

The View From Here

Music up

Twelve jurors file into a room. Stand together, to offer their verdict:

Not Guilty - media response to the case projected into the space.

Shadows in the jury room. A reverse excavation, moving through time, bringing the room to its current state.

The jurors file back into the space, preparing now to leave. This thing is finished with, but their lives have not yet kicked back in. They are caught in this in-between space, uncertain how to negotiate their ways through it.

As some make their departures, it becomes apparent that others are in no hurry to leave.

Terri is busy with her phone, Leighton hovers, as if overseeing the departures. Jonathan observes, perhaps with a hint he is judging people. Toni settles into a seat, breathes deeply, then slowly exhales. Kim moves to her, gentle and maternal in her manner. Henry and Esther remain on the fringes, apart, unable to either settle or leave.

Kim Are you all right?

Toni Yeah. Just...

Kim I know.

Toni No, it's that, *pauses, smiles at the admission, conspiratorial*, the babysitter isn't expecting me for another hour.

Kim I'll get you a coffee.

Esther also moves to the drink dispenser. Leighton grows anxious.

Leighton I'm not sure we're allowed to stay here.

Esther I'm just getting a coffee.

Jonathan moves to her.

Jonathan How do you drink that?

Esther I'm a student. I can't afford real coffee.

Jonathan Yeah you can. Just cut back.

Esther I have one a day. Cutting back would take me to zero.

Kim moves past, smiles at Esther, gets a coffee for Toni.

Kim Sugar?

Toni No... Two.

Leighton I think we're meant to clear the room. They just asked us to pack up our belongings.

Kim We'll go if they ask.

Leighton looks uncertain.

Kim You don't need to stay, if it makes you uncomfortable.

Leighton No, I should.

Jonathan You're not the foreman now.

Kim sits beside Toni.

Kim You have photos?

Toni shows her on her phone.

Kim How old?

Toni Eighteen months.

Kim She's gorgeous. What's her name?

Toni James.

Kim I'm sorry.

Toni It's fine.

Kim He has beautiful hair.

Toni Yeah.

Kim Is he like his father?

Toni Hope not.

Silence. Kim sits uncomfortably as Toni drinks her coffee.

Jonathan takes a piece of screwed up paper from the table and shoots it at the bin, misses. It lands at Henry's feet. Henry scoops it up and throws it back. All eyes on Jonathan as he shoots again. It misses by even more. Henry takes the paper and drops it in the bin.

Henry You have far to drive?
Jonathan Sorry?
Henry You said you lived up on the coast.
Jonathan Forty minutes maybe - traffic will have died. New road helps.
Henry Be good to live at the beach.
Jonathan Yeah, it is.

They settle into silence, all aware that these little sputterings of conversation are heard by all. Terri sits, takes pen and paper and doodles. Leighton watches over her shoulder. He checks his watch.

Jonathan moves to a pizza box, opens the lid.

Jonathan Anyone want the last piece?

No response. Jonathan eats it down greedily. Terri checks her phone. Looks to Esther.

Terri You'll know how these work, right?
Esther Maybe.
Terri I'm using a lot of data. My son told me I should turn things off, but...

Esther takes the phone.

Esther How old's your son?
Terri Twenty five. He's in Sydney. Thank you for this. He's very busy, he's a lawyer now. I don't like to waste our Skype time on little things.
Esther Here, it's under Settings. Then just go here, and this one. You set that to on.
Terri Once more, show me again. Slowly.

Terri takes out a notebook, makes a laborious copy of the relevant screens.

Leighton moves to the door, peers out into the corridor. Closes the door carefully, as if intending for them to remain undiscovered. Henry watches, smiles. The others don't notice.

Jonathan How about you?
Henry Sorry?
Jonathan Take you long to get home?

Henry I'm just up in Brooklyn.
Jonathan You walking?
Henry My flatmate works in a bar downtown. I'll go and wait there, get a ride back with her.
Jonathan I had a girlfriend worked at a bar. Used to give me free drinks.
Henry Nice.
Jonathan Til she got caught.
Henry They fire her?
Jonathan Nah.... She was sleeping with the manager.
Henry Right.

Leighton sits at the head of the table, in what was probably his chairman's seat. We see him searching for a conversation starter. When he speaks, it is in the manner of a pronouncement.

Leighton I start work at six tomorrow.

An awkward beat, as all wonder whose duty it is to ask.

Toni Is that normal for you?
Leighton Saturdays it is. There's an early delivery on Saturdays. The ports still aren't fully operational, after the earthquake, so it comes down overnight on rail, out of Tauranga. They have the spare capacity. It's just me. I unlock the warehouse and then the freight company do the drop off. Our warehouse guys come in at seven thirty, it gives me time to scan it all, for the inventory... I don't have to. Technically my shift starts at seven thirty.

He looks around, as if expecting praise.

A Court Official enters. Leighton leaps instantly to his feet, like a naughty school child caught in the act.

The Official moves around the table, picking up pens and unused writing pads.

Official Everybody okay in here?
Leighton We're just... we're just waiting for rides.
Official That's fine. There's no hurry.

