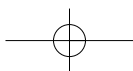
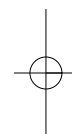
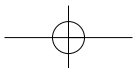
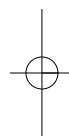
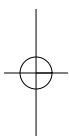


# PART 1





## Prologue

Between the black sea breakers, like hurdles on a racetrack, the sections of beach are private spaces. On the cliffs above, a man leans on a higgledy-piggledy run of white railings, a sketch pad balanced on the gloss-coated metal of the top rail, looking first out at the summer sea then down at his drawing. The beach curves into the distance, disappearing into the sea in a haze of spray and sand along to the east. Each of the long rectangular spaces between the groynes is the same at first glance then different, never the same again. In the section directly beneath the drawing man, pebbles are scattered like freckles on the smooth shoulder of sand leading to a shadowy pool like a hollowed collarbone beneath the breathing mouth of the sea.

At the tide line, handfuls of mussels, flung by the waves into the cracks between the high, wet sleeper fences, hang in festoons on ropes of slippery

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neon-green weed, heavy with the life within each shell, which is laced shut and sealed tight by clamps of white barnacles across its blue-black surface. A breeze swings a necklace of shellfish and they clatter against the black wood, and shells jut from cracks in the breakers like hungry beaks. The breeze plays on the beach, flipping a wave up to slap the groyne, catching an empty paper bag off the sand to dip it in and out of the meandering tide line. The mood is idle and nonchalant.

Without warning, the breeze changes gear, the wind breathes in then blasts out in a crashing rush of waves. Frilling like torn lace they gain momentum and loom, walls of water pounding, hurling stones up the softly scooped sand, more freckles emerging on the skin of the beach.

Over the breakers in the next compartment of the shore, the wind leaps upon a child digging with her pink spade, bent back, squatting, intent. The little girl sings a nursery rhyme while she pats a heap of sand and turns to the hole she has started. In a rush her hat falls backwards off her head, her curls whip into her eyes and sand stings her bare arms and legs. She straightens up, mouth open, her green swimsuit sharp edged and bright like a new leaf, and scuttles sideways a few steps, seeking safety behind a woman who is bending over a basket pulling out a towel.

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There is no one else on the whole long shore, just this small group, a woman and her two children, laughing and content in their own world, safe on a beach which at high tide will be consumed by the sea. To the backdrop of the whisper and crash of the sea she hums, and a snatch of her voice flies up and over the cliff. The man smiles; he recognises the tune well enough to know it is out of key and he finds it delightful that she is oblivious of him and singing really quite loudly and tunelessly.

The wind curls around her and throws her skirt up, showing a flash of black underwear and a slice of stomach, creamy like the new moon. The upside-down skirt swallows her up to her shoulders; and as she is unaware of being watched, her movements are unhurried. The skirt is still rucked up, and she reaches for the child, arms extending as if from a flower.

‘Let’s bury someone,’ she suggests to the child, and the child proffers a doll.

‘Her,’ she says firmly.

‘OK.’ A sudden strafe of wind picks up a yellow beach towel, a stripy doll’s chair and a spray of sand and throws them high into the air. An open newspaper bowls towards the woman. She is in the middle of chaos, none of it her own, and for a moment she seems in danger of being engulfed by it. On the cliff the man is watching intently, alert and ready to rush

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to the rescue, even though it is only paper. It may be foolish, but the impulse is real: she is alone, there is no one to help her, and she looks way too fragile to withstand the mad intensity of the elements. The bundle of newspaper is solid enough to knock her off her feet, as if it is wrapped around a cannon ball. He expects her to turn round, her face white with panic, but she laughs and shrieks in mock alarm and the little girl laughs too and they are turning, dancing on the sand, and the woman tries to untangle her clothes and pull down her skirt again.

'We almost got bowled over, are you OK, sweetheart?' she asks the child, who nods and begins scampering in and out, zigzagging towards the water, past the baby who sits on the sand and smiles. 'Wait!' calls the woman, 'I'm coming too.' She runs towards the waves, her skirt tucked in somewhere and the tops of her thighs flash pale as she moves.

From the cliffs, the man watches. He is possessed by a sense that this small scene he is witnessing is exactly what is meant to be happening today. None of it was planned by him, nor by the woman on the beach. It is all part of a greater universal order. In other words, they were both meant to be here today. Why? It's a good question. Maybe she has the answer. Is she asking the same question as she stands with the foaming tide around her ankles, playing with the

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baby? It's impossible to know what she is thinking except that she looks content, not yearning, not tragic, but fragile. Who is she, and how can he know her?

A seagull floats dreamily on an air current. The small girl in the green swimsuit starts to cry, pulling at the newspaper wrapped around her doll's chair. The woman doesn't hear her as the sound floats up the cliffs and away. The baby smiles and pats the sea. She is scooped into the woman's arms, and the woman nuzzles her to make her laugh. The wind has moved on, throwing chaos further down the beach.

A small starfish hand reaches up as the older child looks to the woman for reassurance. With the baby on her other hip the woman stands in the stillness, glancing about as if she is looking for the whirlwind, hoping to actually see the invisible force at the heart of the erratic movement of all the chairs and clothes and paper on the beach.

