



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Research Commons

<http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/>

Research Commons at the University of Waikato

Copyright Statement:

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

The thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognise the author's right to be identified as the author of the thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from the thesis.

All I Remember is Forgetting

Creative Writing thesis: Fiction

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Professional Writing

at

The University of Waikato

by

Marcus Hobson



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2021

Abstract

All I Remember is Forgetting is a novel about the complex weaving of memory, relationships and works of art. We observe these through the eyes of Roger Phillips, whom we first encounter washed up and living in his car after the failure of a third serious relationship. Unsuccessfully married twice, Roger has not navigated matrimony as well as he might. Instead he has escaped into a world of painting, photography and sculpture.

The main driving force behind the narrative is a wooden box containing Roger's collection of 600 art postcards. These are pictures collected from galleries and museums around the world. Thirty years in the collecting, it took Roger's second wife, Margot, only fifteen minutes to pitch them all into a landfill north of Auckland. Also missing were his most treasured books. Gone were all the stories from the myths of the Greeks and Romans on which he fed his imagination. So much so, in fact, that he is convinced that Eris, goddess of strife and discord, has been on a mission to ruin his life. While every book held special meaning, it was to each postcard that Roger attached his most personal recollections – the gallery, the surrounding city, the occasion and the person he was with. Each a complex narrative. All the memories of his life were tied to those small pieces of card; suddenly they were lost for ever. Art had always been Roger's escape, his safe haven, but also his erotica, wrapping him in the beauty and hidden narratives in the lives of artists and their models. The imperfect fragments of Roger's life show us that love is not best understood through art. Roger fails to see the philosophy of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of golden repair. Breakage and mending are part of the history of your life, to be celebrated not disguised.

This is a many-layered exercise in ekphrasis, where dramatic verbal descriptions of works of art are layered with descriptions of Roger's married life. In some cases both become so entwined that they form an entirely new layer of art. The novel weaves the highs and lows of Roger's journey; both the pain and the humour. Through the lens of great art and its creators we find mirrors, reflections and the distortion between life and art. We travel from Sheffield and London to Paris and New York, before coming firmly to rest in New Zealand.

Do not believe everything that Roger tells you, but remember the words of Oscar Wilde: it is only through art *that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence*.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

Kia ora!

First and foremost I must thank and acknowledge the profound debt to my wife Åsa. Not just for giving me the space to write this, cooking dinners after coming home from a day's work, but more for the immense encouragement. For her thoughts on the fragments I read out loud over dinner. For being my first reader. Most of all though, for still loving me after listening to all the facts and fictions I made out of all my previous relationships. Her acknowledgement that those were the things we had to go through to arrive at each other remains incredible. Thank you for getting to the end of the book and still loving me. You are amazing.

To my wonderful cohort of Master-ful writers at the University of Waikato, whose unfailing words of advice, encouragement and criticism have helped every step. Thank you all. We arrived at an unprecedented level of trust. "I love what you're doing there, but..." should forever be our mantra. We went through COVID and lockdowns together, Zooming our route to success. To Phillida, Rachel, Imé, Avinash and Hugh; thank you, what a talented bunch of writers you are. And what a ride; from the bars of Auckland to the rural Wairarapa, the streetwise rap of Kirikiriroa to the charm breakers of India, on into the deep space and alien encounters.

And finally to my tutors. To Catherine Chidgey and Tracey Slaughter. Amazing writers and brilliant teachers. Thank you for so much good advice, scholarship and wisdom. An insane amount of guidance. It was such an honour to sit in your classes and attend the launches of your books over the past year.

A special thanks to Tracey Slaughter, who ran a one-day writing course that drew me Waikato in the first place. Your teaching of 'Writing and Embodiment' helped me find the right way into my story. An entry that had evaded me for many years and even more drafts. Thank you for unlocking the voice. Thank you for making me read *As I Lay Dying* again and finally being able to see it for the masterpiece it is.

Thanks also to the University of Waikato for creating such a unique and brilliant course, and surrounding us with so much fine teaching.

Marcus Hobson
Kaimai Ranges

*It is through art, and through art only, that we can realise our perfection;
through art and art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of
actual existence.*

Intentions, Oscar Wilde (1891)

*In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary's winter gown, said Janine,
Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara.*

The Rings of Saturn, W G Sebald (1998)

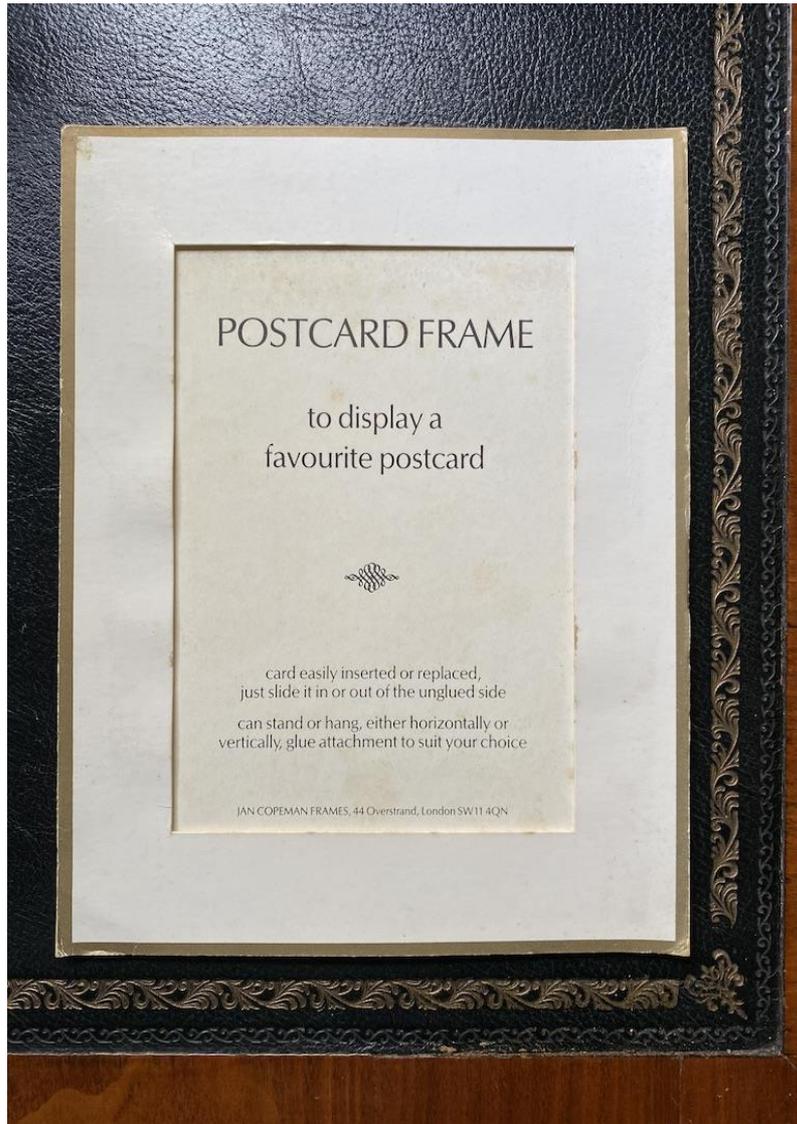
Contents

Abstract		ii
Acknowledgement and Thanks		iii
Index		v
Part I	Life before Samantha	
1	The Unreliable Memories of Roger Phillips	1
2	Signs and Symptoms of Addiction	5
3	The Painted Ladies	9
4	The Rodin above my Bed	14
Part II	Life with Samantha	
5		The Story of Eris 18
6	Tales of Tissot	23
7	The Railway Station	32
8		The Children of Eris: Horkos 42
9	John Ruskin in Sheffield	46
10	The Pre-Raphaelites	52
11	Maillol Statues	57
12	Quatre-vingts Dessins de Rodin	62
13	Penzance	65
14		The Children of Eris: Logoi 70
15	Roger Fry, Vanessa and Holly	75
16	Southwold 1994	79
17	Twenty-eight plates	85
18		The Children of Eris: Pseudea 91
19	Ariadne on Naxos	96
Part III	After Samantha but before Margot	
20	Memory holder	100
21	Hotel with the walled garden	102
22	Venus and Mars	108
Part IV	Margot	
23	The Wilton Diptych	112
24	The Reading Girl	116
25	The Arnolfini Wedding	122
26	The Hangover	125
27	So many levels of artifice	130
28	The Helga Pictures	138

29		Eris picks a fight in Paris	143
30	The torso of Adèle		149
31	Visit to the Villa Borghese		153
32	The Lost Thorntons		160
33	Homage to a Paul Smith Boot		164
34	Telephone Sex, British Style		169
35	Rossetti's Lost Works		174
36	The Alabaster Pot		177
37	A Man seated reading at a Table in a Lofty Room		181
38	Nighthawks		185
39	Lee Miller, artist, photographer and lover		190
40	Caravaggio hiding on the wall		195
41		The Children of Eris: Neikea	200
42	Charleston, the Writing on the Wall		208
Part V		Sophie	
43	Devonport digs		213
44	The Isle of the Dead		217
45	Black Coffee		222
46	Odysseus and Calypso		228
47	Dora Maar		234
48	Postscript		238
Reference List			240

PART I
Life before Samantha

The unreliable memories of Roger Phillips



Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

W B Yeats *The Circus Animals' Desertion*¹

I didn't have a place to go. All I had were my car and its contents. Parked under a convenient street light so that I could read. Clinging to characters pulled from someone else's head. Surrounded only by sad reminders of times when I had been with someone else.

Am I making it sound worse than it was? Yes, probably, but at your lowest point, at the bottom of the pit with no visible ladder out, your imagination is prone to make things worse. I did have a commitment to be in an office tomorrow, looking corporate and presentable, ready to do my job. Ready to be friendly with my co-workers. Talk about how our weekends were. Well mine was shit. Beyond that one commitment, I had nothing. I would do my job and in return I would get money, which would pay some bills, meet some of my *financial* commitments. Beyond that neither party to the arrangement really gave a damn. I had no one to give a damn about.

I spent that night parked on the foreshore, close to the Harbour Bridge. A thin strip of land; roadway, car park, rocks piled against the relentless tide, barrier between waves and a safe harbour behind. A strip of land which once was water. Just beyond the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron. That sounds very up market, but it's less so when you are sleeping in your car, with nowhere to piss or shit or wash. When you are only there because the parking is free and you can leave your car all day in relative safety. That is important when it contains all your worldly possessions. It didn't help that I couldn't lock the car at night, because the alarm would start sounding when I moved around inside. During the day I could lock it, when I was far enough away not to hear it blaring. On and on. At night anyone could open the door.

All my worldly possessions. My clothes, pillows and duvet, a few small personal items, cufflinks and the like, and the only objects that still have value to me, boxes full of my favourite books. The ones that matter most. The ones that have meaning, that resonate. The ones not already taken or destroyed. Salvaged flotsam on the shore.

I was lucky that the car was an old four-wheel drive, the back was cavernous and had often been used before to move house. It had never been my house before.

¹ M L Rosenthal, *Selected Poems and two Plays of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Collier Books, 1980), p. 185.

As my first week of car park life rumbled past, I found that if I was able to secure a good spot, under a lamppost, I could read late into the evening. If there had been a toilet available, I might have bought some beer or wine to take the edge off the pain, but with nowhere to piss, I didn't want to have to leave the relative warmth of my duvet or the discomfort of my new bed, the passenger seat. If I lay on my side the orange glow would light my page and I need not risk running down the battery. There was a block of cheese and some bread in the footwell, next to the accelerator.

I had a shower at work. I was clean, at least. I didn't smell homeless. And because I am an anal person, I still had a week's worth of ironed shirts for work. I made a conscious choice not to think about where I would iron for next week. So far, on a diet of desperation and nervous energy, I was surviving on three or four hours of sleep a night. Between the nervous waking, the proximity of passing cars and the metal clink of rigging on the masts of boats behind me in the marina, I could grab a little sleep before the next noise jolted me awake.

The smell of the sea was everywhere, just inches from my nose. It filled the car, whenever I opened a door, it seeped into my pillows, so that when I put my head down, all I could smell was the saltiness of the air, clinging to every fabric.

The big leather seats were the most uncomfortable bed of my life, even when piled high with a layer of duvet and pillows beneath me. They reminded me of camping as a child, before the invention of the blow-up mattress, but I was younger then. I needed more comfort than a handbrake in the hips. Even though I liked something about the loneliness, not answerable to anyone, not required for any task or conversation, I could feel my mood slide from despondency into despair.

The winter nights were thankfully mild and often I would sit for a while on the jagged, barnacle encrusted rocks in front of my car and feel the pull of the tide just beyond my toes. The occasional splash of a bigger wave, lapping at a different angle. I wasn't a jumper. I had never once in my life reached a place where I could see only one exit. No, I was just at the bottom of a deep, dark pit. It must be a wide pit, because so far I hadn't bumped into a ladder. I also had my pride, pride that would stop me from asking for help. The loan of a bed or a couch. Best of all, I had books. Hundreds of books.

It was difficult to read, to immerse myself in a book, slip out of my current situation, but I kept trying. Each night I would choose another title and read the first few pages, in the

orange-yellow light that made the pages fizz with flickering colour. The wind and the ocean spray would gently rock the car in their own strange lullaby.

I picked up *The Blindfold*, remembered liking it back in the '90s when it first came out. Was Siri Hustvedt married to Paul Auster back then? I knew that I had some Auster in the car as well. I thought how well his titles – *Man in the Dark* and *Travels in the Scriptorium* – worked for my position now. A man unable to sleep, telling stories to himself. Another who would lie awake like I did, momentarily unaware of where he was, trapped in an unknown room. Having thought of them, I wanted to read those titles and not *The Blindfold*, but I didn't want to go hunting this late in the day, pulling out boxes and striped canvass bags into the dark and the sea spray. I had bought this copy of *The Blindfold*, a trade paperback with French flaps, when it was first published. Back in a previous life; two or three lives ago. It was a cold book that matched my situation. Something fell from the middle pages as I pulled it from the back seat. A postcard. One of the lost postcards, come back to find me. A statue of a woman, warmed by the Mediterranean sun.

The tear that ran down my cheek tasted of salt, like everything else.

Signs and Symptoms of Addiction

Intact

Sir John Soane's Museum
The dome and galleries behind No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields.
Built 1808-24
Acquired 1982
Middle Drawer, Left

Real addiction can have a wide range of unpleasant symptoms and lead to distressing consequences. For addicts of drugs and alcohol, this can include the breaking up of relationships, mood swings, paranoia, poor judgement, anxiety, stress, poor performance at work and havoc with personal finances. Some addictions are not so easy to detect or diagnose. It is quite common for addicts to call their problems by other names, to lessen the impact. Some addictions take the form of obsessive collecting. For those people there are places where they will instinctively feel at home. Where their instincts and oddities are not out of the ordinary. Where their collecting zeal is celebrated. They know, the moment they enter, that they are safe. They are home and among friends, people who understand them.

For me this place manifests itself as a terraced house on a leafy London square. A Tardis from centuries before the telephone box was invented. A place already celebrated for two hundred years. The Sir John Soane's Museum is the best museum in the world. It probably takes the award for the most crowded, and the least suitable as a museum. In fact, this little house is so crowded that no more than ninety people are allowed inside at once. Even that feels too many. On my first visit, there were only six of us.

Close to Holborn and the British Museum, behind the Central Courts of Justice, is a square called Lincoln's Inn Fields. Number 13 is on the north side, part of a long terrace of identical red-brick Georgian houses. It stands out a little because someone has added some extra frontage. A bit of stone instead of brick, and some bigger windows. Up on the third floor there are a couple of classical statues. Other than that everything looks normal. Inside it is a period piece. Highly polished wooden doors lead to a sitting room with a large table and book-cased walls. Any wall space not covered in books is peppered with paintings. You would not be surprised to hear the rustle of a copy of *The Times* as the gentleman of the house reads over breakfast. Everything is unchanged. Even the air tastes of antiquity. Move deeper into the building and you are forced to choose from two narrow passageways, walls full of plaster casts, medallions and statues. Things shift from Georgian into classical.

Nothing prepares you for what comes next. The shift back in time. Gone are the refined Georgian features. Now the walls are white-washed, every inch covered with a display; statue, urn, architectural feature, column or bust. Hands, feet, faces and foliage. The dimensions of the room change. Above, daylight is cascading down through a lantern window, even though you are on the ground floor. In the centre of crowded room, which is dominated by a life-size statue of a naked god, you look down into the basement level and gaze into the alabaster

interior of a sarcophagus. The last resting place of the Pharaoh Seti I. The whole surface, inside and out, covered in hieroglyphs. Called *The Book of Gates*, it provides all the spells and rituals needed to reach the afterlife. On either side of the tomb, low arched vaults disappear off into darkened grottoes full of more marble glory. There is even a small garden wrapped into the middle of the house, dotted with statues.

Not only is this a shrine to classical architecture, but also an impressive collection of paintings. There are scenes by Canaletto, seascapes by Turner and two series by Hogarth, including the famous *Rake's Progress*. A young man, Tom Rakewell, inherits and then loses a fortune, ending his days naked on the floor of Bedlam. The death of his miserly father sees him inherit a good sum of money and at once he rejects his already pregnant fiancée. He sets himself up with a music master, a fencing master, a dancing master, a landscape gardener and a bodyguard. Behind him on the wall of his London home you can see a painting of *The Judgement of Paris*.

From fashionable retainers we move to orgies at the Rose Tavern Brothel in Covent Garden, where harlots steal his watch. This is closely followed by his arrest for debts, marriage to a wealthy heiress, and visit to the gaming house in Soho where everything is lost again. Prison is followed by the madhouse, where only his rejected fiancée is there to comfort him, while well-dressed ladies come to see the antics of the lunatics. The series was the soap opera of its day, full of allegorical details and contemporary commentary.

There were lessons in there for me, but I must have missed the lecture. Probably too busy chasing girls.

Sir John Soane spent his whole life collecting. Gathering ephemera from around the globe, until his house overflowed. Rather than leave the fate of his collection to chance, to the whims and feuds of family, he left everything to the nation to be preserved as a museum. All his collection. Intact.

I spent my life collecting, perhaps not as rigorously as Soane, but consistently, and at every opportunity. Around the items I collected, I carefully wrapped my memories. I expected to always be able to reference my collection, gain access the stories I had twisted around works of art, whenever I needed them. I kept them in a wooden cabinet of curiosities, which due to budgetary restrictions, was really a box from IKEA.

Some of the behavioural and social signs of addiction include withdrawing from responsibilities and socialising. Losing all interest in activities, hobbies or events that were once important, disrupted sleep patterns and, worst of all, the continuation of existing bad behaviours despite already knowing their negative consequences.

The Painted Ladies

Missing

'Vanessa incognita'

Inscription page of *Pale Fire* 'To Véra'

Vladimir Nabokov.

April 23 1962

From: *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art* Yale, 2016

Bottom Drawer, Right

As a child I watched birds. Faithfully recorded every species in the garden or at the local reservoir, on every childhood holiday. I collected feathers and made plaster casts of footprints on muddy river banks and along the edges of ploughed fields. I collected owl pellets, the avian equivalent of fur balls, soaking them in warm water until they were soft enough to separate out the jawbones of tiny mice, voles and shrews. I made little charts so I could identify the various prey and know what was on the menu in any particular season. The thigh-bones of shrews, thinner than slivers of matchstick, were impossible to pin down exactly to Common, Water or Pigmy varieties. For a while I had a collection of birds' wings, which I cut from the bodies of dead birds. I'm not sure my mother ever realised I used her best kitchen scissors. My prize find was the wing of a duck, which I stumbled on in the middle of a field. No body, just a wing. No scissors needed. The indigo-blue secondary feathers, as bright and shiny as sapphires.

Library books suggested all manner of projects ideal for young naturalists, from building nest boxes for robins to sieving the droppings of deer through a pair of mum's old tights. This was supposed to tell you what the deer had been eating. After twenty minutes in water, everything looked like shit. Some projects were less glamorous than others, and while I was good at making a mess, I was less of an expert at cleaning up after myself. An experiment I never confessed to was putting crushed gooseberries in the petrol tank of my father's lawnmower. They were not a liquid that would power a combustion engine, I discovered. At least I didn't have to eat them.

For a few years my bible was *The Collins Guide to Animal Tracks and Signs*. Not only were there pictures of bird and animal footprints, but detailed pages showed row after row of hazelnuts attacked by squirrels, voles, woodpeckers and magpies. To be honest, looking back at these now, you would struggle to tell the difference between a hazelnut emptied by a woodpecker, a water vole or a nutcracker. I delighted in page 168 which had a whole double spread of animal and bird poos. From bats to beavers, badgers to bears. Five different types of deer, although I could only collect from the three species in the local park. I used to bring out this page at family gatherings to elicit horrified screams from my various aunts. Once I was sent to my room. Forty years later, it still works perfectly on my children's girlfriends.

It will be no surprise to discover that I progressed to digging things up and the study of archaeology. From the bones of shrews, I graduated to the bones of our ancestors. Then, from

history, I developed a love affair with art. I began to favour visits to galleries, museums and historical places. In the days before phones allowed you to record every visual experience in pixelated detail, the best way to preserve memories was to buy a postcard. Not only were these attainable on a pocket-money budget, but they were easy to pin to the wall. Postcards were less prone to bugs and mites than the bird's wings, so I was allowed to keep them in the house.

My collecting was addictive. What began with butterflies eventually progressed to wives. Butterflies were easier to catch. The garden was full of them, buddleia bushes swarmed with different species; Red Admiral, Peacock, Small Tortoiseshell, Orange Tip, Painted Lady. *Vanessa cardui* is the scientific name for the Painted Lady. Not common, but my absolute garden favourite. I repurposed the old wooden tennis racket from the garage, removing the remaining strings and sewing a net curtain onto the frame. An unlikely sounding transformation into a lethal catching weapon. Forehand, backhand, volley and smash. Every shot a potential capture. Each imprisonment celebrated with a whoop. From the net, I transferred the victims into what was called the 'Killing Jar'. I bought carbon tetrachloride from the chemist and soaked small quantities into balls of cotton wool. After a few minutes in the jar with the lethal fumes, the butterflies were dead but still relaxed. Leave them too long and they would stiffen and their wings would fold together.

To fan out their wings, strips of tracing paper were placed over them and pinned onto specially made cork boards. After a couple of weeks like this the wings set and the finished specimen could be mounted and framed. They looked best in pairs; males and females if they were different, sometimes back to front. Undersides of butterfly wings can be very drab, more for camouflage than display. Others have beautiful patterns. Some had 'eyes', to deter curious birds. The worst part of the mounting process was pinning the butterfly to the board. This required a pin through the thorax. If the carbon tetrachloride hadn't done its job, then the pin would make sure that they were past the point of no return. Stronger specimens might still be groggy and try to escape. They needed more time in the killing jar.

Only once did I stray from collecting jewel-like butterflies. Some way from home, well off the beaten track and away from public rights of way, was what I like to call my secret lake. It was large enough to have a small boat jetty, but after years of neglect was overrun with reeds

and bulrushes. Around the edge were bushes and hedges that teemed with small birds, while herons stalked the shallow muddy water. It was here I first encountered a hawk dragonfly.

It was huge. So big that, at first, I thought it was a small brown bird. This was something that I had to have in my collection. There were no other dragonflies mounted on my walls, but the size and uniqueness of this one was everything. The difficulty of the hunt was intoxicating. The tennis racket net had to be modified. I gaffer-taped a stout wooden broom handle to the shaft. This gave almost enough reach to get the net out over the open water. But it made the net unwieldy. No sweeping dropshots now. I walked the four kilometres to the lake with the modified net over my shoulder and a large capture box tucked in my backpack.

My first attempts failed. There was no sign of the victim on that day. Only the call of the birds from the hedges and the frogs from among the reeds. On the second attempt I was ill-prepared. The edge of the lake was muddy and my white trainers were soon waterlogged. The dragonfly remained tantalisingly out of reach. The net was modified again. The broom handle replaced with a much longer bamboo cane. Now it was almost impossible to manoeuvre, but at least I could reach out over the water. I knew that I was ready. There were a few close sweeps where the dragonfly darted away at the last moment. This time I had gumboots, allowing me to inch out into the shallow water. A wide sweep, and another miss. A flick of the wrists and a sudden sweep back the other way and she was mine. Close up she was huge. Her wings rattled loudly as she tried to beat her way out of the net.

The box I had brought to capture her had to be large enough to hold both body and wingspan. Easing the big box into the net brought me terrifyingly close to losing my prize. Not only was she beautiful, with tiny white triangles on each segment of her long brown body, but she had two yellow stripes down the sides of her thorax. Her wings were stiff and powerful, totally unlike the fragile butterflies where one slip of a finger could brush away the jewelled patterns. Like smudging ink.

I walked home with the box in my arms, not daring to let it rattle about in my backpack. I knew she was angry with me by the constant rattle of wings beating on the cardboard. Once home, I had to get on with the killing. Lots of the carbon tetrachloride went onto the cotton wool, enough to clear my nose with the fumes. I set the box down and decided to leave it until the next day before being brave enough to look inside.

Mounting a dragonfly has one crucial difference to a butterfly. It is not just a matter of pinning the insect. The dragonfly has a much bigger body, it eats other insects and has a complex digestive tract. The thorax has to be cleared out, the guts removed and a small stick inserted to hold the body rigid. I had to perform surgery with a sharp scalpel. The thought of just touching the big insect was terrifying, let alone cutting into it.

When I eased the lid tentatively off the box, all seemed well. As I reached to lift the dragonfly out, it launched itself into the air and began to beat wildly around the room. I was terrified and ran away screaming. She was back from the dead. It was some time before I ventured back with my net. I repeated the whole capture and kill. A double dose of poison this time, followed by surgery few days later. I followed all the required steps and left her for weeks with her wings pinned to a board.

I was horrified by the Brown Hawker I had captured and killed. In the end, I was too scared to mount her in a frame and hang her on the wall like I did with the butterflies. Instead, she languished in the kill box, at the back of the drawer below the bird wings. I could never bring myself to open the lid. So deeply have I hidden those memories that years later I cannot recall the fate of the brown box of death.

My three favourites butterflies continued to hang, pinned in a frame. The Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*; large and dark, all scarlet, black and white, like an insect version of the Red Barron; the Peacock, *Inachis io*, with big eyes on its wings like roundals on a fighter plane; and the best of all the vivacious Painted Lady, *Vanessa cardui*, a vivid burst of tawny-orange wings with black and white tips. But I was about to abandon the butterfly net and become more interested in a very different type of Vanessa.

The Rodin above my Bed

Missing

The Kiss, 1901-04
Auguste Rodin (1840 – 1917)
Tate Gallery, London
Acquired 1982
Middle Drawer, Right

I had an eclectic selection of postcards blu-tacked to my bedroom wall at university. Twelve postcards of *The Kiss* by Auguste Rodin just above the bed. A blank wall that I had filled with small windows out onto other worlds. A quick reference guide to the evolution of my taste in art, available from the Tate and the National Gallery. Fine art intermingled with the erotic. The wonderful thing about art is how it allows you to have naked pictures on the walls. My friend Crispin called it ‘posh pornography’ in another astute judgement that foreshadowed his becoming a professor at Oxford.

“We should do an experiment,” he suggested. “If I paste a whole girly mag on my wall and you cover your with artistic nudes, we’ll see who is asked to take them down.”

We never did, the outcome was too predictable.

Halls of residence. Rows of identical rooms. Floor after floor. Narrow single beds with springs that squeaked so much they deterred any form of exuberant intercourse. It was a place of monastic sex; slow, withholding, creeping penetration. A sex of slight movements. Sex without rhythm. Tuneless. For those that wanted something more rhythmical, the mattress could be dragged onto the floor where all hell would break loose. On the hard concrete, a different life could be lived. Girls liked the beds, the enforced restraint of the slow-motion. The boys were all about deep, dirty, floor sex. So much testosterone in a three story building, I’m surprised the foundations were able to take the nightly pounding.

I destroyed a little booklet of black and white photos of *The Kiss*. Ten or twelve pictures scattered across the wall, interspersed among the postcards. In my limited experience of sculpture, *The Kiss* stood head and shoulders above the rest. At different times, in the years that followed, I travelled across London just to stand and stare at the detail. The postcard-sized black and whites allowed me to do the same. Different angles; the man’s broad back, his hand upon her thigh, the slimness of her calf against his knee, her arm around his neck, the touch of lips that was impossible to see from ground level, detail of arms and hands, thighs and breast. The photos were wonderful, they allowed you deep into the intimate areas of the stone.

I used to think the man’s hand lightly resting on the woman’s thigh was a thing of beauty. That sentiment would change years later, in front of Bernini’s sculpture *The Rape of Proserpina* at the Villa Borghese in Rome. Pluto’s hand grips Proserpina’s thigh with force, the indents into the flesh the most powerful and subtle use of marble I have ever seen. But that

was years later. Another story. For now, I was content to get off on *The Kiss*. A hand resting gently on a thigh, not gripping it.

At this stage my collection of postcards was small enough to put most of them on the walls. Perhaps there were a hundred works of art. Not postcards of places I had been, just the works of art.

I think her name was Belinda. The girl I could have had under *The Kiss*. A round name for a girl who, from a distance, looked mainly composed of large round breasts. All the boys wanted them. And one or two of the girls. They were, without question, magnificent.

On the night of the end of term ball, I kissed Belinda early in the evening. It was a lascivious kiss, filled with lust and the promise of unspoken pleasures. It unbalanced and disoriented me. She vanished for hours, before reappearing, slightly dishevelled, at the end of the night, looking for a place to crash at the halls of residence next to college. She wanted me for somewhere to stay. I would be cheaper than a long taxi ride home. Possibly more fun. It is a source of great regret that I turned her down. Decades later, I still wonder how life might have turned out if I had taken that path of pleasure.

I knew that early the next morning my father would arrive to collect me and take me home for the summer vacation. I wasn't packed. The postcards were still on the wall above the bed. I had this vision of Dad at the door of my room, Belinda and I passed out naked and covered in secretions, on the floor, and a vast pink taffeta dress discarded in the corner of the room. I suspect he might have approved of Belinda's rude bustiness, but I will never know. Would I have hated myself afterwards? No, probably not.

Art mirrors life, and so there is more than one version of *The Kiss*. One can be found at the Tate Gallery in London, two at the Musée Rodin in Paris. A marble one inside and a bronze one in the garden. Perhaps there are others. Rodin was paid a small fortune by the French government to carve a version in marble after his first plaster efforts.

The subject of the sculpture came from Dante, the story of Francesca and Paolo, who supposedly fell for each other while reading stories of courtly love. Francesca's husband, who was also Paolo's brother, discovered the lovers together and stabbed them both, so paving the way for hundreds of paintings and sculptures of the subject in the centuries that followed. Thankfully for us art lovers, they are almost always depicted naked. Their first incarnation by

Rodin can be found on the *Gates of Hell*, a huge monumental project that Rodin began as the doors to the planned museum of decorative arts. The project was canned, and the doors were only cast in bronze after Rodin's death. They can be seen today at the Musée Rodin in Paris. The world missed out there. Look closely at the details; so many of his famous statues, such as *The Thinker* deliberating at the very top. Paolo and Francesca are down the left-hand side.

I love the history of these pieces, especially the one that I first fell in love with at the Tate, before I had the chance to see the others in Paris. The English version of *The Kiss* was commissioned in 1900 by a gay Bostonian collector and connoisseur called Edward Perry Warren. I wouldn't normally state someone's sexual preference like that, but in this case, it has relevance to the story. He lived in East Sussex, close to the area that would become a haunt of mine when I fell in love with all things Bloomsbury. Virginia Woolf lived just down the road. Warren specified in the contract that the "genital organ of the man must be completed". I'm not sure that part of the contract was properly fulfilled, as it seemed rather vague to me. It was not until 1904 that the completed sculpture was delivered, and then it turned out to be too large to fit into Warren's Sussex house, so rather sadly it had to be kept in the stables. Ten or so years later, Warren loaned it to the Lewes Town Hall, where it was installed in the Assembly Rooms. These were used by the troops billeted on the town during the war, and so began another controversy, where the locals considered that its raunchy subject matter would make the troops think of things other than fighting the Germans and so it was covered with a sheet for a few years. After it was returned to Warren, it was covered in hay bales in the stables, to protect it from bombs. I love that this particular version had such a sheltered life, unlike the French versions which are all out there loud and proud in the Musée Rodin. And unlike the photos above my bed, forever wrapped up, or should I say unwrapped, in my fantasies of the night that never was with Belinda.

When I first encountered *The Kiss*, I was enraptured by its bold nakedness, and the sum of all the parts; hands, thighs, arms, legs, breasts. In the rotunda at what would become known as Tate Britain, I could lose an hour taking in the different parts. Then along came the Tate Modern, the old power station on the other bank of the Thames, and my favourite sculpture was moved to an insignificant spot down a corridor, outside the toilets. Soon after I found Bernini, and nothing would ever be the same again.

PART II
Life with Samantha

The Story of Eris

Eris was a difficult girl to get on with at school. She had that rare mixture of qualities: enough beauty and sex appeal to make all the boys want her, and enough bad-ass venom to kill off any friendly approach. The combination made her irresistible. Especially to those who fancied themselves: the overachievers, the vain and cock-sure, not to mention the deluded who thought they stood a chance.

No-one stood a chance. Eris' world was not like that. She was the bringer of strife and discord. Lessons disrupted. Teachers undermined. Detention turned into riot. She was especially dangerous to couples. If you watched her movements, from a safe distance, you could see the stealth and circuitous routes she used. Suddenly appearing from nowhere in front of a couple who were innocently chatting or, more daring, holding hands. You could see them both recoil in horror at the abrupt arrival. Even from a distance you could see her say something, not much, but enough to sow the seed of doubt.

Once or twice, even I did not see her approach, and so was close enough to hear the comments she made to some dumbstruck boy.

"How's that rash on your buttock? I do hope it's better, it looked so sore. You must be in agony on these hard seats."

And off she would flounce, with just the right amount of swing to her arse and hips to make him watch her depart, jaw dangling.

His girlfriend would turn to him with eyes blazing. "How does she know that?" she would ask, through gritted teeth.

It didn't matter that the question was complete fiction, that there'd never been a rash on either buttock, or anywhere for that matter. The seed was sown, the damage done. By the next break time they were no longer a couple. Eris was a bitch. I loved to watch her at work.

The very bold, or the very stupid, tried to fight back. Resistance was futile. I think she must have used the buttock line more than once, as I saw a boy drop his pants to prove he didn't have a rash. Spotted by a teacher, he was in front of the headmistress before break-time had finished. Exposing yourself to girls was regarded as a serious misdemeanour and the boy's parents were instructed to take him home. No doubt he was told to reflect on what he had done. A blossoming romance with a very pretty girl was soiled, just as Eris intended.

No couples were safe. Even remaining single was fraught with danger. A sharp-tongued comment as she passed by a group of boys, or girls, would leave someone red-faced, confused and ashamed.

Eris would swing both ways, enchanting some of the girls as much as she did the boys.

“I see you’re wearing that new underwear, such a pretty bra. Has your girlfriend seen it yet? I do hope she likes it as much as I do. I love how easy it is to slip off.” In a syrupy voice, with a tickle under the chin.

No one had to worry about coming out, Eris would do it for you, and in front of most of the school. No-one’s precious secret was safe. She must have possessed magical powers, because no-one said “Don’t listen to Eris, she’s always telling lies.” They just believed everything she told them.

As I said, I liked to watch from a safe distance, watch the way she worked and how well she timed her approach for maximum impact. For everyone to hear, or perhaps just the person that mattered. As far as I knew, she had no friends and no-one tried to befriend her. But she never looked miserable. She walked with all the confidence of an enchantress. You could watch the drooling faces of boys follow her progress across the playground, undressing her in their heads or imagining getting their own back for some slight she’d inflicted on them.

I was one of the lucky ones. Not bright, or forward, or stupid enough to catch the flare of her anger. Middling can be another word for invisible. I kept my relationships secret, well outside the school yard, where there was no danger of public humiliation.

My only encounter with Eris was very out of character for me. She was strangely out of position, not on the edge of a group or within ear-shot of anyone, not poised to walk past some boys she could belittle. I walked up to her and half-whispered something lewd. Something I wanted to do. I have no idea what propelled me to this irresponsible act. It was not like me at all. I don’t think I really wanted to do that to her, or perhaps only so secretly that I was afraid to admit it, even to myself. Did I even know how to?

She paused for several seconds, regarding me as if unaware of my existence. Then, it was as if she clicked back to life.

She cut me down with “Only in your wettest dreams, Roger.” No-one heard.

But it was the pause that gave everything away. She was taken by surprise. After that she never spoke to me again in the remaining few months of school, and then she was gone. I don’t know if she went away to university, to aspire to a new level of victim, if she went

abroad, or if she just vanished for the next few years. Eventually, she re-emerged and as if from nowhere had a brood of offspring that were equally dangerous. There were fifteen of them, unleashed on the world. Perhaps they came in litters of five. How many years had passed?

Eris was always the elephant in the room; she never forgot. Never forgave an insult, and could recall the smallest speck of information to use against you later. Wedding disruption was her speciality since Classical times. For that reason she was never invited; no-one would risk ruining their special day by sending her a nicely printed and embossed invitation through the post. Who even knew where she lived? Did you simply address it to *The Bringer of Discord* and expect the Post Office to do the rest?

That didn't stop her turning up at Holly's wedding to James. My girlfriend, Samantha, was there as the bride's best friend. Bridesmaids and flower girls had been dispensed with. What was I there as? Boyfriend of the best friend? Casual observer? Not quite. I was covertly the jilted love interest. The rogue. The good-boy turned bad. The trickster who had been secretly seeing Holly for some pre-marital fun. Fun that had turned more serious when I discovered how much more fun I had with Holly than I did with Samantha.

A couple of hours before the wedding was due to start, under the guise of delivering flowers and generally helping out, I had snatched five minutes alone with Holly. Eris saw us locked in a passionate kiss around the back of the garage, out of sight from the house full of relatives. I opened an eye to look around the head I was kissing and spotted Eris in the garden. She had been watching for a while, taking in the sight of tongues and roving hands, and now our lives were doomed.

As soon as Eris caught my glance, I knew she still remembered that stupid insult from school. Had never forgotten it and had waited years for a suitable revenge. Now she could deploy her offspring to do her dirty work.

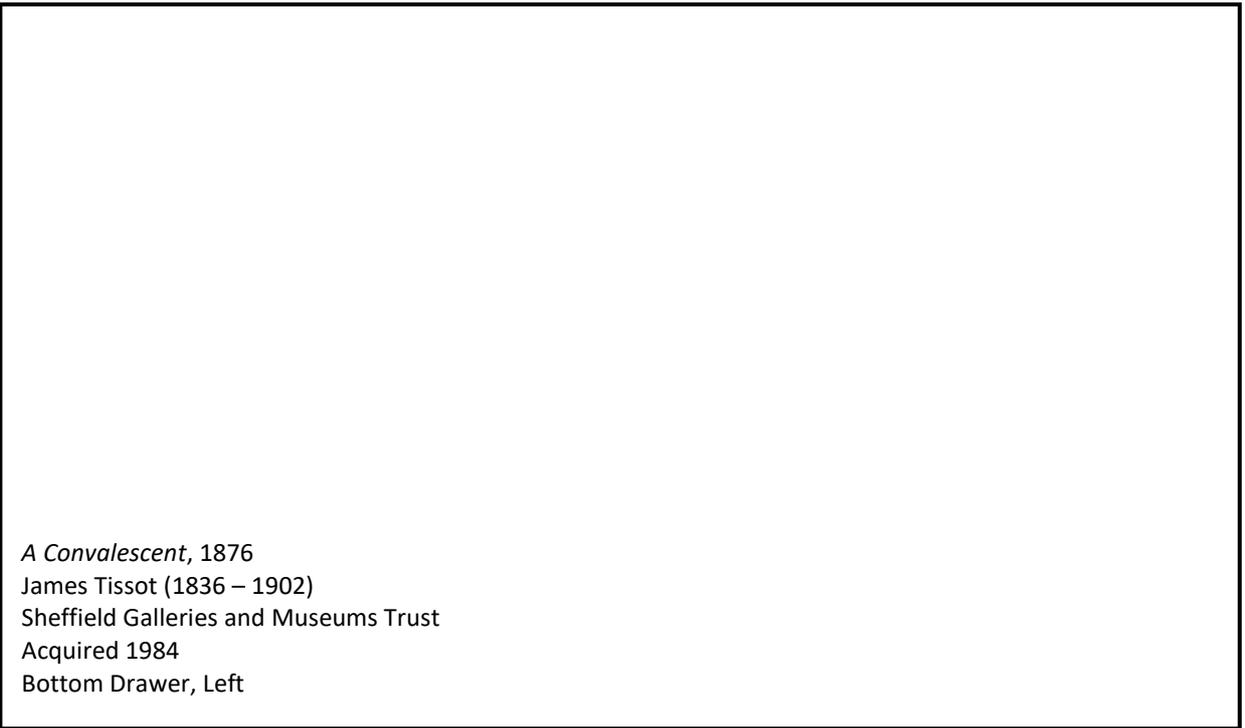
Holly was sure she was making a mistake that day, but was too deeply invested in events to pull out. A wild beast cornered by every relative, all bent on getting her through the wedding ceremony. Every escape route blocked by a sugary smiling aunt or crying cousin. The kissing didn't help. Her eyes were wide with fear. Holly had chosen her bed and I had chosen mine. Sadly they were not the same one. We were both unhappy. We piled our lust and regrets into those five minutes of frenzied fumbling round the back of the garage.

Eris saw it all. The information fed her power. Now she would hound my life and ruin every attempt I made to start a better one. She would not allow me to be happy. At the end of the reception, as every other guest turned to watch Holly and James depart, I couldn't bear to see them and looked the other way. There was Eris in the distance, watching. Feeling my eyes on her, she turned and gave me that knowing smile. Her children would be coming to torment me soon.

Thankfully she only thought me worthy of sending four of her progeny of tormentors; the Neikea (queens of quarrels), Pseudea (lover of lies), Logoi (spreader of stories), and most dangerous, Horkos, who specialised in the swearing of false oaths. All sent to follow, hound, harass and interfere in everything I held dear. They would not let me go until I had ruined all that I thought I treasured.

Tales of Tissot

Missing



A Convalescent, 1876
James Tissot (1836 – 1902)
Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust
Acquired 1984
Bottom Drawer, Left

We all have a romanticized vision of love. We all imagine finding the one, that perfect person in whom we are only too happy to invest all our time, passion (and money). We believe that we have found that person when certain stars align, but more accurately when the right levels of dopamine and serotonin are reached and continue to be released into our bodies. The hormonal rush of pleasure, followed by the flood of happiness and an unquenchable urge to be with the object of our desires. These chemicals are how we know that we are in love.

Samantha and I knew because we spent hours squeezed into my small MG sports car, reversed into a hidden gateway down a little used forest road. We only went as far as kissing and touching, given the tight bucket seats and position of the handbrake. Not to mention parental morals. I released buttons and clips, slipped cold hands inside clothing against warm flesh. We fogged the windows so much that the fan heater couldn't clear them. Driving her home like a blind maniac to get there by curfew. All that promise that when sex finally did happen it would be relentless and repeated.

Somewhat less certain in our chemistry lesson is how we know that we will stay in love with a person. That is where the oxytocin and vasopressin come into play – the attachment hormones. I needed those later, after the shift from fingers and tongues to grown-up sex. Because that opened up a whole new set of fears and terrors. A spectre of consequences where fear of pregnancy overrode all pleasure. Somewhere there must be a whole series of contrary chemicals; the ones that make people appear annoying, irritating and grumpy, highlighting every niggle, mis-step, failure and fault. More about those later.

What I find most interesting in all this talk of chemicals is how important the correct levels are. For example, dopamine is also in play when it comes to substance addiction, addictions to foods or buying material goods. They kick in just as you enter the boutique, or in my case the bookshop or gallery store. Even more dangerous, too much oxytocin and we are heading into the dangerous territory of affairs or heightened feelings of jealousy.

When I think about art, I am most often drawn to representations of the female form. The closer I looked into that world, the more intrigued I became by the way that artists navigate the tricky domestic situations when dealing with their model or their muse. That special person who evokes their passion and inspires them to carve or paint the most beautiful work. Sometimes this muse will sit comfortably in their life as the sole object of their passions. At other times this arrangement may not be so convenient. The artist may already be married.

Let's say he is a male artist. His wife may once have been his muse, but she is now relegated to the role of ex-muse. No-one wants to be the former muse. The position of artist's model is always a precarious one. After a few years, good looks will begin to fade, the features which made her so beguiling will now be seen in other, younger women. The other problem is that artists tend to be an untrustworthy, lusty bunch with too much time on their hands. And bad things are bound to happen when models spend a lot of their working day naked. James Tissot was unusual in this respect and preferred his models covered. Apart from a woman in a casually draped Japanese dressing gown, from his time in Paris, there are no nudes.

When true love does blossom between the artist and his muse, it can lead to some tragic stories. Some die young, while still beautiful, not yet subject to the ravages of time. Like the paintings and the statues, they will never age. The problems of other, younger, more beautiful successors will never trouble them. The tragic story of Tissot's muse was a slow burning one of discovery for me.

Tissot's paintings of the high Victorian era were a riot of colour and a sumptuous smothering of huge dresses. He perfectly caught that moment in history when gowns consisted of acres of satin, corseting the wearer into strange inhuman shapes. Waists so narrow that surely women couldn't breathe. Tissot showed us ships and regattas, bright with flags; even the streets of Brighton were richly draped. What I remember best was a pond-side garden party surrounded by ironwork columns. Overhead the horse chestnut leaves are turning yellow and gold. Rugs have been put down, all manner of foods spread out; cakes and pies and slices of meat, a silver spirit kettle with its little burner beneath, a blue and white Japanese tea pot with a snaking dragon handle, glass bottles with rounded bottoms that had to lie on their sides. The men wear cream blazers and brightly coloured rowing caps. The women are in patterned dresses; checks and stripes. There are shawls against the autumn chill. Although it was painted a century before I first saw it, that was what I imagined life was still like down in Oxford and Cambridge, but certainly not in London. I bought the postcard of the garden party from The Tate and stuck it on my wall. If you look closely at the bright silver kettle there are characters reflected there, standing outside the picture. Perhaps one of them is the artist.

In 1983 I moved into a tiny flat just off Abbey Road, right behind the famous recording studios. You could hear bands and orchestras warming up in the practice rooms. To save money, three

of us had rented a two-bedroom flat, so I was relegated to a year on the lounge sofa bed and the occasional visit from Samantha. My amorous adventures were constricted by the rattle of sofa legs on the wooden parquet flooring. It was a faux-leather, sticky vinyl sofa, not made for the rigours of teenage lust.

Each morning on the way to university I would have to traverse the crossing made famous by The Beatles, battling through tourists just to reach the other side and turn into Grove End Road. People darted into the traffic to grab a photo of their four mates on the crossing. People who didn't live around there and certainly didn't understand just how erratic the drivers of the 159 bus could be. Or how they travel in packs of three; the first one full, the second standing room only, and the third empty and unlikely to stop if the ones in front had already done so. Miss that bus and there was an hour to wait for the next convoy of three. The empty bus stopped for no-man, especially a tourist with a camera on the crossing.

London has this love affair with blue plaques – markers to show that a particular house was once the home of someone famous. On Grove End Road there was one such plaque on an outside wall, stating that the large house behind had once been the home of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema – a Victorian painter whose forte was classical scenes. He toured the ancient world and somewhere I had once found a book of the photographs he collected from Greece and Rome – wonderful records in themselves of what antiquities remained intact, even in Victorian times.

What I didn't know until a little later was that the former owner of that house was James Tissot. He had moved to London in 1871, having fought in the defence of Paris against the Prussians the previous year. He bought number 44 Grove End Road in 1873 and set about remodelling it, from a modest two-story Queen Anne villa to the latest in Victorian chic with a new studio and a vast conservatory. He doubled the size of the property. By the time I saw the house, the beautiful pond had been filled in and the iron columns around it removed. The place was in a bad state, having been split into flats in the 1920s, bombed and burned during the war, left empty, then split into flats once more and generally knocked about. But those horse chestnuts were still there in the garden, even if the pond had gone. Something drew my eye to the layout and to that painting in the Tate. I must have tracked down the history of the place in the university library to discover the link to Tissot. The blue plaque was certainly not letting on about former owners.

