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MAPS OF OUR SPECTACULAR BODIES

**MADDIE
MORTIMER**

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Split
Split

I

I, itch of ink, think of thing, plucked open at her start; no bigger than a capillary, no wiser than a cantaloupe, and quite optimistic about what my life would come to look like. I have since ached along her edges. Delighting in my bare-feet-floorboard-creeps across from where she once would feed, down to where her body brews, I have sampled, splintered, leaked and chewed through tissue, nook, bone, crease and node so much, so well, so tough, now, that the place feels like my own.

It is, perhaps, inevitable that after all this time, I have come to feel a little dissatisfied with the fact of my existence. This is not easy to admit. I suppose one can only be a disaster tourist for so long before the cruel old ennui starts to set in. But the Greeks said that in the beginning, there was boredom. The gods moulded mankind from its black, lifeless crust and this is, of course, encouraging.

Today I might trace the rungs of her larynx, or tap at her trachea like the bones of a xylophone, or cook up or undo some great horrors of my own because here is the thing about bodies: they are impossibly easy to prowl, without anyone suspecting a thing.

Until, of course, they do. And then, of course, they aren't.

The Beginning of the End

Lia remembered two things about the beginning of the end.

The first: the time it took the traffic lights to change.

The second: the fact that nobody died.

She was one crossing away from the place she needed to be, the surging rhythm of the city in her pulse, the day tripping quick towards rush hour. Her senses felt unusually alert. Nicked wide open by nerves, perhaps. It was nice. A nice change. To feel this exposed, this alive, whilst standing at a red light waiting for the world to resume itself.

A man in a suit that was too small for him sighed heavily and hailed a taxi.

Two women spoke loudly on their phones, slices of their conversation burying themselves into the back of her neck;
I told him I said you can't help how you feel. Booked the two thirty slot tomorrow, there's some leftover casserole in the fridge you can microwave. No cash, I'm afraid. Won't be late. God, I always feel so bad. Remember to feed the cat.

Lia pinched the velvet of her earlobe and thought about tragedy.

Which poet was it that said an abiding sense of tragedy can sustain a man through temporary periods of joy?

Which philosopher was it that said
all tragedies begin with
an admirable quiet?

Today had been full of clamour.

Everyone seemed seconds away from catastrophe.

The belt of a woman's coat bounced against her bicycle spokes. Cycling accidents were rising at a steady rate of 15 per cent each year. More than 4,500 resulting in death or serious injury, yesterday's newspaper had read. The city just keeps culling, there is grief on every street, Lia thought, as the plump belly of a toddler emerged at an open window and her eyes flicked down the floors below, counting, jaw tight, as the toddler leant its milk-white head out in delight, resting its tiny fingers on the ledge.

Four floors. The fall was four floors down.

Fluorine is pale yellow, chlorine is yellow-green, and bromine is red-brown.

A girl in a blue school uniform began lecturing her friend loudly on the subject of elements.

The halogens get darker as you go down, see.

Lia noticed the girl had thick straight lashes that interlaced as she blinked and a profile of rare, youthful prettiness, the kind that stood out amongst the mass of waiting faces, growing impatient at the crossing, and it was always so hard, she thought – so hard not to get distracted by beautiful things.

Back at the window, the toddler had disappeared. The window had been shut. This was, of course, a relief.

She took a deep, heavy breath in through her nose, concentrating on the stretch of her ribs, the widening of her chest, and held it. Trapped it there. The crackling warmth of petrol air. It had been two years since she'd walked these streets. Crossed this crossing. Two years since she'd sat staring at the scan of her body and brain pinned up against the light, pointing to the dark patch swimming about the centre. *That's the corpus callosum*, the doctor had said. *Nothing to worry about* (she let the long, lovely breath

rush through her lips) *just the thick nerve tract connecting one hemisphere to the other.*

A gap in the traffic had emerged. A clear path, connecting one side of the road to the other. The lights still hadn't changed. A man with matte skin made a break for it, which prompted the girl in the blue school uniform to dart out into the road too, pulling her friend behind her. It was then that Lia's eyes latched to the car, turning the corner, coming quickly through the afternoon. She saw the collision before it happened, felt the possibility of it collapse in on her lungs the way rain crescendos into something more than rain.

