

The Possible Length of Touch

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She presses the arrow on the grey rubber to begin playing the song, again. The afternoon sun doesn't touch her, even as it floats between the sections of her dark hair. Underneath a tree she leans back, eyes closed behind dark shades, and ears plugged with the sounds of her music repeating over and over.

I watch her because I watch people. Stare them down, collect them to file and classify. I keep my focus outward, I never have to look within. At least that is what my therapist said until I stopped seeing her on account of her asking about my sex life.

"It is an important step in your treatment," she said.

I nodded, walked out at the appointed time and didn't come back. I didn't understand why everyone was so interested in my sex life. I sure wasn't. And anyway, something has to be just for me.

The girl under the tree gets up and strolls past me without noticing my gaze or my smile. It's okay, I tell myself, it's just a woman outside some hostel in some country and she's just passing through just like you. I give myself affirmations because I believe that what you tell yourself is what defines you. Tell yourself you're the most beautiful woman, have a few drinks, wear the right clothes and you will be. It's like what my mother used to tell me, "You are what you eat," except that it should have been, "You are what you tell yourself." If you think and act like a hero, you will be. If you think and act like you have no strings, you won't. Life is this simple, believe me. It only took me twenty-eight years to figure it out and I intend to spend the rest of my existence creating myself as I see fit.

I am not going to apologize for where I am right now. I'm going to enjoy this.

This is New Zealand. I'm in Christchurch, a town so wet and green midwinter that even the ducks in the pond carry umbrellas. I'm traveling worldwide with a world plane ticket. I can go to any airport, plop it down and get on the first available flight. I can be gone, just like that.

I bought it because the travel agent promised that by the time I came back home, I'd be different. Plucking the credit card from my wallet, I slid it over and booked the first flight for six months in advance. And during those six months I plotted and planned, I never let on. Not once.

Here's the thing, and this is crucial, I have evolved. That girl who used to be me is not the woman I am now. Period. That girl apologized, gave in, and stood along the edge of everything. She was the kind of girl you wouldn't notice and you wouldn't recall. How do I know this? I was the girl who had a name no one could remember.

"Veronica?"

"Vida?"

"Vanessa?"

"Violet," I'd whisper, "sorry," never looking anyone in the eye.

Then there was a kiss and I haven't been the same since. I've seen a lot of countries, a lot of people, and every time I look in the mirror, I still see me with traces of that girl and this woman. "Violet," I say in England, "Pleased to meet you. You must be Violet of Bath, I'll never know you after tomorrow. Goodbye." I left America five months ago, but I can still see that Violet. I can see that sliver of a girl she was

then: lonely, boring, and needy. You take something from every place that you go, but if you learn how, you can also leave things behind. To become something or someone else, you have to try it on for size though the process isn't easy. All the old parts, the despair, the insecurity, or the doubt, want their turn on the stage too. But if you play one part or trait of yourself to the fullest, for example boredom, you learn very quickly which traits are valuable and which are worthless. I left boredom in Oxford, innocence in London, and the wallflower in Munich.

This is what I live now. This is me and I like her. This is what I do: pursuing those who are moving solo, place to place, like a hawk. No home. No family. I want those that are free from everything. I want to see what they have, I want a piece, I want to try it on, and then I want to leave. What you give is what you are. What you see is what you get.

If you could choose to be anyone, who would you choose to be?

I sit next to a red headed man in a hunter green stocking cap at the pub. Ordering a pint, I watch soccer on the television in silence. If strangers share anything, it is the soundless space around them. When the silence becomes too comfortable, something else is always tried. He's an aussie and here to ski in Queenstown, once he gets there. Telling me, I nod not caring.

"And you," he asks.

"Canadian," I lie, "writing for a college based travel magazine."

"A young one."

"As young as I need to be for this town."

We sleep together in his rented room, of course. His hands are soft and I wonder who takes care of them, him or some lovely thing that plays temporary mother. There's nothing sweeter than what is offered to you freely. Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. The thing that keeps what we want out of our hands is fear. I left my fear in Istanbul.

