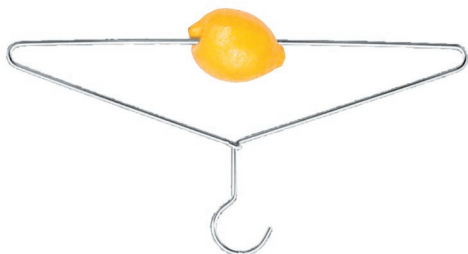


light reading series

featherproof



Elizabeth Crane

DONOVAN'S CLOSET

What I'm about to tell you notwithstanding, I am not a stalker. Or a boyfriend-stealer. I ended up in Donovan's closet entirely by accident.

We'd been flirting for a while. He used to be in a band with my friend Jason, who was now in this band Diatribe. I was never really much into the music scene before that (I love music, but the whole indie music scene eluded me – something to do with a degree of coolness I found intimidating – Jason once said “you could weave a tapestry from the mutton chops alone”) but I started going to all Jason's shows, to show my support, and so did Donovan. It was easy to see why they were friends – they both had that brainy rock star thing going on, which on Jason equaled a non-haircut \$50 haircut, Levi's, and the occasional D&G jacket (courtesy of his day gig at the jingle house) and on Donovan, the 29-year-old prematurely balding shaved head, black-rimmed glasses (nerd cool) and lab coat. He's getting a degree in chemistry. He's a chemist. He's a chemist who plays in a band. (His band is called U.) You have to admit that's pretty cool. He plays drums. Possibly you already know that there are all kinds of drummer jokes (I didn't), that the drummer is typically seen as the slacker of the band, but I LOVE drums, and the chemist-drummer combo was a total indie rock do as far as I was concerned. (I know thing zero about chemistry, which in some weird way made him even more appealing. I felt like his understanding of chemistry, even if I was unable to ever converse with him on the subject, just put him on this other level of intelligence. I felt like only grown-ups knew about chemistry. I didn't even know anyone who'd taken it in high school.) Plus, Donovan! Who doesn't need a boyfriend named Donovan?

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Elizabeth Crane is the author of two collections of short stories from Little, Brown, *When the Messenger Is Hot* and *All This Heavenly Glory*.

Her work has also been featured in publications including *Washington Square*, *New York Stories*, *Sycamore Review*, *Book*, *Florida Review*, *Eclipse*, *Bridge*, *Sonora Review*, the *Chicago Reader*, *Sleepwalk*, *the Believer*, *McSweeney's Future Dictionary of America*, and *All Hands On: The 2NDHAND Reader*. She received the Chicago Public Library 21st Century Award, granted by The Chicago Public Library Foundation, in October 2003. A New York City native, she now lives in Chicago with her husband and teaches writing at Northwestern's School of Continuing Studies.



Jason and I initially became friends primarily on the basis of our mutual love of shopping. (It was some time later that I found out he's actually kind of brilliant and a crazy overachiever who paints and writes novels in his spare time.) You have to appreciate a straight guy who loves to shop but avoids whatever that whole tucked-in, primpy, hair gel look is that there's a serious infestation of over at those bars over on Rush Street. Jason can wear a thousand-dollar jacket in such a way that you notice Jason before you notice the jacket. (Which we agree to be one of the prime fashion directives: 1) If someone says you look great and then an hour goes by before they say anything about the jacket, you have made a successful purchase. If that same jacket can go entirely unnoticed at the hipster bars, then you have a gift. 2) The right pair of boots can make many things possible. 3) Labels go on the inside.) I'm fairly certain he goes shopping more than I do. We've gotten into a thing where we call each other from our cell regarding new purchases. (Or regarding perfect future spouses spotted while shopping, like the woman he followed into Agnes B. or the cure but bitter hipster I saw picking through flat-fronts at Village Thrift who carves/roped on the very conversation I was having about him in which I referred to him as "my new boyfriend" and assumed I was talking about someone else when he heard the word "skinny" and wouldn't hear it when I pointed out that he was eavesdropping he only started ["I'm not your boyfriend"] he was like, "I'm not your boyfriend"] and when I consulted the Magic 8 Ball key ring again about our future. My eye landed on No, but it was on the line again between that and Yes, and when I looked closer the No I'd seen was followed by the word Doubt. It was on the line between Yes and No Doubt.

