

TRYSTING

Emmanuelle Pagano

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SHEFFIELD



I wake up, and I can hear the sound of little creatures walking around on an invisible piece of cloth stretched tight next to my ear, stretched between me and him. Between me and him, just enough room for a cloth pulled taut like paper. I open my eyes and it's nearly light. He's scratching his stubble. The tiny sounds stop as he smiles at me. His hand leaves his cheek to touch mine.

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It's been a long time without her now. I'm starting to get used to the loneliness, the evenings, the little seven o'clock sadness.

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My parents had an orchard, their pride and joy, which took up all their spare time. They would be there before work in the morning, as soon as they got home at night, and

often even after dinner. We took advantage of this to meet in secret, in my bedroom. I could see the orchard from my window, and kept an eye on my parents' movements between lingering kisses. The trees were perfectly aligned, almost to the centimetre. Each bore its allotted fruit and stood in regimented order with no room for confusion: cherries, apples, apricots, and then in front of them pears, figs and plums; then, in front of them again, close to my window, came rows of bushes supported by stakes and metal wire. The scent of thousands of raspberries, blueberries and red-currants perfumed my long lie-ins when, at my mother's daily insistence, I opened the window to air the room. I used to laugh at my parents and their steely rigour. It wouldn't have surprised me if they had decided to plant the whole orchard in alphabetical order. But once, while we were making fun of them, complicit in an over-long embrace, my father burst in, chased him away and punished me for my disobedience. Confined to my bedroom in the middle of August, pensive at my window, I daydreamed and looked out at the orchard. I hoped that he would come and rescue me. He came the next night. I heard the sound of branches moving. It was very hot, so I had an excuse for leaving the window open. I could see him darting around among the trees, stripped to the waist, up to something. He wasn't alone. From far away, he blew me a kiss, signalling that I should go back to sleep. I got back into bed, disappointed. At first light, I rushed to the window. My father was already in the orchard, frozen before the spectacle of metamorphosis, his transformed fruit trees. The peach trees were hung with pears, the pear trees were heavy with apricots,



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the apricots had been replaced by plums, and from the plum trees swung fresh figs. He had spent the night working on this little act of revenge with the help of his many friends. They had picked every single fruit and, carefully attaching a loop of fishing line to each stalk, had swapped them all around.

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She releases me from ordinary life in a perfectly ordinary way, just by the way she moves, by the way she moves and speaks. She has a different way of being.



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My partner is an accordionist. He plays for dances, weddings, birthdays and retirement parties, or sometimes he does the musical interludes at cultural events, readings, poetry, talks on local history, that sort of thing. I met him at my best friend's wedding. I was bored, and trying to amuse myself by watching the other guests. I always have a book in my bag but I was afraid of seeming rude if I got it out. So I watched people. They all looked tense and ill at ease. Only one person was opening his arms wide, and it was him. To make his music, he was embracing the air, welcoming the empty space, breathing with easy movements. I fell into the circle of his arms. Quite literally, I found myself filling that hollow, those great bellows, his musical chest. I wanted to



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hear the sounds of his big heart, disordered by desire and then set right by the accordion.

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Because I had injured my hands and they were in bandages for several days, he washed and tended me down to the details, down to the navel, to folds of skin, down to cotton buds, to the combing caress of an eyebrow.

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Loving him means worrying about him. The air solidifies in my throat. My stomach is full of heavy objects. I try to find things for my body to do. Walking, cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the floors. I try to think about mundane things, to crowd out this anxiety that's so full, full of him, and replace it with light, inoffensive preoccupations. But the worry takes me by the throat, or by the stomach, as soon as I stop. Then my body reminds me of the weight in my stomach, in my throat, this weight of loving him.

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The police said that it was probably a voluntary disappearance. I spent months searching for her, months that stretched into years in the end. Then I decided to stop, and began to





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go out and meet people again. One evening, I got home a little earlier than usual and put the television on. I ended up half-asleep in front of a documentary on alternative lifestyles – people living in yurts, teepees, tree houses, pods, all that grassroots eco-warrior crap. I had almost dropped off when I saw her. She was coming out of a hut, all grubby and utterly beautiful.

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He rang my doorbell. He was selling calendars. Over a coffee, he explained that he'd bought them up front, but that, of course, he recovered from sales the twenty-five years he had already advanced. I laughed at his slip of the tongue. It was true, though. He was selling time and I wasn't getting any younger.



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He doesn't like eating anything that still has its skin on. He thrusts it aside with his tongue or his fingers before carrying the flesh to his mouth. He unrolls the black pudding from its casing, holding the skin down carefully with his fork. Even grapes and figs have to be peeled. I make fun of his fussiness. But I let him get on with it, and my teasing is gentle and affectionate. Sometimes I extract the pulp for him and put it into a little dish, then rinse my fingers.



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His son had a birthday party this afternoon, and my son was invited. When we arrived, he was blowing up balloons. He made me a coffee as I stood with a few other parents who were still hanging around, and then he sent us all away, telling us to come back and collect our children around five or six o'clock. Yes, he'd cope fine by himself. My son fell asleep in the car on the way home, tired out from the games and full of sweets, the balloons he had brought back as souvenirs floating around him. I didn't wake him up straight away when we got back. I caught hold of a big, bright yellow balloon, pressed the opening to my lips, and let it deflate slowly, breathing in his air.



