

Words in Black Marker

I don't know why I didn't just leave this party with Erika. Like I'm not still hoping that Jason will show up. That the fairy tale of going home together will come true. But it's after midnight, and even the most misguidedly optimistic side of me has to admit he isn't coming. I should get realistic and call it a night.

I grab a beer from the fridge and use a rusty opener to pry off the cap.

I don't know anyone here. I just met the party's hosts tonight – friends of Erika's, two girls and a guy sharing the top half of this decrepit house. All in their early twenties, like Jason.

He's twenty-two, an age that feels like a lifetime ago, even if it's only been nine years. I was living with Andrew, my college boyfriend, thinking it was only a matter of time before we'd get married. Now, it's obvious how wrong we were for each other. But I was naïve back then.

And at thirty-one? I'm hanging around a party on the off-chance that a boy might show up. It's possible not that much has changed.

Jason. I met him one night at Erika's apartment. She was bitching about her job, and I was bitching about how long it had been since I'd had sex, and both of us were on our second margarita. There was shouting in the hallway, and when we went to investigate, we found her neighbor Charles playing drunken tag with a shaggy-haired stranger. He had a devious smile and smelled delicious, like some witch-brew aphrodisiac made of sugar and fireworks and meat. By the time Charles introduced us, something had burned a place for his name to lodge inside me. *Jason*.

The two boys came over and helped us finish the tequila and then it was late and Charles said he had to get to bed. Jason moaned about being hungry, so I walked with him to the corner market. Together we went straight past the door, as if we'd discussed it. In the back alley I ran my hands under his shirt and over his shoulders, and it was more than I could stand. I pulled him down on top of me and felt gravel mash into my back. Afterward, he walked me to my apartment. We kissed good night while the sky lightened around us.

We slept together a few times after that, and I never stopped being hungry for him. Like a pang. Like I was starving.

Someone enters the kitchen, and for a wild split second I think it could be him. But it's just three girls, all looking fashionably disheveled in a way that clearly took effort. One of them brushes past me to get to the refrigerator. I notice a word on her hand, written in black marker:

FEISTY. I read it out loud. "You're feisty?" She shrugs, reaching into the fridge.

"I'm tasty," one of the other girls says. She shows me her hand, with TASTY scrawled across it.

I look at the third girl. "What about you?"

She sighs and holds her hand up. OBLONG.

"Oblong?"

"Fuck if I know," she says. "Stupid Rob."

Tasty giggles. "The deal is, there's pens out there." She jerks her head toward the living room. "And everyone's getting words on their hands. But you can't do it yourself. Someone has to write what they think describes you."

"So, you're tasty," I say.

"Damon thinks so," says Oblong.

Tasty laughs. "Yeah, well, he's never gonna find out."

Feisty passes beers to the other girls. "We should have just written on each other."

"You're right," Tasty says. But I can tell she's pleased with her word. "You should get one!" she tells me. I give her a noncommittal smile.

What would Jason write on my hand? I'd want it to be so good it's embarrassing: SEXY, BEAUTIFUL, HOT. But I worry it'd be something like CRAZY or NEDDY or OLD. Probably he'd just write some random thing

that came to mind. TURNIP. BISON. HORIZONTAL. I guess that last one would actually make sense.

About a month ago, he said he didn't think we should keep fooling around. Neither of us had ever implied that it was anything more than sex, so I didn't see what the problem was. But he said it just didn't feel right anymore. I got the feeling there was somebody he was interested in, or maybe already seeing. I nodded and said I understood.

I ran into him at Erika's a couple of times. It seemed important to prove that we could still hang around each other. Acting casual was hard, but it was better than staying away completely. Then I saw him out at a bar and we drank with a bunch of people until last call. When everyone started to scatter I reminded him how my place was on the way to his place. *Walk that way with me. Come up for a quick beer.* I saw doubt in his eyes, but he said okay, and I knew I had a chance. In my apartment we sat on separate ends of the sofa, drinking and talking about nothing much. Finally I slid over and climbed on top of him. I kissed his neck and his chest. I pushed up his T-shirt and licked the spaces between his ribs. I reached down and unsnapped his jeans.

"What are you doing?" he muttered as my tongue danced closer to his waist.

"What do you think I'm doing," I said, and then my mouth was too busy to talk.

"I hate you," he murmured between sighs. I rose and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"You hate me?"

"Yes," he said, standing up, lifting me with him. I felt myself beam as he carried me to my bedroom. He was powerless to resist me. I was the powerful one.

I don't feel powerful now, here at this party, walking alone into the living room where a dozen or so people are lounging around. On the coffee table are a couple of black Sharpies, waiting.

The guy who lives here looks at me. "Hey," he says. DANGER's on his hand. "You got your word yet?"

I sit down and wave my unmarked hands at him.

"I could give you one," he says. "But, I mean, I don't really know you."

I shrug. "I don't know any of you."