The little girl laughs again. Pointing as a ball whips up on a curl of air and bounces to the sea where waves rise and fall, as if the water itself is panting. It is loud now, like a shell pressed to the ear, shingle dragging back the weight of it, pulling it away from the shore, tugged by the moon. Spitting and sighing, the wind mutters off, slapping a knot of netting on to the breakers.

Another gull drifts over, too big, like a cuddly toy

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on a wire as it floats awkwardly on an air current. It is almost drawn into the spin then swoops out again sounding raucous laughter. Pointing, the baby laughs too, crawling along the beach as the gull soars up over the pitted cliff, where chalk crumbles like cheese and small lumps tumble in the still air.

The man sits down at a table outside the café and turns the pages of his notebook. Distracted, he half stands again, looking over to see where the group on the beach are. They are self contained, absorbed, and have no idea he is there; suddenly he wishes they would see him. Sound fills the tranquil space around him now the wind has moved away, and voices carry up from the beach.

‘She’s like a crab,’ pipes the child. ‘They have to go back to the sea or else they might die.’

The woman’s answer is slightly breathless, ‘Yes, but at least crabs come from the sea in the first place. She’s a human and she will just get capsized.’

‘I was a stone before I was born,’ says the child.

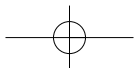
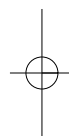
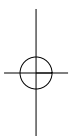
There is a pause before the woman, her voice buoyant and full of smiles replies, ‘Maybe you were.’

The words resonate, amplified by the cliff, fluting over a tangle of lobster pots drying at the top. The man writes ‘I was a stone before I was born’ on a blank page, and he shuts his notebook. Across the beach comes the sounds of the family approaching.

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He looks around, squinting in the fall of sunlight hitting the pavement. There is no one else on the street. No one on the grass between the cliff edge and the café. No one trudging up the switchback tarmac path from the beach. No one anywhere in this dozing seaside village. Even the parked cars have settled anthropomorphically into sleeping creatures in the lazy afternoon, mirroring the black-and-white cat coiled on the seat of an old tractor nearby. No one is here save the man and the family on the beach. He lights a cigarette. A peal of laughter and a squeal fly up from below, and it takes just a step and he is by the railings looking down. They are right below the café now, and the woman is bent over the child, helping her put her shoes on, while the baby sits solidly beside them on the sand. He gasps on his cigarette then chucks it over the railings. It's a reflex reaction, he recoils, swears under his breath and watches helpless as the salmon-pink head of the lighted cigarette flares, dropping down the cliff like a stealth missile towards the baby.

'Oh shit!' The cigarette lands near the three of them but touches none of them. The woman is kneeling, one child on her lap, her hair falling over her shoulders, the baby clambering on to her too. Three faces lift like flowers to see whose voice they have heard, and the skirt is like petals around them.



1

*Grace*  
Copenhagen  
Five years earlier

**H**ow do I do this? Hurling from the airport in a cab, adrenaline pounds through me, shaking me up and out of the trance of my flight. Copenhagen. I have never been to this city before, I am not sure where I am going or what will be there when I arrive, but at least the sense of panic is familiar. Jumbling along rather than travelling is what I do. Less glamorous than I would like, but isn't everyone a bit less dazzling than their wildest dreams? I have been to so many cities and arrived like this, alone, disorganised and sometimes with my case tied together with string, which is less a bohemian touch and more of a zip-locking problem. It's always such a rush. Something weird happens to my brain when I am

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planning a trip and the planning gets suspended until some time after the last minute. So here I am, zooming along on a familiar rush of anxiety, a bit like, I imagine, the Cresta Run, with a taste in the back of my mouth which reminds me of green wine gums mixed with gin.

It's very unrelaxing, and I try to regain a trance state in the back of the taxi so that I can summon a nice plump guardian angel to coo at me that all will be well. It isn't really happening right now, but usually that is what gets me through. And the best thing is it's true, despite endless squalls of drama; I have never stepped blindly off the edge of what I know and hit the ground, something has always broken my fall.

All this is metaphorical, of course. For in real life, I am clumsy and I bump into bits of furniture all the time and miss my footing on steps. Even just now, on the escalator at the airport, I got a strap from my handbag caught in the moving banister and my bag whooshed away, gliding like an unreachable prize down the escalator next to the hordes of unheeding people who also looked like prizes or trophies waiting to be scooped off rather than human beings making their own way somewhere. I watched in the suspended state that I am so familiar with for a moment, but then action seized me and I ran

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up the down escalator. A teenage boy, clean, blond and smartly dressed like everyone else I have seen so far in Copenhagen, noticed me dashing in the face of everyone else, and he grabbed the handle of the bag before it was crushed into the floor by the inexorable motion of the escalator. My guardian angel was clearly still on duty then.

Generally, I have a lot to be thankful for, and, as I live near to a gospel church on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, I have every opportunity to remember it and even to sing harmonies about it if I want to. The choir leader is a huge cushion-shaped lady called Jezebel who wears orange wafting dresses and has flowing sensibilities. Maybe she joined the choir to override her scandalous name. I don't know, but I was once there when her husband Ezra arrived to pick her up, and the moment of their meeting was operatic. Jezebel burst into a chirruping riff of song and rushed to hug him, her hugeness engulfing his slight form like a blazing fire as their bodies met and began to sway together. Thinking of them now, dancing in the dusty church room in Manhattan, makes me smile and I feel less nervous with them in my head.

