

Playthings
by Faith Graham



BROWN SKIN
BOOKS



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Games. It started with games. Like the very first one: each one of us taking a turn and parading around the house nude for a whole weekend while the others stayed clothed. It sounded childish and infantile to me when they came out with it. It's what little kids do, don't they? *You show me yours*, etc. Why not just get it on? But the game was subtler than I imagined.

Don't look so nervous, Faith, she told me, I'll go first. And she did go first, maybe because she thought I'd chicken out. Or maybe she knew how I would respond. Perhaps she knew what I saw in both of them together and wanted to share.

She unsettled me. She knew I thought she was gorgeous, her breasts like ripe fruit, her belly so flat and perfect, without a single mark. You're staring, she'd say, giggling. I know, I'd say, giggling back. I can't help it. She'd lie on the couch, her hair like a blonde curtain on the pillow, and then she'd play it up, lolling and doing the whole kitten thing. And so help me, it worked. *God*, she unsettled me in a way that even he couldn't.

And both of them together. Sorcery.



Me. Who was Faith? Over the next few months, I began to think of myself as beginning and ending with them, but there was a single identity once and the natural starting point for this whole story is who I was. Look in the mirror. You see a woman turning thirty-two, still girlish in body but who can no longer call herself a girl, wide generous mouth and small nose, hair I still fight with every day using all the weapons in my arsenal like *Dark & Lovely* relaxer. My breasts small and someone told me once my best feature was my legs, but I don't know. Not a stretch mark to be found because there has never been any time for ankle-grabbers, always career, career, career.

I *think* I liked my job. I have a moment's hesitation about it because I got it by accident, fell into it. I took it because, hey, I need to eat, too. I often wondered then if I'd lost the plot to my life. Each morning, the buzz of conversation in the lecture theatre as I strolled in with my sheaf of notes. 'Okay, let's talk about attribution.' Or the inverted pyramid of story structure. Or libel. Or compression of detail in broadcast style as opposed to print. They start off worshipping you because you are *The Word*, but by exams you pick up on the judgement in their eyes: why aren't you still out there?

Of course, I still had a peculiar pseudo-glamour at the university, students

and instructors and even folks at parties always with an opening gambit: ‘So you were a reporter on *American telly*?’ And I would roll out the tale. Yes, Dad was an air serviceman at a NATO base but divorced Mum and went back home to the US. So I had an in with the American immigration authorities. I made my way to New York, and I slowly graduated from freezing Bronx closet to my slightly larger closet on the Upper West Side with the cliché exposed brick wall and fern plant. A producer thought it was sexy having a black chick with a British accent (he actually put it that way, and I wanted the job so badly I kept my mouth shut). Fluff pieces mostly—if and when I got the chance to get into the field. And yes, I could be a presenter or ‘anchor’ as they call it in America, but where do you go from there?

‘Anchors are gods,’ was the mantra I heard again and again, usually after I got into arguments that reduced my stock in office politics. Sitting behind a desk, doing the equivalent hard labour of a parrot, presenters can alter your line-up of news. They can kill your copy. They will take out the most important, crucial line of information because they can’t pronounce an African name. Of course, they’ll always do it as a polite suggestion to the control booth while on commercial break. ‘John, don’t you think Faith’s bit on the refugees should go in the bottom third? It’s fucking depressing.’

‘Sure, okay, Ted. Jane will throw to sports, and if we got the time...’

I had wanted so much to be a producer, and having come to the biggest media pond in the West, I discovered the Ken doll behind the TelePrompTer had more control over how you perceive events than the journo on the street. So I went back to my first love: documentaries. But I was never a cameraperson, I was a writer, I was a reporter. I couldn’t just go out and shoot tape. I would need staff and resources. And you can make all the docs you want in America, but your best buyers are the giant operations like PBS and The History Channel and Animal Planet. Here I was, wanting to tell stories about Eritreans trying to make a life in Brooklyn or the *true* history of the business of rap music or how AIDS really got started. Too controversial, too costly, too narrow a market, too much of C, D, or E.

So I came home. I was working on pitches and trying to get my foot in the door at Channel 4 and the BBC. A network that will go nameless here turned me down flat for a documentary series on black American painters, and six months later, I watched my concept produced by someone else for a half-assed one-hour programme. They stole it and didn’t even do it *well*. As the saying goes, those who get screwed over, teach.

I check over these last lines now, and I think how bitter all of this reads. Yes, I have some bitterness—I’ll admit it. But I’m trying to tell you where my mind was and where my life was when we all came together. I’d prepare my lectures

and mark up assignments and do student consultations, and on the side, I kept at my *real* work, scripting my proposed series on the Algerian War.

