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Midnight Kiss

If you add the shadow of death to a moment of passion you are in that instant free of all normal ties, your mind grows still and your body enters a state of non-being. Pleasure and pain, sex and death, *yin* and *yang* are mismatched twins, two fish each containing the eye of its opposite.

I wrote that sentence before my morning appointment with the doctor. It means nothing in isolation but I awoke with those words in my head and committed them to paper – the keyboard, the monitor. The winter is cold, bleak, colourless. There are no clouds, no sky, just a grey blanket like a shroud lowering over London.

The little finger on my right hand has a fracture. It is painful. The doctor spent a long time with my hand like a song bird nursed in his palm, his shirt cuff clipped with an onyx link, the gold face of his watch gripped by the strap nesting in a hairy wrist. Broken fingers are oddly intimate.

'You do look pale,' he said.

'Yes, I noticed in the mirror.'

'Are you sick?'

'Yes...'

He squeezed my good fingers. 'Do you want to tell me?'

I sighed. 'I write, you know, books...'

'Ah,' he replied.

He nodded wisely. He understood. Writing is a sickness, an ailment, an addiction. When I'm not writing, I'm thinking about what I have written that day and, when I do go to bed, I lie sleeplessly thinking about what I am going to write when I get up and start again the following day.

I am a night person, an insomniac, the girl at the bar who looks like she should have gone home and maybe has no home to go to. A false image I cultivate. I am thin, theoretically attractive,

in an abstract sort of way. I have hollow cheeks, high cheekbones, long legs, perhaps too thin, lips dry with cold, clotted with gloss. I have stopped being promiscuous and compose my work in the dead hours between two and six while London sleeps and the night planes follow the Thames into Heathrow carrying businessmen and migrants hoping to make it in the greatest city on earth. When you are bored with London you are bored with life. That's what it says along the side of the number 19 bus Mother takes to Peter Jones.

When I do sleep, I sleep badly, in spite of the magnets under my mattress that are supposed to orientate my body north to south so the lay lines and dragon lines pass through the invisible portal at the top of my skull and down to my feet, my best feature, I would soon be told.

I have worked as a tutor, in marketing, and for a women's magazine, which involved writing captions for interiors and combat with photographers fixated on depth and apertures. Regular working doesn't suit me, it interferes with writing, and now I earn my rent as a waitress at corporate events where the high priests of the City banks congratulate themselves by drinking buckets of champagne and falling over. The change of job meant a dip in my salary, so I moved, from West London, where rents cost the earth, to East London, where the cost is broken streets, a fall and a fractured finger.

It was the finger that saved my life.

The story begins on New Year's Eve. Having dumped Julian, an actor with floppy hair and lots of good teeth, I went with a girlfriend I don't particularly like to a tartan-themed charity ball in a kilt too short and my little finger bound to its partner in blue tape. There is something oddly poignant going to a ball with another woman and she must have felt the same way, abandoning me, as she did, for the first hairy-kneed faux Scotsman to say *och aye the noo* over the long candle-lit table.

After dinner consisting of haggis, which I didn't eat, I danced alone on the fringes of the swaying crowd like a stray swallow chasing the migrating flock.

A man appeared.

They usually do.

Men in the 21st century are no longer hunter gatherers. They are game players, artists, sculptors. They see me across the

rainbow of fiesta lights as a blank canvas requiring their signature in a gooey splash of scribbled jism; a column of alabaster that needs to be reshaped, their sculpting hands eager to rid me of my clothes and go to work with their carving tools. I could be perfect, just perfect, if I only gave them the chance. The man, this shimmying shaking dancer, is wearing tartan socks, plus fours, like a lost golfer, and a Tam o'Shanter that gives him the earthy, intense look of Che Guevara.

'Dance?'

'I am dancing?' I answered.

'That's not dancing, it's just moving about.'

'I have a bad finger.'

'Not a very good kilt either.'

I liked him immediately. I can't stand men who say nice things as they push back their floppy hair.

'Drink?'

'That's very generous of you, seeing how the bar's free.'

We drank whisky.

'Twelve year old malt,' he said.

'You know about those things?'

'No. I'm just flirting with you.'

'Honesty can be very unattractive,' I said and he shrugged.

