

The background of the cover is a photograph of two white, textured bathrobes hanging from metal hooks on a light green, paneled door. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the texture of the robes.

FILIP VUKAŠIN

modern marriage

‘Sophisticated, dark and original.’
Genevieve Gannon



Filip Vukašin is a Melbourne doctor who works in a range of positions in Sexual Health, Cosmetic Medicine and General Practice. He enjoys reading, swimming and listening to Lana Del Rey. *Modern Marriage* is his first novel.



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Klara

The heady aroma of roasted coffee seeps into Klara's consciousness, slowly awakening her from a dozy state among the crisp sheets Dante had changed last night without even having to be asked. She smiles, keeping her eyes closed to relish the last moments of sleep. He must have walked to Bang Bang while she was still snoozing and bought them both coffees.

Fingers crossed he's also bought me an almond croissant.

Ever since they moved into their dream home in Elsternwick five years ago they've been obsessed with the pastries at Bang Bang, their favourite local cafe.

Klara's hand reaches out to Dante's side of the bed. Her fingers run up and down the milky white sheets as if she is stroking him, remembering the warmth of his tummy against hers a few nights ago, his stubble tickling the nape of her neck and, better than everything, feeling connected again. Dante seemed ready to try for a baby after weeks of tense conversations and simmering silences. He had avoided the topic at first but now seemed eager, maybe even a little pushy. Maybe men do have some kind of emotional cycle that isn't as obvious, or maybe marriage is just like this – cavernous lows and delicious highs.

The bottom step of the stairs to their bedroom makes its comedy creak as Dante's footsteps slowly get louder. It sounds like he is carrying something, carefully avoiding dropping it. With the anticipation of

coffee, Klara opens her eyes and sits up against a propped pillow. She tidies her hair before pressing gently on the soft flesh under her eyes to massage away any puffiness. Her throat is scratchy and she puts a palm to her forehead to check for a temperature – it's likely nothing but still she's relieved she called in sick to work today.

The bedroom door opens inwards and there he is, handsome in his cream suit and white shirt with the top two buttons undone. He grins and she knows it can't be fake, she knows he truly must be happy to see her because even around his brothers he hides his crooked tooth. Klara's told him a million times she adores his smile. He has a takeaway coffee in each hand, a brown paper bag balanced precariously on top of one.

'What's the occasion?' Klara asks as she reaches for the bag and opens it to find her wish fulfilled.

'Got to look after my *niña bonita*,' he replies, kissing her cheek and setting her coffee down on the side table. 'Your throat okay?'

Klara wobbles her hand to say so-so, then sips the hot liquid, letting it sit in her mouth for a second, savouring not only the tangy sweetness but also what it means, because it's not just a coffee – it's an olive branch, a small sign that he loves her and is willing to work on this marriage. Like the love languages she has read about, this is an act of service after the tumult. The warmth soothes her tonsils.

'You skipped the gym this morning?' Klara asks.

He nods and runs a hand through his thick black hair, the sleeve taut against his thick forearm. It's rare for him to still be here this time of the morning. A few months ago he joined a gym and started going obsessively before work.

'I wanted to be here for you,' he replies.

'Hero,' she teases.

They sip their coffee in unison and fall into an easy silence.

'We should go out for dinner soon. It's been a while since we ate out,' Klara says. 'I bet you're sick of cooking.'

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Dante shrugs and looks at his watch. Sometimes she is jealous of how he looks at his recent purchase. The adoration, like it's a precious baby.

'And I wanted to organise a dinner with Tom before he goes to Peru. It's been ages since he came over and I thought since he'll be there while your parents are, he could take them a present from us.'

The throb in Klara's throat surges between swallows like a wave. Sometimes, when she's feeling guilty, she gets this kind of wedge in her pharynx. She imagines Tomas alone at the clinic today, sorting out her patients and that unfair complaint while he's busy packing for Peru. They were friends well before becoming business partners, but occasionally she wishes they hadn't blurred business with pleasure.

Dante continues to stare at his watch. The shallow creases around his eyes deepen. He must be late for work now.

'Maybe they can send us presents back via him! You know they always say they overpack and can't fit everything they wanted,' she adds.

She watches his thumb pick at the paper cup. His jaw moves slowly up and down as if he is biting on the inside of his bottom lip.

'I don't want to burden him or them with that kind of stuff. They'll be back here in a few weeks anyway,' Dante replies. 'Gets complicated.'