In the morning, I'm gone before he wakes or decides to open his eyes. It doesn't matter which, I got what I came for and I'll pretend so did he. I don't have much money left, though I'll never tell anyone this. I could call my husband for more, and he'd probably forgive me, ask me to come home and fill the hole in my pocket, but then I'd forego my mysterious disappearance. From this aussie, I got a place to sleep, a nice tumble, and the slice of life he wanted to share: a bed in a town waiting for the next bus south. "You're perfect," he'd said.

"Ah, but only as perfect as you need me to be."

The morning is wet and I meander along the carefully cleaned streets, cut banks, and well behaved birds bobbing in the creek like toys. It's as artificial as everything else and feels too tidy, too natural, and too economically friendly as if it has no secrets. Never trust someone who tells you they have no secrets. Because in telling you this, they already have one.

I have no secrets.

Sipping corporate worldwide coffee, tasting exactly the same in every place, I watch. I see her again going into a museum that describes and displays behind glass the aboriginals of this country. Her dark hair still parts in the sun and her clothes, thick coat, jeans, and hiking boots, are the same as they were days before. Her costume she wears daily without masquerade. You get what you see. She is the same girl over and

over again. If she doesn't dabble in make-believe, then she won't catch it dazzling before her. It's like stealing candy from a baby. If you could give someone exactly what they want, exactly when they need it, there would be no questions or suspicions. We do not question gifts, we are too greedy.

I follow her in, eye the jade and black stone. Painted eyes follow me around the room, as the exhibit tells the story of a people looking out at the white man instead of the white man looking in. One wall features today's Maori and the ritual warrior dance the kiwi team does before football games.

"Violet," I say extending my fingerless gloved hand, "pleased to meet you." Her eyes shift toward me with a warning fierce as fire. I melt into an easy smile.

"Nan," she says and I knew it for truth. Her name is tenderly stitched on the strap of her backpack as if by mom before summer camp. The letters are deep red and scuffed from long days of travel. If she wasn't supposed to be lost, if she had someone special and loving somewhere else, then why was she here? No one loses themselves on purpose. No one chooses what they do not want. I do not lie.

"Strange these people, so dark and proud."

"Yeah. Sorta."

Balancing from one leg to the other, I am impatient because skirts make me vulnerable. Both when I wear them and when I approach them. Don't confuse me with any idea of love and romance. I desire bodies and am not repelled by many; sex, nationality, ability, race or age is not a deterrent.

What I don't approach is those who surround themselves with a blanket of friends, family, and acquaintances. Those are the ones with real fear. They are so afraid of themselves, of being alone, that they'll trade anything to keep others near. Go anywhere in the world, and these types of people screech like traffic. They're the ones in large groups with roaring laughter. They're the ones on long tour buses and posing for massive group photos. There is something to be said for numbers, to hide within so many voices, and never to stick out. But how do you separate an electron from the nucleus? How do you pull one thing from a throng that is clutching together? I don't. I want the free radicals.

My therapist did not understand my marriage and kept small little marks of what I said on a yellow pad of paper. "Why did you get married?"

"I don't know. I just did." She gave me that look that said "you can do better than that," while flicking her watch with her finger as if willing the session to go by faster.

"You know," I said, "not everything happens for a reason." I was growing bolder. By that meeting in her office, I'd already bought the ticket and already cheated on my husband twice, once with that kiss and once with another. "Sometimes you just do things because that is what you are supposed to do. I went to college and met a man. I graduated. We got married. I had a kid. We bought a house. That is what people do."

"I am not interested in what people do, Violet. I am interested in what you do. What you did."

She thought she had all of the answers and maybe she did. I spent all those afternoons staring at the pastel painting just above her head and tried to be who she wanted me to be. I tried to know what I wanted and desired. I tried to be insightful and introspective. But what do you expect from a business major? I had always been

more engaged by numbers than people.

"What do you want out of a marriage?"

"I don't know," I said, "I guess, I want nothing."

After hours in the museum, a walk in the park, and a pub, I feel like I've known Nan my whole life. Like ■we've been cut from the same cloths and because I'm a little drunk, I can't tell if I'm giving her what she wants or if she's giving me what I want. But since introspection never worked for me and action did, I ignore that idea and move in the direction of desire.

"Nan," I say, "let's share a bottle of cream liqueur on ice."