‘Okay, guys, I’d tell my students. ‘Today, you get to roast me alive. I’m going to show you my old showreels and outtakes, and you’re going to see how it’s *not* supposed to be done.’ And there was me up on the screen, flubbing intros, reciting some copy for my stand-up that was so OTT and should have had red pencils tearing through it. Little Faith Graham looking very young and very green. Laughter and applause from my students. *My* students. Yeah, I guess I liked my job. I loved hearing that one of the graduates landed a position as Assistant Producer with ITV or he or she got a subbing job at *The Observer*. I was getting comfortable.

I had a man, and I was getting comfortable with him, too. I had made it a point not to date any journalists—no sense of commitment. Richard worked, probably still works, in a forensics lab for The Metropolitan Police, and initially, I thought his job must be fascinating. All that ‘CSI’ stuff you see on telly, but he joked that no, there’s no booming soundtrack while you’re playing with test-tubes, and reading DNA markers can be quite tedious. He was reasonably good-looking, with a handsome angular face and his muscles built up from his gym membership. His thing was swimming. ‘You don’t sweat when you swim,’ he said, which was a clue to his sense of cleanliness and need for order that extended right into the bedroom...

He was sweet to me at first. But his attentiveness had too much deliberate planning to it. I’d hear songs from a new album I intended to buy, and he would hit HMV on Oxford Street and pick it up for me. Then I discovered his appointment book where he jotted names of paperbacks or CDs he heard me mention. I thought, Jesus, why is he like that? All methodical preparation. I looked for spontaneity in him. ‘Hey, let’s go to Brighton for the weekend!’ He couldn’t. He didn’t trust his car. There was supposed to be engineering works Sunday on the rail, so that option was out, too...

And he had his unusual ‘idiosyncrasies’ in bed. He wouldn’t go down on me but wouldn’t explain his reasons. I resented him for it and how it made me feel so unattractive, and I certainly wasn’t going to have an uneven trade. Over the months we were together, we fell into a ceasefire pattern of plain vanilla missionary sex.

I don’t know why I let it go on, because there was a night when he was inside me, and by this time, I wasn’t having orgasms any more, although his body could still relax mine. He was still physical comfort food up until that night. He finished with a grunt and held me close, not saying anything, not asking anything.

Does he assume I’ve come? Does he even care? I held him and knew this

should be over, but I couldn't imagine what I could find that would be better. Not yet.



I first met Tim years ago when he was dating a friend of mine. I'd take the train up to Oxford to see Angela and find her hard at work in one of the college libraries, scribbling notes about black jazz musicians who had lived in Paris. Angie was a hopeless romantic, and maybe that's why she hooked up with Tim. He was a powerful personality, telling us in every bull session at the Turf Tavern about when he would put out magazines for *us*, for our people. Angie liked being involved with a crusader. Going up to see her every third weekend eventually meant drinks with Angela and Tim.

'So what's the new one like?' I remember asking her before he arrived for the very first time.

She looked at me through those owlish spectacles of hers and declared, 'He's a stallion in bed.'

I burst out laughing. 'Ang, that's not what I meant!'

She bit down on the swizzle stick from her rum and Coke. 'That's what *I* meant.' She was happy, bubbling-over happy.

Then he walked in and joined us. Tall, sporting a thin goatee, and his skin was a deep rich brown, his dark eyes made absolutely captivating by lush eyelashes. Angie and I often said we would kill to have those eyelashes. I think I caught the quality that lured her. As he walked alone, he had a stern pensiveness that didn't look affected. He really did have this black Byron thing as if he were putting together his great plan, just one more thing left to do.

Despite her telling me that Tim and I 'had something in common' in journalism, he rubbed me the wrong way for several weeks. I was finishing up a BBC internship and ready to go off on the great adventure of Manhattan, and he fancied himself more experienced in news than me. He was full of uninvited warnings. 'Don't work for the American networks, Faith. They don't give a shit about us.' But then, he didn't want me working for any large corporation.

He had plenty of opinions to share. 'Miscegenation is the dirty little secret they don't like to talk about,' he told us one night. 'Four hundred years ago, they didn't have a plan and they didn't want it out in the open, but today, of course, they're all for it. Racial harmony! Universal brotherhood. Everyone will get along because we don't have our own pure strains left. You exterminate the culture, sure you get harmony with one side.'

Angie and I found this hard to take. We both had had white boy-friends before.