Klara doesn't think it's such a big deal. Tomas will be visiting family in Peru, staying very near to where Dante's parents are currently holidaying. She's trying to be thoughtful and reach out to her in-laws, a way of showing they are on her mind even though they're on the other side of the world. Having moved to Australia when their three boys were young, they now use every opportunity to take holidays and visit family in Peru and Serbia.

But Dante's hunched posture and lack of eye contact tell her not to push it, not to ruin this moment. It's not worth it.

'I better get to work,' Dante says. He kisses her so quickly on the mouth that she doesn't have a chance to kiss back.

'I love you,' she says.

'You too.'

Klara

Klara's mobile rings, jolting her out of sleep with a stitch of nerves as if she is late for her final exams. It's Tomas. She lets it sound four times as she looks around her bedroom and steadies her breath. Sunlight forces itself through the window.

'Hey, Tom.'

'Klar! I saw your email. Finished booking a few things for my Peru trip and just wanted to check in. How are you feeling?'

'I'm okay, just having a rest. I actually feel a lot better. Probably should've just come in to work.'

'Is Dante taking good care of you?'

'Yeah, he is. He brought me coffee and pastries in bed this morning.'

'Aren't you a lucky woman!'

Klara peels the phone from her ear and looks at the time in the corner of the screen. She can't remember the last time she took a sick day, let alone slept until 11am.

'Are you seeing patients? Or have you gone on an early lunch break?' Klara asks, massaging a crick in her neck.

'I'm just in between patients and wanted to run that complaint by you.'

His words are a splinter in her drowsy brain. Tomas reminds Klara of the complaint from a new patient called Blake, who presented two weeks ago and saw her for botox in his forehead.

Why is he bringing it up on her sick day? It could surely wait. She steadies herself on the side of the bed, plants her toes on the floorboards and relays what she remembers.

'He said it was his first cosmetic treatment, a treat for himself 'cause his wedding anniversary was happening or something,' she says.

So many faces, so many wrinkles, moles, jowls and unkind perceptions of self requiring attention. Harsh words jump into her mind.

Superficial. Vain.

She tries to stop judging her patients. It's often just a playback of all the things she has heard said about her for being a cosmetic doctor ever since she couldn't get into neurosurgery.

Vacuous. Unimportant.

She sees a fair share of male patients. They now care about their appearance much more than ever before. Even the rough, shabby-looking electricians and ageing lawyers. She strains to recall his story further.

'He's the one who told Afida that he hadn't told anyone he was having botox and kept shouting that he looked like a stroke patient,' Tomas adds.

Afida, ever the level-headed receptionist, managed to keep a straight face when they talked about it later. Klara remembers it was the day she was running late from her gynaecologist appointment. During the consultation with Blake, most of her focus was on the upcoming IVF process, the police checks and invasive diagnostic measures she would have to endure. Dante would only need to ejaculate in a jar.

'Then today he called again about his left eyelid being droopy and he was still furious, ruined his weekend, blah blah,' Tomas finishes.

'Shit, they can be dramatic. Did he come in today? How did he look?'

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Most in the cosmetic field deal with a high proportion of body dysmorphic patients. Rarely are the patient's obsessions steeped in reality, so often they just need a bit of hand-holding and counselling to get them through the adverse effects. But not far from her mind is Tomas's last complaint – lumpy lips from the wrong filler – which, regardless of the fact it didn't involve her, sank Klara into a guilt-ridden angst for days. She was barely courageous enough to set aside her fear of their clinic looking like incompetent imposters and even asked her medical insurance for advice just in case.

'Yeah, he did. I know you're off sick today but that's why I thought it best to let you know. He's majorly pissed off and left a bad review on our website, naming you directly. He was insistent on seeing you and I was worried that maybe he wanted to confront you or something. I gave him a free touch-up today and offered him a free skin peel, which he lapped up ...'

'They always do. God, these people are just ...' Klara squeezes her fist tightly and straightens her posture to ease her back muscles from the irritation, then slumps as Tomas continues.

'Anyway, we've got him off our backs for now.'

People love getting free things. They rejoice in complications and stuff-ups because it gives them a reason to complain or receive extras. Two years earlier, she and Dante had booked a hotel online for a trip to San Francisco. Once the payment had cleared they realised they had been overcharged, which frustrated them for days through costly international calls trying to rectify the situation. Dante blamed her for it after a heated argument over the grocery shopping days later, linking the two to her sloppiness. After finally clearing up the issue with the booking agency they were upgraded to a presidential suite and incorrectly reimbursed the whole amount. While enjoying the spoils of the suite in San Francisco they laughed that the irritation, arguments and phone bills were worth the effort and could become a habit. But there hasn't been a subsequent holiday.