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She and I have been playing a waiting game right from the start. I'm always the one waiting and she's always late. I've got used to it. I arrive on time because I never know exactly how late she's going to be. Sometimes just a few minutes, sometimes more, much much more. I arrive at our meeting place and say to myself: here goes. I read. I always bring a book with me but after a couple of chapters I'm already worrying, despite myself. I carry on worrying for who knows how many pages.

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He had begun his adult life by dying, as many adolescents do, but unlike most, he never stopped doing it. He would die regularly, every two or three years or so, and nobody could say or do anything to stop him. After each failed attempt, he would bounce back, rediscover his enthusiasm for life, and meet a new woman. Sometimes it was actually the same woman but they always seemed new to him. As far as he was concerned, it was a complete regeneration each time. With each new life, he was unashamedly joyful. I was one of those new women: the last. During his revivals, he even had children, one with me. He was alive. And then, without showing any signs of it at first, he would die. His four children were thriving, they loved him, I loved him, he had a good job, everything was fine, and suddenly, just like that, he was dying again. Only to be reborn. As new. You might almost think that he had simply metamorphosed, shed his skin, if it weren't for all the scars, the traces of his deaths, which were deeper and more numerous each time. He had never taken pills; his deaths were always violent. He'd die by hanging, drowning or shooting. The second-to-last time took off the bottom half of his face, but he still got up smiling, smiling without a chin.



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When he was in my flat, he would constantly bang into things. He couldn't find the doors or the switches and he kept forgetting where the furniture was. Every protruding chair leg was a potential trap. When he was in my flat he was clumsy and blind, as though he wasn't really there.

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I live in this city, this crowded, expensive city hemmed in by motorways. We're very cramped here, living, eating and sleeping all packed together. Space is an arrogant luxury, and when you look up, the skies are always at once oversized and out of reach. I walk along the streets with my head thrown back, dreaming of height and air. In the apartment, I can't stretch my arms out fully without touching shelves, furniture, a wall, a door, objects, my partner. We pile up our things as best we can, and when we can pile no more, we resign ourselves to the job of sorting. We try to decide how important the things we own actually are, according to our own odd set of criteria. We weigh the bulk of the thing against the memories it contains, the encumbrance versus the attachment. Then we consider the correlations of our lives. This causes arguments. Calibrating two sets of memories, affections and idiosyncrasies is a delicate business. We attach different significance to things and emotions. Until now, he and I only ever had minor clashes, always staying on the right side of friendly. Little skirmishes about nothing, never any hostile arguments. But this business of sorting, after a decade or so of shared lives, of tenderness and of more and more stuff, mine, his, ours, threatens our little shared corner of space and time. We begin to get in one another's way. Now I spend my evenings out in the streets, walking around with my head down. On one of these dawdling walks, as I am putting off the moment when I have to go home, I come up with a simple solution that has never occurred to us before. Storage units.



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They're underground spaces, like huge rigid cardboard boxes in ultra-modern cellars that you can walk or even drive into. You go into a sort of garage, but it's less like a garage than a tiny city-within-a-city, with its own traffic, roads and alleyways between the units. At the entrance to this miniature city, a very helpful attendant explains how it works. He shows me around and unlocks one of the empty units so that I can see inside. It's very clean and well lit, and I'm sure that my partner will feel as relieved as I do. I ask myself why we thought of it so late, so late in our life together, so late in our relationship, our dusty mess. We sign the hire contract with the excitement of young newly-weds. But before we can move, we need to sort, to decide which things will be taken away, stored, kept at a distance, temporarily expelled from our apartment. It is only then that I realise that all we've done is move the problem. We still have to sort, assess and calculate how many square metres we have. Our dithering becomes disproportionate, and we've reached the point of considering separate apartments when one night I shut myself in the storage unit and have a good, proper cry, screaming and howling as our city never lets us do.



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Everybody is looking at us. He gets embarrassed and tries to stifle my laughter with his hand, which moulds to my mouth. I carry on laughing into his fingers and he starts laughing too because it tickles.



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She doesn't want to talk to me in front of her son. She doesn't want to break it off with me in front of him. She doesn't want to say it – I'm leaving you – in front of him. He and I have got on well all these years. I drop him off at school, collect him in the afternoon, make him snacks and help him with his homework. We go for walks together, or to the cinema or the park. She doesn't come because she's always at work. When she does finally come home she wants to talk to me, keeps saying that she wants to talk to me, one-to-one. I know what she's got to say to me one-to-one. I don't want to hear it. I stick to her son for as long as I can, as often as I can. I don't let him out of my sight. She'll never have the chance to talk to me alone.



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He puts his arms around me and then draws back a little. He pulls my T-shirt away at the neck and looks over my shoulder at my back. I can tell he's looking at something by the way he stops moving. He isn't stroking me or kissing me or doing anything, just holding the neck of my T-shirt. I say What is it? He says: You.

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