

Supper Club

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A New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice

For fans of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*: A sharply intelligent and intimate debut novel about a secret society of hungry young women who meet after dark and feast to reclaim their appetites--and their physical spaces--that posits the question: If you feed a starving woman, what will she grow into?

Roberta spends her life trying not to take up space. At almost thirty, she is adrift and alienated from life. Stuck in a mindless job and reluctant to pursue her passion for food, she suppresses her appetite and recedes to the corners of rooms. But when she meets Stevie, a spirited and effervescent artist, their intense friendship sparks a change in Roberta, a shift in her desire for more. Together, they invent the Supper Club, a transgressive and joyous collective of women who gather to celebrate, rather than admonish, their hungers. They gather after dark and feast until they are sick; they break into private buildings and leave carnage in their wake; they embrace their changing bodies; they stop apologizing. For these women, each extraordinary yet unfulfilled, the club is a way to explore, discover, and push the boundaries of the space they take up in the world. Yet as the club expands, growing in both size and rebellion, Roberta is forced to reconcile herself to the desire and vulnerabilities of the body--and the past she has worked so hard to repress. Devastatingly perceptive and savagely funny, *Supper Club* is an essential coming-of-age story for our times.

Lara Williams is the author of the short story collection *A Selfie as Big as the Ritz*, and her writing has been featured in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Vice*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *McSweeney's*, and elsewhere. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and is featured in *Best British Short Stories 2017*. She writes and teaches creative writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. She lives in Manchester, England. *The Fearful Are Caught*

Lina was the first. We met her in a caf#x17d; with cloudy gray furnishings and a needless accumulation of potted plants. The tables were piled with magazines that had titles like *Wheatsheaf* and *Gardenia*, their covers featuring tanned girls with ribbony limbs, all pigtailed and peasant dresses. One by one, Stevie turned them upside down. Lina messaged us from outside, and we watched her do it, crinkling her nose at the beginnings of rain.

I'm outside.

Shall I come inside?

I mean, shall I meet you inside?

Where are you sat?

Sorry, I just hate not knowing where to sit.

Are you near the back window? I think I can see you.

Okay, I can see you. I'm heading in now.

Sorry.

Sorry.

Lina had blond hair knotted over her shoulder. She wore a navy cord suit and a white silk shirt. Her bulky trainers were incongruous to her outfit. She explained she wears them to and from work but in the office is required to wear heels.

She worked as a front-office manager at an expensive hotel. It was reasonably paid; she'd get a discounted Caesar salad in the hotel bistro for lunch, plus use of the steam room and sauna. But she worked a fifty-hour week and once got docked pay for having chipped her nail varnish on the tram. And watching all the rooms being used for affairs and, worse, for ordering sex workers, had made her paranoid about her husband's fidelity.

"At first it was the middle-aged couples leering over the counter. Drunk and conspicuous, like we couldn't believe their audacity."

She wore a thin gold bracelet, which she rolled between her fingers. Spinning it in circles against her skin until it left a faint red mark.

"Then it was the younger ones. Women asking which lift would take them to Room Thirty-three. Their eyes never really leaving the floor. Walking out of the hotel still adjusting their clothes."

Stevie and I made notes: me scribbling into a notepad, Stevie tapping at her phone. We didn't know what we were collating at that point, but the data felt urgent and indispensable. Lina's round face turning pink.

"But it was the sex workers who got to me. And the men who use them. These completely ordinary-looking men."

Lina's obsession began with the women: eyeing the sizes of their waists, scrutinizing their faces-wondering whether her husband might find them attractive. She'd think about the way they dressed, whether her husband might want her to dress like that. The women mostly weren't sex workers, but to her they might as well all have been. These other women, with their lipstick and their lacquered hair. All offering something else, something new, something she never could-being in possession of just the one human body-and trying to make a penny off it, too. She wondered whether she hated these women or if she was afraid of them. Whether there was a difference.

She became fixated on the idea that her husband must be having an affair or using sex workers-or that he eventually would. She'd follow him home from work, leaving her own work early, making up doctors' appointments or dentist checkups, taking Ubers across town. She'd sit on the other side of the square outside the recruitment agency where he worked, having already taken note of the colors he was wearing that morning in order to better spot him. She'd follow him on the opposite side of the street, a few feet behind, her gaze fixed on him diagonally across the road. She'd trail him into shops on the way home from work, ducking behind the bread counter in Tesco. Once she held an especially large watermelon out in front of her head so she could walk past him undetected and check the contents of his basket (Jazz apples, cooked ham, Ritz crackers). She would trace him all the way to the train station, where he would sometimes stop for a drink at the station pub, not telling her, saying he had to work late; and if he was lying about this, then what else was he lying about? Dishonesty, she felt, was a spectrum; you might be on the less potent end, but you were still on it, prone to slip up, slide further along, depending on the circumstances.

She wouldn't stop until she had followed him all the way to their door, and then she would crouch down, sometimes crawl on her hands and knees, hiding behind the brick wall that fronted their home. She would wait there for thirty minutes, sometimes an hour, until she was sure, until she was absolutely certain, he wasn't going back out.