‘Thanks, Tom. I feel so bad about it, but I appreciate you dealing with it.’

‘No worries. Can I get you anything? Cough syrup? Vicks?’

‘I’ll be fine. Thanks, though.’

Ending the call, Klara lets out a long breath through pursed lips. She remembers Tomas once saying, ‘It’s only a matter of time before we all get a complaint,’ back when she was helping him through his own.

I thought I was different.

In order to prove to Tomas she’s still productive on her sick day, Klara decides to finally work on the clinic kitchenette renovation quotes she promised him she would take control of. She plods into the shared home office. On her desk is a framed photograph of her and Dante on their honeymoon six years ago. Fiji. Sitting on the shore, both cheesily smiling into the camera held at arm’s length, their modern glass villa in the distance and the sky an orange flame. Klara’s copper-red hair is pulled up high in a ponytail, sunscreen marks glistening on her cheeks, make-up-free and euphoric. She treasures this picture of Dante, with his wavy black locks messily covering his face and his skin so deeply tanned, a contrast against hers.

She riffles through the paperwork until she finds the builders’ cards before typing up an email to the cheapest offer. She copies Tomas in.

Task down, her fingers hit the ‘news’ tab in her open browser and she begins scrolling headlines that will hopefully occupy her mind. Trump, Mosul, marriage equality, Brexit, Pell, more Trump. A more depressing barrage of media seems impossible. Nothing catches her attention for long enough to forget she has the whole day ahead of her, alone, feigning a sickness that now looks nocebo-induced. She expects Dante to be home by seven and she wonders if she should book a dinner out. Maybe have some wine to loosen them both up

and keep trying. Secretly she still holds out hope that it won't come to IVF, that her body will recognise they've made it through their rough patch and accommodate.

Between the pictures and headlines of turmoil, she thinks of their own. A difficult two years dealing with the unexpected inability to fall pregnant, the final piece to their enviable life that people aren't ashamed to enquire about. At first, sex off the pill was connecting and hopeful, then she added cervical mucus and body temperature checks before they decided, businesslike, to book in dates and times for sex in order to comply with ovulation. Dante stopped calling it sex for a while, but 'procreation' sounded like vet-speak. Quickly it became a half-hearted hassle before she finally convinced him to start the pre-IVF tests. Time is against her. And it seems he too has finally realised, because recently something has shifted. She can see it. He's ready to do it together.

She looks back at the honeymoon photo and laments the loss of her firm arms from her years of swimming. Now the tissue hangs looser and those lungs, which could effortlessly hold litres of oxygen, seem so leaky. Her thoughts mushroom and she replays the theory that maybe this is why she has had trouble conceiving. That maybe Dante's recently increased morning gym visits and more muscular frame are a subtle hint that she should be doing more exercise herself and, worse, maybe he isn't attracted to her anymore. She's not exactly unfit ... but it's hard not to think that her best years are behind her. Lipodissolve can tauten and a few mils of filler can lift, but that won't help her get pregnant.

Jumping up from the desk, Klara walks determinedly into the bedroom and changes into a tracksuit and jacket. A midday walk will also clear her head. She stops by the kitchen and reaches for her prenatal vitamins. A daily reminder of the growing absence. The pill lodges in her throat briefly like peanut butter smeared on a guilt sandwich. She coughs and swallows, then picks a pair of

overgrown brown sunglasses and black cap to shield her, mostly from patients.

She steps out into a fine springtime breeze, leaving the front door unlocked. Dante hates her doing that but she doesn't want to have to carry the bulky set of keys on her walk. Besides, she'll be home before Dante gets back from work – he'll never know.

Trudging through brown elm leaves scattered on the footpath and passing a bustling flower shop, Klara reflects on her love of Elsternwick. It's so close to the beach that a salty mist often reaches their windows and clears the city congestion, but their house is tucked away far enough to not be battered by windy gusts. Weaving between a group of pensioners walking slowly on the footpath, hands in her jacket pocket, collar up to her cheeks and face down, Klara paces brusquely, like a hen in a rush to feed.