'I know, it's so hard to do the right thing.'

'Or know what it is.'

He tossed back his drink. So did I. He refilled the glasses. My eyes prickled as I swallowed the fiery fluid and the band silenced before a drum roll. A man leapt on the stage, the skirts of his kilt like a sail, and announced in a Highland accent...

'Twenty seconds...' He looked at his watch, paused, then counted backwards: 'Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one...'

And we kissed.

It was at first a soft and tender kiss tasting of Johnnie Walker and garlic from the stuffed mushrooms that had accompanied the haggis. That lingering tang faded as I tasted his tongue and offered my tongue for him to sample. We kissed as if one of us, or both of us, needed mouth to mouth resuscitation. My heart was pounding in my chest and I wanted his hands that pressed against my shoulders to run down my back to my bottom that

peeked out boldly when I bent from the shortness of the absurd kilt.

We joined a circle of people, crossed our arms and sang along as the band played *Auld Lang Syne*. I was wobbly on high heels. My finger hurt. My heart was popping in my chest like champagne bubbles. I took his arm and he held me steady, his hand running around my back and clinging to my side. He looked into my eyes. I love it when there is no need for words. I knew what he was thinking. I was thinking the same. If you are going to go to bed with a man it has to be right then, that night, that moment. The immediacy makes my pulse race, my underarms tingle, and it is just too sad to sleep alone on New Year's Eve.

'Your place?' he said, and took my elbow.

'Or yours?'

He smiled. 'I don't have one.'

'Lucky you met me, then.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I had a feeling my luck was going to change.'

The cab whizzed along the Embankment, the bridges lit like spaceships, the Thames a coiling sheet of silver steel. Our lips touched. My heart fluttered and I adored being in the back of a cab that black night with a stranger who knew nothing about me. I could be anyone – an artist, an actress, a Foreign Office analyst, a ballet dancer, recently retired, of course, more a choreographer. In the closet there are a thousand masks and every one fits.

He paid the driver and waved away the change.

'Happy New Year.'

I gave him the key to open the downstairs lock.

'It hurts with my bad finger.'

'Oh, yes, I'd forgotten that,' he said.

He dropped a kiss on my hand. We climbed the stairs and he opened the door to my flat without the fuss I always have, pulling in the door to a precise angle before turning the key. Men are always good at those things.

The lamp on my desk belongs to my grandmother. I had begged her to give it to me. It is an art-deco figure of a man in ivory-coloured porcelain. He wears a top hat and tails and stands below a Victorian lamppost lighting a cigarette. The woman he is waiting for has not turned up, perhaps her husband knows? But he perseveres. I like that. Men who persevere get there in the end

and, while he waits, the lamp has a warm amber glow like an imagined sunset.

The living room, also my study, contains a cork board pinned with appointments, random phrases that weave their way into stories, a spare passport photo ready for when I lose my passport. There is a black leather sofa, a blue rug woven through with a Tibetan snow lion stolen from the loft at home, two tubular steel chairs from the 1960s and a table with extending sides. My laptop sits on a copy of Longman's *Chronicle of the 20th Century*, a gift from my uncle, a writer, because he is mentioned in 1985, the year I was born.

The ceiling rises to a peak, like an arrowhead. There is room to lay out my yoga mat at the entrance to the annex the landlord, Simon Singh, calls 'the kitchen.' The bathroom contains a tall arched window with a view of the grey slate rooftops and glass-walled City banks, hidden that starless and moonless night, although on sunny days I like to imagine men with binoculars watching as I step into my knickers.

On the floor there is a letter from NatWest containing three pages of threats. A loop of Christmas cards like a washing line is suspended at an angle between two walls and a sprig of mistletoe hangs serendipitously from the light fixture. I stabbed him in the chest with a good finger to get his attention.

'Excuse me.'

I pointed at the mistletoe and pointed at my lips. He grinned.

'Yes, they are beautiful.'

I ran my tongue over them. They felt cracked like flaking paint.

'Do you mean that?'

'I wouldn't say it if I didn't.'

'Mmm.'

Relationships are nine parts intuition, one part madness. The first part of the nine consists of physiognomy, and he was rather good-looking in that tousled hair, firm-jawed-needs-a-shave sort of way; big brown eyes full of secrets, wide shoulders in a white shirt.