I am a bit worried about seeing my work, a lot is riding on it – not least me getting all the way here from New York, and I always have a pre-show terror

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that I have been painting the wrong thing all this time. Anyway, I am going to focus right now on the cheerful and solid image of Jezebel and Ezra dancing, and it is appropriate, as they are the inspiration for one of the pictures in the show. When I do this, I know all of it is going to be fine.

I am by the sea now, on the quay by the harbour. Somewhere nearby is the famous mermaid. I can't see her, it is too dark beyond the street lights and although I am sure she is lit up, I don't know where to look, but I can picture her supplicant pose, her head bowed, her naked grace. The only thing I know about her is that Eric Gill made her and he also designed the script that is used for the London Underground. Oh, and she is the Little Mermaid who lost her voice to the King of the Underworld. That's quite a lot to know about a statue, in fact. Especially one I haven't seen. The cab swoops out from among tall, coloured warehouse buildings and along the harbour. The street is wet with pewter skimming all surfaces, a dull grey gleam, too cold to evaporate and dry out, and not yet crystallising into frost. Beyond the fizzing street lighting, night begins to swallow roof tops and awnings, and needle-pointed church spires. Further along the harbour the opera house glows like a space-age pagoda out of the dark.

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In the cab the indicator ticks, otherwise all sound seems swallowed by the dark. Outside, above the invisible horizon, the moon is like a flower, purple shadow staining petal imprints on the solid silver disc, hanging as if nailed on to the flat, black sky. Looking at it, I can't help feeling it's hung a bit too low. My forehead is pressed against the cool window of the taxi, and I am so hot that my skin sticks to the smooth glass; my eyes flicker with a need to sleep and it is refreshing to look at something so clean and restful.

My brain chatters with rushing thoughts. What if my show is hung too low? What if my pictures are all drooping below the plimsoll line I carry in my head when I am painting them? What can I do? Nothing, is the sensible answer. There is an hour before the doors of the gallery open to the public and the press, so I suppose I could get them all to help me and call it an installation. I'm about to arrive and at last I'll meet Hans Stettjens the gallery owner. When I realised I wouldn't be here to put up the show, he called me for an hour to talk about the hanging and said he would do it for me. He said to delay the show would have a drastic domino effect on me and the gallery.

'But I can't come until after the funeral.' I was on

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the phone in London, sitting on the floor in my sister's bedroom overlooking the canal.

'The funeral?' There was a long silence in which I heard him swallowing, then he said, 'My dear, I am so sorry.'

'It was my mum,' I said, and my throat swelled with the loss.

'You poor child,' he said, and his sympathy was like a warm blanket around me.

'It's really hard to believe,' I said. 'I didn't used to see her very much, but I can't grasp that I will never see her again.'

'You need time for your grief. Let me take care of your work. The paintings are beautiful and we will show them well for you.'

'Thank you.' Once I began crying about my mother, it was hard to stop; all the regret I felt for not having seen her, and not having liked her much got muddled with the relief that she was not alive to drink herself to death now. Hans Stettjen's kindness and his interest and his capability all reminded me of what was impossible between me and my mother. It's funny how much easier it is to express a whole range of emotions on a canvas than it is to sit face to face in a family and talk. Somewhere along the way I got scared of saying anything to my mother because I knew she was fragile and it might be too much for

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her. The small phrases people use can echo in a child's head and I didn't dare ask her what she meant when she shook me, aged five, after I had spilled ink across the whole of the sitting-room sofa, and said fiercely, 'The trouble with you is that you can't keep still. You even got out of your cot on the wrong side and everything since then has been a struggle.' She had then stalked off and the door of her room had closed with a crisp click. I had told Lucy, my older sister, and she had looked very frightened. 'Which is the wrong side?' she whispered.

'I don't know,' I wept in reply. 'Mummy didn't say.'

The next telephone conversation I had with Hans Stettjens was more businesslike: 'Let's talk about how you would like them hung,' he said. 'The nudes are very arresting; I see them as a triptych, no?'

'No,' I almost yelled. 'They don't go together at all. Well, not close together. They need space. Everyone needs space, Hans.'

For me, hanging an exhibition with my pictures in it is an act as intimate as the removal of my clothes. I had never imagined that I wouldn't do it myself, or even be there for the final adjusting and changing of light and space between the work. And I hardly have the vocabulary for talking about them and how they should be. I can be articulate on paper

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or canvas, but not in conversation. I don't actually even know my right and left, which baffled Hans when he was hanging my pictures with me on the phone guiding him.

'Yes, do it there! Do you see? I mean up a bit from the green one on the same side as her hair and the tree.'

'The left, you mean?'

'Do I?' I was waving my arms in front of me with the phone under my chin, mouthing at my sister Lucy to tell me which was left and which was right.

