

Human pillow

Monday morning was especially cold. I peeled off my scarf, a serpentine knit that belonged to my ex and headed to my desk. Leah came out of the kitchen and rushed over when she saw me. We were always the first in the office.

‘I stayed at Cam’s apartment over the weekend,’ she wiped a piece of croissant off the side of her mouth. ‘He has this raw concrete fireplace, it’s sleek but cosy. Why don’t you get back in the game now too Mak, how long has it been since Hammad?’

I pictured them entwined under a too-small blanket.

‘Not sure,’ I flinched. ‘Almost a year?’

‘You haven’t even been on any dates since, right?’

I switched my laptop on and pulled a report out of my bag hoping to deter her. Instead, she found the only bare spot on my desk and managed to slide onto it without disturbing any surrounding papers. Her long wavy hair skimmed my keyboard as she leaned in closer.

‘I’m just saying, you need a little winter warmer,’ she teased with an exaggerated wink. ‘Speaking of cosy, Cam’s sister lives in London and has this crazy job. People pay her to hug them, a professional holder or cuddler or something. There’s even an article about her online. I think she’s a hippy. If I was single, I might try it once. It could be a fun experiment.’

‘Sounds strange,’ I ran a hand over the report on my desk. ‘I’ve got to get this behemoth out by lunch.’

‘Okay, let’s get a coffee later.’

I watched Leah glide across the faded carpet on thick wooden heels that barely caused an indent. She always wore cowboy boots to work in winter, often with oversized blazers, I’d so far counted she must have three different pairs. Today’s were white and grey with a little orange star on the side.

People like Leah were built to use the sentence, ‘if I was single.’ I like to think that we are all born with little notebooks nestled in our minds. Over the years, they fill up with phrases that we use most often. Leah would have ‘boyfriend’, ‘fiancé’ and later, ‘husband’ in the pages right up front. There would be numerous entries detailing unique ways to say, ‘thank you’ to all the compliments that come swimming her way.

I wasn’t naïve about the advantages that good looks gave you, I just wasn’t a receiver of them. The problem was, I never had a memorable form. I was always slightly chubby, with limbs that weren’t pronounced. Adolescence brought curves at the right time, though they were never discernible. My wispy hair fought to escape my scalp, as if I were in the tropics, despite the arid air outside. In my first year at high school, during home economics class, we baked gingerbread men for a charity fundraiser. One spread a little on the tray, no longer resembling the shape of the cookie cutter. A blonde girl with a perfect constellation of freckles across her nose snickered and said, ‘this one looks like Mahek.’

Through the rest of high school and university I continued to retreat into myself. Then I met Hammad. He was also an ardent supporter of going under the radar. We sat in the dullest corners at the cinema, cheekily wiping our buttery hands onto each other’s pants. We called ourselves the anti-head turners, those that passed by unnoticed. We lived under a cloud of tender obscurity, and it was okay because we were together. After three full years together, he decided to leave me three weeks before my thirtieth birthday. When the doorbell rang on

the morning of my birthday, I expected it to be him standing there, telling me he had made a big mistake. Instead, it was a delivery man with two boxes. I opened the boxes up to find my things from Hammad's apartment. My dog-eared paperbacks, tshirts, unwashed reusable coffee cup and some underwear folded too many times - like origami. That afternoon, on the way to my parents' house I made a stop and dropped all his belongings at the Salvation Army store. I deleted his number from my phone. All that remained was his macabre scarf that I found months later, curled up in the corner of my closet like a discarded snakeskin.

By mid-morning the office had filled up. I checked my inbox again. Wedged inconspicuously between meeting requests was an email from Leah. *Check it out!!!* Her subject lines were always vague and enthusiastic. The email contained a link to an article. 'Hire a Hug: How one London woman became a professional cuddler.' I forwarded the email to my personal account and went back to my report.

That night, I sat in my pajamas with a hot cup of tea and clicked on the link to the article. As it opened, I saw a picture of a woman with bright red hair. A quote beneath her photo outlined she believed in the healing powers of touch and wanted to dispel any stigma that the practice was sexual. She said gentle touch activates the parasympathetic nervous system, lowering heart rate and cortisol levels, which helps the body relax. It was about human connections. I read the entire article and wondered if there was anything like that here in Perth. A search returned more results than I was expecting. 'Cuddle on cue' sounded catchy, and I clicked on the link.

First Step: Choose your cuddler. A large banner sat atop a multitude of profiles with a variety of filters such as location, age, and even hair colour. Each profile consisted of photos and a little counter that told you exactly how many cuddles the person had provided in the

past. There was a section for reviews and snippets from news articles about how touch therapy was scientifically proven to improve wellbeing.

I looked over at Hammad's scarf strewn across the couch and wondered what non-sexual hugging with a stranger would feel like. Hammad was the only man that had ever held me. There were people who touched strangers all the time. Maybe in a lifetime we could all become strangers to ourselves anyway. When I was thirteen my mother came into my room and sat on my bed. She told me she had something important to tell me. She held my hand tightly and told me that inside a boy's underwear was something unclean. The kind of dirt you could never wash out no matter how hard you scrubbed. That if anyone ever touched down there, the stains on their hands would be visible for days. She gripped my limp fingers and squeezed them intermittently for emphasis.

