

Guy

a novel



*"I love the way that she
approaches prose – I think
it's really beautiful."
–Lena Dunham*

Jowita Bydlowska

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A BUCKRIDER BOOK

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1

THE BEACH IS FULL. IT IS ALMOST ALWAYS FULL THIS TIME of day. There are cars parked on the sand, some with their hatchbacks open, sudden buffets of beige and white food – the food of the people who come to this beach. The food of people who grow large and soft: children with apathetic eyes, women with chafed thighs, men with rolls of flesh over their hips.

There are Fours and Fives everywhere. Their eyes flick over my face, flick away. Flick back again. I love them for it, but the nerve. It's the media, the music videos. Every wannabe Britney Spears thinks she is Britney Spears. But if you were to stick the actual Britney Spears on this beach with no handlers? After a few hours she'd be violently pink from the sun, and her thighs would be as chafed as every other girl's here. Unhandled, she'd be burping up yellow Cheetos. She'd deteriorate from a Seven to a Four just like that.

A Four walks by, looks up from her phone. Small lips, big nose. Small breasts, a belly.

“Hey,” I say. I’m feeling generous. Bored. And it’s a lovely evening.

“Hey?” she says.

“Great dress,” I say. “It looks really good on you.”

“Oh, thanks,” she looks down at the dress. She blushes. It’s a simple one: *on you*. As if I’ve seen her in other dresses. As if I were familiar. She will now hope I am familiar. Me being familiar alleviates the suspicion. Why would I be talking to her? *On you*. Her eyes big and hopeful. The dress is roomy, like a tent. It’s a dress that hides things, thighs. The dress is pale green.

I don’t ask for her number. I won’t ask for her number. I’m suddenly tired. Not tired. I want to keep on moving. I smile and say, “Have a good night, gorgeous.”

Her mouth opens, “May I pet your dog?” she says. “Please?”

“Sure,” I say. I do admire nerve. She thinks she’s a Seven, at least.

She bends down to pet the dog. A wave of spasm zaps through the dog’s body. Pleasure. The girl’s back is covered in purple stains of old acne.

“Our neighbour had a—”

Dog like this, or something. I look over to the boardwalk. The boardwalk shops are a chaos of hues. It’s a landfill of flip-flops and inflatable seahorses. And plastic sunglasses and plastic pails. And dripping ice cream and the sticky fingers of children, fingers that like to reach for the dog, like the Four here.

I snap the leash, the dog’s head snaps. “Have a nice day,” I say.

I walk away. I don't turn around to see if she continues standing there, but I'm sure she's still standing there. I imagine soon she'll dislodge herself from our encounter, go back to her fat husband named something like Steve or Dave – Steve or Dave who will always remain confused as to why they had a horrible fight on their way back home to Dinktown, South Carolina, or wherever they're from – somewhere close by, as Steve/Dave is a nervous driver. Was it something he said?

I head toward the edge of the water. The sun is behind us, giving the ocean an orange tint. The sand is white during the day. Now it's deep yellow. Later, brown. Everything looks very nice. Everyone takes a picture with their phone. There's a grating beat of trance music in the distance.

A Two walks by. I turn to watch the back of her. You rarely see a Two, especially in a bikini: this one is a fluorescent green contraption that refuses to contain the body. Bits of her escape between the strings – an accordion of flesh. Her mouth is open, an enlarged-tonsils mouth. The one next to the Two is at least a Five. She turns around. She has a sweet face with bugging out, slanted eyes. Long, full lips. She's even odder-looking than her friend. She grins at the dog. Then it clicks for me. Of course. They must be on some kind of field trip. Short-bus field trip.

I pull the leash. The dog looks up at me. When he looks at me like that, I imagine he's winking at me. So I wink back at him. I bend down and pat his black head, sharp, black ears above a white face. A wet brown nose and blue, not brown, eyes.

My eyes, like the dog's, are blue. Women love my eyes. There are a lot of other things about my face that women

love, I've been told. I have good cheekbones. My mouth with its corners curling up a bit, a wide smile.