Once he had gone to bed, she would stay up late to devour his Internet activity: scrolling through his history after he'd fallen asleep. She installed a keystroke logger on their downstairs desktop, finding out all his passwords and accounts. When her husband used the bathroom or showered in the morning, or popped out to buy a pint of milk, she would check his phone, reading his texts, looking at his photos, reviewing his outgoing calls. She learned what kind of pornography he liked and that sometimes he looked up his old girlfriends on Facebook. But no sex workers. Never sex workers. She began feeling almost resentful at his inactivity, thinking about all the well-dressed businessmen who ordered champagne and chateaubriand sent to their rooms, who wouldn't patch through their wives' telephone calls-did he really think he was better than them?

It became a routine of sorts. The following. The checking up. The phone. One Saturday afternoon he went to watch the football, and she noticed his phone left behind on the kitchen counter. She didn't even think about it, it was instinctive. Perched against the oven, she opened his messages: a text from an unknown number. Thanks for last night, let's do it again soon, how much do I owe you for the room-punctuated by an image of lips, clavicle, rib cage, and breasts. She stared at the message for a while, worrying she had imagined it, that she had literally willed it into existence. She waited for the anger, the disappointment, the betrayal she had anticipated to course through her veins, surprised when all she felt-all she actually felt-was relief. It was over. It had happened. And it didn't hurt that bad.

"That's why I'm here," she told us. "That's why I want to do this."

Stevie and I could not contain ourselves. We squeezed hands underneath the table. She grinned back at us.

"You're in," Stevie said.

"We've not got a date for the first one yet," I added. "Or a venue. But we're looking. Probably something next month."

We finished our drinks and told her more about our vision for Supper Club. We told her about the ethos. About what we hoped the events would look like. The sort of women we were hoping to recruit.

"So your husband," Stevie said. "Did you leave him after you found out?"

"Oh, no," she replied, perhaps a little dreamily. "We stayed together. We're kind of happier than we've ever been. It's weird to think," she added. "It was just one year. Just one really peculiar year. But it transformed my life forever."

Stevie's face changed. "That's ridiculous," she said, forever teetering on the precipice of hostility, never afraid to speak her mind.

"Don't you think that's ridiculous, Roberta?" She turned to me. "To put an emphasis on one arbitrary stretch of time that's . . . you know, a total construct? I mean, we are all just these giant accumulations of stuff and experiences and talking and things happening to us. You can't break a human life down into years and say that one of them in particular really means something."

Lina looked embarrassed. She began fiddling with her bracelet again.

"Roberta?" Stevie said. "Roberta, don't you agree?"

I half smiled-out of generosity or discomfort, it was often hard to know. And I didn't say that I didn't agree, but I didn't say that I did.

Expectations

The September that I left for university, color clung to the branches, the result of a magnanimous spring. There is something particularly unbearable about being sad in the heat: the terrible knapsack of it, carrying it around like a heavy load. Something between melancholy and nerves, a blank no-man's-land, lousy with the lethargy of hot weather. Who can be bothered?

On my last morning at home, I looked out at the cemetery that backed onto my bedroom window. I hooked open the latch and pushed forward the glass pane, swinging my legs over the ledge, lighting a cigarette, and exhaling thin curls of smoke toward the graves. Growing up next to a cemetery had made me flippant about death. It was as perfunctory as chopping cabbage beside my mum: Van Morrison on the radio, the dog expectant beside our legs, flipping scraps of veg to the floor. Hearses dragged slowly past our house, but so did garbage trucks and milk vans. Families sobbed and howled, we turned up the

TV. Sometimes I liked to pretend my own dad was dead: imagining the funeral, what I might say, what hymns might be sung. Whether there would be any readings or speeches. I got a strange satisfaction from thinking about it.

He wasn't dead, of course. Just gone—he'd left when I was seven. And though my mum encouraged me to stay in touch with him, eventually I stopped replying to his letters, wouldn't answer his phone calls. So I was used to the vagaries of loss, the spaces left behind, my dad's absence apparent in the most peculiar ways. The suite of friends' husbands that swung by, each offering a particular trade or service: fixing a clog in the gutter, ringing the council about streetlights. Not that my mum was incapable. She was a problem solver, resourceful in a way I've never since witnessed.

"Some things come better from a man," she would tell me wearily. Though I could barely remember my dad, I was acutely aware of a lack in my life: missing something I'd never really known.

I sat on the windowsill and thought about death, my dad, and whether or not I'd get a good room in halls, while downstairs my aunt Hetty loaded up the van.

My aunt was a woman who drove a van. It was an olive-green Toyota HiAce, and she drove it in sleeveless shirts and khaki shorts, a carton of orange juice wedged in the cup holder to be slugged back noisily at traffic lights. On the weekends she'd go to watch Arsenal wherever they were playing, traveling all over the country, the continent, with the large group of men who were her friends. She'd tell me stories about cutting them down to size, drinking them under the table. "I know men." She tapped her index finger to the side of her head. "I know how their brains work." She was a woman who'd lived a very glamorous life.

