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SECOND STORY

Matt Kessler

Deesha Philyaw selected "Second Story" as the winner of the 2022 Barry Hannah Prize in Fiction. Of the story, Philyaw writes: "The author writes with such immediacy and raw detail, I think I got high just reading this story. A string of languid, almost-hallucinatory vignettes shape this deeply intimate, deeply strange narrative. There are layers upon layers of provocation and entanglement here. Ultimately, despite being part of a rotating squad of regulars and extras, Kip and his wasted crew of friends, frenemies, and hook-ups exude such loneliness, I can't help but still think about them."



The Second Story is our favorite bar. It reminds us of a small-town gay bar, the type that would be called Chances, or Drifters, or Missed Connections. It's downtown, off the loop, by Navy Pier, and, as everyone always emphasizes, the—second—oldest gay bar in Chicago. It still has that feel, covert, discreet, secretive. Everyone is welcome. It's not hip, it doesn't cater to types like leather daddies or muscle queens or butch dykes or fashion gays. It's just a smelly, old one-room bar with a TV connected to a laserdisc player, a dartboard, and a bartender that pours free shots when the mood is right. I'm four years sober and I don't go there anymore.

Preston watches Ciara's "Work" video on the television. Ciara and Missy Elliot dance in hard hats, suspenders and baggy yellow track suits atop an oil rig. Preston and I gossip about a late-night party in Bridgeport, he looks away and mouths the chorus, "Work work work... Bitch you better work."

Gary and I lean against the window ledge overlooking Ohio Street, sipping tequila sodas. At his bar stool sit three glossy Marc Jacobs bags—one extra-large, one medium, and one small. Our friend, the salesclerk, gave Gary these bags so he could post a silly video on Instagram, and we've carried them around the Mag Mile all afternoon. We wait for Dora, who'll be cut from her job at the Howard Brown thrift store at six, and we compare pictures of English fashion designers Henry Holland and Richard Nicoll on my iPhone, trying to decide who's hotter. I review the plan again for our prank: when Dora arrives, Gary will go to the bathroom and I'll convince her that he just spent \$16,000 at Marc Jacobs. He says, No, surely, she's not that gullible. I say, Watch, she'll believe anything, you just have to say it to her with a straight face. Dora walks through the door wearing a red backpack and I slap his arm and say, Shut up, shut up, shut up. She looks at us suspiciously and drops her backpack next to the Marc Jacobs bags. Wow, she says, what's gotten into you?

A man in a trench coat sits at the bar, asleep, with his head resting on his forearms. It's Friday, just after dinner, and a roomful of strangers stand and sing "Hollaback Girl." He doesn't wake up.

Zach, the bartender in the American Eagle hat, lights a match and spits a stream of fire above the till. A thrill from childhood runs through my body.

The Blackhawks play Game 7 of the Stanley Cup. The bar is packed and silent. Everyone stares at the TV. I wait for Rowan to get cut from Nightwood and try to figure out the rules to ice hockey. No music plays. The only sound is blades cutting into ice.

Coming down off mushrooms, by myself, in the middle of summer, on a late afternoon. Whitney Houston's "Queen of the Night" video is on the television. I try to write a poem about celebrity and pop stardom, and how Whitney the person is imitating the ideal of Whitney, the icon. The handwritten ink letters on my notebook paper look insignificant, frail, full of cracks. Whitney looks strong, monumental.

Zach, the bartender, pulls me by the collar of my Sisters of Mercy t-shirt and kisses me. You're cute, he says, write your number on the receipt. He texts me the next day while I'm at brunch with Rowan and writes, Sorry, I was blackout drunk last night, and I found this number in my wallet. I don't remember who you are. Face pic please?

Dora and I sit alone at the bar drinking bottles of Miller Lite. The bartender puts in a new DVD and skips ahead to the Pet Shop Boys' video "Heart." Dora hops off her stool, slaps the counter, points at the television and cheers. She says, Best Pet Shop Boys song ever. She cocks back her neck and shoulders, as if she's about to limbo, closes her eyes and, for a second, transports herself to a dance floor on a crowded night across town, as if she were surrounded by all of our friends.

Tank and I sneak out and jack each other off in the alley, by the dumpster behind the Burrito Beach.