He drew me to him, pressing his hands against my back. I was trapped, encircled, gathered up, protected. Our heads adjusted, and our lips moved in for a second tasting, slower, more ponderous, and I recalled something I had written, words that

came into my head because they had been fiction and now they were fact: I kissed the stranger, this unshaved Che with sparkling eyes, and I thought, the kiss is the greatest of gifts, a miracle, uniquely human. A kiss beneath the mistletoe. A kiss after midnight. A kiss before dying. The devil's kiss. As a picture tells a thousand words, so a kiss says everything that's important. I am told prostitutes never kiss their clients. It is too personal, too human. We kiss to say I love you. We kiss the rings of the self-important. The feet of conquerors. The rich dark earth when we reach the promised land. We kiss our hands and wave as loved ones begin a journey. We kiss strangers before dawn in the first hours of a New Year because our wintry lips are incomplete until they are oiled by a kiss.

I enjoy the sway of two anxious bodies swirling about each other like a faltering gyroscope, like a whisky-soaked octopus. His hands slid under my short skirt, and the thing that went through my head was: oh, God, I wish I wasn't wearing tights. I wriggled free and dragged him towards the bedroom where I turned on the lamp. I have a big bed. I like big beds.

He gazed around at the clothes escaping from the wardrobe like fleeing ghosts, shoes too drunk to stay on their heels, the pillows like sand dunes on the beach of my saffron sheets.

'Messy clothes tidy prose,' I said.

'What?'

'I write.'

My first chance to lie and I blurt out the truth. It made him think.

'A journalist?'

'Novelist,' I replied, knowing the word sounds more boastful than the imprecise and unassuming 'writer,' which means close to nothing: copywriter, scriptwriter, underwriter, typewriter.

'Anything I may have read...?'

I sealed his lips with my finger.

'I hate questions.'

'So do I.'

He grabbed me. I liked being grabbed. I like wriggling free then being grabbed again. I like running away and being chased, being caught. We kissed and kissed, then paused for breath. He pressed his teeth against my neck, just gently, and I forgot to mention the kiss of the vampire and how that, too, is so

wonderfully erotic. I could feel his cock swelling against my stomach, pushing at me like the head of a kitten pushing at a closed door. I ran my tongue over the bristles of his chin, his neck, his chest. He released my bottom as I slid down to my knees. I patiently unhooked his belt, unbuttoned the buttons on his plaid plus fours and tugged at his boxers – how sweet, I thought, they are tartan.

His cock was straight, firm and, in the dull light of the lamp, the head was pink like his lips. I sucked the head and ran my fingers over the quilted skin. He sighed. He relaxed. The stranger had met a girl at a ball and the girl had taken the stranger into her mouth, down, down, deeper and deeper; it was just so gloriously decadent being down on my knees like this and I wanted to swallow him whole like an oyster.

I came up for air and flicked my tongue like a feather up and down the warm flesh. He sighed and puffed. Time for the stranger was standing still. He wanted that moment to freeze and last forever. He had found a wicked girl, a promiscuous girl, a pleasant-enough-to-look-at-in-a-heroin-chic-sort-of-way girl and that New Year's Day in the early hours his cock was in her mouth. I sucked the head and rimmed the groove, teasing the nerve endings. I wet the fragile tissue of his testicles with a long stroke of my tongue and took his balls one at a time into my mouth.

His hands rested on the back of my head and he rocked slightly on his heels. I went back to sucking the soft cap of his penis. I ran my tongue down the shaft and up again, wetting the column. Many times I have found a boy's cock in my mouth and in the back of my mind a sense that this was so unfair, so one-sided, that true passion is give and take and this was a lot of give without a lot of get.

Sometimes, this time, it was different. His cock was a friendly creature massaging my gums, the inside of my cheeks, the bells of my tonsils. His pulsing cock vibrated over the membranes and tissues of my throat, touching my taste buds with its sultry perfume, the slap of flesh against flesh like the sound of the tree branch that tapped at night against my window. I was drunk on whisky, mesmerized, meditative. I sucked and kissed and nibbled and teased and he groaned and sighed and quivered and gasped. His cock was a wonderful toy, a drawbridge that sprang up when I pulled it down, that shook like a dancer when I teased the

groove with the tip of my wet tongue. It was a magnet like the magnets beneath my mattress connecting the polar points of our passion and fusing them in an aura of completion.

