



FRITES

by Brandon Taylor

HAMMOND'S closest friend Oliver is a pediatrician. It is an occupation for which Oliver is poorly suited because, for one thing, he hates children, and for another thing, the sight of blood makes him incredibly uneasy. Oliver's father and grandfather and great-grandfather were all pediatricians, so in a way, it doesn't matter if Oliver hates children and vomits at the sight of blood—there was never any other job for him.

On Tuesdays, Hammond and Oliver have lunch downtown at a restaurant called *Mercy Buckets*. Hammond always orders the sandwich with the apple slices and crispy bacon and delicious, thick-cut bread. There's also an aged cheddar and spicy mayo. For a side, they share a large cone of

frites, hot and greasy. Oliver has a salmon salad. Chunks of pink flesh glazed honey gold and dispersed over dark green lettuce and spinach. There are pieces of bright fruit and preserved, sugar-dusted berries. Oliver prefers the apricot dressing and a just a dash of vinegar. For drinks, Hammond takes a fizzy lemon cider and Oliver has a light beer, golden-hued and topped with a hat of foam.

“So, how are things?” Oliver asks on a sunny Tuesday in early October. This is a common question, and often there isn’t much to tell because it has only been six days since the last time they have seen each other. But today there is much to tell and Hammond rises up a little straighter in his chair and leans across the table. He rests his hand on Oliver’s arm and exhales sharply.

“Oh, Oliver,” he says. “There’s so much shit going on—I can’t even, I don’t even—I mean, God.” He’s stammering over himself. Bits of frite stick to the corner of his mouth. His eyes are glossy and rimmed red. Oliver is a little startled by this. He settles his palm on Hammond’s knuckles. It’s second nature, this gesture, though it wasn’t always so.

“What the fuck is up?” Oliver’s heart is going a little faster. Hammond leans closer. Oliver can now see the frite sticking to Hammond’s blond whiskers. He suppresses the urge to brush it away. Hammond’s pulse is

hard and fast beneath his hand. It isn't like Hammond to be this way—well, it is like Hammond to be shot-through with anxiety, with worry, but isn't like him to let it show. In fact, Oliver takes a bit of pride in the fact that he is among only a select group of people who can discern the contours of Hammond's moods, the way they rise and fall like a large cat moving beneath thick velvet, but this is surface, too much raw nerve exposed.

“Sylvia—” Hammond begins and then bites his lip hard. “Sylvia broke up with me.”

“What?” Oliver asks. It is his turn to lean across the table. Hammond withdraws his hand from Oliver's arm, and leans away. “What, why, when?”

“She—she thinks I'm...” Hammond rolls his eyes first up and then down and then to the left. He stares off for a few seconds, and it feels like several minutes have passed before he shrugs his shoulders. In the distance, there is the state capitol, some cars, a small park, and a row of shops. There is a fountain shooting bursts of foamy white water into the air. Occasionally, a few drops carry on the breeze and speckle the corners of their napkins like an errant, intermittent rainfall. The air is cool and the sky is a vivid, metallic blue. “She thinks I'm insane.”

“Like—insane?”

“Certifiable,” is what Hammond says as he folds his hands into his lap. He does look pale now that Oliver is really getting a look at him. Pale except under his eyes, where he’s got a bruised look. His lips are red, chewed raw, and his hair is a mess. With his own eyes, Oliver traces a blue vein from the bend in Hammond’s arm up into the sleeve of his shirt. Hammond is fidgeting. “She thinks I am unwell,” Hammond says. He’s running the tape back in his mind. Oliver can see it.

“Fucking hell,” Oliver says. He wants to reach out again, to reestablish the contact they’ve lost, but he restrains that urge. Instead, he folds his own hand into a fist that he pushes down against his thigh to keep himself from moving. The other hand he flexes again and again and again. The pressure on his thigh hurts at first, but then it becomes numb, just another part of him. “I mean—where is it coming from, Hammy? Where?”

Hammond presses his tongue to edge of his teeth and then bites his top lip. There’s no blood, but Oliver winces just the same. He can almost see it, the dark welling beneath the surface of Hammond’s skin. He tamps down the nausea at the very thought. Hammond takes a breath.

