

Daddy

Content warning: Sexual themes, language

‘Sometimes the clothes do not make the man.’

George Michael, *Freedom!* ‘90

Brenton Bright sprawled on the bed, chewing a wedge of orange. A fresh hit of citrus filled the room as he smacked his pulpy lips. Soft grey sheets were tangled around his ankles. His penis curved right. That flaccid slug when hard left my insides feeling like I was being scooped out or stretched. His balls flopped like deflated grapes held together by webby, wrinkled skin. He reached across and grabbed another wedge and continued to suck the juicy flesh while distracted by something on his phone.

It was that hour of twilight when the blue seemed apprehensive to consume the remnants of the day before succumbing to the smothering flood of night. A gorgeous, wistful time. In the mirror I saw welts blooming down my back and bruising my bottom. Thick red strips marked into my neck like raspberry ripple cake. Pale on pink. His leather belt lay discarded, coiled into itself like a snake.

Come here, he said. The last of the daylight glistened on his white temples.

I collapsed onto the mattress and tucked into his side. He fed me a piece and then stroked my jaw, pulling me into a kiss. His cologne, with its undertones of pepper and cloves, was an olfactory extension of sex and control. His eyes travelled up my bare legs, taking in his brand. Our bodies intertwined as we dozed. Splayed and splayed.

The room was lit by the streetlamps when we came to. Long shadows climbed the walls. Brenton lay asleep, snoring in stertorous delight. I moved gingerly around the room, pulled on my jocks, and grabbed the bowl of masticated oranges.

The marble floors were cool on the balls of my feet as I ambled to the kitchen. I threw the leftovers in the bin and placed the dish in the sink. Resting against the bench, I took in his apartment—sun drenched during the day, everything now looked spiky and dim.

The bulbous couch in soft, earthy caramels; the squat, fat armchairs; antique globe resting on a mahogany credenza; lotus shade lamps; tea-stained maps framed in gold. Books upon books, upon books. Surfaces littered with curling paperwork. His apartment had an antique store feel. Baroque, haunted.

There were more oranges in the fruit bowl next to me. These fiery, fleshy suns reminded me of home. The tip of the North Island in New Zealand, if only it curved towards Melbourne and a bridge connected us, I'd run. I was in too deep with Brenton now, but how I craved for the simplicity of my boyhood and the fruit from my mother's orchard. The lemons, the pears, the apples, the oranges my brothers and I would steal, clawing at the waxy peel, tasting like summer. Surreptitiously spooning Mum's marmalade, jams, and jellies. How I longed to return to the life I'd once shunned.

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I could always sense my father's disappointment with me. He'd never tell me outright, but I could feel it in the way he praised my two older brothers for their victory on the rugby pitch and the way they readily adapted to life on the farm. He left me alone and I followed my mother around the kitchen as if connected to her apron strings. His quiet, judgmental eyes on me as I moved through his house with the small, dull look of a mouse, whereas my brothers would bellow and laugh. In my smallness, they were titan.

My brothers' outdoor labour left them worn and ruddy under the harsh New Zealand rays, my indoor proclivities towards drawing and cooking and dutifully watching my mother gave

me a parboiled look on my tender, pale skin. I derived no greater joy than helping Mum gather eggs from the hens, make stews, pot herbs, and patch our mottled sweaters.

Seldom in his praise, well versed in avoidance, the older had I grown the less I spoke to my father. We would be cars with dim headlights on State Highway One, passing with the merest of flickers. When I was nineteen, I told him I was moving to Melbourne.

Suffocated by the smallness of Kaitaia, bored by the repetitive drudgery of life in the checkout aisle, I yearned for glamour, expanse, and the decadence of a city. Mum didn't stop weeping the day I left. Tear stained at the bus stop, she waved me off. Dad stayed in the car, listening to sports on the radio. It took the six hours to get to Auckland Airport to push away his neglect and disinterest. I loved him—the way well-behaved boys are expected to love their fathers—did he love me?

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Melbourne was further than I'd ever been. At first, the noise—the deafening roar of the trams clanging down the streets, the horns of the cars blasting through the city, the clomp of heels on pavement—was overwhelming. The prelapsarian silence from the countryside didn't exist here.

I shared an apartment with two girls I'd met online. They were never home, always out with their boyfriends, and I spent those first weeks by myself, staring at the Netflix menu.

Mum would ring and I would tell her about the paintings at the NGV and how resplendent the weeping willows down by the Yarra River looked. Their swooping, airy boughs in bright green reminded me of our farm. She would love the food but hate the hustle. I would fib and tell her I'd met hundreds of people and had lots of new friends.

