



### San Francisco

They made love the way the earth shook; that's what she told him. *We make love like an earthquake*, when she wasn't too embarrassed to say a line so vulgar as that. "We fuck like San Francisco," was easier to admit than the former.

"Oh?"

Dennis was naked, so it usually goes. He had his hands on her ribcage, and her hands were there, too, pressed between wet skin and the mess of her daisy-print sheets. Bess had bought them on a Tuesday. Dennis had come, too. He'd wandered through John Lewis, poking lava lamps and scrutinising their limited collection of crockpots. "You'd think they'd need more colours," he had said, and Bess had agreed, insisting that pan should also come in *saggy arsecheek* or perhaps in *limp sock blue*.

"You're terrible."

She was, but Dennis liked it, so they got along well enough.

Well enough to kick down her neighbour's porch swing every Sunday—and Bess's neighbour was crazy, so he'd think them a hurricane and phone the police to check up on his family's health. Well enough to spray graffiti outside their local shopping mall, writing out love notes and horror tales in weighted-red letters, spelling 'sod it' and 'forgive me' and 'REvOlutioN!!' to the left of a lingerie window—and they imagined that these mannequins might take their advice, someday, break free of their chains, and pursue a life in the concrete wilderness.

Or perhaps, they would not need to do any of those things. Instead, the pair would stay in bed until the evening, when Bess's mother would call them down for soup, but they would not want the soup, had found similar liquids in the swallow of Bess's warm belly, which was rounder than it should have been, but

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lay with perfect stillness as her boyfriend's hands reached for the back of her neck, touched her at the collarbone, and then—

"I'm hungry," Dennis said. "Fancy a meal?"

"Smoke first," Bess replied. "Then we hit town."

It was enough, she thought, to be young and in love, and know that the world would never stop spinning.

A confession: We do not always get to marry the person that we love.

A correction: Sometimes we do get to marry the person that we love, and we get to have children, and those children get to be happy, and we can observe—from afar—unflinchingly, the devotion and care of each of Love's movements: the Meet-Cute, and Falling, that Marriage, the Child, the Other Child, and their Children, and the Garden in which we will walk at age ninety-one, hands held together like tree roots, fingers frail like the coils of a garlic press, but unafraid of the life that comes after.

I am sorry. That isn't how this one worked out.

"It's been at least a decade," Dennis said—speaking well enough for a man who might as well have been a ghost—at least, in her esteem—with one hand on the hip of his corduroy jacket, watching her in a Sainsbury's parking lot as though Bess might just blow away like driftwood out to sea. It would not surprise her. *Ten years, ten years, ten years*, pulsing between their two bodies like an afternoon storm.

"Hell, I haven't seen you since—"

"You look great," Dennis corrected her, although Dennis, of course, was the one who looked better. His hair was whipped like a sweet shop cream, low quality, all sugar, which glowed at the line of his jaw, stubble lit up like church light. He was still so blonde. Bess had once checked his teenaged rooms for



peroxide, wondering if Dennis had stolen some bleach from the family kitchen or shamefully bought dyes in a trip to the store.

Dennis had not changed.

"It's good to see you," Bess said. *Ten years, ten years, ten years.* Dennis had spent ten years inside of her body, and it was not in the way he had before. Dennis smiled at her now, the perfect orange-cut slice, and it felt like the crawl of dead moss, like a cancer growing inside of skull bone, or worms inside the belly a dog. She had questions he would not answer. *Why did you leave me? Where did you go? I remember you; I remember; I remember. How could I ever forget?*

"I don't understand what you're asking of me."

"I'm asking if you love me."

"I do."

"I don't understand what you want anymore."

"I don't want anything."

"How can you even be happy with your life? How are you so happy just to wallowing away in this shit little town with your shit little friends. I look at you and you might as well be sitting on a toilet every time you sit down in a chair."

"Fuck you," Bess said.

"But I already have."

*Ten years, ten years, ten years.*

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"I feel like I'm living my life in fragments," Bess told him, ten minutes in. She was chewing nervously on a mango skin and kicking the side of her boot heels, trying to remember what language sounded like when it wasn't inside of her head. "Like none of this is real. Half the time I can't remember how I got somewhere, and the other half feels like I've been moving all my life to get to some set destination, some set place—and there's nothing I can do about it: it's fated, all knotted up, twisted. I'm going to end up here. I'm here. Final. I can't untie God, you know?"

"Yeah," he said, "I guess."

"Have you ever felt that way?"

"Yeah," he repeated. "I have."

They stood by the hood of Bess's car for a while longer, ignoring the rain and the collection of strangers pushing beside them, running through their Other Lives, clutching their packets of naan bread and kale. Bess and Dennis recollected old stories, expending their memories, until Bess became distended with them. Her fingers grew larger than her leopard-print gloves, her skin felt like velvet, and if she wasn't careful, she felt as though she might throw up. *Ten years, ten years.* She might vomit; she might vomit on him; Bess could throw up her intestines.

Obvious to this, Dennis was still laughing.

"I, for one, can't believe we used to behave so scandalously."

"We were only children," she said.

"That was the problem."

"It wasn't all bad."

"Of course not. I only meant to suggest—"

She had ruined it. Dennis held his thumbs between his index fingers, which meant she had embarrassed him. Bess hadn't wished to embarrass him, and yet—

She could kiss him, she thought suddenly. She could kiss him, and make it all go away. Except that Bess had forgotten how to kiss (or how to kiss him).



Bess had never even had to think about kissing him before—not consciously—but she'd kiss him now with the whole of herself, in the wake of black tongues and former selves. She could kiss him.

She does not. Bess remembered instead, the Kool Aid stain (blue) of Dennis's teeth on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July: when they had decidedly been mocking America and the boy had first said 'I love you', and she had kissed him in a passionate return, when Dennis had tasted like phosphate and acid and salt, and she had accused him of being her own brand of vitamin C.

"Do you remember the time we stole grapefruits from the supermarket?" Dennis asked then. He took a bite of her mango, too, as though slipping (if only briefly) back into the realms of their acquaintanceship. "We only stole them, of course, because we had never tasted them, but we refused to pay for anything we might not like, as though there were anything in the world we truly liked at that age."

"We were saving our money for more important things."

"Illegal things," he answered. "The grapefruit was delicious, though. I remember you stabbing me in bed with the spoon that we stole, too, with its hard ridges. They were like shark teeth. I think I still have the scar from that one, right below the navel. You wounded me."

"We might have to check later for proof."

Bess was the only one laughing now, but she ate the memory down inside of herself—*grapefruit, grapefruit, grapefruit*—memorised *grapefruit* so that she would not forget what was important: that they had loved each other once; they had loved each other. Not even he could take that away from them.

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"Do you believe in soulmates?"

"No."

"Arse."

"I'm only being honest!"

"Then be honest closer to my standards, you prick. In your language, *I demand to be appeased.*"

"I'm only saying that... I'm trying to explain. Well, there are over eight billion people on the planet, and what? That's just living, and you think there's only one person for anyone on earth who's ever lived? Considering that you're born in the right time or the right place, and whatever anyone else who's smarter than I am has said before me. I don't think I can believe it. I don't know. I just..."

"What?"

"I like being here," Dennis said, eighteen, and smelling of liquorice stains, eating warm crackers, and covered with clement grass. "I like being here."

Somewhere, Bess knew, the earth might be shaking. It was probable. The world was cookie-cut in fire lines, in volcanos and lava, and rumbles deep in the earth she'd never grown up to understand. But, in that moment, Bess could not fathom how the earth might shake as much as her small brown hands.

"I like being here, too," she answered. *I like being here, with you.*