

GIFT

Read the following short story, and then answer the questions about the short story that follow. The short story is approximately 8,000 words, and is called “Gift.”

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Gift

A clatter of pool balls. Smooth jazz playing on the speakers, whenever someone isn't using the juke box. I sit in the booth in the back corner, my usual outpost here, hunched over my big notebook, carefully making a straight vertical line in pencil, drawing in a strut connecting floor and ceiling on the first floor of my latest creation. I can see it all in my head already, all five floors, every room, every piece of furniture, every painting, every trinket on every shelf, and it's good to get it down. It's good to be working on the sketches. I like this stuff. Architecture. Pure fantasy. Scratching pencil lead, or, graphite, it probably is, onto paper. It gives me a chance to just be... no one. I don't hear any voices when I'm working on this. I can't even say I hear my own, most of the time. It's a weirdly effective numbing agent for the mind. Part by part, line by line, I am filling the page in.

A drop of sweat falls off of my brow and lands on the page, about where the third floor's guest suite bathroom will be.

Distracting.

I lean back, feeling my back decompress with little aches and tingles. I maybe hadn't realized just how long I was bent over that notebook, finishing off the previous building that I had started on yesterday. With a sigh, I grab a couple of napkins out of the dispenser on the table, and wipe the sweat off of my forehead, and off of the rest of my head while I'm at it, ears, back of the neck. My shirt probably isn't visibly soaked, only by virtue of the fact that it's black. The weather had been hot all week, but it's been the worst today—now tonight—, and the AC here in Ivory's hasn't been switched on all summer.

I reach over to the other side of the table, and grab my fruity drink, which is sweating as much as I am. The fruit punch-y, pineapple-y, rum-y taste is nice for sure, but tonight the fact there's ice in the drink makes it. I'd just as gladly be sipping on water with ice cubes, almost.

Drink in hand, its condensation making it feel like I just grabbed it out of a cooler, I turn in my booth, and look over to the bar. Presently there are two men there, each one to himself.

I look first to the one in the green tank top: he's drinking a jack and coke, and his body screams of athleticism, sore muscles that are contented to be sore, they've been given their workout; he plays on the college football team, he's having a good season but he's not doing well in his classes, one teacher in particular isn't cutting him slack like she's supposed to for a good player on the college football team, she might really screw things up for him; on his phone, which sits out on the bar in front of him beside his drink, he's looking through an ebook, open to his physics reading assignment for today, he's really not getting it, he knows he's going to have to backtrack through the book a long ways to catch up; shaking it up and going out to read at a bar has been a nice change of scenery but it hasn't helped him understand the material better. I wish I could help him, but, I've never been a science whiz myself, unfortunately. Not one of the gifts I have been graced with.

I look to the other guy at the bar, the one in the white collar shirt: he's drinking a beer; on his phone, he's looking through a spreadsheet; he supervises an assembly line that is currently producing little assorted nut snack things; it's going well enough for them, but he's going over all of the data he can about it,

making sure that there's not something he's missing that would give lie to it actually not going well; but, so far it's all checking out, it all does seem to be shaping up to be a really positive production cycle for them. He doesn't know it, since his back is to me, but I lift my glass up towards him and silently toast to his success. I then have another sip, and set the glass back down on the far side of the table from me.

As it so happens, I don't know either of these men—Terry and Jason, are their names. I'm a regular here at Ivory's, here most nights out of the week, back here in my booth. They're both first timers. I have never met them, here or anywhere else, nor have I heard of them secondhand. But I'm also not guessing when I say all this, about Terry's struggles in his physics class and Jason's studious interest in his team's figures. Nor am I guessing about the fact that Terry just took a sip of his jack and coke that hit him all wrong and has made him queasy.

I was twenty three, working in a movie theater and going nowhere fast in life, when it switched on like a light bulb. The ability to look at someone and read their mind. I think the first time it happened, I had been sweeping up popcorn in the lobby when I glanced up to my manager who was clear on the other side of the lobby behind the counter, and I heard her clear as day that she wanted me to hurry up and come take her spot because she was already working way over and her feet were killing her. I shouted over that I'd be over soon, because, I was kind of zoned out, and I'd thought, without thinking about it, that she'd said all of that to me out loud. And she never talked about it after, but, I realized that that didn't add up, that would be a lot of oddly detailed information for her to convey at a raised voice, and I didn't remember her voice being raised. I think that was the first time it happened. But, in any case, once it was on, it was on, and it got real overwhelming real fast.

