

Off-Limits (In Which the Bitchy Virgin No One Can Get with Visits a Gay Bar)

TOO YOUNG TO enter The Hole legally, and not pretty enough to flirt their way past the bouncer, the sparkly uglies smoke outside the fenced patio, flicking ashes into the gutter and butts into the street. They swallow pills like breath mints. These lost boys are waiting for some drunken oldster to stumble from the throbbing gay bar, someone they can charm into buying them a forty, who'll take them to the moon with a flare of crystal meth, who'll make them feel young, which they are, and beautiful, which they are not. They are children of the night, and the oldsters are the only ones who can afford them. Saliva will be exchanged, semen swallowed, someone robbed, someone infected, someone hurt. The sparkly uglies glower at me as I flit by them, my ID already out, and I smile back.

I'm here to make someone fall in love with me, and I will smile again and again.

I hear, "Cholo" muttered under a breath, and then someone corrects, "More like *chola*."

The bouncer is bald and bulging, a barbed wire tattoo climbing his arm like a varicose vein, encircling a cartoonish grinning penis on his shoulder. He's a bear. Not my type. He glances at my ID, I'm twenty-five, and he smashes a stamp onto my hand. I flash him a smile, thank him, call him "Honey," and leave him to watch the sparkly uglies alone.

The patio fence is high for privacy, necessary for a place like The Hole in a city like Sacramento, and the patio is roofed so that even on rainy nights the smokers can suck their cigarettes dry. Only a handful of smokers are outside now. Two lesbian heavies press against each other, almost ready to kiss, but not quite, still in that stage where they're erasing everyone around them.

I pass yellowing infecteds, disease in their dark eyes, their skin leather, and they watch me as they light cigarettes from Bics, pretending to be sensuous, seductive, and clean. I avoid their looks because I don't want them to cat-call me. Infecteds are the dalits, a caste off limits.

The music is painfully loud inside The Hole, thumping like a drag queen's

heartbeat. It smells of plasticide bodyspray, sweat, and cigarette smoke. The lights are low to hide the ugly of the uglies, and walls shimmer because they are covered in red, sagging velvet. Framed black-and-white photographs dimple the billowing velvet. Some are of old-time movie stars, Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall. Some are of naked male bodies, muscular, with a dark tassel of pubic hair ornamenting semi-erect members. Some are of topless women leaning against tile walls and curtains, looking like pinups cut from World War II *Playboys*. They are all white. The glass is thick over these pictures of perfect bodies; they cannot be touched.

LEVI THE BARTENDER hisses colorful well drinks and amber Budweisers into pint glasses from the hoses at the bar. I'm not even at the bar and he's already poured my Diet Coke, virgin. I offer a dollar bill because I know he'll wave it away, and he waves it away. He adds four maraschino cherries.

The music quiets, someone announces the drag show in a few minutes.

"You sure I can't drop in something harder, Raul?" Levi asks.

"Levi, my love, a Diet Coke a day keeps the plastic surgeon away," I say. "Liquor makes thicker." I bite a cherry and slide into a barstool.

"How the hell am I going to get you drunk and take advantage of you?"

He wants to fuck me. He's older than I am by a good decade, missing a tooth, and tonight he's already a little drunk or high. It won't happen and we both know it.

"Not tonight," I tell him, and blow him a kiss, which we both know serves as the only payment I can afford. The music picks up, so we don't have to talk.

Someone brushes past me and I tense.

THE OLDSTERS ACROSS the bar eye me. No one has a job these days except old fucks like them, because of old fucks like them. I hate the oldsters instantly; they stole all the money.

The Hole will get more crowded soon, populated by the desperate, the depressed, who'll burn what little money they have at The Hole because they need to drink and don't want to drink alone. They'll first buy Budweiser because it's cheap, and then rum or tequila or something mixed with vodka because it works better as the night wears on.

But now the bar's population is sparse, so the oldsters eye me. They are sipping cosmopolitans and martinis, which they will also buy for whatever young thing they fancy. They are hunting in a pack, these wealthy middle-aged queens. They can afford to be direct.