I found work at a department store on Bourke Street. The black billowing pants and black papery cotton shirt of my uniform swallowed my slim frame. They put me upstairs—on the second floor of the haberdashery, where I sold cufflinks and wallets and tiepins. Serving all matter of gentleman and wives, sisters and mothers. I took to my tasks with sedulous care. Dusted, vacuumed, stayed late, started early—I'd never been so excited to work.

My second month at the store, I served Brenton. He walked through my section with a laconic comfortableness. White hair slicked back, a worn briefcase in one hand, his shiny monk-strap shoes clipped as he walked. The broadness of his shoulders reminded me of my father. I guessed he was in his early fifties. He dressed with the self-assurance of a man who knew his place in the world. His windowpane three-piece suit exuded authority.

He circled the cabinets and I was fascinated by how he would stop at an item and hold it in his spare hand, inspecting it as though it were a prized jewel. He picked out some tan leather gloves. My cheeks prickled as he moved to the counter with feline sleekness.

Beautiful, just beautiful, he said, handing over the gloves. I couldn't tell whether he meant the accessories or me. His dulcet tones conveyed an accent I would later find out was Bostonian.

Are you a member with us? I asked, wrapping the gloves in tissue. He shook his head. He didn't bother sharing his details, hated spam emails cluttering his inbox, and didn't care about accumulating points to put towards new items or upcoming sales. If he liked something, he'd buy it.

Are you new? I haven't seen you before, he said as he paid.

Sort of.

Where are you from?

New Zealand. Moved here in August.

Fresh. An outsider, he smirked. There was something sinister in the way he said this. His lip curled and one of his eyebrows twitched. And what is a handsome boy like yourself doing in this city?

I paused, my heart trembled. No one had ever called me handsome before. I didn't know what to say, so I shrugged.

Family? Friends?

Just me, I smiled meekly.

I walked around the counter to hand him his goods. With our transaction now complete, a morsel of disappointment took hold. His eyes took in my body, my shapeless uniform, the way my sable hair curled round my ears.

He winked and handed me a business card. My fingers tingled as I held it. The ecru paper curved at the edges, his name written in cursive: Brenton Bright, Investments.

Give me a call, anytime you want company.

His peppery scent lingered after he left. I stared at the card and stroked the corners, spelling out his name, stopping on the word *investments*. It conjured up an image so beguiling and vague.

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The next week he took me to dinner. I arrived early and the maître d' showed me to the table. She poured a glass of sparkling water and handed me a menu. All the wines were multisyllabic, coming from exotic European countries I'd only ever seen through Instagram. A far cry from the box my father used to drink from.

The restaurant had a crepuscular feel—dim golden lights against dark stained wood tables. A picture of minimalism.

Brenton walked down the stairs, fastidiously dressed in a charcoal suit. He smiled when he saw me, pecked my cheek and rubbed my shoulder. He waved down the waiter, ordered a bottle of malbec, then told me about his day—I tried to keep up as he talked about venture capitalist opportunities and his Toorak clients with more money than sense.

The claret red wine was like velvet on my tongue. All our meals designed to share came out in little colourful portions on deep, black plates. He ordered another bottle of red and continued talking. He'd been in Melbourne for ten years. Los Angeles for three. New York for sixteen. He'd once met George Michael in a nightclub, they spent the evening racking lines. Brenton kept talking about easy Australian money, low interest rates, and how ripe with opportunities this country was to enable start-ups to thrive.

You're exquisite, you know. Pale like milk and supple, he said with his stained purple teeth; his foot underneath the table rubbed against my calve. Then, Tell me about your family.

I shared a story about my father. A story that always made me sad. I'd once performed in a play, spent afternoons rehearsing lines in our fields, bought tickets for my parents on opening night. Mum came to watch me, alone. A lump caught in my throat as I remembered looking out into the auditorium and seeing that empty seat beside her.

Brenton placed his hand on top of mine. It was warm, comforting.

Later, he took my hand as we strolled down the street. The drink had loosened me. He pulled me in for a kiss. His tongue explored my mouth with force, his hands pawed my back and underneath my shirt, inhaling my musk. Back at his apartment he stripped me down and

assessed my concave stomach, the fine hair blooming from my boxers. He pulled out my prick that throbbed at his touch. He made me take his cock in his mouth. It was large and my jaw tensed as I tried to take him all in. He was forceful with his thrusting, tears tickled at my eyes.

Bend over, he grunted in my ear, I'll show you how real men fuck.

He flipped me across the bed as if I was a rag doll. I cried out in pain as I took him all. His hands grabbed my neck, choking me as he climaxed. He grabbed tissues to clean himself up.

