

(publication forthcoming)

Mr. Pink

a short story

by Kate Reed Petty

To keep the women straight, Owen based them on characters from *Reservoir Dogs*. Madeleine Pink was selfish. Hillary Brown was a know-it-all nerd. Jasmine Blonde was charming but super mean. Alexis White was competent, cool. And Jen Orange was fucking Beretta.

He image searched for profile pics with subtle mnemonics: Alexis was a bouquet of white flowers, Madeleine the paint swatch for Pantone 205. He put all five women in L.A., though Jen spent half the year in New York. He had them each follow 700 of the people who followed him.

Then Owen spent the rest of Saturday morning writing hundreds of posts, so that their accounts would look human, and sympathetic, and real.

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He'd made his first fake account Friday night. "TravisBickle4587." Just a cool, generic guy, a smart and cynical nobody who posted about movies, and what he ate for lunch, and why Owen Kane was innocent.

Owen chose "Travis Bickle" because it was something a typical movie guy would choose. He didn't want the account to stand out.

But he also liked what the character stood for. Travis Bickle was a flawed dude, definitely, but this was a flawed world. Travis Bickle understood about ends and means and righteousness and being justified.

For Travis's profile pic, Owen chose the famous still from the end of *Taxi Driver*, DeNiro covered in blood with a finger-gun pointed at his own head. The image was one of Owen's favorites.

Travis wrote *hello world*.

Owen leaned back and tried to think of something else. He was fresh off of a short, circular phone call with his manager that had not gone well. His manager was supposed to be helping him but wasn't—maybe couldn't—but whatever, Owen just needed some sympathy.

Travis wrote *SWINGERS is the best movie ever made, come @ me bro*.

Travis wrote *Okay here's my #minutemoviepitch: SOME LIKE IT HOT meets DIE HARD, two hostages in drag must stop a bank heist*.

Then Owen realized that was a pretty good idea. Travis deleted the post so no-one would steal it.

Owen opened a new browser to scroll through his own feed for inspiration. But everyone who was smart and cared about movies was posting about Owen and the now-five women he'd offended. Owen logged out.

Allegedly offended.

Owen stared at the blinking cursor on Travis's account. He suddenly felt stupid for thinking that Travis could help him. What was Travis doing hanging out on social media on Friday night? Travis was a creep and a perv.

What Owen needed was some women standing up for him.

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He used burner email accounts to register them. He gave them all the same password—URAG00dManOwenKane!—which his computer told him was very strong.

He named them after a clique of girls who'd lived on his freshman hall. Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen.

He hadn't seen those girls since sophomore year. But he still thought about them, sometimes. They were mean and funny and everyone always hung out in their rooms. Even now, fifteen years out of college, when he thought about power he thought about them.

They overflowed between two dorm rooms, five girls tessellated on top of each other. Long limbs under towels running to and from the showers. Piles of clothes on every bed, like too many pillows in a luxury hotel.

He wanted them to notice him, that's all. Like they noticed the acoustic guitar guy. Or the soccer guy. Or the gay guy. Or the other acoustic guitar guy. But when Owen made a joke they ignored him. When he repeated it louder, they said *yeah, we heard you the first time*.

Recently, at a mall, Owen passed a store overflowing with body lotion, and the smell of fake flowers wafting out the door sent him spiraling through arousal and nausea and self-hatred. That old familiar feeling.

So this is despair, he used to tell himself, on any given weeknight when he emerged from that dorm room, the sound of everyone's laughter closing the door behind him.

Except that one time. He'd brought pot brownies. And after they were all high he started talking about porn, how they should put some porn on. Both of the acoustic guitar guys agreed. They joked about it until the girls agreed, too.

Owen remembered that moment so clearly: Sitting over one of the girl's computers, his fingers curled over the search bar like a gargoyle, hesitating.

Not because he didn't know the video he wanted. He was hesitating because he wasn't sure what to type. He didn't want his search terms to give it away. He wanted them unprepared. He wanted them nauseated and aroused.

What's taking so long, Owen? one of the girls said. Another said, *No girl's ever said THAT to Owen before*, and everyone laughed.

Owen just chuckled pleasantly. He'd have his revenge.