'Not every white guy I went to bed with cared about making lighter and lighter babies,' said Angela.

He relinquished a bit of ground. ‘I’m not saying they do. I’m saying it’s unconscious acceptance of a pervasive notion. Wrap it up in liberal thinking, and it’s not such an ugly unpalatable idea any more. Think about how everyone goes on about how beautiful mixed-race babies are. Like they have special aesthetics?’

Mandela was a sell-out for having given up violence. The Hutu-Tutsi clashes weren’t tribal, they were part of a war with a political agenda. Check it out if I didn’t believe him. Read more Fanon. Read Diop. Tim was arrogant to me, but when we finished for the night and walked out of the pub, I saw his arm around Angela and was happy for her. Then he kissed her goodnight, and... The kiss went on. It had a casual honest passion that made me envy her.

‘What do you think?’ she asked as we headed back to her flat. ‘Come on, tell me, tell me, tell me!’

‘Well, I started, ‘More radical than thou.’

She groaned. ‘I know. But throw me something.’

‘He’s gorgeous.’

‘More,’ she prompted.

‘And...’ I couldn’t think of anything off the top of my head so I told her, ‘And I wish I had someone kiss me like that.’



Flash forward past New York, past going back and finding my grim but functional flat in the council estate in Bethnal Green, past numbing college lectures, and he was there. I ran into him at the Respect anti-racism concert while in a horrendously long queue at a food stand, and I learned he and Angela had broken up—why I didn’t know and was too polite to ask, and she was doing thesis work in Paris for three months anyway. I got the sense that he would have liked to ask me out, but Angie’s ghost was hovering close by. ‘Take care,’ we said to each other. Modern code for I Don’t Expect to See You Again.

But I did see him again. He was at the magazine section of Borders in Oxford Street one day, which I subsequently learned he referred to as his ‘Mecca’. Checking out the competition. He was clean-shaven now, dressed in a blue pin-stripe, looking impeccable, and I had stopped to stare at this man not because he was attractive and looking at *Loaded* or *Maxim* or even *The Voice*. A man—this man—was leafing through *Black Beauty*. He was checking out *Black Hair & Style*.

‘Tim?’ A note of curious disbelief. Was he just skipping through to leer over the photos of Beyoncé Knowles?

‘Faith! How are you doing?’

‘You thinking of getting a facial or something?’ I teased.

He grinned and held up a magazine called *Embrace*. ‘Ever read this one?’

I shrugged. ‘Couple of times.’ I was squeamish about admitting what I read.

There are so damn few intelligent magazines out there for women that it's bloody embarrassing. *Embrace* was better than most. 'I mostly skip through it at the rack.'

He play-acted clutching his chest and staggering. 'I'm wounded! You obviously never turned to the masthead.'

He published it. It was his. I laughed out loud, happy for him and deeply impressed. At the same time, I was confused. 'What are you doing, publishing a woman's magazine?'

'Why not?' he shot back. 'Didn't I always say I wanted to put out something for our people? Look. Women buy magazines. Women *read*. And brothers don't want to read shit like *FHM* and *Maxim*.' He lifted the latest issue of *Loaded* from the shelf and let it fall again with disdain. 'This is English Lad-ism propaganda, and I can't stand that shit. Most of the time, white guys skip through the girlie pics at the rack anyway and don't buy. Where's the profit in that? Fifty per cent of your cover price revenue goes to your distributor, so I'll be damned if I put myself out for browsers.'

'Fifty per cent?' I asked, astonished.

'Yep.'

He had taken business courses at night over the past three years. He had worked his ass off to put together a financial model to go impress Lloyds and Barclays and the Royal Bank of Scotland, and now the circulation audits gave him a quite respectable rating. In his briefcase, he still carried around the *Guardian Media 2* supplement with him on the cover—it was good PR to have it with him for sales meetings.

He suggested coffee, but if he hadn't, I would have. I liked how his confidence had never left him but it was tempered now by a self-deprecating humility born of experience. He smiled more often, and he had a nice smile. The eyes under the long lashes had warmth that I hadn't seen in them before. He asked politely about my work, and I sensed genuine interest. I mostly ducked his questions, embarrassed by my progress. I had a 'We'll let you know' from Discovery Channel, a letter of acknowledgement from Channel 4 and a flat 'No' from Canada's CBC. That didn't compare with a growing publishing empire. But he talked about his company as if he were an employee, not the founder.

'The designers are fantastic!' he said. 'I really have to bring you around and show you what they can do. Oh, and we just took over the office suite next door and converted it into a photo studio for the fashion shoots. It's really taking off.'

