hear her smile. "You look too good in here to be all by yourself."

I can't speak.

She takes my hand, still smiling, and rests it against her breast before slowly guiding it down her body; she's showing me exactly what she wants from me. How she wants it.

But I already know.

I know where she wants my hands. I know where she wants my mouth. I know where she wants me most of all.

I take her into my arms, hitching her leg around my thigh before I kiss her, breaking her open. She's so soft, slick, and eager in my arms, kissing me back with an urgency that drives me wild. I tilt her head back as I break away, kissing her neck, then lower; slowly, carefully, replacing my hands with my mouth everywhere on her body. Her desperate, anguished sounds send shock waves of pleasure through me, setting me on fire. She reaches behind her, searching for purchase against the tile wall, her back arching with pleasure.

I love the way she loses herself with me, the way she lets go, trusting me completely with her needs, her pleasure. I never feel closer to her than when we're so entwined, when there's nothing but openness and love between us.

She touches me then, gently wraps her hand around me, and I squeeze my eyes shut, hardly able to contain the sound I make, low in my throat. All I can think in this moment is that I don't want this to be over; I want to be trapped in here for hours, her slick body against mine, her voice in my ear begging me, as she is now, to make love to her.

"Please," she says, still touching me. "Aaron—"

I sink down, without warning, onto my knees. Ella steps back, confused for all of a second before her eyes widen with understanding.

"Come here, love."

Ella is hesitant at first. I feel her sudden shyness, desire, and self-consciousness colliding, and I study her as she stands there, the sheen of her wet curves in this light, her long dark hair painted to her skin. Hot drops of water race down her breasts, skim her navel. She's dripping wet, so gorgeous I hardly know what to do with myself.

She makes her way over to me slowly, her cheeks pink with heat, her eyes dark with need. I intercept her once she's standing in front of me, planting my hands around her hips. I look up at her in time to see her blush, a moment of self-consciousness gone in seconds. She's soon gasping my name, her hands in my hair, at the back of my neck. She's already so wet, so ready for me; the sight of her—the taste of her—it's too much. I feel like I'm detaching from my mind as I watch her lose herself. I can feel her legs shaking as she cries out for more, for me, and when she comes she stifles her scream in my hair. I'm on my feet a moment later, capturing the last of her cries with my mouth, kissing her as she trembles in my arms, her harsh breaths slowing down. Ella reaches for me even then, touches me until I'm blind with pleasure. She pushes me, gently,

I move inside her with painstaking slowness, the pleasure so profound it seems to sever my connection to reality.

"God, you feel so good," I say, hardly recognizing the ragged sound of my own voice. "I can't believe you're mine."

She only moans my name in response, her arms wrapped tight around my neck as she pulls me closer.

I can feel her growing torment, her need for release as great as my own. We find a rhythm as we move. Ella hooks her legs around my waist, and she doesn't stop kissing me; my mouth, my cheeks, my jaw—any part of me she can reach—her feverish touches interrupted only by desperate pleas begging me for more—faster, harder—

"I love you," she says desperately. "I love you so much—"

I let go when I feel her come apart, losing myself in the moment with a stifled cry, my body seizing as it succumbs to this, the most acute form of pleasure.

I bury my face in her chest, listening to the sound of her racing heart for only a moment before disengaging myself, for fear of crushing her. Somehow the two of us manage, just barely, to squeeze in together on the narrow bed.

Ella tucks herself into my side, pressing her face against my neck, and I reach for the insubstantial covers, drawing them up around us. She grazes my chest with the tips of her fingers, drawing patterns, and this single action ignites a low heat deep inside me.

I could do this all day.

I don't care what happened yesterday. I don't need an explanation. None of it seems to matter anymore, not when she's here with me. Not when her naked

up against the wall, kissing my throat, running her hands down my chest, my torso, and then she sinks to her knees in front of me, taking me into her mouth —

I make a tortured sound, grasping at the wall, hardly able to breathe. The pleasure is white-hot; all-encompassing. I can't think around it. I can hardly see straight. And for a moment I think I've actually lost my mind, separated from my body.

"Ella," I gasp.

"I want you," she says, breaking away, her words hot against my skin. "Please—now—"

My heart still pounding in my chest, I step aside.

Turn off the shower.

Ella startles, surprised even as she gets to her feet. I step past her to grab a towel for each of us and she accepts hers with some confusion, refusing to dry herself off.

