

The Windmill

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It was the summer I thought I was a composer. I had a bunch of flatmates from the music school, and they were all practicing madly – in a flutter of fingers, a slap of the metronome, a burst of brass – and I was writing pieces for them to play. Their other friends at the music school got in on it too, so I could write for almost any instrument I wanted. I used crazy combinations of instruments, switched between odd time signatures, and I'd have stretches in which multiple players would improvise at the same time. Sometimes Calvin, our resident writer, would pen lyrics for the two tenors, Henry and Greg, and we'd have a big concert followed by a booze-up at the flat.

It was an ugly place, our flat, huge, and damp and mouldy in any space that didn't get the light, which was most of it. But whenever we had one of our concerts, we opened all the windows, and a tiny slit of sun would creep in, and we'd all pretend that the brown and white carpet was a wooden floor, that our faded jeans and torn shirts were tails and black dresses, that the upright was a Steinway.

It was at one of those concerts that I met Steven. Steven wasn't a musician, which made him immediately far more interesting than anyone else. Not only that, but he was American, originally from the South, and although his voice had lost most of its Southern twang, I loved listening to his vowels dip and dive, all smooth and clear as a river. His mind moved like a river too, flowing fast and taking wild twists and turns. He was tall and slightly stooped, with eyes so dark they were almost black.

Steven had been invited to the concert by a pretty blonde pianist named Laura. I had a boyfriend then, a cricket player. I knew it wasn't anything serious with Mike, but I'd always had a boyfriend, and somehow he'd wheedled his way into this position, with his thick protective pads and a helmet under his arm. On the night of the concert, he was playing a one-dayer out in the suburbs, and wouldn't be in till late. I was disappointed, because the concert was going to conclude with a short piece of mine, which I was hopeful might be the first part of the first movement of my largest work so far. But Mike had been called in to play at the last moment.

"I'm sorry El," he'd said. "One of the boys has broken his collarbone. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I'd shrugged it off. But standing there, while the percussionist set up, and the clarinettist fumbled her pages, I couldn't help but feel angry with him. When the performers started to play, I looked across the room and saw an unfamiliar face, and for some reason, the dark eyes sought out mine.

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I got Steven's number and we began a weekly tradition of drinking coffee at the local café, our feet up on a small glass table. I'd talk about music and my latest work, and he'd talk about conquistadors, and where he'd come from. I'd describe my composition class – the kid who used elaborate mathematical theories for each of his pieces, the goth girl who

refused to speak to anyone – and he'd talk about his most recent home in the Midwest – the big plains, railway tracks for miles, sky stretching over your head like a massive hand. Eventually, I broke it off with Mike, and Steven and my coffee-drinking evolved into parties and long drives out of town.

It was getting towards the end of summer when Steven and I got together, and as the trees all started to shed their leaves, we were sprinting around among them, using all our newfound energy. The broad leaves were so crunchy underfoot we felt like we were breaking apart old worlds with our shoes. When the wind swirled the leaves up into the air, I felt as vulnerable as a handful of old leaves; I felt just as prone to flight as falling.

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We didn't go out too often, Steven and I, because when we did, we both drank too much and, being students, we just didn't have the money. But we'd go to a party now and then when there weren't any good movies on, and there was often a party within walking distance of Steven's apartment. Sometimes we'd start at the bar, and then stumble over to a house. This one time early on, I remember loads of people all scattered out on someone's front lawn, with drinks in red plastic cups, and coloured lights strung all over the entrance to the house. I remember going in and putting our beer in the fridge, or as much as I could fit, and taking the other bottles out onto the porch. Steven was talking to some of the philosophy boys, and so I headed over to Henry, the tenor. I don't remember what we talked about; I just remember feeling the whole time like Steven's frame was right behind me, like he was just about to put his hand on the small of my back. I felt suspended in that space just before his hand fell. It was all I could think about.

After ten minutes or so he came up to me and said, "El, d'you want to go?" and although there were probably another dozen people I'd intended to speak to, I nodded. We left all the beer in the fridge. We walked away from the laughter and the light of the party, up one block, two, and then he stopped me on the corner before the park and kissed me. He started tugging at my skirt, fingers slinking down my waistband, and I pulled off his jacket, and started to unbuckle his belt, and then I laughed, my head spinning slightly. "Let's go," I said.

I bought my first car that autumn. I'd only have it for nine months (I would eventually total it by driving it into a tree), but when I bought it, way out in the suburbs, I thought it was gorgeous. I was a crappy driver, and supposedly wary of carbon emissions, but I still drove out to the beach most days I wasn't working, with my scraps of manuscript on the passenger seat, and the tape-deck blasting a contemporary composer's latest work.

