

ZEN REN

*Content Violation*

Nipples were the good days. I could review an endless queue of those reports, brown stains on skin, zoomed into the puckered borderland where good became bad. “Blessed by the nipple gods today,” Tiffany often declared upon returning home. Like many employees recruited right out of college, we were also roommates; the company offered discounted housing in the high rises above the downtown offices. It made it easier for everyone to stick to the first rule of the Feed Safety team: *Never describe real content with people on the outside.*

Nipples were the good days, but the other days brought honor. My first week, my manager Mickey found me clutching the cold banister in the stairwell, breathing in thin sips because he’d just shown us the infamous “roisserie baby” training slide. “Hold on to this feeling,” he encouraged, his hand on my shoulder. “Nobody on social media should have to see things like that. You’re helping them so much.”

When Tiffany saw my red eyes, she sliced straight to the truth: “This isn’t a crying sort of place, okay?”

They were both right. I learned that gasping over atrocities was a performance only meant for the world outside this office. Why cry over a roisserie baby, when I could pluck it out of the feed and replace it with a photo of your sister feeding her terrier chunks of birthday cake?

On our first date bar-hopping through a cool part of town I’d never seen before, I told Graham I’d just taken down a snuff film group. “It’s like one of those supposedly uplifting headlines,” he said in a friendly taunt. “*Employees donate sick days so coworker can go to chemo.* You seem really smart, so why do you work someplace that lets that happen?”

I replied that they gave us duck confit for lunch. He leaned far back in the leather barstool and raised his glass with a dramatic flourish.

Graham was thirty, and unlike most men my age, he gave good compliments: *You sound like such a problem-solver*. He'd say it while dragging his gaze up and down me, and I liked that whatever he saw drew out a wicked little smile. Because he was an analyst for a legislator, he wasn't allowed to have social media—a welcome respite from the scattered, distracted dates I'd gone on to wait out the time before my next shift. He flattered me with references to things like *A Pattern Language* or Žižek. I didn't tell him the last serious thing I'd read was the ISIS quarterly magazine to catch up on the new spring trends for terror. When we walked to my apartment, I detoured through my office's marbled lobby so he could admire the giant paintings on the wall I didn't understand.

At my door, he said, "I just want to make sure you saw that one thing on my profile."

I said of course—I'd been with guys in open relationships before.

Afterwards, slicked with sweat in my bed, Graham told me about his fiancée, R—. Their rules seemed so mature and European (no sleepovers, no meeting family), at least compared to the don't-ask-don't-tell my friends suffered, fueled more by political anxiety rather than enlightenment about love. He showed me a picture of R— holding a rhubarb pie. It seemed important to show him I was resilient, cool with anything, so I said it was my favorite. I'd never actually tried rhubarb pie before. But from the look of it, red and glittering with casting sugar, it was easy to guess what it tasted like.

### **Section 8: Nipples. Subsection 1) 33% visibility is acceptable.**

Rules governed my life. On Monday mornings, I dragged myself to a sterile conference room to teach overseas contractors North American culture, like how the number 88 was about white supremacy. But growing up Chinese, 88 meant double happiness, relationship luck. Now every time I saw the number appear on my screen, I felt anxious until I could resolve it into one feeling or another.

Every rule broke down into an equation to simplify decisions. Yet even within math, some variables felt subjective. In training, I'd project a viral screenshot from a Fantastic Four porn parody on a whiteboard to draw the rest of Invisible Woman's nipple into a pie chart: a slice of pink areola in blue Lycra. Only then could you see her nipple was 40% visible. You always had to hold the hidden parts

in your mind to recognize what was exposed, and only then could you decide if an image was bad enough to remove.

In college, Tiffany convinced me to take a math class taught by a professor she had a crush on. We learned about multiple kinds of infinities: “In whole numbers, you can count from one, forever.” But between the numbers 1 and 2, there was another endless stream: 1.1, 1.11, 1.111 . . . I took comfort in the idea that one could exist so expansively in the boundary of something else. I told myself if I found myself on the edge of any rule, between 33% and 34%, I could still be safe, and the event horizon of whole things would not suck me away.