'I'd like to see the place, believe me.'

'You should consider writing for us, Faith. I know your thing is TV epics but if it's not *too* beneath you—' Flash of a cheeky smile here. '—I could boost my usual freelance rates for an old friend.'

‘By the word or flat fee?’

He laughed. ‘Hey, I said I’d boost the rate, I didn’t say I was an idiot. Flat fee.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

We shook hands, and he held mine for a moment. ‘It’s really good to see you again.’

‘Same here.’

He was so dynamic, so *together*. I found myself admiring him, and I knew that my admiration for someone was often the beginning of an attraction for me. Hell, I thought, it’s not like you weren’t going to break it off with Richard. Thank you, God! I rested my hand on the table, hoping he would reach for it again.

‘So first I’ll give you the tour—’

‘That would be great—’

‘And you can meet Sally.’

‘Sally?’

‘Yeah. I’ve been going out with her for quite a while now. Oh, shit, I can hardly call it “going out”—we live together. *Duh*. Sorry, sudden regression into male stupidity. I haven’t really lived with anyone before.’

‘Sounds serious.’

He nodded, smiling shyly. ‘Yeah, I guess it is. It is serious, but it’s *nice* serious, you know?’

I patted him on the shoulder and said, ‘Jesus, Tim, I don’t know if I can handle you all grown up.’



Sally. My friendship, my attraction to Sally, grew in stages. It crept up on me with its startling realisations. First there was the shock of Sally herself. White, blonde, younger than us by ten years, give or take one or two. After the introductions, Tim knew exactly what was on my mind. The second we had a moment alone together in his office, he responded to my unspoken challenge.

‘Oh, come on,’ he said sheepishly. ‘Intelligence allows for change.’

Sally. White *and* American. Flashing her sunbeam smile, and it wasn’t *How are you?* posh Hampstead tones or even Essex white girl screech. No, it was ‘How you doin’?’ I heard soft East Coast. And I thought: Boston? Virginia? It turned out to be Midwest, tempered by years of Manhattan.

Tim and Sally never talked about how they met, but he had hired her as an editorial assistant, and she worked part-time with flexible hours so she could go to theatre auditions and take the occasional television job. She was stunning. You’ve probably seen her, you just don’t know you have. Since she remains open about everything in her life, revelling even in her personal scandals, I can

mention she had a bit part on an episode of *The Bill*. She had a larger role in a Channel 4 movie. Sally is an excellent mimic, and she has a better ear for English accents than most Americans I know. She's certainly not in the Dick van Dyke league, and I'd actually put her ahead of Gwyneth Paltrow. It would be a while before I learned how an aspiring actress ended up leaving the theatre capital of America for London.

She used to complain about how people told her she had an 'angel's face'—that's a sloppy imprecise comparison. There was an elfin quality to her features, and framed by that golden hair, I saw how men infantilized her the same way they did with me because of my height—wanting to dress me up in the old school blazer and tartan skirt.

Slipping by degrees ever deeper into the orbit of the magazine staff, I began to appreciate her quirkiness. Getting nostalgic together once over New York, she confessed to me her vegetarianism could be undone any time by a Third Avenue hot dog, and she cracked me up with her version of a Brooklyn accent. Some days, I'd show up to submit an article in person that I could have emailed, and Sally would take my hand and start leading me in a dance to music on her headphones. It didn't matter that only she could hear the song—or appreciate Lyle Lovett.

'Penguins are so sensitive, penguins are so sensitive to my needs...'

Finishing up a mail out, she'd declare, 'Well, all's well that ends.'

She would drag Tim and me to plays, saying Tim went out of duty but Faith, *you* will actually get it. She would do ruthless imitations of the cover models who breezed into reception with their diva airs, but she would also come back from an audition depressed at being typecast again. 'I am going to end up as the oldest fucking ingénue in British television!'

Fridays, when I didn't have to teach, I'd meet Tim's editorial and production staff at an All Bar One, and I remember the night I really started to think of her as a friend. The talk at the table turned to sex, and the Welsh designer who was the crude sort remarked, 'Shagging shouldn't be such a big deal! But Christ, it's hardwired into girls' brains that it should be. I mean, girls always cry when they come.'

The girls at the table looked at each other. I kept my mouth shut since I'd been known to shed a few tears during orgasm sometimes. Stupid me, as if that could show on your face. The others were piping up now.

'What are you talking about—'

'That's not tr—'

'I don't always cry when I come—'

And then Sally above all the rest shot back: 'That's fair. Guys always cry when they *can't*.'

