

Contact

A monologue by Lily Shahmoon

Marcus: 25, male, sensitive

A space break indicates a pause.

I start by telling her what she already knows
I tell her I don't really think I've ever been in love
That we don't say love in my family
I never end a phone call with 'love you'
I never sign birthday cards 'love, Marcus'
My first girlfriend
Even after eighteen months, we never said it

She says *I didn't know that*

It's sort of awkward this
Us sitting so far apart
Me confessing
Or stalling, really
Telling her about love, which is not what I should be telling her about

I say yeah, and she waits for me to start the story again

So yeah
Love
Or the absence of it
What I'm trying to say is I believed in it
It just
Didn't feel urgent
Or maybe not that
Maybe it just didn't feel impossible

That's sort of how it feels
When you get the test results
It sort of feels like you'll never love again

She says *you're scaring me*
And I say no no no it's not cancer or anything
Don't worry
It's just herpes

I wasn't going to say it like that
I had it all planned out
I was gonna say
It's only infectious when I'm having a flare up
Most people only get flare ups about once a year
It's basically like having your period once a year
It's basically nothing

Instead I say *wow now I wish it was cancer*
She says *my dad had cancer*
Which I actually knew

Shit

I say yeah
 Yeah that's awful
 But this isn't like that
 It's not you know
 Life threatening
 It's like having your period once a year

I'm praying for a comically large anvil to fall on my head
 Or even just a phone call to take me out the room

But no
 I'm still talking
 Why am I still talking?
 I'm telling her about
 The stigma and the biology
 The *history*
 Jesus
 I'm the herpes Wikipedia page

She yawns really loudly
 As if she isn't actually interested in my genital sores
 Stands up and says it's getting late
 She's got work in the morning
 She can't do this now

She says I'm a great guy
 I say *it's fine*
 Before she can tell me that it's over

*

When she's gone I grab myself a coke from the fridge and switch on the TV
 It's playing Antiques Roadshow but I can't find the energy to change channel so I watch the whole
 episode and then the next one
 I text Ellie to tell her it's over
 She asks if I'm OK and I say yeah
 She washed her hands before she left like she was leaving a crack den
 But other than that
 Yeah
 I'm OK

The first girl I told was Caroline
 I started dating her before I got the results back
 In fact, we were at the cinema when I got the news
 We were watching the new Spiderman film and I was sweating buckets
 Wondering if I was allowed to kiss her
 If she'd want to have sex after
 And Caroline held my hand and said *Don't worry, Spiderman will save the day*
 She must have seen me frowning

When we got out the movie I saw I had a missed call from the clinic and I knew right then
 I knew because it was a call, not a text
 They text you if it's all clear
 If it's a call, they want you to come in
 To tell you face to face

The nurse said either I had to call all the people I'd had previous sexual contact with or they could send a message for me
 I said no
 I'm a man
 I can handle it
 At least I thought I could
 Until I told Caroline who turned *purple*
 Said I had tried to seduce her under false pretences
 That I was gross
 I think she actually called me a slut?
 The whole thing is a bit of a blur

I went back to the GP with a list of phone numbers and the nurse said it's OK
 Most people do the same

It's just sad cos it should have been different this time
 We were actually friends
 I actually thought she'd understand

*

Ellie comes over the next night and cooks me pasta
 When she asks me what actually happened I tell her we didn't want to ruin the friendship
 Which is kind of what she said
 And Ellie says *that's a fair enough reason*
 That it's hard to get a friendship back once you've crossed that line
 She's right obviously but I still expected her to be on my side
 She tells me to stop moping
 That she's obviously on my side
 She says she never liked her anyway, which I knew but never thought I'd hear Ellie say out loud

I find myself looking at her underarms while she stirs
 The crevice of her underarms, where the skin bulges out from the sleeve of her vest
 I have the weirdest urge to pinch it

You haven't got any sauce, Ellie says, which makes me stop thinking about her underarms
 I tell her I have tomatoes and she says *how am I supposed to make a sauce from that?*
 So we eat the pasta with butter and cheese and we watch 24 Hours in A&E together
 Ellie puts her legs up on mine and won't move them even when I ask

*

I have my first flare up a few months later
 Ellie's supposed to come over
 I try and convince her not to but I missed her birthday drinks last week and now she says I owe her
 She comes over with a Tesco's bag and starts pulling out cans of spaghetti hoops
 Every time she turns around I find myself scratching