**Graham, Article III: Sleepovers. A) Never. *Amendment: unless Bon Appétit says.***

Graham took me hiking on Austin’s rolling green hills, got me into vegetarianism before he shifted to keto, and was always thrifting me books he thought I’d like. All the while, he told me more about R—. She also had an impressive job: a director of a nonprofit for addiction therapy. She read Jane Austen and voted even for municipal things, which upset me. For a few days I wondered if I was living wrong. When my ten-hour shifts ended, I only had the energy for *The Bachelorette*, consoling myself that the brain rot was okay because I’d saved lives, probably.

One evening as we watched *The Bachelorette* season finale, I asked why R— hadn’t moved to Austin with him. Graham said, “She’s piloting a new outreach program in Boston but believes in the strength of the relationship.” It calmed me, the way the words struggled out of his mouth—a parrot unused to copying new words.

The next afternoon Graham surprised me at my place with a picnic basket, an artfully curated collection: semi-ripe cheeses and crackers, Castelvetro olives, jarred sangria, a book with a French title for me, even a Chinese mooncake. At the park we laid it all out on display, and I tucked my yellow sundress underneath me, conscious of looking nice. I went for the mooncake first; I didn’t like the look of it with everything else.

He said he felt lucky to be seen at the park with a cute girl reading Balzac, enjoying a fancy meal. “I’ve been getting my shakshuka down. It’s a North African breakfast. Have you had it?” When I said no, he responded, “Well, *Bon Appétit* says it’s best to eat it fresh. If

you want to try, you should spend the night.”

The next morning at his dining table, I flushed when he put a plate of eggs in front of me and I realized he'd caught me in such a cliché.

The rules of sleepovers and other things crumbled against his laws about freshness. That summer we feasted on merguez, khachapuri, injera. In the mornings, I took leftovers home in his Pyrex, bruises from his grip dappling the backs of my thighs. Everything kept for days.

### **Homewrecker 101: Sabotage the relationship at every opportunity.**

Not many people could handle that the guy they were seeing also had a fiancée. So even if I felt anxious my life wasn't as settled as his, I still had that. “I'm impressed,” said Tiffany, when I came to her room to confess where I'd been going. She'd snapped her mascara tube shut, only one eye done. “You little homewrecker. I didn't know you had it in you.”

I would protest the label, except she'd turned it into praise. Tiffany never tolerated defense against her verdicts. In high school, she broke down metal at a scrapyard and caught stray dogs for an extra twenty. Then she ran off to Arizona to work on a hydroponic farm. In college we met because she offered to pay me for math tutoring services with shrooms instead of cash, and even though I never smoked them or whatever you were supposed to do, I was fascinated by her confident approach to life, always trusting her own feelings like facts. She'd earned her right to colorful opinions. I often fantasized about what a wet dream her college application essay must have been.

One slow afternoon at work, I asked her how many people she thought we'd saved. We dragged out a whiteboard from a conference room, and our markers squeaked out the work of terrorists and rapists. She laughed at the final number because we'd made an error; it was the entire population of the earth. As she scrubbed the board clean, she asked, “What happens when we've done our jobs, and there's nothing more to delete?”

Her words hurtled me into a cold fright. I wasn't like her, changing everything from year after year, comfortable no matter whose life she wore. There was still so much good to do for all the

trouble in our world. It was all I ever thought about.

As Graham and I got closer I began to feel pangs whenever he brought up R—. At first I thought it was jealousy, which disappointed me: Did I need to read more of his ethical non-monogamy books? Fuck more artists, smoke cigarettes? I didn't want a real relationship with a guy who'd only be in town for a year, even though I'd get distracted staring at my work screen thinking about us, my eyes glazing over as I deleted porn or corpses. Dating him felt right; he praised me all the time that I seemed put-together for someone my age. It was easier for me to believe it from him than from other men because he had such an impressive fiancée, so he knew what quality was.