Hans Stettjens was unfailingly polite. 'Yes, very good indeed, left it is,' he said as though I had performed a rabbit-from-hat miracle. I must say, it felt a bit of a miracle. I have never shown my work before without seeing the gallery space and the pictures hanging in it. And now I am about to arrive and they will all be there, ready and waiting for me. I was trying to explain to Lucy why it was weird, and the only comparison I could find was a bit random.

'Well, Lucy, imagine if you had a baby and it wasn't with you one day and you went to a party and the baby was there all dressed and ready with someone else.'

I knew exactly what I meant and how I would feel; I could imagine a baby all dressed in a red satin outfit looking all wrong, but Lucy raised her eyebrows and

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nodded in a special 'You are bonkers' way and said, 'Mmm. Maybe, but I haven't got a baby, so it's hard to imagine any of it, Grace, and it's a lot of fuss to make when we've got to deal with all this business of Mum, you know.'

I groaned, then bit my lip. She wasn't going to understand and it didn't matter that she couldn't. Lucy has always been very down to earth, and she couldn't understand the battles I had with Mum.

'Oh well, just believe me when I tell you that I need to hang my own show, it's very personal, I always do it myself.'

Lucy hugged me, 'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said, and tears were swimming in her eyes.

'And I'm sorry, too; the timing of everything is making this all so hard.'

So in the end, doing this show differently is only one of the myriad things that has changed in our lives, and it is nothing to do with Lucy, and it is no one's fault. Mum died. That's the thing that makes life different for ever more. And now is not the time to try to come to terms with it. I have to get through this evening in Denmark and then there will be time. I shiver, afraid of just how much time there will be from tomorrow.

I would have been in Denmark for a week by now if things had been different. I pull my knees up to

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my chest and hug my shins, making myself tightly small on the back seat of the cab. I wish I had someone who could have come with me, someone to talk to. Leaning back against the plumped seat back, I flirt with a wild notion of escape, of opening the door at the next traffic lights and stepping out into nowhere.

Three weeks ago in New York, when the paintings left, I wanted to call them back, to look at them again, to give myself another final chance with them. Shock and grief are playing havoc with my mind and I am scared to admit even to myself that I have no proper memory of Mum's face when I think of her now in the aftermath of her death, and in the same way, my pictures dissolve in bewildering chimera in my mind when I am trying to visualise them. I couldn't command any sense of them once they had gone, and I couldn't remember what I was trying to do with them. I kept expecting another chance, and it's the same with Mum. I did not expect never to see her again.

A year ago I won the award to be shown here in Denmark in a new amazing contemporary art gallery. I worked towards the show as a date, a deadline, an end in itself, without thinking much about Copenhagen or what it meant to be coming here all the way from the States on my own. To have a

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one-man show so far away from my life was a bigger deal than I could imagine, so I just didn't let myself think about it. I didn't really have time to think about anything else either; the show took a while to take shape and I was so wrapped up in the work that I didn't notice time slipping by until all the jumbled events that make up everyday life had loomed and cleared in methodical disorder, and when it was almost time for me to leave, my work was already shipped.

Mum was the last big thing in the way. Not Mum herself, but the way she and I could never get on, even when separated by all the dark water of the Atlantic Ocean. It wasn't any different from how it had always been, the obstacles were the same. It had begun as small mutual childhood disappointments: hers that I was so chaotic and clumsy; mine that she couldn't laugh when I spilled a drink. Instead, she would purse her lips and sigh, and even from the beginning, neither of us knew how to say sorry. Silence is easy to live with, and to break it is as frightening as it would be to walk through a pane of glass. Mum and I had never managed to talk to one another. Both of us could talk to Lucy, both of us loved Lucy, and she was stuck in the middle willing us to get on. But she couldn't mend the fractured bond between us. In the end no one could.

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I was all set up to go to London on the way to Denmark, dropping in from another continent just to have a stilted pre-Christmas lunch with Mum. I had talked to Lucy and we had agreed it would work best if she came too.

'I'll go and get her and bring her to meet you,' Lucy had said. 'That way there can be no ducking out.'

'I want to duck out,' I had blurted down the phone to my sister, but she wasn't having any of it.

'Oh no you don't. Just remember, you live far away and you only do this once in a blue moon. I am here all the time and it's not always easy.'

'But you're good at it, Lucy, you always have been.' A childhood memory floated past me containing Lucy with neat hair and clean hands brushing the cat, kneeling on the floor in the hall with sunlight shafting on to her hair. I was there, sitting next to Lucy, my favourite toy, a one-eyed doll named Blue in my arms, waiting for her to finish with the brush. Maybe it's not a memory, just a bad dream, but I think the next thing that happened was that the front door opened and Mum walked in. In my memory I held my breath, but I doubt I did in real life.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'Nothing yet, but I am about to brush Blue,' I answered.

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'Blue's got fleas, she'll ruin the hairbrush.' Mum picked up my doll by the head and, opening the door, flung it out into the garden. She turned and smiled, a small, sharp flash in her eyes as she looked at Lucy and me and sighed.

'Find something nice to play with, darling,' she urged, and walked briskly past us into the kitchen. I waited until she turned the radio on before I opened the front door and tiptoed out into the garden to find Blue and bring her back in. I hid her from Mum after that.