The Official leaves.

Terri checks her phone.

Esther also attending to her screen.

Esther Well, it's everywhere.

Each turns to their screen - a private viewer of the breaking news. The case has caught the nation's attention.

The weight of what he has read pushes Leighton back down into his chair.

Esther is visibly shaken. Henry moves across to her, offering a plastic plate on which sit the four remaining biscuits. Esther shakes her head.

Henry Yeah, I know. What are they doing putting fruit in a biscuit?

Terri We used to have them at home, when I was a child. They were the only biscuits we were allowed in the house.

Kim And chocolate wheatens. Do they still have chocolate wheatens?

Nobody seems sure. But this talk of biscuits, somehow universal and unimpeachably neutral, has fired a moment of sharing.

Kim They do, don't they? I think they do.

Leighton I don't know what they are.

Kim They have chocolate on one side, and weird biscuit on the other. It's, it's grainy. Unpleasant. You wouldn't eat it, without the chocolate.

Jonathan Like chocolate digestives.

Kim A little bit, yeah.

Henry And chocolate thins. My grandmother always has chocolate thins.

Toni It's old people, isn't it? They prefer biscuits that only have chocolate on one side.

Esther looks at Terri.

Terri What are you looking at me for?

Toni You're the oldest here.

Terri Thank you.

Henry It's like they feel the need to ration their pleasure.
Esther Who?
Henry Old people. You know, because they... Doesn't matter.
Leighton I like squiggle tops.
Toni I ate two packs of them once.
Leighton Amazing, right?
Toni I don't really like them.
Kim I just realised where I know you from.
Terri Sorry?
Kim I knew I'd seen you somewhere, but I only just remembered where.
Terri Okay.
Kim At university. You work at the university.
Terri Yeah.
Kim You didn't teach me, but I used to see you. You had a scooter. I parked
 next to you sometimes. Up by the medical centre. It's stupid, but I
 remember your helmet. You have a yellow helmet.
Terri Bright yellow. Sorry, I don't remember yours.
Kim Neither.

*Terri checks her phone, as if it might provide her with an escape from the conversation.
Kim just seems pleased to have finally placed Terri.*

Esther What did you lecture in?
Terri Sorry?

*Jonathan has moved to the far end of the table. He leans over and picks a notebook off
the floor. He holds it up.*

Jonathan Is this anyone's?

People look, shake their heads.

Leighton What are you doing?
Jonathan Just curious.
Leighton You can't do that. It's not yours.
Henry Whose is it? Does anybody know?
Leighton It's an invasion of privacy.
Terri That was Hamish's seat... The trainee cop... Wore a rugby shirt.
Jonathan He was called Hamish?

Terri Yes.
Jonathan He didn't say much.
Esther What did he write?
Leighton I'm not comfortable with this.
Kim So leave.
Leighton We could vote.

Leighton is ignored. Jonathan sits at the table and begins to flick through the notebook. Kim and Esther join him immediately, one on either side. Leighton stays at the far end, resolute. Terri looks away, feigning disinterest. Toni is of two minds initially, then moves to the notebook. Henry doesn't move, but nevertheless pays close attention to the proceedings.

The notebook is passed around and read silently. Clearly it is a single passage that has gained their attention, and as they read it they are affected, indeed repulsed.

Leighton I told you not to read it.

Kim reaches across the table and takes Esther's hand.

Kim It doesn't mean we were wrong.

Esther is unconvinced, is disappearing into herself.

Henry We all agreed.

Esther snatches back the notebook and storms over to Henry, thrusting it into his face. She walks away.

Esther *Almost to herself* I didn't know it was going to be like this. I thought it would be different.
Leighton What sort of different?
Jonathan Let's not do this.
Kim Why not?
Jonathan It was unanimous. Forget it and move on.
Toni So why are you still here?
Henry I thought it would be more like television.
Esther Me too.

Kim turns to Terri

Kim What do you do?
Terri Me?
Kim At the university. What was your job?
Terri I'm a professor.
Kim In what?

Terri pauses. She would rather not say.

Terri I'm a criminologist.
Jonathan You should have told us that.
Terri Why?
Jonathan It might have helped us, knowing you were an expert.
Terri It's not the jury's job to be experts.
Jonathan You knew more than us.
Terri The judge told you all you needed to know.

Jonathan leaves it, but it is clear he is not happy. Others also seem challenged by Terri's revelation.

Silence. Again, people finding something to focus on.

Kim I'd like to talk. I'd like to talk about what happened in there.
Jonathan This is a mistake.
Kim That's your opinion.
Jonathan I actually know a little bit about this.
Kim Okay.
Jonathan I'm a life coach.
Kim Is that even a real thing, a life coach?
Jonathan It's my job.
Kim Some people work as magicians. That doesn't make magic a real thing.
Jonathan If I thought you'd listen, I could help you discover where that hostility's coming from.
Kim Yeah, I got a fair idea.

Kim turns away. Again, a difficult silence. Still nobody shows any sign of wanting to leave. Henry moves back to the biscuits. Takes one.