As well as the perils of the Abbey Road crossing, I was also making trips to Sheffield to see Samantha. On one of these I discovered a stunning painting by Tissot hanging in the Sheffield Art Gallery. The old stone municipal building, set in a city park, doing its northern impersonation of something classical, was not far from where I was born. The painting is called *A Convalescent* and is dated 1876. Here is the same pond. The leaves on the horse chestnut are perhaps a week or two further into autumn. A young woman is asleep in a wicker chair, bundled in a warm woollen shawl against any late autumn chill. An elderly lady is sitting with her, more affected by the nip in the air, in her shawl, furs and gloves. The sunlight on the dying chestnut leaves is one of my favourite impressions. So are the details. A large red woven tapestry rug has been brought into the garden. It would be heavy to carry and is not quite flat on the ground. Three wicker chairs with deep comfortable cushions and a small wooden table sit on the rug. A cake, tea and coffee pots, milk, sugar, hot water. Silverware, blue and white porcelain and even a bone handled knife are all shown in such great detail that you could reach out to touch them. Help yourself to another slice of cake. The elderly woman has a book on her lap and hand-held reading glasses raised to her eyes, although the book is abandoned and the focus of all her attention is the sleeping convalescent. Her look is one of concern but the young woman is peaceful and the sun has settled in the fringe of her hair. On the one empty chair there is a man's broad brimmed hat and a walking stick, as though he has just stepped away for a moment, perhaps to get some more hot water.

I was moved by the signs of recovery in the young woman. Seeing her coincided with the beginning of a long period of illness for my father. The sudden problems with an appendix followed by a slow convalescence, only to be replaced by more serious illness with treatments that slowly drained the life out of him. When I found Tissot's painting I thought Dad was just starting on the road to recovery. In fact it was the slow five-year decline towards death.

I stood for ages admiring the painting in Sheffield, but it is only recently that I discovered the story of the woman in the chair. For many years, all knowledge of Tissot's muse was lost. By the time someone came to write his biography, in the 1930s, all his close friends had passed away. There was a hunt for information about the woman who was called "la Mystérieuse", the mystery woman. For decades she remained nameless, her story lost.

In fact, her name was Kathleen Newton, mistress and muse of James Tissot. He first met her in 1875, allegedly as she went to post a letter in St John's Wood. Her story is a terribly tragic one, but Tissot was fascinated by her. She was born in India to Irish parents. Her father

was a military man, but he lost his wife soon after Kathleen was born. He sent his three children back to England for their education. When she was seventeen her father decided to marry Kathleen off to a military doctor in India. She was put on a boat and sent away to be married. What didn't go to plan were the actions of a certain naval Captain during the many months at sea. I could say that she fell for his charms, but I am pretty sure the problem was that he fell for hers. Kathleen arrived in India and shortly afterwards married Dr Newton (Isaac Newton no less; his parents obviously had a sense of humour). Being a good Catholic girl, she discussed events with the priest who advised her to confess to her new husband exactly what had occurred on the voyage over. She did, and Newton immediately sought a divorce. The sea captain paid for Kathleen's return trip to England, although by this point she was pregnant with his child. Her daughter and her divorce arrived in almost the same week in December 1871. Now an unmarried mother, she kept the name of Mrs Newton.

At this point Kathleen goes to live with her older sister Polly at 6 Hill Road in St John's Wood. I give this address very precisely because I used to live at number 1, an identical house just across the road. It was one of those brick villas with steps up to a raised ground floor entrance. There were two floors of bedrooms above this level. I can imagine what it was like being there, perhaps in rooms at the very top of the house where her own daughter and her sister's two children slept. Round the corner, Mr Tissot was extending his house and studio while waiting around post boxes for pretty 21-year-old single mothers.

Motherhood was without doubt Samantha's biggest fear. Not just before we married, but throughout our relationship.

From 1876 onwards almost all Tissot's paintings are of Kathleen. In some she is identified as Mrs Newton. Others have opaque titles, like *Spring* or *October*. One thing is certain, he painted her relentlessly until her death from tuberculosis in 1882. She and her daughter lived with Tissot, and in 1876 she bore a son; some scholars think that Tissot was the father. The family group certainly featured in a number of his paintings. He described this as the happiest time of his life. After Kathleen's death he sat by her coffin for four days. He attended the funeral in near-by Kensal Green and then he simply packed up and returned to Paris. The gardener reported that he left all his paints behind. The house sat empty for nearly a year, until his friend Alma-Tadema bought it. In Paris, Tissot threw himself into his work, painting furiously. He produced a series of French scenes, but these were mocked by critics at the time, saying they all featured the face of the same Englishwoman. So desperate was his sense

of loss that he came back to London to try to contact Kathleen via a séance. He believed that he found her again. The outcome of the experience was a haunting portrait of a ghostly woman with Kathleen's face. Going back to Paris, Tissot turned his back on his famous society portraits and spent the rest of his life painting religious scenes.

I found the whole story incredibly sad, even though Tissot and Kathleen had been happy together for six years. I look at some of the beautiful portraits, especially those just of Kathleen, and I can see how much he loved her. But their life together was an odd one. They were not married, so they could not be together in "polite" society – in other words in the circles in which Tissot mixed. There are portraits of her by the river Thames in Richmond and in Greenwich, places that the two of them could be together without causing a scandal. He painted her and the children waiting for a ferry in Greenwich and we still have the photographs he used to get the composition right. He is there with his son, but in the finished paintings, the man painted sitting behind Kathleen is someone else. There was a trip to France, paintings of her at the Louvre, where Tissot introduced her to friends such as Edgar Degas.

Samantha had begun our relationship with moral inhibitions. Religious scruples that stopped her sleeping with me, but did not rule out a good deal of erotic intimacy. Kathleen was a woman of principles too. She would not marry Tissot, because she did not believe in divorce. Tissot in turn was fascinated by her contradictions; the Irish Catholic background, the divorce and the status as a single mother of not just one, but now two children. There is a rumour swirling among the half-stories, that Kathleen took her own life with an overdose of laudanum. She had seen the change in Tissot's paintings, the sombreness that had overtaken them, the themes of illness and departure, as he watched her become increasingly sick. We will never know where the truth lies. All we can see are paintings of Kathleen with ever darker rings around her eyes.

In my life with a dying father I lost the ability to find words to describe the situation, or my own feelings. I was too young and ill-prepared to deal with such emotions. It was hard to sit by the bedside of a dying man whom I had known all my life but who couldn't speak to openly about dying and illness.

As I read about Kathleen and looked at the dates, I realised that *The Convalescent* was not the sick and ailing mistress dying of tuberculosis, but the woman who had just given birth to their unacknowledged son. It was a different type of convalescence. When Tissot first met

her, the young Kathleen was about the same age as Samantha. Soon *she* would be the mother of two children, while Samantha remained terrified of pregnancy for the whole of our relationship. Eventually her multiple precautions, the many barriers that she placed between my sperm and her womb, would place another between our love.

Post-script, February 2021

Thirty-eight years later, I had a surprise encounter with Kathleen. In the South Island city of Dunedin, there she was in the city art gallery. It was like meeting an old friend, rounding a corner and suddenly seeing her there. I wanted to kiss her on both cheeks and hold her for a second in a close embrace. She was standing on a railway platform, with a vast array of luggage at her feet. A trunk, a hat box, a suitcase and a bag. I scanned all the details. The folded tartan rug she was holding, together with a thick manuscript, the ends of the pages tattered and worn, like it had been a long time in the reading. What was she taking with her to read that day? Was it a novel or a magazine? She holds a vast, exuberant bunch of flowers; whites, yellows, pinks, blues and reds. It is undoubtedly Kathleen. I know her face so well. But the dates given by the gallery are too early. On the little card to the side of the frame it says 1871-3, while on the frame itself is painted 1874. Both those were before Tissot had even met Kathleen. A detail caught my eye. On the top of the suitcase, at an oblique angle, are a set of initials in white. A capital letter T and either side of the stem are two Js, facing in different directions. James Tissot – the name he took in England to anglicize himself. But really, in France he was Jacques-Joseph Tissot. That relationship that was always being hidden, but here he was travelling with Kathleen, their luggage mixed together on the platform of Willesden Junction.

Seeing her again, so recently, made me think of another story that came a little later. Tissot's painting gradually declined in popularity. Fifty years ago you could have picked one up for almost nothing. For more than half a century no-one knew who Kathleen even was. At some point in the 1930s, the first exhibition of Tissot's paintings was held in London. A distinguished man in his late fifties came to look at the paintings, and before walking out declared, "That was my mother". That was their son Cecil. It was not until the 1940s that the true identity of Kathleen was discovered, when one of her sister's children produced both details and photographs. I find it strange to think that she was lost for so long, hushed up and

hidden in true Victorian fashion, but look at the paintings and there she is. Tissot painted her almost exclusively for six whole years, only for the story to be hidden for sixty more.

The Railway Station

Missing

The Railway Station, 1862
William Powell Firth (1819 – 1909)
Royal Holloway College, University of London
Acquired 1985
Bottom Drawer, Left

Railways played a big part in my late teens and early twenties. They were the alternative to owning a car, before you had a proper job. My route to and from university and also my escape north to visit Samantha in Sheffield. All I recall of those trips was the lustful yearnings of young lovers who had not seen each other for weeks. The groin aching anticipation. Often there were parties and concerts on a Friday night after I arrived. More hours of anticipation before we could be alone. Crushed together in a cold single bed. Thinking back, I remember the train journeys so well. In the middle lay home, where I had done most of my growing up, the familiar pull of it, like that scene from *The Wind in the Willows* when the Mole feels the pull of his past life, his past memories calling to him, while the Rat pushes on with the trip, thinking only of the warmth of home and not the Mole's feelings, refusing to listen or to stop. There was my home, my childhood, rushing past, outside in the windows, with no way to stop or go back. Pressing forward with another life.

As my father became ill, the pull to go home was worse. The need to stop and see him, to visit and keep his spirits up, had to be weighed against the thrills that awaited me further to the north. I had no experience of dealing with someone ill in hospital. Apart from one incidence of concussion after a game of rugby, I had never been to one before. At least I knew what I was doing in the north.

There was a piece of art that perfectly encapsulated the whole experience. William P Frith painted *The Railway Station* in 1862. It is a huge canvass, over a metre high and more than two and a half long, packed with the everyday life you would expect to see on a crowded Victorian station platform. Women and children, soldiers, police officers, porters stowing baggage. Just as crowded then as the platform of St Pancras on the days I travelled north to see Samantha.

Amongst the more than sixty people the painting depicts standing on the platform of Paddington Station, one small round man called Louis Flatlow is shown talking to the engine driver. He was the man that commissioned the painting in the first place, paying £4,500 in 1860. That would be the equivalent of £550,000 today, or roughly a million New Zealand dollars. A massive amount of money for a painting at any time in history. I suppose since he paid that much he had a right to say that he wanted to be included in the painting.

In the middle of the foreground is a small family group, a mother bending to kiss the younger son while his father and elder brother look on. These are the artist William Frith and

his family. He probably saved a little money as he didn't have to pay them to model for the painting. Around them the stories of the other passengers get more interesting.

Samantha had chosen to go to university in Sheffield, the town of my birth. It was an odd feeling to be a stranger in your home town. To know it less well than Samantha. I only had the half-memories of childhood, half-formed or half-remembered. Strange ironies lurked around the city that was home to generations of both my parent's families. My grandfather had been in the RAF, navigating bombing raids on Germany towards the end of the war. Then afterwards the war gave him another employment, working on the rebuilding of Sheffield cathedral after it had been destroyed by German bombing. Tit for tat.

Next to his family, Frith placed a foreign gentleman whose idea of a cab fare is very different from that of the driver. The Hansom cab driver is standing there demanding a bigger fare, holding out his right hand. Funny how some things in London don't change in more than a century and a half. Frith described the model he used for the foreigner as "a mysterious individual who taught my daughter Italian". He was a Venetian, possibly a count, who had been forced to flee the country. He was reluctant to pose for Frith, fearing that a good likeness might end up with him being recognised by some aristocratic friends who would come to England. The artist assured him that he would not make the portrait realistic and he had nothing to fear. When he actually came to paint to final scene Frith reneged on the promise because he believed that the portrait would stand out from the others as being unrealistic. Did the mysterious count owe someone money, perhaps for gambling debts, or was there a woman involved somewhere? Had he eloped with the woman standing next to him in the picture? Sadly, even if he knew, Frith didn't tell us.

At the far end of the platform, two policemen are making an arrest. They were both members of the City of London Police and we even know their names. DS Michael Haddon (holding the handcuffs) and DS James Brett (with a sealed writ in his hand). Frith described them as being excellent models because they were accustomed to "standing on watch, hour after hour, in the practice of their profession, waiting for a thief or a murderer." They also came with a good deal of notoriety, having been involved in solving many high-profile police cases that were well reported in the newspapers.

Frith loved crowds, both in his paintings and his personal life. He had twelve children with his wife Isabelle and a further seven with his mistress Mary Alford, who later became the second Mrs Frith. Breakfast times must have been as busy as Paddington station.

Travel from the centre of Sheffield out along Ecclesall Road, up the hill from Endcliffe Park, just past Greystones Road you will come to Huntingtower Road. Scene of those cold adolescent unions. A few more streets up the hill is Ringinglow Road, which flowed out of the city into the Peak District National Park, and my aunt's house in Hathersage. From cold stone city streets to bare open moors in a matter of minutes.

My favourite part of *The Railway Station* is the porter standing on the roof of the carriage. He is piling on trunks, suitcases and baskets. These would all sit on the roof during the journey, held there by a low metal rail around the roof edge and covered by what looks like black netting. That baggage could be safe on the roof is a great reminder of how slow rail travel was. Imagine how long it would take at every stop if someone had to climb onto the roof, undo the netting, find your luggage and lower it down. And there were more stops in those days, the route was full of small village stations.

The painting of *The Railway Station* was a well-documented affair. Not only did Frith record what he was doing, the press also closely followed the development of the painting. There was a good deal of discussion about the high price that was paid, and many different amounts were quoted. Frith had already made his reputation with two similar works called *Ramsgate Sands* and *Derby Day*. This new contract meant he was being paid £500 every quarter (today's equivalent being £61,000) from which he would have to meet the various expenses. He paid the people who posed for portraits and also paid Scott Morton who painted all the architectural backgrounds, as well as a photographer who took a series of studies of Paddington station. It seems incredible to today's notion of how artists work to think that the progress of a painting would be followed in the newspapers.

Equally unusual was the way that the painting was viewed once it was completed. It was exhibited at the Haymarket Gallery from April to September 1862, when over 21,000 people paid money to see it. An art critic, Tom Taylor, wrote a "charming little book" which was a key to the picture and was on sale in the exhibition room, bound for a shilling or six-pence unbound. This told the visitors what was happening in the painting, something that was thought to be essential for a Victorian subject picture. There were, apparently, many who

were glad to “have the aid of so experienced a describer.” When I discovered this, I became really curious to read what Taylor had said. It seems the 39-page guide offered a set of alternative readings. As the two famous detectives arrest the man with his foot on the step of the carriage, Taylor describes him as “a fraudulent banker, an actuary, bank cashier or railway clerk – who has long been carrying on his embezzlements.” It seems the so-called art critic simply peddled a whole host of possible narrative details. Adding fictions to the fantasy, what a great job.

Samantha shared the house off Ecclesall Road with three other girls; Amanda, Jane and Vicky. At weekends it became as house of eight, as boyfriends arrived. Samantha had the downstairs room, the former lounge with a high ceiling and draughty window always wet with condensation. In the winter we were permanently frozen, but we didn’t care. All that was important was being together. There was one bathroom, in a modern brick extension at the back of the house. For some reason that room was even colder than the rest of the building and the shower had no real power. It was like standing outdoors in the middle of winter, trying to wash under a dripping tap. Happy times. After the first three or four weekend showers all the hot water was gone until the next morning.

We know a surprising amount of detail about the viewing experience involved in seeing *The Railway Station*. First shown in a small gallery next to the Haymarket Theatre, it was open for business from 11 in the morning until 6 at night and cost one shilling to get in. That is about £6 in modern money, or about the cost of two coffees from Café Nero around the corner. Someone was employed to keep the crowds moving along and not standing too long directly in front of the picture. There was only one painting in the show, in a brilliant red-gold frame and surrounded by chocolate coloured cloth that sloped outwards to catch the eye and absorb the light. Around the edges of the room was a large scaffold hung with purple drapery, next to which it was possible to stand and stare at the painting for longer.

By the time Samantha rented a house in her second year, they had been abandoned by one of the girls, gaining instead an unruly posse of male medical students. A new bigger house was chosen. My memory of the layout of rooms in the three storied terraced house on Granville Road has faded, but I think this time there was a lounge. At the bottom of the hill

was the main railway station, close to the city centre. It was a hard walk up the hill if your bag was heavy. There was a corner shop and a phone box further up. The old pay phone was our lifeline in the weeks we were apart. Almost all roads in Sheffield seemed to be on a slope. Like Rome, it is a city built on seven hills, the only difference between the two fine cities being the weather. And the Sheffield smell from foundries and iron works. When the wind was in the right direction, you could also get a good lung-full of yeast from a local brewery.

The painting was next exhibited just four kilometres away in Cornhill, and after that went on a national tour of the provinces. The eventual owner, Thomas Holloway, first saw it in August 1864 in Scarborough. In 1863 the painting, and the copyright for engraving it, was sold for £16,300, or the equivalent of about £2 million today. After that it continued to be exhibited, but now was also engraved so that reproductions could be made. There were further international exhibitions in London in 1872, Philadelphia in 1876 and Paris in 1878.

That phone box near the top of Granville Road brings memories of one particularly anguished call. Not only was Samantha very strong willed, but she hated anything that might have the hint of a lie or a deception. I was happy to tolerate lies by omission, if it made life a little easier, but she would not let situations like that linger. We had therefore been at odds over whether she should tell her parents we were having sex. I was sure they could continue to live in their self-imposed, blinkered ignorance. Samantha was convinced they had to be told. We called to tell them from the phone box on Granville Road one Saturday afternoon. I was there too, for moral support. We gathered up pockets full of change and trudged weightily up the road. Someone else was using the phone when we got there, but having taken hours to prepare ourselves, there was nothing else to do but wait. And allow the tension to build. We had already avoided the subject for a few months, so I suppose I was living on borrowed time. We were eighteen or nineteen, adults, why did her parents have to know? Why couldn't they just guess or assume? Why did we have to do the work for them?

Samantha found it hard to begin.

“Look, I’ve got something to tell you...”

...

“No, no, nothing like that...”

...

“Yes...but...”

...

“No, just listen...”

I thought for a moment she was going to lose her cool and tell them to shut the fuck up.

“It’s about Roger and I...”

...

“No! Just listen while I tell you...” She drew in a deep breath.

“We’ve started sleeping together...”

I could hear a raised voice down the receiver, although it was too muffled to make out the actual words being shouted.

“But I love him...” The pitch of her voice was higher and I could see a tear about to roll.

“I...”

...

...

“But...”

...

“I’m not a whore. How can you say that Mummy?”

...

It wasn’t going well.

Nor was the conversation over in one go. We walked up and down the hill a few times throughout the afternoon and early evening. From the phone box on the steeply sloping street you could look out across the city and watch the warm glow of lights being switched on. I wasn’t included in the conversation, and felt like the Venetian in Frith’s painting, not wanting to be recognised for fear of the consequences. I had plenty of time to admire the view.

Pretending not to be there, I signalled moral support through the squeezing of a hand or any other available body part. I watched the changing emotions on Samantha’s face. From determination to pain, back and forth as she changed from dutiful daughter to wanton whore. That was a word I think I did hear shouted down the line. Very Victorian. Sometimes her face would crease up with tears, other moments the eyes would blaze with rage. It was an Oscar-winning performance. At the other end, the phone was handed back and forth from mother to father, and I watched the face change with every handover. Her relationship with her

mother was never the smoothest, they would argue late into the night sometimes, but never when I was around. Her father was long suffering, but knew for the sake of a quiet life he could not be seen to support his daughter, or he would be in the dog house too. I often wonder what her parents said to each other when they came off the phone. Just how angry could they be? They had got together in the sixties, was there no sex and drugs and rock and roll for them?

When it was finally over, there were tears and recriminations. I had made her into a whore, apparently. I was surprised at that, given the level of both her preparation and enjoyment. The condoms, spermicidal jelly and other barriers. She had prepared herself fastidiously. I was off the family Christmas card list for a while. There was no point them saying I couldn't see her any more, it was too late, we were an item. *She were proper deflowered*, as they say up North.

On the bright side, Samantha didn't speak to her mother for at least two weeks, which was quite a saving in loose change. I continued to provide emotional support, and avoid the temptation to ask why we had to tell in the first place. There was a gloomy heaviness in the air. The wind was blowing yeast our way. I was nearly sent back to London for suggesting that the best way to clear the air was have more sex.

Eventually there was a reconciliation, and a trip up there by the parents when I was not welcome for the weekend. I think they realised that they would lose their connection to their daughter, and so some leniency and common sense was applied. It was not a moral dilemma. They were not religious people, just rather old fashioned.

Thomas Holloway bought *The Railway Station* in 1883 for a mere £2,000, presumably because the commercial possibilities for the work had been exhausted. He put it in the art gallery at Royal Holloway College alongside works by Turner, Constable and Gainsborough, and a host of canvasses by little-known Victorian painters. I spent my last year of university at Royal Holloway and, in a time-honoured tradition, sat my final exams in the picture gallery, watched by the sixty characters on the station platform, not knowing at the time exactly who they were or all the stories that swirled around them. For those being examined, such paintings were a distraction. There was so much to look at and admire. The half-naked slave girls being traded at a classical marriage market, was the canvass that most distracted me. Looking back,

it was something of an honour to write eight papers of essays in the presence of such masterpieces.

I am still fascinated by the way *The Railway Station* represents a totally different approach to the way art was viewed from that of our own times. Paying to see just this painting, then national and international tours, and a book describing what is happening. And then there was the advance payment which in part was funded by subscriptions. People paid to buy a black and white reproduction, even before the painting was completed, involving them as investors in the whole process of painting and printing. This was the era of speculation, in just the same way as it was with the railways, buying the chance to get rich by carving up the country with new rail lines, stations and terminus hotels.

I still love railway journeys today. The joy of absorbing the different landscapes that flash briefly past. The fleeting views into the worlds of others, over back fences and into back windows. The ever-changing landscape of farms and towns, tunnels and bridges. Leaving London for the north meant embarking at St Pancras station, with its huge iron span roof and massive red brick hotel frontage, like slipping back in time to the Victorian era.

I loved those train journeys North, passing familiar places, sometimes being diverted along an alternative route via Derby rather than Nottingham. But not all were pleasant. Somehow, against the odds of destruction and furious tempers that came to dominate my later life, a single sheet of ruled paper survived.

Monday 13th April 1987, 1:45pm

I have just left Sheffield station. A mild spring day, although the sky to the east looks dark and menacing. I have been in Sheffield only an hour, but many lost memories returned to me as I passed along its northern streets.

It was the place of my birth twenty-two years ago. More importantly it was the place of my father's birth fifty-five years ago, and almost to the day, the location for my parent's wedding some twenty-seven years past. Life is more transient when expressed in such terms. My twenty-two years seem nothing, although the changes that have occurred are enormous. I look from the train window and see all those

changes on the landscape; most are for the worse. I can only think about the great change in my life. My father has gone.

It is nine days since he died, but as yet I do not seem to have faced or really contemplated the ways this will change my life. My mother pointed out that I no longer have someone to turn to for help or guidance, the wisdom of an experienced voice.

Meanwhile, on the St Pancras train small vignettes of life flash past my window. My quick eye takes them all in, down to the tiniest detail. A great tit in the top of an ash tree, a half-hidden footbridge over a tiny stream on the approach to Dronfield. A crow's nest in the topmost branches. I do not like to dwell on my father's death – I am not sure if I am afraid to think about it or if I have already managed to cope with it. I know there will be times of great sorrow when I will miss him and cry over his lost days and what might have been. Even now my heart wells up into my mouth and my eyes become moist. Why does it happen to the good ones? I wonder if I will ever realise how much I loved him?

The Children of Eris:
Horkos

Horkos – the swearing of false oaths

I had insulted Eris with my lewd insinuation, after which she had seen me kissing Holly, so the goddess of discord unleashed her invidious offspring to torment me. It was not a quick come back. They stalked me for years, quietly confounding my life until everything that I thought I wanted was rendered worthless. Every relationship was ruined and undermined by my own selfish lies. Probably the worst of all Eris' fifteen children was Horkos, giver of curses on anyone who swears a false oath.

The biggest oath you can swear these days seems to be a wedding vow. The love, honour and obey trilogy that participants often fail to maintain. They will for a while, but not for ever. Because Horkos has no boundaries to his work, no definite timeframe, he started early, leading me astray before I had actually sworn my vows.

Horkos studied me well. My weaknesses were easy to spot. I even met him half way to the underworld, in a basement wine bar called *The Mithras*. There he placed those dual temptations; wine and women. Then coupled them with my own speciality, being easily led. The perfect trifecta. I was so young and naïve that I didn't see them for what they were, or what they were going to do to me. I merely saw fun, and another bottle, a lift home in the cab, the diversion to her place for another bottle, and, well... Betrayal, guilt, shame. And a hangover. And going to work the next day wearing the same shirt and tie. That faint sense that you can smell your own sweat. The big neon arrow above my head, flashing the word "cheat" towards me every time I looked up. Could it be worse? Well, slightly. The woman I had just fucked was there on the other side of the office, a faint smile on her lips every time I looked her way. She was still hungry. Horkos made it too easy. And, just for fun, he added a neat twist of addiction. Made it simple to repeat.

What am I doing trying to blame it on the god? I drank the wine, kept on drinking, placed my hand on the stockinged thigh. I was in control of the cock that pushed... you get the picture. I could have stopped at any point, had I wanted to. Gone home. Stopped the cab, jumped out and got on the underground. Kept my hands to myself. Kept my pants on. I had free will. We were both too drunk. The sex wasn't very good, sloppy and fumbling, and the following day neither of us could really remember if it was bad or just indifferent. The excessive alcohol had ruined it for us. That should have been enough to stop us doing it again, but the next time we were nearly sober and it was very good. Although, being so sober, the

guilt kicked in earlier than it might otherwise have done. And, because it was good there was a certain inevitability about it happening again.

There is that phrase; to have your cake and eat it. The more you think about it, the less sense the phrase makes. The pleasures of possessing as well as eating. I had a perfectly good cake waiting at home, but chose to chase after a completely different cake, because I liked the look of the rich butter icing. And it was a layer cake. And having licked the icing off I thought I could just go back home where everything would be fine. With icing all over my face and pussy on my breath. How deluded I was.

It was a curious place, *The Mithras*. A wine bar named after a bull killing cult that the Romans brought to Britain. The place itself was a throwback, it last had a makeover in the 1960s. Its chief attribute was that it was dark. The vaulted brick ceilings fading away into a distant gloom. There were tables stacked in the furthest recesses, which I'm sure the staff believed that you couldn't see in the shadows. The features of the people around you were softened by candles in straw-wrapped chianti bottles. Anonymous. A low doorway off a narrow street and a precarious winding descent on a creaking wooden stairway that was so steep that the climb out needed ropes and crampons. I'm surprised people didn't die trying to drunkenly climb those stairs.

At the time, I didn't understand the symbolism that was lurking underground. Horkos' cruel tricks only became clear much later. In the Roman world, the worshippers of the god Mithras had a complex system of seven levels of initiation and communal meals. I thought I was just going to the pub seven times. How could I not see what would develop? The worshippers met in underground temples across the western half of the Roman Empire. Mithras was originally part of Zoroastrian religions from Persia, he slaughtered a bull and then shared a banquet with the Sun god, Sol.

Every Mithraeum has a representation of Mithras killing a bull, usually in a prominent central niche in the temple. He kneels on the exhausted bull, pulling back its head by the nostrils and stabling at the same time. A dog and a snake reach up towards the dripping blood, while a scorpion seizes the bull's genitals. A raven often flies overhead, or on some representations, sits on the body of the bull. Mithras has hunted the bull and dragged it into a cave where he overcomes it. He often has two helpers, who hold up flaming torches. There is a lion headed man being squeezed by a snake. Temples of Mithras have been found from

northern Africa to northern England, in France, Germany and Italy. The symbols are always the same. We do not know what they mean, although we can guess at many of the things that went on.

I was the sacrificial victim, dragged to the underground tavern, stupefied with wine and then seized by the testicles. After that it was easy to hang me out to dry.

The wine bar was named after the London Mithraeum, found during construction work in 1954. A newspaper of the day showed a vast queue of people waiting to see the discovery, all dressed in dark overcoats and hats. It was a bleak post-war city where overgrown bombsites remained and rationing was still in place nine years after the war had ended. Built as a temple to Mithras in the mid-third century, the cult did not last long. The temple was rededicated to Bacchus in the early fourth century; the cult soon gave way to wine. I know what that is like. I always give way after too much wine.

Deep below the current street level the Mithraeum has been recreated, on its original site on the bank of the Walbrook, a river that still flows several metres under our feet, between the cellars and basements of some of the biggest banks in the world. A perspex panel of the statue of Mithras sits like a hologram in centre stage. The impressions of pillars and walls, created using high-tech lighting, give a haunting sense of what the underground temple would have looked like. Just a few metres away, were the subterranean vaults of the wine bar, decorated with painted murals of vines and drinking, as though calling on both the cults to help Horkos do his evil work. The serpent of sin wound around my body while I drank freely, just like it did around the lion-headed man in the statues. I was born in August, a proud Leo, while my temptress was an October child, the scorpion with a tight grip on my testicles. Funny how history likes to fuck with you and repeat itself, as it plays yet another trick.

John Ruskin in Sheffield

Missing

Study of a Peacock's Breast Feather, 1873
John Ruskin (1819 – 1900)
Watercolour on paper
Collection of the Guild of St George, Sheffield
Acquired 1985
Bottom Drawer, Left

The tiny little feather, with its individual blue spines, separated enough to be able to count the exact number of them, should you wish, was a favourite postcard from a Ruskin exhibition in Sheffield.

In the Lake District, that unique landscape of North-west England, where mountains and lakes combine like nowhere else in that crowded island, there is a large white lakeside house called Brantwood. A jumble of rooflines and chimneys, set into a wooded hillside. Built onto and added to, upwards and outwards, over many years to create a place where the owner wanted to live and write. The home of John Ruskin for the last twenty-eight years of his life.

It is hard to capture in words the insane beauty of the view from the house without a picture or a photograph. The calm glassy surface of the narrow strip of Coniston Water. The line of trees on the far bank. A few houses in the little village and the green of fields with their outlines made by the straight lines of the drystone walls. Green quickly gives way to brown, to heather and moor and rugged stony land that rises steeply upwards. Deeply scoured and lined by the passing of time and the retreating of the ice that made the landscape. Towering above all that, the mountain top. The Old Man of Coniston. Forever joined in my mind with my old man. My father and our last proper time together. I remember leaving my father at the pub at the bottom of the hill, and climbing the mountain and then, when I got back, hearing his tales of doing the same thing as a youth. Living his life vicariously for him, while he only had a few more months to live. Those memories are all tied up together now in my mind. Ruskin's house, my dad and the paintings of the lakes, the stones of Venice and that little peacock feather in the Sheffield museum. City of my birth and my father's too.

John Ruskin, writer, artist, philanthropist, collector and art critic has a strong link to Sheffield. The places he endowed were the places my people came from, Loxley and the Rivlin valley. There were my roots, and there Ruskin left some gifts for me to find.

It was strange to have grown up for so much of my life away from the actual place of my birth, the home to so many past generations of both my parents' families. Their memories were tied up in the place, but I never lived there with them, never shared their stories or went to see places together. I never walked through city streets with my dad so he could say, look, that was where such and such happened, where I did this as a boy, or where we went hunting for pieces of German aircraft shot down during the war. Where something crashed or a bomb exploded, or where one of my many uncles lived. My own school was such a big thing for my

dad, getting me through exams, encouraging me with my studies, but I have no idea what school he went to in Sheffield or even exactly where he lived. He was someone that I knew so well, but I still have no idea about his past, his young life, his family, his father and mother, or even his sisters. All those things were all abandoned when he left the city, and now it is too late to ask for details.

I was just getting closer to my father when I lost him. Dead at 55, me left behind at 22. Neither of us ready for that deadly passing. My father was best appreciated when I was an adult. Before that, all his concerns were too grown up.

A man on the rise, trying to improve his status, pull his family out of their working-class Sheffield roots and re-pot them firmly in the middle class. I particularly remember his pride at me being the first in the family to get to university. While I took it in my stride, he took it as a massive step upwards, revelling in it for those four remaining years of his life. And yes, it was lovely to see. That day at the Albert Hall doing my little bow to Princess Anne in my cap and gown. I was happy to have made him proud.

He was proud in other ways. Lifting himself out of stonemason's boots and into smart black patent-leather business shoes. Buying his own business was *his* pinnacle, not working for someone else. Being his own boss. I have the benefit of hindsight, I know how much that cost him. Life itself.

Running his own business, the worry of being responsible for the lives and welfare of several others, was bad for his health. He fretted too much about those men and women and their families. He worried and he drank, to ease some of that worry. He would come home via the pub and several whiskeys. I remember now he always called it Scotch, a blend called Bells was his tippie of choice. Usually he was home after a couple of hours, but occasionally Mum would stomp down the road and drag him out. Her full of vim, him happy and laughing. Dinner would be late on those nights. She would remember anything that was said about her visit, any insinuated insult or slur. Who wore the pants, for example. Such episodes would be repeated back to me for the next thirty years. The insult never forgotten.

Dad was a man of honour, who liked to laugh – although I cannot hear the laugh any more. Can't recall if it was long or loud, soft or understated. All I recall is the good-natured banter and the silly things that father and son shared.

And the bad back. The disc he slipped in the army, falling down a trench somewhere in Egypt during the Suez Crisis. For many years Mum endured his nightmares as he leapt from

the bed in the middle of the night, shouting out a warning that they were under attack. It was only a little war. Not enough for full-blown PTSD.

He didn't have the school or varsity days to remember, but plenty of tales from the Officer's Mess, just as bad as me at university. Tales of grown men indulging in school-boy tricks. Mum would start to tut tut when the Mess stories started. Next she would be telling me that Dad was ruined by having a 'batman', an NCO who acted like a personal servant to an officer, pressing uniforms, shining boots and driving them around. She would become the stand-in for his batman; doing the chores, ironing the shirts, polishing the work shoes. She always said there was a level of expectation.

Yes, he liked to drink but he was a good natured drunk. Never violent or shouting. Just occasionally loud and singing. My favourite moment was when I was quite young, about ten, and was woken in the early hours by a huge commotion in the kitchen. Dad had come home very drunk, fallen over trying to be quiet and cut his head open on the corner of the table. When I wandered in, Mum was there with a cloth trying to stop the bleeding. What stuck in my mind the most was his complete failure to remember my name.

"My shun," he slurred, pointing vaguely in my direction.

A shake of the head and another go. "Myy...shun."

The best he could do.

At other times I was referred to as the "Number one son." That started after a business trip to Japan, but it always made us laugh, because I was the one and only son, the only child.

I love him.

I still miss him. After more than thirty years. I wish we'd had more adult time together, the chance to go back to Sheffield, when we could have talked more about life's lessons. He always wanted to know what knowledge I was gathering. One night when one of my Uni mates came to stay, we drank wine and whiskey and talked about leadership late into the night.

"What is leadership?" Dad kept asking.

Julian and I would launch into another heated debate, bringing out examples from our different history courses, and then he would ask again.

"But what is leadership?"

And off we would go again; Julius Caesar, Atilla the Hun, Churchill, Stalin, Alfred the Great. Anyone who got results. They all had a few moments of fame before he asked the question again. I'm pretty sure we didn't arrive at a satisfactory answer before the booze ran dry and the debate fizzled out in the early hours. For the remaining years of his life the phrase 'But what is leadership?' was the answer to any insoluble problem.

On his travels around Europe, Ruskin commissioned copies of the architectural details he found. Paintings and sketches, but also plaster casts of stonework, of columns and capitals. Many of these were given to his museum in Walkley, three miles from the centre of Sheffield now swallowed up into the city centre. Indistinct. He chose the site to be a destination, the end point of a good walk out of the city. Encouraging people to take exercise, to follow the River Don and to see the rivers Loxley and Rivelin flow down the valleys into it. In his little museum visitors could be transported all over Europe, seeing features he had gathered up, exploring for themselves. Like my final point on top of The Old Man, high above the Lakeland scenery, looking out for miles over the hills and rivers as they poured out into the Irish Sea miles in the distance. It gave you a different perspective.

It is hard to imagine how the working people of nineteenth century Sheffield responded to what Ruskin left to them, what he set up for them in his museum. He wanted to encourage them to turn their hands to other skills and crafts. Not just the grind and industry of commerce. If you walk along the Rivelin Valley now it is urban woodland, a place to enjoy wildlife and discover heritage. The old water mills, once more than twenty of them along the river, were there to drive wheels used to sharpen the knives that Sheffield was once famous for. Those were the places that some of my great-grandfathers worked, others in the coalfields nearby, feeding the furnaces that melted the iron and steel and give the city its prosperity. I wished I knew more about all those generations.

I would love to know if any of my ancestors took that walk out of the city to visit Ruskin's little museum. To know if his efforts had any impact somewhere back in my family, inspired anyone to look differently at their lives or work. Did that filter through to me somehow? Is that why I love Ruskin's paintings of Venice and the little peacock feather? Because of a Sunday afternoon walk up to the museum and the way it was talked about later over tea with the family?

While Ruskin was doing so much for the people of my home town, he was also embroiled in an artistic rivalry with the painter James McNeill Whistler. Tricky thing, rivalry, as I discovered when I found that in her first term in Sheffield, Samantha had become involved with another man. That first term was when we saw the least of each other. When we were making new friends, joining clubs and societies, exploring new cities and moving houses. Samantha was doing more than that. She confessed that she had kissed him a few times. I didn't tell her about Holly.

In the summer of 1877 a new gallery had opened in London called The Grosvenor Gallery. It was to act as a shop window for painters who found The Royal Academy too stuffy, too much part of the establishment. Although Ruskin didn't make the opening night, when he did write a review of the show, he singled out Whistler as a charlatan, who was asking 'two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.' In particular Ruskin took exception to *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket*, which he thought an act of 'ill-educated conceit' and 'wilful imposture'. In Ruskin's opinion, Whistler's *Nocturne* was nothing but a hasty sketch, dressed up in a gold frame, and offered for sale as a finished work of art. He basically said that anyone who bought it was being conned and it wasn't worth the money. I dubbed my rival for Samantha as an imposter too.

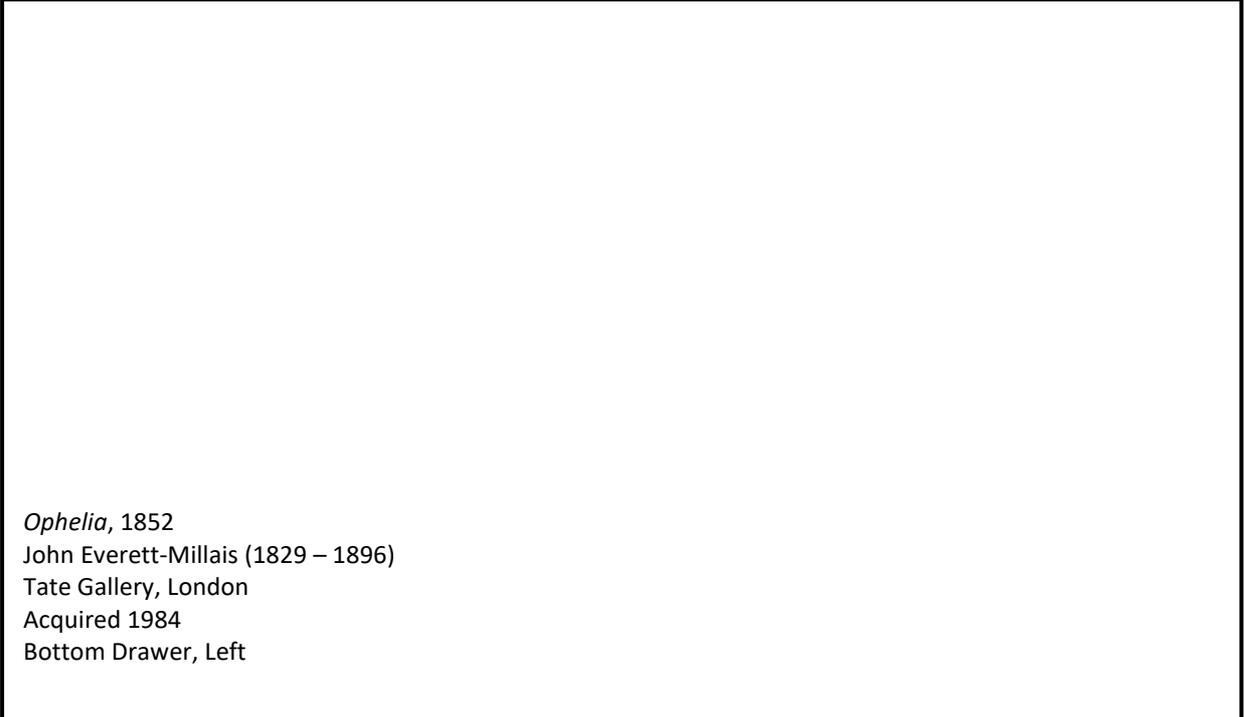
Whistler took Ruskin to court for the damage to his reputation. He expected to have lots of support from the many similar artists, but in the end none of them wanted to suffer the same fate, and so his support dwindled. Ruskin on the other hand was able to draw on lots of support, and his friend Burne-Jones spoke on his behalf.

In the end Ruskin lost the case. But Whistler's victory was a hollow one as he was only awarded a farthing in damages, driving him to bankruptcy, due to legal costs being split between the two parties. Some elements of the trial were farcical, such as when the picture was accidentally shown to the jury upside down. But people stopped coming to Whistler for their portraits. Rapidly it became shameful to have any painting by him. Ruskin's health and mental well-being also suffered. Neither man came out of the spat well.

A couple of days into the second term of university, I received a phone call from a weeping Samantha telling me that Stephen, my tall lanky rival for her affection, had committed suicide over the Christmas break.

The Pre-Raphaelites

Missing



Ophelia, 1852
John Everett-Millais (1829 – 1896)
Tate Gallery, London
Acquired 1984
Bottom Drawer, Left

In 1984 the Tate Gallery in London (there was only one Tate then) held the Pre-Raphaelite exhibition. It was visited by quarter of a million people and sparked a revival in all things Victorian, including their art. Until much more recent times it was one of the most visited exhibitions that the gallery had ever held. I went twice and then spent an age trying to decide if I should buy the catalogue. I'm not sure what took me so long, I always love to buy a memory like that. Having the book on my shelf was like being able to visit all over again. The original copy that I bought was lost to a fit of rage from Margot, but that was many years later.

Was I a true lover of the Pre-Raphaelites? I was less keen on the early religious works by Holman-Hunt and Millais. I was happiest in front of the extraordinary portraits by Rossetti. Those he painted after Jane Morris became his model, with her full lips, dark eyebrows and long neck. The beautiful woman of *Proserpine* and *Monna Vanna*. I'm sure that Rossetti made her more beautiful on the canvass than in real life. In the surviving photographs of her, she never looks quite so stunning, always appearing a little pained or distracted. He was in love with her and no doubt jealous of her husband, William Morris. For a while the three of them lived together at Kelmscott Manor, a grand old stone house in Oxfordshire. While Morris was away, Rossetti spent many silent hours painting Jane. Bernard-Shaw described her as "the most silent woman I have ever met." That is what I see in all the paintings of her. The deep silence and the sorrow in her eyes. Like someone who only speaks a foreign language and could not understand anything that was going on around her. Samantha was very quiet for several weeks after the news of Stephen's death.

They were not very careful with their models, the Pre-Raphaelites. For the painting of *Ophelia* in 1852, John Everett-Millais left his model, Lizzie Siddal, in a tub of tepid water for hours. His attempt to warm the iron tub with a row of candles beneath did nothing to keep the water warm and she became ill with pneumonia. He was too engrossed with his painting to notice the candles splutter and die. Her father made Millais pay her medical bills. Lizzie was the model for Rossetti for ten years before they eventually married in 1860. Two years later she was dead. A combination of ill health, depression, an addiction to laudanum, and two unsuccessful pregnancies. Being the muse and model for a great painter was no walk in the park. What is less well known is that Lizzie was also a painter and wrote melancholy poems like Rossetti's sister Christina. Her short tragic life continues to fascinate artists and writers to this day.

It was ironic that this poor woman was rescued from working long hours in a milliner's shop making hats only to work for long hours as an artist's model. She changed people's view of what was beautiful. Her mother was already so worried about her health that she was willing to let her work as a model, which she thought less physically demanding, but in those days was viewed as tantamount to prostitution. Lizzie's tall, thin figure and long red hair were not considered sexually attractive at the time. One female journalist described red hair as "social suicide". Bitch.

Lizzie was "engaged" to Rossetti for nearly ten years. Neither of them was easy to live with. But at least he taught her to paint. Many contemporary critics derided her paintings, especially when set next to the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who had been painting for years. It was John Ruskin who saw the genius of her work and paid her an annual salary of £150 to be able to paint. In the hat shop she was earning £24 a year. She was the only female artist to feature in an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite works in 1857. But she soon became disenchanted with what she saw as the attempts of Ruskin and Rossetti to control her. She gave up the annuity from Ruskin, used her savings and took her sister to stay in the spa-town of Matlock in Derbyshire. Then, instead of returning to London, she went to Sheffield, her father's birthplace, and lived with cousins. She enrolled in the Sheffield School of Art, determined to be an artist in her own right. She considered her relationship with Rossetti to be over by 1858. He may not have agreed.

I love the strength of character Lizzie displayed at this point. It is a weakness of mine, to fall for strong willed women, believing them to be super confident in themselves and all they have to give to the world. Sometimes that veneer of confidence is a front, something they have erected to hide their real feelings, emotions and underlying fragility. That was the emotionally ragged Samantha that I observed when we next met up. Some of her options had been taken from her.

The next two years of Lizzie's life are a mystery. At some point she moved to Hastings, a popular location for recovering invalids. The cold industrial air of the north probably did not agree with her. She became dangerously ill. Those cold baths with Millais would not have helped. Rossetti arrived in Hastings with a marriage licence, and as soon as she was well enough, in Spring 1860, they were married. One story says that she was not even well enough to walk the five minutes to the church, but had to be carried the entire way.

They honeymooned in Paris and Lizzie became pregnant. In May 1861 she gave birth to a still-born daughter, perhaps due to the amount of laudanum she was taking. In February 1862 when Rossetti returned home late from teaching and dinner, he was unable to revive her. The half-bottle of laudanum that he had seen when he left was now empty.

At this point in the story, just when you think that the poor woman had suffered enough, it turns out there were more horrors to come. Rossetti had placed the only copies of the poems he had written to her into her coffin. Seven years later he decided that he wanted them back. In the autumn of 1869, her coffin was exhumed from Highgate cemetery. Rossetti was not there. By that time some of his friends considered him to be mad. He employed Charles Howell to retrieve the poems. There were no lights to dig by so the men built a fire. Howell turned out to be an extravagant liar, and told Rossetti that when he opened the coffin Lizzie's body was perfectly preserved and her long red hair had continued to grow, filling the coffin so that all they could see were the copper colours glinting in the flames of the fire.

To be honest, I'm not really sure that the poems were worth exhuming. The rumour of them might have been better than the reality. They were lambasted by others at the time for being from "the fleshy school of poetry". The eroticism and sensuality would cause offense to many. *Nuptial sleep* describes falling asleep after sex. Fleeting moments from his life included the translation of an appropriately named *Ballad of Dead Ladies*. This was part of a series, a sonnet sequence, called *The House of Life*, about the physical and spiritual development of an intimate relationship. Here is an example:

*Lo! they are one. With wifely breast to breast
And circling arms, she welcomes all command
Of love, -- her soul to answering ardours fann'd;*

Oh dear.