Then there's the rest of me. A strong, well-defined body. Lean and muscular. You might think: athlete. No tattoos, no scars except for a pale line on my shin from a bike accident. Tall enough, the third-tallest boy in class. Caucasian. Dark hair. Slightly tanned. A nice dick, seven-plus inches, cut. Shoe size, eleven; chest, forty-two regular; waist, thirty-four – an eight-inch drop. The neck, sixteen-point-five. Perfect proportions. But we're not shopping for clothes here, so all of this simply means *I look good*.

Presently, I get to the end of the sandy patch where there's a small shack, a beach eatery. It serves "healthy smoothies." This is a euphemism for thick, mud-green liquid. Brutalized fruit and veggies. Protein powder. A sticky, sugary taste in your mouth.

I'm not here for the smoothies. The real reason I'm here is because the smoothies are the perfect girl snack. The place is swarming with girls. Sunburned, giggly girls that come from the beige inns. Or from the cheaply built beach houses. Or they come out of the hatchbacks of their parents' cars. Giggly, jiggly girls determined to atone for last night's beer and pizza with sugary mud. Girls keen on shedding their parents' white-food values. Girls promising their growing belly bulges that they will eat better from now on: smoothies, water, grass.

There are a few tables outside the shack and a couple of smaller tables inside where there are computers. Girls in their cheapo beachwear squirm around screens watching videos

of the latest pop sensation, whoever it is – lately, \$isi. The smoothie cups sit empty, abandoned on the window ledges.

Today, there's the usual throng of girls gathered around the computer screens. \$isi's latest hit, "Brokenhearted," bounces off the walls. There's a coconut smell of tanning oil in the air. The girls sweat and vibrate with excitement. The song has a cocaine line of a hook. I remember a producer saying that a song is a success if you can't imagine you could ever stop listening to it. But then you run out of your high, and only \$isi can give you the right fix again.

And only people like me can give you \$isi.

I have a sudden image of \$isi tiptoeing to a bathroom. We're in a hotel. A dark room, a vast white bed, me in it. She is holding herself between her legs. There's sunlight cutting through the slit in the curtains. It divides the carpet in a straight, bright line, \$isi's brown feet turning white as she steps through it. She says, "I always thought that was a cliché, sleeping with people to get ahead in life."

"You feel used?"

She turns toward me, "Not at all. Make me a star."

I can't see her after staring at her feet, at the bright line for too long. Everything – her face – has vanished. Then it all comes back slowly, the contours of her face. Small and narrow, a mouse face. The clamped mouth. She looks like a child pretending not to be a child. But she is no longer a child. I'm not her downfall; I am her saviour. I will make her into a star.

I do make her into a star.

I line up behind a Seven and a maybe-Four and a solid Three.

There's some problem with the smoothie machine. Panicked bustling behind the counter.

"She was so sad when I saw her in that video," says the Three.

"How do you know she was sad? Oh my god, it's all just for show," says maybe-Four. She's got a look that's all wrong. Her hair is wild and curly. There's a lot of it, uncombed. Glasses, too. She's either a lesbian-in-training or this is a pretty-girl-trying-to-be-ugly thing. Some men consider that cute. I don't. I consider it tiresome.

The Seven says, "I read on Perez that she, like, had a big breakup, but she won't talk about it because she's, like, becoming media-smart, so she's just giving hints and stuff to the press."

"Please," the maybe-Four says.

"I don't know, I just read it online."

"Yeah, when I saw her in the video, she really seemed totally genuine," says the Three. In the same moment she looks up and sees me. She blinks. Looks down.

The maybe-Four says, "Dolly, look at me, look, look. Guess if I'm sad or not, come on, look." She relaxes her forehead, her dark eyes suddenly turning softer, bigger, bushy eyebrows going up a little above the glasses.

The Three shakes her head, "Very mature." She looks behind the Seven. Looks at me again. She does this quickly, nervously. It's like a tick, that quick glance.

I take in her face. It's perfect. It's round and a little flat with zero cheekbones. The chin is round, but already

propped up by a promise of a second fold. She's not fat. She's well nourished. For now. Her eyes are the best feature. Round, doll-like eyes with supremely white whites, sugar whites, baby eyes.