I stubbed out my cigarette against the exterior wall and went downstairs. My aunt was throwing in suitcases and canvas bags, landing each with a loud thump.

"Careful!" I yelled.

"You know, you might have helped," she responded, and I wondered why it hadn't even occurred to me to offer.

Joan of Arc snapped at our feet. She was a usually stoic French bulldog. The rescue trust we'd adopted her from told us she'd been abandoned, found whimpering beneath a cooling bonfire. She must have crawled there for warmth. The name was obvious. We called her Joa for short; appropriate, as that was the shape of her bark. Jao! Jao! she would yap, as if with an accent.

[AU: Jao or Joa for barks/dogs name?]

"She knows you're going," my mum offered solemnly. I picked Joa up, snuggling her loosely in my arms. We had been a triad: her, me, and my mum.

"Can she come with us?" I asked.

My mum leveled her gaze on me, and I took Joa inside, scooping up her face. "I'll be home soon," I said, kissing her good-bye.

My mum had taken the passenger seat while my aunt switched on the engine. The van hummed a low vibrato. I got in the back.

"Right," my aunt said, revving the engine. "Let's get you moved out."

I pulled the lap strap across my waist as tight as it would go.

I was not unaccustomed to the trappings of an urban environment: once a year we'd take a trip to the city for shoes. We'd eat sushi off rubber conveyor belts, ding the bell for more sparkling water. I'd drag my mum to vintage stores and buy oversize sweatshirts and buttoned dresses. She'd marvel at their cost and scrutinize stains, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. "You'll get that out with vinegar," she'd concede, shaking her head in a seasoned disbelief. We'd finish with a trip to the cinema, a rare opportunity to see something foreign. But I was always happy to come home. There was a sense of order there. Everything closed at five, so you knew where you were.

Now I was moving to a much bigger city. A city in which the train station contained more enterprise than my entire hometown. "It's like an international airport!" I'd exclaimed on my first visit, coming to look round the university. My mum eyed me warily: my callow gait and habit of tripping over my own feet.

The roads were wider and more hazardous than I was used to. Everything felt immediate and perilous. The buildings slowly increased in size and density. I pressed my face against the glass. We passed Turkish sweet shops and Chinese bakers. Snooker halls and shisha cafés. Organic grocery stores and newsagents with bars across their windows. Newspaper boards warned of gang crime and fraud, reported stabbings and rape. Back home we'd passed just two: bee infestation closes school and lake algae: killer? The traffic wound sluggishly through the city center, backdropped by an orchestra of car horns and emergency services.

As we neared the campus, everything began to space out. We circled its glassy modern structures for a full hour, trying to find my accommodation. My mum and aunt bickered in the front. They are like an old married couple, I thought. They are literally like an old married couple. A map was produced, a relic of charming antiquity, and we realized that my new home was set just outside the city, not quite suburbia but almost. "Here," my aunt said as we approached rows of dilapidated three-story town houses surrounded by a somewhat bleak industrial landscape. It was a world away from the grassy slopes and induction activities I'd imagined. On the website the halls had been photographed capped in snow. They'd looked a lot nicer that way.

Across from the student blocks were low rows of shops and businesses. A tiny vegetarian café. A semiderelict laundrette. A chip shop. There was an unmarked plot of land

that contained a single abandoned supermarket trolley. We unloaded.

Other Books

Supper Club. A sharply intelligent and intimate debut novel about a secret society of hungry young women who meet after dark and feast to reclaim their appetites--and their physical spaces--that posits the question: if you feed a starving woman, what will she grow into? "A visceral and dangerous celebration of feminine appetite and agency. Dark, vivid and infinitely compelling, Williams boldly explores what happens when women dare to cross lines and take up space with their bodies, the hungers and delights to be found in transgression, and the anger and pain we are afraid to claim." --Mona Awad, author of *Bunny* and *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl* Roberta spends her life trying not to take up space. At almost thirty, she is adrift and alienated from life. Stuck in a mindless job and reluctant to pursue her passion for food, she suppresses her appetite and recedes to the corners of rooms. But when she meets Stevie, a spirited and effervescent artist, their intense friendship sparks a change in Roberta, a shift in her desire for more. Together, they invent the Supper Club, a transgressive and joyous collective of women who gather to celebrate, rather than admonish, their hungers. They gather after dark and feast until they are sick; they break into private buildings and leave carnage in their wake; they embrace their changing bodies; they stop apologizing. For these women, each extraordinary yet unfulfilled, the club is a way to explore, discover, and push the boundaries of the space they take up in the world. Yet as the club expands, growing both in size and rebellion, Roberta is forced to reconcile herself to the desire and vulnerabilities of the body--and the past she has worked so hard to repress. Devastatingly perceptive and savagely funny, *Supper Club* is an essential coming-of-age story for our times.

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