Believe me, I thought I was a lunatic. I was pretty sure I had gone schizophrenic. But I did get a handle on it. And it took no stroke of genius to monetize this new gift either. I'm trespassed from every casino in Las Vegas, from the strip all the way out to the micro casinos tucked away all throughout the suburbs surrounding. But I made my millions there before leaving.

I reach across the table and grab my fruity drink again, have another sip of the cool cocktail, and then set it down again. I turn my head back down to my notebook as I hear another new person entering. I take up my pencil, and am back to scratching in the details of this same little room as I overhear the new man ordering a glass of whiskey.

I'm not even done with the next strut in this room before I hear him order a second glass, and I hear Liam, tonight's bartender, cut him off.

That gets my attention pretty quickly. I glance up at the man. He's standing there at the bar, dressed in black cargo pants and a black long-sleeve shirt, and a black scarf that I assume is for its value in fashion, and not as a way to keep warm in this stuffy bar that is already a furnace in this hottest summer weather.

This man just drank the entire glass of whiskey as though he was gulping down water after a jog. I can feel his stomach and throat burning, but indeed, he was completely genuine in his intent on having a second glass. He is trying to get d-r-u-n-k, and he knows what his limits are, and he would like to get to them. He usually drinks at home, and would be glad to tonight, but for the fact that he just woke up less than half an hour ago, saw it was late enough that all of the liquor stores would be closed on a Wednesday, and so he got dressed, and headed out for the part of downtown where the bars are. He realized upon stepping outside that he was overdressed, but he was on a mission.

I search for why he's trying to get drunk.

So, the way it works, basically, is that I have access to his mind in all of the same ways that he does. At a glance, I get all of his surface-level thoughts that he's thinking, right as he's thinking them. Hell, I don't even have to glance, really: if I'm in the same room as someone I can kind of hear it whether I'm looking or not. If I'm right next to someone I can definitely hear it. It's why I prefer the likes of Ivory's, instead of a place that gets busier. Crowded rooms get... very... very... loud. I was glad enough to get out of Las Vegas, I'll tell you that in a heartbeat. But, besides his surface-level thoughts, I can also attempt to recall things, basically as well as he himself would be able to recall things—actually a little better, because, while he may be a

layman in the art of thinking, I am for better or for worse a bit of an expert. So, no, I would not be able to pull the memory of his birth from out of his mind, because that memory does not exist anymore, the data is not there, no one has it, himself or me—at least, the birth as experienced from his perspective. Were his mother here, I assuredly could pull that one out. But, that's not the question at hand, anyways, I'm not trying to pull out anything nearly so far back. Trying to think for him about why he wants to get drunk, that is quite easy. And he won't know that I'm doing it, doing this information gathering. Right now, as I am digging deeper and learning that he's trying to get drunk because he is a pervert and feels deeply ashamed about it, he is completely unaware that I'm getting those thoughts from him, his mind is only on trying to weigh how many more bars are open down the street, and whether it will be worth it to try to bribe one more drink out of this bearded and unimpressed bartender in front of him.

He decides that he'll chalk this one up to a lost cause, and play the next bars a little bit slower. He glances down at the change he got for his first drink, which is sitting out on the counter. He takes the bills, and leaves the coins, and then turns and heads for the door.

I flip the covers of my notebook closed, drink the last of my fruity sweaty drink, and then stand up and head out after him.

As I'm going, I can sense my exit from a lot of perspectives. Through my own eyes and other senses, of course—my feet touching the ground with each step, my own sense of balance. I can also see myself leaving through Liam's eyes: he wonders how in the hell I do it. Every instinct in his thought processes tells him I'm a predator, but his conscious mind can't help but also remember his surprise that every time someone I've walked after has returned to the bar, they've been nothing but happy to see me again. I can also feel my exit in the peripheral awareness of the two at the bar, they sort of hear my footsteps and have vaguely noticed Liam's attention looking my way, but neither of them makes anything of it, they were more interested in the other guy who is already out the door, they're just paying enough attention to make sure there isn't trouble—good

instincts on both of them, some people are very dim and would not even be clocking that kind of thing subconsciously.