“Uhm. Well, you know how I have trouble sleeping at night, right? So, she asked me why I kept getting up in the middle of the night.”

Oliver nods.

“So, so, so I say, ‘Oh, you know, my bladder is shitty at night.’ And she’s like, ‘Oh, I don’t believe you.’”

“Jesus,” Oliver says, whistling.

“Right, so then, I say, ‘I don’t know what you want me to say, I don’t know what you want.’ Then she’s like, ‘Are you a drug dealer? Are you a prostitute? Are you cheating on me?’”

“Wait, these were—”

“Actual questions!” Hammond lightly slaps the top of the table and its delicate black ironwork rattles a bit. Their glasses are sweating. Hammond drums his knuckles on the table, though not in any particular rhythm.

“Fuck,” Oliver says.

“Yeah, and then when I have no answer for her, she decides, oh, that’s it, she can’t be with somebody who’s got *problems*.”

“Okay, but—I mean, what is the problem that she’s seeing?” Oliver asks. *You’re perfect*, is what he wants to say. *You wouldn’t need to explain anything to me*, is what he wants to say. *You don’t need her*.

“Well, she saw me doing my routine? I guess? I mean, I didn’t do anything except look in the mirror.”

“Did you tell her?”

“Did I tell her that I need to look in the mirror five times a night because I’m afraid I’m shrinking? No. Slipped my mind entirely.” There is a coarseness to Hammond’s voice, a wildness in his eyes. Oliver retreats, tries to see the whole thing from a distance, from above, from several different angles, tries to diagnose the core problem here, what’s working at him.

“So she saw you looking in the mirror and broke up with you?”

“Yep! She said she didn’t believe me. She said there was something wrong with me.”

“Well, there isn’t anything wrong with you, Hammy,” Oliver says, his voice calm and sure. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” Hammond says, laughing, grinning. He leans forward until his chest is against the table and nods several times. “I feel like shit, Oliver. Thanks for asking.”

“She’s moving out, I guess,” Oliver ventures forth—it’s obvious and perhaps it is too concrete a thing to say about this whole mess, which has brought Hammond so low so fast. Why didn’t Hammond call him sooner? Why didn’t he say something? Reach out? Are they not the other’s only friend, the other’s only person?

“Already gone!” Hammond says. “Already gone this morning! All her things packed up, and she’s out the door.”

Oliver sighs, and Hammond sighs. Neither of them says anything. The waiter brings their food, offers to top off their drinks despite their drinks being not even half-gone. Dark grease spills out of Hammond’s sandwich and muddies his white plate. A smear of orange mayo across the rim of the dish. He’s eating, at least. He has an appetite. Oliver looks at his salad, douses the lettuce with the apricot dressing. It’s a pale yellow glaze on the leaves, and on the beautiful pieces of salmon.

“You can stay with me if you want,” Oliver offers. Hammond is still chewing, and Oliver wonders if he has even heard him. He waits, roots around in his salad. Hammond’s chewing slows.

“I bet your girlfriend would *love* that,” is what Hammond says, sniffing.

“Oh. I mean, she loves you,” Oliver says. His eyes go in the other direction, away from the capitol, down the hill, toward the lake which is visible only partially through gaps in the trees that line the avenue. The edge of a sail boat nudges into view.

Hammond laughs, barks, coughs.

“Lie to yourself, don’t lie to me,” he says.

“It’s not a lie,” Oliver counters, turning, sharply, his voice bristling. “She loves you. I love you. We love you.”

Hammond shakes his head several times. “That’s not true, Oliver. She hates me, actually.”

“You’re exaggerating, wallowing,” Oliver says.

“Miriam—” Hammond says and then draws short. “I don’t think she feels the way about me that you think she does.”

“What makes you think so?” Has Oliver misunderstood, miscalculated something? Miriam, whom he has been seeing for a year and a half, has always seemed happy to see Hammond. She’s shared Hammond’s writing on social media. She has smiled at him at parties. She has cooked dinner and lunch for them. She smiles at Hammond’s jokes. “She always has something nice to say about you.”

“I don’t know, Ollie. It just—she feels cold to me.” Hammond shrugs.

“It’s my place anyway,” Oliver says, choosing not to engage the idea Hammond has brought up, which catches Hammond off-guard, and he squints at Oliver.