It's almost always in the eyes. The hope and belief and freshness that nothing can recreate as a girl gets older. Sometimes you see it in celebrities, the baby-bright eyes. But that's all artificial, mechanics at work. Armies of professionals and products: the liquids and lights that hide the yellowness of spray tan, the paleness of heroin, tiredness and heartbreak.

"This is so annoying," the maybe-Four says to no one in particular. She says it loudly enough to get one of the women behind the counter to look up in our direction. The woman's eyebrows knot and unknot.

"Em, be quiet," the Seven hisses.

The Three looks at me again. This time I invite her eyes into mine. I don't look away. I don't smile yet either. I just let the eyes do the talking – mine pulling and hers coming forward. Closer and closer until it's pupil to pupil, my eyes engulfing hers in the sort of promise that she's just started to look for in life. *Open wide. My engorged dick in your mouth*, I say with my eyes.

I can sense the internal squirm: she wants to blink. But she doesn't blink.

Let me fuck you. Let me show you, teach you. Let me free you from your dumb, sad life for at least a few moments. Turn you over on all fours. Tell you I love your breasts, your ass. Pull your hair a little, make you gasp.

Her head twitches, eyes down.

There's more noise behind the counter, near the smoothie machine. Someone shouts that it's working. The girls in front of me stop talking. The line moves forward and they move with it.

The Three looks one more time, and now I smile: *Put your hand right here. See how hard you're making me?*

Outside the shack, the dog is panting in the sun. An aggressively serious woman with yoga gear enveloping her flat, athletic body walks by and stops abruptly. Her face softens when the dog jumps with a stifled bark as I come out with my smoothie. A former Six, now a Four; she's slowly turning into a thoroughbred horse; you can see her youth falling off her.

I go up to the dog to make a show of petting him. I tell him he's a good dog.

I praise my dog for things like sitting and shitting and eating. If he could sing, I could make him a pop star. Same IQs.

I check out my Facebook page to see if anyone's commented on the rockfish with tomato sauté and brown rice. No one. When I look up, the woman is walking away. Her ass is nice, but she probably hates its plumpness that refuses to be processed by the gym equipment.

The three girls come out and start to push patio chairs around one of the tables. They're talking in whispers. I can feel the excitement. Without looking, I know they're looking at us, my dog and me.

I check my Facebook again. Homemade ravioli, one comment: “nice!” Someone named Cassandra. I have a vague memory of armpit stubble scraping my nose.

There’s a scrunch of sand and clacking of flip-flops behind me. “What’s your dog’s name?”

I turn around. It’s the Seven. Her face is a triangle of well-arranged cheekbones. Pointy chin, full lips. There’s hardness in her eyes that only comes from knowing that you’re pretty.

“Dog. The dog’s name is Dog,” I say and her hard, clear eyes widen for a second and then squint.

She says in a flat voice, “That’s funny.”

“It’s *very* funny.”

“Actually, my friend wants to know. She’s obsessed with dogs,” she says.

“Well, it’s Dog. It’s easy to remember.”

“Dolores, come over here,” she shouts.

Dolores, the sweet, well-nourished Three, blushes a big blush that comes right through her sunburned cheeks. She gets up from the table.

Who names a girl *Dolores*? It’s mean, like naming her *Gladys* or *Bertie*. It’s like naming a girl after her grandmother who was courageous because she survived the Nazis. Or had many children on the prairie somewhere and once amputated her own leg in the dead of winter, while running. But *Dolores* it is, and it’s perfect. It’s perfect that she’s stuck with the name of an old lady, more humiliating somehow.

I watch Dolores walk. She’s got the barely-lifting-her-feet walk. In her flip-flops, she shuffles. It’s the walk of weekends

in pajamas, evenings in front of the TV – a bowl of Lucky Charms and a glass of warm milk – the walk of slouching from class to class, panting runs around the gymnasium and moving side to side if forced to dance at the school prom, where she went with her gay best friend. It’s the walk of a girl who doesn’t want to be noticed, and I notice every single thing about it.

“Hi,” she says, to me or to the dog. She sits down on the wet sand, facing the dog and stroking his stupid, happy face.

