

THREE

The last time we tried to have sex, Mandy wore her hands. It was all right at first, giving myself to their sheen, their industry. She even touched herself for me. Her robotic fingers hummed a little, and she brought herself to a small climax against their vibration.

Then we turned off the light and all I could see were her big white plastic clown hands turning in the dusk.

‘What?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What is it?’

She flopped onto me, and her big white hands crashed into the pillow either side of my face like bludgeons, like hammers.

She had begun to adjust. She stroked me with her feet. She wanted me to like her feet. She wanted me to accept

them in their new, exalted role, as she accepted them – as second hands. All I could think about, when she touched me with her feet, was the woman, the friend of my dad's, to whom I had more or less lost my virginity. This was not a particularly happy memory.

She ran the soles of her feet along my penis. She wanted me to join in. She pressed my foot to her sex. My toes scrunched her hair as though it were a carpet. Her hand kept me from pulling away.

‘What’s wrong?’

I touched her clitoris with my toe. It was wet there. It felt all wrong – wine spilt on a carpet. ‘I can’t do this,’ I said.

My company aside, Mandy spends much of her time alone. Her father is in a home and can no longer be relied upon to recognise her. Her mother remarried over twenty years ago and lives and works abroad. She has no brothers or sisters.

Mandy is learning who her real friends are, and it’s been a steep learning curve. One of them sent her flowers and a card that told her to ‘Get better’. There are much kinder women in her life, but they are older than her, and by now they have their own responsibilities: jobs, young children.

Mandy’s life has been comprehensively locked down since the accident. Until she’s restored enough and confident enough to leave the house, I am all she’s got.

‘You should leave the house,’ I tell her. ‘We should go for a walk.’

She holds up her big white hands: evidence for the prosecution. ‘Go for a walk,’ she says.

‘Yes.’

‘Go where you like,’ she says. ‘I’m not keeping you here.’

In the kitchen I neck a couple of tablets. Spending so much of my time indoors, in Mandy’s overheated rooms, and breathing the recycled air of the hospital, has given me one head-cold after another. ‘I could take you for lunch.’

Mandy says nothing.

‘In town. I could take you for lunch.’

‘How am I supposed to eat lunch?’

‘The way you usually eat lunch. With your hands. And I can help you. If you get into real difficulties we can ask for a trough.’

Mandy bursts into tears. ‘Why do you have to be such a cunt?’

So I take her to lunch, and that’s when I learn that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who still enjoy playing in puddles and those who never did.

When high water overcomes the Middle, it rises through the pavements everywhere at once. Mandy and I teeter along duckboards down flooded alleys – pausing distracted at this church or that, this bookshop, that stand-up patisserie – and slip, the pair of us, like a couple of drunks, on stone footbridges, their steps edged in marble slick as soap. The water in the city’s culverts is always the same colour, regardless of season, weather, or time of day: the blue-green of plastic garden furniture.

Again and again I crash against the rocks of her resentment.

‘Do you have to keep bumping into me like that?’

‘Do you have to keep pawing me?’

This after she asked me to take her arm. ('Please. I'm afraid to fall.')

The water is gone by lunchtime. From the window of the first-floor restaurant I watch as a clear foot of it drains away through tiny sink-holes between the flagstones. The damage done.

Mandy is playing her 'Come here, go away' game with the staff. She wants the waiter to dry her shoes. She wants the waiter to bring her shoes back. She wants the waiter to bring her some dry shoes.

In the centre of the square, a man and a woman in smart-casual clothes trot in circles, round and round. Every so often they point at random into the air, as though firing imaginary weapons.

Mandy wants a drink. Mandy wants the waiter to know, me to know, the world to know, that she cannot be expected to sit down to five courses with wet feet and no drink.

Out the window, I watch them playing. The couple's gestures are ungainly and unpractised. I lean back in my chair, and now I see that I have been watching them through a flaw in the glass; that they are smaller and nearer than I thought. That they are children.

Mandy stands up suddenly. 'You can have my starter if you want.'

'What is it?'

'I'm going.'

'Why?'

'All your sniffing and snotting,' she says. 'I feel sick.'

It is beginning to dawn on me that Mandy is not actually depressed. She is grumpy. There is a difference, morally.

‘Why can’t you use a handkerchief?’ she says.

It’s after midnight by the time I get home. She’s left everything on, as usual – the television, the fan in the downstairs bathroom. I go around the house, stepping softly, switching off the lights.

Upstairs, I look in on Mandy. She is already asleep. I pull the covers around her and shut her door.

On the terrace, I take out my phone. The air is still, and the canal running past the end of the garden might be a mirror; the lights reflected there are still and absolutely solid. If only the water were closer I might be tempted to throw this useless slab in, just to break the tension.

Dad’s number has been ringing all week, unanswered. Now it comes up unobtainable. I stare at the screen, the number illuminated there, as though it’s the technology that’s betraying me.