Esther They good?
Henry Awful. Want one?
Esther Sure.

Esther takes a biscuit. Toni is struggling with something she needs to say.

Toni He told us what to do, didn't he?
Henry Who?
Toni The judge. He told us what to do. (*To Terri*) Is that normal?
Terri He told us what to focus on. It's normal.
Toni But he told us our personal feelings should be put aside.
Leighton That's what you're meant to do.
Toni I know.

The new tension sits with the room, unaddressed.

Esther I don't think you can.
Henry What?
Esther Put your personal feelings aside.
Jonathan You're meant to try.
Esther That's not what I mean. We... we were asked what a reasonable person would assume. I don't know how you get to reasonable, without your personal feelings.
Jonathan Well, you reason.
Toni It seems too much to me. It seems too much to ask.
Esther I wanted to be able to say yes, maybe that's reasonable, but you can do better than reasonable. Raise your sights.

Kim When's your babysitting expecting you?
Toni She's pretty flexible. Charges by the hour, so...
Kim Tell me about it.
Toni You have kids?
Kim No.

Jonathan is restless. He has something he wants to say. He is clearly afraid to say it.

Jonathan Can I just say something. And don't take this the wrong way. I just...

He looks around, loses his nerve.

Terri You can talk.
Jonathan I just - we're not mind readers.
Terri Who?
Jonathan Us. Men. You can't ask us to read your minds.
Toni *Gentle, resigned.* Just trying to read our faces occasionally would be a start.
Jonathan Okay, sorry for speaking.

The moment of tension has fractured the room. People find their excuses to look away, to shuffle to another position, another task.

Terri Where do you work, Kim?
Kim Advertising... That's got nothing to do with this.
Terri With what?
Kim All of this.
Terri I know.

Leighton tries, awkwardly, to lighten the mood.

Leighton I saw a documentary, where, I think it was a university maybe, in the States, where you had to get signed consent if you wanted to have sex. The woman actually had to sign a piece of paper. Even if she agreed to sex, even if she started it, you could still be prosecuted if she hadn't signed the contract.
Jonathan That whole country's a mess now. Look at their president.
Terri I'd actually be okay with that.
Henry Trump?
Terri Signed consent. I don't think that's a terrible idea.
Jonathan *Uncomprehending* That's ridiculous.
Terri Why?
Jonathan Because, you know...

He looks around, expecting more support than he sees.

Jonathan It'd sort of ruin the mood. 'Here you are darling, just a little bit of paperwork'.
Henry Might just be the way you say darling.
Terri People used to say that about condoms.

Leighton Would it even count, if you were drunk when you signed? Wouldn't that be a problem?

Terri Shouldn't that already be a problem?

Leighton You ever been to Courtney Place on a Saturday night?

Terri I was there last weekend. I went in to pick up my daughter. She's nineteen. Her and her two friends - one of them was so drunk the others had to help her into the car. And if she hadn't had them there, if they'd become separated... I remember looking at them in the rear vision mirror, three smart, strong, wonderful young women, painted dumb with make-up and alcohol, and outside, young men on the street circling like sharks. A part of me... I wanted to say to them... This isn't what we fought for. It isn't what we had in mind, when we marched for you.

Leighton *Quietly, to Henry.* What marches?

Henry Feminism.

Leighton Oh.

Terri You've heard of that, right?

Leighton Yeah, I've got an auntie who's a feminist.

Terri Okay.

Leighton What? What did I say?

Jonathan shakes his head, the older male, warning the young cub off from this particular hunt.

Terri returns to her phone. Looks puzzled. Esther is glad of the distraction.

Esther More phone trouble?

Terri No, no, I'm just, I'm not sure what this message means. I ordered a ride home.

Esther Do you mind if...

Terri passes over the phone.

Terri I haven't used Uber before. There are questions, about the conditions for their drivers, but my friends say it's so...

Esther When did you order the ride?

Terri When we came in here. But I don't know how I find out when they'll arrive, or how I'll know... I should just order a taxi. But I don't want somebody to be left waiting outside. Should I just go out there?

Esther Yeah, you don't want to wait outside.

Terri Why not?
Esther Well, it's cold. And you haven't actually ordered a ride.
Terri There was a confirmation button.
Esther Yeah, it looks like you signed up.
Terri You have to, don't you?
Esther As a driver. You signed up to be a driver.
Terri Okay, I didn't want to do that.
Esther No.
Terri Am I going to get people calling me now, wanting rides?
Esther Calling you?
Terri You know what I mean.
Esther You're fine. I'll delete it.
Terri Thank you.

Jonathan I've got a mate who drives for Uber.
Henry That how he signed up?
Jonathan Says it's good. A good way to meet people.
Henry I guess.
Jonathan You know, you're driving, have a bit of a chat. You like what you hear, you ask for a number at the end. It's good. You single?
Henry What? Um... *Aware others are watching, interested in the response.* Yeah, you know, at the moment.
Jonathan You should sign up.
Henry You're meant to ask the customers for their phone numbers.
Kim They'd kick you off the list.
Henry If they found out.
Kim Which they will, as soon as somebody makes a complaint.
Jonathan Why would you complain? He's not forcing anybody to give them his number. It's an option. He's giving them an option.
Toni Some women are going to be pretty uncomfortable being asked.
Jonathan Why?
Toni Because... It doesn't matter.
Jonathan Okay.