Lucy had sighed on the phone. 'Maybe one day you and Mum will sort it out,' she had said.

'I'll try when I come this time. I want us to get on, Luce, I really do.'

But Mum pre-empted my plan to see her, and let slip the vestiges of lucidity, sinking into breathless death behind her kitchen door on the day before I was to arrive. Lucy telephoned early. A call before seven in the morning can never be good news. Climbing out of sleep I heard the phone and I swallowed, a dry lump in my throat. I think I knew already when I heard Lucy's voice, brittle and tight, staccato with confusion and strain.

'Oh Grace. Oh God. Oh shit. The thing is, Mum died.'

'Oh.' I felt my heart stop for a beat too many,

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then race away, while a desolate bell chimed in my head. 'Good timing.' I realised I had said it out loud. Accidentally. Me and my big mouth. I found myself staring into the earpiece of the phone as if hoping my words would come back unsaid.

Luckily Lucy was still talking, she knew I hadn't meant it as it sounded. 'Yes, but the thing is, they found her all folded up and crumpled like she had fallen off a towel rail behind the door into the kitchen. She was very thin.'

My ear was hot. I pressed the telephone tighter to it, wanting to feel something solid no matter how insubstantial. I couldn't tell if the quaver in Lucy's voice was grief or laughter.

'Like Peter Pan's shadow,' I said.

'What?' said Lucy. 'What are you talking about, Sis?'

'You know, he kept it rolled up in the drawer.'

Lucy gasped. 'Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose so.' She began to laugh, I began to laugh as well, and somehow we were both giggling and gasping across five hours of time difference and our shock. Even when we stopped, the energy of laughing stayed inside us, propelling the first untested steps we had to take to begin our lives without our mother.

The taxi pulls up in an industrial part of the harbour. The sea glitters and slaps against the keel

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of a dark ship and the skimpy petals on the moon unfurl to cover it fully. It is as if a fall of soot has dropped through the cavern of a vast chimney and blanketed the surface of the sea. A moment of darkness exists, then a thin ribbon of light from further down the harbour brings back the dancing movement of the water. In that unlit moment, my skin crawls, and I shiver, the impenetrable blackness of night hooking me out of my reverie of displacement. On the street a taste of salt in the air hits the back of my throat, and the damp night is like a splash of cold water on my skin. Knotting the belt on my coat more tightly makes me feel pulled together. Better. Gazing around and stamping my feet to prove I am actually here in Copenhagen, I begin thinking randomly about corsets. Surely more should be made of the improvement to self-confidence that wearing them must bring? It is true, those women who wore them long ago didn't have to cross half the northern hemisphere, or at least eighty degrees of longitude, alone, so maybe they were never fully aware of how very good it is to stand up straight, take a deep breath in and walk tall. If—

My thoughts break into shards. The taxi has gone, the quay is empty yet romantic, lit with just a few street lights with pools of gold glowing beneath them. I turn my back to the sea and am dazzled by a lighting

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projection I was too close to see before. The Stettjens Gallery has a façade of exquisite purity. Or rather, it usually does; I've seen photographs of it in newspapers and design books, and among the paperwork that Hans Stettjens, the owner, has been sending me. Nothing has prepared me for the reality. The strips of steel and glass and concrete have inspired rapturous adjectives from the press and the architectural world at large and it is taut and beautiful. But it is not the building that is startling, it is the projection mounted on its façade. A huge green-lit screen covers the whole front of the building, and on it, slowly changing like a kaleidoscope, are magnified images of my work. It is like a giant window lit up at night with the figures I painted appearing huge, and slowly moving one after another like a giant shadow-puppet show. The effect is bigger than the sum of its parts. No actually, it's not. The projection is big, but so are all the parts of it. The thing that is small is me. It's a bit scary to see such a public representation of my work, but at least it's facing the sea, not a busy street. Probably no one will notice it. Anyway, this is the right place. I should go in.

Gripping the handle of my suitcase, I gaze at the shifting colours on the wall. It reminds me of a lava lamp. I can't go on standing outside for ever,

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but I also can't bring myself to go inside. So I hang around a bit, gawping up at the projection, unable to make much sense of it. I look across at the harbour mouth and find myself wondering what it would be like to be out at sea and see this vast projection. I haven't got an answer except that I'm sure it would be a lot better than being here in front of it as the accidental author. I am cold now, and I'm running out of excuses. I set off across the road and then stop again. Until I go in through the door and introduce myself, no one knows who I am or that I am here. This limbo feels the most comfortable place to be. No demands are being made of me, no expectations burden my psyche. This is a moment where I could vanish. I could hide, I could unzip the suitcase and get into it. As it has wheels, there is a good chance that I might roll off the harbour into the sea, and I would have to be Houdini to escape. Or I would float away, bobbing up the coast to another part of Denmark, maybe Elsinore. Vaguely I remember Elsinore is on the Sound. Wherever that might be. At school, Lucy and I fought like cats to be chosen to play Ophelia in the pantomime version of *Hamlet* which our English teacher wrote. Lucy won. It was so annoying, and I had to be Laertes in drag.