Billy, Rowan and I sit in the back corner, stir our Jack and Cokes, and wait. It's just past noon on a Sunday and the place is empty. Last night, Billy slept with his friend's fiancé in Rowan's apartment. Billy's in town from San Francisco to shoot a music video and, today, he's bored. He stirs his drink again. He says, This place sucks, let's go to the W, Bear, buy me some lunch. He calls Rowan "Bear" but neither of them will explain what the nickname means or where it came from. Rowan tells him to finish his drink, and then we'll decide. Billy stands and paces the bar. He wears a San Francisco 49ers bomber jacket and faded Levi's, he's tall and handsome, and brings a distinctly straight vibe to this small bar that's pretty much a turn-on to everyone there. He sits next to the one woman at the bar and introduces himself. She's a short middle-aged woman with bleached blonde hair and highlighted tips. She's seated next to an older gay man with spiky hair and a puka necklace. They both dress like they're teenagers. Rowan and I don't talk; we watch Billy who is, somehow, always the center of attention.

Rowan, Preston, Tank, Dora the bartender and I stand in a semi-circle on the roof around Frances, who arrived from San Francisco to perform a drag show at the Berlin night club. He's young, blonde and wispy, with bunny rabbit teeth and a disarming way of standing near you and grabbing your forearm and laughing freely when you talk. All of us follow him on Twitter. He's the first person we know to post every intimate detail about his life non-stop. And now we're meeting him. He seems like a sane, sweet, charming, down-to-earth person despite his large online following and the crazy life of sex and

partying he tweets about. The bartender points towards Lake Michigan. Concrete skyscrapers block the view. It's May and the wind picks up and the sky turns dark with a threatening rain. I wear cut-off jean shorts, a red t-shirt and an unbuttoned flannel. Everyone moves closer to Frances, laughing, but I can't follow the conversation, my mind is buzzing from the line of coke we just snorted in the bathroom. The baggie is in my pocket, bait to lure Frances closer to me. A bag of heroin is in a tin container in my apartment. More bait for later on, an aggressive play I'll mention if the cards fall just right.

Rowan is typing into the keypad of his Blackberry with both thumbs. He laughs and smiles at the palm-sized silver device like they're on a date together. The clock says quarter past six. The bar is empty and the movie, *The Piano Teacher*, doesn't start until seven. Rowan texted throughout the cab ride and dinner too. I want to slap that phone out of his hands and crack the screen. He has no qualms about letting me know if I bore him, if I say something gauche or obvious, if I should just shut up. He'll change conversations while I'm mid-sentence, stare into the distance and not respond, or take out his phone and chat with other friends on Blackberry Messenger. I stand and say, Rowan, I'm going to go. He looks up, lifts an eyebrow, puts his hand on my wrist, squeezes. He says, What are you talking about? We already bought our tickets. I look at the dinged-up silver device in his hands and nod. I say, Put it away. He looks down and says, Hold on, one more thing. I say, No, now. Fine, he says, and flings it across the bar toward the wall. What do you want to talk about, he asks. What?

Gaspar's new Levi's are unzipped, his eyes are closed and his head is craning towards the window. A man he just met is pawing at his sweater and digging between his legs. It's the first time I've seen his cock, which looks like his bald head, only redder, less charming. Their kisses are slobbery, juvenile, sweet. Both men are in their late 50s. I sit on a plumber's lap and chat with Guillaume, Gaspar's husband, about the rest of the itinerary for their visit; they'll rent a car and drive to Louisiana to visit a much older American that Guillaume had an affair with when he was thirteen. The plumber is twice my size. He is from the Southside and wears a grey t-shirt that shows the flag of Chicago. He says, Look, I like you, I don't play around, we should go get dinner. Why do you want to see a schmoie like me? He has dark olive skin and colorless eyes that look like they're trying to find the con that everybody is playing. When he learns that Gaspar is Guillaume's husband, he becomes so upset on Guillaume's behalf that he loses his cool. He says, Look, I can't tell you how to live your life but that's not right. That's your husband. If I'm you, I beat that guy's ass. This makes Guillaume angry. Guillaume is Parisian and doesn't mince words. He's a bald bank executive with a commanding nose and taut cheeks that quickly show displeasure. He looks at the man like he's hired help and says, I'm not heterosexual. I'm not American. I don't care if he has some fun. It's okay. Why not? The plumber tosses me off his lap, tells me my friend is crazy and leaves.