She passes her favourite cafe, Bang Bang, where Dante picked up the coffees that morning. Each thud of her sneakers swells a tension in her calves, then her forearms, before a heat sears her face. Her hands begin to sweat in her jacket pockets so she releases them and pulls her sleeves up. Each symptom is like an instrument weaving its way into a symphony. A crescendo presents with pounding in her chest and for a moment Klara thinks it is a good sign. She picks up her pace.

This is great. Working on my fitness again will surely help us conceive. Or at least it can't hurt!

With each step Klara imagines her body accommodating new life, the foundation for her perfect baby to materialise inside her. She passes through a flock of pigeons on Glen Huntly Road and startles when her mobile starts buzzing in her pocket.

It's an unknown number.

'Hello?'

'Hi, is this Klara Garcia?'

'Yes ... speaking?'

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‘My name’s Dr Clarke, I’m an intensivist at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. Have you got a moment?’

‘What ... yes?’

‘Is Dante Garcia your husband?’

There’s a mash of confusion. Deep breaths.

‘Yes ... I’m ... his wife.’

‘Okay, well, I’m sorry to give you this news but Dante is here at the hospital in the intensive care unit.’

In an instant the sore throat, the complaint, the fertility – none of it matters. She stares at a crack in the footpath, her mind sharpening as the doctor continues.

‘He’s been in some kind of incident. We aren’t exactly sure of the details but would appreciate you coming as soon as possible.’

The following minutes are punctured by shallow breathing and a vertiginous sensation as Klara follows the doctor’s directions, steadies herself in an Uber, then tells the driver to go through an amber light as he delivers her to the hospital.

Tomas

Tomas checks the batch numbers on the syringes of filler he injected on a young patient's cheeks and enters them meticulously into his clinical notes. Klara's recent complaint has forced him to tidy up his own compliance. If the issue with the patient Blake escalates into an official investigation, the whole clinic's procedures, all of their notes and protocols would be under review.

With his next patient running late, he opens a browser on his computer and continues the search for a wedding venue. Neither he nor Sam want anything lavish, but since they're aiming for a late summer wedding they'd prefer something outdoors.

Three years ago, when he met Sam at the Melbourne Cup, neither of them imagined they would be planning a wedding, legal or not. He scrolls through locations and imagines what food they might serve and how much it all could cost. Part of him regrets agreeing to the kitchenette renovations at the clinic because, with the wedding and his upcoming trip to Peru, he'd prefer less financial burden. However, with Klara's email this morning pursuing the works, it feels too late to back out.

He looks up at his medical degree in the glossy blue frame that Klara bought and mounted for him when they opened the Brighton Cosmedical Institute. It was just another one of her many generous gestures. Not many people had ever been so big-hearted to him; so fully understanding and embracing of him. He was a foreigner, from

a different land and a different culture, but she never once commented on his accent or his identity. She accepted him completely. It makes complete sense to ask her to be his 'best woman' or 'groomsmail'. The idea forms dimples in his cheeks.

It would have to be a non-religious ceremony because even though his faith has survived his wavering beliefs, the church just isn't ready for him yet. Tomas scrolls through a list of venues and restaurants that offer small wedding packages. Klara would of course bring Dante, which could bring its own complexities.

Tomas checks the waiting room on his screen. His patient still hasn't arrived, which will eat into his lunch break. He walks into the little kitchenette he and Klara share between their consulting rooms. As the kettle boils for his tea, he tries to recall the last time he saw Dante. It was a couple of weeks ago, when he picked Klara up from work. Unsurprisingly, Dante avoided eye contact with Tomas. Thinking of Dante triggers an uncomfortable weight in his stomach, like the heaviness of what he knows, of his guilt, has anchored to his intestines. He planned to give Dante until he and Sam returned from Peru to tell her. And if he hasn't ... well, Tomas would have no choice but to tell Klara himself.

Walking back into his office with a steaming mug, he sees a voicemail from Klara illuminating his mobile screen. He must not have heard her call over the whistle of the kettle. He listens to Klara spit urgently into the phone, explaining that Dante is in hospital, her voice tense, as though she's trying to hold it together. She explains that she's called Dante's twin brothers Marko and Stefano, but his parents are still in Peru and she can't get a hold of them.

Tomas quickly dials her back but she doesn't answer. Dread balloons inside him but before he has time to retry Klara, a message pops onto his screen from Afida, telling him that his next patient is waiting. With one hand he minimises the weddings page, and with the other he drops the mug on his table, splaying milky chai across his desk.