More likely Dad, hearing of the accident, has shaken me off at last. Since I texted him from the hospital, six weeks ago, I have heard nothing from him. My emails bounce. My messages vanish into the aether. I can make any number of excuses for him, and that’s exactly what I have been doing, for months now. For years. Maybe his phone was stolen. Maybe he lost my number. After years of widening separation, maybe he is struggling to contact me, just as much as I have been struggling to contact him.

The thing is, I can no longer fool myself. I remember this feeling too well, from our last days at the hotel—

The phone rings. An unfamiliar number. I swipe the call open. ‘Hello.’

‘Conrad.’

I lean back against the wall. 'Michel.'

'How are you?'

Still fucked.

Of course, if he knew my real circumstances, if I told him everything, he would know how impossible it is for me to accept his offer. As it is, he cannot understand my reluctance. 'A couple of weeks, longer if you like, though it's very cramped here – you'd probably do your nut.'

He has his camera turned off this time. I try to picture him from his first phone call. His orange face aglow. The shapes and shadows round him. He might have been sitting in a toolshed.

'That's very generous.'

'So you'll come?'

The company I work for is tiny, vigorous and volatile. I've been on compassionate leave since the accident. My job is hanging by a thread. I can't explain this to Michel now, because I've already spun him a line about how free-spirited my life is. I can't turn down his invitation without seeming unfriendly. Though, of course, I can't go.

'Hanna would love to meet you,' he says. 'Have I told you about Hanna?'

I make the right noises, letting him talk himself out. Behind the sardonic delivery that is his signature, he sounds the happiest I've known him. 'She has this plan for survival. We're going to live happily ever after.'

'That's nice.'

I should tell him about Mandy. Why don't I tell him? But after all this time – we left school, what, ten years ago? – it feels wrong to burden him with my present horror. I shared too much with him before: things he should

never have had to hear. No wonder we've hardly spoken since.

'We have this boat,' he says.

A boat. Christ. I had had it in my head, until the accident, that I had done pretty well for myself. A place in a pretty, watery, wedding cake-y part of town. Michel's woman has a *boat*?

'We're going to sail around the world.'

That sort of boat. A working boat that you sail. That's all right, then. I had visions of them sunbathing in public view in exclusive marinas.

'We'd love you to see it,' he says. 'It's a bit of a wreck.'

Which reminds me.

'I've not been going out much,' I say, without thinking. 'Since the crash.' I should have said I was back at work. I should have said I was working all hours, trying to catch up on myself.

Stupid. Stupid. Now how am I going to get out of visiting them? Given that I have told him I'm my own master, alone and fancy-free, and on the sick? Of course I cannot go. Shall I tell him that I am incapacitated? That I have lost my face, my hands?

'Well, how about just for a week, at least?' he says.

'I can't,' I tell him, increasingly desperate. 'I can't.'

Mandy has a touching belief in mornings; in her mind, for a little while at least, they have the power to set all things to rights. 'Come on in,' she says. 'The door's not locked.'

She's in the bath. The water's heat has flushed her scars: her face is edged and crazed, more shattered than torn.

‘I’ll wash your back.’

She’s put on weight, slumped here, undone, day after day in these white rooms. Slim pads of fat give under my fingers as I work soap along her spine.

‘That’s nice.’

‘I’ll do your hair.’

She turns, her face sliced up into a smile. ‘You do too much for me.’

She slides deeper into the water, raises her legs out of the water, and fetches me the shampoo from the shelf behind the bath. I take the pink bottle from between her clamped feet, my throat in spasm, and she shimmies herself upright again. While I work the shampoo through her hair she raises her knees and rubs her stumps against them, washing them. A smell rises. Soap and roses.

‘Who was it on the phone last night?’

Falling in love with a person is hard. Falling in love with a world is easy. Confusing the two loves is easier still. I spend the day wandering round the house in mourning for it all. Mandy’s kitchen. Mandy’s underwear. Mandy’s pillows and shoes. I love her scarves and her seven different kinds of toothpaste (a flavour for each day of the week). I love those little blue bottles of essential oils gathering dust on her bathroom shelf. I was always a sucker for Mandy’s world. Her visits to out-of-the-way antique shops. Her cutlery drawer, every knife and fork a ‘piece’. Wine glasses from an arcade near the Palace of Sports. Cushions from a woman who lives on one of the old lime tree avenues in the Turkish quarter. In Mandy’s world, everything has an aesthetic value. The humblest objects acquire a small but telling erotic charge.

Packing is the work of a moment. Laptop and charger, a couple of jumpers, underwear, jeans. Mandy has a hospital appointment this morning. She's back from her fitting at two. I haven't got long. Every time a taxi passes outside the window, my heart gives a tiny jolt.

It's all right. There is time. I wonder if Mandy's hands are dexterous enough yet to allow her to unlock her front door? They must be. She managed all right the day she walked out on me in the restaurant. Only that was a Tuesday. Maybe the cleaner was in.

I don't know.

Anyway, I should phone her, if only to warn her, to tell her I'm gone.