Preston sits by the window in a tweed parka bent over an issue of *Cabinet* magazine. I set a saltshaker and a napkin with lime wedges next to him. I return with two shots of tequila and apologize for arriving a half-hour late. Sorry, I say, I was snorting Adderall. I lick the spot between my thumb and index finger, sprinkle salt on it, hold up my shot glass and wait for Preston. He hasn't turned to face me yet. He's tall, deliberate, imposing. He holds his emotions within his chest. He has a tight fade and custom-designed gold rimmed glasses. He closes his magazine, tucks it in his canvas tote bag, glances at the drink and stares at me. He says, Girl, get it together. It's Wednesday afternoon. He waves at the empty bar. His voice is angry and loud. He says, We're in our thirties now. You're either the type of person who has a problem or you aren't. Figure it out.

Rowan rubs my thighs through my jeans and nestles his beard into my neck. I'm seated on a barstool, propped against the counter, with my ankles around his heels. He whispers, Let's get in a cab and go back to Pilsen. It's been months since I've seen him. I'm there with Dora. He's there with Preston, James, Jun and Janice. Janice stares at us involuntarily like the sight of two men kissing makes her uncomfortable. Her look reminds me that a night with Rowan can spiral into three or four, cocaine, pills. I say, Not tonight. I'm here with Dora. I promised I'd take a cab up north with her. I can't ditch her. He says, I can pay for Dora's cab. I push Rowan away and glance back at Janice and feel ashamed for my erection.

Out on the sidewalk we hear car brakes, high heels, the crinkling of Cheetos bags; upstairs the sound is warm, yellow, contained, firelit.

Bored, waiting for Rowan, watching the excited faces of twenty-year-olds rush up the stairs on the black-and-white CCTV. A girl wears a glittery silver headband with a dangly star. Is this because it's Saturday or because she's going to a gay bar? Her outfit is a patronizing nod towards festivity, a camouflage. I text Rowan, tell him I'm leaving, anywhere is better than here.

The bar smells like New Orleans motel carpet; it's the saddest place in the world.

Look, I say, and kick Rowan's suede derbies. Zach's about to spit fire again. I cruelly lift my lips in the outline of a smile. Rowan stares across the bar. His expression says, Look at how pathetic and childish they all are. Fire? What is this? A talent show?

Gay marriage. This is a debate. Rowan is against it. Kenneth Anger is against it.

Rowan wears a Swedish black winter coat with a fanning grey collar like a tiger's mane. It smells like the cardboard sleeves from 70s records, ramen noodle packets, cigarette ash, the vintage velvet gold couch in his Pilsen apartment and red wine. I hold his ribs an extra moment as I greet him and scratch his dirty brown hair behind his ear. He smiles the smile of a boy, a rat. I'll come in that mouth soon, I think.

For all Rowan's big talk, he's a prude. He doesn't do apps, he won't let me fuck him in the ass, he still believes in love. He just wants to be treated like shit. He wants to be ignored. By a straight-acting guy.

The men are sad sacks: husbands hoping to solicit before dinner, office workers in corduroy pants and brown derbies, over-the-hill alcoholics trying to latch onto a free drink by saying a funny word or two. They're warnings, all of them. I just don't see it that way because I'm thirty-two and still have options.

Tank and Rowan dislike each other. Tank's screen name is Pigwar, Rowan's is WideToReceive, mine is XoxoGossipGirl.

The night that Kenneth visits from London, we meet a ballet dancer from the Chicago ballet. He says Rowan looks like Jesus and teaches him how to do a jeté. We go back to his high-rise apartment and Rowan calls me his boyfriend. Dora and Kenneth sit on the ballet dancer's clam-shell white leather couch and laugh when Rowan says this, but I'm touched. The ballet dancer says he didn't know Jesus had a boyfriend. He thinks Jesus is lying.

Rowan says, Girl, we should do heroin together. You would love it. When he finds out that Frances and I snorted H, listened to trip hop, and held each other all weekend, Rowan is so angry that he deactivates his Twitter account and begins to see a therapist.

Tequila soda and MDMA, the tingle.

Prince's Super Bowl Halftime show plays on the TV. His purple guitar is shaped like the symbol that he uses as a stage name. The symbol is a combination of the male and female gender glyphs, and Prince calls it the love symbol. As he plays his solo, his silhouette is projected onto a large white backdrop. The love symbol looks like an enormous cock that he strokes in front of the Super Bowl crowd and, together, the male and female symbols on the guitar form the hermaphroditic glyph. This performance is for everyone and no one, we are all perverts and lovers, we all want to be stroked.

