

Shatter

Or

Orchid

You look at yourself and feel nothing but peace. You have no idea what to do. The earth could burn in all its beauty and hope and salvation but for one glorious moment there is calm. And you clutch at this moment like a longed for present, a glass orchid. So beautiful and frail it scorches at the touch. And this glass orchid crumples in your fingers, it shatters, you are ripped to threads.

Waking up, sun seeping in through the net curtains, latticing across his back like the lashes of a Christ, I shatter. He looks so peaceful like that, drained of the demons that raise themselves with his eyelids, he is blank and kind. As I drag myself towards the shower I watch him from the corner of my eye, watch for the slightest move, or change of breath. I take off my clothes and fold them carefully away before I look. The night has not been kind, but it's been worse. As usual I've slept squashed, up in the far corner of our big bed, and the sheets have left lines all over my body that stand out deep red. I feel gently over my face, pushing a little here and there to check. My cheek feels bruised, but not too bad, my nose is tender and I have a long, angry cut on my leg, all fixable. The beginnings of fingerprint bruises are showing on my shoulders. My back is run with thick red fingernail marks. I lie under the scalding water, splayed on the floor. It beats into my skin, under my skin, but the burn is good. It seeps into me and restores. I take stock carefully as I feel over my limbs, massaging out the knots. In the steaming water the cut reopens and blood is running everywhere. I watch it, running away down the drain, and it feels so right.

As I dab at my nose I think but nothing comes. Only the fears, not the memory. I've shut the door, but he won't wake, that I've taken care of. Knockout drops with his last hit last night, this morning, enough for a little more quiet. Once he wakes it will begin again, and I will go with him. But for now I can lie here piecing it together and making sense. This is my only time for peace. Then the other starts.

Somewhere in the darkness, teeth gaping, bugs burrowing beneath my skin.

Not fires, not infernos, but black, and something moving in the dark. “You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing.” I read that once, when we first moved in. In among the filth and the cockroach corpses we found the boxes of dusty old books. There were all sorts, Joyce and Burgess and art and military history. I read them hungrily in the mornings before he woke. I snatched at time away to lose myself in the pages, but it was never enough. They meant nothing. The people who wrote them knew nothing, felt nothing. They talked forever about flowers and brooks and the wind in the trees. They’d written thousands of words on lovers and starry nights and it was pretty, but it meant nothing. And then I found one that knew. This one grasped something of life that I could not bear or understand. This one frightened me, knew the secrets. He came to me in the dark, with the noises.

And his voice in my head “here, here, it is the beating of his hideous heart”. His heart as I lay, ear pressed to his chest.

I wipe the blood from my nose where it has started to run.

Once, a long time ago, I had clutched his leg, screaming how I loved him and begged, wildly, for sanctuary. As he laughed his fist lashed. I fell heavily and saw nothing but black. When I came to he was gazing at me, glassy eyed and smoking. I left my eyes slitted and watched him, the easy grace of it all. The way he held his cigarette, the line of his beautiful jaw. As I watched he poured the stuff onto the glass table, effortless and smooth while he cut out the lines. He knelt beside me and shook me gently, whispering my name, his hands in my hair.

The way the water fills the shower is a little mesmerizing. If I sit at a certain angle my leg blocks the drain and the water begins to rise. It creeps up and up, inches and inches, and that depth is fascinating. It reaches the top of the tiles and I have to let a little run away

before it spills over the edge, but it is deep enough. If I ever wanted to it would be deep enough. For now I can watch it and draw my name in the surface and revel in the warm water playing at my thighs.

At last, when I pull myself from the water my muscles have loosened and the bruise on my cheek has stopped pounding. I apply my makeup carefully. He doesn't like to see the revelry of the night before, it makes him uncomfortable, so I cover it. First green, to take the colour out, then flesh, then powder. Why don't I know? Last night was monsters and demons, not streetlights and traffic and fumbling keys. Where did we go, how did we go? Only these few hours, just the morning, that is my life, just the morning, wondering. And every night is him.

I take care with the long red cut on my leg as I slide on my jeans. Its drying slowly, becoming a long clean scar. Socks, shirt, slowly slowly with my tender muscles. Watch in the mirror as I button my jeans over my jutting hip-bones. I open the window to let out the steam. The breeze is warm and blows through into my face. I let it run over me gently, restoring. I lose myself just a moment before I catch my own eye in the mirror. My eyes are grey and its so long since I've looked at them. I stare into my own eyes and feel something break. I shatter. I break.

