

YOU AND YOUR
HEALTHY LIBIDO

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FICTION

Certain penguins mate for life; so do condors, whales, beavers, silver-backed jackals, great auks. There's ritual, but no ceremony. No costumes, no props, no registry, no audience but the incidental. They just decide. Then they stay. But how do they know? How do they choose? What happens when the animals change their minds?

Picture the person, standing in front of a Plexiglas wall. The wall cuts through an artificial landscape of rocks and water, so that the water is up to the person's waist, held back by the finger-print-clouded glass. In the artificial landscape are real penguins. They're compact and black, their feathers look like they're made of rubber, from a distance they look like bath toys; but up close they look like marvelous real live penguins, which they are, with wet beaks and a reflective glint in their pupils, pupils that if the person got close enough she might be able to see herself in.

Picture the bridesmaid, a thing not of nature. A pink dress, with a pink ribbon around the waist, tulle skirt, sequins streaking like sweat down the bodice. The bridesmaid stands apart from the others, a rare seized moment, tapping at her cell phone in the shade of a Norway pine. The lake glints through the trees. It is going to be a blindingly bright day. It is going to be perfect. *What is wrong with me?* she wonders. *It's selfish to be sad today. It's their day.* All she wants to do is run down to the lake, unzip the dress, let it fall to her ankles, step out. To run into the water, where she and the bride have skinny-dipped since they were teenagers. Let the dress drift like a fat pink ghost across the lawn.

The penguins do look like they are wearing tuxedos, all of them, even the females, and the person, whose name is Adrienne, envies them this. In a few days she will travel home to Minnesota to be a bridesmaid in a pink strapless dress, her shoulders laid bare and vulnerable, some kind of jewelry clutching her throat and wrists.

"I want badly to cut my hair into some sort of very butch mohawk configuration before I go," says Adrienne. She turns to Jules, the person she calls her person, in lieu of partner (too corporate) or girlfriend (too light, too often misconstrued, too girl for andro prince Jules, as unsuitable as her birth name, Juliana.)

"But you won't," Jules says.

"Maybe I will."

"You won't. You always say stuff like that."

"How do you know?"

"I know you." Jules delivers this like a sentence.

Adrienne leans in closer to the glass. They stare into it together. They have come to see Otis and Tripp, the male penguins who have pair-bonded. There was an article in the *Oregonian*. A zookeeper has given them purple leg bands.

Otis has dragged an egg-sized rock up onto the bank, and now is trying to incubate it. He twists his head back to nibble at something on his flipper, then settles back into place. Tripp waddles off, hops into the water and goes for a swim.

Tears begin to pool in Adrienne's eyes.

"Uh-oh." Jules bumps her elbow. "Let's move on."

"I'm not ready yet. I'll meet you."

Jules sighs, but doesn't argue. "I'm going the way of the walruses," she says, and goes.

Adrienne turns back to the penguins. The little tufts on top of their heads, their brave snowy chests, the way they tip their heads back like they're surprised by what the other is saying. Tripp slides up out of the water and waddles over to Otis. He convinces him to get off the rock/egg, and they hop up their fake cliff to go sliding with all the heterosexual penguins. Everyone tips forward and goes soaring down into the water, over and over, together.

This is what brings the tears. She wishes Jules could see this, she wishes her parents could see this, she wishes everyone would see this. The penguins are proof, they are real. They are real love, unmotivated by reproduction or economics or parental pressure or wedding gifts or tax breaks.

They even have sex. Which is more than some people can say.

Not having sex is the worst feeling. It feels as if there's something burning deep inside of you, a coal in your stomach; it hurts terribly but you must keep it alive, just in case. It's as if you've skipped ahead and read the last page of the book — now you know how it ends, and the chapters still ahead of you will all be tainted by that.

Adrienne didn't mean to start counting, but it has been fifty-one days.