Rowan teaches me a trick. Buy the bartender a shot. Why? Just do it.

Gary goes to the bathroom. Next to the barstool sit three Marc Jacobs bags, and I hold his new pink rose Marc Jacobs watch, which I show to Dora. Girl, I say, Gary just spent \$16,000 at Marc Jacobs. Dora's eyes widen and she repeats the sum in long, stretched-out syllables. I say, Either Gary's really good with money, or he's really bad with money. Dora shakes her head and says, Gary's something. Then she looks around the bar to make sure he isn't within earshot and asks, Do you think his mom is helping him out?

Gaspar and Guillaume tell me that they're sure Rowan is in love with me. They're sure, they just know. How? His eyes stay glued to me when I'm not looking—that is the best and only proof.

Cocaine in the bathroom. Rowan snorts a line without making a sound. He tells me that the snorting noise is gauche. I ask him how he learned to do that. He says, practice, lots of practice. I bend my head over the line of cocaine and sound like a greedy little piglet. I try again and again, but never get it down, I'm always in the troth.

Tank won't come if Rowan is there. Tank hates Rowan because Rowan always starts fights. Last time I was at Rowan's apartment, we watched a movie on Netflix after we fucked and, in the upper right-hand corner, I noticed that Rowan was signed into Tank's account. I'm sure, now, that there's more to the story but I'm too upset to ask in a way that sounds

nonchalant. Rule number one, you always have to be nonchalant about sex, no one belongs to anybody.

Tequila soda—the drink of summer. Whiskey ginger—the drink of winter. Gin and tonic—the drink of spring.

The bathroom at the Second story is unexpectedly homely and spacious. It is a single-use bathroom with a lock, a sink, a mirror, and a toilet that's clean. It reminds me of my grandmother's bathroom in New Jersey. The only thing missing is the water pick. Adderall is more enjoyable than coke. Coke is glamorous. Adderall leads to sex. Coke leads to spaced-out stereo sessions on the couch. Rowan and I don't choose. We like both.

Rowan steals his roommate's Game Boy and trades it for an eightball at 3 am. We go uptown to find the dealer nodding out over a plate of pancakes at a diner in the Ukrainian Village, and we wake him up and take a cab to his storage unit where he keeps his bicycles and video games. The dealer agrees to hold the Game Boy as collateral until Rowan pays him back. We stay up all night watching Robert Altman's *Pret-A-Porter* and lie next to each other on the couch. We haven't had sex yet, ever. I slip my hand beneath Rowan's t-shirt and rub his chest. He pushes my hand away and says he really doesn't think we should do that, that he's been trying really hard to make sure that I'm the friend he doesn't do that with. I'm disappointed, but I'm also relieved, because I agree with him. We go to sleep and, in the morning, there's still so much coke in the bag on the desk. I do another line. Rowan tells me that I'm acting really unattractive, that it's ten a.m. I tell him that it's ok, I can be unattractive, we're bros.

I host an after-hours at my apartment after the Second Story closes. Roo is in town from New York and everyone wants to hang out late into the night because it's so nice to see him again. Dora comes, Lay comes, and a few other friends come too. We dance to "Womanizer," "Spin Spin Sugar," and "Never Let Me Down." Everyone kisses. The lights are out, a lamp is knocked over, a record is stepped-on and broken. Rowan and I dance. Our lips meet, I feel his beard, his tongue. That night we blow each other on the floor next to a girl who watches us as she pretends to be asleep. Rowan says, Weird, I thought your dick would be bigger, and passes out on my chest.

We do it again the next night. We're supposed to meet up with everyone for brunch in the morning, and Rowan texts the thread, Guess what? Kip just came in my mouth! See you at ten. It's supposed to be a joke, an intentionally bad spin on the overly friendly and formal language of text message threads. But everyone acts really put off and tells us that we have problems, which embarrasses me. Later, Rowan asks, Is this our first fight? a phrase from a reality TV dating show that he likes to repeat ironically. I don't see him again for two weeks.

A Sisters of Mercy t-shirt, a green army parka, a black baseball cap and combat boots. This is what I wear when I go to the Second Story alone.

MATT KESSLER'S writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *MTV News*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Pitchfork* and *Vice*. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Literature & Creative Writing at the University of Southern California.