Jonathan moves back to the table, picks up Hamish's notebook, flicks through. Not clear if this an attempt to provoke or simply escape the conversation.

Esther I'm tired of it, you know?
Henry Of what?

Esther Just... I don't know. Everything. I was in the supermarket yesterday, I needed apples and a toothbrush. I don't like crowds. There's a thing about that many people, an awareness of the weight of them. It was busy, just before dinner, people rushing to get home, and when it's like that, I put my eyes down. I just, you know how you smile at strangers, and that's good, right, it's lovely, I think you should, but there's something about that interaction that depletes me. I need time to recharge between smiles, I have a crap social battery. So I'm navigating the aisles by following my feet, playing truant from the world, but now in the supermarket they've put advertisements on the floor. You can't walk down the aisle without stepping over a half naked woman, selling some shit you put on your skin. And I just feel like, I feel like I should be able to buy a toothbrush and a bag of apples without stepping over half naked women. Do you know what I mean?

It is Leighton she looks at, at the end of this speech, just because he is the first in her line of vision. Confusion wrinkles his brow.

Leighton Um... No, not really.
Kim Don't look at them if they offend you.
Esther Yeah, I... I don't think offend is the right word. It's more...
Terri Exhausting.
Esther That's closer.

Leighton stands, walks across to the plate of biscuits and takes the last one. This act of movement has unintentionally draw every pair of eyes to him. He turns, surprised at the attention.

Leighton What?

No one speaks. There is nothing to say.

Leighton People never take the last one. My father had a store, in Eketahuna.

The connection between these two statements is unclear to all but Leighton.

Henry Is that where you grew up?
Leighton He told me that. He told me people never took the last thing on the shelf. If you wanted to sell the last item, you had to buy in more stock.
Henry Right.

Leighton It's not in other countries. It's a New Zealand thing. We think if we take the last one, the next person to come along won't be able to have any. It makes us feel selfish.

Henry But if you don't take the last one, it's going to waste.

Leighton He used to bring things home, if he couldn't sell them.

Kim Because they were the last item?

Leighton Or past their sell by date. I was brought up on the things other people didn't want.

Esther Is that a metaphor?

Leighton I don't think so. I didn't really pay much attention in English. I liked science. I would have liked to keep doing science.

Terri It's not too late.

Leighton I have my career to think of now.

Leighton smiles, delighted to have had this attention. The others are lightened, too, by the chance to attend. The mood lifts. Kim turns to Terri.

Kim I don't think it's my fault. I wouldn't do the job, if I thought it was my fault.

Terri I don't think it's your fault.

Kim But you don't like advertising.

Terri Not particularly. No.

Kim I think that's unfair.

Terri You might be right.

Kim I have a four year old niece. I took her shopping for a sweatshirt, for her birthday. And you get to the shop, this children's shop, you walk in the door, and immediately you have to turn left or right. If you turn left, it's all browns and blues, you know - tiny little imitation-working-man's-jeans, checked shirts and t-shirts with trucks and trains on them. Clothes made for moving in - for jumping and running and climbing trees. But if you turn right, you're assaulted by an explosion of pink and purple: a mutated fairyland finished in fake fur and sequins. Clothes for standing still in, for looking pretty, for advertising the little girl as a thing to look at. I get it, you know. I get how fucked up that is. I'm not insensitive to the problem.

Terri Of course you're not.

Kim But you looked at me. When I said I worked in advertising, you looked at me.

Terri I'm sorry. I wasn't aware of that.

Kim Yeah you were.

Terri Okay, a little.

Kim I've got a photo in my lounge that my grandmother gave me, and it's of her as a little girl, with her family, all posing for the photographer, and okay, the clothes are different, and the hairstyles are different, and the poses are different, but it's that, it's that same thing. It's the little girl smiling like an angel, saying to the camera, please look at me. Please tell me I'm beautiful. It wasn't us, you know? It's screwed up, it is monumentally screwed up, but it wasn't us.

Terri No, it wasn't.

Kim But?

Terri thinks about this, considers not answering. Takes a deep breath.

Terri But... when you see something screwed up, aren't you supposed to try to change it?... And maybe now it's your turn.

Kim turns away, not happy with this but not ready to argue.

Jonathan What do you think?

Leighton Me?

Jonathan Yeah.

Leighton About what?

Jonathan This. All of it.

Leighton I don't know what this is. I don't know what you mean.

Toni Don't.

Jonathan Don't what?

Toni You're bullying him.

Jonathan Really?

Toni Yeah.

Jonathan Okay. But here's the thing. There are things you don't want to hear.

Toni Me?

Jonathan Women.

Toni Yeah, we sign a pledge on our thirteenth birthdays, things we don't want to hear. We like to keep it consistent.