We lay there, afterwards, sharing a cigarette. My body was tender and sore. The room sour with sweat and semen. The only other man I'd been with had treated my body with such hesitation, every touch had been like a nervous tic. Ah, the follies of youth and inexperience. This was different in every way. Brenton saw me as his property, something he could treat and use as he pleased. I wanted him all.

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There were more dates. More adventures. A life of decadence unlocked and I, escorted through. With summer approaching, we fell into a metronomic rhythm. He'd take me out for dinners and then home to fuck. We'd spend weekends together, going on long walks, late lunches at wineries, visit art galleries, see plays or the Melbourne Philharmonic. He held my hand while we watched a poignant performance of La Boheme. Tears streamed down his face like melted butter.

He showed me a world I had only ever seen on screen. With no one else to talk to and no one to share my dreams, I enjoyed Brenton and his stories.

Some nights we would have dinner with a small group of his friends. All of them steadfast in middle age with young men by their sides. Us boys would sit in stunned silence, subdued,

quietly eating, while the men would talk about their latest cars or yachts or Saint-Tropez holidays.

One evening he entertained a collection of men I'd never met. The night wore on and they consumed more bottles of wine. Little plastic bags full of cocaine were snorted. Brenton ushered me to the bedroom where he asked if the men could share me. He stared at me with those eyes like chips of dirty ice, and I nodded. Under his spell. Eager to please. He removed my clothes and beckoned his friends to join, then he hung back and took photos.

In the morning blood, shit, and piss stained his luxe sheets. My insides stung like a hot knife pressed against skin. He took me shopping for a new suit and tailored shirts.

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He encouraged me to quit my job and move in, offering to employ me as his personal assistant. He worked long hours and needed someone to mind the apartment, run his errands and manage his affairs. Sick of the rude customers and hours on my feet, I said yes. He handed me an envelope full of hundreds and told me to pick up dinner and buy something nice to wear.

You're mine now. Be waiting in the bedroom when I get home, he told me. Then he left for the day.

That morning I lay there, blankets wrapped around me like a cocoon. Small ripples of discontent took hold.

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When I spoke to Mum, I told her I'd become a personal assistant. She was excited and happy I was making it all on my own. I didn't tell her about Brenton and what he did to my body.

Instead, I told her about the oppressive January heat that made everyone irritable, with the warm air that reeked of mildew. She promised to save up and visit. After speaking with her I would sometimes lie on the bed and weep, wishing I could be close to her.

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I've been thinking about our arrangement, he said one evening.

The irresistible pulchritude of dusk upon us. He poured an even measure of whisky into two tumblers, handing one to me. I'd spent the day reorganising his cashmere sweaters in preparation for winter, planned our European holiday in July, and made reservations for the ballet next week.

Yes? I asked, taking the tumbler.

There are things I'd like to try. Things I want to do to you.

I was silent, my breathing slowed.

You're a good boy, an obedient boy.

I want to make you happy.

Yes, and you do, but I need more. I want to see my belt against your back, I want to see you tremble, crying out my name. His lip quivered.

I sculled my drink and tried to process those words.

And, of course, I would increase your allowance. You'd be performing a new service, he asseverated, drained his drink, poured another. But, if you don't—well, I'm sure we can make other arrangements for you.

He stared at me with like I was prey and I moved uneasily in my seat.

After the nights at the Opera, the wardrobe full of new luxe clothes he'd bought, the French lessons he was making me take, the cash he'd given me, the fancy meals—all of it so intoxicating. Without him my life was dull, nights in, aimlessly staring at the Netflix. Couch. Movie. Boredom. Repeat. I might as well have stayed in Kaitaia. His life was a glossy magazine, a copy of *Esquire*, and I wanted to be in the pages.

I nodded. His face cracked open with delight.

Excellent, just excellent, he said, satisfied.

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Undress. Bend over. Let me see that boy cunt, Brenton barked. I followed his orders. My clothes lay in a crumbled heap. He slid off his belt and curled it around his fist.

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It wasn't long before I grew tired of the fine dining, the orchestra and all that heavy music. His rooms suffocated me with their antique sameness. Trapped alongside the brocade wallpaper of his palatial Collins Street apartment. On days when he had set me no errands, he would simply lock the front door from the outside so I couldn't leave.

Sometimes he'd pleasure me, allowing my body to tremble at his lick or touch. He might kiss me and hold me close, just so I could feel the warmth of his skin. But it'd always be at his behest; that he'd always be the one in charge.

As my twentieth birthday approached, Brenton said he'd take care of me. Shower me with gifts for being such a good boy.