We nearly fell off our chairs and rolled around on the floor.

Tim and Sally. As I grew closer to them, I tried to include Richard. I did. The four of us went to a couple of movies together. I dragged him to one of Tim's rich pasta meals on a Saturday night, but he was always reserved around the two of them, pensive. Tim and Sally would give me looks in the kitchen or in the hall that said: *We're doing our best, but it's not as if the guy tries very hard.* To them, he was a conversational wallflower, a stuffed shirt. After dinner one night when I thought he was honestly making an effort, I coaxed him into sleeping over with me in the guest room. When I asked him the next week whether he liked my new friends, he furrowed his brow as if I had given him a calculus problem.

'They're certainly flamboyant,' was his terse verdict.

Then he described how he rose before me that Sunday morning on his way to the bathroom, and Sally stepped out, completely nude with only a towel around her hair, still polishing her arms with lotion. 'Morning, Richard,' she said absently, and on she went to her bedroom.

I told him: Hey, she's an actress. She's bound to be an exhibitionist.

And when I questioned Sally about it, she rolled onto her back on the carpet and laughed. 'Faith, what do I care if he sees me! Don't tell me *you* care?'

'No, no,' I said quickly, feeling ridiculous over the spectre of any jealousy, 'I just... I think you made him feel a bit uncomfortable.'

'Jesus, I think everything makes Richard feel uncomfortable,' she said.

By then, of course, I had an inkling of how little regard she had for Richard, and parading past him in the buff seemed to be a manifestation of her contempt.

I made one last try to include him. I managed to persuade Richard to join us on the weekend we all went to this cottage in Sussex owned by a white friend of Sally's. For a brief while, he was a good sport but that wasn't what I took away from the weekend. Games again. Tim came up with the clever idea of having a water pistol fight, only our guns were filled with red wine. There we were, ducking and weaving around the heavy antique furniture, and it turned into guerrilla warfare, boys versus girls.

We had ditched Tim and Richard outside and, squealing like children, raced back into the cottage. Sally said, 'Hide, hide!' There were quick footsteps at the door, and she pulled me into a closet, our trainers shoving back the Hoover and a toolbox and a brush and dustpan. Breathing heavily, trying to contain our giggling, and they still hadn't found us. We figured that even if they yanked open the door, we'd get 'em first.

Sally stood behind me, closer than she needed to, and it was remarkably hot in there. I felt her breasts through her thin blouse on the curve of my back, and there was a rattle as she accidentally kicked something in the recesses of the closet. She grabbed me around the waist as if she might fall.

‘Shhhh...’

She muttered okay and giggled again. So did I.

And she still hadn’t taken her arm away.

It draped around me, affectionately, reassuringly. It could have stayed that way as the gesture of a friend, only I found myself leaning back into her. I could smell her hair. I felt her cheek rest on my own. Two of her fingertips actually brushed my bare skin where my jumper stopped short at my midriff. I wanted her to do something else, anything. There in the darkness of the closet, I think I was almost ready to turn around to her...

The door opened, and we both jumped and raised our hands instinctively, and Tim whooped in victory. I tasted Cabernet in my mouth and felt it running down my nose. Gotcha.



Games. Two keep their clothes on, one of us must be nude for a whole weekend. That was how we would move towards the main event. Each of us takes our turn.

And she said, *Don’t look so nervous, Faith, I’ll go first.*



I began to hang around more at their house in Kingston-upon-Thames. I was writing regularly for the magazine now in addition to my teaching duties, and the excuse was that it would be more convenient if I just rode the train into work with them when I needed to come to the office. Never mind that it was actually quicker by minutes from Bethnal Green Tube. None of us cared that it was a fiction. I liked being with them, and they seemed to enjoy having me around. I didn’t even bother to invite Richard to join us any more or suggest we go on ‘double dates’.

There was only the three of us. Watching TV with a comfortable familiarity, my legs over Tim’s as we shared the couch. Or Sally asking if she could borrow one of my blouses. Tim naked to the waist and in pyjama bottoms first thing in the morning, Sally wearing the top and straddling him in a chair, and there was me, the only one in a robe when I came downstairs from the guest room. ‘Good morning, sunshine...’

All of our problems dissected by the three of us, Tim’s arguments with his business creditors, Sally wishing to be taken seriously by casting directors. Me working up my courage to finally dump Richard, even though it was taking so long.

