

**IRIS
GREEN,
UNSEEN**

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For Dan

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My underwear is mid-thigh when I notice. There on the toilet cubicle wall. Four little words inked above the sanitary bin:

Iris Green is grey.

I drop back to the seat with a clunk of plastic on ceramic.

Grey?

Obviously it could be worse. Just below, among doodles and epigraphs, I learn “Suzi T’s legs don’t close”. On the back of the door, lingering despite the cleaner’s best efforts, is the ghost of an invitation to Jess Arthur’s OnlyFans page for buck-teeth fetishists.

It could be so much worse: an unflattering photo turned meme or nasty rumour running wildfire over social media.

It's honestly *been* so much worse.

But “grey”? The casual specificity jabs me like a needle under the nails – sharper and more precise than a thousand empty insults. And it's gutting this is the one immortalized on a toilet wall: Iris Green, notoriously bland.

I dig my camera from my bag and line-up the viewfinder. The graffiti transforms with the snap of a shutter. Now it's mine. Now it's art.

My fingernail rakes the scrawl, but it doesn't shift. Hard to know how long the writing's been there; this isn't my cubicle of choice and I could have easily missed it before. But I have suspicions about what sparked this particular lack-of-character assassination. I'm only surprised I've been allowed to get away with it for so long. Eventually someone was bound to realize I don't belong with someone like Theo Hastings.

The toilet seat complains as I sit back. For a moment, the whole world shifts under me. The edges of my vision sparkle, silver and strange, shimmering fish climbing the cubicle and my chest tightens in what feels like the most debilitating anxiety incident of my life, only different. This time the jittering isn't under my skin; it's over it. Dizzy, I wobble on the seat and brace myself against the wall. My fingers are gone, my edges faded to nothing but pins and needles. I recoil, snatch my hand away from the wall and stare.

I blink and it all stops – no dizziness, no fuzzy vision

or my fingers paling away to nothing – and the skin of my hand tingles like the ringing in your ears after a loud gig. I flex then make a fist. *Get a grip, Iris.*

Pants pulled up, skirt smoothed down, I get out, heading for where I always go.

Whenever sixth form gets too much and I can't breathe, there's a cupboard I hide in. Tucked round the back of C-block, it's what passes for a photography "darkroom" in our school and it's basically abandoned. After one week of intro to photography at the beginning of year twelve art, everyone else ditched it. Either they believe the paintbrush is mightier than the shutter, or they prefer the immediacy and flexibility of digital over film. Fine by me. I've staked my claim. This room's my Narnia, my oasis, my escape.

At least it was. As I swing through the door this Tuesday lunchtime, I'm pulled up short by someone else's work on the drying rack. Someone has been in my room.

I step further inside to see what I'm dealing with and unclip one of the mystery portraits.

The girl in the photos is making *that* face – eyes half closed, lips apart, all sexy-pouty-sultry. It would look ridiculous on me, but it doesn't on this girl with her perfect skin and huge eyes gazing straight into the lens – unembarrassed, confident. And why shouldn't she be? The cut-outs on her dress reveal a belly so flat it looks practically airbrushed, only—

"What do you think?" says a voice behind me.

My elbow smacks the wall and pain streaks through my funny bone.

“I didn’t think anyone else used this space,” the intruder continues, leaning in the open door. I’ve seen him before – Baker Something from year thirteen – dark, wavy hair, brown eyes and a smirk that already grates.

“Because the regular users keep it tidy.” I rub my bruised elbow, annoyed it’s too late to pretend I wasn’t looking at his photos. “And they don’t leave their dry prints everywhere.”

“Hmm, well, the prints were wet when I left them, see? That’s pretty much the reason for drying them.” His lips twitch. “Reckon I might need a do-over. These look underexposed?” Baker Someone says, reaching for the nearest print.

“She looks pretty exposed to me.”

Baker looks at me and I’m very aware I’m uselessly standing here. *Why? What was I meant to be doing?* I push the bottles of developer and stopper back into place on the worktop too forcefully. There. That.

I clear my throat. “Do you think you’ll be in here a lot going forward? Because, if so, maybe your things could go—”

“‘Going forward?’ Do I need permission?” This Baker guy leans against the side, eyebrow raised. He’s too close. Less his fault than the minuscule proportions of the room, but it’s disconcerting to sniff the minty smell of body wash over boy-skin.

“It’s a free school,” I say.

“But?”

“This doesn’t exactly look like a school project. Thanks to the ... uh ... naked girls.” My cheeks catch fire. *Oh, nice one, Iris.*

“Naked?” He shakes his head, lips twitching again. “There is a singular clothed girl in these pictures.”

My eyes slip off his. It’s uncomfortable enough to stare people dead in the eye at the best of times, but here? Point-blank range? When I expected to be alone?

