



Tame Mare

by Patrick Hyland

I've always felt quite content in my marriage. He knows what I like: photographs from the left, steak cooked a minute shy, and teeth brushed before any funny business.

He's a good listener too. Smiles and nods when I veer off on a tangent, the odd open question to keep the wheels turning. All the W's — except why. Well-trained. Uses a coaster on the walnut coffee table, wears a freshly ironed Oxford to dinner. Never forces the issue when I say I've a headache.

There'll be times I'll forget he's there. I'll turn over in bed and find him next to me, the nose hairs twitching like spider's legs, and I'll whisper the Lord's name in vain. An utterly unobtrusive man, with an altogether uninspiring presence. And it suits me just fine.

It's only when the lights flicker in the group chat that the stomach will turn. In the lead-up to anniversary season, they tend to lay it on thick. Flower arrangements, sparkly things, and landscape views from penthouse suite windows. The replies then: #couplegoals or #anotherblissfulear or #imnotcryingyouare, and the bile forms thick in the throat.

I'll peer across the room and he'll be sitting in his slippers — poring over a crossword, or a map of Eastern Europe, or a scale model kit of a Volvo S122 — and I'll turn off notifications and reach for the Gordon's.

You could scribble *Short-Term Amnesia* down in the calendar, next to *School Starts* and *Doctors @ 9*. Kathryn will put to the back of her mind his fondness for whiskey and accumulators, and the hole the size of an Australian Thoroughbred he left in their son's college fund; Jennie gets all fuzzy trying to remember the 22-year-old arts student she found in her ensuite shower during half-term; Laura struggles to recall her World Cup ritual of applying an extra coat of foundation to the left cheekbone.

They can be a right shower of hypocritical bitches when they want to be.

But I value their input, so every now and then I'll re-emerge. Press a thumb over Kathryn's latest selfie — the two of them all teeth and Ray-Bans — and tap the heart emoji. Swipe right on the photo and start typing: #g-i-d-d-y-u-p. Might be a bit triggering — #giddy, perhaps?

They'll see right through it, but I could do with a sounding board. I was loading the washing machine the other morning and found an envelope at the bottom of the basket. Held it to the light and caught the scent of lavender. A flick of the wrist revealed the word Bunny scrawled in slender cursive. Centre-aligned. The tail of the y curling upwards and arching back into itself, a supple sort of youthfulness that's beyond me. Lines so sharp I had to stop myself rubbing a thumb over the ink.

And the W's came thick and fast.

I'm stretched out on the ottoman, soles tingling with the warmth from the open fire. The cat's parallel to the hearth, the gentle rise and fall of the belly a sign of life. I drain my glass and draw little water circles into the walnut with a fingernail. The group chat's ablaze and I flip the phone face down. They can wait.

Holding the envelope between my fingertips, I flick one corner and watch it spin. Bunny is turning somersaults, and in a gin-soaked haze, the name mutates.

Funny. Scummy. Dummy.

With an eye half-closed, I make out the shape of himself, earlobe-deep in the bonnet of a 1963 Ford Cortina. The urge to confront is a feline snore. Tame and fragile, a child. If I could pick her up in my arms, I would. Grab him by the collar with the free hand and ask him why.

But I'd always rather be happy than dignified. And so I tear Bunny in half, discard her remnants to the flame, and tell himself to go brush his teeth.