

My cousin wears a wedding ring ...

My cousin wears a wedding ring to stop people from trying to pick him up at bars. Even though he's only twenty-three and not really good looking enough for it to be an issue. I only see him once every six months, but during our brief meeting I notice it at once and comment on it as soon as social decorum will allow me to do so.

'Oh, this?' he laughs, twirling it around a long finger so that it slips up slightly, revealing a red chafe mark, the result of other twirling sessions. 'It's not real. You know it's not real. I would have invited you.'

We both know that's not true, but neither of us will admit it to each other or to ourselves, and so we continue our conversation as if I am not here under duress and he actually wants to talk to me. Family dynamics are a beautiful thing.

'It's really just a way of ensuring desperate love rats don't try to pick me up in bars.' he explains nonchalantly, still twisting that little gold band around that long pale finger. I stare at it, fixated, wondering how much he spent on his fake wedding ring. Whether he got it from a proper jewellers. Whether the jeweller suspected it was fake. Whether he takes it off in the shower, or whether his imaginary marital bonds follow him even there.

'Is it really that much of an issue? For you? I mean...it's a little bizarre, don't you think?' I say, after a pause of a few seconds and five ring twists.

'Yeah,' he admits. 'A little. It doesn't exactly help to dispel the family rumours that I've become a lone psycho since graduating.'

'No, I can't imagine it does.' I don't mention that this foray into life alone has been the sole topic of several family dinners in the past three months. I doubt that Aunt Sarah really knows what borderline psychosis entails anyway, except what she has discerned from that triumph of humanity, google.com

'So, how is work anyway?' I ask politely.

'It's okay. I guess it's okay. I have this recurring nightmare where my manager breaks a clothes hanger, then beats me mercilessly with it and I have to go work in Macdonalds again.'

'Worrying,' I say as he looks down nervously at his hand, the ring hand, and smiles slightly at the thought. We both remain silent for a minute, listening to the traffic below and the dripping of the shoddy plumbing in the pipes. It isn't really a companionable silence, not even in the loosest sense of the term, but it's a bearable one.

‘Music sucks though’”

‘Huh?’ I stir out of my heavy-eyed silence to utter that most eloquent of expressions, proving that my expensive private school education was not entirely wasted.

‘The music at work. It sucks.’ he repeats.

‘Oh yeah. Totally.’ I reply, doing my English teacher proud with my extensive vocabulary and complicated syntax.

‘Yeah.’

Pause.

‘Clothing stores are where CDs go to die.’ I remember this quote from somewhere suddenly. I can’t remember who, where or when but as it thumps in my head I say it, my mouth acting as some kind of parrot to my brain.

‘Mmm. Yeah. Definitely.’ He finally stops staring at his hands, and looks at me for a second, a bold uncomfortable stare that reminds me of a look my teacher used to give me during language orals. ‘Definitely.’

We sit in the same uncompanionably bearable silence for a while. I think of asking all sorts of questions about rings, and desperate love rats and the music at work, but I don’t. We say our goodbyes, and he lies and says he’ll call me and I lie and say I’ll email sometime. Part of me intends to do it.

Later that week I go to a family dinner, and tell my Aunt Sarah that I think he’s gone insane, feeding the family gossip canon. I feel guilty, but tell myself he deserves it for being so odd. Somehow, I secretly know he doesn’t.