

I worked at the aquarium, at the ice-cream stand. James was a PhD candidate at Cardiff University. He was writing a thesis about science and poetry. He was twenty-three and wore a pale blue corduroy jacket. The elbows were so worn they looked waxy. He bought it from a shop on Brick Lane, which was a place I had read about but never been. James studied his undergraduate degree at a college in London. He admired and was disgusted by London equally. He always talked about his ‘undergrad days’ when he was drunk. He was often drunk.

I was in love with him. I felt breathless whenever I saw him, even if he was only walking past the kiosk, even if he hadn’t seen me. When business was slow, I would hold my phone under the counter and write memos in the notes app about clever things I could say to him. I would summarise my opinions on world events and contemporary literature, distill complex thought processes to two or three sentences. (We’re experiencing a crisis of empathy in the West. *Jane Eyre* fails to imagine any womanhoods beyond whiteness. Every political emergency of the twentieth century has now been reduced to a punchline; this is how we propagate apathy. Narrowness is an inevitability of our culture.) James never listened to me for longer than two minutes. Instead of pissing me off, this motivated me to speak only with extreme precision and clarity. I was sixteen-years-old.

James was frequently at the aquarium for research. He walked around with a small leather notebook. It had creamy unlined pages. He was locally known amongst aquarium employees as ‘the PhD’ and sometimes, when someone was in a good mood with him, as ‘our PhD’. His open notebook fit neatly in the palm of his hand. In the other he always held a monogrammed fountain pen. I saw him in the act of writing very rarely, but the pages of his notebooks were filled with scrawling blue ink.

We met in May. James was standing in the blue walkthrough tunnel. I knew him to see him but not to talk to. He’d walked past the ice-cream stand more than once. I thought he was attractive, and for weeks I had tried to contrive ways to meet him naturally.

He was holding his little book. At first I thought he was reading. When I got closer, I saw that he was writing, or he had the appearance of writing. Two pages were populated

with inscrutable drawings, messily labelled. The diagrams looked like those shimmery windmill toys, pinwheels.

James said: I was just admiring the oriental sweetlips.

I jumped. I hadn't expected him to speak or realise I was standing there. I started so badly that I dropped my bag. He didn't address this. I was still leaning down to gather up the things that had spilled out (rose Vaseline, aloe vera hand sanitiser, two spare hair bobbles, a secondhand copy of a romance novel, an unopened sanitary pad) when he said, Would it be corny if I described her as 'majestic'?

The fishes' shadows were gliding over his face. Looking up at him, I felt very brave. I was paid less than minimum wage to scoop ice-cream. I had just finished an illegal nine-hour shift. James seemed like he was expecting me to be mature, like I would say anything I wanted. Yeah, I said, that would be corny.

James laughed.

We stayed until the people who worked in the aquarium major asked us, very kindly, to leave. James asked if I wanted a lift. When we got into town I asked him to stop at the top of my road but he kept driving until we were outside my house. My mum didn't apologise for forgetting to pick me up. Instead she asked, Who was that? He's tall.

It was true that James was very tall. He had clear skin. He was very good at making people laugh. These three qualities, more than any others that applied to him, made him a hit at parties and with women and especially with women at parties. He was popular too with younger men, who found him aspirational, but rarely with older men, who bitterly saw themselves in him. He was poorly-received at the pub but well-received at my school friends' parties. This was OK, because only one pub in town would serve me. James would say, I hate chaperoning your mates' house parties. But then I would find him in the kitchen making a round of Old Fashioned's or encircled by a group of people in the smoky garden.

It was fun to show him around town, which he was unfamiliar with. I felt like his tour manager. He was the most intelligent person, the most stunning, in every room. I liked being the one who had brought the sun.

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We liked to drive around, whenever I had days off from the aquarium. I directed the days, picking the roads we went down at random. There was always wine and tinnies in a reusable plastic bag in the backseat. The windows were always down, so we could smoke (James had taught me how to roll) and I held the cigarette to his lips when he asked. We occasionally parked in a lay-by to wander around a field or admire a view. I wore short dresses and brown combat boots and carried a different book with me everyday. It was June. I felt like we were the living soul of summer.