Stepping outside, it actually feels a little cooler than in the bar—I'm sure the weather hasn't actually improved any, but at least the slight breeze is, well, something. Chris's black scarf—his name is Chris—blows out to the side in a suddenly stronger breeze as he walks: I feel the breeze as him, and then a second later the breeze has arrived at me, and I feel it as myself too.

I start following after him, keeping my footsteps quiet—I am successful in that effort, I don't register in his awareness whatsoever. He's aware of the cars on the street beside us, but only because the headlights annoy him a little bit, having to walk with them coming the other way right next to him, blinding him. One of the cars honks, and he's annoyed that he can't see the situation through all the glare of the headlights, because if they're honking about him how would he know it anyways, and why would they honk at him anyways, he didn't do anything, dammit. These might not sound like flattering thoughts when I lay them bare like this, but, actually, they are exceedingly normal. Anyone else walking down this street would have better than even odds of thinking the same or worse. I stare at him as we go down the sidewalk towards the next bar, and I make sure I've fully understood the dimensions of his thoughts that I had started to unpack while we were inside.

He is in a dark place right now. He feels a huge amount of self loathing. He carries a secret that he hasn't told anyone else. He thinks it's a bad secret. He watches porn on the internet of animals. And he's seen a lot of it. He's seen videos of male dogs sticking it to men and women, he's seen videos of men sticking it to male and female dogs. Stuff with horses, stuff with goats, stuff with sheep. It seems like a fairly limited amount of this material has ever made it to the internet. I say that for two reasons. One is that I can see Chris has rewatched a lot of these videos, often when he's searching for them the same ones come up. The other reason is that I've seen these same videos before in other people's memories. I can't say I've ever gone to the web for that kind of stuff myself, but I recognize some of these scenes, a man on a bed sticking it in a great dane's pussy, a woman sucking a weird red dog cock as someone off screen holds it there for her.

By the time we're nearing the entrance to the next bar, I have gathered a lot. Firstly, that he has seen so many of these videos, and that's his secret, this is the only thing he gets off on and he's ashamed of it. His shame stems from the fact that so much of this material is rape, if not overt sexual murder, of the animal. He has seen videos where the animal is tied in restraints, and is trying to get away, but is forced. He has seen videos of men sticking it in a chicken, and while I can't find any memory of a video showing the chicken dying, I would agree with his thoughts on those videos, which are that the chicken in question seemed greatly pained and probably didn't have her health held in high regard by someone who would do that to her. Chris has also seen videos that he does not consider to have been abusive, where the animal seemed like he or she was having a lot of fun getting to fuck a pervy human. And I would agree with his thoughts on those videos too: in those videos, it does seem like the animal had a great time. I would go even farther than he has, and say that it's fucked up for his sake, and for the sake of people like him, that all of these videos, the abusive and the okay, seem to all be shuffled together on the websites he goes to as though they are the same kinds of videos, when they are really, really not. In any case, he still feels shame around those positive videos too, for the fact he can never talk to anyone about it.

Well, he thinks he can't talk to anyone about it. I'm going to get it out of him though. Helping people through their sexual damage by leading a good example is kind of my thing.

Oh, the other thing I have gathered, about Chris, is that his damage isn't anything worse. He's never raped an animal himself, he's never had sex with anyone at all, two legged or four. And as far as porn goes, animals are his sole interest, which, have no doubt, I've been in the thoughts of people who have seen worse, and I'll leave it at that. We are all flawed. Chris is flawed too, but he is not as far gone as he believes himself to be. And I would see him set on a better path. I follow him into E's, the next bar down the street from my usual post at Ivory's.

As he goes up to the bar, I loiter around inside by the door, grab a newspaper off a wire rack that's just inside, and make

some idle to-do about fanning myself with it. No one notices me much, I can say with confidence.

Look. I know how this comes across. Am I here to get my own rocks off? Yes. But if getting my rocks off on helping others is a crime, then I would submit that there are much worse criminals out there than me, your honor. It's true, I have used my gift as a means of getting around, and often times early on, it was a selfish interest, I will cop that every day of the week. But listen. Putting it in someone who's agreeable but distracted and not all that enthusiastic herself? It's sort of a bore, when half of the experience like it or not is in her mind too. I learned that if the other isn't over the moon, I'd have usually been better off staying home and pleasuring myself alone. On the other hand, tickling someone's most sensitive interests, letting them run free with their kink that they've never gotten to indulge in before, and reading them the whole time like I'm them, now that's something, and it's fun just about every time. Feet, spanking, role play, whatever their schtick is. Am I a foot guy? Not on my own. If I let a foot guy perv on my feet, do I feel his tinglies? You betcha.