Jonathan See what you're doing? You're fighting it already.

Esther What things?

Jonathan You know the bullshit part? I can't say them. That's how you do it. You make it so we can't say it.

Kim Yeah, we're magic.

Jonathan They don't need to be, do they Leighton?

Leighton I don't want to get involved in this.
Jonathan Yeah you do. That's exactly what you want. It's what we all want, right?

Leighton looks away. There is an edge to Jonathan now, a cruelty that speaks to some sadness he can not name.

Henry If there's something you want to say, just say it. If you don't want to, that's down to you. Nobody else.
Jonathan You seriously think they won't judge me, if I say what I'm thinking?
Terri Well, without knowing what you're going to say...
Jonathan He knows.
Henry What?
Jonathan So does he.

Leighton looks completely uncomfortable. Somehow he does think he's imagined himself inside Jonathan's head.

Henry If there's some male telepathy club going on here, I was never sent the password.
Jonathan Grow some balls. The password is grow some balls.
Henry You're full of shit.
Jonathan Okay.

Jonathan walks away, picks up pen and paper. Begins to idly doodle. Kim stands, moves towards the door.

Kim Well, I guess somebody needs to start this... Good to have met you all.
And thanks. Thanks for not making this harder than it had to be, eh?

Toni moves forward, to hug her. This could be a one-off thing, an acknowledgement of their connection, but Terri stands and embraces her too.

Terri I don't think it's all advertising.
Kim I know.

Now there is a strange social obligation on Esther to embrace Kim, and at this point the only unspoken decision is whether the men will also hug her goodbye. Henry moves forward, breaking the ice. Leighton is last in the queue. The manner of the embrace

speaks loudly of his loneliness, his lack of connection. Kim absorbs this fact, unable to leave, Jonathan finds the opening he was waiting for.

Jonathan You ever been to Courtney Place, Leighton?
Leighton What? Sure.
Jonathan To do what?
Leighton Just, you know... bars and stuff.
Jonathan At night?
Henry Leave him alone.
Jonathan You're the one who dared me to speak my mind.
Leighton I...

Eyes to Leighton, loaded with an understanding of what is to follow. Sympathy.

Leighton I don't go out drinking. I can't... I'm saving for a house, For the deposit.
Going out is an easy way to spend money you can't afford.
Kim Good on you. We tried to get a deposit together, it was beyond us.
Leighton I don't mind living further out. And I'm good with my hands. I can do it up
myself. The thing is just to get your foot on the ladder. I've worked it out. If I
start low, and move up once, ten years in, using my capital gains for the
deposit, I can be mortgage free when I'm fifty. Or reduce the payments ten
years in when it's... It's more expensive, when you have kids. That's when
you want to be able to dial back the payments.

Jonathan doesn't need to say anything. The others have heard all they need to hear. But Jonathan moves forward, predator now. Although his tone is gentle, his intention is clear.

Jonathan When was the last time you went out with anybody, Leighton? When was
the last time anybody touched you?
Kim Could you be any more of a shithead?
Jonathan See what happens, when you speak your mind?
Henry When your mind's connected to your arse.
Leighton Last Easter.

The room turns, horrified that Leighton might be prepared to answer this. Esther attempts to provide physical cover, standing before him.

Esther Leighton, you don't have to -
Leighton I went home at Easter, to see my mother.

Esther In Eketahuna?
Leighton Dad died two years ago. The store's still there. The town formed a trust, because they didn't want to lose it.
Esther I'm sorry.
Leighton I like to get back, when I can. She knows a lot of people there, but I think she still gets lonely.
Esther It must be hard.
Leighton She hugged me, when I left. That was the last time anybody touched me, apart from a hand shake. Seven months ago... I get lonely too.

Toni moves forward, to hug Leighton. He shrugs her off.

Leighton Don't!
Toni Sorry.

Nothing to say in this silence. Kim moves back into the room, sits. In doing so, she signals the acceptance that there is a conversation to be had, that this is why the seven have lingered. There is no excuse now not to talk. Jonathan looks Kim in the eyes.

Jonathan You're not the only victims.
Kim When did I ever say I was a victim?
Jonathan 'Raise your sights.'
Kim Okay, well that wasn't me.
Jonathan You think it.
Kim Actually, yeah, I do think we could raise our sights. All of us.
Jonathan And what exactly is it you think women need to raise their sights to? I'd be interested to hear.

Kim pauses, thinking.

Jonathan Yeah, I thought so.
Kim *Uncertain* We could all be kinder.
Jonathan Yeah, we could all be kinder.

Jonathan turns suddenly, as if his own emotion has taken him by surprise. He leaves the room quickly, no goodbyes. Henry moves, about to go after him.

Esther Let him go.
Henry Nah, I think that's his bag. He left his bag.

Terri That's his phone. He's coming back.

They stare at these items that guarantee his return, aware they now sit in a holding space, a chance to catch their collective breath.

Henry moves to get himself a drink of water. Esther follows him. They speak quietly, to one another, but are aware the others can hear them.

Henry So, how's your faith in the justice system holding up?