I had just finished my first year of sixth-form college, and wasn't sure if I wanted to go back. I found what I considered working life to be very boring. I said often that I wanted to drop out and travel, although I didn't have a passport. James said that you didn't really need qualifications, that life was about more than what you were taught in school. This was very interesting to me, because university was always the way out of my life; no one had ever presented an alternative.

When we paused in the fields to lie in the grass and get off with each other, I would, at James' request, talk about my life and the people in it. He was very interested in the things my friends did and said, and what I thought about it. (Amybeth is cross with Isabel for kissing Callum; Oliver will be the only Oxbridge candidate in our whole year; Mr Rhys is a creep and a weirdo and his arrest surprises no one, not least of all the girls at school because we've been saying for years what a weirdo he was but nobody listened because the voices of women and girls have been historically disregarded.) James was mostly an attentive listener. I was flattered to be the object of a man's interest and to be treated, I felt, like a person. More than anything, I loved any performance that seemed to engage him.

When James talked at length, it was about his research and the university and his friends, who all seemed very cool and worldly. His best friend was a photographer in America. She had a website with a blog, which I bookmarked, and she had tens of thousands of followers on Instagram. He was sometimes jealous, although I reassured him that his work was more important, socially.

At home, I had to Google the things that James mentioned to me (environmental racism; trickle-down economics; the season finale of *Survivor*; the Indian Ocean oriental sweetlips; Mao) but he never brought up the same topic more than once. My research area became very broad. I filled my brain with half-facts about subjects for which I had no material reference. If James told me that superhero movies were militaristic propaganda, then I agreed and said that the film industry was an essential arm of the Western imperialist project. Or if James said that postmodernism in poetry was responsible for all the romance left in the world, I would tell him, I go on loving you like water.

These interjections, on my part, had the strange effect of making James angry. He would deny that he was upset with me and we would drive around in silence. The sunlight became cool in hue and temperature. I turned on the radio on and smoked out of the window. We listened to the oldies station. I became well-acquainted with the popular songs of the late twentieth-century. By then it was July. When I offered James the cigarette he pulled his eyes away, his stare tunnelling down the road.

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There were fewer tourists in August. The days at the aquarium were slow. I was making more notes during my shifts, although James and I spoke less when we were together. When he picked me up in the evenings, he asked me no questions.

James told me his best friend was going to visit. He promised I would like her. I thought this was a weird thing to promise. I had been reading her blog. He was going to pick her up from the airport, he said, so I would need to find another way home. For a few days I did not see him.

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James texted me to meet them at the pub. They were sitting at a table near a window and the sun was very hot on my back. It wasn't the right pub, the one where they knew me, so I sat in the corner of the booth with a glass of sparkling orange juice. His best friend was very short and elegant. She was wearing a dark cardigan and boots. She had a frenetic energy, like she was late to catch a flight. When James went to the bar for the second

round, she apologised. I'm so sorry, she said, but I don't know your name. I introduced myself.

The two of them talked mostly about university and their friends. They didn't talk about James' research, or her photographs, or the state of the world. I found their conversation very uninteresting and tried to hide it. I watched the dust motes in the air that were caught in the light, like bubbles suspended in water.

We left for a party at my friend's house. James was in a very good mood. I invited his best friend reluctantly. I was beginning to feel that I wanted neither of their company. James was gregarious during the drive. I sat quietly in the front seat.

The party was very busy. The house was in the middle of a field, and all the doors were open. I had already drunk some of the backseat tinnies. I was relieved to see people I had currency with, who were happy to see me. Everyone commented that it had been ages, they hadn't seen me all summer. By the time I realised that James had left the party, everyone was asleep. I had woken up on a sofa with someone else's coat over me. I tried texting him but he didn't reply. I walked around the house. Each room of sleeping teenagers was in a state of destruction. The sky in the windows was paling.

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I saw James one more time. He brought me a magazine at the aquarium. His poems had placed in a national competition. It was his first publication. He told me that he was flying to America in September. He didn't say anything about poetry or tropical fish or his best friend. I said, I'm happy for you.

Are you? said James. I want you to understand.

Later, when I read his poems, I recognised the contours of my own life. My mum said she always knew he was bad news, that PhD. I kept the magazine under my bed until I moved out the next year, to go to university in the city.

*1999 words*

