

## **Fourth Wall**

A group of our friends was planning to go to see a play in the Regent Theatre on Saturday that some drama students from our school were performing in, and I guess because his friend Owen McConnell had a thing for me it was a bit of a laugh that Everett asked me to go with him.

I had a new-found status – at least among the boys – after finally hitting puberty and getting tits etcetera which meant it was finally okay for him to talk to me at school.

Anyway, I knew Everett didn't like me and I didn't like him. All I saw when I looked at him was my mum making us sandwiches at my house after school when we were four and then him throwing up in the sandpit after, or being a bit older and doing our best to get carpet burns when sliding down the stairs in his house, or getting unreasonably furious with each other during Monopoly games while the younger kids messed around.

Besides, I'd never be pretty enough for *Ever*, even now. He liked Iris, had for like forever. He'd told me so himself when he was nine. I'd known him long enough to realise he was still in love with her now, no matter his other girlfriends, no matter how many of his friends she'd dated.

It was actually nice to have him talk to me in the hallways now I was part of his crowd, to have him ask me for help with homework or to complain about the boys to me. He was just as opinionated as I remembered. A *lot* of people got on his nerves – his friend Julian Ortíz was one of them. Julian had a major part in the play on Friday. It didn't help that he was tall and dark-haired, with a jawline that could cut glass, and it was an inside joke how the girls in our year and below went wild over him. Anyway, he was sunken deep in the boys' bad books.

When I say Julian was in their bad books that doesn't mean he wasn't part of their friend group – that's not how it worked. He was, and because girls loved him he actually commanded a considerable amount of respect within their hierarchy. Even so, they would turn up to school drama performances to hoot and holler at him from the audience, memorise his lines so they could recite them back to him in the hallways. When I asked Ever why they did that to him if they were friends, he was silent for a moment, then said 'We're just kidding around. You wouldn't get it,' and ignored me for a week. Then when we saw each other at

Adam Lawley's party he acted like nothing had happened and I guess we were fine again.

On the night of the play he picked me up from my house early and we got ice cream from the gelato place in the Octagon. I got a feijoa sorbet and he got chocolate, just like he did when we were small. We sat on a bench at the outer wall of the pool of the fountain to eat them under a grey sky. He still spouted the same kind of rubbish he used to. He always came up with weird words for normal things – the seagulls which gathered in front of us were 'sea chickens', the bench a 'people-shelf', a downy feather by his feet which he kicked at was a 'bird-leaf'. He was hopeless at not getting ice cream all over his face, so I gave him the packet of pocket tissues I always kept in my bag.

He asked if he could show me something, and that I wasn't allowed to laugh.

He'd been taking photos for two years now on his mum's camera and editing them on his phone. He showed me a picture of his family's German pointer looking out from yellow tussock, damp-furred and poised, a self-portrait in the redwoods from when his family went up to the North Island for Christmas, him standing small beneath the thick and towering trees, a candid shot of his sister applying makeup in her bedroom, and another one of the following moment where she turned to him in fury, face scrunched and half-made up, with the mascara wand still held in her hand like a weapon.

They were good, actually good, and I told him so. He tucked his phone back into his pocket and shoved his hands into his jacket. He made sure I knew he was just playing around but I'm pretty sure he was pleased.

We stood up to go.

The sun was sinking down below the horizon and its fiery strangled light collected in his curls, setting them alight, glancing off the planes of his face. For a moment he was two things at once, the silhouette of a boy against an orange sky, an alien stock image, but his still-visible shadow features were familiar, timeless, Ever.

He grinned when he saw me watching him, eyes wide and bright, arrogant, glimmering.

A crowd of our friends had already gathered outside the Regent. They puffed white mist out of their lungs into the night, hands shoved deep into pockets. They stared at me and Ever arriving together. Owen McConnell, standing in the centre of the group, looked away as soon as I met his gaze.

Iris bounded over to me and tucked her puffer-jacketed arm around mine. I watched Ever watch her, her glittering dark eyes and dark hair under the amber streetlight. She turned to greet him, but he had already pushed himself into the pack of his friends, boys who enveloped him like a huge shadowy cloak, until he was one head among many.

We moved into the Regent's foyer in a group, too loud and too boisterous for the plush red carpet, the ornate ceiling, the chandeliers, the stained-glass windows.

Ever was by my side again as we found our seats in the theatre. I sat to his right, and a whole row of boys stretched to his left. From either side of the stage, the tragedy and comedy masks leered down at us, ribbons tangling below their chins.

My bladder was bursting. I got up gingerly from my seat and made my way to the aisle. Iris looked up at me as I passed her. 'Where are you going?' she whispered.

'I need to pee,' I whispered back.