I could feel his pleasure mounting. He was going to fill my mouth with his syrupy essence, spray his sperm across my face, my eyes, my nose. I imagined the taste of nougat and almonds as I took him deep into my throat, sucking hard, waiting for that moment, that sudden jerk, that first hint of pre-come. But just as the adventurer hesitates before claiming the prize, before the true king pulls the sword from the rock, he stopped himself and withdrew. I was ready for his orgasm, my throat gaping. I felt let down yet, instantly, immediately relieved.

He took my elbows and pulled me up so he could kiss me again, so he could taste himself on my lips. The way he expertly undid the buttons on my white blouse made me wonder where he could have acquired such skill. Did he take bad girls home every night? Was this handsome stranger Lothario, Don Juan, Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*; so good, I read it twice.

He found the hook at the front of my bra, how clever, and weighed my breasts.

'They're small,' I murmured.

'Small is beautiful.'

'Not that small.'

'They are perfect,' he said and I purred.

He kissed my breasts in turn, left first, then right, taking my nipples into his mouth and biting down just hard enough to make them pop out, eager for more. At the same time his quick fingers found the zip on my kilt and the tartan fabric fell about my toes. He rolled down my tights and I hopped about from foot to foot as he expertly rid me of this clutter.

Just as I had gone down on my knees, like an echo, he did the same. He took the sides of my panties and pulled at the elastic. He ran the moist fabric down my legs and over my feet. He dropped down and adjusted his head so he could savour me. I adored the touch of his tongue and he drank from me as if from an upturned cup. I could smell my own scent. I pulled him up and we stumbled to the bed where, in a long kiss, I tasted warm salty seas with a fragrance as sweet as baby breath. I recalled vaguely a boyfriend saying once the stuff was 100 per cent protein and he wanted to try living on my liquids and nothing else for a week.

He slid up inside me, and time wasn't suspended. It was racing. He was going to come. I didn't want him to, not now, not yet. *La petite mort* is as often as not *la mort depuis longtemps*. The longer you wait, the more you delay, the more you reach the moment of release before receding, the greater the pleasure, the more wonder and mystery that wraps itself around the orgasm.

As he tensed, I let his cock slip from its warm cocoon and sewed kisses over the fine curly hair on his chest. I straddled his neck and lowered my drenched pussy over his mouth as if it were a saddle on a horse. He kissed and sucked, nudged my clitoris and wormed his tongue into the heart of my pulsating vagina. Liquids seeped from me in a continual stream, piquant and vital, the essence of sex. Tended the right way and in the right places, a girl is an eternal fount that just keeps giving, the milky fluid creaming over the walls of my pussy, over my spread lips, anointing the stranger in a fine spray that coated his face.

My heart was a little boat that had broken its moorings. My breath was trapped in my throat. I rolled to one side and slid across his body. I took his cock back into my mouth, completing the circle, his tongue pushing back into my vagina, my tongue wrapped about his shaft. We rocked to and fro like sunflowers in a field, deeper and deeper while the tree branch tapped like a metronome against the windowpane and we found perfect harmony.

My pussy continued to leak nectar into his mouth. Our bodies were slippery with perspiration. I could have remained in that position for the rest of my life, but the tempo changed, his body tensed and my throat filled with warm sperm that tasted like coconut milk. I gobbled it down, greedy for more. He kept pushing into me, I kept drawing at his cock and, as the last drips drained into my mouth, I grew rigid. I released his cock and gasped as his meaty tongue ignited an orgasm that made me scream. I cried out as if in pain but the pain was an intense, all-consuming pleasure.

My body was trembling as if in fever. I rolled to one side, arms wrapped around his legs, our bodies drenched, throbbing, electric. I was dizzy. He pulled me up and pushed his cock back inside me as if it were a jewel being placed back in a velvet box. We rocked gently like waves on an outgoing tide and, on that tide, the ship would soon be sailing.

We slept for an hour. We made love again and he slept again, staying hard inside me while I lay awake enjoying the feel of his weight pinning me down. Sometimes you have to picture what you wish for. I had pictured the stranger and willed him into being.

