

## Ink

---

Wrinkled clear film around a forearm. A menthol super-king cigarette is carried to Amy's mouth. She takes a long, considered drag then exhales a smoke stream into cold air. It's October and the park is dying. Her other arm wraps tightly around her waist, elbow resting on the upper side of her palm. Feet shuffling, she takes another drag, another exhale. The routine becomes meditation. A small girl on a purple BMX bike whizzes in and out of Amy's eye line, riding the concrete waves of the skatepark. Occasionally the girl calls *looklooklook what I can do*. Amy looks, nods.

In Amy's mind, all of her husband's potential reactions play on loop. This morning she had said, *make yourself useful do that washing while I'm out* and swung the front door behind her before the rest of the words escaped, *fucking lazy bastard*. She didn't tell him she was going to get a tattoo. He would think she was joking, like when he would sit across the room scratching his balls and her nose would coil, eyes rolling, before, *you carry on mate one of these days I'm going to run away with a Nice Black Man*.

It took an hour to sew Amy's first tattoo into skin. Unlike what friends claimed, she hadn't found odd enjoyment in the pain. She cried, continuously. When it was done, jaw unclenching, nostrils scented with ink and metal, the artist went *suits you*, like he was sure. At the mirror, Amy couldn't look straight away. She started at her shoulder, tickled by splitting ends, white vest strap, scanning each freckle cascading down her arm. Skin growing hot, red. There is it. He was right, it did suit her. Quickly, she put on a pink hoodie and covered the arm. On the walk home to collect her daughter, she felt tall.

Watching the BMX wheels spin, Amy pauses drafting comebacks. Considers that if it wasn't for their child, she might not be here, in this park. This thought invites a flurry of bigger thoughts. Each one she refuses. The cigarette ash drops. Amy chews at loose skin from the cuticle of her thumb, then lists the things she shares with her husband; a girl, a house, a bank account, a history, a fish. They have made a good life.

A tiny brown Dachshund sniffs along the damp tarmac Amy is standing on. When her feet intrude its path the dog nips the bottom of her legging, begins tugging at her to play. Amy cranes down, with a smile and *oh hello* she strokes the dog. Panting and footsteps come closer.

*oh god sorry*

*oh he's orite<sup>1</sup> he's cute*

*sorry about him puppy everything's exciting*

The voice is not entirely new. Amy's head tilts upwards, peering at the approaching face.

*oh my god amy amy miller remember me*

*fuck* Amy thinks, suddenly conscious of her fringe. Jade pulls the dog from Amy's legging and scoops it into her arms, where he sits licking her cheek. Amy takes a drag, exhales up towards clouds. When she's finished,

---

<sup>1</sup> dialect for "alright"

*orite of course I remember you what you doing round here then*

Stroking the Dachshund, Jade explains,

35 *yeah I'm okay just visiting mum fuck it's been ages hows you*

*you alright where you living now then*

*oh right nice it has been aint it I'm still round here actually*

*that's my girl over there*

40 Jade looks, and a moment to take in this non-stranger offers itself to Amy. If they stood chest to chest, Jade would tower over Amy. She is long and underneath her black puffer jacket, built solid. Black t-shirt denting into lean muscle, dark green combat trousers, endless pockets, white Air Max<sup>2</sup> with no crease. A silver chain sits at Jade's collarbone, a silver ring hangs from her nose and two studs in each earlobe. Her face still has babyfacedness to it, but now there is new seriousness, new focus. Creamed black coils of hair sit still at the top of her head, then a neat fade with sharp lines shapes her forehead and jawline. She looks like she smells of  
45 good aftershave.

*is it she's beautiful how old*

*six had her just after college what you been up to*

Amy extends the open cigarette packet, despite quitting three months ago, Jade takes one. Now the dance begins.

50 *oh you know finished uni just a bunch of posh kids with too many opinions not worth the debt really*

*-oh really?*

*and now I'm just doing producing stuff for this theatre company*

*-sounds interesting*

*can be a bit soul-destroying though so I do my own creative projects on the side*

55 *-must be busy*

*yeah stressed and underpaid more like but you know bits a bobs<sup>3</sup> not bad*

To Jade, it seems that the rest of the world is small and uninteresting. Her shoulders rise when she speaks, like someone trying to squeeze themselves into old jeans.

