

**2002**

*Lately I have begun to dream of amorphous shapes. For so long they have been jagged and sharp. Mostly they're plant-like: bulbous and round. Mostly. But sometimes. Rare times. It's our two bodies. Fused into one.*

*Bulbous.*

*Amorphous.*

*Us.*

\*

The girl swings out wildly from her boyfriend's side, laughing. She wants to get a better look at the fullness of him and let him glimpse the further promise of herself. She stumbles into me. She's unsteady on her feet, drunk on summer lust. I can smell the musky scent of lovers. In the oppressive heat, it rises from their skin and invades my heightened senses, and I can identify the individual acts of love that have passed between them. A wave of nausea begins its slow passage through me. Its sluggish undertow pulls silty memories from deep under the surface and clouds the clear pool of my sorrow. The girl pulls away from me shocked by my iciness.

Summer is not the season for loss. Grief lurches around blindly in this brash light that illuminates too starkly, and I find that this unwieldy emotion cannot be contained in the same way that it could in winter. Back then, the mist and cloud cloaked me in layer upon layer of muted greys, the lightness of which built to form densely compacted strata. Summer is a time for shrugging off the weight of heavy layers though, as the sun spreads hot, itchy fingers underneath and nags us to divest. Time isn't healing me and I no longer feel welcome, either in the homes of friends who let me weep quietly in their company throughout the winter, or in the patches of dappled light that contain lovers in the park.

My breath is short when I reach the brow of the hill and she has her back to me. If I approach her from the front she is all jutting bones and attitude. She is multi-faceted, though, and from some angles barely a sliver of herself. She reminds me of me. She lost her head and her arms will never hold anyone again. We are both on a knife-edge, although she has the advantage over me as she struts in a solid eternal pose and I slide and stumble precariously, forever in danger of losing my balance.

The absence of her is what brought us together. With her there between us, we might easily have passed each other by with barely a glance, but the shock of not finding her in place made me stare at him instead. He wasn't shocked. He was there to see where she had stood, whereas I had gone to touch base with an old friend.

### ***JANUARY 2001***

'She's gone!'

'She'll be back.'

'How do you know?'

He slips a newspaper clipping from between the pages of a book.

'*Moore's Knife Edge U.S. Tour*,' I read aloud.

A picture shows the sculpture being lifted from her plinth. A rope is wound around her torso and looped around her neck. It's attached to the limb of a crane and a man stands by the platform, loosening her from the safe base she has occupied for more than two decades, about to hoist her, free-swinging, into an unknown future: a tour of a foreign land.

'She's been gone a while,' he says.

'I've been away,' I reply. 'In America, coincidentally.'

He catches that the coincidence is the fact that the sculpture is touring America, not

that I'd been visiting his homeland, and I'm glad about this.

'I suppose I should...' I point vaguely in the direction from which I came.

'Coffee?'

He smiles and turns towards a nearby bench. I don't like coffee, too bitter, but I like his smile, so I sit. The wind clatters through leafless trees and in the west, the weak sun slips towards London's skyline.

He pours me a cup from a flask, and I wrap my frozen hands around the plastic. The sight of the chequered thermos conjures up memories of family picnics and winter walks; memories that don't belong to me and my dysfunctional childhood. Coming up here had often been a salve for that. I look back at the empty plinth and feel her loss sharply.

'Are you a sculptor?' he asks.

'No. You?'

'Only in secret. You're an artist, though' he says, pointing at my paint-stained hands.

'I'm a botanical illustrator.'

'Why do you call Moore's sculpture "she"?' Its title is *Standing Figure Knife Edge*,' he says.

'She's feminine, don't you think?'

He points to the newspaper clipping. 'It says here that Henry Moore built the form around a bird's breast bone. It was originally called *Winged Figure*.'

'Do you always believe what you're told?' I ask.

'Almost never,' he says.

His gaze is intense and makes me nervous. I want to break its spell.

'I didn't know sculptures toured. What do you think she'll be doing?'

'I dunno. Trashing hotel rooms and hanging out with groupies?'

We laugh right into each other's faces. It's a shared, familiar laugh more suited to long-time lovers telling old jokes than to strangers. Our glance snags and lengthens. It shapes into something else. Eyes. Lips. Breath. Close.