The hallway to the bathroom was lit by a single muted lamp. I couldn't hear the play at all from inside my stall. I washed my hands, then pushed open the heavy bathroom door and walked out, letting it swing closed behind me.

Owen was standing in the hallway, his face shadowed in the dim light. He'd followed me out of the theatre.

'Owen?' I said.

Then he was close to me, towering. 'I've seen you look at me in school,' he said.

'What?' I said. He smelt like fabric softener.

He seemed nervous. 'You don't have to try and make me jealous. I've seen you look at me,' he repeated, as if it was something he'd memorised.

And then he'd grabbed onto my upper arm and was leaning in. I pushed him away violently, without even thinking about it, the white cotton of his sweatshirt soft under my hands.

I practically leapt up the stairs, not looking back to see if he was following, striding back into the dark theatre. I clambered back to my seat, heart thudding so loud I could barely hear what was happening on stage. I tried to control my breath. Iris crunched her popcorn, oblivious.

Ever leaned over to me. 'Are you okay?' he whispered.

I shifted in my seat, rubbed my palms down my thighs. 'I, um. Owen – he just tried to kiss me.'

‘*What?*’ Ever hissed, and I quickly shushed him. ‘*What?*’ he repeated, quieter, then sat back. His face was troubled in the glow of the stage. He didn’t look at me again.

We shuffled out of the Regent into the night, stiff and shivering. Iris covered her yawn with a sleeve. ‘Julian was good, wasn’t he?’ she said to me. ‘I wasn’t actually expecting him to be that good.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

The boys around us were high-spirited, mimicking Julian’s lines, his theatrical weeping, his death scene. Only Ever didn’t join in, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket.

Iris looked at me more closely. ‘Hey, are you alright?’ she asked.

Ever had just tapped Owen on the shoulder. Owen turned, and Ever shoved him, hard. Exclamations of surprise broke out around them, people stumbling away.

Iris turned from beside me to stare over at them.

Ever was saying something to Owen, his hands fisted at his sides. Owen retorted something, and then Ever swung at him, his fist connecting with Owen’s jaw with a fleshy thud.

Some girl let out a scream. Everyone held their breath. Some of the boys swore, something almost like delight tinging their voices.

Owen doubled over, clutching his face.

A beat passed where Owen worked his jaw for a moment, assessed the damage, his back to Ever. A wide space cleared around them.

Then Owen went for him.

The crowd surged with excitement so that I was pushed away from the scene and I couldn’t see either of them anymore. The boys were chanting something, over and over. The girls clutched each other’s arms, wide eyes glinting, pushing their way to get a closer look.

Iris was staring at me, understanding crawling over her face. ‘Is Everett – is that for you? Did Owen finally try something? Oh my god, that’s so – that’s so – that’s for you!’ she breathed, fervent. She stood up on her tiptoes to get a closer look at the fight. To get a closer look at him.

The crowd shifted again, like a shoal of sardines in the sea, and I saw Ever standing over Owen, dark blood pouring out of his nose over his chin, heard the sick hollow thud as he kicked him in the ribs, leaving a shoe print on his white sweatshirt.

Then a giant bald security guard from the Regent was shouting and shoving and the crowd was breaking up. Some boys grabbed Owen and lifted him, because he could barely stand. Some other boys thumped Ever on the back as he stood stock still in the streetlight, staring down at a wet patch of cherry-dark blood at his feet – his or Owen’s I didn’t know.

Iris turned to me, pushed me gently.

‘Go get him,’ she said, bright eyes on Ever. It seemed for a second like her gaze lingered on him, like she was taking him in.

Then she was gone and it was only me and Ever in the street.

I walked over to him slowly. He was unrecognisable. He didn’t look like anyone I had ever met. He wiped clumsily at his upper lip with the back of his hand, making it worse. I could hear him breathing, the suck and push of air from inside his lungs.

I opened my mouth to speak, closed it again. ‘Ever,’ I said. ‘The tissues I gave you?’

He pulled them wordlessly out of his pocket, hands trembling, smearing blood over the plastic. He pulled out a wad of tissues, too fast, too many, wiped at the viscous liquid. When he started walking, without even thinking I followed him.

He found his car in the darkened car park. He turned the key and the locks thudded open in the doors.

‘Ever,’ I said again.

His hand was still on the car door handle. The night echoed around us – the mist of our breath hung in the air.

He cleared his throat. ‘I’ve got to get cleaned up before my mum gets home. I’ll see you at homeroom on Monday?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘See you.’

He got into his car and started it, the headlights searing into the dark. The engine seemed too loud for the night. It turned smoothly onto the tarseal, stayed straight and steady between the lines of the road and then it was gone. For a second it seemed almost strange to me that it was Ever driving that car, that it was his hands on the steering wheel, that there was a boy inside that cold metal machine.