"But—"

I scoop her up without a word and she squeaks, half laughing as I carry her over to the single bed in our room. I lay her down carefully, and she looks up at me, eyes wide with wonder, her wet hair plastered to her skin, water dripping everywhere. I couldn't care less if we flooded this room.

I join her on the bed, carefully straddling her damp, gleaming body before leaning down to kiss her, this need so brutal it's almost indistinguishable from anguish. I touch her while I kiss her, stroking her slowly at first, then deeper, more urgent. She whimpers against my mouth, urging me closer, lifting her hips.

body is wrapped up in mine, not when she draws her hands along my skin, touching me with a tenderness that tells me everything I need to know.

All I want is this. Her.

Us.

I don't even realize I've fallen asleep until her voice startles me awake.

"Aaron," she whispers.

It takes me a moment to open my eyes, to find my voice. I turn toward her as if in a dream, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "Yes, love?"

"There's something I want to show you."

Pg. 133

"We should probably get going if you want to get this back," I say, touching her waist, then tugging her close. My lips are at her ear when I whisper: "I'm going to marry you today. And then I'm going to make love to you until you can't remember your name."

Ella makes a startled, breathless sound, her hands tightening in my shirt. She pulls me closer and kisses me, nipping my bottom lip before claiming my mouth, touching me now with a new desperation; a hunger still unmet. She presses her body against me, hard and soft soldered together, and I lose myself in it, in the intoxication of knowing just how much she wants this.

Me.

Her mouth is hot and sweet, her limbs heavy with pleasure. She drags her hand down the front of my pants and I make an anguished sound somewhere deep in my chest. I take her face in my hands as she touches me, kissing her

deeper, harder, still unable to find relief. She seems to be torturing me on purpose—torturing both of us—knowing there's nothing we can do here, knowing there are people waiting for us—

"Ella," I gasp, the word practically a plea as I break away, trying and failing to cool my head, my thoughts. I can't walk back into a crowd right now, looking like this. I can't even think straight.

My thoughts are wild.

I want nothing more than to strip her bare. I want to fall to my knees and taste her, make her lose her mind with pleasure. I want her to beg before I make her come, right here, in the middle of nowhere.

"I really don't think you understand what you do to me, love," I say, trying to steady myself. "You have no idea how badly I want you. You have no idea what I want to do to you right now."

My words do not have the intended effect. Ella is not deterred.

Her desire seems to intensify, more in every second. That she could ever want me like this—that I could ever inspire in her the kind of need she inspires in me—

It still seems impossible.

And it's addicting.

"*You* have no idea," she says softly, "how you make me feel when you look at me like that."

I take a deep, unsteady breath when she touches me again, dragging my hands down her body before sliding a hand under her sweater, up the curve of her rib cage. She gasps as I skim the soft, heavy swell of her breasts, her body responding in an instant to my touch.

Her skin here, like everywhere, is like satin.

"God," I breathe. "I can never get enough of you."

Ella shakes her head even as she closes her eyes, surrendering to my hands. "Kenji was right," she says breathlessly. "We can't be left alone together."

I kiss her neck slowly, tasting her there until she moans, not enough to leave a mark. She reaches for me then, her own hands grasping for the button of my pants. In my delirium I let it happen, forgetting for a moment where we are or what we need to be doing until I feel her soft fingers wrap around me—a cool hand against my feverish skin—and my head nearly catches fire.

I'm moments away from losing my mind. I want to strip off her sweater. I want to unhook her bra. I want her to undress in front of me before I—

This is madness.

Common sense is returned to me only through a brutal, agonizing reclamation of self-control, just enough for me to place a hand over hers, forcing myself to breathe slowly.

"We can't do this here," I say, hating myself even as I say it. "Not here. Not now."

She looks around herself then as if emerging from a dream, the real world coming back into focus by degrees. I take advantage of her distraction to put myself to rights, stunned to realize I was only moments away from doing something reckless.

Ella's disappointment is palpable.

"I need to take you to bed, love," I say, my voice still rough with desire. "I need hours. Days. Alone with you."

She nods, her ring catching the light as she reaches for me, collapsing

against my chest. "Yes. Please. I really hope you're not planning on falling asleep tonight."

I laugh at that, the sound still a bit shaky. "One day we'll have a proper bed," I say, kissing her forehead. "And then I doubt I will ever sleep again."

Ella jerks back suddenly.

Her eyes widen with something like comprehension, then delight. She nearly bounces up and down before taking my hand, and with only a sharp exclamation of excitement, she tugs me forward.