'Mahek, beti, do you understand?' she pressed.

I believed this to be true for years. When my friends told me about what they did with their boyfriends, I nodded in awe, wondering how they hid their dirty hands from their parents. Even when I finally realised what my mother told me was only a scare tactic, it always remained in the back of my mind and when I first spent the night with Hammad I had an extra long shower, the searing water almost stinging my skin.

I entered in search criteria and scrolled through the returned profiles on the Cuddle on cue site. One stood out. A man with swollen lips and the right amount of scruff. His name was Neil. I looked through his profile and wondered how easy the process would be to book him in. If Hammad wasn't the last person to have held me, then I might be able to imagine others doing it too. It could be like a gateway drug for moving on. It only took a few clicks before the confirmation page.

On Saturday afternoon Neil was sitting on my couch. His polo shirt was creaseless, and he was taller than I imagined. His face looked exactly like the photos in his profile, it was uncanny. It was as though he had been cut from the grey background and pasted into my living room. I wore an especially baggy cardigan and jeans. He weaved ground rules into casual conversation with the ease of someone who had been meticulously trained to do so.

‘I love the painting you have up above the dining table. Did you sign the waiver on the website too?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded nervously. ‘I read through it all.’

The words ‘therapeutic’ and ‘non-sexual’ were a mantra I had been whispering to myself right up until I answered the front door. I told myself that even if there were any feelings that popped up they would only be coming from my end, and so I could hide them expertly. No one would ever know anyway.

Soon we were standing by my bed. The first time Hammad had been allowed in my room, I told him resolutely we needed all the lights off and all of our clothes on. Then slowly as weeks passed by, he unraveled me piece by piece. Neil smiled warmly at me.

‘How should we do this then? We can lay down and be facing each other, or spooning? It’s completely up to you Mahek.’

He said my name the way strangers do, as though it was an unfamiliar item on a menu. I wasn’t ready to breathe on someone, so I asked him to lay behind me. He curled his body against mine, his thick legs bending to fit my mold. His arm found its way across my shoulders, and I felt my arms prickle with goosebumps. I wondered if we could go under the covers or if that would be considered a breach of rules. I would feel less exposed there.

As we lay together, I couldn't help but focus on my breathing. The more I noticed it, the more unnatural it felt. I wondered if I was breathing too fast or slow, I didn't want my panic to be mistaken for arousal. I began to scrutinise myself the way we only ever do when we wonder what another person is thinking of us. Contemplating every inch of my body and cursing it for emitting too much heat. Neil remained perfectly still, almost meditative. By the time I started to feel comfortable the session was already about to end. Neil had mentioned this was common in the first session and promised the second would be a different experience.

When Leah stood by my desk on Monday morning, I told her I'd been on a first date. I described a watered-down version of Neil, brown eyes (less sparkly), tall frame (less muscular). A small restaurant, bowls of beef pappardelle and one too many glasses of wine.

'You were right,' I smiled. 'Winter is the perfect time to find a couch companion.'

'How did you meet this guy?' She was genuinely happy for me.

'Just one of those dating apps.' I said offhandedly.

The next few times Neil and I lay together, I was completely relaxed. I made sure my bedding was always freshly washed in preparation for company, and I began to associate him with the smell of clean sheets. We had a rhythm going based on my preferences. First there was silent spooning, then talking for the latter part of the session. While we chatted, Neil would run his fingers lightly across the top of my back. This was one of the options he offered. I'd placed a small mirror on my bed side table, so whenever I looked up, I could see a portion of us in the frame. We spoke about my work and his plans to travel next year. Neil was also a part-time electrician.

One morning, only hours before Neil was due to arrive, my mobile rang. It was the agency Neil worked for. A woman with an airy voice explained that she was sorry, but Neil was no longer available, and could she instead recommend another cuddler?

‘Will Neil be available on another weekend instead?’ I frowned.

She hesitated a little, then went on to explain he’d resigned. He was in a new relationship and had decided to leave the company. She giggled nervously and wondered out loud if she should be telling me that. ‘So, do you want to book with someone else for today?’

I hung up the phone and realised I hadn’t said goodbye. A relationship. Sexual. Touching. Non-therapeutic. Two handy-man hands placed atop asymmetrical breasts. I wondered if he was in a relationship with one of his other clients. The thought gnawed at me. He had been nothing but prudently professional when we were together. Always soft, neutral, curling around my body like a human pillow. My hands flexed in agitation. There had been a moment the last time we lay together, when I thought something was pressing against the back of my thigh. My breath caught in my throat and my stomach began to jump as though it was cooking popcorn. Then, when he stood, I saw a large angular metal buckle on his belt. I stared for a moment longer, searching for shapes, for something out of the ordinary, but there was only the buckle.

‘I like your belt,’ I mumbled and shifted my gaze

‘Thanks, Mahek,’ he smiled, then left.