

The Red Room

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Darrell

1. The first time I went to the red room was on a Sunday night in August last year—the first time I met Darrell. I was wearing a navy T-shirt, a black turtleneck, a black corduroy skirt, brown riding boots, and a long camel coat. By the time we got to the red room, I was walking up to strangers and saying, “Hey kid, you wanna see a dead body?” at which point I would open up my long camel coat to reveal my own, undead body. No one thought it was particularly funny. Or maybe Darrell did; I don’t remember it very clearly.

Earlier that night we had been to the Agincourt Hotel for something called “Synth Sundae,” in which someone called “Dom” was playing. Darrell knew Dom and so we could get in without paying. Most of the acts weren’t that interesting, and I hadn’t yet started asking kids if they wanted to see a dead body, so Darrell and I spoke about marriage instead. We all went to Bar Broadway afterwards: Darrell, Dom, one of the other acts from the night, a schizophrenic, and me. The schizophrenic man lit cigarette after cigarette, indoors, and so we all did. When he left, Darrell, Dom, and I piled into an Uber and went to the house in Stanmore that housed the red room.

In the red room I took off my long camel coat and my brown riding boots. We drank Passion Pop in the living room while watching *Peep Show*. When the third episode finished I stood up and walked back to the red room, where my long camel coat and brown riding boots were waiting, bringing Darrell with me. I took off my black turtleneck and my black corduroy skirt. Throughout the night, if one of us needed water or to piss or whatever, the other would wrap around them when they returned to warm them up again. I liked how the red walls didn't dull or fade when the light outside changed.

2. The eighteenth time I met Darrell was in Melbourne. I had gone to see The Jesus and Mary Chain play their seminal album *Psychocandy*, live in a dreary Melbourne setting. Darrell was there just because he had gotten cheap flights. We met on a Sunday night in March this year. I was wearing a high-waisted black leather skirt that reached my knees, a navy gingham children's paint shirt, and single-strap black Birkenstock sandals.

I met Darrell at The Grace Darling Hotel, where our friend Michel Rowland was playing. Because we both knew Michel Rowland we could get in without paying. Darrell and I were both wide-eyed and frenzied because we had been cooped up in Sydney for so long. That we could have a drink or get into any bar or club we wanted to without a time restriction was overwhelming; we drank excessively in celebration.

Darrell saw a third person he knew—a man who looked like me—and began to tell a story in which he had attempted to call the man who looked like me out for drinks last night, but it wasn't the right phone number. He was laughing hysterically and kept saying, "The last interaction I had with you was not with you."

No one thought it was particularly funny, and I wrote it down for later.

When Michel Rowland finished playing we all walked from Collingwood to Fitzroy to eat ramen. Darrell and I left to get to the house he was staying in; there, I took off my black single-strap Birken-

stocks and my black leather skirt. Throughout the night, if one of us needed to drink water or piss or have a cigarette or whatever, the other would wrap around them when they returned to warm them up again.

3. The fifth time I went to the red room was a Friday night in March of this year. I was wearing a white linen shirt, grey cotton shorts, and black Teva sandals. Darrell and I met at Tandoori Hut in Enmore at ten that night. Darrell was reading Michel Rowland's self-published novel. I don't know if he had paid for it.

Darrell had already ordered and I had already eaten. He ate and I watched the cricket playing and we left at eleven, walking through Enmore and the backstreets of Stanmore to get to the suburban house where the red room was housed. I don't sleep, so I didn't think that eleven was unwholesome. Darrell doesn't sleep, so he didn't think eleven was unwholesome either.

In the red room I took off my black Teva sandals and touched the red wall. I had painted my nails a similar colour, an ode, and I liked watching my nails dull and fade as they slid over the red walls.

I went to the living room, where Darrell served me red wine and scotch finger biscuits. He played *Speaking in Tongues* by Talking Heads on a record player and danced while I read a magazine. I put on his sunglasses and looked so sinister that I had to ask him if he wanted to see a dead body. We both thought it was particularly funny.

We went back to the red room and I took off my white linen shirt and my grey cotton shorts. Throughout the night, neither of us got up to piss or for a drink of water or whatever, not even for a cigarette. We often slept together just like that—you know, for convenience. We held each other anyway—you know, just because it felt more natural than not holding each other. I thought about the sentence I had written down a week ago: "The last interaction I had with you was not with you." I watched the red on the walls move and strengthen as the light outside changed.

4. One night late in an endless summer, when clothes would no longer dry because of the humidity, and it didn't matter anyway, because when you put on new clothes your sweat would dampen them immediately, I went to the Carlisle Castle in Newtown to drink beer, eat peanuts, and wait for winter. I went with an old friend named Andy, and, while we sat there, Darrell's housemate Greg walked in. Greg was a friend of both Darrell and me, but not a mutual friend. Living with someone creates a different bond. I knew him vaguely. Greg told us that Darrell would be arriving shortly. We decided to start a pool game to give our unplanned reunion a sense of purpose.