It's kind of worse than I thought it would be
 This
 Obviously because my best friend's in my kitchen and I can't keep my hand out my pants

But also because

It's like I've spent over a year convincing myself it's basically nothing
 But basically
 It's not

Ellie's mixing the spaghetti hoops in one of my pans
 I ask her if she's ever going to learn how to actually cook
 She says I'm hot when I'm snarky
 She asks if *she* ever got back in contact and I tell about our brunch
 Basically a pity brunch we had, the week after she turned me down
 It was too lame to tell her about at the time
 Ellie says *just think*
You'd have been dating a girl who un-ironically goes to brunch

She brings the bowls over to the couch and talks with her mouth full about the guys at work who
 sent an email chain around betting her cup size
 She says she's *not that upset* because most of them overestimated it
 'Not *that* upset' is Ellie speak for pretty upset
 I put my arms around her and she says yes
Keep them there
Then you'll stop scratching your balls when you think I'm not looking
 It's enough to almost pull away but I suddenly realise that her heart's beating really fast
 She doesn't notice that I've noticed
 She must be making an effort to breathe slow

I move my hands to the middle of her back where I can feel it most
 Trying to ignore the guilt
 And she presses her nose into my neck

This isn't fair

She doesn't know

*

I didn't ask Ellie over again after the sores cleared
 Every time I picked up my phone to text her I thought about the break-out
 About her heartbeat and how I spied on it with my crotch on fire
 She wouldn't want to see me anyway
 If she knew

I met up with this girl called Katya instead
 From a
 Basically
 From a herpes dating website
 She barely speaks English but that's hardly the point
 She's in the bathroom now
 She spends ages in the bathroom after we have sex
 I don't know what she's doing in there

Ellie sent me a text this morning asking where I've been
 I've been staring at it since Katya went into the bathroom

This is stupid

I text her back asking if she wants to hang out next week
 I dunno why my fingers are shaking
 Katya comes out the bathroom and I guess she must know because she starts getting dressed

*

Ellie says we should actually *do* something
 Like plan a real thing
 Rather than her just cooking ready meals at my house

She books dinner at some Ethiopian restaurant she heard about from someone at work and we go
 and eat the food with our fingers
 I kept thinking of *her*
 And how she washed her hands when she left my place

After the meal Ellie says she's so full she needs to walk
 Which is code for her wanting to talk to me
 We only get a few paces from the restaurant before she says *Look*

We don't have to do this. It's fine.
 I act like I don't know what she's talking about, until she says *you know what I'm talking about,*
You're not attracted to me
And that's fine
We can still be friends.

And I say, *yeah?*
 And she says *yeah, don't worry*
 She says *lets go back to yours and watch reality TV*
 I tell her I'm relieved
 Which I should be

Now she's here

She keeps opening the fridge and looking in it, before claiming how full she is and closing it again
 I just watch her
 She opens a cupboard, inspects the tins
 Says how good the food was and waits for me to agree

I keep noticing things about her
 The way her knees turn into each other or the fact she doesn't have earlobes
 I keep thinking about how she said *yeah, don't worry*
 And wondering if she meant it

Didn't you like the food?, she asks again
 And I say Ellie
 I have herpes

I can see her thinking but she's not saying anything
 She doesn't say anything for so long I wonder if she still knows how to speak
 She asks if it's treatable
 And I say
 No
 It's kind of a forever thing

Why are you telling me this

I can barely hear her

Because I think it's relevant

There's a thing we used to do as kids
Where you push each others' hands apart and count out a whole minute
And when you take your hands away it feels like there's a ball between them
Like your hands are repelling magnets
And the air between them is literally tangible
That's what the air in the kitchen feels like
Like it's holding us apart

I say
I get if you don't want to run the risk
And she says *yeah*
Really quickly
So quickly it actually knocks the wind out of me but I don't let her see that

She says *I'm sorry* and I say *that's OK*
I'm OK
She says *are you*

I think about watching 24 Hours in A&E
And how the show feels like Ellie to me

Yeah I'm fine
I promise

Then all of a sudden Ellie is wading through the air to get to me
She takes my hand which is how I realise it's shaking
She says *OK, OK*
OK OK OK
She says *OK* so many times it becomes *KO*
I want to tell her this
I want to tell her that she knocks me out
Instead I say I'm shit scared and she says *actually*
I'm not

And I squeeze her hand so hard I can feel the pulse in it

And it's fucking racing