It also meant that whenever he complained about R—, I felt frustrated for the both of us. That was how I knew I wasn't a homewrecker. Without R—, I wouldn't know the shape of my own boundaries, this fault line flooded over by his pleasure in me. I listened for hours as he vented. I tried to see myself in his eyes: my kind reactions, how patient I was, yes, how fortunate for him, to be with someone like me.

One warm afternoon in bed, as he was showing me Lyle Lovett on vinyl, he said he wished R— and I could meet. Reaching toward my thigh, he added: "She's just a more jealous person than you." I asked what he meant. "Oh, you know. She can be sensitive. She could never do your job." His words muddled all the images in my mind. I wondered if my headless body would resemble R—'s, if without a face our breasts could offer the same pleasures. As he thrust it shifted the position of my hand over his chest, his nipple. Not okay. Okay. Not okay. Okay.

The next morning, before Graham woke up, I looked up R—'s profile for the first time. There were pictures of her new monstera, a selfie at a concert with a musician floating in a haze of pink and green fog, shakshuka wounded with slashes of orange fat. She ate heirloom radishes from the farmer's market, whereas I collected new Doritos flavors, a hobby from college. Her smile exuded a buoyant quality that felt trustworthy. I wondered what she'd think of my profile if she saw it, if she could see my goodness the way I saw hers.

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**Rule 1: Looking at R—'s profile. a) After work. b) After 4 p.m. c) Only in the office.**

Every time Graham vented to me about R—, I reasoned even more fervently on her behalf. I told Graham what to say, where to put his hands and when, how to look guilty enough to elicit sympathy and not disgust. Then we would fuck.

After, I'd feel better if she'd posted a smiling selfie. At first, I was too obsessed, the link to her profile always cocked within my fingers. But anything could be absolved if I did it the right way, with the right rules. R— took her breaks around 4:00 p.m., too. She posted in a steady stream, often venting, quickly deleting, sometimes alluding to frustrations with Graham. My fingers itched to comment: *Yeah, you're too good for him.*

She was a good person who helped others. I hoped people saw me like that, too. As I passed by churches, I felt a sense of ownership of the people who flowed in and out, warm bodies conjured by the tolling of a bell. I knew they were alive because I'd taken down terrorist chats conspiring to storm churches with guns. She helped counsel people through bad things. I could remove those bad things entirely. We were almost, just about, the same.

One evening, when Graham and I were soaking in his hot tub, he asked me to grab his phone to change the music. I was choosing which Anderson .Paak album when a fresh text vibrated into my fingers.

It was from R—: *reading abt the history of stump speeches. anyway, i miss u*

The sight of her name alone clapped into me the muted thunder of pleasure striking pain. I told Graham she'd texted. "Tell her something sweet for me," he said from the tub, leaning back with closed eyes. "You're so good at that."

My damp thumbs left glowing drops as I typed. *are you outside*

R— replied: *on the balcony*

*are you looking at the sky*

*yup*

*imagine all that light reflecting off the moon, into my eyes, back to the moon, all the way to boston. i'm right there with you.*

She responded: *i don't think that's how reflections work.* Cold washed over me as I reread the text and saw how juvenile I

sounded. But then she texted a pink heart, which pulsated exquisitely on the screen. I held it for a moment under my wet finger, as if its movement could slip inside.

When I returned the phone to Graham, he didn't even thank me. For the first time I felt anger at him and his leisurely pleasures—the way he sucked up all his good words from me yet always acted as if it was I who needed guidance.

One morning, when he treated me to a brunch at an expensive place downtown, Graham reminded me that R— was visiting for a few weeks for her birthday. “We shouldn't text. I just don't want her to see your name pop up and have a fight. I'm sorry.”

