

We had two bodies, hers the taller. I would have had to stretch to kiss her, to perch on my tiptoes, to cling to her for balance maybe. I thought a lot about this stretching. I considered its indignity. I wondered whether she would have to stoop to kiss me and whether it was right to ask someone to make themselves smaller for you.

I tried very hard never to look small to her, and to impress her, so she would deem me worthy, so she might stoop for me. But it was the wrong thing to ask and she wouldn't have done it even if I had, and I hadn't.

When I told her that I loved her we were both sitting down. She opened her closed fist, which was a kind of response I guess, and showed me the brown apple core within. Did I die? No, I did not die, though I did not know this for certain at the time. Some embarrassments are too specific to convey.

Afterwards, I sat on my bed with the door open and heard the zip on a bag in the room down the hall. A gathering of belongings. A light switch, a soft close, her feet, the stairs, a slam below. And silence.

I hated listening to the familiar sounds of her leaving. I had come to know these sounds intimately over the past year—but only now did they feel personal. As if with each leaving, she were leaving *me* specifically. I was a small child being left at home by her mother.

She rang me months later, once summer was over. She had read the books I gave her in the spring and would like to lend them to me now so we could discuss them. I told her that I had been reading the early books of her favourite author.

We had not seen each other in months, and yet there existed all the many silent hours we had spent apart—hours spent reading in service of a relationship, which seemed to me to be over. I pictured her working her way through these books. Convinced myself these were hours she had spent thinking of me. Though, of course, I no longer knew at all what it was that occupied her mind when she was still and alone.

Occasionally, I would yield to temptation and allow myself to imagine that she was with me, her body pressing into mine. I thought of her waist and how it felt to hold her. Rising to her ribs, falling to her hips. Her smell, softness, breath.

And coming to, I would experience the loss of her all over again; a feeling as profound and sudden as if my tooth had fallen out.

An afternoon in my bedroom. Me, on the floor; and her, lying across my bed. When the conversation lulled, neither of us looked away. There, in my room, the intimacy between us was a coat I wanted to take off.

Tell me what you're thinking about, she said, her eyes searching my face.

I glanced out the window, then turned to her: I was just thinking how we know so much of each other.

She laughed, since my voice was full of worry.

Do you hate it? she asked.

Yes, I said, laughing too, and shielding my face with my hands. I hate it.

That's a shame, she said, and rolled onto her back.

She smiled at the ceiling, I smiled at the wall.

A sensation rose in me. Of being held within the spacious structure of our relationship. Something like joy crawled up my body.

I fantasised often about writing a play with her, the two of us creating a wonderful, alive thing for everyone to see. Perhaps it was the same feeling a different woman might have, falling in love with a man and overwhelmed by a compulsion to carry his child. A physical manifestation of love that – once brought into existence – could never un-exist. I longed to share a creative love with her.

Is this it? Is this the child? I always pictured a collaboration. But perhaps it is only fitting that I created this thing without her knowledge and had more energy for the project than she did.

In the supermarket and the park, at work and at home, on the tube and on the bus, I would look around and think: *I don't exist without her.*

I dreamt about turning taps and no water flowing forth. Was this my real life? Did I exist? I had no witness to tell me so.

She used to see me, used to observe me, and in such a way, she offered a legitimacy to how I chose to live. Now she was gone, I behaved much as I had before, except there was no one there to tell me it was right or good, and often enough it would feel wrong and bad.

Without her, I felt unobserved, and lonely in my efforts to validate my own existence. My attachment to the earth turned slack. Like a child had let go of a balloon and it was floating haphazardly, governed by the winds and the moods of the sky. Free, but with no desire to be.

You cannot want someone to do something in German. You can say 'I want to hear the song' or 'she wants to hear the song'. You cannot say, as you do in English, 'I want her to hear the song'. I read arrogance in the English structure, an illusory sense of control: as if the articulation of desire could be so intimately entwined with any action that might result. As if all our wants tread on the cusp of realisation.

To approximate this idea in German, you might say: 'I would like, that she hears the song'. The separate clause is significant. The conjunction 'that', and the German comma, separating one person's desires from another's actions.

The implication being, to my mind, that we have little influence on those around us. That the expression of want is distinctly separate from the question of how another person might respond. That we are powerless, useless, and ought to be humble.

I try my best to assume the German attitude. Put this way, is it not a quiet desire? *I would like, that she loves me.*

I painted my nails red and, on the tube that evening to a friend's birthday party, I turned my hand and inspected the colour. How the crimson varnish melded confusingly with the dried blood of my cuticles. I smiled at the irony. The idea that someone might see me and think me the kind of person I am not. The kind of person who looks after herself.