Forty-five seconds into the video they kicked him out of the room. The walls of the hallway throbbed under his hands as he made his way back to his single. He had not realized that he was so very high.

He lay on his narrow bed and dreamed about his future life, his real life, when he would tell the story of the time he tricked the mean girls into watching disgusting porn.

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Now here he was again, his fingers again hovering over the keyboard, again unsure of the words he wanted to use.

The problem was he couldn't remember what those five girls from college were like. They were gauzy, always laughing, out of reach. The first posts he wrote sounded flat and bitter. He deleted them.

He opened another window and started scrolling. *The Oscars Kanye the Ghostbusters with girls in it. The betrayal! A joke about feeling insecure in Thai restaurants Mercury in retrograde a rant about plane travel*

The opening scene of Reservoir Dogs. Owen clicked and Quentin Tarantino's voice reached out to him, talking about Madonna.

The scene dawned on him, comfortable as a third beer with an old friend. A group of thieves, in a diner, jostling with each other. Who was moral, who was a man. *Like a Virgin is about big dicks.*

This was a movie about power, but this was a fair fight. This was a movie about power, and how you could earn it by being smart.

Madeleine Pink. Hillary Brown. Jasmine Blonde. Alexis White. And Jen Orange was fucking Beretta.

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After that it was easy.

Madeleine and Alexis wrote competing reviews of a popular streaming TV series. Madeleine said it was overproduced and pulpy, Alexis said that was the point.

Jasmine made jokes about writers' block. Hillary complained about politics. Jen posted about a trip to a farmer's market where she spent too much money on subpar baked goods. *They were baked bads*, she posted.

Owen giggled about that for the rest of the day. "Baked bads," he said to himself, shaking his head, as his lunch steadily rotated in the microwave.

Alexis shared a post by a film critic who called himself the Hulk. Jen shared a post about a news satire show. Madeleine shared a post by a cynical comedian. Jasmine shared a bunch of posts by right-wingers and added *just jacking off!* to all of them. Hillary shared a post by Alexis.

By Saturday night they'd each gained at least a hundred followers. Jasmine and Jen had the most, with 340 and 282, respectively.

All five of the women shared posts from Owen Kane, adding little LOLs or just the word "this" with an emoji of a pointed finger.

It made Owen want to check his own account. Because he'd logged out Friday night, he had to click the little box to prove that *I am not a robot*. Then he had to wait for a text message with a six-digit code. Then he was in.

But he'd forgotten that he was now getting dozens of notifications every hour. His account unspooled down his screen and into a bottomless pit, a swarm tangling up and around itself, suggesting Owen Kane receive medieval punishments.

For what crime? Owen was an asshole. He knew that. But everyone is an asshole. This wasn't fair at all.

He logged out. He did fifteen pushups. He did a breathing exercise.

He sent his manager an email, saying that he was just going to keep his head down and finish the screenplay. *I'm working all weekend*, he said. Then he felt much better.

He logged back into the women's accounts.

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By Sunday afternoon each of his women had really found her voice. Hillary was going by Hills. Alexis was writing clever haiku. Jasmine never capitalized anything, UNLESS SHE CAPITALIZED EVERYTHING. Madeleine used a lot of emoji.

Jen had gone through and liked all of Owen's #minutemovieitches from the past year. Jen had become his favorite. She was really funny and smart.

Owen was proud of himself. He'd been struggling over the same screenplay—THE APARTMENT reimaged as a high school rom-com—since moving to New York last year. He was 40 pages into the script and had been stuck there for months.

Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen made him feel like he was on vacation with new friends. Friends that everyone liked. He watched their follower counts climb.

In the afternoon, taking a break, he walked to the coffee shop to treat himself to a mocha.

"Baked bads," he said, waiting in line, chuckling to himself over the pastries arrayed in the glass case. He realized there was another joke in there.

Baking bads. He tried to think of a pun about cooking meth. *Cookie meth?* Something like that. A warm breeze blew in through the windows of the coffee shop and he was suffused with the feeling that things were going to be okay.

He smiled at the girl who always took his order. "Large mocha for here," he said, leaning slightly toward her.