Rossetti died aged 53, twenty years after Lizzie, but had been in decline for some years before that. He was a virtual recluse in his house in Chelsea, addicted to chloral hydrate and drunk on whiskey which he used to mask the bitter taste of the drugs. His house at 16 Cheyne Walk was full of extravagant furnishings, exotic birds and animals. Rossetti became fascinated by wombats, spending hours looking at them in London Zoo. In 1869 he acquired his first wombat as a pet. It was brought to the dinner table and allowed to sleep in a large centre-piece during meals. He also had a llama which he learnt to ride and would ride it around the

dinner table wearing a cowboy hat. Mad as a fucking hatter. But then what can you expect from someone that sanctions the exhumation of their ex. What is the phrase, best let sleeping dogs lie?

But getting back to *Ophelia*. It was one of the paintings on that Pre-Raphaelite exhibition. Millais painted Lizzie in the bath to get that sense of her hair floating in the water. To get the detail of the river correct, he chose a spot close to Kingston where the river Ewell flows into the Thames. He went there in July when the water weeds were in full bloom. The mats of water crow's foot float on the surface of flowing streams, and small white flowers shoot up from them giving the surface of the water a magical appearance. It is only because of Samantha that I know the name of this plant, or am able to recognise it for what it is, and its preference for the fast-flowing chalk streams of southern England. If she had not pointed it out one day, as we wandered through the water meadows of Winchester, I would have remained forever ignorant. Plants were her subject, she taught me about campions, lady's bedstraw and ivy-leaved toadflax.

All the flowers in *Ophelia* have some symbolic meaning, like the forget-me-nots on the bank. The lost text of the catalogue went into considerable detail about every plant that was featured.

None of the men in her life were any good for Lizzie Siddal. Yes, they may have rescued her from an early grave as a hard-working milliner, but was she ever really happy after that point? I hope that those two brief years in Sheffield were good for her, when she painted on her own terms and wrote her poetry. I imagine her living in a small stone terraced house, not far from my ancestors. Perhaps she was drawn to the countryside around the city, perhaps she visited the cathedral. She died too young to see the works of art that Ruskin gave to the city. The little houses on Huntingtower Road, where Samantha lived, would not be built for another thirty years. The land on that hillside was still just fields, but I'm sure the cold rooms were just as chilling as baths warmed by candles; never warm enough.

Maillol Statues

Missing

La Méditerranée, 1902-1905
Aristide Maillol (1861 – 1944)
Musée Maillol, Banyuls
Acquired 1990
Middle Drawer, Right

It was idyllic. If someone said find the most perfect spot for an artist's studio, where creativity and living would be easy, this would be right at the top of the list. It nestles on the side of a tall hill that plunges straight down into the Mediterranean, surrounded by gravelly terraces of grapevines and olive trees. Where wind mixes with the gentle trickle of mountain water on its meandering way down to the sea and where the cicadas are so loud they deafen anyone who takes a quiet moment there. This was perfection. Samantha and I found this tiny oasis, and sat in the garden by the tomb of Maillol, crowned with its beautiful statue of a seated woman looking out towards the shimmering blue Mediterranean. She shares the name, she is *La Méditerranée*.

On 20th January 2009 an eighty-nine-year-old woman died in Paris. Her name will be meaningless to most around the world, but we owe a profound debt. She worked tirelessly to preserve the memory of a man that we can now all share. She inspired that man to a greatness he had not previously reached. I have often gazed on her naked body and enjoyed how it looks and how it makes me feel.

If someone paints or sculpts you when you are young and beautiful, and sometimes naked, there is a chance that you will stay like that forever. And so, whenever someone mentions your name, they will think of you as that firm fleshed young woman, who remains perpetually beautiful, despite all the passing years. The model for *La Méditerranée*.

The Parisian lady was called Dina Vierny. Passports don't have to give your occupation any more. These days jobs change too quickly for a document that has a ten-year lifespan. In the old days Dina might have called herself an artist's model. Later she might have stated her occupation as museum founder, curator, and art dealer. At only five feet two, her small stature belied the fact that she was transformed into vast monumental statues of marble or bronze, and then scattered around the world. You can find her in Paris and the South of France, in London and New York, even in Auckland. How wonderful to be so many places at the same time. Today, she is often larger than life, although in Auckland her headless memorial is life-sized. The perfect size to pull into an embrace.

Dina Vierny is the reason that we have even heard about the French painter and sculptor Aristide Maillol. As a fifteen-year-old student in the 1930s, Dina was introduced to the aging artist for the first time. She remained his model, some would say his obsession, for the next

ten years, until his death in a car accident in 1944. She persuaded the seventy-three-year-old to take up painting once more, as well as to continue with his sculpture. Then, after his sudden death, she took on the role of promoter of his art, eventually creating the wonderful Musée Maillol in Paris. She donated eighteen of his sculptures to the French government, on the condition that they put them on display in the Jardin des Tuileries. They are still there today, for all the world to enjoy. As big and bold and robustly naked as the day they emerged from their bronze casting. Down in the South of France, overlooking the Mediterranean, in the tiny villages where Maillol lived and worked, you can find countless examples of his beautiful statues. In the rustic museum that was his home and workshop, or in the small rural town squares where his female figures sit in mournful contemplation above several war memorials. Yet more are scattered across the city of Perpignan. He gave vision to a national sense of grief after the First World War. His statues are not of those that were lost, but those that remained, silently weeping, grief stricken in their moments of loss.

Not long after we married, Samantha and I borrowed a small village-house in the foothills of the Eastern Pyrenees. From there we explored the towns and villages, the museums and galleries, the local markets and wine makers. It should have been the most idyllic of times. It was there that I began my love affair with Maillol and, by association, with Dina. There were many holidays where all I wanted was to walk in the mountains and climb the hills to castles and monasteries perched precariously on rocky hilltops or up almost vertical mountain tracks. I would leave Samantha to sit and read, or to eat a lunch of cheese and bread, while I scrambled to those inaccessible spots. Sometimes the trip was easier and we could drive right up to a tiny church, such as Saint-Martin de Fenollar, high in the Pyrenees.

“Come on, we have to look inside.”

“What, in there?” she rolled her eyes, “It looks like an old shed.”

“That old shed is full of treasure.”

Her long sigh signalled displeasure. My treasures were not the same as hers. We crossed an open gravel area, more like a pétanque court than the formal approach to a place of worship – but then they take pétanque very seriously in this part of the world. A small stone cross, an abandoned chess piece, sat forlorn on a low plinth. There were ripe peaches hanging over the wall from the field beyond, filling the air with their sweetness turning to decay and the frenzied buzzing of wasps feeding on the ripe flesh.

“There are no windows. It’ll be all dark and fusty.” The unspoken “like you” was left hanging as an accusation. “No-one is going to be struck down by the joyous love of God in a cold dark hole like that.”

In one respect she was right, we were in a hole, sunk well below ground level. Five steps led down into the darkness. By the time we stepped onto the stone floor we were already in the middle of the narrow room. The ceiling was rounded. The walls curled inwards at the bottom, like standing inside a barrel. They were bare, dirty white, spotted with damp, but at the far end was a much smaller room, the chancel. In there the walls were darkly painted. I found a light switch and illuminated the scene. Now they were covered in jewels; sapphire, ruby and emerald colours as fresh and vivid as the day they were painted nearly a thousand years ago.

Samantha was silent.

Then she turned, brushing past me in a haze of florid perfume like the peaches outside, and stomped out of the church. The noisy heels of her boots faded into the distance.

I wondered why I had married her. It wasn’t for the china collection or the shared love of floating water plants. At first, we seemed to have so many things in common and would impress each other with sights and knowledge we could share. Now it felt like there was no wonder left that would impress, or return me to the status of loved. I remained lost in the tolerated zone.

I looked at the paintings a little longer, the bearded saints raising small cups in my direction and the wide-eyed-Virgin with her hands spread open in a gesture that seemed to say, what are you to do? What indeed. White-winged angels fluttered around the central Christ figure who held two fingers and a thumb across his chest, like a pretend gun. Shoot her and bury her under the peach tree perhaps, I whispered to the roof. The unblinking paint gave no signal that I was on the right track. The timer on the lights ran out, plunging me into darkness.

For someone who created the most beautiful and exquisite sculptures of a woman’s body, capturing every delicate curve and sinew, rounding each breast and belly into the most realistic of shapes, it seems that Monsieur Maillol was a very shy man. In a radio interview in 2008, Dina said that for the first two years working as his model, she kept her clothes on. Not out of modesty, but because Maillol was shy. It was she that proposed they try some nude

studies. "Since he never asked, I figured he would never have the courage," she said. I love that it was her taking the initiative. But then, she was a ballsy young woman. Some might say she had no shame, belonging as she did to a local nudist club. To me she was perfect. Maillol set up a stand so she could continue to study, while posing in the nude.

Men have an idealised picture of a woman's body. Over time this does not always correspond with what we find ourselves next to at night in our beds. When I first met Samantha and we fell in love, she was lithe and fit and I lusted after her womanly curves. After a few short years, we lost some of the ideal shapes, although I clung to a little more of my vitality as I continued to play sports and run. Samantha developed a vast enthusiasm for food, cooking and entertaining. She became less like Dina and more like something painted by Rubens. I did not stop for a moment to consider if I was the reason for her weight gain; if I represented something that made her unhappy and turn to food. I didn't believe myself to be so shallow as to stop loving a woman because her looks had changed, but I must admit that the changes in the first few years of our marriage probably didn't help us. They turned me into a voyeur. But the innocence of just looking can get you into as much trouble as going further. Was that what drew me to the relative innocence of art? Who can take someone to task for looking lustfully at a painting? It is not like the woman is real, or that you are going to ask her on a date, or worse, pay for a quick fuck. No, you are going to look and admire. Perhaps lust, but that is your own business, no-one else has to get involved, or even know. It is a game you play solo.

The beauty of a Maillol statue is that his bronze women are perfect reproductions of Dina. They are not catwalk beauties, they are women that you meet in the local markets buying bread and goat's cheese made in the mountains, they are women that you fall in love and sleep with, and whose rounded breasts and soft bellies are as familiar to you as your own skin. He captured the things that most engross us and in doing so, highlighted needs that were not being met in my life. The desire, and the lust that I wanted to feel, were missing in the flesh. They had crept out of the back door while no one was watching and when I went to try and find them again, they were no-where to be seen. The things I was clinging to, that I thought would keep us together, were in fact driving an invisible wedge between us.

Quatre-vingts Dessins de Rodin

Missing

Nude woman lying down, seen from the front, c. 1900
Auguste Rodin (1840 – 1917)
Musée Rodin, Paris
Acquired 1988
Middle Drawer, Right

As well as stunning designs in stone, Rodin sketched profusely. Momentary pieces, flashes of inspiration. Lots of figures, lots of women, lots of them nude, often rudely nude and in your face. I loved these, the secret thrill of imagining the model in front of the artist. There must have been more than a ripple of excitement in the whole scenario. I asked Samantha once about one of them. At the Musée Rodin, in front of a cabinet of what can only be described as pornographic sketches.

“What do you think?”

“Mmmm?”

“What do you think about this?” I pointed directly to a hastily drawn snatch.

Some of the sketches, the pencil outlines of reclining and recumbent figures, had been covered with a wash of watercolour. There was some shadow in the skin tones, but mostly these sketches were about shapes and movement. Pubic areas were a dark brown stain of hair. Look closer at some and the pencil lines beneath the paint show a fascinating level of detail. Well I thought so. Samantha was less keen.

She drew in a deep sigh. It was enough to tell me she didn't approve, and that made me feel naughty and provocative.

“Do you think Rodin fucked them before he drew them, or after?”

“Roger!”

“Oh you're right, probably both.”

I loved to shock her like that. I think it aroused me as much as the pictures did.

“I'm sure he didn't write the titles though, look at this one. It's called *Nude woman lying on her back, seen from the front, with her hands on her genitals and legs raised*. Fingering before a fuck would have been better.”

“It's time we went for lunch.”

“Perhaps we could go back to the hotel room?”

“Lunch, Roger.”

Always food.

I left via the shop, for postcards, but I discovered an unexpected treat. *Quatre-Vingts Dessins de Rodin* was an A4 sized folio of some of his best nudes, each one on printed in full colour

on thick paper. Something for the bottom drawer of the bedside table. Perhaps even something to look at over lunch.

Penzance

Still owned

"Penzance", 1906
Eleanor Hughes (nee Waymouth) (1882 – 1959)
Home of Roger Phillips
Acquired 2014
Landing, top of the stairs

I love a good junk shop. The chance of treasure. The faint possibility that you will recognise something that turns out to be of great value. The sort of story that always gets centre stage on the *Antiques Roadshow*. Bought for five bucks, now conservatively valued at fifty thousand. It has not always been like that. There was a time when I would not have wanted to delve too deeply into the rubbish that other people want to throw away. But people change, and now I am happy to rummage. I think there is a deep-rooted human instinct there, the love of getting something for nothing, or at least very little. Like the annual pleasure of plums, peaches and pears from my garden trees. Free stuff. Love it.

Samantha, on the other hand, was very keen on collecting glassware, porcelain and pottery. She was less keen on second-hand, even less on junk. Just as we were leaving university we came upon a huge sale of Waterford crystal glasses (champagne flutes, goblets for red and white wines, whiskey tumblers, sherry and port glasses) all different shapes and sizes, larger or miniature versions of each other depending on your tipples of choice. In the same sale there was Minton china (dinner, dessert, and side plates, soup bowls, serving dishes, platter and gravy jug). They had a thin blue floral pattern of intricately twisting foliage around the rims and then a silver metal edge that would spark if you accidentally placed one in the microwave. An indoor firework show. At the time such luxuries were the last things we really needed. I was persuaded of the need to buy them, and that step obliged us to have to visit subsequent sales in search of individual pieces to add to our collection. I think I managed to add a brandy balloon to the Waterford throng, only one, which allowed me to pool the heady liquid around in the palm of my hand and sniff the changing aroma as it warmed. Thinking back, it probably looked very pretentious with all those matching bowls and dishes crammed onto the table in the kitchen of our one-bed flat.

A few years later, Samantha shifted us to Emma Bridgewater spongeware pottery (dinner plates, side plates, bowls, terrine, serving bowl, mugs, coffee cups, soap dish, even a toothbrush holder). Something more practical, something we could use every day. The dominant pattern was a fig leaf; heavily incised leaves and the occasional fruit, swirling across the plates and platters, like foliage on which to lay your food. As a result, much of our tiny flat overflowed with these items, stashed into cupboards so that it was almost impossible to remove what you wanted. The sheer volume of items meant cupboards were arranged in an intricate sequence to hold as much as possible. If any of these items were required, they had

to be carefully removed in the correct order, which had to be memorised. This was not a job for anyone without the most delicate of touch. Ham fisted assistants should not apply.

I had a little pattern: every two or three weeks I would take a little trip to some favourite haunts, shuffle through the junk, and pick up a bargain or two. Charity shops in wealthy suburbs are always good. Unless they really know the price of things. Rich people's rubbish is often gold. For example, they often discard unread books. These are often hardback, sometimes first editions, occasionally signed. Bought for a dollar or two, they might sell elsewhere for thirty or forty. I'd take that profit any day. Except I wouldn't, because I'd have to keep the book. I found a few signed Margaret Atwoods that way. There is a sweet spot for books from the 80s and 90s, where such finds are possible. You never find anything from the 50s or 60s. They were all biffed a few years back, before my time.

Samantha was more horrified by the idea of other people's clothes. Obviously, most of us draw the line at pre-used underwear, but I have several lovely shirts that were pre-owned and out of which I have had years of good use. Always go for the quality brands. The fabrics are always better and will last you longer. I have my own strange value chart that I apply to the transaction. I calculate how much my shirt costs me to wear today. So, if I bought the shirt I'm wearing new, for say \$150, then I would have to wear it 150 times before it is only costing me a dollar every time I put it on. But the fine cotton work-shirt in a subtle blue check which I bought for just \$2 in an Op Shop, and which I have worn once a week to work for six months now is already costing me less than eight cents every time I wear it. That feels good. Especially when I see people wearing their new \$150 shirt. Third time out, still costing you fifty bucks to wear it. Because of all this, I own far more cotton shirts than I do T-shirts.

Don't get me wrong, Samantha was not a snob, there were just places where she drew the line. Things she wouldn't do. Second hand clothes and moral dilemmas. For example, when someone gives you too much change. Undercharges you or forgets to add something to your bill. Those were the times when I would skip away, happy to have got one up. With Samantha, we would be heading back to the shop to return something or pay the difference. All a question of morals and I didn't have as many as I should have.

Fossicking in a junk shop I came across an old watercolour. It was drab, too many shades of brown and grey. The mounting was in a bad way, the glass broken and the backing torn, but

the frame was oak and in reasonable condition. It was the scene that caught my attention. A place I recognised. Above the hillside sheds and rows of houses, I recognised the church tower. The old church in Penzance. Below it, the houses fall steeply down to the harbour front. I knew that place. I had stayed in one of those old houses, now a hotel. That shiver of familiarity ran through me. That was the view of the old town you got as the boarded the boat across to the Isles of Scilly.

There was a signature at the bottom of the painting, although there were no details on the back that would give anything away. *E Weymouth 06* was all it said. A little time on the internet was all I needed to find a married name Eleanor Hughes, under which she did most of her painting. She was born to English parents in that most English of New Zealand cities, Christchurch. She went back to live in Cornwall where she married into a famous painting group and lived in the little artist's settlement of Lamorna. What I had was a very early painting from her first return to England, perhaps some four years before she married and settled in the south-west. There are works of hers in some of the New Zealand museum collections, and plenty in England where her prints remain very popular.

The painting brought a flood of memories which had been long discarded. Or suppressed. Cornwall was where I went on my first honeymoon, where I saw and explored a landscape that was new to me and learned to love lots of things about art. Started buying prints, went to the Tate gallery in St Ives and explored the little galleries in the narrow streets of the old fishing village which has such a strong artistic pedigree. Samantha and I stayed at the top of the hill in Newlyn, itself famous for its 'school' of artists.

The Newlyn School got going in the 1880s when several artists were attracted to there to paint. The fishermen of the little port were one of their main subjects, with their glistening catch out on the beach or sitting on the granite walls of the jetty. Artists were drawn by the clarity of the air, ideal for painting outside. I looked up a list of those who are included in the Newlyn School; Stanhope Forbes, Alfred Munnings and Dame Laura Knight were names I knew at once, then Lamorna Birch, founder of the little colony a few miles away and there was Eleanor Hughes named on the list as well.

My memories of a few weeks in Cornwall with Samantha are not memories of her but of the place and the landscape, the weather and the scenery. West Penwith, that area closest to

Lands' End is quite different to other parts of England. Rough moorland, and granite rock everywhere; the houses with their thick the stone walls, the churches and pre-historic burial mounds. Everything was granite and it gave the countryside a beautiful calm glittering brownness that I loved. The trees were stunted, all wind-blown in a certain direction. The buildings nestled low in the landscape to escape the wind and the weather. The gorse grew rampant, and everything had a wildness about it which is hard to catch in a sentence. On granite cliffs the cold waves of the Atlantic Ocean pounded away, and on the sides or tops perched the disused shafts and chimneys of tin mines that stretched out under the sea. Men would descend into these hellish holes and mine for tin below the waves and be able to hear the ocean crashing above their heads. The very thought of it makes me shudder.

Sometimes, when the weather broke and the fine clear painting air swept ashore, you could look out from the tall cliffs and see the tiny flat Isles of Scilly twenty-odd miles away across the open ocean. They were like a mystical land, the land of Lyonesse, sometimes there and sometimes not, mythical and magical, waiting to be discovered.

I had erased Samantha from these Cornish memories, but now I had the painting it reminded me of her, of glass and china collections tottering in cupboards, and of oddly named villages; Boswednack, Morvah, Botallack, Towednack, and Treen. Places we had been together.

The Children of Eris:
Logoi

Logoi – the telling of stories

There was a weekend in London when I, Roger, went off the rails. When I went to every shop I loved and bought every item that I desired. Books I couldn't afford and pens I didn't need, CDs by terrible bands and garish shirts I'd never wear. A day or so later I limped home wearing an overlarge coat that looked like a stitched quilt worn by Native Americans. It didn't fit and it wasn't me, Samantha told me. Don't even mention the platform sneakers. In one of the deep pockets was a stiff cardboard box which contained a leather folder. It was the era of the Filofax, but this was a different riff. Made by a company called Mulberry and bought from that most delicious of stores, Liberty of London.

In the dying days of the Filofax, that power tool of the Eighties power-mad executive, before there were electronic devices on which it was possible to record your every thought, appointment, project, photograph and to-do list, everything was hand written. No I'm not talking about the middle ages, with monks writing in the scriptorium, I'm talking about the Filofax, when everything was collected up into your diary. When it was no longer acceptable to have just a diary to record your meetings. There had to be job lists, objectives, mission statements and motivational quotes of the day. Just having a meeting to go to was not sufficient. Now the meeting needed an agenda, actions points and follow ups, each with a specially designed page in your Filofax. Each Filofax came in a range of sizes from slim-pocket to fat-desk versions. A4, A5, A6, pocket and mini-pocket. A range of annual refills from the page-a-day to the week-a-page. Damn it, I loved all that shit.

And every year, new inserts to make your life even more organised. The end of the year transfer of crucial details, old year removed, new one inserted. Just how organised was it possible to be? Except. Except, that I hated to be that organised. I wanted to be more spontaneous than my Filofax allowed. I loved the spur of the moment and the unplanned encounter. I never used the weekly or monthly budget sheets. They were spare paper which might end up with a few lines of impromptu poetry or some descriptive prose about a sunset or a character on the tube. God help me if there were ever any numbers on that page.

I loved the leather binding of the Filofax, and some I coveted. I had one pocket version for a year or two, slim tan leather that fitted nicely into the pocket of a suit jacket. That morphed into a fatter desk-version with the smoothest of hide leather and that reassuring smell when you opened your briefcase in the morning. I read somewhere, as someone analysed the rise

and fall of the Filofax, from the heady days of the 1980s to the depth of despair in the mid-1990s, that at one point the company had over 1,000 products; every conceivable type of folder and insert. No wonder they went into such a steep decline.

There was one product that I coveted more than any other. It wasn't made by Filofax, but was designed to replicate them and use the same insert pages. It had the familiar six metal rings in the binder, so diaries and inserts were interchangeable. This was an exclusive product made by Mulberry, an English company that specialised in very fancy leather products; handbags, holdalls, belts and shoes. I still have that Mulberry organiser, thirty years later. And if I press it to my nose, it still carries that intoxicatingly heady smell of leather, just as it did the day I first saw it in the shop. It is a deep rich chestnut-coloured leather, tooled to look like lizard or crocodile hide. Inside, the Mulberry logo is highlighted in gold and is as fresh as the day I bought it.

There is a bit of a story to that day. Stories were the speciality of Logoi, that other son of Eris who dogged my life. He delighted in weaving a good story, and for him, the more painful the story, the happier he was.

It would be fair to say that I lost the plot completely that weekend. As I wandered through the streets of London, there was Logoi, sitting on the tube, or in some fancy café, watching my progress, now and again nudging me in the direction of some other pretty shiny thing that I didn't need. It was a day of 'don't need'. And it was a day of 'buy it all'. A week or so later, sitting in the wood panelled office of an exclusive shrink, talking through the events of the day, he was able to come up with a very fancy phrase about dissociative-something and non-cognitive something else. I never understood what they meant.

I don't think he ever came up with the possibility that I was depressed, unhappy in my marriage and unable to find a way to escape. That it was a *cri de coeur*.

I often wonder if Logoi was sitting on the shelf of trophies behind the shrink's desk. There among the awards and the little antique nick-nacks picked up on his travels around the world. Was he directing the conversation when the highly-paid expert started to expound his psycho-theory? Babble, babble, babble.

"Well Mr Phillips, what seems to be the problem?"

"I had an odd time at the weekend. I err..." I was trying not to use the phrase 'went off the rails' even though that was the one in my head. "I... I ended up buying lots of things I didn't need."

His poker face didn't flinch, but deep behind it I could feel the line 'You should meet my wife' hovering for his internal amusement. "What sort of things exactly?"

"Clothes that aren't my style, books, music, fancy leather goods. Expensive designer things I can't afford."

"Exactly how long did this experience last?"

"Two days." I saw a flicker across his face. I had obviously done better than his wife. "I even stayed overnight in a fancy West End hotel. It's blown all our savings money."

"Has anything like this ever happened before?"

"No." I could be definitive on that.

"Are you under any kind of stress, financial stress or stress at work?"

I thought about the sort of financial stress that Samantha applied to our lives, but that was hardly a causal factor. "Not that I'm aware of."

"Did anything else happen over the two days?"

Was this the time to talk about the amount of time I spent in phone boxes? Or that I wasn't happy in my marriage and couldn't find the right way to leave?

Apparently three conditions have to exist in order to provoke the level of cognitive dissonance displayed on my day of spending. The decision to make the purchase has to be important, for example the sum of money might be a significant one. It might therefore be something that was not available or allowed. Then there has to be some form of psychological cost. Well that was pretty obvious. Samantha was going to chew my bollocks off when she saw how much I had spent. And finally the things I bought had to be relevant to me. Well that was easy. I coveted the Mulberry organiser from the moment I first saw it. But also the terrible things, the shoes and the coat especially, were chosen because they were things I was not supposed to like – well outside my normal style. Not to my taste and certainly not to Samantha's. I think I was trying to tell her that I was someone else. That I needed to break out of the repressed life I was living. Or that I was off my rocker.

Samantha spent a while trying to work out if we could return any of the things and get our money back. She tried to whittle down the overspend to a more manageable level. Could any be given as Christmas presents in the ultimate deferment of costs? It was like living with a human balance sheet. She was the profit and I was the loss. Logoi was the story teller, both

the stories I invented and the ones we told to everyone to explain away what might just have happened.

Roger Fry, Vanessa and Holly

Missing

Portrait of Vanessa Bell, circa 1911
Roger Fry (1866 – 1934)
Pencil and gouache on paper
Acquired 1990
Bottom Drawer, Right

In November 1910 my namesake, the art critic Roger Fry, organised an exhibition called *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* at the Grafton Galleries in London. It was the first show in Britain to feature Gauguin, Manet, Matisse and Van Gogh, and bring their works to the eyes of the general public. Van Gogh had already been dead for twenty years. Cézanne had died just four years earlier. This show would be seen as a pivotal moment in art history, many of the reactions at the time were hostile. Kind people thought Fry was mad. Even so, there was a second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912.

The important thing was the reaction, and the way people were being asked to view the art. Many ground-breaking paintings were brought over from the continent. There were early works by Picasso. Virginia Woolf wrote a biography of her friend Roger Fry, published in 1940. In it she said;

“It is difficult in 1939, when a great hospital is benefitting from a centenary exhibition of Cézanne’s works, and the gallery is daily crowded with devout and submissive worshippers, to realise what violent emotions these pictures elicited less than thirty years ago. The pictures are the same; it is the public that has changed...The public in 1910 was thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter.”²

Woolf describes the reactions of anger and laughter at the sight of the paintings, well known works by those we now revere and whose value is in the tens or even hundreds of millions. Wilfrid Blunt described the paintings as “...the works of idleness and impotent stupidity, a pornographic show.” I’m not really sure which exhibition he went to see. It is interesting to see so vividly how tastes change.

Fry was a critic, writer and scholar and coined of the phrase Post-Impressionist. In 1910 he met Vanessa Bell and her husband Clive, and it was from then that he became part of the Bloomsbury Group. In 1911 he began an affair with Vanessa, but she was to break his heart in 1913 when she fell in love with the painter Duncan Grant and moved in with him. She was still married to Clive. A broken man, Fry went on to have several brief affairs but it was only after he met Helen Maitland Anrep that he found his soul mate. She was to become an emotional anchor for the rest of his life, although they never married. Both Vanessa Bell and Helen Anrep had been in unhappy marriages and Fry offered them a tenderness and care that

² Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991).

they had lacked from their husbands. They were strange times, when so many people could be involved in a marriage.

Watching Holly go through the collapse of her marriage was a curiously complex event for all concerned. Well, it was complex when she was an attractive woman you had a secret affair with a few years earlier. A woman you would love to do more than just hug in sympathy. As I watched I felt old desires rekindled. Perhaps it was knowing that suddenly she was free of marital bonds, even though I wasn't free of mine. That was certainly what it looked like Roger Fry was doing. There was a lot of free love going around the Charleston Farmhouse, decades before the sixties thought they invented it.

In the midst of the turmoil in his personal life, Fry created some beautiful paintings of his own. He is best known as an art critic and curator, but I challenge you not be drawn to the simple beauty of his paintings. His portrait of Vanessa Bell, sister of Virginia Woolf, wearing a green shirt and crocheted black headscarf, dates from the time that they were lovers. It is a very stark portrait. Bell looks directly at him and her eyes are questioning, as if to say 'What exactly do you want from me?' A quick sketch of a fleeting look, and I think it catches the uncertainty perfectly. Her thin angular face and full lips never failed to remind me of Holly. It is so unlike Fry's other paintings. His portraits usually had lots of details in the background; chairs, rooms and fabrics. Vanessa has no background. She is stark. All mood, no time for detail.

In another painting of her, this time sleeping, the effect is soft and tender. I wonder if there is something unique to a painting of a woman you desire that makes it singular. I found one portrait of Helen Anrep by Fry. It is interesting to place it next to his portraits of Vanessa. Helen has all the stiff, formal lines of a friend, Vanessa all the soft curves of a lover. Emerging from one relationship, perhaps a little broken, it is possible to cast around, looking for love and a connection that has been missing for so long. At that time, you are vulnerable, and far too likely to jump at the chance of some warmth and companionship. You are likely to fall in love too quickly, and not have those feelings returned. To put it simply, you are likely to make a fool of yourself. I know I did.

Even with her similarity to the young Vanessa, Holly will always be linked in my mind with the artist Augustus John. I took Samantha to visit Holly, and managed to divert the three of us to see an exhibition of work by John at the National Gallery of Wales in Cardiff. There were lots of portraits of John's wife Dorelia, not the most beautiful woman, but with a very striking

face. There were delicate pencil sketches of the women that flocked around John. Dorelia was best friends with Fry's Helen, bringing the circle back around. My memory of that hour in the Cardiff exhibition were the beautiful faces, those on paper in pencil and chalk, and the anguished face that stalked the gallery alongside us, heart torn and broken, emotionally wrecked, but beautiful to watch as she wandered the gallery not seeing any of the art. As I watched how beautifully gaunt Holly had become in her grief, a memory of the nights after the Mithras ambushed me and squeezed all the joy out of my mood.

Holly was the only woman I knew at that time who had a motorbike licence. That was the sort of thing that gave her extra vitality, not just the good looks and the lithe figure, but the unexpected. Was it just the school that she went to? The girls were feminine but it was their intelligence that gave them life and turned me on. I recall Holly's smile, toothy and wholesome, it had a warmth that many smiles fail to live up to. I loved it. When she smiled at you, you felt her presence and knew that she was genuine. There in the moment with you.

I wonder what Samantha would think to the confession that I fancied her best friend? I'm sure everyone fancied Holly, so was it really a big deal? I suspect Samantha would be disappointed in me, mortified that I was just like all the others, the multitudes of men who threw themselves at Holly's feet. The crushed and rejected, ignored and, in some sad cases, simply never noticed. Holly had too much going on in her life to notice soppy folk hanging around waiting for a chance to speak to her. Make yourself known or make yourself scarce was her *modus operandi*. After her first failed marriage, I am sure there was a queue of men wanting to be the next in line. I was not one of them.

Southwold, 1994

Missing

Southwold, Suffolk, 1875
Edwin Edwards (1823 – 1879)
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Oil on canvass, 48.6 x 89.2 cm
Acquired 2001
Bottom Drawer, Left

How odd to be confronted with this image, suddenly, tens of thousands of kilometres out of context. To be sent right back to Britain from the south of Australia. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne has a painting of Southwold in Suffolk that dates from about 1875. The artist was Edwin Edwards, who, because he was self-taught, was ridiculed by the English establishment and never achieved the success he was due.

The French, surprisingly since he was English, were his champions and it is from their records that we glean much of what we know about him. They recall him as a passionate observer of the English coastline, painting his way around the country and recording the scenes he saw. Phillippe Burty recalled how when documenting the Cornish coastline, Edwards worked from "A solid armchair, tied with ropes, lowered with a hoist half-way down the cliff. There for long hours, kissed by the wind, touched by the wings of sea-birds...lulled by the multiple singing of the great waves that come from several thousand leagues to collide against the insensitive granite, cooked by the sun, intoxicated by his dream, merry with the drunkenness of work...Edwards painted and drew." He recognised a good painting, but not when best to end a sentence.

Edwards' scene of Southwold was far more placid. The steep slope down to the beach, the boats drawn up on the sand. Houses in the distance, huts along the back of the beach, just like they are today. Two boys sit on the top of the bank, looking out to sea.

It wasn't the view itself that caught me by the throat, but the place. The little town of Southwold and the events of 1994. A strangled cry for help, a sense of despair and drowning, jolted me out of Melbourne and back to an unhappier time. I was unhappy with Samantha, trapped and stifled, inhibited emotionally and sexually. We had become too familiar over the long years together and now we could no longer find any occasion of shared joy that brought us together. It was time to acknowledge the inevitable. Our relationship was irrevocably dead. And I was a thirty-year-old man with no idea how to leave a relationship.

So I ran away. I ran away from home for the weekend. A grown, married man, took to his car, his little red Volkswagen, and sped eastwards out of London to Southwold. It was autumn, the night was dark and wet and I had only one thought: that I needed to get to Southwold. I had never been there before, but I had seen pictures, read about the place and heard of an old coaching inn called The Swan. That was the only place in the world that I wanted to be on that Friday night that I ran away.

It is hard to explain. The depth of need is hard to put into words or to rationalise. Why Southwold of all places? Couldn't I just have gone to the pub around the corner? I didn't know anyone there, could not expect to meet a soul I knew. It's a sleepy old fishing town where old folk go to retire. What was it that drew me there?

To be completely anonymous, looking out on a bleak ocean from a flat landscape was exactly what I needed. On the way I played the same song over and over on the car stereo, *The Gift* by Annie Lennox, off the album *Diva*. The opening beats, *dum dum-dum – dum dum-dum*, the heartbeat of it. In those days there was no such thing as a CD player in the car. I had a tape player and over that two hundred-kilometre, three-hour drive, I became an expert at re-winding that tape. Giving it just the right number of seconds before hitting play again. Arriving at just the right spot to hear the opening beat. The tenth track on an eleven-track album.

*Darling, don't you understand, I feel so ill at ease.*³

At some point I had to ring her and tell her where I was and what I had done, so yes, I did feel ill at ease. I knew what was coming. How would she react? With anger or sympathy? Annie's tone as she delivers that first line of the song is upbeat, no sense of the problems to come. I was not so relaxed and I knew the other lines on their way.

Take this gilded cage of pain and set me free

*Take this overcoat of shame, it never did belong to me.*⁴

Just hearing the lyrics again brings tears to my eyes, the pain of that night still inside, trapped and frozen. I was trapped, unable to put feelings into words, discuss what to do next or what sensible course to take.

Let's go out into the rain again

*Just like we said we always would.*⁵

I can recall the slippery winding road. Funny how that drive of twenty-six years ago is etched onto my brain. Not every twist and turn, but some of them. The wind lashing rain from the North Sea. The sudden corners when you're driving fast, the prickly, bare hedgerows. Somewhere close to the destination a big church looming out of the dark as the narrow road

³ Annie Lennox *The Gift* from the album *Diva*, 1992 BMG Records (UK).

⁴ Lennox.

⁵ Lennox.

right-angled into the gloom. First I had to cross London in the wrong direction to get the car, an overnight bag, a notebook. My life in a weekend.

Where was Samantha that evening? Why wasn't she home when I made the dash in and out, grabbing my things? All that is lost somewhere in a fog of age. There must have been a small window of chance.

Twelve times an hour, thirty-six times I could have listened to *The Gift* over the three hours it took to drive.

There was that other track on the album, the same tempo and vibe, called *Why*. The first track on the album. The heart wrenching speech at the end. Listen:

*This is the book I never read,
These are the words I never said.
This is the path I'll never tread
These are the dreams I'll dream instead.
...
This is the fear,
This is the dread,
These are the contents of my head.
These are the years that we have spent,
This is what they represent.
This is how it feels,
Do you know how I feel?⁶*

All of me, all my emotions summed up in a few lines of a song. I was so alone. Without someone to share my feelings. When the relationship you are living becomes hard to step out of, or find another human being to talk to who might understand.

And then you are straight into *Walking on Broken Glass*. And that was what it would feel like when I got home.

I rushed through the damp windswept night to Southwold, hoping to find a room at the Swan, perhaps a late supper and a pint of beer. A quiet corner with my Mulberry leather binder, trying to put my feelings into words on a page.

⁶ Annie Lennox *Why* from the album *Divya*, 1992 BMG Records (UK).

There was one room left when I arrived. Leaving my bag on the vast empty bed, I set off down the road in search of food. It was only a few steps before I could hear the sound of the ocean, the waves crashing against the concrete seawall. I followed its roar to the end of the street which stopped abruptly. The ocean was right there, in what felt like the middle of town.

I sat on the cold concrete and felt the spray on my face, the saltiness mixed with the tears. Not tears of pain or heartbreak, just the tears made by the wind blowing in my face. I was too numb to cry for myself at that point.

Back down the road was a narrow pub with a low door. The Lord Nelson, The Hero? I can't remember the name exactly, only that it was warm inside. There was a fire and I sat on my own at a table in the corner. Drank beer, ate food and stopped shaking for the first time that night. I didn't catch anyone's eye. Didn't talk to another soul beyond the barman, but I felt more comfortable there than I had in my own little home. I do remember that I couldn't write anything of merit that night. I rambled pointlessly across the page. Words would not form into good sentences, only poor ones. My emotions were too trapped to be allowed onto paper. In the end I wrote a paragraph which described the room, as though I was not there at all. Perhaps I needed to be rubbish at writing that night so that I could remember it years later.

I loved Southwold. Strangely I still do, the warmth of emotion that goes with the memories of narrow streets and a lighthouse in the middle of town. For that Friday night and the Saturday, when I walked out onto the marshes, across the river Blyth to Walberswick. Beyond that to Dunwich, a strange little town that is now a village, reduced to row of houses and a few crumbling walls by the relentless action of the sea.

How wonderful to find that others have loved the place and preserved it in literature. Penelope Fitzgerald used it as the setting for her novel *The Bookshop*, and W G Sebald, in *The Rings of Saturn*, which I discovered years later, had been to the end of the same road as me. I know this because of the building on the corner. Somewhere else I can see with perfect clarity. Called the Southwold Sailors' Reading Room, it was a refuge for old and aging sailors, retired from the sea with nothing more to do in life. Here they could read a newspaper or a book, sit in the warmth and perhaps to spin some yarns with those around them. There was a luminous white plaque on the outside wall, with a scallop shell at the top and mermaids underneath, giving the name of the place. Built in 1864, at the height of the temperance

movement, as an alternative to ending up in the pub. Like me. The walls inside are full of photographs and paintings, and in the narrow strip of gravel outside, where the benches are tight up against the brickwork to keep you out of the wind, there is a flag pole. Run up some messages with flags, remember the knots, don't let the memories fade.

The Reading Room would have been one of the buildings in Edwin Edward's painting of Southwold, newly built right on the cliff edge, with the Lord Nelson in the narrow street behind.

Twenty-eight plates

Missing

Plate #23, 16th April 1953
Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973)
Musée d'art Moderne, Ceret
Acquired 1992
Bottom Drawer, Right

They were created in a flurry of activity over five days from the Monday 13th to Friday 17th April 1953. They are not all the same size, but range from 15 to 17cm in diameter. The majority are around 17cm. You can see them all in the small Musée d'Art Moderne in the southern French mountain town of Ceret.

A series of 28 painted plates. Bull fighting scenes by Pablo Picasso.

Samantha and I had an argument on the day we visited Ceret. It started over something trivial, the buying of a couple of bottles of wine when I stopped for bread and cheese at a village shop. We didn't need more wine, apparently. Discontent escalated from there. Such heated exchanges would come and go, anger would wash through our lives for an hour or two and then be gone again as quickly as it appeared.

Ceret has a weekly market, when the narrow streets throng with people and little stalls sell every item imaginable from pots and pans to live ducks and pigeons. It is better to visit on a non-market day, it will be easier to park. There will be less chance of an argument as you drive around looking for a space.

All but two of the painted plates have a central scene with the black silhouettes of bull and a picador mounted on a horse. We begin gently, very static scenes as bull, horse and rider face off against one another. As the scenes develop so does movement, until all three are in frenzied motion. In what you might describe as the final scene, two horses pull the dead bull from the arena.

I remember rounding the corner of the chiller aisle in an English supermarket. On the floor in the middle of the aisle was a small screaming child thrashing the ground with her arms and making a hell of a noise. As I entered the aisle, the child's mother and other sibling were just leaving the far end. As soon as the thrashing child noticed her mother had gone, she leapt to her feet and ran quietly after her. There was something similar with Samantha's behaviour. Some of it was attention seeking, but when I decided I had grown out of such childishness and wasn't going to play that game anymore, she got sulky. I would walk away and not notice her tantrum. She would ignore me for the rest of the day.

I'm not sure there was a definite order to the Monday to Friday plates, but two in particular capture the start of the day; the arrival of the crowds from all directions as they throng toward the amphitheatre. This is followed by the parade of the bullfighters, some on horseback and some on foot, as they march into the arena.

Samantha never looked worn down by all this verbal fighting. As if the anger that lived inside her simply had to be flushed through on a regular basis. She seemed to suffer no ill effects, while for me it was exhausting, draining the life and spirit out of my existence.

Because we know the day each plate was painted, we can tell that they were not created in the chronological order of the bullfight. For example, the end of the day scene was painted on the same day as the one showing the arrival of the crowds.

I am no fan of a bullfight, and have never been to one. I think it is a cruel and unnecessary sport in this day and age, but I am happy enough to recognise a tradition, one that has a long history all the way back to Roman times.

I would have preferred not to fight with Samantha, there was no pleasure in that either, but it continued to happen. Forever arguing about trivial things, incidents that had no significance or lasting impact on our lives.

There is an equally long history of trying to ban bullfighting. When the Arabs had control of much of Spain, the practice was made illegal, but at the same time it became a mark of resistance to Arab rule. One pope in the 1400s, a Pious the something or other, tried to ban the sport, linking it to paganism. But it lingers on, although far less popular that it once was. It travelled with the Spanish to South America, where it can also be found in Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Peru, as well as Mexico to the north.

What I love about Picasso's plates is the way he captures scenes that are both very close and very distant. We have a sense of the huge size of the arena and the crowd, and at the same

time the scale of the matadors are exaggerated, so the intricacy of their movements take up the whole arena.

For many years I adopted a softly, softly approach to our arguments. Doing my best to defuse the situation and calm things down, not understanding that sometimes there was no logical explanation to the situation. I would never find it by reason or gentle words. There was nothing I, nor anyone else, even if they had a long-pointed lance, could do about what was going on. Nothing I tried made things better.

On many of the plates from early in the week the colours are just terracotta-red and black, the crowds nothing more than stylised dots. By the end of the week, the crowds become a bigger part of the composition. The heads and shoulders of the people sitting in front of the artist are discernible. The sky is visible above the far wall of the amphitheatre and the red flags that run along the top of the arena are waving in the breeze.

A system of flags would have been helpful to signal that trouble was on the way. That way I might have been quicker to understand the need to take cover, or even remove myself entirely from the scene of the fighting.

Picasso suddenly introduced a blue-grey colour for the sky and made the sun into a prominent feature. On six plates the sun itself is drawn, while on several others its bright yellow light floods the arena in dramatic shafts that stream from the sky.

Samantha was very precious about her plates, the china and the pottery versions that she collected and coveted. For that reason I never threw a plate or deliberately smashed one on the floor. To have done so would have been a step too far. It would certainly have prolonged any argument by days if not weeks.

Picasso's plates evolve from having a square frame on the round plate with bull and matadors taking up the central third, to the entire roundness of the arena being represented, a sense of the vast crowds and just a tiny fraction of the space belonging to the barbaric events in the middle.

How many years did it take me to work out there was nothing I could do about my arguments with Samantha? Quite a few. More than it would have taken many patient saints. Unfortunately, once I did find this out, I stopped trying or pretending to give a shit, and that did have a detrimental effect. I would think “bugger it” and wander off. The pointless arguing had happened so often that I was bored by the whole performance. It was like watching the same dance over and over again. The thing became stale and lifeless.

Some people don't see the genius of Picasso, they hate his occasionally bizarre styles or the weird heads of women, front-on and side-on at the same time. These were simple little plates, the week's work of a unique talent the like of which the world may never see again.

I often felt that I lived in a parallel universe at the other end of a sofa, where I was always in the wrong. Where I had always done or said something that put me in a place of disadvantage. On the other hand, if I hadn't done something, then I was at fault again for a failure to do it. Wrong for spending money on a book, wrong for not remembering to buy some fancy food stuff for a dinner party.

Sometimes the bull appears very subdued, standing motionless. The horse and picador will face him, equally still. One plate stands out, where the bull takes centre stage, the arena is empty but for the tiniest hint of a figure in the far distance. Here is the hunted creature, alone in his magnificence.

Our day in Ceret was not a success. No hint of genius. Samantha threw a hissy fit and I refused to join the fight. I became the calm stationary creature that refused to participate. Samantha stormed off and I went to see the Picasso plates at the Musée on my own. I found her, an hour or so later, sitting on a low wall in the market place with a face like thunder.

One plate is a mêlée. Two horses and their riders, two men running into the centre and another in mid-air, thrown by the bull, which is mid-flight, tossing the man upwards.

“You should go and look at the museum. The Picasso plates are amazing...”

“We’re leaving.”

I knew there was no point arguing, but I enjoyed telling her about them on the long drive home, while she sat in frosty silence. To my certain knowledge, she never did pick up or open the catalogue with pictures of the plates. Never once enjoyed their story or wanted to be reminded.

In some scenes we see the mastery that Picasso had over of very few lines. The movement of the horse is enough to suggest the lunge forwards or swerve sideways, the rear backwards, exposing the vulnerable belly to the sharp horns.

I would never go to a bullfight. I cannot see pleasure from watching the killing of the animal.

The Children of Eris:
Pseudea

Pseudea – the telling of lies

What happens when your life is too ordered, too smotheringly controlled to allow you to breathe or even be yourself? Then you lie. You cover your lapses with little stories. When every penny has to be accounted for or saved for some uncertain future, what pleasure is there in the present? What joy living in the now?

One of the things that Pseudia knows is that the application of pressure in a certain area of your life, one you feel strongly about, can culminate in bad responses and behaviours.

Marriage can get very heated when it comes to money and finances. Having two people who don't watch the pennies can spell big trouble, but not as much as two who are on completely opposite sides of the fence. We were a long way apart in matters of money. I called Samantha anal over financial matters. Not to her face. She called me irresponsible. Somewhere in the middle of those extremes was a sweet spot where it is possible for couples to live together. We weren't there.

Samantha loved to budget. Nothing brought her more happiness. And when I say that, what I mean is that she took every household bill and multiplied it out and divided it back until we had a figure that we should put aside for bills each payday. Everything went into that figure; petrol, car repairs, dentists and doctors, insurance, mortgage, holiday savings, clothing, weekly travel cards, subscriptions, even birthday presents. I cannot live my life with that level of planning. Or scrutiny.

For me life needs to have an element of spontaneity. When you can just do things on a whim or an impulse. For Samantha that was only possible if it was well planned and costed out first. Pseudia saw this at an early stage and gradually began to use it as a wedge between us, prizing us further apart.

Pseudea knew that subtle was best. In order to have a *little* freedom in my life, I was allowed a small weekly allowance. Enough for the odd small item but not enough to, say, buy myself a book. If it had been enough, I would have bought fifty-two books a year. And all the other things I wanted.

Rather than having the intended effect of imposing frugality and restraint, what actually happened was that I found more and more inventive ways to get around the imposed limit. The extraction of funds from other areas, the syphoning of small amounts from the bill savings into the back pocket to pay for things I wanted. Fiddling with cash payments, roundings,

backhanders and theft. Although, wait a minute, is it technically possible to steal your own money? I'm not sure.

New books, odd postcards, the occasional drink at the pub, were all slipped under the radar as I became more and more adept at "beating the system". Or as it is better known, lying.

All this budgetary restraint was doing was creating a level of dishonesty that was both unhealthy and exponential. What kind of person enjoys receiving the monthly bank statement so that she can cross reference it back to her own record of every expenditure item? It was like a male menstrual cycle. I would become tense and irritable when I knew that statement was due any day. When I could sense the possibility of painful questions arising and would need lightning reflexes to manufacture instant lies. "I paid for that with cash" was lame but a frequent fall back. I would have been useless in the world of cashless transactions.