“Right, but you live together,” Hammond says as if leading a stray pony back to the proper track.

“But I pay the rent.”

“But, you don’t pay rent. Your family owns the building,” Hammond laughs.

“That is a minor point.”

“It doesn’t matter, Ollie. I have a place. I don’t need to crash on your couch.”

“I know you have a place. I just...” Oliver trails off, making a vague motion with his fork. His neck is hot. His face is hot. He feels warm all over.

“I know, and thanks—but this is my mess.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

“Okay.”

The rest of their lunch goes smoothly. They talk around things rather than through them. There are long drinks from their glasses. There’s slow chewing. But they get through it, and then they descend the stairs inside and exit into the bright afternoon. In practice, Hammond usually goes back to the library to finish writing for the day, and Oliver goes up the street to his practice where he spends the day seeing small children and being

regarded reproachfully by his office manager who is in fact his father's office manager. Today, neither one of them has the energy to part from the other, especially not on such tense terms. Hammond holds his light, gray jacket under his arm and leans against a parking meter. Oliver stands very close to him. A slight breeze squeezes between them. The edges of their clothes mingle.

“Let's go to the park,” Oliver says on a whim. “We can watch the ducks.”

“The ducks have gone south,” Hammond says, but he pushes from the parking meter and they go along the street to the park. After a few steps, Hammond says, “I'm sorry about before.”

“It's okay,” Oliver says, almost before Hammond has finished speaking. “I'm sorry, too.”

Hammond slides his arms into his jacket and zips it up half way. The park is immediately much cooler than the street; shade hangs over them. There hadn't been any clouds in the sky before, but now, over the water, Oliver and Hammond see thick, fluffy clouds hanging low.

“They look like sheep,” Hammond says. The air is thicker with moisture, and when it comes over them, it drives a chill into their bones.

Oliver wishes he had brought a jacket or a sweater with him. Instead, he's dressed casually, but professionally in charcoal gray slim-cut slacks and a slim-cut button-down decorated with small boats. Hammond notices him shiver. "You want my jacket?"

"No, it wouldn't fit anyway," Oliver says. And it's true, their bodies are different. Hammond is lean and pale and slim—his jacket too small for Oliver, who, though in remarkable shape, retains a bit of the doughiness from his boyhood. His hair is black and coarse. If he were to let it grow, it would turn bushy, into a soft brown halo. People don't know what to make of him at times. He is *ambiguous*, they say, meaning it as a compliment. In actuality, he is a quarter black, Haitian. His mother is biracial, from Paris. His parents met in Quebec. There is nothing ambiguous about him, about the lines of his family, except for his maternal grandfather, who is a shrouded figure. When people look at him, they miss it at first, but the longer they look, the more certain they become that there is something *different* about him, something *ambiguous*.

"Oh, because you're He-Man, that's right."

"Shut up," Oliver says, rolling his shoulders. "Don't look at me."

"But isn't that the point of having muscles? For people to look at

you?”

“No—in fact. I would like to *not* die of heart disease.”

“Ah, I see. Cardiac health,” Hammond says and climbs onto a large black rock on the edge of the lake. The wind is in his hair, is ruffling his clothes. Oliver leans against the rock to cut some of the wind on him.

“Yes,” he says. “Cardiac health.”

“You do look great,” Hammond says. “You look like a movie star.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you. Your validation is what I live for.”

“But isn’t that true?” Hammond laughs a little at the end of this. “I don’t see any ducks, Ollie. I told you they had gone.”

“We have been here for two seconds—try some patience.”

Hammond hops down from the rock and sinks a little into the moist dirt. His cheeks are red, his eyes glossy. He’s on the brink of tears.

“Oh, Hammy.”

“Stop, stop, it’s fine,” he says, holding up a hand to keep Oliver at bay. Oliver’s chest tightens and he presses his fist into Hammond’s hand.

“You’re not fine,” Oliver says. “It’s not fine.”

“But what can you do?” Hammond asks with a little shrug and a shake

of his head. He closes his hand around Oliver's fist. There is a look that passes between them and stays, holding them fixed in place. Oliver wants to move, wants to say something, but Hammond is asking him not to, holding him still. They're matched, counterbalanced.