"Want to be my Latin lover?" one oldster shouts over the thumping Lady Gaga.

“Not tonight,” I shout back. I laugh and wink. Maybe when I’m older, but by then I’ll be with someone who is not you.

“Aw. C’mon. Levi, get my Latin lover some tequila, and make it Patrón, not the cheap Cuervo crap.”

“Leave him alone, you old fucks,” snaps Levi, who can say such things to them because they also want to fuck him.

I am the Bitchy Virgin No One Can Get With. Not Levi, not the aging queens, no one.

I GUARD MY drink as if the oldsters have it in them to slip me Rohypnol, stir, chew another cherry. Levi is complaining about his love life, his back to me. He downs the shot of Patrón the oldster buys for him instead of me. I slip a cherry stem into my mouth, tongue it into a knot.

“Oye Levi!” I wave.

Levi pivots, the gap from his missing tooth flashing. “You want another round?” Levi asks, reaching for my half-empty glass.

As he refills it, I stick my tongue out and show him the knotted stem. I show it only to him, but the oldsters can see it, too.

He shakes his head. “You are a tease,” he says. He leaves the pint of Diet Coke on the counter. “Next time, it will be full calorie.”

“You love me for being a bitch, mi amor,” I say.

I leave the knotted stem on the counter.

THE BAR IS filling because the drag show is going to start soon. Levi is occupied filling plastic cups with Budweiser. I push off from the counter and head toward the writhing dance floor. I don’t join, just watch. A group of lesbians I’ve talked with on previous nights invite me to join, and I shake my still half-full drink and mouth, “Later.” They are having such fun.

The pretty white bois don’t make eye contact with me. Their eyes dart away. A quick glance is all you need. Are you worth it? The pretty white bois throb in the music, wrap themselves around each other. No. I’m not worth it.

A DRIED UGLY introduces himself to me. He smells of Axe. There’s a flake of dandruff on his eyebrow; I watch it so he thinks I’m making eye contact. I forget his name as he says it. He’s not my type, but bless him for trying, and I do bless him, I grin, smile, and laugh, because I know he’s joking about something, and I don’t care what. I reward his valiant attempts with something he can pretend is flirtation. I clutch my stomach as I laugh. He’s going to fall in love with me.

I’ll shake him off when I’m ready and he’ll feel awful for a few minutes,

but then he'll realize that he tried, he tried!, and that's what matters, right? He was brave, he took a risk, that's what matters, he'll think to himself, now proud. Tonight, when he touches himself, he'll think of me.

He's almost falling in love with me and his hand grazes mine and I pull away.

"Want to dance?" he asks.

I can see how he'll look when he gets old. His teeth will only get yellower. His thinning hair will continue to vanish until there's more scalp than hair. His body will wilt. He's finished.

"Want to dance?" he asks again. He wants to kiss me. I'm beautiful to him.

"Later, dear," I lie. I rattle the ice left in my glass. "I'm enjoying the drag show," I lie. A drag king is onstage trying to boss her way through something Jimmy Hendrix. The king is pathetic, as too many kings are, struggling to appear masculine, with spirit-gummed facial hair, flannel and jeans, a backwards baseball cap. Her feminine face and thick chest betray her. She's trying so hard, but it's a costume. Sad.

I push away, disappear, hope the dried ugly finds someone else, someone not me. Never me.

PISS PUDDLES THE bathroom floor. A clot of what I hope is chewing tobacco rings the toilet and the door to the stall is gone, probably a good thing, and I'm standing at the urinal. Men are relieving themselves one after another in the stall next to me. I'm waiting. Nothing happens. I can't squeeze anything from my bladder. I smell piss and Band-Aids. I'm out in the open. I'm afraid someone will grab me. My bladder is full, but nothing comes. I'm frozen. I want everyone to leave. I want to scream, "No! I just have a shy bladder! I'm not waiting for a blow job, you perverts! I'm not!" in case any of the men who enter and exit the stall next to me, one after the other, think otherwise.

