

Tinder Embers
by Katy Weicker

The morning light is an aggressive splash of orange. It burns with a brightness that makes me squint my already-closed eyes even tighter to try and block it. A raccoon-mask of pain pulses though my face and causes me to suck the warm air through my teeth – though in all fairness to Mr. Sun, that may be the remnants of my run-in with Mr. Tequila last night.

I roll away from the light and pull the rough comforter over my head. It smells like stale sex under here. *A fucking Dutch oven.* The air is stifling. Suffocating. I blink my eyes open. Grey and blue tartan fabric stares back at me. Never, in my entire life, have I owned grey and blue tartan.

My breath is hot. It reverberates off the underbelly of the comforter onto my face in moist waves of sick. My stomach contents slip up into the back of my throat. I swallow the burning chunks and cough. They surge again.

I toss back the blanket, roll across the mattress toward the edge of the bed and stare at the dingy beige carpet, waiting for a tsunami of vomit to decimate the unfamiliar loafers haphazardly discarded below me. When the tequila-soaked sludge stays dormant for five 'Mississippi's, I decide I'm probably safe. My shoulders and hips seize against the navy polyester sheets as I roll away from the floor onto my back.

The white popcorn ceiling has a crack running down the length of the room. A jellyfish-shaped watermark stains the corner next to the closed bifold closet. My fingers itch to throw open the doors. Like a tomb, its artifacts would hold clues to the man who inhabits the space. A baseball glove? A three-piece suit? Skeletons?

A buzz pulls my attention from the ceiling. I glance over at the nightstand to my brick-heavy, imitation-designer purse. My phone and keys sit next to it, an arm's length away. The screen of my phone lights up as it vibrates against the particle board surface. I reach for my lifeline. My muscles protest. My best friend's text burns my retinas as I stare at her fuzzy concern, "checking in."

"Alive," I assure my dutiful wing-woman.

"Code word?"

I smirk and send her an avocado emoji.

Grace sends me an eggplant back.

In the distance a shower runs. Somewhere, in the abyss of this foreign apartment, my latest conquest cleanses himself of me. Part of me is offended. My pheromones should be a badge of honor. Even though his are not. They're musty, pungent, clashing with my sweet scent. My skin is sticky with his various body fluids. He clings to me, claims me like a dog who's marked his territory on my chest.

My stomach flips again. I draw myself to a sitting position and swing my feet over the edge of the bed. My heels clip the metal frame.

"Fuck," I mutter as I shuffle over to the jumble of clothes at the foot of the bed. I pluck my thong and bra from the discarded articles. The idea of day-old crotch floss and underwire is about as appealing as a root canal. I toss them up toward the headboard before tugging on my jeans. I untangle my beaded top from his Woody Woodpecker t-shirt. Cologne wafts over me. My jugular jumps at the hints of cedar and leather engrained in the butter-soft fabric. "Fuck."

I shake out my top and frown at a crusted milky stain on the shoulder. *Rude*. I glance at his t-shirt. The stupid, hyperactive cartoon bird's face. *All's fair in love and*

one-night stands. I pull on the shirt and tuck the copious amounts of fabric into my jeans in an effort to give myself some sort of a waist. A balled lump on my hip causes me to cram my hand into my pocket. I pull out a hair elastic and empty condom wrapper. I crumple the wrapper and chuck it. It unfurls mid-air, fluttering lazily like a feather in the wind before landing in the lace cup of my bra. I am the Forrest Gump of *Tinder*.

The screen of my phone lights up again. I pile my hair into a messy bun and clamber back to the nightstand. Grace has sent me a shrimp emoji and a question mark.

I shove my shirt into my purse. My core pulses. I send Grace an elephant.

She responds with a shamrock and a dog.

My ears prick, aware that the dull roar of running water down the hall has ceased. My window of escape is rapidly closing. I scramble to collect my shoes and hurry into the hallway.

The light outside the bedroom is harsh. Overhead tracks of 100-Watt light bulbs line the ceiling, and I know the one grey hair I have on my twenty-eight-year-old must be shining like a beacon. Framed posters line the walls. A red race car, a soccer player kicking a ball, Big Sur at sunset. This one causes me to do a double take. The waves crash and churn the tranquil teal waters against shark fin shaped rocks under a red and purple sky.

I hitch my left foot into my studded silver stiletto and wobble, press my palm against the low-hanging sun to steady myself and put on my right shoe. My arches seize in protest as I teeter toward the front door.

"You're leaving?" a voice calls from the end of the hall.