On the light rail home from the zoo, the two people take a three-seater, the seat between them holding bags. One of them has overgrown red bangs falling into still-damp blue eyes, the other is light and thin and taut as a cello string. They are quiet together, but it is hard to tell if it's the quiet of no-need-to-speak or the quiet of things-unsaid. They take out magazines.

Adrienne looks up from her *New Yorker*. "What are you wearing, anyway? Do you know yet?"

"To the wedding?"

“Yeah.”

Jules closes her magazine and looks at the empty seat between them. “Babe, I’m sorry,” she says. “I don’t think I can go to the wedding.”

“You don’t think you can go, or you can’t go?”

Jules glances pointedly at the people slouched across from them and lowers her voice. “I can’t.”

Adrienne points out in a not entirely steady voice that their flight is in five days.

“I’m sorry, I can’t handle it. It’s too much — it’s a wedding of people I don’t know, it’s your family, your friends. Your whole homogeneous small town. I don’t fit into that.”

“But you fit with me. I’ll be there. *With* you.”

“You’re in the wedding party. You’ll be up there in front, or you’ll be behind the scenes. What am I going to do, hang out with your mom? She can hardly look me in the eye.”

“But you’re my date. To everything.” Adrienne’s head falls forward. “I can’t bear the thought of showing up alone. Gay and alone.”

Jules puts a hand on Adrienne’s shoulder, the corner of her body. That shoulder had been one of the first things she admired on Adrienne. It was a good shoulder, lightly freckled, smooth, hard underneath. “You won’t be alone. You’ll be among your people.”

Adrienne leans into the hand, pressing herself into it, wishing it would cover more of her. “You’re my people.”

The thought flashes into her mind, selfishly, sternly, that if they were married Jules would *have* to go. But what good is that. That isn’t the case, or what she wants; and anyway, when it comes to love, duty just breeds resentment.

Adrienne looks down at her *New Yorker*. She finds herself irrationally irritated, *offended*, to see another fucking Roger Angell piece about baseball. She slams it shut, except because it’s a magazine, it’s just a limp slap. “I can’t read this. I hate it.”

“Here, take mine.”

“You already read this one.”

The corners of Jules’s mouth have taken a sympathetic downward turn. “It’s okay. It’s the least I can do.” They look at each other for a second.

“Yes, it really is.” Adrienne takes the magazine but doesn’t open it. She gazes up at the backlit advertisements at the top of the train, which promise a world of marvelous options. Love has been advertised to her the same way shoes and extension classes and liquor are, as a good thing that will ease your pain and improve your sex life and make you happy.

At first it’s true. That feeling where your very *bones* are in love, where your eyes become lenses

and the world a movie, where every nerve ending is an antenna, attuned to the other — neither of these two people had ever known anything like it, and they fell in love with the feeling as much as with each other. They swore they would do anything to keep it. That *incandescence*. Do Adrienne’s friends feel it too? They must. Maybe this is why they marry, to trap it like a firefly in a jar. Then even if it dies, at least you have the jar.

The maid of honor finds the bridesmaid by the tree, turning her phone off and on again. The phone keeps switching to No Service; all her texts sprout red exclamation points next to them. Try Again. Try Again.

“Ady! Come into the house,” whispers the maid of honor, who fills out her pink dress beautifully, a shadow of cleavage bisecting her sternum. The dress does not fit Adrienne right — too roomy in the bust. So she is wearing a strapless push-up bra that is padded with squishy packets of liquid. It feels like she is wearing breasts on top of her breasts. The bra grips her skin with thick rubber traction. The dress still feels as though it could fall off at any moment. She tugs up the bodice and follows the maid of honor into the guest bedroom.

The two other bridesmaids are sitting on the bed pouring a bottle of champagne into plastic cups. They all look happy and excited. They hand her a cup.

The champagne bubbles up like relief. Adrienne drinks deeply and feels her edge melt off a bit. “This is wonderful.” She sits down on the bed.