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*'... Was your father dear to you,  
Or are you like the painting of a sorrow,  
A face without a heart?'*

I didn't even know I knew these lines until I woke with them running through my head on the morning of Mum's funeral. And now that they have come back to me, they rush round and round in my head. I'd like to try to make a painting of a sorrow. It might be a painting of Mum, I don't know yet, but when I get back to New York and my studio I can start to make sense of everything that has happened since I left. Until then I have to go wherever life takes me. I want to see Elsinore. I wonder how I can get there. Who can I go with? Suddenly loneliness hits me, and it is like vertigo in the way it swoops and grabs me from the guts and I wish like a howl that I had someone to go there with. Within the gallery the space is white. Dizzy, soporific white like being inside snow, except for the three large canvases hung at the far end and the paintings on both of the walls leading there. There is a sense of hard-won serenity in the room, a reverberating almost-stillness that I recognise as the aftermath of excessive action. It is like a stage set, and I can feel, though I cannot see, the last dust being swept from the floor, the papers and staple tucked away in a drawer and everybody

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smoothing themselves down, ready for the evening to begin. The warmth of the space flares and a vein on my temple throbs as loud in my head as a drum beat.

The gallery staff all turn round when I come in and the weight of their anxiety lifts and floats away from them to fall on top of me almost palpably. The pictures are mine and now I am here to speak for them. But I don't want to. I want them to speak for themselves. In the silence someone's bracelet or perhaps the metal strap of a watch hits the rim of a wineglass. The glass sings a pure note into the noiseless moment and the sound is renewing and spine tingling. I shrug off the anxiety I felt when I came in and it is like a coat slipping off.

To no one in particular I say: 'Oh, I love that. Wouldn't it be great if we had some music in here?'

There is a flurry towards me, a girl with wheat-blond plaits smiles and says, 'We often have music before the show, we just weren't sure you would . . .' she tails off, looking a little apprehensive.

I smile at her. 'Don't worry, you're very kind to think of it. I don't want to interfere with your preparations.'

She presses my hand between hers and the warmth of her welcome is physical, too, on my cold skin. I don't feel so stiff and alarmed now, the gallery is

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running smoothly, the show is hung and looks like someone else's work to me. I like the sensation of seeing it for the first time much more than I thought I would, and everyone here is overflowing with goodwill. A boy takes my suitcase and disappears with it behind a partition. Hans Stettjens comes across from the desk where he has been talking on the telephone and we shake hands. His eyes are long and narrow like flints, and his hair is a dusting of iron filings on his perfectly domed head. He bows over my hand. It is nerve-wracking. I cannot live up to expectation, I have never been able to. I can feel a wobbling expression forming on my face and I bite my lip to get rid of it as he speaks in beautiful English that makes me embarrassed that I don't know a single word of Danish.

'Miss Hart. I'm so glad to meet you. How was your flight?'

'Oh. God. I mean good. Please call me Grace.'

He has a sweet smile and is staring at me kindly. Like everyone I have seen in Denmark, he has a fine, chiselled face and nice clothes.

I babble on, filling the silence before it happens, 'Outside is quite a statement of – of— Well, it's certainly saying something. I mean—' I can't talk properly because I am trying to take Hans in; I am wondering if he will be an ally, and I'm not sure if I

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can allow myself to like the way he has hung my work, even though he has done exactly what we talked about on the phone.

I struggle with the silence again as his kind eyes regard me, and off I go in another peal of talk: 'I suppose it's like asking someone else to look after your baby – I mean having someone else hang your show.' I can't keep looking at him looking at me, it's embarrassing and I am getting hotter and hotter in the room. I tear off my coat and just stop myself chucking it on the floor behind me. Immediately the girl with plaits glides over and takes the coat.

'Thank you,' I whisper, and repeat it as she hands me a glass of water. As I drink it I surreptitiously look around the room at the work. It looks just as I would have hoped if I had dared hope anything. Excitement begins to bubble up inside me.

'Let me show you the hanging,' says Hans, guiding me around the paintings, his hand under my elbow so I cannot be surreptitious any more. I have to look and I will have to answer, there is no way out as he is beside me, his eyes moving ceaselessly between the paintings and my face, his expression still wise, thoughtful and kind. I do not know him, I am often hostile in a new situation like this, but now I feel his warmth and I begin to relax. In a comfortable silence, we walk around the pictures, and I begin to

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absorb what the show looks like as a whole. I smile at Hans without speaking, I am so grateful he has not directly asked, 'What do you think?' and that he is giving me time.

And the bubbling excitement I felt a moment ago is gaining ground. This is thrilling. I am so excited because I could never have imagined that all together, hung by Hans Stettjens, the pictures could look so amazing. And now I realise what someone unconnected might see and it is fascinating. Hans is clasping one waxy thumb and forefinger in a tight circle about the bony wrist of the other hand. He really wants to know what I think. It is a jolt to realise this. And he is nervous.

I want to reassure him. I open my mouth, 'I want to cry.' Great. That was definitely not what I meant to say.

'Oh no, that's not what I mean.' Appalling to say that, when I mean it is wonderful, and now I am crying, tears prick at the corner of my eyes and my nose tingles.