Fuck. I screw on a smile and turn to face my latest conquest.

He stands in the entrance to the bathroom. Steam billows out around his glistening skin like he's an ethereal being instead of a slightly too short, slightly too hairy, slightly too spare-tired notch on my belt. A black tribal tattoo of a dragon snakes up his ribs, its tail tucked into his towel like a genie emerging from a lamp.

He tucks his thumb into his towel and leans against the door's frame. The blue fabric is thread-bare, leaving little to the imagination. Not that I have to imagine. That curved, hairy knob is burned into my memory. The only thing worse than dick pics are mental images.

"I was going to make you breakfast," he informs me. I wonder if he's waiting for a gold star sticker.

"I'm meeting a girlfriend for brunch," I lie.

"At seven am?" He steps toward me. I press my back into the door. He stops like I'm a caged animal he's scared of spooking with any sudden movements. He takes another step. I shift my weighted purse on my shoulder. He freezes. Smiles. His teeth are shiny, white and straight, but there's a gap between the front ones. It splits his grin into two perfect halves that just don't quite fit together. "Come on, I make a mean Eggo waffle." When I don't bolt, he takes another step, eyes my unsupported chest. "Nice shirt, by the way."

I shrug. "Mine has a stain..."

He glances down at his towel-covered junk. His lips twitch in this hybrid proud and embarrassed grin. "Sorry about that."

"I was gonna drop it off at the cleaners..."

"On your way to your seven am brunch?" he teases. I don't smile back. His smile flutters. "Send me the bill."

"I can pay for my own dry-cleaning," I assure him.

Any pride is swallowed by the pink that spreads across his cheeks. "I didn't mean to infer..." He takes a quick step forward. Stops himself. "I was just trying... Sorry... "

I feel my own cheeks begin to warm. "It's fine. I really should be getting going."

"At least let me call you a cab." His eyes are soft, pleading. And blue, I realize.

"I'm gonna walk."

He eyes my footwear. "In those shoes?"

I ignore the pinching sensation across the tops of my toes. "Always."

His smile flickers again. "Are you usually this stubborn?"

"Yes."

He laughs like warm honey spreading easily over dry toast, permeating my hard crust, softening it under his spell as he leans into me. His hands find my ass. He tugs my hips away from the door. His tongue jets through my lips, past my teeth. The cool, pepperminty taste of toothpaste buzzes against my own morning breath-caked mouth. His towel pokes at my thigh. His tongue pokes at the back of my throat. My stomach contents gurgle. I squirm. He lets me go quickly. *Too quickly?*

"Sorry," he mutters.

"It's fine," I find myself reassuring him. "I should..." I motion over my shoulder to his front door.

His fingers twitch as he reaches around me and opens the door. "Can I call you?"

I waggle my phone and duck past him. "Shoot me a message."

My heart pounds as I hurry down four flights of stairs and out the main doors of his apartment building into hangover-heightened reality. Birds jackhammer their morning calls into my brain, the city smells of garbage and grease coat my throat. The

sizzling sun cooks the pavement under my feet. My soul hisses like a cat being tossed in a bathtub. I rummage blindly through my purse for my sunglasses, fumbling my phone in the process. My eyes ache as I tug on my glasses and retrieve my phone from the warm ground.

"Made it out alive," I text Grace before adding an avocado emoji. "He tried to make me breakfast."

She sends me a winky face in response.

"By 'breakfast' I mean Eggos," I amend.

Grace responds with a gold star.

I frown. "He wants to see me again."

She sends me another winky face.

"Enough!" I type. "Words!"

Three tiny bubbles appear on my screen. An eternity. I brace myself for a paragraph. Instead, I get a heart emoji.

An engagement ring...

A baby bottle...

"Jesus Grace!"

A blowing kiss face...

"I don't want a boyfriend."

An eye roll...

"Don't judge me."

A shrugging girl...

"I'm coming over."

She sends a thumbs up...

A stack of pancakes...

A beer...

?

An app notification lights up my screen. I flick it away. "He already messaged me!" I inform Grace.

She sends me a wide-toothed grinning face.

I adjust my open purse. *My underwear and bra. Fuck.* I glance back over my shoulder. \$69.99 worth of lingerie. I do a one-eighty toward his apartment. Take two steps. Stop. *Fuck.* Another one-eighty. I continue walking away. "It might be time to give up online dating."

Another grinning face...

A heart...

I squirm in his shirt. "The guys on here are so needy..."

She sends me a facepalming emoji.

"Don't shame me," I beg.

An eternity of bubbles. Then, "slut."