

Double life

He shrugged off his prayer garb as easily as his boxers

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There is a thong in my drawer that has stayed in the same place since last year. Sometimes, the red lace will poke out between the sensible white cotton and grey briefs, only for me to stash it out of sight like the semi-secret he was. It's the only item that has stood the test of time from that fleeting summer spent with him.

Everything was brief with us: his body on mine, the song that played on the aux cord repeatedly that summer and the park trips languorously basking in the sun's rays until we could no longer ignore the threat of a breeze.

Weekends were always rushed affairs. There was always a sister or a mother coming back early with her judging eyes boring into the apartment, as if she could smell the sweat of bodies and stained sheets permeating around the apartment. It was probably why we lived in the future; where big spaces were prominent, away from prying eyes and the lingering sense we were doing something wrong. The big spaces came to represent time, something we woefully lacked. There was always talk of marriage, but we would have been babies trapped in adult paperwork.

Furtive exchanges became the backbone of our relationship: longing looks in the park, a long, slow lick of an ice cream or a stroke on my hand. I was a ghost of a secret; the only tangible giveaway the black underwear accidentally ending up in his sister's laundry basket. Wisps of nothing, crude in the daylight, women's size M laid out on his bed awaiting collection but no explanation as to their owner.

By day, I played the role of the dutiful, God-fearing daughter where no one would have been able to guess the weekend's frivolities, the marks on my

legs and neck carefully shrouded in roll necks and long layers. But by night, I had awakened a second Layla. I would come alive in a room of one's own, except this time there were two bodies. Play clothes as I dubbed them, had their own separate identity. Thongs so small they didn't look like they could fit over a Barbie's leg, black fishnets, sheer mesh tops, the spiky heels that created criss-crosses all over his back, as if I was leaving a semi-permanent dent that no tattoo ink could hope to mask. A Mary Poppins overnight bag, packed with the precision of a military agent, mine for the millennial age. Packed not only with physical items but with the trepidation of steps on the landing, ears waiting for a door to be flung open or a voice on the stairway.

Being a sexual being was like dancing on a tightrope, navigating the slippery line between what I ought to be doing, what is expected and what I was doing. I was always near slipping, only to be caught in time before nearly giving way to a fall.

It is tricky practicing your faith and living a double life. There are the lies you're forced to upkeep, embroiling yourself and others in a lengthy covering up scheme as to where you spent last night while prayers, encouraging honesty, were left unattended. I would be consumed with an all-encompassing guilt as soon as I was home, the overnight bag hidden away and the insides looking like gaudy Blackpool souvenirs. Mirrors were no longer used for vanity purposes; instead, I averted my eyes, anxious they had become portals into my inner turmoil. I would promise to repent, reciting prayers half-heartedly with one eye on my phone, awaiting a text. Ramadan,

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once the holiest month of the year, no longer held the same excitement: a month without physical contact suddenly became a death sentence. Conversely, sex and religion coexisted easily for him, shrugging off his Friday prayer garb as easily as his boxers.

And when my resolve was no longer shaky, a text would come through. My sisters are gone for the weekend and from there, it was a countdown to that familiar cycle, heady with expectation. And I would savour that knowledge that in a room of one's own with two bodies would be intertwined at last. I began to detest weekdays for familiar routine yet simultaneously the mundanity would be bearable for Friday was bound to come again, heralding the return of new me.

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When he left (almost as suddenly as he arrived) taking the texts that signalled not just a double life but a third or fourth life with him, there was some kind of flagrant disobedience in deciding to live in a high-walled, airy flat in a brand-new neighbourhood. Where curtains were left open instead of widely shut and early morning Sundays no longer heralded the transition to normality but instead the beginning of a weekend day.

Space. So much space. ♦