Esther It's my faith in humanity I'm trying to cling to. Sorry, that sounds... pompous.

Henry Passionate.

Esther Thank you.

Henry I'm not sure I did anything.

Esther It's what you didn't do.

Henry Okay. Well, I'll just keep not doing things and let you think the best of me.

Esther He's just so... people get so angry. And I go quiet when that happens.

Henry Probably for the best.

Esther But... You know, I was actually excited, when I found out what the case was about. Not... sorry, that sounds sick, I don't mean -

Henry I know.

Esther But, I now feel like such a fraud. I study this. I am writing a thesis on violence against women. I felt like I had something to say. I felt like this was my chance to contribute. But, when people get angry, I go quiet. And when people talk about this, they always end up getting angry, so there's no point is there, knowing anything, thinking anything, if you let yourself get scared silent every time anybody disagrees with you.

Henry Does anybody ever change their mind as the result of an argument?

Esther How else do you do it?

Henry I don't know. Walk beside them, until they're used to having you there. Eventually you take another path, and they trust enough to follow you.

Esther You're an optimist aren't you?

Henry That's just another word for coward, isn't it?

Esther You noticed how that happens? How everything's just another word for something else.

Henry Words huh?

Esther Bullshit.

Henry Yeah.

A silence long enough for Kim to feel she has permission to intrude.

Kim What would you have said, if you'd been able to? What did you want to say?

Esther I don't know.

Henry It's okay. Nobody's going to shout at you.

Esther looks at him, uncertain of this. But she takes the plunge.

Esther You know what, there's this phrase I kept hearing in the here, and I counted how many times it was used. Sorry, I don't mean to sound like I was using you for research, but I got to thirteen. Thirteen times people started their sentences with 'You can't expect men... You can't expect men not to notice what a woman looks like. You can't expect men not to interpret that as a come on. You can't expect men to know what women are thinking...

And it seems to me that's the problem. It seems to me we really don't expect much of men at all. We just take these habits, these lazy, unambitious habits, and we treat them as immutable truths. We've bought into this stupid reductive lie, that every little baby born with a penis is fated to be aggressive and competitive and, well, predatory, that this unambitious package of adjectives defines his very nature. And if that's what we expect, it's what we're going to keep on getting. At some point we're going to have to raise our expectations.

She looks to Leighton and Henry, self-conscious this might have sounded like an attack.

Esther Sorry I don't mean for that to sound insulting. It shouldn't sound insulting. It should be more insulting if I didn't say it.

Henry places his hand on Esther's shoulder, a moment of unguarded approval and connection. She turns, surprised but not uncomfortable. Smiles.

Kim What did you mean before, about it being our turn?

Terri We did what we could. Now you do what you can. That's how it has to be. Maybe this time you'll have more luck bringing the boys with you.

Kim turns to Toni, notices she's gone very quiet.

Kim You all right?

Toni Yeah, just, you know. A long day, right?

Kim You want to get home? You have a lift?

Toni No, I'm... I'm not ready to leave.

Kim Okay.

Esther You didn't tell us what you do.

Henry Me?

Esther Yeah... Student, Advertising, Lecturer, Distribution Manager, Mother, Life Coach... That's not really a thing is it?

Terri God I hope not.

Esther And mystery man.

Henry I, it's nothing. I just... you make something up. It doesn't matter. What you make up will be more interesting.

Esther Scuba diving instructor.

Henry Yeah, sure, that'll do.

Esther Nah. You're afraid of small places. You get claustrophobic.

Henry Where do you get that from?

Esther It's the price you pay for not telling us. We get to mould you.

Kim He has a fruit stand, downtown. Sells fruit to the office workers at lunchtime.

Esther You've seen him?

Kim No, it'd suit him though.

Henry I'm sort of offended you're not guessing lawyer or nuclear physicist.

Esther Yeah, you would have told us.

Henry I don't know. Nuclear physicists can be socially shy, a lot of the time.

Leighton He's a gardener.

Esther Okay, I can see that.

Leighton No, seriously, look at his hands. Or a farmer, but farmers have a different walk.

They look at Henry anew. He holds up his hands in surrender.

Henry Okay. Got me. I garden. I have a contract for some of the retirement villages. It's good. I like the outdoors. Obviously, I study nuclear physics in my breaks. There's a lot of good thinking time.

Esther Why didn't you want to tell me that?

Henry You're writing a thesis. She's got a PhD. He manages a whole, I don't know, what is it?

Leighton Distribution centre.
Esther It's not a very good thesis. I'm probably going to have rewrite the whole thing, after today.
Henry Okay. Well my gardens are amazing.

Toni Can I tell you something?
Kim Of course you can.
Toni This is stupid. I'm not one of those people who wants to tell complete strangers every detail of my life, but...
Henry We're not complete strangers.
Toni I know. Thank you.

They wait. Toni takes her time.