He unpegs the photos from the rack but with no real urgency. He stops to examine one and I peer over his elbow. She gleams back – a girl version of Baker – all glossy hair and dark, deep eyes. Even in black and white the girl in the photos isn’t grey.

I begin preparing my equipment.

“So I’m Baker.”

“Congratulations.”

“And you are...? I mean, other than mightily concerned about this young woman’s clothing choices.”

I shake my head.

“Just saying.” Baker holds up his hands. “I see where this is going and it’d be my pleasure.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can source a location, but you’ll have to style yourself if you want a portrait.”

“A ... um ... I don’t think...” I sputter through my fluster. “My boyfriend wouldn’t appreciate that.”

“Boyfriend?” Baker whistles, his substantial eyebrows shoot up. “And manager or...?”

I ignore the jibe. And I can’t help it, not even after four months together, can’t help the brag slipping through my teeth. “Theo Hastings.”

Seymour from last year’s production of *Little Shop of Horrors* and lead singer of Vanishing Fact. People tend to know Theo.

“Oh, that guy.”

That guy. Of course. I’m hot and furious with myself for falling into this trap. Of course he doesn’t believe someone like Theo would go with me.

Baker tilts his head to the side. “Actually, I’m thinking of the wrong guy. All those high achievers blend into one another. Them and their template faces.”

“You know what? I’m going to come back later.” I put back the equipment, fast.

Baker says, “Hey, if I offended you... Um, what’s your name?”

I squeeze past him to open the door and slip out without another word. Silent, nameless.

Grey.

*

The way my dad tells it, I was born keeping secrets.

“Blind as a bat practically from birth,” Dad will say at family parties to an audience who’ve heard it all before. “Nearly four years old and she never said a word.” The

story will be accompanied by laughter and wine. The implication is clear. I did that. A deliberate ruse by my small self to make my parents look negligent in front of medical experts.

Of course I wasn't blind – lazy-eyed first, myopic later – but a correction only makes Dad roll his eyes before launching into some embarrassing story from before I was old enough to control my own bowels. It's a wonder he has so many of these anecdotes – small Iris and Dad didn't hang out much.

The thick pink-framed glasses that brought my world into focus were binned a decade ago and replaced with a series of progressively more flattering successors. While I can barely remember the fuzzy time before them, I often think how dazzling it must have been to suddenly see with crisp edges. Maybe it was like being behind my camera lens: shocking and joyful and brilliant. The whole world an endless catalogue of possibilities.

After school, I follow a stranger up the cobbled high street, a guy in a checked suit with a silver-tipped cane, so dapper he belongs in black in white. I imagine tapping him on the shoulder.

Excuse me, can I shoot you?

He'll hesitate – a second of confusion – before noticing the camera clenched between my damp hands.

My bad joke breaks the ice, and he's so charmed he lets me take the photograph.

In the darkroom the portrait will spark to life. It'll speak to love, tragedy, life and spirit. It'll be the ideal start to my exhibition project: a prizewinner, an attention-grabber. Maybe his family come to the preview. Perhaps they'll request a print.

Only they won't.

I stop walking, stop daydreaming. Return to the world. Master of candid photography, Henri Cartier-Bresson, once spoke of the decisive moment, but I watch mine walking away, shining brogues fading in the afternoon sun. A smack of car exhaust finishes off the fantasy.

"Iris, are you *stalking* old men?" Olivia shouts, startling some pigeons.

Bert and Olivia's hands are rammed full of canvas bags stuffed with their post-school shopping haul courtesy of the least weird charity shop in town. Bert's red suede jacket hangs from her arm and her cheeks are flushed with bargain-hunting success.

"You shouldn't harass pensioners," Olivia says.

"Harass?" I blink and Olivia throws an elbow into my side.

"Put an ice-cold frappé in my hand this instant," Bert sings. She wipes imaginary sweat from her forehead and pretends to faint against me. "I must replenish. I swear wrestling my ginormous bum in and out of jeans burns five hundred calories per minute."

"*Gorgeous* bum," Olivia corrects, as I'm distracted by my

phone buzzing in my bag. As I fish for it, I'm dimly aware of Bert agreeing her bum is both glorious and generous and a gift to the world, but she fades out, replaced by him.

Theo: you still in town?

Me: over by boots. be quick?

Theo: incoming

My heart jumps. When I glance back up Olivia's watching me with an odd expression.

"Hmm?" I say.

She says, "You should have come. I scooped a pristine hardback of *Northanger Abbey* and there was a jumper you'd have gone *wild* for."

"Was it grey?" Six hours on, I'm sure the toilet graffiti will haunt me till my final breath.