Chris sits down at the bar. When the bartender gets to him, he orders a glass of whiskey, and sets some bills out on the counter. The bartender takes a couple of the bills and leaves the others, and gets Chris his drink. Chris does take his time with this one—at least, he does a better job of taking his time than at the last bar, where he more or less chugged his 90 proof glass. This time, he is taking measured pauses between his gulps.

I come forward, and have a seat next to him—not directly next to him, the bar isn't crowded tonight, so I leave one stool between us. I keep it light, order a beer. The bartender has it to me in no time, easy.

As I'm having my second sip, Chris is ordering his second glass.

The bartender looks at him. She's teetering on getting it to him or not. He almost has it, but then he ruins it for her by trying to grab his wallet out of his pocket, and stumbling off of his stool clumsily onto his feet. He still tries to hold out the money, but she tells him to take it easy for a little bit, and turns away.

I slide off of my stool and onto the one I'd left between us, and lean over to him all conspiratorially, and say, "They're strict around here."

He's pleasantly surprised to have someone on his side, but he leaps on it, and answers, "Yeah. I came here to drink, now they're not serving drinks?"

I suggest to him, "Probably too many lawsuits, from people who can't hold their liquor."

"Mannn I can hold my fuckin liquor, they shouldn't ruin it for the rest of us."

"You said it," I agree. I'm not even blowing smoke, too much. I do agree, different people have different limits. Some people could sniff what Chris drank tonight and not be responsible to be left unattended. Chris here, if he has his way, is barely warmed up. I ask him, and I actually haven't read his mind on this so I actually am asking him, "Do you like amaretto?"

He has no idea what that is, and takes a swing at answering, "I don't smoke."

I wear an amused little smile to myself, and tell him, "It's booze. It's 20% and it tastes like tootsie rolls. I have way too goddamn much of it in my fridge at home, if you wanna blow this place and hang out at mine, drink until we're silly, laugh our tits off watching dumb internet videos, that'd be a good night in my books."

I drink from my bottle as he decides. The bait is very strong, and don't I know it. I've just suggested one thing he knew he needed, booze, and another thing that I knew he needed but he didn't realize it until I brought it up, which would be friendship, comradery, a pal, someone to have fun with, hang out. He thinks about what the odds are that I might murder him, and he figures the odds are about ninety percent that I do, but he also makes up his mind that he doesn't care. I suppress a sigh at that. There are a lot—a lot—of depressed males walking this earth who would walk into something that might kill them just to prove a point, even if that point is something as petty as, "I knew it would, and I don't care." I am glad to see he has no intention whatsoever of killing me, though it is also a little sad to see he doesn't even think he would if I tried to kill him, he would probably just take it. But, it's good inasfar as I don't have

worries for my own safety, or for taking him to where I live. I have had to slip away from hookups in the past when I realized that that wasn't the case with some people who at first had seemed nice.

"Is your place far from here?" he asks.

"Up the hill, about three blocks."

"Really?" he asks, mind flashing to images of passing by the houses in that area, and recognizing that they are mostly mansions, not to mention the location, right on downtown.

I lie, and tell him I hit it huge on the lotto and am mostly just pretty bored these days. I do tell him the truth that my place isn't one of the huge houses you'd see from the main street, it's a more normal modern house tucked away down one of the residential blocks.

A short time later, we are walking across my front yard, up to the door. I fetch a key out of my pocket, unlock the place, and step inside first.

He steps in after me. In his head he is solemnly resigning himself to whatever may happen to him tonight, but that is quickly replaced with other more giddy thoughts when he sees my living room: there's the couch and TV, where I predict we'll be spending some time, but past that, I have a bunch of instruments set up, which immediately catches his interest.

"You play?" he asks, walking towards the equipment.

