

Units

Jazmine / 19:56 / 1.5

Jaz is cross-legged, face stretched into the dusty mirror, drink by side. The sticky smell of almost-finished takeaway crawls across the hallway, and noises of deliberation scatter down the stairs. Jaz is deciding on her part for the night. It feels like she needs to let herself regret something, or at least contribute to some stories. They need new stories. She rocks back onto her bum and picks up the drink. Need to find a straw once her lipstick's on. Dark lipstick? This eyeshadow is already dark. But then, you need stage paint under those lights. You need everything exaggerated. Need to catch attention between strobes.

The music upstairs seeps more loudly through the floorboards. A carousel of skin-tight combinations are being tested out upstairs. Rummaging around her smeary makeup box, Jaz picks up a plum lip liner. No. Actually, she has full intention of leaving whatever's on her lips across someone else's mouth tonight. Nude pink, easily wiped away, no mess. She takes another sip. Eyes should probably be bigger now. Rummages again for glitter. Flashing grains fall to the carpet. She presses the impression she needs onto the inside corner of her eyes. Eyes wide. Knees wide on the floor. Jaz thinks about her lacy underwear. Thinks about who might take it off. They have an unknown face, but perhaps a beautiful smile. Sip. A tiny pebble of ice slips into her mouth to finish melting.

Beanie / 20:13 / 4

Stood in front of the evening light, phone in hand. Chin up, no doubles. Tongue curled back inside her mouth. Beanie's heard that's how you make it sexy. Smile. Teeth, then no teeth. Lift the phone up, no neck folds, no lines. Big eyes. Raise eyebrows and tilt the camera down to hide your forehead. The strange height of your hairline. And the lines on your forehead from raising your eyebrows. Now wide eyes, arched eyebrows, hair behind one ear. Head turned to the side. Smile again. Wait. She takes a strawful of the gin and cheap lemon tonic. Rustles painted fingers between

powdery roots. Lift the phone and try again. Try with teeth. No, without teeth. Try without a smile. With a different smile. Turn head, untuck hair, pout for a joke and then because it might look good. It looks awkward. Try looking away from the lens, try candid. Try 'laughing'. Relax your face and swipe through the pictures. Gin and cheap lemon tonic. That one? Maybe, with a filter. She tries one more. A few more. Bite lip? God don't bite lip. It was ironic anyway. Gin and cheap lemon tonic. The light outside has finished sinking. Beanie takes another sip. She picks the very first photo, after all.

Nick / 20:15 / 2

“When we heading out?”

Nick is hunched over, forearms resting on the edge of the coffee table. “Eh, they said to go over at like eight thirty.” He’s fixed on the tiny trough of paper between his thumbs and forefingers. There’s an ever so slight tremble in his right thumb which no one else would notice.

“So we getting started here?”

“Yeah no rush.” Carefully he manages to tuck the paper over and behind the contents. He thinks of the time she said the tobacco looked like tea leaves. He’d laughed into her necklace and kissed her salty skin. A sharp kind of anger presses up against his breastbone. He focuses on his hands. He swallows with an effort. He stops the tremor in his thumb. Cranes his neck, tongue out, then leans back, rolling the cigarette triumphantly to a perfect tightness. “Hand me that lighter will you?” He says it with too much urgency, the sharpness still sitting in his chest. Light. Light again. Draw in, breathe out. Breathe in again... Nick drops his shoulders. Things dissolve, mostly.

There are three in the room. Room that serves as kitchen, lounge, party venue and guest bedroom. Al sat to the right of Nick, coat still on and fingering records over the arm of the sofa. Sammy perched on a stool by the sink, a four-pack on his lap. Left leg jiggling. The radiator behind the sofa breathes out heavy heat, and a window is propped open with a coke can. The place smells of

dried bbq sauce and damp tobacco, and every surface has a tackiness to it. In the corner is a shelf stuffed with books, and a turn table seated on an upside down box.

“Chuck us on some tunes will you AI?”

Jazmine / 20:39 / 3.5

Perched on the arm of the laden sofa, drink in one hand, the other curled across her waist. A casual arm to cover the exposed fold of her stomach. Crop tops are for standing. Shoulders back and navel pulled in, Jazmine assumes that well-practiced appearance of not caring how she looks.

“What time did the boys say they’d be here?”

Reaching across to put her drink on the corner of the table, Jaz pulls her phone from her back pocket. “Well I told Nick eight thirtyish, so they probs won’t be here till at least nine.” She had unlocked her phone even though there were no messages, and now scrolls absently through Instagrams she’s already seen.