I'm home behind a door with a thousand locks. No one can see me.

A trickle. Enough. Finally.

THE BEAST MAKES too much noise. He wheezes when he talks and he talks too much. His round face bobs on his round body. He's wearing makeup and Abercrombie. He looks like a nesting doll. Open him up and inside of him are more round Abercrombie beasts.

I do not discourage him.

"Are you a top or bottom?" the beast finally asks. "Don't tell me you're versa. I hate them bitches. All fucking queer studied and shit. Like I care if I'm buying into a hetero-normalicity, or whatever. Bitch, I don't care. Make up your mind."

I savor this. "Virgin," I say with a shrug. The beast's eyes bug.

“Liar,” says the beast. “I don’t believe you. I DON’T believe you. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.” I’ve had this conversation a thousand times. I enjoy it. His shock is flattering. It means I’m beautiful.

“That’s gotta be some sort of record. Bitch, you’ve never sucked—”

“I told you I’m a virgin.” I sound annoyed at the beast.

“Sucking is *not* sex.”

How a beast like him can find sex astounds me.

“Why?” he asks.

My standards are higher than yours, so I’m the Bitchy Virgin No One Can Get With. I’m pristine. I have no diseases yellowing my skin or boiling pustules on my genitals. I take no medications to keep me breathing like the septic dalits. There is no poison inside me at all. “Because,” I offer.

“You’ve kissed a guy, right?”

I nod.

“You waiting for the one true love?”

No. A better offer.

The beast finds a reason to leave. I’m the Bitchy Virgin No One Can Get With, and he sure as hell isn’t changing that. Not tonight.

I WATCH AS the beautiful boy whispers to a girl. She is the hag to his fag, but she is thin and pretty. He’s white, blond, blue-eyed, and American Pie. I want to swoop by him, say, “Let’s dance,” and grab his hand like a five-year-old and take him onto the dance floor. Even better: I want him to see me and see that I cannot approach him. He’ll like the shy ones and so he’ll come to me. He’ll take me by the hand onto the dance floor. He’ll have a thing for brown boys. We’ll dance, close enough that the oldsters will tremble in envy like they have Parkinson’s, and an optimistic ugly will sidle up to us, grind against us, and we’ll shake the ugly off with a glare. The beautiful boy will whisper, “Let’s go outside,” and we’ll pick up our drinks from his skinny hag. Outside he’ll light a cigarette and I will take a drag from it even though I’ve never smoked. He’ll offer me a sip of his beer and I will sip it even though I don’t drink. This alcohol mixed with his saliva will give me courage; I’ll laugh, take the cigarette from his mouth, swallow another puff. “I’ve never done this before,” I’ll say. And he’ll fall in love with me. “I’ll teach you,” he’ll say, and he’ll lower the cigarette and he’ll lean in, and I’ll lean in too, and we’ll lean together until we’re breathing each other’s air and you could pass one piece of paper between us, but not two.

I wish I could taste him.

He kisses the girl.

He’s a breeder, I realize, he’s trawling for the pretty hags, the girls made

randy by watching boys dry hump on the dance floor. An opportunist. The worst form of ally. He's hoping that dumb faggy fucks like me grab his ass and flirt just enough so he can feel attractive. I hate him.

I am also relieved. I never approach, never make a move. I'm the Bitchy Virgin No One Can Get With. I'm untouchable. It's safer.

AN OLDSTER IS talking to me now, outside, on the patio. He brought me outside because it was too loud inside and he wanted to talk. I've forgotten his name already. His face is too clean, poisoned with Botox. It looks airbrushed. Like a lawn saturated with weed and pest killer, nothing lives in that face. His eyebrows look painted, his hair sculpted, his teeth bleached, but his body sags. He's the type that comes every night to drink. He comes in here looking for love, for sex, for *something*, getting fat on liqueurs and bar food. He is doughy. I've forgotten his name, so I call him Doughboy.