“Hi. He likes you,” I tell her, and she looks up. Our eyes do their thing – mine telling hers that I like her. Hers unsure, but already rushing in, getting swallowed.

“Dolores used to have a dog but it got hit by a car, right?” the Seven says.

Dolores blinks and nods solemnly and says, “His name was Punky. It was my dad’s dog. An Akita.”

I’m impressed. I know enough about dogs to know that an Akita is not an easy dog. It’s a large animal. Bigger than mine, with muscular though slim shoulders and paws twice the size of Dog’s. It’s a dog of single guys or couples – never couples with children. I wonder if Dolores’ parents are divorced. *My dad’s dog* clearly suggests that.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

The Seven says, “Dolores was pretty bummed out, right?”

“It’s okay,” Dolores says. “This is Kelly,” meaning the Seven, who looks a little startled by suddenly being introduced. She thrusts a little pink-nailed paw at me.

I say, “Hi, Kelly. I’m Guy, nice to meet you.”

“Guy’s your name?”

“Yes.”

Ready? One, two, three!

“That’s funny. So you have a dog named Dog, and you’re a guy named Guy?” Kelly says.

“That *is* funny,” I say. “And you’re Dolores?” I say to Dolores, who nods. She has broken eye contact to look into the eyes of the dog named Dog.

“Dog. Nice to meet you,” she says to the dog, who says nothing.

The maybe-Four remains at the table throughout this exchange. She’s absorbed in her phone, slurping her smoothie, but now she looks up. She wrinkles her forehead. I consider smiling. But no. I can tell she’s the kind of girl who’ll call me a perv to her friends the moment I leave: “Did you see the way that perv was smiling at me? Fucking gross.”

It’s time to go anyway. I’m sure I got this. Just look at Dolores trying not to look at me.

Kelly moves her hand to shield her face from the sun, “So you live around here?” She’s trying on confidence.

“Vacation. The grey house over there,” I point in the direction of the beach house. It’s a four-bedroom, two-garage nautical castle complete with solar panels and white wooden columns that support all three decks. It belongs to me, paid for courtesy of my grandmother’s will.

“The big grey one? Dope,” Kelly says.

“House-sitting for my friend,” I say. *Dope*.

“Not yours?” she says, her voice like a sigh. I imagine her life already taking shape: assessing and comparing friends’ possessions. One friend’s car, another friend’s pool. Another friend’s graduation party. Just like her mother, probably, with her friends’ Botox jobs, husbands, summer homes and

children graduating from prestigious colleges. “Nice gig,” she says.

“It is. Well, it was nice to meet you. Gotta take this guy home.”

“Which guy?” says the maybe-Four from the picnic table. How could she hear that far?

“Nice to meet you too,” says Dolores. “Nice to meet you, Dog.”

I walk away. The sky is turning even bloodier around the edges. The beach is famous for its spectacular sunsets. Around this time, you start seeing the beach people holding their phones up, taking pictures of the sun. Romantics.

I know that Dolores is looking at me walking away. She sees my wide back, the way my calves spasm slightly. A twitch that lasts a moment too long. I’ve had women tell me that I strut a little. This used to bother me, but it doesn’t anymore. It’s not a put-on strut like what my best friend, Jason, does with his walk. He’s just trying hard to not be mediocre, which he is.

For me, the way I move, it’s natural.

“It’s like you’re trying to pick a fight,” Gloria, my girlfriend, said once.

But I’m not trying to pick a fight.

Just the opposite.

2

AS A CHILD, I LIVED WITH MY MOTHER, MY SISTER AND MY father in a small town in Ontario, Canada, where everyone knew that the dentist was a drunk and that the one, part-time homeless lady lost her kid in a freak accident in a silo after her husband had left her for the drunken dentist's receptionist. There was a library and a courthouse in our small town. Also, three high schools. My mother taught at one of the high schools. My father worked at the courthouse.

My early childhood was uneventful. There was one funeral – my mother's mother, whose will divided the family, with us ending up on the lucky side – and one birth – my younger sister.

