

You Never Let Me Leave

She imagines being rolled up into herself. Like a pinwheel sandwich at a children's birthday party. Or a common garden snail. Like a Swiss roll. Like the cotton on a metal bobbin, wound ready for the machine. Her bones are cartilage; she will not snap. Head pushed down, chin on her chest, nestled into her collarbone, you could roll her head forwards, tuck it in tight, and then turn and turn again, spinning like an old 75, until you reach her feet.

She is rolled up naked. And there is no filling – no frosting, or cream cheese, or jam – no snail whorls. Instead, there is the space where the curve fails. Where you cannot roll her tight enough. Where flesh refuses to sit on flesh. These places where the body is not. The weight of air against skin. And it is this absent body, this spacing, which makes the spiral.

She had thought about folding, but then decided that it would be of no use at all. For this act is not to be confused with origami, or some other art form. And there is to be no harness to it – no straight edges are to be allowed. She will not be scored or pleated. She must be rolled. She must make a curve. She must not be required to be straight. Orthodox. Square. Conventional. There are to be no parallels, no sharp edges, no creases. No planes of projection.

And yet although she convinces herself that her intention is bound to the artistic and the avant-garde, she must admit, only to herself, that the real reason is that she is afraid. She does not want to be flattened out, as folding might require. To be exposed like that – just the very thought of being exposed like that – makes her catch her breath. She can feel her heart

beating, the irregular trembling of a pulse, not in her chest but as a fluttering in her throat. A moth (and it is certainly a moth, never a butterfly), flitting against her larynx, struggling to get out.

As a curve, she is faceless. Her nose is pressed into the space between her breasts. It sits perfectly there, in the gap between those shallow, uneven balls of flesh. Her lips kiss her sternum. Her eyelashes tickle her ribs. This facelessness helps, because eye contact also awakens the moths. She hates to meet the eyes of anyone. With her child, she has had to make a special effort; she forces the engagement: trains herself to lift her face to meet the toddler's gaze. She knows with certainty that if she doesn't do this, the little girl will grow up deformed. Already the child is unruly – she licks her mother's face rather than kissing her, grunts in low guttural tones rather than talks, contorts her small, undersized body and waves her arms wildly for no determinable reason. She has read that mothers (there is no mention of fathers) who do not make eye contact deny their children the experience of unconditional love.

She told him this once, 'You are the only person I have ever looked at.' She wanted him to understand how much it took from her to do that. What a risk she was taking. Not just in looking, but in admitting the consciousness of her behaviour. She wanted him to take that look tenderly, and with compassion, knowing it was a gift she gave to him and no one else. He said to her, 'You have the most intense gaze.' She thought, in these instances when they looked at each other, that something solid passed between them. It was a cliché, and so she could not tell him, because he had told her that there was nothing worse than cliché, but in those moments she felt some kind of non-physical association between them; there was what seemed to her to be a slowing of time, a silent dialogue in which the air between them

became thick with promises. She thought he felt it too. That the cliché prevented him from saying it, but not from feeling it. But then she realised that she didn't know. Because he was the only person she had ever looked at.

It was, for her, like sex. And so she thought, when he looked at her, that he was saying 'I want to fuck you.' Sometimes, she even thought he was saying 'I love you.' Well, perhaps not 'I love you', but maybe 'I want to love you.' Or almost maybe.

But mainly he was saying 'I am angry' or 'I am confused.' She stood on the opposite sides of rooms to him. She stood in hallways next to him, close enough to hear him breathe. She waited for him to cross the floor and fuck her. She waited for him to kiss her on the mouth. Instead, he turned his head, so that she felt the brush of his stubble on her cheek, but could not remember the feeling of his lips on hers.