"Let me buy," she says, already giggly in the shadowy community room of the hostel she stays in. There is no mistake in her meaning. In her room, that is luckily unoccupied, I peel her from her layers of clothing like I peel her secrets. She keeps them in tight balls wedged in her backpack and along her tongue and they slip out with each sip.

"I've never kissed a woman," she says.

"Don't worry," I say, not telling her I was once in her place. I can't tell her there was a woman who once placed her hps lightly on mine. Tonight I am the experienced lover. As I tilt my head, I try to hear Nan's song over and over. But it's jumbled and not quite clear. I don't think I'm losing my touch; maybe I'm looking too hard. That is the only drawback in filling the wants of others, sometimes your own wants start to look a lot like theirs.

"Oh, this is so new," she says.

She speaks of New Zealand and traveling, or maybe of my hand on her belly. I kiss her and her song pours into my mouth, it is naive and innocent, it is new and young, it is inexperienced and waiting for discovery. It is sweet and juicy, but that could be the creamy liqueur talking.

"I've never," she sighs. For her, I am a power she time and again meets. This power is always more than her, greater, fuller, and with a depth that her eyes will never travel. She reminds me of a girl I used to know, not quite sure of herself while grasping at any simple understanding she can. I am a first. I am a kiss in the corner of an office party. I am slack with confusion and desire. I am leaning against the wall as she walks away, turning to give a wink and a finger raised to her lips in secret. I am standing there for days when she comes back, unexpectandy. I am that kiss. I am a first. I am a second. I am a third. I am not sorry that I gave in to it freely. I am sorry that I didn't sooner, that I didn't know, that I was confused.

Like the things Nan sees as she travels, there is nothing like the first. There is Paris at night with lights of white and red stretching the street from one end to the next. She says, "I've seen so many streets, but the first I ever saw was *Champs Eljsee* at night. When I climbed onto the dock in Venice, I saw the Bridge of Sighs and now I see it everywhere." She is discovering the world one image at a time. She would notice only the distinct, the differences, and never the similarities.

She laughs in the middle of our love, so hard that tears form at the corners of her eyes and I lick them away. This makes her laugh harder and I am beside myself with curiosity, so I laugh too. The bed jiggles beneath her; the slit from the door casts everything in shades of shadow. My smile is not real, because I wonder if she's laughing at me and that makes me uneasy. Have I missed something? Have I given too much and the power is no longer mine? Finally, I say, "why are you laughing?"

"Because you're perfect," she says, my heart between her teeth. She could be my husband or my therapist, or that kiss.

"Ah, but only as perfect as you need me to be." She laughs again and all I can think to do is kiss her, and eventually she stops.

In the morning, the clouds as thick as quilts withhold light. I pack my bag and watch the air move between her lips. Writing my email on a piece of paper, I crumple it and toss it in the trash. Seeing her again would break her illusion of newness. She's probably already had emails before and besides, who's to say she'd recognize me again. I'd be someone else to her, both for her sake and mine.

I awake in the Sydney airport, several hours later. New Zealand was picturesque, but how many postcards can you walk through before enough is enough. How much breathtaking scenery until you've passed out from lack of oxygen: a green vista, a mountain range, and a glacier lake so blue it glows turquoise. Yes, it was beautiful, but like death it felt timeless and lost, like it was secretless, virginal, and whole. If the entire planet has been raped by man's pilgrimages and conquests, it is not fair to leave one place sacred. I flew out as soon as I had this truth.

In the airport, I find the post office first. My bag is getting too heavy and my costumes are used up. I have to send what is empty home. Clothes are trapping, you wear them, you love them, and they become you. And as a trap, you represent what they represent. A woman in a flowing skirt: a witch, lesbian, or hippie. A man in a suit: business, upper-middle class, or bachelor. There are others. If you could put on a different ensemble every day, no one would have to travel. The world would be recreated every morning at sunrise.

This is what you need to travel: credit card, id, travel book, food, toothbrush, and the clothes on your back with one or two spare. Everything else is rubbish. The travel and guide books lie. You will never get bored on planes or trains. You will never have emergencies. You will never need souvenirs, gifts, or reminders of your travel. Send everything back home, if you buy it. You need nothing but yourself.