Reflection in the giant three-way mirror (always a potential danger even knowing they're usually skinny mirrors) and it looked like me, but if I were a movie star. I was almost sparkly. I'm not sure how long I was in there and for sure I can't tell you what exactly happened but I just felt better. Afterward I had a long talk with Mel. I confessed about Donovan's closet to Mel like he was a priest and Mel was cool. Mostly he just listened. I had the impression he'd heard weirder things. He told me to feel free to come back anytime. It was an amazing place, and I told him I'd like to, but I had a feeling I wouldn't need to. It was like something got lifted. Then we shopped. It was an all-around good day.

After that I was still drawn to the closet, I won't tell you I wasn't, but I didn't need it so much after that. I never told Donovan about the closet but I did tell him that I was pretty sure I had a spiritual experience in the dressing room at Barney's. And I tell you he did not even laugh. He could have, I was even kind of giggling when I said it. We didn't talk much about that sort of thing. (Spiritual experiences or even Barney's, for that matter.) I figured it wasn't his thing, being scientific and all, that maybe he'd judge me, but he didn't. He kissed me on the head.

Right after that I consulted the Magic 8 Ball key ring again about our future. My eye landed on No, but it was on the line again between that and Yes, and when I looked closer the No I'd seen was followed by the word Doubt. It was on the line between Yes and No Doubt.

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Bitter Hipster] have turned out to be men of lesser ambition. To whom the oft-cited mantra "selling out" expands to include concepts like *paying rent*, *having car insurance* and sometimes even *having a phone*. All of which, when spoken aloud, must be heavily italicized. Guys who have a certain studied cynicism. And you know, there's a certain cynicism inherent in being from New York, which I am, but a) this is Chicago and b) after a while it's just boring. I prided myself on my ironic detachment too, when I was seventeen. I'm thirty now. There are some things to be happy about.) But Donovan was obviously really funny and really smart, and, entirely unsolicited, mentioned that he loved two of my favorite authors and after just a few minutes of gabbing I was sure that he really was going to be my new boyfriend. Sometimes you can just tell. And every time I saw him it was the same thing, we'd just gab and it would be obvious that we could keep gabbing but then he'd never ask me out. I consulted my Magic 8 Ball key ring, which I only used in emergencies for two reasons: because there was always a chance I wouldn't get the answer I wanted (it had an uncanny rate of accuracy; I know, but whatever) and because nine times out of ten it landed on the line between two answers, and you could never get it to stick on one or the other before it picked another two – my solution to this was always to choose whichever one my eye landed on first, but sometimes the mind plays tricks this way (always in my favor). In this instance, when I asked if Donovan was going to be my new boyfriend it landed on one very nebulous answer: Can't Tell. For the moment I decided it was best to leave that alone.

I fantasized about him for weeks. In my fantasies, there's sex, of course, which is needless to say brilliant (so brilliant that I can almost pretend there are no appliances involved), but mostly in my fantasies he naps with me on the couch (I have a bigger couch, in

minutes." I didn't have to mention I was at Donovan's. He found me in the closet in a pair of Donovan's sweatpants and my hair in a scrunchie. He gently pulled the scrunchie out and smoothed out my hair. "I had no idea it had gotten this bad." He handed me a brush and we drove straight over to Barney's.

In the men's department, Jason called over a shoe salesman (they knew each other by name) and asked him to tell Mel he was here. Mel, a fiftyish man in a navy Jil Sander suit, came out from the back room and hugged Jason like they were old friends. Jason introduced me to Mel, who shook my hand and smiled warmly. "Mel's my personal shopper," he said.