"Not uh," I start, and then I lose my train of thought. Normally one on one I'm better than this, but, let's say it is a learned and practiced skill to not get sidetracked when you're thinking for two or more. And Chris just got really excited at seeing all of what I have—keyboard, upright piano, guitar, bass, drum kit. He plays all of it. Some of his go-to's on each are rushing through his mind, he's eager to touch but wants to make sure I won't be bothered. I start over, "Yeah, I play."

It's actually more of a science experiment to me, or something akin to that. I have been in the thoughts of a great many people who can play musical instruments. Seeing someone's thoughts about something doesn't necessarily make me an expert in it. I took all of the normal math classes in high school, and just being exposed to the teacher talking about the subject did not make me automatically understand all of it

inside and out, I barely scraped by with passing grades—at the time I thought it was on pure luck, in hindsight I do realize that if high schools actually failed all of the students who didn't grasp the subject matter they were supposed to, graduation rates would be bleak. So, anyways, with this rock band setup, I'm not so much trying to pen the next pop hit or express my soul through music. I'm more-so seeing how much actually has rubbed off on me with this subject. How much I can access if I really put my mind on it. So far, the answer is that more of it has rubbed off than I would have guessed. For something I never had a knack for pre-mind reading, I've made a lot more headway on this than I have on calculus.

"Are you in like, a band?" Chris asks.

"I'm not against it, but no, I just play by myself. Notebook over there on that desk has some of what I've been composing if it interests you at all. I'm gonna grab drinks, feel free to play whatever you like if you want."

He is very pleased about the permission to touch the instruments and the knowledge that I am going to get drinks, and he actually is very passingly interested in my music as well, which is more than I would have guessed. He asks, "Sheet music?"

"Yeah."

"I'll check it out," he says, "but, I won't be able to play it without having heard it first. I only know how to, kind of read that stuff as a refresher."

He's not weird for that. That actually makes him pretty average among musicians. I give him a little play salute as I walk off down the hall, deeper into the house towards the kitchen.

Behind me, I hear the fuzz of the amp kicking on, shortly followed by some metal licks.

In the kitchen, I have a normal fridge, and then I also have one with a glass front that is more akin to what you'd see in a supermarket. In the glass-fronted one, there is, indeed, an absurd collection of booze, a large percentage of it being amaretto. It's a personal favorite. A bit like drinking candy that also makes you tipsy. I could drink the stuff all night every night, and, for some periods of time, I more or less have done that.

I grab two bottles, and a couple of glasses from the cupboard. Holding the glasses pressed between my arm and chest and holding a bottle in each hand, I return into the living room and all of the metal guitar sounds. Also returning into Chris's thoughts, he is pretty self-pleased that his guitar work is sounding good, he's aware it ought to be impressive.

Hey, as a budding musician who can't do what he's doing but can, directly, appreciate the talent that he's got behind it, sure, I'm impressed. I tilt back my head, and give him a loud, "AWOOOOO!"

He caps off his jam with a few fast strums, and then flips something on the guitar that turns it off—I hadn't been aware of that switch, and I make a mental note, that seems handy to know about.

I sort of make a show of slightly lifting the glasses and bottles in my arms.

Chris sets the guitar back on its stand, and comes over.

"Take either, should be the same," I tell him.

He grabs a bottle and a glass, freeing me to hold my own in each hand too. With two *pop!*s, our bottles are open and we're each pouring our first glass.

He's wondering if he should say anything.

I help him out, and make a toast: "To a fun night."

His mind blanks for half a second, but he smoothly enough retrieves the appropriate response: "Cheers."

We clink our glasses, and then each have a big, long drink.

Hits. The. Spot.

I start walking past him towards the upright piano, and I mention as I go, "More where that bottle came from whenever you want. Your pace."

"That is, a dangerous offer," he says honestly.

"I trust you," I say, less honestly. I do trust that he has a good sense of his own limits, I got that off him pretty much right away, but I also got that he has a habit of pushing them. So, I don't trust him, but I do trust that if I have to cut him off, he'll inadvertently tell on himself.

I take a seat on the piano bench, and set my glass and bottle on the ground beside myself.

I say over my shoulder, “I know I promised something to the effect of watching silly internet videos, we can get to that of course. Humor me with a song first?”

He’s stoked, but gives a subdued, “Yeah. What did you have in mind?”

As soon as I turn forward to face the keys, I feel him secretly —“secretly”—down the rest of his glass.