Richard. Tim was outright blunt in the kitchen as he prepared dinner one evening. To be fair, the conversation’s honesty was fuelled by a lot of alcohol, Sally drinking gin and Tim and I having Scotch. ‘He’s fucking dull.’

Sally gave him a scolding slap at shoulder height. ‘Tactful bastard, aren’t

you?' Then with perfect timing, she turned to me and covered her face in rehearsed anguish, making an over-the-top sob. 'But he is! He is so fucking dull!'

'You both think that?' I asked. 'Really?'

She took a clean spoon from the dish rack and scooped up a taste of Bolognese sauce. 'Look. He is a good-looking guy, I'll give him that. Handsome face, okay build, nice package—'

'Live-in partner standing right here,' Tim put in, checking on the garlic bread.

'Please,' she answered. 'Like you feel threatened.'

'But?' I nudged Sally.

'But... I think you're lying back and thinking of England. A lot.'

'Wooo-hooo,' said Tim. 'You lecture me on tact?'

'Oh, my God,' I heard myself whisper. 'It's that obvious?'

'Oh, Faith,' she said and hugged me briefly. 'Sorry, honey, maybe we shouldn't talk about this—'

'No, I can take it, I—'

She shrugged. 'It's just that... Well, if you're keeping a guy around just to have a man, then he'd better rock your world if you're investing your self-esteem in him. I know you're having rough times lately, but he makes one poor mascot. You're drop-dead beautiful, don't you know that? You're amazing. Tell her, Tim.'

Tim stirred the sauce, smiling but not looking at me. 'She knows.'

Her hand on her hip, Sally laughed and said, 'I think what you really need is a slow, comfortable screw. And not the drink. Maybe I should loan my man to you for a night.'

'Excuse me?' said Tim.

'Oh, sure,' she told him, 'as if you wouldn't leap at the chance to do it with permission! On second thought, Faith, I'll take you to bed myself. You want a job done right, leave it to a woman.'

Tim chopped green peppers for the sauce and tossed a piece into his mouth. 'I still get to watch.'

I rolled my eyes. 'You'd sell tickets, wouldn't you?'

'Course not.' A comedian's pause. 'I'll make more money from publishing the photos.'

We both slapped him now. 'Hey, hey!' he protested. 'I *am* in publishing!'

In that moment, I didn't take either of them seriously. I leaned over and pecked Sally on the cheek, telling them, 'Thanks, guys. If I need to be ravished by anyone, it's nice to know I have choices.'

'At least show her what a real kiss is like,' said Sally, and she nudged Tim.

He turned to kiss her, but she steered him towards me.

'Sally...' I warned. 'We're getting...'

But I didn't back away. I watched him give her a look as he approached me, and something passed between them that I couldn't translate. I had only a flickering of understanding. I couldn't be sure at all, but did they...? Had they actually... discussed me already?

Too much booze. All of us. This was stupid. And dangerous. One of us would get our feelings hurt.

His lips on mine, and I already tasted the Scotch. Well, he must taste it from me. His eyes were closed. I opened my mouth first, and his tongue slipped in and under mine, and so help me, I closed my eyes as well, and we were suspended for a fragment of time. His lips like pillows, so gentle, his tongue dancing with mine, following my lead. I felt myself becoming wet. He was pulling me into him, and as the kiss died and we broke apart, I hugged him and rested my head on his shoulder. I felt guilty, knowing Sally was watching us, and yet I melted into him so that I could feel the reflexive hardness in his jeans. She had let me open this gift, and I wouldn't return it.

We ate dinner and didn't talk about it. We watched a video, all of us staying polite and quiet, none of us making our usual wisecracks about the plot or the poor acting or whatever. The elephant stayed in the corner of the room. We said goodnight to each other, and I noticed that for the first time ever they left the door to their bedroom ajar. Just in case. Neither one knocked on my door—*neither* one of them—but they were *together* behind theirs, making the invitation clear.

The next morning, I got up last, and they had already headed off to the magazine office. I had to teach class that day, but because I was such a coward, I left them a note. Unsigned, it informed them in a single sentence I WANT TO.

I so wanted to.



Don't worry, Faith, I'll go first...



Sally the first weekend. Making rice for dinner on Saturday night, and she bent down to collect a bowl from the cupboard under the sink. All at once, I had a rude view of the lips of her pussy. I hadn't thought of her that way before. I had thought of her mouth and her arms, the way her hair fell on her shoulders. She was sensual in my mind but still not sexual. Sally was half a head taller than me, and I was looking for a kind of sheltering tenderness from her. I had never had any doubt about what I wanted from Tim—dark brown chiselled muscles and his washboard stomach and his filling me. But with Sally, it was more... complicated. Perhaps I made it that way.