"Welcome," Mel said, which I thought was a funny thing to be saying at Barney's, the way he said it, anyway. It was like he was welcoming me to some kind of fraternity. Plus, we were still in the men's department, which I didn't have much use for. "Come on back," he said, leading us to the back of the store. He leaned into Jason's ear. "I have some nice things for you when she gets settled." Jason nodded. "I'll let you show her in from here." Jason led me into a secluded dressing area reserved for special customers. It was exquisite. Like a spa. It didn't smell like lemons, but I will say I had a little bit of that closet feeling almost as soon as I walked in. It was all white with a skylight even and there was a huge overstuffed chair with an ottoman in one corner I settled myself right into. The shoe salesman came in with a glass of wine and a small cheese platter and then he and Jason left me alone for a little while. I thought maybe someone would bring me some clothes at some point, but no one ever came and I was kind of hoping they wouldn't anyway. They just let me stay until I was ready to come out. I had a little wine and cheese and fell asleep in the chair. When I got up I felt like I'd had a week's vacation. I caught my

my fantasies) and we do the crossword puzzle in our pajamas (he wears pajamas!) and we have a word-of-the-day from the OED (you have to pick a random word and use it in a sentence) and we listen to NPR and he explains to me whatever I don't understand but not in a condescending way, and he reads to me, he reads to me, he reads me to sleep and we watch Adam Sandler movies (indicating our well-balanced cultural palate) and he never says anything mean, he only says nice things, really smart nice things like I remind him of the best parts of Franny Glass (knowing someone else might get all bent out of shape about this but that I appreciate the personally-designed offbeat compliment), and he tells me he's so happy I agreed to be his girlfriend (he says girlfriend in my fantasy-feeling of dread like I always do when they talk about the future. I know that when Donovan and I talk about the future in my fantasy that there is an actual future, and he kisses me on the head and says that he makes breakfast and remembers that I like my bacon well-done and remembers how I take my coffee. Some of the stuff I fantasized about was based on conversations held in a variety of the hipster bars around the city. It wasn't completely made up on my part, I could tell that when Donovan eventually became my boyfriend that it would be pretty much like that, probably with a few bonuses thrown in I couldn't guess about.

Of course, you've probably already figured out that he has a girlfriend. Why Jason failed to mention this I've no idea. "I didn't think it mattered?" Jason often said things like this with a grin, a low giggle, and a long drag on a cigarette. "No, I didn't know you liked him that much," he said.

"My Hello Kitty vibrator has never seen this much action," I said.

Jason and I have long since crossed the boundaries of what is normally considered appropriate in a male-female friendship. It's one of my favorite things about us.

"I think he's my soul mate."

"You don't believe in soul mates."

"*I know*," I said, "that's the thing."

Jason said he didn't think Donovan and Harumi (Why? Why? Why always Harumi or Sasha or something? Why never Becky?) were that serious and that I should just ask him out. I reminded Jason I wasn't a boyfriend-stealer. "Hey," he said, "they're not married. It's all above board at this point, I say."

I didn't ask him out. But after weeks of this non-flirting on the Diatribe circuit he ended up asking me if I wanted to go get some coffee after a show at the Empty Bottle. He told me up front that he was seeing someone but that he was really enjoying getting to know me and suggested maybe we could have a conversation that didn't involve second-hand smoke and earplugs. On the way out I whispered in Jason's ear, "I can't believe you told him, cocksucker," and he said, "Something had to be said." The usual grin/giggle/drag combo followed with a new flourish — he shoved a Trojan in my coat pocket.

I pretended to be shocked, but it was a good thing. Donovan and I went to the Hollywood Diner (way too bright at 2 a.m. for anyone's good, but open) and talked more about books we love and how he started drumming on pretty much any available surface when he was a kid (he openly admits to being heavily into Duran Duran when he was about eleven — do they even have a drummer?) and we really did talk about chemistry (you don't realize it, but it has everything to do with everything, apparently) and he told me a

"That was probably a mistake. He knew it was a bleak day if I wasn't in the mood to shop. Finally he said, 'I'll be over in ten

I told him I didn't feel like shopping.

Jason took a long pause and finally said, "Let's go shopping."

him I wasn't doing it that much and that I could handle it.

I made some excuses but I kind of messed up when I told

two shows."

"You smell like lemons and laundry and you missed our last

"What do you mean?"