Picks up her drink again, eyes still on phone as the screen times out. Shifting her weight to the left, Jaz squeezes the phone back between denim. Her thighs, pressed one on top of the other, bulge at the sides and look wider than she’d like. Tight jeans are for standing. There’s a thigh gap when she pushes her arches out. Tight jeans are for nights out. Crop tops, glitter, fake lashes and contoured hollows. ‘Jeans and a nice top’. A ritual, Jaz thinks of it. And takes part willingly. Hooks on her Converse stained with dance-floor filth, leans at the bar with sticky elbows and bouncy cleavage, lends sparkles to her housemates and sucks sweet drinks through brightly coloured straws. And on nights like this, when groups are going ‘out out’, everything is about sex. Jokes are dirty, questions are personal, cheeks are closer, sometimes touching. But it’s okay because this is the ritual. Alcohol is the fire and sex is the smoke that hangs around.

“Shall we play a game?”

Beanie / 21:40 / 9.5

Sat on the couch between Nick and Sam. Head tilted back, looking at the ceiling. For a moment. Beanie wishes she wasn't so drunk already. Drunk? Yeah, maybe. Just don't have too much more. The bottle of wine between her thighs is mostly full. She felt sober when she'd opened it. She remembers what looking down does to that awful roll in her neck. Shit. Lifts chin. Smiles and blinks, normally, she thinks. Beanie thinks she could probably save the wine she doesn't drink.

She closes her eyes for a just a second, and focuses on slowing down the alcohol trickling around inside her.

“Beanie, can I borrow your charger?”

“What? Yeah sure, go ahead. It's by my bed.” She lifts the bottle and takes another sour swig.

Sam / 21.55 / 6.5

A drink in each hand and Sam is feeling unusually cool. He's even being funny. People are laughing. Now is good. They might have noticed too. Doesn't usually drink but it's end of term. Why not. Getting out, the attempt to impress, the pounding conversation, is usually exhausting. But right now is good. Right now he's got Beanie next to him and he's got the energy. To play that part for the night. And a drink in each hand just feels so ridiculous. “Hey we getting a taxi?” Even his rattling Irish accent doesn't sound so bare tonight.

“Yeah they're coming at quarter past I think.”

“Better get going on those beers Sammy you've barely made a dent on 'em.”

“Two at once?”

“Odds.”

“...Three.”

“Three, two, one... One. Ayyyyy. Drink up.”

“How do I even...?” Sam tries to stretch his lips around both bottle rims and regrets it instantly. He rethinks. Five out of seven people are paying attention to his attempt. He decides to just lift them both to his pursed lips as he normally would. He does. Tips them as high. But there’s twice the liquid and half the control. Beer streams across his cheeks towards either ear. Gasp, splutter. Fuck. He coughs along to all the laughs. Laughs too, a little. Then apologetically dabs at Beanie’s splattered arm. “S. Sorry.”

Jazmine / 22:18 / 7

Jazmine gives up, slaps the mirror shut. Turns back to face the windscreen. Taxis always chuck about. “Yeah the bottom of the high street. Thanks. Yeah. Thanks.” Gear shifts from first to third to fourth to second. Jaz catches her left eye in the wing mirror. Her fake lashes heavy over a dark pupil. She leans forward to look at the other. Uses her little fingers to wipe the gathered purple dust from the creases in her eyelids. Sits back, watches lamp posts sliding past. Faster, slower. One stops just outside her window. Jaz twists round and dives her right shoulder into the seat. “You all got change?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, no, but. But I can transfer it to you. Promise.”

“We’ll need a cash machine anyway. To get in.”

“I’ll just pay your entry. Does that work?”

Jolted forward. The lights are red. Swimming in the puddles. “It better not bloody rain.”

Beanie / 22:43 / 13

“ID’S PLEASE.”

Face the front and file through smiling. Take back the little pink card with a small sense of triumph. Just for passing as yourself. Specific smile reserved for bouncers. ‘Yes that’s me’ slash ‘I’m not drunk I promise’ slash ‘thanks so much’. Don’t blink too slow. Overly pleasant to the bored-to-death boy with the sacred stamper. Just in case. Stamp on the hand. Mark of the tribe. Hah, look, another triumph. No smudges, nice neat letters. Warm, thick, sweaty air. Blinking. Silhouettes in the steam and smoke. Neon sign to the ‘ladies’. Swing round, catch the last one striding in. “Right let’s go.”

Nick / 23:20 / 12.5

“Cheers mate.”

“Cheers.”

Nick shakes his head, slams down the plastic rim. Fucking hates the taste of vodka. But take what you can get. Wipe your mouth don’t lick your lips. Stop your face from screwing up. Gesture towards dance floor and steer Al’s shoulders through the other shoulders. Faces. Passing girls and placing apologetic hands across their backs. Nick feels his smile take longer to spread than it usually does. Boys taller than him. Kick a rolling pitcher between some other feet. Someone waves an arm, digs an elbow. Girl passes close, places an apologetic hand on his bicep. Sheets and strips of coloured smoke. Nick smells that perfume between two flashes of light. He can smell it for a moment. Just. Sharp frustration pricks his throat and stomach. Teeth tightened. Fists crushing finger tips. Girls without eyes, with red rolled across their drying lips, girls without real smiles. Fake smile, his fake smile. Twisting, pushing, rubbing, lights change and new song starts, three different girls make eye contact, one pretty, one taken. Eyes meeting but vague and without connection. Nick needs a fag.