And mainly he was looking at other women and saying 'I want to fuck you.' Women who were like him. Women who were like his mother, or his grandmother, which amounted to the same thing. Not women like her. Not a woman who would cry in the street and beg, and apologise for who she was, and make excuses for who she wasn't, and offer to do anything. Not a woman who would agree to do things that made her feel sick at herself just to keep the possibility. Women who were like his wife – his wife who had walked out one day without explanation, taking the dining chairs and leaving him the table.

They had joked together, lying in bed afterwards, his soft, writer's fingers entwined with hers, that she had settled for a little less love, for a little more house. And now he was settling too. This she suspected, and this he knew. It was a more balanced equation. A little less love,

for a little less love. Because if you didn't love each other very much then when she left you (because she would leave you) it wouldn't feel so much like you were being crushed under the weight of a collapsed building, struggling for breath in a small pocket of air surrounded by the mangled wires and rubble that was once your life, waiting for a rescue party that was never coming because you didn't know how to scream.

He thought that she was beautifully straight. She was an efficient administrator. An exceptional academic. He would grant her such parochial talents, rather than the bohemian creativity he reserved for those who had a piece of paper to affirm it – a degree in drama, or art history, or music. He did not see, as the ancient Greeks knew, that a line is a very special kind of curve. He did not see that all curves are made of lines. He did not see that a curve can also be the right line. However much she looked at him, and he met her gaze, he did not see these things. He did not see that she had a much quieter artistry within her; did not see it because that art was darkness, and intensity, and things you could not enunciate, or market, or sell at an hourly rate, because to do so was to expose the fragile, damaged wounding that was unspeakable. Such sentiment, frankly, was melodramatic. And words should not be this – they should be sparse, and finely wrought, and crafted with a ruthless mental scalpel.

So he did not see how the spiral could resolve itself. And while she believed that passion came from the negation of negation, their backwards and forwards see-sawing erosion of selfhood, he wanted only perfect circles. If Newton had told him that the earth was not really spherical, he would have denied it. Watching the gentle breakdown of his emotional defences gave her a physical sensation of being underneath his skin. There was pleasure for her in these encounters, a kind of addiction to seeing him raw, and without the veneer he tried so hard to publically maintain. Her honesty terrified him; it was unruly, and wild, and coarse.

He spoke. She spoke. He repeated his words. Sometimes more slowly, or with a different emphasis, just to give the sense that he was saying something. He wanted only a conversation with himself.

And yet he always began it. She wanted to go to bed. He wanted to talk about why they should not go to bed. She did not care what it was. He wanted to know what it was. She wanted only animal sounds and reactions. He wanted responses, and language. Give it a word, a name. Something that was not 'love', or 'relationship'. But it had to be something. Something that would remind her it was nothing. He was careful to place these signs everywhere, so that she could not overlook them. He did not hold a door, or pay for dinner, or tell her she was pretty. He never came with flowers. When her husband left, in the very middle of things, she thought he might bring some comfort to keep her company in the night. That he did not do this was not malicious, for he never considered such kindnesses. And yet, he was very generous in reminding her what he did not feel. This, he thought, was decent and honest. It was important that she understood that he did not find her exceptional in any way. He did not want to hurt her by allowing her to think she was more significant than she was. He could not be responsible for allowing her the illusion of feeling beautiful, or loved, or wanted. This would be devastating for her when the moment came that he moved on. They were having 'some nice times, and some nice sex' and it was imperative not to make it more than it was.

Her sofa was a giant semi-circle of purple velvet. It looked like it had been stolen from a low-budget online porn movie. She would lay on it, and he would sit opposite her, refusing to remove his shoes, starkly upright in a worn out, beige armchair that she had inherited from