"Wait—Ella—"

"I still have something to show you!" she cries, and breaks off into a run.

I have no choice but to chase after her.

Fuck: 24

Shit: 29

Lord's name in vain: 100+

Pg. 54

university *and* secondary school. The first time she let him take off her bra, she lay on her back moaning softly, her fingers splayed on his head, and afterwards she said, "My eyes were open but I did not see the ceiling. This never happened before." Other girls would have pretended that they had never let another boy touch them, but not her, never her. There was a vivid honesty about her. She began to call what they did together *ceiling*, their warm entanglements on his bed when his mother was out, wearing only underwear, touching and kissing and sucking, hips moving in simulation. *I'm longing for ceiling*, she once wrote on the back of his geography notebook, and for a long time afterwards he could not look at that notebook without a gathering frisson, a sense of secret excitement. In university, when they finally stopped

Pg. 72

MARIE WAS SLIGHT, and Obinze was not sure whether she was timid or whether her halting English made her seem so. She had been with them only a month. The last housegirl, brought by a relative of Gabriel's, was thickset and had arrived clutching a duffel bag. He was not there when Kosi looked through it—she did that routinely with all domestic help because she wanted to know what was being brought into her home—but he came out when he heard Kosi shouting, in that impatient, shrill manner she put on with domestic help to command authority, to ward off disrespect. The girl's bag was on the floor, open, clothing fluffing out. Kosi stood beside it, holding up, at the tips of her fingers, a packet of condoms.

"What is this for? Eh? You came to my house to be a prostitute?"

The girl looked down at first, silent, then she looked Kosi in the face and said quietly, "In my last job, my madam's husband was always forcing me."

Kosi's eyes bulged. She moved forward for a moment, as though to attack the girl in some way, and then stopped.

"Please carry your bag and go now-now," she said.

The girl shifted, looking a little surprised, and then she picked up her bag and turned to the door. After she left, Kosi said, "Can you believe the nonsense, darling? She came here with condoms and she actually opened her mouth to say that rubbish. Can you believe it?"

"Her former employer raped her so she decided to protect herself this time,"

Pg. 133

"If I tell you what these people do, eh," Aunt Uju would say to Ifemelu, tapping at a magazine photo with her French-manicured nail. "Their real stories are not even in the magazines. Oga has the real gist." Then she would talk about the man who had sex with a top general to get an oil bloc, the military administrator whose children were fathered by somebody else, the foreign prostitutes flown in weekly for the Head of State. She repeated the stories with affectionate amusement, as though she thought The General's

Pg. 235

Newspapers were strewn on the floor, job listings circled in ink. She picked one up and flipped through, looking at advertisements she had already seen. escorts caught her eye again. Ginika had said to her, "Forget that escort thing. They say it isn't prostitution but it is and the worst thing is that you get maybe a quarter of what you earn because the agency takes the rest. I know this girl who did it in freshman year." Ifemelu read the advertisement and thought, again, of calling, but she didn't, because she was hoping that the last interview she went for, a waitress position in a little restaurant that didn't pay a salary, only tips, would come through. They had said they would call her by the end of the day if she got the job; she waited until very late but they did not call.

Pg. 239

defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers. Now, even after she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her.

Pg. 297

"You are *sexier*."

He told her he had never been so attracted to a woman before, had never seen a body so beautiful, her perfect breasts, her perfect butt. It amused her, that he considered a perfect butt what Obinze called a flat ass, and she thought her breasts were ordinary big breasts, already with a downward slope. But his words pleased her, like an unnecessary lavish gift. He wanted to suck her finger, to lick honey from her nipple, to smear ice cream on her belly, as though it was not enough simply to lie bare skin to bare skin.

Later, when he wanted to do impersonations—"How about you be Foxy Brown," he said—she thought it endearing, his ability to act, to lose himself so completely in character, and she played along, humoring him, pleased by his

quite suddenly, a sexual urge overcame him. A tide of lust. He wanted to fuck somebody. He would text Tendai. They had met at a party Nosa took him to, and he ended up, that night, in her bed. Wise and large-hipped and Zimbabwean Tendai who had a habit of soaking in baths for too long. She

Phillip was slender and elegant, his red silk shirt open at the neck. His mannerisms, supple gestures of his wrists, fingers swirling in the air, reminded Obinze of the boy in secondary school—his name was Hadome—who was said to pay junior students to suck his dick. Once, Emenike and two other boys had lured Hadome into the toilet and beat him up, Hadome's eye swelling so quickly that, just before school was dismissed, it looked grotesque, like a big purple eggplant. Obinze had stood outside the toilet with other boys, boys who did not join in the beating but who laughed along, boys who taunted and goaded, boys who shouted "Homo! Homo!"

bookshelf and laughing about how often his mother had tried to get him to read the book. And then they were standing by the bookshelf and kissing. A gentle kiss at first, lips pressed to lips, then their tongues were touching and she felt boneless against him. He pulled away first.