'They look great. I . . . I can't tell you. I'm sorry I'm not making sense . . .' How maddening. It is so easy to perpetuate a myth, to believe your own demons. So hard not to make the same mistake over and over again. Hans is anxious, his eyes contract into small black knots, he has one hand over his eyes,

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he swallows. He is a little theatrical, but frankly, so am I. Oh God. The show is about to open and we are all awry with one another and there is no reason for it. Shit. I press my palms into my eyes and take a deep breath. 'I love them.' Oops, more crying because it is true.

Hans puts his arm around my shoulders and we face one of the pictures, a big canvas with two figures entwined in the sea. I suddenly find myself wondering whether I should have given them gills and I giggle.

Hans's eyes brighten. 'Just tell me what is wrong and we will do our best to improve it right this instant. Yes. At this moment we will change it for you.' He flourishes a handkerchief, blows his nose, purses his lips and snaps his fingers. Two young boys arranging glasses on trays put down their tea towels and come over. I take a deep breath, and grab his arm, yanking his sleeve as he issues a torrent of instructions to these boys in Danish, during which they look at me as if I am an alien. Which of course I am, up to a point.

I make myself interrupt: 'No, no. You don't understand – I mean, I haven't made myself clear. I am not making sense. What I meant was, I love it. The pictures look incredible. They look so much more than they are. Or more than I thought they were. Oh, I'm making it worse, aren't I?' I wish I had made the effort to learn

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some Danish before coming here. I would love to be making an effort. Instead, I wave my hands and feel smiles bursting out on my face. 'Actually, I am stunned. It's so much more than I ever thought it could be. It's so exciting, I feel in awe. What I really want to say, though, is thank you, that's all.'

Hans relaxes, relief easing every muscle and bringing the blood back to his pale face so that I suddenly realise that his pallor has been reminding me of a vampire. He rubs his hand over his stubble hair and laughs too.

'Miss Hart, I mean Grace, it makes a big difference that you are here. I am so glad you like the hanging, it's been . . .' He trails off, and I can feel myself blushing, remembering the stilted phone calls and my endless faxed drawings which must have clogged up his office every morning as I obsessed over how far apart and in what order the paintings should be hung. How can I ever have thought I knew better than this kind, saintly non-vampiric man?

'You know, it would have been a nightmare for you if I had been here,' I confide, and Hans nods wholeheartedly. I still want to make up for causing trouble, so with a sense of climbing into a tumbrel and heading for certain death, I open my mouth and say, 'Is there anyone you want me to talk to? I know

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I said I couldn't, but if you need me to be interviewed or anything, I can. I know I can.'

His eyebrows ping upwards. Hans considers me then claps his hands, and I follow him as he moves down the room.

'Yes,' he muses, 'first I think you could do with eating something, you look as though you might evaporate. There will be a couple of people to talk to this evening. Your work has attracted a lot of interest in the press.'

We are in the back office now. Hans opens a small refrigerator and reaches into it. I am expecting a special Danish snack, but he hands me a tomato and a small carton of milk.

'That's pretty weird,' I can't help commenting, but he doesn't hear; he is bustling about the office putting things away and tidying. He has a tea towel over his arm and calmly polishes a glass before handing it to me.

'Of course there is food, but I always have something like this first,' Hans says. I stare gloomily at the milk and the tomato. I especially don't want the milk. He pours it into the glass. There is no way I can refuse, he is being so motherly, and apart from the grossness of what he is actually giving me, I am grateful for the thought.

Hans holds out the milk and, narrowing his eyes,

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looks at me. He grins half in embarrassment as he suddenly says, 'You have a look of the mermaid – the Copenhagen mermaid. I think they will photograph you.'

'What, naked?' I tease, but he is not really listening, he looks at his watch.

'Jerome Michaels, from the oil company, was scheduled to be here to meet you, but he's been delayed and will arrive later this evening. If you are happy to do press now, I think we should have you with him. Glacon is big money and the press is very interested in their new sponsorship programme.'

'OK, you just tell me what I have to do. I guess all artists sell out to commerce sooner or later, I just didn't realise I had done it already,' I joke, but the joke falls into space unnoticed. I don't mind, Hans seems happy and anything that can help me forget the glaring reality of my pictures on the walls must be good. I like Hans, he takes things personally. Hans squeezes my shoulders in an awkward hug. 'We just need to make sure this is not all too much for you,' he says, and tears sting my eyes because he is so thoughtful.

I wonder if any artist enjoys the experience of watching people looking at their work? I find it unreal, and dreamlike. Or nightmare-like, more often. I keep reminding myself that I am grateful anyone has turned

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up at all, as the gallery fills with people and flashbulbs explode like snowballs in the crowd. There is an unhurried yet insistent current as the guests mingle, greet one another and move through the gallery in front of the pictures. Often at a private view no one looks at the work. The ones I go to in New York are usually attended by friends and everyone stands in huddles, their backs to the paintings, drinking glass after glass of cheap red wine.