*Whenever I remember that first day I imagine that he reached out and touched me, but he didn't. He didn't tuck a stray curl of hair behind my ear or run a wistful finger down my cheek. Only his eyes reached out to me when he spoke.*

'I want to sculpt you,' he said.

We descend from the Greenwich Park hilltop at the pace of the setting sun. The air is cold and crisp and something crackles between us. I catch the sweet, spicy scent of a winter-flowering Viburnum and I sense a promise of things to come. As we enter a warm, smoky pub, heat rushes through me and we shed our coats and order drinks with a sudden urgency, as if time is already slipping through our grasp and there's not a second to lose in getting to know one another. At closing time I announce I am going home, even though I don't want to leave him. This is when he touches my face. This is when he runs his thumb down my cheek and says, 'Come home with me'.

When we get there I am unexpectedly shy.

'I'm going for a shower,' he says. 'Join me?'

I watch him undress down to a lean, muscled body while I remain fully clothed. I'm not sure what to do. I stand on the edge of the shower and we kiss. Wanting more, I strip and get in. Under the running water, we laugh like children but it's seductive and we are not innocents. We run naked and wet from bathroom to bedroom. He raises one eyebrow to heaven and lowers the other to hell as I watch him move his tongue down my body not taking his eyes off mine. I put my hand on his face and stop him.

'Don't you want me to?' he says

‘It’s too...’ I search for the right word ‘... personal,’ I say, not sure if that’s it.

He looks at our exposed bodies tangled in the damp sheets.

‘It doesn’t get any more personal than this,’ he says.

It’s so simple and true, but I’d never really felt it before. I let him carry on and for the first time in a long time I feel as if I can trust someone. We stay awake until the sky lightens, until I watch him pull away from me and into his clothes.

‘No shower?’

‘I want to smell you on me,’ he says, laughing, and then he’s gone.

I wander through London’s streets not knowing where I am, our feral scent rising off my skin. I find my way home and back into my own bed. It’s 9.30am on a Monday morning, and I am in love.

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‘...and he loves giving head. A LOT,’ I shout.

‘Marry him then,’ says one friend.

‘That won’t last,’ says another.

It is the first and last time I ever tell anyone about him. He waits three days to call me, makes one date, and breaks it three times. After that I don’t hear from him.

***FEBRUARY 2001***

‘I lost your number.’

‘Not good enough,’ I say, not breaking my stride.

‘I deleted it by accident.’

He puffs as he jogs alongside me.

‘Can ya slow down a little? I’ve just chased you three blocks already. I only wanna talk.’

‘You could have done that on the phone if you weren’t so careless.’

I dash out into the road and put a lane of traffic between us then look wildly in the other direction seeking a gap through which to escape.

‘Please!’

His yell contains a note of entreaty that I can’t quite ignore. I turn to face him.

‘I can’t get you out of my mind,’ he shouts, over the noise from the road.

‘And yet you “deleted me by accident”.’

‘It wasn’t an accident.’

We look at each other over the cars that pass between us.

‘I can’t get you out of my mind,’ he repeats.

‘Another man might think that was a good thing.’

‘I’m married.’

Another woman might have been propelled further and faster by that statement but I remain rooted on my traffic island.

‘But you can’t be. I felt...’

I don’t know what fails, my voice or my nerve.

‘I know,’ he says. ‘I felt it too.’

He throws himself into the traffic to reach me and we are marooned together.

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His wife is at home in America. She's a high-flyer.

*Of course she is.*

He works in finance.

*And sculpts in secret?*

He's been transferred to London, temporarily, but he'll be going back eventually.

*Of course he will.*

They have four children.

*Four! Did it make it any better if there were only two?*

I can hear him telling me details but all the time I'm imagining us together again. By the time we are standing outside his place his story is finished

'Do you want to go home?'

'No.'

'Do you want to come in?'

I hesitate. I am standing on a precipice and I am not a high-flyer. He looks at me intently. He is not offering me anything. There will be no soft landings.

'Yes,' I say finally, and step off the precipice hoping I can float down unharmed.

### ***MARCH 2001***

Spring is unsettled, and so am I. Thunderstorms lash the city followed by sudden changes in temperature that make the daffodils bloom then wither as cold days follow mild ones. I am as confused by my behaviour as the plants are by the unpredictable weather. Everything feels

wrong about this situation. I am not mistress material. For the whole of March I decide almost every day that I will have to break it off. I notice women with babies in prams, dragging toddlers by their side and I think of his wife doing the same thing in faraway New York, while he drinks and fucks with me. Of course, she's not pushing prams and dragging toddlers. She's a high-flyer. She has an army of women, who don't fly so high, to help her. This doesn't make it any better.