My own compositions came flowing out of nowhere, pieces for oboe, bassoon and soprano, for snare drum, violin, and cello. I felt like every time I wrote a new piece I was breaking a new item of furniture, smashing something and leaving it in cleanly cleaved pieces on the floor.

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Steven was funny about my music. When he asked to listen to the recording of the clarinet and percussion piece from the concert – a recording punctuated by coughing, by slipped notes, by beer cans opening – he appeared to listen attentively. Once the spatters of applause had died down, he stayed silent for a moment. Then he said, “It’s like a jersey cow that lives under a broken windmill, and the cow’s mooing, right, and then the windmill starts spinning and can’t stop, and it spins so hard that the spindles spin right off, and the cow is buried underneath.”

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My mother had a lot to say about Steven. “Well, he’s a little odd,” she’d say, helping herself to more salad. “You’ve got to admit that. And he’ll go home sometime, back to the States, and it’s really just too difficult, that cross-country stuff. That stuff’s so hard. You’re too young for that.”

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, I felt spurred on. Steven was like no one I’d ever met before. He had political ideas that I didn’t agree with in the least. We fought a lot. One day I announced I was going to a protest against the war in Iraq. I bravely asked if he’d come too.

“I’m going to pass on that one, El,” he said. He’d finished school for the day, and was stretched out on the couch with a beer in his hand.

“They’re too emotional,” he said. “They’re just arguing that ‘war is bad’. That’s not an argument.” He stretched out. “Walking down the street waving signs isn’t an argument.” “And drinking beer on the couch is an argument?”

“I’m not arguing. I’m fucking tired. You go if you like.”

So I went. You could always tell before we were about to have a massive blowout. It would start quietly, back and forth, and then our retorts would crescendo and blur into one another until we were yelling. It happened often. Although we could always tell when it was about to happen, neither of us would back down. And we never succeeded in changing the other’s mind.

I guess sometimes I felt just like that jersey cow, and he was the collapsing spindles of windmill, burying me. But at other times, of course, it was the other way around.

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My theory about the larger piece I was working on was that it would have movements with dramatically different instrumentation; the first movement would be clarinet and percussion, followed by a more extensive wind section. The second movement I hadn’t quite decided on. The third and final movement would be percussion, string quartet and four-part harmony. Around this time, I’d keep waking up with a musical line in my head, and reach over the edge of the bed for some manuscript to scrawl some version of it down. I wasn’t any good at writing down the timing, but if I had the notes correct I’d remember the timing in the morning. I learned if I kept the light off, Steven would sleep through my crumpling and scrawling. It was strangely all-consuming, this project. I became obsessed with diminished fifths and semitones, and I found myself listening for

them everywhere. I had always heard them in music, sure, but now I thought I could hear them when Steven spoke; I could hear them in the sound of a doorbell, in a birdcall.

I played Steven a section for marimba, piccolo, and flute on my laptop, and he said, “It’s just like two tiny sisters squabbling over a tiara, but they’re under the ocean, and eventually the ocean itself swallows the entire tiara whole, and then the sisters are left with just waves.”

That year I realised I could get almost anyone I wanted. I’d always had a boyfriend, but I guess I hadn’t registered what that meant. I’d just started working in a coffee shop, and there were guys who’d come in regularly just to see me, just to watch me smile while I made their latte. It wasn’t that I’d been oblivious to all this before, but there was something about being behind that counter and playing up the role – my usual greeting with eyes knowingly wide and feigning captivation – and all the guys who’d want to loiter around the counter and talk, ask what I did, ask what I was doing later. Then, at the end of the day, Steven would come in to pick me up, his tall, solid frame so familiar, so sturdy.

Though I guess I always knew the other guys were there; they were always loitering around the counter in my mind. They were from the office building next door, well-to-do lawyers and accountants, and I knew them all by name. The one I liked best was Jon, a lawyer, who’d come in almost every day and sit at the bar around the coffee machine, and talk with me whenever I had a moment. He knew about Steven, but sometimes he’d call anyway and ask if I’d be up for a drink.

I kept my room at my flat, because it had a piano, and because Steven and I liked, we said, to have ‘our own space’. But I spent every night at Steven’s place, which was just on the edge of town. Some nights we got drunk at his place and bitched about Laura, whom, we decided, had never been truly good at the piano, and must’ve somehow fluked her audition to get into music school. Steven didn’t even think she was all that pretty. We complained to one another about how the music students couldn’t talk about books, never read, thought music was all that mattered. Steven couldn’t believe that Henry smoked so much pot, and we both said that Graeme was putting on far too much weight and wasn’t it awful how he never left his apartment and how did he ever expect to find a boyfriend. We felt secure in that slightly damp, cold one-bedroom apartment, in our exclusive territory under the thick duvet, behind the bright green curtains. At night when we drew the curtains, they muttered in the wind, and we could see the sky glimpsing through.