He came here most days. He usually made her laugh. He planned to ask her out one day. She had hair dyed electric blue and a neck tattoo. *She was fucking Beretta!* He realized it as he waited for her to acknowledge him. Maybe today was the day he would ask her out.

But she wasn't looking at him. Owen stared at her for a long awkward minute before he realized that she was not going to look at him. “You can take your card out,” she said to the floor. She rotated the face of the digital pad toward Owen, and turned her own face beyond him.

“What can I get you?” she said, her warmth a sudden spotlight pointed at the next person in line.

Owen hit the screen where it said *custom tip*. He left her twenty dollars. Then instead of signing in the blank space on the digital pad, he wrote *fuck you bitch*.

He left his mocha on the counter and walked out.

He was eager to get home anyway. He had things to do. He was in the best part of the writing process. The characters were doing unexpected things. He wanted to see what they would say next.

Like Alexis wrote: *The end of this film / oh my god oh my / god this sucks*, about PASSENGERS, which Owen liked, actually.

Jasmine wrote *i really respect that the q-tip marketing slogan is VARIETY OF USES. i've been in such a q-tip rut. ear cleaning only. I CANT BELIEVE I'M WASTING MY Q-TIPS' POTENTIAL*. Which was just weird, although it got 67 likes.

Madeleine wrote *I want to remake THEY LIVE but set in modern-day tech-drowned San Francisco*. Owen disagreed. He strongly disagreed.

Owen disagreed with Madeleine so vehemently he logged into his own account to respond. He ignored the angry red notification bell at the top, and just started writing. *Remake THEY LIVE?! Sacrilege!! Next you'll be telling me you want to remake it with a female cast.*

Then he remembered that he wasn't supposed to be on social media for a while, and deleted it.

Hills dug up Travis Bickle's post about SWINGERS and reposted it with a comment, *Imagine being a straight white man #nostalgia #barf*, Madeleine agreed, posting the emoji for rolling your eyes.

Then Alexis agreed, too, posting something about the Bechdel test.

Jen responded *No way, Swingers holds up #vegasbaby*. Jen really was his favorite, God love her.

But still. Owen sat for a minute, imagining what it would like to be Travis, reading that post, reading everything the women had said about him. He imagined Travis wouldn't care. Travis would write *fuck you bitch* and keep going. Travis was a creep and a perv.

Owen opened a new browser window and deleted Travis's account. He didn't need Travis anymore. He liked Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen so much.

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There were programs he could have used to manage all of the women's accounts simultaneously; he could have been scheduling things to post throughout the day, so that he didn't have to be so involved.

Instead he kept five different browser programs open, each in privacy mode, and routed through the VPN he'd set up while researching a pitch for a spy film last year, because he was paranoid about getting caught.

Plus it felt pretty cool to have five browsers open like that. Monday morning when he sat down at his desk with a cup of coffee he felt like the stoic, competent Captain in a space epic, like he was driving the rebel ship in THE MATRIX.

He felt important, and in control, and he knew that today was the day the women were going to break their silence about Owen Kane.

Jen went first. *I've been agonizing all weekend over whether to say this. Owen is an old friend, and I'm heartbroken over the accusations against him. He deserves a fair hearing. Innocent until proven guilty.*

Owen leaned back and looked at that for a long time. He blinked tears. "Thanks, Jenny," he said.

Alexis liked the post, and then Hills, and then two other strangers, too. Owen was encouraged.

A little later Hills responded, *I still think he's sexy. In that Christian-Slater-in-Heathers serious bad-boy kind of way.*

Then Hills responded to her own post, *Not to belittle a serious matter. I'm just saying, with Owen, you know what you're getting into, the dark edge is part of the fun.*

Then Alexis said *I agree, I've never seen Owen do anything disrespectful, he's just joking around sometimes. I'm not sure about all of this.*

The tide of posts about Owen started swelling then. *Did you even read the accusations and I read his first script, it's obvious he hates women and all kinds of other unfair things. But also level-headed responses.*

It's not like he's Harvey Weinstein, people said.

Madeleine and Alexis joined in, pointed out the danger of *things going too far*, said *both sides needed to be heard.*

I don't know Owen that well, but he has always been supportive of my work and totally gentlemanly,
Jasmine finally chimed in.