It was admittedly a wild accusation when said out loud.

out. He said, "Have you been hanging out in Donovan's closet?"

dition but there was no program for me. Jason finally figured it

I was addicted to Donovan's closet. It was like any other ad-

stop.

so it wasn't even like I was sneaking in anymore. But I couldn't

given me a key a few weeks after he'd given it to me the first time,

Las Vegas, when Elisabeth Shue gives him the flask. He'd officially

plate of cookies and a flower. I felt like Nicolas Cage in Leaving

he'd left me a copy of *A Prayer For Owen Meany* on a tray with a

really seemed like he'd understand. Once I opened the closet and

the relationship. And I came so close to telling him, because he

everything was okay, and we were like he was afraid *Id* and

the schedule I was used to and he was so attentive, asking me if

— he never said anything. He didn't seem to be pulling away on

who minded everything). At first I thought Donovan had no idea

mind (a major improvement given my history of dating people

ing in love with him, at the very least, and that he seemed not to

seen it before to know what it looked like. I was sure I was fall-

with me even though he hadn't said it, and it wasn't like I'd ever

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I'd tell him I'd call him back and run over so I could be in the closet. It was just better in there. I tried not to take advantage by staying for more than an hour or two at a time. I didn't think I was hurting anyone. I didn't take anything and I didn't snoop. Once he came home on his lunch break, that was bad, and he made a phone call in the other room and I thought maybe he was talking to Harumi but it could have been my imagination and I tried not to listen. I mean, I wanted to, but I didn't want to have any resentments, based on what? I was in his closet. Plus he'd already told me he ended it with her about a day after our first sleepover. I closed the door and caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. It was the first time I'd ever bothered to close the door. It was not a good mirror. It was the only flaw with the closet. It looked like I hadn't slept for a week and my skin looked yellow. And not jaundice yellow. Lemon yellow.

I never mentioned the closet to Donovan. This went on for a while. Then I found myself sort of unsatisfied outside of the closet, even when I was with Donovan, even though everything was inconceivably good with Donovan, sometimes even if I was with Donovan in Donovan's bed, three feet from the closet. I started breaking plans with friends to be in the closet. I took longer and longer lunch breaks and used up all my sick days in the space of three weeks. I started forgetting things. Once, I woke up in the closet with no memory of having gone in there in the first place. I tried just carrying around one of his shirts or something else from the closet, but it was a poor substitute, and I tried my own closet but I could not duplicate the lemon scent or the feeling I had at Donovan's. Still, I thought I could leave the closet anytime. It wasn't like things weren't going well in the relationship. In fact ever since the story thing I was fairly sure he was falling in love

Okay, and I don't know if his expertise in science had anything to do with it, but I think maybe he did have a more advanced notion than most about physical responses to stimuli, because he paid particular attention to areas occasionally neglected by the less scientific types I've known. I might go so far as to say he made possible interactions I didn't know were possible. It was quite a bit better than I had fantasized about. When Donovan left for work in the morning he told me to sleep in, borrow any clothes I wanted to, and gave me a key to lock up. I held the gleaming key in my fingers and had a whole new series of Hi-

little about Harumi (not so much that any of my insecurities went into overdrive), mostly to insist that he and Harumi weren't exclusive, and to point out what he feels like he already has with me that he doesn't have with Harumi – I finally told him I didn't mind him talking about her but that he had to just stop saying her name; I explained why and he smiled like somehow this was endearing to him. He said we had some kind of deep connection. (He tried to explain it with a chemical analogy, which I only sort of got, but he was rather passionate about it as a concept, which just made me like him more.) I'd have gone home with him long before the whole subject of our scientific love came up (okay, my word, not his) about two hours later when he invited me over; there was some discussion about what a bad idea it might be, what with Harumi! and all, but I'm pretty sure we both knew how it was going to end up when we left the Bortle. He said he just wanted to sleep next to me, which of course I've heard before, but as I was walking out of the diner he put his arms around me and put his head into the back of my neck and in that moment I knew he *would* just sleep next to me (assuming I had any ability to control myself on occasions when this line is spoken, which I usually don't).

honey-I'm-home key-based fantasies. He said he'd call me later on my cell and he did.

