

Tan Line

Will Gawned

He sits opposite me in the booth, large hands wrapped around the red coffee mug. It is late. I can see that he is tired, his unruly eyebrows knitted together in a frown, brown eyes downturned to watch the sugar sink into the milk foam. I can't help running his appearance past my inner critic: dark hair too long, stubble unkempt, ill-matching jacket and jeans, but he looks up at me watching and smiles, his expression apologetic. I want to smile back, but instead I look down at my coffee and busy myself stirring, letting the clinking of the spoon against the cup fill the silence.

"Thanks for meeting me," I say, not looking up at his wide lumberjack's face.

"No problem," he says "It's been a while."

I look to see his smile replaced by a pensive look. He wants to know why, of course. Why it has been so long? Why I didn't call? Why I have suddenly called now? Today, tonight.

"I lost my phone..."

"Ah," he says, eyes narrowing. He picks up the coffee and takes a swig. I break eye contact.

He knows that isn't the whole truth. I can see that he thinks I'm a player.

I make a show of looking around the café, brightly lit with fluorescent tubes. Outside the darkness is punctuated with distant car headlights that glide slowly by. The floor is tiled black

and white like a chess board and we sit in one of six booths, benches covered in red faux leather. There are no other customers and the waiter sits behind the counter leaning on his elbow, reading something. It is quiet except for the humming of the fridges, stacked with cold drinks. I used to come here a lot with friends, until I stopped coming for some reason I can't remember. It is out of the way.

"I'm surprised you called," he finally says.

I look back at him, he's leaning forward now, elbows on the table, waiting, eager. I want to lean across to meet him, let our lips meet, but I can't, not here.

"There is no one else here," he whispers, as if I spoke my doubt aloud, leaning further towards me, eyes alive and a cheeky grin playing across his full lips.

"Not here," I say withdrawing and looking around.

He leans back and finishes his coffee, in one smooth motion. My mug is still full. I sip. He drums the fingers of his left hand on the edge of the table. His right hand is beneath the table, no doubt resting against his crotch.

"So where do you want to go?" he asks, watching as I sip my coffee. He winks at me and grins.

My cock stirs in my jeans. My body remembers his rough touch, how his mouth tastes, our bodies pressed hard against each other.

"It's not what I had in mind," I say, trying to convince myself as much as him.

The drumming stops. Silence stretches out between us and I don't dare look him in the eye.

"What then?"

I detect an angry edge in his voice. He's frustrated. Hell, I would be too. I wipe my eyes, trying to gather my thoughts into some sense of coherence. I'm too tired.

"I'm sorry," I say. "It's late. I shouldn't have asked you to come. I'll go."

I prepare to stand, but he grabs my hand and squeezes. Soft brown eyes full of concern.

"No mate, I wanted to come. Sit down, let's talk."

I sit, his hand still resting on mine, warm against mine. His skin is calloused. He works with his hands but I don't exactly know what he does. I know so little. We sit like that for a while, looking at each other and I feel wetness in my eyes. My throat is tight. Fuck. I didn't want to cry. Men don't cry.

"More Coffee?"

The waiter startles me and I pull my hand away and sit on it. I see my reflection in the waiter's black-rimmed hipster glasses. My face thin and warped and see through. I feel my lip quivering and turn away.

"I'll have another, the same again thanks," he says, at ease.

"I'm fine," I say, my voice high pitched.

The waiter walks away, all business, and my companion's eyes follow him.

"Cute guy," he says to me with a smile. "Wouldn't mind having a go at him."

I laugh. A short sharp startling burst despite myself.

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?" he asks.

“How do you be so open about it?”

He frowns leaning back and looking up as if an answer is written on the white plaster board ceiling. He sighs. When he speaks the edge is back and he crosses his arms.

“It’s just who I am. There’s no shame in it.”

I can tell I’ve offended him. I’ve put him in a box with a label and I he hates that. Hates all the thoughtless questions. When did you know? What’s it like? Why do you choose?

“You should try it,” he says, and I hear the taunt. Beats living a lie.

“I’m married,” I say. The words tumble from my lips with instant regret.

I watch his expression change through the motion of his eyebrows, the tilt of his chin, from anger to sorrow to neutral. He meets my gaze.

“I know.”

He pities me and I hate him for it. I hate his lumberjack face that just makes me want to kiss him endlessly.

“I’m not an idiot mate. Tan line on your ring finger.”

I look at the ring of pale skin on my hand. The hand he had held not so long ago. I’ve been so careful to remove the plain gold band before we meet. Remove the symbol that binds me to another. I feel the gold heavy in my pocket, resting against my thigh reminding me of my guilt. My chest is tight. I hear my pulse in my ear and my cheeks hot with shame. I fold my arms to mirror him. I’m such an idiot.

He unfolds his and lays his hands flat on the table. The waiter returns with a coffee and disappears back to the counter and whatever he is reading.

“You knew I knew.”

“Why would you let us ... If you knew?”

“I didn’t take any vows mate. It’s not my business where you stick your dick.”

The lights are too bright. The café too intimate. The floor unstable, writhing in rhythm with my heartbeat. I’m outraged. I know I have no reason to be. No right to be. I pursued him. I initiated. I’m the one that cheated. I’m the liar. The memory of standing uncomfortable in a suit being watched by everyone burns in my mind. The vision of her fair face behind the veil. That gentle face, full of hope and love and expectation. I lied to her. I said the words. I took those vows, I took them and lied in front of our friends, our families and God. I lied to myself and them and I thought I had lied to him too. I thought he would know that married men don’t fuck men. But he already knew the truth.

I’ve lost his attention. He’s watching the waiter now and I can see what he’s thinking. A predator stalking new prey. He doesn’t care about me anymore. I shouldn’t expect him to. I gulp at my almost-cold coffee, swishing the bitter-sweet liquid across my tongue. He tears open the little paper sachets of sugar, pouring them again atop the milk foam to watch it sink through. A small ritual. Going through the motions.

“So what now?” he says as he stirs the coffee, head down.

“I don’t know,” I say and it feels like the first honest thing I’ve said.

He looks at me cautiously.

“I want to see you again,” he says.

I reach across the table, letting the tips of my fingers touch his. I feel my legs trembling.

“Okay,” I say.

He smiles with the slightest of nods.

“Okay.”