I must have drifted into sleep. I remember my eyes blinking open, a smile on my lips. There was dull light around the unclosed blinds. Morning had come. It was the first day of a New Year – a new beginning. He was dressing. He leaned over, kissed my forehead, and I watched as he left my bedroom. I heard the click of the front door. Then there was silence.

What Girls Really Think

Three times a week I go to the gym. I swim whenever I can and fast walk around the park listening to Bach. Coupled with flamenco, or rather *cante hondo*, which I also love, Bach inspired the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca when he was writing *Blood Wedding*, his most poetic and best-loved stage play.

Cyril Connolly, a biographer of George Orwell, said whenever you start writing a book you must set out to write a masterpiece. This counsel, both wise and haunting, is written out on a strip of card pinned to my cork board. There was a time when I read a lot of erotic writers, but not anymore. I don't want to be 'tainted' by styles other than my own and feel certain that you only find success writing when you are 100% you, original, identifiable, unique, on the edge of the crowd.

Writers I admire include Milan Kundera, Nikos Kuzanzakis, Camus, of course, Bret Easton Ellis, early Martin Amis, Stieg Larsson and Emily Brontë, who first caught my attention when I discovered the umlaut over the ë and fell in love at thirteen with Heathcliff, the archetypal romantic hero, beast and schoolgirl fantasy.

If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.

Thus spake Miss Brontë and I underscored those words in pencil.

At school, my skill at hockey and tennis was based on pace and anxiety more than talent. Reading was an escape; sex sublimation for girls trapped behind the walls of a convent clinging to the wuthering heights of the cliffs around the Kent coast. Writing I abhorred because it was formalised, regulated, imprisoned.

I was introduced at university to Anaïs Nin by Oliver Masters, my tutor, a lanky Heathcliff character who seduced my mind and encouraged me to write and submit a short story to an erotic

magazine edited by a beautiful woman who had once been his student. All life is incestuous. The story was published. I was thrilled, terrified and at the beginning of a journey that has no end and no precise direction.

'Why erotica?' my friends ask; my mother, too.

And I tell them: erotica is an untapped well of human mystery and potential, the seam of gold hidden below the fault lines of a culture that imposes limitations on our true nature. If erotic writing is to be regarded as literature, the taste and cadence of the words must embrace the senses, ignite the passions. The emotion is integral to the story. Readers must be stripped naked and led to a warm bath perfumed by sex. They must feel as they dress the softness of silk and the chafe of leather. Each description is a portrait so fresh and vivid they can hear the adagio slap of flesh against flesh, the rattle of chains, the snap of the whip, the sound of one hand clapping against willing buttocks. Readers should be inspired to seek in their lovers new erogenous places, the enchantment of role play, masks, ball-gags and bonds. In the heat of the night, when you allow the brain to rest, the body lives a life of its own.

'Let go,' I tell my friends. 'Just let go.'

Erotica holds up the mirror to a society where those things damned and outlawed are secretly desired. The erotic explores human extremes, lost love, impossible love, innocence and purity mingled with decadence and debauchery. All human fears and hungers become clearer analysed under the microscope of erotica. As I keep telling Mother, erotica is about feeling, not fucking.

My head throbs. I swallow two Nurofen Plus with my Starbucks House Blend and stare across the rooftops at the fey grey watery sky. The night is still with me. I am wearing big comfy socks, a long tee-shirt, no knickers and a woolly cardigan with sleeves that swamp my hands. My finger hurts. My body is sticky and smells of the stranger. I don't want to wash away the smell. Not yet. My laptop is open but I can't focus on the little black words on the screen.

Daddy is home from his job in the Far East 'lying for England,' as Mother tells her friends. They are snug in their Chelsea terrace and will go out this New Year's Day to have lunch at the

Hurlingham Club. Perhaps I'll go, too. I haven't seen much of my father this holiday. I miss him when he's not there and rarely see him when he is. 'Daddy's little viper,' Mother said once, and I've never forgotten it.

I place my coffee cup beside the man standing under the Victorian lamppost and leaned over the laptop. I start typing out my thoughts on erotica for some future blog and my fingers freeze, all nine fractured like the tenth as if in solidarity. I hear the classic ring of my iPhone, but when I reach for the machine, it remains silent while the ringing continues.