Was that movement? Slowly, hark, louder, louder, louder, louder! In the other room I can hear him. Bedsprings, then footsteps. I can hear him moving clothes, hear the buckle on his jeans. More footsteps, closer and closer until the door swings back towards me, and here, here, it is the beating of his hideous heart. He stands a moment, framed in the light, perfect, like an angel or a Christ. A smile plays on his lips and as he moves the image shatters. With that smooth easy grace he takes me up close, enfolds me, captivating, magnetic. The green in his eyes holds me as he takes out the pillbox. He rests the tab on my lip and watches. Don't think. Swallow.

Shatter

Or

An Obsessive Guide to True Love

I saw him in a cliché. A party, a friend, a meeting, a spark, all the usual. And as I watched the pieces fall away with his careless glances, I knew I had never touched. Never been touched. Never breathed, never seen, never known quite so completely. And in a flash of blinding ephemeral light it was clear that nothing had ever been clear, and in the luminosity I was born in beauty and hope and salvation, felt the perfect clockworks.

His hands were what caught me. His expressive beautiful hands with the thin silver bracelets and the crisply folded white handkerchief in his breast pocket. He was my boss's brother. I was his brother's secretary. So damn predictable, I've been told. He was grey around the temples and I was desperate and tragic and beautiful. Predictable? Ask me if I give a fuck.

For the radiance of one glorious night he was mine. Mine apart, free from the restriction of social decency. Mine, running calloused hands across my stomach, breathing close to my ears, using my eager body to satisfy. In the glow of a streetlight I watched him sleeping, tangled in sheets. I lay on his chest and listened to his heart beat and each beat erased a little of what had been, or blocked it. Each beat bored holes through my body like a nail through cotton candy. And so I was, before that time, clumsy flimsy wood, unthinking, blurry.

I lay there until the sun rose watching as he slept on his back with the light playing over his face and his silver bracelets playing patterns on the wall. I watched as he blinked awake slowly, and I pretended to doze as he got up and tiptoed to the shower. I watched as he brewed coffee in a towel and dressed with those slow sensual hands. When the door closed behind him and I was sitting crouched in the hallway, I caught a glimpse of his white handkerchief resting on the table. I'd like to think he left it on purpose, but he didn't. I know he didn't.

I settled on the squishy sofa and waited. He didn't call the first day or the second. Neither did my work or my friends or the water company or the telemarketers. The silence was thick and I was quiet. It has been sixteen days. The phone stays silent but I do my laundry and wash the dishes and take out the rubbish. And each time I wipe the mugs and change the sheets I wipe away the traces of him. He was perfect, not like that other one, with his flawed, haunting, jaded eyes. He was solid, and real. He was slightly prosaic and aggressively normal and perfect. In the dark of my bright little sitting room, I glimpse perfection, a life of divine sanity, and then watch it shatter. The dust begins to collect and the silence grows.

The phone stays silent.

I was never the stupid one. I was never the dormant passive stupid girl. I laughed at their disability, their depressing, immobilizing normalcy. I laughed at their hopeless passions and their big lipid eyes drowning in tears as I took their loves. I laughed at the men who never realized how disposable they were, and I laughed as they turned away, burned by my eyes. And as I strode from the office of a Friday afternoon, last week's heartbreak watched me go, watched me in the local bar, watched me leave with next week's last week's heartbreak. And as he remembers the touch of my breath on his neck, twisted in sheets, brewing coffee in the morning, I feel him shatter.

In life there is a moment when you realize that you are alive. There is a single split second, and suddenly you know, and ok will never be ok again. It shines a spotlight in our faces and reminds us of what we are. It is these moments that breaks us and warm us and keep us. We live and die for these moments, and chase them ever after, because after them nothing else is ever good enough. No one else is ever as good.

I didn't shy away, I stared. When the lights shone in my eyes I gazed on, enthralled and watched from the corner of my eye as the shards skittered away.

Shatter

Or

Andromeda

In serenity there is fear. And loneliness. And regret. Serenity is acceptance and calm and repentance. In serenity you see yourself as you are, as you have become. The things you didn't chose come out from their place of forgetfulness and dance teasingly in front of your eyes.

The serenity of this Wednesday morning is crushing. There's a bite in the air, but I settle myself in our tiny garden with a book and Lucy's school dress. She tore the hem at school, and brought it home to me, dumped it in my lap and ran away to play. Her little blonde pigtailed bouncing around, screeching at Zac to run after her, she was always such a noisy little thing. And this morning it is so very very quiet. Earlier when I dropped Zac at kindergarten I almost wanted him to make a fuss, tell me he didn't want to go. I could have stayed with him, played with the other children, fingerpainted... something. Instead I am sitting in this quiet garden alone, waiting for the school bus to drop them home

What was it I did before? For almost as long as I remember I've been changing sheets and making cheese sandwiches, but before there must have been something. I remember sitting by the ocean reading, but there's no university to read for anymore. I used to meet friends for coffee down on the strip and sit in the sun gossiping. I used to get dressed up and go dancing till morning, then work all day, dead on my feet. Today, for the first time, I am not living for them. My time is my own, but I have nothing to do with it. My baby is at school, for the first time playing happily without me. He's too young yet, I suppose, to understand the importance of firsts. They come right after lasts.