There were men at the table next to us who would leer at me when I bent over to take a shot. Sometimes they said things to me that I couldn't hear. Darrell told them that they weren't funny, that no one was laughing.

I agreed to go and see the red room again, and to see the new chickens that Darrell and Greg had rescued. Someone decided to play *Disintegration* by The Cure but all I could hear was the beating of a bass drum. I laid down in the red room and was terrified of the walls, saw them close in on me, saw them dance to the drums in a way they shouldn't have been able to do. I knew they wanted to hurt me; I began to see them only through a mass of my own hair. I let go of everything that was inside my body on the white linen sheets and Darrell called my parents. The next day I asked him to recount everything that had happened, but all he could tell me was that he could not wrap around me or keep me warm. I told the Carlisle about the men at the pool table next to us but they weren't there any longer. For a long time after that, Darrell and I did not speak.

Sam

1. The first time I met Sam was on a Friday night in December last year. I was at the Bald Faced Stag in Leichardt, where a friend of Darrell and me hosts live music weekly. Tristan always hosts the events for free, so you don't have to know him to get in without

paying. I had gone alone, because my friend Ana was in Vietnam, and because I knew I would know enough people there. If you go to enough “underground” music events in any city you will begin to see the same people, and I saw the same people around a pool table.

Tristan asked me if I wanted anything to eat, because every Friday night the Stag allotted a small tab to the band that Tristan booked, but the band this week comprised four very strict vegans. He told me it included beer as well, so I accepted. “Resch’s refreshes,” I smirked. Tristan was competing in a pool game against someone I had seen once but never spoken to. He had had a cleft palette when he was younger and his hair was receding. He always wore polo shirts and never seemed penetrated by his surroundings. A few nights before I watched him guest program the show *Rage* with the rest of his band. There was a huge storm happening and Darrell had come over, drenched to his core, under the pretense of needing shelter. We didn’t notice what time we fell asleep, and we hadn’t noticed when we’d woken up either, but the news featured live coverage of the Paris bombings.

I didn’t tell Sam that I recognised him.

2. The first time I saw Sam was on the last Thursday of November last year. The house that I shared with a friend was at the bottom of a hill and was prone to flooding, and so one of us would usually stay awake during a storm. There was a storm out, and my friend was in Melbourne for the weekend, so the privilege was mine. I was sitting on the couch, eating Nutella with a spoon directly from the jar, when I received a text from Darrell. “How far is your house from Redfern?” he had asked. I told him it was impossible to walk.

“How far is your house from The Erko?” he asked thirty minutes later.

“I’m there now,” I said. I told him it was just down the road. Five minutes, tops.

“Gimme shelter,” he had said. I sent him a location and then sent him an address. It took him forty-five minutes to reach me.

“Hello.”

“Hello.”

“Can I come in?”

“Yes,” I said. “What happened?”

Darrell told me the storm had started when he was walking to Redfern Station after going to the pub after work. He had texted me then. I wondered why he didn’t take the train to Stanmore, to the red room, where he lives. I wondered why he felt it was necessary to tell me he had been drinking. I could tell. He told me he could have just taken an Uber, but he felt that once he committed to public transport as his route he had to finish his route on public transport, and then he asked me if I wanted to watch *rage*. I wondered why he had come over at all. I wondered what he wanted.

The band guest programming *Rage* comprised friends of Darrell’s. He told me this twice before telling me the episode was a repeat. He asked me if I knew Sam and I told him I did not. I fell asleep during *Heaven or Las Vegas* by Cocteau Twins and woke up to live coverage of explosions in Paris. Darrell woke up two hours later but did not want to watch the news. We went to get coffee instead.

3. The last time I saw Sam was two weeks ago. He had wanted to meet me before going on a tour of Europe and America for a month. I didn’t want to meet him because all of our meetings up to this point had been about how difficult it was for him to accept that his last relationship had ended. Sam had told me a story about how it’s okay to be vocal about thoughts and feelings—and that I had taught him that. Sam told me that, because I had taught him that, his thoughts and feelings had slowly based themselves on my thoughts and feelings. I didn’t believe it, but agreed to see him anyway.

“Have you thought about the zine idea?” Sam had asked. I told him I had. I told him I had a lot to say, and he laughed for a very long time. When we said goodbye he shook my hand.

Later that night, Sam sent me a link to *Pink Orange Red* by Cocteau Twins. It made me cry, so I responded with a link to Joan Didion

reading excerpts from *Blue Nights*. For a long time after that Sam and I didn't talk.