Is this an Apple trick? Is my whisky-addled brain playing games with me? Is the codeine in the Nurofen finally working? I shook the thing. Nothing.

The time reads 11:47 and the weather app highlights a depressing minus two degrees, cloud and snow.

I call a friend to make sure the phone was working.

She answers immediately.

'Hi, Minnie, Happy New Year.'

'I don't like being Minnie any more. Anyway, I'm fat,' I said.

'I can't bear it when thin people say they're fat, it makes normal people feel obese.'

'I'm in love, Lizzie.'

'You've always been in love. With yourself.'

'I want to be coddled, not...not castigated.'

'I love that word. Who with?' she asked.

'I don't know.'

'Typical.'

I sniffed. 'I've got a headache as well.'

'Don't we all, dear. You're so spoiled.'

'No I'm not. You're not being very nice today.'

'Ah, poor Skinny Minnie, tell me everything.'

Lizzie is an old friend, someone I trust, a good ear to hear my New Year's Eve tale of love and woe. I told her everything.

'Then,' I said and sighed, 'he kissed me on the forehead and just left...'

'That's a good sign.'

'You think so?'

'It's a lovely story, really romantic. I'm going to write it down...'

'You'd better not.'

'I'm going to call it *The Little Red Kilt* and publish it with that picture of you in a mask, you know the one...'

'Elizabeth Elmwood, I'll murder you if you do.'

'According to Georges Bataille, even murder can be erotic.'

'I'm fed up with him, he ruined my life.'

'How's the writing going?'

'Slowly. You?'

'I am totally inspired by your story, in fact, I might turn you into a series.'

'I'm never going to tell you any of my secrets again,' I said and she laughed.

'And who else is going to listen?'

Again, I heard the ringing phone. I shook my machine.

'Can you hear that?'

'What?'

'Lizzie, gotta go.'

The sound was coming from the bedroom. I raced in, but the moment I crossed the threshold the ringing stopped. I searched through the bedclothes, under the pillows, under the bed.

There: an iPhone in a sensible black case.

So, the stranger had left behind something other than his smell on my skin, the stains on my bed sheets. I searched through the phone's settings and found his name. I looked at messages, search history, notes. I was tempted to check 'recents' and call back, but stopped myself.

I made fresh coffee. My headache was tapping away like an unlatched door in a far off room. A slice of light crossed my desk and I could see a helicopter, a giant insect against the sky, the roar making the windowpanes rattle.

Since giving Julian Rhodes the 'I don't think we should see each other for a while...' speech, I'd been *boyfriendless*, and that's not a wise place to be. Far better to be with a man you don't like, than to be setting off on New Year's Eve with another girl. Being single is an admission of failure, a lack of something. Was I too fussy, too demanding, too spoiled, as Lizzie always says?

No, I don't think so.

Most of the men I meet are more concerned with the picture than the meaning of the picture. They see the world as if from inside a *camera obscura*, a darkened box with a single hole letting

in the light. They shoot snapshots that lack depth of field and capture a realism devoid of the surreal or sublime. They have an idealised view of glamour and beauty based on the air-brushed perfections of *Marie-Claire* and *Vogue*.

All girls compare themselves with every other girl. It is our nature; our tragedy. I can, with little effort, appear highbrow, with my hair in a pleat, demure at the country club in Barbour and tweed, a louche tart, who looks as if she has just thrown on her clothes and can't wait to tear them off again. The closet holds a cast of characters we explore every time we go out and sometimes it feels right to get it wrong, a subconscious signal that something else is wrong.

'You just don't bother do you?' as Julian remarked that night after he'd appeared in a fringe play at the King's Head and come off stage high on adrenaline to find me in jeans, All-Stars and a blue cagoule. It was the production's closing show. We went to The Ivy for dinner, a table booked, the girls in the gang dressed like butterflies. I was dressed like me.

Julian, when we got home, stripped off my jacket and jeans like wallpaper from the wall. He wasn't reaching for the me inside my clothes, but the me he had created in his mind, the shop store mannequin that he banged away at like he's hammering a nail, releasing the adrenaline and replacing it with the frail hope that the pub play would lead to the West End, a TV part, his photograph in the *Evening Standard* arriving at a premiere.