At twelve, I was a well-adjusted boy. No setting things on fire or drinking my mother's vodka. I never did drugs. I was not into upsetting my parents since that would draw their attention to me. This is why I never bothered telling my father about walking in on my mother touching hands with our neighbour, Karl. Karl who – I could always

sense – wanted to, or had done so and wanted to again, fuck my mother. It was doglike, the way they seemed to pant at each other as they talked.

I also never got caught with my pants rolled down in my mother's underwear drawer, spending myself right into the wooden corners of it. That was probably the most troubling sexual thing that I'd done in my life. I've never done truly creepy things like touch my little sister when tasked with changing her shitty diaper. (The takeaway? It's not my fault she was anorexic in her twenties.)

Overall, I was a good kid. So it was a surprise to everyone when Caroline happened. The way I think of it – *Caroline happened* – is intentional. It was an event, like a hurricane, threatening enough that it gets its own name. Though looking back on it, it was more like Guy happened to Caroline; perhaps that's what she would say.

Caroline was one of my mother's students. My mother had an altruistic side, and she provided tutoring for the underprivileged kids.

Every Tuesday and Thursday evening, the basement filled with those retards sitting or standing beside my mother at a large table, their homework spread out in front of them like war maps.

Caroline was older than me, fifteen to my thirteen. But she looked closer to my age with her almost breastless body. She was not pretty. Not only that, she wasn't even ugly. She was just something drawn randomly. A bunch of squiggles and lines that made up the form of a girl so incredibly uninteresting that she immediately fascinated me. I could not understand it fully, or explain it to myself as I acknowledged

it. It was as if her lack of attractiveness was some kind of a vacuum for my attractiveness. We complemented each other that way.

The first time I saw her, she was holding some papers in her hand, nervously. She wanted to read her homework to my mother or something. Something that stressed her out. I stressed her out too. Before I turned away, I sensed her attention on me. You can tell those things. I remember the intensity, the urging...the desperation even, as I felt it. Was she in trouble, and was I the only person capable of saving her? Her attention was thrilling, the obviousness of it, the way it surrounded me and made me feel powerful, big. A big boy.

“You’re so adorable,” she said later, in a mocking way. “You’re like my annoying little brother.”

She was probably unaware of the fact that the whole time she was scanning me, I was thinking about things I had seen in German nudie mags. What would it look like to shove my dick in her mouth? Or flip her onto all fours to try to penetrate her? I was imagining pinching her tiny nipples till she squeaked. I knew about the things people did to each other. I was always good at research.

She started staying longer after her tutoring lessons, and my parents didn’t mind. We sat in the backyard – it was spring – and talked. I dwelled on the details of her. A tiny braided bracelet. How delicate it looked wrapped around the protruding wrist bone. I wanted to take the bracelet in my mouth, taste the dirty threads that had accumulated her sweat.

Her knees. A dark spot from a scab that left a mark, like a kitten's paw. Also, the way her hair looked wet on a hot day when it got too greasy from being outside. Or how she scratched the side of her leg and then would sometimes clean the same nail with her bottom teeth, which was disgusting, but somehow wasn't.

She was a collection of images, impressions – artifacts that I'd bag up and file for later. All those images, parts of Caroline brought out something in me – a need to be in contact with another human being. Not just any human being: her, specifically. It was sexual, but it was not exactly about sex. I couldn't tell what it was. It felt as if there was a short-circuit in my brain, some pleasant malfunction. Yet. I was troubled by this need; it was as if I absolutely had to be around her all the time. It was like the flu. I hoped it would pass. I wasn't sure if this was okay, what I felt. In retrospect, it was probably just puberty.

Sometime near the end of the summer, I lost my virginity to Caroline. It happened on the weekend when my parents were away with my younger sister.

Caroline undressed me like I was a child. She undressed herself.

We lay side by side on my parents' bed. We stared at each other. Looked over each other's bodies. Our bodies were foreign planets, newly discovered.

We didn't talk.

I had already guessed the outlines of her breasts and predicted the flat stomach. But I was still shocked by her

neat-but-bushy mound. It was the same mousy colour as the hair on her head. It seemed very exotic. She looked nothing like the hairless women from the nudie magazines full of pneumatic lips and tits.