Sally in front of me. My fingers trembled as I put my hand on the small of her back, her skin warm. She turned.

'Are you okay?' she asked. 'You're shivering like crazy.'

'I want...' I couldn't say it. I couldn't say anything. I had never felt so embarrassed in my life. I'm not gay, I told myself, but I want *this* girl, and I want her man, too. 'I want...' Jesus, what was happening to me?

She took my hand and brought it to her mound, breaking our set rules, our rules that said the nude person wasn't allowed to touch the others. But she wasn't really breaking them, only bending them, only helping me touch her. I let her do it. She could have done anything to me in that moment, and so much for trying to pull off the sophisticated act through this. I wasn't the one who was naked anyway. Silly Faith.

I knelt down in front of her on the kitchen tile, my face close to her mound. She smelled sweet. Vegetarian, she laughed. Hey, I'm not trying to be crude, she said, but that's what it is. I brushed her lightly-coloured pubic hair, a white girl's hair, fine and wispy, not like my own thick black curls. I felt the strange, foreign texture, and she said *It's all right, I want you, too. We both want you.* And I understood the point of these weekends, to fluster ourselves, to get ourselves so hot and bothered that any last inhibitions were burned away, until we just lost ourselves in it when the moment came, and it was right.

But there were other things besides arousal. The two of us clothed—it didn't matter what combination of 'us' it was—would talk to the naked person and behave around them in peculiar ways. Naked, they took on a different role or even accepted one we assigned to them. Sally, so comfortable with her body, so open and trained in the language of movement, was our queen. She played the part, and we treated her accordingly. We waited on her. Do you want something from the kitchen, Sal? We'll make it for you. Tim: you comfortable, hon?

He took this professional massage course months ago, and he'd got pretty good at Swedish style and a few Japanese Shiatsu points. There were moments that weekend when I worried about being the third wheel, when the game seemed to melt away and they were a couple again. I should go read that thesis, I said nervously, jumping up from the couch.

'Don't you dare,' Sally mumbled into the pillow. 'Stay with us.'

Watch me, she seemed to say. Watch us. We won't shut you out. Be with us.

I made a feeble play at pretending to want to know about the pressure points. Tim took my thumb and pressed it hard into the muscle just under Sally's buttock. I pushed. She yelped in mock protest. I changed the pressure to a caress. I let my hand linger.



Tim wouldn't get the royal treatment on his weekend. Oh, no. When his turn came, Sally and I both acted like his weekend would be our revenge for dreaming up this whole thing, even though I'm sure both of them cooked it up

together. With no conscious thought, she and I settled on a different approach. We dominated him. We didn't need a silly S & M collar. It was... subtle.

Get those books for us, would you please? You're tall, baby. Do this chore, do that one. Sally would invite me to talk with her about him in the third person, with Tim standing right beside us. Feel that, she'd tell me, and she'd take my hand and place it on his cock, thick and long even while limp. Tim wouldn't comment, wouldn't take it as the start of anything. This wasn't foreplay, this was come-uppance, and he knew he'd have to be a good sport.

We didn't fondle him affectionately—we treated his genitals like toys. I stood toe to toe with him, my eyes only at the height of his chin, and I cupped his balls in my hand, feeling the fuzz of them. The rules of the game were that he couldn't touch me. Not yet. But I could touch him. Like an object. Like a possession.

It was Sally who set the tone that weekend, but it didn't take me long to dive in. I came into the bathroom Friday night, searching for the lipstick I'd left behind, and he was standing there shaving. Completely nude as required. He didn't even know how wet he made me, simply standing there over the sink, muscles flexed with no conscious pose, that beautiful rope of his penis hanging down as he went about a chore of basic masculine grooming. The white foam on his cheeks and neck somehow made the bareness of his chest and legs and ass more erotic.

He tried to keep cool, averting his eyes but saying, 'Hey, Faith.'

Trying to bluff me out. Standing proudly and perhaps thinking I would duck back because of the old programming of manners. I mean, what do you do when you walk in and find a person like that? Excuse me, pardon me. *No*. I marched over and ran my palm down his flat stomach, feeling the muscles of his six-pack. I let my fingers play in the forest of his pubic bush. He knew I wasn't doing it to tease him any more. I was letting myself be selfish. And the Faith of that weekend, the first sign of a Faith I barely knew, cupped his balls again and then brought her fingers to her nostrils. I smelled his musk. I held his eyes as I took my middle finger and smacked my lips on it.