I pick out a small box and empty my bag of all but the essentials. The clothes are dirty, the book is read, and the souvenirs unwrapped. But the addressee would not care. Though my home is officially where my husband resides, I will not send it there. I send it home to mom who will wash it, read it, and put it away. That is what moms are for.

Taping it up, I pay the tab and leave the shop. In four to six weeks, mom will know where I'd been and who I've met. She will smell them and imagine all kinds of adventures. For her, I am everything she couldn't be and was too scared to try. She married right after college and never did another thing. Wrapping herself in family, she is never alone, even now. She surrounds herself by me and the stories she creates for her friends. The world is made of many kinds of people and we will never understand what we choose not to.

I am my mother's untapped desire. Did she ask me if that was okay or fair?
Am I complaining?

I have no secrets. And I am not a mother.

My therapist began seriously digging into my personal life a month before I was to fly out. Because my rendezvous with my real life was about to begin, I had to fake the old life all the way to its expected end. I was stapled to the chair. "Do you enjoy being a mother?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I am nothing like my own mother. I am not good. I am not sacrificing."

"Are you sure? I think that you are."

"Oh," I said and changed my tune. I don't think my therapist would have known the truth if it had hit her, because her habit was to disagree. I was getting very good at telling lies, at masquerade and I was bored. Life is so long and we spend so much of it confused.

Sydney is a city on a harbor. The city wraps around the water connected by three bridges and ferries moving back and forth. There are also water taxis and tour boats, but only those who want "tourist" stamped on their forehead pay the fare.

I ride ferries and pack light. I am anybody and nobody. I blend in. I could be local, young, and genderless. I am a reflection of what eyes cast on me if they see me or if I choose to be seen. In the harbor, a trio of hunched back whales have made a wrong turn. They spray ferries and everyone "ohhs" and "ahhs." Their rareness is the spectacle that reminds passengers nature is close.

Annoyed, I shoot the whales death glares because I left nature in New Zealand and it followed me here. I wanted a city, pure and simple. I wanted to smell the oil in the air, be overcome by the sound of traffic, be ignored by those with money, and be pick pocketed by those without. A city is full of people too busy to look you in the eye and I wanted a place where I could do the same. I am not looking for scenery, for whales putting on a show, but seek what is created by people in the moment. Together, on this boat, these people create a unique happiness and cohesion tied to the dirty spray of water mammals. If I had the nerve, I'd push them in to reunite them with their beloved mother nature. The misdirected trio makes them feel connected.

They lie.

If you're going to be alone your whole life, why not start now. As a woman alone and traveling, I am afraid of nothing. There is nothing that someone could take from me that has not already been taken or that which I have already given up. What I had is that of which I rid myself: family, husband, home, child, job, security, and the dream. Those were things I had, but did not want and did not desire. There is no use keeping things you don't need, in replaying events in your head that happened yesterday or ten years ago. I keep nothing but that kiss. All you have is one breath and it disappears over and again.

At Darling Harbor, I wander licking gillnets and watching bodies enter and leave bars and pubs. The light is in streaks on the ripples of the slip of the sea. The pigeons are asleep and the water is mostly blackness. I am dressed like a boy with my hair shorn. I could be fourteen. I could be accosted, but my stride is too gallant for an easy youth. I walk like I've seen the world, because I have.

A man is following me and has been for twenty minutes. He trails me like I'm leaving bread crumbs. He must be hoping for a free house or a quick meal. I am looking for the same because I have neither.

"I'm not selling," I throw to the water and wait for a reflection to bounce back.

"I know." He sounds local and amused.

I halt my back to him because he wants a tease and what is more exciting than a young man's tight ass?

"I have a problem," I say pitching my voice with a crack and tilting my head

to catch the shadows along my jaw. He stops behind me and stands too close for strangers, too near for acquaintances, but perfect for lovers. I must look like an invitation that he wants to accept.

"I have a solution."

We sleep together, of course.

"You're new at this. Young," he says, rummaging for scotch in a cabinet of half lit room.

"Yeah," I say, waiting for how I'm supposed to respond, pretending not to watch him. There's always a sign.

"No worries," he tips the scotch into two glasses without ice. "Your holiday secret is safe with me."