60 *of course, Amy thinks, of course you live in London with a good job and a sausage dog.* Then immediately feels ashamed by this quick spike of resentment. Amy is genuinely happy to see Jade doing well, she likes her. She just gets irritated by the performance of people compressing their lives because they assume that Amy is plain and void of all aspiration. Jade asks direct questions and seems deliberately interested in Amy's answers.

---

<sup>2</sup> Air Max: type of shoe

<sup>3</sup> bits a bobs: small amounts

65 *yeah me and dan are still together who would have seen that coming got married just after she was born  
and I'm working down the petrol station now ...*

As she talks Amy can smell the after-rain tarmac of the playground they used to run around on. Feel Jade's hand pressing into her back, *TAG! you're it*, legs colliding under the canteen table, little fingers curling around pinky promises<sup>4</sup>. These small affections once tied them together. It's obvious to Amy that Jade has grown into herself, isn't afraid of what someone could think. It's as if there are three worlds, the one they  
70 were in together, and the ones they walked into themselves.

*how long you here for then and hows your mum*

At some point, Amy's eyes drift to the corner of Jade's lip that the cigarette touches, and stay there. She catches herself, this happening, and feels silly. She is sure that Jade has had plenty of women since. Amy tries to picture them all but she can't. They all become versions of herself, except she hadn't been a  
75 woman, she was a girl, and anyway she doesn't know how she got here, at this thinking, but here she is. Whilst they both talk as if none of it existed, somewhere inside, Amy has remembered.

*Oaaaaccchh mummmmyyy*

Amy runs, leaving such thoughts trailing behind her like a loose string. The bike wheel is suspended in the air, still spinning. Her daughter is collapsed beneath its aluminium frame. Helmet askew, eyes watering, and  
80 although there is pain there is also this new person who has run towards her too,

*Are you a boy or a girl?*

Which now said cannot be unsaid. But Amy tries to catch its damage,

*oih don't be rude –*

*-it's alright. I'm a girl*

85 *are you okay your knee looks sore*

Now everything can continue; pouting, whimpering, hot tears. Amy picks her daughter up from the floor and brushes her down. Mothering transforms Amy, makes her soft in ways she keeps secret. Jade watches this part of her unfold in action. Irritably, she thinks *why are you still here*, wishes that Jade had taken this mess as a cue to keep walking. As if Amy herself had fallen over, her skin grows pink and her ears ring.  
90 Today has been too much, now this. So much to explain to him.

The Dachshund leaps from Jade's arms and runs circles around the hurt girl's feet. Sobbing turns into giggling, as Amy lifts the crashed bike and begins to twist its metal,

*can I give you a lift home don't want her limping back*

Amy pictures Jade pulling up on their drive, and then sparks another cigarette. A few seconds pass before  
95 she recognises that this is kindness, and nods her head in acceptance.

The blood has dried over the graze when they reach the blue Peugeot 106<sup>5</sup>. [...]

*can I see*

---

<sup>4</sup> *pinky promise*: a type of promise gesture most often used by children

<sup>5</sup> *Peugeot 106*: type of car

Amy turns as she pulls her seatbelt, and is met with Jade's open, expectant palm. Her arm moves into it, almost automatically. A signet ring turns the light, as Jade's fingers unpeel clear film from pink skin.  
100 Underneath, the tattoo reveals itself. Amy scans rapidly for signs that this was a bad decision, that she only did it for attention. Quietly,

*it's beautiful does it mean something*

Amy pulls her eyes from Jade's face to her own body. The wings of the tattoo seem so delicate, as if they are floating out of her.

105 *I just wanted something different you know*

*yeah*

Jade's childhood bedroom had bright green walls with a Mis-Teeq<sup>6</sup> poster, a bunk bed, and an orange lava lamp. Here, Jade performed open-heart surgery once. Amy lay eyes closed, silent and motionless, trying to be as close to death as possible. Like all good surgeons, Jade performed the operation straddled across  
110 Amy's waist, frantically shouting orders to imaginary assistants whilst pressing a pink plastic stethoscope into Amy's cheeks. She played Doctors well, hovered above Amy muttering *I'm not sure the patient is going to make it*. At which point, Amy's tongue flopped sideways out of her mouth and the whole room tensed holding in laughter.