The three of us came close to letting it explode on Tim's weekend. It was the Sunday afternoon when we decided to watch a video, and we interrupted it to make some drinks.

Sally laughed and said, 'You haven't seen him hard yet, Faith, have you? Shit, I thought he'd stand at attention for you first hour of Saturday! Oh, we can make him hard without even touching him—'

I didn't even see her coming. I was staring at Tim, who was still laughing and saying he wouldn't give us the satisfaction, joking and clowning, chanting maths

tables, five times twelve is... Then her hand was gently turning my face to hers, and she was kissing me. My hands flew up, empty, I was so startled. She was kissing me the way I had wanted her to for so long, and I pulled her into my arms. She eased back, gave me a second kiss just on the lips, her eyes darting to the right to say: look. Go ahead and look.

‘Tim’s lost already.’

‘Oh, my God,’ I said, and covered my mouth with my hand like a little girl.

His cock looked enormous. I could still taste her, but I was imagining him inside me. And the next weekend was my turn.



When I stayed at their place, I was always home the earliest, and I tried to ‘practice’ around the house. I was never more conscious in my life of the feel of my skin *against* things. The black leather upholstery of the couch stuck to my ass, and I felt ridiculous. A breeze from the window ruffled my hair and made my nipples hard. I thought of Tim inspecting me with his gaze, wondering if he’d like the shape of my breasts and my legs. I never worried about Sally’s acceptance. I don’t know whether that made me love Tim more because I was frightened of his reaction, or if I was more in love with Sally because of my trust.

My mind flashed back to the image of Sally bending over, only now I thought of *me* looking in that cupboard and the eyes of my friends on my flesh. I fantasised about what it would be like. Would they desire me? Maybe they would just take me, the two of them, and I liked the idea. I selected a CD from the rack and thought, *I’ll show ’em who’s not inhibited. I’ll do a striptease.* I spun around the house, dancing away, posing, examining myself in mirrors. I was nervous and yet so turned on, and I was going to retreat to the second bedroom because I needed to touch myself, but there was a key turning in the door—

Mad dash to the bedroom. Hey, you, both of them calling, it’s six.

‘It’s showwww-time!’ yelled Sally.

‘Coming,’ I said.

They gave me ten minutes. Then: Come on, Faith. From behind the door, I answered, this isn’t fair—you two see each other all the time. *No, no, no*, they laughed. You never saw *me* before, he said. You never saw *me*, she echoed. I didn’t argue, merely barricading myself in the room. I heard Sally pick up the plastic CD case and say, Oh, I love this album, and she started it up again on the stereo. My self-designated cue from an hour ago when I had nerve. I heard them outside debating the issue.

‘Maybe I better go in and talk to her,’ she whispered to Tim.

‘Look, if she was that scared, she’d skip back to her own flat.’

‘We shouldn’t bully her into this...’

That's what made me open the door. I hated my own fear.

I stood in front of them, silent, in my panties and bra. I was shivering like the day I touched Sally. She recognised this.

'You want us to help you?' she asked.

I nodded.

But the rules, forget the rules... Tim came behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, nuzzling my neck, protecting me, and I basked in the size of his chest that was now a backboard for me. I felt myself melt into him the way I had with her in the closet. Sally was murmuring something about not being afraid as she tugged my panties down, only I wasn't listening, I was stepping out of them willingly. Tim was massaging my breasts, my nipples squeezed between his fingers, and it was hands, all hands, his callused masterful ones on my breasts, and her delicate hands cupping my ass as she leaned her head against my belly. It was an embrace for three. So help me, I was so worked up, and I heard this stranger that used my voice say, 'Please... Cradle me, please cradle me.'

Sally ducked her head so that my legs rested on her shoulders, her hands still cupping my ass, and Tim sank to his knees and held my waist. I hardly ever masturbated. But my fingers worked a frantic rhythm on my clitoris, and I felt as if my thighs were soaked with my lather. I heard myself breathing hard and chanting, 'I need to come, I need to come...' I knew their eyes were on me, and I felt disconnected, floating away from myself, and I looked up and saw Sally, then Tim, both of them fascinated, and it pushed me over the edge.

Tim: 'Do it, love, do it. Make yourself come...'

Sally: 'Your pussy's so beautiful, I want to taste you...'

I screamed once and burst into tears. Release. Sally kissed my belly near my navel, and Tim leaned over and kissed my breast, and the aftershock of the earthquake hit. Cradle me, I was still pleading with them, cradle me, cradle me...