Olivia's eyebrows crinkle in confusion. I didn't mention the graffiti to my friends. Too embarrassing. A bitter reminder it's only been a handful of years since such commentary was a too frequent occurrence. Olivia's gaze sweeps me, from battered black boots, black tights and uniform right to my mouse hair. She sucks her teeth. It's a source of vast disappointment to Olivia that in all our shopping trips I've only ever made it inside one or two actual shops. But, for me, all the interest is outside.

"I did get you a little something-something," Olivia

says, rifling in her bag, lifting out a hardback. “You don’t have it, do you?”

I run my finger up the spine of the white dust jacket with gold lettering, *Rebecca*, and shake my head. “Thanks.”

“Did Iris get her thing done?” Bert asks, pointing at my camera.

“Um, so, no,” I say, tucking the book in my bag. “Not exactly. The quirky older guy was perfect, but I wussed out.”

“Photographing old men is such a normal thing to do with your time,” Bert says with an affectionate eye-roll. “At least it’s a departure from your recent oeuvre of abandoned trash.”

“That was...” I wave my hand limply. “It was my Keith Arnatt phase.”

“I know, the rubbish was a beautiful metaphor! You know who else is a beautiful metaphor?” And she nudges Olivia and they lean and put their cheeks side by side and throw their arms high. They look so perfect – Bert and Olivia and their pre-filtered lives.

I take the shot and Olivia asks to see, forgetting that’s not how it works. The camera’s analogue: no screen – just glass, light and film.

“Take one with my phone?” Olivia says, handing it over so I can create a replica.

“Love the commitment to eccentricity, but it’ll be nice when you get your upgrade and join the twenty-first

century.” Bert waggles a finger as I snap the shot and then fold my hands round my camera protectively, shielding it from her judgement. “We might at least see some of your shots.”

“Yeah. Maybe. I mean, don’t bank on it.” I rub my fingers together with a grimace in the universally understood gesture of skintness and hand Olivia’s phone back.

Bert watches the screen as Olivia reviews my efforts. “You’re coming into money soon. I can feel it in my bones.” And I know what she means: the sixth-form art exhibition.

“I’m fairly sure they only give you money for winning; it’s not a participation prize,” I say, my words speeding up as I get into the rhythm of Bert’s company, brightening, extending my energy to match hers as I hear my voice slip into similar inflections. “Actually, entering would cost a bomb in materials, so it would be the opposite of helpful and quite a massive dent in the new camera fund.” I stop, suddenly aware of how long the attention has been on me. I cast around for a distraction and, falling back on my default, nod at Bert’s bag. “What else ... did you get?”

Bert tuts. “Pretending you’re not even entering just to give everyone else a scrap of hope? Crafty.”

“So crafty,” I echo as I scan the road and check my phone. He said he’d be here.

Bert narrows her eyes. “Waiting for someone? Let me guess.”

Right on cue, he comes striding down the hill, his

school bag swinging, hands in pockets, blond hair ruffled by the breeze: Theo. He's a perfume advert, a dream sequence. Somehow he's mine.

He calls a greeting and throws an arm round my shoulder, eyeing the girls as I stretch on to my tippy-toes to plant a kiss on his jaw. He whispers in my ear, "Why're they here?"

"You thought I was shopping alone?" I tease. "Have we met?"

Theo says, "Didn't think, did I?"

"When do you?" Bert snaps. Olivia's absorbed in her phone, not even acknowledging his arrival. It's awkward, as it always is, how openly they wear their dislike. "We were going for coffee."

"Hmm, you sure?" Theo smiles, his perfect lips stretching out over perfect teeth, his eyebrows lifting, yep, perfectly, as I turn to molten caramel. "Because I've got hot choc at my house. Marshmallows. Cream. A bedroom door."

I tuck my lips between my teeth and taste sugar. For a second, I hesitate. Contemplate my best move, the one that doesn't let anyone down. Life would be so much simpler if Theo and my friends could all be kept in separate boxes. Never meeting, so never making for these confused moments where all eyes are on me.

"Don't think I don't see you, Iris Green," Bert says with a dismissive flap of her hand. "Go then, go. Vanish on us, why don't you? Again."

Before I have time to agree, Theo has my hand and is pulling me away down the road.

In the monochrome streets on the way back to Theo's, I keep my eyes peeled, searching for personality in the detail – this girl's neon bra strap matches her lipstick, the red stripe in that woman's hair, a man with a long plaited beard. But there's no one as interesting as the man in the hat.

I glance up at Theo. Painfully handsome. A perfect subject right under my nose.

“Theo!” As he turns from two paces ahead, our hands still joined, I line up his answering frown in my viewfinder.

An unwelcome flash of memory. That boy, Baker, in the darkroom. His face. *Oh, that guy.*

Theo's frown dissolves into an easy smile.

Click. My decisive moment.