Four people, one on each corner of the bed, in identical pink dresses that look entirely different on each of them. Adrienne and the maid of honor have known each other since childhood; the other two are friends from the bride’s college life and adult life. Three of the bridal party have paid to have their hair done, arranged in loose crowns of curls, flowers woven into the edges; the other has attempted to tuck her long bangs behind her ears and finally just clipped them to the side with a bobby pin she found in the master bathroom, and, with a pang of shame for not making more of an effort, says, “I need some cosmetic renovations.”

“Try this.” One of the bridesmaids hauls out a tackle box of cosmetics. She brandishes a huge fluffy brush and dips it into a tub. “That better not be glitter,” Adrienne warns and the bridesmaid says, “Oh no, it’s way beyond.” She dusts shimmering bronzer on Adrienne’s shoulders. The soft bristles tickle and Adrienne giggles, and then the others want some, and for a moment they are four girls, doing this girly thing, it is sweet and comfortable

and like high school, home, safe, insular — what would Jules be doing right now if she were here? What is Jules doing right now? Writing? “Writing”? Adrienne looks away from the phone she’s left on the dresser and instead asks for a refill of champagne. She proposes a toast to the maid of honor for providing it.

They click plastic cups together. Adrienne gulps champagne.

“It’s really more fun to be a bridesmaid than a bride,” confides the maid of honor, who technically is a matron of honor. Adrienne was a civilian for that wedding. Had she even worn a bra? The maid of honor turns to her now. “Ady, are you and Jules going to get married, now that it’s legal? You could even marry up *here*.”

“Oh, no,” Adrienne says. “It’s not our thing.”

“Come on. You guys would be adorable.”

Adrienne and Jules have agreed they are anti-marriage. They are resisting the homonor-mative. Jules calls marriage the ultimate consumerism, a breed of shopping with an especially punitive return policy. They don’t need or want the state’s sanction of their feelings. But the secret truth is that if Jules proposed, Adrienne would say yes. If it meant she could keep Jules forever? Yes, she would marry her. Tomorrow.

“Gay marriage is for straight people,” Adrienne says. A lighthearted remark. When her friend James had said that to her, she’d laughed hysterically.

The other women look at each other and one asks what that means.

“I mean it makes straight people feel better. You know like after the Supreme Court decision, how everyone on Facebook made their profile pics all rainbow? Like, even their straight wedding photos, suddenly all Prided out? It was really weird.” It had been an astonishing display of both support and erasure.

“Or maybe *all marriage* became gay,” says the matron of honor. “Who cares? Reap some benefits!”

“I totally rainbowed my picture,” one of the bridesmaids says. “I thought it was supportive.”

“It was. It was,” Adrienne concedes. She had been driving down Lombard Street when the news came on the radio, and she had begun to sob so hard she had to pull over. “Am I being a jerk? I’m sorry. I wish Jules was here. She can explain it better.”

The adult-life bridesmaid says, “We should probably get out to the wedding?”

“Yes.” The matron of honor reaches into her bodice and tugs each breast toward the center. Her

cleavage deepens, stately and confident. “Are we good to go?” she says, looking at Adrienne.

“I’m sorry,” Adrienne says. She looks down the front of her dress, into the shady gap between her breast and the stern curve of the padded bra. “I’m not making much sense. I haven’t slept well the last couple of nights.”

Two people, lying in one bed. One suitcase, lying next to the bed. The people are on their backs holding hands, looking up into the darkness, and one of them feels like she is about to be launched into the darkness, while the other is ready to sink into it. One will leave and one will stay; one slides her hand inquisitively down the other’s smooth belly and the other gently removes it and places it back where it came from.

One feels, despite her best stoic efforts, a familiar ache in her throat. “I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s not your fault,” Jules says. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you.”

“I’m broken.”

“No, you’re not. You’re just ... sprained. We can fix it.”

“Why are you always so optimistic,” Jules says. “You and your healthy libido.”