Guilt settles on me: a remnant of my Catholic upbringing that I don't seem able to eschew. Despite its constant gnawing, it doesn't seem capable of holding me back. Every time I go to meet him I want to rush up to complete strangers in the street and scream "I'm sleeping with a married man". Surely this is some form of mania. I don't tell anyone.

He doesn't meet any of my friends. He doesn't know anyone in my life. He doesn't get to know me in any way except through what I say or what he can discern from knowing my body. He seems to discern a lot.

I don't want him to leave his wife and children and I don't want him to marry me. This should make our intensely sexual relationship perfect. It isn't. You can't have passion without feeling and despite our intentions we are forming an attachment. We are living in a bubble of denial; this relationship could not survive outside it.

The way that he loves me feels beautiful and cruel. While I train my brain to ignore the wrongs of the situation my body begins to rebel in small ways: a cough that won't go, an infection that lingers on, bruises that remain on my body in bold black and purple, and cuts that won't heal, each one filled with a nagging awareness of deception.

He sculpts me over and over: first in clay then in stone. I watch myself emerge from the rock, limb by limb and it unnerves me that he can find me in there. Afterwards, he puts

his work-roughened hands on my body and moulds my flesh with his touch while he chisels at my emotions with his presence, or removal of it. It's a heady, if not healthy, combination.

*Give me head over health any day. Ha ha!*

***APRIL 2001***

We stand naked. Eye-to-eye. Hipbone to hipbone. Both of us six feet tall. We are as dark and pale as each other: white skin, black hair. We are a striking couple. His blue eyes peer into my green ones. We could be siblings instead of lovers. His hard, masculine body fits itself into my lean feminine one. When we make love the fierceness bruises us, our jutting bones knock each other as our attempt to possess makes us rough: pulling, pushing and squeezing as we try to get inside one another. I want to see the view from those blue eyes. We spend hours in bed and afterwards fingerprints and bite marks litter our bodies. We look fight-worn. We retire to our corners between rounds to watch each other and fuel the passion by being close but not touching.

We meet in pubs and parks and weave a merry dance back to the bedroom, laughing and joking but not touching on the way. We can't be seen as a couple. One night, in a back street near Tottenham Court Road, he rips the buttons from my shirt and we stand in shocked silence before he reaches in and grabs my breasts. As rain starts to fall we push each other into a doorway and have harsh, raw sex against a wall with the busy world just a few feet away.

'Hold me,' he pleads, as he pushes me into the rough brick.

Are we high on the danger? Crazy with the illicit thrill?

Yes we are.

I never think of his other life when we're together. It's only when I'm alone

that the demons come. I don't know what he thinks. Can a man this passionate be so cold?

***MAY 2001***

Sometimes I don't hear from him for days and then he'll be on the phone demanding to know where I've been. A large part of our lives is closed to each other. I don't tell him about my everyday life and he doesn't tell me about his. I try to act normally while I look for a way out, but I'm not really paying attention to my life. I'm thinking about him and what we will do when next we meet.

He hides as much of his life from me as he can. He's reluctant to tell me personal details. I imagine he doesn't want to be found when this is over. He doesn't understand that I would never look for him once he goes. I don't want him on those terms. I don't believe people leave unless they want to, and I know that he will leave. I don't know why I keep going back for more. There is no more to this relationship than sex. I think it. I say it. But I can't quite believe it. Sometimes I want more. Sometimes I think he does too. Neither of us say anything. We would both make brilliant poker players.

This cannot go on.

***JUNE 2001***

Outside the sun is shining. The hybrid musk roses are releasing their scent and the promise of love into the June air: Moonlight and Penelope infiltrate the branches of the rhododendron bush in my garden as though they are climbing plants. I am sitting inside pretending that I'm not waiting for the phone to ring. I wonder if it's time to give in to the advance of technology and get a mobile phone but what will that really achieve? I'll still be putting my life on hold and pretending I'm not waiting around for him to call. I need to end it.

He turns up an hour late, held up by ‘something from home’. It makes me want the whole thing over with even more. I can’t come directly out and tell him so I open the wine he brings and we talk. I want to make love one last time. It’s a desperate physical tussle. I’m more violent and demanding than ever before, pushing us into impossible positions, driving us towards orgasms that don’t release the tension, which leave me with a sense of dissatisfaction, that I can see reflected in his face.