Tears pricked my eyes in the dark busy street, crowds rushed past, a strange weight on my chest. I was out of the underground now, but found myself paralysed, unable to move forwards in the direction of my destination. Knowing that I would be bad company whenever I did arrive.

There, in my make-up and long coat, my unhappiness assumed an unreal quality. As if it stood slightly apart from me and maybe did not belong to me after all. As if perhaps, if I were stubborn enough, and summoned all of my courage, I could simply walk away from it and leave it there on the dusty gum-dotted pavement.

I imagined it: a briefcase in my hand. I set it down gently, upright, and walked away in long, confident strides. An action movie in slow motion. A button clicked; a bomb detonated. A huge explosion behind me, filling the frame, and my figure, unfazed, unpausing. Flaming debris falling like rain. I did not look back. I was far away now. The physical distance so great it may as well have been the past.

Standing there in the street, contemplating chaos, I noticed a chip in my left thumbnail and a pain moved through my chest, confirming that the unhappiness beside me really *was* mine to bear, and could by no means be relinquished at the roadside.

Adjusted my grip. One foot before the other.

I caught a glimpse of her as I arrived at the bar, and she looked different: beautiful in the way a person can look when you have not seen them in a long time. As I greeted my friends, she noticed me and smiled and made her way towards me. Beneath her warm gaze, I felt chosen and trembling and alive. There was a lump in my throat as she hugged me hello.

You cut your hair.

Yeah, she ran a hand through it. I wanted a change.

I was pissed off that she had become more beautiful. No one told me I was supposed to become more beautiful. She began to explain what her life was like now, and I searched for the words to describe my own: not quite knowing how to muddle all the disparate parts together into a plausible whole, which could then be held up to the light and turned for inspection.

I mentioned a film we had once seen together, and she told me it had been on her mind a lot recently. Something in the way she said it—as if maybe *I* had been on her mind a lot recently.

Conversation was easy, but I did not want it to be. So I brought up the past, making the exchange strained and uneven, full of half-formed admissions and veiled, blunted accusations.

I don't exist without her. I went to the toilets and cried.

Then I returned and talked to her again until I noticed a slight dip in her energy, at which point I made my excuses and headed home, before she could do the same.

On this, I was resolute: she was never going to leave me ever again.

She found me standing outside in the street, searching my route home.

How come are you leaving? Did I upset you?

I shook my head: No, we're fine.

You left so suddenly, she said openly, in the same way she had always convinced me to admit my secrets.

It's strange—seeing you again. I wasn't expecting you to come tonight.

Oh, she said. I knew you were coming. I wanted to see you.

I crossed and uncrossed my arms. This time, she was the one who brought up the past.

When she apologised for hurting me, I said: You didn't hurt me, Martha.

I know you wouldn't say if I had hurt you.

Well, you didn't.

I looked past her shoulder. I sounded like a child; I didn't know how to sound different.

I know I messed up, too, I said. And I'm sorry.

She could tell I was only reasserting my power; that mine was not a true apology. She said: No, you didn't do anything. It was just me.

I listened recently to a podcast about writing fiction, and the host said that if you wrote a love story without a happy ending then you were breaking your end of the bargain. As I listened, I thought: This is ridiculous.

And also: Well, that is how *I* feel, too, about *my* life. That I have been denied something. So is that not the most honest way a story could be told? Is it not right that the reader feel denied, like the narrator?

Standing before her, I studied her face, and understood with a new resignation that I could not see her clearly. That I had lost any semblance of objectivity. She looked *familiar*.

As I said goodbye and left, there was no version of me that remained. On the pavement outside the bar, she stood and watched me as I walked away, pausing there until I disappeared from view around the corner. And then, even once she could no longer see me, I continued to exist.

HIGHLY COMMENDED

The Pavement Gardener by Sherry Morris

Does anyone ever notice all the lone vegetables lying around the streets these days? There seem to be more and more about — almost as if someone is planting them with purpose. Probably there always was a scattered mix and, as a former Very Busy Bloke, I just never noticed. But since becoming a grower, I take things slower. And I notice.

I'm not talking about rotting produce that's been dumped deliberately. I mean perfectly edible food that's fallen by the wayside. One day there'll be a solitary King Edward lying pristine on the pavement. The next week, a fat rustic onion will roll along the gutter. A fallow month will follow before I spot a parsnip peeking from a doorway. Today I watched a carrot balance the curb. I imagine most of these vegetables drop from shopping bags. Does the owner never notice? Or could they not be bothered to stop? Does anyone ever feel bad leaving about their potato behind?