Adrienne is silent for a moment. “What happened? We weren’t like this when we met.”

“No. We were amazed.”

“Shocked that the other existed.”

“I still am,” Jules says.

Adrienne rolls her head to look at her. “Are you really?”

“Yes.”

Adrienne turns her eyes back to the ceiling. “Somehow, you don’t sound that shocked.”

“Please don’t cry again.”

Adrienne wonders if this is one of the problems. Jules has cried in front of her exactly twice in two years. Crying is weakness. No one wants to fuck a weakling. No one wants to fuck a sad person. The best you can do with a weak and sad person is “make love,” and “making love” requires tenderness, and tenderness is too close to mercy.

Adrienne swallows it back and says, “I keep thinking about the penguins.”

“About what.”

“Maybe none of this has been real. Maybe we dragged a rock into the nest.”

Jules turns on her side to face Adrienne. “Sssh.” She strokes Adrienne’s cheek. “Go to sleep.”

“I can’t.”

“Imagine you’re on a beach,” Jules murmurs. “It’s like that day at the coast. You’re lying on the sand.”

“Okay,” Adrienne whispers.

She closes her eyes as Jules quietly retells her about Cannon Beach, where they’d gone last September. Haystack Rock hulking up out of the ocean. The water too cold to swim in, reddening their feet and ankles. The orange flannel blanket they lay on, looking up so the dune grass fringed the cobalt blue sky. The story begins to feel real. The bed is a beach. The cream sheets are warm sand. Jules puts an arm over her chest, a leg across Adrienne’s, rests her body on her, and her body is the sun, warm on Adrienne’s skin in the dark.

Adrienne breathes in the salty air and finally sleeps.

Picture the person landing at the tiny regional airport and walking across the tarmac, shouldering the garment bag like a cape. She pushes through the glass door to the air-conditioned terminal where a woman who is obviously her mother is waiting, aquiver. The mother asks, “Where’s Jules?” and the person averts her eyes and says, “She couldn’t come.”

Then you see the mother seize her and hold her, so long and so tightly that you can’t tell if the person is being consoled or reclaimed.

The bride has lined them all up in order of appearance. Adrienne is paired with a brother of the groom, a subcompact man from Chicago, thirty, unmarried — “You two match, both gingers,” her friend declared with satisfaction — and since they are the shortest, they will go first. Adrienne is instructed to walk on his left and hook her hand around the crook of his arm, and slowly they set off down the aisle together, staring straight ahead. Everyone turns in their folding white chairs to see. Her parents are smiling as she walks down the aisle. Her hand grips the arm of a man, a person she neither knows nor needs to support herself upon. The new kitten heels that she will never wear again sink into the grass with each step, so she feels like she is tipping slightly backward.

Here Adrienne stands now on the edge of the bedrock of society, barely able to force her weak blue eyes open in the blazing afternoon sun. She figures out that if she lets the left one squeeze shut, the one turned away from the audience, she can manage to keep the right one open. A sort of creepy-looking wink. The best man gives her a funny look.

The sun is in her eyes, her shoulders are bare and hot. The bouquet is voluminous and fresh and

sweet, a cool salad to the broiled salmon she is becoming.

The men in their tuxedos do not look much like penguins.

There are bees in the bride’s bouquet.

Looking out at the audience seated on the lawn, Adrienne wonders, *Who would show up for us?* In the rows of white faces, she wonders, *Where would Jules sit?* She wonders, *If I asked, would Jules say yes?* and she knows that she’s afraid to ever ask.

Now the vows, but Adrienne catches only snippets. A breeze has picked up, and two wrens have begun to sing. The birds have begun to sing so loudly in fact that the people in the back, it will turn out, can hardly hear a word. But everyone knows what they are saying, like the words to a favorite song, and when, smiling through tears, the bride and groom kiss — the act of supreme optimism — everyone applauds and everyone cries. And Adrienne, with a small bright ache flickering in her chest, is one of them.