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Written by Rowan Somerville

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The Shape of Her

ROWAN SOMERVILLE



PHOENIX

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One

Max struck out along the moving walkway. Despite the vigour of his pace, the bounce and swing of his shouldered luggage, the heat gathering under his clothes and the sense of excitement that filled him – brimming into a slightly asinine smile – Max did not progress in any way.

To move forward he must speed up, struggle against the flow of other passengers, face their disapproving expressions – and for what? Max had found a balance, an equilibrium, an easy and familiar pace that could be maintained without gaining or losing ground. But he stopped, allowing the moving walkway to drag him backwards, back to the point of departure, past the other passengers scorning him for his puerile game – back until the static lip of metal slipped under his heels and he was stationary.

He smiled, looking pityingly at the people around him, basking in the sense that life in the past month shimmered with extraordinary radiance. The source of such radiance was a girl so wonderful that every moment, every object, every thought, pulsed with the shape of her. He'd never been happier than right now. Never had more to look forward to.

His precious Valentine.

He looked around to see if the object of his thoughts had made it to the airport. His eyes pushed through a parting of the crowds, skimmed like the fingertips of a Braille reader over faces and bodies then lingered on a screen advertising a private

bank, warning parents to prepare for the *best* days of their children's lives. The children in question, a schoolboy and girl staring out, in uniforms that would precipitate a stabbing in any British high street, their expressions a precise mix of vulnerable and impudent.

Max crossed the corridor and sat back at his place, heels hooked onto the chrome strut of the four-foot coffee stool. His cappuccino remained before him, untouched. He stared at the advertisement and wondered what Valentine had been like as a little girl – adorable certainly, fragile, tough – could you be both? The fluorescent light behind the picture flickered and died. As the faces faded into shadow a sense of unease crept into Max. He hardly thought about his schooldays now – never in fact – but he was sure that they couldn't have been the best of his life. The backlight flickered on again, flooding the little girl's face with a glow that was, for a moment, angelic.

Max smiled. It was a good omen. Any second now and he'd see her, hold her in his arms, feel her ribs through thin wool, see her pale skin, those frail lips, squeeze that tender frame until she disappeared in his arms. He wanted to consume her, bite her tiny ears, seize her earlobe between his teeth till she squealed. Perhaps he . . . perhaps he was in . . . well it was too early to say, but he was unaccustomed to feeling like this; not so it weighed in his chest, throbbing under his coccyx, straining his jaw, like an anxiety – but somehow exhilarating. It was like waiting for his Ma to take him home when he was a boy, standing at the boarding school gates, at the end of term. Waiting for his world to become whole again.

Max scraped away the cocoa topsoil from his cappuccino, and flicked it onto the saucer. He liked chocolate, he liked coffee – but together, why? The eastern European Barista behind the counter had taken his gesticulations for encour-

agement and unleashed an extra deluge of cocoa-flavoured dandruff.

He suspended his spoon over the flattened landscape of foam and plunged it onto specks of chocolate, pulling out peaks that hung and wilted before collapsing into arabesques like folding ballerinas.

‘I don’t know,’ he’d sighed to his mother that morning, gazing about the drawing room of her house, wondering why only twenty-two minutes had ticked by when it felt like so many more.

She’d longed to know what he intended to *do* with his life, now that his education was long concluded. But he had no idea, no idea at all – other than to spend the summer with Valentine.

They spoke little; rehearsing the same questions, regurgitating the same answers – answers each had wordlessly consented to hear. Max was rarely in the family house, but the photograph of him, propped on the mantelpiece – scrubbed, combed and almost disappearing in a large school uniform – it had never left. Fused in time – a scared little boy smiling thinly in someone else’s clothes – never quite losing faith in Mummy and Daddy’s promise that everything was going to be all right.

‘Must get to the airport,’ he’d lied, pecking a goodbye onto her cheek. He had an hour to spare, perhaps more. His mother looked as though she might say something, her hand fluttering to reach out to him. But Max had turned and made for the door, promising postcards and a longer visit on his return. As he shut the front door behind him and paused on the doorstep, he’d managed to thrust away the approaching guilt and for a moment had felt . . . almost nothing, nothing but a delicious longing for his Valentine.

Now, in the airport, he raised his cappuccino to his lips,

the foam, a strange landscape; alien tentacles, sea anemones, predatory, deadly.

Voided with a loud suck.

How would it be with her, with Valentine? He remembered that long weekend in Wiltshire; her best friend's parents away – Tuscany was it? A life immediately desired. Old house, Queen Anne they said. Light streaming through windows twice his size, people he'd never met, soon familiar as friends. Dinners, wine, weed, flashing eyes, touching feet. A huge table crowded with bottles and cups, coloured bowls smudged with coloured foods, ashtrays and flecks of bright green marijuana, with the twisted white tops of rolling paper strewn like dried-up cherry blossom. Lunches outside in warm spring sunshine. The sun, it seemed, those afternoons, shining just for them. Heavy purple flowers, crowded over the crumbling garden wall like bunches of grapes. Tennis and a pool, a private pool – what a thing. Guarded from gaze and wind by a maze of walls, ancient and red – a rich peoples' secret. Beautiful girls lying around, wearing so little. Where to put his eyes? The other boys seemed used to it, born to it. He could hardly hold on to normality.