There never seems to be a pair or a bunch or a clutch. It's always just one, looking out of place and vulnerable, like a wandered-off child. All these displaced vegetables can't be accidental. For a while I believed they were left for me. By Tash. To remind me of what's important.

I'm still getting to grips with the allotment. Not because of its size — it's small; from its centre I can take just three steps in each direction. Not because of the time commitment — I work just three days a week now. What's difficult is the responsibility — nurturing seedlings and caring for buds so they blossom into produce and flowers. I'm no master gardener, but I am improving. I can tell cucumber seed from beetroot, carrot seedling from spinach. There won't be a repeat of planting tulip bulbs and discovering later they're garlic.

Last week at Sainsburys, the checkout kid puzzled over the seed packets on the belt. He flipped them front to back like he was looking for the barcode.

'What do you do with these?' he asked.

He was serious. Grew wide-eyed on hearing cucumbers and carrots would develop from the envelopes he held in his hand.

'You'd mean real cucumbers and carrots — like the ones we've got here?'

'Better than the ones here, mate,' I told him. 'If you do it right.'

He watched me pack, studied my purchases for signs of sincerity. I nodded to him as I left. He waved. I smiled. It felt like I'd planted a seed.

I still have tough days. There's a young pear tree at the back of the plot, against the wall. Technically, it's the garden's, not mine, but I water it, talk to it, encourage it to grow. I felt proud when it fruited. But then tree surgeons came and pruned it all the way back to its slender trunk. I sobbed and sobbed when I discovered what happened. Didn't have the words to tell anyone why.

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Tash was thrilled to receive a plot at Culpepper Community Garden. Thought it a fluke, then a sign, as waiting lists were long. For the first time, we were in one place together for a year — possibly two. I'd warned her when I proposed that moving would be constant with me. Marriage meant going with the flow. She'd nodded, said that was fine. But the last few times I announced our next destination, she'd taken a deep breath. Sealed her lips into a line so thin they almost disappeared. Exhaled while gathering her cherry black hair into a ponytail, then headed for the packing boxes.

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This was the ritual. The first night in our new place, we'd sit on the floor, among the boxes, with glasses of Malbec, brie and a pot of thyme.

'Here's to making the most of our thyme here, Charlie,' she'd say, tearing a leaf from the plant and placing it on a hunk of cheese. We'd giggle and clink glasses at the simple joke.

For me, her toast meant hunting down the best local café for breakfast fry-ups. Trying out Time Out eateries, wine bars and coffee shops. Exploring recommended tourist sites as well as hidden gems. I had no interest in choosing cushions, crockery and duvets. She could spend her time sorting out the household, making it a home.

'Tell me,' she said once, 'Where can you see us settling?'

I thought she wanted another giggle. Laughed and shook my head.

'In three years? Maybe five?' I didn't hear her plea.

'We're like water,' I said. 'Remember? We flow.'

She didn't laugh. And I didn't realise the packing boxes were filling with discontent.

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Tash thrived at the community garden. Joined the committee and weeding sessions, learned to espalier fruit trees along the back wall. She enrolled in a beekeeping course to tend the garden hive, noting it took years to become an expert. Told me that Irwin, the weathered beekeeper engaged by the garden, was preparing a select few to assume his role.

I never minded her hobby. Her insistence that each place we lived have a south-facing balcony or windowsills to crowd with potted herbs, seedlings, house plants. She needed

something to sustain herself while I worked. But the bees were new. I didn't like the sound of them. Couldn't imagine why anyone would want to embrace something so unpredictable.

She argued there'd be no garden without the bees. That the risk of getting stung was low. Bees responded to the vibe around them, she said. The key was to stay calm, steady. Move slowly. She pestered then nagged for me to come along.

'Hey working man,' she'd say. 'Come meet *my* workers. They'll slow you down. Help you enjoy life, stop being so busy.'

I was reluctant. Knowing somehow, I'd get stung.

I gave in for her birthday. Was gobsmacked by the enormity of the colony, counting more than ten hives. She said some days their hum could be heard from fifty metres away. I offered to watch from outside the enclosure, but she smiled, shook her head. Gave me a protective suit, hood and gloves, taking nothing for herself, saying she preferred entering in regular clothes.