I pick up my own glass for another sip to keep up, and answer, “Improvised, play what comes to you. Original, something you heard, whatever you’re feeling.”

“Sure.”

I lay the bed of a comfortable, approachable piano melody, to see where we go from there.

Competently, he finds the key we’re in, and lets a few chords drone out at opportune moments. Then, after the melody has come around a few times, he stops with the droning and starts up a chugging on the guitar, dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn, and I sense that he wants me to give him more to work off of. I throw in the flourishes he wants—exactly the flourishes he wants, little stings on the high keys here and there and switching up the rhythm to something more... he thinks of it as ‘jazzy,’ I don’t know if that’s right, but certainly something more shaken up than what I’d started on. We play back and forth, it’s a dialogue, and he’s into it. He’s having memories of himself in high school and another boy with curly brown hair, Caleb, the two of them a few times found themselves alone in the band room—some kind of detention? I can’t break this flow to unpack it completely right now—but he and the other boy played instruments back and forth and really, really, almost magically, seemed to be able to communicate their intentions back and forth, and play more or less exactly what the other had hoped would be played. This is reminding him of that. As we’re going and the notes are flying, Chris launches into one of the movements of Freebird, and I cackle with amused joy, not letting myself slip up, seizing this victory of musicality by the horns.

When his solo is over, I start letting us glide to a gentle landing with this, letting things ring out.

He is very emotionally open right now. Let loose from standing tight and upright in public, he is getting to make loud music, show off, flourish, he could do a lot of things he normally wouldn't be in a habit of right now.

I get up from the piano bench. As the last of his chords is still ringing in the air, I stand up, walk to him, and over the humming guitar, I lean in for a kiss. He reciprocates, although he's never kissed anyone before, he doesn't fully know what to do being this close with another person's face, doesn't know what to do against another human's weird rubbery muscly mouth and lips, against my stubble. He's curious to try it though, for a little bit.

I don't dwell on it though. As he's getting towards really over thinking it, I back off.

He's still very open. If I started unzipping his pants, he wouldn't say no—I can say that very confidently, because he is imagining me doing just that, and he would very much like that, less for the pleasure of it even, and more for the sake of not being a virgin anymore. He wants to be rid of that label, to not have to call himself that. He would like, when other people talk about sex, to not have to think about it as some kind of hypothetical.

And I could give that to him. And I might. But, later. If I can behave myself, that will be something for if we meet up again on another day. Tonight, I want to help him with the other thing. The porn thing.

I slink an arm firmly around him, a sort of hug, my hand going up across his back and resting on his opposite shoulder. But I say to him, "We eh, might have skipped the part where we talk about this first."

He gives a little laugh at that.

I ask, "Am I getting ahead of myself?"

He does think that I am very much getting ahead of myself, but that he's glad I am. Even still, he becomes embarrassed at the idea of being the one to suggest it goes any further. Sheepishly, he suggests, "We could... do more..."

I slink off of him. He switches off the guitar again, and as he's putting it back on the stand, he awaits me setting the bar for where we're going to go, what we might do, what's on the table.

Oh hell, I'm a sponge, what's on the table for me is quite a lot more than what there would have been before this gift, before I was more or less forced to be at least halfway into what any person I'm around is into. But, again, I make sure not to forget myself, my intentions.

"How about this," I start. "Are you gay?"

He immediately flushes at the prospect of having to answer that. Many, many, many, many images flash across his mind of seeing male humans and male animals doing each other in the butthole or sucking each other off. It's also not lost on him what he was just about to be down for, with me. But somehow, the idea of getting off to human males with animal males, or the idea of himself being swept up in the moment with another man, somehow all of that jars with the idea of "being gay." The label isn't one he feels is quite appropriate to himself. There is another one he has settled on, a while back, that is a bit more vague, a bit more apt for him.

He tells it to me: "I'm kind of more pan than gay, so I mean, kind of gay."

I go and retrieve my glass and bottle, and he does the same. As we're each topping off our glasses again, I say, "How about this: I don't want to seem like I'm taking advantage of you. Got you drunk, and all that."

He is quick to chime in at that, "Oh I don't feel like you were —"

"I know, I know," I tell him. I am though: I am getting him drunk.