A hard grit rises in the back of Oliver's throat. He can see the darkening edges of Hammond's eyelashes, the way they're going sticky with wetness. It has always hurt him to see Hammond this way. In school on the rich part of town, when they were boys and when life should have been good and sweet and fair, Hammond had been plagued by intense anxiety. Like a swarm of bees chasing him through every day, he'd been pricked and stung by the wildness of his feelings, and Oliver had watched him from the outside, wanting nothing more than to peel Hammond open and go inside and keep him steady. On sleepovers, he had watched Hammond thrash and flail and cry and moan, his fists swimming through the air as he fought and strained and tried with everything to keep himself from falling apart. And then through their teenage years, in high school, in college, adulthood. The darkness following Hammond had lessened in scope, sharpening into a fine mist that trailed out behind him. It's only in moments like this, when the light comes in upon him just right that you can see it, plain as day, sadness like a soft rain coming in from the lake. And as

always, Oliver kept at a distance, at a remove, not knowing what to do or say, except to remain, bearing witness to it.

Oliver doesn't want another repeat of their senior year in high school, when a bad break up sent Hammond spinning down and down and down inside of a depression so deep that it seemed he'd never smile or move or think or breathe again. He has no way of knowing if Hammond is off his meds again, and he knows that to bring it up now would be to alter something in this moment, which, while dire, is perhaps the closest they've been in months. And he's missed Hammond, missed the way Hammond at times comes to rely on him, to need him. But he also knows that if he takes the risk, that if he opens his fist, Hammond will pull away because this isn't what is meant for them.

"Hammy..." is all that Oliver can manage without making himself entirely complicit in either the dissolution of the moment or the dissolution of Hammond. He wets his lips. Hammond is not looking at him. He's looking up the slope through the park, back toward the white stone of the capitol.

"We should get back, huh?" Hammond says. There's an edge in his voice, like he doesn't know how to manage the distance between two things tearing him apart. The wind off the lake is harder, firmer now. Oliver can

feel it chapping his cheeks. He steps toward Hammond, and Hammond lets himself be approached.

“Hammy,” Oliver says, embracing him. Hammond presses his face against Oliver’s chest. There is a sound like a sigh and then it deepens into something else, something like a tie being drawn through a collar. Hammond’s hair smells sweaty and oily. Oliver buries his face against it anyway. It’s fine, it’s all fine.

“I think your girlfriend really fucking hates me,” Hammond says.

“She doesn’t,” Oliver says.

“I would hate me.”

“You do hate you,” Oliver says, trying to make a joke, but there is a soft sound of affirmation from Hammond at this, and it guts Oliver. “Hey, this isn’t the time to be thinking about that.” He loops his arms around Hammond’s shoulders, and Hammond lets himself be hugged.

“I do,” Hammond says.

“You do, what?”

“Hate myself,” he says. “I keep driving people away.” There’s a warmth welling on Oliver’s collarbone, a smeary, salty wetness.

“How can you? When you’re so wonderful? How can you hate

yourself?”

“Some days I don’t know—how to be in this place, anymore.”

“In what place? Here? The city?”

“No, not like that,” Hammond says. His breath is now turning warm against Oliver’s chest, dampening his shirt. Oliver wants to pull him away so that he can look at him, get down to the root of this. There’s an icy edge running down his spine, making him uneasy. He hates this sort of talk.

“Then what do you mean?” Oliver asks quietly, trying not to sound spooked.

“I like—sometimes, I don’t know how to be in the world.”

“Oh fuck, Hammond,” Oliver says, sighing, gripping Hammond tighter to himself. “Oh fuck.”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” he says, and he tries to get out of Oliver’s grip, but Oliver is stronger than he is, bigger, more insistent. He’ll hold on forever.

“I couldn’t—” he tries, fails tries again, “I couldn’t be here without you.”

“Oh please,” Hammond says, and there’s a laugh. “You have Miriam.”

“You are my best friend,” Oliver says, each word coming out clearly

and firmly as if it is his last, each word a promise, a prayer. “I couldn’t live without you.”

“That’s absurd. And manipulative.”

“I know. I’m sorry. But it’s true.”

“You could live without me.”

“Maybe, but I’d have to try, and I don’t want to try.”