‘You’ve had enough, haven’t you?’ he says.

‘Yes.’

I’m so glad that I don’t have to say the words myself that I smile.

‘So this is it then?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

He looks shocked. I feel relieved. We lie there looking at the ceiling.

‘I can’t stand the waiting around, or the way it’s making me feel about myself,’ I say.

‘Did you know you were going to break it off before we came to bed?’

‘Yes.’

He looks astonished.

‘I just wanted to sleep with you one more time.’

‘No one has ever done that to me before,’ he says. ‘This is one hell of a break- up.’

We watch the ceiling fan make a slow revolution, the words “break-up” hanging in the air.

‘Can I still call you?’ he asks.

‘What would be the point?’ I say.

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It’s the first time I have seen any friends in months. It’s good to be in a group and we talk and laugh and I make no explanation for my absence. We decide to leave the pub and go to a club and we rush the exit in a group of excitement. The door swings back and he steps through it. He is so out of context that at first I don’t recognise him. My friends pour past him through the doorway and out into the street. I am almost there with them. I can smell the freedom of the night air when I feel his hand grab mine.

There is everything and nothing to say. He opts for nothing.

My friends are just outside.

‘They’re waiting for me.’

He looks into my eyes.

‘I’d better go.’

He’s unshaven and desperate looking. People give us a wide berth. I reach for the door and he moves towards me.

‘Come with me,’ he whispers, his face pressed close to mine.

‘I c...’

‘...come with me.’

He takes the beginning of my refusal and exhales his own words back into my mouth, converting it into an appeal. That’s all it takes. We disappear through a side exit, leaving my friends to wonder where I’ve gone. A street away he pulls me into a hotel. Once inside the room, I expect an onslaught but he just takes my face in his hands, looks into my eyes, and

says, 'I just wanted to see you.'

We make the softest, slowest, sweetest love of our lives. Our style, usually so frenzied and fierce, is replaced with something different. Our hard bodies soften and blend into one shape: one beautiful, organic shape with no edges. In the background Sheryl Crow's *I Shall Believe* is playing on the radio and I know that I'll never again be able to turn away from him. Something will have to pull me.

### ***JULY 2001***

The weather gets increasingly hotter and summer begins to shimmer with promise. We don't talk of love but some days, using alcohol to excuse any flash of feeling, we talk like a real couple. We make love in my bedroom, with the heat so palpable it is an active participant. The ceiling fan only serves to move the already hot air around the room and we throw ourselves into the drama of the mix: the heat, the sex, and all that lies beneath the surface.

Oceans of sweat form on our fevered skin. Our bodies slide and slip over one another until we dissolve into laughter. Afterwards, we lie under the fan and shoot water from a spray bottle up towards its fins. It drifts back down and settles on our flesh in a fine mist that doesn't cool us. When we can stand the heat no longer we go in search of music and cold beer.

The whole world seems to be in a good mood. Women in summer dresses reveal bare tanned flesh and the men look fit and healthy and happier than usual. We go to a pub where the music is loud and fun. We sit at the bar and talk to everyone coming and going. London becomes a city of extroverts when the weather is good. We are all each other's best friend. A guy taking photos of the crowd with an old Polaroid camera and selling them to everyone is doing a roaring trade. Everyone is buying because there's nothing like a solid remembrance

of the good times when they are happening. So many great moments pass by without us noticing but tonight everyone seems aware that we are building a great memory for the future. The crowd is unwilling to forget how life has flashed its potential at us. The sun is illuminating opportunities that remained in shadow throughout the winter months. We do not have our photo taken. There can be no evidence of us together.

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The moonlight falls through purple muslin casting a violet hue over my body. I am happy to recline. He is happy to put the finishing touches to yet another sculpture.

‘Why don’t you ever draw people?’ he says.

‘Plants are simpler.’

‘I’m not sure if that answers my question.’

He hands me a sketch pad.

‘Draw me.’

I draw an extravagant plant with beautiful flowers and deep convoluted roots and he laughs.

‘Why won’t you draw me?’ he asks.

‘It’s too personal,’ I say.

He smooths his hand over my stone ass.

‘It doesn’t get much more personal than this,’ he says.