*I'm going to have to do mouth to mouth* and before either of them questioned it Jade landed on Amy's  
115 agape mouth. The silence made the seconds leap. Warm breath moved between them. Quickly, in a voice as thin as thread, Amy said *kiss me* and her eyes squeezed closed tighter. Jade's mouth softened. Then, with new braveness, *like they kiss in movies with your* – and Jade's tongue passed into Amy, where there was wet and oddness. In both of them, a surge of strange heat arrived.

*can you take us to get milkshake*

[...]

120 Three McDonald's strawberry milkshakes have a pink syrup swirl left on top, from not being mixed properly. The Peugeot fills with the sound of them all sucking up thick sweetness through cardboard tubes. They're pulled up in a car park bay. Amy has no idea what time it is, just knows that she should be home. When Jade had leaned out the window to tap the card machine, Amy had seen the bright white band of Calvin Klein boxers tight around her brown waist.

125 *let me know how much it was I'll pay you back*

*don't be silly it's nothing*

*no I don't like owing I will you've already done –*

*-shut up*

130 The abruptness of this order sends Amy's eyes darting. Then she clocks a familiar waywardness in Jade's eye. She's teasing. Jade's still look towards her means that Amy has to concentrate really hard on spinning the straw in her milkshake. She's chewed the top of it, which was an amateur move. Every way Amy moves

---

<sup>6</sup> British girl group

her body now feels amateur. She has this immediate feeling that Jade could do anything to her, like punch her or drive towards the motorway, and no part of her would resist.

135 After the kiss, Amy carried new wanting home to her own bed. When dark came, she would rub against a giant teddy bear until she sank into warm vibration at the edge of sleep. Curl up to it, kiss at its fur as if it were the top of Jade's head. Amy couldn't be sure if this secret behaviour, for which she had no name, was normal, if other children in her class did the same. [...] She had to turn off her thoughts to do this, otherwise, she began to sting with the sense that something was wrong with her.

140 After weeks of pressing against their weight and want together Jade confessed, *do you think that we could be like a boyfriend&girlfriend if we didn't tell anyone* Amy stared blankly into her wide and waiting eyes, *no don't be gross that's weird*. Then something in Jade faded.

145 Amy doesn't want to leave the car because being in it feels like forgiveness; light and open-ended. As they drive along her street, identical pebbledash houses flickering through the window, Amy forgets her child and the dog in the back seat. Is imagining she and Jade are going somewhere. Tonight the sky has decided to set in pink, and for a moment Amy thinks she's living in part someone else's daydream.

The engine hums outside the house. They exchange Instagram accounts, and Amy asks Jade to say *hello* to her mum. She wants to say *it would be nice to see you again* or *let me know when you're back again*, but it gets stuck. When she gets to her door, daughter in one hand, dishevelled bike in the other, she doesn't look back at Jade reversing into the road. Only stops to listen.

150 He's waiting in the hallway when the door opens. She wheels the bike through to the garden, pushes out *you orite* as she passes, getting no response. At dinner, they eat in silence, their daughter rolling peas around a plate. Then she says,

*mummy is jade lesbian*

He bites at the question first,

155 *who's jade and why do you know what that word means*

Before she even knows she's responding, Amy says,

*what do mean how does she kno-*

*-she's too young to know about all that fucking shit*

160 *right*, Amy thinks, *too young*. As he begins interrogating his daughter about the day, Amy lifts up her plate of food and thumps it on the table. Her body moves with charge, gets up and slips out of the room. Passing under the doorway she says,

*I got a tattoo today by the way*

165 Her walk up the stairs is accompanied by the soundtrack of his shouting, Amy mentally drowns the hissing words, their volume muted. One part of his raging does rise to reach her, as her foot lifts up onto the last step. He wants to know *who the fuck does she think she is*, and admittedly, all she is sure of at this moment is that she is not the woman he thinks he is shouting at.

(2022)