A throat-scream brake. Delayed smack of machine impact. The buckle of skinny knees as the girl's body hit the concrete. Lia felt time fold, the seconds doubling over. *Oh my God*, a telephone voice rasped loudly by her ear, but before she could get a closer look, the scene had flooded with people, all gnawing, clawing away at the prospect of a massacre, quick as starving rats to sudden crumbs.

Lia wanted to be sick.

The girl was dead. She knew it. She could feel it; the new chill in the air, the slowing of the clouds, the dizzying shift of atmosphere when tragedy drops into an ordinary day like this. The crowd seemed to be multiplying and all Lia could think was –

she would never get to tell her parents about the sort of day she'd just had. She would never take a chemistry exam or fall in love or know what a particularly nasty UTI feels like; she would never go to Manchester to study medicine, never become a medic or get to save any lives, and perhaps there would be other people that would die in years to come because of this very moment, because a man with matte skin had made a break for it and a young girl in a blue school uniform who knew things about elements had darted out into a road too soon, and Lia had watched all the glittering possibilities of her life flare up and flicker out, just like that.

She imagined the horror of walking over, leaning down with the rest of the rats, pushing the girl's hair gently off her face, to find that it was Iris, her Iris, her eyes stripped clean of their life.

A perfectly functioning body! the doctor had said. *And a happy, healthy brain!*

As if there really was such a thing.

The crowd had parted a little, so that Lia could finally get a glimpse of the girl lifting to her feet, just as Iris would at three or four, after having taken a tumble. *I'm fine*, she was saying, as she brushed herself down, quite unharmed. Someone offered to examine her knees. *I'm fine*, she said again, only louder and harder, her face flushed pink from the shock.

Lia couldn't believe it. It was, of course, a relief. But also – the slightest bit disappointing.

The girl's friend led her back to the safety of the pavement, where they both began to laugh, quite hysterically, the terrible sound churning away into the violent city. The spectators dispersed quickly, clumsily, back to their journeys, ashamed of their bloody appetite, and Lia felt the edges of the place cool and settle, her mind collecting up all that had briefly unravelled as the traffic lights went from chlorine to fluorine to bright bromine red, as the world shifted down
three octaves
too late.

By the time she had got to the other side of the road,
she had landed on
Yeats.

The poet was Yeats.

She still couldn't remember the philosopher.

Her eyes remained locked to the pavement until she reached the hospital.

The doctor said it was bad news.

It was back.

She couldn't hear the rest.

The room had emptied of all sound.

There was only the chilling giggle of the girl who hadn't died. So faint it was barely audible at first, but as it grew clearer and closer the voice was joined by other voices, those of London's lucky inhabitants who had all narrowly missed their endings, and like wave strengthening upon wave their lament bounced between the brick and glass of the city before rushing in, at last, through the crack in the hospital window, filling up every inch of the room:

It was you, Lia.

Not us.

You.

They

They, seeds of her hope, choir of her heart, now they are all rustling awake.

They, with their histories, plots, songs and remedies, stretch out from the mist-thick blanket of sleep, as word of my little disfigurement carries, like a gut-wind carves and cleanses a day, and

I must admit to feeling a little pleased.

You cannot polish a diamond without a bit of friction, after all, and it is beautiful, really, the way they yawn and twitch, shudder, click, sniff, wet and stiff as dogs smelling ghosts,

ready to try and snuff me right out.

How

Feeling brews itself in different locations, depending on the body. A man's most honest impulses may begin in his hands or his heart, his toes, throat, fingers or thighs. Lia felt most things first in her stomach.

An example: when she first felt love she was sick everywhere.

It had been the day the stranger had washed her feet. The sensation of something buried very deep had gone charging up through her lining, and she had found herself churning out the contents of her stomach over his large nimble fingers, between her own small toes. He hadn't flinched or grimaced, but had simply dipped his hands back into the bucket of water and sponged off the sick from her feet. She had wiped the bile from her chin, raised herself from the chair and dripped up the stairs to her bedroom, rubbing her stomach beneath the thin cotton of her shirt and wondering how he had done it. Made her feel as if her body's purging was perfectly normal, like there was nothing particularly disgusting or even interesting about it, and she had felt very seen and yet very small all at once.

It was no surprise, then, that when the doctor announced the cancer had spread, Lia felt a stirring in her stomach. This deep-vowelled *how?* like a wolf's cry. The doctor searched her eyes

sadly and nodded, ever so slightly, as if he were agreeing with the churning stomach sound, how how howing away at the body's betrayal.