The only gift I wanted was for things to return to how they were when we first met. That first dinner in the darkened restaurant, before I fell under his spell. Now I was a pawn,

powerless to his fists, or belt, or cock. Part of me wondered if he was growing weary—we would lapse into days without speaking, he'd order me to sleep in the guest wing, but then he'd fuck me straight for a week, belt at my neck, paddle against my back. The next day it might hurt to sit or get comfortable.

The trees turned gold, and the leaves dropped. The days shortened. I spent hours walking the hallway with the blinds drawn, often not bothering to dress, preferring to spend days in his silk robe. I liked to sit in his office, pretend I was part of the working elite, making calls to important investors.

I'd flicked through most of the books in the apartment—gold embossed covers, printed in tiny font and filled with milquetoast stories about New York's elite. I found a book on the console in his office, a photo album bound in verdant leather. Weighty in my hands, I sat in his swivel chair and perused, hoping I'd find some insight into his childhood, his parents, his grandparents, some breadcrumbs that would help me understand the man he'd become.

What'd I found should have shocked me, but the welts across my back and burns on my arms had made me numb. The album was a panoply of undressed young men, in a variety of sexual positions. He had a type—scrawny hips, jutting clavicles, pale and pale and pale. There were innocent pictures in Positano, Corsica, Malta, boys on vacation with Brenton, basking in the sun, all intermingled with smutty Polaroids. Boys hogtied, ball-gagged, spread-eagled, whipped, beaten, submissive; stricken faces, mournful eyes. Red stripes against soft skin like sunburn. A collection of props: whips, riding crops, paddles, thick rubber dildos, harnesses, leather cuffs.

The photos had been arranged into different chapters of Brenton's life. I counted twenty-five men. The last of the pictures were me—in the bath, on the bed, lashings down my back, his friends with saggy middle-aged arses taking me from behind.

Of course, I was just another number.

Bought and paid for. Owned.

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I never mentioned that I'd found the photo album, but it wasn't like he'd kept it hidden. What did he gain from me knowing there had been others?

He lay in the next room, and I stood in the kitchen, cutting oranges. A post-coitus routine. The way he gorged on this fruit had an inchoate quality to it—juvenile, pedestrian, mortal. This innocence that somehow grew into a man whose heart beat twice an hour. I held the bowl of orange wedges close to my chest as I moved through the house.

He looked up as I entered with the fruit.

Quick nap, then we'll go again, he commanded. This time, I want you in the black restraints. You know where to find them.

He took a wedge in his mouth and sucked.

I bit my lip, nodded once. My body still so raw, unsure I could do as he wanted, but I braced myself for what would come next.

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You could tell he'd had a stressful day by the crimson flush that travelled up his neck. Most Tuesdays and Wednesdays he would be home late, so used to seeing him after nine, the fact he'd walked through the door just after seven startled me. I was still traipsing about in my silk robe; I hadn't turned on any of the lights. I'd just let the darkness pool into the living room while I sat there staring into nothing, sipping on a shiraz.

Brenton undid his tie and threw it onto the credenza, and I handed him a glass. His face pressed into wrinkles.

How was your day? I asked him, feigning joviality.

I lost a pretty crucial investor. It's going to fuck up my quarter. He rocked on his heels, slugging back his drink. He had a dangerous look in his eyes as they travelled up my chest, stopping on the loose, open silk making way for my ghostly, alabaster skin.

Oh, I whispered, stroking his arm. What can I do to help?

What a dumb fucking question. You know what I want you to do.

I put down my wine and trudged to the bedroom, untying my robe and discarding it on the floor. The pronounced clomp of his leather shoes against the marble followed.

I was barely in the bedroom when the heel hit me, and I stumbled forward, wincing, biting my lip to stop from crying. He hated crying. The sharp outline of his shoe seared into my back when he kicked me again. I fell over, curling into the foetal position. He kicked me again, took off his shoe and beat me. I concentrated on the carpet. From down on the floor I could make out the fibres, all those little thistles in different colours—orange, red, green, swirls and swirls.

He grabbed me and threw me onto the bed, untying his belt. It landed on my bottom with a firm crack. He hit me again and the flesh sizzled. I stared at him glassy eyed, just letting him take out his anger. He dropped his trousers and soon he was fucking me, strangling me. On and on and on and on.

I pretended I was back on the farm, picking fruit with Mum, picking daisies from the garden, hearing the gentle noises of all the cows and sheep. His grunting and wheezing pulled my focus. This monster on top of me, claspng my mouth and biting my ear.

When he'd finished, I sat on the bed naked, legs pulled up to my chest.