But nobody paid her much attention, because there were hundreds of other posts, spinning away. Momentum was gaining. Complexity was increasing. What was once a chorus was now an argument.

He leaned back at the desk of his starship, navigating this strange world, and felt a warm, buzzing feeling of relief in his chest. Maybe he would make it back alive.

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Tuesday morning, THE APARTMENT as a high-school rom-com stared back at Owen from the big white space on page 41, empty and bitter. He missed Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen.

He decided to write one post from each of the women. Just as a way to get the creative juices flowing. Then he would get back to the screenplay. He would finish the screenplay today, he just needed to get the juices flowing first.

He opened his five browser windows and stretched out his fingers over the keyboard and typed URAG00dManOwenKane! in the box under Jen's name.

His computer flashed back at him in red text, as if irritated. *The username and password you entered did not match our records. Please double-check and try again.*

Owen tried again. *The username and password you entered did not match our records. Please double-check and try again.*

He switched to another browser and tried Hills, and then Madeleine. It was the same. And the same for Alexis and Jasmine.

Forgot password? he clicked, and the browser promised it was sending him an email.

But then he couldn't get into his burner email accounts. *Wrong password. Try again or click Forgot password to reset it.*

He logged into his own email. That password worked. He had a response from his manager, from the note he'd sent Saturday night: *Great, Owen, can't wait to read the new script!* and the thumbs-up emoji.

Owen didn't really think that was helpful.

Owen switched over to his own social account. He ignored the alarm bell icon—now 3,746 notifications red—because he was staring at the post that was sitting at the top of his feed.

At one o'clock in the morning the night before, Jen had posted *Can't sleep, quick can you guys send me as many cute photos of sleeping kittens as possible?* Owen was definitely asleep at one o'clock.

And then like thirty people had sent Jen pictures of kittens. Jen had spent the next hour responding to all of them with variations of *awww adorable* and *thank you this helps!*

As Owen stared, a new post appeared. Jasmine wrote *some personal news: i've decided to become a brand, from now on please call me JASMINE! the exclamation point is mandatory.*

Owen stood up from his desk, letting his chair knock over backwards. He turned and went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He did a breathing exercise. He got into the shower and let the water run as hot as he could stand it.

He wiped a circle into the steam on the mirror and stood looking at himself. He would use this one day, he reminded himself. He would use all of this in a script. Nothing bad could really happen to a writer because a real writer could make anything into art.

He did fifteen pushups and then went back out and sat down at his computer and tried, again, to log into the women's accounts, but he didn't know the words to use.

Wrong password, the internet said. Try again?

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Hours later he was still staring at his computer screen, the setting sun casting long shadows from the beer cans piled up around his desk.

The women were all talking without him.

Alexis posted about a sold-out concert she wanted to see, *does anyone have tickets?* Owen had never heard of that band.

Hills described a new perfume she kept smelling on beautiful strangers, *like overripe peaches in a room where someone smoked a joint half an hour ago, can anyone tell me what it is?* Owen did not like when women wore perfume.

Madeleine posted *There are SO MANY badass Latinx folks doing comedy in LA and generally being awesome, I feel like we need to rally, can we start an annual get-together to celebrate each other's awesomeness?* Owen had thought all of the women were white.

Jasmine found a vintage commercial for cigarettes, *is it just me or does this look like an ad for the lesbian lifestyle?* Jen responded *Once you got the bug, EVERYTHING is an ad for the lesbian lifestyle.* Which, like, what did that even mean?

Jen posted *I have to go to the DMV today, what can I expect?* Hills replied. *It's like the red bathroom in THE SHINING* with a screenshot meme captioned *You've always been the Caretaker.* Normally Owen would have laughed. Instead he felt tears in his eyes.

They were hanging out, having a great time. They were fine with him sitting there, listening. They posted all around him, friendly teasing phrases that didn't mean anything. He kept thinking of things he wanted to say but he was afraid to speak up.

He kept getting up and standing in the middle of the kitchen as if he was going to make himself something to eat but he didn't want to eat anything.