Imagine this sort of exchange whilst out shopping.

"Exactly how much are we allowed to spend on mum's birthday present this year? Look at this, it would be perfect..."

"Oh no Roger, it's more than four pounds over the budget we set ourselves this year."

You could almost hear the chains tightening around the savings account vault. Or see Smaug opening a wary eye to look out across the endless pile of treasure. How does that allow for finding the perfect gift by chance and does it even take account of inflation?

"Remember when we bought that thing seven years ago that was eight pounds fifty over budget?"

I couldn't recall.

"If we over spend on this we'll have to balance it out with what we buy my mum."

And on and on it went and until my very lifeforce seeped out into the grey pavements.

This love of budgeting, playing with figures and numbers, must have its own naturally occurring drug in a limited number of people. If we received an unexpected bill, say a repair to the car that was way outside the predicted amount (as they inevitably are), then Samantha would take inordinate pleasure in removing the predicted expenditure from the figures and recalculating the whole year's budget in order to cover the new expense. What sort of person had a rush of dopamine about that? I mean, I know I married her, but she was not like that when she was younger. That was not where the pleasure receptors were.

I don't know enough about the chemical stimulants in the brain to be able to say why the opposite things worked for me. If I could get away with something, if I could sneak a new book into the house or make a clandestine visit to sit for an hour at the national gallery, undetected, then I got a similar feel-good rush. There is no wonder that we began to slide further and further apart.

Tight budgeting makes for a claustrophobic life. I had to slip out of that mould for short periods of time. I was too constricted to live that way. Sometimes I would take the car somewhere and sit in a quiet street, perhaps with a book, or just with my eyes closed and the sun on my face. A small (free) trip outside the confines of my life.

Were there exceptions to these fiscal rigours? Well there was china and glassware, which always seemed to find a way into our cupboards no matter what the budgeting gods were saying at the time. I found ways to spin out book buying so that second hand items could continue to slip into the house and onto a shelf with a few surreptitious spaces between the volumes, giving the impression that something already lived there and had been recently pulled out and moved elsewhere. But even that had limits. At some point you reach capacity and there are no more spaces to be made.

"Roger, is this a new book?"

I lived in fear of the question. My knee-jerk reaction, my default setting, was to lie.

"No darling, of course not. I've had that for ages."

"It looks very new," she fanned the pages, "It even smells new."

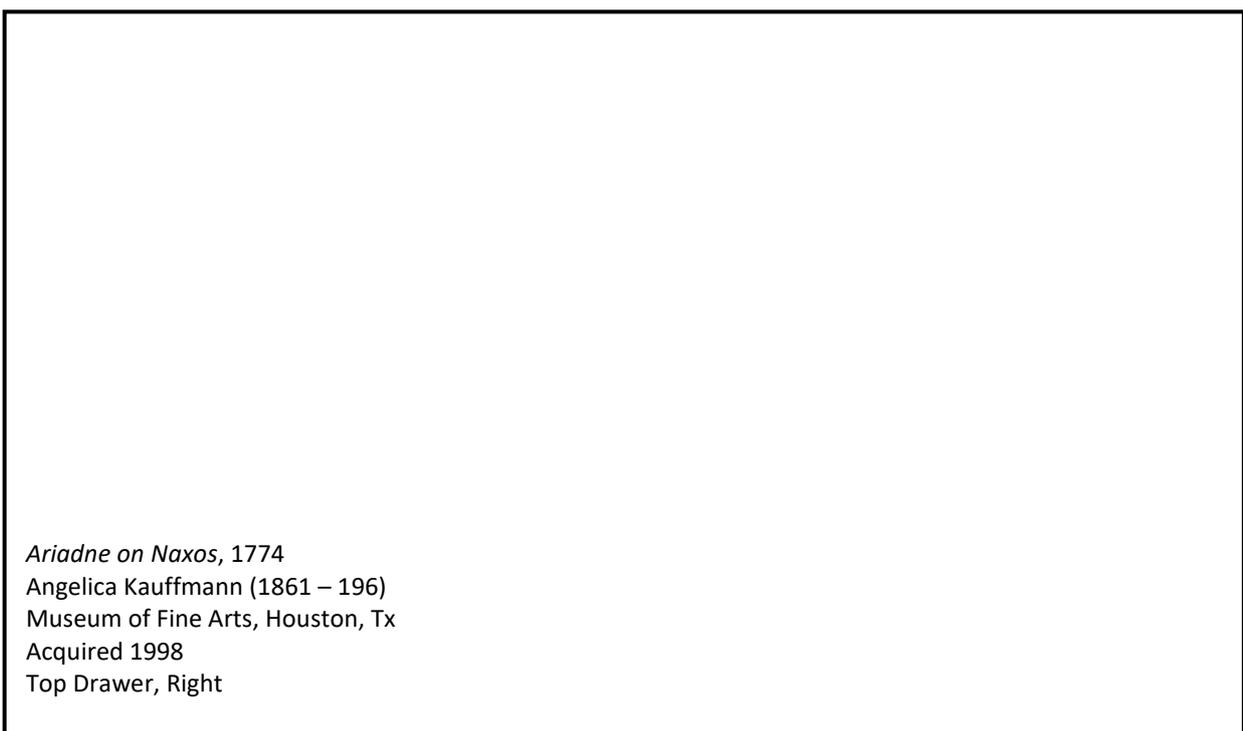
"No, had it ages. Not read it yet. That's why it still smells new. You're letting the smell out by fanning it like that." I was given a glare that could have been bottled and sold to the makers of chemical weapons.

In fairness, I should've tried an experiment. Listed all the things that I smuggled into the house, and then all the ones that Samantha bought, more openly. What would the balance have looked like? On my side the books and perhaps a little booze. There was very little in clothing or footwear, no fancy goods. There was the music. It was me that decided to go out and purchase a CD player and begin to buy the new format after it had surged past vinyl sales. Our record deck didn't work anymore, so it was a reasonable decision to convert, but at the time it proved to be contentious with the budget holder.

On the other side of the balance sheet sat Samantha's tastes in clothes and shoes, which were a little more expensive than mine. But the big thing was food. The buying of extravagant food items and the holding of dinner parties. So they were not exactly selfish things, they were shared, but at least with mine there was something left the following week or year. With hers the best you could hope for were some leftovers tomorrow.

Ariadne on Naxos

Missing



Ariadne on Naxos, 1774
Angelica Kauffmann (1861 – 196)
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Tx
Acquired 1998
Top Drawer, Right

It is too easy to think that the Greek myths are very fixed. X did this to Y, these guys beat those guys, and this monster was killed by that big fella.

The reality is that the more you study the myths, the more variety you find. It is like discovering that lots of authors have all written the same story, but with lots of different endings. The Romans built on stories that the Greeks started. Swapped them around a bit for their own purposes. This is further complicated by a feeling that everything happened at the same time. Events and writers were hundreds of years apart. Some events may never have happened at all, while some are history. A lot of them began as stories passed around the hearth in the evening, while the bread was baking on the hot stones. Netflix for ancients. Storytellers often took the first story and reinvented it, gave it a new spin or expanded one of the stories of a minor character. On top of that, not everything made it into modern times. Only some versions were lucky enough to survive, and they were often based on much earlier texts. This has given scholars decades of endless fun, trying to work out which version came first. Which was original, which was a later copy, which is the fake.

Theseus is a confusing character in mythology. He seems to have been everywhere, in his own story and popping up in other people's. He's the big fella that walked into the Cretan labyrinth and killed the minotaur. That half-man, half-bull creature that was the outcome of someone's mum dressing up as a cow and well... Moving on. To kill the minotaur he got help from King Midas' daughter, Ariadne, who used a thread to guide him back to safety.

The reason I like the Theseus story is all to do with Ariadne. As daughter of the king she had a very privileged position, but she fell in love with Theseus, and so made her escape from Crete altogether. This was where things start to remind me of Samantha, or rather, my shitty treatment of Samantha. On his way home from Crete to Athens, Theseus abandoned the woman who loved him on the island of Naxos. He left her sleeping on the shore. This is the vision of her most represented in the art of subsequent centuries. The boat sailing away, the beautiful woman left behind with no-one to help her.

I like the parallel with my own life, because things don't exactly turn out well for Theseus. He had arranged a signal with his father, that he would change the sails on his ships from black to white if he successfully defeated the minotaur. But in his haste to abandon Ariadne on Naxos, he forgot all about the signal. As the boats come into view from Athens, the sails are black, and Aegeus, certain that his son has died, hurls himself from a cliff. The hero's

return turns into a funeral march. My own escape from Samantha, which at first, I thought was such a great opportunity to live a different life, turned instead into a series of disasters.

The image of Ariadne that I like the most was painted by Angelica Kauffman in 1774. It is so rare to find a female painter in those times, and perhaps because she was a woman, in her painting Ariadne is not naked. Look at almost all the other representations (all by male artists) and if she wasn't abandoned completely naked, at the very least she has woken up with bare breasts. The usual story, any tale from Greek or Roman mythology, then the artist feels he has free reign to make the woman naked. Lots of old artists getting off on mythology.

Who am I to talk. I love a naked painting just like everyone else.

Kauffman's Ariadne is a bit melodramatic, the thumb of her left hand pressed against her forehead, the arm other outstretched, in the "woe is me" gesture, while at the very furthest edge of the canvass a ship vanishes into the distance. Her setting is very opulent for a beachfront abandonment. A thick divan, a red throw and a box of jewels and pearls by her side. A quick "Sorry luv, 'ad to scarper," from Theseus.

She was quickly scooped up by one of the minor gods, so there was a happy ending for Ariadne, and a fine excuse for Theseus – how could he compete with a god? Weasel!

Why does this make me think about how I left Samantha? Did I sneak out of the door without leaving a forwarding address or was I a bit more polite about it? It was complicated. It was always complicated. I went to live down the road, well five or six streets away. I moved into a one-bed basement flat, taking some of my stuff with me. It was a mutual arrangement, rather than abandonment. We gave ourselves more space, literally and metaphorically. But what did Samantha think was going on? Why did she think that we would remain a couple? Because she did. I was too spineless to actually say "I'm leaving you."

I remember the Saturday morning a few months later. There was a bell on the gate at the side of the house. You had to walk down the outside of the building to let a visitor in. It was a way for the owner of the big grand house above me to ensure that people didn't just wander into her back garden. Anyway, the gate buzzer started ringing very early one Saturday. I was inside asleep with another woman.

I remember the cheerful face at the gate.

'I've come to...' I don't know, do something lame.

My washed-out face from a night out, and the obvious way I was standing in front of the gate which said I was not letting her past. All followed by the realisation of what was happening down there, in the underground burrow. The changing look on her face as she tried to hold it together.

The question she answered herself. "She's in there isn't she?"

The nod from me.

The closing of the gate with a firm click.

I don't think there is any point trying to rationalise what happened. Samantha only came around thinking she might catch me up to something. She would never have come so early, or unannounced, if she did not suspect what she would find. But then the reaction, when she did find she was right. Not good.

I should have handled that better, made a nice complete split months before instead of not following it all through – like Theseus on the ship way off in the background. Quite clear he wasn't coming back.

PART III
After Samantha but before Margot

Memory holder

Mine was a simple wooden box of memories. I had filled it with postcards.

Each card carried a set of memories, access into which could be granted in one of two ways. Either by the picture on one side, taking you back to a specific room on a visit, part of a one-off journey or one of many similar encounters standing before a certain gallery wall lost in contemplation. Or it took you to the place named on the back of the card, a gallery or a museum, perhaps a tiny frescoed church high in the hills many kilometres and centuries away from all the other memories.

It was an instant access system. Pull the card from the drawer and consult both sides in order to be transported back to another time, another life (another wife?). Without the card, pieces of memory were missing. A place that you visited once would be forgotten. Some pieces were the object of several, tens, perhaps even hundreds of visits. Like the green robed Mary with her alabaster pot, where the cumulative time of my short visits amounted to hours of my life. With most it was only once, a passing through, a few snatched minutes on a long trip to somewhere else. For a handful it was a location that wasn't even marked on a map and now, years later, would be impossible to find. Such is the imperfection of memory when combined with the passing of time.

Just like in the art world itself, my collection contained fakes. Postcards of pictures that I didn't see, that were on loan to somewhere else, or having a sabbatical in the basement on the day I passed through. Those were only ever a postcard, a tiny miniature from the shop, with no concept of how large or small, how grand or how elaborately framed, the real picture was. Without the true intensity of oil or watercolour, only printer ink. Never the same. There were several fakes in my collection, never seen, but spotted on the rack, that moment of hesitation and regret, I must have missed that somewhere in the gallery, perhaps I was diverted into another room.

Hotel with the walled garden

Missing

Brigantine sailing past green fields, 1930s
Alfred Wallis (1855 – 1942)
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
Acquired 1997
Bottom Drawer, Right

I had booked the luxury hotel several months before, as a treat to celebrate my tenth wedding anniversary with Samantha. In the time between making the booking and the beginning of August, our relationship exploded, shattered and fell apart. That sounds a bit overdramatic. I had moved out, and was living more or less a single lifestyle, while Samantha was clinging to a vain hope that we might get back together. Not a feeling that I shared. For the past couple of months I had been technically, although not legally, single. Now, a couple of weeks before the uncanceled hotel booking, I explained the situation to Jane. It was a large double suite. A luxury room that at the time seemed worthy of the ten-year mark. (I don't think I mentioned the ten years to Jane.) No expense spared. I invited Jane to come along and share it with me, on the basis of one rather drunken night we spent together and a visit to an art gallery.

Jane and I were 'sort of' seeing each other. We met one weekend for tea at the Tate Gallery and looked at the art together. That was probably the attraction. The next weekend she took me to Grantchester and we sat in the Orchard Tea Rooms, talking about Rupert Brooke and Edwardian England like a couple of pretentious snobs. I tried to write my own rubbish poems while I sat there waiting for her to come back from the toilets. Then, as we sat on deckchairs in the long orchard grass, I sketched on a block of paper, trying to capture her look. It was possible to do such things in the sometimes uncomfortably long silences that stretched between us. Being so close to Cambridge, she took me to see Kettle's Yard Gallery, which to her credit she knew would blow my mind. Most of the galleries I had been to were large, municipal, old and stuffy. This was a fusion of old and modern, a new wing grafted onto a row of old cottages. The art inside was "modern", all twentieth century, although thinking back much was from the first half of the century. Not modern as in wtf is that supposed to be. That was where I discovered Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and the naïve painter Alfred Wallace from St Ives. Jane and I walked around that gallery on different planets. She knew it well, I had everything to discover. All these years later, I still remember one particular feature. A low stripped-oak table. Water marked and bleached by years in the sun, it was rustically covered with a few sea shells and a series of rounded pebbles that curled in a spiral from large in the middle to tiny at the tail. Innocuously placed on the table a small bronze statue about ten centimetres high, a geometric shape, a man's body and a fish tail all mixed into a perfect symmetry. Small enough to miss between the pebbles and vase of flowers. A masterpiece by Gaudier-Brzeska. I was captivated. In my mind, memories of Jane will always be linked to

Kettle's Yard. The art I found there will always be redolent with her long red hair, freckles and pale white skin. It was a rite of passage. Kettle's Yard allowed the visitor to transit from elegant Georgian house to modern brutalist box, from soft wide-wooden floorboards to windowless geometric. In the same way, Jane was my transit from the stiff-buttoned, multi-layered contraceptive past of Samantha to a different, more liberal future.

Jane had a degree in art history. And from Cambridge, so she was certainly over qualified for her role as an executive assistant. That position was all about efficiency and fast responses to the problems posed by the five or six managers she was assigned. Anticipation played a big part too. She was just too 'arty' for the role; enchantingly disorganised, beautifully ditsy. She was everything I loved, and the organisation we worked for, hated. Under the tapestry fabrics and floral scarves there was a stunningly attractive body swaddled in a festival of William Morris. Our brief romance lasted only a few weeks. I couldn't cope with her extreme level of indecisiveness and unpredictability. She, I'm sure, just couldn't cope with me. But that was not before that weekend visit to a luxury West Country hotel.

I cannot even hope to recreate the level of uncertainty and discomfort we felt sitting at dinner in the ever-so-posh restaurant that Saturday night. Jane and I could find no conversation, no common point that might, on other days, have set us going on a long conversation about art or culture. That night no words would come, every sentence was forced. The silences grew and grew, and as they did, my mind flooded with panic over what to say next. I ordered nice wine, hoping it would help to relax us. I watched as Jane took a sip, knowing it was one she liked, but seeing at once that she had no stomach for more.

I have never seen so much nervousness in a person. Some of it was sexual tension. Jane knew that I wanted to sleep with her, but rather than saying no, that she didn't want to, she let me plough ahead with the thing. It was strange to be part of an activity which requires two people, where only one is taking part.

Memory will play tricks on us at the best of times. At the worst we can be struck by an awful remembrance, something haunting that will literally make you hide your face in shame. Sometimes this is a creeping memory, ghostly and half-formed, but gradually more and more is recalled until it is a full-scale haunting. Sometimes you are spared the entire thing, and pieces will remain stuck in a murky swamp of jumbled images, refusing to come out and reveal

themselves. The vital difference was alcohol, which dulled the vividness enough to let it pass unseen. Other times, you really want things to be clearer.

That is how it was on my first night with Jane. I wish I could remember more. I know there was a dinner. It was at the Oxo Tower, when I clearly remember people swigging directly from bottles of vintage Krug champagne. A few hundred pounds a bottle. Treated like piss. Destined to become piss, very soon. That was the night that several of us went back to Jane's flat. A cluttered ground floor apartment in Battersea. Artsy, like her. Shared with one or two others, just vague faces. We began as a large group but gradually numbers dwindled until, at last, I was the only one left and she asked me to stay. She had one of those Victorian brass beds with noisy springs and a rattling frame. We kissed rather a lot in the old glass sun room at the back of the flat, before moving to the bed.

And then the fog of alcohol descends. The several hours of drinking came into play, so that further details are missing. I know she invited me into her bed. After that, well things are blurred, like a photograph that is out of focus. We had both consumed a good amount of alcohol. I vividly remember the long red hair and the surprisingly full breasts, which had been well concealed under those layers of William Morris. I certainly don't recall any indecision on her part on that occasion. Later, yes, lots of it. But then, no, none at all. Was our first attempt at love making an abject failure? Too soft, too dry, too drunk? I don't remember much about the next morning either. Was it a working day or a Saturday? How was our parting? I have no idea.

The encounter was enough for a brief, clandestine relationship to develop. Closely hidden, we thought, from everyone in the office, while being in plain sight. Brief smiles in the morning that only we knew meant we had seen each other over the weekend. It was short lived and only memorable for the visit to Kettle's Yard and that night in the country hotel. She should never have agreed to come. It was clear that she didn't want to be there, and was uncomfortable with what was about to happen. So why did she turn up? Why not just say no?

The hotel was north of Gloucester. She took the train from London on the Saturday and must have sat in that carriage for hours thinking about her decision to go. I picked her up from Gloucester station and drove northwards. All these years later, we are no doubt both stuck with a memory of a weekend we would rather forget. In that exclusive country house hotel, Queen Anne style, red brick, all very Jane Austen, with a wonderful walled kitchen garden,

bountifully bursting with fruits and vegetables. The plantings neatly laid out in rows, the trimmed and espaliered fruit trees, greenhouses brimming with produce. Only the bedroom was in disorder.

What a spectacular bedroom, high ceilings with wooden beams, vast bed, lounge area and an opulent bathroom too. I sat for a long time on the sofa, sipping at the wine I had brought up from the dining room, while Jane was in the bathroom. On one of the lower ceiling beams was a row of old books. I took down a copy of the play *Becket*, published in 1961, and for several minutes tried to read. I still have that paperback, but none of the postcards from Kettles Yard. I love old play scripts, because often there is a cast list from the first performance; this one was by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre on 11th July 1961. Amongst a host of names I had never heard of were three I had; Christopher Plummer, Diana Rigg and Ian Holm. Strangely all three of them have died within the last six months. The book, which I obviously stole, is stamped with the name and location of the hotel. I had forgotten that. Unbelievably the place was called Hope End. How appropriate.

Becket was a martyr. So was Jane that night. He was killed off by the King's henchmen. "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" She went through with something she didn't want to do. I would have been happy not to either, since the situation had become so awkward. Second time, still not a success. It is strange, I am remembering things from a quarter of a century ago, but the pain is as fresh as it was on the night. How odd to be raking over those memories, bringing them back to life. I thought I had forgotten.

On the Sunday morning, we walked around the gardens and then went into the little town just down the road, to the craft shops and galleries until, dry of conversation, I drove her back to Gloucester for an early train back to London. That same day that I drove to Hay-on-Wye, the bookshop capital of Britain, but was so thrown off balance that I skipped the bookshops and drove up the hill to take a long walk on Offa's dyke as the weather and the rain closed in.

To say I was off balance is an understatement. To have passed over the chance to spend anything less than every available minute in every bookshop I could reach, means I must have been in a bad way. I bought myself a long, waxed stockman jacket, before setting off along the hilltop walk. A ranger in an olive-green Land Rover stopped me as I headed off, concerned

that I was about to become the object of a search and rescue. No, I needed wide open air, the rain in my face and the desolate open moors for a few hours of deep breathing.

Jane will always remind me of Kettle's Yard, a place that I will always love. I will think about the paintings of Cornwall and St Ives. The softly creaking wooden floor boards. The gentle flow of the watery boats and harbour scenes by Alfred Wallis will always carry a hint of Jane, of her long red hair and pale freckled skin. Enchanted by her looks from a distance.

Alfred Wallis never had an art lesson in his life. He took up painting in 1922 aged 67, scared of loneliness after the death of his wife. He painted on pieces of old cardboard, using whatever colour he could get from the chandlery shop, not the art supplier. He was the harbinger of modern art, except that he couldn't paint better, because he never learnt how to. This was the best he could do, not some evolved simplified style that took him decades to dumb down to. He was real, like Jane. I loved them both for that.

I had moved on from Samantha. Not entirely successfully, but I was moving on. I thought, or at least hoped, I was set for something wilder.

Venus and Mars

Missing

Venus and Mars, c1485
Sandro Botticelli (c1445 – 1510)
National Gallery, London
Tempera and oil on poplar 69.2 x 173.4 cm
Acquired 1992
Top Drawer, Right

Work had been phrenetic. We were putting together a bid for a big contract. I needed half an hour away from the office in front of some art – a ten-minute walk to Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery. I was almost at the door when Steve from the sales team caught me.

“Hey Roger, some of us are going to talk business over a pint. Wanna come?”

“Sure, whereabouts?”

“The Rhino. Alex is getting a cab.”

“Oh, OK.” I tried not to sound disappointed. I wasn’t sure what sort of pub the Rhino was but it sounded odd. I followed him to the front exit where Alex was standing by the open door of a black cab. We squeezed another body onto the back seat and I sat on one of the fold-downs. After a ten-minute ride the driver performed a dangerous U-turn in the middle of the busy main road and deposited us outside something that described itself brashly as a Gentleman’s Club. The reality didn’t fit with the image in my head. No deep leather chairs, walls of old books, cigar smoke and a strictly male-only members policy: this place was all about ladies. It oozed sleaze from every plush plastic pore.

“Come on Roger, there’s nothing to see on the outside.”

I was hustled through the door by the other four, who were welcomed as familiar visitors. In the dim interior it was obvious that the small stage and glistening pole were the only focus of attention. Close to the ceiling above the stage a lithe and very tanned woman was concealed under the smallest G-string I had ever seen. Using only one leg and no arms, she glided down the pole and began to writhe on the floor.

We took a table near the bar and the group split up; one to the bar for drinks, one to the loo, one pulled aside by a table of ladies whom he obviously knew. I sat down with Alex.

“Not been here before then?” he asked.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Put it like this, not often you see eyeballs that far out of their sockets.”

“I see, that obvious.”

Alex laughed and drew closer to my shoulder so he could be heard above the throbbing musical beat.

“You’re always slipping out at lunchtime. Got a little bit of business on the side?” He didn’t quite wink, but he may as well have.

“I go to see a lady down the road.” I made it sound casual.

“Nice one Roger, a lady. I like that, you sly dog.”

“She’s umm, a bit older. Middle Ages.”

“They’re the best. Experience is everything in that game. What’s her name?”

“Err...Venus.”

“Ha, ha, ha. Excellent. Classical.”

“Renaissance actually. And Italian.”

“Oh, even better; foreign totty. You really are a sly dog. Just wait till I tell the others, they’ll be well impressed.”

“It’s not just *her*, there are others. But she’s the real masterpiece.”

“Blimey Roger, where do you get the energy?”

Beer arrived at the table, along with two of the team and a scantily clad young lady with a wide, fixed smile.

“Everything all right, gentlemen? My name is Natalie. Anything you need you just have to ask. Remember, it’s strictly no touching, or Gavin,” she nodded her head towards an imposing suit of muscle standing by the door, “will be happy to throw you out.”

“Ere boys, listen to this.” Alex pulled the attention back to the table and everyone leaned in. “Turns out Roger is more of a sly dog than we thought. Got a bit of lunchtime action lined up called Venus.”

I was congratulated and slapped on the back.

“How often do you do ‘er then?” Clive asked, taking a long swill of beer.

“Oh I probably see her two or three times a week.”

“Jeez Roger, that must be heavy on the wallet.”

“Free entry.”

“Free entry. Lucky bugger. Name like Venus I thought you’d be paying through the nose.”

“You mean she just lets you slip in at lunchtime?” Steve sounded impressed.

“She’s always reclining in the same place, up against the wall.” I was enjoying the banter.

“Against the wall no less. You really are a dirty dog, Roger. Some of us had you down as just an artsy poofta, but we’ll have to reassess.”

“Sly dog, dirty dog and dark horse. I bet you do it doggy style, Roger.”

There was a burst of laughter around the table.

“Takes stamina.” Hamza joined the conversation for the first time, as if he had been thinking it all through. “Banging against the wall. Strong arms and lots of power in the core.” He looked me up and down with a hint of respect.

A new act was on stage, and attention flicked to the uplit blue neon floor show.

Clive leaned over towards me. "Does she take new customers, this Venus? I like the older ones myself. Always in less of a rush."

"Oh yes, she's always happy to see a new face."

"I'll get the address off you later." He seemed satisfied with that.

"You can become a supporter, pay an annual fee. It's tax deductible if you do it that way."

"Blimey, you are a long-term punter then."

"Been going for years, can't help myself. Her skin's so white. Never seems to age. I can't get enough of her look of complete satisfaction."

"Cor, I'm starting to get hard. Pale, ageless and against the wall. Sounds too good to be true."

I reassessed and decided I hated the people I worked with.

The second stage show was even more naked, if that was possible. Clive's attention was caught by the passing Natalie, who began to whisper a run-down of prices and minutes.

Alex reached over for his second pint. I was only halfway down my first.

"This Venus," he said, trying to sound casual, "Does she do anything around the back way?"

"Afraid not. There's nothing going on there. All an empty canvas."

"Pity, she sounds like a right goer."

"It'd take a few people to get her down and spin her around."

Alex's eyes widened. "What...like a gang bang? She does that too? That's bloody Italians for you. Shame about the back door."

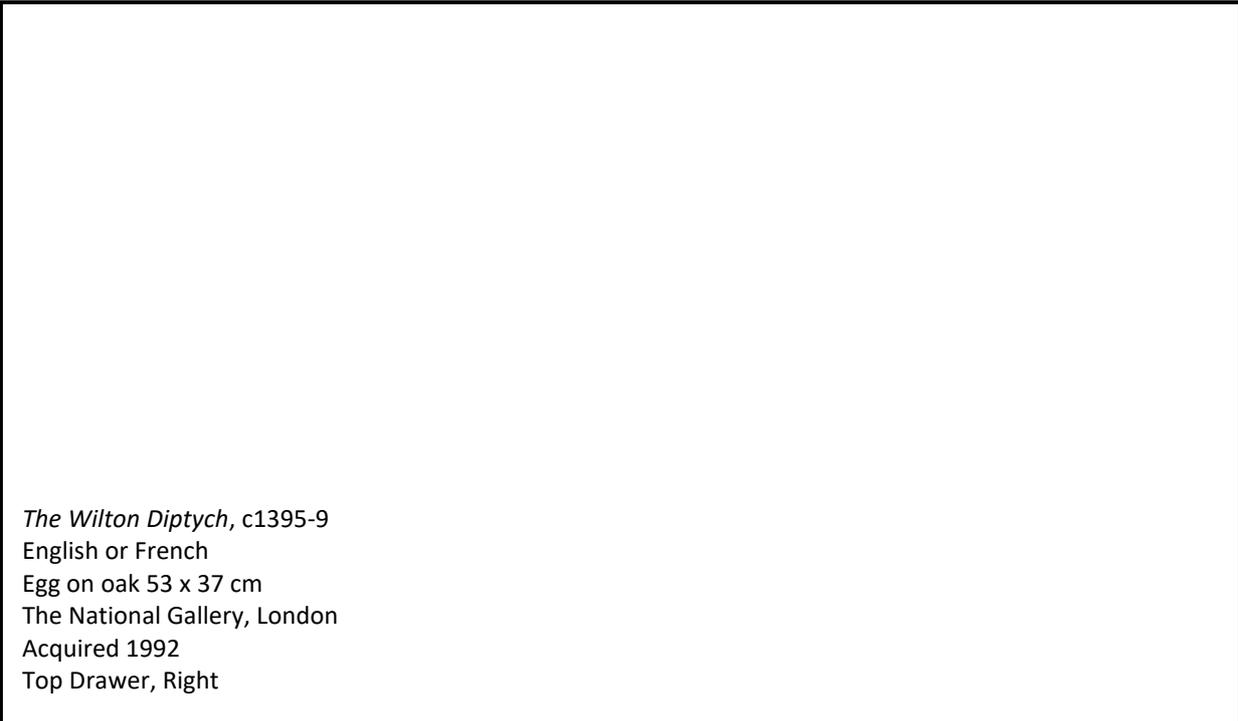
I downed the rest of my pint and made the excuse of a meeting to get to. Clive had disappeared with Natalie, but I left the other three laughing together. Happy to have some new office gossip.

Did I still have enough time for a quick visit to the National? Smooth my nerves with a splash of culture? I could apologise to Venus for pimping her out to a bunch of drunken salesmen. No chance of her being a fake. I wondered what address I could give to Clive.

PART IV
Margot

The Wilton Diptych

Missing



The Wilton Diptych, c1395-9
English or French
Egg on oak 53 x 37 cm
The National Gallery, London
Acquired 1992
Top Drawer, Right

The young King kneels in front of three saintly men – kings and martyrs. They direct his attention with their right hands, while in their left each holds a symbol; the arrow of martyrdom, the ring of kingship and the Lamb of God. The child King's red tapestry robe is festooned with designs of deer amid garlands of broomseed pods. His hands, slightly open, are not pressed in prayer, but waiting outstretched to receive a gift. All four men look intently to their left to the joining panel where a blue-robed Mary holds the infant Jesus in the King's direction, a precious bundle of joy. Around Mary cluster eleven blue-clad angels, their white, grey and black wings like a flight of herons. Each a blend of the unknown artist's observation and imagination.

The boy King is Richard II. Not the evil hunchbacked monster Richard, who did away with the princes in the Tower and whose mutilated body was dug out of a car park in Leicester, but an earlier relation, from nearly a century before. Shakespeare wrote plays about both of them, but we only recall the evil one, Richard III. Writing about this more civil Richard here in the painting, the Bard said:

“Not all the waters in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;”

They share an unlucky similarity, Richard II and Richard III. Both lost the crown of England. Richard II deposed by his uncle's son, Henry IV, while Richard III lost the Battle of Bosworth to Henry Tudor, ending the Plantagenet line forever.

I was standing in the subterranean exhibition rooms of the National Gallery, holding a full glass of red. Trying to look casual while admiring the small oak panel called the Wilton Diptych. One of the perks of working for a big company with deep pockets was being invited to these after-work functions. A profitable corporate, hoping to impress clients by being cultured and helping them rub shoulders with priceless art and famous experts. I was already a lover of the Diptych and its rich history, but I was hoping to rub more than shoulders with the antipodean PA I had spotted hovering near the wine table. I had noticed her several times at work, and felt emboldened by our brief conversations at the photocopier and the coffee machine. I was surprised to see her here at the exhibition, convinced parties and raves were more her scene. Perhaps we could talk more freely away from the office. Watching her, my imagination was running riot. It turned out that she was from New Zealand. A year or so later we would be having a daughter and she would hand the precious infant to me, just like the

blue-robed Madonna. The baby Jesus wasn't wearing a nappy, but there were plenty of angels on hand to help. We wouldn't have any baby-help, angelic or otherwise, but on that spring evening in London, parenthood was a long way from our minds.

The Wilton Diptych overflows with symbolism. The white deer, known poetically as a white hart, although that comes with overtones of English pubs and football grounds, was the King's badge and is worn by Richard and all the angels. Look a little closer and you will see that they all wear necklaces composed of seed pods from the broom plant. A reference to the Latin name for the broom, *planta genista*; Richard was a Plantagenet king. I knew lots of these little stories and something of the life of Richard. In the catalogue for the exhibition, a chapter of historical background had been written by Dr Caroline Barron, who had been my university tutor. She was an expert on Richard and the Peasant's Revolt which came to a head just down the road in Smithfield. The fourteen-year-old King defused the situation and the rebel leader, at the head of a mob of forty thousand angry men, was killed. Richard was on the cusp for me, right at the end of my course of mediaeval studies. As far as I was concerned, he was almost Modern History.

Richard's first wife, Anne of Bohemia, died in 1394, about the same time as the panel was painted. The young couple were unusual. For a start they were both about the same age and seemed to be very much in love. That didn't happen much in those days. Richard was only 33 when he died. Exactly my age. The young King was encouraged to marry again, and a union with Isabella of Valois was arranged. She was only six. Richard was dead by the time she was nine and she was married-off again, only to die in childbirth at the age of nineteen.

The Diptych is a portrait of the young King, newly single, kneeling in front of his ancestors, the Anglo-Saxon Kings Edmund and Edward. I have called them panels, but in fact the Diptych was a small portable altar. Fold the hinges together, close it up, and off you go to the next palace or stately home with your retinue of nobles and courtiers. More feasting and drinking. But the Diptych was for Richard's quiet moments, when he spoke his prayers and sought help with his most pressing worries. Oddly, as he knelt before the altar, there was a picture of himself kneeling before the Madonna.

The significance of my moment in front of this tiny altar would only become apparent much later, after I had enticed the young PA into my bed and into my life. I was newly single too,

enjoying my freedom in the city of London. In possession of what looked like a secure job, and about to be handed a child. All the angels' eyes were blue, but hers were brown. I called them brown, as in *Brown-eyed girl*, the song we sang together, but she preferred to call them hazel. She didn't favour blue either, preferring clothes of brown, black or tan. Like the kneeling monarch, my eyes were fixed on the beautiful woman in front of me. But first there would be too much red wine, then too much drunken sex, followed the next morning by copious amounts of coffee, and finally sex that was slower, less rushed, and more pleasurable. All the waters of London could not fully wash out and remove the red wine stain from her white shirt. No balm or ointment could soak it out, so that when she finally returned to work after two nights and a day in bed with me, she was still robed in that same shirt, with its secret spill of wine that was my excuse to get her nearly naked. I watched that mark all day from my desk across the office, hardly able to contain myself until I could remove the shirt again that night. By then we were a couple.

For weeks we were furtive, unable to acknowledge our new relationship at work for fear of infringing some unspoken employment protocol. This was taking client relationships too far. We spent our evenings together in the west or north of London, unwilling to be parted until the early hours, when I would drive her home to Islington before returning home to shower and catch the tube to work. Brushed and ironed into a presentable suit, trying not to grin like a monkey. On weekends we went away, exploring the country, with me as guide to all things historical. Staying in old pubs and inns, we rumbled the sheets into tangled knots at every opportunity; at The Lifeboat, The White Horse, The Red Lion, but never The White Hart.

The Reading Girl

Missing



The Reading Girl, 1886
Theodore Roussel, 1847-1926
Oil on canvass, 152.4 x 161.3 cm
Tate Gallery, London
Acquired 1988
Bottom Drawer, Left

Reading was a little ritual that I shared with Margot. A simple thing that had a special place in our developing relationship. The nightly ritual soon became embedded in our lives. Not lost in separate books, but me reading aloud to her. The reading had its origins in me telling stories, reading a few pages, and later, playing her an audio cassette.

In my bedroom drawer was a box of recordings of *The Hobbit*, following the adventures of Bilbo Baggins, which we listened to early in our relationship. We fell asleep to the sound of murmuring voices. Soon after I was nicknamed 'Hobbit', partly because I loved the stories of Tolkien, and partly because I lived in an underground flat, the back half with no windows or natural light, just like a hobbit hole. Margot had not been brought up with these tales, no one had ever read them to her as a child. Thinking about it, no one read them to me either, but they were there in my life from an early point, taking over from the *Famous Five* and the *Secret Seven*. Life dominated by mythic characters, rather than lashings of ginger beer.

Where did our reading go after Tolkien? It is hard to recall exactly what came next, but at some point, we left the dwarves and elves behind, and planted ourselves firmly into the world of men. Bernard Cornwall was a favourite for quite a while. From Uhtred of Bebbenberg in Anglo-Saxon days, to Thomas of Hookton, mediaeval archer at the battle of Agincourt. Plenty of adventure, battle scenes, rough living and swearing. Not exactly gentle night-time reading, but enough to send Margot off to sleep. Sometimes she would doze off and I would swap the book I was reading to her for another title that I was reading alone; the book I had for the train journey into work or the lunchtime alone with my sandwich.

Our reading out loud lasted a long time, surviving our transition from daters to parents, from London to New Zealand. I liked the nickname 'Hobbit'. The way it was said quietly, whispered almost, at the point she fell asleep. "Goodnight, Hobbit." Little more than the movement of lips. A susurration.

The reading became even more important during the pregnant times, when Margot was uncomfortable with the baby pushing on her insides, always telling me that she could feel the springs in the bed. So convinced was she that the bed was at fault, that I ended up creating what was known as 'upper class' in our bed, an extra duvet, double or triple folded and placed beneath the sheet to protect her from the vicious springs. That left her much higher in the bed than me, in the upper class perhaps or business, with me down in economy. There were never any springs, it was just the tangle of limbs, of developing bones that were pressing on

her insides. Men have no idea what that must be like. Margot and I spent hours debating the uselessness of mattress makers, how they could let so many springs poke out. We changed sides one night, just so that I could feel how bad they were. Took the bed apart, moved the cushioning. There were no springs, and I slept soundly, while Margot rumbled round trying to find any position that was comfortable.

There came a point when the name of Hobbit was taken away from me, never again to be spoken softly or lovingly into my ear. All softness left, to be replaced by stone. A cold stone, plucked from a frozen mountain side or taken from the bed of a river where the snow melt was rushing past. It held the frost of winter which never melted into the fresh green shades of spring. What did I do to lose my nickname?

Chiaroscuro – the technical phrase for the strong contrast between dark and light. The transition from the loving nickname period to the darker, unloved times. The beginning of the end, where the warmth faded and the bitterness and hatred slowly seeped in, bringing the chill of ending.

The Reading Girl

The young woman sits in the chair oblivious to the eyes of the observer. She is engrossed in reading her magazine. It is not like a modern magazine, with glossy pages of salacious stories, photos and adverts for the latest, must-have, items. This is a serious magazine, all text and no pictures. This is a thinking, intelligent, magazine. And that is the impression that she gives us of herself. Clever, but unabashed. Happy to spend an hour with her magazine while quite naked. Over the back of the chair is her silk kimono. Pink inside and sky-blue trimmed, with designs of cherry blossom and tree branches on the white front. The fabric trails across the floor in an oddly twisting fashion. Trailing like her long legs trail from the folding campaign chair. Her right hand, holding the magazine and resting on the chair arm, helps to cover her belly and her nakedness, so there is nothing for us to see of her lower half, beyond those long trailing legs.

Her chin is almost resting on her chest, her long neck stretched forwards. Because her face is tilted away from us and in shadow, you cannot tell if her eyes are open. The light falls fully on her bare chest and the kimono. There is no illumination of the black background, nothing

more to connect her with the rest of the picture than the legs of the chair and the pink silk on the floor. Like a Caravaggio, a chiaroscuro, there is just blackness beyond her and the edge of her black hair is lost into the background.

The name of the model is Hetty. Short for Harriet. She was a professional model, along with her two younger sisters. The artists who painted them were the best of the best in their day, and the young ladies were much in demand. Their father was a cork cutter from Portsmouth, their mother a needle worker, who between them had thirteen children. They must have been happy that their three daughters found well paid work modelling in London.

There is one piece of the picture which I find puzzling. Hetty's right hand. It should be fully in the light, in the brightest part of the painting with the soft whiteness of her thigh just below and her belly above. But the hand is dark. Blackened. Like she has been using it to pick up coal. A dusty black, at odds with the rest of her colouration. What does this mean? Is there some subtle message there about her status? Does it tell us that she is a working girl, whose job was to do menial tasks, to make the fire or to work outside? There is the slightest hint of sun colouring on her forearms, perhaps she was someone who worked outdoors. Everything else in the picture is about sophistication.

I love the unexpected size of this picture. No tiny miniature that can be overlooked on the gallery wall. This is life sized. More than one and a half metres in each direction. This is vast and in your face, a whole wall full, and I love that about it.

Dig a little into the history of this painting and you will soon discover that its initial reception was less than complimentary. The critic for the *Spectator* wrote:

“Our imagination fails to conceive any adequate reason for a picture of this sort. It is realism of the worst kind, the artist's eye seeing only the vulgar outside of his model, and reproducing that callously and brutally. No human being, we should imagine, could take any pleasure in such a picture as this; it is a degradation of Art.” (*Spectator*, 16 April 1887).

The artist, Theodore Roussel, is better known for his etchings and scenes from along the Thames. Wonderful glimpses of life in the Victorian city. He certainly benefitted from the mild scandal that his painting of Hetty generated. His friendship with Whistler also deepened. In 1890 they were both drawing and painting Hetty at the same time, as she reclined naked on a carved wooden sofa strewn with clothes and pillows. I prefer Roussel's version, in which

Hetty is more languid. Her eyes are closed but her pose is provocative. She was *his* mistress after all.

I discovered that Roussel lived in Parsons Green, a long skinny length of London that ran alongside the Thames from Hammersmith until it joined up with Chiswick. There was a cinema there where Margot and I watched Guy Ritchie movies, and close by an excellent Chinese where we loved the duck that we would roll in pancakes and hoisin sauce. Just along the road the hospital was where our little daughter was born.

Chiaroscuro, A Profile, the Golden Scarf

Now that I knew Hetty was the model for *The Reading Girl*, I could find out a little bit more about her. She was only 19 when Roussel painted her reading in the chair. That was in 1886. At some point after that Hetty became his mistress. She was often in his paintings and many by contemporary artists such as Millais, Holman Hunt and Whistler. In 1900, sixteen years after they first met, Hetty bore Roussel a daughter, whom they called Iris. He was 53, Hetty twenty years younger. It was at this point that Roussel painted what I think is the most stunning portrait, *Chiaroscuro, A Profile, the Golden Scarf*. I have never seen this picture in real life, only in its pixelated form online. That will never be the same as standing in front of layers of paint. Whatever the camera can do, and it can do some amazing things, it cannot replicate the layers of oil paint that pile one upon another to give height and depth and texture on a canvass.

Side on, the portrait captures the essence of a beautiful young mother, about the same age as Margot when she was fighting with the springs in our bed. Again the lighting is dramatic. Only one side of her face and neck are illuminated, along with the deep plunge of her neckline. On her head the golden fabric catches some of the light. The scarf, piled up high, comes down low on her forehead, casting her eyes into shade. There is a hint that some of her dark hair may be falling out of the front of the scarf, but the shadows could be playing tricks. It is her nose, lips and ear that are all in the brightest light. And it is her lips that form the most sensual moment of the whole painting. Full and very slightly parted. Everything else lost into the chiaroscuro. It is hard to say exactly what quality of lips makes them most kissable. The lips in this picture do it for me in a way no other piece of art does. I wasn't going to tell Margot they did more for me than her lips.

Roussel's wife of twenty-nine years died in 1909, leaving him free to marry again. His daughter by Hetty, would have been nine by then. But, in 1914 Roussel married Ethel Melville, widow of the Scottish painter Arthur Melville. This was the point at which Hetty stopped modelling for him. Had he overstepped the mark, was this one insult too many? Hetty was aged about 47 by then, but would live for nearly another forty years.

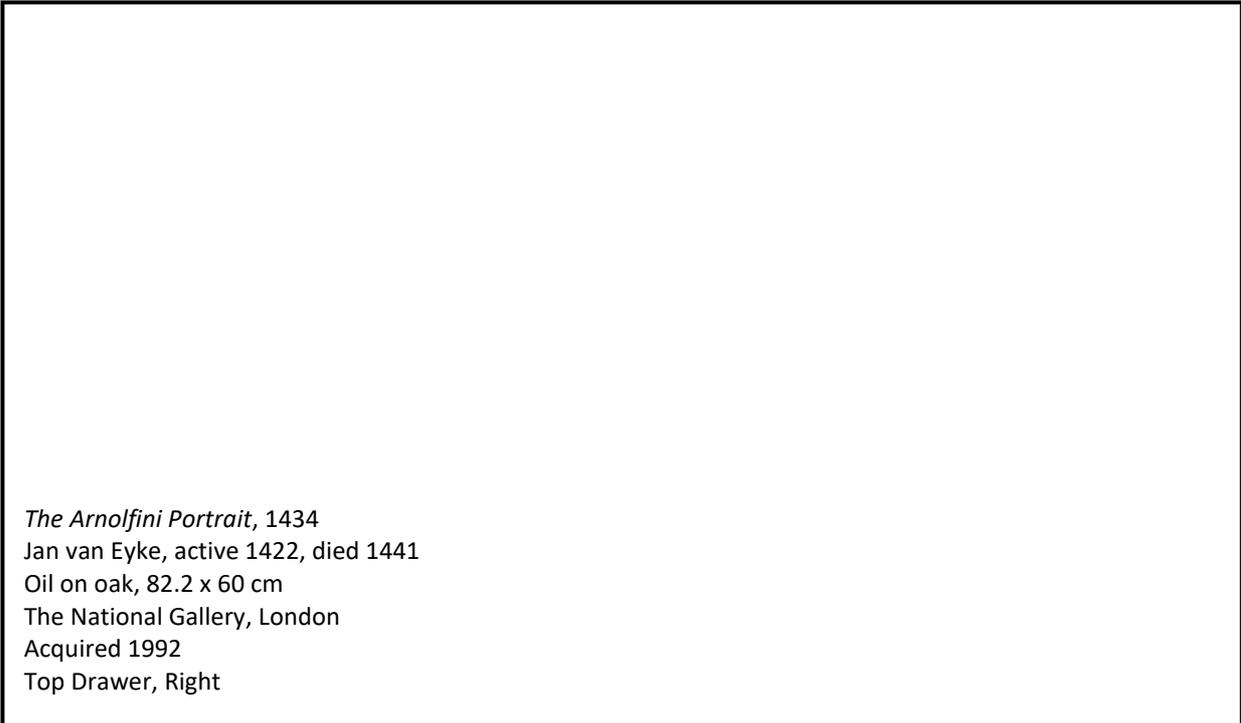
The meagre sources that I found about their tangled lives could not tell me if the end of her modelling for Roussel was something Hetty instigated, because she felt his rejection so keenly, or if it was Ethel, his new wife, who made the relationship between model and painter, mistress and artist, come to such an abrupt end. At that point, Roussel and Hetty's daughter Iris would have been growing up fast, the same age as my daughter when I walked out on Margot forever.

I think it was Oscar Wilde who said, "A man who marries his mistress leaves a vacancy in that position."

In the period of time after I lost my nickname, Margot continued to read, but never to be read to. She absorbed herself in her books alone. She was never as relaxed and naked as Hetty in *The Reading Girl*, either before I lost my nickname and certainly not after. She took a different literary course, started to read stories of romance and sex that I would never dream of reading myself. I think she was searching for something she had lost, an intimacy I had taken from her, an excitement even. We lay in bed, beside each other, worlds apart.