“You could learn,” Hammond says, and Oliver shuts his eyes and squeezes Hammond with all of his strength.

“I don’t want that,” Oliver says. “I don’t want to learn. I don’t want to try.” And it’s true, it is unfair of him to stake his life on Hammond’s life, but hasn’t it always been this way? Hasn’t it always been the truth? The two of them in this city, in this world, together, making it, trying with everything in them to find a way forward? Hasn’t it? Hammond is making fists with the back of Oliver’s shirt, he’s bunching it up and letting it go, bunching it up and letting it go.

“She called me insane, Oliver.”

“I know,” Oliver says. “She shouldn’t have.”

“I did what I was supposed to. I took my meds. I saw my doctor. I stuck to my routine. I did what I was supposed to.”

“I know, Hammy.”

“And still, she called me insane. I wasn’t doing anything, Ollie. I promise, I wasn’t doing anything.”

“I know.”

“She called me insane.” Hammond cranes his neck up and looks at Oliver, and Oliver hates that there is nothing he can do to fix the damage that Sylvia has done to him. He hates Sylvia, who was never a good fit for Hammond. She never had the kind of gentleness he needs, never the kind of inner kindness. Rather, she was waspy and mean and rude, but funny, yes. And she was a good cook, and Hammond loves food. And now she’s gone, which is something that Oliver now realizes he’s been hoping for the way that some people hold their breath and wait for a bad smell to pass. Fuck her, he wants to say. Fuck her and good riddance, goodbye.

Hammond sucks down a breath and takes a step back. Oliver lets him go, watches him carefully.

“I’m a fucking disaster,” he says. “A real mess.”

“You’re not,” Oliver says, but Hammond just puts up his hands, shrugs.

“I am what I am,” he says. “I am what I am.”



They make their way back up the street, the lake's cold wind at their backs. Their arms thrown across each other's shoulders. They are talking animatedly, brightly. There is laughter in their voices. They come to the corner and stop.

“I guess I have to get back to work,” Oliver says, chewing the corner of his lip. “Will you call me if you need me? Will you call me even if you don't think you need me?”

Hammond is on the cusp of giving a negative answer, saying that he doesn't need anything or anyone, that he's fine, so fine, but he doesn't. He sees it in Oliver's eyes that if he says anything other than yes, he will be performing an act of cruelty against his closest, dearest friend.

“Okay,” he says, gently, softly, so that it sounds like he means it, and he does. Oliver watches him carefully, eyes him up and down, and Hammond tries his best to look, or seem credible. He hates it when Oliver looks at him this way. He doesn't know what to do with his hands. But Oliver is good to him, kind, sweet, generous.

“Okay,” Oliver says, and he turns. “I will talk to you later.”

“Sure—oh, Ollie!” Hammond calls. Oliver stops immediately and pivots. He doesn’t say anything, just raises his eyebrows and turns his head a little. “The ducks are gone.”

At first, Oliver doesn’t know what Hammond is talking about, but realization dawns, sure enough, and Oliver shakes his head.

“Oh, right. Well, you win this time.”

“I’m always right,” Hammond says.

“Yes, always,” Oliver says, and then he’s gone up the street, getting further and further away. Hammond stands and watches because it makes him feel good to watch Oliver. He has always liked watching Oliver, knowing where he is. When Oliver is gone, Hammond shudders a little. He thinks of Sylvia, the ugly conversation they had last night during which she chewed up their relationship and spat it back at him as an unrecognizable black mass. His insides are raw and quivering just thinking about it. She’s gone now. Probably staying in a spare room on the side of town where she is a nanny and private chef.

“Oh fuck her,” he says, scoffing, trying on some of Oliver’s anger but finding it a bad fit for him. Anger has always been a challenge for him. It

leaves him feeling enervated, raw. It is not his nature to be angry, though there are times when he is provoked from somewhere far beneath his skin by something unnamable, when he is moved into action that feels more wild than angry. Less so with the medicine. Less so these days. He imagines the language that his therapist will use to articulate this event to his mom and dad. *This break up is hard on him*, Dr. Schwartz will say. *He is coping*.

That his therapist reports to his parents on his well-being in broad, general strokes is not unknown to him. It is part of his comprehensive mental health plan. Keep everyone in the loop. Let everyone know how he is doing, how he is handling things. There was a minor break a few years ago that left a jagged edge running down the middle of his life, and so it's best to keep things level, keep everything above the table. It is fine. Everything is fine.