On the way home, she vomited into the bin outside the station. Thick, pink clumps and chunks of breakfast and lunch, sour and fizzing in phlegm. And what if that could be it, she thought. If one could just throw tumours up, find them like coins in mud, polish and frame them next to the art in the kitchen. Turn them into fridge magnets with the machine that Iris had got last Christmas.

Iris. Iris. How would she tell her?

The streets had become remarkably quiet.

At home, Lia climbed to the safety of the fifth stair, where no notable events ever took place, and sat there a while, hugging her knees. She wished she had let Harry come with her. He would be waiting for the call. The only thing worse than hearing the news was having to tell it. She felt quietly grateful not to have to witness the dulling of his eyes, the panic sinking in his cheeks.

The phone barely rang twice before he answered.

Yes?

His voice was heavy with hope.

It's back.

A silence.

Fuck.

Another, longer silence. The squeak of Lia's hot palms clutching the banister tightly.

Fuck indeed.

Harry was the most capable person Lia had ever met. It was hard to know what to make of pure human goodness like his, for her life had been so littered with people who bounced effortlessly between extremes, and she had come to expect a certain degree of difficulty.

He demanded nothing of her. He had this gentle, scrappy energy and a way of smiling that was like watching a parachute open, and though he believed himself to be a man of middling talent, rarely the main event, but the sort of person that got you there and back safely, he was quietly remarkable, and the best sort of partner Lia could have ever hoped for.

We'll fight this, Harry said suddenly, sounding quite unlike himself, *we've done it before and we'll do it again.*

Statements like these never sat well in his voice. He thought too deeply for such certainty, observed the world too rigorously. Lia tried not to let it frustrate her.

Harry.

Yes?

Can you pick up a pudding? Something cheap and rich and fluffy.

He laughed lightly.

The most disgusting one I can find, he said, sounding much more like himself.

Lia sat on the end of her bed and drew out the shape of his language; the hills, the bends, the steady dips of it:

We've done it before and we'll do it again

The battle of each word against the circumstance of it:

So how would the fight begin? Would there be some warning,
some sign that it had started? A horn? A quaking-gallop-humdrum
on the horizon,
flags in the wind?

In the quiet of their bedroom, she looked for flags.

Her coat hung limply on the corner of the door like some stuffed
and sorry scarecrow, skewered deep into its sacred patch of land,
waving away the world.

Iris would be back soon. Today had been her first day at secondary
school. She had left that morning as confident as ever in her new
school uniform; shirt, skirt, hands and feet far too big for the rest
of her tiny frame, and though Lia had been so impressed, the sight
of her leaving had felt like the end of something. As if there was a
chance she might never come back.

Lia went down to open the front door, to wait for her on the
doorstep, peeling off her shoes and socks to feel the shock of cold
stone against bare soles. She looked
out and

up and thought,

Me –

I am not battling. I am as still and as constant as September sky,
selfish and sympathetic in equal measure.

Minutes later, Iris came bounding down the road with the world
on her back, her cheeks flushed with the excitement of the day.

What are you doing waiting there for? she said, leaping into Lia's
arms, and Lia felt the street hold its breath, the swelling of its
surfaces, the gradual muffle of its parking cars and sycamores.

Oh, you know. As I expected.

Iris shrugged like these changes were the easiest things. The street exhaled. Lia watched her half skip through the hallway, the mouth of the house, before disappearing around a corner, down the throat, and felt drenched with the exhaustion of loving someone as much as she did in that moment.

In the kitchen, they peeled vegetables. Iris spoke animatedly about her day, picking at food in the fridge, the frost of her laugh billowing out into its stark electric light. Perhaps, Lia thought, if she were the one doing the fighting, they would all be fine.

We have our own lockers, which is nice. The playground is so big and so concrete; there are so many rooms and corridors I got lost, a few times. Everyone was shy. Made a few friends. The chairs were the strangest part.

The chairs?

*When I sit on the chairs
my feet don't quite
reach the floor.*

Outside the house, Harry watched Lia and Iris passing peacefully through the frame of the front window, eyes sore and glassy. His afternoon had developed this close, narrow quality, so that from the moment he had left the university, he had felt as if he were walking down a long, straight corridor, and there had been no corners or buses or stairs or pauses, as if London herself were helping him home. Home. Now that he was here, he felt quite unable to move a step further.

Lia must have said something that Iris hadn't liked, because she was scowling down at chopped onions, or aubergine, he could not