The Arnolfini Wedding

Missing



The Arnolfini Portrait, 1434
Jan van Eyke, active 1422, died 1441
Oil on oak, 82.2 x 60 cm
The National Gallery, London
Acquired 1992
Top Drawer, Right

The Arnolfini Wedding by Jan van Eyck, 1434, can be found in London's National Gallery. This small wonderfully detailed painting has been the subject of much speculation in recent years, since the emergence of a theory that it may have been painted after the death of Constanza (on the right) in childbirth. She looks pregnant in the picture, her left hand resting on her bump in the same way all pregnant mothers do. Her death might explain the sombre black and brown clothes worn by Giovanni (on the left), if indeed these are the subjects. Nothing is certain. I loved this painting and for years would visit the original at least once every month

The joy is in the details and the subliminal messages they tell, like the beautiful brass light hanging from the ceiling with its single lit candle, a symbol of a wedding contract. The curving mirror on the wall behind the couple, in which it is just possible to see what could be the artist entering the room wearing a blue turban. Above the mirror there is writing on the wall. This is where the artist has chosen to sign the painting. Jan van Eyck was here 1434, it says. Sometimes we feel compelled to write on the wall, to let our feeling out. Some people write on walls just to be antisocial; others, writing on the lounge wall using permanent marker, are trying to make a statement in the most obvious place possible – just above the flat screen TV.

Some scholars have tried to argue that Constanza is not pregnant at all, that this was the way artists at the time tried to portray women, with rich gowns looking like they were, but in fact not. There is a great deal of emotion around the subject of pregnancy and childbirth. The arrival of the news that a woman is pregnant can spell so many things; the beginning of a wonderful journey into parenthood, or the trapping of a partner into a relationship that neither party was ready for. Such discussions soon become impossible to hold, for the sake of all those involved, but especially the resulting child. These conversations become unnecessary when you fall in love with that little person. When you hold their tiny body in your arms and are enchanted by their innocent smiles and gurgling noises. No-one feels trapped at that point.

Only much later, when you are looking back from a point where there is hurt and pain. When you still love the little being that was born out of love and lust, and is quite the most perfect gift. But your love for their mother, well that may have waned and now you think you both of you were trapped because of your child.

I remember the night, the day and the night, after we discovered the news. The long searching conversations about what we should do and also the unspoken options. The option that was too painful to call by name. The thing that neither of us could say, the spectre of

which hung around the sunken bedroom, filling us with fear. We were new lovers. This was too soon to know if we were right for each other, for ever. Would everything work and we'd be brilliant parents? This was a big change. Up to this point we were being carefree. Delighting in having no real plans and enjoying every moment together. What would happen when there was someone else in the room, in the house, in our lives? How would we feel then?

I suppose the fact that we even needed to have that conversation in the first place says there were doubts in our minds. If we had known that we were perfect for each other for ever, then there would have been no difficult conversation. We would have just got on with things.

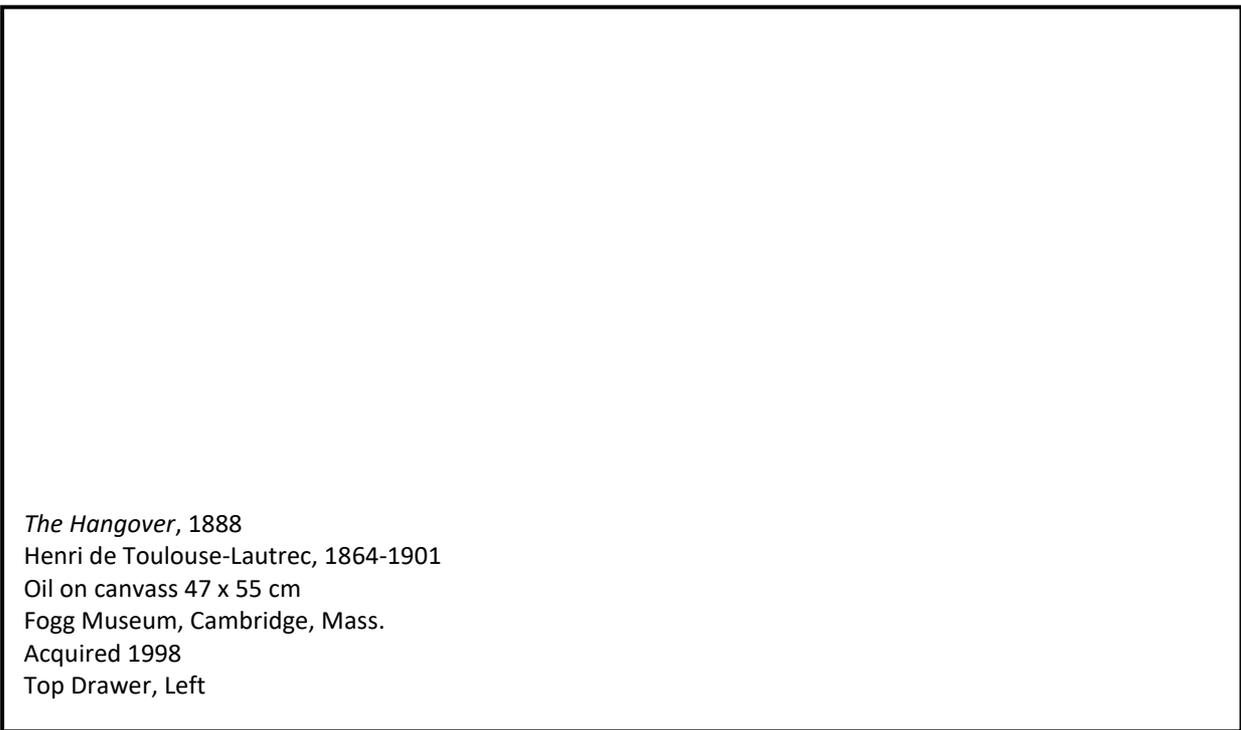
Van Eyck has placed a number of symbols of purity throughout the painting of *The Arnolfini Wedding*. The spotless mirror and the translucent beads of the rosary hanging on the wall next to it. These were things that often appear in paintings of the Virgin, while little dogs were symbols of fidelity in marriage.

If you look closely in the background of the painting, just to the right of the ornate brass chandelier, there is a carved wooden finial to the high-backed chair. This is Saint Margaret. We know this because she is subduing a dragon. The patron saint of pregnant women. My advice is to be careful which Margaret you mean. There are two saints with that name. Margaret of Antioch is indeed the patron saint of expectant mothers. She was allegedly swallowed whole by Satan, but his stomach rejected her, opening up and letting her step out unharmed. The other Margaret, Margaret of Cortona, is patron saint of the falsely accused. I was just the person to need her help. She also got to advocate for the homeless, the insane, the single mothers, reformed prostitutes and step children. Little did I know that several of these things would come my way in subsequent years. I would date a reformed prostitute for a short time, before she confessed. Perhaps that doesn't count.

Van Eyck's painting is sometimes known as *The Arnolfini Portrait*, sometimes as the *Wedding*. The jury remains out about what is really being shown here. Was there a wedding? That was a painful subject that Margot and I would spend the next four years working on.

The Hangover

Missing



The Hangover, 1888
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1864-1901
Oil on canvass 47 x 55 cm
Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass.
Acquired 1998
Top Drawer, Left

In the confluence of English counties, on the wavering boundaries of Wiltshire, Oxford and Berkshire, close the White Horse of Uffington, is a small quaint country pub. The landlord is a lover of whiskey and has an unrivalled collection of bottles behind the bar. I think he said there were over sixty, but my memory is a little hazy. There are blanks.

Margot claimed to be a whiskey lover, but after that evening I think she lost her taste for it. They were heady times, in the early flush of love and lust. Adjusting to new feelings and different priorities. Living life to the full and finding something more to my taste. We were frequent visitors to the Downs, those rolling chalky hills of southern England that could be found to the south or west of London. Inland downs or coastal ones, we didn't mind as long as it meant long walks in countryside. I had begun to talk about long walks again, and was heartened to see that Margot possessed a pair of stout walking boots. They were not new and shiny, but scuffed and marked and slightly worn on the heels. They had actually walked long walks. My dream of walking the Icknield Way had returned from the dark place into which it had vanished during the years with Samantha. Margot even fuelled this dream by finding me a copy of *The Icknield Way* by Edward Thomas. In those early internet days, there was no such thing as online second-hand bookshopping, but she had emailed a collector who had magicked a copy up from somewhere. I pored over the pages, looking at the woodcut illustrations, thinking about routes that Thomas took, and how they might be different today.

The Icknield Way crosses southern England, from North Norfolk to the Dorset coast. One of the oldest roads in Britain, it was never turned into a motorway or even a proper road, but remains for much of its length a trackway. I wanted to take photographs from one end to the other, even if I had to do it stage by stage. Because it was such an ancient trackway, following the downs in many places, bits run close to all the ancient sites; prehistoric stone circles, barrows and hillforts that I dragged Margot around the country to see.

The Icknield Way was published in 1913 and has over fifty small black and white pen drawings of scenes along the route. The style of the book, with these beautiful drawings, took me back to school days when an old illustrated copy of *The Natural History of Selborne* was where I learnt all manner of pen and ink techniques that I used in my art class.

The book chronicles ten days of walking, and includes some delightful caricatures of the people Thomas encountered along the way. It takes him over eighty pages of his book to get to the start of the walk, and even then he does not bother to get to the furthest point north,

in that part of Norfolk where as a child I had already walked a tiny fraction of the Icknield Way, or as it is called up there, The Peddars' Way.

Straight off, Thomas arrives in Thetford and heads off on a diversion when talking to one of the locals.

“In the railway train I asked a man who knew all the country about him whether he knew the Icknield Way, but he did not. He knew where the oaks and pines grew best and what they fetched, the value of the land, the crops on an acre of it and what they fetched. He knew men's rents and what each farm cost when it changed hands last. He knew also the men living and dead, and the lives they lived, what they were worth, and whose bed they died in. He was a man himself, a vast handsome fellow nearing sixty, well bearded, whiskered and moustached, but not so as to hide full red lips and small, cheerful, and penetrating dark eyes...After much about the price of potatoes, etc., that came in at one ear and bolted straight out of the other, he told me about himself and his family.”⁷

Nothing to do with the trackway but everything to do with life around him. It is a rich book, and here I was at last with my own fine green-covered copy. Not a first edition, but early and with all those illustrations.

The Icknield Way and *The Natural History of Selborne*, both green and both resplendent with drawings of a long vanished Edwardian Britain. Both lost to Margot's late-night jealousy, when my late arrival home made her search out my most loved books and tear their pages away from the green spines, ripping the beautiful pen and ink plates into several pieces so it was impossible to reconstruct them or consider the possibility of salvaging one to put in a frame on the wall. I could have understood if it was just *The Icknield Way*, it was a gift from her and she thought that I no longer deserved it. I was no longer special enough for all the effort that she made. But the Selborne was mine and I had drawn so many of those pictures myself, learned the technique of trees and buildings from the artist Edmund New. I was infuriated more by that wound than by the loss of her gift. Part of my childhood gone. It remains unreplaced. Because the book has been in print for so long, there are so many versions that I have struggled to find the exact same copy. Only that one will do. And what would I do if I

⁷ Thomas, Edward, *The Ickneild Way* (London: Constable, 1913)

had such a copy? Set to work copying those pen and ink drawings once more. Learn that technique all over again. Damn right.

Would I replace the Thomas too? Yes, but it would be a costly venture. Not so many copies of that volume out there in the world. Perhaps others had been the source of dispute too, only to be found eviscerated on the study floor.

I realise that I too have done an Edward Thomas, taken off on a distraction and abandoned my thread. The little pub and the night of whiskey, when we asked the landlord which was the best and sampled that. Then set off through a tour of several more, before landing on some favourites, the names of which are now entirely forgotten. Margot told the story of a Hogmanay in Edinburgh where in the early hours of the New Year a wizened and whiskered Scottish gentleman had introduced her to what he thought was the finest whiskey in the world with the description “like an angel having an orgasm on your tongue, lassie.” She couldn’t remember the name of that one either. Perhaps that is the secret of the Scottish distillers, by the time you’ve drunk enough to find the holy grail of fine taste, you’re too drunk to remember the name and so the search begins all over again. The landlord liked her story.

Late the following morning we emerged, plagued by beating hangovers. Although we had officially missed the time for breakfast, the patron’s wife smiled kindly on us and cooked up something greasy and nourishing that made us feel half-human. I suspect she had encountered the same situation before, when her husband had encouraged other guests to travel widely across the stills of Scotland, only to regret their journey the next day.

We had reason to regret more than most, as a few weeks later we discovered Margot was pregnant. It was a night of whiskey we never should have had, but one which thankfully had no lasting impact on the youngster, although neither she nor Margot has ever shown any inclination to unstopper another whiskey bottle.

That painful morning always brings to mind *The Hangover*, a painting from 1888 by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. A woman in profile, her head rested in her left hand, elbows on a small round café table which holds a bottle of red wine and a nearly empty glass. ‘Hair of the dog’ might have been a better title, although I’m sure the French don’t use that phrase, saying something more akin to fight evil with evil or bad with bad. Anyhow, Suzanne the model, who had the same dark eyebrows as Margot, also had a scowl and a downturned mouth which gave away her suffering. I can’t recall another painting which so beautifully captures that

moment of regret the following morning. When you wished you had had a little more sense, or restraint, the previous night. Suzanne Valadon, the model Toulouse-Lautrec used was painted by Renoir five years before, red bonneted and dancing with a man in a straw hat. She is young and has a healthy rounded face. The same dark eyebrows are very much in evidence. Along with a powerfully shaped nose.

At the time Toulouse-Lautrec captured Suzanne's hangover she was only twenty-three but already has lost some of those more rounded features. By then she had been his lover for two years, but her attempted suicide brought their relationship to an end. I am not sure which came first, or if one led to the other.

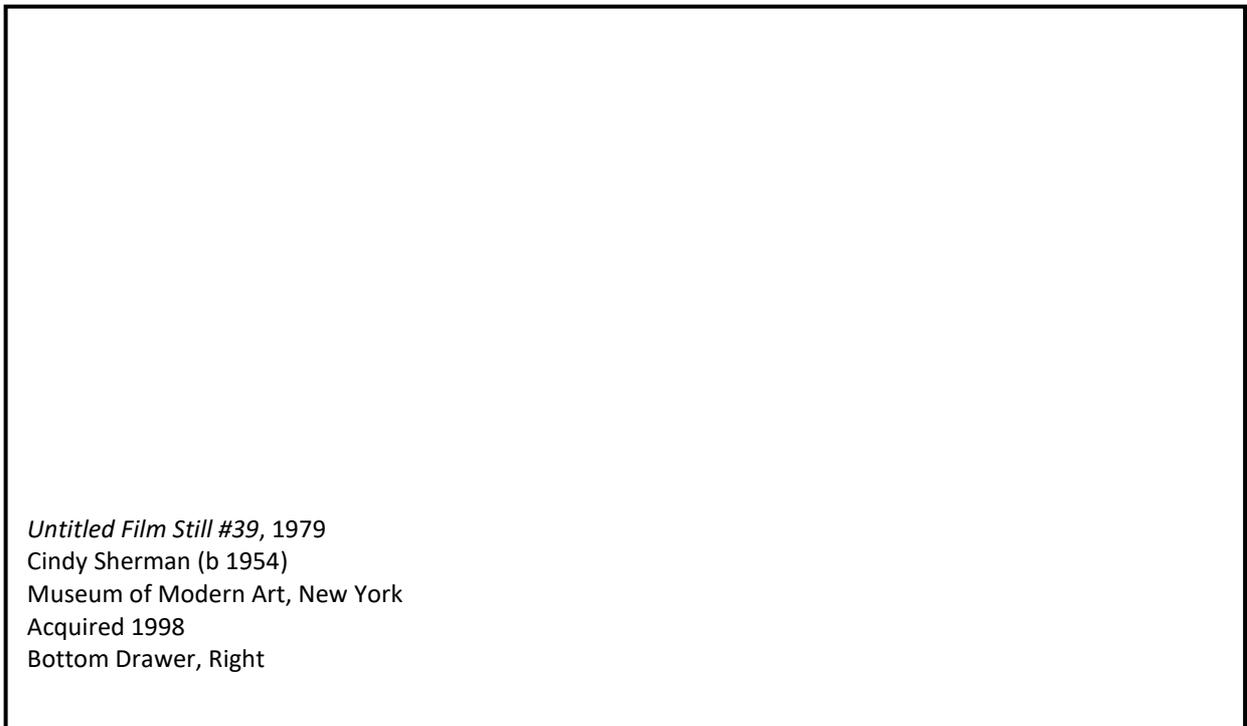
Thankfully she was unsuccessful. By the 1890s she was painting in her own right. Degas saw some of her work and encouraged her to continue. Valadon's self-portrait from 1898 is stunningly beautiful. She is thirty-three and after only six years as a painter has mastered the craft. I love the ice-cold blue eyes, the arching black eyebrows still prominent, the red hair and the strong jaw line. Ten years before she was just the model, now she has transformed into the master. I love the assurance of her work. As she modelled she also learned, listening and watching the masters at work. What would someone give to have been the pupil of Renoir and Lautrec?

There is another self-portrait from 1927, the same strong woman clearly evident. Now in her early fifties, she still has those dark black eyebrows, the strong jaw line. The style has moved on, it has elements that you can see in others of the time. Hints of Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell in the patterns and technique. The eyebrows the same as the ones I see every time I catch up with our daughter.

Today I went in search of a postcard, one that I knew, against the odds, had survived. Instead of that one I found another, survivor because of its size – slightly too big for the wooden box. It was inside a folder of stories, paper cuttings and little sketches of my own, a pencil sketch by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. Dated 1896 it is called *Femme Couchée – Réveil* (Sleeping woman – Waking up). I bought it from the Courtauld Gallery on the Strand, when I was in love with Margot. It is a pencil sketch. A woman in a rumped bed, cushions piled high. The main detail is around the hair and eye of the waking woman. The dark eyebrow reminded me so much of Margot that I placed it on my wall at work, as a reminder of those languishing mornings making love when we first met. There was Suzanne, in all her glory.

So many levels of artifice⁸

Missing



⁸ Cindy Sherman talking about her own photos.

It is always a risk, not giving your work of art a name. Other people will come along and look to assign it a name, just to help them know what we are talking about. The situation is made worse if there are lots of these untitled works. When Cindy Sherman began on her black and white photographic essay and called all sixty-nine pictures *Untitled Film Still*, there was no way around the problem. Someone had to give them all a number.

They can all be found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The grainy black and white photos look like B Movie stills or film noir advertising. Each one is a photo of Cindy, dressed in a range of wigs and op-shop outfits. She creates different characters from the fifties and sixties. They come with no story or explanation. You, the viewer, have to provide that. Some of the pictures give you plenty to work with, props and backgrounds, a whole setting for a story. Others are little more than a face and the neckline of a blouse. One is the tear-stained face of a woman at a table with a cigarette in her hand. Even the top of her head and hair are outside the picture. Every viewer will assign a different story. Has her boyfriend cheated on her, has her father died, or is she just recovering having watched a weepie film? So many possibilities, and all of them rest on our hands.

I love that all the photos are fake. Nothing is real. The woman, Cindy, is obviously very invested in each photo. She is both artist and subject. Playing the role of the woman in each shot. She is the only character in every photograph. Apart from the gaze of the viewer, it is all about her. Sixty-nine fakes.

Relationships can be full of forgery. On the surface everything looks fine. The outwards picture we present to the world is of domestic happiness. These are the scenes, the photos that sit on the sideboards of our lives. On display. But the photos we never take, those of the tears, the anger and the malice, are never on show. There are no pictures of us deliberately doing something to hurt the other. No backward glance from the brothel door. No candid moment with scissors and silk ties in hand.

I'm not sure I looked carefully at every one of the sixty-nine versions of *Untitled Film Still*, but I know that there are five which count as my all-time favourites. They have the most powerful stories, and an element of the erotic. Where the erotic is combined with the narrative is the place to pan for gold.

Untitled Film Still #4

In *Untitled Film Still #4* a woman in a light-coloured suit is standing leaning against a door. The door is closed. So are her eyes. Is she waiting for someone to come home? Has she been waiting for long? I feel she has. A dark three-quarter-length coat is thrown over her shoulders. The doorframe in which she is leaning is part of a long corridor. We can only see a short way along it, but it is completely bare. The only visible feature is a wooden beam running across the ceiling. You know it is wooden because of the wandering crack through it. The picture is grainy, suggesting it was taken at night. Perhaps she has been waiting here for hours? Did the man she is waiting for stand her up? What has he done to her that makes her keep waiting? Why, after so many hours, does she continue to stand there? She could go home and try calling him. Something is compelling her to stand here. Does she think that this is her only chance to catch him? Might he leave or disappear? Does she have a piece of urgent, pressing news that she must tell this stranger? Did they meet just once before and did things get a little out of hand, go too far, and now there are consequences? Something is driving her to keep standing here and not give up. There are a thousand possibilities.

Margot came to my flat one night, early in our relationship. She had no idea if I would be home or not, and nor did she know the exact address. She just told the cab driver to take her to Chiswick. She rang me from the back seat and made me give the driver exact instructions. She was drunk but she wanted to be with me, and I found that flattering. I paid the driver and agreed with his observation that she seemed like a lovely girl. I guided her down the passage to my basement flat. We had noisy sex and then I gave her tea and a meal, knowing she would feel better for it in the morning. In the early hours I drove her home, so she could change and shower for work. #4 reminds me of that evening, of what might have happened if I had been out and had come home to find Margot, eyes closed, half sleeping against my front door. Waiting for my return from who knows what other adventures.

Untitled Film Still #14

Untitled Film Still #14 contains an object on which the whole story hinges. The dark-haired woman in the black silk evening dress is holding something in her right hand. It could be a

knife in a black plastic sleeve. It might just be something covered in an old sock. It may or may not have a handle which the woman is gripping. Her facial expression is slightly apprehensive, her sideways look has a hint of uncertainty. She is standing in front of a low sideboard and there is a mirror on the wall behind her. Reflected in the mirror are one or two clues; the corner of a dining table, a single glass of champagne in front of a chair and a man's jacket hanging over the back. Is she about to take the 'possible' knife, pull it from the sleeve and stab him? Is he blackmailing her over something? Is he about to take her out for the evening, is that why she's dressed up? Over the top of her silk dress is a black lace jacket which fastens at the back on the neckline. The lace separates to show a long glimpse of her bare back. It is quite a sexy outfit. But she is so wary. Her pose is stiff and alert. What has he done to her that is making her wary? The champagne implies something good between them, a celebration. Is the knife to defend herself, or to attack when least expected. Has she been provoked or is she afraid? It is impossible to read her eyes.

#14 reminds me of the night I took Margot to the company summer ball. It was ridiculously lavish. They had rented Blenheim Palace for the night. There were marquees on the lawns and fairground rides. All very formal, black tie. Margot was pregnant, although not visibly so. In fact, was she ever visibly pregnant? Even the midwife at the hospital that we rushed to was looking around for someone who looked obviously pregnant. It was only when Margot doubled over, gripped with the pain of a contraction that the midwife spotted us.

There were hundreds of people at the ball, including a woman whom I had dated briefly before I met Margot. Her name was Caroline. Knowing, even then, that Margot could be a little jealous, I had skimmed over her story a little and shortened her to Carol. But I remember bumping into Caroline at the ball and introducing her to Margot. We talked for a few minutes before drifting off to play on some more fairground games. Margot gripped my hand. "That was her wasn't it?" she whispered threateningly into my ear. To my discredit, I said no and went back to the lie about her being called Carol. Why was I so worried about things that had happened in the past? I had no need to be insecure about anything. Looking back, it makes no sense. Nor did Margot's attitude. She hoarded away snippets of information to use against me at some point in the future. "Was that something you and Carol did together?" she asked in that tone of slimy contempt, when I suggested a we try something different in bed.

Margot, in her lacy black evening dress, had that same look in her eyes as #14. Ready to slip a broad knife blade between the ribs.

Untitled Film Still #39

This is my favourite of the whole collection of sixty-nine. It is certainly the most erotic and sensual. Probably why I like it so much. It is also the most blurred, with a distinctly hazy feel to it. It is shot from ground level in a dark room looking up into a brightly lit one. A woman is standing at a bathroom sink. The light above the sink is on and illuminating her top half. Below the level of the sink, her legs and feet are in deep shadow. Her head is lowered, looking down at herself, and she is holding her hands to her stomach. She is wearing only an undergarment; a slip or negligee with a lacy trim at the bottom. It is too short. Is it a teasing garment or is she newly pregnant? Is she smoothing it down because it is too short, or is she resting her hands on her belly to question if it feels rounder? That is where the enigma of this picture lies. Is she afraid that she is pregnant? Behind her in the bathroom there is a toilet and the curtain is closed. This is the darkness of night time. The end of the day, about to go to bed.

I remember Margot standing in the bathroom. Newly pregnant, no longer wondering why she felt so different, sickly. Suddenly repulsed by foods she'd always loved. The test kit still on the sink. The lines showing she was positive. She didn't feel positive. We were not expecting this, and had no time to think or plan. The test meant we were about to enter into a long and difficult discussion about the future, when last weekend we were not planning more than a couple of weeks ahead.

Untitled Film Still #50

Of my five favourites, this still is the one with the most information in the room. It is also the most enigmatic, when it comes to guessing the meaning. A woman in a formal dress is sitting on a sofa. She is wearing a hat and has her shoes on. I think that it is a dress, but it could possibly be a coat. There is an animal print around the cuffs and neckline. The neckline plunges quite deeply. Her posture is very still and rigid. She is not relaxed, even though she has a drink in her left hand.

What sort of room is this? It is very sterile. There are plenty of objects, but no clear story with them. And then there is the statue at the back of the room. Something wooden and tribal from Africa or Indonesia. Something primitive and at odds with the modern simplicity of the rest of the room. So many straight lines – the curtains, the fireplace, the sofas and tables, even the round bowls on the coffee table have a straightness about them. The woman and the statue are the only things in the room with curving lines. There is one other piece of art in the room – another tall piece next to the statue, only far more abstract. Lots of overlapping squares and rectangles of metal. Like the loose links of a chain, or the bars of a prison.

Look more closely at the woman. She is sitting sideways on the sofa looking towards the door of the room. She is not leaning back into the deep cushions. Because of the hat it is not possible to see her eyes or read any emotions there. All I can see are the dark lipstick and the over accentuated cheek bones. There is just the faintest hint of cleavage in the deeply cut neckline of the dress or coat. Is it a hint at allure or attraction? Has she dressed to attract, but in the most subtle and understated way she can find within the limits of her wardrobe?

This isn't Margot. This is more like a nervous, unnamed woman in a brothel, apprehensively awaiting the approach of the next punter. She has closed herself off from the world, worried about who it will be and what he will be like. Will the approaching man treat her well, or will he humiliate her? Until she is somewhere other than this room, in the calm of somewhere they are alone, she will never know for certain. She used to think that she could read them all, but there is always one, one that will disprove every rule you have spent months and years creating. Every fibre of her body is tense. How is she going to relax enough to make conversation, let alone love?

There is no-one else to choose from. It's her or no-one. It's her or wait for another girl to finish, but men don't want to feel like they are grasping freshly used goods, even in a place like this where everyone's used up. She doesn't make any eye contact, but leaves it up to the man to make the move and ask the questions. Make the request of her or her pimp. How did she arrive at this situation? How could she let herself slip so low? Desperation. Nowhere else to turn, no other route? The pain of it all too much. Only the pills are keeping her upright. No, this isn't Margot, but it's Margot's fear, what she always thinks I'm up to. The man in the suit standing at the door just out of shot. The sad washed up man with nothing better in his life.

Untitled Film Still #3

I have kept this one until last. Perhaps because I find it arousing. There is something very sexy and sassy about this still. The woman with the short blonde hair and wide almond-shaped eyes is looking back over her shoulder from the kitchen. Her chin is slightly tucked into her raised left shoulder. Someone has said something to her and in the next second, she's going to fire back a cutting reply. She's standing at the sink; there are cups, pans and bowls and a bottle of washing up liquid. She has a short frilly apron tied at her waist. Her sleeveless turtle-neck jumper is pulled tight over her breasts, which in this photograph are subtly prominent. Her eyes carry the look of flashing anger. Someone has said something...No let's be more specific. A man has said something and she is not at all happy with his words. The next thing likely to happen is that the apron will be off and dumped in the sink and she'll storm off to lock herself in the bedroom, or pick up a jacket and leave the house all together. He's overstepped the mark. Something he has said, although there's a chance that it's something he's not done. That he's neglected or belittled her in some way.

This photo is the only one that I don't link to a moment with Margot. It is later, on the rebound from that long and painful relationship, when I found Sophie as a willing match, sparring partner and equal. I am not one for unequal partnerships. Equality is all. I like my women strong and feisty. Perhaps that's where I went wrong. I digress.

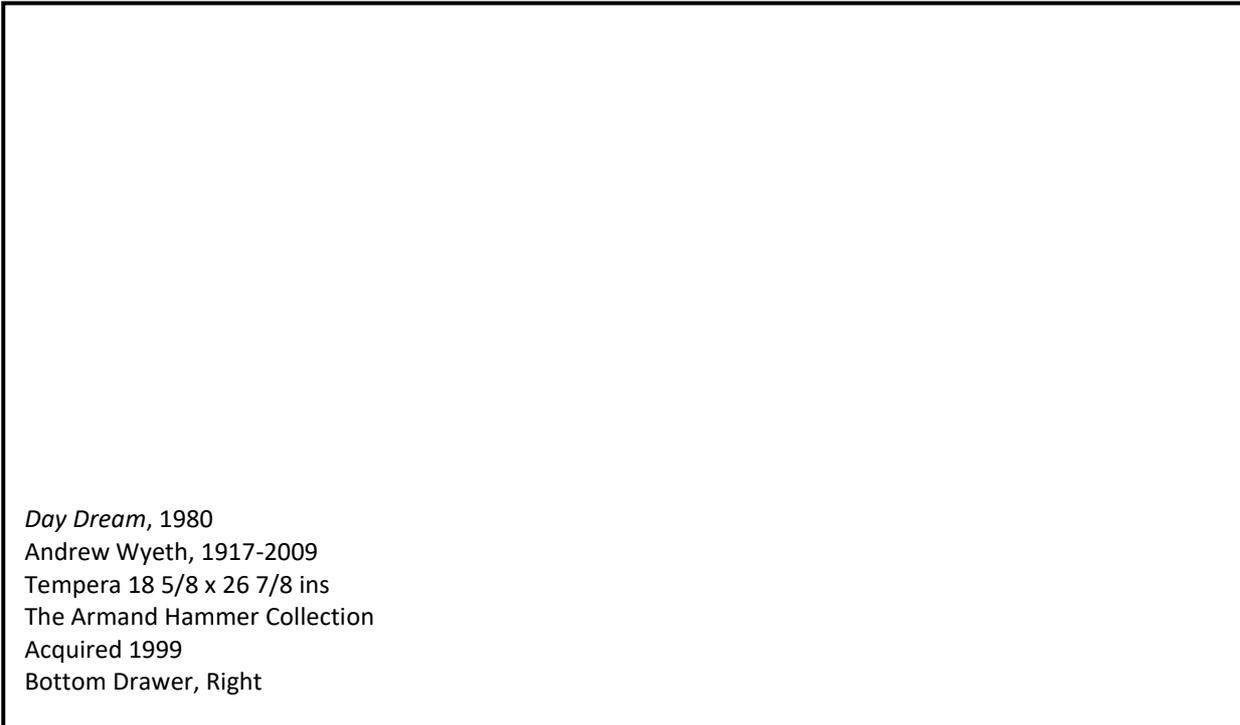
This photo brings Sophie to mind. The fake woman. Never real, never constant about what she wanted. The blonde bombshell with the amazing culinary contours. Goddess of the pasta sauce. In fact, she was the one that told me the story of whore sauce. Puttanesca. Slut spaghetti. It is only now when I fact check it, that I discover what she told me was probably rubbish, but I loved the tale at the time. Did I ever give anything to her – not gifts, but knowledge, stories or lessons she might employ in her life? She certainly gave them to me. She taught me about second-hand clothes. How to rummage and the importance of the label as a signal of quality. Cheap shirts will not stand the test of time, or the rigours of the washing machine. What did I teach her? I'm not sure I want to know. But this short-haired sassy blonde in #3 twisting away from the kitchen sink, pert breasts in a tight sleeveless jumper, has a momentary flicker of Sophie in the wide eyes and confident expression. She has a comment on her lips, ready to fire back. What a strange time we had together for those seven or eight months. When people call a relationship a rollercoaster, they can't mean anything as epic as

this. From the highest of heights to the lowest of lows and a final drop that nearly killed me. The suddenness of a stone fall. Not so much the “wind of the cannonball” as it passes far too close, but more the debris of the explosion, in the bomb crater with the earth, being flung up and out and scattered in the wind. That is what it felt like for those first few weeks after she piled my every belonging in the garage and told me she never wanted to see me again. For me, #3 has that look in her eyes.

Cindy Sherman was asked why she stopped making the *Untitled Film Stills*. It was very simple, she said, she had run out of clichés.

The Helga Pictures

Missing



Day Dream, 1980
Andrew Wyeth, 1917-2009
Tempera 18 5/8 x 26 7/8 ins
The Armand Hammer Collection
Acquired 1999
Bottom Drawer, Right

It is the silent paintings that speak to me so loudly.

Andrew Wyeth's most famous painting is called *Christina's World*. I saw it at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It is a remarkable work of art. There is a story and underneath, a hidden nightmare waiting to be unpicked. You start simply looking at the painting on the gallery wall, absorbing the little details. After that, and only if you are willing, it is possible to push further. Once you have entered the truth behind the painting, there is no stopping the slide into other stories that lurk within Wyeth's work.

On the surface I was happy. We were happy. But the veneer was fake, not real wood. Not solid, just a thin surface. An imitation, pretending to be a happy marriage.

Christina's World, painted in 1948, shows a woman lying on the ground looking up the slope to an old farmhouse. She wears a light pink-coloured dress with a belt at the waist. The painting is best described as sparse. The landscape is bare – no trees or features, just the house at the top of the hill – festooned with windows and surrounded by two or three outbuildings. It could be an illustration from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. That could be Dewey Dell looking wistfully up the hill to the Bundren farm. Cash could be working wood for a coffin in one of the barns. There are two lines of wheel tracks that lead through the grass and up to the house. The waggon with Addie Bundren's body might have just rolled past. Not a road, just the constant wear of wheels in the same place. It gives you certainty someone lives there and travels enough to make the track. Some of the grass around the house has been cut, but other than that the landscape is uniform. If you look closely at the house, squashed up against the top of the painting, you can make out a tall ladder leaning against the front, all the way up to the roof. Like someone has escaped out of one of the dormer windows. Someone whose life may have become too difficult, has left the house by the most dangerous route. In the dark hour before dawn.

In bottom corner, Christina's left arm, which is mainly hidden from sight behind her body, is reaching up the slope towards the farm. As if she is about to start moving in that direction. You can take the picture exactly as it is, just those sparse details and the woman on the grass, or you can dive a little deeper into the life of the model and artist.

Christina Olson, born 1893 and died 1968, the woman in the painting, suffered from Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, a genetic disorder which would eventually rob her of the use of her legs.

Andrew Wyeth was friends with Christina and her younger brother, and often used them in his paintings. He painted their home many times. He used the deserted upstairs bedrooms that Christina could no longer reach, as a studio. She was 55 when he painted this picture, although she looks much younger. Unless you know the story, you would never know that she is unable to walk. Her skinny right arm might catch your attention. When Wyeth talked about the painting to *Life Magazine* in the 1960s, he said that he didn't dare ask Christina to pose, but used his wife Betsy to model the torso. He recalled the dress and the pink colour from watching Christina crawl along the ground as he sat up in the house painting. The image had etched itself into his mind.

Now that you know a little more, it is impossible to unlink that knowledge from the painting. Christina, older than she appears and crippled. Now that I had cheated, in reality or just in Margot's mind, the image will not go away. Nothing I say can convince or reassure her that she is mistaken, that I never did those things. The image of lust is engrained. I have entered the Kafkatrap. The more that I deny any wrongdoing, the more this is evidence of my guilt.

From the periphery of *Christina's World*, enjoying the view up the slope, I was curious to know a little more about Andrew Wyeth. Look deeper and other stories will emerge. Among the countless works, I recognise another masterpiece that I had not linked with Wyeth. Here is Helga. I have seen her face before.

Known as *The Helga Pictures*, there are 247 studies of German-born Helga Testorf, painted secretly between 1971 and 1985. They were completed without the knowledge of either Wyeth's wife, Betsy, or Helga's husband, John. The painting I recognised was *Braids*, painted in 1977. A modern-day Caravaggio – the background is black, but the light falls brightly onto Helga, illuminating her face, highlighting her sharp cheekbones, her green turtle-neck sweater and her braided hair. She was about forty when this was painted but there is a youthfulness about her, a rigour which sits a little deeper than just the plaits of a much younger woman. Delve into the series, all 247, and there are many such treasures; stark, beautiful portraits. Nudes which shock and surprise. Helga is always passive and unsmiling, but that in itself gives her a character that is unimaginably deep and thoughtful.

I was intrigued by fifteen years of deception. The shared and secret intimacy of sitting for hours naked in front of a man. And let's be clear, there are lots of nudes. In the book *Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures* by John Wilmerding, I counted 123 paintings and sketches where

Helga is naked. Pretty much exactly half of the entire output. From the simplest of line sketches to complex and detailed works in tempera. I have one word: exquisite. I have other words, some of them rude and Anglo-Saxon, but that one is the best. At no point over those many years did Wyeth reveal to his wife what he had been doing. There were obviously questions about just how close Wyeth and Helga were, although he denied any impropriety. But if you look closely at the whole collection, the many naked works, the tempera and the sketches, you'll see in many Helga appears to be asleep in bed. These are especially beautiful for their intimacy and innocence. There is a closeness needed to allow someone to draw you while you sleep. Was it real or faked? Was it a post-coital doze? Here, living in the Kafkatrap, there are no such questions. Everything is branded post-coital.

Wyeth went back in time and used egg tempera for his portraits. Just like Botticelli used the ancient technique to capture the beautiful face of Simonetta for his painting of *The Birth of Venus*. Tempera was fast drying, it was a rush – there was no time to waste, you had to work fast. The semi-opaque layers allow great precision of detail. It is the detail that I love.

Two of the *Helga Pictures* fascinate me more than all the others. Two of the tempera works, the finished products rather than the sketches. The first is called *Day Dream* and without doubt is the most sensuous portrayal of a sleeping woman I have ever seen. Any art gallery in the world will probably have at least one reclining nude somewhere, but this is on a different level. Helga is posed on her side, her right leg slightly forwards, her arms folded together across her chest. This is a pose I have seen before, one that I have woken up next to in the quiet hours around dawn and watched in the lover next to me. This is a sleeping Margot to whom I have brought a cup of waking tea, kissed gently on the forehead and been greeted by a mumbled thank you. The pose and the curves of the body are perfect and the softening achieved by a mosquito net hanging over the bed is perfect. I am in awe of how beautiful this painting is. Everything about it is soft and gentle. I look at it and remember why I fell in love with Margot. We were as close as any couple believes they will ever be, and we believed that it would always remain like that.

The other painting is quite a contrast. It is the one Wyeth enigmatically called *Lovers*. Helga sits stiffly upright on a stool in front of an open window. She is completely naked with her head turned to the side. It is one of the most extraordinary depictions of pubic hair that I have

seen, in any piece of art anywhere in the world. Pubic hair has a very transient history in art. These days, it is having something of a renaissance. In the actual Renaissance it was hardly ever there, often replaced by a waft of diaphanous cloth that would float around female genitalia. It was far more often absent than depicted. It vanished entirely in the Victorian era, like an early onset Brazilian. At best there was sometimes a hint of it. In some raw paintings, like the nudes of Walter Sickert, it is there, but only as an impression. In *Lovers* it is positively celebrated, caught by the sunlight from the window to the right of the canvass. Much of Helga's twisting torso is in shadow. That is where the magic happens, because the sunlight catches and plays in her pubic hair. Wyeth has somehow caught that wiry texture that only luxuriant pubic hair has. I don't know how, but he has it exactly and perfectly nestling in her groin, with the play of sunlight and the hint of ginger colour. It is impossible not to be mesmerised, even if you prefer your ladies to be shaved and bald. I have yet to see another artist capture realism like that. He must have spent hours looking at her muff.

The following comment was made by Wyeth in a 1986's article in *Time Magazine*. "Every artist undresses his subject, whether human or still life. It is his business to find essences in surfaces, and what more attractive and challenging surface than the skin around a soul?"

I could not have resisted the temptation to touch, faced with a naked body for all those hours, looking so intently, detailing every curve, every rise and fall. But then, I never had such a chance to watch. No-one ever lay so still in front of me for fifteen years. And I can tell you, I would never have sat on my hands for fifteen minutes, let alone years. Margot was right not to trust me when there was naked flesh involved.

Eris picks a fight in Paris

Eris made an appearance at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris last week. The intercession by the goddess of discord came because of a pretty patterned dress, spotted in reds, blues, black, white and yellow. I loved that the young lady who was wearing it, Jeanne Huet, actually called the garment *la robe de la discorde* - the dress of discord. It was a lovely dress and very reasonably priced at €49.

On this occasion, Eris's golden apple came in the form of the lady at the ticket booking desk who took one look at Jeanne's cleavage and refused her entry. Despite it being a hot day and the gallery already being full of young people wearing crop tops, spaghetti straps and sports bras. I think her actual words were, "Oh no, that won't do, that's not coming in." As other staff joined the debacle, all the male attention became focused on the poor girl's breasts and as Jeanne said later, "I am not responsible for the fantasy that other people project on me." Jeanne is, appropriately, a literature student who is working on a book about the sexual emancipation of women in literature. As she rightly noted in her open letter to the museum, the hypersexualisation of women happens "everywhere men are". And she is right. Eris organised that.

Men are very one-dimensional beings. There isn't always a lot going on beyond their basic emotions and needs. Subtlety is at best poor. Refinement and finesse are often lacking. Beyond food, booze and sex there are few other emotional requirements. Perhaps a sport or hobby. In some cases that might stretch to a book. Probably one about booze, sport or sex.

Jeanne was good enough to provide a link to the website where you could buy the multicoloured €49 dress. The model shown wearing it has an average sized bust, so perhaps there was no way of knowing how much the dress might gape when worn by someone with an ample décolletage. I know that I should be more subtle, but I do like the word décolletage. Afraid that I might mis-use such a word and cause offense, I did check exactly what it meant. There was a shadow of doubt in my mind between cleavage or just the neck downwards. The word is made up of *de* (meaning remove) and *collet* (meaning collar), so literally removing the collar, exposing the neck. In a dictionary from the '70s it was "the wearing of a low-necked style of dress", while an online dictionary takes me to quite a different zone – "the display of bosom provided by a low-necked garment, especially the separation between the breasts." Wow, that was very specific. My French dictionary was prim in their definition – "The baring

of neck and shoulders". I love the way that this word has wandered up and down the female form, rather like the gaze of one of those males I mentioned earlier.

As my search continued, I was surprised to find the longest entry I have ever encountered on Wikipedia, all about cleavage. The typology and etymology, the role of Jane Russell in a particular dress in the 1941 film *The Outlaw*, the underwired bra that Howard Hughes designed and the eight different types of cleavage, with illustrations of champagne, cocktail, highball and hour glasses. The history through ancient, mediaeval and early modern times, enhancement, corsetry. The article goes on and on. There is enough detail to please a conference hall of plastic surgeons. I rest my case about the one-dimensional half of the population.

The point about Jeanne's story which most drew my attention was the irony of it being this particular art gallery that called her out for showing too much cleavage. Whilst I am not a world expert and my view is based only on a small international sample from London, New York, Paris and Rome, I would say that the Musée d'Orsay has more breasts on show than any other. By some considerable margin. Perhaps the Musée Rodin has more female nudes, since half the sculptures there are women and a good percentage are naked. They do have one or two naked men, so there is some balance, which in itself is unusual. But moving back around the corner to the Musée d'Orsay, the ridiculousness of the situation is made so much worse by the existence of one particular painting, *The Origin of the World* by Gustave Courbet. A good number of people call this picture pornographic. It shows a woman's belly, spread legs, genitals, one naked breast and her luxuriant pubic hair. That's all that's in the picture and it's right in your face. Her other breast and head are covered with a sheet. It was painted in 1866 for the private collection of erotica owned by a Turkish diplomat. A time when pubic hair was simply not shown in art, even if it was encountered in the marriage bed. Around the same time, John Ruskin was alleged to have been repulsed by the first sight of his naked wife, Effie Gray. His only experience of the female form, before that night, having been statues and paintings. Was it her pubic hair that so put him off that the marriage was annulled? There were claims of infertility, but after she married another artist, they proceeded to have eight children. John Everett Millais didn't have the same aesthetic problems that Ruskin did.

My own fascination with Courbet's painting rests on the reception it has received. It is, after all, a picture of something that half the world's population has (and the other half have seen

or are looking for). But still it continues to court controversy, 154 years after it was painted, and in an age when all manner of smut is freely available online.

Part of me is fascinated by where the boundary of art and pornography lies, as well as why these two areas can be so hard to define. I don't think Eris was following that line of enquiry. Some scholars turn the argument on the viewer of the work, asking if it is the viewer's interest in the picture that turns it into pornography. That too raises a difficult issue with this particular picture, since it was commissioned and painted for someone who wished to be sexually aroused by it. I am not sure that they were taking a purely artistic interest in the painting. To shed light on this conundrum, the identity of the model is important, and in this case, there are three or four possible candidates.

There was no point taking Margot to the Musée d'Orsay. She would have made the experience hell. At each female nude she would have made a sarcastic comment and reduced the wonder of the art to a point of fear. Fear of what she might say next, fear of the next accusation, true, false, or anywhere in between.

"Is that the sort of thing you like?" With a sneer.

What would she have said in front of *The Origin of the World*? I didn't challenge her when she made such remarks. I resorted to a silent vigil, withdrawn into myself. I can imagine the torture of a few hours at the gallery. I am thankful it never happened. Would there even have been any point in a trip to Paris? Where would we have gone? There were so many places to see, but also so much naked art – the Musée Rodin would have been out of the question. A stroll in Tuileries Gardens would have been constantly interrupted by the naked statues of Aristide Maillol. The Louvre, or the Musée Cluny still have their fair share of bare females. In the Musée Picasso their faces are as contorted as their feelings and their relationship with the great master. No, Paris was never going to be a safe place for Margot and I to explore together. Or come home from alive.

One of the candidates for modelling *The Origin of the World* was Constance Quéniaux, a dancer at the Paris Opera, and the mistress of Khalil Bey, who commissioned the painting. Also in the running is Marie-Anne Detourbay, yet another mistress. He was a busy boy.

But wait, there's more. *Woman bitten by a serpent* is another stunningly erotic piece of art found in the Musée d-Orsay. Another naked woman, this time writhing on the ground. The

model was Apollonie Sabatier, later the muse of Charles Baudelaire. The sculpture caused a scandal at the Salon exhibition of 1847, but made both the sculptor, Auguste Clésinger, and the model, famous. Apparently, a brass snake was hastily added to the sculpture just prior to the exhibition. I wonder what the work was entitled prior to that, because 'Woman Writhing on the Ground' might not have been ideal. Apollonie is also considered a model for *The Origin of the World*, after she had ended her five-year affair with Baudelaire. He had used her as one of four character models in his collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*, some of which were banned as "an insult to public decency." She had some previous form for indecency.

There is one final candidate for the model, Joanna Hiffernan, who was also the lover of the artist James Whistler. He was a good friend of Courbet. The fact that there was a brutal falling out between Whistler and Courbet at this time adds fuel to the argument. It is obviously difficult to attribute a painting where there is no face, but there are now claims that another painting which contains a face was in fact at one time part of this work. The marks on the underlying canvass match up exactly, but as yet the artistic establishment are reluctant to accept scientific evidence. If they can be convinced by machines and infra-red imagery, then the hot money is on Joanna as the red-head in the bed.

Within two years *The Origin of the World* was sold. Khalil Bey lost a fortune gambling and so the work quickly passed onto the open market. Once it did and was separated from its original intent, then to some extent it lost the ability to be called pornography and became art. According to the Musée d'Orsay, postcards of *The Origin of the World* are the second-best seller in their shop. Even in the last ten years there has been controversy around the painting. In 2009 in Portugal, Police confiscated a book that used the picture on its cover from the display in a bookshop, citing that the law forbids the public display of pornography. In 2011, a Danish artist used the image as his profile picture on Facebook, and so did hundreds of others in support when his account was shut down. 154 years and still shocking. Courbet should be proud.