I sigh. If I were to stab someone on the street with a knife, that would be assault with a deadly weapon. If I were a surgeon and cut someone open with a scalpel to perform life saving surgery on a patient, that would be me doing my job. I like to think of what I do as somewhere admittedly in the middle of those two things, but a lot closer to the life saving than the assaulting. I *am* doing this with the intention of saving him—suicide has crossed his mind a lot more than it does most people's. And I may not have a degree, but by whatever unknown forces, I have been given the role of world's biggest authority on what other people are thinking.

So yeah, what I do is sleazy. What surgeons do is gruesome. Sometimes some people are allowed to do things that other people shouldn't. Hopefully the end result is for the better.

I have a sip from my refreshed glass, and tell him, "I'd like to know you better anyways."

That sets him on edge, social nervousness prickles his skin.

"What you're into," I add.

That is a relief in his book, for a second, and then he actually thinks about what he is into, and now it's making him nervous again. He takes a gulp from his drink.

As he drinks, I suggest, "If you wanna get off, we could each have a seat on that couch, and you can pick something to put on that you're into, and we can watch it together, drink our drinks, make a night of it. How's that?"

No longer wanting to be on the defensive, he forces a little smile, and asserts, "I don't know what you're into. People have a large variety of limits, and stuff. I don't want you to be bored, or like, freaked out."

He says it thinking he is the biggest freak in the world, so anything I might suggest I'm into, he can match it.

"I like to explore new things all the time," I tell him, and then I sip my drink. "You won't freak me out."

He is hyper aware that I did not answer his implied question about what I'm into, and he does indeed call me on it: "Name your favorite thing."

I tell him, "I don't want you to feel like you have to conform your interests to my interests. I look at a lot of different stuff. No shame. None. Lately I've been looking at a lot of furies. You know them?"

He is unbelievably stoked that we are even in the same ballpark. Worst case, he figures, we watch some furry stuff, and he'll have an okay enough time getting off to that, he won't have to be faking it too much, not nearly as much as if we watched something human-on-human.

He is not able to stop himself from a huge smile, and tries to half cover it with his glass as he says, "Yeah I know what furies are," and then he has a drink. In his mind, he is picturing a couple of videos he's seen of someone in a fursuit getting mounted and fucked by a dog.

He notices his hardon is pressing against his pants. I can feel it too.

“Care to get more comfortable?” I ask, glancing down at his crotch and back up to his eyes.

He wanders over to the couch, and sets down his drinks. “I’ve never JO’d with another guy before,” he tells me. “I don’t know what’s, like, polite, I guess.”

He briefly considers if he’s really doing this, and then he decides it sounds fun and he definitely is, and he peels down his pants and underwear and kicks them off, and is ass naked on one side of my couch, still wearing his shirt and scarf, his prick completely stiff. I join him, sliding off everything from the waist down too, and taking a seat on the other side of the couch.

I grab the TV remote and press the power button, though this TV takes a little bit to load up.

He asks, “So you wanna watch furry stuff?”

“Nah hotshot, I wanna watch what you wanna watch.”

“I uh, don’t think you do.”

“If I don’t I’ll tell you you were right. No harm in suggesting it.”

That first part, laying it up to him as a challenge, really lands with him. I’ve given him his permission, his excuse, to tell me something really wild and out there.

He comes out with it: “Animals. Actual animals. Bestiality videos.”

What a weight that is, taken off his shoulders. It’s like it has been a mission, for years and years, to keep that information a secret at the cost of anything else, and now the mission is done, and if I but let him know it’s alright, then he will be able to truly relax for the first time he ever has. I have been in the minds of people who at one point in their lives sat accused in a court of law, in a trial that really could have gone either way, and so I know what the feeling is, when the jury has come back with a verdict, but the verdict has not yet been read. He more or less feels the same way, after revealing that about himself, and now awaiting how I am going to take it.

With an amused smile, I say, “Oh, alright,” and I take a sip of my drink.

Chris goes straight for his bottle, and takes what in his mind is a victory drink. I'm glad for him. He's earned that.

I press him, "Is that your thing?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty hot, alright," I say, and begin toying with myself. "What kinda animals are you into?"

"Um. Dogs, mainly."

Nodding, I say as though learning all of this for the first time and being very intrigued, "Okay, okay. Got a website for that or anything?"

"Are you sure you want me to look it up?"