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At that time, when I listened again to the first part of the first movement, I saw that jersey cow under that collapsing windmill. The cow and the windmill had become inseparable from my own collection of notes. Steven was writing a thesis on Bartolome de las Casas, and he’d spend all day in the library, and then come back with stories about the conquistadors bashing ragged paths through the dark green jungle, or describing the fabric of las Casas’ robes. He would ask what I’d been writing and I’d show him, or I’d

play him a midi version on my laptop, and he would listen, and then say, yes, it was the coughing of a seahorse, or a lonely clock radio, or tsunami in a diner in New Jersey. Then we'd fuck, and hold each other, and he would call me his little minstrel, and I'd call him my conquistador, and we'd silently congratulate ourselves and drag our bodies exhaustedly into sleep.

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The snow was just starting to thaw when I started having trouble with the piece. I found I couldn't stop revising. Suddenly, I didn't want the windmill to fall on the jersey cow. That wasn't, I realised, what was supposed to happen. Or maybe I just needed to be able to make that decision myself. That Steven was always adding to my work initially seemed exciting, like a collaboration, but eventually it started to get to me. I wanted my work to exist on its own; but none of the sections could exist in my mind without a windmill and a cow, or a hand that turned into a rare species of fish, or a lamp going on and off in a snowstorm. Once he'd attributed these images to the music, I couldn't imagine the music without them; and even though the clarinet didn't sound like a cow, every time the clarinetist hit a note, I couldn't help hearing and seeing that jersey, hear her mournful cry from underneath the windmill spindles. I felt sorry for her.

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Then Steven graduated and got a job working for the government, and he earned a lot more, but they worked him really hard. One night he brought a bottle of red wine home, poured two glasses almost to the brim, and sat me down.

"El," he said. "We need to talk."

"OK," I said. I was starting to work on the second movement, but I still couldn't decide on the structure.

"I'm working really hard," he said, "and I'm just so tired all the time. I think we need to... I guess I think we need to spend a little less time together. I need a bit more time to myself, I think."

I looked up. I had just thrown in a lot of grace notes into the piano part, and while they would sound pretty, they seemed extraneous. Then I looked down and every note looked extraneous.

"Of course you do," I said. "I really need to do some more work on my piece, too. I don't even know what I'm doing with it at the moment."

My voice sounded cool, but my face felt completely rigid. We tried to resume the conversation the way it usually would've been, but it didn't work, so I left my untouched glass of wine and packed up my stuff and said I was heading home, and he said I'm sorry and OK. I walked up the path feeling awful. But of course he needs some time, I thought, of course he does; you just need to be understanding. I wanted to go back to hug him and kiss him and ask him if it was alright, but I didn't want to make things worse. And I didn't want to seem needy. Then, at the top of the path, I realised I'd forgotten my jacket, and I stopped for a moment, and then turned around and walked back towards his house. At the time it seemed an adequate – if somewhat flimsy – excuse. As I approached the door, I could see his slightly stooped silhouette in the window, and I saw him chugging

back my glass of wine in one hit, and going to refill it. Seeing this, I was overcome with a sort of panic, a hit of revulsion, and I turned away again. I rubbed my arm with my hand, ostensibly to warm myself up, but really just to reassure myself I was still here, still the same.

I didn't answer his calls the next day. I put my phone on silent and stuck it in the hot water cupboard, and spent all day in my room trying to figure out the second movement. When I went to check my phone four hours later, after I'd had so much coffee I'd started trembling, I had six missed calls: one from my mother, four from Steven, and one from Jon. I didn't listen to the messages. I just called Jon.

We met at a bar in the middle of town. I'd changed about fifteen times before leaving the house, eventually wearing a casual dress Steven had given me last year. Jon was waiting at the bar, wearing his suit. He was one of those men who was a little too good looking; I didn't really trust him. He had a narrow face, lovely bone structure, and was blonde and slightly unshaven.

"Ellie!" he called when he saw me. He kissed me on the cheek. "I was worried you wouldn't come."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'm here."

"You look beautiful. What can I get you?"

I looked around the glossy bar, all the black and silver and wooden surfaces, the barman down the end with his white shirt and black apron, reaching a tall glass bottle from a high shelf, spinning around and pouring it into a triangular glass.

"I'll have a gin and tonic, please."

Classy bars intimidated me. I never knew what to order. I never felt quite like I fitted; even when I got drunk in these places, the wooden chairs still seemed too angular, the mirrored surfaces reflected one another, the lines remained out of dialogue with the curves of a body. It was as though these glossy places were a reflection of where we would like to be comfortable, where we would like to feel at home, but no one ever did; all anyone ever did was pretend.