‘Do you sculpt your wife?’

‘Are you kidding? She doesn’t even know I do this.’

‘She doesn’t know you do many things.’

‘Everyone deserves a secret life.’

‘Does that include your wife?’

He nods.

‘And me?’

‘Yes.’

He is fierce and abrupt. He doesn’t like us both in the same conversation. He prefers us on different continents. He gives my stone ass one final polish and then seeing the look on my face comes to nuzzle my neck. He runs his hand over a yellow bruise that won’t heal.

‘You’re too open for secrets,’ he says, laying me back.

The truth is, I’m not. I have grown a taste for them and so am not ready to tell him that I already have a secret life. As he caresses my body, I think of the hundreds of sketches that I have made while he sleeps: lying spread-eagled, then curled, then in motion, in moonlight and shadow, all through the night to dawn and daylight. Before he wakes I put my drawings away, climb back into bed, and sleep innocently in his arms until the sun pours light and life into my room and our affair. When he has gone to work, I sit at my desk and work on my small, delicate paintings of plants. In the afternoon I drag my easel to the garden, strip out of my clothes, and paint huge canvasses of him, from my sketches. My desire intensifies with the deepening of my tan and the extravagance of my work and the time no longer hangs heavy on my hands when we are not together.

Even in this kind of fervour there’s no way I’ll tell him how I feel.

***AUGUST 2001***

He's leaving. He's going back to America and we have only one month left. The mad, hot, crazy summer drives forward and we must break it off. I am Calypso. Odysseus is returning to Penelope.

All his sculptures are gone. He doesn't mention them and I don't ask. Months of intense, intimate work have vanished and I wonder if they meant anything to him. He's casting his away-from-home playthings aside and I will soon be among them. It makes me feel as though he has left already.

Awakened with passion, my artistic vision has changed and I now fill sketchbooks with scenes from the city and the summer people: young couples kissing under the trees in Greenwich Park; old couples holding hands as they listen at the bandstand; riverboats carrying clicking tourists up and down the Thames; people spilling out of pubs and overflowing on to pavements; kids playing football on the smallest patch of green space; and the kite flyers on Blackheath, their patches of sky-bound colour tethered to the ground with silver strings.

We continue to meet but we are stuck in some place that we don't know how to get out of. We can't return to the days when we pretended that we were carefree and uninvolved and we can't move forward. We try to pull away from each other but it isn't working and instead we spiral dangerously closer.

Temperatures continue to rise but it's heading towards the end of summer and now the heat sees tempers flare and the night air is filled with the sound of arguing couples. It would appear that we cannot deal with too much light in our lives. Those first days of summer made promises that the tail end cannot sustain. The continual glare from the sun points up human flaws, like skin blemishes in a magnifying mirror, and the heat just aggravates the sore spots.

I wake early. I want to tell him I love him but I leave while he's still sleeping. There are no more goodbyes to be said. I only want to hear hellos.

***SEPTEMBER 2001***

It felt like he disappeared into the ether. That was before he disappeared into the ether. It was an astonishing vanishing act. First he left and I felt the dull ache of the inevitable. Then, *poof!* He was gone and I was floored by the shock surprise of the inexplicable.

There is no epitaph for our love. No light flashing on a machine with a message of love whispered from his seat on the plane. No one calls me to see how I am. I cannot wear widow's weeds. Nobody lets me know that he was on one of those four planes. I don't even know why he was. I read about my loss with everyone else, in the *Evening Standard*. He had been a pillar of the London financial community, if only temporarily, until just eleven days before the Twin Towers fell. There is no mention of the secret sculptor. If I hadn't known his name I wouldn't have recognised him. There is no hope that he will come back. I don't know if it's harder to imagine that he would have returned to me or better to believe that he wouldn't.

As his wife, along with thousands of Americans, buries an empty box and leans on the support of a nation devastated by this act of terror, I bury my own empty box, small yet symbolic, within sight of Henry Moore's *Standing Figure Knife Edge*.

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***JANUARY 2002***

It's January again. I can't believe a year has passed since we first met. I sit on the hill with the *Standing Figure Knife Edge* and my thermos, which is not chequered. I look at my reflection in its chrome finish and try to see in my eyes if time is healing me. My breath

forms a heart on the polished surface and I write our names inside to prove that we were real.  
I know that something has to change but my reflection says that time isn't healing me and I  
can't see what will.