Hammond breathes.

Everything is fine.

He turns away from the place where Oliver disappeared—goodbye, Oliver—and he steps back onto the sidewalk and walks and walks. He is going back to the library, which is enormous and made of chrome and glass. He has some writing left to do. He is in the middle of an essay about

a berry crumble that Sylvia made for him two nights ago. It had a homemade crust and lots of butter. She didn't use any sweeteners, just lots of berries, a jam and a paste she had made. She was so good at making things from raw ingredients, churning them up into something fresh and new for him. He is at the part of the essay where he describes how she made the jam, the long hours spent in the kitchen, the boiling water, the dark berries simmering in the pot, the fog wafting up into her hair, struck through with beams of light from the balcony window. And he had helped her, kissing the nape of her neck, brushing the tops of her shoulders with flour or flecks of water. He is not good at cooking, but he loves to watch and loves to help. He is clumsy in the kitchen, but he means well.

A wreath of steam rises from the pot, and she holds the lid, looking at me like I've told her a bad joke (and I probably have). There isn't quite a smile there, but there is the beginning of something, maybe a laugh or sternness. Sylvia is the type of woman who takes her jam very seriously. It's a dark sludge now, she says, but soon it'll be magic, ambrosia. Where has she gotten this word, ambrosia? But she means it.

Hammond stops on the street corner and blots his sleeve against his eyes. He isn't crying exactly. There's a welling up of something. He's riding the swell of emotion that feels too large for him to tamp down. It's buoying him up. The walk light is flashing toward him. He steps into the

crosswalk. There is construction north of him. Some people are drilling down into the earth, pulling up white, chalky chunks of asphalt. Dust swirls through the air. Hammond steps beneath the awning of the library's entrance and tries to catch his breath. The world is getting away from him.

He's alone today. She left him. It's days like this that make him want to break himself down into the millions of tiny things he once felt shifting around inside of him as a child and slip away into the sky piece by piece. It reminds him of that song he used to sing in primary school: *The ants go marching, two by two, the little one stops to tie his shoe.*

Hammond shakes his head. He squats down close to the ground and tries to steady himself. He needs to breathe. He needs to get a grip on things. He needs to hold himself together. He pictures Oliver. He tries to remember the warmth and the strength of Oliver's arms, how Oliver had held him together at the lake. He tries to remember Oliver's smile. Tries because Oliver's face is already slipping away from him, and that's the real terror here, that's the real thing that stabs at him in the guts and opens him up, that's the awfulness. That Oliver's image is receding from him, and all that's left is the blank, cold gray of the ground.

A speck. Dark. Another. Speck after speck, dropping to the ground that is between his legs, a small rain. Hammond sniffs. Tears. He's crying

on the ground outside of the library. He should go inside. *Go inside, do your work.* Another speck. Another drop. One after another. They don't overlap, but land just beyond one another, the tears from his face. There are people, but they seem not to notice him, or else they're used to this sort of thing. It happens often enough, he supposes—people coming apart.



Oliver is sitting in his office. He's bouncing a racquetball, squeezing the blue rubber between his hands. Hammond is on his mind like a low-hanging bank of clouds, throwing a shroud over everything else. He could move Hammond into the spare room in their apartment. Miriam will not like it. She won't protest exactly, but she won't like it. But Hammond needs them. He needs friends right now. Being alone is not good for him.

He has a view of the lake on the opposite side, away from the park. He glances out and sees a forever expanse of shimmering horizon. Water everywhere, gleaming in the abundance of sunshine. It's a view he has come to take for granted, and for moment he sees it anew. It's beautiful. Out of the west, he sees a string of black bodies. They're coming on slow,

but as they grow closer to him, he knows what they are. The ducks have returned, ten or so of them, gray and black and white. It's almost like they're swimming through the air. He lets out a laugh and picks up his phone.

He dials Hammond's number, and the phone rings and rings and rings.

He dials again, and when Hammond answers, his voice is creaky and wet—the ducks have gone by then.

“Hello, hello, hello,” Hammond answers, like he's speaking through a crack in the universe.

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