her grandparents. At the end of these conversations – sometimes four or five hours long – she would be (according to him) unreasonably hysterical. ‘Let’s leave it for tonight, lovely. Just leave it,’ he would say. And she would look at him when she had never looked at anyone else, and think that then he would kiss her. Then he would fuck her. Then he would stay. That such fitting together – because surely that is what it was – such exhaustion, would mean that they would fall into bed. On each occasion she was as shocked as the first that this never happened. She was on her knees, her eyes said. She thought at the time that she thought that she knew that he saw this. He observed her desperation and it drove him further away from her and towards the door. ‘You never let me leave,’ he would tell her. ‘You won’t ever let me leave.’ He said it half pleading, half assertion. But he never stayed. He would stand at the bottom of the slope of the driveway and turn to see her reluctantly close the front door. As the latch clicked shut she would lean against the wall, and slide herself down, her back caressing the small dimples of the textured wallpaper. She sat there, at an opposite angle to the door, underneath the yellowed net curtain, staring up at the coloured glass, her knees drawn to her chest. She waited for him to turn around and come back. She was certain he could feel her imploring him not to leave her there. Then, she waited for him to text her and say he was sorry he could not stay. Then, she waited for him to call her from his flat and tell her he wished he had stayed. Then, she waited for him to send her a Facebook message, or write her an email, to ask her when he could see her.

He said, ‘You were right when you said it would be easier just to fuck you.’

He said, ‘She makes me laugh.’

He said, ‘She is a whore in the bedroom.’

And now there was nothing left but to curl in on oneself. Close the body down like a clenched fist, gritted tight, nails dug into the palm until it draws blood. She sits on her bed; it is the bed she purchased to replace the one her husband and she had slept in, so that he might feel less uncomfortable. The bed she bought with its wrought-iron rather than polished wood, all curves and spaces; spaces to wrap a tie around, or a belt, or a rope. She lifts up her skirt, undoes her suspenders, rolls down her stockings and pulls them over her sharp-edged toenails. She stands up, undoes her skirt. Pulls her sweater over her head, so that only her underwear is left. She will roll better without clothes to rough the edges.

Just once, she called him, crying, at three in the morning, a desperate, wailing thing more like a cat than a woman. He told her calmly and sleepily, in his usual clipped, public schoolboy tones, with just the slightest but intentionally noticeable hint of annoyance, that of course it would get better. He recommended that she take her feelings and put them in a box beneath the bed, where they would be precious but not present. And because she always did as he told her to, she did this also, wrapping the box in twine, tying the lid tight. Yet in the night the contents would dance free and spread out across the room, a mushroom cloud of vitriol and desire. This happened however many other men took her to bed. It happened however many times her daughter smiled at her. It happened however much she hated him. However many days passed, or turned into weeks, or months, or years, so that the time in which they had spoken every day had been eclipsed by the time in which they hadn't. Or, worse, by the time in which they had spoken every day to someone else.

But perhaps, if she curled up tight enough, she could try. She could fossilise herself. Perhaps she could forget the fact that so many times she had almost left him. That she had almost got

there first. For the words he would not give her, when she had given him so many. For the things he said, and for the things he could not say. But, most of all, for the fact that she knew that when he was fucking her, always from behind so that their eyes would not meet, he was thinking of someone else.

She wrongly thought that what would make the difference would be not being that someone else. If he knew, surely, that he would never come home to find her loading the dining table into the back of a friend's car, that she would never be accountable for there being three tones in the carpet instead of two – the bleeding from moss, to laurel, to feldgrau – marking the violent waltz of time in its sun faded graduations. A stubborn child, she refused to quit. She waited for him to see what she knew he never would see. The spiral rather than the vortex. That what she spoke was only what he felt, and that the difference he so feared was only in the performance.

Her friend Julia, a topologist, once tried to explain to her why a coffee cup was just like a donut.

She knew she was fooling herself. She was moving nowhere. With a spiral, the curve stretches outwards from the centre, progressively further and further away. But for distance you need a straight line. With a spiral the end point is never far from the beginning.

Each night, she wakes to the phantom sensation of his tongue in her mouth, and his hand hard on the back of her neck, stroking her. She wants to say to him, 'You never let me leave.' But, as always, he has already taken the best line.