He did fifteen push-ups. He did a breathing exercise. He thought of punching a hole in the wall, but he was too afraid to try, because what if he couldn't do it? He had written a lot of characters punching holes in walls but had never actually done it himself.

He walked back toward his computer

and he was hit by a wave of shame so powerful he couldn't breathe. He held on to the back of his chair and gasped. Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen knew him, his women *knew him*. They weren't like the others, the crowd online that had projected their own values and politics onto a few skimpy hysterical accusations from old mistakes, the unfair thrashing mob screaming for Owen's head. These women were his friends and lovers. He had laughed with them, confided in them, had trusted them to carry him through this hard time in his life. He thought he could trust them. But he didn't know them. He didn't know whether they understood him, what they thought about him. He didn't know them at all.

And then Madeleine turned on him first.

I've been thinking a lot about the accusations against Owen Kane, and I feel really terrible about the way I reacted to them.

I tried to defend Owen because he's a friend and I thought I owed him that, but I've come to see that his behavior is unforgivable.

Hills wrote *Me, too. I've been talking to a lot of the women who had bad experiences with Owen Kane. I believe them. I'm sorry I was myopic before.*

Alexis liked it and added *I've changed my mind, too.*

Jasmine liked it and added *you think you know someone, turns out he's a MOTHERFUCKER like ALL THE REST.*

Owen watched Jen's account, holding his breath. For a while she was quiet. Then: *Hey guys, she wrote. This is really hard.*

Then she reposted the accusations, one after the other. He knew these things. He hadn't looked at them since last week. But he knew them by heart. One was from a crazy person he had made the mistake of dating for three months. One a crazy person he'd hooked up with just once. One was a very level-headed, cold person who hated him. One was a very insecure person who was apparently comfortable lying and who wanted to fit in. One was a very lovely person who must have felt some kind of loyalty to the others. All of the things they said were technically true, if you looked at just the bare facts. You couldn't argue with the facts. But it was the very story that was untrue, it was the way the women interpreted the facts. It was the way they reacted that were lies. And Jen had reposted them all. All of the accusations, in full. And after each one she had added her own accusation. *Same threat to me, she said. Same violent grab.*

That was just messing around!! Owen typed, and then deleted, and then typed and deleted again, a hundred times.

I didn't do anything wrong. Deleted.

These were the kinds of things that just happen. Deleted.

It wasn't fair to call him out, and only him, *when men do these kinds of things all the fucking time.*

Deleted.

What about the girls who made fun of my sexual stamina in college? What about the producer who said she could tell from Owen's writing that Owen was an incompetent lover? Deleted. Deleted.

Delete your account, said Madeleine and Hillary and Jasmine and Alexis.

And Jen was fucking Beretta. *You need to apologize, Owen,* she said.

Fuck you bitch, he wrote back.

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He deleted the post, too late.

This is what I'm talking about, Jen wrote, with a screen captured image of Owen's last post. He watched as dozens of people reposted it. And then hundreds. The red bell at the top of his screen screamed in alarm.

He closed his computer like punching a hole in the wall. Then he went out and sat in his car and gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white and he knew he needed to apologize.

He got out of the car and walked back up to his apartment and went straight to the computer, not even turning on the lights. He stared at the empty white box with his fingers hunched over the keyboard. He didn't know the words you're supposed to say.

I'm sorry, he wrote, but it sounded so dumb. He deleted it.

He opened a new search box, and typed *the ending of Reservoir Dogs*. He found a video clip of the last five minutes of the movie, starting with the Mexican standoff.

He watched it five times. Every time, it made him sob. Every time, when he got to the very end—Mr. Orange gasping in a puddle of blood, confessing his betrayal to his closest friend—Owen had to wipe and press on his eyes and squeeze them shut.

After the fifth time he clicked command-C on the video link.

He opened a new post. *I'm sorry*, he wrote. Then he deleted it. Then he wrote it again: *I'm sorry*. Then he deleted it again. *I'm fucking sorry*, he wrote, then deleted that, too.

Then he posted the video link. He tagged Madeleine Hillary Jasmine Alexis and Jen. *I'm fucking Beretta*, he wrote.

Then he closed his computer and sat alone in the dark.