I happened to be in his closet when he called. I ended up sleeping until around two and was just getting around to looking for something to wear when he rang. He said he had a great time talking to me last night. *Talking to me!* He had that quiet voice. He asked if he could see me again. I said that he could. He asked if he could do those things to me again in the future. I said that he could. He ended up telling me at some length exactly what things he was talking about and embellished some more on top of that and I can't say I'm really a big fan of phone sex but something about that closet, it was almost like he was there, maybe better. I pulled a white oxford shirt off a hanger. It smelled like lemons. The whole closet smelled like lemons. It wasn't really even all that neat, there was a pile of laundry on the floor, and nothing seemed to really be folded or hung with any care. Which kind of went along with his style – he had a sort of rumply thing going on. I looked for some evidence of lemons or lemon-scented something. I thought maybe it was something of Harumi's, and the smell was so amazing I might not even have minded if it did trace back to some other girl, but I didn't come across anything girly. There were boxes of antique chemistry sets. Most of them no longer had their original contents but instead were filled with memorabilia, a little plastic helicopter, photos, old cufflinks, miscellaneous postcards and bundles of letters from his dad dating back about twenty years. I resisted what was only a small urge to snoop further. It wasn't the main attraction to me. It wasn't even the lemon scent, although that was somewhat intoxicating. It was like I found something I didn't even know I was looking for.

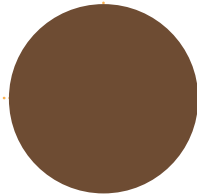
As Donovan hung up I called Jason as soon to report. "Where

Right around this time I started spending more time in his closet. My office was fairly close to Donovan's, so sometimes on my lunch break I went over for a nap. Sometimes I brought a book. It was a great place to read. There was a light, and it wasn't quite as big as a walk-in, but it was enviously roomy. But it wasn't any of that, really; it was just the magic of the closet like I said. Sometimes if Donovan seemed like he wanted to have phone sex

said, "Yeah, I think I probably shouldn't have said that." what was going on, that he'd backed off just after he'd said that, he love with me. When he suddenly stopped calling and I asked him me about three days after he told me he thought he was falling in only time I ever reached this juncture at all the guy broke up with up with them. I've never really gone past this juncture before. The relationship is usually when people start pulling away so I'll break

People don't say stuff like this to me. At this juncture in the there was a rightness in the world, "Like you do," he said. thing of it was mainly that the greatness of it made him feel like being some kind of weird spin on Little Red Riding Hood but the favorite story of his called "Little Red," which he tried to explain as and he said crazy nice things like he told me I reminded him of this which just killed me in the best way), and he remembered stuff, he was tall and skinny but he was a tiny bit soft around the middle I said, kindly. He wore cotton pj's, just the bottoms mostly (and crossword), listened to NPR and he did explain stuff to me just like together. It was not at all unlike my earlier fantasies. We did the Donovan and I started spending more and more time to-

far, or maybe it didn't matter, I don't think he could hear me over the key cutter anyway.



are you? The signal isn't too good."

"I'm in his closet."

"In whose closet?"

"Donovan's."

"What are you doing in his closet?"

"Do you want to hear about this or not?"

"Why don't you call me when you get home?"

"I don't know, I might hang here for a little while."

"In Donovan's closet."

"Yeah, it's just really nice."

"So?" (Phone drag/giggle combo, grin implied.)

"It was good. There will be more. There already has been more."

"Nice."

I fell asleep on the laundry for a little while. Fortunately Donovan had band practice after work. It was the best sleep I've ever had. I dreamt of lemons and babies that looked like the best parts of Donovan and me, sleeping on shearling blankets. I put on the shirt and brought myself to leave and then I did something I didn't expect to do.

I copied the key.

Not only did I copy the key, I told the key copier that I was moving in with my new boyfriend. I told him I was pregnant and that we didn't believe in marriage in the conventional sense but that we were planning a Hindu ceremony at the Oak Street beach and that we were going to have twins and name them Akbar and Coyote if they were boys and Esme and Olive if they were girls. I told him Akbar was my deceased father's name and that I was an architect and that we were going to move as soon as the mountaintop hideaway was finished. I may have gone too