I dabbed my lips with a napkin and told him I was fine. I wanted to say: It can just be for a coffee. We can be friends. But then I saw the clouded look in his eyes and thought: He's afraid. He doesn't want her to know about my good work, that their relationship is better because of me.

He asked me if I could pick up a gift at Nordstrom—he would pay me back. I agreed, but the second I arrived at the jewelry counter I felt a smear of anguish. This was different from him asking for help apologizing. I was running errands like a maid, a promise of labor so invisible you could leave the door unlocked to invite it in.

I chose an emerald on a short gold chain of vines and got a card printed:

*To my darling girl,  
You deserve all the good things in this world, and more than that too.  
Have the happiest of birthdays.*

I tried not to dwell on how many times I'd erased *my darling girl*, struggling to type beyond “R,” afraid of feeling the rest of her name slough free from me.

**Employee Handbook Rule #24: Please do not comment on news controversies with anyone.**

A few days into R—'s visit, Mickey rounded up everyone on Feed Safety into a small meeting room full of unfamiliar people from headquarters. A gray-suited HR woman gravely informed us a story from The Verge had just gone viral about the “harrowing conditions” for Feed Safety employees and leaked all our tightly guarded

rules for bad content. The article described the gore we reviewed in lurid detail and called us the forgotten dregs of the company.

Our department director reminded us we couldn't talk to anyone about the news. Mickey said that the company would set up counseling, and that we would all be tested for mental fitness to ensure we could handle the work. A lawyer announced they were revising the more controversial rules to address public outcry—the nipple rule was moving from 33% to 66%.

After, Mickey quietly pulled the senior employees into a windowless meeting room. "There's talk that they want to replace us all with bots, so everyone can feel better that humans aren't being traumatized." When I asked when this might happen, he said, "They're doing the mental fitness test this afternoon, so maybe the sweep starts now."

Feeling cold and shaky, with no other guidance on what to do, I went back to my desk and opened up R—'s profile. Her familiar face smiled back at me. I saw she was holding a coffee cup I recognized, at the café in my favorite art museum.

### **Graham's rules for dates, #3: No phones.**

I stayed in my car when I arrived. Graham and R— sat at a small bistro table on the balcony: She'd worn an olive duster jacket and leather ankle boots. Their taut faces held the aftermath of an argument, and she kept shaking her head, making her dark curly hair bounce.

When Graham walked away with their cups, R— snatched up her phone. I realized I had no idea what she read each day. She kept scrolling through a long article. I ached to read it too, so that if I somehow met her, I'd be prepared, I'd understand all her references.

When the two of them walked back into the building, I dashed towards the museum entrance on the other side of the street to follow them, rushing to the top floor. After a minute, they appeared in the white stone atrium below. The two moved in that slow, waddling gait of pigeons as they pointed at the statues around them. Every time Graham left to look at something else, R— would whip out her phone and do a quick scroll. She reached for it instinctively, like how a baby reaches for any pacifier it sees in mindless hunger. I wanted to smack it out of her hands. It just didn't seem like the R— I knew to be so addicted to her phone—wasn't that hypocritical?



What if she wasn't actually good at her counseling job?

When Graham returned from the bathroom and saw that she'd gotten sucked into her phone again, he said something in an exasperated voice, then grabbed it. "I'm just giving you a break," he said. When she turned away, he pulled back with equal force.

The phone went flying, and splashed into the coin fountain. Other patrons turned to look, then scattered across the marbled floor with hushed commentary. R— retrieved her dripping phone. From up high, I could see the cracked screen sputter before going dark.

Graham approached her, conciliatory. He rubbed her back, leaning in, and I could tell he was trying a real apology. I desperately wanted to know what he was quoting from me. Then he ruined it: He pulled out the jewelry box. She took it in surprise but no elation, as if he was showing off an interesting rock he'd found. She glanced at the contents, flashed a polite smile, then tucked the box inside her purse. As if waking from a fugue, she relaxed. But when they turned around, I saw that she had emptied her face and body of all feeling, wearing the same blank look she had when scrolling.