If Margot and I had preserved a better relationship, we might have both enjoyed discussing in detail what we could see in Paris. I could have compared her arse with that of the statue in front of us, perhaps weighed up the merits of one breast over another. But no, Margot had already done all that comparison for me and decided that I would prefer all the other anatomy

on display to her own. That was clearly not true, but no matter what I said, I could do nothing to convince her that I still desired her body.

I love that some of these pictures have prompted as much black ink of words as they have paint on the canvass. It is easy to forget just how much of what we see today was groundbreaking or branded as obscene when it was first created. Paris was the perfect home for Eris. She had been up to centuries of mischief there already.

Talking of scandal, one of the most interesting pictures in the Musée d'Orsay is called *Olympia*, by Édouard Manet. He used the title to deliberately set it amongst the other representations of classical myths, goddesses and nymphs. Eris would have been at home. There, nudity was quite acceptable in 1863. But *Olympia* is wonderful because Manet has set the naked woman in modern times, removing her from the veneer of classical respectability. She wears a single sandal, has a thin black cord tied in a bow around her neck and is brought flowers by a servant girl. Her setting is modern, while her pose is a direct link to portraits from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A Titian, or the *Rokeby Venus*. Placing her like this, so naked and wanton, makes her into a prostitute, and that also makes you, the viewer of the painting, into the prostitutes' client, standing in the doorway and about to approach the bed with your requests and needs.

Every woman I knew became a prostitute, in Margot's mind. She called everyone whores. The young or the old, the married or the single, even the too old and too young to indulge in carnal acts. All were tarred with the same brush as I was. And for what purpose? I'm not quite sure. Just to make me feel uncomfortable? Or to stop us going to Paris?

The torso of Adèle



Torn but repaired

The Torso of Adèle, c 18
Auguste Rodin 18xx -1917
Musée Rodin, Paris
Acquired 1992
Middle Drawer, Right

The Musée Rodin in Paris, housed in the Hôtel Biron, is the ultimate art lover's paradise. The huge house with tall windows is flooded with light, and the imposing walled gardens, complete with paths down to the lake, are the perfect place to display a host of vast bronze statues. To enter through the gates is to venture into a magical realm, where oversized people stand silently among the hedges, topiary shapes and pathways, where the unexpected lurks at every turn. A place where life-like heads emerge from vast solid blocks of marble. All Rodin's major works are here; *The Thinker*, *The Kiss*, *The Gates of Hell*, the monument to Balzac and *The Burghers of Calais*. Late in life, this huge house in the very centre of Paris was Rodin's home and studio.

Upstairs at the Musée Rodin, in a tall glass cabinet crammed with statues, limbs, heads and torsos, it is possible to find the small statue of Adèle. It is called the *Torso of Adèle*, but that feels slightly inaccurate, because it is a complete body and I always thought that the word torso referred to the main trunk. In fact in the world of sculpture, a torso is a body without head, arms or legs. That certainly isn't the case here.

The *Torso of Adèle* is technically a maquette, the small clay statue a sculptor will make first. Rather like the preliminary sketches of a painter. Adèle is long and stretched out, as though her naked body is writhing in passion. She is a well-endowed woman, with a flat stomach and long legs, but sadly, without a head.

For all the stunning carvings at the Musée Rodin, the heads and bodies where the marble is polished to a silky finish, Eve struggling to hide her nakedness, the lovers engulfed in their kiss, my favourite remains this rough clay figure. Adèle is a beautiful woman, and perhaps conforms more to our twenty-first century ideal of the female shape than those of the late nineteenth, when she was made. Her nakedness and her raw sexuality are very contemporary. I wonder if the woman who modelled this lay on the ground for Rodin? I like to think that perhaps she was stretched out on a bed. Post-coitally would be a nice image; stretching, arms thrown back, after making love.

I was able to buy a postcard of the maquette, the writhing figure set against a soft blue background. It made her clearer to see than she had been in the glass cabinet, where the shadows of sculptured body parts played over her. On the postcard, the shadows across the body were delicious, subtly suggestive without showing too much, and for that reason I made my own drawing of her. Selecting blue paper, I copied her curves using pastels. These were a

new medium for me but I loved the way that I could add flesh tones by using my finger to smudge the colours together. The application of a dark black line on the paper for shadow could be mused and fused into the other colours until it became beautifully natural. The light reflecting off the outer edge of her skin could be highlighted by adding stark white and blending with the pale tan beneath. Her long left-thigh was a mix of four different pastel colours. I learnt pastels as I made my picture of Adèle and was inordinately pleased with the results. I tried to copy other works using pastel, both paintings and statues, but none of them were anywhere near as competent as Adèle. Perhaps it was because she had no head, no tiny details to trip me up. No lips or nose to anguish over. Just the long slender lines of arms, legs and belly, the roundness of the breasts and the artful shadows that left her with some modesty.

My first pastel copy of Adèle left Samantha's house with me, my books and clothes. I put her in pride of place on my subterranean bookshelves where, several months later, Margot would suspiciously ask if that was a former lover. I secretly wished it was. I showed her the postcard to put her mind at ease that it was not a 'real' person. There was something in her tone, even as she held the postcard in front of the drawing, that suggested some lingering doubt. As if I had posed someone in the same artful recline. Suspicions, even then.

I was very proud of that first pastel work. Sadly that initial version disappeared from the bookshelf, victim of the wrath of Margot. Being only in a cardboard mount and without a frame, it perished easily. She knew that I was proud of it, and so she singled it out for an act of vengeance. The postcard, one of the few representations of Adèle I had ever been able to find, was torn in half.

Tear: to wound, to lacerate, to divide by violent measures, to remove by pulling, to act with turbulent violence.

I had looked at that postcard for hours, studied the detailed form, copied it onto coloured paper. The postcard was in a bad state. The bottom corner ripped away, and the jagged line sellotaped back together. In some places the join was a few millimetres out.

The line of the rip fascinates me. Never straight, it arcs towards the body in the picture, following the inside of her thigh. Then dives, whips across her middle, passes lightly across her own tear as if teasing her towards a climax, touching with the most tantalising tenderness. Like a strike of lightning, fizzing towards her groin. Adding something unintended, a crackle

of static absent from the perfect postcard. Her body twists away from this new touch, her torso bends backwards, away from the point of impact, arching back from the intrusion.

When I drew this portrait, using the card in its perfect state, before the tear and the crumpling, the scarring like the shattering of broken glass, there was no central point. The fizzle of lightning charges everything.

All those hours of looking and I missed how much her spine arches backwards. I didn't exactly capture the way her rib cage protrudes, or the tautness of the muscles from belly-button to groin. Looking at *that* line quickens my pulse, excites me at the prospect of running a finger over its tight muscularity. That same finger I used to smudge the chalky texture of the pastel, to blend two shades of yellow ochre with the burnt sienna and a fleck of white. Blended them on the paper until they were as soft to my touch as real skin.

Adèle was not as smooth as I portrayed her. She was lumpy. There was a kink in her back that I have softened. There was a lump in her arm, like a tumour. Her breasts were not perfectly round, there were lumps and dimples which I could not show in pastel. I smoothed and softened every line, merging each colour into another, softening any harsh edge until it was sensual and sexual and surging with lust and desire. The deep shadow of her breast, rising, rounding, rudely rotunding, raising my excitement and straining my jeans. I used my fingers to blend her, soften her shadows and shaded the sweep of her breast. I made myself hard in the drawing of her curves. Her figure is lust, desire, debauchery. Even with the creases and crinkles in the card. One day the three strips of tape will dry out, turn crisp, no longer hold the corner in place. Age will overcome her, thighs will be lost, and I will no longer stiffen at her good looks.

Why did you rip the postcard, Margot? Were you jealous of her lumpy curves, her smooth-shaven sex, or the way her breasts defied gravity to hold their roundness in mid-air? Were you jealous of that photo of a tiny piece of plaster, or was it deeper than that? Did I lust after a model who has been dead for a century? Did that make you bitter? I can't fuck a piece of card, any more than I can get off on the picture of a piece of clay. Didn't you see that? It was just a piece of flat card, held together with three pieces of sticking tape. Torn, no longer perfect, but still sexy. She was no threat to you. She wasn't real. She had no vagina, no nipples to suck, but still you were jealous. I will never understand.

Visit to the Villa Borghese



Torn

The Rape of Proserpina, 1621-22
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598 – 1680)
Villa Borghese, Rome
Marble, 225 cm
Acquired 2001
Middle Drawer, Right

The Villa Borghese sits in its own park in the centre of Rome, just across the River Tiber from the Vatican. The gravel paths are too hot to linger on, forcing you to seek out the shady places below the umbrella pines to escape the scorching heat of summer. It was built by a Cardinal, Scipione Borghese, whose uncle was Pope. The Cardinal loved his art and commissioned the young sculptor Bernini to fill his home with vast statues depicting classical scenes. It did not seem to matter that these were pagan gods being carved, or that they were naked. But I guess if you lived in Rome you were used to that sort of thing; the place is teeming with naked statuary. Bernini created incredible works that form part of some of Rome's famous fountains. Inside the Villa Borghese it is possible to see a work called *The Rape of Proserpina*. I should explain that in Italian this is known as *Ratto di Proserpina*, but the word rape comes from the Latin *raptus* which is better translated as seized or carried off, not a sexual violation.

Romans had their own names for the Greek Gods that preceded them, so Proserpina in Greek was called Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus. She was abducted (seized or carried off) by Hades, God of the underworld. The Romans called *him* Pluto, and the Disney Corporation have ruined that for all of us. I prefer Hades, it is both the person and the place. So I am going to stick to the Greek originals and not say "When in Rome..." A deal was struck between the boys, Zeus and Hades. Demeter got to have her daughter Persephone back for half the year, and for the rest the poor girl had to be content being queen of the underworld. She was goddess of fertility, wine and agriculture for obvious reasons.

I'd never looked up the meaning of the word adultery. Not properly. In a dictionary. I'd always thought it was the act of sleeping with someone. More specifically, the act of making love, not just transactional sex, but something more extended; exciting and very much wanted by those involved. Obviously, it is happening with someone that you are not supposed to do it with. Adultery, to me, hints at some sort of relationship, not just a one off.

The Rape of Persephone is one of the most beautiful and erotically charged statues that I have ever seen. Persephone is repulsed by Hades. Every part of her body is trying to push him away. She grinds the heel of her left hand into his forehead, curling her fingers away from touching him. Contrast his demonic grin. He has hold of his prize. Look at all those bulging muscles. She is never going to escape his grip. As you walk around the side of this massive two-and-a-half metre high statue, suddenly you are confronted by his huge hand gripping her thigh. Lost in

the sumptuous marble beauty of the Villa Borghese, this moment came as a shock. This is stone. This is Carrara marble; pure white with just a hint of blue, like a cold morning on the beach at the end of spring. This huge hand is pressing into the softness of her thigh. The indent of each finger into her flesh is breath taking. Bernini was only twenty-three when he finished carving this in 1622.

I had to understand what I was being accused of. I had to turn to the dictionary, where I found adultery means violation of the marriage-bed. Sexual commerce by a married person, with one who is not his or her wife or husband. I love that it is very specific – adulterer is a man guilty of adultery. An adulteress is a woman guilty of adultery. I'm not sure what happens if the man is not yet married to the woman with whom he has a child. My dictionary may be a little old for the whole *de facto* concept. Also 'sexual commerce' is rather obsolete. That definitely does sound like a transaction. I bought this sex about an hour ago, but it doesn't seem to fit anymore.

The sculpture is all about movement. The two of them are frozen in a moment of phrenetic energy. The sort of movement that would only last a second. This is what defines them as Baroque rather than Renaissance. Observe them from a distance, from over by the window, and you will see that their two bodies form an X shape. Hades is standing on the ball of one foot, poised to take a forward movement. He is hauling Persephone up into the air, while she is pushing him away. Her hair is streaming out behind her from the speed at which he has lifted her. The conflict hangs in the air between them. His left foot is firmly planted, taking all his weight. The muscles in his calf are straining, as are those in his buttock and the top of his right thigh. The hardness of his thigh muscles compared to the softness of hers. Her mouth is open, ugly in a cry of horror. She is being abducted by this monster, even her toes are curled upwards, trying to resist.

It is something of a euphemism to say 'sleeping with someone'. If all you did was sleep alongside them, it would hardly warrant the accusation of adultery. For the purpose of this story, I did not get as far as that, as far as sex, making love or even touching. I did go as far as laughing, in that certain way when you are relaxed in woman's company. As far as lunch and

a couple of glasses of wine. And as far as the sexual tension that hid inside and behind every word spoken and question asked. Every glance and half-smile.

Because of the upward tilt of Persephone's head, and your position alongside the plinth looking up from below, you do not easily notice the tear that has been carved already running down her cheek.

Managers above a certain rank in the firm where I worked were allocated junior members of staff to mentor. Your main job was to run your projects and the teams involved, but you also had to meet regularly with your three or four mentees. There was a formal process to complete. Twice yearly appraisals, forms to fill in, feedback to gather from managers. Not only did you yourself have to give feedback on all the staff on your projects to their mentors, you were also the bearer of good or bad news for your mentees. Praise and criticism, ways to improve performance, recommended training, all the various stuff like that.

By some quirk of fate, the three staff I had to mentor were all women. There was no particular rationale for that, they were simply allocated to me. I did not pick them myself. Like me, they all worked in the field of finance. Two were exceptionally intelligent, hard-working and likable characters with well-rounded personalities. Then there was my problem child. She was called Lara, and everyone had a problem with her. She was clever. She had an MBA from a good English university. She had studied at Harvard for a year. She was willing to work hard and meet deadlines. She was also stunningly beautiful. A Middle-Eastern olive skin, large dark eyes and a lovely smile. For some irrational reason she was treated with favouritism by all the men she worked for and gathered nothing but spite, malice and jealousy from all the women who worked around her. I had to be the impartial voice of reason in her performance appraisal, trying to balance the conflicting feedback.

And then there was Margot. Her jealous nature took nothing to provoke, so I was in trouble because of Lara from the moment I was appointed her mentor. I don't think Margot ever met her, but some supernatural oracular ability meant she was always throwing the words 'olive skin', 'dark eyes' or 'Middle Eastern' back in my face. If she had ever met Lara I'm sure the words would have been worse. Slut, whore, slapper. Those and more were applied when talking about her to me. It would be impossible to count the number of times I was accused of fucking Lara. I had enough problems trying to unpick the bias out of her performance

appraisals and set targets for her improvement. And suggest strategies to keep her out of trouble with the drooling male staff.

What I really need to explore is how much that day, that meeting for lunch with Lara, its casual chatter and catching up, those couple of glasses of wine, could be called adultery? Where does one activity stop and another begin? Is it perhaps the hidden, the unspoken thoughts and desires that give away the real intentions? If you could read the inner thoughts, then that would say it all. The wishes and the “what ifs” were where the adultery lay.

A bolt of cloth has been thrown into the whirlwind motion of the statue, wrapping itself around Persephone’s right arm, flying away behind her, but also falling between them. Just enough to fall over Hades’ outstretched right thigh and cover his dick, but not quite enough to conceal an escaping ripple of pubic hair. Persephone’s blushes are spared as the material pulls tightly between her thighs, covering anything that the Vatican might have deemed inappropriate.

Lara suggested we meet in the Campo de’ Fiori and asked if I knew it.

Yes, of course I did. Two whole days in Rome and I was behaving like I had lived there all my life. I had found it the day before. There was a cinema at one end, and I agreed to meet her outside at 1pm.

Allow me to set the scene for my ‘alleged’ adultery. The Campo de’ Fiori is a rectangular square in the centre of Rome, close to the much more famous Piazza Navonna. Its name means field of flowers, although there is some dispute as to whether this was because it was in fact a meadow of flowers or if it had been a flower market. Today it is the setting for a large market that fills the central area with noise and fresh fruit, together with the smells of meat and fish that lie on beds of melting ice. At the end of the day it is a messy square full of all the rubbish you would expect from a busy market. Puddles of ice, stalks and leaves and rotten fruit, trampled tomatoes, empty boxes and abandoned crates.

Two things make me love the Campo de’ Fiori. First, the mixture of the buildings that crowd around the sides, making it sometimes shaded and always colourful. Mismatched shapes, that have taken centuries to create. But primarily my fascination is due to what sits at the centre of the square. A huge and brooding bronze statue of a man called Giordano Bruno. I had never

heard of him before I entered the square for the first time, but I was drawn to his memorial and have loved that statue ever since. He wears the robes of a monk, which I think he was originally. His hood is drawn over his head so that his face is deeply shadowed. It is a statue of pure drama. He was burnt alive on this spot in February 1600 by the Catholic Church. Not long before Bernini started his carving career. I believed on that trip that the reason for his execution was for saying the world was round, but later I discovered it was far more complex than that. He said the stars were just distant suns surrounded by their own planets that could support life. He insisted the universe was infinite and could have no celestial body at the centre. He was a scientist who was simply centuries ahead of his time.

I loved the statue, brooding over the square and positioned to defiantly face the Vatican. My trip was full of sculpture, powerful and beautiful and my camera bore witness to just how many I observed and admired. Bruno was one of the best. He towers, floats almost, above the market stalls each morning. By evening he has the square to himself.

Lara was late, but I didn't care.

There comes a point when the constant suggestion you are up to something makes you think, what the hell, why don't I do it anyway? How can things be any worse? If someone keeps pushing you in that direction, how strong do you have to be to keep on saying "No, I'm not up to anything." Or, "No, I only see her to give her a performance appraisal." But then comes the doubt. If you did do something, then you would be lying. Actually doing the thing you denied for so long. Then we would have entered a very different game.

There was that evening, the year before, in London.

Back in the Campo de' Fiore Lara had gone inside to the toilet. I fiddled with my camera and lay it on the table, pointing at the door. I swivelled the viewer around to see what kind of shot I would get. As Lara emerged I took several quick photos, acting casual, as though I was doing nothing. A few hours later, I looked at them for the first time. In two or three I had caught something of her beauty and the extent of her smile. A day or so later I deleted all of the photos, convinced that their discovery would implicate me in something that simply did not

exist. I did not have a safe place to hide them or send them. I wish I had, because I would love to see them again one more time.

I deleted Lara's number from my mobile. But not before, in very faint red pen, I put a small dot under the various page numbers of a novel, spelling out her number. The novel was called *Original Bliss*. I still have the copy. The first red dot is on page 60, the last on page 145. The cover shows a naked Venus taking the hand of a tiny Cupid, from a painting by Lucas Cranach, a sixteenth century German painter who delighted in calling his paintings things like *The Ill-matched Couple*, *The Mis-matched Couple* or *The Unequal Couple*. In several, but not all, of these an ugly old man is fondling the breast of a younger woman.

When I got home from my week in Rome, from meetings with Italian bankers and my Swiss colleagues who spoke Italian, I had only two souvenirs. A postcard of the statue of Persephone and Hades and a book about the treasures of the Villa Borghese. A few days later I came home to find that the postcard torn in half and the guide-book in several pieces. The lower half of the postcard was missing, the part from Hades' groin downwards.

The Lost Thorntons

Destroyed

Monasterio de Leyre, 1982
Valarie Thornton, (1931 – 1991)
Etching, 12.2 x 20.1 in
Christies Contemporary Art, London
Acquired 1982

In the 1970s and 80s, the English printmaker Valerie Thornton created a series of beautiful lithographs. The rock of Romanesque churches, the colours of ironstone. Flint-knapped walls of East Anglia their whites and greys catching the sunlight. For me she was all about the angels and saints, naïvely carved, stiff, with little sense of perspective. Achingly beautiful for their primitivism and age. They radiated thousand-year-old aura, while still feeling modern on your wall. Paid silent homage to the nameless masons and carvers who created them. The architects who demanded there be carving for the glory of God. Thornton captured the stonework of yellow ochre, burnt sienna and raw umber.

For my twenty-first birthday my parents came to London for the day and bought me one of Thornton's prints; an archway of saints and angels, beasts and birds. Equally lovely was a much smaller angel that Samantha bought me. The tone and style were similar and they complimented each other on the wall of our tiny flat. I treasured them, especially after my father died the following year.

Fifteen years later when I saw the empty space on the wall in my study, I confronted Margot at once.

"Where are my pictures?"

"What pictures?"

"The two in here, the old carvings."

"Haven't seen them." The way she said it was too glib. I knew at once she was lying.

"What do you mean you haven't seen them? They've gone off the wall." I stared at her for a heartbeat. "Where have you put them? I haven't moved them."

"They're gone..."

"What have you done with them?"

"I've thrown them out." Her tone became bolder.

"What?"

"I didn't like them."

"You didn't like them? What the fuck have you done with them? They were mine. They were a gift from my father, which he couldn't afford, just before he died. Where are they? Where have you put them?"

"Gone."

"Gone? Where are they?"

“Gone with the bins this morning.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

I could see in her eyes that she was deadly serious, but her righteous anger was starting to crumble behind a tiny tremble of the lip.

“I don’t fucking believe you.”

My anger was incandescent. I didn’t have enough breath to speak words.

I looked wildly around, wanting to smash everything.

Anything.

Looking for something I knew would break.

Something to smash against a wall.

Channel my anger at Margot into any object that came to hand.

Trying to calm myself with thoughts of clearing up the broken pieces.

Lost after fifteen years. My father’s gift.

Instead, I stormed off down the road and across the park, muttering to myself like a madman, replaying arguments in my head.

The winged angel with the trumpet.

I sat on a bench under the tall plane trees, gripping the wooden planking with white knuckles until the anger began to ebb.

The carved animals around the curving archway.

Only then could I hold my head in my hands.

The tall sinuous saints to the side.

I didn’t know whether to weep or rail.

The strange animal-face with cat-like ears, symbol of what mediaeval fear?

None of that mattered anymore.

No-one was going to call me the best husband in the world. I was trying to be all things to all people; the loving husband, fun father to a tiny child, efficient employee, competent manager and valuable asset in front of clients who were paying me a fortune. I gave that damned job my energy just to keep the nice house and the lifestyle. I didn’t have a better course to navigate right then, but the loss of things I loved threatened to take me down a spiral over which I had no control.

I struggled to maintain a righteous anger. Knowing that I betrayed Margot with the desires in my head. An attraction pulling me away from her. I was overcome with a sense that my anger couldn't be justified. Just knowing that made me angry again. Realising that her actions were pushing me closer to something I would really regret. How safe was it to even stay in the same house, to put everything that I treasured, every collected memory, at risk of destruction?

Homage to a Paul Smith boot

Missing

Someone to share my life with, 2002
Mathew Sawyer (b 1977)
Photograph of paint on leather
Location unknown
Bottom Drawer, Right

Hearing one story often reminds you of another. This morning, reading the New Zealand writer and art curator Justin Paton talk about his ten favourite paintings, I learnt the story of a work called *Someone to Share My Life With* by Mathew Sawyer. I'll let the three sentences speak for themselves:

*...because sometimes a painting that disappears ends up staying in the mind longest. Late one night in 2002, artist Mathew Sawyer took the shoes from his neighbour's front step, painted an exquisite bird (a swallow) on the sole of each, took a photo and then put them back. In the morning his neighbour laced on the shoes and walked out into the streets of London.*⁹

As soon as I read that, I set off to find the photograph that Sawyer took of the shoes. A few minutes later, Google had given me what I wanted. The shoes were not as I had imagined, but somehow even better. They had very worn leather soles, and the heels had been repaired. I think they had recently been wet. Perhaps that was why they had been placed on the front step, soaked from the rain. Concentric rings around the worn patches looked like tide marks as they dried. The heels had an odd quality about them, like the person had worn them while walking on fine gravel and lots of microscopic stones have embedded themselves into the surface. The tiny blue swallows were painted in the areas of greatest wear, the ball of each foot, flying towards each other with the light reflecting off their blue wings. The paintings would be the first point to touch the ground as the owner stepped out onto the pavements from his front door the next morning. He takes a size nine and a half.

The story reminded me of a pair of my own shoes, with their own disappearing art work. Many years ago, when I too lived in London, and at a brief time in my life when I could afford to be both frivolous and fashionable, I bought a pair of boots to get married in. Black leather ankle boots, they were relatively sombre, but with a hidden edginess that I loved. On the exterior, the only feature beyond the shining black leather was a dark-brown chestnut stripe, almost a panel, sown down each outward facing ankle. The inside of the boot was a different matter, with bright purple leather hidden to everyone but the person taking them off at night. What I loved the most was the sole. Into that deep tan leather was carved a map of London,

⁹ Paton, Justin, *How to Look at a Painting* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2005).

the snaking course of the River Thames winding through the city of straight roads. And what made them so wonderful, rather like the pair of swallows, was that not only did no-one know the maps were there, but they were walked back into the streets they depicted. I wore those boots to death, they were so comfortable. I walked to work, went on my lunchtime strolls, visited all the galleries, museums and bookshops that I loved to haunt. The soles in contact with the exact same streets they showed.

Because I wore them all the time, the leather soles gradually thinned until, at last, the maps were invisible. Gone, never to return. There was no replacement sole available, other than the standard bare leather from the cobbler. The delicately tooled lines, the streets and the twisting River Thames had worn into the London pavements. Not often you get to walk on water like that. The soles have been replaced twice since then. That is how much I loved those boots. Bare leather replaced rivers and streets, then bare leather replaced bare leather until at last, a rubber sole was all I could afford.

I wore those boots so much that eventually the leather tops began to crack. They probably needed better care, more polish to keep the leather supple and shoe trees to stretch them and stop the surface creasing. I continued to wear them until the crack became too big to use them as smart work shoes.

I still have them, deep in the detritus of my life, at the back of my wardrobe. I love them too much to throw them away. Even though they are reduced to items of clutter. I hunted them out, after I read about the swallows. They have been in this particular wardrobe for five years, but probably not worn for ten. I tried one on for old time's sake. It is still instantly comfortable, although some of the leather inside has cracked a little and sticks awkwardly into my foot.

I consider their archaeology. Inside the leather is still purple. And there is a rectangular label stitched to the inner sole. If I turn the boot in various directions I can just make out the words *Paul Smith* on that label, in that familiar hand-writing style used on suit jackets and shop fronts. Turning them over, the soles and heels are rubber now, and I can see from the heel that they have been replaced at least once in New Zealand.

There is one tiny reminder of their former glory. That little strip between the heel and the sole that never comes into contact with the ground. All that remains of the first, mapped, leather sole, still perfectly stitched along the sides, the pale cord intact. Cut through, directly across the sole, in order to glue the new rubber covering and plug the holes that have been

worn through by so much walking. That little leather strip is cracked now, soaked by rain and snow, a shoe that has been on business to Sydney, Singapore and New York, as well as London, Auckland and Wellington. So many cities with a broad river or harbour running through. The stitching along the sides remains remarkably strong and shows no sign of wear. I wish I had cared for them better.

I am lucky to still have them at all. The suit and tie they were bought to go with didn't fare so well, in the greater scheme of things. I came home late one night to find them bundled out of a window and lying on my driveway. The suit pants and the silk tie were sliced by scissors. It was a symbolic act by Margot. She was angry at me staying out late and took out her anger on things that were special from our wedding. Although, I don't recall seeing the long satin dress from *Ghost* out there on the drive. The one that took so long for her to decide on. Just the suit and tie I wore were slashed to ribbons. Other fragments of ties lay scattered on the drive, like the floor around a child's day of collage cutting art. I picked up some of the fragments. The grey silk tie my father bought, for me to attend my first serious job interview. There was a food stain on the front now, so I was only keeping it for the memory of my Dad.

I had become my own installation. Out there on the driveway I was a piece of art, surrounded by swirling pieces of silk, knee deep in the jewelled colours. New colour combinations formed around me as I walked. But I was an unwilling visitor, this was not some private showing which I had paid to attend. It was too modern, too avant-garde for my taste. Too much like an interactive piece by Marina Abramović for me to truly enjoy. I wondered if the neighbours across the street were fans. Were they watching from behind their faintly twitching nets?

Most of the ties didn't matter, they could be replaced. One held sentimental value. One that could never be replaced. A one-off. That was the only item on the drive that really made me angry. I could feel my fingers squeeze into the palms of my hands. The tension, as my jaw clamped tighter. For some strange reason the sentiments contained in the wedding suit were nothing to that gold patterned tie, designed using the background of the *Wilton Diptych*. There were matching cufflinks in the same silk. I loved that tie with the passion I loved the painting. It reminded me of tranquil moments from the past, lost in a reverie with art, drifting through the centuries with the others standing before the same shrine. After years of loving

the little altar, it then became the place where Margot and I first got together, now reduced to so many scattered ribbons at my feet.

I bundled up the fragments of my life and pushed them into the boot of the car, before the rain came or the dew fell to spoil them more than they already were. I would search through the wreckage for survivors later in the day. I was wearing the boots. At least they were safe.

Telephone sex, British style

Missing

Telephone Box, 2014
Banksy (? - ?)
Photograph,
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire
Bottom Drawer, Right

In the days before anyone had a mobile phone, every London phone box sold sex. They were knocking shops of small printed cards advertising local sex workers. These have been reinvented as “Tart Cards” for the Insta era. Originally just a cartoon woman, scantily clad and exaggerated, a slogan and a phone number. Not even a name, just a service. Printed on bright red, yellow, pink and green card. A tiny piece of cheap grade blu-tack to hold it in place.

Total domination

489 ****

Was this the ultimate answer to sexual frustration? A seedy card followed by an even seedier transaction? I was mesmerised by the range of possibilities.

Busty 42DD blonde

493 ****

Somewhere, as little as a few hundred yards away, was a woman who would sell me her body. For thirty minutes or an hour. In that time I was offered the chance to indulge numerous fantasies. From the sentimental to the downright base.

Spanking New brunette

724 ****

These cards were everywhere in central London. I could spend ten minutes holding the receiver without making a call. Reading the ads and getting aroused. Alone in my stand-up box perusing the land of possibilities.

Make me your lunchtime treat

493 ****

We haven't progressed far in two thousand years. The graffiti on the walls of Pompeii has things that are very similar – a cock carved into a stone in the road points you in the direction of the nearest brothel. The same sentiments were all there, just in Latin. All we have added in two millennia is the telephone. And the stigma.

If anyone wants a screw, he should look for Attice;

she costs 4 sestertii.

The beauty of these phone box fetishes was the simplicity of the transaction; phone, ask, get an address. If they were busy, there was no answer. Pick another card.

Your pain is my pleasure

495 ****

My modus operandi was to ring, ask about a service, get excited at the prospect, get a price and an address, then chicken out. Once or twice I stood and looked at a seedy doorway. Was my need for connection about to be satisfied? No, I wasn't ready yet.

At my command

724 ****

If you didn't hang up quickly enough and connected to a real person, it was often an unsettling experience. Questions were not well formed and answers were unspecific.

"Oh, hello."

"Ohhh." More of a husky moan than a greeting.

"Umm, err... what sort of things do you do?"

"What-ever you like darling."

"Oh, OK. Thanks very much. Bye"

Human doormat required

499 ****

For the lovers of literature and verse, sometimes we could get a bit of a rhyme going.

On your knees. Whip, Lick 'n' Tease

402 ****

One surprise: the number of cards advertising spanking, whipping, domination or bondage. I had no idea that these were so popular. What was it in the British male's psyche that made him love being whipped by a woman in latex or leather? Surely being admonished by his wife would give him all the humiliation he was seeking?

Miss Whiplash, Punishment and Correction

724 ****

Degrading, that's what it was. Wanting to be subservient or humiliated. Where was the fun in that? I didn't get it. Others obviously did. People struggling with the repression handed down from earlier generations.

No school dinner only lashings of discipline

493 ****

And then things took another kink with the appearance of a new and unexpected range of services.

Kinky Mistress Transformation Specialist

935 ****

Someone would carefully dress you in sensuous women's clothing and *then* beat you. As though you needed to be severely punished for such deviance.

Be transformed completely by a genuine specialist with exquisite wardrobe

229 ****

Exquisite wardrobes. That was too weird. How big a clientele would they cater for? Enough to warrant a special advertisement on the phone box wall. But really, wardrobes? How big a range of sizes did they need to carry?

Just a phone call away from ecstasy

224 ****

Some services went the other way, proclaiming Spank Me. The use of the word cane was popular. Some of the spankers even had uniforms, or dressed as schoolgirls, or worse.

Sex kitten in PVC

580 ****

Occasionally the list of services was too much even to be contained on the card. Surely all that was going to take you more than an hour.

Mistress Amy ready to punish you...

Sissy training, uniforms, toys, caning, PVC, rubber and much more...

724 ****

By the early 2000s, the brightly coloured cards with their cartoon characters had gone. Now we had real photos, in full colour. They were so prolific that not just the back wall but the windows of the phone boxes were covered too. Some were stuck to the ceiling, and occasionally you had to peel one off the receiver before you could use the phone. No wonder the mobile became so popular. I'd had one for three or four years by then.

Steamy Rubber Fantasies with Charlotte

0181 *** ****

London sex went cosmopolitan. Scandinavians were popular, Japanese, the occasional Aussie who'd bankrupted her OE. Overt advertising of gay, lesbian and transsexual activities. Suddenly, everything was on the menu. Sometimes it wasn't clear exactly what that was.

Cruella, Specialist in the Unusual

937 ****

When acronyms began to appear it was time to leave my phone box fantasies behind. Three or four letters that stood for something; action or activity. That was too big a loss of face, to have to ask the seller what she was offering.

GFE, COB, PSE, RCG

Rossetti's Lost Works

Ripped

Study for *Writing on the Sand*, 1858
Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828 -1882
Private collection
Acquired 1983
Middle Drawer, Right

It took me more than a week to decide to buy the two volumes of pictures by Rossetti. The Catalogue Raisonné. Plates of all his paintings, sketches and preparatory drawings, page after page of beautiful women's faces. Two big hardback volumes, rich red covers inside the shiny dust jackets. I'm not sure exactly how expensive they were, but enough to make me dither, leave the shop, come back, leave again and in some reverse denial of Christ, buy them the third time. A big extension to my overdraft, which the bank would never have approved if I told them what I was using it for. I was happy. I had so much to look at, to slowly leaf through page after page of female forms.

The front cover has a pen and ink drawing of Rossetti and Lizzie Siddal, walking side by side on a windy day; his hair blowing, her skirts whipping away. He is awkwardly reaching for her hand. Her face is a study in serene beauty, eyes cast down to the ground.

Why do I dwell so much on the memory of those two volumes? Because I saved them. Rescued them from the executioner's basket. They were gutted. The pages pulled away from the ruby-red covers. All of volume one had been wrenched out, the force ripping the paper insides of the covers, revealing cardboard beneath the glued end papers. Small pieces of cotton string fly in all directions from the spine, tiny arms flung high in their distress.

In volume two the first three pages are still intact. Behind them, the bottom corners of five or six leaves of pictures, thin slivers still somehow clinging to a gauze spine of glue and cotton. No effort has been made over the last twenty years to reassemble the plates of volume two from the text of volume one, turn them the right way around, or even try to match pages ripped in half. All I have done is to keep them together. And cart them around the world.

A memory of beauty. It is possible to look through a still-bound section of forty pages. Two pages in from the back of this wad, the force on the cotton strings has caused the pages to ruck together, concertinaed into a ball of paper that has squashed flat into the centre of the other damage. These pieces are too ruddled and folded to ever be smoothed back flat. In one, the top right-hand quarter of Lizzie's head is missing, torn in a straight line through her eyes, forever blinded by Margot's anger and violence.

I hate to argue. I cannot stand the anger that starts to well up inside me. Most of all I hate being pushed, involuntarily, towards it. Perhaps I am too timid. Maybe I won't stand up for myself. I felt anger at the destruction of my books. But I didn't go back to replay the memory, or revive it to fuel other fights. I covered the wound which caused the ripping in the first place.

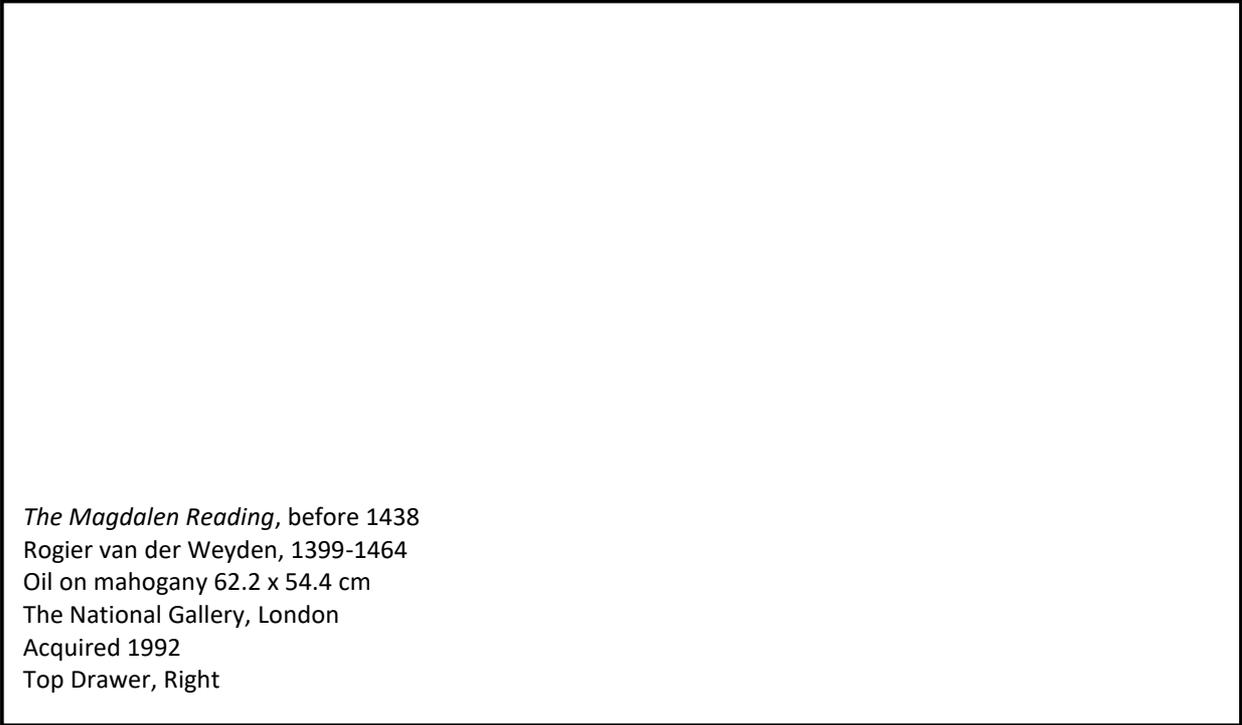
A jealousy of how much I loved those pictures. An insecurity that I might like them more than I did the physical flesh before me.

The paper page was no threat. Margot didn't get that, and I didn't get her insecurity. So we danced around these problems, avoiding and ignoring, allowing them to fester like cancer in our relationship. Separating us like the books from the spines.

I still have those shredded volumes. They sit among my other books, their spines still perfectly intact. Only when you pull them from the shelf do you see the destruction. I know they are there, pricking at my resentment, reminding me that it is better to talk things through than fuck other women in revenge.

The Alabaster Pot

Missing



The Magdalen Reading, before 1438
Rogier van der Weyden, 1399-1464
Oil on mahogany 62.2 x 54.4 cm
The National Gallery, London
Acquired 1992
Top Drawer, Right

After Samantha and I split up, I never got close to getting any of the Minton china, but I did get some of the crystal glasses. Because she also wanted to keep all the fig-patterned plates and bowls, I was allowed to take the Emma Bridgewater coffee cups. Collected over several years from their annual sales on the Fulham Road, there must have been at least twelve. The same shaped cup and saucer, all with different spongeware designs and patterns; roses and flowers, animals and fruits. Many were just one-off trials and never went into full-scale production. In fact, the coffee cups were a line that you rarely saw in the shops. Everyone just wanted the mugs. As a collection, the cups were quite unique.

After sharing a china laden life with Samantha, in their new life with Margot, the coffee cups went to live in a Victorian pine linen press at the back of the kitchen. One night, when work had demanded that I be out late entertaining clients with fine food and wine, I returned home in the early hours to find all the cups shattered across the terracotta tiled floor. Little shards crunched under foot as I walked to the safety of the kitchen bench. So many years – all those pilgrimages to the annual sale – gone in an instant. The pleasure of finding a new design that wasn't already part of the collection. Even the realisation, after buying the first four or five, that we were forming a collection. All smashed into the floor. It was a helpless feeling. All the pieces were there, some as large as half a coffee bowl, but nothing could be salvaged. The damage to each had been calculated to ensure nothing could be reassembled. I imagined some being dashed onto the floor more than once, to make sure they were sufficiently broken. Fine white splinters pushed into the leather soles of my shoes. The only thing left to do was to sweep the crunching pile into the safety of the bin, before little childish feet entered the kitchen the next morning. A bit of my life that I had already lost had been lost some more. This time permanently. I have nothing left of all those cups.

I opened the door of the study that doubled as our spare bedroom, desperate for a few brief hours of sleep, only to find the destruction continued. The shelf of Victorian poetry editions, from my first purchase of Tennyson, a leather-bound Milton, a Byron, and the green-leather Shelly that had belonged to my mother, all now ripped on the floor. Most I didn't care about, they could be replaced quite easily, and cheaply, since the Victorian poets had lost their shine. The Shelly was one of the few books that belonged to my family, or had any history beyond that of my own purchase. The red leather Milton had been beautiful to hold. The soft leather cool to the touch. Just like the cups, there was nothing I could do with the torn pages other than gather them up into another big bag for the tip. The hard corners of

the covers pushed against the black plastic, like little bodies trying to escape a womb. There was so much debris to put in the bin that week that I had to drive them to the dump. A further indignity that passed without a word spoken or comment made. We both left the unspoken to fester, perhaps in the hope that one side or the other would make some verbal concession, but neither did.

While I took the remains of books and pottery to the tip at the weekend, during the week I sought sanctuary at the National Gallery. It was close to The Strand, where I often worked. My favourite pilgrimage, a place of calm amid the conflict of my relationship and the turmoil of early parenthood, was to stand in front of *The Magdalen Reading*. A tiny oak panel with a seated woman lost in her contemplation of a good book. She has been reading the same page for almost six hundred years, and is still engrossed. She wears the most opulent of green robes, richly woven with a textured underskirt of stippled gold braid. On the wooden floor next to her is a small alabaster pot. It has a lid with a tiny handle, not unlike the ones on the surrendered Minton serving dishes. It is this insignificant item that makes this green robed woman into Mary Magdalen. Without it, we would not know who she was. The pot is her traditional attribute. It is the symbol she has been turned from sinner and fallen woman, into this saintly version of herself, repentant and absolved from all her past sins. I would never achieve such an exalted position in Margot's eyes, but remained constantly guilty for sins I had not even the inventiveness to commit in my wildest dreams.

I loved the Magdalen's quiet contentment. Such serenity remained entirely out of my grasp. An alabaster pot would not have survived the destruction of the coffee cups. I could always visit her at the gallery, to absorb a little of her calm. In the hush of the gallery, amongst the reverence of the visitors, it was possible to catch a shiver of it. Beyond that the painting had so much more to tell. It was a tiny part of a much bigger work, a vast Dutch altarpiece. Behind the reading figure there was a man standing, his head cut off so we only see his trunk; to her side another man in a red robe, kneeling on the floor. All you can see of him is a small fraction of the robe and a foot. The upturned sole is what tells us he is kneeling. Nothing more. Detective work has discovered the identity of these people, Saint Joseph standing and John the Baptist kneeling. The picture was bought by the National Gallery in 1860, but the entire background had been overpainted with a thick layer of brown paint. Somewhere in the 1600s

someone had decided to give it a more contemporary look, and removed all the background. Once all the detail of the figures, the window and cabinet just behind Mary were rediscovered in the 1950s, suddenly the head of Saint Joseph at a museum in Lisbon became a missing part of the same altarpiece. There are only three fragments left of what was once a huge panel. None of these show the main subjects. All we have are the minor saints from around the edges. A sketch at a Stockholm museum, potentially shows us the figures on the other side of the altar. St Catherine of Alexandria is seated in the middle. A wonderful piece of detective work, the single huge altarpiece, sawn up and then divided around Europe, bought by different collectors and museums. Piecing together fragments of a lost story about a woman engrossed in a book.

A Man seated reading at a Table in a Lofty Room

Missing

A Man seated reading at a Table in a Lofty Room, about 1628-30
Follower of Rembrandt, 1606-1669
Oil on oak, 55.1 x 46.5 cm
The National Gallery, London
Acquired 1982
Top Drawer, Right

The title on the back of the postcard read, “A Man seated reading at a Table in a Lofty Room”. Once attributed to Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669). Strange that the words *seated* and *reading* didn’t deserve a capital letter while Table and Lofty did.

This was the first Rembrandt painting that I ever saw in real life. One of the highlights of my first trip to London’s National Gallery. Late September, 1982. My first few days away at university, exploring the big smoke on my own. My first trip to the National Gallery, the Portrait Gallery next door, and down the Embankment to the Tate. These were all free, all I had to do was walk there. When I first saw this little masterpiece it was still considered a real Rembrandt. When the Gallery bought it in 1917 they were convinced it was. Now it is attributed to a ‘Follower of Rembrandt’. What is that – copier, forger, pupil, friend, rival – what? Someone selling knock-off Rembrandts around the corner from his house in Amsterdam? A stalker? I’d like to know when they decided it wasn’t the real thing, the work of an imposter. It is hard to dislodge it from my brain as the first actual Rembrandt I’d seen, since it is undoubtedly a masterpiece. I stood for ages looking at the play of light and shadow. I was in the presence of artistic greatness. It isn’t even on show at the moment. A fake, trying to be something it isn’t.

It is not a big painting – about the size of the *Katikati Advertiser* when you open it out on the breakfast table. The man in the title is a minor part of the composition. Little more than a head wearing a cap. Off centre. A slightly rounded silhouette, emerging from the straight lines of the shadowy wall. The faintest hint of a face. His body is all shadow, lost into the wall behind him, sucked into the blackness.

From the little postcard it looks like there is no detail in the face, but if you make it larger, blow up a photo on your phone, features begin to appear. A mouth, nose, and left eye. He is looking straight at you, as though he is surprised that you are there. He is slightly plump. Sitting at a table or a desk, there is virtually no detail to the objects in his room. Everything is about the sunlight reflecting through the windows – the pattern of the ironwork holding the small glass panes, reflecting on the rough lime-washed wall. There is no lamp or fire within, the window is the only source of light.

Like the hour or so before dawn, sitting in the hard, pink chair. Comfortable to sit in, not good for sleeping. The high back is ideal for pushing against the door. Wedging it closed. The chair helps distribute your weight across the back of the door to keep it shut and stop it being

forced open. Around 4 am in the summer months, the darkness starts its imperceptible break, lightens a shade or two from black to deepest grey. Leaving the coast of South America behind, the sun travels the wide Pacific, seeking out my little room. There, imprisoned in this cramped study space, with its curtain-less window out onto the back paddock, my room begins to emerge from shadow. Desk and bookcases lose their shapeless forms and grow a little detail. Like Rembrandt's painting – I still call it his – this is also summer. This is not the cold harsh sunlight of winter. This is a warmer sun. Time to emerge from under a threadbare chair cover that served as a blanket for the night.

The scholar in his lofty room, perhaps a writer, or a lover of books, sits huddled against the wall. In front of him, in the shadows, are his books. His prized possessions. He has placed one on the table and is reading. It must be hard to see the page. At least there will be no tears. He has nothing to cry over. His heart is cold, he's long dead.

No-one else in my house is awake. It is silent outside – I might have a few more minutes before morning life resumes. Only the birds are awake and singing.

The man's room is very narrow – yes, it is lofty, double height at least, but the floorspace is cramped. There is hardly enough space for more than his desk and chair.

Around the time of this painting, 1630, Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam and fell in love with Saskia, the young cousin of his landlord. He painted and drew her often. Her young face was perhaps a little plump, burdened with extra chins. It's a happy face. She was rich, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer. Rembrandt, on the other hand, spent his life struggling with money.

Saskia bore him four children, only one of which lived longer than a few days. Saskia herself died within a couple of months of the birth of her surviving son, Titus. One life exchanged for another. She made a will leaving Rembrandt and Titus her fortune, but included the condition that most of Rembrandt's share would be lost if he were to re-marry. A tough ask, especially since he had a young baby to look after.