I smothered inside the suit. Found it difficult to see. Sound was everywhere — a furious thrum that reverberated in my head, chest and limbs. My breathing turned into shallow pants. I sensed she was talking, probably reminding me to stay calm, move slowly. A bee landed near my face. I yelped, tried to brush it off, accidentally crushed it. They swarmed then, covering the suit. I thought one was inside my hood and flailed. She pushed me out of the pen, became the centre of their fury. No-one knows how many times she was stung.

I escaped untouched.

I heard that buzzing in my sleep for a long time afterward. Dreamt the bees carried her off, back to her parents in Ohio.

She recovered, said she didn't blame me, but she was different. Distant. I told her about my dream. Maybe she muttered, 'I wish,' but perhaps I was mistaken. It was a critical time at work, requiring focus. She stopped telling me about the garden, didn't invite me to go along. She also started humming. All the time. Said the bees liked it, but she did it in the flat, at dinner, even when we made love.

'Isn't a bee's hum a warning?' I asked.

'It's just humming,' she said.

But the vibe felt all wrong.

When I came home waving a list of job postings she said, 'I'm staying here.'
Her tone was solid now. Going with the flow was gone.

I said an extension to my current post wasn't guaranteed. That it was time to leave, start afresh. She gave a tight smile and shrugged, hooked her hair behind her ears and said, 'You know where the boxes are.'

That was the autumn that led to the disastrous winter — temperatures fell to -10C.

Her plants died, the bees died, then she died. She hadn't seen the car as she crossed the road, her nose buried in a bee book.

I'm sure she would have told me. She was probably waiting for the right time to say we needed to stay put, prepare a nest. Instead, it was the doctor who patted my hand and said she was sorry for my double loss. I saw pity in her eyes. Felt a buzzing thrum in my chest and head. The bees had won. I was suitably stung.

For a long time I did nothing, just walked around the flat looking at her things. Picking them up, setting them down. I realised how little I knew her. Her parents came. It was awkward. I'd never had much to say to them. In all that not-talking, I heard a familiar hum. Didn't try to shield myself from the droning sorrow and stinging rage of how I'd lost their daughter and grandchild. I just absorbed each barb.

Later they said they'd pack up her things, but I said to leave them. Her things were all that held me together.

Her seedling trays comforted me. I'd see her standing on the balcony, wearing mismatched gardening gloves and that faded Red Hot Chili Peppers t-shirt. Fussing over delicate shoots, coaxing them to grow, asking in baby-talk if they were too hot, too cold, too thirsty.

I knew then I'd keep the plot.

The committee chair had invited me around several times, but I'd made excuses. Now I accepted. She led me to a plot near a tap that had been cleared and tidied. She hoped that helped. I stared at all that dark earth. So much space to fill. How would I manage?

A small plant with periwinkle petals sat in a makeshift pot. Forget-Me-Nots she said, ready to plant out. I just needed to keep them damp.

I hadn't come prepared to garden, but the urge overtook. I scooped soft soil barehanded. Settled the delicate beauties in the ground, then patted the soil back into place. Watched the petals blur. Figured between tap and tears, they'd stay well-watered.

I spent those early days digging holes. Not rows or troughs, but holes. Turning soil with a shovel over and over as I dug deeper and deeper. Far beyond what was needed to sow seeds.

Nothing would have grown at that depth, but I couldn't stop. I dug until my back ached and blisters formed on my hands. But the hole was never big enough.

Once while digging, a woman approached.

'Your Natasha said my sunflowers were her favourite. Maybe you'd like some seeds?'

I hadn't known she liked sunflowers, that she was going by her full name. No wonder people looked confused when I said 'Tash'. So many things I still needed to learn.

Miraculously, the sunflowers grew. Tall and proud. I started looking up again to the sky instead of staring down at the soil. I remembered how much she loved cloud watching. Giving each one a name and a shape as it drifted past. I just wanted to hitch a ride on one, head to the next place. We both laughed at how we saw the same thing so differently. I didn't plant anything else that first growing season. Sunflowers and Forget-Me-Nots surviving in the same space was enough.

I could have taken a new post somewhere else but I stayed. Bought an almanac. Studied the weather. Became a grower.

Three years on and this is my plot: beets, potatoes, radishes, onions, carrots, parsnips, garlic. I plant other things too — strawberries, cucumbers and flowers, but root vegetables grow best. I nurture and talk to them all. Even the ones I can't see. I pick the fruit, harvest the vegetables, eat most of what I produce. The excess I give to friends. And some I plant around pavements, adding to the ones already there. As a reminder for people to grow.