Doughboy is telling me about the cities he's visited and I'm pretending that I'm interested in Paris, London, Rio. I'm laughing, smiling, showing my teeth, making this old Doughboy want me so bad he aches. Lean in. Don't touch. No touching. Show him the teeth. Don't touch me. Doughboy puts his hand on my side, and I back away, spin, and laugh.

He's pretending to be young. He's lying, and I hate him for lying, for being fat and old and ugly and fake, for poisoning his face, for having a job and money when no one else has either, for being alone at his age. For liking me. For making me reject him because he likes me.

He asks for my phone number.

"Sorry," I say. "I only date men my age." Doughboy turns red, his dead, Botoxed forehead almost wrinkling. I want to ask him, Why are you single? I want to ask him, Why haven't you found someone your own age? Why the fuck are you chasing guys like me? What the hell is wrong with you, old fuck?

I sip my Diet Coke, my third. He thinks I'm interested in his stories of Rio and Paris, in conversation. He's confused. The Hole is not a place where conversation is the agenda. The Hole is a place where conversation is a tactic used to pursue another agenda, an agenda of the body, not the mind, of salt, sex, liquid, and flesh. But here I am, a saint, the sweet Virgin Maria, interested in what the Doughboy has to say, but not in the Doughboy.

"Hey," he says, loud. "I asked you for your number. You fucking me around?"

He's supposed to wander away, embarrassed for chatting up the twenty-five-year-old. He's supposed to stumble into someone his own age.

"What do you mean?" I play innocent.

"I asked for your phone number. We've been talking for like fifteen minutes." Ten actually. "I'm not *imagining* the chemistry. I'm not crazy."

I shake my head, you poor fucking old sap. “I’m sorry. Those are my rules.”

Doughboy wants to spit on me. Were it not for the Botox, his face would be contorting like a baby’s. “We’ve been talking for like half an hour and *all* I asked was for your phone number.”

I’ve forgotten his name. “Sir, if you’re looking for a date, you should pick up someone closer to your own age,” you old fuck whose name I’ve forgotten. “I’m here to *meet* people.”

He kicks a chair, which clatters to the concrete, and now everyone is looking. We’re entertainment.

“Why are you *fucking* with me?”

“Sir, I’m not, sir.”

“Why? You a breeder, spic?”

“I can see why you’re still single.”

“BITCH!” His hands are doughy, soft, and it hurts less than I expected when he hits me, but it does hurt. I’m tossed back, the lights spinning, and a glass shatters, and I’m on the glass, I’m on the ground, looking up at feet, at shoes, at knees, where everyone looks the same. The thick, tattooed arms of the bouncer are on Doughboy, dragging him away, and he’s shouting at me, something like “Bitchbitchbitch!” and I’m wet, covered in my drink and his, glass under me, sharp but not cutting, and the floor is sticky and they’re all watching me, my body splayed out on the gummy sewer of alcohol, of ash and butts, of vomit, of sweat and blood and semen, of disease, and it’s all sticking to my arms, my back, my neck, my hair, and everyone is looking at me like I’ve done something wrong, like I’m some drunk, and that’s when they bend down, the angels, and I’m lifted, rescued, by the beautiful breeder boy and the drag king dressed like Jimmy Hendrix, who suddenly, up close, looks masculine, and they pick me up, and they ask if I’m okay, and I’m not. “He’s drunk,” I say, “I told him no, I didn’t do anything.” I hurt in a thousand places and I want to cry.

I hear Levi’s voice through the music and rabble, I hear his voice, “Banned! Banned for life!” I hear his voice. “Tell Raul it’s okay, bitch is BANNED!”

I’m a thousand years old, my face tingles, and I let them hold my weight. Someone hands the beautiful breeder boy a new drink for me, Diet Coke and cherries from Levi, another gift from my Levi. I feel them brushing off the glass and cigarette butts and I don’t want them to stop. I want to curl up with them, become theirs, only theirs, before I’m just another one of the uglies, the oldsters, desperate and broken, before it’s too late.