I do not respond, but wait for the liqueur to move me to the place I should be. Nan's laugh trickles into my mind, and I wonder if I've lost my touch. That maybe she's done something to me that I didn't catch. But I won't see her again, so there is no use dwelling. I watch the fan swing shadows in the room.

"Another," I say.

In the morning, he was gone, and a wad of cash was my morning sunrise. He did not ask for any proof of my maleness and I did not offer it. He wouldn't see what he didn't want to. I was his young boy and he paid me well. I got what I came for and so did he.

My therapist told me, "Sex is for fun or can be." I agreed because she needed me too. I was leaving tomorrow and these fifty minutes were only something in which to fill hours until departure. It is easy to read people, to see what they want and why, if only we ever stopped and looked. If you give someone what they want or what they expect, you own them because you know their desires without having to ask or to be told. Imagine giving that kiss. Envision the possibilities of giving another person something so vital to their existence that their desire blinds them to it. It is invisible. If you could reveal it, would you?

I was staring at my therapist, imagining her clad in something silky and long. She wanted me and I knew it. She wore her desire like a red herring pinned into her dark curly hair. Or to be more precise, she wanted the idea of me. She wanted to wrap her long arms around someone who was bored with family and monogamy. Dripping with the need to know, she sat perched on the edge of her chair, eyes wide and unsuccessfully disguised.

Leaning in close, she said, "You must heal your past and I will help you." Meaning she would do it for me between the psychological sheets of her educated bed. She wanted to peel off my metaphorical clothes and see what nasty things I did beneath. But since I knew what she wanted, I had the power. Be careful when people want too much. My husband was paying for this, but I was getting the idea that my therapist would do it for free.

But I'd come to realize I never wanted continuity. I wanted one night at a time and each night never looking the same as the last. A life is a random sample of memories strung together which creates a story of cause and effect. I never wanted a life. I wanted secrets. I wanted to be desire. I wanted to subsume what everyone was so afraid of and not live it and let go, but be it newly, day after day.

I have so many secrets now that I do not count them. They are pennies in a piggy bank, coins in Trevi Fountain, and change wedged into a pop machine. Secrets

are docks on cold lakes of other secrets. My therapist knew I was telling lies.

She said, "You're telling me lies."

"I'm not here by choice," I said to her smarmy glasses.

"Oh, but you are."

I wouldn't say she was a nice therapist.

I played the tune she liked best by explaining that I was here because my husband threatened to leave me because he knew I was having an affair. Though I was having several. He promised to take our daughter, the house, and everything in it, even the duvet. How I loved the duvet. My guilt was as complete as the packed bag under the bed, the empty bank account, and the typed letter. He could have it all, I had other plans and there was nothing that could be done to change my mind.

"We do not have to talk about sex," she said.

"But, that is the point, isn't it."

"Why did you cheat on your husband?"

"That isn't the question."

"Ok, then what is," she said, raising one finely chiseled eyebrow.

"Why did I marry? Why did I have children? Why am I here? Why is he paying for this? Why am I evasive? What am I afraid to say?"

"I think you know the answer to those."

"I don't."

"I think you're keeping secrets."

"I don't have any secrets," I said. The kiss wedged in my mind.

Fast forward by twelve hours. I left, flew the coup, to travel the world, see everything that I needed to. I could not be his wife, though that is what he needed. I had finally come to terms with some of my own needs. Wearing the wife costume was not a temporary because he expected stability, dependability, and trust. He wanted to wake up next to the same woman every morning. He wanted his coffee the same way, black with sugar. He wanted to grow old together, to retire, and to die with nothing ever really changing. I told him that was impossible and that nothing was forever.

He had a problem.

I wanted a masquerade.

I am on a bus to the vineyards North of Sydney. The bus is scheduled for fifteen stops in one day. At each stop we get one glass of wine, nibblets, and a chance to buy to our hearts content. I seem to be the only one who notices that the bottle price goes up at each stop and the glasses get progressively smaller.

Overhead, the sky is patchy. The sun winks in and out, making the countryside mysterious and changing, gloomy and bright. I enjoy this. Others on the bus fidget, checking to make sure their umbrellas are still in their bags. The group is mostly in pairs, college kids, aussies, newlyweds, and lovers. There are two of us who are none of the above. It is I and Nan, but she doesn't recognize me and I pretend to not know her.

