

## Laura

By Patrick J Stephens

The Australian girl sits next to you, choosing to ignore the handful of empty chairs littering the classroom. She speaks, not realizing that you're engrossed with your own work. You turn and listen, but part of your sight looks past her, at the open window that gives you a panoramic view of Edinburgh – the kind you saw in brochures long before you came.

She tells you about her night, how she coaxed her shy neighbors into playing strip poker, even though she envisioned herself as a sort of con artist, having played the game before. She even pulls out her phone, nicked and scratched with countless hours of use, and pulls up one of her various social networking sites; picture after picture on the miniature screen scrolls by of her laughing and pulling at her shirt, then undershirt, then her trousers, followed by a pair of laced, heart emblazoned socks. You wonder why she's the only person in these pictures, why it looks like she's holding the camera. But you don't dare voice your concerns.

She shoves the phone back into her pocket, shifting her weight in the seat in such a way that allows her to lean in closer; the scent of citrus perfume mixed with sweat surrounds you. Her boyfriend couldn't come, she says: he didn't have the balls to move so far from New South Wales, population seven million, home of Byron Bay and maybe a hundred other girls more attractive than her. She smiles at that – just kidding, she waves the comment off. She name drops: actors she's met at conventions; books she's read until two in the morning; foreign films she can recite in their original language; how she hasn't been to any local pubs yet, even though she's new to Scotland, and been here over a month, just like you. Though, she concedes, she does wish people would give her some alone time.

Then she smiles again and asks if you're free tonight.

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