Its eleven o'clock so I'll make myself coffee, find something to nibble on. The sink is strewn with dirty breakfast things. Two cereal bowls and a plate of toast crumbs. And Geoff's grubby shoe marks trailing down the halls. Some days he's like a child himself. Like a charming little boy. He's left me a note on the fridge. *Not home till 9*. Oh well,

doesn't matter. Husbands are alright, but they come and they go, they work late, they grow old and go bald. When I met Geoff the first time I forgot his name, then mistook him for a friend's boyfriend. I got ridiculously drunk, and he drove me home. When he phoned me the next day I agreed to a 'sorry date' and he took me out to dinner. He was nice, kind, on the up. He thought things through. From that auspicious beginning, we got married on a pretty spring day in a pretty church, even though neither of us is religious. He said that's just the way that things are done. And then Lucy was born and he became largely...useless. Geoff is a nice man, in a colourless sort of way, who works too hard and loves his family, but these days he's nothing more than a walking wallet and dinner left in the microwave. Husbands are alright, but your children are different. They're special.

I do a quick tidy up, plates washed and away, benches wiped, breaky things in the cupboard. There's only one more job to do. I go to the kitchen cupboard and pull out the packages hidden at the back. Tomorrow is Geoff's birthday, and yesterday we went shopping. We bought a new tie, very loud, that he will wear unwillingly to work and explain that his kids bought it for him. We have a macaroni box Lucy made at school and a big box of chocolates. And a little blue box with a silver bracelet inside. When Lucy pointed to it in the window I bought it without thinking. I suppose I thought that one morning I'd wake to the light of the morning sun playing over the silver, but our window faces away from the sunrise. I carefully take off all the price tags and make sure they're all perfect. Then put them back in the cupboard to wrap with the kids later.

I settle myself back into my chair with my coffee and watch. The sky is so blue today, and in the distance a skywriter has just appeared. It drones ominously overhead, letting out smoke from behind, which curls and twists. Curls and twists and is gone in an instant. The sweet peas are out early this year and the smell of them fills up the garden. And the sunflowers we planted and all the ivy climbing the walls. When we first moved here there were wild orchids growing along the far wall, but they went when winter came on and never grew back. They grew old and died, pretty as they are. I can see myself doing just that, sitting in this chair in the sun when I'm eighty and arthritic, and the

thought isn't entirely bad. There's something to be said for calm and relaxed. I must be getting old. One minute a whole life ahead of you, then the world takes charge and there you are suddenly, sitting in a chair getting old.

It's so quiet, here in the garden as the sun begins to get fierce. You listen for the running and the giggling so much more when it's quiet. They're so little that their feet don't resound on the tiles, they tap. And their little blonde heads bob when they walk. They bicker over morning TV and get playdough in the remote buttons.

The sun isn't too strong, just warm and I can feel my eyes start to close. I don't even struggle to stay awake, just let it take over. For a while I float with the tides, images and snatches of songs playing through my head and tantalizing smells wafting. I try to reach out to them, follow them, but I'm caught. Fixed to the spot. I look down to my arms, chained to my sides, trapping me against the cliffs, waiting for the monster. Geoff is perched on a rock by my side, reading the newspaper aloud in a ballerina costume with the children playing at his feet. As I watch Zac's ear detaches, flying through the air and attaches itself to Lucy's leg. Then Lucy's nose to the back of Zac's head, and suddenly, there are body parts flying everywhere, reshaping them. I look down to my chains, but they aren't chains, they are hard, tough ropes of flowering sweet peas. And the children are gone. Geoff has finished his newspaper and left while I struggle to free myself from the plants. Exhausted, I wait for hours but no one comes. I am Andromeda on the rocks. I am waiting for a graceful green eyed monster and bound by thick tough stems of orchid as they grow and change. The water is rising, it is cold and swirling around my thighs, and as I struggle against the ropes they harden, smooth as glass, and shatter. My arms are ripped with jagged fragments and blood runs everywhere staining the rising water.

I jerk awake, sweating and shaking. Somewhere in the distance, I can hear the sound of feet in the driveway.

And yes, there they are. There is the key turning, and the door slamming open. And feet. The sound of Zac's tiny feet. I shatter.