I was angry at Graham for turning my gift into a cheap bargaining chip. Yet R—'s face still arrested me. She had touched what I had chosen for her, and then I had become a part of her expression. She'd seen something real, of me.

The two started to drift off toward the foyer, likely heading to Graham's apartment. If R— couldn't post, I would have no idea where they would go after today. The realization seized me with a desperate need, although what exactly it was I couldn't articulate. Where could we possibly meet that Graham wouldn't see?

I rushed downstairs to the women's bathroom. It was empty, filled with a powdery smell. I fixed my hair in the mirror, took a swab from a jar to clean my eyeliner.

After a few minutes, in the frosted windowpane of the bathroom door, a figure began to appear. The shadow in the window grew larger, and her colors began to emerge. I tucked myself behind the curved wall. The door swung open, and I counted one, two, steps of her boots.

Then I rushed out from behind the wall, crashing hard into R—.

A hundred objects clattered to the bathroom floor. We apologized and scrambled to pick up wallets and pens and other detritus and stuffed them into each other's purses and stood up awkwardly. Before she vanished into a stall, I caught a whiff of her elegant, grown-up perfume.

When she came out, we caught each other's reflection in the mirror and she smiled in that tight way that people do to acknowledge they've just embarrassed themselves. She looked so different, I thought, softer-edged. I didn't dare let my eyes go anywhere but her reflection; looking directly at her felt too intimate.

"Drat," she said, pumping the lotion bottle. "They're out."

I offered her a tube of lotion from my purse, which she took. She touched up her eyeliner, asked if I was on school break. Did I look that young? Was it because the lotion was just Bath and Body Works, but she was a grown woman who wore real perfume?

"I just left work early," I said. "Stressful day."

"That sucks. What do you do?"

"I review reports of violating content on social media and take it down."

She whipped around, amazed. "Like that story that's going viral right now? I was just reading it. Oh, don't spoil the rest."

Upon hearing that the object of her obsession had been me, a violent desire possessed every molecule of my body, blinding me with need. All I said was: "Yes, like that."

When she asked what it was like on the job, I said I wasn't allowed to discuss it. She said she understood and described her own job, with all its rules about silence. For a moment we felt like real friends, just gabbing on a work break before heading out to save the world. Then she looked directly at me. "I hope I'm not overstepping. But you should see someone. The stuff you have to look at is really fucked up."

Her words didn't make sense. In a world of helpers and helpes, weren't we the helpers? What was it about me that looked to her as if I was hurting? What quality was this, that Graham seemed to also see, that made him try to guide me?

I could hardly look at her eyes, which filled so deeply with sympathy. "It's really not bad. I'm helping people all day."

Then R— said something truly ugly: "Yes, but you deserve help too, you know?"

She offered back my tube of lotion with an outstretched hand.

I opened up my purse for her. “Oh,” she said. “I think you may have taken something of mine by accident.”

She pointed to the jewelry box.

I’d taken it when we bumped into each other, a frenzied gesture I had no control over. An image, already faded, appeared before me of me being the one to realize, hand it over, and receive her recognition of my goodness.

“No,” I said instead. “This is mine.”

She made that strained smile again. “My fiancé gave it to me for my birthday. It’s the same box.”

“There’s a big sale at Nordstrom. It’s just their box.”

She searched in her own purse, then stood a little taller, and said it was hers. I realized it didn’t hurt me to look at her eyes, which no longer seemed terribly sympathetic or obscure; instead, they flickered between shades of cold sterility.

A calm blanketed over me. “If it’s yours,” I said, “do you know what’s inside?”

Suspicion painted her every word. “It’s a gold necklace with an emerald charm.”