But Jon was a good pretender. He chatted in a familiar way with the barman, ordered the drinks, and led the way to a table. As I followed, I remembered a piece I wrote once which involved tightening one of the strings of a cello more and more while plucking it, until it finally snapped. It had only been performed once, that piece, quite a while ago; but the point was, I felt like that string, like someone was tugging at me and tugging at me, and all the while I was getting thinner, finer, more likely to break.

But now I had a drink.

Jon held up his glass. "Shall we drink to you finally agreeing to meet me," he says. "Or shall we drink to your piece? Let's drink to your piece, and then you can tell me how it's going."

We clinked glasses. I didn't want to talk about the piece. The piece was a mess. It was a cluster-fuck of cows and windmills and vast unencumbered bits of sky, and teacups full of rain sitting on railway tracks. But Jon wouldn't understand this. So I talked him

through the movements, and told him the bits I was having trouble with, and he listened. He told me he was sorry he wasn't much help but that I'd be fine because I was brilliant and that also it seemed unfair to him I could be both so brilliant and so beautiful. I asked him about his work, and he told me he had a red clock on his desk and he billed in blocks of seven minutes. Yesterday, he said, he had bashed the clock with his fist. He held up a bandaged hand. I didn't know whether to believe him. We kept drinking. The lines of the bar got slightly softer as I drank. My trips to the bathroom got more and more frequent and increasingly unsteady. I looked at myself in the mirror and wiped at the mascara under my eyes and said, out loud to my reflection, "What?". But nothing answered. My hand reached for the tap and missed. I sat down on the toilet seat and thought about crying. I got up again.

"So Ellie," Jon says, when I get back to the table. "Look, I know you have this boyfriend. And I figure something might've happened with him or something, and whatever, it's none of my business. But can I walk you home or something? Just make sure you get there safe and all?"

I nod. He picks up my coat and helps me into it. We walk out. We walk the twelve blocks to my place slowly, watching the snatch of sky above the buildings as it seems to get closer to us. Jon stops me at the door to the flat.

He says, "I'd love to hear some of your music sometime."

"You'd probably hate it," I say.

"Well," he says. "I like *you* quite a bit," and his voice is quieter now. He is looking at me, and I look back. I don't want to go back to my room with my unclean sheets and my piles of screwed-up manuscript, but I don't want to go to a strange house either. I keep looking at Jon and think I don't even want to see Steven, the bent over, alcoholic fuck-up that he is. I move forward and hug Jon, and he leans close to kiss me and I kiss him for just a moment, just that moment before you pull away, and the needles ricochet through my body like they haven't in a while. And then I pull back from him, and say goodnight, and go into the house.

About 5am I wake with my heart racing like a train. I can't recall absolutely everything, I'm terrified there's something I might've forgotten, I feel cold and hot and cold again, I get up and my head feels like thoughts are oozing out of it, like if I keep moving they'll all squeeze out onto the floor. I go to the bathroom and vomit. I think of Steven. I think of his hands, his hands on me. I get my phone, and start to call him, and stop, and start, and stop. I lie back down on the bed.

Three days later I meet Steven at his apartment and we both say I'm sorry and we cry and we worry we've lost something. He says, "Ellie, I have to go back to the States. A friend of mine has offered me a job there, way better than anything I could ever get here. And I want you to come with me."

And then we're at the airport, and there's too much luggage, and too much crying, and I think I should change my mind. I think I should go, but I can't, I know I couldn't follow someone somewhere, not even him, I know that while other people would, I'm not going to make that mistake. I know Steven is slightly stooped, compulsively embellishes my

music, chews off chunks of his nails, can hurt me terribly, and does. His flight is being announced over the loudspeaker.

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Over the next few months, I rewrite my piece, trying to rid it of all connotations of him. No matter what I do, it remains a ripped-apart version of his stories, an elegy to what we had. The piece is performed in the Grey Concert Room by a number of the music students, most of whom Steven and I used to complain bitterly about, to an audience of a hundred. My mother is there, and Jon is there, and everyone is very polite and speaks about what a future I might have as a composer.

But all I can think about is what happens at the end of shows, when the cast all come out for the curtain call and link arms and bow, and there they all are, disparate characters, some of whom never had a scene together, some of whom detested one another on stage, slandered, even murdered, and now they're all linking arms and bowing and beaming like their faces will crack open. The cast throw up their arms to signal to the wings, and the applause sounds like hard rain. The audience does not contain any faces I know; I look for Steven, but he is in the centre of a massive continent, under a sky, not watching.

But if he were watching, from his distance you could see that the cast aren't actors at all, but rather a pair of tiny sisters, a lamp in the snow, and a caramel-coloured cow underneath an intact, silver windmill. And the windmill spindles are turning so slowly that the force of the wind must be less than a breath.