Rembrandt constantly had money problems. Don't feel sad for him. They were all of his own making. He was a spendthrift. Saskia's family accused him of squandering her fortune. He was a compulsive buyer of books and art, collector of all manner of antiquities, such as the props and weapons he included in his paintings. He owned works by Rubens, Holbein and several other old masters.

There were a series of housekeepers – one called Geertge Dircx was wet nurse to Titus and became his common-law wife, but he deserted her in favour of a younger housekeeper, called Hendrickje Stoffels. Geertge tried to take him to court, saying that he had promised to marry her. In turn Rembrandt accused her of pawning some of the jewellery Saskia had left to Titus in her will. Somehow, Rembrandt managed to get Geertge sent to a house of correction which freed him up to live happily with Hendrickje for the rest of her life. He painted her often, in some of his most sensuous portraits. They never married. Couldn't afford to.

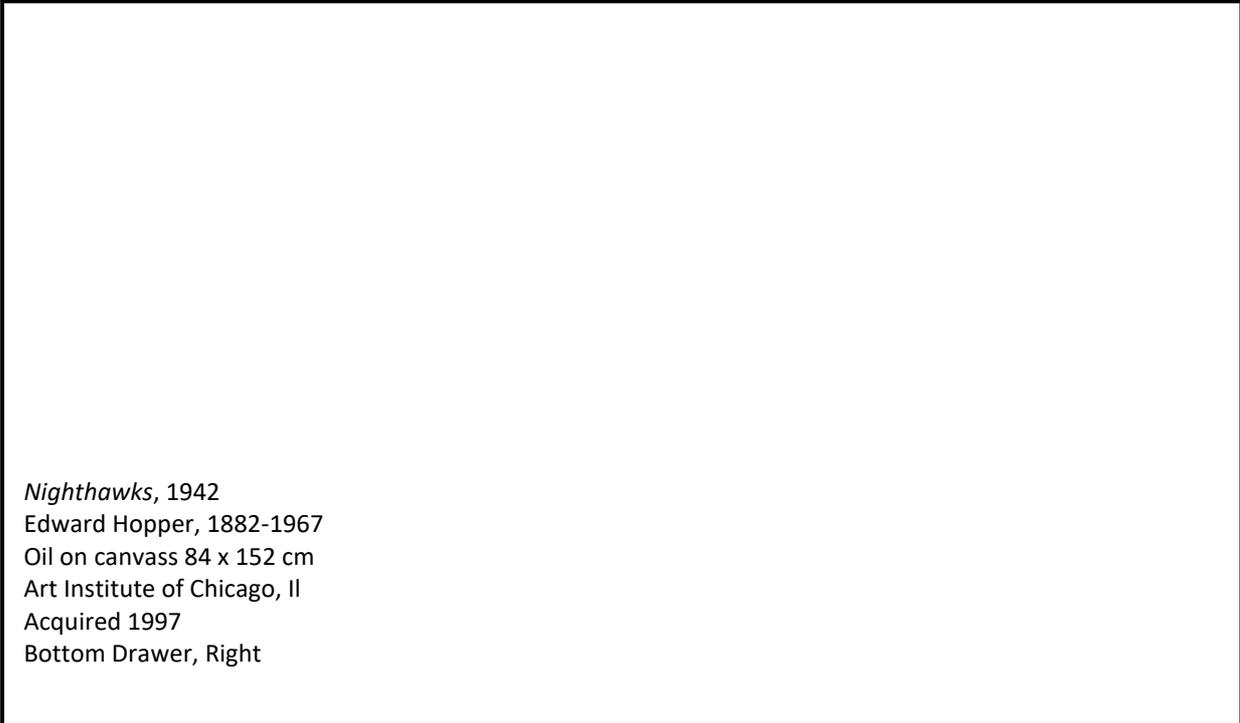
Twisting and turning uncomfortably in the pink chair, I know now that my second wife is not the right one for me. I know that between myself and the collection of books on which I have squandered our money, one of us will not make it to a place of safety. Not even the art works hanging on the walls are safe. Some have gone already. Casualties along the way. There will be accusations. Lawyers will be called to attest to the level of my spending, bills will be checked and credit-card statements will be excavated from the detritus of history to prove a point. They will be flourished in the hands of lawyers in Auckland court rooms. I came with books; a quiet voice says. I arrived with a wide wall full, it is just that I continued to buy. Those delicate little beings, so vulnerable to fire and water, were my refuge and solace in the uncomfortable times. The times when I pushed the pink chair against the door to hold it shut. When I sought to keep the whirlwind of anger and emotion out of my little sanctuary.

Margot never came to the window, although I half expected that she would. I feared a face looming out of the darkness would be more terrifying than the beating on the door behind me. Here at least I remained invisible, until dawn.

The long shafts of morning sunlight catch the top most branches of the gum trees high on the hillside across the paddock. The beauty of life around me creeps out of the shadows into the light of a new day. Soon the sun will explode into the oaks and the totara along the creek edge. I will lift the pink chair away from the door and step out into the rest of the house. Walk past the holes beaten into the thin plywood skin of the door panel, just a few centimetres behind where my head had been pushed into the back of the chair. I search the house for new damage I will need to fix.

Nighthawks

Missing



Nighthawks, 1942
Edward Hopper, 1882-1967
Oil on canvass 84 x 152 cm
Art Institute of Chicago, II
Acquired 1997
Bottom Drawer, Right

There's a rumour that Edward Hopper's most famous painting *Nighthawks*, three people sitting at the counter of a late-night diner, was inspired by a short story by Ernest Hemingway. Hopper admired a story called *The Killers*, as well as *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*.

While both stories have cafés, and the first is certainly a diner, neither of them match the set of characters in the painting. In *The Killers* there are two assassins, about to carry out a contract killing on a tall Swede – Ole Andreson. They come to the diner, knowing that he is often there for his supper. But they talk too much, giving away their plans, betraying their reasons for waiting. They linger for two hours, until it's clear he won't come. One of the men has a shot gun under his too tight overcoat.

In Hopper's painting, there's a couple at the bar; a sharp-nosed man in blue shirt and suit, with a grey felt hat, and a red-haired woman in a bright red dress. They look bored and disinterested in life, and each other. Perhaps they have been married a long time; or they don't know each other at all and have nothing in common. The man has a cigarette between the first two fingers of his right hand. The short man that works in the diner, with his close-cropped ginger hair and his white uniform, has nothing to add to our story. For me there is only one interesting character in that diner; the man sitting with his back to us. The man with no face, whose expression we cannot read, about whom we know nothing and can make no judgement. He is the interesting one. All the stories should be about him. The guy we don't know, or don't recognise, always sitting at the end of the bar, with no-one to talk to.

All we know about him is from looking at the painting. His hair is close cut, but the shadow of his hat prevents us knowing the colour. His blue jacket is slightly tight and pulling at his arms, as though he's put on a little weight since he bought the suit. He's clean shaven, and has a mug of coffee on the bench. He's probably right-handed; he's holding a glass in his right hand. If you look very closely at the right side of his face it appears quite red, he's a heavy drinker, spending too many of his evenings sitting alone at the bars of all-night diners.

Hopper said this painting wasn't about loneliness, but more to do with the possibility of predators in the night. The hawk shaped nose of the first man. As I look at the details, I am not sure that I agree. All four people in the picture are lonely. At least three of them are bored with their lives and possibly their wives. We will never be sure about the man with his back to us. He *could* be waiting for the most perfect, beautiful girl in the world to finish her late-night job, so he can walk her home and pull her into the most perfect bed of dreams. She

could be working long hours to help pay for their wedding or their tickets for a dream trip to Europe. He could be, but I don't think so. If he was waiting for that heavenly creature, he would be looking out of the window. No, he's a sad loser with few friends and no life to speak of. His chubby back is the perfect vision of loneliness that Hopper was so keen to deny. No one wants to buy a painting of a bar full of losers, right? Well, apart from a Chicago museum.

May 13th, 1942.

An invoice is typed for Mr. Edward Hopper of 3 Washington Square, New York. He is to be paid \$3,000 for *Night-Hawks* by the Art Institute of Chicago, less commission of 33.3% and the cost of several photographs. In total, he will receive \$1,971.00.

They didn't scrimp on the commission back in the day.

Lovers of Hopper have spent a lot of time trying to identify the real diner in the painting. They have searched Greenwich Village, Hopper's neighbourhood, but never found a match. It might have been on the corner of Perry Street. Hopper said it was 'suggested' by a restaurant – so it is likely that it was a composite, made up of many such places, not an exact copy. There are lots of bars and diners in central Manhattan, just the sort of places to find a little group of customers like this.

Edward Hopper married Josephine Nivison in 1924. They had been at the same art college together, but only became an item two decades later. They remained together until Hopper died in 1967. Jo died the following year. They were an attraction of opposites – she was short, open, gregarious and sociable, while he was tall, secretive, shy and introspective.

From 1924 onward Jo modelled for various figures in Hopper's paintings, although he only painted one oil specifically of his wife. She was the model for the woman in *Nighthawks*. Throughout her life she kept detailed diaries and accounts relating to her husband's work. These diaries also show that the marriage was at times troubled – there were frequent rows which sometimes escalated into fighting.

In these diaries, Edward would add pencil sketches of his work, while Jo would add details about each painting. From them we learn that she was the model for the woman, while Edward was the model for both men at the bar, using a mirror. What I note from all the details

of people and colours in Jo's description is, "Other figure dark sinister back – at left." It took Hopper about a month and a half to complete the painting.

So, Hopper used himself as a model, but Jo thought there was something sinister about the figure on the left. The man with his back to us. I recognise that figure, because it is me. In him I see the man who doesn't want to go home. Who is so troubled by what he will face there, that he prefers to spend an hour sitting on his own in an empty bar. Prefers to watch nothing much happen rather than face the possibility of a row or an argument, covering the same old ground yet another time. Reciting the same tired lines. The five-hundredth performance of the same play, with the same dialogue.

There is an art to this sort of lingering. It has to be just the right amount of time. Spend too long there, lost in your own thoughts, and your behaviour will be the cause of another row. You will be late and you will be chastised for being so, and interrogated about where you have been and exactly who you have seen. To answer that you have sat in a bar all on your own, seen no-one and talked to not a soul, will be unacceptable. Margot could never do that, and so, by inference, nor could you.

"You must have been seeing someone. It was a woman, wasn't it?"

Who was she?

What did she look like?

What happened between you?

Why have you taken to seeing her in a bar and how long has this been going on between the two of you?

Is she attractive?

Is she BLONDE?

What's her name?

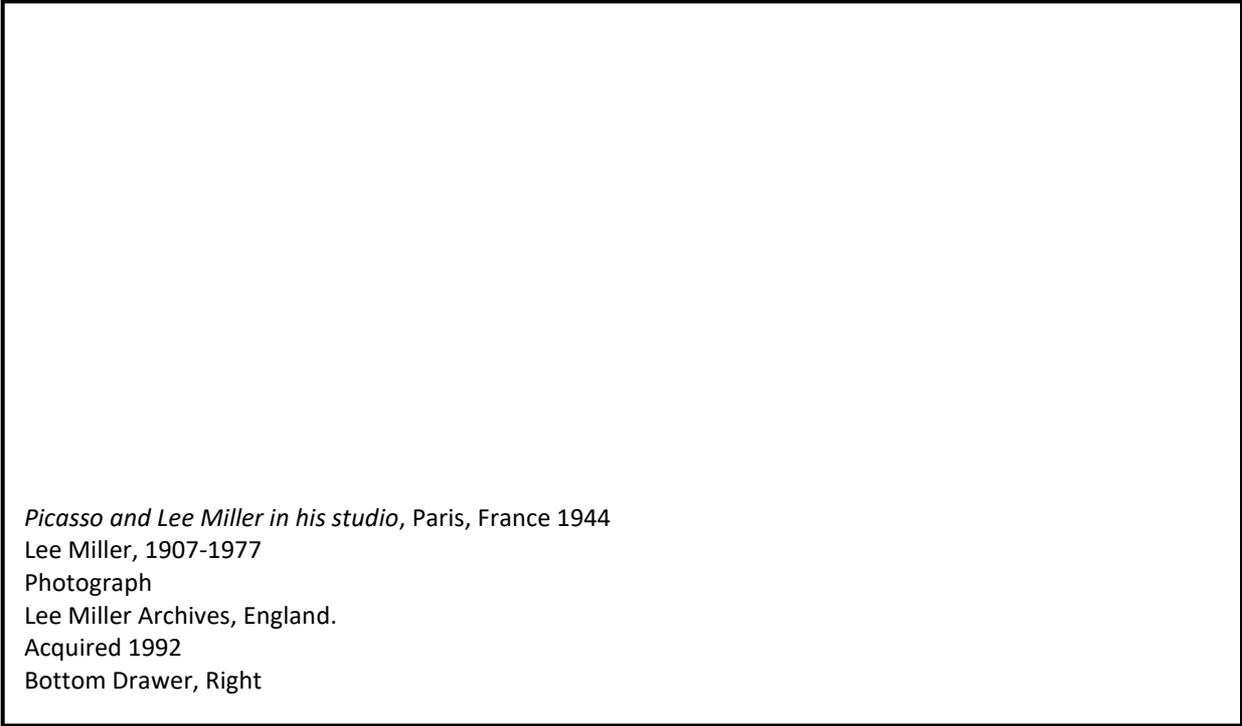
Have you fucked her? I bet you've fucked her, haven't you?"

And there you are, all you said was that you sat quietly in a bar on your own, talking to no-one, and now it seems that you have been fucking a blonde behind your wife's back for months. Perhaps years. To never be believed is a curse. Was there a male version of Cassandra?

To be allowed to sit quietly, in the corner of an empty bar, thinking no thoughts at all, that would be a blessing. That is why it is better to say nothing, not mention it, never take too long. Only ever just enough time that can be passed off as working a little late, something the boss needed for the morning, or the heavy traffic crawling out of town along the northern motorway.

Lee Miller, artist, photographer and lover

Missing



Picasso and Lee Miller in his studio, Paris, France 1944
Lee Miller, 1907-1977
Photograph
Lee Miller Archives, England.
Acquired 1992
Bottom Drawer, Right

To expose someone to an excess of trauma, to put them in the firing line of horrors and emotions too often, for too long, can desensitise them to events around them. It can also push them too far. Too much, and it can unhinge their minds. The end result may manifest itself in depression or they may turn to a crutch, like alcohol. I may have been the one who caused this. Not intentionally, but the trauma may have been a result of my actions.

The consumption of alcohol became too great. Margot and I matched each other, drink for drink. Evenings were not passable without two or three strong gin and tonics, in addition to a couple of bottles of wine. That was too much. But it is hard to call yourself out as an alcoholic. Especially if you are enjoying it. Or if you need it get through the arguments that stretch in front of you.

The history of people's lives can sometimes surprise you. The intensity of emotions through which they travelled can be unexpected. When I looked into the life of Lee Miller, deeper than the photographs, what I discovered unsettled me. She was many things. On the one hand she was an exquisitely beautiful woman. There is one photograph in which she appears like a statue, naked from the belly button upwards. One arm is behind her head, the other holding her neck. Her head is turned to the side, her jaw line very straight and her neck incredibly long and slim. The word that comes to mind is lean, not a gram more fat than is necessary. Ribs and muscles all showing. The black and white picture could easily be a Greek goddess, although just a shade too skinny to be Venus, more like Artemis goddess of hunting and patron of girls and young women.

On the other hand Lee was an artist, she was at the cross-over point between art and photography, a leading figure in the surrealist movement. And, when the war came, it also turned out that she could write. On her first writing assignment for Vogue magazine she described life in the hospital with the wounded American soldiers, and she was right there in the middle of the bombing of St Malo, describing the way the buildings shook and what it felt like to accidentally stand on a severed hand.

Delve into her personal life and the story will blow your mind. As a young girl she had a wonderful father, the sort of father we all aspire to be for our daughters. He encouraged her to do everything that her brothers did. Everything was possible, but at the age of seven she was raped and contracted venereal disease. The treatment at the time was barbaric and her two brothers were sent two blocks away so that they were not traumatised by the sounds of

her screaming. She went into therapy at an early age and was advised to look on sex as a trivial amusement, to reserve herself for love. Love was to be held sacred above all else. Unfortunately, what came next was just as traumatic. She fell in love with a boy but while they were out canoeing together he fell into the cold water and died. It turned out his heart was very weak. Her next lover was an aviator, who showered the deck of the ocean liner taking her from America to Paris with roses, but crashed on the flight home. It seems unnecessary to saturate one person in so much heartbreak.

Once she got to Paris Lee met the American surrealist Man Ray and fell in love with him. Their relationship, in one form or another, was to last until they both died in the 1970s. This was the time of the Surrealists, a world into which Lee fell, but she was too independently minded to fit the mould. The predominantly male world rebelled against bourgeois beliefs. They believed marriage was superfluous, families redundant, and free love (*l'amour fou*) the only form of relationship a true surrealist could aspire to. Sadly all those men also came with the usual double standards. They could have as many lovers as they wanted, but they disapproved of their women having the same freedom.

Lee abandoned Man Ray and not long after married the wealthy Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey. They went to live in Cairo, but this was not the life for a woman like Lee and she soon began to feel trapped in a gilded cage. Some of her photography from the time is stunning – for example *Portrait of Space*, 1937 – the torn hole in the side of a tent looking out to the emptiness of the desert beyond. Photography as autobiography.

I was guilty of taking a strong and independent woman and leaving her alone as a mother. It is strange that anyone should do that, but such actions are not uncommon. We fall in love with women for their strength, drawn to their independence and free spirits. To think that they will change after the birth of a child is a ridiculous notion. If anything, we should look for ways to double their independence and remember to always include our offspring in these new lives. I remember us saying we wouldn't let our baby change our lives or stop us living as freely as we had always done. To think that just shows that we had no experience of what it means to be a parent, or how great a demand a young helpless baby would have on our lives.

In fact, we did very well. We took our little daughter everywhere, in all manner of transporting devices from slings to backpacks, buggies to bicycle seats and eventually a whole back wheel with its own pedals. We walked, climbed and trekked to all manner of remote

places, but at the end of the day one of us had to go to work to earn money. So I abandoned Margot with our little girl during the weeks. Once I arrived home to be told that I was the first adult conversation of Margot's day. What was I supposed to do? I had entertaining, training and courses to attend, not to mention those I had to deliver myself. I could not be there as much as I wanted, and even less than Margot wanted. Somewhere within the growing resentment at my perceived freedoms grew the mistrust about what I was up to.

The expat life in Cairo was not for Lee Miller, just as a lifestyle block north of Auckland wasn't for Margot. Aziz indulged her by arranging a trip to Paris. It was there, in 1937, that she first met Roland Penrose. He was a quiet, shy Englishman – rather like I saw myself – but from a strict Victorian upbringing. I see another parallel here, because until I met Margot I really hadn't loved. Instead I had been following the traditional English upbringing. Margot brought a whole Antipodean shake-up to the matter. Like Lee in Paris, she became a tutor in personal liberation from that stiff English upbringing. In 1939 Lee left Aziz and moved into Roland's house in Hampstead. It was the day that the Second World War was declared. They married in 1947 and lived together until Lee's death in 1977.

Lee had a single child, a son called Antony Penrose. While she was in Paris she became well acquainted with Picasso. He was so enamoured with her that he painted her six times. Roland bought one of these pictures and gave it to Lee as a present. Her son Antony recalls it hanging at their family home in Sussex and being teased mercilessly by his school friends because they said his mother was so ugly. She had both of her eyes on the same side of her face. I don't know if the family still owns that picture, but today it would be worth tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars. We may not always understand the value of something that we have. Until it is too late.

Lee and her son did not have a great relationship. She became more and more plagued by depression and drinking. When Antony asked her if he could work with her on preserving her work, she discouraged him, thinking that it would be bad for his own creativity. Thank goodness not all sons listen to their mothers. Although Lee told him that nothing remained of her work, after her death in 1977 he discovered 60,000 photographs, negatives, documents, journals, love letters and souvenirs in cardboard boxes and trunks in the attic of their family

home. He has brought her work and her achievement to the world. We owe him a huge debt of gratitude for preserving the story of this most beautiful and incredible of women.

There is a photo of Lee and Picasso in his studio in Paris from 1944. I love this shot. Lee is taller. Paris has just been liberated, and she has not seen Picasso for six or seven years. She is wearing military style clothing – her shirt has pockets and lapels. Picasso has a silk tie which looks more modern than 1944. His smile seems very genuine, but there is something else. His eyes are too fixed, the glare too intense. He wants more than he is letting on. And then there are the arms – they have arms around each other's shoulders. His hand rests on the back of her neck – it is a very intimate gesture – his fingers are touching the soft pulse of her neck, just below her hair-line. Her hand is on his shoulder, but it is clenched, gripping the fabric of his shirt, almost pulling at it. Holding him back. She is smiling at him, but is there fear in her smile? I'm not sure, but the more I look the less I think she is relaxed.

Lee worked as a freelance photographer for Vogue magazine, but as war came she was no longer interested in frocks and handbags. The British would not let a woman be a war correspondent, so she joined the American press corp. Six weeks after D-Day she flew into France and joined the invading army. Her photography and reporting were as close as you could get to the front line. She followed the American soldiers that liberated Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945. Photographed the fear in the eyes of captured guards as well as the piles of human corpses. What she saw haunted her in the dark years that followed.

No one was there to witness my battles with Margot. The arguments, the shouting, the things thrown and smashed left no trace once they were cleared away.

The lasting impact of those scenes, the death and destruction haunted Lee for the rest of her life. Margot and I fractured, split and broke apart. It took time, it was messy and painful. It was not the way we saw our futures, but it was better that we did. We were not meant for each other, we were too volatile when mixed. Two benign substances that only ignite when combined. The safety instructions on the bottle advised that they should always be kept well apart.

Caravaggio hiding on the wall

Missing

The Taking of Christ, 1602
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1571-1610
Oil on mahogany 62.2 x 54.4 cm
The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin
Acquired 1995
Top Drawer, Right

Betrayal, that is what the painting *The Taking of Christ* is all about. That moment when Judas plants a kiss on the cheek of the Messiah to identify him to the Roman soldiers. But there is another story, not in the painting, but about it. About not seeing things for what they are, even if they are hiding in plain sight on the wall of the Jesuit College. Or even if I was doing them right in front of Margot. About seeing what you want to see.

My Caravaggio postcard is a long-lived favourite – somehow making its way through the relationships with Samantha and Margot. In one life God and religion would play a part, and in the other it would be a source of disquiet and distrust.

What do you see in the painting?

Christ is leaning away from Judas, resisting the moment of betrayal when the kiss will be planted on his cheek. The Saviour's forehead is lined and his eyes downcast. He is accepting of the situation, or what must come of this moment, but his will is resisting. Look at his hands and the tension in them. Fingers laced together, palms pushing downwards, forcing his arms straight and his whole body rigid.

And Judas. His brow is even more lined, his forehead wrinkled. He has seized Christ by the arm, holding him and pulling him towards that fatal kiss. The kiss that changes everything. The kiss that defines a religion, and one that will also send Judas on his way to madness and death. When Judas realises his betrayal, and the price of thirty pieces of silver, will mean Christ is sent to his death, he tries to return the money. It will not be taken. He hangs himself from a tree in the place that becomes known as the Field of Blood. There are two different accounts of his death. In one he hangs himself, in the other he seems to burst open on that same Field of Blood. It becomes the place where strangers are buried. And thirty pieces of silver, well that is worth two or three hundred dollars at today's silver price.

The kisses that I paid for were a betrayal, when I should have stuck with the free ones I could get from Margot's lips. Kisses I resorted to when I realised how much I hated where I was. When I knew I had failed again. While for me those costly kisses signalled the end of any relationship with Margot, she thought there was still something worth clinging to.

Look closely at the painting. Look at the hands and noses. Behind Christ is John, his head almost merged with that of the Messiah. His right hand is raised up, his fingers spread, panic

on his face. Then there is the hand of Judas, firmly gripping the arm of Jesus. Below that the two hands of Christ, the fingers woven together.

These four hands make a line down from the top left of the painting to the middle at the bottom. They are highly illuminated, stressing their importance. And one more hand, in one sense the most important here, a right hand gently holding the lantern by the thumb and forefinger to partly illuminate the scene. This is the tallest item in the picture, the high point. This person is not identified as a disciple, because he is the artist. This is Caravaggio himself. His hand is doubly significant because it is the one that lights the picture and creates it for us on the canvass. Without his hand we have nothing. It casts a light in both senses.

If you shone a light down on my life, flipping over the stone under which it had been lived for so long, the sight would be horrific. A train wreck of bad decisions. All the signs had been building; unhappy in the relationship, stung by lack of tenderness to not hand out any myself. I lost all self-control and didn't care about getting caught doing something I shouldn't. Worse, I secretly wanted to get caught.

I bet they get a lot of odd requests, those women you pay for kisses. Mine was probably pretty tame compared to some.

"Scratch me," I said. "Down my chest."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Rake me with your finger nails so they leave marks."

Her first attempt was too gentle. I looked her in the eye.

"Much harder."

She got the feel for it, let the pull of nail in skin soak up her hatred for that way of life, the punters with their pawing hands and stale breath. And the real reasons; the low point when this was the only way to pay this month's rent.

The red welts rose up garishly in long lines down my chest. They were perfect. There was no way they would go unnoticed, or be ignored. I was bound to be found out. Discovered. This, of all the cruel acts I could find, must be the one to bring about the end of us.

Five hands in the painting, brightly illuminated central characters. But there are three more. The black gloved hand of the soldier placed upon Jesus' chest, lost into the shadows of beards and the space between Judas and Jesus. A sliver of light reflects on the black fabric of the

glove. It almost looks like a thumb, until you realise that this is the soldier's left hand and the thumb would be on the other side. I never noticed that before. And two more hands, very faintly in the background. Holding onto the fabric of John's robe as he tries to flee.

Don't forget the noses. Look how prominent the noses are. Six of them. John's turned upwards as his mouth lets out a shout. Jesus and Judas very close together. And then the two soldiers, whose helmets are pulled down to shade their eyes, but whose noses leap brightly from the shade. And then we have our painter again, peering over the top of everything to get a better view.

The central four noses; Jesus, Judas and the two soldiers, are almost in a dead straight line. The light, in the form of a flash of white paint is reflecting of each of the four. Why is that so important? There must be a reason. But fuck knows. Straight lines down and across the canvas. Forming a cross, prophetic, signalling what is to come. What the future holds. The end for all of us.

The Kiss that changed everything.

This is the moment when the world changed. The ultimate moment of betrayal. The kiss planted on the cheek. For me, that was where it began but it wasn't where the kiss ended up. It moved from cheek to lips. Such things were often frowned on. No kissing. So that first kiss was tentative. But once it was allowed and gently returned, then the die was cast and such kisses would be allowed to continue. There was no going back from that sort of kiss.

I was surprised there was no tension in her body. It was her first day at work. She had made up her mind to take that job, and so she was ready for anything that came her way. It might have been a bad experience. It might have been forced not consensual. That would have changed her whole outlook, made her angry and perhaps forced her to consider a different career. But no. I was there on her first day, with gentle hands and quiet manner, unrushed and confident about myself. I would take control and seek out what I wanted, so that a week or so later, when I came back, I found myself rewarded with more than just a kiss.

By then the red welts had almost faded, but I was still trapped. Other signs to look for when you're afraid someone might be cheating; enjoying the attention of someone else. Did I mention the major insecurities? Low self-esteem, self-loathing, inability to form a lasting relationship. And especially the lack of self-control. No mention of red welts in that article.

Sixty years in the dining room.

It is a good job that the Jesuits don't have food fights. The painting hung in the dining room of the Society of Jesus in Dublin from the early 1930s until someone recognised it for what it was in 1990. They thought it was a copy by a Dutch follower of Caravaggio, one Gerard von Honthorst. In 1802 a member of the Mattei family, the same family in fact who had originally commissioned the painting from the artist, sold it to an English politician as a copy by Honthorst. Somewhere over those two hundred years since it was painted they had lost track of what it really was, just as I had lost track of what my life was about, and what was really important. The painting sat in the politician's Scottish castle until the 1920s. From there it was sold to an Irish woman, who later gave it to the Jesuits in gratitude for their support following the shooting of her husband by the Irish Republican Army in 1920. In 1990 Father Barber asked experts from the National Gallery of Ireland to clean the picture. As they removed the layers of dirt and discoloured varnish, the masterpiece began to emerge. The deep blackness of the background, the shadows, the vivid reds of the robes and the play of the light on the black armour of the soldiers. It was all there. It had been for centuries.

Under my varnish everything about me was weak. A fake façade that I had erected in front of my real self. A self that had been hidden so long I no longer knew who I was or what I really looked like. The betrayer.

In the mid-1990s, when *The Taking of Christ* was in the National Gallery in London, I was undergoing my own expulsion from the love of God into the godless wilderness of divorce and much better sex. The reality was far less simple. I'd swapped one problem for another.

The Children of Eris:
Niekea

Neikea – arguments

The most trivial things can sometimes be the worst. Take arguments for example. These can spiral out of control with hardly any effort. That's what makes the Neikea some of the most dangerous of Eris' offspring. And I say 'some' because they are plural, a group of them, all primed for maximum impact. We say 'an argument', but really it's nothing more than a collection of insults, actions and hurtful statements. There's never just one thing. And even if there were just one, the beauty of an argument is that it gives the chance to vent any number of other problems. No one uses the idiom of an argument to just vent on one thing, they use it as the perfect opportunity to bring up lots of other little niggles.

We underestimate arguments. I think they have magical, as well as malicious, qualities. It's never long before you forget what an argument was actually about. Like a spell that quietly removes information. Unless your name is Margot, in which case you will have a near miraculous ability to remember every bad thing that has ever happened and pull it into the current discussion. And relitigate it at the next one.

We argued about people. Specifically women. We argued about women that I'd met, that I had meetings with in the course of my work, women that I called work colleagues or co-workers. Women that served me in shops and others I held doors open for, because my father taught me to be a gentleman. Margot would cyber-stalk some of them, find them on Facebook and check them out. Not great when you consider we all use old profile pictures from ten years ago. You know the ones, when you had fewer wrinkles and were several kilos lighter. These old photos never helped my case.

"You said she was old and fat."

And so she is, but in her decade old photo Margot sees her only as sex and lust and single and moist and every bad thing that might be construed by the fact that you were in the same office together at half past ten this morning. I'm not good at arguing, and especially when facing into that sort of shit-storm.

I was arguing with unreality, about things that never happened, but what course do you follow when you're disbelieved? It took me too long to learn that taking a humorous and flippant approach was doomed to failure and worse, likely to lead to another night sleeping on the sofa.

My fall back was usually, "Well come and meet her then."

This was always greeted with a “Hah!” or some similar noise to signal disdain and an ‘As if I would lower myself to that level’ dismissal.

I had to travel to Wellington. The boss was away, and a member of staff in the office there had overstepped the mark in a serious way. Someone had to sort the situation out, and it fell to me. I didn’t want to go. In the back of my mind I knew it would create trouble at home, but I also knew it was down to me. There was talk of an internal disciplinary process, which lifted it beyond the level of the local managers.

Flights and a hotel were hurriedly arranged for me, while I made the call to Margot. It was a strange experience, after just a few words you knew that everything else you said was either not being listened to, or had no impact on the person you were saying it to. As soon as the words ‘immediately’, ‘overnight’ and ‘Wellington’ left my mouth, I may as well have said nothing further, because all the fine reasons and rationale which I attempted to deliver were nothing more than background noise.

Prompted by the word ‘overnight’ all that came out of her mouth were words like ‘whores’, ‘prostitutes’, ‘fucking’, and ‘getting up to God knows what’. I remember the deep sigh that blew from my nose and mouth. The length of air that was expelled and with it the sense that this would be another sleepless night of phone calls, constant questions and, as time wore on, increasingly drunken accusations of all manner of things that weren’t and hadn’t happened. I had no choice but to draw in the next breath and resign myself to it.

I needed to eat somewhere. Probably in a sad hotel room on my own. During that meal, perhaps with a glass of wine, there might be two or three phone calls. Sometimes I would buy a nice bottle of red to take to my room, knowing that it would help me to weather the storm. If I left the TV on during the call, as had happened in the past, there would be questions about which bar I was in and who I was flirting with. What was that background noise? It must be a bar. If I turned it off during the call, that was even more suspicious, as it sounded like I had stepped outside and was covering up what was happening in the background.

One of the problems with being constantly hounded in this way was that you start to try and avoid the call in the first place. Delay the fateful moment when you knew what would happen. Avoidance was a tactic that the Neikea knew would make the situation worse. Where have you been, what have you been up to? Once I took such a call in a hotel restaurant. What a mistake that was. There were thirty people all listening to me talk on the phone. All listening

to me squirm and try to defend myself. No matter how quietly you try to hiss your answers, they still come out loud enough for all to hear.

After a whole bottle of wine to myself and a hearty meal, I became my own worst enemy. A little drunk and suddenly keen for another couple, I launched myself out into the windy Wellington night. Looking for a little more red, and some company. That would do nicely. The Neikea's work was almost done. The light was set to the blue touch paper.

I don't recall finding anyone to chat to, but I was always accused of it. Suspected of being with a woman, even though I was hopeless at chatting them up. Sit me down next to someone's grandmother and I was a hit. Put me in front of someone attractive or available and I would go to pieces. Not ideal. It was a shame Margot never figured that out. It would have saved her from a lifetime of vitriol.

On this particular HR-problem trip to Wellington, I went to the airport direct from work. I had no luggage and nothing clean for the following day. No toothbrush, no hairbrush. I hate a second-day shirt, one where there's just the faintest hint of perspiration when you pull it on in the morning. Shirts were created to be worn fresh. Learning from previous experience I knew it was advisable to check my bank account. Make sure that I wouldn't be left embarrassed at the checkout with no way of paying for the items in my hands. Toothbrush, razor, toothpaste. Then there was the matter of the shirt. I had a look at some shirts on Willis Street. In the nice shops, the boutiques with their designer labels. I found one shirt I loved, even if it wasn't really work style. A multitude of small red circles, sometimes blue within the red. The cuffs had double press-stud buttons. Ideal for a night out. Less so for a day in the office. I kept searching. I walked to the very ends of streets where the low budget shops were hiding. Still no shirts. Where did the low and middle-ranking Wellington workers go to buy their shirts? Where was that Farmers department store for the mid-range item I was seeking? I was obviously heading in the wrong direction.

In the end, I bought the designer shirt with the last credit before the limit was reached. I also decided to push my luck and buy another bottle of red. That worked too. I went to a cash dispenser and took out \$500 in case the free money came to an end, leaving nothing to settle the hotel bill.

Margot rang while I was out buying another bottle of wine. I ignored the call. She rang again while I was in the shop buying the new shirt. She rang again much later when I was in a bar,

drunk as a skunk, wearing my new red and blue circle shirt. I was too drunk to talk to her then and turned the phone off. That was a mistake. I lost count of the missed call alerts that came through when I turned it on in the morning.

Things felt different when I arrived home the next day, late and hungover. Still wearing the new shirt funded by money from beyond my credit limit. I felt like shit, and I probably looked and smelt like shit too. When I rang to say what time my return flight would arrive, all I got was the answer phone. The frost in the air was fizzing, probably because it was humid early summer.

Did I have an excuse? Was there a reason that I did what I did?

Errr...

No.

Something in the house was different. Something was missing. There were gaps on my bookshelves. The Neikea had been at work, whispering in Margot's ear, helping her mix together a nice gruel of revenge.

I kept my postcards in a box. A plain wooden box with six identically sized drawers, all slightly larger than a standard postcard. The box came from the IKEA near London's Brent Cross at some point in the early 1990s. It was made of birchwood, and IKEA called it Moppe. In Swedish that means moped. I have no idea. Each drawer was deep enough to hold about one hundred cards. Five of the drawers were dedicated to art, while one contained architecture and views of places that I had visited; old buildings, cathedrals, mediaeval halls, painted church walls, especially if there were scenes with devils, beasts or green men. Although I didn't know it at the time of purchase, my Moppe box had one unique feature. It was impossible to open the middle drawer on the left-hand side. This was the drawer full of architecture and locations. The only way to open that drawer was to remove the other five from the frame.

Margot obviously didn't know that. She emptied the postcards from all the other drawers and took the whole collection to the dump. All except the drawer which stuck. That says to me that she pulled out each drawer, emptied the contents and returned the empty drawer to the box. If she had pulled them all out together she would have discovered the secret of the sticking drawer. She took the cards but not the box. She left that where it was, on a book shelf, for me to casually pull open at some point and discover my collection gone. It was a perfectly calculated move. I had been collecting those cards for over thirty years and would

never be able to replace them. I could never travel to all those cities again, it would take another lifetime and I would never have the time or money to undertake such trips. Even if I could, there were cards from exhibitions which collected together works from countries all around the globe, bringing them together for a few brief months. It would take many lifetimes to track all those down, even if I knew where to start.

The five hundred lost postcards were not only the record of where I had been and what I had seen, they were my memories. Stories about how I came to a certain place, or who I stood with to admire that special picture. A day remembered, a trip, or the buying of two cards so one could be sent to someone with certain words or phrases, desires or fantasies. Each was unique, special to me, but there were so many that it would be impossible to list them or hope to name each one. Show me the picture and the story would return. Without the image the memory was blank.

The drawers in my IKEA box were arranged the following way:

Top Drawer (left)

French Impressionists, mainly from London galleries, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Individual postcards from anywhere that had just one or two examples in their collection. Favourites? More Monet, Sisley and Pissarro than Renoir and Degas. More landscapes and buildings in this drawer than people.

Middle Drawer (left)

The sticking drawer. Postcards of churches and cathedrals around Britain and Europe, Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, Prague and Rome. Film posters for arthouse movies such as *Diva* or *Betty Blue*, anything by Peter Greenaway. Several antique postcards of London streets from before the Blitz. Some designs for British postage stamps. Yes, I know, that *is* very odd, but some of those designs were beautiful.

Bottom Drawer (left)

Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian art, including many postcards from the 1984 Pre-Raphaelite exhibition at the Tate Gallery, the Ruskin Museum in Sheffield and various small municipal galleries around the UK. William Morris postcards from the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Top Drawer (right)

Renaissance paintings from galleries in London, Paris, Rome and New York. Some of the early items in this drawer were collected from galleries in Amsterdam in 1981 and 1983. Rembrandt and Vermeer were well represented, as were numerous pencil sketches with their delicate details. Some trees drawn by Rembrandt had an insane amount of detail. They came to London in the 1990s, God knows where from.

Middle Drawer (right)

This drawer was reserved mainly for sculpture, from the Tate Gallery in London, The Met in New York, Rome, Southern France, Prague, the Eric Gill exhibition and the only showing of the George Ortiz Collection in Europe, in 1994. The time span in this drawer was huge – from classical to modern, from ancient Rome to Frink, Hepworth and Henry Moore. There were plenty of examples by Rodin, because I could never resist the Musée Rodin in Paris. And then there was Maillol, who captured the shapes I loved most in a woman.

Bottom Drawer (right)

Late-nineteenth and all twentieth century painters, including Picasso and Van Gogh. Those artists who might not fit into the category of Impressionists, but worked around the same time. From the Picasso Museum in Paris, the Maillol Museum, a Van Gogh exhibition in London, the Post-Modernist painters and the members of the Bloomsbury Group, like Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. This was my favourite drawer.

This list gives the impression of a strict order than never quite existed. In truth the box was a disorderly, some postcards would wander and some would refuse to be categorised into one particular drawer. It is possible that works by the same artist could be in multiple drawers. French Impressionists could cross over with Gauguin and Van Gogh, while Picasso could pop up in multiple places in paint, pencil, print, stone or ceramic.

I pulled out one of the empty drawers and walked into the kitchen. Margot was standing at the macrocarpa bench making lunch.

I held the empty drawer in front of her. “You know what these were?”

“Tiny pieces of paper?”

“No. These were the last thirty years of my life.”

“Aww, boo-hoo.”

“Don’t you get it? Something that takes thirty years to collect might be very special.”

“Does it hurt?” She was using that baby voice I hated.

“Yes it fucking does.”

“If you spent less time fucking, they would still be here.” Now her tone was icy. “You just can’t keep away from them, can you?”

“Not that again. Give it a rest.”

“No I won’t give it a rest.”

We paused to glare at each other across the bench.

My voice was almost a whisper. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Go on, tell me.” She was back to the baby voice.

“You have pushed me too far.”

I walked around the bench into the kitchen area. As I did, Margot reached up to one of the cupboards and swung the door with all her strength into my nose.

I had the presence of mind to take a photograph of my bruised and bleeding nose. I showed it to my solicitor and several months later to the judge. It didn’t help my case. The destruction of my precious things had zero value in the eyes of the law. Instead I would have to give Margot half of my pension, even the parts I had amassed while married to Samantha. Justice was served.

Charleston, the Writing on the Wall

Intact

The Garden Room, Charleston
The Charleston Trust
Photograph by Pia Tryde
Acquired 1992
Middle Drawer, Left

I remember that conversation very clearly.

“That was where you went with her.” It was a statement, not a question. Margot’s tone was full of accusation.

Yes I had been there, but that was in the past. Before us. I had moved on, leaving ‘her’ behind. Margot and I were together. We were a couple. I couldn’t understand why that didn’t make all the difference.

“Yes I went there.” What was there to deny? “It’s was beautiful place. I loved it there.”

I was too effusive. I’d gone too far in my praise. I saw my mistake in the narrowing of the eyes and the glare that came after.

I carried on. “We should go. You’ll love it there.”

I was in a pit, but somehow digging myself deeper, with no thought for the consequences. Or my own safety.

“Charleston.” The voice was all sarcasm, the mimic a ten-year-old uses talking to a younger sibling. It wasn’t becoming in a grown woman. I was back-pedaling, looking for an escape instead of thinking how juvenile it sounded. I should have been more aware, spotted the signs of trouble ahead. There was probably a time, early on, when we could have had that conversation, set some ground rules. Established that places like Charleston had made me who I was, and that there was nothing to fear from that. Instead I just tried to avoid confrontation.

I never did take Margot to Charleston. We went close, onto the South Downs for walks, down into Alfriston with its timber framed houses and narrow streets, and even to the Cricketers, a nearby pub. But we never went to the Charleston farmhouse. Home of Bloomsbury, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. All those names that used to gather there. The Woolfs, the Eliots, painters, writers, a who’s who of early twentieth century Modernism. There was a road sign for it off the main road. When Margot and I passed the sign the atmosphere in the car turned cold. I waited for a comment. An icy barb every time.

“That was where you went with her.”

Never a name, just the third person pronoun.

It didn’t always come. Sometimes, just the silence was enough for me to feel the chill.

For my part I took other routes to avoid that piece of road altogether. I found places closer to Brighton that were just as good for walks. We discovered The Devil's Punchbowl instead. The same rolling chalk downs, but different.

The Bloomsbury artists loved to paint on the walls, and furniture. Who said a canvas had to be a sheet of fabric or something in a frame? They used tables, chairs, plates and doors to express their art. Did they write on the walls? I'm sure they must have. They seemed to daub on everything else.

Charleston, home of the Famous Women Dinner Service. 50 hand-decorated plates to celebrate famous women throughout history. From Helen of Troy to Cleopatra, Jane Austen to Greta Garbo, Beatrice to Charlotte Bronte, the Queen Mother to the Queen of Sheba. There was Botticelli's Simonetta and Lizzie Siddal. Even Miss 1933 with her blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Made by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, the artists even had a plate with their own portraits, meaning Grant was the only man in there.

Eventually there was no safe haven from an argument. It was like the sudden chill of winter arriving on a south-easterly. Especially in the ad breaks during the delayed coverage of the rugby test. Between the tractor ads and the promotion of grass seed with contentedly grazing cattle, there was always the occasional girl in a bikini. When I couldn't help but notice her scantily clad figure because it was spread across 55 inches of our living room wall.

"Is that what you like? Is that the sort of bimbo you enjoy?"

"Not at all..." I knew she wasn't referring to the cattle. I could feel the tension in the air squeezing around my throat.

"I bet you'd like some of that. Get her on her back. Fuck her."

My temperature rose a few degrees and a film of sweat formed on my brow. All classic signs of lying; increased heart rate, a twitch and perhaps touching my face. "For God's sake, give it a rest."

"No, I won't give it a rest. You like to fuck them. You watch them at the strip clubs and then you fuck them."

"No, not at all."

Here we were again. Repeats and re-runs of the same old shit.

Sometimes it would stop there, only to simmer under the surface, like the boiling magma of a feisty volcano. I lived in fear of the next ad break, praying that the same ad was not repeated, knowing they always were, over and over. On other occasions Margot would storm out of the room and there would be the bang of a bedroom door slamming at the other end of the house. I would tentatively go back to the game, lowering the volume so she wouldn't hear play resume. Once or twice she came back and wrenched the plug out of the wall, plunging the room into darkness. No further play on those nights.

I took a photograph of the words that I wrote on the wall. The situation had brewed and stewed until, finally, the exasperation was too much. The exact words of the argument were hazy, but the end result was very clear.

I was empty like the box. I had nothing more to give. There was no loving piece of me left in the relationship. I was wiped out, all my drawers were empty and there was nothing pleasant to take out any more; no smile, no flash of love, wink of humour or desire-filled squeeze of the arse.

The photo says everything. Everything that I wrote on the wall.

Most of the walls in our lounge were windows and doors, filtering in the bright sunlight.

permanent marker

Two sets of double doors to a wide wrap-around deck, overhung with grape vines.

never listen

Only one wall was large enough to hold some art and that was where we put our big TV.

ENOUGH

With the height of the TV, on its cabinet of glass fronted shelves and drawers, my linguistic art had to be long and rectangular.

I have had enough

No contractions. Proper English. I'd filled the space above the TV with a print. A procession of contorted bodies and freakish creatures. Something from Picasso's "Bizarre Period". Not my favourite, but a splash of autumnal colour on a neutral wall.

I stole the bare space between the picture and French windows and filled it with my words of frustration.

FUCK it

The more I wrote and filled the wall, the more my feelings and frustrations flooded out.

The huge capitals of the last line stretched as wide as the TV beneath.

NOT WORTH IT ANY MORE

That wasn't quite the end of the story.

It took eight or nine coats of paint until you couldn't see the words anymore.

I wrote them in frustration and then meekly covered over my feelings the following day. Why?

Mostly, to hide it from my daughter and her twelve-year-old sensibilities.

But not to hide it from my wife.

It is over

For her I would gladly have left it there forever. Made her run the open homes and show around the potential buyers. Explain why the wall was full of vitriol.

In the late afternoon sun, as it slanted under the vines, you could almost read the indents in the wall, under the nine coats of paint.

move on

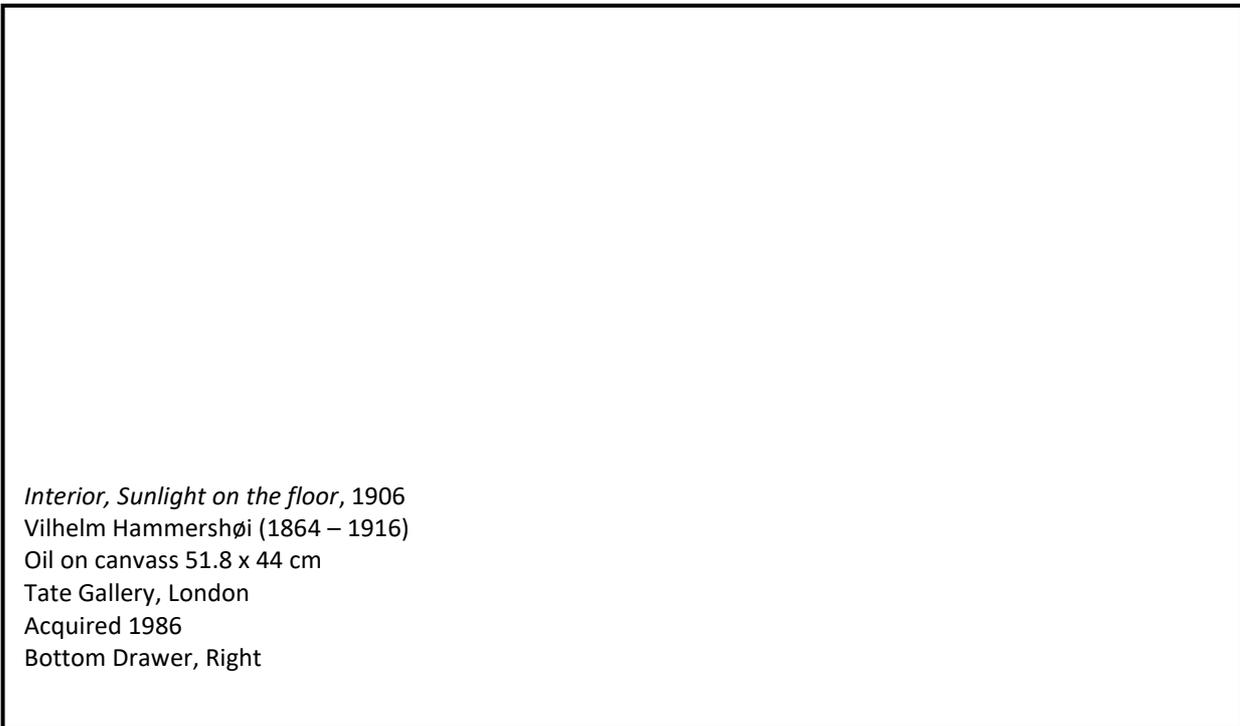
But still I didn't leave. For a few more days.