Ana

1. The first time I met Ana was in the last Tuesday of June last year. I had bought four tickets to see Marina Abramovic deliver her keynote address at the Roslyn Packer Theatre in Walsh Bay, and Ana had come along, as a friend of a friend of mine. Because I couldn't think of a fourth person to invite, Ana was the one I invited. Ana asked me what I did in my spare time, and whether I had a job. I told Ana I was never specifically employed, or not employed in a proper sense, and she laughed because she never had been either. I told Ana I spent most of my time sitting on a mattress that sat on the floor in a house in Camperdown, reading Nabokov and trying to produce a worthwhile thesis about the use of time and photographs in *Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire*. Ana told me she spent most of her time sitting on a mattress that sat on the floor in a house in Marrickville, and that she spent most of her time reading a German architecture journal so she would have something to talk about during class.

Ana and I decided to have a cigarette before the talk began while our mutual friends went inside to be seated.

I told Ana about how my mentor professor had asked why I don't dress more professionally, when he himself was only ever seen in novelty T-shirts with old book covers on them: *Lord of the Flies*, or *The Metamorphosis*. I told her how he had asked me why I was always so jovial, why I should not present myself more seriously, and why I had now decided to speak to him in short, abrupt sentences instead of the conventionally long sentences I had used before. I told her that he had asked me why I didn't perk up, and whether I was actually enjoying writing a thesis.

Ana told me a similar story in which she had spent the majority of her honours year supervised by a professor who continuously flattered her. And although it *was* flattery, it was also a kind of malice. She had decided to change her thesis topic, as well as her supervising professor,

three weeks before her due date. She had not regretted it. She had sent her former supervisor a “thank you” letter for the time he had spent with her for the majority of the year, but he had never replied. She had not regretted that either.

At the end of Marina Amramovic’s keynote address we all went to McDonalds. It was all that was open that late.

2. The fourth time I met Ana was on the last Monday of October last year. We had decided to meet at Lentil as Anything in Newtown. Our mutual friend had just left for a nine-month trip around South America before which both of us had been reliant on her to pass the time. We were both hoping we could now rely on each other to pass the time. Ana asked me what I had been doing in my spare time. I told her I had just been dumped for the first time and that, consequently, I wasn’t doing anything much at all, although sometimes I’d go out with a friend named Darrell, and maybe drink too much. She then asked me why I thought I had been dumped, and I found the question refreshing.

Ana told me she hadn’t been doing much with her time either, and that she didn’t know if she wanted to do anything. She told me a story about a time when she was thirteen years old and had been in a bitter mood all day. She was in the car and her father had asked her if she wanted to get a soft serve from the drive-through at McDonalds; Ana had just shrugged in response. Ana told me that her dad had stopped the car on the side of the road and turned around, telling her, in a voice between a whisper and a yell, that if she wasn’t happy at this exact moment, in this exact situation, then, “well,” she “would never be happy.”

Later on, Ana and I walked to the Dendy to watch *The Lobster*, a dystopia set largely in a hotel on an island where people of a certain age are sent to be coupled, because, in the future of the film, being outside of a relationship has become illegal. The people on the island had either reached a point where it was expected that they should be married, or were recently bereaved or divorced. There was a line in the

movie that struck me; it referred to the protagonist, who had himself just gone through a divorce, and it went something along the lines of “he didn’t burst in to tears the first time someone told him they didn’t love him anymore, and he didn’t consider that would be normal.” A few months later I told Ana that I thought about this line a lot.

3. The last time I met Ana was on the second Friday of May this year. By this point, I had long lost count of how many times we had met before. I was waiting in line at the Bald Faced Stag in Leichardt for a mini-festival hosted by Tristan. Darrell and I both knew Tristan, but no one that night could get in for free. I was wearing a red turtleneck and a black leather miniskirt with monochrome black low-cut Doc Martens. Ana was wearing a white linen dress she had bought from a factory outlet in Melbourne.

That night I told Ana about Joan Didion’s book *Play It As It Lays*—about how I wanted to get a snake tattoo on my forearm as an ode to the novel, since a snake appeared on the first edition of the book, symbolising danger or men, or danger *and* men. When the headline band played, the crowd pushed both Ana and me too close to the front and we were separated. The singer of the band took his shirt off, and I noticed one of the men next to me smell my hair. The singer of the band was Sam. On the drive home we went through a McDonalds drive-through and ordered soft serves.

Ana left on a scholarship to Venice the next day. She was exhibiting at the Venice Biennale, on a scholarship she had received through the architecture faculty at university. The Internet in Ana’s apartment was dismal at best. For a long time after that Ana and I did not speak.