“Oh, the doorbuster. It’s got vines, right? I got the same one.”

Far from being angry, it was as if she’d pulled back her expression, flattened out her lines until she became a blank page, unreadable. I dug around in my purse, and handed her my receipt with my name on it, line item EMRLD, GLD CHN, for \$200.

She stared at it, then released it back into my hand. “It’s been a strange day.”

“I’m sorry about your necklace,” I said, and realized with grief that I really meant it. “I hope your fiancé isn’t too upset.”

“It’s fine. He’ll be fine,” she said. Agitation flooded her face, and she clutched her purse closely to her body, as if shielding herself. “I didn’t want him to do anything for me, anyway.”

When she rushed out, the scent of my lotion still lingered, then overpowered her perfume.

**Rule: Ensure the mental fitness of each person to do the work.**

Back at work, a man in a doctor’s coat was plucking off my team one by one to do the mental fitness test. “It’s just a silly game,” Tiffany promised, when she saw my exhausted face. “You’ll be great at it.”

When my turn came, he took me into the dimmed room with a

chair and a computer, attached gelled probes to my scalp, then left. I calibrated by watching a dot that jittered across the screen, blinking when instructed. When the test began, I relaxed when I saw it was just pictures of dead bodies. I circled the violating bits. I highlighted slurs in hate speeches. I recognized the 88s.

Every few images they'd show me something cute, like a baby seal, which made me afraid it was about to explode. I slowed my breathing, counting 1, 2, 3. I looked for a pattern, and figured out those came every 4th time. Nature's rules always made themselves known if you were observant enough.

After I finished, Mickey came by my desk with a beaming smile, holding a slip of paper. "You scored as *Exceptionally High Resiliency*, in the top 1%."

Next to me, my phone was blowing up with texts from Graham. Without looking, I deleted our text thread and then blocked his number.

I tried to take comfort in the capitalization of "Resiliency," which meant it was a real science. Every harm could be neatly stowed away according to rules and regulations, hidden behind metal bars that allowed nothing to slip out. But something in this logic felt unsatisfactory, clawed at me. I wanted to put my whole body in a machine that could read my every neuron, then tell me what I was like, something objective and real—not clouded by all the things I wanted so badly for myself.

Alone in the cafeteria after work, Tiffany found me in the corner nursing an espresso. Once I saw her, I couldn't hold back anymore. "I've done something really stupid," I said, and told her everything.

Tiffany took in my deluge, hardly changing her expression. Then, in an uncharacteristically gentle voice, she told me she'd done something similar in college. She'd been with a married finance guy, hooking up in hotels downtown. One day she visited the library where the wife worked—curious for a peek—but it freaked the guy out.

It struck me how she was sneaking around while we were taking math classes together, learning about infinity, me none the wiser. Every time I looked too closely at her, the student and scapyard and adulterer, the image fractured apart. Of course she knew how to exist in a million pieces.

"It's not a big deal," she said, taking a sip of my espresso. "This

isn't who you are at the heart of things."

Hearing about myself like that startled me. "I don't know what that would be."

"Sure, you went a little cuckoo for a hot second, but you're not some criminal. You literally had a receipt, right? So, stop beating yourself up. You're still a good person."

I nearly cried. I hadn't realized how starved I was to hear that, and to know it was true because someone was telling me that it was true.

I took the jewelry box out of my bag and held it up to her. "Could you help?"

She clasped the chain around my neck. I turned over the vines so that they faced the right way, but every time I adjusted one, another flipped over, twisting everything further with each touch, so I pressed the chain into my skin to keep it in place.

I told myself everything was okay. Tiffany's words, my mental fitness test—all of it told me something that R— had made me uncertain about. I was strong enough to endure what most people could not. The job of being a good person was easy enough. Just a matter of curation. Of endurance. I could do that, I tried to tell myself, but my thoughts were drowned by the blood rushing in my ears.

"How does it look?" I asked, reaching for my throat.