"Yeah, that's fine," I tell him. I go to the web thing on my TV, and hand the remote over to him. It occurs to me then, we are missing something. I say to him about the bestiality website, "Look that up, I'll be right back with lube and more drinks."

With a smile, looking back and forth between the remote and the TV screen, he says, "You got it."

I step away from the living room very pleased with the way this is going, glad for Chris, and looking forward to the rest of the night. We'll watch some videos, we'll bust, and when it's all said and done, I think my companion for the evening will have been all the better for it.

I skedaddle up to my bedroom and grab the basket of assorted lubes that I keep on the dresser. I think back on all of the memories I have been privy to of Chris jacking it. From his muscle memory of how the container on his lube works, and the knowledge of what it feels like when he rubs it onto his shaft and how it holds up in practice, I actually know exactly which kind he uses, it's one of the very common store brands. But—professional poker player here—coming back downstairs with just that kind for him and just my kind for me would be a tell. Maybe not much of one, it could be a coincidence, but by this point, I don't want to give him any kind of prompt to question how I know things. I return down the stairs with the entire basket, stop back into the kitchen for a couple more bottles of amaretto as well, and then with my arms full return once more into the living room.

Chris is sitting there leaning back into one corner of the couch, stiff as ever, giving me a smug grin. I turn to look at the

television, and there indeed is one of his bestiality websites that he's called up. I nearly lose my balance, coming back into his presence, like stepping from solid land onto a rocking boat: he has downed the rest of his bottle, and is definitively drunk.

I set everything down on the ground in front of the couch. We have a giggle at all of the different kinds of lube I have—some stuff is good for some activities some stuff is good for other activities, what can I say. He does grab the one he usually uses and tells me as much, but then he asks if I recommend something different. The one he usually uses is fine.

Lubing my own tool, I start to stroke it as I face the screen. Chris, absolutely thrilled to be doing this, starts doing the same, with the remote in his other hand. He starts navigating through the site.

I say to him, "Wow, so many videos. I didn't know so many people were into this. Which of these do you like?"

He highlights a few for my interest, telling me this one looks to be a man taking it from a male dog, that one looks to be a man giving it to a mare, et cetera.

We make a night of it. Everything goes according to plan. We watch through some videos and he is utterly euphoric, firstly just from watching the porn itself, secondly from the booze, and, thirdly, as a new twist for him, the acceptance he feels within himself, what was once a shameful knowledge in him is now a smug knowledge, he is my teacher, or so it is good for him to believe. We both bust. He eats his without thinking about it, and then is briefly mortified at the idea that he might have just done something that would ruin my opinion of him, but I stick my tongue out at him and then eat mine too. I order us pizza, we each take turns washing up in the bathroom. Chris learns my name when the pizza guy says it: Dean? Yup, Dean here, thank you. Over pizza, Chris and I chat some more about the videos, what's out there. I lay the seeds for a better path for him. Are there others like you, I ask him. Are there communities. Basically, hey, I see there's a lot of porn, obviously some people are making this and even more people are hounding after it, so to speak, so what's the deal, why don't I ever seem to see people talking about this, do you not have any friends who are into this. He intends to look into all of that. He doesn't tell me so, he just

goes along, says yeah I don't know, it's weird, it's fucked up that things are like this, I don't know what to tell you. But he is looking forward to seeking those things out.

After our food, we go for a second round of watching through some videos. Chris helps me—"helps me"—steer clear of the videos that seem abusive. We chat openly about that, ah, no I hate that, I just want to see everyone having a good time, we agree.

After we've each finished a second time, Chris is very sleepy—he thinks it's because he didn't get enough sleep earlier, in my expert opinion it would be because of the orgasms and the large amount of food earlier and the booze, but what do I know. I get him a couple of blankets, and he falls asleep on the couch.

In the morning, he is gone.

I hope to see him again down the road.

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1. Is Dean a reliable narrator or an unreliable narrator? Why do you think so?
2. Dean justifies his actions by comparing himself to a professional surgeon, rather than somebody cutting people open at random. Are Dean's actions in this story actually ethical?
3. What comparisons can be made between Chris's sexual interest in animals as a human, and Dean's sexual interest in humans as a mind reader?
4. Dean appears to possess a very large amount of amaretto, which he describes as being 20% and tasting like tootsie rolls. Does this say anything about him? Why or why not?