Toni I am a mother. I wasn't. I was a tutor, fine arts, I'm an illustrator. Then there was James, and Marcus, James' father... it changes, with a kid. It's good, it's a good change. But it's hard. You have to be a grown up. There's this helpless, demanding little human being depending upon you, and it doesn't matter how you feel, or what you want, or... you have to be the grown up. And I think, I think that's the thing now. I don't think we're learning how to be grown ups. You're right, we're not expecting enough of one another.

He came home one day. Out of nowhere. And he said... the thing I remember is the way he said this - like it was the most natural thing in the world, like he was suggesting we get fish and chips or think about water blasting the driveway on the weekend. He didn't even have the decency to sound embarrassed. He said 'I've been thinking about maybe it would be good for us to experiment with some different partners. I think it might help us grow as individuals.'

I said things that maybe could have been better expressed. I remember taking his wallet. It was on the kitchen bench, and I grabbed it and said 'yeah well actually I was thinking it might be good for me to develop a gambling addiction. I was thinking that might help me grow as an individual. So how about you give me your credit card and I'll give you your dick back, and we can get together after the weekend and compare notes.'

He used that as his excuse to storm out, the way a five year old rages from the room. Slamming the door behind him. The door woke James up. That's when I knew I'd never forgive him.

Toni's head goes down. Leighton moves across to her, gives her a hug.

Sound of footsteps from the corridor outside. Terri peers out.

Terri It's Jonathan back.
Esther Is he still angry?
Terri Just let him punch himself out.

Jonathan enters, stands in the middle of the room, humming with whatever rage ails him. A sign he may have been crying. There is a sense that what comes next has been practised outside.

Jonathan We've been together three days, and every time I've spoken, I've felt the way you've looked at me. You want to know why I keep my opinions to myself? Because none of you are prepared to listen.
Terri We're listening now.
Jonathan You're not.
Terri Okay.

All eyes on Jonathan, none commenting. He settles into the silence, prepares himself.

Jonathan I get it you know. I get there's shit for us to work on. I get we've got to show a little more restraint. I get we've got to work harder at seeing the person beneath the bullshit. I'm not insensitive to that. But...

He looks around, still not certain he should continue.

Jonathan It cuts both ways, and we're not supposed to say that. We're meant to pretend we haven't noticed that it's the mothers and the grandmothers in the clothing stores, queueing to buy their darlings tutus and fairy wings. When we watch the mother passing on her eating disorder to her daughter, we're meant to stay quiet. And when we see the women, who insist we do not objectify them, spending hours in front of the mirror, making objects of themselves, we don't get to ask them to show a little fucking restraint?

I just... I think it might all work out a little better if we thought about sharing the blame.

Jonathan falls silent, still and depleted, waiting for the assault. He sits. Nothing comes.

Jonathan Come on then, say it!

Esther Say what?

Jonathan That I'm a woman hater.

Esther Do you hate women?

Jonathan No.

Esther There you go then.

Henry moves carefully forward, sits beside Jonathan - two grown men cross legged on the floor.

Henry When did you find out?

Jonathan Find out what?

Henry She was cheating on you.

Jonathan looks confused, shakes his head.

Jonathan That's got nothing to... that was years ago.

Henry nods. Waits. Jonathan drops his voice, to share just with Henry.

Jonathan I knew. But I didn't let myself believe it. She lied to me, and I lied to myself... for what? Just to keep her company? Come on man, you know it. You know it isn't all one way.

Henry Yeah, but... it sort of isn't the point, right?

Silence. Uncertain here which way Jonathan will go. He slows nods.

Jonathan We still get to make choices.

Henry If we want anything to be worth shit.

Jonathan Yeah, I know... Hard sometimes, though.

Henry Yeah. I think it's meant to be.

Jonathan Shit, listen to us. We should be writing greeting cards.

Henry 'Happy Birthday. Harden Up.'

Henry embraces him, moves away.

Jonathan moves, stands, seeks a place where he is no longer apart. Looks up, still six pairs of eyes upon him.

Into this stillness the Court Official arrives.

Leighton Sorry, we were just...
Official Ten minutes or so and the cleaners will be in here.
Terri Thank you.

As the official turns to leave, Kim takes his arm.

Kim Excuse me.
Official Yes?
Kim Did you know much about the case?
Official A little.
Kim And do you think we -
Official You had a very difficult job. Thank you, all of you.

The official leaves. A sense now that whatever is said will be wrong. It is as if a window has been opened and the future has come in on the breeze.

A round of careful picking up of belongings, of diligent, heartfelt hugs, and then, one by one, they depart.

Henry is the last to leave. It is not deliberate, he has genuinely strewn his belongings throughout the room: a sweatshirt, phone, wallet, a bag with his running gear. He is unhurried, well used to being the last to collect himself.

As his head goes up to lead the departure, Esther reappears.

Esther Sorry, I was just...
Henry At school I was always the last to leave class. Often the last to arrive as well.
Esther Yeah.
Henry You weren't.
Esther No.

Awkward for a second, snagged on an angular moment. But his smile is warm, genuine. He simply sits. She moves, as if to look out a window.

Esther I didn't notice that before.

Henry What?

Esther Out the window. You can see a door at the side of the building. Do you think that's where they take the prisoners in and out?