It was all about his needs. Men have so many. What he saw in *me*, was the girl behind *him*, in that photograph, stepping out of the back of a cab in a short skirt that showed her knickers. I was the accessory, the prize, the adjunct to his career. Julian always looked at me as if I were standing with my back to a mirror and what he saw was a reflection of himself. He had never bothered to read my books.

I finished my coffee and wandered through to the bathroom to comb the tangles from my hair. I could still smell him.

Tom, Tom, the Piper's son stole my heart and away did run.

I liked the stranger and liked him just as much now that he had a name. I liked the way he had danced at the ball, boldly, rhythmically, without showing off. I had felt a sudden rush of pleasure as we joined hands to sing in the New Year. 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot.' It is *such* wise counsel. When he said

'your place,' the way he had touched my elbow was with the confidence that anticipated my saying yes. A pact had been made by our bodies and we acted quickly enough not to allow our brains to step in and ruin everything.

Fireworks exploded in the sky as the taxi curved along the Thames. His kiss was a rare bird – the first sip of champagne. I loved the way he moved my body this way and that way, shaping me, turning me like a tailor with a bolt of cloth, lifting me by the hips so I could take him into my mouth while he sipped from my cup. He manoeuvred me on to my hands and knees so he could enter me from behind, his fingers gripping the handles of my hip bones, my breasts swinging like church bells, like udders, the position animal, feminine, deeply sensual.

I closed my eyes. I pretended there was a film crew in the shadows and now, in my morning memory, I watched the video, backside wriggling, mouth gaping as I gasped for air. He had been too polite to pierce my bottom, although he did in my fantasy footage, his long tongue oiling that inscrutable passage with my own juices before he pushed up into my core. I quivered with pleasure as he pumped out great gushes of hot sperm that filled my belly with a deep and abiding satisfaction.

My mouth had gone dry. I was holding on to the side of the sink panting and a faint moistness seeped from my sex.

Was it more exciting making love with a stranger? Without names, with our heads in the early hours drumming with music and our veins hot with whisky, we were lost to our primitive senses. We made love through the night like sun worshippers struck by the mystery of an eclipse. He was a considerate lover, a patient lover. You get by giving, you take through sharing. Men often see sex as combat, a battle to be won; a race to the finishing tape where the prize is orgasm. Tom wasn't like that.

The phone rang. His phone. I had taken it with me into the bathroom and sat on the loo to take a pee as I answered.

'Hello, Tom.'

'You found my phone?'

'Did you leave it behind as a device?'

'Subconsciously, I'm sure,' he replied. 'So, what about lunch?'

I thought for a moment. 'Is this an invitation for lunch or a need to retrieve your mobile? I can send it in a taxi.'

'How do you know my name?'

'I know everything about you, Doctor Bridge. Why didn't you look at my finger?'

'Not my field, I'm afraid, and I wouldn't want to interfere.'

This man named Tom who worked in Sri Lanka and sent messages that were never frivolous knew me as intimately as a man can know a woman and yet now, in the daylight, across the invisible wires, he sounded shy, sweet, a nice man in a world where girls, some girls, me, always fall in love with bastards.

'Do you remember the address?' I asked.

'Indelibly.'

'One o'clock.'

'I'm always on time.'

'I'm always late.'

We disconnected. I put my fingers to my lips. I do declare: I was smiling. The pulse of my headache ran slower. I flushed the loo, grabbed my own phone and called my parents. In turn I wished them a Happy New Year. I couldn't make the Hurlingham, I explained. Something had come up.

'Something interesting?' Daddy asked.

'Potentially.'

'Good. You deserve it.'

'Do you think so?'

'Absolutely, Katie, absolutely. How's your new flat?'

'A bit squalid. I stole the rug from the attic, the one from Tibet.'

'You're welcome to it, you know that.'

'Thank you, Daddy. When are you going back?'

'In a week or so. Will I see you before then?'

'Absolutely,' I replied; he loved that word. He lived in a world without absolutes and sought them wherever he could find them.