She pulled me on top of her and aimed my dick at her little vagina. She moved her hips. I figured I had to move along with her, and as I did I penetrated her. She was soft and wet inside. Hot like breath. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. It was eternally comforting. I was falling into her softness. Too fast, too recklessly.

I came.

She laughed with delight and then wrapped her arms around me, hugging me; she was bigger than me. After we fell apart, she snuggled up to me. She breathed "I love you" into my neck.

Immediately, I started to develop a headache. It was the sort of headache you get from running for too long or some other strenuous physical effort. I was in no way exhausted from the sex. Yet the headache was creeping in regardless. Something else was happening, too.

I felt it first physically. It started with her arm. Her arm around me got heavy, as if it was her leg instead. Her body next to me became too long. There seemed to be no escape from it.

Still, her heat and smell made my own body respond with an intensity that terrified me. I gripped my dick. I held it, feeling it get hard. I wondered if by sleeping with Caroline I had unleashed something bad. Was I now capable of violence? Murder? I felt capable of it. I didn't know where it came from. I didn't know what to do but to lie still until it

passed. I kept thinking of fucking: her, the women in nudie mags. My mother too, or someone who was like my mother. My homeroom teacher.

I wanted to run. I wanted to push my dick right back into Caroline. Her heavy arm kept me pinned to the mattress. I imagined that the arm pinning me down was capable of protecting me from whatever was happening inside me. I kept still. I waited. I let go of my dick.

Eventually, I fell asleep and dreamt of being covered in thick, dense blankets.

* * *

After that weekend, things were different between Caroline and me. I developed other acquaintances in the neighbourhood: boys. I spent my afternoons playing video games in their basements, or smoking in the garbage-infested park by the river that ran through town.

One evening, Caroline accosted me on my way home. The meadow near our house was loud with buzzing insects. She came out of the darkness and threw herself at me.

I did nothing. I let her hold me with my arms at my sides like a doll. I imagined myself to be a doll. Like a doll, I waited patiently for it to be over, to be put back in my box. Instead, Caroline tried to kiss me.

I moved my face away until she stopped trying to kiss me. She needed to leave me alone. I said that. I thought she would understand – it would free her up too, to have more time to spend with friends.

“You little piece of shit.”

I felt my dick stir. It confused me. “I’m sorry,” I said.

I noticed then that she had changed her look. She was wearing makeup. Her hair was blonder. She dyed it, like my mom. She was trying to make herself pretty. If I had been a little piece of shit, I would've said something to her about it – how it didn't work – but I wasn't even sure that it didn't work. Maybe she was prettier now?

“Do you love me?” Her voice sounded small and angry, like an ugly little animal that peeped after being stepped on.

“No. I don't think so,” I said, truthfully.

“I hate you.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” She pushed me away. She lifted her hand as if to slap me. She stroked my cheek instead. And then, for a brief moment, I felt what I had felt before, the longing.

“I'm sorry,” I said. I didn't mean it. But her face softened.

“You don't even know,” she said.

She said other things after that. Things I've heard again many times. Not from her, but from others: that I had opened up something in her, that she had changed because of me, that I made her feel beautiful.

How?

I didn't know.

“I'll be okay,” she said, finally, and I thought what happened was a good thing, that I had done a good thing. I knew then I would do it again. I'd get better at it. I knew that I was capable of changing someone, someone plain and insignificant like Caroline, of turning her into a person who could light up from inside, if even for a moment.

It was like magic. I wanted to make that magic again (and again!) because that was what I seemed to be good

at. I wanted another Caroline, another devotion like that. I believe I became instantly addicted to it. You cannot fight addiction. It installs itself in your head and doesn't leave. You can try to control it. But it's always there, a faint whisper somewhere behind you.

* * *

Caroline ended up dating a senior from her high school. He didn't knock her up. She didn't drop out of school to do drugs. She didn't become obese. She finished school and went to college to become a nurse. She became a nurse and eventually renewed friendship with my mother when my mother was dying of cancer in the hospital where Caroline worked. I felt proud of how well Caroline turned out.