The Danish scrutiny is thorough and serious, and I want to run for cover, but there is nowhere to go and I am tensed for the critical equivalent of a bucket of cold water to be thrown over me. The air is full of energy, a combination of excitement and exhilaration, partly caused by people coming in from the cold, I suppose. It's exciting to hear the babble of other languages, and also to be among people who seem to be really talking about art. Of course, I don't know for sure, they could be discussing the plot of Denmark's leading soap opera, but I don't think so. This would never happen in London. My spirits are flipping up and up in the warm and unexpected welcome I have found in Denmark. In New York when it happens, it is always bound up with money. The atmosphere in an uptown private view only becomes charged when the show sells out. Copenhagen feels purer, but maybe it's just the drink

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talking. I look down at the ice in my glass, and decide not to have another vodka. Isn't vodka and milk a cocktail? I think it's a Black Russian. But that's when they are mixed, not when they are drunk one after the other in separate glasses. Looking around at all the unfamiliar faces I slump inside with the effort of doing this alone. Denmark feels very foreign suddenly.

When I won this award, I wasn't entirely sure if Denmark was nearer to Norfolk, where I grew up, or New York, where I live. Painting my way through the year towards the show, I secretly acquired Danish material, each bit revealing to me the depths of my ignorance. There are so many things I know nothing about, but it felt uncivil to know nothing about a country hosting a prize which had made such a difference to me. I think I thought they might take it away if they found out how little I knew about them. I liked the stuff I found out – the first king of Denmark was Gorm the Old, commemorated along with his queen Thyra by the Jelling Stones, two great rune stones planted in a churchyard at Jelling. He was succeeded by his son Harald Bluetooth. Knowing these things served no purpose beyond the pleasure of knowledge, and I filed the information away, telling myself that by the time I finished the work and got to the show, I would have met someone to share it

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with, someone who might come with me to Jelling and Elsinore. Someone to look over the harbour at the Oresund, the stretch of water that connects the Baltic to the North Sea. Someone who wanted to know what I know and what I feel. It was a measure of hope I threw up into the universe. I hadn't had a proper boyfriend for a couple of years and although I was scared to admit it even to myself, I wanted that to change. Now, all of a sudden, here I was, standing alone in the middle of the room at this exhibition, my own solo exhibition and the first since my degree show eight years ago, and no one I know is here with me, and there is no one specially here with me who wants to know what I feel. I'm not so sure I even want to know myself, though sadness is creeping into me like incoming tide. I look around, and my mind detaches and takes off, floating above me, separated by unchangeable circumstances from everyone else here: I made the pictures, and I am not one of the crowd. The warm welcome feeling evaporates and I feel like a deflated balloon, strung out with the strain of being on show, exposed and visibly alone. That is the most tiring part. Like a bride, I am at the centre of a party but also the outsider, the one person here with a different function from everyone else. But at a wedding there is the bridegroom too. And he is the other half of

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the bride. Another person also experiencing the aloneness, and thus sharing it. I love the idea that somewhere on earth each of us has someone who is our other half. I wonder if we only have one, or if in all the millions and billions of people there are several with whom we could feel equally whole? It seems unlikely, but then so does the idea of there being even one. And it's just as unlikely that there should be none. What would be the point of that?

The point is that there is no point, one of the top three favourite arguments at art school. I never really went for it. How can we be put on this earth with all our instincts to yearn and strive and seek to find meaning if there is no meaning? And without meaning, how can there be love? And love is real. Often flawed and sometimes dangerous, but love is the spark that ignites us and burns through life. I believe that. I don't know what else I believe.

The motherly kindness of Hans Stettjens approaching now with a small plate of rolled silver-backed fish and three slate-grey capers, and the goodwill in the gallery is suddenly unbearable. I can't be the object of so much kindly focused attention for a moment longer. I feel the pressure building inside me; the gallery is filling up with an increasingly physical energy and it's like a giant blancmange or a pink cloud, benign, absurd, but engulfing and

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too much. The heat in the room presses against my temples and sweat breaks on my neck. I am near the door. It opens as more people come in, fresh air stiff on the folds of their overcoats. I turn my back on the room and step through the slice of space separating inside from out. I am suddenly free.

The moon has moved. It peeps from behind a church spire further along the front. A gilt cord of light loops away towards the church like a fishing line, but it is impossible to see the way properly or to work out where the sea ends and where the land begins. The breeze cuts through my dress, I am chilly now, and shivery after being so warm. But I can't go back into the gallery yet. I sit down on the low wall looking out to sea, confused and relieved to be outside gathering my thoughts. I am a long way from home. In fact, I am not even sure where I think of as home unless it's my studio. I am alone and I have forgotten my coat. Looking around in the dark, my impression of the city is oddly one of light. The streets are broad, the buildings set back on wide pavements. All the lines are crisp and clean, and the shadows of verticals and horizontals loom huge in the chiaroscuro of street lights. Along the line of harbour, tall multi-coloured buildings like doll's houses stare through many windows at the sea as it stretches towards Norway, and somewhere much nearer is the mermaid,

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small and naked on her rock. These unfamiliar yet familiar elements of a city combine with my solo travelling and the grey shroud of grief for my mother which I forget and remember with the flashing regularity of a lighthouse beam. I feel as if I am the eye of my own storm, still, like the mermaid, at the centre of my own chaos.