Henry moves across, stands at her shoulder. They stare into the night, comfortably close, neither speaking.

Esther Strange how it always looks so easy, when you view it from a distance.

Henry What?

Esther Everything. Living.

Henry Gardens are like that. They look easy. When they're flourishing.

Esther You know the movie about the gardener?

Henry Maybe.

Esther It's old. About a gardener who says simple things that sound profound. He ends up advising the president.

Henry You calling me simple?

Esther Don't judge me until you've seen the ending.

Henry By then you'll be gone.

Esther Strange isn't it?

Henry Yeah.

Esther That this is all we'll ever know of one another. Like finding a photograph of a stranger and having an inexplicable urge to hold onto it.

Henry Never really had that.

Esther Neither. I just liked the metaphor. Sorry, I'm tired. I fear you've seen the worst of me.

Henry I feel like I peaked today. I've probably oversold myself.

Esther I did wonder.

Henry moves first. He doesn't pick up his bag, but instead sits.

Henry Did you say what you needed to?

Esther When?

Henry Today. To the others. When you were explaining your thesis to us, I felt like there was more you wanted to say.

Esther There's always more.
Henry That's not true for everybody.

Henry waits. He can tell that in time she will start speaking, and he will listen.

Esther Okay, this is unfair. This is not going to be coherent. It is 10.35 on a Friday evening and you can not expect this to be coherent.

Henry I appreciate compost more than most.

Esther Well, okay... There used to be a thing called decency, you know? But it became old fashioned, that word. Embarrassing and sentimental. And when you let that happen, when you let decency become the measure of the past, then indecency becomes the measure of how modern you are.

The problem with running away from things is you don't look where you're running to. This world where everything's been commodified, where sex is reduced to body parts, to be photographed, pixelated and distributed to strangers, until the internet's arteries are clogged with pornography, where seven year old girls stand in front of the mirror teaching themselves to twerk, where our desperate fear of missing even one experience sees us consuming life in great thoughtless chunks, overprocessed and indistinguishable - when did we ever decide that was the world we wanted? I don't remember being asked.

And I want to say, what about connection? What about that basic human need not be noticed, but to be attended to? To be listened to, to be questioned, considered, to be understood. What about the tenderness of a tear wiped dry, of a hand held securely, of a secret shared? Why isn't that the billboard aspiration? Couldn't it be that somewhere in the endless expanse between the fairy tale and the adult movie there exists a version of sexuality actually worth aiming for? I want to live in a world where intimacy is possible. Where people can develop the habit of seeing one another as human beings again, not a collection of lifestyle choices and arbitrary binary associations. Where we aspire to draw close.

Jonathan used a surprising word tonight. He spoke of restraint. And isn't that the whole point, somehow? Isn't the relentless, indiscriminate sexualisation of everything just the final sputtering of the last candle in a world deprived of sunlight? In a world where we've become too self-absorbed to even bother looking out the window?

By now Esther has returned to looking out the window. Henry does not move. He lets the silence settle.

Henry So what do we do?

Esther I don't know. I used to think I knew. But I don't.

Henry So what did you used to think?

Esther That we could quieten our egos and attend to each other with proper kindness, so that one by one we might become less lonely, less frightened. God, I'm sorry... Don't say I didn't warn you... Incoherent.

Henry No, I'm...

Esther Lost for words?

Henry I'm not like you, I can't make things sound like that.

Esther That's a good thing.

Henry You know the more modest people are about their talents, the more shit it makes the rest of us feel, right?

Esther Okay, sorry... Try.

Henry No, it'll sound... I don't think it belongs here. I don't think I can say it, not after today.

Esther So everything's poisoned now? I refuse to believe that.

Henry I wanted to say... I wanted to tell you what it was like to listen to someone else saying all the things you've kept inside, when you'd almost stopped listening to them yourself. And it's... good. It's a good feeling... What?

Esther is silent. Doesn't respond.

Henry See, it sounds like a line, right? That's what we've built, finally. A world where everything's on offer, so everything we say sounds like advertising.

Henry stands. They face one another. It's not obvious what the next move can be. Henry falters, about to lose his nerve and leave.

Henry I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable.

Esther You didn't.

It is clear Henry will speak again. He takes his time.

Henry There was an old woman at one of the homes, I mean, ninety something, and she'd come out and water the roses on her balcony every day, even in a storm. I offered to do it for her, but she insisted. Her husband died when she was eighty. They were married for sixty years, and she had another fifteen without him. I asked her once, how she stayed married for that long, she said I should know, being a gardener. Constant, gentle attention, she told me, and never letting yourself forget how beautiful the air will smell, next time the flowers bloom. And tread softly she said, I remember that, the last words she said before she walked inside. I wouldn't normally remember that, but she died that afternoon. They said I might have been the last person she spoke to. Tread softly. That's not bad for your final words. I looked it up. It's from a poem.

Esther Yeah.

Henry Sorry, I don't know why I told you that.

Esther I'm glad you did.

Henry Would it be weird if I hugged you now?

Esther It'd be weird if you didn't.

They embrace.