"Then just pick someone," says a skinny girl with long hair. There's a meanness in her eye, like she's waiting for the chance to brand someone NASTY or SKANK. So I scan the room. The only other girl is hunched in the lap of a red-haired boy. It's hard not to roll my eyes as I read their clasped-together hands: PRETTY and SPECIAL. The guys all look the same – dark hair, pale skin, band T-shirts, ragged jeans. My eyes land on the one who looks a bit like Jason. He seems like he could be sweet under that scowl, and his skin is smooth and glowing. I think about what my hand might feel beneath his shirt. "You," I say, pointing.

He laughs and staggers over, squeezing in next to me. I look into his eyes and immediately know I've chosen wrong. His pupils are tiny and he smells like sour milk. He scrawls big letters on my right hand, then drops the pen and walks away. The long-haired girl snickers and claps her hands.

I don't want to look down, but I do. My hand reads SHREW.

"Shoulda chose me," Danger Boy says. I give him a smile like it's no big deal, and try to convince myself I mean it. Who cares if someone I don't even know calls me a shrew? I tell myself this whole thing is just stupid. That nothing that a boy can do will hurt me.

Like that would make it true.

Maybe I should've just married Andrew after college. We wouldn't have been happy, but at least I would've been done. Settled. Something.

People laugh and talk while I sit and drink my beer. After a while, when no one's looking, I grab a marker off the table. I go in the bathroom and unscrew the cap, thinking I'll black my word out. Then I have another idea. The pen's a little shaky in my left hand, but I manage to add a D.

SHREWD.

I walk out of the bathroom with a swagger, looking around for that little smarmy fucker. I feel like I've bested him, won the game of wits. But he's not around.

I felt like I won a game with Jason, that night in my apartment. It turned out that didn't matter either.

In the kitchen, I open another beer. No one says a thing about my word. A lot of people don't even have one. When I go back to the living room, the pens aren't there, and none of the same people are either. I wonder where they went – the pack of boys, the long-haired girl, the

PRETTY SPECIAL couple. Maybe they're outside smoking. Maybe they went home. Maybe they're having some kind of fun you can only have in your early twenties when you don't know any better. When that's basically the point.

It's time to leave. Really, it's been time to leave since I got here, even if I'm just now figuring that out. So I abandon my beer and start down the carpeted staircase. The stairs bend at a landing, and I stop there, looking at a folded poster taped onto the wall: a photo of the statue of David, with words in some language I don't know. David stands there proudly in all his naked white perfection, like he can't even help being that beautiful. But I have the pen in my pocket and I draw it like a sword. I scribble a thick mustache, eager to deface him, but I have to admit he still looks good. He's burly now, like a leather daddy. I give him shades and bondage gear, straps and chaps and a forest of chest hair. I cap the pen and lean back to admire my work.

Then I crumple. Giving David a marker makeover hasn't changed anything. If Jason were here, it wouldn't change anything. Nothing is ever going to change anything. I stare at the ceiling and press my palms against the wall with the pen loose in my hand. It's a ridiculous posture, an overblown caricature of despair. But there's a small comfort in being so dramatic.

The front door opens. A girl calls loudly to people outside and bounds up the stairs. I straighten myself out before she gets to the landing. She's tiny, with hair cropped short in a pixie cut. When she sees me, she stops and gives me an enormous smile.

"Hello!" She blinks her long-lashed eyes, like a cartoon newborn deer. I smile back half-assedly and start to move past her.

"Check you out!" She points to my hand and nods. "You're *shrewd!*"

I bite off a sarcastic laugh. "Not really," I say. She tilts her head and looks at me. I lean against the wall – no dramatic pose this time, just tired. And I see what's on her hand: BRIGHT.

"It fits you," I say.

She tilts her head down like she's blushing. "Thanks!" Then she looks up. "Well, if you're not shrewd," she says, "what are you?"

I shake my head. *I'm nothing. Stupid. Tired. Lonely.*

By the time I realize I'm saying it out loud – "I'm lonely" – it's too late to take it back.

I wait for the pixie girl to laugh at me, or put on a pity face and say she's sorry. Instead, she picks up my left hand and takes the marker. I close my eyes, feeling its cold wet tip slide on my skin.

"There," she says. I open my eyes. Her short red nails surround the loopy, pretty swirls: *Lovely*.

Her big eyes search my face for a reaction. "Better?"

It is better. Shrewd was wishful thinking. At least this feels true.

I look at my hand in hers again, and this time I read the writing differently. I can't tell for sure what she meant to put there, but now I think it says *Lovely*.

I add my other hand to our hands clasped together, and she brings her other hand on top of that. And we stand there for what feels like a really long time with all our hands clasped together, beneath Bondage David and the party upstairs, until a group of people stumbles through the door. The pixie girl lets herself get caught up in the swarm of them. Our hands and words break apart as she's swept upstairs.

"Have a good night," she calls out to me. Like it's a blessing.

I smile and wave my lovely, lonely hand. 🌟