Jazmine / 23:55 / 11.5

Lips pressed halfway across each other, hands pushed through matted hair, lips moving, finding, locking and opening. Eyes shut tight don't open eyes. Sweaty soft against him. Stop. Start again. He edges his toes, or her heels, towards the corrugated corner. Dark walls and sticky floors. Oily lids pressed shut to each other. Her thumping ears hear a woop and a laugh and a name called out. Hands move, one up from waist other down the back. Pushing back bend her back press hard hold tight. Tongues working between teeth, open jaw. Clumsy, stopping to start again. Breathing through her folded nose but trying to sort of concentrate. Keep tummy in keep back arched, back aching. Floor feels at a sort of tilt. Press back against the solid wall, straight, cold. Stopping, starting, breathing. Stop. Let's stop, "let's go outside."

"Another drink?"

"Mmm. Maybe."

"I'll get them. See you outside?"

"I can come, dunno what I want yet."

"I'll surprise you."

Sam / 00:30 / 10

Shuffle feet around and keep moving. Sam feels tired and legs heavy. Blinking lights and smoke, another step back into his back. Twang of annoyance. No, enjoy don't worry no one else is worrying just dancing. Copy Beanie bend knees cross arms in front. Sam makes the most of this and Beanie crosses to dance with him both getting sillier funnier and spinning round, round spin round to find Beanie gone. Girls gone. "Toilets probably." Back to shuffling and looking seeing nothing just eyebrows and mouths and backs and biceps.

Sam thinks how strange he would look if everyone else just disappeared, the music went off, the lights came up, and he was still doing what he was doing. Just shuffling around by himself and jiggling his torso about. Sam thinks about being thirsty. Sucks his tongue and feels his furry teeth.

Dancefloors can be pretty lonely. When everyone stops seeing each other and stops hearing the lyrics. And are just moving. How crazy it would look in daylight.

Stumble, straighten, laugh, swing, shuffle. Limbs heavy and eyelids ready for sleep. Checks watch. Got a taxi in his pocket and needs fresh air in his mouth. “You seen Jaz? Nah Beanie’s with the others. Me neither. Yeah. Okay. See ya. Yeah.”

Beanie / 00:41 / 15

Bare knees on tile and forearms on white plastic. Tall walls and cheek in palm. Just feel better, to go back to dancing. Breathe in. And out, for a little while. With lashes touching tight. Beanie peers down into the sodden tissues and watery wine stains bleeding into them. The gritty chunks of takeaway.

“Beanie you in this one?”

Shuts her eyes eyes shut ignore the smell. Quite comfy actually. Just some stillness and some breaths and then she can stand up and wipe her eyes.

“Beanie you alright? I think Bean’s really drunk guys.”

“Oh for fucks sake this happened last time. It’s only like 12.30.”

“You seen Nick at all?”

“No not seen him or Jaz for ages.”

“Omg do you think—”

“Nah I saw Jaz with a random guy like half an hour ago.”

“Surprise surprise.”

Tilt head a little testing things tilts too much.

“Be nice if she could have a gals night with us for once, y’know?”

“Ugh she can do what she wants.”

Hang open lips.

“Beanie you gonna let us in? Are you in this one?”

Open eyes. Focus. Not that bad. “Yeahh. I’m fine. I’m fine be out in a minute hang on.”

Close eyes for just one more moment.

Jazmine / 01:24 / 17.5

Rolling steps wait pavement no too close eyes close. Closed. How? Why? Jaz can’t think can’t remember her mouth what’s done. Still rolling why can hear voices one voice talking low and a car noise driving leaving. No more music stop rolling. Open eyes now stairs light too light close eyes. Want to be still just still. All Jaz can think is how she wants to be still and sleep and not feel like this and “can” wait “can we” just stop “leave” just “leave me to be still”.

“Come on sweetheart let’s get you to bed.”

Still rolling tilting even though her eyes are shut tight. Feet swaying not walking. Not walking lifting where lifting, floating, moving, jolting. Taxis always jolt. Taxis home... bag. “Sarah?” Door closing. Why the stairs? Rolling stops rolling head back and resting head back and running away head moving body staying. “W. Wee dnt hve stairs.” Let sleep please. Stop moving. Eyes open, just for a moment.

Jaz doesn’t know where she is. Jaz can’t do anything, can’t think to do anything, but shut her eyes again. Just for a moment.