"I don't have condoms," she said, brazen, deliberately brazen.

"I didn't know we needed condoms to have lunch."

Each time he dropped her off, he kissed her on the cheek, both of them leaning toward each other, and then pulling back so that she could say "Bye" and climb out of his car. On the fifth day, as he drove into her compound, she asked, "Do you have condoms in your pocket?"

He said nothing for a while. "No, I don't have condoms in my pocket."

"Well, I bought a pack some days ago."

"Ifem, why are you saying this?"

"You're married with a child and we are hot for each other. Who are we kidding with this chaste dating business? So we might as well get it over with."

"You are hiding behind sarcasm," he said.

"Oh, how very lofty of you." She was angry. It was barely a week since she first saw him but already she was angry, furious that he would drop her off and go home to his other life, his real life, and that she could not visualize the

"I touch myself thinking of you," she said.

He stared at her, thrown slightly off balance.

"We're not single people who are courting, Ceiling," she said. "We can't deny the attraction between us and maybe we should have a conversation about that."

"You know this isn't about sex," he said. "This has never been about sex."

"I know," she said, and took his hand. There was, between them, a weightless, seamless desire. She leaned in and kissed him, and at first he was slow in his response, and then he was pulling up her blouse, pushing down her bra cups to free her breasts. She remembered clearly the firmness of his embrace, and yet there was, also, a newness to their union; their bodies remembered and did not remember. She touched the scar on his chest, remembering it again. She had always thought the expression "making love" a little maudlin; "having sex" felt truer and "fucking" was more arousing, but lying next to him afterwards, both of them smiling, sometimes laughing, her body suffused with peace, she thought how apt it was, that expression "making love." There was an awakening even in her nails, in those parts of her body that had always been numb. She wanted to tell him, "There is no week that passed that I did not think of you." But was that true? Of course there were weeks during which he was folded under layers of her life, but it felt true.

sized everyone else up, wondering how much of a "somebody" each was. It smelled of money, easy money, easily exchanged money. It dripped, too, of sex. Obinze's friend Chidi said he didn't chase women in Abuja because he didn't want to step on a minister's or senator's toes. Every attractive young woman here became mysteriously suspect. Abuja was more conservative than Lagos, Chidi said, because it was more Muslim than Lagos, and at parties women didn't wear revealing clothing, yet you could buy and sell sex so much more easily here. It was in Abuja that Obinze had come close to cheating on Kosi, not with any of the flashy girls in colored contact lenses and tumbling hair weaves who endlessly propositioned him, but with a middle-aged woman in a caftan who sat next to him at the hotel bar, and said, "I know you are bored." She looked hungry for recklessness, perhaps a repressed, frustrated wife who had broken free on this one night.

For a moment, lust, a quaking raw lust, overcame him, but he thought about how much more bored he would be afterwards, how keen to get her out of his hotel room, and it all seemed too much of an effort.

She would end up with one of the many men in Abuja who lived idle, oily lives in hotels and part-time homes, groveling and courting connected people so as to get a contract or to be paid for a contract. On Obinze's last trip to Abuja, one such man, whom he hardly knew, had looked for a while at two young women at the other end of the bar and then asked him casually, "Do you have a spare condom?" and he had balked.

After Edusco left, Obinze called Ifemelu over and over but she did not answer. Perhaps her ringer was switched off, and she was eating at her dining table, wearing that pink T-shirt she wore so often, with the small hole at the neck, and HEARTBREAKER CAFÉ written across the front; her nipples, when they got hard, would punctuate those words like inverted commas. Thinking of her pink T-shirt aroused him. Or perhaps she was reading in bed, her abada wrapper spread over her like a blanket, wearing plain black boyshorts and nothing else. All her underwear were plain black boyshorts; girly underwear amused her. Once, he had picked up those boyshorts from the floor where he had flung them after rolling them down her legs, and looked at the milky crust on the crotch, and she laughed and said, "Ah, you want to smell it? I've never understood that whole business of smelling underwear." Or perhaps she was on