If you were to keep *your* eyes closed in the morning, while lying in your own bed and tell yourself, "This is not my home. I know who I am, but I am a stranger here, known by no one, and will not be staying for long." If *you* said that and opened your eyes, do you have the strength to make it so?

That is what I did for months. I had a ticket. Then I left.

I trail Nan all afternoon. She dresses the same, though without the heavy

coat. Her hair catches the sun and she hums to herself the same tune over and over. Twice, she asks the girls behind the counter if they sell batteries. Twice, they say no. My guess is that her cd player is dead and she is losing the song hour by hour. When she did have it, each time she pushed repeat, did she hear a different song?

My bag is full of three bottles of wine, the cheapest and from the first winery. Stop one was a shack. It badly needed paint, a sidewalk, and window panes. I fold my legs out and rest my hands behind my head forming two perfect triangles with my elbows. Above my lips, I have carefully placed a neatly trimmed mustache. I've let my sideburns grow out and the one or two hairs that sprout on my chin float in the air near my face, free. Women's body hair does not have to be a dirty secret. It can be disguise.

Just past the quaint patio, kangaroos with joeys hop and lie like cats on the neatly cut grass of winery number seven. We sit on plastic chairs by plastic tables and drink dry red wine from goblets that taste slightly like butter.

Nan inches towards a couple of kangaroos who lounge on the lawn. A mother with a joey looks on, with her nose twitching. The joey's legs stick out of the pouch rather than its head. She is beautiful in a warmer climate and I want her, even though I can't. Then she would have me and I won't have that. My husband tried to have me as well as various lovers wanted to have me at least twice. But to be contained by one person's expectations is limiting, though tempting. I might have once wanted to be Sleeping Beauty; I now wanted to be the prince hacking through the rose bushes to get to the prize. Her waiting for the kiss. But if I found her today, I think I'd still walk away.

At the final winery, Nan sits on the beautifully crafted metal bench next to me. I'm well past drunk, but attempt to pretend otherwise. Most of the group is similarly liquored and are loud and obnoxious no matter what country they're from. I can smell her, but pretend not to. The sky is wide and full, stars pinned to the sky.

"What a beautiful night, Violet," she says.

"Yeah it is," I say, trying to not act surprised that she remembers me. I run my fingers along the edges of my slacks, but it feels like I'm doing it through water. I'm disjointed and unconnected, the sweet embrace of wine. I hear her laughing even though I know she is not.

"Isn't it fun, the way we leap from one body to the next," she laughs lightly and continues. "My batteries are dead, but even though I can't actually play my song, I can still hear it. Routines are so important, you know, they organize our life and give it meaning."

I'm not exactly sure what she is talking about, but I venture a guess. "Nan, it's fine that you recognized me in my disguise, but I don't want you. I don't want anything twice. I want something new each night, and though you're very pretty, I can't."

"Liar."

"No. I don't have any secrets."

"Listen," says Nan, "every action is a pattern of something else. There are no new choices. Sometimes we trade in one life for another, but they're virtually the same. All I want is for you to teach me that kiss."

I glance at her, feeling numb and wondering if I'm hearing her or hearing myself. Did I tell her this, I wonder. Did I reveal that much? Did my husband hire her, my therapist? Is she Nan? Is she the girl in the office? "You're lying," I say.

"No. I have no secrets. You are Violet. You are someone I'd like to play with because it is not fair to change someone and then disappear for good. If you're going to give someone a gift, it is also important to stick around and watch them enjoy it. We can be someone different every night, this can be our pattern."

"No," I say, realizing I'm biting my lip and not knowing how long I've been doing it. Where I've bitten feels like fire, like they're scorched. The wine feels sluggish in my veins, thoughts twirl but I can't think of what to say. Finally, I finish, "I am not who you think I am."

Then the kangaroos seem to be watching us. Their eyes glassy and their noses spitting steam even though it is at least fifty degrees. The grass looks too green, like plastic splices of turf. The trees are blowing and dancing as if timed. As if their movement was organized. A kangaroo kneels and the joey carefully crawls from the pouch, like the birthing of a child already having seen and lived in the ■world for some time. It is reborn from a temporary resting place. Inching forward, its wet eyes look as if the world is nothing new.