After taking off my clothes in the bedroom, I ambled back to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. I leaned forward and shook my head. Misty green eyes above pale blue half-moons tender to the touch. Cheeks hollow. Nose winter red. I sniffed. Three glasses of champagne, a big glass of red wine, two shots. Never again, I whispered. Never. New Year. New Regime. A New Year's Resolution.

'Work harder, worry less, be nice to Mother.'

There, I'd said it.

I stood back and continued the examination. Shoulders? Wide, clavicles defined above wells deep enough to gather coins in exchange for wishes. Breasts? Small but perky, fans of the uplift bra. I squeezed my nipples and a tingle raced up my spine that pressed boldly through the soft skin. Likewise my ribs, the keys of a harpsichord that tinkled with Bach's Concerto No. 1 in D Minor. I quite liked my hips, the way they jut out, the faint bulge of my belly that I stroked, wondering what it would be like to be pregnant. Long legs good for running away and revealing in short skirts; long feet with toes unembellished with varnish, long hands with a damaged finger. My pubes were matted. I stroked the hair and sniffed my fingertips. I adored being a girl.

I spent ages under the scorching spikes of the shower, ridding myself of those lovely smells, turning myself back into a virgin. I then stood in the window willing unseen eyes to be looking back. I brushed my hair, a long dark drape, brittle as kindling, in spite of the orange blossom conditioner. I stroked my tattoo. It has no depth, no response to my touch. But it is there, like a shadow, a memory.

When I was in my first year at university, I went one break with a friend to a tattoo parlour in Wardour Street, where she had two black butterflies engraved on the soft skin just above her left hip.

'Why do you want them?' I asked her.

'I don't know; it's just a bit of fun.'

She shrugged and looked away. There is something sad about England on spring days with the rain beating against the window and the people in the street hurrying by with umbrellas turned inside out. Alice went with the tattooist into the clinic and I studied the display as the electric needle buzzed through the open door.

It had never occurred to me to mark my body, but I suddenly understood why a tattoo made people feel as if they belonged to something they would find hard to explain or identify, a tribe, a mindset, a new era in which social media and marketing has sucked the marrow from our individuality.

Who was I and where did I belong?

I had no interest in ornamenting myself and knew girls who had been inked as a dare and then regretted it. My abrupt desire to have a tattoo wasn't to show that I belonged, but to remind

myself that I didn't want to belong. The tattoo would be an aide memoire, a metaphor. To quote JG Ballard, another writer who belongs on my list of greats, I was living life as a bourgeois, but was secretly an anarchist.

My eyes ran over the designs on the wall and one of them jumped out at me like a dancer in a club picked out by a spotlight. The shape was like a dancer, a continuous swirling line a little over three centimetres wide at the base and vanishing to the point of an inverted spiral of the type calligraphers placed at the end of hand-written manuscripts.

I sat and watched the rain until Alice and the tattooist appeared, the job done, her hand nursing her hip through her skirt.

'Do you have time to do another?' I asked.

Alice looked at once shocked, then pleased. She wasn't alone. The tattooist was a Rastafarian, with dreadlocks down to his waist and the face of a saint. He smiled his laser-whitened teeth.

'I am so happy, and it will make you happy,' he said. 'You have chosen?'

'That one,' I said, pointing.

'Bit small,' Alice remarked.

'Small is beautiful,' I responded.

We went through to the clinic. I laid on a leather-topped massage bench, lifted my hair above my head and indicated the back on my neck at the point immediately below the hairline.

'There,' I said.

'No one will see it.'

'Yes, I know.'

'You won't be able to see it.'

'But it will be there.'

'You, you crazy girl...'

'Thank you,' I said.

Like my friends, I immediately regretted having the tattoo and it hurt for weeks. There were scabs, the skin was bright red and I laid in bed at night having imaginary discussions with my mother about life being a journey and if you take a wrong turn you can never get back on track again.

Then the scabs fell off, the red faded and in the three-way mirror I stared at the reflected spiral and changed my mind. I had at the time been reading a book about geishas in ancient Japan

and discovered that these devotees of passion covered their bodies in heavy kimonos exposing only their hands, face and the nape of the neck, an intensely sensitive spot for women and one of those zones that can drive men into paroxysms of desire. It had not entered my mind when I had the tattoo inked into my skin that rainy day, but I had, in my first year at university, placed an extended foot on the road to the erotic.