OVER NOW

PART V
Sophie

Devonport digs

Missing



Interior, Sunlight on the floor, 1906
Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864 – 1916)
Oil on canvass 51.8 x 44 cm
Tate Gallery, London
Acquired 1986
Bottom Drawer, Right

I moved into the bare rooms with a sense of enormous optimism.

A one bed flat and more that I could afford. A lot more than I should be spending, if I were being sensible. But I was not being sensible, I was breaking away from my unhappiness and launching myself into a new chapter. A fresh page.

I was going to live above the fish and chip shop. A narrow doorway straight off the street and a steep stairway directly into the flat. A single bedroom at the back and next to that a dark, narrow hallway to a bathroom. The narrow hallway doubled as the kitchen.

To the front, a single massive room. High wooden ceiling, four metres high, with a wall of bare brick. Very loft apartment chic, with mortar that crumbled to the touch. The front wall had a single high sash window through which the sun shone all day. In the afternoons it sparked off the channel in the Waitemata Harbour. It was a writer's home. There was a dirty net curtain.

At first, I had a single chair to fill the vast room. I put it by the window so that I could sit and look out. The small park just across the road, the new library building and the statue of the soldier, tall and stoic, tunic unbuttoned in war-time toil. Through the trunks of the tall decorative palms the bright sparkling harbour beyond.

It was an old chair, a grand-father's, perhaps one generation further back. Officially a captain's chair, stout and well made, heavy carved wood, elm perhaps, hard, upright and uncomfortable. Right now it was all I had, and it would do nicely. There would be more, a desk to go under the window so I could sit and write stories, some old wing-back chairs, a rug and, most important, bookshelves, lots of book shelves. The ornaments for my bare walls.

My break apart-ment. The place that I found after I left Margot, the place where I planned to pick up the pieces of my life. I had no plans to share this place, it was just for me, so that I could be myself.

Victoria Road, King Edward Parade, Windsor Reserve. All very colonial, but it had some age and history and that felt good. My captain's chair would feel right at home.

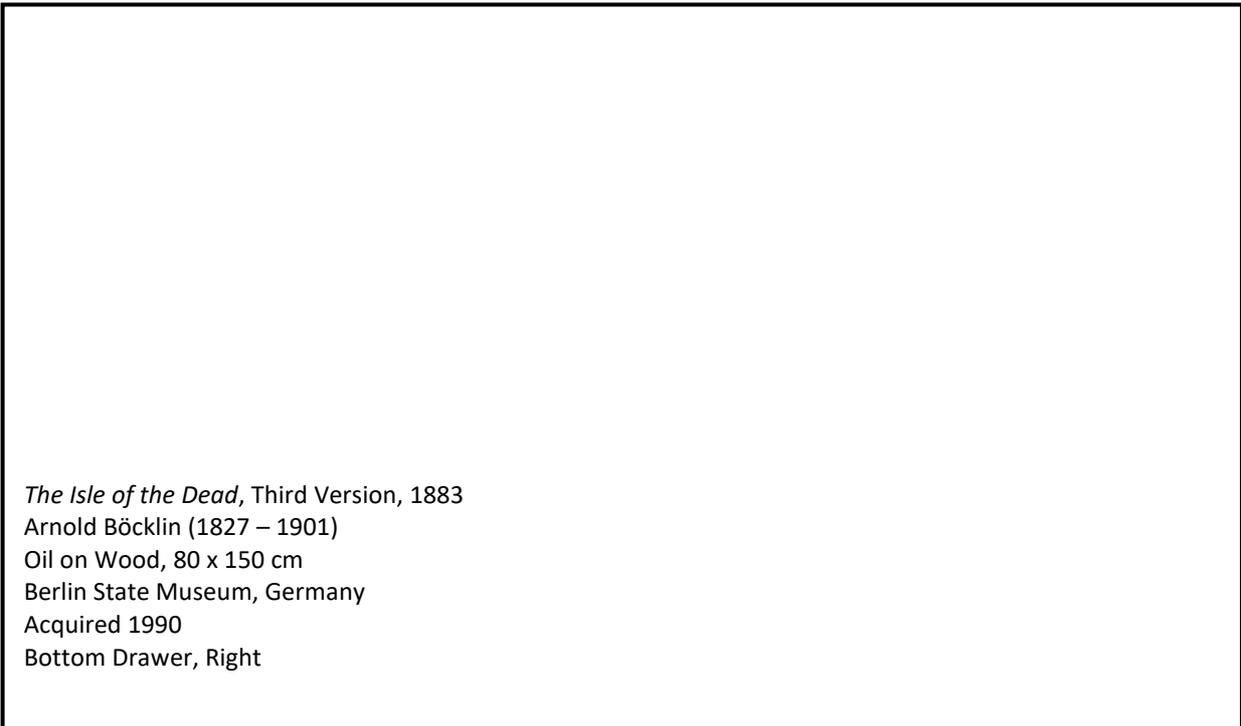
I lived in the bare interior for a week or so. Before I claimed a bed and a desk and some other items. Soon there were three chairs and I could invite guests and no-one had to sit on the floor.

It was like living in one of those bare interiors by Hammershøi. The empty rooms with the sunlight seeping in the tall window, casting a reflection on the bare floor. No sign of Ida, with her back to us, in this interior. I could sit on the floor in the evenings, with the window open and the sounds of the evening revellers below. The orange glow of the street light across the road patterning my bare floor. The smell of the food cooking below.

My first two visitors were Jason and Sophie. Friends from work, keen to lend a helping hand, shocked to see how bare the place was. They took me out to dinner, unable to stay too long in a place with nothing inside. Couldn't see the potential that I could. I secretly fancied Sophie and would spar with her in the conversations over dinner while Jason sat silently alongside us. She was feisty and full of life and we had an easy, comfortable friendship. I knew Jason better, and when things started to get difficult between the two of them, I tried to help them both. Secretly all I wanted was the platinum blonde bombshell, but we would see. First, I needed furniture.

The Isle of the Dead

Missing



The Isle of the Dead, Third Version, 1883
Arnold Böcklin (1827 – 1901)
Oil on Wood, 80 x 150 cm
Berlin State Museum, Germany
Acquired 1990
Bottom Drawer, Right

In his novel *Despair*, Vladimir Nabokov noted that every German home contained a copy of the painting *The Isle of the Dead*. A guide book for newly married wives called *In the German Home* dispenses some advice about pictures to hang on the wall. For the lounge, it advised that “pictures should not be overly animated in either palette or subject, since when looked at every day their effect may prove unsettling.” The book does not give any suggestions for exactly which pictures to use, but in one of the photographs of a model room, against the dark wood panelling, there is a copy of *The Isle of the Dead*.

That guide was written in 1903, twenty years after Arnold Böcklin painted not one, but five slightly different versions of his most famous work. Although he was born in Switzerland, Böcklin was much loved by the Germans. In my experience, Germans like to provide instructions. I once owned a German fridge. A tall Liebherr with a stainless-steel finish. I had to look up something in the instruction booklet and discovered, to my horror, that it took a more instructional tone than I thought necessary. The top shelf was for dairy products, it said, the second for cold meats, sausages and sauerkraut. I was horrified that a fridge maker should be so demonstrable, so exacting. I took against the fridge-maker and placed sausages on every shelf. I would not be dictated to by my fridge, especially a German fridge.

Although from the title you might think that it sounds like a depressing painting, I do not find it so. There is something about the tonality and the way the sun shines on this rocky island with its tall cedar trees that I find beautiful. Restful. It is only when you dig a little deeper that you find an unhappy narrative lurking below the surface.

“How are you feeling?”

Sophie was lying on the couch when I got home. She had felt unwell and stayed off work.

“It’s in the bathroom.”

I knew better than to ask to have the mystery explained, so I went to have a look. On the sink was a long white packet and a page of crumpled instructions. The last time I saw one of these must have been a good fourteen years before. The little window in the plastic pen had blue lines. When I smoothed out the instructions, I discovered that this meant we were going to be parents. Both of us parents for a second time. The first time with each other.

“That explains why you were feeling crook.” I planted a kiss on her forehead and smiled.

“Are you pleased?” She searched my face to read my reaction.

“Delighted.” And I genuinely was.

There was nothing more to say. We both already had a daughter from our previous marriages, but this new arrival would cement us together. A fresh start. A perfect start.

Böcklin began his first painting of *The Isle of the Dead* in 1880. German art at the time was dominated by historical subjects, while in France the Impressionists were all the rage. Böcklin had been painting fauns, centaurs and mermaids, and was struggling to make a living. He didn't fall into any category. He had moved to Florence where he used the inspiration of the English Cemetery for this painting. The tall cypress trees are found in cemeteries all around southern Europe, and the rocks, classical-style doorways and arches appealed to the northern Europeans who had become trapped in the large cities behind their heavy curtains, laced into their corsets and stiff collars.

Sophie and I were excited. We were making plans and called our little surprise ‘Lentil’, having read somewhere that was about how large she was right now. We convinced ourselves it would be a she, since that was all we knew. We never considered the possibility of a boy. We didn't tell anyone. Partly because things had happened so quickly. I guess we didn't want them to think badly of us for the indecent haste. It was only a couple of months since Sophie had stopped seeing Jason, and I had helped her sort out the trauma of that difficult extraction. We were also trying to keep the news from Sophie's twelve-year-old daughter, although I am sure that she knew something was going on, as we spent all our time grinning.

Böcklin never provided a public explanation of his painting. It was left to the viewer to provide a story to fit with the image. Many saw the oarsman of the little boat as Charon, who ferried the souls of the newly deceased to the underworld of Greek mythology. That would make the stretch of water that he is crossing the river Styx, or perhaps the Acheron, one of the five great rivers that converge at the centre of the underworld. The Greeks portrayed Charon as a simple boatman, while in the Sistine Chapel's *Last Judgement* Michelangelo has him as a claw footed monster with pointed ears and bulging eyes. If Charon is the boatman in Böcklin's painting, that would make the white clad passenger the recently deceased soul.

There was a list of possible names for Lentil, waiting for her to emerge. We were never going to have a girl called Jane or Karen. Instead there were names like Montgomery, Blake and Scarlett. We pretty quickly moved from Lentil to Scarlett. We were never going to be those parents, the Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily ones, but we were dangerously close.

Only one doubt preyed on our minds, the spectre of Jason. But I was let into the secret of his single testicle and lack of fertility. No-one else was supposed to know these things. Now they are in a book. For the removal of doubt there were lists in a notebook, columns of dates and last remembered periods. The last remembered fuck was conspicuously absent from these records. None of the numbers were conclusive and all we wanted was certainty. We kept telling ourselves that Lentil was ours and clung to a positive outlook. Changes were made to diet – wine, cigarettes, seafood and certain cheeses all vanished. Folic acid was added as a meagre replacement.

The true story behind the painting may be simpler. Having painted his first version, which was still on the easel in his Florence studio, Böcklin was visited by a young widow called Marie Berna. She asked him to paint her a second version, which he made slightly smaller than the first, but into which at her request he placed a coffin on the boat and interpreted the white clad figure as the widow. This was Marie's memorial to her dead husband. Böcklin went back to his first version and added these two extra elements in front of the boatman. They transformed the painting into a different narrative.

The first three versions were all produced in Florence. The English Cemetery, which was close to his studio, was where Böcklin's infant daughter Maria was buried. I suspect he may have spent some time there quietly reflecting. The third version of the painting is the most strikingly different, the grey-white rocks are seen in the strong light of day rather than the low warm glow of a setting sun. You can even see Böcklin's initials over one of the tomb doors hewn into the rocks on the right. This particular painting was bought by Adolf Hitler in 1933, exactly fifty years after it was painted. There is a photograph of the Führer meeting Molotov, the Russian Foreign Minister. Just behind them is that third version of *The Isle of the Dead*. The fourth version was destroyed in Berlin during the Second World War and survives only in a black and white photograph. I don't think we can complain. Four out of five ain't bad.

“This baby is a little further on than we thought.” The tone in the nurse’s voice was very positive, as though this would be excellent news. She probably thought that we would be happy shortening the time until we could meet our little one. The reality was quite the opposite. The news spelt death for that innocent little foetus.

The discovery that it was not ours, but had been conceived in the month before we started seeing each other, instantly changed the mood. There was no doubt now. Our worst fear had entered the living room. There was no doubt that Jason was the father.

No pretending any more. No trying to convince ourselves that dates and times would work. The drive from the clinic through central Auckland was sombre. I didn’t know what to say and Sophie was saying nothing.

It was his.

Sophie was having none of it. Abortion. It was to be aborted. It lost its name and sex. I didn’t have any say. I wasn’t involved. I hadn’t been involved in the making and I had no say in the ‘unmaking’. She could not, would not, have Jason’s baby.

There were doctors to convince, but she would take that entirely in her stride, without missing a beat. There were things about Jason that Sophie was never going to tell me. Truth, rumour or just invention. I didn’t know.

In fact, it took longer than we expected. Weeks passed waiting to see doctors, before appointments were fixed. Drinking, cheese, seafood and especially smoking resumed in greater excess than before. The folic acid pills were abandoned in the bathroom cupboard. It felt like she was trying to poison the little embryo.

My only role was to drive her to the hospital, help her to check in, and then collect her again towards the end of the day. The thing that stuck in my mind from that terrible day were her eyes; wide and startled, like someone had given her a terrible surprise. The shock was frozen on her face. She could hardly walk. I was trying to hold her up, firmly but tenderly at the same time. All her humour and sharp wit were drained, sucked out of her body.

I was powerless. I had no role. Sympathy was unacknowledged and uncalled for. I had not been part of the creation and I was not welcome at the removal. I was the lover and the potential husband, but I felt as if I had lost my role. On that day, I was nothing, emasculated by the bloke with one ball.

In all Böcklin had fourteen children, but five of them died in childhood and three more died before he did. His first fiancée also died very young. He was not a lucky man when it came to life. Perhaps that is why his pictures of *The Isle of the Dead* are so hauntingly beautiful. Two years after he had finished the last of the five versions, he painted a picture called *The Isle of Life*. It has no feeling, mood or depth. He was better dealing with death.

Black Coffee

Missing

Black Coffee, 1895
Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898)
Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum
Lithograph
Acquired 1998
Bottom Drawer, Left

The wonderfully erotic world of Aubrey Beardsley. Some of these pictures are as rude as you can get, imagine them as the Pornhub of their day.

I have admired the works of Aubrey for many years. As a teen I was delighted by the erotic and downright indecent nature of some of his illustrations. I started reading Greek plays from the age of sixteen, linked to my Greek history classes, and there, hiding in plain sight, was the comedy of *Lysistrata*. The class, composed entirely of boys, laughed at the notion of withholding sex and the innuendo in the play. In reality we were all virgins and had no idea what was going on. Or why it was so funny, since we weren't getting any either. In ancient Greece a war between Athens and Sparta had raged for years. The womenfolk came up with a plan to bring it to a swifter conclusion than the men had managed. Their cunning plan was to withhold all sex from their husbands and lovers.

We boys should have been grateful that our version of the translation of Aristophanes' play had been bowdlerised. The phrase "I will not adopt the lioness on the cheese grater position" as part of the oath that the women swear, was completely absent from our text. These days, with the joy of Google, it is possible to indulge in the international scholarly debate that this line has engendered. Apparently, the cheese grater was a highly prized piece of kitchen equipment in ancient times. They have been discovered in the graves of rich Etruscan women. Not an item you usually associate with the journey to the afterlife. There is nothing like learned, crusty old scholars talking about sex to remove all the fun and arousal. "I think that it is a position that is going to involve the woman on top with some extra back and forth moving or rocking," one scholar is quoted as saying. Really, can't you do better than that?

As a group of boys we could relate to Beardsley's drawings of the Spartan messengers, deprived of sex by their wives. They stood there with their exaggerated and hugely oversized erections. Something all schoolboys would be familiar with, that being the time in our lives when the appearance of an erection was not only pointless, but often arrived at inopportune and embarrassing moments. We lived with those frequent erections until we got our hormones under control, but we delighted at these raunchy illustrations, the long and skinny, the thick and (surely) uncomfortable. We had so much to learn, but not about Greek drama.

Those were innocent days, so where did I find Beardsley's black and white illustrations for *Lysistrata*? I don't remember the book, probably something that got into the school library without any teachers inspecting the contents and illustrations.

Beardsley's work proved that the Victorian period was not all prudishness. Some artists were pushing the boat out and causing a stir. In art classes we might get to consider a tame Toulouse-Lautrec, but it would be years before seeing the seedier side of life, the ones Walter Sickert liked to paint.

In a small junk shop in Whangerei I discovered three prints of Beardsley drawings. They were all taken from his illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. Sophie took a liking to the prints. I don't think she knew much about them, only that she liked the simple black and white lines and the art nouveau style. One entitled *The Peacock Skirt* appealed, probably because of her love of vintage clothing. I bought the three of them for her – but it turned out that she really didn't like one of them. That one is hanging on the wall just above my desk. *John and Salome*. There is a good deal of cruelty in the picture. The expressions are not kind, especially given what is about to happen in the story. Salome's breasts and belly button are exposed. The rest of her is wrapped in rich fabrics and cloth. The whole series of illustrations for Oscar Wilde's play are extraordinary. Even though they appear very crude to us, some censure was applied at the time. In another picture, *Enter Herodias*, not only is there a caricature of Wilde in the bottom right of the picture, but the naked steward had to have his genitals covered before Beardsley's publisher would agree to show the picture to the public. A modest loin cloth was added, but the publisher failed to spot the bases of two candles that sit on the lower border of the picture, both shaped like a phallus. It is altogether a strange piece of work and one of several which are not strictly part of the play at all. Beardsley loved to hide rude things in his pictures. He was, after all, little older than a schoolboy himself.

Black Coffee

Sophie didn't take her coffee black, but insisted on an odd mix of soy milk and a certain brand of sweetener. If the café didn't have that particular sweetener I could often be spotted trailing back out of the door in her wake, empty handed.

In Beardsley's picture called *Black Coffee* two women are sitting at a table together. They are opposites. One has blonde hair and grey clothes, the other has black hair and a white dress.

They both have flamboyant hats with ribbons, flowers and feathers. On the table is a blank menu and a cup of black coffee. The black coffee is in front of the woman dressed in white.

They are sitting together on a grey sofa. Behind them is the simplest of backgrounds. A wall panel, possibly a window, and two stone columns, balustrades would be a better description, to the left. These items, although simply drawn, add a great deal of extra weight to one side of the picture.

The real intrigue is the area we cannot see. What is happening under the table, blocked from our view? The woman in white is leaning forwards slightly, which tilts her right hand into the lap of the other woman. The most startling features of the woman in grey, beyond her slightly sour expression, are the two black streaks her light hair, like little horns sprouting from her forehead. Is she devilish? What is her companion's hand doing? There are some other examples where Beardsley represented same-sex attraction and gender fluidity in his art. What is he trying to show us here? Is the woman in grey trying to cover what her companion's hand is up to in her lap? Are the horns in her hair an indication of some sort of sinful behaviour? Things are not always black and white.

I had been seeing Sophie for a couple of months. From day one everything had been moving at a huge pace. From plunging into seeing each other, moving in together, potentially planning a family, to looking for a house to buy. While all that was happening, there was still so much that we did not know about each other. The sort of details that couples might learn over the course of several months of dating.

Surprises continued to pile into our lives. One morning, post-coitally, Sophie asked me if I had ever been attracted to men. My answer may have been a little flippant, citing the love of a good muscled male statue, but nothing beyond. And certainly nothing that could be called physical.

A moment of silence passed.

I asked why she had asked.

Today's revelation is that she considered herself to be bisexual. Although it is not always in my nature to question people hard about some statements, I felt in this case that I needed to know a lot more. It turned out that Sophie and her best friend, one that didn't like me, had been fucking each other for a long time. The friend was married, to a bloke, and they had

children, but she had discovered her more diverse appetites a few years before. I suspected that she had seduced Sophie into a similar way of thinking, but didn't voice that suspicion.

Now I really had more questions to ask. Had this happened while we had been seeing each other? Apparently only a couple of times.

That would be approximately once a month.

I went from obvious questions to fantastical ones.

"So you wouldn't object if I fucked another woman?"

"I certainly would." I could hear the venom in the reply.

"But what you're doing is just the same."

"No it's not. It's quite different."

"So perhaps I can let another woman lick me. Then give me a blow job. That would be the same."

"Not the same at all." I could hear more anger in her voice. I was on wafer thin ice now.

"You still come when she licks you?" I asked.

"I'm not going to answer that question." That counted as a minor victory for me. Probably the first and only one.

"OK, perhaps I can fuck her at the same time as she is fucking you. A threesome." Now I was pushing my luck, but I was still in shock from the revelation.

"That's never going to happen. She doesn't like you."

"That's irrelevant. I don't have to like her to fuck her."

It was not until the next day that we were back on speaking terms. Well, as much as monosyllabic answers could be called speaking. The subject was unresolved. I had even more questions. These were the purely practical. Where and when did it happen? How? What were the circumstances? Which rooms? Then there were the more intimate details. Was there anything that she particularly liked? Anything we could add to our own repertoire? Standing up or lying down? What was it that drew her to this ... this experiment, way of life, change of direction? I wasn't sure what to call it anymore.

"Bisexual just means you can swing both ways," she eventually informed me in her most verbose statement for days.

Selfishly I wanted to ask her if that meant she was happy for me to have more than one partner, but I decided not to push my luck. We had argued for more than 24 hours and I was tired of it. I decided just to make a request.

“Tell me next time.”

“Before or after.”

“Both. I may have questions.”

This wasn't a question of black and white. There had to be some grey, some give and take. At the moment it felt like I was doing all the giving and she did all the taking. Sometimes it felt like trying to argue with a poltergeist. Someone not always present, certainly not always making sense, and sometimes unexpectedly dangerous.

Leonard Smithers was a publisher who worked closely with the Decadent Movement and with Beardsley. He was born in Sheffield in December 1861. Together they founded a magazine called *The Savoy* in 1896, which ran to eight issues in competition with *The Yellow Book*. Smithers was asked by the dying Beardsley to destroy all his obscene drawings and particularly those for *Lysistrata*. Smithers ignored the request and continued to sell reproductions, together with a number of forgeries. Although he trained as a solicitor, it seems he was far from honest in some of his activities. He was someone else who liked a bit of smut.

Odysseus and Calypso

Missing

Ulysses and Calypso, 1883
Arnold Böcklin (1827 – 1901)
Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland
Oil on canvass 104 x 150 cm
Acquired 1999
Bottom Drawer, Right

Odysseus spent somewhere in the region of seven years with the beautiful Calypso, marooned on her island. Did he really sit on the shore staring out to sea on every one of those 2,555 days, or did he stay in-doors and fuck her wildly on some of them, never giving Penelope a second thought? On the colder rainy days, did they drink wine made from the grapes that grew around the door, and spend the whole day buried under animal skins for warmth, naked and fucking the day away until the storms passed? My take on the character of Odysseus is that he was never going to pass up the chance of a bit on the side.

Was he overly grateful just after he arrived, having been saved from drowning in the wine-dark sea? Did Calypso come to him at night and tend to the lost sailor? I bet she did. And I bet he returned the favour. He was, after all, at his lowest ebb. All his ships and crew were lost, all the treasure from Troy was at the bottom of the sea, there was just him left now. What would it take to make him feel like a man again?

What sort of prison was the island really? Thickly wooded, full of bird life, vines bursting with grapes, cool bubbling spring water, meadows of violets. Even the god Hermes gazed in wonder. Odysseus was in no rush to leave.

Then suddenly, after the visit of Hermes, Calypso finds him tools and points him to the tall pines that grow on the island. Now he can make a ship, stitch sails, and weave flax together to make ropes. All these things were there before. The tools, the trees, the flax. But he took no action, did nothing to 'escape' for seven whole years.

He was too happy fucking the beautiful goddess to worry about escape.

Obviously, there is quite a lot of art that shows Calypso – often entwined in the arms of Odysseus. Hey guys, plenty of scope for painting another naked woman from classical mythology. Some of them are very beautiful, but one scene that I particularly like is from 1630. It is probably the most unflattering of all the Calypso portraits, since she is shown kneeling on all fours and is what the art world might call Rubenesque, and the rest of us, plump. We are greeted by a big behind and a rounded stomach. We don't see her face at all – it is all arse. But the bit that I really enjoy in this painting is Odysseus. Four fingers and a hand. He is climbing up the cliff from the sea. Calypso has a gentle grip of his left hand. She isn't going to help him much with a grip like that. He has just been washed ashore, having lost everything to the wrath of Poseidon.

Lots of portraits show the couple together in their grotto, surrounded by servants and cupids, plump little children with grinning faces, some of them in flight, holding chains of flowers and pink curtain robes. I can count fourteen of the little critters in one painting from 1670. Hermes is tumbling into the scene with news the party is over. Odysseus looks very grumpy, while Calypso is looking directly out of the painting at the viewer – with an expression that reminds me of Tilda Swinton in the movie *Orlando* when she addresses the viewer directly. It's that, "I think my fun is over" look. My other favourite is by the German Arnold Böcklin. Odysseus stands tall and brooding with his back to us. His shoulders are hunched and you get the sense that he has wrapped the beautiful blue cloth of his robe around himself to emphasise his misery. Calypso is sitting on a bright red cloth that she has spread over one of the beachside rocks. She is naked to the waist and is looking wistfully back towards the brooding Odysseus.

I must be honest, I love this story of Odysseus and Calypso. It is my ideal, lost on an island with a beautiful woman who's prepared to offer you immortality and a lifetime in her bed.

I have an illustrated translation of the *Odyssey*, with paintings by William Russell Flint. Another artist that liked to paint a nude. It was first published in 1924 and the paintings have that early twentieth century feel. In one of them, Flint has captured the moment of parting. Odysseus with his back to Calypso, who is sitting on a low stone bench and trying to hold onto his hand. His chin and his body language all say that his mind's made up; he's ready to leave. Seven years is long enough. Her gesture is useless, it will never stop him. Her head is lowered so that her long braids fall over her face, hiding her expression. Her posture says more than pages of words ever could. Behind them, serving girls are bringing food and wine to load onto the boat that Odysseus has built, the sail of which can be seen in the distance. I love the power and drama in this picture.

This was the absolute opposite to my parting from Sophie. For us, nothing happened in person. All messages came by text. Hermes was an iPhone. There was no face to face meeting. I pored over that small black phone, needing glasses to read all the bitter bile. I couldn't find the nuance from the foreshortened messages of hate. FFS. I don't think there was ever a why. I'm not sure I walked away knowing what I had done wrong. I had no prior experience of being the dumped rather than the dumper. I learnt there is a need to cling on to something you

thought was good, even if you knew it wasn't. There is a need for security, a safe place. Where you can be yourself not keep up the aura people want of you, in jobs and careers and as a human being. There must be a place where you stand naked in front of the mirror and see only your inner self. Where your weaknesses are allowed to show, and it doesn't matter.

After days of sleeping in the car all the bad bits were on show now. I needed a haven. A place to run to. I needed to find the room that was big enough to hold a mirror that I could stand in front of.

Book Five of Homer's *Odyssey* is a happy place for me. As the gods debate Odysseus' fate at the start of the book, they do actually say he was "held captive in the nymph Calypso's house" and "she holds him there by force". Poor bugger.

But as we read, we hear that things were not exactly working out for the couple "Since the nymph no longer pleased." As soon as Odysseus is given his freedom to start working on a boat, shaping the timbers and making the sails and ropes, we get this little giveaway as to what they have been up to on the happy isle together:

"Even as he spoke
The sun set and the darkness swept the earth.
And now, withdrawing into the cavern's deep recesses,
Long in each other's arms they lost themselves in love."¹⁰

Turns out that Calypso has been a bit of a sneaky bitch, having hidden from our man a heavy bronze axe that fits his grip, with both blades well-honed, and a fine olive haft. She also has a polished smoothing adze. Just what a shipbuilder needs. Having presented these to Odysseus, in that 'look what I just found' moment, she leads him to the island's outer edge where the tall trees grow – the alders and black poplars, "seasoned, drying for years, ideal for easy floating". He fells twenty trees and splits them and trues them straight to the line.

All these things have been here all the time – the wood, the tools, but Odysseus has made no attempt to get away or escape.

¹⁰ *The Odyssey* by Homer, Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin, London 1996

A few lines of Book Five of the *Odyssey* have to represent some of the most beautiful and idyllic settings of any imagined life. A beautiful island, full of trees and grapes to make wine, plenty of food, some serving girls to cook and clean, a few domestic tasks such as weaving, so there are obviously some sheep somewhere. The olive wood handle implies olive trees, fresh olives with a little goat feta. I am in heaven. Add the springs of clear fresh water, grape vines for wine, and I am already in my own personal nirvana. And then add a goddess who is both beautiful and does not age, and even better who has the hots for you.

Not hard to get carried away with that story. When Sophie and I found a little house in Northland, on a hilltop above the beach, with a big garden full of fruit trees and veggie patch, not to mention a paddock where we let the neighbours graze sheep from which they were going to make their own cheese, well, I thought we had found that same paradise. Here was the place to make those dreams come true.

Sophie, directed by the gods, or was it just her girlfriend (with benefits) who came over to help her clear me out of the home we shared? I had been banished to the house up north, cutting lawns and working in the garden, watering the vegetable patch, and making it into our own slice of paradise. While I was up there toiling, Sophie packed up all my clothes, emptied out the drawers she had allowed me to occupy along with a third of the rail in the wardrobe for suits and shirts, and placed everything of mine in the garage. The locks on the house were changed. All I got was an ultimatum to remove everything from the garage within the next twenty-four hours. I had no-where to go. The house in the north was a weekender, two hours' drive away, not somewhere you could live and commute to work. And since it was me paying the bills and the mortgage, I had to be at work to pay those bills.

That Sunday night, when I got back to Auckland, I spent my first uncomfortable night sleeping in a car, before walking to work where I could take a shower.

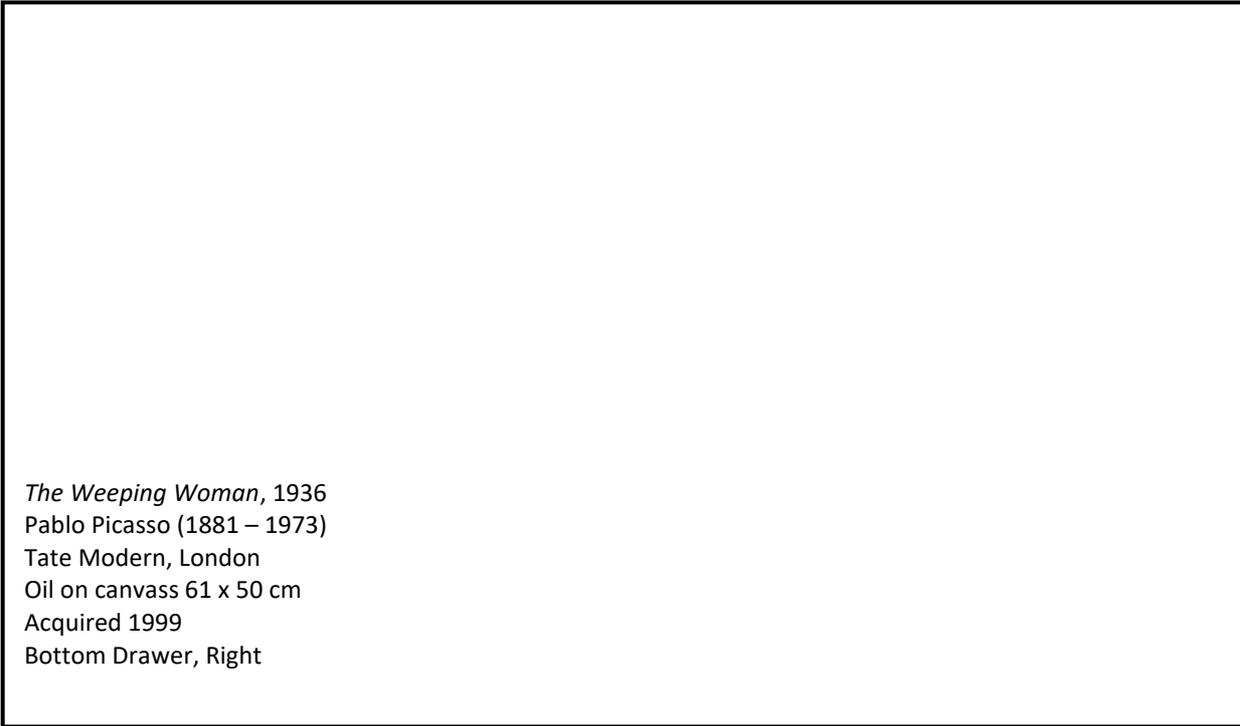
I embarked on a desperate search for somewhere to live. Somewhere cheap, a room not a house. Somewhere close to where I had been living, only a short commute to work. I was back to where I had been eight months before, when I first entered the firmament around Sophie. Then I was embattled and triumphant, keen for a fresh beginning. Now I simply felt alone and rejected. That must have been how Odysseus felt when Calypso found him washed up on her island; no ships, no men, no treasure. Everything lost.

I love the story of Odysseus, weeping on the shore, thinking of his wife Penelope who has been without him for sixteen years. When at last Calypso tells him that he will be released from his imprisonment on her island, that the gods have willed that he be allowed his freedom, what does he do? He creeps into her cave and shags her. Obviously. Just the sort of thing you would do after all those years of missing your wife.

It brings to mind one specific moment with Sophie. She was standing in her kitchen and turned to me saying how very horny she was all the time, and as I took a step towards her, her eyes were blazing with anger as she hissed “don’t touch me”. Hindsight tells me there are reasons for everything. The trick is finding out what those reasons are and which ones are important.

Dora Maar

Missing



The Weeping Woman, 1936
Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973)
Tate Modern, London
Oil on canvass 61 x 50 cm
Acquired 1999
Bottom Drawer, Right

It is hard to look at *The Weeping Woman*. It is hard not to be moved by the pain and the grief the painting conveys. It is raw. I know her face is blue and green and yellow, but her tears and the chewing of her fingers tell us plenty about her mental state. Something in my head had smashed that image into the picture I have of Sophie in those last few weeks. The same level of anguish. When you know something isn't right but cannot say exactly what it is. When you wish you knew what was running through someone else's head.

Picasso worked quickly – many of his paintings were completed in a day. That is why there are so many of his works. *The Weeping Woman* was painted on 26th October 1937. A day's work. The next day Dora might have been fine, her mood improved and she might have smiled and talked with him and perhaps all was well. But at some point, on 26th October, she was weeping and her face was contorted like a monster. That was how he painted her that day. That was how he remembered her, weeping.

In the lower level of the Musée Picasso in Paris is a room called The Muses. Painting of some of the women Picasso loved – in 1937. The portrait of Dora Maar in that room is in the same style, but she looks poised, calm and self-assured. The portrait of Marie-Therese from the same year is also beautiful. They were both his lovers. At the same time. On one night both these women were in Picasso's studio, and demanded that he choose between them. But, because he was a complete bastard, he refused and said they should fight it out. He left, with the two women wrestling on the floor.

I didn't want anyone to fight over me, far from it, I never wanted to be in another fight, what I wanted most of all was a calm and peaceful life, where it was possible to be the person I wanted. We have only so much of ourselves that we are able to offer to a relationship. The genuine part of you, which may come with some faults, a few rough edges, and a range of characteristics that you have developed over your lifetime. This is a take it or leave it moment. If you really don't like those bits of me, then it is probably best if you are not with me. If you do like them, if they make you happy, loved, and make you feel special, then we have a magic, a chemistry that will see us through lots of life's problems.

About six months after Sophie and I got together, all the good elements had gone and there was nothing that Sophie could see that made her want to be in the same house as me. My feelings hadn't moved at quite the same speed, and I was still trying to make things better, to salvage something I still thought was worth fighting for.

If you are fascinated by Picasso, then at some point you are bound to come across the trail of destruction that he left through the female population of Europe. Marie-Therese Walter, who was wrestling with Dora that night on the studio floor, hanged herself four years after Picasso died. His final wife, Jacqueline Roque, spent the night of his burial stretched over his snow-covered grave and in 1986, 13 years after his death, she too committed suicide. She shot herself in the head. In 1975 Picasso's son Paulo, by his first wife Olga, drank himself to death. Paulo's son, Pablito, killed himself by swallowing bleach when he was not allowed to attend his grandfather's funeral. It was truly a fucked-up family and at the heart of it was Picasso with all his wives, lovers, mistresses and terrible treatment of women.

Dora said that "All (Picasso's) portraits of me are lies. They're Picassos. Not one is Dora Maar." That is the important thing, to look at Dora and her photography, look at the art she created in her own right and judge her only on that, not by the way she is seen through someone else's eyes.

In 2010, a painting called *Nude, Green Leaves and Bust* took a little over eight minutes to sell for over 106 million US dollars. The painting took Picasso only one day to paint. For regular mortals, we would only need to create one piece like that to fund our entire lifetime. Picasso was churning them out at one a day.

In 2018 an auction of 20th century art owned by David and Peggy Rockefeller fetched \$646 million for the art alone. That included an early Picasso that sold for \$115 million. He was only about 24 when he painted "Young Girl with Flower Basket". The piece was bought from the artist by Gertrude Stein, and her estate sold it to Peggy Rockefeller in 1968. Only two careful lady owners from new.

Sitting on the back doorstep of the little brick and tile house that Sophie and I shared on Northcote Point, silently smoking cigarettes, we were not able to put the feelings in our heads and hearts into words. Neither able to voice their pain.

I had seen this bubbly, extrovert girl change completely from the warm smile and the text messages full of innuendo. Change into someone lost in a book, a cigarette and her own misery on the cold-concrete doorstep. A shadow of the girl I started dating. Had I turned into

a Picasso? Had I made her like that, or was that who she was all the time? Had I been just a shiny new distraction for a few months?

“Drink?”

A shake of the head. Another endless silence.

“Something to eat?”

Another shake.

“Smoke?”

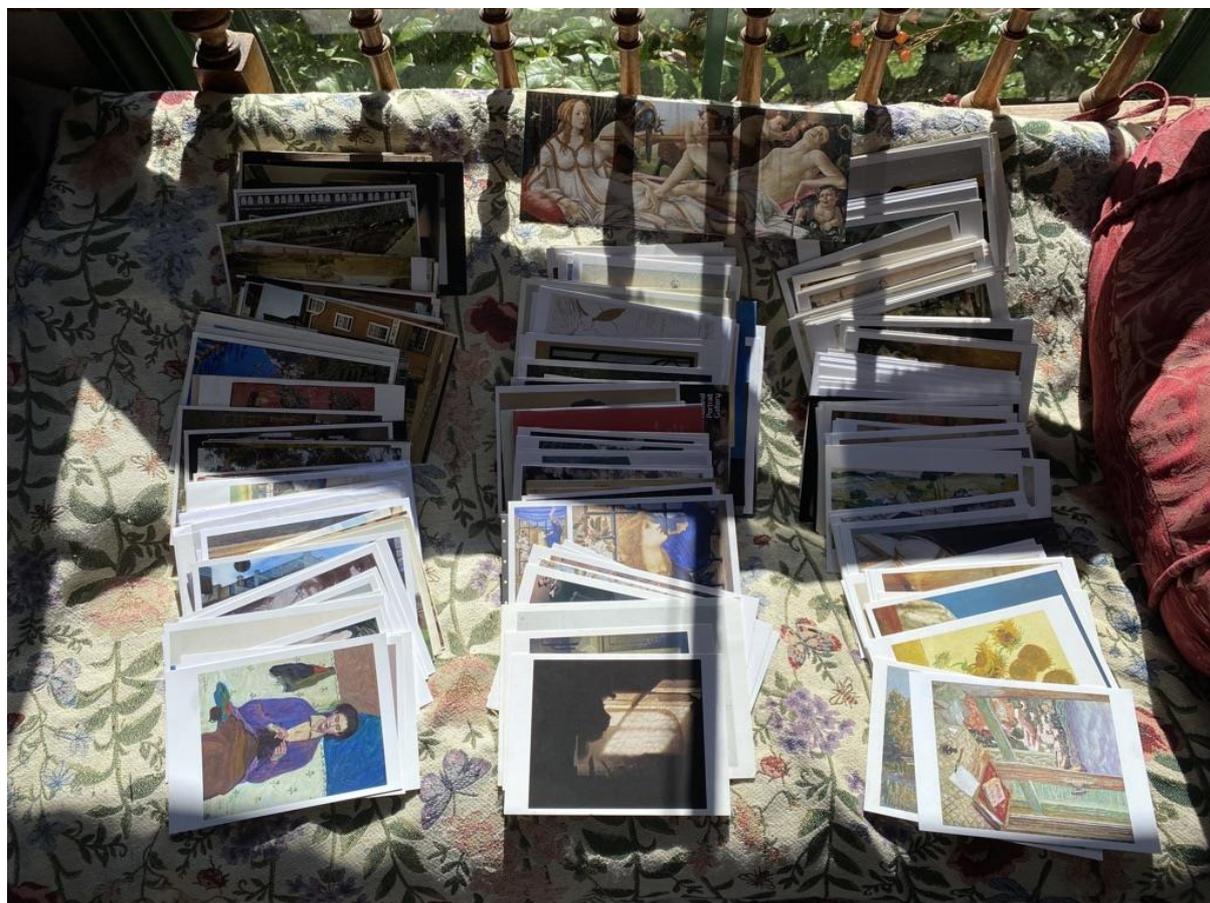
No reply. Perhaps a faint twitch of the blonde hair. Was that all I was worth? She was pretending to read that book. I took a cigarette I didn't want from the white packet. It gave me something to do. It didn't calm my nerves. How had I become so lost for words? Why was my brain failing to find the start of any sensible conversation? We had reached a sour impasse of nothing.

I stubbed out the cigarette and went inside to pack a bag for the weekend. Tomorrow was Friday and I could drive north after work. Toiling with a spade in the garden would be easier than not speaking.

That one-sided conversation was our last. We never spoke again. At some point over that weekend, while I tended veggies and turned the soiled, Sophie turned my life upside down and turned out all my things.

Our only communication was by text. Long bitter sentences to which I could say nothing that made any difference to how things had become. On Sunday night I reversed my car up to the garage door and transferred my clothes and books, blankets and pillows, into the boot. It was late in the evening by then. I drove a hundred metres down the road and slept in the car, still within sight of our front door with its changed locks. The next day I moved home to the Auckland waterfront and began to rebuild my life. Fourth time lucky.

Postscript



In the Northern summer of 2017 I was in London. Passing through, on my way back to New Zealand. There was a window, the dawn to dusk of a day before my evening flight, when I could grab an opportunity. A chance to reclaim some of what I had lost, to buy back a small fraction of the lifetime of postcards that lay pulped and rotting in a rural New Zealand rubbish dump. From Portrait Gallery to National Gallery, from British Museum to Museum of London, from Tate Modern to Tate Britain, I walked and ran, tubed and bussed, until the bags I carried were full to bursting. At first, I had to stop and look, visit the old friends, pay homage at the diptych and the alabaster pot. By the end there was so little time that I dashed from shop to shop, not seeing the art at all, only reclaiming postcards. I could not get them all. I was nowhere near. Hundreds short of what I had, but at least it was a start. And to that start I would add new places, new experiences, sights and works I had never seen before. I would venture further north, to Stockholm and Oslo, find new joy in Munch, Larsson and

Hammershøi. There was still time for new love and perhaps, one day, the best trip to Paris I could imagine.

The final story of Venus and Mars has not yet been written. Eris is not invited.

Reference List

Reference works on Art and Artists

- Bell, Quentin, *Bloomsbury* (London: Futura Publications, 1974)
Bell, Quentin, *Elders and Betters* (London: John Murray, 1995)
Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin Books, 2008)
Browse, Lillian, ed., *Augustus John Drawings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941)
Butler, Ruth, *Rodin: The Shape of Genius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)
- Chapel, Jeannie, *Victorian Taste. The complete catalogue of paintings at the Royal Holloway College* (London: A Zwemmer, 1982)
Collins, Judith, *Eric Gill: Sculpture* (London: Lund Humphries & Barbican Art Gallery, 1992)
Clark, Kenneth, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (London: The Folio Society, 2010)
- de Botton, Alain, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon, 2013)
- Eco, Umberto, *On Beauty* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2004)
Ede, H S, *Savage Messiah* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1931)
- Fagence Cooper, Suzanne, *To See Clearly Why Ruskin Matters* (London: Quercus Editions, 2020)
Farthing, Stephen, ed., *1001 Paintings You Must See Before You Die* (London: New Burlington Books, 2006)
- Gordon, Dillian, *Making and Meaning The Wilton Diptych* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1993)
- Hagen, Rose-Marie & Rainer, *What Great Paintings Say* (Köln, Taschen, 2000)
Hicks, Carola, *Girl in a Green Gown The History and Mystery of the Arnolfini Portrait* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2011)
Holroyd, Michael, Mark Evans and Rebecca John, *Themes and Variations The Drawings of Augustus John 1901-1931* (London: Lund Humphries, 1996)
- Laclotte, Michel, *Painting in the Musée d'Orsay* (Paris: Editions Scala, 1986)
Langdon, Helen, *Caravaggio: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 1999)
Langmuir, Erika, *The National Gallery Companion Guide* (London: National Gallery Company Ltd, 2002)
le Normand-Romain, Antionette and Christina Buley-Urbe, *Auguste Rodin Drawings & Watercolours* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006)
Little, Stephen, ... *isms Understanding Art* (London: Herbert Press, 2018)
- MacCarthy, Fiona, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989)
MacCarthy, Fiona, *William Morris A Life for our Time* (London: Faber and Faber 1994)
Mathieu, Caroline, *Guide to the Musée d'Orsay* (Paris: Spandem, 1992)
Monrad, Kasper, *Hammershøi and Europe* (Copenhagen: Statens Museum of Kunst, 2014)
Musée Catini Marseille, *Edward Hopper* (Secaucus: The Welfleet Press, 1989)

Ortiz, George, *In Pursuit of the Absolute Art of the Ancient World* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1994)

Parris, Leslie, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery Publications 1984)

Paton, Justin, *How to Look at a Painting* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2005)

Penrose, Antony, *Surrealist Lee Miller* (East Sussex: Lee Miller Archives, 2019)

Richardson, John, *A Life of Picasso, Volume 2* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996)

Royal Academy of Arts, London, *Post Impressionism: Cross-Currents in European Painting* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979)

Seckel, Hélène, *Musée Picasso Visitor's Guide* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1995)

Spalding, Frances, *Duncan Grant A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997)

Surtees, Virginia, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Oxford University Press 1971)

Wallace, Robert, *The World of Rembrandt 1606-1669* (Netherlands: Time Life International, 1975)

Wilmerding, John, *Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1987)

Woolf, Virginia, *Roger Fry A Biography* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991)

Woolf, Virginia, *Walter Sickert: a conversation* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1934)

Works of Fiction and Autobiography

Barthes, Roland, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (London: Vintage Classics, 2018)

Duras, Marguerite, *The Lover* (London: Flamingo, 1986)

Ernaux, Annie, *A Girl's Story* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016)

Ernaux, Annie, *Simple Passion* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021)

Ernaux, Annie, *A Man's Place* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020)

Sebald, W G, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: The Harvill Press, 1999)

Smart, Elizabeth, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (London, Fourth Estate, 2015)

Stepanova, Maria, *In Memory of Memory* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021)

Ward, Sophie, *Love and Other Thought Experiments* (London: Corsair, 2020)