A girl at three o'clock, sleeping by her freshly kissed boyfriend, covered only with wisps of violet in little 'v's, another at four-thirty, bouncing on the diving board in ironic leopard-print bikini briefs – like an arrow head, hardly bigger – pointing to that yearned for place. And Valentine's best friend, Hazel – she was under close and covert surveillance as she stooped to pick up a Frisbee and the candy-stripped material of her briefs seemed to smile up her shapely rear like a joker's mouth. Hazel had turned, he recalled, her bikini top stretching like two nets held by tugboats, straining to contain the magnificent warm melting curves that begged to burst out and flood the universe with ... she'd seen him ... fuck ... he'd decoyed as if their eye contact was part of a normal sweeping

of the vista. OK, she'd looked away. What did he think she'd do – he mused putting down the still warm cup – run away screaming pervert?

Her tits were probably too big for him anyway. What was one supposed to do with breasts that big?

Nice though.

Tine herself, she was the exception, the zenith of poolside glamour. An old one-piece swimsuit – from school . . . do you think it's too small? She'd smiled, hoiking it, oh so innocently by the shoulder straps, and twirling once before dropping on to her belly in front of him so they made a 'T' in the long cool grass. 'T' for her.

Everything for her.

Max found himself fingering foam from the rim of his cup into his mouth, his imagination opening her legs, examining this part of her, where the tight scoop of material disappeared between her thighs, sketching a loosely drawn 'Y'. What might he find when he was finally allowed to do, rather than think, to cross those intimate thresholds, to uncover, to touch, see, what letter would she be there? A scribbled 'T'? And when he turned her over, opened her . . . a shaded 'O'? Max stood, shaking his head to dislodge the letters, the images, a vortex of desire. He must act, do things, buy condoms before she arrived. Who knew if they could be found on this little island of hers.

That first afternoon, he had walked her home from tennis in Regent's Park. She was wearing a short and pleated tennis skirt – she'd claimed that it was club rules – which suited him. They walked side by side, he'd taken her racket, still warm-handled, and slashed it inexpertly through the air. Every few steps, the tops of their arms would touch. Her flatmate was out. She'd told him he could find a drink in the kitchen. She needed to shower, she'd said, turning and locking her eyes on

to his. He'd been looking for an opening, a hesitation that might allow him to leap the space between wanting and having. Maybe he should wait, he'd thought, take her somewhere to dinner – they'd been to dinner. Should he just kiss her? Leap into the chasm? Too late, she'd left the room. He could follow her, walk straight into her bedroom and . . . No, too rapist. Too rapist? Too embarrassing. She'd be undressing and assume he'd waited deliberately.

But here she was. Back. Walking into the kitchen, sweatshirt off, T-shirt and skirt, flick, flick. She needed a clean towel, she mumbles, opening a cupboard, stretching up, revealing a taut waist.

He's on his feet now. She turns from the cupboard. His head targeting hers. Locked on. Four feet and closing, three, two and half, she's in retreat, she's moving. Abort, abort.

He's shot out a hand, a grappling iron of sorts. Flailing. Found an arm, hooked, tugged. Too hard, harder than he means to.

Abort? She's moving towards him, lips first, pulled by lips, lip to lip – they're touching – mouth, tongue . . . She breaks, pulls back.

She's taken a step back, but does not turn away. She's placed her hands on her left hip and pushed the old-fashioned white button of her tennis skirt through its eye and stands looking at him as the skirt unwraps from her waist.

A thing sprung with magic. A slow spring.

Every time his friends asked him how the sex was with Valentine, he'd changed the subject or nodded his head in a way he hoped was both experiential and knowing. In truth, they had not done it. There had been no shortage of sexual tumblings, intimate moments – more intensely erotic and enjoyable than anything he had experienced – but she had not let him penetrate her, or even touch her down there. Not at

all. Not yet. Despite hours of rubbing, of kissing, of grinding, of climatic sucking, she would not even take off her knickers. ‘There’s no point,’ she’d say, ‘it would be unfair to both of us, like serving up a delicious meal and then saying we can’t eat it. When it’s right, it’ll be right and then I’ll be yours.’

‘Mine?’

‘Yours. All of me.’

He wanted her, there was no doubt about that, every bit of her, everywhere – but almost more than being in her, he just wanted her naked, to look at. He’d seen women, of course he had, hundreds; four-inch, two-dimensional mannequins, pornographic images bristling with insertions, stripped, shaved and bent double. He wasn’t a virgin. He’d been with a couple of girls, a few fumbled couplings; brief, unbearably exciting, embarrassing. But Valentine, when she had stood before him in her knickers that afternoon – like nothing was wrong – so real, so beautiful, so perilous, she’d tangled him up in a shame he couldn’t understand.

‘Max . . . Max . . . MAX . . .’ And there she was before him. Watching him dream.

Max leapt up, pulling at the tightened seams of his underwear, meeting her outstretched arms. Mute fireworks of heat thudded up his neck, blushes like smacked skin.

‘Valentine,’ he said, encircling her with his arms.