I didn't like that, I whispered. My stomach sank, my chest tightened.

Quit being a fucking cunt, you love it.

No, Brenton. You love it.

Yes, and you have to do as I say. You're a cum-hungry, slut.

I want to be with you, I like parts of our life. My voice was shaky as I watched him circle the bed, arms crossed.

You have everything you could ever want, you're a spoiled little whore. A spoiled little whore, with no work ethic.

I want you, but not like this. Can we be normal? Saying these words, I pictured this was my Dad in the room.

This is my normal, you knew that when you started with me. It was the same in that restaurant. And then when I took you home to fuck, and you begged on your knees for my cock. You love taking it like a little bitch. My little bitch.

Can we try just normal? Please?

Normal is overrated. You're not the first and you won't be the last, I can always find another. He looked away when he said this. Cold air spilled into the room and I shivered.

Brenton, please...

You're tired. You don't know what you're saying.

I know what I'm saying.

Get some rest.

He wasn't listening. Maybe he was never listening. He was the architect of his own life; I was merely a sketch, another blueprint, a placeholder. He left the room, and I exhaled. Under the covers I rolled onto my side, listened to the trams on the street below, people entered, disembarked, headed home.

Brenton returned. His face had a round softness to it. He pulled the covers around my chest and tucked me in, kissed my forehead and brushed away my curls. His lips pressed against mine.

I've got a few things to do before I turn in, he said gently. Sleep well.

He turned the lights off on the way out and didn't come to bed that evening.

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In the morning he was nowhere to be found. A wad of cash on the bench was left on the bench, more than he usually left. The front door left unlocked.

I showered and spent twenty minutes drying myself and investigating the rainbow of bruises tinting my skin purple and green. I dressed in a grey-marl sweater that hung off my shoulders, made a strong coffee, and crammed the money into my wallet. On my way out I found the photo album, tucked it under my arm and left.

The air was biting and crisp. Busy commuters moved with dazzling speed up and down Collins Street. I walked to the Yarra River and explored the Botanic Gardens. I'd spent so

much time trapped inside, running hot baths scattered with salts and oils to soothe my broken body—so much time alone with my thoughts.

Melaleuca trees stained the river brown. I sat on a park bench. Leaves clogged the banks and float upstream in thick, congealed clumps. In my hands was Brenton's album filled with the Polaroids, the keepsakes, the mementos of boy after boy, their naked flesh frozen in time, pain everlasting. It landed in the water with a plop and sunk to its soggy grave. I couldn't say how long I watched the water, but my thoughts drifted from Brenton and his collection of boys, to my mother, the farm, even to my brothers and eventually, my father.

Mum, I said when she answered. Hot tears welled.

Sweetie, how's Melbourne?

Mummy, my voice cracked. To be held by this woman and be loved was the only thing I craved. I said, I miss you, I miss you so much.

We miss you too. Are you coming home for a visit?

Work's pretty full on, I lied, Brenton's belt flashed through my mind. But soon, I promise. How's Dad?

Your father, stubborn old goat, getting bad heartburn all these years, and he's finally doing something about it.

What's happened?

He's going in for some tests. They think there's a blockage.

Are you okay?

I'll be fine.

Mum...

My throat constricted. Tears trickled down my face. I took a deep breath but couldn't finish my sentence, so I hung up.

Thick, dark clouds hung low in the sky. I trudged back towards the city. The streetlights glimmered. I climbed the worn flight of shallow steps at Flinders Station and looked at the train timetable above the race gates. All these destinations: Sandringham, Williamstown, Lilydale, Sunbury. Places I'd never been because he'd kept me confined to the city grid. I could jump on the train. Head out to the end of the line. Escape.

I powered towards the city and up Collins Street. My footsteps slowed as I reached his apartment building, sandwiched between two office towers. The warm sandstone brick stood out against the sea of blue and green glass. I stopped before the vestibule. The amber glow of his apartment lit within. He must have arrived home early. I stood on the street, picturing Brenton upstairs, sinking into his deep armchair glued to his phone, whisky or wine in hand. He hadn't called.

The wind cut my cheek. The air changed. Rains were coming and by morning the air would be ripe with pleasant, dewy petrichor. My flesh tingled, remembering his brand, his touch, but there was still something left of mine that I controlled, that I owned—my name, my body, and the choices I made, the situations I put myself into, that was all mine and mine alone. My mistakes, my lessons. Mine. Confident, buoyed by hope and a steely resolve that things would be okay, that I would move on and become a better version of myself, or whatever that bromide meant.

I took one last look at his apartment windows, stuffed my hands into my pockets and continued walking.